



POSITIVE
Ageing in London

AWOC15 - The Ageing Without Children Conference: 'But Who Will Look After You When You're Old?'



26th January 2015

nalisa Donno and Maria-Letizia Tanturri shows that: “Male lifetime childlessness is highest (above 23% among men aged 45–49) in Finland, Italy, Germany, the UK and the Czech Republic.”

- Norway which is one of the few countries to record data on childless/free men has identified that the percentage of childless/free men has risen from 14% in 1985 to 23% in 2013.
- The Institute of Public Policy Research estimates that by 2030 there will be 2 million people aged over 65 without adult children, up from 1.2 million in 2012. Approximately 230,000 of them will be in need of more than 20 hours of care a week and will have no informal support.
- Recent data coming out of Holland from the work of Professor Renske Keizer, Family Sociologist at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, estimates that of women who have no children, 10% of them have chosen this (‘childfree’), 10% are medically infertile and 80% are childless by circumstances not of their choice.

The role of the family in providing care

It is not possible to discuss the issue of people ageing without children without looking at the role of family carers in providing support to older people.

It has been suggested that AWOC makes the assumption that older people with children are, and should be, cared for by them. We have said before, and would like to restate, that we are not saying that at all. What we are doing is reflecting the reality as born out by all the evidence: the vast majority of older people *are* currently supported by their adult children when they need care in later life. Our society continues to very much underestimate or be in denial about the amount of support families give to their parents or grandparents.

It is important that we acknowledge that the reality of ageing in the UK is that adult children do step in to assist their parents as they age (even if it’s the bare minimum). Whilst it may not be the case that

children become involved in their parents personal care needs, most are involved at some point with helping their parents make decisions about finances and end-of-life decisions, supporting them to access the services they need, choosing and supervising care provision, driving them to and from appointments and social events, organising their last move, helping them with technology and many, many aspects of living that may become harder as we get older. More importantly, the State assumes family support is the default position and plans policy accordingly. As long as the state assumes large levels of family support, there will not be the investment in care, health, housing and other services that are required.

Claire McNeil from the Institute of Public Policy Research presented their Generation Strain report to the conference (the report can be found from the AWOC website). The report highlights the growing gap between older people needing care and support and the ability of families to provide it for a variety of reasons.

- Most care for older people is not provided by the state or private agencies but by family members, at an estimated value of £55 billion annually. However, as the baby boomer generation ages, a growing ‘family care gap’ will develop as the number of older people in need of care outstrips the number of adult children able to provide it. This is expected to occur for the first time in 2017. In Britain, just as elsewhere in Europe, unpaid or informal care from families or friends is a vital part of the long-term care system, without which there would be an unsustainable burden upon formal services (Kraus et al 2011). Among those receiving care, the most important source of informal care at present is care by adult children.

- By 2032, 1.1 million older people in England will need care from their families – an increase of 60 per cent – but the number of people able to care for older parents will have increased by only 20 per cent, creating a shortfall in our collective capacity to care for older generations (Pickard 2013).

- A series of public bodies including the House of Lords Select Committee on Public Service and Demographic Change, The Equality and Human Rights

Commission and the National Audit Office have issued warnings of increasing pressures on the system and the consequences for society if they are not faced up to.

- If the supply of informal care does not meet rising needs for care then this is likely to mean an increase in demand for formal care and an associated increase in long-term care expenditure, at a time when net spending on older people's social care is falling (Audit Commission 2012).
- New generations of older people are less likely to have children. The number of people aged 65–74 without children to care for them in old age will almost double before the end of the next decade. By 2030, more than a million people in this age group will not have children, compared to 580,000 in 2012. Overall, there are expected to be 2 million older people without children by 2030 and, while not all will need help, this represents a significant proportion of the older population.
- Children are far more likely to live away from their parents, sometimes as a result of labour market forces that have constrained the location choices of some workers (Grundy and Shelton 2001 cited in RVS 2013). Those who live further away are less likely to maintain regular contact with ageing parents (RVS 2013).
- Communities have been 'hollowed out', with the private and public sector institutions that have traditionally served as social hubs – local pubs, post offices and libraries – facing funding cuts or closing down (Bazalgette et al 2012).

Key themes

1. People ageing without children are unrecognised in policy on ageing

The issue of people ageing without children has been largely absent from debates and discussions about ageing. A plethora of reports (e.g. 'Don't Stop Me Now' from the Audit Commission, 'That Little Bit of Help' from Joseph Rowntree and Independent Age 2013, 'Building a Society for All Ages') have

been published but none reference the issue of people ageing without children despite often talking at length about demographic change. If it is mentioned (e.g. in *Housing Choices and Aspirations of Older People* published in 2008) it is very briefly at the end of a much longer section of family relationships.

"Of course not everyone has close family relationships, or close family living nearby. Again the absence of family tended to influence people's housing decisions. People preferred to stay in a place where their non-family relationships were established, or where services and facilities were convenient, or in some cases had moved to sheltered accommodation."

Lord Filkin's seminal 2013 report 'Ready for Ageing?' does raise the issue.

"There should be a sharing of responsibility for social care between individuals and the state. The implementation of the Dilnot Commission proposals makes this sharing explicit and puts a limit on individual risk. But many people do not have families who can provide care, nor the money to buy it, and cannot cope without care - and this situation will worsen as demand rises (see Annex 10). If the neglect of social care continues and these people are not properly supported in the community, they will end up with more severe needs, or will suffer crises and go into hospital, driving up healthcare costs."

However, the Government does not appear to have taken the issue on board.

Indeed, the line from the current Government has been to place greater emphasis and expectations that children will and should care for their parents.

"In those countries, when living alone is no longer possible, residential care is a last rather than a first option. And the social contract is stronger because as children see how their own grandparents are looked after, they develop higher expectations of how they too will be treated when they get old. If we are to tackle the challenge of an ageing society, we must learn from this – and restore and rein-vigorate the social contract between generations.

And uncomfortable though it is to say it, it will only start with changes in the way we personally treat our own parents and grandparents.” Jeremy Hunt, Health Secretary in Speech to National Children and Adults Services Conference 2013.

“Our society has often left too many people who are the responsibility of the public services on their own in later life, even though they have family alive and other people you would have thought would care. We have gone through a period where the sense of a wider family responsibility has been much less important than it has in the past. I think we need to learn better the lessons of many other cultures and communities, of which the Asian and African communities are noticeable. They understand the obligation to look after your family to the end.” Simon Hughes, Justice Minister in Interview with The Telegraph April 2014.

This rhetoric coming as it does against a background of savage cuts to social care and an ageist society, ignores the fact that at least 20%, and possibly as many as 25%, of people will age without children. It presumes that there will be a family around to provide support and takes no account of people without children at all.



Jody Day during her talk

2. Affected by multiple taboos

People ageing without children are affected by multiple taboos; ageism, sexism and homophobia.

Society in the UK remains ageist; derogatory comments and assumptions about older people pass

by without remark and little censure. Older people are seen as a burden on society, lacking value or importance.

Because of the combined prejudices against people without children (whether chosen or not) and ageing, there is a very large social taboo that makes it difficult to talk about the subject.

Jody Day talked about ‘bingos’ as they are known in the childless/childfree world – these are predictable and often insulting statements made in response to attempting to dialogue about childlessness, and ageing. They are called ‘bingos’ because on a really bad day/week you can get a ‘full house’.

Bingos might include:

- “It’s your own fault you’re childless, you can’t moan about it now.” (A common one aimed at the childfree and others that people ‘presume’ have chosen their childlessness.)
- “You should have thought about that when you were gallivanting around for your career!” (Not knowing about infertility, lack of partner, etc and also ascribing any woman with a ‘job’ as a ‘career woman’.)
- “If you’d really wanted children, you would have tried harder.” (To someone with multiple failed IVF cycles or perhaps a genetic condition that made motherhood unwise.)
- “Well, I didn’t have my children so they could take care of me when I got old!” (Contradicting the idea that childless/free people should have done so just so they could.)
- “I don’t expect my children to look after me when I’m old.” (Though when challenged by asking what plans they have in place to ensure their children don’t have to, these people are often strangely quiet! As well as denying the reality that children often have to look after the parents when they age.)
- “Well, what have you got to worry about, you’ve got loads of money that you’ve saved from not bringing up children!” (Unaware of the cost of living crisis for the many who live alone and don’t

get family tax breaks... let alone fertility treatment debt.)

- “You can all just live together when you’re old.” (As if that’s what they’d like for themselves and not taking into consideration the needs of the individual nor later life care needs).
- “You can’t expect the state support now, you should have thought of that earlier!” (Not considering that childless/free adults have paid taxes their entire working life to support the infrastructure used by families such as education, health, roads, leisure, sports, etc.)

There isn’t a single positive word in the English language to describe a woman without children (and not connected to children such as grandmother, godmother or aunt) past her childbearing years. Older people are routinely referred to as grannies or granddads with no thought as to whether that is actually the case.

For men, there are no statistics kept by the Office for National Statistics on fatherhood, although other sources, see above, estimate it at about the same as for women at 20%. It is probably greater for men due to those who father children with different partners. Therefore, we find it interesting that it has been much harder to get the media to include men in the discussion on ageing without children, even though AWOC is about all adults. They default to it being a ‘wom-en’s issue’, the assumption being that either men don’t mind getting old without children or falling back on the idea that men can have children what-ever their age, even though research suggests that is not the case. In the interview that Kirsty, Jody and Robin gave to BBC TV Breakfast Time (watch clip [here](#), segment starts around 1m 35s), Robin’s verbal contribution was entirely cut from the broadcast, although his left ear did feature!

3. Intergenerational relationships are key – but how to have these when disconnected from other generations because not a parent?

The importance of forging relationships with people

across generations was raised many times, not just in terms of help and support in later life but in feeling and being part of a wider community. One of the appeals of co-housing for people ageing without children was that it wasn’t limited to just older people but could include people of all ages.

However, the difficulties of creating such relationships in a society that is often suspicious of older people, especially older men, without children was discussed. Robin Hadley’s research had identified that men particularly missed out on intergenerational relationships.



Robin Hadley talking about men ageing without children

“When couples get older, they have a whole raft of experiences, you know, first day at school - if you haven’t had those experiences you’re shut out along with everything else.”

“People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn’t got kids in middle age is.”

“I don’t want people saying, ‘Oh, he’s a bit of a paedophile, this one, looking at the kids.’”

Quotes taken from **Robin Hadley’s** PhD research

Jody Day’s organisation Gateway Women has had

success in creating ‘meet up’ groups across the UK & Ireland (around 60 at last count) and also a lively and very supportive online community. However, the next challenge would be to turn these into hyper-local, intergenerational support networks for childless/free women. Something similar, or something integrated could also support childless/free men.

But it’s not just about ‘support’ – childless/free adults have a great deal to offer to each other and to the wider community – something from which the very strained ‘nuclear family’ structure could gain a great deal if a way could be created to open the ‘nucleus’.

4. Learning from LGBT community

David Mitchell and **Vito Ward**, volunteer ambassadors for Opening Doors London, were interviewed by **Derek Freeman**, also of the project (www.openingdoorslondon.org.uk) about the experiences of LGBT people. For people from the LGBT community, the possibility of children is often a remote one; some 90% of LGBT people will age without children. Both David and Vito talked about how they and other LGBT people had many intergenerational friendships and contacts. Being part of an excluded group in society brought them together on other ways and they had found their own solutions.



From left to right: Vito Ward, David Mitchell and Derek Freeman

David – being with children is a natural part of life

with family and friends. I don’t wish that I had my own children to ‘blackmail’ into looking after me, although when I was younger I did want to have children. Ageing is generally not good: your appearance and mobility suffer, I don’t recommend it!

Vito – our generation of gay and lesbian people lived through persecution and criminalisation and this influences how we see services, carers etc. Most care workers are heterosexual. Some older lesbians got married in order to have children, and some then had their children taken from them when they were revealed to be lesbian. Older gay men and lesbians will have different perspectives on the issue of ageing without children.

David talked about his intergenerational ‘chosen family’ which was extremely important to him though he wouldn’t expect them to provide personal care for him.

Vito commented that her network is because of her ‘secret life’ as a younger lesbian and then losing her career and a lot of her personal life because she was found out. It made her decide never to lie about herself again! She has a great peer network but this won’t help her when she gets older as her network will be getting older too.

Both commented they had a definite fear that as they aged, they might be forced ‘back into the closet’ as services for older people are often blind to the needs of older LGBT people.

5. Exclusion of men

As discussed above, men have been very much sidelined as the profile of the issue of people ageing without children grows. Statistical information is not kept on fatherhood and so we simply don’t know how many men ageing without children there are.

Men are ageing without children for as many diverse reasons as women; they may have chosen to be childfree, their partners may be unable to have children and their choices are affected by many things including upbringing, class, employment, educational attainment, timing of relationships in

their life course, entry and exit into employment, attitudes to women and sexual orientation all play a part.

It has already been identified that older men are more at risk of poor health, isolation, excessive drinking and smoking and depression than older women. Older men without children are even more at risk of the above.

In addition, the ability to father children is seen as mark of being 'a man'. Men who do not have children can perceive themselves as being lesser men or be perceived as being so by others.

The narrative around men aging without children also contains its own bingos:

"Lucky escape mate!" – implying that the idea of being without children is an enviable state to most men. However, the poor health of men ageing without children shows this is far from the case.

"Charlie Chaplin was fathering them into his 80s." Implying that men can go on fathering children until well into old age. Research shows that is definitely the exception rather than the norm.

6. Fear of abuse and exploitation

Many people on the day spoke of their fears of being ill-treated when they were old and had no one to speak for them. A particular fear was developing dementia; people talked of concerns of financial abuse, of neglect and of being unable to express their views and of not being listened to. It was noted by several participants that people ageing without children had not featured in any of the campaigns around dementia which seemed very focused on helping families but did not appear to address the issue of those without families.

7. What about those who were parents but who are now ageing without children?

These groups include those who've had children but who have since died, are absent (perhaps in another country, an issue for BAMER communities) or are now estranged from their children. Where do they fit into 'ageing without children' demo-

graphic?

What does ageing without children actually mean? Does it mean only those who have never had children for whatever reason? Or does it include those who had children but those children were no longer part of their lives? For people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities whose children often live in other countries, there was a particular concern to be seen as people needing support as part of the AWOC agenda.

However, it was also pointed out that people who have never had children do face additional issues as raised above in terms of taboos and exclusion.

Action Points

It was agreed by everyone that solutions to the issue needed to come from people ageing without children themselves and some key points for action were identified:

- ***Campaigning to ensure policy and planning on ageing takes into account of people ageing without children***

Both national and local policy and planning on ageing is not taking the issue of ageing without children into account. AWOC should campaign on a local, regional and national level to ensure that politicians, local authorities, the NHS, housing associations and the wider community are aware of the growing numbers of people ageing without children and the impact this will have on services.

- ***We need to identify where people ageing without children are geographically located***

Although we have some statistics for the UK as a whole, we have no breakdown by local authority area of where people ageing without children are. We don't know if there are some local authority areas where there may be significant populations of people ageing without children where work should be focused.

- **Information on men ageing without children**

It was suggested that AWOC should try and get a question on the next census about people ageing without children so that some better data could be available on the numbers of men affected. This would also feed into the point above.

- **Dementia**

The work of the Dementia Friends campaign was noted and widely praised. However it was felt that people ageing without children who have dementia have been overlooked in the discussions around tackling dementia and its impact on people and society. AWOC should work with organisations like Alzheimer's Society to ensure people ageing without children are not forgotten.

- **Everyone needs to be encouraged to plan for their old age**

As discussed earlier, a common response AWOC receives from people with children is that they didn't have their children to look after them nor do they expect them to do so. However, all the evidence we have shows that for people with children, the vast majority will end up being supported by them. Everyone, whether they have children or not, should be encouraged to make plans for their later life so that even if they do have children, they have taken steps to ensure their children won't have to provide care.

- **A need for advocacy**

Many people expressed the need for advocacy services to help people ageing without children to speak up for themselves or to advocate on their behalf as they age. Many have had experiences supporting elderly relatives themselves and have seen how much advocacy work is needed to get services and support in place.

- **Existing projects and ideas need to be explored**

There are a number of existing projects and ser-

vices that would be especially beneficial to people ageing without children, these include:

- Surrogate grandparents
- Intergenerational projects
- Co-housing
- Shared lives
- Community volunteer networks
- Practical support with housework shopping and gardening

However their existence is not uniform across the country, many people are not aware of them and their funding is precarious. AWOC should work with providers to help develop ways of sustaining and scaling up existing services as well as looking at new approaches e.g. technology, robotics.

- **Challenging assumptions**

The many assumptions around ageing without children, and childless/childfree people in general needs to be challenged, unpacked and refuted with both data and personal stories. For example, assumptions about finances, the reasons they are childless or childfree, their 'selfishness' or their vast and supportive social group. Childless/childfree adults are not a homogenous group, just as 'parents' are not.

Thanks To

Age UK London, Beth Johnson Foundation, all the speakers on the day and finally the audience who listened, shared and participated.



A conference delegate in discussion

Appendix 1

Conference Agenda

Ageing Without Children 'But who will look after you when you're old?'

Monday 26th January 2015
Toynbee Hall, 28 Commercial Street, London, E1 6LS

10.30	Welcome and introduction	Mervyn Eastman
10.45	Background to AWOC	Kirsty Woodard
11.00	“Who’s afraid of the crazy cat lady?”	Jody Day
11.20	Men ageing without children	Robin Hadley
11.40	GBT perspective	David Mitchell / Vito Ward
12.00	Panel Q&A	
12.30	Lunch	
1.00	'Generation strain'	Claire McNeil
1.20	Academic perspective on AWOC	Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Middlesex University
1.40	Panel Q&A	
2.00	Discussion groups	
2.45	Round up and close	
3.00	Talk & Share session for those who wish to participate	

The Speakers

Dr Mervyn Eastman

Mervyn trained in Social Work (CQSW) in the early 70's and has worked in all fields of social care, much of it specializing in issues, services and policies related to age and ageing. He Co-Founded and is now President of the Practitioner Alliance for Safeguarding Adults (founded 1997) and following retirement as a Director of Social Services for a North London Borough, became Director of the Government Programme, Better Government for Older People (BGOP) a post held until 2009. Change AGENTS Network (a Charitable Society for the Ben-efit of the Community and a form of Co-operative) was co-founded out of BGOP in 2009 and seeks to change how we think about Older People. Has authored numerous publications on a range of issues related to public services and Older People, and was the first person (back in 1984) outside the USA to publish a book on the then marginalized issue of Elder Abuse in the domestic setting.

E: mervyn.changeagent@gmail.com
Twitter: [@mervChangeAGEnt](https://twitter.com/mervChangeAGEnt)
W: www.pailondon.org.uk

Kirsty Woodard

Kirsty has 20 years experience of working in the field of ageing. She began in 1994 running an advocacy and advice service for older people before becoming the manager of Well & Wise healthy living centre for older people in Camden, a partnership of 13 member organisations in Camden. She went on to advise Age UK on social care policy and service development models. She has been a freelance consultant and trainer since 2007 working with third sector organisations, mostly on redesigning services for older people and making them more sustainable. She is also in the process of setting up a social enterprise called manAGEing through sport to help tackle loneliness and unwanted isolation in older men. She is married and identifies as childless.

E: kirsty@barkerandwoodardconsulting.co.uk
Twitter: [@smalltent](https://twitter.com/smalltent)
W: www.barkerandwoodardconsulting.co.uk

Jody Day

Jody is the Founder of Gateway Women, the global friendship and support network for childless-by-circumstance women. Gateway Women hosts workshops, social events and retreats for childless-by-circumstance women as well as a private online community, recently reviewed as the best in the English-speaking world. Jody has also created the 'Wisdom Circle' specifically for older childless women now feeling isolated and marginalised because of not being grandmothers. Jody is the author of the Amazon #1 bestseller *Rocking the Life Unexpected: 12 Weeks to Your Plan B for a Meaningful and Fulfilling Life Without Children* (2013) which is spreading the passionate and compassionate philosophy of Gateway Women around the world. It includes a section on attitudes towards age-ing without children. Jody regularly appears in the media and is becoming known as the 'voice of the childless generation'.

E: jody@gateway-women.com
Twitter: [@gatewaywomen](https://twitter.com/gatewaywomen)
W: www.gateway-women.com

Robin Hadley

Robin's previous career included roles as a deputy technical manager and scientific and technical photographer for The University of Manchester. Robin changed careers and his training as a counsellor led him to research into the desire for fatherhood in involuntarily childless men as part of his MA at The University of Manchester. He then followed this up with a self-funded MSc exploring the levels of broodiness in females and males, parents and non-parents. Both these pieces of research have been used as the basis of a play, 'The Broody Boys', by the Australian actor/writer/producer Alan Hopgood. Robin is now undertaking a PhD, which explores the lives of involuntarily childless older men. Dr Mo Ray and Dr Emma Head supervise Robin. Robin is a student member of both the British Sociological Association and the British Society for Gerontology.

E: r.a.hadley@keele.ac.uk

Twitter@RobinHadley1
W: www.wantedtobeadad.com

Vito Ward and David Mitchell

Opening Doors London (ODL) aims to specifically meet the needs of older LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) communities and is aimed at men and women who identify as LGBT and are over the age of 50. We have members from across London and beyond.

The aims of the Project are to develop services for the older LGBT community that combat isolation through the provision of:

- regular social activities
- a dedicated signposting and referral service
- a befriending service

The project also campaigns with service user Ambassadors to ensure OLGBT voices are heard by policy makers and to provide information, guidance and staff training for statutory and voluntary sector service providers, in order to help them develop appropriate and inclusive services for older LGBT people

For more information contact:
Stacey Halls, Project Manager & Campaigns Officer
Tel: 020 7239 0400
E: Stacey.halls@ageukcamden.org.uk

Clare McNeil

Clare is a Senior Research Fellow at IPPR. Prior to that she worked with ADDACTION, British Red Cross and the Young Foundation. Clare is the author of several publications including Generation Strain, Fair Shares: shifting the balance of power in the workplace, and Rethinking Intergenerational. Clare is currently on secondment to the Cabinet Office.

Trish Hafford-Letchfield

Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Middlesex University
Trish joined Middlesex in 2008 and is a qualified nurse, social worker, manager and educator and has research interests in ageing, educational gerontology, leadership and management, and sexuality in social work. Trish is a teaching fellow and has developed a number of projects using the arts in professional education and practice

E: p.hafford-letchfield@mdx.ac.uk
W: <http://teachingfellows.middlesex.wikispaces.net/Trish+Hafford-Letchfield>

Nicky Lambert

Nicky joined Middlesex University in 2013, she is the Director of Programmes for Pre-registration Mental Health Nursing and an Associate Professor for Practice. She is registered as a Specialist Practitioner with the NMC and is a Teaching Fellow with the HEA. She has worked across mental health services including PICUs, emergency clinic, acute wards and with Crisis teams. Nicky has worked in services ranging from the Maudsley hospital to Sydney as a mental health nurse, she has also nursed, taught, and managed in Brighton and Bristol. She trained as a PMVA instructor and has worked as a Consultant and Visiting lecturer working for a number of universities, councils and charities advising on managing aggression, taking team days and supporting learning and development. She worked as a Ward Manager and a Practice Development Facilitator in Sussex and was a Senior Lecturer, Programme Manager and Practice Education Facilitator in Bristol.

Nicky works with the CQC as a Specialist Advisor and is a Trustee for West Hampstead Women's centre.

E: n.lambert@mdx.ac.uk
Twitter: @niadla

01.04.15



E: ageingwithoutchildren@gmail.com
W: www.awoc.org
Twitter: [@awocuk](https://twitter.com/awocuk)
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E: [c/o GDeuchars@AgeUKLondon.org.uk](mailto:c/oGDeuchars@AgeUKLondon.org.uk)
W: www.pailondon.org.uk
Twitter: [@pailondon](https://twitter.com/pailondon)