

Social Care workforce (ENGLAND)

February 2025

Older people with social care needs must be supported by people that are valued and properly compensated for the essential care they deliver. Social care should be built to provide people with fulfilling careers with professional development and safe and proper working conditions.

The social care sector is chronically underfunded and suffering from severe and chronic staffing shortages with Skills for Care estimating 131,000 vacant posts in 2023/24ⁱ. Low wages and poor terms and conditions are driving compassionate, skilled carers into other sectors with better pay and prospects. In 2024, Care workers with five or more years' experience earned on average, 10p more per hour than care workers with less than one years' experienceⁱⁱ. In domiciliary care, 38% of workers are employed on zero hours contractsⁱⁱⁱ. The turnover rate for the care sector is almost 25% meaning significant numbers of staff leave their roles in a typical year. For older people the consequences of these staffing shortages and retention issues are often dire, resulting in no care, poor or inconsistent care, or care that does not meet their specialist needs.

The estimated 1.6 million strong adult social care workforce has never been expected to do more^{iv}. The complexity of need is rising^v, and care workers are often required to undertake tasks that would previously have been undertaken by clinicians. The number of registered nurses working in social care declined by almost 40% between 2012 and 2022^{vi}, contributing to the reduction in nursing home beds^{vii}, either through closure or having to change their service offer to residential care only.

Between 2021/22 and 2023/24, there was a huge increase in care workers being brought in from overseas, from 20,000 to 105,000 workers. These extra people made a significant contribution to reducing vacancy rates in the sector, but since then concerns about the route being misused to facilitate general immigration has led to it being partially shut down. Overseas recruitment has also seen a huge rise in reports of exploitation by rogue employers^{viii}, with some workers living in appalling conditions^{ix}. This shows that while overseas recruitment can definitely help, it is not a sustainable long-term solution.

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A package of measures is urgently needed to address the fundamental workforce issues facing the social care sector, to make care an attractive and valued career choice, and improve recruitment and retention in all job roles. The Skills for Care-led Social Care Workforce Strategy, published in 2024, outlines both immediate and long-term measures that could serve as a blue-print^x. A functioning, responsive and skilled social care workforce is essential to the Government's mission to rebuild the NHS and cut waiting lists. Ultimately, reform is needed to ensure that the sector is fit to play its vital role in delivering support to those who need it within their communities, whether they are remaining in their own home or living in a residential setting.

Public Policy Proposals

- The Government should move at pace to broker and implement a Fair Pay agreement for care workers. There should be a sector specific wage and scale, ultimately aligned with NHS Agenda for Change, for reasons of fairness and to promote greater integration between health and care. Providers and commissioners will not be able to meet these extra costs on their own; significant Government funding will also be required.
- Fair Pay Agreements must robustly reinforce the right of Domiciliary Care Workers to be paid for travel and training time and be protected in law.
- In expanding delegated health duties, the Government must set out how it will compensate care workers, registered managers and providers for the extra training, time and risk management that will be required, and cover any increased insurance costs.
- Action should be taken to improve recruitment and retention of nursing staff in care homes. Pay and conditions for clinical professions working in care must compare favourably with those offered by NHS providers, with equivalent opportunities for Continued Professional Development.
- The illegal underpayment and exploitation of care workers, including those from overseas, must be tackled through a robust system of regulation and enforcement .
- Steps must be taken towards the professionalisation of the care workforce, linked to training and development and aimed at improving overall standards of care. The Professional Standards Accredited Registers programme^{xi} could be used as a starting point.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and equalities issues. See <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/> for more information.

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- ⁱ Skills for Care (2024), The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England
 - ⁱⁱ Skills for Care (2024), The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Skills for Care (2024), The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England
 - ^{iv} Skills for care [Workforce estimates \(skillsforcare.org.uk\)](https://skillsforcare.org.uk)
 - ^v Age UK (2024), State of Health and Care of Older People in England 2024
 - ^{vi} Age UK (2023), State of Health and Care of Older People in England 2023 (Abridged)
 - ^{vii} Skills for Care (2022), The state of the adult social care sector and workforce 2022
 - ^{viii} [Surge of 'rogue employers' exploiting international care workers – Channel 4 News](#)
 - ^{ix} [Migrant workers in UK to fill care roles 'charged up to £20,000' in illegal fees | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian](#)
 - ^x Skills for Care (2024), A Workforce Strategy for Adult Social Care in England
 - ^{xi} [Accredited Health Registers | Professional Standards Authority](#)