



Planning Together
Policies and Participation
in Ageing Societies
16-17 September 2009



Thursday 17 September, 12:00
Panel 6.

‘Unlocking the Potential’ of Older People: New Research Evidence to Inform the Policy Debate in Northern Ireland.

Christine Irvine
Volunteer Development Agency

Abstract: Key Literature Like other countries in the developed world, Northern Ireland’s population is ageing. Population projections for Northern Ireland forecast a 70% increase in people aged 50+ years between 2007 and 2030 (NISRA 2006). A major focus of public policies which relate to older people have been on their needs or perceived dependency on the state. However, less focus has been given to the fact that generally people in the UK are living longer, in better health and wealth than previous generations (Evason et al. 2005). As a result there are many wasted opportunities to involve them more widely as active and valuable citizens. Volunteering is one specific area of community participation in which older people are currently under represented and which is the focus of this report (It’s All About Time 2007).

Methods Desktop Research: A scoping exercise was carried out to identify the research gaps in current literature regarding the range of benefits of volunteering for ‘older people’. **Primary Research:** A telephone survey (n=350) and focus groups (n=6) with a cohort of volunteers and non-volunteers between the ages of 55-70+ yrs old, to explore lifestyle choices and attitudes towards volunteering. **Findings** From the literature review there was research evidence to show that the impact of volunteering can be multiple and varied and can cross physical, mental, social and economic boundaries. However, a considerable lack of information from a Northern Ireland context was apparent. The primary research was able to suggest that generally volunteers had a more positive attitude to life, were more sociable and fulfilling lifestyles. Many of the barriers which exist for ‘older’ non-volunteers such as transport issues, bureaucracy and cost of living must be addressed by a partnership approach with policy makers and practitioners. **Key Policy Messages** Research evidence has argued that volunteering can be a useful vehicle to promote and address many of the issues older people face which are also priorities for Northern Ireland government i.e. poverty, social inclusion and health. The information gained from this research can provide evidence to inform the shape and direction of policies within Northern Ireland.