



# Ageing Well Network

## CASE STUDY SUMMARY

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

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

### Background

In the mid-2000s, The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) embarked on a major initiative in the ageing field in the Republic of Ireland. As part of its investment, Atlantic wanted to help build the infrastructure of the ageing sector. Unlike other sectors, the ageing field was weak and fragmented. Individuals in nongovernmental organisations, academia and the government performed important work but rarely had the opportunity to talk to one another.

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

### What Made the Network Unique

The Ageing Well Network had several features that were crucial to its success. Those features were:

- **Inviting only senior executives to participate.** Network organisers wanted participants who were in positions to make decisions and ensure their implementation.
- **Creating a multi-sectoral network.** Because the ageing field in Ireland was so fragmented, it was important to bring together the various sectors so they could share ideas and begin to create a cohesive field.
- **Including top government officials across departments and agencies.** Any real change in the approach to older adults would have to include the government so it was crucial to have government officials involved. These officials came from a range of departments including those not typically seen as involved in ageing issues such as transportation and education.
- **Working for change within the system rather than focusing on an advocacy capacity.** Because government officials were involved in the network, a crucial focus was to find ways to work with those officials, rather than in an advocacy and potentially adversarial role.
- **Holding off-site retreats using the Chatham House Rule.** For the first three years, the network held overnight retreats for its members under the Chatham House Rule in which no news media were present and no one could be quoted. These meetings allowed participants to get to know one another in a low-pressure, intellectually stimulating environment.

### Accomplishments

An independent case study noted that since the Ageing Well Network's inception in 2007, it can claim a number of key accomplishments including:

- **Contributing to Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy.** The network made a significant impact on the development of a national strategy on ageing for older people. Two of its important contributions were to broaden the view of ageing beyond health and to provide a perspective of older people as contributors to society, not burdens.
- **Developing the Age-Friendly Cities and Counties Programme.** The Ageing Well Network led the establishment of Age-Friendly Cities and Counties programmes in 16 of Ireland's counties. The programme focuses on transforming communities to make them as age-friendly as possible. Based on principles developed by the World Health Organization, Ireland's programme is now regarded as one of the most developed and holistic in the world. Ireland's local authorities have now committed to carry on the work so that all 26 counties will have age-friendly structures.
- **Introducing New Ways of Thinking among Participants.** Several network members said that their participation with colleagues and nationally and internationally recognised speakers sparked new ways of thinking that would not have happened without the network. For example, one member, Brian MacCraith, said that as a result of his work, on the first day of his presidency of Dublin City University, he announced a plan to make it the world's first age-friendly university.
- **Catalysing a New Focus on Ageing in Ireland.** Ageing Well Network's initiatives and stature contributed significantly to an increased focus on ageing in Ireland, participants and observers said. It helped raise the profile of ageing issues as a national priority and brought issues to places they had not previously been discussed such as with police and transportation. The Taoiseach (prime minister), for example, has identified the goal of making Ireland the best small country to grow old as one of his top three priorities.

### Conclusion

The Ageing Well Network ran from 2007 to 2013. In just six years, it can point to a number of accomplishments, including strongly influencing the National Positive Ageing Strategy, initiating the world's most developed Age-Friendly Cities and Counties programme and putting ageing on the agenda of senior government officials. While networks are not in short supply, the particular characteristics of the Ageing Well Network are noteworthy and could be useful to others looking for ways that a network can help bring together a fragmented field and influence both national and local policy.

### For more information

To learn more about the Ageing Well Network, read the full case study at <http://bit.ly/AWN-Case>

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