



### Overview

The Healthier Working Lives (HWL) research project offers unique insights from the adult social care workforce aged 50+ in central Scotland. The data originates from HWL's ethnographic study and was gathered by speaking and listening to staff themselves, revealing multiple factors that can increase job satisfaction and lead to improved retention outcomes for an older demographic of workers.

### Background

Our ethnographic data originates from the *Healthier Working Lives* (HWL) project, which was funded by Innovate UK/ESRC as part of the Healthy Ageing Programme and ended in February 2024. The main aim of HWL was to generate and develop the ideas of care workers aged 50+ through innovative co-design, and to scale and share these across the adult social care sector.

For more information about HWL, please visit [Healthier working lives for the care workforce - King's College London \(kcl.ac.uk\)](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/healthier-working-lives)

### A brief methodology

Care home managers were recruited through invitation emails and/or presentation 'pitches' at online conferences, social care forums and regulatory meetings by one of the researchers who was employed by Scottish Care - a membership organisation representing the adult social care sector in Scotland. Data was collected between May – October 2022 during in-person site visits to six individual care homes - three of which belong to the same organisational group. The primary ethnographic methods included both daytime and overnight observation, resulting in extensive fieldnotes based on rich conversations with over 40 care home staff aged 50+ - representing a variety of backgrounds, specific roles, and levels of seniority. The following is derived from a thorough secondary analysis of this data.

### Key points:

- The adult social care sector has experienced significant recruitment and retention challenges for decades, but these difficulties have been exacerbated over the past few years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit<sup>1</sup> and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Enabling staff to prioritise spending time with and caring for residents is a key factor associated with improved retention outcomes and job satisfaction.
- Staff appreciate recognition and respond well to small tokens of appreciation, such as vouchers, discount cards, and wellbeing initiatives. These gestures make staff feel valued and 'seen', and have a seemingly disproportionate effects on staff morale, motivation and overall satisfaction with both organisations and leadership.
- Managers who identify and nurture the interests and career aspirations of individual employees tend to experience a more engaged workforce, and slower turnover of staff
- Care home providers are already implementing creative ideas aimed at improving recruitment and retention, including employee referral and values-based recruitment. However, these innovations and their positive impact are often absent from public discussions on the future and sustainability of the adult social care sector.
- Employees at every level of the sector, with the right support, are extremely well placed to participate in the decision-making process around reforming social care practices.
- Implementing such proposals inevitably requires substantial time commitment, effort and resources which is challenging for managers who already face relentless pressure in their day-to-day responsibilities.
- Encouraging staff to work autonomously in a supportive environment, and assist career progression, without overwhelming the capacity of an already stretched workforce, is an important concern for providers

<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Government, 2022. [National Care Service - adult social care workforce: evidence](https://www.scotland.nhs.uk/publications/national-care-service-adult-social-care-workforce-evidence). Health and Social Care: Publications.



### Caring to Care: Physical and emotional dynamics of caring:

Staff's ability to develop bonds with residents strongly affects motivation, job satisfaction and attitude. Interviews across all care homes highlighted the high value that staff place on interactions with residents, often described as the 'highlight' of their working day and the reason why staff choose a career in adult social care:

*Lara, one of the carers who I meet in the staff room, never stops moving. In between busy daily tasks lists, she makes sure she has plenty of daily interactions with the residents. This is "definitely her favourite part of the job", even though she has to deal with vast amounts of paperwork these days. Lara adds that "I like that I can talk to them [residents], it's good that we get to sit and talk together here".*

There is a clear link between retention outcomes, both positive and negative, and the amount of time staff were able to spend on the 'caring' elements of their daily job. Staff turnover was described as an ongoing challenge in three homes, and a 'major' challenge in another. These workers reported that time spent with residents was limited and often rushed, mostly due to high workloads and staff shortages. They expressed concern over residents' wellbeing and safety, and feeling stressed and guilty if residents didn't receive adequate attention:

*One of Kara's worries when she gets home from work is "the emotional side of things". Sometimes, "there is not enough time to meet the basic needs of each resident", such as shaving or washing. Kara often thinks about this when she is back at home and goes through the list of people in her head who didn't get to have a shave that day.*

In the two other care homes, neither managers nor staff indicated problems with retention. They raised numerous examples where staff were encouraged to engage and develop rapport with residents, even if this came at the expense of other competing tasks:

*Management encourages their staff to spend time with the residents. Anna mentions Charles, one of the residents, who likes to sit on a bench in the garden most days. The two of them often chat on her way to the office, though Anna has become very good at knowing what mood Charles is in and when he might wish to keep to himself. One day not too long ago, Charles asked Anna to dance with her. So, they did have a little dance in the road at 10am, which she describes as "really lovely and good fun".*



In one care home, staff were delighted to organise special outings for their residents. These trips seem to provide deep enjoyment for all – including the staff who seem to get just as much out of them as the residents.

*Sue tells me about the 'wish list', which seems available to every resident in an entirely non-morbid way. It gives residents the opportunity to go on ad-hoc outings that are a bit special. For example, she had recently taken a female resident for a walk to a lake where she spent time swimming as a child, whilst another resident who used to be a farmer was able to visit a farm.*



### Perks of the job:

Staff identified the deep importance of 'tokens of appreciation'.

Workers valued receiving free meals and snacks during shifts, but also made multiple references to ad-hoc monetary vouchers they had been given in recognition of hard work. Staff said these gestures made them feel 'recognised and appreciated' by managers, which was reflected in positive retention outcomes.

*Charley talks about a BBQ which the care home put on for the staff in the summer, where managers served staff, which was "a great day, so much fun for everyone". She also mentions that staff received £30 shopping vouchers after a recent Covid breakout to thank them for their hard work.*

*“What employer does that for their staff?”, she asks, adding that “we feel appreciated here. They [management] are like your own parents in here, they look after us”.*

These insights are especially timely within the current cost of living crisis, which disproportionately affects low-income workers such as care workers. Staff appreciate when their employers notice the impact these current events have on their personal circumstances.

### **Pursuing flexibility:**

Addressing the impact of shiftwork and long hours on workforce health and wellbeing, especially in an older demographic, is of critical importance. Care workers are routinely exposed to unfavourable conditions and work characteristics including physical demands, limited flexibility and shift work, all of which negatively affect retention (Van der Borg et al, 2017). In two care homes, managers tried to support staff with more flexible shift patterns, which was associated with higher retention. Conversely, staff whose employers couldn't offer much flexibility felt this was a challenge which affected their personal life and long-term employment prospects.

*Laura, one of the carers, gives her manager credit for organising the rotas. She says that “they are good at ‘flexing’ employment contracts if needed. They are very accommodating. [This home] is one of the best places to be employed”.*



### **Mental Health and Wellbeing Support:**

Physical and mental health incentives offered by the workplace are well-received by staff and influence their views of what makes a rewarding work environment. All six care homes offered a diverse range of wellbeing programmes. However, their take-up depended on how these activities were organised. We found that providers who ran sessions that fitted in with staff's work schedules saw a much higher engagement from their workforce. Staff appreciate easy access to free classes or activities that benefit their health, highlighting the positive impact these had on their stress levels and wellbeing. Managers who proactively reinforce the benefits available, and ensure they are utilised, tend to have improved staff retention:

*Maria, one of the managers, runs me through a long list of incentives that are currently on offer for the staff, which include mindfulness courses, massage chairs in the staff rooms, as well as free reiki and yoga classes. There seems to be a strong emphasis that doing what is best for the staff will benefit the residents, and proactively making positive changes. Maria explains that “we talk about person-centred care for residents but that should be for staff as well”.*



### **Career progression and diversifying skills:**

Care home providers who dedicate time and resources to recognising and supporting the professional interests of their workforce are perceived favourably by staff - and retain their staff for longer.

*Mary is very motivated to keep her residents active and independent for as much and long as possible and has completed many different qualifications. She explains her role is a little unusual because “I’m the only one in the whole region with this job title, it was made up just for me”. Mary is grateful that managers noticed “what I was naturally very good at” and paid for a training course which eventually led to this new role, as well as a small pay rise.*



This same care home stood out for employing a member of the HR team to ensure staff are up to date on their mandatory training, and explore potential opportunities to help diversify their skills. Investing in and upskilling staff can also benefit a care home's finances, as a better retained workforce reduces the need to hire costly agency staff.





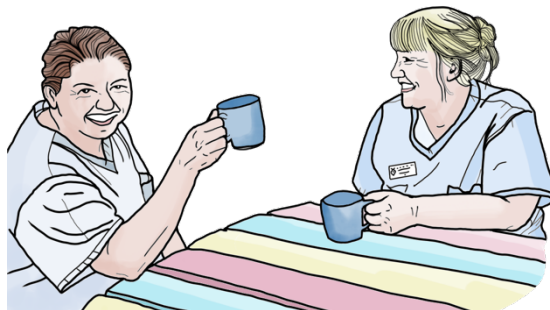
### The Potential from Within:

A wealth of new ideas and innovative approaches already exist which aim to improve retention amongst older workers in all care homes we visited. The potential of a new recruitment strategy known as value-based recruitment (VBR) was raised in interviews with managers from two care homes. VBR allows employers to look wider than their usual pool of recruits and find people who may not have previous experience of working in care but do have the moral values and behaviours that would make them an asset to any care organisation (Skills for Care, 2021). We saw examples of care homes applying these principles and prioritising ‘life skills’ over formal qualifications and previous work experience when recruiting new staff.

*Joseph is in his 60s and used to work as a postman before taking early retirement but “got a bit bored just being at home” so he applied to join a care home. He felt well-prepared for this role, despite having neither relevant job experience nor qualifications, because he has always helped to look after his daughter who has learning disabilities. He credits management for recognising his potential and offering him the opportunity to work in elderly care. After some years in the job, managers noticed Joseph’s ability to build rapport with younger residents and offered him a transfer to another unit where he now works with a young adult who has severe learning disabilities. “I absolutely love it,” he says.*

### Conclusion

Retention and recruitment continue to pose serious challenges for the adult social care sector. Whilst important conversations on the need for pay uplifts for the social care workforce continue, the HWL programme was able to identify **several low or no cost factors** which can **increase job satisfaction** and **lead to improved retention** outcomes among older workers.



### Policy and Practice Implications

Despite obvious benefits, efforts to improve retention and recruitment in adult social care require substantial time and resources. This is challenging for care providers who already face relentless pressure from the daily running of care homes. Finding a balance between encouraging staff to have career progression and autonomy in their roles, without overwhelming the capacity of a busy workforce, is vitally important.