



The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs

Making the call for a post-pandemic focus on regaining older people's role in society

Annual Statement

MARCH 2022



Foreword

For close to two years, we have seen a very considerable burden placed on people of all ages, communities, and society as a whole. The pandemic has, of course, been tough on everyone.

The necessary public health measures introduced to protect all of us from the worst impacts of this virus have, however, affected older people disproportionately – large numbers of older people sadly have lost their lives while many others have lost their independence.

Like everyone else, older people understood the importance of protecting themselves and other people. What they largely didn't appreciate was the fear and diminishment that accompanied this.

As lockdown followed lockdown, it turned out that, for many older people, and despite their resilience, the side-effects of Covid-19 – loss of confidence and capacity, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, depression – were and are as harmful as the disease, and perhaps more so.

Many older people experienced the age-related imperative to “cocoon” – a word which older people loathed, comprehensively – as fundamentally ageist. Older people's health deteriorated as non-Covid health services were cut back and there was less opportunity for exercise. Not surprisingly, the incidence of depression among older people rose.

The sad fact is that it need not have been like that.

In 2013 the Government published the National Positive Ageing Strategy (NPAS). It still awaits meaningful and coordinated implementation. Much of its content is still valid. Had it been implemented in a structured way in the seven years between publication and pandemic, many of the negative effects on older people of the Covid-19 response could have been avoided. NPAS contains still relevant approaches to eliminating ageism, ensuring that ageing is taken seriously, that older people's needs and preferences inform policy and practice, that most older people can age in place, get the supports they need, have options in their lives and can participate fully in all that's going on.

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs must ask; Is the lack of urgency itself a manifestation of institutional ageism? What has made implementation so problematic?

Covid 19 has also exposed a number of fault lines in our health and social care system; We continue to be heavily reliant on residential nursing homes. There are limited resources available to enable older people to continue living in their own homes. Most worryingly however, with an ageing population, Ireland does not have an active or coordinated approach to the implementation or monitoring of its lead national policy for older people – The National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013).



Foreword

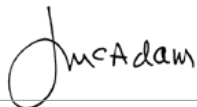
The pandemic is, of course, not over. The heightened challenges faced by older people during COVID-19 have been clear for all to see and so the Alliance will continue to call for a renewed focus on regaining the positive role of older people in society. In particular, the Alliance wants Government to:

- **Institute a coherent system of supports so that older people can stay in their own homes to end of life, as so many want to do.**
- **Take ageism seriously and implement a well-resourced and meaningful programme of action to counteract it.**
- **Appoint a champion with a cross-Departmental brief to prioritise older people's issues across the board and resource the active implementation of the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013).**
- **Establish an independent Commissioner or Ombudsman for Older People, similar to that in Northern Ireland.**

We are an ageing population. In Ireland, it is predicted that those over the age of 65 will reach one million people within the next 10 years – or just two typical Dáil terms.

Older people and their interests must be considered by elected representatives when making decisions, now more than ever.

It is our hope, by the next International Day of Older People – 1 October 2022, we will have seen significant progress on some of these key issues.



John McAdam
Independent Chair, Alliance of Age Sector NGOs



Maureen Kavanagh
CEO, Active Retirement Ireland



Karen Horgan
CEO, Age & Opportunity



Seán Moynihan
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Siobhán O'Connor
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Sharon Foley
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Sue Shaw
CEO, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament



Áine Brady
CEO, Third Age

Older People 'Telling It Like It Is'

Older People felt “cancelled” during Covid-19; ‘Telling It Like It Is’ – An account drawn together by the Alliance captured the experiences of a broad diversity of older people living in Ireland through the pandemic.

‘Telling It Like It Is’ explained how many of the events that happened during the 2020 and 2021 waves of the Covid-19 crisis affected older people disproportionately including:

- **Older people died disproportionately. Frequently their end-of-life wishes were not sought or honoured. Dying with dignity is the hallmark of a decent society.**
- **Older people were bereaved disproportionately. Restrictions on funerals, bereavement and consolation caused deep distress that will reverberate for a long time.**
- **Older people’s independence and decision-making agency was reduced disproportionately. Life became a series of instructions from others.**
- **Older people in nursing homes became subject to what was ‘allowed’ and ‘permitted’ within their own homes.**
- **Older people whose relatives and friends lived in care settings were unable to visit them properly for months. The restrictions, however justified, caused enormous distress.**
- **Older people living in their own homes felt frightened into isolation, which weighed particularly hard on those who live alone.**
- **Older people being told that they were no longer able to participate in voluntary work felt like their contribution was unrecognised and undervalued.**
- **The pandemic exposed the precarious and often inequitable nature of home care provision.**
- **There was a deep frustration of precious time lost which cannot be regained.**



The pandemic affected everybody in different ways, and of course public health actions needed to be taken to protect health and lives were saved. However, this account shows that for most older people the negative effects of the pandemic restrictions were very significant, wide-reaching and diminished their role in society. It took away older people’s right to make their own decisions.

While public health authorities were operating in very difficult and uncertain circumstances, we need to face up to the fact that some of the strategies used to deal with Covid impacted very negatively on many of the other social determinants of older people’s health and wellbeing by isolating so many from the people, activities, services and supports that make life positive and worth living.



Alliance member and Irish Senior Citizens Parliament CEO Sue Shaw

A flavour of what older people told us about their experience;

- **“I never felt old until this year...Now I am made to feel my age as vulnerable and dependent.”**
- **“I can’t meet my friends, I can’t go to the beach, I’m tied to the house. Loneliness and isolation. It’s cruel.”**
- **“I have become more introverted and have lost my sense of hope. There doesn’t seem to be light at the end of the tunnel.”**
- **“I feel Covid can now be used as an excuse for a system that does not allow people to live and die at home.”**
- **“I volunteered locally to do the voluntary contact tracing and at first was accepted but then I mentioned I was over 70 and was told no, you can’t do this due to your age.**
- **“[The pandemic] made me think about how dependent I will be on others in a few years. I didn’t like it and I could have done without the reminder of how ‘outside’ of society older people can be made.”**

‘Telling It Like It Is’ is not a typical NGO document. It is direct, blunt, unfiltered and pulls no punches. The Alliance hopes that it will jolt readers into:

- **realising how older people experienced the pandemic across 2020/2021**
- **recognising that older people have to be consulted meaningfully about matters which affect them**
- **committing to opposing ageism.**

The Alliance believes that the experience of older people, as set out in ‘Telling It Like It Is’, has clear implications for future policy and practice in Ireland.

“ Telling It Like It Is asserts that older people’s experience of the Covid-19 crisis could have been less extreme if there had been more consideration of how pandemic measures would impact them – and more meaningful consultation.

This account shows ageism was lurking behind many of the decisions that were made. Older people loathed the word ‘cocooning’ – as fundamentally ageist. People’s health deteriorated as non-Covid health services were cut back and there were less opportunities for exercise. Not surprisingly, the incidence of depression rose. ”

Alliance member and The Alzheimer Society of Ireland CEO Pat McLoughlin (now retired)

“ Older people make up a vital and growing part of the Irish population and are active citizens, not passive recipients. Excluding older people diminishes all of society and loses a huge reservoir of experience and creativity ”

The Community Foundation for Ireland Chief Executive Denise Charlton (which is supporting the work of the Alliance)

What older people want

“Cocooning”, during the pandemic, saved lives in one way and may cost them in another.

During the pandemic, “cocooning”, as a concept, played into the already prevalent notion that older people are a vulnerable, frail group, whose need for protection and care sets them apart from the rest of Irish society.

“Cocooning” resulted in less physical activity, increased stress and anxiety and lowered sleep quality. Loss of muscle function and increased weight are likely to result, in due course, in more falls and fractures, more cardiovascular disease, lower quality of life, less confidence and, ironically, more vulnerability to diseases such as Covid-19.

What older people want now is generally simple – connection, friendship, dignity, choice, support – ordinary aspects of the human decency that Irish people pride themselves on.

During the pandemic, public health concerns and bureaucracy sometimes got in the way of ensuring that saved lives were lives worth living.

Ireland now needs to create the conditions in which older people can regain their energy and purpose. The vaccination programme is only part of the answer.

In early 2022, many are now up and at it, determined to get their lives back and to have a good time before anything else awful happens. Many more, however, are hesitant and uncertain, their confidence, ability or will damaged by their experiences.

The Alliance now asks; **Are older people’s views being sought, heard, acted upon?**

What the Alliance is now calling for

Ageism was endemic in Ireland before the pandemic came along. It was lurking, almost unnoticed, in plain sight. Then the pandemic set it free.

We would suggest that if ageism had not been so prevalent, the effects of the pandemic on older people would have been less severe.

In 2016 45% of people aged 50 and above said that they felt discriminated because of their age. How many would say it if asked today?

Everyone gets older, every day, so it’s in everybody’s best interests to change the narrative and tackle it.

As a start, **Ireland urgently needs:**

- A whole-of-Government approach to tackling ageism in the system, led by a champion with cross-Departmental clout.
- Awareness campaigns.
- Media standards about the representation of older people.

Only Government can bring together all the relevant stakeholders and ensure best quality collaboration. The Alliance and its member organisations are more than willing to play their part.

A selection of Alliance led activities, 2020 / 2021

Alliance member organisations have all worked hard to stay close to older people and hear their issues. This trust has given us a hotline to how older people experienced the pandemic.

Across the pandemic the NGOs have transformed their services, programmes and ways of working in order to broaden their reach – with a number of major new services and information hubs being opened thereby reducing waiting lists and extending member organisation connection with older people across the country.

In parallel the member organisations have collaborated on a range of influencing programmes and submissions across 2020–2021 – including but not limited to:

- **Advocacy** for the 2020 General Election, the subsequent Programme for Government and on key issues such as homecare standards and legislation, the set up a Covid 19 emergency fund and the need for a stability package for charities.
- **Pre-Budget** 2021 and 2022 Statements.
- **Defining shared policy positions** as part of an Alliance Charter. The Charter has been presented to Government and senior officials at the Department of Health.
- **Submissions** to:
 - The Expert Panel on Nursing Homes.
 - Inform Ireland's Report to the UN Review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and position key Alliance policy 'asks' of government.
 - The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council mandated Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons on the subject of 'ageism' – reinforcing deficit areas in Ireland's approach to age related policy implementation.
 - The Oireachtas Justice Committee regarding the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020.
 - The Minister for Mental Health and Older People on the need for a resourced programme of work to tackle ageism.



Who is the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (the Alliance) represents the collective thinking of seven significant NGOs working in the age sector.

Separately, we provide vital services for older people, support older people to contribute to and participate in community life and advocate for better policies, services and supports for older people at national and local level.

Together, we collaborate to combat ageism and to seek action on the specific issues that make older people's lives more difficult than they need to be. We work together to support Ireland in becoming a better place in which to grow older.

The Alliance is committed to **collaborative leadership and the pooling of our capacity and resources to maximise our collective impact.**

Standing meetings of the Alliance are held on a bi-monthly basis. These meetings are attended by the CEO's of the seven member organisations together with the Alliance's independent Chair, John McAdam. A number of thematic working groups would also convene to progress specific actions.



Active Retirement Ireland will reach out to all older people to stop loneliness through friendship and support.



Age & Opportunity: Our mission is to enable the best possible quality of life for us all as we age.



ALONE; Supporting older people to age at home.



The Alzheimer Society of Ireland: Our mission is to advocate, empower and champion the rights of people living with dementia and their communities to quality support and services.



Irish Hospice Foundation; Our mission is to work towards the best end-of-life and bereavement care for all.



The Irish Senior Citizens Parliament; Working to promote the voice of older people in policy development and decision-making.



Third Age; Responding to the opportunities and challenges of ageing in Ireland.

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World Health Organization (WHO) Member States, have recognised, in both the *'Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health'* and through the Decade of Healthy Ageing: 2021–2030 how **ageism not only damages our health and well-being but is also “a major barrier to enacting effective policies and taking action on healthy ageing.”**

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WHO Global Report on Ageism (WHO, Geneva, 2021)

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The United Nations appointed Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons concluded as part of her recently released report that **“strategies designed to counter ageism must form a central part of “healthy ageing,” “active ageing” or “ageing well” initiatives.”** Furthermore, the Independent Expert concluded that **“States must accelerate the development of policies, laws and practical measures to combat all forms of ageism and age discrimination.”**

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Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons to the 48th session of the UN Human Rights Council (September 2021)

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Ageism...denies people their human rights and their ability to reach their full potential.

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António Guterres, UN Secretary-General (March 2021)



**The Community
Foundation for Ireland**

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