

HR

From adult social care international recruitment crisis to collaboration

Pete Fahy looks at how the West Midlands is rewriting the future of social care workforce planning following the closure of the health and care visa route to employment.

By Pete Fahy | 19 January 2026

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When the Health and Care visa route for adult social care roles closed, many were left grappling with the consequences of a system that had expanded at speed and contracted just as quickly. Thousands of international care workers had arrived in the UK full of hope; many then faced sudden redundancy, revoked sponsorships and the risk of exploitation.

In the West Midlands, local authorities, regional bodies and community partners came together not only to manage the immediate crisis but to build the foundations of a more resilient model of workforce support. [The International Recruitment \(IR\) Programme](#), which was already underway, has become an example of how collaboration can achieve positive change in a dispersed sector.

Fourteen local authorities put forward a dedicated International Recruitment Lead who worked with WM-ADASS and four core delivery partners – [West Midlands Employers \(WME\)](#), [West Midlands Care Association](#), [Lifted](#) and [Bridgit Care](#) – together with safeguarding leads, public health teams and community organisations. This infrastructure created a shared space to confront challenges, understand emerging risks and solve problems together.

Local areas retained flexibility to act, while the regional partnership provided data, shared intelligence, governance and a consistent framework. This combination enabled the system to respond rapidly to visa revocations, provider instability and worker displacement.

Alongside partnership working, the region invested in digital tools designed not as one-off interventions but as long-term workforce assets. Platforms such as Lifted and My UK Life were developed with sustainability at their core, capable of supporting the wider social care workforce long after the Programme ends.

The programme sought to reflect the lived experiences of international care workers. Many emphasised the importance of human contact, and digital translation opened another essential layer of support. AI-enabled features helped workers seek guidance, understand rights and access training in their own language, increasing confidence and independence.

Digital platforms also offer scale. Councils can now reach thousands of workers with consistent information. In a sector facing long-term workforce shortages, this digital-first, human-centred approach offers a sustainable model that could support the wider workforce just as effectively.

Safeguarding has been one of the Programme's most influential areas of work. Sandwell Council developed an exploitation-prevention model that is widely viewed as leading practice.

Faced with cases of modern slavery, illegal fees, financial coercion and unsafe accommodation, Sandwell created a multi-agency approach that included intelligence sharing, practical screening tools, exploitation-awareness training for providers and a clear pathway for workers at risk.

This work exposed a wider truth: exploitation in social care can arise not only from a small number of employers but from systemic vulnerabilities. These include poorly regulated recruitment chains, lack of worker voice and the system not being fully prepared when international recruitment expanded. Sandwell's model provides a blueprint for protecting the workforce and supporting good care providers to recognise risks and strengthen good practice.

Local partnerships have been central to the Programme's impact. Councils worked closely with Tulia, the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) and Citizens Advice to reach communities that might otherwise have been invisible to local systems. In Coventry and Warwickshire, for example, Tulia supported workers through hundreds of drop-ins and weekly contact, offering legal and emotional support alongside active problem-solving, peer networks and trusted community links to help people regain stability and belonging

Now, there is a national opportunity to build on this learning. From ethical recruitment standards and workforce data infrastructure to exploring a national recruitment pool that reduces duplication among providers.

The Programme makes one thing clear: social care reform is not just about systems or policy, it is about people. International care workers arrived wanting to care, often facing hardship but demonstrating extraordinary resilience. Their experiences of hope, loss and rebuilding underscore the fundamental truth of the sector: care is personal, relational and rooted in dignity.

The Programme shows what is possible when systems work with shared purpose and leaves behind a legacy of collaboration, safeguarding innovation, digital inclusion and community partnership.

As workforce pressures continue, the question is no longer whether these approaches work but how quickly they can be applied to the wider adult social care workforce to ensure that everyone who cares for others feels they belong, are valued and supported.

Skills for Care data shows increasing numbers of registered managers and senior leaders nearing retirement, alongside challenges in attracting and retaining younger workers. This creates a real opportunity to apply learning from international recruitment to build cultures of support, belonging and ethical practice so care becomes a career people want to join and stay in.

Pete Fahy is vice-chair and international recruitment lead of the West Midlands -ADASS branch and director of adult services & housing at Coventry City Council

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