



age &
opportunity

Learning To Power Change

The experience of four older groups in four counties
of community education as a way of fostering
critical thinking and civic engagement

Kildare

North Leitrim

Wexford

Wicklow

Adele McKenna

Published by Age & Opportunity
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ISBN 978-1-900578-03-4

Age & Opportunity
Marino Institute of Education
Griffith Avenue
Dublin 9
01 805 7709
www.ageandopportunity.ie



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Foreword

At Age & Opportunity we work toward a society where people of all ages can feel included in all aspects of life. We work in promoting greater participation of older people in arts and culture, physical activity and sport, and in education and active citizenship. Put simply, our work is informed by the knowledge that societies work better when people of all ages and backgrounds feel involved in decisions that affect them and if they are facilitated to contribute to finding solutions to the challenges that they and their communities face.

This report is concerned with the impact of participation by groups of older people in community education initiatives in Kildare, Leitrim, Wexford and Wicklow. What the participating groups had in common was that they had each participated in a targeted educational programme to facilitate them to contribute to a local Get Vocal project. Get Vocal is an Age & Opportunity initiative funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies which aims to strengthen the voices of older people in Ireland by increasing their capacity to make themselves heard on issues that are important to them. The provision of a variety of education and training opportunities to members of participating groups has been a key way in which their capacity for advocacy has been developed. The main courses in which the participants in this study had been engaged (and which were the subject of the discussions that informed it) were Ageing with Confidence courses (Wexford and Kildare), Voices through Art courses (Kildare), Get Vocal Leadership for Advocacy course (Leitrim), and advocacy, social policy and equality training (Wicklow).¹

Benefits identified from participation in courses that were common across the four sites included personal growth, active ageing and increased social interaction, civic engagement, and greater political awareness and engagement. For some, the impact had been ‘truly transformative.’ The research highlights the importance of courses and training specifically tailored to older people available in community settings with content that strikes a balance between challenge and allowing for social interaction and fun. Some participants identified the particular importance of an environment that is informal, familiar and welcoming. Some also expressed an appetite for further courses and training in civic engagement and advocacy once confidence had been developed.

The research shows the difference that small-scale community education approaches can make and contributes to a compelling case for expanding the opportunities available for participation in education that fosters both personal and civic outcomes.

Catherine Rose
CEO
Age & Opportunity

¹ In some cases a variety of training courses were undertaken as the report sets out in more detail and groups also benefitted from the support of a development worker.

Acknowledgements

Age & Opportunity wishes to acknowledge The Atlantic Philanthropies as the funder of this research and of the Get Vocal project. We also acknowledge the researcher, Adele McKenna. Both the researcher and Age & Opportunity wish to sincerely thank the individuals and groups who gave so generously of their time during consultations at each of the four sites in Kildare, North Leitrim, Wexford and Wicklow. Special thanks go to the focus group participants who also took part in supplementary interviews. The assistance and support of the programme coordinators in each of these areas is also gratefully acknowledged. Finally, the researcher wishes to acknowledge the staff of Age & Opportunity for their guidance and advice throughout the process, in particular Louise Halloran and Ann Leahy. This report is the culmination of a research process which has proven both fulfilling and worthwhile for the researcher. It is hoped that everyone involved in the research will benefit from its findings.

Introduction

Aims & Objectives

The purpose of this research is to identify how specific Community Education interventions, in four different sites across the country (Leitrim, Wicklow, Wexford and Kildare), have been experienced from the perspectives of the older participants. All of these projects received funding under the Get Vocal programme. The Kildare project was a VEC-led initiative and also received funding from the Kildare Partnership Company. The Get Vocal programme is an Age & Opportunity initiative aimed at strengthening the collective voices of older people. Further information on the Get Vocal programme is provided in Section 2.

The following research questions structured the consultations held at each site:

- What did the participants respond well to (in the sense of developing self-confidence, capacity for critical thinking, engaging in collective advocacy and contributing to deliberative processes)?
- What constraints, if any, did the participants identify?
- What would enable participants to (further) increase their involvement in collective advocacy?

Age & Opportunity believes that case studies can best capture the experience of participation from the perspective of the older people involved. Each case study includes comprehensive quotes from participants. The outcomes of this research will inform a new initiative by Age & Opportunity focusing specifically on

Community Education provision as a means of building capacity for advocacy amongst older people.

Methodology

The research process, including the consultation phase at each of the four sites, and the analysis and drafting of this report, was conducted by an independent researcher on a part-time basis between May and August 2011. The process was aided at each phase by the Assistant CEO and the Research and Policy Co-ordinator of Age & Opportunity. The researcher proposed a variety of data collection approaches for this research. It was agreed, before the consultation process began, that using qualitative research methods would yield the best results.

Ospina (2004), quoting Shank (2002) states that qualitative research is “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning.” Ospina (2004) argues that by ‘systematic’, Shank (2002) means it is “planned, ordered and public”. Ospina (2004) also argues that such research follows rules made in agreement with other members of the qualitative research community. “By empirical, he [Shank] means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. Inquiry into meaning says researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience.”²

The priority focus of this research has been to document and analyse the experiences of certain older learners participating in community education courses on the Get Vocal programme and the VEC-led community education initiative in Kildare, that was also part-funded by Get Vocal. Furthermore, the research seeks to understand how the participants interpret these experiences; the impact it has had on their personal development and ultimately, on their journey to proficiency as advocates for older people.

² Ospina, Sonia (2004) *Qualitative Research* NYU, Sage Publications; Pp. 2
http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/publications/files/Qualitative_Research.pdf

Qualitative research also offers participants the chance to voice their opinions and experiences in a manner less rigid or constrained than quantitative approaches will allow. Qualitative research is concerned with documenting the experiences of participants in their own words. As such, the method is ideally suited to a case-study approach and therefore ideally suited to the Age & Opportunity research.

The qualitative data collection methods chosen for this research are as follows:

- Focus groups
- Face-to-face interviews
- Telephone interviews
- Secondary data sources (conference reports, articles, etc.)

Focus Groups

Focus groups were scheduled with Get Vocal participants involved in community education at each of the four sites in counties Kildare, Leitrim, Wexford and Wicklow. Each focus group lasted between an hour and fifteen minutes and an hour and forty minutes. Focus groups consisted of between four and ten participants. The focus group format incorporated a brainstorming session, small group work, written feedback forms and opportunities for larger group discussion. The focus group format is provided in Appendix 1.

Participants were also asked to use a visual aid (a handout of a graphic of a mature tree) to illustrate their feelings about the programme both before and after taking part in it. The participants were asked to imagine that the branches of the tree/the numbers on the scale represented milestones in their journey through the training. They were asked to mark a location on the tree which best illustrated their feelings before the training began and a second mark to illustrate their current feelings about the training. The exercise helped participants to visualise their progress. All of the participants reported feeling more positive after participating in the training. This is illustrated on each handout by marks indicating a steady climb up the branches of the tree. A copy of the visual aid handout is provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

Interviews

To supplement data gathered during the focus group, consultation interviews were conducted with three participants. Efforts were made to contact, and arrange interviews with, at least two other participants without success. Two of the three interviews were conducted face-to-face. The third interview was conducted over the telephone. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour in duration. Wherever possible interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy and ease of transcription. The interview format was structured using a topic guide (see Appendix 3) which covered each of the categories discussed in the focus group consultations.

Secondary Data Sources

The researcher also engaged in desk-based research, including a review of relevant literature, to enhance the content of the report. In the case of the Kildare site a secondary data source, namely a conference report from June 2011, has been referenced to provide context for the work of the Older Voices network, which is of relevance to this research. Academic research on the advantages of qualitative research methods has also been sourced.

Content of the Report

This report is divided into five sections:

Section one, which is the introduction to the report, outlines the aims & objectives of the case studies research and describes the methodology used in the collection of data during the research phase of this project. A qualitative research approach has been used, including the hosting of focus groups and individual interviews.

Section two provides a background to the research, namely information on Age & Opportunity and information on each of the programmes delivered to the four sites, including Get Vocal, the Ageing with Confidence (AwC) training programme, and the AgeWise workshops.

Section three forms the main body of the report. It describes the consultations held at each of the four sites: Kildare, Leitrim, Wexford and Wicklow. This part of the report is divided into four sub-sections, one for each of the sites. Each sub-section is formatted as a case study, using comprehensive quotes from participants throughout. The case studies provide details of the experience of taking part in various community education initiatives delivered as part of the Get Vocal programme, from the perspectives of the older participants in each county.

Section four offers an analysis of findings from the case studies, emphasising the common themes which are shared across all four sites. It draws conclusions (and makes recommendations for future action), based on the findings from the consultations at each of the four sites.

Background to the Research

Information on Age & Opportunity

Age & Opportunity is the national non-profit organisation which promotes opportunities for greater participation by older people in society through partnerships and collaborative programmes. Age & Opportunity's vision is an Ireland where older people have the opportunity to realise their potential and participate in an inclusive society.

Age & Opportunity promotes creativity, participation, confidence and engagement among older people and works with partners to create opportunities to learn, to take part and to make a difference.

Age & Opportunity's programmes grew from different ways of cultivating involvement by people aged 50 and older. Some tap into latent skills, talents and abilities. Others tackle attitudes and discrimination which prevent people from taking part. Some of Age & Opportunity's major partners include the Health Service Executive, The Arts Council and The Irish Sports Council.

Information on each of the Programmes

Get Vocal

The aim of the Get Vocal programme is to strengthen the voices of older people in Ireland by increasing their capacity to have their views heard. It supports groups

and networks to develop ways of speaking out on the issues that matter to them and spark initiatives that help society to understand the needs, problems and hopes of older people. To speak out effectively, groups and networks need to build their advocacy ability. One of the ways of achieving this is to harness the unique strengths of community-based education initiatives. All Get Vocal-supported sites take a community development approach, often including formal and informal education approaches. The community education aspects in four of these sites are the specific focus of this report.

Two initiatives offered on the Get Vocal programme are described below:

- *Ageing with Confidence (AwC)*

The aim of the AwC programme is to offer a holistic approach to health promotion. It aims to enhance the development of older people by providing education for health, by developing life skills and by promoting positive mental health and self-confidence. The programme aims to increase participants' self-confidence by exploring their own ageing; challenging the myths and stereotyping that lead to ageism; and providing information on physical, psychological and social aspects of growing older. It is offered one half-day per week over eight weeks.

- *AgeWise*

The aim of AgeWise is to raise awareness of attitudes to ageing and older people among organisations whose work affects the lives of older people. From there, it encourages action on how ageism may be countered within organisations and workplaces. It is generally offered once-off, as a half-day's workshop, but can be offered in more depth over a longer period.

The workshops enable participants to:

- Understand the personal, cultural and structural effects of ageism
- Identify instances of discrimination against older people
- Devise strategies to counter discrimination in the workplace or community

These are part of Age & Opportunity's broad menu of programmes and activities, including Go for Life and the Bealtaine festival.

Kildare

Case Study

Background to the Kildare Site

Prior to receiving a Get Vocal grant from Age & Opportunity, the Ageing with Confidence (AwC) programme and the Voices through Art (VtA) programme in Kildare, were rolled out by County Kildare VEC Community Education Service.

VtA is a programme by Kildare LEADER Partnership (formerly Kildare Community Partnership) which provides older people in Kildare with an opportunity to express their ideas through the medium of art. The programme facilitates participants to work collectively, exploring issues together in a safe and supportive environment; simultaneously building self-confidence and well-being.

When the second phase of funding was sought in 2010 from Get Vocal, it was to develop a programme, using a community intervention approach, to empower vulnerable and marginalised older people in Kildare to become actively involved in their local communities by participating in the AwC and VtA programmes.

Older Voices Kildare uses these programmes to reduce social isolation and build the confidence of participants. Currently, Older Voices Kildare engages in pre-development work as part of the VtA course, which builds capacity among participants for future collective advocacy, enhancing their ability to advocate on their own behalf. It is one of the few projects supported under the Get Vocal programme that uses the arts as a means of advocacy. The strengthening of older people's individual and collective voices is a goal of the programme.

It is anticipated that these outcomes will be achieved by:

- Establishing a network for older people
- Developing an Older Persons' Forum
- Introducing capacity building measures for specific target groups

Consultation with Participants

This case study of the Kildare site has been generated from discussions held with selected members of Older Voices Kildare. Quotations taken directly from the consultations are used throughout. In July 2011 a focus group was held at The Mill Community Centre in Celbridge. The group was made up of eight women from various older people's groups across the county. Half of the women had taken part in the AwC programme (four out of eight participants). Seven of the women had taken part in VtA courses (seven out of eight participants). All of the participants are newcomers to this type of initiative.

The project development co-ordinator did not attend the focus group. The session lasted one hour and forty minutes. Information gathered during the consultation is supplemented with extracts from 'Exploring an Older Persons' Forum: Your role in an Age Friendly County' conference report, held on 28th June 2011.

Participants' Expectations of the Training

As outlined above, half of the eight participants in the Kildare focus group took part in the AwC programme and almost all of them took part in the VtA courses. Three participants took part in both.

Ageing with Confidence (AwC)

A small number of participants had no feelings about the AwC training before they took part:

“ I had no expectations.

Some participants hoped for a social aspect to the training:

“ I hoped for friendship and companionship.

“ To meet new people.

Other expectations were bound up in hopes for personal growth and improved well-being:

“ I needed time out for myself.

“ More confidence from mixing with others.

Voices through Art

One of the participants who had taken part in VtA but not in AwC was quick to point out that while the two courses were different each participant's expectations for the courses were similar.

“ All of the expectations for Ageing with Confidence apply to Voices through Art as well. We just wanted to express them in a different way, through art.

For some participants the emphasis was firmly on self-expression:

“ I wanted to learn to express myself.

Another participant's expectations were shaped by the perceived emphasis on art. She assumed that taking part would require a level of artistic ability that she did not feel she possessed:

“ At first I was put off because I thought I would need to be good at art and I'm terrible at art but it was completely different to what I expected. It was great.

Impact of the Training on Participants

For the Kildare participants, the biggest impact of the training has been on their personal growth and development particularly in relation to AwC. Involvement in VtA has impacted on the participants' social lives and, in particular, on their attitudes toward active ageing.

Personal Development

Before participating in the AwC course:

- “ We had no confidence to express opinions.
- “ I wouldn't speak out for fear of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing.
- “ I found it hard to go into a crowd on my own.
- “ We found it hard to put our ideas forward; we let others do the work.

The women in Kildare believed this changed as a result of taking part in AwC:

- “ I was dying to speak out but I was afraid of my own voice. I'm not shy now though!
- “ We stand up for our ideas and put our point of view across.
- “ AwC was a great workout for the brain. It made you think.”
- “ At the start of every session we were all asked to share how we were feeling that day. I was reluctant at first but in the end it gave me confidence to speak out.

For some of the participants the experience of taking part in AwC had a very profound effect on their personal growth and well-being. They were able to acknowledge and resolve issues from their past and appreciate the experiences which have brought them to this point in their lives.

“ I held on to a lot of resentment about my early life, about my lack of education but when I heard everyone else’s stories, they were all in the same boat, my resentment disappeared after AwC.

“ The training made me take stock and value the achievements I had in my life, to be proud of them. I worked all my life. I raised two beautiful children. It made we realise I should be proud of that.

“ We spoke about the past, about our emotions. We shared our troubles and our sorrows and I feel like I’ve dealt with that now.

Active Ageing /Social Lives

The VtA course has also boosted the participants’ self-esteem, and for some, has had an unanticipated effect on their involvement with local active retirement groups:

“ I have much more confidence now and will put my ideas forward as suggestions for the running of our clubs.

The women participating in VtA also identified opportunities for creative collaboration as one of the most beneficial aspects of taking part.

“ Working on themes and the various interpretations of those themes, like the friendship theme, it meant something different to everyone.

“ The group gelled well.

Involvement in the art course has since led to other exciting activities and participation in some unusual events:

“ Through the ‘Voices through Art’ we got involved in a flash mob in Newbridge. We did it in a big group and we all knew each other so we gave each other confidence.

“ We got involved in a six-week course in modern ballroom dancing.
We did singing as well, through the University of the Third Age (U3A). We joined Maynooth Choir for 8 weeks.

Exposure to new opportunities has encouraged participants to learn new skills, discover latent talents, and overcome shyness in order to meet new people. All of which has facilitated a very positive move toward active ageing among the Kildare participants.

“ I never had a social diary before, but I do now!

“ We have made some lovely friends from other clubs.

“ The socialising has been great.

Outcomes of the Training

At the Kildare site the key outcomes from the community education initiatives have been the benefits to participants’ personal development and how they now embrace active ageing opportunities. This new-found confidence, coupled with social skills sharpened through interaction with others in new and challenging

situations provide a solid footing for the group to take its next steps.

Participants at the Kildare site were aware of Ireland's difficult economic situation. They were concerned about issues impacting older people in particular, especially cuts to social protection entitlements and tax increases. The group wanted to learn how to address perceived threats to their quality of life.

“ We want to learn how we can take action if more cuts follow.

“ There is motivation among us to act if things get worse.

A few members of the group emphasised their desire to maintain the recreational aspect to their activities. Following years spent juggling the challenges of careers, child-rearing and financial worries, they felt that now is the time to enjoy life.

“ Fun is the number one priority. We have spent our whole lives being serious.

“ Just give us more art and dancing please!

However, the majority of participants were also keen to have their say about the changes currently taking place in Irish society and wished to be consulted on how this was likely to impact the lives of older people. In order for this to happen, the Kildare women suggested that several obstacles first needed to be overcome. They identified a number of barriers to engagement, which are outlined below.

Barriers to Engagement

Personal Barriers

The group identified confidence as a major barrier to getting involved, particularly for older people who are nervous about taking part in group activities or speaking in front of an audience.

Limited interest or feeling overwhelmed and intimidated by the task, are other potential obstacles to getting involved, especially for those people who prefer the friendship and fun elements of participating in an older persons' group. Balancing the social side of group involvement with advocacy work is vital to ensuring each individual engages at a level s/he is comfortable with.

Societal/Cultural Barriers

The focus group participants also believed that the prevailing ethos/preoccupation with youth in Irish society marginalises older people and renders them invisible. As a result the participants did not believe their protests would be heard by Government. They did not feel they can influence change, individually at least. However, some of the participants hoped that older people might make a difference collectively:

“ We feel we have no power to influence these things; although there is probably strength in numbers.

These women spoke of the need for the establishment of an organisation to successfully represent older people and advocate on their behalf. The Kildare women agreed that they would be willing to lend their support to such an organisation.³

Institutional Barriers

Other barriers to engagement were generated by the chasm between those who are in positions of power and those who fear reprisals if older people chose to take a stand and challenge Government policies which affect them.

“ Older people depend on social welfare entitlements. We can't afford to have them taken away from us.

These concerns were recently echoed by delegates at a conference organised by Older Voices Kildare. When they were asked what potential issues might prevent

³ These participants were not familiar with the work of Older & Bolder

their involvement in a national lobbying campaign (as part of an older people's network), the delegates had this to say:

“ Fear of being seen to challenge the Government or State Agencies on whom we may be dependent.⁴

Conclusion

The women participating in the Ageing with Confidence (AwC) and Voices through Art (VtA) courses facilitated by Older Voices Kildare, have demonstrated the progress they have made both in their personal development and their approach to active ageing as a result of taking part in the programme. While the group was at a relatively early stage in developing the capacity of its members, this progress constituted a solid foundation on which to build interests in other initiatives such as advocacy/working for change.

The Kildare participants agreed that they have already benefitted a huge deal from their involvement in the programme in a short space of time and they also recognise that there is also great potential for the future. They expressed high levels of enthusiasm for continued engagement in courses which will enhance self-esteem and confidence and which provide opportunities for social interaction and fun. The participants also expressed strong motivation to act against Government policies which threaten the standard of living of older people and to support any initiatives aimed at challenging or addressing them in the future.

⁴ 'Exploring an Older Persons' Forum: Your role in an Age Friendly County' conference report (June 2011), Pp. 8

North Leitrim

Case Study

Background to the North Leitrim Site

In 2008, Community Connections CDP received grant funding from Age & Opportunity in the pilot phase of Get Vocal to explore the idea of bringing together older people from the northwestern part of Ireland in an organised way. Community Connections CDP had been working with older people in North Leitrim, West Cavan and West Fermanagh since 1991.

While older people's groups in the Northwest decided they were not yet ready to establish such a collective, a further application was made to the Get Vocal Programme to build the capacity of older people involved in groups in North and South Leitrim. The capacity-building measures included a course in advocacy and leadership skills, developed by Community Action Network (CAN) for Get Vocal and piloted in Leitrim, and participation in AgeWise workshops throughout 2009. Following on from this, at a joint meeting on 14th April 2010, a consensus was reached by the 30 older people participating, that there was a need to develop a second phase to the programme, aiming to establish a countywide network that will advocate on behalf of older people in Co. Leitrim.

The Leitrim project is currently in Phase 2 of development (2010/2011) and continues the capacity building and leadership development process of Phase 1, with a focus on advocacy skills in areas such as campaigning and lobbying to influence policy locally. The network is currently identifying specific issues with a countywide policy dimension, in order to provide training and support to local

groups in planning a campaign, and implementing specific actions to address these issues. Members from both areas (North and South Leitrim) will have the opportunity to participate jointly in these practical advocacy training sessions. It is envisaged that Phase 2 of this training process will facilitate the formation of a countywide advocacy group.

Consultation with Participants

This case study of the County Leitrim site has been generated from discussions held with selected members of the fledgling countywide Network. Quotations taken directly from the consultations are used throughout. In July 2011 a focus group was held in the Bee Park Community Resource Centre, in Manorhamilton, North Leitrim. The focus group was held with four members of Club Cluainin, a local older people's group, who are also members of the countywide Active Age Network. The group was made up of four women. An invitation was extended to members of South Leitrim groups but no one was able to attend on the day. The project development co-ordinator for North Leitrim also attended the focus group. The session lasted an hour and a half. All of the participants were relative newcomers to this type of initiative.

Members of the Leitrim countywide Network participated in the Get Vocal Leadership for Advocacy course. Members participating in the focus group, concentrated their discussions on the impact of this advocacy skills training, particularly in terms of influencing policy at local level.

Participants' Expectations of the Training

When asked about their expectations of the training, the women were divided: half didn't know what to expect or expected nothing; the other half had an interest in learning about advocacy and applying the skills to their local situation.

“ I was unsure.

“ I had no expectations.

“ I wanted to learn advocacy, although that’s not a word I would have used before the training! We prefer ‘self help’ or ‘representing ourselves’.

“ I wanted to learn about advocacy, specifically for older people.

“ Political division in the county has led to poor representation for North Leitrim in the past.⁵

“ We wanted to learn how to do something about this.

In addition to their expectations about the content of the training sessions, the North Leitrim participants had expectations relating to the participants from South Leitrim. According to the focus group participants, opportunities to interact with groups from South Leitrim do not arise often. North and South Leitrim are not only divided along geographical and constituency lines but there is also a perception that a gulf has traditionally existed between residents of the two communities. Participants in the focus group were delighted to remedy this by getting to know South Leitrim participants engaging in the same training.

“ I hoped to make new friends.

“ I wanted to get to know people from South Leitrim.

“ Building bridges with groups in South Leitrim.

“ I was looking forward to coming together to bridge the divide [between groups from North and South Leitrim]

⁵ The local constituency area consists of North Leitrim and Sligo. Before the most recent election, the majority of elected representatives were based in Sligo. Participants felt that the issues of importance to constituents in North Leitrim were not satisfactorily addressed as a result.

The desire to meet, get to know and collaborate with older people from South Leitrim was a recurrent theme throughout discussions with participants.

Impact of the Training on Participants

Involvement in the Get Vocal programme, particularly the Leadership for Advocacy course, has impacted on the North Leitrim participants in a number of ways. These include personal development, involvement in social activities and in the broader community, as well as their awareness of and engagement in political issues at both local and county level.

Personal Development

Each of the participants agreed that they had less confidence or self-esteem and fewer social skills before starting the training than they have since completing it.

“ I’d only deal with people in my own small group before.

“ I was very quiet.

“ I had some social skills but not as many as I have now.

The training has had a transformative effect on some of the participants and all agreed that it has benefitted them personally, particularly in terms of interacting with others.

“ I am a different person altogether. I’ve more confidence in myself.

“ I’ve learned to mix with people more.

“ It’s about coming in and meeting people and enjoying being there.

“ My confidence increased in dealing with a broader spectrum of people.

Involvement in ‘Community’

One of the focus group participants disclosed that she had never engaged in volunteering before she became involved with the Get Vocal programme but has subsequently become a volunteer since taking part in the training. The training gave her the confidence to get involved with local voluntary groups. Another participant explained that she has always been an active volunteer in her local community and this has not changed. The other members of the focus group did not feel that the training had a significant impact on their community involvement.

All of the participants explained that as a result of taking part in the training their interest in community is no longer limited to their own local area of Manorhamilton or indeed to North Leitrim. Instead, the training has impacted on what the participants now define as ‘community’. The training, and specifically the establishment of the Network, has nurtured a broader view of community, one which incorporates South Leitrim, thus allowing for a countywide approach to community involvement and for addressing the needs of older people all across Leitrim through joint advocacy initiatives.

“ Our interests have broadened to the larger community, including South Leitrim. We’re not divided anymore.

“ The training is providing an opportunity for us to get to know one another” [groups from across the county].

“ The Active Age Network comes together twice a year. It’s a good opportunity to bridge the gap between the two communities and groups.

“ On ‘Get Vocal’ we [groups from North and South Leitrim] are united.

Political Awareness and Engagement

The North Leitrim participants explained that before becoming involved in the Get Vocal programme they had little or no interest in politics.

“ I didn’t know who my local politicians or councillors were.

Of those who were somewhat politically aware, their interest was limited to local issues in North Leitrim.

“ I had limited knowledge of the issues as they applied to the entire county.

Political engagement was either extremely limited or non-existent before the training but has increased among some of the participants:

“ I used to be shy of making requests to the political representatives face-to-face, when they’d come to the door canvassing. Now I request to meet and discuss issues with them directly.”

Outcomes of the Training

Countywide Collaboration

There have been a number of tangible outcomes from the training since the Leitrim groups became involved in the Get Vocal programme. Firstly, as a result of interaction facilitated at Network meetings, there is currently much greater mutual understanding of the key issues facing older people in both communities. The issues of concern are broadly similar and include healthcare services and rural transport provision. The training provided to Network members in North and South Leitrim has fostered a countywide approach to collaboration, including issues of advocacy. To date, the Network has agreed to collaborate on one important issue: transport. Rural transport, in particular, is a major issue of

concern for older people in Leitrim.

“ Now the North and South Leitrim Active Age Networks are tackling the transport issue together, like arranging meetings with Leitrim Development Company” [the rural transport service provider in Leitrim].

Stronger Together

When asked if they preferred working in a group to working individually, participants were unanimous in their opinion that working as part of a group has been more helpful.

“ We’re stronger as a group.

“ We’re working together as friends.

“ There’s better communication between us now that we’re working together.

Information Sharing

According to participants, another positive outcome from the training and from membership of the Network has been the opportunity to share and distribute information of relevance to other older people throughout the county. For example, members have promoted Smarter Travel options among other older people living in the north and south of the county who might not otherwise have known about it. The opportunity to share information was described as one of the most beneficial elements of the experience.

Barriers to Engagement

Personal Barriers

Another barrier to engagement, suggested by the North Leitrim participants, is the challenge of agreeing on one issue to pursue from among the myriad of issues which concern older people in Leitrim. There are so many important issues which

warrant attention, that choosing the right one can seem like a daunting prospect, as well as the prospect of collaboration with other individuals in North Leitrim and with groups from South Leitrim, all of whom have their own opinions on what issues are most urgent. Just beginning this process can feel overwhelming, according to these participants.

Thankfully, in the case of the countywide Network in Leitrim, members have so far successfully negotiated a consensus and are currently tackling the issue of most concern to them at this time, which, as mentioned above, is the lack of suitable transport, particularly in the most rural parts of the county.

The Leitrim participants were also acutely aware of the time-consuming nature of advocacy work and the slow pace at which progress is made. Participants recognised that vast reserves of patience, motivation and energy are needed to achieve even small victories, which can involve weeks, months and even years of hard work and dedication.

“ We realise now with the transport issue that getting things moving takes a long time. It’s slow progress.

This prospect was daunting for many and caused some members to become disillusioned or to lose patience and drop out.

Fortunately, participants here felt that the advocacy training they have received and the support they can draw on from being part of a Network have equipped them with both confidence and the skills needed to overcome such barriers:

“ Now we’re taking on new things and moving outside of our comfort zone. We’re embracing these challenges now.

Institutional Barriers

A lack of suitable transport options was identified by the joint North & South Leitrim Network as one of the major issues impacting on older people’s lives in

the county of Leitrim. This lack of transport has also been identified as a barrier to engagement in initiatives for older people, including the Get Vocal programme.

Additional Findings from the Leitrim Site

A Visual Aid: The ‘Tree’ Rating Scale

Three of the four participants chose low-hanging branches on the image of the tree to illustrate how they felt before participating in the training. The fourth participant placed a mark at the roots of the trunk of the tree to depict her anxiety about taking part. Following the training, all four participants felt they had moved up the tree to at least a quarter of the way up the branches. The majority had moved half way up the branches of the tree and in one case, slightly higher than half way, indicating that they had all benefitted from the experience of taking part in the training and viewed their participation in a positive light.

Conclusion

One of the most striking features of the Leitrim site was the division which previously existed between groups from the North and South of the county. Participation in the Get Vocal programme and the establishment of the Network have provided members from both areas of Leitrim with opportunities to meet, get to know one another and work together in a positive and empowering way.

By taking part in the training all of the participants reported that they benefitted personally through increased self-esteem and confidence. In some cases it has led to greater involvement in community activities, including volunteering. The members of the Network are now equipped with a new set of skills, including advocacy skills, which they have been putting into practice. These skills have led to greater awareness of and engagement with political representatives and political processes. Most significantly the skills have aided members of the Network to agree on a key issue of concern for older people in the county, namely

transport, and to embark on a plan to improve transport options available to older people across Leitrim.

Participants in North Leitrim described the Get Vocal experience to date as educational, challenging and confidence-boosting. They value the friendships they have made with others from North Leitrim and with members of groups from South Leitrim. The Network is relatively new but these members are eager to advocate on their chosen issue (transport) and to build on their progress so far in addressing the needs of older people in the county.

Wexford

Case Study

Background to the Wexford Site

In 2008, the County Wexford Partnership applied for funding to Age & Opportunity, to train local facilitators in delivering the Ageing with Confidence (AwC) programme. During this pilot phase fifteen AwC facilitators were trained and a number of AgeWise workshops were delivered. In 2009, Phase 1 was funded under the Get Vocal programme. During this phase, Wexford Local Development (WLD) supported the establishment of the Wexford Age Equality Network. The Network is made up of a number of local older people's groups. Phase 1 of the project concentrated on expanding the Network, strengthening its governance structures, cultivating internal working relationships and supporting group and individual participation. These objectives were achieved using a number of different methods, including:

- Consultations, seminars and open forums
- Awareness raising
- Coffee mornings
- Media skills training (including TV, radio and print media)
- Research
- Regular meetings

Further capacity-building measures were also planned. These additional measures have been introduced as part of Phase 2 (the current phase) which began in 2010. The capacity-building measures include equality training for committee members and additional AwC courses. The aim of Phase 2 is to

strengthen the capacity of the Network to advocate on behalf of older people and to build relations with the public sector. To this end, members of the Network received Advocacy Skills training in 2010. Currently, the focus is on expanding the Network into a countywide structure that is representative of older people from all four electoral areas and on developing and strengthening the newly established sub-committees.

Consultation with Participants

This case study of the Wexford Age Equality Network has been generated from discussions held with selected members of the Network. Quotations taken directly from the consultations are used throughout. In June 2011 a focus group was held at the WLD offices in Enniscorthy, with seven members of the Wexford Age Equality Network. The group was made up of four men and three women. The degree of past involvement or previous experience in initiatives of this nature varied widely between participants. Some brought extensive knowledge and experience to the Get Vocal programme, accumulated throughout their professional careers and through serving on a variety of voluntary committees in later life; while other participants were relative newcomers to this type of involvement. The project development co-ordinator also attended the focus group. The session lasted one and a half hours. Two members of the group, one man and one woman, also participated in individual interviews on the same day.

As outlined above, groups involved in the Wexford Age Equality Network have so far undertaken the AwC course, a two-day advocacy workshop with consultant Brian Harvey, equality training (committee members only), media skills training with consultant Pat Montague and committee skills training, under the umbrella of the Get Vocal initiative funded by Age & Opportunity. The member groups also receive ongoing administrative support and comprehensive assistance in the long-term development of the Network, from a part-time co-ordinator based in WLD offices. During the consultation, the participants focused their discussion on the following types of training:

- AwC course

- Media skills training
- Advocacy skills training
- Committee skills training

Participants' Expectations of the Training

When asked what they had first hoped would be the outcome of taking part in the various training sessions the participants had this to say:

“ I wanted to be an effective communicator.

“ I wanted to learn how to harness our power.

“ I wanted to be a voice for older people and to be making changes for future generations.

“ ‘Get Vocal’ says it all. It is a better, clearer phrase than advocacy and it is easier to understand. We wanted to learn how to ‘Get Vocal’.

Impact of the Training on Participants

The participants were affected by the training sessions in a variety of ways.

Personal Development

Some of the participants, especially those who were new to this type of involvement, felt that the AwC course in particular had a positive impact on their personal growth and development. The course helped them in generating greater self-confidence, increased resilience and better coping skills.

“ The training was absolutely fantastic. As you get older, sometimes you become ... an invisible person. But I

don't feel that now. That's gone. I feel like I'm me. And I got that from Ageing with Confidence. I can say I'm a person in my own right and just because I'm getting older it doesn't make a difference. I would advise anybody to do it.

I kept saying to myself 'I'm not any good' but the feedback I'm getting is that I am good so I think Ageing with Confidence has helped me to stop putting myself down all the time, to say 'Well, I can do this. I can give it a try'. That's not to say I wouldn't still get knocked, I would, but I'd get up quicker.

“ Before this I had a fear of getting involved. But now I'll try anything. I want to get involved in everything.

The AwC training has also been beneficial for participants with relatively high self-esteem:

“ I would have been a reasonably confident person anyway, you know. Although I have always been critical of myself so maybe I shouldn't be quite as critical. I'm a perfectionist so I would be critical of how I approach things. In this training I became aware that I'm like that. The course was a new experience and it's a case of not being sure of your ground but I feel more confident now.

Participants recognised that the AwC training equipped them with new skills, including coping strategies for dealing with difficult life experiences and the challenges of growing older.

“ We all talked about problems and about things that had happened to us in our lives. It came from everybody. But we all have our own problems and we've carried

them through life and we've learned to cope with them. You're still scarred by them but the training helped me cope better with them. I can accept things that have happened because I recognise that I can't change it. I can deal with it better now. [AwC] gave me a coping mechanism to cope better with it."

While the participants were very complimentary about the AwC course in general, some acknowledged aspects of the course that they found personally challenging:

“ There were bits of it I wasn't comfortable with. That's a personal thing just with me but I wasn't comfortable with certain parts of it. You were asked to give some self praise at one point and I felt uncomfortable about that because I don't buy into that. I don't like to receive praise. I can give it to other people but I don't like getting it.

“ Now, there were sad parts in it. There were different kinds of emotion and of course you didn't like feeling sad but that was part and parcel of it.

Acquiring New Skills & Interests

The training has equipped each participant with new skill sets, which has boosted their confidence and also increased their capacity to participate more effectively in the Network.

All of the participants agreed that taking part in the media skills training has been extremely beneficial and has equipped each of them with the practical tools and techniques needed to disseminate the Network's message effectively.

“ We did [media skills] training with Pat Montague which was fantastic. I know a lot of it will come back to me when I need it. We did mock interviews. I didn't

think I'd have anything to talk about but Pat explained that when they ask a question you talk a little bit about it and then you move on to what you want to talk about. It worked. I was talking away about everything. And Pat said I was an interviewer's delight because they didn't have to ask the questions I just went ahead and talked away. That was really, really good.

“ Media skills are very important especially if I need to do radio interviews or write a letter to newspaper editors. We learned how to approach that in the training.”

Participants also spoke about the Advocacy Skills training they received which they referred to as 'working for change'. Initially, the two day advocacy skills training proved daunting for some of the participants:

“ At first I was a bit apprehensive because I thought a lot of it would go over my head or that I wouldn't take it all in, but I did.

However the training appears to have sparked an interest and ignited greater awareness among participants in the role that politics plays in their lives and the influence which older people can wield if they choose to get involved:

“ I'm interested in it [advocacy] now. I wasn't before, but I am now. I have an opinion now. Also I bring information back to other older people and let them know what's happening and what's being done.

“ I'm reading books on the political system, like 'Working for Change' by Brian Harvey and I'm watching political programmes on television.

“ I’m more tuned in to current affairs and what’s going on at Government level.

“ I’m more aware and not afraid to speak up now.

“ We’re more vocal now and we’re motivated to tackle the issues for older people.

Older People Coming Together

One of the main benefits of the training programmes, according to these participants, is the opportunity to meet other older people’s groups in Wexford and to discuss common interests and challenges; so too with the regular Age Equality Network meetings. When asked to describe the most beneficial outcomes, participants said the following:

“ It brings people together.

“ Bringing groups together.

“ Sharing experiences and common problems.

The participants believe that the local groups derive strength from one another and are better able to identify and address the concerns of local older people when they work collectively within the Network:

“ We are stronger as a group coming together to tackle issues rather than as individuals.

“ Each group within the Network is autonomous but we come together for a common purpose, to challenge issues facing older people like the hospitals and pensions.

A number of participants spoke about how important it is to ensure that older

people cultivate a common ‘voice’, to articulate their needs in a way that is acknowledged and listened to by decision makers.

“ I joined the Age Equality Network to be a voice for older people, to try to help older people. I want it to be a more friendly place for older people to live in so they won’t be afraid or intimidated or frightened or feel invisible. I want them to be a voice and one that is heard.

“ We need a voice and we need to develop it in such a way that it has real substance so that we’re not just shouting off a soap box.

Outcomes of the Training

Personal Development

A number of the participants noticed a positive impact on their self-confidence as a direct result of taking part in the AwC course, as outlined above. Learning and developing new skills and working together with other older people’s groups are further outcomes.

Political Engagement

Another tangible result of participation in the Advocacy Skills training in particular has been increased engagement with political representatives and with political processes:

“ With the pension issue, we stood outside shops and got signatures and we sent them all in to Government. We talked to the local councillors about the pension issue too and about older people’s rights. I was talking to politicians at the door during the election. That was another thing, making them aware of the issues. Before

the training I wouldn't have been involved in petitions or marches or meeting politicians or any of that kind of stuff.

“ Wexford was at the forefront [of the response to Government proposals to cut entitlement to pensions and medical cards] by organising petitions with 9,000-10,000 signatories.

Barriers to Engagement

The Wexford case study provides strong evidence of increased capacity and enhanced motivation to get involved in activities that strengthen the rights of older people. Despite this, participants identified a number of challenges which the Network encounters in its advocacy work.

Personal Barriers

The members of the group are motivated to achieve success for older people in their county but they also recognise the enormity of the task. This can be a daunting prospect for many older people:

“ Our vision is to make County Wexford the best place for people to grow old but there is always more to learn and always more to do.

“ The big thing is consultation not lip service. Although, maybe policy makers tend to dismiss us because older people find it difficult to express what we want or need, and when we do we don't know how to use their language, the right language, so it is dismissed.

Another participant suggested that many older people have little interest, do not have access to the right information or have limited opportunities for

engagement with democratic processes. He suggests these older people may feel that they have very little power to influence Government policies and will need greater support if they are to take a more active role in shaping their future:

“ When you say political engagement, to me that’s a one, two, three day course, and I can’t see that there’s a huge desire out there for that. But there is a role in promoting the idea that we all need to be more politically aware and engaged. I mean, older people will vote but I’m not sure they could tell you why they vote. I’d love to ask older people that. Put the question to them ‘Why do you vote?’ I don’t think they understand the power of their vote. They feel that they’re not influencing anything, which of course they are. There needs to be information provided to older people about the power of their vote.

Institutional Barriers

Some participants also expressed frustration with their political representatives and with the lack of opportunities for meaningful consultation on issues important to older people.

“ Politicians creep around stuff and they don’t give you specific answers. They don’t say ‘we will do this or we will try to do that.’

“ Sometimes parties just put something about older people into their policy statements, just for the sake of it. Like in the Programme for Government they mention Older People’s Councils but if you ask any County Councillor ‘what does that mean?’ they don’t know. Even people in the Department seem to know nothing about it. So it’s in there but what does it mean and what’s it going to mean for older people? We want

to get to a position where we can influence the role of the Older People's Councils. We have to be proactive.

“ We invited all the local politicians to a public meeting but the take up was not sufficient. More of them should have been at the meeting.

Additional Findings from the Wexford Site

Profile of Participants' Community Involvement/Civic Engagement

In addition to the elements discussed above, participants reported greater association with their local community since joining the Network and taking part in the training, sparking new involvement or increased and more effective involvement at community level, including civic engagement.

Three of the participants in the Wexford focus group (two of whom also participated in interviews) are particularly involved in their community. Two of these participants have been involved at community level for many years, (predating their involvement in the Network), but reported further involvement in volunteering activities since joining the Network. The third participant joined a local active retirement group before joining the Network but had not had any previous experience of community engagement before that.

The case of the third participant illustrates the path to greater involvement that she followed. The third participant was new to any type of involvement in the community before moving to Wexford a number of years before. The first group she joined was the local Active Retirement Association (ARA). She was encouraged to join the Network by a friend and attended the AwC course with her husband. She credits the course with boosting her confidence and self belief and imbuing her with a more positive and resilient outlook on life and ageing.

Having joined the active retirement group and the Network, other opportunities to get involved became open to her, which she accepted. After participating in the

AwC course she felt ready to attend and speak at a conference. It was the first time she had done so and the first time she had the confidence to speak in public. The participant also recorded an interview with RTE for a feature on Positive Ageing Week. In the twelve months since she participated in the training she has become a member of the Tidy Towns committee; she is an active member of the fundraising committee for a local building restoration project and she has joined the local folk group.

While she expressed an interest in the advocacy skills training and in getting involved in local advocacy initiatives in the future, the greatest change in her life, brought about by the training, has been the boost to her confidence and the fact that her input is now in demand. For this participant the experience has been particularly transformative:

“ When I moved to Wexford nobody knew me. So, I had to get involved. I had to put myself out there. I could have stayed at home and let life pass me by but I never thought in a million years that getting involved would mean I'd be doing all this. It's come back to me a hundred fold. I know so many people now it's unbelievable! People are always ringing me now [re: volunteering] asking me 'Can you do this? Can you do that?' and that has given me a great boost, to know that people see me in that light. At this stage in life when my mother was getting 'old' I still feel I have lots to offer and lots I can do. I'm capable of doing more than even I think I am. I take confidence in that.

Rating Scale

On a scale of '0' to '10' (where '0' is extremely negative and '10' is extremely positive) the participants were asked to rate their feelings about both before and after they had taken part in the training. Two of the seven participants rated their feelings before the training as below '5', specifically, on the '1' and '2' position. These participants admitted to feeling sceptical and anxious about the various

training opportunities. The remaining 5 participants rated their feelings between '6' and '8' on the scale. They were excited about the prospect and looked forward to the challenge. Following the training all seven participants felt better about the training and had moved up the rating scale. The majority had moved to between '8' and '9' on the scale while the two participants whose ratings were closer to negative (below 5) had either moved up to '5' or just below it on '4'.

Conclusion

Participants from the Wexford site have articulated in their own words the impact and outcomes of establishing the Age Equality Network and taking part in each of the training initiatives rolled out for the Get Vocal programme. The training has had a positive effect on participants' self-esteem and confidence. For some, involvement in the Network has also led to increased involvement in community projects. The members of the Network are now also equipped with a new set of skills, including media and advocacy skills which they have been putting into practice. For example, in their approaches to Government to create opportunities for meaningful consultation regarding the remit of the proposed Older People's Councils set out in the Programme for Government. These skills have led to greater awareness of and engagement with political representatives and political processes, and a strong desire to advocate further for the needs of older people, in Wexford and at national level.

The participants are also aware that for certain older people barriers may exist to this type of involvement. They recognise there are many challenges to be overcome if the collective 'voice' of older people is to be heard. However, the members of the Network who participated in the focus group are confident in their abilities. They feel capable, motivated and enthusiastic about tackling these difficulties and overcoming them, for their own sake and for future generations of older people.

Wicklow

Case Study

Background to the Wicklow Site

The County Wicklow Network for Older People was established in the final months of 2007. In 2008, the Network received grant funding from Age & Opportunity to provide members of the executive committee with training in committee skills, including organisational skills, and in advocacy. The development of the Network was also supported by Wicklow County Council during this period. AgeWise workshops and Ageing with Confidence (AwC) courses were provided to some committee members during the pilot phase in 2008/2009.

During Phase 1 (2009/2010) work began on increasing the membership and on building capacity to ensure the Network would become self-sustaining. Developing a strategic plan was also a goal of the Network during Phase 1. In this phase the Network was supported by the County Wicklow Partnership, which had been established a year earlier, in 2008.

At present, the County Wicklow Network for Older People is in Phase 2 of development (2010/2011). The aim for 2011 is to further expand the Network's internal structures and to build external links with older people's groups in the county. This will be achieved by creating structures that enable dissemination of information to older people, allowing them to make informed choices and to advocate on their own behalf. The Network also aims to cultivate strategic links with county and state agencies and relevant community sector organisations.

The Network's executive committee is currently focused on the following:

- Equality, Social Policy and Advocacy Skills training
- Active learning through convening and supporting working groups and sub-committees
- Increasing the membership of the Network by developing member supports (information packs/newsletters)
- Hosting area-based, socially inclusive seminars with local politicians, business people and providers of state services to meet with and listen to the needs and concerns of older people in local areas.

Consultation with Participants

This case study of the County Wicklow Network for Older People has been generated from discussions held with selected members of the Executive Committee. Quotations taken directly from the consultations are used throughout. In July 2011 a focus group was held in Brockagh Resource Centre, in Laragh, Co. Wicklow, with ten members of the Executive Committee. The group was made up of five men and five women. There are 15 members on the Executive Committee in total. The project development co-ordinator did not attend the focus group. The session lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. One member of the group, a woman, also participated in a telephone interview a week later. The interview provided an opportunity to supplement and verify findings from the focus group consultation.

The amount of time that participants have been involved in the Network varies. However, the majority have been involved with the committees of other organisations representing older people (for example Active Retirement Associations) and have considerable experience at committee level.

“ Most, more than half, are coming from older people's organisations.

The participants expressed a degree of confidence and aptitude which pre-dates their involvement in the Network or the training they have received on the Executive Committee.

As outlined above, the committee members have so far undertaken the AwC course and the AgeWise workshop; a two-day advocacy workshop with consultant Brian Harvey, equality training and committee skills training; under the umbrella of the Get Vocal initiative funded by Age & Opportunity. The committee members also receive ongoing administrative support and comprehensive assistance in the long-term development of the Network from a project co-ordinator based in Arklow. During the consultation, the participants focused their discussion on the following types of training:

- Advocacy Skills training
- Committee Skills training

Participants' Expectations of the Training

When asked what they had first hoped would be the outcome of taking part in the various training sessions the participants had this to say:

“ I was looking forward to the group having some focus.

“ Support for the work being done by the group and by each individual.

“ I was relieved that the group could move on from being ‘a talking shop’ and we could start to take action and implement the strategic plan [by drawing on what they were learning in the training and on the support of the co-ordinator].

“ It's a learning process.

Impact of the Training on Participants

Unlike the participants at other sites, members of the Wicklow focus group did not stress any impact on their personal development. Instead, some members of the group felt that self-esteem and confidence are likely by-products of the various training opportunities, which they attended in a professional capacity during their working lives, and as a result of experience garnered from personal involvement with other voluntary organisations and initiatives over many years. Therefore, members of the focus group opted to by-pass any discussion of the benefits of the training on their personal growth and instead negotiated with the researcher/facilitator to change the format of the discussion to focus exclusively on issues of political awareness and engagement.

The group unanimously agreed that the advocacy skills training they received as part of the Get Vocal programme has had a positive impact on their political awareness and on subsequent political engagement.

Political engagement: Advocacy Skills

“ That was a whole new ball game! The advocacy skills training actually provided a personal philosophy. It was hugely wonderful. It has opened up a whole new world to me.

The ‘new world’ referenced above by a member of the Network, was revealed upon learning how to lobby Government and other political representatives at local and national levels, in order to influence positive change in the lives of older people. These skills include:

- Approaching political representatives to request meetings
- Preparing for these meetings and the importance of thorough research
- Organising letter writing campaigns and petitions
- Formulating parliamentary questions relating to the needs and concerns of older people

The participants also viewed information packs, provided as part of the advocacy skills training, as useful resources, since the packs amalgamate all the necessary materials in one document detailing the most effective lobbying techniques.

Participants valued instruction on how to articulate issues of concern to older people. After the training, they felt motivated to effectively challenge policies which detract from or jeopardise the standard of living of this section of society.

“ You learn how to challenge and not to give up.

“ Brian taught us how to challenge and to never let it go. Be persistent. He gave us insight into how to write a letter. Be concise; be clear about your issue so they can see what it is at a glance. If they don't reply, write again, contact them and say 'Remember me?!'

The participants believe that the advantages inherent in being part of a Network, namely added credibility and influence, have benefitted their advocacy objective:

“ There is always strength in numbers, in terms of influencing TDs.

“ A network can gain access to those in power/decision making bodies, not so an individual.

This was demonstrated at a seminar organised by the Network before the 2011 General Election. This event was well attended by political representatives:

“ We have held seminars and they have been a wonderful success. They give older people a voice. The Minister for Older People at the time and lots of politicians attended. In the workshops the participants discussed lots of important issues and the actions that need to be taken. We wrote lots of letters to TDs after that.

The Network creates a space for numbers of older people from different places in the county to come together to identify and discuss common concerns; while the advocacy training has helped the executive committee to tailor a strategy for dealing with them. This is then passed on to the rest of the members.

“ There needs to be many voices but one clear message.

“ You learn how to empower other members to advocate for themselves.

Empowering other Older People

The notion of empowering other older people to advocate on their own behalf was an important concept for the Wicklow participants. The advocacy training has provided the executive committee with the skill sets to achieve this. In fact, some of the participants are eager to take this notion of empowerment even further in the future, through delivery of training designed by older people for older people.

“ I want to empower older people to feel they can make a difference to their own lives, through making a phone call or posing a question to a politician. The training gave me those skills.

“ At some point in the future I'd like us to offer advocacy and lobbying training and maybe leadership training as well, especially to social activities groups. They can identify the issues affecting them but they aren't in a position to act on it because they aren't political. Maybe we could deliver training to them and teach them how to advocate for themselves.

Committee Skills

In addition to advocacy skills training the executive committee of the County Wicklow Network of Older People also received Committee Skills training. A participant expressed satisfaction with this training, not least of all because she

could apply the learning from it to another volunteering role:

“ These [committee skills] were useful for me as the chairperson of an Active Retirement group. It is tricky to be chair of a community group made up entirely of volunteers. The training taught me how to involve everyone and I believe I passed that on to the chairperson who came after me. So it isn't just useful for being part of the Network, I brought those skills with me to the older persons' group and passed them on to others.

This participant applied the skills she learned from the Get Vocal training to other roles she held in her life, as well as passing them on to other people so that a 'snowball' effect was created. Committee members were also introduced to new ways of classifying and allocating the Network's core responsibilities, and how to establish working groups to carry them out. A participant identified this method as having a particularly positive impact on her involvement in the Network.

“ It's good because you can use your expertise in the areas you're most interested in.

She believes the working groups illustrate just how well the Network is embracing good practice. Matching members' unique skills with particular tasks of interest to them, results in greater enthusiasm and motivation to get the work done.

Outcomes of the Training

A number of positive outcomes from the training have been detailed previously.

Establishing a Library

In addition to the outcomes identified above, a further concrete outcome from participation in the training has been the Executive Committee's decision to

establish a library of materials with a specific focus on older people's issues. The library will be housed in the Brockagh Resource Centre and will be a valuable resource made available to all Network members. The library will assist in the objective of keeping members informed and increasing political awareness.

“ Brian [advocacy training consultant] told us to read everything about the political scene that we could get our hands on and to use the internet as a resource too. As a result of this we have agreed to establish a library for the network which will focus on older people's issues. We will all take responsibility for bringing in newspaper clippings, books and internet articles and we'll pool them together in a library.

Barriers to Engagement

Despite the many encouraging outcomes identified by the Network, the Wicklow participants also highlighted a number of issues which they feel could potentially hamper engagement in collective advocacy in future.

Personal Barriers: Older People's Attitudes towards Engagement

The first barrier to engagement may be the attitude of the older person toward becoming involved. One participant suggested that if older people were to take a proactive approach to the issues affecting their lives they could be successful in bringing about change.

“ I believe we live in a Nanny State. People have to stop whining to others about their problems and go out and make change happen. Their voices can be heard if they care to voice them.

Another participant suggested that the challenge of engaging with older people in the past arose when the training provided was not tailored to the specific needs of

its target group, in this case older people. If training is not developed or delivered with the older person in mind they are likely to lose interest. He believes the recent batch of training has successfully addressed the particular needs of older participants.

“ It’s easier to follow and digest as a result.

Personal Barriers: Maintaining Motivation and Momentum

The participants suggested that once older people overcome the barriers to engagement and take steps to become involved in collective advocacy a further challenge may present itself, namely how to harness the motivation generated by engagement and how best to build on this? This, for the Wicklow participants, is an equally challenging concern and a further barrier to effective advocacy.

“ After the training, people are energised and motivated. The challenging part is how to use that motivation to build momentum and get things done; to implement the plan you’ve just spent weeks talking about....Use it or lose it.

Other participants pointed to the volume of information provided during advocacy skills training, suggesting that taking part in such training, without any prior experience in the field, can feel slightly overwhelming, especially at first. Putting what has been learned into practice may also prove difficult.

“ The amount of information to digest is considerable.

“ But when the training is paced correctly and information is introduced slowly over time - then it’s not overwhelming.

“ It is a challenge to think about all that needs to be implemented after the training! That’s when I feel overwhelmed!

Societal Barriers: Attitudes of Society toward Older People

It was suggested by a participant that the attitudes and prejudices of other groups in society may also impact negatively on older people's involvement in collective advocacy. If older people are viewed as a drain on the country rather than a bounty of experience and skill, those in power are likely to absorb and reflect these opinions and older people may not be afforded the right to be heard.

“ Older people in Ireland need to be viewed as a resource and need to be valued as such, if we are to be taken seriously at the top level.

Disparity within the County

In addition to the above barriers, a participant suggested the geographical size of the county and its urban/rural divide can act as barriers to engagement, since the issues facing older rural dwellers may differ from the issues of urban older people.

“ Wicklow is like two separate counties. We have really rural parts and then the parts on the DART line and they are completely different, with different issues facing the older people living there. For the people in rural Wicklow another big issue is transport.

Additional Findings from the Wicklow Site

Importance of ongoing support and overall responsibility for coordination

The members of the Wicklow focus group had a further discussion about the value of administrative support and the vital role which a dedicated staff member with overall responsibility for supporting the coordination of the Network plays in its smooth running. These supports, coupled with access to suitable premises, have facilitated the members to grow the Network and drive it forward.

“ The co-ordinator's support is invaluable.

“ We would be going around in circles without her, [the co-ordinator] there would be no momentum or continuity without her.

“ We need her [co-ordinator] for ongoing support. We wouldn't be here without her.

“ We need leadership” [in implementing the plans they have made].

“ Every voluntary group needs two things if they are to succeed: administrative support and premises. Now we have both.

Once the Network is at full strength and successfully run by its members, these supports will be reduced and the Network will become self-sufficient.

Visual Aid: ‘The Tree’ Rating Scale

Seven of the ten participants illustrated their feelings prior to participating in the training by marking ‘1’ at the base of the trunk of the tree. The remaining three participants marked ‘1’ slightly higher up the tree but only in the lower branches. A small number expressed scepticism and anxiety about attending the training before it began. All of the participants, apart from one, illustrated their feelings after the training by marking a ‘2’ in the mid to higher branches of the tree. All of the participants agreed that their participation had been positive and worthwhile.

Conclusion

Participants from the Wicklow site demonstrate considerable experience and self assurance in their efforts to date with the County Wicklow Network for Older People. They have welcomed the support provided by the dedicated staff member who helps to co-ordinate the Network and assists the Executive Committee in implementing its ambitious strategic plan. The training initiatives rolled out as

part of the Get Vocal programme have equipped the already experienced and capable executive committee with additional skills sets, including committee and advocacy skills training. These skills have led to greater awareness of and engagement with political representatives and political processes, and a strong desire, not only to advocate for the needs of older people across the county of Wicklow, but to empower older people to advocate for themselves by delivering training directly to local groups.

Analysis of Findings

Introduction

Here we return to the research questions identified in the introductory section. These questions provide a framework for analysing findings emerging from the consultation process, which were detailed in the case study sections. To recap, the research set out to establish how the community education interventions of the Get Vocal programme have been experienced from the perspectives of the older people involved in four sites. The research questions are as follows:

1. What did the participants respond well to?
2. What constraints, if any, did the participants identify?
3. What would enable participants to increase their involvement in collective advocacy?

What Did the Participants Respond Well to?

Motivations for taking part in the Get Vocal programme varied across sites and between participants. Some participants did it for personal reasons, to learn something or to make new friends, others for altruistic reasons, to benefit their local community or older people's position in Irish society. While the groups at each of the four sites are at varying stages of development, the benefits derived from taking part in the community education aspects of the Get Vocal programme are common threads linking each of the older participants across the study. While the specific impact of participating in the programme differs for

each person, all agreed that the experience has enhanced their lives in a variety of ways and for one or two participants the impact was truly transformative. The core areas where participants underwent a positive change after taking part in community education as part of Get Vocal include:

- Personal growth: such as increased confidence and self-esteem
- Active ageing: including increased social interaction through new or enhanced involvement in activities/hobbies
- Civic engagement: including increased involvement in local communities as a result of taking up new or additional volunteering roles and/or supporting various causes.
- Greater political awareness and engagement: including advocacy activities, such as lobbying to influence local or national policies governing issues of importance to older people.

It is important to note here that these core areas are not mutually exclusive. Exposure to one element often encouraged participants to get involved in others. In the context of these case studies, each issue is often interlinked, converging and overlapping simultaneously. However, participants at some sites chose to focus their energies on cultivating greater political awareness and engagement while groups at other sites, largely at an earlier stage in their development, were more focused on issues of personal growth and active ageing.

Most important to note is that across each of the four sites there was an appetite amongst the participants for continued involvement in these types of community education programmes. Participants also spoke of other older people in their areas who had expressed an interest in taking part in further training in the future. Having missed out on or passed up the opportunity to participate first time around, the other older people were motivated and encouraged by the participants' strong endorsement of the various training programmes.

Personal Growth

Participants at three of the four sites identified personal growth as a positive by-product of taking part in various training opportunities offered as part of the Get Vocal programme. Personal growth is an umbrella term for a large number of

beneficial outcomes experienced by participants. It also varied from site to site. In Kildare, participants singled out the AwC training for encouraging them to express their opinions freely and without embarrassment. For many in the Kildare consultation, AwC offered catharsis, helping to heal feelings of bitterness or resentment for difficulties encountered in their early lives. It helped many to deal with their past, while also encouraging them to feel proud of their achievements, such as raising a family, a successful career, maintaining a home, etc. In the Voices through Art (VtA) programme some of the Kildare participants found a vehicle for self expression through the medium of art.

In Leitrim the Leadership for Advocacy training received by participants gave them the confidence and social skills to speak to and mix with a broader spectrum of people than before.

Amongst Wexford participants, increased confidence was also acknowledged. However, for some participants the most valuable aspects of the personal growth they experienced through Ageing with Confidence (AwC) were increased resilience and better coping skills, including coping strategies for dealing with difficult life experiences and the challenges of growing older.

In contrast to the participants at the other sites, members of the Wicklow focus group did not stress any particular impact on their personal development. Instead, some members of the Wicklow group felt that their self-esteem and confidence were more likely by-products of training and development opportunities which they had received in a professional capacity during their working lives, and from personal involvement with other voluntary organisations over many years. However, these participants reported benefits from the training derived from other areas, in particular political awareness and engagement.

Active Ageing

Participants at two of the four sites reported positive changes in their social lives from taking part in Get Vocal. In Kildare, the benefit of social interaction within the group was felt strongly. Those involved in the VtA programme welcomed the opportunity to collaborate on art projects. The women at this site formed strong

friendships with each other. For many, this led to involvement in social activities and taking up hobbies, none of which had been available to them before. In Leitrim also, the opportunity to interact with others and to make friends with other older people in both North and South Leitrim, was viewed as very desirable for the Network and beneficial to individual members. Active ageing was less significant at the Wexford site and was not raised by participants in Wicklow.

Civic Engagement

Participants at the Leitrim site reported an unusual outcome of the training; namely that the Network's interest in 'community' is no longer limited to their local area or even to North Leitrim. Instead, the training has impacted on how the participants define 'community', extending it to incorporate South Leitrim. They now take a countywide approach in supporting and addressing the needs of the older people in their community. Increased involvement in voluntary work was also reported by participants in Leitrim and in Wexford, as a positive by-product of participation in the training aspects of the Get Vocal programme. Many of the participants at these sites experienced personal growth, especially a confidence boost, as a result of taking part in the various training programmes. For a few of these participants, their improved self-esteem meant they were ready to challenge themselves further, by getting involved in charities and voluntary organisations and giving back to their communities.

Greater Political Awareness and Engagement

All of the participants consulted for the study at each of the four sites, agreed that they are currently interested in getting more involved in advocacy work and working for change than they ever had been previously and that the Get Vocal training has contributed to this enthusiasm and interest in a very significant way. Participants at the Wexford and Wicklow sites were especially keen to discuss the benefits of the training on their political awareness and engagement, but it was raised to some degree by each of the sites during the consultation phase. Participants at the Kildare site were keenly aware of the difficult economic situation facing the country. They were concerned about the issues impacting older people in particular, especially the threat brought on by cuts to social protection entitlements and recent tax increases. The group would like to learn

how to address what they perceive to be threats to their quality of life and are motivated to act. The participants expressed particularly strong motivation to act against Government policies which threaten the standard of living of older people and to support any initiatives aimed at challenging them.

The Get Vocal training and the establishment of the Networks in North and South Leitrim nurtured a countywide approach to addressing the needs of older people in Leitrim through joint advocacy initiatives. As a result of the Leadership for Advocacy course, which was a focused intervention delivered to both groups in Leitrim, members of the Active Age Networks have chosen to tackle one issue affecting older people, namely transport, and are in talks with statutory agencies and local service providers to address this issue. The group's level of political engagement was extremely limited or non-existent before the training. Where it existed it was limited to local issues in North Leitrim, but now takes a countywide approach by co-ordinating efforts with South Leitrim through the Active Age Network. They have taken a results focused, practical approach to their advocacy work. Despite members' limited exposure to political engagement, they are making progress.

Advocacy training sparked interest and awareness among Wexford participants in the role that politics plays in their lives and the influence that older people can wield if they choose to get involved. Since the training Wexford participants have become more vocal and motivated. They spoke about how important it is to ensure that older people cultivate a common 'voice', to articulate their needs in a way that is acknowledged and respected by decision makers.

Participants in Wicklow valued instruction, as part of their advocacy training, on how best to articulate the issues of concern to older people. After the training, they felt motivated to effectively challenge policies that detract from the standard of living of older people in society. The advocacy training helped the executive committee to tailor a strategy for dealing with the concerns of older people.

As identified above, the four sites are at very different stages of development, with some just beginning to formulate their contribution to advocacy, while others

appear to be developing a strong capacity for critical analysis and meaningful engagement with the political system. The variety and choice of training interventions available to participants, along with tailored content which had been devised specifically with older people in mind, facilitated the growth and progress of groups at each of the sites, despite being at different stages in their development. Developing courses specific to older people, which cover a broad range of areas and varying levels of complexity to encourage progression, will ensure programmes are adaptable to the needs and stage of each group.

The research participants also acknowledged the vital role played by the project coordinators working at each of the four sites and recognised the positive contribution the coordinators have made in moving the programmes forward and in supporting members' involvement.

What Constraints (if any) Were Identified?

The constraints to participation can be categorised in three ways:

- Personal
- Societal/Cultural
- Institutional

Personal Constraints

Participants at the Kildare site identified confidence as a major barrier to getting involved, particularly for people who are nervous about taking part in group activities or speaking in front of an audience. All the participants at the site reported experiencing greater confidence and self-esteem after training.

Lack of interest, feeling overwhelmed, frustrated or intimidated by a task are other obstacles to getting involved, according to the Kildare and Leitrim groups. Feeling daunted by the enormity of their advocacy work was also highlighted by Wexford participants. Fortunately, being part of a Network and having the support of a programme co-ordinator go a long way to addressing these concerns.

According to Kildare participants, balancing the social side of group involvement (friendship and fun) with advocacy work is vital to ensuring each individual engages at a level they are comfortable with. This balance is more likely to be achieved in a relaxed, informal learning environment, particularly as part of a community education outreach initiative.

Similarly, a Wicklow participant suggested that a constraint for older people participating in various training initiatives in the past arose when the training provided was not tailored to the specific needs of its target group- older people. If training is not developed or delivered with the older person in mind they are likely to lose interest. Fortunately the participant was satisfied that the Get Vocal training had successfully addressed the particular needs of the older participants.

Societal Constraints

Kildare participants believed that the prevailing ethos/preoccupation with youth in Irish society serves to marginalise older people and render them invisible. The Kildare participants also expressed concern that older people cannot influence change as individuals but hoped they might make a difference collectively.

The attitudes and prejudices of other groups in society may also impact negatively on older people's involvement in collective advocacy, according to participants in Wicklow. If older people are viewed as a drain on the country rather than a bounty of experience and skill, those in power are likely to absorb and reflect these opinions and older people may not be afforded the right to be heard. Participants in Wicklow suggested that as a group within Irish society older people feel they cannot influence the issues affecting their lives. However, they feel that this is not so, they believe older people could be successful in bringing about change if they are willing, as a collective group, to take a proactive approach and lend their voice to the cause.

Institutional Constraints

Other barriers to engagement identified by Kildare participants can be generated by the chasm between those who are in positions of power and those older people who want to act but may fear adverse consequences if they chose to take a stand

and challenge Government policies adversely affecting them. Wexford participants also expressed frustration with their political representatives and with the lack of opportunities for meaningful consultation on issues important to older people. However, all of the groups taking part in advocacy skills training reported having a better understanding of the processes involved in ‘working for change’ and greater confidence in applying this learning to older people’s issues.

Leitrim participants identified a lack of transport links in the county as a potential constraint to participation. The skills they have learned through the training have aided members of the Network to agree to embark on a plan to improve transport options available to older people across Leitrim.

What Would Enable Further Involvement?

We can address this question in two ways, by identifying:

- Ways to encourage greater numbers of older people to get involved in transformative community education
- Ways to encourage continued involvement by those who have participated in transformative community education initiatives

Ways to encourage greater numbers of older people to get involved

- Continue to tailor course content to specifically address the needs of an older audience. Participants in Wicklow emphasised how important this is in keeping older learners interested.
- Continue delivering outreach programmes in community settings. Participants from Kildare and Wexford declared particular enthusiasm for further training in settings which are informal, familiar and welcoming.

“ I always say you’ve got to bring the education to the older people because older people are not going to go to the education. You have to try to bring it to their own

communities because they are absolutely intimidated to go to a college.

- A number of Kildare participants highlighted the importance of a balance between content which challenges and stimulates older learners but also allows time for social interaction, cultivating friendships and having fun.

Ways to encourage continued involvement by those who have already participated

- A participant in Wexford felt very strongly that older people should have access to the educational opportunities they missed out on earlier in their lives. He suggested developing a second phase of AwC which would build on the learning from the first phase. He suggested that this might include pre-college courses to prepare older learners who wish to enrol in formal education. He also suggested that another strand of phase 2 might incorporate an advocacy module.

“ You have to build up a person’s confidence before you can encourage them to get involved. AwC could be used as a way of building people’s confidence enough to get them involved in other educational opportunities.

- Build on the motivation to engage in (further) advocacy work displayed by participants across each of the four sites, by offering the Leadership and Advocacy course developed by the Get Vocal programme in Leitrim.
- A Wicklow participant also suggested piloting a ‘training for trainers’ course on advocacy (and leadership) skills, with one or more sites already involved in the Get Vocal programme (where sufficient capacity and interest exist). Participants who successfully complete this course could be charged with the responsibility of delivering advocacy skills training to other groups in their county/area, thus empowering both the trainer and the participants. If successful, similar initiatives could be rolled out all across the country.

Concluding Remarks

The final section of this report revisited the research questions (first identified in the introductory section) which structured the consultation process for this study. These questions aided the analysis of findings from each of the four sites: Kildare, Leitrim, Wexford and Wicklow. The analysis highlighted the numerous commonalities of experience and the shared interests of participants across these sites. It detailed the positive impact the community education initiatives and other supports under the Get Vocal programme have had on participants in the areas of personal growth, active ageing, civic engagement and greater political awareness and engagement. Constraints on participation in the Get Vocal programme were also detailed. These included personal, societal and institutional constraints. This section also put forward suggestions made by participants for further developing the valuable role played by community education opportunities delivered in a context of community development support.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Focus Group Format

Timeframe

1 - 1.5 hours

Introduction (10 mins)

a) Introduction by facilitator: (5 mins)

- Explain the purpose of consultation
- Provide a timeframe for the session
- Outline the structure of the session
- Emphasise that confidentiality is assured

b) Introductions within the group: (5 mins)

- Participants' names
- The name of their group
- When they took part in the training

Part 1: Brainstorming Session (10 mins)

- Brainstorming as a group on their expectations of the training before they took part in it? What had they hoped to get out of the training –on a personal level- when they first heard about it?
- Use 'the tree'⁶ as a visual aid. Pass out photocopies of it to each participant. Ask each person to mark '1' on the tree to indicate how they feel.

⁶ A visual aid (of a mature tree with lots of low hanging and tall branches) used as part of a facilitation technique aimed at encouraging group participants to articulate their progress and

Part 2: Small group work (25 -35 mins)

- Explain what is meant by the following categories and give examples. Ask each small group to discuss at least two of the following:

Categories	Examples
Personal Development	Self-esteem and confidence; new social skills; handling stress
Active Lifestyle	Socialising; travel; interests and hobbies
Civic Engagement at Community Level	Volunteering; charity work, etc.
Political Awareness at Local & National Level	News media, attending meetings
Political Engagement at Local & National Level	Campaigning; signing petitions, attending rallies/marches, voting

- Discussion should be structured around the changes each member of the group has witnessed in themselves, under each of these headings (i.e. before & after the training). Pass out worksheets to each group to record this information.
- Feedback to the larger group.

Part 3: Group Discussion (10-25 mins)

- Return to 'the tree' and ask each participant to mark a '2' on the handout to indicate how they feel about themselves since the training.
- What have been the most beneficial personal outcomes for each participant?
- What have been the most personally challenging aspects for each participant?

- Has the formal learning (structured training) or informal learning (co-ordinator mentoring) been most useful for each participant?
- Describe the experience of working as part of a group. Do you prefer working in the group or alone?

Closing: (5-10 mins)

- Go around the group one by one asking each participant to describe their 'journey' in one word (i.e. how they would describe the impact of the experience on them personally?).
- Thank each of the participants for taking part in the focus group.

Appendix 2 - Visual Aid



Appendix 3 - Interview Question Template

Background to the Research

- Interviewer introduces herself to the interviewee
- Purpose of the consultation as part of the research
- Structure of the interview and timeframe
- Confidentiality assured

Introductory Questions

- How long have you been a member of your local group?
- Had you been aware of the training Programme before you became a participant in the training?

General Questions

- Can you list three things you enjoyed about the training? Why?
- Can you list three things you didn't enjoy about the training? Why?

Personal Development

Self & Self Confidence:

- Did you learn anything new about yourself from the training? Please elaborate on your answer. Give examples.
- Have your perceptions of yourself altered in any way since you participated in the training?
- Has it had an impact on your feelings of self worth/self-confidence? Why do you say that? Give examples.

[Optional] Handling Stress

- Can you list some of the factors which cause you stress in daily life? Tell me more about them and why they cause you stress?
- Has the way you deal with stress changed in any way since you participated in the Get Vocal training?

Active Ageing

- Do you have any hobbies/are you engaged in regular leisure activities?

- Has your involvement in these pursuits changed over time? (Increased or diminished?)
- Has the training had any impact on the types of activities you are currently involved in? Give examples.

Civic Engagement

- Are you involved in any civic activities? E.g. Volunteering or charity work?
If yes, how did you get involved?

Political Awareness and Engagement

- What are the issues of importance to you/to your quality of life? At local level? At national level?
- Have you been involved in any activities where the aim was to:
 - ‘Strengthen older people’s voices’ in relation to these issues or;
 - ‘Work for change’ in a certain area,
 - Build relationships with politicians/official representatives in order to influence policy?
- Can you give examples of these types of activities? (E.g. attending meetings, rallies or marches; signing petitions). How was that experience for you?
- Would you have felt confident enough to do this before you took part in the training? Or is it something that’s happened since?
- Would you like to get involved in more of this type of activity in the future? Why?

Final Questions

- Would you like to add anything else at this point? Have we covered everything you wanted to talk about?
- Do you have any final thoughts/comments about your experiences of the training?
- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.



Age & Opportunity

Marino Institute of Education
Griffith Avenue
Dublin 9

Telephone

01 805 7709

Email

info@ageandopportunity.ie

Website

www.ageandopportunity.ie

