

Crisis-stricken social care sector needs its own workforce strategy, says chief executive of Skills for Care

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As the Government prepares to unveil its long overdue workforce strategy for the NHS, the boss of Skills for Care, has called for the social care sector to be given its own strategic plan to meet the need for an extra 480,000 workers by 2035.

With the latest figures showing there are 165,000 vacancies across the sector, Oonagh Smyth, chief executive of Skills for Care, the strategic workforce development and planning body for social care in England, has spoken out about the urgent need to revitalise the country's ageing and increasingly depleted social care workforce.

Speaking to Newcross Healthcare's Voices of Care podcast series, she said: "We're expecting the NHS workforce strategy in the next few weeks. We need the same for social care....It's really important that we have that national conversation.

"We know that at a system level, the ICBs are responsible for workforce planning across health and social care. But whereas in health they're going to have those national priorities coming from the NHS workforce plan, they won't have the equivalent from social care. And I think that's going to be even more important.

"We don't have enough people now. We're going to need even more people in the future and we're going to need different skills and we've got to make sure that we are thinking about the workforce we need in 10 years' time, 15 years' time, or we will find that we just don't have enough people or we don't have enough skills and that will impact on people's lives."

Commenting on the difficulties the sector faces in retaining and recruiting workers, Ms Smyth admitted that the most recent figures were concerning: "For the first time since we've been gathering that information, we saw the workforce shrink last year. We actually had 3% reduction in the total number of people working in social care, and that would be a worrying trend if we saw that continue. We also saw a similar level of turnover, but a much lower level of new starters. So a 7% reduction in new people starting.

"So we need to make sure that we've got enough people starting in social care. But I always call it the leaky bucket effect. There's no point in doing that if we continue to lose the number of people that we lose. And so we need to focus on both of those areas, getting new people in and keeping them."

With Skills for Care's research showing that care workers are still some of the lowest paid roles in the economy with a median hourly rate of £9.50, Ms Smyth said the biggest factor influencing whether people come into social care or not is the local labour market"

"The more and more that we can do to break the sensitivities between social care and the local labour market, the better. That might mean pay often means pay. It often means focusing on the terms and conditions.

"What are the things that social care can do that other sectors can't? Even though social care is very low paid, people stay in social care longer than they stay in other low paid roles. And why is that? Well, it's because they find the role really satisfying. And so there are things that we can do to differentiate ourselves from other sectors. But in the long term, in terms of when we think about our workforce strategy, we have to look at value and we have to look at pay."

Rejecting the idea that social care is a drain on society and on the public purse, Ms Smyth goes on to make a powerful argument for recognising both its economic value – reported to be worth around £51bn a year - and its under-appreciated community value.

"We need to talk much more about what does social care do in terms of people's lives, in terms of prevention, personalization, and what can we support other sectors to think about what we do really, really well. And these are highly skilled roles. You know, social care staff are doing things that district nurses used to do ten years ago. And that's because people's lives and people's needs are getting much more complex and we have much higher expectations of our social care staff than people value or

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recognise.”

Hosted by healthcare expert Suhail Mirza, the podcast episode featuring Oonagh Smyth 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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