



## BRIEFING 5: Workforce

**The Ask:** Social care workers deserve to be held in the same esteem as health and education professionals. There needs to be a pay and progression framework with fair pay and clear career paths for all social care professionals.

### Why the Workforce Question is Everyone's Business

Behind every statistic in this briefing is a person. A care worker travelling between home visits on wages that barely cover their costs, deciding whether they can afford to stay in a job they find deeply rewarding. A social worker carrying a caseload that keeps them awake at night, watching a colleague leave for a better-paid post across the border. An Occupational Therapist doing work of equivalent skill and complexity to an NHS colleague, for less pay, wondering whether to make the move. An Approved Mental Health Professional covering a catchment area too large for one person, holding the most serious decisions in the system, running on empty. And behind each of them, the people of Wales — older people, disabled adults, children and families — waiting for support that cannot be arranged because there is no-one available to provide it.

These are not exceptional circumstances. They are the daily reality of social care in Wales and they are why workforce is not a HR technicality or a matter of pay scales alone. It is the foundation on which everything else rests. No funding commitment, no structural reform and no new policy will improve a single person's life unless there are enough skilled, supported and fairly paid workers to carry it out. This is an issue for every Senedd Member, not only those whose brief covers health and social care.

### The Workforce in Wales: Scale and Challenge

Wales has approximately 80,000 people working in regulated social care — supporting older people to live at home, caring for looked-after children in residential settings, undertaking statutory social work with families in crisis, and delivering the reablement and community support that keeps people out of hospital.

The challenges are longstanding and well-evidenced. Vacancy rates in social work typically run at ten to fifteen per cent; in some frontline care roles they are higher still. High turnover means services are in a near-permanent cycle of recruitment. Pay has not kept pace with comparable public sector roles. The gap between what local authorities pay directly employed staff and what is available to workers in the independent sector — the majority of the care workforce — remains wide. There are no consistent career pathways visible to someone starting out in care today.

Two specialist roles illustrate this structural problem with particular clarity. Occupational Therapists (OTs) are essential to local authority social care — assessing needs, enabling rehabilitation and supporting independence at home — but social care is losing them to the NHS at a rate it cannot sustain. An OT in a local authority team may be doing work of equivalent complexity to an NHS

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colleague for significantly less pay; Welsh Government has increased commissioned pre-registration OT places, which is welcome but without pay parity social care will continue to train occupational therapists for the NHS at its own expense. Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs) face a related pressure: Wales does not have enough of them, those who are qualified are experiencing burnout across catchment areas too large to manage safely and the significant investment required to qualify as an AMHP cannot be recouped when retention is poor. In both cases the root cause is the same — social care cannot compete with the NHS on pay and terms and it is paying the price in the specialists it cannot keep.

These pressures will intensify as demographic demand grows and the reforms of the Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025 are implemented. Action is not optional.

### What ADSS Cymru has Done — and Why Our Partnership Matters

ADSS Cymru has not only advocated on workforce: we have delivered. Since establishing the Workforce Leadership Group in 2021 — bringing together directors, heads of service and workforce leads in close partnership with Social Care Wales, Welsh Government and the WLGA — workforce has been at the centre of everything we do.

In 2022, ADSS Cymru led the development and roll-out of the All Wales Pledge for children’s agency social workers, helping to drive down cost and reduce agency dependency, with a clear ambition to extend this to adult social workers and achieve full harmonisation of terms and conditions across the workforce. A Cultural Ambassador Network has been established across all 22 of Wales’s local authorities as part of the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, alongside a self-assessment framework and Leading the Change workshops. We have supported strategic workforce planning, contributed analysis on fair pay proposals, provided evidence on the workforce implications of the removal of profit from children’s services and piloted AI-assisted tools for the workforce in residential care in the Gwent region.

ADSS Cymru has raised cross-border workforce concerns with Welsh Government throughout the Social Care Negotiating Body development process.

Directors of social services carry statutory responsibilities for workforce sufficiency; their experience and operational knowledge are essential to getting this right, and the new government will find in ADSS Cymru a ready and constructive partner.

### The Pay Question: Harmonisation and a Pay Lift

The single most significant barrier to a stable social care workforce is low pay. This is a structural fact that has compounded over decades, and it now requires structural solutions.

The Pay and Progression Framework for Social Care in Wales, developed by Social Care Wales in partnership with the Social Care Fair Work Forum, is a serious and welcome attempt to address this. It establishes five pay bands aligned to role complexity and qualification, comparable with NHS skills and responsibilities and work is now underway to map current pay against the framework. ADSS Cymru supports its ambition and believes the next essential step is to make it mandatory, not voluntary, across all providers including the independent sector. Without a mechanism to drive consistent adoption in commissioned services, the pay gap and the recruitment and retention pressures it creates will persist.

Harmonisation of terms and conditions — so that pay, leave and career structures for social workers and other specialist roles in social care are consistent across local authorities and genuinely comparable with equivalent NHS posts — is a clear, long-standing and increasingly urgent ask. Pay

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differentials between Welsh and English social workers are a driver of outward movement that Wales cannot afford. The same dynamic applies to OTs for example, where the gap between social care and NHS terms is actively depleting specialist capacity in local authorities.

The Social Care Negotiating Body, whose final form the new government will shape, must bring pay, terms and career progression into a coherent, sustainable architecture. ADSS Cymru — as a statutory employer and commissioner directly accountable for workforce sufficiency — must be central to the SCNB's governance and design from the outset. Early engagement will make the process credible and deliverable in practice.

### Digital Workforce and the National Care Academy

The National Care Academy, developed under the previous administration to provide a Wales-wide infrastructure for workforce development and career progression, is central to the long-term ambition for the sector — including building the digitally confident, AI-ready workforce that sustainable service delivery increasingly requires. ADSS Cymru supports its continued development and would welcome early clarity from the new government on how the Academy will be resourced and sustained into the 2027 to 2030 period.

### International Recruitment: A New and Serious Risk

The UK Government's Immigration White Paper, published in May 2025, proposes to end overseas recruitment for care worker roles and raise the skill threshold for work visas to degree level — removing a recruitment route particularly important to rural, coastal and border communities, with no credible domestic alternative offered in its place. ADSS Cymru responded formally, welcomed the inclusion of Welsh Government and Skills Wales in the new Labour Market Evidence Group, but was clear that the White Paper offers no funded transition, no pay reform and no training investment to compensate for the route it closes. Social care does not appear on the new Temporary Shortage List despite high vacancy rates across Wales and ADSS Cymru will continue to work with Welsh Government, Social Care Wales and the WLGA to press for transitional support, as well as advocating for the needs of the sector.

### The Children's Residential Workforce and the Not-for-Profit Transition

The transition to not-for-profit children's residential care under the Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025 is the most significant structural change to children's services in a generation. Local authorities have responded with genuine pace: over 200 beds have been developed or are in development. But the workforce sits at the heart of this transition and represents its most significant risk.

Long shift patterns and staff shortages are causing exhaustion among residential care workers. Pay and conditions do not yet reflect the complexity of the role and access to the Level 3 Award in Residential Childcare while maintaining shift cover remains a systemic constraint. A further structural challenge is that while for-profit providers remain operational during the transition, experienced staff cannot yet transfer to new local authority and not-for-profit homes — the workforce the new model needs cannot fully form until the old one recedes. Smaller homes and more specialist placements, necessary to meet increasing complexity of need, are also inherently more expensive due to fixed staffing requirements and reduced economies of scale. Workforce costs have increased by an estimated seven to nine per cent since the Regulatory Impact Assessment was completed in 2024, and the £75 million transitional funding now supports a smaller delivery envelope than originally envisaged. Third sector and not-for-profit providers are expected to form part of the long-term solution alongside local authorities, and the funding framework must reflect the real-world cost of the whole transition if momentum is to be maintained.

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### Foster Care: Central to the System

Foster carers are an indispensable part of the children's workforce system. Most children thrive best in a family setting and the shortage of foster placements is now a direct driver of children entering residential care who would be better served with a family. Carer numbers are declining or stagnant across much of Wales, allowances in many authorities do not reflect the true demands of the role and Foster Wales — while making real progress in growing in-house capacity — cannot address sufficiency alone. A national strategic focus that treats residential and fostering capacity as a single challenge is what the situation demands.

### Working With the New Senedd

The workforce issues set out in this briefing are longstanding. Whilst progress in certain areas has been made, this Senedd term provides a genuine opportunity to accelerate that progress. A new government with commitments on fair work, community-based care and the continued implementation of the Health and Social Care Act; cross-party alignment around prevention and the wellbeing agenda; and the development of the Social Care Negotiating Body, all create conditions in which meaningful change is achievable. The direction of travel is right. What is needed now is the momentum, resource and partnership to make it real.

ADSS Cymru is seeking an active and ongoing working relationship with the Welsh Government and with Senedd Members across all groups to drive progress on pay and harmonisation, on the architecture of the SCNB, on the National Care Academy and workforce sufficiency and on the funding realities of the children's residential transition. Our members lead social services in all 22 Welsh local authorities. They carry statutory responsibility for workforce sufficiency and the practical, operational knowledge of what the workforce of Wales needs. That expertise is available to the new Senedd — and we are ready to use it.

### Key Sources

Health Education and Improvement Wales and Social Care Wales. Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2020–2030. Cardiff, 2020.

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Welsh Government. Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025.

Social Care Wales. Workforce Data and Trends. Cardiff, 2026.

ADSS Cymru is the Association of Directors of Social Services in Wales, the professional leadership body for directors and senior managers of social services in all 22 Welsh local authorities.

**For further information:**

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