

Older people contributing to civil society

What is happening now?

Older people make a huge contribution to civil society.

- Over half (55 %) of people in their 60s are working, volunteering and/or caring for a friend or relative.
- There are strong overlaps between people who volunteer and people who give informal help to neighbours and friends: people who do one are more likely to also do the other.
- Older people are more likely: to vote in elections; to be trustees for charities; to be local councillors; to be members of community councils and other community organisations; to be office bearers in churches and other religious bodies.
- Volunteering is particularly common amongst older people. One third of people aged between 65 and 74 volunteer at least once a month - which is more than for any other age group - and over a quarter (27 %) of people aged 75 or over still volunteer regularly.
- The majority of older people who have volunteered before and are not volunteering now 'say that they would like to take on some sort of volunteer role'.
- The caring for others that older people do takes many forms, including full-time or part-time carers for partners, grown-up children who need support and for neighbours and friends. Many people in their 50s, 60s and even 70s are also caring for their own parents or for other older relatives.
- Increasing numbers of people are regularly caring for grandchildren, either to help the children's parents while they are working or by taking on a bigger role when the family is under pressure.

Older people are active as participants in the democratic process and civil society more widely, both as voters and as candidates for office and as office bearers.

- In the 2010 UK General Election, 76 % of registered voters aged over 65 voted, whilst only 44 % of voters aged between 18 and 24

What is civil society?

'Civil society' is a phrase used to describe all the ways a community comes together and people choose to work together to support each other.

It includes people contributing their time and their skills, as well as contributing their views.

It includes

- volunteering
- caring for or looking out for other people – family, friends, neighbours or other people in someone's community
- democratic participation – for instance through voting in elections and standing for office
- being members of churches and other religious bodies
- belonging to clubs for sport and other leisure activities
- people working together in hundreds of other interest groups and associations such as trade unions, parent associations, pensioners' groups and study groups.

cast their ballot.

- 80 % of public appointments in Scotland are of people over 50.
- The average age of charitable trustees in UK is 57 and 67 % are aged over 60.

Overall, people who have had a higher education and people who are better off are more likely to volunteer and to vote, and this pattern also applies among older people. So there may be older people who would enjoy taking on more roles but need some encouragement to get involved.

The Royal Voluntary Service estimated in 2011 that volunteering by people over 65 contributes the equivalent of £10 billion in the United Kingdom as a whole. A quarter of all families are dependent on child care provided by grandparents, resulting in a contribution to the UK economy estimated at £4 billion.

Benefits for older people

People who are involved in these ways have better physical and mental wellbeing than people who are not engaged with society and other people: being involved and engaged is good for you.

Many older people stay connected with and contribute to society through clubs, associations, friends and family. Volunteering is another way of staying connected with other people.

People who volunteer and provide care for others feel they are making a contribution and are respected for this by others. It is good for people's confidence and self-esteem. It keeps people physically and mentally active.

A regular commitment gives structure to someone's week or day. Structure and routine and the company of others reduce the risk of loneliness and depression, both of which are more prevalent amongst older people, particularly when they are living alone.

People learn new skills, which brings satisfaction and is another factor in keeping people well.

Benefits for wider society

Communities benefit when older people are seen having a positive, valued role.

Many younger people benefit from the support they get from older people working as volunteers or carers.

Projects and organisations benefit from the experience and ideas that older volunteers bring. This includes the different perspectives of people who have chosen to be involved because they want to make a contribution.

“Many older people are ready to take on positions of responsibility within voluntary groups and charities. They bring their lifetime of skills and experience to these roles.”

Older People's Forums, or Over Fifties' Forums or User Panels, bring together older people to contribute their views and experience of care services and other issues that affect people living in their area. Some have arrangements to make sure that people who live in sheltered housing or are homes and people who cannot get out of their home easily are included. People say they value the friendships and support from each other as well as the opportunity to make a difference for all older people in their area.

JLSH Tenants Association (Jedworth Court & The Loaning Sheltered Housing, Bearsden) gives everyone living in the complex an opportunity to become involved in planning for activities (which are all organised by tenants themselves). The Association gathers and represents tenant views on improvements to the complex and services. It has also accessed funding for social activities and equipment for common areas. With that funding, it has been able to buy a Nintendo Wii, laptops and a film projector and to organise social functions including big screen movies, physical activities, quizzes and computer classes.

Grey Matters in Helensburgh now has 100 members. Councillors come and present local plans to them. Other organisations consult with them and they are seen as an important group. One member said: “We are able to have our say - and people listen to us. We make the decisions about what we need and we are heard. With Grey Matters it belongs to us.”

Disabled People's Housing Service in Fife has a programme called Housing Mentors (55+). The volunteer mentors aged over 55 are available to other older people to talk over their future housing needs. Individual mentors are often people who have chosen unexpected solutions for themselves. By sharing their own housing stories with others, they can inspire innovative thinking in older people who might otherwise have accepted second best. Another key contribution of the mentors is in sharing their stories of life change as a result of suitable housing – for instance, they are now involved in fund raising or organising community events and social occasions.

Men's sheds usually bring together men who have retired and want to be part of a place which gives people company with other blokes and something useful to do, such as making items for local people. Many sheds also welcome younger men who want to learn about woodwork or other practical skills. The people who are involved are making a contribution in many ways: running the group, passing on their skills, supporting each other and doing practical activities to benefit their community.

“After just six months our men’s shed group in Helensburgh has over 30 men and is applying for charitable status and looking for premises. It has been hard work but I am so looking forward to doing engineering stuff again with a group of other guys.”

“The lady who gets our men’s shed organised is secretary to lots of community groups in this part of Lanarkshire, even though she has a long-term disability herself.”

“We started a group to support women in similar situations over 20 years ago. Today we’re still meeting at the same community centre and the person who got things going is still the main organiser.”

“Our group have started organising local residents to do something about the location of bus stops and pedestrian crossings. The situation is not good for older people who needed a bit longer to cross the road safely. But it is also putting the lives of other people at risk, especially children and mums with prams. Several members have been doing this sort of thing for many years and we know where to start.”

Risks and points to watch

Some organisations take little account of older people’s circumstances and other commitments when they volunteer or take on less formal support roles. Not everyone can drive, or get a lift, and public transport is not always very convenient or accessible.

For some older people weekends are a busy time with family outings or attendance at church. For others, weekends could be a lonely time when they would like to get out and work with others on something constructive.

Evening meetings and activities may suit people who are working. But transport and personal safety after dark may be issues for some older people who don’t drive or don’t feel confident to drive at night.

Older people who take on roles such as volunteering and being a carer can feel that this is expected of them because they do not have paid work commitments. The risk is that people feel taken for granted and get less support than people of working age who are taking on these roles.

Some volunteering opportunities for older people are based around other people’s perceptions and expectations of what older people can contribute, rather than starting from the wants and skills of older individuals themselves.

Some volunteering opportunities aimed at people who are retired are based around people contributing professional skills. The implication is that people who were in other roles and situations have less to contribute and that their experience is not valued.

The laws which protect older people against discrimination in employment do not extend to volunteering. Some organisations which work with older volunteers have policies and procedures which discriminate against older people, even if this was not intended.

Older people having less access to training - assuming older volunteers and other active members of groups are not interested, or that they will be there for a shorter time and so it is not worth the investment.

Organisations may have attitudes and policies that make a clear separation between people who receive services and people who provide them, even though this may not reflect the circumstances of those who are now involved.

Older people sharing or accepting attitudes that limit their contribution. Such attitudes could include the perception that older people don’t really want to mix with younger people, or are only interested in issues specifically affecting older people.

Many organisations or participation processes fail to consider ways to involve people who are more frail or who have limited mobility - including difficulty getting out of the house – but still want to contribute.

There is a risk of organisation which have volunteers not taking account of older people generally having lower incomes than people of working age. Good practice is offering volunteers expenses such as travel - including taxis for people who can’t get there by public transport and don’t have a car - and lunches.

“There was a consultation event about plans for the shopping centre. But no-one thought to hand in the leaflets around the sheltered housing or to the older people’s club. It felt as if our views didn’t matter.”

“When you have worked as a bookkeeper, everyone wants you to come and do their books for them. But that was just what I didn’t want – I wanted something different from what I had been doing all of my working life!”

“I never thought of myself as the sort of person who would be a volunteer and who did things. But a few years ago I hadn’t been well and I started coming to the walking group. Then the co-ordinator asked me and some other walkers to help her organise a Big Walk to promote walking. Then she encouraged us to get our First Aid training and go on more courses. Now I’m a trained Walk Leader with certificates and everything. I go to the volunteers’ meetings and I am one of those people. It’s great to be giving something back and It’s good to be recognised in this way.”

“All my life I’ve been working for social justice. I want to continue contribute on issues such as fuel poverty and employment rights that affect everyone rather than on things about older people. I was asked about my views on the support service I get and I asked whether the support workers were on zero hours contracts and what were the Council going to do about care workers getting a living wage? But that wasn’t what they wanted the feedback from an older person to be about.”

“The school never told me that the session I was going to do had been cancelled because of a school outing. I felt that they didn’t really value my time, that because I was retired I had nothing else to do with myself all day. I was quite upset and thought that they would never do that to a paid staff.”

“When we began it was volunteers in our 60s giving support to people in their 80s. Now we’re in our 80s, with most of us needing a bit of support and some of us needing a lot. There is more peer support now – or rather, it was always there and we are recognising and celebrating it now. We’ve changed but the way the Council sees us still hasn’t changed.”

Ways activities led by older people can contribute

Older people designing publicity aimed at people who are less experienced and less confident about becoming a volunteer.

Buddy support for new volunteers can encourage more people to take on new roles.

People who have become involved recently helping to design and present training for other volunteers, so this works well for people who are new to this sort of role and activity.

People getting together to think about the equalities aspects of volunteering, such as ways to encourage people from ethnic minority communities and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people to get involved and make them feel welcome.

Sharing out roles and tasks to enable more people to make a contribution, such as have several people to chair meetings.

Points for discussion

What needs to change to help older people contribute in their own ways to civil society?

What needs to change to help older people benefit from civil society, both through their active participation and also as recipients of support (often including both roles at the same time!)?

Are older people around you carrying too much of the responsibility for creating and running civil society, and even for filling in gaps that have appeared following cuts in public services?

Are grandparents and other carers carrying too much responsibility for child care and hence being prevented from contributing to society in the way they would like to?

Will the raising of the pension age make it more difficult for many organisations in which older people are active and how should they respond?

Are the opportunities for co-production in developing and providing services opening up ways for more older people to make a contribution if they want to do this?



Sources for more information, advice and ideas

The Institute for Volunteering Research has published a 'Good Practice guide on Involving older volunteers' <http://www.ivr.org.uk/component/ivr/involving-older-volunteers-a-good-practice-guide>

The Royal Voluntary Service has useful reports on the benefits of volunteering. 'Gold Age Pensioners: valuing the socio-economic contributions of older people' <http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/our-impact/reports-and-reviews/2011>

'**The impact of volunteering on well-being in later life**' uses information from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. The report looks at the impact of volunteering on depression symptoms, quality of life, life satisfaction and social isolation. <http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/our-impact/reports-and-reviews/2012>

ResPublica published a report in 2011 which makes recommendations on how, as our society ages, the already large contribution of older people as volunteers could be further increased. 'Age of Opportunity: older people, volunteering and the Big Society' <http://www.respublica.org.uk/publications>

Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme 'Retire into Action' aims to offer the opportunity to everyone over 50 to volunteer': www.csv-rsvp.org.uk

About Wisdom in Practice

Wisdom in Practice is a project which supports and promotes the development of services and other activities led by older people. It is funded by the Scottish Government through the Equalities Programme and is run by Outside the Box.

There is a range of resources for groups, including publications, 'how to guides', events and development support for individual groups and projects.

This is one of a series of discussion papers on topics which older people have said are important to them.

There is more information at www.wisdominpractice.org.uk

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