

Back on track

Improving
employment support
for over 50s
jobseekers

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in partnership with:

About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

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Introduction



As of April 2020 there were 3.27 million people aged 50-64 out of work in the UK, of which 251,000 were ‘unemployed’ – meaning that they were actively seeking work (ONS 2020, a). These figures only take into account the very start of the COVID-19 lockdown and will now be substantially higher. In the period between March and May 2020 – when COVID-19 and the lockdown took hold – the number of people aged 50 and over in the UK claiming benefits more than doubled (ONS 2020, b).

This recession brings new urgency to a long-standing problem: unemployed people in their 50s and 60s struggle to return to work. This report offers lessons from the experiences of older jobseekers, and from examples of support programmes in different parts of England, to help commissioners and providers think through how best to solve this challenge.

Older people have not been hit by the highest unemployment rates in the short-term aftermath of this crisis, but early indications point to a ‘u-shaped’ effect on work and earnings. Research from the Resolution Foundation has found that younger and older workers have experienced the brunt of the hit to jobs and pay, with the very youngest in the most challenging position. Some 35% of employed non-full-time students aged 18-24 are earning less than they did prior to the outbreak, and this compares to 30% of those in their early 60s, and 23% of 25-49 year olds.

We cannot allow this group of people to be shuffled out of the workforce early – struggling to get by for several years, as they wait to reach their state pension age, while their financial position and health declines.

In the longer-term, older people will be amongst the hardest hit, given that this group are less likely to get back into work after redundancy. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, people aged 50-64 had the lowest re-employment rates following redundancy.¹

It is vital, then, that the response of Government and other employment support providers is tailored to the needs of this group. We know that they tend to have the worst outcomes from existing support programmes. For example, of those aged 50 and over who enrolled on the government's Work programme (which ran from 2011 to 2017), only one in five had a positive job outcome – the worst performance of any group (DWP, 2018).

But, as we showed in our 2019 Rapid Evidence Review, evidence on 'what works' to support unemployed jobseekers back into work is scarce (Parsons and Walsh, 2019). Existing evidence points to work-based training and personalised support as key – but for the most part, the age of participants has not been considered in the evaluation of employment support programmes. As a response to this, the Centre for Ageing Better commissioned Learning and Work Institute to develop a more informed understanding of the existing employment and skills provisions for this age group at various locations across the country.

As well as an initial analysis of labour market data at a local and national level, interviews were conducted with both employment support leads/managers and over 50s accessing employment support in three local areas to understand the experiences of employment services for over 50s. These areas were: Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, Bristol City Council and West of England Combined Authority. The insights within this report are drawn from the research carried out within the three different geographical locations and have been clustered according to prevalent themes within the overall research. The research focused on the development and understanding of two topic areas: barriers to employment support for over 50s, and good practice in supporting over 50s back into employment.

While this research was carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic, lessons learnt from this research are now more important than ever in ensuring over 50s have access to the most suitable and successful models of support. This report will offer insights for anyone thinking through how to best support this group.

¹A forthcoming report from the Centre for Ageing Better and the Learning and Work Institute will outline in detail the impact of this – and previous recessions – on older workers.

Key findings

Barriers to regaining employment for over 50s

1. A **lack of confidence** both in their own ability and their perceived employability
2. **Changes to the way that jobseekers are expected to find and apply for jobs**, which require new skills – for which training is rarely provided
3. **Unsuitable training** that fails to consider and utilise individuals' experiences and existing skills
4. **Underdeveloped digital skills** that are commonly needed to complete work-based tasks – these are often particularly necessary for office-based roles
5. Lack of access to **flexible working**

Good practice: Stages of supporting older workers back into employment

1. Support needs to **consider the individual's experiences and responsibilities outside of employment** – for example: health issues and caring responsibilities
2. Any **training** offered should **expand on clients' past work experience and skills**, and be directly applicable to their abilities and history
3. Some clients will need **support to navigate new job application processes** – with job searches increasingly moving online, this is particularly important for those who need to develop their digital skills
4. Over 50s need to be directly and thoughtfully targeted in the **advertising and marketing** of employment services
5. Clients need **accessible signposting** to other relevant support and training at the end of any support programme – including apprenticeships

Barriers to regaining employment for over 50s



There are a variety of barriers that over 50s come up against when trying to regain employment, and just as the barriers are varied so are individuals' experiences of them. We must recognise that individuals over the age of 50 are not a homogenous group. Not all over 50s will experience all the challenges outlined below in the same way, or even at all. This report focuses on the people who have struggled the most to get into work and draws upon a cluster of factors that are particularly prevalent among this cohort.

Lack of confidence, aspiration and expectations

There is widespread belief among older jobseekers that employers do not want to hire over 50s and prefer young applicants. One adviser reported that when older workers

cite barriers, "90% will say it is their age". Another advisor noted that, "It is really interesting that everybody comes in and the first thing they say if they're older is their age, when I didn't ask."

Whether or not the job market is ageist – available evidence suggests it is – internalised ageism among older jobseekers is clear from the interviews. Clients consistently attribute their poor success in the labour market to the idea that employers discriminate on the basis of age and will always prefer someone younger. This leads them to reduce their own expectations of themselves. For example, one participant stated, "If you look at apprenticeships, etc. I think often employers want to look to the young for apprenticeships where they can mould them, they struggle more with the idea of taking on an older person who might have had bad habits."

It was raised within the research that this lack of confidence and low expectations of oneself can lead to the individuals coming across as

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unconfident in their job interviews and therefore increases the risk of them losing out on employment opportunities. This suggests that, for older clients, employment support for this group needs to focus on changing this mindset, to help them gain confidence and understand that their prior experience is a positive for potential employers.

At the same time, the work of tackling ageism cannot solely rest on the shoulders of the over 50s. Employers need to work to eliminate age-bias from their recruitment processes – and forthcoming work from the Centre for Ageing Better will outline how they can do so. In 2020-21, we will be working with employers to test and design age-inclusive and efficient recruitment practices.

Skills and skills gaps

Some older workers find they need to update or develop their skills, particularly if they’ve been in a previous job or workplace for a long period of time and have been forced to change jobs for reasons such as redundancy or changes to their health. This is compounded by the fact that older workers are less likely to receive in-work training than younger ones (Eurofound, 2015). While they invariably come with a wealth of skills from previous employment, their experience might not feel immediately transferrable. The impact is that people can be left feeling unconfident, deskilled and as one of our interviewees put it – “on the scrapheap”.

Declining health is also a reason for the need to develop new skills. Some participants expressed a need for a career change because of their decreased health; however, their skill set meant they were unable to change industries easily. For example, people might

find regular manual work in a previous role is no longer suitable. One advisor’s interpretation was that: “It might be that they were a tyre fitter and they are [not] able to do that role anymore, or they worked in construction and have got bad knees.” This narrative was common for most who worked in manual roles.

Where vocational skills are needed, accessing training can be difficult and there was low awareness among unemployed older workers of opportunities for training such as apprenticeships that would be open to them. For example, in one of the focus groups, participants shared their knowledge of opportunities in the local area, with one stating “This is more information than I have ever had from any of the services.” This may point to the need for local services to do more to advertise opportunities for retraining and to highlight that they are open to people of all ages.

It is also important to note that there must be a choice in what skills training the individual participates in. It is often the case that such training is not suitable for the recipient. For example, one participant was made to attend a CV workshop even though, by their own admission, they had “a perfectly good CV and a great educational background in which I developed literacy skills key to developing a CV.” Such training is commonly seen as unhelpful and unnecessary.

Digital skills

Within the focus groups many participants were particularly vocal about their lack of confidence in work-related IT skills. Some were confident using digital devices for social purposes, but not for work-based tasks. One advisor identified technology as a barrier for half of their clients.

It’s important to note that basic skills overlap considerably with digital skills and the reason

why some struggle with IT may be that literacy and numeracy skills also need improvement. This may be the result of their career history being largely in manual work rather than in an office setting.

New forms of job seeking

A considerable challenge for many people over 50 in seeking work is their unfamiliarity with recently-developed job search techniques and tactics – not least of all, the importance of searching for jobs online.

One advisor stated that “people who have been in employment for years and need to make a career change, some don’t know where to start to look for work. It can be difficult for older clients to understand recruitment is different now especially as over 80% is done online, so you cannot ‘knock on the door’ of an employer and ask for a job as happened in the past.”

It’s essential that if face-to-face support cannot be given when looking for jobs online that training is offered, to ensure that less digitally-confident jobseekers are not missing out on opportunities.

Flexible working

The need for flexible working increases for many of us as we get older: due to declining health, caring responsibilities or simply the desire to work less and have more time to enjoy other things. The need for flexible working is even more important than ever with 1 in 4 people now having caring responsibilities – a number skewed towards women (Carers UK, 2020).

Increasingly demanding caring responsibilities were commonly cited in our interviews: from looking after grandchildren to caring for partners and parents who were in ill-health. As people live longer, one interviewee suggested, older clients are more and more

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often looking after ageing parents, which some employers do not understand. They still associate caring with young children and need re-educating about the requirement for flexible working for carers. The Centre for Ageing Better (2020) report entitled, [‘Supporting carers back into work’](#) highlights the barriers faced by carers when trying to gain employment, and flexible working is deemed one of the most effective ways of supporting carers back into the labour market.

Good practice: Stages of supporting older workers back into employment



Attracting and engaging over 50s

Attracting over 50s onto the employment support programme was found to be one of the biggest issues in developing successful services for older workers. The research suggests that, for this age group, word of mouth remains the most important way of learning about and accessing services, especially in local areas. However, outreach work in communities, ranging from one-to-one meetings, informal chats at coffee mornings to community events were also mentioned as good places to engage with people. Being visible in a community is also vital, and many providers have situated their staff and offices within local communities to increase engagement with jobseekers over the age of 50.

Providers should think about which forms of outreach might work best for jobseekers over the age of 50 in their locality and try a combination of methods. Practices such as delivering flyers to houses were found to be

quite labour intensive and best done when there is a project that can fund the staff time required. Understanding the reasons for lack of engagement is key to improving employment support for over 50s, and local areas could benefit from carrying out local market research into ways of engagement.

Tailored provision and models of support

We found broad similarities across the support on offer to over 50s between the different areas, largely determined by similar funding and commissioning structures.

A key point highlighted in this research – as in our previous evidence review – is the need to tailor support services to the individuals' needs and to ensure that people's existing experience of work, learning and life is recognised. Much of the 'difference' between approaches for over 50s and other age groups will be in the style of delivery of the provider

and their staff. An inclusive and friendly approach is key – especially for those who might not be experienced in searching for jobs online, might be apprehensive about the learning environment (especially if they had a poor experience at school), have recently left a long-term role, or have been out of the labour market for many years.

The most consistent theme is that adequate time needs to be allocated to working with those over 50s facing multiple barriers and furthest from the labour market. This includes time for the review and assessment, time for training and time for in-depth support.

The following observations were made and defined as best practice in tailoring the provision for over 50s:

- The need for awareness and understanding of the specific needs of clients by advisers, for example, not all clients need a CV writing or IT course
- Some over 50s prefer separate programmes by age group but others welcome opportunities for intergenerational working. Specific activities such as skills reviews or advice on developing a CV are best done separately
- Support needs to be not just tailored for the age group but also personalised to the individual – a feature that can be offered through mixed-age programmes
- It's important to be able to offer support for longer periods if needed – although funding of course makes this challenging. Continuity of adviser support was also seen as a particularly important to this age group

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Onwards signposting of clients and creation of progression routes

As services are often time limited, many advisers and service users highlighted a lack of follow-up opportunities and onwards signposting as a key reason clients failed to secure employment.

This follow-up can look like:

- Referral to Adult Education Services for IT skills, Maths and English
- Referral to further vocational training – including apprenticeships
- Arrangement of work experience placements
- A session with invited local employers to meet a specific group of clients– such as the over 50s – to help them form networks and understand the local landscape
- Group sessions with other jobseekers to share knowledge and experience, with a focus on specific ways forward.

We also heard about programme staff approaching training providers directly to tailor courses for particular groups of clients.

Training opportunities

It is vital for jobseekers to have access to high-quality re-skilling opportunities. There were some innovative examples of training that produced positive outcomes such as 'Returneeships', designed to focus on the employability skills of the unemployed. This is where individuals work towards achieving a variety of qualifications relevant to their existing skill set. However, these are expensive and vocational programmes that covered both basic and advanced skills were not readily available across each local area.

As stated, not all adult learning provision is free, and the cost of learning continues to be

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an issue. This is why many of the participants within this research were actively seeking out a range of options for reskilling both within their service and within the local community, and made good use of networks so that they knew about all the training on offer. However, this relies on the individual's ability to have the knowledge and resources to access such training and can therefore exclude large numbers of over 50s.

Advisors and service users noted that not all participants were keen on retraining and that they would need to be convinced of its effectiveness before agreeing to take part, given the time spent attending training and in some cases the financial cost to the individual. This is particularly relevant for high-level qualified people who did not think workshops such as CV building or basic IT skills were appropriate for them. Again, this emphasises the importance of a tailored approach.

Age-friendly employers and partnership development

From the interviews with service leads and service providers, collaboration with employers proves to be crucial in supporting over 50s back to work. But dated and ageist views of older workers being less attractive to employers is still an issue raised by employment support service users. This view is of course not ubiquitous, and some advisors we spoke to said that they felt ageism is becoming less of an issue, at least from better

employers. One advisor stated: "I don't think there's much of a barrier from employers any more for people over 50. I think there was years ago – ten years ago." Similarly, another advisor stated that employers are now "waking up to the fact that they need to be less ageist."

However, other service providers report contrasting experiences and that they still need to spend time getting employers to understand the benefits of employing older workers. One adviser said: "I think if an employer was to meet this person face-to-face, or give them a trial, you know, work trial for a day, I'm sure they'd see the benefits, and I can honestly see that, because we've got a lot of good people out there with skills, and the experience, and the knowledge, to, you know, do a lot of different things, in a company." Making those opportunities more widespread is crucial to overcoming both the external ageism of some employers and the internalised ageism of jobseekers.

Conclusion

Most employment services are still developed to provide intergenerational support and can tend to focus their efforts on those perceived as easier to place – which often means younger, healthier workers. This tendency is particularly likely to emerge at a time of high unemployment – when the imperative to get the maximum number of people back to work quickly drives activity, and when public and political interests are focused on protecting the future of the young.

This research shows there is a need to address complex and inter-related barriers for this cohort of over 50s, which include but are not limited to: low confidence levels, actual and perceived age discrimination, skills gaps, lack of support for health conditions, and the need for flexible working.

There is often a range of support available, but elements of the support such as engagement and signposting need to be developed further to better meet the needs of their older clients. Effective mechanisms for the co-ordination of support will also be vital. In different localities, there can be a variety of services and support available that needs to be packaged into coherent programmes of support for individuals. This requires effective and expert signposting, collaboration within and across organisations, and partnership working across services and agencies.

Finally, any development and trialling of new approaches must be underpinned by rigorous testing and evidence sharing. Robust

evaluation practices will ensure that the success of support is clearly monitored and assessed and enable good practice to be replicated. Evidence should be shared with key stakeholders and practitioners, ensuring all those working to improve support for over 50s can learn from others and utilise new ways of working. This, in turn, will help to build up the evidence on the effectiveness of new models of support for over 50s.

This report highlights some dedicated practice among service providers, and a clear will to provide better support to this group. At the Centre for Ageing Better, we're working to build the evidence base further, to provide those providers and commissioners with the information they need to do right by older jobseekers. We cannot afford not to.

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