



**Submission to Galway County Council Local Community
Development Committee on Local Economic and Community
Plan**

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Overview

Age Action Ireland was established in 1992 as the national non-governmental organisation concerned with ageing and older people, acting as a network of organisations and individuals including older people and carers of older people, and as a development agency promoting better policies and services for older people. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by empowering them to live full lives as actively engaged citizens and to secure their rights to comprehensive high quality services according to their changing needs.

In order to further this mission we have a number of core objectives:

- To mobilise and empower older people to advocate on behalf of themselves, their families and their communities
- To change attitudes towards ageing and older people in Irish society
- To effect changes in legislation and policies by influencing Government, state agencies and the social partners
- To secure the right of older people to comprehensive high quality services and where necessary to initiate services
- To focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged older people

A central feature of our work is raising awareness about the lived experience of growing old in Ireland. This includes advocating for policy changes, which will have a positive impact on older people. Other programmes of work include ageing in the developing world, promoting intergenerational solidarity and helping older people to develop computer skills.

Age Action has a national remit and in 2013 we delivered our services in 152 geographical locations across Ireland. We have a regional office in Galway which provides a range of services to older people in the West of Ireland. Our team in Age Action West comprises of six members of staff and our main services are Care & Repair and Getting Started. In 2013 we trained 595 older people under our Getting Started programme and we provided 3,626 DIY jobs, befriending visits, trade referrals, telephone contacts and quote checks for older people in seven locations in the region. We also run a book club, a weekly improves Spanish class, and hold events to mark Positive Ageing Week, Seachtain na Gaeilge and Social inclusion Week.

Our office is considered by many as a place open to all those who want to drop in for a quick chat, and as such provides some valuable social contact, mostly for people who live alone.

We also deliver our Getting Started programme in libraries around the Galway County including Ballybane, Tuam and Clifden as well as Moylough Family Resource Centre.

We are currently developing a Glór group in Galway. Glór is the Irish word for voice and the Age Action Galway Glór Group will enable older people to make their voices be heard by decision makers.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to Galway County Council Local Community Development Committee on the development of its Local Economic and Community Plan. We would also welcome the opportunity to engage in any future consultations on this and any related matters.

Data from Census 2011 indicates that almost one-fifth (18%; 30,780 individuals) of the population of Galway County is aged 60 years of age and over. This is similar to the national population where 16% are aged 60 years and over.

With a notable proportion of Galway county comprising of older people, it is imperative that the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) incorporates older people within the Local Economic and Community Plan both as stakeholders and as a target group whose needs are to be addressed.

Older People as a Stakeholder

Social engagement through activity can help to maintain quality of life, promote social contact, combat loneliness and isolation and maintain people as active members of society. It is also another way of supporting self-identity. Participation is associated with belonging, where belonging for most people develops first within a domestic context, second within a community and educational setting and third through engagement in occupational and leisure activities¹. In this way participation can relate to paid and unpaid work; volunteering; active citizenship; involvement in decision-making/consultation; social inclusion and the prevention of isolation; intergenerational relationships; eradicating discrimination and ageism and promoting life-long learning.

Active citizenship is an all-encompassing concept embracing formal and non-formal, political, cultural, interpersonal and caring activities². It incorporates consultation and involvement in decision-making that directly affects the person. The negative view of retirement and older

¹ Slater, R. (1999) *The Psychology of Growing Old*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

²Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) *The Concept of Active Citizenship*. Dublin: Secretariat of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship

age as a time of withdrawal from society must be dispelled and we must examine how active citizenship applies to older people.

It is imperative that the contribution older people make (family carers, volunteers etc.) is acknowledged and that policies and practices are developed that encourage continued and increased contribution and participation. Valuing people's experiences underpins this, as well as tackling negative perceptions of older age which fail to acknowledge the cultural, social, political and professional resource that older people represent. The Plan should focus on the potential for wider involvement and not forget that older people are essential for the cohesion of communities³ (AGE, 2006).

An integral aspect of participation is involvement in decision-making. Meaningful consultation is effective as it identifies real need. It can also be empowering for those involved. The active voice of older people in policy making and decisions at a local and national governance level is important.

Recommendation:

- It is imperative that older people are seen as a critical stakeholder during the development of the Local Economic and Community Plan. They should be involved in all stages of the consultation process and represented at appropriate stages of development, monitoring, implementation and evaluation.

Addressing the Needs of Older People

We are concerned about those older people that experience social isolation and exclusion particularly in rural areas. A critical issue for older people living in rural areas is the difficulties in accessing basic services which affects the management of ongoing health problems (through access to services) and can intensify social isolation and social exclusion. This is exacerbated by an ad hoc rural transport system. The CSO (2009)⁴ found that rural dwelling households have consistently more difficulty in accessing basic services (particularly in relation to transport, banking and general practitioner) in comparison to urban households. Households headed by someone aged 55 and over had more difficulty accessing services than those with a younger head of household.

³ Age: The European Older People's Platform (2006) Towards a European Society for All Ages. Brussels: AGE.

⁴ CSO (2009) Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2007- Housing Module
<http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/silc/2007/silchousing2007.pdf>

One way of addressing older people's experience of isolation and exclusion is through the provision of adequate transport systems. The National Positive Ageing Strategy⁵ identifies transport as a priority area in addressing ageing. The first goal of this Strategy is to 'Remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities' (Department of Health, 2013: 19). The provision of an accessible and affordable transport system is identified as an objective in delivering this goal. The Strategy states that people should be enabled 'as they age 'to get out and about' through the provision of accessible, affordable, and flexible transport systems in both rural and urban areas' (Op.Cit).

While many older people have access to car, others are unable to drive due to health reasons or the high costs of maintaining a car are prohibitive. The proportion holding a drivers licence also falls off with Census 2011 highlighting that 60% of those aged 70 to 79 years and 30% of those aged 80 years and older having a drivers licence. A lower proportion to the younger age cohorts (such as 79% amongst those age 40 to 49 years). Car ownership is also lower amongst households aged 65 years and older (72%) than those younger households (for instance 89% amongst those age 45 to 49 years). It provides access to amenities such as shops, post offices and banking, health and social care services as well as valuable social contact. The latter is well documented as essential for promoting and supporting both physical and mental wellbeing.

Appropriate transport solutions can weave a web connecting the person to their wider community and supporting the person's independence. In this way transport is an integral aspect of having a good quality of life. These sentiments are echoed by the World Health Organisation, who identify accessible and affordable public transportation services in both rural and urban areas so people of all ages can fully participate in family and community life; particularly important for older persons who have mobility problems⁶ (World Health Organisation, 2002).

⁵ Department of Health (2013) *National Positive Ageing Strategy* - <http://health.gov.ie/blog/publications/national-positive-ageing-strategy/>

⁶ World Health Organisation (2002) *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework*. Geneva: WHO

Recommendation:

- The Local Economic and Community Plan must, have access to transport embedded in any programmes or plans of work particularly those targeted towards older people and those experiencing social isolation and exclusion.
- The participation of rural dwelling older people requires further synergies of existing services. It is imperative that the Plan includes strategies, programmes and projects to combat social isolation and exclusion, alleviating the marginalisation of older people.

Isolation can be supported (not only by transport services) but also through e-inclusion and information technology infrastructure. However, it is important to acknowledge the digital divide and the gulf between young and old. Over half (53%) of those aged 60 to 74 – over 280,000 people have never used the internet and use among those aged 75 and over is negligible at only about 3%⁷. Age Action is addressing this divide because without interventions and training tailored to older people's needs this gap will widen. Digital literacy is now a necessity for accessing health and welfare information, for using online services, saving money as well as maintaining contact with family and friends. The latter is particularly important in light of the increase in emigration due to the economic recession and the dispersion of families across the globe

Recommendation:

- We urge Galway County Council Local Community Development Committee to be cognisant of the digital divide throughout the development, monitoring, implementation and evaluation of this plan. Furthermore, the Plan should support further training for Older People to get online.

Finally, as evidenced from our work in Galway to date, Age Action believes that public libraries are an essential social asset that must be maintained and developed. In an era of increasing social isolation among older people libraries provide opportunities for social interaction as well as being well placed to become the first port of call for older people seeking information. A properly equipped public library can through allowing older people to

⁷Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (2013) *Doing More with Digital National Digital Strategy for Ireland Phase 1 – Digital Engagement* - <http://www.dcenr.gov.ie/NR/rdonlyres/54AF1E6E-1A0D-413F-8CEB-2442C03E09BD/0/NationalDigitalStrategyforIreland.pdf>

access information technology help to overcome the e-exclusion experienced by many older people.