

## A Strategy for Scotland with an Ageing Population: Qualitative Research with the General Public

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To feed into its *Strategy for a Scotland with an Ageing Population*, titled: “All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population” (published March 2007), the Scottish Executive commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct qualitative research among the general public. Seven focus groups and 10 depth interviews were undertaken between 9th May and 17th May 2006. The research focused on attitudes towards the ageing population; aspirations for old age and perceived barriers to fulfilling those aspirations; and perceptions of change needed to support an ageing population.

### Main findings

- Most participants were aware of the fact that Scotland’s population is ageing. However, they were less likely to appreciate the scale of the issue and the potential implications. There needs to be a shift in understanding before they will take action to better prepare for their own old age or accept the need for less popular government measures.
- Participants defined ‘older people’ as people aged at least 60 and strongly equated ‘older’ with being retired. Discussions therefore focused on this age group and on retirement – a somewhat narrower focus than that of the Strategy.
- Old age, or retirement, was primarily seen as a time free of work and family commitments – leisure time when you could go on holidays, spend time with grandchildren and pursue hobbies.
- The quality of this leisure time was dependent on three main factors, in order of importance: health, money and social contact.
- Participants were divided on how well society treats older people. Older participants themselves, however, generally felt that they were treated very well and the barriers they perceived related mainly to health rather than the negative attitudes of society.
- Across all age groups, a youth-centred orientation was evident: it was felt that whatever changes were made to improve life for older people or remove barriers, these should not be at the expense of younger people who should take precedence.
- Beyond some people planning their pension, participants were not typically planning for their old age at all. This was because their planning horizons tended to be short or medium term but also because the inevitability of ageing appeared to mitigate against the need to plan for it; the fact that it is a very gradual process meant it was easy to put off action to another day; the lack of guarantees about planning for health or financial security; and the fact that ageing was too “depressing” and “scary” to think about.

## Introduction

The Scottish Executive has developed *A Strategy for a Scotland with an Ageing Population* titled: “All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population” to address the challenges and opportunities posed by Scotland’s ageing population. To feed into the Strategy, Ipsos MORI was commissioned to undertake qualitative research among the general public.

Seven focus groups and 10 depth interviews were undertaken in both urban and rural locations. The participants were of varying age, gender and socio-economic status. One group was with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender participants, one was with Asian participants, five depth interviews were with disabled people and five were with people aged 85+.

## Expectations and planning

Old age, or retirement, was primarily seen as a time free of work and family commitments – leisure time when you could go on holidays, spend time with grandchildren and pursue hobbies. The quality of this leisure time was dependent on three main factors, in order of importance: health, money and social contact.

However, beyond some planning their pension, participants were not typically planning for their old age at all. A number of reasons emerged to explain this. Most importantly, planning horizons tended to be short or medium term at best. Beyond relatively vague thoughts about how they might wish their future to be, most participants seemed not to actively plan anything much beyond the next year or so.

A number of attitudes also explained the reluctance of participants to plan for their old age: the *inevitability* of ageing which appeared to mitigate against the need to plan for it; the fact that it is a very *gradual* process which means it is easy to put off action to another day; the *lack of guarantees* about planning for health or financial security; and the fact that ageing is too “*depressing*” and “*scary*” to think about.

## Society and older people

Participants were divided on how well society treats older people. Older participants themselves, however, generally felt that they were treated very well and the

barriers they perceived related mainly to health rather than the negative attitudes of society.

However, participants’ thinking was youth-centred, i.e. what is best for young people. For example, enabling older people to working longer was desirable – but not if this meant taking jobs away from younger people.

## Contribution

One of the aims of the Strategy is to provide opportunities for older people to make a continuing contribution and remove the barriers to doing so. The Strategy will take a broad definition of ‘contribution’, including the payment of taxes, buying goods and services and involvement with friends and neighbours - as well as working and volunteering. However, participants took a narrower definition of ‘contribution’ and focused very much on employment, volunteering, caring for grandchildren and, in particular, on the wisdom, experience and skills they could pass on to younger generations. Using participants’ own, narrower definition of ‘contribution’ then, it is important to note that there was little sense that they felt old age is *about* making such a contribution - rather they felt that older people have “done their bit” and that old age is therefore their time to do as they please.

## Work

There was widespread support for the retirement age being flexible and allowing people to work for as long as they wanted to and were capable. There was also support for having the flexibility to work part-time before stopping work altogether.

At the same time, however, there was an equally widespread perception that retiring around 60 or 65 seemed “about right”. In terms of when people want to stop working, the dominant view was that you would retire as soon as you could afford to, but another view was that it was desirable to keep working as long as you can.

A number of pros and cons emerged at both the individual and societal levels in terms of people working longer. There was a feeling that forcing someone to stop working before they were ready to would make them feel “useless”. In addition, society could benefit from older people working longer, even if it is ‘only’ volunteering and from older people passing on their experience to younger people.

However, there was also feeling that it was good to allow people to work as long as they wanted but not if this meant depriving a younger person of a job - this concern may well be a hangover from previous eras of high unemployment.

Stereotypical views of older workers were also apparent in discussions: they were seen as more experienced but also slower, less willing to change and less comfortable with new technologies.

## Health and well-being

There was optimism among the participants that they would be healthy in old age. However, health is the aspect of ageing about which they were most worried, with particular concerns about “being a burden” and having to rely on someone else to look after them.

In terms of trying to ensure good health in old age, behaviour was divided with some younger participants trying to exercise and eat healthily and others giving it little thought. Those who were not actively preparing for a healthy old age had a variety of reasons for this: some simply hadn't thought about it, others felt that you can try and be healthy but this will not guarantee health in old age as genetics and other factors mean that ill-health in old age can happen to the most health conscious people. There was also a more general feeling that it is hard to plan for anything that far in advance because people are dealing with more immediate issues.

Overall, the motivations and barriers relating to healthy living for a healthy old age appeared much the same as the motivations and barriers which affect people thinking about health in the short and medium term.

## Services for older people

In the main, discussions of services for older people centred on the adequacy, or inadequacy, of current provision rather than on more aspirational ideas about future provision.

Moreover, when asked about the implications of the ageing population on the provision of services, responses tended to be simply that *more* and *better* services would be needed. There was little appreciation of the economic and demographic problems that might be faced in attempting to meet these needs.

It was commonly felt that there is a shortage of care services and negativity about current standards of care was expressed.

Health care provision for older people was also seen to be inadequate. Hospital closures and staff shortages were cited as the main reasons.

## Transport

Participants generally viewed recent developments in public transport services positively (e.g. accessible buses and free bus travel for pensioners).

## Housing

Younger participants had given almost no thought to where they might live when they were older. Although some older respondents were more conscious of health problems which might make their current accommodation unsuitable, the dominant view was that they would only move if, and when, they had to.

The consensus was that greater thought needs to be given to the number and types of houses that are being built and more affordable housing for older people. However, these views did not appear to translate into a personal concern about suitable accommodation being hard to find when the time came.

## Implications for the Strategy

Several implications for the Strategy can be drawn from the findings of this research. These include:

- emphasising the benefits to all of society, not just older people, in addressing the ageing population issue
- encouraging older people to make a continuing contribution by emphasising the benefits to the older person (e.g. enjoyment and social contact) rather than simply focusing on ‘contribution’
- avoiding ‘scare tactics’ in initiatives to encourage better planning, and emphasising the current benefits of taking action
- using more positive images of old age to help combat the notion that ageing is too “depressing” and “scary” to contemplate.

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The report, "A Strategy for a Scotland with an Ageing Population: Qualitative Research with the General Public", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Executive website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent>

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