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Age UK is the new force combining  
**AGE** and **HELP THE AGED WE WILL**  
*Concern*



# Grey Matters – A Survey of Ageism across Europe

EU briefing and policy recommendations



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Age UK is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (registered charity number 1128267 and registered company number 6825798). The registered address is 207-221 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UZ. Age Concern England (registered charity number 261794) and Help the Aged (registered charity number 272786), and their trading and other associated companies merged 1 April 2009. Together they have formed the Age UK Group, dedicated to improving the lives of people in later life. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI and Age Cymru. ID111030 05/11

## About Age UK

Age UK is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, formed in April 2010 as the new force combining Help the Aged and Age Concern. We have almost 120 years of combined history to draw on, bringing together talents, services and solutions to enrich the lives of people in later life, at home and abroad.

We are a founding member of AGE Platform Europe, and have many years of experience working with European partners, including EU institutions and stakeholders in the UK and other member states. Our current EU influencing work focuses on active ageing, consumer policy, digital inclusion, employment, equal treatment, financial services and health.

Age UK is the only British charity to focus research funds exclusively on later life. The research we fund is providing answers and we've already seen significant breakthroughs in dementia, falls prevention, stroke and incontinence.

At European level, Age UK works closely with other researchers and has played a leading role in the Futurage project.

This report is authored by Age UK, in partnership with the European Research Group on Attitudes to Age (EURAGE). The underlying data and analysis were provided by Dominic Abrams, Pascale Sophieke Russell, Christin-Melanie Vauclair and Hannah Swift, EURAGE, University of Kent.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Professor Dominic Abrams and his team at EURAGE, University of Kent, for providing us with a comprehensive analysis of data from the European Social Survey 2008–9. Their full report of this research is being published in parallel by Age UK and will be available on our website at [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)



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# Introduction

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Ageism is now the most widely experienced form of discrimination in Europe. This has serious consequences for 164 million senior citizens living in Europe today.<sup>1</sup>

While gender and race have been headline equality issues in Europe, ageism is becoming a top order issue for the 21st century. In practically all developed countries life expectancy is increasing, fertility is decreasing, and working lives must be longer if pension promises are to be sustainable. These trends have significant implications for many aspects of modern life: the labour market, workplace technologies, consumer behaviour, social security systems, national health arrangements, and economic growth as a whole.

The demographic challenge is high on the agenda of Europe's policy-makers, at EU and national level. The latest figures from the European Union's Statistical Office<sup>2</sup> show that 17 per cent of Europeans are currently aged 65 and over, projected to rise to 30 per cent by 2060.

In the past 12 months, important EU policy debates have been launched on the subject of ageing, including a Green Paper on the future of European pensions, EU 2020 employment targets up to age 64, and a European Innovation Partnership for active healthy ageing.

The year 2012 has been designated the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, which aims to engage the 27 EU Member States in promoting active ageing in employment and community life, healthy ageing and independent living.

The European Parliament also recently launched debate on the consequences of demographic change for the future of EU Cohesion Policy.

Age UK is actively engaged in these processes, directly and through AGE Platform Europe.

To inform the debate, Age UK has commissioned an important pan-European analysis from the European Research Group on Attitudes to Age (EURAGE), entitled *Ageism in Europe and the UK*. The study compares European Social Survey data from 28 European countries and sheds light on an ageing continent.

This briefing summarises key findings from the study for a European audience.<sup>3</sup> It presents policy recommendations to EU and national decision-makers, concerning employment, active ageing, equal treatment and intergenerational solidarity.

We hope the briefing will prove a useful input to the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (EY2012), and support the work of AGE Platform Europe and the EY2012 coalition of NGOs<sup>4</sup> in promoting active ageing and intergenerational solidarity.





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## Methodology

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This briefing is based on a comprehensive analysis of data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2008–9, provided by the European Research Group on Attitudes to Age at the University of Kent. The ESS is a biennial project that studies the attitudes and values of participating countries across Europe. The 2008–9 ESS included a special module on attitudes to ageing.

The research analysed data from 54,988 respondents within 28 countries in the fourth round of the ESS, which took place in 2008 and 2009. The 28 countries comprise 21 of the 27 EU Member States (all but Austria, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta), two EU Candidate Countries (Croatia and Turkey), two European Economic Area countries (Norway and Switzerland), plus Israel, Russia and Ukraine.

The survey addressed four general areas.

- General attitudes – at what age are people seen as young or old?
- Experiences of age discrimination – was it noticed, was it benevolent, was it hostile?
- Do different age groups reflect different perceptions of status?
- What is the quality and quantity of intergenerational contact?

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***The research for this report analysed data from 54,988 respondents within 28 countries.***

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## Young or old?

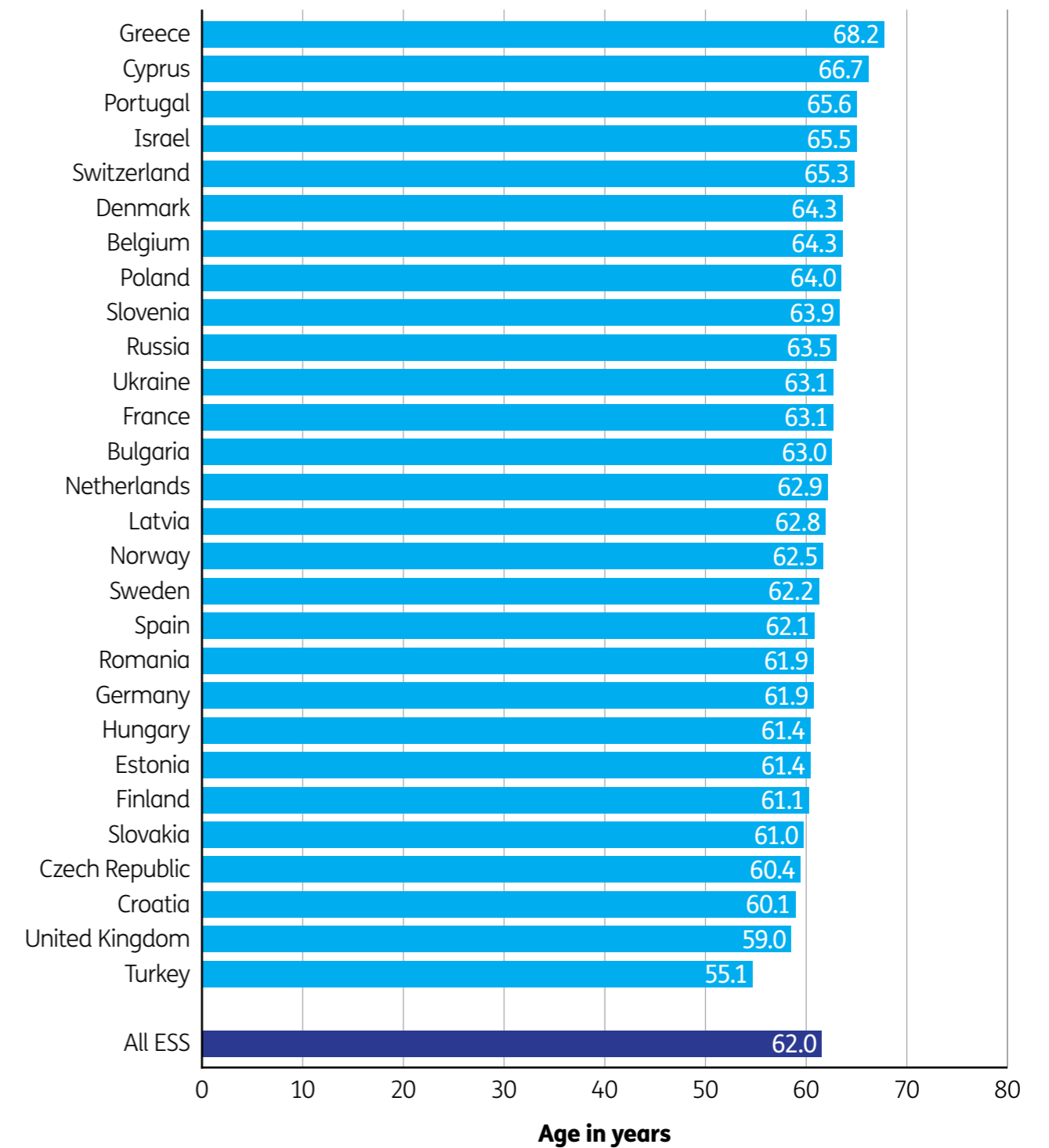
The survey explored how Europeans categorise themselves and each other according to age, by asking people when they thought old age started and when youth ended. The average age at which old age is perceived to start is 62, rather below today's pension age in many countries.

There was less consensus on when youth ended, ranging from 34 in Sweden to 52 in Greece, with an average of 40.

Perceptions of oneself as young or old can lead to self-limiting behaviour ('I am too old for this' or 'I am too young to do that'), and can affect judgements made on the abilities and competence of others.<sup>5</sup>

These perceptions can feed into other limiting practices – for example, the insurance industry refusing to cover older motorists and travellers, or charging significantly higher premiums.

**Figure 1 Perceived start of old age in ESS countries (mean estimated age)**



# Age discrimination

The survey found that ageism is the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe for every age group. Thirty-five per cent of respondents reported unfair treatment on grounds of age; more than on grounds of gender (25 per cent) and race/ethnicity (17 per cent).

This may reflect the fact that broad EU legislation exists to ban discrimination on grounds of gender and race, whereas the only EU law addressing age discrimination relates to specifically to employment (Directive 2000/78<sup>6</sup>).

Just under half of all respondents across Europe (44.4 per cent) see age discrimination as a serious problem. Turks (17 per cent) and Danes (22 per cent) were the least concerned by ageism, but in five countries over 60 per cent saw it as serious, headed by France (68 per cent).

With regard to unfair treatment, 39 per cent of all those surveyed reported experiencing 'a lack of respect' because of their age, for example, feeling ignored or patronised. Twenty-nine per cent reported 'being treated badly' because of their age, for example,

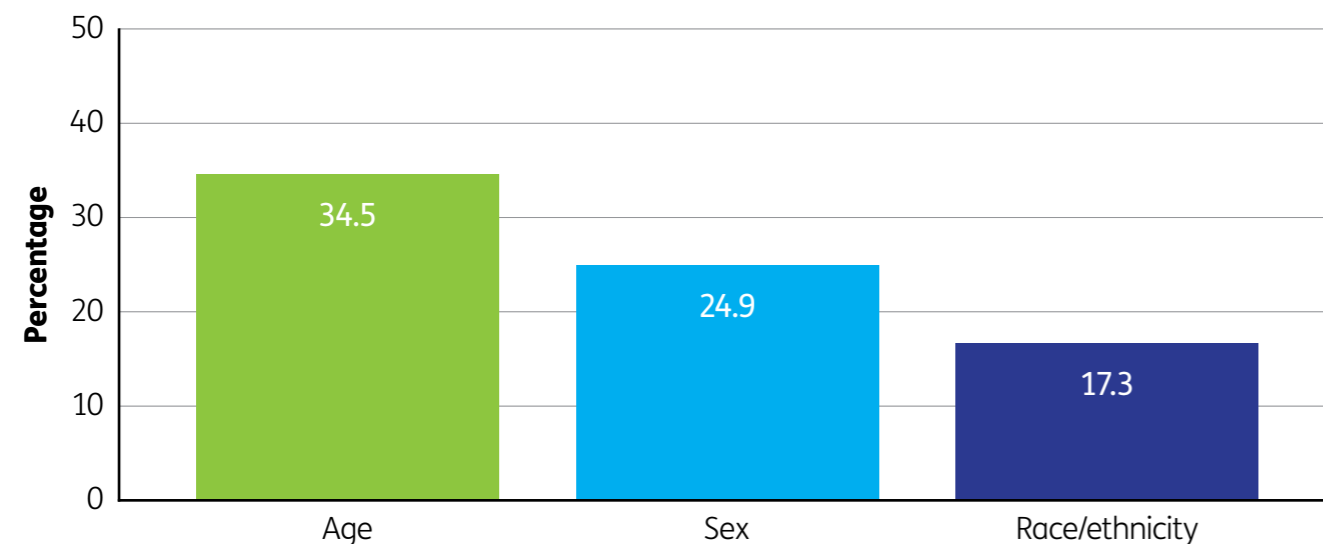
being insulted, abused or denied services. This suggests that more than a third of all Europeans experience age discrimination, and that a majority of these are facing serious unfair treatment.

The EU has long recognised that the European legal framework for tackling discrimination is not complete.<sup>7</sup> There is no minimum protection for people suffering discrimination on grounds of age, outside the area of employment, which was addressed by Directive 2000/78.

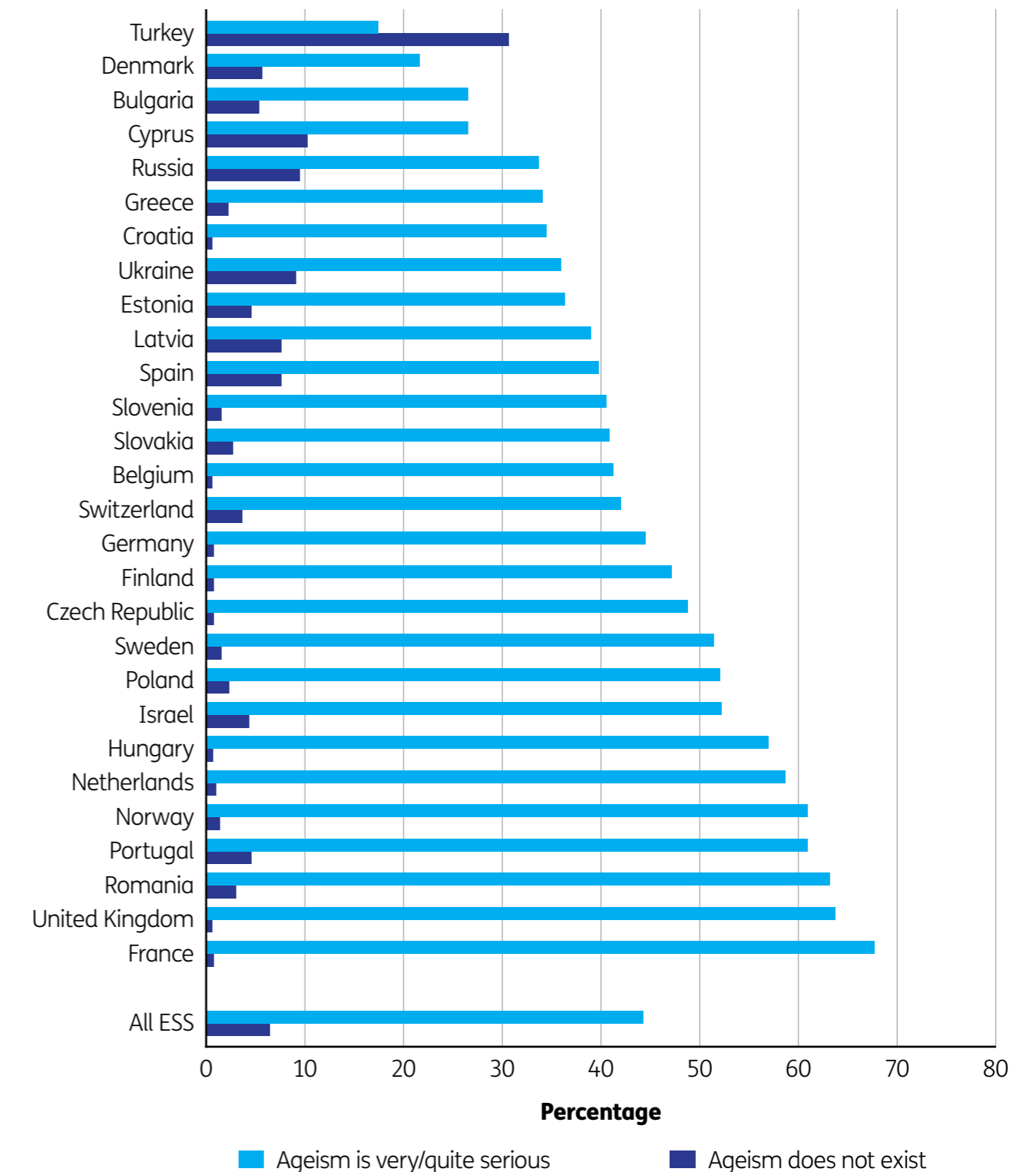
To extend the scope of EU equal treatment law, the European Commission published a draft Directive – COM(2008)426<sup>8</sup> – banning age discrimination in the provision of goods and services. Three years on, this Directive has not yet been adopted.

Given the widespread evidence of serious unfair treatment evidenced in this survey, Age UK hopes that broader EU equal treatment law can be adopted without delay. We are keen to engage with EU policymakers to help make this a reality.

**Figure 2 Percentage of people across ESS countries who had experienced unfair treatment because of their age, sex and race or ethnic background (includes individuals who did not indicate 0 on a scale that ranged from 0: 'never' to 4: 'very often')**



**Figure 3 Percentage of people in ESS countries indicating that ageism is a very serious/quite serious problem or that it does not exist**





### Policy recommendations to combat age discrimination in Europe

1. Ensure effective national implementation of Directive 2000/78 continues, banning age discrimination in employment and occupation.
2. Press for effective national measures going beyond Directive 2000/78 (such as in the UK, where the Government is finalising Equality Act measures to ban age discrimination in access to goods and services).
3. Expedite EU legislation to extend the ban on discrimination on grounds of age, to tackle discrimination of older people in access to goods and services. The draft directive COM(2008)468 remains a good starting point.
4. Introduce policies to tackle multiple discrimination faced by older women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and migrants.
5. Ensure universal access to essential services, being mindful of the barriers that different procedures can create for older people, who may have less access to the internet or to basic bank accounts.

## Employment

The European Social Survey looked particularly at the threats perceived in relation to employment. This is very relevant, given the general pressure to raise pension ages, and the target set by the Europe 2020 Strategy to reach 75 per cent employment of all Europeans aged 20–64 by 2020. Currently only 46 per cent of people aged 55–64 are in work; this drops to 11 per cent of 65–69 year-olds and 5 per cent of those aged 70–74.<sup>9</sup>

Across the countries surveyed, 50 per cent of respondents were worried that employers tend to favour people in their 20s, rising to 57 per cent of those aged 55–64. Finns were the most concerned about this (68 per cent) and Norwegians the least (29 per cent).

There was also agreement that a 30-year-old boss would be more acceptable than an equally qualified 70-year-old.

These negative attitudes could have a detrimental impact on older workers in the employment market as people are encouraged to work longer.

Age discrimination in employment and occupation is banned at EU level, by Directive 2000/78. This legislation has been transposed into national law by all 27 EU Member States, and has had some effect in reducing ageism in the workplace.

However, exemptions permitted under the Directive mean that age remains a key factor in recruitment. This makes it especially hard for older Europeans to find work – a particular challenge as we emerge from the financial crisis.

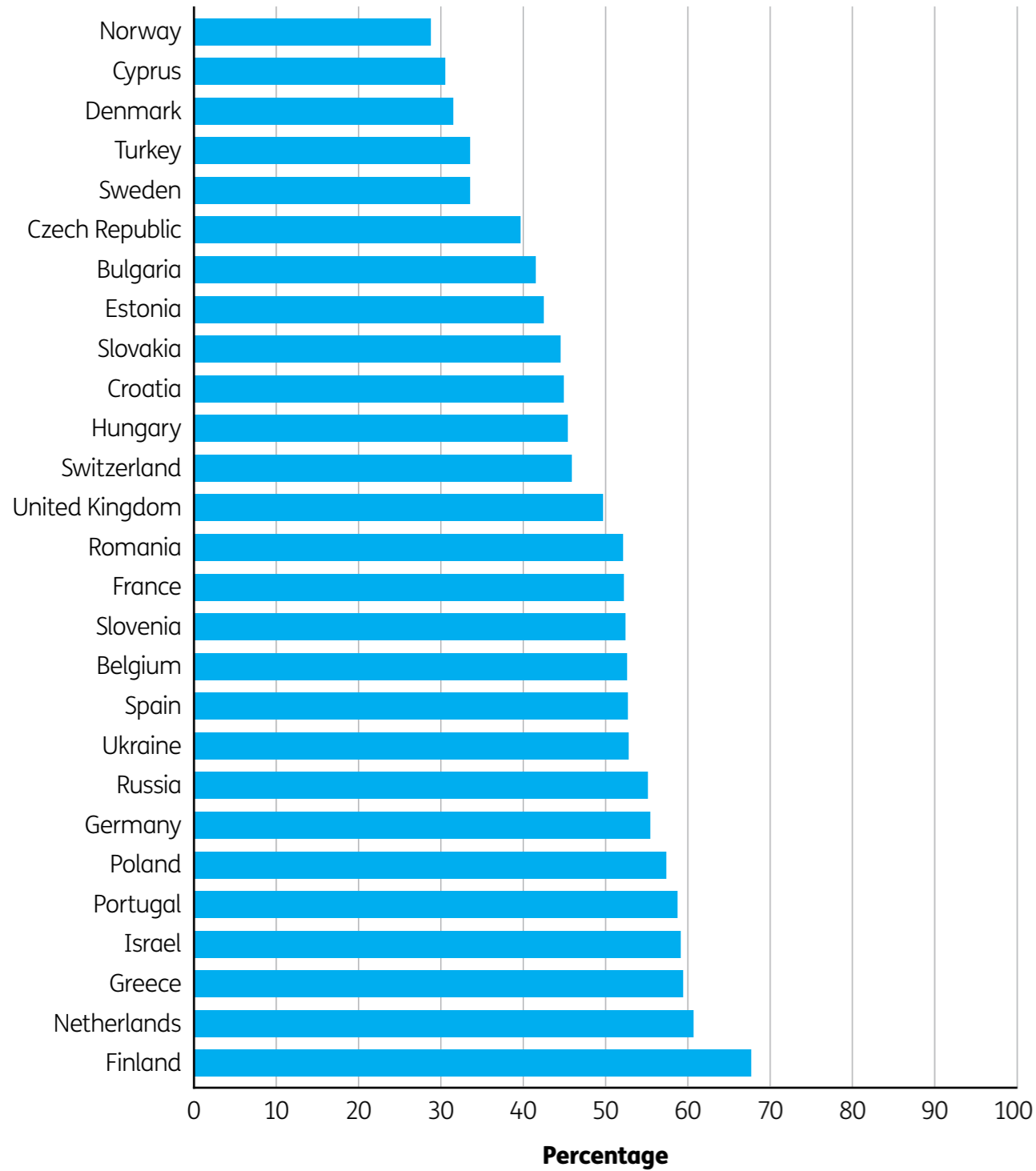
The negative attitudes to older workers confirmed in the survey also point to an underlying weakness in EU employers' ability or willingness to retain older workers. This can have serious economic and social consequences, including increased poverty among earlier retirees, greater demand for benefits among unemployed older workers, and deteriorating physical and mental health for unemployed older Europeans as activity declines.

While individuals should retain the right to retire at agreed statutory ages, staying in employment later in life can have health and social benefits. This is supported by recent research<sup>10</sup> which found that later retirement delayed cognitive decline.

Age UK welcomes the fact that active ageing in employment has been designated the first theme of the 2012 European Year. We hope that policy-makers will seize this opportunity to improve employment prospects for older Europeans.



**Figure 4 Percentage who are worried that employers will show preference to those in their 20s (includes scores between 6 and 10 on a scale that ranged from 0: 'not at all worried' to 10: 'extremely worried')**



Note: There is no valid data for Latvia.

### Policy recommendations to improve employment prospects for older Europeans

1. Focus the Europe 2020 target to raise the employment rate of older workers, by disaggregating the 75 per cent overall target by age group.
2. Use National Reform Programmes in response to Europe 2020 to monitor the employment rate of older people annually and develop new policy measures to help meet the overall EU 75 per cent employment target by 2020.
3. Implement Directive 2000/78 more effectively, removing exemptions permitting age discrimination in recruitment and abolishing mandatory retirement ages where these still exist.
4. Use post-2013 EU Cohesion Policy to boost the employment and training of people in later life, including through the European Social Fund.
5. Support national and local programmes to encourage older workers to stay in work, including phased retirement options and flexible hours.

# Active ageing

In proposing the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing, the EU recognised the demographic shift taking place in the EU and that many people experience old age as a time of marginalisation.

Active participation of older people in voluntary, community and learning activities increases wellbeing, reduces isolation and makes a significant economic contribution.

Fifty-seven per cent of respondents in this survey (including over-70s themselves) felt that over-70s contribute little to the economy. People over 70 were less likely to be seen as making an economic contribution than those in their 20s, with the lowest scores in Slovakia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic, while France took the most positive view in a rather low-scoring contest.

Yet older people increasingly stay active in unpaid voluntary and family care roles;<sup>11</sup> their consumer spending power is also significant, and growing, unlike that of other age groups.<sup>12</sup>

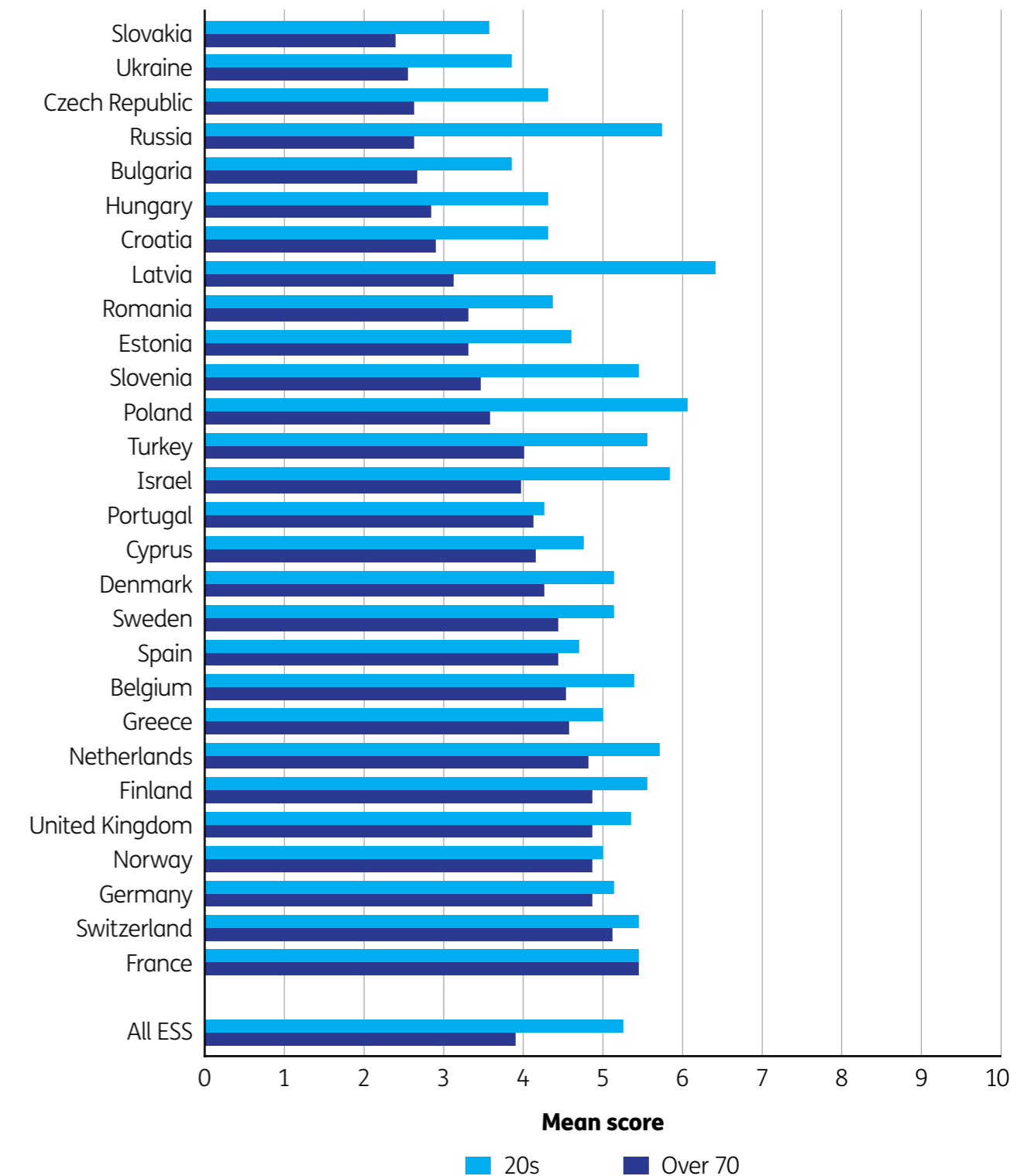
It is important that the 2012 European Year highlights the immense value of older people to societies and economies across Europe.

Lifelong learning is central to active ageing, promoting self-development, confidence and physical and social wellbeing. Evidence suggests the social aspect is particularly valued by older learners.<sup>13</sup>

The EURAGE analysis also found that economic conflicts between generations are of particular concern, as they provide a basis for resentment and can be underpinned by ageist attitudes. These concerns are likely to be affected by people's overall worries about their national economy.

Addressing negative attitudes to older people is essential to reduce perceptions of conflict between generations. It is timely therefore that the EU is seeking to promote intergenerational solidarity as part of the 2012 European Year, alongside measures to help Europe recover from the economic crisis.

**Figure 5 Perceived economic contribution of people over 70 and people in their 20s (scale ranging from 0: 'contribute very little economically' to 10: 'contribute a great deal economically')**



### Policy recommendations to promote active ageing

1. Use the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing to highlight the huge economic and social contribution of older Europeans, in employment, volunteering and caring.
2. Use the current review of the EU Single Market to empower older consumers and grow the silver economy: tailoring and marketing products appropriately, promoting inclusive design, and facilitating e-commerce.
3. Promote lifelong learning by making adult education available to more older people, including through the EU's Grundtvig programme, which funds training opportunities for adult education organisations, staff and learners.
4. Encourage EU and national policy-makers to go beyond the Europe 2020 target of 15 per cent of Europeans aged 20–64 in lifelong learning, and revise the target to include no upper age limit.
5. Use the European Innovation Partnership on Active Healthy Ageing to fund social and technological innovations promoting active and independent ageing, with input from older people themselves.

## Intergenerational solidarity

Intergenerational contact has been proven to break down barriers and reduce perceptions of threat.<sup>14</sup>

This survey found that younger people are seen more often as a tangible threat – more likely to commit crimes, for example; while older people are often seen as burden on health and public services – thus, as an economic threat.

It also found that people aged over 70 have the lowest perceived status in European society, even in their own eyes. This varied widely across Europe with older people having the highest status in Cyprus, and the lowest status in Bulgaria (see Figure 6).

Friendships across Europe tend to be age-segregated: the survey found that 53 per cent of all Europeans have no friends over 70, rising to 80 per cent among people aged 15–24. Across Europe most people tend to have friends of their own age and feel more comfortable with their peers.

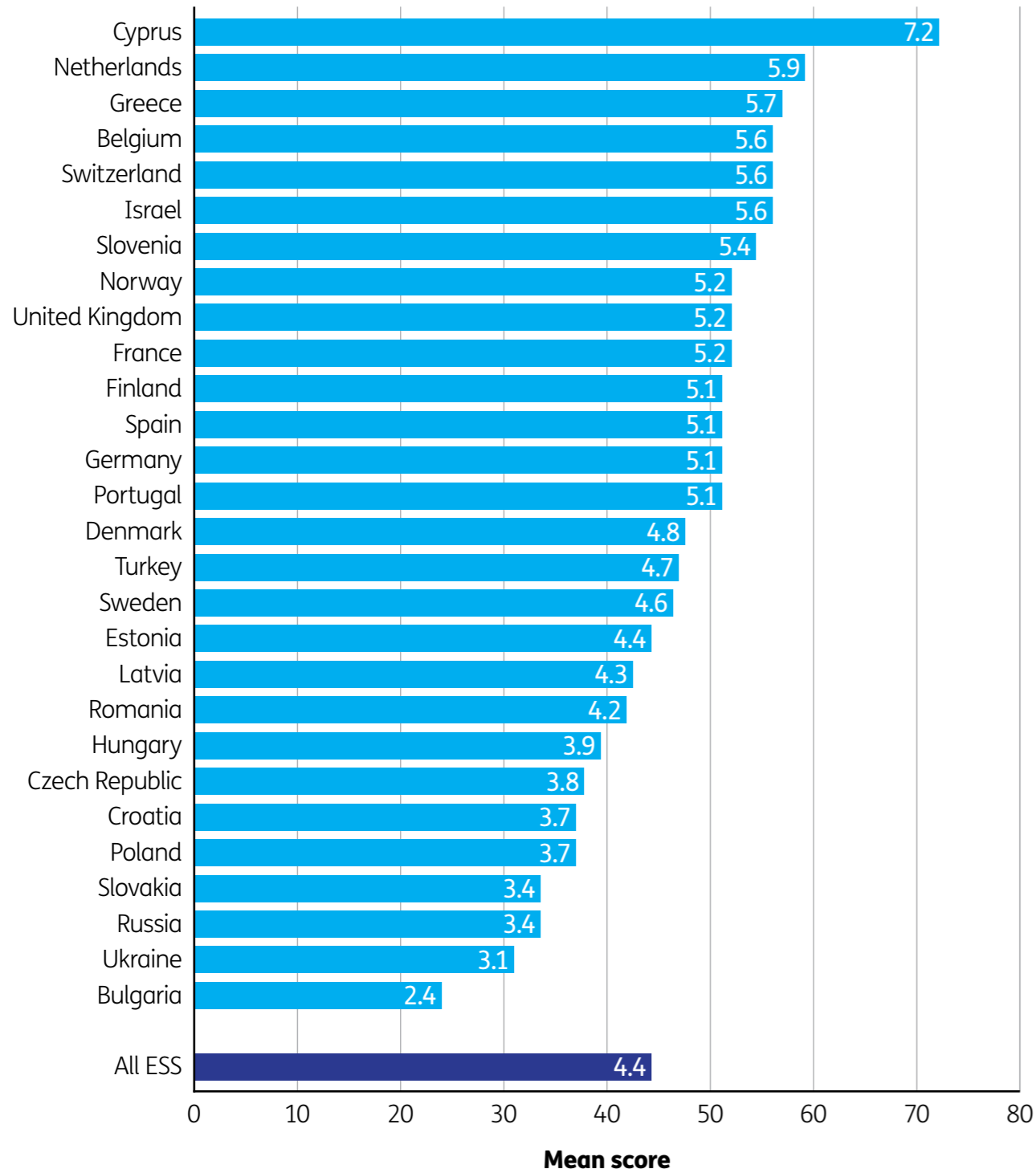
Intergenerational relationships within families, however, seem to be close and confiding – 85 per cent of all Europeans surveyed felt able to discuss personal issues with family members over 70.

Since 60 per cent of respondents have children or grandchildren aged between 15 and 30, and 60 per cent also have family members over 70, the family is clearly a very important medium for promoting intergenerational understanding.

The challenge is how to transfer the successes of intergenerational family relationships to the wider community to reduce prejudice and create stronger social ties with older people, particularly those without families of their own.

Research has established that a powerful way to overcome prejudice is to foster close, honest and personal relationships with others who are seen as belonging to a different group.<sup>15</sup> Creating the opportunity to build these relationships is key. This suggests that European initiatives to promote intergenerational understanding that build on the existing strong contact within families may have good chances of success.

**Figure 6 Perceived status of people over 70 (in ESS countries mean scores, scale ranged from 0: 'extremely low status' to 10: 'extremely high status')**



### Policy recommendations to promote intergenerational solidarity

1. Use the 29 April European Day of Solidarity between Generations and the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations to change public perceptions about the socio-economic contribution made by older Europeans, highlighting the need for intergenerational contact and promoting specific measures.
2. Use the EU Digital Agenda to promote digital inclusion and online social networking to older people, encouraging younger people to share their skills.
3. Promote the sharing of public resources and swapping of skills between age groups, by encouraging youth projects to involve older people and vice versa.
4. Provide fiscal incentives for schemes that bring together people of different generations in the workplace and in the community.
5. Share best practice between countries and regions, particularly from those countries where the perceived status of older people is higher, such as Cyprus.



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## Conclusion

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The results of the European Social Survey show how much work needs to be done to address age discrimination and prejudice in Europe.

There is a wide variety in responses from the 55,000 Europeans surveyed across the 28 countries, reflecting the cultural diversity of Europe and different attitudes to society and family. But the general trends are clear:

- 44 per cent perceive age discrimination as quite serious or very serious
- 35 per cent report unfair treatment on grounds of age (more than on grounds of gender or race)
- 29 per cent have been insulted, abused or denied services on grounds of age (across all age groups)
- 51 per cent are worried that employers show preference to people in their 20s
- 57 per cent believe that people over 70 contribute little to the economy
- 53 per cent of all respondents have no friends over 70.

It's not all bad news. Over 85 per cent of respondents feel able to discuss personal issues with family members over 70, so intergenerational contact is flourishing within European families. Older people are generally viewed as principled and worthy of respect.

But the perceptions of age prevalent across Europe can lead to self-limiting behaviour: 'I am too old for this' or 'I am too young to do that'. They also affect judgements made on the abilities and competence of others – including by employers and service providers. Such ageist attitudes and prejudices reinforce inequalities in society, making later life a time of increased vulnerability, poverty and isolation for many.

The European Union and its member states increasingly recognise the need to address the opportunities and challenges of population ageing. As new European and national policies are defined in the areas of active ageing, employment, equal treatment and solidarity between generations, the ESS research demonstrates how important it is to understand and address the subtle forms of prejudice experienced by older people.

Europe 2020 makes clear that older workers are part of Europe's economic recovery, not a burden to be carried. But the EU has a wider responsibility to ensure that people in later life participate fully in society.

Legislation has an important role to play, and Age UK would like to see the EU's draft Equal Treatment Directive put back on the table for serious debate. People in later life also need to have equal access to opportunities to continue learning and contributing to society.

Leadership is also required, and the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations provides a good opportunity. Standards must be set by European and national champions, in political, civic and media worlds, arguing for a positive view of ageing in order to tackle the persistent corrosive effect of ageism.

The prize is a Europe where all generations flourish. An active older population enjoying better health and wellbeing will be better able to help build the social and economic capital of their countries and of Europe as a whole.



### Policy recommendations to combat age discrimination in Europe

1. Ensure effective national implementation of Directive 2000/78 continues, banning age discrimination in employment and occupation.
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5. Share best practice between countries and regions, particularly from those countries where the perceived status of older people is higher, such as Cyprus.

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# Notes

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- 1 According to US Census Bureau estimates for 2011, there are 164 million people aged 60 and over living in the 28 countries that participated in the fourth round of the European Social Survey, on which this study is based.
- 2 Demography Report 2010, European Commission Staff Working Document, produced by the EC Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/documents/Tab/report.pdf>
- 3 Age UK has also published a briefing on the basis of the same data for a UK audience: *A Snapshot of Ageism in the UK and across Europe*.
- 4 See [www.age-platform.eu/en/age-policy-work/employment-and-active-ageing/2012-european-year-on-active-ageing-and-intergenerational-solidarity](http://www.age-platform.eu/en/age-policy-work/employment-and-active-ageing/2012-european-year-on-active-ageing-and-intergenerational-solidarity)
- 5 B. Levy and M. Banaji (2002) 'Implicit Ageism', in T. Nelson (ed.), *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons* (pp. 49–75). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- 6 Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000, establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.
- 7 As set out in the European Commission's 2008 Communication COM/2008/420, 'Non-discrimination and Equal Opportunities: A renewed commitment'.
- 8 Proposal for a Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation - COM(2008)426
- 9 Eurostat figures from 2009, as set out in the 2011 EPC report *Working Away at the Cost of Ageing*, available at: [www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_1265\\_working\\_away\\_at\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_ageing.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_1265_working_away_at_the_cost_of_ageing.pdf)
- 10 Research article: Michael Lupton et al. (2010) 'Education, Occupation and Retirement Age Effects on the Age of Onset of Alzheimer's Disease', *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 25(1): 30–36
- 11 In the UK, 4.9m (58 per cent) of over-65s in England participate in volunteering or civic engagement (source: Cohesion Research Statistical Release 11 (2010) (Citizenship Survey 2008–09, England), Communities and Local Government, Table 3 (participation at least once a year); 2.8m (13 per cent) of over-50s provide unpaid care (source: *Focus on Older People* (2004) Office for National Statistics).
- 12 European projections show that the 65-plus market will grow by 42 per cent from 2010 to 2030, while the 15–64 market will fall by 4 per cent: Eurostat Statistics in Focus, 72/2008, available at: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-072/EN/KS-SF-08-072-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-072/EN/KS-SF-08-072-EN.PDF)
- 13 In a UK survey of lifelong learning, 27.8 per cent of learners aged 65–74 reported the benefit of meeting new people and making new friends, as opposed to 18.7 per cent of learners aged 17–54. *What older people learn: the whys and wherefores of older people learning*, NIACE 2007.
- 14 A large number of studies show that experiences of positive contact between members of different groups lead to positive intergroup attitudes and relations, including T. F. Pettigrew (1998) 'Intergroup Contact Theory', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47: 65–85.
- 15 S. I. Gaertner and J. F. Dovidio (2000) *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The common ingroup identity model*, Philadelphia: Psychology Press; D. J. Schneider (2004) *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, New York: Guildford Press