

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs

September 2023.

Pre-Budget Submission



Our one collective Budget 2024 Ask:

To support the Alliances call for the speedy establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People that would account directly to the Oireachtas, with a mandate to safeguard and protect the interests and well-being of older people and an ageing population.

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (the Alliance) represents the collective thinking of seven significant NGOs working in the age sector including Active Retirement Ireland, Age & Opportunity, ALONE, The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Irish Hospice Foundation, The Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and Third Age.

Ireland is ageing faster than anywhere else in Europe. The over-65 population has grown by 35 per cent over the past decade and it is predicted that this group will reach 1 million people by 2031. The greatest increase will be in the over 80s. Of female children born today, over 50% are likely to live to age 100 or beyond.

Our economy, our health service, our communities and indeed families themselves need to adapt. Although many Government Departments and agencies have an important role to play in creating a society that works for us all as we age, we do not yet have an active and measurable national strategy for ageing and older people that is supported by a structured, cross-Departmental approach with senior-level Government oversight.

Ageism has been revealed as deeply institutionalised throughout our services and systems and across wider society. Ageism is everywhere. Because it is so embedded it feels almost normal and goes unchallenged. Yet it has huge negative consequences for people of all ages.

There has been no shortage of theoretical models and policy statements relevant to ageing and older people in Ireland. Indeed, policies toward older people date all the way back to 1968 (Care of the Aged), 1988 (The years ahead) and the current policy being the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013).

Many of the commitments set out as part of these policy frameworks have, however, yet to be meaningfully advanced or benefited from coordinated implementation. Much of the policy content though remains valid. The 2013 Strategy, in particular, contains still relevant approaches to eliminating ageism, ensuring that ageing is taken seriously, and that older people's needs and preferences inform policy and practice.

An Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People would have the ability to safeguard and protect the interests and well-being of older people and an ageing population.

What is the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs proposing?

We are calling for the speedy establishment of a new public office - an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People (similar to that which is in place in both Northern Ireland and Wales) - that would account directly to the Oireachtas, with a mandate to safeguard and protect the interests and well-being of older people and an ageing population by:

- **Advising Government on matters concerning older people**, including by reference to international best practice.
- **Reviewing and overseeing the adequacy of legislation, policy formation and future planning** which is informed by the voice and lived experience of older people in Ireland.
- **Holding Government and public bodies to account** by monitoring policy implementation and practice.
- **Creating a positive ageing experience** by promoting healthy ageing, combatting ageism and challenging age discrimination.

Such an office would help to ensure that Ireland's various policy commitments relevant to older people are meaningfully monitored and that older people are treated with respect and on an equal basis with the rest of the population.

What is missing is an independent champion with statutory powers and a cross-Departmental brief who takes responsibility for focussed progress on tackling ageism and making the 2013 NPAS vision a reality. A Commissioner for Ageing and Older People would support a coordinated approach towards the implementation of strategies and actions relevant to the needs and rights of older people taking a role independent of any one department.

Independent Commissioners, with strong track records of achievements, are in place in both Northern Ireland (estb. 2011 with a £1.5m budget in 2022) and Wales (estb. 2008 with a £1.1m budget in 2022).

Ageing will be a dominant theme in the 21st Century according to The United Nations World Economic and Social Survey. In Ireland it is predicted that those over the age of 65 will reach one million people by the end of this decade – or, potentially, within the lifespan of the next Government.

This call, we would suggest, must not be conflated with the work of the planned Commission on Care. The Commission, though it has yet to be established, will have an important role in examining the care and support needs of older people. It is anticipated, however, that an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People will have a far broader remit, recognising the full capacity and potential of older people and will cover the needs and rights of older people across the spectrum, not just in terms of health and care.

As life expectancy increases, the need to ensure that Ireland becomes a great country in which to grow old is increasing too.

This single investment – the establishment of an Independent Commissioner, will help to ensure that all the key players streamline their work, with the expressed interests and needs of older people at their core.

The Alliance would be pleased to work collaboratively with Government in supporting the establishment of this proposed new office.

Without this, Ireland will be forever playing catch-up with demographic change.

Who is a Commissioner for?

Often, we talk about the needs of Ireland's ageing population as if this represents a change in demographics to be considered in the future. The truth is, our population has already gotten considerably older in recent years, and will continue to do so.

- In 2011, there were 535,716 people aged 65+ in Ireland, making up 11.4% of the total population.
- By 2021, this was projected to increase to 796,484 people; by 2031, to more than 1 million.
- By 2041, the population aged 65+ is projected at almost 1.4 million, or 22.4% of the population.
- Furthermore, the number of people aged 80 and over is projected to increase from 130,598 to 457,962 between 2011 and 2041. This is an increase of 250%.

Older people are not a homogenous group and every individual's experience of ageing will be different. In the experience of the Alliance, significant numbers of older people experience challenges relating to income, housing, health, transport, work, energy, education, and digital communications. The Alliance's recently launched account 'Telling It Like It Is; Combatting Ageism' also exposed the ingrained nature and impact of ageism in Ireland in which older people are typically portrayed as uniformly frail and vulnerable. Furthermore, this important account revealed how there has been an implementation deficit in relation to many of Ireland's policy commitments relevant to ageing and older people.

An Independent Commissioner would have a remit to promote the needs of older people across *all* Departments, ensuring the needs of older people are met across the variety of services and departments they interact with.