

Written evidence submitted by Sense (EPW0050)

About Sense

Sense is a national disability charity that supports people with complex disabilities to be understood, connected and valued. Sense supports children, young people and adults in their home and in the community. Sense campaigns passionately for the rights of the people it serves, and offers practical help and support to families and carers, including information and advice, short breaks and family events.

Who does Sense support?

Sense supports people with complex disabilities including people who are deafblind, as well as those with learning disabilities, autism, sensory impairments and complex health conditions. The people with complex disabilities we represent often require significant or constant care and support from family members or social care, including support with personal care. Many of the people we support are also deafblind, including individuals with congenital deafblindness, and also those who are visually impaired or Deaf or Hard of Hearing who then acquire an additional sensory impairment. While those who have acquired deafblindness tend to have less complex care needs, they are still likely to have communication needs which require the right support.

Evaluation of Commitments

Planning for the workforce

Commitment: Ensure that the NHS and social care system have the nurses, midwives, doctors, carers and other health professionals that it needs.

As the social care system does not have the care workforce it needs, the Government cannot be said to have met its commitment. Providers can only do so much to attract staff, particularly when providers are paid very low rates by local authorities. The Government has a responsibility to do more to enable providers to recruit and retain the care workers our social care system needs.

While recruitment and retention have long been a problem in the sector, with turnover at 38.1 per cent in 2019-20¹, the situation has worsened over the past two years. This is due to a number of factors including: the impact of Brexit; the pandemic; the lack of a people plan; pay and conditions; and career advancement.

The impact of Brexit

Brexit has likely played a part in the lack of carers. According to Skills for Care, only 1.8 per cent of starters in the sector between January and April 2021 arrived from outside the UK, compared to 5.2 per cent during the same period in 2019.² Whilst Sense staffing levels have not been directly affected, our services have still been affected by the wider impact of Brexit on the general recruitment market.

Although Sense does not have a position on Brexit, we do not believe that it is a mitigating factor when evaluating the Government's progress against its commitments, particularly as it has had the opportunity to prepare for the end of free movement.

The pandemic

England's adult social care system was in crisis even before Covid-19. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by the sector, imposing new costs on an already underfunded system and worsening morale among care workers and services. Unsurprisingly, the emotional toll of the pandemic on the workforce, added to the same factors causing labour shortages across the economy, has made it particularly challenging to recruit and retain care workers. These challenges have in turn impacted those receiving social care, many of whom had already seen their support withdrawn as a result of the pandemic.

Although turnover in the sector initially decreased slightly during the pandemic, the reopening of other sectors of the economy, particularly retail and hospitality, has made it harder to recruit and retain staff.

In research carried out by the Nuffield Trust, care providers said that they the easing of lockdown had made it more difficult to recruit, particularly as the hospitality sector was able to offer more competitive pay packages than the social care sector.³

¹ <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/adult-social-care-workforce-data/Workforce-intelligence/publications/national-information/The-state-of-the-adult-social-care-sector-and-workforce-in-England.aspx>

² Ibid.

Our own services report that, in the wake of the pandemic, the staffing situation has never more serious.

The need for a people plan

The Government's commitment to ensure that the care sector has the care workers it needs is not specific enough. There needs to be more detail on how the Government intends to put this into practice. While local authorities and providers have a role to play in ensuring that the sector has the care workforce it needs, the Government also has a responsibility to respond to the workforce crisis.

While the NHS has a people plan, the social care system does not. The absence of a people plan for the social care sector is characteristic of the many ways in which social care is treated differently to the health service.

Although the Government's recent White Paper on social care set out what it describes as a strategy for the workforce, this falls short of being a comprehensive workforce plan equivalent to that of the NHS People Plan. With the sector facing a severe labour shortage at a time when it is both underfunded and under strain as a result of the pandemic, the need for a people plan is evident.

This people plan will need to address a longstanding challenge faced by the sector – the difficulty it faces in offering competitive pay and conditions, as well as equivalent career advancement prospects, in comparison to other sectors.

Pay and conditions

The low rates paid by local authorities makes it difficult for providers like Sense to compete with better pay and conditions in the NHS, and even in other sectors such as retail and hospitality.

Without parity of pay, conditions and esteem between the NHS and social care, employers like Sense will continue to struggle to recruit and retain staff.

³ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/going-it-alone-health-and-brex-it-in-the-uk>

Career advancement

Sense also finds that a lack of career advancement opportunities in the sector makes it less attractive than the NHS or even unrelated sectors like retail and hospitality. The sector would be more likely to recruit and retain staff if career pathways were clearer and there were more gateways into senior roles.

We are already involved in programmes to develop leadership skills within the sector. For example, Sense is working with Birmingham South and City College on a leadership programme designed to support people to develop the values, skills and behaviours needed to progress in the social care sector. It is vital that the Government incorporates the development of leadership skills into its plans for developing the workforce.

Building a skilled workforce

Commitments

- Help the million and more NHS clinicians and support staff develop the skills they need and the NHS requires in the decades ahead.
- £1 billion extra of funding every year for more social care staff and better infrastructure, technology and facilities.

While the Government has announced additional funding for the social care sector, our services report that this is not making a difference to frontline operations.

As an employer of a skilled care workforce, Sense understands that having the right quality of staff is just as important as having the right number. Trained, well-paid and engaged staff who are working with the individuals they support to achieve the best possible outcomes are an essential part of delivering safer and better care.

Any commitment to ensuring the workforce is skilled would have to set out clearly the skills that would be expected of the care workforce.

Ensuring that the workforce is skilled

To support people with complex disabilities to interact with the world and lead enriched lives, care workers may need to:

- Provide communication support;
- Give people with complex disabilities the support they need to work or look for work; and
- Support people with complex disabilities to develop and maintain relationships.

Despite the skilled nature of the profession, there is little standardised training across the social care sector.

At Sense services, we find that very few staff have the Care Certificate when they begin working for us. And as the Care Certificate is very basic, we supplement it with around 3.5 days of additional training.

While providers like Sense can play a role in building a skilled workforce, this is more effective when the Government supports, resources and enables these efforts.

Given that the Government's commitments on training the social care work are vague, it is difficult to say whether the Government has acted on them. The Government's commitments could be improved by the introduction of more specific targets for improving both the quality and uptake of the Care Certificate.

Wellbeing at work

Commitment: Listen to the views of social care staff to learn how we can better support them – individually and collectively.

The Government's commitment to improving wellbeing at work is not specific enough to evaluate. However, it is important to note that low morale in the sector cannot be tackled in isolation. While the Government's proposals for initiatives to provide wellbeing and mental health support is positive, the root cause of low morale amongst care workers is often linked to pay and conditions, limited prospects for career advancement, and stress brought about by the workforce crisis. Without addressing these issues, it will be impossible to significantly improve wellbeing at work.

Annex: How does Sense Living support people with complex disabilities who draw on care?

Sense's policy positions on social care are shaped by our insight as a provider of care to people with complex disabilities, as well as by our experience of employing a highly skilled workforce in the social care sector.

While providing this care, Sense takes a person-centred approach, putting each individual we support at the heart of planning and developing their own support, giving them choice, control and independence in their lives.

Our expertise in communication allows us to do this. We take the time to understand the way the people we support communicate, which can include signing, symbols, objects of reference, gestures or body language. Whether it's shopping for food, furnishing a room, following an education or training programme or trying a new activity, we support people to express their preferences and make them happen.

Residential Care

Sense has supported people in residential settings for many years. Last year, we supported 230 adults with complex disabilities through residential care, each of whom have their own rooms, individual care plans and skilled Sense Living staff on hand 24 hours a day.

Supported Living

Last year, Sense Living provided supported living for 105 people with complex disabilities. Supported living gives people with complex disabilities the opportunity to choose where to live, who to live with and what they do every day.

Our skilled staff provide people with the level of support that is right for them, whether that is support 24 hours a day or support for part of the day, such as for personal care or making meals.

Whether it's shopping for food, decorating their home, taking part in activities in their community, or enjoying creative or physical activity, we enable people in our supported living to communicate their preferences and act on them.

