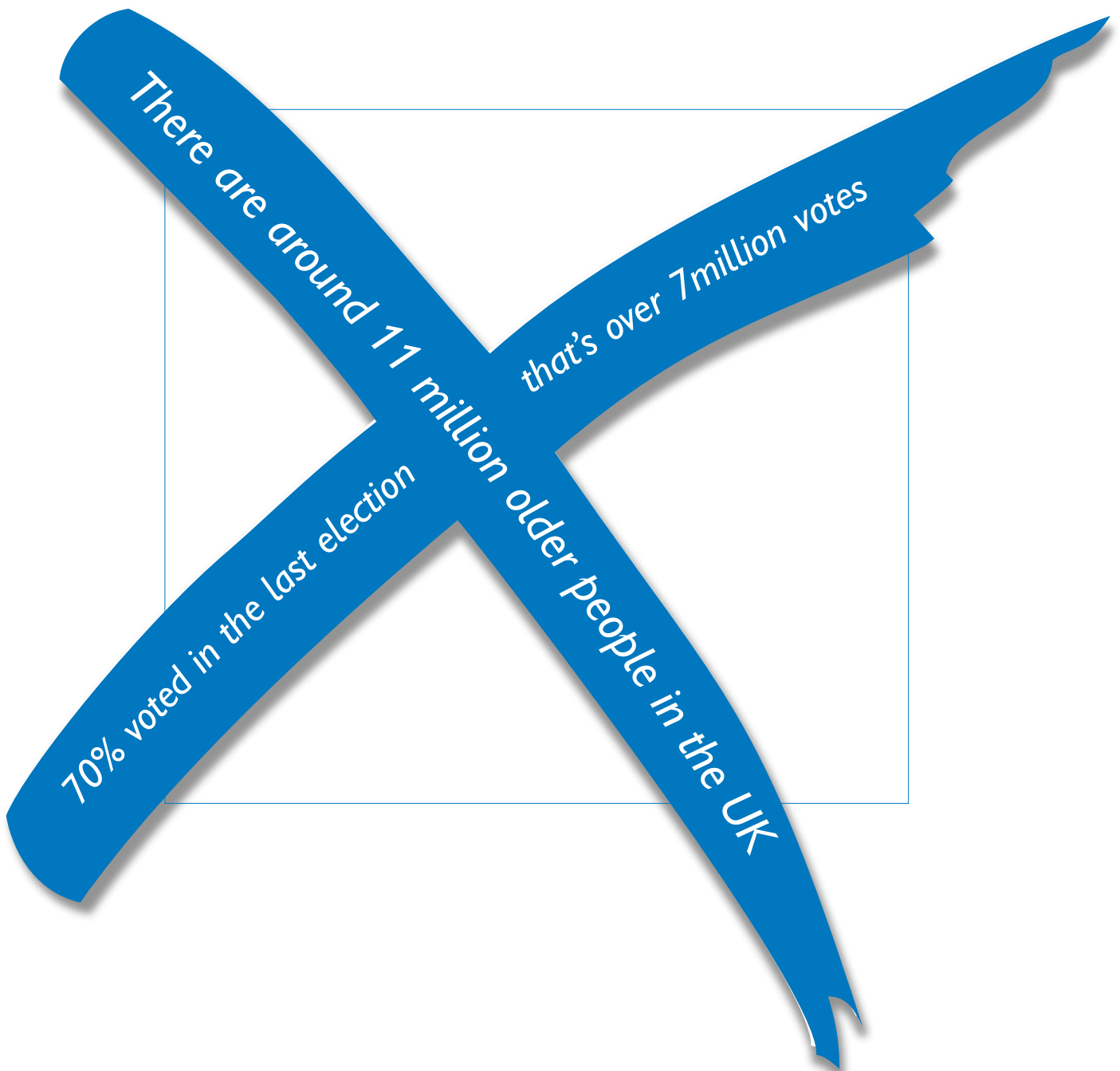


The Help the Aged challenge to the next Government



Help the Aged



The Help the Aged challenge to the next Government

Help the Aged expects to see the next Government make a clear commitment to the UK's ever-growing population of older people.

Our next Government should:

- fight the ageism that blights older people's lives;
- tackle pensioner poverty; and
- support older people to remain fully involved as active citizens.

There are 11 million older people in the UK today. They are a great economic and social asset, and a dynamic electoral force. They want the next Government to commit itself to ensuring that all older people can realise their potential and live healthy, active later lives.

Equality and human rights

A person's age does not determine their abilities.

Age discrimination in employment is to be outlawed. But, if we are truly going to drive out ageism from the workplace, we must ensure that legislation is tough and uncompromising.

Age discrimination in the provision of goods and services should be outlawed as well. A Single Equality Act, as has been pledged in Northern Ireland, to harmonise existing legislation, is essential and long overdue.

Older people want a fairer and more just society. We expect the next Government and the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights to champion equality of opportunity for all our citizens.

We need a commission with strong enforcement powers. It must be able to establish equality and human rights in every area of society, for the benefit of us all. And the Human Rights Act must be used to rid us of the scandal of elder abuse, for example in care homes.

Our next Government should:

- ban age discrimination in employment and in the provision of goods, facilities and services;
- bring in a Single Equality Act and a duty on public bodies to promote equality, not just for race and disability but across the board; and
- give the Commission for Equality and Human Rights the power to enforce the Human Rights Act and equality law.

Opportunities for work

The UK is an ageing society. A longer working life must be part of our strategy to avoid a pensions crisis. But it must not be imposed. It should be a positive and attractive choice for older people.

The benefits of working longer cannot be confined to management and the professions. People who face working beyond retirement age in low-status, poorly paid and repetitive jobs must be given support, such as careers guidance, training and skills development.

People should be able to choose or negotiate their own retirement date, not be forced to retire because they have reached an arbitrary age limit. We expect the next Government to abolish mandatory retirement ages and age limits on employment protection legislation.

We live in a culture that supposes we get less competent as we get older. The next Government must challenge this wholly mistaken belief. It must actively persuade employers to adopt practices that encourage and enable older people to continue working,

including flexible hours, part-time work, meaningful fringe benefits and other employment bonuses.

Our next Government should:

- abolish mandatory retirement ages;
- expand employment protection to all ages; and
- create incentives to working longer.

Lifelong learning

Strategies for lifelong learning tend to favour younger people pursuing careers. If older people are to be valued and valuable members of society, they need better access to learning, not just as a means of equipping them for the workplace but also to promote health, well-being and citizenship.

Older people need educational opportunities provided on a more flexible basis. If they are to be truly involved, the growing digital divide between the generations must be addressed urgently, not only through providing access to information and communication technology (ICT), but also through a proactive effort to get more older people interested in it.

Our next Government should:

- create a strategy for involving older people in learning, with new opportunities for part-time and flexible adult learning;
- end age discrimination in education by scrapping age bars on grants, loans and learning programmes; and
- get all older people online by providing Internet access in the right places and working to stimulate interest in ICT.

Adequate incomes

Choices and opportunities often depend on disposable income. Successive governments' policies have allowed the state pension to dwindle, and have then attempted to address the subsequent, unacceptably high levels of pensioner poverty with means-tested benefits.

Our core objective is to see the basic state pension entitlement raised to a level that allows older people to live active and comfortable lives, and that builds a secure platform from which second tier pensions can flourish. We must start with the oldest people first.

Second-tier pensions must be properly protected. The pensions issue has been a political football for too long. The next Government must have the courage to hand over pension planning to an independent authority.

But while provision for pensioners is dominated by means-testing, our transitional position is to see benefit take-up rates and targets sharply improved. The next Government should establish an urgent but realistic timetable for ending pensioner poverty.

Our next Government should:

- raise the basic state pension to an objectively defined 'decent' threshold (at least the level of the Guarantee Credit) to lift the majority of older people out of means-testing, starting with people over 80;
- increase target rates of take-up of all benefits for pensioners to 90 per cent by 2008; and
- hand over pensions policy to an independent pensions authority.

Fairer Council Tax

Since the Council Tax was introduced just over 10 years ago, bills have more than doubled, while the average pensioner household has seen its income increase by just one-third.

Pensioners have real cause to be angry about the increasing burden of this tax, which disproportionately hits those on lower incomes. A tax based on property values alone will always punish pensioners who rely on their assets but have little income.

According to the latest Government figures, 1.4 million pensioners in Great Britain missed out on up to £770 million worth of Council Tax Benefit in 2001/02.

The next Government cannot paper over this problem with short-term handouts. The system should be reformed to make it fairer and more related to pensioners' ability to pay.

Our next Government should:

- reform the Council Tax system to make it more related to pensioners' ability to pay; and
- set a target for central and local government to achieve 90 per cent take-up by pensioners of Council Tax Benefit by 2008.

Appropriate health and social care

We can limit the impact and incidence of dependency and poor health in older age, but to achieve this we must redouble our efforts in the fields of prevention and health promotion.

This will involve not just the NHS — for example, in the prevention of falls or the promotion of exercise. It will also require a complete overhaul of our community health facilities. Lack of facilities and neglect in the care of eyes, ears, teeth and feet ruin the quality of life of far too many older people.

Recent increases in the delivery of high-level packages of community care have come at the expense of low-level packages. We must halt this downward trend. It is more important and

more logical to deal with low levels of dependency today to prevent greater dependency later.

The next Government should no longer ignore the collapse in care capacity, either at the lower level or in the intensive and care home sectors. We need to deliver appropriate, properly funded care across the whole spectrum of need.

To do this, we will need a skilled and motivated workforce. The next Government should work to address the current staff shortages by ensuring that workers in the care sector are trained to the highest standards and remunerated accordingly.

The attempt to distinguish between personal and nursing care has caused chaos and done nothing to improve quality. Wherever it is delivered, personal care must be free.

Our next Government should:

- provide free personal care, as is available in Scotland;
- end the postcode lottery in access to health and social care services;
- invest in the care workforce by providing training and fair pay;
- invest in health promotion among older people; and
- invest in social care to reverse the decline in the availability of low-level care and support.

Warm, dry homes

The development of Winter Fuel Payments has been helpful but recent falls in the incidence of fuel poverty have largely come from decreasing energy prices – a trend that is now changing.

We must tackle the root of the problem, which is the poor condition of much of our housing stock. Improving the thermal efficiency of a house not only prolongs its life for future generations but also saves energy, improves health and makes life more comfortable for its current older occupant.

Behind the shameful levels of excess winter deaths in Britain lies a no less shameful catalogue of avoidable illness, discomfort and misery that older people suffer because of cold, damp homes.

Our next Government should:

- give every pensioner the right to free central heating and home insulation, as has happened in Scotland; and
- set targets to reduce the number of winter deaths to the level of countries with comparable climates.

Research into ageing

Our population is ageing rapidly, posing enormous challenges for our care and social security systems. Yet our investment in research into ageing is paltry. This is shameful.

We must make more effort and spend more money to address conditions such as incontinence, osteoporosis, dementia and arthritis.

Our next Government should:

- significantly increase funds for research into ageing and age-related disease; and
- focus on increasing capacity in the scientific community to research the common conditions that devastate quality of life in old age.

Affordable, accessible transport

Older people need safe, affordable, reliable and accessible transport to enable them to remain active citizens, leading full and satisfying lives.

Progress has been made in extending concessionary fares in Scotland and Wales. Concessionary fares schemes should be extended throughout the UK and the planning of public transport routes and frequency of services should be sensitive to older people's needs.

There must be more support and encouragement for community transport schemes and dial-a-ride programmes for those older people who need assistance from door-to-door.

And much more needs to be done to get extra help to harder-to-reach communities, including the housebound, people in rural areas and people from minority ethnic communities.

Our next Government should:

- provide a free, full-fare transport pass for every pensioner in the UK, which can be used across local boundaries; and
- involve older people in planning local transport and the pedestrian environment to meet their needs.

Safer streets

Fear of crime among older people is too high, causing many of them to feel cut off from the rest of their communities.

We must provide reassurance for them, and plan and regenerate neighbourhoods so that

they are safe and attractive. Somewhere that looks run-down and neglected serves only to isolate older people, who may be too afraid to leave their own homes.

Community policing arrangements need to be extended, and more effort must be made to tackle criminals who specifically target vulnerable people.

Our next Government should:

- ensure that every older person has a named and visible local security presence – a neighbourhood warden, a community safety officer or a local police officer – wherever they live;
- ban doorstep selling of property repairs to crack down on rogue traders and bogus callers who target older people; and
- set targets to reduce crime against older people.

Local services and amenities

If older people are to enjoy full and satisfying lives in the community, they need a vibrant and accessible range of local services and amenities, from banks and post offices to libraries, parks and public conveniences.

All areas need to plan locally for their on-going vitality, informed by the views and perspectives of older people as well as private sector interests.

Our next Government should:

- support the post office network in deprived rural and urban areas;
- support 'last in community' shops and services; and
- put older people at the heart of community planning and neighbourhood renewal.

Benefits from international development

Older people in developing countries are at the bottom of the global economic and social ladder but their numbers are growing at twice the rate of those in developed countries.

In countries affected by HIV/AIDS, for example, older people are increasingly becoming the primary economic providers and child carers, yet they are often excluded from HIV/AIDS programmes.

The UK's international development programme should recognise the chronic and debilitating poverty of older women and men throughout the developing world. It should vigorously support developing countries to respond to the vast challenges of ageing and development.

And it should ensure the active involvement of older people in reaping the benefits of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the protection of their basic human rights.

Our next Government should:

- ensure that older people in developing countries get their fair share of development benefits in line with commitments made in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing;
- ensure that aid allocations double, to reach the 0.7 per cent of GDP target;
- ensure that aid programmes target the poorest people - in particular, by increasing funding for social protection and by providing a universal social pension for everyone over 60; and
- involve older people in action to achieve the MDGs and, in particular, work to cut extreme poverty by 50 per cent in line with MDG 1.

Involvement and consultation

Older people know what works for them, and what support and services they need.

The Better Government for Older People programme and the development of the National Partnership Body in Wales have shown the positive results of including older people in the planning and delivery of services. The next Government should develop this approach and work to involve older people in all their diversity.

Many older people already meet together in senior citizens' forums throughout the UK, some of which are supported by the Help the Aged Speaking Up for Our Age programme. The next Government should engage with these forums as the voice of older people in their communities.

Older people are not looking for special consideration, but they do want to be listened to and engaged as active citizens. Too often, they have had policy imposed upon them – they are now demanding that policy should be framed with them.

Our next Government should:

- give older people equal access to positions within civil society;
- ban age discrimination in volunteering and public service; and
- set standards in its work to promote consultation with older people, as in Wales.

Joined-up services

Older people have to jump through far too many hoops to access basic services.

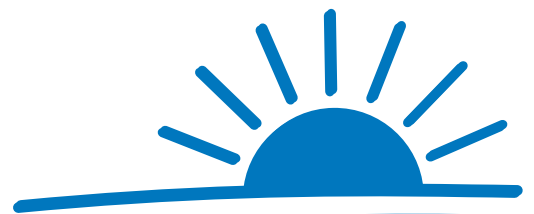
Services are provided by a wide range of agencies, all operating their own eligibility criteria and application processes. The low take-up of benefits, often leading to pensioner poverty, is a result of this complexity.

Although there have been efforts to join up services for younger age groups, providing client-centred services through personal advisers, there are no similar services for people in mid and later life. There are no equivalents, for example, of England's Sure Start or Connexions for older people. This imbalance should be addressed.

The next Government should build on the lessons learned from the Care Direct pilots and the thinking behind the proposed Third Age Service for England to create a new, joined-up way of helping older people to achieve their potential.

Our next Government should:

- create joined-up services for older people, providing access to opportunities and support during transitions in later life, not just in times of crisis.



Help the Aged

Working for a future where older people
are highly valued, have lives that are richer
and voices that are heard.