

# Policy Position Paper

## Volunteering and active citizenship (England)

April 2016

**Everyone should have the opportunity to learn, join in, volunteer or work.**

### Key Issues

Later life is a time when many people wish to volunteer and make an active contribution to civic and community life; indeed many community groups are almost totally dependent on older people's contributions. Volunteering does not just play an important role in delivering services, but also in improving the lives of the volunteers themselves; improving physical and mental health; combating loneliness and personal isolation; bringing communities together; boosting independence; providing contentment and satisfaction; and empowering people.

28 per cent of people aged 65–74 and 19 per cent of 75+ in England have participated in formal volunteering at least once in the last 12 months.<sup>1</sup> Many more volunteer informally, and many older people take an active role in the life of their communities through campaigning and other forms of social action. Older people's forums give members a powerful voice in their area. Age UK has contact with more than 250 local older people's forums in England.

In spite of these positive figures older people do face potential barriers when volunteering, not least the ageist policies and practices of some organisations that impose upper age limits on volunteers. There may also be physical challenges for older people with visual, auditory and cognitive impairment, or it could be something as simple as a lack of transport, or the timing of a meeting (if it is held late at night, many older people may be reluctant to attend it). Additionally cultural and language differences or confusing internal processes and infrastructures of organisations can lead to disengagement, or may lead volunteers to feel that they have a lack of influence. A flexible and inclusive approach to developing and recruiting volunteers will help to encourage older volunteers.

Many voluntary sector organisations that provide vital support to many volunteers have been hit hard by the economic climate and government funding cuts. From 31 March 2016, Government will no longer continue with previous engagement through the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing (UKAFA) and local government engagement is increasingly online and limited.

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<sup>1</sup> *Taking Part Survey 2014/15*, England, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015

## Public Policy Proposals

- National and local government should continue to support voluntary organisations to help them grow and develop their management capacity. Approaches to increase volunteering should be developed with older people themselves, to design new ideas that fit with their expectations and lifestyles.
- Older people can be a valuable asset to their local community, as long as their basic needs are met and their contribution is valued. Local authorities and voluntary and community organisations should encourage older volunteers to take up benefit entitlements and other support they may need in order to ensure they can live independent, active and healthy lives.
- Local authorities and voluntary organisations should promote programmes that offer older people the chance to stay active, take up new interests and learn skills. They should encourage volunteering and involvement in social action. This requires more imagination in the way they involve older people, including learning from informal volunteering that emerges independently of any organisation.
- A range of volunteering options should be developed to meet the diverse needs of older people, including those who are making the transition from work into retirement, or those who are seeking to improve their skills to return to work.
- Public bodies should support organisations that give opportunities to volunteers. This could include both direct support for volunteer training, accreditation and resources, but also recognition that supporting a service delivered by volunteers doesn't just benefit the immediate service users, but also has a wider impact through the benefits to the volunteers.
- Public bodies must ensure volunteer management costs within funded programmes are properly costed for the level of volunteering being delivered. Whilst volunteering is freely given, it is not cost free.
- In order to combat discrimination, including on the grounds of age, the Government should consider how volunteers can be brought under the scope of the Equality Act 2010.
- Local leaders need to encourage mutual understanding through encouraging intergenerational dialogue and working in partnership to identify barriers between different generations. Intergenerational programmes are under-explored as a means of overcoming these barriers; a wider range of these programmes should be developed.

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