Centre for Ageing Better

Supporting 50+ workers back into employment

A guide to working with 50+ jobseekers

ageing-better.org.uk

What we have learnt and what works well

Purpose

This guide is aimed at frontline employability workers, managers and their teams. It is designed to help you better understand and support jobseekers in their 50s and 60s - whether you work at Jobcentre Plus, for a contracted provider, or in a voluntary community organisation.

You can use it as a tool to review how you work, and to make changes so that services are more engaging and better suited to older jobseekers. It includes points to reflect on what you already do, and suggestions on how to think about changing delivery to get better outcomes for both providers and service users.

Context

Traditional employment support provision has not worked for people in their 50s and 60s. Our engagement with employment support providers, commissioners and jobseekers suggests help is needed to better tailor support to make sure it works and is accessible for everyone. Below we set out the insights gained from our research across the sector: reviewing employment support offers at home and abroad, learning from practitioners, and co-designing new approaches with older jobseekers from different walks of life.

It is important to remember that over 50s are not a homogenous group and that everyone will have their own experiences, but by highlighting common challenges and themes raised by people unemployed at this age, we can work to deliver services that do not disadvantage people and that can lead to better outcomes and experiences of support and work.

For those interested in further training, the Institute for Employability Professionals, in partnership with Centre for Ageing Better, have developed introductory training modules for upskilling frontline staff engaging with over 50s. Accredited Learning – Employability Support for Over 50s (myiep.uk)

Engagement

Many jobseekers believe that services are not designed for them. We can convince them otherwise by working through trusted relationships, and setting out exactly how you will help people. This positive start is fundamental to good outcomes.

Effective engagement

Recruiting those people who fall outside of the benefit system can be difficult. Similarly, those who are referred to services on a voluntary basis may not engage regularly or actively commit to a service. But thinking creatively about channels of engagement, how you describe provision and working alongside local community networks can provide a strong foundation for support.

We know that:

- Many over 50s respond positively to word-of-mouth recommendations by friends and associates whom they trust

- Engaging with individuals in-person is important to establishing an initial positive relationship

- Some people in this age group find it intimidating walking into a Jobcentre or a formal employment and training environment – delivery of services in easily accessible, familiar surroundings is often more beneficial

- People aged 50 and over want to see that a service is relevant and tailored to them

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Things that we know work well

Using multiple avenues of engagement:

- Actively seek out and work with local organisations and community networks – such as faith groups, community groups and housing associations. This can help overcome barriers of mistrust

- Engagement at a very local level enables you to make contact with those outside the system. Focus on establishing yourself in the local area so that you become more aware of local challenges, existing activity and become an organisation people want to talk to. Greater understanding of local activity will help you to promote pathways that are relevant to individuals

- Have a range of options for contacting people: text; phone; online; in person. This offers the best chance of enabling people to engage in a way that is comfortable for them and will increase the likelihood of them continuing to work with you. Flexibility in timings is also important

- Focus on the whole person: when promoting provision make it clear that support can be holistic and not just about "getting any job". Personalised support that looks at their whole life circumstance will draw people in

Taking time at the outset to develop a positive, professional relationship is key to:

- Understanding the range of personal circumstances that can affect how a person engages with employment support and ultimately employment

- Being able to tackle issues that are difficult to address and may not have easy solutions – setting out how you can help people navigate issues, move towards more positive outcomes and giving them belief in your offer is important

- Setting out the journey – small steps are often needed to convince others of your support, their capabilities and of opportunities that could benefit them

Things that don't work so well

People often find it difficult to engage with support and to be proactive when:

- Contact is made through a generic offer without specific relevance to their age or circumstance. This is not about just labelling provision as 50+, but ensuring that the service does not exclude or set itself out in a way that disadvantages people in their 50s and 60s

- They have to travel a distance to access support, and possibly enter an unfamiliar environment or one that they see as just focused on work at all costs. Trusted places are key to good engagement

- They feel that employment support will negatively impact any benefits that they currently have in place – people can be very wary of sanctions and have negative views on the system based on past experiences or word of mouth

- They feel that they have stepped into a situation where they have no agency, and there is no possibility of accommodating their individual, personal circumstances

- They don't see themselves represented in the promotional materials – this reinforces the feeling that the programme is not for them. Positive language, promoting provision as collaborative and utilising images of people they relate too can help with this

Your personal practice

Thinking about your current practice of identifying and engaging clients:

- Review your current relationships with local partners/stakeholders:

  - Is there good representation in terms of over 50s?

  - Are there any new partnerships you could forge?

  - Who is best placed within your team to take on the engagement with group leaders and/or participants you want to reach?

- Thinking about the materials that you use for the over 50s age group:

  - Is the language positive, encouraging and inviting?

  - Does the language or use of imagery include any unintended ageist stereotypes?

  - Is the imagery representative of the people you are targeting?

  - Have you been able to implement any feedback from this cohort with regard to the effectiveness of these materials?

- Are there elements of your engagement processes that might act as a barrier to access?

  - Taking account of your contractual requirements, how flexible can you be with sign up and on-going engagement?

  - Identify one aspect of your engagement process that you feel could be improved and plan to implement that change

Further reading

Ageing Better has created the first free library showing positive and realistic images of over 50s in a bid to challenge negative and stereotypical views of older age. The photos show a more realistic depiction of ageing – to help tackle ageism and challenge the idea that all older people are frail and vulnerable. The library, which contains over 3,000 images and is regularly updated, offers journalists, organisations and individuals a wide selection of images, including those focused on work.

Photos in the library are free for use across your marketing materials, presentations and websites. You can download our simple guide to using the image library and guidance around commissioning age-positive images.

Remote engagement: removing barriers to inclusion - remote-engagement-CoP_0. pdf (ageing-better.org.uk)

How services can reach older men | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)
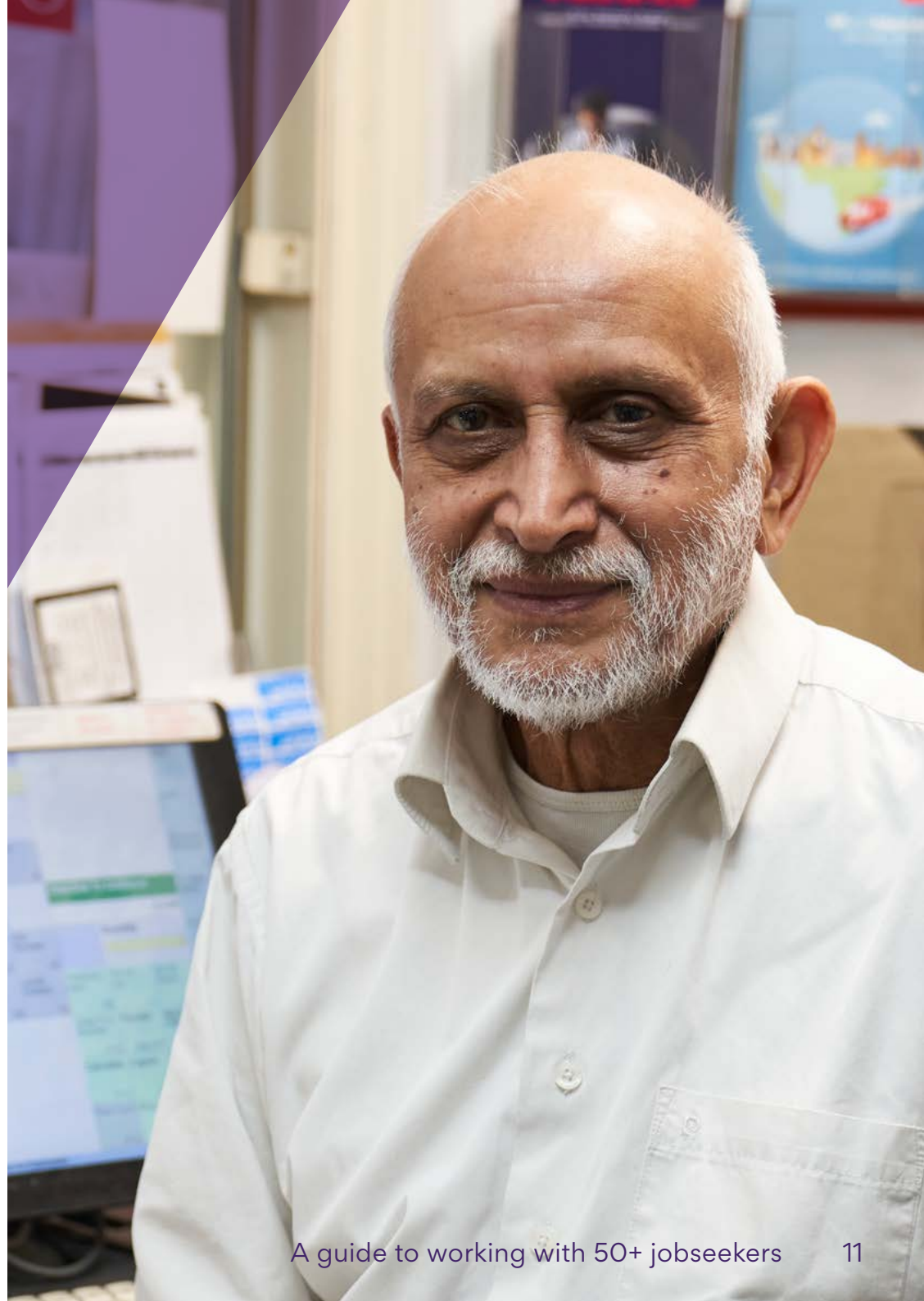
Coaching

Effective coaching can be game-changing for individuals. Good coaching helps people reach their goals by considering not just their work ambitions but also their physical health, emotional wellbeing, family and social life. When group coaching is introduced as an element of employment support, it can offer much needed peer support and help to address social isolation.

The coaching experience

People aged over 50 who are looking for work bring with them significant life experience and a range of skills. Good coaching can strengthen your rapport and develop confidence in the individual, enabling them to explore a greater range of opportunities and to have more positive outcomes.

We know that:

- People in their 50s and 60s don't necessarily want a coach that is their age, as long as their coach is empathetic to their life circumstances

- Often, older jobseekers do not know how to identify their own abilities, how to sell their skills, or have confidence in navigating the system of support

Things that we know work well

An empathetic approach that focuses on confidence-building, which means:

- Understanding personal needs and aspirations and planning towards an end goal that recognises these

- Challenging internalised ageism – helping people see themselves as working age and as having skills and experience that can still add to a workplace

- Building a positive outlook and self-confidence – this is often knocked by negative experiences of looking for work in our 50s and 60s

Life journey mapping (not just focusing on employment history), which means:

- Focussing on what a person has done at different stages in their lives, and identifying practical, transferable skills from any previous employment and their life outside work – including skills outside of formal qualifications

- Making sure you understand what they have already done, which should mean you don't duplicate activity or send people to things not relevant to their goals

- Setting realistic goals based on their experiences and aspirations. Ensure you involve the individual in this and keep relating activity back to their circumstances

A collaborative approach:

- Jointly agree goals and steps towards them, making sure that they reflect the person's genuine aspirations and past experience

- Ensure that the person knows why they are being asked to complete activities, and understands how they relate to their previous experience and short and long-term goals

- Understanding the logic behind the support being offered and how this meets people's goals is important in building faith in a coach's ability

Practical support, to build an individual's understanding of the jobs market:

- Job search and application processes and tools may have changed substantially since the last time the person was looking for a job – so practical, unpatronising support to navigate those processes can make a big difference

- Older workers might have large existing networks, but will need help understanding how to engage them

- People might need support engaging with employers - particularly if trying to move into a new sector

- Building your own awareness of different sectors and experiences you can increase service user confidence in your abilities and encourage them to work with you

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Things that don't work so well

People can feel undervalued when they come away from a meeting where:

- Their age has been emphasised negatively

- Assumptions have been made, based on their age, about their abilities, wants and needs (for example, not all over 50s will automatically need digital training – decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis)

- Their individual voice is not listened to, and their personal experience isn't recognised

- They feel they are on a standard pathway that has no flexibility or relevance to their individual circumstance

- Their unique situation is not addressed e.g., the need for language support or recognition of non-UK qualifications

- Options are not fully explained, and expectations are unclear or are not met

Your personal practice

Reflecting on your experience of working with 50+ jobseekers:

- Think about the link between low self-esteem and motivation to find work

  - Talk about confidence building techniques with colleagues – look at building a peer group to share best practice

  - Take time to research confidence-building and note down any strategies that might be helpful for use in your practice

- Reflect on your ability to identify people's internalised ageism

  - What does this look like? Are people referring to themselves as "too old", or making assumptions about roles not being for them?

- How effective have you been in positively challenging this? What challenges have you encountered in doing this?

- How do you measure success in this? What has helped change people's opinions?

- What methods are effective in ensuring that there is open dialogue with your 50+ clients about their action plan?

  - In what ways do these differ from working with other age groups?

  - Evaluate the effectiveness of 'active listening' in your interactions – are you listening to each individual story? Think about how you talk to people through next steps and how you link this back to what they've told you. How might this be perceived?

- Think about how you communicate your thought process behind the support being offered – is there a way to make it a more collaborative conversation?

- Consider a challenging conversation that you feel did not end well

  - Can you identify two techniques you could implement to achieve a positive outcome if faced with similar challenges in future?

Further reading

- Group coaching insights for over 50s made redundant: prototyping-redundancy.pdf (ageing-better.org.uk)

- Principles for good coaching and delivery of employment support for the economically inactive: Improving employment support for over 50s in Greater Manchester | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

Good Coaching

Holistic coaching helping people reach their goals by focusing on the whole person approach. This means helping individuals to consider not just their work goals but also their physical health, emotional wellbeing, family and social life.

Build confidence
In your experience, their worth and their potential

Take practical steps
Write job-specific CVs and practice interviews linked to an end goal

Think forward
Create space to step back and think about goals, holistically

Peer support
Full of empathy, encouragement and emotional support

Challenge gently
Expose and work through "ageism" mindset

Communication
Open two-way collaborative dialogue that fosters trust

Transferable skills
Looking at skills from both work and personal lives for new roles

The right job
Get a job they're happy with – good work looks different to everyone

Job search skills
Boost confidence with how recruitment works today

Upskill
Match people's needs, experience, expectations and aspirations to the right training

Delivery

Every element of delivery is crucial to success. Whether you are meeting clients face to face, responding remotely to queries, sourcing suitable training or liaising with potential employers, the way the programme is managed and implemented will determine how effective support is for those in their 50s and 60s.

Effective delivery

A holistic approach to delivery is crucial to successfully supporting people in their 50s and 60s into or closer to employment. A flexible approach can also make a big difference, including offering support in different settings, outside of formal employability service facilities.

We know that:

- There are many people in the 50+ cohort who do want support to find fulfilling, long-term work

- Some older workers have had bad experiences of employment support services and will have negative perceptions of what is available – they may be less likely to work with you as a result

- Some people are confused by the different types of support on offer and what is available to them

- "Good work" looks different for different people; particularly with this age group, flexibility and acknowledgment of personal circumstances will affect their ability to sustain a role

Things that we know work well

Support is delivered flexibly and locally:

- Consideration is given to the level of flexibility needed, whether this is in terms of timing of appointments, location of meetings, accessibility of interviews or work environments

- The setting is local and welcoming to the jobseeker. There should be spaces for privacy when needed, and spaces to share experiences and benefit from peer support

- You can demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of local services and opportunities. Believing in your abilities will increase people's willingness to engage with you and to follow steps you agree together in your action plans

A holistic approach to supporting everyone which looks at:

- Personal aspiration and goals. This may mean looking beyond previous employment and considering a change in the type of work e.g., moving from intense physical work to something more sedentary

- Experience beyond formal qualifications that could be used in work

- Life circumstances including any responsibilities outside of their job search requirements e.g., caring or personal health concerns

- Short-term and long-term financial considerations – these are particularly important as we move towards considering retirement

Offering a range of methods of interaction:

- 1:1 sessions can build rapport and confidence; peer groups offer valuable support, the opportunity to share experience and avoid feelings of isolation long term. There are great benefits to mixed groups meeting, allowing people to learn from one another, share experiences and demonstrate their personal skills

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Things that don't work so well

People can feel employment support isn't for them when:

- They don't feel a connection with the person who is supporting them; this causes reluctance to engage fully and a lack of trust in ability

- They feel that there is no flexibility in terms of delivery style, rather they are expected to fit into a system where everyone is treated the same, regardless of age, experience or circumstance

- They sense negative preconceptions about their age and capability

- Handovers to different providers / services / advisors aren't detailed, meaning they have to keep repeating personal information or their experience

- They are signposted to courses or alternative services that are not relevant to their needs or without any explanation as to how it fits with their goals

Your personal practice

Considering your experience of delivering services to older jobseekers:

- Consider the space you meet with your clients

  - Are there any barriers to making it a welcoming environment? Think about the experience from arriving outside to sitting down with you – how would you feel if it was you arriving for the first time, what might make you feel anxious?

  - Are there any changes that you can make to put your clients at ease and help to build trust and establish a good rapport?

- Consider the practicalities of how you look at a person's life circumstance when trying to support them into work

- Are there any challenges for you to working in this way?

- How do you ensure that you have fully understood the individual's situation? What approaches or questions work best? Have you revisited this with people who have been on your caseloads for a while?

- Share approaches with colleagues – could you work together to support those in similar situations?

Further reading

- Parsons, D and Walsh, K. (2019) *Employment support for over 50s:Rapid evidence review.* Centre for Ageing Better/Greater Manchester Combined Authority/ Department for Work & Pensions: Employment support for over 50s: Rapid evidence review | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better. org.uk)

- Principles for good coaching and delivery of employment support for the economically inactive: Improving employment support for over 50s in Greater Manchester | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

Effective Delivery

A holistic approach to delivery is crucial to successfully supporting people in their 50s and 60s into or closer towards employment. Establishing trust and focusing on the individual can lead to honest interactions allowing you to confront common challenges within a supportive and positive framework.

Future focused
Position support as an opportunity

Practical advice about the process
Emphasise the practical support to help them get a job they want

In this together
Highlight sharing experiences and challenges with others who 'get it'

Focused on their needs
Explain the offer is tailored to their needs and circumstances

Options and control
Give people the power back after long term unemployment or the shock of redundancy

Positive and opportunity-led
Talk about strengths, next steps and potential, not 'being in the gutter'

Age isn't an emphasis
You can acknowledge age without making people feel old!

Experienced not experts
Coaches with experience in finding jobs, not expert in all jobs

Skills

The vast majority of skills support is targeted towards younger people, meaning those in their 50s and 60s feel that services are not for them. The way in which skills services are delivered and marketed is particularly important for this age group - and they need to feel confident about its relevance to the jobs market.

The value of skills development

Many people who have been out of work for a long time, or who have worked in one place for a long time, might have outdated skill sets or have little experience of formal training. Working with people and providers to ensure appropriate delivery of skills and to make progression pathways clear can make a huge difference to people's willingness to engage and their success with skills delivery. The importance of transferable skills and wider life experience is also a crucial aspect of skills development and people need to be supported in how to show these to employers.

We know that:

- Many jobseekers aged 50+ are likely to have outdated formal qualifications that may no longer be recognised

- Skills often need updating for use in the workplace, particularly if moving to a new sector

- Older workers are often overlooked for or less likely to engage in training, although many do still want to progress

- Not all over 50s will need help with digital literacy, although many might – perceptions about a lack of digital ability as we get older can actually create confidence issues for many

- Value needs to be given to the vast range of transferable skills people have

- Careful consideration needs to be given to the 'where, how, by, with whom and what' aspects of training as this fundamentally affects successful outcomes for this cohort

- Training needs to be relevant and support the individual's end goal

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Things that we know work well

Relevance – clear identification of a pathway that:

- Is directly linked to individual goals – people do not want a list of training courses on their CV with little relevance to their aspirations or that don't link to work they want

- Builds on identified transferable skills or seeks to update traditional skills

- Is clearly communicated and jointly agreed upon – understanding relevance and appropriateness is key

Specificity – training that:

- Is specifically designed for people who aren't used to being trained – focus on pace, language used, delivery methods

- Is adapted to support people who may have had poor school experience, been out of a classroom for a long time or not be used to taking part in training

- Provides practical skills and is focused on work they want and gives them some experience of the work before they move into employment – things like SWAPs and apprenticeships can work particularly well with this group

- Has the flexibility to fit around other personal commitments such as caring responsibilities or appointments

- Offers a choice of timings, local venues (alternatives to traditional college environments) and online access to enable them to access training around their existing commitments

Quality – in terms of:

- Marketing materials that suit the target group, using language and images designed to draw interest and make people feel training is for them

- Course content that is delivered well and allows for differentiated learning so that people can progress appropriately whilst building confidence. Content should be clearly linked to end goals and progression pathways

- Effective communication prior to attending the training: giving information, answering questions and addressing any concerns will help set expectations. Sharing examples of peers who benefited from the training can also help

✗ Things that don't work so well

People are likely to lose motivation to engage with skills training when:

- They don't feel involved in the decision-making process around the training. This can lead them attending generic training that doesn't address their needs or add to the skillset required for their chosen area of work

- They were uncertain about what to expect in attending the venue – confidence is a big issue

- They didn't know what to expect with regard to course content, or they were expecting something quite different from what was delivered so they felt unprepared

- They had bad experiences previously but have not had a chance to talk these through – asking about previous training and how they felt about this should be done before you sign people up to new activities

- Follow-up activity after the course doesn't build on what they learnt or link to their goals – training should be part of a clear individual journey to work, not just something everyone has to do

Your personal practice

When signposting older workers to training that is available:

- How do you assess the suitability of a course for an individual?

  - How much flexibility do you have to ensure that any training offered is appropriate and easy to access?

  - Think about the training you have sent people on – have you seen how this is delivered? Make suggestions to those running sessions or highlight any challenges they could work around

- How do you use the feedback you gather from providers or participants to inform your future practice?

  - Are there systems in place to enable you or your team to discuss the training needs of older workers with providers?

  - Could you facilitate a peer group of service users to help work on shared challenges? This could be delivered as an alternative to regular one-to-one sessions to keep support interesting and engaging

- How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the training you recommend?

  - What support are you able to offer to people who have had a negative experience of training?

  - Do you feedback and follow up on any concerns people have had with providers? Can you offer any practical tips based on any issue raised?

  - Share good practice – if a course works particularly well and feels inclusive, how can you help replicate that across other training, either in-house or delivered by partners?

References

Further reading

- Principles for good delivery of employment support for the economically inactive: Improving employment support for over 50s in Greater Manchester | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

- **Mid life support insights** - Helping workers plan for the future will help employers retain skilled staff | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

- **Research into digital skills inclusion**: COVID-19 and the digital divide: Supporting digital inclusion and skills during the pandemic and beyond | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

The above pulls on our learning across employment and worklessness. All of Ageing Better's reports and insights are accessible on our website.

Other reports of note include:

- anon. (n.d.) *MICA: Supporting Older People into Employment (SOPIE): Identifying factors influencing return to work in the over 50s*. UK Research and Innovation. Available at: https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=MR%2FL006367%2F1

- Maitland, A. (2010) *Working Better: The over 50s, the new work generation*. Equality and Human Rights Commission. Available at: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/agefriendly/workingbetter_over_50s.pdf

- Parsons, D and Walsh, K. (2019) *Employment support for over 50s: Rapid evidence review*. Centre for Ageing Better/Greater Manchester Combined Authority/Department for Work & Pensions: Employment support for over 50s: Rapid evidence review | Centre for Ageing Better (ageing-better.org.uk)

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