

Participating in the Community and Activities



**Help the Aged
Policy Statement 2008**

Summary

Help the Aged believes that older age and retirement should represent a time of enjoyment and fulfilment when people are able to participate fully in the community, learn new skills, or take up a hobby. However, older people continue to come up against barriers that prevent their participation. As a result, what should be an enjoyable stage of life can become a time of loss, loneliness and isolation.

Background

Older people make a considerable voluntary contribution to society, often bringing valued life experiences to bear. Age Concern estimates that people aged 50+ in the UK make an unpaid contribution of £15.2 billion per year as carers, £3.9 billion in childcare as grandparents and £5 billion as volunteers. Despite this, older people are often restricted in how they contribute to public life. For example, many people find it difficult to undertake voluntary work for charities because of arbitrary upper age limits.

The benefits gained from volunteering are enormous for an organisation, society as a whole, and for the volunteer. As the Institute of Volunteering Research (IVR) states, for the older person voluntary work can help maintain a sense of purpose and self-esteem; lessen the social isolation felt by those cut off from social networks, the workplace and family; have beneficial effects on mental and physical health; and may help gain paid employment. Older volunteers can also provide additional benefits to the organisation they work within. Older people have gained maturity and experience both from inside and outside the workplace, and have therefore built up a skills bank over time. Fifty per cent of those aged 65–74 and 38 per cent of those aged 75+ have taken part in some form of volunteering in the last 12 months.¹ As the population ages, there will be an even larger potential pool of volunteers.

Older age should represent a time when people can engage in learning and participate in new activities, but much more needs to be done to ensure that disadvantaged older people are able to do this. It is vital that funding remains for outreach projects and educative courses that enable disadvantaged older people to learn new skills, meet people and enjoy their communities. Yet in 2006 only 38 per cent of

over-75s participated in the arts and only 25 per cent of over-75s had been to a museum or gallery.² Many older people experience loneliness and isolation, and nearly half of all older people (about 4.6 million) consider the television to be their main form of company.³

Issues and evidence

Benefits of participation

• reducing loneliness

Many older people in the UK experience loneliness – sometimes as a result of losing a partner, which has a profound effect on well-being. Others become lonely because they are unable to engage in the hobbies which used to keep them occupied; this is particularly the case for people who used to participate in active pastimes that required a high level of mobility and/or fitness. We estimate that about 170,000 people over the age of 65 are bereaved per year. Some 23 per cent of older people reported some level of depression⁴ and 18 per cent of older people reported being socially isolated.⁵

It is perhaps uncontroversial that reducing loneliness by increasing opportunities to participate is a good thing; however, services which achieve this are rarely prioritised, despite evidence to suggest that investing in this area would be money well spent. The House of Lords Scientific Committee found that *‘inactivity and isolation accelerate physical and psychological declines, creating a negative spiral towards premature, preventable ill health and dependency’*. Enabling people to keep active through participating in the community can help them to stay healthy and happy, thus reducing costs to the NHS.

• reducing or alleviating the symptoms of illness

Thirty-eight per cent of people in Great Britain aged 65–74 and 50 per cent of those aged 75+ have a life-limiting long-standing illness.⁶ Nearly

1 Home Office Citizenship Survey 2005 Report.

2 National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport 2007.

3 NOP/GfK 2006.

4 Research into Ageing factsheets updated from Dementia UK, LSE, King's College and Alzheimer's Society 2007.

5 NOP/GfK, 2006.

6 General Household Survey 2006, table 7.2(b), Office for National Statistics, January 2008.

700,000 people were estimated to be suffering from dementia in the UK in 2007, and by 2025 the number is expected to have risen to 1 million.⁷

Dulwich Picture Gallery funded one of its resident artists to spend time in the intermediate care unit at the local hospital. The artist helped older patients to produce silk paintings in small squares – this method was chosen as even those with arthritis in their hands were able to use the big brushes used in silk painting. The small squares were later combined to make a beautiful large picture which now hangs in the ward. Several participants commented that the physical symptoms of illness had reduced (*'You just forget the pain'*).

A range of studies have indicated that participation in the community can have significant health benefits, in some cases reversing the symptoms of long-term conditions. In 2004, the Arts Council published a medical literature review, *Arts in Health*, which showed how involvement in a variety of art projects had proven beneficial in improving patient care, including cancer and mental health care and pain management. A large number of patients involved in the clinical studies were from the older population. Among the reported benefits were reducing recovery times after surgery, better management of pain, decreasing levels of depression and, crucially, contributing to reduced lengths of stay in hospital.

• quality of life

As we age the things which make up our daily life change and as a result we derive our quality of life from different things. For instance, if success at work has been central to an individual's feeling of well-being, when they retire they will need to adapt and derive satisfaction from something else. Participating in the community or taking up a new hobby can help fill the void left when paid employment ends or a partner dies. However, 12 per cent of older people (over 1.1 million) feel trapped in their own home. Seven per cent of older people (nearly 700,000) do not go out more than once a week. Three per cent of older people *never* go out.⁸ Thirty per cent of those aged over 65 do not report their quality of life as 'good'.⁹

⁷ Carers UK factsheet, website 2006.

⁸ *Spotlight 2007* and Help Unite Generations surveys (NOP/GfK, 2006 and 2007).

⁹ *Spotlight 2007* and Help Unite Generations surveys (NOP/GfK, 2006 and 2007).

Quality of life is also vitally important for those living in care homes, as shown in the recent Help the Aged report and literature review *My Home Life*. The research highlighted the profound impact on happiness and reduction in dependency of residents which could be achieved when staff took very simple steps, such as providing portable music players or tuning a radio to a resident's favourite channel. Given that 50 per cent of residents' time in care homes is spent asleep, socially withdrawn or inactive, and only 3 per cent spent on constructive activity, there is real potential for improvement in this area.



Barriers to participation

Much evidence suggests that older people encounter barriers to participation in the community. Research has shown that many older people are reluctant to participate as they feel they are too old to start something new. They may also be unwilling to get involved in projects as they are concerned about how people will perceive them as a result of their age, and worry that they may feel uncomfortable and out of place. Other significant obstacles include their health status and the lack of transport. Older people are also disinclined to join groups on their own, and feel more comfortable going with a partner or friend.¹⁰

Older people often have limited access to community, leisure or educational opportunities, because they find them unaffordable. Some 2.2 million people (over one in five pensioners in

¹⁰ *Taking Part: a national survey of culture, leisure and sport*, DCMS 2007.

Great Britain) live below the poverty line.¹¹ For single pensioners mainly reliant on state pension, average disposable weekly income is £150.¹² In 2005, the Citizenship Survey noted that ‘people with higher incomes are more likely to be involved with civic activism activities’. Older people are often heavily dependent on public transport, yet transport plans frequently fail to take their need for safe, accessible and reliable transport into account. The National Travel Survey 2007 notes that 45 per cent of people over 70 have problems walking and using buses due to mobility difficulties. Help the Aged believes that local authorities should offer flexible alternatives to the free local bus pass for those older people who cannot use public transport.

Fear of crime is another factor preventing older people from participating in activities and enjoying their communities. The 2001 British Crime Survey found that while 22 per cent of women aged 65–74 are very worried about being mugged, only 1 per cent experience this crime at first hand. The impact on contributions to communities is significant. Forty-seven per cent of those over 75 years of age and 37 per cent of people over 50 no longer take part in social and community activities after dark because of fear of street crime.¹³

Social isolation

A variety of other factors can leave people isolated from or without a sense of belonging to their local community. Income is vital to preventing isolation; for example, it can mitigate mobility/health difficulties as those with higher incomes can, for instance, afford to pay for taxis or equipment to make their home accessible. But income is also vital because, even if you can physically get out and about, many of the activities people want to do cost money. Not being able to afford to attend a local evening class or go out for an inexpensive meal can mean people are cut off from social contact. The financial situation of widows merits particular attention: often the death of a husband can mean loss of pension rights.

11 *Opportunity for All 2007*, DWP, October 2007 and *Households Below Average Income*, chapters 6 and 7, DWP 2007 (figures quoted before housing costs).

12 *Family Spending 2007*, table A40, Office for National Statistics 2008.

13 *The Fear Factor: older people and fear of street crime*, Age Concern 2002.

Losing friends and especially a lifelong partner can be devastating emotionally. We can be left without the people who had previously offered us support, reassurance and identity. Practically, bereavement can also be debilitating in many ways. For instance, if a partner who was always the car-driver dies, the bereaved partner may have to struggle with public transport for the first time in their life. Similarly, one may have dealt with the finances or was always the one to arrange social events but the remaining partner may lack the confidence to deal with these. Thirty-seven per cent of older people live alone¹⁴ and, for many, becoming accustomed to this can be a difficult process. Well-timed support can make a real difference.

Many older people with serious health conditions struggle to get out at all and can become housebound for all or most of the time. Being housebound and living alone can often lead to severe loneliness, especially for people who do not have family or friends who are able to visit them. Older people can also become isolated and lonely within care home settings if proper attention is not given to their needs.

Lifetime neighbourhoods

In order to enable older people to involve themselves fully in their community, it is vital to ensure that their neighbourhoods do not create barriers to participation in volunteering, learning or social activities. The Government has committed itself to working towards creating ‘lifetime neighbourhoods’. Help the Aged has produced a manifesto, *Towards Common Ground*, which argues that in order to become a ‘lifetime neighbourhood’ communities must meet the following ten conditions:

1. **Access to basic services** – while everyone needs access to money, healthcare and some shops, neighbourhoods and communities that do not provide these can leave older people isolated.
2. **Safe, secure and clean streets** – this matters to all age groups but older people are particularly likely to fear crime. Good lighting, well-kept, clean streets and a police presence should all be prioritised, to help people feel more confident about getting out and about.

14 The General Household Survey 2005, ONS.

3. **Realistic transport options for all** – while older people are given free bus passes, many are still unable to get around because physical impairment prevents them from using buses, or because there are simply no routes. Transport options should be available for all.
4. **Public seating** – should be made available in many more places: having somewhere to rest means that older people can remain mobile for longer in their communities and that they can enjoy public spaces.
5. **Information and advice** – if no one knows about them, services might just as well not exist. Good advice and information on everything ranging from social care to local volunteering opportunities are essential for older people's well-being.
6. **Lifetime homes** – new homes should be built to Lifetime Homes standards and people in existing homes should have access to necessary repairs and adaptations to make their homes last for a lifetime.
7. **Older people's voices heard** – older people must be involved in local decisions that affect them, and their voices must be heard.
8. **Places to meet and spend time** – whether it be a public park, a shared community centre or a village hall, spaces for people to meet are vitally important to all of us and all ages.
9. **Pavements in good repair** – all pavements should be repaired if reported to be dangerous, so that older people are less likely to fall or to have a fear of falling in their local neighbourhood.
10. **Public toilets** – clean, safe, accessible public toilets should be available at public places in every local area, to help prevent older people becoming isolated and excluded.

Tackling the barriers to volunteering

Age discrimination is endemic in our society. Despite the numerous benefits, on both sides, older people often find that they are unable to volunteer because of their age. Of the 61 per cent of organisations that responded to an Institute of Volunteering Research (IVR) questionnaire, 60 per cent claimed to have a fixed retirement age.¹⁵

¹⁵ National Survey of Volunteering, 1997.

Many organisations cite insurance as the barrier to recruiting older people. Others felt that having a blanket policy avoids the need to assess volunteers on an individual basis. Some felt that older people would be less able to undertake the work on health grounds.

The fact that there were discrepancies within organisations which had this cut-off point suggests that these organisations could be more flexible and could abolish the age limits. Similarly, the fact that some organisations are able to find insurance for older people suggests that cover is available.



Jean, an active and lively woman of 86 from Marlow in Buckinghamshire, is unable to work as a volunteer in her local charity shop because she cannot be insured against accidents. Although she offered to write a disclaimer or pay her own insurance cover she was still turned down for the post.¹⁶

Although anecdotal evidence suggests that older people face similar age limits when volunteering, current regulations against age discrimination in employment do not cover volunteering.

¹⁶ *Everyday Age Discrimination*, Help the Aged 2005.

'Most charities rely on people of retirement age and over. All are active and have more time to devote to fundraising events. I considered this more ageism and a complete insult to such dedicated people – that their lives and services to charity are of so little value.' (For several years the woman quoted has fundraised for a charity that is now putting an age limit of 75 on its volunteers because it says older people cannot be covered by its insurance.¹⁷)

While the insurance industry argues that insurance should not be a factor in relation to older volunteers, it continues to be the case that insurance is, at the very least, being used by the voluntary sector as an excuse not to recruit older volunteers.

Indirect age discrimination also abounds, creating significant barriers to increased participation by older volunteers. When government and the voluntary sector use language and imagery which sells volunteering as a youth activity, and when so much emphasis and funding for volunteering is targeted at younger people, older people are likely to be put off. Similarly, the advertising of volunteering opportunities exclusively via the internet is indirectly discriminatory, since only 29 per cent of people aged 65 and over have ever used the internet.¹⁸

Access to education

'When I was younger I took part in plenty of courses but there is nothing available now you are retired.'

The Government has placed significant emphasis on education as part of its agenda, and lifelong learning has, at least in terms of rhetoric, been part of this focus. The DfES Five-year Strategy for Children and Learners (2004) noted that *'lifelong learning is at the heart of our agenda. By this we mean learning across the whole of life – not just post-19 or post-16 learning, but the development of learning communities from the cradle to the grave'*.

However, over recent years courses popular with older people have suffered from significant funding cuts. Adult and Continuing Education has been funded by £200m from the LSC budget through local authorities and £100m from within LSC's

¹⁷ *Everyday Age Discrimination*, Help the Aged 2005.

¹⁸ *Internet Access 2007: households and individuals*, ONS August 2007.

Further Education budget. However, Adult and Continuing Education is at risk because it is the least closely linked to employment. The Association of Colleges has argued that the focus on 16–19-year-olds will risk increasing costs of courses for older people and result in cuts to courses currently provided. Access to education is a vital factor in encouraging participation in voluntary work, as highlighted by David Blunkett in a preface to *The Learning Age* (1998) where he noted the societal value of learning: *'Learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship'*. Currently only 7 per cent of those aged 65–74 are participating in learning in the UK; this falls to 3 per cent among over-75s.¹⁹

Integrating services

The SEU report *A Sure Start to Later Life* made the very strong case for investment in a single access point for services, particularly for excluded older people. Access to volunteering, social activities and lifelong learning were mentioned as some of the key services which should be accessible via these hubs, both to help older people find opportunities to participate, and to harness volunteer-led services to meet needs. This was a very welcome development as it demonstrated clearly the link between participation and the broader older people's agenda.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable trends of recent years has been the retreat of basic services from local communities. The Government has just announced yet another round of post office closures, which will inevitably have a huge impact on older people. At the same time bank branches, local shops and leisure facilities have also been closing. Many services have relocated to out-of-town centres which are accessible only by car, or have moved online. But since only 31 per cent of older people living on their own have access to a car²⁰ and just 29 per cent of people aged 65 and over have ever used the internet,²¹ older people are being left stranded. Even healthcare services are now being merged and relocated away from their original neighbourhood.

¹⁹ *The Road to Nowhere?*, table 7 (current participation), NIACE 2007.

²⁰ The General Household Survey 2005, ONS.

²¹ *Internet Access 2007: households and individuals*, ONS August 2007.

Aside from basic services many older people lack opportunities to pursue hobbies and activities. However, even where these opportunities exist they are facing cuts; lunch clubs and many community centres are closing down.

Older people also greatly value the opportunity to mix with people across generations, and more thought needs to be given to how intergenerational links can be fostered within communities. It is vital to recognise the value of social clubs and community hubs, and support the foundation of these initiatives, as well as to extend them into other settings such as residential care homes.



Recommendations

- Help the Aged believes that older age should represent a time when people can learn about and participate in new activities. We want to see much more done to ensure that disadvantaged older people, in particular, are included in outreach projects in art and other social activities.
- Departments across government and both the public and the voluntary sector should meet the challenges issued by the Commission on the

Future of Volunteering in its manifesto, which sets out undertakings to enable greater access and get more people involved in volunteering; the same agencies need to influence behaviour to tackle the various barriers to volunteering. Government should tackle the specific barriers older people experience in relation to volunteering, using the recommendations from the Commission on the Future of Volunteering as a clear steer in developing a strategy.

- Upper age limits for volunteers should be removed, and organisations should shop around for insurance companies which are prepared to provide cover for older volunteers at reasonable rates. More transparent advice on insurance cover for organisations is also needed, as many do not realise that employer's liability and/or public liability policies can often adequately cover a volunteer's role.
- A decent income on which to live is vital to preventing isolation and loneliness in older age: the basic state pension ought to be at a level which allows comfort and security in retirement.
- Local authorities should work with communities to support the provision of activities for older people, whether these are educational, social or health-related. Such opportunities, which are greatly valued by older people, help prevent isolation, loneliness and health decline. Care homes should also aim to provide residents with opportunities that support their quality of life.
- Local authorities should work with older people to ensure that an age audit of the local area and services is carried out, to ensure they are age-friendly and there are no barriers to older people getting out in and enjoying their neighbourhoods.
- Government and local authorities should invest in befriending schemes to reach the most isolated and housebound older people in our communities.
- Age discrimination in the provision of, and access to, goods, facilities and services is widespread and its impact on older people is profound, resulting in second-class citizenship. Help the Aged believes age discrimination must be banned and a positive duty placed on public authorities to promote age equality.

- Local authorities should take up the LinkAge Plus pilots as a means of providing a joined-up approach to services and an accessible community information centre for older people.

Economic justification

People of 50+ already make an unpaid contribution of £24 billion to the economy, but if obstacles preventing older people from participating in their community were removed there would be potential for an even greater contribution. Add to this the clear evidence of the benefits of participation in terms of relieving illness and loneliness, and the perceived savings in public spending are substantial.

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WE WILL fight to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from
POVERTY, ISOLATION and NEGLECT

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