



LIFTED · POLICY REPORT

April 2026

The 15-Year Route

An evidence-based assessment of the proposed settlement timeline for care workers and its projected impact on workforce capacity

Executive Summary

The Government's Earned Settlement Consultation proposes a 15-year route to settlement for care workers - five years longer than for any other occupation. Lifted's research, based on a survey of 1,162 sponsored care workers, indicates that 69% would leave or consider leaving the UK if this provision is implemented. Applied nationally, this represents a potential loss of over 4.2 million hours of care per week.

The Government's Earned Settlement Consultation proposes extending the standard settlement route from 5 to 10 years. Within this framework, a separate provision applies exclusively to care workers: a 15-year route - three times the current wait, and five years longer than for any other occupation. Nurses retain the 5-year route. Under the current proposals, a volunteer in a care home could reach settlement before a professional care worker who has spent a decade looking after the same residents.

Lifted surveyed 1,162 sponsored care workers between December 2025 and January 2026. 69% (803 people) said they would leave or consider leaving the UK if the 15-year route is implemented. 58% hold a university degree. Applied to the 153,000 sponsored care workers in England, the departure of this workforce would remove over 4.2 million hours of care each week, affecting an estimated 250,000-280,000 vulnerable people.

This policy change would affect a sector already under significant pressure. Social care contributes £23 billion to the UK economy and employs more people than any other sector. International recruits work an average of 40 hours per week - more than double the 19 hours worked by the typical domestic part-time recruit. Since 2022, 180,000 sponsored care workers have come to the UK and now deliver around

40% of all care in the country. They represent a substantial and essential part of the current workforce.

“The most common reasons given for leaving were family separation costs, visa and dependant fees, and a loss of trust in the terms under which they came.”

- Survey finding, Lifted research (Dec 2025 – Jan 2026)

Recommendation: Remove the 15-year carve-out for care workers. Apply the 10-year route on the same terms as every other occupation, with transitional protection for those already in the UK on the original 5-year promise.

69% would leave or consider leaving under the 15-year route	4.2M+ care hours per week at risk	15 yrs for care workers - vs 5 for nurses, 10 for all other occupations
---	---	---

1. The current state of adult social care

Adult social care supports over 1 million older and vulnerable people in England. It is the largest single employer in the country - significantly larger than the NHS - and contributes £23 billion to the UK economy. It is also one of the most under-resourced. Vacancy rates remain well above the national average at 111,000, unpaid family carers fill gaps no service can, and providers across the country are handing back contracts they cannot staff.

International recruitment has been the single biggest factor sustaining the system. Since the care sector was added to the Shortage Occupation List in 2022, 180,000 sponsored care workers have come to the UK. They now deliver around 40% of all care in the country. They are, overwhelmingly, the reason the sector has not yet collapsed.

2. The proposed settlement framework

The Earned Settlement Consultation has been reported publicly as a shift from a 5-year to a 10-year settlement route. In practice, the proposals create a three-tier system:

- **Nurses:** 5 years. The current route is retained.
- **All other workers:** 10 years. A doubling of the current wait.

- **Care workers:** 15 years. Three times the current wait, and five years longer than any other occupation.

No other occupation is subject to a longer settlement route. The justification offered in the consultation is that care workers do not make a 'significant economic contribution.' This claim is examined in Section 5.

3. About Lifted and the basis for this report

Lifted is a technology platform working to address the social care workforce challenge. We work with 400 UK care providers across immigration, compliance and workforce operations, and 44,000 sponsored care workers are registered on our platform. We are IAA-registered, commissioned by West Midlands ADASS, and founded by care providers for care providers. Lifted's CEO, Rachael Crook, is a former Adviser in the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit and an Obama Leader.

Because we sit between providers, workers and Government systems, we observe directly what policy changes mean in practice - who leaves, who stays, and why. This report draws on that operational perspective.

4. Survey findings: 1,162 sponsored care workers

Between December 2025 and January 2026, Lifted surveyed 1,162 sponsored care workers working in the UK. To our knowledge this is the largest direct survey of this workforce on the settlement reforms. All respondents are currently employed by UK care providers on a Health and Care Worker visa. Full methodology and the anonymised dataset are available on request.

Key findings

- 69% would leave or consider leaving the UK if the 15-year route is implemented.
- 58% hold a university degree. Respondents include qualified teachers, lawyers, nurses and doctors.
- International recruits work an average of 40 hours a week, compared with 19 hours for the typical domestic part-time recruit.
- The most common reasons given for leaving were family separation costs, visa and dependant fees, and a loss of trust in the terms under which they came.

5. Projected workforce impact

Applying the 69% figure to the 153,000 sponsored care workers in England gives a plausible workforce loss of around 107,000 people. Based on the 40-hour average

working week, that is 4.2 million+ hours of care lost every week. Those hours map directly onto older and disabled people: an estimated 250,000 to 280,000 individuals would lose part or even all of their current package of care.

These are not hours that can be backfilled quickly. Domestic recruitment cannot replace them at the pace required; the sector has been trying for a decade. International recruits also work, on average, more than double the hours of the domestic part-time workforce they would need to replace.

The modelling suggests that a 15-year route would not merely slow international recruitment - it would risk reversing it, while simultaneously destabilising the existing workforce.

6. Examining the policy rationale

“Care workers do not make a significant economic contribution”

Social care contributes £23 billion to the UK economy and employs more people than any other sector. The economic contribution of a care worker extends beyond the hours they personally deliver. It includes the ability of adult children to remain in work, hospital beds freed from delayed discharges, and community settings that prevent expensive acute admissions. By standard measures of economic contribution, the care workforce is not marginal.

“Settlement must be earned”

Lifted’s survey respondents have worked an average of 40 hours a week, many for years, looking after people the state has a duty to protect. The consultation proposes that care workers face the longest route to settlement of any occupation. If settlement is to be earned through contribution, it is difficult to reconcile a framework in which the workers with the longest hours and most direct care responsibilities face the longest wait.

“A 15-year route will encourage domestic recruitment”

The evidence from a decade of workforce strategies is that domestic supply cannot meet demand at the required scale, pace, or hours of availability. Restricting the international pipeline does not, in itself, generate domestic workers. The more likely outcome, based on current trends, is that it leaves people without adequate care.

“Care is different from other skilled roles”

Care work is distinct - but the distinction does not support a longer settlement route. Nurses, whose work most closely resembles that of care workers, retain a 5-year route. A policy that treats care workers less favourably than every other occupation is difficult to reconcile with any principled assessment of what ‘skilled’ or ‘essential’ means.

7. Policy recommendations

Lifted is not seeking a special exemption for care workers. The following recommendations aim to ensure care workers are treated on equivalent terms to every other occupation in the UK:

1. **Remove the 15-year carve-out for care workers.** Apply the 10-year route that will apply to every other occupation.
2. **Protect those already in the UK.** Care workers who arrived under the 5-year promise should complete that route. Changing the terms retrospectively is a question of trust as much as policy.
3. **Recognise care work in settlement policy as a skilled, essential profession.** That means parity with nurses where the role is clinically comparable, and a clear, published route for progression.
4. **Publish an impact assessment before the policy is finalised,** including modelled workforce loss, hours of care at risk, and the effect on older and disabled people.

8. Consultation response and next steps

The Earned Settlement Consultation is open for submissions. Substantive responses from providers, clinicians, local authorities, family carers and Members of Parliament will strengthen the evidence base available to policymakers. The following actions are open to stakeholders:

- **Respond to the consultation.** Full link in the footer of this report.
- **Write to your MP.** A template and the accompanying parliamentary briefing are available here <https://internationalcareworkers.netlify.app/>.
- **Contribute evidence.** Lifted can facilitate direct access to care workers, providers and families willing to share their experience.
- **Share this report** with commissioners, trustees, and partners in your network.

The consultation remains open. There is still time for the evidence to inform the final policy.

About this report

Published by Lifted, April 2026. Lifted manages visa applications, compliance and workforce operations across 400 UK providers. IAA-registered. West Midlands ADASS commissioned partner. Founded by care providers for care providers.

Data sources

- Lifted survey of 1,162 sponsored care workers, December 2025–January 2026. Full dataset and anonymised testimony available on request.
- Skills for Care workforce estimates, 2025.
- The Department of Health and Social Care published statistics on adult social care.
- Government Earned Settlement Consultation:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/earned-settlement>

Press and partners

Lifted can provide journalists, MPs and policy stakeholders with direct access to care workers, providers and families. Rachael Crook, CEO, is available for an interview.

Contact: rachael@liftedcare.com · <https://www.lifted-talent.com/>