

Focus On...

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Centre for Ageing Research
and Development in Ireland



Focus on innovative community projects for older people

Introduction

Activities and projects in local communities are an essential element in maximising the participation, capacity and inclusion of older people in society. They can also help to build intergenerational solidarity and help to combat social isolation. In addition, these projects are a means for older people who have retired to continue to bring their skills and expertise in contributing to local communities and society as a whole.

This edition of the CARDI “Focus on . . .” series looks at some innovative community projects for older people across the island of Ireland, showing how innovations can harness the contributions of older people as a social resource.

Key findings

- In ROI, over half of the income for non-profit organisations comes from state grants or contracts (53%) while in NI, government and public bodies provide 62% of income (The Wheel, 2012) (NICVA, 2012).
- Older people are the main beneficiary group of 8.4% of voluntary and community groups in NI (NICVA, 2012).

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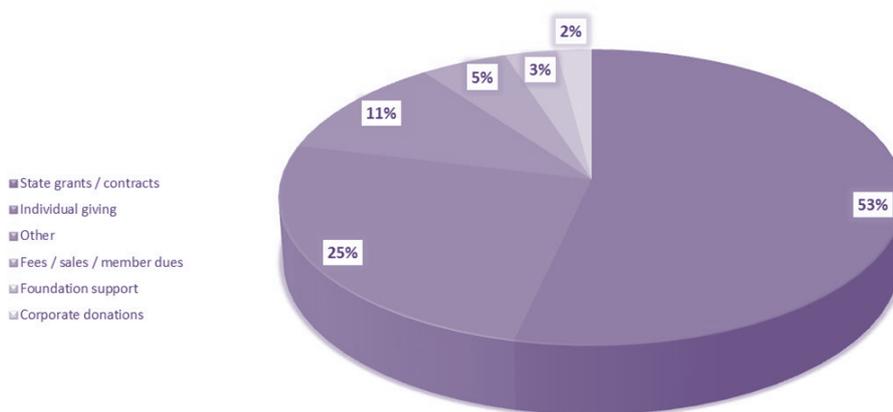
- Higher levels of social engagement result in lower levels of physical and cognitive limitations over time, as well as a lower risk of mortality (Thomas, 2011) (Thomas, 2012).
- Low mobility is associated with low social engagement even in the absence of disability (Rosso et al., 2013).
- There is a new paradigm for growing old in communities that highlights the unique contributions of older adults as a core social resource (Black, Dobbs, & Young, 2012).

Community projects in NI and ROI

In ROI in 2009, there were at least 11,700 organisations employing over 100,000 people, involving over 560,000 volunteers in their work and managing turnover of €5.75bn (The Wheel, 2012). In NI, there are over 4,800 community or voluntary organisations with a workforce of almost 28,000 people and 88,000 volunteers¹. The sector has an annual income of £741.9million. 6.4% of the organisations are older people’s organisations while older people are the main beneficiaries of 8.4% of voluntary and community organisations in NI (NICVA, 2012).

In ROI, over half of the income for non-profit organisations comes from state grants or contracts (53%). 25% of income is from individual giving and other sources include foundation income, corporate donations or membership fees.

Figure 1: Sources of income for non-profit organisations in ROI



Source: The Wheel (2012)

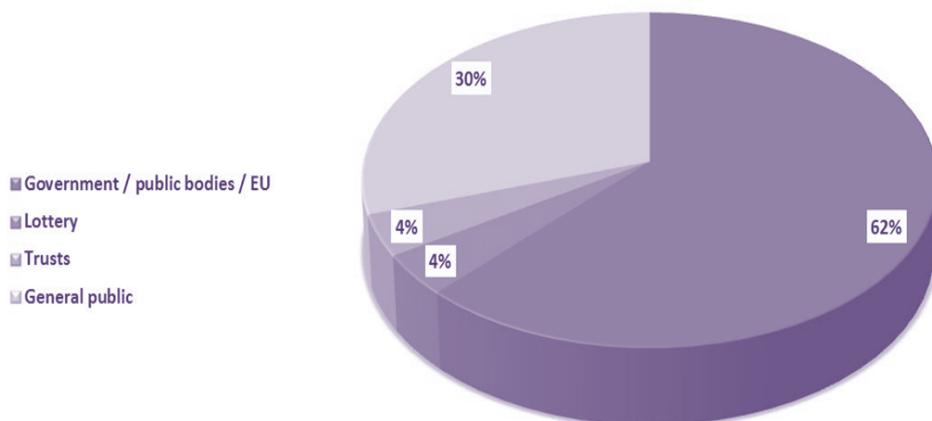
The most popular focus of activities for the non-profit sector in ROI are culture & arts (8%), overseas development (7%), social services (6%) and economic, social & community development (6%) (The Wheel, 2012). There is no current

¹ The definition of volunteering in NI is “the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside (or in addition to) one’s immediate family” while the definition in ROI is “the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society, local communities, individuals outside the immediate family, the environment and other causes” (CARDI, 2011).

research identifying the target groups for the services of non-profit organisations in ROI.

As in ROI, the majority of funding for voluntary and community sector organisations in NI comes from government sources- either central government (34%) or non-departmental public bodies (17%). Other government sources include EU funds, local government or health and education bodies (NICVA, 2012).

Figure 2: Sources of income for voluntary and community organisations in NI



Source: NICVA (2012)

When asked to describe the sub-sector which best describes their organisation, 6.4% of community and voluntary organisations in NI said “older people”. Older people are the main beneficiary group of 8.4% of voluntary and community groups in NI. Community development was the most common activity of the groups (15%), followed by children & families (14%) and health & wellbeing (8%) (NICVA, 2012).

Participation in community projects

Social engagement was measured in the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) in ROI. 6% of women and 7% of men were in the most socially isolated category while 26% of men and 27% of women were in the most social engaged category. TILDA showed that among the over 75 age group, men were more socially engaged than women. The study also showed that quality of life increased with greater social integration. Participation in formal activities outside of work, including volunteering, was greatest among older adults with higher levels of education (TILDA, 2011).

In a study of older people in NI conducted in 2005, loneliness was considered to be the second biggest issue facing the over 65s, after the fear of crime (Evason et al., 2005). A survey of older people living in Belfast found that almost one-fifth (19%) never went out to the shops and 38% said that they never went out to use local services such as the post office or library. Problems with health and mobility were identified as the biggest factors in restricting and preventing older people getting out and about (Engage with Age, 2010).

Higher levels of social engagement result in lower levels of physical and cognitive limitations over time (Thomas, 2011). Furthermore, a US study published in 2012 showed that higher levels of social engagement result in a lower risk of mortality. This was after controlling for other factors that influence risk of mortality such as socio-demographic factors, health conditions and

health behaviours. The research indicates that maintaining high levels of social engagement in later life is important for the health of older adults (Thomas, 2012).

A study of African-American men aged 55-95 in Detroit published in 2013 showed that community engagement had a positive effect not just on well-being in this group of older men but also had a positive effect on perceptions of neighbourhood conditions, with the more community engaged men having much more positive perceptions of their neighbourhoods (Tiernan et al., 2013).

Involvement in community projects increases social engagement so the development of innovative community projects that appeal to all older people is important for physical as well as mental health. Choice is an important aspect of getting older people involved – particularly as older people in the future will be an increasingly diverse group with differing needs and interests.

Innovative project examples

Many community projects that involve or cater for older people are based on a traditional view of older generations as in need of care and support. Newer, more innovative community projects focus on harnessing the skills of older people as well as providing a forum for interaction and social engagement. A study on ageing in the community conducted in the US using a community-based initiative found that there are six “actionable themes” for promoting ageing with dignity and independence in the community:

1. Meaningful involvement
2. Ageing in place
3. Respect and inclusion
4. Communication and information
5. Transportation and mobility
6. Health and well-being

The research indicates that there is a new paradigm for community ageing that highlights the unique contributions of older adults as a core social resource (Black et al., 2012). Innovative community projects should take account of this new paradigm in order to appeal to more independent older generations of the future.

A selection of examples under each of the six actionable themes in Black et al. (2012) can be found below.

Meaningful involvement

Men's sheds

Research from Australia reveals that older men tend not to participate in formal, adult education programmes. Older men were traditionally also less inclined to participate in community activities. However, learning is effective for older men in community settings when it is social, local, practical, situated, and in groups, particularly for older, sometimes isolated men who have experienced a range of setbacks in life (Golding, 2010). Developed in Australia, the idea of *Men's Sheds* is to provide a forum for informal learning and social engagement for men. The concepts of *Men's Sheds* have shown that an innovative idea that caters to groups who may not otherwise be socially engaged can make an enormous difference to those groups.

There are now over 1,100 *Men's Sheds* worldwide, with 900 existing in their country of origin. *Men's Sheds* are not for profit organisations that aim to provide advice to and improve the overall health of all men. It is a forum to encourage social activities and friendships as well as providing health information to men. The sheds operate on a local level in the community, promoting social interaction and an increased quality of life. There are over 100 sheds across the island of Ireland and the first *Men's Sheds Association* in the Northern Hemisphere was established in Ireland in 2011. Members are from both NI and ROI. In a 2013 report on *Men's Sheds*, just one third of men reported having a positive educational experience in school, but over three-quarters reported being keen to access more learning opportunities in the *Men's Sheds* (Carragher, 2013).

Ageing in place

Abitare Solidale

Governments in NI and ROI have stated a policy preference for older people to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. For many older people, however, living alone can be a significant challenge, particularly if they have limited mobility. One community project in Italy is addressing this in a novel way.

The Auser association was established in Italy in 1989 and now works through 1,412 local associations around the country. It has 260,000 members as well as 40,000 active volunteers. The aim of the organisation is to assist older people in continuing to play an active role in society after retirement. In co-operation with the Municipality of Florence, Auser has developed *Abitare Solidale*, a project which supports inter- and intra- generational cohabitation as an integrated solution to tackle different kinds of social problems.

Older people can benefit from living with other groups in need, such as, families who need childcare support, women who are victims of domestic violence or people in need of affordable and appropriate accommodation. The older people get companionship as well as housekeeping and household maintenance in return. The project brings together the complementary needs and resources of older people living alone with people at risk of social exclusion and poverty who are seeking safe accommodation and new opportunities in their lives.

Social workers, public authorities and volunteers work together to provide tailor-made housing solutions as well as support and protection to users in all stages of the cohabitation. The project aims to optimise existing housing stock while providing an alternative to nursing homes for older people who would not otherwise be able to live alone without support (Innoserv, 2012).

Respect and inclusion

GAA Social Initiative

The all-island *GAA Social Initiative* was founded in 2010 as a result former President of ROI Mary McAleese and her husband Martin noticing an absence of older men in attendance at official functions during their visits to local communities. It is a club-based, all-Ireland project that aims to use GAA clubs

as a means to provide older men with a social outlet that will facilitate their full engagement in community life.

The initiative also has a specific aim of preventing vulnerable older men from lapsing into social isolation. It presents opportunities for men to participate in social gatherings, attending GAA games, health-related activities and community projects (GAA, 2010). One example is the use of theatre to attract older men to a social community activity – two plays were staged in 2012 and older men were encouraged to attend. The events were also used as fundraising for the initiative itself (GAA Social Initiative, 2012).

An important aspect of the *GAA Social Initiative* is the encouragement of people to participate. The initiative uses any and all local resources in an attempt to identify suitable people for approach, such as GPs; health nurses; postal workers; religious figures and other men's groups (Kilbride, 2011).

Communication and information

Fáilte Isteach

Third Age in ROI developed the *Fáilte Isteach* community project in 2006. It aims to help migrants coming into the country with low levels of English by providing free conversational classes. Older people who are members of Third Age volunteer their time as tutors, beginning with just 12 tutors in 2006 and developing to over 500 in 2014. As well as building intergenerational solidarity between younger migrants and older tutors, the project utilises the teaching skills of older people.

There are now over 50 projects operating throughout ROI, and a thousand hours of free tuition are provided each week to people from over 70 countries. The project is supported by the government Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration which sits within the Department of Justice and Equality, as well as other private foundations (Third Age, 2014).

Transportation and mobility

ITN America

A not-for-profit organisation *ITN America*, founded in Portland Maine but now expanded across the country, aims to provide door-to-door transport to thousands of older people across the US. This is an innovative solution that interacts with local and state government to provide on-demand tailored driving service. Older people can trade in their own cars to pay for transport, and volunteer drivers can store up credits to provide for their own future transport needs.

Volunteer credits are also used to fund older people with low incomes in using the programme. Adult children can also buy gift certificates for older relatives to use the system. As with budget airlines, trips booked in advance for off-peak hours are cheaper than last-minute journeys in rush hour. The organisers have also linked with shopping and health centres to co-fund trips made by older people (ITN America, 2014).

Spring Chickens

The Big Telly theatre company based in Northern Ireland run a community initiative which aims to challenge perceptions of older people as members of their communities. The project, “*Spring Chickens*” is a creative arts project which focuses on increasing creative expression and engagement among older people throughout NI. It encourages older people, many of whom have never been to the theatre before, into the arts (The National Lottery, 2014).

In this programme older people from different backgrounds come together for a workshop that involves role-play, storytelling, characterisations and mime. The workshops can take place in sheltered accommodations, residential homes, day-care centres, older peoples groups and homes in rural areas. The workshops aim to provide both personal and social benefits to participants. In 2009, as part of the *Spring Chickens* programme five simultaneous theatre performances by older people themselves took place across NI (The National Lottery, 2014).

Policy in ROI

The *National Positive Ageing Strategy* in ROI formally notes the significant role that the community and voluntary sector has as both a service provider and advocate in the implementation of the strategy. In particular, the strategy notes that the sector has first-hand experience of close working with older people as well as experience of advocacy on behalf of older people and a commitment to social solidarity and equality (Department of Health, 2013).

One of the stated objectives in the strategy is to promote the concept of active citizenship, encouraging people of all ages to become more involved in and to contribute to their own communities. The strategy aims to develop opportunities for older people to participate in a range of arts, cultural, spiritual, leisure, learning and physical activities in their local communities. This policy recognises the new requirements of older people in terms of active involvement, although an implementation framework for the strategy is yet to be published (Department of Health, 2013).

Healthy Ireland – the framework for improved health and well-being in ROI published in 2013 also includes support for community and local group led projects. In aiming to create an environment where every individual and sector of society can play a role in achieving a Healthy Ireland, the framework notes that projects run by community and local groups can augment the work done by government departments and organisations (Department of Health, 2013).

Policy in NI

One of the aims of the strategy for older people in NI published in 2005, *Ageing in an Inclusive Society*, was “to promote equality of opportunity for older people and their full participation in civic life” (OFMDFM, 2005). Voluntary and community sector organisations are represented by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action which is a membership organisation and national infrastructure body.

In February 2014, a new NI *Active Ageing Strategy* was launched for consultation. Participation is a core strategic aim, with the strategy including

commitments to involve older people in policies and decision making, as well as promoting digital inclusion. As part of the new strategy, the NI Executive will work with local councils to find new ways to increase the number of older people taking part in leisure activities (OFMDFM, 2014).

A new public health strategic framework was published in NI in 2012. *Fit & Well – Changing Lives* notes that community is a determinant of health and well-being. The participation of people in their communities and the added control over their lives that this brings has the potential to contribute to well-being and other health outcomes (DHSSPS, 2012).

Conclusion

Social engagement is important for the health, well-being and independence of older people. Higher levels of social engagement also have a positive impact on the risk of mortality among older age groups. Community projects that cater to the needs of diverse groups of older people are important in encouraging social engagement and interaction. Projects should also contribute to the independence of older people as well as harnessing the immense potential older age groups have in contributing positively to society.

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