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Why the social care visa had to go

*Labour's White Paper "Restoring Control Over the Immigration System" has proposed closing the social care visa route for workers from overseas. While this might seem like an odd move in a country in need of more care workers, **Alan Manning** argues this was a needed change to a seriously flawed system.*

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One of the changes to the UK work migration regime announced in this week's **White Paper** was that care workers could no longer be hired directly from abroad. To **some** this return to the pre-2021 system was an act of economic self-harm (isn't the UK desperately short of care workers with **high levels of vacancies?**), pandering to the worst type of anti-immigrant rhetoric and not even doing that in an effective way as public opinion generally **supports allowing the hiring of migrant care workers**. In fact, it's an important and necessary change as the current visa, inherited from the previous government, was seriously flawed.

Why importing low-wage care workers is bad policy

The demand for migrant care workers stems largely from the fact that pay and conditions are not attractive to enough locals to fill all the jobs. But work visas for jobs that locals don't want that include a path to settlement are simply bad policy. They may have desirable short-term outcomes but at considerable longer-term cost.



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The reason is simple. If wages in social care are below prevailing market levels it is hard to recruit and retain locals. It will be possible, however, to recruit migrant workers, almost certainly from lower-income countries for whom these salaries are an improvement on what they could earn back home.

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After five years in the UK a migrant with a care worker visa can apply to settle permanently in the UK. Though we could do with better data on how many will take this option, it is likely that many from lower-income countries will settle permanently. Until March of 2024, once someone had acquired indefinite leave to remain, they had the right to bring family to change jobs and to claim welfare benefits. It is likely then that many who started work in the UK on care visas, then leave care worker jobs as they have the same labour market freedoms as locals and, like them, they are likely to be able to find better jobs elsewhere in the economy (after all, poor pay and conditions was the reason the care worker visa was introduced in the first place).



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Those who came on a care worker visa and worked in social care for five years may have another 50 years in the UK, during which there is no obligation to work in social care or even to work at all. And their partner may also be in the UK for 50 years and never work in social care. So of the 100

years the couple will live in the UK only five can be guaranteed to be working in social care. A visa designed to supply labour to the social care sector is a very ineffective way to provide care workers and may mostly supply workers to other sectors.

How large are these concerns depends on how many care workers settle, how many bring dependants and the work they do after settlement. The UK lacks the data needed to answer these questions, though hopefully we will have it in the not too distant future. But a study of a similar visa in Canada found that after 10 years **only 15 per cent were still working as care-givers**.



The solution to concerns about recruiting and retaining care workers is simple; treat them better, make it a more attractive job. The government needs to deliver on its promise to do exactly that.



A longer-term solution to the care-worker crisis

The general lesson here is that work visas with a path to settlement do not work for jobs where the demand for migrants comes from poor pay and conditions. If you really want migrants in these jobs then you should go for temporary work visas. Then people on care worker visas can only remain in the UK if they continue to work in social care and will have no path to settlement nor rights to bring dependants. But migrants on temporary work visas are very vulnerable to exploitation, likely making what is already a **bad situation** even worse. If you don't like temporary work visas because of these problems, then your alternative is to not have work visas at all for most jobs that can't recruit locals because of poor pay and conditions. The solution to concerns about recruiting and retaining care workers is simple; treat them better, make it a more attractive job. The government needs to deliver on its promise to do exactly that.

The decision to try to move away from a social care visa is the right one. But will this cost the Treasury money as it will force up wages in the social care sector? Perhaps in the short-run but in the long-run it will quite likely improve the public finances. Again, our data is poor. If workers on

social care visas remain on minimum wage jobs for the rest of their lives and have families then they will almost certainly be a long-term cost to the Treasury. If, however, they have pay progression then that might not be the case. Even the short-run benefit of the care worker visa looks more positive than it really is because not all costs are often accounted for by the groups who benefit from the visa. When care workers could bring child dependants (before March 2024), the government needed to pay the cost of educating them (perhaps £6k a year) – a social care worker that looked cheap was actually quite expensive. Though this extra cost would not be on the budget of the care home or the Department of Health and Social Care so it's not surprising that they support a system in which they do not pay the full costs.

The social care visa had to go because it is an ineffective way to hire workers into social care. The White Paper is to be welcomed for seeing through the shallow analysis that doesn't look at how visas actually work in practice rather than on paper, for standing up to employer lobby groups and the government departments that ally with them who are happy to impose costs on others, and for a decision to prioritise the long-run over the short-run.

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Alan Manning is Professor of Economics in the Department of Economics at LSE, and co-director of the community wellbeing programme at LSE Centre for Economic Performance. His research generally covers labour markets, with a focus on imperfect competition (monopsony), minimum wages, job polarisation, immigration, and gender.

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