



Research Update



All our futures: attitudes to age and ageing in Ireland

Ann Marie Gray and Lizanne Dowds



Introduction

In 2002 the National Plan for Social Inclusion (Government of Ireland, 2002) set out a vision of older people living active and full lives in their own homes for as long as possible and having sufficient income to support an acceptable standard of living. Also in 2002, the Equality Authority published its report 'Implementing Equality for Older Persons' which contained 72 recommendations relating to policy making, work, income, age limits and health and social care. The government has also recently consulted on what should be in the new National Positive Ageing Strategy (consultation period ended September 2009). This will set the strategic framework for future policies, programmes and services for older people. The Minister has emphasised that the Strategy had to be developed within 'the constraints posed by the present fiscal situation'. Attitudes to age and ageing in both the North and South of Ireland were first examined by ARK in 2003 in a series of surveys funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. The 2003 survey findings provided an important baseline of attitudes and perceptions. The repeat of the surveys in 2008/9 provides an opportunity to assess if, and how, attitudes have changed, taking into account policy and legislative changes and the potential impact of campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of the issues facing older people. This report is focused

on the South of Ireland and provides a brief summary of public attitudes to older people over the period 2003-2008 in the light of the economic and social context.

General views on the position of older people

Large majorities in both the North and the South of Ireland hold positive attitudes towards older people. There is broad agreement that older people are much younger in their ways these days and an acknowledgment that society does not recognise the contribution that many older people are still able to make. The latter belief is held less strongly in the South though – perhaps reflecting that the contribution of older people is increasingly being recognised. However as Table 1 shows, there continues to be a more positive attitude to ageing and to older people in the South of Ireland than in the North. While large majorities in both jurisdictions hold generally positive attitudes towards older people, there is no reluctance in the North to express a negative attitude as well with many more people prepared to say that older people are too set in their ways and that older people are not willing to listen to younger people.

However against this background of highly positive attitudes towards older people

there is also an increasing sense that this group is not always receiving the respect that they deserve and a rising concern about how older people are treated vis à vis the general population. Respondents were asked whether they felt that they themselves were treated with more or less respect as they got older. (Table 2)

As was the case in 2003, most people in 2008 did not feel that respect diminished as they got older but that belief was perhaps held a little less firmly than it had been five years earlier. There was a rise in the number of people who feel that you are treated with less respect as you get older – up from 20% to 26%, and evident in both the under 65s and the older age groups. When asked about older people more generally, there is also evidence of increasing concern. Respondents were asked how they thought people in their 50s and over were treated compared with the general population and it is notable that the proportion of older respondents (aged 65 and over) who felt that older people were treated worse had risen ten percentage points since this question was asked in the 2003 survey – from 25% to 35%. (Table 3)

Overall, these findings on issues relating to respect and recognition suggest that while attitudes are highly positive towards older people there has been a growing sense over the last five years that things are not really

Table 1: General attitudes towards older people

	North of Ireland	South of Ireland
% agree		
These days older people are much younger in their ways	90	87
Society doesn't recognise the contribution that many older people are still able to make	92	77
Older people are admired and respected by young people	32	52
Older people are too set in their ways and ideas	60	39
Older people are not willing to listen to young people's views	46	34

Table 2: As you get older, do people treat you with more or less respect?

	%					
	2003			2008		
	Under 65	65+	All	Under 65	65+	All
More respect	36	38	36	30	31	30
Less respect	20	22	20	26	29	26
The same	41	39	41	40	37	40
Don't know	3	1	3	4	3	4

Table 3: Thinking about older people in Ireland, that is people in their 50's and over... Do you think that older people are, on the whole, treated better or worse than people in the general population in this country because of their age?

	%					
	2003			2008		
	Under 65	65+	All	Under 65	65+	All
Better	16	35	19	19	26	20
Worse	38	25	36	36	35	36
The same	42	38	41	39	35	39
Don't know	4	3	4	6	4	6

Table 4: Perceptions of personal discrimination 2003 and 2008.

	2003	2008
	%	%
Self not treated well by an employer because of age	4	11
Friend or family member not treated well by an employer because of age	9	18
Self treated with less dignity and respect by people in the health and social care professions because of age	8	13
Friend or family member treated with less dignity and respect by people in the health and social care professions because of age	17	23
Self not offered medical treatment that might have helped because of age	3	10
Friend or family member not offered medical treatment that might have helped because of age	9	19
Self not treated as well by people in the financial sector because of age	6	18
Friend or family member not treated as well by people in the financial sector because of age	10	22

really that great for older people. All of this would be consistent with a public becoming more aware of the problems facing older people and an increasing awareness of the potential for ageism.

Discrimination against older people

One of the key aims of the surveys was to examine perceptions of discrimination against older people and measure to what extent this changed between 2003 and 2008. Back in 2003 it was clear that many people believed that discrimination against older people in general was probably quite widespread, but there were relatively few instances of personal discrimination reported by respondents against themselves or friends or family. What has changed by 2008 is not the general perception of discrimination (which remains high but stable) it is perceptions of personal discrimination which are on the increase. Of course greater reporting of discrimination may not necessarily mean that more discrimination is occurring. It is possible that the policy focus on equality issues generally since 2003 has increased awareness and resulted in people being more sensitive to ageism. Incidents which would not have been defined as ageism in years gone by may now be interpreted as such. Whatever is driving this finding, the changes in perceived discrimination between 2003 and 2008, both in the North and the South of Ireland are marked. Table 4 shows the figures relating to perceived discrimination in employment, by the health and social care professions and by those in the financial sector.

Although the number of people who felt that they themselves had been discriminated against by an employer is quite low, it has nonetheless nearly trebled since 2003 (from 4% to 11%). When respondents were asked whether they had ever felt that a friend or family member had been discriminated against because of their age the numbers had doubled in both the North and the South of Ireland since 2003. The under 65s are more likely than the older age group to have perceived this and defined it as discrimination but it is nonetheless on the increase across both age groups.

The dignity and respect accorded to older people when they use health services and the choices made about their care has been subject to debate and scrutiny for some years. Results from the surveys show that, as is the

case with employment issues, there has also been an increase in personal reporting of discrimination by health and social care staff. Close to a quarter of all respondents in 2008 reported that they felt that a friend or family member had been treated with less dignity and respect by people in the health and social care professions because of their age. With regard to medical treatment itself quite small numbers perceive injustices but the change over time is again quite marked. Only 10% of respondents in 2008 who were aged 50 or over felt that they had not been offered medical treatment that might have helped them but this was still an increase on the 3%. Similar patterns emerge when respondents are asked about perceived discrimination against family and friends where the proportion reporting a problem has doubled from 9% to 19%.

Exactly the same pattern emerges in relation to financial services as was the case for healthcare and employment issues. The number of people saying that they themselves had been discriminated against by the financial sector in 2008 was only 18%. However this had tripled since 2003. A further 22% of respondents said that a friend or family member had been discriminated against in 2008 and again this had more than doubled since the 10% reporting rate in 2003. It is possible that the 'credit crunch', and the debate about the culpability of financial institutions for the recession have influenced attitudes to some extent. Individuals, or their friends or family, may have been affected by developments relating to banks such as Northern Rock, the Anglo Irish Bank or the Presbyterian Mutual Society. At the very least the extensive media coverage may have resulted in greater anxiety or concern. These findings do however add weight to calls for financial (and other) services to be covered by equality legislation and for that to be effectively implemented.

Public perceptions of state provision for older people

The survey results highlight stark differences in opinion in public attitudes in the North and South of Ireland when it comes to state pension provision, with participants in Northern Ireland much more likely to feel that pensioners were getting a poor deal. In contrast, although 60% of respondents in the South still felt that the pension rate was a poor deal and it is noticeable that the strength of this view has lessened in the five

years since 2003 (dropping from 71% to 60%). Quite possibly, perceptions have been influenced by the context of the recession in latter times.

In terms of financial provision by the state more generally (taking account of other benefits provided for pensioners) the picture was slightly different. A clear majority, 60% of participants, thought that provision was inadequate – as was the case in 2003. However while the under 65s are again slightly less likely to see provision as inadequate in 2008, those over 65 are increasingly feeling that there is a problem here. Possibly the removal of the automatic entitlement to medical cards is a factor in this increasing discontent among the older age group.

The findings from the surveys also suggest the wider population is becoming slightly less willing to see older people subsidised for services such as gas and electricity with the number in favour declining from 93% in 2003 to 84% in 2008.

Participation and representation

Although historically older people have been viewed as politically passive, in more recent years in both the UK and Ireland there has been more mobilisation of older people around key policy issues. The growth of advocacy organisations and initiatives targeted at increasing the social and – to an extent – political participation of older people has certainly provided greater opportunity and higher visibility for older people. We may see older people becoming more politically active due to disillusionment and disappointment with the way in which older people's interests are represented by authorities and politicians.

Looking at survey results for the 65+ age group there is a clear sense of an emerging discontent with representation and a desire for empowerment as shown in Table 5 below. The sense that the authorities do not do enough for older people has risen dramatically from 50% to 66% between 2003 and 2008. Other survey results confirm this message. Less than a third of the 65+ group feel that politicians adequately represent older people, a massive 81% feel that the government does not consult older people adequately about issues that affect them, and at 80% there is overwhelming support for an independent body outside government that champions their needs and rights.

Perhaps the most interesting results here are those which reflect the support for the empowerment of older people themselves beyond the discontent with perceived inadequate representation. There was widely expressed agreement that older people needed to organise themselves and stand up for their own rights. Seventy seven per cent of those aged 65+ agreed with this statement while a full 86% agreed that older people needed to stand up more actively for their own rights. It is noteworthy that this last question was also asked in the 2003 survey and the agreement figure at that point in time was higher at 93%. Although both figures still represent overwhelming support it is possible that, over time, some respondents now feel that older people standing up for their rights is something that is indeed now happening. And certainly in the South of Ireland there is considerable awareness of media campaigns on behalf of older people. Thirty five per cent of all respondents and 41% of those aged 65-74 in the South of Ireland had been generally aware of such campaigns during the previous twelve months.

Table 5: Do you think that the authorities in Ireland do all they should for older people, do too much, or do not do enough?

	%					
	2003			2008		
	Under 65	65+	All	Under 65	65+	All
Do all they should	22	48	26	19	28	20
Do too much	1	1	1	1	1	1
Do not do enough	73	50	69	70	66	69
(Don't know)	5	2	5	10	5	9

References

Government of Ireland (2002) Social Inclusion: Building an Inclusive Society, the national plan for social inclusion. Dublin: Stationery Office

Equality Authority (2008) Implementing Equality for Older Persons. Dublin: Equality Authority

Key Points

- Public attitudes towards older people were highly positive in 2008, just as they were in 2003
- However the proportion of older people who feel that they are treated worse than the general population rose from 25% in 2003 to 35% in 2008.
- Perceptions of discrimination have risen markedly between 2003 and 2008.
- The proportion of older respondents who said they had not been treated well by the financial sector because of their age had risen from 6% in 2003 to 18% in 2008.
- Reports of friends or family members being discriminated against by an employer because of their age had risen from 9% in 2003 to 18% in 2008.
- 23% of respondents said that a friend or family member had been treated with less dignity and respect by the health and social care professions because of their age.
- Among the 65 and over age group, the belief that the authorities do not do enough for older people has risen from 50% to 66% between 2003 and 2008.
- Among the 65 and over age group, 86% agreed that older people needed to stand up more actively for their own rights

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In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster.

Aberfoyle House, Magee Campus, University of Ulster
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 71375513 Fax: 028 71375510
Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 90973947 Fax: 028 90 90973943
Email: info@ark.ac.uk