

National Assembly for Wales Inquiry into employment opportunities for older people Flintshire County Council submission January 2015

1. Flintshire County Council would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on employment opportunities for older people in Wales.
2. Flintshire County Council is a unitary authority in north east Wales with a population of approximately 152,506¹. The County is a major economic driver for north Wales and north west England and is host to one of the largest concentrations of manufacturing employment in the UK, especially in the advanced manufacturing sector. Through the Deeside Enterprise Zone, up to 7,000 new employment opportunities are forecast for the County and the challenge for the future is to ensure that economically inactive residents across the sub-region are able to benefit from this opportunity.
3. In common with the rest of Wales, Flintshire has experienced significant demographic shift towards the older age groups and the proportion of residents aged 65 or over increased from 13.1% to 19.1% between 1983 and 2013, compared to 15.7% and 19.5% as an average for Wales as a whole². However, the Wales Audit Office estimate that the number of people living in Wales who are aged 65 or over is likely to increase by 33% and the number over 85 by 80%³.
4. The proportion of older people claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) in Flintshire compares favourably to younger age groups; 1.2% of 50-64 year olds are claiming JSA compared to 3.3% of 18-24 year olds⁴. However, this is masking a considerably lower rate of economic inactivity. The activity rate for the working age population in Flintshire was 77.7% for the year up to December 2013 (compared to 75% for Wales as a whole). However, for the 50-64 age group this drops to just 40.6%, compared to 37.8% for Wales as a whole⁵.
5. Older people are also more likely to have low skill levels than other workers. In Flintshire 11.8% of 50-64 year olds hold no qualifications compared to 7.7% for the working age population as a whole⁶.
6. Older people are estimated to be worth over £1billion to the Welsh economy each year⁷. Increasing employment for older people is important to:
 - avoid premature withdrawal from the labour market and to tackle an increasing dependent to worker ratio in the economy;
 - enable older people to exercise their right to participate in the labour market;
 - enable older people to benefit from the health and wellbeing that employment can promote⁸.
7. It is crucial, in the debate about the employment of older workers, that the rights of older people to work is recognised and that high levels of unemployment among

¹ Census 2011.

² Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates.

³ Wales Audit Office All Wales Local Government Improvement Study: Independence of Older People - Project Brief. 2014.

⁴ Office for National Statistics October 2014

⁵ Office for National Statistics December 2013

⁶ Office for National Statistics annual population survey December 2013

⁷ Ageing Well n Wales 2014

⁸ Manchester Equal Opportunities Commission 2005

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younger age groups is correctly ascribed to labour market issues rather than “blamed” upon older workers.

8. With the economic downturn, retirement has become less affordable so providing older people with the opportunity to remain in work or reenter the labour market, particularly in a flexible setting, has gained importance⁹.
9. In addition to the barriers to employment faced by the population as a whole, older people face particular challenges in entering or maintaining a position in the labour market. These are:
 - Employer perceptions of older workers
 - Skills and qualifications
 - Caring responsibilities

Older people are also more likely to be managing a long term health condition or disability.

10. Ageing Well in Wales identifies tackling age discrimination as a priority for Wales. Older people are subject to widely held stereotypes both positive (good with customers, loyal and reliable) and negative (lower adaptability to change)¹⁰. These have little evidence behind them¹¹ but can influence the way employers view older workers¹². In some sectors, this may favour older workers; for example service sector organisations may view older workers more favourably as may the retail sector¹³. This is of particular importance as many employers prioritise soft skills over technical skills but these will be difficult to assess reliably. Manufacturing is a sector less likely to view older workers favourably and in the Flintshire context this is of particular concern, emphasising the need for intervention to debunk the stereotypes around older workers and promote positive perceptions amongst employers in this sector.
11. The changing economy has seen the rapid introduction of new technologies and the decline of lower skilled employment opportunities. Older adult’s employment has become concentrated into declining sectors leading to a mismatch between their skills and those of expanding sectors¹⁴. Older adults are less likely to possess qualifications; borne out by the figures for Flintshire above. Older people are less likely to participate in training particularly if they are not in employment¹⁵. This emphasises the importance of informal and community based learning provision, including that provided by the Communities First programme, in re-engaging older people with learning.
12. Ageing Well in Wales highlights that learning for older people not only improves employment opportunities but also enhances social inclusion; contributes to personal wellbeing and increases their efficiency as workers and volunteers. Continued learning can also increase resilience through financial and digital inclusion.

⁹ Ageing Well in Wales 2014

¹⁰ DTI 2003

¹¹DTI 2003

¹² DWP 2001

¹³ DTI 2003

¹⁴ DTI 2003

¹⁵ DTI 2003

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13. This emphasises the need to:

- provide training that matches the needs of employers;
- focus on building the soft skills prioritised by employers;
- ensure that entrepreneurship support and apprenticeship programmes meet the need of older workers;
- encourage life-long participation in learning for example through the grass roots learning engagement delivered through programmes such as Communities First.

14. A significant proportion of older people have a role caring for others; 39% of 50-55 year olds for example¹⁶. In Flintshire 6,572 individuals aged 50-64 provide care to others, with 1,302 providing more than 50 hours each week¹⁷. This can bring major challenges in terms of participation in the labour market as well as to their health and wellbeing. Continued participation in employment or volunteering is of particular importance to promote continued social integration and reduced the isolation to which carers may be more vulnerable.

15. The Carers Strategy for Wales 2013 recognises that employment flexibility is vital to carers retaining or securing employment¹⁸. The Strategy highlights the increased challenges faced in encouraging employers to support carers in a difficult economic climate but stresses the need to continue to build employer support through initiatives such as the Carer Friendly Employer Recognition Standards delivered since 2011 in north east Wales.

16. An integrated approach is needed to supporting older people into employment as no one element of their needs can be effectively addressed in isolation. This is highlighted in the Welsh Government Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023¹⁹.

17. The review of the New Deal for 25+ programme found that the intensive activity element of the programme significantly increased employment levels in older workers²⁰. The review also found that having an advisor of a similar age was found helpful although older people in professional or managerial sector were less likely to find the advisory support of benefit. The review further identified that support for older workers should include work preparation coaching; health management training; and greater awareness of part time working opportunities as well as advice on how to combine work with a pension income. The importance of quality dependent care provision was also highlighted.

18. The importance of flexibility of employment to retaining and attracting older workers has already been highlighted. The Manchester Equal Opportunities Commission found that flexible employment options have the following benefits:

¹⁶ Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010

¹⁷ Census 2011

¹⁸ Welsh Government 2013

¹⁹ Welsh Government 2013

²⁰ WCVA 2014

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- “It allows older workers to remain in their existing employment by downshifting in some way, either through reducing their hours and/or amending their work roles.
- It provides opportunities for 'bridge employment' between career occupation and full retirement.
- It encourages those who are not currently working because of their caring responsibilities, health issues or unemployment to return to employment.”²¹

The Commission recommended that greater awareness was needed of older workers rights to request flexible and reduced hours. This is further highlighted in the Carers Strategy for Wales 2013²².

19. In summary, Flintshire County Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on employment opportunities for older people and recommends that a strong and integrated approach is needed by the Welsh Government to join together the different elements of support for older people into a package that enables them to be retained in or attracted into the labour market. In particular, the Council wishes to highlight the need to:

- avoid the development of programmes that increase inequity by focussing only on specific age groups;
- build upon the success of the Communities First programme in engaging older people in learning and the labour market and upon the tailored support offered by the LIFT programme;
- ensure that pre-employment support matches the needs of older workers and that the lessons of previous programmes are learnt;
- continue to encourage employers to support and invest in carers and offer flexible employment opportunities and to raise awareness of the rights of older workers to request flexible working arrangements;
- ensure that programmes of support to carers and disabled people provide a sufficient quantity and quality of support to enable labour market retention or reengagement; and
- ensure that the new European and Rural Development Plan funding programmes are used flexibly and creatively to enable the development of new forms of support for older people and for their participation in the labour market.

For further information on this response please contact:

Niall Waller, Economic Development Manager, Flintshire County Council, County Hall, Mold, CH7 6NF. Telephone 01352 702137 or email niall.waller@flintshire.gov.uk

²¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010 p.1

²² Welsh Government 2013