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Digitalisation and Older People's Grassroots Organisations: Opportunities and Challenges

A policy brief based on the Virtual-EngAge study – Virtually Engaged Positive Ageing: Operationalising active retirement associations for engagement

Virtual-EngAge Policy Brief Series, Report No.1

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ACTIVE RETIREMENT IRELAND

What is the purpose of this policy brief?

The purpose of this policy brief is to examine the role of digital technology in supporting older adult grassroots organisations' communication and mobilisation of collective engagement in the areas of social connection, information access and dissemination, and advocacy.

Based on this examination, and a research informed multi-stakeholder participatory process, six co-identified actions areas and corresponding actions are presented for grassroots groups, civil society and government. The brief draws on findings from the Virtual-EngAge study, a national research project that examined the lived experience of technology use and non-use for individual and collective engagement, by members of a national grassroots membership organization – Active Retirement Ireland (ARI). This policy brief will present: (1) a short overview of international research and policy on technology development for older people; (2) a description of the research methods, and the multi-stakeholder participatory process; (3) a short summary of relevant findings; and (4) concluding remarks, followed by the policy and practice actions.

Why is this topic important

Older adult grassroots organisations have been recognised in research and policy as playing an important role in supporting the engagement, and citizenship, of ageing populations (Music et al, 2022; Upadhyay, 2015). This includes with respect to communication and mobilisation across the areas of social connectivity, information access and dissemination, and advocacy. With increasingly digitising societies, there are questions and concerns about how this role might be enhanced or threatened with the application of digital and communication technologies, and with the increasing demands of digital participation environments. In policy agendas across the European Union and its member states, there have been calls and commitments made to manage a just digital transition for all. Digitalisation has in itself been promoted as strengthening the potential for a fairer, more 'social Europe' (European Commission, 2020), and has been established as such within the EU Pillar on Social Rights, where a number of its 20 principles enshrine digital rights such as: the right to digital education; and the right to access essential digital communications services.

However, there is little information available on the challenges that are facing older adult organisations in adapting to this digital transition. How these groups can meet what are likely to be the diverse needs, preferences and digital literacies of their members with respect to communication and mobilisation for collective engagement has largely not been investigated (Seifert et al. 2020; Scholz et al., 2018). The ways in which digitalisation might help circumvent, or further compound, long-standing sustainability struggles facing these organisations are also not well understood. These include changes in the nature and levels of volunteering, membership recruitment, ensuring relevance for heterogenous and new cohorts of older populations. Reflecting these gaps in knowledge and the lack of targeted policy and policy action, efforts to support older adult organisations to harness digitalisation and negotiate the digital transition have largely been absent across many European countries. This is despite warnings of the further expansion of a generational digital divide if such grassroots groups continue to be overlooked (Council of the European Union, 2020).

About Active Retirement Ireland

As a national membership-based representative older persons' organisation, there are a number of reasons why Active Retirement Ireland (ARI) is a particularly valuable and unique organisational example to conduct this analysis. ARI incorporates approximately 500 local Active Retirement Associations (ARAs) and a national membership of approximately 21,500 older people. Although supported by a national professional secretariat (four core positions including CEO), ARI is based on a three-level structure involving voluntary committees at local (ARA local leadership), regional (nine regional teams, committee members and Regional Development Officers) and national levels (national steering board).

ARI promotes engagement opportunities for older people to self-organise and engage in social, physical, cultural and educational activities, and aims to serve as a representative voice for older people. ARI has to ensure communication and coordination across and within all levels to ensure a smooth implementation of its activities. ARI utilises a multi-modal approach to communication (e.g. postal; telephone; e-mail) to engage with each of the three levels, and to reflect the wide range of members' and volunteers' digital literacy. Within this structure, it is typically local ARA secretaries that are the primary information conduit between higher organisational levels and individual members.

Policy Context

The circumstances and needs of older adult grass roots organisations, or a more general focus on digital communications in later life, are largely absent from policy and strategies related to digitalisation in Ireland. This is despite recognition that older people have a right to full participation in public, social and cultural life (Department of Health, 2013). There are a number of broader frameworks, however, that are generally relevant. The 'Harnessing Digital: The Digital Ireland Framework' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022) for example, is a national strategy that sets out Ireland's position digitally within a European vision for 2030. While the predominant emphasis is on the digitalisation of business, public service, infrastructure, and general up-skilling, there is brief mention of older cohorts as being vulnerable to being left behind due to the digitalisation of everyday life. A number of related strategies also reference the circumstances of ageing populations. The '10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy,' (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021), launched to drive digital competency and literacy, identifies older people as a vulnerable group at risk of social exclusion. Similarly, 'Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy for 2021-2025', (Government of Ireland, 2021b), sets out to support older people to live independently in rural areas through improved connectivity and digital innovation. Nonetheless, specific actions targeting older people or specific details regarding measures to enhance digital literacy and connectivity are generally not addressed in these documents. This absence of detail and clear action has been noted within the broader civil society landscape. Age Action Ireland's (2021) 'Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population' report promotes a range of reforms for government to consider to address digital barriers such as accessibility, education and training, and income. This particular report underscores the importance of inclusivity as a concept, including with respect to maintaining non-digital forms of communication, and with respect to implementing a rights-based approach to digital inclusion for older people.

While the focus on ageing and older people remains underdeveloped, calls for consideration are more evident at the level of European and international policy debate and guidance. This includes more prominent and direct recognition of the digital transformation as a priority area for the equity and effectiveness of future ageing societies, such as within the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (UNECE, 2023). Similarly, the United National

Department of Economic and Social Affairs' (UNDESA) Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing has every year since 2019 highlighted challenges for older people around digitisation. It also includes a wide range of policy documents and related materials that call specific attention to the digital divide, with older people highlighted as one of the groups impacted by this divide, or more specifically targeted as encompassing cohorts impacted by a generational digital divide. As far back as 2001, the OECD published a report entitled 'Understanding the Digital Divide' in which they reported that older people were much less likely to have access to digital infrastructures (OECD, 2001). In more recent years, there has been a focus on promoting strategies that seek to enhance digital skills and literacy in an effort to close the digital divide between young and old. However, in addition to these calls, more direct references to the nexus between digitalisation and individual and collective engagement in later life is also evident. The outcome of proceedings of the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union on the topic of Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation (Council of the European Union, 2020) makes various acknowledgements and recommendations connected to civic engagement, communication and civil society organisations. This document notes the potential for the development of a digital platform for greater civic engagement; the need for high quality, accessible and easy to use forms of digital communications; and the need for the older adult civil society organisations to be included in decision-making around older persons and digitisation. Finally, in a report on the 'Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) discusses the potential value of digital technologies for communications with and from older people, and their civic engagement if equal digital access is secured.

What did we do and who was involved?

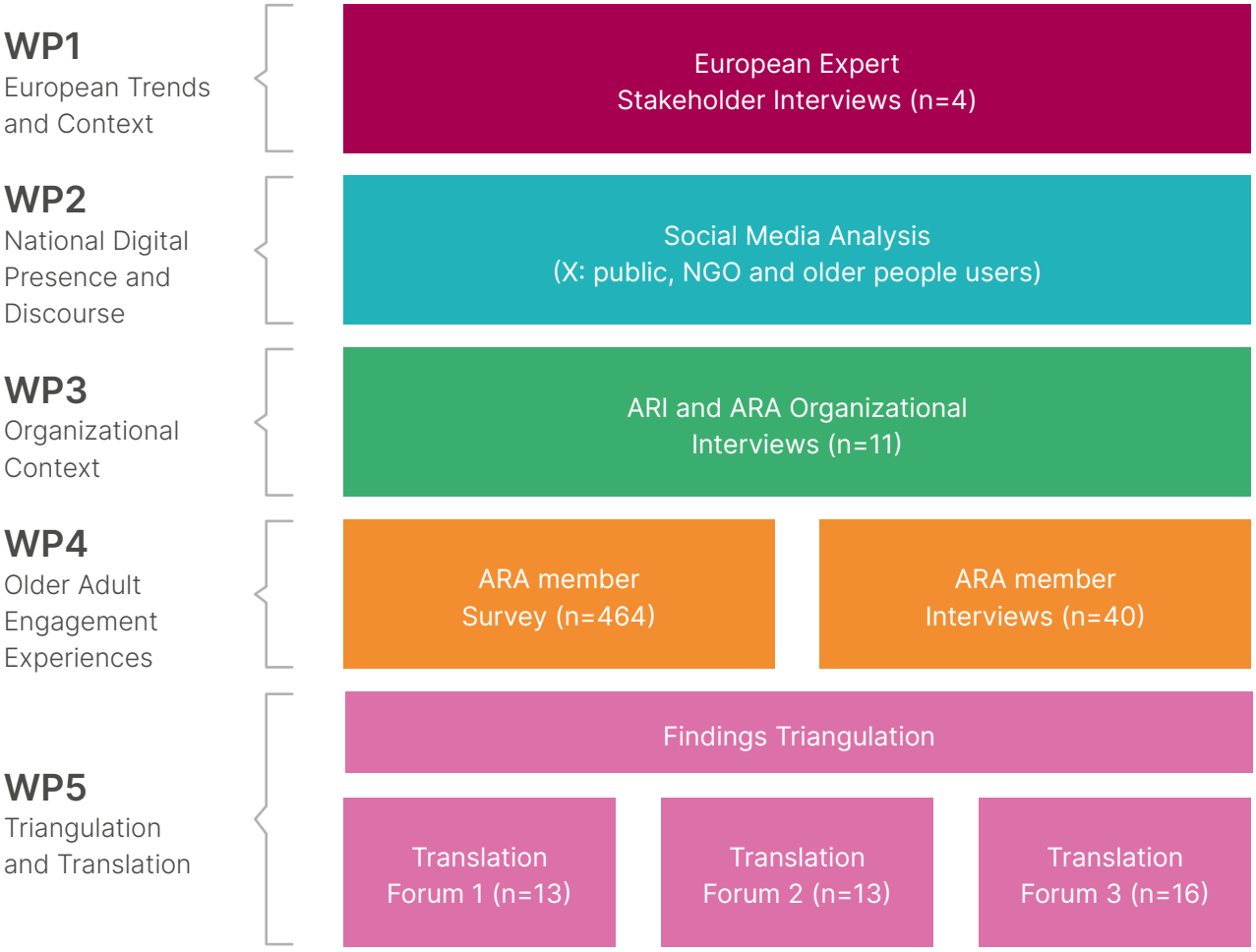
The research evidence used to inform this policy brief was taken from a multi-level mixed-method, interdisciplinary study. A detailed summary of the work-packages (WPs) is presented in the Virtual-EngAge Translation Report Series available from: https://icsg.ie/our-projects/virtual-engage-2/.

The main methods included:

1. **Four expert policy interviews** were conducted with European policy stakeholders to examine policy and digital innovation trends in relation to older adult grassroots organisations.
2. **Social media analysis** of X (Twitter) was completed to investigate the prevalence, the level of interaction and the perceptions of ageing organisations in Ireland.
3. **Eleven semi-structured interviews** were conducted with ARI staff and volunteers to examine the existing and potential role of digital technologies in communication.
4. **A self-completion survey** was distributed to ARA members across 150 local groups. In total, 464 questionnaires were returned (52% response rate) from 369 women and 83 men (12 did not disclose their gender).
5. **Forty in-depth follow-up interviews** were conducted on routines of collective engagement and technology use, involving 24 women and 16 men, ranging in age from 63 years to 88 years.

How the actions for this policy brief were developed?

The actions presented in this policy brief 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 5 individuals drawn from the older adult interviews. 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? – a short summary

To help contextualise and situate the recommendations presented in this Policy Brief, the core research findings are now presented in summary form. For full details of the main findings on this topic please see Virtual-EngAge Translation Report 1.

What European Stakeholders Say

Digital transformations and grassroots organisations

Policy stakeholder interviewees noted the opportunities and challenges that arose from the digital transformation for older people's organisations. First, the **potential of technology to assist groups in relationship building** amidst complex networks 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?… I think there would be more connections, and wider connections. (Stakeholder-In-01)

Others who represented specific groups noted how digital technology was already being used to **bolster engagement** as one tool – addressing 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…. (Stakeholder-In-03)

Stakeholders spoke about **significant challenges** that have yet to be overcome. These included digital literacy, and individual motivation. Also mentioned was how technology may challenge some older people, in relation to overuse, or information overload:

> … how much [to] use…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)

The most frequently cited challenge regarded the **lack of bottom-up involvement** in agenda setting, and in technology development.

> So you have actually these two (top level and industry) and the thing is they have not come together properly yet…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

Older adult representative organisations had a reasonably strong presence on X, with 21,879 tweets in all.

However, the level of engagement with these groups was relatively low – just 10 tweets have more than 100 retweets. There was more evidence of public institutions, other non-profit organisations, or independent professionals interacting with these groups, with older adults, and the general population, less likely to follow these organisations. By and large, replies and impressions were positive, with little disagreement evident.

The findings suggest that this ***national-level interaction is characterised by a professional network that largely holds common interests***.

In contrast, the local ARA dataset indicated ***a very low representation of local groups on X***, with only 764 tweets overall and only ten tweets receiving more than five retweets. 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.

Overall, these findings illustrate how there is ***little direct contact between these national organisations and local associations, and older adults on the X platform***. While some local groups are likely to use other platforms (e.g. Facebook) to communicate with their members, X is a major public digital communication sphere.

Digital Profile of Members

With reference to Table 1, the ARA member survey reported high rates of internet access and high rates of training completion. This suggests a ***group that is in overall terms engaged digitally***.

The research indicates that older adult ***ARI members are using digital technologies for engagement to a reasonably strong extent***, with an already high-rate of adoption evident for social connection activities (75%), and information access and dissemination spheres (65%), but with a notably lower rate for advocacy activities (19%).

However, ***variations in the frequency of internet use, exposure to technology during working life and digital proficiency suggest 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 maintaining their level of use, or reducing their use.

Overall, ***technology use in engagement was largely driven by those with high-digital proficiency, masking digital divides in this population***.

Across the three areas, ***technology was also used less for collective engagement, and more in narrow, instrumental ways***.

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).

Current practices and multi-modal approaches

Participants from all levels of ARI discussed the need for, and the current practices regarding implementing a multifaceted communication strategy. ***A combination of traditional and digital means was evident throughout ARI***, even if the depth of digital forms became shallower at more local levels.

The transition from a sole reliance on post and telephone communications was described as rapid 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)

Participants noted the ***importance of a supported integration of digital technology into ARI's communications***, with efforts both formal and informal in nature. However, notwithstanding national-level time-bound initiatives (e.g. peer-to-peer learning) and local ad-hoc training sessions, network-wide digital training programmes were not evident.

Informal practices were found to be operational locally with this secretary describing attempts to suit all members:

> [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...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 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, implicating long-standing organisational characteristics, as well as more recent gaps in digital preparedness.

First, participants identified the ***complexity of organisational structure*** as complicating coordination and record-keeping practices and leading to gaps, bottlenecks, and information loss. A primary challenge concerned how information flowed downstream from the central national office to regional committees, to local secretaries, but with no direct contact with members. Members noted the patchiness of communications and how not all information received by secretaries seemed to be acted upon:

> ... 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 downward one-way nature of the information flow, with a limited sense of exchange with higher organisational levels.

Second, challenges regarding ***data security and deficits created inefficiencies*** at all levels of communication, inhibiting engagement. Participants, particularly those in regional and local-leadership roles, raised challenges regarding data protection regulations and knowing what information can and cannot be shared. Deficiencies in core data, such as members' contact details, within the organisation were also reported by interviewees, and were described as a significant burden within a multi-level dynamic organisation.

Third, ***structural barriers reduced the potential for digital communications***. In many cases, concerns focused on training, and telecommunications infrastructure (e.g. broadband) availability, and were most pronounced in underserved sites (rural or peripheral places). In other cases, participants described the prohibitive costs of purchasing digital devices, especially for those on fixed incomes. Participants spoke of a digital access divide, and how this inequity became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> [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 (ARI-National-In-04)

Fourth, while tailoring local communications was an important practice for implementing a multi-modal engagement strategy, participants highlighted the ***challenge of accounting for the range of digital capacities*** of group members, with a 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….(ARA-Member-In-0467)

Communication and mobilisation preferences

At the national level, preferences were expressed for the increased use of digital communication tools (e.g. e-mail; video-telephony platforms). 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… (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***.

At the regional level, development officers and local ARA leadership recognised the ***potential for greater connection across and within regions***. Participants spoke about the missed opportunities that resulted from what they felt was the current fragmentation between ARAs. Where these 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.

At the membership level, ***preferences for communication reflected the diverse ARA membership digital engagement profile***. With reference to Table 2, there was a reasonably even split between the proportion of survey respondents who chose traditional postal mail, and e-mail, with Smart and analogue phone applications also evident but less preferred. These ***preferences were linked to previous know-how and education***, where higher levels of frequency of internet use, and educational attainment were both significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) related to a preference for e-mail communication. Moreover, ***preferences were also significantly linked to age, and access to social support***, where being in a younger age group, and having someone to assist with technology was significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) associated with a preference for e-mail.

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.

Older interviewees demonstrated varied attitudes towards digital communication. The ***reluctance to use technology stemmed from a fear of making mistakes, or a fear that digital communication may replace face-to-face interactions***. Others, while not enthusiastic, were open to technological changes and accepting of what they considered its inevitable dominance. Some, however, wholly embraced digital tools, viewing them as essential for communication:

> "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?" (ARA-Member-In-12)

Future sustainability and function

ARI's capacity to drive collective multifaceted engagement was also linked to ***concerns regarding the sustainability and perceived relevance of the organisation***. This was across three primary dimensions.

First, participants were ***concerned about the external presence of the organisation***, and felt that, despite progress in increasing visibility, that the organisation was still 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. (ARI-National-In-04)

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 a reduced ability to recruit new members.

Second, there was concern about external perceptions of who was involved in ARI and its ARAs, and who was not, with some of these perceptions being representative of ***negative associations that again dissuaded new members from joining***. A number of participants felt that ARI's membership was perceived to comprise of older age groups and older women only, and to lack cultural and ethnic diversity.

Third, there was ***concern about the organisation's capacity to sustain its relevance*** for mobilising engagement in a heterogeneous and increasingly digitised ageing society. While all participants agreed that ARI's principal purpose is and should remain to support older people's social engagement,

some participants noted that its full range of other functions and its 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)

There was a ***desire for the organisation to expand its empowering role*** - evident amongst survey respondents. Seventy percent of respondents reported that they would like ARI to regularly send them information on advocacy issues, while 76 percent - reported that they would like information on social activities, 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. More than half of respondents (55%) reported that they would like ARI to be more active in supporting social activities. Just under half (48%) reported that they would like ARI to be more active in supporting advocacy activities. Finally, just under 70 per cent (69%) stated that they would like ARI to be more active in distributing information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this policy brief was to examine the role of digital technology in supporting older adult grassroots organisations' communication and mobilisation of collective engagement, using ARI as a case-study example. 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 has 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 by 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.

In an overall sense, the rate of ***adoption of smart and internet-based technologies has been reasonably strong*** within ARI's population, particularly given the low-levels of up-take that are sometimes reported for older adult groups. Nevertheless, this adoption conceals a narrow use, and strong patterns of inequality with significant challenges regarding digital proficiency, and education, age, social support and working-life found. Furthermore, ***traditional modes of communication are still critical***, with many people relying heavily or solely on these methods.

It is clear from the findings that organisational structures and coherency of external messaging may combine with specific issues regarding digital access, and digital literacy and adoption to disrupt the realisation of the positive qualities of a digital transformation. ***Digital and organisational communication challenges can compound and reinforce each other***, whereas, disjointed communication pathways are likely to complicate the process of managing the introduction, and balancing of digital communications. It is notable that, like civil society organisations in other jurisdictions, these ***organisations appear to be largely left to address these questions on their own***. Given the potential role of these kinds of organisations 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 of membership-based grassroots organisations in the face of digitalisation. It seems likely that a ***re-orientation in the communication strategies and practices is necessary*** to help ensure that grassroots groups can be impactful in harnessing digital technologies appropriately to communicate and mobilise older people around collective engagement in Ireland. These efforts ***must be accompanied by a greater leveraging of investment to sufficiently enable and sustain this re-orientation***. There are three development areas in particular that must be considered.

First, in terms of ***accessible communication modes***, although recognising the potential efficiencies that digital communications technologies might bring to such grassroots organisations, the ***need to support both traditional and digital modes of communication where desired is required***. Supporting any informal strategies within organisations, through more direct assistance for these information 'brokers' would seem to be important in this regard, given the locally held knowledge of communication needs, and the sort of tailored, person-centred approaches that this can foster. In time, the balance in preferences within any organisation may change with a shift towards more digitally supported communication. Even then, vigilance is necessary to ensure that a multi-modal strategy is preserved, and the preferences of even a shrinking minority are addressed. ***Maintaining equal access to communications, equal access to internal dissemination channels and equal opportunities to contribute to the organisational and mobilisation strategies should always be central***.

Second, in terms of ***communication capacity for engagement***, to both facilitate a supported digital transition, and to ensure the equitable participation and engagement of older people amidst this transition, ***a significant investment in building digital communications capacity within older adult grassroots organisation*** is needed. This investment must be appropriate to ensure that older people

can truly participate as full citizens in Irish society. This is in terms of being socially engaged and connected, being informed and informing, and being represented and being advocates, and being digitally equipped and supported if desired across each of these spheres. For those at the national-level, organisations must be operationalised to ***intensify the regularity of communications*** at a scale that supports their representative potential. In an organisation such as ARI, 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. 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 - a call that has been made in civil and research spheres (e.g. Age-Platform, 2024). However, capacity building of this scale cannot only fall to grassroots groups. 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.

Third, in terms of fostering ***positive empowerment*** there is an opportunity for older adult grassroots organisations to strengthen and expand their role in empowering and representing older people. This is the case for ARI, given the size of its membership base, but is also likely to be relevant for other groups. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a legacy of paternalistic and ageist 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 the capacity of these groups to represent and empower the voices of Ireland's ageing population. This slight change in emphasis is likely to be particularly critical given some of the structural challenges that older people's grassroots organisations face (like those faced by ARI) with respect to digitalisation, and the task of ensuring an inclusive digitising ageing society. These groups are key in affirming the positive image of older people's engagement, and their capacity to adapt when needed and when in line with their own preferences. A more ***assets-based, more capability-orientated approach is required towards equipping ageing societies for an equitable digital transition***.

Based on the evidence-informed deliberations within the Virtual-EngAge Translation Forum, 11 key recommendations are made:

Recommendations for grassroots organisations

1. Where possible, and where in line with member preferences, older adult grassroots organisations should implement and refine a multistrand (multi-modal) approach to communication that cements commitment to providing equitable access to information and opportunities for participating in organisational decision-making.
2. Resources should be actively sought from state and private sources by older adult grassroots organisations to support the development of a focused communication programme, involving high levels of engagement, diversity of content, and supported by sufficient staff in line with the organisation's size.
3. Older adult grassroots organisations should be supported by state agencies to provide a range of communication formats (e.g. visual; audio; easy-read) to alleviate challenges in relation to the accessibility of content regarding literacy, and disability access.
4. Older adult grassroots organisations should ensure their communications include and reach diverse and 'new' groups of older people (such as those of younger ages, those from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds), to aid the recruitment and retention of potential members from these backgrounds.
5. A core function of older adult grassroots organisations' communications must be to empower older people, promoting their full participation and their agency in public and digital realms to effect positive change in local communities and wider society.

Recommendations for Government and State agencies

6. In line with the significant potential for older adult grassroots organisations to lead a fair digital transition for older people, government must provide appropriate and consistent investment to support digital literacy amongst the membership of these groups.
7. Key state agencies tasked with supporting adult digital literacy should be facilitated to work in collaboration with grassroots organisations in the design and implementation of a structured training programme on digital communications and safety. These include SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards Ireland and the National Adult Literacy Agency.
8. There is a need for both policy, and civil society organisations to build awareness amongst older people of their rights and entitlements regarding participation and accessing information and services in the context of digitalisation.
9. Working in collaboration with civil society organisations, Government must incentivise greater levels of private innovation in digital technology development to support the engagement and participation of older people in society, including, and with respect to, inclusive and needs-led design and the production of affordable and accessible devices.
10. In recognition of the importance of collective engagement across the life course, Government should work in collaboration with civil society to establish multi-level strategic goals on the role of digital technology in enabling full societal participation for all older individuals and groups.
11. Older adult civil society organisations should be the primary target of such strategic endeavours and should receive state support to develop programmes which attend to the promotion of later life citizenship and engagement, at national, regional and local levels.

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