Older People as Volunteers
Evidence Review
This evidence review is part of a series produced by Age UK, in order to provide evidence to underpin decision-making for people involved in commissioning, service development, fundraising and influencing.
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Benefits of involving older volunteers
Volunteering in later life brings many benefits, some of which are generally associated with volunteering, but some of which are specific to older volunteers. The main elements of these are as follows.

For older volunteers themselves
The benefits of volunteering for older volunteers themselves are:

• improved mental and physical health prospects
• improved life satisfaction
• a feeling of usefulness and of having a role to play in society
• opportunities for social interaction.

For recipients of services delivered by volunteers
From the available evidence, it is difficult to separate out benefits specifically provided by older volunteers, but some studies suggest that older volunteers:

• have more maturity and experience, which allows them to understand others’ problems
• are able to empathise and engage with older service recipients better than younger volunteers
• engage with children and young people in a different way.

In addition, recipients were found to have been treated with dignity and respect and, as a result of the support (which would not otherwise have been available except via paid-for services), to have experienced reduced isolation and greater confidence and independence.

For organisations
For organisations, the specific benefits of involving older volunteers are that they:

• are generally well motivated and skilled
• are able and willing to share considerable time
• are able to talk to a range of service recipients – young and old – and to pass on the benefits of their life experience
• are willing to give long-term commitment to their roles
• often have good social links, which are useful for recruiting more volunteers.

Barriers to volunteering in later life
Barriers to starting to volunteer in later life include:

• lack of information about options
• ageist assumptions on the part of organisations’ policies
• a lack of confidence on the part of potential volunteers
• conflicting family commitments
• above all, health-related limitations.

There is also limited evidence of some cultural and social variations acting as inhibiting factors to volunteering in later life.
Recruitment and retention of older volunteers

Recruitment of older volunteers is most often through word of mouth. However, it can be aided by targeted messages in appropriate media, for instance, community-based groups advertising in local newspapers. Recruitment of black and minority ethnic (BME) elders may benefit from a targeted approach.

For effective recruitment and retention, evidence suggests that organisations should stress the personal, as well as the altruistic, benefits of volunteering. Successful retention also depends on how older volunteers are managed: explicit recognition of contributions of time and skills is key to retaining their services, particularly if there is a danger of overlap with paid employees or a risk of them feeling that they are being taken for granted.
1 Introduction

Aim of this review

We live in an ageing society. Projected demographic changes show that by 2035, while the percentage of the population aged under 16 and aged between 16 and 64 will drop, the percentage of those aged 65 and over will increase. The number of people aged 85 and over is projected to be 2.5 times larger in 2035 than in 2010.1

While the impact of these changes will be felt more generally in public policy terms, they will also have a significant impact for volunteering policy and how we involve older volunteers more effectively.

Volunteers have traditionally been seen as service-deliverers; their role is to deliver, or to support the delivery, of a service to a group of clients. However, in the last decade it has been increasingly recognised that volunteering benefits not just the client, but also the organisation, the wider community, the volunteers themselves, as well as their friends and family.

As the cohort of older people grows, then so does the potential group of older volunteers. If we, as a nation, want to make the most of this group’s skills and experience utilise, then we need to improve our understanding of their involvement as volunteers.

This evidence review brings together the research that looks at what older volunteers want from their involvement as well as the evidence that shows the many and varied benefits that the involvement of older volunteers brings.

In particular, this review highlights the mental and physical health benefits that older volunteers gain from their volunteering, demonstrating not only that volunteers are the facilitators of a service but that the very act of volunteering is also in itself a service to the volunteers. Therefore, any programme designed to benefit older people will have a double impact, if it is delivered by older volunteers.

Definitions

For this review, we use the Volunteering England definition of volunteering as an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives.2

A distinction is usually made between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ volunteering. While boundaries can be unclear in people’s lived experiences, this review takes the conventional stance that formal volunteering is usually associated with activities undertaken through an organisation or group. This is distinguished from informal one-to-one acts of ‘good neighbourliness’.3

While we acknowledge that older people make huge contributions to society through informal volunteering, most of the published research is on formal volunteering, so that will be our focus – and is implied below unless otherwise noted.
**Background**

Nearly 4.9 million people aged 65 and over in England (58 per cent of that age group) take part in volunteering or civic engagement. Of these, 39 per cent of people aged 65–74 and 24 per cent of people aged 75+ in England are participating in formal volunteering at least once a year; the average for all adults is 37 per cent.

It is difficult to gauge the appetite for volunteering in later life from surveys, as the answers vary considerably depending on how the questions are asked. A recent Department for Work and Pensions poll, *Aspirations for Later Life*, found that, of the 43 per cent of adults in Britain who said they had goals for later life, 39 per cent mentioned ‘spending some time volunteering, doing voluntary work’ as one of their goals. This would be about 13 per cent of the total adult population – making volunteering the second most popular answer after ‘leisure activities and hobbies’ and slightly higher than doing paid work, attending social clubs and community activities, and learning and acquiring new skills.

However, current levels of participation among the general population, and among older people in particular, are relatively low compared to some other countries. At the same time, many older people suffer loneliness and isolation; more than half a million people living in the community – 6 per cent of people aged over 65 – leave their home only once a week or less.

Increasing the opportunities to take part in volunteering locally, in particular for people who have poor health or who are relatively isolated, could boost independence and help to tackle loneliness. There is evidence that well-targeted local activities, such as volunteering, can also help to improve health and to prevent admissions into hospitals and care homes (see Section 3).

Some social commentators have begun to look at ways to facilitate volunteering among older generations, and have considered whether it might be necessary to reconsider State Pension entitlements, moving toward a model based on the social contribution made by the individual during their working life and rewarding them accordingly, rather than just relying on payment into what is essentially an insurance scheme. Others think that the best way to incentivise older volunteers is by acknowledging their unique status and skills sets, and recognising the value of their contributions.

A September 2011 report by the think-tank ResPublica, *The Age of Opportunity*, aims to assess the role already being played by older volunteers in society and to provide a summary of different types of volunteering activity involving older people, not only in the UK but also in Japan and the USA. Although it does not go into the detailed analysis of benefits, barriers and opportunities outlined below, it makes the point clearly that older people in the UK are already the bedrock of volunteering and the Big Society.
Volunteering benefits not just the client, but also the organisation, the wider community, the volunteers themselves, as well as their friends and family.
2 Policy context

Later life is a time when many people wish to volunteer and to make an active contribution to civic and community life. Indeed, many community groups are almost totally dependent on older people’s contributions. From a public policy perspective, more older people participating in formal volunteering is to be encouraged, particularly taking into account projected demographic changes and the current rise in unemployment among older workers.

Furthermore, volunteering is often regarded as a key measure of social capital and thus an indicator of a healthy civil society. Because volunteering also has significant benefits for older people (see Section 3), giving more older people and those approaching retirement better opportunities to offer their time to local voluntary schemes would be an effective way of supporting civil society.

The ministerial statement of 17 October 2011 by Care Services Minister Paul Burstow, summarising the new strategic vision for volunteering, sets out the Government’s view of volunteering and recognises: ‘that volunteers already make a tremendous contribution towards the health and care services and support within their communities, improving the quality and choice of services available in our country’.

Policy background

In 2001, the previous Labour administration put forward a plan to use the skills of the over-50s, by encouraging them to volunteer for community-led projects. A total of £19 million of government funding was pledged for a new volunteer ‘Experience Corps’. In an echo of similar concerns being expressed more recently, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that volunteers would not replace statutory sector provision, but would rather work alongside it.

Two years later, however, the project was pulled, after it was deemed to have failed to deliver on its objectives. When it was created, the Experience Corps was set a target of recruiting 250,000 volunteers in the over-50s age group by March 2004. But when funding was pulled, it had only managed to attract 130,000 volunteers – and just 75,000 of those had actually been placed in volunteering work. As a result, the Home Office concluded that the Experience Corps had little chance of meeting its target. The Experience Corps also attracted criticism from established organisations in the voluntary sector and from volunteers in the field for focusing too much on headline-grabbing marketing, which alienated its target audience, rather than appealing to it. The Home Office said that, as a result of the Experience Corps project, it had learnt ‘a number of lessons about attracting older volunteers’.

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Despite this setback, Labour was still keen to promote volunteering. Gordon Brown announced 2005 as the ‘Year of the Volunteer’ in his 2004 budget speech. The soon-to-be Labour leader seemed to take a personal interest in the role of volunteers; he talked about celebrating the achievements of volunteers across the country and appeared to be relishing the chance to tell everyone about the volunteering opportunities available. He stressed the need to encourage more people, more employers and more organisations to ‘get involved in engaging a new generation in serving their communities’.

A report into volunteering, published in 2007, suggested that never before had the UK government directed such attention to volunteering or invested so heavily in initiatives to promote it, and it suggested that public interest in volunteering was growing. At that time, participation and volunteering were included as key targets set by the Government in a set of National Indicators (NIs), which measure performance against national priority outcomes. The Local Government White Paper Strong and Prosperous Communities introduced a set of 198 NIs, which were included in the local government performance framework, and covered all the national priority outcomes that local authorities were responsible for delivering. Two NIs in particular were concerned with participation and volunteering: NI 3, ‘civic participation in the local area’; and NI 6, ‘participation in regular volunteering’.

By the time of the last election in 2010, Labour’s manifesto recognised the importance of the voluntary and community sector, in particular its independence and campaigning role. If elected, Labour pledged to give greater support to third sector organisations in competing for public sector contracts; and to establish a National Youth Community Service, with the goal that all young people would contribute at least 50 hours to their communities by the age of 19.

By contrast, for the Conservatives it was all about the Big Society: encouraging social responsibility, not state control. They proposed creating 5,000 independent community organisers, with training funded by the Cabinet Office. Every adult citizen would be encouraged to be a member of an active neighbourhood group, which would address local issues: for example, start new schools, take over parks and libraries that were under threat, look at planning, and hold the police to account. There would be a National Citizen Service for 16-year-olds, which would be voluntary, would last for two months, and would include outdoor activities and community work. They also included a commitment to reviewing the criminal records and vetting and barring regime, scaling it back to ‘common sense levels’. The Civil Service would be transformed into a ‘civic service’, by making sure that participation in social action was recognised in civil servants’ appraisals. Finally, an annual Big Society Day would celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action.
Volunteering and the Big Society

The Coalition Government says that the Big Society is about more productive and responsive government and a more self-reliant and participative society. Others have taken the view that it represents a way of disguising the cuts to public services agenda embarked upon to tackle the current fiscal deficit. Whichever view is adopted, there is no clear strategy or plan for a Big Society; rather there are a number of threads coming together, which link community empowerment and social action with decentralisation and public sector reform.

The Big Society calls for a shift in the relationship between citizens and the state – devolving powers to individuals and communities, enabling them to influence, design and, in some cases, deliver the services and the support they need, working in partnership with the public, private and non-profit sectors.

All government departments are expected to embed the Big Society within their structural reform plans. The most relevant departments for volunteering are:

- the Cabinet Office
- the Department of Health
- the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The Coalition has undertaken a number of initiatives associated with the Big Society, which could impact on volunteering. These include the following.

National Citizen Service

The National Citizen Service is a voluntary eight-week summer programme for 16-year-olds to carry out activity and social action in residential and home-based settings.

Local Infrastructure Fund

Up to £30 million is available to fund partnerships of local infrastructure organisations, to allow them to rationalise and transform the support services they provide to frontline civil society organisations.

Civil Service volunteering initiative

The Civil Service volunteering initiative was launched in February 2011 as a way to get more professionals using their skills to support charities and voluntary groups, by volunteering for at least one day each year. Under the new initiative, senior civil servants will be expected to encourage volunteering, and charities will be invited to directly request specific help when they need it. The Civil Service is committed to giving 30,000 volunteering days a year.

Transition Fund

Charities in England have been awarded a total of £81 million in the third wave of payouts from the £107 million Transition Fund (as at June 2011). According to the Cabinet Office, the aim of the fund is to help charities to prepare for Big Society opportunities.

To date, more than 900 charities have received support from the Transition Fund, which is supposed to help those services that are most vulnerable to reductions in public spending.
Big Society Bank

The organisation previously referred to as the ‘Big Society Bank’ has now been officially named Big Society Capital group. Big Society Capital is being funded with up to around £400 million from dormant bank accounts. An additional £200 million will be provided by the four largest UK high street banks.

Big Society Capital will become fully operational after obtaining EU and UK regulatory approvals. It will act as a wholesale investor for social investment and will champion the sector to the public, stakeholders and investors. It will invest capital in intermediaries, so that they are able to invest in frontline organisations, but it will not make grants.

Costs of volunteering

It is important to note that building volunteering and social action is not cost-free. There needs to be an ongoing investment of resources in existing and new organisations, to enable older people to take on these roles. The Big Society agenda promoted by the Coalition Government offers the opportunity to widen the scope of the voluntary sector’s role, but it will be important to ensure that community-led and volunteer-led initiatives are not just seen as a substitute for existing publicly funded provision.

For example, it is not clear whether the Big Society agenda recognises that different volunteer roles require different levels of management, and that the more complex roles, particularly within health and social care, will require greater co-ordination and management in order to be effective and sustainable. For older people to engage effectively in community activity, they need support and accessible information and advice.

Consideration should be given to the distribution of investment to reach those who may currently be excluded, as well as to communities that are already active. Established charities are in a position to provide support for other community organisations to connect with the whole community. Further incentives for existing and new networks to evolve and fill the gaps in knowledge and skills will be needed.

Summary

Encouraging volunteering and active citizenship can help to improve community cohesion, as part of wider strategies that deal with issues including poverty, the provision of public services and the built environment. The nature of volunteering and the expectations of those who become involved in it are changing, not least because of the Coalition’s attempts to build a ‘Big Society’ and the difficulty in clearly defining what this might look like.
Benefits for older volunteers
Research identifies a great many ways in which individuals derive benefit from volunteering as an older adult. Most reported benefits are around physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, such as improved self-reported health, improved cognition, general mental health, increased life satisfaction, higher levels of social support and interaction, and improvements in the ability to cope with one’s own illness (especially depression).

Morrow-Howell, Hong and Tang (2009) give an overview of the benefits to older volunteers regarding the varied levels of increased life satisfaction and greater levels of happiness. This theme is explored by other researchers in more depth. Casiday et al. (2008) stress the increased ‘life satisfaction’ as one of the major benefits for older volunteers, which Grimm, Spring and Dietz (2007) describe as ‘happiness’ and add to their listing of health benefits of volunteering in later life. For the purposes of this review, we can take these two terms (‘life satisfaction’ and ‘happiness’) to be synonymous.

The WRVS report on their 2007 survey found that the majority of older volunteer respondents reported a marked improvement in their life satisfaction, with 40 per cent describing it as ‘a lot better’ and a further 30 per cent as ‘somewhat better’ as a result of the voluntary work undertaken.

Allied to the theme of life satisfaction, Grimm, Spring and Dietz also described benefits of later-life volunteering in terms of a greater sense of control over life, as did a 2004 study of the benefits for older volunteers in Scotland. In fact, there is some evidence that volunteering has a greater effect in this regard for people in later life than it does for younger volunteers. A study of older adults by Harlow and Cantor (1996) found that participation in community service was more strongly correlated with life satisfaction for retirees than for those individuals who continued to work for pay.

Research for the Beth Johnson Foundation also included evidence of improvement in confidence and self-esteem both for children and older volunteers. Grimm, Spring and Dietz pick up this theme specifically for those volunteering in later life as described by Sullivan and Sullivan (1997) in terms of ‘a greater sense of purpose in their lives’.

Retire into Action also gives examples from Scotland of increased social activity. Several of those interviewed in the research said they welcomed the chance they now had of meeting new people and extending friendship circles. The report cites the example of Gordon, from Glasgow, who pointed out that these opportunities are particularly important when you retire, because you have then moved out of the world of work and lost the networks that provided for you. As Gordon put it: ‘It gives you a sense of belonging.’
Musick and Wilson (2003) found greater effectiveness of church-related volunteering on depression in older volunteers than secular equivalents; however, it is not clear whether this was as a result of better social contact in church groups, a shared belief and feeling of usefulness, or other factors discussed later in this section.29

There is also limited but significant evidence of improved cognitive functioning observed in older volunteers. The 2009 study by Carlson et al. brings together evidence supporting an earlier study of the Experience Corps programme by Fried et al. (2004) to show higher levels of cognitive functions, such as flexibility of thought and making connections, in participants of the volunteering programme compared to a control group.30,31

In addition to these benefits, many studies have found physical health benefits as well, such as a decreased risk of mortality, summed up by Casiday et al.32 However, a new study by Konrath et al. (2011) offers an interesting perspective on this, in that it shows that this observed lowering of mortality risk is dependent on the motives for volunteering, with the improvement only observed in those who volunteered for altruistic reasons (which the authors term ‘other-oriented’ reasons) rather than for more ‘selfish’ reasons.33

The setting for, and type of, volunteering can also be a significant factor for older volunteers, for instance how closely the volunteer is involved with hands-on tasks. For those studies summarised by Casiday et al.34 that examined specific volunteering programmes with respect to the health and wellbeing of volunteers, it is interesting to note how often volunteers derived benefit from involvement in direct care and education of patients, as opposed to more superficial roles in healthcare settings. The studies indicate that volunteers who participated, for example, in peer support/self-help groups, social support of older people, organising activities for people with disabilities, palliative/hospice care provision, and cancer support (including patient care, advocacy, fundraising and education) show the greatest benefits from their volunteering.

The most commonly noted beneficial health effect of volunteering in later life is an improvement in self-rated health.35,36,37,38,39 Although it is difficult to tease out the extent to which actual health status is reflected in self-reported measures, this widely reported finding is significant in its own right, as perceived benefits reflect both positive psychological and physiological factors. Evidence of actual independently observable improvement to older volunteers’ ability to carry out activities of daily living without functional impairment, as summed up by Casiday et al.,40 is not extensive and points to a need for further research, but it is supplemented by an observed increase in healthy behaviours. Librett et al. (2005) found that older volunteers working on environmental projects were more likely to meet recommended physical activity levels, but this finding does nothing more than indicate the likelihood of a correlation between volunteering in later life and improved physical health improvements in physical health.41
Most studies show a combination of mental and physical health benefits. For example, one study of patients with chronic pain who trained to become volunteer peer supporters for other patients reported lower levels of pain, disability and depression, and greater feelings of control and self-efficacy. Themes such as ‘making a connection’ and ‘a sense of purpose’ came out of their narratives particularly strongly. Although most of the benefits for older volunteers are thus seen as a mixture of social and health-related, there is one category where the evidence of direct benefit is strong: namely for those suffering from depression in later life. This is particularly strongly linked to social integration and usefulness to society.

Interestingly, Li and Ferrero (2006) found that, while depression is a barrier to volunteer participation in mid-life adults, it serves as a trigger for volunteering among older adults, who may look to compensate for losses in roles and social relations that occur with ageing.

Also, Sullivan and Sullivan (1997) discovered that people who volunteered after having a heart attack reported reductions in despair and depression, two factors that have been linked to an increased likelihood of mortality in this type of patient.

A review of studies found that older volunteers show greater health and life satisfaction benefits than younger people, either because they are more likely to have health- and age-related problems, or because volunteer positions give them social and physical activity.

One explanation for health benefits is that volunteering has a positive effect on aspects such as one’s sense of purpose and life satisfaction, which correlate with lower risks of poor physical health. Additionally, being a volunteer may improve a person’s social networks, which help to buffer stress and reduce risk of disease, plus protecting them from isolation in difficult periods.

It could be that some findings of health benefits are due to volunteers starting out with better health, which is why they are able to volunteer, whereas people in poorer health do not. But some studies show that people who begin volunteering earlier in life are less likely to develop health problems later in life; plus, other longitudinal studies demonstrate that people who volunteer later in life are less likely to develop physical and mental health problems than their non-volunteering peers.

One study of older volunteers reported that those who said they gained the greatest benefits from volunteering were those with lower income and lower education, and also people who received more training and support. Additionally, people who volunteered in positions that required specialised skills and/or that contributed to public safety saw more benefits than those who worked in generalist roles, such as administrative support; it may be that they felt more valued.

Families of older volunteers can also be seen to benefit. ‘Spill-over’ benefits to families were reported by 58 per cent of older volunteers in the Morrow-Howell, Hong and Tang study (2009): family members felt less concerned about them, and they gained important knowledge about resources in the community.
Benefits for recipients of services delivered by older volunteers

There is a body of evidence covering the benefits of voluntary support for service recipients in general.

A review of the Home Office Older Volunteers Initiative found the following benefits of having older volunteers.

• **Maturity:** they have had experiences that enable them to understand the problems of others.51

• **An ability to engage with other older people:** they have more empathy for the issues experienced by older people than younger volunteers.

• **An ability to engage in a different way with children and young people:** they are able to offer a ‘calming influence’ and to allow children to feel more confident (see also Changing the Lives of Children and Older People52).

Across a range of services outlined in the Public Aspect Community Service Connection Report53 (including befriending projects such as Home from Hospital and Good Neighbours; community transport services in Sussex and Surrey; and a Books on Wheels scheme in Surrey, Lancashire and Cheshire), survey respondents made up mainly of older service recipients were shown to derive real benefits and to value the support of the volunteers who delivered them. Service recipients spoke about services delivered by volunteers as ‘a life-saver’: ‘Without the service, I would curl up in the corner and have a good howl’; ‘I feel lonely, but your loneliness can disappear when the volunteer comes’.54

Benefits for organisations

For voluntary organisations, older volunteers offer a range of benefits.55

• **Loyalty:** older people spend more time on their volunteering and stay longer than younger people.

• **Skills:** older people have spent much longer perfecting their skills.

• **Availability:** those who have retired from paid work and are no longer responsible for child-rearing can give significantly more time.

• **Confidence and authority:** many older people have gained experience and confidence over the course of their working lives.

• **Commitment and continuity:** they are more altruistic than their younger counterparts.

• **Social networking:** they have social networks that allow them to act as ambassadors for the organisation, thereby bringing other people in.
Benefits for society

Encouraging volunteering and active citizenship can help to improve community cohesion, as part of wider strategies that deal with issues including poverty, the provision of public services, and the built environment. The benefits to society of older volunteers are considerable and wide-ranging, as a 2011 report on older people, volunteering and the Big Society summarises.

One way to improve community unity is through intergenerational volunteering projects. Strengthening intergenerational links can help to deal with anti-social behaviour and promote good citizenship, even in troubled communities. Benefits identified by participants have been that they develop intergenerational friendships, gain increased understanding of the other age group, gain confidence and develop new skills. Conversely, where there is discord between generations, it can undermine attempts to foster community cohesion. A lack of understanding and dialogue can contribute to divisions between older and younger people, which can lead to older people becoming isolated and fearful. Crossing generational boundaries and promoting mutual respect and understanding between different age groups is crucial.
The main barriers to volunteering for any age group are a lack of time, experience and knowledge. Physical and mental ill-health can also be barriers to volunteering. There can be language or cultural barriers too. There are some age-specific factors in these barriers; and there are barriers created by ageist practices in organisations.

Although retirement can mean more free time, this is not always the case. A Cabinet Office report found that 60 per cent of older people who would like to volunteer did not do so because of ‘a lack of spare time’. Respondents in a study of local Age Concern volunteers in Newcastle cited family commitments and responsibilities as one of the main barriers for older people to start and maintain volunteering roles. For example, as paid work decreases, older people may find that they are caring for grandchildren, spouses and/or parents. The same study identified potential volunteers’ own health problems as another of the key barriers. These themes are echoed by an analysis of the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey.

The way in which people think about volunteering is influenced by their actual experiences, with non-volunteers tending to be more negative than those with volunteering experience. Perceptions and stereotypes about volunteers and volunteering act as barriers to people getting involved, as they may see it as something that is not for them.

A lack of knowledge about where to go to for information on how to get involved was reported. Thirty-four per cent of 65–74-year-olds are not aware of the need for help or the opportunities to help. This shows a need to improve communication with people about volunteering needs in their local area.

One review found a strong impression that the policies and practices of organisations were inherently ageist: with organisations imposing upper age limits on volunteers; plus there being a strong bias towards the recruitment of young volunteers; and tasks being offered to older volunteers that are stereotyped as ‘appropriate for their age’, despite their particular skills and abilities.

There could be cultural barriers to volunteering. Opportunity Age found that:

- people of Asian backgrounds are significantly less likely than their white or black counterparts to be involved in volunteering
- older people from black and Asian groups might fear racism as well as ageism
- there may be language problems; for example, low percentages of older Bangladeshi and Pakistani women able to speak English
- there may be additional caste or gender issues that also pose barriers.

There are potential barriers for specific types of programmes as well. For example, some barriers experienced by intergenerational volunteers include the fact that older and younger people may have different needs, motivations and interests, so meeting these to everyone’s satisfaction can be a challenge. Finding suitable times and venues for both age groups can be a problem, as well as working around various family, work and school commitments on both sides.
5 Recruitment, motivation, retention and support

The most successful method for recruiting new older volunteers has been found to be word of mouth.\textsuperscript{69, 70, 71} Sometimes media, in particular local newspapers, local radio and parish magazines, are effective.\textsuperscript{72}

Specific messages that present tangible reasons for volunteering work better than abstract (relatively value-laden) messages for recruiting volunteers.\textsuperscript{73} While some older volunteers first began volunteering after retirement, the majority had a history of volunteering earlier in their lives.\textsuperscript{74}

Older people are most likely to volunteer for organisations that assist and/or benefit other older people, or local and community groups.\textsuperscript{75} For all age groups, the most common tasks are raising/handling money, and organising/assisting with an event. However, older people are also more likely than younger volunteers to be involved in committee memberships and visiting people.\textsuperscript{76}

Factors that influence older people to volunteer

Many of the factors that are decisive in persuading older people to volunteer are common to other age groups, but there are some factors that can be identified as being more pronounced and typical of older volunteers. They tend to revolve around the themes of time (time available once the potential volunteer has retired, which was in short supply when they were working full-time) and usefulness (the desire to be more useful to society or to a specific target group of individuals, or to continue to be useful in this way in later life).

As for any age group, the reasons for wanting to volunteer can be a mixture of altruism and self-interest. Specifically for older people, altruism can be identified as the desire to continue to use professional skills for the benefit of those who need them\textsuperscript{77}; or, as the WRVS Impact Report shows, as wanting to have some kind of positive role in society – helping others.\textsuperscript{78, 79} The same theme is picked up by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as being able ‘to give something back’\textsuperscript{80} and as wanting to ‘make a difference’.\textsuperscript{81, 82}

Although by no means in conflict with these altruistic motives for volunteering in later life, there are a number of more personal reasons for volunteering, most common of which is described by much of the literature in terms of the need to ‘keep active’ or ‘do something with spare time’.\textsuperscript{83, 84, 85, 86} There is a perception by many that this has indeed helped in the successful management of key events in people’s later lives, such as: transition from paid employment\textsuperscript{87}; dealing with the ‘empty nest’ syndrome; or coping with the death of a spouse or partner.\textsuperscript{88, 89}

Finally, there is evidence that people volunteering have benefited with more future-oriented and practical aims, such as continued personal development through gaining new skills\textsuperscript{90, 91} and simply meeting new people.\textsuperscript{92, 93}

Although many of the above factors apply equally to older people of both genders, a few gender-specific trends are also discernible in the studies. For instance, women are more likely to get involved in activities such as sitting with, or providing personal care for, those who are sick or frail, whereas men are more likely to get involved in activities such as providing transport, advice, information, counselling and, up to the age of 75, sport and exercise.\textsuperscript{94}
Despite the fact that the Carnegie Inquiry’s advice was published almost 20 years ago (in 1992), it may still be of use to voluntary organisations today. For instance, it recommends that such organisations should consider presenting volunteering opportunities as an alternative to leisure rather than as an alternative to paid work. It also states that practical considerations, such as transport and location, can greatly affect decisions on volunteering, particularly in later life. For example, the Inquiry found that travel plays an important role for volunteers, especially those in rural areas, determining how easy it is for them to access volunteering opportunities, given that people over 65 are less likely than other age groups to own a car.

**Potential of a Lifetime** (also Baines, Lie and Wheelock and Low et al.) found that commitment to volunteer with a particular charity or organisation depends on:

- prior experience of, or connection to, the organisation
- the image or reputation that an organisation has among the general public
- the actual ‘task’ that is offered.

**Retaining volunteers**

Once people have been recruited as volunteers, there are several general messages from the literature on the issues involved with their continued involvement, and what organisations need to bear in mind to be successful in retaining their services. The theme of being appreciated figures prominently, sometimes expressed as the volunteer and their efforts not being taken for granted. For instance, Rochester and Hutchinson (2002) found that people continued volunteering with an organisation because they:

- believed they were doing something interesting and worthwhile
- were given responsibility and a degree of autonomy, which gave them a sense of creativity within their role
- felt treated with respect and acknowledged for their contribution.

This last theme is also picked up in other studies, for example, in Lee and Brudney (2008). In practical terms, organisations wishing to retain the services of older volunteers are advised:

- to foster this respect and acknowledgment, by working with them to help and enable them to recognise themselves the skills that they have
- to offer volunteering opportunities with a chance to make a real difference
- not to treat volunteers as ‘cheap labour’
- to set up working practices that do not make assumptions about the wishes and interests of older people (see Hutchinson in *Older and Bolder*).
The theme of avoiding negative experiences in volunteering is also picked up by some studies. For instance, in *A Choice Blend*, volunteers’ experiences ‘on the job’ are described as having the potential to dissuade them from continuing. Specific complaints from older volunteers can be summed up as follows.

- Older volunteers complained of being given routine, low-level tasks that do not take account of their abilities and potential.
- Focus group participants agreed that they would put up with ‘boring’ tasks for a while, but that sooner or later they would say something or leave.
- Availability and quality of volunteer management was sometimes an issue.
- The volunteer managers were not always sensitive to volunteers’ needs for flexibility in working times and responsibilities.

In addition, the same report stressed the need for a strong induction policy, as induction was found to be important as a way of providing reinforcement of the volunteer’s own motivation to volunteer and their sense of identifying with the organisation. It could even identify doubts about the wisdom of proceeding at an early stage.

In addition to the need for a good induction, successive studies have shown that volunteers derive benefits from other procedures common to all good employers, whether of a paid or volunteer workforce, such as ongoing training and skills development, regular supervision and a safe, friendly and comfortable work environment. Similarly, the need identified by Hill to involve volunteers in the decision-making process is an important issue for all supervisors, as is the feeling that they are being listened to.

While many elements of good volunteer management are applicable also to the management of paid employees, there are additional lessons that volunteer managers can take from the literature.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation study points the way to the conclusion that success in retaining the services of volunteers is determined not so much by a set of actions or criteria that are different from those needed to manage a paid workforce, but more by a different attitude and mindset. The study concludes that, in addition to stressing the altruistic benefit of the volunteering work, organisations wishing to retain the services of volunteers need to stress what volunteers get out of it, and to remind volunteers regularly how they will benefit too.

More recent studies have reinforced the relevance of the above points specifically to older volunteers. Tang, Morrow-Howell and Choi, in a study published in 2010 in the United States of the reasons why older adult volunteers stop volunteering, stress that, in addition to factors such as the length of time of volunteering, volunteering in other programmes and the type of activity, the key elements that determine continued participation in volunteering activity by older people are practical issues, such as financial security (particularly among low-income older volunteers) and the adequacy of ongoing support. A useful distinction made by this study is between preventable and unpreventable reasons for withdrawal of volunteers. In addition to the former category, neatly summed up by the study as ‘problems with programme administration’, the authors also give a useful reminder that, no matter how good organisational and personal support is (even to the point of suitable payment for lower-income volunteers), there are other, more or less unpreventable reasons for the withdrawal of older voluntary workers, not least health issues.
Training

Training is important not only for paid staff, but also for volunteers. A 2008 study of older volunteers shows that volunteers reported that training increases their knowledge and skills as well as their self-confidence.\textsuperscript{112} Other studies have picked up this theme, showing that well-delivered and appropriate training increases volunteers’ value to an organisation, makes volunteers feel valued, and helps to motivate them to stay within the organisation.\textsuperscript{113}

However, in the case of older volunteers, psychology and self-image may play a role in counteracting the benefits of training, if volunteers think they are ‘too old’ to learn new skills. Also, the idea of ‘classroom-style’ teaching can also be off-putting, particularly for those who have been involved in management and training in their previous working lives.\textsuperscript{114}

One way to overcome older volunteers’ reluctance to accept training is suggested by Dingle (2006): the use of different terminology. This can be effective. For instance, calling training ‘information exchange’ or ‘team days’ may make it more palatable for older volunteers.\textsuperscript{115}

Another approach, cited by Hill (2006), is to present the training as building on the older person’s knowledge and experience rather than as something new. Thus, the training can be shown as adapting skills they already have to a new situation, rather than learning a whole new skill base. Likewise, a more practically based ‘on the job’ training through mentoring and/or shadowing existing volunteers may be a more successful educative approach.\textsuperscript{116}

Other factors to consider

An organisation’s paid staff are essential for creating a welcoming environment for volunteers. However, Forster refers to tensions between paid employees and older volunteers as one of the ‘unpleasant secrets of non-profit organisations’.\textsuperscript{117} In the most extreme form of this tension, paid staff can view volunteers as amateurs – or even as a threat to their jobs.\textsuperscript{118} Younger staff can also feel under scrutiny from older, more experienced volunteers. This in turn can lead to stereotyping in both groups and to older volunteers feeling exploited, unwanted or undervalued.\textsuperscript{119}

If sound personnel management practice and a knowledge of how best to present support and training can be successful in maintaining volunteers’ continued participation, what is a manager to do when an individual older volunteer’s participation is no longer wanted? If the manager’s monitoring of his or her group shows poor performance on the part of an older volunteer, whether for health reasons or other competency issues, then the manager may need to act.

Forster (2006) highlights positive ways in which declining effectiveness of volunteers can be dealt with.\textsuperscript{120} After acknowledging that a strong commitment to the task or the organisation can make it very difficult for some older volunteers to let go and withdraw voluntarily, Forster (2006) goes on to suggest the various options for managers. The manager can address these issues through volunteer days, training and supervision, and can look at the possibility of adjusting the task the person is carrying out. If the older volunteer simply can no longer perform the required tasks, they can still be allowed to attend events, to enable them to keep the social aspect and to maintain social contact.\textsuperscript{121}
Finally, there are specific issues relating particularly to older people in some black and minority ethnic communities. Barriers to participation in volunteering in later life include:

- a lack of outreach work by mainstream organisations to BME communities and individuals\(^{122}\)
- the need to offer interesting and challenging volunteering roles\(^{123}\)
- issues relating to language\(^{124}\)
- a preference for informality\(^{125}\)
- a culture clash with middle-class-oriented organisations\(^{126}\)
- at its most extreme, incidences of racism and tokenism\(^{127}\)

Compared to the body of evidence on potential barriers to participation by BME elders, there is less research-based advice on how to overcome these barriers. The former National Centre for Volunteering (now called Volunteering England) suggests the following to overcome barriers to BME recruitment:\(^{128}\)

- Contact existing community groups and discover if/how the group delivers the service within their own community.
- Take time to analyse your own assumptions about BME groups and volunteering.
- Draw up an equal opportunities policy with an explicitly anti-racist stance.
- Ensure that the policy is being adhered to through ongoing monitoring and periodically review the policy in the light of changes in legislation, attitudes and good practice.

Obaze advises that those wishing to recruit older volunteers from minority ethnic groups should involve BME groups in their policy-making and recruitment.\(^{129}\) They should also ensure that all managers, staff and volunteers are made fully aware of the policy and should encourage a positive view of BME people within the organisation. Specific mention of the policy should be made in all publicity and recruitment material. Finally, the possibility of linking into informal networks within the BME communities should be explored.
Older people are already the bedrock of volunteering in this country. Without their contributions, the idea of a Big Society would be unthinkable.

Volunteering by people in later life brings many benefits, some of which are generally associated with volunteering, but some of which are specific to older volunteers.

For older volunteers themselves, benefits include improved mental and physical health, improved life satisfaction, a feeling of usefulness and a role to play in society, and increased opportunities for social interaction.

As for service recipients, studies suggest that they benefit from older volunteers’ maturity and experience. Being mature and experienced allows older volunteers to understand others’ problems, and enables them to empathise and engage with older service recipients better than younger volunteers, and to engage with children and young people in a different way. In addition, service recipients were found to have been treated with dignity and respect.

Organisations benefit from involving older volunteers, because they are generally well motivated and skilled, are able and willing to share considerable time, are able to talk to a range of service recipients – young and old – and pass on the benefits of their life experience. They are willing to give long-term commitment to their roles, and often have good social links that are useful for recruiting more volunteers.

Barriers to volunteering in later life include a lack of information about options, ageist policies and attitudes in organisations, conflicting family commitments and, above all, health-related limitations. There is also some evidence of cultural and social variations acting as inhibiting factors to volunteering in later life.

The most successful recruitment of older volunteers is through word of mouth. However, it can be aided by targeted messages in appropriate media, for instance, community-based groups advertising in local newspapers. Recruitment of BME elders may increase volunteering participation by those communities.

For effective recruitment and retention, evidence suggests that organisations should stress the personal as well as the altruistic benefits of volunteering. Successful retention also depends on how older volunteers are managed: explicit recognition of contributions of time and skills is key to retaining their services, particularly if there is a danger of overlap with paid employees or a risk of volunteers feeling that they are being taken for granted.
Notes

2 Compact. Volunteering England, 2005
4 Cohesion Research Statistical Release 11 (Citizenship Survey 2006-09, England), Table 3 (participation at least once a year). Communities and Local Government, 2010
8 ICM research for One Voice, Age Concern and Help the Aged, 2009
11 There is no universally accepted definition for ‘civil society’, but for example the World Bank has adopted one from leading research centres: ‘the term civil society [is used] to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations’. For example, ‘community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.’ Available at: web.worldbank.org/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:244752~menuPK:201562~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html
13 Quote by Fiona Mactaggart replying to a question from Jim Cunningham, Hansard, 18 September 2003
15 Communities and Local Government (Cm 6939-I), 2006
16 National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships – Update on publication of the final definitions for the national indicator set. Communities and Local Government, 2008
22 WRVS Impact Report. WRVS, 2009
24 Retire into Action: A study of the benefits of volunteering to older people. RSVP Scotland and CVS, 2004
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33 ‘Mortes for Volunteering are Associated with Mortality Risk in Older Adults.’ Konrath, S., Fuhrel-Forbis, A., Lou, A. and Brown, S. Health Psychology, 2011, DOI: 10.1037/a0025226

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70 Third Age Volunteering. National Trust East Anglia, 2005; as cited in Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


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78 WRVS Impact Report. WRVS, 2009


80 Active Ageing in Active Communities. Davis Smith, J. and Gay, P., for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005; as cited in Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006

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84 WRVS Impact Report. WRVS, 2009


87 Active Ageing in Active Communities. Davis Smith, J. and Gay, P., for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005; as cited in Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


91 Retire into Action: A study of the benefits of volunteering to older people. RSVP Scotland and CVS, 2004


93 WRVS Impact Report. WRVS, 2009

94 Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006

95 The Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age was launched by the Carnegie UK Trust in 1990. Its aim was to examine issues affecting the life, work and livelihood of people who have finished their main job or career and completed the raising of their families but have 20 or more years of healthy active life ahead of them.


100 Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving. Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J., for the Office of the Third Sector and National Centre for Social Research, 2007


103 Older and Bolder: Involving older people in volunteering. Hutchinson, R., for Hackney Agency for Volunteering, 1999; as cited in Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


105 Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


108 Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


113 Older Volunteering: Literature review. Hill, K., for VITA, 2006


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