

Connectivity and Participation

Challenging Social Exclusion

Policy Position Paper August 2024

Introduction

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.

Age & Opportunity challenges social exclusion 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 just some of the drivers of social exclusion that we encounter in our work with older persons, and we propose policy actions to address them.

Ageism and Social Exclusion

Underpinning all our work is a mission to confront ageism in all its dimensions – stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, and in all its forms – institutional, interpersonal and self-directed. Age & Opportunity believe that ageism is a key driver of social exclusion. We call on Government to take ageism seriously and to take meaningful action to counteract its influence on social exclusion.

The current Programme for Government highlights the concept of an Age Friendly Ireland. However, it is considered under Universal Healthcare, with a focus on 'accommodation and future healthcare needs'. We maintain that promoting health and care as the defining policy

priorities related to older persons is ageist. It perpetuates social exclusion by failing to recognise older persons as full citizens with the same rights to civic, political, economic, social and cultural participation as everybody else. We have called for a full Ministerial portfolio related to older persons which would promote social inclusion in all areas of Irish society and not focus just on health and care. We have also called for an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People to ensure that older people are treated on an equal basis with the rest of the population.

Poverty and Social Exclusion

Poverty is also 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.

Structural Barriers

Through our programmes and research, Age & Opportunity have identified and highlighted other factors that can exacerbate social exclusion. In 2023 our research into older person's perceptions about themselves as rights holders found that older people are disproportionately impacted by poor public facilities, inadequate public transport and policies relating to driving licence renewals and insurance. It also recommended that 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.

The Digital Divide

Older people are also more disadvantaged by the delivery of information and services online. In 2020 the Central Statistics Office reported that 29% of 60 to 74-year-olds in

Ireland have never used the internet. This was in comparison to 1% of those aged 16–29. In October the same year, Age & Opportunity spoke to almost 900 older people 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.

Peer researchers indicated that the policy of pushing all services online is a driver of social exclusion amongst their contemporaries.

Increased and responsive investment in digital literacy and lifelong learning is welcome but should not be limited to within the workforce and to literacy/digital literacy as stated in the current Programme for Government. Many older persons who were not served well by the education system deserve a chance to access all kinds of learning on all kinds of platforms for self-fulfilment and greater participation in society.

Creating Communities

Social inclusion is also about belonging to the communities created by social and cultural events. Year on year, participants in Age & Opportunity's arts, sports, physical activity and lifelong learning initiatives report feeling more connected to their communities as a result of participation in these initiatives. International research highlights their benefit to wellbeing and self-actualisation. Age & Opportunity research carried out in 2020 found that welcoming and accessible buildings, as well as appropriate programming are key to participation in community activities. Older people are also key to providing community activities as evidenced by high numbers of older volunteers in Ireland. The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) recommends that 'efforts to increase volunteering and social participation among older adults should be encouraged as these activities provide benefits not only to the participants but to society.'

Ageing in Place

One of the most acute impacts of social exclusion is loneliness. In 2019 TILDA reported that participants aged 75 years and older were more likely than younger participants to report being moderately lonely. Research carried out by Age & Opportunity with over 700 groups in 2020 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. This makes ageing in place a very important factor for combating social exclusion.

Age & Opportunity believe that Government should prioritise its commitments to create more housing options along a continuum of care. We also recommend significant increases for primary, community and home care and support for all older citizens who wish to continue living full lives in their own homes. This should include provision of sufficient resources to extend personal assistance services to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability so that all can participate fully in community life.

Age & Opportunity are working to combat social exclusion by:

- Promoting a fundamental shift in thinking about ageism and older people which will lead to a more equal society for all as we age.
- Recommending a human rights based approach across all government policy seeking to address social exclusion. This includes recognising the right of all citizens to participate fully in the life of their community and resourcing all the supports needed to realise this for all citizens throughout their lives. It also includes a commitment to consult older people when policy decisions are being made.
- Seeking the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People. This office would ensure that Ireland's various policy commitments relevant to

older people are meaningfully monitored and that older people are treated with respect and on an equal basis with the rest of the population.

- Supporting the call for a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.
- Supporting actions to reduce the risk of poverty for older people by calling for delivery on the commitment to benchmark the State pension to a ‘basic level of pension adequacy’, and facilitating greater choices related to extended working lives.
- Recommending that government and financial services be inclusive and accessible to all. This involves reducing bureaucracy and eliminating any other barriers, including the digital gap and institutional discrimination.
- Increasing opportunities for meaningful consultation with older people to identify and address barriers to social inclusion.
- Recommending faster implementation of commitments relating to housing and care continuums which would enable more older people to age in place.
- Promoting a social rather than medical model of disability and recommending eligibility for personal assistance services to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.
- Researching and recommending additional focus on and investment in infrastructure to reduce the barriers preventing older people from accessing and feeling welcome and comfortable in open spaces and public buildings. Furthermore, we recommend policies and practices designed to combat social exclusion of older people in consideration for any public funding for venues and events.
- Supporting more accessible, affordable, and flexible transport systems in both rural and urban areas.
- Recommending that any differential treatment of older people in relation to driving licensing or insurance is evidence based.
- Recommending that all existing opportunities for education, training and lifelong learning area be available to older people and prioritise older people as a target group under Ireland’s Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

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