

Cuts to social care workforce funding will devastate an already beleaguered sector



(Alamy)



Baroness Altmann

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With The announcement that £500m of promised funding to develop the social care workforce has been halved, is deeply concerning. This risks worsening the NHS crisis as well as social care

vision.

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Chronic staff shortages leave more patients in NHS hospitals unnecessarily, increasing the non-hospital care they need to survive. Cutting funding for staff training and wellbeing, seems to prioritise near-term budgeting over addressing the health and care crises and is a further blow to this beleaguered sector.

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The adult social care system has seen a staggering 52 per cent rise in staff vacancies, according to the charity [Skills for Care](#), with staff turnover well over 20 per cent a year and 165,000 unfilled positions.

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The government's declared vision for health and care cannot succeed without the people to deliver it

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Recent announcement emphasises the need to digitise social care, improve data-sharing and boost productivity, but social care is very labour-intensive and without the hands-on staff to look after people, the numbers unmet needs and NHS pressures will keep rising. The government's promised £100m more investment in digitisation, £35m for innovation and £50m for improving insights, data and quality assurance are insufficient.

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...government's declared vision for health and care cannot succeed
...out the people to deliver it. Among the workforce of 1.5m there are so
...y wonderful, dedicated staff but how long can they remain
undervalued? And, as the numbers of people needing care keep rising, how
will new workers be attracted to this sector?

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...ral inflation. The NHS pays its care staff better than private care firm,

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median hourly pay for newly-recruited NHS healthcare assistants in 2022 being £10.50 an hour, while independent sector care staff in 2022 earned £1 an hour less – just £9.50. Pay, pensions and status are far lower than in the NHS, and providing similar pensions and benefits would be a major advance for care staff. It is estimated that up to half a million care workers could earn more in supermarket jobs than social care. The worst affected are homecare sector staff – often on zero hours contracts, paying their own fuel costs for driving between people’s homes, unpaid for travel time or when someone they are supporting is admitted to hospital.

Without a proper workforce plan and enough funding for staff training and wellbeing, it is hard to see the situation improving. Even the government’s decision to add care workers to its shortage occupation list to help recruit overseas staff is inadequate since the minimum pay requirements are above average care workers’ earnings.

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Social care was privatised many decades ago, leaving responsibility with local authorities, while the NHS is more directly under national government.

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budget cuts saw cash-strapped councils refusing to pay enough to cover the costs of providing care, especially as inflation soared, driving some providers out of business and others refusing new clients and handing back contracts, creating more unmet needs and NHS pressures.

Older and disabled people are unlikely to take to the streets to protest, but everyone in the country needs a functioning NHS and all civilised societies should ensure they look after the most vulnerable, rather than trying to side-line them and continually make promises that are not delivered.

Social care has long been the Cinderella element of our health system. Successive governments have promised to fix the crisis, but it just keeps worsening.

This should not be a party political issue. Indeed, the government's white paper to put "people at the heart of care" received cross-party support even if most wanted the measures to go further. So, halving the funds for staff training improvements, after removing the funding levy that was supposed to raise billions for NHS and social care, is doubly disappointing.

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Perhaps mindful that social care proved a political minefield in general elections both for Labour – under Gordon Brown 2010 – and the Conservatives – under Theresa May 2017. Kicking this issue into the long-grass until after the next election has some appeal, but promising radical fixes, while hoping the crisis does not blow up on their watch is unsustainable.

Sooner or later, this has to be resolved and at the heart of it all will be staffing.

Baroness Altmann, Conservative peer