

Community Contributions Roundtable report

Topic: Contributing to communities

Background

Many forms of community activity contribute towards enjoying a good later life. These vary from informal engagement (such as chats over a cup of tea with an elderly neighbour), through to regular unpaid activity with an organisation (such as a library), that has specified time use and tasks. More than two and a half million older people in England engage in formal volunteering each month¹.

Our research, 'Later Life in 2015'², found that as well as help and support to others, these activities also provide the person making a contribution with a sense of purpose, the chance to expand their circle of friends, and opportunities to mix with people from different ages and backgrounds.

Yet our initial consultations with people in later life have highlighted the challenges faced by some who would benefit most from this 'win-win'. In general, people further down the socio-economic scale report lower levels of community action³, as do people from black and minority ethnic groups⁴.

As more people are working and caring into later life, the traditional shift towards volunteering may be becoming harder to manage. The Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing⁵ recently criticised a 'collective failure of the imagination' of charities to harness the talents of an ageing population. There is a pressing need to uncover 'what works' in achieving sustained take up of community activity by more people in their 50s and beyond.

The Centre for Ageing Better is therefore prioritising community contributions. We want more people in later life to be able to take up opportunities to contribute their skills, knowledge and experience to their communities. We aim to draw together and share existing evidence, and build the evidence about promising approaches that can help this happen.

To initiate our programme of work on this area, Ageing Better organised a roundtable in London on 7th March 2016 that drew together participants from academic, public and charity sector backgrounds (see Annex 1 for list of participants).

The aims of the roundtable were to explore the evidence for how people can be supported to contribute to their communities; and identify where better evidence could support action to overcome problems.

¹ Calculated as 33% of the 5.4 million aged 65-74 plus 20% of the 4.4 million aged 75 and above, taking proportions from the 2014-15 Community Life Survey and demographics from 2015 ONS population estimates

² <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Later-life-in-2015-Ipsos-MORI-Ageing-Better.pdf>

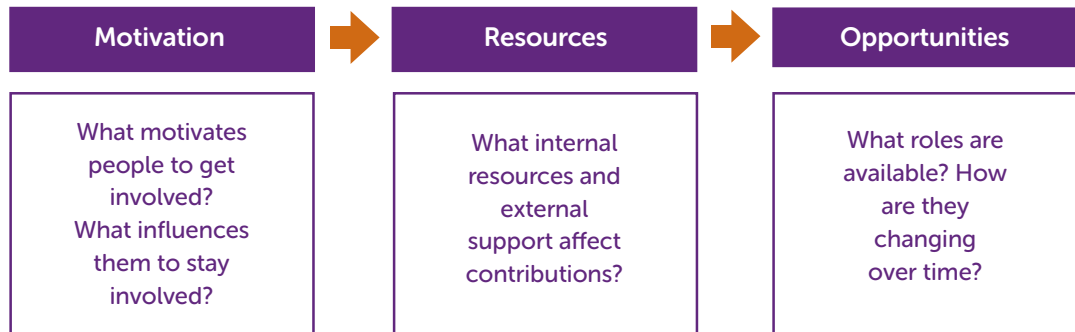
³ For instance, Mohan and Bulloch (2012) The idea of a 'civic core': what are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales? Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre working paper 73 - which uses data from the Citizenship survey to examine differences by occupational class

⁴ The Community Life survey 2015-16 finds some 28% of those with a 'White' background undertaking formal volunteering at least once per month, compared to 20% of those with an 'Ethnic Minority Group' background. A differential of six percentage points is also observed in those undertaking informal volunteering.

⁵ https://cvsanpc.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/decision-time_final-report-of-cvsa_mar15.pdf

Drawing on a framework developed by the Institute for Volunteering Research (Brodie et al, 2011), we structured conversation around three key factors that enable community contributions:

Figure 1 Benefits and barriers for participants in community contributions



Source: adapted from Brodie et al (2011) 'Pathways through participation' (p74)

The roundtable examined these issues in the context of two prominent topics:

- How to promote and sustain community contributions amongst those who are making the transition to retirement (or semi-retirement), and who are considering volunteering; and
- The role of community contributions in improving the employment prospects for those in their 50s who are unemployed or economically inactive.

Problems and solutions to these topics differ in at least two crucial dimensions. First, external sources of support vary widely in terms of the time, empathy and insights they provide to those making or seeking to make contributions. Second, different opportunities (such as formal versus informal volunteering) having differing effects, and differing standards of evidence on those effects. A range of such considerations led to a lively discussion among participants.

Summary

The discussion highlighted five themes – motivation, support and opportunities; specific issues relating to transitions to retirement; and specific issues relating to volunteering as a route into employment.

Motivation

1. Altruism and reciprocity are central to why people make community contributions – but there are a variety of other important reasons. Social relationships are important for many, and for some, volunteering is an opportunity for personal development in a less pressurised situation than paid work.
2. Motivations are fluid – both across generations (with sometimes markedly different expectations about suitable roles and management styles) and across a person's life (participants mentioned the "messy lives" of those making, or desiring to make, community contributions). People's choices of when, where and how to contribute reflect these diverse and changing motivations.
3. Organisations can, on occasion, unintentionally cut across the motivations of those making community contributions. This applies both to those actions that seek to 'formalise' voluntary activity; and to those strategies that 'take volunteers for granted' such as seeking to increase their numbers while cutting levels of paid staff.

Support

4. Support is needed before making a community contribution, as well as during the activity – for example, training on how to deal with the resistance that some recipients may have to 'being given help', or support to manage an individual's own health problems while contributing.
5. People who undertake community contributions in later life are influenced and supported in a variety of ways – family and friends; mentors; employers; charities; neighbourhood groups; local authority volunteer centres; and website listings.
6. Participants called for a more coordinated, 'whole system' approach to supporting volunteers, drawing on the different roles and strengths of different organisations and agencies (including employers as well as public and voluntary sector) and deploying new techniques, while working with the grain of existing informal networks and sources of support.

Opportunities

7. Participants identified a range of new opportunities for people to contribute their professional and life skills, going beyond the traditional 'formal' volunteering role to include, for example, micro-volunteering and digital volunteering. Alongside this positive perspective there were, however, views expressed identifying possible drawbacks to expanded roles for volunteers, in particular a mistrust of replacing paid staff.
8. The Corporate Social Responsibility agenda was felt to offer significant untapped opportunities to promote community contributions, for people in the middle of their working life as well as those nearing retirement or stepping down their level of paid employment.
9. One participant saw opportunities for public services to support people in difficult circumstances to make community contributions for their own wellbeing and personal development, benefiting them and preventing further demands on services as well benefiting their communities.

Transition to retirement

10. Participants argued that transitions to retirement are far less abrupt and far more diverse as compared to previous generations, and that this needs to be recognised and supported.
11. It was felt that employers should take a holistic view of the transition to retirement – beyond simply a single input on financial planning, often at quite a late point. This would entail providing advice and support to employees to help them take actions that promote a sense of purpose and wellbeing throughout their careers, as a key element of being a 'good employer'.

Volunteering as a route to employment

12. Some participants expressed reservations about undue reliance on volunteering as a route into work. In particular, it was felt that it was important to take local labour market conditions and barriers on the employer side into account, and not be unrealistic about the possible impact of volunteering.
13. In addition, it was argued that an 'instrumental' perspective on volunteering (seeing such roles mainly as something to do for personal benefit) could be counterproductive – both for the communities being supported, and for the person themselves (since they are engaged in activity that they might not find interesting or purposeful in itself).

Feedback from the roundtable

Our report of the roundtable examines in turn these themes of motivation; support; opportunities; specific issues relating to transitions to retirement; and specific issues relating to volunteering as a route into employment for those in their 50s. The final section outlines our next steps on the community contributions agenda.

Motivation

Participants emphasized that those who make community contributions do so from a range of reasons, above and beyond altruistic or spiritual motivations.

“ It’s just something you do. When a neighbour’s in trouble you help out ...”

“ Don’t ignore the reciprocity that makes many want to be volunteers – that’s when they are the beneficiary and have been the beneficiary of services that have used volunteers and they want to give something back.”

“ Volunteering gives you a chance to explore what your true potential is - either by using skills you don’t realise you have, or ways to reapply the skills you’ve already got in a different setting.”

“ There’s a trend in the way that volunteering opportunities are being packaged for social opportunities – such as gyms which combine keeping fit with befriending.”

Motivations are greatly influenced also by personal circumstances, not least previous engagement.

“ The most important predictor of whether you’re going to be volunteering in your 60s is whether you are volunteering in your 50s or your 40s.”

However, some people may not have the true consequences of their actions readily identifiable.



A lot of people find themselves alone and if you're in a happy family now it's hard to imagine that later you might have 15 or 20 years alone."

It was stressed that an individual's choice of which forms of community contributions (or what balance of community contributions) to undertake reflects different motivations. Consequently, the concept of a "spectrum" of community contributions was considered important.



Everyday help often doesn't look at all like 'volunteering'."

Informal volunteering has a great advantage for some since it involves much less bureaucracy. However, this poses challenges for organisations trying to harness this kind of activity.



There's a lot to be learnt from some school gates, which work brilliantly for parents as a way of giving each other support and befriending."



There's a risk that in attempting to formalise things like befriending - you might almost kill off the very essence of it."



Many villages have got some kind of lunch club for older people and at some point you have to learn that you use a particular chopping board for one sort of food, and we've got volunteers who've been cooking quite happily for 50 years and suddenly they're being told they're doing it wrong ..."

Support

Participants cited highlighted major barriers that some people face, and the need for support to address these.



Potential volunteers may have messy lives, they may have been made redundant as they got older, they may have had health problems, mental health problems. They could have stopped working in a traumatic way ... They need support if they're to make a good go of a role that will enhance their lives."



People have very different start points - health and skills and transferrable experience."



People with high care and support needs, they need support to have opportunities to reciprocate the care they receive from others and give back."

More subtle barriers could still present major problems in some cases.



Everybody is up for inter-generational activity, but sometimes these interactions can lead to one side or other or both feeling rejected, because people can't see past a vocabulary from the other that to them is just not acceptable."



Accepting help can be much more difficult than giving help for all sorts of reasons – it really makes a difference to be trained in making it look like help for the helper or some similar type of technique."

Participants noted that there was a significant amount of support already in place, and that the picture was much more complicated than perceived by many policy-makers.



There's a 'cobweb' of connections in local communities, people giving and taking, people building friendship and trust, and it's very important to recognise that whole picture and make sure that the formal kind of volunteering doesn't cut across those messy, informal, mutual networks."

Trusted intermediaries and meeting spaces were felt to be a crucial element of this network of support.



Informal relationships so often come about because of meeting spaces in communities."



People trust GPs, they trust churches. There are places people trust and think about and already probably contribute without thinking about it."

There were calls for a more co-ordinated approach, while recognising the challenges to this.



It's crucial to get systems in place to be able to make a better matching between volunteers and voluntary opportunities."



As people get more long term conditions, we should move away from an individual focus to think about the whole system - GPs, employers, councils - to help some of those transitions"



Public money's tight. We need to be realistic. Local authorities can be there to make the partnerships flourish, by advice and guidance and potentially a little bit of funding, but it's got to be more the charities and the other organisations which take up the baton on this."



Companies need to recognise more what it means to be a good employer, so that you get more of a mix between employment and volunteering."



We shouldn't put all the focus on the volunteers. What about changing the employers, the work placement opportunities and the retirement transition arrangements?"

In particular, participants called for charities to 'raise their game' in their support for volunteers.



The voluntary sector still requires people to volunteer quite formally, and this means there's a mismatch, instead we need a continuum of roles that people can step up or down to as they choose."



They should be doing more to invest in support structures for volunteers."



There needs to be more recognition about the difficulties of volunteer management – more training for volunteer managers, and more use of tools on impact."

However, it was felt that there was much scope for further research on the agenda.

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There's a big evidence gap in deciding which ways actually do result in a cost effective and resource effective way of recruiting, harnessing the energy of volunteers."

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If we look at what's been done for younger people then there's huge scope to use behavioural change techniques, incentives, to encourage more older people to get engaged."

Opportunities

Participants observed opportunities both for individuals and for organisations.

In terms of opportunities for individuals, participants noted both a range of constraints and emerging prospects.

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It's important to look at people in the round, they shouldn't be confined by their paid work experience."

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Some people's skills don't get the recognition they deserve because they haven't had an official job - this particularly affects women who've brought up a family and run a home."

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Micro-volunteering means there's some interesting projects giving people a chance to transition to new industries."

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We have a lot of generations coming through now who are growing up and ageing with technology and now we can use that to open access but also combat isolation."

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A lot of people have useful non-professional skills, whether it's driving or whatever, and they would want to contribute if the opportunities were right for them."

In addition, for those individuals who were facing “messy lives”, or were at risk of “lacking a sense of purpose”, one participant argued:

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There’s a triple dividend⁶ to be gained if things go well. Some people will go into work but there are other massive social and public benefits to people even if they don’t lead to full scale to work.”

In relation to organisations, volunteering is seen both as a threat and an opportunity:

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There’s been a huge growth in demand for professional skills on a pro bono basis, particularly from small to medium sized charities.”

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Sometimes you see organisations – especially the NHS and public services - not wanting to use a volunteer for what otherwise might be a paid job ... there’s a real tendency to just try and define it as additional or unskilled and complementary. I think we need to explore this attitude towards skilled opportunities, and how that can be managed.”

Transition into retirement

The transition to retirement is at least to some extent an untapped opportunity – but one that is shifting from previous decades.

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The mindset is still prevalent, you work until a certain Friday afternoon and then you stop, and then you go on holiday ... People need to understand more that when you retire you’ve probably got 20 or 30 years still to live, most of it in good health.”

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People’s retirement is going to be changing very quickly as new cohorts come through, and this affects the supply of people who are both willing and able to make community contributions when working lives do extend, at least for those who are fit enough to.”

⁶ The idea of the Triple Dividend – for an individual in difficult circumstances, for the community they contribute to, and for the public services they might otherwise need to draw on – was developed by the Early Action Taskforce http://www.community-links.org/uploads/documents/Triple_Dividend.pdf

A general view was that a constructive approach is needed if the opportunities are to be seized



It's much more positive to think, when you get older, how you contribute, how do you change your skill set, rather than - you should start volunteering because otherwise you'll get lonely, you're going to die."

Employers were seen as crucial in managing the change well.



Companies need to recognise what it means to be a good employer, see the wellbeing benefits from supporting volunteering."

Such an approach sees retirement as one point in a process, and consequently it was recommended that programmes for engagement for community contributions should reflect that wider process.



Focusing too much on the approach to retirement means you don't get the insights from younger people who are volunteering, people who are in work or are part of the employer volunteer services."

Volunteering as a route into employment for those in later middle age

Several participants expressed the view that there are major problems to address for those who are unemployed in later middle age.



There is still a prevalent idea around that older people should get out of the way and let the younger people have their jobs, and that needs to constantly be attacked, because it's completely fallacious."



Job advisors find it hard to hard to give good advice to those that transition in and out of work as they get older."



There is a major problem with the 50s who are made redundant. I have experience of somebody at the moment who is getting to the interviews, getting to the last two but not getting the jobs ... the people they're employing are younger but have more knowledge."



There's often an assumption that people are less productive towards the end of their working life, but if people get training and aren't ignored then that may well be untrue."

Volunteering was seen by many as potentially useful as a route to increasing employability (though not a panacea), but this was far from a unanimous view.



Community contributions and volunteering have obvious potential as a way of getting people into work, but they're not enough by themselves. There needs to be a structured approach, that reflects capacity, circumstance, job search support needs."



Volunteering, especially for those with mental health issues or something like that, has attractions. It brings less stress because there's less obligations, less responsibility, it may be just a very much more supportive environment - and so for those people the issue is how do you replicate the things that are enabling them to flourish in a volunteering role?"



If you're looking at supporting an older person into work, volunteering might be an unjustified intermediary step. Work placements might be a better route."



There seems to be a lack of strong examples of volunteering or other forms of community contributions as a way of getting people back into work - that's disappointing but it's also an opportunity for evidence strengthening approaches."

A further key point of debate was on the extent to which employability should be the dominant focus of attention, rather than the act of community contributions – unintended consequences can be both positive and negative.



In one scheme looking at neighbourhood approaches to loneliness, several volunteers who had been economically inactive got into jobs, got into different activities. That had a lot to do with confidence, having support and so on - but it was never thought that it should be turned into a job gaining exercise, because that was not the point of it."

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It is well worth looking at programmes that didn't aim to bring people back into work but actually helped massively, like the Health Champion social action programme in Sheffield.”

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Having routes in work as the dominant theme might mean we end up with so much churn it's not only expensive for charities but the actual experience of making community contributions is compromised.”

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People definitely can get attached to volunteering instead of employment. Once they've been in an environment for a while that works for them and they've formed relationships, why should you be surprised they feel reluctant to move out to a different one?”

Next steps

The Centre for Ageing Better is very grateful to the roundtable participants for their time and energy taking part in the event.

We are reviewing the evidence on how making a contribution to their community can improve people's wellbeing in later life. As part of this, we will look at the evidence on the wider spectrum of community contributions (including informal volunteering and neighbourliness), since a broad perspective was identified by participants as important in gaining a deeper understanding.

To understand more about enabling more people to make a valued contribution to their community, we want to explore the theme of trusted intermediaries which participants highlighted. We will bring together learning from organisations and processes which already help people find opportunities to contribute. As well as evidence from existing practice that can be shared and applied more widely, we will identify gaps and promising ideas to investigate further.

We are particularly interested in what will work for people who are most likely to benefit from improved support – people who are not currently making a contribution but who could do so with relatively limited additional help; and people who occasionally make a contribution but who don't feel valued or recognised for this. We are commissioning research into motivations, support, barriers and opportunities related to greater participation for these groups.

Annex 1 – Participants at the Community Contributions roundtable

Anna Dixon	Centre for Ageing Better
Lord Geoff Filkin	Centre for Ageing Better
Catherine Foot	Centre for Ageing Better
Jean Gaston-Parry	UKAFA
Ilona Haslewood	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Matt Hill	Institute for Volunteering Research
David Knott	Centre for Social Action, Cabinet Office
Louise Mabley	National Association of Voluntary Services Managers
Jill Mortimer	Age UK
Guy Robertson	Positive Ageing Associates
Ben Robinson	Community Links
Neil Reeder	Centre for Ageing Better
Patrick Shine	Shaftesbury Partnership
Allison Smith	Royal Voluntary Service
Jane South	Leeds Beckett University
Jamie Ward-Smith	Do-It Trust