



## **AONTAS is requesting that Pobal includes people over the age of 65 as a target group in its next iteration of SICAP.**

### **Context:**

Ireland has seen a huge increase in life expectancy in the last decade. Between 2010 and 2015, the proportion of Ireland's population over the age of 65 grew from 11.3 per cent to 13.1 per cent. This represents an increase of nearly 100,000 people in the over 65 age group in just five years. (Age Action Ireland CLG, 2017)

According to Age Action Ireland, over one-quarter of people aged over 65 live alone. This puts this group of people at risk of social exclusion. Another factor that can contribute to social exclusion for this group includes restrictions in mobility, with over half of older people experiencing some restriction in mobility and of those aged 75 and over, 22% are 'strongly limited'. Furthermore, Age Action highlights concerns about emotional poverty among older people. Rural isolation in particular can have a particularly negative effect on the well-being of older people.

Adult education can contribute significantly to addressing such challenges. The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of all adults to quality learning **throughout their lives**. In light of this we are requesting that Pobal considers the inclusion of those over the age of 65 as a target group in the next iteration of the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

### **Community Education:**

Community education is adult education which takes place in local community settings. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their communities, and is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. Community education therefore results in wide ranging positive outcomes for individuals, their communities, and society as a whole, by increasing social cohesion as well as empowering people to be engaged learners and active citizens.

In Ireland community education is funded by numerous bodies including Education and Training Boards (ETBs) under Solas, the HSE, other government departments, philanthropic and other charitable organisations as well as EU initiatives. **Many projects involved in the delivery of community education are funded under the Pobal programme SICAP** and many are members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). The CEN is the only national network of independent, voluntary community education groups. Many SICAP funded projects have a history of community development work and expertise in supporting

participation in education by the most marginalised people in their local communities, including people over the age of 65.

Community education has been cited in a number of high profile international reports as an effective mechanism to increase lifelong learning participation, a key goal of the European Commission. The European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2014-2020 'supports learning opportunities **from childhood to old age** in every single life situation'. (European Commission, 2017).

Numerous research reports have highlighted the impact of community based adult education in terms of reducing isolation, increasing social inclusion, well-being and mental health in those over the age of 65. Findings in such reports have included the following:

### **Decreased Social Isolation and Improved Mental Health and Well-Being:**

A significant finding from a study carried out in Limerick is that the community education setting was noted "by approximately half of the learners as a venue where personal issues such as loneliness, the impact of suicide and addiction issues etc. can be discussed with other learners" resulting in tangible supports among participants (Power, et al., 2011). The AONTAS study More than Just a Course backs up this finding highlighting that, for older people, adult learning works to prevent their isolation and social exclusion and helps them maintain well-being. (AONTAS, 2011).

A UK study (Dench & Regan, 2000) which explored the impact of learning on older people showed that 80% of older learners reported a positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas: enjoyment of life, confidence, self-concept, life satisfaction and ability to cope.

Community education also provides a positive first step back to education for many older people who have had previous negative experiences of the education system. In the Limerick study many learners commented on how difficult their formal education experience was and, accordingly, had a degree of fear and hesitancy about returning to education.

There were also numerous examples in this study of participation in classes and the subsequent establishment of informal networks and increased self-confidence. (Power, et al., 2011). A Europe wide study backs this evidence up though it's finding that adults over the age of 65 who engage in adult education benefit more than any other group in terms of health and mental well-being, with social interaction being seen as an important source of well-being (Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, 2014)

### **Improved Intergenerational Relationships:**

Improved familial communication was evidenced through a variety of examples in the Limerick study. Additionally findings in this study suggest that the adult learners that participated in the research are now cognisant of the need to demonstrate to children and grandchildren that learning is not something that should 'stop at the school gates' (Power, et al., 2011)

Community education classes have likewise created opportunities for people of different age groups to interact and socialise with one another. Cooperation between mixed age groups who may traditionally have had no previous interactions with one another is a highly beneficial outcome of community education. Intergenerational projects also provide a way of carrying on traditions and pass on local culture to younger generations and can result in older people having an increased sense of security in their communities (Butts, et al., 2007)

### **Improved Digital Literacy:**

The Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI) has highlighted that 53% of people aged 60–74 in Ireland, have never used the internet, compared with 3% of those aged 16–29. According to Eurostat only 7% of those aged 65+ use e-government services, which is a cause for concern. The main factor restricting use of the internet in ROI, according to this study, is lack of skills, cited by 46% of those aged 65+. Furthermore studies have shown that confidence using the internet declines with age. (Hardill, 2013)

A report commissioned by Age and Opportunity (Bailey, 2012) finds that 20% of people over the age of 55 who are engaging in community education are participating in IT related courses. This highlights the demand for such provision, a finding that is backed up by anecdotal evidence from CEN members, many of whom struggle to meet the demand for IT classes for people in this age bracket. Community education provides low or no cost courses for people with low IT literacy skills in a local, non-threatening environment and consequently can help to narrow the digital divide between older and younger adults.

### **Greater Community Engagement:**

The Limerick study mentioned above found evidence of increased community engagement as a result of engagement in community education. Through activities organised in local community settings, adult learners in Limerick City were offered a number of “different opportunities to be active in their local community. These opportunities included the establishment of parent-support groups, nominations to Boards of Management of local schools and signing up to other locally-run activities”. (Power, et al., 2011)

Community education can also be a catalyst for social cohesion resulting in an increased likelihood of learners intervening in situations in their community that threaten community cohesion, like anti-social behaviour. (AONTAS, 2011)

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As has been highlighted in this submission, adults over the age of 65 are at increased risk of social isolation, digital exclusion and mental health issues. The mission of Pobal is to “work on behalf of Government and in partnership with various stakeholders to improve outcomes, particularly for people experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion”. Social inclusion can be achieved through engagement in community education programmes supported by SICAP funded organisations. Community education is underpinned by a human rights approach to education and does not discriminate on the basis of age. It is a fundamental aspect of any social inclusion community development programme and can support the achievement of Pobal’s mission.

The National Positive Ageing Strategy aims to “promote the concept of active citizenship and the value of volunteering, and encourage people of all ages to become more involved in and to contribute to their own communities”. The Strategy also aims to provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities; and to support people as they age to maintain, improve or manage their physical and mental health and wellbeing (Department of Health, 2013). Excluding people over the age of 65 from the SICAP programme is completely at odds with the National Positive Ageing Strategy.

In light of this, and the evidence highlighting the role that community education can play in helping the government to meet its own age friendly targets, AONTAS requests that Pobal gives our submission consideration and acknowledges the rights of people over the age of 65 by including them as a target group in the next SICAP programme.

**This submission is endorsed by both Age Action Ireland and Age and Opportunity.**

**For Further Information Please Contact:**

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