

# Growing old in a London Borough; the shrinking personal community and how volunteers help to maintain it

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# GROWING OLD IN A LONDON BOROUGH; THE SHRINKING PERSONAL COMMUNITY AND HOW VOLUNTEERS HELP TO MAINTAIN IT

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## Summary

### Aims and methods of the study

This research emerged from a partnership with Age Concern Camden, which runs resource centres or 'day centres' for older people as well as befriending and advocacy services. It is based mainly on interviews and discussions with users of these older people's resource centres, with volunteers there and also with volunteers who visit older people in their own homes. Altogether 20 volunteers, mostly themselves retired, and 18 centre users provided information in the spring and summer of 2005. An additional focus group was held with ten members of the National Pensioners' Convention, a lobbying group for older people.

The aims of the research were:-

- a) to examine the 'social capital' of older people (the networks available to them for friendship, emotional and practical support)
- b) to examine the role played by volunteers in supporting isolated seniors as well as the limits and constraints of this role

The study took place within the context of a wider programme of academic research at the Families & Social Capital Research Group at London South Bank University, and like the rest of that programme was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

### The national context; information from large-scale government surveys

For several decades between one in three and one in four people over 65 have lived alone. What has changed over the last thirty years is that older people are living longer, leading to a higher proportion being left without partners or other relatives living with them. Thus the proportion of those over 75 who live alone has slowly risen to just under a half in 2002. Alongside this trend, greater migration in society means older people are more often distant from their relatives and experience rapid turnover of neighbours. Contact with friends and neighbours decreases with age. Thus there is a growing need for practical support, particularly since the oldest old often have mobility problems and for that if no other reason, are less able than most adults to go out and make new friends.

Many seniors may not actually need any help from their relatives with domestic tasks, transport or nursing care. But less than one in four over 65s living alone actually receive any help from relatives as often as once a month. It is hard to believe that this does not imply a considerable deficit of practical support.

### Loneliness; the decline in personal communities and its causes

Those who attend a seniors' resource centre or become clients of a 'befriending' scheme no doubt do so because they feel a need - they will be towards the 'most lonely' end of the spectrum of older people's experience - though less so than those who need, but do not benefit from, these forms of service. As illustrated through the interviews reported here, older people become isolated through distance from relatives, through being childless, or because they have outlived their friends, or because they are housebound. Even if not completely housebound, frail older people have mobility problems, compounded by fear of crime in public places especially in central London. They may not make as much use of 'accessible transport' as they could, partly perhaps for lack of confidence and familiarity, partly because of some specific problems about multi-storey living for older people in inner London.

The less they feel able to go out on their own, the less they can meet existing friends or make new ones. An extension of working life, or involvement in volunteering, has sometimes been advocated as an insurance against isolation in older age. But this study offers little support for the notion that people who do this have more social contacts by their 80s than those who do not.

How do resource centres combat isolation?

Centres help to widen seniors' networks. They provide a valued source of company and stimulation, though hampered by a shortage of funds and paid staff. Centre contacts sometimes result in active friendships which go beyond the centre setting, but not necessarily. Some members say they have made 'acquaintances', rather than friends, and do not see them elsewhere. This is particularly true of those who have had a very intensive intellectual life in their professional past, who may find centres insufficiently stimulating. Making friends with other people of the 'frail' age group is less valuable, in terms of practical support and companions to go out with, than a friendship with someone under say 60 who is active and mobile. Here it helps to open up centres to a slightly wider age range, to create a context in which cross-generational contacts can develop. Younger members can be actively encouraged to develop activities for older ones and give them support, but it is important that they should not feel that too much is being asked of them. This means that centres need adequate paid staff.

Home care services

The friendly home help who kept an eye on her client in a holistic way, and could be regarded as a friend, seems to be a thing of the past. Home care services have become somewhat fragmented due to sub-contracting and reliance on agency workers. Seniors who use them report some problems of quality and scope of services, and a feeling of lack of control over what happens in their home or when it happens, because of the involvement of two or three different workers, each under considerable pressure to complete their 'round'.

The role of volunteers

Volunteers' capacities are a valuable form of 'social capital' for the older people they help. The role of the visiting advocate can be especially important in filling the gaps which home care services do not cover; in particular helping clients manage money and paperwork, or negotiating with landlords and utility companies. By helping older people to take decisions advocates and counsellors can point to real achievements in helping clients continue to live independently. The befriender, visiting to provide company and sympathy, has in some ways more difficult task. These volunteers felt they were providing something of value, but that sometimes their clients were withdrawn and hard to help. They felt they would welcome more contact with other volunteers to discuss this work.

In the centres, volunteers operate in two different ways. One model is that of 'solidarity by members' in which younger users are encouraged to develop and lead activities for older ones. A second model maintains a greater distinction and distance between 'providers' and users' of services. The first model is potentially more productive of friendships between over 60s and under 60s; but its risk is that some younger members feel they are treated like paid workers when they are not.

A few volunteers saw their unpaid work as a path to paid jobs in a similar field. For them, training and support are especially important. However, most volunteers were already retired and wanted to use their spare time and professional skills to help others. The choice for them was often less about whether to volunteer but who or what to volunteer for. Typically they had very active lives with plenty of

friends, and often family commitments as well. They had less need of social contact with other volunteers than of opportunities to share their experiences and problems with colleagues. Quality support of volunteers can help to increase an organisation's attractiveness to them, helping to retain their commitment in a situation where many organisations compete for their time.

### Conclusion and policy implications

Solutions to the isolation of older people require helping them to maintain contact with their surviving friends; helping them make new friends – preferably a little younger than themselves - and addressing their needs for practical support. Some key points which are relevant to the future development of policy for older Londoners are:-

- Improving internet access has potential benefits on all three of these fronts
- Mobility is very important; accessible transport needs to be publicised and frail individuals helped to take it up and gain confidence in going out. 'Buddies' or escorts may be needed for this, especially for new users.
- Cross-generational contact is very important; in practice the very old seem to make links most naturally with those who are around the same age as their children (or as their children would be if they had any)
- An expansion of good neighbour and befriending schemes could help with both of these objectives, but need to be adequately funded for volunteer support
- Seniors' resource centres, and possibly the communal facilities in sheltered housing schemes, could be opened up to a wider age range to facilitate this kind of cross-generational contact. This could be done by means of partnerships with other community organisations to draw in such activities as literary and other discussion groups, chess, bridge, singing, dancing, adult education and facilities for internet access.
- Partnerships of this kind might generate additional revenue for the host centres, as well as widening the range of activities and contacts available to senior users.

## Introduction

The potential social isolation and loneliness of the very old constitutes a major threat in Britain's ageing society. Inadequate social relationships are one dimension of social exclusion for older people (Barnes et al., 2006), as measured by the frequency, depth and perceived adequacy of contacts with children, other relatives and friends. Around 10% of people over 65 report feeling often or always lonely; this proportion rises with their age, and is higher in metropolitan districts than in other types of English local authority, especially in London, where it attains 21.6% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006). Many seniors (and others) live alone – 21.8% of men over 65, and 4.5% of women over 65<sup>1</sup> - with an inherent risk of isolation as advancing age affects people's capacity to go out and about. There is some debate about whether loneliness in older people has increased in recent years; but the consensus seems to be that it has certainly not fallen despite increased prosperity. Victor et al. (2002) find a significant increase in loneliness amongst people in their early 70s, comparing similar studies between 1957 and 1999, though not amongst those aged 65-69. The risk of inadequate social relationships amongst older people is aggravated by the trend to smaller and more geographically dispersed families, and perhaps by the inbuilt and unconscious ageism of a society in which the lifestyles of different generations move apart due to rapid technical and cultural change. 'Active ageing' through prolonged involvement in paid work and voluntary work is often advocated as a solution to the risk of social exclusion for older people (McCarthy and Thomas 2004; Social Exclusion Unit 2006). There is some evidence that people who are substantially involved in volunteering and/or community organisations are less likely to experience loneliness or lack of adequate friendships (Wenger et al. 1996). However once work (paid or unpaid) ceases there is a risk of gradual attrition of the set of social contacts made from such sources, so that people in their eighties and nineties may have lost the social networks they had in their sixties or early seventies.

Friends, relatives, and sometimes neighbours or contacts with churches or other community organisations, constitute social resources for the individual – the 'social capital' on which they draw for practical and emotional support, or, as Ray Pahl (2000) prefers to put it, their 'personal community' of relatives and friends. These 'personal communities' suffer a process of attrition in older age. Former work colleagues lose touch; friends, partners and siblings die; and grandchildren move further away, geographically and sometimes also in terms of lifestyle. Ray Pahl's study of data from the British Household Panel Survey (Pahl and Pevalin 2005) shows how as people grow older, they turn more to surviving relatives (other than partners) than to friends for their closest social relationships. The support of a seniors' resource centre, or of a befriending scheme for older people, can play an important part in filling the gap for those whose personal community has fallen away. But at their best, these forms of support may help users to re-start a process of making new friends. One challenge for voluntary work with older people is how to maximise the value of befriending and other support services in helping seniors to maintain and regenerate their personal communities. In studying how they do that, something of the volunteers' own personal communities is revealed in their accounts of why they volunteer and how it fits with their other uses of time. Since most volunteers are themselves over 50, this enables us to reflect on the notion of 'active ageing' and the role of voluntary work in laying the foundations for a supportive 'personal community' in one's older age.

Sociologists often conceptualise social capital as a mutual resource through which people offer friendship and help to each other (Putnam, 2000). However, as this research will illustrate, many in the oldest age groups are no longer able to offer any practical help to others as they did when they were younger. They can offer friendship and their often fascinating personal accounts of many decades of history, but often only if others come to them. They have usually offered many years of

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<sup>1</sup> Social Trends 34 (2004)

hard work and support to others – their colleagues, employers, children, other relatives and friends – but they cannot count on reciprocal support from those they have helped in the past where those individuals have now died or are far away. Nor can they easily reciprocate help from new friends in the ways that younger people repay favours, such as babysitting, lifts and errands. Some evidence on this is given in the Retirement Survey 1988<sup>2</sup>; amongst the generation aged 55-69, who may have both adult children and parents aged typically over 75-80, about one in six gave their parents help but only 1% exchanged help with their parents; although one in five 55-69 year olds both helped and were helped by their children. The very old, especially those with mobility and health problems, depend more on solidarity than mutual aid; the most valuable social ‘resources’ for them are relationships which expect nothing by way of practical help in return. This distinction between mutual aid and unreciprocated solidarity is crucial to thinking about social capital in the context of an ageing society.

This paper examines some aspects of seniors’ social exclusion through research in a single London borough, where the author was privileged, through a partnership with the local branch of a national NGO, to meet a number of older people and volunteers who assist them. It considers a number of implications for the way that various public services – housing, transport, home care and adult education – relate to older people. Whilst not intended in any sense to evaluate the work of the helping NGO, it illustrates the ways in which resource centres and home visits by volunteers can alleviate some of the isolation and other problems which older people experience. It also examines this process from the viewpoint of the volunteers; how they view their work, their motives for becoming involved, and how they balance volunteering with family commitments and other activities. The comments of the volunteers, themselves mostly from the age group one might describe as ‘recently retired’ can also cast light on the hypothesis that involvement in voluntary work is itself a valuable source of social contacts and some kind of ‘insurance policy’ against social isolation as they grow older.

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<sup>2</sup> Jarvis et al. 1996, table 5.8, p. 65

## Older people in the community; the national and demographic context

Before reporting the findings of the interviews in London, we set the scene by examining the situation of older people as shown through a number of large-scale government surveys. The Census, the annual General Household Survey, the 1988 Retirement Survey and the Time Use Survey 2000, all have valuable information to offer.

Between 1971 and 2004, the proportion of the UK's population aged over 65 rose from 13% to 16%.<sup>3</sup> The number aged 85 and over rose faster, from 7% to 12%. Those over 65 are expected to reach 23% of the population in 2031. In London, the demographic picture is somewhat different from the national one, since London attracts younger people to work in the city, and those who can afford it often move elsewhere after retirement. Those aged over 60 are expected to fall as a share of London's population up to 2021 (Greater London Authority, 2005). Compared to smaller settlements, London has some considerable advantages for older people; the relative abundance of small local shops, the generous free public transport concession for those still mobile enough to appreciate it, and a vast array of museums, art galleries, and musical events to suit all tastes, many free or at very low cost. On the other hand the many restrictions on parking impede mobility for those dependent on lifts to go anywhere. The rapid turnover of London's residential communities, with high cultural and linguistic diversity, means difficulty for some older people in forming or sustaining relationships with neighbours. Fear of crime is also a significant issue. All of these disadvantages of living in London as older people were highlighted by those interviewed.

Older people, especially women, are more likely to live alone than those of working age. In 2002 48% of people over 75 lived alone, compared to only 12% of those aged 25-44. Amongst the over 75s, 60% of women lived alone compared to 29% of men<sup>4</sup>. There has been a historical rise in the proportion of older people living alone, which stabilised only in the 1970s. Tunstall (1966) provides some evidence that the proportion of seniors living alone rose substantially from 1900 to 1962 – from 10% to 22%. The later figure is slightly higher than the 1961 Census, which he also cites as showing 19.5% of over 65s living alone. Most of the growth in solo living took place in the 1950s, since he mentions that the 1951 Census gave 13.4% of seniors living alone. His source for 1900 was Seebohm Rowntree's survey of York, which found 23% of older people living with non-kin as lodgers. However in the twentieth century this form of living shrank, so that only 3.6% of British seniors lived with non-kin in 1962 (Tunstall, 1966). The decline of the 'lodger' arrangement contributed much more to the doubling of the proportion living alone during 1900 to 1962 than did any decline in the proportion living with their children (from 36% to 32%). For around the last thirty years the proportion of all people over 65 living alone has remained stable at 27-29%, but those who will soon retire (born 1946-50) are expected to contain a considerably higher number of one-person households than previous generations.<sup>5</sup>

The proportion of over 75s living alone rose from only 40% in 1973 to a high of 51% in 1995, since when it has fallen slightly. The slow rise in solo living amongst the oldest age groups over the last 30 years is partly due to fewer seniors living with their adult children or other relatives, and also rising divorce. It is fortunately not due to a rise in widowhood; in fact fewer women become widows now, and later in life, since male life expectancy has been rising faster than female.

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<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics web site, on [www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=949](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=949), accessed 1.12.05

<sup>4</sup> Data from 'Living in Britain; results from the General Household Survey', HMSO 2004

<sup>5</sup> Population Trends issue 99, spring 2000, p.31



Older people in general are at risk of social isolation and lack of practical support; one in five see a relative or friend less often than once a week.<sup>6</sup> This proportion is no higher than for the population as a whole<sup>7</sup> but it is more serious in so far as older people are more likely to need practical support and often find it less easy to go out and make new friends. Those over 70 have less people they can count on in serious personal crises than younger age groups, in particular less people living locally who would help.<sup>8</sup> The proportion of older people who do not see a friend or relative as often as once a week is if anything slightly higher amongst couples than amongst those living alone, perhaps because the couples at least have each other. It also varies by age, peaking at 29% for those in their late 70s; it is smaller for those aged 65-74, who presumably retain their former social networks, and smaller again as people get into their 80s and begin to receive more visits from friends and relatives who come to look after them. Whereas 63% of those aged 65 to 74 visit someone at least once a week, only 47% of those over 75 do, illustrating the decline of mobility and energy with advancing age. Receiving visits does not fall off with age in the same way; 68% of those in either age group receive someone at least once a week.<sup>9</sup> Although those over 70 are in general much more likely to talk to neighbours than those in their 20s<sup>10</sup>, amongst seniors contact with neighbours 'to chat to' does decrease with age; 81% of those in their late 60s talk to a neighbour at least weekly, but only 71% of those aged 85 and over.<sup>11</sup>

Bliezner (1989) describes how friendship grows from acquaintance through a process of exchange – of affection, esteem, information, services, etc. Not all acquaintances develop into friends, but friends can only be made from an initial set of acquaintances. As people age, they see some of their long-term friends die before them (Litwak 1989); and there will also be attrition of former social contacts due to migration or illness of either party, or changes in circumstances. Thus they need to replenish the set of acquaintances from which new friendships will develop; but this inevitably becomes more difficult as advancing age affects the capacity to make new contacts. As people age, they need their friends more; even 'loners' or those who were self-sufficient when married, need more company and practical support in widowhood or as their physical capacity declines. The networks people have during their working lives are very distant in time by the stage of life at which they most need help from friends. For those already aged sixty, average life expectancy is a further 19 to 23.3 years for women and 15.9 to 20 years for men.<sup>12</sup>

Historically, in the 1960s and earlier, older people received a lot of support from their children, although the evidence for this may have been exaggerated (Finch 1994). Support for the older generation was often in the context of reciprocal childminding of grandchildren (Dench and Ogg, 2002). According to Townsend (1957) older women in East London in the 1950s tended to reciprocate help with shopping and housework by cooking for their daughters' or sons' families and

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<sup>6</sup> Data from General Household Survey 2001-2, from 'Older People; May 2004', article on the Office for National Statistics website at [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget\\_print.asp?ID=883](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget_print.asp?ID=883)

<sup>7</sup> See account of results from the General Household Survey 2000 by the Office for National Statistics, on <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=183&Pos=4&ColRank=2&Rank=448>

<sup>8</sup> See 'People's perception of their neighbourhood and community involvement; Results from the Social Capital Module of the General Household Survey', on [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/)

<sup>9</sup> Traynor and Walker p. 80, Table 53

<sup>10</sup> See People's perception of their neighbourhood and community involvement; Results from the Social Capital Module of the General Household Survey', on [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/)

<sup>11</sup> Traynor and Walker p. 81, Table 54

<sup>12</sup> Estimates vary between sources. Population Trends issue 118, table 5.1 gives the higher figures for each gender, whilst an article on the Office for National Statistics web site written by the Government Actuary's department in July 2004 gives the lower figures; see <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/SearchRes.asp?term=government+actuary&x=26&y=16>

by minding grandchildren, even when they had quite limiting health problems. Jan Pahl (2000) points out that rising life expectancy means the period of life when older women need most help is postponed well beyond the stage when their grandchildren are young. According to the UK Time Use Survey (see Gray 2005a) the peak age for grandmothers helping with grandchildren is 50-70. But by the time the grandparents themselves need support in very old age, the children and grandchildren they helped may be living far away, since migration between UK regions, and indeed internationally, is increasing. Moreover the rising divorce rate tends to weaken contact between generations (Kreager 2004).

Whilst the actual extent of inter-generational help in the mid-twentieth century is debated, and in particular three-generational households were not always happy or preventive of loneliness amongst older adults (Finch 1994; Victor et al, 2002, Townsend 1957), there is some concern about the possibility of a declining 'solidarity of care' (Johnson 1995). In 1995, about 11% of men aged 45-64 and 15% of women were caring for a parent or parent-in-law.<sup>13</sup> A study of national trends in caring between 1985 and 1995 (Pickard, 2002) found that caring by adult children and children-in-law fell, and caring by the older person's spouse increased, as did the number of older people entering residential care - despite the increase during this period in the proportion of over 65s with at least one grown-up child. Pickard argues that these changes cannot be entirely accounted for by the greater availability of spouses as carers, although by 1995 more of the over-65s were married and their spouses were surviving longer than ten years earlier. This change is also observed by Hirst (2001). The decline in inter-generational help appears to be partly a cultural change, perhaps associated with more daughters and daughters-in-law being in employment, although the extent of paid work amongst those who did care for their parents or parents-in-law in fact increased. Slightly fewer households contained a carer in 1995 than in 1985.<sup>14</sup> As life expectancy rises, an increasing number of people in their 50s or early 60s are still providing care for their parents at the time their own grandchildren are born, leading to a time-squeeze from different family commitments on this middle or 'pivot' generation, particularly if they have jobs as well (Dench et al 2000; Jonsson 2003; Mooney and Statham 2002).

The UK Time Use Survey shows that a rather modest proportion of older people receive help at home from either their children or other relatives. Amongst couples with the male partner over 65, 5.2% had some form of help with household tasks from their children during the four weeks prior to the survey. The proportion is under 8% even for couples with one partner over 80. Other family help for couples is rare – only 2% of couples with the man over 65, and under 3% of couples with the man over 80, received help from relatives other than their children. Older people living alone, especially older women, receive more help from relatives than do couples. Amongst singles over 65, 15.1% of women get some help from their children and 8.4% from other family members, whilst only 12.9% of lone men over 65 are helped by their children and 6.8% by other relatives. For nursing care, almost 8% of couples with the man over 80, 4.6% of single women over 80 and 4.1% of single men receive help from their children or other family members.

Looking at help given by adults under 65, only 6.8% of men and 10.4% of women told the Time Use Survey that they had given regular help to their parents or parents-in-law in the last four weeks. The average amount of time received by people over 65 from their children, across all respondents whether or not they obtained any help, was just 24 minutes per week to couples, just over an hour to single men and over an hour and a half to single women. The types of help were more varied than what is generally regarded as 'care'; decorating or house repairs and lifts were the tasks most

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<sup>13</sup> Department of Health/OPCS 'Informal Carers' supplement to 1995 GHS

<sup>14</sup> 'Informal Carers' supplement to 1995 GHS

commonly done by men for their parents, whilst cleaning was the most important form of help given by women, followed by shopping and lifts.

The Retirement Survey 1988 showed that 18% of men aged 55-69 'regularly or frequently' helped their parents, as did 14% of women.<sup>15</sup> The gender difference, contrary to the greater predominance of women in 'care' activities, is explained by the fact that lifts, shopping and 'DIY' were amongst the most frequent kinds of help. Comparing this to the Time Use Survey of 2000 suggests that there may have been a decline in help to parents; at the later date, only 6.4% of men aged 55-69 had helped their parents in the last four weeks, and 8.6% of women. However, the methodologies of the two surveys are not fully comparable, and understandably those who gave most care may have been under-represented in the Time Use Survey since completing the survey documents (including two 24-hour diaries) was itself quite a time commitment.

Help from children is by definition unavailable to the childless. The long-term trend in childlessness has been erratic and complex, affected by wars and declining infant mortality as well as by changes in cultural practices. Tunstall's survey of over 65s in 1962 (Tunstall 1966) involved a generation born in the late nineteenth century when families of five or more were common. His sample had an average of 2.6 surviving siblings and their parents would have had no shortage of children to assist them. But Tunstall found that one third of women he interviewed – born mainly in 1882-1897 - had no children alive. Many of these would have lost children, since only 14% had never married. Few of Tunstall's sample were over 80, but life expectancy has since risen and it is the very oldest who tend to need more help from their children and from others. Over the 1990s, the proportion of people over 80 who never had children has been rising. This has occurred because childlessness rose from the generation of Tunstall's sample to the generation of women born during 1916-20, whose childbearing years were affected by the Second World War. In this age group, whose survivors are now aged 85 and over, national data show that around one in five never had children.<sup>16</sup> However amongst women born in 1946, those who will retire shortly, only 16% are childless. Amongst those born in the early 1960s, the proportion still childless by 1999 had soared to almost 40%. When today's 60-69 year olds reach 80 they will have slightly more children than those before or those who come after them – an average of 2.3 per woman compared to 1.9 for women born in 1920. But looking to the longer-term future, women born in 1960 (now 45) are expected to end up with an average of less than two children each. By 2040 octogenarians will have less children to call on than those who are in the oldest age groups now, and more of them will have none at all – an inevitable feature of an ageing society. They will need informal help from non-kin rather more than today's oldest people, and it is not too soon to think about what social changes may be needed to ensure this

However childlessness, and separation from children by their migration, was also widespread in early nineteenth century England; Kreager (2004) writes that in that period just over half of the older men and just under half of the women had no child to live with, as would have been customary at that time for those with a surviving adult family nearby. Support needs were met in ways which would not be acceptable now; one third of older women lived with non-kin, either as servants, or employers of servants, or placed as boarders with a family by the Poor Law Guardians. Anderson (1971) suggests that some older women living with non-kin may have found a role as surrogate grandmothers who minded children, thus 'paying' for their keep. As already noted, Seebohm Rowntree's survey of York in 1900 still found 23% of older people living as lodgers.

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<sup>15</sup> Jarvis et al., 1996, p. 64

<sup>16</sup> Population Trends issue 99, spring 2000, p.31



## Methods of this study

Interviews with centre users and volunteers were sought in the spring and summer of 2005 at three resource centres for older people. The host organisation kindly mailed all its volunteers, over a hundred of them, of whom eight agreed to be interviewed individually, a further seven joined a focus group, and five returned mail questionnaires. Most of the volunteers were retired. Some were involved in running centre activities and others visited older people in their homes, some as part of a befriending scheme, others to do 'once-off' advocacy tasks like helping someone sort out financial problems, preparing for a house move, or negotiating for domestic repairs.

Across the three centres, the activities offered at the time of writing included lunch, parties, tea-dancing, yoga, art classes, musical appreciation, poetry, creative writing, hairdressing, manicure, computer classes, bowls, darts, bingo, swimming trips, seaside trips, shopping trips and some other outings. Each centre had a users' committee and was run as a members' club, but with the emphasis on access to anyone who wants to join. There were some special activity sessions for Bengali speakers and other 'ESOL' groups. Each centre produced a monthly members' newsletter, with articles written by members or volunteers on health issues and historical events, quiz questions, jokes and the like, as well as news about activities. The centre members varied considerably in their age, health and mobility. Centre 1 was within a sheltered housing complex, and attracted largely people with significant mobility impairment or other health problems, several in their nineties. Centre 2 had a combination of mobility-impaired members who were brought there by minibus, and others, usually slightly younger, who were able to enjoy dancing and visits to the pub. Centre 3 had this same range of members, plus a younger element brought in by a programme of leisure activities for the over 50s, which the members loosely described as the 'early retired project', some of whom became volunteers to cook, run parties and other activities for the older ones. Those interviewed as individuals were predominantly the older and less mobile centre members; all women, they mostly belonged to the 5% of older women who receive services from local authority home helps<sup>17</sup>, and to the third of older people who have difficulty with some domestic or personal care tasks.<sup>18</sup>

A total of 18 service users took part in focus groups at centres, and seven of them were interviewed individually in their homes as well. Additional views were gathered through a meeting with ten members of the National Pensioners' Convention (NPC), a national lobbying group for older people.

In writing up this study, some details have been suppressed which might make participants identifiable, for example their former occupations where distinctive and the places where their relatives lived. Women predominated amongst both centre members and volunteers, and all quotations are from women unless otherwise specified.

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<sup>17</sup> Traynor and Walker 2003, p. 84, table 58

<sup>18</sup> Jarvis, Hancock, Askham and Tinker 1996, p.33; data based on the General Household Survey and other government surveys

## Loneliness; the decline in personal communities and the absence of family support

Older people, like younger ones, present a wide spectrum in the scale and quality of their social contacts. As one would expect, many of the centre users interviewed for this research find themselves at the 'relatively isolated' end of this spectrum; they had found themselves in poor health and without family support, and that is partly why they come there. It is sometimes their main form of everyday social contact, and highly valued for that. By contrast some users have many friends outside the centre, from whom they bring stories and contacts for those who are more isolated. A random sample of older people would no doubt have revealed less loneliness along with more mobility and better health. However, the value of this sample is precisely that it focuses on people who have a relatively high incidence of feeling lonely or unsupported, and illustrates the life situations which can give rise to this.

Lonely people naturally feature strongly amongst those who are visited by volunteers. As one volunteer said, 'I don't think I see anybody now where I'm not the only visitor practically, apart ... or they are totally reliant in their social contacts on professions visiting....there are huge issues of loneliness, particularly if there's been a bereavement and it's usually multiple bereavements as people approach eighty'. Since women tend to be younger than their husbands, almost half of older women become widows by age 65 and 80% by age 85.<sup>19</sup> Although life expectancy is highly variable – both in general and amongst any one individual's friends – those who survive longest inevitably have a relatively high probability of outliving their own age-cohort. An important insight into the issue of outliving one's network was offered by a lady in her late 90s, who quoted the eighteenth century essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson; 'If a man does not make new acquaintance as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone'<sup>20</sup>. However, now housebound, she had to depend on people coming to visit her, which clearly raises the stakes against making new friends.

Maintaining 'personal communities' for older people involves a two-fold challenge; how to keep in touch with friends and relatives who survive; and how to replace, with new friendships, those who pass away or lose touch. The interviews with centre users and volunteers illustrated the problems the very old face in this regard, and the ways in which the volunteers tried, with varying degrees of success, to help them avoid social exclusion. The findings on the social contacts and support networks of seniors are examined under three headings; relatives, neighbours and friends.

### Relatives

Some of the people who attend the centres, or are visited by volunteers, have no living relatives or at least none who are at all closely in touch. As mentioned earlier, nationally about one in five or six older women have no children. By default a niece may step in; several interviewees mentioned nieces, but nieces tend to be less close than daughters. Some seniors' relatives rarely visit except at Christmas (Box 1). Sometimes children have emigrated, or live in distant UK cities. Moves are said to occur more frequently than in the past because of young adults seeking employment or good schools for their children. Even when they stay in London, the shortage of social housing and high prices of homes mean it is often hard for them to find housing close to their ageing parents. But there is an impression that generational ties are being weakened by more than distance; whereas older people were found who receive a phone call from their son or daughter almost daily, others gave the impression that their children were 'busy' and uninvolved. In a separate research project with fathers of 10-11 year olds in London, the author asked what participants in three focus groups thought about the issue of looking after aged parents. Their consensus was that older people 'did not want to be a burden' to their

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<sup>19</sup> Social Trends 34; 'Marital status of people aged 65 and over; by sex and age', available online at [www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Expodata/Spreadheets/D7189.xls](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Expodata/Spreadheets/D7189.xls), accessed 1.12.05

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.samueljohnson.com/friendsh.html#8>, accessed December 16<sup>th</sup> 2005.

children, and often chose to move where they wanted to live – for example by retiring to the seaside - regardless of their children's location. A converse pattern was found in a third project in Hertfordshire and Essex; in a sample of older people distinguished by the fact that they regularly looked after their grandchildren whilst the parents worked, several had moved to their town to follow their grown-up children (Gray, 2005b) . Although not usually sharing a home with the two younger generations, these grandparents had chosen to strengthen inter-generational ties, which was possible because obtaining pleasant and suitable houses for all three generations within close proximity was a lot easier than in London.

Box 1; People with few or far-away relatives

'Some people's children don't visit except at Christmas. They think "the government will look after her". ..One lady, she is always mentioning her nieces, what lovely "girls" they are – they're now in their 50s. But she hardly ever sees them, makes the excuse for them that they are "busy with their own life". Sometimes she almost cries about this in the pub. She was on her own for Christmas. ... Older people [in inner London] find their children have to move away because there are no homes for them nearby. Then the generations lose touch, especially in the winter, the children don't come back from the suburbs to visit'.

(volunteer 5)

'I have no relatives now except my niece who moved to <a western county>. She has a husband and children. They don't visit any more, they phone occasionally. I have 2 god-daughters in <northern England>, they are closer, more like family, I get a phone call from one or other of them most weekends.

(Centre member A)

She has one son, who lives 200 miles away, doesn't see him often, he has his own busy life and often isn't easily to be found by phone. A bachelor, he is not used to caring for anyone. She also mentions a niece, to whom she gave her car when she felt she was too old to drive safely, and a stepson with wife and children, who phone and visit sometimes. They recently moved out of London and off hand she can't remember where to. They and her son come for Christmas.

(notes on interview with Centre member B)

'I have a grand-daughter and cousins, but they are not in London. My grand-daughter is almost 18 now, I used to be able to take her on holiday, go to the theatre, the opera with her. But not now, she has her own life and she is not here'.

(Centre member C)

'If you have grandchildren and nieces they will give you an eye, but if they just phone up every 14 days, how are you to be sure that someone would find out if something was wrong?'

(Focus Group with NPC)

'We have no children. We do have nieces. We used to help look after them, but they have their own lives to live now. ...One has four children. She won't put herself out to come visit us. One of her two daughters said she tried to get her to come but she is too wrapped up in her own world. All I've done for those girls, they should have done something for me. Though we had no intention of being reimbursed when we did it. You've got to be fair, they are terrific, but we don't see them a great deal, they have their own families, their own friends. But it would be nice to meet them and have a chat.'

(Married man, mid-70s)



## Neighbours

Older people's contact with neighbours not only seems to reduce with advancing age, as mentioned earlier. It may also have fallen slightly over time; in 2001 78% of all over 65s talked to their neighbours at least once a week, whilst 82% did ten years earlier.<sup>21</sup>

Some interviewees felt that the decline in neighbour contact for inner Londoners had begun after the second world war, when many people moved from large multi-occupied houses with shared front doors, bathrooms and sometimes kitchens, into self-contained flats. Television, which first became popular in the 1950s, was also thought responsible for people staying in their own homes more and a decline in casual visiting. Participants in one focus group with centre members, in an area of densely packed multi-storey flats in inner London, thought that recent changes in the design of blocks of flats had made contact with neighbours more difficult. Measures to improve security, like entry-phones, remote-operated doors, and barriers between balconies had all made it more difficult to visit neighbours in a casual way. Sometimes remote doorbells or entry-phones did not work, and then people could miss visitors without realising it.

There were differing views on whether loss of shared gardens, common in the 'old days' of large shared houses, also meant less neighbour contact. One centre member who did feel this also recalled with affection how a 'community garden,' which had been started close to her modern block of flats, brought people together for cultivation, relaxation and chat. However, a volunteer who lived in a street where several back gardens had been joined together as a private park maintained by the Council for all the tenants, said that in practice it was little used and did not help neighbours talk to each other.

Sheltered housing schemes for older people were welcomed as supportive, but they are not considered a complete answer to issues of isolation. Firstly they reduce the chance of meeting younger people as neighbours. Secondly, shared social activities are inaccessible to the least mobile unless someone is available to help them get to the communal area, which sometimes means pushing a wheelchair. Wardens can help encourage this, up to a point:-

'I know this woman who has had several falls so was quite anxious about walking from her room to the main area but then someone comes and gives her an arm, someone to walk with. I think that's through the Warden identifying someone who lives near and is quite happy to knock on her door and they walk together - but that's going to fall down if the helper becomes unable to do that.'

(volunteer 8)

Thirdly, the average age of tenants in sheltered housing tends to increase as the scheme matures, leading to a higher proportion of people who need considerable help to move around the complex, or who have run out of social energy. This tendency is aggravated by the shortage of places in such schemes; only those in greatest need can now get a tenancy.

Neighbours are potentially important sources of support for older people living alone, especially in an emergency. However, most interviewees felt they could not expect much support from their neighbours. Some said neighbours were usually out at work and they just did not meet them much. Interviewees seemed to be closest to those who were a little younger than themselves, rather than very young families with children. If they had someone they thought they could call on for support, it was usually someone over 50. Getting to know people means remembering them from one or two chance

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<sup>21</sup> Goddard and Savage 1994; Traynor and Walker 2003

encounters, and having good enough eyesight to do that. As one man in his 70s said, 'Older people don't remember faces, it's not their intention to cut people out, but you have to make allowances for that.'

One reason given for lack of neighbour contact was the rapid turnover of population, especially with the selling of council flats in recent years (see Box 2). As some estates see rapid turnover because they are moving into owner-occupation, others become more socially deprived. One woman lived on a run-down estate which appeared to have an increasing incidence of noise, neglect of public areas and unruly children. She found she could not get to know her new neighbours, who were immersed in their own problems including domestic violence and barely even cleaned the stairs. When she moved there over 30 years ago, most of her extended family were also there, but they had died or moved away. Now she had no friends or relatives near, and was fearful about what would happen to her in an emergency; 'I think "God, if I'm ever ill I've got nobody to do anything!" I've hurt my back and hurt my ankle a couple of times and fortunately it didn't last ...I don't know what I'd do ... they would probably do something next door if I asked them but if you don't ask ...'.

There were also accounts of relationships with neighbours which indicated a degree of ageism and even hostility. One woman felt that she had been blamed for some problems about rubbish in her block of flats which were actually due to someone else; 'they wouldn't believe an old woman'. Another found neighbours almost refused to take in a parcel. When visiting one person for interview in an obviously expensive private block, the author had to appeal to a neighbour to open the common front door when the entry-phone failed to work properly. There was little sympathy for an octogenarian upstairs who needed to know that someone had arrived to see her; 'we shouldn't really be called upon to do this; it isn't a care home'.

## Box 2: Relations with neighbours

'My cousin who lives in Spain came to London and brought me a present. I was out so she tried to leave it with a neighbour. The neighbour said, she would take it this once but don't ask me again. I have nobody amongst the neighbours whom I could ask for help. Maybe two people on the next floor if I was really stuck, I would have to be desperate. One is 80, the other 60.'

Woman in her late 80s, living with her son

I have been 33 years in my block and now I only know 2 or 3 people. I used to know them all. But people buy their flats, then they sell them or sub-let. People keep changing now. But I do have a good caretaker.

Woman in her 80s, inner London

The difference now [that I've moved to sheltered housing] is I have help, I can ring a bell and someone will come and see what I need. I'm not isolated any more, there is a communal room, we play darts, we have quizzes...I was very isolated in my council flat ...I had no communications with the neighbours there.

NPC member

'Neighbours don't meet. I'll tell you a story. Once I met a young man in the lift of my block of flats. He had a piece of wood and it was too long to go in. So he said, I'll saw it in two, and he did. Then we talked. He said, how long have you lived here? I said, I've lived in this block of flats for 39 years. He said, I've been here 11 years. But we never met before! Now we speak to each other every day. I think it was because we were on the first floor, so often we used to use the stairs rather than wait for the lift.'

Male centre member

Difficulty in getting to know neighbours was experienced irrespective of the type of neighbourhood; it was experienced in expensive suburban private blocks of flats and inner-city council estates alike. With a couple of exceptions it was confirmed by several volunteers, speaking of their own experience, as well as by centre members, so that it seems it is not just due to poor health, lack of mobility or social energy that people experience a lack of neighbourliness in London. Would these interviewees have fared better if they had not stayed in London? National data confirm the impression from this study that Londoners have less contact with each other as neighbours and are less likely to exchange help with them.<sup>22</sup>

## Friends

The difficulty of maintaining friendships in old age is twofold – how to keep up with surviving friends as energy and mobility decline, and how to replace friends who die.

Declining social energy may gradually erode people's capacity to keep up friendships even with those of their own age group. Two centre members said that although, as housebound people, they could still keep in touch with friends by phone, in practice they tended not to phone people much – and writing letters had also become more difficult. There was also a more intangible reluctance to make an effort to

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<sup>22</sup> People's perception of their neighbourhood and community involvement; Results from the Social Capital Module of the General Household Survey', on [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/)

see others. One volunteer said of the person she regularly visited:-

'It's good to see her actually reminiscing about things and she can talk about her family and what she used to do [in her professional life]... she's very good on the past but I've noticed over a year she's much less interested in that ... I used to talk about what television programmes we both watched and she was quite keen on that but that's become less keen so I suspect that they are less important. ... I think she was very sociable at one time and they have group lunches and group coffee mornings [in the housing scheme] but she won't go to any of these. I've offered to go with her and I've done my best to persuade her and in the end we did have a long discussion about ... well, she actually was somebody who quite liked being on her own and that was okay [but] on the other hand she's lonely so it's a bit of a "no-win" situation.... She can actually walk very well but I think ... there's something that actually stops her from making new friends and whether it's because she's just too tired ... too much energy ... or ... there's a bit of "Well they don't come to me so I am not coming to them" ...it's almost as though it's too much effort to start to make a friendship'.

Although this volunteer felt she had not succeeded in persuading her 'client' to make a social effort, at least she had tried, and in only slightly different circumstances she might have succeeded. This illustrates the potential value of a befriending scheme in encouraging seniors to keep up their social networks and providing them with a confidante with whom they can share the little worries which sometimes become barriers to being socially outgoing.

Sheer loneliness may itself induce a lack of energy to listen to others, again making new friendships difficult. One volunteer in her 60s, speaking of her own mother, said:-

Tonight I will listen to my mother prattling for an hour [said humorously and with fondness], that's my role [in the family support network for her mother]. It's not a question of talking with, but talking at. (AG: Why do elderly people do this do you think? Is it an issue of hearing difficulty?) Would take a geriatrician to tell you, but probably that's only a part of it. It's partly about having lost a partner, being alone a lot, they bottle it up and it all comes out.

This volunteer was doing for her mother what she and other volunteers may also do for someone they visit; being a good listener; so that when her mother talked to others perhaps less patient, the need to talk would be less pressing and would be less likely to impede a more two-way social interchange.

Dr. Johnson's advice, if universally followed, would be a real challenge to ageism in the way people tend to select social contacts. It would mean that as the old reached out to the young and the young responded, we would all have some friends older than ourselves as well as some younger. We would face the death of some of them earlier in our own lives, but have a greater chance that at least some of our friends would outlive us. Resource centre 3 had tried to overcome ageism in a modest way by running an 'over 50s programme' to attract into the centre people in their 50s, rather than just those over 60 who were the main target group for all three centres. This achieved some positive contacts between them and the older members, and some of the 'early retired' group were drawn in as volunteers. It made a considerable difference to the social environment for all centre members, reducing the apparent social stigma attached to a group only for the very old or which the volunteers were very conscious. A particularly wide array of activities were offered, including some which the 'early retired' group had developed. However, the downside was that this group felt they were doing too much as volunteers, and were constantly called upon to do more. Although they liked what they did, it had not

on the whole led to friendships either with the older ones or with each other which went outside what they did at the centre. However, it was an environment which blurred the formal distinction between helper and helped, which is conducive to friendship and which may reduce the barrier to 'outside contact' created by the volunteer code of practice where that formal distinction is present.

Apart from the predicament of those who have serious mobility problems, there are additional reasons why making younger friends is easier said than done. One respondent, although obviously very socially active, happy and with many surviving friends, said 'younger people are tiring – it's fine for an hour or two, but they tire me'. Some interviewees also felt a cultural gap between themselves and younger generations; this feeling focussed on their relatives, but implied a barrier which may be more acute where no kinship bond exists. As one centre member said, 'I wouldn't want to live with my daughter. The younger generation are so different now. Their music! It's shouty, all noise.' Others chorused agreement with this. Younger people, in particular the grandchildren generation, were perceived to spend a lot of time interacting with machines (TV, video, computers, music systems) with consequently less time to talk or read, the activities older people thought were most important. Rapid cultural and technical change thus reduces the area of common interests that can be the basis for bonding and shared activities; the generation gap is perhaps wider than it was before the electronic age. A national 'inter-generational network' is organised by Age Concern to bring older people into schools, children's nurseries etc as volunteers and to bring children and youth into residential homes and sheltered housing schemes for shared activities including IT (in which young people generally have more expertise). It would be an interesting topic of future research to investigate how this addresses generational differences; how far it leads to contacts which last and in particular to those which extend to the youngest generation's families.

'Active ageing' is often advocated as an insurance policy against isolation, implying that it is easier for seniors to maintain social contacts if they continue paid work beyond the minimum retirement age or take up voluntary work as a partial substitute. For example McCarthy and Thomas (2004) cite the finding of a MORI study that belonging to organisations increases an individual's number of close friends. They advocate a 'lifelong commitment to volunteering' as an insurance against loneliness in older age. If this is true, one might expect to find that both centre members, and also volunteers who had recently retired, would mention ex-colleagues and co-volunteers amongst their friends. In practice, it was remarkable that only two volunteers did so. However, one focus group of volunteers noted that women who have never worked, or not worked for a long time, are the most likely to become isolated but also the least likely to volunteer or get involved in organised activities.

Wenger et al's (1996) finding that older people who have extensive community and volunteering involvement are relatively less likely to be lonely appears at first sight to contrast with the low correspondence here between co-volunteers and friends. However, one must bear in mind that volunteer work (with Age Concern and in several cases with other organisations simultaneously) was not the only, or necessarily the most salient, group activity in these people's lives. One volunteer had many friends in her bridge circle and her synagogue. Another played tennis and attended several adult education classes in her neighbourhood. Two went to ballroom dancing groups. Volunteer work tends to be one of several 'group' or 'organised' activities from which active 'young old' may form new acquaintances, who may or may not eventually become friends. What has to be said, however, is that one to one visiting of older people is by definition a way of making only one new acquaintance, unless there is extensive contact with co-volunteers. Unlike volunteers in the evidently very successful Age Concern befriending scheme in Buckinghamshire studied by Andrews et al (2003) those interviewed in London tended not to be drawn into reciprocal personal friendships with their 'clients'. However this does not mean that the London work was less successful. Several of the London volunteers

interviewed were involved in advocacy – intended to be short-term and task-oriented rather than a long-term befriending relationship.

The interviews, both with both retired volunteers and centre members, suggested that former work colleagues may be important social contacts for some individuals still in their 60s but merely memories for those who were older. Ex-colleagues move away or lose touch, so that the natural attrition of a workplace network with which someone has daily contact until her sixties means that it often has virtually no influence on her life fifteen or twenty years later. Even where still considered friends, ex-colleagues may not be able or willing to offer practical support, nor even be living close by. In the future, ex-colleagues may be even less important for the friendship networks of those still working now. Two volunteers commented that developing and maintaining ties with work colleagues had become more difficult with social change in recent years. One aspect of this change is that fewer people, especially in London, work in the area where they live (Watt, 2003). A second aspect of workplace change which has impeded social contacts between colleagues is increasing job turnover; temporary contracts are increasing and fewer people are staying in the same job for most of their working life.

Can volunteering become a source of friendship for retired people, and is it sought for that? Some volunteers did clearly feel an absence in their lives when they stopped paid work, but this was perceived more in terms of a loss of structured activity to give their lives meaning and a sense of being useful, than in terms of friendships with colleagues. On the whole they took up volunteering out of goodwill to the community and to replace the sense of satisfaction they got from paid work, rather than to meet people or to make friends – they had many other ways of doing that. Nor did most of them in practice attach much importance to friendships with co-volunteers, although those who worked in centres enjoyed being with other volunteers and centre users during the hours they were there. One person who was particularly active as a volunteer with several different organisations still felt acutely isolated after several family members had died or moved far away from where she lived – as an exception to the general rule, she clearly would have liked to make friends through volunteering but this had not actually happened.

Friendship, as Ray Pahl (2000) notes, has many aspects, revolving around Aristotle's distinction between friends of utility, friends of pleasure and friends of virtue. The third category of friendship is the one most associated with a lasting loyalty and shared interests. 'Friends of pleasure' with whom someone shares certain activities without it necessarily going further, may be common amongst co-volunteers or members of a community organisation. 'Friendship of utility' is identified most closely with social capital as a career-building asset, and with the attitude of 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours'. Those who have relatively little energy, mobility or physical capacity to reciprocate favours from friends are in a poor position to attract them, unless it is in return for things done long ago. The oldest old perhaps have need not of 'friendship of utility' but of a fourth category, that of solidarity which offers practical support without expecting any return. Solidarity is not necessarily based on a 'friendship of virtue,' which is most likely to be found amongst others whose practical capacities (to shop, drive, repair, run errands etc) are similarly eroded by age. Solidarity may be associated with the definition of a friend in Dr. Johnson's dictionary which, as Pahl (2000) notes, is 'one who supports you and comforts you while others do not'. One interviewee, housebound and in her nineties, referred to this by making a slightly different distinction; that between 'fair weather friends' – friends of pleasure perhaps - and 'foul weather friends':-

'Foul-weather friends are there when things are going badly...when you are having a bad time, when you're in trouble, when you NEED a friend ... the foul-weather friends are the ones who are left and they are few and far between. ... you don't have to ask, they are there...there are more fair-weather friends usually than foul.... [In hospital] a

couple of fair-weather friends came fairly regularly ... just sort of said "Hello, how are you?" and "You look much better" bla bla and that was that.

And fair-weather friends are nice to have around and they come to visit and you know, you have got a happy relationship and perhaps you used to go to the theatre together or something but they are never there when anything needs DOING' [They say] "Oh, let me know if you need help." I'm the last person to let people know if I need help! I HATE asking for help! The foul-weather friends are there anyway, they appear or they come ... "I'm here!" ... "I've come to do ..." you know? It's different'

How can, and do, people acquire and retain foul weather friends whose loyalty extends to periods when they need practical and emotional support in older age – and replace these friends as they die or lose touch ? Reciprocity is crucial to most social relationships, and if people are unable to make the effort to contact others, eventually their friends may cease to contact them:-

I'm sure [the falling away of active friendships with advancing age] is something to do with illness that gets people less mobile and then the visitors drop off and they don't come.  
(Volunteer 8)

Whilst any activity which widens a person's range of social contacts increases the list of individuals with whom close friendships might be established, it does not guarantee that any such friendships will actually develop. Clearly seniors need to maximise social contacts with those who are active as well as loyal, and who share their interests –but whilst this is a necessary condition of ensuring an adequate support network, it is unfortunately by no means a sufficient condition. Attending a resource centre is one way of increasing contacts, and the next section examines how the resource centres addressed this issue for isolated seniors. Perhaps more important is to find ways of breaking down ageism in society at large. Some volunteers commented how activities designed for seniors tend to be stigmatised by younger people, or by seniors who feel they have other choices. Yet, given only the physical ability and confidence to walk a short distance or to use public transport – a big 'if' for many of the oldest, in practice - there are many activities in London which can and do bring them into contact with the 'empty-nester' generation for sociability and intellectual stimulation. Some examples are the Progressive League based in Hampstead and the News from Nowhere Club in Waltham Forest, or the many book-reading circles attached to public libraries. NPC members made the point that in the past many seniors have sought cultural outlets and contact with younger people through evening classes. However recent cuts in adult education budgets have reduced the number of 'leisure-oriented' classes (in music, politics, art etc.) and made participation in others (e.g. dressmaking) conditional on working for a qualification, which is unattractive to retired people. The University of the Third Age, a cooperative of older adult learners, takes on greater importance as other forms of lifelong learning for seniors are cut back.

In search of 'foul weather friends' seniors may also need to adapt and deepen existing social contacts. Here the fear of being seen to be lonely and in need of help constitutes a barrier; as one volunteer said of the lady she regularly visited:-

'There's a concern about her asking for anything and I've suggested "Well why don't you knock on the next-door lady ... you used to be very friendly with her" ... (She said that!) "Why don't you knock on her door and [ask her to] come and have a cup of tea" ... "I couldn't do that" she said'.

There may also be a need to extend the context of some social contacts. Allen (1996) notes that many of the social contacts people have are context-specific – people we know as colleagues, or

neighbours, or whom we regularly meet in pubs or clubs, whom we do not tend to meet outside those contexts. These he defines as 'mates' who may or may not become 'friends' (extending the relationship to other contexts) in due course. In the modern world Allen's concept of a 'mate' may be more appropriate than Aristotle's 'friends of pleasure', since work (paid or unpaid) is such an important source of such contacts for most people.

As an example of this extension of context, one activity centre organised trips to pubs for groups of women members, accompanied and encouraged by a volunteer. This is particularly valuable for women who are single, and most of all those recently widowed, who often feel ill at ease in the company of couples, and need companions to go out with especially to pubs, where lone women feel out of place. Discussion at two inner London centres also revealed that for women living alone, fear of crime was a significant barrier to going out and about, and consequently a block on meeting new people. The fear of crime is also a barrier to accepting little acts of solidarity from people whom the vulnerable senior does not know:-

'I felt very tired whilst carrying a heavy bag home from the supermarket. I sat on a doorstep and a boy aged 11 or 12 came and asked if I wanted help. I was very glad to accept. But I wonder if I would have trusted him if he had been 17 or 18.'

(Centre member in her late 80s)



## Immobility, transport and crime

Keeping up with old friends and making new ones crucially depends on mobility, increasingly so as migration increases, as society becomes more dependent on car ownership, and as work colleagues are drawn from a wider area. The widening geographical spread of personal networks increases the risk that older people become cut off from contacts and activities as their mobility declines.

One interviewee identified the start of her isolation from friends by the time when she no longer felt able to drive safely. Car ownership decreases with age, and with widowhood (since in many older couples, the driver has been the man). Thus only 42% of women aged 75 to 84, and only 25% of women aged 85 and over, have access to a car.<sup>23</sup> However, many households, particularly in inner city areas, have never had a car, and here the increased difficulty of using public transport comes into play. The resource centres have tried to plug this gap by offering theatre visits, seaside trips, shopping trips and other outings in which members are taken by minibus. These are greatly appreciated, and patient drivers are praised for their help to passengers who use wheelchairs or walking frames. However, parking close to a theatre or tourist attraction can often be difficult.

Outside of these occasions, some centre members are very seriously restricted in their movements. One suspects that the several options for accessible door to door minibus services and taxi subsidies need to be much better publicised (see Camden Council web site for details<sup>24</sup>). Even getting a lift from a friend or volunteer can be difficult for the frail senior because of parking regulations, unless s/he meets the eligibility criteria for a disabled person's 'blue badge' and has applied for one. It may not be well understood that these badges belong to a person, not a particular vehicle, and so can be held by someone who is not a car owner or even a driver; the holder can in fact offer the use of a badge to someone who gives her a lift. However, some centre members lived in areas of central London where normal 'blue badge' privileges do not apply. As with many other situations, seniors do not like to ask for help especially from strangers, and taxi-drivers fall into this category. For someone who feels so vulnerable and unsteady that she dares not venture outside her apartment door alone, and who lives in a high-rise block, it appears an insurmountable obstacle to negotiate for the driver to wait during the time it takes to struggle into the lift and come downstairs. Some interviewees felt a fear of crime when using lifts in their blocks of flats, let alone in the street. They felt that if they hired a taxi to take them home, the driver having met them would often help them out of the cab and into the building. But calling a strange driver, without knowing in advance what they could count on him to do, was an unacceptable risk. Thus some forms of outing, for some seniors, are only practical with an escort.

Transport to medical appointments is particularly difficult. Because hospital transport involves a collective minibus which picks up several patients in turn from different places, the route is often very slow and roundabout and a journey of a mile or two can take an hour and a half each way. There is a risk of appointments being missed if hospital transport fails to arrive in time due to some delay or misunderstanding. One interviewee had missed several appointments from this factor.

For older people who can still walk around their neighbourhood and use public transport, the fear of crime in inner London was a major issue. It was felt that those carrying sticks are easily identifiable as potential targets for muggers. Attacks are most feared by people going about alone, so the opportunity to make new friends through the resource centres and then to go out with them is not only a benefit in terms of members' social lives; it also helps to make them feel safer in public places. Centre members warmed to the recently appointed street wardens, who as a police auxiliary service not only keep an

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<sup>23</sup> General Household Survey 2002

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/transport-and-streets/community-transport-initiatives/accessible-transport/>

eye out for potential thieves but had given a lot of practical support to one of the resource centres, helping with transport and organisation of parties.

## Seniors' resource centres as a source of social contact

To what extent did the centre members make friends with each other in ways which extended beyond the centre sessions? and what can be done to maximise the chance of doing this ? Both volunteers and centre members reported several instances of close friendships being formed through the centres, resulting in some members visiting each other or going to pubs and restaurants together, and some more housebound people phoning each other regularly. But there were also some barriers to friendships being formed. Members were said to be sometimes territorial (guarding own chairs closely) and forming little cliques. One volunteer explained she helped new members break into an established group:-

'If someone new comes they don't take to her too much, they will chat a little to the new one, but only for a few minutes. It takes a year to become one of them. My friend R, she doesn't need me so much now, they have accepted her. I phone her, she'll say, I've got someone with me.'

Another barrier was that some retired professionals felt a sense of cultural impoverishment about some of the activities offered. Although these typically include quizzes, some musical appreciation and literary discussions and some art classes, some members would have liked more time in activities which involved intensive intellectual stimulation; they regarded bingo and dancing as boring. This was associated with a feeling that as their old friends died, they could no longer choose to meet people with their specific intellectual interests:-

It's not the sort of people you would normally meet and you go home and it was very nice to see them and that's the end of it ... you don't make, really, friends ... as one grows older I suppose it's more difficult to make new friends...[in the past] I only did connect with art classes and I made friends ... I know one says it's difficult but they [the people she meets now at the centre] are different sort of friends to what you had. They are acquaintances more than friends.

(retired teacher, late 80s)

Associated with this was a feeling that going to a resource centre made one dependent on a service for the socially excluded. In the words of one volunteer:-

'It's good to have places where isolated people can come together. There is a bit of stigma attached to coming to a place where it's all very elderly. Like the tenants' hall in D's estate, where about six people can sit and pass the morning together. But there's some stigma attached to that because it's the elderly coming together, younger age groups are not involved. So it's good that [at this centre] there are lots of activities which attract some people in their 50s.'

(volunteer in centre focus group)

Actually my in-laws are really quite elderly and I guess they have their own support networks over the years of people coming in to do various things but although they are quite isolated and lonely will NOT go out to Day Centres ... not something they want to get to grips with, that sort of social contact, really. (volunteer 3)

This particular centre had recognised the importance of those in their 50s as a 'bridge' generation, linking the older ones to younger working people. By setting up a programme of classes and social activities to attract the 'early retired' it had brought in several people as centre members who later became also volunteers, offering a new range of activities for the older ones. Another advantage of this strategy was that it blurred the formal distinction between volunteers and 'beneficiaries', making it easier for friendships to form across age groups, and reducing the social distance which has to exist between helper and client where these are formally distinct

The early retired (around 50-65) constitute a valuable 'bridge' between seniors and the rest of the community because they often see their new-found free time as an opportunity to launch into a wide range of new activities. One volunteer, who perhaps best illustrates this, had launched into a new career with training for a form of part-time work she enjoyed. She had also taken up sports, dancing and volunteering for two organisations. She led an active social life with her husband, who had joined the activity programme of a seniors' resource centre in another borough. She had deliberately chosen this point in her life to start a range of new activities, making new friends, rather than relying on her old, work-related network.

A second volunteer, now in her 70s, was making the transition between her former role as helper at one of the centres studied, to becoming just a member. She had stopped volunteering there because she found it more and more difficult to walk there and there was no direct bus service. But she still went sometimes to join in activities, whilst continuing to volunteer for a different organisation. She also had a very full social life, meeting friends or relatives almost every day for different activities, and spending considerable time giving help to an eighty year old friend. Where ex-volunteers stay as centre members, this is likely to widen the pool of contacts and activities to which the older members can be linked, and again blurs the distinction between helper and beneficiary.

## Help from statutory services

Some centre members, and many clients of those volunteers involved in home visiting, received help from home care services. There were a number of discontents about the way these work. Most concerned the fragmentation of services and the systems for service delivery, rather than the individual workers involved.

NPC members were concerned that many older people may not be getting the help they need. This may be a particular risk if the need develops suddenly for someone who has been independent and has had no history of contact with the social services. Such people are likely to have developed a pride in their independence and will also not know how to go about getting help. This was echoed in the comments of one volunteer on a befriending scheme:-

'One of the difficulties for older people is taking up services, the sense of shame and loss of privacy that comes with all that; whereas with the right support and feeling okay about it then I think they can effectively take up services in a very constructive sort of way ...'

This often goes together with a reluctance to ask for anything, whether from service providers, friends or relatives. What help is offered may then be insufficiently tailored to the older person's needs. Speaking of the relationship between her client and the warden of a sheltered housing scheme, the same volunteer comments:-

'She says "I don't like to ask for help ... I'm not an asking for help person". And some people are like that ... she says "He doesn't offer so I'd never ask"'

Care packages for seniors have been under financial pressure in recent years, and are highly fragmented by privatisation, sub-contracting and the use of agency workers. All these factors seem to have affected the quality of the service, in the view of both users and volunteers. It can be very difficult to receive in one's home a weekly complement of several different workers, for example one to help with getting up and breakfast, another to deliver and re-heat lunch, and others to deal with laundry, bathing and/or shopping – particularly if there is frequent change of personnel in each of these roles. Today's home care package is very different from what might have been provided twenty years ago, that is, the long-term support of a single home help who did several different tasks, and stayed long enough in their job to form a friendly, supportive relationship with the older person. Talking to centre members and visiting some of them in their homes revealed that clients of such services now often do not feel in control of their own timetable; about when they can plan to receive visitors, make phone calls, or do anything which requires privacy or concentration. Each carer has a substantial 'round' of clients to see daily, spending with each one only as long as it takes to complete the assigned task. This inevitably means some variation about when they will reach any particular client, and the client must accept the service when it arrives or not at all. The arrival of the micro-waved lunch at 11.45 whilst a guest is still taking coffee and biscuits, the uncertainty about what time a care assistant will arrive to do laundry or cleaning, adds to the older person's overall difficulties about receiving visitors and reduces their sense of control over their own domestic arrangements. This interacts with the 'slowing down' of daily tempo for an older person and the feeling they cannot deal with too many events in a day. One volunteer described how this affected the scheduling of her regular 'befriending' visit:-

There's a different timing which I think one has to try and understand like I said once 'Can I come Monday morning because I can't come Thursday?' and she said 'Well, that's bath day' so I said 'Well what time do they come?' and she said 'Oh 1.30' so I

think ... and I said 'Well, could I not come at 10 o'clock in the morning?' and she said 'No no, I'm getting ready for it! ... I get the bath ready'... so that gives me an idea of her timing is totally different to mine and what it means and that the 'event' is so important to her that she has to have the whole morning free. She couldn't cope with me being there as well. I think it's something that I find quite hard to understand.

(Volunteer 8)

Several seniors described their home carers as kind and hard-working people, and there was an appreciation of the low pay, job insecurity and stress from the intensity of the daily round which care workers undoubtedly experience. None the less communication between carers and clients was sometimes poor, as many of the carers have a first language other than English and their accents are not always easy for older people to understand. As one volunteer said:-

It's very difficult I think for elderly people because they have to accommodate different people all the time. Sometimes they are men and I think elderly women do not always want a man to manage things.

The way home care work has recently developed means that care workers do not have time to chat to their clients – although in some instances, there would be language barriers if they did have time. The pressure to move on to the next client and complete the round means that there is little opportunity for discussion about how the client likes things done:-

The Home Help comes in and goes off shopping and comes back again and it all happens in a rush and she [client] gets very anxious about it in case they won't get what she wants and then they bring the wrong thing back and there's not time to change it.

(Volunteer 8, in a befriending scheme)

Help with cleaning is on the whole restricted to the everyday; as one lady said, her curtains had not been washed for quite some time because she had nobody to help take them down and re-hang them. Discussion of the service with its managers is also difficult:-

It's quite hard for elderly people to manage the Home Help Service because she might ring up and complain and say 'I didn't like the way this woman dealt with me', but it's very hard to get through on the telephone [as] they are always engaged.

(volunteer in a befriending scheme)

## The role of volunteers

The volunteers who took part in this research were spread amongst several types of role. Some worked in centres, preparing and serving meals, helping to organise activities, and (particularly the men) doing 'odd jobs' and garden maintenance. Some took on the responsibility of being a regular visitor for a lonely person through a 'befriending' scheme, or saw people in a professional counselling capacity. Others were 'advocates', making short-term interventions to help people sort out personal and financial administration or housing problems. Box 3 illustrates the way in which advocates, and to some extent 'befrienders', performed a trouble-shooting function, doing things which relatives probably would have done if only they had been available. They show how the voluntary sector is particularly well adapted to meet individual needs which do not fall into home care or counselling categories, but which are vital to help an older person preserve their capacity to live independently. Counselling itself is also important to help them do this:-

The counselling would be about helping them make use of professional help that comes in or any befriending service that might be around or can they go out to places like <resource centre>? A couple of people I've counselled I think have gone on to be able to maintain themselves really and be more independent themselves so it is productive I think.

Volunteer 3

### Box 3; Examples of what advocates do for isolated seniors

Reading and dealing with correspondence, bills and domestic filing for those with sight impairments

Negotiating with creditors, especially utility companies

Negotiating with social landlords over repairs to the home

Helping someone to change a standing order for rent payments, following a rent increase

Helping someone to hire a cleaner

One volunteer felt that people who are in the retired age group themselves understand the problems of older people better, and are more accepted by older clients, than some social workers, who are obviously younger. She thought that older people sometimes need a detached outsider, who can persuade them to take the steps they need to take in a forceful and authoritative way. Those volunteering in an advocate capacity were retired professionals with much experience in persuading people (for example a social worker, a doctor, a teacher) so they were well equipped for this role.

Those who helped in the centres tended to be from different occupational backgrounds. They were more likely to have experience of practical skills like gardening, cooking, hairdressing and so on, which they offered for the benefit of the centre community. They had less sense of professional distance from the centre members than the befrienders and advocates did from their clients. Some of the most natural relationships developed in Centre 3 where – as described earlier – the members of the over 50s project became helpers for the activities involving the older ones. This had particular benefits, in the light of the previous discussion of the importance of friendships across age groups and the need to overcome any stigma attached to activities designed for the oldest. It also blurred the distinction between volunteer as 'service provider' and 'service user' - though not enough in the eyes of some of the

volunteers who felt that older members sometimes treated them as if they were paid waiters in relation to serving food and drink!

The running of the centres thus combines two different models of the relationship between members and volunteers. The model, apparent in Centre 3 where younger members with talent, time and inclination provide part of the programme for other, older members, might be described as one of solidarity by members. It coexists in that centre with another model, more evident in Centres 1 and 2 – the second model being that of service provision to users, where volunteers and members have more distinct roles.

Volunteers are instructed to follow a code of practice which lays down certain boundaries and rules, which are designed to prevent either party from taking advantage of the other. Thus clients of the befriending and advocacy schemes will not generally have the phone numbers of the volunteer they see, in case they make too many demands. Volunteers are asked not to arrange to see centre members outside the volunteering setting – ‘official’ visits, or the centre, and centre- arranged trips. This prevents gifts or legacies being offered in exchange for friendship. But one volunteer in practice found it a hard rule to follow:-

Volunteers are not supposed to associate with them outside the centre- that's the rules. [AG: Why ?] I think it's in case you take advantage of them in some way. But I haven't done anything wrong. ....L who had just been widowed, met me at a bus stop, pleaded with me to go have a cup to tea with her, so I go and have a cup of tea. And I meet them up the market, we discuss buying clothes together.

(volunteer 6)

Some centre members also described how much they appreciated an invitation to a volunteer's family party to meet her grandchild. These experiences suggest a paradox; that a rule made for good reasons may sometimes impede the natural development of friendships between volunteer' and isolated seniors.

Volunteers' capacities and goodwill constitute a real resource, a form of social capital for the senior clients and for the community at large. How can this be fostered and extended? It is necessary to consider some of the tensions involved in the role and also the motives for becoming involved.



## Volunteers' relationship with service users

Some of the volunteers clearly took considerable pride in what they had achieved for their clients or for the organisation as a whole. They had a sense of taking charge of a problem and successfully sorting it out, either for an individual or for the seniors' community more widely. Or they had successfully run a centre activity, or given much-needed emotional support to centre members. Some examples of these achievements are given in Box 4. They include an example of the complex negotiations that an advocate sometimes carries out for her client, in this case to make sure a lady was not left without heating.

### Box 4: Examples of volunteer achievements

I do make-up and manicure for the users, I think it's important for them to look good, that makes them feel good; I don't like to see elderly with food stains on their clothes, for lack of help with the washing. Someone admired my own nails, then I offered to do it for others.  
(Volunteer in a centre focus group)

'Just before we had that really nasty cold snap in February and the weather forecast was for 'dire' the next day, the Council were putting in a downstairs toilet for her 'cos she can't get upstairs and she was apparently using buckets. So they are putting in this downstairs toilet and in order to do it they had taken out all the radiators and left her with one fan heater and the weather forecast was for minus 8 or something. So I rang up this social worker and said 'Excuse me but what are you doing about Mrs X and her heating?' He said 'Oh I've written off her case now and it's not me anymore... I've passed her over to Occupational Therapy' ... I said 'Occupational Therapy?' ... 'Oh yes, they deal with alterations to houses' I said 'Fine, well can you ring them?' ... He gave me the number and I phoned Occupational Therapy and I said 'Has she got someone designated?' ... 'Oh yes, her occupational therapy officer is deaf' ... so I said 'Can I speak to the duty officer?' ... 'Oh I guess that's me' she said and I said 'Can you make sure that some form of heating or somebody goes round today and talks to the people who are doing this building and say they have got to give her some heating because tomorrow it's going to be minus 8 all day or something!' I said that I wanted a phone call back before 5 pm to say this is happening. I did get that phone call and the next day I rang her in the afternoon and she said, 'Oh yes, they came and put the radiators back this morning, now I'm warm and I'm fine'.  
(Volunteer 7)

I was asked if I'd like to be on the Falls Prevention Project run by the Primary Care Trust and we had three meetings for people all over the country who were doing this in the Blackpool Hilton for two nights so that everybody could hear the same message and the discussions and workshops. That finished a few months ago and from what we did, the number of falls [in this borough] as counted by people having to go to the Accident and Emergency ... those numbers were cut by 40%. And that's a big saving to the National Health - paying for keeping us in the Blackpool Hilton !  
(Volunteer 4)

By contrast some volunteers had experienced mixed feelings, which alongside achievement included some tension or sense of failure in their relationships with clients. They felt the people they visited were hard to help, and were not sure if their efforts were always of value. For example one volunteer found that the lady she had undertaken to visit was spending much time in hospital, where she was often feeling too poorly to really benefit from company. Moreover on a couple of occasions her relatives had turned up to visit at the same time; the volunteer was unsure how to relate to them, and did not even know how well they could understand English. Her client did not always speak to her in English, and then she could not understand. She felt unsure how to deal with these situations, although when she

had first started visiting she had felt appreciated, particularly when she found that the client enjoyed crosswords and that this was something they could do together:-

... The last few times I went she doesn't know who I am - she just knew me but she didn't know where I was from 'cos apparently she says she gets so many different people coming into hospital...this last period her mind has definitely deteriorated. She started talking to me in <her own language>.

(volunteer 5)

Another volunteer found her client withdrawn and hard to help:-

I don't know how much I have in common with this woman? ...her value system is probably quite different to mine in some respects. So she knows very little about me and she doesn't appear to be interested [in me]which I've always been quite surprised [about]. She's very warm towards me and very grateful and ... but it's always left to me to lead the conversation and a bit of me thinks 'That's fine, okay I'm okay with doing that!' but it might benefit her if she could be more interested in me and the outside world because that's another interest and it sort of basically takes people out of themselves to some extent.... they've tried to ask me to persuade her to go on their annual outing or go out to tea and that sort of thing and I said that I'd do my best but I don't think that I'll manage it.... I try to think of new things to chat to [her about] and there aren't new things ... it's her life and I think she wants to repeat different aspects of it perhaps? ...I couldn't let her down; I think that would be a real blow ...if I said 'I'm sorry, I can't come anymore' ...She says she has a friend ... even if I don't come very frequently ... it's somebody else there. That's the feeling I get but I don't know whether that's right so, no I'd feel really bad about letting her down and I think at least I feel maybe I'm hopefully giving her something and that's important.

(Volunteer 8)

This volunteer did express her concerns about the client's depression to the volunteer coordinator, who offered to send a counsellor to the client. But this raised another problem for the volunteer; should she have tried harder to avoid the need for another person to get involved, and would the client herself welcome a counsellor?

Sometimes volunteers also had to face difficult questions of boundaries. In one instance, there was a temptation for a befriender to support the client in lodging complaints about various aspects of the home care service. This she resisted, having been instructed by the volunteer coordinator to refer all questions of this nature to him, as well as feeling that it would be unfair without hearing the care staff's view, which she did not feel was her role. As she said, 'someone outside has to look at those issues' and anyway she needed to limit her time commitment because of obligations to her own family. In another instance, a volunteer was worried about the emotional burden and responsibility of visiting a vulnerable person in hospital, who made some statements about 'being poisoned' – a delusion or something she should report? A third volunteer was not sure how far it was legitimate to respond to requests to socialise with lonely centre members outside of the volunteer setting.

These everyday difficulties of volunteering suggest a need to boost the 'social capital' of the volunteers themselves, to enable them be, and feel, more effective and to allay doubts and anxieties which might threaten their commitment in the longer run. One centre-based volunteer also wanted more formal

training, since she was looking for job opportunities in working with older people – a not infrequent motive for volunteering, as we shall see in the next section.

Volunteers have initial training and are brought together for occasional social gatherings by the volunteer coordinator. But several, especially those working with older people in an isolated way, would like more contact with other volunteers. What they wanted was less a social gathering than to have an opportunity to share experiences and discuss common problems. As one said,

I have got quite a lot of friends who are 'in the business' shall we say so I've sometimes shared things with them about things so I've probably got ... maybe I've got supports elsewhere I think. But there would probably be a role for running a group about volunteering. ... I suspect [the last meeting] was more of a social thing but ...I do think that there would be some value in having group discussions'.

However, she qualified this by saying that her time was limited :

'I can see that it might be valuable because we could share ideas but I'm also not sure I want to get involved with lots of other people you know ... I've got quite a lot to do ... but maybe I will try and go to the next meeting'.

## The motives of volunteers; their commitment and their limits

Most of the volunteers who participate in the research were retired. The majority were in their 60s, with some retired but under 60 and a few in their 70s. Doing something after retirement; replacing paid work, was a major motive for volunteering. Some saw this in terms of filling the gap in their lives left when they no longer had a structured work day; they wanted stimulation to 'keep the mind active'. Others missed the contacts they formerly had with students, colleagues or patients. Related to these feelings about retirement was the idea of using the skills and experience they had gained in a lifetime's work. Some retired professional people had very systematically chosen a form of voluntary work in which they felt they could do this. One person saw volunteering in terms of an obligation of those who no longer had paid work to give something back to the community if they could. One unemployed volunteer – who had sought out her role for herself, rather than being 'sent' by the New Deal programme - felt she owed the community something in return for her benefits; she also saw volunteering as an entry path into the kind of paid job she would like to have.

Although 'wanting to help' was the way most volunteers put their commitment, the subjective sense of 'feeling useful' was also important for some. One volunteer made an interesting distinction between these two in describing her very busy life:-

[AG; Did religion play a part for you in deciding to volunteer?] Not really; I did want to feel useful. I think everybody who thinks properly should have that feeling anyway.... I think that you should justify your existence insofar as it's a good thing to make your stay on earth useful, to do something useful... I wanted to do something useful and I feel one should do that. I have a friend and she's in Sheltered Accommodation but she should really be in a Home. she's well over eighty I think ... she's just got iller and iller and more and more decrepit.... I see her every Sunday morning; I go round there and take her a little bit of shopping. That's Sunday morning filled; I don't do it for her...I do it for myself... you say that I fill my time up ... well; this is how I fill my time up....{AG; I'm sure she appreciates you...?} Yes, she does but I come out really frustrated because I feel ... I'm not a 'Do-gooder' I really am not! I'm selfish if anything [Honestly put]. I feel ... I get cross with her because I feel she should be looked after in a Home and she's struggling all the time.

(volunteer 2)

Religious belief barely featured in volunteers' motives, although some were committed to their Christian or Jewish faith and noted that volunteering was an important activity for their religious community. One person had begun volunteering whilst attending a Catholic secondary school, and another noted the importance of 'friendship circles' and good-neighbour activities attached to synagogues.<sup>25</sup> Another commended, as a general model, the contact circles run by many churches, in which a circle of congregation members each make it their job to phone each other up.

Only a minority saw volunteering as a way of making friends amongst other volunteers, even amongst volunteers working in centres. In one case, an unemployed person had offered her time as a volunteer to a number of organisations looking not only for company and new friendships, but also contacts and experience leading to a job. So far she had been unsuccessful on both fronts. However, several volunteers said they chose this activity partly because they liked meeting seniors and in a couple of cases sought contact with older people whilst they were missing relatives they had lost.

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<sup>25</sup> As it happened all of those interviewed who mentioned any religious background were Christians or Jews; but it is well known that other faith groups also have well-developed networks for solidarity between congregation members

Gaining experience in preparation for employment was a partial motive for three people – in one case it was part of her practical training for a new ‘post-retirement’ career, much more for interest than for money. But all of the three volunteers who were thinking about further paid work related to their activities with older people had a history of involvement in voluntary work, often with several organisations. They gave the impression that volunteering was something that they had done in the past and would continue to do irrespective of their job situation.

A surprising conclusion from the research was that where the volunteers had time pressures or conflicts, these were not posed in terms of conflict between paid work and volunteering. Rather, they were potential conflicts or trade-offs between different forms of unpaid activity. Some of the retired people were still looking after older relatives or grandchildren – in one case grandchild care amounted to a full time job. They made it clear that if push came to shove, their own families would have to come first. But what was also noticeable was that most volunteers were involved with two or more different volunteering settings. There was a sense in which the work they did with older people competed for their time and interest with other voluntary activities – and in some cases with commitments to informal ‘good neighbour’ activities as well. To retain volunteers, and to persuade people to extend their commitment to special projects or committee work where they are needed, any one organisation may have to convince volunteers that their time is as well or better used and valued than in their other unpaid activities. There are many highly individual reasons why volunteers may feel more attracted to one activity or organisation rather than another. However, what some volunteers seemed to want, in order to sustain their commitment, was more support and contact with each other, as mentioned earlier. In the centres, the need seems to be to guard against volunteers being treated as paid workers or being asked to do too much. Where ‘early retired’ members had agreed to give some of their time to help those older than themselves, they felt this had tended to become an ever-expanding commitment because of the lack of paid staff. They wanted to limit their time at the centre to give space for their own social and cultural activities, and were afraid of being asked to do too much. They felt older members should not expect and demand their help as if they were employees, and should also understand that the charges made for certain activities were destined for centre funds, not to pay individuals.

## Conclusion; Some solutions to the social exclusion of older people?

This study has illustrated a very real problem of social isolation amongst older people. It may be aggravated in London by high population turnover, leading to less neighbourliness than in more stable communities. The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) in 2003 showed that older people living in towns are more likely to be excluded from social relationships than those in rural areas, and that London in particular has a high incidence of low contact with neighbours.<sup>26</sup> This problem of isolation needs to be addressed on three fronts; firstly by helping older people to keep in touch more easily with their surviving friends; secondly by helping them to make new friends. Thirdly, there is the familiar challenge of how to help older people live independently with less difficulty. Especially, they need friends amongst people younger than themselves who will outlive them and support them in ways which require greater physical capacity and mobility than their peer group may have.

One of the key barriers to be overcome on all three fronts is internet access. The internet gives access to e-mail – an excellent way to keep in touch with distant relatives and friends, which can be done without leaving a chair. E-mail does not require acquisition of stamps and envelopes, or taking a letter out to post; it can be done all within the home. The internet also opens the door to many other aids to independent living – such as shopping deliveries, online banking, information about cultural activities, news, Council, government and NGO services. Through e-lists and chat-rooms it is also a gateway to expressing one's point of view on any number of topics. Two American experiments have shown e-mail networks to have positive benefits for members' social interactions (Findlay 2003). Seniors' resource centres provide computer classes, and within the borough studied there is even a scheme to lend laptops to housebound people. But for those who cannot easily go to an internet café or public library, long-term regular internet access can be a problem. There may be a role for an internet café facility within resource centres – and also for technical support tailored to the older person who wants to install and maintain their own home computer, and to customise it to their own requirements such as screen readability. All these services are provided by Hackney Silver Surfers, a project in a nearby borough, led by Age Concern. It perhaps needs to be recognised that internet access by older people may in future years become almost as necessary as access to a telephone is now. Their lack of it may rapidly become a new source of social exclusion as society becomes more internet-dependent. As one NPC member commented:-

Computers are very useful if you can understand them and I've got one, but it is creating a two tier society. You need broadband. There are so many things where people now have to say, "No, I can't, I haven't got a computer". Even some of the BBC programmes, you are expected to contact them by e-mail or on their web site, not by phone.

However, the notion of learning about computers is not necessarily daunting even to the very oldest. In one interview, the author discussed e-mail as a substitute for international letter-writing with a housebound lady in her 90s. Her response was very positive; 'People say that e-mail thing is marvellous...yes, I could go to those classes at the centre – it would be an interest'. Given suitable funding, improving computer access for older people is a suitable focus for inter-generational learning projects, possibly in conjunction with schools, universities or projects which recycle office equipment.

It was surprising, in this research, to find that telephones appear to be under-utilised as a means for housebound or almost housebound people to keep in touch with their friends. There were many accounts of younger relatives phoning regularly from distant parts of the UK; but far fewer of older

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<sup>26</sup> Barnes et al. (2006), p. 32

people making calls. Although this may be partly due to declining social energy or a feeling that they do not wish to impose on others, it deserves to be further investigated whether there are physical or cost barriers to using the telephone more. Do people know how to turn up the volume control on their handsets? Have they kept in touch with the declining relative cost of phone calls over the years, or do they fear phone calls are more expensive than they really are? Do they know which are the best call payment packages for their needs, so that they get best value for money? Are their phones conveniently located in the home, and do they have a cordless handset which they can carry about with them?

There may be a task for NGOs helping older people, or for local government services, to persuade private sector companies to give more attention to the needs of the older customer in their sales and marketing activities, so as to provide older people with the information and advice they need to choose the kinds of telephone and computer equipment which are best for them.

Greater use of the telephone for social contact can also be encouraged by telephone circles, which as mentioned earlier are sometimes set up by churches. There is no reason why this type of initiative should be confined to religious people – it could be set up as a supplement to seniors' visiting schemes, or within tenants' and residents' associations. Tele-conferencing groups have been shown to have positive social benefits for older people in Canada and Australia (Findlay, 2003). In Britain the charity Community Network, a non-profit organisation providing telephone conferencing services, helps local authorities and NGOs organise 'Friendshiplink' groups to bring together older people by telephone in their own homes.<sup>27</sup>

One way of helping older people to make new friends, especially amongst those slightly younger than themselves, would be to build partnerships between resource centres for seniors and other community organisations, especially those engaged in cultural activities which could be shared across age groups. These include dancing, which is already a popular activity at centres. But for the very oldest, the most welcome may be activities which are less physically demanding – such as bridge and chess clubs, choirs, discussion groups, poetry and novel reading groups, and so on. Resource centres could also become homes for workshops of the University of the Third Age, which holds sessions on a wide range of topics in the fields of literature, history, art, technology, IT skills and so on. The recent 'Sure Start to Later Life' report (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006) refers to several models of cross-generational mixing in community centres where activities for older people are housed amongst those for the under 50s. The Sundial Centre in East London, recently featured in the Guardian, links active people in their 50s to older ones.<sup>28</sup>

Several ideas about housing design, management and allocation were raised in this research project. Doorbells and entry-phone systems are of crucial importance to isolated seniors, and their maintenance may often be overlooked. Sheltered housing schemes may work best for the very oldest where some people in their 50s and early 60s can be part of the scheme or at least be near neighbours in adjacent blocks, so that the community as a whole maintains a reasonable proportion of active and mobile people. Their communal facilities are expensive to maintain, especially in terms of staff, and opening these spaces to bookings by certain other community groups – for example those mentioned above – may be a way of raising revenue as well as providing opportunities for inter-generational contact. They could also attract a wider cross-section of the public by becoming homes for internet cafés and for adult learning activities, especially those of a semi-recreational nature. As an example, the Westbury Fields

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<sup>27</sup> See Social Exclusion Unit (2006) 'A Sure Start to Later Life', p. 67, and [www.community-network.org](http://www.community-network.org)

<sup>28</sup> 'Voices of Experience', Guardian Society 1.2.06, p. 7

housing scheme in Bristol has opened its doors to older people outside the tenant community for a range of services and activities.<sup>29</sup>

Above all, maintaining social contacts and cultural interests requires mobility. Paradoxically, those who most need information about such services as Dial-a-Ride and Taxi-card are least likely to find out about them, unless they have internet access. Volunteers engaged in befriending and good neighbour schemes could help to publicise accessible transport facilities and help older people make the necessary enquiries and applications. There may also be a need to extend 'buddy' systems which help older people gain the confidence to use these transport services.

Given sufficient support and information backup, volunteers could help to achieve a number of these objectives. But the organisation, training and support of volunteers requires professional paid workers and has its cost. The 'social capital' inherent in the goodwill of those who are willing to give time supporting isolated seniors needs to be combined with adequate financial resources in order to address the growing problems of loneliness and inadequate personal support in the ageing society.

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<sup>29</sup> See Social Exclusion Unit (2006), 'A Sure Start in Later Life', p. 80



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