



Age & Opportunity

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media in relation to the topic of Inclusion of Older Persons in Sport

May 2023

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. This submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media draws on experience and insights gained by Age & Opportunity through running the National Programme for Sport and Physical Activity for Older People since 2001 which is funded by Sport Ireland and the HSE. Our work is based on a significant body of international research evidencing the social and health benefits of engaging with sport and physical activity for all older people regardless of age or ability.

1.2. We offer our views on ageist language and representation of older persons which contributes to social exclusion and can lead to older persons being overlooked in policy and practice in relation to participation in sport and physical activity.

1.3. We identify three specific cohorts of older persons that should be considered by the Committee in relation to inclusion in sport and physical activity:

1. Older people in social and health care settings;
2. Older people receiving home support services;
3. Independent older people living in their communities.

1.4. We outline the importance of participation in physical activity for those living in care settings and those in receipt of home support services.

- 1.5. We make the case for upskilling care staff to facilitate participation in physical activity and point to the lack of a continuing professional development framework for care assistants.
- 1.6. We highlight ageism in eligibility for personal assistance services and argue for the right of all disabled persons regardless of age to participate in meaningful activities including sport and physical activity.
- 1.7. We outline the importance of capacity building and value of older persons as leaders and advocates in the provision of opportunities in sport for all citizens.
- 1.8. We highlight the importance of accessible public spaces and offer insights from our recent research in this area.
- 1.9. Finally, we include, as requested, a summary of the recommendations we offer for your consideration.

2. AGE & OPPORTUNITY

2.1 Age & Opportunity is the leading national development organisation working to enable the best possible quality of life for us all as we age. We do this by:

- championing the creativity and value of older people;
- combating stereotypes and negative views of ageing;
- developing inclusive and engaging experiences which respond to the interests and needs of the diverse older adult population;
- developing, testing and measuring the impact of pioneering programmes and approaches;
- making evidence available to policy-makers and service providers;
- working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that Ireland's policies, strategies and programmes are directly informed by the needs and experiences of older people.

3. AGE & OPPORTUNITY ACTIVE

3.1. Age & Opportunity are responding to this request on the basis of our engagement with older persons through our Active programme which is the national physical activity programme for older people funded by Sport Ireland and the HSE since 2001. The Active Programme includes the following initiatives:

- PALs (Physical Activity Leaders) - An education and peer leadership initiative which trains older people how to lead sport and physical activity sessions in their local groups and communities.
- CarePALs - Trains those working or volunteering in care settings to lead suitable physical activities with people in their care.
- PPALs – Trains older persons with intellectual disabilities to lead suitable physical activities with their peers.
- Active National Grant Scheme - We allocate funding to groups to help them to engage their peers in more physical activities and sport by purchasing equipment encouraging further participation.
- FitLine - A telephone mentoring service which encourages participants to start getting more active.
- Go for Life Games - Teams from all over Ireland participating in regional games events and coming together to take part in a national day of sport in June every year.
- Walking Football – An initiative in partnership with the FAI to promote and develop walking football with groups of older people, including Men’s Sheds.
- European Week of Sport – a chance for older persons and groups to try a new sport or physical activity as part of this #BEACTIVE European week each September.
- Actively Changing Gears - a collaboration across both our Engage and Active programmes which offers a combination of resilience and physical activity training as part of our PALs, PPALs, FitLine and Walking Football initiatives.

4. FACTUAL INFORMATION OF RELEVANCE

4.1 AGEIST LANGUAGE AND REPRESENTATION

4.1.1. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, older persons were talked about more than ever in the Oireachtas, in the media, in public discourse and in everyday life. We would like to draw the Committee's attention to the importance of using language that is precise, accurate and value free in private and public conversations with and about older persons is more important than ever. Ageist terms should be as unacceptable as sexist or racist ones.

4.1.2. Older persons is the most appropriate term to use. The 'er' qualifier makes it more acceptable and inclusive than just old. It indicates that age is relative - everyone is older or younger than someone else. It recognises a continuum of ageing, all older people are not the same age. Above all, it is the term that older people prefer. This is reflected in terms such as the United Nations Principles for Older Persons and the International Day of Older Persons.

4.1.3. The elderly is one of the worst ways to describe older persons. It lacks an equal and opposite term and is problematic because of its association with dependency and frailty. In 1995, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of Older Persons rejected the term elderly in preference for 'older persons'.

4.1.4. Geriatric is a medical term and should only be used in medical contexts, we would never refer to children as pediatrics. Likewise, just as we don't refer to people under 50 as junior citizens there is no need to refer to people of any age as senior citizens. Pensioner or OAP implies financial dependency and renders invisible the very many older people who are in paid or unpaid work.

4.1.5. We do change as we get older. Functional abilities change over time. Older persons do become ill, do live with disabilities and many health issues do become more prevalent with age. When dealing with any disability or health issue - at any age - person-first language should always be used. Someone lives with dementia rather than exists as a dementia sufferer. People are users of wheelchairs rather than wheelchair bound and have had strokes rather than are stroke victims.

4.1.6. Portrayals of older persons can also be stereotypical leading to ageist attitudes and behaviours. Many of the images used to represent older people in care settings are negative stock images - wrinkly hands, slippers, walking frames. On the other hand, portrayals (often in advertising and often used to promote sport and physical activity) of older people as happy and affluent, active and leisure oriented can be positive but often exaggerated and unrealistic. These representations do not reflect the diversity of older persons and the experiences of ageing.

4.1.7 Recommendation: That measures are taken to ensure that all ministers and public servants, including those in public service broadcasting organisations use appropriate language and imagery when referring to all older people.

4.2. SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN RESIDENTIAL AND DAY CARE SETTINGS

4.2.1 The United Nations Principles for Older Persons includes the charges, under the heading of care, that older persons should:

- have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness.¹

Residents of Care Settings and visitors to Day Care Settings therefore should be enabled to be as physically active as possible and to enjoy the well documented evidence-based attendant health benefits that physical activity can promote. Helping older persons to be active is important to avoid deconditioning. This is where people lose functional capabilities like getting dressed, sitting into a chair or being able to walk to the toilet.

4.2.2. CarePALs is a person centred health promoting intervention developed in 2014 by Age & Opportunity's Active programme as a direct response to demand from those working in care settings for whom there was no similar opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills needed to

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-principles-older-persons>

promote appropriate physical activity in group settings. To date 1,468 individuals have completed the CarePALs initiative.

4.2.3. CarePALs supports the aspiration outlined in the National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People to bring about a transformation from institutional to more person centred models of care. On a practical level it helps to meet Standard 18 by facilitating greater opportunities for participation in leisure activities that suit their needs, preferences and capacities.

4.2.4. Based on the same model as our existing Physical Activity Leader (PALs) initiative, PPALs was developed by Age & Opportunity in partnership with TCD in 2018 as a course to train older people with intellectual disability to lead activities and games with people in their own centres. Our evaluation illustrated the importance of training staff and key workers to support the PPALs in their delivery of the initiative.

4.2.5. Meaningful activities in home, day and residential care settings facilitate relationships and help confer a sense of achievement and maintain a sense of self. Some activities are more valued than others, generally characterised as ‘meaningful’. Key to this is

- taking account of individual interests;
- small group activities most appreciated;
- integration into everyday life.²

4.2.6. This means that staff need to take time establishing what is considered valuable by individuals and need training and resources to facilitate meaningful activities and ensure that these activities are prioritised as an essential component of quality of life in care. As such, within care settings, there needs to be understanding of the value and potential of physical activity within those settings and the appropriate infrastructure (planning, resources, people,

² Age & Opportunity (2003): Home from Home? The views of Residents on Social Gain and Quality of Life: A Study in Three Care Centres for Older People

budget) to offer a range of engagements/experiences.

4.2.7. As providers of education and training opportunities for those who work in care settings including home support services, we have been struck by the fact that while other medical professions working in care, nurses, physiotherapists etc. operate within mandatory continuing professional development contexts and are therefore resourced and facilitated to access training, an equivalent system does not seem to be in place for care assistants beyond basic QQI Level 5 training and health and safety requirements. This reflects the lack of value placed on the role of care assistants and, indeed, those for whom they care.

4.2.8. We believe that there is a need for a network based organisation in Ireland such as the UK based NAPA (National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People) which is tasked with:

- Developing a mixed membership of care settings, housing with care and day care settings, activity staff, service users and their families;
- Developing strategic partnerships with other relevant organisations;
- Becoming an effective training, assessment and qualification awarding body;
- Setting the standard in training and leadership for activity provision;
- Leading on the development of a career path for activity provider.³

4.2.9. Recommendation: That physical activity is prioritised as an essential component of quality of life in care and that staff are trained and resourced to facilitate participation by all older persons in their care.

4.2.11. Recommendation: That a network based organisation for activity providers be established and resourced in Ireland.

³ <https://napa-activities.co.uk/>

4.3. SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE RECEIVING HOME SUPPORT SERVICES

4.3.1. The United Nations Principles for Older Persons also includes the charges, under the heading of self-fulfilment, that older persons should:

- be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential.
- have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.
- have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness.⁴

4.3.2. This charge relates to all older people including those who need additional supports for such opportunities and access. For many disabled persons this support is provided by personal assistance services, however persons with disabilities over the age of 65 are not entitled to such services.⁵

4.3.3. Recommendation: That entitlement to personal assistance services be extended to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.

4.3.4. Recommendation: That a social rather than medical model of home support is nurtured by policy and practice in order to allow all older persons to access and enjoy some level of physical activity and reap the attendant health benefits.

4.4. SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY

4.4.1. Both individuals and society benefit from participation by older persons in sport and physical activity. “There are high rates of volunteering and participation in both active and social leisure activities and organised groups among older adults in Ireland. Taking part in these

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-principles-older-persons>

⁵ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/personal-assistance-services-in-ireland-a-capability-approach-to-understanding-the#:~:text=Personal%20assistance%20services%20are%20provided,of%2065%20are%20not%20eligible.>

activities is associated with better quality of life and fewer depressive symptoms. While this clearly demonstrates that volunteering and social participation are important features of successful ageing, the fact that more than half (56%) of older adults volunteered their time and expertise at some stage, and almost one-in-five do so on a weekly basis, highlights the important contribution that older adults make to the economic, social, cultural, and community well-being of the population.”⁶

4.4.2. Age & Opportunity’s Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) initiative is a unique peer leadership scheme enabling older adults to lead their peers in recreational sport and physical activity. It demonstrates how older persons can be active agents of progressive change in relation to inclusion.

4.4.3. In May 2020, Age & Opportunity convened a Covid-19 Stakeholder Group for the purpose of producing guidelines on promoting the safe return of older people to sport and physical activity.⁷ At the first meeting of the Group it was agreed that we should also prepare a report that represents the views of older people on how Covid-19 has impacted on their involvement in sport and physical activity.

4.4.4. The recommendations in this report include actions for policy makers and media providers in relation to addressing fears post pandemic – fear of meeting other people, of digital technologies, and of getting older. Recommendations also point to opportunities and supports needed to encourage older people’s groups to return to physical activity, upskilling group members, providing enabling environments both indoors and outdoors and the resources and transport infrastructure to avail of them.⁸

4.4.5. In 2021 Age & Opportunity conducted follow-up research on older persons use of public spaces for sport and physical activity. A number of key determinants to access and use of public

⁶ Wellbeing and Health in Ireland’s Over 50s 2009-2016 <https://www.doi.org/10.38018/TildaRe.2018-00>

⁷ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/guidelines-on-the-return-to-recreational-sport-and-physical-activity-for-older-adults/>

⁸ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Impact-of-Covid-19-Report-Age-Opportunity.pdf>

open space were identified as having significant importance in this research and should be given due consideration in development of projects, funding and policy decisions in the future.

4.4.6. Lack of public toilet facilities is the biggest barrier to using public spaces for older persons. Other barriers include lack of physical infrastructure such as benches, handrails, fresh water taps, etc. and safety concerns were also highlighted.⁹

4.4.7. Recommendation: That local authorities place additional focus on and investment in infrastructure to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of open space.

4.4.8. Welcoming and accessible buildings, as well as appropriate programming are also key to participation – staff working in gyms should be trained and enabled to cater for the needs of older members and plan activity sessions appropriate to older members. Fulfilment of appropriate actions in this regard should be a consideration for any public funding.

4.4.9. There are significant transport and day to day care-related issues that are barriers to the social inclusion of older persons in many activities. Making public transport more accessible, convenient and safe, especially in rural Ireland, is critical to decision-making around attending and participating in sport and physical activity.

4.4.10 Inclusion in Sport and Physical activity is also about belonging to the large communities created by sports events. Age & Opportunity welcome the recognition of Croke Park as the first age friendly stadium in the world and recommend that age friendly infrastructure and actions should be a consideration for any public funding for venues and events.

4.4.11 At the time of writing GAAGO is in the news in relation to the accessibility of live games. This issue is pertinent to inclusion, as older persons are less likely to be digitally connected and/or competent and in addition, the paywall may be prohibitive for those living on what we have elsewhere pointed out is an inadequate state pension income. On the other hand, greater

⁹ <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Peer-Research-on-Public-Spaces-September-2022.pdf>

availability of games on television and the internet can mitigate travel or accessibility barriers which can exclude many older persons.

4.4.12 We draw your attention to the EU Regulations under which member states are allowed to designate certain sporting and cultural events as being of major importance to society and to ensure that they are available on free to air television service on a live or deferred basis.¹⁰ We suggest that when the current list of designated events come up for review at the end of 2023 that the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media ensures that those who are most reliant on free-to-air television are considered in the decision making process.

5. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 That measures are taken to ensure that all ministers and public servants, including those in public service broadcasting organisations use appropriate language and imagery when referring to all older people.

5.2 That physical activity is prioritised as an essential component of meaningful activity, promoting quality of life in home, day and residential care settings.

5.3 That a structured continuing professional development framework is developed for care staff focused on the provision of meaningful activities, including physical activity for all older persons.

5.4 That eligibility for personal assistance services should be extended to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.

5.5 That a social rather than medical model of home support should be nurtured by policy and practice in order to allow all older persons who wish so to access and enjoy as much physical activity as they can and reap the attendant health benefits.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/df462-public-consultation-on-designation-of-major-events/#current-list-under-review>

5.6 That a network based organisation for activity providers be established and resourced in Ireland.

5.7 That additional focus on and investment in infrastructure is prioritised to reduce the barriers preventing access and use of open space.

5.8 That more accessible, affordable, convenient and safe public transport is prioritised.

5.9 That policies and practices designed to increase participation of older persons in sport and physical activity should be a consideration for any public funding for venues and events.

5.10 That the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media should ensure that those who are most reliant on free-to-air television are considered in the decision making process about designated sporting and cultural events.

END

Prepared by:

Mary Harkin, Policy, Research and Evaluation Manager, Age & Opportunity

May 2023