



Check Against Delivery

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Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage on Universal Design in new projects and public realm planning.



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
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Age Action is grateful for the opportunity to speak before the Committee regarding Universal Design in new projects and public realm planning. Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people. We advocate for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives, based on the realisation of their rights and equality, recognising the diversity of their experience and situation.

Today I will speak briefly on taking a rights-based approach to Universal design; Universal Design as a means of enabling ageing in place; the affordability of Universal Design; and lastly, the ambition of Universal Design policies.

Age Action takes a rights-based approach to advocating for older persons. Similarly, Universal Design needs to be understood as a means of guaranteeing people their fundamental rights. There are around 48,000 people with dementia in Ireland, and this is expected to double by 2030. Just over one in five persons aged 65+ are affected by frailty, so their body is less able to resist injury or illness. 35.2% have a disability and others will have mobility issues. These people's ability to exercise their rights depends on their homes and communities being universally designed. Taking a rights-based approach to Universal Design means recognising the lived experiences of these older persons and the serious affronts to equality and non-discrimination that their unmet need represents.

When it comes to ageing in place, which is the overwhelming desire among older persons, universal design is key. Universally designed homes are as suitable to raise a young family in as they are to grow old in. Yet ageing in place also depends on where the home is situated. 40% of people aged 65 or older do not have a driving licence, and 40% of people aged 65 or older live in rural areas, with limited transport options. Housing and planning policy must work in tandem with transport policy to implement Universal Design.

Now turning to the affordability of Universal Design. Just over half of all older persons has an income in the bottom 40% of society, and half have savings of €5,800 or less. Just over a quarter of employers, managers or higher professionals aged 65+ experience disability. In contrast, over 35% of manual workers and 42% of unskilled workers aged 65+ do so.

Age Action estimates that 10% of older households cannot afford adaptation of their home to increase accessibility. The Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability are, for many people, the only option available to make their homes safe and usable. A recent private members' motion on these grants highlighted that they are not affordable and that there are associated unacceptable delays.<sup>1</sup> Age Action has heard from older persons themselves about feeling sick, and wanting to give up, when they go through all the effort of applying for these grants, only for nothing to come of it. More people need to be entitled to these grants, with a greater proportion of their costs are covered.

If Universal Design measures were implemented in the initial construction phase, there often would be no additional cost. Limiting cost barriers to the construction of universally designed homes will in part depend on wider reform of the housing sector to achieve affordability, as well as the introduction of Universal Design building standards that make it the new construction industry norm.

Finally, Age Action is concerned about low ambition in implementing Universal Design. One of its advantages is its ability to be mainstreamed. Everyone has a right to move and interact safely and independently not only in their own homes but in the homes of others and in their communities. Universal Design promotes positive ageing, but there is no positive ageing without social inclusion. One of the actions under the Housing Options for our Ageing Population is for in five years, 30% of new housing to be universally designed. This is inadequate. Similar to the successful building energy efficiency regulations, building regulations should progressively realise a full implementation of Universal Design, under which all new buildings are compliant. These new standards should be matched with mechanisms to ensure they are being met. In the interim, there needs to be education about Universal Design so people building or buying homes understand its importance and don't overlook it. If Universal Design isn't universalised, we will instead have to continuously, arduously and expensively adapt homes to meet the needs of persons whose circumstances we are capable of anticipating now based on the lived experience of older people now.