

Migrant Care Workers in Ageing Societies

Comments to the report of the work of COMPAS

The National Care Association is the leading trade association for the independent care sector and represents SME providers of health and social care to adults and children across the UK.

We welcome this report as it highlights the significant contribution that migrant workers make to the health and social care system within this country.

The independent social care sector is of fundamental importance to the whole health and social care system in this country and without this vital sector the NHS and Local authorities would not be able to fulfil their primary functions.

The figures within the report speak for themselves; 12% of the care workforce is migrant labour, in London more than 60% of all care workers are foreign born. Although it is suggested that more than 40% of foreign born care workers are British nationals or enjoy permanent residence status it does suggest that just under 20% are work permit holders and potentially, if the interviewees for the survey are representative, 10% of care workers could be employed without permission to work within the UK or working contrary to their immigration status.

Social care employers continue to struggle to recruit sufficient motivated, dedicated, caring staff. The recent downturn in the economy has not resulted in a rush of people suddenly deciding that a career in adult social care is for them.

Recent announcements from the Government on schemes to assist the long term unemployed aged between 18 and 24 into care work with various grants and employer subsidies suggests a tacit acceptance that the social care sector desperately needs staff. The cynic in me wants to know why the Government now thinks that these long term unemployed (often known as the NEETS – not in education employment or training) will suddenly wish to go into social care when this route of entering the workplace has been available for many years.

Social care employers have greatly valued the enormous contribution that their migrant staff has made to their businesses but of course the reality of that contribution has been in many cases that migrant workers have worked for wages lower than those that resident workers would accept. And let me be clear that wages are low because social care work is not valued by society, particularly care of the elderly. We still see the impact of the reverse auctions held by local authorities for the awarding of contracts to providers and of the continual non acceptance of the real cost of care. Fee levels predicated on minimum wage levels for staff are the norm across local authorities and the recent economic downturn has seen a reduction in the number of self funders and therefore an increase in local authority funded placements. Pressure on public funding are only going to increase and this will not be good news for the social care sector.

Social care employers have a responsibility to their migrant staff that most take very seriously and the recent changes to the work permit rules has impacted many foreign nationals working in our sector. The uncertainty around the introduction of the Points Based System lead to employers in some areas sending migrant workers home and indeed in some cases migrant workers were rounded up by the UK Borders Agency and deported.

This is not to say that in a small number of cases employers have not acted in the best interests of their workers and the report highlights some of the discrimination that migrant workers have suffered both in their employment rights and in the way they are treated by those they care for.

The report highlights examples of discrimination – however we believe that some is of a direct result of the UKBA rules which employers have to operate within for work permits – if you promote a worker on a work permit potentially you have to then reapply for the permit and go through the whole process of proving that there is no resident worker suitable etc. Never mind the new minimum pay levels for Senior Care Workers as part of the PBS scheme. This whole system works against the migrant worker and provides no incentive for the worker or the employer to train and develop.

The report's findings on the future demand of the sector for more workers are telling; such significant increases cannot be met from the resident labour force.

Many employers would tell you now that they require more workers. But they require workers with particular skill sets; caring, motivated, wanting to work with people, respectful, good communication skills in the language of the individuals they are caring for; able to work shifts that will be across days or nights, weekends and bank holidays.

Short term fixes such as those currently proposed to “encourage” the long term unemployed in to the sector will potentially have some positive impact but the huge growth in staff required will mean a multi layered approach will have to be taken – we do require social care to be funded adequately to meet the wage expectations of the workforce. We do require the ability to continue to employ senior care workers from outside of the EEA and as the report quite rightly states we may need a migrant route in the future for lower skilled workers.

Social care requires dedicated and motivated workers, and some of the best are migrant workers. It s about time we recognised their contribution to the care of our most vulnerable people and treated them as valued members of society.