

Ageing matters *in Ireland*

Make your vote count



Support Age Action's election demands **Pages 4-5**



End the two-tier health system **Pages 6-7**
Pension reform cannot wait **Page 12**



For all older people

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PUBLISHER	Age Action Ireland Ltd
ADDRESS	30-31 Lower Camden St, Dublin 2
TELEPHONE	+353 1 475-6989
FAX	+353 1 475-6011
EMAIL	info@ageaction.ie
WEBSITE	www.ageaction.ie
AGE ACTION IRELAND LTD	Company Limited by Guarantee Registered in Ireland No. 198571 Charity No. CHY 10583
CHIEF EXECUTIVE	Eamon Timmins
PUBLISHING & INFORMATION	Justin Moran & Gerard Scully
SUB-EDITING AND DESIGN	Catherine Osborn

■ Cover photo: Posters from political parties during the Fiscal Treaty referendum in 2012

Put ageing on the election agenda

The upcoming general election is a golden opportunity for each of us to make a difference. If we fail to grab this chance with both hands, the current generation of older people could pay a steep price over the next five years, and everyone – young and old – will certainly pay the price for decades to come.

General elections are important, not just because voters have the opportunity to give their verdict on their current TDs and aspiring politicians, but also because they get the chance to tell the political parties what issues matter most to them.

The political parties will try to tell you what the big issues are. Management of the economy, homelessness and job creation are among the key areas. All are important.

Planning for an ageing demographic

But how many parties have explained how they will plan for Ireland's ageing demographic or how they will work to meet the changing needs of our ageing population? Older people are not "bed blockers" or "demographic time bombs". They are an important (and growing) part of our population with real needs which have been largely ignored by policy makers.

As a result, our systems are failing to meet the needs of our older people. Without major changes, how will Ireland fare in 2046 when the number of over-65s is expected to have trebled to almost 1.5 million?

By ignoring the need to plan for our ageing population, previous administrations have been sleep walking Ireland into a major crisis. General Election 2016 is an important opportunity to provide a wake-up call.

Candidates and parties need to be told that creation of a truly age-friendly society is essential. This will be the criteria by which we judge candidates when we go into the polling booth. The "grey vote" can no longer be fooled by glib catch cries or the promise of a few euro.

Age Action has published our election demands (see pages 5 and 6). We have met all the major parties and have organised regional hustings meetings around the country. We have also teamed up with other older people's organisations for the "Earn Our Vote" campaign.

But, ultimately, the real power rests with you. The politicians are calling to your home looking for something very valuable – your vote. Don't give it away cheaply. Make sure every candidate you meet is told of the importance of the ageing agenda.

— Eamon Timmins



■ The health needs of older people are not the cause of the crisis in our hospitals.

HSE blames older people for hospital crisis

“The A&Es, they have left them as if the people who go into them are a lesser breed than those who can afford to go elsewhere and that’s wrong.”

Speaking to RTÉ’s *Morning Ireland*, Age Action member Beth Nunan summed up the crisis in our emergency departments in a single sentence.

As *Ageing Matters* goes to print, Cork University Hospital is cancelling operations. The Mater hospital in Dublin is asking people to stay away from their emergency department and Beaumont is postponing surgeries.

Already, in the first 20 days of January, 64,952 people have attended our emergency departments, up almost ten per cent on the first 20 days of 2015.

The HSE knows the reason why, telling the media: “Of particular significance has been the marked increase in the proportion of older persons attending emergency departments. These patients typically have a much higher requirement for admission.”

Not to blame

“Let’s be clear,” said Age Action’s Justin Moran. “Older people are not to blame for the crisis in our emergency departments. No one is going to hospital because they’re in good health.

“This crisis is the result of systemic underfunding of our emergency departments and the complete failure to roll out a functioning primary care system.

“Older people are going to hospital emergency departments because the primary care facilities that should be

there, that we were promised, that we were told were coming, never appeared.”

The Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) has warned that cancellation of operations will not solve overcrowding.

“It is a shameful situation,” said Dr Ray Walley, IMO president. The root of the problem lies in the lack of capacity in the system as a whole and until that is addressed the problem will reoccur with cancellation of elective surgery becoming routine.

“The crisis is a result of conscious choices taken by ministers and health administrators and its solution will come about when different choices are made.

“In the coming election every political party must be challenged as to whether they believe recurring crises like these are acceptable to us as a society.”



■ Age Action members campaigning ahead of the 2007 General Election.

Parties must listen to the 88 per cent

Age Action has warned that every political party must listen to older voters in the coming election. The organisation pointed out that turnout among over-65s at the last election was 88 per cent, far higher than the national average.

“The old clichés are true,” said Justin Moran of Age Action. “Older people are more likely to turn out to vote and with almost half a million older people in this state their votes are going to prove decisive

in constituencies right across Ireland.

“In our manifesto, Age Action sets out three simple, effective and achievable proposals for the next government, ways in which they can change the lives of every older person in Ireland, and all of us who hope to grow old.

“These are issues any candidate or party serious about leading this country needs to be able to address in the run-up to this election and our members will be watching to see how they respond.”

Gerard Howlin, a public affairs consultant and former adviser to Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, points to the

medical card protests as first showing the political strength of Ireland’s older voters.

Power of ‘grey vote’

“Older people actually have the capacity to be politically very powerful in a way I don’t think was ever actually appreciated before that,” he said. “Everyone knew they were extremely influential but what became apparent was that if messed with they will actually snap back.”

Mr Howlin also believes that traditional loyalties among older voters could be changing.

“Just because somebody used to vote Fianna Fáil or

Age Action's election priorities

► Community care

We want an immediate investment of €33 million in home supports to cater for growing demand and to provide services outside normal working hours, but that's not enough. We need a right – in law – to community care to ensure older people can stay at home as long as possible.

► State Pension reform

We need the State Pension system reformed. The changes to PRSI bands have taken huge sums of money off our pensioners. They must be reversed and a long-term benchmark put in place to ensure the State Pension keeps its value.

► Minister for Older People

We need leadership. There is no one at Cabinet level with responsibility for older people or delivering the National Positive Ageing Strategy. We must begin planning to ensure that we can meet the needs of today's older people and all of us who hope to grow old.

Fine Gael and is in their 70s or 80s I wouldn't assume that's what they're going to do next time. Older people are more freewheeling in their voting intentions now than in the past."

This echoes the feedback Age Action has been get-

ting from our members.

"No party or candidate should be taking older voters for granted," Justin warned. "Our members and older people across the country are going to be looking hard at everyone who's seeking their vote.

It's up to the candidates to work for their support, to earn their vote.

"We're urging every older voter out there to get out and vote, join the 88 per cent and ensure the next government knows it has to deliver for older people."



■ Campaigners unite to urge candidates to 'earn our vote'.

Politicians must 'Earn Our Vote'

Age Action is a founding member of the 'Earn Our Vote' alliance, bringing together Ireland's leading older person's charities and advocacy groups to fight for the needs of older people.

The alliance consist of Active Retirement Ireland, Age Action, Age and Opportunity, Alone, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament, Active Ageing Partnership and Third Age Ireland.

More than half a million citizens are over the age of 65. In what is likely to be a very close election, where every vote will count, older voters will play a decisive role in the outcome of the election.

Together, Age Action and others campaigning for the rights of older people will be encouraging our supporters to make sure the candidates and parties earn our votes.

► **For more information check out www.earnourvote.ie.**



■ Charities, academics and campaigners launching the Health Reform Alliance outside the gates of Leinster House.

Charities unite to end two-tier health system

A number of Ireland's leading health charities, campaigners and academics have launched the Health Reform Alliance, setting out a charter of five core principles that include a call for a universal, publicly funded, health-care system.

The current members of the alliance are the Adelaide Health Foundation, Age Action, Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Asthma Society of Ireland, Irish Cancer Society,

Irish Heart Foundation and the Samaritans.

"Ireland's health and social care system is in crisis," said Rachel Wright, Chairperson of the Alliance. "It simply cannot meet the needs of the hundreds of thousands of people across Ireland who depend on it every day.

"Cuts in funding since the economic crisis have further restricted access to health services as hospital beds are closed, staff numbers are down and waiting lists grow ever longer.

"We must set out a new vision for our health service, one that treats everyone

equally and guarantees our right to quality health and social care."

Five key principles

Ahead of this year's General Election the Health Reform Alliance is calling on political parties to set out their vision for health-care in Ireland, one which the alliance says should be based on its five key principles:

- The health and social care system treats everyone equally.
- The health and social care system is focused on the needs of all social groups in society.

- People have an entitlement to health and social care, free at the point of access.
- The different elements of the health and social care system work together and are connected.
- The health and social care system is a universal, publicly funded system.

Age Action is one of the founding members of the alliance and the organisation's head of advocacy and communications, Justin Moran, explained to journalists at the launch of the HRA just why this initiative is so important for older people.

"Older people face significant barriers in getting proper rehabilitation supports or adequate community care," said Justin. "These are essential for positive ageing, to enable older

people to fully participate in all areas of life.

"In one community health-care region an older person might be getting the home help support they need. Ten miles down the road in another administrative region someone with the same needs might not even be eligible for home help.

"Our home help services are underdeveloped, inequitable and fragmented. Geography, not need, is driving decisions about the quality of support available to older people."

Wider debate

The alliance stressed the need to broaden the debate on healthcare in Ireland, warning that it needed to focus on meeting the needs of everyone who uses our healthcare system and who relies on it.

With plans for universal health insurance scrapped, it is now time for political parties to refocus on the core question of how we can move forward and provide quality health and social care for everybody in Irish society.

The alliance argues this must be at the heart of the debate in the coming election. It needs to be central to the decision voters make on polling day.

"All of us must join in the debate about how we provide health and social care," said Dr Catherine Darker, Adelaide Assistant Professor of Health Services. "It can't simply be left to policy makers and economists. Our health and social care system is often a matter of life and death.

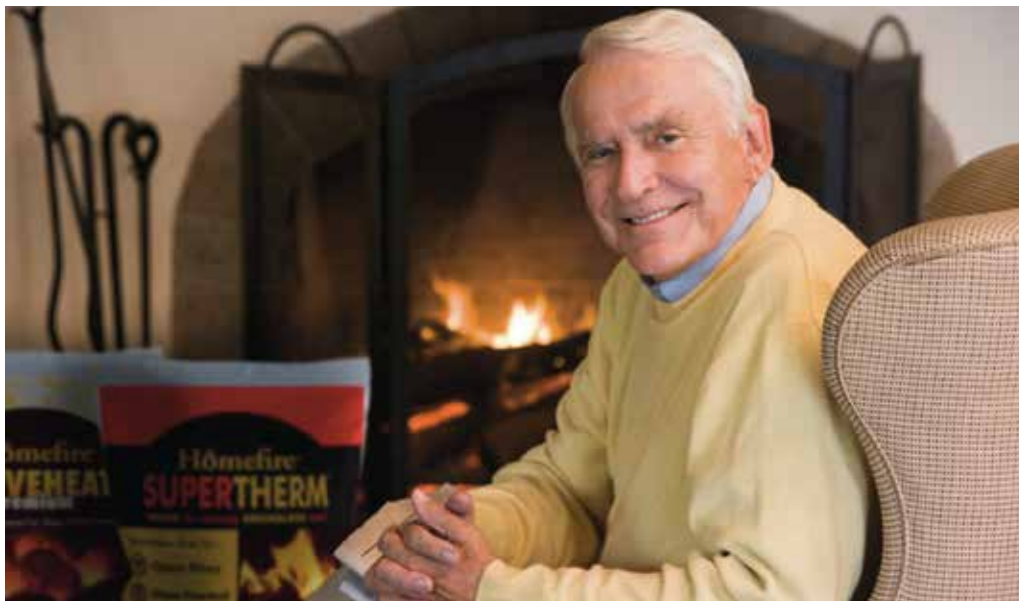
"Everyone — patients, family members and the public, health workers and care providers — must be involved.

"However, there is a particular need for groups marginalised by our health service like Travellers or migrants, or those with specific needs, like older people or people with mental health problems or intellectual or physical disabilities, to have their voices heard."

The alliance hopes to engage with the various political parties ahead of a major conference on health-care reform planned for May.



■ Justin Moran of Age Action, Kathleen O'Meara of the Irish Cancer Society and Rachel Wright of Samaritans Ireland outline the principles of the alliance's charter.



■ The ban on smoky coal will be good for the environment and your budget.

Smoky coal faces ban next year

In September 2017 a nationwide ban on smoky coal will be introduced. While this should have a minimal impact on the income of older people it could benefit our health and our environment.

As far back as 1990 Minister Mary Harney banned the sale of smoky fuels in Dublin and other major cities. In those days householders had to replace their grates and in some cases install enclosed solid fuel burning units.

Fortunately, the new ban won't require anything like that. This is because the new fuels burn more efficiently, so there is no danger your grate will melt.

"Modern smokeless fuels

are now designed with the consumer in mind," said Ida Dunworth of CPL Fuels Ireland.

"They last significantly longer than your traditional smoky coal. They are a lot easier to light and, better still, they last overnight so the next day all you have to do is refuel the fire, no need to go to the bother of actually resetting it."

Irish companies

Many Irish companies such as CPL Fuels and Arigna Fuels, now produce smokeless fuels which are a blend of biomass products and bitumen fuel products. The biomass products are residue products from food production.

These new fuels burn up to 30 per cent longer than normal smoky coal. They also reduce CO₂ emissions by 30 per cent while producing 75 per cent less par-

ticulate emissions so they are better for the environment.

Anybody who suffered from respiratory problems before 1990 will remember the added difficulty of breathing during winter months. This problem is still with us. A recent UCD study showed Kilkenny has six times the EU limit of particulates in the atmosphere. Half of this pollution comes from domestic fires.

There is also a cost benefit to using manufactured fuels such as biomass or ovoids. Premium smoky fuels cost €605 per ton to heat an average room while smokeless biomass (50 per cent biomass) costs €496 and smokeless ovoids cost €466.

A comprehensive cost comparison of all domestic fuel is available at www.seai.ie.

A Smokeless Ireland No Cause for Concern

The Next Generation of Fuels
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- Better fire-life
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to existing fireplace or stoves

*Compared to house coal



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■ Age Action supporter Breda Sargent joins OFTEC's David Blevings, Minister Kathleen Lynch and Age Action's Justin Moran at the launch of the guide.

Tips to keep warm and save money

Age Action and Kathleen Lynch TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Older People, officially launched a free guide, offering advice to help older people using oil home heating to stay safe and warm throughout the cold months.

The guide, which is being distributed throughout Ireland, was created by OFTEC, which represents the domestic oil heating and cooking industry in Ireland, in conjunction with Age Action.

The campaign was first launched last year and is building on its previous success, highlighting the

important issue of excess winter deaths and helping those at greatest risk keep safe and warm.

"It's essential that older people know what they can do to keep their fuel bills low and stay warm and well over the winter months," said Minister Kathleen Lynch. "This is a must-have reference guide for all older people."

Free of charge

Age Action will be distributing the guide throughout its network of branches and shops and the guide is available free of charge. A digital copy is available to download from both the OFTEC and Age Action websites.

"Approximately 600,000 homes in Ireland use heating oil as their primary

heating source so it's vital to provide older people with as much information as possible to help them save money and keep warm through the coldest part of the year," said David Blevings, Ireland Manager of OFTEC.

"We want to help as many people as possible save money and we've teamed up with Age Action to get that message out to older people."

"Many of the most vulnerable older people rely on oil heating to keep warm," said Age Action CEO Eamon Timmins. "But with high numbers of older households struggling to afford the fuel they need, it's essential that people know what they can do to keep their fuel bills low and stay warm."



■ Gerry Scully and Claire Bellis manning an information stall in Wexford last year.

High insurance costs frustrating older people

The information team has been getting a number of calls recently on travel insurance and the high costs faced by many older people, writes Senior Information Officer **Gerry Scully**.

January is when many people begin to consider their summer holidays and older people are no exception. When Cliff Richard went on his summer holidays I don't know if he had insurance for the bus, but he certainly would not get it today!

Our information team is again getting calls from older people struggling to find travel insurance at a reasonable rate and this discrimination also affects older drivers.

Unfortunately, there is no company providing travel insurance specifically for older customers. We do have a list of companies who are willing to quote for older customers so please do get in touch if you would like a copy.

Because car insurance is a legal requirement, you have to be given a quote. So if you are refused, simply return to the

first company you contacted and they are legally obliged to give you a price – but unfortunately there is nothing to stop them trying to rip you off.

The insurance industry really is one of the last bastions of blatant ageism.

Pension increase

We have had a number of people calling to complain that they did not get the full €3 increase in their pensions.

This is because if you are on a reduced or 'pro-rata', pension, your increase will be smaller but everyone on the State Pension, both contributory and non-contributory, should have got some increase. So do get in touch if that is not the case.

Also, if you are claiming a Qualified Adult Allowance, there is an increase of €2.70 for a partner or spouse over 66 and €2 for a partner or spouse under 66. Again, this is less if you are on a reduced, or pro-rata, pension.

Please contact our information team at (01) 475-6989 or helpline@ageaction.ie. The line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and closed for lunch.



■ Age Action members campaigning to protect the State Pension.

Pension reform cannot wait

Thousands of pensioners, most of them women, saw their pensions cut following reforms introduced by the Government in 2012. Age Action intends to make the need for changes to the pension system a priority for the next government.

Changes to the PRSI bands announced in 2012, taken in conjunction with the policy of averaging out PRSI contributions over a worker's lifetime, have hit the incomes of many who left the workforce for long periods.

"Age Action warned these changes were going to be disastrous when they were first proposed," said Head of Advocacy and Communications Justin Moran. "Some pensioners

are €1,500 worse off a year but it's an issue the Government seems intent on long fingering.

"Although the Government says they protected the State Pension during the recession, and the top rate was untouched, they raided the pensions of those who didn't have the full amount of PRSI contributions."

Two main causes

There were two main causes behind the drop in incomes.

Firstly, the Government increased the number of bands of PRSI contributions from four to seven, making it harder to get a decent pension payment.

Under the old system, for example, someone with an average of 20 PRSI contributions each year was entitled to €225.80 a week, but this dropped to €196 after the changes.

"The second problem is the averaging out of PRSI

contributions," explained Justin. "This is calculated from when you start your working life.

"So if you worked for a couple of years in the 1960s and then left the workforce, maybe to raise a family, and then went back to work in the 1990s the Department goes back to the 1960s to work out your yearly average.

"The practical impact of this is that people who took long absences from the workforce – mostly but not exclusively women – are punished by having their pensions cut."

Age Action is planning to carry out in-depth research on the impact of these changes throughout 2016. If you or a family member has been affected by them please contact us at (01) 475-6989 or email advocacy@ageaction.ie.



■ Minister Michael Ring launches the Age and Opportunity and Sport Ireland research on activity among older people.

Photo: Tommy Clancy

Over-50s getting on their bikes!

Irish people over 50 are now more likely to be active than inactive, according to a new survey from Age & Opportunity's Go for Life and Sport Ireland. The research shows that 53 per cent of older adults can be classed as "active" instead of "low or not active".

Just over half of over-50s are getting half an hour of physical activity five days a week. Age & Opportunity and Sport Ireland have been tracking the behaviour of older people since 2006. This is the first time active older people are in the majority.

"The research is great news," said Go for Life manager Mary Harkin. "It

shows the kind of impact that programmes like Go for Life are having on the lives of older people across the country. It feels like we've reached a bit of a milestone by becoming the majority."

The majority of people are becoming healthier and more active simply by increasing their walking speed and making time for a regular walk each day. Apart from walking, the most popular activities among those over 50 are swimming and golf.

Cycling

One area that is seeing a notable rise is the popularity of cycling among older people. Since 2011, the numbers on their bikes have almost doubled, passing out activities like dancing and weight training.

"At the same time, we can't be complacent,"

warned Ms Harkin. "The research shows a lot of people feel completely excluded from sport and physical activity."

The research found people aged 50 to 64 were more inclined to be active than those over 65 and that people from more affluent backgrounds were more likely to be active than their less well-off neighbours. On a positive note, older women are beginning to catch up with men in participation in sport.

"We are trying to empower people to get more active and to open the door for others to take part," Mary continued.

"Many people want to take part but have been put off by misconceptions about sport. Go for Life shows them it can be fun and that there's usually tea and a biscuit at the end of it!"



■ Prescription charges have risen a staggering 500 per cent since 2010.

Prescription charges put lives at risk

A leading health economist has warned that prescription charges for medical card holders could be responsible for increasing numbers of strokes and heart attacks.

Speaking at a recent conference of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, Professor Charles Normand of Trinity College said the charges have caused people with blood pressure problems to cut down on their medication.

He suggested this could be responsible for 200 to 300 strokes every year and a similar number of heart attacks.

The professor's remarks support Age Action's argument that the charges should be abolished as soon as possible.

"Prescription charges

have increased 500 per cent since they were first introduced in 2010," said Justin Moran. "Older people bear the brunt of this because they are more likely to have several conditions requiring medicine."

Almost a third of people aged over 65 have five or more prescriptions and Age Action's information team has dealt with older people who have been forced to ask their pharmacist for advice on which medicine to skip because they cannot afford the charges.

No move to cut charges

"It was very disappointing that we saw no move from the Government in the October budget to cut the charges," said Justin.

"While initially proposed as a means to avoid over prescribing, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these charges now amount to a tax on being sick."

However, Professor Normand challenged the original argument for prescription charges, telling the conference there is no convincing evidence that fees and charges like this discourage waste but there is evidence that they deter people from getting the medicine they need.

Calls from Age Action and organisations representing patients and health workers to abolish or cut the charges have been ignored by successive governments. Prescription charges now raise an estimated €120 million every year.

"Professor Normand's analysis shows that not only are prescription charges devastating to the incomes of many older people, they're a real risk to a person's health," said Justin. "Getting rid of this 'sick tax' should be a priority for the next Government."

Congratulations to Cork's Lady in Red

Mary Murphy of the Cairde Active Retirement Club in Wilton, Cork, receives the Best Dressed Lady prize from Gerard Keane and Lisa Murphy at a recent fundraiser for Crumlin Children's Hospital with her friend Angie Benfaffaf.

Photo: Egle Laukyte



U3A GROUPS



© Active Virginians U3A
Contact Patricia Rice at
(087) 235-0515 or email
mspatprice@gmail.com.

© An Cosán U3A Tallaght
Contact Imelda Hanratty at
(01) 462-8488.

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Contact Peter Branigan at
(087) 292-4001

© Ballyroan U3A
Contact June Murphy at (01)
494-7030.

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Contact Eileen Larkin at (087)
4128607 or (01) 455-7653.

© Blessington U3A
Contact Peter Polden at (087)
815-1018, (045) 867-248 or
email pjpolden@gmail.com.

© Bray U3A
Contact Linda Uhleman at

(086) 045-1600 or email
linda_uhlemann@yahoo.
co.uk.

© Carrick-on-Shannon U3A
Contact Margaret Fawcett at
(086) 837-2934 or email
mgtfaw@gmail.com.

© Dublin City U3A
Contact John Roche at (01)
201-7490.

© Galway U3A
Contact Livio Rocca at
u3agalway@gmail.com.

© Lucan U3A
Contact Maureen Newell at
lucanu3a@gmail.com.

© Maynooth U3A
Contact Helena Kirkpatrick at
(01) 628-5128.

© Monaghan U3A
Contact Mary Beagan at (047)
75942 or (086) 331-4439.

© Newcastle, Dublin 22 U3A,
Retired Active Men's Social
Contact Matt Dowling at (01)
458-9007 or (086) 844-3820.

© Roscommon U3A
Contact Vivienne Clarke at
(087) 126-7639 or email
clarkevivienne@gmail.com.

© Sutton-Baldoyle U3A
Contact Christine at (01)
832-3697 or email
u3asutbal@gmail.com.

© Tramore U3A
Contact Mollie Hunt at
molliehunt@eircom.net.

© Waterford U3A
Contact Josephine Murphy at
(051) 871-037 or email
jo1murphy7@gmail.com.
For more information, email
Sam O'Brien-Olinger, U3A
Development Officer, at u3a@
ageaction.ie or phone (01)
475-6989.

Forget something?

A huge thank you to all of our members who have already renewed their membership.

But we just wanted to remind those of you who haven't got around to it yet to please renew as soon as you possibly can.

Age Action is your organisation. Make sure you're a part of it!

Annual membership application

I wish to join Age Action and enclose
 €..... membership fee, plus €.....
 voluntary donation payable to Age Action
 Ireland Ltd.

If you are already an existing Age Action
 member and wish to renew your membership
 please write your membership number here ...

Full name:.....
 (Block capitals please)

Address:

Tel:

Email:
 (Block capitals please)

Date:

FEES

- €20 Individual – retired/unwaged
- €40 Individual – employed
- €60 Voluntary Body
- €200 Statutory Agency
- €500 Commercial

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IBAN: IE82 IPBS 9906 2587 7790 21
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until further notice. Starting on: 1st Day of
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