

Economic Policy Centre

Pensions and Intergenerational Equity

Can Auckland become an age-friendly city?

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Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland has the largest and most ethnically and culturally diverse population of people aged 65 and older in New Zealand. Given that this population will increase substantially over the next few decades, urgent work is already underway to transform our city into one that works for those over 65s.

But there is one key area within its age-friendly planning that Auckland Council has not given enough attention to: employment of older workers. We need to have conversations about how this group of workers can be retained in the workforce. If we don't recognise the benefit of intergenerational work and knowledge, we risk losing valuable skills and experience and imposing hardship on ever-increasing numbers of older people and their communities.

Although there is much to celebrate about the Auckland Council's Tāmaki Makaurau Tauawhi Kaumātua Age-friendly Auckland Action Plan, it doesn't go far enough. It does include the World Health Organisation's eight core characteristics of an age-friendly city: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; communication and information; community support and health services; and civic participation and employment. In addition, the plan includes two areas: Kaumātua and culture and diversity.

It also expands the outdoor spaces and buildings domain to become Te Taiao - the natural and built environment, and it incorporates a Māori well-being framework. This age-friendly agenda benefits the whole community, all ages, abilities and cultures, and it is future-proofed, in part by engaging local boards in their own projects.

But the lack of attention given to employment of older workers is cause for concern. Of those in Auckland aged 65 and over, 34% are still working.

¹ PIE Commentaries are opinion pieces published as contributions to public debate, and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Pensions and Intergenerational Equity Hub.

Te Ara Ahunga Ora Retirement Commission's recent Work and the Workforce report showed that 24% of New Zealanders over 65 are still working compared to 10% of those over 65 in the UK, 12% in Australia, 19% in the US and 20% in Japan. And among New Zealanders aged 65 to 69, 44% still have jobs. This is a significant number of people who need support in an often ageist environment.

As the workforce is ageing, the nature of work is changing: technology and automation are creating new roles and laying rest to others. For older workers to transition and meet employer demands such as harnessing new skills, they need access to re-training.

In May 2019, the then Retirement Commission's (RC) surveyed 500 companies to explore our ageing workforce and ageism in general. The findings reinforced what we already know: when asked if there were enough training opportunities for people over 50, only 17% said 'yes'.

That RC survey found that most employers agreed there was a shortage of highly experienced workers. Those same employers had a positive attitude towards older workers, finding them no different to other age groups regarding resistance to change, absenteeism or sick leave. However, 80% of those employers had no specific strategies or policies to attract and retain older workers, and the majority agreed that older workers can face barriers to being hired because of age.

Meanwhile, research for Auckland's age-friendly plan found that 13% of older Aucklanders (around 26,000 people) did not have enough money to meet their everyday needs. For many of these people, employment means they can pay their rent and power bills and still eat.

Auckland's age-friendly plan focuses primarily on volunteering opportunities for older people and doesn't go far enough when it comes to exploring how to best support our more senior people to continue to work.

There are some national strategies that are designed to improve the landscape for older workers.

Supporting older people to stay in the workforce and transition their skills as they age is a key part of the new nation-wide Older Workers Employment Action Plan He Mahere Mahi Whakawhiwhi Mahi mō te Hunga Pakeke.

In addition, the Ministry for Seniors has developed a Mature Workers Toolkit to support improved age-friendly practices, and assist with hiring, developing and retaining mature workers.

The Government has another strategy designed to support the ageing demographic: Better Later Life He Oranga Kaumātua, with a vision that older New Zealanders lead valued, connected and fulfilling lives.

The first action plan within the Better Later Life strategy focuses on employment, housing and digital inclusion. All three areas are important, but in many cases, employment is vital.

Overall, if we want to create a truly age-friendly Auckland, we need to do more to support our older workers.

While our libraries provide vital digital learning and access, the outskirts of Auckland often have only intermittent reception – compromising maintaining employment! This demands an immediate fix. Also, often, while digital and other skill learning is not prohibitively expensive, it is distance learning, online, digital. Instead, local schools could easily be adapted to the after-hours community education they used to provide.

We all need to upskill, constantly, in this rapidly changing world, where bank transactions, bill payments and even employment require an online presence. This is the way of the the present and possibly the future.

But the fact remains that face-to-face, Kanohi ki te kanohi, enables humanity, and so much more learning. We need to review our approach and access to training and retraining, and remember who we are training, and why we need them.

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