Engagement & volunteering Briefing

This briefing explores older peoples’ involvement in volunteering and politics.

Nearly 4.9 million people aged 65 and over in England (58%) take part in volunteering or civic engagement. In our own Age UK survey we found that 41% of people over retirement age in the UK volunteer on a regular basis (this could be formally or informally). Similarly, Government surveys in England have found that that 39% of people aged 65-74 and 24% of those 75+ said they were involved in formal volunteering at least once per year.

Volunteering benefits both health and quality of life. Older volunteers report that their volunteering:

- gives them a role in life and a sense of being needed and respected,
- decreases mortality and improves self-rated health,
- increases mental health and decreases depression,
- reduces stress and increases life satisfaction,
- provides social support and interaction,
- healthy behaviours and the ability to cope with one’s own illness,
- provides a positive transition from work to retirement.

Below is a summary of the relative benefits from a survey of people 55-plus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of volunteering</th>
<th>Aged 55-64 (%)</th>
<th>Aged 65+ (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I meet people and make friends</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gets me out of myself</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes me feel needed</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives me more confidence</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives me the chance to learn new skills</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes me feel less stressed</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It improves my physical health</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, housebound older people receive value from visits by older volunteers.

In addition to volunteering, another form of civic participation in which older people frequently engage is voting. In the 2005 general election, voting was more common with increasing age: 75% of those 65-plus voted, as opposed to 37% of those 18-24. However, only 30% of people 65-74 and 29% of people 75+ feel they can affect decisions in their local area. Additionally, over half of adults surveyed in Great Britain (53%) feel that politicians treat older people as second-class citizens. 68% of people aged 65+ agree that politicians tend to see older people as a low priority, and 67% of adults say that politicians do not take older people seriously.

Despite a decline in perceived influence with age, 90% of people aged 65+ feel they belong strongly to their neighbourhood, compared to 77% of all adults in England. The recently retired are also the most active in civic events. 40% of 50-64 took part in at least one civic activity in the last year, compared to 33% of 65-74 and 27% of 75+, and an all-age average of 31%. The same pattern is shown in the categories Participation in Civic Activism and Civic Consultation. For example, 21% of people over retirement age participate in local community activity such as forums, regeneration projects or local government panels, on a regular basis.
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13. The effects of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people. Lum T, Lightfoot E., Research on Ageing, 2005
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18. Voices: Research on older volunteers. Gale, K., Age Concern Research Services, August 2006
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31. One Voice: Shaping our ageing society, Age Concern and Help the Aged, 2009
32. Ageism survey, ICM Research for Help the Aged, April 2008
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