



Policy Position Paper

Tackling Ageism

United Kingdom

August 2026

Ageism is not an inevitable feature of society; it is a set of attitudes and structures that can be changed. Re-engage is committed to challenging ageism wherever it appears. Our central focus is on challenging stereotypes and negative perceptions of older people and ageing, promoting inclusivity, and amplifying the voices of those aged 75+.

1. Background

- 1.1 Ageism, or age discrimination, is the stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination against people based on their age. It can be produced through negative portrayals and labelling, restricted access to services and opportunities, and systemic policies through which people are undervalued and underinvested. Ageism in the UK affects people of all ages but particularly older adults, manifesting as prejudice, negative stereotypes and discrimination in workplaces, healthcare, media, and services - leading to reduced opportunities and poorer outcomes. Ageism is deeply rooted in society, often leading to negative internalised beliefs about ageing and reduced psychological well-being¹.
- 1.2 There are three main types of ageism:
 - 1.2.1 **Institutional ageism** is embedded in laws, rules, social norms, policies and institutional practices.²
 - 1.2.2 **Interpersonal ageism** occurs in the discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and interactions between individuals based on age.²
 - 1.2.3 **Self-directed ageism** happens when a person internalises negative societal stereotypes about ageing due to repeated exposure to ageist messages, leading to self-limiting beliefs and behaviours.²
- 1.3 Ageism affects older people in various ways. Examples where it is prevalent include losing or being refused a job due to age, being refused services such as car or travel insurance or interest-free credit, receiving lower quality service in a shop or restaurant, being refused a health service or referral to a consultant, doctors dismissing symptoms and the media portraying older adults as frail or incompetent, reinforcing stereotypes.³
 - 1.3.1 Older individuals who are positive about their own ageing can live 7.5 years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions of ageing, even after accounting for age, gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness, and functional health.⁴ And previous research has shown that 36.8% of older adults aged 65+ in the UK reported age discrimination.⁵
- 1.4 Ageism also interacts with other protected characteristics such as gender and race, leading to intersectional discrimination where simultaneous disadvantages create heightened experiences of inequality. For example, older women often face greater barriers and poorer outcomes due to the intersection between age and gender, which affects economic security, health, access to services and social inclusion. Research

from 2024 found women aged 50+ were less likely than men in the same age group to feel valued by health and care services staff (44% compared to 56%) and less likely to be confident that a medical problem would be dealt with by the NHS (39% of women, 52% of men).⁶

- 1.5 The rapidly ageing population in the UK means the issue of ageism is a growing concern. 19% of people in the UK were aged 65 or over in 2022. This number is projected to increase to 27% by 2072.⁷ Taking action on ageism must be a priority to ensure all ages are able to participate fully and equally in society, and we are all able to benefit from their contributions.
- 1.6 Legislation has been introduced to tackle ageism across England, Scotland and Wales through the Equality Act. The UK's equality act 2010 is a law that protects you from discrimination on the basis of certain protected characteristics. Age is one of nine protected characteristics. The Equality Act bans direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation based on age.⁸

Ageism and loneliness

- 1.7 Loneliness is not an inevitable part of ageing. It is often the result of ageist systems and environments that marginalise older people. Ageism contributes to loneliness by:
 - 1.7.1 Reducing opportunities for social participation through inaccessible or exclusionary community spaces.
 - 1.7.2 Weakening intergenerational relationships by reinforcing stereotypes that separate age groups.
 - 1.7.3 Creating digital exclusion that cuts older people off from essential services and social networks.
 - 1.7.4 Discouraging help-seeking due to stigma or fear of being seen as a burden.

2. Our statement

- 2.1 Re-engage's experience shows that when older people are included, respected, and connected, loneliness can be significantly reduced.
- 2.2 Ageism remains one of the most pervasive yet least challenged forms of discrimination in the UK. It shapes attitudes, behaviours, and systems in ways that marginalise older people and limit their participation in society.
- 2.3 Re-engage views ageism as a barrier to equality, wellbeing, and social participation. We believe that challenging ageism is essential to building a society where everyone can age with dignity and connection. Our position is grounded in three core principles:
 - 2.3.1 **Respect** – recognising older people as individuals with diverse experiences, strengths, and aspirations.
 - 2.3.2 **Inclusion** – ensuring communities, services, and policies are designed to welcome and involve older adults.
 - 2.3.3 **Equity** – advocating for fair access to resources, support, and opportunities.

3. Implications and recommendations

- 3.1 Ageism has consequences for older people that impact independence, wellbeing, and access to essential services. Action across government, public services, and civil society is needed to dismantle ageism and promote age-inclusive communities. To achieve this, we recommend the following:
 - 3.1.1 **Establish a commissioner for older people and ageing in England and Scotland.** These roles would ensure that the rights, needs, and voices of older people are heard at the highest levels of decision-making, helping to

address issues of loneliness, social isolation, and ageism within England and Scotland. Please see our [policy positioning papers](#) on this topic in our policy hub.

- 3.1.2 **Consult older people in policy and service design.** Policy should be inclusive for older people - centralising older peoples voices in decision-making, to ensure decisions are made *with* older people, rather than *about* them.
- 3.1.3 **Challenging ageism in public discourse.** Policymakers and media organisations should challenge negative stereotypes in media, advertising and public discourse, promoting positive and diverse portrayals of ageing. We encourage members of the public to reflect and recognise internalised ageism, challenge ageist language and assumptions both publicly and privately.
- 3.1.4 **Collect data.** Improve Government statistics on age and ethnicity so policy makers can better understand and act on the issues facing older people, as is currently possible with official poverty statistics.
- 3.1.5 **Ensure digital inclusion.** Require public services to maintain offline access and encourage age-friendly technology design across industry.

References

- ¹ 'Ageing: Ageism' (World Health Organization, [2025](#))
- ² 'Society: The State of Ageing 2025' (Centre for Ageing Better, [2025](#))
- ³ 'Ageism'. *Discrimination and rights*. (Age UK, [2025](#))
- ⁴ 'Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging (Levy et al., [2002](#))
- ⁵ Perceived age discrimination in older adults (Rippon et al., [2014](#))
- ⁶ 'Older Women in the UK Building a picture of older women's lives' (Age UK, [2025](#))
- ⁷ 'The UK's changing population' *House of Commons Library* (Barton, Sturge and Harker, [2024](#))
- ⁸ 'Age Discrimination' (Unison, [2025](#))

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