

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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A positive approach to ageing



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Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address you on behalf of the European Commission today, and I would like to thank the organisers for this invitation. I am honoured to be here today to celebrate with you the International Day of Older Persons.

My speech will look at some highlights of the European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity. I will also explain how this policy approach contributes to the economic recovery in Ireland and across the EU.

Today, Europe is at a turning point in demographic terms. As the baby boom generation retires, the number of people aged 60 or older is rising roughly twice as fast as in previous years, by about two million a year. Meanwhile, the number of younger people entering the labour market is falling. So the working-age population will soon be declining fast.

An older population presents various challenges: to our job market, to our health systems and to our living standards after we retire. Many fear that the burden of providing pensions, healthcare and social services for the growing number of older people will become too heavy for the fewer younger people.

Some expect outright confrontation between generations as older people defend their social benefits, neglecting the needs and interests of the younger generations. However, the interests of young and old people are not as opposed to each other as one might think.

Older people depend on the success of younger people if they want to enjoy good social protection and social services; so it is in their best interest to invest in the future of the young. Younger people care about their elders and want themselves to be treated with respect and dignity when they are old.

We can and must avoid confrontation between generations by developing a positive approach to tackling the challenge of ageing. An approach focused on creating better opportunities for an active and fulfilling life for people of all ages.

The key is to ensure that, as people grow older, they can continue to contribute to the economy and society, and to look after themselves for as long as possible. This is what we call active ageing.

We do not need to fear for the future of an ageing society,

- if we preserve our health longer;
- if we create more opportunities for older workers on the labour market; and
- if we remain active members of the community.

In short, we need to create an environment rich in opportunities, where growing old does not necessarily mean that one becomes dependent of others.

This is the key message of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

The 2012 European Year promotes active ageing in three areas — employment, participation in society and living independently.

In practice it means fostering an active-ageing culture that includes older people, rather than excluding them, that develops their potential, rather than focusing on deficiencies, that empowers, rather than patronises older people.

The European Year seeks to change attitudes to ageing and to challenge the understanding of what it means "to be old" and "to grow old".

In order to challenge negative stereotypes and to foster relations between generations, we have launched many activities in the course of the European Year. Let me briefly mention a few examples.

With the generations@schools initiative we brought together older people and pupils in their local schools. They met in classrooms to share their personal experience of what it means to be old and young. They also shared their skills and learned from one another. They told us they enjoyed this experience, or had lots of 'craic', as you may say! We hope to repeat it next year.

Through the European Awards Scheme, for which the submission deadline just passed, we were also looking for activities and good practice examples that facilitate the participation of older people and support intergenerational solidarity. Later on this month, an EU Jury will meet to select the winners. These will include employers who create age-friendly work places, social entrepreneurs with brilliant new ideas and a strong drive for creating a better society, local communities that provide facilities for people of all ages, but also journalists who in their work tackle the challenging issue of ageing and the relations between old and young. Through the Life Story Challenge, we will pay tribute to the most impressive 'active agers', who shared their stories with us.

Last but not least, there is the European Seniorforce Day. From Cyprus to Ireland, events are being organised to highlight the potential of older people who are engaged as volunteers in all sorts of cultural, political and social activities - such as the activities promoted by the Third Age.

The Senior Force Day in Ireland will be marked by an Intergenerational Volunteering Week later this month. I am sure Ronan Tooney, the National Coordinator of the European Year in Ireland, will tell us more about it in his speech later today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In preparation of the European Year, we conducted a survey, which says that a majority of EU citizens – 61% - feel that people aged 55 and over are perceived positively.

Ireland is doing even better: 76% of respondents said they believe that older people are perceived in a positive light in their country, while only 15% felt they were perceived negatively. This situation is different in countries in Central Europe, where older people tend to be viewed rather negatively.

The Eurobarometer survey also found that only a third of Europeans are convinced that the retirement age will need to go up by the year 2030. That is very much at odds with what most policy-makers and experts think!

People in Ireland are much more aware of the need for a higher retirement age. 53% said that it will have to increase, compared to 31% who disagree.

By contrast, respondents in Romania (87%), Latvia (86%) and Slovenia (83%) are most likely to disagree that the retirement age will need to increase in future.

While the idea of a higher retirement age is not well accepted among Europeans, they do seem to be keen on opportunities for working longer and a clear majority rejects the idea of mandatory retirement at a particular age.

In Ireland, 46% of respondents said that they would like to work beyond the age at which they are entitled to a pension, compared to around one third for the EU as a whole.

Most Europeans find the idea of combining a part-pension with part-time working more attractive than being fully retired at a given age. And there is a strong support for that idea in Ireland – as many as 78% would favour that solution.

All this shows that Europeans, and especially the Irish, may not want to be forced to work longer, but – given the right opportunities – they might be very happy to stay longer on the labour market.

And indeed older Europeans need to stay in the labour market for longer to secure our future prosperity. Without active ageing, we will not be able to meet two of Europe 2020's five targets. We cannot hope to raise the employment rate of people aged 20 to 64 to 75% or lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020.

Today less than 50% of people in the 55-to-64 age group are employed. Meeting the Europe 2020 employment rate target means employing almost 18 million more people by 2020 and raising the employment rate — especially for women — in the 55-to-64 age bracket.

At the same time, we need to facilitate the labour market entry for young people and to combat youth unemployment. The European Social Fund is a very useful tool in that regard. In 2007-2013, just over one hundred million euros were committed to specific youth employment measures from the ESF. For Ireland, this was just under 30% of the total ESF allocation.

These funds were used to finance initiatives, such as Youthreach that is targeted towards unqualified early school leavers, by offering a programme of integrated general education, vocational training and work experience. Obtaining new skills and getting higher educational qualifications will help young people to improve their employability.

Overall, to meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy, we need a social protection approach that would rely on investment in human capital (such as lifelong learning and up-skilling) and that, at the same time, helps to make efficient use of this human capital, regardless of people's age, gender or ethnicity. This social investment approach recognises that social policies are a productive factor, and are necessary to economic development and employment growth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are now in the last quarter of this European Year. Clearly, it is too early to assess its impact on policy developments in the Member States, particularly at local and regional level.

But the Year has certainly mobilised a wide range of stakeholders and showcased many new initiatives to promote active ageing and strengthen solidarity between generations. It has elicited commitments for further action from the Member States.

The Age Friendly Counties Programme in Ireland, presented at a Conference in Brussels on the 4th of June, is a very good example of such a commitment.

The Minister of the Environment, Community and Local Government has set the goal that every Local Authority area in Ireland will have its own Age Friendly County Programme to improve the health and well-being of older people and increase their participation and influence in the social, economic and cultural life of the communities. And the most interesting thing is that each Age-Friendly County (AFC) initiative establishes a local Older People's Forum, that is a series of public consultations with older people at town and village level, to inform on the priorities of the strategy to be adopted.

I want to congratulate you on the 11 programmes that are already fully operational, with another ten in their early stages, and I encourage you in your ambition to have the remaining 13 areas operational by the end of 2013.

We need to build on the political momentum generated by the European Year, here in Ireland, but also throughout Europe, and ensure there is proper follow-up. The Commission is keen to support the Member States and stakeholders through various initiatives.

First, together with the Member States, we are finalising a set of guiding principles for active ageing. They will offer a general framework for improving the conditions and opportunities for active ageing.

We hope they will be endorsed by the Social Affairs Ministers in December under the Cyprus Presidency.

Secondly, to measure progress in active ageing, we also are working with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the European Centre in Vienna on developing an active ageing index. It should give us an indication of the untapped active-ageing potential of both women and men in each country.

Thirdly, the European Commission plans to issue an open call for proposals in 2013 to support the Member States in developing comprehensive active-ageing strategies.

At our conference in June on "Good governance for active and healthy ageing", there was broad agreement on the need for public authorities at various levels, and across different policy areas, to work closely together on designing effective and comprehensive strategies for active and healthy ageing.

We will be happy to support this and ensure that countries can benefit from each other's experience with such integrated policy-making for active ageing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a succession of European Years by which the European Union has put citizens and their needs in the centre of public attention. We had the Year against Poverty in 2010, the year on volunteering in 2011, followed by Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations this year, and citizenship next year.

This European Year has encouraged EU Member States to step up their efforts to promote active ageing. They have come up with actions and entered into commitments.

I would like to thank our Irish partners, the Office for Older People at the Ministry of Health and Third Age Ireland, as well as other members of the European Year coalition, for their valuable contribution to the successful implementation of this year.

I trust that your good work will continue beyond this year.