



Sector Skills
Collective

From recruitment to workforce sustainability: building the health and social care workforce

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Foreword

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The health and social care workforce is fundamental to the health, wellbeing and independence of people and communities. Yet the sector faces persistent recruitment and retention pressures, changing models of care, rapidly evolving occupational roles, and ongoing technological advancements. Building a sustainable workforce requires more than filling vacancies: it requires a long-term approach to skills, careers, progression and professional development.

As one of the UK's leading assessment and awarding organisations serving health and social care, NCFE has a unique perspective on the role that technical and vocational education can play in developing the workforce. Through the Health and Social Care Skills Collective, we brought together strategic workforce leaders, employers, educators, people drawing on health and care services, union representatives, and sector organisations to consider how education and qualifications can better support the future of the sector.

The Collective identified a clear need to move beyond a short-term focus on workforce shortages and towards a sustainable workforce ecosystem: one that attracts people earlier, creates visible career pathways, strengthens retention, supports movement across health and social care, and prepares people for changing roles and technologies.

This paper sets out the key outcomes from this inaugural discussion from the Collective. It reflects the expertise and perspectives of those who contributed and identifies areas where greater collective action could strengthen workforce sustainability and the pivotal role of technical and vocational education over the next decade.

The future of health and social care depends on a workforce that is skilled, adaptable, valued, and able to learn. Investing in that workforce is an investment in better care, stronger communities, and a more sustainable health and social care system.

Executive summary

The health and social care workforce is facing profound and interconnected challenges. Workforce shortages, rising demand and changing models of care cannot be addressed through recruitment activity alone. The Health and Social Care Skills Collective identified the need for a long-term approach that develops people before they enter the workforce, supports them throughout their careers, and enables them to move between roles and sectors as their skills develop.

Technical and vocational education has an integral role to play in this transformation. Qualifications and apprenticeships provide valuable routes into health and social care, but their purpose and progression opportunities are not always sufficiently understood by learners, parents, careers advisers or employers. T Levels and other Level 2 and 3 qualifications need to be understood as part of a wider progression framework connecting education with employment, apprenticeships, higher education, higher technical and professional careers.

The Collective also identified a need to strengthen the connection between health and social care. Both sectors draw from the same labour market, yet workforce structures, competencies and progression routes remain too separate. Greater alignment could support workforce mobility, improve understanding between professions, and help create a workforce organised around the needs of people rather than sector and organisational boundaries.

Three priorities emerged particularly strongly: attracting people earlier and making careers more visible, improving workforce experience, progression, leadership and retention, and preparing for future skills and system transformation.

The Collective's central message was clear: technical and vocational education should help people build careers, not simply achieve qualifications.



Planning for a sustainable health and social care workforce

The sector needs to move from responding to immediate vacancies towards developing a workforce pipeline for the future. Participants observed that workforce planning can become dominated by current shortages, while education and training need to anticipate changing models of care, emerging occupations and new skills requirements.

A sustainable workforce strategy should therefore look at least 10 years ahead, connecting workforce planning with education, skills development and service transformation. Qualifications should prepare people not only for today's roles but for careers in which responsibilities and occupational boundaries may evolve significantly.

This means developing lifelong learners who can enter the workforce, build new competencies and retrain as roles change. Transferable skills, adaptability and resilience will become increasingly important, alongside technical and professional knowledge and the need for agile training as skills needs continue to evolve.

The ambition should be a workforce ecosystem in which education, employers and sector bodies share responsibility for developing capability throughout people's working lives.



Qualifications are only the beginning - creating learning cultures, not just training programmes

Technical and vocational qualifications are an important foundation for health and social care careers, but their impact depends on how well they connect to employment, progression and ongoing learning.

Participants highlighted that employers often have a stronger understanding of degree routes into clinical careers than of technical and vocational routes. This can make it harder for both learners and employers to see how qualifications fit into a coherent career journey. Qualifications should therefore be viewed as part of a wider workforce development system: supporting application and capability rather than simply compliance, while being better connected to employers and progression opportunities.

This requires a more agile approach to learning. Participants questioned whether some existing training, including mandatory training delivered through short e-learning modules, is always sufficient to create meaningful cultural or behavioural change. Learning needs to be relevant to workplace practice and should develop professional judgement, confidence and the ability to challenge poor practice.

Quality improvement and digital capability should also become more prominent. Learners should be introduced to quality improvement early so they can contribute to innovation, safety and productivity. Appropriate use of AI and technology could also reduce duplication and administrative burden, creating more time for care.

A qualification should not mark the end of learning. The Collective highlighted the importance of CPD, mentoring, peer learning and professional curiosity, while recognising the practical challenge of finding time for development when services are under significant workforce pressure. Staff are often expected to perform complex tasks under pressure without sufficient opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues.

Learning and development therefore needs to become part of everyday workplace culture, rather than being treated as an additional burden. It should be seen as an investment in retention, quality improvement and better outcomes. Employers, educators and sector organisations all have a role to play in creating environments where people can continue to learn throughout their careers. This includes mentoring and coaching, opportunities for peer learning and reflective practice, and support to develop new skills as roles change.

A more connected health and social care workforce

The boundary between health and social care is becoming increasingly fluid, yet workforce development has not always kept pace.

Participants repeatedly highlighted the fact that the two sectors recruit from the same labour pool while operating through separate workforce structures and progression frameworks. Greater alignment could help address recruitment and retention challenges while supporting people to move between health and care settings.

Common competencies and shared approaches to workforce development should therefore be explored, particularly across social care and Bands 1 to 4 of the NHS. Workforce pathways should increasingly be designed around the skills needed to support people rather than around organisational boundaries.

This does not mean removing the distinct identity or expertise of different professions. Instead, it means creating stronger foundations of shared capability, alongside clear routes into specialist and professional roles.

Integrated working should also be supported by greater sharing of effective practice. Examples of successful multidisciplinary teams could provide useful case studies for employers and educators, helping good practice to spread more widely.





Recognising care as a profession

The status and perception of social care emerged as a major workforce issue. Participants felt that social care continues to be undervalued despite the complexity, responsibility and specialist skills required. Career opportunities are often less visible than equivalent health pathways, while young people, parents, schools and careers advisers may not fully understand the breadth of opportunities available.

A particularly powerful message from the Collective was the need to "turn care into a profession, not just a job". This means strengthening professional identity, making progression visible, recognising specialist skills, creating leadership opportunities, and celebrating excellence across the workforce.

Professional identity is not simply about status. It can contribute directly to confidence, retention and workforce pride. Participants also discussed whether professional registration or membership could provide another means of demonstrating competence and strengthening professional identity.

Creating a stronger professional identity must be accompanied by genuine opportunities to develop and progress. Individuals should be able to see routes into specialist, leadership, technical and professional roles rather than viewing progression as dependent solely on moving into management.

Making careers visible

People need to understand health and social care careers much earlier. The Collective identified a need for greater exposure before age 16, alongside expanded volunteering, work experience and stronger relationships between schools, colleges and employers. Many young people may already have informal caring experience but may not recognise this as relevant to a future career.

Engagement should not begin only when learners reach T Levels or other Level 3 routes. These qualifications often sit in the middle of a much longer career journey. Earlier engagement, potentially beginning in primary education, should reflect learners' age, circumstances, accessibility, funding and the practical realities that influence choices.

Career pathways should make the connections between school, vocational qualifications, apprenticeships, higher education, professional registration and leadership clear and visible. Learners should be able to see not only how to enter the sector, but where their career could take them.

Work experience and volunteering have an important role to play. Real world experiences can develop confidence, professional behaviours and employability skills while helping individuals understand the realities of health and social care work. High-quality placements are particularly important, and placement providers need support to ensure learners experience appropriate standards, behaviours and expectations.





Developing the skills that careers require

Technical competence alone is not enough to prepare people for successful careers in health and social care.

The Collective identified communication, empathy, teamwork, resilience, adaptability, professional judgement and the ability to remain calm under pressure as critical capabilities. Leadership skills, including conflict resolution and managing teams, should also be developed throughout people's careers rather than introduced only when someone becomes a manager.

Coaching, mentoring and effective teamworking should begin early in education and employment. At the same time, leadership development must address workplace culture.

Staff need psychologically safe environments in which they can learn, challenge poor practice and develop professionally. Negative workplace behaviours can undermine retention, quality of care and effective safeguarding.

These capabilities should not be treated as additional to technical education. They are fundamental to professional practice and should be embedded throughout qualifications, placements, apprenticeships and continuing professional development (CPD).

Policy considerations

The recommendations below reflect the collective expertise of stakeholders involved in the Health and Social Care Skills Collective. While perspectives varied, there was strong agreement on the direction of travel:

Develop a shared and coproduced health and social care workforce sustainability framework for the next decade, aligning workforce planning, education, qualifications and service transformation around future skills needs.

Create clearer and more visible career pathways connecting school age engagement, vocational qualifications, T Levels, apprenticeships, higher education, professional careers, specialist roles and leadership.

Develop common competencies across health and social care, particularly where shared skills could support workforce mobility and integrated models of care.

Strengthen early careers engagement, including school outreach, volunteering, work experience, and better careers advice and guidance for learners, parents and advisers.

Embed employability and professional skills throughout technical education, including communication, teamwork, resilience, adaptability, professional judgement, leadership, coproduction, coaching and mentoring.

Policy considerations continued...

Strengthen leadership and workplace culture, ensuring people are prepared for leadership responsibilities and that workplaces support psychological safety, professional curiosity, learning and appropriate challenge.

Make lifelong learning part of workforce strategy, with CPD, mentoring, peer learning and professional development embedded within everyday practice rather than treated as separate activities.

Strengthen the status and professional identity of social care, including clearer progression, recognition of specialist expertise, and greater visibility of the contribution made by care professionals.

Ensure qualifications anticipate technological and occupational change, including digital capability, quality improvement and appropriate use of AI.

Strengthen employer and education partnerships alongside people with lived experience, ensuring qualifications and placements are closely connected to people and workforce needs, and that employers take responsibility for supporting high-quality workplace learning.

NCFE and the wider policy landscape

NCFE is already actively contributing to the development of the health and social care workforce through its portfolio of qualifications, continuous professional development, and engagement with prominent sector partners including Skills for Care and Skills for Health.

The Care Workforce Pathway, developed in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care, Skills for Care and the wider sector, is the first universal career framework for adult social care. To make progression pathways accessible, reflect standards and support recruitment, retention and continuous professional development, NCFE has mapped its portfolio to eight of the role categories. This alignment illustrates the knowledge, skills, learning and development that connect to each role, providing a clear sense of what progression can look like within the sector. The Care Workforce Pathway is clearly evolving which presents the opportunity to ensure that NCFE products remain aligned with current, new and emerging needs – something that the Collective insights will strongly support.

NCFE has also recently launched its Level 3 Technical Occupational Entry in Social Care, a qualification developed to address the need for more young people to be able to enter the social care workforce. At present, NCFE is the only awarding organisation who has had technical qualifications approved in adult social care through the reforms.

The Skills Collective now provides an opportunity for NCFE to contribute to a wider conversation about how technical and vocational education can support workforce transformation in the health and social care sector. Participants expressed a clear ambition for the group to become an action-oriented forum capable of influencing policy, workforce development and qualifications.

The proposed next phase of work could include a Health and Social Care Workforce Sustainability Blueprint, a Career Pathways and Progression Framework, a Core Skills and Future Capabilities Framework, and a collective Sector Position Statement. Together, these could provide a practical foundation for aligning all stakeholders around shared priorities.

The Collective should also consider how its work can support social mobility. Technical and vocational education can provide routes into meaningful employment for people from overlooked, forgotten or deprived communities, while more inclusive entry and progression pathways can widen participation in the health and social care workforce.

Looking ahead: building the workforce for 2035

The central challenge for health and social care is not simply how to recruit more people; it is how to build a workforce capable of meeting changing needs over the next decade and beyond.

That requires earlier engagement, clearer careers, stronger vocational pathways, and better connections between education and employment. It requires investment in retention, leadership and workplace culture, alongside greater professional recognition. And it requires a more integrated approach to workforce development across health and social care.

The Collective provides an opportunity to move from discussion to action. Its next phase should establish a shared definition of workforce sustainability, confirm priority workstreams, identify leadership and membership, and agree clear milestones for delivery.

Above all, the sector needs to shift from managing workforce shortages to building workforce capability.

Qualifications are an important starting point, but they cannot do this alone. Sustainable workforce development depends on the whole system – employers, educators, policymakers, awarding organisations, sector bodies and professionals working together to create careers that people can enter, develop and sustain.

The goal should be a health and social care workforce that is skilled, confident, adaptable and valued; one that can move across traditional boundaries, embrace new technologies, continue learning throughout its career and deliver high-quality, person-centred care.

Building that workforce is not simply an education challenge. It is a shared responsibility – and a long-term investment in the future of health and social care.