



# Improving accessibility for older people – Investing in a valuable asset



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contribution of older people to society, the role of mobility in the quality of life of older people, and whether making it easier for older people to travel would enable them to increase their contribution. The paper commences by considering evidence on the economic value of older people to society. This shows that older people make a net contribution through expenditure in shops, employment, voluntary work, childcare and taxation which exceeds their cost to the taxpayer. The assumptions underlying the calculations are examined and found to be robust. The patterns of travel of older people are examined and found to be consistent with the estimates of the economic contribution of older people. Mobility provides many intrinsic benefits for older people, facilitating independence, reducing social isolation and physical activity. Evidence from the examples of the ability to drive and providing free bus travel is considered. Then the contribution of older people to society in future is examined and how travel contributes to this. It is shown that changes in older people's mobility would affect their contribution to society. Ways in which the mobility of older people could be increased are identified.

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## 1. Introduction

Many older people feel undervalued by society according to a recent report published by the Royal Voluntary Service based on a study designed to improve older people's well being and increase their involvement in society (Hoben et al., 2013). Various causes were found including negative perceptions and labelling of older people. The traditional services being provided to older people project an image that discourages their use by some potential users, particularly those who do not wish to be identified as old or those who wish to mix with people of all ages. These findings reflect common attitudes in society, with older people seen as a burden on society, receiving money and not contributing much.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the contributions of older people to society and whether it can be increased by improving accessibility. Because the ageing process is continuous, with many people finding their abilities to travel deteriorating gradually over time rather than going through a sudden transition as happens with some disabilities, it is not appropriate to define the older population exactly. Sources of evidence about older people use various cut-off points so various figures will be used in this paper.

## 2. The contribution of older people to society

This topic is very timely because older people are becoming a larger proportion of society as longevity increases. As Table 1 shows, one hundred years ago, 5.2% of the population in England and Wales was aged 65 or over. By 2011 this had increased to 16.5%. Over the same period, the number of people aged 40–64 also grew while the number of younger people decreased. If these trends continue, there will be a growing elderly population and a decreasing population in the age groups that have traditionally been economically active. For these reasons, in common with many countries, Britain is increasing the age at which people receive their state pensions. This means that more people will be retaining their jobs beyond the age at which people retired in the past. Some people may welcome this as an opportunity to continue earning income and enjoying the workplace culture while others may resent having to work beyond an age at which those of previous generations could enjoy a more leisurely lifestyle. Either way, there needs to be adequate transport: either to ensure that they can

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**Table 1**  
Population by broad age groups, 1911–2011, England and Wales (%).  
Source: Office for National Statistics (2011).

Age	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
0–14	30.6	27.7	23.8	23.0	22.1	23.0	23.7	20.5	19.0	18.8	17.6
15–39	41.8	40.0	40.4	37.7	35.0	32.9	32.6	36.3	36.2	34.5	33.2
40–64	22.3	26.2	28.3	30.1	31.8	32.3	30.3	28.2	28.9	30.8	32.7
65+	5.2	6.0	7.4	9.2	10.9	11.9	13.3	15.0	15.9	15.9	16.5

reach work or to enable them to have fulfilling lives to address the issues identified by [Hoben et al. \(2013\)](#) mentioned at the beginning of [Section 1](#).

All members of society, including older ones, have inherent value, for example, in terms of creativity and relationships. An important element is the economic contribution to society. The value of this for people aged 65 and over in the United Kingdom has been estimated in a study commissioned by the [WRVS \(2011\)](#) (now the Royal Voluntary Service). An economic model was constructed using the following headings for people aged 65 and older:

*Costs to society:*

- State pension payments.
- Age-related welfare payments.
- Age-related health care.

*Contributions to society:*

- Expenditure including the wider value through multiplier effects.
- Social care.
- Childcare.
- Volunteering.
- Bequests to voluntary sector organisations.
- Gifts and donations.
- Savings for grandchildren and asset transfers to family members.
- Employment taxes paid by employees.
- Capital gains tax.
- Inheritance tax.
- Taxes on expenditure.
- Other taxes.

Some of the contributions to society involve travel. Employment taxes are paid on earned income and so are associated with travel to work. Expenditure and the taxes on it, plus the multiplier effects through the economy, are associated with travel to shops and leisure facilities. The report distinguishes between formal and informal volunteering. The former is done on behalf of voluntary sector and community-based organisations and is associated with travel to the various locations where the voluntary work is performed such as hospitals and charity shops. The latter is effort expended on behalf of friends or neighbours, not involving any third-party organisations, and so is likely to involve travel to their friends' homes or other locations where shared activities occur. Older people often provide childcare for their grandchildren, sometimes enabling the children's parents to be employed by escorting the grandchildren to and from school and looking after them whilst their parents are working. This generates trips between the grandparents' homes and the grandchildren's schools and homes. Social care probably generates few trips because it generally means an elderly person looking after a spouse or partner at home.

The [WRVS \(2011\)](#) report estimated the total contribution of older people to society in monetary units. [Table 2](#) shows the costs and the contributions, with the contributions that involve travel shown explicitly. It can be seen that older people contribute more to society than they receive from it with a ratio of contributions to costs of 1.29 to 1. This is not necessarily what would be expected so it is worth considering the assumptions made in estimating the figures.

The costs of pensions, welfare payments and health care are based on statistics produced by the British Government, with assumptions made about the proportions of total welfare payments and health care spent on older people. The former is based on figures issued by the British Government department responsible for welfare payments (Department of Work and Pensions), and the latter on figures produced by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and so are likely to be reliable.

The expenditure figures are based on the statistics in Family Spending based on the Living Costs and Food Survey ([Office for National Statistics, 2013a](#)) which includes the age of the reference person in a household, so the expenditure by households where the reference person was 65 or over was used. Some people over the age of 65 may live in households where the reference person is younger than this, and some younger people may live in households with a reference person aged 65 or over, but this seems unlikely to cause a large error. The appropriate taxation rates were applied to the figures to estimate the taxes on expenditure. The value of voluntary work by older people was estimated from a survey of 2100 people aged 65 and over carried out by the WRVS from which the time spent on voluntary work was estimated. The voluntary activities were grouped according to value, ranging from basic services such as cleaning and gardening to higher value services such as organising events and attending committees, and assumed shadow prices applied. The lowest figure was the national minimum wage and the highest about four times this. Since many older people have years of experience and could, if employed, earn more than this, these figures seem to be fairly conservative. However, the Chief Economist at [Age UK \(2014\)](#) has also

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