COUNSEL

People in Ireland are generally healthier and living longer than ever before. By 2011 it is estimated that 14% of the population will be aged 65 and over. This is in no small part due to advancements in medical care and living standards in recent years. However, the recent demographic changes are placing a greater burden on our health and social services. Government policies and strategies to promote positive ageing will be crucial not only to meeting the challenges but also to harnessing the benefits associated with the new trends.

National Positive Ageing Strategy

Last June, the Minister for Older People and Health Promotion, Áine Brady TD, launched the consultation phase of the National Positive Ageing Strategy. One of the priorities of the new Office for Older People, for which Minister Brady has overall responsibility, is to develop the Strategy for Positive Ageing. The preparation of the Strategy is linked to the Programme for Government 2007–2012 which commits to better recognise the position of older people in Irish society. It will cover policies, services and practices in areas such as health care, housing, transport, income, employment and independent living. However, it is disappointing to note that the Minister has indicated that there will be no new funding made available for the Strategy.

Positive Ageing Policy

Public policy for older people is mainly designed by our politicians. Older people are often seen as ‘dependent’ and are not given the opportunity to contribute to or significantly influence the policy-making process. This can complicate the process and may ultimately cause the strategies which are developed to fail to meet their objectives. This is why, given the opportunity, older citizens and groups acting on their behalf should actively participate in the consultation phase. Positive ageing policy enables older people to participate in the community without excluding those who may be restricted in activities as they grow older. Previous strategies relating to older people in Ireland have mainly focused on health and care services whereas it is proposed that the new Strategy will...
Perceptions of older people

Old people are not a problem in society but they are sometimes perceived negatively and ageism remains a major challenge. Perhaps it is a fear of getting older that leads people to neglect the elderly. People see older people as needy and compliant, and physically not functioning very well. However the older people of Ireland showed there was more to them than this when the Government attempted to take away the over-70’s medical card scheme in the October Budget last year. A spark was ignited, the ‘grey power’ rose up as a group and although they came to Dublin in wheelchairs, on crutches, and supported by canes, the intellectual voice was not diminished in any way and they won.

However, it is a cause for concern that some GPs want to drop out of the ‘over 70’s medical card’ scheme because they say that they are not adequately compensated for the work involved.

**Fáilte Isteach**

The concept of ‘positive ageing’ acknowledges that older people are a resource for their families, their communities and society as a whole. Many retirees in their sixties and seventies have a lot to contribute to society. The skills they have acquired over their lifetime can be passed on to younger generations. Retired doctors and engineers and other professionals could give talks to pupils on what it is like to study for a degree in their field and can highlight the positive and negative points of joining these professions. Retired doctors could offer their services to community health projects, or form a late-night GP clinic with each doctor taking on one or two nights out of the week. Retired carpenters and other tradesmen might offer low-cost services for the elderly.

Those who know a foreign language can help immigrants to learn to speak English and develop an understanding of Irish customs and ways of doing things which would be helpful to a person entering the country for the first time. This is evident from the ‘Never Too Old To Teach – Fáilte Isteach’ program which began in a local community in Meath in 2005 and is now being extended nationwide. The program was the direct result of an observed local need among the increasing population of new migrants in the area who were experiencing difficulty in their social and working lives as a result of their lack of English. Members of the Third Age Foundation, an older people’s organisation in the area came up with the idea of using their skills and talents to teach conversational English to newcomers from countries such as Argentina, China, France, Germany, Spain, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine and Sweden. The project focuses on conversational English, basic lesson plans on daily scenarios using small discussion groups, visual aids, practical demonstrations and role play. According to Mary Nally, Chairperson of the Third Age Foundation, “The Fáilte Isteach programme has had an enormous positive impact on both volunteers and migrants. Not only have migrants improved their conversational English but our older volunteers have made many new friends and shared so much about our culture while learning about the cultures of migrants.” This is a noteworthy example of the important contribution older people in Ireland make to Irish society.

**Organisations and support**

There is a danger that older people will become socially isolated when they retire. If they cease their membership of political parties it means less representation for older people. Fortunately, a large number of organisations are working to improve the lives of older people in Ireland. These include Age and Opportunity, Age Action Ireland, the Federation of Active Retirement Associations, the Senior Citizen’s Parliament, the Senior Helpline, the Older Women’s Network (OWN) (Ireland), the Retirement Planning Council, the University of the Third Age as well as statutory bodies (see Useful contacts). By becoming more organised, older people gain a forum to express their ideas and to highlight their rights. Many elderly people make significant contributions to the arts - the artist Louis le Brocquy and poet Seamus Heaney to mention but two. Bealtaine is a national festival celebrating creativity in older age and it has grown over the years to become one of Ireland’s biggest arts festivals. From dance to cinema, painting to theatre, Bealtaine showcases the talents and skills of both established and first-time older artists and performers. It is a chance to make new and challenging work and a chance to communicate traditions between the generations.

Age Action Ireland organises a Positive Ageing Week (PAW) each year, a festival which highlights the positive aspects of ageing and celebrates the contribution older people have made and continue to make to their communities. The aim is to dispel the many negative perceptions that surround ageing and demonstrate that ageing is something to be celebrated, not feared. Age Action coordinates and promotes PAW. Events and activities are organised by active retirement groups, local voluntary groups, nursing homes, libraries, commercial organisations and individual older people themselves.

**Older and Bolder**

In the lead up to the General Election in 2007 the Older and Bolder campaign,
Don’t forget... Whether you are purchasing insurance or enrolling in courses for further education we recommend that you always ask if there is a discount for those aged over 55.
allocated financial resources to support enterprises that employ disabled people, as well as companies that are adopting e-work schemes to help senior staff to obtain a more flexible retirement process by enabling them to work part-time at home.

Nursing homes

The controversy in 2005 over the Leas Cross home in Swords, Co Dublin and its later closure severely damaged public confidence in nursing homes and highlighted the need for improved practice and standards in this area (See ‘Nursing home care and costs’, Consumer Choice, October 2007, p372). The Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney, published the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Leas Cross Nursing Home last July. The evidence before the Commission suggests that the principal cause of the decline in care standards between 2003 and 2005 was the failure of Leas Cross Nursing Home to employ a sufficient number of competent staff to provide the necessary standard of nursing care. In practical terms, the ratio of nursing staff to care attendants was inadequate. In addition, there is evidence that many care attendants lacked appropriate training. It is vital that this report is used to ensure that no other patient or family has to face problems like this again.

Under the new Care and Welfare Regulations for Residential Care Settings for Older People which came into effect in July, the Chief Inspector of Social Services will now have the power to inspect all designated centres for older people. As part of the new regime all Nursing Homes (public, private and voluntary) will have to be registered. This will replace the current system whereby the HSE registered and inspected private nursing homes only.

Most elderly people prefer to remain in their own homes with the assistance of community nurses. Many are in fairly good health and with a little outside help can manage on their own at home. It is vital that the system of providing grants for essential repairs to houses occupied by elderly persons living on their own is maintained. A target outlined in Towards 2016 states that ‘Every older person would have adequate support to enable them to remain living independently in their own homes for as long as possible’. However, in the coming years there may be many more people relying on residential homes and additional health and social services. The Bord Snip report has proposed that the carers’ allowance, which is just over €220 per week, should be cut for households which are already in receipt of one weekly social welfare payment. This may mean that elderly parents or family members with disabilities who are being cared for at home may be forced into residential care at a high cost to the State. Another problem is that many nursing homes do not accept people with mental disabilities, leaving the family trying to cope with problems that they have never been trained to handle and which can get out of control. If the Government cuts help to carers including visits of the community nurse, house cleaners, meals on wheels and such supports they cannot expect to be able to successfully pursue a policy of having people cared for in their own homes for as long as possible. More, not less, support must be made available for carers.

According to the Older and Bolder Campaign (see Useful contacts) some of the problems commonly experienced by older people are:

- Difficulty in obtaining information about entitlements
- Difficulty in accessing services
- Age limits for services
- Gaps in services
- Loss of entitlements
- Lack of clarity regarding entitlements, health, housing, transport, education and other services
- Supports that don’t ‘join up’ and work together to meet their needs

common problems

choice comment

Ageing is an inevitable process but this does not mean that older people are not entitled to enjoy life and maintain their health in the most vibrant way possible. We need to reclaim the old and involve them in our lives and communities, listen to them, provide them with company and find out what they think. There is currently a lack of understanding about the difficulties and inequalities that face older people in Ireland and this has made it difficult in the past to successfully implement a long-term strategy for ageing. The way in which older people are perceived in society must change. Research and meaningful consultation to inform the development of the National Positive Ageing Strategy is the way forward. Older people must have their say in designing the strategy but this can only be successful if their views are taken on board and used in decision-making. In addition, adequate funding must be provided in order to implement new policies. The aged population in Ireland would cite as positive contributions the medical card for the over-70s, the bus pass and the lowered threshold in buses. However, there is clearly a lot more work to be done in creating an age-friendly society which will benefit every citizen in the long run. After all, we are all heading in the same direction.

Useful contacts

The Carers Association
www.carersireland.com

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)
www.tilda.ie

Technology and Research for Independent Living
www.trilcentre.org

University of the Third Age
www.u3a.org.uk

Sinéad McMahon

www.u3a.org.uk

Age

University of the Third

Technology and

Research for

Independent Living

www.trilcentre.org

TILDA

The Irish Longitudinal

Study on Ageing

The Carers Association

www.carersireland.com

www.u3a.org.uk

Study on Ageing

The Carers Association

www.carersireland.com

www.u3a.org.uk

www.trilcentre.org

Independent Living

www.trilcentre.org

The Irish Longitudinal

Study on Ageing

TILDA

www.tilda.ie