

# ELSA - Episode 8

## Volunteering: good for others and good for you

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Volunteering, people, pandemic, work, ageing, older, place, wellbeing, ELSA, contribution, connections, change, groups, lives, Oldham, ambition, community

### SPEAKERS

John Hannen, Christine Garrington, James Nazroo, Pauline Coltman.

#### **Christine Garrington** 00:00

Welcome to the ELSA podcast from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. I'm Chris Garrington. In this series, we're talking about how ELSA is helping us better understand what happens to us as we get older and to live longer, happier, healthier lives. In this episode, we're discussing the benefits of volunteering for older people with James Nazroo from the University of Manchester, John Hannen from Ambition for Ageing, and Oldham based volunteer Pauline Coltman.

#### **James Nazroo** 00:23

In ELSA we've studied volunteering since study started in the early 2000s. I think we studied it largely because as we set it up, we perceived the kind of social dimensions of older people's lives to be really important to collect information on. And crucially important, I think, in the social dimensions of older people's lives is volunteering. Something like a quarter of older people post-retirement age, volunteer, and those people who do volunteer do so frequently. We're not just really focusing on the things that people do informal volunteering organisations, but also the more informal stuff that people do to help others.

#### **Christine Garrington** 01:13

And so when you look at those people who volunteer versus those who don't, what do you find?

#### **James Nazroo** 01:17

People who volunteer have much better wellbeing than those who don't volunteer. And we find that in a number of ways, so we use a number of measures of wellbeing which go from how happy you are, to how confident you are in yourself, and so on. And we find that wellbeing is higher for those people who volunteer, we also find that the more you volunteer, the better your wellbeing. And we also find that people who start volunteering in later life, their wellbeing improves. But there's one absolutely crucial additional thing here, which is what people get from their volunteering. So people who feel rewarded, feel that they get some return from their volunteering are more likely to have higher wellbeing than those who don't feel rewarded from their wellbeing. And that kind of leads us to think about the

relationship between volunteering and work because we find exactly the same for work. People who get some return from their work feel much better than those who don't get returned from their work, and have higher wellbeing than those who don't get returned from their work. And so that then leads us to begin to think about whether volunteering is a substitute for work. But I don't think it is, and I don't think it is, for a number of reasons. People don't move straight from work into volunteering, people volunteer before they retire. And indeed, people who are working are more likely to volunteer than people who are not working for a number of reasons. But also volunteering is much more than a work role. There's a whole set of other things that volunteering brings around your identity, your self-esteem, your connections with other people in your community, and so on. So I do think it's a great deal more than a work replacement.

**Christine Garrington** 02:59

So James, why is also such a useful source of information for researchers like you who are interested in the sorts of things that help us age healthily?

03:07

When we set ELSA up, we were really concerned and trying to understand people's lives holistically. So not just to focus on the economic dimensions of their lives, which obviously are crucially important, and not just on the health dimensions are their lives, which also are crucially important and the psychological and social dimensions, but rather to bring all of those dimensions into a single investigation so that we could look at the interrelationships between those different things. And then if we think about how people age and what people experiences as they grow older than a crucial dimension of that is their health and wellbeing and what drives their health and wellbeing. And so understanding how social environment drives their health and wellbeing, understanding how economic environment drives health and wellbeing, enables us to think about wellbeing in later life in a broader context. And you could say the same if you want to think about retirement, or if you want to think about pensions, or if you want to think about housing, there's a whole set of additional information that helps you understand that in the whole, rather than in a segmented way. And the other dimension is that it is a study of the English population. So it's representative of the English population, which means we can talk about differences across different dimensions of the population, whether it's people living in particular geographical areas, people who are poorer or richer, or people who are healthier, or not healthy. And then the third dimension that's absolutely crucial is that we study people over time. So we interview the same person, again and again, every two years on average. And that means that we can see how their experiences of life change as they grow older, what drives that change and experience, and all of this information then we bring together to understand how people's lives change as they grow older, but also then to talk to policymakers, and use that evidence to try and influence policy in order to improve the lives of older people.

**Christine Garrington** 04:59

Yes, thanks for that James, I'll come back to you shortly to ask you a little bit more about your recent work, and also to discuss how the pandemic, how COVID-19 has impacted on people's volunteering. But John, I want to ask you a little bit about the work of Ambition for Ageing, tell us something about the work that you're doing.

**John Hannen** 05:19

Ambition for Ageing is a programme of work that seeks to build age friendly places. And our approach has always been not to look at the problems that many older people face but to deal with them as individuals, but in the way that a place can enable our disabled people from building really positive social connections. And so we spoke to people in a variety of places a wide diversity of places and asked them, What would make the place they lived in more age friendly. And one of the things that was said, quite early on when we were consulting with people was, we want to live in a place where people look out for each other, but we don't live in each other's pockets. That sense of wanting to be able to recognise people, be familiar with people, have some way of contributing to each other's lives, but not necessarily having that tied through friendships or family. And so we developed a programme of work where we've given a lot of communities resources, to develop social projects. And some of those can be the kind of formal volunteering or, but more often, it's a broader, more informal way of people being able to contribute to each other. So over the last five years, we've had something like 20,000 people being involved in the design and delivery of over 1400 projects. And within those projects, you can't really tell the difference between the helper and the helped. So everybody's a volunteer, and everybody's a recipient. And it's been a really interesting programme, just by being able to understand what the community is wants to do with each other, and find ways of collectively engaging with each other, helping each other, supporting each other and making contributions.

**Christine Garrington** 06:59

That sounds absolutely fantastic. And do the sorts of benefits from volunteering that James has outlined, resonate with your experiences, working and speaking with volunteers, as you do on a daily basis.

**James Nazroo** 07:10

Yeah, and what's really important is the sense of the return that people got, people aren't just undertaking unpaid work as a chore. It's that sense of gaining something from it. And that sense of when we found the place, people saying "somewhere I can have a voice, somewhere can contribute", and actually seeing that benefit of a change to place and knowing you played your part in it, even though it is hard work and it does take a contribution, is rewarding and makes people feel more connected and more socially connected. And it's really important that we look at volunteering in the wider perspective. And I've got a colleague who says try avoid the V word that times because sometimes the word volunteer is a label isn't something that people engage with. But that idea of making that contribution, and through that contribution connecting and being rewarded and feeling part of something bigger. That's the real return that people have often felt.

**Christine Garrington** 08:06

Yeah, that's really interesting. And Pauline, I wonder if you feel that way, too. But first of all, tell us a bit about the volunteering that you do.

**Pauline Coltman.** 08:13

Yes, I do quite a lot of volunteering. I'm involved in quite a lot of groups, I have been involved with Ambition for Age and right from the start. And I volunteer for Age, UK, Henshaws, Oldham Community Leisure Services, and quite a lot of various other groups that are too numerous to mention.

**Christine Garrington** 08:35

Now obviously, you're helping a lot of people with the volunteering you do. But what benefits would you say that you get from being involved in volunteering? It does what, you know, John was saying there, and what James was saying earlier, you know, do you agree with that if you like?

**Pauline Coltman.** 08:51

I strongly agree with what the both said because through volunteering, I've been given so many opportunities to do things that I would never have dreamt I could have done. It's given me so much confidence, to do things and also, I've met so many lovely people that have become become lifetime friends. And also because I'm involved in so many things I know quite a lot of people, and if people come to help more often than not able to put them in the right direction. And I do agree with what James and John have said, health benefits as well.

**Christine Garrington** 09:32

It's really interesting that you talked about how it's giving you confidence, I wonder if you can tell us a bit about that.

**Pauline Coltman.** 09:38

Because people have believed in me to do things. And they've said, oh yeah, she'll be good for doing that. And I think am I, really? Yeah, it's just given me, I'm not afraid of doing anything, I'll have a go at anything. And I think that stemmed from the volunteering really. Just people believing in me.

**James Nazroo** 10:02

I'd just like to just reflect a little bit on what Pauline and John have just said and, and the kind of importance of the opportunity. So the work Ambition for Ageing is doing to create the opportunity for volunteering I think is absolutely crucial. One of the things that we found in ELSA is that people don't volunteer equally of course, and what we do find is that at least a formal level, and probably in an informal level as well, people who are better educated, who have more money, who have better health are more likely to volunteer and gain the benefits from volunteering. And given the benefit from volunteering, the kinds of things that Pauline has been talking about, I think it's absolutely crucially important that those opportunities to volunteer, whether we call them strictly volunteering, or whether we call them helping out, or whatever it might be, should be available to other people, it helps build community, but it also helps give the returns for individuals who take part the increasing confidence, the increase in happiness, feeling you're contributing, but importantly, feeling connected. And so I think that's absolutely, absolutely crucial.

**John Hannen** 11:10

Something Pauline said, just echoes with me in terms of that kind of confidence and the ability to do things, because actually, it was a different Pauline, someone in Bury, that I remember speaking to saying, and she said to me, I didn't know I could do that. And part of that is in the individual, in terms of I didn't know I had the ability to do the things that I do. But partly is also in terms of permissions. And that ability sense of I didn't know that was possible. I didn't know that somebody like me could do this thing in my community. And I think one of the things that volunteering can do, it's that kind of personal

confidence. But also it's about that kind of sense of the wider capability and capacity to feel that you can do something to change the place you live in. And I think that volunteering is a step along with that, if it's the right volunteering opportunity and the right way of contributing.

**Pauline Coltman.** 12:00

Yeah, I do agree with both with what John and James have said. Because I am, I do feel part of my community. And it's nice that people know me by name. And because I'm helping people in that community. People also want to help me as well, because I don't know, you probably are aware, I am visually impaired. And sometimes I do need a bit of help. And my neighbours also just say to me, are you alright, can I help you. And that is lovely aswell.

**Christine Garrington** 12:36

Yeah, that's really, really important. Thank you very much for that. So I want to move on now and talk a little bit obviously, about the situation we've all found ourselves in the last few months with the pandemic and lockdown, and that has undoubtedly impacted on a lot of people's ability to get out and I'm sure do the volunteering that they ordinarily do. And James, this is something that you and colleagues have been looking at. Could you talk us through exactly what it was you were looking at and why?

**James Nazroo** 12:59

One group of people who it's impacted on more than others is older people. And older people because they're more vulnerable to the infection and the consequences of the infection, having serious illness and potentially dying. And that means that the kind of rules that have been put in place to control the pandemic have been particularly felt by older people. The need to reduce social contact, the need to isolate, and so on. So one of the things that we did as part of the ELSA study was trying to explore older people's experiences of the Coronavirus pandemic. And we did this by doing a special interview with our participants. Most of them did it online, but a few did it by telephone. And we're going to do this interview again in the coming month. As we know, during the pandemic people did need extra help. And you won't be surprised to hear of course, that people's volunteering reduced quite significantly over the pandemic. So something like two fifths of those people who were volunteering prior to the pandemic stopped volunteering in the early months of the pandemic, then another fifth reduced their level of volunteering with only a small proportion of people increasing their volunteering. And this has really serious implications, serious implications both for the people who volunteer themselves and their reduced opportunities to volunteer, but also, of course, for the people and the groups that they were supporting.

**Christine Garrington** 14:30

So Pauline, then tell us a bit about how the pandemic has impacted on you personally and your volunteering.

**Pauline Coltman.** 14:37

Well obviously, we've not been able to meet up on a face to face basis because the place where one of the group meets is a sheltered housing association. And we're not allowed to go in there, but I ring around the members every week or they're in me so the contact is still there. But I've become involved

in so many groups over the COVID period on Zoom, and I absolutely love Zoom, because it's made me so independent. And I don't have to go out of the house is brilliant. I mean I know shouldn't be saying that really, but for me, it's completely changed my life soon. I'm on it every day, at least two or three times a day. And I've joined all these many groups, and it's just been brilliant for me. So as you can tell, my mental attitude is quite buzzing at the moment because I've met all these new people, which is really good. And also, a few weeks ago, I started doing a level two instructors fitness course. And so that's kept me busy as well.

**Christine Garrington 15:47**

Wow, wow. James, can I come back to you there? I wondered whether that's something that's featured at all in your findings, or whether that's asked at all in the study?

**James Nazroo 15:57**

Yeah. So I think what Pauline is saying about her kind of increased social context through Zoom is absolutely fascinating. One of the things that we were really interested in exploring is how people maintain their social connections during periods of lockdown, or semi lockdown. And the digital has obviously become crucially important in all of our lives. So the ways in which we connect through video conferencing type platforms is one example. As you might expect, older people are less likely to use online digital devices. But one of the things that we found is that far more people are using these tools, and we expect it to, we did our interviews during the COVID period using both online and telephone. And we were expecting quite a lot of people to prefer to use telephone than online for their interviews, and actually far, far more people than we expected use it used online methods. And that is, I think, because the Coronavirus pandemic has pushed all of us into using online methods more than we would otherwise. And this is also the case for older people, given the older people are more likely to need to isolate, then I think this is just fantastic that we've had this change in behaviour. It's not a complete substitute, of course, and I'm sure Pauline would say this as well. It's not a complete substitute for personal contact, but what it does do is enable you to maintain your connections with family, friends and to build new connections with people.

**Christine Garrington 17:32**

Yeah, thanks, James. John, I wonder what your take is on this whole sort of digital aspect of, you know, what's happened during the pandemic and the opportunities as well as the as the downsides, what what have you seen? And what are your experiences in your role?

**John Hannen 17:48**

So I think there are the two stories. And I think one of the issues is there'll be people who are already have the kit in the house, but didn't use it, or didn't use it regularly. And this has kind of forced people to basically it's pay more attention to what different functionality the smartphone might give them, or their tablet. And so they use it more. And they become more familiar with it and more practised in it, and therefore that then opens some doors. However, there's a bit, the digital divide them plays a role. And if you can't afford to have a good data connection, or can't afford the kit. Or you've just never built up the literacy and don't have somebody to help you, then you can end up on the opposite side of the issue. So it becomes quite polarising in that sense. But I do think that the fact that we've had to move in and out of lockdown and then out of restrictions, has made organisations provide a more varied set of

offers. I was actually speaking to an organisation we were working with, and they were talking about some of their users had chronic pain, and they would often struggle to get out of the house anyway. And now they felt normal, because they had the same, everyone else had the same restrictions that they had on a normal day. So the fact that things were moving on to Zoom was kind of more equitable, because everybody was in the same boat, and then they could engage with stuff that everybody else was engaging with because of the restrictions. And it's made some of those organisations think well in the future, rather than going back to face to face for everything, do we now need to keep two doors into our organisation, an online door and the face to face door. So I think that what this will change is the behaviour of individuals and organisations in how they become more practised in the use of IT. But I think you do have that group, especially people on lower incomes, people from ethnic minorities, disabled people who might have lower incomes as a matter of course anyway, if you've not got access to decent kit, decent data connection, then you just end up on the kind of the poorer side of that divide. And that's poor in terms of social connection as well.

**Christine Garrington** 19:53

I want to move on a little bit away from COVID. I was interested to see that one of your recent campaigns John described people as valuable not vulnerable. I think that's a really sort of striking phrase. I wonder if that's a tricky message, though, to get across in these challenging times?

**John Hannen** 20:10

It may be, but it's a very necessary message to get across. Because in any time, I mean, Pauline was just mentioning before the fact that she helps people in our community, but also receive some help as well. And recognising that many people who do need a bit of extra additional support still have significant contribution they can make to their communities. And we need to see people in the round and see people for their experience, people for the energy and commitment they can bring. And not just out recipients of care and recipients of support, some of the support that you can give somebody may help them to make a contribution to somebody else. And it just, we just need to recognise that no matter what the situation is, no matter what the the challenges we're facing, everybody has a role to play in supporting somebody else. They just might need some additional support themselves to help them make that contribution.

**Christine Garrington** 21:00

Yeah, so just finally, I mean, John, you made the point a moment ago about how organisation and individuals behaviour is changing as a result of the pandemic. And that may, will, and that will filter through into the way we sort of act and behave and things around volunteering in the future. So I'd really just love to get everybody's final thoughts on volunteering in the coming months and years. What do we need to understand better? And what's going to change? I think you've hinted at that already, John, but let's just start with James, first of all.

**James Nazroo** 21:29

Yeah, so I think John has made some crucial points about about the contribution that older people make to society. So rethinking the place of older people in society, and what the one of the things that the Corona pandemic has done is to reinforce this notion of vulnerability, and downplay the contribution that older people make. And I think it's critically important that we understand, understand the

contribution. We can think about in terms of volunteering in terms of grandparenting, in terms of paid work, as well, and in terms of broader contributions to society. So I think that's crucially important, and that's what we need to think about in terms of volunteering, is not just to think about volunteering as that formal activity, but think about the broader range of activities that older people contribute to society. But then also to think about context. And again, John has made a crucially important point about how context can be an enabler or disabler of ability to take part in society. And the ways in which socio-economic inequalities might shape that. So to think about the ways in which we can enhance the opportunities for older people to contribute where and when they want to, by addressing the factors that constrain that contribution.

**Christine Garrington 22:45**

John, what's going to be the focus for you and ambition for Ageing over the coming months?

**John Hannen 22:49**

As we start to open up, when we start to kind of leave the situation behind, what will have changed is, a lot of people will now know they can do things they didn't know they could do before, as much as they have those restrictions in place. So we look at the kind of mutual aid that's emerged to help support people, people now know what to do in terms of if there's a crisis. And that will leave many communities stronger, there'll be that kind of community and memory of what to do in an emergency and how to support each other. But I think the challenge will be places where people have lower incomes, because they'll be quite damaged by the the economic impacts of the crisis. So cafes, restaurants, shops will, may close in some places where they may hang on in others. And so we're going to see a great inequality in places. So I think we're gonna need to pay attention to those places that have been harmed economically and socially, by the crisis, where digital divides a stronger, and pay a bit more attention to how we start rebuilding connection there and rebuilding communities there because I think some of the areas that are a bit more wealthy, or have the kind of the tools and the people in place who know how to build connections and maintain connections will do okay. It's just that we've got to see a massive increase in inequality, and that needs to have some attention paid to it.

**Christine Garrington 24:08**

And then finally, Pauline, I really want to come to you for your final thoughts on what volunteering looks like for you in the coming months and years, what you think it's going, how you think it's going to change at all, and what are your hopes and and fears for the future?

**Pauline Coltman. 24:24**

Well, hopefully, I can get back to face to face with a lot of people because, as already been mentioned, a lot of the older people don't want to use technology. So face to face to them is a valuable tool. But also online is very important as well. But also that was mentioned, I'm about to join another group called poverty in Oldham. So hopefully, I can make a bit of a difference with that and connect with that as well.

**Christine Garrington 24:59**

Thanks to volunteer Pauline Coltman, John Hannen from Ambition for Ageing and James Nazroo from the University of Manchester for joining me on this episode of the ELSA podcast. You can find out more

about ELSA on the study's website at [www.ELSA-project.ac.uk](http://www.ELSA-project.ac.uk), and check out Ambition for Aging's work at [ambitionforaging.org.uk](http://ambitionforaging.org.uk).