



Participation Charter

Strengthening the Voice of Older People in Ireland

A collaboration between Age Action and the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament

Supported by Community Foundation Ireland

Supporting meaningful participation, stronger representation,
and a greater voice for older people in public policy and public life

AgeAction
Age Equality

**Irish
Senior
Citizens
Parliament**
The Voice of Older People

**Community
Foundation
Ireland**

FOREWORD

Strengthening the Voice of Older People in Ireland

Older people have the same human rights as everyone else: the right to be heard, to participate, to influence decisions, and to live with dignity, autonomy and respect. However, while other groups have benefited from dedicated international human rights instruments, older people do not yet have a legally binding international convention recognising their specific rights as older people. Too often, their voices remain absent from the policies, services and public conversations that shape their daily lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this reality with painful clarity. As Ms Nada Al-Nashif, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated (Geneva, February 2026):

“The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare how, in the absence of explicit standards and focused attention, the rights and realities of older persons can remain invisible in law, policy and practice.”

Ms Al-Nashif was providing important background to the decision of the United Nations Human Rights Council to establish an intergovernmental working group to draft an international convention on the rights of older persons.

This Charter was developed through the *Strengthening the Voice of Older People in Ireland* project (Q3, 2025), commissioned by Age Action Ireland and the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament, and facilitated by Mosaic Social Impact. The work sought to explore how older people experience participation, representation and influence in public and policy discourse in Ireland.

As part of the process, more than 700 people aged 60 and over, living in the Republic of Ireland, responded to a survey about their experiences and views. The survey was circulated with the support of Age Action, the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and a number of civil society organisations working with and alongside older people, and included online, written and telephone options to support participation.

The survey does not claim to be a statistically random sample. However, although women were over-represented among respondents, the age profile of participants broadly aligns with the older population recorded in Ireland’s 2022 Census.

A Message to Decision-Makers

For too long, governments and other decision-makers have relied heavily on the traditional loyalty of older voters, treating them as passive supporters rather than as active citizens seeking to shape decisions that affect their lives, their interests, those of their communities and the future of the country.

The survey’s data sends a clear and undeniable message to policy-makers, public bodies and political representatives.

When participants were asked whether they felt listened to in relation to public issues affecting older people, the responses were striking:

19.4% answered **“Yes”**.

29.8% answered **“No”**.

26.6% were **“not sure”**.

A further **24.2%** stated: **“I have never tried to engage”**.

Taken together, these findings highlight widespread uncertainty and scepticism about whether older people’s voices are meaningfully heard. They also point to a deeper issue of disengagement, exclusion or lack of accessible opportunities to participate.

The study’s Executive Summary notes:

“Older people want to be more involved in decisions that affect their lives, but they often feel excluded, stereotyped, or treated as an afterthought. Many reported frustration with processes that invite their views but fail to produce any meaningful change.”

Echoes of a Global Experience

This frustration is not unique to Ireland. It reflects a wider international concern about the rights, visibility and participation of older people.

The United Nations has appointed an Intergovernmental Working Group to draft an international convention on the rights of older persons, reflecting growing international recognition that stronger and more explicit protections are needed. In its statement to the Organisational Meeting of the Intergovernmental Working Group, Ireland stated:

*“It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the human rights of older persons are protected and respected on an equal basis with those of younger persons... the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need for a legally binding instrument to ensure that older persons’ rights are promoted, recognised and realised.” **

The message is clear: older people’s participation is not a matter of goodwill or consultation alone. It is a matter of rights, equality and democratic inclusion.

A Call for Collaborative Action

Ireland is ageing. The Central Statistics Office has shown that the proportion of the population aged over 45 increased from 35.4% in 2013 to 40.6% in 2023. In contrast, the proportion aged under 45 decreased from 64.5% to 59.4% over the same period.

This demographic shift should not merely be seen as a burden, but also as an opportunity.

Older people already make an extraordinary contribution to Ireland's families, communities and economy, including through caring responsibilities, child-minding, civic participation, professional expertise and lived experience. As more people live well into their 80s and beyond, society has an opportunity to better recognise, value and include this contribution in public life.

Society must respond authentically and systematically to this change. The Irish State, the private sector, public bodies and civil society organisations all have a role to play in ensuring that older people are not simply consulted, but actively included in the decisions that affect their lives.

We express our sincere gratitude to the Community Foundation Ireland for supporting this project. The insights from the survey, the evidence base and this Participation Charter provide a strong foundation for deeper intergenerational collaboration and a renewed commitment to strengthening the voice of older people in Ireland.

Our two organisations hope this set of documents will help all strands and age groups in Irish society to fully value, respect and harness the extraordinary contribution of Ireland's growing older population, now and into the future.

If you are looking for an accessible primer on how to actively strengthen the voice of older people in Ireland, read on.

Signed: **Age Action & Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament**

** Statement of Ireland, Intergovernmental Working Group on Older Persons, pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 58/13, Organisational Meeting, 18 February 2026.*

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1. INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

A Stronger Voice Through Participation

Older people are not simply recipients of services, beneficiaries of policy, or subjects of consultation. They are citizens, community members, volunteers, carers, advocates, leaders, and decision-makers whose knowledge, experience, and perspectives have significant value in shaping society.

Yet despite the growing recognition of participation as a fundamental element of good public policy, many older people continue to report feeling excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. Consultation is often inconsistent, opportunities to contribute can be limited, and feedback on how views have influenced decisions is not always clear.

At the same time, Ireland is experiencing significant demographic change. As the population ages, it becomes increasingly important that older people are not only consulted about public policy but are actively involved in shaping it. Strong participation benefits not only older people themselves, but also communities, organisations, public bodies, and society as a whole.

This Charter has been developed in response to that challenge and opportunity.

The Collaboration Behind This Charter

The project was supported by Community Foundation Ireland, whose funding enabled Age Action and the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament to explore how the voice and influence of older people in public policy could be strengthened.

While the project initially focused on conducting a thematic policy consultation, discussions throughout the process highlighted a broader question:

How can participation itself be strengthened?

The Steering Group recognised that the long-term value of the project would not simply come from consulting older people on a particular issue, but from identifying principles that could support meaningful participation across the age sector more generally.

The result was a decision to develop a Participation Charter: a practical framework designed to support meaningful, inclusive, and effective participation by older people in advocacy, policy development, consultation processes, and organisational decision-making.

Listening to Older People

The Charter is grounded in the voices and experiences of older people.

As part of the project, a national consultation was undertaken in 2025 to explore how older people view participation, consultation, representation, and their role in influencing decisions that affect their lives and communities.

The consultation generated strong levels of engagement and demonstrated a clear appetite among older people to contribute to public policy discussions.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of:

- being listened to respectfully
- receiving feedback on how their views were used
- having meaningful opportunities to contribute
- improving communication between organisations and older people
- strengthening collaboration across the age sector
- ensuring participation is accessible and inclusive

The consultation findings reinforced a simple but important message: older people want to be involved, and they want their involvement to make a difference.

Participation as a Foundation for a Stronger Voice

Participation is not a single event, a survey, a public meeting, or a consultation exercise. Meaningful participation is an ongoing process that enables people to influence decisions, shape priorities, share lived experience and contribute to solutions.

Research consistently shows that participation leads to better decision-making, stronger policies, improved accountability, and greater trust between organisations and the people they serve.

For older people, participation is also closely connected to dignity, inclusion, active citizenship, and belonging. It provides opportunities for people to contribute their knowledge and experience while helping organisations and public bodies better understand the realities of ageing in contemporary Ireland.

This Charter seeks to support a culture in which participation is valued, planned, resourced, and embedded within the way organisations engage with older people.

It is intended as a practical guide and a shared statement of principles for organisations that wish to strengthen participation and contribute to a stronger voice for older people in public policy and public life.

2. UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION

Participation in context

Participation is more than being informed. It is more than being consulted. It is more than attending meetings or responding to surveys.

Participation is the active involvement of people in decisions, discussions, and processes that affect their lives, communities, and interests.

For older people, participation can take many forms. It may involve contributing to consultations, influencing policy development, sharing lived experience, serving on advisory groups, participating in community organisations, engaging with elected representatives, or helping shape the priorities of organisations that represent their interests.

Meaningful participation recognises older people not simply as recipients of services or policy decisions, but as active contributors whose experience, knowledge, and perspectives bring value to decision-making processes.

Moving Beyond Consultation

Consultation is an important part of participation, but participation and consultation are not the same thing.

Consultation often involves asking people for their views on a particular issue. Participation goes further. It creates opportunities for people to influence decisions, contribute to solutions, and understand how their views have been considered.

Many older people who participated in this project expressed a desire not only to be asked for their opinions, but also to understand what happened next. They wanted to see evidence that their contributions were valued and that participation led to meaningful engagement rather than one-off conversations.

Effective participation therefore involves listening, responding, communicating outcomes, and creating opportunities for ongoing involvement.

Participation, Dignity, Citizenship and Inclusion

Participation is closely connected to dignity, citizenship, equality, inclusion, and belonging. It helps ensure that policies, services, and initiatives are shaped not only for older people but with older people. Participation recognises older people as active citizens whose knowledge, experience, and perspectives have value and whose voices should be heard in decisions that affect their lives.

Meaningful participation creates opportunities for lived experience, local knowledge, and diverse perspectives to inform discussions, influence priorities, and contribute to decision-making. It strengthens connections between individuals, organisations, communities, and public institutions while helping to ensure that participation is inclusive, respectful, and equitable.

Participation is not only a way of improving decisions. It is also an expression of dignity, inclusion, active citizenship, and the right of people to contribute to public life. When participation is meaningful and accessible, it strengthens both individuals and society.

Barriers to Participation

Despite its importance, participation is not always easy.

Older people may experience barriers that make participation more difficult. These barriers can include inaccessible communication, digital exclusion, transport challenges, limited opportunities for involvement, unclear processes, lack of feedback, or previous experiences where participation felt tokenistic or ineffective.

Some groups may face additional barriers due to disability, health conditions, language, income, geographic location, ethnicity, caring responsibilities, or other circumstances.

Recognising these barriers is an essential first step towards addressing them.

Participation cannot be considered meaningful if opportunities are only available to some people. Organisations seeking to strengthen participation must therefore actively consider accessibility, inclusion, representation, and support throughout their engagement processes.

Meaningful participation does not happen by accident. It requires commitment, planning, resources, and a genuine willingness to listen and learn.

3. THE CHARTER PRINCIPLES

The following principles form the foundation of this Participation Charter.

They are drawn from the experiences shared by older people through the consultation process, informed by national and international research, and supported by established participation frameworks, rights and equality frameworks, and good practice guidance.

The principles are intended to support organisations, public bodies, community groups, and representative organisations in creating participation processes that are meaningful, inclusive, transparent, and effective.

While every organisation will apply these principles in different ways, the underlying commitment remains the same: ensuring that older people have genuine opportunities to influence decisions, contribute their experience and knowledge, and play an active role in shaping the policies, services, and initiatives that affect their lives.

The principles should be viewed as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Meaningful participation is rarely achieved through a single action or activity. Rather, it is built through ongoing commitment, relationships, trust, communication, and accountability.

THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

A framework for strengthening the voice, influence, and participation of older people in public policy and public life

- 1** Participation Should Be Meaningful
- 2** Participation Should Be Inclusive and Accessible
- 3** Participation Should Begin Early
- 4** Lived Experience Should Be Valued as Evidence
- 5** Participation Should Influence Decisions
- 6** Participation Should Lead to Feedback and Visible Outcomes
- 7** Participation Should Strengthen Collaboration and Collective Voice
- 8** Representation Should Be Transparent and Accountable
- 9** Participation Should Be Sustained
- 10** Participation Should Promote Civic Engagement, Rights and Dignity

Building a Stronger Culture of Participation

These principles are intended to be read as a connected framework rather than as standalone commitments. Together, they support participation that is meaningful, inclusive, influential, accountable, collaborative, and sustained.

By applying these principles in practice, organisations can help ensure that older people's experiences, perspectives, and voices contribute to public policy formation, organisational decision-making, and public life.

PRINCIPLE 1: PARTICIPATION SHOULD BE MEANINGFUL

Principle Statement

Older people should have genuine opportunities to contribute to discussions, influence decisions, and help shape the policies, services, and initiatives that affect their lives.

Rationale

Participation is most effective when people feel that their involvement has purpose and value.

Participation can sometimes become a one-off exercise where views are gathered but participants are left unclear about how their contributions were considered or whether they influenced any outcomes. This can lead to frustration, disengagement, and a loss of trust in participation processes.

Meaningful participation goes beyond asking for opinions. It creates opportunities for dialogue, shared understanding, and influence. It recognises that older people bring valuable experience, knowledge, and perspectives that can strengthen decision-making and improve outcomes.

When participation is meaningful, people are more likely to engage, contribute, and remain involved over time.

Application in Practice

Meaningful participation is characterised by:

- clear information about the purpose of the engagement
- realistic opportunities to influence decisions or recommendations
- opportunities for discussion rather than one-way communication
- respect for differing views and experiences
- feedback on how contributions have been considered
- transparency regarding what can and cannot be influenced
- ongoing opportunities for involvement where appropriate

Reflective Considerations

Meaningful participation requires organisations to think carefully about the purpose of engagement, the opportunities available for influence, and the experience of those taking part. The following questions may help organisations reflect on whether participation processes are genuinely creating opportunities for meaningful involvement:

- Why are we engaging older people on this issue?
- What influence will participants have on the process or outcome?
- Have we clearly explained the purpose of participation?
- How will we demonstrate that contributions have been heard and considered?
- What feedback will participants receive after the engagement process?

Key Message

Meaningful participation is built on respect, transparency, feedback, and genuine opportunities to contribute. It ensures that participation is not simply an activity, but a process through which older people can make a genuine contribution to decisions that affect their lives and communities.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), the Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028, and the Commission on Care for Older People.

PRINCIPLE 2: PARTICIPATION SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

Principle Statement

Participation opportunities should be designed to enable the widest possible range of older people to take part, regardless of their circumstances, abilities, background, or location.

Rationale

Participation is only meaningful when people are able to access it.

Older people are not a single, uniform group. They have diverse experiences, identities, interests, abilities, and circumstances. While some people may be able to participate easily through online consultations, meetings, or written submissions, others may face barriers that limit their ability to engage.

These barriers may relate to mobility, disability, health conditions, digital access, literacy, language, income, caring responsibilities, transport, geographic isolation, or confidence in engaging with formal processes.

If participation opportunities are not designed with these realities in mind, some voices may be unintentionally excluded. Inclusive participation seeks to remove barriers wherever possible and create opportunities for a broader range of people to contribute.

Meaningful participation requires more than inviting people to take part. It requires creating the conditions that make participation possible.

Accessibility and inclusion should be considered from the outset of any participation process rather than addressed later as an additional consideration. Organisations should actively identify and remove barriers wherever possible and take steps to ensure that participation opportunities reach people whose voices may otherwise be underrepresented or excluded.

Application in Practice

Inclusive and accessible participation may involve:

- providing information in clear and accessible formats
- offering multiple ways to participate, including online, in person, by telephone, and in writing
- considering transport, timing, and venue accessibility when organising events
- supporting participation by people with disabilities or additional needs
- using clear language and avoiding unnecessary jargon
- recognising and addressing barriers that may prevent participation
- creating welcoming environments where people feel respected and able to contribute

Reflective Considerations

Inclusive participation requires organisations to think carefully about who is able to participate, what barriers may exist, and whether participation opportunities are genuinely accessible to a diverse range of older people. The following questions may help organisations reflect on the inclusiveness of their participation processes:

- Who is participating and who is not?
- Are there barriers that may prevent some older people from engaging?
- Are participation opportunities available through different formats and channels?
- Have we considered the needs of people with disabilities, those experiencing digital exclusion, or those living in rural or isolated areas?
- Are we actively seeking perspectives from groups whose voices may be less frequently heard?

Key Message

Inclusive and accessible participation ensures that opportunities to contribute are open to all older people, not only those who face the fewest barriers to engagement.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Framework, Age Friendly Ireland, Older People's Councils, and the Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028.

PRINCIPLE 3: PARTICIPATION SHOULD BEGIN EARLY

Principle Statement

Older people should be involved as early as possible in discussions, planning processes, and decision-making activities that may affect their lives, communities, or interests.

Rationale

Participation is most effective when it takes place before decisions have been finalised.

Meaningful participation depends not only on who is involved, but also on when they are involved. Participation that takes place during the early stages of planning creates greater opportunities for older people to identify issues, influence priorities, contribute ideas, and help shape the development of solutions.

Early involvement can also improve the quality of decision-making. It enables organisations to draw on a wider range of experiences and perspectives, helping to ensure that policies, services, and initiatives are informed by the realities of people's lives.

Involving people early also helps build trust. It demonstrates a genuine commitment to listening and creates confidence that participation is intended to inform decision-making rather than simply validate decisions that have already been made.

Application in Practice

Early participation may involve:

- engaging older people during the initial stages of planning and policy development
- involving older people in identifying issues and opportunities before solutions are developed
- involving participants in identifying priorities
- seeking input before options have been finalised
- creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue throughout a process
- allowing sufficient time for meaningful engagement and reflection
- ensuring participation is built into project design rather than added as an afterthought
- communicating clearly how participation will influence subsequent stages of work

Reflective Considerations

Early participation requires organisations to consider not only who is involved, but also when participation takes place. The following questions may help organisations reflect on whether participation opportunities are being offered early enough to influence discussions, priorities, and decisions:

- At what stage are older people being invited into the process?
- Is participation taking place early enough to influence outcomes?
- Have participants had an opportunity to help shape priorities or define the issues being considered?

- Are there opportunities for engagement throughout the process rather than at a single point in time?
- Have we allowed sufficient time for meaningful participation to take place?

Key Message

Participation is most effective when it begins early enough to influence the direction of discussions, not simply respond to decisions that have already been made.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), the Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028, and the Commission on Care for Older People.

PRINCIPLE 4: LIVED EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE VALUED AS EVIDENCE

Principle Statement

Older people's lived experiences, perspectives, knowledge, and insights should be recognised and valued as an important source of evidence in participation, policy development, service design, advocacy, and decision-making processes.

Rationale

Older people possess valuable knowledge and experience gained through their daily lives, interactions with services, involvement in communities, and experiences of ageing.

Participation is strongest when lived experience is recognised as a valuable form of evidence alongside research, policy analysis, professional expertise, and statistical data. While formal evidence can help identify trends, patterns, and outcomes, lived experience provides important insights into how policies, services, and decisions affect people in practice.

Recognising lived experience as evidence helps ensure that decisions are informed not only by what is measurable, but also by what is experienced. It can help identify issues that may otherwise be overlooked, challenge assumptions, improve understanding, and contribute to more responsive and effective policies, services, and organisational practices.

Valuing lived experience does not mean that all people share the same views or experiences. Rather, it recognises that the voices of those directly affected by decisions provide an important source of knowledge that should be considered alongside other forms of evidence.

Meaningful participation therefore requires organisations to create opportunities for older people to share their experiences and to ensure that those experiences are listened to, respected, and considered within decision-making processes.

Application in Practice

Valuing lived experience as evidence may involve:

- creating opportunities for older people to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights
- involving older people in discussions about policies, services, programmes, and initiatives that affect their lives
- recognising lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge alongside research, professional expertise, and statistical evidence
- using participation processes to explore how policies, services, and decisions are experienced in practice
- ensuring that lived experience informs planning, service design, advocacy, review, and decision-making processes
- creating opportunities for dialogue between lived experience and professional or technical expertise

- recognising that diverse experiences can provide valuable insights into different needs, challenges, and opportunities
- demonstrating how lived experience has contributed to understanding issues and shaping responses

Reflective Considerations

Valuing lived experience as evidence requires organisations to consider how the knowledge and experiences of older people are gathered, understood, and used. The following questions may help organisations reflect on whether lived experience is being meaningfully incorporated into participation and decision-making processes:

- How do we create opportunities for older people to share their experiences and perspectives?
- Is lived experience considered alongside other forms of evidence when decisions are being made?
- How do we ensure that lived experience informs planning, policy development, service design, and advocacy?
- Are we listening only to opinions, or are we actively seeking to understand people's experiences?
- How do we demonstrate that lived experience has contributed to our understanding of issues and potential solutions?

Key Message

Lived experience is a valuable form of evidence. Recognising and valuing the experiences, knowledge, and insights of older people helps create more informed decisions, stronger participation, and more responsive policies, services, and organisations.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, the Commission on Care for Older People, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), and the Citizens' Assembly on Ageing.

PRINCIPLE 5: PARTICIPATION SHOULD INFLUENCE DECISIONS

Principle Statement

Older people's views, experiences, and perspectives should have genuine opportunities to influence decisions, priorities, policies, services, organisational practices, and the development of solutions.

Rationale

People are more likely to participate when they believe their contributions can make a difference.

Meaningful participation is not measured by the number of consultations held, meetings organised, or responses received. Its value lies in the extent to which participation helps inform thinking, shape priorities, improve understanding, and influence outcomes.

Participation can also help identify issues that may otherwise be overlooked, challenge assumptions, and contribute practical insights that strengthen decision-making processes.

Not every suggestion can be adopted, nor will every participant agree with the final decisions reached. However, participation should have a clear pathway to influence. Older people should be able to see that their contributions have been considered seriously and that participation forms part of decision-making processes rather than sitting alongside them.

When participation influences decisions, it strengthens trust, accountability, and confidence in both the process and the organisations involved.

Application in Practice

Participation that influences decisions may involve:

- incorporating lived experience into policy and service design
- involving older people in identifying priorities and areas for action
- demonstrating how feedback has informed decisions or recommendations
- creating mechanisms through which participants can contribute to ongoing discussions
- ensuring participation findings are considered during decision-making processes
- documenting how participation has shaped outcomes where appropriate
- communicating the impact of participation to those involved

Reflective Considerations

Participation is most meaningful when it has a clear pathway to influence. The following questions may help organisations reflect on how participation contributes to decision-making, priority-setting, and the development of actions or solutions:

- How will participation influence decision-making?
- Are there clear pathways through which participants' views can inform outcomes?
- How will we demonstrate that contributions have been considered?
- Have we communicated the impact of participation to those involved?
- Does participation influence decisions in practice, or is it primarily an information-gathering exercise?

Key Message

Participation is most meaningful when people can see that their contributions have informed thinking, influenced decisions, or helped shape outcomes.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), the Commission on Care for Older People, the Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028, and the National Positive Ageing Strategy.

PRINCIPLE 6: PARTICIPATION SHOULD LEAD TO FEEDBACK AND VISIBLE OUTCOMES

Principle Statement

People who participate should receive feedback on how their contributions were considered and, wherever possible, be able to see how participation has informed decisions, actions, priorities, or future developments.

Rationale

Participation is strengthened when people understand how their contributions have been used and what has happened as a result of their involvement.

One of the most common frustrations identified through participation processes is the perception that people are asked for their views but are not informed about what happens afterwards. When feedback is limited or absent, participants may feel that their contributions have not been valued or considered, reducing trust and willingness to engage in future participation opportunities.

Providing feedback demonstrates respect for participants' time, knowledge, experience, and involvement. It helps create transparency, strengthens accountability, and enables people to understand how participation contributes to decision-making and organisational learning.

Visible outcomes are equally important. While participation cannot guarantee that every suggestion or recommendation will be adopted, people should be able to understand what was heard, what actions were taken, what decisions were made, and where change was not possible.

Meaningful participation therefore requires organisations to build feedback and reporting mechanisms into participation processes from the outset rather than treating them as optional or secondary activities.

Application in Practice

Participation that supports feedback and visible outcomes may involve:

- providing participants with updates on the outcomes of consultations, engagement activities, and participation processes
- explaining how views, experiences, and recommendations were considered
- communicating what actions have been taken as a result of participation
- being transparent where suggestions or recommendations have not been adopted and explaining why
- publishing summaries, findings, or reports in accessible formats
- identifying how participation has influenced decisions, priorities, services, policies, or organisational practice
- keeping participants informed of next steps and future opportunities for involvement
- building feedback and reporting mechanisms into participation processes from the outset

Reflective Considerations

Feedback and visible outcomes help demonstrate that participation is valued and taken seriously. The following questions may help organisations reflect on how effectively they communicate the results and impact of participation activities:

- How do we inform participants about what happened after a consultation or engagement activity?
- Can participants see how their contributions influenced decisions, actions, or future developments?
- Are we transparent about what changed, what did not change, and why?
- Do we provide feedback in ways that are accessible and easy to understand?
- Have feedback and reporting arrangements been planned from the outset of the participation process?

Key Message

Participation is strengthened when people can see how their contributions have been considered, understand what happened as a result, and remain informed about future actions and opportunities for involvement.

Informed by the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), the Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028, and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

PRINCIPLE 7: PARTICIPATION SHOULD STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE VOICE

Principle Statement

Participation should strengthen collaboration between older people, organisations, and participation structures, creating opportunities to work together, share learning, reduce duplication, and build a stronger collective voice in public policy and public life.

Rationale

Effective participation is strengthened through relationships, partnership, and shared endeavour.

A stronger voice for older people is more likely to emerge when participation is supported by collaboration between organisations, representative structures, communities, and older people themselves.

Collaboration recognises that participation is not simply about gathering opinions. People are more likely to remain engaged when they can contribute throughout a process, see how their perspectives are valued, and have opportunities to help shape outcomes rather than simply respond to proposals.

Collaboration involves creating opportunities for dialogue, shared learning, joint problem-solving, and mutual understanding. By working together, organisations and older people can draw on different forms of knowledge, experience, and expertise to develop more informed and effective responses to challenges.

Collaboration can also help strengthen the collective voice of older people. No single organisation, participation structure, or individual can fully represent the diversity of older people's experiences and perspectives. Working together can help reduce duplication, strengthen advocacy, improve coordination, and increase opportunities for participation and influence.

Collaborative participation helps build trust, strengthens relationships, and encourages a sense of shared ownership over decisions and outcomes. It also enables organisations to move beyond consultation towards more active forms of engagement where participants can contribute throughout a process rather than at a single point in time.

Meaningful collaboration acknowledges that older people are not only stakeholders in decisions, but valuable partners in shaping them. It also recognises that organisations can strengthen participation by sharing learning, coordinating engagement where appropriate, and working together where a collective voice can increase influence.

Application in Practice

Collaborative participation may involve:

- creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue and engagement

- involving older people throughout different stages of a process
- establishing advisory groups, working groups, or representative forums
- encouraging shared problem-solving and discussion
- recognising and valuing lived experience alongside professional expertise
- supporting collaboration between organisations, participation structures, and older people to strengthen collective learning and impact
- building long-term relationships rather than relying solely on one-off consultations
- creating opportunities for participants to contribute to the design, implementation, and review of initiatives
- coordinating participation and engagement activity where appropriate to reduce duplication and consultation fatigue
- sharing learning, findings, tools, and participation practice across organisations and structures
- working together where a shared or collective voice can strengthen influence

Reflective Considerations

Collaborative participation is built on relationships, dialogue, and shared ownership. The following questions may help organisations reflect on whether participation processes create genuine opportunities for people to work together in shaping decisions, priorities, and solutions:

- Are participation processes designed as one-off activities or ongoing relationships?
- How can older people be involved throughout the lifecycle of a project, policy, or initiative?
- Are we creating opportunities for dialogue and shared learning?
- Do participants have opportunities to contribute beyond consultation exercises?
- How are we building trust and long-term relationships with participants?
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with other organisations or structures to strengthen participation and avoid duplication?
- Where would a collective voice help increase influence or improve outcomes for older people?

Key Message

Participation is strongest when older people, organisations, and participation structures work together to build relationships, share learning, reduce duplication, and strengthen the collective voice of older people in public policy and public life.

***Informed by** the National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation, Age Friendly Ireland, Older People's Councils, Public Participation Networks, the Commission on Care for Older People, and the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Framework.*

PRINCIPLE 8: REPRESENTATION SHOULD BE TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE

Principle Statement

Where organisations, groups, networks, or individuals represent the views of older people, they should be clear about who they represent, how views are gathered, how positions are developed, and how feedback is shared.

Rationale

Participation often takes place through representative organisations, committees, councils, networks, advocacy groups, and other participation structures. These structures can play an important role in connecting older people with decision-making processes and ensuring that their experiences, concerns, and priorities are heard.

Representation can strengthen participation, but it also carries responsibility. No organisation or individual can automatically speak for all older people. Older people have diverse experiences, perspectives, needs, and priorities, and representative processes must remain connected to those they seek to represent.

Transparent and accountable representation helps build trust. It enables people to understand how views are gathered, how priorities are identified, how policy or advocacy positions are developed, and how decisions or outcomes are communicated back.

Accountable representation also requires ongoing dialogue. Organisations and representatives should create opportunities to listen to older people, test emerging positions, include diverse perspectives, and report back on what has been heard, what has changed, and what further action may be needed.

When representation is transparent and accountable, it strengthens legitimacy, trust, collective voice, and the quality of advocacy and decision-making.

Application in Practice

Transparent and accountable representation may involve:

- clearly explaining who is being represented and in what context
- gathering views through accessible and inclusive participation processes
- being clear about whether input reflects individual views, member views, representative positions, or wider community perspectives
- creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue with those being represented
- ensuring that diverse voices are considered, not only the most visible or confident voices
- explaining how priorities, positions, or recommendations have been developed
- reporting back to those represented on outcomes, decisions, and next steps
- reviewing representation processes to identify who is being reached, whose voices may be missing, and how accountability can be strengthened

Reflective Considerations

Transparent and accountable representation requires organisations to consider how they gather, interpret, communicate, and report on the views of those they seek to represent. The following questions may help organisations reflect on the legitimacy and accountability of their representative role:

- Who are we representing in this process?
- How have views been gathered and from whom?
- Are we clear about whether we are presenting individual views, member views, organisational positions, or wider community perspectives?
- How are diverse experiences and perspectives being included?
- How do we report back to those we represent on outcomes, decisions, and next steps?

Key Message

Representation is strongest when it is transparent, accountable, and connected to the people it seeks to represent. Clear processes for gathering views, developing positions, including diverse voices, and reporting back help strengthen trust, legitimacy, and collective voice.

PRINCIPLE 9: PARTICIPATION SHOULD BE SUSTAINED

Principle Statement

Participation should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a single event, creating opportunities for continued engagement, dialogue, and relationship-building over time.

Rationale

Meaningful participation is rarely achieved through a single consultation, meeting, survey, or engagement activity.

Strong participation develops through ongoing relationships that enable trust, understanding, and shared learning to grow over time. Sustained participation is strengthened when engagement is supported by regular communication, feedback, visible actions, and opportunities to remain involved. These elements help create participation processes that evolve over time rather than ending when a consultation or engagement activity concludes.

Ongoing participation also helps strengthen accountability. When organisations maintain communication, provide feedback, and create opportunities for continued involvement, participants are more likely to understand how their contributions have informed decisions and future actions.

Viewing participation as an ongoing process rather than a one-off activity helps create stronger connections between organisations and the people they serve.

Application in Practice

Sustained participation may involve:

- creating regular opportunities for engagement and dialogue
- maintaining communication with participants between engagement activities
- providing updates on progress, outcomes, and next steps
- establishing ongoing participation structures such as advisory groups, forums, or representative networks
- building long-term relationships with participants and communities
- creating opportunities for participants to contribute to future initiatives and discussions
- reviewing and improving participation processes over time
- recognising participation as a continuous organisational commitment
- building participation into organisational planning, decision-making, and review processes
- creating feedback loops that connect engagement, action, communication, and learning

Reflective Considerations

Sustained participation depends on relationships, communication, and ongoing opportunities for involvement. The following questions may help organisations reflect on whether participation is embedded within their work as an ongoing process rather than a series of isolated activities:

- Is participation viewed as an ongoing process or a series of isolated activities?
- How do we maintain relationships with participants over time?
- What mechanisms exist for ongoing dialogue and engagement?
- How do we communicate progress, outcomes, and future opportunities for involvement?
- Are we creating structures that support long-term participation?

Key Message

Participation is most effective when it is sustained over time, creating lasting relationships, ongoing dialogue, continuous opportunities for engagement and influence, and a culture of learning and improvement.

PRINCIPLE 10: PARTICIPATION SHOULD PROMOTE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

Principle Statement

Participation should promote civic engagement, rights, dignity, inclusion, and voice of older people, recognising them as active members of society with valuable contributions to make to their communities, public life, and decision-making processes.

Rationale

Participation is not only a mechanism for improving decisions. It is also an expression of active citizenship, dignity, inclusion, and the right of people to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

Older people are full members of society whose experiences, knowledge, skills, perspectives, and contributions have value. Participation helps ensure that these contributions are recognised and that older people are not excluded from discussions, decisions, services, or public life because of age, circumstance, or other barriers.

Participation should not be limited to issues traditionally associated with ageing. Older people are affected by decisions relating to housing, transport, digital services, healthcare, community development, public services, climate, culture, and many other aspects of society. Their perspectives therefore have value across a wide range of policy and community discussions.

Rights-based and equality-focused approaches emphasise the importance of creating opportunities for people to participate in ways that are meaningful, inclusive, and respectful. They recognise that participation is not simply a mechanism for gathering views, but an important part of ensuring that people are treated with dignity, fairness, and respect.

When participation is meaningful, inclusive, and sustained, it helps strengthen confidence, belonging, civic engagement, and influence. It creates opportunities for older people to contribute to public life, shape priorities, influence decisions, and help create more responsive policies, services, and communities.

A strong culture of participation helps ensure that older people's voices remain visible within public life and that their experiences and perspectives continue to inform discussions about the future of society.

Application in Practice

Participation that promotes citizenship, rights, and dignity may involve:

- creating opportunities for older people to contribute to public policy discussions and decision-making processes
- supporting participation in community, civic, cultural, and organisational life
- recognising older people as active citizens and contributors to society
- promoting participation as a positive and valued contribution to communities and public life

- ensuring that participation opportunities are inclusive, accessible, and respectful
- identifying and addressing barriers that may prevent participation
- creating pathways through which older people's voices can inform advocacy, policy, and decision-making
- encouraging leadership, representation, and active involvement
- supporting opportunities for intergenerational dialogue and engagement
- recognising and valuing the ongoing contribution of older people to communities and society
- creating opportunities for older people to contribute to discussions on a broad range of policy and community issues, not only age-specific matters

Reflective Considerations

Participation can strengthen citizenship, dignity, inclusion, and influence when people have meaningful opportunities to contribute to issues that affect their lives and communities. The following questions may help organisations reflect on how participation supports active civic engagement, rights, dignity, and voice:

- How are we supporting older people to influence decisions and contribute to public life?
- Do our participation processes promote dignity, respect, and inclusion?
- Are participation opportunities helping to strengthen confidence, engagement, and civic involvement?
- Are there barriers that may prevent some older people from participating on an equal basis with others?
- Do older people have meaningful opportunities to shape the advocacy and priorities of organisations that represent them?
- How do we ensure that older people's voices remain visible within public debate and decision-making?
- Are we recognising and valuing the contribution that older people make to society?

Key Message

Meaningful participation promotes civic engagement, rights, dignity, inclusion, and voice. It recognises older people as active members of society whose experiences, perspectives, and contributions have an important role in shaping public life, decision-making, and the future of their communities.

Informed by the National Positive Ageing Strategy, Social Justice Ireland publications on citizenship and participation, the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 23 of the European Social Charter, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014 / Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

4. EMBEDDING PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICE

Building a Culture of Participation

The principles outlined in this Charter are intended to guide everyday practice. Meaningful participation is not achieved through a single policy, consultation, or event. It is created through organisational cultures, behaviours, systems, and relationships that consistently value the involvement of older people.

Organisations seeking to strengthen participation should consider how the principles of this Charter can be embedded within planning, governance, consultation, communications, service design, advocacy, and decision-making processes.

Participation is most effective when it is viewed as a core organisational commitment rather than an occasional activity. Embedding participation within organisational culture helps ensure that the voices, experiences, and perspectives of older people are consistently valued within decision-making, planning, service development, and advocacy.

Communication and Engagement

Clear communication plays a central role in effective participation.

Older people should have access to timely, accessible, and understandable information about opportunities to participate, the purpose of engagement activities, and the outcomes arising from them.

Organisations should seek to communicate in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs of different audiences.

Good communication helps build trust, strengthens relationships, and supports meaningful engagement.

Accessibility and Inclusion

Participation opportunities should be designed with accessibility and inclusion in mind from the outset.

This may involve considering venue accessibility, transport, digital participation options, communication formats, timing, language, and any additional supports that may be required.

Removing barriers to participation helps ensure that a broader range of voices can be heard and represented. Accessibility and inclusion should be considered from the earliest stages of planning rather than introduced as an afterthought once participation processes have been designed.

Feedback and Accountability

Participation is strengthened when people understand how their contributions have informed decisions and actions.

Providing feedback demonstrates respect for participants' time, experience, and involvement. It also helps strengthen transparency and trust.

Organisations should seek to communicate outcomes, explain decisions, identify how participation has influenced future actions wherever possible, and be transparent where suggestions have not been adopted and the reasons for this.

Representation and Diversity

Participation processes should seek to reflect the diversity of older people's experiences and perspectives.

Organisations should regularly consider who is participating, whose voices may be missing, and what additional steps may be needed to engage underrepresented groups.

Diversity strengthens understanding and contributes to better-informed decision-making.

Collaboration and Co-Design

Participation is most effective when organisations create opportunities for collaboration rather than relying solely on consultation.

Where appropriate, older people should be involved in shaping priorities, designing initiatives, reviewing proposals, and contributing to ongoing development and improvement.

Collaborative approaches help strengthen ownership, trust, and the quality of outcomes.

Monitoring, Learning and Improvement

Participation should be reviewed and strengthened over time.

Organisations should seek to learn from participation activities, gather feedback on engagement processes, and identify opportunities for improvement.

A commitment to continuous learning helps ensure that participation remains meaningful, inclusive, and effective.

Monitoring participation can also help organisations understand who is participating, whose voices may be missing, what barriers are emerging, and how participation processes can become more inclusive, representative, and effective over time.

5. PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

Participation can take many forms. Effective participation often combines a variety of approaches, creating opportunities for older people to contribute in different ways depending on their interests, experience, availability, and preferred methods of engagement.

The examples below illustrate some of the approaches that can help strengthen participation and support a stronger voice for older people in public life.

No single approach is sufficient on its own. Effective participation often involves combining different methods and structures to create opportunities for ongoing dialogue, representation, influence, feedback, and collaboration. The most appropriate approach will depend on the purpose of participation, the people involved, and the decisions being considered.

Older People's Councils

Older People's Councils provide structured opportunities for older people to come together, discuss issues of importance, identify priorities, and contribute to local and national conversations.

These forums can help ensure that lived experience informs policy discussions while creating ongoing opportunities for participation, representation, and collective action.

Public Participation Networks

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) provide mechanisms through which community and voluntary organisations can engage with local government structures and contribute to decision-making processes.

For many older people and age sector organisations, PPNs offer an important route through which local concerns, experiences, and priorities can be communicated and represented.

Consultation and Engagement Processes

Consultations, surveys, focus groups, workshops, public meetings, and discussion forums can all play an important role in gathering views and experiences.

When designed effectively, these approaches can provide valuable insights and help inform policy development, service improvement, organisational planning, and advocacy activity.

The effectiveness of these approaches is strengthened when participants receive feedback and can see how their contributions have influenced outcomes.

Consultation processes are generally most effective when they take place early enough to influence discussions and decisions rather than being limited to commenting on proposals that have already been developed.

Collaboration and Co-Design

Participation can extend beyond consultation into more collaborative approaches.

Co-design involves people working alongside organisations to shape policies, services, projects, or initiatives from an early stage. It creates opportunities for shared learning, joint problem-solving, and the development of solutions that are informed by lived experience.

Collaborative approaches can help strengthen ownership, improve outcomes, and build trust between organisations and participants.

Advisory Groups and Representative Structures

Advisory groups, steering groups, representative forums, and other structured participation mechanisms can create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and engagement.

These structures can support longer-term participation by enabling older people to contribute to discussions, provide feedback, identify emerging issues, and help shape organisational priorities.

From Local Voices to National Influence

Participation is often strongest when local experiences can inform wider discussions and decision-making.

Opportunities for engagement at community level can help identify issues, concerns, and priorities that may have relevance beyond a single locality. Creating pathways through which local voices can contribute to regional and national conversations helps strengthen representation and ensures that participation has the potential to influence wider policy and public debate. Strong participation systems create connections between local experiences, representative structures, organisational advocacy, and public policy processes. These connections help ensure that lived experience can contribute not only to local improvements but also to wider discussions, priorities, and decision-making.

Participation as an Ongoing Commitment

The examples outlined in this section are not intended as a checklist or a set of mandatory approaches.

Rather, they illustrate the many ways in which participation can be strengthened and embedded within organisations, communities, and public life.

The most effective participation approaches are those that reflect the needs, interests, and experiences of the people involved while remaining consistent with the principles outlined in this Charter. Organisations are encouraged to review and adapt their participation approaches over time to ensure that they remain accessible, inclusive, representative, and effective.

6. LOOKING AHEAD

Building a Stronger Culture of Participation

Participation is not a destination. It is an ongoing commitment to listening, learning, collaborating, and working together.

The principles outlined in this Charter provide a foundation for strengthening the participation of older people in the organisations that represent them, in public policy discussions, and in the wider decisions that shape communities and society.

Creating meaningful participation requires more than individual consultations or engagement exercises. It requires a culture in which participation is valued, planned for, supported, and embedded within organisational practice.

As Ireland's population continues to age, creating opportunities for older people to contribute their knowledge, experience, and perspectives will become increasingly important. Strong participation benefits not only older people themselves but also organisations, communities, public institutions, and society as a whole.

Strengthening Voice and Influence

One of the strongest messages emerging from this project is the desire among older people to have a stronger voice in decisions that affect their lives.

Participation creates opportunities for that voice to be heard. It enables older people to contribute to discussions, influence priorities, identify challenges, help shape solutions, and participate more fully in public life.

A stronger voice is not achieved through a single organisation, initiative, or consultation. It is built through ongoing engagement, collaboration, representation, and a shared commitment to ensuring that older people's experiences and perspectives are reflected in decision-making processes.

The principles contained within this Charter are intended to support that ambition.

Working Together

Meaningful participation is a shared responsibility.

Organisations, community groups, public bodies, representative structures, and older people themselves all have a role to play in creating environments where participation can flourish.

Collaboration across the age sector can help strengthen participation opportunities, share learning, build capacity, and support a more coordinated approach to engagement and representation.

By working together, organisations can help ensure that participation becomes a consistent feature of organisational practice, public life, and decision-making rather than an occasional activity.

Learning and Evolving

Participation is not static. New challenges, opportunities, technologies, and expectations will continue to shape how people engage with organisations and public institutions.

For this reason, participation processes should continue to evolve. Organisations should remain open to learning, adapting, and improving their approaches based on experience, feedback, and emerging good practice.

The Charter should therefore be viewed as a living framework that can support ongoing reflection, dialogue, and development across the age sector.

A Shared Commitment

This Charter represents a shared commitment to meaningful, inclusive, and effective participation.

It reflects the experiences of older people, the learning generated through this project, and the collective ambition to strengthen participation in public policy formation and public life. It is also informed by national and international participation frameworks, policy commitments, rights and equality frameworks, and examples of established good practice.

By embracing these principles, organisations can help create a future in which older people's voices are consistently heard, respected, and reflected in the decisions that affect their lives, communities, and society.

7. EVIDENCE BASE AND FOUNDATIONS

The Participation Charter is grounded in the experiences, views, and perspectives shared by older people through the national consultation undertaken as part of the Strengthening the Voice of Older People project.

The consultation findings provided the primary evidence base for the Charter and informed the development of the participation principles contained within this document.

To strengthen and contextualise those findings, a review of relevant national and international policy frameworks, participation models, rights and equality frameworks, research, and good practice guidance was also undertaken. Together, these sources informed the development of the Charter and helped ensure that the principles reflect both lived experience and established good practice.

The following sources and frameworks informed the development of this Charter:

Primary Evidence Source

- National Consultation on Participation and Public Policy Formation (Strengthening the Voice of Older People Project)

Participation and Engagement Sources

- Public Participation Networks (PPNs)
- Older People's Councils
- Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)
- Children's Participation Action Plan 2024–2028

National Policy and Strategy Sources

- National Positive Ageing Strategy
- Citizens' Assembly on Ageing
- Commission on Care for Older People
- Age Friendly Ireland Framework
- Social Justice Ireland publications relating to citizenship, participation, and inclusion
- Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014 / Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

International Frameworks and Good Practice Sources

- WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Framework
- WHO Healthy Ageing Framework
- United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030
- United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1991)
- Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing
- European Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 25)
- European Social Charter (Article 23)

The Charter is also consistent with the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, particularly the principles relating to participation, independence, self-fulfilment and dignity.

A detailed analysis of these sources, together with the rationale for their inclusion and the specific elements informing the Charter, is available in the accompanying: “*Research & Evidence Base*” document.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Most importantly, we wish to acknowledge and thank the older people who participated in the consultation and engagement activities that informed this work. Their experiences, insights, and perspectives provided the foundation upon which this Charter has been built.

The consultation findings were complemented by a review of national and international participation frameworks, policy commitments, rights and equality frameworks, and examples of good practice, helping to ensure that the Charter is both grounded in lived experience and informed by established evidence.

This Charter reflects a shared commitment to strengthening participation, supporting meaningful engagement, and ensuring that older people's voices continue to contribute to public policy formation and public life.

For further information on the research, evidence, and sources informing this Charter, please refer to the accompanying *Research & Evidence Base* document.