



**Chambers  
Ireland**  
Advancing business together



## Chambers Ireland submission to the Department of Health on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing

September 2021

Chambers Ireland is the State's largest business representative network. We are an all-island organisation with a unique geographical reach; our members are the Chambers of commerce in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

Since pledging to advocate for and support the advancement of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in November 2019, our Network has been closely engaged with the aims of the goals and as such are very pleased to contribute to the Department's consultation on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

Labour force inclusion is an important area of policy for our Network of Chambers and our business members, and this shapes our approach to this consultation. As an advocacy body, we have continuously proposed policy changes which will support greater access to the workplace for all excluded demographics, with older people in general, and older women in particular, being a key cohort which we have identified as needing particular attention.

## Chambers Ireland policies on providing for an ageing population

Chambers Ireland understands that providing for the needs of an ageing population requires a multi-faceted response to reduce systematic disadvantages that impact older persons, cater to their further development and support any additional needs. Addressing these will be required if we are to build “a society for all ages.”<sup>1</sup>

Our recent policy outputs have covered several issues that have a direct and indirect impact on the opportunities available to older persons and the quality of life which they can enjoy. These issues include labour force participation, access to affordable childcare, the creation of sustainable towns and cities, lifelong learning and the development of Ireland’s public transport network.

### Older persons and development

As noted in the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, changing family patterns, lack of access to technology and other socioeconomic changes “can marginalize older persons from the mainstream of development.”<sup>2</sup>

Given that changes to the structure of family units have resulted in fewer multigenerational households, older persons now rely more on themselves to provide for their needs. In recent years, digitalisation and service consolidation has required that they adjust – but this is not always a straightforward process due to gaps in knowledge and technological competence. On a most basic level, the rollout of nationwide access to high-speed broadband remains critical.<sup>3</sup>

Key to addressing issues of knowledge and competence is learning and development. This has the potential to provide long-term benefits to people as they grow older, given that retired people will come to rely on the skills they learned earlier in life, including in work. Unfortunately, Ireland currently has lower levels of engagement in further education and lifelong learning compared to other countries.

There is also a significant imbalance between the investment in training through the National Training Fund for those currently in employment and those who are not.

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<sup>1</sup> [Madrid Plan of Action and its Implementation](#)

<sup>2</sup> Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, page 19

<sup>3</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to SME Growth Taskforce](#), page 4

Chambers Ireland believes this should be urgently reassessed.<sup>4</sup> We would also like to see an increase in resources to Regional Skills Fora, in line with population, to support their efforts to address skills needs around the country.<sup>5</sup> Doing so would provide more people with opportunities to upskill, leaving them in a stronger position once they retire and enter old age.

There is also a need to address gender-specific issues which impact the potential outcomes of both men and women as they age. Addressing these issues will enhance the opportunities available to them as they grow older. Among these issues is participation in the labour force. A striking feature of recent developments in the Irish labour market has been the increase in women's labour force participation and employment, although this is still significantly lower at 68.1% compared to 88.2% for men.<sup>6</sup>

The engagement of women as they grow older is particularly concerning, with a drop off in labour force participation at child-rearing age which further declines over time without recovery. Chambers Ireland has proposed the development and implementation of flexible working policies and the introduction of affordable childcare, and other caring duties, to counter some of the underlying obstacles which prevent achieving parity among men and women in this area.

Providing employees with greater choices to organise their work – and so too their caring responsibilities – will reduce the risk of them leaving the labour market altogether and thus limiting their opportunities for development as they age in the future. In Ireland, the net cost of childcare is 28% of the average wage of a couple, while the EU average is 12%. This makes it more likely that one or both parents will have to compromise their personal development to take care of their child or children.<sup>7</sup>

## **Advancing health and well-being into old age**

Fundamental components of achieving health and well-being in old age is the ability to remain active, socialise with others, act independently and, when needed, access healthcare services. To achieve this, it is important that towns and cities are easily

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<sup>4</sup> [Chambers Ireland's submission to the Department of Education and Skills on the Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for Higher Education and Further Education and Training](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to SME Growth Taskforce](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to the Department of Justice and Equality on Flexible Working under Future Jobs Ireland](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to the Department of Justice and Equality on Flexible Working under Future Jobs Ireland](#)

navigated through urban design which accounts for the mobility needs of all, provides diverse communal amenities and maintains critical and easily accessible public services. Adequate public transport – both for those who live within a community and those on the periphery – is also needed.

Urban design is a holistic concept that provides for both the physical infrastructure of a community and the types of businesses, services, amenities and housing it provides. As people become older and mobility becomes more challenging, older persons can become more reluctant to engage in physical activity. Chambers Ireland has focused strongly on creating inclusive urban environments, publishing a 10-point guide to designing outdoor living spaces in association with the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland,<sup>8</sup> a guide to best practice to support sustainable cities and towns in the post-pandemic recovery,<sup>9</sup> and making 'Place' the central theme of our Budget 2022 submission.<sup>10 11</sup>

In addition to mobility, older persons will also be less likely to socialise with members of their community if the amenities it offers does not suit their needs. In Ireland, local pubs can often be the focal point for people to come together but a reliance on this is marginalizing and not particularly supportive of good health outcomes. Outdoor facilities including parks and other green spaces, comfortable and inclusive street furniture and pedestrianised areas would help to encourage older people to be more active – physically and in the community.

As a whole, the offering provided by the night-time economy can be uninviting for older persons, thus limiting the hours of the day in which they can be active. Chambers Ireland has previously provided a submission to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media on the Night-Time Economy<sup>12</sup> where we advocate for safe, vibrant and inclusive public spaces for all ages throughout the day and night. A successful night-time economy should avoid a single sector dominating the experiences on offer. Instead, a broad choice of activities “after hours” – a mix of attractions that cater for a diversity of ages, income levels and cultures should be incorporated.

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<sup>8</sup> [10 Top Tips for Designing Outdoor Living Spaces](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Places Matter – Best Practice in Supporting Sustainable Cities and Towns in the Post-Pandemic Recovery](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Put 'Place' first and commit to radical plan to support recovery of cities and towns, says Chambers Ireland in Budget 2022 submission](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission on Budget 2022](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media on the Night-Time Economy](#)

Access to healthcare services will always be a critical element of ensuring the health and wellbeing of all but perhaps most acutely among older people. However, an increasing urbanising population is liable to compromise the health outcomes of older persons in regional and rural areas. As more people move towards urban settlements, rural dwellers risk becoming more distant from healthcare services and centres of excellence.<sup>13</sup>

A move towards the provision of healthcare services through health centres will require improvements to public transport networks so that an increasingly non-car driving population will have access to the ambulatory care that they will need.

### **Ensuring enabling and supportive environments**

Chambers Ireland uses Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) of the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a foundation of our policymaking. An integral part of this is ensuring that communities provide for the needs of their citizens – which will also change over time. Important elements of this which impact older persons include infrastructure to support ease of movement, the provision of accessible public services and vibrant, inclusive public spaces.

We have provided comprehensive policy proposals on the infrastructure in our towns and cities, most recently in our ‘Place’-focused Budget 2022 submission. Our cities and towns have become increasingly hostile environments for those who do not travel by car, particularly for those who are infirm or aged. Small barriers such as kerbs can become insurmountable to those with mobility issues or the uneven surface caused by dips in footpaths (to allow vehicle access) can provide a further hurdle.<sup>14</sup> An unsafe travel environment makes active travel less inviting for these groups and poses a particular threat to the health and safety of older persons. Local Authorities have a special role in creating people-friendly towns and cities, one which we recognise in our [Excellence in Local Government Awards](#) through the Age Friendly Initiative category.

Public services play an important role in the day-to-day life of each of us but their accessibility has become more limited with the shift from in-person to digital services and the consolidation and closure of services including post offices and bank branches. For older persons, these services are of social importance as well as allowing them to manage their personal affairs. As we outlined in our submission on the Postal Regulation Strategy 2022-2024, increased urbanisation and an ageing population will

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<sup>13</sup> [Chambers Ireland response to the Public Consultation Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the Health Sector](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Chambers Ireland’s submission to the Department of Transport’s Sustainable Mobility Policy Review](#)

increase the importance of An Post's Universal Service Offering to ensure that elderly persons who are digitally disadvantaged have access to alternatives forms of communication.<sup>15</sup>

Action	Value of action/ extent of impact/ positive outcomes/ learnings
<b>Older persons and development</b>	
Digitalisation training to address issues of knowledge and competence	There is a great need to invest in the digital skills of older people and those who are older to reduce the likelihood that they may become digitally disadvantaged, and so more socially isolated, as they grow older still
The rollout of nationwide access to high-speed broadband	While the development of technological skills is important, key to developing them is the capacity to use them, and the parts of the country where older people are more likely to be a greater share of the population are older, tend to have poor to non-existent digital infrastructure.
Focused spending on training for those in employment through the National Training Fund	To ensure that people remain engaged in the workforce as long as possible, it is important that greater, and better, use is made of the National Training Fund to ensure that those who are today active in the workforce have the skills to continue for as long as possible.
Focused effort to keep women in employment, and specific efforts to reintroduce older women into the workforce	Older women are twice as likely to have become disengaged from the workforce than men. As they spend less time in the workforce it becomes increasingly more challenging for them to return. Counteracting this will need significant attention.
Increased supports for people with caring duties will disproportionately benefit women (98% of full-time carers are women) and older ones in particular	Women begin being excluded from the workforce as a result of the childcare needs. They may also become burdened with other caring needs too.

<sup>15</sup> [Chambers Ireland submission to the Commission for Communications Regulation on its Postal Regulation Strategy](#)

<p>A national flexible working strategy is needed which looks beyond the narrow focus on remote working and seeks to create a framework that supports everyone who can engage with the labour force to the greatest extent that is feasible.</p>	<p>Flexible workplaces will help those that have caring duties of a temporary kind to maintain contact with employment, and ensure that their skills do not degrade through disuse. They will also create greater opportunities for those who have become alienated from the workforce to reintegrate into it.</p>
<p><b>Advancing health and well-being into old age/ Ensuring enabling and supportive environments</b></p>	
<p>From the Chambers Ireland perspective these two areas cannot be disentangled, neither is possible unless policies in the other area are also effective</p>	
<p>Comfortable and inclusive street furniture and pedestrianised areas would help to encourage older people to be more active – physically and in the community</p>	<p>Our urban centres need to be reshaped to facilitate walking and cycling by all people, with older people needing additional services such as benches for sitting on which are designed with older people in mind. They should also be distributed with a frequency that they can help people make journeys without fear. Similarly, a vastly increased number of accessible convenience facilities are needed in our cities and towns.</p>
<p>Support a broader choice of activities “after hours” with a mix of attractions that cater for a diversity of ages, income levels and cultures should be incorporated.</p>	<p>Our night-time economy needs to provide activities which cater to the interests of older people, and help them maintain connections with their community across all ages</p>
<p>15-minute-towns and cities</p>	<p>There is a critical need to build our neighbourhoods and urban spaces around the concept that 95% of the day-to-day journeys we need to make can be carried out within a 10-15 minute walk of where we live.</p> <p>While it is vital that this shift is made for environmental reasons, no cohort will benefit quite as much as older people who will find their world opens up before them as the poor planning problems that have inhibited their experience of the world are undone</p>

<p>An unsafe travel environment makes active travel less inviting for these groups and poses a particular threat to the health and safety of older persons.</p>	<p>The built infrastructure concerns that we have been highlighting throughout this document are key to ensure that people can maintain their capacities for as long as possible. When mobility is structurally inhibited it is not possible for the individual to resolve the problem, and so their health inevitably declines.</p>
<p>Access to ambulatory care and health services</p>	<p>As healthcare moves towards a more decentralised model it is vital that healthcare centres are accessible through active travel means. They should be available within that 15-minute zone around someone's home or else we will continue to see older people delay engaging with treatment until it becomes a critical incident that needs much more substantial treatment, and a greater likelihood of being debilitating for the patient involved</p>



