

# Age-Action

## Age Equality

*For a society that enables all older people to participate and  
to live full, independent lives*

## Submission on the review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)

September 2021



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



pobal

government supporting communities

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Context .....	1
Goals 2017-21 .....	2
Age Action’s Activities 2017-21 .....	5
Observations on Public Policy 2017-21 .....	13

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**Context**

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)<sup>1</sup> was adopted by the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, and it is reviewed every five years. The period 2017-21 had the goals of (a) recognising the potential of older persons, (b) encouraging longer working life and ability to work and (c) ensuring ageing with dignity. Member states have been asked to report on their successes and challenges in implementing these goals.<sup>2</sup> The Department of Health is compiling Ireland’s contribution and they have asked Age Action to make a submission in relation to the Europe region’s 2017 Lisbon Declaration, as follows:

“The Department of Health requests that your organisation submits a short analysis of any actions or policies taken by your organisation that illustrates how Ireland has worked towards the implementation of goals and measures agreed in the 2017 Lisbon Ministerial Declaration and progress made over the 20-year lifespan of MIPAA (if applicable), together with any plans for further actions in the near future. We would be grateful if you could explain the value of actions taken, what impact they had within society, as well as positive outcomes and learnings obtained during development and/or implementation.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/madrid-plan-of-action-and-its-implementation.html>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/fourth-review-and-appraisal-of-the-madrid-international-plan-of-action-on-ageing-2002.html>

## Goals 2017-21

The following goals were agreed for the European region in the 2017 Lisbon Ministerial Declaration.<sup>3</sup>

### I. Recognizing the potential of older persons

What has been done to empower individuals to realise their potential for physical, mental and social well-being throughout their lives and to participate in and contribute to society according to their capacities, needs, and desires along MIPAA's Regional Implementation Strategy commitments 1, 2, 8, 9, and 10 (see Appendix 1) and the goals of the Lisbon Ministerial Declaration?

- developing and implementing socially responsible and future-oriented economic and financial strategies
- fostering effective consultations with, and involvement of, older persons and their representatives at the national, regional and local levels in designing policies
- promoting a positive image of older persons, acknowledging their contributions to society
- fostering work and volunteering of younger and older persons in intergenerational settings
- encouraging businesses, non-profit organizations and public enterprises to involve older persons as consumers in the planning and design of goods and services
- ensuring that older persons can attain and maintain their highest possible level of health and functional capacity by supporting the development of age-friendly environments and housing.

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3

[https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/Ministerial\\_Conference\\_Lisbon/Documents/2017\\_Lisbon\\_Ministerial\\_Declaration.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/Ministerial_Conference_Lisbon/Documents/2017_Lisbon_Ministerial_Declaration.pdf)

## **II. Encouraging longer working life and ability to work**

Which measures have been implemented to recognizing the potential embedded in the employment of older workers and developing labour market strategies to promote maximum participation opportunities for workers of all ages along the RIS commitments 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10 and the goals of the Lisbon Declaration?

- promoting lifelong learning opportunities
- fight unemployment at all ages, reducing financial inequalities and poverty, taking up measures to reduce the gender pay gap
- encouraging employers to value the experience of, and to retain and hire, older workers
- providing incentives for longer working life opportunities and more flexible retirement choices
- planning and implementing pension reforms, that take into account the increasing longevity and the extension of working lives
- facilitating the reconciliation of employment and care work.

## **III. Ensuring ageing with dignity**

Which measures have been contributing to protecting older persons' enjoyment of all human rights and dignity, promoting their autonomy, self-determination and participation in society, and making sure that no law, policy or programme leaves room for discrimination of any kind along RIS commitments 7, 8, 9 and 10 and the goals of the Lisbon Declaration?

- protecting older persons' enjoyment of all human rights and dignity, promoting their autonomy, self-determination and participation in society,
- supporting the necessary infrastructure and assistance to prevent all types of abuse and violence against older persons,
- fostering the development of innovative methods and services as well as user and age-friendly technology and products,
- raising quality standards for integrated social and long-term care and health services and continuously adapting the status, training and working conditions of professional care workers,

- supporting research on individual and population ageing processes to better address emerging needs in ageing societies,
- promoting the participation of both persons with dementia and/or mental and behavioural disorders and their informal carers in social and community life,
- respecting the self-determination, independence and dignity of older persons, especially, but not limited to, towards the end of life.

### **MIPAA's Regional Implementation Strategy commitments**

1. Mainstreaming ageing
2. Integration and participation
3. Economic growth
4. Social security
5. Labour markets
6. Lifelong learning
7. Quality of life, independent living and health
8. Gender equality
9. Support to families providing care
10. Regional co-operation

## Age Action's Activities 2017-21

Age Action supports and advocates for equality and human rights for all older people.

Everything we do is based on a recognition of the diversity of identity and situation among older people and a concern for equality for all older people. In addressing ageing, our work includes a concern to influence perspectives on and responses to ageing. This pursuit of equality and human rights is underpinned by our work to promote ageing in place, life-long learning, and health and wellbeing for older people, empowering them to live as active citizens.

Our work is driven by an organisation that is professional in its operations and lives out its values of dignity, participation, diversity, social justice, and professionalism.

### **Action: Getting Started Computer Training *Supporting Digital Inclusion***

Age Action's Getting Started Computer Training provides training in computers, smartphones and the Internet for people over the age of 55 all over Ireland. Getting Started supports older people to build confidence in their digital skills keeping them connected to their communities and enabling them to access public services which are increasingly diminishing offline pathways. Learners have been able to take their newfound digital skills far, using the internet for activism, research, and more. The Getting Started training is uniquely delivered in small one to one class groups held in libraries, community centres, schools, colleges, family resource centres, corporate offices and housing complexes for older people.<sup>4</sup> As of 2021, it is estimated that 275,000 people over the age of 65 do not use the internet and many more may be counted as "online" but of those that are, 43% have below basic skill levels (Eurostat) lack the basic skills or confidence to allow them to make meaningful use of the internet, to access publicly funded services or to be safe from criminality online. Age Action innovated the programme to deliver virtual digital skills training in response to COVID-19 restrictions. The Age Action Getting Started Keep In Touch

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/getting-started-computer-training>

(KIT) is a free eight part How To Guides which provide step by step instructions to people on use of technology including how to get online, use of Apps including WhatsApp and Facetime, COVID-19 Tracker App, how to avoid misinformation about COVID-19. The guides are supported by an online tutorial available on the Age Action You Tube channel which enables people with digital skills to become Digital Champions by teaching someone else digital skills.

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* Since 2017, Getting Started has had 10,072 beneficiaries, including 9,681 regular students and 391 students who benefited from one-day workshops. A key lesson is that one to one learner led tuition supports older people to have better educational outcomes. Continuous access to training and supports is also needed to ensure people maintain and develop their digital literacy skills.

### **Action: Care and Repair Service *Supporting Ageing in Place***

Age Action's Care and Repair does small DIY jobs, free of charge, for older people to help them maintain their homes and their independence. Operating in Cork, Dublin and Galway, Care and Repair does jobs that might be more difficult to complete as we get older people but not big enough to call in a tradesperson. The service prioritises carrying out jobs in the homes of older people who are being discharged or have recently been discharged from hospital, and has received funding from the Health Service Executive (HSE) to support this aspect of the work on a nationwide basis. If someone is coming out of hospital, no matter where they live, Age Action supports them to make sure their house is safe. Care and Repair can remove trip hazards, install handrails, replace toilet seats or move a bed downstairs to make sure the home is ready for their return. For any job that is too big or specialised for our team details of local tradespeople is provided.

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* There were 43,458 beneficiaries of this service in the period 2017-2020 (2017: 16,115,<sup>5</sup> 2018: 12,120, 2019: 10,024, 2020: 5,199<sup>6</sup>). Repeated surveys and studies have found that older

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<sup>5</sup> Including telephone contacts and befriending visits, which are no longer part of the programme.

<sup>6</sup> Service reduced due to COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

people overwhelmingly want to age in place at home and in the communities where they have built their lives.<sup>7</sup> It is also much more cost-effective for someone to live in their own home compared to the high cost of nursing home accommodation. As Care and Repair helps people to live at home for longer, it contributes to both enhancing older people's wellbeing and independence, while also reducing potential costs on the state to deliver or subsidise nursing home care. The provision of assistance linked to hospital discharge also prevents unnecessarily long stays in hospital beds, which supports the work of the HSE.

### **Action: Information Service *Empowering People's Self Determination and Autonomy***

The Information Service provides an empowerment pathway for older people and people supporting older people to make informed choices and decisions through the provision of factual and timely information and referrals that is tailored to older people. Typically, people contact the Information Service at a time of stress in their lives. Often people are seeking advice on how to understand social welfare entitlements such as pensions, how to access community supports such as home help, how the Fair Deal scheme applies to their personal situation, to highlight an experience of ageism or how they can report concerns about an older person living in their community. Trained information officers provide information or referrals to the appropriate organisations.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of COVID-19, our Information Service developed our "Call Safe" initiative, making 12,000+ "check-in" calls to make sure older people had the information they needed to remain safe, informed, connected, and supported through the pandemic.

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* In the period 2017 to present, Age Action has answered over 10,000 questions from older people (approximately 2,300 per year).<sup>9</sup> The main three topics have been healthcare (15%), nursing homes (12%) and social security entitlements (9%), with a wide range of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Donnelly, S, O'Brien, M, Begley, E and Brennan, J (2016) *"I'd prefer to stay at home but I don't have a choice" Meeting Older People's Preference for Care: Policy, but what about practice?* University College Dublin.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/information>

<sup>9</sup> 10,323 queries since 2018.



other queries, including queries about elder abuse (4%). Part of the added value of this service is the assistance given to people to improve their understanding of their entitlements and how to apply for them. Assistance is also given to people to complete forms, especially as literacy (especially literacy in form-filling or reading administrative rules) is a significant barrier for a large proportion of older people. An EU lifelong learning report found that “in Ireland, age seems to matter more than in other countries.”<sup>10</sup> They found that 28% of those aged 55 or older faced significant literacy barriers.

### **Action: Lifelong Learning**

Age Action, through the University of the Third Age network (U3A) helps bring lifelong learning to older people who have ceased full time employment. This work is part funded by Solas<sup>11</sup>, the State agency tasked with building a world class Further Education and Training (FET) sector to fuel Ireland’s future. Members of U3A form interest groups covering a wide range of topics and activities. No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment and personal fulfilment being the prime motives, not qualifications or awards.<sup>12</sup> As a result of COVID-19 none of the U3A groups are holding their regular face to face meetings, however groups have set up meetings using Zoom and continue to engage virtually.

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* There are 30 U3A groups operating throughout Ireland. Age Action facilitates a series of webinars (using Zoom) for all who can and would like to engage in discussions. In the period 2017-2021, there was an average of 1,680 members of U3A every year. The self-led nature of the U3A groups demonstrates older people’s independence and autonomy.

### **Action: Positive Ageing Week**

Positive Ageing Week (PAW) is an Age Action initiative to promote the agency of older people and to celebrate the contribution they make to our families, workplaces, communities and society as a whole. For 19 years, individuals, groups, local

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user\\_upload/Ireland\\_Adults\\_Report.pdf](http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Ireland_Adults_Report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.solas.ie/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/lifelong-learning-u3a>

authorities and businesses have been organising events to mark PAW, which also coincides with the UN International Day of Older Persons each year. Example PAW themes have included “Ageing in place”, “Pandemics: Do they change the way we address ageing?” and “Reconnecting communities by reframing ageing”.

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* Since 2017, over a thousand activities have been organised under PAW. All events in 2020 were held online due to the pandemic. Since 2017, at least 35,000 people have engaged with one or more PAW events.

### **Action: BIG Corporate Challenge**

The Age Action BIG Corporate Challenge is our six-month Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme that encourages corporate teams to promote intergenerational connection whilst raising funds and awareness to support our work. By pledging to “Be Inter-Generational” (BIG) participants increase understanding across generations, which the WHO has identified is key to transforming attitudes towards ageing and achieving a more inclusive society that values all of us as we age.<sup>13</sup>

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* The value of the BIG Corporate Challenge is to encourage businesses, non-profit organizations and public enterprises to involve older persons as consumers in the planning and design of goods and services.

### **Action: Representation and Participation**

Age Action seeks to foster effective consultations with, and involvement of, older persons and their representatives at the national, regional and local levels in designing policies. In 2020 Age Action appointed a Policy Stakeholder Engagement Officer with a remit to build capacity of the organisation to support older people to claim their right to participate in public life including the design and implementation of

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combatting-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>

public policies. Age Action is an active member of the following forums to represent and encourage direct consultation with older people:

- The Consumer Stakeholder Group (CSG) of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU)
- HSE National Patient Forum
- National Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Technical Advisory Committee
- National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS) – Dept of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
- Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) National Nursing Home Experience Survey Advisory Group for Older Persons
- Advisory Group on Recommendations on ICT enablement of older persons services
- Creating Our Future Advisory Forum – Societal Pillar

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* Involvement in this activity has allowed Age Action to share information and perspectives that may not have otherwise influenced the direction of policies or recommendations from these forums.

### **Action: Research on Ageing**

Age Action actively supports research on ageing with a particular focus on participatory research. Age Action is currently a partner in:

- Irish Research Council (IRC) New Foundations Study “Agency and Ageing in Place in Rural Ireland” with University College Cork (UCC)
- Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, National Disability Authority (CEUD-NDA) funded Research for the Built Environment (Long-Term Care) Adaptation and Retrofit from a Universal Design Approach
- During 2018 Age Action participated in an EU Erasmus + funded project called “Wellbeing and Healthy Choices for Older Adults and their Carers”. The main objective was to promote active and healthy ageing through physical

and nutritional training for older adults who are confined to home. Details can be found here: <https://www.uni-muenster.de/ProjectWhole/>

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* Involvement in this activity has allowed Age Action to share information and perspectives that may not have otherwise influenced the direction of policies or recommendations from these forums.

### **Action: Intersectionality**

Age Action is a partner in the Best4OlderLGBTI project which aims to raise awareness of, and fight against, discrimination of older people based on their sexual orientation. Seven organisations, from six European countries are working together, helping to create an inclusive society, where people can live their lives with dignity and equality, regardless of age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, culture or social status. The project is funded under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme (REC) and has a dedicated website [www.best4older-lgbti.org](http://www.best4older-lgbti.org). Age Action also is a member of the Coalition against Hate Crime Ireland, which has made a submission to Ireland's draft hate crime legislation as well as others actions.<sup>14</sup>

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* An important learning from this action is that older people are just as likely to suffer from discrimination as younger people, whether that is due to sexuality, ethnicity or other grounds identified under Ireland's equality legislation. Any holistic approach to fulfilling the human rights and equality of older persons must ensure that intersectionality with other grounds for discrimination is adequately addressed in any policy.

### **Action: Campaigning and Policy Advocacy**

Age Action's advocacy work is part-funded by the state agency Pobal, which supports communities to achieve social inclusion and development.<sup>15</sup> Age Action also received funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development as a member of the Community and Voluntary Pillar, which originated in structured

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<sup>14</sup> <https://inar.ie/our-work/policy-and-advocacy/coalition-against-hate-crime-ireland/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.pobal.ie/about-pobal/>

national social dialogue. This public funding for advocacy work provides a channel through which issues facing older people can be communicated to various Government departments and agencies, for example through consultations and bilateral meetings between the Community and Voluntary Pillar and departments, as well as through national events such as the annual National Economic Dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

*Value of action/extent of impact/positive outcomes/learnings:* In the period 2017-21, Age Action has made dozens of submissions including proposals for the national budget, briefing papers on topics such as digital literacy, nursing homes, mandatory retirement, and the rights of older persons, and submissions to a wide range of Government departments and public bodies.<sup>17</sup> Age Action has made presentations to committees of the Oireachtas (Irish parliament), to politicians and to officials in Government departments. This advocacy work, supported by the State, has enabled Age Action to raise issues of concern to older people to a greater extent than would otherwise have occurred.

All policy submissions and briefing papers are published online<sup>18</sup> but a selection of Age Action's advocacy work that is most directly related to the goals of the Lisbon Ministerial Declaration include:

- Submission to the Department of Justice and Equality on Flexible Working (January 2020)
- Submission on Pension Auto-enrolment (November 2018)
- Briefing Paper on Reversing the 2012 State Pension Cuts (February 2017)
- Submission to the Commission on Pensions (March 2021)
- Presentation to the Stakeholder Forum of the Pension Commission (April 2021)

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f49b5-national-economic-dialogue-2021/#documents>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/campaigning-policy>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/campaigning-policy>

- Membership of the STOP67 Coalition who successfully campaigned for the repeal of legislation that would have increased the pension eligibility age for 67 in January 2021
- Briefing Paper on Supporting Digital Literacy Among Older People (January 2020)
- Briefing Paper Carrying Inequality – How Cumulative Inequality Impacts Older People (March 2020)
- Briefing Paper on Regulating Nursing Home Charges (July 2017)
- Membership of the Steering Committee of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice’s research advisory committee
- Submission to the Committee on Justice on Dying with Dignity Bill 2020 (January 2021)
- Submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Response Measures – Nursing Homes (June 2020)
- Submission to the Nursing Homes Expert Panel (Alliance of Age Sector NGOs) (June 2020)
- Submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Response Measures – Nursing Homes (September 2020)
- Participation in the “Respect to Prevent” STAGE programme funded by Erasmus which published “Participants’ Experience of the Respect to Prevent Elder Abuse Workshops”, which examines the experience of participants in socio-drama workshops designed to help care workers and older people in residential settings challenge ageism, understand their human rights and prevent elder abuse.

The following section outlines a sample of issues of concern for older people in the period 2017-21.

## **Observations on Public Policy 2017-21**

Age Action’s policy analysis and advocacy is informed by the lived experience of older people in Ireland, and the diversity of their lives. Through surveys, focus

groups and feedback to Age Action's services, we keep abreast of the issues of concern to older people.

Age Action has the following observations on public policies affecting older people in the period 2017-21. Analysis of these policies – including lessons learned from problems arising – should be accurately reflected in Ireland's contribution to the review of MIPPA.

## **I. Recognizing the potential of older persons**

- The establishment of a Commission on Taxation and Welfare in 2021 addresses the serious gap in fiscal planning for Ireland's changing demographics, especially the growing proportion of older people (who will represent approximately 25% of the population by 2050, up from 15% in 2020). As a result of the success story of greater longevity, provision needs to be made for adequate public spending, which will naturally increase in a range of areas such as the State Pension, healthcare and social services. In its Terms of Reference, among other issues, the Commission will take account of ageing demographics.<sup>19</sup> As one example of where fiscal planning is needed, the ESRI has projected the likely growth in demand for hospital beds, which implies the need for construction of both new hospital wings and entirely new hospitals, both of which are expensive to build and to staff, and which will take time to deliver. It has been estimated that between 3,200 and 5,600 extra hospital beds will be needed by 2030.<sup>20</sup>
- In 2021, the Taoiseach met with representatives of the Community and Voluntary Pillar to discuss the potential for a new form of national social dialogue, which would fill gaps that exist in relation to articulating social and environmental issues that are unresolved. The Programme for Government

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/7cf49-commission-on-taxation-and-welfare-2021-terms-of-reference/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/publications/how-many-beds-capacity-implications-of-hospital-care-demand-projections-in-the-irish>

commits to creating “new models of sectoral engagement”. Taoiseach Micheál Martin has spoken about the need for social dialogue and “regular and open engagement with all parts of society”.<sup>21</sup> This is important because older people are often not (or no longer) represented by trade unions, professional associations or other occupational representative bodies. Likewise, older people cannot access the institutions of the state set up to deal with economic issues, such as the Workplace Relations Commission. Yet, older people may have concerns with their former employer in relation to their pension, or they may simply seek to work collectively to raise issues of concern (such as the State Pension, home heating costs, transport costs, access to health and social care, etc.). Organisations like Age Action provide one channel that empowers older people to speak about the issues that concern them, but this role is hampered if national social dialogue does not include non-economic representative organisations in the community and voluntary sector. It remains to be seen what model of social dialogue is promoted by the Government.

- The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the strength of civil society in mobilising support for older people across Ireland. At the same time, the lack of direct consultation with older people about the Government’s response to the pandemic had unintended consequences, such as a one-size-fits-all approach that reinforced ageist stereotypes and led to many older people feeling disempowered and told “Go to your room, keep your head down and your mouth shut”.<sup>22</sup> Residents of nursing homes were especially vulnerable to the virus and were disempowered in terms of heavy restrictions being placed on their freedoms and, in some cases, weaknesses in the delivery of safe care by nursing homes. As of February 2021, more than 1,500 COVID-19 deaths in Ireland occurred in nursing homes, representing well over a third of all COVID-19 deaths.<sup>23</sup> At least four in every five nursing homes in the state reported a case of

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/ee34a-speech-by-an-taoiseach-micheal-martin-td-on-the-national-economic-dialogue/>

<sup>22</sup> Comment from an older person on Age Action survey.

<sup>23</sup> [Covid death toll in nursing homes passes 1,500, with 369 in January alone \(thejournal.ie\)](https://www.thejournal.ie/covid-death-toll-nursing-homes-passes-1500-369-in-january-alone-1234567890/)



COVID-19 in 2020.<sup>24</sup> Lessons need to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to inform national policy on healthy ageing and the empowerment of older people. For example, the European Commission report found that “COVID-19 has strongly affected long-term care systems, adding evidence to the urgency of strengthening them. Systemic weaknesses were highlighted by high mortality rates in long-term care facilities, difficulties in ensuring continuity of care, and the impact on the well-being of older people and carers. Although it is too early to assess the effect of the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to draw lessons to improve systems on a structural basis and make them more resilient.”<sup>25</sup> Age Action, the Coroners Society of Ireland and the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) have called for a wide-ranging inquiry into COVID-19-related deaths that occurred in nursing homes. The investigation should not be allowed to run for years as a sprawling tribunal, but should be a properly resourced, clinical and human rights investigation, designed to deliver definitive findings in a reasonable period. The voices of diverse older people must be actively sought as part of this process. The fundamental rationale of an inquiry into COVID-19 deaths, especially in nursing homes, is to identify what went wrong and to implement recommendations to ensure that the same problems never recur.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the digitalisation of the economy accelerated. Many older people have embraced the opportunities provided by new technology and internet connectivity. At the same time, an estimated 275,000 older people in Ireland, representing 25% of those aged 60-74 and 56% of those aged 75 or older,<sup>26</sup> are not using the internet. COVID-19 has had a disproportionately negative effect on people who are digitally excluded. Public health services and other public services were moved online at a fast rate. People who were not using the internet were either at a disadvantage when it came to accessing services, or simply could not access services. The EU has recognised multiple

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<sup>24</sup> *The Irish Times*, 9 June 2021, [Four in five nursing homes reported at least one Covid case in 2020 – regulator \(irishtimes.com\)](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/four-in-five-nursing-homes-reported-at-least-one-covid-case-in-2020-regulator-1.4544444)

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2021) Long-Term Care Report Trends, challenges and opportunities in an ageing society. Volume I. Joint Report prepared by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the European Commission (DG EMPL) <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24079&langId=en>

<sup>26</sup> <https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA78>

barriers to digital inclusion: “For some people, the digital world is not yet fully accessible. For others, it is not affordable. And others were not taught the skills to participate fully.”<sup>27</sup> Across Europe, response measures taken during the pandemic could leave victims of elder abuse in further isolation without access to assistance or support services, and may have made it even more difficult for them to seek help or to report abuse.<sup>28</sup> The digital exclusion of some older people in Ireland remains a significant concern, which is worsening as more private and public services adopt a digital-only approach or fail to provide adequate staffing to provide an equally good service using traditional telephone or over-the-counter delivery of services. Age Action has called for a rights-based approach to digital inclusion of older people, alongside supports to achieve comprehensive internet access for older people and the continued provision of alternatives to digital access.

- Recent Government initiatives have sought to encourage older people to sell their homes and move to smaller dwellings. While some older people would like to “right size” their home to make it more manageable, this is not a straightforward proposition and it is not helped by ageist narratives claiming that older people are unfairly occupying “empty nest” family homes. Most older people want to age in place, meaning that they wish to remain rooted in the community where they have built their lives and where they have social networks. Due to Ireland’s pattern of housing development, there is often a lack of appropriate alternative housing in the communities where older people live. For example, areas characterised by housing estates often lack any apartment buildings. One learning for the future is the need for greater diversity of development in every area, to give older people choice and control over where they live as they age. At the time of writing, the Government is preparing a new housing strategy, which needs to reflect these realities.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-inclusion>

<sup>28</sup> Age Platform EU (May 2020) *COVID-19 and human rights concerns for older persons*. Available at [www.age-platform.eu](http://www.age-platform.eu).

- A welcome commitment in the Programme for Government is that a Commission on Care will be established to “assess how we care for older people and examine alternatives to meet the diverse needs of our older citizens”.<sup>29</sup> At the time of writing, this Commission is yet to be established. An allied commitment in the Programme for Government is the continued development of a universal public health service, as Ireland remains the only EU country without a complete public health service and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the weakness of Ireland’s fragmented public-private system.

## **II. Encouraging longer working life and ability to work**

- To date, public policy on longer working life has had mixed results. The unilateral increase in the qualification age for the State Pension to 67 caused hardship among many older people who were forced to retire at age 65 by mandatory retirement clauses in their contracts of employment. These clauses are commonplace and remain lawful, unlike in other jurisdictions (e.g. mandatory retirement in most professions was made illegal in the USA in 1986).<sup>30</sup> Due to public disquiet in relation to the State Pension at the 2019 general election, the qualification age for the State Pension remains at 66 and the legislation for higher qualification ages has been repealed. A much more comprehensive set of policies is needed to give older people options for a fair and flexible retirement based on their own needs and circumstances.
- Ageism in the labour market remains a major concern. People over the age of 55 who are unemployed are more likely to be long-term unemployed (for more than one year).<sup>31</sup> Many older people report difficulty in gaining interviews let alone employment. Much more culture change, with supporting public policy, is needed for the Irish labour market to embrace the talents, skills and experience that older people can offer.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2015/08/02/is-it-time-to-abolish-mandatory-retirement/?sh=409a73e240db>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.age-platform.eu/publications/age-position-integration-long-term-unemployed>

- There is significant gender inequality in relation to Ireland’s system of social security including the State Pension. The core model of welfare is a “male breadwinner” model, based on the outdated assumption of a primarily male workforce, with spouses (typically women) designated as “adult dependents” rather than as citizens with entitlements in their own right.<sup>32</sup> As a result, many women (including older women) do not have any income in their own name, but are reliant on their husband to provide them with a share of the social transfer allocated to his control. The gender inequalities built into Ireland’s model of welfare are exacerbated by the fact that women disproportionately lose paid employment to engage in child rearing and/or unpaid caring responsibilities for relatives. This means that many women struggle to attain sufficient social insurance credits to have a State Pension in their own name. Similarly, women’s occupational pensions tend to be lower for the same reason. The result is significant gender inequality in the distribution of income among older people. The ESRI finds a 35% gender gap in Irish pension incomes.<sup>33</sup>

### III. Ensuring ageing with dignity

- Ireland’s inaugural National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) set out actions to protect older person’s enjoyment of their human rights and promoting their social inclusion and autonomy.<sup>34</sup> The strategy referred to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing among other commitments. Stemming from the strategy, local authorities have developed “age friendly” action plans at local level. However, in terms of learning for the future, many of the actions in the strategy have not been fully implemented and there is a need for a revised strategy and a renewed commitment by the current government to implementation.

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Considine, M and Dukelow, F (2009) *Irish Social Policy: A Critical Introduction*, Dublin: Gill & MacMillan Ltd, and Cook, G and McCashin, A (1997) ‘Male Breadwinner: A case study of Gender and Social Security in the Republic of Ireland’ in Byrne, A and Leonard, M (eds.) *Women in Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*, Belfast: Beyond the Pale.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/publications/gender-pensions-and-income-in-retirement>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/737780-national-positive-ageing-strategy/>

- Age Action has identified the need for Ireland to establish an independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the value of having such an independent voice. A Commissioner would investigate systemic issues affecting older people, review the adequacy of policy, legislation and services affecting older people, and advise Government on matters concerning older people, including by reference to international best practice. Issues where a Commissioner would add value include in learning from the pandemic; reviewing nursing homes and home care policies; identifying supports and services for Ireland's rapidly ageing population; understanding poverty and deprivation among older people; and promoting international best practice for the implementation of assisted decision making across all public bodies. Older people are identified by the UN and other international organisations as a category that deserves special recognition. Wales has had a similar Commissioner in place since 2003, and Northern Ireland has had one since 2011. In Age Action's 2022 pre-budget survey of older people, 92.3% agreed with the proposal of establishing a Commission for Ageing and Older Persons, including two-thirds (65.7%) who strongly agreed.