

A strategy for the care workforce

August 2023

Executive Summary

Globally, the care economy is growing as the demand for care for children and the elderly increases. We are all likely to need, provide, and/or receive some form of care in our lives but adult social care and childcare and early education¹ in England are in crisis, with many people unable to access the care services they need for themselves and their families.

Representing different parts of England's care system, the underlying challenges facing the childcare and social care sectors are almost identical: government inaction, chronic underinvestment, a fragmented and largely privatised provider landscape, and widespread exploitation of care workers by employers enabled by weak accountability and labour market enforcement mechanisms.

However, the single greatest challenge affecting our care system is staffing - with both sectors experiencing acute recruitment and retention issues. Care work remains stubbornly low paid, with workers overwhelmingly facing poor working conditions, limited development and progression opportunities, and poor support for their health, safety and wellbeing. The workforce, overwhelmingly female, are often marginalised and silenced in issues affecting their day-to-day working lives, including the level of care, support and education they can provide.

"We're chronically short staffed despite recruitment efforts. We don't have the resources and materials we would like to enhance the children's learning and development."

Nursery worker

"There are unsafe staffing levels on both the day and night shifts. Care is depressingly rushed and residents long for just those few extra minutes of social contact. But we simply don't have the time. Staff are on their knees. Many are taking jobs in supermarkets for the same pay but far less stress." **Social care worker**

New TUC analysis shows that across the UK care workers are earning below the real living wage and are significantly underpaid relative to pay across the rest of the economy.

- More than three in five (62 per cent) childcare assistants and practitioners earn less than the real living wage.
- More than three in five (61 per cent) social care workers and senior care workers earn less than the real living wage.²

¹ Hereafter referred to as social care and childcare, respectively.

² Real living wage analysis is based on Labour Force Survey Q1 2023, and the Living Wage Foundation's Real Living Wage of £10.90 per hour. The analysis has been done at national level using the £10.90, and therefore does not take into consideration the higher Real Living Wage in London. As the analysis was done based on Q1 2023, it does not take into account the planned pay rise in Wales, which came into effect in June: <https://www.gov.wales/social-care-workers-in-wales-to-receive-real-living-wage-uplift>

- Social care workers earn only around 65 per cent of the median salary for all employees (£21,500 per annum compared to £33,000).³
- And in childcare, practitioners earn only 56 per cent of the median salary for all employees (£18,400), while childcare assistants earn 58 per cent of the median wage (£19,000).

This leaves many care workers and their families struggling to survive - more than one in four (28 per cent) children with a social care worker parent are growing up in poverty.⁴

"I had to use savings and cut back on spending to make sure had enough for a household shop and pay bills like rent, electric and gas. In the past I have gone without to make sure my children don't go without." **Social care worker**

While central government is the predominant source of public funding for care the organisation of care is devolved to the four nations, which has led to significant divergence in how care services are run and funded. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring sufficient provision of social care and childcare in their area.

Currently, there is no overarching national workforce strategic framework and associated funding in England. The failure of successive governments to engage in strategic workforce planning has meant staff numbers have failed to keep pace with the increased demand for social care and childcare – a challenge that will only grow in the future.

- New TUC analysis of Coram Family and Childcare trust survey data found that 97 of 102 (95 per cent) English local authorities that responded to the survey said they were having difficulty recruiting staff with the right skills and qualifications – and 81 (80 per cent) said it was "very difficult".
- In social care in England, there are currently 152,000 vacancies, equivalent to a 9.9 per cent vacancy rate.⁵

To help fill this gap, the TUC is proposing a new care workforce strategy for England, developed with trade unions and informed by the voice and experiences of care workers. We set out the critical building blocks to ensure care workers are valued and supported, as a key means of addressing the current staffing crisis and improving access to and quality of social and childcare services.⁶

Therefore, the core elements as set out in this workforce strategy should be integrated into government policy at the highest levels and led by relevant departments

³ Comparisons to median salary are full-time salaries and based on the 2022 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

⁴ TUC (2022) [1 in 4 children with care worker parents are growing up in poverty | TUC](#)

⁵ Skills For Care (2023) [The size and structure of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#)

⁶ This care workforce strategy builds on TUC's recent [New Deal for Social Care](#) and a [New Deal for the Childcare Sector](#) proposals.

overseeing childcare and social care in England – currently the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care respectively in England. We propose that the final strategy is agreed through National Partnership Forums in social care and childcare, with full participation of workers and their unions.

We propose four key focus areas for the national care workforce strategy:

Worker voices heard and valued including through sectoral collective bargaining arrangements and through the creation of National Partnership Forums in social care and childcare.

Decent pay and conditions for all care workers through a collectively bargained sectoral agreement on fair pay and decent working conditions, a new sectoral minimum wage of £15 per hour, sick pay, secure contracts and full payment for all time worked, as well as access to efficient labour market enforcement mechanisms.

Skills, training, and progression pathways with nationally negotiated training frameworks to ensure consistency and quality. These should be aligned with national pay structures to make sure staff are fairly remunerated and can progress as they acquire new skills and knowledge. Training must be accredited and qualifications recognised and transferrable to new employers.

Protect health, safety, and wellbeing including ensuring that staffing levels are based on care and education needs and not arbitrary ratios. And a zero-tolerance approach to workplace abuse with comprehensive safeguarding and support, notably for staff who may be at increased risk of experiencing abuse and harassment including Black and migrant workers.

To deliver this strategy the TUC is calling for government to take the following enabling actions:

- Provide adequate, long-term treasury funding to deliver the strategy including off-setting 13 years of real terms cuts to local authority budgets and establishing a future funding pathway that will enable local authorities to meet demand and deliver good pay and conditions for the care workforce including a £15 wage floor.
- Support local authorities to move towards public provision of social care and childcare wherever possible and as soon as possible. Where a decision is made to outsource delivery of care services, public funding must come with conditions to ensure that public contracts deliver decent employment standards and high quality care.
- Develop in-depth data and insight to understand current workforce needs in both social care and childcare, predict future trends and support transparency.

- Increase attention given to care services in contingency planning exercises, so that the care workforce role, and requirements such as staffing levels, are better understood before any future pandemic or other disaster.
- Ensure worker voice is central to the implementation of technology used to plan, deliver and monitor care services, including digital technology and AI to ensure that care workers are aware of how technology is being used and for what purpose and that workers are not exploited or discriminated against.

Introduction

We are all likely to need, provide, and/or receive some form of care in our lives. Yet in social care and childcare in England are in crisis, with many people unable to access the care services they need for themselves and their families.

At the heart of the problem is a lack of strategic planning and investment, which has led to a severe recruitment and retention crisis in the care system.

The care system is not working for families, and it is not working for care workers.

It's time for a proper plan to ensure the care workforce is supported, rewarded and able to progress – now and into the future.

This report, developed with care workers and their trade unions, foregrounds care workers voices and experiences to spotlight current challenges across the care economy.⁷

We lay out the critical building blocks of a care workforce strategy that are common to childcare and social care. Our proposals will ensure all care workers in England are valued and supported, as a key means of addressing the current staffing crisis and improving access to and quality of social and childcare services.⁸

Why is the strategy needed?

Social care and childcare are critical public services. Yet persistently poor pay and employment conditions, chronic government underinvestment and extensive privatisation have contributed to an acute recruitment and retention crisis across both sectors. As a result, care services are far from meeting current or future demand.

In this section we evidence the challenges facing the care system in England, to show why a new workforce strategy is urgently needed.

⁷ Care worker quote sources: GMB (2023) CEC Special Report Social Care; TUC (2023) TUC childcare worker survey 2023; TUC (2020) [Dying on the job](#); Unison (2023) Unison social care worker member survey 2023; Unison (2021) Unison survey of Black members in social care – EHRC Inquiry submission; Unison (2021) [Staffing levels in care 'dangerously low' with dying residents denied dignified end, says UNISON survey](#).

⁸ This care workforce strategy builds on TUC's recent [New Deal for Social Care](#) and [New Deal for the Childcare Sector](#) proposals.

Funding and privatisation

There is a long-term and chronic underinvestment in care services. The UK spends less than 0.1 per cent of GDP on childcare, the second lowest investment in the OECD.⁹ And the shortfall in social care investment has been so great in recent years that measures aimed at giving a funding boost to the sector ‘won’t touch the sides’ in relieving the system’s pressures, with the workforce crisis ‘worse than ever’.¹⁰

While central government is the predominant source of public funding for care the organisation of care is devolved to the four nations, with significant policy divergence between them. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring sufficient provision of social care and childcare in their area.⁵

Many local authorities across England are facing challenges meeting their statutory duties to provide care because of the ongoing workforce crisis, in the absence of an overarching national workforce strategy and associated funding.

In Spring 2023 over half a million hours of domiciliary care (564,584 hours) were not delivered across the English regions due to lack of staff – which is equivalent to around £14.7 million worth of care that could have provided jobs and ensured people receive the care they need in their homes.¹¹ Similarly in childcare and early years education, 40 per cent of councils in England saw a spike in nursery closures in 2022, with 88 per cent expecting more closures in 2023, citing workforce shortages as a key factor.¹²

Increasing fragmentation and privatisation of care in recent years has compounded these challenges. In childcare, private providers account for 65 percent of all group-based providers and nearly a quarter of all provision.¹³ Private providers also deliver the majority of social care services, for example 87 per cent of care home beds for older people are supplied by for-profit organisations.¹⁴ The significant increase in the role of private equity in care services in recent years has led to profit extraction and reductions in the staff pay and terms and conditions as well as quality of care across both sectors.¹⁵

⁹ Centre for Progressive Policy (2021) [CPP | Women in the labour market \(progressive-policy.net\)](https://www.progressive-policy.net/cpp-women-in-the-labour-market/)

¹⁰ UK Parliament (2022) [Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee - Long-term funding of adult social care. Second Report of Session 2022–23](#); IfG (2023) [Performance Tracker 2022/23: Spring update - Adult social care.](#)

¹¹ ADASS (2023) [Spring Survey 2023](#)

¹² LGA (2023) [Nine in 10 councils concerned about nursery capacity ahead of 30 hours free childcare extension – new LGA research | Local Government Association](#)

¹³ TUC analysis of DfE childcare and early years provider survey [Create your own tables, Table Tool – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁴ Laing Buisson (2021) Care Homes for Older People UK Market Report, 31st edition.

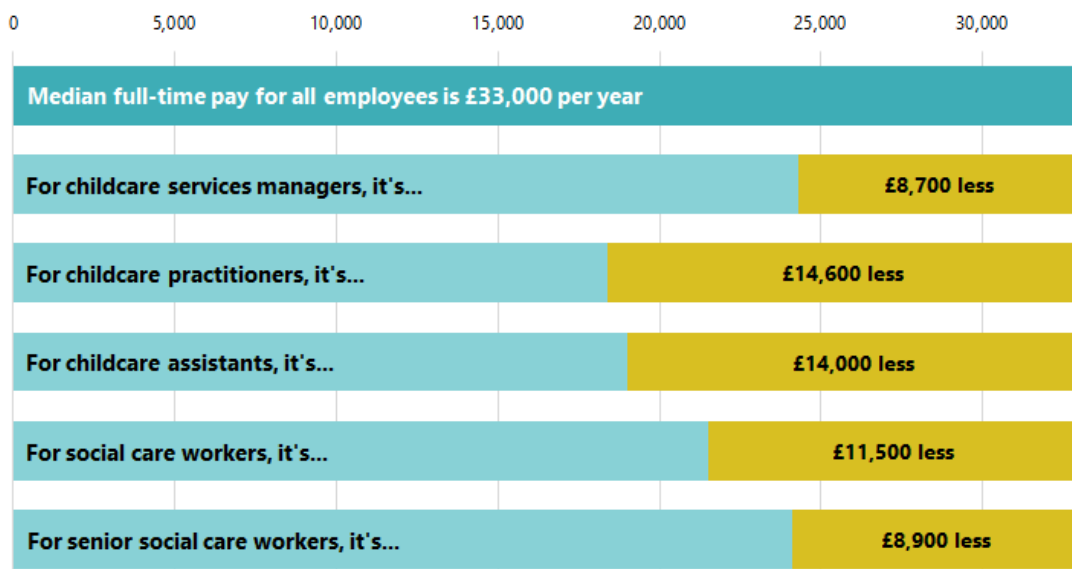
¹⁵ Corlet Walker, C et al. (2022) [Held to ransom: What happens when investment firms take over UK care homes. CUSP Working Paper Series, No 35](#); CHPI (2019) [Plugging the leaks in the UK care home industry: Strategies for resolving the financial crisis in the residential and nursing home sector](#); Nuffield Foundation and UCL, (2022) [Nursery sector risks being damaged by large corporate takeovers | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#); Guardian (2023) [Childcare sector in England must not become ‘playground for private equity’, experts say | Children | The Guardian](#)

Pay and working conditions

New TUC analysis shows that care workers in the UK are earning below the real living wage and are significantly underpaid relative to pay across the rest of the economy, as detailed in Figure One and as follows:

- More than three in five (62 per cent) childcare assistants and practitioners earn less than the real living wage.
- More than three in five (61 per cent) social care workers and senior care workers earn less than the real living wage.
- Social care workers earn only around 65 per cent of the median salary for all employees (£21,500 per annum compared to £33,000).
- And in childcare, practitioners earn only 56 per cent of the median salary for all employees (£18,400), while childcare assistants earn 58 per cent of the median wage (£19,000)¹⁶.

Figure 1. Gross full-time annual pay (£), all employees and selected care occupations



Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2022

¹⁶ The difference between early years and childcare assistants and practitioners: the ONS occupational code defines practitioners as “leading the learning and development of and care for children from birth up to five years of age in a school, nursery, or childcare environment” and assistants as “assist[ing] in the care of children from birth up to seven years of age in day or residential nurseries, children’s homes, maternity units and similar establishments”. As practitioners seem to be more experienced and in charge of leading activities, it seemed surprising that practitioners are, on average, paid less. One possibility is that these job titles, in practice, are sometimes used interchangeably.

This leaves many care workers struggling to survive on poverty pay. More than one in four (28 per cent) children with social care worker parents are growing up in poverty.¹⁷

"At home it is always cold because I have to turn the boiler off. We eat one meal a day, I hardly see my kids because, I work shifts, waking nights, sleep ins etc for overtime. I have no life, I just work and come home." **Social care manager**

Low pay is a key factor contributing to the recruitment and retention crisis across care sectors. In a 2023 GMB survey, 93.8 per cent of social care workers said they believed low wages put people off working in care.¹⁸ In a new TUC survey of childcare workers, more than one in two (55 per cent) said the one thing they would change about their job is pay.¹⁹

"We're doing teaching on the cheap." **Childcare practitioner**

"There is no consistency in pay and conditions due to different contracts in place. This adds to low morale and a sense of not being valued. I have made a positive difference to the lives of vulnerable adults as best I can, but I don't feel I can continue in such circumstances. I feel unnecessarily stressed and lacking in confidence. ... The sector needs younger people to join. But the pay is too poor to make it a long-term career." **Social care worker**

"Cannot stress how poor management is, how low morale is, and how demoralising it is to read about huge fees being paid by parents when we are told minimum wage is "competitive" by nursery operators." **Childcare practitioner**

Women are disproportionately likely to work in paid care jobs, particularly those from marginalised groups. In social care, working class women from Black and migrant backgrounds are overrepresented in the workforce. 81 per cent of care workers and senior care workers are women, and 25 per cent are BME (compared to 15 per cent across all workers). The number of migrant social care workers is growing rapidly, largely due to care workers being added to the shortage occupation list in 2022 – in 2022/23 70,000 international care workers were recruited, up 50,000 from the previous year.²⁰

In childcare, it is younger women from working class backgrounds that are overrepresented in comparison to the wider labour market. 99 per cent of early education childcare assistants and practitioners are women, and 41 per cent are under 30.²¹

¹⁷ TUC (2022) [1 in 4 children with care worker parents are growing up in poverty | TUC](#)

¹⁸ GMB (2023) CEC Special Report Social Care.

¹⁹ The TUC surveyed 540 childcare and early years workers between 7th July and 7th August 2023. The survey was self-selecting and is not a weighted representative sample. The survey has been used to give an insight into the experiences of people working in the sector.

²⁰ Skills for Care (2023) [The size and structure of the adult social care sector and workforce in England.](#)

²¹ Based on TUC analysis of the Labour Force Survey Q1 2023

It is no coincidence that this group of historically undervalued workers are underpaid and subject to exploitative conditions in the care economy, with frontline care work undervalued compared to similar roles elsewhere in the health and education systems.

Care workers told the TUC low pay is linked to the professional status of care roles in social care and childcare settings as opposed to the higher pay attached to equivalent roles elsewhere in the education and health care system.

"We're expected to do a lot of the same work as teachers and we get paid so much less than them." **Childcare practitioner**

"The lack of respect for early years as a job – we are expected to be educated to degree level, the same as a teacher, however our pay is not on par and our knowledge of the age group is not considered to be at the same level of a teachers..." **Childcare practitioner**

The impact of low pay is often combined with job insecurity and a lack of access to sick pay, a triple blow that leaves many care workers in a precarious financial situation. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of social care workers are employed on zero-hours contracts.²²

"With me being on a zero-hours contract, I don't always get work. If I become ill I don't get paid. If I get a cold or flu-related illness I'm expected to stay at home without pay because I may pass the illness to our service users ... It is a very very stressful life." **Social care worker**

"I can't pay my bills or heat my home I have to choose one of them. I start to accumulate debt that I can't always pay off because I can't guarantee I will have the pay." **Social care worker**

Skills, training and career pathways

The changing demands of our care system mean that it is now more important than ever for workers to be given regular opportunities to update their skills to support their career progression, keep pace with technology change or develop new skills to support change in the workplace and deliver high-quality care and education.

In social care, the long-term absence of clear career pathways linked with training has led to unsustainable turnover rates, and there is not a parity of esteem and access to the training and qualifications that can be attained in the NHS for care workers who undertake similar roles to NHS workers.²³

In childcare, the skills gap is exacerbating recruitment issues. New TUC analysis of Coram Family and Childcare Trust survey data found that 97 of 102 (95 per cent)

²² Skills for Care (2022) [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England 2022](#).

²³ GMB (2023) CEC Special Report Social Care; for further discussion of challenges around career pathways and training in social care see TUC (2023) [DHSC Care workforce pathway for adult social care: call for evidence: TUC submission](#).

English councils said that they were having difficulty recruiting staff with the right skills and qualifications – and 81 (80 per cent) said it was “very difficult”.

“Not enough qualified staff coming to work in Early Years which puts pressure and stress on qualified staff. More children with additional needs attending nursery and not enough trained staff to help deal with individual needs. Not enough support. Not feeling valued by employer.” **Nursery worker**

In focus groups with the TUC, childcare workers told us the low rate of pay puts those with higher levels of qualifications off as they can get better paid work elsewhere such as in schools.

“Nurseries are losing their qualified staff. Your [NVQ] Level Three’s they don’t want to do the hours anymore, they want more money, they leave. And you are struggling to get another Level Three.” **Nursery Deputy manager**

“It’s really difficult to get staff at Level Three at the moment.” **Childcare practitioner**

For many care workers, gaining extra skills and additional responsibilities comes with very little reward. New TUC analysis shows that even those working in senior and management roles in the sectors earn significantly less than the UK national median, earning around £24,000 in both social care and childcare – around 27 per cent less than the median salary for all.

“I got 10p extra an hour for taking over and being in charge... it’s a disgrace.” **Childcare practitioner**

Care workers not being fairly remunerated is pervasive at all levels of the workforce and contributes to staff leaving their roles. Between 2016 and 2022, the pay gap for experienced social care staff compared to new starters fell from around 30 pence per hour to 7 pence per hour in England.²⁴

The disconnect between pay, skill and expectations of childcare providers was a strong theme in our survey of childcare workers. The lack of recognition of the skill involved in delivering childcare and early education has impacted workforce morale and left workers feeling undervalued.

“Trying to progress up the scale is hard and changing jobs to do so impossible as nurseries do not want to employ more experienced staff but would rather take trainees or newly trained staff so that they can save money”. **Nursery worker**

²⁴ Skills for Care (2022) [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England 2022](#); Skills for Care (2023) [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England 2023](#).

“Early years staff are expected to go above and beyond every day often doing a lot more than their role entails however we could earn the same working in a supermarket which doesn't show that staff or early years education is valued.” **Childcare practitioner**

Health, safety and wellbeing

Across both social care and childcare poor health and safety practices are rife, with little support leading to stress and burnout, driving workers out of care jobs and deterring would-be care workers from entering. Care workers were deemed essential key workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, but were not provided with adequate support or basic protection such as suitable PPE to ensure their safety at work – with little evidence that lessons have been learnt by the government for future pandemics:

“Two colleagues died as a result and I lost count of the number of residents who also died. Worst experience in 41 years of working in health and social care. I'll never forget or forgive.” **Social care assistant**

“[There was a huge] shortage of PPE in care homes. [I was] expected to go into Covid patients without appropriate PPE [and] wash deceased Covid patients without appropriate PPE.” **Residential social care worker**

Workers in social care and childcare also report increasing work intensification, with increasingly unmanageable care worker to service user ratios and long hours negatively impacting workers' mental health and wellbeing as well as service quality.²⁵ As of September 2023, new relaxed ratios in childcare settings will come into effect in England, though they are not mandatory, the move has been widely criticised by workers, providers and parents alike.²⁶

“Morale is really low. My senior now says if we have anyone on holiday, we don't get release staff to cover that. We are on the point of breaking. Some days I can't do it anymore. An office job might be better for me but I'd be leaving my kids behind.”

Nursery worker

“The dying aren't dying with dignity because there's not enough staff to sit with people in their final hours. Residents are being neglected, not having baths, meals are late, and staff are exhausted.” **Social care worker**

This is highly concerning given the negative health effects associated with intensive working practises, with long hours known to be a major cause of fatigue, accidents and injury and long-term illness.²⁷ In a recent GMB member survey over two-thirds (67.5 per

²⁵ Early Years Alliance (2018) [Mental health and the early years workforce | early years alliance \(eyalliance.org.uk\)](https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/); Unison (2016) [Councils still insisting on 15 minute homecare visits](#); TUC (2023) TUC childcare worker survey 2023.

²⁶ Your Money (2023) [Campaigners slam revived childcare ratio relaxation plans - Your Money](#)

²⁷ TUC (2023) [Work intensification: The impact on workers and trade union strategies to tackle work intensification.](#)

cent) of social care workers reported they their work was causing them stress or impacting their mental health.

"People aren't getting regular baths or showers, just a wash. There's no time to do the job properly. Some are not getting dressed until 2pm, and assisted feeding is rushed. Staff are exhausted, angry and upset because they know they just don't have the time to do everything as they should." **Social care worker**

"We don't have enough staff for children's needs." **Nursery worker**

"I do overnight shifts. I have sleeping problems. I never leave work on time. It's affecting my emotional sense. I feel exhausted and very low." **Homecare worker**

"It is so intense all the time. [I] often miss breaks and work through lunch to try and fit everything in. Just too many children to care for, it's totally exhausting and can take over your life." **Nursery worker**

"Staff morale has never been so low." **Childcare practitioner**

Care workers are at heightened risk of violence and abuse in the workplace. For example, in social care, nearly four in ten (39 per cent) of reports for serious injuries in residential care settings were caused by violence in 2021/22, rising to half or more in some regions – compared to 9 per cent for all workers.²⁸ Social care workers participating in a recent GMB survey recently reported that assaults often take place in mental health, dementia, and other, specialist settings where safe staffing ratios are not necessarily in place and proper risk assessments may not have been carried out.²⁹

"I am attacked on a fairly regular basis. The worst being an injury to my forehead that required 18 stitches." **Team leader, social care**

Childcare workers also report violence, connecting this to unsafe and unsuitable staffing levels because of arbitrary adult-to-child ratios which don't account for differing needs of children. Many of the childcare practitioners we spoke to talked of their real concern that inadequate staffing levels and not having enough staff with the right skills was compromising the care that children with special educational needs receive.

"It's the level of violence because these children are non-verbal, a lot of staff have been bitten, punched, kicked, glasses broken." **Childcare practitioner**

"On paper it looks like staffing levels are fine but we've got some children that require two staff to one child because of the level of violence." **Nursery worker**

"I work in a local authority nursery in an age 2-3 room where our ratio is 1-5. We have a huge number of children with additional needs who if they were in a specialist placement

²⁸ GMB (2023) CEC Special Report Social Care.

²⁹ GMB (2023) CEC Special Report Social Care.

would have a 1-2 ratio. Managing the different complex needs is impossible in such a high ratio.” **Nursery Worker**

Black care workers are at additional risk of poor working conditions as well as violence and harassment in the workplace.³⁰

“My experience regarding racism cut across members of staff and service users. Some services users decline to go out with you because they don't like you or are not comfortable with you as a Black person.” **Social care worker**

“The head of service wanted to reduce my holiday entitlement. I challenged this as this was not done to white colleagues who had a change of role. I was made to jump so many hoops and made to contact the HR yet other colleagues who are not Black did not encounter the barriers I faced. The matter did get resolved but after I had put up a fight. I felt treated differently.” **Social care worker**

Migrant care workers play a crucial role in ensuring a skilled and fully staffed care workforce delivering care services - and will remain so in the years to come. Yet exploitation along this group is particularly rife with many experiencing threats and abuse from employers and service users alike.³¹ Yet many migrant care workers experience significant barriers to exercising their employment rights.³²

The growing need for care

Without a strategy that centres recognising and valuing the workforce and seeks to pay care workers accordingly, the crisis in care will only get worse.

Age UK suggest that 2.6 million adults over the age of 50 in England are now living with some form of unmet care need.³³ In social care projections suggest that between 2023 and 2033 the number of people requiring support in England will rise by 28 per cent among over-65s and 15 per cent among those of working age, while the number of people needing residential care (or equivalent specialist housing) will rise by 27 per cent between now and 2033.³⁴ And according to a recent Department for Education survey, in childcare around 64 per cent of group or school-based providers in England report having difficulties meeting demand due to staffing issues.³⁵

³⁰ Turnpenny et al. (2022) [Abuse and Wellbeing of Long-Term Care Workers in the COVID-19 Era: Evidence from the UK](#).

³¹ Guardian (2022) [Migrant care workers came to help the UK. Now they're trapped in debt bondage](#); Financial Times (2022) [Exploitation of migrants is rising as care homes struggle to fill jobs](#).

³² Meri Ahlberg, Caroline Emberson, Lucila Granada, Shereen Hussein and Agnes Turnpenny (2022) [‘The vulnerability of paid, migrant, live-in care workers in London to modern slavery’](#), Rights Lab University of Nottingham.

³³ Age UK [We can't wait for care campaign | Age UK](#)

³⁴ Hu, B, Hancock, R and Wittenberg R. (2020) Projections of Adult Social Care Demand and Expenditure 2018 to 2038, Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, LSE.

³⁵ DfE (2023) [Pulse survey of childcare and early years providers](#)

Estimates suggest that the government's announcement to extend the 30 funded hours offer to children from the age of nine months will require at least 38,000 more childcare workers.³⁶ However this risks exacerbating existing problems - in our survey and our focus groups childcare practitioners from Scotland told us repeatedly that a similar extension of funded entitlements without a proper plan or resources to address staffing levels had caused significant issues, increasing their workload, putting more stress on them and often meaning they were not able to meet the needs of children.³⁷

"The [introduction of 1140 funded hours] has changed the job significantly and I feel it's a common theme that getting it right for every child is actually getting it right for no child until the 1140 changes. There is lack of understanding of the job and throughout the UK there are knowledgeable practitioners leaving in droves." **Childcare practitioner**

"1140 and the hours children receive is sending staff to breaking point." **Childcare practitioner**

The care sector is in crisis. With no clear plan backed up by proper funding, it is difficult to see how current needs will be met, let alone how we will cope with future demand.

³⁶ Women's Budget Group (2023) [WBG finds Government funding for early education and childcare falls short by £5.2bn - Womens Budget Group](#)

³⁷ In 2019 Scottish government introduced a duty on local authorities to increase the number of funded hours for childcare for 3- and 4-year-olds and eligible 2 years olds from 600 to 1140 hours. This was due to be rolled out in August 2020 but was paused until August 2021 due to the impacts of the pandemic. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that the funded entitlement is available for all eligible children in their area. [Early learning and childcare expansion - Early education and care - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

A strategy for the care workforce

We have outlined a set of common challenges across the social care and childcare sectors. These stem from the undervaluing of the workforce, a lack of recognition of the skills and expertise of the workers, and a misunderstanding of the importance of the work that social care and childcare workers do.

It is time for a comprehensive people plan, led by those on the ground - the workforce and their representatives.

In the following section, we lay out a strategy for the care workforce in England across four key focus areas – the critical building blocks necessary to put staffing on a sustainable footing and improve access to and the quality of care.

Government should integrate this strategy into policy at the highest levels as a central pillar of national care services in social care and childcare. This will be led by the relevant departments - currently the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care respectively in England.

The final workforce strategy should be agreed through National Partnership Forums in social care and childcare, with full participation of workers and their unions.

1. Worker voices heard and valued

- Government should ensure there are effective means for workers to participate in all decisions about their working lives through sectoral collective bargaining and by establishing National Partnership Forums in social care and childcare.
- National Partnership Forums should bring together government, trade unions, employers and commissioners, and provide machinery for engagement and negotiation. These Forums should support care service coordination and development and the implementation of national and local policy and strategy where there are implications for the care workforce.
- Government should ensure that union recognition and collective bargaining are mandatory conditions for obtaining public contracts and public funding.
- At an employer level, staff should be involved in organising rotas and teams and there should be a requirement to consult with staff and their union representatives over changes to the organisation of work.

- All parties to collective bargaining should ensure bargaining takes account of the nature of the workforce, particularly gender, race, and migration status. Consultation and negotiation structures should work alongside Black and migrant workers to identify relevant issues and making sure that Black and migrant workers' voices are represented at the negotiating table.³⁸

2. Decent pay and employment conditions for all care workers

- Government should ensure that all social care and childcare workers are covered by sectoral collective bargaining arrangements (fair pay agreements). This should bring together employers and trade unions to agree minimum pay and working conditions which are binding on all employers in the sector nationally.
- Government should introduce a new sectoral minimum wage of £15 per hour for all childcare and social care roles. Both sectors should adopt nationally negotiated pay and grading structures that reward staff fairly, according to skills, experience and qualifications and allow for progression. The pay structures should be transparent and deliver parity with equivalent roles in the NHS and schools and ensure full payment for all time worked.
- Government should make auto-enrolment into workplace pensions work better for low-paid workers in this sector by removing the minimum earnings threshold and raising employer contributions. And explore options for sector-wide pension schemes, to help retention and make working in childcare and social care a more attractive long-term career.
- Government and employers should improve terms and conditions of service - most importantly including access to decent occupational sick pay, paid at a rate that is at least equivalent to a week's pay at the real living wage, as a minimum. Workers should receive their full statutory holiday entitlements.
- Workers should have access to efficient labour market enforcement mechanisms and to redress if agreed pay and employment conditions are not met, including for agency and migrant workers.
- Workers should have a right to predictable schedules and minimum guaranteed hours, with the use of zero-hours contracts in both the childcare and social care sectors ended.
- Every employer should have robust grievance and disciplinary processes, agreed with the relevant trade unions and including full access to union representation.

³⁸ See TUC (2022) [Trade union anti-racism manifesto](#).

3. Skills, training and progression pathways

- Government should introduce nationally negotiated training frameworks to ensure consistency and quality. These should be aligned with national pay structures to make sure staff are fairly remunerated and can progress as they acquire new skills and knowledge. Training must be accredited and qualifications recognised and be transferrable to new employers.
- Every worker should have the right to ten days' paid training time and an individual learning account.
- Government should support the recognition and professionalisation of the care workforce by establishing care worker registration systems where they do not already exist, with no cost to workers to register.
- More broadly, government should cancel plans to scrap Level Two and below courses and reinstate any recognised care or early years education training earmarked for funding cuts. They should also restore the successful UnionLearn programme that supported workers to get back into training and learning.

4. Health, safety and wellbeing

- Government and employers should ensure staffing levels are based on care and education needs, and not arbitrary ratios and engage with the unions to agree standards for safe staffing levels.
- Government and employers should ensure workers have access to safe and appropriate personal protective equipment, with regular replenishing of stocks and training in its use for all workers. Relevant risk assessments should be published by employers and shared with whole workforce.
- Individual employers should carry out workplace stress risk assessments to mitigate psychosocial risk such as burnout and issues arising from workload, work intensity or work culture. There should be a zero-tolerance approach to workplace abuse and harassment, and particular support for those workers who may be at additional risk of experiencing abuse and harassment including Black and migrant workers.
- Unions and employers should ensure that every worker has access to accredited trade union health and safety representatives, with roving representatives having the right to access multiple sites.

What is needed for the strategy to succeed?

First and foremost, this strategy will need adequate, long-term Treasury funding.

Funding needs to restore 13 years of real terms cuts to local authority budgets, setting a future funding pathway that will enable local authorities to meet demand and deliver good pay and conditions including £15 wage floor as soon as possible.

Ministers need to support local authorities to move towards public provision of social care and childcare wherever possible and as soon as possible. Where a decision is made to outsource delivery of care services, public funding must come with conditions to ensure that public contracts deliver decent employment standards. This would include supporting commissioners and providers to carry out workforce analysis and planning and implement the actions outlined in this workforce strategy.

There should be a robust evaluation of outsourced contracts, and commissioners should share learning and good practice about insourcing and procurement of care services that deliver good work.

Government should establish a Domesday Book central register of public service contracts, which will include information on all care contracts or providers in receipt of government funding, with contract or funding details, company information, their remuneration and employment policies and contract performance.

The National Partnership Forums for social care and childcare should develop in-depth data and insight to understand current workforce needs in both sectors, predict future trends and support transparency, including:

- Shared national minimum workforce datasets for social care and childcare bringing together provider, commissioner and national-level data on providers and the workforce.
- Expand current national datasets to ensure workers' experiences and conditions are fully captured, including in-work travel time, changes to workload etc.

Government should ensure that care services are not an afterthought in contingency planning, so that the care workforce role and required staffing levels are better understood before any future pandemic or other disaster.

Finally, worker voice should be central to the implementation of technology used to plan, deliver, and monitor care services including digital technology and AI to ensure that care workers are aware of how technology is being used and for what purpose and that workers are not exploited or discriminated against.³⁹

³⁹ See TUC (2021) [Dignity at work and the AI revolution: A TUC Manifesto](#) and NASUWT (nd) [Artificial Intelligence and Digital Technologies](#)

Appendix

Table 1. Percentage of employees earning less than the Real Living Wage (£10.90) in Q1 2023, by care occupation

	Number earning less than £10.90 per hour	Number of employees	%
<i>Early education and childcare practitioners</i>	56026	68275	82
<i>Early education and childcare assistants</i>	72819	139005	52
Early education and childcare practitioners and assistants	128845	207280	62
<i>Care workers and home carers</i>	427122	690418	62
<i>Senior care workers</i>	50548	91439	55
Care workers and home carers and senior care workers	477670	781857	61

Source: TUC analysis of the Labour Force Survey Q1 2023. The analysis has been done at national level using the £10.90 figure, and therefore does not take into consideration the higher Real Living Wage in London. This is due to data limitations. As the analysis was done based on Q1 2023, it does not take into the account the planned pay rise in Wales, which came into effect in June: <https://www.gov.wales/social-care-workers-in-wales-to-receive-real-living-wage-uplift>. Again, this is due to the data available at the time of analysis.

Table 2. Median annual gross full-time salary for all employees and selected care occupations

	Median full-time gross annual salary (£)	Difference (£)	Less than % gap
All employees	33,000		
Early education and childcare services managers	24,292	-8,708	-26
Early education and childcare practitioners	18,429	-14,571	-44
Early education and childcare assistants	19,028	-13,972	-42
Care workers and home carers	21,523	-11,477	-35
Senior care workers	24,072	-8,928	-27

Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2022.

Tables 3, 4 and 5. Demographics of selected care occupations by gender, ethnicity and age.

Table 3. Gender

Sex of respondent	Male	Female	Total	% women
Early education and childcare services managers	0	29565	29565	100
Early education and childcare practitioners	1283	70952	72235	98
Early education and childcare assistants	835	138507	139342	99
Care workers and home carers	144299	578943	723242	80
Senior care workers	14961	78636	93597	84
All workers	17234425	15647469	32881894	48

Source: TUC analysis of the Labour Force Survey Q1 2023. Total number of workers is all in employment. The source is the same for tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Ethnicity

	White	BME	Total	% BME
Early education and childcare assistants	115371	23971	139342	17
Care workers and home carers	537094	186148	723242	26
Senior care workers	76372	17225	93597	18
All workers	27989110	4876454	32865564	15

Data for early education and childcare services managers and practitioners has been omitted in this table due to issues with sample size.

Table 5. Age

	Under 30	Total	%
Early education and childcare practitioners	29668	72235	41
Early education and childcare assistants	56674	139342	41
Care workers and home carers	167484	723242	23
Senior care workers	16443	93597	18
All workers	7430929	32881894	23

Data for early education and childcare services managers has been omitted in this table due to issues with sample size.

Table 6. Number of Local Authorities who report struggling to recruit childcare workers with the right skills and qualifications, by region

	Number of LAs who responded	Number having difficulty recruiting staff	as % of LAs that responded	Number saying "very difficult"	Very difficult as % of LAs that responded
East Midlands	9	7	78	6	67
East of England	8	8	100	8	100
London	20	19	95	17	85
North East	4	4	100	4	100
North West	18	18	100	14	78
South East	16	14	88	10	63
South West	9	9	100	7	78
West Midlands	6	6	100	6	100
Yorkshire and Humberside	12	12	100	9	75
<i>England total</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>79</i>

Source: Based on local authority breakdown of Coram's 2023 Childcare Survey provided to the TUC. 102 of 152 local authorities in England replied to the relevant question on the Coram survey. For more information please see [Coram Family & Childcare Survey 2023 - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)