

A New Narrative on Ageing



Why do we need a new narrative?

The demographic time bomb – it's an all too familiar story: the notion that an ageing society is a major social and economic threat. In this story older people are seen as dependent on working age people, make no contribution to and have little value in society.

Negative portrayals of older people are commonplace: the media is largely preoccupied with the assumed cost of ageing, reinforcing a view that older people are **dead weight** in society – non-productive beneficiaries of state largesse; at the same time, however, they are perceived as well off, and in the eyes of some social commentators responsible for both the housing crisis and youth unemployment. Like any group outside the social mainstream, older people are routinely stereotyped and are the subject of many false assumptions and untruths.

Why does it matter?

How older people are perceived and the assumptions made about them are bound to influence society's response to ageing. Negative perceptions result in older people being 'compartmentalised' and regarded as having little value. Continuing to see ageing as a social problem, the **old narrative**, gets in the way of creating the kind of change that would benefit people of all generations.

What do we want a new narrative to do?

Our new narrative needs to speak to all generations. Ageing is the FUTURE for us all; yet we tend to fear it, much as in past times what was not known was feared and sometimes persecuted. Dispelling the myths, exposing the untruths, creating a more balanced portrayal of ageing as part of life, will enable people to have a more hopeful view of their own 'future ageing' and to be more appreciative of older people generally. We need a more enlightened view of ageing, so that through a less fearful perspective, people will think about their own future, how they might want that to look, and hence what might need to change right now.

So, a new narrative should:

- challenge the perception that ageing and longevity are nothing more than a socio-economic problem and that people in later life are a burden on the rest of society
- celebrate the ageing process, the contribution made by older people and the achievements that have resulted in more of us living longer and healthier lives
- confront the negative stereotypical portrayals of older people and the underlying ageism within wider society
- contribute to a better understanding of the real implications of an ageing population in a changing society, recognising that ageing and longevity are intergenerational issues, with younger and older people needing to develop a shared vision of ageing well.

What will this achieve?

A new narrative will provide a template for a more appreciative view of ageing. Through such a narrative the contribution made by older people and their value to society will become better understood. Not only will this new narrative form the basis of shifting social attitudes and influencing policy, it will serve to help older people themselves become more confident about their own personal ageing journey and their place in society, potentially resulting in a more activist approach to achieving greater involvement in shaping the communities in which they live. It will also help the younger generation: to recognise that a debate on ageing is also a debate about their own futures; and, to think about how they might best prepare for a longer and more valued life.



The five pillars of a more positive view of ageing

The more older people are valued by society, the greater the likelihood of a better later life. However, commonly held assumptions about ageing lead to largely negative social attitudes. What is needed is a more positive view of ageing through better understanding of later life issues and wider recognition of the contribution older people make, and have made, to their communities. Ageing is an issue for all generations.

Ageing itself is not a social and economic problem. It is an inter-generational issue, presenting both opportunities and challenges.

Everyone is a unique individual, each with a different story. 'Lumping' all older people together leads to a negative view of ageing.

Older people are active citizens and assets within their families and communities.

Older people are not an economic burden but net contributors to the economy.

Equal access to employment opportunities for older people will benefit business and society as a whole.

These messages need to be at the heart of wider society's consideration of ageing. In particular, policy makers and all those whose decisions affect people in later life need to be motivated by a more positive view of ageing.

SEEFA's aim is to ensure that through its network of individuals and local groups, these messages will be consistently presented in public meetings; in relevant groups and committees; in response to consultations; and at every opportunity where false assumptions and negative perceptions are encountered. Further information on each of the above messages can be found on the SEEFA website at www.seefa.org.uk

Who needs to listen?

This new narrative needs to be heard by all organisations and institutions whose decisions and actions affect people in later life: government, business, social commentators and the media in general.

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