



Work That Matters

How social care jobs
are better than we think



Work That Matters

Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	8
2. Skilled + engaging jobs	11
3. Purposeful jobs	15
4. Secure jobs	19
5. Jobs with growth	23
6. Jobs with balance	27
7. Healthy jobs	29
8. Jobs with voice + respect	32
9. Jobs that deserve more	36
Appendix	39

Call to Action



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About Care Matters

Care Matters is a hub for evidence, ideas and action on how good social care enables adults to live fulfilling lives with the right support.

It has been established by a group of specialist social care providers who want to celebrate the ambitions and achievements of people who draw on support, recognise the skill and commitment of the people who work alongside them, and encourage a more hopeful and human conversation about social care.

Care Matters provides a place to bring together research, new ideas and personal experience. By exploring what works, what good support makes possible and where things need to change, the hub aims to contribute to a better understanding of social care and shape a brighter future for people who draw on support.

About the three providers

Choice Care, involve Care & Support and Voyage Care together employ over 17,000 colleagues and support nearly 6,000 people. They specialise in supporting adults of working age – including people with learning disabilities, autism, brain injuries and other complex needs – to live the lives they choose in homes and communities across the UK.

Their care is provided in homes and flats up and down the country. The people they support have the right to pop to the shop, jump on the bus or go to college, like any other neighbour. Colleagues bring a deep understanding of the people they support and the ability to knit together the input of GPs, healthcare professionals, social workers and education and employment services around them.

About Public First

Public First is a global policy, research and strategy consultancy that works with governments, businesses and institutions to understand public opinion and address major economic and public policy challenges. Its work combines economic modelling, data analysis and opinion research to bring the voices of the public into decision-making. It is a member of the British Polling Council and a company partner of the Market Research Society.

The authors of this report are Andrew Harrop, Jamie Selig and Jules Walkden.

If you commission, provide, regulate, or write about social care or employment and what makes a job 'good', please use these findings in your own work, whether in submissions and consultations, recruitment and careers materials, briefings for colleagues, or workforce-related decisions. The full survey data and question wording are set out in the appendix.

To speak to the researchers or find out more about Care Matters, scan the QR code to visit www.carematters.org.uk



Executive Summary

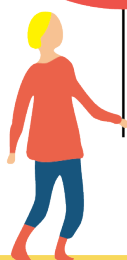
Jobs in social care for working-age adults are often seen as unskilled, unfulfilling and insecure. That stereotype is wrong.

This report, researched and written by Public First and commissioned by Care Matters, measures the quality of work in social care for working-age adults and compares it to the wider labour market. It finds that careers in this sector are more purposeful, secure, and skilled than the majority of jobs in the UK labour market – and especially jobs that compete for the same workforce as social care.

Drawing on a representative survey of 4,099 UK workers, alongside qualitative research, we find that jobs in the sector perform strongly against the average UK job at all pay levels, and better still against jobs paying up to median full-time earnings (a sub-sample of 2,315 of the 4,099 respondents).

Care jobs should be better paid. But our evidence shows that a positive and rounded story can be told about jobs in the sector: one that celebrates the contribution of care workers, encourages more young people into the profession, and promotes social care for working-age adults as a long-term, secure and purposeful career.

The sector performs well across 40 measures of job quality



Across each of 40 measures of job quality that we tested, social care for working-age adults performs **either at or above the average** for other UK jobs with up to median full-time earnings (i.e. £40,000 per year). On **nine measures**, jobs in this sector are better than the average for other roles at this pay level by a statistically significant margin; they are worse than average on none (see figure 1).

- **Jobs in working-age social care are more purposeful.** Compared to other jobs with pay at or below the median, people in the sector are more likely to say that their job helps other people, is meaningful and worthwhile, and makes them feel proud. The qualitative evidence reinforces this, with focus group participants consistently describing how making a tangible difference to people's lives is a central feature of their job.
- **Jobs in the sector are associated with significant skills and responsibilities.** Work in working-age social care requires more job-related skills, more people skills and more personal responsibility than the average job with low to middle pay. The sector significantly outperforms business administration, retail and hospitality, and construction, utilities and manufacturing on job-related skills and personal responsibility.
- **Jobs in social care for working-age adults provide good job security and a long-term source of employment.** On whether their jobs will still exist in 10 to 20 years' time, the sector ranks highest of any we measured at this pay level. At a time when AI is reshaping the future of work, no workforce is more confident its jobs will endure. This reflects both rising demand for care and support, and the inherently human nature of the work, with digital and AI adoption likely to augment not replace personal contact.
- Workers in the sector are more likely to have clear and formal ways **to raise issues and concerns with their employer.**



Care does not just compare well against jobs with low-to-middle earnings: it stands up against jobs at all pay levels. On seven out of the 40 measures, the sector performs better than the average UK job by a statistically significant margin; it is below on only one measure. Given the gulf between the sector's reputation and the data, this finding is notable. Taken together, the report's findings point to a sector with strong pathways and career foundations – one that offers meaningful, skilled and secure work – and opportunities to build a long-term, skilled career.

FIGURE 1: NINE SURVEY MEASURES WHERE JOBS IN WORKING-AGE SOCIAL CARE ARE SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN OTHER WORK WITH UP TO MEDIAN PAY

	Working-age Social Care	Other Jobs
Job Purpose		
'My work helps other people a great deal'	+1.2	+0.8
'My work is meaningful and worthwhile'	+1.1	+0.8
'I'm proud to do my job'	+1.1	+0.8
Job Character		
'My job involves a great deal of personal responsibility'	+1.3	+0.8
'My job requires excellent people skills'	+1.1	+0.8
'My work requires a great deal of job-related skills and expertise'	+1.0	+0.7
Employment Security		
'I'm certain jobs like mine will exist in 10 to 20 years' time'	+1.2	+0.7
'Job security at my work tends to be very good'	+1.0	+0.6
Support and Voice		
'My work has clear and formal ways to raise issues and concerns'	+0.8	+0.6

Each positive statement is paired with an opposite negative statement (see appendix). Scores run from +2 (fully support positive statement) to -2 (fully support negative statement). Reported differences are statistically significant with 95% confidence interval. Responses are for people earning under £40,000. For 7 out of 9 of these indicators social care also performs significantly better than the average for other jobs at all earnings levels (this is not the case for 'my work is meaningful and worthwhile' and 'I'm proud to do my job').

The findings bust another myth – that healthcare jobs are better than social care jobs. Social care may have a reputation as a 'Cinderella service', when compared with the NHS, but on 39 of our measures of job quality there was no statistically significant divergence between low-to-middle paid workers in healthcare and social care for working-age adults. On the final measure - personal responsibility - working-age social care significantly outperforms healthcare.



Our findings are important in the context of the jobs crisis for young people, when so many adults aged under 25 are not in education or employment. Critically, the number of jobs in social care is rising, at a time when traditional 'first job' sectors such as retail and hospitality are in decline. The survey results show that the quality of jobs in social care for working-age adults is notably higher than in these two industries: **working-age social care outperforms retail and hospitality by a statistically significant margin on 15 measures.**

FIGURE 2: SIX FURTHER SURVEY MEASURES WHERE JOBS IN WORKING-AGE SOCIAL CARE ARE SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN IN RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY

	Working-age Social Care	Retail & Hospitality
Training and Development		
'In my job there are lots of opportunities to reflect, learn and improve'	+0.7	+0.4
'People who do my job become much more skilled and employable because of the training and professional experience available'	+0.6	+0.2
'In my job there are lots of opportunities to take apprenticeships or professional qualifications'	+0.1	-0.2
Job Purpose		
'My job is very well aligned with my personal values'	+1.0	+0.6
Job Security		
'In my job, people are always able to work the minimum number of hours they want'	+0.6	+0.4
Job Character		
'My job requires a lot of problem solving'	+0.4	0.0

Each positive statement is paired with an opposite negative statement (see appendix). Scores run from +2 (fully support positive statement) to -2 (fully support negative statement). Responses are for people earning under £40,000. Reported differences are statistically significant with 95% confidence interval.





An answer to labour market challenges

For young people looking for work – whether to find a first job or to build a career – care for working-age adults offers the prospect of quality employment. This challenges perceptions about adult social care, which is often portrayed as an undesirable occupation for UK workers. The survey shows that social care for working-age adults provides people with more employability-related skills and better access to apprenticeships and qualifications than retail and hospitality (see figure 2). Our qualitative evidence also reveals strong progression opportunities, including routes into management or specialist practice.

Social care jobs offer an attractive alternative for young people for two reasons in particular. First, research has shown that young adults are increasingly motivated by meaningful work and making a difference to others¹. In our survey, working-age adult social care ranked highly for purpose and value. Second, mental health is a key barrier to work for many young adults and social care for working-age adults has a good record of employing people with mental health conditions. In our survey, 24% of workers in the sector reported a mental health condition that limits their day-to-day activities, compared to 14% of workers across all jobs. This is a direct answer to the Milburn Review on young people not in education, employment or training, and to The Mayfield Review Keep Britain Working agenda: care is an expanding sector that can draw more young people into good, secure and meaningful work, and offer a pathway for many held back by their mental health.

When it comes to questions on work-life balance, the sector is in line with the average for jobs at or below median pay and for jobs at all pay levels. It is comparable to retail and hospitality, and better than construction, utilities and manufacturing. On workplace health issues it again sits in line with other jobs with low to middle earnings.

Jobs in working-age social care are in line with the average on satisfaction with pay and non-pay benefits. This is perhaps surprising given the low pay and restricted terms and conditions in the social care sector. In our qualitative research we heard from workers who did not feel their pay reflected the responsibility, skill and emotional labour the role demands. Remuneration is largely out of the control of individual employers in social care for working-age adults, as services are almost exclusively funded by public sector commissioners. The Government is seeking to address low pay in social care through the forthcoming Adult Social Care Negotiating Body.

Evidence to change perceptions of social care jobs

Overall, these findings fundamentally challenge the way working-age adult social care is often portrayed – in the media, by policymakers and in the government's own statements – as low-skilled, low-quality work. When compared with other roles at or below median earnings, the sector provides a robust career offering.

A radical rethink is needed. The survey shows that a much more positive story can be told about the sector: one that celebrates the contribution of care workers, draws more young adults and early-career employees into the profession, and supports people's pathways into long-term, secure and purposeful careers. The immediate challenge for employers and policymakers is to recognise and communicate these strengths, while addressing the areas – particularly pay – where the offer remains weaker.

Changing how careers in social care for working-age adults are understood will be critical to attracting and retaining the workforce needed to meet growing demand in the years ahead.

1 Purpose over pay - the priorities of Gen Z (Serco, 2025); Independent investigation of the NHS in England (2024)

1. Introduction



This report, researched and written by **Public First** and commissioned by **Care Matters**, brings together new evidence that the narrative around jobs in social care for working-age adults should be far more positive. On the quality of work, care jobs compare well with others across the economy, and especially with those competing for the same workforce. We evaluate how the sector performs across a range of 40 indicators that cover job requirements, purpose, work-life balance, job security and development.

Our analysis spans the whole UK workforce, but we primarily focus on jobs paid at or below full-time median earnings – i.e. the jobs that social care competes against for talent. Across the 40 measures of job quality, roles in working-age social care either match or exceed the average score for other jobs in this pay bracket. There are no measures where the sector is below the average for other jobs by a statistically significant margin.

This matters well beyond the sector and relates directly to the Government's central priorities – namely spreading growth to every postcode and reducing economic inactivity, precarious work and net migration. It speaks to questions at the heart of the Milburn Review on youth employment and the Mayfield Review on health and work.

The focus of this study is social care for working-age adults – the focus of the work of Care Matters. Adult social care is widely discussed as a service for older people, but half of council social care commissioning budgets are spent on care for working-age disabled adults.¹ In 2024/25 £11.8 billion was spent by councils on support for working-age adults in England – with the NHS and private sources providing around £3 billion extra². Misconceptions about the quality of these jobs therefore carry real weight for workforce strategies, not just for the reputation of the sector.

These findings should therefore feed into the Big Conversation on Care and the work of the Casey Commission. Demand for social care is rising, driven by demographic change and increasing complexity of need, and the sector continues to face workforce pressures relating to recruitment, retention and progression. Tackling misconceptions about the quality of careers in care is a priority given the drive from government to fill vacancies in the sector domestically. Measuring job quality against realistic alternatives in the labour market allows providers, individuals and policymakers to promote work in the sector as a positive choice. A focus on the people who support working-age adults in these conversations will be key to building a care system in which people drawing on care can live 'gloriously ordinary lives', made possible by a skilled and motivated care workforce.

The analysis in the report draws on a mixed-methods approach, combining a nationally representative survey of 4,099 UK adults with focus groups, case studies and workshops. This approach allows us to benchmark job quality across sectors while also capturing the lived experience of working in social care. The analysis focuses primarily on 2,315 workers earning at or below median full-time pay (i.e. up to £40,000 per year). This is a sub-set of the 4,099 respondents, with the full sample used where relevant to support the analysis.

1 Adult social care finance report, 2024-2025, DHSC 2025

2 LaingBuisson, Adult Specialist Care UK Market Report, 2025



Where would you place your job on the following scales?

I always enjoy work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	I never enjoy work
I am very satisfied with my job	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	I am very unsatisfied with my job

Next

FIGURE 3: EXAMPLE OF TWO QUESTIONS FROM THE SURVEY

About the survey: In the survey we presented respondents with 40 paired statements about their jobs – for example 'I never enjoy work' versus 'I always enjoy work'. We asked them to evaluate their own job on a 5-point scale between each paired statement, with the middle of the scale neutral between them. We converted these responses into a score for each question (with +2 representing support for the positive statement and -2 support for the negative statement). We then averaged the scores for workers within each sector, with +2 the highest possible score and -2 the lowest possible score. For most questions, for most sectors, the average score was between 0 and +1 which shows that people lean towards positive rather than negative statements about their jobs. Only industrial sectors with a minimum unweighted sample of 100 or more workers with below median earnings were included in sectoral comparisons. Across all the questions, jobs in working-age social care performed at or above the average for other jobs with low and middle pay.

About the qualitative research: We conducted 5 focus groups with care and support workers, supervisors and managers, employed by the three providers of specialist adult social care who commissioned this research. We also held workshops with leaders and HR professionals in the three businesses. These generated strikingly similar findings to the workforce survey.

The survey instrument was developed by Public First, drawing on the extensive literature on measuring job quality³.

We began by asking two questions relating to overall job satisfaction and then asked questions grouped into 8 domains, that reflect previous academic and international studies:

- Skilled and engaging jobs (7)
- Purposeful jobs (4)
- Secure jobs (5)
- Jobs with growth (4)
- Jobs with balance (5)
- Healthy jobs (4)
- Jobs with voice and respect (7)
- Jobs that deserve more (2)



3 Understanding and Measuring Job Quality (CIPD, 2018); Measuring Good Work (Carnegie UK, 2018)



The appendix sets out the full list of paired statements. The survey instrument asked people to rate their own jobs, so in one sense it is a subjective appraisal. But by asking 40 different questions, we are probing deeply into the constituent parts of job quality and exploring each role's intrinsic features, drawing on decades of previous research on job quality. In this way the survey looks beyond whether jobs are liked by or suited to individual respondents, to explore their underlying characteristics. Importantly, all respondents are asked the same questions in the same way, so statistically significant differences across sectors represent genuine divergence.

FIGURE 4: JOB SATISFACTION

	All earnings		Earnings below £40,000	
Scale	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=3979)	Social care for working-age adults (n=120)	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=2214)	Social care for working-age adults (n=101)
Job satisfaction	0.79	0.84	0.64	0.82
Enjoy work	0.93	0.93	0.80	0.93

Looking at the results for overall job satisfaction illustrates the approach we follow. Our indicator 'enjoy work' is based on the paired statements 'I never enjoy work' versus 'I always enjoy work'. A score of +2 would mean every respondent chose the positive statement and -2 that every respondent chose the negative one. Looking at workers of all earnings, social care for working-age adults and other jobs across the labour market each have a score of +0.93 – i.e. workers in both groups lean towards enjoying work to an identical degree.

By contrast, there is a differential when we compare jobs earning under £40,000 per year. In this instance, jobs in social care for working-age adults continues to score +0.93 while other jobs score +0.80. Social care is now ahead of other jobs, however the difference is not statistically significant (at 95% confidence). We therefore say that job enjoyment in working-age social care is in line with the average for other jobs. We follow this approach throughout: we only say sectors perform better or worse than a comparator when the difference is statistically significant.

Our indicator of job satisfaction uses the paired statements 'I am very satisfied with my job' versus 'I am very unsatisfied with my job'. On this measure working-age social care outperforms the average for other jobs both when looking at all earnings and earnings under £40,000 per year. However, again we view these results as broadly the same, because the difference is not statistically significant.

Across the report, we report findings for people who work in adult social care for disabled working-age adults, which is the focus of Care Matters. However, the responses were broadly similar across social care, so including people who mainly work with children or older people would not significantly change the story of this report.

The sections that follow take each of the eight domains in turn, setting the survey findings alongside the qualitative research and a case study from a worker in the sector.

2. Skilled + engaging jobs

FIGURE 5: KEY FINDINGS ON THE CHARACTER OF JOBS

Skilled + engaging jobs							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Skills required	0.7**	1.0	0.9	1.0	0.5**	0.3**	0.6**
Personal responsibility	0.8**	1.3	1.0*	1.0*	0.7**	0.6**	0.7**
Problem solving	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.1*	0.2
People skills required	0.8*	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.8*	0.2**
Varied & stimulating	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.2*
Flexibility	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.2
Pace appropriate	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.5

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

* indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval, and ** with a 99% confidence interval.

Jobs are more rewarding when they require skills and responsibility; come with variety and autonomy; and are without excessive workload pressure. These intrinsic characteristics of a job are defining elements of good work.

The dashboard above shows that, when it comes to workers with low and middle earnings, these characteristics of the job are a defining strength of working-age social care. Across the seven metrics we surveyed, working-age social care consistently outperforms key comparators. On three of seven questions, the sector is above the average for other jobs in this pay bracket by a statistically significant margin. For the other four questions it is in line with the average.

When we combine all seven questions into a single indicator, working-age social care ranks among the best in this comparator group. It is significantly higher in quality than other jobs overall, and than jobs in retail and hospitality, business support services, and construction, utilities and manufacturing in particular.

Three quarters of workers in working-age social care say their job requires a great deal of job-related skills and experience.



Both the survey and qualitative evidence show that jobs in working-age social care require substantial job-related skills and expertise. When asked to choose between two statements, 76% of workers in the sector leaned towards a statement saying their job required 'a great deal' of job-related skills, while just 11% opted for 'very little' job-related skills. On this question, the sector scored at broadly the same level as healthcare and education – and significantly higher than retail, hospitality, administrative and support services, and construction, utilities and manufacturing.

Our qualitative research explored the skills required. Participants in our focus groups said that communication was one of the most critical skills for the job, particularly when supporting individuals who are non-verbal, distressed, or unable to express their needs clearly. Workers in the sector need to adapt their communication styles continuously, use active listening, interpret behaviours, and build trust over time.

Alongside this, the participants emphasised the importance of patience, empathy, emotional resilience, adaptability, and teamwork:

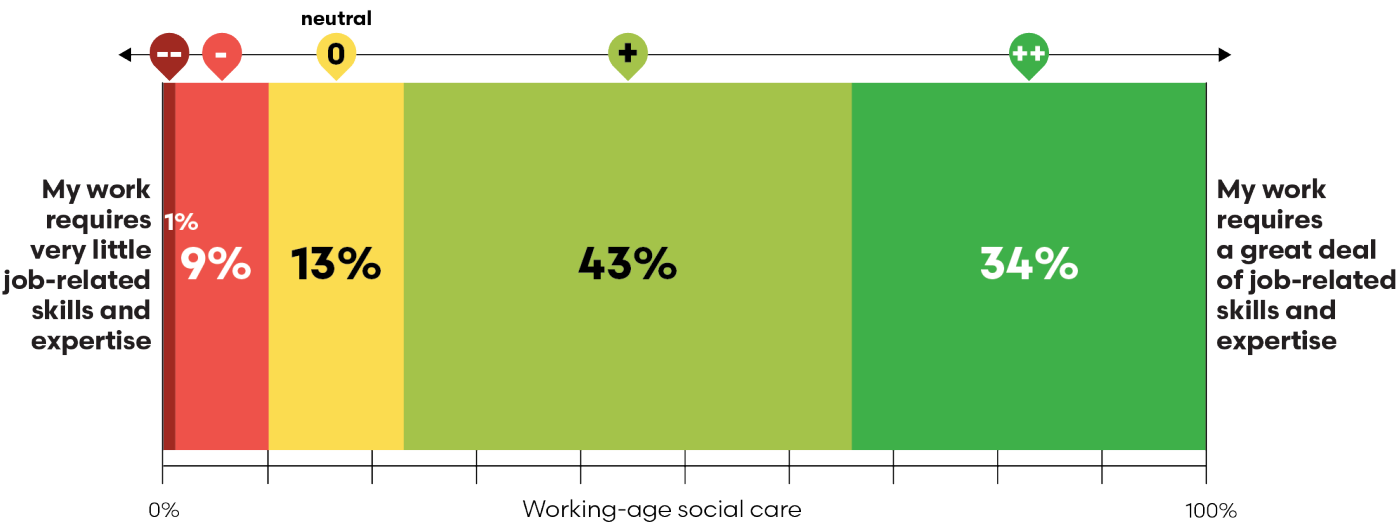
“As a support worker, you're a jack of all trades... You support them with their personal care, you do their medication, you liaise with professionals... You don't realise how much this job actually does entail. You also have to be that person in that person's life, because there's some people that I support that don't have any family...”

- Support worker focus group participant

Managers identified the same traits and particularly emphasised:

- **Emotional resilience and the ability to remain calm** under pressure.
- **Strong communication skills** – particularly when supporting non-verbal individuals – alongside the ability to build trust, adapt to different needs and perspectives, and respond sensitively to complex situations.
- **Reflection and professional judgement** to understand the root causes of behaviour, maintaining professional boundaries, and avoiding taking situations personally.

FIGURE 6: MOST PEOPLE IN WORKING-AGE SOCIAL CARE SAY THEIR JOBS REQUIRE 'A GREAT DEAL' OF JOB-RELATED SKILLS AND EXPERTISE



Source: Public First poll, All workers – all incomes, n=4099, 23 April-13 May 2026.



The survey findings also show that **roles in the sector carry significant levels of personal responsibility, compared to other jobs with low and middle pay.** The average score for workers in the sector was +1.3 compared to an average of +0.8 across the economy. Reported levels of personal responsibility are significantly higher than in five major comparator sectors including healthcare and education.

In the focus groups, managers emphasised that team members regularly apply complex judgement and problem-solving skills while balancing risk, independence, and wellbeing. Support workers told us that they often manage medication, coordinate with healthcare professionals, respond to safeguarding concerns, support behavioural interventions, and make rapid decisions in challenging contexts. Some directly compared their roles to healthcare professions, arguing that social care workers often operate at comparable levels of skill and responsibility, but receive less recognition for doing so.

Flexibility and adaptability were also central to how participants characterised their roles. No two days were described as the same. Staff frequently respond to changing behaviours, medical needs, family dynamics, staffing pressures, and community activities. Many participants valued this variety, often contrasting it with previous roles they experienced as repetitive or routine. In the survey's measures of job variety and flexibility, roles in working-age social care were in line with the average for other jobs with below median earnings.

Yet, a consistent theme across the focus groups was a strong sense that the public often misunderstands the role – underestimating the skills, expertise and responsibility involved.

Some argued that their skills are often overlooked because they are viewed as “soft skills”, despite being essential to delivering safe and effective care. Others felt that people assume care work only consists of routine personal care tasks.

“There’s not a lot of understanding around what’s involved in care... There’s just that level of understanding that isn’t there for all the professionals.”

- Manager focus group participant

Some support workers speculated that the low pay associated with their role was a major contributing factor to the negative view on the skills associated with social care:

“But then I think societally... sometimes it is devalued. I think people just don’t value how much skill is involved in the role... Maybe it’s due to pay. I got paid the same at [my former retail job] as I do in my job now. And I’d say it’s 20 million times harder. So maybe that’s one of the reasons why people stigmatise the job and think it’s easy as a reasoning.”

- Support worker focus group participant

This points to a distinct mismatch between the skills required in working-age social care and how those skills are perceived. The survey results point to high levels of skills and responsibility for a worker with below median earnings. Likewise the focus group participants viewed working-age social care as a skilled and demanding profession requiring a distinctive combination of technical knowledge, emotional intelligence, communication skills, and personal responsibility. Arguably, policymakers and the wider public underestimate the complexity of this work and the level of skill required to support individuals to live safe, independent, and fulfilling lives.

Building a career: Michelle's story

Michelle has enjoyed a long career in social care. She began as a support worker working with adults with learning disabilities and has since progressed all the way to Area Manager.

Michelle joined social care having previously worked in hospitality. She decided to switch careers in search of something more fulfilling. The change was sparked by a conversation with a friend who worked in the sector. Michelle recalled thinking: "I need to do something like that". She said "I couldn't stop thinking about it, how wonderful it sounded... So that's what I did and I've never looked back."

She has no qualms about promoting the sector to those thinking about joining:

"*I would say 'do it'. You'll never find another job like it. I think it's fulfilling. You definitely get out what you put in, and make time for people and get to know people..."*

Case Study

Michelle's Story



Michelle's current role sees her working across multiple locations, overseeing teams of managers and supporting the running of services. Her day-to-day responsibilities include monitoring data and performance, ensuring compliance, helping fill vacancies, supporting assessments, and providing overall guidance and oversight to managers. She says she's developed unexpected skills in data analysis and using spreadsheets, learning to see how they impact service quality and outcomes.

Michelle says that her career progression has been aided by being exposed to a wider range of tasks and responsibilities, helping her to understand how the sector operates beyond frontline care. **She has moved between different services and roles - especially as a peripatetic and registered manager - which allowed** her to learn from others, build confidence, and take on greater responsibility. She also highlights that holding full responsibility for a service brought a stronger sense of achievement and professional growth.

She says she's most proud of turning around a service that was rated "requires improvement" by building a strong team, improving operations and activities, and ultimately achieving a "good" rating from CQC, which was a significant milestone in her career.

For Michelle, strong support and continued training are the foundations of success in social care.

This is helped by her organisation's support and understanding. She says "the organisation is very accessible to you" – and very receptive to questions or concerns. Good work is recognised too, she says: "you're celebrated within the organisation". Michelle is clear about what keeps her in the sector:

"*The people we support and the difference that we can make to people and that feeling that you get when you walk in. You can just feel like the team are happy, the team are competent, the people we support are living their best life..."*

3. Purposeful jobs



FIGURE 7: KEY FINDINGS ON THE PURPOSE IN WORK

Purposeful jobs							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Aligned with values	0.7	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.7*	0.6**	0.6**
Meaningful/worthwhile	0.8*	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.5**	0.6**
Proud of job	0.8*	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.6**	0.5**
Work helps others	0.8**	1.2	1.3	1.1	0.8**	0.6**	0.4**

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

* indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval, and ** with a 99% confidence interval

Jobs in working-age adult social care perform strongly on measures relating to purpose, meaning, and social contribution. In the survey the sector scored very positively on three of four questions relating to purpose – significantly outperforming the average for other workers with low and middle pay. The positive statements that the respondents tended to support were:

- 'My job is very well aligned with my personal values'
- 'My work is meaningful and worthwhile'
- 'I'm proud to do my job'
- 'My work helps other people a great deal'

When the results of these questions were combined into a single score, jobs in working-age social care beat almost every comparable sector – being matched only by healthcare and education.

Even when workers with high pay are included, adult social care ranks ahead of almost every sector on measures of job purpose.

FIGURE 8: COMPARISON OF MEAN SCORES ACROSS THE WIDER LABOUR MARKET (ALL INCOMES)

Scale	All GB (excl. SC)	Working-Age Social Care	Healthcare (NHS)	Prof. Sci & Tech	Education	Business Admin	Retail	Info & Comms	Financial & Insurance	Manufacturing	Construction	Utilities	Accommodation & Food	Transport & Storage
Aligned with values	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.6	1.1	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6
Meaningful/worthwhile	0.9	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.1	0.9	0.6	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.5	0.7	0.7
Proud of job	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.7	1.3	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.4	0.8	0.7
Work helps others	0.9	1.3	1.3	1.0	1.1	0.8	0.6	1.1	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.6	0.7

Source: Public First polling, n=4,099, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for all workers.



On these measures of purpose, jobs in working-age adult social care compare favourably to roles in all pay brackets, **not just those with low and middle pay**. Figure 8 shows the performance of all jobs in the sector, compared to roles across all other sectors, at all earning levels (i.e. using the full survey sample of 4,099 workers, not just the sub-set of respondents with below median full-time earnings). On each of the four measures, jobs in working-age social care are at or above average – and are significantly above average on whether their work helps other people.

This strong sense of purpose emerged as a consistent theme throughout our focus groups. **Participants frequently described their roles as emotionally rewarding** because of the direct impact they have on people's lives. Whether that was supporting individuals to become more independent, achieve personal goals, overcome distress, or simply experience enjoyment and connection was repeatedly described as the most fulfilling aspect of the job. This sense of purpose also speaks to a wider policy challenge: with around a million young people out of work, as the Milburn Review has underlined, a sector defined by meaningful, high-impact work has a real part to play in drawing the next generation into good careers.

Many focus group participants linked this sense of purpose to broader feelings of pride, contribution, and social impact. Participants described their jobs as varied, relational, and deeply meaningful:

“ *I've been cleaning before. I've done a shop assistant [work] before. I've done all different roles, hairdressing. And then this is just, it's rewarding. It's a really rewarding job. You get to meet so many different people. You can give them the best quality of life...I wouldn't have it any other way, really...”*

- Support worker focus group participant

They frequently spoke about the satisfaction of helping people live more independently, participate in their communities, and achieve goals that previously felt inaccessible. Several spoke about the change they were able to bring to people's lives:

“ *I cherish my job, not... because of the salary or wages I earn. It's because of being impacting. These guys I met here, I've never seen them before. I came into the country in less than four years now... Even [if I left the country today], I've impacted 10 people's lives, I contributed to their life to grow, to change, to make things easy for you, to contribute to the goals you plan to have in your dream life.”*

- Support worker focus group participant



Managers similarly argued that the most rewarding moments consistently centred on supporting individuals to achieve progress, whether through small everyday achievements or major milestones. Helping people overcome distress, gain confidence, build independence, or access new experiences was repeatedly described as a major source of pride and motivation:

“*For me it's all about the people that we support. It's all about empowering them and it's really humbling to see their lives change over the time that we support them... I've seen people go through journeys of doing voluntary work or getting small employment... [Each] was achieved by having great people around them that were patient, that wanted to spend time with them, that wanted to understand to do to help them learn...”*

- Leaders' workshop participant

Importantly, this sense of purpose appears to play a significant role in retention and long-term commitment to the sector.

Across focus groups with support workers and managers, and in a series of workshops with the leadership teams of the Care Matters providers, participants argued that the emotional reward, meaning, and sense of contribution associated with the work were powerful reasons why people remain in the sector despite relatively low pay and high emotional pressures.

Making a difference: Mark's story

Mark works as a social care worker in a residential care home. He supports adults with autism and other disabilities, including both hidden and physical conditions. His role involves one-to-one support, helping residents with daily living, activities, and building independence.

His motivation for entering care work is deeply personal. Having experienced the foster care system himself, he developed a strong desire to support others—particularly those who may not receive the level of care or advocacy they need. **He is driven by empathy and a sense of responsibility to help people who may be in more challenging situations than he was.**

His experience in foster care strongly shapes his approach. Mark said: “my experience in care...has always been a big motivator.” He emphasises dignity, respect, and ensuring individuals have a voice in decisions about their lives—something he felt was sometimes lacking in his own experience. He said:

“There was a couple of instances where between my social worker and my foster parents, decisions were made for me, without even consulting me. I’ve always just re-channelled all of that really in this work.”

He describes his role as enabling people to live full, meaningful lives—supporting everything from daily independence to major life experiences like holidays and personal development. For Mark, a good day is one where residents are safe, happy, and have had meaningful or enjoyable experiences. Importantly, success is defined by the individual—whether that means engaging in activities or simply having control over their day.

He highlights residents’ achievements. Mark describes supporting a resident to gradually build confidence—from needing encouragement just to walk to a bus stop, to eventually completing multi-mile walks and engaging more broadly with others. He says this was “a big breakthrough moment.” He has also supported residents on holidays, including helping one person experience their first-ever trip. **Mark explained that residents “haven’t had many holidays in their life.” Being able to experience this was “quite [a] big achievement for them.”**



4. Secure jobs



FIGURE 9: KEY FINDINGS ON SECURITY IN WORK

Secure jobs							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Job will exist in future	0.7**	1.2	1.0	0.8*	0.2**	0.6**	0.6**
Employer retention	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.7*
Job security	0.6**	1.0	0.7	0.8	0.5**	0.5**	0.4**
Unpaid overtime	0.1	0.2	0.0	-0.2*	0.1	0.2	0.4
Able to work desired hours	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4*	0.4

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

* indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval, and ** with a 99% confidence interval.

Jobs in working-age social care perform better than average on job security over the short-term and long-term. People in the sector are significantly more likely than other workers across the economy to support the statements:

- 'Job security at my work tends to be very good'
- 'I'm certain jobs like mine will exist in 10 to 20 years' time'

On both these measures, working-age social care performs well against all the other sectors we examined. The sector offers stable, secure employment at a time when other parts of the labour market are shedding jobs and people are worrying about the effects of automation and AI on the long-term future of many occupations.

Meanwhile workers in the sector are in line with the average for other jobs with respect to three statements relating to secure terms of employment:

- In my job, people are always able to work the minimum number of hours they want (this sector performs significantly better than retail and hospitality on this measure)

- In my job, people never work more hours than they are paid
- People in this job tend to stay with the same employer for a long time

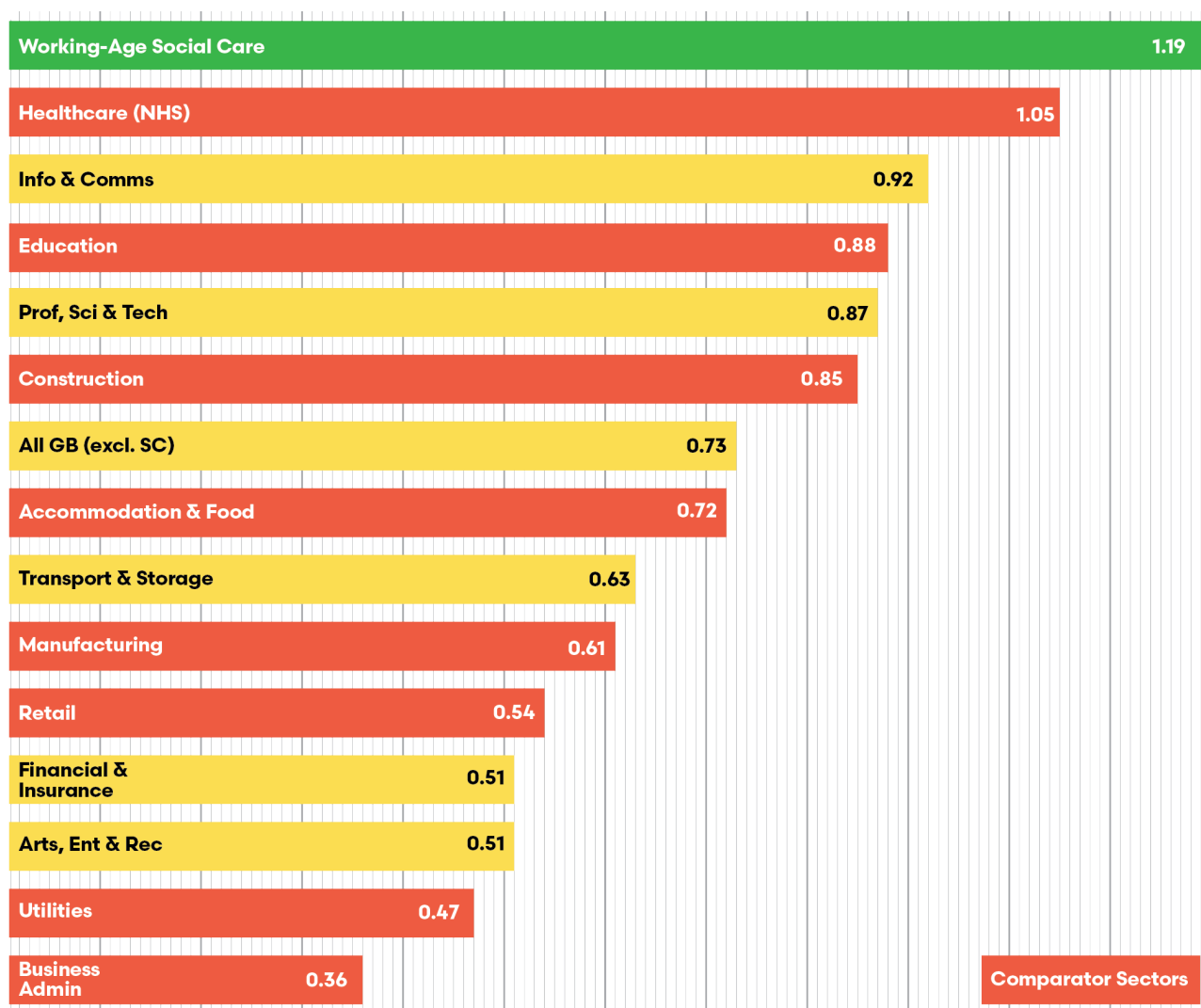
Secure work and job terms was also a big theme in the qualitative research. **Both managers and support workers consistently described care work as one of the few sectors largely insulated from fears around automation and artificial intelligence.** They viewed care work as stable, long-term employment with sustained demand for skilled workers. Participants recognised that digital tools and AI would increasingly support administrative tasks, but overwhelmingly believed the fundamentally human nature of care work would remain unchanged.

“AI is not going to change care for a long time. Care is there. And I think that’s a big fear for young people at the moment of particularly graduates. The market is going to change significantly over the next few years, but care has huge job security.” -

- Leaders' workshop participant



FIGURE 10: WORKING-AGE SOCIAL CARE PERFORMS UNIQUELY WELL AGAINST AI JOB FEARS



Source: Public First poll, All workers – all incomes, n=4,099, 23 April-13 May 2026. Differences between working-age social care and other sectors are statistically significant at 95% confidence level, with the exception of healthcare.

This is an area where the sector performs well compared to all jobs. The working-age social care workforce performs significantly above the wider labour market average on both expectations that jobs will exist in the future and perceived job security.

Across both managers and support workers, there was a strong sense that care work offers greater employment stability than many of the comparator sectors, with permanent contracts typically the norm in contrast to the insecure work and fluctuating hours seen elsewhere.

The sector performs particularly strongly on expectations about whether their jobs will exist in future with a mean score of 1.19 – the highest of any sector.

“ I think people feel really, really safe...
People feel really safe in their roles.”
- Leaders’ workshop participant



This stability was reinforced by perceptions of persistently high employer demand. In our focus groups, participants said that demographic pressures, rising complexity of need, and increasing demand for community-based care mean social care roles are likely to become more important over time.

However, participants were also clear that employment security does not remove all pressures associated with the role. Staffing shortages, sickness absence, and high demand can still create pressure on existing teams. Some workers also described tensions around overtime and additional hours, particularly where employees wanted to work beyond safe limits or supplement income through agency or bank work elsewhere.

“What you do find is a lot of people do want to work a lot of hours. And that’s a choice that we restrict... [otherwise] it’s a risk to the people you support.”

- Leaders’ workshop participant

“I think you’ve got to do it before you realise what it’s like... He feels like I’m always at work because I’m a manager and I’m on call...”

- Manager focus group participant

While the three businesses reported improvements in recruitment and comparatively strong retention, the sector continues to face workforce pressures, particularly following the pandemic and changes to migration rules. Even so, the Care Matters providers described significant progress:

“Our turnover has dropped from post-COVID being nearly 50% to 25% this year... overall, the metrics are all going in the right direction.”

- Leaders’ workshop participant

“Our attrition is about 16%, which again against the sector average of 24, is quite low.”

- Leaders’ workshop participant

The evidence suggests that working-age adult social care offers a relatively rare combination of high employment security, sustained demand, and hours that suit employees.

At a time when many sectors face increasing uncertainty driven by automation, casualisation, and economic instability, care work stands out as a source of long-term stability – albeit one accompanied by ongoing pressures on workload and staffing.

Developing skills: Mark & Daisy's story

Mark is an Accounts Director having been with his employer for 31 years. He started in care in 1993 and has progressed through various roles. Daisy, Mark's daughter, joined the business in October 2025 as an apprentice social care worker. She finished her GCSEs the previous summer, achieving an A in health and social care.

Mark said he was drawn to care through watching his grandfather's carers and recognising the value of what they were doing. He describes his mother – a nurse – as someone from whom he inherited caring instincts. For him, the attraction has always been about seeing what difference the right support can make to someone's life. In this vein, he said his favourite role across his entire career was as a social care worker. **He said: "it was the best job in the world. It probably still is to be fair."**

Mark says the sector has changed significantly. He thinks public understanding of people with learning disabilities has improved. Career pathways are much more visible and accessible now, and training is considerably better and more varied than it was. He says:

"*The training was of a good standard back then, but I think it's much better now. There's a wider range of subjects. I would say that our social care workers these days are far better trained than we were when I was first starting out as well."*

He also feels the sector is more professionalised thanks to changes in legislation. Mark also highlights how data and technology have transformed service delivery. When he started, there were no computers and hours were reported by fax. Today, digital tools and smartphones capture detailed daily records – covering diet, wellbeing and activities – **which helps to identify trends, inform support plans and improve understanding of behaviour.**

Daisy says people assume the job is simpler than it is. **Daisy says "you're constantly being trained"** and plans to complete her Level 2 apprenticeship and progress to a Level 3. She said some people think that carers just help people get ready and take them out. In reality, she said, you get to know each person deeply as an individual, you build real relationships both with colleagues and with the people you support, and you learn a great deal about yourself along the way.

Mark agrees with this and emphasises the skills required to be a carer. He says:

"*I don't think anyone first coming into care truly understands the scope of all the different training and development that you need to kind of gather all those skills and do it successfully over a long period of time."*



5. Jobs with growth



FIGURE 11: KEY FINDINGS ON TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Jobs with growth							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Skills/employability development	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.2*	0.2*	0.4
Career progression	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	-0.1	0.2	-0.1*
Opportunities to learn	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.4*	0.4
Apprenticeship /qualif opps	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.1	-0.1	-0.2*	-0.1

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

* indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval.

Training and development is one of the strongest features of a career in working-age social care. Across our interviews and focus groups participants highlighted the breadth of training available, the support they received from employers, and the opportunities to progress into more specialised or senior roles. Many described entering the sector with limited prior experience and being supported to develop through structured learning, qualifications, and on-the-job development.

In our survey, working-age social care was in line with the average for other jobs with below median earnings on measures relating to training and development. However the sector performs significantly better than retail and hospitality on three of the four development-related measures:

- 'In my job there are lots of opportunities to reflect, learn and improve'
- 'People who do my job become much more skilled and employable because of the training and professional experience available'
- 'In my job there are lots of opportunities to take apprenticeships or professional qualifications'

This indicates that social care offers a comparatively robust development proposition for those seeking to build skills and advance their careers. Focus group participants frequently described training as both extensive and varied:

- Many described a wide range of progression opportunities, including routes into management, specialist practice, quality assurance, training, and operational leadership.
- Several participants saw themselves remaining in the sector long term specifically because of the opportunities it provided for continued growth and development.

“ Within our field, within our industry, there are many, many pathways to progress... There's no limits. There are so many opportunities out there for people who want to work in the care industry.”

- Manager focus group participant



FIGURE 12: CARE MATTERS EMPLOYERS OUTPERFORM THE WIDER LABOUR MARKET ON TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Care Matters employers outperform the wider labour market on training and development		
	Care Matters Employees (n=1,089)	All GB Workers (excl. WASC) (n=3,979)
Skills/employability development	1.1	0.6
Career progression	0.8	0.3
Opportunities to learn	1.1	0.7
Apprenticeship/qualif opps	1.0	0.2

Source: Public First polling, n=1,089, 15th Apr-1st May 2026; Public First polling, n=4,099, 23 April-13 May 2026

* The two polls are not directly comparable. Both asked respondents to self-assess the quality of their own jobs, but the samples differ in nature: the labour market survey is a nationally representative poll of the UK workforce. The Care Matters employee poll used a self-selecting sample, weighted to the demographics of the firms' employees. As such, comparisons between the two are indicative only.

Alongside our research on the whole labour market, we conducted a survey of employees at the three Care Matters providers, asking a sample of 1,089 employees the same set of questions about the quality of their jobs. Across all four measures relating to training and development, jobs in the three organisations considerably outperform the average UK job, reflecting the investment sector employers make in their staff and in supporting their career development.

Many care workers expressed ambitions to move into more specialised or senior positions while remaining within social care. Examples included progressing into service management, area management, positive behaviour support (PBS) specialisms, quality auditing, and wider leadership roles.

“I’ve been in my role for three years now... I have a passion for quality [auditing], so I think that will be my next step. But I have a big need for moving around, growing, learning. So it’s not something that I plan to be on the same position for a long period of time...”

- Manager focus group participant

“I can see myself carrying on with the job and in the near future I do feel ready to take an area manager job responsibility as well. And [there are] opportunities they’re raising in the company most of the time, so that opportunity is going to raise for me at one point.”

- Manager focus group participant



Training in the sector is comprehensive and consistent, and career progression pathways are well established – with clear options to move into management or to develop more specialist skills. In the three Care Matters providers all employees complete a comprehensive induction and mandatory training programme covering safeguarding, regulatory requirements, and core skills. This is complemented by significant investment in accredited qualifications, including programmes supported through growth and skills levy funding. Progression is also supported through clear development pathways, internal academies, and leadership programmes.

Training, learning, and career progression represent a significant competitive advantage for working-age social care.

The sector offers employees a level of development and advancement that matches or beats most other sectors and is a key factor underpinning workforce retention and long-term career commitment.

“*Within our field, within our industry, there are many, many pathways to progress. So you can start as a volunteer, you can start as a support worker, you’ve got opportunities to gain insights and do professional development such as diplomas, you can do degrees, you can do your care certificate, you can go and learn about specific things like quality and audits. There’s no limits. There are so many opportunities out there for people who want to work in the care industry.”*

- Manager focus group participant



Building a long-term career: Donna's Story

Donna is an Assistant Operations Director, overseeing 24 supported living services. She started with her employer nearly 14 years ago as a 'bank' social care worker. She initially picked up night shifts, before moving into day shifts and then progressing through full-time social care worker, team leader, deputy manager, home manager and eventually operations.

She had previously worked as a cook in a school kitchen, but wanted something more fulfilling and purposeful. **Donna explains that social care has transformed her view of work and careers.** She describes developing a passion for her work—which she had never experienced before—as motivating this shift. She said:

“I've never felt that way about a job before I would say this is the only job that I felt really passionate about and looked at it as a career.”

This motivation has stayed with her throughout her career. **Donna has continued to pursue additional responsibility and qualifications, including her Level 2 and Level 5 in health and social care, as well as a leadership qualification. She says her ability to do so, “gave me a feeling of self-worth. I wanted to continue to push myself.”**

Donna says her pride, commitment and belief in the work have kept her motivated. **However, her pride is also deeply personal. She said that her children were proud of her career and both work in social care—one at the same company.**

She points to the long-term change she has seen in the people she and her teams support as a key motivator. She explains that one person had frequent hospital stays and high support needs four years ago. Through consistent team support, they are now preparing to move into their own property, hold a full-time job, self-medicate and are close to full independence.

She reflects that a 'good result' might be something as significant as independent living, or as small as someone going to the shops after weeks of not leaving the house. She explains: “a good outcome could be someone just going out to the shops that day... but they've not been to the shops for the last three, four weeks.”

She feels the sector has changed significantly and largely for the better. In particular, she says care has become more person-centred, with stronger governance and a clearer focus on supporting people in the right way. **Her career highlight was achieving an “outstanding” CQC rating as a home manager – which she described as “very difficult to achieve.”**



6. Jobs with balance



FIGURE 13: KEY FINDINGS ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Jobs with balance							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Work-life balance	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.5	0.7
Hours suit circumstances	0.9	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.8
Location suits circumstances	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.5*
Advance notice of schedule	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.9	0.7	0.4*
Easy to take time off	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.5*	0.2*	0.2

Source: Public First polling, Workers earning under £40k, n=2,315, 23 April -13 May 2026. * indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval.

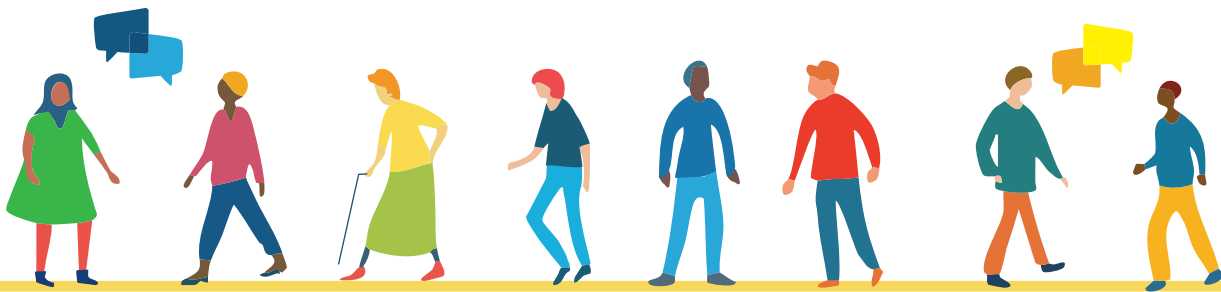
Jobs in social care are often assumed to be incompatible with satisfactory work-life balance. Shift patterns, unsociable hours, and the emotional intensity of supporting people with complex needs all contribute to that perception. The evidence, however, suggests a very different story.

Across five measures of work-life balance, our survey finds that working-age social care performs broadly in line with the average for other jobs with below median pay. This runs counter to mainstream narratives surrounding this sector.

Notably, when asked to choose between two competing statements, **70% of workers supported a statement saying the hours they work suit them and their personal circumstances well, while only 18% said they don't suit them.**

This positive picture is driven largely by the flexibility embedded within care roles. In our focus groups, participants frequently described positives, such as:

- Having meaningful discretion over when and how they worked – something many contrasted directly with previous jobs in retail or other shift-based sectors
- Employers with adaptable rota systems, compressed hours, and guaranteed-hours contracts specifically to accommodate this.
- Praise for longer shifts over fewer days, increasing both flexibility and predictable income
- Managers who routinely accommodate college timetables, exam periods, and medical needs



“There’s pros and cons. I have shift work, so you could work any day in the week and then have days off in the week, have a weekend off, work earlier, work late... I didn’t think I could do a Monday to Friday job and then have every weekend off.”

Support worker focus
group participant

“They’ve managed to work around me a lot with [college]... when it comes to exams, giving me the time off if I need it.”

Support worker focus
group participant

These comparisons suggest workers evaluated work-life balance in relative rather than absolute terms. **In practice, many workers described care work as offering a form of flexibility that is difficult to access elsewhere within the comparator sectors.**

However, this flexibility has limits, as both the survey findings and qualitative research make clear. In particular, access to flexibility often depends heavily on individual managers and staffing capacity, meaning experiences can vary considerably across services. More generally, shift work can involve unsociable hours, weekend working, and difficulty fully separating work from personal life. In the survey, the measure where responses were most negative were in relation to the statement ‘in my job it is very easy to take time off at short notice for personal reasons’.

The overall picture is of a sector that performs better on work-life balance than its reputation suggests – and in line with comparator sectors. Flexibility, where it exists, makes the demands of the role more manageable for many. But that flexibility is uneven, context-dependent and does not remove the underlying pressure of shift work that can come with significant responsibility.

7. Healthy jobs



FIGURE 14: KEY FINDINGS ON HEALTH IN WORK

Healthy jobs							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Mental wellbeing support	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.4	0.4
Physical health support	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.5
Work causes illness	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.6
Sick leave frequency	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.6*

Source: Public First polling, Workers earning under £40k, n=2,315, 23 Apr-13 May 2026. * indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval.

While jobs in adult social care come with real mental and physical health pressures, the sector performs in line with comparable roles on health-related measures. High emotional demands, the complex needs of the people drawing on support and physically intensive work can all affect workers' wellbeing. Managers and social care workers in the sector acknowledge the challenge of sustaining good employee health. In the qualitative research they highlighted challenges including managing complex needs, communication barriers, physical harm and bereavement.

The survey data bears this out: on four health-related measures, jobs in working-age adult care are not significantly different from the average for other jobs across the economy or for comparator sectors such as healthcare, retail and hospitality. These measures cover employer support for mental wellbeing, employer support for physical health, work-related illness or injury and frequency of sick leave. On one measure, sickness absence, the sector is significantly worse than one of the comparator sectors (construction, utilities and manufacturing).

“There's also the challenging side of the job. For example, in my case, we lost someone last year. Natural death... [it] created such a close-knit environment because we all went through that loss and we all knew the person in question, although it was very, very challenging for everybody. It made us close, the team, the people we support... And I think it's one of the biggest challenges in care.”

- Manager focus group participant



This success of social care in matching other sectors on health issues reflects both necessity and culture. In our leaders' workshops, employers recognised that supporting workforce wellbeing is critical not only for retention and attendance, but also for delivering high-quality care. They described a shift towards more proactive and structured wellbeing support. As one support worker explained:

“*We've got people that we can contact if we're struggling with our mental health, or any other financially related sort of issues we may have. On call doctors 365 days a year if we need to seek medical advice for something not just for us but for our family members too. I think over the years we didn't have as much support as what we do now.”*

- Support worker focus group participant

In our focus groups, participants highlighted that support provision has become more comprehensive over time, extending beyond traditional occupational health services to include preventative support, family wellbeing assistance, and financial advice. Others described more formalised wellbeing provision, particularly around mental health and personal challenges:

“*If people have some challenges, mental health challenges, we have an organisation which works with the company and they have about 10 sessions of anonymous counselling... And then we also have some financial support assistance. If you need help or you are facing some personal challenges, we have these in place.”*

- Support worker focus group participant

There was also recognition that the sector employs a significant number of people with lived experience of disability, mental health challenges or neurodiversity.

In our survey, 24% of working-age social care employees said they had a mental health condition which impacts their ability to carry out day-to-day activities, compared to an average of 14% for workers in all sectors.

This suggests that specialist social care can be an unusually inclusive place to work, offering opportunities to people who may face barriers to employment elsewhere and supporting them to remain in and progress within the workforce. In this respect, the sector already exemplifies the kind of inclusive, retention-focused employment that the Mayfield Review is seeking to encourage across the wider economy.





Some participants felt that social care could offer a more accommodating and supportive environment than other sectors, with flexibility, variety, and values-driven work contributing positively to wellbeing. In our leaders' workshops, employers described efforts to better recognise and support neurodiverse staff and those experiencing mental health challenges:

“ We get quite a lot of people in this industry coming in with mental health issues or some neurodiverse issues. So we have to make sure that we have captured that and are aware of it and put support where needed.”

- Leaders' workshop participant

“ I have a strong positive thought that this sector is a better employment place for many, many people who would articulate themselves as having neurodiversity...”

- Leaders' workshop participant

Leaders also described an increasing focus on the active management of physical health, sickness absence and return-to-work support. Several participants in the worker and manager focus groups noted increased use of occupational health services and more structured approaches to supporting employees through periods of ill health:

“ We've got quite a robust sickness absence policy now as well. We deal with short term and long term absence and we use occupational health much more regularly than we did before. Again, with the premise of how do we keep somebody at work or how do we get them to return?”

- Leaders' workshop participant

The qualitative evidence shows that, in a sector that comes with inevitable health risks, many organisations are investing seriously in workforce wellbeing, with this investment being noticed and valued by staff. The range of support on offer – mental health counselling, occupational health, financial assistance, and more structured approaches to sickness absence – has expanded considerably in recent times. This all feeds through into our survey findings that the sector's performance is broadly in line with comparable jobs.



8. Jobs with voice + respect

FIGURE 15: KEY FINDINGS ON VOICE AND SUPPORT

Jobs with voice + respect							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Fairness across backgrounds	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.1	0.8	0.8	0.7
Trusted/respected	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7
Managers positive/supportive	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.3
Colleague relationships	0.7	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.5*
Manager involves in decisions	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.5
Senior leaders listen	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1
Clear ways to raise issues	0.6*	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.5*	0.5*	0.3**

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

* indicates results that are statistically different from working-age social care, with a 95% confidence interval, and ** with a 99% confidence interval.

On workplace support, voice and organisational culture, jobs in working-age social care perform at or above the average for other roles in the economy. It is broadly in line with other sectors, but outperforms other jobs with below median earnings on the statement 'my work has clear and formal ways to raise issues and concerns'. On this question, working-age social care significantly outperforms comparators including business administration and support, retail and hospitality, and construction, utilities and manufacturing.

In the qualitative research, participants reported feeling genuinely listened to and supported by managers. Practices described across focus groups and workshops included:

- Regular supervision, forums, listening sessions, and wellbeing conversations.
- Direct access to senior leaders, including structured engagement programmes where senior management met frontline staff.
- Structured feedback systems designed to ensure staff concerns were acted upon.



“ We launched the forums about three years ago now... [where] the MDs and the lead person for that particular division would go out and meet with our front lines to understand what is it really like to work here?”

- Leaders' workshop participant

However, these positive experiences were not universal. Perceptions of support depended heavily on individual managers and service-level cultures. Participants mentioned occasions where communication broke down or staffing pressures intensified, leaving people feeling overlooked or undervalued. Some said the quality of support varied considerably between services, even within the same organisation, or described marked improvements following a change of manager.

“ It wasn't great at the start, but now I feel like I can go to management and they will listen and understand and act on that.”

- Support worker focus group participant

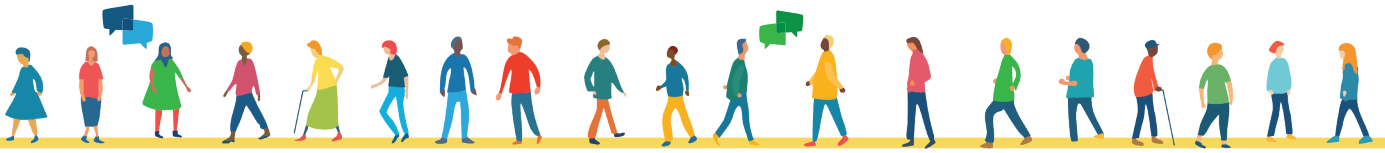
The strength of colleague relationships emerged as one of the most consistent themes across both the survey and qualitative research. Focus group participants described:

- Highly supportive teams, strong camaraderie, and cultures where colleagues actively helped one another manage both practical and emotional pressures
- Unusually close bonds built through working alongside the same colleagues over long periods
- Reliance on teammates as essential to coping with the emotional intensity of the role

Many argued that the nature of care work itself generates this closeness. Staff face emotionally demanding situations together in a way that is qualitatively different from most other sectors at similar pay levels:

“ It's really just having a great support group within your team. It's such a big thing, isn't it? You've got to have a good team to make your life easier.”

- Manager focus group participant



“Another thing that always came to you really strongly in the colleague survey was around supportive co-workers, so the sense of teamwork and support from colleagues. And I think obviously when you’ve got teams that have worked together for numbers of years, those relationships are quite strong.”

- Leaders’ workshop participant

The providers say they place considerable emphasis on fairness, inclusion, and creating supportive environments for workers from diverse backgrounds.

Participants in the leaders’ workshop highlighted: the importance of values-led cultures as a foundation for inclusive practice; the sector’s relatively high proportion of neurodiverse workers, overseas staff, and employees with lived experience of mental health challenges; the perception that social care can offer a more accommodating environment for people with health or personal challenges than many other sectors.

Developing skills: Benmarc

Benmarc was previously a kitchen porter before moving into care. He decided to switch careers and become a support worker, motivated by helping others – and making a noticeable difference in people’s lives. His career path is driven by a desire for fulfilment and he is motivated by seeing “that difference you make with [residents] and how much happier they look.”

Through his job, Benmarc has learned how to communicate with nonverbal individuals, including understanding their signs, needs, and emotions. Over time, this has become instinctive. As a result, he says his confidence and career satisfaction have grown.

Benmarc is clear-eyed about the realities of his career. He says that

“*you really have to pay attention to who you’re caring for.”*

While he dismissed the idea that “it’s quite an easy job” – he said “we do have our ‘on’ and ‘off’ days and you have to be equipped to support them in those up and downs.”

He now sees a long-term career in the field and is planning to pursue a NVQ Level 2 qualification. He expects opportunities to progress into more senior roles and sees continued education as the route to this. He says that

“*right now, I’m just a normal support worker, but I could improve to a higher one as a senior who’s really in charge of the day, or a manager.”*

A career in social care has been transformative for Benmarc. The ability to “see the change you make”, he argues, “improves your quality of life.” It has given him a career and clear path to progression. The benefits, he adds, extend beyond his career: the skills you develop – like attentiveness – are transferable and can improve your life outside of work as well.

Case Study

Benmarc's Story



9. Jobs that deserve more

FIGURE 16: KEY FINDINGS ON PAY AND BENEFITS

Jobs that deserve more							
Scale	All GB Workers (excl. SC) (n=2214)	Working-Age Social Care (n=101)	Healthcare (NHS) (n=219)	Education (n=282)	Business Admin & Support Services (n=158)	Retail & Hospitality (n=440)	Construction, Utilities & Manufacturing (n=371)
Pay satisfaction	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.5
Non-pay benefits satisf.	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1

Source: Public First polling, n=2,315, 23 April-13 May 2026, results for workers earning under £40,000 per year.

Satisfaction with pay and non-pay benefits in the sector is in line with the average for other jobs with low and middle pay. Respondents across the labour market seem to have similar subjective views on pay, with the responses for working-age social care not being significantly different to any of the comparators we looked at.

In our qualitative research, however, pay dissatisfaction emerged as a clear and consistent theme. Focus group participants repeatedly described pay in adult social care as failing to match the demands of the role. They emphasised that the sector requires highly skilled, emotionally demanding work with significant responsibility, yet pay does not adequately reflect these demands.

This dissatisfaction also needs to be read against the wider economic backdrop. Pay in the sector is largely determined by the fees that public sector commissioners are able to pay, leaving individual employers with limited room to raise wages. At the same time, the cost-of-living increases and broader wage inflation of recent years have squeezed household budgets across the economy and intensified competition for staff from other low-paid sectors, sharpening the sense that care pay has failed to keep pace.

The gap between perception and survey result may stem from how workers evaluate pay. Focus group participants did not typically compare themselves to workers in other industries in the abstract. They compared themselves to the level of responsibility, emotional labour, and skill their job requires, and found the reward wanting.

A retail worker earning a similar wage is not managing medication, responding to safeguarding concerns, or supporting someone through bereavement. The dissatisfaction is fundamentally about fairness and recognition, not just absolute income level.

“ I think another reason why a lot of people probably wouldn't want to come into the job is because of the high level of responsibility for the low level of pay... It's a lot of pressure, I think, for some people to handle for not that high level of pay or recognition.”

- Support worker focus group participant



“ *I think pay has been a big thing. I mean, I've been in care for many, many years and it's always been a big thing. People don't want to come into the job because the pay can be quite bad and people tend to work long hours...”*

- Manager focus group participant

“ *It's very hard because I know when I've done care jobs before and you've worked a lot of hours and sometimes the reward isn't the reward, it's the guys... It's not money, unfortunately, and it should be a little bit of both, especially the way the world is. Everything's getting more expensive and nothing's moving up.”*

- Manager focus group participant

This distinction matters. The significance of pay dissatisfaction in this sector is not that workers are uniquely badly paid relative to comparable roles. It is that the gap between what the job demands and what it pays is felt acutely by a workforce that is otherwise highly motivated and committed. Pay is functioning as a signal of social worth as much as a source of income:

“ *When it comes to payment... We are very, very low paid as managers in care... So we are seen as well as a very low paid class that doesn't glorify our profession, and doesn't really reflect what we do and how much value we have in society.”*

- Manager focus group participant

“ *It can be selfish, but I think the pay does affect it. I know we said like it's not about money and everything, but I think a lot of people sometimes, they work so hard, and then they want to be rewarded about what they do. I don't think people who work in care feel valued enough for the work they do. And this is in general, everywhere you go, if you speak to any carer...”*

- Manager focus group participant



The three Care Matters providers were highly aware of pay dissatisfaction. They said that pay levels are largely determined by the fees set by public sector commissioners, but they had invested heavily in non-pay benefits and workplace support. While employees remained dissatisfied with wages, in the qualitative research they were often considerably more positive about other aspects of the employment offer. Recognition initiatives like reward platforms, peer nominations and awards schemes were widely valued, though participants were clear these complemented rather than substituted for fair pay.

The broader picture that emerges is a workforce that is frustrated by the financial realities of the sector but is prepared to make a trade-off because of the strength of everything else – the purpose, the nature of the work, the job security and the development opportunities. Non-pay factors sustain employee motivation and retention despite widespread pay concerns, not because these do not exist. That is both a testament to the quality of the sector's wider employment offer and a reminder of a critical vulnerability facing adult social care.

“*When people or colleagues do something above and beyond for their jobs [you can win] between £25 up to £500. And it's quite motivational for them to share those celebrations and the good stories with the managers because sometimes they really focus on with the daily jobs and [forget] to share the real outcome and the positivity with us...”*

- Manager focus group participant

Appendix



Public First conducted an anonymous online survey of 4,099 workers in Great Britain between 23 April and 13 May 2026. Results are weighted using iterative proportional fitting ('raking') by interlocking age and gender, region and social grade to nationally representative proportions. Quotas were set to ensure the sample reflected the actual composition of the GB workforce, with responses drawn from workers across sectors in proportion to ONS employment estimates, and from businesses of a range of sizes.

Respondents were asked to rate their jobs across 40 semantic differential scales. Each scale presents two opposing statements at either end of a five-point spectrum, and respondents select the point that best reflects their experience. For example: 'My work requires very little job-related skills and expertise' at one end, with 'My work requires a great deal of job-related skills and expertise' at the other. Respondents could select any of the five points between the poles, scored from -2 to +2.

The order of questions was randomised for each respondent to minimise ordering effects. During analysis, scales were coded so that in all cases a higher score represents a more positive outcome. This allows scores to be compared directly across scales and sectors.

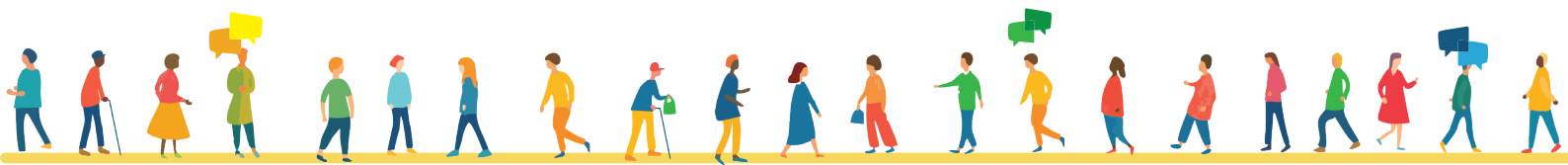
Mean scores for each scale were calculated as weighted averages using demographic weights. Differences between groups were tested for statistical significance. Differences significant at p less than 0.05 are marked with one asterisk and those at p less than 0.01 with two. The text only reports on differences with more than 95% confidence.

The full wording of each pair of statements is set out below. Respondents placed themselves on a five-point scale between the two poles. Full results are available on the Public First website.

Scale	+	—
	Positive statement	Negative statement
Overview		
Job satisfaction	'I am very satisfied with my job'	'I am very unsatisfied with my job'
Enjoy work	'I always enjoy work'	'I never enjoy work'
Job characteristics		
Skills required	'My work requires a great deal of job-related skills and expertise'	'My work requires very little job-related skills and expertise'
Personal responsibility	'My job involves a great deal of personal responsibility'	'My job involves very little personal responsibility'
Problem solving	'My job requires a lot of problem solving'	'My job requires very little problem solving'
People skills required	'My job requires excellent people skills'	'My job does not require people skills'
Varied & stimulating	'My job is varied and stimulating'	'My job is repetitive and boring'
Flexibility	'I have a lot of flexibility and choice over how I do my job'	'I have no flexibility or choice over how I do my job'



Scale	+	—
Pace appropriate	'The intensity and pace of my job is appropriate and manageable'	'The intensity and pace of my job is excessive'
Purpose and values		
Aligned with values	'My job is very well aligned with my personal values'	'My job is not at all aligned with my personal values'
Meaningful/worthwhile	'My work is meaningful and worthwhile'	'My work is not meaningful or worthwhile'
Proud of job	'I'm proud to do my job'	'I'm not proud to do my job'
Work helps others	'My work helps other people a great deal'	'My work does not help other people at all'
Security		
Job will exist in future	'I'm certain jobs like mine will exist in 10 to 20 years' time'	'I'm certain jobs like mine will not exist in 10 to 20 years' time'
Employer retention	'People in this job tend to stay with the same employer for a long time'	'People in this job tend to change employers frequently'
Job security	'Job security at my work tends to be very good'	'Job security at my work tends to be very poor'
Unpaid overtime	'In my job, people never work more hours than they are paid'	'In my job, people often work more hours than they are paid'
Able to work desired hours	'In my job, people are always able to work the minimum number of hours they want'	'In my job, people are often unable to work as many hours as they want'
Growth		
Job develops skills	'People who do my job become much more skilled and employable because of the training and professional experience available'	'People who do my job do not become more skilled or employable'
Career progression	'In my job there are lots of opportunities for career progression (e.g. promotion; becoming more specialist)'	'In my job there are no opportunities for career progression (e.g. promotion; becoming more specialist)'
Opportunities to learn	'In my job there are lots of opportunities to reflect, learn and improve'	'In my job there are very few opportunities to reflect, learn and improve'
Apprenticeship/qualification opportunities	'In my job there are lots of opportunities to take apprenticeships or professional qualifications'	'In my job there are no opportunities to take apprenticeships or professional qualifications'
Work-life balance		
Work-life balance	'My job offers an excellent balance between work and home life'	'My job offers a very poor balance between work and home life'
Hours suit circumstances	'The hours and times I work suit me and my personal circumstances very well'	'The hours and times I work do not suit me and my personal circumstances at all'
Location suits	'The location(s) I work at suit me and my personal circumstances very well'	'The location(s) I work at do not suit me and my personal circumstances at all'
Advance notice of schedule	'In my job, people always know well in advance when and where they will be working'	'In my job, people often don't know when or where they will be working until the last minute'



Scale	+	—
Easy to take time off	'In my job it is very easy to take time off at short notice for personal reasons'	'In my job it is very difficult to take time off at short notice for personal reasons'
Health and wellbeing		
Mental wellbeing support	'My employer provides a lot of support for my mental wellbeing'	'My employer does not provide any support for my mental wellbeing'
Physical health support	'My employer provides a lot of support for my physical health'	'My employer does not provide any support for my physical health'
Work causes illness	'My work never causes me to become ill or injured'	'My work often causes me to become ill or injured'
Sick leave frequency	'People in my job take sick leave very rarely'	'People in my job take sick leave very often'
Voice and respect		
Fairness across backgrounds	'People from different backgrounds are always treated fairly in my job'	'People from different backgrounds are never treated fairly in my job'
Trusted/respected	'I always feel trusted, respected and valued by colleagues and managers'	'I never feel trusted, respected or valued by colleagues and managers'
Managers positive	'In my job managers and leaders are very positive and supportive'	'In my job managers and leaders are very negative and unsupportive'
Colleague relationships	'In my job relationships between colleagues are very positive and supportive'	'In my job relationships between colleagues are very negative and unsupportive'
Manager involves in decisions	'My manager always involves me in decisions that are relevant to me'	'My manager never involves me in decisions that are relevant to me'
Senior leaders listen	'Senior leaders in my organisation always listen to employees'	'Senior leaders in my organisation never listen to employees'
Clear ways to raise issues	'My work has clear and formal ways to raise issues and concerns'	'My work has no clear and formal ways to raise issues and concerns'
Pay and benefits		
Pay satisfaction	'I am very satisfied with my job's pay'	'I am very unsatisfied with my job's pay'
Non-pay benefits satisfaction	'I am very satisfied with my job's non-pay employee benefits (e.g. discounts, leave, pension, rewards)'	'I am very unsatisfied with my job's non-pay employee benefits (e.g. discounts, leave, pension, rewards)'



	All earnings		Earnings below £40,000	
Scale	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=3979)	Social care for working-age adults (n=120)	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=2214)	Social care for working-age adults (n=101)
Overview				
Job satisfaction	0.79	0.84	0.64	0.82
Enjoy work	0.93	0.93	0.80	0.93
Skilled and engaging jobs				
Skills required	0.81	1.01*	0.68	0.99**
Personal responsibility	0.88	1.19**	0.82	1.27**
Problem solving	0.54	0.50	0.38	0.42
People skills required	0.86	1.13*	0.75	1.06*
Varied & stimulating	0.61	0.48	0.44	0.52
Flexibility	0.51	0.47	0.36	0.42
Pace appropriate	0.43	0.55	0.41	0.55
Purposeful jobs				
Aligned with values	0.85	0.95	0.75	0.97
Meaningful/worthwhile	0.91	1.06	0.80	1.11*
Proud of job	0.95	1.08	0.83	1.06*
Work helps others	0.85	1.26**	0.77	1.23**
Secure jobs				
Job will exist in future	0.73	1.19**	0.65	1.16**
Employer retention	0.58	0.34	0.50	0.35
Job security	0.68	0.91*	0.55	0.96**
Unpaid overtime	0.14	0.07	0.15	0.17
Able to work desired hours	0.56	0.59	0.46	0.64
Jobs with growth				
Skills/employability dev	0.56	0.62	0.40	0.56
Career progression	0.31	0.39	0.12	0.23
Opportunities to learn	0.69	0.76	0.57	0.67
Apprenticeship/qualification opportunities	0.20	0.20	-0.03	0.13



	All earnings		Earnings below £40,000	
Scale	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=3979)	Social care for working-age adults (n=120)	Average GB job excluding social care for working-age adults (n=2214)	Social care for working-age adults (n=101)
Jobs with balance				
Work-life balance	0.73	0.70	0.69	0.68
Hours suit circumstances	0.91	0.88	0.90	0.79
Location suits	0.90	0.92	0.87	0.86
Advance notice of schedule	0.75	0.80	0.69	0.75
Easy to take time off	0.38	0.21	0.30	0.14
Healthy jobs				
Mental wellbeing support	0.65	0.63	0.50	0.57
Physical health support	0.59	0.56	0.43	0.55
Work causes illness	0.83	0.82	0.76	0.79
Sick leave frequency	0.45	0.12**	0.42	0.19
Jobs with voice and respect				
Fairness across backgrounds	0.96	0.95	0.91	0.92
Trusted/respected	0.80	0.74	0.68	0.72
Managers positive	0.68	0.57	0.52	0.54
Colleague relationships	0.80	0.93	0.71	0.86
Manager involves decisions	0.65	0.65	0.52	0.53
Senior leaders listen	0.41	0.37	0.23	0.36
Clear ways to raise issues	0.68	0.95*	0.56	0.83*
Jobs that deserve more				
Pay satisfaction	0.54	0.33	0.30	0.25
Non-pay benefits satisfaction	0.36	0.29	0.22	0.20

Care Matters

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Researched and written by:

