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The voice of care

FROM BURNOUT
TO BALANCE

How EAPs Can Future-Proof the Social Care Workforce

March 2025

Acknowledgements

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About Care England:
Care England is the largest and most diverse representative body for independent providers of adult social care in England. It is a registered charity that works collaboratively with its members, stakeholders, and the Government to implement the foundations of a sustainable future for adult social care. Care England represents small, medium, and large providers, including single care homes, small local groups, national providers, and not-for-profit voluntary organisations and aims to improve the quality of care and ensure the health and safety of both staff and residents in care settings and advocates for sustainable policies and practices that address the sector's workforce challenges.

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Executive Summary

The adult social care sector faces unprecedented challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified professionals, with staggeringly high rates of vacancy (8.3%) and attrition (24.2%). These workforce challenges have a profound impact on the viability of care providing organisations, staff and the people the sector supports, and are exacerbated by demographic change and increasing demand for care services.

The ability of the sector to address key barriers, including low pay and poor perceptions of social care as a career, is limited by a challenging financial environment and low fee rates paid by Local Authorities. In the absence of meaningful Government intervention, it is vital that care providers explore innovative solutions to support their workforce and attract the necessary talent to their organisation.

Care England has partnered with Vivup, a leading employee benefits and wellbeing provider. Vivup's Employee Assistance Programme can help boost retention through proactive solutions ranging from financial support forums to burnout prevention strategies.

Demonstrating a commitment to employee wellbeing through long-term solutions, such as preventative mental health support and financial assistance, Vivup helps organisations within the care sector establish themselves as an employer of choice. In turn, these organisations will be better positioned to attract more talent and ensure that talent stays on board by offering a secure career that supports staff now and in years to come.

Background: Recruitment and retention challenges in adult social care

The adult social care sector faces unprecedented challenges in both recruiting and retaining qualified professionals. According to Skills for Care, in 2023/24 the sector vacancy rate was 8.3% (131,000) and attrition rate was 24.2%, despite an estimated 105,000 individuals joining the sector from overseas. 350,000 care workers left their roles in 2023/24, with a third of those leaving the sector altogether. Our Sector Pulse Check reported that a third of providers reported a decrease in domestic applications over the last 12 months.

This crisis is exacerbated by demographic change, an ageing population and increasing rates of multimorbidity resulting in higher demand for care; the gap between carers and those in need of care is increasing to unprecedented, and unsustainable levels. According to Skills For Care, 'if the number of adult social care posts grows proportionally to the projected number of people aged 65 and over in the population between 2020 and 2040, an increase of 29% (540,000 extra posts) would be required by 2040'.

The issue is compounded by the fact that the care workers tend to be older than staff in other sectors - the average care worker is 34, with 27% of staff aged 55 and above. This 27% of staff moving towards retirement in the next ten years equates to 540,000 posts to fill. This, combined with the need for an additional 540,000 posts due to the ageing population as well as the 131,000 vacancies that currently stand, points to a potential shortage of approximately 1 million workers by 2040.

Barriers to recruitment and retention

There are a wide range of factors that contribute to the challenges facing the adult social care workforce. Low pay and poor perceptions of social care as a career remain key, unaddressed challenges, identified by care providers as the principal factors harming recruitment and retention efforts.

Despite a desire to increase pay, care providers are severely limited in their ability to do so due to insufficient fee rates paid to them by local authorities. According to research by Care England, 85% of care providers reported that local authority fee uplifts failed to cover the rising cost of the NLW in 2024.

Providers do not have any other option for recruitment, as there is little support to help boost domestic recruitment - providers are forced to turn to international recruitment, which is becoming more difficult.

Concerningly, recent statistics show the UK Government's recent tightening of migration rules in March 2024 has already reduced international applications for many providers with Skills for Care reporting applications down from 26,000 per quarter pre-April 2024 to 8,000 per quarter after the 1st of April and a fall in visa applications over the last quarter to June 2024 of 81% lower than the same period in 2023. International recruitment was a lifeline, helping to keep the sector afloat, reducing vacancies and costly agency reliance, but that lifeline has now frayed.

The elevated vacancy rate in adult social care compared to other sectors in the UK economy points to significant labour supply shortages. Disappointingly, the volume of domestic applications to the sector remains insufficient to meet the demand, as UK workers likely favour work in other sectors for higher pay and less responsibility or pressure. The reasons for this - namely low pay, poor perceptions of the sector and challenging nature of the work - remain largely the same as previous years.

The impact of staffing shortages

Staffing shortages have a real impact on the viability of care providing organisations, existing members of staff and the people who draw on care and support services. According to Care England, as a result of staff shortages in 2024, 40% of care providers increased agency use, 3 in 10 turned down new admissions and 12% had to close services altogether.

The impact does not end there. Challenges in the adult social care sector also have knock-on effects throughout the NHS as, in many cases, it is not possible to put in place packages of care to support patients at home. In 2023, it was reported that there were 470,000 people in England waiting for care; coupled with delayed discharges which as of February 2025 sit at 22,000. These contribute to ambulances being unable to transfer patients and lives are lost. The Kings Fund shows that while the number of people requesting care has increased over the past five years, fewer people are receiving the social care they need as a result of staffing shortages in the sector.

Addressing recruitment and retention challenges

Organisations from across the adult social care sector have long-since called on Government to take concerted action to tackle the deep-rooted challenges facing the care workforce. For instance, in Care For Our Future: The roadmap to a sustainable future for adult social care, Care England called on the Government to mandate the professional registration of adult social care staff, implement a fully-funded £15 minimum care wage and develop parity of esteem with NHS staff, and, eventually, consolidate reforms within a fully-funded, long-term adult social care workforce plan. Without addressing the key barriers to recruitment and retention, most notably low levels of pay and poor perceptions of social care as a career, there is little hope of fundamentally turning the tide and achieving truly sustainable staffing in the sector.

Unfortunately, the reforms tabled by the Government to date have been limited. Where investment has been made, the impact has been minimal – 84% of care providers reported that the grants administered by Government in 2023, including the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund – Workforce Fund, had no impact on the financial sustainability of their organisation. In the absence of meaningful Government intervention to tackle workforce challenges, it is vital that care providers explore innovative solutions to support their workforce and attract the necessary talent to their organisation.

The next section of this paper outlines a series of tried and tested workforce solutions for care providers, which together represent a comprehensive end-to-end solution.

vivup Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP)

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) have been shown to improve retention rates to support care staff as employers can equip the workforce with the tools they need to build personal resilience and deal with issues before they escalate, become difficult to treat, or affect workplace performance and presenteeism.

An EAP helps keep staff well and at work by supporting their mental, physical, and financial wellness with a blend of preventative and in the moment solutions such as telephone and face-to-face counselling. Further, using an EAP solution helps employers demonstrate commitment to the workforce and in turn attract and retain more valued staff by enhancing employee benefits, offering a solution equivalent to a £1,500 per annum pay rise.

How it works...

By introducing an Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme (EAP) to support care staff, employers can equip the workforce with the tools they need to build personal resilience and deal with issues before they escalate, become difficult to treat or affect workplace performance and presenteeism.

An EAP will not only help to keep staff well and at work by supporting their mental, physical, and financial health with a blend of preventative and in the moment solutions but will also help employers demonstrate their commitment to the workforce and, in turn, attract and retain more valued staff.

EAP solutions ensure care staff will have access to a wide range of services that work in unison to support their wellbeing across all life stages, including:

- Online GP Services
- A proactive health management platform to deliver effective, evidence-based interventions that help people live happier, healthier lives
- 24/7, 365 Telephone Helpline with in-the-moment support
- Telephone Counselling
- Face to Face/Virtual Counselling
- Access to resources including:
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) Self-help Workbooks
- Domestic Abuse Resources and App
- Online Debt Advice
- Legal Support
- Dependent Family Support
- Financial Support
- Peer-to-peer Support
- COVID Recovery
- Carer Support

A credible EAP solution offers care providers the option to discuss and receive support for a range of mental, physical, and financial health concerns, ensuring that employees can access the right support at the right time from one centralised location. Holistic, all-encompassing EAP support services will not only help care homes cultivate happier, healthier workforces but will also enable employers to protect their organisations against any events or challenges that may present themselves in the future.

Benefits to Care Providers

Reduced absence rates

Staff absence is costing the UK economy around £18bn annually and 12.7% of all sickness days in the UK can be attributed to poor mental health. With workers in care experiencing the highest absence rates (3.8%), compare to other sectors, it's important to offer support options that help tackle absenteeism before it becomes a problem.

Without support in place, employers can expect to pay higher overhead costs in agency reliance and/or overtime cover while also experiencing reduced performance and service levels, workplace disruption, and low morale. However, as The Mental Health Foundation confirms, a business investment in employee wellbeing is key to keeping absenteeism under control. The Foundation estimates that for every £1 invested in wellbeing, £8 is saved due to reduced absenteeism.

Alternative to increasing pay

The issue of low pay is longstanding within the care sector. A report conducted by the Resolution Foundation confirms that the average care worker earns less than 80% of the wider workforce. With the cost of living increasing above the National Living Wage over the last two years, care staff are struggling to afford the things they want and need.

Low wages also present wider issues with morale, productivity, and retaining talent. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) states that employers who pay the UK's voluntary Real Living Wage experience enhanced reputation, easier recruitment, better labour relations, improved employee commitment and higher levels of motivation.

However, with pay rises not always possible in the care sector due to years of underfunding, social care workers are identified as the worst affected by insecure jobs. As such, employers must provide financial wellbeing support to help keep their people on track; this can be done by:

1. Supplying staff with forums which promote open dialogue on financial concerns and providing staff with financial seminars/meetings within the workplace enables their people to gain useful information and much needed support. By encouraging regular and open communication, employers can help reduce any stigma around financial struggles.
2. Provide employees with a financial wellbeing benefit which offers debt advice as well as a variety of easy to access financial wellbeing tools and resources such as financial calculators, information sheets, blogs and videos.
3. Use marketing materials to promote awareness of what financial support is available to staff and how they can access it.

The Care Worker's Charity has produced several resources to support registered managers and care workers to manage their finances, including how to budget, a savings calculator, and the charity also offers advice on energy and money saving advice for social care.

Reducing Burnout

The social care sector employs more workers than the NHS and research published by The Society of Occupational Medicine found that, in 2022, NHS England lost 75,000 staff to illness caused by burnout. A further 170,000 have left (or are planning to leave) due to workload pressures.

The reported 152,000 vacant adult social care posts in England during 2022/23 is 13,000 less than the previous year and led to care workers being added to the Shortage Occupation List in 2022, promoting an international recruitment drive which saw 70,000 overseas workers join the adult social care sector to help plug the gap.

This means that 57,000 domestic workers exited the sector which is further evidence of the workforce crisis.

Because burnout is caused by excessive and prolonged workplace stress, it tends to occur once the employee has reached a point of crisis. At this point, the employee is likely to be experiencing a sense of disengagement and a loss of purpose within their role – which in turn can impact workers' health, job performance, morale, and quality of life.

Employers can help prevent staff burnout by:

1. **Ensuring staff levels meet productivity demand.** It is crucial to have experienced staff available who are adequately trained to complete the task at hand. Having a proactive approach to annual leave and sickness absence is vital. Employers should ensure staff members can cover team members roles should an absence occur and that they are fully aware of any ongoing projects.
2. **Workloads are evenly distributed amongst staff** with realistic and achievable deadlines. Keeping up-to-date statistics on employees' productivity levels as well as conducting regular workload reviews, will help identify and address any areas of concern quickly.
3. **Ensure staff feel comfortable in approaching management** should they feel their workloads are unachievable. Having regular one-to-one meetings and an 'open door' mentality will help assist this.
4. **Encouraging teamwork and acknowledging achievements** will help staff feel supported and valued. Employees who feel appreciated in their workplace, feel more engaged and are less likely to want to leave their employer.
5. **Encouraging staff to take regular breaks** and to maintain physical activity throughout the day.

Without preventative healthcare tools and in-the-moment support services, the issue of burnout will continue to cost the UK care sector dearly. It is therefore essential that care sector decision-makers invest in interventions and strategies to address burnout before it impacts employee mental wellbeing.

Evidence Base

The positive impact of providing this kind of mental and financial support is already being felt in other care-related organisations. Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board provide community, primary, mental health, and hospital care to 450,000 individuals in the local community. When COVID-19 hit, it became clear that a dedicated mental health programme was needed to safeguard employee wellbeing after leaders realised their existing services no longer met requirements given the huge spike in anxiety, stress, and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic.

During the early days of COVID, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board had just two mental health counsellors providing face to face support to over 12,000 employees. With a long waiting list driven by a huge influx of staff now requiring assistance, it was decided that the introduction of a consistent wellbeing provision was key.

An EAP solution provides three vital strands to form good mental health habits in and out of the workplace. First, a 24/7 telephone helpline calmed the high levels of fear and anxiety being experienced by staff and reassured them that support was always available. Next, access to responsive counsellors with high referral rates allowed for more in-depth mental health care. Finally, a wide range of available online resources enabled staff to initiate self-help behaviours to work through challenging times.

With 50% of all employee referrals now being referred by line managers, support on-hand 24/7, 365 days a year, and the ability to access self-help tools when staff need them most, Cwm Taf Morgannwg are in a much stronger position to safeguard the mental health of their people in a meaningful way as they continue to navigate the after-effects of the pandemic from the front lines.

Most importantly, the introduction of a dedicated EAP has enabled staff to constantly consider their own wellbeing in the same way they would prioritise their physical health. As Cwm Taf Morgannwg discovered, only then can good mental health habits be formed and ingrained in our day-to-day lives.