

**“Active Ageing in Active Communities:
Volunteering and the Transition to Retirement”**

**Justin Davis Smith and Pat Gray 2005
Policy Press with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

**Reviewed by Dr Gary Kitchen
Get Heard Consultancy**

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This clearly presented report looks at the role of volunteering in the transition from work to retirement. The context for the study is intriguing. Participation in the labour force amongst men aged 60-64 declined to below 50% in 1999 from almost 83% in 1971. Yet surveys have suggested that the 50+ age groups are least likely to volunteer. So what role does volunteering play in the transition to retirement? The report uses 21 individual case studies with older volunteers, interviews with relevant organisations and a review of background literature to try to shed light on this question.

The claim to have ‘allowed unprecedented insights into the lifeworlds of older people’ is overstated. Nonetheless, the case studies are valuable in gently undermining the simplistic picture of volunteering as an intermediate stage between paid work and unproductive inactivity. Only a proportion of the volunteers were motivated by the ‘trigger’ of retirement. Even for those who fell into this category, it did not ‘appear to be the first or primary feature of retirement patterns or identities’. For others, volunteering in retirement represented the latest installment of volunteering activity carried out throughout their lives.

The report analyses the organisational issues involved in managing and supporting older volunteers, and makes several sensible recommendations on how volunteering levels might be improved amongst this age group. It will be useful to both voluntary and statutory organisations seeking to deepen their understanding of the needs of older volunteers.

The term ‘volunteering’ seems to be used throughout to designate disparate activities that ‘involve’ older people, from administration through to governance. The report shows some awareness that this may be problematic. I have come across instances in my work where it appears to be assumed that utilising service users in relatively subordinate roles as volunteers accountable to paid staff counts as ‘user involvement’. The philosophy of user-involvement, however, has always emphasised having an impact on direction or decision-making, which may not entail volunteering at all. Some deeper investigation of these important tensions would be helpful.