Centre for Ageing Better

Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Media guidelines for reporting on ageing and older age

ageing-better.org.uk

Introduction

In the UK, ageism is the most prevalent form of discrimination, with one in three people experiencing age-based prejudice or discrimination.

Research shows the media often uses age-related stereotypes and commonly portray growing older and older age as a time of decline and frailty. Ageism in the media can also be seen in narratives about intergenerational unfairness which characterise older people as rich at the expense of younger groups, even though millions of older people are living around or below the poverty line. Women also face a 'double jeopardy' of sexism and ageism in media reporting.

Whilst ageism is often perceived as being less harmful than other forms of discrimination, normalising and reinforcing ageist attitudes manifests in discriminatory practices in everyday life that impact upon our health and wellbeing in many ways, whilst limiting our opportunities for employment and access to health care.

We get more – not less – diverse with age (e.g. in terms of income, health, social relationships). Given its role in public life and power to influence attitudes and opinion, the media has a duty to ensure that older people's experiences are more accurately reflected in the stories we see and read in the news every day.

Best practice

Use preferred terminology

Use terms that are precise and accurate. The term older adult(s) or older person/people is respectful and should be the standard if there is a clear need to reference the age of someone or group in your report. If possible, ask sources what terms they prefer.

Use

- ✓ Older adult(s)
- ✓ Older person/people
- ✓ People in later life

Avoid

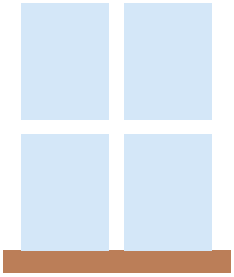
- ✗ Old person/people
- ✗ Old Age Pensioner (OAP)
- ✗ Elderly

✗ Don't make jokes using clichés and phrases like 'old hag', 'codger', 'geezer', 'dinosaur', 'over the hill', 'teaching an old dog new tricks' or 'teaching grandma to suck eggs' etc.

✓ If a person has said it, you may wish to quote them. However, consider if it is justified to do so – is it a fair or responsible thing to publish?

✗ Don't refer to someone as 'Grandfather/Grandmother' if it isn't relevant to the story.

✗ Don't call people in care homes, patients – older people who live in care homes are residents who are living in their home and should be referred to as 'older people living in care homes' – even where extra help and assistance is needed.



Avoid 'othering' and compassionate ageism

Avoid using othering terms such as 'they' and 'them' in describing older people, which encourages people to generalise and consider older people as a homogenous group.

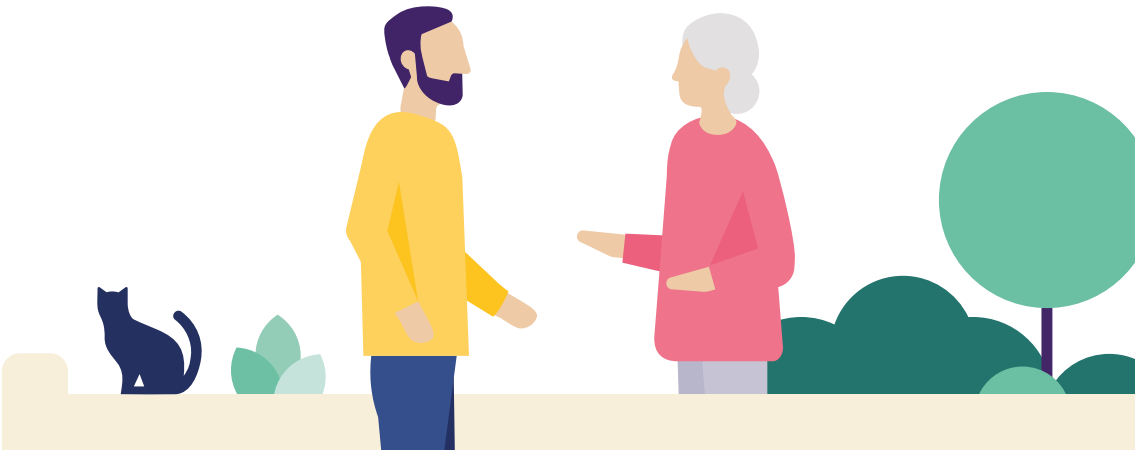
Being older doesn't necessarily mean you are frail, vulnerable or dependent. Many older people live healthy, active lives, participating in and contributing to workplaces, communities and society.

- ✗ Avoid well-meaning but patronising portrayals of older people which infantilise or undermine people.
- ✗ Don't use terms like 'dear', 'young at heart', 'little old lady' or 'grandmotherly'.
- ✗ Don't use offensive terms such as 'grumpy old man/woman', 'geriatric' or 'senile'.
- ✓ Always refer to people by their names.
- ✗ Don't state someone's age unless it is relevant – e.g. There is no need to say 'Mary, 86, runs an allotment'. However, if you must state someone's age, be specific, to avoid generalising.
- ✗ Try to avoid using sensationalised language, both negatively (e.g. 'vulnerable', 'desperate' and 'terrified') and positively (e.g. 'beloved' and 'smiling').

Don't stoke conflict between generations

The idea of an 'intergenerational conflict' between older and younger generations is prominent in public life. But, while views vary across age groups, the majority of the public don't agree that older people benefit at the expense of younger people.

- ✗ Avoid metaphors that present old age in terms of crisis. These metaphors reflect a perception of old age and the 'baby boomer' generation as a societal burden:
  - Grey / Silver tsunami
  - Demographic cliff
  - Demographic timebomb
- ✗ Don't mistake age for wealth. Millions of older people are living in poverty or on low incomes. Generalising about the wealth of older generations is misleading and creates an inaccurate sense of competition for resources between generations.
- ✗ Don't use the terms 'bed blocking/bed blockers', which is dehumanising and often used in an ageist way, with older people 'taking up space' in hospitals and denying others urgent treatment. This is an issue of system failure which is detrimental to all ages and should not be framed as older people being a burden on society.
- ✗ Avoid inaccurate 'boomer' v 'millennial' tropes. These mask the diversity that exists within generations and encourage unnecessary social divisions.



Think carefully about imagery

Imagery used alongside stories about older people often caricatures later life. It is important for the media to show diverse and positive representations of older people.

- ✗ Avoid close ups of wrinkly hands clasped together. The use of this kind of imagery is dehumanising and encourages the public to see older people as the object of pity.
- ✗ Don't focus only on portrayals of later life as a time of frailty and decline or assume a life stage means a person has particular likes or interests.
- ✓ Keep images positive but realistic. Avoid unrepresentative images such as older people skydiving.
- ✓ Use our free image library, containing hundreds of photos of people aged 50 and over in a range of settings to highlight the diversity of later life.

Resources

Image and icon library

We have created a free image library, containing hundreds of photos of people aged 50 and over in a range of settings to highlight the diversity of later life.

To help improve representation of later life, this library includes a series of ten age-positive icons, designed to replace the limited and stereotypical selection of icons and symbols commonly used to depict ageing and older people.

The images and icons are free to use and we hope will to help challenge stereotypical imagery of later life which feeds into ageist attitudes.

WHO Global Campaign to Combat Ageing

The World Health Organisation has some great resources around starting a conversation on ageism as part of its Global Campaign to Combat Ageism.

WHO guide on avoiding ageism in communication.

Publications

Ageing Better report on the role and impact of language and stereotypes in framing old age and ageing in the UK.

Ageing Better report on language used by government, the media and social media, advertising and ageing-focused charities in relation to the topics of age, ageing and demographic change.

Ageing Better report on public perceptions of ageing, older age and demographic change.

A report on the portrayal of Older People in News Media by the Older People's Commissioner for Wales.

Research by the Royal Society for Public Health & The Calouste Gulbenkian foundation on how negative portrayals can harm older people as they lead to direct age-based discrimination that can promote social exclusion.

Centre for Ageing Better

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.
Let's make ageing better.

This report is part of our work on tackling ageism and is freely available at **ageing-better.org.uk**

Reproduction of the findings of this report by third parties is permitted. We ask that you notify us of planned usage at **digital@ageing-better.org.uk**

The Centre for Ageing Better creates change in policy and practice informed by evidence and works with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.