Ageing Well Network

Introduction

The Ageing Well Network in the Republic of Ireland, created in 2007, filled a considerable gap. No forum existed for senior-level executives to come together and discuss, in a safe and stimulating environment, the challenges and promises of an expanding older population.

The careful and thoughtful approach of its leaders enabled the Ageing Well Network participants to create policy changes that have the potential to benefit tens of thousands of older people in Ireland.

Those changes, participants say, would not have come about without this forum. Many participants also say that they work in new ways and relate differently to those they sometimes saw as adversaries, leading to better, and more productive, work and working relationships.

The network had several key features that likely contributed to its success, including an insistence on senior-level participation from all organisations; use of the Chatham House Rule to ensure free-flowing discussions that would be kept confidential; and an ability to adapt to the needs of members, including changing from a think-tank to a catalyst for action.

During its six-year tenure, the Ageing Well Network experienced challenges to which its leaders and members had to adapt, including the economic recession that often took the attention of government participants, a feeling among some nongovernmental participants that civil servants received precedence and a need to find new ways to sustain the interest of its members.

The lessons learned from this complex undertaking provide a model for any sector that is fragmented and tackling issues that require a multitude of views, expertise and knowledge.

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CREATION OF THE AGEING WELL NETWORK

In the mid-2000s, The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) embarked on a major initiative in the ageing field in the Republic of Ireland. As part of its investment, Atlantic wanted to help build the infrastructure of the ageing sector.

Unlike other sectors, the ageing field was weak and fragmented. Individuals in nongovernmental organisations, academia and the government performed important work but rarely had the opportunity to talk to one another.

This was not simply a theoretical problem—it was an urgent, practical one. The population of those 80 and older was expected to as much as quadruple in the following 30 to 40 years. Over the same period, the country would see a shift from six people in the workplace for every person in retirement to two people for each retired person. The changes would have a fundamental impact on the structure of Irish society and would touch on every aspect of society—health, transportation, policing, the built environment, business and others. But as yet, there had been no overarching, coordinated response to this massive looming population shift.

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Because of its fragmented nature, the ageing sector had been ineffective in securing the resources and policy changes needed to improve the lives of older people. Further, those working in the ageing sector had not made use of valuable research that could have helped them better serve older people, which sometimes led them to wastefully "reinvent the wheel," according to an internal report on the sector.

Ageing had been a low priority for the government in the early 2000s. However, as the decade progressed, there were encouraging signs that policymakers were paying more attention to the needs of older people. With the expected increase in the population of older people, the government recognised the need for additional services such as community support, acute hospital beds and long-stay institutions. The government also saw the need to address the inadequate coordination of services.

As part of its investment in ageing and after consultations in the field, Atlantic funded two separate and complementary organisations: the Ageing Well Network and Older & Bolder.

Atlantic established Older & Bolder in 2006 to develop and strengthen the advocacy and policy capacity of its members. Older & Bolder began as a collaboration of five nongovernmental ageing organisations to undertake a communications campaign to influence the new government that would be elected in 2007. The main goal was for Ireland's older population to have a place on the new government agenda.

THE NETWORK'S FOCUS

Atlantic created the Ageing Well Network in 2007 with a different but complementary purpose to Older & Bolder. Its members were top executives from 75 organisations representing all elements of government, business and civil society. Preparatory research commissioned by Atlantic had concluded that there was no structure in the Republic of Ireland that served as an autonomous leadership network that was not "owned" by the government and that attracted membership at a senior level from the full range of academic, voluntary, business and public sectors, according to the internal report.

The primary aim of the Ageing Well Network was to act as a leadership network and think-tank for leaders in the ageing sector in which members could learn from each other and from national and international thinkers and practitioners. The focus of the network was deceptively simple: to explore effective approaches to realising a shared vision of "an Ireland that is a great country to grow old in."

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Mary Sutton, The Atlantic Philanthropies' country director, Ireland

"At the time, there were individuals working in the ageing field, but they were very isolated from each other," said Mary Sutton, The Atlantic Philanthropies' country director in Ireland. "There was very little cross-fertilisation of ideas and very little excitement about the notion of the field of ageing. There was very little of what you could call a field."

For example, individuals working in academic research, providing services or encouraging civic engagement among older people, typically worked in isolation. They did not have the opportunity to meet with one another to share ideas or begin to develop a common worldview of the ageing field.

The initial idea for the Ageing Well Network was fairly modest: to bring people together in a knowledge exchange over a finite period that would contribute to a leavening of the field.

Additionally, because the ageing field was so fragmented, space existed for creating a network that would bring together the various players, noted Tom Costello, programme executive, ageing, at The Atlantic Philanthropies. There had been a National Council for Ageing and Older People but it was in the process of being dissolved around the time Atlantic formed the network.

Anne Connolly, a respected leader in Ireland who had done the initial scoping for the network, was asked to lead it. Connolly had had a long career in government, nongovernmental organisations and business. She also had a large and deep network, which she tapped in creating the new organisation.

"Ageing was a really neglected area in government," Connolly said. "No one was hostile to it. But they hadn't been challenged to think about it."

At the time, Connolly said, most of Ireland's older population had a good quality of life. But a minority led lives that were unnecessarily difficult and marked by isolation and a fear of poverty. Additionally, little planning had taken place to prepare for the projected large increase in the population of older people in the coming years. Finally, many saw older people as dependent and a burden on communities, rather than as a resource, Connolly said. It was time to reconceive the role of older people from that of a burden to a benefit, she noted.

"The big gap was the lack of joined-up thinking in the sector," Connolly said. "People were doing brilliant work, but it was in isolation. You can't talk about health unless you address issues of transportation and quality in the home."

Maureen Kavanagh, CEO of Active Retirement Ireland, said she was eager to become part of the network.

"I always thought working in networks was the only way to go," she said. "You can bring cross sectors together in an environment where you can have discourse. Otherwise we work in singular pillars, which doesn't create much sustainable change for older people."

Connolly recruited senior leaders with the promise that together they could potentially create something bigger than the sum of the parts. She did so just prior to the collapse of the Irish economy when many people, especially government leaders, could easily have found an excuse not to participate.

"The way it was constituted was potentially very exciting," said Cillian Twomey, chairman, board of directors, St. Patrick's Hospital. "It represented the entire constituency of older people as well as the involvement of a range of senior-level officials in the government. You had senior players who effectively deliver policies, and they were interested in participating. It was an entirely new concept."

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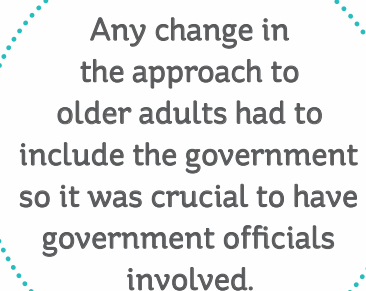>
> Maureen Kavanagh, CEO, Active Retirement Ireland

Connolly recruited the widely respected Don Thornhill, who was the former secretary general of the Department of Education, to serve as chair. In addition to his high standing in Ireland, Thornhill had the benefit of not working specifically in the field of ageing before. Thornhill said that Connolly needed a person from outside the sector who would be beyond reproach in "the division of the spoils." Because he came from outside the field of ageing, he could facilitate a process of engagement among groups of people who were, in some cases, deeply suspicious of one another.

KEY FEATURES OF THE NETWORK

The Ageing Well Network had several key and often unique features, which were crucial to the later success of the network, several participants said. These included:

- **Inviting only senior executives to participate.** Network organisers wanted participants who were in positions to make decisions and ensure their implementation;

- **Creating a multi-sectoral network that included representatives from academia, nongovernmental organisations, government and business.** Because the ageing field in Ireland was so fragmented, it was important to bring together the various sectors so they could share ideas and begin to create a cohesive field;

> Any change in the approach to older adults had to include the government so it was crucial to have government officials involved.

- **Including top government officials across departments and agencies.** Any real change in the approach to older adults would have to include the government so it was crucial to have government officials involved. The network went beyond the typical government agencies of health to include top representatives from the departments of transportation, environment, education, finance and housing, as well as the Taoiseach's (prime minister) department. Many of those government officials had a "reformist" approach to their work and were eager to participate. That is, they did not see participation in the network as an obligation but rather as an opportunity to learn and do more to serve older people;

- **Working for change within the system rather than focusing on an advocacy capacity.** Because government officials were involved in the network, a crucial focus was to find ways to work with those offices, rather than in an advocacy and potentially adversarial role. Never envisioned as an advocacy body, the network did not take public positions nor did it have a public profile. However, because its members were in key decision-making roles in their organisations, the network anticipated that their participation would broaden perspectives that would ultimately help influence improvements in policy and services and inform the research agenda in ageing.

  "There was nervousness among the senior civil servants about participating," Connolly said. "We put on the table that we need to understand the constraints that they work under. We need to work with civil servants to make smart decisions in how to use limited resources."

- **Holding off-site retreats using the Chatham House Rule.** For the first three years, the network held overnight retreats for its members under the Chatham House Rule, a principle borrowed from international diplomacy in which no news media are present and no one will be quoted by name or affiliation. These meetings allowed representatives from the ageing sector and government to get to know

one another in a low-pressure, intellectually stimulating environment. During those early years, the network held three formal off-site meetings per year.

Each retreat featured a well-regarded speaker, often from another country, who was there to provide new ideas and spark discussion. Initially, the organisers also used a "speed-dating" approach to help participants get to know each other.

- **Creating working groups on areas of interest to members.** Much of the real work took place in smaller working groups that emerged out of the interests of the members and addressed challenges they faced in their day jobs. These working groups allowed participants to put their ideas into action and realise some of the most practical value of the network.

- **Setting up an infrastructure for the network, including an executive director and staff.** The network was led by an executive director and had a staff who carried out or commissioned research, provided information to network members on key areas in which they were working and coordinated all of the retreats and meetings.

- **Limited life.** Atlantic envisioned the network to be operational for a limited though unspecified time—enough time to help spark conversations and help build a leadership sector in ageing but not enough time for it to become institutionalised.

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FIRST STEPS OF THE NETWORK

The initial concept of the Ageing Well Network was as a think-tank for members of the ageing sector to come together and exchange ideas that would benefit all of their work. During the first year or so, much of the network focus was on building relationships and gaining trust among the members.

"It created a forum that simply didn't exist before," said Conn Murray, manager/CEO, Limerick City and County Council. "It gave people freedom to speak openly and freely in a friendly atmosphere with others in the private sector, government, nongovernmental agencies and business. It was a nonthreatening forum and we do not get that very often. Normally you are always watching your responses. Because the Chatham House Rule was observed in full that gave a level of trust to the conversation."

Several participants said that their interactions with other network members and keynote speakers broadened their view of ageing. Twomey, a physician, said he tended to view older people's issues through the prism of illness. He said the network helped him recognise that 90 per cent of that population are well but may be struggling with other issues, such as not receiving benefits to which they are entitled or securing transportation in rural areas.

Andy Cullen, former assistant secretary general at the Department of Transport and member of the network, "I'm a bureaucrat sitting at my desk buying more trains and modernising the fleet. These other 'soft'

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issues never come up. But then you go hear a psychiatrist at one of the network retreats and a great big issue is social isolation for older people, and transportation is referred to as a major barrier for them in combating that isolation. I wouldn't have thought about that without the network."

The overnight meetings featured international and national speakers as well as comprehensive and accessible information packets with research and other supporting materials. Network members also had access to an interactive website and online information service that included weekly alerts on relevant news and developments. The network had a tailored service for individual members in particular areas of interest. In addition, the executive director met with members individually twice a year to gain feedback and discuss ideas.
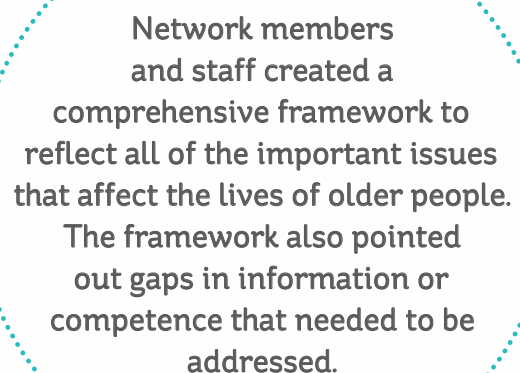
Accomplishments

NETWORK ARTICULATES NEW VIEW OF AGEING AND OLDER PEOPLE

In early 2008, the network took the step of articulating the challenges that needed to be met to achieve the vision of making Ireland one of the best countries in the world in which to grow old. Network members and staff created a comprehensive framework to reflect all of the important issues that affect the lives of older people. The framework also pointed out gaps in information or competence that needed to be addressed. The resulting model was a broad perspective on the needs of older people that included economic, social and cultural factors.

The model developed from this framework focused on six targeted outcomes in which older people can:

- Enjoy an adequate income, free from the fear of poverty;

- Live in a place that feels like home;

- Participate as valued members of their own communities;

- Have access to a good health service responsive to their needs;

- Live in age-friendly communities;

- Benefit from policies and plans informed by their needs and reliable research.

That framework has served as the basis for much of the network's work—and of others as well.

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NATIONAL POSITIVE AGEING STRATEGY

One of the best examples of the usefulness of its role as a think-tank came in response to a government desire to establish a national strategy on older people. In January 2008, the government established the Office for Older People, marking an important step in the development of public institutional infrastructure around ageing. A key function of the Office for Older People was to develop a National Strategy on Positive Ageing in conjunction with voluntary groups.

To develop the strategy, the government invited submissions from interested groups. Providing input into the National Strategy on Positive Ageing was a natural step for the Ageing Well Network, which had access to expertise

in its members and an infrastructure to carry out research. In 2008, the network, with the input of several working groups, produced six influential position papers based on the framework it had developed earlier.

Those papers were later turned into a report, *The New Agenda on Ageing*. The position papers and subsequent report incorporated and synthesised the latest research and policy developments from Ireland and abroad to determine best practices in relation to all aspects of ageing and older people.

David Bloom, professor of economics and demography at the Harvard School of Public Health, who participated in the launch conference for the *New Agenda* report in Dublin stated that it "will be a tremendous resource because it distils and synthesises findings from across the many disciplines that underpin the emerging field of ageing. It's truly a tour de force and will be a terrific resource for both aspiring specialists and established professionals throughout the world."

Two of the network's most important contributions in those papers were to broaden the view of ageing beyond health and to provide a perspective of older people as contributors to society, not burdens. The network created a model based on eight aspects of ageing, including transportation issues, pension and income security, and happiness and engagement. This model was largely adopted in the government's National Positive Ageing Strategy, published in 2013.

The National Positive Ageing Strategy will serve as a blueprint to plan for the projected increase of the older population in Ireland. A key element of the strategy is a commitment to a dedicated programme of monitoring and reporting on how older people are faring across a range of indicators.

"One of the major outcomes of the Ageing Well Network is the National Positive Ageing Strategy," said Thomas Scharf, a professor of social gerontology at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and member of the network. "Without the network, that wouldn't have been achieved. Many of the key elements in the strategy were based on contributions of the groups that belonged to the network that marshalled the evidence in one place."

AGE-FRIENDLY COUNTIES

The *New Agenda on Ageing* whetted the appetite of network members to tackle some of the biggest issues addressed in the report. At this juncture, the Ageing Well Network began to shift its role from that of a think-tank to carrying out on-the-ground action research to improve the quality of lives of older people.

Conn Murray, a network member and then manager of County Louth, pointed out the reality that where older people live has an enormous impact on both how long they live and also how well they live. Out of that insight and other work by network staff and members came perhaps its biggest achievement—the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme. The programme focuses on transforming communities to make them as age friendly as possible.

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In the early 2000s, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a Global Age-Friendly Initiative. In an age-friendly community, policies, services and structures are designed to support and enable older people to "age actively"—that is, to live in security, enjoy good health and continue to participate fully in society. WHO had developed guidelines for age-friendly cities that the Ageing Well Network decided to adapt for Ireland.

At the time, few, if any, places in the world had adopted the model of age-friendly cities. The idea intrigued Connolly and some other network members. Murray, who was county manager of the smallest county in Ireland, was eager to try a pilot project in his county.

In 2009, with funding from Atlantic, the Ageing Well Network piloted a programme in County Louth. All public services affecting older people were brought together, including health, policing, fire, transportation and social welfare. Through a consultation process, participants looked for ways to make the county as age friendly as possible. The pilot programme coincided with the economic crash, when few governmental resources were available to make changes that cost much money. The network was able to exploit an environment in which there was huge pressure to achieve more with less resources, Connolly noted. That is, there was more of an appetite for innovation among county officials than there would have been during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger.

The focus was on looking for easy-to-implement ways to help older people stay in their homes, feel safer in their homes and in the community, and assist them to get out to where they wanted to go. Many of the changes were simple, such as altering a bus route so it dropped people off in front of the hospital rather than at the bottom of a hill, or issuing official cards for workers who might come to an older person's door with a number to call to verify their identity. But these changes had a major impact on the quality of older people's lives.

After the successful piloting of the programme in Louth, the Ageing Well Network went on to lead and support its extension to 16 counties across Ireland with local authorities, using a 12-step approach that the network had developed and tested. Each programme had to begin with a baseline study of current service provision; bring together an alliance of stakeholders; set up an advisory council, with members representing older people, businesses and service providers; and draw up and implement a strategy. The initiative staff consisted of seven people, including five regional managers, all of whom worked under the umbrella of the Ageing Well Network.

In essence, the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme provided a laboratory to implement the ideas that the Ageing Well Network advocated in its submissions to the National Positive Ageing Strategy. The network not only had the research to support the work, but it had all of the key national and local players around its table to put those ideas into practise.

Ireland's Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme is now internationally regarded as the most developed and holistic in the world. The programme migrated to the mainstream in 2013, led by Ireland's local authorities who have committed, with Atlantic support, to carry on the work so that by 2016 all 26 counties will have age-friendly structures, including Older People's Councils with active nongovernmental organisation involvement. Key figures in the formative years of the network continue to lead the programme, including Murray, now CEO of Limerick City and County Council, and senior statutory and community sector representatives.

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CO-HOSTING INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The network's influence on a positive ageing strategy was also seen when it co-hosted the 1st International Conference on Age-Friendly Cities, held in Dublin in 2011, with WHO. A highlight of the conference was the signing of the Dublin Declaration on Age-Friendly Cities by representatives of 38 cities. The signatories committed to implement positive ageing strategies in their cities. Another conference in 2013 in Dublin brought the total signatories to 74.

Several participants said that their involvement with the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme gave them a practical laboratory to see the interconnectedness of their work with other parts of the ageing sector.

For example, Maurice O'Connell, former CEO of the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland, noted that his organisation had been planning to purchase a building in a local town to serve as a day centre for patients with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Originally, O'Connell said he would have likely located a building on the outskirts of town. But his involvement with the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme and hearing speakers at the retreats helped him understand the importance of connectedness for older people in the places where they lived. As a result, his organisation purchased a former hotel in the centre of a small and charming town. There, patients and their families can walk to local shops, cafes and a nearby pub.

"My involvement with the network made me think that, rather than separate them because these patients need special care, let's encourage them to be part of the community," O'Connell said. "I doubt I would have done this without the Ageing Well Network. This network gave me the tools to actually think differently."

"This network gave me the tools to actually think differently."
Maurice O'Connell, former CEO, Alzheimer's Society of Ireland

HELPING PEOPLE REMAIN AT HOME

Another concrete outcome of the network is an initiative to help older people live in their homes longer. Evidence shows that older people wish to remain in their homes and that this is important for their health, well-being and sense of autonomy. However, Ireland, like many other countries, had incentives in place for people to go into institutional care when it became difficult for them to care for themselves rather than stay in their homes.

The concept of addressing this issue through the network came from a member and led to the formation of a working group to further the idea. The resulting network initiative, called Older People Remaining at Home (OPRAH), seeks to enable more older people to stay in their own homes and communities and avoid unnecessary hospitalisations and admissions to nursing homes. It also seeks to provide better and more tailored supports that more effectively meet the individual needs of older people living in their own homes.

To do this work, however, required the collaboration of key statutory, voluntary and private agencies at national and local levels —just the type of collaboration that the network was set up to deliver.

The initiative seeks to enable more older people to stay in their own homes and communities.

The network decided to take initial steps by designing a pilot on two sites modelled on the concept of home care co-ordinators developed in Britain. Home care co-ordinators can ensure that, upon discharge from hospital, older people can receive a full range of personalised health and social supports necessary for them to continue living in at home.

The idea was later expanded to an additional four sites with new elements, including a range of community supports, respite, telecare, social activities and assistive technology. The sites also provide services to people with dementia. All of these sites are located in communities already participating in the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme, which means that many of the working relationships needed for this initiative were already established.

NEW FOCUS ON AGEING IN IRELAND

With these and other initiatives, the work of the Ageing Well Network has contributed significantly to an increased focus on ageing in Ireland, according to network members and observers.

"The Ageing Well Network has helped raise the profile of ageing issues as a national priority," Scharf said. "It has been hard to ignore ageing issues within the government because of the voice that has been given to its leaders. It has given the ageing sector a focal point and they have a direct and much more immediate impact on policy than they would without the network."

The network also brought ageing issues to places they had not been previously discussed before, such as with justice, transportation and environmental departments, notes Connolly.

Additionally, in 2013, the Ageing Well Network made a presentation to the influential Global Irish Economic Forum, a bi-annual high-profile forum of high net worth individuals with Irish roots, on making Ireland the leading country in the world to grow old. The forum, in turn, made a commitment to support smart ageing technologies.

The Taoiseach (prime minister), meanwhile, has identified the goal of making Ireland the best small country to grow old as one of his three top priorities.

FORGING NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Participants also said that the network helped them create new relationships with one another and better understand each other's perspectives.

"We have become less adversaries to the establishment," said O'Connell. "My way of lobbying government departments is very different than it used to be. It's about understanding the other person's point of view and looking for ways in which we can work together rather than saying 'you have to give me this in order for me to do my job.'"

The relationships among the network members are leading to greater collaboration as well. Participants say that they now often call other members of the network to gain their perspective on matters related to ageing.

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Challenges

The Ageing Well Network achieved a number of concrete outcomes. Like other networks, it also experienced some growing pains and challenges. One of the first of its kind to do so, the network brought together senior leaders from the public, business and nongovernmental sectors who in the past had been adversaries, at least at times. It was operating during a time of severe economic recession, which put pressure on the time and resources of network members. The network also had to respond to the changing needs and interests of its members.

Among the key challenges cited by participants were:

- **Government officials became less involved in the network over time.** As the economic crisis in Ireland deepened, several government officials participated less in the network then they had in the beginning. While the network's independence made it able to work without the constraints of government interests, the fact that it was not created by government also may have made it easier for senior civil servants not to participate as fully as they might have, some members said.

  "It's very hard to maintain a high level of engagement once the novelty wears off," Connolly said. "The network has functioned without a key government representative from the Health Service Executive in the last few years. That was a huge flaw."

- **Nongovernmental organisations perceived that their voices were less valued than those of government participants.** There was a perception among some representatives of nongovernmental organisations that the Ageing Well Network had an inner circle that consisted of senior civil servants, whose voices had the most influence.

- **The transition from a think-tank to action approach caused dismay among some members.** The original premise of the Ageing Well Network was to act solely as a think-tank, but over time it moved into taking action on initiatives such as the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme. This shift caused discomfort among some members, at least initially, because that type of on-the-ground work could be viewed as rubbing up against the interests and territory of their work.

- **Implementation of the National Positive Ageing Strategy and other concrete actions to help older people is still a work in progress.** The National Positive Ageing Strategy—the blueprint for government's response to and work with older people—has not yet been translated into implementation. Some participants also felt that the Age Friendly Cities and Counties initiative, while positive, did not go far enough in terms of carrying out system-level changes for older people.

- **Ending a time-limited organisation was difficult.** The Atlantic Philanthropies and the network organisers always conceived of the Ageing Well Network as a short-term network that would help solidify the disparate ageing sector. However, like many such organisations, particularly those that are successful, it was difficult for many participants when the network closed in December 2013. Some worry that, without Atlantic's financial backing of the network, it will be difficult to sustain the collaborative work it spawned.

  "My opinion was that the winding up of the network was premature, though I know the wider policy context of The Atlantic Philanthropies' winding up its activities," Thornhill said. "I think somewhere between seven and 10 years would be more ideal for the network to be in existence, because I think the successes are now becoming more apparent and the momentum would increase if the network was still in place."

Lessons Learned

The Ageing Well Network was particularly successful in its ability to bring together senior leaders, including government officials, from a range of sectors to find ways to address a neglected and vital issue. Its work raised the profile of ageing at a time of severe economic disruption and laid the groundwork for a coherent policy and practical response to both the needs and the contributions of older people. Its conception, approach, flexibility and challenges can provide useful lessons for others seeking to build a network that will make a real impact on any fragmented sector. The following are the key lessons learned from the work of the Ageing Well Network.

ESTABLISHING A NETWORK

- **Provide the infrastructure to run a network including full-time staff.** The Ageing Well Network was successful in part because it had an infrastructure of staff to provide resources, direction and support to its members. Between the network itself and the Age Friendly Cities and Counties initiative, about 13 to 14 people were employed. While not all networks would need the same level of staffing, most require at least one full-time staff member to carry out the necessary day-to-day work.

- **Find a strong leader to lead the organisation.** The executive director of the Ageing Well Network was universally praised for her charisma, powers of persuasion, and the strong networks she could draw on, among other traits. While not all leaders need to possess the same combination of skills or personality, it is important to have a leader who is comfortable managing a network comprised of a number of strong personalities who are seeking to make a significant impact on a field.

ENCOURAGING AND MAINTAINING GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

- **Recruit senior-level executives who are in the position to make change.** One of the first decisions about the Ageing Well Network was to include only chief executives, agency heads or those with similar authority in the group. That was done to ensure that the participants had the standing in their peer group to engage in high-level discussions and the clout in their organisations to carry forward ideas that came out of the network. By having only senior leaders in a network, the chances are increased for systemic policy and practice change.

- **Include top civil servants from a variety of government departments—not just the "obvious" ones.** Just about any social issue will require the participation of government for real change to occur, so for a network of this type to have lasting impact, it must include government officials. An important lesson from the Ageing Well Network is that it is vital to look for civil servants from a number of government agencies and not just those that might spring to mind immediately.

> By having only senior leaders in a network, the chances are increased for systemic policy and practice change.

The Ageing Well Network included government representatives from the justice, transportation and environmental departments, all of which have a direct impact on the quality of lives of older people. Without those representatives, the network would not have accomplished nearly the depth of work that it did. Consider also including deputies who may be just as well suited as their superiors to carry out change.

- **Find the reformers among the civil servants.** Just about all of the government representatives in the Ageing Well Network could fairly be described as reformers—they were always looking for better, more effective ways to do their jobs and eager to participate in a network that could give them the opportunity to make a bigger

impact. Those types of civil servants—who participate not because they must but because they want to—are those most likely to do the hard work of making lasting policy change.

- **Limit the time commitment of participants, particularly government officials.** One of the ways of overcoming the challenge of government officials becoming less involved in the network was to make their 'time asks' more focused on issues that were of real importance to their own day jobs. For example, there was very good engagement by officials in the OPRAH (Older People Remaining at Home) network initiative and in the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme, because these were more subject-specific and time-limited commitments.

CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE FOR CHANGE

- **Create a safe environment for meeting by holding off-site retreats and using the Chatham House Rule.** People who have not worked together closely before, and may have been adversaries in the past, need the time and space to get to know one another in a safe environment. For the first several years, the Ageing Well Network held off-site, overnight retreats that allowed participants to spend time together knowing that what they said was protected by rules of confidentiality.

> Helping people get to know each other personally in the beginning can go a long way in establishing strong working relationships.

- **Take the time in the beginning to help people build relationships with one another.** Most productive working relationships have a personal connection as well. Helping people get to know each other personally in the beginning can go a long way in establishing strong working relationships. At one of the early network meetings, organisers did "speed dating" where pairs of people spent five minutes together and then moved on to meet other people. The organisers arranged some pairings in advance of people who they thought would enjoy getting to know one another. At the offsite retreats, organisers also moved people to new tables after each dinner course to help facilitate relationships and discussions.

- **Create something that is useful for people and helps them do their jobs better.** Most sustainable engagement comes out of self-interest. Understand people's agendas and look at how to align one person's agenda with another's. Several members praised the top-flight speakers who presented at the meetings, both from abroad and Ireland, who they said stimulated their thinking in new ways.

Finding dynamic speakers who can present on "trending" topics or draw connections between seemingly disparate elements of a sector can be helpful in capturing people's interest. Network staff also prepared useful information packets on the speakers and meetings and sent them to participants in advance, which helped them immediately engage. Additionally, help people start or join specialist working groups addressing issues of particular interest to them to maintain their engagement.

> Most sustainable engagement comes out of self-interest. Understand people's agendas and look at how to align one person's agenda with another's.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

- **Adapt to changes in participant's needs and the evolution of the network.** At the start of the network, participants met

three times a year at overnight gatherings. After about two years those meetings became less well attended as members found it difficult to go away for that length of time, especially as the economic crisis deepened. Network organisers began holding fewer overnights and eventually starting scheduling Dublin-based half-day meetings that were easier for people to attend. The working groups also evolved into one of the main ways that participants were involved in the network.

When it became clear that members wanted to participate in more than a think-tank, organisers encouraged them to participate in programmes such as the Age Friendly Cities and Counties initiative. Doing so kept the interest of participants.

- **Communicate clearly any changes in focus.** The shift from think-tank mode to action research took some members by surprise and put them off. Clearly communicating any major shifts in approach or strategy is crucial to maintaining the support and interest of network members.

Next Steps
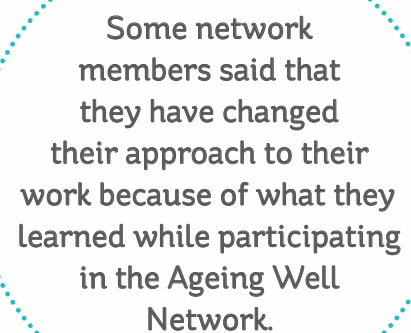
As part of its planned wind down, Atlantic ended the Ageing Well Network in December 2013. Its work, however, is continuing in a number of ways. Atlantic has funded the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme until December 2016 to complete its extension to all local authorities and embed it into the system at local and national levels. The programme will also facilitate the transfer of the national programme to Dublin City Council.

> Some network members said that they have changed their approach to their work because of what they learned while participating in the Ageing Well Network.

In addition, Healthy Ireland, a new national framework for action to improve the health and well-being of the country over the coming generation, is tackling a number of issues related to older people including developing a framework for monitoring their health and well-being within the National Positive Ageing Strategy.

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Brian MacCraith said that because of his participation, on his first day as president of Dublin City University, he announced a plan to make it the world's first age-friendly university. The university has identified 10 principles to put that vision into action, including a research agenda, intergenerational learning, a health and fitness division to reach out to older adults, and arts and cultural events.

"This all came from my participation in the Ageing Well Network," MacCraith said. "It had a catalytic effect on my thinking."

Conclusion

The Ageing Well Network ran from 2007 to 2013. In just six years, it can point to a number of accomplishments, including strongly influencing the National Positive Ageing Strategy, initiating the world's most developed Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme, piloting a new initiative to help older people remain in their homes and putting ageing on the agenda of senior government officials.

Many of those who participated said that their experience with the network has changed how they approach their work. They say they work with new colleagues across disciplines in ways they have never done before. Where ageing was once a weak and fragmented field in Ireland, they say that the network, in part, has helped create the beginnings of a more integrated and stronger sector.

While networks are not in short supply, the particular characteristics of the Ageing Well Network are noteworthy and could be useful to others looking for ways that a network can help bring together a fragmented field and have influence on both national and local policy.

Acknowledgments

More information on the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programme can be found here:
http://agefriendlyireland.ie/

Notes