

Education and training needs of the over-50s

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Although unemployment across the North East region has fallen again, with more people in full-time and part-time paid work, one group that has been overlooked by central government and other public agencies is the over-50s. True, a majority both of men and women in this age cohort who are below retirement age and living in the North East are in paid employment, with a significant minority of middle-class professionals having opted for a four-day week. Nevertheless, the stark reality is that thousands remain economically inactive and excluded from the labour market.

In Newcastle upon Tyne about 1,000 50-64 year olds are registered as receiving Jobseekers Allowance. Thousands more, mostly former coal miners and shipyard workers, have been 'parked' on disability benefits. There is a large group of 'hidden unemployed', including, for example, people who depend on a partner's earnings, and long-term unemployed people receiving Disabled Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payments. In addition, a growing minority of the over-50s, having experienced redundancy in their working lives, have

been forced into self-employment on precarious working conditions coupled with an irregular and modest income.

To the social scientist Chris Philipson, author of *The Sociology of Old Age*, over-50s or 'pensionista' unemployment is a class- and gender-related phenomenon. The majority of those involved are white, former blue-collar workers living in the most disadvantaged former industrial neighbourhoods across both Tyneside and Wearside. Thousands of people across the region are the victims of both globalisation and automation, which have caused long-term unemployment and consigned them to the economic scrap heap. They are disconnected from economic opportunities, even though some of them live near major employment development sites and retail parks.

The North Bank of the Tyne contains 20 per cent of the most deprived wards in Newcastle (Benwell, Scotswood to Walker along the Tyne, including Lemington, parts of Fenham, central Blakelaw, Cowgate, North Fawdon and Newbiggin Hall) and Wallsend. In the last half decade, research into the

situation of people living in these areas has been carried out by, among others, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), Prime (on the 'missing millions') and, more recently, by Anna Round on behalf of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) North.

Work conducted by Dr Nick Drydakis of Anglia University reveals that women over 50 are very much less likely to be offered a job interview than women in their late 20s. Men in this younger group were found to be three times more likely to be offered an interview than men over 50, while for women this figure rises to five times. Despite the 2010 Equality Act, age-based discrimination is rife across the region.

A similar process is taking place in the teaching profession, both in academy chains and in FE colleges, where older lecturers are being weeded out by an ageist executive culture that is obsessed with cost cutting, to be replaced with newly qualified teachers or even unqualified staff. This is happening at a time when annual salaries of FE chief executive officers have soared above £180,000.

The Carnegie Third Age Programme, which champions older people, maintains that campaigns against ageism are having at least some impact. Although some companies use subtle techniques of employee recruitment that favour applicants who are under 45, a growing number of employers have policies and procedures aimed at counteracting age-based discrimination. Twenty years ago high street giants like M&S and outdoor retailers like B&Q adopted schemes favouring applicants over 50, while today all B&Q stores have a proportion of older workers, who are less likely than younger people to take time off and have proved to be just as productive.

However, although the DWP has produced information intended to encourage employers to retain, recruit and retrain older workers, stubborn ageist attitudes and belief systems persist amongst some employers, including in the public sector. The previous Labour administration's New Deal 50+ has been abandoned, and the Prince's Trust programme to support business start-ups for the over-50s has withered on the vine, while training opportunities – other than in volunteering – remain few and far between.

As noted, many older adults in the North East live in communities which have high rates of poverty, unemployment and physical and mental ill health, and at the same time low skill sets and few, if any, qualifications. Given recent employment patterns and the fact that most 55 year olds haven't been involved in formal education for several decades, few of them are equipped to compete for jobs in a fast-paced, digital employment market which favours IT-

savvy 24 to 35 year olds. A significant number are locked into a cycle of deprivation that acts as a barrier to employment and prevents many neighbourhoods from achieving their full potential.

Politically, a significant number of these partially-employed households located on the outer council estates, in riverside neighbourhoods and in Northern coastal towns are traditional 'Old Labour' voters. But, as Goodwin and Matthews note in their book *Revolt on the Right* (2015), many have deserted Labour, 'the people's party', for the radical rightwing UKIP. In Blyth, an industrial Northumbrian coastal town, UKIP came a respectable second in the 2015 general election. They polled well in Sunderland, Redcar, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough. Over 70 per cent of voters in these de-industrialised towns backed Brexit in the EU referendum. For Goodwin and Matthews, UKIP reflects this group's sense of grievance, anger and economic insecurity. They feel that they've been 'left behind' and that the principal political parties, including Labour, have stopped listening.

Although local authorities like Newcastle and North Tyneside have signed up to a Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme post-referendum, funded by the EU to narrow the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged, more needs to be done by central government and other public bodies to address the needs of this numerically large post-50 cohort and reduce age, gender and economic inequalities. Central government needs to re-prioritise adult skills and education to improve the life chances of the 'left behinds' or 'just managing'. As Estelle Morris, vice-chancellor of Sunderland University, points out, adult education has been starved of resources. Opportunities for adults over 50 to get back to study or update their skills have been cut to the bone. Yet these are the policies that could help the over-50 'left-behinds' to get back onto the ladder. As Morris recommends, this policy needs to be placed firmly back at the top of the agenda to help promote a more inclusive society.

It must also be recognised that the long-term hidden older jobless still face consistent age-based discrimination when applying for vacancies. Yet many have had decades of valuable work and life experience. Some possess useful transferable skills without knowing it. But because of prejudice on the part of some employers they don't stand a chance in a fast-moving, competitive labour market. Older workers are offered some protection under the age component of the Equality Act, but too many bosses avoid their legal responsibilities. If we're serious about creating an age diverse workplace, business and civic leaders need to re-emphasise the value of older workers.