

**Volunteering By
OLDER
PEOPLE**

**a route to
OPPORTUNITY**

Filiz Niyazi

 the
national
centre for
Volunteering

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FOREWORD

A route to opportunity

This series of booklets is based on a year-long research study carried out by The National Centre for Volunteering with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The aim was to identify organisations that had succeeded in involving volunteers from one of five groups traditionally under-represented in formal volunteering, and to examine the reasons for their success.

The five groups are young people, older people, unemployed people, disabled people and people of black and ethnic minority communities. National surveys have shown that members of all these groups are disadvantaged when it comes to access into volunteering. Where black people are concerned, however, this under-representation only applies to 'mainstream' organisations; volunteering is a widespread and vital feature of black community life in Britain.

The organisations we studied were chosen with a view to providing a representative sample in terms of geography and field of activity (social welfare, education, environment and so on). For each of the five groups, we also tried to find an organisation that because of its interests might be thought unlikely to succeed in recruiting volunteers from the under-represented group – a youth group involving older people, for example – but this search met with only limited success.

We are not suggesting that the organisations we chose are the best at recruiting particular types of volunteer, or that because they have managed to recruit from one group, they will necessarily be successful with the other four. What they have in common, however, is that they have each tried in their own way to make volunteering accessible to people who have not traditionally been involved.

Who are the booklets aimed at? At every organisation that currently involves volunteers (as well as those who don't do so yet but would like to) and wishes to explore new ways of reaching out to potential recruits. The booklets also contain useful lessons for those who make

public policy – and of course, for the volunteers and would-be volunteers themselves.

The series is intended to be read as a whole. Although some organisations may, because of their circumstances, be drawn to one booklet in particular, we hope they will eventually be led on to read the others as well. In fact, although the booklets are presented as separate texts in their own right, and can of course be read as such, the many common themes that emerge across the five can best be understood by a thorough reading of the whole series.

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Filiz Niyazi

Where are the older volunteers?

Each year, according to the most recent *National Survey of Voluntary Activity in the UK*, around 23 million people work as volunteers through organisations. Of these, 7.7 million are over 55. Taken in isolation, this figure for older volunteers seems quite impressive – but it becomes less so when you reflect that there are approximately 10 million other people in this age-group who *don't* volunteer.

This book will therefore explore two key questions: Why don't these older people volunteer? And how can volunteering be made more attractive to them? Throughout, our definition of 'older person' will be anyone over 50.

A great deal to offer

Volunteering has a great deal to offer to older people. The experience of seeing their children grow up and leave home, often followed by retirement from a lifetime of paid work, can leave them feeling marginalised and unneeded; they may become isolated from society and life may seem to lack the purpose it once had.

However, by enabling older people to make a worthwhile contribution in the company of others, volunteering can boost their self-respect and sense of purpose. More than that, it can provide them with an opportunity to try something completely new, at a time in their lives when they thought they were 'past it'.

In turn, older people have a lot to offer to volunteering:

- **Maturity.** Most older people have lived through a wide range of experiences – typically including work, child-rearing, retirement/redundancy and bereavement – and so are well qualified to help others.
- **Skills.** When people retire, the skills they acquired during forty years of working and family life can be made available to the community.

- **Availability.** Research shows that retired people have an average of 80 hours free time a week – which means they can be much more flexible than other volunteers about when and for how long they volunteer.
- **Loyalty.** The *National Survey* found that older people put in more hours of volunteering per week than any other age-group. They also stay longer with an organisation.
- **Numbers.** There are 10 million people of pensionable age in Britain – and the number of older people as a proportion of the total population is rising.

In fact, as time goes by, organisations will have less and less choice about whether they recruit older people as volunteers – there'll be few other places to look. As the Demos study, *Freedom's Children*, suggests, older people may come to be regarded as the new caretakers of society, usurping the traditional role of women as 'hubs of the community'.

Given the potential advantages of volunteering by older people, why then are they *less* likely to volunteer than, say, people in their 30s and 40s, most of whom still have jobs and childcare responsibilities?

The major reasons for non-involvement seem to be:

- the economic circumstances of older people
- the ageism in British society
- apathy
- competition from other leisure activities.

A matter of economics

Although the spread of employment-linked pension schemes means that some older people are relatively prosperous, about three-fifths of all retired Britons are still dependent upon the basic state pension. Older people often cannot afford the numerous incidental expenses – especially the fares – that volunteering involves. In addition, the fact that people are living longer means that some pensioners are caring for dependent relatives, perhaps an extremely frail parent.

Ageism

Ageism, in the sense of a blind prejudice against older people, has only recently been taken seriously in this country. But some suggest that it is already as serious a problem as sexism and racism.

Like sexism and racism, ageism begins at the level of language. Thoughtless media clichés such as ‘the burden of an ageing population’ and ‘the demographic time-bomb’ brand older people as useless. They perpetuate the myth that as soon as someone reaches 60 they should retire from paid work – and, the implication is, from life itself – because they’re ‘past it’.

These attitudes inevitably affect the way public and private agencies treat older people – including, sadly, the voluntary organisations responsible for most of the volunteering that takes place in Britain. Some of these organisations impose an arbitrary retirement age on their volunteers. Others blandly assume that older volunteers are only capable of working with older clients, rather than accepting that, given adequate support, they can do anything that volunteers of any other age can do. The Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age found that a surprising 20 per cent of organisations were guilty of this kind of age discrimination, despite the fact that some of them professed to having equal opportunities policies.

Organisations and individuals sometimes justify their ageism by claiming that older people are ‘always ill’. But the statistics do not support this claim:

- Three-quarters of all people aged over 65 are in good health
- Women of 75 are as healthy today as women of 50 were in 1960
- Almost 80 per cent of people over 80 show no symptoms of dementia.

But the real point here is that the ability to volunteer has nothing to do with age. People can become incapacitated when they are 30 or remain in rude health until they are 90; it all depends on the individual.

Research shows that the reason why most people volunteer is because someone they know asks them to. One of the most damaging consequences of ageism is that older people are seldom asked to volunteer.

The apathetic ones

It is true that many people are simply not interested in volunteering, nor indeed in any other kind of leisure pursuit. And it is older people – those with fewer family and work commitments and hence the most time to spare – who are often the least interested, the most apathetic, of all. ‘Many older people are content to accept the passive role that popular prejudice casts them in,’ says Dr Eric Midwinter, former director

of the Centre for Policy on Ageing. 'They often take the idea of retirement extremely seriously and extremely literally, and stop participating in *everything*.'

It is particularly important, therefore, that older volunteers should be 'caught young' – that is, a few years *before* retirement – while they are still motivated enough to see volunteering as a benefit to themselves and society.

Competition from elsewhere

There will be other people, however, with a very clear idea of what they want to do with their retirement; this might be anything from gardening to sport, from DIY to tourism. These are the activities volunteering has to compete with if it is to attract the attention of recently-retired people. Organisations therefore need to point out that volunteering brings as many personal rewards as any other leisure activity, but with the added 'feel-good factor' of being beneficial to the community.

Five hurdles to leap

In this booklet, we shall discuss the obstacles to older people volunteering under five main headings (although there is obviously some overlap). None of them is insurmountable for an organisation that genuinely wants to recruit older volunteers.

1. **Voluntary organisations are sometimes ageist.** Not only do they restrict the age at which they will accept people as volunteers, but they also take an unacceptably narrow view of what activities are 'suitable' for older volunteers. Given adequate support, older people can take on voluntary work that is both physically and mentally taxing.
2. **Volunteering is not publicised as the entertaining, sociable leisure activity it can be.** Organisations have been slow to point out that volunteering is not just 'doing your duty to society' but is in fact an activity that can bring valuable personal rewards – especially to marginalised older people. However, to ensure that these rewards are delivered, organisations will have to provide the kind of voluntary work that meets the specific needs of older people.
3. **Volunteering doesn't always offer enough of a change.** Admittedly, some older people do have problems adapting to change

– but it's a mistake to assume that older volunteers will always want to do the same things as they did during their working lives. To attract older people who may have had unrewarding careers, voluntary organisations must be able to offer a complete change: for example, the chance to exploit an underdeveloped skill or to learn a completely new one.

4. **Organisations don't usually give older people an opportunity to continue learning.** The all-too-common assumption is that they are 'past it'. However, by providing older volunteers with ways to keep their minds active – for example, through discussions, demonstrations, support groups and training – organisations can help the volunteers, the community, and ultimately themselves.
5. **Volunteering does not offer equal access to all.** Volunteering needs to be made accessible to all older people, not just to 'typical volunteering material': white, middle-class, retired professional women. It has just as much to offer to older people who are black, working class, male, disabled, or in any other category excluded by the stereotype – but first they need to be convinced of this.

Some organisations who succeeded

In the subsequent chapters of this booklet we shall be looking at the experiences of five organisations who have succeeded in overcoming some of these obstacles. These organisations are:

- **Generation Link (GL)** is a joint initiative by Lambeth Wel-care and Lambeth Social Services to provide preventative social work for young families and older people in the London Borough of Lambeth. It has recruited eight older volunteers who act as 'adopted grandparents' to families in need.
- **St Barnabas Hospice (St B)** in Worthing aims to provide a high standard of care for its patients and support for their families. It has about 500 volunteers, who work in the wards caring for patients, in the kitchens, with relatives, organising functions, in the day centre, as clerical workers, as gardeners, and in the charity shops.
- **The Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS)** Meals on Wheels service in Hambleton, North Yorkshire, is one of the many WRVS branches across the country that work alongside statutory agencies and community organisations to provide essential services wherever there is a need. Nationally, WRVS currently involves

140,000 volunteers in four service areas: emergency, family, hospital and food. In Hambleton, more than 400 volunteers deliver around 42,000 meals per year.

- **Age Concern Leeds** (AC Leeds) is one of the 1400 autonomous Age Concern organisations throughout England that aim to improve the quality of life for all older people. AC Leeds currently involves more than 200 older volunteers in providing services that include meals on wheels, a befriending scheme, a drop-in centre and a hospital service.
- **Agewell Health Counselling Group** (AHCG), based in Sheffield, adopts a novel approach to health promotion by building up the self-confidence of older people from all backgrounds so that they can counsel other older people. AHCG has already trained up ten volunteers and is currently recruiting more.

All these organisations have created an innovative, non-ageist image of volunteering, and have been rewarded by the loyalty of their volunteers. We shall now look at the strategies they have used and how they can be replicated by other organisations.

CHAPTER TWO

Never too old

People in Britain are retiring earlier and living longer; a retirement lasting 20 to 30 years is fast becoming the norm. And as we have seen, the vast majority of these pensioners are fit and active. So at a time when the demand for volunteers is outstripping supply, one might reasonably expect voluntary organisations to welcome this supply of potential volunteers with open arms. Not so. The Carnegie Inquiry found that 56 out of the 300 organisations it studied would not take volunteers above a certain age, or obliged their existing ones to retire at that age; 65, 70 and 75 were particularly favourite ages for enforcing these discriminatory policies. They are blatant examples of ageism.

All the five organisations examined in this booklet have non-ageist and non-rejection policies for involving volunteers. They claim they would be unable to operate if they brought in discriminatory practices. In fact, three of the organisations operate a kind of 'reverse ageism': they only recruit people over 40 – and, in practice, most of their volunteers turn out to be over 60.

Hard work

WRVS, St B and AC Leeds point out that most of the work their volunteers do involves a certain amount of physical exertion; for example, distributing meals on wheels, driving people with mobility problems, working in charity shops, gardening, and helping at drop-in centres. Yet they all find that, with a little support, most of their older volunteers are well able to perform these tasks (the less traditional work these organisations offer their volunteers is explored in greater detail in chapter 4). So much for the 'frailty' of older people!

WRVS Hambleton gave us a particularly striking example of how older volunteers can cope with tasks that are both physical and mentally taxing. Miss M. Wilkin is the volunteer responsible for organising the delivery of meals on wheels to 40 clients. This involves

recruiting and supporting the volunteers, planning the delivery schedule for the drivers, overseeing the payment accounts of 40 clients, and dealing with volunteer expense claims. Miss Wilkin is herself in her 70s.

When we asked what she looks for when recruiting volunteers, Miss Wilkin explained, 'I do not recruit on age. Some people are fit at 80, while others are frail at 60. I recruit on motivation and ability to do the job.' Miss Wilkin herself delivers meals when volunteers are absent or when a new volunteer needs induction or on-the-job support. This involves climbing stairs to deliver both hot meals and frozen food to more than twenty clients – this must be done within one and a half hours to ensure that the food is either still hot or still frozen and therefore safe to eat. What motivates her? 'Seeing people of my age so frail makes me value my own good health. I would rather wear out than rust out, as long as I'm physically and mentally able to give.'

Clearly, if WRVS can offer these physically demanding tasks to active older volunteers, so can other types of organisation.

Support for the less active

The organisations we studied do however concede that, on average, older volunteers are not as fit as their younger colleagues. So to enable them to do demanding work, the organisations give them plenty of support. And when it becomes clear that a certain activity is becoming too taxing for a volunteer, the volunteer co-ordinator talks to the volunteer about transferring to a similar, but less arduous task. This strategy is the basis of an effective non-rejection policy, and its success is reflected in the fact that many older volunteers have been with the same organisation for anything up to 13 years.

But as St B and AC Leeds point out, some volunteers would be unhappy about changing their activities; for example, those with special skills, such as artists, gardeners, teachers and creative writers. So to help these volunteers remain in the role of their choice, but at the same time to prevent the work becoming too much for them, St B and AC Leeds adopt these precautions:

- encouraging them to take plenty of rest
- allowing them to work for short periods only (say, one to three hours)
- not placing too many demands on them
- encouraging the more able volunteers to support the less able

- allowing all volunteers to determine their own working pace.

We asked an AC Leeds volunteer who has been teaching French for 16 years what motivated her. 'I love it,' she said. 'I'm 76, and I don't want to do anything else but teach people of my age group. They are my friends, and I want to keep their minds active because they lost so much education as a result of the war.' Asking a volunteer like her to stop teaching because she is too old would be devastating. She would lose her personal identity as a teacher as well as the opportunity to inspire and befriend older students.

A choice of tasks

If volunteers become bored or unhappy with the work they have been given, they usually leave. But if they can be offered a choice of alternative tasks, the problem is less likely to arise.

AC Leeds and St B both involve up to 500 volunteers in their various departments. St B employs a full-time volunteer co-ordinator, and AC Leeds a half-time one, to manage these volunteers centrally. Both have discovered that a co-ordinator who is not attached to a specific department takes a more dispassionate view of the needs and skills of volunteers. This in turn enables the co-ordinator to better match these volunteers to the work on offer from the departments.

With this centralised system, volunteer co-ordinators are also in a better position to offer an alternative if a volunteer complains that the work they are doing is unrewarding. Volunteers can be given a trial period in the new job to decide whether it is suitable for them. If it is unsuitable, they can ask to be moved to yet another job or department without having to leave the organisation. As the St B volunteer co-ordinator told us, 'It stops volunteers from being trapped in passive, immobile roles, or from doing something that is too demanding for fear of letting the department head down.'

A male volunteer at St B told us how he had been able to switch from being a driver to a community volunteer, visiting the relatives of patients, and then more recently to becoming the first male ward attendant. He said, 'The variety means I always come home with my batteries recharged.'

It pays to be insured

The *National Survey Of Voluntary Activity* found that only 37 per cent of volunteers aged 50 to 74 knew that they were covered by their

organisation's insurance policy; 33 per cent definitely knew they were not, and 27 per cent were not sure.

By contrast, every volunteer in the five organisations we studied was fully insured, with few or no restrictions on drivers. WRVS volunteers are fully covered under public liability insurance for claims up to £10 million. This includes drivers up to the age of 75; drivers over 75 can still drive for the organisation, but are only given third-party insurance cover. St B and AC Leeds will still insure drivers over the age of 75 if they pass a test. AC chief officer Angela Wheatley told us, 'A person's age should not create any kind of barrier. We have drivers in their 80s doing a great job.'

Precautions concerning physical activities, such as lifting clients, are also essential for supporting older volunteers. St B's volunteer drivers transport frail, disabled and sick people from the hospice to their homes, which often involves helping patients who use heavy wheelchairs. As many of the drivers are themselves aged between 65 and 80, this can sometimes be a problem, even though the volunteers are given training by physiotherapists. The St B volunteer co-ordinator regularly consults her drivers in order to update the guidelines on safe ways of lifting. 'Acting upon the views of the volunteers,' she explained, 'is the best way to insure against physical injury.'

The cost of insurance premiums should not be used as an excuse to discriminate against older volunteers. As we have seen, most of the volunteers available to the organisations we studied are over 60, but they have had no difficulty in insuring drivers of 80 and over. Moreover, research shows that volunteers who are covered by an organisation's insurance policy attended more regularly and put in more hours than volunteers whose organisations did not insure them.

An important practical point: organisations that ask volunteers to give out professional advice, especially concerning money, should make sure that those volunteers are covered by professional indemnity insurance.

Tackling the transport problem

Organisations are sometimes reluctant to recruit older volunteers because they fear it will become expensive to transport them to and from their place of work when they 'inevitably' become frail. This fear is exaggerated, however. Most of the volunteers in the five organisations are fit enough to drive, even into their 80s, or to use public transport.

However, some of the organisations do help with transport. St B

organises transport once a week for one of their oldest volunteers, a woman of 84 who comes in to do sewing. She told us, 'I really love coming to sew at the hospice – I've been doing it for years.' The volunteer co-ordinator said, 'It's worth making a special effort, otherwise we would have been rejecting her services (and her) when we want and need them.'

The AHCG volunteer co-ordinator told us he often gave the three or four volunteers in his counselling group a lift to the town centre, where he knew that they could all catch their connections. The volunteers had already made known their reluctance to attend meetings on winter evenings. 'In fact, I make it a priority not to organise *any* evening meetings,' said the co-ordinator. 'For older volunteers, using public transport at night can be a frightening experience.'

GL minimises the transport problem by taking travelling time into account when matching volunteers with clients. All GL volunteers are local residents, which means that only short trips are needed; this is easier and safer for the volunteers and cheaper for the organisation, especially when taxis are required.

A rewarding activity

It's a mistake to assume that time hangs heavy for all older people. Some are very busy in their gardens, on the golf course, or at painting classes, while others make themselves indispensable by minding their grandchildren. In fact, volunteering has to compete with quite a lot of other activities that are available to older people; for example, psychologist Michael Argyle recently found that, even for older people who were already volunteers, dancing came top of their list of personal satisfactions and volunteering only second.

But a recent study found that by no means all older people spend their increased leisure time in such fulfilling activities; many spend several hours a day just watching television.

So there is a double challenge here for voluntary organisations. Firstly, to prove that volunteering brings deeper personal rewards than many of the other leisure activities available to older people. And secondly, to convince the less enterprising members of that age-group that, if they do volunteer, they won't be just thrown in at the deep end; they will be given as much support as they need – and won't be asked to put in more time than they can spare.

Providing satisfaction

The 1991 *National Survey* found that older people who were specifically motivated to volunteer by the desire to meet people and make friends were the most likely to become regular volunteers (and those motivated by the desire to continue doing the kind of work they had done before retirement were the least likely). This suggests that volunteering can be successfully publicised as a superior alternative to other leisure pursuits.

By offering voluntary work for a short period each week – about the same length of time that people might spend on any other leisure activity – and by not asking for a long-term commitment, organisations

like AC Leeds have attracted volunteers who are primarily motivated not by altruism but by what personal enjoyment they might derive from the experience. Iris Denison, the AC Leeds volunteer receptionist, is a grandparent who looks after her grandchild some of the time. She became a volunteer because she saw it as a logical extension of one of her existing leisure pursuits: 'I had been coming to AC classes once a week to meet people. Then I saw an opportunity to do some reception work, as they were prepared to be flexible about the hours I volunteered.' Her involvement has grown even more since then; she now organises the Retired Activity group for two hours each week.

We asked volunteers from all five organisations if they felt satisfied and whether they enjoyed their work. The response was overwhelmingly positive, especially from the St B and AHCG volunteers.

Most of the people who volunteer for St B are motivated by both altruism *and* personal reasons, which guarantees a high level of job satisfaction. A focus group of eight St B volunteers told us that they all

**St Barnabas Hospice:
Volunteers Judith
Coldner (left) and
Tom Green (centre)
serving drinks from
the alcoholic drinks
trolley on a Sunday
morning**



felt particularly appreciated by the staff of the hospice. 'I feel like I belong,' said one volunteer, 'and everything that volunteers do is valued.' When asked about staff/volunteer relations, the group agreed that the volunteer co-ordinator paid close attention to the evolving needs of the volunteers and of the hospice. One volunteer said, 'She will allow you to do what you really want to do and for as long as you want to.' Another source of satisfaction was the feeling of doing good for the community. One volunteer said, 'I feel that it's one of the most

rewarding things I've ever done in my life, just letting other people see you care about them.'

We also discussed motivation with a focus group of ten trainee AHCG counsellors and helpers. They had all wanted to meet people, as they were feeling lonely and housebound after their retirement. Most of them had volunteered before, and were highly altruistic. They were particularly attracted to AHCG because it sounded like an organisation in which they could help marginalised people from their own age-group to overcome problems they themselves had experienced, such as the death of a spouse or other loved one, retirement, ill-health, depression, loneliness, alienation, ageism, poverty, and the burden of caring for frail and disabled elderly people.

Comments from members of this focus group included:

- 'This project will give people a place to go and talk. I couldn't talk to anyone or trust anyone. I think I would know how desperate they feel. It would feel great to help.'
- 'I know how old people can be treated, and it's very wrong. Old people have a lot of knowledge. I'm 85, and experience a lot of problems. I'd like to share that experience.'
- 'I had no friends whatsoever when I retired. Now we volunteers have become friends and we support each other, because we all have problems, as well as the clients.'

The importance of flexibility

Voluntary organisations would probably have more recruiting success if they recognised that older people have all kinds of constraints on their time – and if they were consequently prepared to be flexible about how and when those older people volunteered.

Britain's current economic situation is obliging more and more women to supplement the household income by taking paid work. As a result, organisations like AC Leeds, WRVS and GL find that older people are taking on more childcare: more grandparents are looking after their grandchildren, or even their own parents. School holidays are a particular problem, as many regular volunteers have to mind their grandchildren.

AC Leeds chief officer Angela Wheatley aims to be as responsive to the needs of volunteers as possible. Volunteers are encouraged to exchange shifts with each other when childcare responsibilities arise. During school holidays, she simply accepts that many regular

volunteers will be unable to give any time, and recruits more people to maintain services. 'At the end of the day,' says Angela, 'volunteers are volunteers and their families come first.'

WRVS expects considerable commitment from its volunteers – but it too accepts the fact that a volunteer's commitment to his or her own family comes first. To deal with this situation, WRVS uses two strategies. Firstly, it has an emergency volunteer team to cover for regular volunteers who are unable to help during school holidays. Volunteer round organiser Miss Wilkin told us, 'You might as well forget half-term if volunteers are grandparents – they're all busy with their grandchildren. I recruit and train casual volunteers well in advance, so I can call on them at short notice.'



**Pam Moffat, WRVS
volunteer district Meals
on Wheels organiser**

Secondly, some WRVS volunteers work from home. District Meals on Wheels organiser Pam Moffat cares for a young child and does a great deal for WRVS as well: she is responsible for administering meals on wheels via round organisers, preparing the monthly financial returns, keeping up to date with food regulations, and liaising with social services over the welfare of clients. As she works for them almost full-time, WRVS allows her to operate from home so that she can meet her domestic obligations as well. 'I like to be able to manage my own time from home,' says Pam. 'I'm technically part-time, but I do a lot more hours than that – I'm always thinking of ways to improve the work I do.'

GL shows its awareness of the childcare responsibilities of volunteers by providing a crèche for them. It uses the facilities already available to staff and parents who attend meetings, support and study groups. 'One volunteer told me she had childcare responsibilities,' said volunteer co-ordinator Vilma Maduro, 'and this made me realise that the other older volunteers should be given the same support as parents and staff.'

Volunteering elsewhere

Family commitments are not the only constraints on the time that older volunteers can spare. Many of them, especially the most highly-

motivated, may well be volunteering for more than one organisation. Household names such as WRVS and Age Concern are now having to compete with newer organisations like GL and AHCG. Not surprisingly perhaps, few organisations are willing to be quite as flexible in situations where volunteers are volunteering elsewhere.

WRVS, however, makes a virtue of necessity and deals with this situation in a way that boosts its own recruitment. Since the most successful way of recruiting volunteers is by word of mouth, it follows that if you spread the word about your organisations through one of your volunteers who happens to be active in another organisation, you may well get some new recruits from that organisation. In this way, WRVS recruits regularly from the Women's Institute and church groups. A volunteer interested in working for the University of the Third Age but already very busy recruiting for WRVS told us she was thinking of killing two birds with one stone. 'I plan to visit the University of the Third Age, not only to learn about an organisation I am interested in but also to recruit for my meals on wheels service.'

Something completely different

To those fortunate enough to have spent their working lives doing something they really enjoyed, volunteering can offer a welcome opportunity to continue practising their skills beyond retirement. Certainly, organisations in need of specific skills should aim to recruit as volunteers people who already possess them.

But for those older people who may not have had a particularly rewarding life – whether they spent it doing paid work or housework – volunteering is unlikely to be appealing unless it can offer them a complete change. The last thing they want is more of the same.

The 1991 *National Survey* showed that third-age volunteers are most likely to be working with community groups, citizen groups and other older people, and least likely to be working with young people and in sport. The five organisations we examined agreed that, in general, this was true of their own volunteers. However, they have also found ways of involving older volunteers in other areas of activity.

Under one roof

AC Leeds does this by offering a wide range of voluntary work under the same roof. Currently, volunteers are being recruited for:

- teaching French, German, Spanish, art, fitness and dance
- facilitating bridge, creative writing, and the Active Retirement Group
- providing information and advice about welfare benefits, insurance, housing, residential care, etc
- befriending and advocacy.

There is also a drop-in centre where volunteers provide food and companionship for users.

Chief Officer Angela Wheatley told us that some of the volunteers carrying out these tasks had no previous experience. They had often started as users of a service; then, if they were good enough, they might

take over a class when the teacher was absent; eventually, they would end up volunteering to run the service themselves. 'They like the challenge of something new,' said Angela.

As we saw in the last chapter, the facilitator of the Active Retirement Group is also AC's part-time receptionist. Both tasks are new to her. When we asked what led her take on the Active Retirement Group, she explained, 'It's fun. I organise the different speakers, make up quizzes and run bingo sessions for older people like myself.'

Joan Cuthbertson was recruited to sell insurance to older volunteers. She gives advice on cover for homes, cars, travel and pets. 'I was first interested in meals on wheels,' she explained, 'but the opportunity to work with insurance sounded more interesting because it was new to me.'

A new type of 'grandparent'

As we have seen, the *National Survey* found that few older volunteers were working with children. But the overwhelming success of GL's new project suggests that all they need is some encouragement. 'We didn't specifically promote the project as childcare,' said volunteer coordinator Vilma Maduro, 'but as befriending and supporting a family in need, backed up by a comprehensive programme of training. We felt it had something new to offer older volunteers.'

The project was launched at an open day, when anyone interested in volunteering could obtain full information. 'The response was overwhelming,' said Vilma. 'We had applicants from all over the country. We narrowed it down to those living in the Lambeth area who met our criteria.' The main task of the volunteers was to act as 'adoptive grandparents' to children and to help parents in need to take control of their own lives. And by giving support to parents and children, the volunteers themselves were empowered. 'I wanted to volunteer because it was something new,' said one volunteer. Another volunteer told us, 'I'll continue to volunteer because it's helping me progress as well as the clients.'

Supporting one's peers

Few volunteers of any age, let alone older ones, get involved in counselling, which puts AHCG among the first organisations specifically to recruit older volunteers to counsel other older people.

The project attracted those who liked the idea of helping people of their own age-group to live a more healthy life. Its stated aims were 'to

encourage a positive attitude to old age, based on principles of personal empowerment.' The project was promoted through flyers that began, 'Over 50? Like to meet people? Like to join an exciting new project? Training provided.'



Age Well Health Counselling Group: A counselling training session

'Some of the volunteers said that, before attending the counselling course, they had felt useless, especially those who had just retired,' volunteer co-ordinator Christopher Holloway told us. 'They felt they had so much more to give, but there was no opportunity to do so. Just joining the group and attending the training has enabled them to feel more useful.'

One volunteer said, 'I wanted to do the counselling because I would learn new skills, get training and keep my brain active so that I wouldn't vegetate.' Another said, 'I feel it's important. I'm 87. I have a lot of life experience but also a lot to learn. It will be a real challenge.' All the volunteers agreed that the really novel aspect of this project was the fact that older people were able to help other older people: 'We know how some of them feel – we've been there ourselves.'

Decisions and negotiations

WRVS also offers a choice of activities, many of which are new to the volunteers who take them on. The main service areas are food, family,

hospital and emergency, each of which offers work to volunteers without formal qualifications who are first trained and then supported in their tasks.

In Hambleton, for example, more than 400 volunteers are involved in delivering meals on wheels. As we have seen on page 15, volunteer district organiser Pam Moffat is in charge of 33 North Yorkshire rounds with more than 20 clients in each round. Apart from the administrative and food hygiene aspects of the job, she is also responsible for liaising with social services over client welfare. If a meals on wheels volunteer reports that one of the clients is in need of care, Pam passes the message on to the local social services department.

Pam finds this the most challenging part of her work. 'I can influence people in social services in a way that would be impossible if I were a paid worker.' In addition, she often has the task of convincing a client, on behalf of social services, that they need more care. So Pam is both a decision-maker – when she draws attention to people in need – and a negotiator – when she brings the client and social services together.

A controversial service

Since 1993 St B has been offering volunteering opportunities in complementary medicine and spiritual healing. It was the open-minded hospice physician who, with volunteer co-ordinator Penny Eggebrecht, persuaded the management to allow volunteers to provide these sometimes controversial therapies alongside the mainstream medical care.

When interviewing would-be volunteers, Penny always takes time to explore their motivations and their skills. So when two volunteers experienced in aromatherapy came to her and expressed a wish to practise in the hospice, Penny waited for the right moment to float the idea. She knew that some of the nursing professionals were suspicious of complementary therapies, whether provided by paid or voluntary practitioners. 'So I simply let the staff know how qualified these volunteers were, and left them to decide whether they should be allowed to practise.' Before long, ward sisters were asking her to recruit therapists. Penny had already drawn up guidelines for complementary therapy volunteers, outlining the aims of the service, the duties of volunteers, the rules on accountability and confidentiality, and the training and support to be provided – and she very quickly managed to recruit the requested volunteers.

Since then, Penny has also recruited two spiritual healers to work with patients with cancer or motor neurone disease. There was some

initial resistance to this from the nursing staff, so the Medical Director organised an open meeting at which staff could air their reservations and the guidelines for the volunteer therapists could be agreed.

One of the complementary therapy volunteers told us that he had been a driver for four years but had wanted to take on something more challenging. So he underwent the necessary training and now finds it really stimulating to work on the wards. 'I think my presence alleviates the burden of the staff. It helps them and me. It's a two-way thing, not a case of "them and us". We all work for the benefit of this hospice and the patients.'

Like anyone else, older people enjoy the challenge of something new. Something they have never had the opportunity to do in their working lives or home lives. The examples we have given in this chapter have one thing in common: all the volunteers had some basic skills allied with a strong motivation to help. The organisations simply provided them the opportunity, together with the training and support, to realise their hidden talents.

Any organisation that wishes to do the same needs two essential characteristics:

- an open mind
- the willingness to interview candidates thoroughly enough to discover not only their skills but also their deeper motivations and desires.

Learning new tricks

'You can't teach an old dog new tricks' is the hoariest of ageist clichés – and sadly, one that older people themselves tend to use. In fact, their conditioning seems to be such that, according to the *National Survey*, very few older people regard the chance to learn new skills as one of the attractions of volunteering. Not surprisingly, therefore, organisations haven't always been scrupulous about providing older volunteers with educational opportunities.

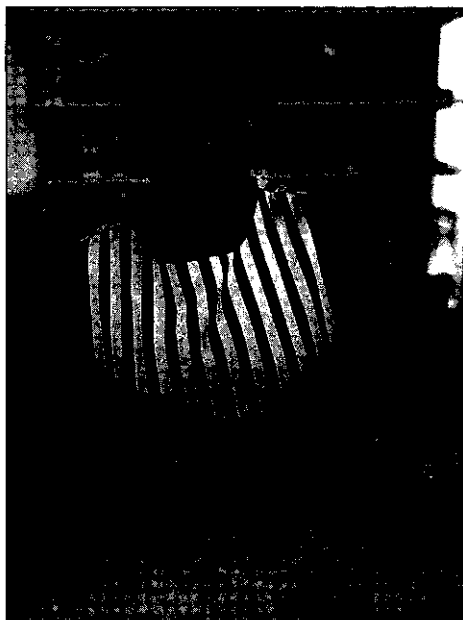
The five organisations we studied have, however, triumphantly demonstrated that, given the opportunity and the encouragement, older people are willing learners, especially when offered a range of different learning formats – including intensive training courses, discussions, study groups and class-based sessions.

Award winners

Larger organisations such as WRVS and AC Leeds offer intensive training to their volunteers. In 1995, for example, WRVS won both a National Training Award and the Secretary of State's award for training of benefit to women. 'The media reports of these awards are useful publicity when you're trying to recruit volunteers,' says WRVS Divisional Food Services Manager Sue Rennilson, 'especially when you're competing against other large organisations.' All WRVS's organisers and supervisors are trained to Basic Food Hygiene Certificate level. One volunteer district organiser told us, 'I'm interested in being trained in food-handling techniques not only for myself, but also because it will put WRVS in a good position if we have to compete with private enterprise to provide meals on wheels.'

Fear of training

Smaller organisations such as AHCG and GL have also been able to convince their sometimes-reluctant volunteers of the necessity for



Anna Meckow, Age Concern Leeds canteen assistant at the drop-in centre

problem-solving. 'Because many of our volunteers had bad experiences at school,' explained Christopher Holloway, the AHCG volunteer coordinator, 'we had to overcome a deep-seated fear of training. We did this by stressing how vital training was to the success of the project – and to the selecting of suitable volunteers.' At the first training session, Holloway allowed volunteers to discuss their fears about training in a supportive environment.

In a focus group, these volunteers told us how useful the training had turned out to be. Studying ageism and sexism gave them a framework for discussing the marginalisation of older people, especially after retirement – and before volunteering. 'Ageism is terrible,' said one volunteer, 'especially the way that some elderly people are treated like children and talked down to.' Another said, 'You've got to keep on learning. Taking the plunge is the hardest bit, because you think you're going to make a mess of it.'

Training by any other name...

All five organisations are aware that some older volunteers dislike the word 'training' – perhaps because they interpret it as passive learning,

compulsory training in subjects such as health, ageism, sexism and racism. In addition, the GL volunteers were trained in self-assertion, detecting child abuse, and drawing up contracts with families. Some volunteers reported that the training made them much more confident about identifying the behaviour associated with possible child abuse – an important part of their work. Others admitted that, prior to the training, they had had no real idea of the problems experienced by the families they would be helping.

AHCG has trained its volunteers in communication skills, group dynamics and

or because they regard it as inappropriate in the volunteering context. Camouflaging the training as 'information exchange' or 'coffee morning discussions' produces a far more positive response; AC, for example, has found that up to 75 per cent of its volunteers find time to attend these events.

AC organises coffee morning discussions for specific types of volunteer, such as those who work in shops or in day centres. The main aim of these events is to discuss good practice: for example, how service can be improved, what lines are selling best in the shops, staff/customer relations, problems of organisation. 'Volunteers prefer the informality of a coffee morning when discussing issues relating to their work,' said Angela Wheatley, AC chief officer. 'They seem to find terms like "discussion" and "information day" less threatening than the word "training". Most importantly, they seem more willing to be critical of the way an organisation does something if they are in an informal setting. We can get to know how they really feel and can act upon it.'

GL and AHCG offer their volunteers informal support and study groups, at which good practice is discussed and volunteers can obtain support from each other and from paid staff. AHCG uses these groups to determine whether a new volunteer should become a counsellor, listener or helper. Also, counsellors can bring any anxieties arising from their work to the group and receive support and reassurance. As well as being much appreciated by individual volunteers, this kind of support helps the group to identify its aims and build up mutual trust. Above all, it helps the clients, as volunteers inevitably become better counsellors as a result. One volunteer who was preparing for a counselling session said, 'I already feel as if I will need and trust our support group.'

In addition to support groups, GL offers its volunteers the chance to join study groups of paid childcare workers who will keep the volunteers up to date with law and practice relating to childcare and child abuse. When we asked one member of a study group why she continued to volunteer, she said, 'I really look forward to the study days and group meetings. I find them really interesting and informative.'

Education for *all* volunteers

St B has recently begun to offer educational sessions and bereavement courses to all its 500 volunteers, after realising that most older people enjoy learning – and not, as previously assumed, just the ones directly involved in patient care. Publicised in a leaflet circulated to all

volunteers in all departments, the sessions consisted of a series of talks by guest speakers on topics such as palliative care, an overview of St B's work, and changes in the voluntary sector and the health services. The back of the leaflet stated 'These sessions are especially for YOU.'

The talks attracted large numbers of 'support volunteers' such as workers in the charity shops and the kitchens, drivers, gardeners, clerical workers, and helpers in the day centre. The volunteer co-ordinator felt that the success of the sessions was due to the relevance of the issues being discussed and the fact that they were open to all volunteers.

All seven volunteers at a focus group told us that these educational sessions had been significant in persuading them to carry on volunteering. One said, 'I really appreciated being invited to learn about wider issues in relation to our work and getting a chance to meet so many other volunteers from other areas.'

The bereavement courses offered by St B were also popular. Volunteer co-ordinator Penny Eggebrecht explained that they were not just about death, but about how people can cope with any major change in their lives, including divorce, redundancy or retirement. One volunteer told us, 'The course was good because we could all use it for ourselves as well as for our volunteer work.'

Older volunteers should always be offered the opportunity to learn. Many of them are eager to keep their minds active, as they find retirement unstimulating. The opportunities should be presented in a variety of formats, as each volunteer will have their own preferred method of learning. This may take time but, as we have seen, it often means that volunteers stay longer with an organisation.

Open to all?

Volunteering is still trying to shake off its image of exclusivity. There is a false but persistent assumption that it is an activity only for middle-aged, middle-class women with nothing else to do. Anyone who falls outside this definition – including older people, black people, younger people, disabled people and so on – might well feel that volunteering is not for them. Not enough has been done to challenge this negative stereotype.

So as an important ingredient of their campaign to reduce the marginalisation of older people, the organisations we studied have begun to attack the stereotypes. They have done this by making it clear that volunteering is open to everyone, and by targeting their recruiting at marginalised groups: not just older people in general, but older people who also happen to be disabled, black, or otherwise 'different'.

Recruitment is often made easier by the fact that certain sections of the population are attracted to certain types of volunteering. For example, environmental and campaigning work mainly appeals to young, educated people – students or unemployed – who are concerned about the future of the planet. Informal neighbourhood volunteering attracts working-class and black people who want to help their friends and neighbours. And of course, older volunteers tend to be attracted to volunteering with other older people.

However, the real challenge for an organisation comes when it wants to reach out to older people from marginalised groups, people who are not 'typical volunteer material'. From our study of the five organisations, we identified five main under-represented groups:

- people with disabilities
- men of all descriptions
- working-class women
- black women

Disability no bar

Nationally, the WRVS already has procedures in place that enable older volunteers with physical disabilities to work from home on the task of co-ordinating 'safe-and-well' checks on isolated or vulnerable people. This benefits both the volunteer and the client; after all, a housebound volunteer knows just what it's like to be isolated from the community. As one client said, 'I live on my own and I'm scared of strangers coming into my home, but I trust the WRVS volunteers. I've got to know them really well. They're my friends, really.'

WRVS Hambleton is located in a largely white, middle-class rural area, so it has not surprisingly tended to attract largely white, middle-class volunteers, attracted by the traditional WRVS ethos of 'you volunteer to do what needs to be done for the good of the community'. However, conscious of the personal benefits volunteering can bring to the more vulnerable members of society, Hambleton is also trying to involve people with learning difficulties and people with depression.

Volunteer district organiser Pam Moffat plans to recruit additional helpers from among the surprisingly large number of people who have suffered from depression since retiring from paid work; the aim is to raise the morale of these 'special' volunteers by asking them to accompany a mainstream volunteer on the rounds. Giving them a chance to volunteer will enable them to reconnect with society after the loss of the social networks associated with paid work. WRVS Hambleton hopes to contact people with these kinds of problem through other agencies that run rehabilitation programmes. Pam Moffat is already liaising with social services and hopes to start recruiting soon.

WRVS has not yet developed specific strategies for recruiting black volunteers because there are few older black people in the neighbourhood. There is also a cultural stumbling block. But the inclusion of black people on all new publicity material has at least attempted to deliver a message of equal opportunities.

Getting your man

Since the WRVS was specifically set up to enable women to volunteer in wartime, one couldn't really expect men to feel comfortable volunteering for it. Pam Moffat agrees it is unlikely she would ever attempt, as a deliberate act of policy, to recruit male volunteers into WRVS; 'it would be like a Scout joining the Guides,' she explained.

However, the informal recruitment of husband-and-wife teams for

meals on wheels rounds – where the wife delivers the food and the husband drives the van – has been surprisingly successful. As a result, men now make up 11 per cent of all WRVS members, and the proportion is rising. ‘The men like to keep a low profile,’ said a district organiser, ‘but we consider their help as invaluable.’

A genuine cross-section of the community

AHCP and GL are both small, newly-formed organisations that operate in the inner city, and both have succeeded in recruiting working-class and black women, who feel more comfortable with the informality and small size of these organisations; it is closer to the kind of volunteering they are familiar with. These organisations also attract women who, irrespective of their class and race, have been victims of ageism – an experience that seems to inspire them to help others. The practical measures these organisations use to attract people from marginalised groups include the payment of expenses and the advertising of volunteer vacancies in the black press.

‘Most of the people we recruit don’t have much money,’ said AHCG volunteer co-ordinator Chris Holloway. ‘So we paid the taxi fares for some people to get to the training course because we felt it was so



Cecily de Harte volunteers with Generation Link as a surrogate grandmother in Lambeth

important they attend.' The publicity flyer for the project clearly states: 'Travelling expenses and training provided.' As one volunteer told us, 'I couldn't volunteer without the expenses. I haven't got a lot of savings, but I have a lot of myself to give.'

When it was set up, GL decided that, in order to reflect Lambeth's multiculturalism, it should make a serious attempt to recruit older black volunteers. The volunteer co-ordinator therefore advertised for volunteers in black papers such as *The Voice* – with some success, as half the volunteers recruited have been black women.

The ethos of an organisation will largely determine the type of volunteer it attracts. If its ethos is frankly traditionalist, like that of the WRVS, the organisation will have to adopt special strategies to encourage marginalised groups to volunteer. The 'safe and well' check programme is a good example; it appeals to a whole range of people who, for reasons of preference or necessity, are housebound. Its informality may also attract working-class and black people who may feel unhappy volunteering within large, structured organisations.

The lessons for organisations

As volunteers, older people have much to offer. Because so many of them have finished with paid work and child-rearing, they often have plenty of time to spare. Also, they stay longer with an organisation than younger volunteers do. But perhaps more importantly, older people possess an abundance of life skills together with the maturity of character to put them to good use. And as people live longer, so the pool of potential older volunteers grows larger.

In return, older volunteers do not ask a great deal. Like anyone else, they want to be given work that is useful, interesting and personally rewarding – and, if possible, carried out in the company of others. Some (but by no means all) older people would particularly welcome activities that are a complete change from what they are used to, or that offer the chances to learn that they may have missed in earlier life. Finally, because not all older people are wealthy, organisations should try to reimburse the out-of-pocket expenses they incur during their volunteering.

These are simple enough needs, but it seems that not every UK voluntary organisation is yet geared up to meet them. To make a success of recruiting older volunteers, then, organisations need to demonstrate:

- The **humility** to acknowledge the life skills and maturity that older people bring and to use them wisely.
- The **sensitivity** to detect and correct any ageism in their own policies and working practices.
- The **imagination** to offer older people a variety of volunteer roles, and to ensure that each of these roles is physically and mentally stimulating.
- The **foresight** to see that, even though older volunteers have retired, they may still want to do something completely new or to carry on learning.

- Above all, the **tact** to allow older volunteers to decide for themselves on the amount of responsibility they take on and the level of support they want from others.

Ultimately, success in recruiting older volunteers will depend on how far you succeed in changing your organisation's attitudes; apart from paying expenses, there's no need to spend any more money. These changes are certainly within the reach of an organisation that genuinely wants to recruit older volunteers.

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