

# COMMISSION ON THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR & AGEING: REFLECTIONS ONE YEAR ON

July 2016

One year on from the publication of the Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing's final report, we brought together people involved in the work to discuss its influence. This paper summaries what the Commission achieved, the lessons learnt and the future relevance of this work. It has been prepared by the Commission chair Lynne Berry and NPC, with input from a variety of sources including the Commissioners, expert advisors and organisations for who the recommendations are particularly relevant.

## Background

The [Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing](#) was established by [NPC](#) in 2013, in partnership with [JLC-UK](#), to put ageing on the agenda of the voluntary sector. It brought together a range of [commissioners](#) with different perspectives and was funded by the Big Lottery Fund and Prudential. In March 2015, the Commission issued its [final report](#) and completed its formal work.

The Commission had an ambitious aim: to encourage charities and funders of all types, not just those working with older people, to consider how the ageing population will affect their organisation. This strategic thinking covered volunteering, funding, governance, services and partnerships, and looked ahead at the next 10 and 20 years to think through how the sector can prepare and adapt

There were three strands to the Commission's work:

- Building an understanding of how ageing will affect the sector: through research, analysis and futures thinking.
- Engaging sector leaders in thinking about the implications of ageing for their organisations: through events, awareness-raising, consultation and dialogue.
- Enabling the sector to respond and adapt to ageing: through practical recommendations, exploring different approaches and sharing best practice.

## What we found

We expected to uncover plenty of examples of organisations getting ready for the future and taking a long-term view on the impacts of ageing. Instead we were struck by what we described as a **collective failure of imagination** in the voluntary sector. While there is some innovation, too often we have seen 'ageing' understood as just a question of what to do with more older people. We concluded that the voluntary sector is not ready for our ageing society and so could miss the chance to help determine how society develops in response, and could also lose out on the dividends of our ageing population—worth £6.5bn in additional funding and volunteer effort alone by 2033.

## What we achieved

During the **18 months duration of the Commission** we:

- Engaged with over 1,000 individuals, who either attended events or workshops run by the Commission or corresponded with us.
- Proactively engaged with a variety of sector and membership organisations to input into our work and reach out to their audiences (including CIPD, NCVO, CSV (now Volunteering Matters), ACEVO, Clothworker's Foundation) and with members of our [Expert Panel](#) (from organisations including Charity Finance Group, NESTA, Institute of Fundraising, RVS and Independent Age).
- Published ten [papers and reports](#), including a full background research paper, our *Age of opportunity* discussion paper and the final report *Decision time*.
- Secured 47 pieces of quality [media coverage](#) about the issue and the Commission's work.

The **final report** of the Commission, published in March 2015, was launched with an event at the Association of British Insurers, chaired by NCVO's Martyn Lewis CBE, which prompted lively discussions and the Twitter hashtag [#DecisionTime](#) trending in London. A number of charities committed to incorporating the questions and recommendations into their strategic planning, including NCVO, Age UK, NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) and Grandparents Plus.

*'This is an important report, a wake-up call to the sector to think radically and differently.'*

**Justin Davis Smith, Executive Director of Volunteering and Development, NCVO**

*'The report is a joy to read, presented in an engaging way and running to a mere thirteen pages. Essential reading for anyone who works in the voluntary sector or works with volunteers.'*

**Rob Jackson, Third Sector**

*'We support the findings of the report – especially that charities will need to create interesting and creative opportunities to volunteer if they want to truly harness the potential of this important group.'*

**Janet Thorne, CEO, Reach Volunteering**

*'This initiative provides just the kick-start that the voluntary sector needs to embrace the demographic changes and opportunities ahead.'*

**Martyn Lewis CBE, Chair, NCVO**

In the year following the launch of the final report we have responded to enquiries, spoken at events on an ad hoc basis where invited, and have integrated the findings into the work and messages of those involved. However we have not had the resource to actively promote the findings and recommendations beyond this.

We know that:

- *Decision time* has been downloaded 1,434 times and *Age of opportunity* 1,033 times.
- Our website has received over 20,000 views and continues to receive around 150 visits each month. We built a newsletter mailing list of nearly 300 people and a Twitter following of over 1,000.

- We have engaged with a range of organisations and stakeholders that were highlighted in *Decision time* as having potential to influence future thinking and action on responses to the ageing population. These include leaders and trustees of voluntary sector organisations, government, voluntary sector bodies, and research bodies, in particular the Centre for Ageing Better.
- We have engaged directly with a number of charities that have shown interest in the work including the National Trust, NCVO, Macmillan Cancer Support, Volunteering Matters and Age UK. The Cripplegate Foundation has incorporated some of the thinking into its work, and the Baring Foundation has considered the relevance of our findings to its work too.
- We have presented our research and recommendations to the Office of Civil Society and the Minister for Civil Society.
- We have presented at conferences and events with a voluntary sector audience, including the Association of Chairs, Association of Volunteer Managers, Centre for Voluntary Services in St. Albans, Green Park Chair's Dinners, Diversity Manager's network for major charities, the Royal College of Physicians, Cass Business School, Trustee Exchange conference, and the Inside Government Conference.
- We have had interest from corporates including Barclays, BT, Goldman Sachs, Grant Thornton, and have spoken at a conference for fund managers.
- We have had interest internationally, including from Japan, Greece and the International Federation of Aging Global Conference 2016 held in Brisbane.

We have not been able to follow-up directly with all those that engaged with the Commission or used the materials, so we can't analyse the impact of this. We would like to hear from you if you have used the resources or if the Commission has influenced your thinking—see contact details at the end of this paper.

## Reflections on the achievements of the Commission

During the lifetime of the Commission we achieved strong engagement with the topic from across the sector. We exceeded our expectation on the number of people involved and media coverage secured. We raised awareness of the impacts of ageing directly with people from a wide range of voluntary sector organisations, and indirectly through our media coverage, blogs and publications. We have engaged with the organisations and initiatives that we identified can further this debate through their work, and hope that the awareness of the Commission's findings will inform their thinking.

We were delighted by the broad range of interest in the final report from those beyond our intended audience, including academics, corporates and internationally. Whilst the impact of this on the UK voluntary sector is uncertain, we believe that heightened awareness of potential impacts of an ageing population on the voluntary sector is valuable, and that some of the interest from researchers and policymakers in the UK may become relevant to our main voluntary sector audience.

We are aware of some examples of charities engaging with the questions raised by the Commission. However, as we expected, this is a slow process of change. We have not seen as broad an uptake of the messages as we would have liked, and in one case where we made direct approaches to ten major charities to discuss the Commission's findings we saw a disappointing lack of engagement.

*'I have heard the Commission's findings referenced in other presentations and public discussions within the sector, which is positive... Disappointed that it hasn't been used more widely in the media as part of the discourse around ageing as much of the material is clear and meaningful for everyone.'*

David McCullough, Chief Executive, Royal Voluntary Service

We think there are a number of reasons for this:

- The challenge of charities engaging with longer term questions and thinking strategically about them, particularly given pressing funding pressures or other sector crises.
- The sector news agenda has been very busy in the last year, particularly with questions of fundraising and governance, making it difficult for people to consider less immediate concerns.
- Funding was not available to support dissemination and awareness-raising post-publication, which has meant some missed opportunities—particularly in responding to opportunities in the news agenda.
- As highlighted in our report, we found a very small number of examples of good or interesting practice, meaning that our message remained largely theoretical, and we couldn't engage charities with practical responses.

The Commission was always intended to have a limited life-span, yet we know that change takes time, and in particular changing strategic thinking is a long term agenda. A lack of funding limited the work we could undertake following the publication of *Decision time*. With hindsight, doing more to support Commissioners and other supporters to embed our findings and retaining some resources for promotion and awareness-raising of the final report and recommendations in the months after launch would have been valuable.

## The future

One of the disappointments of the Commission was that we uncovered only a small number of interesting responses to the challenges we raised. However of those that we did identify, we know that positive progress is being made, much of which will be useful in furthering the sector's response to the ageing population.

For example:

- The [Centre for Ageing Better](#) launched in December 2015 and has published research into what makes a good later life, and launched a partnership to tackle inequalities in later life in Greater Manchester, and with Business in the Community to encourage employers to create age friendly workplaces.
- The [Age of No Retirement](#) is entering a new phase of development and growth, with the aim of creating an age-neutral, multigenerational world, where we value young and old in equal measure. It launched the UK's first intergenerational innovation platform in May 2016.
- [Age UK](#) has developed a leading approach to extended working lives and pre-retirement learning, which is available to all employees.
- The Big Lottery Fund has recently [announced £9.5m in grants](#) to three projects that aim to help create a society where older people are more valued and can play a more active role in the decisions that affect their lives, as well as developing a new, more positive narrative about ageing.

However, these are isolated examples of progress, and there is a great deal more to do. Much of our thinking, provocations and recommendations are still highly relevant to the sector.

*'Just like all other sectors, the voluntary sector is aware of the increasing challenges of ageing and, just like all other sectors, is broadly doing nothing about that'.*

David McCullough, Chief Executive, Royal Voluntary Service

*'The ideas captured in the Commission's reports are if anything more relevant and appropriate now than ever. There is real value there that should be spread more widely'.*

Ken Burnett (Commissioner), author, lecturer and charity trustee

Here we highlight a number of our findings that we think are particularly important, especially given developments in the charity sector in the last year.

## Fundraising

The Commission highlighted strategic challenges for the sector around acting with integrity, adapting to new patterns of giving as people spend money differently throughout longer lives, and engaging with the next generation of philanthropists and their priorities. The recent crisis in fundraising has brought to the fore the relevance of this thinking, and the way that charities connect with donors and deal with vulnerability. In addition the changes in pension regulation on annuities may impact giving patterns, and offer challenges or opportunities.

*'The Commission's identification that there's a "growing weariness with aggressive fundraising methods" now seems prophetic and timely. It was also prescient that the Commission called on charities to ensure that fundraising staff have the right skills and experience to connect with donors across the age spectrum—an age diverse workforce and listening to supporters are vital'.*

Ken Burnett (Commissioner), author, lecturer and charity trustee

## Volunteering

The Commission highlighted the huge value that older volunteers bring to the sector and the changing profile, commitments and expectations of future generations. It identified that volunteering will have to 'compete against increasing demands on people's time and resources', and recommended that the sector develop new types of flexible, skilled volunteer roles and consultancy-style internships to attract people looking for new opportunities to use their skills in later life.

The importance of this becomes clearer in the context of the continued government focus on Fuller Working Lives and its success as demonstrated by high numbers of over 50s in employment and the increasing employment rate of older people. Whilst positive in many ways, it is likely to have implications for the commitment that this age group can make to volunteer roles and the time of life at which they may wish to take them on.

The recent fundraising scandals, collapse of Kids Company and the Charity Commission's more active role in identifying and tackling issues in charities has shone a spotlight on governance and the role of trustees. We know that 66% of charity trustees in England and Wales are aged 50 and over, so the implications for charity governance of changes in older people volunteering as trustees must also be considered urgently.

## Employment

The Commission highlighted a choice for the voluntary sector: to exemplify best practice in managing age in the workplace, becoming an employer of choice for people in later life or to get left behind as the private sector creams off the skills and experience of an ageing population. Whilst there are initiatives that respond to this, such as within Age UK and NIACE's mid-career review, it is not clear that there is much activity in the voluntary sector to take advantage of it. In contrast, a number of large businesses in the corporate sector are well-developed in this area, and the Centre for Ageing Better are partnering with Business in the Community. Is the voluntary sector putting enough effort in here, or will this be a missed opportunity?

## The broader context

Changes that are affecting the context within which the voluntary sector operates, such as changing funding streams, devolution, development of place-based approaches, and increasing demand for evidence, will impact on voluntary organisations of all types. Those organisations supporting older people may find that devolution and place-based approaches offer opportunities to deliver their work more effectively for the older and ageing

population. All organisations adapting to these changes will gain from thinking carefully about the implications of an ageing population for them—whether in adapting their services for the future, or in considering how they can make the most of all that older people can bring.

## Next steps

The Commission officially finished its work in March 2015, but the resources produced are still available online for free and the interest and enthusiasm of those involved remains. Whilst there is no dedicated resource going forward, we will continue to feed our recommendations into influential organisations, initiatives or individuals and look for opportunities to promote the thinking generated, including through our own work.

If you would like to share your feedback on the Commission's work or have any questions or suggestions, please get in touch via [Info@thinkNPC.org](mailto:info@thinkNPC.org). We'd love to hear what difference our work has made to your thinking.

### Find out more

**Website:** <https://voluntarysectorageing.org>

**Final report:** [Decision time: Will the voluntary sector embrace the age of opportunity?](#)

**Research report:** [Population Ageing & the Voluntary Sector: Key Figures & Projected Trends](#)

**Key facts:** [Infographics looking at the voluntary sector today and the population of tomorrow](#)



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**New Philanthropy Capital**

185 Park Street, London SE1 9BL

020 7620 4850

[info@thinkNPC.org](mailto:info@thinkNPC.org)

[@NPCthinks](#)

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