

Volunteering

(England)

December 2022

Everyone should have access to accessible and welcoming volunteering opportunities, enabling older people to contribute to their communities.

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, either as part of the transition into retirement from paid work or as a route back into paid work.

Barriers to volunteering

Government statistics show that the proportion of all adults engaging in formal volunteering at least once a month fell from 27% (about 11 million people) in 2013-14 to 17% in 2020-21 (about 8 million).ⁱ

Research on volunteering among people aged 50+ found that older people with lower incomes or low levels of education are under-represented among older volunteers.ⁱⁱ Disabled volunteers are more likely to say volunteering had negatively impacted their health and wellbeing than non-disabled people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Age UK's own research^{iv} suggests that issues include flexibility of the role, addressing transport requirements, making sure the volunteer environment is accessible and comfortable for older people and recognising and addressing community languages and cultural preferences.

Issues in deploying volunteers to carry out statutory services

Local Government has experienced huge funding cuts in recent years and many have sought to save money by commissioning the voluntary sector to deploy volunteers to staff services. However all too often the funding is not sufficient to cover the management, training and administrative costs for the outcomes they expect the service to achieve.

With the appropriate infrastructure and support, 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. However, there are significant risks to service continuity and sustainability. The constant need to recruit, train and support to the appropriate level means it is unlikely to be cheaper than using 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. For a Basic Level DBS check there is a fee, including for volunteers, which would need to be covered by either the individual or the organisation. A volunteer needs to be carrying out certain work for an enhanced level DBS check to be applied for,^v which can vary month-to-month. Asking volunteers to apply for a DBS check can impact on the safety of the people the volunteers are there to help and can also have cost implications.

Public Policy proposals

- Government and the public sector 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.
- All organisations that recruit volunteers should 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.
- National and local Government should support volunteers' training and accreditation, for example by offering accredited health and safety and safeguarding training.
- Basic level DBS checks should be free of charge. This would ease the financial burden on charities and other organisations who rely on volunteers.
- Government should 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.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and crosscutting themes such as age equality and human rights.

www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/

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 NCVO (2020), Time well spent: diversity and volunteering available [here](#)

^{iv} Your Voice Panel Surveys, Age UK a regular panel survey of older people who are hard to reach

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