



## **Voices: Research on older volunteers**

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## **BACKGROUND**

VITA stands for Volunteering Initiative for The Third Age. It is a Home Office funded project, working to raise the profile of older volunteers, especially those over the age of 65.

VITA aims to promote the value and impact of older volunteers and to increase the number of over 65s volunteering by removing barriers across the voluntary and community sectors. This will be achieved by promoting best practice within organisations and encouraging older people to value their skills enough to want to use them within their communities.

VITA has been tasked by the Home Office to listen to the voices of older volunteers themselves. There is a feeling that, until now, they have not been consulted enough about their needs and wants.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The principal research objective is to drill down deeper into what it's really like to be an older volunteer and the motivations and barriers to becoming one.

Specifically:

- what are the motivational factors to volunteering?
- what are the barriers?
- what are the positive experiences of volunteering?
- what are the negative aspects?
- what are their experiences of being 'managed' or being a manager as a volunteer?
- what is their perception of the image of volunteering?
- what gender differences exist within the voluntary community?
- how do they view 'caring' - is this a type of volunteering?
- how does befriending work?
- what are their views on volunteering with young people?

## **METHODOLOGY**

A wholly qualitative approach was adopted for this project. Two phases were undertaken to address the above objectives. The first phase comprised eight standard length (1.5 hours) focus groups in February and March 2006, two groups in each of the following locations;

Bath  
Henley-in-Arden  
Gateshead  
Nottingham

In each location, one group was held with 'younger older' (65-75 years) volunteers and one with 'older older' (75+ years) volunteers. Respondents were recruited through local Age Concern organisations, together with snowballing from contacts in other organisations. This permitted the inclusion of volunteers from organisations including Age Concern, WRVS, local hospitals, national charities and many local organisations.

The second phase took place in July 2006. This involved seven one hour telephone depth interviews with respondents who currently did voluntary work. Organisations included Age Concern, St John's Ambulance, WRVS, the church (lay reading, running a lunch club) and a local wildlife trust. This second stage of research concentrated on the issues of barriers to voluntary work, the image of volunteering, befriending and working with young people.

## **CIRCUMSTANCES OF RETIREMENT**

Great differences were seen with regard to individuals' level of choice in the timing of their retirement. Linked to this, attitudes to retiring varied – from excitement through to fear. Staggered retirement had only been offered to a small number of people but this proved to be of interest to many should it have been offered. Certain individuals – mostly ex-public sector - had attended pre-retirement courses and again, this would have been welcomed by many to help the adjustment giving up work entailed.

For many of the respondents, retirement at 60 or 65 had been expected in their industry, if not mandatory thus the timing of retirement had been to some degree imposed rather than being a matter of choice. This was the case for those who had worked in occupations as diverse as nursing, education and office work. Attitudes to this 'cut off point' were polarised. For some, retirement had been anticipated in a positive sense; they had worked hard and had therefore looked forward to a more comfortable, relaxed lifestyle:

*"I was physically and mentally exhausted."*

However, others had resented the fact that others were dictating when they stopped work:

*"I never wanted to give up work – ever...I think I have a lot to give  
I was terrified of leaving work, I just didn't want to stop working."*

For them, retirement was a state into which they had been forced and they often still begrudged this. These individuals were much more likely to have sought other, often part time employment as a direct replacement – always unsuccessfully.

A number of individuals - mostly male - had had to retire early due to ill health: heart attacks/heart bypasses, strokes and hip/knee replacements were the most common conditions that had precipitated finishing work. In this instance, retirement had often come about fairly suddenly – a necessity due to new circumstances. As a result, adjustment had often been difficult as they hadn't had time to prepare for the change.

Certain respondents had chosen to take retirement at a point in time when it was financially advantageous to do so. For example, one male respondent had taken

advantage of a local authority's final tranche of early retirement that had meant seven years enhancement to his pension:

*"They made me an offer I couldn't refuse!"*

Other individuals had reached a point which suggested to them that it was 'time to go'. Examples included getting a new, much younger boss and a lecturer feeling that the age gap between himself and his students was too wide.

For a number of the older women, retirement had been more about qualifying for a pension than marking a change in lifestyle; they had given up paid employment many years previously on marrying or having their first child and had been kept busy keeping a house and raising a family. They hadn't re-entered employment once the kids had left home thus no great shift in circumstances and means of spending time had been experienced on 'retiring'.

Some of the male respondents who had been self-employed had experienced a more staggered approach to retirement. They had slowly wound down by working increasingly fewer days until they were 'not needed' and/or they were confident that their replacement was fully in control.

Only a very small number of respondents had been offered staggered retirement. One volunteer had been given this option by her employer – a high street bank – but she had been looking forward to making a clean break from work so had not taken this up. For others, it was more a case of having been able to take alternative roles in their organisation/industry which more often than not had involved a compromise. An ex-head teacher had been aware that he could have joined the local supply teacher list but only as a 'grass roots' teacher and he had also felt this was unfair on newly graduated teachers trying to get on the job ladder. An ex-nurse had been put off by having to drop a grade if she took fewer hours – the demotion from sister to staff nurse had been too much to bear.

Attitudes towards staggered retirement were mixed. Those who felt that retirement had been forced upon them were positive towards the option of being offered this:

*"I would have taken it with pleasure."*

However, a great many were indifferent to staggered retirement, feeling that a clean break permitted them to pursue existing interests and explore new options:

*"There are lots of things you can do whilst you're still young...it's good to branch out and try new things."*

Moreover, those who had suffered from ill health were sceptical about their employer wanting to keep them on in any role.

Pre-retirement courses had been offered to, and taken up by a relatively small number of respondents across the sample. Public sector roles (local authorities, education, healthcare) and employees of larger companies (eg LTSB) were more likely to have benefited from such information. The scope of such courses appears to have varied greatly: some had been fairly short sessions (a few hours) focussing solely on financial

matters – investments, stocks and shares and pensions. However, other respondents had enjoyed longer one or two day courses comprising a much broader remit: beyond financial planning, there had been talks on the concept of retirement, dealing with the change in lifestyle and ways to occupy the hours previously spent in paid employment. Within the latter, voluntary work had been touched upon to varying degrees.

For a minority, this was where the seed had been planted to pursue voluntary work but it had necessitated the actual experience of retirement itself and a direct request for help or aid to pursue the idea. The majority of attendees were very positive about what they had learnt on the courses.

Those who had not attended a pre-retirement course were mostly positive about the idea, primarily due to their own experiences of retirement. They felt that it would have better prepared them for what to expect and give them inspiration about, and access to ways to usefully employ their time.

## **MOTIVATIONS TO VOLUNTEERING**

As expected, a huge range of factors were identified as motivating individuals to take up voluntary work. What was seen, however, was that volunteering had been part of some respondents' lives – mostly women – for some time prior to retirement and was thus a continuation of a long-term interest and commitment.

### **Pre-retirement**

A number of active churchgoers participated in the research. Most had undertaken voluntary work for many years prior to retirement as an integral part of their religious beliefs:

*“The church gives you that mindset.”*

A significant proportion of the older female churchgoers interviewed had got involved with church-based voluntary work as soon as they had given up paid employment on getting married or having their first child – a means to fill their time whilst their husband was at work and creating a role beyond that of wife and mother. This had tailed off for some once they were busy with a young family but they had ‘kept their hand in’ and had certainly participated more once their children had left home. Others had maintained an active interest throughout and many of these women had subsequently diversified into non-church activities through colleagues who additionally worked for local (including hospitals) and/or national organisations using volunteers. Other churchgoers had also commenced their voluntary career through the church's activities, such as one respondent who had been a lay reader for 25 years:

*“I enjoyed the church, I enjoyed the ministry of the church, I enjoyed the ceremony of the church and I suppose I wanted to be part of it.”*

Additionally, some of the other female respondents who had given up paid employment on marrying had started volunteering through their children's activities such as youth

clubs. Other respondents simply seemed to be community-spirited at heart and had always played a central role in organisations such as the Guides and Scouts.

Voluntary work had also entered some people's lives during and subsequent to the Second World War. The 'pulling together' mentality of the war effort had stayed with them and they had continued to spend time helping as a volunteer.

Other older women who had not been in paid employment since getting married had been asked to get involved with volunteering once they had become empty nesters or widowed. Friends who were already participating in organisations had requested their help and this had been deemed an appropriate activity to fill time and give purpose:

*"Suddenly everything is gone...I needed something to give me an incentive to go on living...volunteering kept me from going crazy."*

A significant proportion of female volunteers interviewed had previously worked in nursing in some shape or form. Outside of paid work, some of them had joined committees of charities involved in caring or had worked for Marie Curie. For them, this had been a significant part of fulfilling their vocation. Some other women had longed to work in nursing but hadn't been able to due to family commitments or other barriers thus volunteering had been, and continued to be, a replacement activity for them:

*"My health was perfect but my education stopped me from being a nurse."*

A small number of respondents had taken on voluntary work for organisations in which they had a personal interest such as RSPB and local wildlife trusts. For example, one respondent had been working for the local National Trust property for 20 years; she had previously been a regular visitor, enjoying spending time there and knowing a lot about its history when she saw an ad for volunteers:

*"I just thought it would be interesting, something interesting to do...a selfish interest."*

## **POST-RETIREMENT**

Many respondents interviewed in the course of this research project had commenced volunteering following a gap post-retirement. Many comments were made about how little consideration had been given to what retirement would be like and how they would feel about it. The differences from working life had been underestimated and sometimes difficult to deal with. To this end, the concept of volunteering had been put to them at a point in time in which they had been receptive to a new outlet and means of spending time. Most often, these individuals had been asked by friends, neighbours or relatives to join an organisation whilst others had happened upon ads in local newspapers or shop windows – application had been predominantly reactive as opposed to proactive.

### **Proactive**

Only a minority of respondents interviewed in the course of this research had sought out means to volunteer during retirement using their own initiative. 'Giving something back' had been a motivation for most of these individuals. Recovering from illness or other

negative experience themselves – or having a close family member do the same - had made them want to help others going through similar misfortune, both as a thank-you to services they had used and the empathy they thought they could bring to users:

*“I had a stroke and thought to myself ‘if I get over this, what can I do? I’ll give something back and help others who have also suffered.”*

Similarly, there were respondents who had been carers and made use of volunteers as respite and they had wanted to ‘return the favour’.

Some respondents were both users and volunteers of a service. For example, a couple of the respondents had ended up running events like bingo in the sheltered accommodation in which they themselves lived. A number of Age Concern volunteers had initially been ‘customers’ of lunch clubs, coffee mornings and outings and had found themselves wanting to help out:

*“I could see that things needed doing and it started that way.”*

Individuals with family or close friends who were already involved in voluntary work had often put themselves forward once they had retired. More often than not, there had been a desire to help out due to the exposure they had to the cause but work or other commitments had prevented them from doing so until that point.

A small number of respondents had moved to a new area soon after retiring; they had decided that voluntary work would be a particularly beneficial means of assimilating into the community and had consequently made a point of seeking out ads in the local press and shops:

*“Getting involved in something and getting to know people as well...almost straight away it gave us a focus.”*

## **Reactive**

However, as mentioned above, most respondents had come across volunteering – or, more accurately, volunteering had found them - only once they had been retired for a certain amount of time and had been struck by the reality of life in retirement. It had necessitated direct requests from friends and family or advertisements to actually pursue the idea.

For those who had previously been in paid employment, one of the main reasons for volunteering had been to create a replacement for work. This manifested itself in three main ways: structure, purpose and socialising. These are discussed in turn.

Throughout many respondents’ working lives, weekdays had been structured and occupied by a routine of waking up, going to work and returning at the end of the day. Retirement had meant that this deeply entrenched routine suddenly disappeared and the sense of loss was tangible:

*“For 40 odd years, 50 almost, you get up at 6:30 every morning and go to work – and then suddenly you don’t.”*

A number of respondents had simply found themselves bored post-retirement. For some, this had been subsequent to a ‘honeymoon’ period in which they had enjoyed their time not working. Once overdue tasks were out of the way and more hedonistic activities had been enjoyed, they had discovered that there was little to occupy all of the time they then had on their hands:

*“I was enjoying gardening and socialising and after about six weeks I was fed up to the back teeth with it.”*

For those who had had to give up work due to ill health, the adjustment had been particularly hard to make as there had been little, if any, time to think about what they would do with their time:

*“Almost seven days a week I worked, in this country and occasionally abroad, and then I had a heart attack. Then I realised that I needed to find something to do with time and my mind.”*

Many had stories about others for whom this absence of structure had already got the better of them and they feared becoming like this:

*“A friend admitted to me ‘I’m staying in bed a little bit longer each day to shorten the days’.”*

Of perhaps equal importance was the need to feel useful in retirement. A number of respondents described how they had felt disenfranchised by retirement when they still felt they had a great deal to offer. Many had underestimated the extent to which their job defined them and gave them purpose. Once taken away, their role had been uncertain, if not eradicated. This was particularly the case when they had had a responsible role in their working life and were accustomed to being needed and respected:

*“When you get to 60 you’re a non-person. I had a good position at work – people respected me.”*

Some had sought to fill this gap through paid employment, usually part-time but had failed to find such work. Additionally for those who had previously worked in nursing, there was a strong desire not to give up their vocation and volunteering had been the ideal means to carry on caring for people.

Social contact was an issue many had taken for granted whilst working. Only once they had retired did many realise how much interaction with other people was necessary to their sense of wellbeing and happiness – and how much of this had been derived from their working life. This was particularly pertinent for those who had worked in service industries:

*“You miss the public dreadfully.”*

Essentially, when voluntary work had been put to them, these respondents had felt that it could recreate all of the things that were lacking in their lives now they were no longer employed.

For some respondents, volunteering had proved to be a replacement for other responsibilities. Some female respondents had been instrumental in the care of grandchildren which had provided them with structure and purpose in the early years of retirement, whether or not they had formerly been in paid employment. Once the grandchildren had gone to school, this role had been eroded and they found themselves with more spare time than they either wanted or needed:

*“For a few years I was watching the grandchildren and of course when they got older my daughter didn’t need my help so much.”*

One respondent had been occupied with caring for his elderly mother during the first few years of retirement; once she had died, he had discovered that he had more time than he needed for himself.

Above and beyond replacing work socialising, some respondents had been motivated by volunteering offering the opportunity to improve their social life. Getting older meant that friendships had gradually disappeared: people had died, moved out of the area or had gone into homes and loneliness had become more common. Respondents who had become widowed during retirement had often felt extremely lost and isolated, having spent their whole life with one person:

*“I was longing to retire at 60 so I could join the Age Concern Jubilee Club...I wanted company.”*

Other respondents had simply been driven by a desire to do some good. They had felt that their own circumstances were very fortunate and that there were many people in their community whose were a lot worse; the time they had in retirement would be best put to helping others. Some claimed that they had wanted to volunteer before retirement but family and work commitments had prevented them from doing so. However, as mentioned previously, it had still taken a personal request or ad to motivate them to take up voluntary work. For some, the trigger to join had been personally experiencing the work of a charity and feeling that they wanted to be part of such philanthropy:

*“My friend was involved in a homeless charity providing food...I went with him one Christmas Eve and it was fantastic, probably my best Christmas Eve ever.”*

A couple of respondents had been recommended voluntary work by health professionals as a means of self-help. One was being treated for depression after a nervous breakdown and the GP had felt that such an activity would be beneficial:

*“She knew I’d been a nurse and was down in the dumps...and it was in my nature to care for people.”*

Another respondent had been told about Age Concern by his nurse:

*“I’d had a year at home and was getting more and more bored and down...she suggested trying Age Concern as a means of getting out and about.”*

Thinking about the future, some respondents admitted that part of their motivation to volunteer had been in return for being a potential user of voluntary services further down the line:

*“We’re all going to need help in the future...you need to be prepared to put something in now. That might be me one day and I hope I’ll be treated like that.”*

There was some discussion about the status quo meaning that voluntary work was essential for the functioning of society in 2006. Traditional support networks were being increasingly eroded; women now had careers and children moved out of the area more frequently. This meant that familial support could not be relied upon and there was a more fragmented sense of community:

*“We’re blocking a hole in the dyke because there’s so many things that need doing within society.”*

Moreover, the respondents tended to believe that younger people were more insular and selfish than their generation – some of this was attributed to issues such as job insecurity, property prices and the threat of terrorism. Being ‘war babies’ – or older – had meant that ‘pulling together’ was core to their mindset.

None of the respondents were volunteering for an organisation with which their former employer had ties.

## **BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING**

First and foremost, it was acknowledged that some older people were unable to do voluntary work – even if they wanted to - due to their personal circumstances. Front of mind were those with their own caring responsibilities, be it for a husband/wife, child or even very elderly parent and those who suffered from a poor state of health/disability. It was also commented that certain people were doing their own form of ‘volunteering’ via ad hoc or even regular helping of friends and neighbours, as discussed in the final section. This wasn’t under the aegis of any organised association but was their own way of doing good and fulfilling them during retirement.

Most respondents felt that an inherent barrier was personality type – if one was not of a particular mindset, one would neither have the drive to take up volunteering nor derive any pleasure from doing so:

*“If you’re not interested in people, there’s no point.”*

All were aware of people who were very much enjoying - and filling - their retirement through ‘selfish’ interests – family, hobbies and socialising – and had no desire to add voluntary work to this. Very few respondents judged these individuals, simply putting it down to differences in character:

*“Probably some people don’t like to be put out. I think they probably worked 9 til 5 or 8 til whatever every day of their lives and just want some freedom and not to be tied to anything.”*

However, there was a perception that lack of self confidence could prevent ‘appropriate’ people from volunteering; especially for women who had not been in paid employment for many years, there could be a sense that they would have nothing to offer despite potentially offering very pertinent skills such as caring and listening obtained through their key roles of childcare and raising a family. Widows and widowers also suffered from a dent to their self esteem when losing their partner:

*“When you’re a widow, you lose your identity.”*

Many respondents felt that there existed an ignorance about what volunteering entailed and demanded from people. This could relate to the skill sets and knowledge base required through to amount of time one had to commit. This could prevent people from looking into it in the first instance, discarding it out of hand without looking into the numerous ways and means that they could help out in their community, be it for a few hours a week or almost ‘part time work’:

*“I think people are afraid...they think that you have to have vast knowledge to impart They feel they haven’t got the time... that it will take up too much of their time.”*

A minority comment was that certain people were thought to reject any sort of work that was unpaid. Again, these were expected to be people who had welcomed retirement and had been happy to stop working – volunteering would seem like a step backwards to something they had happily left behind. However, some felt that people were more selfish/mercenary nowadays, hence volunteering not being an appealing option.

Caring for grandchildren also took up a lot of some older women’s time, a function of their daughters/daughters-in-law working as opposed to being full time child carers:

*“If you’ve got grandchildren you’re useless...picking up from school... you really haven’t got a lot of time for a regular commitment. I have five grandchildren and their needs come first.”*

Lack of transport was suggested as being a potential barrier, especially in more rural areas – non drivers in locations where public transport was scarce eg around Gateshead might feel that the hassle involved would be too much for them.

There were a small number of comments about applications not being followed up. Whichever route had been followed to applying for voluntary work, there were incidences of the applicant having to chase the organisation after lodging their interest/application. Whilst they themselves had pursued it, they could see that some people might lose momentum and confidence at this stage if they felt that the organisation was not interested.

A greater number of respondents suggested that the CRB checks required of applicants could potentially deter people from going through the process:

*"I think there are more barriers these days...like you have to have a CRB... I've heard of people being put off it. If you want to work with children you have to pass all these bloody checks and so on...whether some of these things put people off, I don't really know...."*

Some of the newer volunteers had undergone this themselves and not found it too problematic. Whilst the vast majority of potential volunteers would have 'nothing to hide', they could appreciate that people might find this intrusive and rather extreme in the realm of simply wanting to 'do some good':

*"I know some people just don't like being asked questions – they think 'why am I not being trusted?'"*

One respondent also commented that such a thorough check might scare people who were claiming pensions and benefits from the state: they might fear that their participation in voluntary work could compromise what they were entitled to.

Beyond the police checks, there also existed a substantial amount of form filling and bureaucracy within the voluntary organisations themselves which could demotivate an applicant. The need for referees sometimes presented problems for older people whose previous employers and peer group per se diminished year after year as they died.

References were also felt to be over-elaborate considering the roles they were going to be taking:

*"I was going to be cooking, serving and washing up – but I needed references!!"*

There was some reference to insurance as a problematic area. This generally related to volunteers reaching an age at which they could no longer be insured to undertake a specific activity they had already been doing – mostly driving. Organisations mentioned included Age Concern and St John's Ambulance. The volunteers were then 'retired' from that role and there was an expectation that they would feel disappointed, if not disenfranchised, and potentially drop out of the voluntary sector. Considering the perceived lack of men in the sector and the role of driver that many occupied/wished to occupy, this was something of a threat to encouraging a more balanced gender split within volunteering. There were no comments regarding volunteers thinking that they wouldn't be covered for the activities of which they would be asked; many were aware that they were insured for the work they undertook and felt that this was appropriate.

One respondent had been 'retired' from voluntary work following the arrival of a new manager who announced that the new cut off point was 70. She was unaware whether this related to insurance, her understanding being that a new law had come in:

*She said "You finish at Christmas"...they didn't tell you why....when you got to 70 there was a law that came out that you'd all got to retire."*

Another was no longer allowed to help people off the minibus which she thought may be related to insurance requirements:

*“At a certain age, over 70, they didn’t wish you to do it...perhaps your reactions are not as quick, especially if you have responsibility for people which I can quite understand.”*

However, by far the strongest perceived barrier was lack of access to information about volunteering. As witnessed, the majority of respondents happened on volunteering through word of mouth or, less frequently, chance viewing of a small ad. Those who had actively sought a means of doing voluntary work often commented that, to their minds, there had been no obvious source of information or even that they had struggled to find any useful detail on how they could go about applying:

*“You don’t realise that you can volunteer until you take the bull by the horns – and even then it’s not that easy. The only barrier I can think of is that people don’t know how to get involved.”*

Advertising for volunteers was seen only infrequently and it was deemed that there was an over-reliance on recruitment via word of mouth.

## **POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERING**

All respondents derived a variety of benefits from their voluntary work. For the vast majority, it had fulfilled their expectations and met the need states that had motivated them to take up volunteering in the first place. In addition, there were a number of unexpected positive aspects – ones that they hadn’t contemplated and sometimes ones which had resulted from the ‘snowballing’ that volunteering had involved.

A great deal of fulfilment was derived from knowing they were making a difference. At grass roots level, they were witness to people’s day to day circumstances and could thus assess the impact they made by virtue of their work:

*“When you walk into the room, their face lights up  
They don’t see anyone or get a telephone call from anyone apart from me  
Particularly the old people who are housebound, it’s a real joy for them to see you.”*

A whole range of experiences were related – such as a worker in a charity shop being able to give a homeless man a suit to wear to the magistrate’s court, a home visitor fitting a washer on a tap thus avoiding a plumber’s £50 call out charge, an escort enabling arthritis sufferers to have a day trip to the coast and a helpline worker being able to impart important information that someone had had great difficulty accessing. The respondent who was a lay reader was able to take Holy Communion to the housebound:

*“Making them aware that they’re still part of the parish church that they’ve gone to all their lives...that they’re not lost and forgotten.”*

They were also able to make a difference to carers as well, such as giving the family a break from their elderly parent by playing dominoes with them for the afternoon. Whilst this means of ‘giving’ fulfilled the deeper part of some volunteers desire to do good, some respondents went as far as expressing that there was a degree of self satisfaction:

*“There’s a certain amount of halo polishing!”*

Those who had been seeking a replacement for work or other responsibilities were finding that volunteering was a very satisfactory means of doing so. The structure and purpose it gave to their lives was all-important. Many respondents referred to volunteering as giving them a 'reason to wake up in the morning':

*"A meaning to the start of the day...need to get up and get dressed."*

A number derived comfort in the knowledge that they had something 'to do' and look forward to. Many were 'working' the same days or part days every week, thus enjoying the way this gave form to their week. They enjoyed being 'useful' again, providing a service; a number of respondents referred to the people they worked with/for as 'customers' or 'clients':

*"It gives you satisfaction – that you are necessary to someone  
It's great knowing that people still want you."*

The pace of life differed from paid employment. In many cases, the work was less stressful and demanding. However, they enjoyed the feeling of commitment – many spoke about having a deeper, more emotional connection to their voluntary work than their paid employment had provided them – they wanted to do it for selfless reasons and took real pleasure in seeing the results. A key advantage was the degree of control they had over their involvement – they could increase or decrease their hours or change the day(s) on which they worked to suit them and fit around their own diary. There were also none of the additional complications of being an employee:

*"You don't have to get involved with the organisation's politics...you don't take it home with you. Sometimes it can get too much but at the end of the day, you can walk away from it."*

Other advantages over paid employment included no/little sense of obligation and freedom of speech.

A number of respondents explained that they had previously taken on too much voluntary work but had since scaled down their involvement without any negative impact:

*"There's a bit in the freemasons' ritual which says 'Without detriment to yourselves and connections' and I think that's very important to hang onto. At one time it would have been two days a week. Which is where I thought 'You're going over the top here'."*

Keeping their minds active was a very important benefit. From remembering names through to book keeping, volunteering kept them stimulated:

*"t keeps me on my toes regarding my faith because I've still got to read and learn because you can't just waffle on, you've got to say something meaningful...you've got to read so that you can find something new to say (lay rader)."*

They didn't want to become like some of their peer group who were declining as a result of not interacting with people or using their brains:

*“ have a friend who’s 70 and he does absolutely nothing. The most he’ll do is get in his car and take his wife to the shops. He doesn’t read, he isn’t interested in anything, he spends most of his day asleep because he’s bored.”*

Volunteering had helped many people in that it had increased their self confidence and self esteem. Some felt that it had prevented or even removed them from depression.

Social contact and socialising were much appreciated elements of voluntary work. Simply by leaving the house, they were guaranteed social contact; for those living on their own, it could be the difference between having someone to talk to that day or not. The volunteers simply enjoyed talking to people and interacting with them on various levels – both their ‘customers’ and their colleagues:

*“ mean, I could garden, knit, sew and do all that sort of thing. But I’d sooner be out meeting people.”*

Many respondents had developed good friendships through volunteering – other like-minded individuals of their age: those who had been widowed particularly valued this aspect of volunteering. Participating in a voluntary organisation created a feeling of belonging – being part of a community. In addition, most organisations had social events for their volunteers which were much enjoyed:

*“or each group there’s a social side – lunches and a Christmas do.”*

An unexpected benefit for many was the variety of people with which volunteering brought them into contact. At their age, their immediate circle tended to comprise family and (usually longstanding) friendships with peers; volunteering introduced them to different age groups and backgrounds:

*“Life isn’t a neat little square filled with 65 year olds. Life has got people of diversity and of background and that’s the glory of life, that’s the spice of life.”*

Numerous anecdotes were offered – from meeting young people with cancer, through to being a Good Companion to a lady who had escaped from Prussia during World War II as a young orphan. Storytelling comprised much of the interaction with the customer and this was very much enjoyed. A great many volunteers felt that volunteering had positively broadened their horizons through the mix of people they had met.

Whilst all made it clear that they neither wanted nor expected gratitude for their work, it made a tremendous impact on them to have direct feedback from the customer:

*“A ‘thank you’ is better than any present.”*

Very occasionally, this was expressed in more unusual ways. One volunteer had been asked to conduct the service at the funeral of a client by his widow due to the close bond that had developed between them – he had regarded this as a tremendous honour. Another respondent had been invited to Buckingham Palace for a reception for volunteers and had represented his region.

The sense of humility created through volunteering was voiced by a great many volunteers. Voluntary work had stopped them from feeling sorry for themselves and wallowing in self pity about their own circumstances; this was particularly the case for those with minor health problems and widows/widowers who felt that they had started to develop such tendencies:

*“You feel lucky when you see the predicament some people are in.”*

Some respondents had been lucky enough to develop new hobbies and interests through their voluntary work. One volunteer had found himself in a completely new role each year:

*“The greatest joy I have in my voluntary life is being Santa Claus.”*

One lady had becoming somewhat addicted to fundraising from trying new activities; she had already raised money through abseiling and tandem skydiving and was about to fly a light aircraft!

Many respondents found that their involvement with one organisation snowballed into volunteering in other charities. They derived so much from voluntary work and found that they had time and effort to give; hearing about other organisations from colleagues who were already involved in them provided motivation to volunteer for these as well. Well over half of the respondents interviewed were volunteering for two or more organisations – be this the occasional tin shake or more regular involvement - and now found themselves almost as busy as they were when in full time employment:

*“I don’t understand these people who say ‘I don’t know what I’ll do when I retire’ – I don’t know how I found time to go to work!”*

## **NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERING**

Most volunteers found it difficult to identify any drawbacks to their voluntary work. Some failed to discern any, despite giving the issue considerable thought – it was a wholly positive aspect of their lives. Some respondents, however, did have their own particular bugbears yet it should be highlighted that these very rarely coloured their view of volunteering per se or affected their propensity to continue with their work.

Most common was a sense of guilt – both towards the organisation and the client. This occurred when they took a holiday or had their own personal business that had to take priority now and again; this was when the sense of purpose was a drawback – being needed meant that one occasionally had to let people down.

Linked to this was work snowballing into more than the original job description and/or a sense that they were being exploited by the client:

*“I’d walk in and she’d say ‘where have you been?’ and when I leave I’ll get ‘you’re not going already, are you?’. The more you do, the more they expect.”*

Some respondents were able to relate specific experiences that had not been enjoyable – be they one-off or repeat in nature. This varied from disliking being a Good Companion to

a lady who was a very heavy smoker through to having found a customer who'd had an accident/fallen ill and not knowing how to handle the situation. Some of the roles were emotionally demanding - for example, one respondent worked with the hospital chaplaincy service:

*"It's very hard sometimes...I might be the first person they talk to after hearing they have three months to live."*

A small minority of respondents had reached a stage whereby the work was starting to feel like an obligation as opposed to a choice. This was more likely to be the case when more responsibility had been taken on – such as running a coffee morning as opposed to just helping out. Volunteering then started to encroach on their 'personal time' and the work was regarded rather more as a duty and with less enthusiasm than as something to which they looked forward:

*"We have to be there at 8.30am to start setting up. It's amazing how often Friday seems to come around now..."*

Other minority comments included: disillusionment at the lack of gratitude from volunteers when a social event had been organised for them; having to provide repeat cover for other volunteers who seemed to have less commitment to the organisation; reporting back worrying situations to management and being ignored; working at a lower level after being a manager pre-retirement.

## **EXPERIENCES OF MANAGEMENT**

Due to the large number of organisations represented in this research project and the variety of roles the respondents played, it was perhaps unsurprising that the volunteers had very differing views of management, both in terms of the degree to which they felt they were managed and – to a much lesser extent - how valued they were.

### **Being managed**

The concept of management was spoken about at some length. Many of the volunteers explained that they didn't think of their relationship with their manager as being that of superior/inferior as in paid employment – that they were equals on the same team with the same goal:

*"Their manner is good – it's not like 'I'm the boss'."*

Moreover, some had considerable autonomy thus being 'managed' - by the organisation itself or an individual - was neither something they actively sensed nor thought about. This varied from being a Good Companion through to running a regular coffee morning without a manager being present. In these instances, they were happily self-supporting and the organisation was very much in the background, a resource if and when they required it:

*"Age Concern have never really bothered us."*

The majority of respondents spoke about their direct managers in very positive terms. These were extremely dedicated individuals who were acting at a level befitting their experience and skills. They were enthusiastic and good ambassadors for the organisation. Of considerable importance was that managers expressed gratitude for the donation of their time. To feel on an ongoing basis that their work was not taken for granted was much appreciated – to be thanked, given feedback and not put under pressure were tantamount. Another important issue identified was a manager's good communication skills.

Managers were approachable and accessible. Many were receptive to suggestions for improving systems and processes and volunteers then had the satisfaction of seeing these subsequently implemented and the positive impact they had. Most also didn't mind getting their hands dirty, carrying out the same – often menial – tasks as the hands-on volunteers themselves.

There were only minority comments about bad management. This tended to relate to a manager having unrealistic expectations of a volunteer's availability and commitment and/or taking advantage of them. Others spoke about a lack of gratitude, both in terms of being verbally thanked and other means of displaying appreciation such as receiving Christmas presents or certificates.

Where experienced, higher level management was generally looked upon in a different light. Being so far removed from the coal face of volunteering had the unsurprising disadvantage of ignorance about the practicalities and logistics involved and unrealistic processes and expectations being set. There was also some criticism about, and resentment of their financial demands on the organisations:

*"I'm not sure about those high faluting types....management on high salaries."*

However, at the end of the day, the majority of grass roots volunteers had very little contact with these individuals – they were fully occupied with making a difference to their customers' lives.

With regard to being a member of a workforce, some respondents spoke about a greater involvement in recent times, such as being invited to the organisation's offices or to attend regional meetings. This was greatly appreciated. The only drawback was the use of jargon and acronyms which created a sense of alienation. Others, however, lamented the fact that such meetings had stopped; they had enjoyed the information dissemination about what was going on in the organisation and the wider community.

One issue that was voiced on a number of occasions was a feeling of being underused by the organisation. Having taken on one role, there was a tendency to become pigeon-holed. Moreover, volunteers' potential was generally not explored – many felt like an untapped resource.

Longer serving volunteers were very appreciative of the recognition they received for their commitment. This manifested itself in a number of ways, such as a certificate or attending a gala dinner.

The roles the volunteers were playing frequently had no resemblance to those in their working lives. More often not that, they were unskilled and menial tasks compared to what they were doing pre-retirement. The parallels that could be drawn included those who had worked in the service industry (direct customer care) and those with office experience (administration). Women who had raised a family often talked about how this life experience was invaluable 'training' for their voluntary work in terms of caring. Managers, as discussed below, brought with them business skills. The disparity experienced by most was actively welcomed; it broadened their horizons and kept them occupied without involving stress:

*"It's quite refreshing to do something different."*

Induction/initial training had been experienced by some respondents (mostly new joiners), none by others. Volunteers undertaking more 'technical' roles were more likely to have received specific training such as working on information helpdesks/helplines, minibus drivers learning how to load and unload wheelchair users and chaplaincy volunteers receiving counselling training. For the vast majority, training was very much piecemeal and on the job.

Whilst very few resented the lack (or absence) of training received, there was a consensus that an informal introduction to the organisation itself would have been appreciated, together with an overview of what their role entailed. There was widespread awareness that induction was more structured and comprehensive for those joining the organisation these days which was a step in the right direction:

*"Everyone starts off at the same level."*

Subsequent training appeared to be lacking. It would appear that the onus was on the volunteer to suggest / put themselves forward for appropriate courses. Moreover, some felt that they would have to absorb the cost of the courses themselves. First Aid was the most commonly voiced need, from those working in kitchens through to Good Companions visiting people's homes. On the flipside, some volunteers felt that the courses they were asked to take were redundant – either not suited to their role or, more frequently, covering issues that were common sense:

*"Why do we need a course to carry a tray and toast teacakes?"*

In this instance, they were aware that they were enabling their manager to 'tick some boxes' to please higher level management who in turn were under pressure to conform to wider health and safety and other laws – a case of political correctness going too far. However, some did acknowledge that there was a need for volunteers to be brought up to date with new regulations so that the organisation was working within acceptable guidelines, whether they personally agreed with them or not.

### **The benefits of using older volunteers**

Respondents were often aware of the benefits that they brought to their respective organisations. Sourcing unpaid labour obviously meant that the organisation saved a considerable amount of money:

*“The church is always poor.”*

Through using volunteers for fundraising, an organisation’s paid human resources could often be channelled through to the front end service users where specialised training may be required:

*“They’re getting paid for it and you’re busy raising funds for it.”*

There was some discussion regarding expenses. Some respondents felt guilty about claiming back travel costs, thus benefiting the organisation even more. Others felt that their allocation barely covered the expenses they incurred:

*“Quite frankly it (£10 expenses) doesn’t sometimes cover your phone calls.”*

The level of experience the volunteers possessed due to their age was deemed to be appreciated. This was a function of having been in paid employment for many years or running a house and raising a family together with - perhaps most importantly of all - a common sense picked up through an array of life experiences. Additionally, their age meant that they had learned to deal with a range of different people in a wealth of different situations thus were adaptable and confident:

*“A tolerance and understanding...we’re used to listening and have been caring for years.  
We’re all old and have got a wealth of experience”*

Certain respondents commented that they were more reliable than paid employees as they were doing the work out of a deeper commitment and had more of a conscience than younger people:

*“We’ve got more ‘stickability!’”*

Another common comment was that older people tended to have more patience and understanding than younger individuals; this was something that they had been able to detect in themselves and could see how this could benefit clients:

*“I think as you get older you tend to have more patience, you don’t get so irate and you can control it if you get cross with people. We’re not quite so over dominant, what we say, what we do...we think about things more.”*

The flexibility that older people possessed as a function of not being in employment meant that they could work at different times of day and fill in at the last minute more easily than younger people who worked:

*“There are certain things that the younger people in employment can’t do...they can only do stuff in the evening really.”*

The client themselves was also thought to benefit from having a volunteer service them as opposed to a paid employee. The knowledge that the person was doing it because they wanted to as opposed to being a paid duty made them feel more comfortable and relaxed:

*“A lot of people are more comfortable with lay people, they’re on a more even level, they can talk to them quite easily.”*

*“When the council took over Meals on Wheels...some of the ladies were saying ‘Oh well, they come at all times and they rush in and they rush out’ whereas when we did it we used to have a little chat.”*

Being of a similar age to the client also made for easier conversation, especially about the past:

*“Because we’re on a similar age level, we understand what the world’s about a bit and particularly when they want to reminisce, we know something of the past...I can relate to the war years and things like that. When they start to reminisce, of course you’ve lived through that time, you can reminisce with them.”*

Many volunteers did not work alongside paid employees other than their managers. Volunteers were often integral, if not the only workforce for the organisation:

*“Without the volunteers, the organisation wouldn’t be able to deliver – it would grind to a halt.”*

In instances where paid employees were present - this was mostly hospitals - none of the volunteers felt that they were treated as second class citizens by the managers. In fact, some found that they were perhaps more valued than the employees due to their selfless motivations and flexibility:

*“I think we’re respected more in some ways because we’re doing it for nothing. Some of them (paid employees) refuse to do stuff – it’s not in their description or they simply don’t have the time...we can fill in where needed”*

Moreover, many felt that the employees they worked with also appreciated their presence:

*“I’m really appreciated by the medical staff basically because they don’t have the time to talk to patients themselves.”*

## **Being a manager**

The majority of respondents were not involved at management level – and had no desire to do so. For them, this was a step too far. They felt a comfortable level of commitment to the organisation but did not want to become further involved – the ability to ‘walk away’ at the end of their working day was a key benefit over their time in paid employment. Becoming a manager had too much of a resemblance to the negative aspects of their working life – it involved pressure, additional time and effort and getting immersed in politics:

*“I’ve pushed myself so much in the past – I’m glad to take part at this level.”*

Additionally, they would lose touch with the hands-on element of volunteering from which they derived so much pleasure. It would also necessitate scaling down the number of organisations one could be involved in and many enjoyed the variety from working with

multiple charities. Being more elderly meant that some also felt less capable of such responsibility:

*“My concentration span isn’t what it used to be and I get tired easily.”*

More specifically, there existed practical barriers: the need to operate technology such as PCs and mobile phones was a considerable deterrent. The jargon/acronyms they had been exposed to would have to be learnt by rote and utilised.

The ‘managers’ encountered in this project were predominantly male and tended to be committee members. This was an issue some volunteers felt unfortunately reflected the wider voluntary community – sexism and glass ceilings operated here as in the commercial world. One female respondent commented about the considerable length of time it had taken her to become a trustee – she had striven for five years whilst men had joined the organisation during this time and managed to attain similar posts:

*“OK, I’ve got a woman here who’s volunteering, what job can we give her to do? Oh well, we need all the magazines putting into envelopes so she could do that. Oh look, a man coming in’. Now he was, probably both had the same job, you know, probably both head teachers somewhere but obviously the male was a headmaster and therefore would go on to the Trustee Board, whereas the woman was a teacher and therefore she was dealing with five year olds and therefore she’s filling envelopes.”*

Such discrimination was thought to diminish in the future as women were increasingly occupying more important posts in working life and were generally more assertive.

Almost without exception the managers interviewed had come from a management background in their working life. Some had commenced their volunteering career at this level, being asked to join committees due to the level of business and management experience they could bring. Consequently, they had less of a background and emotional connection with the cause than those who had risen through the ranks. For those who had started ‘at the bottom’, involvement at management level had been a natural progression; as they had become more involved, there had been a greater desire to make things work more efficiently so they had put themselves forward, if not been asked directly. Volunteering had subsequently given these individuals the sense of purpose and respect they had derived from their status at work prior to retirement. They certainly felt very committed to the organisation but did not believe that this was any greater to that non-managers had; becoming a manager was partly a matter of personal choice, with some volunteers working at ‘lower’ levels for 20 years or more thus demonstrating their commitment via longevity instead.

## THE IMAGE OF VOLUNTEERING

Prior to starting their voluntary work, all respondents' image of volunteering had been strongly female due to the emphasis on caring:

*"The traditional role of the woman has been a caring role."*

Most had associated volunteering with direct interaction with people who needed help thus women were perceived to be more disposed to do this than men due to their childcaring role. This female orientation – and ignorance about the manifold means of volunteering – were thought to act as a major barrier to men becoming involved in voluntary work, as discussed in the next section.

The image had also been of older people; children were at school and younger and middle aged adults were busy working and/or raising families – it was only older people who had the time to commit to such work:

*"Elderly people with time on their hands, nothing to do, retired."*

Their experience had proven them to be correct on this count. Many expressed concern about whether the next generation would provide the same number of 'older' volunteers due to a more 'selfish' mentality and potentially the need to continue in paid employment for a greater period of time in light of the pensions crisis.

Some had also perceived voluntary work to be full of worthy individuals. Linked to this, there had been an association with the church and christianity – 'do-gooders', sometimes zealously religious; this perception had been eroded once they saw for themselves the broad spectrum of people who were volunteers. In addition, there had existed a middle-class image for some – more privileged individuals doing something for those less fortunate than themselves:

*"Middle class...twins and pearls."*

However, most volunteers considered that the public as a whole had a fairly positive perception of volunteers today – that people were aware that many organisations simply couldn't function without them:

*"I don't think the general public really have got any  
downs on people who do voluntary work."*

Whereas most non-volunteers saw it as 'not for them', they were happy for others to take the strain and did not necessarily judge them for it:

*"They'd admire you but then they'd make an excuse 'Oh well, I haven't got the time'."*

## GENDER DIFFERENCE WITHIN VOLUNTEERING

Almost all respondents acknowledged that the voluntary sector was heavily skewed towards females.

There were certain organisations where male volunteers were as commonly found as women, however. Church-based organisations featured a significant proportion of men:

*“If you belong to a church, I think men volunteer very well.”*

Other organisations included St John’s Ambulance and a local wildlife trust. However, most other voluntary organisations and roles such as charity shops, fundraising, lunch clubs, trolley shops, hospital shops were very heavily female dominated. Male volunteers were seen as being very much in demand:

*“f you get men coming in, you think ‘Oh lovely, goody goody’.”*

First and foremost, they were able to undertake physical work that was beyond the scope of the female members:

*“ometimes there are very heavy things to carry...men have the strength which women don’t.”*

Men also gave an organisation more balance and it was acknowledged that they could bring more authority. Depending on what type of employment they had been in previously, they could bring with them useful and relevant skills such as bookkeeping and other administration.

Whilst it was acknowledged that women outnumbered men in their age group due to the effects of World War II and men having a shorter life expectancy, there was definitely an ingrained attitude that it was ‘more for women’. This mostly stemmed from the traditional role of women being carers thus it was not an obvious choice for men of their age as a means of occupying their retirement:

*“I think men in their late 70’s and over might think that it’s women’s work.”*

Moreover, some of the men interviewed commented that their chosen switch of role had been hard for others to accept as well:

*“It’s not seen as a ‘man thing’...it’s more for women. They (male peers) tend to ridicule me for what I’m doing.”*

Once again, this originated from a lack of awareness about the multiple ways volunteering manifested itself today; the male respondents had often found roles that did suit their more traditional roles such as drivers and handymen.

Rather than look to voluntary work, men were also considered to prefer to fill their time indulging in more ‘selfish’ pursuits:

*“You’ll find them all on the golf course.”*

Another point of note was that many men were members of their own clubs and organisations, such as the Masons and the Rotary which occupied a lot of their time and also comprised fundraising – their own form of volunteering.

Another issue voiced by one respondent was that men could have felt – and may still feel – daunted by joining a female-dominated organisation:

*“I think quite frankly that some of the ladies...were quite domineering in that they were masters in their own little domain and probably frightened men away.”*

It was also thought that many men would struggle with adjusting to the drop in seniority that they had occupied for many years in employment:

*“A lot of men who could volunteer have always been in a position of authority and perhaps they feel that with volunteering, you’re not in charge.”*

Encouragingly, a number of respondents felt that a change was already underway. Men were featuring more and more in voluntary organisations, usually brought along by their wives. This was believed to reflect both the erosion of traditional gender roles and a more informed understanding of what ‘volunteering’ can encompass:

*“I think younger men now are brought up to be helpful ...they take part in the housekeeping and in all the housework. I think it’s just a change in public attitude, a lot of things that were left to women that aren’t nowadays.”*

Men were now seen volunteering in activities in which they had been noticeable absent before:

*“They wouldn’t go and man a canteen, that was a lady’s job but that has changed, men are manning canteens now. I’ve been into a hospital setting quite a lot and you’ve got all sorts of people working together, ladies and gentlemen working in shops.”*

There still existed jobs to which men were thought to be particularly well suited. Driving was the most commonly quoted, be that for an organisation’s minibus or hospital service. Being a handyman or gardener also had a good fit, being ‘traditional male jobs’.

## **CARING AND VOLUNTEERING**

Only a very small number of regular, unpaid carers were interviewed in the course of the project. Some had been carers for relatives in the past. These individuals regarded volunteering as a rewarding means of spending their time out from caring; it got them out of the house and interacting with other people, thus proving their worth to the wider community.

Caring was seen as a distinctly different activity to volunteering. It involved an inherent commitment to the person/people in question through an existing relationship; more often than not, this was as a function of blood ties – a husband, wife, parent or child. There was consequently no real ‘choice’ to be made as to whether one was involved or not:

*“Something you just do as part of family life  
You couldn’t walk away from it.”*

There was some discussion surrounding whether or not full time carers should be paid by the Government.

Another major difference from volunteering was the ‘complete’ nature of the care provided, covering all personal needs. Volunteering generally catered for a more narrow part of an individual’s lifestyle / requirements.

## **BEFRIENDING**

Helping of neighbours and friends was commonplace. A number of respondents did not view this as part of their ‘voluntary work’, seeing it as neighbourliness or being a good friend:

*“I don’t really call it work...I look at it as trying to help people  
I don’t really look upon it as work really...it’s not like being involved in the shop or in the canteen which is more structured...to me they’re friends.”*

As such, there was discussion about a large section of the retired community who were undertaking such work without even thinking about it as volunteering as it occurred without the aegis of a larger organisation. Whilst some differentiated this from volunteering – doing good for someone you didn’t previously know – others did not disassociate such behaviour. One respondent related his experience giving a talk at the local WI: he had asked who currently ‘volunteered’ and none had raised their hands. Afterwards, he had expressed his surprise at this to one of the audience and she had explained that a great deal of work was indeed going on – but it was seen as Doris ‘helping’ Mabel. Volunteering was therefore not a fully inclusive term.

Nearly all respondents who ‘visited’ someone on a regular basis had known the individual for some time. In most instances, the person was an old friend or even distant family member, often whose circumstances had changed e.g. moving into a residential home, having a long term illness; this had generally resulted in them being less mobile and able to socialise thus requiring their social life to come to them.

Less common was the development of a regular visiting pattern with an ‘acquaintance’; this tended to be where the person being visited was a member of the same church as the visitor and their change in circumstances was permanent eg being widowed, being disabled. Visiting acquaintances also took place for short periods of time when the individual was temporarily ill, immobile or without their usual support network.

None of the respondents interviewed in the second stage of research were participants in an organised befriending scheme.

The roles undertaken in their position as ‘befriender’ were many and varied. Simple conversation occupied the most time spent with the individual and was the most important role played. The befriender was the listening ear for all the subjects that the individual wanted to talk about:

*“We put the world to rights...we have a little moan sometimes.”*

Very often this could be just general chat and gossip – what was going on in each others lives and those of mutual friends/acquaintances. Sometimes the befriender was the outlet for concerns:

*“They’re worried about family and business...they have money worries, they have neighbour worries...they’re lonely. The main thing is after I’ve done the communion is to sit and listen to their problems and try to help in any way I can.”*

Consequently, many of the visitors had found themselves trying to solve these problems by doing things themselves or putting the individual in contact with the right person:

*“She thinks it’s time she made a will and she wants to get her house valued...we’ve got a very good solicitor in our own congregation who I’ve made arrangements for him to go to see her...I’ve also rung an estate agent.”*

Some of the respondents were taking on additional responsibilities, either on a regular or ad hoc basis. These included reading the newspaper to the individual, shopping, taking people to visit friends and relatives and taking them out for a drive or a meal:

*“If they want shopping, you go and do it wouldn’t you.I sometimes get her prescription for her...I’ve taken her down to see her sister who lives in Bedford.”*

Certain activities were seen as beyond the scope of their role, especially for those who were visiting acquaintances as opposed to old friends or relatives:

*“I don’t clean or anything like that...I wouldn’t like to bother with money and things like that, getting pension. I always feel like that’s quite a responsibility.”*

All respondents enjoyed their ‘befriending’, not least because the person was previously known to them and thus someone they liked and in whom they took an interest. However, more challenging aspects did exist. The lay reader interviewed found some of the people he visited a difficult prospect:

*“Going to young people who have just lost a baby...and old people who have been married, for 60, 65 years...I find that very tragic...they haven’t got the will to live...it takes it all out of you mentally.”*

Visiting people with Alzheimer’s or with poor memories was also hard work in terms of keeping the conversation going. There was also a selfish concern that they didn’t want to find themselves in similar, lonely circumstances when they got older or if they became ill.

With regard to placing a befriender with an individual, there were very mixed views as to the criteria that should apply. Some felt that a person with the right demeanour was all that was required:

*“Anybody could if they’ve got the right attitude...a caring sort of attitude  
You’ve got to have compassion.”*

Commonality of background was deemed important by many. Often, this boiled down to age due to the ability to relate to and talk knowledgeably about an individual's life and experiences:

*"Because you've got to be on a similar wavelength and you've got to understand the situation that the person you're visiting is in. They like the person to be nearer their age because we can talk about the things that used to happen."*

However, others felt that age shouldn't be a barrier and that a younger visitor could be of great benefit to an individual who perhaps didn't have any other interaction with someone of a younger generation:

*"I'm as happy with older friends as with younger friends."*

One respondent spoke about her own negative experience of having volunteers older than herself helping her:

*"When people a bit older than me are giving me a hand, it can make you feel that you've really hit rock bottom."*

Matching up gender was less clear cut. In circumstances where the individual suffered from an embarrassing condition eg incontinence, it was felt that female befrienders were more appropriate, be the individual being visited male or female:

*"I wouldn't ask anybody other than a lady because of her health situation I've heard one or two saying that they feel a bit embarrassed when it's a young man...my generation, we embarrass so easily."*

A minority generally thought that women made better befrienders per se because of an innate caring and compassionate attitude:

*"The chap is quite ill, is very immobile and men don't have the same sympathy as some ladies do."*

It was also believed that many females on their own would be worried about having a gentleman visitor in their homes. Conversely, a small number thought that men might welcome a female befriender if they were single and woman might like some male company!

Volunteers possessed a large number of benefits over paid befrienders. Employees could not be flexible with regard to time – both in terms of when they could visit and duration of stay – whereas those doing so voluntarily had the scope to do so. The individual benefited knowing that the visitor wanted to be there as opposed to being paid to do it. The attitude of volunteer would always be preferable as a result:

*"The compassion to me didn't come over. They were doing a job 'Let's get it done so I can get on to my next client'. They're coming for nothing so it means that they're obviously kind and they want to help."*

A volunteer was more likely to go the extra mile and provide something more personal than an employee could, there being no strict job description and a greater desire to get to make the individual happy:

*“Perhaps they might think about the person they’re visiting...perhaps they were interested in poetry...this person could read it to them.”*

Consistency was not ensured with paid individuals; a different befriender could simply show up one day as a replacement for the previous person:

*“If you have a paid person and they change, the continuity’s not there because they don’t get to know that person quite so intimately.”*

## **INTERGENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERING**

Many volunteers found themselves working both with colleagues and clients of their own age group due to the high proportion of retired volunteers within the community and the types of organisation for which they worked and, consequently, the types of client they serviced.

Interaction with young people through volunteering was thus very low. Some of the female volunteers worked with young children (under 11) through playgroups and activity weeks and very much enjoyed it:

*“We do an activity week for a whole week for about fifty children during the summer holidays and I love that...craft things, we do music...painting, cooking.”*

Others had worked with youngsters in their ‘previous voluntary life’ eg working with cadets at St John’s Ambulance, running a youth club, running a Brownie pack. All had very much enjoyed this experience, seeing young members rise through the ranks and feeling that they had made a difference in their lives:

*“I feel what you teach them when they’re young has stayed with them throughout their whole life.”*

Many of them had reached a point where they felt that the service they were giving was being compromised and/or their activity levels meant that they couldn’t keep up due to their age:

*“I was sort of getting to the age of 60 and I thought ‘Well, I’m really not up to this anymore’...when you’re dealing with teenagers, they want some activity, they want to be going out playing ball and all this sort of thing.”*

One respondent was currently working with young homeless people. She did find this quite difficult at times with respect to finding common or safe topics of conversation but had never felt vulnerable or threatened:

*“I find it a bit difficult to know what to chat to them about.”*

Active barriers to working with teenagers existed amongst a minority. These respondents had fairly low opinions of this age group overall, to the extent that they were frightened of any form of interaction with them:

*“Lack of respect today and I sometimes think they tend to know more than you do... I'd feel very vulnerable going in with teenagers...being assaulted. I just look a bit funny and think a bit funny...they might not accept me...I am slow and I'm deaf so I've got a hearing aid.”*

Other respondents simply had not found themselves in a position to work on an intergenerational basis. They felt comfortable with the amount and type of work they currently did thus expanding this to encompass intergenerational work was something they were not seeking out. They had no concerns about working with teenagers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*In the main, these recommendations are derived from an analysis of the group discussions and depth interviews carried out for this research. However, there are some more general recommendations that are derived from a contextual interpretation of the issues, which whilst not directly attributable to the research study content, are pertinent to the report. Where this is the case the recommendation is marked with an asterisk.*

### 1. RECRUITMENT

- Volunteer-involving organisations need to ensure that information regarding specific volunteering roles is distributed locally. This information could be circulated using local media, social networks, libraries and other local venues.
- They need to ensure that volunteers receive high quality service on first contact, whether this is on the phone or in person.
- There should be a locally delivered recruitment campaign aimed at people just retiring to raise awareness of volunteer opportunities locally. This should communicate how valuable their skills will be to the community. Routes for the campaign include local press and radio as well as awareness-raising events and community development initiatives.
- Recruitment information needs to be available in the most accessible format possible and in places where older people visit such as cafes, supermarkets, GPs, chemists, art galleries, museums, libraries, luncheon clubs, faith groups, community halls. Best practice would suggest that large print and an accessible font such as Arial helps.
- Further support should be given to pre-retirement courses delivered across all sectors to raise awareness of volunteering including the benefits to the individual and the end users.

- Organisations should ensure that they have clear and tested procedures in place to follow through with volunteer enquiries. CRB checks should be fully explained at the beginning of the process so that potential volunteers are aware and do not leave later or find them intimidating.

## **2. SUPPORT, MANAGEMENT, REWARD AND RECOGNITION**

- Volunteer-involving organisations need to be funded in order to implement good practice in relation to volunteer management. This will include flexibility and variety of roles, effective recognition systems, good induction and training on IT, etc. Information needs to be delivered in an accessible manner, free of jargon and in large print.
- Information needs to be developed for volunteers in the most accessible formats. This may include some of the following: large print in a clear font such as Arial, audio format, Braille, in different languages, in paper format through the post as well as e-mail and face to face in meetings.
- Older volunteers need to be given the opportunity to be involved in the design and implementation of their volunteering, with levels of responsibility and commitment being individually agreed.
- Organisations should ensure that they are not operating discriminatory practice – this includes arbitrary upper age limits and limiting roles or tasks being offered. It would also include recruitment not being biased to younger people in images or response mechanisms or being limited by the image older people have of themselves.
- Paying expenses would also be appreciated. This could include expenses for safe transportation or childcare for grandparents.
- \*Voluntary and community organisations should develop clear practice around supporting older volunteers with disabilities. If volunteers develop disabilities but want to continue volunteering, this should be taken into consideration and their roles and tasks adjusted accordingly
- Good volunteer management and structure is valued and important. A culture within organisations needs to be created which respects and values the time volunteered as well as the need for volunteers to spend time away – on holiday, with grandchildren etc. A flexible approach which values skills and experience will lead to longevity of commitment.

### 3. RAISING AWARENESS THROUGH NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

- National Campaigns should be used to raise awareness of key issues to the Voluntary & Community Sector and to individuals currently volunteering or potential volunteers. They are not recommended as direct recruitment mechanisms.
- Central government should send out information about volunteering in any correspondence that is sent to who are known to be about to retire or have recently retired. This will raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering and will inform people that their skills and experience are valued. It will also be an opportunity to keep people up to date with the opportunities available.
- The Age Discrimination Campaign aimed at voluntary sector organizations and run by Volunteering England and VITA should be further expanded to address ageism in volunteering. This should be done directly by telephone and backed up by good practice information distributed free to all stakeholders
- Further work could be done on diversifying the image of volunteering for the general public. This could include older men, older people with disabilities or health problems, older people from BME communities and those in the 80+ age group.
- A campaign could be run to raise awareness of volunteering in order to counter negative stereotypes of both volunteers and the roles being offered. Benefits could be profiled such as fun, social, structured, better health, increasing social capital in local communities. Breadth and scope of roles need to be profiled. It is evident that the best ambassadors for volunteering are the volunteers themselves. Promotion of the social element of volunteering is likely to be very persuasive.
- Many older people informally volunteer already, but often they do not describe this experience as volunteering. Volunteer-involving organisations may increase their volunteering base by appealing to people that are helping out neighbours and friends and would not be intimidated by doing this on behalf of an organisation. They will not recognise advertising which just asks for volunteers as referring to them with their skills.



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