

***Survey of Members of the
Scottish Parliament on
Age and Employment Issues***

**TAEN – The Age and Employment Network
March 2009**

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Survey on Age and Employment Issues

Introduction

This survey was conducted by TAEN – The Age and Employment Network. It followed a similar survey of Westminster MPs in the autumn of 2007, undertaken jointly with leading older people's charity Help the Aged, TAEN's strategic partner.

The mission of TAEN – The Age and Employment Network is to promote an effective job market that serves the needs of people in mid and later life, employers and the economy. Help the Aged works to secure and uphold the rights of disadvantaged older people in the UK and around the world.

It is becoming increasingly important to understand the impact of population ageing. TAEN's role is to interpret demographic change and to help organisations and individuals build advantage from it.

While the employment rate of people over the age of 50 has shown the fastest growth in recent years, it is still considerably lower than the rate for 25-49 year olds. Today, around 72 per cent of people in the UK aged 50 to state pension age are in work, compared with 80 per cent of those aged 25-34 and 82 per cent of those aged 35-49. The comparable figures for Scotland are 72 per cent of those aged 50 to state pension age, 82 per cent of those aged 25-34 and 84 per cent of those aged 35-49 (but the statistics for Scotland lag those of the UK by six months¹. Interestingly, while 12 per cent of people aged over state pension age work in the UK, the figure for Scotland is two percentage points lower at 10 per cent.

Before the economic downturn took effect, the Government had declared an aspiration to increase the overall employment rate of people of working age from 75 per cent to 80 per cent. By its reckoning this would have required at least one million more people over 50 joining the workforce – although this increase depended on the timeframe. The recession, however serious, will not alter the demographic changes that western economies face. In mid-2007, people over 50 represented 35 per cent of Scotland's total estimated population and people aged 50 to 65 19 per cent².

For six years TAEN was an active member of the Department of Trade and Industry's Age Advisory Group on the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006. TAEN has been taking stock not only of the effect of the Regulations since their introduction in October 2006 but also of the awareness of the impact of demographic change and its economic and social implications among councils, local development agencies, businesses and others involved in the labour market.

With the passing of the Age Regulations into law it might have been assumed that age discrimination would no longer be an issue in the UK (or perhaps Europe generally, since the law emanated from an EU Directive). Nothing could be further from the truth. Legislation outlawing age discrimination in employment and vocational training has

¹ Labour Market Statistics, ONS, February 2009

² General Registrar Scotland

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certainly not eradicated discrimination in these areas. Neither has it done anything to prevent age discrimination in other walks of life – notably in the provision of goods, facilities and services.

If we are to deal with the challenges of an ageing society, we need to understand what is happening and we need to understand how far others understand these matters too. Scotland, like other parts of the UK, has an ageing workforce. A key issue facing Scotland's economy is demographic change and the associated business implications. A greater understanding of issues experienced by older workers and how to address the challenges posed by an ageing workforce is essential. This is why we decided to conduct a survey of MSPs on age and employment issues. Although this is not a devolved issue, we felt that establishing the impact of the legislation in Scotland was important and that it would allow us to draw comparisons based on findings from the similar study carried out with MPs predominantly in England.

MSPs are well placed to report on how people and organisations behave in many walks of life in Scotland. They meet with constituents, visit companies and employing organisations and take a great deal of interest in the undercurrents of problems and concerns that reflect the moods of business and those who earn their living in all sectors of the economy. This report bears out many of these assumptions and our purpose in publishing it now is to provide the insights our survey reveals.

In September 2008, we sent MSPs a questionnaire (attached as Appendix). Twenty-six responded, representing a response rate of 20 per cent, although three said they did not respond to questionnaires and not all respondents answered each question. Some provided additional comments, some of which are included in this report. We note that the average age of MSPs is 52.

Survey Results

1. Age discrimination

Before embarking on our survey we recognised that individuals with experiences of age discrimination were likely to seek resolution of their grievances in a number of ways, including lodging complaints with employment tribunals. Drawing complaints to the attention of MSPs would, we reasoned, be a solution adopted by only a minority. Nevertheless, bearing in mind TAEN's daily contact with members of the public complaining of age discrimination in various forms, we assumed that some complaints would surface in MSPs' surgeries. Surprisingly, only 26 per cent of MSPs responding said their constituents had raised concerns about age discrimination. However, they did not go into detail. And one respondent commented that she would refer any constituent who contacted her about age and employment issues to his or her constituency MP. Although this may account for some of the difference in the responses of MSPs and MPs, we were surprised by its extent (26 per cent against 60 per cent).

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At TAEN we have seen no reduction in the number of people aged 50+ contacting us because of their difficulties in finding work and this was true for the period before the recession started to affect the job market. Many are skilled and well qualified. The view that employers and recruitment agencies continue to discriminate against older people, despite the legislation, is widely held.

Have constituents raised with you any concerns relating to direct and indirect age discrimination?

MSPs

Yes	6	26%
No	17	74%

MPs

Yes	49	60%
No	32	40%

One MSP who commented said that whilst the issues had not been raised on an individual or general basis he had the distinct view that there was a problem. He added that there seemed to be a mind set, particularly in the West of Scotland, on the part of both employers and indeed potential workers that once people reach pensionable age - that was it. He was unable to identify from among his own circle of friends and acquaintances anyone over the age of 65 who works and said that none of the businesses with which he had contact had older employees.

Although unrelated to employment, another commented that a constituent had complained that the age limit for jury service was still 65.

Westminster MPs who commented said the issues raised included forced retirement and the default retirement age of 65 introduced under the Age Regulations; difficulty in finding work; selection for redundancy; unemployment; and the reduction in funding of lifelong learning. A number also said constituents had raised issues about age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services unrelated to employment.

2. Employers and issues of age discrimination

How far are employers troubled by the 'red tape' of the new Age Regulations? How far have they found them a burden? To what extent have the Regulations influenced their behaviour, positively and negatively in the ways desired or expected? How far do employers seem to understand the real issues around the demographic changes in society and the need to treat older workers as a valuable resource? And although employment and age discrimination are not devolved issues, we wondered how far they might be reflected in the kinds of discussions MSPs were having with employers in their constituencies - hence our next question.

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Have you had any discussions with employers in your constituency about issues of age discrimination?

MSPs

Yes	4	17%
No	19	83%

MPs

Yes	32	41%
No	46	59%

Only 17 per cent of MSPs had held such a discussion. One respondent said he had discussed age discrimination with employers but not in relation to employment itself. More than half had held no discussions. Those who commented said they had been in touch with a range of employing organisations and bodies in the public and private sectors.

In contrast, more than twice as many MPs responding had held such discussions with local employers.

3. Barriers to securing suitable employment

Age discrimination is only one of the barriers older people face in securing suitable work. Individuals contacting TAEN have highlighted a number of issues. Some believe employers place too much emphasis on qualifications and too little on their skills and experience. Many looking for work or who want to change direction are not eligible for funding to update or develop their skills. Others say they are seen as too old, too experienced or over-qualified by employers. Many comment that working in retail seems to be the only work option for older people. Several have mentioned diminishing opportunities as a result of the outsourcing of work overseas. And for some, the introduction of the default retirement age of 65 under the Age Regulations has led to forced retirement. We wanted to know in our next question whether MSPs had identified the same issues.

Are you aware of any particular issues arising for older people in your constituency who would like to work but are not able to secure suitable employment?

MSPs

Yes	4	17%
No	19	83%

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MPs

Yes	30	39%
No	47	61%

Under a fifth (17 per cent) of MSPs were are of any particular issues facing older jobseekers. Of those who responded, one commented that there was a general expectation that older people would be judged poorly at the job application stage. Another said that although nothing has been raised with him specifically, he suspected such issues might exist.

In comparison, the response rate by MPs who were aware of issues was more than double that of MSPs. Some of the areas identified included lack of skills and access to appropriate training, lack of suitable employment opportunities, forced retirement and general age discrimination.

It would therefore appear that the majority of MSPs, and indeed MPs, have not experienced the same level of enquiries and do not have knowledge of the issues which are raised by individuals with TAEN.

4. Issues affecting the local economy

It is becoming increasingly important to understand the impact of population ageing on the economy and on workforces to manage its effects successfully. UK average life expectancy increased by 30 years in the 20th century. Each day average life expectancy extends by five hours and this rate of increase is accelerating. Women are having fewer children and at a later age. People over state pension age now outnumber those under 16; and it is estimated that within 15 years there will be three million more people aged over 50 and a million fewer under 50. In light of this background, we wanted to ask MSPs whether these issues were already starting to have an impact in their constituencies.

From your knowledge of your constituency, are population ageing, skills needs and the employment of older people issues that are already affecting the local economy?

MSPs

Yes	10	53%
No	9	47%

MPs

Yes	45	62%
No	28	38%

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Just over half of MSP respondents confirmed that they were aware of the issues that were affecting the local economy, which is in line with the response rate from MPs in their survey. One respondent cited the ageing population and a lack of younger workers rather than any form of discrimination. Another said that although there was a problem regarding skills in her constituency, employers were still not looking to recruit older people. Two MPs representing Scottish constituencies referred to the shortage of young people entering both the offshore and onshore sectors of the oil and gas industries in our earlier survey though this point was not commented upon by any MSPs.

5. Discussions with local authorities and agencies

The government's 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review announced new Public Service Agreements (PSAs) covering 2008-2011. The PSAs set out key outcomes the government wants to achieve. In this context, we wanted to check whether MSPs had held discussions with local authorities and agencies around the social and economic implications of demographic change. This is particularly relevant in light of PSA 8 which relates to maximising employment opportunity for all; PSA 15 which relates to addressing disadvantage by reason of gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief; and PSA 17 which relates to tackling poverty and promoting greater independence and wellbeing in later life. The subset of performance indicators for PSA 17 includes the employment rate of those aged 50-69 and the difference between this and the overall employment rate.

Have you had discussions with local councils, development agencies or other bodies around demographic change and its economic and social implications?

MSPs

Yes	14	64%
No	8	36%

MPs

Yes	43	56%
No	34	44%

It would appear that the majority of MSPs and MPs talk to public sector organisations on the issues of demographic change and the implications both economically and socially. One respondent noted his discussions had related to equal opportunities. The others who commented said their discussions had centred on housing, health and social care provision and the impact of a high proportion of elderly people in the population on services. This is typical of responses received from MPs.

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6. Extent of understanding of issues around demographic change

TAEN believes it is important that those involved in the labour market understand the issues of demographic change and population ageing. We know many employers have concerns about skills shortages but we wanted to know how far these concerns are surfacing in discussions MSPs have with business, particularly around unlocking the potential older workers offer as resource.

Do you think issues around demographic change and the need to engage older people in the workforce are well understood among businesses, unions and those involved in the labour market in your constituency?

MSPs

Yes	11	55%
No	9	45%

MPs

Yes	28	39%
No	44	61%

Just over half of MSPs felt businesses and unions understood the issues, compared with just over a third of MPs. While this is encouraging, there are still significant numbers of both MSPs and MPs who do not think that there is an awareness among businesses and unions of the issues, which suggests more work has to be done. One respondent commented that the issues had not been raised with him by either employers or prospective employees. Another felt they were only beginning to be understood.

7. Need for training and information around demographic change, age and employment issues

The need for training and information is clearly linked to responses to Question 6 and the extent to which the issues are understood.

Do you see a need in your constituency for training and information to promote understanding and action around the employment of older people, demographic change and business success?

MSPs

Yes	18	82%
No	4	18%

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MPs

Yes	60	83%
No	12	17%

While just over half believed the issues were well understood (response to question 6), more than 80 per cent still saw a need for training and information. The proportion who recognised this need mirrored that of Westminster MPs. One MSP commented that it could be useful as it would alert employers to untapped resources. Another agreed, saying he thought employers believed that someone of pensionable age would not want to work. Others believed training and information on the topic could be positive and that updating knowledge was, in any case, a good thing.

8. Briefing for MSPs

In response to the need for guidance, TAEN is preparing a briefing document for MSPs to help in their work at national and constituency level.

Would you appreciate TAEN preparing guidance for MSPs on the issues raised in this survey – the implications of demographic change on employment of older people and how labour markets might be made to work for older populations?

MSPs

Yes	20	95%
No	1	5%

MPs

Yes	68	93%
No	5	7%

As in the case of MPs, a large majority of MSPs believed such a briefing would be useful. One respondent commented that region/constituency specific data would be helpful.

Conclusions

Our sample was modest but at 20 per cent of MSPs was probably fairly representative.

More than a quarter (26 per cent) of MSPs reported that their constituents had raised issues with them relating to direct and indirect discrimination, a much lower proportion than MPs (60 per cent).

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Only 17 per cent of MSPs had had discussions with local employers on issues relating to age discrimination. In contrast, more than twice as many MPs responding to our earlier survey had held such discussions. The same small percentage of MSPs (17 per cent) said they were aware of particular issues in their constituencies that arose for older people seeking work but who were unable to find suitable employment (83 per cent said they were not so aware). Against this, the response rate of MPs who were aware of issues was more than double that of MSPs.

MSPs were invited to comment on whether they believed population ageing, skills needs and the employment of older people were issues affecting the local economy of their respective constituencies. More than half (53 per cent) of the respondents said that this was indeed the case, roughly in line with the response rate from MPs.

A majority (64 per cent) had held discussions with local bodies about the impact of demographic change, a slightly higher percentage than MPs (56 per cent). The few who commented said their discussions had centred on housing, health and social care provision rather than on employment.

While 55 per cent of MSPs thought the issues of demographic change were well understood among businesses, unions and those involved in the labour market in their constituencies, a large majority (82 per cent) believed that there was nevertheless a need for such issues to be more broadly understood in their constituencies in order to promote action around the employment of older people and business success.

Interestingly, there seem to be generally lower levels of concern and awareness among MSPs than MPs, despite the greater demographic challenges and perhaps some cultural barriers to extending working life in Scotland. More than half of MSPs responding to the survey (compared with only a third of MPs) believed that the issues to do with demographic change and their impact on the workforce were well understood by businesses, unions and others involved in the labour market. Additionally, they appeared to be less aware than MPs of the difficulties faced by older employees and jobseekers.

Finally, MSPs appear to value the idea of a briefing being provided by TAEN and we will seek to address this need in the near future.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire to MSPs on Age and Employment Issues

1. Have constituents raised with you any concerns relating to direct or indirect age discrimination?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

2. Have you had any discussions with employers in your constituency about issues of age discrimination?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

3. Are you aware of particular issues arising for older people in your constituency who would *like* to work but are not able to secure suitable employment?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

4. From your knowledge of your constituency, are population ageing, skills needs and the employment of older people, issues that are *already* affecting the local economy?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

5. Have you had discussions with local councils, development agencies or other bodies on issues around demographic change and its economic and social implications?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

6. Do you think issues around demographic change and the need to engage older people in the workforce are well understood among businesses, unions and those involved in the labour market in your constituency?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

7. Do you see a need in your constituency for training and information to promote understanding and action around the employment of older people, demographic change and business success?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

8. Would you appreciate TAEN preparing guidance for MPs on the issues raised in this survey – the implications of demographic change on employment of older people and how labour markets might be made to work for older populations?

Yes	
No	
Comment	

Name Date

Constituency

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it to:

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TAEN's aim is to help create an effective labour market which works for people in mid and later life, for employers and for the economy.

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