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Opinion: Strategic Leadership Is Essential in the Wake of Overseas Sponsorship Changes

In May 2025, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announced that the government will end the recruitment of care workers from abroad by the end of the year. This decision represents a major shift in workforce policy.

From the date of implementation, new overseas applications for care worker roles under the Health and Care Worker visa route will no longer be accepted. This change is part of a broader set of measures aimed at reducing net migration. Importantly, the government has clarified that the policy will not immediately affect those already in the UK on valid Health and Care Worker visas. Individuals will still be permitted to live and work in the UK, renew their visas, and switch sponsors if necessary, at least until 2028. This transitional period is intended to provide some stability for existing workers and their employers while giving the sector time to adjust to a new model of workforce development.

In recent years, international recruitment has played a critical role in stabilising frontline staffing levels. In 2022–23 alone, more than half of all new starters in the care sector were recruited from overseas. Many of these individuals work full-time hours in line with their visa conditions, whereas a significant proportion of the domestic workforce is employed on a part-time basis. As a result, the actual contribution of internationally recruited staff, in terms of total hours delivered, is likely even greater than the headline numbers suggest.

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We take the position that this is a leadership challenge as much as it is a resourcing issue. This policy shift is likely to intensify the existing structural pressures facing health and social care. Vacancy rates remain stubbornly high, and workforce churn continues to undermine continuity of care. Currently, there is no immediate replacement for the volume of roles filled via international recruitment.

There is also a deeper, less visible risk that organisations will focus on filling vacancies, rather than addressing a long-term workforce strategy.

This moment, challenging though it may be, creates space for a recalibration of workforce strategy. The end of overseas sponsorship will force providers, commissioners, and systems to think differently about recruitment, retention, and workforce supply. In doing so, it will create the opportunity for innovation. Role design, local labour market partnerships, and support models that prioritise staff wellbeing and progression will be important strategies.

It is our view that organisations that act with purpose now, bring their executive teams together, engage external partners, and work collaboratively will be better positioned not only to manage disruption but also to strengthen their services for the long term.

Leadership matters most during periods of transition. The withdrawal of overseas sponsorship is not simply an operational disruption; it is a strategic inflection point. Those who recognise this, and act accordingly, will emerge more resilient.

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