

Cost of living squeeze is forcing health workers in Surrey to relocate to cheaper parts of the country, says senior NHS leader

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The NHS in Surrey's problems retaining staff have been laid bare after a leading NHS boss revealed it is repeatedly losing workers to the Midlands and the North due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Ian Smith, chair of NHS Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Board, has lambasted recruitment and retention in the sector, describing it as one of the main driving forces behind the current 'deep crisis' in social care and 'crisis' within the NHS

In a wide-ranging interview with the Newcross Healthcare 'Voices of Care' podcast, Mr Smith also told how wages in the care sector had got so poor he knows of cases where NHS staff were getting paid less than the cleaners of their offices and care homes.

He said: "We've got rapid turnover rates, especially when we recruit from out of the country. So, they'll come to Surrey and pretty quickly figure out the cost of living in the south of England is untenable. And so, they go off to the Midlands or the North. So, we've got a much higher rates of turnover in the NHS workforce than normally. And our sickness rates are two or three percentage points higher than normal, partly [due to] COVID. I think stress is a big problem."

Turning his attention to staffing problems in the social care sector, he said: "Social care is absolutely in crisis. The headline figures are probably a hundred thousand short out of a workforce of 1.2 million or so, and rates of turnover in social care are higher, and we're just paying those people too little. I mean, we're paying them £12, £13 an hour, often on zero contracts. And it's just very, very, very tough to keep them.

On the issue of government funding for the NHS, Mr Smith admitted there was a need to be realistic about how much the country could afford to spend on health and social care but that increased demand for services needed to be recognised:

"Acuity is higher post-COVID, and people are iller. We've had a big spike in mental health, particularly children and young people's mental health in Surrey. Eating disorders, self-harm, adolescent suicide, rates have doubled in the last two or three years. So, we've got an increasing need at a time when real budgets are being declined.

I understand the politicians and our view that you really want to promise the best service and do it at the lowest cost to the taxpayer. But I think we've got to start being a lot more honest with the British people about what we can afford."

Commenting on what he would like to see in the Government's long-awaited workforce strategy for the NHS, Mr Smith said:

"The first thing we need to do is to make sure we're working as efficiently as possible.

We need a much more graduated system of health care delivery and send people to the most appropriate person. It's beginning to happen [with] social prescribing, but we've got to do a lot more of that. I think until we've really figured out what sort of breadth of skill we need in the workforce and we're making sure that people are doing their real jobs. So, if it's a social care problem or a social problem, let's have a social worker doing it rather than the GP."

Hosted by healthcare expert Suhail Mirza, the podcast episode featuring Ian Smith is available now alongside previous episodes in the series on various platforms including [YouTube](#), Apple, Spotify and the [Newcross Healthcare](#) website.

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