

Findings from Ipsos MORI and Centre for Ageing Better deliberative workshops with people aged 45 and over

Topic: I am making a valued contribution
to my community

About the workshops

In January and February 2016, Ipsos MORI and the Centre for Ageing Better conducted two day-long deliberative workshops with people aged 45 and over, one in London and one in Birmingham.

The workshops were the final phase of a programme of work conducted by Ipsos MORI for the Centre for Ageing Better, looking at how different groups of people in England are currently experiencing and thinking about later life. The report and related materials from the earlier phases of this research can be found [here](#). Part of this work involved analysing data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing to develop six segments of the 50 and over population who are experiencing later life in markedly different ways, in terms of issues such as their health, financial security, social connections and overall wellbeing. These segments were:

- Thriving boomers
- Downbeat boomers
- Can do and connected
- Squeezed middle aged
- Worried and disconnected
- Struggling and alone

More information on the segments is available [here](#). The workshops brought together people from all six of these segments to spend time discussing and reflecting on a set of topics that the Centre for Ageing Better has identified as priority areas in achieving a good later life. The topics were:

- I live in a home and neighbourhood suited to me
- I am in work
- I feel confident to manage major life changes
- I am making a valued contribution to my community
- I keep physically and mentally healthy and active

Participants explored what each topic meant to them, and then developed and debated their own ideas for what actions or changes could help more people enjoy this aspect of a good later life.

The data generated from the discussions were analysed using a thematic approach, where the individual ideas and suggestions made within each of the topic areas discussed were categorised into similar themes.

This short briefing summarises the main findings from the workshops on the topic '**I am making a valued contribution to my community**'. Further briefings are available on each of the other topics.

What does the topic 'I am making a valued contribution to my community' mean to people, and why does it matter?

Most participants understood this primarily in terms of formal volunteering but also noted informal actions such as checking in on their neighbours. Regardless of their definition, participants felt that making a contribution to their community was worthwhile not only for those who directly benefited from this, but also for their own wellbeing. This was because making a contribution provided a sense of **structure and purpose** – something many were worried about losing as they gave up formal employment. This was noted across segments but was particularly prevalent among older participants who had been out of work for some time.

"It makes you feel worthwhile. If you work in a job for a long time and then retire, then you need to get that self-worth from somewhere else. Otherwise you might as well die."

Downbeat Boomer, London

In a similar vein, participants noted that volunteering or contributing to the community can give people responsibility and put them in a position of respect, where others may ask them for guidance or advice. This particularly appealed as it was a role that many missed on retirement.

"I do miss that – being asked things. It was the biggest thing I missed after being retired. I used to run projects and people would ask me things; if they had a problem they'd come to me. When you're retired all that stops, so you have to do something else. Perhaps if there was something that I could contribute in that respect, it probably would help"

Squeezed Middle, Birmingham

More generally, a strengthened sense of purpose and responsibility were seen as factors that contributed to better health (particularly mental health).

"I think it helps you mentally and physically."

Downbeat Boomer, Birmingham

Contributing to their community was also seen as a way for people to **give back to society**, and ensure that others are able to benefit from the same advantages that they have had. For instance, some participants highlighted the

ways in which their community has supported them through difficult times. Because of this, they are now motivated to contribute to help ensure that the same kinds of support are there for future generations.

“ I get a huge amount from my community. It gives me friends, stability and an education for my children. I want to give something back in order to help sustain that.”

Downbeat Boomer, London

Contributing to their community was also considered a valuable way of fostering **intergenerational cohesion**; people of all ages can become involved in community activities for the benefit of everyone. This reflects findings from other discussions during the workshops which placed value on interacting with people across different age groups.

The value of these relationships was felt to lie partly in people from across the generations being able to offer different kinds of knowledge and experience.

“ I would like to volunteer more, and I would go back to the school again if I could. Helping children with special needs is so fulfilling.”

Downbeat Boomer, London

In addition, these relationships were felt to be a benefit for older people in terms of keeping them engaged with modern life, and, in some ways, keeping them “young.”

Younger participants, particularly those in the Squeezed Middle Aged segment, took longer to think about how contributing to the community would be beneficial to older people; instead, they tended to focus on what younger people can do to help older members of the community, rather than on the contributions that older people themselves can make. This seemed to be influenced by the fact that they did not identify themselves as being “older” yet. Once they started thinking about what they might do over the next ten or twenty years, they identified similar benefits to the other participants in the workshops.

What could help more people make a contribution to their community as they get older?

The majority of participants were keen to contribute to their communities and made a range of suggestions around how this can be encouraged and facilitated.

Feeling valued

When considering how they might contribute to their community in later life, some participants noted that in practice this may often translate as moving from paid employment into unpaid work. In order for people to want to do this they suggested that it was important that those who gave their time felt valued and respected in these voluntary roles. They warned that, without this, it would be easy to feel as though their skills and generosity were being taken advantage of.



I have stopped making a contribution. I had bags of time when I first retired, and I gave a lot of my time to the local community then. I was chairman of the football club for ten years but I haven't heard from them since I left. I tried to get involved with something else but they didn't want me. I am a bit cynical now."

Thriving Boomer, London

Though contributing to the community was not usually expected to have a financial incentive, people did expect that it should have some of the other benefits associated with working. Participants wanted to feel that their contributions were appreciated and were making a difference. They also needed to feel that their views were listened to and acknowledged.

Making opportunities visible and available to older people

For people to make a contribution to their community, they need to be aware of existing services and organisations that they might potentially become a part of. Participants felt that the local authorities had a role to play here by, for instance, reopening community centres – many of which were thought to have closed in recent years as a result of pressures on public spending.

This was identified across the segments and was seen as particularly concerning given how community centres were valued as safe places where people can get involved in a range of different activities – both as a recipient and as a volunteer.

“ We say reopen the community centres that have been closed, because again, that gives people a purpose to go somewhere...then put posters through the door to tell people about this. People are scared to let people into their houses, but there are dozens of community centres that have been closed. They could be revamped – they’re there ready – just get it manned!”

Downbeat Boomer, Birmingham

Some suggestions from participants for making opportunities visible and available are shown in the boxes below:

“Open more community centres” and “reopen community centres that have closed” – to provide somewhere for individuals to meet, find out about and become involved in activities

“Hold coffee morning for specific ages to share ideas and implement” – to allow likeminded peers to find out about and plan activities

“Charities – open door events” – to allow individuals to find out about available opportunities in the local area

Another method of making community based opportunities accessible to older people suggested by participants was allowing those nearing retirement to take some time out of work to participate in voluntary activities.

This point was particularly made by the downbeat boomers, who were often still in work, but was reinforced by participants in other segments in separate conversations about employment. It was thought that a scheme like this could be subsidised by employers and, along with increasing exposure to volunteering opportunities, would also help ease people into retirement.

“ Employers could give people a day release to do community based activity whilst at work, and I think that is especially good for those who are close to retiring.”

Downbeat Boomer, London

“Employers – give people day release for community based activity” - to give individuals the time to explore appropriate opportunities prior to retirement

Finally, advertising was considered to be important, especially to encourage participation across a range of older people, not just those who are already well connected in their community. Putting leaflets through doors, and in places often frequented by older people such as libraries and GPs, was suggested as a means of doing this, as was placing adverts in local newspapers or magazines.

Turning this around, participants suggested a local leaflet to advertise the skills of retired people. This would allow employers, voluntary and community organisations or even individuals to access an untapped source of knowledge and expertise in their area. Some suggestions for advertising available opportunities and skills are shown below:

“Community volunteer register” - for individuals to register their interest and availability

“Voluntary opportunities newsletter” – to allow individuals to find out about available opportunities in the local area

“Councils to advertise for people to do voluntary work” - to allow individuals to find out about available opportunities in the local area

Reducing barriers to participation

Participants noted that the state of health could be a major influence on the ability to make contributions to the community. It was considered important that provision is made to support individuals with a range of health needs to ensure they are not excluded.

“ I think he needs help with his health issues before he can move forward in the community. Once your health is good, then you can do different things, he could join different clubs. If you don't feel well, you don't want to do other things.”

Downbeat Boomer, London

Next steps

The Centre for Ageing Better is very grateful to the workshop participants for their time and energy taking part in the workshops. We are using the insights and ideas that people generated to feed into our work programmes.

We are reviewing the evidence on how making a contribution to the community can improve people's wellbeing in later life. As part of this, we will look at the evidence on informal contributions as well as formal volunteering, and a sense of purpose and relationships, both identified by participants as important components.

In our work on enabling more people to make a valued contribution to their community, we want to explore the theme of 'making opportunities visible and available to older people' which participants highlighted. We will bring together learning from organisations, groups, individuals, community spaces and processes which already help people find and take up 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 will engage more deeply with people in these groups to understand better what can help them.