

Centre for Ageing Better response to – The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government

About the Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. By 2050, one in four people will be over 65. The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by the government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

Summary

Age is a protected characteristic, as set out in the Equality Act. Ageism and age discrimination across the whole lifecourse are endemic in our society, from the workplace to the media to politicians – and yet this is an issue on which the GEO has been disappointingly silent. In the Minister for Women and Equalities' recent speech¹ on the government's new approach to tackling inequality across the UK, the word 'age' was not mentioned. This is in-keeping with the absence of action on addressing age related discrimination from the GEO's stated priorities. As it is the GEO's role to lead on the 2010 Equality Act, this lacuna in the Office's work means that vital progress on tackling age discrimination is not being made and important intersections between age and other protected characteristics are not getting the necessary attention,

Today, there are more people aged 60 and over than there are aged 19 and below. The population aged 65 and over will increase by almost 5 million over the next 20 years (an increase of 40%), and the population aged 85 and over will increase by more than 1 million (1.15 million) over the next 20 years (an increase of 72%).² Despite this, attitudes to ageing remain firmly stuck in the past, and people in later life experience prejudice and discrimination in a range of settings.

Ageism, like other forms of discrimination, has detrimental impacts on our health and wellbeing. On an individual level it limits our ambitions and perceived power to take control of our lives. On a societal level our failure to move away from broad stereotypes and assumptions is leading us to miss out on the contribution of a huge and growing part of our population. Taking action on

¹ Fight for Fairness speech (2020) <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/fight-for-fairness>

² Office for National Statistics (2019), 'Estimates of the population for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/Populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

these forms of discrimination must be a priority for government and GEO if we are to ensure that people of all ages are able to participate fully and equally in society and the economy. Importantly, age also interacts with other protected characteristics such as gender and race. Older generations are becoming more diverse. Based on data from the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing comparing the first wave of data collected in 2002 with the most recent wave in 2018, the proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people aged 50-70 has doubled from 4% to 8% since the previous generation.³ An increasing number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people are now approaching later life and our evidence shows that, compared to white people, they are facing challenges due to an accumulation of disadvantages built up over the life course. These challenges span across a large number of areas in their life, putting them at risk of missing out on a good later life.

We welcome the focus on addressing socio economic inequalities which are at the heart of the disparities we see in the healthy life expectancy we can enjoy. This focus should be used to add coordination and impetus to achieve the government's commitment to increasing healthy life expectancy and closing the gaps between the richest and the poorest.

However, it is also clear that while progress has been made in tackling racism, sexism and homophobia in the workplace, there is much less awareness of the importance of age-diversity and tackling ageism. The Government Equalities Office has also a clear role to play in promoting the rights of older people and upholding responsibilities under the Equality Act to consider age as a protected characteristic. It must be clearer and more visible about these responsibilities.

Improving equality and reducing discrimination and disadvantage for all in the UK

Ageism and age discrimination in the UK

One in three people in the UK report experiencing age prejudice or age discrimination.⁴ According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's National Barometer of Prejudice and Discrimination, more people of all ages say that they experience ageism than any other form of discrimination.⁵ These stereotypes can be damaging to individuals in two ways. First, they can result in prejudice and discrimination, which can be experienced both directly and indirectly; second, they can shape the way we think and feel about age and our own ageing. These stereotypes and attitudes are shaped, reflected and reproduced in the language that we use, both in terms of our everyday lives and in a range of different contexts such as the media and policy.

³ UCL & IPPR (2020) <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/who-is-at-risk-missing-out-data-release>

⁴ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) Dodderly but dear? Examining age-related stereotypes <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Dodderly-but-dear.pdf>

⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/national-barometer-of-prejudice-and-discrimination-in-britain.pdf>

Written evidence submitted by Centre for Ageing Better [GEO0018]

Negative old-age stereotypes can not only influence how people are treated by others via discriminatory practices, but also affect how people view themselves and how they feel about their own ageing. Internalisation of these stereotypes and the threat they can pose to our identity mean that older people can start to perform in line with age stereotypes contributing to their self-fulfilling nature. Exposure to negative age stereotypes has also been associated with worse health outcomes⁶, including a reduction in longevity⁷ and increased risk of dementia.⁸ Along with age discrimination in society, ageism directed towards the self may discourage older people from embracing the behaviours and opportunities that would enable them to fully participate in society.⁹ It is through these processes that ageism presents a significant barrier to capitalising on the opportunities offered by an ageing population

However, people are also most likely to say that ageism is not a serious form of discrimination. Despite growing evidence of age discrimination and age being recognised by law as a protected characteristic, age discrimination is often not taken seriously. Few cases are taken under the Equality Act. In England and Wales there have been 2,407 decisions that have involved age discrimination between 2017-2020.¹⁰ Many of these claims have been withdrawn or the age discrimination element has not been proven, with the case being judged in terms of unfair dismissal or on other characteristics such as racial or gender discrimination.

Ageist attitudes are not inevitable but a result of persistent negative stereotyping about older people across a range of sectors including politics, the media, advertising and charity discourse. Our research has found that despite these sectors using different language and often having quite different tones, the narratives they help to create and reinforce largely draw on negative stereotypes about older people and ageing.¹¹

Political discourse predominantly reflects concerns around meeting the perceived increasing costs of service provision for an ageing population, framing an ageing population as a drain on public resources. The catastrophe we have seen in care homes in recent months is perhaps a consequence of the way we as a society characterise older people – as a burden on the health service, dependent on others, and heading inevitably towards death. Such views are shared by policy-makers responsible for making life-and-death policy decisions at this crucial time, who see the issue of an ageing population as a problem.

⁶ Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(6), 332-336. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x

⁷ Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Kunkel, S. R., & Kasl, S. V. (2002). Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 83(2), 261.

⁸ Levy, B. R., Ferrucci, L., Zonderman, A. B., Slade, M. D., Troncoso, J., & Resnick, S. M. (2016). A culture–brain link: Negative age stereotypes predict Alzheimer’s disease biomarkers. *Psychology and aging*, 31(1), 82.

⁹ Swift, H. J., Abrams, D., Lamont, R. A., & Drury, L. (2017). The risks of ageism model: How ageism and negative attitudes toward age can be a barrier to active aging. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 11(1), 195-231. doi:10.1111/sipr.12031

¹⁰ Employment tribunal decisions from Feb 2017 onwards https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions?tribunal_decision_country%5B%5D=england-and-wales&tribunal_decision_categories%5B%5D=age-discrimination

¹¹ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) An old age problem? How society shapes and reinforces negative attitudes to ageing <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/old-age-problem-how-society-shapes-and-reinforces-negative-attitudes-ageing>

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Participation in the labour market

The workplace is a common setting for ageism, and negative attitudes towards older workers risk harming not just older people but the economy at large. Today, one third of the workforce is over 50. Figures from before the pandemic showed that workers aged 65 and older are likely to be responsible for more than half of all UK employment growth over the next 10 years and almost two-thirds of employment growth by 2060.¹² However, ageism in the workplace risks jeopardising this growth.

In 2018, we found that of workers who have applied for jobs since turning 50, over a quarter (27%) have been put off jobs since turning 50 as they sound like they're aimed at younger candidates; almost a third (32%) believe they have been turned down for a job because of their age; nearly one in five (17%) have or considered hiding their age in applying for a job since turning 50; and two fifths think their age would disadvantage them in applying for a job.¹³ Of all over-50s employees, more than 1 in 10 (11%) said they have had comments or 'jokes' from colleagues or managers related to their age in their current workplace; 4% said they have considered leaving their job because they feel they are discriminated against because of their age; and nearly a third (29%) don't think their workplace values older workers.

Our recent research found that despite age being a protected characteristic under the law, few of the employers interviewed had strategies or approaches specifically aimed at making the recruitment process more diverse and inclusive in the context of age.¹⁴ It found no evidence that employers use approaches specifically aimed at de-biasing the recruitment process for older workers, and found very little evidence that employers evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives that are meant to reduce discrimination more generally, such as 'language decoding' tools. Many employers did not see age discrimination as being a problem in their organisation, despite the fact that some of those interviewed held negative views of older people, such as older workers 'having poor IT skills' or looking 'worn-out.'

Reducing ageism in recruitment will be even more crucial in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 400,000 over-50s currently out-of-work.¹⁵ This group are more likely to face long-term unemployment than younger age groups once they fall out of work, with ageism in the recruitment process a significant factor. Without action to improve their employment chances, we risk seeing many of these people fall out of the workforce permanently.

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on the finances of older workers, who appear to be the second hardest-hit group (behind the youngest workers) as a result of the crisis. Nearly one in four employees aged 54 and over, who were working before the crisis, were on furlough in June–July, while among those still working, one in five were working fewer hours. By

¹² Restless (2019) <https://restless.co.uk/press/over-65s-likely-to-drive-half-of-all-uk-employment-growth-in-the-next-10-years/>

¹³ Centre for Ageing Better (2018) Age discrimination in the workplace <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/Age-friendly-employers-stats.pdf>

¹⁴ Centre for Ageing Better (2021) Shut out: How employers and recruiters are overlooking the talents of over 50s workers <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/shut-out-employers-overlooking-over-50s-workers>

¹⁵ Restless (2021) <https://restless.co.uk/press/unemployed-over-50s-are-two-and-a-half-times-as-likely-as-other-age-groups-to-be-unemployed-for-at-least-two-years/>

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September, furloughed 55-64s were the least likely to be back at work. The number of older workers seeking unemployment related benefits doubled during the lockdown and there is a risk of further job losses as the furlough scheme is unwound and as some sectors struggle to recover. Research by the IFS found that over 30% of workers age 54+ were worried about their job security, with those who have a disability or limiting health condition 34 percentage points more likely to be worried about job security than those without.¹⁶

Although DWP are doing great work on the fuller working lives strategy, it is GEO's responsibility to shine a light on discriminatory practices and develop a cross-government equality strategy.

Ageism in health and care

Ageism also affects older people in health and care settings, an issue which has been brought to the forefront by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is concerning then that the GEO does not list DHSC as one of the departments 'it works closely with'.

International studies including a systematic review published in 2020 have found widespread evidence of ageism in healthcare, leading to older people being denied access to care and treatments, being excluded from research studies, and suffering cognitive impairment.¹⁷ Our research has found that in health and social care stereotypes of older people tend to be extremely negative, focusing on death, physical and cognitive decline.¹⁸ Getting old is often seen as a process of increasingly bad health and this can lead to over- or under-medication for pain management. Assumptions about people's lifestyles in later life can also result in lower likelihood of being screened for sexually transmitted diseases or substance abuse.

This means that while ageism is often not taken as seriously as other protected characteristics, and sometimes seen as more acceptable, ageism has profound consequences for the health and wellbeing of those in later life. That has never been more visible than during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early weeks of the crisis, it was common to see social media commenters reassuring one another that the disease was fatal "only" to older people or those with underlying health conditions; one journalist argued that the virus might benefit the economy by "culling" the elderly. It is still common to see arguments made that the lives of older people are of less value than the young, and that the deaths of older people may be a reasonable price to pay for a loosening of restrictions.

Health is not just DHSC's responsibility. GEO should be challenging health inequalities and discrimination by ensuring policies and practices are helping all protected characteristic groups.

¹⁶ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) The coronavirus pandemic and older workers <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15040>

¹⁷ Chang E-S, Kanno S, Levy S, Wang S-Y, Lee JE, Levy BR (2020) Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. PLoS ONE 15(1): e0220857. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220857>

¹⁸ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) Dodderly but dear? Examining age-related stereotypes <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Dodderly-but-dear.pdf>

The GEO's role in highlighting the numerous equalities issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated many of the issues faced by those in later life, and in particular the intersectionality of age with other protected characteristics such as ethnicity and socio-economic status.

One of the most shocking outcomes of the pandemic has been the health inequalities which have been laid bare, highlighting the vastly different ways that those from different ethnic groups or socio-economic backgrounds experience health in later life. Even before the pandemic, disability-free life expectancy among women was falling, and the wealthiest people had almost twice as many years of disability-free life ahead of them at age 65 as the poorest. With a greater burden of ill health in the poorest in society, it is the poorest who will suffer most from the delays in diagnosis and treatment of health conditions that have resulted from the pandemic. The coming years may therefore bring not only a further reduction in disability-free life expectancy overall, but a larger gap between the richest and poorest if government do not champion healthy ageing.

The pandemic has served to expose and amplify housing-related health inequalities among those in later life. Of the 4.3 million homes in England that do not meet basic decency standards, half are occupied by someone aged over 55.¹⁹ Across the country overall, over-75s are disproportionately likely to be living in non-decent homes, with one in five over-75s living in a home that does not meet basic decency standards. Our research has found that people who have been identified as most at risk of COVID-19, including older people, those with pre-existing health conditions and Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups, are more likely to be living in non-decent homes, along with those on low incomes.²⁰

We welcome the Minister for Women and Equalities' statement that GEO will have a renewed focus on evidence and data. However, there is a large data gap, both in terms of breakdown by age as opposed to grouping people over age 65 in one statistic, and the availability of data which is broken down by age and its intersectionality's such as geographic inequality, socioeconomic status, race and gender. GEO should use the Inclusive Data Taskforce to tackle this data gap. This must include breakdowns of age and the intersectionality of age with factors such as geographic inequality, socioeconomic status, race and gender.

¹⁹ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) Home and dry: The need for decent homes in later life <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/home-and-dry-need-decent-homes-later-life>

²⁰ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) Homes, health and COVID-19 <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/homes-health-and-covid-19>

Supporting and implementing international equality measures in the UK, including the UK's international commitments

As the Minister for Women and Equalities is also the Secretary of State for International Trade, she is in a good position to champion the UK's commitment to international strategies and highlight our contribution on a global scale.

2021 marks the start of the WHO's Decade of Health Ageing to foster healthy ageing and improve the lives of older people, their families and communities by addressing four areas of action. The Decade builds on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. Like the WHO's Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health (2016–2030) and Madrid Plan, the Decade supports realisation of Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The GEO is in an important position to support and implement policies that contribute to the decade, and to highlight the great work the UK is doing on a global stage. The Centre for Ageing Better is contributing to the Decade's vision through the UK Network of Age-friendly Communities. The decade needs national leadership to ensure policymakers across the country are working towards the Decade commitments, and to make sure their efforts are recognised internationally.

Conclusion and recommendations

As a protected characteristic, age clearly falls within the remit of the GEO – but it is equally clear that the GEO has not taken on this responsibility thus far. This has led to a lack of direction and leadership on the issue within government and contributed to a culture in which ageism and age discrimination are taken less seriously than other forms of discrimination. Going forwards, the GEO has a positive and important role to play in championing the rights of older people, tackling age-discrimination in a range of settings, and creating a society in which people of all ages are able to participate fully.

The GEO should:

- **Support a cross-departmental strategy on ageing** to embed action to improve later life across government and ensure joined-up policy-making on the issue. Demographic change is a complex issue that requires collaboration across multiple government departments. GEO is in a central position to champion a cross-departmental strategy on ageing and to compel government to act on this critical inequality issue. This should include things such as supporting DWP and BEIS to ensure older workers are not excluded from the labour market and employment support services, and supporting DHSC to consider health inequalities across all protected characteristics.
- **Set out key priorities for GEO** to promote awareness of age as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, and include people with lived experience in the development of the priorities.

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- **Include age in all data collected under equalities monitoring** so that age-related inequalities are visible and the impact of measures to tackle age-discrimination can be monitored. The GEO should use the Inclusive Data Taskforce to tackle large gaps in data by breaking down and comparing data more effectively.
- **Use GEO's focus on addressing socio economic disparity to advance the government's Ageing Grand Challenge mission** – to ensure that people can enjoy at least five extra healthy, independent years of life by 2035, while narrowing the gap between the experience of the richest and poorest.
- **Challenge the 'intergenerational injustice' narrative.** This narrative, which is common in the way that many politicians and the media discuss ageing, obscures the inequalities across the lifecourse and artificially stokes conflict between generations. This leads to the proliferation of ageist views which are harmful to society. GEO should challenge ageist language across all sectors.
- **Support and implement policies that contribute to the WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing.** The decade needs national leadership to ensure policymakers across the country are working towards the Decade commitments, and to make sure their efforts are recognised internationally.

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