

Guest editorial: Volunteer involvement, ageing and older adults: a key pathway to active and connected communities?

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This Special Issue coincides with the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development 2026, as proclaimed by the United Nations. As part of these celebrations, volunteer involvement is often presented as a panacea for any number of problems, a cornucopia of free and plentiful unpaid labour, delivered by angelic individuals and organisations motivated by nothing but a sense of duty and service who only need to be asked. Older people are often seen as the typical recipients of such volunteer input and increasingly as volunteers themselves. The contributions assembled in this Special Issue, including first-hand accounts of those involved as volunteers, those involving volunteers and those researching volunteer involvement, support some but also directly contradict other assumptions about volunteering and about older people's involvement in volunteering. The assembled evidence illustrates the enormous potential volunteer involvement brings to individuals and communities but presents a much more complex phenomenon, embedded in a contested policy and practice landscape, which remains to be appropriately explored and articulated in terms of real-life actions, people and communities.

The work for this Special Issue began in July 2023, during a symposium at the annual conference of the British Society of Gerontology where we discussed "The Role of Volunteering in Older Adult Volunteers' Lives" (Grotz *et al.*, 2023). At that time, contributions to the symposium determined, from the limited evidence available to us and from personal accounts, that there are nothing like equal opportunities to be involved. Not everybody has access to the economic, social and cultural resources required to participate as volunteers and to connect with or contribute to their communities. Volunteer involvement of and for ageing and older adults appeared far from inclusively open to all and there was a common, unquestioned presumption of benefits from and for volunteering that, rather, seemed to mask a wide range of challenges. Such critical observations resonated with work by the Institute for Volunteering Research undertaken for the "What Works Centre for Wellbeing" (since closed in 2024), which in contrast to an idealistic representation, illustrated the complexity of volunteer involvement, suggesting among other findings that those who would most benefit from volunteering are unfortunately also the ones least likely to be able to become involved (Stuart *et al.*, 2020). During the discussions at the symposium and in subsequent work, it became also clear that there is no common language or evidence base to underpin debates of volunteer involvement of or for ageing and older adults. Neither is there a consensus on how volunteer involvement is conceptualised, best enacted or supported. The definition of the European Commission in 2011, explaining that different nations can have different approaches and terms, seems to capture best the current practice of "each to their own", meaning everybody can describe it and enact it "will you, nill you". Given the lack of consensus, we have deliberately aimed for diversity and not prescribed a single concept or approach in preparing this Special Issue. While topically focused, this Special Issue presents a

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plurality of perspectives and voices which reflect a range of involvement contexts older people and volunteers encounter. Knowledge presented in different formats, including the first-person accounts of volunteers with lived experience and involvement practitioners, are here equally valued and presented alongside the findings of research and theoretical debates.

This Special Issue presents nine contributions from four countries on two continents, ensuring that the examples from the UK cover all four of its nations. The authors, in this order, offer an account from an older adult volunteer organiser of singing groups for people living with dementia in England (Edwards), from an older adult volunteer in Northern Ireland (Nixon and Whyte), from a volunteer organiser of services for older adults in Scotland (Nisbet) and research findings about the residential care home and volunteering landscape in Wales (Llewellyn *et al.*). Those are followed by findings from research into senior citizens' co-operatives in Germany (Rosenkranz and Goertler), evidence of social value of volunteer participation in later life in Slovakia (Brozmanova *et al.*), and an exploration of seven culture-related types of involvement from the USA (Lai and White-Saul). The final two contributions offer an analysis of the effects of pension age on volunteer involvement (McNicol and Rutherford) and a practice example of dementia services involving volunteers (Gill *et al.*).

Our starting point for this Special Issue was to bring together diverse experiences and knowledge, so as to help us to understand volunteer involvement of and for ageing and older adults as complex and challenging, but we knew we cannot capture the breadth of volunteer involvement in the UK, let alone globally. The UK Government uses a range of more than a dozen context examples in its Community Life Survey to prompt answers, at least half appearing relevant to ageing and older adults in a variety of settings. These include culture and recreation, community activity, healthcare and social assistance. Others, while less obvious are also relevant such as "Children and Youth" in intergenerational programmes, Education as in adult and lifelong learning, and Human Rights and Advocacy in political campaigning from pension protection to the right to die with dignity. This illustrates that volunteer involvement research relating to ageing and older adults, in practice potentially spans all life stages of individuals, all global communities, and extends into all fields of social, medical and community studies. We argue therefore that this Special Issue should help energise a more concerted effort to understand this ubiquitous and consequential phenomenon which helps situate both ageing and older adults as active and volunteering as a route to action with and for ageing and older adults.

In this Special Issue, we therefore want to interrogate whether volunteer involvement, of and for ageing and older adults, can be a key pathway to active and connected communities. The answers that emerge here suggest that volunteer involvement can indeed enable active and connected communities. The papers also testify to this being neither certain nor easy and that it will depend on context and on the degree of agency volunteers can secure. Given the lack of consensus, the breadth of approaches and the ongoing distortions of volunteer involvement we argue that the papers here merit and stimulate a critical debate on an often-misrepresented area highly relevant to ageing and older adults' lives.

References

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- Stuart, J., Kamerāde, D., Connolly, S., Ellis Paine, A., Nichols, G. and Grotz, J. (2020), "The impacts of volunteering on the subjective wellbeing of volunteers: a rapid evidence assessment, what works centre for wellbeing and spirit of 2012", available at: <https://assets.uea.ac.uk/f/185167/x/e0c67fb1f6/www-volunteer-wellbeing-technical-report-oct2020-a.pdf> (Accessed 05.07.2026).