



Why Ireland needs to take ageism seriously and take meaningful action to counteract it.

Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism

Executive Summary

January 2023

Community
Foundation
Ireland

Introduction

Ageism arises when age is used to categorise and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage and injustice.

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. The 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing, which Ireland has recently adopted, also recognises that more progress is needed in respect of the combatting of ageism.

'Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism' was developed, by the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, to set out why Ireland needs to take ageism seriously and take meaningful action to counteract it. The document highlights both the nature and impact of ageism in Ireland, and sets out a number of evidence-informed strategies to reduce it.

In 2016, 45% of people in Ireland aged 50 and over said that they felt discrimination because of their age. The experience of ageism is also proven to be more pronounced as one grows older.

The Positive Ageing indicators report, Department of Health, Ireland, 2016.

'Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism' reveals how ageism is deeply institutionalised throughout our services and systems and across wider Irish society. Because it is so embedded it feels almost normal and goes unchallenged. Yet it has huge negative consequences for people of all ages.

This Alliance publication concludes with nine recommendations for action, informed by the evidence, to create an Ireland for all ages.

Ageism in Ireland; A snapshot

Ageism, In Ireland, is experienced across an extensive range of settings and environments. Broken down by setting, the Department of Health's Positive Ageing indicators report (2016) reveals such discrimination was most evident in looking for work (87%); shops, pubs and restaurants (37%); banks (36%); the workplace (33%); transport (25%); health (24%) and public services (16%). 'Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism' also describes both the experience and impact of ageism in the contexts of housing, income, the media and wider discourse, lifelong learning, and the digital environment.



The 2016 Positive Ageing indicators report quoted 2014 prevalence figures of 42% of 50–64-year-olds experiencing age discrimination, and 52% of over 65s.

The Positive Ageing indicators report, Department of Health, Ireland, 2016.

The Alliance document reveals how older people, in particular, felt negatively stereotyped throughout the pandemic, and many reported that they experienced additional ageism in the formation of government policy and society's attitudes. Such a policy response targeted towards 'the elderly' and 'the vulnerable' pre-assumed that there was a universal connection between the two, and went a long way towards undermining the confidence and self-esteem of all older people.

'Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism' highlights how ageism is experienced in an Irish context and can impact on one's physical, mental, and sexual health while also increasing the risk of social isolation and loneliness – both of which are associated with serious health problems.

The Impact of Ageism

Ageism has serious and far-reaching consequences for people's health, well-being and human rights.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has set out the numerous and harmful effects of ageism: shorter lifespan, diminished mental and physical health, isolation, lost commitment to their workplace, cognitive decline and reduced quality of life. For individuals, ageism also contributes to poverty and financial insecurity in older age.

Ageism is associated with premature death – estimated by the WHO at as much as 7.5 years.

Many studies on ageism concentrate on its egregious effects on older people. However, age discrimination, ageist attitudes and negative age stereotyping can damage every generation. First, it can allow us to overlook the resources, skills and experiences that older people offer for the good of all. Second, it can allow us to patronise and discriminate against older people, thereby creating a less just society. Third, older people themselves may imbibe the stereotype, and begin to believe they are less equal, have less value and are less able to continue to contribute to society.



What can we do to counteract it

We must now deal with the collateral damage caused by the pandemic and some of the strategies used to respond to it.

‘Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism’ sets out nine recommendations for action, informed by the evidence, to create an Ireland for all ages. These recommendations aim to help stakeholders reduce ageism. Implementing them successfully will require political commitment and the engagement of different sectors and actors.

The Alliance is calling on Government and other actors to commit to implementation of the WHO endorsed strategies which have been shown to work in reducing ageism. Committing to some of the long overdue awareness campaigns and education programmes – first promised by Government as part of the 2013 National Positive Ageing Strategy – would represent a positive ‘first step’.

Going beyond some of the basic commitments set out in the 2013 Strategy, the Alliance is now calling on Government to **relentlessly pursue the three key policy goals, which Ireland has committed itself to when adopting the 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing.**

“We are fully committed to mainstreaming ageing and our ultimate objective to make Ireland a great place to grow old”.

Minister for Mental Health and Older People, Mary Butler, participating in the 5th United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE] Ministerial Conference on Ageing, Rome 2022.

The three main policy goals underpinning the 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing – which Ireland has recently adopted.

- 1 Promoting active and healthy ageing** throughout life.
- 2 Ensuring access to long-term care** and support for carers and families.
- 3 Mainstreaming ageing** to advance a society for all ages.

The Alliance also recommends that Ireland **establish, with some urgency, an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People** – similar to that which is in place in both Northern Ireland and Wales. This would help to ensure that Ireland’s various policy commitments relevant to older people are meaningfully monitored and that older people are treated with respect and on an equal basis with the rest of the population.

Nine recommended actions to reduce ageism – A snapshot:

Action One: Establish a Commissioner for Ageing and Older People.

Action Two: Develop a joint Government–Alliance led awareness campaign in order to promote an age-balanced image of society.

Action Three: Develop a guide for media and other opinion making actors providing advice and guidance on imagery, language, messages, media standards and portrayal relevant to the representation of ageing and older people.

Action Four: Identify and revise existing ageist policies and practices in order to reduce ageism and address age discrimination.

Action Five: Invest in education and training interventions to reduce ageism.

Action Six: Facilitate intergenerational contact interventions to foster interaction and solidarity between people of different generations.

Action Seven: Invest in data gathering to gain a better understanding of ageism, its prevalence and how to reduce it.

Action Eight: Support the private sector to develop and implement interventions – such as intergenerational mentorship programmes and age positive practices – to prevent and respond to instances of ageism.

Action Nine: Develop the capacity of employees and employers to detect, report and respond to incidences of ageism and age discrimination.

Conclusion

It is time to say no to ageism.

The pandemic and responses to it have, arguably, created a simplified view of older lives in public discourse – as homogeneous, vulnerable, isolated units readily cut off from families, friends and activities, their contributions to society expendable.

COVID-19 has brought immense challenges to society. The response to the pandemic would appear to have inadvertently increased a prevalent ageism, with older people bearing the brunt of COVID-19 in language, isolation and in death rates. The Alliance would strongly suggest that if ageism had not been so prevalent, the effects of the pandemic on older people would have been less severe.

The voice and lived experience of older people must now be heard by those responsible for policy development and implementation. We are calling on decision-makers to listen and respond to these reflections on the ageist experience of older people in Ireland.

Unless we change now the way we treat older people, we may create the future that we fear for our older selves. So, there is a healthy degree of self-interest in making the changes now that will benefit all our futures.



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”.**

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

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The work of the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs
is made possible thanks to funding provided by
Community Foundation Ireland