

# Helping out

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Taking an  
inclusive approach  
to engaging  
older volunteers

[ageing-better.org.uk](https://ageing-better.org.uk)





# About us

**The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.**

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

## About this guide

This guide is designed as a practical tool to support organisations working with volunteers to engage over 50s and widen participation among different types of people.

We hope it helps open up conversations between practitioners, funders and people who want to help out in their community but may face barriers to involvement.



## In less than 20 years

**one in four people will be over 65.**

(Office for National Statistics, 2017)

# Finding connection through contributing

**We know that making contributions in our communities – from helping our neighbours to formal volunteering – is good for our individual and collective wellbeing.**

As well as helping others, we help ourselves through building confidence, social connections and a sense of purpose.

Ageing Better's review of community contributions in later life, carried out in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), explored how to enable more people aged 50 and over to contribute their skills, time and knowledge to their communities.

It found that age is far less relevant to people's experience of contributing than their circumstances; those who are least healthy and least wealthy are the most likely to benefit but the least likely to take part.

The review also found that many people face practical, structural and emotional barriers to taking part.

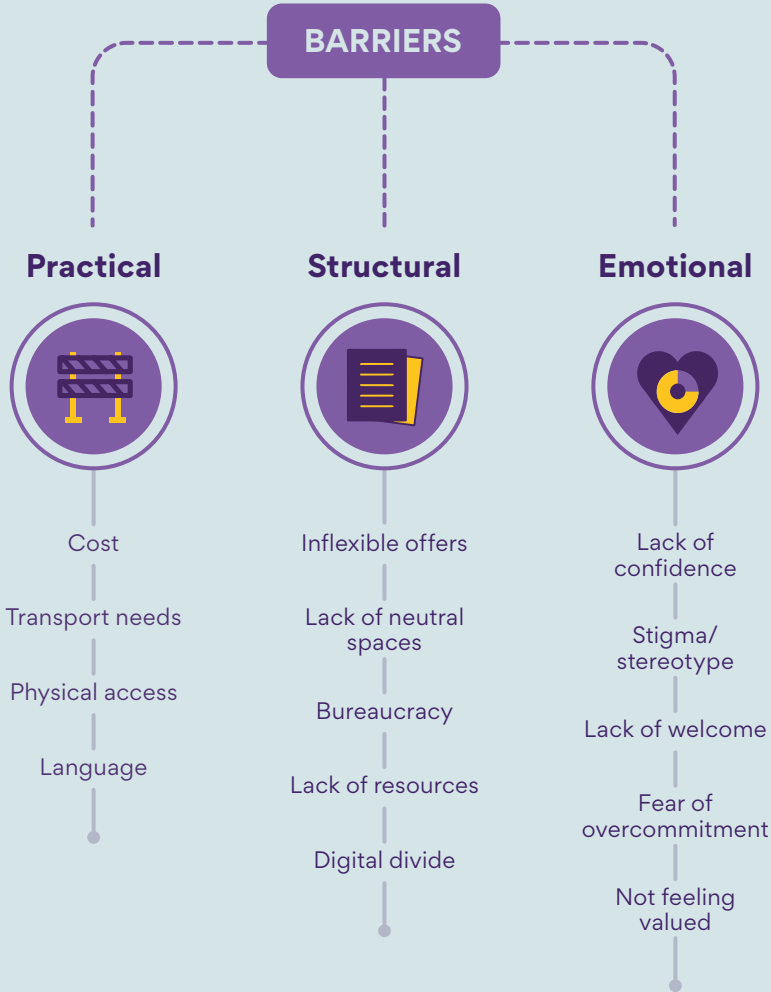


## **The healthiest over 50s**

**are four times more likely to engage in formal volunteering than the least healthy.**

(Royal Voluntary Service, 2012)

These barriers can worsen for people as they age and their personal circumstances change – for example, developing a health condition or taking on caring responsibilities.



# Increasing diversity in volunteering

**We have an ageing and increasingly diverse population. We need a new approach to community participation and volunteering to ensure that more people enjoy the wellbeing benefits of being involved with their communities.**

Without action to attract and retain a more diverse pool of volunteers, organisations may find they are unable to reach people in need. The current ‘civic core’ of highly engaged individuals are mainly healthier, wealthier and White, because of the barriers to getting involved faced by other groups. But we can’t rely on this limited pool of people to sustain community activity in the future as more people work for longer and provide care for longer.

In 2019, our joint grant programme with DCMS awarded grant funding to five projects across England. The aim was to test age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles set out in the review to enable a more diverse range of people in later life to make a contribution.

They involve approaches being flexible and responsive, enabled and supported, sociable and connected, valued and appreciated, meaningful and purposeful and making good use of people’s strengths.

The projects aimed to address barriers to participation and develop models that they could share to inspire others to take action. There was a focus on understanding how those people who are most at risk of missing out can be supported to get and stay involved in ways that work for them.



# COVID-19 and recovery

**The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted an outpouring of community spirit and volunteering, which has been critical to the local response.**

Many people in older age groups have made significant contributions to their communities during lockdown.

However, others have been prevented from helping during this time and may now require support to re-engage when and where possible.

The decision to ask everybody over the age of 70 and with health conditions to take additional steps to socially isolate has had a significant impact on many people taking part both formally and informally in their communities.

While some older people were able to continue their roles, many were asked, or felt they needed to step away. This had serious implications both for individuals and for the organisations with whom they worked.



**30% of people aged 50 to 70**

**volunteered informally during the lockdown and 87% have said they want to continue.**

(IPSOS Mori, 2020)



Our grant programme was almost complete when COVID-19 hit and lockdown began in March 2020. The examples in this guide include approaches tested before lockdown and provide insights into how taking an age-friendly and inclusive approach:

- Prepared our grantees to respond to the pandemic in more agile, flexible and adaptive ways
- Can support organisations to re-engage volunteers and widen participation among those aged 50 and over in future

# Taking an age-friendly and inclusive approach

Through our grant programme and learning from our review, we have identified five actions for a more age-friendly and inclusive approach to involving over 50s and widening participation from a more diverse range of people:

We know that many organisations have made huge efforts to adapt and take a more flexible approach to keep people engaged. As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, we hope these actions can help you sustain and build on those efforts.



Connect and listen



Focus on what matters to people



Play to people's strengths



Remove barriers



Be flexible





Glasses

Light blue surgical mask

Blue floral patterned zip-up jacket

Jars of jam in a green plastic crate

TESCO  
FRUIT & FIBRE  
FRUITY CRUNCH

TESCO  
MULTIGRAIN  
HOOPS  
GLUTEN FREE

NESTLE  
CHEERIOS  
WHOLE GRAIN  
as our main ingredient  
and no artificial colours or flavours



# Connect and listen

- Spend time listening and getting to know your volunteers to find out what skills and experience they bring and what they want to do.
- Work to understand and embrace diversity. People in later life are not a homogenous group. They are increasingly diverse.
- Consider individual circumstances, how they may change and how to support people to stay involved.
- Listen and empower people to do what matters to them – and in ways that work for them.



Guided conversations – using questions to discuss issues, explore interests, strengths and expectations – can help you get to know people and build relationships, rather than formal applications.

Even if you can't meet up, try keeping in touch via phone, Zoom, meet ups on people's doorsteps or by post. These contacts will help people to stay connected and feel valued.



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We used to think of volunteers as almost a single, morphed group. But we now work hard to observe, listen and understand each individual volunteer, why they're volunteering, what they want to get out of it and what their strengths are. That way we can offer them tasks and support to suit them, which gets the best out of them, meaning they have a better experience and we get a better volunteer.

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Sustain



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We need to find different ways of connecting with our volunteers that address the issues we face with COVID-19 and shielding. We are thinking about what people can do from home – and not just on the phone or online. How can we take activities and opportunities into people's homes?

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Hastings Voluntary Action



# Focus on what matters to people

- Be mindful that the term 'volunteering' can be off-putting to some people. Find other terms and ways of talking about taking part or helping out people that may respond to.
- Recognise the skills and interests that people have had time to develop.
- Make your activities fun and welcoming. The social aspect may draw people to other opportunities to help in their communities.
- Celebrate everyone's contributions and share stories, successes and experiences.



Consider talking about and exploring the idea of 'helping out', 'being a good neighbour' or 'giving time' instead of using the term 'volunteering'. This can help people to think about what they currently do in different ways and feel more positive about being involved.

A welcoming smile and a chat to go with tea and cake are the cornerstones of many activities. If that's not possible due to social distancing or other circumstances, a regular phone catch-up or even a delivery through a letter box (of seeds to plant, a printed update to share news) can help people feel in touch and involved.



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We held quizzes, cake making, decorating a heart, meditation activities, all to break the ice, to help have people to have something to focus on and have something to occupy their hands, while they talk to those around them. We wanted to help people create connections, bond and grow in confidence so they might be able to volunteer in the future.

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When we talk about it, they realise that they're making a difference, and we're celebrating that. They may not want to call it volunteering, but they realise that they're having a positive impact to those around them, whatever it is they're doing, and this is all part of helping build people's confidence and self-esteem.

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Late Spring



# Play to people's strengths

- Embrace people's different abilities, aspirations and needs.
- Design tasks or activities that people can dip in or out of rather than making them commit to formal volunteer roles.
- Encourage regular participants to welcome and support newcomers to help them develop confidence and new skills.
- Support people to be 'co-creators' in the tasks and activities they want to get involved in.
- Work with volunteers to create opportunities – such as being champions, ambassadors or session planners – for people who are keen to do more.



Find out if participants want to help out too – they could start with small things like making cups of tea or monitoring the 'chat' on a Zoom call and go from there. Giving opportunities to shift from being helped and to becoming a helper can build confidence and develop new skills.

Find things newly signed up volunteers can get involved in quickly. Being kept waiting after having volunteered can make people feel as if they are not valued.





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This was one of the reasons we created the Ambassador role, a pathway out of Late Spring [peer support for bereaved people aged 50 and over], while staying involved with us and benefiting from their enthusiasm and commitment.

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Late Spring



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We have adapted some volunteering roles to our online Zoom gatherings. Volunteers help to get conversations started [between participants]. One volunteer sings, so he has sung lines of songs for a quiz and another tells funny anecdotes.

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Kent Coast Volunteering



# Remove barriers

- Focus on the person and the support they might need as an individual. Often emotional barriers are overlooked, such as lack of confidence or self-esteem.
- Make the application, joining and induction processes simple, with clear and accessible information and concise forms. Provide regular support, such as training or regular catch-ups.
- Consider who is not taking part in your work currently and how you might seek to make links to organisations where under-represented people are getting involved already.



Think about ways to support people to take part. For example, offer respite for carers, taxis to travel to venues, peer or professional support to rebuild confidence, access to and training for digital opportunities.

A phone call on the day before or after an activity or volunteering opportunity can help a person feel connected, valued and more able to take part.



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We've worked on reducing the requirements, simplifying the process and making it easier and better, and also trying to be much more supportive. This includes at the induction stage, which is now about supporting people to be good volunteers instead of going through lots of rules and dos and don'ts.

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Good Friends for All



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We used neutral 'third spaces', to hold the sessions. Somewhere that was accessible in all its senses, and wouldn't intimidate or put people off, but instead make them comfortable and relaxed.

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## Be flexible

- Try out different ways of communicating with people. Some people may need face to face conversations. Others may need support to get online.
- Create a range of opportunities to suit different circumstances, interests and abilities and different levels of commitment.
- Explore connections in your community and make links with like-minded people, groups or projects, both formal and informal. You may be able to share resources, ideas and experience.
- Don't be a perfectionist! Being age-friendly and inclusive does not mean you have to be perfect. There are always ways to improve.



Try out different low-tech, low-cost, low-risk ways of engaging with people. Our projects put together test resources, including hand-drawn flyers, to identify the best marketing approaches; a cardboard cut-out colour wheel to test an approach to introducing volunteering interests; and collages made from Post-it's to explore garden volunteer strengths.

Consider developing 'taster' or 'micro-volunteering' sessions and activities. Offer a choice of quick, easy tasks, in shorter chunks of time that people can take part in with little or no commitment. For example: making cards, writing letters, creating care packages, setting out chairs, serving tea and cake, planning events.



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We learnt that we can't be prescriptive, the model can't be too structured, it has to be flexible to meet different circumstances, otherwise it essentially goes against what we're trying to do.

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We've had the chance to reflect and refine our approach a little, shape things in a more thoughtful way. And it's made us think about creating volunteering opportunities that are more flexible, more task based, not so much on-going roles with long-term commitments.

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Kent Coast Volunteering

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.  
**Let's make ageing better.**



This guide is part of our work on **Connected communities** and is freely available at [ageing-better.org.uk](https://ageing-better.org.uk)

The Centre for Ageing Better creates change in policy and practice informed by evidence and works with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.