



Department
for Education

Skills England: Sector skills needs assessments

Health and Adult Social Care

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Summary

Health and adult social care are linked, but separate sectors, working together to support people to live independent, healthier lives and central to the government mission to build a health and social care system fit for the future.¹ This briefing considers health and adult social care as a single sector, recognising interdependencies and value in supporting cross-government ambitions including economic growth, reducing unemployment, improving population health and reducing NHS waiting lists.² This is especially important given current ambitions towards a Neighbourhood Health Service and achieving greater integration between health and adult social care services. There is also an integral link between the NHS and the life sciences sector, which is covered within its own briefing.

Health data included in this briefing focuses on the National Health Service (NHS) in England, which provides physical and mental health care for all who are ordinarily resident in England.

Adult Social Care covers a wider range of practical support to help people live independently and stay well and safe. It includes support in people's homes, care homes, and elsewhere in the community.³ Adult social care services are commissioned by local authorities but are primarily delivered by independent providers. Most adult social care staff are employed by small and medium-sized private providers, of which there are around 18,000 in total.⁴

Priority jobs and skills

The NHS is the largest employer in England with around 1.5 million employees.⁵ Over half of the workforce (approximately 700,000 FTE) is made up of professionally qualified clinical staff who have degree level training including doctors, nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and healthcare scientists. Clinical support staff, such as healthcare support workers and technical staff account for approximately 400,000 FTE. There are many other staff groups that help to provide NHS services but are not directly employed by the NHS, for example, there are nearly 150,000 FTE staff working in general practice and more than 24,000 dentists performing some NHS dental activity in 2023-24.^{6,7} Adult social care employed 1.6 million people in 2023/24.⁸ The majority of the workforce are in direct care occupations (76%) such as care and home care workers, followed by

¹ [Build an NHS fit for the future](#), gov.uk (2024)

² Children's social care has been excluded, reflecting its treatment as distinct sector by government with separate data exploring different needs and barriers.

³ [Key facts and figures about adult social care](#), The Kings Fund (2024)

⁴ [Adult Social Care: Key facts and figures | The King's Fund](#), The Kings Fund (2024)

⁵ [NHS Workforce Statistics - September 2024 \(Including selected provisional statistics for October 2024\) - NHS England Digital](#), NHS England (2025)

⁶ [General Practice Workforce - NHS England Digital](#), NHS England (2024)

⁷ [NHS Dental Statistics for England, 2022-23, Annual Report - NHS England Digital](#), NHS England (2023)

⁸ [Adult social care workforce in England](#), House of Commons Library (2024)

managers (7%), and regulated professions (5%) such as registered nurses and social workers.⁹

The health and adult social care sectors have the highest proportion of vacancies (41%) and the largest volume of workers in demand occupations.^{10,11} The Employer Skills Survey (ESS) 2022 show that 36% of vacancies across health and adult social care were hard-to-fill due to skill shortages, in line with the UK average of 36%. Skills England engagement¹² with the adult social care sector suggested specialist care including end of life and dementia also experience a shortage of skilled staff and demand for this is expected to increase.

An ageing population in the UK will increase demand for services as both the type and complexity of work changes. The Skills for Care Workforce Strategy and the Lord Darzi review emphasised the need to attract, retain and train up qualified workers to meet changing skills and population needs. Skills for Care model that, if the adult social care workforce grows proportionally to the projected number of people aged 65 and over in the population, then 430,000 new posts would be required by 2035. By 2040, an estimated total of 2.38 million adult social care posts would be needed, an increase of 29% from 2023/24.¹³ Given wider reform ambitions and demographic changes, it is expected that new health and adult social care strategies will be needed to support a new model of care. The refresh of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, announced in December 2024, will be informed by the 10 Year Health plan and reflect the changing model of care.¹⁴

As the rate of multiple long-term conditions increases, and population demographic changes, clinical research will become an increasingly valuable aspect of healthcare delivery. Health and social care workers are interested in more opportunities for research involvement but often cite lack of research time, support and skills as key barriers.¹⁵ There are growing gaps within the research workforce, with surveys showing that the medical research workforce has not increased in line with the more than 50% rise in NHS consultants over the last 20 years. This trend is likely to be mirrored across all clinical researchers. Thus, the research workforce is not matching NHS need.¹⁶

Whilst key skills required to meet growing demand vary by occupation, engagement with both sectors recognised that digital skills are vital to enhance clinical skills. In the NHS,

⁹ [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#), Skills for Care (2024)

¹⁰ [Employer Skills Survey research report](#), DfE (2023)

¹¹ [Occupations in demand 2024](#), DfE, October 2024

¹² During this engagement process and the drafting of this publication, Skills England was set up in shadow form within the Department for Education (DfE). [Skills England - GOV.UK](#)

¹³ [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England, 2024](#), Skills for Care (2024)

¹⁴ [Government to tackle NHS workforce crisis with refreshed plan - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [Research for all? An analysis of clinical participation in research | RCP](#), Royal College of Physicians (2020)

¹⁶ [Clinical Researchers in the UK, OSCHR](#), UK Research and Innovation (2025)

these skills will allow staff to spend more time focusing on patient care, with examples noted such as the automation of administrative tasks, usage of genomics and artificial intelligence to support diagnosis, robotics usage for surgical care and automating dispensing for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians.¹⁷ Likewise, adult social care engagement suggested that digital skills could support efficient use of care workers time, and support community-based prevention. Whilst digital skills are essential for advances, it is also vital to recognise the growing need for other skills, such as delegated healthcare tasks, to meet the increasingly complex needs of individuals drawing on care and support.

Women represent over 70% of both workforces and this gender imbalance could be impacting the supply of skills. Around a third of both workforces are from ethnic minority groups (31% in the NHS¹⁸ and 32% in adult social care¹⁹) compared to 16% of the total 16 to 64 UK population.²⁰ Ethnic diversity decreases at managerial level, with ethnic minority representation at the most senior levels in the NHS at 10.8%.²¹ In adult social care 19% of all managers are from ethnic minority groups.²² In the adult social care workforce the average age in 2022/23 was 45, with 29% aged over 55 and potentially nearing retirement.²³ Succession planning will be critical to ensure continuity of service.

Training routes into the sector

Whilst training routes have increased and supported NHS workforce growth by 25% since 2010, supply has not kept up with the demand for NHS services and the need to address staffing challenges.²⁴ Degree level training is needed for clinical roles/regulated professions including doctors, dentists, nurses, allied health professionals', social workers, pharmacists and midwives.²⁵

Apprenticeships (some of which are at degree level) offer an important alternative training route for nurses, allied health professionals and other staff. Skills England engagement highlighted that apprenticeships attract a diverse talent pipeline and improve social justice.

The NHS also provides supported internships for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities, or autism, to develop skills and gain employment, employability programmes such as the Get Started Programme which support unemployed people into entry level

¹⁷ [NHS Long term Workforce plan](#), NHS England (2023)

¹⁸ The Kings Fund (2024)

¹⁹ [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#), Skills for Care (2024)

²⁰ [Annual Population Survey Jul 2023-Jun 2024](#), ONS (2024)

²¹ [NHS Workforce Race Equality Standards \(WRES\)](#), NHS England (2023)

²² [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#), Skills for Care (2024)

²³ [A workforce strategy for adult social care in England](#), Skills for Care (2024)

²⁴ [NHS Long term Workforce plan](#), NHS England (2023)

²⁵ [Professional regulation](#), NHS Employers (2022)

roles and apprenticeships, and support T-level qualifications.^{26,27,28} Since April 2021 there have been 10,000 starts in the Adult Social Care sector from DWPs SWAPs programme.²⁹

Most of the adult social care workforce in England are not registered with a regulatory body, apart from registered managers, and do not require a minimum qualification to work in the sector. In 2023/24, just under half of the direct care (unregulated) workforce held a relevant social care qualification. The most common level of qualification for these roles was at Level 2 (18%) followed by Level 3 (17%) in 2023/24. The majority (61%) of direct care workers had engaged with the Care Certificate Standards, an agreed set of standards defining the knowledge, skills and behaviours expected in specific roles which support induction and experience high levels of engagement.³⁰ Regulated adult social care professions such as nurses and social workers require qualifications, with Skills England's engagement highlighting the importance of a variety of training routes including degrees, graduate programmes and apprenticeships.

Key occupation: Nursing

Nurses work in both the NHS and adult social care workforces. There are four fields of nursing: adult, children's, learning disability and mental health. Recognised as an in-demand occupation, both the NHS and adult social care plan to increase nursing roles in the future, leading to direct competition for nursing skills.³¹

It is estimated over 37,000 nurses work in adult social care in 2023/24, with the majority in adult nursing based in care homes, compared to approximately 360,000 FTE nurses in the NHS (including health visitors) in September 2024.^{32,33}

Key training routes into nursing include achieving a nursing degree or studying an apprenticeship. For example, to become a nursing associate – a role which bridges the gap between being a healthcare support worker and a registered nurse – it is possible to undertake a Level 5 Nursing Associate apprenticeship.³⁴ This continues to be amongst the most popular apprenticeships, with 4,100 starts recorded in 2023/24. Of those starts,

²⁶ [Supported internships in the learning disability employment programme](#), NHS England (2025)

²⁷ [Preparation for Work](#), NHS England (2025)

²⁸ [T-levels in health and care](#), NHS Employers (2023)

²⁹ [Sector-based Work Academy Programmes \(SWAPs\) Management Information, April 2021 to December 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

³⁰ [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#), Skills for Care, 2024

³¹ [Occupations in demand](#), DfE (2024)

³² [Registered nurses](#), Skills for Care (2024)

³³ [NHS Workforce Statistics - September 2024](#), NHS England Digital (2025)

³⁴ [At school or college? | Health Careers](#), NHS Careers (2025)

the majority (over 70%) were started by learners aged over 25.³⁵ Qualified nursing associates can also go on to train as a registered nurse by putting their training towards a shortened nursing degree or registered nurse degree apprenticeship.³⁶ Given these training routes are shared between the sectors, there is direct competition between the NHS and adult social care for nursing skills.

Securing the future workforce

Health and adult social care sectors face issues beyond skills which impact their ability to attract and retain their workforces. Furthermore, research access and awareness must be integrated into health and social care roles, ensuring the research workforce is sustainably maintained and staff have the time, support, and tools to engage in various healthcare settings.

Suggestions to overcome barriers to growing the future workforce in both sectors included clearer information, advice and guidance to attract future employees from schools and colleges, highlighting the range of careers available within adult social care and opportunities for progression which are less widely understood. With high staff turnover disincentivising employers to invest in training, it was suggested that further recognition of prior learning would reduce financial and administrative concerns. A competitive training offer was seen as key to making the NHS and adult social care competitive employers.

In response to these concerns, both the NHS and adult social care are exploring ways to recognise prior learning and experience. For example, the development of the NHS Digital Staff Passport will allow employees to share their employment history, education and training information with other NHS trusts.³⁷ The adult social care workforce aims to achieve parity of esteem with the NHS and is exploring the development of a similar product, further facilitating movement of skilled workers between sectors.

Gaps in provision

Our engagement highlighted further education and skills training, alongside higher education, as key entry routes into health and adult social care sectors. However, feedback from employers highlighted key areas of concern regarding the current further education and skills system:

- Employers in the adult social care sector suggested that apprenticeships and training programmes are not fully effective due to their length, complexity, and

³⁵ [Apprenticeships academic year 2023/24](#), DfE (2024)

³⁶ [Nursing associate | Health Careers](#), NHS Careers (2025)

³⁷ [NHS digital staff passport](#), NHS (2024)

academic requirements not aligning with the skills required in the sector. Whilst praise was given to the Level 3 Social Work Apprenticeship for increasing the pipeline for social workers, apprenticeship content was considered too restrictive, making it challenging for learners to specialise.

- Alongside further recognition of prior learning, expansion of other training routes such as T levels in growing the talent pipeline at lower levels. For adult social care, modularisation would allow greater flexibility to support learners' interests as well as meeting societal needs. Optional module suggestions included autism and mental health care.
- Concerns were raised about the perceived administrative and financial burden of the current apprenticeship system. Reconsideration of the English and maths requirements to focus on role-relevant competency would be welcomed. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training could support international workers to overcome this hurdle.
- Finally, as the population ages and health and care needs grow, both employers and government will need to consider the best join up of key areas including education, housing, transport and immigration to support more complex needs, alongside supporting care workers who are being asked to take on more clinical, delegated healthcare tasks.



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