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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Working Towards an Age Friendly Strategy for Cork, 2024-2028

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CORK AGE FRIENDLY CITY PROGRAMME

UCC University College Cork, Ireland Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

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About the Project Partners

This project brought together the members of the Cork Age Friendly Programme with PhD research students in University College Cork to make the first steps towards the development of a new Age Friendly strategy for Cork City, Ireland.

Each year a number of postgraduate students in University College Cork partner with a community organisation as part of their engagement in a module called "Community Based Participatory Research". The module has been running since 2016 and is coordinated by three UCC staff members Kenneth Burns (School of Applied Social Studies and Community Academic Research Links), Ruth Hally (Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning - CIRTL), and Catherine O'Mahony (Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning - CIRTL and Community Academic Research Links). The module is co-run with Community Academic Research Links which is an engaged research initiative at UCC which links community groups with students and staff doing research to explore a research question of interest to the community group. In 2024, nine PhD students from across the University enrolled on the module with the Cork Age Friendly City Programme. For the duration of the module (which lasts approximately 8 weeks), the students attend participatory meetings with the community partner one week, and the following week they participate in classroom-based sessions with the module coordinators on campus.

The main aim of Age Friendly Ireland is to make Ireland a great place for older people to live in and age in, with dignity and independence. Age Friendly Ireland is a shared service of national government with local authorities delivering the national Age Friendly City and County Programmes (31 Local Authorities) who support all of society to prepare for the major demographic change presented by an ageing population. The Age Friendly programme sits within the World Health Organisation framework and global movement, tackling the challenges and opportunities of our ageing population by empowering local authorities to lead the way in changing perceptions about ageing and how services are organised and provided.

The Cork Age Friendly City Programme is the umbrella term given to all actions and activities that contribute to Cork's designation as an Age Friendly City. To progress the continued growth of Cork as an Age Friendly City, a revised strategy is necessary. The implementation of the strategy is supported by the Age Friendly Alliance. The Age Friendly Alliance is a group of people including nominated representatives of the Cork City Older Person's Forum, the Age Friendly Coordinator, and representatives of organisations that play a key role in implementing actions in fulfilment of an Age Friendly strategy. Ultimate responsibility for the strategy sits with Cork City Council. A series of Older Person's forums are organised across the year, and these forums accommodate a steady communication loop with Cork's older people and the agencies who play key roles in Cork's functionality and development (aka The Alliance). The Age Friendly Alliance is a high-level cross-sector group, chaired by

the Chief Executive of Cork City Council, whose member agencies form an overarching strategic partnership to develop and oversee the realisation of the Age Friendly City Strategy.

This report is written as a short summary of the process to share the learning for other community groups. A digital copy of this report can be downloaded from the Community Academic Research Links website – click here and scroll to completed projects 2024. Thanks to Ballyphehane Community Centre, Nano Nagle Place, and Cork City Council for hosting the community events.

Introduction to the collaboration

This collaboration came at an interesting point for the Cork Age Friendly City Programme. The previous Age Friendly Strategy for the city covered 2016 – 2020 and work on the new strategy had been delayed due to Covid. In that time period the city expanded its borders. The focus of the collaboration, based on initial discussions with the Cork Age Friendly Coordinator, was to begin the development of the next strategy (2024-2028) with older adults. The proposed guiding question was:

"What are the themes of importance for older adults for the 2024-2028 Cork Age Friendly City Strategy?"

The Cork Age Friendly City coordinator recruited a group of older persons and relevant stakeholders to participate in the project. These individuals were recruited from various communities, voluntary and social groups, and included representation from relevant stakeholder groups such as the HSE and the Cork Public Participation Network and Age Friendly representatives. UCC had nine students enrolled on the module and the three module lecturers, bringing the combined group to about 25 people.

The group met on Wednesday mornings for 4 x 2.5-hour sessions from February to March. In these sessions, the large group engaged in a series of exercises to encourage discussion on people's experience of living in Cork, and their preferences for an Age Friendly City. On the 10th April 2024, the group came together for a final public facing session in the Cork City Hall as part of the Cork Life Long Learning Festival.

Key Stages of the Partnership

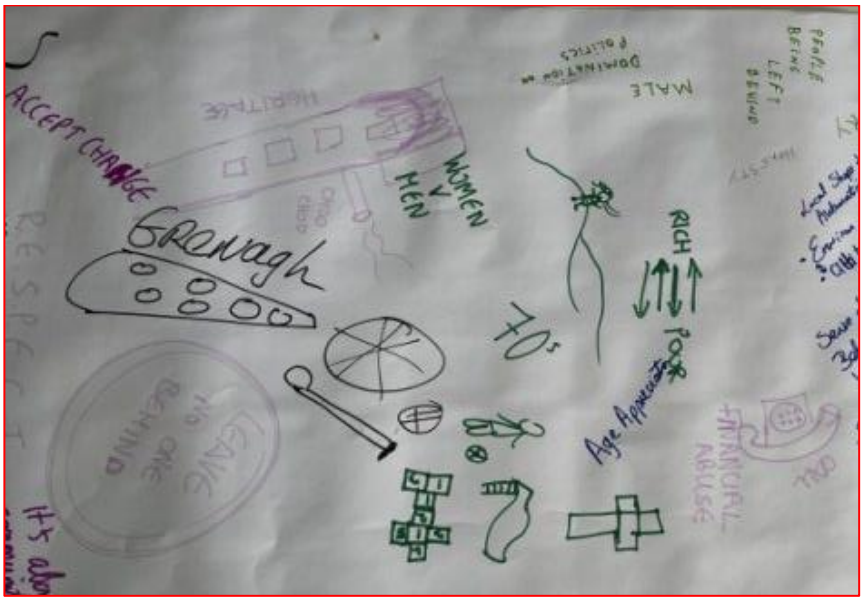
Stage 1: Group Formation and Early Discussions

Our first meeting took place in the Oak Room in the Nano Nagle Place. Because the Cork City Council staff working on the Cork Age Friendly City Programme recruited the participants joining the UCC researchers, many of the individuals were unfamiliar with each other. Many of these people shared a common interest; to make Cork a place that is safe, healthy, and supportive of ageing. Aside from this common interest, they didn't know each other therefore work had to be directed to building trust and collegiality among the group.

Ruth (UCC) and Stephen (Cork City Council) provided an overview on the collaboration; how did the collaboration come about and what do we intend to do together? The first exercise aimed to uncover a bit about each other and where we came from. Students shared a little about their hometown/city and what made it unique. While this exercise helped to loosen things up a bit, it was apparent that the community group really wanted to talk about Cork as an Age Friendly City and to make progress in this regard. At this point, the guiding question was presented, and all agreed that the focus of the collaboration should be on identifying themes for the next Cork Age Friendly City Strategy.

Stage 2: Brainstorming and Exploration of Potential Themes

Significant ground was covered during these sessions. One opening exercise encouraged participants to reflect on what their families did for fun when they were children or what games they played as kids. This task gave people space to reflect on what made them



happy as children and the factors that influenced that happiness e.g. few cars, playing safely outside, familiarity with neighbours. It helped to clarify what should be prioritised in the next strategy as well as unearthing cultural traditions that should be nourished. This sparked many conversations about the need for intergenerational and intercultural activities in Cork with the participants excitedly sharing ideas.

A further example of work untaken by the group was when the group examined the previous Cork Age Friendly City Strategy (2016 – 2020). They approached this through the following steps:

- Assess what areas the strategy made progress on.
- Identify key changes that have occurred since the last strategy which are likely to impact the future strategy such a
    - Rise in immigration levels leading to a more diverse population
    - Post covid context
    - Climate emergency
    - Acute housing crisis and increased levels of homelessness
- Reflect on the composition, role, and function of the Age Friendly Alliance.

This task stimulated lots of discussion on the role and function of the Age Friendly Alliance with a few group members expressing frustration at inconsistent representation from some organisations represented on the AF Alliance. Group members expressed the need to have consistent, committed attendees from all organisations, with staff or representatives who are 'decision-makers'. This was a recurring theme and one that required dedicated time. Stephen spoke about the leadership and commitment offered by the Alliance Chair, Cork City Council Chief Executive, and there was widespread appreciation of her investment in the Cork Age Friendly Programme.

To stimulate discussion and inject new energy, an exercise focussed on a global, age friendly dimension was facilitated. Three students and one community participant took part as follows:

Step 1
At your table, tell the group the city/town and country in which you grew up or most associate with.

- You might ask people are they familiar with it, have they been there?
- Maybe drawn a rough outline of the country on the shared paper and an X where your city/town is.
- Tell the group if your city is known for anything in particular - famous world heritage sites, rare animals, a poet or actor, political upheaval, etc.

Step 2
Share a story, example or policy that illustrates how your city/town is (or isn't?) Age Friendly. You can draw on a personal story such as a memory you have from childhood, or you can share a recent government policy, cultural movement etc.

Step 3
The larger group will come back together. One person from each table (not a UCC person) will be asked to share what they learned including anything of relevance for the next Age Friendly City strategy.

Step 4
The student and the person giving the feedback will put a sticker on the world map to indicate where in the world the city is.

The purpose of this exercise was: to learn from the practices and cultures of cities around the world, and to stimulate ideas among the group regarding what Cork could do to become an Age Friendly City. Importantly, it served to ensure we got to know each other more, value our differences and similarities, and build trust. This exercise galvanized the group and was the precursor to defining what elements must be in the new strategy.

Stage 3: Emergence and Development of Themes

Significant ground was covered in the 3rd and 4th community sessions. One of the module coordinators presented an overview of current policies and statistics related to aging in Ireland and this overview was made available to the group. The information shared helped to contextualise and situate the conversations that were occurring among the group while also bolstering the emerging findings.

Everyone took part in the Unfinished Sentences exercise which required individuals to think about Cork in the future. Individuals were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. I would be happier living in Cork if...
2. The type of city I want to live in is one where…
3. I could contribute to Cork being an Age Friendly City by…

On campus the following week, the students and module coordinators undertook an analysis of the responses to the Unfinished Sentences, and all the information generated to this point in the process. The findings were presented to the group and the group provided

further input to create a model titled 'Working towards an Age Friendly Cork by 2028' (page 12). Figure 1 aims to summarise the main points arising from this collaboration, which are elaborated upon in the next section below.

Table 1: Summary of Key Findings from the Collaboration

Theme 1: Respect Older persons want to feel respected by society. This was the strongest and most prevalent theme throughout the collaboration. It is a cross-cutting issue and connects with how people experience the city and public places, e.g.: poor footpaths, dereliction, safety and garda presence, ineffective public transport system, services such as banking and healthcare. It is also felt in how older people are treated by others with little allowance made for mobility and other challenges associated with aging. People felt that there is a lack of respect for the wisdom and experiences of Ireland's aging population, and they'll feel other countries show more respect to older people. The group want opportunities to connect with younger generations to build reciprocal respect. *"My doctor said: you're getting old and you'll have to put up with it"*
Theme 2: Connection Loneliness and isolation are a significant challenge encountered by older persons. There are many factors that inhibit older adults from leaving their homes, primarily poor transport and feeling unsafe. There is a strong desire to socialise and contribute but this group felt that they need to be supported to do so. Personal stories of the acute loneliness experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic were shared as well as one wheelchair user sharing how she is inhibited from socialising due to poor infrastructure and provisions for those with disabilities (parking, footpaths). Terms such as 'community spirit' and ….? *"During Covid I nearly went mad. Only for X, I wouldn't see anyone from one end of the week to the next".*
Theme 3: Contribute The group spoke about wanting to volunteer and contribute to society. They want to do this for the social benefits and because they have significant expertise. They are passionate about making a contribution to society and making Cork a better place to live. They want informal opportunities to contribute such as being part of a local community group, and more formal opportunities such as invitations to committees or boards that align with their skillsets. They pointed to the mental and physical health benefits they gain from contributing and they want to be facilitated to contribute.

"Those outdoors gyms, why can't we organise an instructor to show us how to use those? Get more people out and about exercising and socialising".

Theme 4: Advocate

Intrinsically linked to being able to contribute was the group's innate need to advocate both for themselves and other older persons. They wanted opportunities to influence policy and public services, and to use their experiences to enhance urban planning and design. If advocacy isn't facilitated, then older people may be perceived as complainers whereas structured, effective advocacy roles would provide older persons with a platform to push for a more inclusive society. This group was bubbling with ideas and there was a collective feeling that their ideas and expertise was not been harnessed by those in decision making roles.

"I worked with the elderly for years as a nurse up until recently. I have so much knowledge, and I'm old now myself. I'd love to join a HSE board and advocate on behalf of the elderly".

Underpinning Conditions

There was also a range of 'underpinning conditions' or 'influencing factors'. These elements, cited frequently, were deemed as necessary for supporting and enabling the delivery of the core themes and objectives:

- Enhanced Garda Presence and Prioritisation of Public Safety
- Quality Physical Infrastructure
- Accessible Person-centred Healthcare
- An Effective and Sensitized Transport System

For example, people spoke about not being able to attend events or carry out daily living activities owing to a poorly functioning transport system. A poor transport system fuels loneliness and isolation.

Cross Cutting Actions

There were multiple ideas proposed by community participants to make headway on the different themes. The group sought to initiate and drive much of these actions through their own networks and communities. For example:

- Intergenerational projects and activities
- Festivals and Celebrations for older persons
- Intercultural projects and activities
- "Senior Olympics" (sports competition for older persons)

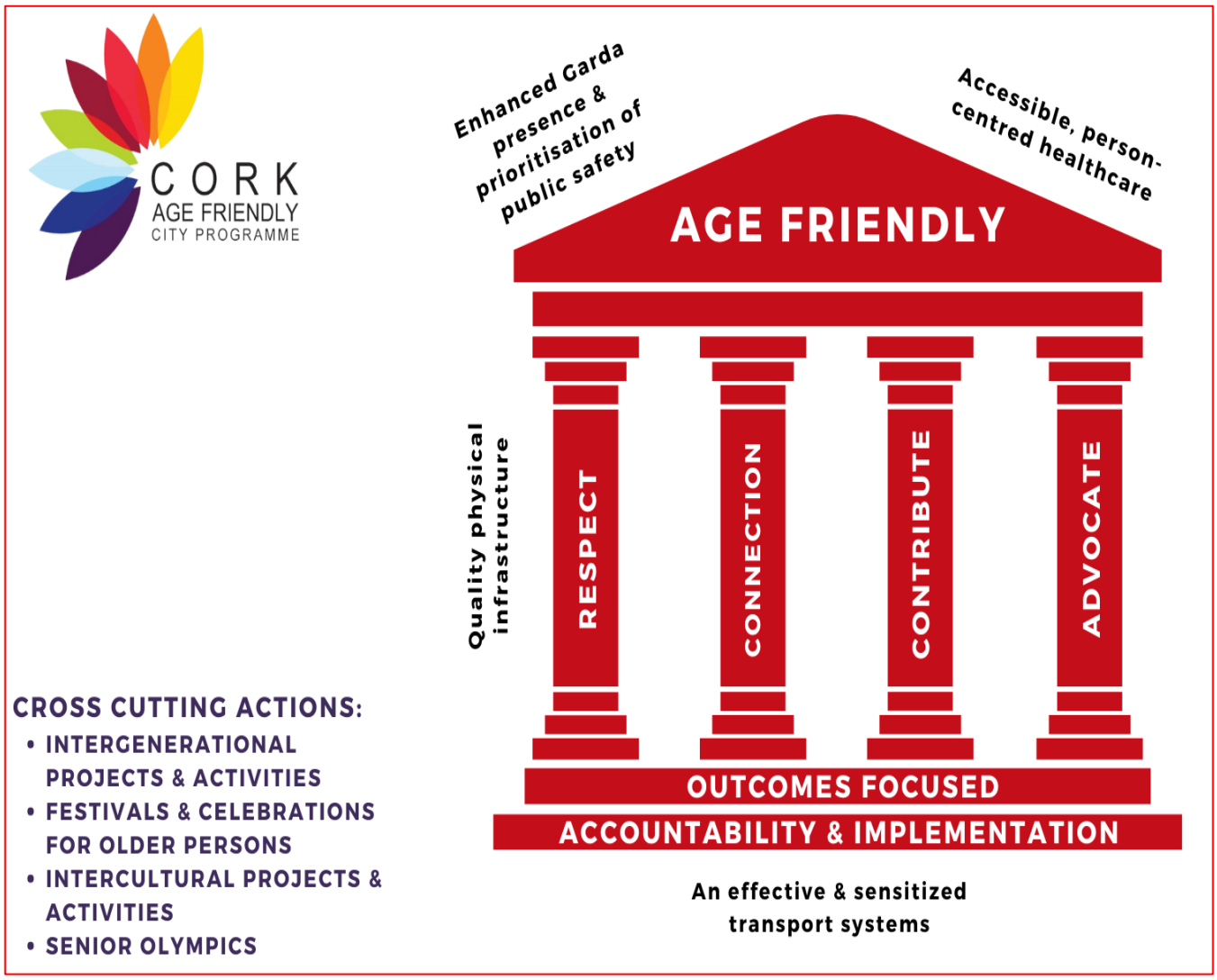
Lastly, to provide space to the group's criticism and curiosity about the Age Friendly Alliance, an exercise called 'Ask the Expert' (Kaner et al., 2014) was introduced whereby a

PhD student and a community participant sat together with a Cork City Council employee, Stephen, and asked him direct questions about the Alliance.

Stephen gave a complete overview of the Alliance; how it was formed, its function, how it has developed. The insights gleamed from this activity called for further adjustments to the model with people asking for words such as 'accountability' and a 'commitment to outcomes' to feature.

The community researchers wanted to signal, to those in positions of power, that this strategy should be pursued with sincerity and intent. In addressing concerns about the Alliance, who are fundamental for the strategy's ultimate success, the community participants felt heard. Equally, the Cork City Council and HSE staff with responsibility for the strategy's development and implementation verbalised a commitment to strengthening the Alliance and addressing the group's concerns. The below model 'Working towards an Age Friendly Cork by 2028' represents the key outcomes to arise from this project:

Figure 1. Working Towards an Age Friendly Cork by 2028



Stage 4: Public Presentation of Research Findings

In the initial planning discussion with our project partner before the collaboration began, it was proposed that the final meeting be public facing and an opportunity to mark the next stage in consultation for the strategy. The final session was scheduled for April 10th 2024 which coincided with the Cork Life Learning Festival so it was agreed that we should participate in the festival, share our learnings with the public and seek feedback on the research findings.

The format of the final session included a presentation from the module coordinator on the collaborative research. An overview of the process, including a tour of the tools and techniques applied, was provided so that attendees could get a sense of how the findings

emerged. The model was presented and talked through in detail. Following this there was a panel discussion where key actors responded to the research findings. There were over 100 attendees including strong representation from Alliance group members. Attendees were invited to partake in conversations on the five themes to assess whether the findings aligned with their own experiences and to develop the themes further. The session ended with an address from Cork City Council's Social Inclusion Specialist Rebecca Loughry where she outlined the plan for further consultation and development of the next Cork Age Friendly City strategy.

Conclusion

The group was encouraged by the start made by this collaborative endeavour. They hope that collective sense of achievement will contribute to a sense of commitment held by the Alliance members to successfully implement this strategy. It is their shared ambition that the energy created by this group helps to bind Alliance members to get behind this strategy and successfully implement it. The strongest messages surfaced by the older people in this project are as follows:

- Fortifying the alliance. The group called for the formation of a strong and committed alliance supported by the Age Friendly coordinator (AFC). An alliance with consistent representation from the different agencies and that felt a strong sense of accountability towards the aging population in Cork. The group hoped for enhanced communication with the alliance via the AFC and were eager to see what could be achieved together. Fortifying the alliance also includes supporting the Age Friendly representatives on the alliance to synthesize individual issues into broader themes linked to specific actions.

- Individualised commitment from agencies. The group wanted individualised responses to the 2024 - 2028 Cork Age Friendly Strategy from alliance members

rather than responses/inputs that can be applied to any city enhancing initiatives. They wanted agencies e.g. the HSE to assess how their services/actions could address the strategy's goals directly.

- Greater connection across shared goals. The findings highlight that all populations and sectors can benefit from Cork being an Age Friendly City and that greater connectivity needs to occur across different populations and cohorts of society. Key agencies such as Cork City Council and the HSE (Cork) could accelerate the achievement of priorities by having more shared activities that would connect different sections of society. Shared events and activities could foster independent relationships and synergies across different ages, cultures, and interests.

The 'Working towards an Age Friendly Cork by 2028' model provides a valuable template for future consultations. To produce a comprehensive and inclusive strategy, there was collective agreement that greater representation from diverse communities needs to be purposely pursued and engrained in future consultations. The Age Friendly Coordinator shared this viewpoint. The group called for consideration to older persons' needs when planning future consultations and any arising strategy evaluations such as paying attention to audio and accessibility issues.