

## Ageing Without Children

Kirsty Woodard got the idea for a service to help people ageing without children over coffee with a friend who had been looking after an elderly parent in hospital. The friend said she was amazed how much time she was spending running around arranging care, doing everything from helping hoist her relative out of bed in the morning to advocating for her with medical professionals. At the end of their meeting, the friend drained her coffee and said: "I wonder what she would do if I wasn't here."

Kirsty had worked in the age sector for 25 years. It was only as she got older and she learned that she wasn't able to have her own children that the problem of ageing without children came into focus. She began to ask around to find out if organisations concerned with ageing had done their own work on the issue. "Everyone came back and said no, they hadn't thought about it," she remembers.

In 2014, Kirsty set up Ageing Without Children, a community interest company intended to support people facing old age without younger relatives to help look after them. She was supported by Dr Robin Hadley, who has a PhD in involuntarily childless older men, Jody Day, who founded an organisation to support women who are childless by circumstance called Gateway Women, and Mervyn Eastman, the former head of Better Government for Older People.

Kirsty was living in the South West when the Transform Ageing programme was announced. As a first-of-its-kind initiative to change the way society approaches and designs services for people in later life in Somerset, Devon, Torbay and Cornwall, seemed a good fit for her idea.

In 2017, Kirsty received £15,000 Grow It award from the programme to develop the business model for Ageing Without Children.

"The Transform Ageing programme is brilliant," Kirsty says. "It's about being prepared to take risks on things and to know it's not always going to work, but to learn from failure."

Sam Alford became Kirsty's Award Manager at UnLtd and encouraged her to test awareness of the issues for people without children around ageing. "Kirsty is pioneering," Sam says. "The whole care system is built on the idea that there will be someone there to support you. There is also evidence to suggest that people who don't have someone end up in care at an earlier stage."

The more she looked into it; the more Kirsty realised the scale of the problem. A 2012 study put the numbers of people ageing without children at more than one million, counting only those who had never had children. That figure failed to include people who are estranged from their children or whose children lived far away. In 2019, Ageing Without Children research was featured in the Guardian with the headline: "[over 1 million childless people over 65 are 'dangerously unsupported'](#)".

The report revealed that ageing without children can be critical for dementia sufferers, who don't have children to help them remember who they are, and LGBTQ people in later life, 90% of whom do not have children. Some found they had to go "back into the closet" in retirement homes. Ageing Without Children found that there were 1.2 million people in the UK over 65 in this situation that had not been recognised, despite the numerous organisations operating in the ageing sector.

On the Transform Ageing Programme, Kirsty worked hard to raise individual and institutional awareness of the issue and the potential policy impact as the numbers of people in later life

increases. She gathered evidence to demonstrate the problem and persuade funders that a big investment is needed to support people to set up their own local groups, where those without children can meet people in a similar situation, set up their own networks of support and to fund work with local councils and other organisations to raise awareness.

She developed a toolkit in partnership with local authorities, allowing them to think about they might address the issue with support groups and change practice where necessary. She also set up local groups and tested a subscription model to make the enterprise sustainable into the future.

However, despite her tireless dedication and engagement of her community of interest, it was ultimately too difficult to make the enterprise financially sustainable in its own right, or to raise the requisite investment to provide more time for awareness raising, campaigning and income generation.

Her story highlights an inherent challenge in the social sector: funders often seek innovative solutions to complex social problems, which will disrupt the current system and that re-imagine how health and social care services are delivered. Critically we don't always build in the timeframes required to develop true systems entrepreneurship. "There are very few funders like UnLtd who are prepared to take a risk," Kirsty says.

Similarly, investors are (perhaps understandably) reluctant to invest in something which can't readily demonstrate a strong business model, yet investment is required upfront to raise awareness and test the most appropriate business models. Systems change takes time and pioneers need a more flexible and patient funding model to allow time for people to engage.

As Kirsty herself suggested, one of the main reasons that she struggled to attract further funding to make the enterprise financially sustainable was because the problem of ageing without children is not well understood. Some saw it as an issue about loneliness, without realising that ageing without an advocate has other dimensions: such as the elderly person waiting in A&E without company, or the ability to trigger and share someone's personal history and memories.

Sam agrees that the pioneering nature of Ageing Without Children made it harder to develop. "It can be hard for people to see it as an issue," Sam says. "When Kirsty spoke about the problem at events, half the audience listened with their mouths open and the other half couldn't understand why you would run something specific for this audience."

But Sam is proud that Transform Ageing was able to offer early-stage support to Kirsty and her idea. "The fact that she was exploring a little considered or taboo area was a key draw for us," Sam says. "Kirsty was a good fit for the programme's aspirations to identify innovative solutions to social problems and have systemic impact on how we think about and respond to the challenges of an ageing society." As a result of Kirsty's experience, the programme learning about the need for a different type of funding and support model for systems change social entrepreneurs will inform future programmes that UnLtd delivers.

Both Kirsty and Sam are sure that this will not be the end for Ageing Without Children. "In five or ten years this will be back on the agenda. It's too important for people to sweep under the carpet." says Kirsty.