

Analysis report on EU and Member State policies, strategies and programmes on population and workforce ageing

Europe's population is ageing: by 2040, nearly 27 % of people living in the EU-28 are expected to be 65 years old or older. At the same time, the working-age population is also shrinking. An older population and fewer workers will have implications for socioeconomic systems, putting pressure on the sustainability of healthcare and pension systems.

This report examines the policies, strategies and programmes relating to these demographic changes that have been developed in the EU Member States and EFTA¹ countries.

The analysis, which draws on a review of countries' policies carried out by national occupational safety and health (OSH) experts and the results of expert workshops held in 10 Member States, considers the factors that influence policy development and implementation in the area of work and the ageing population. It also suggests some considerations to be taken into account when policies and strategies are developed².

The challenge of extending working life

Raising the official retirement age and promoting the labour market participation of older people are strategies that governments throughout Europe have followed to try to reduce the impact of demographic change. However, while the employment rate of those aged 55-64 has increased, people are still leaving the labour market before reaching the official retirement age.

The factors influencing labour force participation of older workers are numerous and complex. They include, among others, pension policies, flexibility in work settings, working conditions, attitudes towards older workers, availability of vocational rehabilitation services and return-to-work support, and health. Therefore, policy-makers are faced with a major challenge when designing policies to promote extended working lives.

Major influences on policy development

Concepts and models

A number of concepts and models have emerged over the past 50 years through research into the issue of population ageing and efforts to find solutions to the challenges it poses. Concepts such as active ageing, well-being at work, sustainable work, age management or sustainable employability appear in European policy discourses and initiatives concerning demographic change and some of them

form the conceptual basis for policy response to population ageing at European and national level.

Differing national demographic trends and OSH systems

European countries vary both in terms of their demographic situations and with regard to the legal and institutional frameworks that they have in place to address OSH issues.

The population is ageing all over Europe, but the magnitude, the speed and the timing varies across countries. While population ageing may be beginning to slow down in some countries, in others it will speed up in the years to come. Furthermore, while in many European countries the issue has relatively recently come to the fore, a few, in particular the Nordic countries and Germany, have been concerned about challenges of an ageing workforce since the 1970s.

European countries' OSH frameworks vary quite widely too. A well-developed and mature OSH system creates better preconditions for dealing with the challenges of an ageing workforce. Mature frameworks are characterised by, for example:

- long-standing laws on OSH and anti-discrimination;
- a strong labour inspectorate;
- a well-established system of occupational health care;
- strong tradition of OSH research;
- participation by occupational insurance institutions in OSH risk prevention and research activities;
- strong social dialogue on OSH issues and long-standing structures for workers' representation;
- well-established multidisciplinary platforms for stakeholder cooperation in policy development and implementation.

Supranational influences

Key international organisations such as the World Health Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Labour Organisation have been quick to recognise the challenges related to population ageing, and their recommendations have shaped national policies both directly and through their influence on EU legislation.

The EU occupational safety and health (OSH) and anti-discrimination legislations have played a major role in the implementation of minimum requirements on OSH and age discrimination in employment in the Member States. In addition, a number of EU policies and strategies have had an important influence on the development of national policies related to the ageing workforce. Meanwhile, EU funding and awareness-raising activities have supported the implementation of innovative practices in relation to age management and active ageing at national and local levels.

¹ European Free Trade Association.

² This report forms part of the deliverable of a 3-year pilot project, initiated by the European Parliament and managed by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), on the OSH challenges of an ageing workforce, including the rehabilitation of sick and injured workers in Europe. The project aims to assess the prerequisites for strategies and systems within EU Member States to take account of an ageing workforce and ensure better protection for all throughout working life.

National policy development: four country clusters

From the analysis of the development of the countries' policies addressing the challenges related to population ageing — and considering criteria such as the scope and overall orientation of the policies developed, the level of integration and coordination across policy areas and stakeholders, and policy implementation — four clusters emerged.

1. Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and Romania: for various reasons, population and workforce ageing have not been a major policy priority. Some of these countries are still suffering the effects of the economic crisis; some have a young population. However, all have implemented pension reforms, and those with an older population have raised the retirement age and restricted access to early retirement, as well as introduced economic incentives to employ older people.
2. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland: this is a large, diverse group, and the countries have varying demographic patterns. Policies focus on pension reforms and other measures to increase older people's participation in the workforce, but they also address working conditions and OSH, training and lifelong learning, or the employability of older workers. Rehabilitation systems focus mainly on people with disabilities, and only limited cross-policy work takes place.
3. Austria, Belgium, France, Norway and the United Kingdom: these countries have relatively old populations and the related challenges are a policy priority. They have introduced comprehensive measures to promote labour force participation of older workers in a holistic way, including measures to promote vocational rehabilitation and return to work, using concepts such as age management and work ability. Social dialogue plays an important role in policy development and implementation.
4. Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden: population ageing started relatively early; an integrated policy framework is in place to address the consequences of population and workforce ageing, covering all relevant policy areas and establishing formal coordination structures, with concerted implementation. The aim is to extend working life in a sustainable way using a holistic approach. Specific programmes and actions are in place and social dialogue and collective agreements play an important role in policy development and implementation.

There are significant differences across the countries in terms of demographics, economic situation, labour market characteristics and OSH systems. Broad policy initiatives may not be transferrable between countries. However, there are a number of policy elements and measures introduced in particular countries that could be applicable to national policy development elsewhere.

Policy-relevant findings

At national level

National governments have a key role in creating an environment supportive of age management and active and healthy ageing. Population and workforce ageing is a cross-policy issue and the challenges can be addressed in an efficient way by integrating the concept of active ageing into all relevant policy areas.

This includes:

- flexible retirement policies;
- promoting equal treatment in employment;
- creating systems for vocational rehabilitation and reintegration into the labour market;
- improving structures for adult education and training, and promoting lifelong learning;
- promoting work–life balance by developing child care and elderly care as well as by supporting carers;
- strengthening occupational health care and introducing periodic health examinations for workers over 45;
- improving data collection on health, disability and absenteeism according to age, gender and occupation;
- focusing efforts to reduce health inequalities on the most problematic sectors and occupations and the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market;
- training occupational healthcare personnel, labour inspectors and OSH experts in issues relating to ageing and work;
- strengthening health education and health promotion;
- promoting solidarity between generations and making efforts to change attitudes towards older people.

Technical and financial support and awareness-raising activities, targeting micro and small enterprises in particular, can help to ensure the success of such measures.

At EU level

The review of national policies showed that the EU legal and policy framework is a driver for action in Member States. The current strategic framework on OSH is based on the principle of active and healthy ageing; it focuses on promoting sustainable working life and employability. The 2016 review of the framework will provide an opportunity to introduce more specific actions to address OSH in the context of an ageing workforce.

Coordination across policy areas, taking into account the interaction of efforts to reduce the impact of population ageing, will be vital for successful outcomes to be achieved, as will the following supporting actions:

- creation and dissemination of guidance and tools to support the development and implementation of national policies;
- establishment of a specific platform for exchange of knowledge and good practice;
- improvement of EU-wide statistical data collection on health at work and sickness absence;
- further promotion of age management and active ageing through various funding instruments, for example the European Social Fund and the European Structural and Investment Funds.

Further information

The report is available in English on the EU-OSHA website at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/safer-and-healthier-work-any-age-analysis-report-eu-and-member-view>

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