



Public Health
England



UCL Institute of Health Equity

Local action on health inequalities:
**Increasing employment
opportunities and retention for
older people**



About PHE

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. It does this through advocacy, partnerships, world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, and the delivery of specialist public health services. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health.

About the UCL Institute of Health Equity

The Institute is led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and seeks to increase health equity through action on the social determinants of health, specifically in four areas: influencing global, national and local policies; advising on and learning from practice; building the evidence base; and capacity building. The Institute builds on previous work to tackle inequalities in health led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and his team, including the 'Commission on Social Determinants of Health', 'Fair Society Healthy Lives' (The Marmot Review) and the 'Review of Social Determinants of Health and the Health Divide for the WHO European Region'. www.instituteofhealthequity.org

About this briefing

This briefing was commissioned by PHE and written by the Institute of Health Equity (IHE). It is a summary of a more detailed evidence review on the same topic and is intended primarily for directors of public health, public health teams and local authorities. This briefing and accompanying evidence reviews are part of a series commissioned by PHE to describe and demonstrate effective, practical local action on a range of social determinants of health.

Ellen Bloomer wrote this briefing for IHE.

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Increasing employment opportunities and retention for older people

Summary

1. Being in good work protects health and wellbeing. Work is an important source of income needed for a healthy life and provides social opportunities that are good for health and wellbeing.
2. Poor working conditions contribute to early retirement. Older people in more disadvantaged social positions are more likely to have difficulty finding and keeping a job. Both issues contribute to health inequalities.
3. A range of employer approaches are likely to increase employment opportunities and retention among older people including measures to promote fair recruitment, equal training opportunities, flexible working, improvements to the physical and psychosocial work environment, phased retirement and succession planning.
4. For employers, the benefits of employing and retaining older workers can include reduced turnover and recruitment costs, positive employee feedback, retention of skills and experience and transfer of knowledge.

The links between the employment of older people and health inequalities

Being in good quality work supports health and wellbeing because work generally provides the income needed to live a healthy life, is a source of social status, and offers opportunities to participate fully in society. Research shows that poor working conditions are associated with early retirement.¹⁻⁴ Older people in more disadvantaged groups are more likely to face difficulties in finding and keeping jobs, as they are less likely to have built up skills over their lives and are more likely to have health problems at an earlier stage in life: both factors contribute to reducing older people's employment prospects.

Unemployment is linked with greater morbidity, including higher risks of limiting illness, cardiovascular disease, poor mental health, suicide and health damaging behaviours such as smoking.⁵⁻¹³ A 2013 review conducted two interviews with people aged 50-69 years old at first interview and found that those who were retired had greater declines in physical, mental and self-assessed health compared to those still in work, with the adverse effects increasing with the number of years spent in retirement.¹⁴ Therefore, increasing employment opportunities for older people, especially for those in disadvantaged groups, may contribute to improved health and wellbeing, lower socioeconomic inequalities and so reduce health inequalities among older people.

Demographic changes are resulting in an ageing population, with 36% of workers expected to be aged over 50 by 2020.¹⁵ A UK study found that being isolated from family and friends was associated with a 26% higher risk of death over seven years among older people aged over 52, suggesting the social aspects of staying in employment are beneficial for older people's health.

Evidence suggests that older people can also be beneficial to employers. Research by B&Q at its Macclesfield store, staffed entirely by over-50s, reported that profits were 18% higher, staff turnover six times lower, with 39% less absenteeism and 58% less shrinkage compared to its other stores.¹⁶

What works to increase employment opportunities and retention for older people?

BOX A

Key features of success in increasing employment opportunities and retention for older people

1. Improvements to the physical and psychosocial work environment
2. Fair recruitment practices that encourage applications from older people
3. Encouraging training opportunities and making them accessible for workers of all ages
4. Flexible working
5. Phasing retirement and flexible retirement options
6. Performance discussion for employees of all ages to alleviate concerns in this area
7. Succession management
8. Training for managers on issues of age
9. Regularly seeking workforce feedback
10. Risk assessment for workers with health or mobility needs

Local authorities have a role as employers and as local leaders in improving employment opportunities and job retention for older people. As poor working conditions contribute to early retirement¹⁻⁴ better working conditions are likely to increase the chances of retaining older staff.

Effective action to address the barriers that may prevent older people from finding and staying in work should help to improve health and wellbeing within this group. Barriers faced by older people at work include discrimination and negative perceptions among employers, for example, relating to performance and training opportunities, and caring responsibilities.

It is against the law to discriminate directly or indirectly on grounds of age in the workplace, and in recruitment and dismissal, except where it is objectively justified.¹⁷ The Department for Work and Pension's Age Positive initiative brings together research and information from employers on effectively managing an ageing workforce and can be helpful for providing information and solutions to recruiting, employing and getting the best out of workers of all ages.

Boxes B and C provide examples of a local authority and a large private sector employer who have taken action to improve the employment and retention of older workers.

BOX B

Hertfordshire County Council - management training and flexible retirement¹⁸

Hertfordshire County Council employs around 35,000 people (including school staff). A third (34%) of employees are aged over 50 and 48% are aged 40-54. More than 60% of the workforce is over 40 years old so there were concerns that this wealth of experience and knowledge could be lost if the career aspirations of older workers were not managed.

Description. The council removed the mandatory retirement age in 2006 and implemented a flexible retirement scheme. With their employer's agreement, employees can access all or

some of their pension benefits while continuing to work. The council allows all staff to work flexibly and highlights the options available to them if they want to ease into retirement by reducing their hours. It also offers a one-day pre-retirement course, focusing on the transition from employment to retirement.

The council has built the concept of 'age neutrality' into its management training programme, so that issues of age discrimination are specifically discussed when managers attend short courses on other topics. It has developed its performance management guidance to include tips for managers around issues of age. The council requires all its managers to proactively deal with the issues of negative attitudes and stereotypes including age. It trains employees in the behaviours and language required for a diverse working environment. There can be a tendency for managers to apply a 'hands-off' approach to managing employees who are approaching retirement age; this is no longer acceptable at the council, which requires a shift in perception and management style.

Impact. The council reports this action has led to lower staff turnover and recruitment costs (turnover currently 13.3%), and positive employee feedback: in the latest staff survey, 65-year-old respondents were the most engaged staff group. This is reported to have benefited the council because it is able to retain employees with key skills, and because its public face reflects the diversity of the council's clients.

While there is often a perception that retaining older employees restricts opportunities for younger workers, the council found that encouraging flexible retirement models can actually support and enable a better transfer of skills and organisational knowledge to younger staff. The council saw an increase in the take-up of flexible retirement following the intervention.

A clear communications strategy to cascade messages about the council's expectations of its staff, together with management training helped to make this approach work well.

Hertfordshire County Council's approach to managing its older workforce provides examples of policies and practices that local authorities can implement, such as flexible retirement options including phased retirement and flexible working and management training on age-related issues. These approaches can bring a range of benefits including reduced turnover and recruitment costs, positive employee feedback and retaining and transferring key skills and experience.

BOX C

B&Q – removing the barriers to employing older workers¹⁶

B&Q employs over 39,000 people; its approach to employment is "based on a philosophy of attitude, not age".

Description. B&Q has identified a number of benefits in employing older workers and has made deliberate efforts to remove barriers that might restrict who they recruit, retain or promote. The company has removed the default retirement age and provides flexible retirement options. It has a range of contract types, which offer hours to suit all individuals, and age-related criteria has been removed from their rewards and benefits. It has a learning and development framework for all customer advisers that offers choice and flexibility around how and when to learn. Flexible working is offered to everyone, irrespective of age, length of service or caring responsibilities. Over 62% of company employees work flexibly.

B&Q regularly seeks feedback and views from its workforce. Diversity insights reporting is used to regularly review the company's attraction and workforce statistics. All stores are encouraged

to employ a diversity champion, and a diversity e-learning programme has been developed and forms part of the induction programme for every new employee and manager. Age positive case studies and media are used in all internal and external communications. Each store has had a disability audit.

In its approach to enabling employment and job retention for older workers, B&Q uses a range of measures to remove barriers to employment among older people, for example ensuring that recruitment practices are free from age bias, and removing age-related criteria from rewards and benefits. The company also highlights the importance of employee feedback: it conducted employee research in the 1990s and regularly seeks workforce views and feedback.

Conclusion

Effective actions to remove the barriers preventing older people from finding and staying in work are likely to help improve health and wellbeing in this group. Barriers to employment faced by older people include discrimination and negative perceptions among employers (for example, relating to performance and training opportunities), caring responsibilities and health. A range of employer approaches are likely to increase employment opportunities and retention among older people including measures to promote fair recruitment, equal training opportunities, flexible working, improvements to the physical and psychosocial work environment, phased retirement and succession planning.

With an ageing population that is facing the prospect of working to older ages, good quality employment opportunities for older people are essential and can bring additional benefits for health and wellbeing.

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