



## Hoping for a good, ordinary life

### Finns' images and experiences of old age

#### For the reader

The attitude of society towards the elderly is evident in the way that they are talked about, the level of their inclusion in common wellbeing and key facets of society, and how their needs are taken into account in decision-making and services. Another decisive factor is how equally they are treated.

Issues related to ageing, old age and services have been studied from many perspectives. However, few studies have asked everyone aged 16 and above what they think about old age and the status of the elderly in Finnish society, as well as what their views are of elderly care and good old age.

Unfortunately, it is common in Finland to exclude the population aged 80 and above from population polls and opinion polls yet still present the results as 'the opinions of the Finnish people'. This would suggest that the opinions of people over the age of 80, which means more than 300,000 Finnish citizens, are not considered to be as important as the opinions of the rest of the adult population and that they are not included in 'the Finnish people' or 'the population'. Young people aged 16–17 are likewise excluded from public opinion polls because such opinion polls usually target the population aged 18 and above or 20 and above. In official statistics, people aged 65 and above are categorised as 'elderly', while those aged 15–74 are categorised as being 'working age'. All of this adds confusion and makes comparison difficult.

The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults (VTKL) wanted to set an example when it commissioned a citizen survey from the research institute Aula Research Oy in winter 2022 and allowed everyone aged 16 and above living in Finland to respond to it, without an upper age limit. The compiled data offers a unique look at the experiences and opinions of the population regarding the status of the elderly in present-day Finland. The respondents to the survey hoped that their responses would not be hidden away 'at the bottom of a drawer'. VTKL has already responded to this wish in many ways, including by launching the 'Tehdään iästä numero' (Age matters) popular movement, which is explained in more detail (in Finnish only) at [www.vanheneminen.fi](http://www.vanheneminen.fi). The aim is to conduct the same survey periodically in order to monitor the subjects studied and their development. By doing so, VTKL, for its part, aims to promote a society that has a more positive attitude towards age.

This report was commissioned by VTKL, and its aim is to create an overview of the survey results and mirror them against research in this field. The main themes in the survey included attitudes towards ageing and old age, the inclusion of the elderly and age-related discrimination, preparedness for old age, and citizens' images of elderly care and good old age.

The first chapter of the report presents the purpose of the study and describes the research data and methods used. The second chapter explains the key concepts



used in this report. The third chapter describes the study population, while the fourth analyses the respondents' quality of life and livelihood. The fifth chapter describes the attitudes of the study population towards old age, and the sixth chapter examines the inclusion of the elderly. The seventh chapter discusses age-related discrimination and the study population's experiences of it. The eighth chapter is dedicated to the views of the study population on elderly care, and the ninth chapter talks about their hopes for a good old age.

Each chapter ends with a summary of the subject area examined and discussion of the findings. The report concludes with an overall summary of all of the findings as well as the conclusions, which constitute the personal views of the author and therefore do not represent the opinions of VTKL. VTKL is in charge of the report's editing and layout.

The widespread age-related discrimination, even in social and healthcare services, and the battered public image of elderly care highlighted by the results are startling. Both young and old people, men and women alike, are subject to age-related discrimination. Age-related discrimination is unequivocally prohibited by law in Finland, and its monitoring should be incorporated into the regular monitoring of non-discrimination.

Developing a Finland that treats people of all ages well and has a positive attitude towards age is a common cause. A broad change in attitudes is required at all levels of society, from top politicians to ordinary citizens. The way in which we think and talk about old age also affects how we approach things related to it. The aim is to establish a society in which no one is underestimated on account of their age and in which different generations can live the best life possible, side by side.

I would like to warmly thank the Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults for this opportunity to explore this unique set of data and share the message it conveys with everyone interested in the topic.

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Marja Vaarama

## **Summary**

The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults carried out a broad survey of the attitudes of people aged 16 and above living in mainland Finland towards ageing, old age, the inclusion of the elderly and age-related discrimination. Additionally, the survey examined preparedness for old age and the citizens' images of elderly care and good old age. The data, which is representative of the Finnish people, was collected through an internet panel and phone interviews carried out between 26 January and 2 March 2022. The data collection was carried out by Aula Research Oy.

The age distribution of the respondents to this citizen survey was broad: the oldest respondent was born in 1925 and the youngest in 2006. Collectively, the respondents were of the opinion that old age starts at the age of 68 on average, but respondents over the age of 85 believed that it starts at 78, for example. According to studies, old age starts approximately at the age of 80. On the other



hand, people aged 65 and above are categorised as elderly in statistics, which most likely goes back to a decision made 83 years ago about the lower limit of national pensions.

In general, the respondents to the citizens' survey had a positive attitude towards old age and felt that it is simply one stage of life among the rest. In contrast, they felt that society's attitude towards old age is negative and saw age-related discrimination in many places. Both young and old people reported having personally experienced age-related discrimination. The parties considered to be the most discriminating were politicians, social and healthcare services, and the labour market. The respondents were offended by talk of the sustainability gap in particular. They hoped for a personal doctor system in healthcare services and better coordination of social services. One in three respondents, particularly in the age group of 26–45, were afraid of growing old, associating it with fears of unemployment, financial insecurity and living alone. Studies have found that younger people also doubt the fairness of pension contributions and the sustainability of the pension system in the future.

The respondents considered personal preparedness for old age to be important. In practice, they did so by paying attention to healthy lifestyles and making sure that their living environment is accessible and located near services. According to studies, accessible living environments that encourage physical activity and meetings with other people support the realisation of these goals in practice. The goal of being financially prepared was also common among those who could afford it. On the other hand, the respondents disliked the idea of preparing a continuing power of attorney in preparation for old age and making an advance decision on the kind of care they would like to receive at the end of their life. Most of the respondents to the citizen survey felt that the elderly do not receive the services they need. The respondents mostly had poor images of elderly care. The responses exuded tiredness and hopelessness regarding what efficiency goals have driven the field of elderly care to become.

The respondents associated good old age with hopes of a secure livelihood, housing and services. They hoped for reasonably good health and functional capacity, self-determination and participation in decisions concerning them, a good relationship with family and friends, and recreational opportunities also accessible to people with a low income. Many respondents mentioned travel, spending time at a summer house, sports, outdoor recreation and opportunities for lifelong learning. They hoped to maintain their mental wellbeing and feared memory disorders and loneliness. They also hoped for a peaceful and good death without pain, and many supported euthanasia.

Additionally, the respondents hoped that society would accept old age as a normal stage of life and consider long age to be an achievement rather than a burden. They hoped for a happy and peaceful old age as full members of society and their community, inclusion without fears and discrimination – and being able to be satisfied with the life they had lived. The respondents' hopes did not include anything special – only a good, ordinary life.

The author believes that it is high time to update society's notion of old age. Talk of the sustainability gap should be banned altogether. We live in a society where people live to an old age and where the number of old people is on the rise. As the name suggests, society belongs to everyone, but the voices of the elderly are not heard well in our society. This must be reinforced in social discourse and decision-making. Building a good society is the best ageing policy for people of all ages in the long term. Good elderly services must be seen as an investment that frees up working age people for the labour market without fears and concerns about their loved ones and their own old age security. It is important to foster a good relationship between generations. More



common events and meetings are needed between different generations. Information on preparedness for old age should be shared in good time at educational institutions, for example. The documents related to old age should be easy and safe to draw up.

For several decades, one study after another has brought up the poor availability of home care and nursing home services. This also causes stress for employees and family members of elderly persons. There is talk of a funding gap of EUR 1.8 billion in elderly care services. Healthcare services require more acute geriatric outpatient clinics with sufficient expertise in treating diseases related to old age and assessing the functional capacity of the elderly. Politicians across party lines must seek to improve elderly services, and this must also involve a service reform. An administrative reform alone is not enough. It makes for strange democracy when citizens want good treatment for the elderly but society is stingy with their services. The efforts to build the industry's reputation must start now. A touch of humaneness towards elderly persons who need help would better correspond to what the Finnish people want. The public image of elderly care is poor, particularly due to the care crises that continuously pop up in the public eye. Attracting a sufficient number of elderly care workers and retaining them in the industry are social issues that must be tackled at the level of society.

Improving the reputation of elderly care cannot be resolved with a magic trick; rather, it requires systematic everyday work for elderly care. It is an endurance sport that requires broad commitment. The majority of problems are something that no individual employee alone can influence – what we need is organisation-wide improvements. Decisive factors include the common will of the organisation, decisions and their practical implementation as well as continuous monitoring and improvement. The number one element in building the reputation of elderly care is improving appreciation of the industry and the old age phenomenon throughout society.