

RETRAINING FOR OLDER WORKERS?

National Older Learners Group - Expert Seminar on the National Retraining Scheme and links with Mid-life Reviews and MOTs

March 2019

Background

As part of its wider programme of adult education stakeholder engagement commissioned by the Department for Education, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) convened an expert seminar on the National Retraining Scheme, attended by interested members of the National Older Learners Group (NOLG). The expert seminar was intended to build upon an earlier national stakeholder roundtable event¹ on career learning, providing in-depth consideration of issues relevant to older learners and workers. The seminar aimed to explore the relationship and opportunities to be found between the National Retraining Scheme (in development in DfE) and the DWP's Mid-life MOT as well as considering other mid-life initiatives (mid-life career reviews, skills reviews, and the TUC's Mid-life Skills Review Erasmus Plus project).

This report summarises key elements of the presentations and discussion.

1. Introduction

The National Older Learners Group (NOLG) had previously identified the potential opportunities to be found in the proposals for a National Retraining Scheme. It was clear from the earlier career learning roundtable event and the Learning and Work Institute's work on the Cost & Outreach Pilots² (which are one part of the wider DfE Career Learning Pilots) that there was potential here for people in midlife who may need to retrain or find ways to refresh their careers or find new jobs.

Mid-life reviews³ and / or MOTs⁴ are becoming available to people in mid-life with a range of purposes, though not yet sufficiently widely taken up. Partly driven by the

¹ L&W Stakeholder Roundtable on Career Learning.

<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/events/national-adult-education-roundtable/>

²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/713472/Career_Learning_Outreach_and_Cost_Pilots_guidance.pdf

³ <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/mid-life-career-review/>

need to save more and to stay in work for longer, reviews, which make sense at many transitions points in the life course, are particularly required at mid-life as the realities of later life start to become apparent. There is a shift in perspective based on changes in circumstances for some, and the key moment at which, unfortunately, age-based discrimination in the labour market makes an appearance - roughly at the age of 50. The raising of the state pension age and the abolition of compulsory retirement ages were the initial impetus for some of this mid-life activity, but the benefits of review can have a wider influence on the whole of life.

The TUC's European funded Erasmus Plus project, Mid-Life Skills Reviews⁵, is investigating with European partners the options for delivery of workplace-based reviews and transferable skills development through working closely with social partners from which peer reviewers are developed, thus extending the opportunity for mid-life review to a wider cross-section of people in work.

Employers⁶ too are gradually increasing awareness of the need to retain their older workforce⁷ as the demographic change makes its impact.

The Fuller Working Lives team in the Department for Work and Pensions has followed up the proposals in John Cridland's independent review of the state pension age to develop what has now been termed the Mid-life MOT⁹. While still in development, a website with links is already available for the public to use, though the intention is still to enrich this material over time. Again this work has been informed by a wide partnership of organisations through a series of meetings and workshops drawing on the activity of many relevant projects in all sectors.

Developing the Mid-life MOT⁸ report illustrates some pilot projects undertaken by Aviva, Legal and General, TPAS and Mercer. It is interesting to note that employers in the finance sector are largely the ones who have been at the forefront of this

⁴ John Cridland (2017): Smoothing the Transition.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611460/independent-review-of-the-state-pension-age-smoothing-the-transition.pdf

⁵ <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/mid-life-skills-review-project>

⁶ <https://age.bitc.org.uk/>

⁷ Ros Altman (2015) A new vision for older workers: Retain, retrain, recruit.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411420/a-new-vision-for-older-workers.pdf

⁸ Centre for Ageing Better <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/Developing-the-Mid-life-MOT-report.pdf>

DWP <https://www.yourpension.gov.uk/mid-life-mot/>

development to date - perhaps because of their awareness of the demographic change.

We could all agree that people in mid-life may need some intervention, support, or self-review to enable them to make the most of their later working lives and to work towards the most positive 'retirement' and much later life. We could all acknowledge that for many this may involve some retraining, whether because of a desire for train or the necessity of change due to current skills becoming obsolete in the labour market. The challenge is to be able to bring these ideas together so that retraining opportunities match the aspirations or needs which people identify will help them to stay in work and progress positively into later life.

The group noted that there is still an absence of information about ageing in most education reports, campaigns and new developments and equally that much of the research and campaigning on ageing neglects the role that education can play. This situation needs to be rectified and could easily be so, if all focus more effectively on inclusion and diversity.

2. National Retraining Scheme

Update to the National Retraining Scheme (NRS) (Department for Education)

The Government announced at the 2017 Autumn Budget that it would introduce a National Retraining Scheme, to help workers retrain as the economy changes. The Scheme is being driven by National Retraining Partnership with the CBI, TUC and Government. The Scheme should be read alongside the government's Industrial Strategy⁹, with which NRS shares some priorities.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uks-industrial-strategy>

In the 2018 Autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced a £100 million commitment to start the initial roll out of the National Retraining Scheme. This funding was intended to start delivering initial elements of the service to the public from summer 2019 and allow testing, evaluation and learning as the service develops. The scheme acknowledges a policy context which includes a changing labour market of automation, longer working lives, and a focus on improving productivity and understands the need to move to lifelong training opportunities as a result of such structural changes. In particular, although there is uncertainty around the scale of the impact, automation has the potential to cause a significant impact on the economy and workers, and most likely to affect negatively people with low skills and who are least able to adapt.

The NRS recognises that adults face a range of barriers to learning and will respond to the challenge to make a shift towards a culture of lifelong learning. The initial target group is employed adults aged 24+, qualified below degree level, particularly focusing on adults who are at risk of losing employment due to technological change. This can and will include people who are aged 50+.

Employers face barriers to introducing a lifelong training approach too and these usually concern costs and time, but for some still not perceiving the need. There has been engagement with both larger companies and SMEs. In terms of engaging smaller employers, the approach to date has been to go into MCA areas where there are networks e.g. Chambers of Commerce, and to set up events where the Department can engage with large numbers of SMEs.

The DfE states that the Scheme will succeed and deliver good value for money if it takes individuals at risk of their jobs changing or disappearing as a result of automation, helps them to gain skills they need to move into a new occupation and successfully allows them to move into more stable, high-productive jobs. The aim is not to displace investment which would already be made by individuals and employers.

The DfE is developing the Scheme using the user-focused test, build and iterate approach, and is delivering pilots to look at engagement, flexible delivery and the impact of cost subsidy. .

The user research with potential adult learners, employers and providers has delivered initial findings for what users would need from a retraining scheme. These indicate that:

- People want a job, not a training course and most wouldn't leave a job to train.
- People are not aware their jobs are at risk.

- Online training often meets users needs for flexibility, but our testing has shown that the Scheme will need our user base lacks confidence in using it.
- Most individuals would pay or co-fund training if it led to a job but most would not accept a drop in salary (some would consider a drop for a year).
- Employers will want any scheme to integrate with existing recruitment processes.

Alongside the user research, the DfE is conducting a number of pilots to help inform the design and testing of the Scheme:

'Cost and Outreach Pilots' - In five local areas across England, DfE is testing how successful marketing and subsidies are in overcoming barriers to attitude and cost for adult learners. L&W has been supporting the development and implementation of the pilots, including evaluating process and impact. The pilots are testing how marketing and different levels of subsidy and how this affects people's engagement in training. One of the findings from the initial evaluation of these pilots is that there is a need for more support to build the initial motivation to take steps towards reviewing one's situation (IAG or other) and potentially taking up retraining.

Flexible Learning Fund – Through delivering 31 projects within this fund, DfE is developing and testing flexible ways of delivering learning to working adults and their effect on overcoming barriers relating to the accessibility of learning for adults.

Construction Skills Fund - Launched in June 2018, this will support and incentivise innovative and employer-led approaches to construction training over the next two years.

EdTech and AIEd Fund – In early 2019, DfE plans to invest in EdTech and AI enabled learning for adults, which will focus on how technology can improve training outcomes for individuals who are likely to form part of the NRS target group.

From the user research and initial pilot findings the DfE has created a simplified version of what the NRS could look like as a process / journey from the viewpoint of the individual, whether they are someone who wants to retrain, needs to retrain but doesn't know it or is reluctant to retrain.

1. Outreach and initial engagement, which can include engagement with users directly or from referral from other Government services or trades unions.
2. Skills assessment (including digitally supported) and signposting to relevant local job and training provision
3. Flexible short duration training, predominantly online and building on existing provision. This is likely to focus on functional/employability skills to get people into workplace.

4. Help finding and applying for jobs – NRS plus input from other agencies
5. Employer engagement to help secure job and technical training opportunities.

The roll-out of the first part of NRS will happen this summer and will initially focus on a small target group. Local relationships will be key to the NRS working in practice – links to local public, private and voluntary sectors. There are opportunities for members / partners to get involved in “private Beta testing”.

3. Mid-Life MOT

The DWP MOT Website was launched 18th Feb, alongside a BiTC toolkit for SMEs to help them to support the initiative. The government aim is to focus on SME engagement. The intention is to enable retention as the more effective strategy in supporting people to do paid work in later life.

Moving forward, the policy focus is on expanding the scheme and take-up. Importantly the aims includes trying to stop people from dropping out of work in first place and encouraging employers to retain older staff.

Alongside the DWP’s work have been 4 MOT trials conducted by Legal and General (see below), Aviva, Mercer and TPAS. Consultation workshops were held by TPAS and also through CfAB and Gulbenkian. Members of the DWP team were engaged across these.

DWP piloted MOT internally on two sites. Feedback was mixed. Some people felt that they were already doing the work and wellbeing aspects via organisational line management. Was some discomfort about the financial aspects, due to misunderstandings that individual would be disclosing personal financial circumstances to their employers.

There is no funding for promotion and publicity. Having to be done via partners, social media, local networks, and so on.

Impartiality is an important dimension of what can help to give people confidence in the service. There needs to be a choice for about when people disclose any intentions to their line manager, and when can work with independent / impartial intermediaries, without any fear of ‘repercussions’.

4. Mid-life MOT trials - the experience of Legal and General

John Power offered us the enticing prospect of a ‘more colourful’ retirement - if we learn to take stock at mid-life.

The pilot at Legal and General (L&G) grew directly out of the Cridland report, Smoothing the Transition (see above), which recommended Mid-life MOTs for people in their late 50s and early 60s. They have, however, very much taken on board Age UK’s¹⁰ comment that 50 is too late for review, because people need time to adjust their future working plans, including for example, retraining and so they have time to sort out pension savings. L&G has 26% of employees who are 46 or older, some much older.

The trials worked through a workshop model with cohort 45-55 in the company. The work was conducted through ongoing feedback. The approach focused work around four quadrants: pensions and savings; financial wellness; health check assessment, and career. The focus of the L&G trial is on understanding what the issues are around financial planning that also concern adults in this context.

In terms of the career element, the findings showed that career was a key area of concern, but engagement was patchy and that may have been due to the method that was used. Most people expect to change career at some point. L&G will now tweak this element as participants valued the career conversation aspect. It is anticipated this will include a longer workshop and potentially including some one to one conversations. A generic “work after 50/ in the digital age” doesn’t work for the majority of people, who would prefer something specific to their needs and future ambitions. There is the potential to curate a series of digital tools and resource on a range of career-related topics, to better support individual needs and further tailor the service to maximise the support provided. The following are topics that could be tested further as to their interest levels:

- Flexible working opportunities (e.g. sabbaticals, location, timing, reduced hours etc.)
- Charitable working and/or volunteering, involvement in community projects etc.
- Creating a portfolio career
- Retraining, core skills & qualification assessment (+ help with CV positioning)
- Changing world of work (including new skills, transferable/valued skills in digital age, AI impact on roles/industries)

¹⁰ Age UK 2017 Creating a career MOT. https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_oct17_creating_a_career_mot_at_50.pdf

- Age-friendly employers and (L&G's) policy/support framework (e.g. flex. working, age apprenticeships, care passports, care allowance etc.)
- Starting a (family) business
- Developing hobbies & interests
- Mentoring & reverse mentoring
- Options for working into 'retirement'.

The pension savings element received positive feedback on the digital tool but needs more development. Any additional pensions guidance or advice that was offered was valued by participants.

Participants were less sure about the direct relevance of financial wellness at the mid-life stage. Responses suggested that they thought it might be more relevant to younger age groups in different industries. It was suggested that some financial planning guidance is useful for some people and that this could be integrated with an outward facing offer of L&Gs, the Workplace Pensions Financial Wellbeing Hub, which has recently been launched for employers. The topics offered will include: Take control of your money; Manage your debt; Plan a budget; and, Achieve your saving goals.

There is no doubt that this sort of topic is needed. The Money Advice Service¹¹ suggests that 1 in 5 people have considerable difficulties ('drowning in debt') of whom 38% feel anxious and 34% suffer from stress or depression. The hub provides access to tools and information to help people manage their money, for a range of financial planning needs. There are calculators and guides and signposting to independent advice / debt advice agencies. The Hub is available via pension scheme microsites. The most popular element of the Hub is the debt management section. L&G envisages that Financial Wellbeing will in fact form the core of the MOT offer.

The Health Risk Assessment component was a strong fit with mid-life concerns and received very positive feedback. L&G will proceed to develop this element as a core component of Mid-life MOT and will align it with further work on mental wellbeing,

¹¹ reference for MAS

working in partnership with relevant charities. There may be scope to link the health element to the five-yearly health check-ups which people are offered via their GP.

The challenge now is how to take the Mid-life MOT forward within the company, and how to make the model scalable and potentially to include client organisations. L&G is looking at introduction of e.g. digital triage to support some elements of the process. This is envisaged as a way of being able to identify the needs of individual employees in greater detail, and then tailor workshops more closely to address these needs.

5. Mid-life Skills Review Project

Ian Borkett introduced the Mid-life Skills Review project with its focus on the digital Value My Skills tool.

Led by the TUC/unionlearn, this Erasmus Plus funded project builds on the work undertaken during the piloting of mid-life career reviews, in particular the work of Union Learning Reps (ULRs) and the Value My Skills exercise on transferable skills.

The context for the project is the changing labour market and demographic ageing, along with trying to address an improved quality of life for older workers. The predicted European labour force will decrease by an average of two million people every year up until 2030. Solutions therefore need to be found to make work more sustainable for older workers. 17.3 million (18.2%) of older people, aged 65 and over, in the EU remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Automation and AI bring a new range of challenges.

Despite the increasing numbers of older workers and the need for them to stay in work for longer as a result of changes to pension ages and insufficient savings, the difficulty of re-entering the labour market after age 50 means focus should be on preventing people from dropping out of work. There are benefits for individuals, employers and wider society.

Trades unions and other social partners are involved in this kind of research and project because individuals need options and the skills to remain in the labour market. Businesses/organisations can benefit significantly from retaining their older workers.

Carrying out reviews is an ideal role for Union Learning Reps (ULRs) to undertake. They are trusted intermediaries and workers are confident to have confidential conversations with them. There is huge demand for this kind of support from workers. The project aims to train a network of mid-life skills champions and will be designing and delivering an online training course for mid-life skills reviewers, alongside an online skills assessment tool with digital badges.

Project aimed to create a “digitally supported mid-life review”. However, evidence clearly shows that mediated support is critical to making a difference, to be accessed alongside digital approach. Particularly for disadvantaged and less confident learners, the role of intermediary is critical.

The Mid-life skills reviews in this project are aimed at people 50+. A review is a structured meeting to review skills, competences and career options. The main targets are those with low levels of basic skills in literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The review offers a reflective space to review situation and discuss future plans. MLRs have a wide ranging and holistic approach, but for the purposes of the project, the project focused on people aged 50+ with low basic skills and who were otherwise facing labour market disadvantage.

The development of the online Value My Skills tool has been a key part of infrastructure to support midlife reviews. Helps people to review transferable skills, highlight their strengths and identify development needs. Can then put this into a short action plan. App builds on original cards produced to support the process. This intervention has proved to be very successful as a way of opening up and having the conversation about midlife needs. A safe, supported reflective space. Currently in beta testing but will be free to use when opening up.

Looking forward, unionlearn aims for workers to have the career management skills and confidence to take charge of their working lives. Mid-life Reviews were established as a process for helping people to take control of their career direction. The digital badging offer will evidence the work done, show the skills people have and contribute to enhanced employability. As a result of the project there will be an increased number of ULRs who are able to deliver mid-life reviews working alongside a wider community of mid-life reviewers across Europe.

The TUC is calling for a midlife review entitlement at age 50 as this is a critical point in people’s working lives.

The TUC is further calling for the mid-life skills review approach to be a key element of the future National Retraining Scheme offer, which could include making use of the digital materials generated through the MLRS project. The materials are open source so could be used by anyone and could therefore be used outside of unionised workplaces. It is important that the approach is asset based and starts with a positive message about where people are.

6. Discussions

Inequality - Age

At the expert seminar there was support in the room for prioritising adults 50+ as that is the age at which age discrimination really kicks in. There was a welcome for the concept of an entitlement to mid-life review at 50, while recognising that this could be delivered in a range of different ways. Demographics play a fundamental role in determining the opportunities that people are able to access.

It was noted that it remains disappointing that all conferences, policies and reports about education, training and employment continue to exclude older workers. (And conversely it is disappointing that much research on ageing makes no mention of education or training.)

Inequality - gender

In the current cohort of 50+ workers there is a pronounced gender disparity, with women more likely to be in precarious and low paid, low quality jobs. When working on both the skills review and careers advice elements of these processes

Life course

The four-stages (quartiles) of the life-course model, used by the inquiry into the future of lifelong learning, may be helpful for understanding different priorities that adults will bring to the workforce at different times, as it distinguishes clearly between the learning needs of younger older (50 - 75) and the older older (75+) groups¹².

Health

It was stressed that when health and wellbeing are being should include mental health.

How do we have the conversations earlier so that they are built in across the working life – focus on preventative / pre-emptive - and not just about health - but about the whole of life? The approach could be built into IAG offer made through adult learning providers. They have access to adults and could offer wider approach.

Fuller working lives

The key concept to make longer working lives successful is flexibility - on all sides- , so that people can find meaningful work for longer. To support someone to extend their working life involves skilled career review / skills review alongside a holistic look at that individual's needs within their personal context.

¹² Schuller and Watson, 2009, Learning through Life; Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning
Leicester, NIACE

As an example, the City of London Corporation is planning an active policy of creating an environment which encourages older adults to return to the workplace, and to stay and progress within it. The project is in development.

A Kings College London study showed that around 25% of people return to work after retire. However, this is socially graded as, at higher levels, it is relatively easy to do but becomes more difficult lower down the scale.

People wanting to return to the workplace don't understand what their options are so reviews are needed at various ages.

Skills and careers reviews/advice

Good research evidence exists that people don't gain benefit from LMI without mediation. Need 1:1 support to make sense of it.

Skills are also needed for non-work related issues; for example, there needs to be support to ensure that people have sufficient digital skills and access to technology so that they are able to engage with support services that are available.

The London Borough of Hillingdon Adult Education Service carries out lots of IAG with adults of all ages, and find that those outside the workplace face significant barriers to engaging with support processes and 1:1 support is critical. Some people may have a long journey back into workplace from e.g, unemployment, caring.

Retraining and jobs

Retraining was the main focus of the discussion as its focus was on the potential opportunities of the NRS. During the development of NRS thus far, the user research showed that awareness of what support and training opportunities are available is very low. Therefore a key part of the new programme will be raising awareness - across all sectors and stakeholders.

However, it was acknowledged that gaining experience is often key to gaining work especially in a new sector / type of work. There is concern as to how people would get experience of different sectors, occupations and career areas which will support them to make a transition, particularly while they are working? This is often the missing bit of the puzzle.

We were reminded of an ESF-funded project in the South East which did satisfactorily enable some people to change work. Men who had worked in manufacturing were trained to enter the care sector¹³. These and further projects included a week's induction which had the effect of enabling transitions. The model was based on orientating training towards skills shortage areas where there are definite jobs. As JCP discretionary funds were also utilised, DWP might be able to shed light on to what extent this model is still being used.

Employers need to take on responsibility and recognise that they have a key role to play in investing in enabling people to be work-ready both for their current job and for progression or transition. When working with employers SMEs as well as larger employers must be involved. However, to date enthusiasm amongst employers for the Mid-life Review or MOT has come overwhelmingly from the finance sector, whose greater understanding of this demographic group has enabled them to take it up, with the additional advantage of the potential for simultaneously creating customer facing products.

Line managers are often the people who set the parameters on the ground over training decisions and culture, but they are often absent from the conversation. It is not their role to carry out mid-life reviews, for example, as this may well be inappropriate, but enabling participation in review and training/re-training means that they must be included in understanding the issues and in implementing employers' age-friendly policies.

Jobs are not as circumscribed as conventional thinking suggests. There are ways of organising the workplace which enable people to enhance and stretch what they do, and would help to address productivity gap. Issue might not be that people need to find a new job, but to be enabled to do their current job differently. It is helpful to consider the difference between expansive and restrictive workplaces.

Intermediaries such as ULRs are helping people to make meaning and see the possibilities of their situation. This is critical in circumstances where work and wider context can seem perilous and scary.

Taking a wider view of skills, and including those that are practised and developed beyond the workplace, helps to build a sense of agency and moves from a deficit to an asset based model.

¹³ More details can be found in:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/283896/ep22-ageing-society-implications-manufacturing.pdf
and at: https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/_publications/580-OlderWorkersOpportSE.pdf

It was emphasised that all involved need to be realistic about what jobs are actually available. The UK has a low paid workforce which means that people are likely to go into other low-paid jobs including as they age. In-work poverty remains the key challenge for people of all ages, and especially in the older and younger age groups.

Partnerships and working at local level

Local infrastructure development and integration is key – IAG, training providers, employers must work together. The example of the partnership approach to recruitment, training, re-training and planning behind the Grand Central development in Birmingham was cited as a good way forward.

Adult education providers are also good at making IAG work, because they have a holistic understanding of their learners and their needs. They need to work alongside other providers including the trades unions and the National Careers Service as well building positive relationships with employers.

Conclusion

The development of the National Retraining Scheme was seen as offering some considerable opportunity for older people in the labour market, helping to achieve the 'retain, retrain, recruit' mantra and the encouragement of BiTC and others to employers to work effectively with their older workforce.

At the same time the limitations of the scheme in its current scope were noted; this scheme as it is currently configured will not be able to meet all the retraining needs of older people. The importance of appropriate IAG chimed well with the developments of MOTs and Reviews. It was recognised that many adults are not accessing even the relatively limited IAG currently available - and awareness needs to be built about this in addition to the Scheme and mid-life options. We are still in need of developing a genuine culture of lifelong learning which would support people to learn and work at all stages of the life-course.

It is important to continue to stress the importance of inclusivity and ensuring, through whatever means are adopted, that older workers / would-be workers can engage and participate. Awareness raising is key - but the messages have to be clear and mean something to the audience - whether older workers or employers.

There are significant linkages between the mid-life MOT / mid-life skills or career reviews of various kinds and any retraining or employment options to which older workers can have access. Providers of these schemes need to liaise with the National Retraining Scheme as it develops, but further they need to ensure that their offers are complementary and refer to each other. For example, Mid-life MOT needs

to link into NRS, and Value My Skills developed by the TUC could have pathways into both. All of the projects have developed considerable awareness amongst employers but it is clear that more is needed, particularly in the SME sectors.

Although some holistic thinking between DfE and DWP has begun to start to overcome the challenges of integrating the background thinking of the NRS and the Mid-life MOT, this work needs to continue. But the need for partnership working to achieve positive outcomes extends too beyond government to all those who are providing education, training, reviews and employment. This seminar has helped this dialogue further along its way.