

# An old age problem?

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How society  
shapes and  
reinforces negative  
attitudes to ageing

[ageing-better.org.uk](http://ageing-better.org.uk)



# About us

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## **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.

# Contents

Introduction	4
Political discourse	8
Media discourse	14
Advertising discourse	26
Ageing-focused charities' discourse	32
Conclusion	38
Appendix 1	40
Appendix 2	41

# Introduction



**The language we use matters. Whether it's an MP speaking in Parliament, a newspaper reporting on current events or a charity campaign, the choice of words can influence the way others think, feel and act on a wide range of issues.**

We know from [existing evidence](#) (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020) that negative stereotypes about age and ageing are very common across different areas of society. These negative stereotypes feed into and reinforce negative societal narratives, such as the idea that ageing is an inevitable process of physical and mental decline, and in turn serve to further exacerbate stereotypes.

Utilising a discourse analysis approach<sup>1</sup>, this report looks at the language used by national government, news and social media, advertising, ageing-focused charities and health and social care organisations in relation to the topics of age, ageing and demographic change. These sectors were chosen based on their potential role in creating and reinforcing societal narratives on later life. Despite different language being used by different sectors, many of their narratives draw on similar stereotypes.

<sup>1</sup> Discourse analysis is an approach in which the language used in a range of different texts (texts being a broad term including written texts but also visual texts such as film) is analysed to understand the narratives that they are creating and/or reinforcing.

This paper is based on research conducted by Savanta ComRes and Equally Ours. It is part of a [wider programme of work at Ageing Better](#), in collaboration with Age-Friendly Manchester, to examine how ageing and demographic change are talked about in society, with the aim of shifting to a more positive and realistic narrative.

Texts for the discourse analysis in each sector were selected based on keyword searches, but not all texts were necessarily specifically about ageing. This report identifies and explores pervasive narratives that are often implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, ageist.

## Dominant discourse on ageing



Top 10 words and phrases most likely to appear in discourse about ageing across all sectors		
Words and phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency
Care	31x	135
Support	7x	62
Social	8x	46
Family	5x	44
Health	14x	41
Services	5x	38
NHS	305x	37
Dementia	280x	17
Challenges	42x	14
Mental	33x	14

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, a combination of the text from all sectors and industries) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus).<sup>2</sup>

This dataset consists of an amalgamation of the six sectors and industries included in the research (government sector, health and social care, social media, online news, advertising and ageing-focused charities) in which we randomly selected a sample of 5,000 words per sector to avoid biasing the results by the size of the dataset per sector. This sums to a total of 29,382 words in this dataset.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>



Saker 35L

# Political discourse



To understand political discourse, six key stakeholders from both local and national government (e.g. MPs, senior government officials, peers) were interviewed alongside analysis of Hansard<sup>3</sup> extracts from January 2017 to August 2019, a selection of MPs' Twitter posts from September 2018 to August 2019 and policy documents from across all departments from 2014 to 2019. Texts were selected using key word searches.

Analysis of these text shows that political discourse predominantly reflects concerns around meeting the perceived increasing costs of service provision for an ageing population. Government often uses seemingly neutral and factual language, presenting their narrative as the 'truth'. However, there are clear signs that their narrative is far more negative than positive, therefore failing to depict a realistic or balanced image of ageing and later life. This narrative frames an ageing population as a drain on public resources, shifting the emphasis away from the need for society to organise itself differently in order to equitably allocate resources across and within generations.

<sup>3</sup> Hansard is a verbatim account of what is said in Parliament. Members' words are recorded and then edited to remove repetitions and obvious mistakes.



## Stakeholder perspectives

Stakeholders suggest that political discourse mostly frames the ageing population as a ‘crisis’. It often uses terms like ‘older people’ and ‘ageing’ interchangeably, focusing on the idea that older people are a distinct segment of the population rather than taking a life course-driven approach that frames ageing as a process that we all go through. According to the textual analysis, political discourse is also more likely than the charity sector discourse to refer to older people as ‘vulnerable’.



**“I think the dominant narrative still is one of seeing ageing as a cost to the public purse and to society... it’s still very prevalent in, for example, debates around funding of social care.”**

Paul Burstow, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

Many of the stakeholders interviewed argue that in recent years there hasn’t been much impetus to create a more positive framing of older people and ageing within political discourse. However, there is some sense that this could be slowly changing within the context of specific policies and departments; for example, the government’s ‘Ageing Society Grand Challenge’ is an attempt to “harness the power of innovation to help meet the needs of an ageing society” (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2019).

Demographic change is seen by governments as a complex issue requiring future planning in order to achieve the systemic change that is required. It is also recognised that due to its complexity, addressing the opportunities and challenges of ageing will need collaboration across multiple government departments. However, stakeholders argue that there was limited evidence that government sees itself as needing to lead the way on these issues.

**14x** more likely

Political discourse is more likely than charity sector discourse to refer to older people as ‘vulnerable’.

## Dominant narratives

Top 10 words and phrases most likely to appear in government sector discourse about ageing		
Words and phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency (Total number =2,779,018)
Care	17x	7075
Social	10x	5219
Support	5x	4270
Health	12x	3196
Services	5x	3046
Funding	25x	2412
Housing	16x	2392
NHS	194x	2227
Young people	180x	966
Older workers	349x	939

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, government sector sources) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus).<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

## Pressures on health and social care

Language relating to tackling pressures on the health and social care system is very common in political narratives related to ageing. The focus is often on specific issues or services including things like bed capacity, care quality and the annual winter ‘crisis’. Of course for many older people the winter can be a difficult time and funding is needed to support them, but the common framing of these things as a ‘crisis’ implicitly associates ageing and demographic change with catastrophic consequences. In turn, this feeds the wider perception that ageing is a problem and older people as dependent on and a burden to the state.

In reality, people of all ages use social care services. A narrative that suggests social care is for older people alone – and therefore that the funding crisis is driven only by them – is hugely damaging. Ultimately, without adequate funding for social care services large parts of the population’s needs will not be met.



**“[The social care precept<sup>5</sup>] will not tackle either the growing crisis in services available to support the elderly or disabled or end the need for cuts to local services, including social care, such is the funding crisis.”**

Gareth Thomas, Labour MP, Shadow Minister (Communities and Local Government), Hansard, Feb 2017

Political narratives are also far more likely to use language focusing on the challenges of an ageing population than the charity sector, labelling many in later life as ‘vulnerable people’<sup>6</sup>.

Social care is mentioned slightly more in political discourse than the charity sector. Once again, discussion about social care frames it in terms of a ‘crisis’, particularly the idea that it is underfunded and funding it will be difficult. The social care ‘crisis’ is also often linked to crises in other policy areas:

<sup>5</sup> In 2015 English councils were given the power to increase council tax to pay for social care services for adults.

<sup>6</sup> 14x more likely



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**“The crisis in our hospitals has been made much worse by the Government’s continued failure to fund social care properly.”**

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Barbara Keeley, Labour MP, Hansard, Jan 2017

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**3x more likely**

Social care is mentioned slightly more in political discourse than the charity sector.

### **Intergenerational fairness**

Intergenerational fairness is also framed through an economic lens. Discourse here focuses on how policies related to older people can affect younger people. Even though, broadly speaking, the baby boomer generation is wealthier than younger generations, the intergenerational ‘fairness’ narrative often ignores the fact that there is inequality within generations too. This creates an inaccurate sense of competition for resources between generations, rather than between the wealthy and the poor. Generations then become proxies for either wealth or poverty, and the true picture of inequality is hidden.



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**“Does my hon. friend therefore agree that we should reform pensions tax relief to enable younger people to save more? Three quarters of pensions tax relief goes to higher earners, who are often older.”**

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Julian Knight, Conservative MP, Hansard, Feb 2017

Common policy areas that were referenced in the context of intergenerational fairness include housing security, finance and pensions (e.g. the triple lock).

## Recommendations

There is a certain practicality to the way in which political discourse is constructed and delivered. Government is, after all, in the business of thinking about the allocation of sometimes scarce resources. However, those who play a major role in political discourse – in particular national government – have a powerful platform. They need to speak responsibly about ageing and to think carefully about how their language and the way they frame ageing might affect views on ageing and older people across society.

There are three ways in which political discourse could be improved:

### 1. Avoid fatalistic narratives of crisis

The repeated idea that older people will always be a ‘burden’, or that later life is an inevitable ‘drain’ on societal resources is hugely damaging. By constantly framing older age groups in this way politicians and policymakers risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, both in terms of how older people view themselves and views on ageing from wider society. Whilst it’s important to think about the allocation of resources, messaging around it should emphasise opportunities as well as challenges.

### 2. Don’t use age as a proxy for wealth or other inequalities

In the context of the debate on ‘intergenerational fairness’, age is often conflated with other factors such as wealth and class. Many of the inequalities between generations are a result of the times people lived through, with some generations able to accumulate wealth more easily due to increases in the value of housing or because they benefitted from generous pensions. This doesn’t mean that this inequality is something defined by chronological age. Furthermore, there are huge inequalities within generations – you are more likely to be wealthy if you are baby boomer but being a baby boomer doesn’t guarantee that you are wealthy: 1.9 million people aged 65 and over live in relative poverty and an additional 1.1 million people aged 65 and over have incomes just above the poverty line (Centre for Ageing Better, 2019).

### 3. Recognise the diversity of later life

Government discourse tends to treat older people as a homogenous group with the underlying narrative that people are vulnerable and dependent because of their age. There are over 25 million people aged over 50 in the UK today, and over 12 million people aged over 65 (ONS, 2020), and these groups are diverse: just because someone is over a certain age doesn’t necessarily mean they are like someone else of a similar age. For example, there are large differences in the age at which different people experience disability and/or ill health, which is far more strongly associated with socioeconomic circumstances than age. Many older adults are fit rather than frail. Language focusing on the challenges of an ageing population and portraying older people as vulnerable is not only damaging to this large group of people, but not particularly representative either. Messaging therefore needs to take this into account and not just assume that people in later life are a homogenous group.

# Media discourse



To understand media discourse (news media and social media), four key stakeholders were interviewed alongside analysis of publicly available local and national media and various social media platforms such as Twitter and more traditional online forums (full list in Appendix 2).

Although distinct forms of media, both news media and social media discourse is predominately negative. Representations of older people are highly reliant on stereotypes, and often caricature older people and ageing in an exaggerated way that relies on clear binaries between 'bad' and 'good'. Topics often reflect those found in political discourse, including health, social care and intergenerational conflict.

## Stakeholder Perspectives on News Media

Stakeholders themselves know that the industry does not accurately reflect the diversity of older people and their experiences and recognise the damage that this can cause.

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“The problem with ageing is that you lump everyone together from the age of 60 on. The conventional envelopes are vulnerability or poverty or something extraordinary like jumping out of an aeroplane at the age of 80. It’s hard to define what a genuine and interesting ageing story is or should be.”

Journalist, Media stakeholder

However, they also suggest that their industry revolves around evoking emotion and therefore the use of crude and limited stereotypes is not surprising.

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“Newspapers are looking to convey an impression very quickly, so if you are writing about old people, and it’s a touchy-feely story, then the grey-haired old couple walking arm in arm up the street might well be a, sort of, image that comes to mind. Similarly, if you were writing about a cold snap coming up, then lonely old person wrapped in a blanket might well be the sort of image that comes to mind.”

Matt Tee, Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), Media stakeholder. (Has since left IPSO)

Despite this stereotyped approach, it is argued that there has been an appetite for change and increase in representation in recent years. However, stakeholders express a limited belief that this will happen in any meaningful way because of the central importance of stereotypes for how this industry works: they easily evoke emotions, good and bad, and help to engage audiences and sell newspapers.

Stakeholders suggest there is scope for influencing those working in the media to include more realistic representations of ageing. Furthermore, some stakeholders suggest that social media also offers the opportunity for representational change as it gives a platform to people looking to share their own experiences of ageing.

## Dominant Narratives: news media and social media

<b>Top 10 words and phrases most likely to appear in online news articles related to ageing</b>		
<b>Words and phrases</b>	<b>Relative difference compared to standard English</b>	<b>Frequency</b> (Total number =6,586,317)
Home	4x	11032
Family	5x	10842
Care	11x	10267
Life	3x	8286
Police	6x	7084
Health	7x	4549
Residents	16x	4069
Hospital	6x	3832
Dementia	194x	2637
Vulnerable	24x	2604

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, online news) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus). <sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>



### Top 10 words and phrases most likely to appear in social media posts about ageing

Words and phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency (Total number =10,783,461)
Life	3x	14608
Family	4x	14503
Home	3x	12055
Care	7x	11653
Love	4x	9206
Skin	11x	5477
Mum	5x	5006
Loved	8x	4434
Baby	6x	4355
Dementia	119x	2642

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, social media) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus).<sup>8</sup>

Overall, media narratives generally represent ageing and older age as a time of decline and frailty. Broadly speaking the narratives reflect two key themes. First, older people are often framed as suffering from poor and/or worsening health and ageing as a process of inevitable decline towards death. Dementia is also mentioned regularly, particularly in the terms of reduced mental capacity. Second, older people are often framed as being inherently vulnerable, with a multitude of stories about older people being victims of things like scams.

Media is of course a very broad sector. There are some key differences that can be observed between social media and news media, and between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

## Broadsheets versus tabloids

Tabloids tend to focus more on individuals, whereas broadsheets focus on older people as a homogenous group in need of social care services. Tabloids tend to be more sensationalised and emotive than broadsheets, both negatively (e.g. ‘vulnerable’, ‘desperate’ and ‘terrified’) and positively (e.g. ‘beloved’ and ‘smiling’).

Tabloid news media is far more likely to refer to older people using colloquial and informal terminology such as ‘OAP’ and slightly more likely<sup>9</sup> to discuss older people in association with sex and intimacy. The latter tends to focus on extreme examples, with few realistic representations of older people’s sex lives. Depictions of sex are often heavily gendered, often linked to taboos about older women being sexual beings or having sexual desires.



**“I remained unconvinced. Do older women really want to rip their clothes off at the clink of a handcuff? Is the average middle-aged woman really obsessed by sex, sex, sex? Sorry, I don’t buy it...”**

Article from the Daily Mail, Online tabloid, Sept 2018

Tabloids are far more likely<sup>10</sup> than broadsheets to feature older celebrities such as actors in TV programmes, but they are often portrayed in a negative way. They are also more likely<sup>11</sup> to associate ageing with death, often in the context of tragic circumstances with the victim being an older person. This further reinforces this sense of older people being vulnerable and victims.

Broadsheets are more likely to talk<sup>12</sup> about health and social care issues relating to older people – often in the context of a ‘funding crisis’ and an imminent collapse of services. This mirrors government discourse on this topic. It also frames older people in a very specific way: a homogenous group who are inactive, incapable and vulnerable. They also place much of the blame at the feet of government.

**5.5x** more likely

Tabloid news media is far more likely to refer to older people using colloquial and informal terminology such as ‘OAP’.

<sup>9</sup> 1.5x more likely   <sup>10</sup> 40.5x characters on TV, 7.5x Royal Family   <sup>11</sup> 3.5x more likely   <sup>12</sup> 3.5x more likely

Broadsheets often mention demographic change and intergenerational fairness as compared to tabloids. Again, these are framed in terms of a 'challenge' and something that creates much animosity between different groups in society. The apparent animosity between different age groups in society is also referred to in tabloids, but often in the context of a perception that 'older people' are selfish individuals who only vote for the Conservative Party and who overwhelmingly voted for Brexit.

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“Record numbers of pensioners are being admitted to hospital suffering malnutrition amid a growing social care crisis. Charities said the figures were ‘shocking,’ with vulnerable people being left to starve for want of help at home or in care homes.”

Article from The Telegraph, Online broadsheet, Aug 2019

“

“Baby boomers and millennials seem at constant loggerheads, one group dismissing the other as feckless, entitled snowflakes afraid of hard work, and in return the young blame the old for Brexit, an impossible housing market, and generally ruining the country.”

Independent, Online broadsheet, Nov 2018

**2.5x** more likely

Broadsheets often mention demographic change and intergenerational fairness as compared to tabloids.

## Social media

Users of social media often<sup>13</sup> use stereotypical adjectives to describe older people.

Descriptive adjectives describing 'old' in social media		
Phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency (Total number =10,783,461)
Wee granny	22.5x	73
Sad old	17x	167
Old fart	13x	872
Old hag	12x	399
Old codger	11.5x	169
Old granny	11x	128
Bitter old	9.5x	172
Old man	6x	13178
Old biddy	5.5x	61
Dirty old man	5x	189
Old crone	4.5x	66
Old woman	3.5x	1654
Grumpy old man	3.5x	234
Grumpy old	3x	410
Little old lady	3x	288
Old enough	2.5x	198

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, social media) by the other source (in this case, online news). 'Bitter old hag' has been excluded from the results due the small sample size of 12 instances of this word in social media sources.

<sup>13</sup> 8x more likely

Intergenerational conflict is a common theme, with discussion often focusing on older people and voting behaviours. This tends to pit the old against young, for example during discussions about how older people predominantly voted leave in the 2016 European Union referendum.

Most of the common terms uncovered through our analysis are highly gendered, with women often portrayed as either looking ugly and unpleasant (e.g. ‘old hag’) or being referred to in a much more patronising manner (e.g. ‘little old lady’). This use of patronising language can evoke pity towards a group seen by many as vulnerable.

Older men are often described in such a way that suggests they are stuck in their ways (e.g. ‘old codger’) and sometimes as creepy (e.g. ‘dirty old man’). These terms are often used by social media users to describe others, but sometimes similar phrases – for example ‘old codger’ or ‘grumpy old man’ – used by people to describe themselves, therefore indicating some sense of internalisation of common stereotypes.

Another common association in social media as compared to online news media<sup>14</sup> is ageing and mental and physical ability, often in the context of a decline; for example, referring to older people as ‘senile’, ‘weak’ and ‘frail’.



**“My Dutch grandmother, however, was a senile, doddering, wheelchair bound diabetes ravaged incontinent wreck by her eighties. So we’ll see. Meanwhile, I’ll continue eating local, doing CrossFit and rock climbing.”**

Reddit, Social media, Sept 2019

**13x** more likely  
than online news media

Intergenerational conflict is a common theme, with discussion often focusing on older people and voting behaviours.

<sup>14</sup> 8x more likely

This link between ageism and ableism is apparent in many jokes on social media, often following the format of “my Nan could (do this task better)”:



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**“My Nan could strike a volley better than Dylan Whyte & she’s in a wheelchair.”**

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Twitter, Social media, Dec 2018

Furthermore, negative portrayals of age often link them with mortality:



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**“My Nan could keep a clean sheet against this Chelsea team and she’s been dead 10yrs.”**

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Twitter, Social media, Aug 2019

Internalisation is also clear in social media discourse, with people talking about themselves ‘getting old’ or having a ‘senior moment’.

Finally, as stakeholders suggested, it’s clear that social media also offers the opportunity for challenging ageist language:




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**“That’s rather ageist. I’m mid-fifties and have no problem chatting to people of all ages on here.”**

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Forum, Social media, Sept 2019





# Sorry Frank

en now to  
things right

## Recommendations

The media often relies on using stereotypes in order to quickly communicate ideas to an audience. It is also heavily influenced by the perspective or agenda of the publications the articles are written in.

There are three ways in which media discourse could be improved:

### **1. The Editors' Code needs to include age as a protected characteristic**

Clause 12 in the Editors' Code sets out expectations with regards to avoiding discrimination. According to the Independent Press Standards Organisation, Clause 12 states that:

“the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.”

However, as you can see age is missing from this statement and from Clause 12 itself. The exclusion of age means that there are no standards that the press must adhere to when reporting on stories relating to age, or even more generally when reporting about things that may or may not be related to an individual's age. This is a huge omission, particularly considering age is one of the Protected Characteristics under the Equalities Act. Adding age to the Editors' Code would enable a proper process for ensuring quality and appropriateness of references to age and stories relating to those in later life.

### **2. Think carefully about imagery and capture the diversity of later life**

Although not directly analysed in this research, imagery used alongside stories about older people often caricatures later life. For example, images of wrinkly hands clasped together in consternation is an all too common sight.

The use of this kind of imagery indicates that we should see older people as the object of our pity, rather than people who are in control and able to direct their own lives. It also ignores the diversity in the experiences of those in later life.

In both words and pictures, the media should attempt to communicate a more diverse representation of what it means to be older without resorting to stereotype and caricature. Journalists and editors need to be careful not to focus only on portrayals of later life as a time of frailty and decline.



### **3. Social media companies should challenge all hate speech including ageism**

It is the responsibility of social media companies to ensure that hate speech is not allowed on their platforms. Increasingly we see them dealing with a variety of forms of discrimination such as race or gender, but progress on age has been far slower. A good test to apply would be: 'Would we tolerate this kind of language/stereotype for one of the other more prominent protected characteristics?'. There should be a similar set of rules and guidelines amongst social media companies as there is for the press in terms of the Editors' Code.

# Advertising discourse



To understand advertising discourse, three industry stakeholders were interviewed alongside analysis of a selection of TV adverts associated with ageing and/or older people from the last five years. They were sourced from three primary platforms (YouTube, AdForum and Ads of the World) using key search terms. Textual analysis was conducted by Savanta ComRes, and visual analysis was conducted by an internal team at Ageing Better.

Advertising discourse predominantly uses unrealistically positive or very negative depictions of people in later life in order to sell products or services. This means that advertisements generally fail to accurately depict the diversity of experience of those in later life. Advertisements for products and services that feature older people are mainly those that specifically target older people (e.g. chair lifts or hearing aids) or relate to death, funerals and pensions.

## Stakeholder perspectives

Advertising stakeholders suggest that the sector conflates the process of ageing – something we are all going through all the time – with the idea of older people.

Like media stakeholders, they argue that the advertising industry does not accurately reflect the diversity of older people and their experiences. The sector is often described by stakeholders as preferring younger people, with those aged 55 and over (which stakeholders say their sector identifies as ‘old’), rarely visible in advertisements for everyday products.

However, again like media stakeholders, it is also argued that the purpose of advertising is to quickly convey ideas and to sell things, therefore requiring the use of crude stereotypes and stark contrasts.

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**“Advertisers, who, on the whole, are looking for simple ways to get to audiences quickly, tend to simplify, and so you get the clichés and the stereotypes.”**

James Best, Committees of Advertising Practice, Advertising stakeholder

Advertising stakeholders suggest that there has been an increase in diversity representation in recent years and that there is an appetite to change, particularly considering the potentially untapped market of older people.

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**“Ageing is seen and talked about as something that needs to be defied. So, you get little messages like, ‘Turn back the clock’ or ‘Look X number of years younger with’ or ‘Combat the seven critical signs of ageing or whatever’. I see that as a very continual and subtle pressure on all of us to believe that there’s something wrong with ageing and that we should do everything in our power to stop it or reverse it.”**

Tricia Cusden, Look Fabulous Forever, Advertising stakeholder



“As advertisers, if we boil down to what we’re here to do, it’s to get people interested in the products that we sell. And given that we have got an ageing population, then it just makes good business sense that we need to make people of all ages interested in the products that we sell.”

Jo Arden, MullenLowe Group, Advertising stakeholder

Stakeholders recognised that negative stereotypes are very common. Ageing is often linked to death and decline and seen as something that we must ‘fight’.

### Dominant narratives

Top 10 words and phrases most likely to be used in TV advertisements		
Words and phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency (Total number =4,861)
Pension	49x	10
Amazing	127x	7
Funeral	82x	7
Smile	20.8x	7
Abuse	70x	6
Forget	27x	6
Retirement	35x	4
Golden age	320x	3
Survivor	199x	3
Loved ones	213x	2

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, advertisements) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup><http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

Within the advertising industry, positive and clichéd language is very common, reflecting stakeholders' suggestions that concepts and emotions need to be communicated quickly in order to sell products. As compared to the charity sector, overly positive language is much more common.

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**“Now after all these years our house has done the most amazing thing of all: given us the money to enjoy our retirement.”**

Key Retirement Television Ad, Key, Advertisement, Oct 2014

However, death and decline are common themes, more than twice as common as they are in ageing-focused charities' documents, with death appearing in adverts about funerals and decline evident in 'anti-ageing' type advertisements. This gives viewers a very polarised idea of ageing: you are either a 'super-ager' or facing an inevitable decline and death. Sometimes these contrasts appear side-by-side in advertising.

Visual analysis of the adverts showed three different types of advert. In the first type, older people are portrayed as a homogenous group of passive and disempowered individuals, usually sitting in a chair, sipping tea and/or staring blankly out of window. In the adverts reviewed, people from older age groups rarely played an active role and were often surrounded by muted colours. This passivity was occasionally directly contrasted with younger people leading vibrant and active lives. Backing music tended to be melancholic and slow, emphasising how sad and lonely the older people in the adverts are.

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**“Washed out sometimes, washed up never. New age, perfect golden age, created to flatter your skin tone. With neo calcium and imperial peony, science it's a wonderful thing. Skin feels re-cushioned with a healthy-looking rosy glow. Gold not old. It's the beginning of a new golden age.”**

Age Perfect Golden Age, Let It Glow, L'Oréal Paris, Advertisement, Dec 2016

**15x** more likely

As compared to the charity sector, overly positive language is much more common in tv advertising.

The second type was almost the polar opposite of this. Consisting mostly of beauty adverts aimed at selling 'anti-ageing' products, they mostly featured glamorous women talking about how the products can help you avoid the 'negative' effects of ageing and stay beautiful forever. This reinforces the idea that ageing is a period of inevitable decline and a loss of beauty.

The third type of adverts were those aimed at selling financial or holiday products directly to older people. In these adverts older people were portrayed as happier and more capable, but still as a homogenous group (mostly white and wealthy) mostly accompanied by old-fashioned graphics and imagery.



## Recommendations

Advertising still relies on stereotypes, and older people are largely absent from advertising around products not specifically designed for older age groups. There are at least three ways in which advertising and marketing could be improved:

### **1. The Advertising Standards Authority should set standards with regards to age**

As our research has shown, there are plenty of examples of adverts that stereotype older people. It is imperative that the Advertising Standards Authority looks at harmful examples of adverts like this and set standards with regards to age – in the same way as they would with race, gender and/or sexuality. These standards also need to be enforced so that those that contravene them are penalised.

### **2. Market general products to all ages**

A lot of products that are for a broad all-age audience are rarely marketed using images of those aged over 50. Considering that this age group accounts for a significant proportion of overall consumer spend, it seems self-defeating that companies ignore this demographic and the potential sales to this group. Avoiding stereotypes is a huge part of this: if advertisers continue to caricature people and ignore the diversity of later life then they risk alienating customers.

### **3. Stock photography needs to capture the diversity of later life**

Stock image libraries are used by marketing and advertising agencies to quickly convey ideas to sell products and services. These libraries often use unrealistically positive or negative depictions of people in later life. Marketing and advertising agencies should test their messages and images with over-50s to get an understanding of why many don't feel represented in their work. Stock image agencies also need to rethink how they commission photographers for their libraries, to reflect the true diversity of later life.

# Ageing-focused charities' discourse



To understand the discourse of ageing-focused charities, seven key stakeholders were interviewed alongside analysis of excerpts from a purposively sampled selection of texts from eight leading UK charities with a remit related to ageing (texts included: open access press releases, blogs and marketing material).

Discourse in the charity sector is largely positive and supportive, particularly in the context of health and disability. Loneliness dominates narratives, often focusing on relationships, social connections and the ways in which we might overcome it. However, it is often framed as an inevitable part of later life with no chance of preventing it.

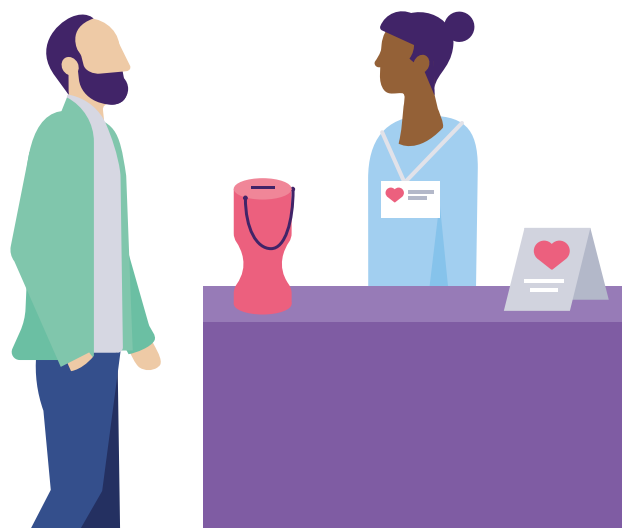


## Stakeholder reflections

Stakeholders from the charity sector argue that they talk about ageing in a more nuanced and holistic way than other sectors. They try to talk about older people as diverse individuals, rather than one homogenous group. Another difference between the ageing-focused charities and other sectors, according to stakeholders, is they see ageing as a process rather than a destination – taking a 'life course' approach to ageing.

Efforts are made to avoid patronising or overly positive and unrealistic depictions of people in later life. However, sometimes seemingly positive framings of ageing such as 'ageing well' can actually have negative connotations as it suggests that individuals can succeed or fail in ageing well, therefore blaming individuals for their own failures rather than highlighting the systems that may have contributed to problems. Of course, many charities do try to influence policy and broader structures and systems, but this does not change the fact that frames like 'ageing well' can be damaging.

Furthermore, campaign language and imagery can be extremely negative although most stakeholders suggest that they are gradually adopting a more progressive approach. There remains a tension however between the fundraising imperative, with campaigns needing to evoke sympathy in order to prompt donations, and the mission of many charities, which is about improving the prospects of and therefore attitudes towards older people in society.



## Dominant narratives

Top 10 words and phrases most likely to appear in charity sector discourse about ageing		
Words and phrases	Relative difference compared to standard English	Frequency (Total number =310,323)
Help	12x	1445
Care	30x	1383
Support	10x	938
Home	7x	916
Need	5x	877
Health	21x	632
Services	8x	596
Loneliness	310x	496
Benefits	12x	362
NHS	191x	245

Relative difference of each feature (topic, word, phrase, grammar or emotion) is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency percentages of the feature in one source (in this case, ageing-focused charities sources) by the other source (in this case, standard English comprised of the British National Corpus).<sup>16</sup>

Ageing-focused charities prioritise meeting the needs of older people, which has become heightened in recent years in the context of austerity.



**“We aim to provide life-enhancing services and vital support to people in later life.”**

Age UK website, 2019

<sup>16</sup><http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

Mental and physical health are a common topic of discussion, particularly in terms of looking after one's partner and the financial costs of such care. As previously mentioned, loneliness is a common topic too.

As compared with political discourse, the discourse of ageing-focused charities covers a far more diverse range of topics including discussing ageing in the context of everyday life issues such as food, clothing, sex and intimacy. It is more likely to discuss ageing in association with things like social inclusion and community<sup>17</sup>. It is also far more likely<sup>18</sup> to use caring, helpful and supportive language.

The charity sector is also more likely<sup>19</sup> to focus on health and disease from an individual's perspective, rather than a policy perspective. This mirrors stakeholders' assertions around the sector viewing older people as individuals, rather than a homogenous group of people for services to be delivered to.

Ageing-focused charities also seems to have a more nuanced approach to later life than the health and social care sector. They are more likely<sup>20</sup> to discuss the social and emotional aspects of ageing<sup>21</sup>, which again could be indicative of seeing older people as individuals who have lives and relationships rather than focusing on a very medicalised notion of older age. The charity sector is also more likely<sup>22</sup> to talk about death than the health and social care sector.

In contrast, health and social care documents are much more<sup>23</sup> likely to link ageing to frailty, weakness and help compared to the charity sector.

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**6.5x** more likely  
Than the health and social care sector

Ageing-focused charities are more likely to discuss ageing in association with things like social inclusion and community.

<sup>17</sup> Most common words/topics: Volunteer, Friends, Community, Not part of a group, Informal/ Friendly, Inclusion

<sup>18</sup> 33x more likely <sup>19</sup> 12x more likely <sup>20</sup> 10x more likely

<sup>21</sup> Most common words/topics: Friends, Friendship, Not part of a group, Thought/belief, Personal relationship, Religion and the supernatural, Emotional actions, states and processes

<sup>22</sup> 9x more likely <sup>23</sup> 20.5x more likely

## Recommendations

As charities we have a key role in defining the narrative on age and ageing. We are also often the kinds of organisations that older people look to for advice and support. This means ensuring that people from older age groups, the beneficiaries of these charities, are able to see themselves reflected in our messaging.

There are two ways in which the charity sector could improve its discourse:

### 1. Be positive but realistic

It's easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the best way to communicate a message is to emphasise the worst things that may happen. However, this fatalism can be self-defeating. It is important to emphasise the good as much as the bad, as long as depictions of both are realistic.

Many charities focus on the isolation and loneliness of older people. However, research shows loneliness tends to be higher in younger adults, and occurs for some people across the life course (ONS, 2018).

### 2. Avoid stereotypes in fundraising narratives

Internalised ageism – in which older people are essentially ageist towards themselves – can be just as damaging as ageism by others. We therefore need to avoid narratives that might increase the levels of internalised ageism. For example, Christmas campaigns that feature very sad and lonely older people sitting in chairs or looking wistfully out of windows are unhelpful. They disproportionately skew our understanding of what people in later life are experiencing towards the negative and disempowered. Many of our organisations also rely on older volunteers, many of whom might be put off if they see the fatalistic messaging often used as part of fundraising activities. There are examples of organisations that have reframed their fundraising narratives away from the negative towards a more positive, such as Oxfam.

SHOP SAFE  
SHOP LOCAL



SUPPORT YOUR  
LOCAL SHOPS

London Government Lambeth

GRAND  
CLOAKS  
SIX  
LEGS

Iceland

Sainsbury's  
Local

20



# Conclusion



**As this research has shown, the use of negative stereotypes and framing is pervasive across a wide range of different sectors. Despite these sectors using different language and often having quite different tones, the narratives they help to create and reinforce largely draw on negative stereotypes about older people and ageing.**

These stereotypes can often be contradictory. We are at times invited to pity older people because of a misperception that older age groups are inherently physically and mentally less able than younger people, but at other times we are encouraged to be angry that older people enjoy greater political power, accumulated wealth and an apparently unfair share of public resources. The ultimate consequence of such negative and divisive framing is a society in which later life is seen as something to fear or dread and older people are seen as a burden.

This needs to change. Not only is it damaging to the UK's social fabric as a whole, it is hugely damaging to individuals too. It can lead to direct discrimination that means older people are unable to access services they need. It can also feed internalised ageism whereby older people view ageing as a negative process and therefore accept situations that are less than ideal or limit their own actions. We need to think more carefully about the language that we use and the impact this has on the policy decisions that are made, how people perceive themselves and others, the products and services we buy, and the support, advice and services we access. Changing our language will enable us to move away from the fatalistic doom-laden discourse of later life, towards a more realistic narrative - one that recognises the opportunities as well as the challenges and diversity of ageing and older age.

## Appendix 1

# Stakeholder interviews and discourse analysis tool

Savanta ComRes conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with 20 expert stakeholders in August and September 2019, each lasting 30-45 minutes. Stakeholders were approached based on a sample of senior decision-makers identified as having an interest in ageing, and the potential to influence their sector's narrative on ageing.

For the discourse analysis, a platform called Relative Insight was used. The entire approach of the Relative Insight tool is built on a comparison between sources, or set of sources, against a comparison source, or set of comparison sources, to provide relative differences, similarities, and frequencies in terms of topics, phrases, words, grammar and sentiment appearing in the compared sources.

In this project, the sources for comparison consisted of data from selected sectors/industries identified by the Centre for Ageing Better.



## Appendix 2

# Sources for the media analysis

### **News media**

Savanta ComRes used NetBase, an artificial intelligence powered social analytics platform, to gain access to full articles of all publicly available online UK media sources, including a combination of local and national media, print and online (both broadsheets and tabloids). They searched for articles related to ageing and/or older people published between September 2018 and August 2019 using defined search terms and then randomly selected a 25% sample of the online media dataset – controlling for key characteristics - removing this any duplicates.

The online broadsheets data consisted of 768,361 words from full articles relating to ageing and/or older people from the top five most read newspapers based on Ofcom's News Consumption 2018 report: The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Independent and the Financial Times. Only articles published between September 2018 and August 2019 were included in the search.

The online tabloids data consisted of 4,072,213 words from full articles relating to ageing and/or older people from the top five most read tabloid newspapers based on Ofcom's News Consumption 2018 report: the Daily Mail, Metro, The Sun, the Daily Mirror and The Express. Only articles published between September 2018 and August 2019 were included in the search.

### **Social media**

A range of different social media platforms were analysed including: Twitter, blogs, forums as well as public Facebook posts, Instagram posts and YouTube comments (in descending order in terms of their proportion of the dataset). A range of online forums were used to create a balance between different ages and genders including Reddit; The Student Room, Mumsnet; Pistonheads; Tractorsforum; Over 50s form; Gransnet; and Money Saving Expert. Defined search terms were used to collect social media posts that were relevant to ageing published between September 2018 and August 2019.

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Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.  
**Let's make ageing better.**



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practice informed by evidence and works with partners  
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and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation,  
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