

Evaluating the Restart Scheme: How gender and age impacts participants' experiences.



Evaluating the Restart Scheme: How gender and age impacts participants' experiences, an Executive Summary.

The Restart Scheme was introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions in July 2021 as part of the UK Government's Plan for Jobs to support job seekers find and maintain employment in the post-Covid-19 labour market. The Restart Scheme promises individualised support by collaborating with local support and employers creating a tailored service. Participants engage for a 12-month period and support includes finding and sustaining employment. Although evaluations of the Restart Scheme have explored its effectiveness, they have not considered how employment barriers vary between groups, particularly how age and gender impacts experiences.

As identified by the Milburn Report (2026), young people (18–25-year-olds) face additional barriers to entering, and re-entering work. Young people have lower participation in employment than older people and are less resilient to shocks to the labour market (ONS, 2022). Following the start of the pandemic there was a fall in youth employment levels and a rise in inactivity levels. The number of young people in employment in May to July 2024 was 206,000 less than pre-pandemic levels, while the number

of inactive young people was 371,000 above pre-pandemic levels (House of Commons, 2024). These pandemic related statistics are significant as the Restart Scheme was designed to support post-pandemic labour market resilience, the number of young unemployed and inactive young people has subsequently risen to 1,012,000 (ONS, 2026).

Concurrently, the UK Government has identified older workers and women as priority groups for employment support, demonstrated by the introduction of initiatives such as the Midlife MOT, 50 Plus Champions, and age-friendly workplace policies, alongside investing in research to understand the health-related employment barriers experienced by women (HM Treasury, 2024).

In line with these various employment trends and Government initiatives, and in wanting to ensure quality and effectiveness in the delivery of their services, Seetec committed to undertaking this research into the facilitators and barriers to entering work for men, women, young people, and people aged 50 and over.

Aims and Research Questions:



The aim of this research project was to evaluate how different groups experience the Restart Scheme and identify what support helps individuals back into work. This research addressed the following research questions:

1. How do young adults (aged 19-25) experience The Restart Scheme? What are the barriers and facilitators to their participation?
2. What needs and concerns do young adults who have been out of work for longer periods have around entering/re-entering the workforce.
3. What needs and concerns do people over-50 who have been out of work for longer periods have in entering/re-entering the workforce?
4. How do people over-50 experience The Restart Scheme? What are the barriers and facilitators to their participation?
5. How does gender impact on young adults' and people over-50's experiences of The Restart Scheme?
6. In what ways do Restart Scheme participants feel service delivery could be developed, improved or changed to better meet people's specific age and gender related needs?

Methodology:

This explorative research employed a mixed-methods two-stage approach. An online survey was open to all Restart Scheme participants in the 4a contract area, the survey had 1061 responses. This provided a strong representative sample and acted as a benchmark with which to compare the experiences of the key interest groups.

Subsequently, key themes were identified and further explored through 11 focus groups with 26 participants falling into the key groups. Participants were recruited via email; all data was gathered in accordance with Seetec's ethical guidelines and was analysed thematically.

Findings:

Q1: How do young adults (aged 19–25) experience the Restart Scheme? What are the barriers and facilitators to their participation?

Overall, there was no clear relationship between age and outcomes on the Restart Scheme; experiences and outcomes appeared to be driven by individual circumstances and support.

Young adults faced similar barriers to the wider Restart Scheme population, including disability, neurodiversity, and physical and mental health challenges. Mental health, particularly anxiety about initial appointments, was frequently cited as a barrier to engagement. Participants suggested that more information and contact before their first appointment could help ease these concerns.

A key facilitator was having a Employment Adviser who took the time to understand their individual needs and goals. Building a strong rapport helped young people feel valued rather than like a 'tick-box' exercise, increasing engagement and participation.

Q2: What needs and concerns do young adults who have been out of work for longer periods have around entering/re-entering the workforce?

Young adults who had been out of work for extended periods identified several key challenges. Limited work experience was a significant barrier, particularly because many were at an early stage of their working lives and had missed employment opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic, when sectors such as retail and hospitality were heavily affected. Participants highlighted a need for more opportunities to gain work experience and engage directly with local employers.

Many young people also valued career information, advice, and guidance, as disrupted education and limited employment experience left some uncertain about suitable career pathways.

A further challenge was a lack of confidence. Some participants felt unprepared for workplace environments while others worried about negative perceptions from employers. Supportive adviser relationships, exposure to workplace settings and guidance on discussing employment barriers such as health conditions or flexible working requirements were all seen as important in building confidence and supporting successful transitions into work.



Q3: How do people over-50 experience The Restart Scheme? What are the barriers and facilitators to their participation?

This research found that health conditions were a key barrier to participation among people aged 50 and over with 32% of women and 27% of men in this category citing a chronic health condition.

Participants with a chronic illness were less likely to find employment with 28% moving into work compared to 43% of participants without chronic illness.

There was no correlation between age and disability or neurodiversity. Concerns about travelling to appointments, venue accessibility, and access to facilities such as toilets impacted initial engagement, highlighting the importance of providing practical information in advance. Health conditions that required participants to change occupation or sector also presented challenges, as they often disrupted established expectations and identities linked to previous employment.

The relationship with Employment Advisers could also influence engagement. Older participants often preferred advisers whose age, experience, or professional background they felt reflected their own circumstances. Some found it difficult to engage with advisers who appeared to have limited understanding of their work histories or who encouraged applying to all roles rather than building a new career path.

Q4: What needs and concerns do people over-50 who have been out of work for longer periods have in entering/re-entering the workforce?

Participants aged 50 and over identified age discrimination as a significant barrier to finding work. Many felt excluded from roles they had previously held due to changing qualification requirements and competition from candidates with more recent experience. Some also believed employers perceived older workers as overqualified, less adaptable, or more likely to leave because of ill health or retirement. Health-related barriers further affected this group, with chronic health conditions often requiring career changes or workplace adjustments that could make securing employment more difficult.

For those who had been unemployed for longer periods, low confidence was another key challenge. Confidence was undermined by extended time out of work and changes in recruitment practices, particularly around CVs and digital skills. As a result, participants valued support in these areas. Interview confidence often improved when participants recognised that their extensive work experience could be an advantage over other applicants.



Q5: How does gender impact on young adults' and people over-50's experiences of The Restart Scheme?

Although participants generally did not perceive gender as influencing their experiences of the Restart Scheme, the findings suggest important differences. Women were substantially more likely than men to secure employment after taking part in the scheme (50% compared with 29%), even when additional barriers such as disability or chronic health conditions were considered. This may reflect women's greater access to the scheme's holistic support offer, including training, health and wellbeing services, and in-work support.

Men were more likely to report impersonal relationships with Employment Advisers and experiences of age-related discrimination from employers. In contrast, women cited caring responsibilities, challenges linked to changing employment practices and increases in the State Pension age, as challenges to navigating the modern labour market.

Q6: In what ways do Restart Scheme participants feel service delivery could be developed, improved or changed to better meet people's specific age and gender related needs?

Participants identified several ways the Restart Scheme could better meet the needs of different age and gender groups. At the referral stage, providing clearer information about the purpose, benefits, and expectations of the scheme could reduce anxiety and create more positive perceptions as only 58% of participants had a positive experience of joining the restart scheme.

Participants also suggested improving information sharing between referral partners and providers to reduce duplication and enable Employment Advisers to focus more quickly on individuals' needs and goals. This is key as just 56% of participants felt as though their needs were considered.

The quality of the relationship between participants and their Employment Adviser was consistently highlighted as a key factor influencing satisfaction and engagement. Many participants questioned how advisers were matched to clients, arguing that greater consideration should be given to advisers' experience, expertise, and understanding of participants' backgrounds. This issue was particularly important for those aged 50 and over, who often valued advisers with relevant professional or sector knowledge. Despite this, 60% of participants had a positive working relationship with their employment advisor.



Recommendations:

- Facilitate greater information sharing between the referral partner and the Restart Scheme ahead of the participant's first appointment to reduce the data gathering burden.
- Strengthen advisor-participant matching to maximise working relationships and drive engagement, particularly for participants aged 50 and over.
- Provide tailored career guidance focused on building career pathways for different age groups, both entering without experience and changing pathways later in life.
- Increase practical employability support and employer engagement supporting young people to gain experience and exposing other participants to new recruitment practices.
- Ensure equitable access to holistic support, particularly for men and those with additional barriers who may not be forthcoming about their needs.

Research and Contact

For a more detailed account of this research and the associated recommendations, please see the main report.

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Research website:

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