

TAKING STOCK

Is Government keeping its commitments to older people?

A report from The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs

Reviewed January 2024; Next Review due 2025



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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 Alliances independent Chair, Maurice O'Connell. 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.



Responding to the Opportunities and Challenges of Ageing in Ireland

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Populations are getting older in almost every developed country in the world. Ireland is no different.

Our older adult population will be the fastest growing demographic of the 21st Century and must be centrally and explicitly catered for as part of any ambitions and priorities of government now and in the future.

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (the Age Alliance or the Alliance)¹ is pleased to launch this report which has involved an analysis of some of the extensive range of Government commitments made to older people, together with an assessment of the progress made by Government across each of these areas.

Policy commitments relevant to an ageing population have been defined across a range of key Government publications such as the current Programme for Government; Our Shared Future, 2020 (a commitment to establish a Commission on Care), the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020 (a commitment to implement benchmarking of the pension), the Sláintecare Strategy and Action Plan, 2021-2023 and the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan, 2021 (a commitment to develop a plan aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation), and Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework, (a commitment to meet the needs and opportunities of an ageing population). The joint policy statement, Housing Options for our Ageing Population, 2019 identified a programme of 40 strategic actions to progress housing options for older people.

A key policy document relevant to an ageing population, the National Positive Ageing Strategy, was published by Government in 2013. This 2013 Strategy suggested that

‘the ageing of our population from this point onwards will represent one of the most significant demographic and social developments that Irish society has encountered’.

¹ The seven-member organisations of the Alliance are Active Retirement Ireland, Age & Opportunity, ALONE, The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Irish Hospice Foundation, The Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and Third Age.

It set out, at the time, an extensive range of policy commitments across four areas; participation, health, security and research.

An implementation plan for this 2013 Strategy, however, was never developed. Ring fenced funding was never allocated. Annual reports on progress were never published. More recently (April, 2023), and of some concern to the Alliance and older people, the 2013 Strategy was described in the Dáil as a



‘cost neutral Strategy (which) does not contain specific actions. Rather, it is a high-level strategic document...to provide direction in relation to the issues that need to be addressed to promote positive ageing’.

This Alliance report, ‘Taking Stock’, provides an important snapshot in time which directly tracks and spotlights the progress (or perhaps lack of) made by Ireland in respect of a range of key pledges and policy commitments relevant to older people in Ireland. As illustrated in the main report, many of the commitments set out as part of the relevant policy frameworks have yet to be meaningfully advanced or benefited from coordinated implementation. Arrangements for monitoring progress and an assigned budget are recognised as basic enablers for any strategy - key factors which have been missing in the case of Ireland’s goals framed to support an ageing population.

Given the rapid growth of our ageing population and the plethora of policy commitments in place it is important that we take stock of the progress being made towards Ireland’s goal that ‘older people will be supported and motivated to enjoy more active, healthy and connected lives and to age confidently and comfortably in their community’. (National Planning Framework, Project Ireland 2024).

This stock-take has, therefore, involved the Age Alliance analysing 17 thematic areas relevant to the lives of older people and an ageing population. This was a pragmatic exercise; we have listed the key Government commitments across the 17 areas and provided a summary of the progress made in each of those 17 areas. Readers, we believe, can then easily judge the level, or perhaps lack, of progress made. The Age Alliance has also included a range of practical calls to action or recommendations in each of the 17 areas.

This analysis was inspired by two recent Age Alliance exercises in the 'Telling It Like It Is' series which explored the lived experience of older people through and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, these accounts revealed how there has been an implementation deficit in relation to many of Ireland's policy commitments relevant to ageing and older people.

In addition to the 'deep dive' analysis across the 17 thematic areas which is featured in the main body of the report, we have, for the purpose of this executive summary and to steer Government action in the short term, focused in on 15 commitments made in respect of older people and have rated the Government on its efforts in these areas.

This shortlist of commitments was lifted out on the basis of several core criteria:

— **That the commitment directly impacts older people**

— **The commitment wording is clear and measurable**

— **Achievement of the commitment is not subjective;
It either has or has not been delivered**

— **The commitment directly impacts older people**

— **If delivered or achieved, the commitment has significant potential to improve (1) the environment for policy implementation relevant to ageing and older people or (2) the quality of life for people as they grow older in Ireland – or indeed both simultaneously.**

A forum of Age Alliance representatives which included CEOs and research/policy officers² from each of the seven member organisations have informed the grading of Governments performance on each of the 15 shortlisted commitments. The grades allocated represent the collective views of the Age Alliance forum rather than the views of any individual. An explanation of the grades is provided in the table below;

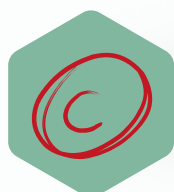
Explanation of grades



Excellent, making a real difference to older people's lives



Good effort, positive results for older people



Satisfactory attempt, but older people still left wanting



Barely acceptable performance, little or no positive impact on older people



Unacceptable, taking steps in the wrong direction, no positive impact on older people




Fail, taking steps that undermine older people's wellbeing



Not applicable, due to vague nature of Government commitment

² Mary Harkin, Policy, Research & Evaluation Manager, Age & Opportunity; Niamh Kavanagh, Membership Development Officer, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament; Gráinne Loughran, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, ALONE.



To its credit, Government has made good or in some cases ‘promising’ progress in some areas. To reflect this, a ‘B’ grade was awarded on the combat of ageism to reflect the very recent development and launch of the national campaign in this space by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). A ‘B’ grade was also awarded to reflect the introduction of the ‘Long-Term Carer Contributions’ scheme which will make it easier for long-term family carers to qualify for the State Pension (Contributory) when they reach pension age. While the goals set have been ambitious there has, however, been limited progress to date in “develop(ing) a far-reaching range of housing options to provide appropriate housing choices for older people” and thus a ‘D’ grade is awarded for one of the Government commitments relevant to housing for older people.

Things are less positive at the other end of the spectrum with one ‘F’ and four ‘E’ grades awarded for, among other issues, the failure to; publish waiting lists for housing adaptations, develop an implementation plan so as to translate the National Positive Ageing Strategy into action on the ground, to benchmark State pension payments, or to develop a plan aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation among older people.

Several ‘C-’ and ‘D’ grades were attained across the 15 shortlisted areas. Together, this shows a lack of significant progress and strong implementation across a range of long-standing policy commitments relevant to positive ageing.

Now, the Alliance firmly believes, is not the time for more research reports or investment in further time-consuming policy development. Much, if not all, of the policy content, strategies and actions to implement positive ageing remain valid. Collectively, we now need to hold Government to account on the pledges that have been made in respect of positive ageing as these are the issues that can make a real difference to the lived experience of our growing older adult population.

In October 2023 Government approved a proposal to establish a ‘Commission on Care for Older Persons’. The Commission is to examine the provision of health and social care services and supports for older persons, and make recommendations. The Alliance welcomes this long-awaited initiative. ‘Care’ is, of course, one critical element of a breadth of determinants or factors that enable people to age well - and thus must be invested in to ensure equity of access and quality of delivery for people as we age. The Age Alliance, therefore, looks forward to contributing to the work of the planned Commission on Care.

The Alliance believes that older people must not, however, be viewed as a single group with homogeneous experiences, challenges and issues. Yes, many of us will experience levels of frailty and vulnerability at some point as we age. It must be recognised that older age should also provide opportunities for active citizenship, for entrepreneurship and gradualised approaches to retirement, for continued contribution and participation in local community affairs, for engaging in the kinds of activities that enhance physical and mental health, and a time for involvement with family, friends, neighbours and the wider community. These and other issues relevant to positive ageing need to be invested in and planned for. They will not happen by chance.

It is understood that a cross-departmental group will be established under the auspices of the Commission on Care to consider whether the supports for positive ageing are fit-for-purpose, and to develop a costed implementation plan for any proposed new supports. The Alliance believes that the planned Commission will therefore provide valuable opportunity for Government to not only consider the value of but **actively make plans for the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People**. In a recent Red C poll commissioned by Sage Advocacy measuring public opinion on such issues, 81% of respondents wanted to see the introduction of a Commissioner for Older People.

Independent Commissioners, with strong track records of achievements directly for older people, are in place in both Northern Ireland and Wales. Proposals for the establishment of Independent Commissioners in both England and Scotland are also well advanced.

Policy for older people in Ireland is currently situated within the Department of Health. Older people have needs and rights far beyond this Department. An Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People would have a far broader remit, recognising the full capacity and potential of older people and covering the needs and rights of older people across the spectrum, not just in terms of health, care, frailty, and vulnerability.

Most importantly, an Independent Commissioner would have responsibility for supporting the effective mainstreaming of ageing across Government while also having an ability to hold Government and public bodies to account.

The Alliance isn't trying to kick the Government in the shins with this report. As highlighted, some positive progress has been made. We recognise strategy implementation and whole of Government working are challenging. An Independent Commissioner would, we believe, be a key 'asset' for Government, helping its departments and agencies to integrate ageing issues into all relevant policy fields and to effect strong implementation and good value for money. Both successful and 'promising' age friendly practice are already visible, but these now need to be scaled up so that they are more readily accessible no matter where one lives.

The Alliance is therefore calling on all political parties to include a commitment in their manifestos, ahead of the next general election, to establish an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People and to relaunch the National Positive Ageing Strategy together with a strong implementation plan and a ring-fenced budget.

An ageing Ireland is an issue in which people of all ages will have a stake. We all want to age well. As a country we must, therefore, strive to become an Ireland that leads the world in becoming age-attuned, age-accommodating and age-friendly.

Explanation of grades



Excellent, making a real difference to older people's lives



Good effort, positive results for older people



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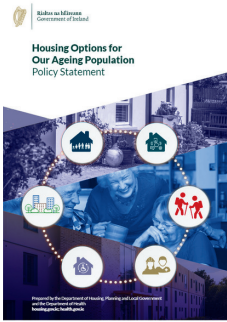

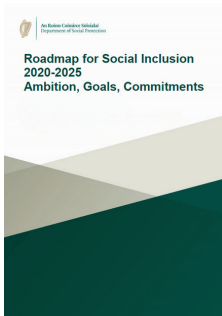













Fail, taking steps that undermine older people's wellbeing





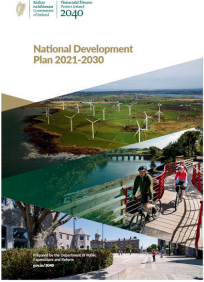





Not applicable, due to vague nature of Government commitment

| GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT (VERBATIM AS PER STRATEGY/POLICY REFERENCED) | GOVERNMENT STRATEGY OR POLICY DOCUMENT | GRADE | RATIONALE |
|---|---|--|---|
| Develop a separate implementation plan so as to translate Goals and Objectives of the National Positive Ageing Strategy into action on the ground |  <p>National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013</p> |  | <p>No implementation plan ever developed.</p> <p>No allocation of ring-fenced funding ever provided.</p> <p>No Ministerial drive, since 2013, of implementation of the Strategy at political level.</p> |
| The Cabinet Committee on Social Policy, chaired by the Taoiseach, will oversee the implementation of the National Positive Ageing Strategy |  <p>National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013</p> |  | <p>No publication of annual updates on positive ageing or annual reports on progress.</p> <p>No evidence of oversight of implementation by the Cabinet Committee.</p> |
| Combat ageism through awareness campaigns and by encouraging the media and other opinion-making actors to give an age-balanced image of society |  <p>National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013</p> |  | <p>Launch of January 2024 IHREC national awareness campaign (TV, radio and online); 'For Equality in Ageing'.</p> |
| Work closely with local authorities to review the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme and the waiting lists in place for adaptations and publish this data on a yearly basis. This will identify any barriers and gaps at local and national level and help to streamline the process to ensure timely intervention |  <p>Housing Options for our Ageing Population 2019</p> |  | <p>Commitment defined in 2019 but waiting lists for the grants have never been published.</p> <p>Some Local Authorities have had to close grant processes at times due to waiting lists being too long.</p> |

| GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT (VERBATIM AS PER STRATEGY/POLICY REFERENCED) | GOVERNMENT STRATEGY OR POLICY DOCUMENT | GRADE | RATIONALE |
|--|---|--|--|
| To develop a far-reaching range of housing options to provide appropriate housing choices for older people, suited to their individual needs so they can plan ahead and, in so far as possible, choose the right home for them |  |  | <p>Demonstrator housing with supports project in Inchicore, (commitment first referenced in Rebuilding Ireland, 2016) still in development.</p> <p>Increasing number of older renters, many of whom do not want to be in the rental sector.</p> <p>Increased numbers of older people on the waiting list for social housing.</p> <p>No national 'rightsizing' strategy, nor Government-led delivery of broadscale home-sharing schemes.</p> <p>The commitment to introduce a Healthy Age Friendly Homes Coordinator, to all 31 local authority areas demonstrates promise.</p> |
| Protect the incomes of older people through the delivery of the commitment to benchmark State pension payments |  |  | <p>Benchmarking of State pension payments has not been introduced.</p> <p>Increase in poverty rates among older people.</p> |
| Provide income and other supports to enable people as they age to enjoy an acceptable standard of living |  |  | <p>Those aged 65+ were the only age cohort to see increases across all three poverty rates between 2020 and 2021.</p> <p>The State Pension will not provide the basis of an adequate income for an older person living alone.</p> |

| GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT (VERBATIM AS PER STRATEGY/POLICY REFERENCED) | GOVERNMENT STRATEGY OR POLICY DOCUMENT | GRADE | RATIONALE |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Examine options for (and ultimately develop) a pension solution for family carers to recognise their important contribution and work</p> |  <p>Programme for Government - Our Shared Future 2020</p> |  | <p>New 'Long-Term Carer Contributions' scheme will make it easier for long-term family carers to qualify for the State Pension.</p> |
| <p>Accessible, affordable, and flexible transport systems in both rural and urban areas</p> <p>Provide a quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs'</p> |  <p>National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013</p> <p>Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 to 2022</p> |  | <p>Lack of transport connectivity, particularly in rural areas, reduces efficacy of the Free Travel Scheme.</p> |
| <p>Introduce a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high-quality, regulated home care</p> |  <p>Programme for Government - Our Shared Future 2020</p> |  | <p>Work on the development of such a scheme is ongoing but no scheme would appear to be close to being put in place.</p> |
| <p>To underpin a planned national health sector policy on safeguarding vulnerable or at-risk adults in the context of their interactions with the health sector.</p> |  <p>Government Legislative Programme</p> |  | <p>Evidence of scoping work underway but no policy yet launched.</p> |

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|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Increase the number of specialist palliative care beds countrywide over the next five years, ensuring that there will be a hospice serving every region in the country.</p> |  <p>Programme for Government – Our Shared Future 2020</p> |  | <p>New funding commitments in place but access to specialist palliative/hospice care is still limited in some areas and settings.</p> |
| <p>Develop a plan aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation, particularly among older people</p> |  <p>Programme for Government – Our Shared Future 2020</p> <p>The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 - 2025</p> <p>Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021 - 2025</p> <p>Sláintecare Strategy & Action Plan 2021-2023</p> |  | <p>No plan developed /launched or sign of plan being in development.</p> |
| <p>Increase hospital bed capacity</p> |  <p>National Development Plan 2021-2030</p> |  | <p>October 2023 HSE Statement on 'Delayed Transfers of Care' from hospital settings.</p> |
| <p>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</p> |  <p>National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013</p> |  | <p>Evidence of good practices exist but ageism, digital disadvantage, funding and structural barriers still drive social exclusion.</p> |

We have a wonderful opportunity in Ireland to embrace our improving life expectancy, to promote independent living and add healthy years to life. And we must embrace it.

We all want to age well. As a country we must strive to become an Ireland that leads the world in becoming age-attuned, age-accommodating and age-friendly. An Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People can play a key role in getting us to this point.

