Ageism and who gets to count as contributing!

Investment in young people is welcome. People in later working life also deserve serious attention. Across generations, the test is combatting barriers including underinvestment, and age discrimination, as well as ensuring that people can get support when they need it, influence the services intended for them and find decent, accessible work when they want it. As Cheryl pointed out, being unable to work, should not result in the wholesale demonisation of people or their demographic age groupings either.

When Cheryl Barrott, Chair of Sheffield Co-operative Development Group (SCDG), opened a South East Wales Co-operative Party meeting as an invited guest, she asked a question that deserves a wider hearing: who decides what counts as a contribution to society?

Cheryl spoke about the support young people need when they are out of education, employment or training. She also asked the meeting to consider people over 50 who are out of work and have yet to retire. Ageism can narrow opportunities at both ends of working life. A young applicant can be dismissed for lacking experience they have never been given the chance to gain. An older applicant can be passed over because an employer assumes they will struggle to adapt.

Alan Milburn's Young People and Work Review examined the circumstances of around one million 16- to 24-year-olds outside education, employment or training, commonly described as NEET. The Centre for Ageing Better has developed a measure called NETER, covering people aged 50 to State Pension age who are outside employment, training, education and retirement. Its analysis counted 2.9 million people across the UK, just over one in five in that age group. By the end of 2025, nearly 925,000 were interested in work or actively looking for it.

There is a Welsh dimension. Welsh Government analysis shows that around three in ten people aged 50 to 64 in Wales were economically inactive, excluding students, in the year to September 2025. That measure uses different criteria from NETER and includes people who have retired. The National Survey for Wales also found that 14% of respondents aged 16 to 24 or 50 and over reported experiencing age discrimination at work or while looking for work. Wales has reason to ask what support is available to people in later working life and how they can help shape it.

These labels can help researchers identify who is missing out. In public debate, they can also flatten very different lives into a single category and can be applied to discriminate too . Cheryl warned against portraying young people, older people and disabled people as a drain on society because they are outside paid work or receive welfare support. Someone also caring for a relative, helping neighbours or volunteering locally she argued should be valued, supported and recognised too for already contributing. People who cannot work are equally entitled to dignity, security and a voice in decisions that affect them.

The co-operative movement has a responsibility to challenge these attitudes in its own organisations and across the UK. That means looking at who gets interviewed, whose experience is valued, how readily adjustments are made and who gets a say when employment

and training programmes are designed. SCDG is working to support and advocate for young people and older adults affected by these barriers, in the sector and more widely.