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The government says migration is too high – but the latest numbers reflect a crisis of its own making in social care

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The UK government's response to the latest net migration figures is that the numbers need to come down. But the UK needs migrants and the skills they bring – and employers know this.

This is particularly true in the social care sector, which has been in crisis for years, and is increasingly important given the country's ageing population.

In recent years, social care has faced serious difficulties in recruiting and retaining workers. Despite being recognised as essential during the pandemic, the reality for workers has been low pay and insecure hours. And there are still record high vacancies in adult social care.

A key section of the social care workforce in recent years has been migrant workers. The recruitment of migrant workers has of course been transformed by Brexit, with new rules and regulations for those arriving to work in the UK.

The government, aware of the importance of migrant workers for the social care sector, sought to address the shortage in December 2021 by expanding the health and care worker visa to include social care jobs.

While this scheme, which came on line in February 2022, was meant to be for a 12-month period, these jobs remain on the UK's shortage occupations list and care workers appear to still be recruited via this route.

This decision appears to have achieved a degree of success: the latest figures reflect a 59% rise in skilled worker visas issued, and an even larger rise (171%) in specific health and care visas. An increasing number of these workers are coming from non-EU countries, a logical consequence of Brexit.

Migrant workers also help to deliver social care in an increasingly diverse country. As Britain's demographics change it therefore makes sense that the social care workforce reflects that change.

Investing in the workforce

Looking back over the past 10 years, the labour shortages in social care stem from a lack of investment in the sector. This includes the decade of austerity measures which resulted in real-terms cuts. By the time the pandemic hit, the workforce was already stretched, and things have worsened since.

Read more: Why care workers are feeling less valued and leaving the sector after the pandemic

If the UK government thinks migration is too high, it needs to invest more in the sector at home. This includes, for example, more resources and measures to improve training opportunities. Increasing pay would demonstrate to workers that their contributions are valued, and offering regular training could help the sector thrive.

While the needs of social care workers need to be addressed now, part of that requires long-term planning and investment that goes further than recent commitments. That planning should include ensuring a welcoming and supportive environment for migrant workers who have (or will) come to the UK to work in social care and continuing to allow these workers to arrive via the health and care visa.

Messaging on migration

The social care situation shows the immediate benefits that migrant workers bring to the economy. As people come to the UK to take up roles that would otherwise remain unfilled, they create other jobs by generating demand in the economy for goods and services. This is before we even turn to the wider social and cultural contribution that migrants bring to the country.



Care workers were stretched thin long before the pandemic labelled them 'key workers'. Eric Johnson Photography/Shutterstock

Despite these positives, the government has reacted negatively to the rise in net migration. Rather than focus on improving the experience of those arriving to work and recognise the benefits they bring, the discussion has largely focused on border control and characterising the number of migrant workers as a problem to be addressed. There is a growing gap between the realities of the UK's needs and the political rhetoric on migration.

Whether the focus is on asylum seekers or migrant workers (often there is a misguided conflation between all new arrivals to the country), the language continually presents those arriving in a negative light and creates an environment that makes it more difficult for migrants to settle in the country. In sectors such as social care, where research has demonstrated that migrant workers have faced racism and discrimination, harsh comments from the government are unlikely to alleviate these experiences.

At the same time, the government has persisted with legislation banning asylum seekers from working. This delays access to training opportunities and creates issues for them later in finding employment.

Rather than a concern, the rise in the number of people arriving to work in the UK should be a source of relief for politicians who have failed to implement and fund long-term planning for crucial workforces.