

## National plan for older people sought

Paul Cullen

The political parties have been asked to commit themselves to introducing a national strategy on older people during the lifetime of the next government.

A dedicated minister for older people should be appointed to implement the strategy in government, a new coalition of five groups working in the sector has said.

The groups - Age Action Ireland, Age and Opportunity, Irish Hospice Foundation, Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and Senior Help Line - yesterday launched the "Older and Bolder" campaign to work for equality for older people.

The campaign is seeking the age-proofing of all government policies, the adoption of target incomes and pensions for older people and the replacement of the mandatory retirement age of 65 years by a more flexible model of retirement.

Older people, both locally and nationally, should be involved in the development of a strategy and a national partnership forum for older people should be set up to oversee its implementation.

As well as a government office for older people, the campaign is calling for the appointment of an ombudsman to provide independent oversight.

Writer Maeve Binchy was due to launch the campaign yesterday but she was unable to attend due to illness.

Delivering her speech, her husband Gordon Snell said older people were like marathon runners who had run further than anyone else and had plenty of thoughts and ideas to share.

"We don't want our voices to be always heard as demanding right, whingeing about wrongs, or listing aches and pains. We want to contribute in a positive way, and believe we have the experience to do so."

The 2002 census showed there were 436,000 people in Ireland aged 65 and over, or 11 per cent of the population. This is set to rise to 15 per cent by 2021, still low compared to the European average of 20 per cent.

"The fact that greater numbers of people in Ireland are reaching old age is a major achievement, the result of improved living conditions and medical advances over various forms of disease," Prof Eamon O'Shea of NUI Galway's centre for social gerontology told the launch.

"However, in many important respects Ireland is an ageist society, seeing the growing number of older people more as a demographic problem than a demographic bounty."

The campaign is seeking a target income for pensioners of 50 per cent of pre-retirement income before tax and says the minimum pension should reach 40 per cent of the average industrial wage.

It also calls for access for older people to health screening programmes such as BreastCheck and the availability of longer-term care as a right.

"Enjoying a good quality of life is a crucial issue for older people," Eugene Murray, chief executive of Irish Hospice Foundation, said.

"Equal access to health services is a basic human right. But the sad reality is that older people face

discrimination in accessing life-enhancing services."

**OLDER & BOLDER: main points**

- A dedicated minister for older people should be appointed;
- National strategy for older people should be developed;
- Ombudsman's office should be set up to protect the rights of over-65s;
- Age-proofing of all government policies should take place;
- New flexible models of retirement should be set up to replace mandatory retirement at 65