



UK COMMISSION FOR
EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

Sector insights: skills and performance challenges in the health and social care sector

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Colin Howat, Michael Lawrie

ICF Consulting

Rosie Sutton

UK Commission for Employment and Skills

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Introduction

This report examines skills and performance challenges facing the health and social care sector. It provides a synthesis of evidence on the sector outlook, identifies major trends affecting skills demand, investigates employer perceptions of skills challenges facing specific occupations, and investigates employer awareness of, engagement with and interest in National Occupational Standards.

The study focuses on five key occupations in the sector: care assistants, care home managers and proprietors, medical professionals, physiotherapists and nursing auxiliaries.

Key findings

The health and social care sector is the largest sector in the UK, employing nearly four million people. It is wide-ranging, covering highly complex acute care delivered in hospital settings as well as personal care and support delivered in people's homes or in residential care settings. It is anticipated that over two million new workers will need to be trained and recruited into the health and social care sector between 2012 and 2022 as the sector grows and some members of staff retire. This is equivalent to over half of the existing workforce and presents key challenges for training and staff retention.

The sector plays a crucial role in supporting the economy by maintaining the physical and mental health of the wider workforce. The current workforce is predominantly female, has an older age profile, and is more highly qualified than the economy as a whole. The sector has a broad occupational mix encompassing a wide range of roles and types of work. Four occupations (including: care workers; nurses; nursing auxiliaries; and doctors) account for over 43 per cent of the workforce. There are also a number of large, non-clinical groups such as receptionists, cleaners and care home managers.

Developments within the sector are driven by demographic change (increased demand for care), social and political factors (including the push for resource efficiency), technology and innovation (advances in treatments and opportunities for patients manage their own health), and growing patient and service user expectations.

These drivers are generating skills and performance challenges in all of the key health and social care occupations, as the sector responds to changing demands. This can be seen, for example, in physiotherapists' growing role in delivering reablement support in community settings, and nursing auxiliaries' increasing specialisation and growth from providing primarily a support function to increasingly taking on additional clinical duties. Regulation and training can help support these changes.

Over the next five to ten years, the sector faces uncertainty due to rising demand and reduced availability of resources, as well as structural reform. Such changes are likely to lead to a more diverse set of employers operating in the sector and a more joined up approach to service delivery by health and social care staff. This will present opportunities for exchange of ideas, as well as challenges relating to differing traditions and working patterns. Existing occupations are likely to expand beyond their current parameters, and new roles are likely to emerge which fill gaps between the traditional health and social care professions. Training structures, professional identities and regulation will need to adapt to facilitate such changes.

Another dynamic is balancing the degree of specialisation with the need for a core occupational skillset, particularly among healthcare occupations. Balancing this to best meet patient and service user need is an ongoing debate, with widespread impacts. The sector also faces long-term questions about how best to recruit people who share and demonstrate the values required in health and social care work.

In addition, technological and medicinal innovation will enable service users to manage their own care to a greater degree, and will affect all occupations. There will be a culture shift as staff adopt higher level skills (for example, to facilitate enablement). The continual evolution of technology and medicine means that other skills implications are harder to predict. A responsive training and regulatory infrastructure will be needed to mobilise quickly and act upon any changes.

Awareness and use of National Occupational Standards (NOS) in health and social care is relatively high, which may indicate a recognition of the importance of standards more generally in health and social care. The central focus on regulated standards and quality of care provision in the sector mean that occupational standards are fundamental for employers. Often, this is driven by professions rather than employers, and the role played by NOS can remain relatively hidden to sector employers.

The sector could take a number of steps to address current and future challenges in the health and social care workforce. These include:

- designing dual route training opportunities and qualifications for new entrants to the sector, which would allow staff to pursue a health or social care career path
- sharing learning on recruitment and workforce planning to aid the delivery of personalised and integrated care

- sharing learning on how to engage lower skilled workers in workplace learning.
- undertaking exploratory scenario planning to examine the future shape of health and social care support jobs
- moving away from a narrowly-defined, task-orientated NOS and encouraging greater use of NOS by national and sector bodies in when developing training across the sector.

Executive Summaries present the key findings of the research produced by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. More detailed analytical results are presented in Evidence Reports.

UKCES
Renaissance House
Adwick Park
Wath-upon-Dearne
Rotherham
S63 5NB
T +44 (0)1709 774 800
F +44 (0)1709 774 801

UKCES
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith St.
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT
T +44 (0)20 7227 7800

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