

Later Life in 2015: Managing major life changes

Analysis of the views and experiences of people
aged 50 and over

Introduction

[Our research - Later Life in 2015](#) - found that psychological dimensions were important to a good later life, with people's attitudes and outlook a major factor in whether they were happy in later life. Further, participants felt that having an optimistic outlook on life was key to managing major life changes.

The Centre for Ageing Better commissioned Ipsos MORI to investigate happiness in later life and identify the factors that make for a good later life. A mixed methods approach was used, involving analysis of existing data to identify groups of people with similar experiences of later life, in-depth interviews and visits with people in each group, and a survey of people aged 50 and over in England. [See end-note: 'Background to the survey' for further information]

This briefing introduces what we mean by major life changes, and outlines some of the findings from the survey and interview data related to managing major life changes.

1. What are the key major life changes in later life?

Later life is a time of change, including: retirement; moving; becoming a grandparent; becoming a carer; relationship breakdown; bereavement; change in health; end of life issues; and entering care¹. **While some cope well with these transitions, which tend to increase in later life, others feel a loss, of career, health and mobility, of home, friends and loved ones.** Transitions can occur at the same time and can potentially influence or trigger each other. While transitions are typically related to serious challenges, they can also be opportunities for growth and development, such as retirement.

¹ Robertson, G. (2014) Transitions in Later Life, *Positive Ageing Associates*

2. Does having a positive outlook in later life help you manage life changes?

The new evidence that we commissioned with Ipsos MORI, [Later life in 2015](#), found that people's attitudes and outlook were a major factor in whether they were happy in later life ([see downbeat boomers](#)). Some people who had lost a partner or were retired struggled to maintain social connections and lacked companionship ([see worried and disconnected](#)). In contrast some people's strong social connections helped them manage such changes ([see can do and connected](#)). We found that some participants felt they were **able to make their way through life changes due to an optimistic outlook on life**. Those participants – typically from both the Thriving Boomer and the Can Do and Connected segments – who felt better able to weather the challenges and changes they faced in later life, partly attributed this to their strong social connections but they also put a lot of it down to their optimistic outlook on life.



Your outlook, just having the positive thing that today is dark, tomorrow might not be, all things pass. My husband died, it wasn't my plan to be widowed young, but I thought every tomorrow won't be as bad...and you get through."

Thriving Boomer, London

Previous longitudinal evidence has shown that **older adults with more positive self-perceptions of ageing live longer and healthier lives²**. The study found that **older adults with more positive attitudes towards ageing lived, on average, 7.5 years longer than those without**. These findings are further supported by another study which examined the impact of people's attitudes towards retirement on their health outcomes³. Results found that **people with more positive attitudes towards retirement live, on average, 4.9 years longer than those with negative attitudes**.

² Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Kunkel, S. R., & Kasl, S. V. (2002). Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 83(2), 261

³ Lakra, D. C., Ng, R., & Levy, B. R. (2012). Increased longevity from viewing retirement positively. *Ageing and Society*, 32(08), 1418-1427

3. Who needs support through major life changes?

In our survey with Ipsos MORI of 1,389 people, aged 50 and over, participants were asked selected questions from the Brief Resilience Scale⁴. Figure 1 shows responses to the four questions within the brief resilience scale:

- I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times
- I have a hard time making it through stressful events
- I usually come through difficult times with little trouble
- I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life.

Figure 1: Responses to 4 questions in the Brief Resilience scale among people aged 50 and over

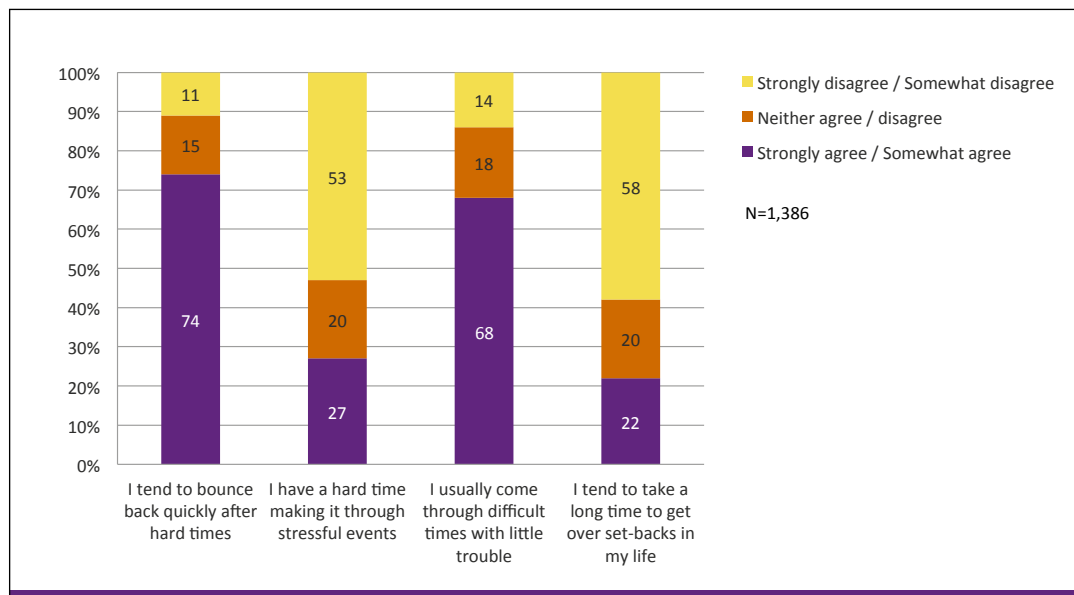


Figure 1 shows the majority (68%) of respondents felt able to come through difficult times with little trouble. 33% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement "I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times" and over 70% either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. A 2008 study⁵, using data from the British Household Survey, found that just 14.5% of respondents felt able to bounce back after adversity.

4 Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The brief resilience scale: assessing the ability to bounce back. *International journal of behavioral medicine*, 15(3), 194-200

5 Netuveli, G., Wiggins, R. D., Montgomery, S. M., Hildon, Z., & Blane, D. (2008). Mental health and resilience at older ages: bouncing back after adversity in the British Household Panel Survey. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 62(11), 987-991.

However, Figure 1 also demonstrates that there is still a large proportion of people in later life who do not feel able to manage life changes successfully. **More than a quarter of people (27%) aged 50 and over feel that they have a hard time making it through stressful events, and 22% said they tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in life.**

Our research highlights some groups of people who are less resilient and who could benefit from support to successfully manage major life changes.

Figure 2: Responses to 'I have a hard time making it through stressful events' by ethnicity

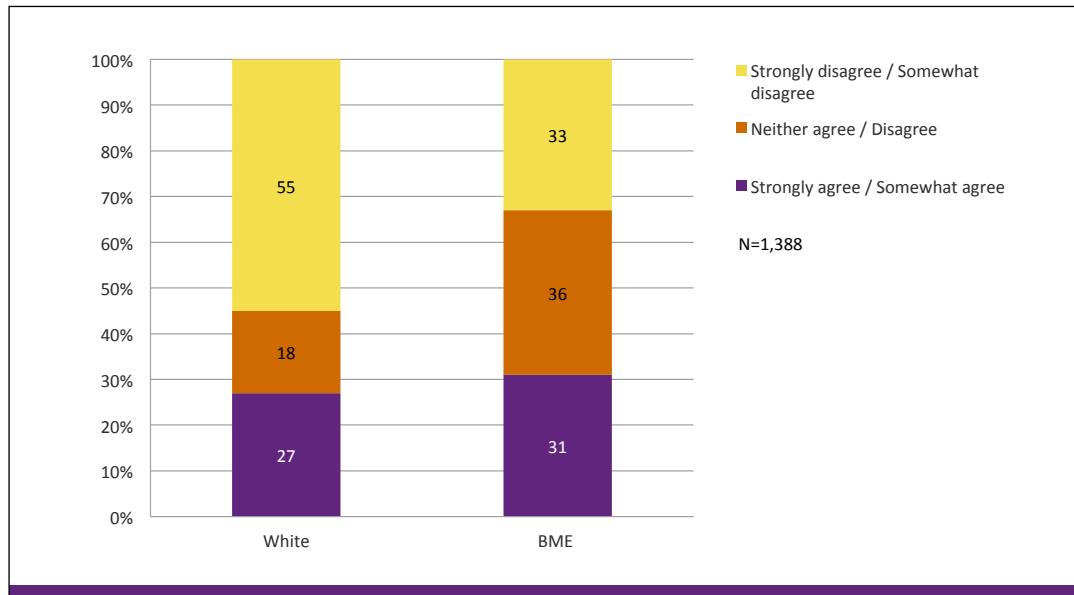


Figure 2 shows that people aged 50 and over, from Black and minority ethnic groups, are more likely to feel that they have a hard time making it through stressful events. While 55% of white respondents disagreed with the statement "I have a hard time making it through stressful events", only 33% of those from BME groups disagreed with it.

There was also a significantly larger proportion of those within BME groups who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This potentially suggests there might be cultural differences in how people perceive these questions.

Figure 3: Responses to 'I have a hard time making it through stressful events' by income

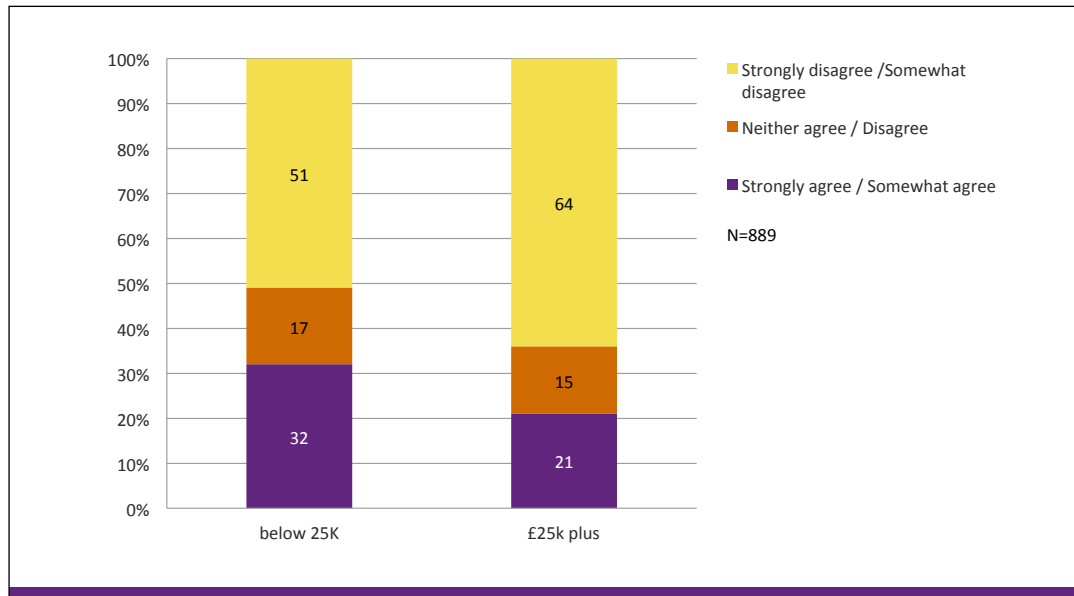


Figure 3 shows that people who earn less than £25k per year are more likely to struggle when making it through stressful events, with 32% agreeing with the statement, compared to 21% of those who earn more than £25k.

There has been mixed evidence in the literature on the relationship between income and resilience. Wells and colleagues⁶ found that having a higher income was associated with lower resilience levels. Authors suggested that this might have been due to the fact that data were collected when the economy was taking a downturn and those with higher incomes were losing more money in the stock market than those with lower incomes. However that finding is not supported by the literature, with most previous evidence supporting our finding that those on lower incomes are at greatest risk of struggling to manage stressful life events^{7, 8}.

6 Wells, M. (2010). Resilience in older adults living in rural, suburban, and urban areas. *Online Journal of Rural Nursing & Health Care*, 10(2): 45- 54

7 Hardy, S. E., Concato, J., & Gill, T. M. (2004). Resilience of community-dwelling older persons. *Journal of the American Geriatrics society*, 52(2), 257-262

8 Wagnild, G. (2003). Resilience and successful aging. Comparison among low and high income older adults. *Journal of gerontological nursing*, 29(12), 42-49

Figure 4: Responses to 'I have a hard time making it through stressful events' and social grade⁹

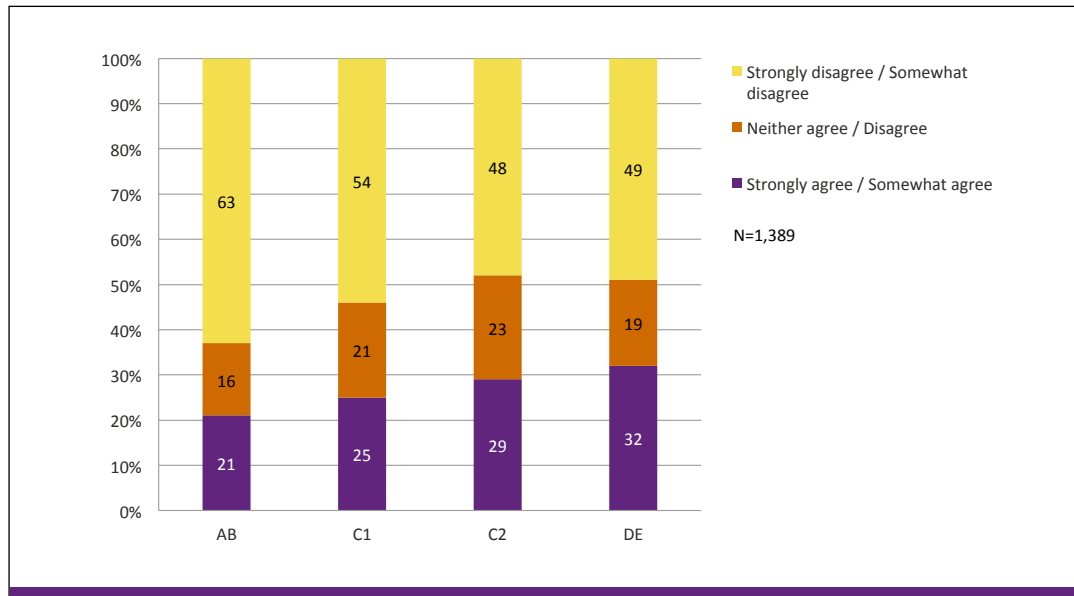


Figure 4 shows that people who have worked in lower skilled manual jobs (C2) are more likely to have a hard time making it through stressful life events (29%) compared to those in professional and managerial jobs (AB).

⁹ Socio-economic Classification (SEC) show the occupation of the respondent: A - Higher managerial, administrative or professional; B - Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional; C1 - Supervisory or clerical, junior managerial, administrative or professional; C2 - Skilled manual workers; D - Semi and unskilled manual workers; E - State pensioners or widows (no other earner), casual or lowest grade workers.

Figure 5: Responses to 'I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times' by how well respondents are managing financially

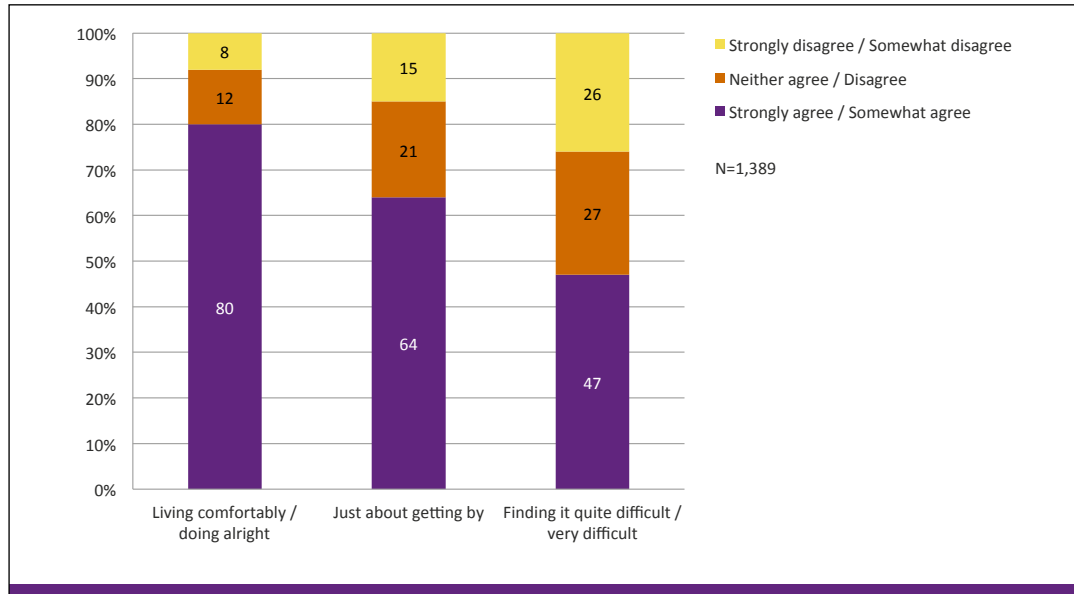


Figure 5 shows that those who find it quite difficult or very difficult to manage financially are significantly less likely (47%) to feel they bounce back quickly after hard times, compared to people who are living comfortably or are doing alright financially (80%).

Figure 6: Responses to 'I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times' by working status

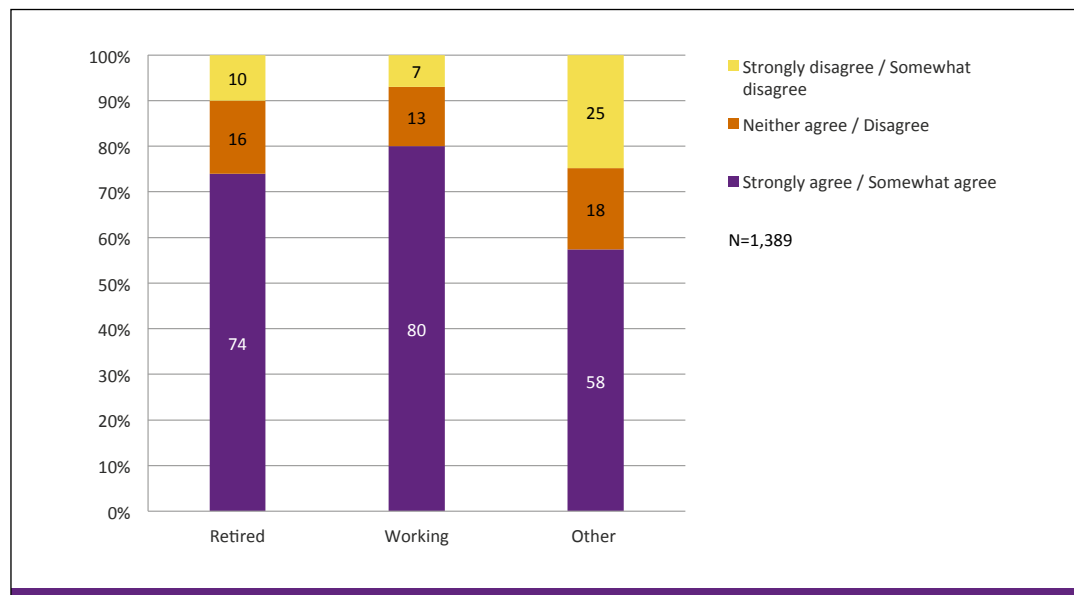


Figure 6 shows that, while people in work or out of work due to retirement are able to bounce back quickly after hard times (74% and 80% respectively), those who are out of work (but not retired) are significantly less likely to bounce back after hard times (58%). Those out of work were predominantly unemployed (some were housewives), and therefore might lack the social and financial support that work can provide when times are tough.

Figure 7: Responses to 'I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times' by whether they have a long standing physical or mental disability, illness or impairment

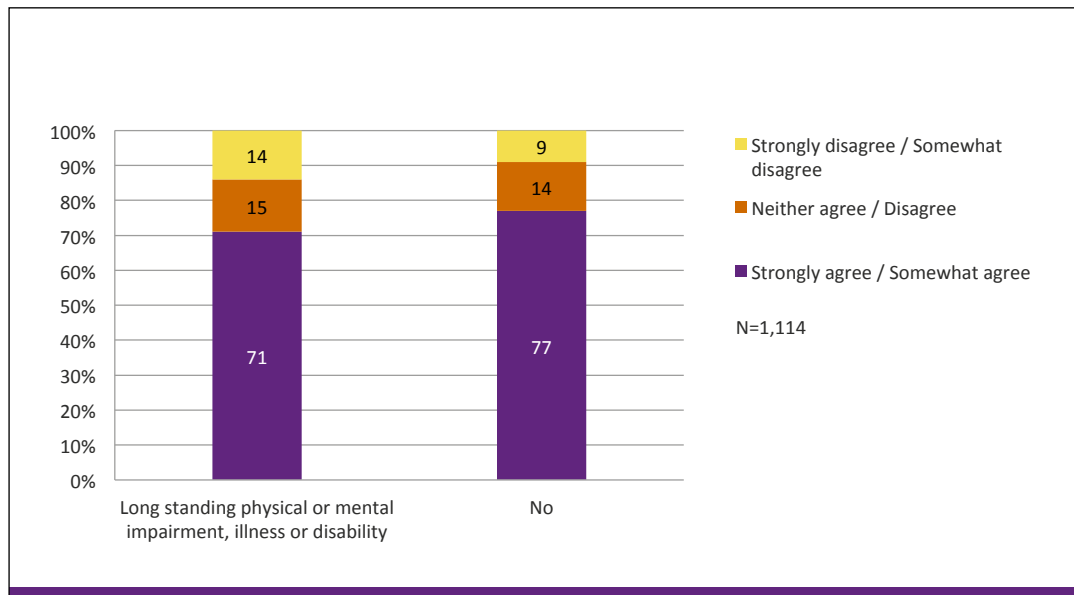


Figure 7 shows a small, but significant, difference between those with a long standing physical or mental disability, illness or impairment, and those in good health. People with a long standing health condition were more likely to feel they do not bounce back quickly after hard times (14%) compared to those in good health (9%). While the difference here is relatively small, it is statistically significant, and suggests that those who are in poorer health may require additional support to make it through major life changes.

There is relatively limited evidence to compare the current findings to, however some previous studies suggest that those at greatest risk include: those with lower self-reported health and wellbeing^{10, 11}; those with lower perceived control¹²; fewer social networks¹³; lower income^{6,7}; and poor early living conditions. The recent GO Science report¹⁴ on resilience characterised the key influencers on resilience into: individual factors, such as outlook on life, optimism and spirituality; community factors such as family, social support and social participation; and factors at the societal level, culture and service provision.

10 Gallacher J, Mitchell C, Heslop L and Christopher G (2012) Resilience to health related adversity in older people. *Emerald Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*, 13(3): 197-204

11 Gooding, P. A., Hurst, A., Johnson, J. & Tarrier, N. (2012) Psychological resilience in young and older adults, *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 27(3): 262-270

12 Jackson, B. R., & Bergeman, C. S. (2011). How does religiosity enhance well-being? The role of perceived control. *Psychology of religion and spirituality*, 3(2), 149

13 Fuller-Iglesias, H., Sellars, B., & Antonucci, T. C. (2008). Resilience in old age: Social relations as a protective factor. *Research in Human Development*, 5(3), 181-193

14 Bennett, K. (2015). Emotional and personal resilience through life. Future of an ageing population: evidence review, Foresight Government Office for Science

Conclusions

- A large proportion of people aged 50 and over are able to manage life changes successfully
- However, there are inequalities with certain groups at risk of missing out on a good later life as they struggle to manage later life changes
- Those at greatest risk include:
 - Black and minority ethnic groups
 - Those with an income of less than £25k
 - Individuals in social grade DE
 - Those who are finding it difficult to manage financially
 - People who are out of work but not retired
 - People who have a long standing physical or mental impairment, illness or disability
- Future work is required to understand these inequalities and learn ways in which we can better support people to successfully manage life changes

Background to the survey

The survey was designed by Ipsos MORI in collaboration with Ageing Better including defining older age, social, financial and health expectations and experiences of ageing, wellbeing and happiness, and community aspects of ageing. The survey questionnaire was 36 questions in length and ran at an average of 16 minutes per respondent. Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative sample of 1,389 adults aged 50 and over across England between 25th September and 18th October 2015. The data are weighted to indicators matching the profile of the population aged 50 and over living in England including age group, region, gender, social grade, employment status, housing tenure and ethnicity. The tables are published, and can be found with a full methodological report [here](#).

This study, Later Life in 2015: An analysis of the views and experiences of people aged 50 and over, the full findings from which can be found here <http://laterlife.ageing-better.org.uk> was commissioned by the Centre for Ageing Better

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