



Age & Opportunity Pre-Budget Submission 2025

July 2024

Introduction

Age & Opportunity's distinct focus, experience, expertise and funding relates to increasing participation, informing public policy and challenging ageism. Founded in 1988, we are Ireland's leading national development organisation working to enable the best possible quality of life for us all as we age. We do this by:

1. Championing the creativity and value of older people;
2. Combating stereotypes and negative views of ageing;
3. Developing inclusive and engaging experiences which respond to the interests and needs of the diverse older adult population;
4. Developing, testing and measuring the impact of pioneering programmes and approaches;
5. Making evidence available to policy-makers and service providers;
6. Working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that Ireland's policies, strategies and programmes are directly informed by the needs and experiences of older people.

We are primarily funded by the HSE, Sport Ireland and the Arts Council of Ireland to work with local communities and organisations across the country to run a range of programmes and activities in three key areas – Arts and Culture, Sport and Physical Activity, Lifelong Learning and Civic Engagement and to inform policy through research and evaluation.

Our Budget 2025 recommendations reflect learnings from participants and partners in our programmes and research and are directed towards Government Departments with the scope to help realise Ireland's ambition to be the best country in which to grow old.

Underpinning our submission this year is the acknowledgement that Budget 2025 is the last chance for this government to honour the commitments made in its Programme for Government. This included delivery of a Statutory Homecare Scheme and development of an implementation plan to deliver on the objectives of tackling loneliness and isolation, neither of which has been realised.

While we do welcome the recent establishment of a Commission on Care, as pledged, we believe that creating an Age Friendly Ireland must be done from a much broader perspective. While the Commission on Care will have an important role in examining the care and support needs of older people, there is a further need for an independent Champion to expand the narrative about ageing beyond health and care, tackle institutional ageism, and support older persons to realise all their rights in relation to full participation in society.

To this end we prioritise in this pre-budget submission our call for the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People, similar to that which is in place in both Northern Ireland and Wales. This would support our ageing population by ensuring a programme for government which really does value older persons. It would ensure that the commitment to mainstreaming ageing is kept to the fore of policy and decision-making and would hold this - and future governments - to account regarding the rights of older persons.

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1. Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons

1.1. Age & Opportunity, along with the other members of the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, recommend that Budget 2025 provide for the speedy establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons that would account directly to the Oireachtas, with a mandate to safeguard and protect the interests and well-being of older persons and an ageing population.

1.2. In Ireland it is predicted that those over the age of 65 will reach one million people by the end of this decade. An Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons would have the ability to focus attention on the issues facing people in later life and facilitate the long-term, cross-government planning needed for a growing ageing population.

1.3. This new public office would be a key asset for Government, helping its departments and agencies to integrate ageing issues into all relevant policy fields and to effect strong implementation and good value for money.

1.4. As an independent champion, relevant priorities for action for a Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons would include:

- Advising Government on matters concerning older persons, including by reference to international best practice.
- Reviewing and overseeing the adequacy of legislation, policy formation and future planning which is informed by the voice and lived experience of older persons in Ireland.
- Holding Government and public bodies to account by monitoring policy implementation and practice.
- Creating a positive ageing experience by promoting healthy ageing, combatting ageism and challenging age discrimination.

1.5. Age & Opportunity have called for an Independent Commissioner in previous Budget and other Submissions. This year, it is the one collective ask of all the members of the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs who would be pleased to work collaboratively with Government and Oireachtas members to support its realisation.

2. Measures to Reduce Poverty

2.1. The first goal of Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) aims to 'Remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities'. However, over a decade later, older persons in Ireland are still routinely experiencing exclusion from full participation in Irish society.

2.2. Poverty is a key driver of social exclusion. Age & Opportunity support all actions to reduce poverty among older persons. This includes realising the commitment to benchmark State pension payments and supporting older persons to extend their working lives if they choose to do so. It also includes providing cost-of-living and other supports to enable people as they age to enjoy an acceptable standard of living which includes social participation.

3. Ageing in Place

3.1 Ireland's 2019 Housing Options for our Ageing Population Policy Statement states that it is a key principle underpinning Government housing policy to 'support older people to live in their own home with dignity and independence for as long as possible.'¹ This describes the concept of 'ageing in place' and is reflected in Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy² and our current Programme for Government³. But this stated policy continues to be mere rhetoric as inadequate housing options, unmet need for homecare services and delay in delivery of the promised Statutory Homecare Scheme means that, for many older people, residential care is the often the easier and sometimes the only option.

3.2. The TILDA Report on Housing Conditions for Older People⁴ published in 2018 states that over half of adults aged 50 years and over experience some housing problem. The most commonly reported problems are damp/mould, structural problems and heating difficulties.

3.3. TILDA also report that adults who report difficulty heating their homes have poorer self-rated health and are more likely to report clinically relevant depressive symptoms and chronic pain irrespective of educational attainment. Adults living alone, renters, those living in older housing and those without central heating are most at risk of experiencing difficulties heating their homes.

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ea33c1-housing-options-for-our-ageing-population-policy-statement/>

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/737780-national-positive-ageing-strategy/>

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

⁴ <https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/HousingConditions/index.php>

3.4. These findings are echoed by the Climate Change Advisory Committee who report that many of the worst performing homes are likely to be owned by older persons and householders least likely to be able to afford the work required. They advise that 'More must be done to support them and ensure that they are provided with necessary help to retrofit their houses and lower their heating costs.'⁵

3.5. We recommend that older persons living alone, living in older housing, or renting, are prioritised for housing adaptation, energy efficiency and fuel allowance schemes and that Budget 2025 should include significant investment in infrastructure to improve housing conditions so that they are not a barrier to enjoying a reasonable standard of living in a place of one's choice as Government policy outlines.

3.6. We further recommend that Budget 2025 prioritise investment in new housing initiatives in order to increase future housing options along a continuum of care to enable ageing in a place of one's own choice for more citizens.

3.7. Ageing in place will continue to be more rhetoric than reality unless we increase investment in primary care facilities across the country to help ensure appropriate provision of, and access to, services in the community. As outlined in the 2019 policy statement Housing Options for our Ageing Population, 'by enhancing and expanding capacity in the primary care sector, we will be able to provide high quality, safe, accessible and sustainable care at the local level and allow people to be cared for in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. Investment in primary care facilities across the country will ensure the appropriate provision of, and access to, services in the community.'⁶

Budget 2025 should include infrastructural investment in this area and also significant increases for primary, community and home care and support for all older persons who wish to continue living full lives in their own homes. This should include provision of sufficient resources to extend eligibility for personal assistance services to those those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.

⁵ <https://www.climatecouncil.ie/councilpublications/annualreviewandreport/#d.en.127050>

⁶ ⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ea33c1-housing-options-for-our-ageing-population-policy-statement/>

4. Age Friendly Public Spaces

4.1. Ageing in place is also enabled by age friendly environments. In 2021 Age & Opportunity conducted research on older persons use of public spaces for sport and physical activity.⁷ A number of key determinants to access and use of public open space were identified as having significant importance in this research and should be given due consideration in development of projects, funding and policy decisions in the future.

4.2. Lack of public toilet facilities is the biggest barrier to using public spaces for older persons. Other barriers include lack of physical infrastructure such as benches, handrails, fresh water taps, etc. and safety concerns were also highlighted. Our research suggests that increased investment in infrastructure is necessary to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of open space.

4.3. There are significant transport and day-to-day care-related issues that are also barriers to the social inclusion of older persons in many activities. Further investment to making public transport more accessible, convenient and safe, especially in rural Ireland, is critical to facilitate participation in meaningful activities.

4.4. Social inclusion is also about belonging to the large communities created by social and cultural events. Welcoming and accessible buildings, as well as appropriate programming are key to participation. We recommend that age friendly infrastructure and actions should be a consideration for any public funding allocated for public spaces, community centres, venues and events. We also recommend that these publicly owned assets be retrofitted to reduce heating and lighting costs which currently act as a barrier to community led social activities.

4.5. Furthermore, as improved public spaces and place-making contribute to community development in both rural and urban areas, we recommend that there is provision in Budget 2025 to resource a National Project for Public Spaces. This initiative would provide grant funding for community led development of enabling environments for physical activity and recreation and a showcase for examples of best practice.

⁷ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Peer-Research-on-Public-Spaces-September-2022.pdf>

5. Digital Equality

5.1. In October 2020, Age & Opportunity conducted a peer led research study and spoke to almost 900 older persons aged over 65 in five counties to find out more about the reasons why people do not or cannot use computers, the internet or other digital technology.⁸

5.2. Our peer researchers indicated that the policy of pushing all services online is not a welcome age friendly development amongst their peers. Essential government or financial services which take a 'digital first/digital only' approach should continue to ensure that other options are available to older people who are experiencing digital exclusion. Budget 2025 should sufficiently resource all Departments to ensure public services remain accessible to all citizens, not just those who are online and we recommend that all Departments budget accordingly.

5.3. Our research also found high prevalence of smart phone ownership. Coupled with higher reliability rates in mobile versus broadband connectivity experienced by older persons, this may provide an accessible route to digital inclusion for more older persons. We therefore recommend an increase in the telephone support allowance to support internet connectivity via smartphone as well as social inclusion and security for those who are housebound and for whom telephone is a primary link to family and friends.

5.4. All citizens should enjoy the benefits that digital access can offer. Budget 2025 should invest in reliable, quality, high-speed broadband infrastructure in those areas that are currently underserved.

⁸ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2022-Digital-Discussions.pdf>

6. Continued Support for Community Groups

6.1. Research carried out by Age & Opportunity with over 700 groups in 2020⁹ found that the importance of community groups in older people's daily and weekly routines pre Covid-19, was considerable. In some circumstances, it could be said this face to face contact and ingrained habit of involvement and interpersonal communication was critical, particularly for those who lived alone and for many of those in rural locations where the likelihood of meeting other people daily was more limited.

6.2. Our findings signal that extra resources in different forms for the groups themselves and for the local and national agencies who support them will be required over the next few years to restore groups to pre-pandemic activity levels.

6.3. We specifically highlighted this issue in our budget submissions over the last few years and have welcomed increasing supports for community centres, men's and women's sheds, volunteering and Public Participation Networks. We recommend that these investments be continued and enhanced in Budget 2025 with particular support for other voluntary groups of older persons.

6.4. Our work with groups of older persons indicates that renting community centres is a barrier to organising activities. Often this is covering the costs of heating and lighting. Retrofitting community centres for energy efficiency would mitigate this barrier for groups of all ages into the future. We welcomed the Community Centres Investment Fund in 2023 and 2024 and recommend that Budget 2025 provide for this again.

6.5. Our engagement and experience on the ground over the past year in particular indicates that loss of social capital continues to be an issue for older people's groups. We welcome the inclusion of 'older people (aged 65+) in isolation' as a thematic focus area in the 2024-2028 Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) from January 2024 and recommend that Budget 2025 provide resources to support the groups who play a crucial role in the social life of older persons.

⁹ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2020-Locked-Up-Locked-In-Locked-Out-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Group-Physical-Activity.pdf>

7. Increase Opportunities for Lifelong Learning

7.1. We call your attention to the fact that Ireland lags behind the European average in lifelong learning with a participation rate of approximately 8.9% prior to Covid-19. The EU has set a target of 15% of adults in Lifelong Learning by 2020. Ireland plans to reach 15% by 2025.¹⁰

7.2. Many community education opportunities for lifelong learning are made possible by the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) which aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality in Ireland by providing social inclusion supports to communities and individuals through community development approaches, engagement and collaboration.

7.3. We welcome the inclusion of those over the age of 65 at risk of isolation as a thematic focus area in the current SICAP and note that funding to women's groups and men's sheds are eligible as long as the funding is allocated to a specific activity that focuses on SICAP target groups¹¹ and is linked to an action in the SICAP annual plan. We recommend that Budget 2025 make supports available to all older person's groups to access this funding for lifelong learning opportunities.

¹⁰ <https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/aontas-welcomes-increase-in-lifelong-learning-participation-rate-to-8.9>

¹¹ <https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/social-inclusion-and-community-activation-programme-sicap-2024-2028/>

8. Meaningful Activities in Care

8.1. In June 2020 Age & Opportunity were invited to make a submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on Covid-19 Response in Care Settings. In this submission we outlined the importance of quality of life domains for those living in care settings and argued for the right to participate in meaningful activities. Our submission was based on our work to promote participation in arts and culture and physical activity in these settings.

8.2. To realise the right to participate in meaningful activities, staff need training and resources, and these activities must be prioritised as an essential component of quality of life in care. This should be set within a framework of Continued Professional Development for all staff in care settings. It also requires resources to access professional services and expertise so that the best possible experience and choice of meaningful activities can be provided.

8.3. We propose that Budget 2025 and following budgets allocate funding to the Department of Justice to establish and resource a national organisation modelled on the UK based NAPA (National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People) and tasked with:

- Developing a mixed membership of care settings, housing with care and day care settings, activity staff, service users and their families;
- Developing strategic partnerships with other relevant organisations;
- Becoming an effective training, assessment and qualification awarding body;
- Setting the standard in training and leadership for activity provision;
- Leading on the development of a career path for activity provider.

8.4. This proposal supports the aspiration outlined in the National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People to bring about a transformation from institutional to more person centred models of care. On a practical level it helps to meet Standard 18 by facilitating greater opportunities for participation in leisure activities that suit their needs, preferences and capacities.¹²

¹² <https://www.higa.ie/sites/default/files/2017-01/National-Standards-for-Older-People.pdf>

9. Equal Access to the Arts

9.1. Age & Opportunity's Arts Programme focuses on older people's artistic and creative potential and supports the meaningful participation and inclusion of older persons in cultural and creative life. The programme is anchored in our annual Bealtaine Festival and a series of year-round resource and development initiatives which support artists, arts participants and arts organisations. We highlighted equal access to the arts for all older persons in our appearance before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media in relation to the development of local and community arts and welcome the recent launch of this report.

9.2. As part of our commitment to best practice, and in consultation with stakeholders and the public, we have developed an Arts & Creative Charter for Older people designed to outline key commitments and principles in relation to working with older people. The Charter is currently being piloted. Subject to funding and investment into the development of training supports for arts organisations, it will be rolled out nationally in 2025.

9.3. The Aims of the National Arts & Creative Charter are:

- To improve the experience of older audiences, arts participants and artists in their engagement with arts organisations in Ireland by recognising older people as distinct communities with particular sets of needs;
- To increase the confidence of older persons in their engagement with arts organisations;
- To increase the confidence of arts organisations in working with and for older persons;
- To advocate for and influence policy (also to be used in training) and best practice in relation to the arts and older persons in Ireland.

9.4. Part of the proposed implementation of the Charter relies on developing a toolkit and training course for the staff of arts organisations interested in establishing best practice principles in working with older persons. It would be expected that this training would become part of the sign up or registration process for the Charter. The Charter will also require national coordination in terms of establishing the network of Charter Organisations.

9.5. We support the Arts Council's ask for a budget increase to €160 million in 2025 in order to help maximise opportunities for artists and audiences and reduce pressure on funded organisations and artists to meet overheads and other costs.

9.10. We further recommend that the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media allocate funding to the Arts Council in Budget 2025 and following budgets to increase provision for the supports for older persons in how they access the arts in Ireland, including the establishment of specific age friendly training for those working in arts settings and artists who wish to work with older persons in social and health care settings.

10. Age Awareness Training

10.1. In 2023 Age & Opportunity carried out an older person led study about older persons' perceptions of themselves as rights holders and how their rights are compromised by ageism. Almost 40% of respondents indicated that they feel they had been treated unfairly on the basis of their age at some point in the past.¹³

10.2. In our Budget 2023 submission we called for funding for an awareness campaign to combat ageism. We are delighted that IHREC were subsequently resourced to deliver a campaign during 2024 and Age & Opportunity contributed as part of the Advisory Group.

10.3. To add value to this investment we recommend that Budget 2025 provide specific funding for the development of Age Awareness training (similar to the HSEland Children First E-Learning programme) for relevant staff of public bodies and all who are working with older people in a caring capacity.

11. Value Added Tax on arts services

11.1. VAT on engaging with arts consultants/contractors is set at the highest rate of 23%. We regularly work with such contractors to deliver our work nationally and this VAT rate is a barrier to engaging with them. Therefore, we recommend that the arts services VAT rate is brought in line with the hospitality and tourism, as well as hairdressing industries. Since art is considered a public good as is reflected in state support, it would make sense to bring the rate in line with those other services.

¹³ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rights-and-Duty-Final-Report-PDF-online.pdf>

12. Support for the Community and Voluntary Sector

12.1. Every year, Age & Opportunity, along with approximately 35,000 other organisations, negotiate the complexity of multiple funding streams and Service Level Agreements across several different government departments and agencies.

12.2. We support the call, led by The Wheel on behalf of the sector, that funding should be provided on a multi-annual, full-cost-recovery basis. This would consider the need for organisations to fund core costs, pay staff adequately, train and develop staff, fund increasing governance and compliance requirements and make provision for pension contributions where appropriate.

12.3. We recommend that Budget 2025 provide for a 10% uplift across funded organisations to provide for core costs as a move towards a full-cost-recovery model of funding.

12.4. We welcomed the increase in the VAT compensation scheme in Budget 2024, from €5 million to €10 million. We recommend that Budget 2025 further increase the cap to €20 million as requested by The Wheel in view of the major contribution that charities make to society.

12.5. As an organisation with first-hand experience of participation in several EU funded projects, we also support the measures proposed by The Wheel to remove some of the barriers for the Community and Voluntary sector in relation to applying for and managing EU funding.

13. Summary of Recommendations

- 13.1. That Budget 2025 resource the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older Persons.
- 13.2. That pension reform includes benchmarking of the State Pension as pledged in the current programme for government.
- 13.3. That older persons living alone, renters, those living in older housing and those without central heating are prioritised for home improvement, energy efficiency and fuel allowance schemes.
- 13.4. That funding is made available to implement the Statutory Homecare Scheme, as promised in the Programme for Government.
- 13.5. That funding is significantly increased for facilities and delivery of primary, community and home care and support.
- 13.6. That Budget 2025 resource increased access to personal assistance services including extension of eligibility to disabled persons over 65.
- 13.7. That age friendly infrastructure and actions should be a consideration for any public funding allocated for public spaces, community centres, venues and events.
- 13.8. That funding is directed to making public transport more accessible, convenient and safe for older persons, especially in rural Ireland.
- 13.9. That the Community Centres Investment Fund is continued with an emphasis on retrofitting to reduce heating and lighting costs which currently act as a barrier to community led social activities.
- 13.10. That Budget 2025 should increase investment, through a National Project for Public Spaces, for community led development of enabling environments for physical activity and recreation and a showcase for examples of best practice.
- 13.11. That all Departments are sufficiently resourced to ensure public services remain accessible to all citizens, not just those who are online.
- 13.12. That the telephone support allowance is increased to support internet connectivity via smartphone.
- 13.13. That Budget 2025 invest in digital infrastructure to ensure that all citizens have access to reliable, quality, high-speed broadband.

13.14. That increased investment in community infrastructure is provided for, including energy efficient retrofitting, to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of indoor and outdoor public spaces.

13.15. That Budget 2025 provide resources to support the groups who play a crucial role in the social life of older persons, including practical supports for groups to access SICAP funding for lifelong learning opportunities.

13.16. That increased resources are directed to promote participation in meaningful activities for older persons in residential and social care settings including a framework of Continued Professional Development for all staff in care settings and the resourcing of a national organisation to facilitate greater participation in activities that suit people's needs, preferences and capacities.

13.17. That funding is directed towards increasing supports for older persons in how they access the arts in Ireland, including the establishment of specific age friendly training for those working in arts settings and artists who wish to work with older persons in social and health care settings.

13.18. That funding is made available for the development of Age Awareness training (similar to the HSEland Children First E-Learning programme) for relevant staff of public bodies and all who are working with older people in a caring capacity.

13.19. That the Value Added Tax rate for arts services is brought in line with the hospitality and tourism sectors.

13.20. That the VAT Compensation Scheme be retained and the fund be increased to €20m annually, to deliver an approximate 50% rebate on the overall claims from the charity sector.

13.21. That Government increase funding to community and voluntary organisations by 10% to close the pay parity gap, put funding for services on a sustainable, multi annual footing, and re-link salaries in the sector with public service pay scales.

Our recommendations support the Sustainable Development Goals.



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