

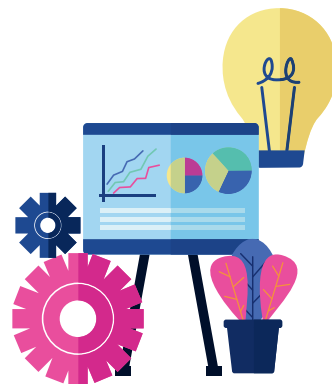
OVERCOMING QUALIFICATION BARRIERS IN SCOTTISH SOCIAL CARE

A SURVEY ANALYSIS



Summary

This Qualifications Report seeks to address the critical challenges faced by the independent social care sector in Scotland regarding mandatory qualifications for the workforce.



This Qualifications Report addresses the critical challenges faced by the social care sector in Scotland regarding mandatory qualifications for the workforce. Registration and associated qualification aims to professionalise the workforce and recognize their valuable skills and experience. However, the drive for full registration with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) has not been matched by sufficient resourcing from key policy and funding stakeholders, leading to significant barriers in accessing and funding qualifications.

The survey, conducted among Scottish Care members, highlights several critical issues impacting the sector. Despite the strong commitment to professionalisation, providers struggle to fund qualifications, contributing to workforce instability. Staff may leave the sector without gaining the required qualification, creating further pressure on services. This comes at a time when a significant percentage of care and support workers still need to achieve their qualification.

Inadequate and inaccessible funding for qualifications is a major barrier, along with limited time for study and low confidence levels among staff. Experienced staff nearing retirement age and internationally recruited care workers face additional challenges in accessing qualifications tailored to their needs. Recent regulatory changes have shortened the timeframe for completing qualifications, amplifying concerns about staff retention and service delivery.

The survey responses indicate that a significant number of social care workers may leave the sector due to the barriers in gaining mandatory qualifications, leading to an increasing number of vacancies and a lack of capacity for vital social care services.

The report calls for urgent and meaningful intervention to support the workforce in achieving qualifications and maintaining high-quality care delivery.

Context

One of the ongoing priorities for the social care sector in Scotland is ensuring that the workforce becomes fully registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). This legal requirement applies to individuals working in registered roles within social care and includes the obligation to achieve a mandatory qualification.

Sector leaders have embraced registration as a way to recognise and professionalise the workforce and highlight the value of their skills and experience in delivering essential care and support services.

Despite the sector's strong commitment to professionalisation, this drive has not been matched by sufficient resourcing from key policy and funding stakeholders. As a result, providers frequently struggle to fund qualifications, contributing to workforce instability. Staff may leave the sector without gaining the required qualification, creating further pressure on services. The [Scottish Social Services Council Register \(April 2023–March 2024\)](#) reports that 58% of care and support workers in care homes and between 55%–58% of those in care at home and housing support services still need to achieve their qualification.

Scottish Care has consistently heard from its members about inadequate and inaccessible funding for qualifications. However, finance is not the only barrier. Others include the limited time available for study, and low confidence levels among staff who may not have engaged in formal learning for many years.

A particularly vulnerable group comprises experienced staff nearing retirement age. These workers represent a significant proportion of the workforce—26% are over the age of 55—and are at risk of exiting the sector prematurely if unable to complete their qualification. This would represent a substantial loss of skills, experience, and leadership capacity.

Another group facing significant barriers are internationally recruited care workers. These individuals may experience difficulty accessing funding and often require tailored support such as translated materials or additional language assistance. Scottish Care's [International Recruitment report](#) shows that over 66% of members recruit from overseas, underlining the importance of addressing these qualification access issues.

Recent regulatory changes have added to these pressures. The SSSC, through its Future Proofing Programme, has shortened the timeframe for completing qualifications from five years to three. While some managers previously reported that five years diminished the urgency for staff, the accelerated timeframe, combined with limited financial and operational capacity, has amplified concerns about staff retention and service delivery.

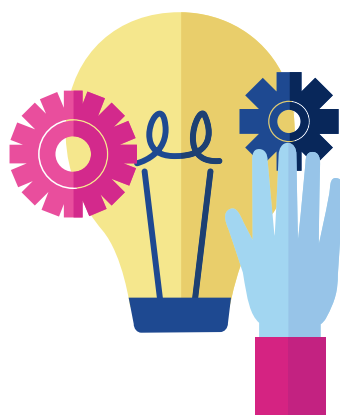
Additional government policy changes—including increased employer National Insurance contributions and the raised salary threshold for international recruits to £25,000 per year —have introduced further financial pressures. In a sector already experiencing funding challenges, these developments make it even harder for employers to support staff qualification and retention.

Survey Rationale

This backdrop led to the creation of a survey aimed at Scottish Care members to capture some vital data around the number of staff within organisations who have still to achieve the required qualification. In addition, we were keen to evidence the barriers that are being experienced across the independent social care sector when accessing and funding mandatory qualifications for their staff teams.

The survey was issued to Scottish Care member organisations in December 2024, with responses received from 98 services from Scottish Care’s membership. Respondents in the most part were Care Managers, who are responsible for monitoring staff registration.

Responses were received from across the diversity of Scottish Care’s membership, with the breakdown consisting of 60% from care homes, 39% from care at home and housing support services, and 1% from day care representatives. Responses were also geographically spread across Scotland with 25 of the 31 Local Authority areas being represented. The response level equates to just over 10% of our individual care provider services and just under roughly 30% of our member organisations.



Impact on Organisations and Care Delivery

To assess the impact of mandatory registration qualifications on the social care sector and its workforce, we sought to understand the number of staff within organisations who had yet to achieve their required qualifications.

The first survey question therefore asked whether organisations had employees who were required to obtain their qualification within the next 12 months but had indicated they would not be doing so.

Of the respondents, 15% reported that they did have staff within their services who still needed the qualification for them to remain working in the sector but who were indicating they did not intend to obtain it. It remains difficult to gain greater clarity as to how many staff this is affecting due to the variations that are seen within care providers including their size and location. However, some respondents indicated that out of their full complement of staff, they have two or three in this position whilst others reported that over one hundred of their staff members have expressed a lack of intention to gain the required qualification.

A follow-up question sought to understand what percentage of staff this represented within respondents' organisations and responses indicated that this made up approximately 16% on average of overall staff members. This evidences that a significant number of social care workers may be leaving the sector in the coming months and years because they find gaining the mandatory qualification a barrier. This creates the potential for an increasing number of vacancies within social care and an overall lack of capacity for vital social care services.

As evidenced in the chart below, there are a range of reasons shared as to why staff are deciding not to undertake the SVQ, or equivalent mandatory qualification. One of the main reasons given in the survey responses was the cost of the qualification, with over 43% of respondents highlighting this as a barrier and 29% stating that lack of access to funding was an issue. Due to the long-term underfunding of the social care sector, which includes the lack of use of appropriate cost models that reflect the true costs of care, organisations often do not have the financial resources or scope needed to fund staff qualifications. Another reason given was lack of time, with 36% of respondents giving this as an answer and 34% of managers indicated on behalf of their staff members that a lack of confidence was also a significant barrier to them completing the SVQ.

Q7 What reasons have staff given for refusing to complete the SVQ?



Another main reason given by respondents was that staff were nearing the age of retirement and had therefore decided not to undertake the qualification. Over half of respondents (52%) indicated that they had staff giving ‘nearing retirement’ as the reason they did not want to complete the qualification. This represents a significant risk to the sector’s ability to continue to deliver high-quality care and support. Loss of this demographic of staff would include many of the most experienced and skilled staff members working in social care who have been in the sector for a long time. Staff will obviously retire, however having a situation where valuable staff are having to leave the sector at an earlier date than planned is a very negative if unintended consequence. This could also result in staff leaving the sector before passing on their knowledge and experience to younger staff through succession planning and through mentoring and buddy programmes. An essential step is to therefore initiate a wider discussion on how to appropriately support staff nearing retirement to remain in the sector through systems of supervision, observation and Continuous Professional Learning (CPL), to mitigate these risks.

We also wanted to ascertain the impact that the loss of these vital staff members would have on responding organisations. We therefore asked respondents: *‘If the staff identified in the previous question leave your service as a result of losing SSSC registration, how would this impact on your service?’* 42% of respondents advised that the loss of these staff would seriously impact them and a further 43% indicated they would be somewhat impacted in terms of service delivery. This clearly has huge implications for the sector at a time when stability is much needed and there is growing demand for social care packages in both care home and care at home provision. A minority of respondents, around 15%, advised that their services would not be impacted by the loss of these staff. There was a free text box provided for respondents to give additional comments and detail about the potential impact on their services and organisations.

“I have lost 1 member of staff who worked with us for 20 [years] who would still be working if she did not have to do an SVQ. In her words she is too old to work a computer to undertake studying. She has been age restricted as cannot use technology.” - respondent, care at home/housing support

“The people we are losing are often the most experienced, so the ones we would least want to lose.” - respondent, care at home/housing support

Access to Funding

For a clearer picture to be built around the difficulties in accessing appropriate funding for staff qualifications, we wanted to understand how and in what way this was affecting the independent sector social care workforce.

Respondents were asked directly if access to funding was impacting on staff being able to achieve their qualification and approximately 30% responded affirmatively that this was an issue. This gives a partial explanation as to why there are still over half the social care workforce who need to achieve the required qualification to remain working in the sector as evidenced in [The Scottish Social Services Council Register 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024](#).

In terms of the funding context within the social care sector in Scotland, the challenges are well known. The current National Care Home Contract cost model, which determines the rates paid by public bodies to independent sector care services for residential and nursing care provision, does not represent the true cost of delivering care to residents with diverse and complex needs whilst meeting the other workforce, service and development costs associated with high-quality care and support. In addition, in many instances current care at home and housing support hourly rates are not underpinned by a cost breakdown that includes allowing for staff learning and development needs. Since the introduction of the Scottish Living Wage, the Scottish Government have provided care employers with an uplift specifically aimed at supporting them to meet the increased rate of pay. This uplift itself usually only covers the specific amount needed to increase frontline care and support workers' rate of pay but not other costs associated with workforce support, learning and development.

Pay increases for other staff roles including managers and supervisors are not always included, resulting in the organisation having to absorb these additional costs to maintain appropriate differentials. This creates additional tension as individuals working to a higher level of accountability and responsibility in senior roles may not being paid a proportionately higher rate of pay which can result in them leaving. In addition, there is no agreed allowance incorporated to cover the cost of staff achieving the qualification meaning that again this cost is either taken on by the organisation, or by the staff member themselves if they are able to. Social care providers are facing constant financial uncertainty with sustainability of their organisations being a real challenge.

Given that employers may not have the funding available to cover the cost of staff SVQs, access to funding support is a crucial route in qualifying and retaining staff members. However, providers in the independent social care sector often cannot

access wider funding support to finance staff qualifications, leaving them particularly challenged.

Social care is defined as a low-paid sector by the Low Pay Commission even with the additional commitment from Scottish Government to the Scottish Living Wage. We can also see from the Scottish Social Service Sector: Report on 2023 Workforce Data that an increasing percentage of the social care workforce is comprised of part-time workers. This can be seen especially in housing support and care at home services where over half the workforce (56%) are part-time workers while in care homes for adults, 43% of staff work part-time hours. Quite often staff working in social care have additional personal caring responsibilities. According to Scotland's Carers – March 2024 Update release, over a quarter of women aged between 45 and 54 and those aged between 55 and 64 provided unpaid care. Flexible part-time hours as are often available in the social care sector can contribute to making it an attractive career choice, as it enables individuals to both work and fulfil their own family commitments. However, this staff group can find the additional pressure of completing a qualification they often have to fund themselves and complete in their own time to be a major barrier and a disincentive to pursuing a career in care.

“Family commitments especially for older workers with grandchildren and/or elderly parents” - respondent, care at home/housing support

“Trying to find appropriate funding and providers for staff to access” - respondent, care home

“We are a CIC not a charity and have been told we do not meet criteria for funding for SVQ from some places which is not correct. Intake for college places has reduced significantly” - respondent, care at home/housing support

Ironically for full-time social care workers, the recent increase in pay to £12.60 per hour makes them ineligible for Students Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) funding as they earn over the threshold. However, they often still do not earn enough to be able to self-fund a qualification, that comes at a significant cost.

“The cost of qualifications is significantly high and SAAS is unavailable if you earn over £25,000 per year which most full-time senior staff do who have to complete more advanced qualifications that cost more.” - respondent, care at home/housing support

Access to SVQ Assessors

Through discussions with Scottish Care's membership, a common theme raised has been the difficulty in accessing SQV assessors in local areas.

In the survey, over half of respondents (54%) confirmed that lack of access to an appropriate assessor had interrupted or delayed their ability to have staff complete the SVQ.

This is a critically important factor that must be considered and monitored so that there are enough trained SVQ assessors available to meet the demand within the sector. This will involve coordination through key stakeholders including SQA to connect assessors with employers and to ensure that an increasing number will be recruited in the future. Members were again asked to provide some greater detail in the comment box around the experience of accessing both funding and available assessors locally.

**"Our main SVQ Provider recently went into Administration. Prior to that a local college we were using had to pull out of helping us due to lack of staff."
- respondent, care at home/ housing support**

Similar challenges are being experienced across Scotland, however in remote and rural areas these issues can be heightened by the distance and travel involved:

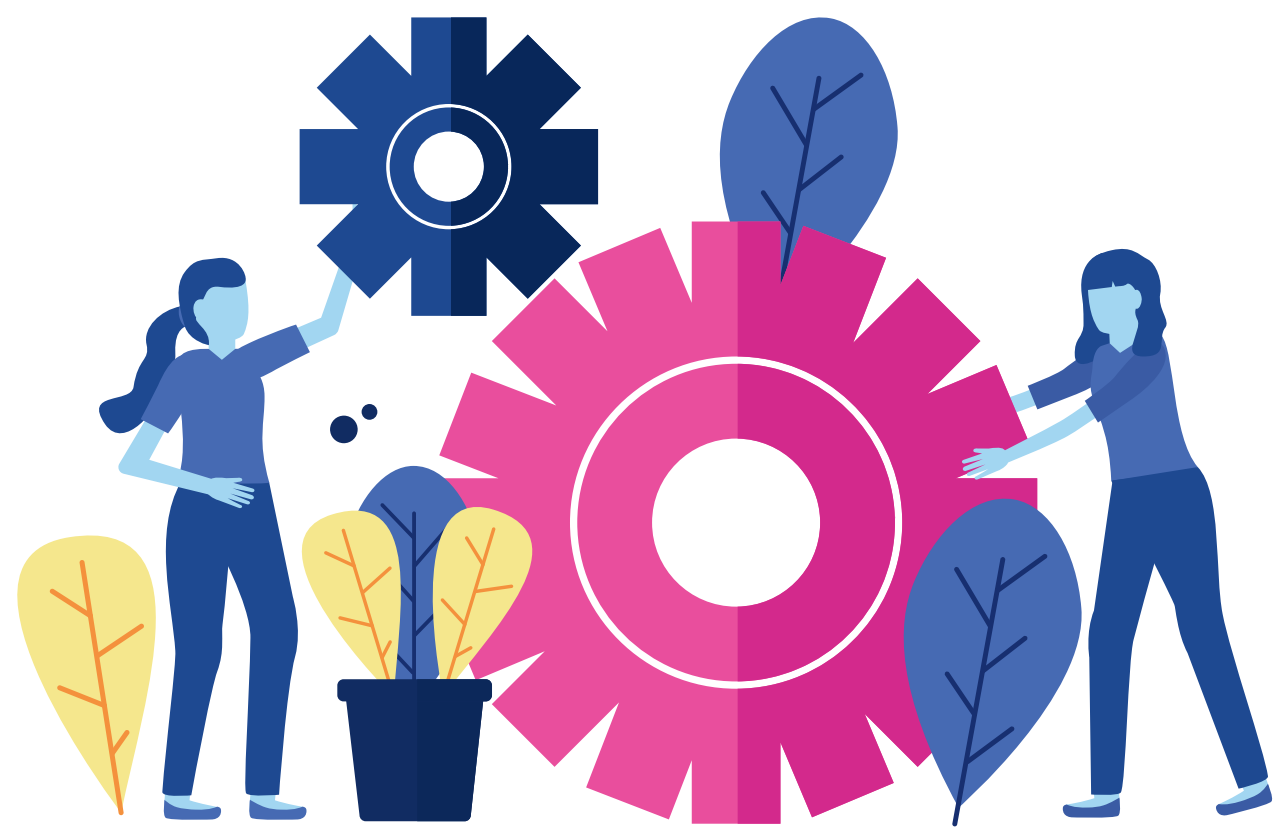
It is really difficult to find a good company who supply assessors for the SVQ, I am currently on a waiting list for some of our staff" - respondent, care at home/housing support – rural area

Access to SVQ assessors in remote and rural areas presents a distinct set of challenges that significantly impact staff training and qualification progress. Care services in these regions often struggle with limited availability of assessors, a problem that is further intensified by geographical barriers. Inadequate public transport infrastructure makes it difficult for staff to travel to centralised training locations and equally challenging for assessors to reach rural care settings.

Additionally, greater travel distances increase both time and costs, placing further strain on already tight budgets. These combined factors highlight a clear need for enhanced funding models that reflect the logistical and financial demands of accessing qualification provision and assessment in rural and remote areas, ensuring that all staff—regardless of location—can access the qualifications necessary for registration and career development.

The responses also highlighted a range of other issues related to access to SVQ assessors that are significantly impacting the progress of staff qualification in care services. Alongside the key concern of the limited availability of assessors, several survey respondents reported slow progress and delays due to the heavy workload of assessors, which restricts the time they can dedicate to individual learners—especially those requiring additional support. This bottleneck in the assessment process contributes to overall delays in SVQ completion and hampers workforce development. Furthermore, the scarcity of assessor time is compounded by organisational challenges such as funding constraints and staffing limitations, often resulting in delays in the qualification journey for care staff.

These access issues, when combined with other systemic and funding barriers, create a significant hurdle for care services trying to meet training and registration requirements within the required timeframe.

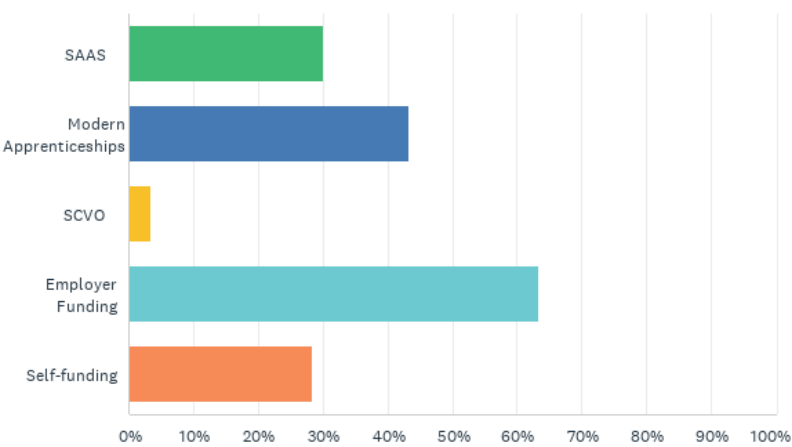


Current Funding Pathways in Social Care

We wanted to explore and evidence how current SVQ provision is being funded within independent sector social care organisations.

We asked respondents to select which funding streams they have been able to utilise to pay for staff qualifications. As evidenced in the table below, approximately 30% of social care organisations have had staff use SAAS funding, with a further 43% advising that they had accessed Modern Apprenticeships funding to pay for their staff qualifications.

Q14 For staff who are currently undertaking their SVQ how has this been funded?



Modern Apprenticeships funding was made available to the social care sector in April 2019 to support the workforce to obtain the qualification they need for SSSC registration. Many Scottish Care members have been able to access this funding through their local college or training provider. However, much of this has unfortunately depended on the knowledge of the care or training manager speaking to the right individual within a training organisation and managing to get access to funding. The funding that was allocated for Modern Apprenticeships is limited and will not cover the full demand that is present within the social care sector.

This has resulted in a high percentage of Scottish Care members funding their own staff team qualifications, with 63% of organisations saying they have done this to retain vital staff. The other element is that social care workers are paying for their own qualification which shows their commitment to their work and role with around 28% of respondents reporting that staff have self-funded.

These figures evidence the diverse and challenging operational considerations that the social care sector is contending with in supporting their staff to achieve the qualification they need to register with their regulatory body, SSSC, and to therefore remain compliant and able to work in the social care sector.

This is also taking place at a time when recruitment of social care workers is the most challenging it has ever been and the ability to retain essential staff members is reducing. The [Staff Vacancies in Care Services 2023](#) report is jointly published by the SSSC and the Care Inspectorate and highlighted that 48% of social care providers have reported vacancies within their services, with care at home, housing support and care homes for adults facing the most significant difficulties in filling these vacancies.

Additional Factors Impacting Qualification Achievement

There are other factors that must be taken into consideration around the social care workforce's ability to achieve their qualifications given the many and varied pressures they are facing.

Due to the challenges of social care recruitment and retention there can be great difficulty in accessing and financing backfill staff that are needed to give individuals time away for training. Time itself is such a precious commodity in social care with the continuous and increasing pressures staff are facing regarding day-to-day care delivery. Time is being eroded that is needed to delivery vital care and support services and therefore it becomes much harder to provide protected learning time for staff teams.

“Backfilling time needed using agency staff” - respondent, care home

“Finding time, as we need to then re-staff their shift as some struggle to do this at home due to other commitments, and also staffing to release staff to help them” - respondent, care home

Another challenge shared by Scottish Care members during workforce forum meetings is the lack of flexibility for social care staff and the incompatibility of SVQ assessment with their work. In many instances, particularly in care at home services, staff members may not be required to complete a great deal of written work or reports in their day-to-day practice. This can cause a gap in the evidence they must produce to meet aspects of the SVQ criteria. Scottish Care members have regularly raised this practical reality as a concern both at previous forum meetings and in response to this survey.

“Our staff do not do the activities that are required for the SVQ. We don’t do personal care, administering meds etc. some staff only work 6-10hrs per week.” - respondent, care at home/housing support

This is also taking place in a context where staff carrying out equivalent roles and duties working in NHS services are not required to be registered with a professional body or to obtain a qualification. This has created an inequality between social care and health workforces, in what is meant to be an integrated landscape, and has contributed to a substantial flow of social care workers being recruited to work in local NHS boards. Scottish Care members have often attributed this to the disproportionate academic and regulatory expectations placed on social care workers despite their rate of pay not reflecting the skilled nature of their roles or their high level of responsibility and accountability. It is no wonder that care managers and employers have long warned that they often lose vital staff, especially once qualified, to other health and social care subsectors and other industries where they can earn more whilst carrying less responsibility.

“The SSSC are still talking about expecting care at home workers to achieve an SVQ3, yet they are still to be paid at the bottom of the public sector scale (living wage only) and there are other jobs better paid and less accountability, responsibility, unregistered and unqualified.” - respondent, care at home/housing support

“I believe there should be a simpler qualification that staff can attain by attending a 2 day course. It gets them in and registered with the SSSC. For many staff they are not good with continuous learning or struggle to apply themselves but they are excellent carers. Just a question how the NHS carers seem not to have to register with the SSSC or if they do this must be a relatively new thing for them. Can't have rules for some and not for others.” - respondent, care home



Qualifying the International Social Care Workforce

We also wanted to better understand the current qualification picture for international workers who have been recruited into social care from overseas.

Due to the inclusion of care and support workers onto the Shortage Occupation List (SOL) in 2023, the sector experienced a large increase of staff from other countries who were able to come and work in Scotland. The availability of overseas staff was a great boost to the social care sector who have long struggled with being able to recruit sufficient staff levels, especially in rural parts of the country.

As overseas staff often have restrictions attached to their working terms and conditions, we wanted to explore some of the potential barriers to accessing the mandatory qualification that may be experienced by this demographic of the workforce. Care organisations have been reporting additional difficulties in accessing funding for qualifications for their international workforce due to an inability to receive public funding until settled status has been granted. This comes at a time when the SSSC have reduced the timeframe to achieve the qualification from five to three years, which could significantly impact this staff group in their ability to fund and achieve the qualification required for registration.

In the qualifications survey sent out to our membership, 23% of respondents indicated that they currently employ staff from overseas who are waiting to undertake their qualification. The survey then asked what percentage this was of their overall staff compliment, and they advised this was on average 33%.

This must be taken in context with the variable nature of the care sector. Survey respondents had an option to input the number of overseas workers this was impacting and responses varied very widely, with some reporting a handful of staff being affected but others reported up to 100 staff members in this situation. This aligns with the findings set out in the [International Recruitment Survey Findings Briefing Report](#) published in April 2024 and contributes to the high-risk element of social care delivery when large percentages of staff are experiencing these barriers to remain working in the social care sector.

We wanted to delve deeper into the specific barriers facing international social care workers and again asked respondents to provide additional details:

“Staff from overseas have to pay £3000 if they have not been in the country for 3 years or more compared to £700 for someone else.” - respondent, care home

Consistent themes of significant additional cost as well as timeframe and residence-related restrictions emerged, which are compounding the challenges associated with recruiting staff from overseas and then ensuring they meet Scottish social care qualification requirements. These issues require reconsideration at policy level.

Conclusion

Despite significant and growing challenges, Scotland's social care sector continues to demonstrate extraordinary dedication. Across the country, employers and staff remain deeply committed to delivering high-quality care and professionalising the workforce.

This is evidenced by staff members choosing to self-fund their qualifications and employers going to great lengths to support them. Notably, around 85% of independent and third sector providers have received Care Inspectorate grades of "Good" or above, reflecting the high standards that persist despite systemic pressures. It should also be noted that the current qualifications system is working well for some services and their staff:

"...My staff are all keen to undertake their SVQ. We also pay the fees upfront and deduct at a manageable amount each month." – respondent, care home

However, the sector's resilience is being tested by increasing fragility, driven by insufficient funding, workforce shortages, limited access to assessors, and tighter qualification timeframes. These pressures are especially pronounced in rural and remote areas, and among older workers and international recruits. Without urgent and meaningful intervention, many experienced and skilled staff could be lost, seriously undermining the quality and availability of care.

Scottish Care raised many of these issues in its 2019 report - [Qualifying Care: An Exploration of Social Care Registration Qualifications in Scotland](#). That report called for visible, accessible, and flexible qualification pathways, recognising that a "one size fits all" approach fails to meet the diverse needs of the workforce. The current findings echo and intensify those earlier concerns. Progress has not kept pace with need, and barriers remain unresolved or have worsened.

Now, more than ever, we must prioritise investment in the workforce. Social care staff are performing increasingly skilled and complex roles in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. For this work to continue safely and professionally, workers must be supported to gain and maintain qualifications. This requires not only fair pay but also sustainable funding structures, appropriate learning and development resources, and long-term commitment from government and stakeholders.

Recommendations

Building upon the findings of the ‘Qualifying Care’ report and the findings of this survey, these recommendations aim to foster a more supportive and effective qualification framework for the social care workforce.



Develop a National Qualification Support Fund

Create a dedicated and accessible funding stream to help cover SVQ costs, with priority given to independent providers, older staff, part-time workers, and international recruits.



Implement Enhanced Rural Provision and Incentives

Introduce increased funding rates and mobile assessor support for remote areas, recognising the additional travel time, infrastructure gaps, and service delivery challenges.



Increase Flexibility in Qualification Pathways by Recognising Diverse Forms of Learning & Experience:

Recognise informal learning, supervision, and mentoring as valid evidence toward SVQ requirements, especially for experienced staff nearing retirement.



Create an Assessor Recruitment and Retention Strategy

Expand the pool of SVQ assessors through coordinated national efforts and partnerships with colleges and training providers to ensure timely access.



Review and Adjust SAAS Eligibility Criteria

Reassess income thresholds so full-time social care workers can access support, especially for advanced SVQs that are often financially out of reach.



Support for International Recruits

Remove funding restrictions based on residency, and ensure accessible, language-sensitive training options to help international workers complete qualifications within the required timeframe.



Align Qualification Expectations Across Health and Social Care

Ensure parity between NHS and social care staff in terms of qualification requirements and support, to reduce workforce migration and improve sector stability.



Invest in Workforce Capacity to Facilitate Protected Learning Time

Invest in workforce capacity to enable paid study leave and proper backfill, ensuring staff have the time and space to complete training.



Refresh and Recommit to 'Fair Work' Principles

Ensure that Fair Work extends beyond pay to include development opportunities, qualification access, and sustainable working conditions for all social care staff.



Support the Older Workforce in Qualification Pathways

Address the specific needs and challenges for the older workforce through tailored support, recognition of prior experience, and flexible assessment methods.



Improve Communication and Support Regarding Registration and Qualification Obligations

Develop measures to improve communication and support from regulatory and funding bodies to ensure all staff are aware of available support.

The future of Scotland's care sector depends on the strength and wellbeing of its workforce. With the right investment and support, it is possible to ensure that the qualification experience also serves to retain experience, foster development, and enable social care services and staff to continue delivering high-quality care to those who need it most.

Thank you

We would like to thank members of Scottish Care for their engagement and support, particularly those who contributed to the survey that forms the basis of this report. We are also grateful to those who have shared their experiences through forums, strategic groups, and other channels. Your input has been valuable in informing our understanding and shaping this work.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank the partners and funders of the Workforce Matters project for their continued support.






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