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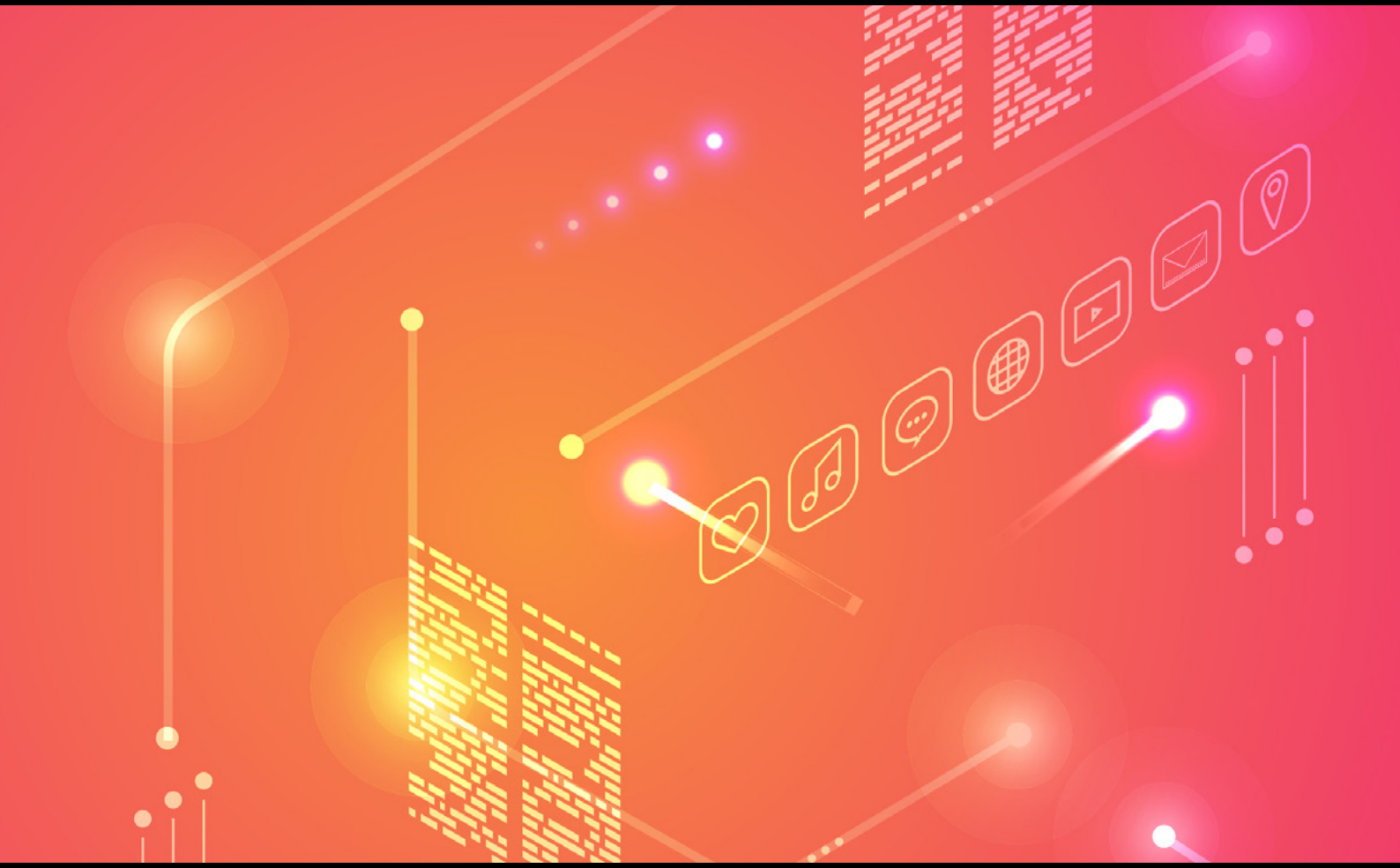
Digitally-supported communication for older people's grassroots organisations

A Research-Informed Action Plan



Virtual-EngAge Translation Report Series No:1

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ACTIVE RETIREMENT IRELAND

Introduction

Although older adult grassroots retirement organisations have been found to have an important role in supporting the collective participation of ageing populations (Music et al, 2022; Upadhyay, 2015), there are concerns that this role is increasingly under threat in digitised societies. There is growing recognition that organisational digital capacities, in terms of communication, mobilisation, and engagement itself, are likely to influence the future efficacy of these groups. The accelerated adoption of digital technologies during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has combined with issues of digital connectivity and digital literacy to reinforce the significance of this issue (UN, 2020; Seifert et al. 2020). Digital engagement has also been recognised as an increasingly important means of participation with respect to social connectedness, information access and dissemination, and advocacy (Hall et al., 2020).

Despite this there is little information available on what kind of specific challenges are facing older adult organisations in attempting to adopt to these new demands, and how they can meet the diverse needs, preferences and literacies of their members with respect to communication and mobilisation for collective engagement (Seifert et al. 2020; Scholz et al., 2018). Some concerns related to digitalisation and these groups can also connect with or highlight long-standing challenges concerning the structure and sustainability of these groups. This includes the changes in the nature and levels of volunteering, and questions about the appeal and relevance of these groups to younger and more diverse sections of the older populations (Nafziger et al, 2023; Hemmings, 2017; Russell et al, 2022).

As a national voluntary organisation that supports a network of active retirement associations in Ireland and a membership of over 21,500 people, Active Retirement Ireland (ARI) is one of the organisations that is facing these combined challenges.

The purpose of this Translation Report is to investigate the role of digital technology in supporting ARI's strategy for communicating and mobilising collective engagement within the parameters of its own organisational structure and membership, and in the context of the on-going digital transformation within society. Based on this investigation, a set of actions areas and actions will be presented. The analysis presented in this report draws on findings from the Virtual-EngAge research study (https://icsg.ie/our-projects/virtual-engage-2/), and focuses on three core areas of engagement: social connectedness; information access and dissemination; and advocacy. This Translation Report has four objectives:

1. To examine national patterns of digital communications and exchanges involving organisations and grassroots groups representing and working with older people in Ireland.
2. To examine ARI's current engagement and mobilisation practices, with respect to traditional and digital modes of communication, and the challenges that impinge on the efficiency and effectiveness of these practices.
3. To examine preferences of ARI staff and volunteers, across the national, regional and local levels of the organisation for traditional and digital modes of communication and mobilisation.
4. To assess internal perceptions of the clarity and appeal of ARI's external messaging and explore the role and function of ARI in supporting future communications and mobilisation regarding collective engagement in-person, and virtually.

It is intended that this analysis will provide insights into the tensions between traditional and digital forms of communication within a national membership based older adult organisation, and the sort of solutions that may help alleviate these tensions, given the digital profiles and preferences of its membership. The analysis will help inform an evidence-based strategy that targets existing barriers, and enhances the coordination and coherency of an organisation's communication and mobilisation in relation to collective engagement.

ARI's Unique Organisational Context

As a national membership-based representative older persons' organisation, there are a number of reasons why ARI is a particularly valuable and unique organisational example in which to conduct this analysis. First, with a nation-wide spread of 500 local Active Retirement Associations (ARAs), and a membership of approximately 21,500 older people, ARI has significant capacity to coordinate and mobilise collective engagement, but is also likely to have to cater for diverse needs and preferences regarding communication and digital technologies. Second, as ARI involves voluntary committees at local (ARA local leadership), regional (nine regional teams, committee members and Regional Development Officers) and national levels (National Steering Board), it has to ensure communication and coordination across and within all levels to ensure a smooth implementation of its activities. Third, the structure of ARI and its local ARA groups means a strong reliance on a series of voluntary leadership roles at all levels, and a dependence on key individuals to facilitate communication and mobilisation. Fourth, as ARI already adopts a multi-modal approach to communication (postal; e-mail), it serves as a useful example from which to examine the balance across different modes.

How the information in this report was collected?

Data for this analysis is drawn from five of the Virtual-EngAge work packages (WPs). These WPs are summarised below.

European stakeholder interviews on transformations facing groups

Four interviews were conducted with European policy stakeholders to examine policy and innovation trends in relation to older adult grassroots organisations and collective engagement. Interviewees comprised of senior policy personnel or chief executives from within European-level civil society, strategic innovation and policy organisations. These included participants from ageing and carer advocacy organisations, a policy analysis unit within a relevant European Commission Directorate General, and a programme on product and service innovation for later life.

Social media analysis of ARI/ARA presence and interactions

A social media analysis was completed to investigate the prevalence, the level of interaction and the perceptions of ageing organisations within major digital spheres of public expression and engagement. Concentrating on X (twitter/cp), the analysis examined national non-profit representative organisations (including ARI) to approximate the level of communication and engagement involving the general ageing civil society sector in Ireland. Data visible during April 2023 was collected. The analysis also examined the presence of local ARAs, to establish their degree of engagement within this public sphere. Both users and tweets were manually annotated into broad categories (e.g. users: individuals, non-profit organisations, public institutions; tweets: social exchanges; event promotion; information provision; political debate/opinion). A manual sentiment annotation was also performed to analyse the sentiment conveyed in tweets (e.g. positive, negative, neutral). While X (twitter.com) is considered not to be well utilised by ARA groups and older people, it remains the most commonly used digital engagement forum offering publicly accessible data for analysis.

Interviews on ARI and ARA contexts and perceptions

Eleven semi-structured telephone/virtual interviews were conducted with ARI staff and volunteers across its three levels, to examine the existing and potential role of digital technologies in communication and mobilisation for collective engagement. Interviewees comprised of three national level participants, four regional participants, and four local-level ARA Chairs. Interview topics included: (1) role of ARI/ARAs in supporting engagement; (2) role of technology in engagement within ARI/ARA; (3) national, regional and local capacities and consistencies in communication and mobilisation for engagement; (4) ARI/ARA social, civic and political functions, and (5) external perceptions and future strategic direction.

Survey and interviews on communication and mobilisation for collective engagement

First, a self-completion questionnaire was distributed to ARA members, and comprised of question modules on: involvement with ARA; collective forms of information access and dissemination, advocacy, and social engagement; role of ARA and technology in supporting engagement; digital literacy, enablers and barriers; and preferences regarding ARI and technology supported engagement. The secretaries of 150 ARAs were sent a survey pack by post, requesting that they would distribute the survey to six of their members (N=900). In total, 464 questionnaires were returned, providing a response rate of 52%. Respondents included 369 women and 83 men (missing information on gender was registered for 12 respondents). The sample ranged in age from 55-95 years (mean age: 75 years; standard deviation: 7.1 years), with 19 percent living in cities, 26 percent in towns, 53 percent living in a village or rural countryside, and 2 percent indicated 'other' location.

Second, in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 40 survey respondents (from 153 respondents who consented to be contacted). The final sample comprised of 24 women and 16 men, ranging in age from 63 years to 88 years (mean age: 75 years; standard deviation: 6.1 years). Interviews explored in-depth those patterns observed within the survey results, but with a stronger emphasis placed on routines of collective engagement, and technology use, barriers and facilitators over the life course. The interview involved three parts. Open participant narration where participants relayed their own narrative of engagement and technology use in response to a single broad question. Second, a series of life paths were used as a visual aid to explore trajectories of engagement, exclusion and technology-use across people's lives. Third, a semi-structured interview guide was used to probe further on the main survey topics. Four interviews were conducted online (via the Zoom telephony platform), 32 by telephone and four in-person.

How the action areas and actions in this report were developed?

The actions areas, and actions presented in this report are based on key messages and outline actions discussed and agreed at a multi-stakeholder Translation Forum. The Forum, which followed a deliberative-democracy workshop approach comprised of 13 members drawn from participants of previous study strands, and as such included representatives from ARI's professional secretariat and its national board[1] (n=3), regional development officers (n=5), and five individuals drawn from the older adult interviews. The Forum was the first in a series of three, with the subsequent two focused on presenting findings and deriving recommendations challenges experienced by ARA members using digital technology for everyday and collective engagement (described in Translation Report 2), and the design of a digital application to support older people's engagement in later life (described in Translation Report 3). In the main, ARI and ARA members attended all three Forums (with the exception of three people).

The Forum lasted for 3.5 hours and comprised of three parts, with a summary of study findings presented on: (1) the enablers and challenges related to the internal communications of ARI and ARAs; (2) preferences for internal communication, and (3) external communications, misperceptions and future functions. After each presentation small-group discussions (for 20 minutes) were held to identify if anything was missed in the research, and to identify key messages for each topic. A plenary session where all messages from the smaller groups were fed back was also held for each topic. Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) techniques were used within the forums to help ensure representation of voice amongst the various participant groups. Each small group discussion included ARI members from different levels of the organisation.

1. This included two individuals who had not taken part in the research, replacing previous participants who had since left the ARI organisation.

What was found?

The findings are presented in seven parts. To contextualise the national study findings, we begin by describing the key opportunities and challenges from a European policy stakeholder perspective. Focusing then on the overall national picture, a brief overview of the prevalence of older adult organisations within X (twitter.com), and their communication exchanges, is presented. The findings then turn to ARI specific insights, where the digital engagement profile of ARA members is first outlined. This is followed by a description of ARI's current engagement and mobilisation practices, ARI's communication and mobilisation challenges, ARI's communication preferences, and ARI's future sustainability and function with respect to collective engagement in digitised societies.

European digital transformations for grassroots organisations

Policy stakeholder interviewees all noted the rapid digital transformation occurring in Europe's ageing societies, and the opportunities and challenges that arose from the magnitude and pace of this transformation for older people's organisations. Three key messages were evident within the findings, which are briefly summarised here. First, a number of stakeholders noted the potential of technology to support grassroots groups, in terms of communication and mobilisation. As this interviewee describes, it is the capacity of technology to assist in relationship building amidst complex networks that may be particularly valuable:

> **I think it will help them organise actually…Yeah, you know, because organising is not easy, eh. I mean if your… networks, it's one-on-one relationships, and you know, and if you haven't talked with someone for six months, you know, it becomes looser again. The technology can help to create… make this web more dense, you know? It doesn't mean that everybody has to be involved all the time… but I think there would be more connections, and wider connections. (Stakeholder-In-01)**

Others who represented specific groups noted the ways in which digital technology was already being used to bolster engagement. As this stakeholder reports – who works on behalf of informal caregivers – technology has been for some the bridge that addresses information gaps and network fragmentation:

> **…many carers turned to the web to try and find answers to the questions, the many questions they may have, to find support, to find other maybe carers who would potentially have answers, or tips for them, so yeah, naturally ICT based solutions have become an important tool in the toolbox, but I'd like to underline from our perspective not the toolbox itself. (Stakeholder-In-03)**

Notwithstanding these benefits, some stakeholder interviewees recognised that the pace of digitisation presented some significant challenges that have yet to be overcome. These included digital literacy, and individual motivation amongst some sections of the older population. For one individual, a key challenge remained the lack of meaningful integration of technology solutions in people's lives, whether for engagement or otherwise. For others, it was the ways in which digital communications need to be managed, and paced, which may challenge certain groups of older people, particularly in relation to overuse, or information overload:

> **…there is something we have seen within a project actually on you know how much the use of social media is still quite of an issue somehow it might be difficult for a number of older people and especially because you know the way information flies within social media it's not always easy to track and to do, so that might be another layer where there is a difficulty. (Stakeholder-In-02)**

However, overall the most frequently cited challenge regarded the lack of bottom-up involvement in agenda setting, and in technology development with respect to ageing societies.

> **So you have actually these two (top level and industry) and the thing is they have not come together properly yet, because it does make sense you know, also they have some top down agenda and alignment somehow. But this has to come bottom up, you know? …and what we have seen in the end is this demand and supply are not really meeting yet… some say it's a fragmented market. You could still say it's a dysfunctional one, because this is not … matching yet. (Stakeholder-In-01)**

Social Media Presence and Trends

There was a reasonably strong presence of national older adult representative organisations on X (twitter.com), with 21,879 tweets in all. However, the level of engagement with these groups was relatively low – just 10 tweets from these organisations have more than 100 retweets, with only the top tweet having more than 1000 retweets. There was also a clear pattern of who was engaging with these organisations. Replies and likes were posted primarily by related public institutions, other non-profit organisations, or independent professionals. Older adults, and the general population, were less likely to follow these organisations. This demonstrates the heavily professional nature of the social media environment for such groups. A third of tweets promoted the actions of the organisations, a third comprised of messages of support, with others supporting and informing people of advocacy issues. By and large replies and impressions were overwhelmingly positive, with little disagreement evident. The findings suggest that this national-level interaction on X (Twitter) is characterised by a professional network that largely holds common interests and values.

In contrast, the local ARA dataset indicated a very low representation of local groups on X (Twitter), with only 764 tweets overall. Primarily, this dataset consisted of third-party bodies (e.g. local news accounts; local authorities) promoting events organized by these groups, rather than being from these associations themselves. These tweets have little feedback, with only ten tweets (out of 764) receiving more than five retweets.

Overall, these findings illustrate how there is little direct contact between these national organisations and local associations and older adults on the X (twitter.com) platform. This is likely to be a reflection of some of the groups – particularly those locally-based – using other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) to communicate with their members. However, as X (twitter.com) is a major public digital communication sphere, it also indicates that the professional outward-facing nature of these networks and exchanges may not encourage private individuals to participate.

Digital Profile of Members[2]

With reference to Table 1, high rates of internet access and training completion were evident amongst ARA members surveyed. This pattern of results suggests a group that is in overall terms engaged digitally. However, variations in the frequency of internet use, exposure to technology during working life and digital proficiency suggests a more diverse digital profile. During the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also evident that while half of those who used digital technology increased their use, the other half did not either maintain their level of use, or reduce their use. Such variation is also reflected in members' use of and satisfaction with technology for engagement.

2. This section will be presented in expanded form in the Virtual-EngAge Translation Report 2.

Table 1: *Digital profile of ARA member survey respondents*

Digital related characteristic	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Group size (total respondent sample)	464	100
Internet access		
Yes	373	87
No	54	13
Missing values	37	
Training course on how to use internet and digital technologies		
Yes	278	67
No	139	33
Missing values	47	
Internet use (frequency)		
Rarely	33	8
At least once a week	64	15
Every day	266	64
Non use	53	13
Use of digital technologies and internet at work		
Never/almost never	187	46
Occasionally	78	19
Frequently/Regularly	139	35
Missing values	60	
Digital proficiency*		
Low	107	32
Medium	58	18
High	163	50
Missing values	136	
Group size (only those who use digital technologies)	363	100
Changes in digital technology use during Covid 19		
Decreased	43	13
No change	126	37
Increased	172	50
Missing values	22	

Notes: *Digital proficiency is derived from the ability to browse the internet, the ability to check information sources on the internet, the use of communication tools, and sharing information, as measured by the Digital Capital scale (Ragnedda et al., 2020; 2018).

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents (n=247) used digital technology to support their social engagement, with 76 percent of this group (n=181) satisfied with this use. Digital proficiency had a significant effect ($p \leq 0.05$) on technology use for both men and women. Sixty-nine percent (n=141) of those using technology for social engagement reported high digital proficiency, while 16 percent (n=33) and 15 percent (n=30) reported intermediate and elementary levels of proficiency respectively. Qualitative findings provided further insight into the nature of this use. Some participants highlighted how technologies made distance less of a barrier, whereas others spoke about engaging in online classes and games and valued a hybrid approach that combined virtual and in-person interactions. But for most, technology use for collective social engagement concentrated on coordinating in-person social activities. Those who did not use technologies to participate socially, highlighted a range of reasons for this lack of use. These included members reporting being fearful of technology, or not being able to use digital technologies, or simply preferring face-to-face engagement. According to survey respondents, information provided online was just one of the barriers to engaging in social activities (11%), with transportation (23%) the challenge reported most, followed by lack of relevance (19%), economic resources (16%) and time (12%).

Sixty-five percent of respondents (n=208) used digital technologies for information access and dissemination, with 80 percent of this group (n=166) satisfied in this use. Again, there was a significant relationship ($p \leq 0.05$) between an individual's level of digital proficiency and technology use in this sphere for both men and women. Seventy-five percent of those using technology for information access/dissemination (n=138) reported high digital proficiency; only 10 per cent (n=18) reported elementary levels, and 16 percent (n=29) indicated intermediate levels. Examples of information accessed and shared included local and national news, welfare and entitlements, and general contact information. Nevertheless, information available only online was the most frequently reported challenge in this sphere (36%), followed by not knowing where to find required information online (20%). Older adult interviewees spoke about how the scale of information available online could be overwhelming and resulted, for some, in an aversion to accessing online information forums.

Just 19 percent of survey respondents reported using digital technologies for participating in advocacy, but once again a significant majority of this group (74%; n=32) expressed satisfaction with their experience. Digital proficiency had a significant relationship ($p \leq 0.05$) with the use of digital technologies, but in this instance this was only the case for women. Eighty-six percent of those with high digital proficiency levels are engaged in online advocacy compared to just 9 percent for those with elementary proficiency. Interview findings showed that technology was an increasingly integral part of mobilisation, particularly in relation to communicating with younger age groups. Digitalisation was not reported by many respondents as a barrier to participating in advocacy, with under a tenth of respondents citing that activities only organised digitally (9%), and poor access to digital communications (4%) functioned as challenges. Challenges related to the lack of relevant activities (24%), lack of connection to advocacy networks (14%), lack of time and competing tasks (14%), and poor availability of information (14%) were all reported more frequently. Nevertheless, some older interviewees highlighted how analogue, rather than digital technologies offered greater privacy for advocacy.

Overall, digital technology use in engagement was largely driven by those with high-digital proficiency, masking digital divides operational in this population. Across the three areas, technology was also used less for collective engagement, and more in narrow, instrumental ways.

Current practices and multi-modal approaches

Participants from all levels of ARI discussed the need for, and the current practices regarding, implementing a flexible multifaceted communication and mobilisation strategy. A combination of traditional and digital means was evident throughout the organisation, even if the depth of digital forms became shallower at more local levels. A number of national-level stakeholders described how they felt digital tools could enhance rather than replace traditional forms, as illustrated by this example of a digital newsletter:

> **"It [digital newsletter] comes out on the last Friday of every month. … We're getting fantastic feedback. And also, it's not just the feedback but it's been the engagement with the ARAs sending in photographs and stories for inclusion in the newsletter… It has provided … head office with a direct communication with … membership which wasn't there before." (ARI-National-In-08)**

Likewise, some local ARA members spoke positively about particular digital applications that were used within some groups, such as WhatsApp. These applications were considered by those who use technology as facilitating immediate information-sharing, as noted by this member:

> **…anything that's coming up, we get an alert on the WhatsApp group…. we get notifications of things that are happening, of meals or whatever. And you reply, and it's all done on the WhatsApp group and I just don't know what we'd do without that. (ARA-Member-In-75)**

The transition from a sole reliance on post and telephone communications was described as being rapid and extensive within the organisation, accelerating significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. National-level participants spoke about digital communications having broadened the scope of the organisation's capacity, changing how the national office manages its communications with local group leadership:

> **We would have gone from sending out 12, 14, 20 letters a year, to sending out a handful, and supplementing that with emails. We've gone from not being able to contact groups by email, to predominantly relying on email to contact everybody, and then supplementing that with the hard copies where necessary. (ARI-National-In-04)**

Study informants noted the importance of a supported integration of digital technology into ARI's communication and mobilisation practices, with efforts being both formal and informal in nature. Examples at the national level included the provision of technical assistance when running large-scale on-line meetings – such as the Annual General Meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic – ensuring those in attendance could engage online:

> **Now there was a lot of assistance given from the organisation… they helped a lot of members just you know; talk them through getting logging in on the morning, like say for the AGM people who were taking part … we did dry runs you know to get … and to check in on Wi-Fi. (ARI-National-In-01)**

National level participants also spoke about previous time-bound initiatives and projects, where the development of peer-to-peer training was a key component. Fostering an environment where members learned from one another, and skills were developed collectively, was seen as reflecting ARI's ethos to be an organisation run by older people:

> **Yeah, for us the peer element, peer-to-peer support… was the key pillar of it… because if it's going to be sustainable it has to be about older people [doing] it themselves, for themselves and with themselves. (ARI-National-In-07)**

Notwithstanding the ad-hoc hosting of local training initiatives by individual groups, a network-wide digital training programme was not provided. Participants at all levels recognised this absence, and the resources required to provide such a programme. A range of informal practices were found to be operational at local levels to try to reach local members. Those in leadership roles, such as this local ARA secretary, spoke about attempting to suit all group members, and using a combination of modes to relay information:

> [I use] technology insofar as that I have a number of people and I'll send them a text message telling them what's on and telling them you know I'll tell them all the information and then my group generally come back to me by text. Now I [know] some of my friends have groups, they... meet them in person because they don't have the skills. They don't pick up the phone to read a text or that, so she has to go to mass to meet some of her group. So a lot of the elderly people depend on meeting a person or somebody calling in... so we [secretaries] all have to communicate with the wider group in a different way and we kind of if we take on the role, we tend to try to suit them and try to engage them... (ARA-Member-In-36)

Communication and mobilisation challenges

Four challenges were identified as impacting effective communication and mobilisation for collective engagement in a digitalised context. The challenges implicated long-standing organisational characteristics, as well as recently emerged gaps in digital preparedness.

First, participants identified the complexities within the organisation's structure as a core challenge to enacting its multi-modal communications strategy. ARI's multiple layers, its regional divisions, and its multiple actors therein, served to complicate coordination and record-keeping practices. As described here, having to account for different boards, committees, and different levels of dialogue challenged communications in the organisation:

> ... we're divided into nine regions, ... so we have... three forum meetings per year and at the forum meeting you would have the board members, the CEO, the regional chairs and the RDOs... and I suppose the regional committees are the link between the ARAs and the board, so they would be a reporting structure at that as well.... and then we have sub-committees of the board... it's the structure of communication [that's a challenge]. (ARI-National-In-01)

Concerns were expressed about how gaps and bottlenecks could appear across the multi-level structure, leading to information loss and a failure to connect with all members. From an organisational perspective, a primary challenge concerned how information flowed downstream from the central national office, to the regional committees, to each local group secretary, with no direct contact with members. Much of the responsibility for the quality of communications in effect, therefore, rested on local secretaries:

> **The difficulty I think is getting to our members because of gaps in that structure. We don't communicate directly with every member. We communicate with the secretary of each ARA and so how much information goes from each secretary to the membership [is a question]. (ARI-National-In-01)**

From a member's perspective, it was the patchiness of communications that was highlighted. Participants noted that not all information received by secretaries is acted upon, or some details may be lost, or decisions may be taken by secretaries regarding what to communicate, and to whom:

> **… one of the big problems you have … is a letter comes down to the secretary and the secretary… decides not to do anything about it … So all of a sudden, the information isn't coming through like, you know… it's getting the message down really. (ARA-Member-In-56)**

However, concerns also focused on what was described as the sometimes stilted, downward one-way nature of the information flow. As this interviewee describes, this stifled the sense of exchange and connection with the higher levels within the ARI organisation.

> **But we would also discuss, you know, our relationship with Dublin [ARI head office] for instance. Like, you know, many people resent that, in Dublin, they make decisions or they are not available when we want to have them giving us information. (ARA-Member-In-07)**

Second, challenges regarding data security and deficits created inefficiencies at all levels of communication and mobilisation, inhibiting collective engagement. Participants, particularly those in regional and local-leadership roles, raised challenges regarding data protection regulations in particular. Ambiguity around what information can and cannot be shared, and when it was appropriate and not appropriate to give out or utilise members' contact details, featured strongly in accounts from interviewees. This lack of clarity again contributed to a narrowing of contacts between ARAs, and regional and national levels of the organisation. Deficiencies in core data within the organisation were also described by interviewees, namely the inaccuracy of members' contact details. Keeping information up-to-date was described as a significant burden within a multi-level dynamic organisational structure, where local memberships and those holding local roles constantly change. As this RDO describes, when information is absent or incomplete the organisation's capacity to reach and mobilise members was significantly capped:

> **…people not having access to email or something like that [is an issue] and the other thing is… there should be an updated list, a yearly updated list of the chairs and the secretaries in your region and there has been situations where that hasn't been accurate in recent years and hasn't been updated. (ARI-National-In-03)**

Third, and more directly related to digital communications, structural capacity barriers were identified as reducing the potential for digital communication across ARI. In many cases, concerns firmly focused on the availability of training opportunities and telecommunications infrastructure (e.g. broadband), with areas across the country described as still lacking reliable internet and mobile signals. These issues were most pronounced in underserved sites, typically comprising of rural or peripheral places. In other cases, participants described access to affordable personal technologies as a core challenge, with the financial costs of purchasing digital devices posing barriers, especially for those on fixed incomes. This interviewee described how both of these challenges combined to limit ARI's ability to advance a more developed digital communications strategy:

> **…the infrastructure is a massive issue and we've massive pockets across the country that have weak mobile signals and practically zilch internet… The other barriers will be equipment for older people, will be again the cost of internet if people want to pursue this themselves and what piece of equipment do they need to have. (ARI-National-In-07)**

Many research participants spoke of a digital technology access divide, and how this inequity became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The catalysing impact of the pandemic on digital technology adoption meant that some of those with the ability to access technologies found new ways to communicate and interact, while those without access became increasingly isolated:

> [During COVID-19] there were those out there, the ones that were in the privileged position of having the digital equipment, [for whom] it's opened up a whole new world of possibilities. However, … those who didn't have that opportunity or that privilege, … Those people are probably now at this stage more isolated than they were before the pandemic. (ARI-National-In-04)

Fourth, just as tailoring local communication and mobilisation approaches was an important informal practice in implementing a multi-modal engagement strategy, participants highlighted the challenge of accounting for the full range of digital capacities of group members. Study informants spoke about how this diversity made it particularly difficult to find a one-size-fits-all solution. Those in local leadership roles sometimes described the considerable task of converting messages into various formats without losing the original meaning, or causing misunderstandings:

> I can't remember what I did but I sent a message out and within a matter of minutes I had two or three people sending me a text message back, 'What the hell are you on about?' … because sometimes it's very difficult to put over what you want to put over, you know you've got a big letter and you're trying to condense that into a text…. Perhaps my texts go on a bit long, but I do try and make it so that people can understand what I'm saying. Sometimes even then I don't put it over correctly… (ARA-Member-In-0467)

Communication and mobilisation preferences

Preferences for how engagement should be communicated and mobilised were often discussed in response to these challenges. Preferences were not necessarily divergent across levels but they were diverse and illustrative of the transitional state of communications within ARI.

At the national level, and especially amongst professional employees, preferences were expressed for the increased use of digital communication tools (e.g. e-mail; video-telephony platforms) within ARI. However, as this national-level participant describes, these digital options may be preferred for their efficiency but were neither universally accepted, nor problem-free, with clear challenges regarding their fit for the various ARI boards and the ARA membership:

> Without effective communication, I can't carry out the role … the only options that I had in terms of communication with people were through traditional platforms… For example [in the case of one person], there was no way of maintaining effective communication with that person other than like a phone… I was lucky in so far as they had been using Zoom, so at least I had that option open to me. (ARI-National-In-08)

Connectivity issues and the desire for personal interaction meant that a number of participants noted that traditional methods like in-person meetings and phone calls still must have a role. This was even highlighted in relation to national-level events, such as the ARI annual general meeting, where some appreciated the convenience of digital meetings, while others missed the social richness of an in-person event:

> It [the AGM] was done on a bespoke platform, people had to log in, there was a team of people supporting people to log in. It was much easier to deliver, much quicker… it worked very, very well in that regard. However… the AGM is a three-day affair, people turn up on the first day, there's an art exhibition, there's a civic reception, they have the meeting the next day, they have lunch, they have dinner that evening with a gala ball… I mean, there's no comparison of those two events… I don't think we'll see a lot of people putting their hand up to say why don't we just keep it online. (ARI-National-In-04)

At the regional level, development officers and local ARA leadership recognised the potential for greater connection and better information-sharing across and within regions. A number of these participants spoke about the missed opportunities that resulted from what they felt was the current fragmentation between ARAs. Accordingly, these participants generally reported a desire for more connection across ARAs. Participants in local leadership roles highlighted the opportunities that could be availed of, including as this person describes, the potential for a more efficient digital-supported means to coordinate ARA-run events:

> **... if they done county by county events and had them on a platform that would be easily accessible for older people. I think that would be a big help, going forward. Like that I could go in here today and say, 'Oh look, they're people that are doing that today, tomorrow or whatever. (ARA-Member-In-01)**

Where these sorts of regional meetings have already occurred, participants praised their capacity to enhance horizontal communication among local groups, both in terms of those that have taken place in person (but organised digitally) and those that have taken place virtually:

> **The development of cluster meetings has been a huge boost to communications between local groups. It's been fantastic for local groups networking with each other. And while they take place in person, they're organised either digitally or by post by a local development officer... The regional meetings themselves have shifted to an online format, they're being held on Zoom or Teams – which again has been good... (ARI-National-In-04)**

At the membership level, preferences for communicating and mobilising engagement reflected to a large degree the diverse digital engagement profile of the ARA membership. With reference to Table 2, there was a reasonably even split between the proportion of survey respondents who chose to be communicated with by traditional postal mail, and e-mail, with Smart and analogue phone applications also evident but less preferred. However, while others spoke about the high value and immediacy of e-mail, they also noted that for many individuals and groups there remained a substantial 'know-how' and educational deficit:

> **People don't want to wait a week to receive a letter – they want to send an email straightaway, if they ask you a question in an email. So, I know with our group there's very few people that even know how to do that. So I think a lot of it is education, or getting new members in that know-how to use technology. (ARA-Member-In-59)**

This link to previous know-how and education was directly evident in the preferences of survey respondents. With reference to Tables 3 and 4, higher levels of frequency of internet use, and educational attainment were both significantly related to a preference for e-mail communication.

Table 2: *Preferences for how ARI should communicate with members*

Communication mode	N	%
Post	226	38
Phone or SMS	64	11
Email	183	30
WhatsApp	103	17
Facebook messages	25	4
Total**	**601**	**100**

Notes: **The total N represents the total number of given answers by individuals. Respondents could express more than one preference.

Table 3: *Respondents' preferred communication mode by frequency of internet use*

Communication mode	Frequency of internet use			
	Non-use (N (%))	Rarely (N (%))	At least once a week (N (%))	Everyday (N (%))
Post**				
Yes	35 (66)	23 (70)	36 (56)	116 (44)
No	18 (34)	10 (30)	28 (44)	150 (56)
Total	**53 (100)**	**33 (100)**	**64 (100)**	**266 (100)**
Email**				
Yes	1 (2)	5 (15)	18 (28)	158 (59)
No	52 (98)	28 (85)	46 (72)	108 (41)
Total	**53 (100)**	**33 (100)**	**64 (100)**	**266 (100)**

Notes: **Differences observed in the comparisons are statistically significant at p≤0.05 level.

Table 4: *Respondents' preferred communication mode by education level*

Communication mode	Education level		
	Primary or none	Secondary	Third
Post			
Yes	47 (50)	98 (51)	85 (52)
No	47 (50)	95 (49)	77 (48)
Total	**94 (100)**	**193 (100)**	**162 (100)**
Email**			
Yes	19 (20)	72 (37)	90 (56)
No	75 (80)	121 (63)	72 (44)
Total	**94 (100)**	**193 (100)**	**90 (100)**

Notes: **Differences observed in the comparisons are statistically significant at p≤0.05 level.

Moreover, respondent preferences were also patterned by age, and access to social support, where being in a younger age group, and having someone to assist with technology was significantly associated with a preference for e-mail.

Table 5: *Preferred communication mode by age group*

Communication mode	Age group		
	55-64	65-74	75+
Post			
Yes	21 (68)	91 (53)	100 (47)
No	10 (32)	79 (47)	113 (53)
Total	**31 (100)**	**170 (100)**	**213 (100)**
Email**			
Yes	16 (52)	84 (49)	66 (31)
No	15 (48)	86 (51)	147 (69)
Total	**31 (100)**	**170 (100)**	**213 (100)**

Notes: **Differences observed in the comparisons are statistically significant at p≤0.05 level.

Table 6: *Preferred communication mode by availability of help with the use of digital technologies*

Communication mode	Having access to someone who can help	
	Yes	No
Post**		
Yes	111 (45)	103 (58)
No	138 (55)	75 (42)
Total	**178 (100)**	**249 (100)**
Email**		
Yes	118 (47)	58 (33)
No	131 (52)	120 (67)
Total	**249 (100)**	**178 (100)**

Notes: **Differences observed in the comparisons are statistically significant at p≤0.05 level.

Further to these preferences, 40 percent of respondents indicated that they wanted to communicate with ARI by non-digital means only, either by post, by phone or by SMS phone messages. This group is more likely: to be older; to have a lower level of educational attainment; to not have used digital technology in their working life; to have lower digital proficiency; less frequent use of the internet, and have less access to someone who could help them with the use of technology.

Older interviewees demonstrated varied attitudes towards digital communication. The apprehension of using technology stemmed in some cases from a fear of making mistakes, such as deleting important information. But others viewed digital communication as being not as fulfilling as face-to-face interactions and asserted their desire to not use digital devices:

> I don't know [about the usefulness of technology to support ARA communication] because … a lot of those people that are in the active retirement with me would have these other phones that they look into Facebook and all these things. … but I've no interest in going any further. I'm dead satisfied the way I am. I have my health and I have my head. (ARA-Member-In-26)

Others, while not enthusiastic, were open to technological changes and accepting of what they considered its increasing inevitable presence. Some, however, had wholly embraced digital tools, viewing them as essential for communication, as this member describes:

> "Well no, I wouldn't be able to manage without it. No way – we'd all die if we didn't have our smartphones. And I find WhatsApp is just wonderful – if I want to pull together a committee meeting at short notice, I only do one message, and the ten of them get it, isn't that wonderful? Whereas before, I'd be… I could be half an hour sending messages." (ARA-Member-In-12)

Future sustainability and function

ARI's capacity to drive collective multifaceted engagement of older people in an increasingly digitalised society was also linked to concerns regarding the sustainability and perceived relevance of the organisation in the future. This was across three primary dimensions. First, for some participants these concerns centred on ARI's external presence. A number of participants felt that the Covid-19 pandemic brought greater opportunities to promote the organisation and its capacity to represent older people's lived experiences. However, despite progress in increasing ARI's visibility, there was a feeling amongst some that there remained a tendency for the organisation and its ARAs to get lost among other Irish groups working on behalf of older people:

> Among the general public, I suppose there's more of awareness of the organisation now than there was in previous years. And we've been working a lot on trying to build up the public face of it. But we're still… I still wouldn't categorise us as well-known… There's still an awful lot of confusion among the general public around the various older people's organisation, we would be mixed up [other groups] a fair bit. (ARI-National-In-04)

Some interviewees suggested that the current situation was the legacy of failed attempts to have a desired effect on public consciousness. The implication of this weakened presence was thought to impact on ARI's future sustainability, with respect to: a lack of coherency around public messaging; insufficient capacity to leverage funding; and, as this Regional Development Officer describes, a reduced ability to recruit new members:

> Though we have officially lowered the age group and all that kind of stuff, it really didn't make any difference [to recruitment], because to be honest I think Active Retirement never actually advertised… how can I put it? in the right way and the right places, you know. We just haven't got enough of a public presence… (ARI-National-In-02)

Second, the concerns of other participants centred on external perceptions of who was involved in ARI and its ARAs, and who was not. These views on membership were described as negative associations that again dissuaded new members from joining, and were considered to stem from the organisation's mismanagement of its image. As this regional-level actor explains, one example was how ARI was often perceived to only cater for older age groups:

> I think the 'old' is still there in everybody's mind, to be honest, if they're truthful. Because over the years until very recently, even the image that the press, the image that our own advertising, everything was like nearly fellas on Zimmer frames, do you know what I mean? But obviously the photographs and the stuff that they used were definitely not giving the impression that there was a younger age group there, you know. (ARI-National-In-02)

Other participants highlighted gender associations, with ARI's membership seen externally as comprising of mainly older women. As this person describes, these association sometimes limited the participation of men:

> **With women it's very acceptable, they see it as a great idea, they can get together and whatever. But with men, it's totally different… but men have a thing about a lot of it and I think it's because of the amount [of] women that are involved in Active Retirement. (ARI-National-In-10)**

A number of participants felt that ARI's membership was also perceived to lack cultural and ethnic diversity. As this national-level actor describes, these associations could intersect to tie the organisation to a stagnated older, predominantly white female demographic and a set of activities that lacked representation and inclusion for heterogenous older populations:

> **The website wasn't very attractive. It didn't really give me much information about the organisation. It showed the organisation in terms of the imagery as being mainly, you know, people who were quite older. I would say 70 plus, all white. I couldn't see any diversity among the membership. And my impression was that it was quite a staid organisation, not very vibrant… (ARI-National-In-08)**

Third, there was concern amongst some participants regarding ARI's capacity to sustain its relevance for mobilising engagement in a heterogeneous and increasingly digitised ageing society. This was very much related to ARI's challenges regarding its external presence and associations, but also its capacity to support older people in addressing the challenges they face in the current Irish context. All study participants agreed that ARI's principal purpose is and should remain to support the social engagement and interaction of older people. But as this regional officer notes, this purpose now sits amidst a range of other functions that align with a long-standing focus on supporting the agency of individuals and groups.

> **… I mean it's the whole thing really. It's the social interaction. Active Retirement has … you know, basically was set up for social interaction. It has now diversified into all sorts of bits and pieces, but the most important thing people want is company… They need to have a reason to go somewhere to meet people that'll be friendly, and the whole objective, Active Retirement's first ever, I suppose, slogan was 'People doing things for themselves.' (ARI-National-In-02)**

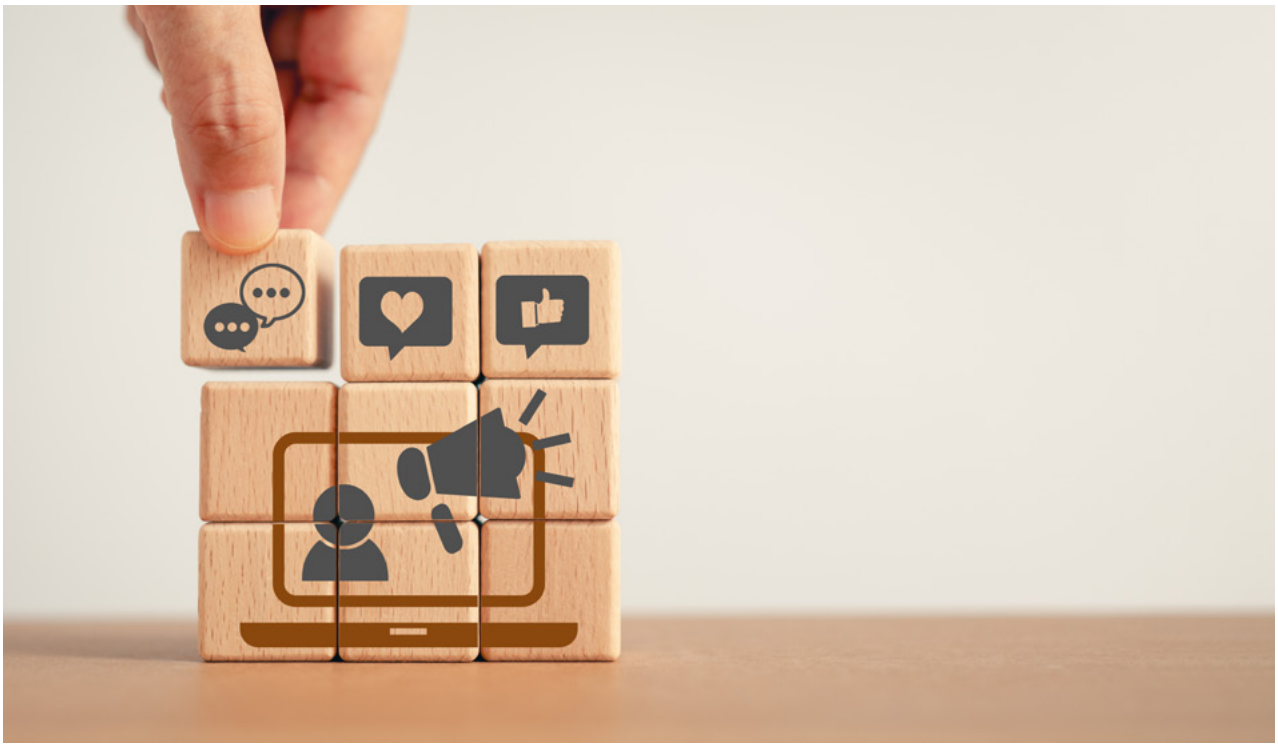
However, many participants noted that ARI's core ethos of empowerment – an organisation operated by older people for older people to address their specific concerns and needs – was sometimes lost:

> **We're an organisation that helps older people to become empowered so that they find their own solutions to issues that they face as older people, you know, if that's isolation and loneliness, health issues, communication issues. And I think that gets lost. My impression, my experience has been that that is not understood by people outside the organisation or by other organisations. (ARI-National-In-08)**

While there was inconsistency amongst older adult interviewees regarding the extent to which ARI should de-emphasise its social focus or actively seek to inform and mobilise older people, the desire for the organisation to expand its empowering and enabling role was clear amongst survey respondents. This was first in terms of communication and information regarding key areas of engagement. Seventy percent of respondents reported that they would like ARI to regularly send them information on advocacy and social issues, while 76 percent of respondents reported that they would like regular information on social activities (even outside of ARI), and 85 percent said they wanted information on important matters relevant to older people. This expanded role also referred to ARI's own active engagement in these spheres. More than half of survey respondents (55%) reported that they would like ARI to take a more active role in supporting its members in social activities. Just under half of survey respondents (48%) reported that they would like ARI to take on a more active role in supporting participation of members in advocacy activities – a notable finding considering only 17 percent of respondents indicated they were currently involved in advocacy activities. Finally, just under 70 per cent (69%) of respondents stated that they would like ARI to take on a more active role in distributing information relevant to older people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis presented in this Translation Report aimed to examine the role of digital technology in supporting ARI's strategy for communicating and mobilising collective engagement. In overall terms, the findings indicate that ARI and its local associations are facing the same sort of tensions and challenges with respect to digitalization and digitally supported communications and engagement that have been found for other types of national civil society organisations in other countries (Scholz et al., 2018; Schreurs et al., 2017; Glowacki et al., 2021). This is also demonstrated with the large degree of consensus between the messages from European policy stakeholders, the national social media analysis, and the experiences of the ARI organisation and its members. Challenges regarding meeting the needs and preferences of a heterogenous grassroots memberships illustrate the transitional nature of communications and how often the current balance between traditional and digital engagements is very much in flux (Hall et al., 2020; Komarcevic et al., 2017). In an overall sense, the rate of adoption of internet-based technologies has been reasonably strong amongst ARI's members, particularly given the low-levels of up-take and the low-levels of digital literacy that are sometimes reported for older adults (Schreurs et al., 2017). Nevertheless, this adoption conceals a narrow use, and strong patterns of inequality. Mirroring previous studies, this research found significant challenges regarding digital proficiency, and education, age, social support and working-life. While COVID-19 has had a catalyzing effect in adoption for some – illustrating older people's overall capacity to adapt – communication preferences understandingly remain diverse. This suggests the transition to digital engagement for older people is still developing, and advancing at very different rates for different groups of older people. It is clear that traditional modes of communication are still critical, with many people relying heavily or solely on these methods.



The research also indicates, however, that many of the communications challenges and tensions facing ARI stem from long-standing organisational characteristics and circumstances, and the group's multi-level structure. These are in many ways independent of the impact or the fairness of a digitizing society. Complex and layered organisational environments within voluntary organisations (particularly those with a high reliance on volunteer roles) have been found to understandably test and stretch the efficacy of most communication systems (e.g. Komarcevic et al., 2017). In the case of ARI, communications are not just multi levelled but are in effect nested and clustered: information flows between national and regional levels, and then branches to local levels, but with little connection to clusters of individual members connected to these branches.

As this research has demonstrated, organisational challenges can combine with specific issues regarding digital access, literacy and adoption to disrupt the positive qualities of a digital transformation. In many instances, digital and organisational communication challenges appeared to function to compound and reinforce each other. In effect, the disjointed organisational communication pathways appear to complicate the process of managing the introduction, diffusion and balancing of digital communications. The pressures of digitalization may further fragment information flows. Challenges regarding communication are also couched within questions around the coherency and impact of ARI's external messaging for promoting and mobilising collective engagement, in-person and virtually. This research has shown there is a need, an opportunity and a desire to address these questions to secure ARI's future as an organisation to represent older people in Ireland. It is notable that, like civil society organisations in other jurisdictions, ARI appears to be largely left to address these questions on its own. Given the size of its membership, and its potential role in supporting the voice of older people as Ireland's ageing society increasingly digitalises, this lack of support seems short-sighted.

The research suggests that a two-fold task lies ahead for the future. In conjunction with local ARAs, a re-orientation in ARI's communication strategy and practice is necessary to help ensure that ARI can be impactful in harnessing digital technologies appropriately, to communicate and mobilise older people around collective engagement in Ireland. These efforts, however, have to be accompanied by a greater leveraging of investment to sufficiently enable and sustain this re-orientation.

ARI Action Areas and Actions

Informed by the evidence-informed deliberations within the Virtual-EngAge Translation Forum, there are six areas of action that can be outlined. Actions based on the key messages identified by members of the Forum are also presented for each area.

Diverse engagement preferences

As with other grassroots networks and groups, there are some local associations, and individuals, who are less likely to engage with ARI-related communications and activities. Groups with more specialised interests, or those who had rarely directly engaged with ARI or its Regional Development Officers were primarily discussed in this regard. While it is important to respect and recognise preferences around communication, it is necessary to ensure that there are no other reasons and constraints that prevent the engagement of these groups in network related communications. This is also particularly important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where there were difficulties in re-engaging with some groups or where some associations have been unable to re-establish altogether. To ensure the full capacity of ARI's ARA network, it is necessary to ensure that all groups have the opportunity to be drawn into any redevelopment of ARI's communications. In addition to the efficacy of communication, this strategy may help optimise the potential for mobilisation across the full ARA national network.

A1.1 Engage in an open dialogue with all local associations as to the purpose and mode of a network and community of ARAs, with a particular focus on those considered to be, or who desire to be, outside the current mainstream ARI community.

Awareness building - Internal and external structure

There remains a need to increase the awareness of ARI as a national organisation and as a network of local ARA associations. This is both in terms of ARI's external profile amongst professional stakeholders, the general public and potential members, and in terms of its own members' knowledge of its internal organisational structure. For some members who participated in this research, it was clear that there was a sense of disconnection from the broader network of ARAs and more so the higher levels of the organisation. This was also the perception of some regional and national level interviewees, who felt there was not always a strong awareness of the overall structure of the organisation, or critically an awareness of the remit and overall ethos of ARI. As the research demonstrated, there were also concerns regarding the perceived associations and discourses regarding ARI, ARAs and other similar organisations, particularly around the capacity of the existing brand and brand messaging to sufficiently communicate the goals of the organisation, and the heterogeneity of its membership. Efforts to enhance the coherency of ARI's brand messaging and external communications and its inclusive appeal to all groups of older people is likely to reinforce ARI's desire to be a proactive and representative voice for all older people. Notwithstanding the limitations in only focusing on X (twitter.com), the social media analysis demonstrated not only ARI's weak digital footprint within a major digital public sphere, but also that this weak presence is a general characteristic of the digital engagement of most Irish ageing-related organisations. The analysis demonstrates that there is of yet considerable work required to address what may be a digital communications vacuum with respect to these sorts of platforms.

A2.1 Design and implement an internal awareness building programme that highlights the national ARI structure, its multiple levels, and the ways in which these levels connect and communicate with one another.

A2.2 Assess the effectiveness of ARI's brand messaging, its capacity to promote the core ethos of ARI internally and externally, and its capacity to represent and appeal to a wide, heterogenous group of older people.

Accessible communication modes

Although recognising the potential efficiencies that digital communications technologies might bring to ARI, the vast majority of participants from all levels of the organisation highlighted the need to continue to use both traditional and digital modes of communication to promote and mobilise collective engagement. This is reinforced by the digital profile of the current ARI membership, where almost a third of ARA members reporting a low digital proficiency, and half reporting intermediate or low levels of digital proficiency. It is also evidenced in the preferences of members, with again a reasonably even split between those who desire postal, and those who prefer electronic communication. It is very clear that volunteers at regional and local levels, are in many instances working to implement informal multi-modal translation strategies of their own, which in some cases involves reformulating and copyediting information. When working well, this epitomised the tailored, person-centred approaches that many participants called for. Exploring how to support these informal strategies, through more direct assistance for these information 'brokers' would seem important.

In time, the balance in preferences may change with a shift towards more digitally supported communication. Even then, care will be required to ensure that a multi-modal strategy is preserved, and the preferences of even a shrinking minority are addressed. As per the overall ethos of ARI - to be accessible for and representative of all older people, the research indicates a collective desire to ensure equity is central within how ARI communicates and mobilises its membership. This is in terms of equal access to communications, equal access to internal dissemination channels and equal opportunities to contribute to the organisation and to mobilise in relation to key issues of interest. Although already strongly evident, there is a continued need to be vigilant that evolving strategies are respectful of all members' preferences, comfort levels and capabilities - this is in line with the assertion of European civil society organisations that older people are not excluded due to digitalisation (Age-Platform, 2024). It is also necessary to recognise that existing communications are primarily text-based and largely predicated on the assumption of basic literacy and English language proficiency. Reflecting on current strategies and their potential to be inclusionary for some and exclusionary for others, is likely to be of critical importance to serve the entirety of the older population in Ireland today and into the future, as growing numbers of migrant and minority ethnic populations, and Irish Travellers enter later life.

A3.1 Continue to implement and refine a multistrand (multi-modal) approach to communication, which retains traditional and digital modes of communication, and cements ARI's commitment to providing equitable access to information and opportunities for participating in organisational decision-making.

A3.2 Diversify the format of communications to alleviate challenges in relation to the accessibility of content regarding literacy, and disability access.

A3.3 Critically examine the capacity of existing ARI/ARA communications to reach and include diverse and 'new' groups of older people (such as those of younger ages, those from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds), and to aid the recruitment and retention of potential members from these backgrounds.

Clarity and organisational multi-level connectivity

It is difficult to ignore the impact of the current organisational and communications structure on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of communications. The complexity of the system, and its effective cul-de-sacs at a local level, narrows the flow of information, conditions the one-way nature of these flows, and challenges the capacity of ARI to fulfil a basic coordination function. – let alone to be able to be mobilise around external events. Based on the accounts of participants within this research, it is reasonable to suggest that communications should be expanded in all directions within the organisation. This in the first instance relates to the need to enhance the reciprocal flows of information up, and down through the organisation. Even though the voluntary, autonomous nature of ARI is not designed as a hierarchical structure, its current communication flows implant a linearity and a tiered nature upon its communications. Given the acknowledged value of cross-local and cross-regional networking, it would seem valuable to harness these cross-level linkages to broaden the breadth of communications. With the pressures on local secretaries and other local leadership to serve as 'information' brokers, there are inevitably concerns regarding the burden on local leadership and the bottlenecks or lags in information provision. These lags become more pronounced where local leadership is not in a position to facilitate a communication strategy that fits with the preferences of local members. It is necessary to ensure that the relaying, translation and reformulation of communication falls not only to local secretaries to manage. With increasing digitalisation pressures and preferences, the current practices are likely to be unsustainable. Although this points to an increasing need to think about enhancing the direct contact with local members, it also suggests other intermediate and facilitatory measures including increasing the number of contact-points within local leadership and identifying and clarifying national contact points for different kinds of communication and engagement (i.e. social; information; advocacy). However, these are changes that require buy-in and a desire for transformation across all levels of the organisation, and must accordingly be carefully managed not to isolate individuals or fragment groups within the system.

A4.1 In consultation with local ARA leadership, ARI must work to streamline direct contact with grassroots membership – whether through traditional or digital communication modes – helping to alleviate the communication burden on local ARA representatives and assisting in removing potential constrictions and delays in communication flows.

A4.2 Local ARAs should encourage members to provide their up-to-date contact details to ARI, if they would like to receive direct communications regarding matters and topics relevant to them, with ARI reaffirming that contact information will be only used for these purposes.

A4.3 ARI should work with actors from all levels of its organisation to explore the feasibility of establishing greater communication links across each of its levels – including multiple communication contact points within local ARA groups – to support smoother communications and to enhance information flow from top-down, and bottom-up.

A4.4 Harness the potential of connections across and within different ARA regions for knowledge exchange, and mobilisation around key issues occurring at local and regional levels.

Communication capacity for engagement

To both facilitate a supported digital transition, and to enhance the effectiveness of communications more generally, a significant investment in building communications capacity is required within ARI. This is a key enabler of the other action areas that have been presented and needs to take place across the multiple levels of the organisation. Reflecting, what is in the scale of Ireland's population, a massive grassroots membership of older people, there must be a proportionate building of capacity to realise the full potential of ARI to support older adults to truly participate as full citizens in Irish society. This is in terms of being socially engaged and connected, being informed and informing, being represented and being advocates, and being digitally equipped and supported if desired across each of these spheres. At a national organisational level, ARI must be operationalised to intensify the regularity and to diversify the content of its communications at a scale that supports its representative potential. It would seem logical that this would include an expanded dedicated professional staff that allows for the development of more defined communication and mobilisation portfolios in line with the task at hand. At the regional and local levels, investment must take place in terms of accessible and practicable training and development. Whether harnessing existing or new models of training diffusion (such as train the trainer), there is now a need to empower older individuals and their groups to utilise their digital agency in engagement. This call has been made both in civil and research spheres (e.g. Peine et al., 2024; Age-Platform, 2024). However, capacity building of this scale cannot only fall to ARI. There has to be a substantial mobilisation of state supports to facilitate an increase in capacity, including in terms of public funding, public support services and programmes, and public-led incentivisation of private investment in this space.

A5.1 Additional funding should be sought from state and private sources to support the development of a more intensive general communication programme, supported with additional staff, and which involves a greater level of contact, a greater diversity of content and periodic assessment of communication effectiveness.

A5.2 As a part of the intensification of communications, funding should in particular be sought to support capacity building for empowerment and mobilisation of voice, including establishing direct contact with all members, and periodic and focused campaigns (e.g. digitalisation; community care) around which members can be mobilised.

A5.3 ARI should work to engage key state agencies tasked with supporting adult digital literacy in the design and implementation of a structured training programme on digital communications and safety. This includes SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland and the National Adult Literacy Agency.

A5.4 In line with the significant potential for ARI to lead a fair digital transition in communications and information access for older people, a more substantial and consistent state investment is required to support digital literacy amongst ARI membership.

Positive empowerment and representation

There is an opportunity for ARI to strengthen and expand its role in empowering and representing older people. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a legacy of paternalistic associations regarding vulnerability and ageing, there is a particular need to develop more coordinated, coherent efforts. This is in terms of general communication and dissemination of information that matters to older people, but it is also in terms of ARI's capacity to truly represent and empower the voices of Ireland's ageing population. As the primary membership-based organisation in Ireland, and given some of the evidence presented in this report, it can be suggested that ARI is already fulfilling this role. However, this appears to be at a scale that is not sufficient to be fully recognised externally, or internally by some of its own members. It can also be suggested that ARI, again because of the size of its membership-base, has the responsibility to mobilise for this role – notwithstanding its other core functions and objectives. This slight change in emphasis is likely to be particularly critical given some of the structural challenges facing ARI's members, and the organisation itself with respect to digitalisation, and the task of ensuring an inclusive digitising ageing society. As illustrated by some interviewee accounts, the affirming image of older people's engagement, and their capacity to adapt when needed and when in line with their own preferences, helps point to the potential for empowerment and representation to be grounded in an assets-based, more capability-orientated approach.

A6.1 Diversify the content of communications in line with evolving functions of ARI and its goals to connect, represent and lobby for older people. This includes ARI's long-standing role in supporting social engagement, and its emerging roles regarding information provision and advocacy.

A6.2 A core function of ARI communications at all levels of its organisation must be to empower older people, promoting the full participation and contribution of older people and their agency in effecting positive change in their local communities and wider society.

A6.3 ARI should engage fully in communicating the importance of empowerment and full participation in later life to inform public policy development and any ongoing policy consultation processes, including the current programme and activities of the Commission on Care for Older People.

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Research Team:

Dr. Margaret O'Neill, (post-doctoral researcher, ICSG and University of Galway), Dr. Arianna Poli (post-doctoral researcher, ICSG and University of Galway), Dr. Erwan Moreau (post-doctoral researcher,Trinity College Dublin), Dr. Brídín Carroll (post-doctoral researcher, ICSG and University of Galway), Prof. Carl Vogel, (Co-Principal Investigator, Trinity College Dublin) Prof. Kieran Walsh (Principal Investigator, ICSG and University of Galway), Christine De Largy (ICSG, University of Galway).

Research Collaborators:

Maureen Kavanagh, CEO, Active Retirement Ireland

Kevin Kelly, School of Engineering, Trinity College Dublin

Advisory Board Members:

Anna Esposito, Università delle Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Italy

Maureen Kavanagh, CEO, Active Retirement Ireland, Ireland

Kevin Kelly, School of Engineering, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Alexander Peine, Open University, Netherlands

Feliciano Villar, University of Barcelona, Spain

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For further information, please contact:

Professor Kieran Walsh
Irish Centre for Social Gerontology,
Institute for Lifecourse and Society,
University of Galway,
Upper Newcastle Road,
Galway

Tel: 00 353 91 495461
Email: icsg@universityofgalway.ie
Twitter: @icsgUniOfGalway

Ollscoil na Gaillimhe
University of Galway

An Institiúid Cúrsa Saoil & Sochaí
Institute for Lifecourse & Society

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin