Over-50s employment support

Findings from research in the West London Alliance sub-regional partnership

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Institute for Employment Studies

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from research conducted with older people and borough partners in the West London Alliance sub-regional partnership, to help inform the implementation of a new West London Integration Hub and ensure that this can meet the needs of older residents who are out of work.

Context

Analysis of Universal Credit and Census data finds that there are generally higher rates of disadvantage among older people in West London than in the country as a whole, with 15% of older people (those aged 50-64) claiming Universal Credit compared with 10% of those in England. Four boroughs have rates of Universal Credit receipt above the London average, with rates highest in Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Hounslow.

Rates of Universal Credit receipt among older people have grown in all boroughs, typically trebling since the eve of the pandemic. This has been driven by increasing disadvantage among older people, as well as the movement of people onto Universal Credit from the benefits that UC has replaced (in particular, incapacity benefits) as their household circumstances have changed.

Growth in UC receipt has been highest in Brent and Ealing (up by more than ten percentage points of the 50-64 population in each) and lowest in Harrow (up by seven percentage points). However, rates of receipt have still trebled in Harrow, where UC receipt was lower than other areas pre-pandemic.

Looking at more local and neighbourhood levels, rates of Universal Credit receipt are generally higher in the southern parts of West London than the northern parts. There are also some notable differences between areas in the elements of Universal Credit being received, with:

■ Higher rates of receipt for 'in work' UC support in the south west; and

■ Among those out of work, high rates of receipt in the 'Searching for Work' group in Harlesden and Greenford, in the 'No Work Requirements' group around Hounslow, Southall Green and White City; and in both groups in southern and eastern parts of Brent.

Analysis of Census data on other demographic characteristics suggests that there is some correlation between areas with high rates of UC receipt and those with high shares of people with low qualifications, who cannot speak English well, are from ethnic minority groups, and/ or are disabled. However, in each case these correlations are not particularly strong, so this data only gives us pointers as to some of the factors that are associated with – or could explain – higher levels of labour market disadvantage.

Understanding and meeting residents' needs

Interviews with residents and borough stakeholders identified seven key, linked themes.

Identification, outreach and engagement

Many referrals into services were from Jobcentre Plus, with mixed experiences. Feedback was more positive where referrals were to services tailored to their needs; but less positive where referral was to larger scale, more generis provision.

Services were also often accessed via community routes – faith groups, libraries, or other Council services (including 'no wrong door' models), while boroughs talked about promoting services through websites and social media, newsletters and word-of mouth.

While referral pathways were felt to have improved post-pandemic, it was recognised that older people were often less likely to engage with services through more traditional routes – emphasising the need to work through wider services in more targeted ways.

Orientation towards work

Residents often wanted to move back into similar jobs to ones that they had previously worked in. However, there were strong preferences for more flexible work (more part-time, local and hybrid), job security and (where possible) less demanding work.

Nonetheless residents were not confident in finding these jobs, often as a result of direct experiences of discrimination. Many were demoralised or demotivated, and some internalised these biases – feeling 'obviously' less employable than others.

Stakeholders had similar views, and emphasised the importance of confidence building and support to maintain motivation. However, it was also felt that older people could have unrealistic expectations (on hours, security, flexibility and so on) and/ or may not understand what other jobs may suit their skills and experiences.

Specialist support to prepare for work

Five key elements of more effective and specialised provision were identified:

- Longer-term, more consistent support – ideally with the same adviser;
- Practical and tailored help – across job preparation, matching and brokerage;
- A supportive and empathetic approach, to build and maintain confidence;
- Strong employer relationships and connections, to help 'promote' older people; and
- A focus on the whole person – including health, finances and caring needs.

Borough level services were invariably seen as being better able to deliver most or all of these things than Jobcentre Plus, as some of the larger-scale contracts such as Restart and JETS were felt to provide less personalised support and to focus on more rapid job

entry. However, no services were providing targeted support for older people specifically, which was felt by residents and boroughs to be a gap.

Skills support

Lack of access to appropriate digital skills support was identified as a key issue. In particular, residents wanted workplace-specific training rather than basic digital skills – so skills that would help them to return to similar jobs that they had done in the past or to use digital technology day-to-day in new roles.

Related to this, older people were felt to be more likely to be at risk of digital exclusion, which could also affect their ability to apply for jobs online.

There were often negative views on apprenticeships. Partly this was about perceptions (with them being seen as something for younger people) but also in some instances reality – with one person reporting having left a highly pressured and very low paid 'apprenticeship' in a nursery. This combination of inflexibility, long hours and low pay clearly runs directly counter to what many older people wanted from work.

Employer engagement, support and challenge

Experience and perceptions of employer discrimination was a consistent theme. Despite this though, boroughs emphasised that current recruitment pressures meant that some employers were starting to think differently about recruitment approaches and candidate pools.

Boroughs were often keen to take advantage of these opportunities, but recognised that more needed to be done; in particular in promoting the benefits of an age diverse workforce (and opening up opportunities specifically for older people).

Addressing wider needs

Three key wider needs were identified, around:

■ Long-term ill health. This was often a key driver of leaving work, with evidence that both physical and mental health had deteriorated for many of those out of work. This then limited the sorts of jobs that people would consider applying for.

■ Costs of living. It was reported that many more people needed help with managing household finances, and understanding how taking a job would affect their income (with it not always being clear that people would be significantly better off).

■ English language and literacy. While less common, boroughs noted that many out of work residents needed help with the practical English language skills needed for a workplace – including around health and safety, understanding instructions and working in teams.

Co-ordination and collaboration

Taken together, these themes emphasise the importance of working effectively across services. There were a number of examples of this working well, notably in referral from employment support into skills or budgeting support; as well as a need and appetite to work more closely with health services in future.

One key area for improvement was around referral between employment support – with apparent duplication and perhaps over-provision of jobsearch support like CV writing and interview preparation; but gaps in more tailored support for things like reskilling, work trials or the more practical support referenced above.

There was often genuine hope among boroughs that the 'No Wrong Door' approach could help to address these issues and to work in more collaborative and complementary ways.

Recommendations

This research sets out a range of challenges in improving employment for older people, but also real opportunities – especially with employers continuing to face recruitment difficulties, and with those commissioning and delivering services looking at how they can do more to raise participation among those outside of the labour market.

The report makes recommendations in five main areas as follows.

1. Tailored, one-to-one support

- A focus on developing specialist 'streams' and lead advisers for working with older residents, within borough services.
- Greater flexibility around delivery within these streams, to tailor support in line with the areas identified in this research.
- A key focus on rapid skills assessment, mapping skills to jobs and building confidence.

2. Building adviser skills and capabilities

- Exploring scope for specialist training for advisers working most regularly with older people, perhaps using the Institute for Employability Professsionals' accredited model.
- Supporting development of a 'community of practice' for advisers working with older people.
- Building in time for more outward-facing activity by specialist advisers – to engage and share learning with people delivering other employment services and with referral partners.

3. Meeting additional support needs

Working to improve access to specialist support in the following areas:

- Health – with a particular focus on access to vocational rehabilitation support (e.g. support with self-management, understanding adjustments, action planning and counselling).
- Digital skills – tailored to workplace needs and with the scope for practical application through volunteering or placements.

- Job-specific skills – and in particular, looking to fill the gap between short pre-employment training and full apprenticeships (this might include working to tailor Mayoral Academy provision to the needs of older people).
- Apprenticeships – designed to meet the needs of older people (for example on flexibility, pay and security).
- English language and literacy – again tailored to practical workplace application.
- Reducing costs of working – for example by subsidising travel or paying wage top-ups via employer grants.

4. Employer engagement

- Developing resources for employer engagement, that can be used across services and that promote age-positive practices.
- Co-ordinating employer engagement activity and conversations – for example by sharing contacts and vacancies; working to develop a joined-up employer offer; and if possible bringing together employers and older jobseekers (e.g. through specialist jobs fairs).
- Encouraging the public sector to lead by example – in job design, inclusive recruitment, flexible training and workplace support.

5. Co-ordination across services

Finally, we would recommend that the 'No Wrong Door' model could focus in particular on:

- Provision mapping – identifying available support and gaps in line with the themes in this research, and identifying which can offer tailored support to older people;
- Referral partnerships – focusing in particular on improving in-person outreach (via co-location with services that older people use) and building partnerships with JCP '50 Plus Champions'; and
- Effective case management – exploring the scope for a more integrated approach to case management across services, to help address risks around duplication and gaps in support.

1   Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies was commissioned in January 2023 by the West London Alliance (WLA) to conduct rapid research to understand the labour market context, experiences and support needs of residents aged over 50 and out of work. This report presents the findings from that research.

Specifically, this work is intended to help inform the implementation of a new West London Integration Hub, as part of the Greater London' Authority's 'No Wrong Door' agenda. The hub's aim is to improve co-ordination of, and access to, employment support and upskilling for out of work residents. The findings from this research aim to ensure that the Hub is able to meet the needs of residents aged over 50, given the disadvantages in the labour market that older people can often face and the growth in worklessness among older people over the last three years.

The West London Alliance is one of four sub-regional partnerships in London, covering seven West London boroughs: Barnet, Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow.

1.1   Approach

The main focus of the research was in-depth interviews with residents of the West London Alliance area who were aged over 50. These interviews were preceded by contextual analysis of Universal Credit and Census data, and by interviews with borough leads for employment and skills. More details on the methodology are set out below.

1.1.1   Quantitative analysis

Analysis of Universal Credit and Census data was conducted in January and early February 2023. Universal Credit data was used as it provides detailed data over time and to very local levels (Output Areas). Data can also be broken down into 'conditionality groups' which broadly reflect the labour market status of claimants – in particular:

- The 'Searching for Work' group – who are mainly out of work and are required to actively seek and be available for work (i.e. are treated as being unemployed);

- The 'No Work Requirements' group – who are out of work and not required to attend interviews or carry out jobsearch activities, usually because of long-term ill health or being disabled; and

- 'Working' conditionality groups – people who are in work and who usually do not have requirements to take steps to increase their earnings.

For this analysis, UC data to Local Authority and to 'Middle Super Output Area' (MSOA) levels was combined with population estimates from the 2021 Census, to give estimates of the proportion of 50-64 year olds who were claiming Universal Credit in different areas and over time. MSOAs are geographical areas with between 2,000 and 6,000 households.

While this approach provides very granular analysis, its main drawback is that it only provides a partial picture – as only around a quarter of all of those who are out of work and aged 50-64 also claim Universal Credit. Nonetheless, this partial picture does correlate very closely with levels of disadvantage. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1 below, which shows the relationship between the share of residents in local areas who live in households that are deprived on multiple measures, and the share of people aged 50-64 in those same areas who are claiming UC and out of work. The close fit between the two indicators means that we can be confident that differences in rates of Universal Credit receipt between areas are likely also to closely reflect differences in labour market (dis)advantage[1].

Figure 1.1: Correlation between proportions of population in Middle Super Output Areas deprived on multiple measures, and population aged over-50 on Universal Credit
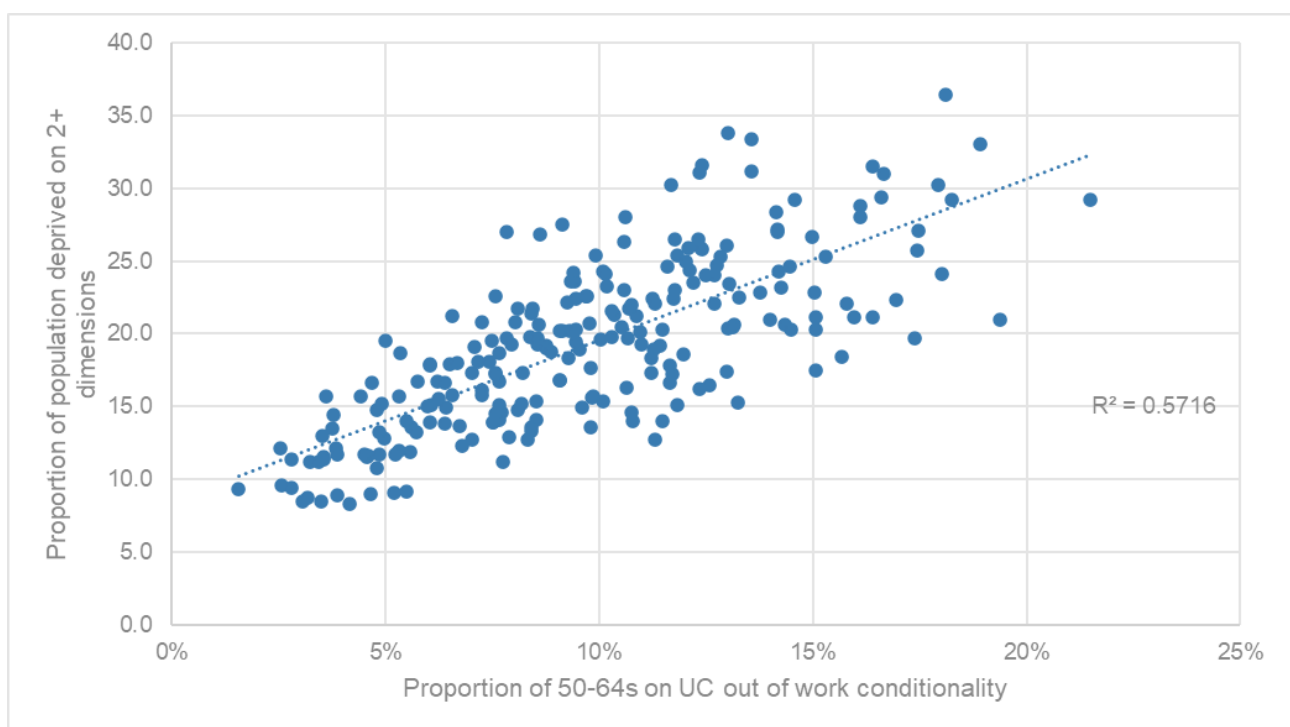
Source: IES analysis of StatXplore and Census 2021

The analysis of Universal Credit data was then supplemented by analysis of wider demographic data from the Census, to explore the extent to which rates of Universal

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[1] Specifically, the graph has an R-squared value of 0.57, which means that 57% of the difference (variation) between rates of out-of-work UC receipt for older people can be explained by levels of deprivation in those areas.

Credit receipt may also correlate with other characteristics and potential labour market disadvantages. However at the time of this research, this wider Census data was generally only available for the whole population (i.e. not just those aged 50-64).

1.1.2 In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews aimed to explore and understand the employment and support needs of people aged over 50 in the WLA sub-region; their awareness of and attitudes to employment-related support; their experiences of support that they had received (if any); and their views on how support could be improved in future.

Interviews with residents aged 50 and over

Interview participants were recruited through local services and through direct applications from those who had seen information about the research project. Seventeen residents were interviewed overall, with interviews taking place between March and April 2023. The interviews covered four broad areas:

■ Experiences of employment, views on barriers to/ opportunities for work, and employment and skills support needs;

■ Views on future employment – expectations/ aspirations for work, factors likely to influence future return to work;

■ Experiences of employment and skills support in the past – finding out about support, engaging with provision, support received, what has worked particularly well, what could be improved; and

■ Views on future support – what would be most effective in finding out about support, engaging with provision, receiving support and achieving outcomes.

The interviews managed to reach a broad range of residents with different characteristics and needs. Around half of those interviewed had health conditions or were disabled; the majority were from ethnic minority groups; around half were on Universal Credit, with the other half on other benefits or no benefit; and there was a fairly even split between men and women. Most participants had been out of work for some time – with two participants reporting having last worked in the last year; just over half having last worked between one and three years ago; and around one third having last worked three or more years ago (i.e. before the Covid-19 pandemic). Around two thirds of those interviewed were currently accessing employment support, with most other interviewees having received support in the past. Only one interviewee had had no experience at all of employment support. More information on the demographics of interview participants is set out in Appendix 1.

All interviewees were given a £30 voucher as a thank you for taking part in the research. Interviewees were provided with a choice regarding how they would like to be interviewed. The majority were undertaken via video platforms, with one interviewee preferring to be interviewed over the telephone.

Interviews with Borough leads and service delivery organisations

Interviews with residents were supplemented by in-depth discussions with key local stakeholders. A range of people were included in these interviews, including Borough leads for employment and skills, employment and skills programme managers, learning managers and apprenticeships managers, and employment support providers. The interviews covered five main areas:

- Their views on the needs, barriers and opportunities for over-50s in their borough;

- Current service delivery for over-50s – what is working well, what can be improved, who is well served, and where are the gaps and potential opportunities;

- How over-50s are identified, communicated with and engaged;

- How services are delivered, and in particular how they fit together; and

- How the No Wrong Door model could support improvements for these groups.

Interviews were conducted via online video calls and were undertaken in March and April 2023.

2   Labour market context

2.1   Summary

Analysis of Universal Credit and Census data finds that there are generally higher rates of disadvantage among older people in West London than in the country as a whole, with 15% of older people (those aged 50-64) claiming Universal Credit compared with 10% of those in England. Four boroughs have rates of receipt above the London average, with rates highest in Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Hounslow.

Rates of Universal Credit receipt have grown in all boroughs, typically trebling since the eve of the pandemic. This has been driven by increasing disadvantage among older people, as well as the movement of people onto Universal Credit from the benefits that UC has replaced (in particular, incapacity benefits) as their household circumstances have changed.

Growth in UC receipt has been highest in Brent and Ealing (up by more than ten percentage points of the population in each) and lowest in Harrow (up by seven percentage points). However, rates of receipt have still trebled in Harrow, where UC receipt was lower than other areas pre-pandemic.

Looking at more local and neighbourhood levels, rates of Universal Credit receipt are generally higher in the southern parts of West London than the northern parts. There are also some notable differences between areas in the elements of Universal Credit being received, with:

■ Higher rates of receipt for 'in work' UC support in the south west; and

■ Among those out of work, high rates of receipt in the 'Searching for Work' group in Harlesden and Greenford, in the 'No Work Requirements' group around Hounslow, Southall Green and White City; and in both groups in southern and eastern parts of Brent.

Analysis of Census data on other demographic characteristics suggests that there is some correlation between areas with high rates of UC receipt and those with high shares of people with low qualifications, who cannot speak English well, are from ethnic minority groups, and/ or are disabled. However, in each case these correlations are not particularly strong, so this data only gives us pointers as to some of the factors that are associated with – or could explain – higher levels of labour market disadvantage.

2.2 Older people claiming Universal Credit

Overall, older people in West London are significantly more likely to be claiming Universal Credit – and so more likely to be disadvantaged in the labour market – than older people in the country as a whole. Compared with the London, rates of receipt are similar for the West London Alliance overall, but this disguises significant variation between boroughs and local areas. Figure 2.1 below sets this out, showing rates of UC receipt for people aged 50-64 by WLA borough, for London and for England.

The figure below shows that at least one in nine people aged 50-64 claim Universal Credit in every WLA borough, compared with one in ten across England. Overall, 15% of older people claim Universal Credit within West London, which is in line with the London average. However, rates of receipt are above the London average in four boroughs, with more than one in six older people claiming Universal Credit in three of these (Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Hounslow).

Figure 2.1 also shows the proportion of older people in each broad conditionality group, which illustrates that rates of receipt are higher than the England average across all main categories ('In Work', 'Searching for Work' and 'No Work Requirements'). Differences are most significant for the 'In Work' group, especially for those four boroughs with rates of receipt above the London average. This likely reflects a combination of factors including more people who rent their homes, higher housing costs and larger household sizes (all of which would increase average Universal Credit awards, and so mean people would need to earn more in order to move fully off Universal Credit).

However, rates of receipt are higher for those out of work too, with particularly high rates of receipt in the 'Searching for Work' group for those in Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Ealing; and in the 'No Work Requirements' group in Hammersmith and Fulham and in Hounslow.

Figure 2.1: Proportion of population aged 50-64 claiming Universal Credit, by conditionality group
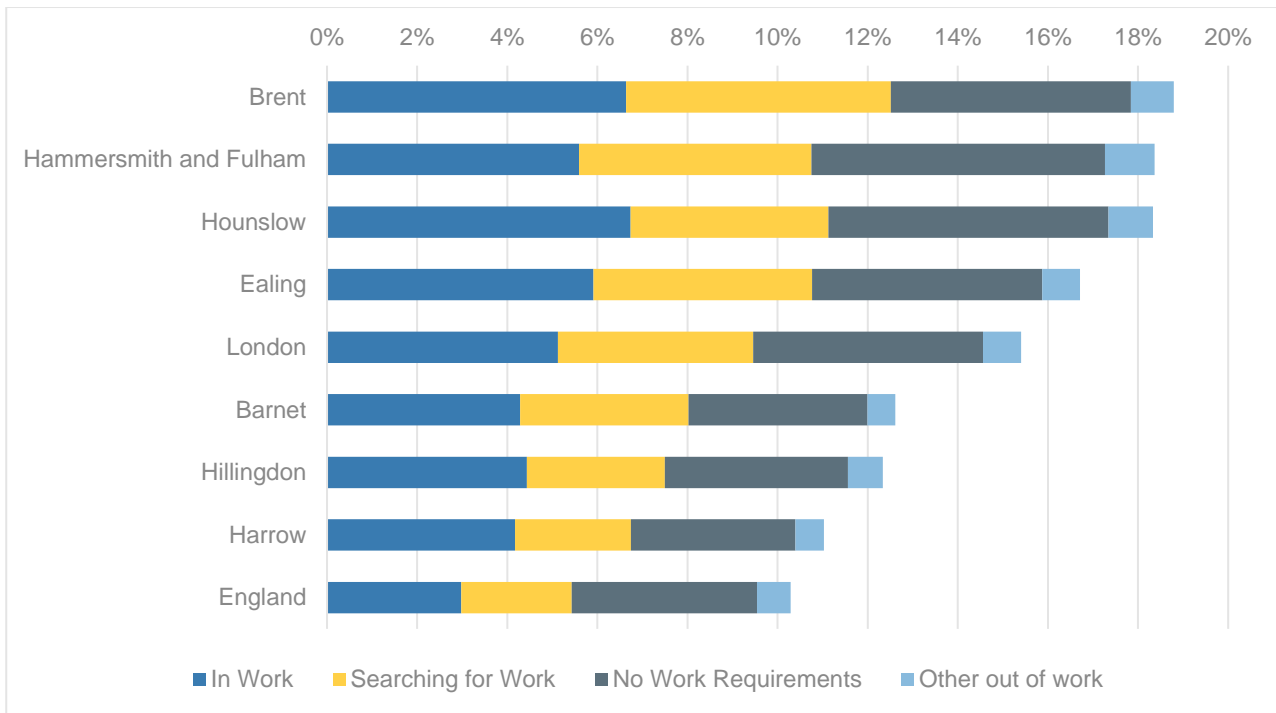
Source: IES analysis of StatXplore and Census 2021

Universal Credit receipt has grown significantly since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This growth in receipt was particularly pronounced in mid-2020, where widespread disruption, job losses and loss of earnings (for both employees and self-employed people) led to over two million new claims to Universal Credit and accelerated the movement of people to Universal Credit from older benefits that UC has replaced (like tax credits, Income Support and incapacity benefits).

Figure 2.2 shows the proportions of those aged 50-64 who were claiming Universal Credit on the eve of the pandemic (February 2020) and in the most recent data (December 2022). The graph is ordered by highest proportion currently on Universal Credit in each borough, followed by the London and England figures. On average, rates of receipt have grown by 9.2 percentage points (roughly trebling overall). The large growth has been in Brent (12.8 percentage points) and Ealing (10.5). In both boroughs, around 5½% of older people were claiming UC before the pandemic. These boroughs saw the largest growth of any borough in all three broad conditionality groups (Searching for Work, No Work Requirements, and those In Work).

Harrow has seen the lowest growth in the share of population – at 6.9 percentage points – but the borough also had the lowest rate pre-pandemic and has seen among the largest proportionate increases (with rates of receipt trebling overall). This lower growth appears to be particularly due to a smaller increase in those in the 'No Work Requirements' group, which could reflect fewer former claimants of incapacity benefits in that borough.

Other boroughs have seen rates of receipt grow by between 7.7 and 9.0 percentage points. In the case of Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham, this was from a relatively high base pre-pandemic (above 8% in both boroughs), so the proportionate growth has been somewhat lower.

Figure 2.2: Proportions of population aged 50-64 claiming Universal Credit by conditionality group, February 2020 and December 2022

Source: IES analysis of StatXplore and Census 2021

2.3   Universal Credit receipt by detailed local area

Looking at the proportion of older people claiming Universal Credit by local area, we see generally higher rates of receipt in south west and south east of the sub-regional partnership, shown in Figure 2.3 below. As noted in the introduction, this uses Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs), which each comprise between 2,000 and 6,000 households. In particular, a quarter of older people are on UC in areas around Hounslow, Southall, Acton Town, Hammersmith and Fulham Broadway; while about a third (32%) of older people are on UC around Harlesden. Rates are generally lower in the northern parts of the sub-regional partnership.

Figure 2.3: Proportion of 50-64 year olds claiming Universal Credit by Middle Super Output Area
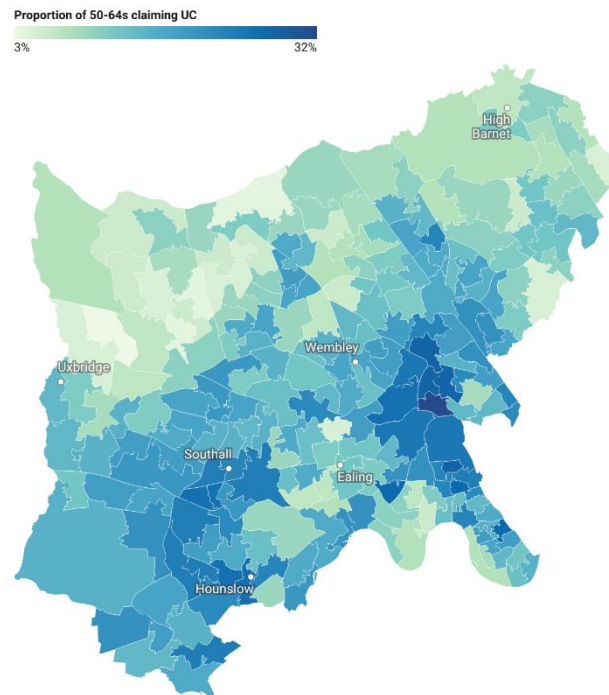
Source: IES analysis of StatXplore and Census 2021. Map created with Datawrapper.

Figure 2.4 below then sets out rates of receipt for each of the three main conditionality statuses – Searching for Work, No Work Requirements and In Work.

These three maps show a similar relationship between the northern and southern parts of the sub-regional partnerships, but there are also some interesting differences between them. Most notably:

- Rates of receipt in the 'Searching for Work' conditionality group – which broadly maps on to unemployment – is most pronounced around Harlesden, in southern and eastern parts of Brent, and around Greenford;

- Receipt by people in the 'No Work Requirements' group – which in particular includes those who are economically inactive due to long-term health and disability – is highest in parts of Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, Hounslow and Ealing; and

- Receipt by people who are in work (and therefore on low incomes) is more pronounced in the south west of the sub-regional partnership – in particular around Hounslow, Southall Green and White City (which likely reflects in particular more people who are renting and who are also paying higher rents).

Figure 2.4: Proportion of 50-64 year olds claiming Universal Credit by conditionality group and Middle Super Output Area
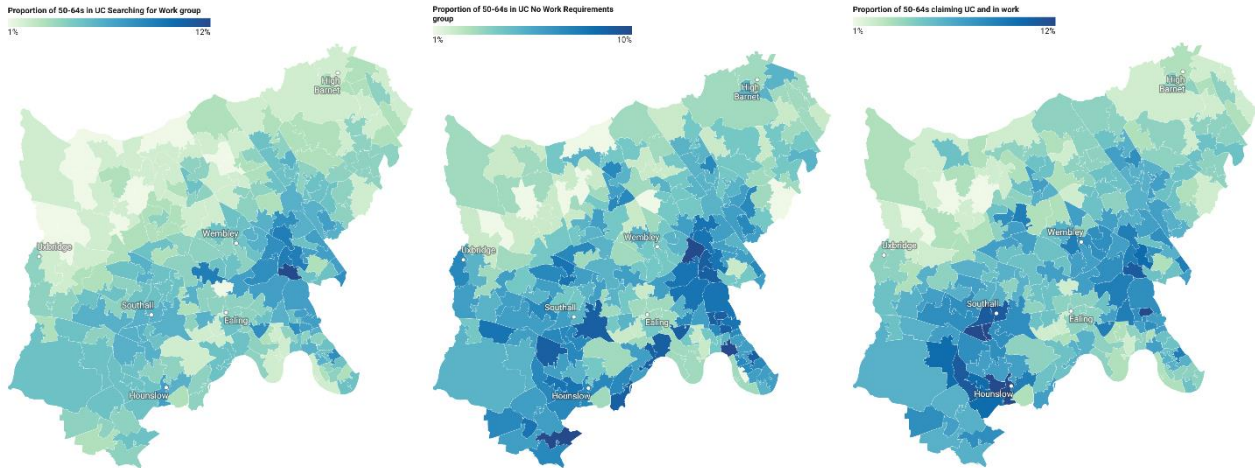
Source: IES analysis of StatXplore and Census 2021. Map created with Datawrapper.

2.4 Demographic characteristics associated with higher rates of Universal Credit receipt

While rates of UC receipt and analysis of conditionality groups can give some insight into the levels and nature of disadvantage for older people, it tells us relatively little about their wider demographics and potential barriers to employment. Therefore analysis was also carried out using Census data to MSOA level on other demographic characteristics. Due to data limitations, this analysis was conducted for all ages – not just older people – but it nonetheless provides some potential pointers on the extent to which disadvantage in the labour market is associated with different characteristics or circumstances. This found some correlation between rates of UC receipt and the share of populations that were:

■ Qualified below Level 2 (equivalent of five good GCSEs);

■ Not able to speak English well or very well;

■ From an ethnic minority group; and/ or

■ Disabled.

However, while each of these are likely to be factors contributing to higher worklessness among older people, the correlations were not particularly strong – explaining between about 10% and 15% of the difference between areas' rates of UC receipt.

3   Understanding and meeting residents' needs

3.1   Summary

Interviews with residents and borough stakeholders identified seven key, linked themes.

3.1.1   Identification, outreach and engagement

Many referrals into services were from Jobcentre Plus, with mixed experiences. Feedback was more positive where referrals were to services tailored to their needs; but less positive where referral was to larger-scale, more generis provision.

Services were also often accessed via community routes – faith groups, libraries, or other Council services (including 'no wrong door' models), while boroughs talked about promoting services through websites and social media, newsletters and word-of mouth.

While referral pathways were felt to improved post-pandemic, it was recognised that older people were often less likely to engage with services through more traditional routes – emphasising the need to work through wider services in more targeted ways.

3.1.2   Orientation towards work

Residents often wanted to move back into similar jobs to ones that they had previously worked in. However, there were strong preferences for more flexible work (more part-time, local and hybrid), job security and (where possible) less demanding work.

Nonetheless residents were not confident in finding these jobs – often as a result of direct experiences of discrimination. Many were demoralised or demotivated, and some internalised these biases – feeling 'obviously' less employable than others.

Stakeholders had similar views, and emphasised the importance of confidence building and support to maintain motivation. However, it was also felt that older people could have unrealistic expectations (on hours, security, flexibility and so on) and/ or may not understand what other jobs may suit their skills and experiences.

3.1.3   Specialist support to prepare for work

Five key elements of more effective and specialised provision were identified:

■ Longer-term, more consistent support – ideally with the same adviser;

■ Practical and tailored help – across job preparation, matching and brokerage;

- A supportive and empathetic approach, to build and maintain confidence;

- Strong employer relationships and connections, to help 'promote' older people; and

- A focus on the whole person – including health, finances and caring needs.

Borough level services were invariably seen as being better able to deliver most or all of these things than Jobcentre Plus and larger-scale contracts, which tended to be more focused on rapid job entry. However, nobody was providing targeted support for older people specifically, which was felt by residents and boroughs to be a gap.

3.1.4 Skills support

Lack of access to appropriate digital skills support was identified as a key issue. In particular, residents wanted workplace-specific training rather than basic digital skills – so skills that would help them to return to similar jobs that they had done in the past or to use digital technology day-to-day in new roles.

Related to this, older people were felt to be more likely to be at risk of digital exclusion, which could also affect their ability to apply for jobs online.

There were often negative views on apprenticeships. Partly this was about perceptions – with them being seen as something for younger people – but also in some instances reality – with one person reporting having left a highly pressured and very low paid 'apprenticeship' in a nursery. This combination of inflexibility, long hours and low pay clearly runs directly counter to the what many older people wanted from work.

3.1.5 Employer engagement, support and challenge

Experience and perceptions of employer discrimination was a consistent theme. Despite this though, boroughs emphasised that current recruitment pressures meant that some employers were starting to think differently about recruitment approaches and candidate pools.

Boroughs were often keen to take advantage of these opportunities, but recognised that more needed to be done; in particular in promoting the benefits of an age diverse workforce (and opening up opportunities specifically for older people).

3.1.6 Addressing wider needs

Three key wider needs were identified, around:

- Long-term ill health. This was often a key driver of leaving work, with evidence that both physical and mental health had deteriorated for many of those out of work. This then limited the sorts of jobs that people would consider applying for.

- Costs of living. It was reported that many more people needed help with managing household finances, and understanding how taking a job would affect their income (with it not always clear that people would be significantly better off).

■ English language and literacy. While less common, boroughs noted that many out of work residents needed help with the practical English language skills needed for a workplace – including around health and safety, understanding instructions and working in teams.

3.1.7 Co-ordination and collaboration

Taken together, these themes emphasise the importance of working effectively across services. There were a number of examples of this working well, notably in referral from employment support in to skills or budgeting support; as well as a need and appetite to work more closely with health services in future.

One key area for improvement was around referral between employment support – with apparent duplication and perhaps over-provision of jobsearch support like CV writing and interview preparation; but gaps in more tailored support for things like reskilling, work trials or the more practical support referenced above.

There was often genuine hope among boroughs that the 'No Wrong Door' approach could help to address these issues and to work in more collaborative and complementary ways.

3.2 Introduction

This chapter sets out findings from the in-depth interviews with residents aged over-50 and living in West London, and with key borough leads and stakeholders. As set out in Chapter 1, interviews sought to explore older people's perceptions and experiences of the labour market and of accessing and receiving employment-related support, and their views on how employment support could better meet people's needs and aspirations.

These interviews identified seven key and interlinked themes which are set out in Figure 3.1. The themes are then taken in turn below.

Figure 3.1: Key themes from depth research with residents and borough partners

Source: Institute for Employment Studies

3.3   Identification, outreach and engagement

Residents interviewed were asked about their experiences of accessing employment support – including how they became aware of it, how it was promoted and any experiences of referral into support.

Many of those interviewed had experienced referral into employment support was via Jobcentre Plus work coaches. While experiences of Jobcentre Plus support were generally mixed, people's experiences of being referred by their work coaches to specialist provision were often more positive. Feedback was particularly good where referrals were in to provision or courses that could meet specific needs and barriers that they faced. Examples were given of Council run services, specialist contracted-out support, and London-wide provision.

> *'The jobcentre let me know about initiatives like the one spearheaded by the Mayor of London's office, which gives you an online training for various fields like project management. So that was helpful. I am doing the project management course.'*

Many of these older people were in the Universal Credit 'Searching for Work' group who had regular (usually fortnightly) meetings with their work coach, but some were in groups with less conditionality and less frequent contact and engagement. Where feedback was less positive however was in experiences of referrals into larger-scale provision like the

Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) scheme (for those unemployed for at least three months) and the Restart scheme (for those unemployed for nine months or more). Some participants reported that this support had been helpful, but many felt that it was less well tailored to meet their needs (discussed in section 3.5 below).

Referrals from Jobcentre Plus and other contracted provision were also referenced by delivery staff as a common route, and again there were some signs that these referral pathways had improved since the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *'A lot of people who come to our services do not come to us directly, but are referred to us through partner organisations, specifically the jobcentre if they are on the Restart programme. We then try to work collaboratively with the various partners to understand the best support that we can provide our residents, as we know that the pandemic has had a big impact on employment opportunities.'*

> Borough training provider

Many residents also had experience of accessing employment support through other routes – including via faith groups, other council services, and when visiting their local library. Interviews with borough staff and stakeholders also emphasised these routes, as well as promoting services through websites, social media, resident newsletters and word-of-mouth (while recognising that these approaches could be less effective for older residents).

It was felt that referral partnerships had strengthened since the Covid-19 pandemic and with the costs of living crisis. Examples were given of referral pathways from housing, health services and debt advice; and there was strong support for this more collaborative approach across services, which was felt would lead to better engagement and improved outcomes. In particular, some boroughs talked about already having in place a 'no wrong door' model, with the ability to rely on a variety of providers and organisations from which they could then identify the best route and support for each resident.

However, it was recognised that more needed to be done to promote services and in particular to reach those not in contact with the benefits system. Many boroughs referenced the need to do *'more with less'*; or that since the pandemic there was less in-person outreach in services like jobcentres, libraries, community centres and housing associations. Some resident interviewees also commented that it did not always feel straightforward to find out about what employment support was available other than via the jobcentre, which was particularly problematic for those not on Universal Credit.

> *'I would like to be able to access employment support and skills, but I am not on an out of work benefit, and I don't know what support there is for people like me. I would like to access support but I don't know where to get that help. I would like to become more confident in my computer skills and get more technical training…I am self-motivated to get a job, but I want to know about where I can find work.'*

Interestingly some stakeholders did raise concerns around the quality and appropriateness of some local provision being delivered outside of nationally or locally commissioned services. One example was given of support through local faith

communities which could help people move closer to work but that were not as well-resourced to then help people into decent work and sustainable, long-term employment.

3.4   Orientation towards work

Residents were asked about the sorts of jobs and employers that they would like to work for. Although interviewees came from a wide range of sectors and job levels, there were often common aspirations: to work in a similar field to their previous employment; in a job that fitted with their skills and capabilities; that offered flexibility – especially around hours and location (with a preference for part-time, local and hybrid work); and had job security. Even when interviewees said that they were interested in working full-time eventually, a number spoke about initially working part-time initially, to understand the role and whether it was the 'right fit'. All of these preferences were listed ahead of requirements around pay.

> *'I would like to do a part- time admin job perhaps with the NHS. Say booking appointments or working on the front-desk. Nothing that is super demanding and it doesn't have to be super high paid…I can do full-time or part-time but would prefer it to be local.'*

However, residents often had very negative views about whether they would be able to secure these sorts of jobs, which were often rooted in their direct experiences of employer discrimination. This is covered in more detail in section 3.7, but bad experiences either in work or in applying for jobs meant that residents often felt demoralised or demotivated in looking for work, and that they would only be able to find jobs through known contacts who may not share those assumptions or biases.

Sometimes, these biases were internalised too – with residents feeling that it was 'obvious' that employers would hire younger workers, who would fit in better in those workplaces or have more up-to-date skills and experience.

> *'If you are an older person in a company you don't look like everyone else who is younger, and it is harder to feel you fit in…I do know all my basic skills and you know I can navigate computers…so I'm reasonable, just average, but well the younger people, I mean, they're just so versatile. They're born with it and they can multi-skill phenomenally.'*

Stakeholders also reported that older people could often doubt their skills and lack the confidence to apply for jobs, as a result of discrimination or repeated knock-backs.

> *'A big barrier is individual attitude…they feel they won't be hired…You see older workers getting pushed out for younger staff, this leads to a lack of confidence which becomes the biggest barrier.'*

Borough employment lead manager

At the same time, borough leads and training providers said that some older people can have unrealistic expectations of the type of work that is available and accessible, particularly in terms of skill levels and requirements, location, contract type/ security and salary. This was seen as being in part due to a lack of awareness of local labour markets,

as many may not have searched for work for some time (further exacerbated by the disruption to the labour market caused by the Covid-19 pandemic); and in part due to people's preferences for work in similar fields and with greater flexibility and/ or support.

Related to this, some stakeholders commented that older people needed more support and confidence building about changing industries or jobs – which some residents reported being open to, but that stakeholders felt could be undermined by low confidence, awareness, or a fear of change.

> *'There is a fear of starting something new. It can be really daunting to start all over again, and this is a big barrier for older workers.'*

<div align="right">Borough training provider</div>

Stakeholders reported that preferences for local work and short/ manageable commutes could also be hard to meet, as the relatively large share of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in West London made it harder to match and broker people into the right jobs for them.

> *'People was to have local work, and this can be hard as there are a large proportion of SMEs in the area, and there are few large employers in the borough. This makes it harder when it comes to employment opportunities, and provides a challenging landscape.'*

<div align="right">Borough employment and skills programme manager</div>

3.5   Specialist support to prepare for work

There was strong evidence from residents and stakeholders on the benefits of more specialised, personalised support for older people. Interviewed with residents identified five key elements of more effective provision, around:

- Longer-term and consistent support – with advisers having the time to work with people and support their progression, ideally with the same adviser over time;

- Practical and tailored support – particularly around help with jobsearch and job preparation, help with skills assessment and accessing skills support, and matching and brokering into appropriate jobs;

- A supportive and empathetic approach – helping to build confidence and maintain motivation, with some reporting a preference for in-person support;

- Employer relationships and connections – to help address biases, and including access to things like work trials and work experience; and

- A focus on the whole person – talking about, understanding and helping to meet wider needs for example around physical health, mental wellbeing, household finances and family/ caring.

Schemes discussed by residents that delivered parts or all of this included Pathways in Ealing, Boost in Barnet, Work Hounslow and Xcite Harrow. As one resident described:

'I was referred onto Work Hounslow by my local church. They gave me support through Christians against poverty. I am getting support through the council through Work Hounslow who are great. They offer one to one help and help with my CV. They also help with training. I am due to go on an IT skills course. They also put you in touch with local employers like Hilton hotels. My work coach person lets me know about local jobs when they come up and offers support if I need it with applications. I see her at the local library. She has also helped with my LinkedIn profile. They also offer other things like course on debt management'.

And as another put it:

'At Pathways I went on an 8-day course and we covered lots of things including interview techniques, filling in applications and writing a CV and cover letters. There is a job information session coming up where employers come in and share the range of employment opportunities that they are offering. I am going to go along and see there that leads. It is a little different from the jobcentre because there is more of a personal interaction with Pathways. It is just not every week but an ongoing day to day thing. I also liked the group work at Pathways where we supported each other. I think there is a benefit to that'.

There was appetite from both residents and borough leads to have more provision that was specifically tailored to the needs of older people.

'We don't specifically target that age group at the moment, but we are very aware of the high level of unemployment rate of the over 50's in the borough, well there is a lot of need in all age groups. We have a general aim to get as many people into employment as possible, but we are still very keen to do something specifically for the over 50's.'

Borough lead for employment services

By contrast, residents' experiences of support directly through Jobcentre Plus was usually of support that was less tailored to their specific needs and more focused on immediate worksearch – what jobs were being applied for, how many applications had been made, where individuals were searching for work, how much time was being spent looking for jobs and so on.

'There is the expectation from the jobcentre that you will take any job, and this is not related to your skills or experience. So, for instance they wanted me to apply for a job as a security guard, a bouncer. I said I would consider this. But I have a degree and a post graduate degree. So, the support that they offer at the job centre, the bar is set low in terms of the jobs as well as the training, it is entry level. The jobcentre just wants to see that you are doing job search and they pay your benefits'.

Nonetheless, feedback on individual work coaches was more positive, with some reporting that their work coach was personable and supportive.

'My work coach is supportive she knows that I have applied for jobs. I go to the jobcentre every two weeks. I think the job centre themselves don't even know what

they're doing. Number one, why do I need to go there every two weeks. It is just five minutes and there are loads of people for her to see after me'.

Feedback on other government-funded schemes was more mixed – in general more positive than Jobcentre Plus, but less so than local or borough services. This included the JETS scheme (Job Entry Targeted Support, for those who had been unemployed for over three months) and Restart (for the longer term unemployed), which are both accessed following Jobcentre Plus referral. The main criticism of these programmes however was that they could be too focussed on a narrow range of jobs, and prioritising rapid entry into any availably job rather than finding the right fit.

'I have a nice work coach at the jobcentre. I was put on the JETS scheme. But it did not work out for me. I felt under a lot of pressure with being told I must get a job in six months; you must do your CV by tomorrow'.

One common theme across Jobcentre Plus and borough services was that 'job fairs' that brought together multiple employers and local jobseekers, are often not well matched to older people's needs. Residents who had experienced job fairs felt that they were more focussed on entry level jobs, and/ or on jobs with physical requirements that meant that they were not suitable for them. Borough leads also highlighted that there were no job fairs specifically for older people, and that in practice they were often better suited to younger people.

3.6   Skills support

Both residents and stakeholders discussed the actual or perceived need for re-skilling and upskilling for older people. This was most commonly around (poor) digital skills acting as a barrier to work, particularly compared with the skills of younger employees, and how this led to perceptions of older people being less able to take on certain roles. A common related theme was how people's previous job roles were being affected by technology, meaning that they needed to improve their digital skills even just to move into similar types of jobs to things that they had done before.

'I would be confident in doing administration if it was just answering the phone, but the other type of work, like e-mails, uploads and downloads, I just get confused…I need to get confidence in doing IT now in an administrative job.'

Borough staff made similar points too, also emphasising how the pandemic had accelerated these trends:

'The over 50's feel that they are not as digitally savvy, because IT had moved on very quickly, and since the pandemic especially many things have moved more online and for some this can be very difficult to grasp and understand…'

Borough training and skills provider

A number of residents had undertaken digital skills training, which was seen as helpful in supplying them with basic knowledge but less so in giving them practical experience of using those skills in a workplace. .Importantly, this also meant that older people often

didn't feel particularly confident that they would be able to demonstrate that they had those skills or could use them in a workplace. Some suggested that digital skills training needed to be delivered alongside practical opportunities to then apply these skills – for example through volunteering or work placements – while others discussed the need for bespoke digital skills training related to specific sectors or job types.

> *'Whoever delivers back to work support does need to address the needs of those who do have or require a higher skills set. I would like and IT course but not just the basic levels that on offer. At the moment, lots of courses are just at entry level.'*

Related to this, stakeholders stated that older people were often at greater risk of 'digital exclusion', with technological changes and costs of living pressures meaning that some residents did not have the necessary equipment available to either keep their training up-to-date or make job applications:

> *'Digital skills really is something that is frequently coming up, but we are seeing that many do not have access to the right equipment, or have the internet to make applications in the first place.'*

> Borough training provider

This then meant that people could be particularly excluded in applying for jobs, with online recruitment increasingly common and something that relatively few older jobseekers would have had previous experience of:

> *'There is a lot of evidence of digital exclusion. We have found that older groups do struggle with on-line applications. Some do find this very daunting, and for other there is the additional pressure if having to be tech savvy, and if they have not had much experience of filling out applications, then this could be a struggle.'*

> Borough employment and skills lead

Although digital skills training was the most common training need identified, it was not the only one. Stakeholders referenced in particular the importance of working with older people to help them understand the transferability of skills that they already had – which may not be apparent to people with little or no recent experience of jobsearch – and the need to work with people to then fill gaps so that they could reskill and upskill for other roles.

This then linked back to the themes set out in section 3.5 above, around helping people to understand what other jobs may be available and a good fit, and to have the confidence to apply for and get these.

> *'It may need a more tailored and individual approach in what can support them. We can look at their transferable skills and any refresher courses that they could have. It's often about providing them with help to change their mindset, as this could really be the biggest barrier. It's about working with them with empathy.'*

> Borough learning manager

> *'Confidence giving is just as important as skills training.'*

Both residents and stakeholders discussed the role of apprenticeships. Residents commented that they wanted to have more opportunities for longer-term training but felt that apprenticeships were not designed for their needs. In some cases, people felt that apprenticeships were primarily for young people and not suitable for them. Borough leads referenced this too, arguing that they needed to be marketed and promoted differently as *'it has been hammered home that apprenticeships are usually for the young and not the over 50's and that has to change'*.

However some residents had also had direct experience of apprenticeships and felt that they were too intense and inflexible to accommodate their needs.

> *'At first I was pleased about the nursery apprenticeship, it was local as well. But I ended up just being there for two months. There was no time to study. It was full-time Monday to Friday. It was all hands on deck with the children. I didn't get a lunch break or in-work time to study. I had to do all that in my own time and at the weekends, and I was only paid £5 an hour.'*

Borough leads also referenced that the low pay offered in many apprenticeships – where the minimum wage is below the National Living Wage – could make it impractical for older people to take these on. It was felt that one way to address this would be to try to open up more executive level apprenticeships to new recruits (not just to those already in post).

> *'Apprenticeships could be good for older people who have been out of work for a while, and I think that they are a perfect route back to employment, but this does often fall down because of the salaries. Older workers do not want to work for the minimum apprenticeship salary which is low.'*

3.7   Employer engagement, support and challenge

As noted in section 3.4, a consistent theme across the research was that older people believed that their age counted against them when they were applying for work. Residents commented about their experiences in job interviews, citing examples of negative stereotypes from potential employers on their physical capacity to undertake certain roles and/ or their ability to work. One participant commented that interview feedback often questioned their *'potential to keep up with the pace as an older worker'.* As one participant put it:

> *'I also think my age counts against me. I know that employers are not supposed to be sexist or ageist, but they are. When I left a previous job, my boss said 'well you know you may not find it very easy at your age to get another job'.'*

And

> *'I think employers are meant to ignore age and ethnic minorities and everything, but I think that on a personal level, when they look at your age then it is different and you are not chosen.'*

Borough leads raised similar concerns, stating that employers often reported preferences for employing younger staff or having concerns about older people. Stakeholders emphasised though that these perceptions were often misplaced, and that there was more that services could do to dispel these myths and to support employers.

'There are barriers from employers. They say it is cheaper to pay an under-25 year old…they don't look at the wealth of experience that someone over 50 has to offer…We do need more feedback from organisations about what more support can be given to them as well.'

Borough employment and skills programme manager

Despite this, some borough leads interviewed emphasised that the current recruitment pressures that firms were facing meant that this was a good time to be talking to employers about how could they widen their candidate pools and recruit differently. Some commented that they had recently been seeing more employers willing to have open conversations about employing older people or changing their approaches to recruitment.

'Organisations are more open to having conversations about employment for older residents. We are seeing more organisations offer internships to over 50's….businesses are also approaching their recruitment differently and seeing an untapped pool of talent that they can use.'

Borough lead for employment and skills

Although these are of course positive steps forward, all borough stakeholders felt that this increased appetite to work differently needed to be capitalised on, and perhaps more could be done to give employers advice and support on how they could work differently. Borough leads talked about the need to work more closely with employers, to build stronger partnerships and networks of employers that were keen to focus on recruiting older people, and to try to provide more 'exclusive' opportunities for older jobseekers.

Finally, alongside this, a number of borough leads emphasised that employer engagement needed to be about more than just *'getting the over 50's into work'* – and that local support needed in particular to continue to work with both employers and residents to ensure sustainable employment so '*it doesn't just become a revolving door.'*

3.8 Addressing wider needs

As well as providing employment and skill support, interviews also identified wider support needs for older residents. Three areas in particular were identified – around health, costs of living and English language skills.

Support with a long-term health condition was the most commonly cited issue. The impact of physical ill-health was given by a number of residents as a key reason for leaving employment, with some saying that while out of work their health had deteriorated further. Related to this, concerns about the physical demands of some roles meant that many residents were limiting the sorts of jobs that they would consider applying for, or wanted work that was closer to home or shorter hours (as noted in section 3.4, this included

residents without significant long-term health conditions but who felt physically less capable than when they were younger).

'I left the job because I found it physically hard lifting heavy boxes and I was starting to feel unwell at work and have dizzy spells. And I was stressed.'

And

'I did do some work experience, it wasn't for long though. It was about a month in customer services in a men's department store. I found doing that job and standing for long periods of time that my feet would swell and back hurt.'

Stakeholders also noted that since the pandemic there had been a rise in mental ill-health including among older people, as a consequence of the pandemic and of fears of not being employable in future, which in many cases could be further exacerbated by poor physical health.

'There are physical, psychological and mental health aspects to this as well. They may have been out of work for some time, and so they may not be mentally or physically prepared to go back into it.'

Borough learning manager

A second significant issue identified was around rising costs of living, with both resident and stakeholder interviews mentioning that many discussions also now needed to include help with finances, financial planning and budgeting, and understanding the costs and benefits of taking up work (including the short- and longer-term impacts on Universal Credit receipt). This was often not straightforward, given interactions between levels of pay, travel costs, Universal Credit awards and other household income or finances – with it not always being clear that people would be significantly 'better off' in work. Borough leads and training providers commented on how these conversations were becoming more common, and had noted a change in the over 50's attitude to employment and pay:

'There is a high population of small business withing these boroughs and that affects the pay that can be offered. If you are willing to commute then you do get paid more, and this is a barrier to many…over 50s are now thinking whether it is worth them putting themselves through all this to be a few quid better off then what they would be if they were on benefits, especially amongst all the uncertainty there is now because jobs are not secure.'

Borough training provider

Thirdly, many of the borough stakeholders said that there was a pressing need for more (and better) provision of English language training, as many older people out of work were first generation migrants with relatively low levels of English language and literacy. These discussions emphasised in particular the need for support with practical, work-related needs – for example in understanding health and safety instructions or requirements, or for understanding instructions and communicating with colleagues.

3.9   Co-ordination and collaboration

Drawing this together, many of the themes from this research – around better identifying and engaging residents, providing specialist support, working better with employers, supporting with skills, helping to address wider needs like health and finances – point to the central importance of effectively co-ordinating support and collaborating across services.

> *'You need to support them through their whole journey and look at the outcomes that are important to then, including employment. That is what works well.'*

> Borough employment and skills lead.

Section 3.3 set out that while referral partnerships had been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, they had in many cases been strengthened, and this applied to partnerships for onward referral for wider support. For example, one resident referred to having received financial support and advice at their local church, and then through a council scheme being given further back to work advice as well as digital skills training. Another talked about how it had been a combination of the Restart Scheme and support access through their council that had enabled them to get into work – with the council services giving them the confidence and practical skills for work, but their Restart adviser helping match them to their new job.

Looking forward, borough leads in particular referenced the importance of better linking up with health services, and building on existing or planned initiatives – like partnering with GPs and working with social prescribing networks.

> *'We are trying to think about how we can promote our services through other partners. We have used GPs, and now we want to get into social prescribing networks so that they can link people into the right places, especially as we know that work can be really important for health.'*

> Borough lead for employment and skills

A further issue raised by residents was around better co-ordinating and collaborating *between* employment services. Many residents had accessed multiple different forms of employment and training provision, and often reported having received very similar support from different sources – in particular around things like CV writing and job preparation. And this potential duplication or over-provision of jobsearch support may be happening alongside gaps in availability o more specialist or tailored provision (discussed in earlier sections).

It is also worth noting that some residents were not always clear about which programme they were on and sometimes even who they were being supported by. While for the individual this may not ultimately matter too much, it does nonetheless have implications for those receiving or making referrals (if for example there are funding or other restrictions on what support can be provided).

Ultimately, a significant barrier to improving access to more specialist support, meeting additional needs, and co-ordinating and collaborating across services continued to be

having sufficient funding – with some arguing that this had led to less support that was specifically targeted to distinct groups and more that was delivered through wider employability services (it was *'difficult to do everything for everyone'*). However, there was also genuine hope that the 'No Wrong Door' model could help to make a difference, by supporting services to work more collaboratively, to be designed in ways that they are complementary to each other, and to ensure that '*nobody gets turned away or lost in the system'.* This also placed a responsibility on boroughs and services to keep directories up to date, communicate effectively and ensure that referrals were followed up on.

> *'No Wrong Door could make more people aware of what is working and projects and programmes that are working. That is what we are interested in learning about, rather than trying to start everything from scratch ourselves.'*

<div align="right">Borough lead for employment and skills</div>

4   Conclusions and recommendations

This research sets out a range of challenges in improving employment for older people – with often limited access to support, a lack of specialist provision, evidence of employer biases and issues in finding flexible and supportive employment, and wider needs among older people that services can struggle to meet – particularly around digital skills, health and budgeting support. However, the research also points to real opportunities to address this, especially now with employers continuing to face recruitment difficulties, and with those commissioning and delivering services looking at how they can do more to raise participation among those outside of the labour market.

The findings from this report point to a range of areas where improvements could be made in future, and in particular ways that we can ensure that the 'No Wrong Door' model can meet the needs of older people. Recommendations are set out below in five main areas.

4.1   Tailored, one-to-one support

Individual boroughs or local commissioners are unlikely to be able to commission specialist support for older people specifically, so we would recommend that within wider employment services there should be a focus on developing specialist 'streams' and lead advisers for working with older residents.

These 'streams' should allow for greater flexibility in support – particularly around the pace, delivery modes and focus of provision; as well as enabling advisers to tailor support in line with the five areas identified in section 3.5 above.

A key focus of this support should be on rapid skills assessment, mapping skills to local labour market needs (informed by local LMI) and supporting residents with building their confidence and self-belief.

4.2   Building adviser skills and capabilities

Alongside this, we would recommend a focus on building skills and capabilities in working with older people, among employment advisers and in wider services. Specifically, this could involve:

■ Training for advisers working most regularly with older people (in particular any lead advisers as set out above). The Institute for Employability Professsionals, with the Centre for Ageing Better, has developed online accredited training at https://www.myiep.uk/page/Over50s.

■ Supporting development of a 'community of practice' for advisers working with older people – for example through action learning sets, and/ or opportunities to come together to share practice and insight (virtually or in-person).

■ Building in time for more outward-facing activity by specialist advisers – so that they can engage and share learning with people delivering other employment services and with potential referral partners.

4.3   Meeting additional support needs

This research identifies six potential priorities for additional support, set out below. We would recommend further work by West London Alliance and boroughs to explore the extent to which these can be met by referring into or adapting existing or planned provision, and/ or the scope for additional commissioning to meet these needs.

■ Health support. We would suggest that the focus here should be on vocational rehabilitation, which is support specifically tailored to helping people to enter or return to work – which can include support with self-management, understanding adjustments, action planning and psychosocial support (like counselling). It is explained in more detail here: https://vrassociationuk.com/about/process-vr/

■ Digital skills. Specifically, we would recommend looking at the scope to better tailor digital support to workplace needs, and the scope for practical application through volunteering or placements.

■ Job-specific skills – and in particular, pre-employment and in-employment training that can fill the gap between the very short pre-employment training available through sector based work academies, and the long-term training offer in apprenticeships. Mayoral Academies in particular could be an opportunity to do this, and there would be value in exploring the scope to tailor courses for older residents within this.

■ Apprenticeships. We think that good quality apprenticeships can play an important role, but need to be more flexible and designed differently for older people (for example on pay and security).

■ English language and literacy training. Both language and literacy are important, as is training that is tailored to workplaces (health and safety, following instructions, working in teams).

■ Exploring ways to reduce costs of working. There would be value in finding ways to strengthen the financial returns from work for older people, and especially those with more complicated household circumstances or incomes. Unfortunately, doing this through direct financial assistance could lead to pound-for-pound deductions in Universal Credit, but there may be scope to explore other options like subsidising travel or paying grants to employers (that are restricted to being used to top up wages – which would lead to smaller deductions from UC).

Finally, we would also emphasise that meeting these needs – if provision is in place – need not delay residents from being able to prepare and look for work. Often additional support can be best delivered alongside jobsearch support, and many of the most

effective models focus on supporting people to find the right job, with a supportive employer, and continuing to address skills, health and wider needs in the workplace (the so-called 'place then train' approach).

4.4 Employer engagement

Improving employer practice, and supporting employers better, should be key priorities. We would suggest that there are three aspects to this in particular to this:

- Developing resources for employer engagement, that can be used across services – both promoting the benefits of age inclusive approaches; and setting out practical steps that employers can take. Both the Centre for Ageing Better (through their 'Age Friendly Employer' pledge: https://ageing-better.org.uk/resources/becoming-age-friendly-employer) and Business In The Community (https://www.bitc.org.uk/fact-sheet/supporting-age-inclusive-recruitment-and-retention/) have developed recent resources that can support with this.

- Co-ordinating employer engagement activity and conversations. This could include simple steps like sharing contacts and vacancies between partners or developing an online directory of employers; through to more resource-intensive collaborations like developing an employer 'offer' across different services (for example linking up vacancy placement, advice on recruitment, advice on job design, skills support and so on). Ideally, this would also include an aspiration of being able to bring together receptive employers and older jobseekers, for example through specialist jobs fairs.

- Encouraging the public sector to lead by example – in job design, inclusive recruitment, flexible training and workplace support.

4.5 Co-ordination across services

Finally, we would recommend that the 'No Wrong Door' model could focus in particular on:

- Provision mapping:
  - Identifying available provision and gaps in support across the services, support needs and themes identified in this research; and
  - Identifying those that can offer tailored support for older people (perhaps with a simple self-certification, e.g. that advisers have completed the IEP training).
- Referral partnerships:
  - Focusing on in-person engagement where possible, through greater co-location in other services;
  - Continuing to strengthen partnerships with Jobcentre Plus – in particular by working with the new '50 Plus Champions' in JCP to improve awareness of borough services, promote best practice and address issues; and

- Exploring the scope to support the new 'Individual Placement and Support – Primary Care' rollout in West London, for example by receiving referrals where individuals are not eligible for IPS support.

■ Effective case management – exploring the scope for a more integrated approach to case management across services, to help address the risks around duplication/ over-provision of jobsearch support and gaps in accessing more tailored support.

Appendix 1: Demographics of interview participants

Table 1: Gender

Male	Female
8	9

Table 2: Disability/ health status

Disability	2
Health Condition	4
Disability and Health Condition	2
No Disability or Health Condition Disclosed	9

Table 3: Borough of residence

Hounslow	7
Ealing	2
Barnet	4
Harrow	4

Table 4: Benefit status

Universal Credit	9
Disability Benefit	3
Receiving Pension	2
No Benefit or Pension	3

Table 5: Length of time out of work

Under 1 year	2
1-3 years	9
Over 3 years	6

Appendix 2: Topic Guide for resident interviews

Introduction to the research

- Introduce self and IES. Emphasise that IES is an independent research centre. Conducting research on behalf of West London Alliance, which is a group of councils in West London.

- Introduce the research. This is about your experiences of employment support in order to help improve services in the future. It's ok if you don't have any recent experience of employment support, as we're also interested in how to help more people to access support

- Emphasise that the conversation and all information that will be collected will be confidential.

- Explain confidentiality: Your personal data will not be shared with any other organisation. Your responses will be reported anonymously. If we quote anything from our discussion, it will not be personally identifiable to you. We can send the privacy notice on request to an email address.

- The interviews will take about 30-45 minutes. **We would also like to send/ give you a £30 voucher as a token of thanks after we complete the interview.**

- Ask participant if they have any questions or clarifications regarding the research.

- Ask participant for permission to record the interview. Explain that their responses will be reported anonymously.

- Remind participant that their participation is voluntary and that they can opt out at any time.

Participant Background

Can you provide me a bit of background about your employment history?

What are your reasons for being out of work now?

Have you had any recent employment opportunities, and what have they been?

What would you consider your barriers to employment are?

What do you think are your employment and skills support needs?

(Probe where they think they may need more help or development – CVs, Interview skills, confidence, help with health conditions, skill development etc)

What difficulties, if any, do you face in finding employment? In what ways could an employment support programme help you address those?

Do you need some upskilling sessions? E.G digital?

Their views on their future employment opportunities

What are your future hopes and expectations about your employment situation?

(Do they want to work, what roles would they like to have, full-time/part-time/zero-hours, level of employment flexibility, location of employment etc)

What factors do you think will influence a future return to work?

(age, health, location of role, type of role, support into and at work, salary vs benefits, caring changes etc)

Experiences of employment and skills services

What has been your previous experience of using any employment or skills support? *[If little/ no recent experience, go to final question in this section]*

- Probes: What did they use, how did they find out about it, why did they access that particular service.
- Try to establish whether this was a publicly funded service (e.g. via borough, JCP, college, health service etc); voluntary/ community service; or private (e.g. recruitment agency)

What support did you receive? [Focus on most recent or most memorable if lots of examples.]

- Probes: what was delivered, who was it delivered by, how was it delivered (virtual/in-person/ one-to-one/ group learning), was the support what they expected, was it aligned with any other needs they had, did they understand the support provided, was it the right programme for them

What did you think worked well in the service(s) and why? [If lots of examples: ask what the features are of the best support you have received]

- Probe: relationship with the person providing support, time/location of support provision, matched what they had hoped for, positive outcomes, improved wellbeing and confidence etc,

How do you think the service (s) could be improved?

- Probe: any service delays, barriers to accessing support, not understanding the services provided, service delivery, service promotion, service engagement and follow-up etc

Are you still regularly attending or receiving any employment or skills service support?

- IF YES: How would you say it's going overall? What could make it better? Why did you return?
- IF NO: **Ask why not**, and if this is due to disengagement then:
- What would make you consider participating in another service?

[If little/ no experience of employment support:] What would you say are the main reasons why you've not accessed employment support in the (recent) past?

- Possible probes: Availability, awareness, suitability, location, practical barriers (language/ health/ care/ travel), perceptions of quality, fears of impact on benefits

Views on future employment and skills support

What would your ideal service look like?

How do you think support could better reach you, and really make you want to take part?

What would any service really not be able to do without?

And is there anything that you'd not want – anything it should avoid at all costs?

Can I also ask three specific questions:

- Would it help if you could access employment support more easily through other services that you receive – like housing, health or council services?

- Would you want to up-skill to gain another job?

- Would it be important to you that your adviser or other participants were older people too, and local to you?

Concluding the interview

Thank you. You have answered all my questions.

- Ask: Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that we were not able to cover during our conversation?
- Remind interviewee about confidentiality and data use.
- Thank interviewee again for their time.

Appendix 3: Topic guide for borough interviews

Introduction to the research

- Introduce yourself by name, IES and the evaluation, thanking the participant for agreeing to take part.

- Introduce the research: West London Alliance is implementing a new West London Integration Hub as part of the Greater London Authority's 'No Wrong Door' agenda. The hub's aim is to improve co-ordination and access to employment support and upskilling for out of work residents. As part of this we have been commissioned to conduct research specifically around the needs of residents who are disadvantaged in the labour market and over 50.

- The purpose of this interview is to help the WLA understand what services are currently available in your area, the level of engagement with over-50s, what barriers they may face and what good practices we can build on.

- Interview will take around 30-45 minutes. Data will be held securely in line with GDPR and the data protection act, so all data collected will be confidential.

- Ask if they have any questions before we begin.

- Interview findings will be written up into a report for our client. Any quotes used will be reported anonymously, for example as 'borough lead' or 'delivery partner'.

- Are you happy to proceed with the interview? **Record informed consent**

- Are you happy for me to record this interview? **Explain this is for researchers' purposes only.** No-one outside of the research team will listen to the recordings or see notes/ transcripts.

- **Record informed consent.**

Current Role

What is your current role/job title?

What is or has been your involvement in the development of any employment support and upskilling including for the over 50 and those disadvantaged in the labour market?

Understanding of Needs

What is you understanding or knowledge about the current needs of over-50s in the borough?

(How is this data collected? Have the needs changed in the last few years? Any trends of note?)

(Probe on differences for different groups – e.g. older women, those with health conditions, parents, those from ethnic minority groups, those with low/ no formal qualifications?)

(If not covered – what would you say is different about your borough/ the groups that you engage with?)

What do you feel are the main barriers that disadvantaged older residents face in accessing employment?

(how is this captured/reported, changes in trends, anything new as a result of the pandemic?)

And do you see any opportunities – in the services we deliver, or for older residents more generally?

What up-skilling opportunities can you offer or sign post?

Current Service Delivery

What services are currently available that help those over 50 to prepare for or access employment? (If needed: interested in all services they may access, not just those targeted specifically at over-50s)

(How long have the serviced been running, who funds them, where are they located throughout the borough, how are they promoted)

What is working well within these services?

(think about reach, measures of success, cover diversity of needs?)

What do you think can be improved?

(probe about location, access, promotion, outreach, what the impact of the pandemic has been on service provision)

How well do you think these services meet the needs of over-50s specifically?

(Are there groups who are better or worse served by current provision, and where are the gaps? E.g. protected characteristics, locations, language? How is this measured?)

How are the services being delivered?

(probe both in terms of how the pandemic has had an impact of face-to-face/virtual means of support, but also in terms of whether services are silo'd, aligned, joined-up, compete for funding)

What do you believe to be potential future opportunities and risks for service delivery for the target groups in your area?

(probe for any new services, service expansion, funding opportunities and risks, connections with any other boroughs)

Service user identification

Are there any specific activities or initiatives in the borough/ your services that are trying to identify and engage groups that are under-represented in employment support?

(which groups and why? Probe for how groups are engaged – e.g. use of partners, data sharing, addressing barriers/ needs around digital/ language, joining up with wider services like health, care)

[If not covered already:] How well targeted would you say this is to people aged over 50?

(views on specific needs and barriers for those who are not engaged/ harder to engage)

Are there any issues around disengagement? If so how are these addressed?

(Methods of contact, follow-up, understanding reasons for disengagement etc)

No Wrong Door

How do you think that the No Wrong Door model could support improvements for these groups?

(probe: provision of a new directory, new advisor facing networks, joined-up services, improved resources or outreach)

Final Reflections

Is there anything else about access to employment services for disadvantaged over 50's that you feel has not been covered in this interview?

Thanks and close.