

Evaluation of Ageing Better's Age-friendly Employer Pledge

Summary report

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in partnership with:

Foreword

Why age-friendly employment matters

Throughout our lives, work can shape our sense of purpose, security and connection with others. Yet too often, ageist assumptions, limited awareness of the contribution and needs of older workers, and inflexible working practices make it harder for people to stay in, return to, and thrive in work later in life.

This matters not only for individuals, but for employers and for the wider economy. As the population ages and working lives lengthen, supporting people to remain in fulfilling work for longer is becoming an urgent priority. The Age-friendly Employer Pledge was developed by the Centre for Ageing Better to help employers respond to that challenge: by improving the recruitment, retention and development of workers in their 50s and 60s, and by encouraging practical action across culture, recruitment, flexible working, career development and health support.

Reading this report

This report offers an independent evaluation of how that Pledge is being put into practice. It explores why employers sign up, what they go on to do, what helps or hinders progress, and how older workers experience these efforts in practice. It brings together survey evidence, interviews and focus groups to understand both the visible changes employers make and the less tangible ways the Pledge shapes organisational thinking, confidence and commitment.

The findings reflect employers trying to do the right thing in different contexts and with different constraints: organisations reviewing the language and imagery they use in recruitment, managers learning how to support older workers more confidently, and teams rethinking flexibility, health support and career development in light of longer working lives. The report also reveals where progress is less developed, particularly when action depends on specialist expertise, additional resource or more fundamental organisational change.

Importantly, the evaluation identifies examples of promising practice to build on. It shows that age-inclusive action does not always begin with complex interventions. Often, it starts with visible signals of intent: public commitment, clearer messaging, more inclusive recruitment materials, better conversations about flexibility and health, and a willingness to challenge assumptions about age and work. These changes can help create workplaces in which older workers feel recognised, supported and able to contribute fully.

Throughout, the report highlights the value older workers bring to organisations and to wider society: through their skills, experience, resilience, judgement and knowledge, and through the contribution they continue to make across generations, sectors and communities. Creating workplaces that enable people to flourish in later working life is not simply a matter of fairness. It is also essential to building a more inclusive, productive and age-friendly labour market.

At its core this evaluation asks a practical question: what helps employers translate commitment into meaningful action, and what difference does that make? By documenting early implementation and emerging impact, this report provides an important foundation for future learning. As the evaluation captures the Pledge during its early ‘start-up’ phase, its ability to demonstrate longer-term outcomes and sustained change is necessarily limited at this stage. The findings should therefore be understood as evidence of initial progress, emerging patterns and perceived benefits, rather than definitive impact over time. Even so, they offer valuable insight into how the Pledge is beginning to influence employer behaviour and practice, and where further development may be needed. It offers evidence for employers, policymakers and practitioners seeking to support longer working lives, and for anyone interested in how age-inclusive practice can move from aspiration to reality.

What is the Age-friendly Employer Pledge?

The Age-friendly Employer Pledge is a commitment made by employers of all types to celebrate the value of older workers. It is open to all UK based organisations of any size, shape and level of experience, who want to retain a skilled workforce, maintain stability and benefit from the productivity of a multi-generational workforce.

Employers commit to take an action each year that supports their journey towards Age-friendly employment. In return they are provided with information and support from the Pledge team – and are asked to complete an annual monitoring form, providing detail on their action and progress.

The Age-friendly action framework covers:

1. Age-friendly culture
2. Health Support for all
3. Continuous learning and development
4. Age inclusive recruitment
5. Flexible working

More information can be found here: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/employer-pledge>

Executive summary

The Centre for Ageing Better's Age friendly Employer Pledge was launched in 2022 to help employers improve the recruitment, retention and development of people in their 50s and 60s.

To understand how the Pledge is being implemented, and what difference it is beginning to make, Ageing Better commissioned an independent mixed-methods evaluation led by the Institute for Employment Studies, in partnership with IFF Research and the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS).

About the evaluation

The evaluation's aims were as follows:

- 1. To understand why employers join the Pledge and how they engage with it in practice:** exploring employers' motivations for signing the Pledge, how they interpret its aims, and what actions they go on to take across the five areas of focus.
- 2. To assess what drives or constrains progress in implementing age-inclusive practice:** identifying the factors that support or hinder implementation, and the conditions under which the Pledge is most effective.
- 3. To explore what difference the Pledge is making, particularly for older workers:** examining early outcomes, changes in organisational practice, and how older workers experience these changes.

Specifically, the evaluation draws on a survey of 78 Pledge Leads, in-depth interviews with 21 Leads, focus groups and interviews with 45 HR specialists, managers and older workers, and evidence from national stakeholders. By bringing together perspectives from employers, employees and wider stakeholders, the evaluation reflects a deliberate effort to capture a broad range of experiences and insights. This inclusive approach helps ensure that the findings speak not only to the organisations directly involved in the Pledge, but also to the wider system within which they operate. In doing so, it highlights how work of this kind can contribute to learning beyond individual organisations, informing wider thinking on age-inclusive employment, longer working lives and the practical steps needed to support change.

Overview of findings

The findings show that the Pledge is helping employers translate interest in age inclusion into practical action. Its strongest influence is on visible, confidence-building and low-burden changes: public commitments, age-inclusive messaging, refreshed recruitment materials, stronger internal signalling, and more deliberate attention to flexibility and health support. The evaluation also highlights where progress is slower, particularly where action depends on specialist expertise, greater organisational capacity, or more substantial change in practice.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the evaluation has met its aims. They provide a coherent early picture of why employers engage with the Pledge, how they are putting it into practice, what supports or constrains progress, and where it is beginning to make a difference for older workers. They also provide a strong and credible evidence base to inform the future development of the Pledge, while highlighting the limits of what can be concluded at this stage.

Key findings

1. Employers usually join the Pledge with existing commitment, not from a standing start.

Employers tend to sign because the Pledge aligns with their organisational values and gives them a visible way to signal age inclusion. Many also want practical guidance, clearer direction and opportunities to learn from others. Recruitment and retention pressures matter too, particularly where employers are concerned about attracting experienced workers or responding to longer working lives.

2. Employers place particular value on how the Pledge is delivered, including the role of Ageing Better.

Employers consistently highlight the importance of the way the Pledge is delivered, as well as its content. The involvement of the Centre for Ageing Better adds credibility and trust, helping to position the Pledge as both authoritative and practical. Employers value the tone of the offer, which is seen as supportive rather than prescriptive, and appreciate the accessibility of resources, communications and engagement. This approach helps organisations feel confident engaging with the Pledge and supports sustained involvement over time, particularly where employers are looking for pragmatic guidance rather than compliance-driven requirements.

3. After signing, employers focus first on practical, visible and low-burden actions.

Across the five Pledge areas, activity is strongest in recruitment, health support, culture and flexible working. Career development activities tend to be less advanced. Employers most often start with changes that can be integrated into existing HR and EDI processes, such as reviewing language and imagery, making internal and external commitments more explicit, strengthening flexible working offers, and normalising conversations about health. The Pledge often adds value by helping employers bring these activities together under a clearer age-inclusive framework.

4. The Pledge has its greatest influence where it gives employers confidence and practical tools to act.

The evaluation suggests that the Pledge is most effective as a catalyst. It does not usually create activity from scratch. Instead, it strengthens, organises or accelerates activity that employers were already inclined to pursue. Its influence is especially evident where employers can draw directly on guidance, examples, imagery, messaging or light-touch support. In this sense, the Pledge helps employers move from broad intention to more age-inclusive practice.

5. Older workers in Pledge organisations generally report positive experiences, but these findings should be interpreted carefully.

Older workers commonly described feeling valued, included and able to speak more openly about age-related needs. Flexible working and phased retirement were particularly important in supporting continued participation in work, while health support was often seen as inclusive and non-stigmatising. However, these findings reflect organisations already motivated to engage with age-friendly practice, and the evaluation design means that many positive outcomes are best understood as perceived benefits rather than verified impact.

6. The evaluation highlights both practical progress and important limits.

The Pledge appears to be strengthening age-inclusive practice in participating organisations, but the evidence also shows that progress is uneven. Action is weaker where employers need more specialist expertise, stronger data, additional capacity, or more resource-intensive support. In particular, in addressing later-career development, many employers still lack the confidence, systems or data to take deeper action or demonstrate impact robustly.

Lessons and recommendations

The evaluation points to a clear set of lessons for the future development of the Pledge and for how age-inclusive employer initiatives are designed, supported and evaluated. These implications are intended as priorities for further action rather than a fixed checklist. They reflect what this evaluation suggests is most likely to strengthen the Pledge's reach, usefulness and long-term impact.

It should be noted that Ageing Better is already responding to these findings and recommendations and will continue to strengthen the Pledge through updated tools, guidance and practical resources.

1. Keep the Pledge simple and practical but give employers clearer next steps.

The Pledge's low-burden design is one of its main strengths. Employers value an offer that is accessible, credible and easy to engage with. At the same time, the evaluation suggests that many employers would benefit from more structured support on what good progress looks like and what to do next.

Recommendation 1a: Continue to prioritise light-touch, scalable support, including newsletters, accessible guidance and practical resources.

Recommendation 1b: Strengthen action-planning support through clearer progression tools, such as maturity models, templates and realistic next-step guidance.

2. Strengthen internal communication and employee awareness of the Pledge.

The evaluation suggests that while many organisations are taking action under the Pledge, awareness among the wider workforce is uneven. In some cases, older workers experience positive changes without necessarily linking them to the Pledge itself. This can limit the extent to which the Pledge reinforces organisational culture, builds trust, and encourages employees to engage with available support. Strengthening internal visibility could help translate organisational commitment into more consistent employee experience.

Recommendation 2a: Provide clearer, ready-to-use internal communication tools that help employers explain their Pledge commitment and what it means in practice for staff.

Recommendation 2b: Encourage employers to make age inclusion more visible in everyday communication, helping employees recognise available support and feel confident engaging with it.

3. Give greater prominence to later-career development.

Career development emerged as the least advanced Pledge area, despite being one of the areas where the Pledge appears to add distinctive value. Employers often recognise its importance but are less confident about how to frame and implement later-career support sensitively and effectively.

Recommendation 3a: Expand practical guidance on mid-life career reviews, later-career development, retirement planning and internal mobility.

Recommendation 3b: Equip employers to approach later-career conversations in ways that support choice and development without signalling assumptions about retirement.

4. Support line managers more directly.

Across the evaluation, line managers emerge as central to implementation. They shape everyday experiences of flexibility, health, career development and workplace culture, but can lack confidence in age-related conversations and decision-making.

Recommendation 4a: Prioritise more manager-focused tools, examples and training on age-inclusive practice, especially around health, flexibility, development and retirement-related conversations.

Recommendation 4b: Ensure resources are practical and usable in day-to-day management, not only at policy level.

5. Build employers' confidence to use age data more meaningfully.

Many employers collect some age-related data, but fewer use it in ways that support diagnosis, prioritisation or robust assessment of change. This limits both employer learning and the ability of evaluations to evidence impact convincingly.

Recommendation 5a: Provide clearer guidance on proportionate approaches to collecting and using age-related workforce data.

Recommendation 5b: Support employers to monitor progress in ways that are realistic, low-burden and useful for internal learning.

6. Continue to invest in practical resources, peer learning and real-world examples.

The evaluation suggests that employers respond most positively to resources they can use immediately and examples that show what age-inclusive practice looks like in settings similar to their own. Peer learning also remains important, particularly where employers want relatable examples rather than abstract guidance.

Recommendation 6a: Expand case studies, templates and practical examples that show how employers have operationalised the Pledge in different contexts.

Recommendation 6b: Continue to facilitate opportunities for peer exchange, especially where employers can share barriers, adaptations and workable solutions.

7. Maintain the evaluative lens in future development.

This evaluation also highlights lessons for future evidence-building. Where initiatives are intentionally low-burden and adaptable, evaluation needs to be proportionate too. It should capture not only what employers have done, but how the Pledge has shaped confidence, awareness, signalling and decision-making, especially where hard outcome data is limited.

Recommendation 7a: Use future evaluation approaches that combine factual tracking with reflective evidence on influence, learning and organisational change.

Recommendation 7b: Continue to include employee perspectives, while recognising the practical constraints of employer-based research and the limits of causal attribution in low-burden initiatives.

8. Increase understanding of and engagement with employers who have not signed the Pledge.

The evaluation is based on organisations that have already chosen to engage, many of whom were positively inclined towards age inclusion from the outset. This means there is limited insight into employers who have not signed, including those who may face the greatest barriers or have the most to gain. Without this understanding, there is a risk that the Pledge continues to reach those already engaged, rather than broadening its impact across the labour market.

Recommendation 8a: Undertake targeted research to understand barriers to signing and participation among non-signatory organisations, including those with limited capacity or lower awareness.

Recommendation 8b: Use this insight to refine outreach, messaging and support so that the Pledge is accessible and relevant to a wider and more diverse employer base.

9. Support employers to respond to wider workforce changes, including digital transformation.

The evaluation highlights growing pressures linked to longer working lives, changing workforce demographics, and increasing digitalisation. While the Pledge already supports employers in core age-inclusive practices, there is scope to strengthen its focus on these emerging challenges. In particular, digital confidence, access to training, and adapting roles to a changing labour market are increasingly important for enabling older workers to remain in and progress at work.

Recommendation 9a: Expand guidance and resources to help employers address digital skills, confidence gaps and the impact of technological change on older workers.

Recommendation 9b: Support employers to plan more proactively for workforce ageing and longer working lives, including through practical tools on job design, skills development and intergenerational working.

10. Make clearer how the Pledge connects to wider policy and business priorities.

The evaluation shows that the Pledge has value beyond the organisations that take part in it. It links closely to issues that matter to a wide range of stakeholders, such as keeping people in work for longer, supporting retention, and reducing early exits from the labour market among people in their 50s and 60s. However, these links are not always clearly explained. As a result, the Pledge may not always be recognised as contributing to these broader policy and system goals, even though its focus is well aligned with them.

Recommendation 10a: Articulate more clearly how the Pledge supports wider priorities around longer working lives, retention and age-inclusive employment.

Recommendation 10b: Use external communications and stakeholder engagement to strengthen understanding of the Pledge's broader strategic value, while keeping its practical, employer-focused approach.

The learning gained by the Pledge team through the evaluation process has been invaluable. The insights and evidence on progress against the original evaluation aims provide a strong foundation of information and data to inform and drive the next stage of delivery.

The team continues to reflect and respond to the data gathered through annual monitoring forms and ongoing conversations with employers. This learning is also influenced by the wider labour market environment, prompting us to consider how we can make it easier for employers take action and how can we better connect them to the external factors that are impacting their organisations.

Businesses need a sustainable workforce in an increasingly challenging labour market.

The Age-friendly Employer Pledge was created to support employers with their age-inclusive work — improving the recruitment and retention of people in their 50s and 60s, embedding Age-friendly workplaces as the norm, and responding to the growing trend of people living and working for longer.

As we move into the next year of delivery, we encourage readers to reflect on these findings, consider the future workforce needs of their organisations, and take meaningful steps on their own journey towards becoming Age-friendly employers.

Institute for Employment Studies

The Institute for Employment Studies is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and organisational human resource management. It works closely with employers in the manufacturing, service and public sectors, government departments, agencies, and professional and employee bodies. For 50 years the Institute has been a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and human resource planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation which has around 50 multidisciplinary staff and international associates. IES expertise is available to all organisations through research, consultancy, publications and the Internet. Our values infuse our work. We strive for excellence, to be collaborative, and to bring curiosity to what we do. We work with integrity and treat people respectfully and with compassion.

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Let's make ageing better.

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