

A BETTER OFFER:

The future of volunteering in an ageing society

Issue paper 1

Susie Rabin, Project Manager, Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing
Dinah McKenzie, Senior Consultant and Russell Hargrave, Media Manager, NPC
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Our ageing society is likely to have a profound effect on UK charities. The loyal band of retirees on whom so many charities rely as volunteers—a group in the past called ‘the reserve army of little old ladies’—are stalwarts of charity work. But the voluntary sector has a lot of work ahead if it is to retain their goodwill and their time.

While nearly all older volunteers feel strongly about the causes to which they give so much time, they are also wary that their loyalty might be taken for granted. As our society gets older, and the baby boomers retire in greater numbers, this tension will become more acute. Will volunteers with long, often challenging careers behind them settle for licking envelopes and setting out chairs, or will they expect and demand more? Will they willingly help run services for free which were traditionally provided by the state? Will charities adapt to attract a retiring generation which is more confident and tech-savvy than ever before?

Society is changing, and volunteering trends will change with it. [The Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing](#) was established by NPC and ILC-UK to consider exactly what these changes might look like, and how civil society should anticipate and respond to these. This paper looks at the future of volunteering, drawing on a series of focus groups with volunteers and a roundtable with charity volunteer managers in June and July 2014. It also looks at the evidence from an exclusive survey conducted with 12 of the UK’s largest charities¹, collectively responsible for hundreds of millions of pounds a year and thousands of volunteers across the UK, on their preparations for our ageing society.

The current picture and future trends

Volunteering is a huge part of life here. Around 23m people in England volunteered in 2012, more than half of whom did so at least once a month. This work is [valued at £24bn to charities every year](#), with volunteering by people aged 50 and over estimated by the Royal Voluntary Service to grow from [£10bn to £15bn by 2020](#).



*Older people’s
volunteering to be worth
£15bn by 2020.*

At the same time, our population is growing larger and it’s getting older. This is likely to continue for the next 20 years at least, with our population predicted to grow by another 7m by 2033. There will be an unprecedented increase in the ‘oldest old’—people aged between 80 and 100—and the number of retired will rise sharply in proportion to the UK workforce.

This huge demographic shift presents the voluntary sector with both an opportunity and a challenge. Retirees represent a growing slice of society, and one which charities will want to attract and maintain. But this is a situation for which they must prepare. Without adapting, charities may find a large part of their voluntary workforce deserting them.

‘My favourite volunteers are the recently retired, have had careers, have had kids, they’re flexible, patient, and they don’t leave!’

Volunteering manager, roundtable

‘Older groups [offer] a much higher commitment’

National disability charity, survey response

In our discussion paper [Age of opportunity](#), we put forward two potential, contrasting scenarios for volunteering in 20 years time, dependent on how charities respond to the challenge:

Future scenario one is enthusiastic engagement. Volunteering rates remain high as the baby-boomer generation retires in better health and with steadier pension incomes than previous generations. They, like other age groups, continue to volunteer in large numbers, with an emphasis on bringing their professional skills to volunteering. More people than ever before enjoy ‘portfolio careers’, combining paid employment, leisure and unpaid social action.

¹ 12 UK charities, selected according to their size and reliance on volunteers, were surveyed by email in July 2014. They were asked to give information on the changing number and ages of volunteers in the last three years, as well as thoughts on the impact of an ageing population on their volunteer workforce.

Future scenario two is insufficient supply and lack of incentive. Volunteering rates drop sharply as people earn less and work for longer—there is less spare time for people to give away for free. And when they do retire, they often step in to support younger generations both financially and practically, especially to reduce the burden of childcare. Consequently, these pensioners lack the time or motivation to volunteer in anything like the numbers seen before. Volunteering is forced to compete with many other pressures, and loses.

It is hard to tell whether volunteering is moving in the right direction. The [latest data](#) from the Cabinet Office and volunteering charity [CSV](#) suggests that UK volunteering numbers have dropped in recent years, but our survey of large charities found that the overwhelming majority—10 of the 12—had seen volunteer numbers rise in the previous three years. This suggests that the large charities have found ways to buck the trend, but leaves difficult questions about whether smaller charities are currently bearing the brunt of lost volunteers.

The benefits for volunteers

‘The buzz’

Charities need to harness the extraordinary sense of physical and emotional well-being that many volunteers take from their work—what one volunteer called ‘the buzz’.

‘it’s a compulsion... I have a lifetime of interfering!’

Female volunteer, Manchester

‘I get real satisfaction from making a change to peoples’ lives .. and knowing that I’m good at it’

Male counselling volunteer, Manchester

‘People who don’t volunteer don’t realise what pleasure you get out of it. It’s a tangible thing’

Female volunteer, Manchester

Where charities are able to tap into this sense of well-being, volunteering can relieve some of the social pressures older people face. More people are divorcing in later life, and families are increasingly dispersed. Loneliness, considered by some commentators as a serious risk to public health, is [growing among the elderly](#). In the words of one older volunteer, volunteering provides *‘a reason for getting up in the morning, having a shower, putting your clothes on’*. Its health benefits are already recognised by many of the people who already engage in it. Used effectively, volunteering can help to ensure that retirees in danger of social isolation and loneliness enjoy an active role in society instead.

Some charities, including [Age UK](#) and [Hackney Targeted Prevention Services](#), have achieved this by encouraging and supporting its beneficiaries to become volunteers for them. This blurs the traditional line separating those who work for a charity from those whom it helps—and in the process helps to ensure that some volunteers are drawn from those who know the services best. With charities worrying about resources, this approach can maintain volunteer numbers while ensuring that organisations stay in touch with the people who have turned to it for help.

Charities should also consider the key role volunteering often plays as people face periods of transition. [Volunteering can restore structure](#) to the lives of people who have faced upheaval, whether recently retired, divorced or bereaved; and it can be a source of new skills and experience for those wishing to return to the workplace.

‘Learn and grow’

Older volunteers also benefit from the opportunity for personal development and the chance to build on their existing skills. And in return, a charity benefits from a lifetime’s accumulation of knowledge and experience, now being given away freely. As one retired female volunteer from Manchester put it: *‘I have lots of skills and experience, and I no longer need paying for everything I do, which was my previous ethos’*.

‘I have carried on [volunteering] because I have been motivated to take on more, learn and grow. I have done things in volunteering that I would never otherwise have done’

Female Samaritans volunteer, Manchester

For a generation used to professional rewards as their careers progressed, and who are now looking to put something back for free, charities might consider whether formal accreditation of such development, or a formal development programme would help to attract and retain more volunteers.

For many volunteers, their unpaid work is about developing new skills. This is a chance to gain experience which will serve them well for richer lives after retirement, gathering expertise with which to switch careers, or simply pursuing something different and exciting. And charities could do well to adopt this sort of language more. Indeed, there is potential to completely re-brand volunteering. Some charities offering voluntary experience abroad have moved away from the popular language of ‘gap years’ and ‘years off’, and started talking about ‘years on’, for example.

The barriers to volunteering

To make the most of any of these opportunities, however, the voluntary sector must face up to the intense pressures likely to confront people retiring in the next 20 years.

Time pressures

Given the sheer number of older people giving time to charities, even a small percentage drop in the volunteer hours they give could dramatically affect charities' resources. Yet all evidence suggests that their time will get squeezed. With people routinely working past 65 for the first time, volunteers and charities alike are especially worried about any available time being spent to help cash-strapped relatives with childcare. With childcare costs now at well over £100 a week on average—and [over £140 in south-east England](#)—this was a dominant theme in discussions of the future of volunteering. Alongside helping to care for their grandchildren, many older people will also find themselves caring for other older relatives or neighbours. Either way, these pressing demands are likely to affect the availability of a voluntary workforce.

'All of my peers are providing 1,2,3 days a week of childcare'

Female retired volunteer, London

'Older people may be working longer, [and] have increased caring commitments'

National heritage charity, survey response

This means that charities will need to make a compelling—and flexible—offer to would-be volunteers if they are to recruit them in adequate numbers.

In the meantime, different political solutions to this pressure have been discussed. The Local Government Association has suggested an incentive to volunteers, advocating a [10% Council Tax reduction](#) for those who show "sustained commitment" to helping their local communities for free. Some commentators have hinted that volunteers should [be entitled to free childcare](#), including the shadow charities minister Lisa Nandy MP. From the views expressed to us, any offer on childcare would be welcomed extremely strongly.

Feeling exploited

Over the past decade the state has reduced the number of local services it provides, while charities have been commissioned to provide more and more. The voluntary sector has taken on this sort of frontline role—running youth clubs, parks, museums, libraries and many more services previously provided by the state—to the point where funding from local and national government now accounts for a third of charity income. This shift in the provision of public services is unlikely to reverse. Indeed, it is likely that further public services will be contracted out to the voluntary sector in the years to come.

This situation has created real concerns among volunteers, who are extremely wary of being asked to deliver what were previously local council-run services. That scepticism was even more pronounced when linked to a project like the Big Society, whose image now seems so sullied that some volunteers want nothing to do with it.

'Proving that volunteers can do something is being used an excuse to hand over more services to volunteers and not run them'

Female volunteer, Manchester

'The Big Society—that could put people off volunteering'

Female retired volunteer, Manchester

'I have issues on taking on tasks that would otherwise be done by paid staff. I don't want to do someone else out of a job'

Female volunteer, Manchester

Volunteers also shared concerns about taking on work which would otherwise be carried out by paid staff, in part because of concerns that this exploited their goodwill and but also because of its impact on the people who would otherwise fill those jobs. Among healthcare volunteers, the [King's Fund identified last year](#) concerns about 'tensions around appropriateness of roles for volunteers and the boundaries with paid staff' in hospital settings, and argued that 'we will do huge damage if we start using volunteers to save money'. Similar concerns have arisen where volunteers have stepped in to run libraries threatened with closure, and volunteers have feared that their willingness to work for free might have a negative impact on communities in the long run.

Existing volunteers also express concern at the emerging trend of 'compulsory volunteering'. The move by the Department of Work and Pensions [to force the unemployed to work without pay](#) clearly hit a nerve with many who choose freely to give their time. The concept of 'property guardians' who [complete 16 volunteer hours a week in return for subsidised rent](#), prompts similar ethical questions. While the public debate around these initiatives has mainly focused on what it [means for the people required to work for free](#), there is also concern that a more transactional approach to volunteering will undermine the altruistic motivations of traditional volunteers.

'Volunteering shouldn't be used as punishment for people who can't find work—that will ruin volunteering'

Female retired volunteer, Manchester

Volunteers evidently feel extremely strongly about this issue. Future planning will need to consider the consequences if charities expect volunteers—or are perceived to expect volunteers—to cover work which was once someone's job. Similarly, the voluntary sector needs to respond to developments in compulsory volunteering as their reliance upon volunteers, even people passionate about the cause they support, has a limit.

The image of volunteering

At the same time, the sector needs to recognise and respond to the wider image problem that volunteering might have. Some people told us that they do not view their activities as volunteering, which they associated with unhelpful ideas of being a 'do-gooder'. They felt they were just 'helping out' at the nursery, allotment or local pool, and for them the corporate language around some volunteering will be a disincentive to join in. Additionally, some people expressed concerns about being seen to interfere. One group with whom we talked was creating a network of 'good neighbour champions', precisely because they felt it would give people 'permission' to be neighbourly and start volunteering more locally. But most simply of all, maybe volunteering needs to be promoted more effectively and attractively.

'You never see a poster saying "Come and volunteer"!'

Female volunteer, Manchester

Efforts are also needed to target groups which are currently under-represented as volunteers. Men, for example, make up only 20% of the entire volunteer workforce. Charities will also need to engage better with younger people, with a view to today's volunteers but also attracting people who will volunteer long into the future.

'Now I see my friends from the train and former colleagues in the city centre—it makes me very, very content'

Male volunteer, Manchester, who had missed social contact on retirement

One group told us that, where a charity had a male volunteer manager he was able to recruit more men. Male volunteers also told us that they gravitated towards charities which had a range of manual and skilled outdoor tasks (and the "boys' toys" to deliver them).

Meanwhile, the government has recognised the importance of engaging young people in volunteering, with the drive behind the [National Citizens' Service](#) (which offers one month developing and delivering 'a social action project' for local communities to 16 and 17 year olds) and the more recent push on [Youth Social Action](#) (which looks to 'mobilise large numbers of volunteers' aged between 10 and 20).

'People have increasingly an anxiety about work—especially young people and long hours. They don't always have the space in their head and schedule to volunteer'

Female volunteer, London

'Recruitment of young people does appear to take more intense supervision from staff'

National disability charity, survey response

Some charities have already got to grips with innovative ways to bring younger age-groups into volunteering. [North London Cares](#), a befriending service for isolated older people in Islington and Camden, recruits young people through social and professional networks and by word of mouth, and invites them to social events with older people. This is where people meet across generations, and 'befriender pairs' form. In recognition of the different ways to engage young people, the charity is constantly working to remove barriers to volunteering by doing as much as it can online, cutting bureaucracy for volunteers to an absolute minimum, and holding events after work and at weekends. The frequency, content and timing of the befriending meetings is left to the pairs.

Conclusions

Clearly, volunteering is enormously beneficial for the individuals involved, and for the organisations and communities they serve. It is also a vital part of the texture of life in the UK. It is tempting to see volunteering as the easy answer to the problems of declining funds and increasing pressure on their services that many charities face. But volunteering is not without its costs or limitations. Nor should it be taken for granted.

Indeed, the goodwill that the voluntary sector taps into when it engages its band of volunteers can dry up quickly due to societal shifts, feelings of exploitation, the politicisation of volunteering and changing perceptions of volunteering.

Recruiting, training and managing an unpaid workforce costs money. As our roundtables and survey have shown, volunteers are attracted and motivated by a range of factors and, as demographics shift, these are likely to become more complex. The voluntary sector will need to become more adept at handling them.

The more dependent a charity is on volunteer time, the more they will need to focus on how an ageing society will change the 'life-course' of these volunteers. People will expect to see charities adapt to their changing needs and capacity, and respond to the skills and energy which they can bring. Even small gestures—volunteers at our roundtables mentioned inviting volunteer teams to staff away days—are a step in the right direction.

Charities will increasingly need to suit the role to the volunteer, rather than the volunteer to the role. This might mean an end to formal, regular volunteering for some, and its replacement with short bursts of work, possibly done on the 'turn up, join in, lend a hand' basis (the kind promoted by the sports charity [Join In](#)). More volunteering may take place online. Traditional volunteer tasks, such as envelope-stuffing, might become a paid task, with volunteers undertaking shorter-term substantial roles, akin to acting as consultants for the charity. This might sound like a radical shift in approach, but that might well be exactly what the voluntary sector needs.

At the same time, government needs to be mindful of the impact of compulsory volunteering, and of politicising unpaid work, on those who freely give their time and skills and seek little in return.

We hope this paper has stimulated thinking about the implications of an ageing society on your organisation and its volunteer programme. We need to act now, to safeguard one of the most precious assets of the voluntary sector: the volunteers.



Discussion points

How can your charity make volunteering more attractive? How can you attract the 'oldest old' through to the younger generations?

How can your organisation attract a younger and wider range of volunteers?

How will you manage the blurring of user, donor and volunteer in the future?

Future-proof your strategy:

Talk to your board and your staff about these issues and consider what you need to do now and in the next few years to respond.

What do you think?

This is the first in a series of discussion papers from the Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing exploring key issues affecting the future of the voluntary sector due to our changing society.

We'd love to get your thoughts and feedback on the future of volunteering or any other topics related to the charity sector and population changes, so get in touch via volsecageing@thinknpc.org or tweet [@VolSecAgeing](#) using the hashtag #AgeOpportunity.

Find out more about the work of Commission at www.voluntarysectorageing.org

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