

# Cast aside?

| Exploring the presence of older characters  
| in British films



# Introduction

As Ageing Better's [previous research](#) has highlighted, the language and imagery used across society related to ageing and older people is overwhelmingly negative. Ageing is associated with decline and ill-health, and older people are commonly portrayed as frail, vulnerable and dependent.

Harmful stereotypes about ageing are common across many parts of society. The media, advertising, film, and TV are some of the most obvious and apparent perpetrators of the stereotyping that feeds our prejudices about ageing and underpins discrimination in our institutions such as workplaces and healthcare settings. The underrepresentation of older people in mass media compounds the problem and

the lack of diverse and realistic portrayals makes the negative stereotypes we see more potent.

While often not regarded as being as harmful as other types of discrimination, negative attitudes to ageing and older people have serious consequences, sowing distrust between generations, impacting people's feelings of self-worth, their choices and opportunities as they get older, and [harming society and the economy](#).

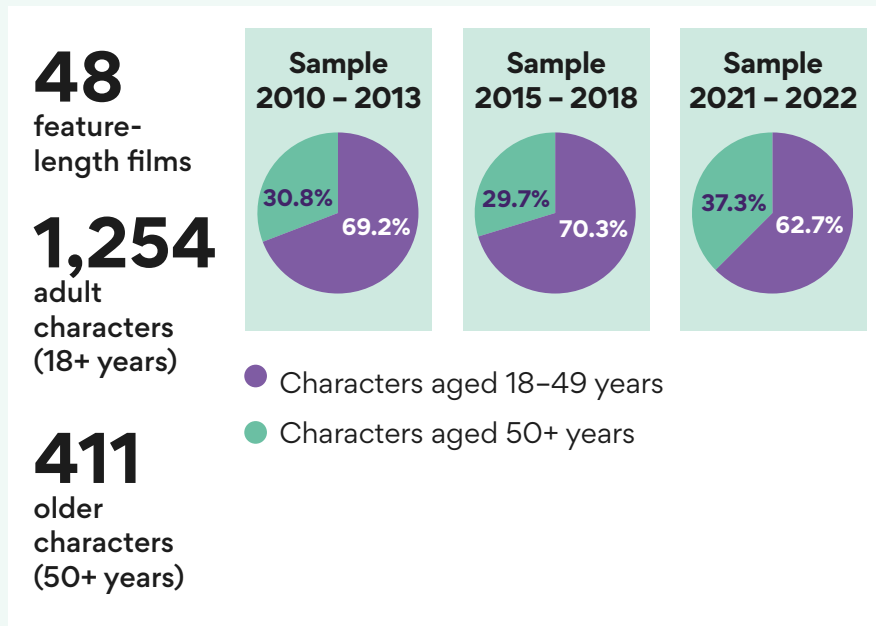
This paper looks at the inclusion of older characters in British films over the last decade, how often they are included and the ways in which they are portrayed. To get a sense of how portrayals might be changing, we looked at films across three time points, comparing films from

the last year (July 21–June 22) with films between 2015–2018 and 2010–2013.

For inclusion in this study, films had to:

- feature in the top 15 of the UK's weekly box office charts ([BFI, 2022](#));
- state the UK as their sole country of origin ([BFI, 2022](#));
- be fictional productions;
- be an original release – that is, not a remaster or rerelease from a previous year; and
- be available to rent or purchase at the time of data collection (Q4 2022).

This meant looking at a total of 48 films.



We included all adult characters (aged 18+) who featured in a speaking role (that is, they had a least one line on-screen), resulting in a total of 1,254 adult characters, including 411 characters (aged 50+) as part of the study. We looked at several attributes in addition to age, including gender, ethnicity, character prominence, character role, health status, physical and cognitive ability, social interaction, affluence, and lifestyle.

Coding was conducted by four coders based in the UK. Each character's age was judged by the coders according to pre-established age groups (Eurostat, 2022). Where no consensus could be reached, characters were excluded from the sample.

The final report was peer-reviewed by three independent academic colleagues, based at the University of Westminster, Newcastle University, and Technische Universität Berlin.

**Figure 1: Elements of the study's sample composition**

# Key findings

## The number of older characters on our screens does not reflect the age profile of the population

Compared to the proportion of the population they make up, older adults are noticeably under-represented in British films. In our study of nearly 50 films from the last decade, around one in three adult characters were aged 50 years or over, despite this age group comprising half of UK adults ([Eurostat, 2022](#); [Office for National Statistics, 2021](#)).

Characters aged 65 years and over were most noticeably under-represented, comprising just 11.7% of all characters compared to 24% of the British population, while the inclusion of characters aged 80 years or over would need to quadruple to reflect the reality of British society.



## We are seeing slightly more older characters in films than a decade ago – but not in major roles

All British films in our sample from the last year featured at least one older character as part of their cast. This is a noteworthy increase compared to the start of the decade, where on average 1 in 4 British films did not feature any characters aged 50 years or over in speaking roles. However, simply including older characters in speaking roles does not automatically mean that these characters were central to the development of the plot or that they appeared much throughout the film.

Taking a closer look at the main cast,<sup>1</sup> only 1 in 10 characters aged 50 or older who featured in a British film in the last year had a major role. Often, older characters are supporters of younger characters, dipping in and out of the film as the

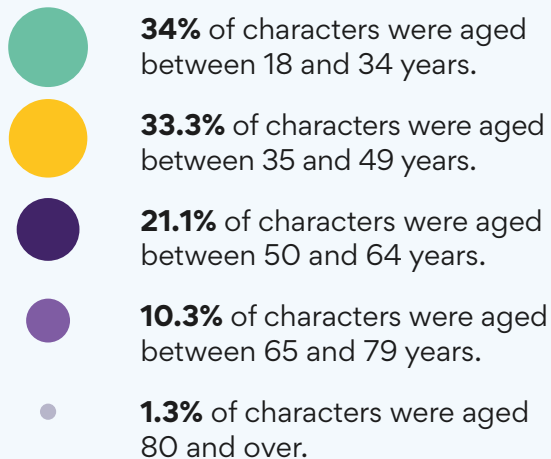
story progresses, rather than themselves becoming the focus of the plot. Our study found that older characters are primarily defined *by* their age, rather than a broader set of characteristics such as their mental or physical abilities.

This general reluctance to feature older characters central to the plot of British films can be seen throughout the films we looked at from the last decade. Our data shows that increasing age lowers the chances that characters will be included in the primary storylines.

***Supernova (2020)* – The film does not shy away from age and ageing but explores it thematically as a central component of the storyline, also exploring LGBTQ+ relationships in older age.**

- 1 A main cast of a film refers to characters in major roles – that is, characters that play an intricate part of the story – the lead or supporting lead characters of a film.

Breaking this down for our entire sample, we found a slow but steady reduction in the percentage of characters from older age groups:



**Figure 2: Age breakdown of characters featured in British films (2010–22)**



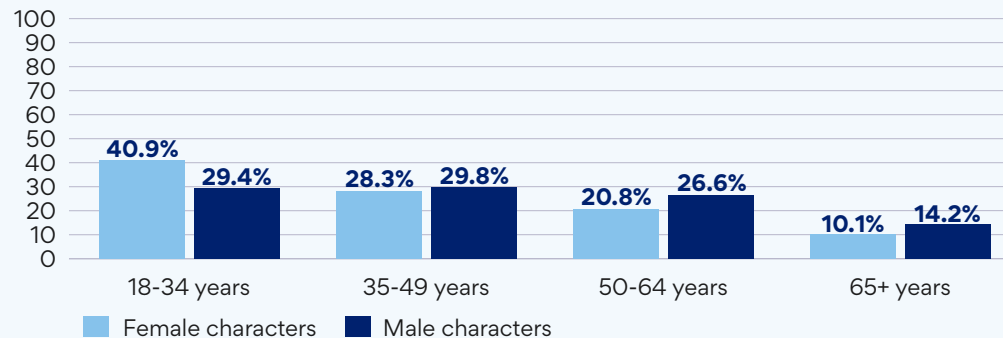
## Older women are those most absent from British films

Previous studies have identified a gender imbalance in the frequency of older adults in the media, mostly at the expense of older women (Swift & Steeden, 2020). Our data corroborates this, showing that older women featured significantly less often compared to older men in British films.

We noted a prevailing, albeit decreasing, gender imbalance. In our sample from the early 2010s, this imbalance stood at 3 to 1 in favour of older men, which has since reduced to about 2 to 1 in the last year.

While this decrease is most certainly a positive development, looking more closely at our data, the closing of this gender gap seemingly only applied to women in their 50s and early-60s, with female characters aged 65 years and over remaining more than three times less likely than men of the same age to be featured in British films over the last decade.

Looking at our sample of films from the last year, the decline in adult characters was more pronounced for older women compared to older men (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Age group of adult characters (18+ years) in British films according to gender**

An imbalance at the expense of women was not only observed in the frequency of their appearance, but also in how much characters spoke on screen. Female characters aged over 50 spoke 14% less than older men in our sample of films from the last year, which was only a slight improvement since 2010, where they had 17% less speaking time assigned to their roles.

Our study found that older male characters are generally able to maintain a level of narrative relevance as they move into old age – they were primarily depicted as active, whilst older female characters appeared to become less relevant with age, both to the narrative and to their younger counterparts. Often older women were portrayed as passive, pitiable, and ridiculed for failing to ‘act their age’.

***Off the Rails (2021) – Older female characters are represented as equally active in their pursuits and decisions as their male or younger counterparts, and are therefore far more prominent in the narrative.***

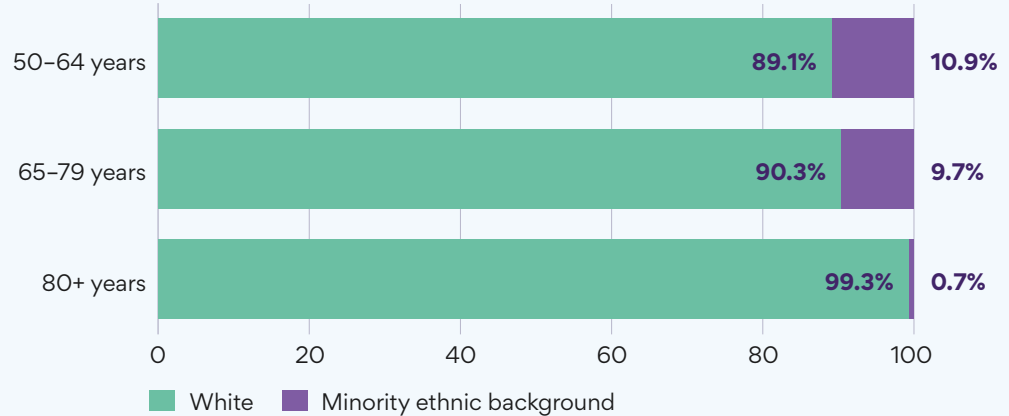


## | There is less diversity in the casting of older characters

Older characters saw significantly less ethnically diverse casting choices, in the period of our investigation (2010–2022), compared to younger characters. On average, only 1 in 10 characters in their 50s, 60s and 70s have a minority ethnic background: less than half as many as younger adult characters during this period. (Figure 4).

Overall, our data points to a lack of diversity among older characters that has not much improved since 2010. Progress was only seen with LGBTQ+ themes finding their way into the plot and into the storylines of older characters, with two recent movies in our sample – *Supernova* (2020) and *Benediction* (2021) – putting it front and centre.

***Benediction* (2021) – Contains several older characters and is progressive in terms of its LGBTQ+ storyline and portrayals.**



**Figure 4: Older characters from a minority ethnic background in British films according to age group**

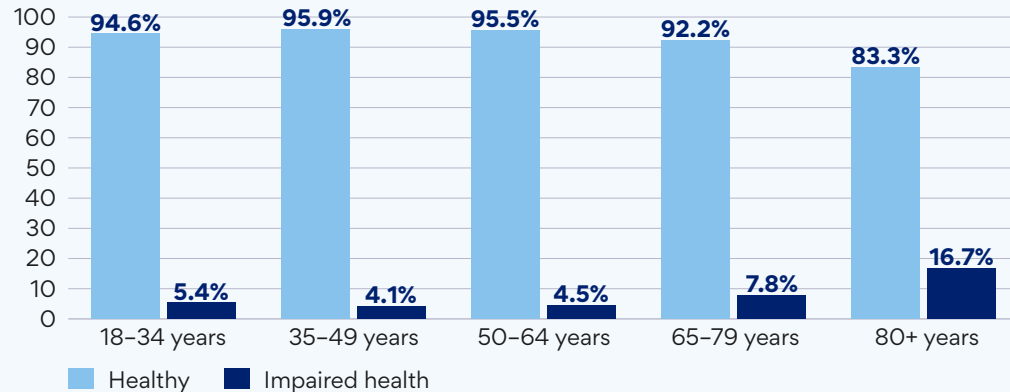
## Some old-age stereotypes persist but associations with dependency and decline are not notably dominant

Overall, our study found that the lives and experiences of older characters are more varied than previous research into British films has identified, and slowly British films are coming closer to embracing the realities of life in the UK. However, in our research, we still noted over-simplified ideas of what it means to age and to be old in the UK, as well as roles and behaviours of characters that feed into pre-existing stereotypes associated with older people.

*In **Off the Rails**, none of the central older characters are portrayed as passive or judged for ‘not acting their age’. In fact, age is never denied or ignored, but embodied and celebrated.*

### Health

Unsurprisingly, we observed a continuous physical decline with age amongst both female and male characters – a common association with ageing we see across society. However, despite this decline, older characters were generally not significantly worse off in terms of their overall health compared to younger adult characters, until they reached their 80s (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Health of adult characters (18+ years) in British films according to age group**

## Wealth and outlook

Older characters were often presented as affluent, with economic wealth particularly concentrated in characters that reached state pension age, playing into a damaging societal stereotype of baby boomers being exclusively well off.

In our recent sample, characters aged 50 and over were almost twice as often presented as exclusively positive compared to those of younger adult characters.

## Social interactions

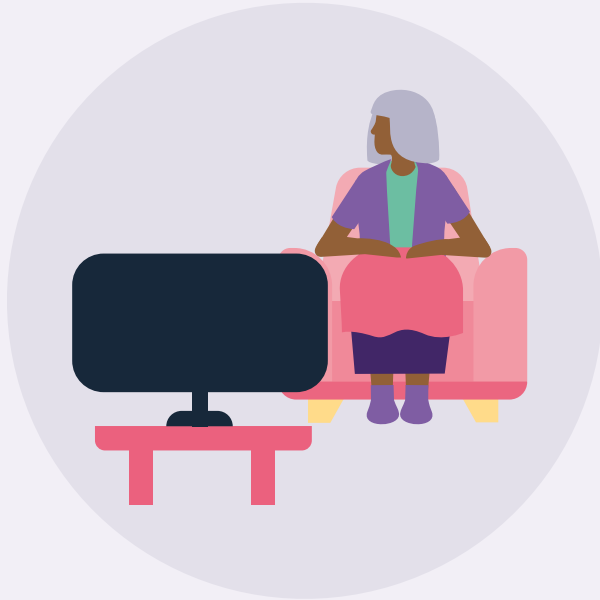
In films we looked at from the last decade, social isolation or loneliness did not play a significant role in the storylines around older characters. On average, 2 out of 3 older characters regularly interacted with people beyond their close family unit. Notably, all age groups enjoyed a broad spectrum of interactions across all films, except for characters aged 80 years and over, who were more often limited to interactions with their immediate family, rather than friends and acquaintances.

## Roles and responsibilities

As characters get older, they are increasingly likely to take on roles relating to parental and family responsibilities. Despite this, many older characters were still pursuing a professional career as part of the films' storylines, often being depicted as influential in their job and holding power over other people.

In films from the last year, only around 5% of characters in their 50s and early-60s were retired, and this share only increased to about 51% for characters who reached state pension age.

# Conclusion and recommendations



While our research suggests there has been progress in increasing the representation of older characters in British films in the last decade, there's still a major problem in adequately reflecting the population on screen, particularly for women, older people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people aged 80+.

However, it is not enough for older characters simply to be included in films. We need to see more older characters in major roles.

We also need a much better understanding of the characteristics of those involved in film production as this could be key in broadening diversity across age, disability, gender and ethnicity.

Research by the BFI from 2011 shows that the majority of UK film audiences think that older characters and older women particularly are underrepresented in film and too often appear in marginal roles – this must be addressed for the prosperity of the industry.

***The Duke (2020)* – It is the older male character, actively rallying against the assumed 'norms' of civilised existence, that drives the narrative, relegating the older female character to the sidelines.**

## | We recommend:

- ① **The BFI should routinely monitor and publicise the age of actors and characters included in UK films to help increase the number of older actors on screen.**

The industry should seek to more adequately represent the makeup of the UK population and the growing interest from audiences to see more diverse characters, particularly older women.

- ② **Writers and film-makers should create more prominent roles for people from older age groups, particularly older women and older people from minority ethnic backgrounds.**

They should consider the number of lines and screen time given to older characters, with a particular focus on redressing the imbalance of dialogue given to older women, much older age groups and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

- ③ **The BFI should routinely collect more detailed data on the make-up of those working in the UK film industry in order to promote inclusion on screen of underrepresented groups.**

Progress has been made over the last decade to increase the number of female writers and directors of UK films (now at 26% and 23% respectively – a record high) but we need a more detailed understanding of the wider diversity characteristics of those working in the industry in order to address inclusion.

# Appendix 1:

## | Full list of the 48 films included in this study

### **Horror**

47 Meters Down (2017)  
All My Friends Hate Me (2021)  
Last Night In Soho (2021)  
Monsters (2010)  
Sightseers (2012)  
Slaughterhouse Rulez (2018)

### **Comedy**

Belfast (2021)  
Bill (2015)  
Boxing Day (2021)  
David Brent: Life on the Road (2016)  
Keith Lemon: The Film (2012)

Off The Rails (2021)  
Patrick (2018)  
People Just Do Nothing: Big In Japan (2021)  
Spike Island (2012)  
The Bad Education Movie (2015)  
Submarine (2010)  
The Duke (2020)  
The Harry Hill Movie (2013)  
The Inbetweeners Movie (2011)  
The Lady in the Van (2015)  
The Nan Movie (2022)  
The Phantom Of The Open (2021)

### **Drama**

44 Inch Chest (2009)  
45 Years (2015)  
Ali & Ava (2021)  
A United Kingdom (2016)  
Benediction (2021)  
Boiling Point (2021)  
Brotherhood (2016)  
England is Mine (2017)  
Ill Manors (2012)  
Nowhere Boy (2009)  
Mothering Sunday (2021)  
Philomena (2013)  
The Pass (2016)  
The Souvenir Part II (2021)

True Things (2021)  
StreetDance (2010)  
Supernova (2020)

### **Action/Thriller/Noir**

King of Thieves (2018)  
Offender (2012)  
Rise Of The Footsoldier: Origins (2021)  
The Courier (2020)  
The Disappearance of Alice Creed (2009)  
The Intent 2: The Come Up (2018)



# Thank you

Everyone, everywhere has a stake in changing how we view older age – so take the first step in challenging ageism and [join our Age-friendly Movement.](#)