

What does Brexit mean for the UK social care workforce?

Perspectives from employers and managers in social care organisations.

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The UK social care workforce

- Demand for social care services in the UK is growing exponentially, due to an ageing population.
- Yet the social care workforce suffers from long term and widespread problems with low recruitment, poor retention, high staff turnover and high vacancy rates (Skills for Care 2017a).
- European Union / European Economic Area (EU/EEA) citizens make up a significant proportion of the UK's social care workforce.
- The UK's departure from the EU (Brexit) seems likely to result in greater immigration restrictions of EU/EEA workers, which
- statistical research has shown could lead to serious workforce shortfalls, exacerbating current recruitment and retention problems in social care (Independent Age 2016, Marangozov *et al.* 2016).
- Existing research has not yet explored how Brexit is perceived by people working within social care services.
- This research set out to examine the perspectives of social care professionals directly responsible for staffing in their social care service organisations. We focused on employers and managers as an 'under researched group' (Orellana *et al.* 2017)

Key research questions

1. How are social care managers and employers evaluating prospects for Brexit on their workforce?
2. Are employers and managers who rely heavily on international recruitment to meet their workforce needs more concerned about Brexit than those who do not?

Methods

A survey and semi-structured interviews amongst employers and managers in two key types of social care service: domiciliary care and residential care.

- A survey (n.17) gathered information on nature, size and operation of social care service, numbers of skilled and semi-skilled staff, types of employment contract, ratios of UK, EU/EEA and non-EU/EEA workers. Respondents were also asked to rank current and perceived future difficulties with recruitment and retention.
- Semi-structured interviews (n.5) with a selection of employers and managers, exploring their current experiences of recruitment and retention and their perceptions of Brexit in detail.

Geographic location

Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch in southern England. This area is characterized by high demand for social care services combined with high numbers of EU/EEA citizens employed in local social care sector.

- In Dorset, people aged 65 and over represent 31% of the population against a national average of 18% (ONS 2017). At the same time, 17% of social care workforce in Bournemouth are EU/EEA citizens, against 8% for south-west as a whole (Skills for Care 2017b).
- These demographic conditions are likely to produce findings which illuminate most sharply the challenges of Brexit, as employers and managers see them. .

Characteristics of organisations in the study

Domiciliary care providers

- 8 survey respondents, 3 interviewees
- Smallest: 18-30 staff. Largest: 1500 staff
 - Most employers and managers hire care workers on zero hours employment contracts (i.e., no fixed hours).
 - EU/EEA citizens comprised between 0% and 50% of staff base across all domiciliary care employers
 - Care staff recruited from local population only (no international recruitment).

Residential care providers

- 9 survey respondents, 2 interviewees
- Smallest: 31-60 staff. Largest 1500 staff.
 - Staff hired on fixed hours contracts (only one instance of zero hours contracts)
 - EU/EEA citizens comprised between 0% and 40% of staff base across all domiciliary care employers
 - Active international recruitment strategies for qualified nurses.
 - Local recruitment strategies for care assistants.

Key findings

- **Almost all employers and managers perceived that Brexit would have a negative impact on the sustainability of their organisation's care workforce.**
- **The nature of these concerns depended on current recruitment strategies (international / local) and extent of present difficulties with recruitment and retention of care staff.**

Residential care providers...

Current recruitment and retention of care staff was reported to be difficult but not severe.

Impact of Brexit?

Many of these managers and employers relied on hiring EU/EEA trained nurses. 5 of 9 survey respondents feared that Brexit would make this practice more restrictive, and they would not be able to find the nursing staff needed for their organisational requirements.

My fears for Brexit are that if they are going to make these workers harder to bring in, then I think very quickly these services are going to go on a downward spiral (R-2)

Yeah, its literally like, head in my hands, you know. If the process is anything like this Tier 2 [UK visa arrangements governing recruitment of non-EU/EEA workers], it's a nightmare (R-2)

Domiciliary care providers

Almost all experiencing major problems with recruitment and retention of care staff and very high staff turnover at present.

Impact of Brexit?

These managers and employers feared retention of staff would worsen. 5 of 8 survey respondents anticipated that their organisation did not have the resources to increase wages sufficiently to compete with bigger care providers (such as NHS) as availability of care workers is reduced post-Brexit.

Employers that currently use Europe to recruit from...they will all be fishing in a far smaller pool of people...those carers we have trained ...will be pulled by hospitals, residential homes and other care providers. Particularly here...it's a very difficult place to recruit from because it's an expensive area to live in. (D-1)

Conclusions

- Social care employers and managers in this study who recruit nurses from EU/EEA were concerned about the negative impact of post-Brexit restrictions to international recruitment. This issue has received much attention in the media, but this is not the only issue at stake for UK's social care system.
- Domiciliary care providers that rely on local recruitment of semi-skilled care workers on zero hours contracts had profound concerns about the indirect effects of wider workforce shortages that Brexit seems likely to engender.
- With Brexit, the challenge of making the social care workforce sustainable, and up to the task of meeting the needs of an ageing population, is more urgent than ever.

References cited
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