

Volunteering

(England)

February 2020

Everyone should have the opportunity to contribute to their communities through volunteering. Volunteers must be supported to carry out the role successfully.



“I have been befriending now for six months and I really look forward to my visits. She is such a lovely lady with a wicked sense of humour!”

www.ageuk.org.uk

Volunteering in later life

Later life is a time when many people wish to donate time to help others and make an active contribution to civic and community life. Volunteering can enable people to improve their social connections and enhance their sense of meaning and purpose. It makes a strong contribution to individual and community wellbeing.

This policy position focuses on formal volunteering, where the volunteer contribution is made through being recruited, supported and managed by an organisation. Formal volunteering plays a crucial role in delivering services through the voluntary sector and many community groups are very dependent on older people's contributions.

Key statistics

28% and 24%

of those aged 65-74 and 75+ respectively volunteered formally at least once a month, compared with 22% of adults in 2018-19.

27% to 22%

Fall in % of adult population volunteering between 2013-14 and 2018-19

£23.9 billion

The value of formal volunteering in 2016

*Community Life Survey in England 2018-19, ONS
UK Civil Society Almanac 2019, NCVO*

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Reductions in volunteering

Government statistics show that the proportion of all adults engaging in formal volunteering at least once a month fell from 27% in 2013-14 to 22% in 2016/17 and then remained at 22% through to 2018/19. For people aged 65-74 it fell steadily from 36% to 29%. There was greater fluctuation year on year for those aged 75+, with a slight rise, from 28% in 2013-14 to 29% in 2016-17, followed by a fall to 24% in 2018-19ⁱ.



It is unclear what impact the trends towards people retiring later or the rising State Pension age is having on older people's ability to volunteer. For some, volunteering activity can be an important part of the transition into retirement from paid work, whilst for others it can be a route back into paid work.

Volunteering has a huge role to play in building connected communities. At the same time the experience of volunteering can help people improve their health and wellbeing through providing purpose and pleasure. Older people make up an increasing proportion of the population. There are therefore strong incentives to increase their involvement in formal volunteering.

Barriers to older people volunteering

Recent research by the Centre for Ageing Better on volunteering amongst people aged 50+ found that older people with low incomes, older people from Black and Minority Ethnic groups and older people in poor health are under-represented amongst older volunteers.ⁱⁱ Age UK's own researchⁱⁱⁱ suggests that issues include flexibility around where and when volunteering needs to be carried out, addressing transport requirements, making sure the volunteer environment is accessible and comfortable for older people and recognising and addressing community languages and cultural preferences.

'It is important to keep my problem solving mind active and 'give back' to an organisation providing support to those in need.'
Trustee at a local Age UK

In 2015, the Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing reported that many parts of the third sector did not recognise that older people can bring a wealth of experience to volunteer roles and can greatly enhance the quality of services.^{iv}

Current experiences of volunteering

Research commissioned by NCVO^v found 96% of volunteers are very or fairly satisfied with their role. However 1 in 5 said they felt volunteering was becoming too much like paid work. 20% of volunteers in the statutory sector agreed that their volunteering was ‘too structured or formalised’ compared with 10% of civil society volunteers.

The role of employers

Many leading employers already have employee volunteering policies as part of their wider corporate social responsibility commitments, and regard these as good for the company’s brand reputation as well as providing valuable skills and experiences for employees.^{vi} If more employers adopted these policies this could increase the supply of volunteers to the voluntary sector, nationally and locally, especially if the employer supports regular ongoing volunteering as well as, or instead of, enabling volunteering for one-off events.

Opportunities for training and accreditation of volunteer skills

Most volunteers will require some specific knowledge and skills for the role to be carried out safely and effectively and it is important that training is available and/or existing skills can be recognised without the courses or procedures being overly costly. Third sector organisations need to have access to training and accreditation services as well as recognition of the need to pay for these services from their funders.

Issues in deploying volunteers to carry out statutory services

Local government has experienced huge cuts in its central government grant in recent years and many councils have sought to save money by commissioning the voluntary sector to deploy volunteers to staff the service. However all too often the statutory organisations funding services provided by volunteers do not build in sufficient funding to cover the management, training and administrative costs for the outcomes they expect the service to achieve.

With the appropriate recruitment, training and management infrastructure, volunteers can carry out roles which are highly skilled and have a huge social impact – as shown by the existence of volunteer magistrates and volunteer fire fighters. It *might* be possible to provide, for example, the appropriate recruitment, training and management to design and maintain a good social care service providing complex and intimate care. But as volunteers are rarely able to contribute time equivalent to a full time role and cannot be required to attend, there would be significant risks to service continuity and sustainability. There would be a lot of people to recruit, train and support to the appropriate level and it would be unlikely to be cheaper than providing the service with paid staff.

Unclear and costly processes for criminal record checks

Many volunteers provide services to very vulnerable older people and it is important that the managing organisation carries out appropriate levels of checks on the volunteer as part of the recruitment process.

There are four different levels of disclosure check carried out by the Disclosure and Barring Service, each of which has its own criteria for stipulating the roles it can be applied to. Anyone can apply for a Basic Level DBS check but there is a fee, including for volunteers, which would need to be covered by either the individual or the organisation.

The law doesn't say when a standard or enhanced disclosure check must be carried out, but it does specify when a DBS check can be applied for.^{vii} This leaves organisations creating their own guidance for the volunteering roles in their organisations which require standard or enhanced checks, introducing a lack of consistency and often some confusion.

Standard or enhanced checks are free for volunteers. However the volunteer can only be asked to apply for this if their role makes them eligible. It is unlawful to request a DBS check if the volunteer won't be carrying out specific work that makes them eligible. Due to the person-centred nature of many services, some volunteer roles may qualify for an enhanced check one month, but then no longer qualify for it the following month, presenting further administrative challenges for organisations.

All of this means there is a lot of uncertainty about when the volunteer should be asked to apply for a DBS check and at which level. This can impact upon the safety of the people the volunteers are there to help and can also have cost implications.

Public Policy Proposals

- National and local government and the NHS must recognise that, whilst volunteering is cost effective and carries many additional community benefits, it is not always an appropriate alternative to a formal service, and nor is it free. They must include the costs of recruiting, training and managing volunteers when they commission services from the voluntary sector.
- As part of their corporate social responsibility programmes, employers should consider offering all employees a number of days per year of paid leave for volunteering and/or facilitate opportunities for their employees to volunteer on an ongoing basis with organisations that provide services.
- All organisations who recruit volunteers should consider how they can develop a range of volunteering options which recognise the diverse aspirations and needs of all older people and the wealth of experience they can bring to volunteering roles. They should particularly consider how they can make the volunteering opportunities attractive to people from BME and LGBT+ communities and people with disabilities and/or long-term health conditions.

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- Local authorities should support registers of volunteering opportunities within their areas to help match opportunities with the skills of potential volunteers.
- National and local government should support the training and accreditation of volunteers – for example by offering accredited health and safety and safeguarding training. They should consider developing their own relevant staff training programmes.
- Government should review its position on DBS checks for volunteers to ensure that all older people (especially vulnerable older people) who benefit from services provided by volunteers are adequately protected, whilst keeping the regulations proportionate, affordable and easy to implement.

See also Age UK's policy positions on Employment, Age Friendly Communities and Engaging Older People in Decision Making.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has policy positions on a wide range of policy issues, covering money matters, health and wellbeing, care and support, housing and communities. There are also some crosscutting themes, such as age equality and human rights, age-friendly government and information and advice

Further information

You can read our policy positions here:

www.ageuk.org.uk/policypositions

Individuals can contact us for information or advice here:

www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice or call us on **0800 169 8787**

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ⁱ Community Life Survey Reference Tables ONS 2018-2019

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/drive-increase-volunteering-and-community-activity-people-over-50>

ⁱⁱⁱ Your Voice Panel Surveys, Age UK a regular panel survey of older people who are hard to reach

^{iv} Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing 2015 <https://voluntarysectorageing.org/>

^v 'Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience'; NCVO 100 2019

^{vi} <https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/blog/time-off-volunteer/>

^{vii} 'DBS Checks: Working with adults in the charity sector.' March 2019, DBS, version 1.0