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# **Towards an Age Friendly Ireland:** A case study in practice

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## Introduction

Ireland is ageing. Census 2016 counted more than 637,000 people aged 65 years or older, an increase of more than 19% over the last five years, and now representing 13.4% of the population. By 2026 there will be 1.15 million people in Ireland aged 60 or over, representing almost one out of every four people.

A population with up to 1 in 4 people over the age of 60 years in the very near future will have significant social and economic implications at an individual, family and societal level. The implications for public policy areas as diverse as housing, health, urban and rural planning, transport, policing and the business environment are considerable.

A key purpose of local government is to promote the wellbeing and quality of life of citizens and communities. The signing of the Dublin Declaration on Age friendly Cities and Communities in Europe (2013) by all 31 of our local authorities represents a significant national commitment to creating an inclusive, equitable society in which older people can live full, active, valued and healthy lives.

The Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme provides a means to operationalise the Declaration and more recently, since 2016, a national infrastructure to bring key actors - City and County Councils, the Health Service Executive, An Garda Síochána, NGO's, business and third level sector representatives - together at local authority level to plan collaboratively, to share resources and to streamline their work, with the interests and needs of older people and an ageing population at their core.

The first local authority led age friendly county programme was established in Louth in 2009. This World Health Organization (WHO) informed programme involves a multi-agency, multi-sectoral approach to age-related planning and service provision. Since 2009, an age friendly programme has been developed in each of the 31 local authority areas following application of a consistent methodology and governance structure which supports cities and counties to be more inclusive of older people by addressing their expressed concerns and interests under the eight defined WHO programme headings.

Within the framework of the WHO's Age Friendly Cities and Communities model, city and county based stakeholders are making commitments to shared action plans addressing pillars spanning housing, our health services, built environment, transport and social and civic participation. Under the leadership of the local authority chief executive's and senior managers, governance is anchored in the multi-agency age-friendly alliances, supported by broadly representative older peoples' councils engaged as co-design partners.

Previously no local forums existed for senior-level executives to plan collaboratively in order to respond to the challenges and promises of an expanding older adult population. Successful age friendly city and county programmes are now working to create the kinds of communities in which older people live autonomous, independent and valued lives. To date, the local government led age friendly programmes across Ireland have implemented real change in imaginative and cost-effective ways. While health and wellbeing is fundamental to the vision a great deal of the programme has focused on actions and developments in other areas; In creating walkable, attractive and accessible communities and age-friendly spaces, and by introducing actions to address participation and inequality it is intended that people of all ages will be supported to enjoy healthier, more active and connected lives.

This focussed and successful approach, case study participants say, would not have come about without the establishment of a consistent and coordinated programme model. Many agency-based personnel say that the age friendly programme has prompted them to work in new and more collaborative ways leading to more productive working and better outcomes for older people.

Since its establishment as a pilot or demonstrator programme in Co. Louth in 2009 the multi-agency, multi-sectoral programme has had a number of key features which appear to have contributed to its success, including strong leadership at local authority level on the part of the city and county council chief executives, a commitment to thorough city and county wide consultation and the co-design of relevant actions together with older people. Through the age-friendly strategies which have been produced participating agencies have become accountable to each other, and to older people, for the age-friendly actions they take.

Across its six to seven year establishment phase, the age friendly programme experienced a number of challenges to which its leaders had to respond including the effect of the deepening recession to which senior level agency officials were required to prioritise, the increase in the number of national health, housing and quality of life related initiatives to which local authorities were being asked to lead simultaneously, the movement of senior agency officials within and across large organisations and regions which challenged required relationship building, and the wide breadth of domain areas considered as part of the programme approach which can, at times, challenge stakeholder focus.

The experience gathered and lessons learned in developing this programme can provide valuable insight for any sector or agenda item that may be fragmented and complex and in need of a multi-agency, multi-sectoral approach.

In hosting the national age friendly programme office Meath County Council brings together, supports and provides technical guidance to the now 31 local authority led, multi-agency Age Friendly City and County Programmes.

In keeping with good practice and with the goal of continuous improvement and learning in mind Meath County Council sought to develop a case study<sup>1</sup> exploring the role of the multi-agency, multi sectoral age friendly programme in progressing innovation and reform while also capturing the lessons learned during the course of this experience. As well as looking back at challenges experienced the case study sought to identify areas for consideration as the national programme enters its next phase of development.

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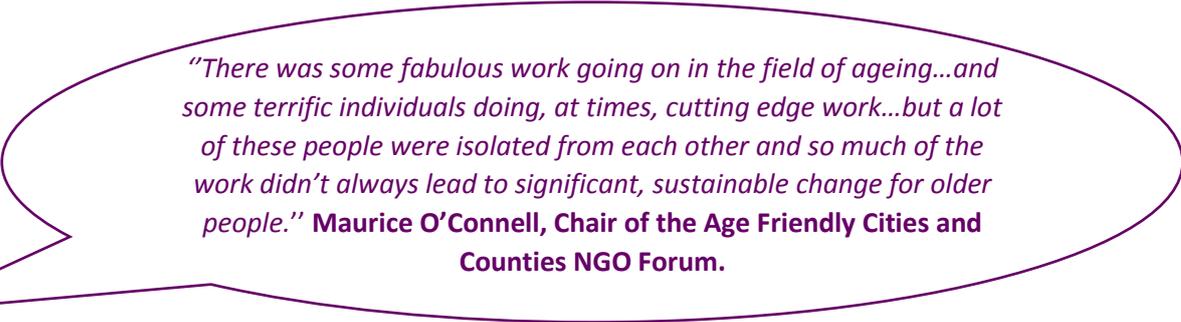
<sup>1</sup> The case study's development was informed through interviews with 28 senior level programme stakeholders as described in Appendix One. Interviews - which generally ranged from one to two hours in length - were semi-structured, addressed a set of agreed priority areas and sought interviewee feedback in relation to their experience of engagement with the programme.

## Background to the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme

The latest Central Statistics Office analysis of the Census returns (2016) shows that the group aged 65 and over in Ireland grew by almost one fifth, 19.1%, since the 2011 Census, making it the fastest growing sector, a faster rate of growth than that experienced in other EU countries. In its *Key Trends 2016* report the Department of Health said life expectancy increased by almost 2½ years in a little over a decade. A century ago it was about 50; today it is almost 77 for men and 82 for women. This trend is set to continue; indeed, it is forecasted that there will be about 20,000 more people living in Ireland over the age of 65 *every year* until 2040.

Ageing in the early part of the 2000's, however, had been a relatively low priority for Government in Ireland. Very limited planning had been undertaken to respond to the expected and significant increase in the older adult population. Older people, as noted by Sean Moynihan CEO of ALONE the housing charity supporting older people, were "often characterised as dependent and a burden on their communities."

For years agencies, NGO's and community groups had been doing some excellent work in the ageing field. Very often, however, the big gap had been the lack of joined up thinking in the sector. One cannot consider health and wellbeing or quality of life unless the issues of transportation, housing design, the built environment and general service delivery are also addressed. The absence, in the early to mid-2000's, of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to Ireland's imminent demographic shift was striking.



*"There was some fabulous work going on in the field of ageing...and some terrific individuals doing, at times, cutting edge work...but a lot of these people were isolated from each other and so much of the work didn't always lead to significant, sustainable change for older people."* **Maurice O'Connell, Chair of the Age Friendly Cities and Counties NGO Forum.**

As the decade progressed, there was growing evidence of an application of additional focus to the field with investment in community support, acute hospital beds and long stay care all being increased. The establishment by government of an Office for Older People in 2008 represented an important step in the development of a government led response to an ageing population. There was growing recognition within government for the need to respond to the inadequate coordination of services. The mid 2000's saw further increased investment in the ageing field. Much of this can be attributed to the targeted funding support provided by The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic). Recognising the field to be weak and fragmented and in looking to support the development of the infrastructure of the ageing sector Atlantic invested in the creation of the Ageing Well Network in 2007.

The primary aim of the Ageing Well Network was to act as a network and think-tank for leaders in the ageing sector in which members could learn from each other and from national and international thinkers and practitioners. The Network set out to explore different approaches to achieving an ambitious vision of an "Ireland that is a great country in which to grow old."

*"Prior to the mid 2000's Ireland didn't really have a field of ageing in the same way that there would have been an established field in children's services. The Ageing Well Network was a think tank and a knowledge sharing community which allowed for considered reflection, brainstorming*

*and new ideas to surface. It played an important and valuable role in building the field.”* **Mary Sutton, Country Director, The Atlantic Philanthropies**

The Ageing Well Networks members were top executives from 75 organisations representing all elements of government, business and civil society. The Network was formed to operate as a think tank for members of the sector to come together and exchange ideas that would benefit all of their work. Its development of six influential position papers, which pointed to best practices across a range of key aspects of ageing and older people, were recognised to be seminal contributions to the National Positive Ageing Strategy which would follow in 2013.

In parallel to the debate, research and exchange of information which was coordinated under the auspices of the Network, the World Health Organization (WHO) was piloting the development of an Age Friendly Cities and Communities model. In 2006, the WHO brought together 33 cities across 22 countries for a project to help determine the key elements of the urban environment that support active and healthy ageing. Dundalk, in Co. Louth, under the leadership of Rodd Bond and the Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), was one of the centres participating in this original WHO initiative on age friendly cities.

Rodd Bond, Director of the Netwell Centre at DkIT, together with Mary Deery of Louth County Council, held countywide meetings with older people asking them to describe what made life easier or more difficult for them across a number of areas. These areas subsequently became the foundation stones for further development of age friendly programmes around the world.

The research, which was based on focus groups with older adults and other stakeholders from across the 33 cities, informed a set of age-friendly city checklists which were framed to help cities and communities evaluate their age-friendliness. The result of the research, ‘The Global Age-friendly Cities Guide,’ also outlined a framework for stimulating local mobilisation efforts for improvement. A fundamental aspect of the approach employed was to include older people as active participants in the process. The guide identifies eight domains of city and community life that might influence the health and quality of life of older people:

1. outdoor spaces and buildings;
2. housing;
3. social participation;
4. transportation;
5. respect and social inclusion;
6. civic participation and employment;
7. communication and information; and
8. community support and health services.

Dundalk’s experience in the WHO global study had caught both the attention and interest of Anne Connolly, Executive Director of the Ageing Well Network, together with a number of its members. Conn Murray, then county manager with Louth County Council, committed to pilot a county wide age friendly programme approach.

*“It was a new agenda. Rodd’s work at town level in Dundalk provided an excellent framework for what would follow. We needed then to apply this at the level of the county and work out together what is an age friendly county...”* **Conn Murray, former County Manager, Louth County Council.**

With the support of the Ageing Well Network and funding provided by Atlantic a pilot age-friendly county programme was developed in County Louth. A range of public services and voluntary organisations – including leaders in housing, health, policing, transportation, continuing education, social welfare and local government – were brought together as part of the pilot programme.

An official launch and first in a series of consultation sessions was held at the Fairways Hotel in Dundalk in November 2008. The launch event provided an opportunity not only to introduce the programme to the community but for consultation across the eight WHO defined age-friendly themes. Participants, as part of the consultation, were encouraged to think of creative ways in which the county could respond to the challenges identified.

Informed by the consultation the age friendly county strategy which followed prioritised the implementation of actions in Louth to help older people feel safe and stay living for longer in their own homes, have walkable access to public and other essential services and to stay socially connected.

Actions promoted as part of the Louth and subsequent age friendly county strategies very often involved low or no cost changes, such as the development of registers of reliable age friendly contractors who can provide basic, cost effective home maintenance services; the provision of advice for older people about how to make their homes safer and the development of district registers of older people living alone as a means of supporting engagement by community Gardaí. These practical changes, however, had a significant effect on the quality of older people's lives.

The demonstrator age friendly county programme in Louth provided a blueprint or template for others to follow. The Ageing Well Network, with funding support from Atlantic and the endorsement of Conn Murray together with a number of key local government officials, was tasked with supporting an extension of the programme approach to additional local authority areas.

A common template, involving a 12 step approach, was agreed which included the conduct of a baseline study of current service provision; establishment of an alliance of relevant stakeholders; facilitation of a county or city wide consultation which was to surface up issues of need and appropriate responses; formation of an older people's council through which local older people can raise issues of importance, identify priority areas of need and inform the decision-making process of the city or county age-friendly initiative; and implementation of a strategy to address the issues identified by older people in the local area.

As of 2016, all 31 local authority areas had formally adopted the age friendly programme thus representing a full national roll out of the model. In each of the programme areas an alliance was established – a high level cross-sector group, most often chaired by the local authority Chief Executive, whose member agencies form an overarching strategic partnership to develop and oversee the realisation of a 3 to 5-year age friendly strategy. Through the strategy, participating service providers and businesses become accountable to each other, and to older people, for the age-friendly actions they take in trying to address the issues identified by older people in the local area. In parallel older people's councils are formed to offer a citizen or service user perspective in monitoring strategy implementation.

This programme extension – from demonstrator site in Louth to a full national rollout – was supported by a core programme team working initially under the auspices of the Ageing Well Network and subsequently by the Dublin City Council hosted Age Friendly Ireland. More recently programme oversight has transferred to a formal shared service hosted by Meath County Council.

The ongoing roll-out of the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme provided further means to trial the ideas and range of good practices surfaced through the Ageing Well Networks activities while also offering an evolving infrastructure to operationalise both the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) and realise the vision of the Network of an Ireland “as a great country in which to grow old.”

The programme in Ireland has been at the forefront of age friendly programme development at a global level with some well-placed commentators recognising it as one of the more strongly positioned programmes;

*"It demonstrated its value very early on. With all 31 local authorities now actively engaged it gives the programme a real sense of legitimacy...Now that it has achieved a full national rollout it's positioned as a programme of real national significance."* **Jim Daly, Minister of State with responsibility for Mental Health and Older People, Department of Health**

*"We cannot underestimate what has been achieved over a six- or seven-year timeline. This is a gold standard programme. There would be few programmes in the world that have enjoyed the same level of success. A phenomenal programme."* **Jane Barrett, Secretary General, International Federation on Ageing.**

In moving from a single county demonstrator site in County Louth in 2009 through to a full extension to all 31 local authority areas in 2016 programme coordination has moved through a number of iterations; initially coordinated under the umbrella of the Ageing Well Network from 2009 through to the networks closure in 2013, to establishment of Age Friendly Ireland as a quasi-independent intermediary hosted by Dublin City Council across 2014 to 2016, through to an embedded shared service function established in mid-2017 and operated by Meath County Council on behalf of the local government network.

A number of key figures which have included Brendan Kenny of Dublin City Council, Jackie Maguire of Meath County Council, Conn Murray of Limerick City and County Council and Stephanie O'Keeffe of the HSE, together with others, have continued to provide oversight and direction for the programme as it has evolved from demonstrator site status through to full adoption across the network of 31 city and county councils.

A core programme team, now led by Catherine McGuigan in Meath County Council, has provided ongoing leadership and technical support for the now national network of programmes as they work to improve the quality of life of older people throughout Ireland.

In WHO's own words "Age-friendly environments foster healthy and active ageing. They enable older people to: age safely in a place that is right for them; be free from poverty; continue to develop personally; and to contribute to their communities while retaining autonomy, health and dignity." Significantly, WHO proposes that "because older people know best what they need, they are at the centre of any effort to create a more age friendly world."

## Key features of the age friendly programme model

The Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme has a number of features – some common to other multi agency, multi sectoral programmes here in Ireland and others again which may distinguish the programme – together which have been recognised by many of the participants as being critical to its successful development and implementation. These features include:

- **Supporting holistic approach together with local focus and application:** For years policy relating to older people dealt almost exclusively with health and social care issues, focussing on burden and costs. The age friendly approach recognises that social, economic and environmental factors are interconnected. The adoption of the WHO eight domain age-friendly model helped to broaden the view of ageing beyond health while also providing a perspective of older people as contributors to rather than burdens on society.

*“I was the only spatial environmentalist involved in the Vancouver study when the majority of participants were gerontologists...which was interesting when one considers the domains focused on and prioritised so many of the important environmental issues...housing, building and outdoor spaces which impact so much on how we live our lives.”* **Rodd Bond, Director of the Netwell Centre, Dundalk Institute of Technology**

The eight-domain framework provided a means to open up conversations about the lived experience of ageing while the establishment of older people’s councils offered a new platform for older people to speak and influence the structures and working approach of key statutory agencies. That the framework was inspired by a WHO programme of work introduced much needed credibility and endorsement while also paving the way for a consistent application across new programme areas.

*“The WHO model recognises that very important fact...where we live impacts on how we live...while the city and county approach speak to the principle of subsidiarity which holds that important social and political issues should be dealt with at the most immediate level that is consistent with their resolution...This encouraged that important sense of local ownership and responsibility...pride even.”* **Sean O’Riordain, Chairman, Public Policy Advisors Network Ireland**

The framework informed the subsequent decision to put in place an alliance or high-level cross sector group which saw member agencies form overarching strategic partnerships. Such a multi-agency approach was credited, by many case study participants, with speeding up implementation.

*“The programme showed that a multiplicity of facets needs to be addressed...It’s about healthy and active ageing and thus a holistic approach involving both social and economic aspects was required...an extensive range of stakeholders had to be involved. The alliances became relevant to foster the diverse stakeholder views and to lever the various age friendly responses which were required.”* **Brian MacCraith, President, Dublin City University**

Over time, and where the multi-agency approach has worked well, the establishment of the alliance has provided stakeholders with opportunity to share skills, pool resources while also addressing shared challenges in areas where there is mutual need such as housing with care.

*“Neither the local authority nor the HSE or even any single government department could tackle this significant issue (housing with support) by working in isolation...The age friendly model showed that we needed to work not only together as agencies but also together with local older people so that we can respond to what is actually needed.”* **Maurice O’Connell, Chair of the Age Friendly Cities & Counties NGO Forum**

- **Leadership and political commitment:** City and County Councils have agreed to lead the age friendly programmes at local authority level with initial programme adoption being formally ratified by the elected members and a significant majority of the multi-agency alliances continuing to be chaired by the local authority chief executives.



*“It is one of the best, if not the best programmes I have seen in my 40-year career...It is probably the best example I have seen of local government taking on such strong national leadership.”* **Jack Keyes, former County Manager, Cavan County Council**

Interestingly, the programme has been adopted without a formal mandate or requirement being imposed on local authorities. Instead, local authorities have, in signing the Dublin Declaration on Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in Europe (2013), committed themselves to a set of core programme values and principles.

Many of the participants indicated that political leadership has played a key role in embedding the age friendly programme and its underpinning principles within both local and mainstream structures. The Dublin Declaration, developed in collaboration with the WHO and International Federation on Ageing has proved to be a strong, supportive point of political engagement for the programme. The Declaration was, in particular, recognised for providing a visible and tangible commitment on the part of the elected councils to the programme and has supported alliances in maintaining an appropriate focus at a time of significant competing demands.



*“It’s very important that the programme is on the radar of the elected members...It can’t just be seen as a function of the executive...The Declaration provides a formal link back to the elected members and we now see alliances maintaining relationships with Council members through annual presentations at Council and engagement with the relevant Strategic Policy Committees and Corporate Policy Groups...”* **Catherine McGuigan, Chief Officer, Age Friendly Ireland | Meath County Council.**

Political engagement has been further reinforced through the provision, by Age Friendly Ireland, of training for over 230 local elected representatives, representing all 31 local authorities, to support their engagement with and subsequent implementation of the Action Plan for Housing.

- **The right people with the right attitudes and the ability to take action:** Bringing about real ‘on the ground’ change for older adults would have to involve those local agencies providing key local services. Age friendly alliances operating across the country involve senior leaders from key agencies, such as the local authority, the HSE, An Garda Síochána, Chambers of Commerce, third level institutions, and others who have sufficient influence and resources to develop and deliver ambitious city and county strategies.

“The more complex, intractable problems, of which ageing is most certainly one can’t be solved be solved by agencies working on their own. There is a need for a number of agencies to be around the table. The (city and county) alliances have provided for a multi stakeholder forum which supports shared ownership. Under the local authority’s leaderships these forums have been much better placed to support effective change and to speed up on the ground implementation.” **Anne Connolly, former Director, Ageing Well Network**

Many of the alliance members, and particularly so those within the front runner county programmes, had a reform focussed approach. Enthusiastic to support the initiative such members viewed the programme as an opportunity to innovate and reform.

*“Not having a mandate was somewhat liberating. We weren’t mired in reporting requirements. We could try new things...things that could make a practical difference to the lives of the people in the communities that we serve. This focus on innovation and the practical has, I’m sure, played a role in keeping senior leaders at the table.”*  
**Seamus Neely, Chief Executive, Donegal County Council**

It is known that multi agency working is not easy. Effective collaboration has been instrumental in supporting successful age friendly city and county programmes to effect meaningful change. Strong and skilful leadership has been critical in securing commitment from the most senior managers of the agencies on the alliance – such commitment has proved to be a core foundation in building and sustaining a healthy programme.

“The age friendly programme has been one of if not the most successful in this respect. It has provided an excellent example in both vision and leadership. Programmes are much easier to control and manage when they are tightly framed but the local authority, while taking on a strong leadership role, has cultivated a sense of shared ownership...both with the other agencies and the communities which they jointly support. That demands a level of risk taking on the part of the local authority but also the skill to execute it well.” **Stephanie O’Keeffe, National Director, Strategic Planning & Transformation, Health Service Executive**

Such shared ownership can, it would appear, be built over time but clearly needs some ‘up-front’ investment to bring it about.

“We had to do a lot of engagement work with the agencies and particularly so with the statutory bodies to get them hooked, to get them to buy into the concept of multi-agency working and then to commit in a pragmatic way to doing things together that would make a difference for older people across the county.” **Conn Murray, former County Manager, Louth County Council.**

This sense of shared ownership was referred to by several of the participants. So too was the value of the ‘creative space’ which such a dynamic has introduced. Once again, skilful ‘soft’ leadership was credited with creating such a dynamic.

“You need to be creative...open within your area and encourage other people to also be creative and open before you can find solutions. The age friendly programme offered us a way to organise a shared agenda. Most importantly it gave us space to collaborate and engage in creative problem solving. That took trust (on the part of the partners) but it also required skilful leadership.” **Rodd Bond, Director of the Netwell Centre, Dundalk Institute of Technology**

- **Older people being central to the programme:** Strategies published to date have been firmly based on the expressed views and priorities of local older people. An older people’s council has been established as part of each city or county programme. These are intended to be representative of the diversity of the local older adult population and are, typically, tasked with the role of offering a citizen or service user perspective in monitoring the development and implementation of the age friendly strategies.

In reflecting back on the dynamic which existed prior to the adoption of the age friendly programme some well-placed stakeholders offered the following perspectives:



*“There was a sense that other groups were better connected to the decision makers. While the doors weren’t closed at all there was a sense that it was difficult to get access and that older people were less of a priority. The age friendly programme managed to put older people more firmly on the agenda of key decision makers. **Bob Gilbert, Chair, Cavan Older Peoples Council***

“There was a very active and successful social inclusion focus ongoing within Cavan. Older people were named within the Equality Act but not much attention was paid to them...There was almost an anonymity to this key group. You have to positively discriminate or intervene to address such instances of social inclusion.” **Jack Keyes, former County Manager, Cavan County Council**

“That was the big success of the age friendly programme. It created much needed awareness of a silent majority.” **Eugene Cummins, Chief Executive, Roscommon County Council**

Successful alliances have nurtured positive working dynamics with the older people’s councils. Such alliances have actively engaged older people’s council representatives as members of the high-level cross sector group and directly involved them in monitoring the implementation of the age friendly strategy. In helping to position the voice of the older person securely within key local consultative networks local authority partners have also supported older people’s councils to become recognised link groups within the local Public Participation Networks. As Maurice O’Connell reminds us; “The potential for the programme to be truly transformative lies in the degree to which it is led or jointly led by older people.”

Front runner county programmes positioned older people as being central to any strategic planning which would be undertaken to improve their lives. Rather than viewing older people as a drain on agency budgets, this new thinking firmly positioned older people as a resource for their communities and economies.

This dynamic or synergy - when it works well – was credited with being both cost saving and life enhancing for everyone involved. The role of the local authority was recognised as being one of a catalyst whose key role it is to bring these two groups together as part of a solution focussed endeavour.

Enabling the direct and active involvement of older people in local decision making has been an important value or principle which has underpinned the work of many of the city and county

programmes to date. In areas where it has worked well programme leaders would appear to have recognised older people as powerful agents of change.

“The public sector approach is often about the problem but the people who experience the problem will very often have the best solution.” **Emer Coveney, Age Friendly Programme Manager, Co. Cavan.**

‘Trust’ would appear to be key in securing that successful and critical dynamic between the Older peoples council and alliance; trust that the older person’s voice is being listened to and taken seriously. So too, the need to keep older people informed both on programme related progress and, perhaps as or even more importantly, roadblocks that may be encountered.

“We didn’t want to take part in a talking shop or some kind of box ticking exercise. If that was the kind of dynamic that was created (between alliance and older people’s council) it would have been very difficult to keep older people at the table. They would see it as a waste of time. Instead, we built up a very honest and trusting relationship with key people like Emer (Coveney, the Council’s age friendly programme manager), the County Manager and the Chief Super (An Garda Síochána)” **Bob Gilbert, Chair, Cavan Older Peoples Council**

- **A shared vision with attainable and measurable goals:** Successful city and county age friendly strategies have focused on priorities identified through comprehensive and inclusive consultation with older people.

“This was driven by the bottom up lived experience of older people...issues that were causing them difficulty or even trauma...very often simple things like the bus pulling directly up to the hospital door or the length of time available for crossing safely at pedestrian lights. For that reason, it was very real and grounded. It wasn’t an agency driven agenda. That’s what made it stand out.” **Mary Sutton, Country Director, The Atlantic Philanthropies**

Those city and county programmes enjoying success have focussed on providing opportunities for older people to challenge and influence the development of the strategies during the drafting process. Indeed, the need to remain ‘true’ to the voice of local older people was identified by programme leaders early on as a key foundation stone for the programme. Programme leaders in Louth recognised the need to re-develop their first draft strategy on foot of candid feedback presented by older people.

“We thought we were well on our way to getting the strategy launched when we hosted a consultative meeting with older people to get their thoughts on the (first) draft. We came away (from that meeting) with the clear message that we hadn’t been listening properly to what they were telling us. The draft was very much based around what the agencies thought they could bring...We went away and re-drafted it to be much more focussed on the older persons voice and the areas which they prioritised. That was a key learning and stood us and the programme in good stead.” **Conn Murray, former County Manager, Louth County Council.**

Strategies which have been successfully implemented have tended to include clear, measurable goals which make it relatively easy for those engaged to see if progress has actually been achieved. Committed city and county programmes have usually initiated annual or biennial review and assessment processes led by the Alliance. As Emer Coveney noted;

“Most meetings contained some element of review. We all wanted to be realistic...not to overpromise and to get done what we had committed to do. Actions in respect of the built environment were very tangible...we could all see the changes introduced. Anything that wasn’t achieved would then become a priority focus for the next period. That (process of review) kept us all focussed and made sure we were heading in the right direction.”

- **Responsive to demand for creative approaches:** Louth’s launch of its programme in 2009 coincided with the height of the global economic crash and subsequent recession - a time when

agency budgets had been cut back, in some cases severely. Very few resources were available to the statutory and non-statutory programme partners to support initiatives which required financial investment. The partners within the alliance therefore demanded creative and innovative responses in a bid to achieve more with less resources. As Rodd Bond noted "we leaned heavily on the environment where there was not only an ambition but a very real requirement to bring about practical change without the need for significant budgetary investment. We all became very inventive...there was a need to as money was in short supply."

- **Working together to bring about system and environmental change - rather than focusing on an advocacy capacity:** Senior level agency representatives were invited rather than being 'mandated' or required to join the alliance. Programme founders were intent on building a positive solution focussed environment where members would join together with older people as part of a working partnership. While accountability in respect of commitments made was encouraged alliance members together with older people sought out ways to work 'with each other' rather than engage in advocacy or potential adversarial relationships. 'Partnership' and 'collaboration' were reinforced softly, albeit continually, as key underpinning values.

"We wanted to keep everyone...older people and agency rep's...together at the table. We didn't want to soft soap anything but at the same time we didn't want anyone taking unnecessary pot shots at agency heads just because they were there at the table. That commitment to 'partnership'...understanding the constraints that everyone was working under was important. The respectful tone and discourse which followed helped us to think creatively and kept people at the table." **Rodd Bond, Director of the Netwell Centre, Dundalk Institute of Technology**

- **Creating issue focussed working groups relevant to alliance member interests:** Often, much of the significant work and progress within front runner county programmes took place within smaller working groups which emerged out of the consultations with older people and the interests and abilities of the members to be able to respond to those challenges.
- **A life-course orientation:** The concept of universal design has according to many case study participants, been core to much of the process. A city or community which enhances life for older people will invariably improve the mobility and independence of people with disabilities. Families will experience less stress when their older members have the community support and health services which they need. Safer neighbourhoods allow children; young families and older people partake in physical, leisure and social activities with confidence. Whole communities can benefit from the participation of older people in voluntary or paid work while the local economy profits from the patronage of older adult consumers. The adoption of a life-course orientation was noted, in this respect by many of the participants:

"We were anxious that the age friendly approach would not disenfranchise or disadvantage other groups. The programme recognises that if you get it right for this group so much will fall into place for other cohorts within the community. So many of the issues surfaced up by older people tended to impact on all members of the community. That whole of community ethos was built in early on. This is a whole of community initiative and not just about the current cohort of older people."

**Annette Barr-Jordan, Age Friendly Programme Manager, Westmeath County Council**

- **Supportive oversight structures hosted by Age Friendly Ireland:** In coordinating the national age friendly programme Age Friendly Ireland, as an intermediary, brings together, supports and provides technical guidance to the 31 multi agency programmes. Structures have been established at national level to oversee this process.

A National Advisory Group provides governance, oversight and advice in relation to the overall programme achieving its goals and objectives. Its membership includes chief and deputy chief executives from a number of local authorities, a national director from the Health Service Executive, assistant secretaries from the Departments of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Health, Rural and Community Development and Transport, Tourism and Sport; an Assistant

Commissioner from An Garda Síochána and the Chief Executive from Chambers Ireland. In supporting the improvement and mainstreaming of the age friendly programme the National Advisory Group plays an important role in providing strategic guidance where local implementation and best practices can influence national policy on a cross departmental basis. In particular the national advisory group is now increasingly recognised as a vehicle for raising priority issues which may be beyond the scope of local alliances to address.

- **Affiliation to the WHO Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities:** The WHO established a Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities in 2010 in order to foster the exchange of experience and mutual learning between cities and communities worldwide. Those eligible to join the global network must demonstrate their capacity to convene mechanisms for inter-sectoral collaboration, conduct baseline assessments and develop, implement and monitor action plans aimed at making the cities and communities under their sphere of influence more age-friendly. It is anticipated that all 31 local authority led programmes will be affiliated to the global network in early 2019.
- **Development of tools, practice guides, regional and national networks, and spotlighting events** to support knowledge transfer, information exchange and to promote the scaling up of age friendly actions which had proven to produce successful quality of life gains for older people at local level. Local authority programme managers working with members of the Age Friendly Ireland team helped to both develop and facilitate a number of knowledge sharing networks, events and resources in this respect – among which included;
  - Forum of chairs of age friendly city and county alliances which brought together those local authority chief executives who chair alliances with the small number of independent chairs where these were in place. The forum, chaired initially by Jack Keyes, chair of the Cavan age friendly alliance played an important role in promoting many of the innovative age friendly actions which had been trialled through the programme and in embedding key age friendly principles within relevant local authority planning frameworks.
  - A national network of chairs of Older Peoples Councils.
  - Supportive regional networks for city and county council-based programme managers to facilitate the sharing of good practice, problem solving and further support relevant cross county collaborations and responses.
  - A national age friendly website and quarterly e-newsletter which hosts a growing compendium of age friendly practices, tools, guides, templates and methodologies to support the city and county-based programme practitioners.
  - In addition to a series of technical guides, toolkits and research studies addressing topics and fields such as programme set up and design, relevant academic literature, programme practices, consultation methods, evaluation, walkability, the built environment, age friendly business and age friendly housing programme officials have developed a series of short practice related videos in order to bring the age friendly experience ‘more to life’.
  - Age friendly recognition and achievement awards ceremonies, with the first such event hosted in Cavan in 2015, provided opportunity to celebrate and recognise some of the innovative and creative age friendly initiatives which have been introduced across the country. Seven categories of awards, each of which were aligned to the WHO themes, featured as part of the open call for submissions and subsequent judging by an independent, expert panel.

## Key milestones: A timeline for programme development in Ireland

	Dundalk's participation in WHO led global research. Establishment of Vancouver Protocol, 2006
Publication of WHO Global Age-friendly Cities Guide, 2007	Establishment of the Ageing Well Network, 2007
Launch of the Louth Age friendly county programme, 2009	Launch of the Kilkenny, Clare and Kildare Age friendly county programmes, 2010
Launch of the Cavan, Monaghan, Meath, Fingal, Carlow, Galway, Westmeath and South Dublin Age friendly county programmes, 2011	Launch of Dublin Declaration on Age-friendly Cities and signing by representatives of 38 cities. Dublin, 2011
1 <sup>st</sup> International Conference on Age-friendly cities, Dublin, 2011	Launch of the north east regional structure (AFRANET), 2012
Launch of the Dublin City, Waterford and Leitrim Age friendly programmes, 2013	Ceremony supporting signing of Dublin Declaration on Age-friendly cities by 36 cities. Dublin, 2013
Launch of the National Positive Ageing Strategy, 2013	Closure of the Ageing Well Network, 2013
Establishment of Age Friendly Ireland, hosted by Dublin City Council, 2014.	Launch of the Limerick, Mayo, Donegal, Cork County, Longford, Sligo, Laois, Cork City and Dún Laoghaire Age friendly programmes, 2014
Ceremony supporting signing of Dublin Declaration on Age-friendly cities by 10 local authorities marking full engagement by all of Ireland's 31 authorities with the Declaration, 2014.	Launch of the Wicklow, Tipperary, Roscommon, Wexford, Kerry and Offaly Age friendly programmes, 2015
International Conference on Age friendly environments, Dublin, 2016	National Age friendly programme office hosted by Meath County Council, 2017

## Accomplishments

While none of the case study participants described the programme as the “finished article” it was recognised by many and, in the words of Margaret Mulligan of Roscommon’s Older People’s Council, for “achieving an amazing amount in such a short period of time.” The following featured amongst the accomplishments achieved;

### Successfully extending a non-mandated programme to a full national roll out

From the launch of the demonstrator programme in Co. Louth and a growing interest amongst senior stakeholders to support further roll out of the model the age friendly programme was successfully extended to all 31 local authority areas across an eight-year term 2009 – 2016.

In each of the programme areas an age friendly alliance was established to develop and oversee the realisation of a three to five-year age friendly strategy which set out to address the issues identified by older people in the local area. In parallel Older People’s Councils (OPC’s) were formed to offer a citizen or service user perspective in monitoring the implementation of the strategies.

A regional approach was adopted by the Ageing Well Network in supporting programme extension with Kilkenny, Clare and Kildare launching their respective county programmes in 2010. A further 11 city and county programmes were launched with the support of the Atlantic funded Network ahead of its pre-agreed closure at end 2013.

With both momentum and growing evidence base building the pace of programme adoption accelerated again under the stewardship of the Dublin City Council hosted Age Friendly Ireland programme office. During this three-year term the programme was launched across the remaining 16 local authority areas. Case study commentators, interestingly, attached considerable emphasis to the City Councils role in hosting the Age Friendly Ireland office across this period and the connect which this facilitated with the wider local government network.

“The Ageing Well Network achieved a lot...much of it through the dynamism and sheer hard work of people like Anne Connolly and Catherine McGuigan. Champions... (such as) ...Conn Murray played a critical role at that point. The decision by DCC to host the programme in 2014 positioned it in a very different way...It provided the programme with a level of endorsement...further credibility...and enabled the AFI team to connect more effectively with local government and senior officials across the relevant agencies.” **Maurice O’Connell, Chair of the Age Friendly Cities & Counties NGO Forum**

“The conversations (involved in positioning the programme agenda) were now increasingly peer to peer. If embedding the agenda within local government across the long term was the ambition then Brendan Kenny’s decision for DCC to host the programme office was key in bringing this about.” **Jack Keyes, former County Manager, Cavan County Council**

“This (2013 and the closure of the Ageing Well Network) was a very delicate point in the programmes development...While an increasing number of counties were committed to running the programme at a local level there weren’t many agencies at all who would have been disposed to taking on new functions or teams...when austerity was at full tilt. Brendan (Kenny, DCC) certainly stepped up to the plate when committing to host the programme office across this period.” **Rodd Bond, Director of the Netwell Centre, Dundalk Institute of Technology**

## Extension of the Dublin Declaration to all 31 local authority areas

Modelled on the Barcelona Declaration (1995) the Dublin Declaration on Age Friendly Cities and Communities in Europe (2013) was developed on a collaborative basis by the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Network of Age-friendly Cities, the Ageing Well Network, and the International Federation on Ageing following a detailed consultation with international experts in the field of age friendly cities and with local authorities. The aim of the Declaration is to commit signatories to a range of actions that are broadly based on the eight domains identified by the WHO in its Global Age-friendly Cities Guide. The Declaration expresses the clear commitment of political leaders of cities and communities to strengthen and champion action to make their communities more age friendly and highlights the need for ongoing improvement across a range of interrelated domains of older people's lives. It commits signatories to undertake a continuous cycle of improvement through a planning process supported by participation in the WHO's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities.

The 2014 joint hosting, by Dublin City Council together with Age Friendly Ireland, of a civic ceremony in Dublin's City Hall saw the signing of the Declaration by 10 local authorities. This occasion marked the full engagement by all of Ireland's 31 authorities with the Declaration. The Taoiseach (prime minister), on the occasion of the 2014 signing described the landmark as "a declaration of Ireland's united commitment to creating an age friendly State."

Various signings of the global Declaration, the official custodian of which is Dublin City Council, have brought the total signatories to more than 120 including a host of international cities such as New York, Mexico, Manchester, Edinburgh and Seoul.

## City and county programmes employed as test beds for innovation and subsequent mainstreaming of successful initiatives

The age friendly alliances have in the main, focussed, on implementing change in a range of imaginative and cost-effective ways. The majority of ideas and actions which have been set as part of the various city and county strategies have been united by one principle; the voice of older people as the driver for required change at local level. As noted by Rodd Bond this active involvement by older people in shaping the local agendas for action has been "a pre-condition for success not an outcome of it."

In addition to providing a framework to pioneer innovation the now national network of city and county programmes has provided a means to scale up these innovative age friendly actions across a wider geographic network. The track record of actions now includes home support services for older people, enhancement of public spaces, age-friendly transport services, senior enterprise and age-friendly business programmes together with a number of pilot and demonstrator age friendly housing models. The age friendly shared service office hosted by Meath County Council is currently in the process of cataloguing the various age friendly initiatives which are being supported across the country. An early stage directory of practices features close to 500 age friendly initiatives supported across the country. The following list provides a selective snapshot of collaborative initiatives supported by a range of programme partners across the eight domains:

- **Transport services** to hospitals, primary care clinics and shopping centres; customised bus routes, community car schemes, shuttle and lift services to provide access to in and out-patient services, support independent living and older people in staying socially and civically connected.
- **Alternative housing models** so that older people can age comfortably in the community they belong to. The Dublin City age friendly programme is currently supporting, together with senior officials from the Departments of Housing and Health, the development of a prototype model of 'housing with support'. The model is to feature a c. 60 home development together with a range of appropriate wrap around supports required to enable older people to remain living in their

communities. The experience of the exemplar 'Great Northern Haven' housing model developed by a coalition of key stakeholders at Barrack Street, Dundalk has informed much of the work conducted by the Dublin city group to date.

- **Care coordination systems** such as the pioneering Cúltaca model. Developed by Netwell CASALA, a joint venture between DkIT, the Health Service Executive of Ireland and Louth County Council. The Cúltaca or service brokers work directly with older people across Dundalk in integrating available formal and informal systems of care in order to maximise older people's quality of life and sustain independence and control.
- **District registers of isolated, older people** which have been developed, with consent, to support effective engagement and emergency planning on the part of City and County Councils, An Garda Síochána and the HSE with frail or isolated older people so as to ensure that they have the confidence and ability to age in place.
- **Peer to peer Garda trained home safety audit programmes** so that isolated older adults can receive advice about how to make their homes safer and be less fearful of crime.
- **Walkability programmes** enabling local authority planners and engineers to join together with local older people to identify and address the quality and continuity of pavements, number, safety and timing of pedestrian crossings and other barriers to mobility across the public realm thereby increasing older people's facility, confidence and motivation to enjoy more active and connected lives.
- **Training programme for architects, planners and engineers** across the local authority network on age friendly housing and public realm design so as to facilitate these key professionals in becoming more 'age aware' and support older people through appropriate planning and design to live independently for longer. This programme has been made possible through the provision of technical and resource supports on the part of both the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design and the Housing Agency.
- **Accessible information systems** provided via 'one stop shop' kiosks, Directories of Services and simplified local authority application systems on housing options, grants, and services.
- **Physical activity and healthy eating training and education programmes** to support more active lifestyles, improve health status and lower rates of hospital admissions amongst older adults.
- **Outreach, befriending and intergenerational skills exchange programmes** to provide opportunities for older people to play an active part in social and civic networks.
- **Demonstrator age friendly hospital programmes** to support hospitals in identifying and adhering to age-friendly standards which contribute to their more 'age-aware' and efficient running. Guided by both the World Health Organizations (WHO) Age Friendly Principles (2004) and key tenets of the National Care of the Elderly Programme (NCPOP, 2012) Beaumont Hospital in north County Dublin has played a lead role in piloting such an initiative.

Pilot approaches on the part of a number of hospitals across the country have confirmed that the pursuit of an age friendly experience within a hospital environment does not just involve the creation of a more easily accessible hospital - through infrastructure and readable signage - but rather an organisation-wide culture change which is required to fully embrace the development of a hospital system and environment that adequately supports and promotes 'age friendly care'.

- **Age friendly business recognition schemes** introduced across local authority areas in partnership with Local Economic Offices and Chambers of Commerce with now more than 750 businesses participating nationwide. Such programmes have involved consulting with older customers and the introduction of very often simple changes to make participating businesses easier to find, enter, move around and make purchases. To date participating businesses have included butchers, hairdressers, banks, credit unions, clothing shops, gyms, hotels, restaurants, bars and taxi services.

- **Age friendly senior enterprise programmes and senior mentors' panels** which have sought to support the transfer of skills and experience of older adults to new and would be business owners and leaders.
- **Age friendly towns programmes** which have supported the introduction of a range of practical actions at town and village level across participating areas which include:
  - Introduction of benches across streets, parks and public spaces, with suitable back supports to give older adults a chance to rest
  - Level pavements, free from obstruction to reduce trip hazards and the fear of falling
  - Traffic lights that provide older people with sufficient time to cross at busy intersections
  - Bus stops in safe locations, with secure shelters, seating and access to relevant information and timetables
  - Public services such as restaurants, hotels, post-offices, banks, hairdressers and supermarkets who adopt relevant 'age-friendly' principles and practices such as good signage and acoustics, suitable seating, managed queuing and product and price information that can be read easily
  - Text alerts, pendant alarms and safety information talks to support older people in feeling safer and more secure in their own homes.
  - IT training, community gardens, men's sheds and age friendly exercise programmes.

The age friendly programme would appear to be increasingly recognised as a driver of innovation in supports for older people with a range of public sector bodies including local government, the HSE and Gardaí actively using the programme as a test bed to support the roll out of a range of initiatives.

### **Supporting older people to remain at home**

OPRAH or 'Older People Remaining at Home' was an action research community-based initiative designed to help older people to stay living in their homes for longer, avoid unnecessary hospitalisations and admissions to nursing homes.

Currently, many older people who need support services of various kinds have little option but to move into residential care, due to the under-development of community-based services and the inconsistency of provision across the country. In 2013, the Older People Remaining at Home (OPRAH) action research project set out to pilot an integrated approach to enable older people at risk of nursing home admission to remain living at home. The initiative required the collaboration of key statutory, voluntary and private agencies across the four project sites. The support co-ordinators introduced across the four sites worked with a cohort of older people to ensure that, upon discharge from hospital or when actively considering a move to long stay care, older people could receive a full range of personalised health and social supports necessary for them to continue living in at home. The four sites were located in communities already participating in the age friendly programme, which meant that many of the working relationships needed for this initiative were already established.

The action research project successfully illuminated a number of systemic barriers to change and the considerable barriers often experienced by older people in identifying, accessing and managing the complex range of services needed to support successful independent living. OPRAH framed a vision for the future of community-based supports for older people. Its recommendations for how to realise it, stem, according to Sean Moynihan of ALONE, from the project's "demonstration of a way of providing support services which can be adapted to suit people's individual needs" as they grow older thereby maximising their independence and health outcomes.

## **Age friendly housing research**

With the support of the European Commission Age Friendly Ireland was facilitated to review a range of assistive living technologies and social Interventions employed across a number of good practice Irish and European housing models for older adults. Reports produced on foot of this review have been credited with informing a number of key housing policies and programmes across the country.

## **Positioning of age friendly principles within key policy documents both nationally and locally**

Informed by programme experience, and in particular the lived experience of older people as surfaced through the ongoing city and county-based consultation processes, the age friendly programme office has been invited to develop a range of submissions for key policy documents both at national and local levels. Such submissions have reflected on a range of important issues which affect the lives of older people while also proposing solutions to respond to their articulated needs. Policy documents which have formally adopted recognised age friendly principles and commitments Include:

- An Garda Síochána Older Person Strategy (2010)
- National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013)
- National Library Strategy: Public Libraries. A five-year strategy (2013)
- Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (2016)
- HSE National Service Plan (2016)
- Action Plan for Rural Development (2017)
- Project 2040, National Development Plan 2018 – 2027
- Project 2040, National Planning Framework
- Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP's) with city and county alliances listed as supporting or lead implementing partner in 27 of the 31 LECPs.
- Local authority Corporate Plans with age friendly objectives defined within no less than 21 of the 31 City and County Council Corporate Plans.
- City/County Development Plans. The policies of each local authority are wide ranging and will impact on older people in many aspects. Arguably the most critical relate to planning policy, housing, urban design and connectivity. The age friendly programme is currently engaged in timeline-based reviews of the development plans across the local authorities so that an age friendly orientation can be included within these key plans.

## **Counties and cities increasingly recognised as key reference points for collection and dissemination of national data and intelligence on older people's health and wellbeing**

As part of a collaborative programme of work involving the Department of Health, the HSE, Atlantic and Age Friendly Ireland the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI) was developed to support a greater focus on the monitoring and promoting of older people's health and wellbeing.

In addition to the development of a set of national indicators on positive ageing, HaPAI has supported the development of 21 city and county baseline-profile positive ageing reports – each of which has been informed by the conduct of c. 500 household-based interviews with older people.

Such city and county positive ageing reports are now recognised for their value in informing more evidence-based decision making, prioritisation and allocation of resources on the part of the age friendly programmes and their member agencies.

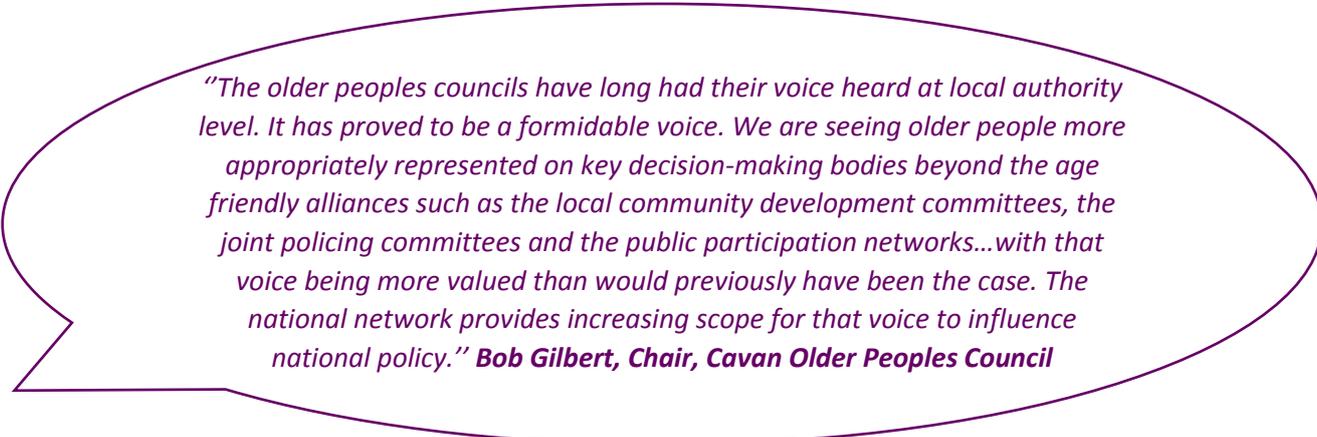
“So much of our second age friendly county strategy was informed by the HaPAI data. It gave us new insights in terms of priority areas that needed to be addressed and a baseline to track progress against.” **Emer Coveney, Age Friendly Programme Manager, Cavan County Council**

### **Older People’s Councils increasingly recognised as the authentic voice of older people within the rollout of the NPAS**

Age Friendly Ireland in its role as an intermediary has facilitated the establishment of a national network of older people’s councils whose membership is made up of all chairs of the city and county based older people’s councils. The purpose of the network is to provide a platform for skill sharing and to surface priority issues relating to policy or practice where resolution may go beyond city or county boundaries.

This national network of city and county based older people’s councils, although formative, would appear to be increasingly well placed to give effect to the stated policy ambition for older people to have a ‘bottom-up’ role in monitoring the implementation of national strategy and in raising local issues of importance.

Together with the HSE’s Quality & Patient Safety Division the age friendly programme co-facilitated an annual series of ‘listening meetings’ with older people’s councils. Such meetings provided opportunity for the HSE to meet directly with older people and to hear their experiences of health care services both locally and nationally. Reports produced have covered a broad range of issues across a number of settings including hospitals, primary and social care. More recently the HSE leadership has requested action reports from Community Healthcare Organisation and hospital managers in response to the findings generated.



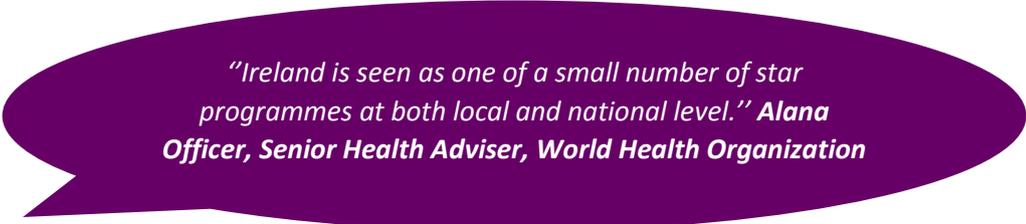
*“The older peoples councils have long had their voice heard at local authority level. It has proved to be a formidable voice. We are seeing older people more appropriately represented on key decision-making bodies beyond the age friendly alliances such as the local community development committees, the joint policing committees and the public participation networks...with that voice being more valued than would previously have been the case. The national network provides increasing scope for that voice to influence national policy.”* **Bob Gilbert, Chair, Cavan Older Peoples Council**

“Officials across the local authority beyond the community directorate are increasingly engaged with the age friendly ethos and the voice of local older people. Effectively, it has been local older people who have asked planners, librarians, those involved in economic development and tourism to get involved...and these officials have responded.” **Emer Coveney, Age Friendly Programme Manager, Cavan County Council**

## Co-hosting International Conference

The Irish age friendly programmes influence on both national and international programme development was seen when it co-hosted a European conference ‘Increasing capacity for age friendly environment in Europe’ in 2016. Attracting over 130 delegates the conference was designed to bring together speakers, panel members, delegates and programme leaders from across the European ‘age friendly’, ‘healthy’, ‘smart’ and ‘sustainable’ cities programmes. In addition to speakers from key departments and agencies across the Irish public sector senior level contributions were provided by WHO Europe, AGE Platform Europe, the European Commission, and the European Covenant on Demographic Change amongst others. The conference provided important opportunity for leaders to explore the links and synergies between these various programmes, the opportunities available to embed innovations and the trends that will make a difference as the age-friendly programme moves towards its next phase of development.

Participating in an advisory capacity on the Strategic Advisory Group for the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities and the Advisory Committee of the Age-friendly Environments in Europe, Ireland would appear to be increasingly viewed as an exemplar of positive practice and innovation within the growing global, age friendly cities movement.



*“Ireland is seen as one of a small number of star programmes at both local and national level.” Alana Officer, Senior Health Adviser, World Health Organization*

## Placing ageing on the National Agenda

In Ireland, the age friendly programme has been credited with bringing about a stronger focus on ageing to the work of an extensive range of public bodies.

“The age friendly programme has helped to lift up ageing as a priority issue for local government. Other agencies are starting to follow suit albeit perhaps at a somewhat slower pace.” **Stephanie O’Keeffe, National Director, Strategic Planning & Transformation, Health Service Executive**

The age friendly programme has also been recognised for bringing the issue of ageing and a changing demographic to fields and professions “which would not previously have considered the issue such as planners, engineers and those involved in tourism and economic development”, according to Maurice O’Connell who also credits the programme for “its provision of a focal point when connecting with an extensive network of agencies and departments” on policy issues related to ageing.

## Challenges

An extensive track record of achievements has been attributed to the age friendly programme. As with other multi agency programmes challenges were, however, experienced. Bringing together senior personnel to plan collaboratively across such a wide range of domain areas at a time of severe budget constraint was, at times, challenging for programme leaders. Case study participants noted a number of challenges in this respect:

- **Programme development and extension took place during a time of economic recession.** The introduction of severe budget reductions combined with cut backs in personnel at all levels across key agencies placed considerable pressure on the time and resources available for senior agency representatives to participate in non-core activities. Simultaneously, the period of economic recession saw considerable movement in senior level personnel within and across agencies and regions which made it challenging to develop consistent relationships necessary for effective inter agency working.

As Conn Murray noted, “it does take time to develop trust, build understanding and commitment. When there are changes to key personnel relationships can suffer...which were reflected in the peaks and troughs of the programme across time.”

The reform and reorganisation of both local authority and health service structures also took place during this phase of programme extension which, as some participants suggested, “made it difficult to identify the relevant agency or programme lead not to mind connect (effectively) with them.”

- **Securing initial funding support for an intermediary to enable wider programme extension beyond the original demonstrator.** Louth’s critical role as a demonstrator programme was recognised by so many of the case study participants. As noted by Brian MacCraith “the Louth story was such a positive news story...it set down a model for others to follow.” Mary Sutton of Atlantic also confirmed that the “Louth programme had worked so well...and had achieved so much.” Sutton, however, noted that the proposition to “scale the programme up via regional hubs was a challenging one” with Atlantic’s Dublin office being “tested very actively by the Atlantic board as to whether this was the right kind of investment given the sense that we may have already done our work courtesy of the investment to date.” The Dublin office sought, as Sutton suggested “to make it (the age friendly concept) real for Board members with study visits and other approaches being facilitated to convey the vibrancy of the approach and show the real energy, ambition and commitment that had been developed by programme leaders in Louth.” From there a decision, on the part of Atlantic, to support a time bound programme extension was taken.
- **Managing multiple ‘whole of government’ initiatives and associated community consultation processes simultaneously.** In the pursuit of improved quality of life for citizens, greater service effectiveness and increased economic competitiveness recent years have seen cities and counties presented with an increasing array of policies and programmes that offer particular approaches from domain perspectives. Increasingly, city and county administrations may be facing the need to deliver parallel, yet overlapping, programmes addressing healthy cities, mental health and suicide prevention, physical activity, age-friendly environments, smart cities, sustainable communities, child friendly cities, and dementia friendly communities, to name but a few.

Framing and resourcing these programmes so that they are accessible and relevant to both agency and community-based stakeholders can be complex and challenging. At a practical level programme stakeholders have spoken of the dangers of consultation fatigue at community level and the challenges which can be involved in sustaining the involvement of senior level stakeholders who may be supporting engagement with a number of programmes simultaneously.

Commentators in this respect have suggested that the programmes have often supported more successful engagement on the part of agencies that have county by county structures, such as the local authority and Gardaí, but have been less successful with agencies which straddle several counties.

Sustaining engagement with an increasingly complex and demanding web of meetings and agendas, very often involving the same cohort of agency personnel and community volunteers, has become increasingly difficult for some. There is, as noted by Margaret Mulligan a “need to support greater convergence across the multitude of comparable programmes.”

Many of the national led programmes will be introduced with a formal mandate or requirement for local authorities to assume a lead role while others, as is the case with the age friendly programme; will rely on the discretion of local government leaders to sustain an appropriate level of focus. At times when understandable priority is afforded to mandated programmes initiatives such as the age friendly programme were described as being in “danger of being de prioritised...which can jeopardise programme momentum and stakeholder commitment.”

The adoption of a standardised, yet non-mandated programme could have proved challenging for some. As noted by Annette Barr Jordan, “there was no carrot or stick. The fact that there was no mandate meant that there was no budget...yet the programme demands commitment and ownership. Consistent participation has been difficult to secure when you are required to prioritise mandated programmes ”

At times, the absence of a mandate has meant that the programme has depended on personal commitment and a level of good will on the part of local leaders but as noted by Bob Gilbert “key people across the agencies can come and go which can make it challenging to sustain the momentum.” Margaret Mulligan suggested that this challenge is equally relevant to community champions where we “can assume that volunteers will just stick with it. Champions do get tired and have to be allowed to move on but that means we need to be always cultivating a tier below them to pick up the agenda when this happens.”

Mulligan suggested that the overall experience of older person council representatives with the programme has been positive but recognises that the quality of engagement can vary from programme to programme. The role of the alliance chairperson in positioning the programme and establishing a positive working dynamic between alliance and older people’s council is, according to Mulligan, critical. Mulligan also noted that the local authority age friendly coordinator has a key role to play in “fronting the programme on a day to day basis and retaining momentum. It is important therefore that sufficient time is made available to the coordinator to fulfil this role.”

Rather than the provision of additional funding informed stakeholders have suggested the key challenge associated with a non-mandated programme lies in the absence of a formal indicator. As noted by Annette Barr Jordan, “what gets measured gets resourced.” While other key initiatives would have one or perhaps two formal indicators, which the local authority is required to report on either to the County and City Management Agency or the relevant Department, the age friendly programme has none. Such stakeholders have suggested that the development of one to two indicators would enhance programme positioning and resourcing.

The development of the model therefore took a level of experimentation with front runner counties trialling slightly different approaches. Interestingly, programme champions such as Conn Murray have suggested that this level of flexibility was one of the key attractions of the programme as it has allowed local leaders “to apply their own blueprint and identify what works best for them.”

The absence of high-level public brand awareness has however challenged stakeholders in securing a consistent level of programme engagement. As noted by Margaret Mulligan “high profile

national initiatives such as Creative Ireland and Healthy Ireland can Hoover up local interest and attention and leave very effective programmes such as age friendly in their wake.”

The operating model clearly depends on the engagement and commitment of agencies and stakeholders from beyond the local government system. Strategies across the country highlight how a range of implementation partners are required to fulfil visions which have been set. The absence of more directive powers for local authorities, in their role as network coordinators, has meant that they have had to rely heavily on soft persuasion powers and relationship building.

- **Achieving a balance of actions and progress across the range of domain areas.** The programmes have tended to focus and prioritise those domain areas where the lead agency, the local authority, has most direct influence such as outdoor spaces, buildings and housing. As recognised by many of the participants “other actors, and most notably An Garda Síochána, have got in behind these wherever they can.”

Emer Coveney noted that it is “important to achieve a focused prioritisation. It’s better to have five key priorities rather than 50. We weren’t always as focussed as we could be due to the breadth of domains and subject issues. While the broad-based approach does promote local ownership and energy it can mean the programme is not as focused as it should be.” Stakeholders have suggested that the “call now will be to apply that same energy to other domain areas where other relevant providers can and should take the lead.”

Managing expectation throughout the programme’s development has required ongoing attention. Seamus Neely noted that “stakeholders want change to happen quickly but a cycle of meaningful change can often take 10 years and more.” Des Mulligan of the Integrated Care Programme for Older Persons described the programme as “both a culture and systems change project which takes time and considerable investment.”

- **Achieving a suitable line of connection with national policy.** The National Positive Ageing Strategy was credited with providing much needed vision and direction at a national level. It was also suggested that the launch of the Strategy in 2013 provided some further legitimacy for the age friendly programme approach and in particular the role and positioning of the then forming older people’s councils. Participants, however, suggested that the Strategy was very often “too high level and clearly under resourced...so much so that national actors are only starting to think about implementation four to five years later.” Some participants also felt that the age friendly initiative, while positive, was “somewhat discounted by national policy makers as merely a local initiative...up until the point it achieved a full national roll out and then could no longer be side-lined or dismissed.”

The development of a stronger link or connect between local action and national policy was, according to participants, increasingly notable as the programme grew closer to a full national roll out. Some commentators suggested that national policy makers could “more easily see the fit...the ready application when the programme was a national one. That was much more difficult to articulate when it was only operating in pockets around the country.” The development of collaborative programmes such as the Dublin City Council led housing with support programme was recognised as another important bridge between national policy and local action.

Stakeholders, such as Sean Moynihan, noted that the use of two different frameworks, involving eight domains in the case of the age friendly programme and four national goals in the case of the National Positive Ageing Strategy, can hamper sought after alignment. According to Moynihan “the language used by both should be reconciled...otherwise it will continue to be very confusing for those stakeholders who we are all trying to engage.” By more actively demonstrating the points of connect and the contribution made by local strategies to the Positive Ageing Strategy, Moynihan and other participants suggested it will “be easier to track, resource and support.”

- **Balancing the pace of programme roll out; weighing up whether to go wide or deep.** At the close of the Ageing Well Network in December 2013 the programme had been formally adopted by 15 city and county councils albeit with some of these programmes at very early stages of development. Funding provided by Atlantic for the national programme office was tied to the achievement of time bound targets for further programme extension. The relatively fast paced approach to programme scale up, which saw a further 16 city and county programmes launched across the subsequent three-year term, was the subject of some debate amongst case study participants. Some participants indicated that they had, at the time, questioned the strategy and the attachment of priority to programme extension over a “focus on deepening quality within a smaller number of front runner counties.” A number of such participants suggested that “on reflection, it proved to be the right approach as scale has brought recognition and more stable, and much needed, positioning at national level.”

Margaret Mulligan, chair of the Roscommon Older Peoples Council, suggested that “it was an amazing job (on the part of Age Friendly Ireland) achieving so much in such a short period of time...but, understandably given such a focus the programme is not as deeply rooted in some areas. Some programmes have struggled to get key stakeholders fully committed on a consistent basis. This will need to be a key focus across the next year or two...bringing all the programmes up to a minimum standard.”

- **Resourcing robust baseline studies proved to be challenging and, at times, a stumbling block for some city and county programmes.** A number of the front runner county programmes had committed to develop robust county profiles based on the conduct of comprehensive household surveys. In Kilkenny, for example, a group of twenty-five committed volunteer researchers conducted 500 face to face interviews with older people across the county. While providing a most valuable data set which enabled evidence informed decision making on the part of the Kilkenny stakeholders the model was not a realistic proposition for other county programmes to replicate. More qualitative methods, including town hall meetings, round table discussions, focus groups, on street surveys and targeted stakeholder interviews were therefore prioritised by other county programmes which followed. Until the launch of HaPAI in 2014 it was not always feasible to marry the more qualitative consultation with large scale quantitative approaches.
- **Initial apprehension on the part of some stakeholder groups.** Understandably, the initiative as it was scaling up presented a strategic challenge for some of the NGO’s and older people’s organisations operating in the wider policy and programme delivery arena. Stakeholders such as Anne Connolly noted that “there was a level of suspicion amongst the NGO’s initially with some anxious that the age friendly programme would become a competitor for attention and resources.” Managing a positive dynamic between the NGO’s and the growing infrastructure of age friendly programmes is something that the NGO’s themselves have invested in heavily. Regular meetings between programme leaders and the Alliance of Age Sector NGO’s has provided for a stronger connect between the programme and the work of eight age sector NGO’s.

At a local level established older person groups had in some cases demonstrated concern “that the age friendly programme could swallow them up.” Taking the time to build understanding and acceptance amongst all stakeholders was therefore recognised to be an important up-front investment. As Conn Murray noted, “the thing about the age friendly programme is that nobody disagrees with it but you have to get the true value of it across to people and make it real.”

Multi agency planning, while not necessarily a new concept does require a different level of engagement and indeed a different approach. Participants reflected that there had been “jaundiced views on the value of multi-agency working in the past...promising much but often delivering very little.” In this context, Conn Murray revealed that “we had to explain it very extensively to the HSE and the Gardaí. They had their own remits and budgets and were only answerable to their own line managers. We spent a lot of time working together to understand the

concept of multiagency collaboration...to making it real...and then to committing in very practical ways to doing things together.”

Having passive members involved was a challenge which participants suggested needed to be guarded against; “They won’t stick with it and may even suck energy away from it if they aren’t actively involved.” Being “clear in one’s ask” and indeed expectation of all participants was a maxim voiced by a number of stakeholders interviewed.

- **Securing momentum across large local authority areas.** Participants have noted that the challenge of citizen centred service delivery can be amplified for the larger local authorities. The level of challenge involved for such authorities was reflected on by Conn Murray, now chief executive of Limerick City and County when commenting “it has been more difficult because of the rural, urban divide and having to get commitment initially from two chambers across both city and county. The scale and sheer number of stakeholders involved can make it more challenging.”
- **Balancing practice development with gathering of evidence:** The age friendly programme has allowed for the development of an extensive range of good practice initiatives. The development of evidence on the efficacy and impact of new or improved, services and practices supporting active and healthy ageing can, according to contributors, now play a key role in supporting wider implementation and take-up. To date, there has been limited opportunity to formally evaluate such initiatives so as to support wider scale up with the required level of fidelity. As noted by Rodd Bond, implementation science can in this respect provide a systematic approach to the design; replication and scaling of innovations to better meet the needs of our ageing society.
- **Closure of the DCC hosted national office at end 2016 created a level of uncertainty.** Both Atlantic and those charged with programme oversight conceived of the quasi-independent intermediary as having a short term, yet intensive role to play in securing a full national extension. Participants noted that there had been some division of opinion as to what was the best means by which to secure the programme investment for the long term. As with many such organisations, particularly those that are successful, there was some concern that the programme would not be successfully sustained on the closure of the DCC hosted office. The agreement on the part of Meath County Council to host initially an interim office to provide national support and coordination was very strongly welcomed by participants involved. “There was a vacuum there...a level of unease that the programme itself was being discontinued. That was a shaky period for the programme. So, Meath stepping in to host an office was an important statement that local government was fully behind a future for the programme.”

## Lessons learned

Cross sector agency and sectoral working is recognised as being difficult. A range of operating cultures, multiple management levels, individual service pressures and cycles of work can all compete with or get in the way of a shared agenda. Nevertheless, the age friendly programme has proved to be an effective model at bringing a range of diverse organisations, groups, services and businesses together.

Now that the programme has been extended to all local authority areas it would appear to have an increasingly important role to play in realising the visions set out as part of key national policy documents such as Healthy Ireland and the National Positive Ageing Strategy. In building such a network of networks the age friendly programme approach has provided valuable learnings for others looking to bring about change and more effectively translate national policy to effective local implementation. A number of lessons can be learned from the work of Age Friendly Ireland in supporting the development of such a programme.

### Find the right 'home' early on

- **Support champions within to lead the programme.** The policy document Putting People First, the 2012 action programme for effective local government, determined that local government would be the lead vehicle of governance and service delivery locally. Empowering the citizen to participate in the development of their community was central to this new model and the age friendly programme approach connected directly with such an ambition.

Louth County Council's leadership in taking on the role of demonstrator combined with its willingness to share its experience and support other counties in adopting such an approach played a critical role. As Brian MacCraith noted, "they were willing to share experience, to support, to advise...their story became such a positive story for the country that the programme multiplied so rapidly." In requesting local authorities to lead the programme organisers recognised the important role played by county managers. MacCraith suggested that it was "similar to the hugely successful 'Gathering' because local government and local communities were put at the centre of the programme. It wasn't top down or Department led." As Mary Sutton noted, "the Louth experience helped, enormously in raising the bar on ageing as an important agenda item. They helped to develop a template for how one might organise an age friendly county approach."

The Dublin Declaration was recognised for its success not only in presenting the programme to key leaders across local government in Ireland but also in positioning the programme globally and Ireland as an international leader.

A small number of programme leaders, including Brendan Kenny, Jackie Maguire, Conn Murray, and Stephanie O'Keeffe, were cited very frequently for their national level leadership and "stepping in at critical points to ensure the programme was sustained."

- **Importance of peer to peer messaging and endorsement.** Leaders within the sector were called on to help and invariably responded. Such leaders were recognised not just for the contribution they made locally but also for their role "in bringing along their peers."

Leadership was not just evident at the most senior executive levels within local government. Instead, the model would appear to have cultivated a shared approach to leadership with participants frequently citing the contributions and commitment of "people like Mary Deery (Louth County Council) and Bob Gilbert (chair of the Cavan older people's network) who always made themselves available to meet with other county programmes." That generous, collegiate approach was both welcomed and valued. Importantly, the peer to peer nature of such engagement was valued most of all; "Mary Deery and Bob Gilbert were highly respected by their colleagues and their experience counted for so much when others were considering the programme."

- **Cultivate a strong sense of shared ownership.** Contributors have suggested that the programme would not have enjoyed the same level of success were its adoption to have come with a directive. That stakeholders were invited to lead and participate rather than the programme being imposed on them was thought to have been critical in developing a committed coalition of stakeholders. As Seamus Neely suggested, “local authorities were invited to lead it. It wasn’t thrust upon them. There’s nothing worse than a project which comes with a time bound budget and then the budget dissipates. It then becomes very difficult to sustain it.”

The development, on the part of Age Friendly Ireland, of informal networks of support was credited with building this required sense of shared ownership. Regional and national networks of alliance chairs, programme managers and older people council chairs were co facilitated with local authority personnel. Gradually such networks become more self-sustaining at regional and national level with increasing ownership being taken on by the relevant programme stakeholders rather than representatives of the intermediary Age Friendly Ireland. As Maurice O’Connell suggested, “the national staff invested a lot of time at local level but also had to be careful not to create a dependency or offer a resource that could not be sustained across the long term. That was tricky when they had targets to reach but did not always have direct control over the outcomes. Building that culture of shared ownership was important.”

- **Don’t mire a programme, early on, with bureaucracy and onerous reporting.** The programme had a strong, robust framework courtesy of the WHO eight domains but still facilitated local autonomy and demanded local ownership. The agenda was, in particular, welcomed by the local government chief executives with one commentator suggesting “instructions, deadlines and box tick reporting can kill an agenda. Goodwill and the voluntary aspect permeated through the age friendly approach.”

Interestingly, participants drew comparison with other multi agency initiatives many of which they suggested had been devolved down to lower management and administrative staffing levels. The models flexibility and opportunity for leaders to apply their own blueprint was thought to be an attractive feature for leaders keen on bringing about change. As suggested by Sean Ó’Riordáin, this dynamic “facilitated creativity, innovation, and the potential for leaders to leave their mark on how they may have positively helped to shape their community.”

‘Softer reporting’ by means of networking and showcasing events facilitated by Age Friendly Ireland were thought to have been important as were the opportunities taken to incorporate regular programme updates within reports provided to elected members and other key stakeholders.

- **Recognise the work already underway within the field.** It was important to recognise that a lot of work was already underway within the field and particularly so within the community and voluntary sector. As Conn Murray suggested, “There was so much of this work that I wasn’t aware of. It was important that we didn’t interfere with this but instead support it with networks and publicise what is being done. The age friendly programme offers valuable structures, networks and recognition for this kind of work.”

## Put in place the structures and resources required to facilitate programme development and extension

A number of critical success factors were identified as playing a supportive role in bringing about programme development. These include:

- Chief executives of local authorities “sticking with it”, and where relevant continuing to chair the multi-agency alliances, have ensured that programmes are positioned credibly and that senior agency representatives sustain their own commitment to the agenda.

In recognising the status of the local authority chief executive Mary Deery noted, “The commitment from the chief executive is paramount. They are the best placed and most influential person to bring an alliance together, to promote a cross departmental approach within the Council and to sustain the effort.”

- Appointing the right member of Council staff to coordinate the programme was described as critical. As Conn Murray noted, “the key here is to get the right person who will be taken seriously because of their seniority but who also fits in terms of their personality, capability and commitment to the agenda.”

Interestingly, Jack Keyes noted separately that the appointments made across the city and county council network had tended to be of a very high calibre. “The standard of the people in the coordinator roles across the country was generally excellent. The more they were seen to invest in it the more the agencies around the table did. Success breeds success”.

- Ensure such systems and resources can be sustained across the medium to long term. Seed or short-term funding can introduce a level of risk. As noted by Conn Murray, “in Louth, I resisted the offer of money for additional staff because I felt it would cost us in the long run...that we would become reliant upon it and wouldn’t be able to sustain the effort.” The decision to embed the coordinator role, within the local authority package of support for the programme proved to be a key success factor.

- **Provide some centralised staffing to coordinate and guide the programme.** Participants recognised that the successful extension of the programme owed much to the technical and facilitation support provided by Age Friendly Ireland. Across the period of the DCC hosting of the national office a core team of eight oversaw the extension of the programme to 31 local authority areas. Commentators suggested that this growth would not have been possible in the absence of a central coordinating body. As noted by Conn Murray, “when Catherine McGuigan came on board to provide regional support it ramped things up. There was now an opportunity to start having conversations with those counties and other agencies around us.”

Not all programmes, of course, will require a team of such scale. Indeed, it is noted that following the developmental cycle involved in securing a full extension to all local authority areas the national coordinating function has now reduced to a core team of four.

The national office was also recognised as “presenting itself in the right way.” As Brendan Kenny noted, “I had no problem taking the office on...I knew I could work well with the CEO and the team.” Jack Keyes suggested that each organisation is recognised for its tone. In the tricky space of multi-agency working, Keyes proposed that the office had established “a very positive, supportive tone” which encouraged agencies and older people alike “to give their best to the initiative.” The office was also credited with “timing its asks well.” Again Jack Keyes suggested, “the office didn’t have a mandate. They were there as guests of the agencies but through a combination of soft skills, persuasion and the provision of well-timed inputs such as the facilitation of networking events, hosting of awards or the production of research, training or technical guides they were always spurring the county programmes on to the next level.” As Emer Coveney suggested “that kept things fresh and key people energised.”

Others within the system recognised the role of the central office in “keeping the programme on the agenda.” As Annette Barr Jordan noted “if the national office weren’t there you would have seen it fall off the agenda very quickly. There are so many topic items and groups vying for attention. We have seen so many programmes come and go in the past. The office made sure that it stayed on the agenda of managers and chief executives.”

The role of the Atlantic funding in supporting such a function was recognised by many of the participants as being critical to the programmes development. In reflecting on the investment, Mary Sutton of Atlantic suggested that the age friendly programme “had allowed us to deepen our grant making in the ageing field...It allowed us to support an engagement that goes across the spectrum...moving from policy to service delivery. It was a very important investment for us which surpassed our expectations in that it moved the approach from debate and discussion to active demonstration via a county approach. Critically, it has provided an opportunity to amplify the voice of the older person. That, fundamentally, is what makes the programme worthwhile and is a core principle that must be sustained.”

- **Invest in programme communications** to support sharing of progress, good practices, knowledge and the brokering of connections and information exchange between agency officials, service providers and the community of interest being served. Websites, newsletters, databases and catalogues of good practice initiatives, networking events and award ceremonies produced by Age Friendly Ireland were all thought to have contributed to building understanding and commitment.
- **Embed principles within key policy instruments.** Due to the diverse nature of work which local authorities are expected to take on all programmes can, at times, be side-lined. For the focus to be sustained across the long term participants spoke of the need for key principles to be embedded within relevant policies and plans such as corporate and city and county development plans. As Joan Martin, chief executive, Louth County Council noted, “the Local Economic and Community Plan is a statutory plan which must be delivered. All key age friendly actions are built into this plan. If it isn’t mainstreamed it will just be a project and you will have to find additional money to delivery it. You can’t have agencies and managers just thinking age friendly when they are walking into an alliance meeting every quarter. The actions need to be visible and have strong oversight and measurement. All the important stuff we do is multi agency. It involves us recognising that we get a better result by working with others. When that collaborative dynamic is there everything else flows.”

### **Facilitate and sustain senior level agency engagement**

The programme has relied heavily on ‘soft power persuasion’. This has been complemented by the establishment of programme oversight, in the form of a national advisory group, involving senior level executives who are in position to make change. Senior level executives on this group have facilitated relationship building with a variety of government departments and ensured that programme goals are effectively positioned within key long-term policy initiatives such as the National Planning Framework.

Alana Officer of the WHO highlighted the challenge when suggesting that “building a movement and wider acceptance across a diverse range of stakeholder groups is very challenging...It needs leaders who are prepared to step out of their boundaries.” The oversight group introduced further credibility and legitimacy for the programme.

The development of the oversight group was also recognised for supporting key leaders to “take the next step”. As Conn Murray noted, “it was very important that the key influencers were with you. Having Dublin City Council and the chief executive of the next biggest local authority behind you provided you with the licence to take it to the next level.”

At city and county level alliances have been established to include chief executives and agency heads so as to ensure that participants had the required standing and decision-making ability to

implement agreed actions. This concentration of senior leaders would appear to have increased the likelihood for relevant practice and policy change at local level. Where such leaders have not been present on a consistent basis these chances have proved to be harder to come by.

High level political relationship building was facilitated from the outset. Opportunities were also taken to engage regularly with the elected members and strategic policy committees. More recent years have seen significant progress been made in respect of policy influence at a national level. Leveraging support of the wider office of the City and County Management Agency would appear to have enabled greater cross departmental traction. The migration of the centralised coordinating unit into a formal shared service managed directly by Meath County Council has been a further key lever in this respect.

### **Shape and communicate a compelling vision for stakeholders to connect with**

The age friendly model is recognised as being more than the myriad of actions set out within the various strategies produced. Frequently, it was described as both a systems and culture change initiative. The model requires a deep level of engagement and, in particular a respect for the consultation process with local older people.

From the development of the demonstrator programme in Louth organisers have sought to shape and communicate a well-articulated vision. Participants surfaced a number of core elements within that vision which were credited as being evident and particularly well understood by those front runner counties across the north east region;

- A commitment to action and the shaping of strategies which are firmly based on the expressed views and priorities of older people.
- A collaborative approach which enables the direct and active involvement by older people in local decision making and encourages new thinking, methods and approaches in response to challenges identified.
- A focus on future proofing of both infrastructure and services so that these do not become outdated or outmoded in the near future and that they are accessible on different levels to all ages and groups.
- A vision to embed the programme within the local government system.

The development of a set of values which underpin the work of the programme was recognised by observers. Mary Sutton noted that the “Louth programme was very committed to meaningful and honest engagement...and building trust amongst older people that their voice was being listened to.”

Programme adoption did not introduce a new budget line. Instead, participants were encouraged to reassess service design where it did not meet user needs and consider older person feedback within relevant budget allocations; “The ask of the agencies was to re consider their service design from the perspective of the older person experience. So a range of very practical actions were put in place.” **Bob Gilbert, Cavan Older Peoples Council.**

As Eugene Cummins, chief executive, Roscommon County Council noted “it wasn’t about more budgets for older people but instead looking at existing budgets through the lens of older people to determine how best they might be spent. It gave budget holders a very important perspective.”

Setting out clearly why a specific programme is needed is in the words of one contributor “the golden rule of any change process.” As Jack Keyes suggested “when both the demographics and rationale were clearly presented to me it became clear that ageing was a major strategic challenge and if you are interested in the social fabric of your county you need to accelerate work in this

area...It became clear that through a truly collaborative approach that you could achieve some early wins readily enough.”

### **Create atmosphere and model of operation which facilitates meaningful change**

A number of underpinning factors were thought to have contributed to the programmes success in developing a positive atmosphere;

- **Build trust-based relationships across sectors for a common purpose.** The development of relationships, understanding and trust amongst targeted programme partners took time. As agency leads changed roles this relationship building often had to start all over again.

Stakeholders also spoke of the need for key relationships “to be minded” with significant value being attached to informal check in calls, updates and conversations between more formal meetings.

- **Facilitate direct involvement by older people** at key decision-making tables. “The fact that we sit on the alliance together with the agencies gives status to us as a group and provides us with a means to directly inform the work of key providers.” **Bob Gilbert, Chair Cavan Older Peoples Council.**
- **Keep leaders at the table through adoption of solution focussed approach.** The economic recession was thought to have prompted an appetite amongst agency representatives for more innovative approaches to challenging issues. As additional resources were very often unavailable and overall budgets were cut significantly it was necessary to be innovative, maintain an emphasis on value for money and leverage the potential offered by other agencies.
- **Encourage an active membership.** As Joan Martin noted, “You sustain your groups and the involvement of key people by having worthwhile meetings where stuff gets done. You can’t have a passive membership. A worthwhile programme will have roles and clear asks of all around the table.”
- **Engage meaningfully with those consulted.** Be realistic and upfront when providing feedback on challenges and roadblocks experienced. As Annette Barr Jordan suggested “It’s important to tell people the truth if you want them to stay with a programme. You can’t over promise or be in defence mode with your partners in the community.”
- **Deepen the experience at town level:** A growing network of age friendly towns, villages and neighbourhoods with participants consulting, mapping, developing and implementing age friendly strategies have helped to make the process more real at local level. As Margaret Mulligan noted the towns-based approach can also “help to compensate in cases where county wide implementation might be slow.”
- **Consider measures to mainstream** pilot and demonstrator projects so that they are sustained across the medium to long term.
- **Respect and build on what is there already.** It is important not to cut across or disenfranchise successful projects or programmes already underway.
- **Good data matters.** The availability of robust data by means of the development of 21 city and county baseline positive ageing reports has, as acknowledged, supported more evidence-based decision making, prioritisation and allocation of resources.
- **Support annual monitoring and reporting** but do not expose programme partners. Effective multi agency collaborations will very often provide a neutral platform which supports positive engagement. As Seamus Neely noted, “that spirit of engagement is all important. Instead of pointing the finger present an offer ‘what can we do to support you to help the shared cause?’”

- **Putting people around the table may not always be enough.** Stakeholders have highlighted the value in developing shared projects which reflect the priorities of the consultation. The development of formal multi agency approaches such as the DCC led housing with support programme was referenced frequently in this context. Multi agency approaches will; often be required to respond to the more complex challenges. “It took leaders such as Brendan Kenny to say ‘I don’t want to just talk about this...I want to see what we can do to respond. This required a different kind of model...a shared project model,” noted Maurice O’Connell.

## Gaps

- Consultation with case study participants identified a number of concerns or gaps which may need to be considered by programme organisers, among which included the following;
- Need to promote greater engagement with shared projects involving shared budgets in order to address what were commonly labelled the more complex and intractable problems facing the older adult population. Housing with support was frequently cited in this context.
- The issues that lie ahead were thought to be “even more challenging” than those addressed during the phase of work to date. As one contributor noted, “It’s going to be a lot more difficult when we try to deal with some of the deeper-rooted problems...age friendly parking and streets are very much welcomed but when it comes to social inclusion and health inequalities, we will need different responses.” The need, in particular for models with associated funding to address systemic problems was highlighted. As one local authority official suggested “creative responses are great but can only go so far. When it comes to supporting people to age in their own community specific housing models and relevant funding will be required.”
- The need to maintain energy and activity levels. Participants, in this regard, repeatedly cautioned of the risks that can be involved in devolving programme responsibilities down to lower staffing levels.
- The absence of overt reference to ‘ageism’ within the core eight domains; a significant societal challenge cited by many and an issue which the age friendly programme may be well placed to respond.
- Succession planning to support a second wave of programme champions. Stakeholders recognised that the programme now appears to be entering a second, post pilot phase where new leaders are needed to support and, where relevant, succeed those who have dedicated themselves to key coordination and leadership roles across both alliances and older people’s councils.
- The move to more of a life course orientation so that age friendly is indeed friendly to all and is not thought to disadvantage other population groups.
- The need to support convergence across compatible programmes so that stakeholders can sustain their commitment to the relevant range of domain areas.
- There would appear to be a growing sense of competitiveness between comparable national initiatives with programme organisers often vying for attention, leadership and scarce resourcing at local level.
- Any urgency or rush to introduce overly onerous measurement and reporting systems which in the words of several participants, may “smother enthusiasm and innovation.”

- Avoiding any sense that the model is too deeply connected with any one NGO. As one commentator suggested “the programme needs to be depersonalised from individual NGO’s. It can’t afford to split the sector.”
- Remaining true to the original, underpinning principles of partnership, collaboration and voice of older people.
- Retaining programme ability to highlight deficits and poor performance as the central office has transitioned from an independent, to quasi-independent hosting and now more recently having become an embedded function within the local government system.
- Scope for Ireland, as a recognised leader in age friendly programme development, to contribute at an international level.
- Facility to broaden out the approach. A significant part of the older persons lived experience lies outside the control of local government. In considering key issues such as pensions, work practices, insurance, financial security, work force retention only so much can be done locally.
- The gap between the closure of the DCC hosted national office at end 2016 and the decision on the part of Meath County Council to provide national coordination was described as “a worrying time which proved to be a sink or swim moment for the programme.” Stakeholders noted that “the programme was, at the time, drifting and that needed to be addressed.” Meath’s adoption of the national hosting role was strongly welcomed with participants suggesting that there may be value in the new host articulating its vision for this next cycle of development.

## Conclusion and next steps

As part of a well communicated wind out strategy Atlantic’s funding support for the national programme office closed at end 2016. Following a Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) facilitated process coordination and oversight has now successfully transferred to Meath County Council.

A national programme lead has been in place since May 2017 and is to be further augmented with the appointment of four additional post holders. Furthermore, a commitment has also been secured to introduce, through the Executive Committee of the County and City Management Association (CCMA), a Memorandum of Understanding between the new shared service and each of the 31 local authorities.

Participants have proposed that the recent agreement on the part of the HSE, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government together with each of the local authorities to formally commit resources to the programme “provides a real indicator of the models success.”

It is understood that the focus of the centralised office will be on embedding the pioneering work of the programme to date in the mainstream. A key priority will be to scale up those many local models of good practice into the consistent application of proven age friendly initiatives across the wider network of cities and counties.

All cities and counties across Ireland are now operating the programme locally. In less than a decade the age friendly programme can lay claim to a number of significant achievements including strong influence across a range of key national policies and the development of a growing infrastructure of multi-agency alliances and older people’s councils committed to engaging with the lived experience of older people. Where the programme is understood to have worked well older people have been supported to become actively involved in local decision-making.

Recognised globally, the Irish age friendly programme has helped to place Ireland's changing demographics on the agenda of a wide network of senior agency officials.

While other programmes can point to speedier scale up, particular characteristics of the approach adopted by the age friendly programme are worth considering and could prove useful to other programme leaders looking to develop effective local and whole of community implementation structures.

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Any errors are those of the author and should not tarnish the reputations of these esteemed persons.

