



# Age Action Ireland Submission to the Open Ended Working Group on Ageing 14: Substantive Input on Public Participation

*Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation promoting equality for us all as we age.*



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



*Age Action is part-funded by the Scheme to Support National Organisations 2022-2025, which is funded by the Government of Ireland through the Department of Rural and Community Development*

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## Participation in Public Life and Decision-Making Processes.

### Accessibility of Public Spaces

35.2% of persons aged 65 or older in Ireland live with a disability, 21.5% are affected by frailty, 4% live in residential care settings, and 48,000 people have dementia, a number which is expected to double by 2030. A survey by the Irish Wheelchair Association found that seventy-seven per cent of people with physical disabilities have poor or no access to public spaces. This inadequacy manifested in parking; entrances of public buildings; toilets; lifts; and emergency exits.

In the 2020 General Election, polling stations were found to be inaccessible, as was information being shared with voters on how to vote. The postal voting system is prohibitively complex. It is also not a secret ballot, as voters have to include their names and addresses.

Some older persons limit time spent in public spaces due to the risk of contracting Covid-19 and the abandonment by the general public of recommended precautions (masks, social distancing). One older couple told Age Action about walks early in the morning before anyone else is up being the totality of the time they spend outside.

### Transport Adequacy.

Inadequate transport also heightens older person's social and civil exclusion. Ireland is sparsely populated in comparison with other European countries and has many scattered, isolated, one-off houses. Nearly 50% of women aged 65+ in rural areas, and around 28% of men, say they have 'unmet' transport needs. The minimum cost of running a car translates into over €75 per week, 27% of the maximum rate state pension. 70% of older persons without a driving licence are women. More than half of all women aged 75 or older do not have a driving licence. Access to driving licences are restricted for people aged 75 and older, an example of institutional age discrimination not based in evidence, given that they are an especially safe demographic of drivers.

### Public Life and Nursing Homes.

Too many older persons with care needs are placed in institutional settings instead of being supported to remain in their homes—in part because such supports often don't exist. Those in institutional settings often remain there too long before being transferred to community settings. The nursing home sector is profit motivated. Between 2009 and 2021, there was a net growth of 45 private nursing homes per year. Private residential settings are under-regulated. Older persons living in residential settings such as nursing homes are often unaware of public discourses and processes happening while they reside in nursing homes, much less opportunities to participate in them. This will be especially a risk for older persons experiencing any form of decline in cognitive capacity. This will also have ramifications for gender equality, as a disproportionate number of nursing home residents are women.

When it comes to voting in national elections, those resident in nursing homes who are unable to travel to a polling place can register with the Special Voters List, which often means having to vote prior to the completion of the various political campaigns, including prior to final debates.

## Digital Exclusion

More than 6 in 10 older persons aged 60 or older (628,000 out of one million) either do not use the internet or have below basic digital skills. This puts them at risk of digital exclusion, a form of social exclusion that limits autonomy and social and political participation, prevents older persons from learning about and accessing important services, and creates risks of abuse and mistreatment. Digital exclusion will occur whenever digital services are developed at the expense of high quality, accessible, adequate offline services. Ultimately, there is a major risk that the drive for efficiencies and cost-savings through digitalisation will mean that publicly funded services become inadequately resourced to provide a quality service via the traditional channels of phone, post and in-person. In theory, public services are meant to prioritise the use of digital alongside maintaining traditional channels of communication (phone, post and in-person), but some services are either adopting 100% online approaches or are making offline alternatives so hard to access that they might as well be non-existent. Often public consultations ran by the State can only be submitted to online and/or are exclusively advertised online.

## Access to Justice

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) oversees all complaints taken under equality legislation, including discrimination cases relating to accessing goods and services. The WRC also provides mediation and conciliation services. The Workplace Relations Commission provides their publications in Braille, large-print and audio format. Their website is screen-reader friendly and designed to be as accessible as possible. They have an access officer to support service users with disabilities who can be contacted via email or phone. Complaints under equality legislation can only be made via an online form on their website, jeopardizing older persons' right to access to justice.