

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.¹ 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).² 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.³

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,^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8}
- decreases mortality and improves self-rated health,^{9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14}
- increases mental health and decreases depression,^{15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20}
- reduces stress and increases life satisfaction,^{21, 22}
- provides social support and interaction,²³
- healthy behaviours and the ability to cope with one's own illness,²⁴
- provides a positive transition from work to retirement.²⁵

Below is a summary of the relative benefits from a survey of people 55-plus:²⁶

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

Finally, housebound older people receive value from visits by older volunteers.²⁷

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 18-24.²⁸ However, only 30% of people 65-74 and 29% of people 75+ feel they can affect decisions in their local area.²⁹ Additionally, over half of adults surveyed in Great Britain (53%) feel that politicians treat older people as second-class citizens.³⁰ 68% of people aged 65+ agree that politicians tend to see older people as a low priority³¹, and 67% of adults say that politicians do not take older people seriously.³²

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.³³ The recently retired are also the most active in civic events.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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- ¹ *Cohesion Research Statistical Release 11* (Citizenship Survey 2008-09, England), Table 3 (participation at least once a year), Communities and Local Government, 2010
- ² Elderly Perceptions Survey, ICM Research for Help the Aged, 2007
- ³ *Citizenship Survey: April–June 2010*, England, Communities and Local Government, October 2010
- ⁴ *Supporting older people to overcome social isolation and loneliness*, Mima Cattan for Help the Aged, 2002
- ⁵ Baines S, Lie M, Wheelock J (2006) Volunteering, self-help and citizenship in later life Age Concern Newcastle and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne
- ⁶ Gale, K (2006) *Voices: Research on older volunteers*; Age Concern Research Services August 2006
- ⁷ Low N, Butt S, Ellis Paine A, Davis Smith J (2007) *Helping Out - A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*; Cabinet Office
- ⁸ Sullivan G, Sullivan M. (1997) *Promoting Wellness in Cardiac Rehabilitation: Exploring the Role of Altruism* *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*
- ⁹ Arnstein P et al (2002) *From Chronic Pain Patient to Peer: Benefits and Risks of Volunteering Pain Management Nurses*
- ¹⁰ *Volunteering, self-help and citizenship in later life*. Baines S, Lie M, Wheelock J, for Age Concern Newcastle and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2006
- ¹¹ *Giving Time: Impact on Health*. Community Service Volunteers, 2004
- ¹² *Gaining health while giving back to the community*. Fried, L et al, for John Hopkins Medical Institute, 2004
- ¹³ *The effects of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people*. Lum T, Lightfoot E., *Research on Ageing*, 2005
- ¹⁴ *Who Benefits from Volunteering? Variations in Perceived Benefits*. Morrow-Howell N, Hong S, Tang F, *The Gerontologist*, 49 (1), 91-102, 2009
- ¹⁵ Arnstein P et al (2002) *From Chronic Pain Patient to Peer: Benefits and Risks of Volunteering Pain Management Nurses*
- ¹⁶ *Promoting Wellness in Cardiac Rehabilitation: Exploring the Role of Altruism*. Sullivan G, Sullivan M., *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, 11(3), 43-52, 1997
- ¹⁷ *The effects of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people*. Lum T, Lightfoot E., *Research on Ageing*, 2005
- ¹⁸ *Voices: Research on older volunteers*. Gale, K., Age Concern Research Services, August 2006
- ¹⁹ *Giving Time: Impact on Health*. Community Service Volunteers, 2004
- ²⁰ *Volunteering, self-help and citizenship in later life*. Baines S, Lie M, Wheelock J, for Age Concern Newcastle and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2006
- ²¹ *Volunteering and Health: What Impact Does It Really Have?*, Volunteering England, 2008
- ²² *Giving Time: Impact on Health*. Community Service Volunteers, 2004
- ²³ *Volunteering, self-help and citizenship in later life*. Baines S, Lie M, Wheelock J, for Age Concern Newcastle and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2006
- ²⁴ *Volunteering and Health: What Impact Does It Really Have?*, Volunteering England, 2008
- ²⁵ *Active ageing in active communities - Volunteering and the transition to retirement*. Davis Smith J, Gay P., for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005
- ²⁶ *Helping Out - A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*. Low N, Butt S, Ellis Paine A, Davis Smith J., Cabinet Office, 2007
- ²⁷ *Supporting older people to overcome social isolation and loneliness*, Mima Cattan for Help the Aged, 2002
- ²⁸ *Election 2005: turnout – How many, who and why?*, Electoral Commission, 2005
- ²⁹ *Citizenship Survey: April–June 2010*, England, Communities and Local Government, October 2010
- ³⁰ Ageism survey, ICM Research for Help the Aged, April 2008
- 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
- ³³ *Citizenship Survey: April–June 2010*, England, Communities and Local Government, October 2010
- ³⁴ *Citizenship Survey: April–June 2010*, England, Communities and Local Government, October 2010
- ³⁵ Elderly Perceptions Survey, ICM Research for Help the Aged, 2007