**National Conference of Sage- Support & Advocacy Service for Older People.**

**Croke Park. Dublin. Friday October 16th 2015**

**Launch of ‘Nothing About You / Without You – Quality Standards for Support & Advocacy Work with Older People’.**

**Welcoming Address by Áine Brady CEO of Third Age.**

Chairman, distinguished guests, delegates and friends.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today to the first national conference of Sage – the support and advocacy service for older people. The purpose of this conference is to launch ‘Nothing About You / Without You – Quality Standards for Support and Advocacy Work with Older People’. It is wonderful that on a Friday, and three days after the budget, we have 400 people registered for this conference. It is also a great honour to welcome here today the Ombudsman of the European Union, Emily O’Reilly. We very much look forward to her keynote address this morning.

It is with regret that I have to pass on the sincere apologies of the Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar T.D., who initially committed to officially open the conference but unfortunately has had to withdraw for family reasons. I am confident that he and his department will work as constructively as possible with Sage in responding to recent recommendations by HIQA and the Ombudsman for the development of advocacy services for people using hospital services.

Third Age is like many organisations in the community and voluntary sector in that it has its own unique story of origin and has developed over the years in its own distinct way. But in an Ireland that is still feeling the severe effects of an economic crisis, with many individual and collective social crises in its wake, there is less tolerance for organisations stressing their differences at the expense of the common good. The scandals which beset parts of the charity sector in 2014 have not been forgotten and it is worth remarking that the emerging office of the Charity Regulator has had to make a plea for more staff because of the sheer volume of organisations to be registered and regulated. If our past has seen a proliferation of organisations, many of them breaking new ground and undertaking developments which were later mainstreamed into formal public services, consideration of our futures, indeed our very survival in some cases, means that like today, we must focus on quality and standards and outcomes for people as opposed to simply maintaining organisations. In short we need to move beyond mere cooperation and into meaningful collaboration.

Third Age is an organisation which is very proud of its deep roots in the communities of rural Meath. From thisbase it has developed programmes such as Fáilte Isteach to link older volunteers with the predominantly younger population of immigrants to assist them learning English and integrate more easily as residents of our island nation.

We in Third Age have long ago recognised what social research is increasingly focusing on – the importance of social networks and the need to provide contact for older people who are lonely or alone.

Our Senior Helpline volunteers support many thousands of older people through one of the most social of media – the humble, but increasingly smart, telephone.

 Through Third Age local we have built an example of how local resources and local leadership can be combined to make a real impact on the day to day lives of older people.

Through our work in negotiating the emergence of Sage as a support and advocacy service for older people we now have a deep appreciation that just as older age can be a time of opportunities it can also be a time of serious challenges.

Third Age has recently begun a process of redefining itself for an Ireland reaching towards recovery – an Ireland that in many respects feels that bit older after going through a major crisis and is hoping that it is also just a little bit wiser. Part of that wisdom is an acknowledgement that things cannot go back to where they were; that times have moved on. Whether you believe that it was lack of institutional regulation or lack of self-regulation, or a combination of both, that brought about our recent troubles, you will probably agree that any organisation needs to consider its future direction and development with a judicious mix of pride and perspective – of passion and planning.

The traumatised Syrian refugees that will arrive in Ireland over the coming months need a clear message – Fáilte Isteach. They will in time become engaged Irish citizens, making their own contribution to our country, as countless generations of Irish people have done in other countries.

Lonely and alone older people need access to a telephone support and helpline but smart phones are no substitute for the natural supports of family, friends and community even if they can open up possibilities for building support networks. Communications is simply the means to an end – connectedness. For some, particularly those who face health and care challenges, there is a need to build Circles of Support so that they can live, and in time die, in the place of their choosing.

Creativity is a phenomenon whereby something new and something valuable is formed. It is a word that is most often associated with culture but it is increasingly associated with systems and service design. Informed by the evidence of the importance of connectedness and the quality of personal relationships to human wellbeing, and especially the wellbeing of older people, creativity is the spark that asks the question ‘why just meals and wheels and a strategy to prevent falls’ which can be terms that make older people out to be cases rather than citizens. Why not instead think of dining and dancing; together they promote nutrition, balance and connectedness…and they also ***sound like a lot more fun!!!***

Sage, the support and advocacy service for older people, whose quality standards will shortly be introduced by Dr. Michael Browne, has developed a simple statement of its approach which we in Third Age find helpful in terms of developing our future strategy. Sage’s approach is ‘to collaborate where possible – to challenge where necessary’. They also have promoted an important organising concept, which I touched on earlier, Circles of Support.

Sage is under the governance of Third Age but it would not exist without the vision and tenacity of Greg Price of the HSE and Tom Costello of The Atlantic Philanthropies. Although its origins lie in the scandal of Leas Cross a decade ago, Sage is just one year old. It is being developed in a context in which there is an increasing focus on the need for support and advocacy services in all care settings - be they home, nursing home, hospital, hospice or hostel.

Sage, more than any other ***Third Age*** programme, sees the challenges facing some older people, including people with intellectual disabilities. We are conscious of the need for a more coherent framework within which support and advocacy services can be developed and, in this regard, it is significant that this conference will today hear from the new chair of the Citizens Information Board, Ita Mangan, the Ombudsman, Peter Tyndall, and the Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, Deputy Jerry Buttimer. We will also be hearing from former Law Reform Commissioner, and Chair of the National Advisory Committee of Sage, Patricia Rickard-Clarke, on the emerging Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) legislation which will enable the establishment of a Decision Support Service.

Chairman, I want to conclude my opening remarks by returning to a key issue that I referred to earlier – of Third Age redefining itself for an Ireland reaching towards recovery. Third Age is an organisation. It is also a phase of the life cycle in which increasing numbers are living into the Fourth Age. In considering its strategy for the future, and in the process of redefining itself, Third Age will focus its deliberations around key themes I have already referred to: Connectedness; Creativity; Challenge.

 We are committed to partnering with others who are also focused on one or more of these key themes and to explore the potential of greater collaboration. It is only through working together that we can exploit the opportunities and meet the challenges of ageing in Ireland.

**Ends.**