Dan Jones, Director of Innovation and Change, Ageing Better

- Ageing Better have recently produced a report on the benefits of contributing in later life.
- Contributing was found to increase social connections, satisfaction, wellbeing and purpose. It is measurably good for you, though not drastically on its own. It doesn’t change levels of social isolation or frailty; some things can’t be changed simply by being involved.
- The evidence of why people volunteer is patchy. Volunteering can build skills useful for finding work, but in areas where there are no jobs this doesn’t help.
- Happy and more socially connected people are more likely to contribute than others – if you have the resources as a person you are more likely to volunteer.
- It is much harder to contribute if you have health or economic issues, or lack social connections. It is these people that gain the most from volunteering, but that are least likely to do so.
- Resources should be focused on those least likely to participate. Building roles that recognise people’s contribution is important for make a position worthwhile. It is important that organisations ask people what they can contribute, not how they can provide specifically what the organisation have already decided they want.
- Age isn’t a factor affecting volunteering rates, but having done it before is key. Mental health can be a major barrier, but volunteering can be very helpful for people with mental health issues. Ageism, both internalised and built into our social norms, also acts as a barrier

Katy Owen, Head of the Centre for Social Action and Evaluation, Social Action Team in the Office for Civil Society and Innovation, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

- The Social Action Team wants to increase formal and informal acts of giving time and money, covering volunteering, social action, neighbourliness etc., in line with the Prime Minister’s vision of a shared society that works for everyone.
- Volunteering has a positive impact on both quality and quantity of social connections, self-esteem, wellbeing and life satisfaction, and has a triple benefit – to the volunteer, the community and the organisation. Social action is habitual, and they are trying to embed it in the life of young people through programmes like the NCS.
- OCS have launched three funds which seek to recognise the value and talent that older people can offer, to build frequent volunteering habits, and to see whether intensive volunteering schemes can work for older people, in a similar way to the NCS.
- The benefits of increasing youth social action are clear to everyone, and the private and public sectors have been keen to be involved. Can we do the same for older volunteering? Projects need to have value for both host and volunteer, with clear impact from involvement.
- OCS aims to encourage and spread high impact volunteering projects. Some examples of projects OCS supports are Shared Lives Plus, where volunteers share their lives with vulnerable adults, allowing them to live independent lives they wouldn’t otherwise have, and Dementia Friends, which has created millions of dementia friends, raising awareness of how people can deal with dementia in their communities.
Kim Roberts is Senior Campaigns Officer at the Charities Aid Foundation

- CAF recently produced a report into how to encourage volunteering in later life, arguing for a post-careers advice service to help more people into volunteering.
- By 2025 25% of the UK population will be over 65, and increasingly people don’t want to retire in a conventional manner- some wish to work or volunteer. 40% are worried about their financial stability in retirement, and 33% are worried about a lack of purpose in later life. Volunteering isn’t the only answer to these problems, but can be part of it.
- Pensioners are twice as likely to give, and 50% of donations come from those over 60, but older people are much less likely to volunteer, or to use a charity.
- Volunteering benefits the volunteer as well as the organisation- 50% said they volunteer because it enables them to give back to their community, it also allows volunteers keep their minds active, meet new people and have a sense of purpose.
- There is a gap between how much volunteering people say they would like to do, and the amount they do. How can we plug this gap? 20% said they wanted more information, and 33% said this information should come from government.
- There are blueprints of what this may look like: Pensionwise is a free government service that provides pension information – could other relevant information be provided too. Could the National Careers Service offer a later life strand? This needs an approach like Surestart; holistic provision of a range of information on a range of topics for older people. The voluntary sector has a role, and good programmes exist, but employers also need to pull their weight.

Oonagh Aitken is Chief Executive of Volunteering Matters

- Volunteering Matters started providing full time volunteering opportunities for young people, but now also provide high impact social action opportunities for all ages.
- 30% of over 60s volunteer regularly through formal organisations. Volunteering and social action are critical to improving health and social care outcomes; volunteering is reciprocal and transformative for the life of the beneficiary and volunteer.
- Volunteering allows people to contribute to community life, and promotes and maintain health and wellbeing. It is a positive and realistic outcome for people with support needs. Loneliness and social isolations are key drivers of poor health – volunteering is the opposite.
- The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP) is a volunteer led programme, supporting people to find community solutions to community needs. It enables projects such as the Norfolk Knitters and Stitchers reach isolated people in their community, or a project that organises volunteers to drive older people to GP appointments- reducing the massive cost of missed appointments, and providing valuable social connection during the drive to the appointment. The Reading in Schools’ project recruits and trains older people across the UK to go into schools to teach people to read. 88% of participants felt a higher sense of purpose, 93% felt more in touch with younger people.
- Volunteering Matters would like to see a future where volunteer led volunteering opportunities are recognised as helping in the prevention of health and social care issues, where focus is on promotion of health over servicing of illness, and all older people have a real opportunity to contribute to their community.
Audience Q&A

Lord Popat asked how British Indians, who traditionally worked until they died, but are now retiring, can be reached? Perhaps information could be included when pension books are dispatched.

Baroness Pitkeathley asked whether those who currently volunteer can be asked to spread the message, as those who don’t volunteer often say they weren’t asked.

- OA: RSVP projects are volunteer led, community solutions to community problems. It is important that they ask people in their community how they can be involved.
- DJ: The third biggest deciding factor on volunteering rates is whether you know people like you who do it. Some communities need much more support than others.

Baroness Barker said NCVO’s state of the sector report shows a collapse of local organisations, infrastructure and CVS network, due to withdrawal of central government support. Government needs to fund digital skills for smaller charities to pitch their volunteering offer. Corporates should be encouraged to provide digital infrastructure, not sending accountants to day centres.

- DJ: There is also evidence of a need for spaces to do social action – local government and businesses should be looking at places that can be put to use.

Lord Hodgson asked how we make sure peoples’ skills are used correctly in volunteer roles?

- DJ: Understanding what you want, and what people can bring, when designing roles, is a hard task. We need roles in which your presence is an asset, but your absence is not a liability. Social networks aren’t the only things that limit social action, other factors limit opportunities to connect, for example living on an estate surrounded by ring roads can make it hard to connect.
- OA: Organisations and volunteers understand the benefit training offers, but training is costly. A lot more could be done if there was funding for volunteer training.

Karl Wilding, NCVO, asked if we learn from what hasn’t worked? If people are looking for local, personal service, was it wrong to defund so many volunteer centres?

- KO: With the new funds, OCS looked for lessons from previous funding, and found people didn’t like funding to be too centrally run. This was built into the grants, so funding is spread across the country and not government branded.
- DJ: There isn’t a vast opportunity for change – not everyone has the predilection to volunteer. About 20% never will, and that’s fine. We need to look at the barriers we continue to put in the way for those who do want to, help them to do it for longer, or to get more from it.
- KR: Can the Prime Minister’s shared society agenda, and the crisis in social care, encourage a larger conversation about funding for social action?

Dominic Cotton, StepUpToServe and Olivia Lam, FSI asked what impact could come from improvement of the digital end of volunteering, perhaps a central register of volunteering roles. Can volunteering learn lessons from the digital job sites market?

- DJ: There is a digital component to the solution, but brokerage is very hard, and it isn’t clear that it is any easier online. Digital literacy is still very low in lower socio-economic groups, and people quickly fall out of digital inclusion once they leave the workplace. Build it and they will come doesn’t always work.
- KR: Simply putting the information out there isn’t the solution – 40% of people approaching retirement are concerned they aren’t prepared, but over 50% aren’t seeking information.
Dominic Pinkney, Camden Volunteer Centre, asked how this works in the context of massive cuts in their borough – are there an army of willing volunteers waiting to be put to work?

- DJ: Volunteers are an asset, not a substitute of things the state should do - there are many projects that didn’t work that tried to use volunteers instead of statutory services. You need to feel worthwhile and valued when volunteering, you have less impact if you feel pressured into it.
- KO: Social action is about complementing services, not replacement.
- OA: Volunteering Matters don’t support job substitution, but the relationship between individual and state has changed. There are projects where volunteers are alongside paid care professionals – 20 years ago those would have been paid social work assistants, but those jobs are gone and not coming back. If volunteers want to do that work, and the services value it, enabling more high-end social care, then the more that can be encouraged the better.

Pam Webb, Zurich Trust, asked if encouraging employers to fund brokerage could be more successful than the government’s pledge to bring in 3 days of employer support volunteering?

- KR: Retirement is now a 20-year project, and government is helping people make some decisions on retirement, but could do more on the other aspects that go with retirement.
- OA: Expectation of employment is changing; people want employers who take CSR seriously. Corporates need to be shown how much good brokerage can impact community and workforce.
- KO: Employers need to understand volunteering’s health and wellbeing impact for their employees. From behavioural insight, we know the impact of normalisation, so need to share examples of organisation who are doing this well, why they are, and what the positive impact is.