

Connectivity and Participation

Meaningful participation at all stages of older age

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Principles of Fundamental Human Rights for Older Persons includes the charge, under the heading of fulfilment, that older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential. This right is reflected in the first goal of Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) which 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'. The policy areas addressed under this goal include employment and retirement, education and lifelong learning, volunteering, cultural and social participation and transport.

This is what Age & Opportunity understand as 'meaningful participation' – the right to engage in and shape the economic, educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society, recognising that needs, preferences and capacities are different for all of us and may change further as we age.

To this end, for over 35 years, we have promoted greater involvement in the areas of arts and culture, sport and physical activity, civic engagement and lifelong learning. Therefore, it is primarily in these areas that we aim to use our evidence and experience to influence policy. In this brief we highlight some policy actions to increase meaningful participation of all older persons in Ireland.

Reducing Barriers to Meaningful Participation

For many older persons, meaningful participation can be increased by reducing poverty, resourcing an accessible built environment and the public transport to reach it, proximity of services and amenities, opportunities for lifelong learning and creativity, thoughtful programming and a diverse range of informal opportunities to create meaningful social connections. Continued investment and capacity building in these areas is crucial to reduce barriers and improve engagement for the majority of those who live at home without need for care. Furthermore, increased consultation is essential to identify and address less obvious barriers for those who appear to have the ability and means to pursue opportunities for themselves.

Older people with disabilities

Older people who age with or into disability face additional barriers to meaningful participation. The Irish researcher and policy analyst Ann Leahy points out that in Ireland ‘separate approaches to policy on ageing and on disability mean that older disabled people generally do not benefit from the approaches and models of disability that apply to disabled people more generally.’ This is reinforced by an age division at 65 within our health system for provision of practical supports and services. For example, eligibility for personal assistance services ceases at the age of 65 meaning that many older persons accessing home care and support have no formal support to participate in activities of their own choosing. This impacts on older persons who age with a disability as well as those who age into disability and is inherently ageist, implying that this cohort do not want or need to participate in meaningful activities.

Older people in care

Age & Opportunity research reflects findings in international studies that meaningful activities in care settings facilitate relationships. They also help confer a sense of achievement and maintain a sense of self. These findings support the aspiration of 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. This involves tailoring care to respond to people’s interests, abilities, history and personality. Age & Opportunity believe that, in care settings, staff should take time establishing what is considered valuable by individuals and ensure that these activities are prioritised as an essential component of quality of life in care.

We also propose that the establishment of a national organisation modelled on the UK based NAPA (National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People) could support care services to promote activity, arts, and engagement. On a practical level it would help to meet Standard 18 of the National Quality Standards by facilitating greater opportunities for participation in leisure activities that suit the needs, preferences and capacities of older persons in these settings.

Age & Opportunity and Meaningful Participation

This policy position ties in with Age & Opportunity’s recent and current work related to meaningful participation (The Arts and Creative Charter for Older People, A Toolkit for Arts and Creativity in Care Settings, Covid-19 reflections and research reports on social exclusion related to digital accessibility and public spaces). These research projects involved substantial engagement with older persons and have formed the basis for policy recommendations we have made in submissions for consideration by Oireachtas Committees and in our annual Budget Submissions.

Age & Opportunity is working towards meaningful participation by:

- Promoting recognition that participation in the cultural life of one's community, including meaningful activity, is a right and prioritise this right as an essential component of quality of life for all older persons including those in care settings through proactive regulation, incentives and funding.
- Providing and encouraging provision of greater opportunities for older persons to participate in public decisions that affect participation in society, hold decision-makers to account and provide feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of actions by various decision-makers.
- Supporting measures to reduce the risk of poverty for older persons.
- Advocating for increased investment in infrastructure in our natural and built environments to reduce barriers to access and use by older persons.
- Recommending actions to improve public transport, particularly in rural areas, in consultation with older persons living in these areas.
- Conducting actions and research to increase digital inclusion.
- Recommending that all existing opportunities for education, training and lifelong learning area available to adults of all ages and prioritise older persons as a target group under Ireland's Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP).
- Nurturing a social model of disability in older age that enhances autonomy, personhood and connectivity in all care settings and extend eligibility for personal assistance services to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.
- Recommending a national organisation for activity providers across Ireland tasked with supporting care services to promote meaningful participation.

References

- United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1991) – [click here](#)
- Government of Ireland (2013), National Positive Ageing Strategy
- Blood, Easterbrook, Robinson and Gwyther (2021), Evaluation of Age & Opportunity's Care Hubs of Arts & Creative Excellence Initiative, Imogen Blood and Associates
- Leahy, Ann (2022), Submission to The Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in response to Call for Submissions on the rights of older persons with disabilities.
- Age & Opportunity, 2003. Home from Home? The views of Residents on Social Gain and Quality of Life: A Study in Three Care Centres for Older People.
- HIQA National Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People – [click here](#)

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