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Title: “I’ve always been a grafter”: Older benefit recipients and welfare conditionality

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Abstract

Those aged over 50 experience the longest spells of unemployment and have particularly poor outcomes on government funded welfare-to-work programmes. Recent policy shifts in the UK have brought an end to differentiated labour market programmes for older social security claimants, but at the same time have extended and intensified the principle of welfare conditionality as part of UK active labour market policy. Using analysis of new data from 44 qualitative interviews with benefit recipients aged 50+ this paper explores older unemployed people’s experiences of the UK’s increasingly conditional welfare system. It concludes that a lack of personalisation results in an ineffective employment support system that neither recognises the skills and attributes of an ageing workforce nor provides appropriate support to help older people to overcome the barriers that routinely inhibit their labour market participation.

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Introduction

Responding to the challenges of an ageing population is a global issue, to which extending working lives has been presented as a key part of the solution.¹ In the United Kingdom (UK), key policy changes including the rises in, and equalisation of, the State Pension Age, reforms to disability benefits and removal of the default retirement age have meant that many older people are expected to remain in the labour market for longer than previous generations.² These new expectations have occurred alongside broader policy shifts which have involved a more intensive application of welfare conditionality in the social security system.³ Alongside other claimants, this has increased the expectations placed on older jobseekers to move into (and progress in) work. As a result, employment service caseloads are forecast to age considerably over the coming decades.⁴

International evidence shows that those facing unemployment in their 50s and 60s have particularly poor labour market outcomes, experiencing the longer spells of unemployment compared to other age groups. Sonnet et al., for example, highlight persistent challenges in raising the employment rate of older people in France, The Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland.⁵ Writing in an Australian context, McGann et al. point to ‘a growing minority [of older workers]... joining the ranks of the long term unemployed’.⁶ Recent UK analysis shows that in 2017, 38 per cent of the UK’s unemployed over 50 year olds had been out of work for more than 12 months, compared with 19 per cent of those aged 18-24.⁷

Previous research has identified a number of age-related, barriers to work for older workers including age discrimination from employers and deteriorating health.⁸ Towards the end of working life, a person’s skills may also become outdated within the context of a rapidly changing labour market and associated shifts in the skill sets demanded by employers.⁹ Other barriers can include constrained household finances and the availability of jobs in the local labour market.¹⁰ Due to a combination of these factors, labour market attachment has been found to decline with age, and in some cases, there is

¹ OECD (2006) *Ageing and employment policies: live longer, work longer*. Paris: OECD; Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (2009) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press.; Sonnet, A., Olsen, H., Manfredi, T. (2014) ‘Towards More Inclusive Ageing and Employment Policies: The Lessons from France, The Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland’, *De Economist* 162: 315–339; Biggs, S., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., & McGann, M. (2016). *Introduction: Policy Responses to Ageing and the Extension of Working Lives*. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 607–610. doi:10.1017/S1474746416000269

² Loretto, W., & White, P. (2006). *Work, More Work and Retirement: Older Workers’ Perspectives*. *Social Policy and Society*, 5(4), 495–506. doi:10.1017/S1474746406003204; Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407; Disney, R., Ratcliffe, A. and Smith, S. (2011) *The baby-boomers at 50: Employment prospects for older workers*, in Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. (eds) *The labour market in winter: the state of working Britain*. Oxford University Press

³ Dwyer, P. (2004). *Creeping Conditionality in the UK: From Welfare Rights to Conditional Entitlements?*, *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 29, 265–287. ; Patrick, R. (2017). *For whose benefit? The everyday realities of welfare reform*. Bristol: Policy Press.

⁴ Kirkpatrick, A. (2012) *How ready is Jobcentre Plus to help people in their 60s find work?* Department for Work and Pensions. In-House Research No 11. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/201064/ihr11.pdf (accessed 07/09/2018)

⁵ Sonnet, A., Olsen, H., Manfredi, T. (2014) ‘Towards More Inclusive Ageing and Employment Policies: The Lessons from France, The Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland’, *De Economist* 162: 315–339

⁶ McGann, M., Kimberley, H., Bowman, D., & Biggs, S. (2016). ‘The Netherworld between Work and Retirement’ *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 625–636. doi:10.1017/S147474641600021X, 625

⁷ Centre for Ageing Better (2017) *Addressing worklessness and job insecurity amongst people aged 50 and over in Greater Manchester*. <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/Addressing%20worklessness%20and%20job%20insecurity%20amongst%20people%20aged%2050%20and%20over%20in%20Greater%20Manchester.pdf> accessed 07/08/2018

⁸ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407 ; Beatty, C. and Fothergill, S. (2009) ‘Moving older people into jobs: Incapacity Benefit, Labour’s reforms and the job shortfall in the UK regions’. in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers*. Bristol: The Policy Press.; Flynn, M. (2010) *Who would delay retirement? Typologies of older workers*. *Personnel Review*. Vol 39, no 3 pp308–324

⁹ Maltby, T. (2009) ‘The employability of older workers: what works?’ pp161–183 in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

¹⁰ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407; Disney, R., Ratcliffe, A. and Smith, S. (2011) *The baby-boomers at 50: Employment prospects for older workers*, in Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. (eds) *The labour market in winter: the state of working Britain*. Oxford University Press

evidence to suggest that some older jobseekers have ‘psychologically retired’ despite still needing to meet the work search conditions attached to their benefit claim.¹¹

McGann et al. warn that policies designed to extend working lives risk trapping some older workers, particularly those experiencing labour market insecurity in a ‘*netherworld between work and retirement*’.¹² Similarly, Biggs has argued that policy shifts have resulted in ‘*a more precarious ageing*’ with older people required to survive in a labour market characterised by the ‘*economic insecurity, casualization, and non-progression*’ that has traditionally been more closely associated with younger workers.¹³ In addition, as Maltby observes, experiencing unemployment in older age increases the risk of poverty in retirement.¹⁴ Biggs et al identify two key issues pertinent to older jobseekers: ‘*the changing nature of work and its implications for older workers and ageing in employment; and changing welfare state reform and the ‘activation’ of older workers*’.¹⁵ However, several scholars have pointed to a lack of research and policy attention on either of these.¹⁶

To address this gap, this article presents new data drawn from interviews with ‘older’ social security claimants in the UK. The next section explores the policy context relating to the use of ‘welfare conditionality’ in the UK social security system, and its implications for older unemployed people. Consideration is then given to the existing evidence base relating to ‘what works’ in supporting older jobseekers. It then provides the details of a major qualitative study focused on the experiences of UK social security claimants, from which data presented in this article are drawn. A sample of 44 ‘older unemployed people’ is described before new analysis exploring their experiences and views of the conditional welfare system is presented. Discussion centres on whether or not recent developments in UK social security policy are appropriate to the needs of older workers and tackling the broader challenges associated with an ageing workforce. It concludes that an increasingly punitive, ‘work first’ approach alongside a lack of personalisation results in an ineffective employment support system that neither recognises the skills and attributes of an ageing workforce nor provides appropriate support to help them to overcome common barriers to older people’s labour market participation. This is a major shortcoming, particularly where extending working lives is a key policy goal.

Welfare conditionality and the ‘older unemployed’

Successive UK governments have ‘expanded and intensified’ the use of conditionality as part of a drive to move people into work and tackle ‘welfare dependency’.¹⁷ As a result, older unemployed people who are in receipt of social security benefits are subject to increasing expectations to engage in work search and other work-related activities, or else risk a benefit sanction, whereby part or all of their income is withdrawn. With regards to specific employment-related support for ‘older’ job seekers, the policy landscape has shifted somewhat in the last two decades. From the early 2000s, a raft of largely voluntary measures were introduced to support older social security claimants into work as part of the New Labour Administration’s New Deal 50+ (ND50+), in recognition of the additional challenges faced by many older jobseekers. One of many differentiated Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) targeted at different groups (other examples include New Deal for Young People, New Deal for Lone Parents),

¹¹ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407

¹² McGann, M., Kimberley, H., Bowman, D., & Biggs, S. (2016). The Netherworld between Work and Retirement. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 625-636. doi:10.1017/S147474641600021X

¹³ Biggs, S., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., & McGann, M. (2016). *Introduction: Policy Responses to Ageing and the Extension of Working Lives*. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 607-610. doi:10.1017/S1474746416000269

¹⁴ Maltby, T. (2009) ‘The employability of older workers: what works?’ pp161-183 in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

¹⁵ Biggs, S., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., & McGann, M. (2016). *Introduction: Policy Responses to Ageing and the Extension of Working Lives*. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 607-610. doi:10.1017/S1474746416000269 p609

¹⁶ Maltby, T. (2009) ‘The employability of older workers: what works?’ pp161-183 in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press.; Biggs, S., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., & McGann, M. (2016). *Introduction: Policy Responses to Ageing and the Extension of Working Lives*. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 607-610. doi:10.1017/S1474746416000269

¹⁷ Dwyer, P. and Wright, S. (2014) Universal credit, ubiquitous conditionality and its implications for social citizenship. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22(1), pp. 27-35; Patrick, R. (2017). *For whose benefit? The everyday realities of welfare reform*. Bristol: Policy Press.

ND50+ was available to individuals aged 50 or over who had claimed either Income Support (IS), Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Incapacity Benefit (IB), Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) or State Pension Credit for at least six months. ND50+ participants were supported by New Deal Personal Advisers (NDPAs), and were assisted with job-searching and applying for jobs, and access to training opportunities funded through a Training Grant. Participants moving into employment and earning below £15,000 per annum also received in-work financial supplements replaced in 2003 by Working Tax Credit (WTC). Although initially offered on a voluntary basis, over time engagement on these programmes became compulsory, with older workers required to undertake work-related tasks to retain benefit eligibility on these programmes¹⁸, particularly following influential reviews from Freud¹⁹, and Gregg²⁰, which argued the case for placing more responsibility for finding work onto individual claimants.

In 2011, the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, replaced the New Deals with the Work Programme. Funded on a payment-by-results basis, the Work Programme was heralded as an 'innovative' solution to long term unemployment whereby contracted providers were given new flexibilities to tailor support around the needs of unemployed people.²¹ No longer differentiated by age, all those who had been in receipt of JSA or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA, the UK's main incapacity benefit for working aged disabled people) for 12 months or more were referred to one of several private or third sector providers. Successive Conservative administrations have continued this trend. More recently, the current Conservative government has introduced the new 'Work and Health Programme' to replace the Work Programme in England and Wales. This programme began operating in 2018 and involves compulsory employment support for those who have been unemployed for over two years. It is available to people with health conditions and other 'vulnerable groups' on a voluntary basis. Like the Work Programme, the Work and Health Programme is delivered by private and third sector contractors, however, funding for the programme has been significantly reduced.²²

These employment support changes were introduced alongside a series of other major reforms to UK social security²³, enshrined in the Welfare Reform Act (2012). Most significantly, these reforms have involved the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), a new benefit which rolls six means-tested benefits (Job Seekers' Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit) into one monthly payment. UC is administered differently to the existing claims system. Claimants must engage with a new 'digital by default' system, where claims are made online, required job-seeking activities are logged on 'Universal Job Match' and recipients are subject to increased and 'ubiquitous' levels of conditionality.²⁴ Significantly, Universal Credit saw the introduction of 'in-work conditionality', extending work-related activity requirements and benefit sanctions to workers in receipt of in the low wage and housing costs supplements of UC.

What works for older jobseekers?

¹⁸ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407; Vegeris, S., Smeaton, D. and Sahin-Dikmen, M. (2010) *50+ back to work evidence review and indicative guide for secondary data analysis*. Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 615; Foster, S., Colechin, J., Bivand, P. and Foster, R. (2014) *Employment support for unemployed older people*. CESI/Age UK.

¹⁹ Freud, D. (2007). *Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work*. An independent report to the Department for Work and Pensions.

²⁰ Gregg, P. (2008). *Realising Potential: A Vision for Personalised Conditionality and Support: An independent report to the Department of Work and Pensions*.

²¹ DWP (2011) *The Work Programme*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49884/the-work-programme.pdf (accessed 07/09/2018)

²² Powell, A. (2018) *Work and Health Programme* <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7845#fullreport> (accessed 07/09/2018)

²³ DWP (2010) *21st Century Welfare*, London: The Stationery Office

²⁴ Dwyer, P. and Wright, S. (2014) Universal credit, ubiquitous conditionality and its implications for social citizenship. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22(1), pp. 27-35.

Evidence to date suggests that the over 50s have had poor outcomes on government funded welfare-to-work programmes²⁵, although several authors²⁶ lament shortcomings in UK programme monitoring and evaluation. However, previous research suggests some common features of employment-related support which are valuable to older jobseekers. In the UK context, for example, the ND50+ was well received by its participants and the programme resulted in sustained job outcomes, particularly for those moving into full-time work. In particular, ND50+ participants greatly valued the positive relationship they had with their advisor, who were reported to be understanding and ‘on their side’ at the same time as offering personalised advice and support.²⁷ Matching participants to Personal Advisors who were of a similar age was also deemed helpful in terms of building rapport and removing barriers to work.²⁸ Furthermore, the provision of short (i.e 3-5 day) Work Trials were found to be effective for some older jobseekers, especially those who have spent longer periods out of work, or who were trying to move into new sectors and occupations.²⁹

Successful outcomes of ND50+ were in part attributed to its voluntary nature, with only those who actively wished to engage with the programme taking up the offer of support. This has been argued to have led to some selection bias, but also resulted in there being sufficient resources to deliver high quality support. New Deal Personal Advisors also valued the non-mandated nature of ND50+ as it meant that they were able to build productive relationships with participants and that they were not under pressure to ‘push’ participants into engaging in activities that were considered unhelpful.³⁰ This suggests that ongoing shifts towards greater conditionality may not be beneficial for this group.

With regards to more recent developments in UK ALMPs, scant attention has been paid to how the ‘older unemployed’ have fared on schemes like the Work Programme and under UC. As has historically been the case with welfare-to-work programmes generally, job outcome rates for the Work Programme decline with age.³¹ Furthermore, DWP funded research has raised doubts over the extent to which Jobcentre Plus was focused on assisting those in their 60s find work. Reflecting on the projected ageing of Job Centre Plus caseloads, this work highlights a gap in the knowledge base about ‘older’ claimants’ experiences of the mandatory employment support on offer³²; a gap this paper addresses by providing new insights into older people’s experiences of the UK’s current conditional social security system.

Methods and sample

²⁵ Ray, K., Sissons, P., Jones, K. and Vegeris, S. (2014) *Employment, pay and poverty: An evidence review* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

²⁶ Disney, R., Ratcliffe, A. and Smith, S. (2011) The baby-boomers at 50: Employment prospects for older workers, in Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. (eds) *The labour market in winter: the state of working Britain*. Oxford University Press; Vegeris, S., Smeaton, D. and Sahin-Dikmen, M. (2010) *50+ back to work evidence review and indicative guide for secondary data analysis*. Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 615

²⁷ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 407

²⁸ Ibid.; Maltby, T. (2009) ‘The employability of older workers: what works?’ pp161-183 in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press; Vegeris, S., Smeaton, D. and Sahin-Dikmen, M. (2010) *50+ back to work evidence review and indicative guide for secondary data analysis*. Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 615

²⁹ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 407

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Foster, S., Colechin, J., Bivand, P. and Foster, R. (2014) *Employment support for unemployed older people*. CESI/Age UK.

³² Kirkpatrick, A. (2012) *How ready is Jobcentre Plus to help people in their 60s find work?* Department for Work and Pensions. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/201064/ihr11.pdf (accessed 07/09/2018)n-House Research No 11.

This paper presents analysis of new data generated in 44 qualitative semi-structured interviews with people aged 50 or above, who were in receipt of either Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) (26 participants) or Universal Credit (UC) (18 participants) at the time of interview.³³

Interviews took place in 2014/15 with participants recruited from eleven locations across England and Scotland. Participants were recruited through a number of sources, including housing associations, advice agencies and community centres. Sampling bias was minimised as far as possible by using a range of organisations and gatekeepers. The interviewees were purposively sampled as working age-adults in receipt of conditional social security benefits. As claimants of either Job Seekers Allowance or Universal Credit, all were subject to so-called ‘full conditionality’, i.e. they were required to undertake up to 35 hours per week on job search, training or work focussed interviews as instructed by their Work Coach, and were under the threat of benefit sanctions for non-compliance. Twelve indicated that they were participating (or had previously participated) in the Work Programme. The majority (39) were not in paid work. A small number were ‘in work’ UC claimants. The interviews focused on conditions attached to their benefit receipt, along with their experience of employment-related support and sanctions for non-compliance. The interviews were analysed thematically using NVivo10 qualitative data analysis Software, and the below quotations are drawn from across the participants to illustrate the key themes emerging from this analysis.

Respondents’ ages ranged from 50 to 61 (with a median of 56). The majority (33) were male and 11 were female. Most (42) lived alone in social rented accommodation, and many were divorced or widowed. All reported struggling financially or ‘just about getting by’, and were often reliant on family (including children) and friends for financial/in-kind support.

Barriers to labour market participation amongst the older unemployed

The majority of participants were unemployed and actively seeking work. Unemployment durations varied considerably across the sample, ranging from a couple of months to a spell spanning over two decades in one instance. Most had work histories characterised by manual, low wage work, and the majority had worked in physically demanding occupations (such as warehousing, removals, and care work). Several had become unemployed following redundancy, others had left their jobs because they were no longer able to cope with the physical demands of their work. Some had become unemployed as temporary contracts came to an end. Indeed, over their working lives, many had observed trends towards increasingly precarious employment opportunities, such as a need to have multiple part-time jobs, and undertake temporary and agency work, sometimes on zero hours contracts. Upon losing work, many of the participants described how they had struggled to re-gain a firm foothold in the labour market.

Participants identified a number of common barriers to work, including; age discrimination, poor health, a lack of or outdated skills and qualifications. Whilst participants were not originally sampled on the basis of their age, and age-related experiences were not a focus in the interview topic guides, the majority of respondents clearly expressed the view that their age counted against them in the labour market, with some respondents even reporting overt age discrimination on the part of employers. Some rejected the notion that they were ‘too old’, and in fact felt strongly that they were able to do the job as well as anyone else. Furthermore, several felt that they could bring strengths to the workplace which younger people lacked. Others, however, felt that discriminating against older applicants was a rational decision on the part of employers. As one Universal Credit claimant reasoned:

Given the choice between a 24-year-old and a [59] year old like I am, people are going to take the 24-year-old, one, because nine times out of ten it will cost them less money, two, there’s a

³³ These older respondents are a sub group selected from the wider sample originally recruited to take part in the wider Welfare Conditionality study, see www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk

chance that if the company's still going in 20 years' time they're not going to have to re-hire somebody else (Male, 59, UC)

For some, a lack of, or the possession of outdated qualifications was a significant barrier to finding work. Whilst some felt this was an understandable barrier, others resented the credentialism that they had observed over their working lives.

Unless you've got this SIA badge... you can't work in security anywhere: in a shop, on a gatehouse, you know, a factory or anything, you need this badge and although my experience is vastly more than any numpty who's going to get one of those badges, I can't get the jobs that they can (Male, 52, UC)

Related to this is the level of digital exclusion that the majority faced – both in terms of digital skills and access to technology. Whilst there were some exceptions (one respondent, for example, was an I.T developer), most respondents reported a lack of confidence in their digital skills. Many struggled with the DWP's online Universal Job Match system, and whilst some felt they had benefited from support to improve their digital skills (where this had been available through the employment support service), some were resistant to new methods of job search, particularly when they had previously been successful through more traditional methods (for example, word of mouth, speaking directly to employers) and where they felt they would not need to use digital technologies in the line of work they were seeking to move into:

I've had no real experience with computers at all... I've had no reason to own one, or no reason to use one, and they're saying to me I'll have to go and use a computer to go onto this, and send emails, and fax to people, and read your emails, and be able to do all these different things, where to me it's like how do I switch a computer on? (Male, 53, JSA)

A good proportion were open to retraining and gaining new skills. However, they explained that the opportunities for doing so were limited, particularly for people of their age:

They've offered me interviewing skills, but I've done all that (Male, 53, JSA)

On the other hand, a significant number did not want to, or did not see the need to participate in learning new skills:

It's too late for me now; I'm 55, what do I want to learn more for? (Male, 55, UC)

As a result, some participants found it difficult to identify alternative career pathways after having worked their whole lives in one particular role.

When somebody directly asks you a question it's very hard to come up with an answer. 'What job would you rather do than the job you've been doing for 30 years?' it's not something I can verbalise because I've never done anything else. (Male, 52, JSA)

Although none of the respondents were claiming disability-related benefits, the majority also described problems with their health. For some, this presented a substantial barrier to work particularly for those whose work experience was largely in occupations which required significant physical strength. As one female respondent with a background in care work explained:

I'd love to go back to doing the work I was doing, but they won't take me on because of health problems and that (Female, 53, JSA)

Several interviewees had recently had their benefit entitlement reassessed and as a result had been moved from claiming sickness benefits (Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance) to more conditional JSA or UC. Where this was the case, most felt they had been wrongly assessed. In some cases respondents had (or were in the process of) formally challenging these decisions. However,

it appeared that others were ignoring their health conditions, and engaging in work which exacerbated existing conditions. One UC claimant described how heavy lifting aggravated an old occupational injury which ultimately led to redundancy.

I hurt my back at work in '95 and I can't lift heavy objects. So I mean it was my fault, when I took the job ... I knew it was too heavy for me but I wanted to work so I took the job. And after about four or five months my back went again and my neck and shoulder, it goes into spasm and it's like that for about three or four months. And the work was too heavy for me so I had to, you know, I was laid off in the end. (Male, 50, UC)

Older people's experiences of the UK conditional welfare system

As claimants of either Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit, all respondents were required to actively engage in extensive job search and work related activity with either Job Centre Plus or a Work Programme provider in exchange for continued benefit receipt. Beyond this, experiences varied as to the levels of conditionality applied – whilst some were expected to fulfil the requirements of 'full conditionality', typically involving 35 hours per week of job search and other work-related activities (such as unpaid work experience and employability courses), others appeared to have Work Coaches who took a more empathetic approach, particularly where health was a significant issue for people. In one instance, this perhaps demonstrates a tacit endorsement that they had been wrongly classified as 'fit for work' as part of the government's overall drive to tackle welfare dependency and move more people into work:

I've got a really good advisor. She knows about my depression and things. She's not actually hassling me to seek employment (Female, 56, JSA)

More generally, participants had variable experiences in their interactions with Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme provider staff. There were a small number of examples where participants felt well supported. For example, one UC claimant went as far as to describe their Work Coach as being 'like a friend:'

That lady helps me a lot, she's very nice. She's more like a friend really, you know what I mean, because she's a similar age to me, so it's nice (Female, 59, UC)

However, other respondents described largely negative experiences, finding their Work Coaches to be unhelpful and patronising. As another Universal Credit claimant explained:

She says, 'you're very clean and very well presented'. What on earth? I'm bloody 60 years old. What does she expect me to turn up like? Dirty jeans, filthy or what? This sort of attitude annoys me (Male, 60, UC)

Both of the above quotations echo findings from the ND50+ evaluations, emphasising the importance of having understanding advisors, and the benefits of matching participants to advisors who were of a similar age.³⁴ More negatively though, two fifths (18) of those interviewed had experienced a benefit sanction, 6 had been sanctioned multiple times. They had been sanctioned for things like missing an appointment and inadequate work searches (in their view, unfairly).

Participants described engaging in intensive levels of work search:

Most days I do about six hours a day yes, I do a couple of hours in the morning, three or four hours in the afternoon. If I've got money I print my CVs out and I go to companies and give my CVs in to them (Male, 50, UC)

³⁴ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407

However, all reported getting either limited (often no) feedback from employers. As a result of this, and particularly for those who had been out of work for several years, they were beginning to lose confidence:

You lose, start to lose your confidence when nothing's happening...with not being in a job for a while it slips away from you (Male, 56, JSA)

Reflecting on the mandatory training available to them respondents described a very narrow choice of re-training options. Regardless of their working background or future work aspirations, these were often limited to attaining low-level construction or security qualifications. Furthermore, respondents were often regularly compelled into participating in training which they considered meaningless as a result of the threat of a benefit sanction:

I've worked mainly in offices all my life. Believe it or not they sent me on a course for construction [laughs] I was given the choice of doing the SIA card [Security licence] or the CSCS card [Construction skills qualification], and it was with the implied threat that if you don't do one of these courses we'll sanction you. (Male, 59, UC)

Overall, participants felt that the employment services offered little in the way of personalised support. As one participant explained: *'I think you're just a number. You just go through like everybody else'* (Female, 59, UC). Perhaps reflecting the shift away from age differentiated labour market programmes highlighted earlier in this paper, interviewees felt that the support offered was not tailored to their needs as 'older' jobseekers with particular work histories.

If they're treating me the same as a 19-year-old, they're either letting the 19-year-old down or me down, because we don't need the same things (Male, 59, JSA)

In some instances, participants had been told to apply for jobs which they considered to be wholly inappropriate:

I'm a builder; I've been in the building trade 40 years and he wanted me to apply for administration in a library... anybody would laugh at you, wouldn't they?... I don't think I'd be able to do the job and I don't think any manager or supervisor would've employed me... that's a bit silly really, isn't it? (Male, 55, UC)

Those who had claimed benefits in the past, felt that there had been a significant reduction in the level of tangible work focussed support provided by Jobcentre Plus. Enabling people into work had been replaced by a regime that prioritised simply processing peoples benefit claims and monitoring clients' compliance with specified work search requirements and recommending sanctions for any perceived transgressions.

It used to be years ago. You could go in, discuss a job with an advisor. They're not there anymore to do that. They're there to get your signature (Male, 52, JSA).

It's changed ... they were more helpful then. They'd look on the computer and help you, but now they just like stand back and they're looking for faults in you, if they don't think you've done enough and it's so easy to sanction people for ridiculous reasons. (Female, 60, JSA)

Where respondents had participated on the Work Programme, their feedback varied. Broadly speaking it was viewed more positively than the service provided through the Job Centre. A handful described valuing practical support such as funding to cover transport costs, and access to computers, printing and photocopying facilities. Another described welcome help to develop their CV. However, overall many participants were critical of the help on offer:

They farm you out, basically. You still go and sign on at the Jobcentre, but you're farmed out to [Work Programme provider] who are supposed to help you find a job. The operative word

there is 'supposed'. They don't give you any help... Well, you turn up, and they just say, 'What jobs have you applied for?' So you show them, exactly the same as you show when you go to sign on, it's exactly the same.... You just turn up and it's almost as if it's another signing on (Male, 59, UC)

It seems to me to be seen to be doing rather than to be doing, you know. It's sort of like pretending to help you, you know, phone you up, how can we help? But then you ask for help and you don't get help. (Male, 50, UC)

After participating for the maximum two-year period, five had 'completed' the Work Programme, and as such were no longer able to access support from it. One had moved into work since starting with the Work Programme, and had remained in contact through monthly phone calls asking if they needed support. This had since stopped despite their temporary employment coming to an end. One participant felt he was being threatened with a 'daily sign on' at the Job Centre as punishment for 'failing' the work programme:

But my job adviser always has this threat that ... because I'd completed the Work Programme she says, 'Well, I can call you in for daily signings' (Male, 59, UC)

For some, the expectation to apply for a high volume of jobs combined with the low number of responses from employers meant that even those who had been out of work for a relatively short period quickly began to lose confidence. As one respondent, who had been out of work for four months described:

[I'm] not very confident at the moment. I'm trying to apply on the computer for about five to six jobs a day... it's a hell of a number of jobs and I've had about five or six rejections ..., they don't even reply half the time. (Male, 50, UC)

However, despite difficulties encountered in their search for work, almost all interviewees displayed a high level of labour market attachment. Whilst some wanted more flexible work to fit with fluctuating health conditions or caring responsibilities, most wanted full-time work. Furthermore, a large proportion described being prepared to "do anything" to move off benefits and into work.

I don't know. There's a lot of people applying. When you apply for jobs on [employment agency website] it says 100 people have applied for this job, you know, the jobs I'm going for 100s are going for it. So you're just lucky that they look at your CV and think oh yes, you know, we like that. So it's a lot of luck involved. I think maybe there's something missing from my CV that needs to be looked at. I don't really know. I don't know. (Male, 50, UC)

Several respondents were keen to stress their identity as a worker rather than as somebody who claims benefits, repeatedly referencing their long work histories:

I haven't been on benefits for over 20 years... I don't care what job it is, I need to get off benefits (Male, 54, UC)

I've always been a grafter (Male, 53, JSA).

The change in status from being in work to being unemployed was clearly difficult for many. As one respondent explained:

I have been so successful in the past and because of that, I feel that I should be more successful now (Male, 51, JSA)

Relatedly, there was limited evidence of lessening attachment or ‘psychological retirement’ as has been found elsewhere with regards to moving back into work.³⁵

Conclusions

This paper has presented findings from 44 in-depth qualitative interviews with people aged 50+ who were in receipt of the UK’s main unemployment benefits. Focusing on a neglected area of policy and research, the findings presented above provide an insight into the lived experiences and views of older unemployed people engaging with services offered by Job Centre Plus and contracted Work Programme providers as part of the UK social security system. Their experiences were captured at a time of significant policy shift in the delivery of social security in the UK, and the behavioural conditions underpinning it.

The evidence presented in this paper shows that older people face particular and substantial barriers to work (re-)entry. The narratives point to common experiences of protracted unemployment and labour market insecurity which, as McGann et al. have noted, appears to be intensifying for some towards the end of working life.³⁶ Changes in both the quality of local labour market opportunities, and the capabilities (significantly those related to health and skills atrophy) observed and experienced by the social security claimants in this sample support the notion of ‘*a more precarious ageing*’. However, despite these difficulties, a desire to be in work was clearly evidenced by participants’ past histories and their keenness to stress their identity as a ‘grafter’. In contrast to other studies, there were few signs of lessening attachment to the paid labour market.³⁷

However, whilst determined to move into work, the findings presented above suggest that the UK social security system does little to bolster this motivation, or provide much tangible help for older claimants to achieve this aim. Recent policy shifts which have brought an end to differentiated labour market programmes on the basis of age, appear to have resulted in a lack of personalisation and employment support which is not appropriate to the needs of older workers. Whilst there were a small number of examples where participants had felt well supported, other respondents described largely negative experiences, finding their Work Coaches to be unhelpful and patronising. Furthermore, any training available through Job Centre Plus and Work Programme providers was largely considered to be of poor quality and/or inappropriate for the individuals concerned, and was not felt to enable people back into work.

Instead, an increasingly punitive, ‘work first’ approach pre-occupied with monitoring and ensuring compliance with the mandatory conditions attached to people’s benefit claims, and sanctioning those who fail to live up to the demands of this increasingly conditional welfare system, works to erode their confidence and undermine their efforts. As a result of this, older unemployed people’s working histories and identities are frequently dismissed, as finding ‘any job’ at the expense of job suitability is demanded. The evidence presented above therefore suggests that the UK employment support system is ineffective in that it neither recognises the skills, experience and attributes of an ageing workforce nor provides appropriate support to help them to overcome common barriers to older people’s labour market participation.

In many respects, it appears that lessons from previous active labour market programmes and ‘what works’ for older claimants have not been heeded. Whilst the Work Programme, for example, was heralded as an ‘innovative’ programme which could be tailored to the needs of individual participants, the above presents little evidence of a personalised programme of employment-related support for older

³⁵ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407

³⁶ McGann, M., Kimberley, H., Bowman, D., & Biggs, S. (2016). The Netherworld between Work and Retirement. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(4), 625-636. doi:10.1017/S147474641600021X

³⁷ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407

jobseekers. In addition to this, outside of contracted provision, the findings presented here corroborate the DWP's own acknowledgement that Job Centre services are not well equipped to provide meaningful support to an ageing caseload.³⁸ As policymakers explore ways to keep people working longer in response to the global challenge of an ageing population, more attention must therefore be given to older people's experiences of unemployment and employment-related support. Simply placing intensive work search conditions on older unemployed people does nothing to overcome the substantial barriers to sustainable work faced by many.

More recent welfare reforms present both opportunities and challenges for older unemployed people in this respect. A key challenge is the 'digital by default' approach of the new Universal Credit system. Without appropriate support, administering social security assistance in this way will continue to present barriers to many older claimants. On the other hand, a focus on those with health conditions as part of the new Work and Health programme could work to meet the needs of older claimants, for whom, as this and other studies have shown, health conditions can present a major barrier to work. Furthermore, we might expect the initially voluntary nature of the new programme to lead to more favourable engagement, as this was cited as a key driver of successful engagement in earlier ND50+ programmes.³⁹ Crucially though, it is important that policymakers seeking to 're-integrate' older unemployed people into the labour market both ensure that they are able to access re-training opportunities (in recognition of the ageing process and changing labour market opportunities) and pay more attention to demand-side factors and the quality of work opportunities they are able to access. These are currently major shortcomings, particularly where extending working lives is a key policy goal.

A final point to note is that the data presented here were drawn from a larger study focused on exploring the experiences and impact of welfare conditionality in multiple policy domains. As such, pensions, savings and retirement plans were not commonly discussed. However, those experiencing unemployment in older age are likely to be at a higher risk of poverty in retirement.⁴⁰ Further research should therefore explore how older people's experiences of work and welfare interact with decisions and behaviour during a person's transition into retirement to guard against this.

³⁸ Kirkpatrick, A. (2012) *How ready is Jobcentre Plus to help people in their 60s find work?* Department for Work and Pensions. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/201064/ihr11.pdf (accessed 07/09/2018)n-House Research No 11.

³⁹ Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report No 407

⁴⁰ Maltby, T. (2009) 'The employability of older workers: what works?' pp161-183 in Loretto, W. Vickerstaff, S and White, P. (eds) *The future for older workers: New Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press.