

Submission to the Commission on Care – November 2024

Introduction

This submission to the Commission on Care is a broad response to the request for views of the public on the provision of health and social care services and supports for older people in Ireland. It draws on Age & Opportunity's experience and insights in challenging ageism and promoting the participation by all older people in society for over 35 years. It is informed by our policy priorities which include informing social models of care that support diversity and personal choice. We trust that the views expressed here will inform the Commission's recommendations for the future development of these services and supports.

Social Models of Care

As an organisation that challenges ageism and promotes greater participation of older people, Age & Opportunity fully support 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 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 social model supporting services for older people is very different to the medical model underpinning services for people with disabilities. 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. Things are often done *for* older people rather than *by* older people or *with* older people.

Provision of options and services 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. 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. We would therefore consider the amalgamation of HSE Older Persons and HSE Disability Services as a progressive policy change that would see diversity and personal choice as just as important for those over 65 as all other adults and social models of care as 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 have 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 also 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 establishment of this Commission on Care and are happy to be part of the 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 has 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 health and social care situations.

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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