

A Tale of Two 60s

Work in a decade
of transition

June 2026



About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The Centre for Ageing Better is an independent centre of excellence on ageing and demographic change.

We work with national and local government, industries, businesses, and community organisations to improve how people experience ageing. Our work focuses on creating better workplaces, homes and communities, while tackling ageism and addressing inequality in later life.

Learn more at [**ageing-better.org.uk**](https://ageing-better.org.uk)

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Definitions

These definitions are explained in more detail in our a Tale of Two 60s Introductory Report and feature throughout this work:

Latent class analysis (LCA) – a statistical technique for grouping people based on patterns in their answers to certain questions. It works on the assumption that people who are similar in measured characteristics share some hidden unmeasured characteristic that can explain behavioural or attitudinal differences between the different sub-groups. LCA was used to identify different sub-groups of people in their 60s in 2002-03 and in 2023-24.

Benefit unit – a single adult or a married or cohabiting couple and any dependent children that are assessed jointly for eligibility for benefit receipt. The number of equivalent adults in a benefit unit formed the denominator for the derived income variable used in the LCA.

Equivalent adult – a way of converting the number of people in a benefit unit into adult equivalents. For example, a couple counts as about 1.6 equivalent adults, rather than two because of economies of scale in sharing living costs. Children are assigned a fraction of an adult equivalent depending on age, with younger children counting for less than older children or teenagers. The income of the benefit unit is divided by the number of equivalent adults in it to give the income per benefit unit equivalent adult.

When speaking about the different experiences of people in their 60s, our analysis identifies two distinct groupings. There is obviously a range of experience within these, but for the purposes of the report we refer to these as:

The precarious group – a sub-group of 60-69 year olds that Ageing Better analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing data from 2023-24 has found share similar characteristics. These include being more likely to be living on a low income, defined as less than £326 per benefit unit equivalent adult per week, often feeling short of money, living on state benefits, a private renter and certain other characteristics.

The secure group – a sub-group of 60-69 year olds that Ageing Better analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing data from 2023-24 has found share similar characteristics. These characteristics include being less likely to be living on a low income (defined as less than £326 per benefit unit equivalent adult per week), less likely to have less than £2,000 in savings, less likely to often feel short of money, more likely to be a home-owner, more likely to be educated to at least O-level and more likely to have a private pension.



Executive summary

Work and retirement in our 60s presents two contrasting stories.

One is of increased economic activity and positive transitions to retirement. Overall, a far larger proportion are working in this stage of their life than were two decades ago, while those in this group who do retire are more commonly doing so to spend time with their loved ones while their health allows.

The other story is of restricted access to work, deep financial need and a denial of agency over work engagement. The result of this is a rising tide of hardship in which the precarious group is trapped. They are forced to remain in work for as long as their health allows, while battling against needless barriers related to health, job search and caring responsibilities. When these barriers prove insurmountable, they must turn to the lifeline of benefits, in some cases for the first time in their working lives.

This report examines how people in their 60s, particularly those in the precarious group, experience work and the transition toward retirement. It exposes the structural barriers that prevent many older workers from accessing secure employment and exercising real choice around retirement.

Key findings

- 1. Work in later life is a financial necessity for the precarious group:** Work for the precarious group in their 60s is driven by financial necessity, not fulfilment. In the face of inadequate social supports, participants frequently expected to work beyond state pension age (SPA) simply to stay afloat. Those forced out of work, typically by health issues, expressed a desire and need to have remained in work for longer. The need to maintain an income to stave off greater financial insecurity means many of those working expected to do so “until they dropped”.

- 2. Health barriers push the precarious group to rely on the benefits system:** When their health prevents them from working, they face additional hardship, particularly if this strikes in the years before SPA. For many **the result of this exclusion from work is engagement with the welfare system**, sometimes for the first time. This presents the precarious group with further challenges. Many experience confusion about their entitlement and how it interacts with the State Pension. Some want to work but are trapped on benefits, as the hours their health allows them to work results in a reduced entitlement and overall loss of income.
- 3. People in the precarious group are denied choice about stopping work:** Retirement has changed across the last two decades and is no longer tied closely to state pension age. The decision to retire is now most commonly a positive one for people to spend time with their family while their health allows. However, while those in better financial positions have greater agency over this transition, this choice about moving out of work is rarely available to the precarious group as they financially need to remain in work. Where they do stop work in their 60s, this is often because they are forced out of work by health issues, meaning stopping work is something that is too often forced upon them at great financial expense.
- 4. Growing economic activity but unequal access to work:** The precarious group faces exclusion from the labour market at a time of growing economic activity among the 60s age group. The precarious group are almost half as likely as the secure group to be in work (0.23 vs 0.44), despite the proportion of 60-69 year olds in work almost doubling over the past two decades (22% vs 40%). The qualitative interviews found that structural barriers around health, job search and caring responsibilities are driving those in the precarious group out of work.

5. Health related barriers exclude the precarious group from work:

Health issues are creating a substantial and often avoidable barrier to work for the precarious group. This group are four times more likely to have fair or poor health (0.71 vs 0.14 in the secure group) and face inconsistent access to the adjustments and working conditions they need. Too often the precarious group is being denied the conditions they need to remain in work as their health needs change. The examples we found of accommodations enabling people to remain in work show that declining health does not have to exclude people from work.

6. The precarious group face unsuitable employment support and ageism in the labour market:

The precarious group are facing disadvantages in job searching that prevents them from accessing work. This comes in the form of higher rejection rates even when well-qualified, implicit and explicit **ageism in recruitment** processes and assumptions about digital skills. Alongside this they often suffer unsuitable **employment support** from Jobcentre Plus, which directs people to roles inappropriate for their health or experience. This creates a double-edged sword for the precarious group in the labour market of a higher bar in recruitment coupled with unsuitable offers of support.

7. Caring responsibilities deepen financial and employment

challenges for the precarious group: Caring responsibilities, though they have declined as the primary activity for people in their 60s overall, are more common for those in the precarious group. Shouldering caring responsibilities forces people out of work alongside saddling them with additional costs. This group is more than three times more likely to be caring for home or family as their primary activity (0.07 vs 0.02 in the secure group). This places carers in a “catch 22”: they can either support family members or financially stay above water. This is a choice that people should not be forced to make.

Recommendations to tackle these problems

People in their 60s who fall into the precarious group face systematic, compounding barriers across health, work, caring responsibilities and the benefits system. These barriers deny them both the ability to earn a secure income and the freedom to choose when and how they retire. Instead of being a decade of transition and opportunity, the 60s for this group are dominated by necessity, insecurity, and limited agency.

The challenges for people in their 60s that this report highlights are not inevitabilities. Barriers to good work and retirement can and must be tackled for those in their 60s now and in the future. The following recommendations would be concrete steps towards tackling the forces of insecurity affecting too many people in later life.

Make good work available to people in their 60s

Access to good work in later life is not evenly distributed. For the precarious group, structural barriers – health, caring responsibilities, ageism in the labour market – limit both access to work and the ability to remain in it.

If a rising state pension age (SPA) means working lives are to extend further into the 60s, this must be matched by a labour market that adapts to changing needs across the life course.

1. Make flexible working a genuine default

For many, flexibility is a critical factor in whether they can remain in work. Planned reforms to strengthen the right to request flexible working are welcome and reflect a broader ambition to make flexibility the norm. However, our evidence shows that a request-based model leads to inconsistent access in practice.

Government should support employers to move towards flexibility as a standard feature of work. This should include:

- Advertising flexible options clearly at the point of recruitment
- Expanding flexibility beyond home working to include hours, patterns and job design, moving these from discretionary arrangements to standard features of work
- Targeting sectors where flexibility is currently least available with guidance and support for employers on how to implement flexible working

2. Embed consistent, preventative approaches to workplace adjustment

Many people in their 60s could remain in work with relatively small adjustments, but access is inconsistent and shaped by workplace culture and management practice. There is also evidence of reluctance to disclose health conditions, particularly where age and disability intersect.

Adjustments should be reframed as part of a normal, preventative approach to sustaining work, rather than reactive or exceptional.

The government's work on health and employment, including the Mayfield Review, has recognised the need to support longer and healthier working lives, including addressing a 'culture of fear' around workplace adjustments. This report shows that, to achieve this in practice, further action is needed to:

- Address the disadvantage caused by the interaction between age, health and disability highlighted by this research
- Reduce reliance on manager discretion through clearer expectations and processes

- Improve awareness and implementation of existing rights
- Focus on sectors where good practice is least embedded, ensuring that efforts to support healthy working lives do not inadvertently entrench existing inequalities in access to good work between workers in organisations of different size, sector and industry

This approach should also account for the self-employed, who often lack access to workplace-based support and face greater income volatility when health deteriorates.

3. Strengthen support for carers to remain in work

Caring responsibilities are a substantial factor in many labour market exits in the precarious group, often forcing a trade-off between income and supporting loved ones. Current provision does not adequately support people to combine work and care.

Government should ensure people can balance paid work and caring without severe financial penalty, including by:

- Introducing a meaningful entitlement to paid carer's leave – our recommendation is 5 days
- Consider complementing this with a one-off, extended unpaid leave entitlement.

Improve employment and career support for those who need it

This report shows that the precarious group faces a 'double disadvantage': a labour market shaped by ageism and structural barriers, alongside employment support that is often poorly aligned to their needs. As working lives become longer, support must reflect the realities of later-life transitions.

4. Ensure the reformed Jobcentre Plus / National Careers Service is designed for people in their 60s

Reforms to careers and employment support offer an opportunity to better support people navigating work in later life. However, past performance suggests that simply expecting all-age services to work equally well for this age group leads to poor outcomes.

The reformed service should explicitly recognise people in their 60s as a priority group and:

- Provide targeted, appropriate career support reflecting later-life transitions
- Ensure skills provision is accessible and relevant at all stages of life
- Focus on clear pathways into suitable work, linking training to real opportunities
- Address barriers identified in this research, including ageism, confidence gaps and outdated job search experience

Government should also take further action to address age-related bias in recruitment, including clearer expectations for employers and stronger implementation of existing protections.

Ageing Better’s ‘Good Recruitment for Older Workers (GROW)’ toolkit provides a practical approach to age-inclusive recruitment: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/grow-a-toolkit-for-employers.pdf>

Improve support for those who cannot work

This report shows that when people in their 60s are forced out of work, most often due to ill- health, they encounter a system that is difficult to navigate and characterised by uncertainty, stigma and insecurity.

5. Improve clarity, certainty and trust in the benefits system

Current systems do not provide sufficient clarity or stability for older claimants, particularly those navigating the transition between working-age benefits and the State Pension. This creates avoidable anxiety and can discourage engagement with both work and support.

Government should review how the system supports older claimants, focusing on certainty, transparency and usability. This should include:

- Clarifying how entering or increasing work affects entitlements
- Improving understanding of the transition from working-age to pension-age benefits

This should also address stigma associated with claiming benefits, which this research shows can prevent people from accessing support they are entitled to.

6. Strengthen financial support for those approaching state pension age who cannot work

This report identifies a gap for those unable to work before reaching state pension age, who often face sharp income drops and limited support.

Government should strengthen financial protection for this group, recognising that inability to work in later life is often structural rather than temporary. This could include:

- Exploring earlier access to elements of pension income for those unable to work.
- Reviewing the adequacy of working-age benefits for those approaching retirement

Enhancing Universal Credit payments by 20% for those aged 66 during the current SPA rise to 67, for instance, would cost approximately £0.14 billion – a small fraction of the £10 billion annual fiscal savings created by the increase.

Adapt to the new realities of work

The evidence in this report shows that the 60s are no longer a fixed transition between work and retirement, but a prolonged and often unstable period shaped by health, income and labour market access. Policy and data frameworks have not yet adapted to this shift.

7. Align policy and data with the changing nature of later working lives

Current approaches still assume a relatively linear transition out of work. This report shows that many instead experience fragmented and involuntary transitions, often with limited agency.

Government should take a more holistic approach to people in their 60s. This should include:

- Undertaking a comprehensive review of how policy supports this group, before making further changes to state pension age.
- Ensuring this review reflects the interaction between work, health, caring and income
- Updating labour market and earnings data to better reflect later-life realities, including using more granular age bands (e.g. 50–59, 60–SPA, SPA+), and aligning official labour market statistics with the current state pension age.

Chapter 1: Accessing work

As the introductory report outlined, the 60s is a stage of life that has undergone considerable change. This raises questions about what work and access to work is like for people as they navigate this transitional period of life. The 29% of the 60-69 population in the precarious group are of particular concern here, as they are less likely to be in work, more likely to have fair or poor health and more likely to have caring responsibilities. All of this suggests that they could face acute challenges to accessing and remaining in work, alongside limited financial means.

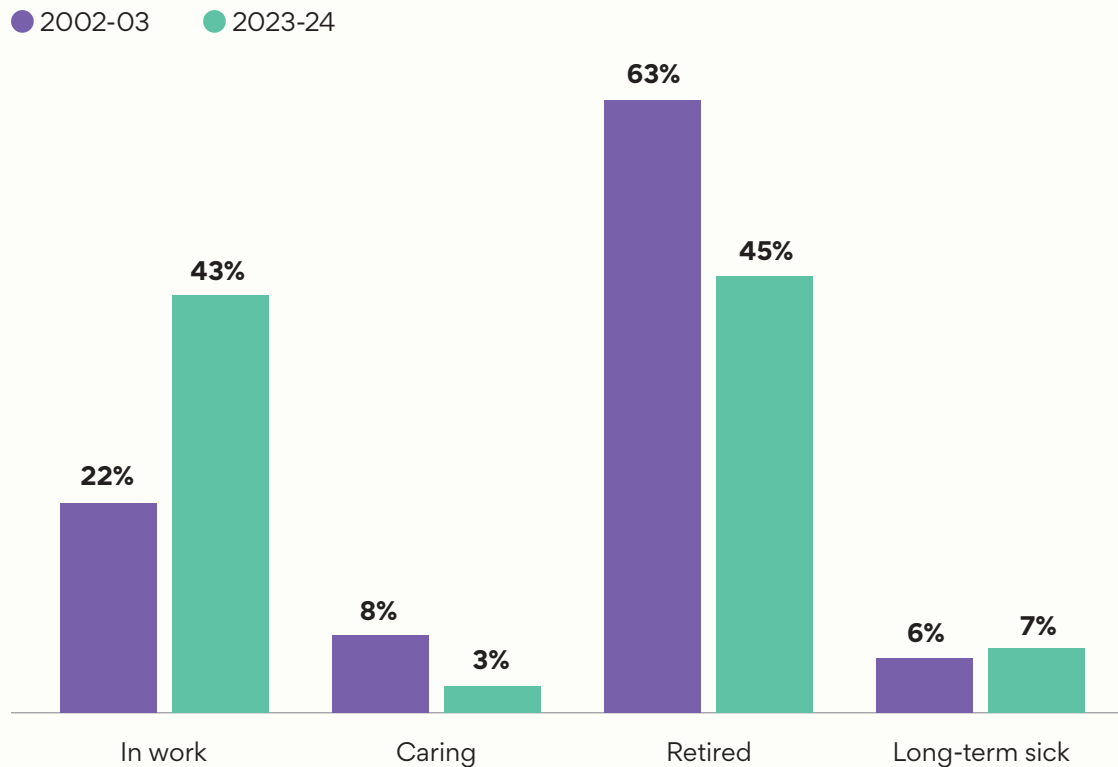
Economic activity among the 60s age group

The last two decades have seen a substantial increase in the labour market involvement of people aged 60-69. Between 2002-03 and 2023-24 the proportion of 60-69-year-olds that were economically active (in employment or unemployed) doubled (22% vs 44%). This is underpinned by an increase in the proportion working (21% vs 43%). That this comes alongside changes to the SPA is no coincidence. Equalising the SPA between men and women will explain much of this increase in activity. Other research also suggests that the rises in SPA may have the effect of increasing economic activity at least to a small degree.¹ It is worth noting, however, that more than half of people aged one year below SPA are already out of work, so increases to SPA alone can only have a limited impact on extending working lives.

¹ The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2022), The effect of increasing the state pension age to 66 on labour market activity [WP202207-The-effect-of-increasing-the-state-pension-age-to-66-on-labour-market-activity.pdf](#)

Figure 5: Labour market status of 60–69-year-olds

Among 60–69 year olds in England, the proportion working has increased substantially while the proportion retired has decreased



Source: CFAB analyses ELSA Waves 1 and 11

This rise in economic activity appears likely to continue into the future, as this upwards trend is reflected in data going back decades, even before policy reforms to stimulate longer working lives.² The 60-69 age group is projected to have the greatest increase in economic activity rates up to the year 2067.³ This shows that this is an age group remaining economically active for longer, including working beyond SPA, in a trend that looks set to continue in the coming decades.

2 The Department for Work and Pensions (2025), Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time: September 2025 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2025/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2025#employment>

3 The Office for National Statistics (2019), Living longer and old-age dependency – what does the future hold? [Living longer and old-age dependency – what does the future hold? - Office for National Statistics](#)



This change was reflected further in the ELSA data used in this research. As shown in Figure 4, a greater proportion of ELSA respondents were working in their 60s in 2023-24 than in 2002-03. Alongside this the proportion retired was lower in 2023-24 than in 2002-03 overall and for the years up until SPA, reflecting the changes to the SPA in that time. There is evidence that this shift towards work in later life will continue into the future, with 24% of the public expecting that they will never really retire.⁴

However, there is evidence that this increased access to work is not shared equally. In the latent class analysis, people in the secure group were almost twice as likely to be in work than those in the precarious group (0.44 vs 0.23). This suggests that, while economic activity and proportions in work have risen over the past two decades, some groups are less likely to be working in their 60s. The qualitative research with the precarious group explored this issue, identifying the severe barriers they face in the labour market.

Health, disability & working conditions

The nature of ‘good’ working conditions also varies tremendously according to the health limitations of workers, with age playing a substantial part in this.

Age and disability and long-term health conditions create compounding disadvantage to accessing and remaining in work. For disability and age, this can be seen in the disability employment gap (the gap between employment rates of Disabled and non-disabled people), with around two in three Disabled people aged 25 to 34 employed compared with fewer than half of Disabled people aged 50 to 65.⁵ In Ageing Better’s ‘Supporting Disabled Older Workers’⁶ research we found that Disabled older workers are navigating a

4 The Standard Life Centre for the Future of Retirement (2024), How our perceptions and expectations of retirement and work are changing, [How our perceptions and expectations of retirement and work are changing](#)

5 The Centre for Ageing Better (2025), The State of Ageing, <https://ageing-better.org.uk/work-state-ageing-2025>

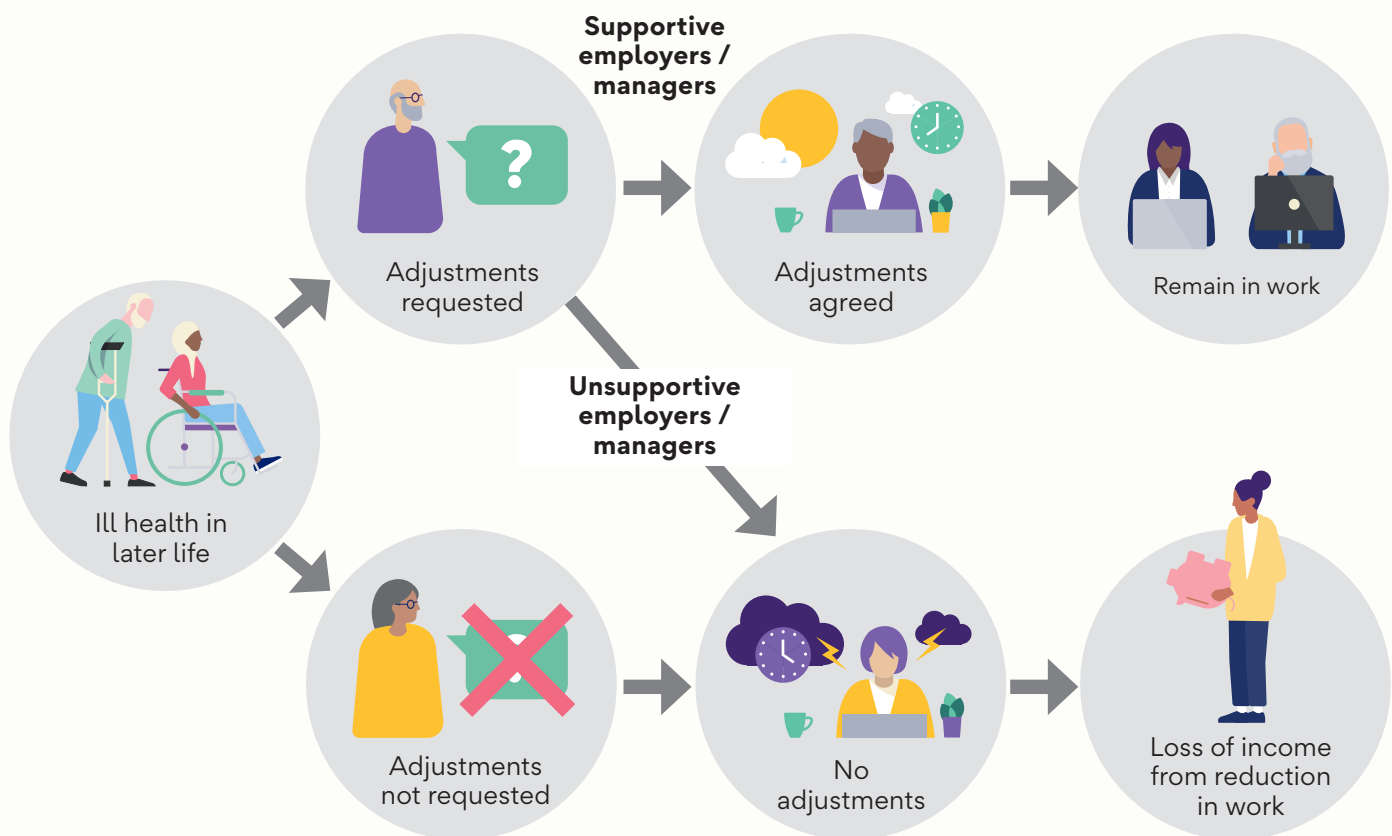
6 The Centre for Ageing Better (2025), Supporting Disabled Older Workers, <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/Supporting-Disabled-Older-Workers-summary-report.pdf>

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.

Poor health does not need to exclude people from work. Reasonable adjustments and flexibility can support people to remain in work, even as their health needs change or they face disability.⁷ However, the qualitative interviews with the precarious group detailed how these are inconsistently available. This results in a game of chance over whether people are able to remain in work as their health needs change.

Figure 7: Access to working conditions needed with later life health issues, drawn from qualitative interviews data

Work conditions suitable to their health needs can allow the precarious group to remain in work



⁷ Holland P et al (2026), Breaking Down Barriers: How Remote and Hybrid Work Can Support Disabled Workers https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/inclusive-working/files/2026/02/Inclusive-Remote-and-Hybrid-Working-Study_final-report.pdf

Some participants outlined positive experiences securing the changes to work they needed. Often this was focused on being provided with flexible working arrangements. This tended to be flexible hours, which were used to accommodate the limitations their health put on their capacity to work.

“They [employer] were fantastic, they still are. I still have to go for quite a few hospital appointments and they’re fantastic, very supportive...and I choose my own days [to work]...it works out well.”

Pre-SPA, renter, female

Others were given more specific changes to accommodate their health conditions and disabilities. In some cases, this was as simple as making physical adaptations to their workspace (e.g. a new chair). The more substantial adjustments included a teaching assistant moving to a class of older children because working with younger children had become too demanding with their health issues.

“My role at school changed as well. I was a nursery nurse and there's no way I could carry on with that. So I was moved to Higher up in the school... Preschool you're working with 2, 3, 4-year-olds and you can imagine what that entails, a lot of on your knees running around all day long, very, very physical and up in the higher up in the school, it's not so physical. Mostly sat down on a chair all day just supporting and helping.”

Pre-SPA, renter, female

Often participants had reduced their working hours to accommodate the limitations of their health. These adjustments to their hours had enabled participants to remain in work, even if earning less from the reduced hours, which was vital to their financial security.

Participants who had the adjustments their health required often expressed positivity towards their employer. The support participants received was a motivation to remain with their supportive employer. Conversely, a few participants had changed roles in pursuit of the flexibility they needed.

Managers can act as either an enabler or a barrier to accessing conditions older workers need. Some participants outlined challenges with managers unwilling to afford them specific flexible accommodations. For example, one participant had been denied changes to their hours to attend choir which they found highly supportive of their mental health. This example also shows that health interventions are not always typical so employers risk missing when a request is tied to an employee's health. A more holistic view of flexibility and support needs in workplaces would tackle this.

In some cases, unsupportive managers existed within a wider context of supportive organisations, which allowed participants to bypass the obstacles posed by their managers. In a few instances, participants had informal flexible arrangements facilitated by supportive managers. A few who had been unable to access necessary adjustments had to seek other employment, forcing them to navigate the challenging labour market faced by older workers.

“I used to go to choir through the day. When I became full time, new manager, nope, not an option. Not doing it, it's not going to happen and I felt as if that safety net had been taken away from me. It was my only mental health support. So it was a bit tricky. Yeah, I'm not going to lie, it was a bit tricky, but you are living alone and you have a mortgage yourself. So is there anything else other than to just suck it up?”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

Reluctance to ask for adjustments presented a further barrier. A few had not requested adjustments, despite potentially benefiting from them. These people outlined a willingness to persevere against the challenges their health posed at work without any adjustments, in some cases out of fear it would adversely affect their relationship with their employer. This suggests that there is a barrier born out of stigma and culture to older workers accessing working conditions suited to their health needs.

“I didn't [ask for adaptations]. Because to be honest, I was a bit wary of how they would take it in the sort of job I was doing.”

Pre-SPA, renter, male

Self-employed participants were often unable to adapt their working conditions. Without the support of sick pay, or a flexible employer able to adapt the conditions of their work, they struggled to work when faced with physical and / or mental health issues. For these people, health issues meant a substantial, sometimes total, drop in income, facilitated by the lack of adequate social protection for people in these circumstances.

“I had a regular client that I had a very, very good income from, she came to an end...and then I was working with different clients, but my unpredictability of knowing what I was facing [with health issues], not being able to turn up ...means that I actually can't work.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

The precarious group faces inconsistent availability of working conditions to meet their health needs as they age. This can act as a barrier to work and to good work, particularly when facing declining health. However, the experience of those who have had the adjustments in their work that they need shows that it is possible to provide the conditions for people to remain in work as they move through their 60s. This needs to be pervasive throughout the labour market, alongside a culture that empowers older workers to request the conditions they need.

Job search

The second barrier faced by the precarious group in accessing work is disadvantage in job searching. This is in both recruitment processes and the employment support available to them.

Older workers face disadvantage in the labour market unique to their age. Older jobseekers tend to have less recent experience looking for work and have often been with their employer for longer. This leads to a tangible sense of inequity, with 69% of UK adults aged 50-66 feeling older age is a disadvantage in the UK job market.⁸ This disadvantage is worse for certain groups, as those with lower levels of education and

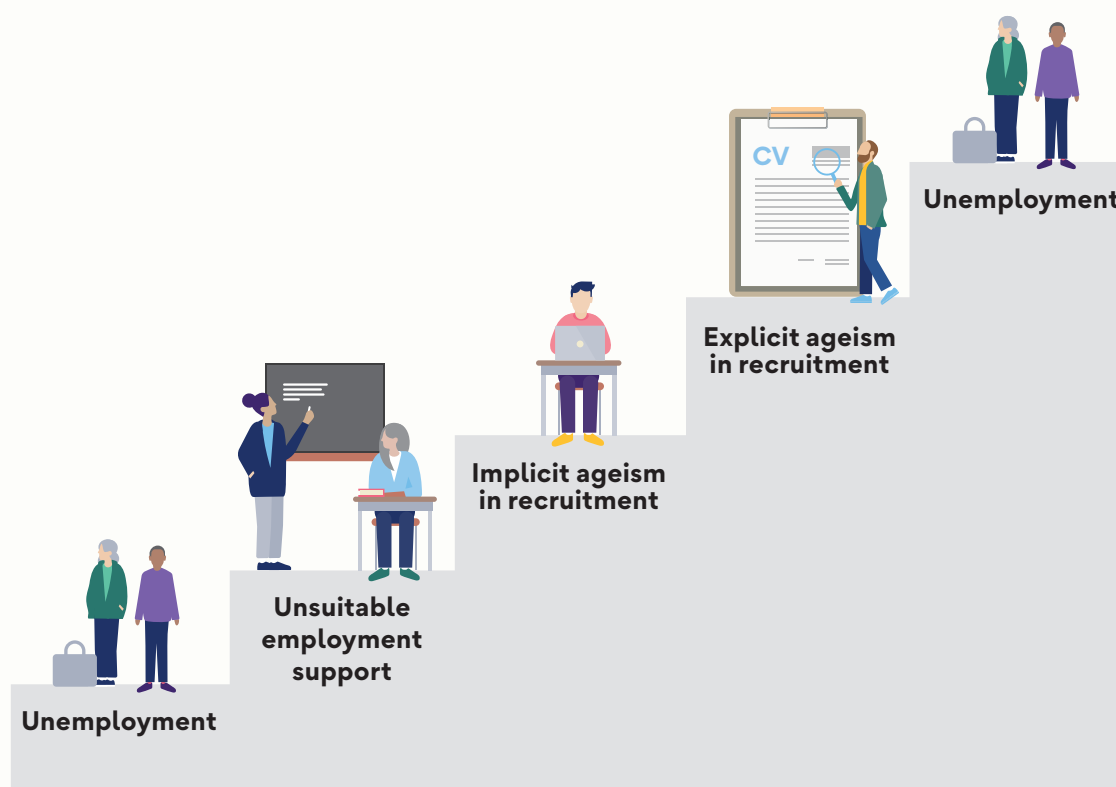
⁸ The Centre for Ageing Better (2025), Supporting Disabled Older Workers, <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/Supporting-Disabled-Older-Workers-summary-report.pdf>

women are less likely to re-enter work after becoming unemployed at older ages.⁹

The qualitative interviews showed how these barriers presented among the precarious group. These barriers exist at every stage of the process, from employment support through to the interview stage of job applications.

Figure 8: Job search barriers faced by the precarious group identified during qualitative interviews

The precarious group face barriers at every step of their job search



Ageism when applying for jobs in their 60s had been experienced by participants. This was presented across a mix of roles and skill levels, from hospitality jobs through to more highly skilled finance roles. Before the interview stage, participants found that they were receiving a high number of rejections for jobs they felt very well qualified for and had strong experience of performing in the past.

⁹ The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2021), Changing patterns of work at older ages, <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/changing-patterns-work-older-ages>

“Earlier in my career, I always have stood out and now all of a sudden I don't. And I think is that a coincidence or is it not you know?... I was applying for 10 jobs a day. Putting in 10 applications a day and I've never had to do that. I mean some people did come back to me, but very, very few very, very few.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

At interview stage explicit and implicit ageism was presented. For example, one participant was asked if she could cope with a digital environment despite a CV outlining strong digital skills including knowledge of coding languages. Most of the experience of ageism at this stage, however, was implicit. This included participants routinely losing out to younger candidates and feeling that they were written off when employers met them and saw they were older. This was particularly frustrating for participants who felt that they were more qualified and capable than they had ever been in their working lives.

“The younger guy, he was in the 30s, he was just frowning the whole way through my interview. And when it came to questions, he said to me, would you be comfortable working in the digital space? And obviously he hadn't read my CV, which I know a lot of people don't do these days... And he just assumed that I wouldn't, and it was very tempting to say, sonny I was making websites before you were born.”

Post-SPA, renter, female, single

Participants who had engaged with Job centre Plus (JCP) in their 60s typically found the support they received unsuitable. These participants were directed to jobs that were not appropriate with their health limitations and past work experience. They viewed the process as something they had to engage with but did not expect to get anything from. Despite this there was a desire for more appropriate employment support for older people that matched their experience and skills.



“He would, like, turn his screen around to me and go ALDI are looking for some cashiers at the moment, and I'd go well, yeah. OK, OK. But, you know I'm not going to get that. I'm not being funny, but even if I wanted a job at ALDI, they'd take one look at me and go we're not going to give you a job because you're not going to stay longer than a couple of weeks [because they think participant will move to something that aligns more to their skills]... So they try and pressure you so I just sit there going, yeah, OK, if you want to set up an interview I'll go along... and of course they don't give me an interview because they see what's on my CV.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

One participant outlined a more positive experience of the JCP in their 60s. They were directed to digital skills training and then funded to go on a course in python coding. They did not find employment through the JCP and ultimately ‘aged out’ of the support once they reached SPA, after a year of support. However, they were still looking for work beyond SPA but now without the support of JCP. This example shows that JCP support can be relevant for older workers, and many are willing and wanting to access support in their job search.

It is worth noting that these are experiences of engaging with JCP from before the government’s planned reforms of the service. However, this does not mean that these issues will not present following reform. Indeed, without considering these challenges and the needs of older workers in the design of a new service there is every chance they will persist.

The disadvantage faced in job search is a double edged for the precarious group. On the one hand, they face a hostile labour market, rife with implicit and explicit ageism. On the other, they are offered support largely unsuitable to their needs or, beyond SPA, no support at all. Those in the precarious group seeking work in their 60s face a mammoth challenge with barriers every step of the way.

Caring & unpaid labour

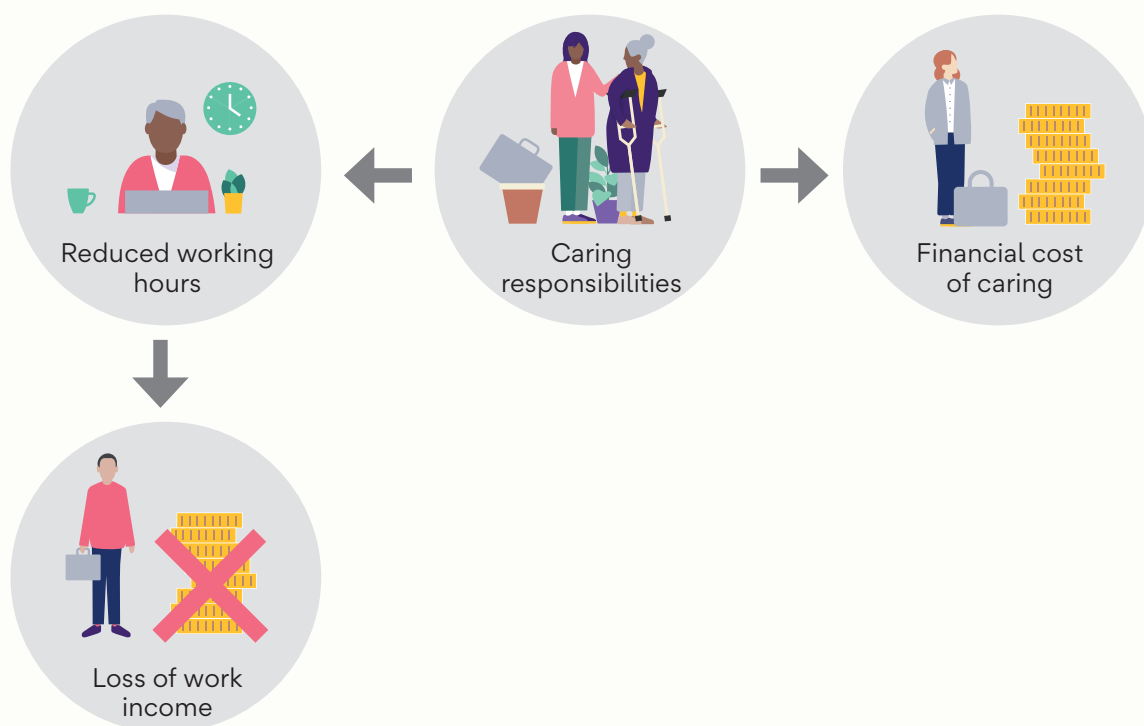
Caring responsibilities create a further barrier, reducing the capacity of the precarious group to work whilst adding an additional financial burden.

People in their 60s are among the most likely age groups to shoulder the responsibility of providing unpaid care. Among the 60s age group, 15% in England and Wales provide unpaid care, only exceeded by 16% among people in their 50s.¹⁰ Within this however, the precarious group are disproportionately represented, particularly when caring (rather than working) is their primary activity.

Those in the precarious group were more than three times more likely to be caring for their home or family as their primary activity than those in the secure group (0.07 vs 0.02). This is perhaps unsurprising, as existing research shows that carers end up shouldering significant costs in taking on this responsibility¹¹ and that one would expect the precarious group are less likely to have the resources to purchase care provision. The qualitative interviews with the precarious group showed how this responsibility translates into a loss of access to work and income alongside rising costs.

Figure 9: Challenge faced by carers from the qualitative interview data

Carers are juggling increased costs alongside reductions in income through work



¹⁰ The Office for National Statistics (2023), Unpaid care by age and sex, England and Wales <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/socialcare/datasets/unpaidcarebyageandsexenglandandwales>

¹¹ Carers UK (2025), The State of Caring, State of Caring 2025

Many of those with caring responsibilities had had to reduce their working hours. Others were already facing challenges in the labour market separate to their caring responsibilities, often a result of their own health issues. In a few instances, participants had given up paid employment to care for elderly parents at the end of their life, facing difficulties returning to work afterwards. Others had spent sustained periods of their working lives acting as a primary carer to a family member. Participants were largely happy to support family members by providing unpaid care but experienced a loss of income from shouldering this responsibility.

“I worked 15 hours a week because I have a Disabled sister but then couldn't carry on to look after her on 15 hours, so needed to get a full time job. So that was the reason I only worked 15 hours because I did 30 unpaid, you know, just as a sister.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

Caring responsibilities brought in additional costs. Many experienced this alongside a reduced capacity to earn through work, compounding the challenges they faced. A few participants had grown up children living with them and rarely received contributions towards household bills. Many covered all costs, acknowledging that financial security was challenging for their children as well.

“My son's just come back home. My middle son with his daughter... I find it really difficult to pay a lot of my bills because I only get the one wage. My son can't afford to pay me much because he's a full time carer for his father, so he doesn't give any housekeeping. He buys his own food and stuff, but I still got to pay for the bills and I'm struggling with the bills.”

Pre-SPA, renter, female

In a few cases, participants would forego their own financial wellbeing in favour of offering support to family members. For these participants, there was a preference for supporting the needs of those they cared for even if it came with a financial hit which they were barely or not able to absorb. This shows that financial necessity is not necessarily the primary or sole driver of people's actions. Policies

targeting this group must therefore be mindful of this fact, and the more holistic motivations for economic actions (such as supporting loved ones).

“They're looking at me and saying...‘oh, can you get me a PlayStation card, Nan?’ And ‘can I buy V bucks’ and things like that. I go, so ‘no, you can have one next week’ and they go ‘Why can't I, when my friends are all on this week. Nan, can I have one?’ So, I go without, to buy them like PlayStation cards so they don't feel left out.”

Pre-SPA, renter, female

Motivations to work

The precarious group reported feeling bound by their financial restrictions to keep working for as long as possible. While they were also driven from work by the systemic barriers they endure.

During interviews, participants typically viewed work as about making ends meet rather than a pursuit of fulfilment. Where people were still working, this was because they needed the money to cover their basic living expenses; however, this does not imply that those not working had adequate financial security to cover their own basic living expenses. Enjoying work was a motivation outlined by a few participants, although this always existed alongside the financial necessity. Keeping active, both physically and mentally, the benefits of social interaction and having a sense of purpose were the other non-financial benefits of work outlined by participants. It is worth noting though that these benefits can be obtained through many contexts other than work.

There were some participants who outlined no social benefits to their work, did not enjoy work, and it was purely out of financial necessity that they continued working.

“Well, if I didn't need to, I wouldn't be working now. I definitely wouldn't be working if I didn't need to. [I will work] Probably for as long as I'm able to. I think financially I couldn't afford to not work so, and I'm not thinking well, you know, in a couple of years, it's retirement. I'm going to have to stop. Unless some miracle happens.”

Pre-SPA, renter, female

Many participants that were still in work said that they would need to work beyond state pension age out of financial necessity. This group felt that their financial situation meant they would have no choice but to continue working for as long as possible, even after receiving their State Pension. However, there was an acknowledgement from some that doing so relied on having access to employment that they could manage with any potential health limitations. This outlines the high level of financial risk that declining health represents to the precarious group.

“If I am 67, and hopefully a young 67, then I would probably maybe not do the job I'm doing, but maybe do a like I said, an easier job, in a supermarket, for instance, just to sort of keep some money ticking over, not really to maybe affect a pension, but just enough to sort of help a little bit extra.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female

Where participants were working beyond SPA, this was a mixture of financial necessity (i.e. as a top up to their State Pension) and enjoying work. A couple of participants were motivated by paying down debt on their home (one from equity release in their late 50s, the other from a mortgage acquired after divorce in their early 60s).

“So for me, I'm now working to service that interest because I want to ring fence that debt because, OK, so I borrowed X amount of money, because I had loads to do on the house, or I had to sell my house at a massive loss and think, God, where am I going to live?”

Post-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female, single

Chapter 2: Health and benefits

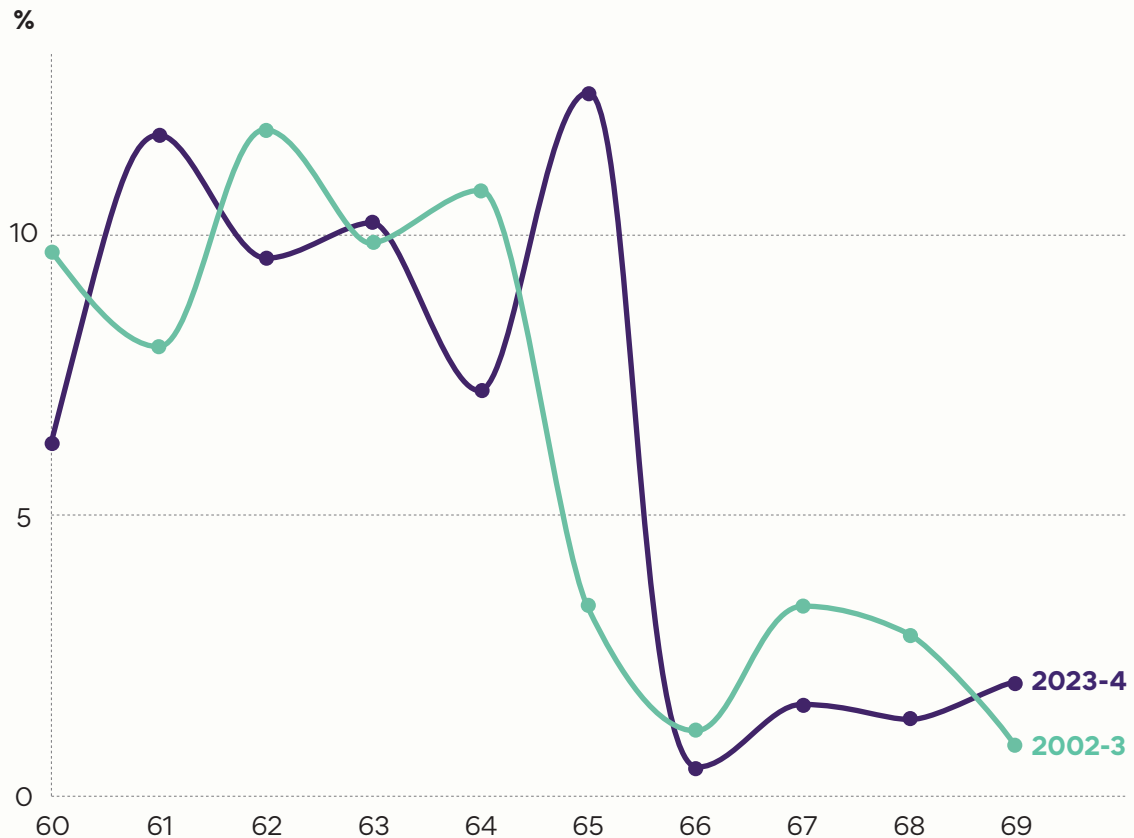
The result of the precarious group's exclusion from work, despite needing the income, is engagement with the benefits system. Many are forced to rely on benefits, particularly where they face health issues but are not yet in receipt of a State Pension.

Health limiting work

Long-term sickness as a reason for not working has remained broadly consistent among people in their 60s in recent years (6% in 2002-03 and 7% in 2023-24). As shown in Figure 11, below, there is a peak in the early 60s for long-term sickness as a reason for not working that drops into the mid-60s. This shift was matched by a rise in people saying they were retired. This is likely the result of people with long-term illnesses reaching SPA, accessing their pensions and therefore considering themselves retired.

Figure 10: 60-69 year olds in England not working due to long-term sickness

The proportion of people describing their current situation as permanently sick/disabled tends to fall as state pension age is reached



Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Waves 1 & 11. CFAB analysis

For the precarious group, however, health issues are pushing many out of work. People in the precarious group were more than four times as likely to have self-rated fair or poor health than those in the secure group (0.71 vs 0.14). While they were more than nine times more likely to be in receipt of state benefits (0.56 vs 0.06 among the secure group). As such, the precarious group is often pushed from work due to health issues and turns to the benefits system.

The interviews outlined the process by which later life health challenges pushes people from work into the benefits system. Even where people were able to secure adjustments from their employer, their capacity to work was diminished, forcing them to reduce their



hours. For some, their health issues were so severe that they felt unable to work at all. All of these people relied on some form of state benefits for some or most of their income. For some this was their first experience of engaging with the welfare system.

“Just about a year ago now, I got diagnosed with a blood disorder and I was fairly poorly. I was in hospital for a while. I had to more or less give up work completely. And I just come back doing part time work now, which I'm doing now.”

Pre-SPA, renter, male

Accessing benefits

Navigating the benefits system in later life, often for the first time, is challenging for the precarious group.

Figure 11: Challenges accessing benefits drawn from qualitative interview data

Accessing state support is fraught with concern and confusion



There was confusion about current and future entitlements. For some this centred on how reaching SPA would affect their income. Some assumed (correctly) that reaching SPA would have a positive effect on their income as they moved from Universal Credit onto Pension Credit. A few were concerned (incorrectly) that they would lose their working age benefits and would only be entitled to the State Pension, reducing their income. One participant had not realised she was entitled to the Winter Fuel Payment until the proposed cuts put it in the news. As a result, she investigated her eligibility and successfully applied for it.

“I'm slightly less skint than I was two months ago, because I've moved from Universal Credit onto Pension Credit and the pension, although it's not loads obviously it's more than a Universal Credit was, and if I weigh against it things like transport and expenditure, I'm actually better off than I was in my last full-time job.”

Post-SPA, renter, female, single

A few of those in receipt of benefits mentioned the government's proposed cuts to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) as a source of concern. This was despite interviews falling after the government's U-turn on proposed cuts to PIP. A couple of participants in receipt of PIP were worried about their entitlement and their next eligibility assessment. This outlines the anxiety attached to relying on this uncertain income source. The experience of one participant justified this anxiety, as she had had her PIP entitlement withdrawn, forcing her to borrow money from a friend to avoid forfeiting on her mortgage. Her PIP was reinstated months later, on appeal.

“I was getting some PIP...and I lost it at reassessment. And I nearly I couldn't afford to pay the mortgage. Nearly lost the house, and then I got a tribunal in January, and I got the back pay... I could pay him [friend who loaned money] back so I didn't lose the house. It's just awful.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female

Stigma around accessing benefits prevented some from exploring this state support. A few participants outlined a desire to not be ‘someone who claims benefits’. This was typically expressed as pride that, despite their financial challenges, they had paid the bills without needing to access support from the state. Another way this presented was by comparison with others who did claim benefits. These participants sometimes felt that they had it harder than those in receipt of benefits but remained proud that they had chosen not to access support. This view existed even among some participants who were accessing PIP, suggesting that for them it was specifically related to unemployment benefits or Universal Credit. Often participants expressing this view were likely eligible for benefits and faced ongoing hardship. This shows how internalised stigma attached to benefits can prevent people in need from accessing the lifeline they provide.

Benefits were the only regular source of income for some participants. These people were reliant on the support of working age benefits while they waited to reach SPA.

“My situation now is I am totally reliant on benefits. I get Universal Credit, a joint one with my partner because she works, but she doesn't earn enough, so we get the supplement...unable to work, so I get a payment for that and I've recently, well in the last 18 months, I was finally awarded PIP enhanced rate for mobility and for living at home. And my partner gets a caring element as well, because she obviously has a certain amount that she has to do for me.”

Pre-SPA, renter, male

Benefits and work

Some participants on low incomes received universal credit while in employment. They worked part time hours, typically due to health limitations, and were therefore eligible for Universal Credit.

“I can't afford to give up work as such, but I am now getting some Universal Credit.”

Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female

A few participants with health problems were caught in the perverse situation where working would have reduced their income. Due to health limitations, they were unable to work full time but the part time work they could manage would adversely affect their benefits entitlement. Ultimately, this would reduce their income compared to not working at all, leaving them worse off. They found this frustrating because they wanted to work. They were critical of a system that incentivised them to not seek work.

“It’s a catch 22. The treatment I need to give me a better chance of being able to do some sort of paid work cost me more than I get, so... when I’m assessed by these people to claim the PIP and whatever is, surely it’s got to be in the government’s interest to have me working and contributing, like I always have done, than taking and giving nothing back whatsoever. But they don’t...say ‘well, yeah, we’ll give you an extra £100 because you need that for that’...it’s yes or no. Computers say no – boom, that’s your bracket.”

Pre-SPA, renter, male

Chapter 3: Transitions from work

The 60s is a decade in which people commonly make the transition from work to retirement. The nature of this has changed in recent decades, from the timing of that choice and the factors that drive it. This chapter will explore how and why people make this transition. In particular it will highlight how the choices available to the 29% in the precarious group are restricted by their financial and health limitations.

Retirement transitions

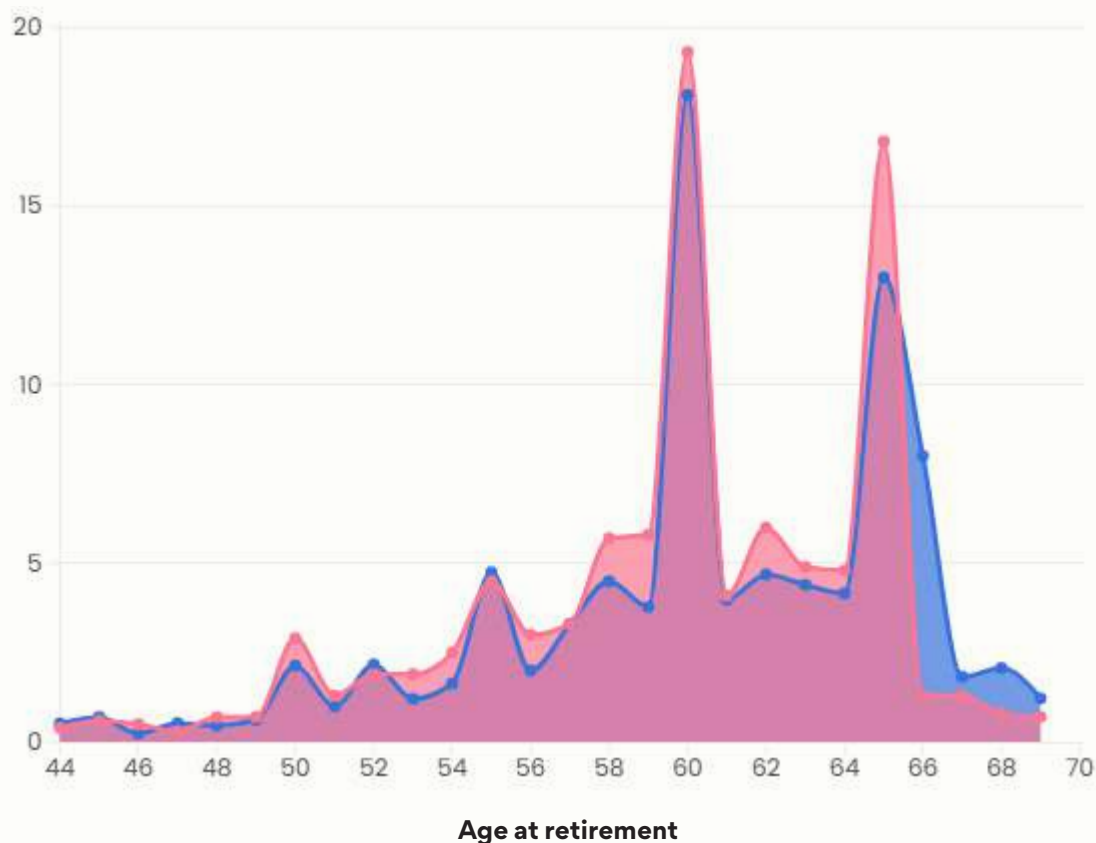
How and when people in their 60s retire has fundamentally changed over the past two decades. As Figure 7, below, shows, the point at which people retire has become more spread across ages 55-68. In 2002-03, there were clear spikes at age 60, the SPA for women, and 65, the SPA for men. By 2023-24, these spikes have decreased, and the distribution is more even across 50s and late 60s. This shows that retirement is less commonly fixed on SPA but rather reflects a process that occurs across a range of different points in later life.

Figure 12: Age of retirement among ELSA respondents

The age of retirement distribution has become more spread out across ages 55-68 since 2002-03

● 2002-03 ● 2023-24

Distribution of retirement ages of retirees aged 60-69



Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Waves 1 & 11. n=5,496 (W1); 496 (W11)
CFAB analysis

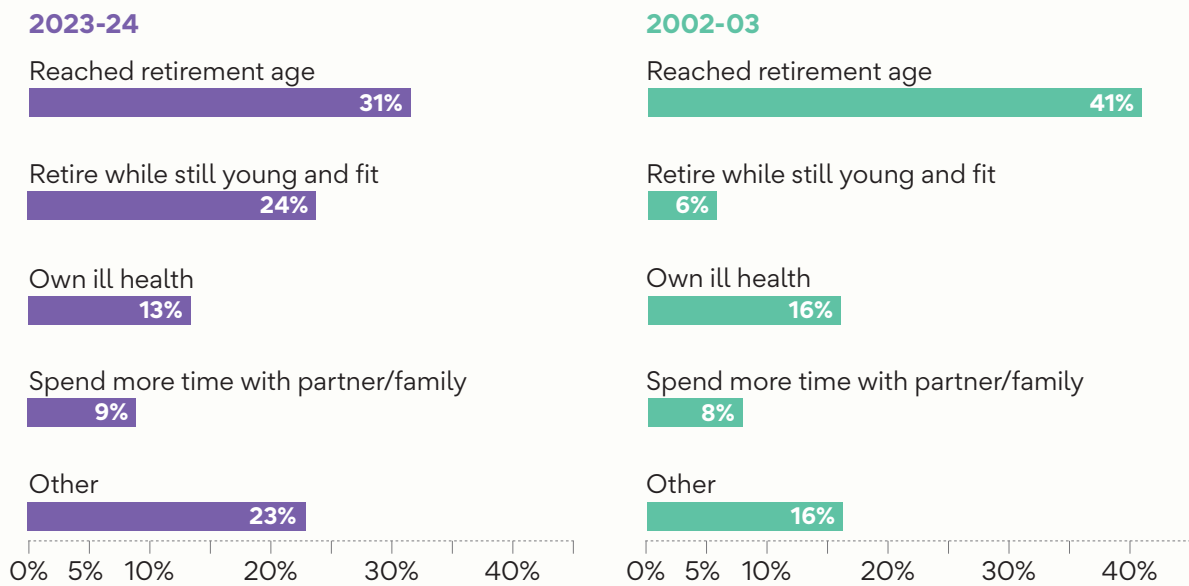
The reasons why people retire has also undergone substantial change. As Figure 13, below, shows reaching retirement age was a much less common reason for retirement in 2023-24 than in 2002-03, although it was still the top reason given. This suggests that retirement is less frequently something people do simply because they reach SPA but rather is a transition they experience based on their own life circumstances. This is backed up by the second and third most common reasons. In 2023-24 these were wanting to retire while still young and fit, which was given by four times the 2002-03 proportion,



and retiring due to own ill health. There is also a consistent proportion retiring to spend more time with partner / family in 2023-24 as in 2002-03. It appears then that retirement has come to reflect priorities around enjoying elements of life beyond work while health allows.

Figure 13: Top reasons for retirement in 2023-24 compared to 2002-03

People in their 60s are now more likely to want to retire while still young and fit than 20 years ago.



Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Waves 1 & 11. CFAB analysis n=1,268 (2002-03); 78 (2023-4). Other includes categories with 5 or fewer observations.

However, the agency related to decision making around the retirement process is not enjoyed universally. There is evidence that people with limited wealth are more likely be forced to retire due to ill health, while making a choice to retire is the preserve of the wealthy.¹² This will include the precarious group, whose members are half as likely to own their home outright (0.4 vs 0.8 among the secure group) and five times as likely to have less than £2,000 in savings (0.4 vs 0.08 among the secure group). The qualitative interviews showed how this loss of agency was experienced by the precarious group.

¹² The Standard Life Centre for the Future of Retirement (2023), Beyond the great retirement: Understanding and tackling economic inactivity amongst the over 50s, [Beyond the great retirement: Understanding and tackling economic inactivity amongst the over 50s | Phoenix Group](#)

It is important to first reiterate that the precarious group were not financially in a position to stop working, even if they wanted to. Most intended on working as long as their health allowed because they needed to maintain their income. A few participants did mention that their work provided a purpose and social interaction, but ultimately it was financial necessity that pushed them to keep going. A few participants mentioned a desire to stop working at state pension age but were not confident their finances would allow them to.

“I'll be happy if I could retire tomorrow, I would, I would. I'd have enough to do and I'd be busy enough. It's not an option at the minute. So I've got no other choice, but just to keep going.”

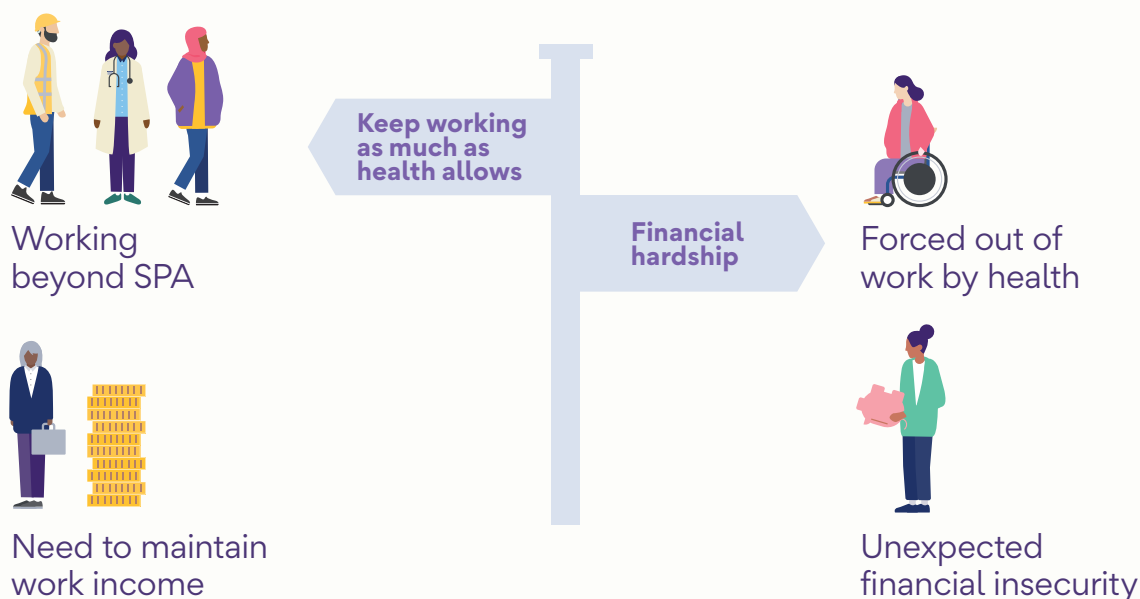
Pre-SPA, owner with a mortgage, female

The need to keep working out of financial necessity also existed for participants who had been forced to stop work or reduce their hours due to ill health. These people had intended to keeping working but had been prevented by often sudden declines in their health. As such, they had faced a rising tide of unexpected financial hardship caused by the sharp drop in their ability to earn as they were forced out of work before SPA.

“I'll be 62 in February and I was hoping to sort of carry on this line of work till retirement to be honest, but unfortunately your health has stopped that, you know, I mean I am doing it, but it can be quite difficult. I'm on medication and painkillers. I've got to work around it and it's just getting more [time] off, but obviously you've got to still try to make a living.”

Pre-SPA, renter, male

Figure 14: The limited choices for transition out of work available to the precarious group



Some wanted to work less but this desire conflicted with their financial need to maintain an income. The desire to work less was underpinned by not enjoying their work but also by feeling increasingly tired as they aged or faced limitation due to health issues.

Some participants working beyond SPA were doing so because they needed to service debts acquired later in life. These participants were hoping to pay off a mortgage secured after divorce and equity release on their home to pay for unexpected repairs to their house. For these people, surprising events later in life had forced them to continue working beyond SPA.

All of this speaks to a profound lack of agency in this period of transition for the precarious group. Where more secure people may be able to exercise choice around retirement at different points or ages and for reasons of enjoying life, the precarious group are forced to remain in work, even beyond SPA. Where their health doesn't allow them to, they are pushed into further hardship. Choice around work in later life for the precarious group is no choice at all.

Conclusions

The barriers that the precarious group face to work and retirement are not a foregone conclusion. They can and must be tackled. It is also worth noting that, while the precarious group face these challenges and will likely experience deeper hardship as a result, they may also be present for people in the secure group. As such, action to tackle these barriers would be to the benefit of today's and tomorrow's older workers more broadly. The recommendations within this report outline a path to breaking down some of these barriers.

The work and retirement limitations of the precarious group outlined by this report are alarming. However, they only present one piece of the puzzle of this decade of transition. The subsequent reports in this programme of research explore two further elements of this stage of later life. Firstly, how wealth, through housing and pensions, influences experiences of later life. The final report in this programme will outline how people prepare and plan for their 60s, including the barriers they face to doing so. Together this programme of research will shine a light on this decade of transition, and the challenges faced by the most precarious people as they navigate it.

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Let's make ageing better.

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