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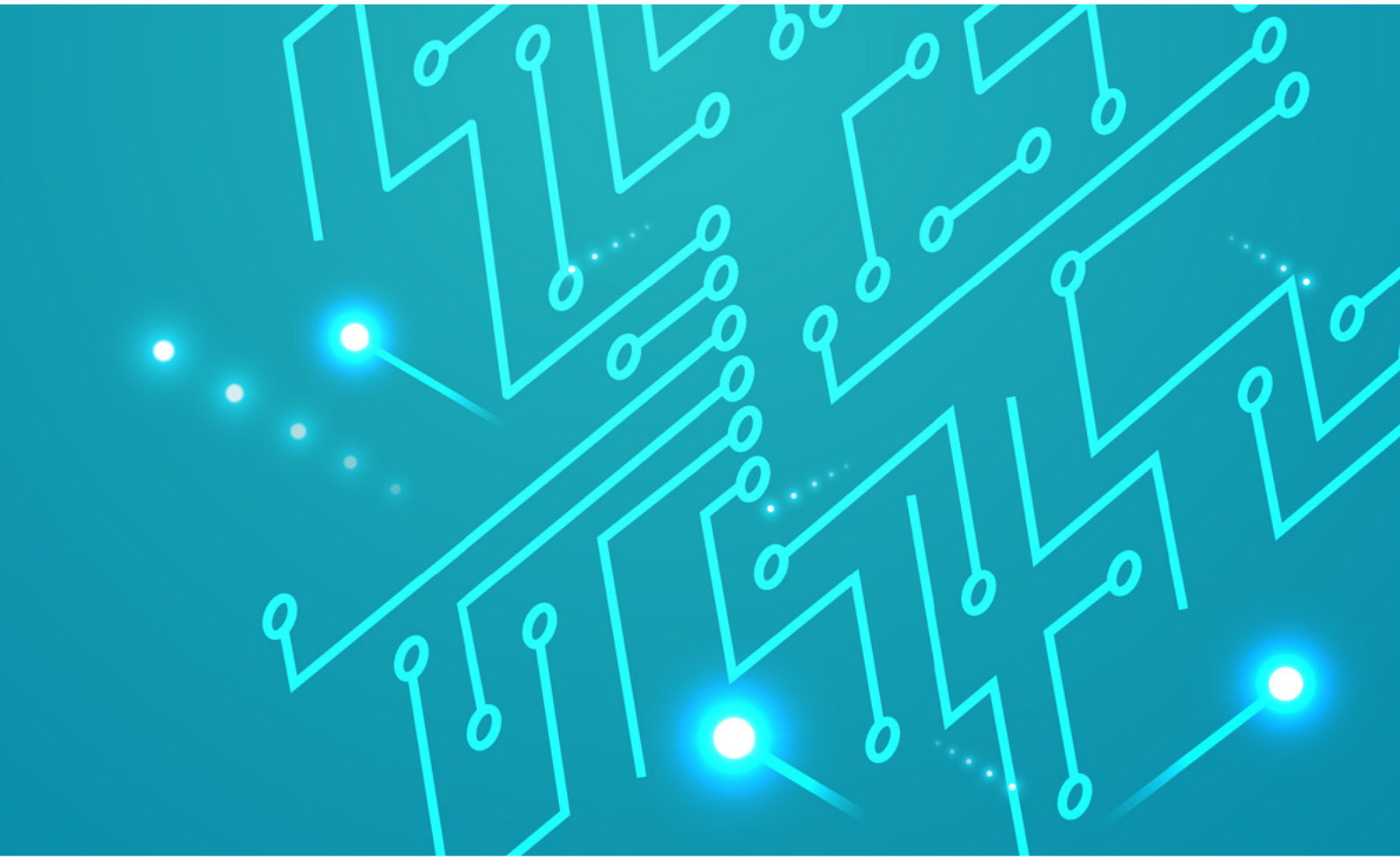
Digitally-Supported Engagement: Securing inclusion in later life

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.2

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ACTIVE RETIREMENT IRELAND

What is the purpose of this policy brief?

This policy brief examines the current and future potential of digital technologies to support the engagement of older people in Ireland, concentrating on the three areas of social connection, information access and dissemination, and advocacy. In doing so, it draws on a research informed multi-stakeholder participatory process to co-produce policy and practice recommendations and actions.

These recommendations and actions are targeted at aiding the development of digitally-supported engagement for older people in accordance with their everyday routines, their technology-use and the preferences of older people. 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 organisation – Active Retirement Ireland (ARI). This policy brief will present: (1) a short overview of international and national 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

Taking part in social, civic and political activities in later life has been found to be important for individual wellbeing and identity, and the overall cohesion of communities (Serrat et al., 2020). These forms of engagement are recognised as being integral to participating as a full member of society, and exercising the rights afforded through citizenship. Engagement is, however, increasingly subject to digitalisation. Digital technologies and applications are now commonly used to facilitate the organisation of activities, and/or increasingly used to deliver these activities online (Fischl et al., 2020). While this has been an evolving digital transition – with long-standing policy recognition that digitalisation is a core part of social and economic development – the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital systems into services and channels connected to participation. There has, as such, been widespread acknowledgment and promotion of the potential benefits that digital technology may have for how individuals and groups engage, including older people (Zhao et al, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are also widespread concerns regarding how digitalisation may, if unsupported, function to exclude older people and their engagement. In some instances, these concerns relate to the lack of industry, policy, and political attention given to factors from people's earlier lives (e.g. education; income; values; exposure to technology) that may impact on their successful adoption of digital devices. This includes the skills and capabilities that older people may already have to draw on to help them in this adoption. In other instances, these concerns relate to how the development and roll-out of digital technologies rarely account for the everyday lives, views and needs of older people (Peine and Neven, 2019). As a result, there is little understanding: of how technologies are currently being used; of the range of factors that may enable or impede the positive impact of technologies on engagement; and of the policy actions necessary to empower older people in their engagement within digitalising ageing societies.

Through a combination of these gaps in understanding, and strategy, it is unlikely that the full benefits of digital technology will be realised. It is also unlikely that we will be in a position to achieve the just transitions - in the dual transformations of digitalisation and demographic change that have been called for by the European Union and national member states.

About Active Retirement Ireland

Active Retirement Ireland (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 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

There is no single policy document or strategy directly focused on the digital transition in later life within Ireland's policy landscape – this is with respect to digital literacy, the use of digital technologies, or the digitalisation of activities and essential services. There are instead a number of references scattered across broader policies that recognise the need to attend to the circumstances of older populations. This is in terms of the potential of digital technologies to address the health needs of older people and to support their independent living and, to a lesser extent, potential experiences of social isolation (e.g. Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy for 2021-2025: Government of Ireland, 2021b). It is in terms of the social, health and economic vulnerabilities of older populations in relation to digitalisation itself, and concerns that they may, if unsupported, experience a digital exclusion (e.g. 'Harnessing digital – the digital Ireland framework'; 'Adult Literacy for Life: Department of the Taoiseach, 2022). It is also in terms of the need for digital inclusion for older people, amongst other groups, as asserted within the Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap (Government of Ireland, 2023), period. This is in respect to ensuring everyone can harness digital opportunities; is included in the design of digital-based services; and supports those who cannot use digital technologies. Specific actions focusing on older people across these documents are generally absent.

At an International and European level, a range of strategies and roadmaps recognise the negative impact of the digital divide on older populations, and the need to ensure that older people have access to opportunities to acquire basic digital literacies. For example, the United Nation's Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030 plan describes the need for older people to have digital literacy skills, as well as the role that assistive technology can play in health and social services for optimising the ability and the well-being of older people (WHO, 2020). The European Commission's Green Paper on Ageing (European Commission, 2021) has a significant focus on the digital transition and of how this impacts communications and services for older people. In this context, the Green Paper discusses challenges around digital skills and digital access. More broadly, and in addition to a number of principles within the European Pillar of Social Rights that assert a right to access to digital education and digital communications for all, the European Pillar's Action Plan recognises the important challenges and opportunities for society brought about by the digitalisation of societies and the digital skills gap amongst older people that needs to be addressed. Similar recognition is noted within the European Commission's Report on the State of the Digital Decade 2030 (European Commission, 2023). A more targeted focus on older people is evident in two documents. 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 (European Council, 2020) notes the multifaceted challenge and need to ensure the on-going and full participation of older people in digital societies, in relation to areas such as social, civic and economic engagement, and communications. In terms of civil society, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) and Age-Platform Europe (2024) calls for older people's access to public services in the context of the digital transition, and digital inclusion more broadly.

Notwithstanding, the consideration given to older people across these various documents, it has been argued that older people remain under-considered within policy, given the magnitude of the on-going digital transformation. This is evidenced across reports, position papers and strategies that either fail to include or only marginally mention the intersection of demographic ageing and digitalisation, and/or the need for inclusivity and development of the older adult technology market.

What did we do and who was involved?

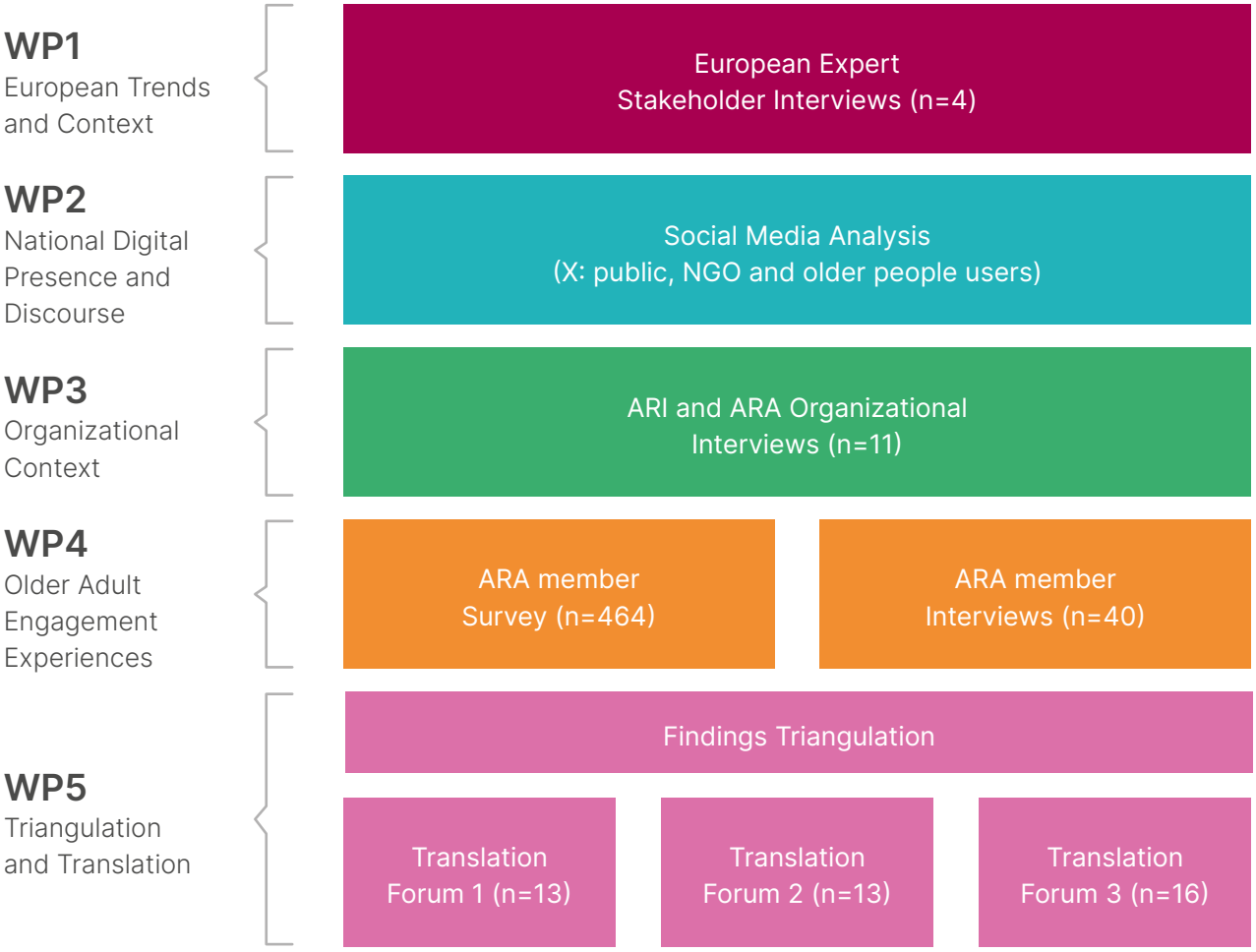
The research evidence used to inform this policy brief was taken from a multi-level mixed-method, interdisciplinary study. A detailed summary of the work-packages (WPs) is presented in the Virtual-EngAge Translation Report Series available from: https://icsg.ie/our-projects/virtual-engage-2/.

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 grassroot 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.
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 recommendations and actions in this policy brief were developed?

The recommendations and actions presented in policy brief are based on key messages and outline actions discussed and agreed at a multistakeholder 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) use of technology in everyday engagement and daily routines; (2) challenges that influence technology use in engagement; and (3) challenges as experienced by those with different levels of digital literacy. 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 2.

What European Stakeholders Say

Engagement barriers and enablers

The benefits of digital technologies for enhancing social connectivity, information access and voice were strongly recognised by stakeholders. Nevertheless, barriers at multiple levels were identified. The **current supply- and innovator-led market was noted to exclude** the circumstances, needs and views of specific groups in need of technology:

> But the problem we see is it's essentially supply driven, okay? Rather than demand driven. So what we see is... a plethora of ICT based solutions targeted at carers. Rarely are actually informal carers involved in the development of these solutions, which means obviously they fall short, or give completely off target, so we can certainly improve that. (Stakeholder-In-03)

Interviews highlighted the significance of the pace of digitalisation, and older people's own doubts of their ability to adapt, and the potential for an internalised ageism. They also raised how **digitalisation could simply compound existing inequalities** and exposed new risks:

> ...one of the risks that has been pointed out and this is something we see now [being] reporting back is that it [digitalisation] gives an additional channel for abuse in different dimensions. Simply because a number of older people who are not able to use new technologies rely on their family, on their carers... while in the past they were able to manage on their own... [so it's] the risk of additional financial abuse or kind of pressure that can be put on older people... (Stakeholder-In-02)

Two key areas of development were highlighted in particular, potentially helping to support digital inclusion. Stakeholders raised **the need for a multi-stakeholder design and development processes** that includes older people and accounts for their diverse contexts and needs. Stakeholders also raised the **need for more integrated, coordinated approaches** that embedded technology amidst a variety of other tools and needs:

> You have to integrate things because a lot of this stuff, you know, since we're dealing with people, they have multi-needs and usually technology is often just a one need, a one thing. So, how do you build that into integrated platform? (Stakeholder-In-01)

Members' Digital Profile and Ease of Engagement

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 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 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).

A statistical analysis[2] was conducted to investigate the relationship between use of digital technology and ease of engagement in the three spheres, and other factors (e.g. health; standards of living; education; social support; gender; age).

Higher ***standards of living, education, health status, and social support were each found to be significantly related to easier engagement*** in social connectivity, information access, and advocacy activities.

Using ***digital technology was found to be significantly related to ease of information access*** ($p \leq 0.05$), ***and participation in advocacy activities*** ($p \leq 0.05$).

Using ***digital technology was not found to be significantly related to ease of participating in social activities***.

Determinants of Digital Engagement

Five core factors were identified as influencing use of everyday digital technologies for multifaceted collective engagement. These factors emerged from the lived experience and life-course narratives of individuals, and are now presented in summary form.

Lifelong development and technological engagement

Life-course experiences significantly influenced exposure to, and attitudes and capacities towards technological engagement, with timing and opportunities emerging as critical factors.

First, ***differential life-course trajectories regarding education, work and family life presented different sets of opportunities for engagement, and different levels of contact with technology***. These experiences encompassed direct exposure to technology, and participants' development of a confidence and capacity to learn new skills. Some older women noted that their roles as homemakers limited opportunities not only for technology engagement, but for engagement more generally. Male participants with professional training highlighted the influence of work-related technology use on their engagement.

> Well, you see, for a few years before I retired, I would have used a computer at work, but that was just a special programme like, you know, and yeah... that's when I would have got the first feel of technology. ... So I sort of graduated from there. (ARA-Member-In-113)

Second, even where these trajectories were not described as directly influencing the end level of technology-supported engagement use in later life, these ***life trajectories impacted the timing of such engagement***. This was most pronounced with respect to specific life events, and stages, such as the onset of a caregiving role or bereavement.

Third, ***life-long personal interests often provided the motivation to engage and embrace digital technologies for some participants***.

Overall, ***engagement emerged as a dynamic component of personal development for participants***, representing a continuation of a life ethos of staying "active". For some, technology was seen as a step in their ongoing journey of personal growth.

Geographies of Engagement

Participants' geographic locations, infrastructure, significantly influenced their engagement capacity. In rural areas, participants noted a shortfall in essential amenities, which restricted the opportunity to interact with the locality, and wider society. Similar challenges were apparent for those living in 'in-between' peripheral locations, where the potential for needed investments was unlikely given proximity to larger urban centres.

2. This included chi-square statistics establishing associations, and logistic regressions to assess relationships when controlling for other possible explanations.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the geography of engagement. It not only confined individuals to their immediate surroundings but also reshaped their social habits. The enforced isolation led to a longer-term re-evaluation of social and technological engagement for many participants in local areas.

In the context of these challenges, a large number of participants highlighted the essential nature of digital technologies for engagement. However, many of these participants also highlighted the ***lack of technology supports and infrastructure***. The lack of accessible training in local areas was also noted as a significant hindrance. This gap led some individuals to suggest that they could have been more confident in using technology if they had received more training. Issues such as power outages, poor mobile phone coverage, and limited broadband access were commonly mentioned. One woman, for example, expressed frustration with unreliable internet:

> **… I'd be doing something on the computer or looking up something and it would disappear … The broadband was so bad. You know? You'd be working on something and you'd have to give it up and go back to it again. … There's no point in having the equipment if you haven't the access to the background technology……(ARA-Member-In-28)**

Digital Technology and Social Relationships

Social relationships significantly impacted use of digital technologies for engagement. The absence of supportive relationships or social networks amplified digital exclusion, especially as activities and engagements increasingly move online. Many participants nevertheless emphasised ***the importance of social support from family, friends, and community groups*** as being crucial in enabling their use of technology, facilitating access (gifting devices) and providing emotional and practical assistance (e.g. troubleshooting; maintenance). This was key in making technology approachable and nurturing a digital agency: 'I must say, my family have been very instrumental in encouraging me' …(ARA-Member-In-14)

Some participants expressed reluctance, however, to burden younger family members for help. ***Reliance on specific relationships for technological support could be problematic***. In some cases, the dependency on others for technology access was most exposed when a sole support is lost due to bereavement. In other instances the dependence on others could lead to relational tensions, where a number of participants spoke about how the person providing support could become frustrated with the pace at which they learned. This could re-enforce negative perceptions around self-efficacy and technology use:

> **But you know, what I've noticed with my own children, I would ring them if I had anything that I wanted advice, right, and they'll talk to me and my son speaks very quickly and he said to me one day, this is quite poignant, 'Do you know, I always thought I had an intelligent mother until now'. I said, 'What do you mean, until now'. Well, he said, 'You're a bit slow at grasping this.' (ARA-Member-In-116)**

Structural Aspects and Ageism

Interviewee narratives revealed ***the multidimensional nature of digital exclusion faced by many participants***. This exclusion pervaded many technology dimensions, from inaccessible jargon to an unfamiliarity with technologies, effectively barring individuals from participating:

> **Excluded. You're excluded from the general run of things because you are computer ignorant. You can't do online business, you can't do this, you can't … I can't even send a text. (ARA-Member-In-130)**

Social discrimination emerged as a systemic issue as a result of the magnitude of the digitalisation of services (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic) related to different forms of engagement,

such as online ticketing. This in effect side-lined older individuals from core participation spheres. But such discrimination was for some participants, also a reflection of entrenched deficits within research and development, where the needs of older people were overlooked.

The ***financial costs of technology use***, such as the costs of devices, maintenance, and constant need for updates, posed additional structural constraints, as did the lack of opportunities for appropriate digital training.

Despite these challenges, ***a narrative of individual responsibility was evident***. For some participants, typically those most engaged, there was a perception that other older people should take more initiative. For those who struggled with technologies, this led to self-blame and a perception that they, and other older adults like them, were the problem:

> I think, if I put my mind onto it, I could do it but as I said before, I've always had people to help me out and they get mad at me and annoyed at me ... But I still don't learn from that, so I think that's my own fault. (ARA-Member-In-75)

Attitudes Towards Virtual Engagement: Acceptance and Resistance

Across participant accounts, attitudes towards virtual engagement emerged as a central theme in how people engaged with digital technologies in their lives, revealing ***a spectrum of behaviours and mindsets towards technology across participants***.

At one end, ***some participants embraced technology for its ability to support daily routines***. This acceptance was largely informed by their ability and access in relation to technological devices. Conversely, ***others spoke about resisting digital engagement***, fearing it might erode social interactions and intrude into their daily activities, as well as a fear that technology would supplant in-person interaction. For most participants, a grey area emerged, where ***recognition of both benefits and disadvantages could co-exist***. This grey area arose where even those who accepted or embraced technology use occasionally voiced the need for limitations of its use. Some participants transitioned from resistance to acceptance, driven by the recognition of the necessity of technology to stay connected, and the benefits it offered for self-efficacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a central factor informing participants' attitudes towards digital technology. While the pandemic necessitated a rapid adaptation to digital platforms for many, it also caused a re-evaluation of what constitutes necessary communication tools. The experience highlighted the balance, revealed in participants' attitudes, between leveraging digital tools for connectivity and preserving the essence of collective interactions

> ... in one way, we've kind of made [technology] necessary. I suppose Covid kind of forced it on us a bit more ... Now, we probably see it as fairly essential and necessary...If we stopped it, it probably would create a bit of trouble. To that extent, it is essential. (ARA-Member-In-35)

Social media discourse on ageing and technology

Within a general dataset extracted from X, most of the tweets (78%) were found to be largely neutral in form. However, on further analysis ***many tweets conveyed that older people were vulnerable***, displaying a compassionate but also a more paternalistic tone. ***Three percent of tweets were positive and 19 percent were negative***.

Negative tweets typically reflected a disagreement with another user, in which the author is making a joke at the expense of the person, and/or using derogatory age-associated terminology (e.g. 'boomer') to insult the individual.

In a dataset on technology, older people and grandparents, 50 percent of tweets deemed relevant were categorised as neutral and contained simple descriptions, such as "my grandfather bought an iPad". The remainder, however, incorporated negative and positive tweets with the former comprising 27 percent of the tweets and the latter comprising of 23 percent. The ***content of positive tweets*** can be categorised into three primary kinds of content, including:

1. A grandparent gave the author a device and they are happy about it;
2. A grandparent acquired/owns a device, and the author is proud/happy for them, occasionally enjoying communicating with them using the device;
3. The author or somebody else is helping a grandparent (e.g. teaching them; fixing the device) and the author is happy about this.

The ***content of negative tweets*** can be similarly categorised into different kinds of content, including:

1. Author making fun of a grandparent's difficulties with technology or technology related to terminology;
2. Author making fun or being frustrated while teaching a grandparent how to use a device;
3. Author expresses jealousy or questions why a grandparent or older person owns a device, as if they do not deserve it or are thought not to be able to use the device;
4. Authors draw on stereotypical age-related associations to describe their own difficulties in using technology, e.g. "It took me so long to find how to do [technology related activity], I feel like a boomer!".

In sum, the results of the analysis suggest that while ***ageing and older people are viewed broadly positively*** within X (Twitter), ***different ageist stereotypes exist on the platform***, including those focused on vulnerability, and derogatory characteristic associations.

Attitudes towards older people, technology and engagement sit within this broader discursive context. ***Age-based assumptions, homogenisation and ageist beliefs were evident in a number of different ways***, including in terms of the inability to use technology, and being underserving of technologies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Older adults were found to use digital technologies for engagement to a reasonably strong extent, with particularly high rates evident in the social connection, and information access and dissemination spheres. The high rates of satisfaction amongst those using technologies also indicates that people were happy with their use of technologies. However, ***usage patterns were closely related to high-digital proficiency***. With almost a fifth of people never or rarely using the internet, and with significant proportions of those with lower levels of digital proficiency not using technology for engagement at all, ***there remains sizeable gaps between those who use and those who do not use technology***. Overall, these findings highlight that the transition to digital engagement for older people is still developing. It is also ***a digital transition that is advancing at different rates for different groups of older people***.

The five identified challenges help to situate these patterns within the lived experience of older people and highlight key determinants of technology use for engagement (Gales et al., 2020; Astell et al., 2019). ***The importance of the challenges was robust across participants who reported low-, medium- and high-digital proficiency***. That said, the negative impact of life-course factors (e.g. less exposure to technology), social relations (e.g. lack of support) and attitudes (e.g. reluctance) was generally most pronounced for those who reported lower proficiency.

The ***impact of challenges was not fixed across people's lives***. In some cases, people showed considerable capacity to overcome these challenges by: harnessing digital training; leveraging support; or engaging with technologies once constraints had lifted. In other cases, challenges (e.g. life events) were resolute across time. Challenges regarding geographic location, structural aspects and ageism were simply more entrenched, and by their nature involved meso and macro level factors that were not easily circumvented at the level of individuals. ***In combination with the wider public discourses on ageing and technology in social media, these findings highlight that exclusion and ageism (including internalised ageism) can be a pervasive social and digital phenomenon*** (Age-Platform, 2024; Leppiman et al., 2021).

Importantly, there is evidence within this research to suggest that ***technology if supported correctly could serve to moderate the effects of these challenges***. Put simply, virtual participation may help overcome limited engagement opportunities in local settings, restricted social networks, and even help elevate voices and combat inequalities in relation to access and representation (Zhao et al., 2022; Fischl et al., 2020). For some research participants, it was evident that some of these benefits were already being realised. For others, it was clear that ***more concentred efforts to support agency and interest in technology was needed*** to leverage such positive outcomes.

Being engaged was often a core part of people's lives and important in their expression of who they were. This was not always about absolute levels of engagement. Instead, engagement was set relative to people's own preferences, and with respect to their own interests and roles. It was also evident that later life was a critical period of engagement, where engagement activities was one of the remaining channels available to people for on-going development. It is for this reason that it is perhaps not surprising that many people found their way to technology through engagement. ***The use of digital technologies was therefore largely faciliatory of these other, mainly in-person, engagement modes***. Thus, virtual participation remained a secondary option. The ***vast majority of people very clearly asserted that in-person engagement was paramount***. It is in this light, that this preference for engagement must be respected – albeit a preference that may change with time.

Response Areas, Recommendations and Actions

In response to the research findings, there are five areas that require specific attention. These areas are presented along with recommendations (R), and key actions (A) relevant to the level of national government, and public, civil and private bodies.

Informed by the evidence-based deliberations within the Virtual-EngAge Translation Forum, these response areas have been agreed as holding value for those of no, low, medium and high technology proficiency.

A balanced and fair digital transition

There is a need to ensure that the integration of technologies in ageing societies is managed in a fair, effective manner. Digital engagement is a key enabler of participation across social, civic, and political realms. It is also a distinct sphere of this participation in its own right. However, recognition of ***the increased risk of inequality that many older people can encounter during this period of rapid digitalisation must be central within any developments regarding digital technologies and ageing***. It is also in line with calls for equity of access for older people in digitalised societies by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (2023), Age-Platform Europe (2024) and Principle 20 of the EU Pillar on Social Rights regarding access to essential services of good quality, including digital communications, and support for those facing barriers to access such services.

R1: In the drive towards digitalised societies, the importance of access to in-person essential services and in-person participation channels must be reaffirmed as the fundamental rights of citizenship for people in later life.

A1: Cross-departmental action is needed by Government to recognise, stipulate and legislate for non-digital access, including working with Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to enforce and build awareness of existing equality legislation.

R2: Social rights of older people must be central within the development and implementation of any policy and programme related to digital engagement in order to cement older people's entitlement to use appropriately designed technologies, and to be offered non-technology, in-person engagement options.

A2: Government must mainstream ageing and the need to meaningfully engage older people within all policy related to digitalisation and digital innovation, public services access and civic/social engagement.

Public Duty enabled digital engagement

In line with European Commission goals regarding just digital and demographic transitions, ***digital engagement for older people must be actively supported***. On the basis of Public Sector Duty there is a need for public bodies and the State to promote equality of opportunity for older people, within an increasingly digitised Irish society, and to eliminate discrimination arising from unfair treatment in relation to technology-supported engagement. These duties require multi-faceted structures and supports to address individual and group-level needs, concerns and spatial contexts regarding digitalisation. There are ***clear strategic and leadership deficits with regard to managing the intersection of these transitions***. There are also ***clear resourcing deficits with regard to supporting individuals, groups and local communities***.

R3: National State leadership is required to ensure that the transition to digitalised ageing societies is effective and fair, and must be grounded in a defined strategic direction developed and agreed with relevant State agencies, civil society organisations, private industry and, critically, older people themselves.

A3: National Government leadership, in the form of a national strategy and adequately resourced implementation, is required on digital equity for older people, including governance and accountability for digital access, literacy, and participation.

R4: A structured programme of training and development must target individual and collective older adult engagement, must be informed by a lived experience perspective and through a flexible set of approaches (including in-person and one-to-one instruction) must cater for and support those individuals and groups with a lack of technology exposure, formal education and different levels of literacy digital literacy.

A4: In conjunction with the National Adult Learning Agency, and the network of Education Training Boards Ireland the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science must work to develop and resource a digital literacy strategy for later life.

Empowered engagement culture and attitudinal shift

An inclusive, constructive culture must be fostered in relation to digital technologies and engagement in later life. This is to advance positive aspirations regarding digitalised ageing societies and to combat entrenched social barriers. On the one hand, ***the value of investing in supported digital engagement in later life must be promoted***. On the other, ***systemic ageist associations regarding older people and their technology use must be challenged***. An inclusive culture must also incorporate the empowerment of older adults in relation to technology in order to build. This is to build older people's confidence in their own capacity to use digital technologies for engagement, should they decide to do so, and to address challenges regarding fear and trust. Without such a shift in culture, blame and/or self-blame is likely to continue to be a challenge.

R5: In conjunction with older adult advocacy and representative organisations, relevant State, community and voluntary and private organisations must actively promote supported digital engagement amongst older populations of different ages and different backgrounds, highlighting the significance and relevance of digital technology for their daily lives.

A5: Cross-sector campaigns must elevate the potential of, and point to opportunities for, supported digital engagement amongst heterogenous older populations.

R6: A dedicated focus on building trust in digital communications and online participation is necessary to help address perceptions of risk and fear amongst older people, while encouraging responsible and informed use of digital technologies.

A6: Technology companies, and public and private service providers, must clarify and enhance digital controls and protections for older people, creating age-friendly digital infrastructures, increasing awareness of known scams, and building consumer sentiment.

R7: Systemic forms of ageism in relation to older people's use of technology must be addressed, combatting negative and problematised associations and framings within public and political spheres, technology and innovation industries, and policy and product development processes.

A7: Government needs to implement cross-departmental action to reinforce implications of age-based discrimination with respect to digitalisation, working with IRHEC to raise awareness and enforce legislation on age-based equality in this space.

Mobilising engaged places

Communities and neighbourhoods must be supported and equipped to fulfil their key role in facilitating in-person engagement and in enabling technology-supported and virtual engagement. This is true for all groups across all stages of the life course, but is particularly impactful in later life where the reliance on immediate environments for resources and services can be more critical. In line with core objectives of age-friendly environments, ***communities and neighbourhoods, therefore serve as brokers of engagement***. Communities and neighbourhoods have, as such the potential to assist in simplifying and enhancing pathways to engagement for older people. However, there are notable absences across telecommunications, mobility and local organisational supports that strain the potential and sustainability of the role of communities.

R8: The development of basic digital communications infrastructure (e.g. broadband; high efficiency telecommunication networks) must be prioritised in digitally underserved community contexts as a 'Public Duty' to ensure digital access is not spatially, or age stratified.

A8: Ensure the full universal implementation of the national broadband plan and assess its capacity to ensure a spatially integrated digital infrastructure.

R9: Creative approaches to repurpose and reharness existing community resources as local digital-engagement hubs need to be more readily implemented, addressing issues of regional digital connectivity and deficits in wider engagement opportunities in local settings.

A9: The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should establish a seed funding digital ageing development grant to incentivise the establishment of hubs.

R10: An assessment of three-fold gaps in engagement structures must be conducted for Irish communities, drawing out singular and combined clusters of digital disconnection, depleted enablement infrastructure, and low-level engagement opportunities, and allow for targeted resource allocation and tailored approaches.

A10: As a part of age-friendly development programmes, local authorities should be tasked with assessing the three-fold gaps in local areas and instigating local action plans.

Equity and life-course informed digital engagement

Whether involving in-person or virtual participation, ***active engagement must be inclusive of all older people***. Accordingly, supports must extend beyond the general older population, to specific groups where risks of exclusion from engagement can be greatest. Such supports include ***developing a greater understanding of diverse preferences, needs and expectations*** regarding engagement. This also includes the need to address prohibitive purchase and replacement costs of digital communication devices, particularly for those already at risk of material and social deprivation. Supports should, as a result, include a ***tailored approach to fostering equitable digital engagement*** amongst those who have had fewer opportunities across the life-course; those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from underserved groups.

R11: National and local initiatives led by State agencies or civil society organisations must support older adults to overcome income and resource, health and mobility and other constraints to provide engagement pathways that are relevant, and independent of individual socio-economic and health status.
A11: The economic feasibility of introducing a digital communication allowance for older adult households should be assessed and weighed against equity and efficiency benefits in relation to a digitally connected society.
R12: There must be a greater mobilisation of relational networks for digital engagement, diversifying the sources of social supports – particularly for those without close networks.
A12: State-led investment should be made available to help support the development of social support structures, intergenerational and otherwise, to foster digital skills learning and exchange in local settings.

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