



Halton Adult Social Care Workforce Strategy

Final Draft

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Executive summary

A shared vision for Halton's workforce

Halton's adult social care system supports some of the most vulnerable people in our community, older adults, those living with disabilities, and individuals with complex needs. But the sector is under increasing pressure: more people need care, their needs are becoming more complex, and the workforce itself is ageing and under strain.

This strategy sets out how we can meet these challenges by building a workforce that is resilient, skilled, and truly valued; where people are supported to stay, to grow, and to make a lasting difference.

The vision here is to create a workforce that sees care not just as a job, but as a meaningful, long-term career. That means investing in people, supporting wellbeing, and making Halton a place where great care staff want to work and stay.

Understanding the challenge

Halton's population is growing older, with the number of people aged 65 and over expected to rise by 40% in the next 10 years. At the same time, Halton faces higher-than-average rates of heart disease and dementia. This means more demand for care, and more complex care needs.

But while demand is rising, the workforce is shrinking. A third of staff are over 55, and only 9% are under 30. Many are leaving the sector, and vacancies are growing. Pay is often lower than in neighbouring areas, and job security is still a concern, especially with the numbers of zero-hours contracts.

And yet there are strengths to build on. Halton's turnover is lower than the national average, and many local residents already provide unpaid care, experience that could be valuable if the right support and flexibility is in place.

This strategy recognises both the challenges and the opportunities. It sets out practical, joined-up action, so that Halton's care sector becomes not only more sustainable, but a better place to work.



What needs to happen

To move from short-term fixes to lasting change, we are focusing on seven key priorities:



1. **Career progression for all**

The creation of a clear career framework that shows how people can move from entry-level roles to leadership positions. This will include recognised qualifications, apprenticeships, mentoring, and guidance; helping people grow and stay in the sector.



2. **Smarter, fairer recruitment**

We'll reach more people: from school leavers to those returning to work, through targeted campaigns, outreach, and values-based recruitment. New pre-employment courses will give people a pathway into the sector, with guaranteed interviews on completion.



3. **Enhancing pay and conditions**

Work to reduce zero-hours contracts, promote the Real Living Wage, and support pay increases linked to training and experience. Long-service recognition, mental health support, and peer networks will help staff feel valued and supported.



4. **Listening to staff voices**

Work to make sure care staff and others have a voice in how this strategy is delivered. This will include creating an engagement forum.



5. **Better use of technology**

With care becoming more complex, staff need the tools to do the job. Targeted work will be undertaken to invest in digital skills and look at how AI and tech can reduce admin and improve care.



6. **More and better training**

Too many staff have no formal qualifications, and many want to learn. Work will explore how to increase access to accredited training, support providers to offer high-quality in-house development, and boost apprenticeships to attract workers.



7. **Working together as one system**

Council and providers shouldn't compete for staff; they should work together. Shared training, joint recruitment, better data sharing, and open collaboration will help us grow and keep the best talent.

How this can happen

Change will not come just from good ideas, it needs commitment, funding, and practical action. So, three things will happen to bring this strategy to life:

- **Link workforce standards to contracts**
New contracts with providers will include clear expectations on pay, training, and career progression, so that good workforce practice becomes a requirement, not a nice-to-have.
- **Create a central workforce hub**
A shared recruitment and training hub will reduce duplication, improve access to development, and allow staff to move between roles more easily without leaving the sector. The hub's scope will be shaped with the sector, but early priorities include shared recruitment campaigns, coordinated training offers, workforce intelligence, and a platform for peer support. Its form whether virtual, physical, or hybrid will be co-designed to ensure relevance and buy-in. Funding, governance, and long-term sustainability will be addressed with partners as part of the hub's business case.
- **Work closely with providers and staff**
Regular workforce forums, better data, and open dialogue with care workers will make sure changes are grounded in real-world experience and owned by the whole sector. A new multi-agency Workforce Strategy Steering Group will oversee implementation of this strategy. It will bring together representatives from the Council, care providers, and partners to monitor progress, provide challenge, and ensure accountability. Task-and-finish groups will support delivery in key areas like training, recruitment, and workforce data, and all work will be co-produced with providers and staff.

A call to action

This strategy is a starting point, not a finish line. Halton has the potential to lead the way in building a care workforce that is proud, prepared, and properly supported.

That will take courage, consistency, and collaboration. But together, with shared ambition and a clear plan, it can shape a care system where people want to work, are proud to stay, and are empowered to care.

These ambitions must be underpinned by realistic funding models and aligned investment. Halton will explore all available levers, including commissioning reform, integrated care system (ICS) partnerships, and national funding streams to enable delivery.

Halton is also committed to transparency and shared learning and will explore all avenues including regular updates to the sector, shared progress reports, and potentially an annual workforce summit to reflect, celebrate, and re-align where needed.

Introduction

Adult social care in Halton plays a vital role in supporting vulnerable adults, including older people, individuals with disabilities, and those with other complex needs. The Borough of Halton is a unitary authority in the county of Cheshire. Since 2014, it has been one of six local authorities forming the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority.

This strategy has been developed to empower Halton's adult social care workforce while addressing both the opportunities and challenges it faces. It aligns with the broader vision for social care, which embraces a strengths-based approach, ensuring that individuals with care and support needs have greater control and choice over how they live their lives.

In recent years, financial pressures, increased life expectancy and the growth in numbers of people living with multiple and complex conditions has put a considerable strain on resources. This creates demand for a workforce that needs to be responsive to these changes and adapt what they do to respond to this changing environment.



A growing and ageing population, alongside increasingly complex health and care needs, means that demand for social care is rising. In response, the sector must not only attract more people into the workforce but also enable staff to work in innovative and flexible ways. It is essential to foster an environment where employees feel valued and supported, one that encourages career progression and retains experienced professionals within the system. Strong and effective leadership will be critical, and a clear leadership development plan must be in place to nurture and support future leaders.

Diversity and inclusion must also be central to workforce planning, ensuring that Halton improves its approach to the Workforce Race and Equality Standard while creating a workforce that is truly representative of the community it serves. An integrated approach, bringing together primary, community, and residential care services, will be vital in ensuring a seamless and responsive care system.

Recruiting and retaining staff with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time, remains one of the most significant challenges in a highly competitive national workforce market. This workforce strategy outlines key priorities designed to address these challenges while supporting the wider vision and values of social care in Halton.

Attracting new people into adult social care to replace those who have left is just one solution to keep pace with the demand for social care services. There is also a need to make sure everything possible is done to retain the existing workforce. This involves a range of approaches including effective recruitment, good learning and development opportunities and a focus on the health and wellbeing of our workforce.

The vision for the social care workforce in Halton is one of recognition, opportunity, and sustainability. It seeks to cultivate a workforce that feels truly valued, where individuals not only take pride in their roles but also receive the respect and appreciation they deserve.

By fostering an environment where career progression is both encouraged and supported, this vision aims to improve staff retention, ensuring that those who choose to work in social care see it not merely as a job, but as a fulfilling and long-term career path. Social care should be recognised as a rewarding and meaningful profession, one that allows individuals to grow and develop while making a tangible difference in people's lives.

Potential employees must also have a clear understanding of the personal qualities essential for success in the sector.



At the heart of this strategy is the commitment to safe and sustainable staffing, ensuring that services are delivered with consistency and excellence. Quality care depends on a well-supported and well-equipped workforce, and the ambition is to create the conditions that enable this.

There is also a strong belief that opportunities to enter the care sector should be accessible to all, particularly those facing economic disadvantage. By providing the necessary support and pathways for growth, more people can be encouraged to

build fulfilling careers in social care, strengthening both the workforce and the quality of care provided to residents.

With recruitment and retention issues impacting nationally on social care delivery, there is a need to ensure that there is a clear strategy going forward for all of adult social care in Halton. This strategy sets out to address the challenges facing the adult social care workforce, including financial constraints, an evolving provider market, and ongoing recruitment and retention difficulties.

A sustainable and responsive provider market is essential to supporting the most vulnerable residents in Halton. This strategy prioritises strong engagement with the workforce, ensuring that change is informed by the needs and experiences of those delivering care. A commitment to open dialogue and evidence-based decision-making will enable staff to play an active role in shaping and improving service delivery.

Halton has adopted an asset-based community development model, which focuses on empowering individuals and communities by identifying and harnessing local strengths. This approach encourages people to take an active role in their own health and well-being, promoting independence while building stronger, more resilient communities.

This asset-based approach will also contribute to the prevention agenda by ensuring that people have access to high-quality, timely information that enables informed decision-making about their care.

Community development has long been recognised as a key strand of health promotion, with strong evidence demonstrating its effectiveness in improving health outcomes and reducing inequalities. Strengthening communities through volunteering, peer support, partnerships, and access to community resources will contribute to a more person-centred approach to prevention.

This strategy sets out a clear and ambitious vision for Halton's adult social care workforce, ensuring that it remains resilient, adaptable, and equipped to meet the evolving needs of the community. Through investment in staff, leadership, and collaborative partnerships, the strategy will support the creation of a social care system that values its workforce, enhances career opportunities, and delivers high-quality, person-centred care.



The Halton landscape

3.1 Overview

Halton's adult social care system faces growing demand at the same time as its workforce is under increasing pressure. An ageing population and rising complexity are driving up care needs, while the current workforce profile; characterised by a high proportion of staff nearing retirement age, challenges in attracting younger people, and a reliance on less secure contracts suggests the system will struggle to keep pace without targeted and sustained interventions.

This is not simply a question of workforce numbers, but of workforce fit. The sector continues to face difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, not because the roles themselves are unattractive, but because the overall offer; pay, progression, working conditions, and job security remains less competitive than in other sectors. Without a co-ordinated approach to strengthening the employment proposition, Halton risks falling further behind in an already challenging labour market.

At the same time, there are positive indicators to build upon. The borough's turnover rate is comparatively low, suggesting that staff do remain where there is a degree of security and support. The high proportion of unpaid carers suggests a local population with care experience that, with the right flexibility and encouragement, could form part of a broader recruitment pipeline. Halton's comparatively lower housing costs and low crime rate may also help position it as an attractive place to live and work, if promoted alongside a more compelling social care employment offer.

This is not a challenge that can be resolved overnight. But with shared commitment, strong local leadership, and clear direction, Halton can take meaningful steps to reshape the workforce landscape ensuring that adult social care remains responsive, resilient, and able to meet the needs of its residents in the years to come.

3.2 The 'as-is' position

Halton's current population is 128,577, with 51% male and 49% female. The number of residents aged 65 and over is rising more rapidly than any other age group and is projected to increase by 40% over the next 10 years. By 2040, this group is expected to make up 24% of Halton's total population. In contrast, the number of people aged 18 to 64 is projected to remain relatively stable, resulting in a more pronounced demographic shift toward an ageing population in Halton compared to the national trend.

Halton is one of the most deprived boroughs in England, ranking 39th out of 317 local authorities. Around 30% of its population lives in areas of high deprivation. Life expectancy varies significantly across the borough, with men in the most deprived areas living 11.7 years less than those in the least deprived areas, and women experiencing a 9.6-year gap.

Economically, Halton is a key industrial and logistics hub, with a higher-than-average proportion of residents employed in manufacturing (particularly chemicals and advanced manufacturing), wholesale and retail, and transport and storage.

Of Halton's 103,948 residents aged 16 and over, 60,121 (57.8%) are economically active (excluding full-time students). Among them, 95.3% are in employment, while 4.7% are unemployed

Halton's population is predicted to grow over the next 15 years. The percentage of residents over the age of 65 is also predicted to increase indicating an increase in demand for social care. Although this increase is in line with national predictions, Halton has a higher than national average rate of Alzheimer's diagnoses for people over 65 and the highest death rate from coronary heart disease in the UK. This indicates higher levels of complexity for social care compared to the UK average which was also reflected in the stakeholder interviews. This in turn links to increased demand, more clinical complexity and increased training needs. Halton also has less care home beds per 100,000 adults (809) compared to Warrington (1879) and St Helens (1390) which is a potential indication of more complex residents being cared for within their own homes.

Within Halton's current workforce 33% of staff are over 55 years old and only 9% of the workforce is under 30 years old. This poses a long-term risk to staffing stability and the loss of experience as 19% of the current workforce have over 21 years' experience in the sector. Mentoring and peer groups are methods in which this experience can be harnessed and passed on to younger and less experienced staff. Currently 78% of the workforce is female which is similar to the national average. Recruitment remains a persistent issue, particularly in attracting younger workers and male candidates. A more diverse, targeted approach, including apprenticeships, career outreach, and engagement with underrepresented workforce groups will be crucial to securing the adult social care sector's future across Halton.



The vacancy rate in Halton is 11.3% higher than the national average which is 8.3%. Closing this vacancy gap should be a priority as carrying high vacancies can lead to staff burnout and increased agency costs. The turnover rate is markedly less than the national average at 13.4% compared to 24.8%. This is encouraging but work needs to continue to sustain this rate into the future especially when looking to recruit from different areas of society and to decrease the vacancy gap.

Job stability is an issue within Adult Social Care nationally, and this is shown within Halton. In 2023 88% of staff were on a permanent contract, this decreased to only 70% in 2024. The number of staff on zero hours contracts is also higher than the national average. By increasing the number of permanent staff, job stability is increased, they are able to access more development opportunities, and the role becomes more appealing.

Offering qualifications can be attractive to potential recruits but also a way of retaining current staff by showing investment within the workforce and potential development opportunities. This can also be a key attraction strategy for the younger population to gain qualifications whilst working via apprenticeships. However, Halton had much fewer apprenticeship starts last year than neighbouring areas.

Alongside formal qualifications it was clear from the stakeholder engagement that training opportunities differed by provider. Some gaps were identified and mental health, trauma informed practice, enhanced clinical skills and digital capability were all seen as vital skills the workforce will need in the future. Expanding structured training pathways and incentivising upskilling will be essential to maintaining high-quality care standards.

'Pay and Conditions' was the category most selected for being the highest driver for staff leaving organisations in the survey. It was also the largest category when looking at the results from a weighted average perspective. Respondents of both the survey and interviews also mentioned pay in the 'other comments' section. During interviews it was discussed as something that could impact Adult Social Care in the future as it was felt that pay in the sector was not in line with the current cost of living.

Care workers employed by Halton Borough Council are paid on average £12.65 per hour, the national average. They are paid less than the other areas meaning that potential staff are attracted to jobs in neighbouring areas rather than Halton itself. Care workers in the independent sector are also paid less than the national average, £11.08 compared to £11.23. The rates for care workers in the independent sector are more competitive with the comparison areas, both Liverpool and Warrington pay less. Providers did mention in the interviews that they would require additional funding from Halton Borough Council to raise care worker wages.

During interviews some participants highlighted difficulties with recruitment due to the economic inactivity level of the population. The employment rate of the population aged 16-64 is less than the national average. There has also been an increase in the number of unpaid carers; this can be an advantage for recruitment as it means the majority of the population have care experience even at an unpaid level. It does however show a need for flexibility to help recruit and retain staff due to the amount of people with caring responsibilities.

Halton has lower crime rates than neighbouring areas, lower rents and more affordable housing, these could be seen as attractions for people in neighbouring areas if the vacancy gap cannot be filled by the Halton population alone. Overseas recruitment is also an option but can be costly and would need careful consideration especially around pastoral support in what is a less diverse population.

Halton faces a potential perfect storm: an ageing population, high care complexity, and a fragile workforce marked by an ageing profile, low pay, and gaps in training. The borough risks falling behind unless it acts decisively to make adult social care a more attractive, secure, and sustainable career.

This context underlines the urgent need for a coordinated, system-wide workforce strategy; one that addresses pay, training, job security, and career progression, while making the most of Halton's assets and values. Without that, the system will struggle to keep pace with rising need.

1) Call to action

This strategy is not just a set of recommendations; it is a commitment to the future of adult social care in Halton. The challenges facing the workforce are urgent and complex, but they are not insurmountable. With bold action, investment, and collaboration, Halton can build a workforce that is:

- Resilient, with the capacity to meet increasing demand.
- Skilled, equipped with the necessary training and development opportunities.
- Valued, recognised for its contribution to the well-being of the community.

To achieve decisive steps must be taken to:

- Implement structured career pathways that foster progression.
- Introduce financial incentives and improved working conditions to enhance retention.
- Embed minimum workforce standards into commissioning contracts, ensuring fair pay and secure employment.
- Foster a culture of respect, recognition, and professional growth.

Halton Borough Council will act as the lead agency in coordinating delivery of this strategy, ensuring alignment across commissioning, provider development, and system partnerships. However, the success of implementation depends on shared ownership across all organisations.

4.1 Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Build a career pathway and identify key roles

A structured, accessible career pathway is essential for the long-term sustainability of Halton's adult social care workforce. Clear progression routes support retention, incentivise training, and attract new staff.

A robust career pathway should encompass entry-level roles, intermediate positions, and senior leadership roles. Each stage should align (where possible) with an appropriate apprenticeship standard, enabling employers to maximise the apprenticeship levy and minimise training costs. Mapping these standards to key roles enables structured career pathways, guiding staff from entry-level to leadership. This approach ensures that Halton's workforce is equipped with the necessary practical experience and formal qualifications to deliver high-quality care.

To implement this effectively:

- Develop a Capability and Career Framework, endorsed by all adult social care providers in Halton, to ensure consistency in career pathways, skills development, and workforce expectations. This framework should clearly articulate key roles, required skills, and aligned qualifications.
- Enhance partnerships with local colleges, universities, and training providers to ensure accessible learning pathways.
- Provide employer-led guidance and mentoring programmes to support career progression.
- Create a visual roadmap illustrating clear career progression routes, helping both new and existing staff understand their development opportunities.



Recommendation 2. Expand recruitment & career awareness

To ensure a sustainable adult social care workforce in Halton, recruitment efforts must be proactive, inclusive, and strategic. This involves engaging underrepresented groups, enhancing awareness of career opportunities, and fostering industry partnerships. The ageing workforce also indicates that targeted recruitment is needed towards younger people. There is also a need to improve data collection on workforce demographics as data provided by Halton Borough Council showed that the ethnicity of 40.7% of staff was unknown. This data is useful to see how the workforce compares to the demographics of the local population but to also help with any target recruitment and to inform EDI initiatives and strategies.



Key recruitment initiatives:

- Pre-employment programmes designed to prepare individuals for roles in adult social care, equipping them with foundational skills and confidence before entering formal employment. (For example, an introduction to care course facilitated by local FE college to prepare people for roles in the care sector, with a guaranteed interview at the end of the course).
- Values-Based Recruitment, adopting values-based hiring practices to widen the candidate pool beyond those with prior experience. This means recruiting people for their compassion, reliability and commitment, then training them. A free tool has been developed by the University of York to build values-based interviews for care staff [Curious About Care](#).
- Targeted outreach campaigns in schools, colleges, job centres, and community organisations to highlight career prospects in adult social care.
- Targeted recruitment of NEETs by utilising different methods of advertising vacancies such as Instagram and TikTok, etc.
- Employer-led career talks and mentoring programmes, showcasing real career progression stories to inspire potential new employees.

Recommendation 3. Enhance pay & working conditions

Despite its vital role in supporting vulnerable adults, Halton's social care workforce can struggle with low pay, job insecurity, and poor working conditions, creating an environment for high vacancy and turnover rates.

By working with stakeholders to explore these approaches, the intention is not to impose additional unfunded requirements, but to highlight how improving pay, stability, and recognition can

have wider system benefits. Better retention and reduced turnover can lessen reliance on high-cost bank and agency cover, improve continuity of care, and reduce recruitment and induction costs. This makes such measures not only beneficial for staff and service users, but also potentially cost-neutral or even cost-saving over time.



Key workforce improvements:

- Promote a structured pay progression system, where salary increases align with experience, qualifications, and career progression milestones.
- Promote financial incentives for upskilling, such as incremental pay increases upon completion of qualifications.
- Recognise long service awards, providing reward and recognition initiatives for staff who remain in the sector for five years or more.
- Prioritise permanent contracts over zero-hours arrangements, ensuring job security for care workers.

- Advocate care providers pay the Real Living Wage for all care workers as a minimum.
- Explore options for helping social care staff to buy their own homes, despite house prices being more affordable in Halton than neighbouring areas as a higher proportion of the population socially rent.

Promote employer-led benefits and retention initiatives, such as:

- Mental health support services, counselling and wellbeing initiatives, to reduce stress and burnout.
- A peer-support network, allowing care workers to share experiences, provide mutual encouragement, and access mentoring opportunities.
- Recognition schemes, including professional accreditation and excellence awards, to celebrate contributions to the sector.

Recommendation 4. Engage the whole workforce in delivery

Ensure that implementation of strategy is done with and not to the social care workforce. It's about doing with people rather than doing to them. Explore ways staff (including those employed by providers) can engage and help inform implementation.

Key engagement improvements:

- Share workforce development priorities widely in a common language that will make sense to all staff in the sector.
- Have an 'easy read' version of this strategy.
- Explore what an employee engagement forum could look like and how it could include both provider staff and staff employed by Halton Borough Council.

This should be complemented by regular provider engagement, co-design sessions, and a shared governance structure, ensuring that implementation is not imposed 'top down' but shaped by the expertise and experience of the whole sector.



Recommendation 5. Increase use of technology

The use of technology is increasing within healthcare and will soon start to become more prevalent in social care especially with the need for more delegated healthcare tasks and the increasing clinical complexity of clients/service users. Some providers are already using technology to decrease administrative time spent on tasks such as recruitment, job planning and rostering.



Key to increasing the use of technology:

- Explore options for utilising e-rostering software across providers
- Understand the potential uses for Artificial Intelligence and whether it is being used in other areas
- Address digital training gaps and ensure staff are able to use technology effectively and adapt to higher levels of utilisation

Recommendation 6. Training

Data provided by Halton Borough Council stated that 43% of staff said they have no qualifications. Providing pathways to attaining qualifications can assist with recruitment of new staff and retention of those already within the workforce.



- Look at options to provide staff with accredited training and access to qualifications whilst working.
- Explore options of working with providers and their in-house training provisions.
- Increase the number of apprenticeships to help attract younger people into a career in social care, Halton currently has significantly less apprenticeship starts than neighbouring areas.

Recommendation 7. Foster collaborative working

There is competition for staff between the health and social care sectors, there could be potential to work together on recruitment strategies to alleviate some of the competition and work towards mutual benefit. Another area of collaboration is with providers themselves.



Key approaches to collaborative working:

- Share learning from past workforce initiatives both from providers and Halton Borough Council
- Look at shared recruitment as a whole – not competing against each other in small areas.
- Consider how to improve data sharing from providers to Halton Borough Council especially around workforce metrics and staff surveys.
- Training costs, for certain qualifications or training; are there economies of scale by combining with providers.
- Establish a Joint Provider Workforce Forum to regularly review progress, share data and learning, and agree coordinated actions.
- Develop a shared workforce intelligence dashboard, co-produced with providers, to support planning and continuous improvement.

4.2 Addressing implementation challenges and enabling change

The challenge: A dispersed workforce in a commissioned system

The fundamental challenge in strengthening Halton's adult social care workforce is that while the commissioner sets strategic priorities, it does not directly employ the majority of the staff involved. Instead, the workforce is dispersed across a several private providers, each operating within their own financial and business constraints.

This model creates a disconnect between workforce ambitions and frontline reality, making it difficult to drive consistent change. A strong workforce strategy means little if providers lack the funds, incentives, or stability to invest in staff.

Several key barriers must be acknowledged:

- Limited direct influence on pay and conditions: The commissioner can recommend workforce improvements, but ultimately, it is private providers who set salaries, contracts, and training priorities.
- Inconsistent uptake of workforce initiatives: Some providers may embrace workforce development, but others, particularly those operating on thinner margins could struggle or deprioritise investment in their staff.
- Competitive pricing pressures: In a sector where contracts are often awarded based on cost, there is a risk that workforce investment becomes secondary to financial sustainability. This can result in a 'race to the bottom', where lower wages and less favourable working conditions drive high turnover and recruitment difficulties.

If these barriers are not addressed, the sector will continue to struggle with high vacancy rates, staff attrition, and an ongoing recruitment crisis. To overcome these challenges, a system-wide response is required one that aligns workforce development with the realities of a complex commissioning environment.

4.3 The solution: Strengthening workforce investment

To ensure meaningful and lasting change, the workforce strategy must be embedded not just in policy, but in the structural mechanisms of commissioning and funding. This means shifting from recommendations to enforceable commitments, incentivising good practice, and creating mechanisms that make workforce investment the norm rather than the exception. This can be achieved through a three-pronged approach.

Prong A: Embedding workforce standards into commissioning contracts

Commissioning contracts are one of the most powerful tools available to drive sector-wide workforce improvements. By incorporating clear and enforceable workforce expectations, the commissioner can ensure that providers prioritise staff development as a core part of service delivery.

Key contractual mechanisms include:

- Minimum workforce standards: Contracts should specify baseline pay expectations, such as ensuring that all care workers receive at least the Real Living Wage.
- Career pathways as a contractual requirement: All providers should be required to offer structured career progression routes, aligned with recognised training and apprenticeship frameworks.
- Financial incentives for high-performing providers: A Quality Premium Payment could reward providers who meet workforce development and retention targets, ensuring that those investing in staff are recognised and supported.
- Blocking the 'race to the bottom': Introducing a minimum price floor in contract bidding would prevent providers from undercutting competitors at the expense of workforce conditions.
- The Council will also explore options for commissioning differently in future, including **block contracts**, **outcome-based payments**, and access to **pooled budgets or workforce funds** through the ICB, to support investment in staff pay, stability, and upskilling.

By integrating workforce sustainability into contractual obligations rather than optional best practice, Halton can create a level playing field; one where quality care and staff investment are not compromised by cost-cutting pressures.



Prong B: Establishing a centralised workforce development hub

One of the core challenges in a sector with a dispersed workforce is that each provider is responsible for its own recruitment, training, and workforce development, leading to duplication, inefficiencies, and gaps in provision. A centralised workforce hub, led by the commissioner, would provide a coordinated solution to these challenges.

Key functions of the Workforce Hub:

- A shared training and development programme: Instead of each provider arranging its own training, a single, coordinated programme would ensure that all care workers receive high-quality, consistent skills development.
- A rotational career pathway: Establishing a cross-provider career structure would allow care workers to move between different care settings (e.g., domiciliary care, residential care, specialist services) without leaving the sector.
- A joint recruitment platform: Instead of competing for staff, providers could access a shared recruitment pool, improving efficiency and sector-wide workforce stability.
- Pre-employment training initiatives: Creating introductory care training courses with guaranteed interviews upon completion would attract new entrants into the sector, providing a structured pathway into care work.

A centralised approach would reduce administrative burden on providers, improve workforce retention, and create a more attractive and professionalised sector.

In its initial phase, the hub will focus on:

- Coordinating a shared recruitment and careers campaign
- Delivering core training programmes and pre-employment pathways
- Providing consistent access to data and intelligence tools for providers
- Offering a platform for peer learning and best practice exchange

The design and scope of the hub will be **co-produced with providers**, with careful consideration given to the funding model, physical or virtual presence, and governance arrangements. This will ensure the hub meets real operational needs and secures provider buy-in from the outset.

The hub's form and scope, including whether it is a virtual network, a staffed service, or a physical space will be agreed through co-production with providers and stakeholders, taking account of available resources and existing assets.

Prong C: Engaging private providers in workforce reform

To ensure workforce improvements are both practical and achievable, private providers must be part of the conversation rather than having solutions imposed on them. A range of collaborative endeavours would enable the commissioner and providers to work together to co-design solutions.

This could include:

- Establishing a multi-agency Workforce Strategy Steering Group will be established. This group to include representatives from the local authority, care providers, voluntary sector, and workforce development partners with the aim of:
 - Holding oversight of the implementation plan and progress monitoring
 - Commissioning task-and-finish groups to lead specific workstreams (e.g., training, data, recruitment)
 - Reporting quarterly to Halton's Adult Social Care Executive Board on progress, risks, and mitigations
 - Promoting accountability, transparency, and shared ownership across the system
 - A clear terms of reference and reporting schedule will be developed to ensure governance remains effective and purposeful.
- Quarterly workforce planning forums: Bringing together commissioners, care providers, and workforce representatives to track progress, share best practices, and identify challenges.
- Local benchmarking workforce data: Publishing regular workforce reports to highlight trends in retention, training, and pay levels, creating positive peer pressure for improvement.
- Listening to the workforce: Establishing regular engagement sessions with frontline care workers to ensure that workforce policy reflects their experiences and needs.



4.4 In summary

Bringing this strategy to life will demand courage, consistency, and collaboration. While the dispersed nature of Halton's adult social care workforce presents structural challenges, it also offers an opportunity: to lead by example, innovate through partnership, and build a system that truly values its people. The actions outlined in this strategy are not aspirations; they are achievable, evidence-based interventions that require collective ownership.

The implementation plan will include regular updates to stakeholders and contributors, ensuring those who have shared their views and time can see the impact of their input. This may include:

- Publishing progress reports twice a year
- Hosting an annual 'state of the workforce' summit
- Sharing good practice and innovation stories from across the system.

By aligning commissioning, capability development, and shared values across the whole system, Halton can create a resilient, skilled, and respected workforce, ready not only to meet today's challenges, but to thrive in tomorrow's care landscape.





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