

# REFORMER THOUGHTS

REFORM



## Ways to Work

## About *Reformer Thoughts*

*Reformer Thoughts* brings together the opinions of leading experts from academia, business and government; frontline practitioners and public service users, to provide readers with valuable insight into the challenges shaping the policy debate. The series aims to give a platform to innovative ideas and facilitate an open and informed conversation about how we can improve public services.

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## About Reform

*Reform* is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We are dedicated to achieving better and smarter public services. Our mission is to set out ideas that will improve public services for all and deliver value for money.

We work on core sectors such as health and social care, education, home affairs and justice, and work and pensions. Our work also covers issues that cut across these sectors, including public service design and delivery and digital public services.

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# Contents

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## Introduction 03

Imogen Farhan, Researcher, *Reform*

---

## Tailored solutions to fix the regional jobs gap 04

Dr Fiona Aldridge, Director of Policy and Research, Learning and Work Institute

---

## Helping people thrive at work 05

Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

---

## To support more disabled people into work, we need actions not words 07

Anna Bird, Executive Director of Policy and Research, Scope

---

## Employment policy needs to catch up 08

Kim Chaplain, Associate Director for Work, The Centre for Ageing Better

---

## Creating good work for the over-50s 09

Christopher Brooks, Senior Policy Manager, Age UK

---

## Going back to work after a career break is challenging – but returnships can help 11

Julianne Miles, CEO, Women Returners

---

## Providing opportunities for all 12

Interview with Claire Findlay, Head of Apprenticeships, Barclays

---

## Conclusion 13

Liz Sayce, Visiting Senior Fellow, London School of Economics

# Introduction

## How do we create an inclusive labour market?

The revival of the UK labour market has been the standout success story in recent years. More people are in work now than ever before and unemployment has hit historic lows.

But, the benefits of this 'jobs miracle' have not been shared by everyone. Some groups still struggle to access the labour market and, as highlighted by the 'Good Work' agenda, not everyone who is in work has access to opportunities to increase their earnings or progress in their career.

Certain groups continue to be marginalised. Over one million people aged over 50 are out of work, but would be willing to work if the right opportunity arose. Women continue to face a 'motherhood penalty,' working less and being paid less for the hours they do after the age of 30. The disability employment gap – which currently stands at 30 per cent – has not changed in over a decade.

Barriers to work are persistent and overlapping. Since the 1980s, the UK's economic growth has been a tale of two halves, creating unequal employment prospects across the country. The employment rate of disabled people, for instance, is over 15 percentage points higher in the South East compared to the North East.

Tackling worklessness and low pay is vital for social reasons, which include positive impacts on health, wellbeing and inclusion. It also makes clear economic sense. It cuts the amount spent on welfare and tax credits, with indirect savings in other public services.

It is estimated that local economies benefit by more than £14,000 per year every time an unemployed person takes up a Living Wage job. Helping people to retrain, upskill and change careers is also crucial to create a flexible labour market that can keep pace with rapid technological change where a 'job for life' is no longer a guarantee.

There is much work to do. Adult learning is currently in decline, with disadvantaged groups – who are most likely to be impacted by technological change – the least likely to engage in lifelong learning. At the same time, the National Audit Office has warned the Government is very unlikely to meet its target of 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, with the number of apprenticeship starts aged 25 or over falling by more than half between 2015/16 and 2017/18.

It is vital that government and employers work together to create opportunities for groups still struggling to thrive in the labour market. This *Reformer Thoughts* series brings together experts from a range of backgrounds to discuss how this can be done. The contributions pinpoint practical steps that Government and employers can take now to help recruit and retain a more diverse workforce, and highlight the long-term policy changes needed to create a more inclusive labour market.



**Imogen Farhan**  
Researcher at Reform

*"There is much work to do. Adult learning is currently in decline, with disadvantaged groups – who are most likely to be impacted by technological change – the least likely to engage in lifelong learning."*

# Tailored solutions to fix the regional jobs gap

When it comes to the labour market, there are many reasons to 'believe in Britain'. Yet, we face profound challenges too. Economic growth has stagnated, and productivity has stalled. Employment has risen, but so has in-work poverty. Unemployment has fallen overall, but persistent employment gaps remain, particularly for those with disabilities.

Where you live matters too. The UK is one of the most regionally imbalanced countries in the industrialised world, creating a huge gulf between our best and worst performing regions. Employment in the South West is currently 10 percentage points above that in the North East; and productivity in London, the UK's richest region, is 50 per cent higher than elsewhere.

The cost of this inequality is borne by us all – acting as a brake on our national economy and creating an imbalance of wealth and opportunity that fosters division – but for some, its impact is particularly painful. There are dramatic regional differences in opportunities for young people, for instance, and even greater variations within regions than between them. Fourteen per cent of 16-24-year-olds in the North East are not in education, employment and training (NEET), compared with 9 per cent in the South West. As part of its work to better understand and address these inequalities, Learning and Work Institute's [Youth Commission](#), developed a relative measure of education and employment outcomes for young adults across England's local authorities.

The [Youth Opportunities Index](#) powerfully reinforces the message that people's life chances are directly affected by where they live. It also demonstrates that the challenge and therefore the solutions vary by, and within, regions. In some areas, greater focus

is needed to ensure better opportunities to train and develop new skills. In others with lower employment levels, more effort is required to stimulate business investment and link people with work opportunities. In others still, underemployment is the bigger challenge.

Tackling these challenges requires investment, and there is a clear and compelling case to invest more in learning and skills development. We estimate that additional investment of £1.9bn per year could boost the economy by £20bn per year, support another 200,000 people into work and help close regional skills and employment gaps.

Of course, how we invest is just as important. Our employment and skills system is highly centralised, with few levers available to localities to ensure the system meets local needs. Though the case for devolution is still to be fully proven, harnessing the energy and efforts of local councils and combined authorities to successfully deliver local industrial strategies surely has a critical role to play in realising the potential of our regions and improving opportunities for all.



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**Dr Fiona Aldridge**  
Director of Policy  
and Research, Learning  
and Work Institute

*"The UK is one of the most regionally imbalanced countries in the industrialised world, creating a huge gulf between our best and worst performing regions."*

# Helping people thrive at work

There are 1.15 million more disabled people in work compared to six years ago. While that progress is welcome, we know that there is more to do so that everyone who wants to work can.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) holds many of the levers to enable disabled people to achieve their potential and lead positive, fulfilling lives. But we need the support of businesses to achieve true equality.

Through [Disability Confident](#), we are working with employers to change attitudes and create employment opportunities by giving them the tools and techniques to recruit and retain disabled people in their workplace. There are already over 13,600 employers signed up to Disability Confident, and their number continues to grow.

Access to Work means people can receive a grant of up to £59,200 per year to ensure that their health condition or disability does not hold them back in the workplace. This can pay for things like travel to work, specialist aids and equipment to support them. Last year we spent £129 million on Access to Work grants, helping over 36,000 people stay in employment.

Our Jobcentres also offer tailored support, backed by our four-year Personalised Support Package, which will see £330 million invested in employment support targeted at claimants with disabilities and health conditions. In addition, our Work and Health Programme is working with local providers to offer co-ordinated and holistic support tailored to the individual's needs to people who face multiple barriers to employment.

Our priority is that people from all backgrounds and in all circumstances are able to achieve their full potential and thrive in work. At the DWP, we continue to challenge how we can improve our support for people with health conditions and disabilities. This allows them to live independently, to take up and stay in employment that is right for them, and importantly, help improve lives.

However, it is not enough to simply get more people into work. Each year more than 100,000 people leave their job following a period of sickness absence lasting at least four weeks. Early, proactive action from employers can retain and reintegrate those who are struggling with their health. Flexible adjustments to the workplace, working hours, or the job itself will also help people to succeed and flourish in their roles.

The Government is [consulting](#) on proposals to reform Statutory Sick Pay so that it is available to all employees who need it. We are seeking views on this and other proposals in our current consultation and welcome thoughts on this important matter.

To provide the right support and be successful in supporting disabled people to meet their full potential we must work collaboratively across government and with disabled people and stakeholders. By doing this we can continue to improve how the welfare system can better meet the needs of people with disabilities and health conditions. Through this and further engagement, we will listen more and reform effectively to deliver policies, strategies and structures that improve the quality of life and choices for disabled people.



**Justin Tomlinson MP**  
Minister for Disabled  
People, Health and Work

*"The government  
is consulting on  
proposals to reform  
Statutory Sick Pay  
so that it is available to all  
employees who need it."*





# To support more disabled people into work, we need actions not words

Disabled people who can and want to work should get the support they need to do so. It's good for employers, the economy and society. But despite years of commitments and consultations from successive governments, we're still miles away from where we need to be.

We know that there are more than a million disabled people who are out of work but want to find a job. There is a million people – roughly the population of Birmingham – who could be earning money, paying taxes and reducing the Government's out-of-work benefits bill, while at the same time gaining greater independence and self-worth.

So what needs to change? Firstly, there is no evidence that sanctions and conditionality have successfully motivated disabled people to move closer to work. We know that the best way to build confidence and unlock talent is not through punitive sanctions and conditionality, but through high-quality mentoring and support on a voluntary-only basis.

Secondly, the assessments process for out-of-work support needs urgent reform. Disabled people can face an array of barriers to work, from inaccessible public transport to a lack of qualifications, skills or work experience. When professionals assess disabled people for out-of-work support, they need to properly understand this whole range of barriers. But the Work Capability Assessment only looks at a limited number of factors, focusing purely on simple tasks disabled people can and can't do because of their impairments or conditions. The Government must grasp the forthcoming disability benefits green paper as an opportunity to make bold changes.

Another major problem is the number of disabled people who are starting work only to fall out of the jobs market later. On average between 2013 and 2018, for every 100 disabled people who moved into work, 120 left. In Theresa May's final weeks as Prime Minister she announced a consultation into reforming Statutory Sick Pay and Occupational Sick Pay. We welcome this, but it's vital that the government does more than just tinker around the edges. We need to see genuine reform to Statutory Sick Pay, so that people who become too unwell to work receive decent, flexible financial support that allows them to phase back into work when they are ready to do so, rather than leaving employment altogether.

Finally, it's crucial that employers are doing everything they can to hire and retain disabled people. The success of Gender Pay Gap reporting has shown us that what gets measured gets done. Scope welcomed the release of the government's voluntary reporting framework last November and we have since published our own guide for employers to help them report on disability in the workplace.

Next year it will be 25 years since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act, a landmark piece of legislation passed by a previous Conservative government. There's a huge opportunity for our new Prime Minister to make his mark by rebuilding trust with disabled people, but we need to see action not just more words.



**Anna Bird**  
Executive Director  
of Policy and  
Research, Scope

*"it's crucial that employers are doing everything they can to hire and retain disabled people. The success of Gender Pay Gap reporting has shown us that what gets measured gets done."*



# Employment policy needs to catch up

The world of work is transforming. From automation and digitisation to the rise of the gig economy and remote working, jobs available to today's workers are becoming increasingly distinct from those of their parents' or grandparents' generations.

Our workforce too is changing. Since mid-2011, the number of people in employment has risen by over three million. This is largely due to the increasing number of older workers and people remaining in work for longer. Nearly third of UK workers are over-50.

These are staggering changes, but the other side of the coin is that worklessness in over-50s remains worryingly high. There are about a million people between the ages of 50 and 64 who would like to be in work, but don't have a job.

Why is this happening? We want the same things from jobs as anyone else: a meaningful, fulfilling role which brings us social connections, enables us to contribute our skills, ideas and experience, and provides opportunities for learning. But evidence indicates we're less likely to get them, especially when it comes to learning and development. As we progress beyond 50, we may struggle finding a new role due to ageist assumptions we're less capable or innovative than younger people.

One solution may be to rethink employment policy. Lots of thought goes into the beginning of our working lives, from introducing 'T Levels' to eliminating unpaid internships. Through the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, larger employers must make training provision or lose money. Although the levy can be spent on any age group, supporting people at later points in their careers isn't prioritised.

Perhaps employers need policies that facilitate changes in culture and processes? In Singapore for instance, employers are obliged to retain older workers if they want to stay in work. Thus, roles have emerged tailored to suit people's needs and aspirations. A change like this would be a radical shift in the UK context, but raises important ideas about how employers and employees can work together to plan for later careers. This could come in tandem with enabling fairer access to flexible working for older workers – something we've recently started piloting with Timewise – so they can change their pattern of work to suit their needs.

Similarly, through the introduction of tools like a 'Mid-Life MOT', employers can enable workers and managers to discuss crucial points like career aspirations, health and wellbeing, and pensions plans. These conversations can seem difficult and don't always occur readily. But they are proven to help people plan and prepare, with the result that both workers and employers feel more secure and comfortable about the future.

Failure to act will have a direct cost for employers. People in well-paid or highly-skilled roles, or with an entrepreneurial mindset, are more likely to leave if they don't think their work matters. At the same time, workers in lower-skilled roles or who begin struggling with manual labour need support to help avoid a cliff-edge where they suddenly stop working.



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**Kim Chaplain**  
Associate Director for  
Work, The Centre for  
Ageing Better

*"through the introduction of tools like a 'Mid-Life MOT', employers can enable workers and managers to discuss crucial points like career aspirations, health and wellbeing, and pensions plans"*

# Creating good work for the over-50s

We are often reminded that the number of over-50s in work has grown and that 'older' workers – usually defined as people aged 50 and above – have been significant beneficiaries of recent labour market trends.

This is not necessarily the case. Economic analysis by Age UK has demonstrated that using the employment rate alone as an indicator of older workers' outcomes can be misleading. While employment rates have increased, the average hours worked have declined, leading to a reduced choice for many older workers.

Age UK hears from people who are trapped in poor-quality or low-paid jobs, and simply cannot see how they can keep working for any number of years. Often these people have a health condition or disability, which makes it even more challenging. People on higher incomes and in good health may be able to swallow rises to State Pension age much more easily than lower-income workers.

Further barriers can include:

**Getting back to work** – when the over-50s lose their jobs, they find it harder to re-enter the labour market than younger workers. This leads to high rates of long-term unemployment, and a group of people finding themselves stuck out of work.

**Access to flexible working** – we consistently see that while many higher-paid workers can access flexibility in their working patterns, the same opportunities are simply not there for those in lower-paid roles. This needs to change.

**Ageism** – polling by YouGov that Age UK commissioned in 2017 found that over a third of 55-64s believe they've suffered age discrimination in the workplace. Many negative stereotypes of older workers are deeply ingrained in working culture. It is particularly pertinent at the recruitment phase, so this should be the initial focus.

**Training** – significant cuts to public funding for training since 2010 have led to a decline in older workers updating their skills. Training policy needs a fundamental rethink if we are to ensure that people can keep working until their late 60s.

Labour market inclusion is important – work is an important part of people's identity and many older workers get a lot out of it. However, this is not everyone's reality. A higher State Pension age effectively means huge numbers of people will be forced into jobs that are physically draining or stressful, often while suffering from worsening health and juggling extra issues like caring responsibilities. Such a world more closely resembles a dystopia than an aspiration.

Increasing 60+ employment will only be possible if public services fully support people – for example by offering more generous benefits for those with health conditions and better training – and if employers provide good quality jobs that allow people to lead fulfilling lives. It sounds great in theory, but in reality, in spite of some positive interventions such as the 'Mid-Life MOT' we are a long way off.

The ageing workforce should be considered a key component of the 'good work' agenda. Government and employers can then build on this to improve labour market inclusion – with the desirable side-effect of improving the UK's economy thrown into the bargain.



**Christopher Brooks**  
Senior Policy Manager,  
Age UK

*"that while many higher-paid workers can access flexibility in their working patterns, the same opportunities are simply not there for those in lower-paid roles."*





# Going back to work after a career break is challenging – but returnships can help

There are 2 million people in the UK who are out of the workforce for childcare or other caring reasons, of whom 89 per cent are women and around 25 per cent have a professional or managerial background.

People also take career breaks for health, relocation, travel and study. The majority want to return to work but encounter major obstacles when they apply for jobs. Older women returners in particular face a triple whammy of unconscious bias – against lack of recent experience, age and gender.

Returnships – fixed term contracts for returning professionals with transition support and a high likelihood of an ongoing role – offer one way to break down these barriers. They aim to create supported routes back to mid- to senior-level roles, while providing a trial period for both sides. Returner employers have multiplied rapidly from three in 2014 to over 65 organisations in 2018. Many returnships are now achieving 80-100% conversion into ongoing roles. They have enabled hundreds of talented people of all ages, with career breaks from 2 to 20 years, to get back to suitable-level work.

However, returner programmes can fall flat without careful upfront planning. Positioning is critical: the programme must be communicated from the start as a way to access high-calibre and diverse talent, rather than a tick-box Corporate Social Responsibility or HR initiative. This requires business buy-in at all levels, from the leadership team to hiring managers. Senior internal champions can most clearly relate the business benefits and secure the required resources, and a supportive line manager role plays a key role.

The opportunities themselves should be developed with the end goal of a successful permanent hire, ideally with ring-fenced headcount. These are not training, shadowing or 'cheap labour' schemes; work needs to be suitable for the returners' skills and experience, with professional-level pay. Offering flexible working at point of hire is a major plus, as it increases the likelihood of returners with continued caring commitments being able to effectively combine their work and home lives.

Each stage of the recruitment process needs to be reviewed and adjusted for suitability for career returners, and training provided to interviewers and line managers. When returners join the organisation, reintegration is accelerated by offering mentoring, coaching and training. Introducing a returnship is a learning process. Those programmes which start with a pilot, evaluate and adjust before scaling up are most likely to be successful.

Employers often say that they underestimated the resources required in running a returnship, but most agree it is worth the investment, as there is a powerful business case. They have demonstrated to employers that skilled returners bring multiple benefits including diversity, maturity and a fresh perspective. In the words of one employer: "The more the hiring managers see the quality of the candidates coming into these programmes and what they can bring over and above another hire, the more we recognise this really valuable group."



**Julianne Miles**  
CEO, Women Returners

*"Offering flexible working at point of hire is a major plus, as it increases the likelihood of returners with continued caring commitments being able to effectively combine their work and home lives."*



# Providing opportunities for all

Barclays has a number of employability programmes that help people of all ages and experiences to develop their skills, gain confidence and increase their motivation.

Nobody should be held back in their career, which is why the Barclays Apprenticeship programme has been developed over the years to include dedicated opportunities for multi-generational workers and those with health conditions.

## **Multi-generational workers**

A multi-generational workforce is crucial, not only for the economy but for businesses too. Multi-generational workers bring a range of ideas and opinions to the table, as well as life and work experience that can better reflect a business' customer or client base.

Our skills programmes have found that retirement isn't always the right decision for everyone. The reasons for this have been predominantly financial, but for others retirement has triggered feelings of isolation. Therefore, offering viable retraining provisions opens up alternative pathways for those later in life.

In 2016, we took this all into account and introduced our Bolder Apprenticeship scheme, a bespoke channel for the over 24s wishing to get back into work. However, there is still the assumption that apprenticeships are for younger people, especially within tech and digital. Local and national governments could play a powerful role here by promoting multi-generational apprenticeships more widely, inspiring potential applicants by sharing real life case studies, and encouraging businesses to develop their own schemes.

## **Able to Enable**

It's concerning how some individuals feel they cannot disclose their health conditions for fear of not securing employment, or that they can't bring their whole selves to the workplace. All employers need to address this and commit to breaking down the barriers that prevent candidates with health conditions from feeling confident in building a successful career.

Our Able to Enable channel is designed to support people whose careers may have been held back by the stigma surrounding their health conditions. The programme offers a

three-month paid internship, giving people the opportunity to learn new business skills, gain experience and build their workplace confidence. On completion, individuals have the chance to be considered for our apprenticeship scheme or a permanent role with us.

As an employer, we have a lot to learn from our colleagues. By listening to our Able to Enable colleagues we're understanding how we can adapt our culture and environment so all staff members feel like they can have a successful career with us.

## **Regional Opportunities**

Our apprenticeships are available across the UK; and this is something I have been determined to ensure. I have been based in the North West throughout my career, so I understand the importance of providing regional employment opportunities. As an example, since 2010 we have welcomed over 500 apprentices to our Technology Centre in Radbroke, Cheshire and it's positive to see that there is a strong and growing percentage of female tech apprentices based there as well. As Barclays looks to grow, we're hoping to inject some of our apprenticeship talent at our new sites, here in the UK and globally, including at our new Glasgow site which is set to open in 2021.

## **Boosting employability**

There is an element of individual responsibility to reskilling but employers should look to provide skills interventions too. Barclays has a strong track record of this. The Barclays LifeSkills programme has supported 8.8 million 11-24 year olds with the core, transferrable skills needed for the workplace, and is soon to be extended to the whole of the UK workforce. The Barclays Military and Veterans Outreach programme helps ex-Service personnel and veterans transition into civilian employment, and will soon support military spouses. Additionally, our Connect with Work initiative connects individuals who have experienced barriers in entering the workplace with recruiting employers – it has supported lone parents, care leavers, ex-offenders and those who have experienced homelessness.



**An interview with  
Claire Findlay**  
Head of Apprenticeships,  
Barclays

*"A multi-generational workforce is crucial, not only for the economy but for businesses too. Multi-generational workers bring a range of ideas and opinions to the table, as well as life and work experience that can better reflect a business' customer or client base."*



# Conclusion

## How do we create systemic change?

The authors in this collection make a compelling case for increasing inclusive skills and employment opportunities, to unlock economic and health benefits and reduce inequalities of place, age, disability and gender.

They describe initiatives that could bring significant change: from returnships to 'Mid-Life MOTs', from connecting recruiting managers with homeless people to investing in learning, skills and local industrial strategies.

But we cannot underestimate the challenge. The authors between them show there are several million older and disabled people who are either out of work but want to work, or in low-paid work with few development opportunities. Meanwhile the beneficiaries of positive initiatives are often measured in the thousands or even the hundreds. The burning question is how to scale up effective approaches and leverage more widespread change, to reap human and economic benefits.

There are some positive trends, including some (albeit slow) growth in flexible jobs (particularly at senior level) and an increase in disabled people in work – although the NAO found that this increase was not matched by a reduction in the number of disabled people out of work. This paradox may be explained by the very positive development of more people being confident to be open about disability at work, as well as by rising employment rates overall.

Real gains can be achieved through the 'intrinsic' leadership of employers and employees. For instance, Microsoft has won awards for inclusive technology geared to reaching a billion disabled people world-wide; and public sector organisations

for embedding inclusive employment opportunities in organisational culture. Projected labour needs, prompted in part by the recent decline in EU workers coming to Britain, may encourage more vigorous employer action to retain and recruit older and disabled colleagues. For instance, the fact that the adult social care sector expects to need 580,000 more workers by 2035 presents a significant opportunity.

However, the overall trends suggest that relying on employer goodwill alone will not deliver change at pace and scale. This requires 'extrinsic' leadership also, as the case of the gender pay gap shows: a voluntary approach over decades did not close the gap, whereas encouragement through mandatory reporting, guidance, peer support and competition generated widespread attention and action plans.

Progress relies on shared responsibility from employers, skills providers, individuals and government; and government – as Justin Tomlinson points out in this collection – can influence employers to promote good behaviours.

One government lever is transparency – an expectation that employers will share publicly their progress towards inclusive, diverse employment and equal pay as part of their commitment to accountability and good corporate governance.<sup>1</sup>



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**Liz Sayce**  
Visiting Senior Fellow,  
London School of  
Economics

*"The key to all these steps is selecting levers for systemic impact, beyond the 'single initiative'; and integrating learning and adaptation, based on transparent sharing of data on progress"*

<sup>1</sup> A forthcoming briefing by Sayce, Bacon and colleagues sets out the detail on how regulations could deliver this.

Another is sharing risk, especially with small employers, to remove any disincentive to recruit or retain a colleague with a health condition. Government consulted in 2019 on improving retention through extending statutory sick pay and supporting small business access to occupational health. They could also enable people with fluctuating conditions to work by creating a flexible fund to cover absences, thereby removing fear on the part of both small employer and prospective employee. Better that someone who wants to work does so when well, than not at all.

Joint leadership at local and regional level are critical to meeting future labour and skills needs through inclusive strategies. Government could incentivise Local Enterprise Partnerships and a range of partners – colleges, employers, local authorities, civil society organisations and health providers – by devolving power and resources to enable innovation to achieve inclusive approaches.

A further lever is a strategic approach to rights. The Women and Equalities Committee argued in 2019 that government should ‘act on its own obligations to embed compliance and enforcement of the Equality Act into its most significant strategies and action plans’.

The key to all these steps is selecting levers for systemic impact, beyond the ‘single initiative’; and integrating learning and adaptation, based on transparent sharing of data on progress. Concerted, sustained leadership could bring this agenda into the core policy and investment mainstream of productivity, place and poverty reduction. The ageing and disabled workforce needs to be at the centre of both the ‘good work’ agenda and future industrial strategy – with involvement of disabled and older people and employers, who hold many of the keys to effectiveness. From that leadership could flow the specific policy tools that, together, could begin strategically to reduce inequalities and wasted potential.

