

# Supporting Disabled Older Workers

## Summary Report

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**Insights for policy  
and practice from  
lived experience**

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in partnership with:

**THE  
POLICY  
INSTITUTE**



# About us

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## **Centre for Ageing Better**

Everyone has the right to a good life as they get older and our whole society benefits when people are able to age well. But far too many people face huge barriers, and as a result are living in bad housing, dealing with poverty and poor health and made to feel invisible in their communities and society.

Ageism, including discrimination in employment, stark inequalities in people's health and financial circumstances, chronic underinvestment in helping people to age well and a lack of political focus – are all contributing to this growing and critical problem.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we are pioneering ways to make ageing better a reality for everyone. We aim to inspire and inform those in power to tackle the inequalities faced by older people, call out and challenge ageism in all its forms and encourage the widespread take-up of brilliant ideas and approaches that help people to age better.

Get it right and more of us can experience good health, financial security and be treated fairly and with respect as we grow older.

Help us make sure everyone can age better.

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# Foreword

Work can offer us purpose, security and connection with others. Yet for far too many Disabled people and people living with long-term health conditions in their fifties and sixties, unnecessary barriers keep these benefits out of reach.

While older workers with health conditions across much of Europe are making gains, the UK is falling behind ([Institute for Employment Studies](#)). Here, only 57% of people aged 50-65 with a long-term health condition are in work, compared with 73% of those aged 35-49. Overall, this means people in this age group are 60% more likely to be out of work, despite being no more likely to say their health limits their ability to work compared to the younger age group.

The perspectives of older Disabled people have not been prominent in the ongoing debates around disability benefit claimants, and Disabled people themselves are all too often positioned as a problem. Our aim in this research is to centre their voices and explore their diverse employment experiences through the lens of the [Social Model of Disability](#). This model highlights how societal barriers – rather than impairments or differences – create disability and thereby limit older Disabled people’s work opportunities.

This research explores some of the human stories behind the numbers we see reported: of people persevering in jobs because they don’t know if a new role would make the same accommodations, of applications going unanswered and interviews clouded by bias, jobs lost because the right support never came, and the pressures of managing health and caring responsibilities around work.

Among these stories are examples that highlight good practice to be built upon. They show what happens when employers look past assumptions and focus on ‘ability, not inability’. They reveal the life-changing power of timely workplace adjustments, often the difference between being pushed into early retirement and thriving at work. Throughout, they highlight the immense value older Disabled people bring – not in spite of their experiences but because of them – as

Disabled people, as carers and as individuals in their fifties and sixties whose expertise strengthens the teams and organisations of which they are part.

At the heart of this project are the voices of lived experience. The Supporting Disabled Older Workers project has been led by a nine-member expert steering group, all older Disabled people or those with long-term health conditions. The steering group and peer researchers were crucial in designing and conducting this study. They have shaped every step of the journey – from selecting the Policy Institute as research partners to analysing the findings and pinpointing where real change is needed. Below, some of them share their hopes for how the research will influence policy and practice to better support Disabled older people like themselves.

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**“I would like to emphasise the agency, resourcefulness, and problem-solving skills of Disabled people and posit meaningful co-production as the best way to recognise and try to dismantle the barriers we experience.”**

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**Martine Connolly**

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**“I hope the report will help show employers that older and Disabled people can still offer real value in the workplace, especially when we are given the right support.”**

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**John Holmes**

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**“I’m hoping to see changes in the future which allow a person to freely express their concerns and needs for adjustments in the workplace, without negative judgement and feeling less than.”**

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**Denise Rodgers**

By embracing co-production – doing with, not to – we have uncovered not only some of the barriers but also some areas for positive change. Insights from the steering group, interviews and survey data further highlight the need for an age- and disability-positive, targeted and curious approach – so that more people in their fifties and sixties can find work, stay in work and flourish.

This report was supported by the Columbia Threadneedle Foundation. Established in 2013, the Columbia Threadneedle Foundation is a UK registered charity, which works with charities to improve individual lives while also driving fundamental social change through tackling critical social issues including employment, empowerment, inclusion, opportunity and mental health.







# Executive summary

## About the research

This research explores the working lives of Disabled people aged 50 and over, placing their voices at the heart of the study. The project is co-designed and co-produced with nine people with lived experience. They formed an Experts by Experience Steering Group (EESG) who played a vital role in shaping the research, from developing the research questions and design, to selecting the Policy Institute at King's College London as the research organisation, collecting data, interpreting findings and identifying recommendations.

We conducted 36 semi-structured interviews across England, including nine interviews led by peer researchers from the EESG. Across the interviews, we heard from a diverse group of Disabled older workers across different sectors and backgrounds. Their stories reveal both the systemic barriers and the everyday resilience involved in starting, staying in or returning to work as a Disabled older person. To complement these qualitative insights, we also carried out a nationally representative online survey of 1,017 people aged 50-66, providing a broader picture of how widespread these experiences are among older people, including those who are Disabled.

The report concludes with practical, co-designed recommendations for policy-makers, employers and support providers. Shaped by Disabled older workers themselves, we hope these recommendations will be considered seriously, particularly by government, who has made it a mission to 'Get Britain Working', as well as by employers and employment support providers seeking to build a more inclusive and productive labour market.



## Key findings and recommendations at a glance

The UK labour market is failing Disabled older people. Our research highlights how age and disability discrimination often overlap, creating deeper disadvantages for these workers and making it harder to stay in jobs or find new opportunities. According to our survey, 69% of UK adults aged 50-66 feel older age is a disadvantage in the UK job market, while 75% thought people with health conditions are disadvantaged. But such numbers only tell part of the story.

Our interviews show that Disabled older workers are navigating a constant minefield, weighing whether to declare health conditions, how to ask for adjustments and how to present themselves in a labour market that they feel often overlooks them or undervalues them. The daily negotiation takes a toll on confidence, wellbeing and long-term health, which is likely to exacerbate the disadvantages they face.

The stories in this report – alongside our survey findings – tell the story of how stigma, poor support and systemic barriers have contributed to the UK's growing economic inactivity crisis.

The recommendations below are based on the opportunities for change identified throughout this report. They highlight ways in which both government and employers could take action on policy and practice to better support Disabled older workers. These recommendations are intended as a starting point for further exploration and testing, rather than a definitive set of solutions. They reflect what has emerged from this piece of work so far and provide a framework for continued discussion, collaboration, and learning.

These recommendations have not been presented as a strict checklist for all employers as an acknowledgement that some actions may be harder for smaller organisations. However, we firmly believe that every employer should look at how they can better support Disabled older workers in a way that suits their own situation. This could bring huge benefits - not just for the workers and employers themselves, but for the UK economy as a whole.

Members of the EESG helped create these recommendations through a process of mind-mapping where members analysed emerging findings and, based on these, identified potential ways to improve employment experiences for Disabled older workers. We also discussed the recommendations in a stakeholder workshop with policymakers, academic experts, and employer representatives, as well as representatives from the Centre for Ageing Better, the Policy Institute, and EESG.

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## **1. Internalised ableism can make it harder to ask for help**

Stigma around age, disability, and asking for support prevents many Disabled older workers from accessing the adjustments they're entitled to. Barriers for participants included feelings of pride, fear of seeming weak, internalised ableism and uncertainty about how and when to speak up. Adjustments must be reframed as rights, not rewards, supporting efforts for a wider shift in attitudes across the workforce.

### **Employers should be supported and encouraged to:**

**Recommendation 1a:** Actively promote access to workplace adjustments, and to address stigma related to age and disability.

**Recommendation 1b:** Actively promote the uptake and participation in peer-led networks for Disabled and older workers, enabling them to share experiences, challenge stigma and build confidence.



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## 2. Disability and age discrimination is often compounded by other forms of inequality

Intersectionality matters. Workplace policies often fail to reflect the lived realities of ageing and disability, and how these intersect with other social identities such as gender. Participants highlighted a lack of support around menopause and other age-related health issues, alongside a broader absence of lived experience in shaping policy. Employers should be encouraged and supported to improve awareness and ensure those most affected are directly involved in designing the solutions.

**Recommendation 2a:** Employers should consider how workers with lived experience of intersecting inequalities – including age and disability – can be meaningfully involved in shaping workplace policies, practices and support.

**Recommendation 2b:** Managers should be supported to improve their awareness and understanding of experiences of ageing and disability, and how these intersect – including practical guidance on the menopause.

### 3. Stigma and low confidence hold many back from applying for jobs

Disabled older workers often face barriers before they reach the workplace. Of Disabled people aged 50-66, 44% felt they had experienced negative treatment when applying for jobs or promotions in the past five years, compared to 25% of non-disabled people. Many interview participants suspected discrimination based on age or disability, particularly when faced with vague feedback or repeated rejections. Fear of stigma and uncertainty about how applications would be received left many lacking the confidence to apply. Employers and government have a responsibility to create clear, supportive processes that allow candidates to disclose impairments safely, feel confident in applying, and to trust that any information shared will be treated with care and transparency.

#### **Employers should be supported and encouraged to:**

**Recommendation 3a:** Adopt name-, age-, and disability-anonymised recruitment processes, and to ensure that any selection tests used are inclusive.

**Recommendation 3b:** Clearly explain how health information and adjustment requests will be used and handled during recruitment and onboarding, to build trust and support effective working relationship between employee and employer from the start.

**Recommendation 3c:** Include as much information as feasible about available adjustments in job adverts, while making clear that they are open to further conversations depending on applicants' needs.



### The UK Government should:

**Recommendation 3d:** Ensure that accessible recruitment guidance is available for both applicants and employers, focused on supporting Disabled older workers.

**Recommendation 3e:** Build on existing initiatives by encouraging disability pay gap reporting for large employers, the publication of diversity data and adoption of inclusive hiring practices.

## 4. Jobcentre Plus currently struggles to provide the tailored support older Disabled individuals need

When asked about employment support services, many participants spoke about their experiences with Jobcentre Plus, describing it as frustrating and bureaucratic, with staff lacking in empathy and understanding of specific health conditions or older workers' needs. When support was provided, for instance through Access to Work, participants described it as critical in supporting them to stay in work, but awareness was low, leading one participant to describe Access to Work as 'the government's best kept secret.' Employment support reform must be guided by lived experience, with a particular focus on Jobcentre Plus as a 'front door' for people to access support.

### The UK Government should:

**Recommendation 4a:** Work collaboratively with users and other stakeholders to streamline the application process for Access to Work and improve its accessibility.

**Recommendation 4b:** Act to improve public and employer awareness of the employment support available to older Disabled people.

**Recommendation 4c:** Reform Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, with a focus on culture, including specialist disability and age inclusive training.

## 5. Supportive managers and open communication shape early experiences of starting a job

Early support from line managers and good induction can help to set up workers for sustainable employment. Participants stressed the importance of normalising adjustments from day one, starting with inclusive onboarding and induction processes. Despite this, 21% of Disabled people aged 50-66, had not asked for adjustments in the past five years despite needing them. Tools like ‘Adjustment passports’ and clear, timely responses to support requests can help ensure older Disabled workers aren’t left waiting in limbo or left out altogether.

### Employers should be supported and encouraged to:

**Recommendation 5a:** Integrate disability and age inclusion into induction and onboarding processes to normalise conversation about adjustments from day one.

**Recommendation 5b:** Ensure that older Disabled people feel confident in communicating their workplace needs to employers, for instance by promoting the use of ‘adjustment passports’.

**Recommendation 5c:** Provide timely responses, with clear communication, to requests for reasonable adjustments.



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## **6. Remote work is a double-edged sword: a crucial adjustment for many, but sometimes comes with risks**

Working from home was seen as a crucial adjustment by many. It helped manage fluctuating health conditions, reduce commuting stress and save energy. But it could also lead to isolation, blurred boundaries between work and home life, and missed development opportunities and conversations in the office. When it comes to remote working, employers must ensure flexibility remains on the table and is treated as part of an inclusive, rights-based approach to employment.

### **Employers should be supported and encouraged to:**

**Recommendation 6a:** Offer remote work as a choice wherever possible and recognise remote work as a reasonable adjustment.

**Recommendation 6b:** Ensure that remote workers have equal access to development and progression opportunities.

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### 7. Good managers make a difference

Job satisfaction among Disabled older workers was closely tied to the quality of relationships with managers and colleagues. People thrived when managers or supervisors were supportive and inclusive, but job satisfaction could be undermined when managers lacked understanding of and empathy for participants' health conditions. Targeted training on disability, age, and inclusive leadership is essential to ensure they lead with confidence, empathy, and fairness.

**Recommendation 7a:** Employers should be supported and encouraged to improve training on disability, age, and inclusive leadership.

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## 8. Positive workplaces are inclusive and flexible

Interview participants explained that positive workplaces were those with inclusive cultures; visible diversity among staff; inclusive and supportive colleagues, managers and policies; as well as access to both formal and informal adjustments. These environments made Disabled older workers feel respected and supported, ultimately helping them stay in the workplace. Employers having supportive policies on paper is not enough: they need to be clearly communicated, consistently upheld, and embedded in workplace culture.

### **Employers should be supported and encouraged to:**

**Recommendation 8a:** Ensure disability- and age-related policies are well communicated, understood and upheld within the workplace.

**Recommendation 8b:** Create inclusive workplace cultures for older Disabled workers through training, networks and visible role models.



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## 9. Life outside work affects work

Many Disabled older workers are balancing employment with caring responsibilities, often for both children and ageing relatives. This meant social activities and family were often sacrificed to prioritise recovering and resting for work, with some likening their experience to being a ‘hamster on a wheel’. Whilst part-time and flexible work helped regain work-life balance for some, not everyone could afford reduced hours. Both employers and government have a role in providing flexibility and broader support, creating conditions that make balancing work and life sustainable for Disabled older workers.

**Recommendation 9a:** Employers should be supported to facilitate flexible, remote and part-time working to help employees manage caregiving and health needs.

**Recommendation 9b:** The UK Government should commission further research on how to best reduce the burden on ‘sandwich generations’, for instance through reforms to childcare and social care.

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## 10. Voices of those with lived experience

Our research approach demonstrates that people with lived experience can effectively be involved in conducting research, as well as shaping government and workplace policies and practices. Throughout this project, Disabled older people provided crucial insights that shaped our findings, from identifying key issues like work-life balance to influencing how themes were interpreted. We believe it is essential that future policies and practices are developed and shaped in close collaboration with people with lived experience, including those who are Disabled and aged over 50.

**Recommendation 10a:** Employers should be supported and encouraged to actively involve Disabled older workers in shaping and co-producing workplace policies and practices.

**Recommendation 10b:** The UK Government should actively involve Disabled older people in developing policies aimed at addressing economic inactivity.

**Recommendation 10c:** The Department for Work and Pensions and employment support providers should actively involve Disabled older workers in developing employment support programmes, producing guidance and training work coaches to develop an understanding of specific health conditions and improve outcomes for the cohort.



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**Let's make ageing better.**

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The Centre for Ageing Better is pioneering ways to make ageing better a reality for everyone, including challenging ageism and building an Age-friendly Movement, creating Age-friendly Employment and Age-friendly Homes. It is a charitable foundation and part of the government's What Works Network.

The Centre for Ageing Better is a registered charity with the Charity Commission of England and Wales registered number: 1160741

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