

Article by Ben Pindar as appeared in Community Newswire on 15 March 2005

Volunteering Barriers London

Million Volunteers Face 'Needless Barriers'

A major new coalition of volunteering organisations launched today has called for the UK to make use of a million older people by removing a host of "needless barriers".

The new group, Volunteering in the Third Age (Vita), has kicked off by revealing the country is missing out on £2.4 billion of free help each year by blocking older people from a host of volunteering opportunities.

New research commissioned by Vita has revealed obstacles to volunteering are causing the UK to miss out on millions of potential volunteering days in notoriously under-staffed sectors such as emergency services support, support for disabled people and their carers, education and community services, each year.

Vita, which was launched by Home Office Minister Fiona Mactaggart in central London, is a two-year, government funded initiative to promote volunteering among the over-65s and encourage more voluntary groups to recruit from this age group.

At the Commonwealth Club ceremony, Vita set out recommendations to promote best practice and encourage the voluntary and community sectors to confront the barriers that can stand in the way of older volunteers.

Over the coming weeks Vita will also issue practical advice to support older people who wish to volunteer and encourage them to have the confidence to use their skills within their communities.

The new research reveals that more than one in ten (11%) of people over 65 would like to volunteer, but do not currently do so.

When asked what they see as the key barriers to volunteering, 43% said that opportunities were advertised in inappropriate places, such as on the internet, which are not available to older age groups.

Respondents also identified mobility issues (58%), cost (35%), lack of self-confidence (39%) and failure to make the appropriate approaches to older people (46%), as key barriers.

Sadly, 27% also identified discrimination and Vita claims that if these barriers were tackled, the UK could see a 40% rise in the number of older volunteers.

Sheila Windsor, programme director of Vita, said: "Everyone wishing to volunteer should be able to do so, regardless of age". "Older people have skills and abilities acquired over a lifetime, which can make a tremendous difference to their communities."

"There are barriers to be overcome, but they are far from insurmountable, and voluntary organisations owe it to all communities to tackle these issues now."

Under Vita's new proposals voluntary organisations across the country are being urged to remove upper age limits, ensure information targeted at older volunteers is available in easy to access places and listen to what older volunteers have to offer.

The organisation also recommends that transport for older volunteers is provided, expenses are paid promptly, home-based volunteering is available and to ensure that insurance is available. Ms Windsor added: "Almost all sectors are desperate for volunteers and it often only takes just a handful of people to make a real difference."

"Home visitors for the elderly, for example, are sometimes the only contact people will have all day, making a huge difference to their lives. Another example is the Crossroads care scheme, which trains people to relieve the carers of disabled relatives for an afternoon a week. A break that can often determine whether a relative feels able to continue providing care at home."

"Typically, it would only take four or five volunteers on this scheme to look after a whole community. It is a terrible wasted opportunity if we fail to encourage willing older volunteers to support these projects."

There are currently over 2.5 million UK volunteers over the age of 65, working across sectors and projects that include child literacy mentoring, emergency services, disabled care, education, home visits for the elderly, single parent support and refugee mentoring.

People over 65 who would like advice on how to volunteer and the kinds of opportunities available in their communities should contact their local volunteer bureau - details can be found by calling 0845 305 6979 and asking for information about opportunities in their areas.

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