



Overcoming intergenerational divides to build better workplaces

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Executive Summary

This report advances a vision of a more equitable future for younger and older workers. In so doing it explores a number of mechanisms by which workers at both ends of the age spectrum are disadvantaged and offers some recommendations as to how these problems might be addressed. These solutions range from tackling age-based discrimination, strengthening labour market regulation, instituting more supportive forms of welfare and supporting the transition into and between jobs, to building intergenerational solidarity, fostering new forms of collective association and creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue.

As a result of our analysis, we are addressing the following recommendations to those institutions and bodies best placed to lead a change agenda in the workplace, namely Businesses (B), National Government (NG), Local Government (LG), Schools and Universities (S&U), Trade Unions (TU) and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). Some of these proposals dovetail with those outlined in the RSA's *Blueprint for Good Work* (Lockley and Wallace-Stephens, 2020). These recommendations are grouped in relation four themes of economic security, tackling discrimination and promoting dialogue, skills and training, and collective action:

1. Economic Security – these recommendations tackle forms of insecurity that younger and older workers may be disproportionately exposed to, ensuring they are properly supported when between jobs (given the higher levels of un- and under-employment that both groups are subject to):

- a. **Single set of day 1 employment rights** regardless of employment status, including universal access to holiday, sick and maternity pay; greater restrictions on the use of casual contracts (NG)
- b. **Implementation of the Welfare Charter (NG)**

2. Tackling Discrimination and Promoting Dialogue – these recommendations aim to reduce ageist discrimination in the workplace, promote inclusivity of different age groups and build understanding and solidarity between younger and older workers:

- a. **Strengthening measures to combat age discrimination in work**, including a statutory age profile reporting duty (NG & B)
- b. **Promote age friendly workplaces** across employers (LG, B & TU)
- c. **Develop an agenda bringing together groups of older and younger workers** to discuss inter-generational issues around current experiences of work and the future of work (RSA, B, S&U)
- d. **Develop a Good Work resource for careers education** to facilitate discussions between students and employers on the future of work (RSA, B, S&U, TU)

3. Skills and Training – these recommendations aim to ensure that younger workers who may be struggling to transition into work, and older workers who may need additional support in changing careers and retraining, are properly supported by comprehensive, properly resourced and geographically focused services:

- a. **Improved careers advice** (including advice on rights and protections) universally accessible both for younger workers and for older workers managing multistage lives (NG, LG, S&U, B & TU)
- b. **Supporting a lifelong learning entitlement for all workers** and ensure that there are separate funding streams for both the recruitment and training of young people, and for the retraining and upskilling of experienced, older workers (NG, S&U)
- c. **Develop a regional approach to employment and skills provision** (LG, B & TU)

4. Collective Action – these recommendations call for a revitalisation of collective associations (such as trade unions), given their significance in driving up terms and conditions of work and articulating worker voice:

- a. **A legislative framework more supportive of Trade Union organising** (NG)
- b. **Address the declines in unionisation**, especially amongst young people and in certain sectors (TU)
- c. **Develop models of “community unionism”** involving unions and other community organisations building local coalitions for change (TU)
- d. **Inter-generational equity and justice bargaining models** to be developed (TU & B)

This report explores the value of an intergenerational perspective on the workplace and the future of work. We contextualise our arguments in relation to ageing societies (with a particular focus on the United Kingdom), aged-based inequalities and trends in the landscape of work. In particular, we focus on the increasing polarisation of labour markets in terms of job quality and interrogate dominant narratives around generational conflict. While noting that younger and older workers sometimes face different challenges inside and outside of the workplace, we recognise that many of their aspirations around good work are the same, and many of the problems they face have shared causes.

1. Ageing Society, Age-Based Inequalities, and the Future of Work

The contemporary world is characterised by ageing societies. While this phenomenon is presently most pronounced in more developed nations, over the next 20 years the majority of growth in the number of people aged over 60 will take place in ‘less developed countries’ (though not the ‘least developed’, which continue to struggle to produce improvements in life expectancy) (United Nations, 2017), with much of that growth concentrated in Asia.

The UK is one such ageing society, where a fifth of the population will be over 65 by 2030. A greater longevity will mean people will work longer either by choice or necessity; to support their lifestyles, because of the inadequacy of welfare provision, and due to progressive increases in the state pension age linked to the increasing dependency ratio (the proportion of those in work relative to those who are retired) (Beck and Williams, 2015). At the same time, younger generations face challenges around extended and complex transitions into work, and both groups may be increasingly exposed to employment ‘precarity’ (Standing, 2011; Lockley and Wallace-Stephens, 2020). In this context, fostering intergenerational dialogue is, we argue, an opportunity to overcome age-based inequalities that manifest in the workplace.

Inequalities rooted in ageist discrimination and the stratification of terms and conditions by age are often a product of the absence of mutual understanding and the presence of negative stereotypes that can tend to restrict engagement between younger (under 30) and older (above 50) workers. In turn the lack of mutual understanding has structural underpinnings, being rooted in the interactional distance (the relative lack of opportunities to bring different generations into communication with one another, particularly in the global north) that is a consequence of the prevalence of age-based social institutions (Fletcher, 2007: 11), practices and geographies. In addition to such ‘generational gaps’, there is an urgent need to develop better policies to support the particular needs of older and younger workers, especially in the context of increasing social, political and technological change, and the economic challenges these changes present.

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In this document we will state what we see as some of the key challenges around promoting intergenerational justice in the workplace and intergenerational dialogue on the future of work. Firstly, we set out what we see as aspects of the overarching context, particularly the polarisation around work quality, the evidence on age-based inequalities and the rhetoric around intergenerational conflict. From this we identify a number of key challenges facing older and younger workers. Subsequently, we outline the future we want to see, both in terms of a broad-brush illustration of more equitable societies, and then the identification of particular

issues around the (inter)generational experiences of work that need to be tackled. In the final section we focus in on how we move towards better futures at work, exploring some of the problems in further detail while also offering proposals for a range of stakeholders aimed at overcoming them.

1.1 Challenges, Questions and Root Causes

1.1.1 Polarisation of Labour Markets and the Proliferation of Poor-Quality Jobs

A key concern in relation to the future of work is the increasing prevalence of ‘dual labour markets’ and poor-quality jobs (or ‘lousy and lovely jobs’ – Goos and Manning, 2007). This has recently been underscored by the phenomena that has been dubbed ‘The Great Resignation’ (Chugh, 2021), whereby large numbers have left jobs in the United States and United Kingdom due to wage stagnation, job dissatisfaction and safety concerns in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the promise of better opportunities amidst a tightening labour market. The key processes we see as driving these phenomena are: shifts towards flexible, atypical and precarious contracts (Umney, 2018; Wood, 2020; Hardy, 2021; Standing, 2011), increasing scientific management leading to greater workplace surveillance, de-skilling and the loss of autonomy (Braverman, 1998), the growth of anti-trade union legislation eroding the possibility of articulating worker voice (Ferdosi, 2021; Ford and Novitz, 2016), the retrenchment of welfare that pushes people towards and keeps them in low paying and poor quality jobs (Birken and Taylor, 2018; Jeffery et al, 2018; Etherington, 2020), and the increasing commodification of Further and Higher Education (Ibrahim, 2011), coupled with reductions in funding (Camden, 2021) and an individualistic approach to education and training that may reduce workers’ options in terms of reskilling.

1.1.2 Inequalities and Demographic Divisions

These processes are in turn a linked to the wider growth of societal inequalities and divisions across the world (Harvey, 2005), with income inequality increasing across almost all OECD countries between the 1980s and 2010s (Scott, 2018: 135). At the same time the processes we have outlined contribute to the maintenance of those divisions by pitching different groups of workers against each other. This happens in a variety of ways, but of particular interest, given our thematic focus on intergenerational justice and dialogue, are those divisions on the basis of age. In what follows we schematically outline what those age-based divisions look like.

Beginning with younger workers in the UK, they are disadvantaged inasmuch as they:

- May be relegated to lower rates of pay (‘youth rates’ of the national minimum wage (Sergeant, 2010);
- Have been restricted from accessing key welfare benefits - including lower levels of Universal Credit and Jobseekers’ Allowance, and the ‘shared room’ rate of Housing Benefit (Landreth Strong and Webster, 2022: 7; Rugg et al, 2004: 24);
- Are paying for a university education that was free to older generations (Ibrahim,

2011);

- Are increasingly excluded from home ownership and decent housing (Furlong, 2013: 110);
- Are over-represented in those sectors dominated by low-paid and precarious work;
- Are increasingly indebted as they move from their teenage years to their early 20s, even excluding Student Loans (Landreth Strong and Webster, 2022: 12);
- Are less likely to be in a union (Tailby and Pollert, 2011: 501);
- Face longer and more complex 'transitions' from childhood to adulthood (McDonald and Marsh, 2005);
- Can be written off as a 'snowflake' generation, lacking in resilience (SoR, 2019; Duffy, 2022);
- Were more likely to lose hours and pay during the Covid-19 pandemic, relative to other groups of workers (ONS, 2021);
- And were much more likely (than older workers) to be employed in sectors that were largely or wholly shutdown during the pandemic (Joyce and Xu, 2020).

On the other hand, younger workers can be seen as advantaged inasmuch as:

- They are also represented as being potentially more dynamic, 'tech-savvy', adaptable, and valuing of diversity (Smith, 2022);
- Employers like to build their own talent pool and transfer knowledge from an older workforce;
- A youthful staff body may have public relations benefits for businesses;
- They may be seen as cheaper than older staff and easier to train;
- Are more likely to be re-employed quickly following redundancy;
- May have greater access to targeted government support schemes (i.e. Kickstart);
- And there is evidence that investing in young people builds loyalty and reduces attrition (Youth Employment UK, n.d.).



Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are significant divisions within the category of young people, with those from professional/managerial backgrounds being much more likely to inherit wealth, be able to undertake unpaid internships and having smoother transitions from compulsory education into work (Atkinson, 2010: 116-117). The same holds true for the presumption that all young people are 'digital natives', when in fact the ability to assimilate new technologies is strongly linked to social and economic resources and education (Good Things Foundation, 2021). And looking beyond class, divisions within the category of 'youth' relate to a wide range of intersectional inequalities on the basis of gender, disability, sexuality and race/ethnicity - given the implications such identities have (for example) on the likelihood of engaging in precarious work (TUC, 2017b).

Turning to older workers, who currently account for a third of the UK workforce (a proportion set to increase as the state pension age rises), they can be seen as advantaged vis-à-vis younger workers to the extent that they:

- May have benefited from higher levels of welfare over the life course (Palier, 2013) and better pensions (including the 'triple-lock') in retirement;
- Will be more likely to own their own homes;
- Are more likely to be in a union;
- May have benefited from 'two-tier' workforces, whereby older workers are offered better terms and conditions than younger workers (and such arrangements may also have been negotiated by a union – Mi, 2021)
- And may be seen as more experienced, capable and able to act under their own initiative.

But on the other hand, older workers can be seen as disadvantaged to the extent that:

- They are less likely than younger workers to have access to training, development or career planning support (Flynn, 2014: 6);
- May be viewed as more expensive;
- May struggle with digital literacy (OFCOM, 2022), and therefore be seen as not adaptable enough to the introduction of new technologies and ways of working (witness Fujitsu allocating \$600m to offload workers over 50 – Sharwood, 2022);
- Have suffered the ravages of deindustrialisation and perhaps the 'scarring' effects of previous recessions (Turmino, 2015), cycling between employment and unemployment – what Shildrick et al (2012) have called the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle';
- Face lower wages than middle-aged adults and lower levels of household wealth (which peaks around age 55 – TUC, 2015: 14);
- Will be more likely to be living with disabilities and limiting long-term illnesses (CIPD, 2022: 16) and to be economically inactive because of this (Flynn, 2014: 6) - especially in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic (TUC, 2022);
- Were more likely to be made redundant during the Covid pandemic and less likely to be re-employed than younger workers (Centre for Ageing Better, 2022);
- And when in poverty, may face starker choices in surviving (including whether to 'heat or eat').

Finally, it is worth also underscoring that there are significant differences in employment outcomes amongst older people in different regions (Centre for Ageing Better, 2022), and as with younger workers intersectional inequalities in gender, ethnicity, class and disability also affect older workers, particularly in terms of employment outcomes. In terms of region, for example, there is a 14-percentage point difference between the employment rate for men aged 50-64 in the North East (66.4%) and the South East (80.4%) (Centre for Better Ageing, 2022).

While this brief review should be sufficient to highlight that both younger and older workers face difficulties and to dispel simple narratives around generational divisions, those narratives nonetheless persist (Milburn, 2019; Howker and Mailk, 2010; Willetts, 2011). And indeed they feed into significant levels of political polarisation in Britain on the basis of age. This has been highlighted in the increasingly gaping chasm in party voting and in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Sloam et al, 2018, Sloam and Henn, 2019a: 78, 102; 2019b), suggestive of significant levels of generational division.

Against this, there exists a considerable amount of evidence that all age groups have shared desires for work with good pay, stable contracts and unionisation (Berry and McDaniel, 2020: 16; Tailby and Pollert, 2011: 500), as they also share similar attitudes on many other issues (Duffy, 2021). Moreover, there is research to suggest that the assumed differences in workplace behaviours between generations is not as significant as stereotypes have suggested (Becton et al, 2014). All of which suggests a basis for the overcoming of the divisions identified in the generational conflict narrative, if we can also tackle some of the practical issues facing younger and older workers. This matters for the dual context of an ageing workforce and the increasingly complex transitions for young people into employment and adulthood.

1.1.3 Challenges Facing Older and Younger Workers

In the workplace, the conditions and inequalities we have noted are connected to the following practical problems:

- Direct discrimination and negative stereotypes of older and younger workers;
- A lack of policies aimed at catering to the specific needs of older and younger workers;
- Differential employment conditions for older and younger workers, including lower earnings potential than other adult workers;
- Problems with integrating older and younger workers within the same workforce and constructing intergenerational solidarities.



2. Imagining Futures, Understanding Mechanisms

On the basis of the foregoing, we would argue that in order to overcome wider social inequalities, tackle divisions within the workplace, and improve both job quality and transitions into and between jobs, there is an urgent need to forge solidarities between older and younger workers to tackle intergenerational divisions (Grady and Simms, 2019: 502). Ultimately our vision is one of a more equal world, with the eradication of all forms of age-based discrimination, greater contractual security and remuneration (for those in routine work especially), an increase in employment protections, legislation and business policies that support the particular needs of older and younger workers, a supportive welfare system, better access to careers advice and training, and stronger collective organisations of workers.

On a practical level this will entail:

- Ending inequalities and discrimination on the basis of age, gender and gender identity, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and class background;
- Advancing the principles of ‘decent work’, such as the right to a secure contract, flexible working arrangements (if required), high standards of workplace health and safety, the promotion of equality and diversity, protection from bullying, discrimination and harassment (cf. Lockley and Wallace-Stephens, 2020);
- The abolition of ‘youth rates’ of national minimum wages, the ‘real’ living wage and the principle of equal pay for equal work;
- Passing legislation that enables rather than frustrates the collective organisation of workers (i.e. through Trade Unions);
- A welfare system that adequately supports workers between jobs and those unable to work due to illness or caring commitments, and supports workers in retirement through fairly funded pensions;
- Improved access to education, training and careers guidance at all ages, to help workers better navigate the increasingly complex transitions between education and work, and between jobs (this also includes the need to educate younger and older workers with respect to their employment rights);
- New models of union organising and the creation of spaces for intergenerational dialogue.

In the remainder of this report, we will expand on these proposals and contextualise them in relation to current legislative and institutional practices.

3. Addressing the Challenges

3.1 Tackling Age-Based Discrimination and Creating Multi-Generational Workforces

Discrimination on the basis of age has been illegal in the UK since the introduction of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations in 2006 (reinforced by the introduction of the Equality Act 2010). Nonetheless, direct discrimination based on assumptions as to a worker's capabilities, and indirect discrimination, which ranges from selecting older workers for redundancy to making causal jokes on the basis of a worker's age, continue to be extensively reported (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018: 10).

Exposure to ageism plots a U-shaped trend across the life-course, with both the youngest and oldest workers more likely to suffer age-based discrimination than those in the middle (Duncan and Loretto, 2004: 104). Ageism is a major problem affecting some older workers. A review of ageism in employment (Harris et al, 2018) highlighted the most frequent negative stereotypes. In addition, inflexible working practices force many older workers to leave the workforce prematurely, particularly those who have caring responsibilities or have a health condition. Ageism is also a problem in the recruitment process. Those exiting jobs or having been made redundant cite ageism as a difficulty in them finding work. A report by Legal and General on over 50s in the labour market shows the challenges of ageism. 64% of the 60-64 age group surveyed believe their age made employers less likely to hire them due to feeling overqualified and not having the right skills. 17% cite health reasons for not getting a job, a proportion which increases with age (CEBR, 2021: 20, 22).

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For younger workers, ageism is more likely to manifest in their perceived ignorance and inexperience, and preconceptions around the attitudes and attributes of more recent generations. While such generational stereotyping may have always existed, there is some evidence to suggest it has grown more extreme, linked to the contemporary narratives of generational conflict we spelled out above. Moreover, the perception of young people as 'not settled down' has a real basis in the enforced deferment of the conventional signs of 'maturity' – such as marriage, home ownership and parenthood – due to socioeconomic reasons (cf. Morgan, 2021).

Tackling both forms of ageism is vital. To prevent direct and indirect discrimination, ensure equality of opportunity, end blocked potential, and to improve business outcomes. Indeed, there are macro-economic arguments that support older workers staying in the job market, as well as financial benefits for employers. Estimates are that by increasing the proportion of those aged 50-64 in work by just one per cent pays dividends – potentially increasing GDP by around £5.7 billion per year and increasing income tax and National Insurance Contributions by around £800 million per year. Research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that a firm with a 10% higher share of workers aged 50 and

over is 1.1% more productive. These productivity gains come from lower job turnover and the greater management and general work experience of older workers. At the other end of the spectrum, the recruitment and retention of younger workers is vital to the sustainability of skills across a range of industries (OECD, 2020). While the stereotypes that underpin ageism may in some instances be culturally entrenched, making these kinds of arguments to businesses and local and national government, may help secure their buy-in to effect change.

The concept of an Age Friendly Employer has been developed to ensure that organisations are inclusive for all ages (Smeaton and Parry, 2018). Core to this is forging an organisational culture which is age positive, as well as embedding age friendly policies right across the organisation. Despite acknowledgement of ageing issues, many employers fail to take concrete action in terms of policies (Chartered Management Institute 2022). **Key to assessing the success of such policies would be the monitoring of data on employment by age and its public reporting, which should become both a statutory requirement for larger organisations (in the same way as gender pay gap reporting) and a means by which organisations can demonstrate their commitment to equality and diversity, and to attract and retain staff.**

The evidence is that age friendly employers having a mix of ages employed is beneficial. According to a recent study by YouGov eight in ten employers (79%) in England state that older workers could help in knowledge and skill sharing (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021: 6). **Younger employees can benefit from the advice, support and mentoring of older colleagues when this is facilitated well in terms of management and culture in the organisation** (which also informs the concept of intergenerational bargaining that we discuss below). The value of such an approach is often demonstrated in team and project working that belies the assumption that age groups are in competition with each other.

But the multi-generational work force requires careful management to ensure that it is inclusive. Raj (2022) argues that with an ageing society, extending working lives is widely viewed as an economic necessity. With up to four generations working alongside each other, organisations must ensure that their workplaces are inclusive, avoiding individual, interpersonal, and organisational harm. Age discrimination in organisations can lead to the formation of workplace ingroups and outgroups, which reduces information sharing and collaboration and requires careful management.



Tackling these issues requires the strengthening of labour market regulation and ensuring younger and older workers are better supported by the welfare system and can access training and skills. Finally, there is a need to promote intergenerational solidarity in the workplace, to look at novel ways of supporting the articulation of workers' voice (through new modes of union organising), as well as exploring the creation of new spaces to foster intergenerational dialogue. It is to these issues we now turn.

3.2 Strengthening Labour Market Regulation

Over a number of decades there has been a shift towards deregulated or more 'flexible' labour markets around the world (Wood, 2020: 2-5). In the United Kingdom, the comprehensive system of job security regulations that were enacted between 1963 and 1978 have been subsequently rolled back, eroding rights around (for example) redundancy and unfair dismissals - in 2012 the qualifying period to be eligible for protection from the latter was increased from 12 to 24 months (Ferdosi, 2021: 525).

One aspect of employment deregulation is the growth of atypical employment (Clarke and Cominetti, 2019) and variegated employment statuses (LWI, 2017). In the UK this takes the form of a tripartite distinction between 'employees', 'workers' and the 'self-employed'. Employees have (theoretically) full protection afforded to them by various pieces of employment legislation, whereas 'workers' (often agency staff or those on 'casual contracts') are entitled to the national minimum wage and holiday and sick pay but are not entitled to redundancy pay or protection against unfair dismissal (LWI, 2017: 9). The self-employed – including the 'bogus' or 'dependent' self-employed (Moore and Newsome, 2018: 478-479) - enjoy neither a guarantee of the minimum wage, nor working hours protection, holiday, sick and maternity pay or a host of other rights.

This matters because of a range of identifiable 'work-based harms' (Scott, 2018; Lloyd, 2019) that are linked to contractual status, including lower rates of pay (TUC, 2017a: 14), pressure to work when sick (GMB, 2017: 5) – including during the Covid pandemic (Jooshandeh, 2021: 41), sexual harassment (Reuter et al, 2020; Adams et al, 2021) and anxiety and depression (Heyes et al, 2018: 429). And this matters for our current discussion as younger workers are concentrated in sectors that make greater use of so-called 'precarious' contracts, while both younger and older workers may be more exposed to certain harms by dint of their age. While such workers can – again theoretically – bring discrimination cases under the Equality Act 2010, even in the absence of statutory employment protections, there are various practical, financial, and emotional barriers to accessing Employment Tribunals (Ioannou and Dukes, 2021: 529).

Alongside these deregulatory shifts, the UK is also subject to some of the most stringent 'anti-trade union' laws (i.e. laws designed to frustrate the democratic processes of organising and collective bargaining) and consequently holds the lowest score for workers' rights in western Europe – on a par with Russia (ITUC, 2020: 9). These include restrictions on the way union elections and ballots for industrial action are conducted, the quasi-criminalisation of certain forms of picketing, restrictions on time off with pay for trade union duties, the outlawing of secondary action, and as of the 2016 Trade Union Act, thresholds for ballots which are not applied to any of the other democratic processes of the state (IER, 2017). Such legislative shifts have contributed to some of the lowest levels of collective bargaining historically, and in comparison to European neighbours, representing a concomitant restriction on worker voice.

A final issue around workplace regulation has been the hollowing out of regulatory regimes in recent decades. For example, between 2003/04 and 2014/15, for workplace health and

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safety, inspections by the Health and Safety Executive and local inspectors fell by 69%, with national prosecutions falling by 35% and local prosecutions falling by 60% - driven by staffing cuts as well as rhetoric around the cutting of 'red tape' (Tombs, 2017: 135). As a consequence, the HSE actually made fewer inspections during the Covid pandemic than in the period running up to it (Jones, 2021: 31), clearly exposing older workers in particular to an increased risk of potential harm.

In this context, it is unsurprising that while some young workers are aware of their employment rights (though many are not) and the legislation underpinning those rights, they feel that the lack of scrutiny and enforcement mechanisms mean that employers can 'get away' with ignoring them (Orlando, 2022: 16). Or that older workers suffer similar treatment and may end up forced out of the labour market. **We therefore argue that there is a pressing need to strengthen effective employment regulation and we would endorse proposals such as those contained in the *Manifesto for Labour Law* (IER, 2016), which call for a comprehensive re-regulation of the UK labour market**, including the creation of a new ministry for labour, the promotion of sectoral collective bargaining, the right of access by trade union officials to workers and their workplaces (also endorsed by the RSA in Lockley and Wallace-Stephens, 2020: 8), contracts that specify a minimum number of regular hours (to tackle the precarity associated with zero hours contracts), the presumption of universal employment rights, and the strengthening of health and safety inspection and enforcement regimes.

We can imagine that such a programme may encounter considerable resistance, given the historical trends towards more 'flexible' labour markets, the widespread reliance of many economic sectors on workers on low-pay and insecure contracts, and concerns relating to the three-fold economic shocks of Brexit, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, rising poverty levels (JRF, 2022), ongoing labour shortages (SIA, 2022), increasing industrial unrest (Islam, 2022) in the UK and elsewhere, and the lack of confidence in labour market enforcement we noted above, are all indicative of a growing crisis in employment conditions and of faith in the social contract that underpins those conditions (cf. Lockley and Wallace-Stephens, 2020). This is a crisis partially rooted in deregulation and only the government has the ability to legislate in order to provide a remedy.

Nonetheless, effective employment rights cannot simply be delivered from above and therefore these proposals should be read alongside those that follow below, which call for greater collective solidarity through a revitalisation of union organising.

3.3 Supportive Welfare

Welfare retrenchment has been ongoing in the UK since the 1980s (see Wacquant, 2009 for a comparative analysis of the United States). While the central tenet of 'less eligibility' (that welfare must be set at a level beneath the lowest wage available on the labour market) has been a guiding principle of welfare delivery stretching back centuries (Neocleous, 2000), the rigour with which it has been applied has oscillated historically. Arguably, workers were confronted with a more supportive system in the immediate post-war decades (Greer, 2016: 165) when compared with today (Wiggan, 2015). Indeed, current reforms have been

characterised by a ‘punitive turn’ (Jeffery et al, 2018) consisting of increased conditionality, capability assessments and a regime of sanctions (Thomas et al, 2020: 61-63).

The impacts of these reforms have disproportionately fallen upon younger workers, who have faced freezes and below inflation increases in benefit levels, exclusion from and reduced eligibility to benefits, and are most likely to be sanctioned (Watts et al, 2014: 6). As a consequence, over three quarters of young people receiving Universal Credit are financially precarious (Landreth Strong and Webster, 2022: 21). Yet for both younger and older workers alike, meagre benefit levels and conditionality can narrow the available choices and may push people towards, and trap them within, poor quality jobs (Birken and Taylor, 2018; Etherington, 2020).

Meagre benefit levels and conditionality can narrow the available choices and pushes younger and older workers towards, and traps them within, poor quality jobs.

Furthermore, for older workers specifically, unemployment tends to be a greater risk, and following the recent pandemic, the over 50s have seen a widening in the gap in hours worked relative to other age groups (indicative of increasing underemployment), their levels of employment fall and have experienced a much weaker recovery than all other age groups (Crossley et al, 2021: 20). For example, 41% of under 50s who stopped working in the first lockdown found a new job in March 2021 compared to just 17% of over 50s. And a third of under 30s who were not working in the first lockdown had found work in a new industry by March 2021, compared with only 7% of over 50s. While government support has

targeted younger workers through schemes such as Kick Start, analogous support for older workers has not been forthcoming.

More generally, older workers are less likely to return to work after spells of unemployment than younger workers. Among all those unemployed in their late 50s, more than one in three have been unemployed for over a year, compared to just over a quarter in their late-30s. This is more acute for those who have been long term unemployed – over 10% of unemployed over 55-year-olds have been unemployed for five years or more, almost double the rate of any other group (CIPD, 2022: 4). Those with lower levels of education, those from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and women are most at risk, being less likely to secure new jobs after becoming unemployed. Finding new work is inevitably difficult for some older workers - many don’t have much recent experience of searching for work. And worryingly evaluations of previous back to work support schemes show they don’t work very well for older workers (Cominetti, 2021: 25-26).

A further key issue for older workers is pension provision and savings for retirement. Exiting the job market without the necessary resources for retirement will exacerbate the growing (since 2012) trend of pensioner poverty (Independent Age, 2022). New research shows that nearly half the population is not confident about their ability to save enough for retirement, largely due to financial pressures elsewhere. Two in five of worried people said they could not afford to put aside enough money for older age while one in five stated that paying off debts was preventing them from saving (Phoenix Insights, 2022; see also Lockley and Wallace-

Stephens, 2020). This is likely to become more significant a pressure with the cost-of-living crisis.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), Unite Community, and the Trades Union Councils have sought to challenge the narrative underpinning welfare cuts and conditionality through advocating for a ‘Welfare Charter’, which we would endorse. The key tenets of the Welfare Charter are the necessity of full employment, a true living wage, a social security system that works to end poverty, an end to ‘workfare’, trade union representation for the unemployed, an ombudsman for claimants, and an end to the sanctions regime and Work Capability Assessments. **We particularly would like to underscore clauses 6 and 8 of the Charter, which respectively call for equality in access to labour markets and social security, and state provision of high-quality information, advice and guidance on employment, training and careers** (which dovetails with our recommendations in the following section).

In addition, other bodies, such as the Centre for Better Ageing (2022), have advocated specialist employment support to older workers through Department for Work and Pensions spending, as well as calling for new legislation on Carers’ Leave (which would also benefit younger cohorts) and extending pensions auto enrolment so that it can be triggered through attaining the earnings threshold through multiple part-time jobs (given the increasing prevalence of fragmentary forms of employment) and we endorse such proposals.

Our recommendations here are primarily aimed at central government, which sets welfare policy in the UK, but they should be read in the context of our contention that (developed in the following section on transitioning into and between jobs) there is a need to **develop an inclusive regional approach to employment and skills provision**. Changes in the labour market are global but inevitably experienced in different ways locally due to a complex interplay of factors including the effect of local economies, demographic patterns, historical local needs, skills bases and industrial sectors (LGA, 2022; OECD, 2018).

The risk of an over reliance on national policies is that they are devised and delivered by a multiplicity of departments and agencies with a lack of clear co-ordination to meet differing local challenges. Key to more effective local solutions is developing an approach which analyses local business and workers’ needs by bringing in different local interests to plan policies. Models such as the Local Government Association’s “Work Local”, which advocates for an integrated and devolved employment and skills service need to be explored (LGA, 2022). But crucially this needs to involve social partners akin to the Swedish Job Security Councils (TUAC, 2018).

3.4 Supporting the Transition into and Between Jobs

The provision of good quality careers' advice that supports young people into a range of vocational and professional jobs and higher learning, has arguably never been more crucial, given the increasingly extended pathways between youth and adulthood.



However, criticisms have been made as to the quality and consistency of schools-based careers guidance in the UK, with the Augar Review (DfE, 2019: 55-56) raising concerns that provision is underfunded and the Local Government Association calling for funding and control over schemes to be returned to local authorities (Long and Hubble, 2021: 5), who were responsible prior the Education Act 2011. Young people themselves have identified that careers support services are overstretched (Orlando, 2022: 20-21) and a further issue pertains to the lack of qualified careers counsellors within schools (APPGfE, 2017: 12).

Holt-White et al have pointed to the range of careers activity now reported to take place in schools, with 84% of school leaders claiming their schools run careers fairs or events, and 80% claiming links to possible careers are embedded within curriculum lessons (2022: 28). Nevertheless, 38% of state school students claim not to have taken part in any careers activity (Ibid: 39), and 37% of school leaders stated that funding for careers advice and guidance in schools was inadequate (Ibid: 6). Moreover, Moote and Archer have argued that the reliance of the majority of careers support on a 'self-referral' system is liable to reproduce existing inequalities in relation to gender, ethnicity and social class. For example, a survey they conducted suggested 65% of white students had met with a careers advisor, as compared to just 33% of Asian students (2018: 197). **This points to the need for greater universal provision of careers guidance and support, which is not contingent upon students 'opting in'.**

There is a need to properly educate younger and older workers in particular as to their statutory employment rights.

Careers related activity in schools is measured against the Gatsby Benchmarks, which are enshrined in statutory guidance (DoE, 2021). The onus for education about employment is left to employers and Further Education and training providers. The Gatsby Benchmarks ask schools to enumerate the opportunities for employer led engagement and engagement with Higher and Further Education institutions (but no obligation to evaluate the impact of these events).

Nevertheless, the opportunity for educating young people about employment rights is missing and does not have any space in the curriculum (which tends to be dominated by rather rudimentary analyses of labour market statistics).

This is a crucial problem, as there is a need to properly educate younger and older workers in particular as to their statutory employment rights, with research having shown that younger workers feel that employers take advantage of their limited experience (Orlando, 2022: 12),

and workers at both ends of the age spectrum tending to have poorer awareness of their employment rights compared to those in between (Meager et al, 2002: 32). This is particularly important given the reliance of many sectors dominated by routine employment on 'recruited acquiescence' (Royle, 1999), which is to say workers who are for a variety of reasons less willing and able to assert their employment rights. **We therefore need a shift away from a focus within the education system on 'employability', conceived purely in terms of 'raising aspirations' and centred on the marketability of the individual (Atkins, 2013), and towards a more holistic approach that teaches older and younger workers about their entitlement to various rights and protections, and the forms of redress that are available should these be violated.** This calls for a shift in emphasis by national government, even if new forms of education on employment rights combined with careers advice must ultimately be delivered by local authorities and educational providers, working with businesses and trade unions.

Students in Europe have a long tradition of pursuing vocational apprenticeships. In Switzerland two thirds of their young people pursue a dual track of classroom and vocational training in more than 250 fields (Lauer, 2019). It would therefore seem surprising that apprenticeships for young people in the UK are in decline. For the academic year 2021/22 the number of young people aged 16 to 19 accounted for only 27.6% of apprenticeship starts (56,200) (ONS, 2022). Paradoxically, the reasons for the decline seem to be linked to government schemes meant to incentivize the employment of apprentices, namely the introduction of an apprenticeship levy on medium to large businesses, which they can reclaim by employing apprentices. Since the introduction of the funding changes in 2017 there has been a large fall in the number of apprenticeship starts. The number of apprentices aged 16-19 fell the most over this period, with 164,000 starts in the first quarter of 2016/17 compared to 40,700 in the first quarter of 2019/20. There are several possible reasons why there has been such a large fall in apprenticeship starts, which include the complexity and inflexibility of the levy, the requirement for non-levy payers to pay 10% of apprenticeship costs (meaning costs are particularly high for SMEs), the 20% training time commitment, a lack of suitable apprentices and lack of available training (CIPD, 2020; Tanner, 2022).



The decline in numbers of young people taking up apprenticeships has been masked by the increase in people aged 25 and over, often those already in work being offered apprenticeships by companies as part of the professional development of their existing staff. In London, for example, apprenticeship starts rose by almost 75% between 2016 and 2018 – going from 22,000 to 38,000 (by far the most in England) – but less than 17% of these were by 16–18-year-olds (Slater, 2022). By comparison it has been argued that the shortage of apprenticeships for young people has been particularly pronounced in the north and midlands, impacting upon the government’s ability to deliver on the levelling up agenda (Tanner, 2022).

While professional development is important, and the opportunities for older workers to upskill and retrain are vital to ensure a population of employees with valuable experience is retained in the workforce, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development have recommended that greater resources should be directed towards the training of young people for whom an apprenticeship would be their first significant experience of work (CIPD, 2020: 11). **Young and old should not be competing for the same funding for training.**

Moreover, there is a need to make educational opportunities genuinely open to all. While the trend in Britain has been towards the increasing marketisation of Higher Education, and an erosion of funding for Further and Adult Continuing Education (Camden, 2021), **there is a need to support genuine lifelong learning given the changing nature of the ‘career’ and the advent of ‘multistage lives’** (Gratton and Scott, 2020). Particularly concerning is the lack of training and skills possessed by older workers that is itself a consequence of a lack of investment in this age group. CIPD data (2022: 15) shows a pattern of older workers participating less in development, with a lack of access to training and progression opportunities, which can be the result of managers making assumptions that older staff are less likely to want such opportunities.

Finally, **there is a need to provide support to Union Learn, the Trade Union Congress’ Learning and Skills Organisation.** Union Learn has formed links between workers and employers in the UK over the last three decades to train union representatives, Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), establish Union Learning Centres (ULCs) and to provide access to courses by up to a quarter of a million learners each year. Such courses have focused upon workers improving the productivity of their businesses and engaging with their communities. Workers have been supported in achieving competencies in English and Maths, have been provided support and advice as apprentices and trainees, and have worked with employers to develop learning and skills strategies. In the context of the current discussion, Union Learn has in recent years partnered with the National Careers Service and the PCS union to deliver ‘mid-life career reviews’ at HMRC (Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs) (Beck and Williams, 2015) to the benefit of the workers, the employer and the union itself.

3.5 Building Solidarity Between Different Age Groups

Unions have been at the forefront of building solidarities between different groups of workers. One example of this is pension provision, where unions have challenged the idea that the protection of retirement provision is only of interest to older workers. The UK’s Union of

Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) for instance has launched a ‘Pensions Awareness’ Campaign and drawn attention to the societal impacts of the exclusion of young workers from effective pensions provision (Grady and Simms, 2019: 503).

Similarly, a variety of unions have active campaigns calling for the abolition of youth rates of the national minimum wage, whereby those in the UK aged under 18, 18-20 and 21-22 can be paid less than the full adult rate applicable to those aged 23 and over. The current position is an improvement as the UK government responded to recommendations from the Low Pay Commission to reduce the threshold for the full adult rate to 23 in April 2021 (previously it was 25). However, from the perspective of the unions this still represents a violation of the principle of equal pay for equal work and Unison’s ‘One Wage Any Age’ campaign (Unison, 2019) has noted that there is no discount for food, housing or bills for 18-year-olds.

In the United States, workers have been taking strike action against so-called ‘two-tier’ contracts (Mi, 2021; cf. Beck and Williams, 2015), whereby workers have differential eligibility for wages and benefits (such as the right to refuse overtime), dependent upon when they were hired. Such contracts have often been negotiated with the connivance of relevant trade unions. The lower tiers are usually those who will be hired after contract negotiations take place (and tend to be younger) and so have no say at the bargaining table or have been hired recently and thus constitute a minority of the bargaining unit (and can be outvoted by more established workers). Such distinctions are a barrier to building solidarity between different age groups as younger workers may feel no incentive to take action to try to defend benefits to which they are not themselves eligible. In this context, the fact that workers throughout the United States are waking up to the dangers of the two-tier system and striking on the basis of ‘equal work for equal pay’ is an important step forward.

The concept of ‘intergenerational bargaining’ is gaining currency in countries such as Sweden. Its premise is to advance a trade union bargaining agenda that considers questions of intergenerational equity and justice.

At the other end of the spectrum, the concept of ‘intergenerational bargaining’ is starting to gain currency in countries such as Sweden. Its explicit premise is to advance a trade union bargaining agenda that considers questions of intergenerational equity and justice. In an exploration of various negotiated settlements by the Swedish trade unions and employers’ associations, Ronmar (2014) argues that ‘introduction’, ‘partial retirement’ and ‘transition agreements’ can make a positive contribution to questions of generational renewal, supervision, training and education, and the prolongation of the working lives of older workers (which includes mandating a proportion of an older workers’ time to be spent on mentoring). Parallel research has been undertaken in the UK, exploring the ‘mid-life career reviews’ noted above as a potentially positive example of such intergenerational bargaining.

Nevertheless, the intergenerational bargaining agenda remains relatively undeveloped, in part because the discourse may be seen to have little relevance to trade unions that are focused on ‘bread and butter’ issues of pay and working conditions, but also because unions may be all

too aware of how the narrative of intergenerational conflict can undermine workers' solidarity, and shy away from the issue for that very reason (Beck and Williams, 2015). While the latter may be a danger, the existence of two-tier contracts (for example) demonstrates that **generational divisions have already become implicated in industrial relations and therefore we recommend that unions, working with employers, dedicate further resources to research and campaigning on these matters.**

3.6 New Forms of Collective Associations for Changing Times

While Trade Unions can be an incredibly effective mechanism for building solidarities between workers and allowing them to uphold their employment rights, there is a need to address the collapse in trade union membership, particularly amongst young people, and in the private sector (Jeffery and Thomas, 2019). This is the case in the UK, but also in all OECD countries, from Sweden to Mexico, and Japan to Turkey (Scott, 2018: 208). In part this is related to the growth of – and young people's concentration in – sectors that are considered to be 'difficult to organise' due to smaller and more fragmented worksites, higher levels of turnover, and staff on more precarious contracts (Moore et al, 2007; Tailby and Pollert, 2011; Wood, 2020). These features in turn can make it more difficult for workers to identify and build solidarity with their colleagues, meaning that the union has to recruit more heavily just to stand still, and that staff may be more susceptible to victimisation (due to their insecure status). All of which entails a greater expenditure of union resources.

Nevertheless, new ways of addressing these issues are emerging, centred on principles of 'community unionism', where unions seek to overcome the challenges of organising by forming coalitions with a wide range of organisations and community actors (in the USA this agenda has been described as 'bargaining for the common good'). In the UK, examples range from collaborations between transport unions and rail user groups to fight ticket office closures, to the campaign for the London Living Wage, which brought together union branches, charities, faith-based organisations and educational institutions through the London Citizens Organization (Holgate, 2015).

A variation of this model has been developed in South Yorkshire, where the Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise (SNAP) campaign has seen local union branches and community members crowdfund the costs of a union organiser (in collaboration with the Bakers' Union) to recruit and support workers in the historically un-unionised hospitality sector (Hardy, 2021: 197-202); a model which has now also been rolled out in Leeds and Rotherham. **We recommend that more unions explore the opportunities for joint campaigning with communities, third sector organisations and social movements.**

New ways of addressing these issues are emerging, centred on principles of 'community unionism', where unions seek to overcome the challenges of organising by forming coalitions with a wide range of organisations and community actors.

There is also a pressing need to develop new models of union organising that take account of the vast increases in self-employment over recent decades (ONS, 2018a). Much of this has been rightly characterised as ‘bogus’ or ‘dependent’ self-employment (Moore and Newsome, 2018), meaning that a business retains a high level of ultimate control over the working practices of an individual, but categorises them as self-employed primarily in order to evade responsibility for basic employment rights (as highlighted above). Such arrangements can present even greater challenges for traditional unions, given the lack of a legally recognised employer to bargain with and the total lack of protection from employer retaliation. Nonetheless, new ‘network models of organising’, again drawing on support from the wider community, have been shown to be effective (Cant, 2020: 169-171).

There are barriers to the implementation of new models of community unionism or network organising, centred on the historic reticence of trade unions in the UK to share resources, oversight and responsibility with external organisations and actors (James and Karmowska, 2016: 103). That said, there is an increasing awareness of the necessity of innovation in the face of membership declines and models such as Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise show that mainstream trade unions can find effective ways of managing relationships with external partners.

3.7 Promoting Dialogue Between Workers of Different Ages

It is clear from the evidence presented in this document that there are significant divisions between older and younger workers, as well as negative perceptions of both groups, which may serve to underpin various forms of stigmatisation and discrimination, but also act as a barrier to collective action by older and younger workers to improve their conditions of employment. Those divisions may also be further exacerbated by intersectional inequalities on the basis of class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

Above we have indicated some of the ways in which these challenges can be overcome, through policies to better support older and younger workers, strategies to challenge discrimination, and initiatives that build solidarity between them. Nevertheless, in many instances there is a need to complement top-down processes (state legislation and NGO/union campaigning) with a bottom-up approach, by creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue.

This is necessary because the prevalence (particularly in the global north) of age-based social institutions (education and social services), practices (leisure activities and interests), geographies (neighbourhood spatial segregation), and societal norms and stereotypes can tend to restrict interaction between different age groups across the life course (Fletcher, 2007: 11). Programmes aimed at tackling such segregation have been in existence for a number of decades now and have been

The prevalence (particularly in the global north) of age-based social institutions, practices, geographies, and societal norms and stereotypes can tend to restrict interaction between different age groups across the life course.

demonstrated to have positive impacts upon the attitudes of one age group towards the other.

On this basis we propose bringing together different groups of older and younger workers, in a range of different industries and occupations, into a dialogue that would be structured around the following questions:

1. How has work changed over the lifetimes of older workers, what lessons can this teach us about the realisation of 'good work' going forward?
2. What do younger and older workers value about the way their work is organised, what do they view as challenges, and are there commonalities between the two groups?
3. What forms of discrimination do younger and older workers face in employment?
4. What are the broad changes (terms and conditions, equality and diversity, environmental, social and corporate governance) that younger and older workers want to see in the workplace, and how can they come together to effect those changes?
5. What are the specific policies that younger and older workers would like to see enacted to improve their experiences of work?

Moreover, given that the majority of students in schools, colleges and universities in the UK do engage with employers either through such forums as networking events, talks or careers fairs, we can also create an opportunity for learning about good work by equipping teachers and students with resources and questions that can be asked, creating a more meaningful dialogue between students and employers based not only on raising aspiration, but challenging employers to define how they are providing 'good work'.

Questions to promote these discussions would be similar to those out lined above:

1. How has your work changed over the course of your career in terms of autonomy, decision making, work life balance and pay?
2. What do you value about the way your organisation/workplace is managed?
3. As a young person newly recruited, how would your organisation show that it values me?
4. What opportunities would there be in your organisation for a young person to effect change?
5. How are young people in the organisation mentored and developed?

Ultimately all of the organisations and actors to which we are addressing this report need to be sensitive to the need to promote intergenerational dialogue within the workplace, but given the central role the RSA has carved out in leading discussions on the future of work, there would be value in the institution leading a pilot project on implementing and evaluating intergenerational dialogues in the workplace and in educational settings. This then needs to be actively promoted to employers and unions as well as industry and employer associations.



4. Conclusion

In this report we have highlighted the challenges of both overcoming age-related inequalities and discrimination, and building intergenerational solidarities, in the context of the ageing society, the polarisation of the labour market, and increasing inequality more generally. There is no straightforward panacea to these problems, but the introduction of new legislation aimed at re-regulating the labour market, alongside increased funding for welfare, skills and education, the devolution of decision-making on skills and training, and new strategies to build collective associations and foster dialogue between older and younger workers can, we believe, create the best conditions to tackle these entrenched problems. Of necessity this will require the involvement of national and local government, businesses, education and skills providers, trade unions and, crucially, the workers themselves. In short what is required is a double movement, top-down and bottom-up, aiming to revolutionise the ways in which older and younger workers relate to the world of work, and to each other.

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