

# GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

## SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS IN AN AGEING SOCIETY

---

The number of people aged 50 and over is growing as our society ages. Yet this age group appears to be under-represented amongst social entrepreneurs.

This Findings Paper explores social entrepreneurship amongst people aged 50+, looking at the motivations, distinctive features and contributions of older social entrepreneurs, and the benefits of social entrepreneurship to them as individuals. It concludes that there is untapped potential in this age group, and that social entrepreneurship may offer some unique solutions to issues associated with an ageing society.

---

**RESEARCH FINDINGS SERIES**

## INTRODUCTION

---

*People aged 50+ are under-represented amongst social entrepreneurs.*

People aged 50+ are under-represented amongst the social entrepreneurs UnLtd supports. As a group, people aged 50 and over form 44% of the adult UK population (aged 18+), but have formed only 18% of UnLtd's Award Winners since 2003.

In fact, amongst UnLtd's social entrepreneurs the real decline in participation starts at age 60. While 13% of Award Winners are in their 50s, only 5% are aged 60 and over. This reflects other research, which suggests that people in these age groups are less likely to get involved in social entrepreneurship than most younger age groups.<sup>1</sup>

In some lights, this decline in participation might not look surprising. Mainstream entrepreneurial activity also declines with age.<sup>2</sup> Yet civic activity and volunteering is high amongst people over 50. Research has found that people aged between 50 and 74 are the groups most likely to take part in regular volunteering, and that volunteering levels amongst these groups increased between 2009-10 and 2010-11.<sup>3</sup>

UnLtd has established several programmes with partners, aimed at promoting social entrepreneurship for and by older people (see page 11 for more detail).

This Findings Paper presents evidence from UnLtd's work with older social entrepreneurs so far, to explore:

- ★ Who are the social entrepreneurs in this age group?
- ★ What motivates them?
- ★ What is distinctive about them?
- ★ What contribution do they make through their social entrepreneurial activities?
- ★ What benefits do they gain personally?
- ★ Are people aged 50+ really 'missing' from social entrepreneurship, or are they just 'hidden'?
- ★ What could be done to increase social entrepreneurship amongst people over 50?

The themes in this paper will be developed and tested further as we continue to support social entrepreneurs in this age group.

1. Levie, J. & Hart, M. (2010). 'What distinguishes Social Entrepreneurs from Business Entrepreneurs? Insights from GEM'. Paper presented at the ISBE (Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship) Conference 2010.  
2. Hart, M. & Levie, J. (2010). Global Entrepreneurship Monitor – United Kingdom 2010 Monitoring Report. GEM.  
3. Citizenship Survey April 2010 – March 2011, Office for National Statistics, published 22 September 2011

# KEY FINDINGS

---

## Who are social entrepreneurs aged 50+, and what motivates them?

- ★ Around half of social entrepreneurs aged 50+ are female; 14% are from minority ethnic backgrounds; and 67% are educated to degree level or have professional qualifications.
- ★ Factors related to age (such as the feeling of having a lifetime of experience to share) or life-course (such as children moving away) often seemed to play a role in motivating people to start a social venture.

## What is distinctive about them?

- ★ **Focus on social value** - There was a tendency for older social entrepreneurs to focus more on creating social value than economic value. Amongst UnLtd's annual survey respondents aged 48 and above, half generated no turnover during 2009-10. Nevertheless, there were exceptions. For example, 9% of those aged 48 and over generated more than £100,000 turnover in the reporting period.
- ★ **Ambitious** - 72% of annual survey respondents in this age group said that they wanted to scale their venture to create regional, national or international impact.
- ★ **Looking for legacy** - The model of scaling that older people prefer may be different from other age groups: older people were often more interested in a micro-franchising model of growth than in expanding their venture themselves.
- ★ **Risk-takers** - The social entrepreneurs interviewed as part of this research seemed no less willing to take personal and financial risks than social entrepreneurs in other age groups.

## What are the benefits of social entrepreneurship in later life?

- ★ **Growth in skills and confidence** - Interviews showed that people over 50 grew in confidence and skills through delivering their social venture.
- ★ **Reducing isolation** - There were several examples of ventures leading to involvement in other civic activity, and more connections with people in the community.
- ★ **Income generation** - Some people aged 50+ use social entrepreneurship as a means to generate income. 44% of annual survey respondents in this age group had created at least one full or part-time job through their venture during 2009-10.

## What contributions do they make?

- ★ Many of the ventures pursued by older people addressed issues related to ageing. Case studies showed, for example, how projects were creating employment opportunities for unemployed older people.
- ★ Annual survey data gave an insight into the social and economic impact created: 56 respondents aged 48 and over had created on average 8 volunteering opportunities and 13 training opportunities each during 2009-10, and had each supported on average 633 beneficiaries.

## Are social entrepreneurs aged 50+ missing or hidden?

- ★ Over 50s seem under-represented amongst social entrepreneurs generally, not just UnLtd Award Winners. This could indicate untapped potential amongst this age group. However, it may be that there are older social entrepreneurs who simply do not recognise the terminology and so may not be accessing support available to them.

## WHO ARE UNLTD'S OLDER SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS?

---

*Social entrepreneurs aged 50+ are often motivated by age related factors.*

Our research found that the socio-demographic characteristics of older social entrepreneurs are similar to those of other age groups supported by UnLtd.

- ★ 53% of UnLtd's Award Winners in the over 50 age groups are female.
- ★ 14% are from a minority ethnic background.
- ★ A large proportion are educated to degree level (44%) or have professional qualifications (23%). This reflects other research on social entrepreneurial activity.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this is an interesting feature, as fewer people in this age bracket will have had the opportunity to access higher education.

## WHAT MOTIVATES SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AGED 50+?

---

Like UnLtd's younger social entrepreneurs, the underlying motivations driving the social entrepreneurial activities of people in this age group are wide ranging, and are strongly linked to each individual's background and life experience. Nevertheless, our research showed some common features in the decision to develop a social venture amongst those aged 50+:

- ★ **An inspirational event or experience:** often these were traumatic events, such as surviving a severe illness or losing a friend or family member.
- ★ **Opportunity:** the project was sometimes not brought to fruition until many years after the event or experience that triggered the interest.
- ★ **Imperative:** in a few cases people were motivated by the idea that, as they were getting older, it was 'now or never' for their social venture.
- ★ **Drawing on previous experience:** people aged 50+ often used their professional experience and transferable skills to run their venture. The evidence also suggested that they were more likely to become social entrepreneurs if they had previous experience in volunteering.
- ★ **Supplementing income:** some of the social entrepreneurs aged 50+ whom we interviewed were motivated by need or desire to develop an income stream.

More work would be needed to examine how relevant age is in relation to these features. However, it was common for social entrepreneurs aged 50+ to

4. Levie, J. & Hart, M. (2009). *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor – United Kingdom 2010 Monitoring Report*. GEM.

5. Harding, R. (2006). *Social Entrepreneurship Monitor United Kingdom 2006*. GEM UK Foundation for Entrepreneurial Management. London Business School.

describe age-related factors amongst their motivations. For example, they often felt they had a lifetime of experience to offer now that they did not have in early adulthood, and that they had more time available now to make their contribution to society.

## WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AGED 50+?

The social entrepreneurs we interviewed for this research seemed no less willing than those in other age groups to take financial, reputational and other personal (e.g. health) risks. In fact, some said that the experience of hardship and ‘a few knocks’ in their lives had given them the attitude that failure ‘would not kill them’, made them more robust and given them confidence to take on their ventures.<sup>5</sup>

Our research suggests that there may be some difference in the model of social entrepreneurship pursued by people over 50 compared with their younger counterparts. The majority of the people we interviewed tended towards a ‘philanthropic’ rather than ‘commercial’ model of social entrepreneurship (Figure 1). For example, amongst social entrepreneurs aged 50+ who completed UnLtd’s pilot programme in Bradford, all but one of those interviewed intended to continue their venture, but only three of the 18 planned to generate income. However, these findings need further testing, as there were also social entrepreneurs whose ventures created both social and economic value.

Similarly, while the majority of annual survey respondents of all ages said that they wanted to scale up their ventures to create regional, national or international impact, there may be differences in the models of scaling favoured by older people. Evidence of this came from UnLtd’s Engage programme, which

Figure 1: The Spectrum of Social Entrepreneurial Activity

### Continuum of Options



## CASE STUDY

### Steven McCleary (Northern Ireland)

Stephen runs a DJ workshop with young people from his estate at risk of involvement in dissident paramilitary activity. He has worked with 12 young people who regularly attend the workshops. Their attitude towards Stephen and other adults working in the community has changed, relationships of trust have been established, and within the group the young people have become supportive friends. They have also agreed to organise and run an event to launch the estate community garden, demonstrating their new willingness to serve their community and take responsibility.

Stephen has also set up discos for younger children from the estate at which the young people get to use their DJ skills. The discos have grown in size and popularity, regularly attracting over 100 kids from a range of backgrounds, and have now been replicated on the opposite side of the city. Several single mums now volunteer to help supervise the children, for which they receive £20 from takings on the door.

includes Award Winners of all ages. Those aged 50+ were more interested in a micro-franchising model of growth which encouraged others to replicate their venture, than developing their own business skills to expand their venture themselves. The opposite was true of younger Award Winners.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LATER LIFE?

Social entrepreneurship offers a unique blend of benefits to help counter ageing issues.

Our research showed how social entrepreneurship provided an opportunity for self-fulfilment, personal growth and development, while also contributing to a better quality of life.

### Personal growth and development

Our interviewees challenged perceptions that people in this age group find it difficult, or are unwilling, to learn.<sup>6</sup> Interviewees saw their stage of life as an opportunity to stay involved, keep learning and expand their knowledge and experience.

Award Winners described growth in confidence and improvements in skills in leadership, project planning, money management, communication and networking. The greatest growth was in the skills necessary for community engagement and leadership, such as self confidence, communication and networking.

“A lot of people are thinking of retiring, aren't they? For me it's my self-development. I've been learning all the time.” (Betty, 63)

### Engagement in civic life, tackling isolation

There were several examples of interviewees who had developed spin-off projects from their ventures, suggesting that social entrepreneurship is linked to longer term and diverse involvement in civic life. In two instances, Award Winners attributed their increased participation in political activity to running their venture, since through doing so they had developed a passion and drive to see the needs of their communities recognised and addressed.

Running a social venture also helped the social entrepreneurs to build closer links with their communities.

“(The venture) made me personally reach out more... I had a feeling of isolation definitely and that's less now.” (Judy, 66)

### An earning opportunity

Although personal economic circumstances were not discussed in every case, some of our interviewees explained how social entrepreneurship contributed to their financial position. Whilst some were well provided for and not motivated to use their venture as an earning opportunity, others experienced poverty and saw social entrepreneurship as a means to generate additional income.

6. Marshall, V. & Taylor, P. (2005). 'Restructuring the Lifecourse: Work and Retirement', in Johnson, M. (ed.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 577

Amongst interviewees from UnLtd's ageing programmes, around a third were using social entrepreneurial activity to generate a personal income. Meanwhile UnLtd's annual survey data showed that 44% of respondents aged 48 and over had created at least one full or part-time job during the last financial year.

Our research found that as an earning opportunity, social entrepreneurship could represent:

- ★ A route out of unemployment.
- ★ A route into self-employment.
- ★ An income patch which supplements a pension or part-time employment.
- ★ An income patch which currently sits alongside full time employment in preparation for transitioning into retirement.

### Social entrepreneurship brings something unique

While many of the benefits described could be gained through other forms of civic activity, our research suggests that social entrepreneurship offers additional benefits, such as:

- ★ Flexibility to fit socially beneficial activity around other commitments.
- ★ An opportunity to shape ventures to reflect their individual skill sets and passions.
- ★ A form of transition into, or even alternative to, retirement.
- ★ The potential for providing an income stream.

## CASE STUDIES

### Lynn Jackson (Margate)

Lynn's venture, History Walkers, trains unemployed people in Margate to become historians of their local communities and take the paying public on walks to learn about ordinary as well as public life. Lynn has so far trained six unemployed people over the age of 50 as walk leaders.

Walkers pay £8 each, of which £6 goes to the walk leader and £2 towards running costs of the organisation. Lynn plans to grow her venture by franchising the model to other towns and cities across the UK, so that visitors can find history walkers in any location. As it expands she also hopes to open the training scheme up to unemployed people of all ages.

### Derek McClure (Northern Ireland)

Derek is working to promote social firm models of delivering social care services, particularly for those with learning disabilities and mental health issues. The models he develops, mostly with public sector clients, form a package which they pay his enterprise to deliver. So far, Derek has sold 12 social firm models.

These models reflect Derek's experience placing beneficiaries in an employment context. For example, 'Daisies Cafés' take on people with learning disabilities and mental health issues, initially as volunteers and then as employees. Derek explained how giving people work builds their independence, confidence and sense of purpose, and shifts them from beneficiaries of social security to tax payers contributing to the economy.

On average, one third of those employed through these firms each year move on to mainstream employment. Derek has also seen significant reductions in medication intake by employees and volunteers.

Older social entrepreneurs create positive social and economic impact.

## WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS DO SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AGED 50+ MAKE?

---

### Tackling issues of an ageing society – and much more

Like other age groups, social entrepreneurs over 50 who participated in our research were running ventures with a wide range of objectives. Some examples include:

- ★ Enhancing education of children in disadvantaged communities.
- ★ Preventing violence and anti-social behaviour in their local community.
- ★ Tackling issues faced by their cultural community, such as health deprivation.

Many projects addressed ageing issues in some way, even when this was not an explicit requirement of the UnLtd awards programme. For example, one third of the award winners supported in UnLtd's programme for social entrepreneurs aged 50+ in Bradford chose issues relating to an ageing society for their focus. Including:

- ★ Enabling ageing well by tackling inactivity in the middle aged.
- ★ Providing employment support for people over 50.
- ★ Building intergenerational collaboration to reduce isolation of older people while passing on cultural skills and traditions to younger generations.

At present, there are no examples amongst UnLtd Award Winners supported through the ageing programmes of ventures that aim to improve physical provision for older people, such as home adaptations. This type of venture requires considerable capital outlay, and the UnLtd awards available through these programmes cannot support this.

### Creating social and economic impact

UnLtd's most recent annual survey showed that, during that financial year 2009-10, Award Winners aged 48+ each created on average:

- ★ 1.5 jobs.
- ★ 8 volunteering opportunities.
- ★ 13 training opportunities.

Compared with other age groups, Award Winners aged 48+ operated at a smaller scale. They were more likely than other age groups to report no turnover during the financial year 2009-10, even though most of the projects were still running.

On the other hand, five Award Winners aged 48 and over, reported turnover of £100,000 or more for the financial year 2009-10. This reflects findings mentioned previously that older Award Winners often focus on creating social value rather than economic value, but that there are clear exceptions to this tendency.

## ARE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AGED 50+ MISSING OR HIDDEN?

The evidence presented so far suggests that people over the age of 50, and particularly those aged 60+, are under-represented amongst social entrepreneurs. Is this really the case? Maybe they just don't identify with this label? It is possible social entrepreneurs over 50 are hidden, as well as missing.

Our research found that, overall, Award Winners had very little awareness or knowledge of social enterprise or entrepreneurship before hearing about the opportunity for an award from an UnLtd staff member.

Even after receiving an UnLtd award, the social entrepreneurs we interviewed used a wide range of terms to refer to themselves and their work, but few called themselves 'social entrepreneurs'. Reasons for not using the term included not being sure of its meaning; concerns regarding their ability to live up to the 'expectations' of being a social entrepreneur; or feeling that it was not compatible with their mission. For example, some felt 'social entrepreneurship' implied the need to make money from the project. Others felt it meant the contrary, and that they were not 'allowed' to generate an income. Another interviewee

assumed that social entrepreneurship meant individual rather than group or mutual efforts.

These insights point to the following possibilities:

- ★ The existence of 'hidden' social entrepreneurs, who are not aware of, or do not readily identify with the label or the language of social entrepreneurship.
- ★ The existence of potential social entrepreneurs with great skills and ideas, who do not think that they meet the 'criteria' for being a social entrepreneur.

### What can help?

We found that applicants aged 50 and over face three common barriers:

- ★ Lack of understanding about social entrepreneurship.
- ★ Wariness about the credibility of the offer.
- ★ Lack of confidence in their own ability to take up the offer.

Evaluation of UnLtd's current programmes has identified several strategies that are effective in addressing these barriers, including pre-application support, targeted outreach, marketing materials and most importantly, tailored face to face engagement. For example, UnLtd Development Managers (staff who directly support Award Winners) reported the need for repeated meetings and phone conversations to build trust and confidence to apply for an award.

"(When the UnLtd) Development Manager took me through, and explained what it was all about, I struggled a bit, I couldn't believe that somebody would give me an award just to go off and do an idea that I had – I was amazed by it." (Linda, 55)

A real opportunity for the sector to promote, develop and support social entrepreneurs over 50.

## SUPPORTING AND GROWING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LATER LIFE

---

Our research has several implications for those working to support social entrepreneurship within the context of an ageing society.

### Older social entrepreneurs can be part of the solution

Social entrepreneurs aged 50+ do not solely focus their ventures towards tackling issues of an ageing society. Nevertheless, there are many examples amongst the ventures pursued by older people of innovative approaches to addressing issues related to ageing and there is evidence, therefore, that social entrepreneurs have a role to play in generating solutions for an ageing society.

### There is untapped potential

We've seen that social entrepreneurial activity can benefit older people personally, and create social value. But participation is proportionally low amongst over 50s, and there is a steep decline in participation amongst people aged 60+. Social entrepreneurs aged 50+ are likely to be hidden as well as missing. However, there appears to be great potential to grow participation in social entrepreneurship amongst these age groups.

### Understand different motivations, ambitions and roles

The aspirations and support needs of social entrepreneurs in later life seem to vary with their economic and social context, and such contexts will not be the same for 50-year-olds as 65-year-olds, or those over 70. Social entrepreneurship can play a range of different roles in older people's lives.

Deeper understanding of what these factors are and how they change with age, would help organisations develop appropriate approaches to working with them.

### Develop appropriate support offers

Our evidence so far suggests:

- ★ The way opportunities are presented and communicated is important. There is a need to demystify what it means to be a social entrepreneur, communicate that it is something people of all ages can do and show the different forms it can take.
- ★ Working directly with older people to generate ideas and explain how social entrepreneurship can work could help to grow participation. For UnLtd, this means putting resources into outreach, and pre-application support and guidance.

*7. Social Entrepreneurs who have been running a project for over 42 months.*

## THE RESEARCH

---

This paper builds on research carried out as part of an ESRC CASE studentship in partnership with Middlesex University, looking at older social entrepreneurs, and evaluations of UnLtd programmes. It draws on four sources of data:

- ★ 20 in-depth interviews with established social entrepreneurs over 50,<sup>7</sup> most of whom have run projects supported by UnLtd.
- ★ Ongoing evaluation of UnLtd's ageing-focused programmes, which at the time of writing has included 34 in-depth interviews with early stage social entrepreneurs.
- ★ A quantitative database of 5,426 UnLtd award winners across all ages, including 982 social entrepreneurs aged 50+.
- ★ Existing UnLtd data on social entrepreneurs of all age groups.

“We're the ones who know, we're experienced. If they throw away all the experience we have, the society will lose a lot.” (Lara, 63)

## ABOUT UNLTD

---

UnLtd's mission is to reach out and unleash the energies of people who can transform the world in which they live. We call these people social entrepreneurs. We provide financial and non-financial start-up support to nascent social entrepreneurs and development support to a smaller number of social entrepreneurs to scale up their social venture.

UnLtd's current or recent programmes with an ageing focus include:

- ★ The Bradford Older People's Pilot programme – this programme, now finished, supported 18 social entrepreneurs aged 50+.
- ★ The Engage England and Wales programme, which is supporting 30 social entrepreneurs aged 16+, whose projects address issues of an ageing society.
- ★ The Ignite programme in Northern Ireland, which will ultimately support over 100 social entrepreneurs aged 50+.

In addition, UnLtd's core awards programmes and many of our externally funded programmes are open to applicants of all age groups.

**Authors:** Bianca Stumbitz, Hannah McDowall and Madeleine Gabriel

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank Professor Fergus Lyon and colleagues at Middlesex University, the social entrepreneurs and UnLtd Development Managers who contributed to and supported us in our research.

PUBLISHED - JANUARY 2012

UnLtd Research 

UnLtd is the trading name for The Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs, a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No. 4180639.  
Registered Office: 123 Whitecross Street, London EC1Y 8JJ. Registered Charity No. 1090393