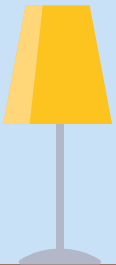


# Challenging ageism

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A guide to talking about  
ageing and older age

December 2021



# About us



## Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65. The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

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

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

## About this guide

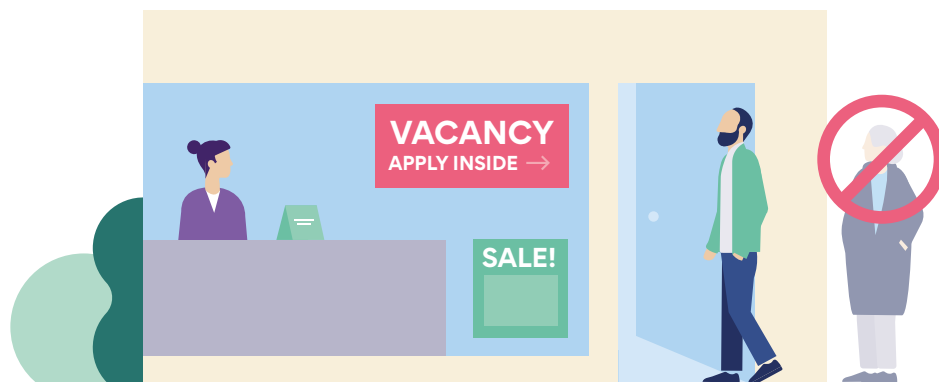
This guide is designed as a practical tool to support organisations in communicating about ageing and older age.

The way people currently talk about ageing and older age is largely negative. To change this conversation we need to stop reinforcing these beliefs – and tell a new story. Small changes to the ways that we speak and write about ageing and older age, if applied consistently, could have a big impact.

We hope this guide gives people the confidence to challenge ageism and champion positive and realistic representations of ageing and later life.

# What is ageism?

Ageism is a bias against people based on their age and manifests in stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination in many aspects of life.



Evidence shows ageism is widespread in society and can be found everywhere from our workplaces and health systems to the stereotypes we see on TV, advertising and in the media.

Ageism affects people of all ages. In the UK ageism is the most prevalent form of discrimination amongst all age groups, with [one in three people experiencing age-based prejudice or discrimination.](#)

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## Talking about age

The way we talk about age influences the way we feel about the ageing process and the way we act towards people in different age groups. One of the biggest obstacles we face when it comes to embracing later life is the negative way we think and talk about it.

Common ageist themes include reducing older people to negative stereotypes, pitting younger and older generations against each other, and portraying later life as a time of frailty and decline.

Ageism can also be internalised, leading people to limit their own behaviour and opportunities, describing themselves in negative ways such as 'past it' or 'over the hill'.



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## Everyday ageism

Ageist attitudes have worrying consequences for physical and mental health. For example, older people are more likely to be prescribed antidepressants than talking therapies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw attempts to limit the life-saving resources available to older people, with 'do not attempt resuscitation' decisions being made without consultation with individuals or their families.

Age-based stereotypes can also negatively impact experiences in the workplace, with 36% of 50 to 70 year olds saying that their age would disadvantage them in applying for jobs. Assumptions that older workers are less competent or less capable of learning new skills leads to people being forced out of the workforce or being passed over for job progression.

Ageism in the media, advertising, film/TV and other fields of public life and culture is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the stereotyping that feeds our prejudices and underpins discrimination. The pervasive idea that older people are worthless feeds into our own perception of ourselves and subtly validates discrimination in other areas.

Faced with overwhelmingly negative attitudes about ageing in day-to-day life, it is unsurprising that older people themselves start applying ageist attitudes to other older people, and indeed to themselves.



# Age-friendly communications principles

Ageing and older people are often negatively represented in our society, despite age being a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.



Communicating about ageing and older people in the right way can help to tackle ageism and promote positive and inclusive behaviour in all aspects of life, from our communities and workplaces to the media, social media and political platforms.

We get more – not less – diverse with age (e.g. in terms of income, health, social relationships). It is important to ensure older people’s experiences are reflected in an accurate and inclusive way.

# 1

## Shift associations with frailty, vulnerability and dependency



**Being older doesn't necessarily mean you are frail, vulnerable or dependent. Older people continue to be active and participate in and contribute to workplaces, communities and society in many different ways.**



Don't focus only on portrayals of later life as a time of frailty or assume a life stage means a person has particular likes or interests, e.g knitting.



Embrace realistic depictions of ageing. People don't have to 'look young for their age' or run marathons to enjoy later life.



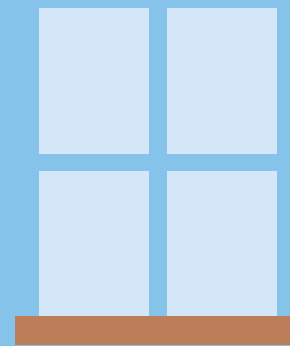
Give older people a voice in your work. Personal stories and experiences can highlight the diversity of people in later life.



Don't reinforce ideas of 'successful ageing' being down to an individual's actions. How we age is often more a product of our environments than personal choices.

# 2

## Use preferred terminology



### Use terms that are precise and accurate.

The term older adult(s) or older person/people is respectful and should be the standard if there is a clear need to reference the age of someone or group. If possible, ask people what terms they prefer.

✓ Use	✗ Avoid
✓ Older adult(s)	✗ Old person/people
✓ Older person/people	✗ Old Age Pensioner (OAP)
✓ People in later life	✗ Elderly

✗ Don't make jokes using clichés and phrases like 'dinosaur', 'over the hill', 'teaching an old dog new tricks' or 'teaching grandma to suck eggs'.

✗ Don't refer to someone as 'Grandfather/Grandmother' if it isn't relevant.

✗ Don't call people in care homes 'patients' – people who live in care homes are residents who are living in their home, even where extra help and assistance is needed.

## 3

## Avoid 'othering' and compassionate ageism



**Avoid using terms and language that evokes undue pity and makes older people sound like another group that's separate from the rest of society.**



Be careful of describing older people as 'they' and 'them', which encourages generalisation.



Be mindful of compassionate ageism, a well-intentioned but paternalistic mindset, where older people are portrayed as vulnerable and requiring protection.



Don't use terms like 'dear', 'young at heart', 'little old lady' or 'grandmotherly'.



Don't use offensive terms such as 'boomer', 'grumpy old man/woman', 'geriatric' or 'senile'.



Always refer to people by their names.



Don't state someone's age unless it is relevant. However, if you must state someone's age, be specific, to avoid generalising.



Try to avoid using sensationalised language, both negatively (e.g. 'vulnerable', 'desperate' and 'terrified') and positively (e.g. 'beloved' and 'smiling').



## 4

## Don't stoke conflict between generations



**The idea of an ‘intergenerational conflict’ between older and younger generations is prominent in public life. But, while views vary across age groups, the majority of the public don’t agree that older people benefit at the expense of younger people.**



Avoid metaphors that present old age in terms of crisis. These metaphors reflect a perception of old age and the ‘baby boomer’ generation as a societal burden:

- Grey / Silver tsunami
- Demographic cliff
- Demographic timebomb



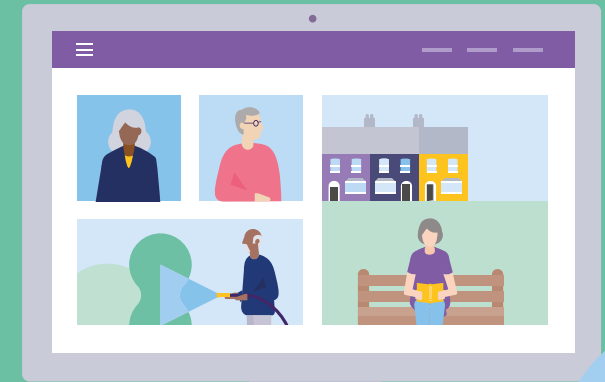
Don’t mistake age for wealth. Millions of older people are living in poverty or on low incomes. Generalising about the wealth of older generations is misleading and creates an inaccurate sense of competition for resources between generations.



Avoid inaccurate ‘boomer’ v ‘millennial’ tropes. These mask the diversity that exists within generations and encourage unnecessary social divisions.

# 5

## Think carefully about imagery



**Imagery used alongside stories about older people often caricatures later life. It is important to show diverse, realistic and positive representations of older people.**



Keep images positive but realistic. Avoid unrepresentative images such as older people skydiving.



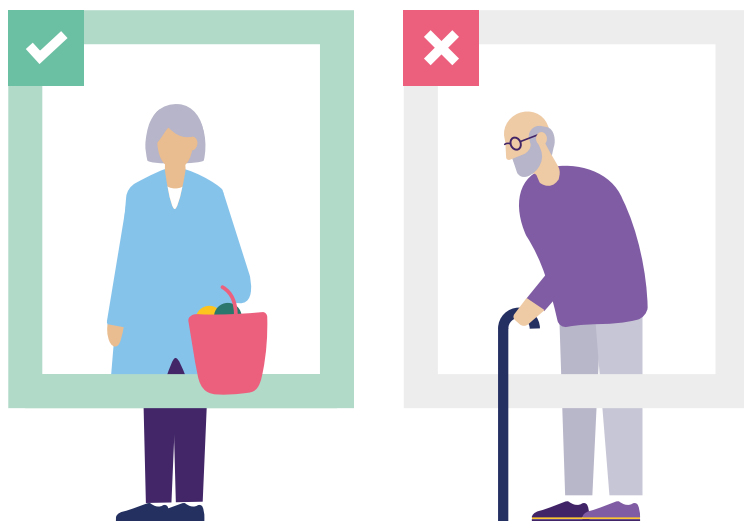
Avoid close ups of wrinkly hands clasped together. The widespread use of this kind of imagery is lazy and dehumanising.



Use our [free image library, containing hundreds of photos](#) of people aged 50 and over in a range of settings to highlight the diversity of later life.

# Reframing ageing

How an issue is framed affects how we think, feel and act<sup>1</sup>.



How you choose to frame an issue in your communications, and the language you use, matters.

It has the potential to influence how people think and feel about an issue and the actions they take.

## Changing the message on ageing

Ageing is often characterised as an inevitable, negative process of physical and cognitive decline and loss. It is commonly associated with vulnerability and dependency, leading to the 'destination' of being old (and, ultimately, death), rather than a continuous, lifelong process.

Dominant thinking and language about ageing and older people are currently interdependent; ageing is thought about and talked of as being about older people, hence attitudes to older people (as a homogenous group) overwhelmingly shape attitudes to ageing.

Our [research](#) has developed and tested new ways of talking about ageing with people of all ages through both focus groups and surveys.

The messages were designed to achieve two main goals:

1. Make people more positive about the process and experience of ageing; and
2. Expand their understanding of the structural nature of this experience. Different people have different experiences of ageing due to the way society is organised and funded and that, by changing this, we have the potential to achieve a society where everyone enjoys later life.

This table outlines the gap that exists between how society thinks about ageing and older age and the messages liked by the public in our research:

### How society currently thinks about ageing and older age



### Messages liked by the public



Ageing is about old people.	> ——— >	Ageing is a life-long process.
Ageing is an inevitable process of physical and cognitive decline, leading to the destination of old and, ultimately, death.	> ——— >	With the right policies, environments and support, people can age well. As we age, many of us report a greater sense of purpose and wellbeing. Our diverse life experience and skills, perspective and resilience mean we have much to contribute in later life.
Old people are frail, vulnerable and dependent, which makes them low in competence.	> ——— >	It's possible for us all to live meaningful and purposeful later lives, participating in and contributing to the workplace, community and society at large.
Demographic change is a growing and unsustainable economic and social cost and burden.	> ——— >	Our longer lives are an opportunity – for the economy, for society and for us as individuals. We all need support at different times across our lives, and we all want to live in communities where we look out for one another.
There is an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities across generations, with older people benefiting at the expense of younger people.	> ——— >	Inequality exists across the life course. Because of the way our society currently works, some of us aren't given the same opportunities to live as healthy and purposeful later lives as we could.
Ageing is something to defy.	> ——— >	Ageing is something for individuals to accept and for society to adapt to. Because of the way our society currently works, some of us are more likely than others to be able to age well.
How an individual ages is primarily their responsibility and within their control.	> ——— >	Because of things like discriminatory attitudes, poorly designed services, and an economy that doesn't work for everyone, many of us aren't able to live as healthy and purposeful later lives as we could.

<sup>1</sup> Nelson, T E., Clawson, R A. and Oxley, Z M. (1997). Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and its Effect on Tolerance. American Political Science Review, 91(3), pp. 567-583

# Combatting everyday ageism

**To help support your organisation/members in challenging ageism, we have set out some practical steps below.**

We hope these help to facilitate conversations between people across the age spectrum and give people the confidence to champion positive and realistic representations of ageing and later life.

## Challenge ageism in everyday conversations



We don't always think carefully about what we say and can perpetuate ageism without even realising we are doing it. When you hear people using ageist stereotypes or displaying ageist attitudes, try to explain how the language they use can impact people.

Sharing stories and personal experiences that challenge common stereotypes can be an effective way of changing people's perception of later life and showing that the ageing process is different for everyone.



Challenge internalised ageism such as describing yourself as "past it" or "having a senior moment".

## Get online



Having more people in later life active and vocal online, such as through blogging and on social media platforms, can help to combat stereotyping of later life.

Social media can be an effective tool in highlighting mutual experiences between generations and the compassion that exists between age groups.



Use hashtags such as [#nomorewrinklyhands](#), [#ageproud](#) and [#agepositive](#), and share your thoughts, experiences, photographs, and films that others will relate to.



## Work with your local media




Local media is a great tool for getting the word out on the work your organisation is doing, but we know [news media can also be the source of ageist stereotypes and attitudes](#). You can encourage local media to move away from stereotypes, use more positive imagery and increase positive examples when talking about ageing.

 Contact local media to challenge ageism in articles and reports - politely pointing out to the journalist why their article or broadcast is harmful or writing a 'letter to the editor' for publication. You could also call in to a local radio station to challenge comments made on air.

## Write to your MP



Writing to your Member of Parliament can be a great way to get combatting ageism on the political agenda. Whether you voted for them or not, it is your MP's responsibility to represent you and your concerns in parliament.

 Consider writing to your MP, attending a constituency surgery, or asking for a meeting. To find out who your local MP is and how best to contact them, type your postcode into the [UK parliament website](#).

## Complain about ageism in the media and advertising





The media generally represent ageing and older age as a time of decline and frailty, with older people are often framed as being inherently vulnerable.

Advertising predominantly uses unrealistically positive or very negative depictions of people in later life to sell products or services. Older people are also largely absent from advertising around products not specifically designed for older age groups.

From our research we found public perceptions of advertising and media coverage around older age groups as 'negative', 'depressing' and sometimes 'patronising'.

Many people noted a complete lack of balanced and realistic representations of ageing and older people.

 Consider making a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority via their [website](#).

 Consider making a complaint to the Independent Press Standards Organisation via their [website](#).

# Facts about ageing

Use these facts in your work to challenge common stereotypes and misconceptions

**1.**

In less than 20 years one in four people will be over 65.

Office for National Statistics, 2017

**2.**

While on average older people have higher levels of wealth than younger age groups, huge financial inequality exists among people in later life. Some 1.9 million people aged 65 and over live in relative poverty. Within this group, 1.1 million are in severe poverty.

Department for Work and Pensions, 2018

**3.**

Most of our later lives are spent living independently. In fact, 90% of over 65s live in mainstream, ordinary housing, not care homes or retirement communities.

Based on care home data and estimates of the number of older people who live in specialist housing

**4.**

In the workplace, over a third of workers are aged over 50. Many people over 50 provide unpaid care for loved ones and in retirement many people volunteer and help out in their communities.

Office for National Statistics, 2019

**5.**

Older workers are the backbone of Britain's public services. 3.4 million key workers are over 50, and 130,000 are over 70.

Office for National Statistics, 2020

**6.**

Regular volunteering (particularly informal) is more common in older age groups. Both formal and informal volunteering peak in the 65-74-year age group.

DCMS Community Life Survey, 2020

**7.**

Life satisfaction is at its highest in later life, and people aged 70 and over are more positive about ageing than any other age group.

Ageing Better, Reframing Ageing, 2021

**8.**

People in younger age groups (16-24) are three times more likely to experience loneliness than people aged over 65.

Office for National Statistics, 2018

**9.**

Contrary to media representations of intergenerational conflict, 80% of people believe older adults have a wealth of experience and perspectives to offer society today.

Ageing Better, Reframing Ageing, 2021

**10.**

Despite most adverts featuring under 40s, over 50s account for more than half of all consumer spending. They are the top spenders in a number of categories such as travel and tourism, food, clothing, household goods and eating out.

ILC UK, 2019

# Resources



## Image and icon library

We have created a [free image library, containing hundreds of photos](#) of people aged 50 and over in a range of settings to highlight the diversity of later life.

To help improve representation of later life, this library includes a [series of ten age-positive icons](#),

designed to replace the limited and stereotypical selection of icons and symbols commonly used to depict ageing and older people.

The images and icons are free to use and we hope will help challenge stereotypical imagery of later life which feeds into ageist attitudes.

## Publications

Ageing Better [report](#) on the role and impact of language and stereotypes in framing old age and ageing in the UK.

Ageing Better [report](#) on language used by government, the media and social media, advertising and ageing-focused charities in relation to the topics of age, ageing and demographic change.

Ageing Better [report](#) on public perceptions of ageing, older age and demographic change.

A [report](#) on the portrayal of Older People in News Media by the Older People's Commissioner for Wales.

Research by the [Royal Society for Public Health & The Calouste Gulbenkian foundation](#) on how negative portrayals can harm older people as they lead to direct age-based discrimination that can promote social exclusion.

## WHO Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

The World Health Organisation has some great resources around starting a conversation on ageism as part of its [Global Campaign to Combat Ageism](#).

WHO guide on [avoiding ageism in communication](#).

Let's take action today for  
all our tomorrows.

**Let's make ageing better.**



This report is part of our work  
on tackling ageism and is  
freely available at  
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