Improved well-being and workforce retention

An evidence summary

February 2024
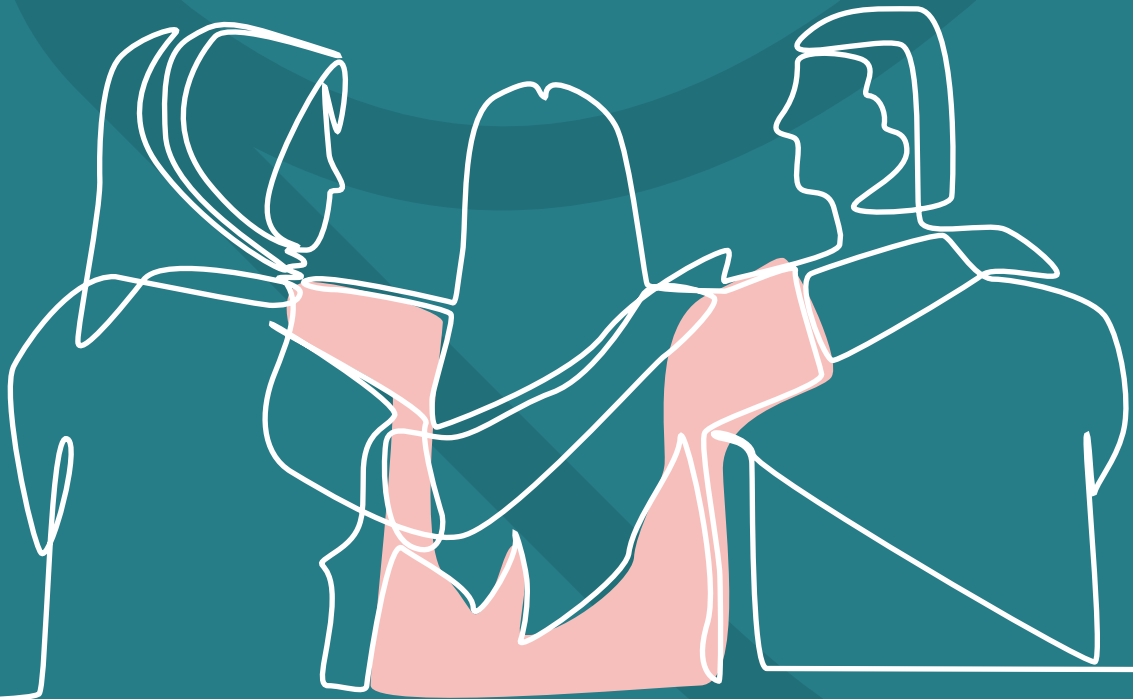
Improved well-being and workforce retention

In this evidence summary, we highlight relevant and up-to-date research on retention and well-being in the social care sector in Wales.

Workforce well-being is an important consideration for employers, both for its own sake and because improved well-being can lead to higher retention rates. This summary presents evidence on how employers in social care can support employee well-being and improve retention rates.

Headline summary

The Welsh social care workforce is facing challenges in retaining employees.

Employee well-being is an important consideration:

- supporting employee well-being is vital for its own sake
- improved employee well-being may support improved retention rates.

Low retention rates can challenge social care by:

- threatening the sustainability and consistency of care
- making attraction and recruitment harder.

Employers can address these challenges by:

- preparing people for the realities of the role
- creating a positive and compassionate workplace
- showing employees that they're valued
- supporting employee health
- reviewing processes and responding to evidence.

There's already work going on in Wales that aims to improve employee well-being. This includes:

- 'The Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care', which prioritises well-being in workforce planning
- plans by Welsh Government to introduce the real living wage for social care workers.

Introduction

Work affects people's well-being because it impacts their life satisfaction and sense of purpose, as well as their economic security. This evidence summary focuses on the relationship between well-being and employee retention, and the role of organisations in creating a culture of well-being in the social care workforce.

Working in social care can be rewarding, but it can also be demanding. It's important for employers to support employee well-being. This is because of the value of well-being for its own sake and because of the link between well-being and employee retention. Improved workplace well-being means people are more likely to stay in their jobs, making it easier to deliver high-quality, sustainable services.

Ways to improve well-being and address challenges with retention could include:

- systemic changes, including rolling out the real living wage and looking at employment terms and conditions
- creating positive workplace cultures
- providing practical support for individual employee health
- developing well-being frameworks to understand more about how to improve conditions.

What do we mean by well-being and retention?

We use the term well-being for individuals and for communities (WHO, 2021). Individual well-being refers to life satisfaction, emotional experiences, sense of purpose, and wider mental and physical health (Stuart et al., 2020). The Well-being of Future Generations Act defines community well-being as the social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions that affect 'population, society and our environment' (Welsh Government, 2015).

Retention refers to the ability of workplaces to keep staff (CIPD, 2021; Teo et al., 2022). This summary considers retention in the context of well-being because there's a direct link between the two. And this relationship works both ways: supporting well-being can increase retention rates, while improving retention rates can have a positive impact on workplace well-being.

If workers are supported with their well-being, they're more likely to view their work positively and stay in their roles. Where workers' well-being is neglected, they're more likely to experience burnout, need sick leave, or move jobs (CIPD, 2021; Teo et al., 2022; Turley et al., 2020). Improved well-being increases an employee's ability to do their job well, making it more likely that care is delivered safely, to a high standard, and with compassion (Social Care Wales, 2022; Health Foundation, 2020a).

A person's well-being can be affected by lots of things. But we know that pay, flexibility, and the nature of work are all linked to workplace well-being. This summary focuses on these elements of well-being, the policy context, and things that employers can do to support employee well-being.

The current challenge

Many things affect employee well-being and how long a person stays in a role. Workers might leave their roles because of personal circumstances. But retention challenges can also be caused by the role itself, working conditions, or external factors like:

- COVID-19: the pandemic increased workloads, stress and risks to care workers. This has led to worse mental health and more burnout (Cannings-John et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2022; Migration Advisory Committee and Revealing Reality, 2022).

- the cost of living crisis: levels of poverty and inequality are rising in the UK (Scott, 2022). Low paid workers like many social care workers can experience financial troubles more intensely. In 2020, more than a quarter of UK residential care workers lived in poverty or were on the brink of poverty. These numbers are expected to grow (Health Foundation, 2020a).

- Brexit: many EU citizens working in the care sector were unable or unwilling to stay in the UK after the UK left the EU (Urban Foresight, 2023b).

Specific features of jobs and working environments can affect the well-being of workers and how long they stay in a role (Teo et al., 2022). Current working conditions in the social care sector don't always help workers thrive (Thomas et al., 2023). Difficulties experienced by workers include:

- high levels of job stress, excessive workloads, time pressures, and burnout (Health Foundation, 2022)

- low pay, lack of sick pay, and limited opportunities for career progression (Edwards et al., 2022; Teo et al., 2022; Migration Advisory Committee and Revealing Reality, 2022; Pitarella, 2020)

- emotionally and physically challenging working conditions (Teo et al., 2022; Pitarella, 2020)

- remote and lone working leading to feelings of isolation from the workplace (Mutebi and Hobbs, 2022; NIHR, 2022)

- low awareness of what care work involves, meaning individuals enter the sector unprepared (Pitarella, 2020).

Supporting employee well-being is vital for creating a workforce where people feel positive and satisfied with their work, and are more likely to stay in their roles. This offers clear benefits to the sector. According to Skills for Care (2021), increased retention rates:

- reduce the time and money used for recruitment
- cultivate an experienced and committed workforce
- reflect a positive work environment that attracts other workers.

In contrast, low retention rates can have an impact on:

- provision of care
- consistency of care
- attraction and recruitment pressure on employers.

Care provision and consistency

Social care employers in Wales say that staff turnover rates are high, with employees regularly moving between roles (Urban Foresight, 2023a). Across the UK, social care employers are struggling to retain their staff. Around 440,000 social care employees leave their job each year in the UK – about a third of the sector (Health Foundation, 2020b). Staff are leaving because of issues such as mental health problems, stress, exhaustion, and burnout (Care Quality Commission, 2022; DHSC, 2022).
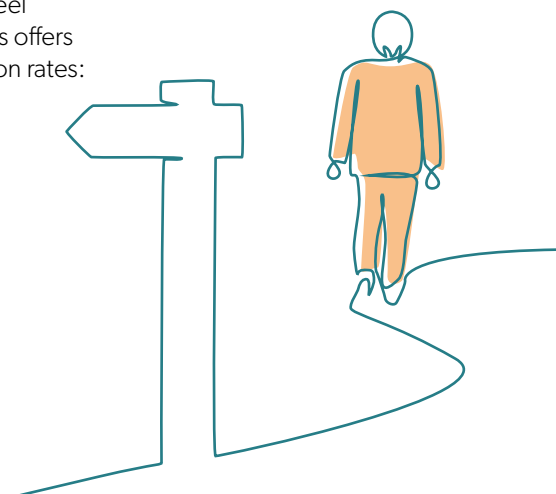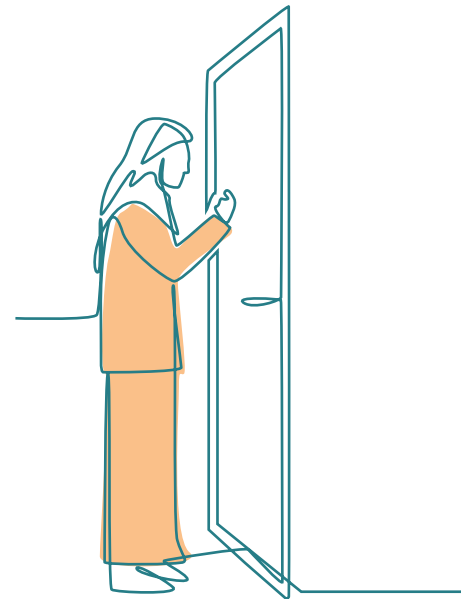
Frequent changes in social care staff can be stressful and frustrating for people accessing care. This is especially true for children and young people, because of the impact of having to build new relationships and repeat personal information (Park et al., 2020). Improving well-being and retention supports continuity in the staff providing care and can improve the quality of care provision (Edwards et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2023)

Impact on attraction and recruitment

Where well-being isn't supported in the workplace, employees may leave. This then means that employers can face higher pressure to attract and recruit new staff. In Wales, we're already struggling to fill vacancies, and demand for services is predicted to grow (for more on this, see our attraction and recruitment evidence summary). The sector can't afford to lose existing employees.

In the health and social care sectors, more staff leave due to long-term sickness than in other sectors in the UK (Thomas et al., 2023). In Wales, Social Care Wales's workforce data shows that sickness levels are increasing. In 2022, there were 214,941 days lost to sickness, a substantial increase from 85,848 days in 2021 (Social Care Wales, 2023). The biggest cause was mental health issues (including work-related stress), which accounted for 37.2 per cent of total sickness days taken (Social Care Wales, 2023).

> Where well-being isn't supported in the workplace, employees may leave

## What's already being done to address this in Wales?

The Welsh Government and other organisations have taken steps to support the social care workforce. In 2020, Social Care Wales and Health Education and Improvement Wales released 'Our Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care'. This placed well-being at the heart of future workforce plans and set up resources and support services to improve recruitment and retention.

The importance of worker well-being and retention is recognised in 'A Healthier Wales: our plan for health and social care' (Welsh Government, 2018). The strategy aims to make working in health and social care in Wales a more attractive career choice. The publication of 'Improving health and social care (COVID-19 looking forward)' also showed how much we rely on care services and why we need to protect the well-being of people who deliver them (Welsh Government, 2021).

The Welsh Government has also committed to paying social care workers the real living wage. Local authorities and health boards will be given £70 million to do this in 2023 to 2024 (Welsh Government, 2022).

Social Care Wales set up the workforce health and wellbeing framework to help improve the well-being of social care workers. This framework sets out four commitments which employers should make to support the well-being of workers. It describes seven components of workforce well-being which these commitments address: finances, lifestyle, good workplace, values and principles, personal growth, collective/social, and health.

The Social Care Work Forum aims to promote good practice, raise the profile of working in care, represent employees, and make sure the sector receives the right recognition and reward. Social Care Wales is an active member of the Social Care Fair Work Forum, alongside other stakeholders including the Welsh Government, employers, and unions. In 2023, key actions for the forum include looking at sick pay, zero-hours contracts, and collective bargaining for terms and conditions (Urban Foresight, 2023a).
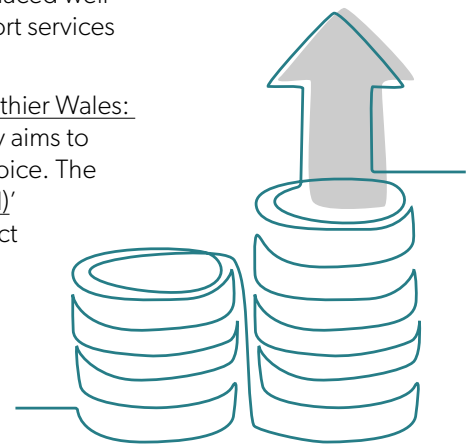
What can employers do to address the challenges?

Many of the well-being and retention challenges in social care need broader solutions. The impacts of the higher cost of living, low funding for the sector, and employment terms and conditions can't all be addressed by individual employers. These broader issues need broader solutions, which must come from a higher level.
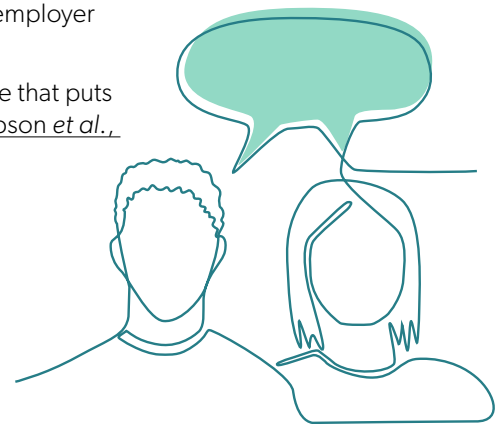
But there are things employers and organisations can do to improve conditions for employees. Employers have a responsibility to follow the national frameworks and approaches in place to promote compassion and respect towards the workforce. It's also valuable for employers to be proactive in promoting positive well-being for their employees, and research provides some support for how employers can do this.

The workforce health and wellbeing framework provides a practical guide for well-being at work (Social Care Wales, 2022). This framework is intended for use by organisations and employers as well as employees, and it sets out areas of employer responsibility related to workforce well-being.

Research shows that organisations must be committed to building a culture that puts staff well-being at the heart of their work to support and retain staff (Thompson *et al.*, 2021). To do this, organisations should follow six key principles:

1. prepare people for the realities of the role

2. create a positive and compassionate organisational ethos

3. show employees that they're valued

4. support employee mental health

5. support employee physical health

6. review processes and respond to evidence.

Preparing people for the realities of the role

Giving people a realistic picture can help make sure the right people enter the sector, which will boost employee well-being and improve retention (Mind, 2018; Turley et al., 2020).

There are some actions employers can take to help people understand what's involved in social care roles. These include creating job descriptions that clearly describe the day-to-day work involved, running 'taster shifts' (Randell, 2021), or encouraging people to attend pre-employment training (Edwards *et al.*, 2022). WeCare Wales's Introduction to Social Care course is an example of a pre-employment training programme that helps people gain skills and an understanding of the roles available in social care.

Creating a positive and compassionate organisational ethos

Creating a positive organisational 'ethos' can motivate employees to work towards a shared goal (Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Employers should set a clear vision for the organisation, and clearly communicate this to employees. This vision should be based on a set of value statements that guide recruitment decisions and leadership practices (Edwards *et al.*, 2022).

There is some evidence that compassionate approaches to leadership can benefit workplace culture (Massie, 2017; O'Toole *et al.*, 2021). According to Bailey and West (2022) and WHO (2021), this can involve:

- listening to employees

- being empathetic and supporting employees through challenges

- being respectful and valuing employee input

- being inclusive and building trusting, mutual relationships.

> Staff well-being needs to be at the heart of work to support and retain staff

Compassionate leadership in practice means being flexible to employee needs by adjusting working hours or days, involving staff in decision-making processes, and holding regular one to ones (Randell, 2021; Edwards et al., 2022; Devi et al., 2021).

It's also important that employers try to build positive relationships between staff members. They should aim to develop and promote processes that build healthy relationships and stop negative behaviours such as workplace bullying and discrimination (McFadden et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). This can include organising training courses that show and promote positive relationships in the workplace (WHO, 2021).

In general, staff should be encouraged to check in with each other. Peer networks and buddy systems can help provide this form of support (Mind, 2018; McFadden et al., 2023; Randell, 2021).

Showing employees that they're valued

Employees who feel valued and appreciated are likely to be happier in their workplace and, for this reason, they're more likely to stay with the same employer.

Following compassionate leadership approaches will help employees feel valued by giving them a voice and sense of agency. There are many actions that help show staff they're important (Edwards et al., 2022; Forth and Bryson, 2021; Teo et al., 2022; Hemmings et al., 2022; Randell, 2021). These include:

- creating progression opportunities
- celebrating and rewarding staff achievements
- providing training and development opportunities
- providing fair working conditions
- making sure that workloads are achievable.
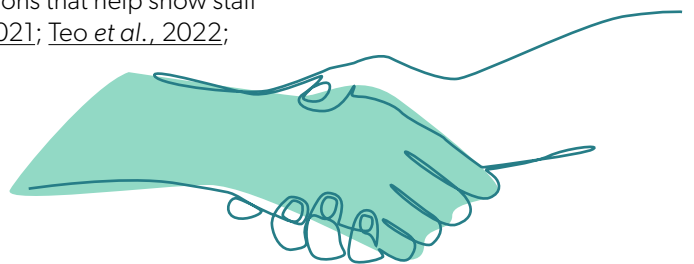
The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) brought together health and social care workers to explore how best to address the workforce crisis in England. The group recommended that every health and social care worker should be given access to £2,000 to spend on personal training and development after three years of working in the sector. This kind of approach shows workers that they're valued and also improves the standard of care they're able to provide (Thomas et al., 2023).

Supporting employee health

Employers must establish clear policies and procedures to support employee mental and physical health.

One example of good practice is to have a workplace mental health plan. This sets out how an organisation will protect and promote the mental health of its employees. Mental health plans should describe how mental health issues will be addressed and give information about the support services available to employees (Mind, 2018). Employers can also provide employees with access to external mental health and well-being schemes. Examples of support available through an organisation or from external providers include (Randell, 2021; Care Quality Commission, 2022):

- mental health first aiders
- healthcare schemes
- counselling services
- resilience training
- well-being sessions.

Employees who feel valued and appreciated are likely to be happier in their workplace

This is already happening within the health and social care sector in Wales. Canopi is a free, confidential service for health and social care staff in Wales. It offers resources, guided self help, peer support and both online and face to face therapies (Canopi, 2023).

It's also important to give managers and leaders regular training so they can effectively respond to workplace well-being issues (Mind, 2018). Employers can support worker well-being by encouraging employees to use the available support services. Providing mental health awareness training for all employees also makes it more likely that employees will access available support when they feel they need it (Bailey *et al.* 2022).

Physical health is also part of employee well-being, and employers should provide support around physical health needs as well.

If an employee can't work because of any type of illness, employers should provide paid sick leave where possible and help them in the return-to-work process (McFadden *et al.*, 2023; Mind, 2018). Regular communication is important, and it must be made clear that they should only return to work when they're ready. This return should be phased – for example, by starting on reduced hours or reducing the initial workload (Mind, 2018).

Reviewing processes and responding to evidence

Processes aimed at supporting employee well-being and improving retention should be regularly reviewed to understand what's working and what needs to change (Mind, 2018; WHO, 2021).

To do this, employers can send out staff surveys, look at workforce data, carry out team mental health audits, and talk to employees. When staff do leave, employers should hold exit interviews so that issues driving staff turnover or reduced well-being can be identified and acted on (Randell, 2021). Employers should also keep up to date with the latest evidence on what works for physical and mental health and well-being. For example, a rapid review commissioned by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing found some initial evidence that interventions focused on personal well-being, learning self-management techniques, and building emotional resilience seem to be the most effective for mental well-being (Blodgett, Kaushal, and Harkness, 2022).

By following these steps, organisations can create a culture that protects the well-being of workers and helps them feel valued. This will also improve retention rates.
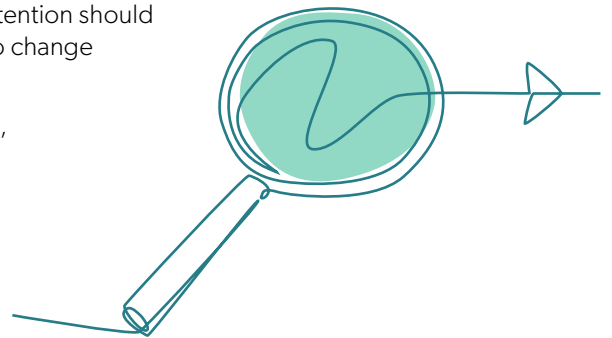
Conclusion

Retention is a vital part of supporting the social care sector and making sure people have access to the best care possible. Employee well-being needs to be prioritised and effectively supported to have good retention rates. Some of what's needed to support workforce well-being requires systemic change. There are things happening at the systemic level in Wales to support workforce well-being that also improve retention rates.

But there are also things employers can do to make sure their workers' well-being is supported. When employers support workers' well-being in a proactive way, it's positive for the workforce, people who access care and support, and the sector as a whole.

Reading list

Here is a list of the five most relevant resources to improved well-being and workforce retention that are either open access or freely available on the <u>NHS Wales e-Library</u>.

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2. McFadden, P., Neill, R. D., Mallett, J., Manthorpe, J., Gillen, P., Moriarty, J., Currie, D., Heike Schroder, Ravalier, J., Nicholl, P. and Ross, J. (2022) 'Mental well-being and quality of working life in UK social workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A propensity score matching study', *British Journal of Social Work*, 52 (5), pp. 2814-2833, <u>doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcab198</u>.

3. Parry, S., Williams, T. and Oldfield, J. (2022) 'Reflections from the forgotten frontline: "The reality for children and staff in residential care" during COVID-19', *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 30, pp. 212-224, <u>doi:10.1111/hsc.13394</u>.

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