

CO-AGE: Assessing the potential of the co-operative model to provide solutions to the challenges of eldercare in Ireland

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Research shows that most people in Ireland would prefer to remain in their own homes as they age (Age Friendly Ireland, 2015; O’Sullivan et al., 2022). Many older people rely on home care to support them to live at home. Currently there are over 6,000 people who have been approved for home care but cannot access it due to a significant shortfall in the number of people willing to take up employment in the sector. CSO population projections indicate that the number of people aged 80+ will quadruple by 2051, creating additional future demand for home care services.

The undervaluing of care work manifests in low pay and poor working conditions, which present a barrier to recruitment and retention in the sector. Outsourcing of care provision by the State, through a process of competitive tendering, has been a key trend in the home care sector in the last ten years. The drive to reduce costs creates disparities in pay and working conditions between care workers employed in the public sector and those working in for-profit companies and non-profit organisations. The transactional, task-based approach associated with the commodification of care devalues the relational aspects of care, rendering those needing care as passive recipients and disempowering those at the frontline of care delivery. The relationality of care calls for a different form of institutional design (Cottam, 2020).

International research suggests that care co-operatives – organisations owned and governed by service users and/or workers and other stakeholders – may provide better wages, working conditions and benefits that help reduce employee turnover in the sector (ILO, 2017). Furthermore, co-operatives have the potential to improve the quality of care and how care is experienced by older people by involving them in the co-design and co-production of care services.

The CO-AGE project engages with a range of stakeholders to explore the potential to develop home care co-operatives to support independent living and healthy ageing in the community in Ireland. In this paper, we provide an overview of the project.

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