

Diversity and Inclusion

Inform social models of care that support diversity and personal choice

Policy Position Paper December 2024

Introduction

As an organisation that challenges ageism and promotes greater participation of older people, Age & Opportunity fully supports Ireland's progress towards social rather than just medical models of care. Our work to promote greater participation of all older people in arts and culture, sport and physical activity, lifelong learning and civic engagement contributes directly to furthering social models that go beyond health and personal care, see beyond the difficulties and fully consider and include each unique individual, allowing us to make decisions for ourselves.

Personal choice is a critical component of effective social care. We should all have the right to make decisions about our own care, including the type of services we receive, how and where those services are delivered, and who provides them. Empowering individuals to make choices about care can lead to better outcomes, increased satisfaction, and a higher quality of life as well as aligning with the UN Principles for Older Persons – independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity that should be central to modern care practices.

Social Models of Care and Diversity

Older people bring diverse backgrounds, customs, abilities, and experiences to care settings. Some differences are evident, while others are not. Factors that contribute to diversity include geographic and cultural background, race and ethnicity, gender identity, gender

expression, and sexual orientation, preferred language(s), religious and family traditions, education and socioeconomic background, neurodiversity, cognitive, sensory, and physical abilities.

In 2020 Age & Opportunity commissioned a film for the Bealtaine Festival which celebrates creativity as we age. This film, entitled 'Where do all the old gays go?' highlighted the worry about care options for those who feared that their preferences and life experiences would not be considered in care settings. This anxiety reflects a perceived lack of sensitivity to the specific needs of specific older people. Social models of care would recognise that all older people have different capacities, needs and preferences and would focus on how care can be improved to embrace and support diversity and inclusion.

Social Models of Care and Personal Choice

In 2020 a Policy Dialogue about home care pointed out that in Ireland, the medical model supporting services for older adults is very different to the social model underpinning services for disabled adults under 65. It claimed that giving dependent older people more responsibility and providing opportunities for us to exercise choice about services and supports is not central to current thinking and provision.

As well as recognising and adapting care to respect each person's values and preferences, social models of care would also serve to combat ageist assumptions that those over 65 no longer wish or are able to participate fully in society. Access to services and supports should not be determined by age. We believe that current discriminations in policy and practice will continue as long as disabled or dependent people are treated differently when they are over 65. Diversity and personal choice are just as important for older people as other adults and social models of care should be the norm for all regardless of age or background.

In this regard, and with a focus on participation and personal choice, Age & Opportunity have consistently highlighted that disabled people over 65 are not eligible for personal assistance. Distinct from home care or support, we believe that eligibility for personal assistance is a crucial part of a social model of care in all settings as it facilitates choice, participation and inclusion in society.

Support for Carers

Because ageism is so pervasive, well-intentioned care providers can make assumptions about older people's capacities, needs and preferences and inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes. Support for individuals and organisations providing care is essential to make social models of care the norm. Age & Opportunity has delivered training to care workers in the areas of leading arts and physical activity and we have supported artists in residence in care settings. We have also been central to the Azure initiative which provides arts experiences for those with dementia and their family or home carers.

Research on our initiatives highlights that care providers need to take time establishing what is considered valuable by individuals and need planning, training, time, budget and other resources to facilitate meaningful activities and to ensure that these activities are prioritised as an essential component of quality of life in care. It also requires resources to access professional services and expertise so that the best possible experience and choice of meaningful activities can be provided.

It is our view that training should be set within a framework of Continued Professional Development for all staff in care settings and that a national network to support care setting activity coordinators would be a significant resource for care settings to promote social models of care.

A social model of care would resource family and professional carers to meet commitments made in Ireland's policy on Housing Options for our Ageing Population to continue social engagement opportunities to ensure that all older people have access to the wide range of existing services in place within communities such as libraries, amenities, shops and social services. This also requires planning guidelines for the development of residential care homes and primary care centres to ensure that they are appropriately designed and located in areas with access to transport and amenities.

Independent Commissioner on Ageing and Older Persons

Age & Opportunity are a member of both the Care Alliance and the Home Care Commission. We welcome the recent establishment of a Commission on Care and are also happy to be part of the NGO reference group informing its work. However, we believe that creating a culture of social models of care should be done from a much broader societal 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 Commissioner on Ageing and Older Persons to expand the narrative about ageing beyond health and care, tackle institutional ageism, and support the full diversity of older persons in Ireland to realise all our rights in relation to full participation in society. This role would be strengthened by a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons and would advance social models of care that support diversity and personal choice as the norm in all care settings.

Age & Opportunity is working to inform social models of care that support diversity and personal choice by:

- Challenging ageism and calling for the development of Age Awareness training for all who are working with older people in a caring capacity.
- Delivering capacity building initiatives for care providers that support social models of care and advocating for a framework of Continued Professional Development for all staff in care settings to support provision for diversity and personal choice.
- Evaluating our initiatives and highlighting the benefits of social models of care in all settings.
- Recommending support for a national network organisation for activity providers across Ireland that could support care services to promote meaningful participation.
- Advocating for greater links between all public policy frameworks on disability and on ageing.
- Advocating for a social model of care in older age that enhances autonomy, personhood and connectivity in all care settings and extends eligibility for personal assistance services to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.
- 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.

References

- United Nations (1991) Principles for Older Persons, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-principles-older-persons>
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