

Towards an Age Friendly County

Submission to Galway County Development Plan Issues Paper

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Our population is ageing.

It is predicted that Ireland will experience unprecedented ageing in the first half of the 21st century and by 2041, there will be 1.4 million people in Ireland aged 65 and over – representing 20-25% of the total population (Department of Health 2013) The population aged 65 and over increased by 19.1% from the 2011 to 2016 Census (CSO 2017) and local policies and programmes need to prepare properly for individual and population ageing.

In 2005, the World Health Organisation (WHO) launched a Global Age-Friendly Cities project and Ireland was among the first countries to pilot the WHO initiative, and has since rolled out a national Age Friendly Programme to all local authorities. Ireland's first national ageing strategy was produced in 2013 and this National Positive Ageing Strategy (NPAS) provides the blueprint for Ireland to become an age-friendly society and is grounded in and consistent with the WHO's active ageing policy framework. In 2014, all local authorities in Ireland, along with a host of other European partners, formally signed the "Dublin Declaration on Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in Europe" which establishes a commitment to develop themselves as places where older people can live full, active and healthy lives, using the WHO framework as a model. The WHO framework establishes 8 themes across which local authorities implement measures to become more supportive of people and enable them to age in place in their communities:

1. **Outdoor spaces and public buildings** – improve accessibility and public realm design in our communities, villages and towns.
2. **Transportation** – through consultation, develop public and community transport options that meets the needs of older people.
3. **Housing** – support people as they age to stay living in their own homes and communities.
4. **Social Participation** – support activities and facilities that promote social connections.
5. **Respect and Social Inclusion** – challenge ageism, combat loneliness and promote the positive contribution of older people in social, economic and public life.
6. **Civic Participation and Employment** – develop initiatives that facilitate people to engage in employment, civic life and lifelong learning.
7. **Communication and Information** – improve access to information and develop increased usage of information technology.
8. **Community Support & Health Services** – coordinate and develop services to enable people to lead healthier and active lives for longer.

To fulfil this commitment, each Age-friendly Alliance develops an Age Friendly Strategy with actions aimed at creating the environment necessary to support active and positive ageing. Since philanthropic funding towards the Age Friendly Programmes ended in 2016, the focus has shifted to optimizing the impact of the age friendly programme on the quality of life of older people, by embedding age-friendly commitments within statutory plans. This will strengthen local implementation by mainstreaming age-friendly principles into funding programmes and services. As age-friendly communities aim to make social and/or physical environments more conducive to older people's health, wellbeing and ability to age in place in the community, this submission is focused on mainstreaming the infrastructural elements of a new Age Friendly Strategy through embedding the relevant commitments in the County Development Plan.

Outdoor spaces and public buildings:

The outside environment and public buildings have a major impact on the independence, mobility and quality of life of older people and are a key determinant of one's ability to 'age in place'. The design of a built environment can often be the difference between a healthy and active lifestyle or one characterized by limited mobility and high levels of social isolation. Age Friendly Ireland collaborated with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority to develop a Walkability Audit Tool, aimed at identifying accessibility and mobility issues to be addressed at local level. Walkability Audits are a practical, low cost method of engaging local people with their town/village environment and provide very useful information on where changes can be made to increase accessibility, mobility and quality of life.

Existing strategic aim:

To ensure that the public realm associated with towns and villages in the County are sufficiently pleasant, safe, accessible and vibrant to entice the public to live, work, shop and socialise there;

How can it be further embedded in our County Development Plan?

Mainstreaming Walkability Audits as part of all public realm works to identify issues in accessibility, mobility and connectivity, and address deficits in relevant areas such as footpaths, pedestrian crossing points and traffic calming, parking, age friendly parking spaces, public toilets and public seating, as part of those funding applications. In addition, a commitment to deliver Public Realm Training workshops to create awareness of the recommendations included in national policy guidelines "Being Age Friendly in the Public Realm".

Transportation:

As driving rates decrease with older age, good transport links help people to access vital services such as medical appointments, social and cultural activities, so that they can be involved in community life, stay independent and keep up social connections. Driving cessation is associated with lower life satisfaction and restricted activity patterns. For older non-drivers, the accessibility and affordability of different modes of transportation are essential factors to ensure that they can remain actively engaged in their communities. Inaccessible or unavailable transport (which can be common in rural areas) can have a detrimental effect on quality of life. In 2016, the Department of Health, HSE, Local Authorities and Age Friendly Ireland, collaborated to compile county by county surveys to inform local policy and practice in ageing. This Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI) data for County Galway found that 22% of individuals aged 55+ reported that a lack of transport options caused difficulty for them socializing or carrying out essential tasks, and 50% of all respondents rated public transport options as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Existing strategic aim:

Provide access for all in an integrated manner with an enhanced choice of transport options including the Rural Transport Programme. Continue the provision of a range of transport options within the County in collaboration with other statutory agencies and transport providers, including a safe road network, a range of bus and rail services, adequate facilities for walking and cycling and opportunities for air and water-based travel.

How can it be further embedded in our County Development Plan?

Include a commitment to enable people as they age 'to get out and about' through the provision of accessible, affordable, and flexible transport systems in both rural and urban areas, and by supporting the design and development of age friendly public and community transport options and infrastructure, in consultation with local communities. Ensure a commitment to examine bus shelters and seating suitable for older people bus stops is provided in accordance with "Guidance on Bus Stop locations" issued by NTA.

Housing:

Previous studies have shown that people want to 'age in place', within their own home and community, and a range of housing options needs to be in place to enable people to stay independent as long as possible. Local survey responses under HaPAI found that individuals first preference is to stay living in their own home as long as possible, and thereafter, their preference is to remain living in their own communities. Support for a range of housing options is proven as over a

quarter of respondents expressed a preference for moving to adapted single or group housing, which was higher than the proportion who expressed a preference for moving to a nursing home.

Existing strategic aim:

Promote and support the development of housing for older people and those with disabilities, including the concept of independent living and the development of “life cycle housing” i.e. housing that is adaptable for people’s needs as they change over their lifetime.

How can it be further embedded in our County Development Plan?

The current Programme for Government includes a commitment to “embed ageing in place options for older people into the planning system, as the County and City Development Plans are redrawn this year” and to draw on ‘housing need assessments and population projections to gain a better understanding of the need and location of housing options for older people’. Older Persons are entitled to different housing options to suit their requirements. Alternatives to nursing homes should be provided through supported housing such as sheltered housing or assisted living developments. These developments allow independent living within the safety of a community setting. The current limited housing options mean many older people are forced to move directly to a nursing home before they are ready as the family home becomes either too remote or unsuitable to adapt for decreased mobility and their required increased support to remain independent. Specialist housing allows people to remain living within their own community and has a long-term beneficial impact on quality of life and well-being. Developing specialised older persons housing options has a positive impact on the wider housing market as it reduces levels of under-occupancy by freeing up larger family homes and making them available for local families. It is important to include a commitment to providing a range of local housing options across communities so that those who wish to remain in their community and live independently or semi-independently have an opportunity to trade down or downsize in the area in which they live (for example to a smaller or single storey dwelling or apartment unit). Continue to deliver Age Friendly Housing workshops to create awareness of the recommendations and guidelines in the future provision of housing for an ageing population.

Social Participation and Community Supports;

Participation in leisure, social and cultural activities with family and community is strongly connected to health and wellbeing – conversely, loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of depression and mental health difficulties as well as cognitive decline. An age friendly community should provide opportunities for people to participate in public life and quality community-based health services can keep people healthy and reduce their in-patient and outpatient services.

Existing strategic aim:

Assist where possible the development of community facilities and services within the County. Encourage and facilitate, where feasible the provision and extension of integrated community facilities to serve the needs of communities in the County.

How can it be further embedded in our County Development Plan?

The lockdown of communities due to the Covid-19 pandemic had a particular impact on older people, and loneliness and social isolation were issues which emerged as key priorities from member groups of the Community Response Forum. It is vital to put in place structures such as an Older Persons Council to provide a social participation forum for older people, especially the high percentage in rural areas who live alone, and as part of this, to support essential community facilities such as Community Centres and Libraries to act as social and cultural hubs for people in their communities. Safe friendly communities with good facilities are also good for children, young people and families of all ages.

*“If you design for the young you exclude the old,
but if you design for the old you include everyone.”*

Glenn Miller, Director of Education and Research, Canadian Urban Development Institute.