

Ageing without Children survey results 2015

“It’s a constant battle to get any help for my mum even though she’s in her 80’s and has dementia!! I feel like I am always having to shout really loudly to get anywhere. I wonder, who will be shouting for me? or will I be the old lady dying alone in a hospital bed because no one cares?”



Ageing without children is hosted by challenging how we think about ageing

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Executive Summary

In January/February 2015, Ageing without Children (AWOC) carried out an online survey of 400 people ageing without children.

Key Findings

- The biggest fear (92 respondents) was having no one to speak up for them or act in their best interests when they could no longer do so for themselves
- 65 were worried they had no one to call on in emergency
- 78 feared being lonely and losing their peer group
- 50 were afraid they would be abused or neglected
- Other major issues were; help with practical tasks (36), being unable to afford care (24), end of life care (24), poor care from the NHS (20),
- In terms of services, co-housing was the most popular (84% in favour), followed by 'networks of community volunteers' (thought useful by 73%), and joint housing (55%). There was also support for the idea of surrogate grand-parenting (42% in favour) and shared living arrangements (36%).
- However, many other service options were also listed as important with access to information and advice, advocacy and care navigator services to coordinate and support people to access support all being key.
- It was notable that many people seemed not be aware of services that already existed highlighting a gap in awareness and marketing of services.
- 90% felt that the Government had not recognised the numbers of people ageing without children and felt they were unaware of the impact on health and social care, or regarded it as unimportant.
- The majority of respondents felt that wider society was unaware of the numbers of people ageing without children or did not see it as their problem to worry about.
- Two thirds of respondents had wanted children but been unable to have them for medical reasons or other life circumstances but one third had made a positive decision to be childfree.

It is clear that in order to support the rising numbers of people ageing without children, there will be a great need for

- Information & advice
- Advocacy services
- Care coordination/care navigator services
- Services that provide practical assistance
- A greater range of housing options
- A range of technological solutions – accompanied by support to help people learn how to use them.

However it goes beyond the need for services; there is clearly a need to change culture and mindsets within organisations and the wider community.

- Government planning on ageing needs to take into account that increasing numbers of people will get old without family support.
- Local authorities particularly need to do far more to identify how many people in their area are likely to age without children and incorporate this into strategies on ageing

- Health and social care services must not assume that there is family support to plug gaps in provision of care or that there is a family member making sure that what is meant to be being provided, is being provided.
- Within the wider community, there is a need to invest in intergenerational programmes and activities so that cross generation contact becomes the norm for people whether or not they have children or grandchildren.
- The assumption that everyone who has family could or should be cared for by them needs to be challenged. Rhetoric that centres on families being responsible for the care of older people is unhelpful and should stop. Instead, all people whether they have children or not should be encouraged to make plans for their later life that take into account what will happen if they do need help or care.

“When people talk about children caring for elderly parents, it is all the small pieces of support that are so important, not whether they end up living together with the child caring for the parent.”

Introduction

In January 2015, AWOC posted an online survey asking what people ageing without children thought about reaching later life; what concerned them, what services they might like and generally how they thought wider society viewed the issue. We were not sure how many people would respond, on our most optimistic days we thought possibly 100 would be the most we could hope for. In the event, at the end of 3 weeks we had 400 responses and had to close the survey as we did not have the resources to analyse more than that.

The results that follow paint a broad picture of the key concerns, thoughts, wishes and ideas of people ageing without children. It is a small contribution towards the research that is needed into the issue of ageing without children.

Special thank you to Dulce Sanches and Rebecca Hutten from the AWOC community who helped with the analysis of the data, and to Mervyn Eastman, Jody Day and Robin Hadley for their support. AWOC is also extremely grateful for the continuing support of the Beth Johnson Foundation. The biggest thanks go to the 400 people who took the time and trouble to complete the survey.

About Ageing without Children (AWOC) www.awoc.org

Ageing without children was formed in September 2014 and held its first conference in January 2015. The organisation has 4 main aims:

1. Research

Many assumptions are made about people ageing without children e.g. that they will have wide circle of friends to support them, that they will have a higher disposable income, that they will age more healthily and be less likely to need services. We want to investigate these assumptions further to establish how far they are true and for what extent of people ageing without children.

2. Emotional support

For people who are childless coming to terms with a life without children can be very hard. The pain people feel about their childlessness can often resurface when their contemporaries are becoming grandparents. We would like people to have a space where they can talk about this and other issues they have about ageing without children. The emotional aspects may vary whether people have chosen not be parents (childfree) or have not had the family they hoped for (childless).

3. Services and solutions

There are some solutions/services for people ageing without children noticeably Cohousing and Shared Lives. There are also many local services such as befriending, help at home, gardening schemes etc often run by charities. However many of

these are small scale and under threat. We want to look at how more sustainable long term services can be established.

4. Campaigning

Between us we have over 40 years knowledge of ageing policy and practice and in that time, we have never seen people ageing without children discussed in Government documents. We want to get the issue of people ageing without children recognised in both policy and practice.

Terminology

In this report, the following definitions are used:

Childless – people who wanted to have children but were unable to, whether by circumstance or for medical reasons

Childfree - people who actively chose not to have children

We also recognise that there are people who are, or were, parents who also regard themselves as ageing without children. These include those who:

- had children who subsequently died
- are estranged from their children
- have children who live a long distance away

Statistics on people Ageing without Children

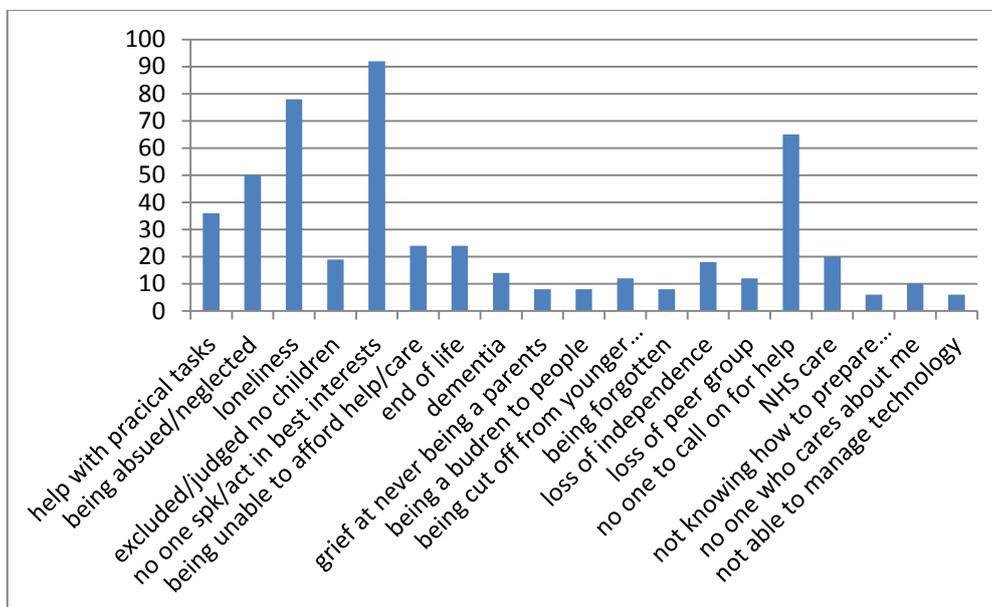
It is difficult to give definite figures on the numbers of people ageing without children primarily because in the UK and across the world (with the exception of Norway), it is only the numbers of women without children that is recorded which means half the data, that relating to men, is missing. It is also important to bear in mind that the numbers below refer only to those people who have never had children and does not include people who are estranged from their children or whose children have predeceased them.

- The Office for National Statistics (UK) *Cohort Fertility 2010* shows that 20% of those women born in the mid-1960s have no children. Although the complete data will not be available until around 2020, it appears from initial studies that an even higher proportion of women born in the 1970s may not have children (by choice or not).
- A 2006 paper Centre for Market and Public Organisation at Bristol Institute of Public Affairs 'Fertility and women's education in the UK: A cohort analysis' by Anita Ratcliffe and Sarah Smith shows that women born in 1955 were the first to see their childlessness double to 1 in 5.
- Using Data from GGS (2003-2010) and Understanding Society Survey 2009-12 for the UK, a 2014 working paper from Finland's Väestöliitto Väestöntutkimuslaitos (The Population Research Institute) 'Europe: time trends and country differences' by Anneli Miettinen, Anna Rotkirch, Ivett Szalma, Annalisa Donno and Maria-Letizia Tanturri shows that: 'Male lifetime childlessness is highest (above 23% among men aged 45–49) in Finland, Italy, Germany, the UK and the Czech Republic.'
- The Institute of Public Policy Research estimates that by 2030 there will be 2 million people aged over 65 without adult children, up from 1.2 million in 2012. Approximately 230,000 of them will be in need of more than 20 hours' care a week and will have no informal support. Read the IPPR report 'Generation Strain' here.

- Recent data coming out Holland from the work of Professor Renske Keizer, Family Sociologist at the Erasmus University Rotterdam) estimates that of women who have no children, 10% of them have chosen this ('childfree'), 10% are medically infertile and 80% are childless by circumstances not of their choice.

Survey findings

Question 1 – What issues most concern you about getting old without children?



- The biggest fear (92 respondents) was having no one to speak up for them or act in their best interests when they could no longer do so for themselves
- 65 were worried they had no one to call on in emergency
- 78 feared being lonely and losing their peer group
- 50 were afraid they would be abused or neglected
- Other major issues were; help with practical tasks (36), being unable to afford care (24), end of life care (24), poor care from the NHS (20),

The key issues for people ageing without children all centre on having no one to speak up for them in their old age and act in their best interests. This was closely linked to a fear of being left alone, having no one to call on for help and therefore of being vulnerable to abuse or neglect. In an ideal world, older people would not need someone to speak up for them and ensure their best interests were protected because it would be automatic. However we know this is far from the case.

“Nobody to speak up for me when I cannot speak up for myself - especially where healthcare is concerned. My mother died recently, aged 93, and had she not had me she would not have got anywhere near the level of support from doctors, social workers, carers etc, as she did. In particular she got continuing health care only because I fought for it using guidelines and didn't give up”

“I will have no-one to look out for me and my interests when I become frail, as I am currently doing for my father who has been diagnosed with dementia. The 'system' is not geared to doing this it assumes there are family members to do this”

There was a particular worry that state services, especially hospitals, are not geared up to manage older people without family. Recent coverage of poor care in hospitals such as Mid Staffordshire where unacceptable levels of care and treatment of patients was only uncovered and raised by families especially adult children has had a big impact. People fear that without someone to speak up for them, they will simply not be treated as well as those whose families are there ensuring they are getting the proper care. With over stretched staffing teams, the belief is that care staff will focus on those who have someone to shout on their behalf and that those without will go to the bottom of the pile.

“I have had to do a great deal for my Mother particularly over the last 10 years, she is now 81 and if I hadn't been around to do what I have done for her, I just daren't think about what her life would be like. There is no substitute for having the input of someone who cares.....It has made me think ahead and realise that when my time comes and if I get sick etc. when I am old, there will be no-one to do for me what I have done for her, I will be at the mercy of the system and the random decisions of people who, even if they do their best, cannot possibly care at the same level as a

The fear of being vulnerable to abuse, neglect or poor treatment also came through strongly:

“You hear terrible stories of abuse at care homes - often it is only exposed because the children or grandchildren become concerned and are able to prove that it's happening”

“I am a power of attorney for my mother and this takes time and research to ensure her money is well invested; who will do this for me. How will I know when I am old if I am being scammed?”

There are also real concerns about being cut off from wider society particularly the younger generations and of being judged or excluded for not having had children:

“Social detachment (i.e. no common interests with people with children/grandchildren, as so much revolves around family interests) Prejudice from others - judgements made about my reasons for not having children”

“Have a fear of being one of those old ladies in the hospital/care home who people feel 'sorry for' because she doesn't have any family so she doesn't get any visitors!”

“No shared memories, no one knows much about my life, no family occasions, no one to pass things on to, no grandchildren”

People from the LGBT community had particular worries about services not being LGBT friendly and were concerned that they could become isolated and cut off from their peer group.

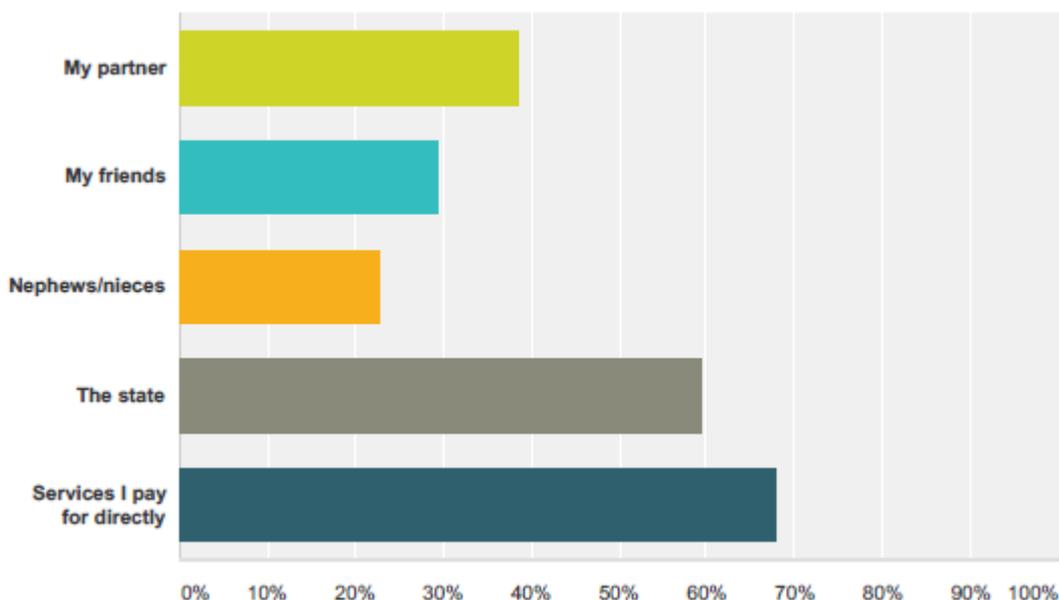
“I fear the dying off of my friendship group and not being able to access services which will recognise that I'm lesbian and be concerned to ensure lesbian and gay older people will require support services which allow them to meet/live together”

However, some respondents did question the idea that it was natural for people's children to support and care for them in their older age.

“The need to change the idea that everyone should have kids to look after them in old age - that this somehow is the natural thing. This is both untrue and a very limited way to look at ageing and the needs which arise and change as we age”

“It concerns me that there is an assumption that people's children should be responsible for their care. We should, as far as possible, be responsible for our own and make provision for it where possible and help others within the community who are

Question 2 – If you need help or care when you get old, who do you hope will provide it?



Nearly 68% of people expected to pay for their help and care. It's unclear whether this is because most prefer this option or whether it is because with all the coverage of the cuts to social care and the problems with the NHS, that people feel this is likely to be the only option open to them.

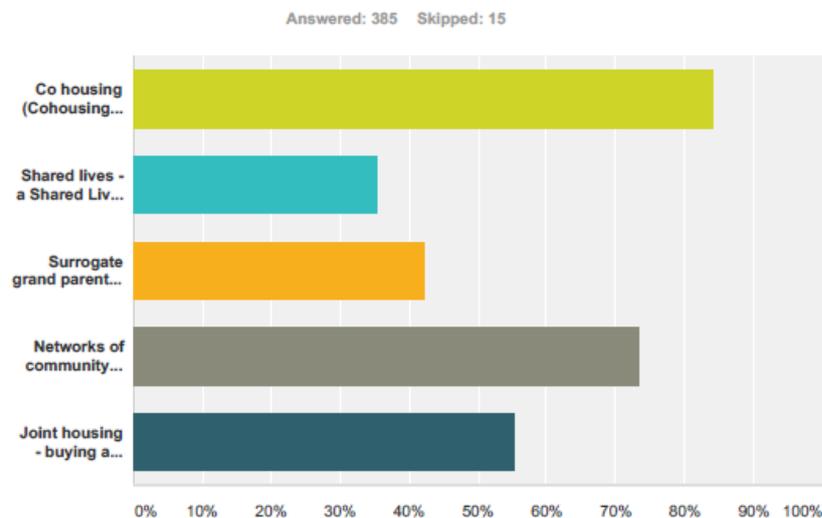
However 60% would like the state to provide their care so clearly there is a still strong belief that help or care should be provided by the Government either nationally or locally, and be available to people who need it.

"I would much rather pay for services myself than rely on volunteers. I'd feel more in control. However I know that not everyone will be able to afford to do that"

"I want compassionate state care"

"My friends are the same age as me so probably will not be able to help"

Question 3 – Below is a list of services people have suggested could help those ageing without children. Which (if any) do you think would be most useful?



People completing the survey were given the following 5 options plus space to contribute their own ideas.

- Co housing (Cohousing communities are intentional communities created and run by their residents. Each household has a self-contained private home but residents come together to manage their community, share activities & eat together)
- Shared lives - a Shared Lives carer and someone who needs support get to know each other and, if they both feel that they will be able to form a long-term bond, they share family and community life
- Surrogate grand parenting - schemes that match older people who have no immediate family close by with individuals, couples and families who don't have any grandparents in their lives.

- Networks of community volunteers that help with practical tasks e.g shopping, taking people to hospital & socializing
- Joint housing - buying a house with friends & employing staff/carers to help with everyday tasks and/or personal care

Of the five ideas suggested, co-housing was the most popular (84% in favour), followed by 'networks of community volunteers' (thought useful by 73%), and joint housing (55%). There was also support for the idea of surrogate grand-parenting (42% in favour) and shared living arrangements (36%).

Key issues raised in response to this question were:

- the importance of having a variety of services on offer to enable genuine choice
- making sure flexibility is built in to all options
- not assuming a one-size fits all solution
- focusing on the quality of care provided
- the critical importance of guardianship and decision-making when a person is ill or loses capacity
- maximizing affordability

Other suggestions people thought would be useful were:

Practical services to support people living in their own homes, for example:

- volunteer drivers trained in how to help the frail elderly
- visiting services in the home e.g. podiatry, technical help with hearing aids, trouble shooting computer problems, help with administrative tasks
- Assistance to keep up-to-date with modern technology and the internet
- Assisted living technology e.g. software to help with paying bills and shopping, gadgets to help with key tasks around the home
- An escort service for visits to hospital and someone to stay overnight e.g. after health-related investigative procedures

Advice and information

- A central list of approved, reliable trades people - gardeners, painters & decorators, handymen, plumbers etc - who are CRB checked and understand the needs of older people.
- Covering rural areas as well as urban.
- Will-making advice on disposal of assets and treasured possessions
- A well publicized central resource of ideas and people

Advocacy

- An advocacy service – to check that basic and care needs, in whatever setting/context are being met; to look after the small things that are so important in daily living as well as help with major decisions.

Support and self-help groups

- Mutual support groups for sharing different skills and capacities, recognizing strengths and weaknesses e.g. decent hearing, ability to drive etc

- Using social media to share inspiring examples of people living well as non-parents
- LGBT specific forums
- A local or online buddy system for older people
- Counselling services offering help to deal with emotional/ self-esteem aspects of childlessness and aging

Community volunteering

- Supporting people to be good neighbours/ look out for elderly people living nearby
- 'Pay-it-forward' schemes where people could bank time, donate and receive help in kind
- Volunteering opportunities for people aging without children to work in primary schools and contribute to the education of future generations
- A national programme for school children to help older adults in the community

Housing related solutions

- Co-designing better retirement homes and villages/ sheltered accommodation and residential care homes, which recognize the progressive nature of care needs over time
- Being mindful of the challenges for people not used to living in shared housing situations, needing time to adjust

Improving statutory services/ regulating private care sector

- Recognizing the importance of meeting people's needs for company, conversation and creative activities, as well as for physical healthcare
- Developing national standards for recruitment and training of social workers
- Requiring all care providers, including private sector, to comply with national standards for delivery of care
- Equal state benefits for childless people

It must be said that many of the services listed above do already exist, however there is a marketing gap, as many people do not know about them. There is an issue about awareness raising more generally, making services visible and accessible to those who need them. There is also the on-going concern about services' capacity to meet demand in the face of funding cuts.

However, it's not just about knowing what services are there and being able to pay for services, it's about what it takes to actually access services, set them up as you want, co-ordinate and check up on them, adjust and refine them over time etc. For many older people this "broker" role is carried out by their adult children. In the absence of children being present or being unable to provide this support, care navigators or brokers are crucial.

“Moving into a different housing arrangement alone won't resolve the multiple issues that present themselves in older age.... Sometimes low level care might be needed, such as help with domestic duties, house and garden maintenance. At other times, it is how to address loneliness, while maintaining independence? The more connections in one's world, the greater likelihood of having supportive people around in times of need”

“Having a register of trades people, or some kind of 24 hour central phone number you could ring if you need help....to find support of the right kind in your local area - a cross between the Samaritans and a concierge service. I would be willing to pay a reasonable fee for this for the peace of mind it would bring”

Like many people I am not at all keen on things that feel like creches for seniors. I do like to mix with people of all ages. I wonder if there are any partnering schemes possible which match older people with groups needing help, rather than with families. Some people might find trying to become part of a family a little difficult, but still appreciate contact with younger people, and the chance to offer something.

Question 4 – Would you find it useful to talk to other people aging without children?

Over four fifths (85%) said they would find it useful to talk to others who are aging without children. The reasons for wanting this were:

- To learn from others in the same situation – especially about valuing the positive aspects of aging without children
- To swap practical ideas, tips and resources for those who need personal, social or domestic care now
- To generate and explore ideas for creative longer-term solutions
- To be part of a network of like-minded people
- To have space to share thoughts and feelings about childlessness and caring for others (especially aging parents)
- To feel less invisible and alone
- To raise the profile of the issue politically, to campaign for better care standards in future
- To get specific advice on legal, employment, financial and care-related issues affecting childless people
- To build confidence in speaking out/ overcoming stigma associated with aging without children
- To work towards improving self-help and mutual care arrangements

A number of people gave qualified answers to the question. A fifth felt that aging without children wasn't a major issue for them yet, but might become so in the future. These tended to describe themselves as in their 40s or 50s, working, with good social support, and still in good health. Several said they wanted to keep in touch with developments and to see awareness of the issues raised more generally so that by the time they were older, there was more support in place. Others felt it was relevant for them now, but expressed concerns about ensuring that talk was focused on achieving concrete practical outcomes. They were keen to avoid creating spaces solely for people to speak of loss and air grievances. For this group, it was important to acknowledge people who are childless by choice, those who have already adjusted to their childless state and those who do not wish to talk about what pains them with others. For some, their concern about talking to others

was more to do with feeling reticent about doing so and wanting some clear safeguards in place.

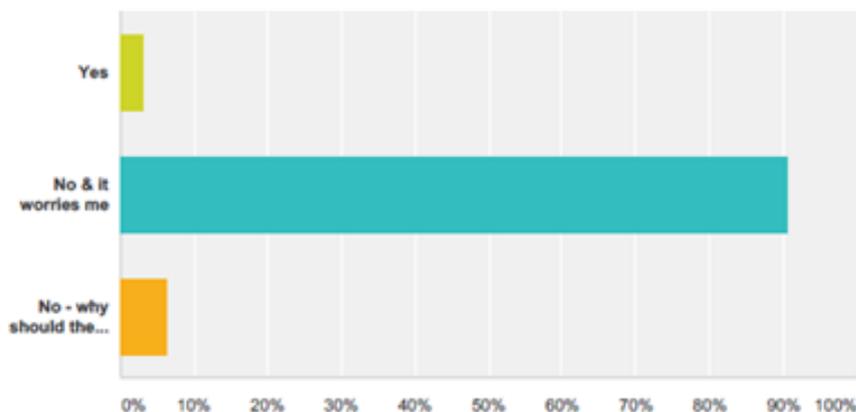
“Sharing ideas can be helpful - not just confidence-building and shared experiences but practical tips about resources and what had worked for them. And on an emotional level, sharing feelings about missing out on family life, grandchildren etc and the sense of loss. Not just in a negative way either but also sharing ways life is good and worth living despite childlessness”

“I still feel tremendous grief for not being able to have children as I am so different to everyone else around me. I feel so relieved if I meet someone of my age and they do not have children. I feel I do not have to pin the smile on when they talk about the children and grandchildren...”

“I have long been alert to the issues which potentially will impact on me as I age without children. Giving voice to these is difficult and I find my thinking is often silenced or dismissed”

“I would like a public debate on the subject. If 1 in 4 of all adults do not have children, why do we as a society depend on them as a large resource for care (practical, financial or both)?”

Question 5 – It is estimated that by 2030, 2 million people will be over 65 without adult children. Do you think the Government recognises this as an issue?



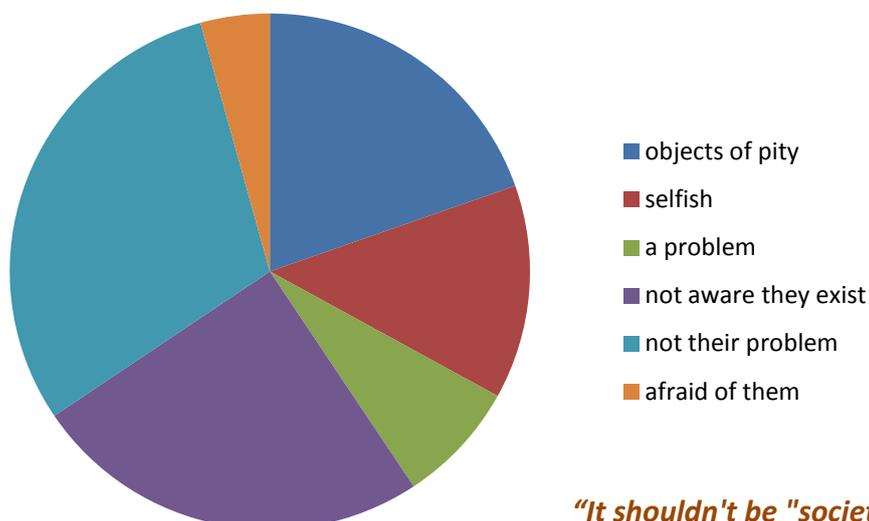
“We hear so much Government talk about "families" but the reality is that many people (both very young - e.g. in care; and old) have no families and Policies need to reflect this. It can be expensive to live alone (even as a choice - some of us quite like our own company!) and this also needs to be addressed”

“there is a lot of talk about the potential health costs of an 'ageing population'. But it seems to address this the same people want to ensure people can 'remain in their homes' - but they don't say how this can be managed, and i'm sure assume at least some family members will support. Often not only 'children' but other family members as well. If you don't have 'family' then policy doesn't have a view”

“The government and the pensions industry are well aware of increasing longevity in the population so I think the govt are probably capable of marrying up those figures with stats about the increasing number of people not having children. However, it's a whole different question about whether or not they are adapting policies accordingly. I would guess they are relying on people selling their properties to pay for care - but who exactly will provide this care is the issue”

As a single woman without children, I have always felt very isolated - almost all the people I know have children, and I have been very surprised at the number of childless people identified in your statistics. I don't expect the government has recognised the problem as they haven't realised the size of it.

Question 6 – How do you think society views people ageing without children?



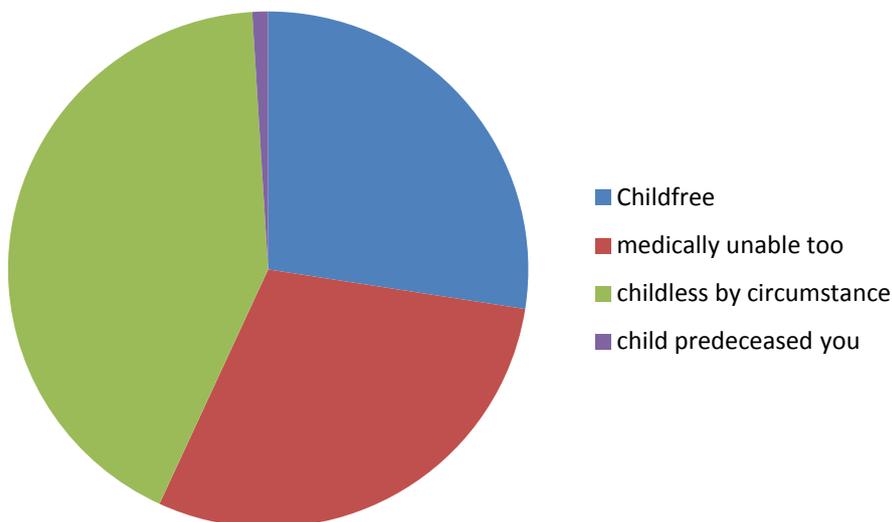
“This should be changed as more discussion about the ageing population is raised - but it needs an active campaign to raise the profile. Plus there should never be an expectation that children should look after their parents and that idea needs to be changed - wonderful if that is what everyone wants but no assumptions please”

“It shouldn't be "society's problem" - but it should certainly should be something that governments recognise and act upon”

“I think most people don't think about ageing because it forces them to think about mortality, frailty and decline. Sounds depressing so why would you think about it! Society has broken down inter-generational contact so older adults are more "hidden" from view. I don't think most people understand what may happen to them physically or with dementia. So in fairness to people, they don't know what they don't know! Add onto that the issue of childlessness and it's pretty invisible”

“People don't like to think about getting older. Old people remind them of the inevitable ageing process. I think attitudes towards older people in general (regardless of whether they do or don't have children) need to be changed (and reflected in changed behaviours towards older people). While older childless people are more exposed to the negative attitudes about ageing in the community and more at risk of having no support or care when in need, older people in general are often isolated, lonely and viewed in a negative light. Older people are frequently considered a burden on other people, communities and the state more broadly. That is, until we become one of those 'old persons' (something no one wants to give thought to)”

Question 7: Why are you ageing without children?



Surprisingly little research has been done to identify why people don't have children. On one level it does not really matter why people have arrived or are arrived into later life without children; AWOC is concerned that the State assumes family support as the default and that those without family are adversely affected by this. On the other hand, there is a difference between people who actively made a choice never to have children and are therefore ageing happy that they are living the life they wanted, and people who did want children who are ageing living with the knowledge they have not had the life they wanted.

Conclusions

Many of the concerns articulated by people ageing without children in this survey reflect the pernicious influence of ageism in society. People expressed profound and deep seated concerns about their old age and how they would be treated. It is disheartening to see how little progress seems to have been made in eradicating ageism. It is deeply worrying that 30% of people ageing without children think that without having anyone to speak for them, they will simply be ignored or pushed to the bottom of the pile. It is all the more worrying because the people expressing this concern most vociferously are people ageing without children who are caring or have cared for their own elderly parents.

It is clear that in order to support the rising numbers of people ageing without children, there will be a great need for

- Information & advice
- Advocacy services
- Care coordination/care navigator services
- Services that provide practical assistance
- A greater range of housing options
- A range of technological solutions – accompanied by support to help people learn how to use them.

However it goes beyond the need for services; there is clearly a need to change culture and mindsets within organisations and the wider community.

- The assumption that everyone who has family could or should be cared for by them needs to be challenged. Rhetoric that centres on families being responsible for the care of older people is unhelpful and should stop. Instead, all people whether they have children or not should be encouraged to make plans for their later life that take into account what will happen if they do need help or care.
- Government planning on ageing needs to take into account that increasing numbers of people will get old without family support.
- Local authorities particularly need to do far more to identify how many people in their area are likely to age without children and incorporate this into strategies on ageing
- Health and social care services in particular must not assume that there is family support to plug gaps in provision of care or that there is a family member making sure that what is meant to be being provided, is being provided.
- Within the wider community, there is a need to invest in intergenerational programmes and activities so that cross generation contact becomes the norm for people whether or not they have children or grandchildren.
- People ageing without children have expressed a great desire to come together locally to share experiences, develop their own solutions, raise awareness and reach out to other generations. This approach should be supported across neighbourhoods.

Ageing without children is an issue that has simply not been on the radar in terms of discussions about ageing, and this needs to change given the numbers of people that are and will be affected by the issue. We have a great opportunity to address the issues raised and AWOC will be

working with others to do so. If we can improve things for people ageing without children we can improve things for all older people.

Support AWOC

Ageing without children has no funding and runs entirely on the goodwill of volunteers. If you would like to support us, please go to <http://www.gofundme.com/tagnm8>

Appendix 1

Respondent data

Age

Under 40	31
40-49	104
50-59	112
60-69	105
70-85	17

Gender

Female	367
Male	32
Transgender	0

Are you a carer?

Yes	56
No	298
Former carer	48

Relationship Status

Single	142
Living with partner	63
Married	162
Widow/widower	14
Other	12

Do you regard yourself as having a disability or limiting long term illness?

Yes	75
No	309

What would you describe your sexuality as?

Straight	354
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Gay	5
Lesbian	14
Bi sexual	9

How would you describe your ethnicity?

White British	333
White Other	10
Irish	7
White and Black Caribbean	2
White and Black African	
White and Black Asian	1
Asian/Asian British	2
Indian	1
Chinese	3
Black	1
African	1