# How to design a future Ireland for an ageing population

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'Population ageing in Ireland can hold vast future potential and opportunity'. Photo: Peter Kindersley/Centre for Ageing Better

**Opinion: a rapidly ageing population means we need creative approaches to help us understand complex needs and allow freedom to define our future**

By P.J. White, South East Technological University

The world's population is ageing rapidly. According to the World Health Organisation, the global population aged over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22% between the years 2015 and 2050. By this time Ireland is projected to have almost 1.6 million people aged over 65. This change in the demographic profile will bring challenges, but also future potential and opportunities.

Positively, we have an opportunity to create a country that can support positive ageing, and develop inclusive intergenerational communities with appropriate products, services and infrastructure. However, there are a lot of unknowns with population ageing in coming years. Coinciding with climate change, the UN has stated that the next decade will be critical for both agendas to understand their complex interconnectedness. Pandemic restrictions also heightened and highlighted many diverse complex issues for older people ,for example, including unmet healthcare needs, loneliness and social isolation and the negative effect of digital exclusion

Privacy

*From RTÉ Radio 1's News At One Minister for Finance Paschal Donohoe discusses a Department of Finance study that estimates age-related expenditure will be €17 billion higher by 2050*

With unknowns and complexity in the future, there are certain things that we do know:

**Healthcare and communities need to adapt**

Older Irish people want to live at home in their community. As a result, communities, housing, products, and services will need to change and adapt to promote independence over our lifespan. To achieve this, Integrated Care programmes for older people will continually need to be developed.

**Digital exclusion exists**

Age Action Ireland has reported that 65% of Irish older people experience it so digital technology needs to become more accessible and usable for older users. As AI and robotics become more relevant in the development of products and services, the wider application of technology for older people should be considered.

**Media perceptions of older people need to change**,

We need more diverse depictions of older people in the media around us. Visual ageism in the media as documented by Prof Tom Scharf can be addressed by awareness and the creation of initiatives such as the Age Positive image library created by the Centre for Ageing Better. Awareness and understanding of the diversity in the lives of older people can also be achieved through film and drama, recent examples include Frances McDormand in *Nomadland* and Anthony Hopkins in *The Father*.

**Education and work will change**

Living for longer may mean working for longer. Working conditions will need to adapt, together with age-friendly education initiatives and lifelong learning opportunities.

*Trailer for Nomadland*

Preparing for future ageing is complex, so how do we prepare for change and adapt? How do we futureproof services, and create new ones? Firstly, multiple perspectives must be understood, and engaging with a diversity of older people is key.

Secondly, the complexities of ageing cannot be understood by one discipline alone, requiring interdisciplinary approaches. New disciplinary composites within gerontology such as gerontechnology (gerontology and technology) and geriatric medical humanities are examples of these.

'Thinking creatively' is often a phrase used when faced with complex issues. Creative processes, such as those employed in design, can allow us to articulate and portray potential futures, offering a means to remove conventions and imagine what could and should be. Methods traditionally employed by creatives to design products, buildings, graphics, and clothes are now regularly being used to address future complex social issues. Design methods are iterative and divergent, allowing freedom to conceptualise difficult-to-articulate future states. Importantly, design methods can be participatory, allowing diverse voices to be heard.

Prototype participatory design tools to understand orientation needs in urban environments for people living with dementia. Image courtesy of Dr. Saskia Kuliga/German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases

Design methods that focus on participation, such as co-design, are of particular interest when attempting to understand the future of ageing populations. Co-design is a means of designing from the bottom up with people from differing perspectives. Internationally, it is cited as playing a major role in the future of healthcare services and it has been identified here as a key methodology to achieve service improvement in healthcare for older people.

Participatory methods in design are key to the development of future built environments and communities, such as dementia-friendly hospitals and national standards for dementia-inclusive communities. The German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases is using design methods and co-research to better understand the wayfinding and spatial orientation needs of people living with dementia in urban environments. Design methods are being used at the McMaster Institute for Research on Aging in Canada to engage interdisciplinary research teams to address issues such as mobility and digital inclusion.

Population ageing in Ireland can hold vast future potential and opportunity. Design methods can help us conceptualise the future state of services, products, and communities, helping us plan for future complex needs. Participation in this will need to involve multiple perspectives, interdisciplinary approaches, and all ages, including a diversity of older

people.

This will take time and planning, so we need to start creating a culture of design and participation now, creating new methods of participation and engagement as we do so. Designing the future starts now.

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# References