

Learning and Skills

England

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Meaningful opportunities to learn for both work and pleasure should be available to people of all ages.

Key issues

With State Pension age rising and people having to work longer, and the concept of a 'job for life' increasingly outdated, it is vital that all workers are equipped with the skills necessary to play a full part in the labour market, able to re- and up-skill as necessary. Learning for pleasure and leisure can bring wide-ranging benefits to older people and is similarly important.

Access to training

Training, personal development and career progression have been identified as important goals for older workers as much as for younger workers.ⁱ However older workers do not always take up the training on offer – often it is designed for younger people and older people may appreciate learning in a different way, for example placing less emphasis on gaining formal qualifications. Training also needs to be appropriate and flexible – once older people are out of the workforce they typically find it harder to get back in than younger people, and often need opportunities to update existing skills or learn new ones. Failure to offer suitable learning opportunities to the over 50s is a form of age discrimination.

Since 2010 there have been substantial cut-backs to Government-funded training for older workers, in favour of greater funding for apprenticeships. Initially, this led to a rise in older apprentices with nearly 61,790 people aged over 45 starting an apprenticeship in 2016/17, up from approximately 10,000 in 2009/10. However this has declined to 38,150 in 2018/9.ⁱⁱ

Apprenticeships can be a good form of learning, but are not suitable for most older workers. The Skills for Life programme offers free learning of different forms, many of which are available to older workers, but none that are specifically designed for their needs.

Career Review at 50 / Mid-Life MOT

Age UK believes that everyone should be entitled to a 'Career Review'ⁱⁱⁱ at the age of 50. This would allow people to access specialist advice on their career options, their training needs, and help them assess their transferable skills. In addition, we hope that people would be able to get help with their finances and any health needs, both of which are important for planning working life and retirement. In early 2019 the Government launched a website offering signposting for a 'Mid-life MOT' around these options, but a physical service is yet to be forthcoming.

Digital skills

Digital skills are integral to modern workplaces, and there must be sufficient opportunities to ensure that people over 50 can access help and training in basic digital skills where appropriate. The onus falls not only on the Government, but also on employers and training providers, to ensure they offer full support. Age UK supports the Government's decision in its Digital Strategy to extend free digital training to all adults who need it, although the Government needs to ensure that other learners do not miss out on opportunities, for example literacy and numeracy skills, as a result.

Public Policy Proposals

- There should be a Government-led inquiry into the decline of training opportunities for older workers. This should seek to explain changes in participation and deliver solutions to redress this, with extra investment from savings generated by the increases in the SPA. It should seek to ensure that older workers' aspirations and the UK's future skills needs can be met.
- Local Skills Improvement Plans, introduced following the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, should include details on how provision for 50+ workers will be delivered. The Government has a key role to play in making the business case for including this group.
- The Department for Work and Pensions website offering the 'Mid-life MOT' is a good first step, but should be extended to a concrete offer involving careers advice and support with finances.
- The Government should increase employer funding of learning, including examining if the introduction of new Individual Learning Accounts will help older workers, which would pool financial contributions towards learning from individuals, employers and the Government.
- The National Careers Service must reinstate the over 50s as a priority group.
- Employers and training providers should ensure that older workers have sufficient digital skills to be successful in modern workplaces.
- The Government must continue investing in adult community learning, which is important to many older people, and can deliver savings in other areas such as healthcare.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and crosscutting themes such as age equality and human rights.

www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/

ⁱ Institute for Employment Studies (2017), Fulfilling work: what do older workers value about work and why?

ⁱⁱ Apprenticeship and traineeships dataset, gov.uk

ⁱⁱⁱ Age UK (2017), Creating a Career MOT at 50, https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_oct17_creating_a_career_mot_at_50.pdf