

Research paper

'Third-age' workers caring for adults and older people in England: findings from secondary analysis of the National Minimum Data Set for Social Care

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What is known on this subject

- The expanding area of paid social care offers employment opportunities to diverse age groups.
- With rises in the age of entitlement to state pensions, people may wish to work for longer.
- There is a knowledge gap between delineating and understanding the contribution of older workers in the English care sector.

What this paper adds

- People aged 50–75 years constitute a large proportion of the social care workforce in England.
- Most who remain working at an older age (60–75 years) are direct care workers.
- The voluntary/third sector appears to be more successful in attracting and retaining older social care workers than the private, for-profit sector.

ABSTRACT

Despite recent policies and legislation promoting age-friendly employment in the UK, the effects of age discrimination are still evident in the hiring, retention and career development opportunities of older workers, and reflect wider societal perceptions. As well as the general challenges faced by older people who are seeking to join and stay in work, those who are members of certain groups face additional cultural, socio-economic and other barriers. This article investigates empirical data on the current stock of older workers in the adult social care sector in England, identified through the National Minimum Data Set for Social Care. It follows a previous discussion of the position of younger workers in the care sector presented in this journal.

Using quantitative data analysis of a large workforce sample of the records of over 80 000 workers, we examine the changing profile of three closely related third-age cohorts and investigate the similarities and differences between those working in the care sector aged 60 years or older, and two younger age groups (50–54 and 55–59 years). The analysis shows that workers in the age range 50–75 years constitute nearly 40% of the whole workforce. In particular, the contribution of the oldest third-age group, aged 60–75 years, is substantial, at around 12% of the total. The implications of this diversity are explored.

Keywords: labour participation, quantitative analysis, social care, third-age workers

Introduction

Recognition of the significance of older people in employment has gained considerable momentum during the past few decades. Despite unmistakable evidence of population ageing, and related policy and research, consideration of its implications for the workforce and employment in later age is minuscule by comparison with the attention given to the consequences of this process for long-term care needs (Watson *et al*, 2003). However, the challenges that population ageing brings to workforce dynamics, in terms of not only facilitating the retention of older people who wish to continue in employment but also responding to issues of poor health and the desire to work more flexibly, are both several and multifaceted. In addition to prejudice and stereotyping, a number of socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors may negatively influence the participation of older people in employment, while personal choices also play a part. Moreover, the definition of what constitutes old age varies considerably according to both sector and individual characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity. For example, in the computer industry, the age of 35 years may be considered 'old' (Clayton, 2007; Platman, 2009). Since the late 1970s, the term 'third age' has been widely used as a way to define older workers in midlife or later, and is used here to refer to the group of workers aged 50 years or over.

Government labour policies in the UK have been explicitly targeted at reducing unemployment among older people (HM Treasury, 2003; Department for Work and Pensions, 2005), and at countering discrimination in employment on the grounds of age. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 (enacted on 1 October 2010 in the Equality Act) make discrimination in employment on the grounds of a person's age unlawful. As a result, workers are protected from age discrimination in recruitment, employment terms and conditions, promotions, transfers, dismissals and vocational training. However, despite recent policies and legislation promoting age-friendly employment, age discrimination is still evident, its effects being experienced through problems with job security, promotion and retention (Adams, 2004; Weller, 2007). In addition to general challenges faced by older people seeking to join and remain in work, members of some groups face additional cultural, socio-economic and other barriers. Campbell (1999) showed that, between 1979 and late 1997, male employment among those aged 55–65 years had fallen sharply, particularly among men with the lowest or no educational qualifications. However, upward employment trends have been observed among older men during the last decade (Hotopp, 2005).

From the UK, Brooke and Taylor (2005) argue that policies with broader remits are needed to enable older people to participate in the workforce. They suggest that policies directed at older workers alone might ignore other age-group dynamics within workplaces. It is important to understand specific workforce inter-age dynamics and perceptions as well as the skills that different age groups may bring to the workplace.

There is also a distinction between employing and hiring older workers. Market-based rationales can explain why employers tend to hire younger rather than older workers. Two factors may come into play, namely the perceived importance of up-to-date qualifications and training, and an emphasis on productivity. For example, Adams (2004) shows that, in the USA, laws forbidding age discrimination, which have reduced exit through early retirement and increased the length of employment, have had scant influence on the probability of older workers being hired. In the UK context, Daniel and Heywood (2007) suggest that, in addition to targeting older workers, it is important to identify the characteristics of employers likely to employ older workers, so that these may be more widely propagated.

As with all other classifications, older workers are not a homogenous group, but rather they differ in a number of characteristics. In particular, education, socio-economic status, gender and ethnic background are important factors which interact with age and employability. For example, in the UK, older black and minority ethnic (BME) workers, as well as older female workers generally, are reported to face double jeopardy in employment as they more often encounter prejudicial attitudes from employers (Watson *et al*, 2003; Moore, 2009).

Moreover, research from around the world and across a range of occupational groups has identified a negative correlation between salary and advancing age (see, for example, Aubert *et al*, 2006). This suggests that skills may lose their validity over time, particularly with the increasing sophistication of information technology. In the care sector, health and risk issues, and possibly greater demand by commissioners and regulators for specific qualifications, may constitute barriers by directly or indirectly excluding older workers from the sector or from particular job roles. However, the gendered nature of the work may be more appealing to older women than to older men (Baker, 2009).

In the care sector, some attention has recently been given to the role of older workers in meeting the increased demands for this work (Manthorpe and Moriarty, 2008). In the USA, Hwalek *et al* (2008) investigated problems related to employing older workers (aged 55 years or above) in frontline jobs in the care sector, from the perspectives of both employers and employees. They found that older workers

remain interested in career development and learning new skills. The researchers recommended further investment in training low-income older people to enable them to participate in the long-term care workforce. However, they detected inherent as well as genuine deterrents in hiring older people, as the most prevalent barriers were employers' perception of the inability of older workers to use technology, and a perceived higher cost associated with hiring this group of workers.

The aim of this article is to investigate the empirical data on current older workers in the adult social care sector in England, identified through the National Minimum Data Set for Social Care (NMDS-SC). The purpose is to examine the changing profile among three closely related age groups and investigate the similarities and differences between those who continue to work in the care sector after reaching the age of 60 years, which is significant as being the current age at which, until very recently, women could draw their state retirement pension in the UK.

Design and methods

The NMDS-SC is the first attempt to gather standardised workforce information for the English social care sector at national level. It has been developed and is run and supported by the sector skills organisation, Skills for Care, with government funding, and aims to gather a minimum set of information about services and staff across all service user groups and sectors within the social care sector in England. The NMDS-SC was launched in October 2005, and the online version for completion by employers was set up in July 2007. Since then there has been a large increase in the number of employers completing the data set (Skills for Care, 2009).

Two data sets are collected from employers. The first provides information on the establishment and service(s) offered, as well as the total number of staff working in different job roles. The second data set is also completed by employers and collects information about individual staff members. The current analysis uses a sample of the NMDS-SC December 2009 release, including 84 041 unique records of workers aged between 16 and 75 years who work in the adult social care sector in England. If a worker has two jobs in social care, information on one of these jobs is used. In addition, the focus of this article is on care work with adults, so we have excluded all workers in children's services, but retained those working in the NHS and other settings. A number of data considerations relate to both the coverage and progressive nature of the NMDS-SC, and therefore the current data do not represent a census of all workers in the English care

sector. For example, there is more information from independent than from local authority employers.

Definitions of 'older workers' or 'mature workers' are elastic, and different researchers use different age groupings. However, there is some consensus about regarding workers aged 50 years or over as being in the 'third age.' In the analysis reported here, the aim is to focus on a particular subgroup of the 'third-age' cohort, namely those aged 60–75 years, in order to compare their characteristics and profiles with two younger subgroups, namely those aged 50–54 and 55–59 years. The purpose is to examine the changing profiles among these three closely related groups, and to investigate the similarities and differences between those who continue to work in the care sector after reaching the age of 60 years and those in the younger age groups. It follows a previous discussion of the position of younger workers in the care sector presented in this journal (Hussein and Manthorpe, 2010). Such comparisons are particularly useful given suggestions in the literature that the hiring of older people remains relatively uncommon (Daniel and Heywood, 2007). The analysis uses anonymised records of 11 923 workers aged 50–54 years, 10 871 workers aged 55–59 years, and 10 267 workers aged 60–75 years. These groups represent 14.2%, 12.9% and 12.2%, respectively, of the total adult care workforce aged 16–75 years.

Results

Where do 'third-age' care workers work?

In England, social care for adults is formally provided by the private (for-profit), local government (local authorities) and not-for-profit (voluntary/third) sectors. Although the voluntary/third sector is the smallest of these, the literature reveals the attraction of this sector for both very young and older workers. In the English care sector, the role of this sector remains important in overall care provision, with long-established charities providing significant support to different groups (HM Treasury, 2002; House of Commons, 2006), including social care provision in the form of care homes and day care services, which employ care staff at all levels.

In the local authority sector, the proportion of older workers gradually declines as workers approach the third age (from 16% of the 50–54 years age group to 13% of the 60–75 years age group). However, the picture is significantly different in the voluntary/third sector, which contains the highest proportion of workers aged 60–75 years, at 14%. Here there is a declining trend among the 50–54 and 55–59 years age groups, but then a steep increase in the oldest group, reflecting

the possible attraction of this sector for older workers, as identified in the literature. Although the data here provide information on paid workers within the voluntary/third sector, and not on volunteers, the sector's workforce dynamics and intrinsic benefits may appeal to wider groups of people, including older workers aged 60–75 years.

If we examine the variations among the three groups that constitute 'third-age' workers, Table 1 shows that the distribution of older workers aged 60–75 years is interestingly similar to that of the youngest third-age group (aged 50–54 years), and both are considerably different from the middle group, aged 55–59 years. The data show that the proportion of workers in the oldest and youngest age tiers working in the local authorities sector is almost identical, except that the proportion of those workers in the voluntary/third sector is highest for the 60–75 years age group, followed by the 50–54 years age group.

The literature reflects some possible linkages between establishment size and the extent to which older people are accepted or retained as workers. For example, a large-scale survey of managers and directors of large firms in the UK (with 500 or more employees) by Taylor and Walker (1998) revealed that employers often perceived older workers as incapable of heavy physical activities, difficult to train, and possibly resentful about taking orders from younger people. In a more recent but smaller study, Brooke and Taylor (2005) found that in both Australia and the UK, age stereotyping is still prevalent in large firms, with a tendency among employers to prefer younger workers for skills development and to offer redundancy packages to older workers. They also suggested that small to medium-sized companies may appreciate the contribution of older workers, particularly if they have been with the same company for some time, in preserving organisational knowledge. However, there is very limited research exploring whether these perceptions differ by establishment size or sector, and whether smaller firms may allow a more personal approach, thus facilitating the retention of workers with different characteristics, including older workers.

However, the current analysis points to a greater prevalence of all 'third-age' workers among large adult social care providers, which may be linked to tighter regulations in the sector requiring staff to possess certain qualifications (Gospel, 2010), and positive human resources practices, as well as greater opportunities for job moves or task adaptation in larger settings. Yet the gap between the oldest (60–75 years) and younger 'third-age' groups is widest among large and micro (small size) providers, particularly for the 55–59 years age group. This suggests that it is not only large employers that may be more flexible or positive in their approach to older workers. The analysis also

indicates some variations in distance travelled to work by age group, suggesting that workers aged 50 years or over tend to work locally. These findings may relate to ability to drive and to car ownership or availability, which may be lower among certain groups of older workers, such as women.

Work arrangements

Moving towards the 'third age' is usually characterised by a shift from full-time employment to more flexible arrangements (Clayton, 2007). Such shifts in work arrangements are considered by some to signify a specific transition, possibly including changes in job role. For example, it may not be possible to work in one's original profession on a part-time basis, so there may be a need to take up other jobs at an older age, which would not otherwise have been considered. Such concerns are likely to affect both employers and employees. Some employers may take on older workers for occasional or sporadic work, such as temporary or agency work in social care (Corney *et al*, 2010). At the same time, taking up part-time, temporary and flexible work may be the only way of enabling some older workers to participate in employment. The data presented in Table 1 show that, as age increases, the proportion of people working part-time rises from 48% to 58%. However, other work arrangements are common among the oldest group, at 7.6%.

In terms of whether workers are permanent, temporary, or employed through agencies that provide temporary staffing, workers in the oldest age group (aged 60–75 years) are least likely to be in permanent employment. One possible explanation is that as they reach retirement age they may have negotiated mutually satisfying working arrangements with their employers. Similarly, a small but non-negligible proportion (6%) are agency workers, which may denote temporary status, which may also be satisfactory. This percentage is significantly larger than that within the younger two age groups (50–54 and 55–59 years).

What do 'third-age' workers do?

As with all adult care workers in England, the most prevalent job role among third-age workers is that of 'care worker' (Hussein, 2009). However, in contrast to the general picture across all workers, the next most common job is ancillary, non-care-providing work. The latter becomes more common with increasing age, accounting for 12.6% of 60- to 75-year-old workers compared with 7.4% of 50- to 54-year-olds. On the other hand, the proportion of managers declines steadily with increasing age, with the lowest

Table 1 Distribution of workers in different subgroups of third age by different macro and micro characteristics

Macro and micro characteristics of third-age workers	Subgroups of third-age workers (age in years)		
	50–54	55–59	60–75
Sector			
Local authorities	70.8	74.3	70.1
Private (for-profit)	18.7	15.9	17.5
Voluntary/third	8.0	7.6	10.2
Other	2.5	2.2	2.2
Number of workers ^a	11 923	10 871	10 267
Work pattern			
Full-time	46.8	43.7	34.5
Part-time	48.4	52.1	57.9
Neither of these	4.8	4.2	7.6
Number of workers	10 593	9858	9233
Employment status			
Permanent	93.0	94.0	90.0
Temporary	3.3	2.8	3.3
Agency	3.2	2.5	5.7
Other	0.5	0.6	1.0
Number of workers	11 923	10 871	10 267
Main job role			
Care worker	46.2	47	47.4
Ancillary staff not providing care	7.4	9.5	12.6
Community support and outreach work	7.2	6.9	7.2
Administrative or office staff not providing care	5.9	6.1	6.1
Senior care worker	4.6	4.2	3.9
Other non-care-providing job roles	2.2	2.2	3.3
Social worker	4.8	4.2	3.2
Registered nurse	2.5	1.9	2.7
First line manager	4.3	3.7	2.6
Managers and staff in care-related but not care-providing roles	3.2	2.8	2.4
Supervisor	3.2	3.1	2.1
Other job roles	8.5	8.4	6.5
Number of workers	11 922	10 870	10 266
Gender			
Men	13.5	14	16.9
Women	86.5	86	83.1
Number of workers			
Ethnicity			
White	90.8	93.0	94.7
Mixed	1.4	1.0	0.7
Asian or Asian British	2.3	1.9	1.3
Black or black British	4.3	2.8	2.4
Other groups	1.3	1.2	0.9
Number of workers	10 627	9846	9337

Table 1 Continued

Macro and micro characteristics of third-age workers	Subgroups of third-age workers (age in years)		
	50–54	55–59	60–75
Source of recruitment			
Adult care sector: local authority	27.6	31.1	30.1
Adult care sector: private or voluntary sector	21.7	20.7	19.6
Other sector	8.8	9.4	9.6
Internal promotion or transfer or career development	9.6	9.1	7.7
Health sector	5.3	4.6	6.2
Retail sector	4.1	3.5	3.7
Not previously employed	2.4	2.4	2.4
Children's sector: local authority	1.7	1.5	1.9
Returners	1.1	0.9	1.2
Other sources ^b	17.7	16.7	17.6
Number of workers	3381	3146	2967

^a Number of workers is different for each characteristic due to missing values.

^b The majority of other sources are unidentified by employers but include negligible proportions of agency workers, volunteers, workers from abroad, and students undertaking work experience.

proportion of managers being found among staff aged 60–75 years.

These findings reflect some interesting and significant trends in main job role across the age range, demonstrating a clear decline in the prevalence of older workers among managers/supervisors and professionals. In total, 18% of the group aged 50–54 years are managers/supervisors. This figure drops to 11% among the oldest group (60–75 years). A similar decline can be observed in relation to professional jobs, as 16% of the group aged 50–54 years are in professional roles, compared with only 11% of those aged 60–75 years. At the same time, older workers are more likely to be engaged in 'other' jobs (17%).

Within the care sector it appears that direct care workers, such as home care workers or care assistants in residential or nursing homes, remain in their jobs as they move into their third age. However, there is a downward shift in the prevalence of professional and managerial roles as the age of workers increases. This may relate to the profile of workers who retire at the age of 60 years, and whether more professionals prefer or can afford to take retirement rather than continue working in the care sector. There is also the possibility that managerial roles may become less desirable as workers shift to more flexible work arrangements. However, the NMDS-SC does not contain any information on perceptions of which job roles may be acceptable or suitable for older workers, either among employers or among workers.

Several work stability measures in the NMDS-SC data facilitate examination of a number of variables as indicators of employment stability. Two main variables are examined here, namely the length of time for which a worker has been employed in the care sector, and the length of time for which a worker has been with the same employer.

The data indicate a clear incremental mean and median number of years in the care sector as the age of workers increases. This confirms observations in the literature that the majority of older workers in the sector are continuing workers, rather than new workers who have been hired recently. Moreover, it indicates a low likelihood of movement between sectors among older workers in the adult care workforce. The mean time in the sector rises from 12.6 years for those in the 50–54 years age group, to 14.6 years among the 55–59 years age group, and 16.6 years among workers aged 60–75 years. These results, together with findings related to job role, may indicate a process of job or employer shifting within the sector, rather than sector shifting, as workers grow older. In addition to length of time in the care sector, the NMDS-SC provides information on the length of time a worker has spent with the same employer. This analysis shows that, when considering older age groups, both the median and mean time with the current employer increase. The median time with the current employer increases steadily, from 8.1 years among workers aged 50–54 years, to 11.3 years among workers in the 60–75 years age range.

Personal characteristics of 'third-age' workers

Employers who complete the NMDS-SC provide information on a number of the personal characteristics of their workers. The majority (84%) of the workforce in the care sector are female. However, the proportion of men is significantly higher among those holding managerial roles (Hussein, 2009). In terms of the proportion of male and female 'third-age' workers, the proportion of men is higher among those aged 60–75 years, and also shows a shift in age distribution by gender as workers move within the third-age stage (see Table 1).

The lower representation of women among the 60–75 years age group may, of course, be related to the history of different retirement ages for men and women in the UK. The higher level of participation of older male workers may reflect a number of factors. Some of these may be personal, such as higher levels of autonomy, or greater responsibilities and financial obligations, among men. Other possible factors operate at employer level. As indicated in some previous research (e.g. Moore, 2009), older women may be subject to double jeopardy with regard to both gender and age, and may face more significant barriers to continuing their employment into later life than men. However, women may also be more able to give up work if they have alternatives that they find more meaningful and a household income on which they can rely. These variations may also relate to the type of job roles performed by older workers, particularly those aged 60–75 years. Ancillary non-care work is increasingly prevalent among this group, but may not be as emotionally rewarding as direct care work (for an explanation, see Box 1). Previous analysis has shown that men are already better represented in this type of work in the sector (Hussein, 2009).

Box 1 Direct care work

Direct care work includes a range of job roles, such as care workers, senior care workers, home care workers, community support workers, and advice and advocacy workers. These workers are considered to be the front-line staff in all care settings. They work with all types of service users who require direct care. Their duties are very dependent on the individual needs of service users, and commonly include assisting and enabling, help with personal care and activities of daily living (washing, eating, toileting, etc.), ensuring users' overall well-being, providing interest and activities to stimulate and engage users, or providing support and guidance in various ways, including end-of-life care.

The data presented in Table 1 show that the oldest group of workers is predominantly white, with a steady and significant decline in the number of workers from all other ethnic groups. Such findings may suggest a selective process with regard to who stays within the sector and who leaves it. They may also reflect the well-documented, multiple barriers faced by some BME older workers who wish to retain their employment in later life, and may reflect cultural issues relating to acceptable ages of retirement among different groups. Similarly, they may relate to health status in later life and reflect the health inequalities among older people from different ethnic backgrounds.

The majority of workers from the three subgroups of the 'third age' are recruited from within the care sector. There is no difference in relation to hiring from the retail sector or other sectors (around 4% and 9% of all groups, respectively), and similar proportions are indicated for the source of recruitment being 'not previously employed' and 'returners' (around 2% and 1%, respectively, across all age groups). However, there is some evidence that the oldest groups do not receive or seek internal promotion or career development, as indicated by data covering the source of recruitment presented in Table 1.

Discussion and conclusion

The NMDS-SC provides a unique opportunity to explore a number of workforce research questions. However, the limitations of the data noted in the Methods section include their coverage and representativeness. The NMDS-SC currently under-represents workers from the local authority sector and over-represents those from the independent sector (the largest sector), so does not entirely reflect the characteristics of the whole social care workforce in England. However, it does provide information about a large enough sample, with spreads both geographically and across different sectors.

This article provides evidence of the considerable contribution of 'third-age' workers to the adult care workforce in England, as workers in the age range 50–75 years constitute nearly 40% of the total workforce. In particular, the contribution of the oldest 'third-age' group, aged 60–75 years, is substantial, representing nearly 12% of all workers. This proportion is higher than that estimated among nurses in England (among whom the proportion of workers aged 50 years or over is estimated to be around 30%), but similar to that found among health visitors (nurses who have undergone specialised training to work with families; Drennan and Davis, 2008).

It is clear from several findings that the majority of workers aged 60–75 years are continuing previous

employment rather than being newly recruited to the sector or to their current employers. The data show long work histories within the sector and, for current employers, high work stability as well as low levels of sick leave. This clear empirical evidence, which is derived from a major data source, reveals the positive role of the care sector in offering opportunities for workers in later life to continue active employment combined with more flexible work arrangements.

The analysis also suggests that direct care workers are able to maintain their job roles as they age (for the 60–75 years age group). However, there are declining proportions of professional and managerial roles among the oldest groups of workers. Such observations may hint at possible downward job mobility, but may also be related to the profile of workers who retire at the age of 60 years, and whether professional workers are more likely to retire at this age because they can afford to do so. It is also possible that certain job roles, such as management and supervision, may become less feasible within the more flexible work arrangements that are possibly preferred by older workers.

There are a number of untested hypotheses that underlie these observations. There could be issues about the perceptions of employers, as well as older workers, in relation to workload, responsibilities and accountability and their interactions with age. Similarly, there could be perceptions about the (in)abilities of older workers as well as the levels of risk associated with older workers and professional work. Research from the USA suggests that there may be a combination of both of these factors, but that the latter are possibly more influential (Hwalek *et al*, 2008). However, the NMDS-SC does not include information on perceptions or motivation of workers or employers, and these areas require further investigation.

Third-age adult social care workers, particularly those in the 60–75 years age group, are significantly better represented in the voluntary/third sector (where around 14% of all workers are aged 60–75 years) and least well represented in the for-profit sector (8.6%). The attraction of the voluntary/third sector for a wide range of people is well documented (Milligan and Conradson, 2006; Baines and Hardill, 2008), and its employers may perhaps be more open to the idea of extended employment in later life. On the other hand, employers in the for-profit sector may be more money oriented, so they may perceive older employees as being less productive, and staffing ratios may be lower. Variations in pay levels between sectors may also be a factor in attracting different age groups to or deterring them from certain sectors. A detailed analysis of pay within the care sector showed that direct care workers in the voluntary/third sector earn significantly less than those working in establishments owned by local authorities. However, they earn more than those working in the for-profit sector (Hussein, 2010), although

the same analysis did not show a significant relationship between pay rates and age when sector of employment was controlled for. These results may suggest the willingness of some older workers to continue working in the voluntary/third sector, but we do not know whether they have any other options, or whether this is due to personal commitment to their employer, their colleagues or the people they care for, or other labour market factors.

Examining the individual profile of older workers aged 60–75 years, compared with the two younger cohorts, there seem to be several complex interactions between age, gender and ethnicity. Male white workers are significantly over-represented among the 60–75 years age group. Again this may reflect the triple jeopardy faced by female BME older workers, as expressed in much employment research, but may also relate to ethnic health inequalities associated with rising age, and is likely to indicate a combination of both of these factors. The gendered nature, favouring men, of older age employment in the UK has been documented in other research (Loretto *et al*, 2005), yet women are proportionally over-represented in the ‘third age’ due to their longer life expectancy, in the UK as in many other developed countries. Policy aimed at promoting the active inclusion of older people in employment needs to take into account the interacting dimensions of age, gender and ethnicity, and information on the impact of the Equality Act is keenly awaited.

Our analysis of recruitment source data again highlights the fact that the majority of workers in the oldest age group (60–75 years) are continuing employment within the sector, with no apparent increase in the proportions who are recruited to social care from unemployment, work in the retail sector or even among people returning to the sector. However, the data indicate a lower prevalence of internal promotions among the oldest group, probably related to the process of downward job mobility that occurs as workers age, whether by choice or otherwise. The low prevalence of internal promotions and career development suggests that there is a low level of continuing professional development among older workers. Similar phenomena have been reported among older nurses and midwives in the National Health Service (Wray *et al*, 2009).

The current analysis highlights a high prevalence of ‘third-age’ social care workers and confirms the diversity of the sector. However, with the secondary position of the care sector in the labour market and the tendency of the oldest group of workers to be less qualified than the younger two cohorts, it is difficult to interpret the high level of participation of older workers in the sector. This may be a sign of active involvement and choice, with older workers recognising this as a personally rewarding area of activity where flexible work is possible, or it may reflect their

limited employment choices and their need for additional income or their desire for additional pension contributions. At present these potential influences on the sector appear to contribute to an age-diverse workforce in social care, but this should by no means be taken for granted.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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