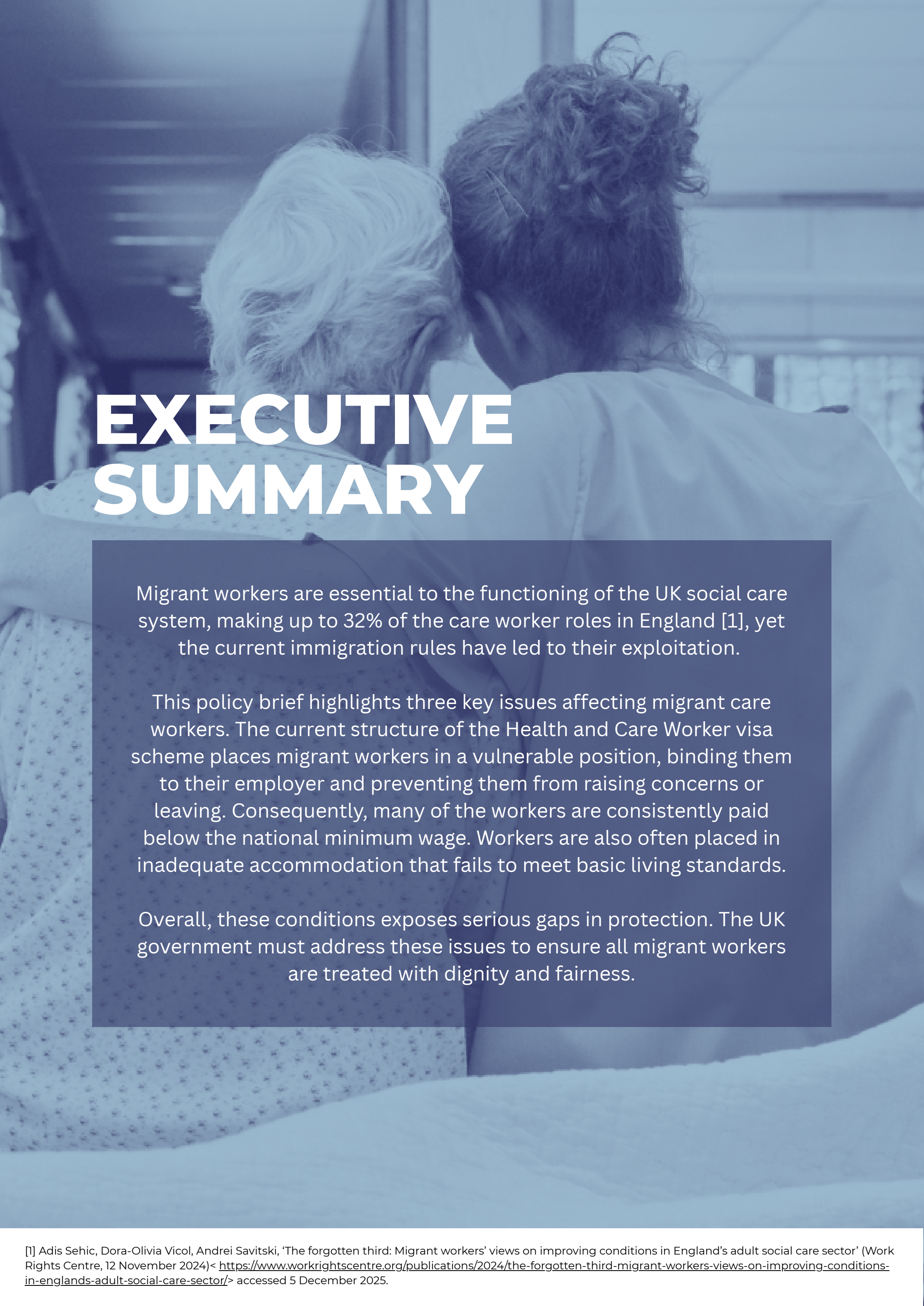


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REFORMING LABOUR STANDARDS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE UK SOCIAL CARE SECTOR





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migrant workers are essential to the functioning of the UK social care system, making up to 32% of the care worker roles in England [1], yet the current immigration rules have led to their exploitation.

This policy brief highlights three key issues affecting migrant care workers. The current structure of the Health and Care Worker visa scheme places migrant workers in a vulnerable position, binding them to their employer and preventing them from raising concerns or leaving. Consequently, many of the workers are consistently paid below the national minimum wage. Workers are also often placed in inadequate accommodation that fails to meet basic living standards.

Overall, these conditions exposes serious gaps in protection. The UK government must address these issues to ensure all migrant workers are treated with dignity and fairness.

[1] Adis Sehic, Dora-Olivia Vicol, Andrei Savitski, 'The forgotten third: Migrant workers' views on improving conditions in England's adult social care sector' (Work Rights Centre, 12 November 2024) < <https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2024/the-forgotten-third-migrant-workers-views-on-improving-conditions-in-englands-adult-social-care-sector/> > accessed 5 December 2025.

KEY ISSUES

1. VISA

1/4

Labour abuse cases are in the care sector [9]

The Health and Care Worker visa allowed workers to enter the UK to work in the social care sector, but its structure created significant exploitation of workers. Although the government has now closed the route, this action does not protect the many migrant workers already in the UK nor address the sector's ongoing labour shortages. [2]

Under the Health and Care Worker visa, migrant workers' right to live in the UK was linked to their employer. If a worker was dismissed, a 60-day countdown began towards potential deportation. [3] Subsequently, the scheme gave disproportionate power to employers, as workers would be at risk of losing both their jobs and visas if they reported abuse. [4] Several described employers explicitly using the threat of immigration to silence issues. [5] In a survey, over a third said they or other migrant workers had been threatened with dismissal for raising concerns about their treatment. [6]



470

sponsored licenses revoked between July 2022 and December 2024 [10]

REFORM:



At a minimum, the Home Office should extend the period migrant workers have to find a new employer to at least 6 months. [7] This measure will reduce the immediate vulnerability of workers by giving them more time to find new employment and leave abusive employers. However, a reform of the sponsorship system is needed. The Health and Care Worker visa should be amended so that it is a sector-wide visa. [8] Additionally, a third-party agency, instead of employers, should sponsor migrant workers, thus eliminating the power imbalance between employers and workers. By using a third-party agency to sponsor, it would reduce the political bias in enforcement, as it is not linked to the government

“Employers treat those on sponsorship like modern-day slaves and threaten to remove it all the time.”

– Migrant care worker in UNISON survey [11]

[2] UNISON, 'Reforming visa sponsorship in the care sector' (UNISON, February 2025) < <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Reforming-visa-sponsorship-in-the-care-sector-UNISON-briefing.pdf> > accessed 5 December 2025.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Isabel Shutes, 'Cracking down on care worker visa will not solve the care crisis' (LSE, May 16 2025) < <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/cracking-down-on-care-worker-visas-will-not-solve-the-care-crisis/> > accessed 5 December 2025.

[5] Adis Sehic, Dora-Olivia Vicol, Andrei Savitski, 'The forgotten third: Migrant workers' views on improving conditions in England's adult social care sector' (Work Rights Centre, 12 November 2024) < <https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2024/the-forgotten-third-migrant-workers-views-on-improving-conditions-in-englands-adult-social-care-sector/> > accessed 5 December 2025.

[6] UNISON, 'Caring at a cost: A survey of migrant care staff in the UK' (UNISON, 2025) < <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf> > accessed 5 December 2025.

[7] Adis Sehic, Dora-Olivia Vicol, Andrei Savitski, 'The forgotten third: Migrant workers' views on improving conditions in England's adult social care sector' (Work Rights Centre, 12 November 2024) < <https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2024/the-forgotten-third-migrant-workers-views-on-improving-conditions-in-englands-adult-social-care-sector/> > accessed 5 December 2025.

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[9] UNISON South East, 'Councils must act on migrant worker exploitation in the care sector, says UNISON' (UNISON South East, 6 November 2025) < <https://southeast.unison.org.uk/news/article/2025/11/councils-must-act-on-migrant-worker-exploitation-in-the-care-sector-says-unison/> > accessed 5 December 2025.

[10] Shanti Das, 'Flawed visa scheme led to 'horrific' care worker abuse, says watchdog' The Guardian (16 March 2025) < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/16/flawed-uk-visa-scheme-led-to-horrific-care-worker-abuse-says-watchdog?utm_source=chatgpt.com > accessed 5 December 2025.

[11] UNISON, 'Caring at a cost: A survey of migrant care staff in the UK' (UNISON, 2025) < <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf> > accessed 5 December 2025.

2. WAGES

UNISON's survey of over 3,000 migrant care staff revealed that three in ten respondents faced problems with pay, with more than a quarter reporting they were paid below minimum wage, which was £11.44 at the time of the study. [12] Additionally, 14% of the workers reported receiving lower pay compared to their non-migrant colleagues. [13] As a result, the inadequate wages leave many of the workers under financial insecurity, with 75% reporting they did not have enough money to pay their bills. [14]

Migration debt further amplifies this financial vulnerability, particularly from illegal recruitment fees [15] that are often not disclosed to the Home Office. In a quarter of the cases reviewed by Citizens Advice, migrants were charged with upfront recruitment fees averaging more than £10,000. [16] These costs force people to sell their assets, take out loans, coupled with additional deductions, and the use of contractual clawback clauses place migrants at a high risk of debt bondage. [17]

Furthermore, the UNISON report identifies that 52% of migrant domiciliary workers who spend nearly a fifth of their working day traveling between homes were not paid for their travel time, leaving a substantial part of their work day uncompensated. [18]

30%

employers deducting wages without good reason

[19]



1/3

were paid less than they should've been

[20]

REFORM:

Fundamentally, UNISON argues that the most effective way to resolve low pay and address issues such as unpaid travel is by establishing a fair pay agreement in the care sector. [21] This would set legally binding minimum standards on wages to ensure that all workers are paid in compliance with the National Minimum Wage, and ensure payment for all working hours, including travel time. Linking to the visa reform, the cost of sponsorship should be split between the employer and the Government to reduce the burden on the migrant care workers.

[12] UNISON, Caring at a Cost: A survey of migrant care staff working in the UK (UNISON, February 2025) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2025

[13] Christina McAnea, 'Migrant Care Staff Having to Share Beds, Sleep Rough and Charged Thousands in Illegal Fees' (UNISON National 11 February 2025) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/02/migrant-care-staff-having-to-share-beds-sleep-rough-and-charged-thousands-in-illegal-fees/>> accessed 29 November 2025.

[14] [10] UNISON, Caring at a Cost: A survey of migrant care staff working in the UK (UNISON, February 2025) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2025

[15] GOV.UK, 'Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health and Social Care Personnel in England' (GOV.UK March 2027) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/code-of-practice-for-the-international-recruitment-of-health-and-social-care-personnel/code-of-practice-for-the-international-recruitment-of-health-and-social-care-personnel-in-england>> accessed 3 December 2025.

[16] Meri Åhlberg, 'How Work Visa Design Is Driving Exploitation of Migrant Care Workers' (Citizens Advice, March 2024) <<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/spotlight-report-no-1-how-work-visa-design-is-driving-exploitation/>> accessed 4 December 2025.

[17] Nicolas Lainez, 'Debt-Financed Migration: Agency and the Productivity of Debt' (2024) 15 Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 3991.

[18] UNISON, Caring at a Cost: A survey of migrant care staff working in the UK (UNISON Report, February 2025) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2025

[19] Ibid.

[20] Meri Åhlberg, 'How Work Visa Design Is Driving Exploitation of Migrant Care Workers' (Citizens Advice, 11 March 2024) <<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/spotlight-report-no-1-how-work-visa-design-is-driving-exploitation/>> accessed 4 December 2025.

[21] 'Fair Pay Agreement Process in Adult Social Care - Consultation Document' (GOV.UK, 30 September 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fair-pay-agreement-process-in-adult-social-care/fair-pay-agreement-process-in-adult-social-care-consultation-document>>.

3. ACCOMMODATION

UNISON reports that migrant care workers are often housed in overcrowded, poor-quality accommodation and are “trapped” with no alternatives. [22] Regular complaints included mold, rotten carpets, leaking boilers and non-functioning heating or instances where landlords refused to switch the heat on. [23] Nearly 1/10 described the accommodation provided as poor or very poor. [24] 24% of the workers stated they had to share a bedroom in the accommodation, with one worker saying 15 people had to stay in a one-bedroom flat. [25]

“We had overcrowding with ten in a house. I slept on a couch in the living room with a woman I didn’t know.”

– A Zimbabwean care worker in the West Midlands told UNISON [26]

REFORM:

Employer-provided housing for migrant care workers should be licensed under a national scheme administered by the Home Office. Employers must submit housing audits as part of the visa process, covering occupancy, rent, and safety compliance [27].

Tied accommodation must meet Decent Homes standards, with rent capped at 25% of gross pay and tenancy agreements independently reviewable by Acas or an equivalent body [28]. A dual licence should be required for employers that provide both work and housing, with automatic suspension for breaches, including overcrowding or retaliatory eviction [29]. Workers must have a fast, confidential route to report violations via the First-tier Tribunal.



[22] UNISON, Caring at a Cost: A survey of migrant care staff working in the UK (UNISON, February 2025) <<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/02/Migrant-care-worker-report-2025.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2025.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Mariña Fernández-Reino, Ben Brindle and Carlos Vargas-Silva, Migrants and Housing in the UK (Migration Observatory, COMPAS, University of Oxford, 4 December 2024) <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2024-Briefing-Migrants-and-housing-in-the-UK.pdf>> accessed 6 December 2025.

[28] Ibid.

[29] John Salt, ‘Labour migration and housing in the UK: an overview’ in John Allen and Chris Hamnett, Housing and Labour Markets’ (1st edn Routledge 1991). <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429021329-5/labour-migration-housing-uk-overview-john-salt>> accessed 10 December.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Health and Care Worker visa should be amended to allow a third-party agency to issue a certificate of sponsorship instead of employers.**
- 2. Sponsorship costs for migrant care workers should be split between employers and the Government.**
- 3. Representation of migrants' voices in the planned Negotiating Body responsible for the Fair Pay Agreement, so that their concerns are directly addressed.**
- 4. The new regulations should require that domiciliary care workers are paid for travel time, and that both travel and care hours are clearly specified in their employment contracts.**
- 5. Employers providing tied accommodation should be licensed separately, with capped rents, mandatory safety inspections, and tenancy terms reviewable by an independent body.**



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