



Age Summit at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 4th – 5th December 2007

Report of an Ideas-Building Event

The purpose of this event was to explore what needs to be done to ensure that **mainstream** advice, guidance, skills development and employment services meet the needs of people aged 40 years or over. In the South East, people aged between 40 and 70 years are beginning to be described as 'Tomorrow's Workforce'. We would like to express our thanks to Prime Advantage, an Equal Project funded through Medway Council and the European Social Fund for commissioning and funding this event.

Our discussions were informed by approaches that have proven successful, many of which have been resourced through discretionary funding, such as European Social Funding. The challenge we wanted to tackle was to identify ways in which to draw on the experience of such projects and introduce them to mainstream services without increasing the cost of such services.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions may have endorsed *all* of the ideas included. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

National influence; regional and sub-regional action

Recognising that the characteristics, aspirations and needs of older workers are as varied as any other cohort of the population, there was a strong consensus that "*we need a **universal** careers guidance, employment and skills system that is sufficiently flexible and robust to meet the needs of older people.*"

We felt that the timing for getting this message across is very opportune. It resonates with:

- the emergence of new thinking within Government Departments and key Agencies about the value of an integrated approach to employment and skills acquisition;
- the development of a new adult 'advancement service' to advise and guide adults on training and employment choices and options;
- plans for growing Train to Gain and developing the design and take up of Skills Accounts.

There is also a very strong economic case for providing the infrastructure needed for older people to extend their working lives as long as they wish. Both the demographic changes predicted over the next 12 years and the increasing skill shortages highlight just how important it will be to support those who want to continue working to do so.

We felt that it will be important to influence how the above and other policies are put into practice to ensure that they are attractive to and meet the needs of older workers. This report outlines:

- key areas that will make a major difference in increasing the take up by older people of mainstream services for employment and skills development,
- the actions that we recommend should be taken forward nationally to raise the profile and importance of older workers, and
- actions that might be taken regionally and sub-regionally to demonstrate how mainstream services can be shaped in ways to increase their take up by older workers significantly.

1. Shaping the emerging Adult Advancement Careers Service

Our starting point in describing the new service will be familiar and essential for all ages. We felt that all organisations within the service need to *"work to common professional standards"* and *"use a common set of diagnostic tools"*. Any adult guidance system for **all** people aged over 19 years requires a comprehensive (and continuously updated) overview of the options and choices open to individuals.

We felt that individuals using the service need to be shielded from its complexity **without** limiting the options and choices open to them. This means that those working directly under the umbrella of the service, as well as organisations working with the service, will have to align their services more effectively than has often happened in the past.

From an individual's point of view it was felt that the service needs to be strongly branded so that recognition of and trust in the service can be quickly developed. That said, it will be important that the service *"is not closely associated with a specific group of people"*, say those who are workless, or professionals looking for career change, to ensure that it is seen *"as relevant for everyone at particular stages in their lives."* The Citizens Advice Bureau was used as an example of a well known service for all.

It was **not** suggested that the Adult Advancement Service should mirror the Citizens Advice Bureau, but that it should mirror the approach of a single *"widely recognised gateway to a range of services."*

While the *"portal or gateway"* of the service needs to be widely recognised and its purpose understood, the *"services on offer need to be tailored to meet the needs of each individual"*. This is essential because the service needs to respond not only to what a person wants to do, but also the reasons why someone has the desire for change or a specific goal in mind.¹ *"Understanding and 'unpacking' individuals' motivations for change is essential for effective advice and guidance."*

The service also needs to offer individuals' an advocate or mentor to help guide them through what may be a series of services and different types of support to help them meet personal goals. Not all will need this support, and the type of support required will vary greatly. Some may just need a 'route map', while others may require fairly intensive support and coaching.

It was felt that life coaching should be an option open to all individuals who require it. Of course, life coaching (delivered under different titles) is open to groups of workless people who embark on some Government-funded

¹ For further details on this and related points, please turn to pages 3 – 4 of Reducing Skills Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers, *Report of an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007* appended to this latest report

programmes. However, many don't have access to this type of support, or see it as a service for " *the upwardly mobile educated middle classes*" rather than themselves.

The idea put forward was that individuals should be encouraged to work with an approved life coach if they feel it would help them clarify their goals and increase confidence and motivation. Funding for a limited number of sessions per individual could be made available through the public purse (for example, as part of the design of Skills Accounts or Health Checks), and the outcomes evaluated to see whether this investment increases individuals' success in making and following through employment and training choices.

From an internal point of view, we agreed that the infrastructure for the Adult Advancement Careers Service should have its foundations in the alignment of existing resources, before new services are developed. By resources we meant the wide range of services offered in the voluntary and private, as well as the public sectors.

There was a strong view that there should **not** be an attempt to map all organisations that might:

- refer to an adult advancement service,
- offer careers and employment advice and guidance
- offer related advice, guidance and support (for example: in health, finance, etc.)
- provide training opportunities
- provide employment opportunities

Past attempts to try and capture the activities of such a diverse and well populated range of organisations have often not been successful. Instead, an approach could be to publicise the Service's intent to align wherever possible, the benefits to organisations of contributing to such an approach, and the process to be adopted. This would not achieve a complete picture, but could be a more effective way of kick-starting the process. The idea would then be to grow the aligned services over time.

The process of alignment should include the following benefits for organisations:

- effective strategic and operational communications strategies
- a regular (say, 6 monthly) bulletin outline of all relevant publicly funded programmes, available nationally, regionally and sub-regionally, with details of eligibility requirements for each programme

This last point raises the issue of how the framework for a new Adult Advancement Careers Service should be designed. It was felt strongly that a national framework should outline the non-negotiable elements that the service must include. At regional level the framework needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable networks of aligned organisations to be fully responsive to local conditions.

It could be argued, therefore, that the primary responsibility for the communication strategies and bulletin updates on programmes and new initiatives should lie at regional level.

Suggested actions

The following ideas were put forward to influence thinking nationally through the promotion and demonstration

(regionally and sub-regionally²) of specific ideas.

- Input into the design of a health check to include key areas in an individual's life (pages 3 -4 Reducing Skills Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers, *Report of an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007* appended to this report)

Inform national leads on the development of the Adult Advancement Careers Service of plans to explore this approach.

- Regionally and sub-regionally align services using the idea of the communication strategies and bulletin outlined as a motivator.
- Regionally or sub-regionally develop the option of life coaching sessions, as part of a portfolio of services. This could be linked with Health Checks, Train to Gain and/or Skills Accounts. At the same time, inform thinking of the national leads on the development of both the Adult Advancement Careers Service and Skills Accounts.
- Explore how the Department of Health's development of Individual Budgets could inform the design and operation of Skills Accounts.

2. Reducing worklessness through an integrated employment and skills approach

It is widely known that it is much harder to get someone who has been out of work for several months back into employment than to help them job change while still in employment. We now have a new national tool to help provide training for employees³. In addition, there are a number of regional and sub-regional sources of funding that could be packaged together (where appropriate with Train to Gain) to develop a strategy that increases the retention of older workers within the workforce.

At the same time, the two key Departments (Department for Work & Pensions and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) with their respective agencies and, in a growing number of instances, Regional Development Agencies are working together to develop integrated models for employment and training. These initiatives recognise that much more can be gained by both workless and employed people if planners, funders and providers "*stitch together*" their programmes and support interventions rather than "*target them in silos*".

The thinking behind the models that are being developed is predicated on the view people often need skills development not only to move into work, but also to stay in work, change jobs and/or careers and climb career ladders. Rather than provide **unrelated** programmes and interventions, the aim is to create an infrastructure that encourages and enables individuals to access employment and training when they need it to stay and progress in work.

We explored how this thinking might be applied to making the most of the employment opportunities that are in the process of being created in the sub-region of the Thames Gateway (which overlaps three regions: London, East and the South East), as a working example of where there is "*a significant economic imperative to retain and retrain at least 100,000 existing workers, as well as ensure that workless people move into employment*". It is

² We agreed that any regional or sub-regional test bedding of the ideas proposed should enhance existing or planned mainstream programmes and initiatives, and be of sufficient size (50 – 100K individuals) to evaluate their potential to be adopted nationally.

³ Scope and eligibility for Train to Gain will expand significantly in the next 3 years, including opportunities for those working in the voluntary sector and self-employed people. For further information please refer to Train to Gain: A Plan for Growth and the Train to Gain website at www.traintogain.gov.uk

important that those living and working in the area are able to take advantage of the new employment opportunities and avoid de-stabilising communities through an influx of workers into the area.

A significant number of the people who *could* fill the upcoming vacancies (after training or retraining) fall into the 40+ age bracket. One of the key challenges is persuading them this is the case. Often low-skilled or workless people don't see or have any confidence in their own potential.

Suggested actions

These ideas were put forward as a way of stimulating interest in new employment opportunities amongst employed and workless people over the age of 40 years in areas, such as the Thames Gateway, where there is an economic imperative to skill and retrain those in employment as well as workless people.

- Launch a marketing campaign promoting upcoming employment opportunities to **all** local residents and workers in the sub-region, but targeted on *"older people through choice of places and types of advertising, role models, etc."*

On a national scale, it was suggested that role models could be included in popular television soaps to break down stereotypes about older people, work and training.

- Carry out in-depth research with different groups of older people living and working in the sub-region to *"identify motivators and approaches that would persuade"* them to train or retrain to stay in work.
- Tailor, fund and put in place an integrated employment and skills model that meets the needs of the sub-region by providing *"relevant and connected support for both workless and employed people"* that matches employers' needs.

3. Changing employers' attitudes and addressing their fears

Realising the full potential of older people not only requires their self-belief and (often) skills development but also the chance to prove what they can do. One barrier they face is that many employers are reluctant to employ older workers. Reasons for their reluctance vary but are frequently based on unsubstantiated fears around older peoples' health, lack of motivation and ability to learn new skills, unwillingness to be managed by younger people, etc.

Two ideas were put forward to help address employers' fears and, by doing, so, change attitudes:

- (i) Encourage self-employment as an option for both older workers and employers to consider. This form of employment could help to reduce significantly *"feelings of risk"* on the part of employers, and *"increase individuals' scope to create portfolios of work and control over the amount of work they take on."*

There was a strong view that, in addition to support in understanding and working as self-employed, those interested in this option would *"also benefit from being able to develop ICT skills."*

- (ii) Introduce the concept of job rotation. This idea has been successfully piloted in Brighton & Hove⁴. In outline, the way in which this approach works is that an independent agency takes responsibility for the employment and training of groups of workers in a particular sector. A group of employers in the sector

⁴ For further details on this approach and Employer Charters contact Claire Mitchell, Engage Employer Engagement Consultant, 01273 291683, 07812 177427, www.equalbrightonandhove.org/engage

sign up to a Charter that agrees to the rotation of employees to enable training to take place. The agency provides 'back filling' to minimise disruption to businesses.

As with the idea of self-employment, this approach removes a significant part of the risk employers feel they take when directly employing people.

Suggested actions

- There was interest in exploring further both of the ideas outlined above in the South East region. The idea of promoting self-employment could be positioned as a multi-agency project involving Business Links with other key stakeholders.
- There was also interest in the idea of developing "sector specific initiatives" delivered through sub-regional groupings of employers and intermediaries. The ideas that emerged from this event could be used to stimulate discussion and ideas within these groupings to produce a range of different approaches that meet the needs of particular groups of employers and older workers.

4. Balance of evidence and action

As always when breaking new ground, we were conscious that we were lacking what we felt was a robust evidence base to support our arguments and ideas. This is not say there isn't evidence available, but it doesn't always "*answer the questions we're asking.*"

There was a strong view that we need to review the data that is collected nationally and regionally and identify whether it provides us with the data to answer the questions we want to ask in respect to the economic, benefits of extending people's working lives. This we felt should include the health and social costs of older people **not** working.

It was agreed that the starting point is to articulate with greater clarity what we want to achieve and why. This will determine the data that needs to be gathered. For example, it was pointed out that we may not wish to "*define work by income.*" There is an irrefutable economic case (as part of a wider economic picture) of the value of voluntary work.

Once the baseline data has been gathered, including the prediction of skill shortage areas, localities and numbers of employment opportunities, demographic changes, etc. it was proposed that regions should take the lead in translating this data into action that should be taken locally and regionally. Outcomes should be agreed nationally by the lead Government Departments. However, regions and local areas will require flexibility so that can be responsive to both employers and individuals in developing and putting into place strategies to achieve the desired outcomes.

One comment made during this discussion resonated with us all: "*sharpening up and strengthening the evidence base should not replace action!*". We all recognised that not taking actions because of lack of data was one of the oldest delaying tactics in the book.

This is not to say that we should **just** trust our instincts, experience and expertise. But neither should we turn our back on what we know and believe because of a lack of data. If we do allow an absence of data to become a blockage then we could find ourselves – or our successors – with much tougher issues to solve than we face at the moment!

Suggested actions

- The national Data Development Group should be informed about the data needed to provide a stronger evidence base for those creating more inclusive employment and skills development infrastructures to retain older people in work (including voluntary work).

The idea will be for the Data Development Group to advise Ministers and the Office of National Statistics of the data needed to support regions in becoming more responsive in developing strategies to support the growth of the economy through employing and upskilling older people.

KH, Open Agenda 14.01.08

Participants

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Appendix

Report of related event held in March 2007



Reducing Skills Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers

Report of an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007

The focus for this event was to explore the need and scope for establishing a national infrastructure to assist older workers into job vacancies that are hard to fill due to skill shortages. Such an infrastructure could provide one solution to the national skills challenge set out in the Leitch Review.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions may have endorsed *all* of the ideas included. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

We are grateful to Tick Tock, a European Union funded Equal Project, supported by the Learning & Skills Council, South East for sponsoring this event and to the staff at Careers Management Kent & Medway for their support in its development.

Universal or narrow?

At the outset of our discussions we quickly came to the view that *"there is no sense in setting up separate services for older workers"* to meet skill shortages. These services should sit within a wider universal infrastructure *"facing employers on the one side and individuals on the other, with the **right** connective tissue in between."* The purpose of this infrastructure is to support businesses and individuals in different ways so that they flourish.

The type of support or intervention will vary according to the particular goal that a business or individual wants to achieve, and what they need to do to achieve it. Alternatively, support can be needed to refocus energies if a goal is unattainable or found to be not what clients' really want.

More than anything else, we felt that this dual-facing system is *"about encouraging creative solutions"*: stimulating *"employers' imagination"* about how to resolve issues, and helping individuals, who want or need to change their work, not to let any preconceptions (about jobs or their skills and potential) limit their options.

As far as older people are concerned, we felt that a separate, narrow range of services targeted at people within a particular age group would neither be helpful nor well received. The circumstances, different aspirations and different needs of people over 45 years will be as varied as those of the adult population as a whole.

We agreed that it is the **stage** a person has reached in their life that can be a trigger point for change, not their age. There are points throughout peoples' lives when they welcome confidential and independent information, advice and guidance on work, life and health options. What we felt is needed is to ensure that all age services are as *"visible and joined up as possible"* on the one hand, while dispelling preconceptions about age on the other.

Build on and build in

There was a consensus that the infrastructure should be built upon existing structures and roles, wherever possible. The gap, of course, is a new adult careers guidance service, as recommended in the Leitch Review.⁵

⁵ A key recommendation within the Review is to establish a new universal adult career service providing labour focused careers advice for all adults (para 8.29, Leitch Review of Skills)

However, in line with the Review we agreed that the way forward was to build on existing structures rather than create new ones.

But by building on we did not necessarily mean holding onto existing ways of working. Indeed, there was a strong view that working practices should only continue if they are proven to be working well. Again, endorsing the Leitch Review, three design features were put forward as critical to success.

- **Flexible** A universal system does not mean a nationally imposed organisational infrastructure. Building on the starting point of what is working well, *"the system should allow for regional interpretation."* This means that the same organisation would not necessarily deliver the same services across the country. So while there is a country-wide offer, the organisations delivering services in different regions should be those that *"stakeholders feel most confident can deliver."*
- **Responsive** As a given, the system needs to be responsive to employers and individuals, whether in work or unemployed. To some degree, this should determine its role and measures of success. Success cannot be captured through 'predicted outcomes': so many into jobs, so many retained in employment, specific changes to employers' recruitment and retention policies. These outcomes are the responsibility of organisations delivering particular types of support that employers and individuals want.

The success of a universal system is that, on the one hand, it helps individuals and employers articulate the issues they are grappling with, and then advocates where they can find help. On the other hand, the system needs to *"ensure that publicly funded support is fit for purpose:"* it is the type of advice, guidance and training which employers and individuals want. Fulfilling this dual role is what will make the system responsive, and its success should be measured against how effectively it responds and influences other agencies to respond to demand.

- **Connected** The importance of the connectivity of the system at strategic and operational level cannot be overstated. A system which aims to match the needs and aspirations of two disparate groups, employers and individuals (those wanting to work, progress or change career) has to *"have first class intelligence about both groups if it is going to meet expectations"* successfully.

In addition, it needs to be well connected to the range of mainstream Government funded interventions designed to help specific groups of employers and individuals, as well as the services, including training, available through the services of voluntary and community organisations and the private sector.

Employer facing - *KEY MESSAGES*

- *Stimulate employers' imagination about possible solutions*
- *Think about the hook that will capture employers' interest with regard to recruitment and retention strategies*
- *Ensure that those advising employers have firsthand experience and knowledge of local information, advice, guidance and training services*

In many ways we felt that employer facing information, advice, guidance and training services are already well-established and respected. In parts of the country, Business Link is a familiar and trusted brand amongst

employers. That said, there was a strong view that the remit of some employer facing organisations should be reviewed so that there is more emphasis on their role *"in stimulating employers' imagination"* with regard to meeting their skill shortages, and wider recruitment and retention policies. At the same time, we felt that the recently established Sector Skills Councils could play a key role in challenging employers' preconceptions and encouraging them to consider recruitment and workforce development strategies that are new to them.

Many felt that often employers do not consider new solutions: they opt for what has worked in the past. However, given changes in demographics, technology and work patterns the old solutions simply do not work. This is when advice about different approaches, such as upskilling existing workers or introducing more flexible working hours is most likely to hit the mark.

Another 'way in' for employer-facing advice and guidance services is in the wake of new legislation. No employer wants to fall foul of the law. On the back of a rather negative stance: 'what do we **have** to do?' ideas about recruitment and retention strategies could be presented as positive solutions and, given that *"employers will need to do something are more likely to be of interest and taken up"*.

The other 'missing link' that many business facing organisations have is a **first-hand** understanding of local training and placement services that employers can tap into. They may know of them, but not in detail and not sufficiently to advocate use of a particular service. Yet this is what employers often want: recommendations.

There is a world of difference between 'selling' someone a service and a recommendation. To be on the safe side and *"to ensure a truly independent service"*, it is often better to opt for more than one recommendation, and outline the differences between each. However, information without the warmth of recommendations is less likely to be taken up, and can also give the impression that the person giving the information *"doesn't really know about the ins and outs of what they're suggesting"* and whether it is really likely to be what an employer is seeking.

Individual facing - *KEY MESSAGES*

- *One service for all adults*
- *Confidential, and designed to empower the individual and enable them to make informed choices*
- *Delivered through a range of settings, including voluntary and community centres by advisers who understand and reflect the age and experience of individuals*
- *Linked with a range of services and training opportunities funded by the State, individual or both*

What we felt is needed is an adult guidance service that offers *"Skills Health Checks"* that are free of charge to the individual. Skills Health Checks would be available at times and in ways that suit individuals throughout their working lives.

The Skills Health Check would comprise a diagnosis of *"where people are in their lives and what this means as regards the career options"* open to them. The diagnosis would go much further than simply an assessment of skills and prior learning. It would cover all the key areas in a person's life:

- ➔ Health
- ➔ Personal finance

- Family
- Skills and training
- Work history
- Attitude to work as part of life
- Aspirations

The rationale behind this is that "*work is only one component in people's lives*", albeit a very important one.

There are other components that are equally and sometimes more important, and which have a strong influence on the work the people want, are prepared, or need to do. Any assessment of skills, training needs or work options has to be placed within the context of what else is happening in a person's life for the diagnosis and subsequent advice and guidance to be meaningful.

Naturally, the diagnosis would need to be conducted in a sensitive and confidential way. The adviser carrying it out would **not** be an expert in **all** the areas outlined above, but "*know someone or an organisation that is.*"

The idea would be that expert advice would then be accessed where relevant. Once individuals' have received the advice they need to make an informed decision, they could then talk through with their adviser the employment options open to them. This could include:

- Retraining and changing career (especially where there are skill shortages)
- Remaining with an employer, but negotiating employment terms and conditions that they feel more comfortable with
- Self-employment
- Portfolio working
- Volunteering

Indeed, any type of employment that meets their health and income needs, and provides them with the life-work balance they are seeking.

We felt that this type of service would be valued by people of all ages, especially when experiencing a major change in their lives, such as moving, having children, health problems, or just seeking a new direction. It was envisaged that people would use the service several times during the course of their lives. We also envisaged that services would be delivered through different approaches such as, for example, e-guidance as in the CareerChangeWebsite developed through the Tick Tock project located at www.careerchangecentre.org.uk

Some of the in-depth services people may be referred to following diagnosis would be paid for by the State: for example, health checks and financial advice. Other services they would need to pay for themselves. This could include life coaching or, perhaps, training that the State does not view as a priority and therefore does not fund fully.

One idea that was put forward to support this approach is for all individuals to be encouraged to agree that a nominal sum, say £1.00 a week, would be taken from their pay. This money would be paid into a portable personal fund and, importantly, would be **their** money to spend as they wish.

However, the purpose of the money would be *"to buy, when needed, different types of professional support and training."* Working on the basis that there will be three or four times when an individual may wish to use specific services say every 5 years or so, they would have around £250 to invest in themselves each time. Some sort of incentive, such as tax breaks on the purchase of specific services or training could make this idea even more attractive.

The connective tissue

We felt that as the model stands, there could be a real risk of it naturally dividing into two parts: one facing employers and the other individuals, and never the twain meet. What we felt needed to be put in place was connective tissue in the form of *"a brokerage between employers and the employment pool."*

It was envisaged that the brokers *"will be evangelistic."* They will need to enthuse to their colleagues working with individuals and employers about the value of reviewing and challenging preconceptions *"what being an older worker, younger worker, working mum means."* and considering new options. While these preconceptions remain, employers may well be missing the solution to plugging skill shortages or just ensuring their businesses thrive and individuals may be limiting their choices and lowering their horizons unnecessarily.

At the same time brokers would need to ensure those looking for jobs are aware of what employment opportunities exist. In today's world when advertising tells us we can have everything we want, grounding people in reality is a sensitive and sometimes difficult job. Again, the task has an element of evangelism within it. How else *"do you persuade manual male workers seeking employment to consider working in call centres?"* It should not be their only option, but surely as the nature of work changes we need to ensure that they consider how they might best earn an income and consider **all** the options.

Just how this brokerage role works as the connective tissue within an employer/individual facing model needs further detailed exploration. Two options were suggested.

The first would be a dedicated team working with both teams of advisers to bring them together to share information, and take on a more challenging and creative role with their clients – encouraging them to leave behind their preconceptions about who is best suited to fill vacancies and the scope for workforce development.

The second approach would be to bring advisers working with employers and individuals together for training, information sharing and, perhaps, 'job swapping' as a way of widening their perspectives and developing new ways of working with both each other and their clients.

It was suggested that one way of signalling support for a more connected and creative approach from the top would be the publication of a new Performance Service Agreement (PSA) target jointly owned by a number of Government Departments such as, Education & Skills, Work & Pensions and Trade & Industry. This is an idea that has been explored a number of times in recent years. Perhaps the announcement of the Spending Review later this year will help move us in this direction.

Professionalism

What will be demanded of advisers working with individuals will *"be more than careers guidance."* As one person pointed out, *"their role is more holistic, similar in ways to the role of Citizen Advice Bureau advisers."* We felt that

from the outset that there should be professional accreditation and recognition of the role⁶. There is also a strong case for developing some sort of accreditation for business advisers, perhaps focused on recruitment and retention, to encourage them to think creatively about solutions that celebrate diversity in the workforce.

There was strong support for the idea of 'showcasing the profession' and the service so that both become visible and known, in much the same way as the Connexions Service is known today. As someone said, *"Next Steps is a well kept secret!"*

The purpose of showcasing is not only about creating a new recognisable service that becomes part of our culture in a similar way to gyms, life coaching and, less recently, the Citizens Advice Bureaux. It is also about raising awareness about career opportunities within this new service. 10 years ago becoming a fitness instructor was not a mainstream career option. 5 years ago the idea of earning a living as a life coach was not considered as a possibility by most, certainly not male manual workers! This is why many felt strongly that we need to encourage individuals to consider joining this new profession, by showcasing career options and progression possibilities.

Endnote

By the end of the event it felt that we had moved a considerable distance in sharpening up a model that, amongst other outputs, would help to reduce skill shortages through the effective guidance and training of older workers. Some shifted radically in their thinking: they moved from favouring a discrete service for older workers (45 years plus) to supporting strongly the idea of a 'universal' service for all adults.

The key to success we saw as bringing together the two sides of the equation: those looking for work or to change jobs with employers needing to fill skills gaps through recruitment or workforce development. This is not to suggest forcing a fit between the two. The challenge is two fold:

First, encouraging advisers to consider their clients' needs – be they employers or individuals – *"creatively and from different viewpoints."* Second, stimulating advisers to use a blend of challenge and creativity in the way they work with clients. The challenge is about exploding preconceptions. The creativity is in getting clients to consider new and, sometimes, unexpected solutions.

So what are the next steps? Participants from the South East Region felt that the event had helped sharpen up elements in a new approach that they are keen to test out in the region in the coming months.

This is a really exciting development that could help us to take a significant step forward in building capacity from funding projects that have developed excellent practice, funded through ESF and other discretionary funding, to a model that can reach more people and employers. This test bed approach will build on what is proven to work well. It will aim to build capacity through influencing established services and plugging gaps in infrastructure.

At the same time, we were conscious that even test bedding across a region is not enough to change attitudes and explode preconceptions at the speed with which this needs to happen to keep the economy buoyant and meet the demands of the country's aging workforce.

⁶ The University of Kent has developed a qualification accredited by the Open College Network that could be piloted as an initial standard for professional advisers.

We felt that what we also need is to encourage a stronger and more visible cross Ministerial support, and buy in from the highest level of the relevant Government Departments and Agencies. One way in which it was suggested that they can demonstrate this support in a matter of months would be through the cross-Department backing of a national media campaign to explode preconceptions about age. Just think of the impact that could have.

What we all felt is important is that we don't allow the issue of age and work to remain on the back burner. It needs to be tackled by recognising that past patterns of employment and retirement no longer apply, and recognising that people's aspirations and potential don't change when they reach a certain age! This challenge we felt needs to be taken up by champions from all walks of life and given wide media coverage. And while we have those who are 'talking the talk' and winning people round, we also felt it important to be demonstrating how we can maximise potential and meet skill shortages in practice through test bedding.

With this two pronged strategy there was a shared confidence that change can be brought about. The challenge we now face is to make it happen!

Krycia Hudek, Open Agenda, 20th March 2007

Participants

Jennie Van Den Berg	Deputy Director of Extending Working Life Division, Department of Work & Pensions
Jon Gamble	Director for Adult and Life Long Learning, Learning and Skills Council
Peter Stansbie	Director of Organisational Development, Skills for Health
Sam Mercer	Employers Forum on Age
Greg Dyche	Deputy Director, Department for Education and Skills
Cathy Hughes	Head of Partnerships, Jobcentre Plus
Keith Frost	The Age and Employment Network
David Winning	Director of Public Affairs, Working Links
Stephen McNair	Director, Centre for Research on the Older Workforce, NIACE
Anne Fairweather	External Relations Manager, Recruitment and Employment Confederation
Imogen Radford	Research Officer, Public and Commercial Services Union
Peter Marsh	Director of Skills, Learning and Skills Council South East
Allan McColgan	Director of External Relations, Jobcentre Plus South East
Barbara Smith	Head of Learning & Skills -Strategy and Development, South East England Development Agency
Gilly Bartrip	Head of Sector Skills and Adult Learning, South East England Development Agency
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Cathy Hull	Head of Centre, The Centre for Work and Learning, University of Kent
Hazel Allan	IAG Manager Kent & Medway, VT Careers Management
Helen Hume	Director, Thames Gateway, Kent & Medway Learning Partnerships
Marianne Davis	Equal Project Manager, Learning and Skills Council South East
Lesley Reilly	Manager, Next Step, Berkshire
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Krysia Hudek	Director, Open Agenda and Fellow, St George's House