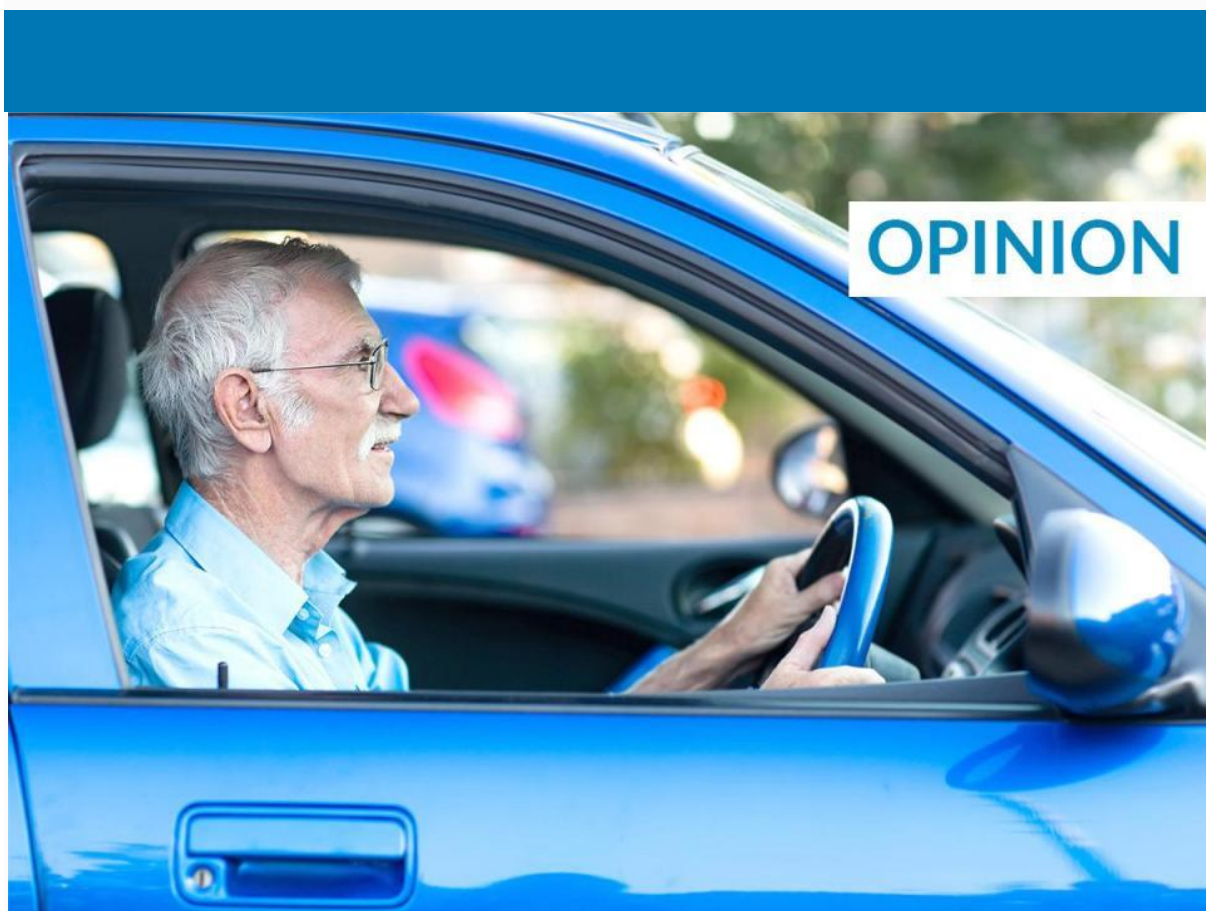


AGE-driven win over ageism

A European directive that would have penalised older drivers has been rethought.



The previous wording of the draft text would have refused driving licences for drivers suffering from a coined medical condition termed 'age-linked behaviour'. Photo: Shutterstock.com

One cannot deny the fact that ours is indeed becoming a grey-haired world. A declining fertility rate and rising longevity are two main factors for this trend in the majority of countries.

In Europe alone, the World Health Organisation last October predicted that by 2024, people aged 65 and older will outnumber the under-15s. In Malta, the elder category already touches the 19 per cent mark compared to the 18 per cent for under-18s. The gap continues to widen persistently.

The concept that age is just a number is overly simplistic. That sacred numeral to define ‘venerable’ status – yes, that’s right, older persons have over the years earned some lexicological respect to seemingly warrant their inclusion among those aspiring for sainthood! – is restless enough not to remain anchored in any one place. Old age status varies from one continent to the other. Even pegging it firmly down in one country does not necessarily mean that other countries will subscribe to that same benchmark.

Let those greying hairs, therefore, or those emerging fine lines around the eyes, or that more leisurely walking gait not be interpreted as irreversible ill omens of an impending biological collapse of one’s talents and abilities. The aged and the ageing are certainly not anywhere near that expiry date that is determined solely by consulting calendar charts.

Early last March, the European Commission released a proposal to review the current directive on driving licences (Directive 2006/126/EC). Past and current developments on European roads, such as electric cars and digitalisation, coupled with the need to improve overall road safety and reduce the number of accidents on European road infrastructure, make this overdue update necessary.

Well done, Europe: a laudable and direly needed motion indeed. The Transport Committee of the European Parliament (TRAN) was tasked with discussing and suggesting amendments to the proposed provisions and to eventually negotiate a final text with the Commission and Council. A vote on the finalised text has just been taken, on December 7, 2023.

From the outset, certain provisions in the original draft put up for discussion by the TRAN Committee were seen to be detrimental and prejudicial to older persons. AGE Platform Europe, a European network of non-profit organisations that promote the interests of these older persons and intensify their voices within the community, immediately took up the matter with the TRAN Committee. Along with the efforts of other stakeholders across Europe, AGE has consistently dredged through the proposed provisions with a view to filter them and make them more age-friendly.

The Maltese National Association of Pensioners has been a member of AGE Platform Europe practically since the agency’s inception. It also provided inputs, along with the contributions made by other member organisations of the European agency, throughout the months of active consultation and discussion with the European Parliamentary Committee’s studies on what amendments to the European Driving Licence Directive were to be tabled.

The main contentious issues in the wording of the draft text from an age perspective concerned:

- the replacement of paper driving licences with mobile ones when existing licences come up for renewal, allowing for no transitory period to facilitate careful grooming-in and diligent hand-holding for older drivers;
- the reduced validity of driving licences held by over-70 drivers to five years, making for more frequent medical check-ups and participation in refresher courses;
- the restriction on the issue or downright refusal of driving licences in cases of drivers suffering from a coined medical condition termed ‘age-linked behaviour’.

In a resounding victory for the efforts propelled by AGE Platform Europe, the TRAN Committee's December 2023 final vote is promoting a changed text for discussion and voting in the Plenary Session of the European Parliament in early 2024. It will provide for:

- both mobile and physical driving licences to co-exist for a short while after the amendments come into force. (The committee is currently suggesting that by 2030 digital licences would have become available on smartphones, and by 2033 – 10 years hence – driving licences in the form of a bank card would become compulsory, by which time the paper version will bid a nostalgic adieu from the European automobile scene.);
- the elimination of the limited validity provisions for drivers over the age of 70;
- doing away with the highly criticised ageist provision to include a medical condition called 'age-linked behaviour' under 'Mental impairments' in Annex III of the original draft.

Winning one battle does not mean that a victory in the war has been notched. The suggested amendments have to be discussed and voted on when MEPs convene in plenary session in January 2024.

The representatives of European citizens will then have to stand up to be counted. Their positive vote on this issue will not only be an honourable bowing out for them before a renewed European Parliament is elected by public suffrage next year. It would also prove that the perception that society's older persons are dead wood and can be considered as exhausted and run out is a bigoted viewpoint that has no place in ... well, yes, this grey-haired world of ours.

By Gaetan Naudi, International Secretary of the National Association of Pensioners of Malta and a member on AGE Platform Europe's Task Force on Accessibility and Age-friendly Environments.