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Policy Briefing
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Lifting everyone up:

Why a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons matters

The United Nations Human Rights Council took the historic decision, in April 2025, to begin drafting a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.¹

This decision is a necessary response to the tremendous changes taking place in human longevity. It is also necessary for strengthening how we collaborate between and within countries to improve policy making and legislation. And it is a necessary reminder that our commitment to protecting basic and fundamental human rights extends

across the life course - and that all older people, no matter who they are or where they live in the world, deserve to be treated equally and with dignity in society.

This briefing paper explains why a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons is crucial for strengthening laws, policy making and improving attitudes towards older people locally, nationally and internationally. It sets out what we can expect from the process of creating a Convention, and what role the UK Government should play.

Why the rights of older people matter

Population ageing is one of the defining transformations of the 21st century. Across the world, millions more people are living longer, healthier and more active lives than at any time before. This is a huge success that is the result of improved healthcare and sanitation, stronger economies, greater access to education and family planning, and gains in gender equality and women's empowerment.

Older people everywhere in the world are entitled to having their rights protected simply for being human. Older people are also integral to achieving thriving, successful societies. They make contributions to their families, communities and economies – as workers, carers, volunteers, mentors, taxpayers, innovators and leaders – yet are often overlooked.

- ▶ One-fifth of the world's population will be over the age of 60 by 2050.²
- ▶ The total number of people aged 80+ globally will triple from 155 million in 2021 to 459 million by 2050.³
- ▶ Women outnumber men in older age worldwide, making up 54.3 per cent of people over the age of 60 in 2024.⁴
- ▶ 80 per cent of older people will live in low and middle-income countries by 2050.⁵
- ▶ The pace of population ageing is outstripping governments' ability to prepare. In France, the population over 65 doubled from 7 to 14 per cent in 115 years. In Vietnam, the same leap is occurring in just 15 years.⁶

What is ageism?

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age. It can be institutional, interpersonal or self-directed.

- ▶ **Institutional ageism** refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age.
- ▶ **Interpersonal ageism** arises in interactions between individuals.
- ▶ **Self-directed ageism** occurs when these harmful attitudes are internalised and turned against oneself.⁸

Many older people face discrimination, unequal treatment, poverty, and even violence and abuse, simply because of their age. Ageism is widespread. We know that one out of two people worldwide is ageist against older people.⁷ Regrettably, it is one of the most socially accepted forms of prejudice and it shapes attitudes, policies and systems with very real consequences for people's lives.

Getting older can also bring challenges as one's body changes. Physical strength and capacity can diminish, susceptibility to chronic illness can increase, and mental and cognitive health can worsen. At the same time, loneliness and isolation is becoming increasingly common in later life, often with greater risk of poorer physical and mental health, economic hardship and poverty.

We can change how we age though. It is the choices we make as a society and as individuals that determine whether ageing is a positive or negative experience. This is why we need to reset our thinking about ageing and refocus our attention on what can be achieved as we grow older. A UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons is a key part of bringing about this change in thinking.

Askale, 63, Ethiopia

Askale provides home-based care to older people in her community as well as supporting her own family.

“I would like to pass the following messages for all government and community members about older women like me: You all have to give due attention to older people and women, since women are the pillars of the family and peacekeepers for their communities as well as for the country.”



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Experiences of ageing around the world

Population ageing is now happening across the globe, but there is no one single experience of being older. A multitude of factors influence how we age and can combine to bring opportunities or challenges, whether physical, economic, social, or cultural.

We often associate ageing with wealthier countries, but the majority of the world's older people live in low and middle-income countries. Many countries are grappling with the impacts of climate change, conflict, humanitarian crises and poverty - at the same time as undergoing radical transformations in the makeup of their societies. Economic opportunity for younger generations is resulting in migration from rural to urban areas, and even internationally. In the absence of state-provided assistance, this is leaving many older people to fend for themselves.

With women outnumbering men in later life,⁹ ageing is distinctly gendered. Even though women may live longer, they often face a greater number of years living in ill health or with a disability. Gender inequality experienced earlier in life extends across the life course and compounds ageism, resulting in poverty, marginalisation, violence and abuse for many older women.

Ageing also intersects closely with the experience of living with disability. The global prevalence of disability increases with age, rising from 5.8% in children and adolescents to 34.4% among older adults aged 60 and over.¹⁰ When this combines with other factors such as age discrimination, poverty and ableism, an older person living with disability can face many barriers to taking part in their community.

The experience of ageing is closely associated with physical and mental changes. While chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes and dementia are commonplace in later life across the globe, our experience of them can change depending on where we live, our social status in society, our gender, and how wealthy we are. The ability of an older person to prevent and get treatment for these illnesses is greatly affected by ageism, often with significant consequences for those who either help or depend on them.¹¹

With every society experiencing rapid economic and social change because of computers and smart phones, digital inclusion is no longer optional and has become fundamental for enjoying many other rights. This is true even in the poorest contexts where access to cash often comes through mobile phone transfers. While many older people have become adept at using new technologies, digital access has also become a barrier to receiving basic services equitably and participating fully in society.

Older people's resilience and endurance is particularly tested in times of emergency and humanitarian crisis. Displacement due to conflict, or extreme weather, often results in older people being left behind, without medical or financial support. And despite the knowledge and skills they bring to rebuilding after disasters, older people are often not counted or are pushed to the side, denying them life-saving support and the opportunity to contribute.¹²

Underlying the diverse experience of ageing, whatever the geographic context, is the extraordinary capacity of older people to play a meaningful role in their families and communities. Older people's knowledge, skills, experiences – and their desire to contribute their time, unpaid or paid – make them the backbone of society. It is often because of the willingness of older people to act as carers, teachers, money earners and mentors that younger generations get the opportunity to realise a better life.

What is a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons – and why does it matter?

UN human rights conventions are powerful tools. They lift everyone up in society by setting shared standards, helping to inform national laws and policies, and giving people clear language to claim their rights. A human rights convention can:

- ▶ Clarify what rights mean in practice
- ▶ Address gaps in rights protection
- ▶ Drive consistent, long-term policy thinking
- ▶ Encourage accountability and good governance

A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would do exactly this for ageing – providing a clear, positive framework for action locally, nationally and internationally.¹³

Building on existing human rights frameworks globally

Older people are already entitled to all the rights that should protect them under international law, but existing treaties were not written with ageing societies in mind. There is a lack of clarity on how human rights standards can be meaningfully applied when we get older. There are also gaps in how our rights should be protected – for example, there is nothing in international law that prohibits age discrimination against all older people.

Human rights conventions have already been agreed for women (1981), children (1990) and persons with disabilities (2008), among others.

Now the international human rights framework needs updating again to include older people. This is how the UN works at its best – clarifying and improving universal standards that can lift up everyone in society.

A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would complement, not duplicate, existing treaties. It would address issues that are especially pressing for all older people, such as access to basic health, social and palliative care, income security (e.g. pensions), property rights, and autonomy in decision making (e.g. when living with dementia).

Most recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has shown what is possible worldwide. It spells out that what prevents a person from participating fully in society is not their disability, but how we respond

Kerry Moscogiuri, Interim Chief Executive, Amnesty International UK:

“It is high time for a UN convention that guarantees the rights of older people, promotes a human rights approach that emphasizes their autonomy and dignity, and challenges ageism.”



Jacinta, 69, Kenya

Jacinta, 69, is a member of an Older Person's Association in Kenya:

“A lot of older people out there do not know much about their rights but [I] am glad we are getting educated ... I want people to know that older people are important in society ... We want policies and laws that address older people's issues. We have laws talking about children and women, but there is none for older people. Older people deserve to be treated better and laws that recognise their rights would help address that.”

to their needs and rights as a society. The voices and experience of people with disabilities were at the heart of the process of creating the CRPD. As a result, the CRPD is transforming thinking, policy and practice across the world.

Where older people's rights are concerned, standard setting already exists at a regional level in Latin America, Africa and Europe.^{14 15 16}

These treaties and agreements provide a strong roadmap for what needs to be done globally, but they are not all legally binding, have gaps, and fall short of the universality that only a UN convention can provide.

What would a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons deliver?

A UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would send a clear, global message that older people matter everywhere in the world. Crucially, it would help older people to be heard when speaking out on what matters most to them.

In particular, it would help with:

Establishing legal certainty and universality

A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would provide language that creates greater legal certainty in how the rights of older people should

be protected. As an internationally agreed treaty, it will only establish a minimum level of standards. Many governments will have legal standards that go beyond what is agreed. A Convention contributes to national and regional standard setting through its universality and the clarity it provides on how older people's rights should be protected across all contexts.

Providing guidance

A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would build upon and complement existing human rights standards, providing guidance to UN Member States and non-state actors as to how existing rights can be used to protect older people better. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides an example of how this can be achieved.

Setting responsibilities and obligations

Articulating legal standards and legal certainty will help clarify the responsibilities and obligations of States, UN Bodies, and other relevant stakeholders regarding the protection of older people's rights. At the moment, older persons do not have a clearly established status as a rights holder group under international law. This absence has resulted in the marginalisation of older persons at international, regional, national and local levels.

Strengthening accountability

When a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons comes into force, it will strengthen accountability between Governments, older people and wider civil society at three levels: 1) through UN treaty monitoring and review mechanisms; 2) as a tool of jurisprudence that can help strengthen national laws and their implementation, and; 3) as a set of standards that helps governments work with other stakeholders to achieve better policies and legislation.

Reframing attitudes

One of the most powerful things a Convention can offer is the opportunity to shift public attitudes to older people away from negative stereotypes and prejudices which reinforce age discrimination, to a recognition of older people as rights holders in society. We have seen the transformation in public attitudes towards people with disabilities that arose through creating and implementing the CRPD.

The process of creating, agreeing and implementing a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would transform our understanding of older people's rights and reframe ageing as a part of our life's journey that should be celebrated.



Alex Kent, Co-CEO, Restless Development:

“A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons will transform lives across generations. It's not only about protecting the rights of older people today – it's about guaranteeing that everyone, everywhere, can age with dignity, security and opportunity. Restless Development are proud to support this Convention.”

An agenda for people of all ages

A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons is not only about today's generation of older people. It is about people of all ages, in all countries, who hope to grow older with dignity and security.

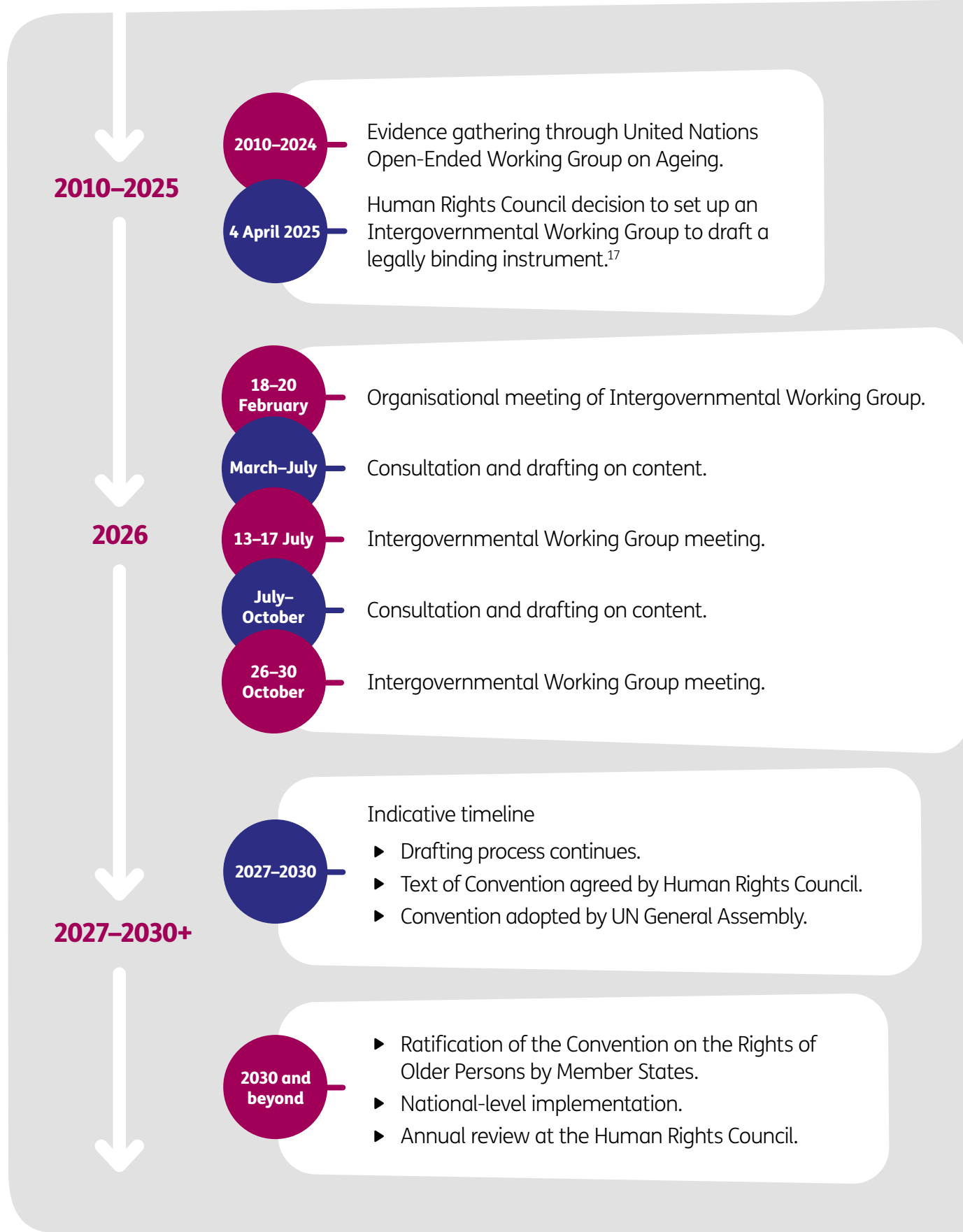
Deep transformations are taking place across all parts of the globe. Younger populations today will age in contexts shaped by rapid urbanisation, climate change, migration and ever-evolving labour markets. A Convention can help us understand how these changes affect all of us across the life course. Without action now to build a fairer society through a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, there is a risk that people could find inequality deepening in later life. This would jeopardise hard-won gains made when they were younger.

Younger people everywhere stand to gain from a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons through:

- ▶ More resilient and sustainable social protection systems, such as pensions and income support, that help both older and younger people alike.
- ▶ Decent work and lifelong learning that supports healthier working lives and helps ensure income security in later life.
- ▶ Communities and infrastructure designed for people of all ages, including older and younger people with disabilities.
- ▶ A future where everyone continues to be seen as a valued member of the community throughout their life and is given the support they need.
- ▶ Support for older and younger people to participate fully in society without fear of reducing opportunities for others.

Intergenerational solidarity is not a zero-sum game. When older people's rights are respected globally, everyone is lifted up and societies become more inclusive, stable and cohesive. A human rights approach helps bridge generations and borders alike, recognising shared interests rather than imagined divides.

Drafting a Convention – UN Process and Milestones



With its decision to set up an Intergovernmental Working Group to begin drafting a new legally binding human rights instrument for older persons, the UN Human Rights Council has embarked on an open-ended process. In practical terms, there is no fixed timeline for when a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons has to be delivered or agreed. This means that getting an end product quickly, that is fit for purpose, depends greatly on the political will of the UN Member States involved.

There is a basic structure for the meetings that will drive the process forward though. This will begin with an organisational meeting in February 2026, followed by two meetings in July and October to discuss the content of the Convention. It is expected that the Intergovernmental Working Group will continue to meet formally twice a year, with further work taking place between sessions, until a text for the treaty has been agreed.

The Human Rights Council's way of working allows civil society to contribute to its discussions. The time between the formal sessions is also an opportunity for older people and their representative organisations, civil society organisations and human rights experts, to continue to work with their governments to ensure that the resulting human rights treaty will be of the highest standard that takes fully into account the lived experiences of older people.

Role of older people in the process

At the heart of any human rights treaty for older people must be the voices and experiences of those most affected. The contents of the Convention will be agreed by UN Member States, but the drafting must include the full and meaningful participation of older people and their representative organisations, to ensure that their experiences inform how our rights in older age are articulated.

The principle of “nothing about us, without us” was well established by people with disabilities in the creation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The same must be true now for older people.

Jan Shortt, General Secretary, National Pensioners Convention:

“As older people, we experience daily the impact of not having our rights protected. We want our voices heard and to be treated equally. We want everyone in society to know that our rights matter. This is why the National Pensioners Convention is supporting the creation of a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.”

The activism and involvement of older people will not only drive forward the process of creating a Convention, but also ensure its meaningful implementation. In particular, strengthening the voice of older people will:

- ▶ Change attitudes of individuals and institutions towards older people – ensuring that older people are seen as rights holders in society equally alongside others.
- ▶ Ensure that the human rights standards that are drafted are informed by the realities older people experience.
- ▶ Build momentum to get all governments engaged.
- ▶ Improve accountability to see that action is taken.

What would a Convention contain?

The drafting of the Convention will build on the substantial evidence and analysis that has been gathered already through years of discussions in the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing¹⁸ and through authoritative research undertaken by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights¹⁹ and other experts. It will also draw on the regional human rights treaties for older people (see above - page 5).

While we cannot predict the exact contents of the Convention, it would have to be broad in scope, providing sufficient guidance, principles and good practice to address the diversity of experience of older people, while demonstrating how existing human rights frameworks can be used to protect older people. We can expect it to touch on the following elements, among others:

- **Age discrimination and ageism:** One of the biggest gaps in international human rights law is the lack of a universal prohibition of discrimination on the basis of age, and the recognition that ageism is a root cause of many human rights violations that older people experience.

- **Exercise of autonomy, independence, liberty and freedom of choice:** This is critical to older people's wellbeing and the enjoyment of all human rights. It includes financial and health-related decisions, and choices regarding where and with whom to live.
- **Freedom from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation:** This includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional violations. Existing standards and laws do not provide the necessary guidance on how protections should be applied to the experience of older people.
- **Income security:** The right of all people to income security is well established across many international treaties, regional and national legislation. Nonetheless, the vast majority of older people globally lack access to any formal income security and support. At a minimum, a Convention would help to clarify and signpost how existing international standards and commitments can work to ensure that all older people live free from absolute poverty and have their basic needs met.



Mohammad

Mohammad was displaced from his home by conflict in Lebanon, along with his wife and children. He lives in a single room with his wife and three children:

“War affects the poor and the old the most ... What do I need now? Peace. Safety. A job. That's all ... There are no laws for older people. No financial support. No one to take care of us. Growing old here feels like a punishment.”

- ▶ **Health:** The right of everyone to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health is a fundamental part of the international human rights framework that directly affects the enjoyment of all other rights. Older people's right to health must therefore be addressed explicitly in a Convention. The World Health Organisation has extensively documented how ageism is an obstacle to realising this right.²⁰ When older people are leading healthier lives, this has substantial positive benefits for them as individuals, their families, communities and the wider economy.²¹
- ▶ **Palliative care:** The right to palliative care is an area that has not been addressed explicitly under international human rights law. Securing the means and support to live in a dignified manner is of the utmost importance for older people who may find themselves spending weeks, months or years in ill health and in pain.
- ▶ **Long-term care and support:** This is an area neglected under international human rights law. Clearly articulating what this protection of older people's rights looks like would be a substantial contribution of the Convention to existing standards.

Why UK leadership matters

The UK has long been a champion of human rights, rule of law and international cooperation. Supporting a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would:

- ▶ Demonstrate UK leadership on one of the defining global issues of the 21st century.
- ▶ Strengthen the rule of law internationally by sharing UK expertise to improve the way that the UN takes into account one-fifth of the world's population.
- ▶ Demonstrate solidarity with partner countries that are already championing the creation of the Convention.

- ▶ Strengthen the ability of partner countries to prepare for population ageing, leading to a healthier, stronger global economy.

The UK can also demonstrate leadership by ensuring that the lived experiences and voices of older people are heard and fully taken into account during the drafting process. Involving older people directly in the Government's engagement with this process will help secure a better-quality result and strengthen the impact of the treaty globally.

Conclusion

A UN Human Rights Convention on the Rights of Older Persons is a bold, practical response to global change. It would build on proven human rights frameworks, reflect the realities of modern ageing, and speak to shared aspirations for dignity, fairness and opportunity for all.

For the UK Government, supporting this Convention is an opportunity to lead with

confidence and compassion to build a world where economic opportunity and growth are available to all. It is a chance to stand up for the contributions older people make today, and for the rights we all want tomorrow.

Because ageing is not about 'them'. It is about all of us – and the kind of society we choose to become.

Endnotes

1. Resolution A/HRC/RES/58/13 that was agreed by consensus refers specifically to the elaboration of a legally binding instrument on the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons. A human rights convention is the strongest expression of an international legally binding instrument.
2. <https://population.un.org/dataportal/home?df=df71dd7f-a082-40e7-b0cb-3a91bdb761f6>
3. <https://desapublications.un.org/publications/world-social-report-2023-leaving-no-one-behind-ageing-world>
4. <https://population.un.org/dataportal/home?df=df71dd7f-a082-40e7-b0cb-3a91bdb761f6>
5. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>
6. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/544371632385243499/pdf/Vietnam-Adapting-to-an-Aging-Society.pdf>
7. <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>
8. *ibid*
9. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2023>
10. <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/global-report-on-health-equity-for-persons-with-disabilities>
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12. <https://www.helpage.org/resource/funding-for-older-people-in-humanitarian-crises/>
13. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/8189/2024/en/>
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15. <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-older-persons>
16. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-intergovernmental-cooperation/work-completed/human-rights-older-persons>
17. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/hrc/RES/58/13>
18. The official UN website of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA) has been archived and access to its documentation may be unavailable. However, information is available here: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/ageing/oewga> or on the website of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People: <https://rightsofolderpeople.org/open-ended-working-group/>
19. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/outcome-documents/ohchr-working-paper-update-2012-analytical-outcome-study-normative>
20. <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>
21. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-2023-health-in-an-ageing-society>

Age International – February 2026

Age UK provides crucial support for older people and drives change locally, nationally and internationally. Age International is the international arm of the Age UK Group, and focuses on improving later life for people living in low and middle-income countries, including during humanitarian crises.

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