CARE ENGLAND
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International Recruitment

A LIFELINE OR A BURDEN?

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Introduction

The workforce shortage is a critical challenge facing the adult social care sector. Over recent years, providers have seen a decline in the number of domestic applications; however, the tumultuous shake-up of migration has significantly affected international recruitment. Between April and June 2024, 8,000 new international recruits started, compared to an average of 26,000 per quarter in the year to March – a decrease of over two-thirds.

The 2024 Sector Pulse Check highlighted that international recruitment was the most commonly reported method for filling care sector workforce vacancies, with 40% of respondents relying on it. However, this is a sharp decline from 57% in 2023, when the 2024 visa restrictions had not been implemented; with 20% of providers identifying barriers to international recruitment as one of their top three challenges, the situation has become increasingly dire. Despite the decline, both datasets emphasise that international recruitment is a crucial lifeline many providers continue to rely on - however recent changes have left many providers uncertain about how to fill the gaps.

The combined impact of limited domestic recruitment, tighter migration laws, and rising international recruitment costs means the sector is struggling to deliver the high-quality care expected. The current vacancy rate at 8.3% – three times the national average – as reported by Skills for Care, which is understood to have reduced to circa 105,000 vacancies in March 2025 alongside a significant number of displaced international workers in parts of the system; providers who once relied on international recruitment are now burdened by the associated challenges of international recruitment and has thus far not managed to overcome the domestic workforce challenges widely seen across the sector.

The reduction in vacancies is somewhat masked by displaced international workers, however, the delays in receiving international recruitment data, means the real impact on workforce retention is unlikely to be seen for another 6 to 9 months.

In this article, we will explore in more detail whether providers can still rely on international recruitment, or if the changes have meant that international recruitment is no longer a sustainable, viable solution to the workforce crisis.

Lifeline: International Recruitment Helps Fill Domestic Vacancies

Many providers have had to rely on international recruitment to fill the increasing number of vacancies which are unable to be filled domestically. Skills for Care outlines that over the two years since March 2022, 185,000 international recruits joined the sector, and the number of British workers fell by 70,000, this statistic encapsulates the workforce crisis. International recruitment will always play a role in the social care sector as an important outlet to ensure individuals can receive high-quality care, as there doesn't seem to be a sufficient growing appetite, as domestic recruits cite the challenging nature of the work and low pay. Moreover, the government's lack of focus on a long-term domestic workforce strategy further deepens the crisis, as the sector is provided with limited support. It is difficult for the social care sector to compete with other sectors; the inherent low wages fuelled by the lack of funding from central government, irregular shift patterns and a more negative perception of a career in care, means that domestic recruits will look to other sectors with greater benefits.

Across smaller providers, Skills for Care outlined that international applications, pre the April 2024 ban on dependents, saw 105,000 international recruits starting direct care, providing roles in the independent sector. This number is extremely telling, without international recruitment, the gap of unfilled vacancies is stark. Although there are greater challenges to international recruitment, which we will explore, it is undeniable that international recruitment provides a necessary lifeline to adult social care.

International recruitment has helped the sector fill vacancies over the last 24 months - but it is not a long term solution to the social care workforce crisis. Many providers have outlined that international recruitment continues to support the workforce in light of domestic workforce recruitment challenges. However, there needs to be a system wide long-term solution to improving domestic recruitment, as the recent and continuing changes to migration rules and increased costs only make the process harder. Providers are reaching a breaking point in trying to fill vacancies and the continued government efforts to supress international recruitment. Without any plan implemented to improve recruitment domestically, prior to the implementation of a Fair Pay Agreement, Employee Rights Bill, and Baroness Casey's review is unlikely to materially impact the sector until 2028. Currently, the sector's workforce remains afloat due to the rewards of historic international recruits and the current level of displaced workers, which without, would look vastly different – as currently, 19% of the workforce originates from overseas.

Burden: Increased Cost of International Recruitment Becomes Unviable

There is no denying that international recruitment has helped many providers fill vacancies, however, coupled with increasing workforce costs, is causing providers increased pressures. Recent government changes to migration rules, rising sponsorship fees, increased minimum salary thresholds, and a complex delayed process, have made international recruitment increasingly difficult as well as a more costly solution to address workforce shortages.

The government's decision to ban dependents for social care workers on the Social Care Visa and Skilled Worker Visa from April 2024 - while exempting NHS workers - has had a devastating impact on the social care workforce. This policy signals a lack of recognition of the sector's workforce shortages which are greater than the NHS.

The Home Office has proposed increasing the cost of a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) from £239 to £525, a fee that must be covered by the sponsoring employer. This change will apply to all new visa applications and renewals for working visas, including the Skilled Worker Visa and Health and Care Visa. While the Home Office has yet to confirm when these changes will take effect, ADASS has highlighted growing concerns among providers about the increasing costs and administrative

burdens of international recruitment. A rising number of care providers are already deterred by the complexity and expense of the process, as there is uncertainty around new wage thresholds, and the sporadic announcements from the Home Office, means providers have difficulty to plan financially and operationally. These latest proposals will only add to the challenges and deter more from using international recruitment to fill vacancies.

The reduction in international recruitment will inevitably drive increased reliance on agency workers to bridge the gap confirmed by the 2024 Sector Pulse Check Report which found 47.9% of responders increased spending on agency staff. Whilst the report highlighted a reduction in agency staff usage to 7.8% in 2024, down from 15.7% in both 2022 and 2023, the tightening of international recruitment policies will force providers to once again increase their reliance on agency workers.

Upcoming changes to terms and conditions under the Employee Rights Bill, means providers will face even greater challenges in maintaining workforce flexibility if the changes are not funded by government.

These rising costs and policy changes make it clear that while international recruitment has been a vital lifeline for many providers, it is not a sustainable long-term solution to the social care workforce crisis. With ever-increasing fees and complex administrative burdens, many providers will struggle to continue using this route. Without meaningful support and engagement from policymakers, international recruitment will become unviable, forcing providers to rely more heavily on costly agency staff; an unsustainable alternative that places further financial strain on the sector.

Conclusion: Where does this leave social care providers?

The role of international recruitment in the social care sector is essential- yet increasingly precarious, and therefore not a long-term solution. It has provided a vital lifeline for many providers struggling with persistent domestic workforce shortages. But, the government's recent migration policy changes and escalating recruitment costs, place providers under increasing financial strain, making international recruitment a less viable option. However, without a long-term domestic workforce plan, providers will increase their reliance on agency workers at a significantly higher cost, further exacerbating financial pressures. Currently, there has been no commitment to fully fund the outcome of the Fair Pay Agreement and Employee Rights Bill - the failure to recognise and address these challenges risks jeopardising care for millions who depend on it.

Looking ahead, an additional 540,000 posts will be required by 2040 to keep pace with the ageing population. Given social care's £68.1 billion contribution to the economy, strengthening the sector with the right resources would deliver far-reaching benefits to economic growth and align with the current governments desire to grow the economy.

If the government continues to restrict international recruitment, it must present an immediate viable domestic workforce solution with a clear fully funded plan to improve recruitment, retention, and workforce conditions, before the Casey review reports in 2028. International recruitment may offer short-term relief, but systemic reform is key to ensure the sector can attract and retain the skilled workforce necessary to support some of the most vulnerable; policymakers must act now to secure its future.

Read other issues of Post-Pulse and the full Sector Pulse Check 2024 report here.