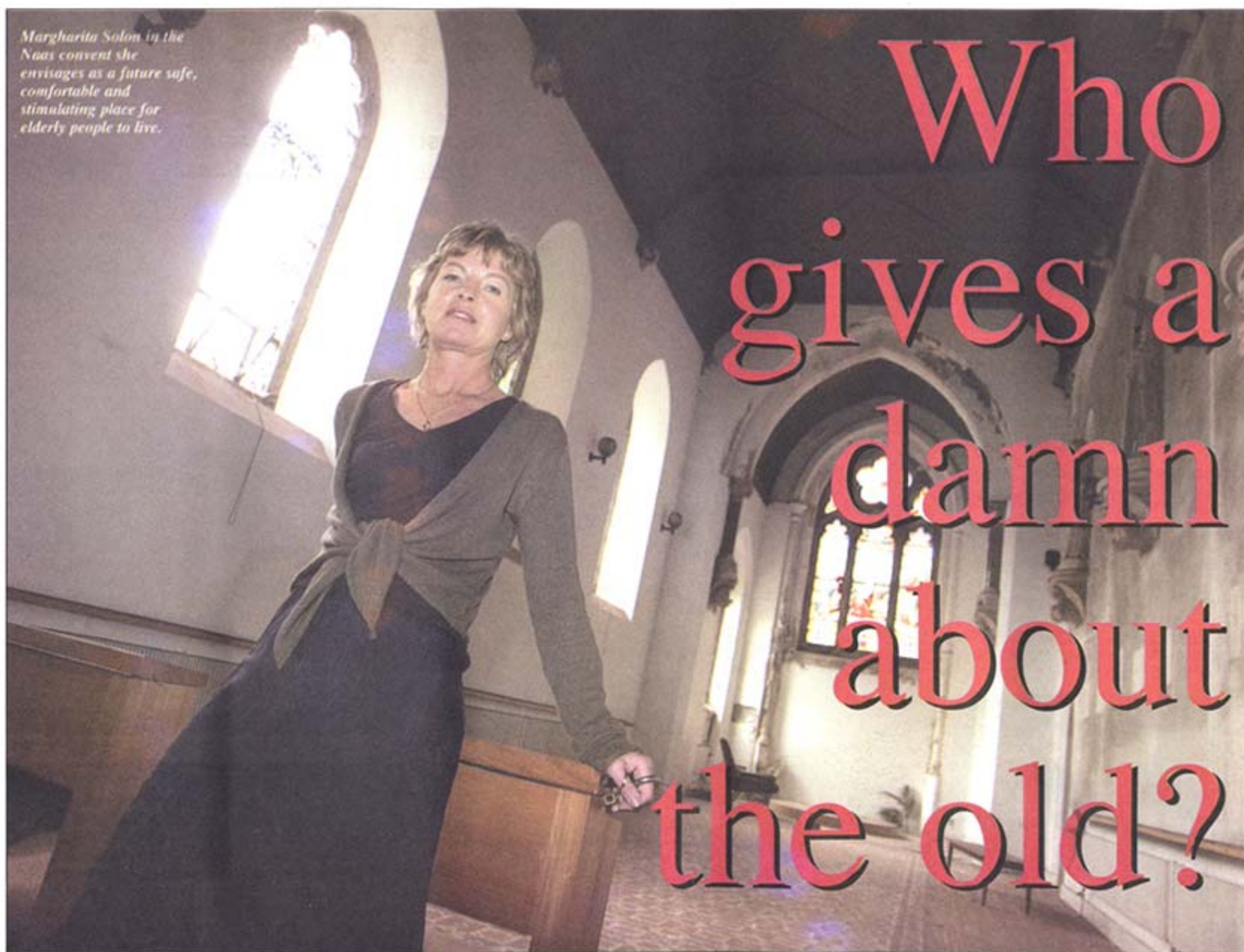


Margharita Solon in the Naas convent she envisages as a future safe, comfortable and stimulating place for elderly people to live.



Who gives a damn about the old?

MARGHARITA SOLON has a vision. When she guides me through the disused Sisters of Mercy convent in Naas, she imagines the Nás na Riogh project brought fully to fruition. Every detail of the architect's blueprint is emblazoned in her mind. She sees a rubble-strewn yard converted into 37 self-contained apartments for the elderly. She sees the convent's decaying interior renovated into modern living space and can almost feel daylight spill into the dank hallway from a glass atrium pencilled into the roof.

And there's more. Installing lifts into the listed building's two-storey blocks will remove the obstacle of reduced mobility. Down the corridor she sees the ornate old chapel doubling up as an exhibition space, its barrel organ restored for afternoon recitals. Looking outside, she sees an overgrown field transformed into a haven for residents to relax or rediscover an interest in plants and gardening. These are her plans.

Nás na Riogh also wants to challenge the isolation of old age. The property selected is right in the middle of town, filtering sounds of life and bustle, chiming along with the bells of Our Lady and St. David. Shops and restaurants invite modest excursions around the corner,

The scandal at Rostrevor House highlighted the way we treat our old people. It seems, politically, the elderly are a weak constituency. The astronomical cost of keeping relatives in care is, in itself, a scandal and with the age profile of the population soaring, the crisis is here and now.

Frank Shouldice investigates.

while Margharita Solon foresees two nearby schools as a vibrant crossover between old and young, a cross-generational bridge between our past and future. That is her dream.

Her enthusiasm is infectious, and the certainty of her vision recalls Kevin Costner's line in *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." There is no doubt that people will come because, unlike a fictional baseball stadium in Iowa, Nás na Riogh will be built for real people who are dying for it to happen. "When you can't live in your own house any more, where do you go? What choices do you have?" she ponders. "You're always hearing people saying, 'If it comes to putting me in a home when I get old, please shoot me'. But

many of the people who used to say the same thing are now in care."

A CULTURE OF INDIFFERENCE

IT IS NOT intentional, but much of Solon's questions are rhetorical, querying the flat complacency with which we tend to face issues of age. The Meath-born nurse works in a system she clearly considers inappropriate for elderly care. Although reluctant to criticise individual nursing homes, she compares aspects of the service in Ireland to orphanage care in Romania. Even with individual staff members doing their best, she suggests a wider

culture of indifference about the aged, a criminal lack of stimulation for those in residence and a pervasive attitude that the most vulnerable people in our society are just biding time.

Solon has enough first-hand experience to know what she's talking about. Trained as a nurse she has "gravitated towards" geriatric care since the 1980s. "I love basic nursing," she feels, wondering if the pull came from the attentiveness she witnessed in her late father Michael O'Connell, a G.P. "There's not a lot of technology with geriatric nursing. Patients are more vulnerable and more dependent. For me, it's just fundamental back-to-basics nursing care. When a touch can mean something. And when asking 'How are you?' can make a difference to someone's day."

"Older people, by and large, want to stay at home," says Paul Murray, head of communications at Age Action Ireland. "It's ironic that government policy – and all the reports state this – is to keep people in their own house for as long as possible. But the money isn't being put into community care to facilitate this. And so we continue to think of older people in terms of nursing homes and hospitals rather than people who need some help along the way."

Put it down to the arrogance of youth ➤



➤ that we ignore ageing as a natural cycle. It's a uniquely democratic process ahead of all of us, provided we live that long. There is a perception that most old people end up in nursing homes, yet figures for long-term care in Ireland are far lower than many might expect.

STRUGGLING TO PAY THE BILLS

ABOUT FIVE percent – one in 20 – of the population enter care in the last years of life. It's essential that nursing services are provided for those who need full-time attention, but the fact is that many who currently reside in nursing homes don't need that level of care.

Of some 26,000 residential beds available nationally more than half are run privately. The rest are provided by the state through local health boards. Typical residential costs in a nursing home – excluding medical treatment – start at about €700 weekly. Public care is paid for by health boards, while private care is paid for by residents and/or their families, possibly with a contribution from the local health board. Last year health boards subvented private nursing homes to the tune of €115 million.

However not everybody can access this financial support. Subject to a means test, the health board can assist to a maximum of €190 weekly. However even if that is topped up the shortfall is overwhelming against basic costs of €700 per week. When the issue arose recently on Liveness a caller from Ballyfermot explained how he and his brother have to cobble together €3,500 every month to house their incapacitated mother. The man's struggle rang bells all over the country. Whatever the emotional upheaval of putting a parent into full-time residence, the economic pressure of cases like these usually means selling off assets, including the family house, simply to pay the bills.

"There are approximately 600 empty beds at the moment," says Paul Murray. "They are empty because who can afford to pay those prices? So you have people delaying their stay in hospital or staying in unsuitable accommodation because they can't afford to move."

"I always look at it from the older person's point of view," proposes Bob Carroll, director of the National Council on Ageing and Older People (NCAOP). "And from the point of view of equality. Suppose you're much younger and you need long-term care. Would you be asked to sell your house? Why do we treat older people differently than everybody else?"

A LIFE IN DIGNITY AND INDEPENDENCE

INDEED THE growth of private nursing homes in Ireland suggests that elderly care presents easy money, rather than embracing



any social ethos. "I suppose there is a need that's being filled by the private-for-profit sector," says Carroll. "However I don't see that as a problem per se. Our interest is the welfare of older people. It's not so much Private v Public as about the quality of service and what is required for older people.

"What's at the back of it all is values," he adds. "Do we care a damn about old people? That's putting it very crudely. But it's more than that – do old people's opinions and views matter in formulating policy? What's at play ultimately is society. What we are prepared to put into the care of old people so they can live lives in dignity and independence in the appropriate place.

"A nursing home isn't necessarily the appropriate place. Sometimes people find themselves in long-term residential care, not because they want to, but because the support service isn't there.

"We also have people in acute care who don't need acute care. They are chronically ill and do need another type of care. What is required for that? What services? If they aren't available we need to be more equitable so that they are there no matter where you live."

The NCAOP took a first-principles approach to the issue in 1988, by identifying four main objectives. That same year, a government working party adopted those



Dr Jerry Crowley T.D. (left) has had great success with St Brendan's retirement scheme at Mulranny in Co Mayo. Examples of successful sheltered housing projects around the country (clockwise from top left) Carnew Community Care in Wicklow, Lisdoonan District Association in Co Monaghan, the Sue Ryder Foundation's housing at Ballyroan, Co Laois and Títhe Cois Tra at Lacken Co Mayo. (Courtesy Irish Council for Social Housing).

objectives in its paper *The Years Ahead: A Policy for the Elderly*, verbally setting out to maintain elderly people in dignity and independence in their own home. Its aims were: to restore those elderly people who become ill or dependent to independence at home; to encourage and support the care of the elderly in their own community by family, neighbours and voluntary bodies in every way possible; and to provide a high quality of hospital and residential care for elderly people when they can no longer be maintained in dignity and independence at home.

THE GULF BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

FOR BOB Carroll, these provide "fundamentals for a policy for the elderly"

in Ireland. They remain as guidelines, but the 1990 Nursing Home Act took the institutional route by offering tax relief for large-scale nursing homes. Community housing schemes, successful throughout the country, lost out.

"We're disappointed with the way it's being treated by the Department of Health," feels Karen Murphy, head of services at the Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH). The Council finds that even when they get the go-ahead for a sheltered housing project, they aren't guaranteed funds to run it. "If the Department of the Environment wants to put in capital investment, the Department of Health doesn't seem to want to put money into community care," says Murphy. "The only reason there aren't more sheltered housing schemes is because the funding hasn't been provided yet."

It is ironic that long-term care is proving a lucrative market while some 150,000 care-givers in Ireland are means tested for carers' allowance. Elderly people might need temporary assistance following an illness or some form of disruption. However the strain on community services means that the first – and only – recourse is a full-time nursing home or somewhere equally unsuitable. Despite occasional scandals – such as the controversy over conditions at Rostrevor House – the glaring divergence between policy and practice is quietly accepted. Those who most need services are unlikely to complain, and politically, the elderly ➤

"When you can't live in your own house any more, where do you go? What choices do you have?"

are a weak constituency. Nothing suggests this is about to change.

What's most curious is that these same conditions await successive generations. It's as though turkeys could vote in July to abolish Christmas but cannot see that far ahead. The NCAOP wants society to prioritise care for the elderly, even if it's motivated by self-interest. "We as a society should be demanding the highest standards in long-term care, whether it's community or residential," says Carroll. "If we put ourselves at the centre, we want to look after ourselves down the line. If we're not doing it right now we're not pushing enough for the provisions to be made. And they do cost money."

A NEW KIND OF CARE

FOR SIX YEARS Margharita Solon has nurtured the idea of better care. The upshot is Nás na Riogh Housing Association, a voluntary not-for-profit group connected to the Irish Council for Social Housing. Separating profit from the equation underpins the whole enterprise. This is a carefully costed project, but the emphasis is on what it can achieve for residents rather than the financial return for investors. Nás na Riogh first planned for a long-term residential care unit alongside a sheltered housing unit. Those ambitions have been revised to sheltered housing only. Having identified the Sisters of Mercy convent as a suitable site, the Association secured planning permission for a 37-apartment complex.

Awaiting the green light means a decision from the Department of the Environment to fund 95 percent of the project. The remainder will be raised locally. The thinking behind Nás Na Riogh is both humanist and practical. Many elderly people go into long-term residential care because they have no choice. They may require occasional assistance rather than full-time care, but relevant services are either overrun or non-existent. Residence-bound pensioners find themselves placed in care where, more often than not, passing the day is inexorably a passive retreat into memory. Personal independence is forfeited.

As far as Solon is concerned it's time for change. "When we think about a nursing home we think of it in terms of a medical care unit," she suggests. "We artificially prolong life through medication. I don't believe in euthanasia but I do believe in giving a quality of life rather than quantity. What we really want when someone can't stay in their own home is something as close as possible to a home environment. I've nursed in homes where people never went out in the fresh air from the day they came in. It's dreadful – dreadful!"

"My idea is that you will be kept active from day one. Instead of all this medication we would have massage, music therapy, art therapy, physical therapy. With the stimulation we will give them their health will actually improve."

HOW ABSENCE OF STIMULUS KILLS

IT IS WIDELY accepted that the absence of stimulus for long-term residents does shorten lives – parking wheelchairs in the verandah between meals does not count as stimulation. Monotony dulls the intellect and senses, while typical ailments such as arthritis or poor muscle tone could benefit from a range of physical therapies. Social isolation is the other bogey which makes community integration a key part of Nás na Riogh, inviting schools and local groups to participate in activities at the residence. They have been greatly encouraged



Margharita Solon says "As you get older and your mobility decreases your choices decrease as well. That shouldn't necessarily be so... It's a matter of taking control of our own destinies."

by the success of St. Brendan's retirement home in Mulranny, Co. Mayo, and the work at Share by transition students in Cork's Presentation Order schools.

For Solon, developing these possibilities is a chance for society to blend generations together rather than hive off into age-related exclusion. Otherwise, she feels, we are abandoning the past, losing historical context and the richness of experience and diversity. Like it or not, major social change is on the way. Some commentators envisage huge problems ahead with Ireland's demographic profile. At present, just over 11 percent of the Republic's population is aged over 65. The youth bias of our population – 21 percent currently aged under 15 – means the national profile will swing considerably so that over-65s will make up a quarter of the population by 2050. It's a significant jump but agencies operating in the area feel that, for now, time is on our side.

"We've done work on population projections," says the NCAOP director. "Our population is ageing. Some people would say it's a disaster, that we're going to break the bank. Our position is, hold on, we should be able to manage it."

Wide-ranging consequences will test that resolve. At present, for example, every hundred workers in the Republic of Ireland support less

than 20 pensioners. Within 50 years that ratio will double to 40 pensioners. The Irish Nursing Homes Organisation (INHO) has sought a meeting with the Minister for Health, warning that "the provision of care will not nearly match demand. A crisis looms unless a plan is put in place."

THIS IS OUR ONLY CHANCE TO PLAN

PAUL MURRAY of Age Action Ireland agrees that the urgency today is to formulate a comprehensive plan. "Italy, Germany, Spain and Portugal are now in deep trouble," he says, pointing out that one-in-four EU citizens will be aged over 60 by the year 2020. "Those countries are already older than here but we're coming behind. We do have time to think." Any complacency about formulating policy will waste that breathing space. The government's decision to set aside €1 billion annually to meet future pension costs has been widely commended – indeed, such foresight is at odds with the lack of resources being put into existing services.

With about 7,000 accommodation units in service for the elderly, sheltered housing has a proven track record. The ICSH budgets weekly care costs at between €50 and €110 per unit/bed. This is less than the weekly

subvention provided by health boards to private nursing homes. Aside from quality of life issues, the government's continued preference to encourage private sector nursing homes is quite baffling to care workers all over the country. "There's a huge value for money issue here," says head of services Karen Murphy. "They are cheaper to run, they're run by non-profit organisations and people stay in their own communities. They work very well. We have hundreds of these schemes around the country and there should be one in every locality where there's a need."

"The big question is what do we want and the answer is to stay in the community," agrees Margharita Solon. "To be as independent as possible. To have as many choices as you can. To interact with a whole variety of people and situations. As you get older and your mobility decreases your choices decrease as well. That shouldn't necessarily be so. What we're saying is, let's change the emphasis and shift it totally. It's us taking control of our own destinies and planning what it is we want."

In the time left to plan for our ageing population, decision-makers might remember that sheltered housing is firmly in line with what government policy purports to be. While health boards allocate €115 million annually in subvention to private care, the Irish Council of Social Housing seeks €2.2 million to fund services needed by non-profit housing schemes.

This is the type of accommodation most old people want yet seven in ten such schemes get no statutory aid towards care. ■

"Those countries are already older than here but we're coming behind. We do have time to think."