



Pre-Budget Submission 2017
Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

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1. Introduction

Age Action was established in 1992 as the voice for older people and Ireland's leading advocacy organisation on ageing issues.

We act both as a network of organisations and individuals, including older people and carers of older people, and a service provider, assisting tens of thousands of older people every year.

Our mission is to empower all older people to live full lives as actively engaged citizens and to secure their rights to comprehensive high quality services according to their changing needs.

This submission focuses on the need for increased support to address digital exclusion amongst older people and the issue of energy poverty.

Separate to this we will make individual submissions to the following Government departments:

- Department of Education and Skills;
- Joint Submission to the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure Reform;
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Irish Aid);
- Department of Health;
- Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government;
- Department of Social Protection.

2. Addressing Digital Exclusion amongst Older People

"I am 89 years of age and I live alone. Now I don't feel so alone, I can now communicate not only with friends in Ireland but also in other countries."

"The course was very good. I had a fear of computers, and this was explained so well to me and with no pressure."

"I am very happy with this course as I arrived terrified – yes really! And am now confident I can use my home computer. Wonderful! A new lease of life."

The National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) commits to “promote access to a wide range of opportunities for continued learning and education for older people¹”. Age Action plays an important role in achieving this through our Getting Started and Lifelong Learning programmes.

Digital literacy is now a necessity for accessing health and welfare information, for using online services, managing one’s finances and maintaining contact with family and friends. A critical challenge for society is the pace of change towards doing the majority of our business online.

For older people, this challenge is even greater as half of those aged 60 to 74 (more than 260,000 people) have never used the internet². Among those aged 75 and over, the figure is negligible at only 3 per cent.

In 2007, the proportion of those aged between 60 and 74 years never using the internet was substantially higher at 77 per cent. While the gap between on-liners and “non-liners” has narrowed, comparatively Ireland falls behind other EU countries. A September 2015 Eurostat report found that only 37 per cent of Irish people aged 65 to 74 use the internet, compared to 70 per cent in Britain and an average across the EU of 42 per cent.

Funding provided by the department to community and voluntary groups for computer training through its Benefit funding programme has played a critical role in closing the digital exclusion gap.

Since being introduced in 2008 the Benefit Programme(s) have provided 156,000 places all over Ireland – helping people to learn new skills, use the internet and access online resources. The programme also supports wider Government objectives e.g. encouraging and helping people to use online public services and online banking.

Age Action’s Getting Started Programme, funded by Benefit, provides tailored one-to-one training for older people. Since 2006 we have trained more than 30,000 older people in basic IT skills. Through this training, learners gain confidence in using the internet to stay in touch with family and friends, pay bills and to keep up to date with the news.

¹ Department of Health (2013) *National Positive Ageing Strategy* p.20

² CSO (2016) ICT Usage by Individuals -

<http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=ICA05&PLanguage=0>

The training provided by Age Action through BenefitIT is delivered on a one-to-one basis. This approach allows the learner to go at their own pace and learning can be tailored to each individual's needs. Feedback on our programmes has been almost universally positive with 99.7 per cent of our learners saying they would recommend the course to others and 98.7 per cent of our volunteer tutors were rated as either Very Good (15 per cent) or Excellent (83.7 per cent).

There is continuing high demand from older people to learn basic skills. Currently Age Action has a nationwide waiting list of more than 1,300 people waiting to do a Getting Started class for the first time. A high proportion of our learners are also interested in repeating the training, for example, people with new devices such as tablets who previously participated in classes using a laptop. The programme also supports intergenerational learning with transition year and college students among the hundreds of Getting Started tutors assisting older people every year.

The programme also tackles the social exclusion that many older people may feel, helping them to stay active, healthy and less isolated. Many of our learners have purchased computers and also now shop online which has a direct economic impact. Getting older people online will also allow them to access e-government services.

However, despite the success of BenefitIT, the commitment, contained in the Government's National Digital Strategy (2013), to halve the number of "non-liners" by 2016 will not be achieved.

Furthermore, the most recent round of funding, BenefitIT 4 – Tranche 6, came to an end on 30 June. While we understand that the department hopes to launch a new training programme in September, there is no information as to what this will entail or its duration.

Recommendation:

1. In 2015, the Government allocated €540,000 to the BenefitIT Programme. We recommend that at least this level of funding is available in 2017 with a commitment to providing funding in subsequent years also.
2. The Government must commit to providing multi-annual funding under the new BenefitIT programme.
3. Funding allocations should recognise the benefits and additional costs associated with delivering computer training on a one-to-one basis.

4. It is imperative that older people continue to use their skills outside of the classroom. The Government must roll out a comprehensive broadband strategy in rural and urban areas.

4. Addressing Energy Poverty

“I cannot afford either life or home insurance. I have to go to bed early to save on heating and electricity. My husband passed away last year and I still have not paid off his funeral expenses. We did have life insurance but they cut it because we couldn’t keep up the payments.”

“My mother cannot afford to heat her home i.e. 5 rooms and lives in one room heating it with a fire which she doesn’t light until the afternoon and goes to bed at 9.30 in the winter to save fuel. Even with help to buy fuel she cannot afford to turn on the central heating for fear of a big bill she couldn’t pay.”

The experience of energy poverty among older people is particularly acute for a variety of reasons. These include³:

- A greater risk of cardiovascular and respiratory illness from cold and damp houses;
- More time spent in the home;
- A greater dependency on dirtier fuels for heating ;
- A reliance on small fixed incomes, therefore any increase in fuel prices has a disproportionate impact;
- A tendency to live in older, less energy efficient homes;
- A higher level of disability and chronic ill-health are reported amongst this age group⁴

In addition to this, consumer behaviour among older people means they are less likely to switch providers due to brand loyalty. Lower rates of access to the internet, along with an aversion to falling into arrears,⁵ can mean many older people do not benefit from increased competition in the energy market.

A longer-term strategy is to tackle energy poverty through increasing the energy efficiency of people’s homes.

³ Goodman, P. McAvoy, H. Cotter, N. Monahan, E. Barret, E. Browne, S and Zeka, A. (2011). *Fuel Poverty, Older People and Cold Weather*. Dublin: DIT/IPH.

⁴ <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/09/new-ageing-agenda-report.pdf>

⁵ Cotter, N. et al (2012) Coping with the cold- exploring relationships between cold housing, health and social wellbeing in a sample of older people in Ireland. *Quality in Ageing and Older People* 12(1):8-47.

Age Action notes the publication of the Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty earlier this year. In particular, we welcome the commitment under the strategy to pilot a deep retrofitting scheme which targets older people who are living in energy poverty and who also experience health issues. Such an approach takes into consideration the public health benefits of addressing energy poverty along with taking a welcome cross-departmental approach to addressing the issue.

The Better Energy: Warmer Homes Scheme administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) is integral to achieving this and is a buffer against energy poverty for older people. The introduction of smart metering will also encourage people to be more energy efficient.

It is imperative that home energy efficiency programmes continue to be funded and that they are targeted towards those on low-incomes and those who will experience the worst effects of living in energy poverty.

Furthermore, it is important that the original objective of the carbon tax as revenue-neutral is achieved by using the funds it raises to address the issue of energy poverty. Currently, this tax is deeply regressive and it is imperative that low-income households and those at risk of energy poverty are not affected by future increases in the carbon tax.

Age Action believes that energy poverty can only be addressed effectively through a joint response across key government departments, most specifically the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection.

We have recommended to the last department that the Fuel Allowance scheme should be extended by four weeks in Budget 2017 and that a mechanism to receive the fuel allowance in two lump sum payments should be introduced.

Recommendation:

5. Ensure the Strategy to Combat Energy continues to be adequately resourced and key actions implemented.
6. Continue to support the three-year pilot deep retrofitting scheme targeting those experiencing energy poverty and health conditions. Build on the findings of the evaluation of this project and roll-out on a nationwide basis [Cost: €20 million over three years].
7. Continue to support innovative approaches to energy budgeting for low income groups, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul's Stay Warm Savings Scheme.

8. Meet the promise of using revenue raised by the Carbon Tax to address energy poverty, which adheres to the original objective of the tax to be revenue-neutral.

9. Conclusion

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this submission. Please do not hesitate to contact us at the details below.

For further information please contact:

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