Introduction
Demographic ageing implies a greater participation by older people in the labour market. To enable this, it is important to examine the factors that can facilitate or hinder extended working lives. Making work more sustainable over the life course requires working conditions that support individuals in remaining in work until the statutory retirement age.

Many factors influence sustainable work: individual characteristics, work-related elements, social norms and the institutional context. This report focuses on the role of working conditions in shaping sustainable work over the life course, using data from Eurofound’s European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS 2015). The report investigates working conditions for different age groups, and links these conditions to three sustainable work outcomes: work–life balance, health and well-being, and career prospects. It also investigates differences in working conditions on the basis of gender, occupation and country.

Policy context
In recent years, many Member States have raised the retirement age and provided financial incentives to work at older ages – in a few cases, seeking to improve working conditions. At EU level, the European Pillar of Social Rights aims to foster convergence towards better working and living conditions. Its principles include efforts to make work sustainable, such as: training and lifelong learning; flexible working arrangements for better work–life balance; and the right to a working environment adapted to workers’ needs. Both the Pillar and the Europe 2020 strategy seek to increase employment rates across the board, suggesting that the focus on improving working conditions must extend to include all age groups. And in the recently concluded autonomous agreement on active ageing, the European social partners commit to facilitating older workers in actively participating in the labour market until retirement age.

Key findings
Poor working conditions have a negative impact on sustainable work outcomes for all employees, regardless of age. Employees who are exposed to physical risks and quantitative demands (working at high speed and to tight deadlines) are more likely to experience worse health and poorer work–life balance. They are also more likely to state that they will not be able to continue work until age 60. Intention to depart the workforce earlier is also significantly associated with poor-quality management and experiencing adverse social behaviour.

Some aspects of working conditions remain stable or deteriorate until the age of 55 and then improve. Workers aged 55 and above report less exposure to physical risks, shorter weekly working hours and greater working time autonomy; older employees also report better work–life balance. However, older employees also participate less in training, and have more limited career prospects. Workers aged 45–54 years report fewer quantitative demands but their level of exposure to physical risks is nearly as high as that of younger workers.

A critical issue for employees aged 35–44 years is work–life balance, since they tend to work longer hours and have more care responsibilities. Results are mixed for younger employees (aged 35 and under) regarding the social environment at work. They are more likely to have social support and positive encouragement from colleagues and their boss, but also experience more adverse social behaviour – particularly women. They are also the most likely to work on temporary contracts, which may contribute to the greater job insecurity they report.

An analysis of the working conditions of workers of different ages also has to take into account differences between occupations. For all ages, a lower occupational level is associated with poorer health and well-being, and poorer career prospects. Especially for low- and mid-level
occupations, working conditions are consistently poor over the life course. The impact of poor working conditions from a young age is likely to accumulate, resulting in poor outcomes at an older age.

Unsurprisingly, working conditions vary by country and by age group across countries: in Hungary and Greece, work–life balance among older employees is much poorer than elsewhere. And for workers within the same occupation, country differences in working conditions outcomes are also evident.

Sustainable work outcomes affect the expected duration of working life – not necessarily in expected ways. Belgium, for example, with generally a good picture of sustainable work, has a shorter duration of working life. Estonia, in contrast, with poorer results for sustainable work outcomes, has a longer duration of working life and higher employment rates at older ages. These differences could be due to different institutional arrangements that facilitate or hinder early retirement.

**Policy pointers**

**Importance of working conditions for workers aged 55+**: It is precisely at the age of 55 that participation in work strongly declines. Conditions of work such as good physical environment, lower quantitative demands and working time autonomy increase the likelihood of workers continuing working when they are aged 55 and over.

**Recognise role of national institutional context**: Institutional and social contexts play an important role in determining duration of working life. Extending working life hence depends on measures in the areas of pension systems, health, education and care.

**Workplace social partners have a particular role**: Differences between countries in relation to working conditions have to be considered, for example, for the implementation of the Social Partners’ Framework Agreement on Active Ageing at national level. The role that employers’ and workers’ representatives can play at national, sectoral and workplace level is essential.

**Broaden definitions of ‘arduous jobs’**: Occupations where work over the life course has a negative effect on sustainable work outcomes require particular attention. The physical context, work organisation and social environment (including psychosocial risks) need to be considered. In line with this, in countries where arduous jobs are defined and given special treatment, psychosocial risks should be factored in.

**Prioritise training for older employees**: One of the challenges that demographic change poses is that of maintaining and updating the skills of the workforce. To increase the share of older employees involved in learning and on-the-job training, implementing the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (on-the-job training for employees over the age of 45) should be a priority.

**Monitor trends in world of work**: Changes in the world of work are likely to have implications on working conditions across all ages and could impact on sustainable work over the life course. For example, the use of temporary contracts (currently limited largely to younger employees) may spread to other age groups with potential consequences. At the same time, technological developments associated with the digitalisation of work may offer opportunities for older workers’ participation. Research and policy work need to monitor these developments.

**Further research required on role of motivation**: Finally, motivation has been identified in the literature review as one of the key factors contributing to remaining at work until older age. This aspect has to be further investigated.

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**Further information**

The report *Working conditions of workers of different ages* is available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications.

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