



National Positive Ageing Strategy
Submission
By
Active Retirement Network Ireland.

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Introduction

Active Retirement Ireland is a national network of over 480 local Active Retirement Associations. ARI believes that older people have the right to be full and participative members of our society. ARI combats ageism through the reality and everyday work of the self-organised local associations and the regional councils. ARI has a large voluntary base with local, regional and national voluntary committees.

The purpose of ARI is to enable retired people enjoy a full and active life and advocate for them.

ARI aims

- To promote older people as independent, self-organised and active members of their communities.
- To act as a voice for older people and their concerns at national level.
- To promote positive ageing attitudes in Ireland
- To provide support and information to the local associations of older people in our regions
- To network the local associations for peer support and information sharing

The target group are men and women over 50 years of age who are semi-retired or retired from paid or un-paid work.

Activities of the national organisation include networking days, training, information seminars and health promotion events. ARI also provide social networking events as a means of ensuring the associations build connections with each other.

Each local association is run by a local voluntary committee who plan and deliver a range of social, cultural, learning and physical activities based on what their members would like to do and their ability to participate. These activities include social networking through tea dances and evenings out; holidays and short breaks; physical activities such as swimming, bowls and walking; learning activities include IT, intergenerational projects, art and crafts. All the activities are aimed at keeping older people active and well. Active Retirement Associations are a lifeline for many older people who would otherwise feel isolated and lonely.

Definition of Older People

For the purpose of this submission ARI defines “older people” as those aged over 50 years. This age is chosen more as an age when people are most likely to take up retirement or semi-retirement and it can be a point in people’s lives at which their circumstances begin to change in ways that have implications for the future.

ARI recognises that people 50 years and upwards belong to very different groups with different needs and aspirations. For this submission we include our members in two broad groups;

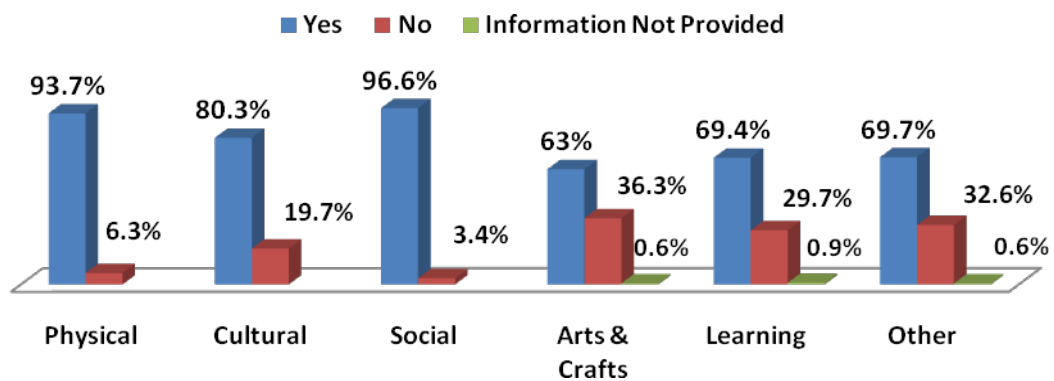
Active Age – older people who are still healthy and active, leading full and independent lives.

Transitional Group – older people who are in a transitional phase between a healthy, active lifestyle and frailty. They may begin to have chronic health complaints which can impact on their lifestyle but still continue to live independently.

In a recent survey on membership ARI found that the members were engaged in a range of different activities depending on their ability

Membership Survey 2009

Figure1: Level of Involvement in Activities



Context

Ireland's ageing population is growing with 467,926 people now aged 65 and over, the majority of these come in 65-75 age groups. There are 708,348 aged between 50 and 64 years of age giving a figure of 1,176,274 men and women in the age groups that ARI is concerned with. (CSO 2008)

ARI does not view ageing as a problem or crisis but as the "demographic bounty" it is. Professor E. O'Shea NUIG termed the description of older people as demographic bounty in 2006 when he described the contribution of older people to Irish society in areas such as caring in the family, caring for relatives, voluntary work and contribution to local communities.

ARI with over 22,000 members in over 480 local associations shows that ageing should be embraced and that old age does not stop you participating to the full in economic and social life. ARI believes that a NPAS that takes an age centred approach to policies and programmes will ensure that older people are entitled to full access to services without fear of age discrimination.

However the reality is that ARI members often find themselves affected by negative attitudes to their age coming from service providers and family. Ageism is a big problem and attitudes to growing old are often negative and discriminatory. Age discrimination has been identified as a common experience by the NCAOP (2005) in health care and social services leading to isolation and exclusion.

Social exclusion in older people leads to depression and mental health deterioration; ARI promotes social networking combined with a range of mental and physical activities as a mechanism to improve the quality of life of older people, especially those living alone and older people who live alone are often more vulnerable, more prone to isolation.

- ✚ 25% of all people over the age of 65 live alone with this increasing to 33% for those over 70 years.
- ✚ 66% of the total number of older women living in rural communities, live alone with 36% of all older men in rural Ireland living alone.

At present most public sector resources for older people are focussed on those with the most severe care needs. The NPAS will need to address ways in which each Government Department and local agency can contribute to the provision of services and provide a more joined up approach to assessing and meetings older peoples' needs.

The UN has done some important work in addressing ageing in a global context and has been a champion in promoting a society for all ages. ARI acknowledges the five broad principles of the UN

- Independence
- Participation
- Care
- Self-fulfilment
- Dignity

ARI welcomes the proposal that these principles should underpin the National Positive Ageing Strategy. A NPAS would provide a co-ordinated approach to older people's issues and give clarity on the rights and entitlements of older people and put in place practical actions for policy and ongoing consultation with older people. The NPAS should reflect the view of older people through meaning consultation with older people and their organisations.

This submission will focus on three key areas of concern of the members of ARI. ARI is also a member of the Older & Bolder Alliance who will be submitting a more detailed paper.

The 3 areas are:

 **Home and Community**

 **Getting out and about to social, learning and networking activities,**

 **Income**

Home and Community

In a recent Older & Bolder consultation meeting on the concerns of older people on independence, participants felt that independence is associated with being able to live at home, as well as being able to participate in all aspects of life and society. For many people their home is the centre of their life.

Issues for ARI:

It is important that people feel safe in their home and their community. As people get older and retire from work they spend more time at home and in their communities yet many of ARI members feel removed from decision making about the community.

A badly lit, littered and vandalised community can suggest an unfriendly and unsafe environment and create fear among older people. Lack of security devices and monitoring services have resulted in older people living in fear in many areas and this has been aggravated by the withdrawal of the Home Security Scheme.

Lack of public transport and rural transport equally acts as a barrier to older people who do not have access to private transport from taking part in their community.

These issues impact on the quality of life of older people by preventing them from being involved in the community to the extent they wish.

Our Vision

To have a more cohesive community where people are friendly, where different generations interact and where all people take care of their environment. This can be achieved through more whole community events and projects in local areas and encouragement of older people to help organise them. Also to develop more intergenerational activities between schools, youth centres and community projects such as ARAs.

Agencies must engage and understand the community otherwise they cannot effectively plan or deliver effective services tailor made to the needs of older people. They will also be unable to mobilise the potential in the community on volunteers and self help.

ARI asks local authorities and agencies to work more closely with existing networks and groups of older people to understand the barriers to accessing mainstream services and identify gaps in current provision.

Public transport and rural transport schemes must be available after hours as an inclusive public transport is essential to independence and participation.

The model presented by Co. Louth as the first age friendly county is worth exploring on a nationwide basis.

Co Louth have taken a whole county approach working in collaboration with relevant organisations and agencies to put in place an age friendly county plan which includes meaningful consultation mechanisms with older people and their groups.

Housing

In April 2004 the Western Region of Active Retirement Ireland commissioned research which was conducted by the Centre for Health Promotion Studies at NUIG. This survey was entitled “Attitudes Towards Old Age and Older People”.

One of the topics looked at was the need for older people to live in their own homes for as long as possible, rather than having to move to institutional care. This is something which is inherent in many older people and surely should be seen as a right rather than a problem. One of the ways that this can be achieved is by the provision of adequate Sheltered Housing in various communities.

There are various categories of Sheltered Housing:

Social Housing - means tested and provided by local authorities

Commercial - commercially driven with sometimes scant regard to the genuine needs of older people.

Charitable - founded and maintained by altruistic societies. These in the main are well founded and in most have a representative from the residents on the working committee.

The one area that would need to be addressed with developers and planners is involvement from older people from the very concept - the planning stage- onwards and on to membership on the committee.

Most, if not all problems associated with housing for older people need not arise if older people had been involved from the design stage - the old story of older people being invisible or really not knowing “what is good for them!”.

Getting out and about to social, learning and networking activities

ARI promotes the idea of older people doing and planning things for themselves. With over 480 self run local groups, ARI is proof that older people with the right support, information and resources are ready and able to organise their own lives.

Issues for ARI:

International studies have shown that isolation and inactivity can speed up the ageing process. As people retire their ability to maintain a healthy social network can decrease as opportunities, such as work, for social contact decrease. As people continue to age, isolation may also be increased by mobility problems and loss of loved ones.

Leisure and learning activities can not only provide opportunities to create new social networks to stave off isolation but can also help maintain good physical and mental health.

Access to IT can provide instant networking and open up global communications for older people. However many older people fear technology and believe they do not have the skills or confidence to use it.

Our Vision:

To encourage older people to engage in hobbies and such activities which improve physical and mental health and boost confidence. Meeting older people's learning needs must be done in a co-ordinated and integrated way with consultation between learning providers and older peoples' groups.

How older people learn must be taken into account especially with IT as large groups and mixed ability groups can act as a barrier to learning. One to one tuition is often favoured at the early stage of learning.

More work should be done between the libraries and older people's groups to encourage more use of IT.

Programmes such as Log –On and Learn need to more widespread and active participation of older people needs to be sought in communities.

Older people need to be able to access easily non-vocational interests and learn new skills through a better partnership way of provision between the VECs and ARAs.

Community education which provides for the non-formal learning in communities should have older people stated as a target group thus attracting the resources needed.

Programmes such as the Go for Life and activities run in local ARAs such as bowls, tea dancing need to be resourced as a quality of life programme rather than seen as purely hobby type interests.

Arts and culture play a huge role in the personal development of older people; festivals such as the Bealtaine Festival run by Age & Opportunity provide support and an outlet for older people's groups to engage in the arts.

Income

Issues for ARI

Income is strongly interlinked with all aspects of life. With people living longer, healthier lives the reality of old age is rapidly changing. Some people do not want to retire at 65 others find themselves unable to retire and many others cannot wait to be free of the daily chore of work and are ready to move to another stage of life.

Adjustments to the age of retirement will require a careful approach and ARI is concerned that one of the solutions will be to increase the retirement age. Retirement needs to be a choice that people make and not be driven by purely economic argument. Adapting retirement ages to suit the fact that we have longer and healthier lives portray policies that are only concerned with one's contribution to the labour market. More emphasis needs to be put on viewing retirement as another phase in the life cycle; one that allows more time for active citizenship and community/family participation.

The state old age pension contributory and non-contributory are the only means of income for the majority of older people in Ireland. When supplemented with supports such as the Household Benefit Package and medical cost support older people are managing to keep a certain quality of life.

However being able to manage on a state pension can still be a struggle for older people with rising costs in fuel and goods.

Clear, easy to follow and accessible information is essential for older people in knowing their rights and entitlements.

Our vision:

To ensure that older people continue to keep the current level of income and to ensure that older people have help to manage and optimise their income through sound independent financial advice on issues such as those arising out of the economic downturn.

To encourage local financial and legal services to consider provision of concessionary rates for older people on legal and financial advice.

Ensure that through the Citizens Information Centres that people are aware of the benefits and services available to them.

For agencies to make better use of local groups such as ARAs and the post office, as points of information.

A Positive Ageing Strategy should provide a co-ordinated and integrated approach to older people's issues and provide clarity on the rights and entitlements of older people. The NPAS should reflect the view of older people through a meaningful consultation with older people themselves and the organisations of which they are members.

It is essential that the NPAS links to other strategies such as the Garda Strategy on Older People and Partnership for the Arts, the strategic plan of the Arts Council.

Ends