

Enabling Environments

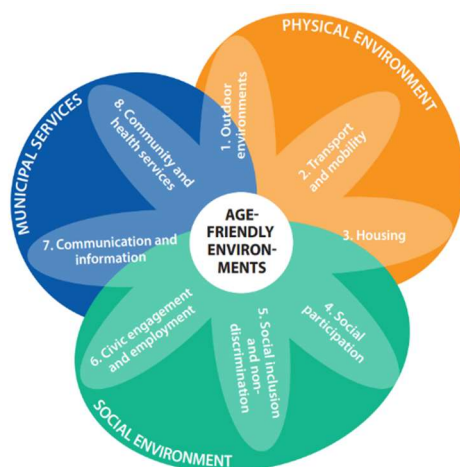
Enable age friendly physical, social, cultural and administrative environments

Policy Position Paper December 2024

Introduction

Age-friendly environments are described by Age Platform Europe as empowering us to age in better physical and mental health, promote our social inclusion and participation and help us maintain our autonomy and a good quality of life. This requires action and collaboration by stakeholders across a wide range of sectors.

As we age, the importance of environments that can support and enhance our autonomy, security and quality of life becomes more of a priority. And in Ireland, the need for age-friendly environments is underscored by demographic trends: the Central Statistics Office (CSO) projects that the proportion of the population aged 65 and older will rise from 13.3% in 2016 to between 23.9% and 27.4% by 2051.



Source: WHO Regional Office for Europe (2016)

For over 35 years, Age & Opportunity has worked towards creating age friendly environments across Ireland. Our actions have been primarily in the domain of social participation through our Arts, Active and Engage Programmes. However, our policy, research and evaluation activities also feed into the other domains within the social and physical environments as identified here by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Social Environment

The first goal of Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy is 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'. This goal reflects Article 27.1 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights which states that everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Age & Opportunity provides a range of opportunities for older people who want to get more involved in arts and culture, sport and physical activity, civic engagement and personal development. It is our learned experience that more policy attention on age friendly social environments would increase participation by different groups of older people. Age & Opportunity creates opportunities for consultation with a diverse range of older people to this end and encourages policy makers to listen to older people and organisations about the challenges experienced in relation to mobility, social isolation, access to services, and engagement in cultural and civic activities. In addition to Age & Opportunity initiatives, Ireland has a wide range of evidence based social interventions targeted at diverse groups of older people, but lack of funding and structural barriers mean that delivery is often fragmented and sporadic.

Civic Engagement and Employment

An age friendly social environment is one that values the contributions of older adults. In 2020 TILDA highlighted the 'vibrant and important contribution' made by the older generation through providing help and resources to both older and younger family members and through volunteering and active social participation in society. Fostering a supportive environment for older volunteers should include lifelong learning and training opportunities, accessible information, resources for community outreach and recognition.

For those older adults who wish to continue working, age friendly policies should be implemented across all sectors. Pointing out that the age-profile of the workforce is likely to increase significantly, recent research from DCU highlights the importance of part-time work, job-sharing and home-working options as well as access to lifelong education and upskilling to meet workplace changes.

Physical Environment

Outdoor Public Environments

In 2021 Age & Opportunity conducted research on how older people use public spaces for sport and physical activity. Our research found that 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, freshwater taps, etc. and safety concerns caused by poor lighting and footpath provision were also highlighted. Our research suggests that increased investment in infrastructure is necessary to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of open space.

Indoor Public Environments

Through our Programme delivery we see the importance of age friendly venues from the smallest community centres to the largest public attractions. Older people's groups invest significantly in their local spaces as meeting venues and deserve the highest standards in relation to the facilities and programmes provided. We have advocated for age friendly infrastructure and actions to be a consideration for any public funding allocated for public spaces, community centres, venues and events. We have also highlighted to policy makers that these publicly owned assets be retrofitted to reduce heating and lighting costs which we can see currently act as a barrier to community led age friendly social activities.

Transport and Mobility

Our delivery of programmes all over the country for many years has highlighted to us that, despite the Free Travel Scheme available to all citizens aged 66 and over, 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. As our population grows older (and we strive to meet our climate targets), further investment to making public transport more accessible, convenient and safe, especially in rural Ireland, is critical to developing age friendly environments that benefit all of us.

Housing

It is not just in the public realm that policy impacts on how age friendly one's physical environment is. Despite Government's commitments to ageing in place, the TILDA Report on Housing Conditions for Older People published in 2018 states that over half of adults aged 50 years and over experience some housing problem. While improvements and retrofits can resolve some of these housing problems, we also need a greater choice of housing options that allow people to move house in order to live more comfortably, and as independently as possible, within their own community as envisaged in Ireland's 2019 Housing Options for Our Ageing Population Policy Statement.

Wrapping a suite of housing adaptations, medical, personal care and community services around the home should be part of implementing commitments to ageing in place. The Alliance of Age Sector Organisations, of which Age & Opportunity is a member have highlighted the need for a programme of strategic capital investment in care and support for older people, including Housing with Supports initiatives, to be delivered in line with demographic projections.

Administrative Environment

In an increasingly digital world, the delivery of services to citizens is not always age friendly. 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. 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. At the same time, those who feel intimidated by digital services could be helped to address fears and improve skills through practical training and support.

Policy Implementation

Ireland has made significant policy commitments to age friendly environments but as evidenced by Taking Stock, the report of the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, implementation remains a problem. While policies provide a strategic framework, local authorities and community organisations often face financial constraints that limit their ability to execute these plans effectively. Age & Opportunity believe that adequate funding and resources should be made available to local authorities, NGOs and community groups to realise age friendly environments for all citizens across all domains.

Age & Opportunity is working to enable age friendly physical, social, cultural and administrative environments by:

- Challenging ageism and delivering age awareness training to older people and service providers.
- Raising awareness among older people and service providers about the rights of all older people in relation to economic, social and cultural participation.
- Creating opportunities for older people to have their voices heard by relevant policy and decision makers.
- Highlighting the contribution that older adults make to create age friendly environments.
- Calling for increased investment in age friendly infrastructure and actions to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of indoor and outdoor public spaces.
- Calling for increased investment in home and community supports and adaptations that make ageing in place a real option for more older people.
- Calling attention to transport issues that continue to act as a barrier to participation.
- Supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector call for an uplift in funding for organisations and groups to close the pay parity gap and put funding for services on a sustainable, multi annual footing.
- Calling for 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.
- Recommending that publicly owned community assets be energy retrofitted to reduce heating and lighting costs.
- Recommending that access to services should never be 'digital only'.
- Advocating for practical training and supports to increase digital literacy and participation among older people.

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Age & Opportunity's policy positions support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals