

Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Inquiry Submission

Education Select Committee

August 2019

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Contact:

christopher.brooks@ageuk.org.uk

Age UK
Tavis House
1-6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
T 0800 169 80 80 F 020 3033 1000
E policy@ageuk.org.uk
www.ageuk.org.uk

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About this Inquiry

This inquiry examines the benefits of adult skills and lifelong learning to the individual, society and the wider economy. It also explores the level of support available to learners, and the role played by local authorities/combined authority areas in providing adult education. This submission by Age UK focusses on issues affecting older learners, broadly defined as people aged 50 and above.

Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland, Age Cymru, Age NI and local Age UKs across England, to help everyone make the most of later life, whatever their circumstances. In the UK, the Charity helps more than seven million older people each year by providing advice and support. It also researches and campaigns on the issues that matter most to older people. Its work focuses on ensuring that older people: have enough money; enjoy life and feel well; receive high quality health and care; are comfortable, safe and secure at home; and feel valued and able to participate.

Key points and recommendations

- With a rising State Pension age and increasing numbers of 50+ workers, it is of crucial importance that workers of all ages have access to training in order to keep their skills up to date. Without this, it will be difficult for individuals to maintain employment and damaging to the UK's productivity.
- Since 2010, there has been a significant decline in funding for adult skills and education, which has affected participation by older learners.
- The numbers of older apprentices has declined in the past three years due to policy changes. In itself, this is not necessarily a problem, but there is little evidence that Government, employers or individuals are increasing their training investments accordingly to address the shortfall.
- The Select Committee should hold a further inquiry to investigate the impact of 24+ Advanced Learner Loans, which appear to have stifled participation in learning among the 50+ age group.
- The design of workplace training needs to be improved, as it often fails to meet the needs of older workers. This in turn discourages people in this group from taking part.
- Age UK welcomes the launch of the 'Mid Life MOT' website. The Government should continue to develop Mid Life MOTs to include careers and training advice sessions.
- Community learning remains an important issue for many older people. We believe it should continue to be funded publicly following the forthcoming Spending Review.

1. Response

Participation in training

1.1 With State Pension age rising and people having to work for longer than ever, it is vital that all workers are fully equipped with the skills necessary to play a full part in the labour market. Personal development is important regardless of age, and as the concept of a 'job for life' becomes increasingly outdated, individuals of all ages will increasingly need to re- and up-skill in order to remain active in the labour market.

1.2 However, since 2010 there have also been substantial cuts to the training budget available to older workers, partly in favour of greater funding for apprenticeships. We are concerned this has had a detrimental effect on participation in other forms of workplace training – while we support the drive to increase apprenticeship numbers, they are unlikely to be suitable for the majority of older workers and should not be funded at the expense of other training options.

1.3 In terms of the numbers taking part, recent years have seen a rise and fall of older apprentices. In 2009/10, there were 10,000 apprentices aged 45+: this increased to about 60,000 older apprentices in 2014/15ⁱ before a decline to 34,000 in 2017/18.ⁱⁱ While looking at apprenticeships alone does not give us the full picture (and Age UK agrees with the reasons behind some of the policy changes), this downward trend is concerning because it indicates fewer opportunities for older workers to access training. It will be exacerbated if employers, individuals or other publicly funded schemes are not increasing their own investment in training accordingly. A full investigation into participation among the 50+ cohort is needed.

1.3 We are also concerned about the negative impact 24+ Advanced Learner Loans appear to have had on participation. In 2012/13, the year before they were introduced, there were 713,000 learners aged 45-59. By 2016/17 this has fallen to 453,200.ⁱⁱⁱ It is not clear precisely why there has been such a sharp fall in participation, but perhaps could be connected to older people being more averse to debt. We would like to see the Education Committee investigate the impact of the loans in more detail.

Training design

1.4 Older workers do want to progress and learn new skills. However we have previously commissioned research that provided evidence people do not take up the training that is on offer largely because it does not meet their needs. The University of Essex (who undertook the research for Age UK) stated:

“Evidence suggests older workers may undertake less formal training but this may be due to a number of reasons in relation to both opportunity and how the training is

framed or presented at an organisational level. Previous background and experience may also mean they choose to learn in cohort-specific ways which differ from contemporary norms surrounding formalised training environments.”^{iv}

1.5 Older workers do want to progress and learn new skills^v. However often people do not take up the training that is on offer, largely because it does not meet their needs – training is often designed for younger people and older people appreciate learning in a different way, for example placing less emphasis on gaining formal qualifications.

‘Mid Life MOTs’

1.6 Between 2013-15, the Government piloted Mid-Life Career Reviews to allow people aged about 50 to get specialist advice on their career options. The pilots found that the vast majority of people benefited from taking part, and that it was a low cost and effective way of engaging them in planning for future work-based needs. It is therefore an important tool in supporting ‘Fuller Working Lives’.

1.7 The service was extended to cover other aspects of ageing, including finances and health, and re-branded as the ‘Mid Life MOT’. In 2019, the Government launched a website providing information, aimed at the ‘mid life’ cohort. Age UK supports this as a good first step, and we look forward to the concept being developed further.

1.8 Everyone should have the opportunity to access relevant advice about careers, training, finance and health at age 50. We examined this in our policy paper ‘Creating a Career MOT at 50’.^{vi}

Age discrimination in training

1.9 The Equality Act 2010 covers age discrimination in training, as well as employment. It is therefore illegal to discriminate on grounds of a protected characteristic, including age, when offering or delivering any workplace training. This law has most notably been put into practice in [Homer vs Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police](#). In 2012 the Supreme Court ruled that Mr Homer had suffered indirect age discrimination because he had been refused the opportunity to apply for a promotion that required a degree level qualification as he was deemed to have insufficient time left before retirement.

Community learning

1.10 Community learning, usually delivered in more informal settings, is also hugely important for older people, and benefits both physical and mental health. Community Learning Trusts, which are local partnerships offering a range of learning provision to suit local needs, regard older people as a priority group. However, in recent years, budgets

have been cut and many courses – delivered through FE colleges and in communities – have ceased without full knowledge of the consequences for individuals and society.

1.10 We call for the Government to maintain the current level of expenditure on Community Learning, as well as to continue working to make sure that it is available in communities across the country.

ⁱ The FE Data Service 2015, Apprenticeships start statistics

ⁱⁱ House of Commons Library (Feb 2019), Apprenticeship Statistics, England

ⁱⁱⁱ FE data service, participation in FE and skills statistics

^{iv} University of Essex (2013), Assessing the Evidence Behind the Common Perceptions of Older Workers, commissioned by Age UK

^v Institute for Employment Studies (2017), Fulfilling work: what do older workers value about work and why?, Centre for Ageing Better

^{vi} 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