

Caring at a Cost: A survey of migrant care staff working in the UK

Introduction

The adult social care sector is increasingly reliant upon staff from overseas to solve its ongoing recruitment crisis. These migrant workers are fundamental to the ability of care services to provide support to tens of thousands of people.

Migrant workers make up a significant proportion (16%) of the care staff employed in nursing and residential homes and in domiciliary care (source: Skills for Care).

Many are hired from India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and other countries to fill staffing gaps. Vacancies in the UK are currently at 131,000, according to Skills for Care.

Care workers come to the UK through a legitimate route – the health and social care visa. Employers apply to the Home Office for a licence to sponsor foreign workers.

However, this situation where migrant staff rely on a single employer has led to a culture of job insecurity and unsafe working conditions, especially for those recruited by unscrupulous care companies.

In November 2023, UNISON published anecdotal evidence of widespread exploitation and workplace abuse in the report [Expendable Labour](#). This research revealed that many care workers had to pay predatory recruitment agents before they could even travel to the UK.

Once they arrived here, these care workers – some of whom have sold everything – had money deducted from their wages, faced dubious demands for fees such as for administration, were threatened with dismissal and deportation, experienced racial abuse, and were housed in substandard accommodation.

Given these findings, UNISON decided to conduct a survey to establish the extent of this shocking treatment. Most survey respondents came from African countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Others were from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Brazil and Indonesia. This is the first major piece of work about migrant care workers conducted by the union.

The findings published here include cases of staff sharing beds with other workers and being housed in overcrowded, expensive accommodation that was mouldy, poorly heated, dirty and on occasion rat-infested.

Dozens have had to pay employers and agents fees of £20,000 or more before they came to the UK only to discover there were no care shifts when they arrived or not the number promised. *Caring at a Cost* reveals many have had money deducted from their salaries for airport pick-ups, uniforms and training.

A common theme was employers not paying staff properly, including for care shifts at hourly rates that were less than the minimum wage. As a result, staff said they ended up in financial hardship unable to pay bills and rent, and they missed meals.

Those who complained about working conditions or pay were threatened with the sack or reported to the Home Office.

Also harrowing were accounts of racist abuse carried out by the people they look after, their families, managers or other care staff. As one worker said: “They treat (us) like modern-day slaves.”

Survey findings

The online survey carried out between November 2024 and January 2025 was of 3,306 migrant care staff. Questions included the type of fees paid to employers and recruiters, pay issues such as wage deductions and not getting paid on time, accommodation issues, racism, and how the current sponsorship system has affected them.

A total of 1,485 completed the whole survey. Some questions were answered by fewer people. Several were multiple choice.

All staff were working in social care in the UK on a health and care worker visa. They provide care in people's own homes (41%), in care homes (29%), supported living services (20%), and in other areas (10%) including hospitals, day centres and as live-in carers.

Fees

Almost a quarter (24%) of migrant care staff had either paid a fee to a care employer or to a recruiter/agency acting on behalf of the care company. The money was paid before entering the UK in return for work once they'd arrived.

The majority said this was for recruitment (70%) or visa fees (67%). Others said the money covered flights (51%), administration and paperwork (51%), accommodation (40%) or training (25%).

Sums amounting to tens of thousands of pounds were not unusual, according to survey participants. More than 100 had paid between £5,000 and £20,000 in fees, and 50 over £10,000. Many said they had fallen into debt as a result of paying fees, with some still in the red as a result.

One care worker – a single mother – sold all her belongings and borrowed from relatives to pay £5,000 in return for the promise of a job. However, there were no shifts when she arrived in the UK and she still has no work.

UNISON says charging fees is unethical and leaves migrant care workers in debt. They're also more likely to be taken advantage of by rogue employers, especially if they raise a complaint.

Once in the UK, workers face even more financial demands with some firms deducting money from the salaries of care staff. A total of 18% said this happened to them.

Fees for administration (29%), uniforms (23%), cars or car loans (22%), training (18%), hotel rooms (7%) and airport pickups (5%) were the kinds of deductions employers took.

Some respondents said they were charged fees the Home Office explicitly forbids from being passed on to employees. This included for the certificate of sponsorship – sums paid by workers ranged from £10,000 to £20,000.

After arriving in the UK, one in twenty five (4%) had to pay to be released from their care contract. In one case, an employer demanded money if the worker broke the contract or left before 18 months. Another was charged for not completing their contracted hours, even though they'd worked every day for three weeks including weekends.

A care home worker from Nigeria working in the North West said: "I paid £13,500 to get a certificate of sponsorship from an agency. They promised to secure a care job for me here in the UK, but I've not had any work from them for a year now."

A care worker, originally from India, now working in Yorkshire and Humberside said she paid around £10,000 in fees to come to the UK. She added: "I had to pay out for the sponsorship and visa, plane ticket, airport pick-up and other charges."

Pay

Care work is a skilled job but pay rates are among the lowest in the economy. Indeed, the vast majority (80%) of all jobs in England [pay more](#) than the average hourly rate for care staff, according to Skills for Care.

The government has promised a fair pay agreement in adult social care, which could lead to a higher minimum wage and enhanced pay scales across the sector.

However, this agreement is not yet a reality and three in ten (31%) migrant care staff who took part in UNISON's survey said they had experienced problems with wages.

Care companies are legally bound to pay the national minimum wage of £11.44 an hour. Yet more than a quarter (27%) of staff said they were paid less. Even more concerning, 14% of migrant care staff said they were paid less than those workers who weren't from overseas.

Data shows domiciliary care workers spend nearly a fifth of their working day travelling between people's homes (source: UK Homecare Association). However, it's commonplace for them [not to be paid](#) for their travel time between appointments, according to research by UNISON.

This appalling practice is exposed in *Caring at a Cost* with more than half (52%) not paid for travel time between care visits. More than a third (36%) received no sick pay when they were ill and unable to work.

Other pay issues included being paid late (31%) and employers deducting wages without good reason (30%).

Caring at a Cost lays bare the consequences of not being paid properly. The majority of respondents (75%) said they didn't have enough money and 57% couldn't pay their bills. Others had to borrow money to get to work (52%), couldn't pay their rent (38%) or missed meals (34%).

Anecdotes shared by migrant care staff included using food banks, getting into debt and being blacklisted by credit agencies. One care worker slept rough because their employer didn't pay for shifts for shadowing other staff.

A domiciliary care worker from Ghana working in the East Midlands said: "I had to miss meals for my groceries to last longer so I could use the money saved to pay bills."

Another from Nigeria working in the West Midlands said: "I slept rough to do some shifts because my employer didn't pay for shadowing. The council came to my rescue by providing me with shelter for the days I shadowed."

A domiciliary care worker from Nigeria working in the South West says: "I didn't have a place to sleep and had to go to a church to plead with the priest for somewhere to stay. The next morning I'll go to a youth hostel to sleep in their lounge until 3pm."

Accommodation

When an employer provides workers with housing, it shouldn't risk their health and safety. But UNISON says migrant care staff are often provided with inadequate accommodation and are trapped because they've nowhere else to go.

More than three in ten (31%) care staff were provided with accommodation by their employer but 9% described this as poor or very poor. Common complaints included mould, damp, heating that either didn't work or that landlords refused to switch on, and dirty conditions, such as stained beds.

Overcrowding was another issue – just under a quarter (24%) said they had to share a bedroom in the accommodation with other workers. One said 15 people were staying in a one-bedroom flat, another that nine were living in a three-bedroom property. In another case, there were three beds in one room.

Caring at a Cost also provides evidence that some landlords take advantage of care staff by restricting access to utilities such as gas and electricity, and demanding money for hot water. One landlady didn't connect the cooker and wanted £10 a week for hot water for daily baths. But it's not all bad. Some employers gave staff a bedroom each and a weekly food allowance.

A female care worker from Zimbabwe working in Yorkshire and Humberside said: "Damp, rotten carpet, central heating not working, boiler leaking, mould in all rooms, clothes and bedding."

A domiciliary care worker from Zimbabwe working in the West Midlands said: "We had overcrowding with ten in a house. I slept on a couch in the living room with a woman I didn't know."

A care worker from Nigeria working in the London area said: "I was asked to pay £600 upfront for a shared three-bedroom flat. But after a few days, more people moved in so the already cramped apartment was then home to nine care staff employed by the same firm."

Racism

The survey shows more than four in ten (46%) migrant care staff experienced racism. The majority (63%) said people they looked after were responsible, followed by other care staff (43%), a supervisor/manager (36%), family members or friends of the people they looked after (33%), or a company owner/employer (17%).

The racism can be defined as overt or covert. Overt includes the use of racist terms by the people care staff look after (or their families) or when they speak about staff negatively while the care worker is present. This type of racism also includes staff being referred to by ethnicity or nationality, not by name.

Many have been called racist names and others have been subjected to vile verbal racist abuse while being spat at and punched.

Covert racism is carried out by white British colleagues and senior staff. *Caring at a Cost* provides evidence of care companies allegedly giving white British staff more favourable hours while migrant workers were given 12-hour night shifts, often at locations far from where they live.

A care worker from Zimbabwe working in Eastern England says: "I had a colleague who was racist to me. She didn't want to touch the computer I'd used."

A care worker from Zimbabwe working in Northern Ireland says: "I have been called a lot of names and had jugs of water thrown at me."

A Nigerian care worker based in London, who wanted her employer to fix the broken washing machine in her accommodation was aggressively questioned as to why this was necessary, querying if such appliances were even used in her home country.

Threats of dismissal

Workers fear – and face – retaliation if they report concerns or challenge their employer over pay and working conditions.

More than a third (36%) said they or their fellow migrant worker colleagues had been threatened with dismissal or redundancy for raising issues about their treatment. If care workers from overseas lose their job or certificate of sponsorship, they face potential deportation.

One worker was warned they would be dismissed for complaining about getting less work than agreed in their contract. Others said employers told them they'd be taken off the rota or their sponsorship would be cancelled. Some said they'd been sent text messages claiming they'd be sent back to their home country if they asked for days off.

Staff who go sick face threats of being reported to the authorities. One worker with knee pain had to get a GP's letter because they couldn't work for five days, and their employer said they'd inform the Home Office they weren't working. Another respondent had to attend A&E to get a report before their employer accepted that they were ill.

UNISON says such threats are intended to make staff compliant with bad working practices. This is reinforced by the knowledge that they face grave consequences if they do lose their job. Many have sold all they own to come to the UK and face financial ruin if they're deported.

Withholding or writing negative job references is another tactic used by unscrupulous employers reported by staff in the survey. UNISON says migrant care staff can be trapped in an exploitative workplace if employers withhold job references.

A care worker from Nigeria working in London said: "There's no work-life balance. Employers treat those on sponsorship like modern-day slaves and threaten to remove it all the time."

A domiciliary care worker from South Africa working in Yorkshire and Humberside said: "I was threatened with dismissal after refusing to sign a contract stating if I left within a year, I'd be liable for training fees."

A Zimbabwean care worker in Yorkshire and Humberside said: "I worked from 6am to 10pm every day and was never allowed time off. My manager would threaten me, constantly reminding me that I was on a certificate of sponsorship."

Sponsorship

Deportation can be a grim reality for many workers when the company they work for goes bust. Or if they lose their job.

Under the current law, care companies licensed to hire staff from overseas must assign a certificate of sponsorship to every migrant worker they employ. Each certificate has a unique number which the worker uses to apply for a visa.

Any care worker who wants to change to a new care organisation must do so within 60 days or face deportation.

Care is one of the most precarious sectors in the UK – firms regularly go under or lose their council contracts. UNISON says there needs to be a safety net to protect care workers financially or help them find a new employer.

Recommendations

All workers deserve fair treatment, job security, and the ability to speak out against poor conditions without fear of retaliation.

UNISON's research shows in stark detail how unscrupulous employers are bringing care staff over to the UK with little regard for their welfare.

Each instance of abuse highlights the vulnerability of workers who've come to care for others. It shows the insecurity of their situation because employers are regularly threatening them with redundancy or deportation.

The consequence of this treatment is that people looked after by care workers also suffer because not all employers are giving migrant staff the necessary training or experience. That means the care provided is not always of a high standard.

UNISON is calling for an end to employers sponsoring migrant care staff. Instead, the union says the government should take on this role and issue each worker with their certificate of sponsorship.

This reform, says UNISON, would be straightforward to implement and not costly to the taxpayer. Removing the role of sponsor from employers would address the power balance between them and migrant care workers, an issue that increases exploitation and poor employer practices under the current system.

Staff then will be able to move jobs without being threatened by the employer sponsoring them. Another benefit is they can challenge employers without worrying about deportation. This would drive up the quality of care for those who rely on these services.

Ultimately the problems in social care won't end until there is major reform of the system. The Westminster government has begun this with moves to establish a fair pay agreement. This will help raise pay rates in care, thereby making it easier for employers to hold on to experience staff and attract new recruits too. The goal, though, is ultimately the creation of a national care service for England, again promised by the government. This would improve provision, raise standards and help relieve pressure on the NHS.