

Recruitment and Occupancy: How to win the key battles for care homes in 2022

**A guide for care home owners,
providers, investors and managers.**

December 2021



FOREWORD

Adult social care is in crisis. Tackling the two key challenges facing care home owners and managers – recruitment and occupancy rates – will be crucial for business survival in 2022. So, what can the care sector do to ensure it can appeal to new workers and potential occupants before it's too late?

We've not doubt that after the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic in 2020 and the ongoing realignment of the care sector through 2021, you'd love to be able to take your foot off the pedal a bit in 2022 – for you and your staff.

But media headlines, government policies and briefings, record staff and resident vacancies and discussions across the industry all make it painfully obvious that the challenges for the care sector are far from over. The care homes that emerge in the strongest position with the most robust commercials by the end of 2022 will be those that devise and implement effective and creative strategies to overcome the two biggest challenges currently facing the sector: recruitment and occupancy.

Expert solutions for boosting occupancy and staffing levels in your care home

At Fulcrum, we understand the challenges that the current state of recruitment and occupancy pose to the care sector. Our expert care consultants have a wide range of experience within different levels of the health and care sector, with specialist knowledge ranging from care home governance, to care management teams and staff. This gives us a unique, shared insight to the problems now faced on all stages of the social care ladder – and positions us to offer strategic solutions for ways care homes can improve both recruitment and occupancy.



This e-brochure will guide you through the challenges, opportunities and strategies you need to be thinking about with regard to recruitment and occupancy to position your care home for commercial success in 2022.

We hope you find it useful – and remember that if you'd like to discuss the specific challenges your care home is facing, please book a complementary 15-minute consultation.

Tony Thiru, CEO, Fulcrum Care Ltd



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Care home occupancy and staffing levels – a sector in crisis

A sector that was already straining at the seams has been stretched – often beyond breaking point – by the pandemic; the shocking images from the early days of lockdown continue to lead to a loss of confidence in the sector. This has resulted in reduced occupancy rates – often below commercial viability – as well as negatively impacting on both staff recruitment and retention. Understanding the reasons for these challenges, and developing effective strategies to overcome them, will be essential for care home owners and managers to ensure strong commercial performance in 2022.

Care home occupancy

In its **sixth Covid-19 insight**, the **CQC** revealed care home occupancy levels fell by around 10% in the first wave of the pandemic, from their previous average of 87%, rallying to around 80% over the summer – a net fall of 7%. With winter approaching and potential new waves of Covid-19, the CQC warns they may fall again. In its mid-year review, **Christie & Co** found that **39% of care homes** surveyed reported occupancy levels of less than 80% – a level the business investment consultants warn is not sustainable in the long term.

Occupancy levels are one of the driving KPIs for care home commercial viability. Critically, the **National Audit Office** warned in March 2021 in its report, **The Adult Social Care Market in England**, that 'The care market depends on the financial resilience of care providers operating within it', yet its analysis found that 39% of large for-profit care home providers have current liabilities which exceed their current assets.

There are several ways in which the pandemic has impacted negatively on occupancy levels across care homes:

- A **19.5% increase** in mortality rates during the pandemic compared with the five-year average
- loss of confidence among people who might otherwise have been considering residential care for themselves or their loved ones
- increased barriers to entry (including enforced initial isolation)
- enhanced Infection Prevention and Control measures making life within care homes more systematised
- restricted visiting

Rising costs for self-funded residents has also played a role. With only **36.7% of care home residents** being self-funding, providers have looked to those self-funders to bridge the gap in their finances created by a high proportion of local authority funded residents; the latest **Care Home Trading Performance Review** by **Knight Frank** reports a 6.7% rise in weekly fees year on year. Anecdotally, we have seen this rise leading to fewer privately funded new residents at some care homes, however the Knight Frank report encouragingly suggests evidence for demand beginning to pick up again.

Significantly, occupancy levels are also impacted by staff shortages. A survey by the **National Care Forum** in October found that 67% of **care home managers surveyed** had either limited or stopped admissions of new residents, with approximately 5,000 people turned away since 1st September. For care homes to get through 2022 strongly and end the year in a robust operational and commercial position, it is therefore essential for managers and owners to tackle the twin challenges of both occupancy rates and staff recruitment.



The state of the care work force

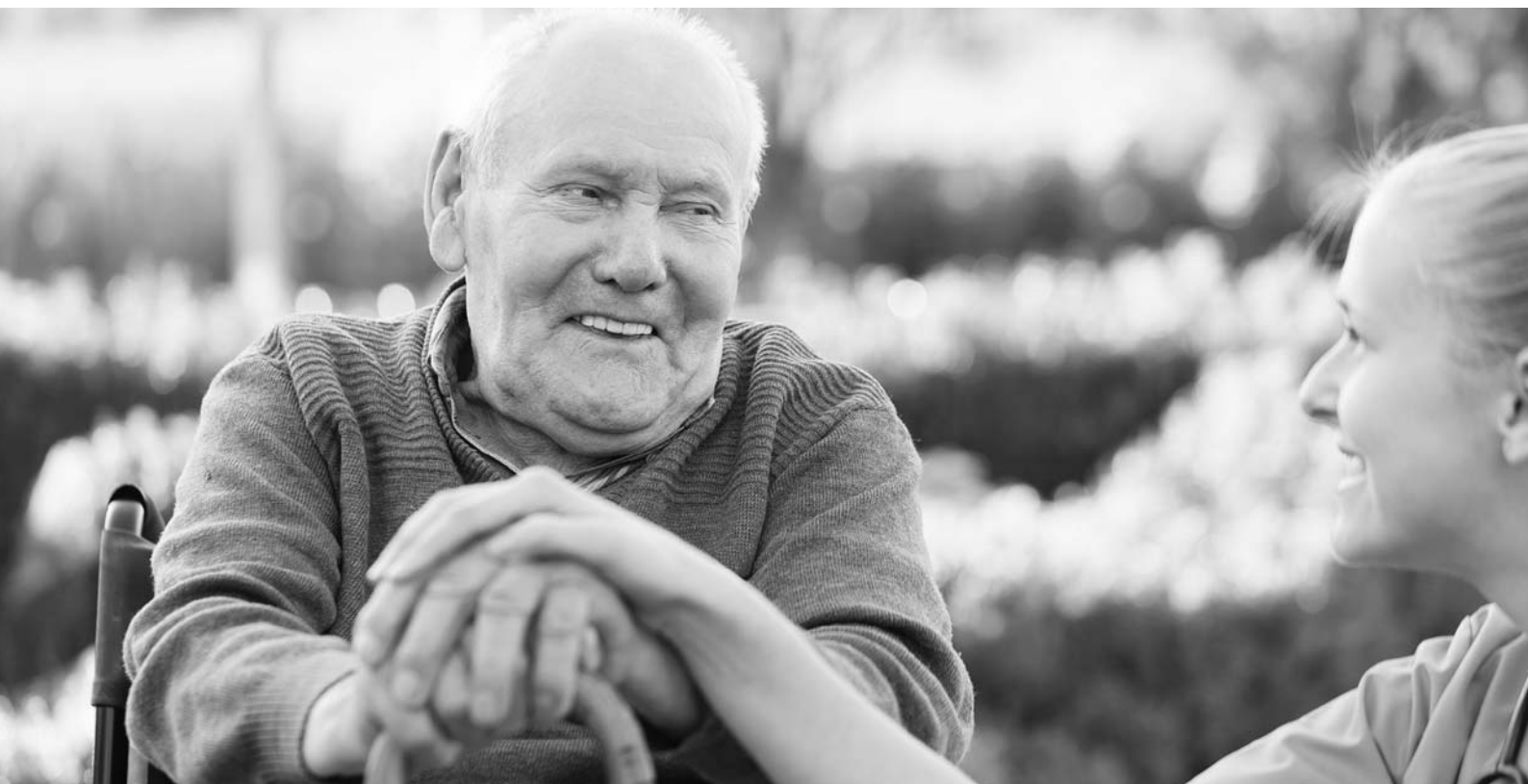
There were **1.67 million people** working in adult social care as of June 2021, but that number is falling, with currently **105,000 care vacancies to be filled**. The **State of the Adult Social Care Sector** annual report by **Skills For Care** shows that **turnover** is higher in the independent sector than among local authority or direct payment staff, with nearly a third of staff (31.1%) leaving their jobs in 2020/21. Staff turnover rates were also highest among residential care staff: 30.3% left their jobs in 2020-21, compared with 28.8% of domiciliary care workers and 24.3% of day care workers.

The **Family Resources survey** estimated that 4.7 million people were providing unpaid care in the UK in 2019-2020, providing an essential prop to an overburdened health and social care sector. However, a recent survey by Care UK found that more than half of these (55%) claim they have lost **some or all of the support they need**. This is one indication that lack of staff is endemic across all verticals within the care sector, meaning that care homes are not only competing with one another to attract staff, but also with domiciliary and day centres, who are similarly under-resourced.

The staff shortage is even more acute for homes requiring registered nurses, with Skills For Care warning that registered nurses had one of the highest vacancy rates in the adult social care sector as of August this year, at 13.4%, a 5% rise since March 2020. This led the CQC to warn in October in its annual State of Health Care and Adult social Care in

England that a lack of nurses is forcing more care homes to end their provision of nursing care. The urgency of the situation has been reinforced by the Royal College of Nursing, which has called on the government to take urgent action "to retain as many nursing staff as possible in light of serious staffing vacancies, as well as high levels of exhaustion and burnout", challenging government claims that the current situation in health and care is sustainable.

Together, these figures demonstrate that, despite the strength and unity the care sector showed throughout the pandemic, there is now a fast-developing challenge for care home owners and providers with a 'tsunami of unmet need' this winter predicted by the Care Quality Commission, reflecting that across the sector there is a *"shared view that current workforce challenges are a key barrier to successful recovery, in particular the ability to recruit and retain staff in key areas."*



The factors behind falling staff recruitment and retention across care homes

There are a number of key factors affecting care worker recruitment and retention:

- **Mandatory Covid-19 vaccinations:** Full vaccination for all care sector staff (except if medically exempt) became **mandatory** on 11 November. A survey by the **National Care Forum** predicted that **around 8% of all care home staff** could leave the care sector as a result. **Analysis** of the latest NHS England data shows that there are 7,806 fewer care home workers since the deadline was announced for staff to receive their first jab in September – 5,603 of those quitting care homes for older people. The figures cover the period from 19 September; nearly half of those who left during those two months (48%) did so in just one week: the seven days up to 14 November – clear evidence that the mandatory jabs have further reduced the care worker pool. The first apparent care home casualty was **reported** at the end of November 2021, when the owners of St Martin's in Coventry said they were devastated at having to make the decision to close the care home due to a lack of vaccinated staff.
- **Lack of incentives to work in the care sector:** Even for fulltime care workers, the **average salary** remains at around £17,000 – roughly around the UK's **minimum wage**.
- **Post-Brexit immigration rules:** With **8% of Britain's care force** coming from within the European Economic Area prior to Brexit, leaving the European Union was always going to reduce the pool of potential carers.

Although the Department of Health & Social Care has recently (November) updated their guidance to allow some fully vaccinated care workers to move more freely between different care homes that are struggling with staffing capacity, this measure may not yet be enough to tourniquet the issue properly – and is yet another reflection of the gravity of the care worker shortage, with the CQC concluding:

"We are concerned that vacancies may increase further as hospitality and travel industries speed up recruitment and offer incentives to new staff. These industries can offer higher salaries than the care sector. Staff from adult social care may also take up vacant posts in hospitals – especially registered nurses. These influences, combined with the effects of the requirement for all care home workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19, may lead to more care staff leaving, unless a new deal for the care workforce is developed."



Current approaches to increasing staff recruitment and retention

In October, the UK government announced an extra **£162.5 million boost** to the adult social care sector to provide better support for care staff recruitment and retention. This figure comes as part of the **Health and Social Care Levy**, which intends to invest a total of £5.4 billion into the adult social care sector across the next three years.

Although an increase in funding has been welcomed, many sector-leading organisations claim that more needs to be done. Richard Murray, Chief Executive at **The King's Fund**, commented that the government had '**unlearnt**' the **lessons of previous health and care policy making**, saying: "...as the funding gap recedes, without an accompanying workforce plan, this will not deliver the goods. The failure of successive governments to grasp the nettle of workforce planning risks overtaking social care reform as the most enduring blot on the face of public policy in England."

A number of leading care sector charities have pulled the matter further into the public area; in an **open letter** to UK Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, **the British Geriatrics Society**, **Age UK**, **Independent Age**, **Care England**, **Chartered Society of Physiotherapy** and the **National Care Forum** outlined two key demands to protect the care sector work force from haemorrhaging further in the short term, including:

- A retention bonus for social care staff
- Temporarily adding care staff to the UK government's **Shortage Occupation List**

With a lack of strategic planning from the top, many independent care homes and care home groups have instead begun to take matters into their own hands. **Greensleeves Care** announced a **5% pay increase** for all care and nursing staff at their care homes from November, with the **BBC** reporting that other care home groups have also offered **wage increases** as part of their approach to tackling vacancies.

Getting ahead of the competition

If you're feeling the strain from both challenging occupancy levels and difficulties recruiting sufficient staff, you are far from alone; these challenges are endemic across the care home sector. Some providers have already taken steps to try to address them, with the most obvious strategies often coming with an evident price tag. However, some of the most effective approaches don't require major investments – only time, strategic planning and effective management. Over the following pages you'll find a number of strategies – ranging from the very simple to multi-layered approaches – that can help put your care home ahead of the competition when it comes to attracting new staff and residents.



Build confidence among potential care home customers and staff

Strategy 1 – Staffing Levels and Occupancy

Restoring **confidence** is key to attracting both staff and residents. Families play a pivotal role in the decision-making of where to place a loved one into care, meaning they are also key stakeholders with whom your care home needs to rebuild **confidence and trust** to improve your occupancy rates, and ultimately your commercials.

Confidence is a feeling, so boosting it boils down to reputation management; however, the stories you tell need to be evidenced as the public is wary of fake news. Moreover, operating any business with staff and customers all coming from within a small geographic catchment areas requires honesty and integrity at all times– there are simply too many informed stakeholders for you to be messaging one thing but doing another and have any chance of getting away with it.

Potential strategies

Some ways to **establish confidence** with your target audiences of potential new recruits and residents, as well as their relatives, include:

- **Ensure compliance:** Families will often refer to CQC reports to help inform their decision about placing a loved one into your care home. By maintaining excellent levels of compliance through the proper systems, processes and procedures, you can demonstrate the quality of care that your residents receive. This equally provides reassurance to potential recruits that you have a robust business, with effective management and Infection Prevention & Control measures.
- **Communicating effectively:** Using PR, marketing and social media channels can help tell the positive stories and benefits that your care home can offer. If a member of your staff, a resident, or the care home as a whole has reached a milestone achievement or has an interesting story to tell, shout about it! Families will often look closely at how your care home presents itself to make sure their loved one is in good hands. Prospective recruits will also be more inclined to apply to a care home that is on their radar through positive publicity and looks like a fun place to work
- **Testimonials and online reviews:** It's always a good idea to have testimonials from residents and their families and your staff, as they are a genuine, honest account of the care you are providing and what your care home is like as a place to work. Asking family members of your current residents to give a review of your care home online or via social media will help improve the overall impression of your care home.

Request more information on boosting confidence in your care home

Our previous e-brochure, Planning for commercial success in your care home in 2021, provided extensive ideas for boosting confidence in your care home. If you'd like a free copy, please **email us**.



Improve your care home occupancy retention

Strategy 2 – Occupancy

The residents are the cornerstone to any care home. It's common for care homes to give thought to how to attract new residents, but it's always cheaper to keep a client than find a new one. If you've had residents move from your care home to a local competitor, it's important to address retention before you start chasing for new residents. Whether you're an independent care home, or part of a larger care home group, employing some of these simple changes could be the missing key to improving your occupancy retention.

Getting the basics right in your care home

There's a saying that you can't polish a t*!d, so before you start any window dressing, you need to be objective about the levels of care and the quality of life for residents in your care home. **Compliance** is a key element of this; even if you provide great day-to-day care for residents, if you don't record this in a way that demonstrates this effectively to the **Care Quality Commission**, you are in danger of receiving a rating that may prompt residents and/or their relatives to start looking for an alternative care home.

Alongside ensuring consistent levels of care and ensuring that you are fulfilling your compliance obligations to get a rating that reflects this positively, it's also worthwhile getting feedback from residents and their families as to what they think you're doing well and any potential improvements/changes they would like made. Answering their needs and wants is key to keeping them happy – and therefore keeping them.

Within this, be brave and conduct exit interviews with any residents or their families who are voting with their feet and leaving you. Are their reasons ones that could apply to other residents, in which case what can you do to remedy this? Or are they ones unique to them, in which case can you message this to other residents and relatives so they're not prompted to start questioning whether another care home might be a better option for them too?

Messaging your good work

Assuming that you've got the basics right, it's important that your key stakeholders know this. As relatives are so important to care decisions, this means communicating with them, as well as your residents. Some of this will need to be on an individual basis (see below), but there are some general communication strategies you can adopt to increase understanding of the quality of care you are providing to all stakeholders, as well as the wider community (which therefore can also help lead to more new enquiries).

General communication strategies to improve visibility and positive engagement with stakeholders align with those intended to drive **general confidence** in your care home, including:

- **Using PR to announce events and news** through your local media, including newspapers, magazines, local bloggers and parish newsletters – especially when good compliance ratings are achieved
- **Sending out a regular newsletter** to your residents' families
- **Proactive social media** about events, activities and investments (such as visitor pods or staff training)

[Please be aware that, if a resident is living with dementia, they may not be able to give consent to being used in any public marketing for your care home, as a best interest decision.]



Tailored communications

What all relatives really want to know is that you truly know their mum or dad and that the care they are receiving is helping them to live their best life. Alongside general communications, it's therefore important to think of strategies that reinforce this message with these key decision makers, so they know that their loved one is in the best place for them. Potential strategies to help achieve this include:

- **Creating a digital portal** for families to stay up to date with their loved one's progress, such as via a private Facebook group or specialist care planning software with a built-in portal for giving updates to loved ones.
- **Assigning a key carer to liaise with each resident's family:** Key care workers can invest in getting to know their assigned residents on a deeper level. If they are then the person responsible for resident/family review meetings, relatives will get a picture of consistent care with a dedicated understanding of their loved one. Dedicated key workers can also build stronger relationships with the wider family, strengthening trust and confidence and providing a platform for more honest communication, meaning any potential niggles are more likely to be raised and resolved before they snowball.

The little details matter for your care home residents and their relatives

A care home should be a home – if it's not, residents won't feel comfortable and are more likely to look for somewhere that does. It's often the small things that make us feel at home, such as our regular whiskey before dinner or hot drink before bed. Providing tailored care that can accommodate these little requests is an easy way to make your residents feel that you care and that they are now at home.

Similarly, the small details can make a big difference to how welcome relatives feel, which will colour how they view your care home during their visits. Small touches that can go a long way include:

- **Priority parking:** Your staff are important, but relatives are your VIPs. If they have to trawl across a muddy, poorly lit car park to get to see mum, they're possibly going to be in a bad mood by the time they get inside. Setting aside priority parking near to reception for visitors tells them that you value them and will predispose them to a positive visit.
- **Get to know them:** Being greeted by name is welcoming – being handed your preferred hot drink with your favourite biscuit is being at home!
- **Open communication channels:** Make sure they know who to talk to about particular issues and how to get hold of them.

Retention is the easiest route to boosting occupancy

Building solid relationships with your existing residents and their relatives should always be the bedrock of protecting your occupancy rates – and should always come before wooing new residents. After all, the costs attached are lower, and happy relatives will do your marketing for you!



Improve your care home staff retention rates

Strategy 3 – Staffing Levels

Prevention is better than cure – and retention is better than recruitment! Hanging on to your existing, valued staff for longer is the single most effective strategy to ensure you have enough staff to fill your rotas and support high resident occupancy rates. With nearly a third of care-home staff changing jobs each year, what can care home managers and providers do to encourage existing staff to stay?

High care staff turnover rates

Staff levels are one of the key challenges within the care sector. The **7.4% increase in jobs** in the sector has been compounded by the high turnover rates; in any one year, care homes can expect, on average, to lose nearly a third of their staff. But these employees are not generally leaving because they have had enough of care; around 63% of care staff are recruited from other roles within the sector. If you lose staff, around two-thirds of them will typically be moving to a competitor.

This provides valuable insights for care home managers, owners and providers. The single most effective strategy to boost staff levels within your care home – and reduce any dependency upon agency workers and the associated impact on the commercials of your care home – is to improve retention rates among your existing employees. Prioritising this could be the difference between commercial success and failure in 2022, so what can you do to improve staff loyalty? Fortunately, there are many strategies you can consider, and not all of them have a price tag attached.

Hold regular staff reviews

Yes, it's extra paper work, but a structured, formal staff appraisal and career progression framework provides the opportunity for your management team to catch up with staff regularly. Rather than this just being an assessment as to whether they are doing their job well, this should be an opportunity to find out what matters to them:

- Is the job matching their expectations?
- Do they feel confident performing all elements of their duties?
- Would they benefit from training to improve their confidence in some areas of their job?
- Are they bored?
- Would they like new opportunities/responsibilities or would they appreciate more variety? What can you do to help them get ready for a promotion/how can you introduce greater variety into their working week?
- Has anything changed in their personal circumstances which impacts on their relationship with work? Do they need more/fewer hours? Do they need greater flexibility? Do they need to change their hours?

Such regular reviews, if conducted properly, can give you many of the insights required to understand what your staff need to keep them motivated to stay with your care home, rather than looking for the solutions elsewhere.

Talk to your existing staff

This may seem obvious, but it's too often overlooked. Care homes can be quick to call in consultants, but slow to consult from the ground up. Have honest, open dialogue with your existing staff (in addition to their regular staff reviews) – as well as exit interviews with employees who are leaving – to find out specifically what they like about working in your care home – and what they don't. Listen objectively to the answers and look for the trends. A singular gripe may not be something you need to address; if lots of your care staff are saying the same thing, this could be a key tipping point motivating some of them to leave.



If you have an effective management structure that encourages communication, these discussions should sit comfortably within your ethos – and hopefully you won't be in for too many uncomfortable surprises, especially if you have regular, effective staff reviews. But if you think staff are unlikely to tell you what they really think, you could hire a care home consultant, marketing expert or HR professional to conduct these interviews for you. Ideally, they should be held one on one, as group discussions are often dominated by the usual suspects, whose opinions you are more likely to be aware of already, while quieter team members may not feel able to share their views in an open forum.

Boost staff confidence

Confidence is one of the 3 interdependent Cs – compliance, confidence and commercials – that underpin Fulcrum's approach to managing care homes effectively. A favourable CQC rating has a key role to play in boosting that confidence; it reassures employees that there is effective management and care for residents, and an open and inclusive staff culture where their concerns and ideas are heard and acted upon. CQC ratings are often interpreted by staff as a litmus test as to whether your care home has effective strategies in place to ensure its survival in a competitive market.

But compliance is not the only tool for boosting staff confidence in how your care home is run. Positive PR stories in the local media, alongside effective internal communications about strategies, investments and planning for the future can all help assure staff that the organisation is well run with effective strategies to attract new residents to ensure commercial viability.

Consider paying staff more

In an employees' market, pay matters, and an unambiguous way of showing existing staff that you value them is to pay them more. However, no care home is able to write blank cheques, so you will need to drill down into your numbers to understand whether you can afford to pay your care workers more, and by how much. However, this is not a simple equation; against the increased costs of a bigger wage bill, you need to offset:

- Recruitment costs
- Training costs of new staff
- The costs of an unsuccessful hire
- Additional agency costs

A small increase in hourly pay rates may be a far more cost-effective strategy, once these other costs have been factored in, than losing experienced staff who know your residents, systems and culture.



Zero-cost and low-cost staff retention strategies

Not all strategies that can help increase staff satisfaction and loyalty have a direct financial cost. Depending on the feedback you receive from staff through explicit dialogue and regular reviews, you could consider the following options to meet their needs and wants to encourage them to stay with your care home:

- **Career progression** – supported by appropriate, recognised training and/or mentoring internally, giving both the mentor and the mentee new opportunities
- **Shift flexibility** – to help them balance work with their other commitments
- **Increased job variety** – this might be as simple as creating a rota for activities so that all those carers who want it get the opportunity for more creative interaction with residents, or organising more trips out for residents so that both they and their care staff get a change of scenery
- **Public recognition** – this can be as simple as a 'Carer of the month', promoted internally but also through your social channels to recognise staff who go above and beyond, who have shown greatest growth in job or who have overcome particular hurdles. You may like to supplement this with a reward, such as a meal for two or cinema tickets.

Supporting care workers' mental health and wellbeing

The pandemic has placed an unprecedented strain on care staff; around a third of employees who handed in their notice last year left the sector altogether. Supporting care workers' wider holistic needs, showing empathy and understanding of the strains they have been through since March 2020 and providing support to help them build the resilience and reserves they need to continue delivering exceptional care in difficult circumstances will help your care home – and the sector – retain more experienced staff. Solutions could include counselling, mental health awareness training and/or mental health first aiders, health and nutrition training or access to wider support programmes through an employee assistance scheme.

Happy staff are loyal staff

Creating an engaged, motivated, loyal workforce reduces staff turnover, which is the most cost-effective way of ensuring you have the staff you need to look after your residents effectively. Getting this right will be crucial for commercial success in the care sector in 2022.



Create dedicated hotlines for your care home

Strategy 4 – Staffing Levels and Occupancy

You only get one chance to make a first impression – and if you blow it, you may never get a second one. Dedicated phone lines are an easy way to ensure that the first contact potential new residents and staff have with your care home is always a gold-star experience.

How are your phone calls handled? Are you sure that your reception staff understand the significance of incoming recruitment and potential new resident enquiries, and are you confident that they are the right people to handle either or both of these? As the two key imperatives for commercial viability in 2022, it is vital that these calls are prioritised and that both potential recruits and new residents (or their relatives) are given a superlative first experience of your care home, from initial call to exemplary follow up.

Unfortunately, it's often the case that some calls are not properly handled or acknowledged if taken during a busy shift. You may be able to overcome this with training, or alternatively, it may make sense to eliminate the risk of business-critical calls getting lost by setting up dedicated recruitment and new enquiry lines, with senior members of staff responsible for both answering and ensuring consistent and swift follow-up, following a structured customer or recruitment journey (see Strategy 5, page 15). This will allow you to direct all applications and enquiries to the right place, without them being buried amongst other daily communications.

Even purchasing cheap mobile phones can work well for this purpose, and keeps those all-important calls separate!

Don't forget the basics when it comes to making your dedicated phone line ring!

Your communication with local services such as the GP surgeries, the hospital discharge teams, local authority social workers are very important in maintaining a pipeline of enquiries:

- Ensure that the **NHS care home bed capacity tracker** is up to date
- The local authority adult social care agreements are signed and valid
- Your home is reflected in any of the local authorities' care directories
- Your care home services leaflets can be found in local GP surgeries etc.

Dedicated phone lines – the first step in a great customer journey

You may have great reception staff, but on a busy day it may be hard from them to give priority calls the proper care and attention they need. Dedicated phone lines for new resident and recruitment enquiries can be a low-cost solution to overcoming this.



Create an effective customer journey to increase conversions

Strategy 5 – Occupancy

If your care home occupancy rates are below where you would like them to be – particularly if they are below the point of commercial sustainability – you need to drive new enquiries and make sure you convert them. Improving the reputation of your care home through strong social media, public relations and community activities will help drive enquiries, but you then need to make sure that from the first phone call, potential new residents and their relatives get the best possible impression of your care home at every point of contact to drive up your conversion rates and convince them that your care home is one that feels like home.

Creating an exceptional customer journey for new care home enquiries

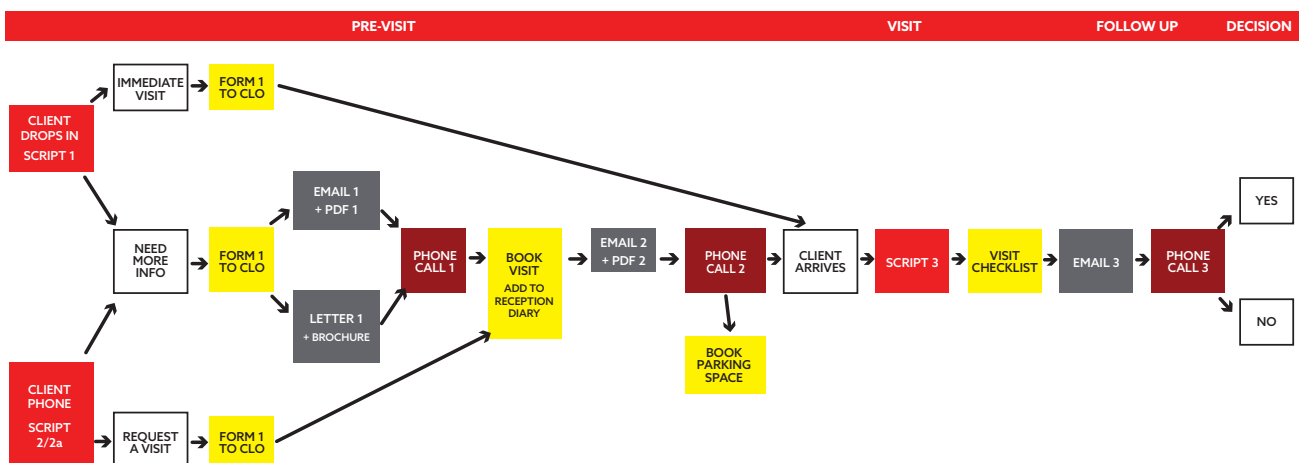
It's an inevitable factor of the care sector that there will always be churn, so securing new residents is a vital element of your business model. This is not something that should never be left to chance – it is far too important. And it has never been more important than in the legacy of the pandemic, with confidence in the sector only slowly restoring.

To make sure it's handled strategically, rather than haphazardly, in your care home, the starting point is to create an exceptional customer journey. To do this, you need to consider the entry points through which any potential new resident arrives at your care home, then the next touch point and so on, until they finally make a decision as to whether your care home is the right one for them or their loved one.

This customer journey should be mapped out, with scripts and documents prepared at each stage, so that every new prospect gets the same, exceptional experience, without deviation. That doesn't mean the customer journey is carved in stone; if you notice that a certain phrase or conducting tours in a particular order increases conversions, the customer journey should be adapted accordingly.

A mapped customer journey also doesn't mean that each prospect has to be taken through every step. The aim of the customer journey is to get to a decision – ideally in favour of your care home; all stages of the customer journey should therefore be structured to steer towards that decision, and once you reach it, the process ends. But this does mean that you need to map out different pathways, depending upon the answers/actions at each step of the process, identifying what needs to happen at each stage and any supporting materials that will be needed. It might look something like this:

CUSTOMER PATHWAY





Appointing a dream team for new resident enquiries

In the diagram, CLO refers to a Client Liaison Officer (or team, with a lead officer plus supporting members) – a role that we recommend all care homes should adopt, even without the title! The reality is that we all have different strengths and weaknesses; building rapport with new prospects in a very short space of time and consistently messaging the positives about your care home are skills that not everyone within your team will have. Some of your staff may be fantastic carers – but that doesn't necessarily make them excellent ambassadors for your brand. With every new resident enquiry being very important to the long-term sustainability of your home, it is vital that the person who handles it excels in these areas.

It is also important that they are good at listening. The customer journey should not be a show and tell – it is vital to find out the things that matter most to the prospect so you can demonstrate to them how your care home meets these.

It's equally important that it is the same person who looks after them throughout the customer journey. This creates consistency and shows how important they are to you and the significance you attach to helping them have the information they need to make such a crucial decision.

Of course, everyone has holidays, and if you get a walk-in enquiry, your Client Liaison Officer may not be on shift. This is where having a Client Liaison Team comes into its own, so you always have someone who is trained in handling new client enquiries on hand to show potential new residents around.

Make sure the whole team knows the process

It's not just enough for the CLO/Team to know the process. Unless you have a dedicated hotline for new enquiries, they will not take the first call, while the chances of them being in reception when a potential new resident makes an impromptu visit are extremely slim. You therefore need to make sure that all reception staff, as well as anyone who might be in reception or might be assigned to cover incoming phone calls understands the process and knows exactly what to say. The last thing you want is someone being greeted with the words 'There's no-one here who can help you right now, can you come back/call back later?'. It's equally important that they understand the value of new enquiries to your home – appreciating the potential five-figure income that this phone call or visit represents is a good way of focusing collective minds to the importance of new enquiries and the need to handle them right.

Crucially, you can see in the customer pathway map that if there is a walk-in enquiry, they are shown round immediately – and every member of staff needs to understand this. Of course, you may be in the middle of serving lunch or there could be a medical emergency and it may not be a great time for your staff – but it is a convenient time for your prospective new resident. If you say, "This isn't a great time, can we book you in for another day?" (for which reads "when it's more convenient for us"), you are as good as saying: "We don't want your business. Go and have a look at one of our competitors in this time you have taken off work/out of your normal activities, and we're happy to run the risk that you may choose them instead of us." That's probably not the message you want to give!



Consistent, timely processes

The diagram also makes it clear that you need consistent processes at each step. This means documenting all stages, making sure that everyone who needs access to scripts, email templates and supporting marketing collateral has them. For example, you might consider having a laminated new enquiry phone script in a convenient, yet discreet, place in reception; staff should be able to find it easily, but it shouldn't be obvious to visitors standing on the other side of the reception desk.

The forms, scripts and marketing materials identified in the diagram would be used as follows:

What	When to be used	By whom	Timeframe	Action
Script 1 Form 1	For client drop in	Receptionist		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arrange visit there and then OR 2. Secure date for visit and pass information to CLO for follow up OR 3. Pass information to CLO to follow up and secure date for visit
Script 2 Form 1	For client phone call	Receptionist		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secure date for visit and pass information to CLO for follow up OR 2. Pass information to CLO to follow up
Email 1 Letter 1	Request for more information	CLO	Within 4 working hours	Send additional info PDF1/brochure Covering email: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask to schedule a visit • State call back within 2 working days
Phone call 1	After email 1	CLO	Within 2 working days	Book a visit
Email 2	After confirmation of visit date/time	CLO	Within 4 working hours	Send additional info PDF 2
Phone call 2	After email 2	CLO	24 hours before visit	Confirm that we are looking forward to seeing you tomorrow
Script 3	When visitor arrives	Receptionist	5-10 mins	
Visit checklist	During visit	CLO	40 mins/1 hr	
Email 3	Post show round	CLO	Immediately post show round	Wonderful to meet you. Reminder of my contacts details in case you have any more queries. Will call you in the next day or two.
Phone call 2	Post email 3	CLO	Within 2 days	

Supplementing the customer pathway map with a table like this helps assign responsibilities and timeframes. The timeframes are equally important; failing to send information or follow-up as promised undermines messaging that you are an efficient, professional organisation and increases the chances of the prospect choosing a more efficient, proactive competitor.

A key element in delivering consistent experiences is a visit checklist. Ideally your CLO/Team knows your care home inside out, but we all know that if we give the same presentation 10 times, we give 10 different presentations; a visit checklist makes sure nothing is left off and that the prospect will have all the information they need to help them make a decision.



Adding value at every step of the customer journey

Each touch point with the new prospect should give them further evidence as to why your care home should be their first choice. You will see in the diagram and table that the first two written communications have marketing materials attached, whether the communication is via email or letter. These should be prepared in advance and structured to add another layer to the prospect's understanding of your care home and why it is a great place for them or their relative. For example, attachment one could be a one-page round up of testimonials (each one chosen to message something slightly different about your care home), attachment two could be this week's menu, highlighting local and homemade produce. The marketing materials should never duplicate content.

The small touches

Whether your care home is rated 'good' or 'outstanding,' there are probably many local competitors who offer a similar level of care and facilities, therefore the decision as to which one to choose can often boil down to the small details. This means your customer journey should anticipate all the small things that together create an exceptional, welcoming experience, such as:

- **Put yourself in their shoes:** The potential residents coming to you may well have mobility issues; having to walk across the car park from the most remote parking space may decide them against your care home before they have even got to your reception, so think about reserving the closest space for them ahead of their arrival.
- **Be there to greet them:** Rather than calling for the CLO/Team when they arrive, it creates a much better impression if they are waiting to open the front door to your visitors.
- **Kerb appeal:** We all know that houses are often sold before the potential buyer steps in through the front door; the same is true about care home assessments by potential residents and their families, therefore it's essential to show the best bits of your care home to best advantage to create a warm and welcoming experience. Keep the garden, car park, walkway to the home neat and tidy with no dead trees, plants or debris such as skips etc. Have a few seasonal planters along the route into the care home so there is always a splash of floral colour to show that the home and its environments are well maintained. Also, prepare a few show rooms which are always ready to view; neatly folded towels and some tasteful silk flowers and pictures will go a long way to making the rooms feel like they are ready to welcome the prospective resident, without overwhelming them with too much clutter so they can't see how they can put their personal stamp on it.
- **Treat them like VIPs, whatever the weather:** What if it's raining? If they're soaked to the skin before they get to the front door, they are not likely to be in the greatest humour as they tour your facilities. Why not have a stash of branded golf umbrellas in reception and go out and greet them with one to walk them in shelter to the front door – and give them an umbrella to take home at the end of their visit so your care home remains uppermost in their mind? It's a small investment to secure a new resident.
- **Prebook refreshments** with your kitchen staff, to be served in a quiet, attractive space after you have finished the tour while the CLO answers any other questions they may have.

Nailing your new enquiry customer journey

Apart from the golf umbrellas, none of these strategies needs any investment beyond management and marketing time, and potentially some staff training. Getting your customer journey right is therefore a strategic commitment, rather than a big budget investment. But when you do nail it, you should be able to drive up your conversions, which in turn will lead to more word-of-mouth referrals, which are always the best form of marketing.



Get your recruitment messaging right

Strategy 6 – Staffing Levels

In such a competitive recruitment market, it's vital to make your care home stand out to potential staff. Luckily, there are a few tips and tricks that can be used to help make job listings for care work more appealing. Our guide will help you make sure your care home recruitment messaging is always working for you.

Identify the benefits of your care home

The first thing you may notice when investigating online job listings for current care home vacancies are that they can all appear to be identical at first glance. This can be due to using similar job description templates, or even recycling the same wording for care worker roles year after year. If that sounds familiar, it may be time to identify what benefits your care home can offer compared with the competition. This will not only allow you to share all of the positives that your care home can offer new candidates, but also demonstrates the added attention to detail your care home gives to seeking new staff – which is an early indicator for potential candidates of the value your care home places on its staff.

There are a number of key points that can instantly help to increase the appeal of your listing:

- **Offering training programmes:** New or inexperienced care workers are more likely to apply to care home roles that can help them develop their skills. Highlighting any training programs that you provide to care staff is a good way to show that your care home is right for them.
- **Clear career progression:** Do you reward longstanding care staff with new responsibilities? Shout about it! By including examples of clear career milestones in your job listing, you can show care worker candidates that your care home values loyalty and retention – rather than quick turnover.
- **Positive testimonials:** One of the most important things for any care sector applicant to know is whether your care home is right for them. Use positive feedback from existing care staff, residents and reviews to help demonstrate the benefits of being part of your care home's team.

Involve your care staff in your recruitment messaging

Nobody knows what matters more about working at a care home than its workers. Discuss with your existing members of staff the things they value most about working at your care home, especially the points of difference with your competition. This is especially insightful if they have worked with your care home for a long time or have worked with other care providers previously. This way, you can develop your care home messaging to include the information that matters most to your team, so increasing your chances of drawing in care worker candidates who hold those same values and appreciate the things that you have to offer.

The best way to get open, natural feedback from existing staff is to talk to them, rather than asking them to fill in forms. Any form is built on a prescriptive idea as to what the answers might be; a conversation can flow and follow unexpected twists. The thing that staff most appreciate about your care home may be something that the management team take for granted – you are most likely to uncover this through dialogue. If you have effective management, you should have an open culture which facilitates these kinds of discussions, but if you think staff may be reticent to talk openly about what's great (and not so great), you could consider bringing in an outside marketing expert or consultant to conduct the interviews for you to get more valuable insights.

Of course, in asking for feedback, you may uncover areas where staff feel less happy. This may be uncomfortable, but effective management teams will use these learnings to inform changes that will help retain good staff for longer as well as improve your chances of attracting the best-fit candidates.





Aim for tailored, emotional connections in care recruitment listings

If you have really strong feedback, you could even use some of this as direct quote/s to sum up in a sentence or two what is so great about working at your care home. After all, 80% of any decision-making process is emotional, rather than rational, so establishing an emotional connection with potential candidates will help you build instant rapport to increase the chances of them applying to your care home. With so many identikit listings, an advert that starts "I'm excited every day to come to work at XYZ Care Home – it's such a lovely atmosphere and it's great to know I'm making a positive difference for the residents" would both stand out and tick a lot of boxes for jobhunters who are looking for a supportive, friendly employer and are truly motivated to care.

Talking with your existing care staff about how to approach new candidates will not only help shape the messaging you use in your recruitment postings but can also give a clear idea of the type of candidates that would work best within your team. For larger care home groups, giving a member of the local care management team the duty of collecting this feedback will enable you to customise each job advert with the traits that the specific care home management team are after. This way, despite potentially needing similar applicants at multiple care home sites, your advert will be tailored to local needs – and not be a quick copy and paste!

Keep your care recruitment listing simple

The last thing that anyone wants when hunting for new work is to be left scratching their head, unable to decipher the job description. Try to avoid using any unnecessary jargon in your care worker job listings and keep any expectations, perks and details of the role clear.

For example, if you offer a good salary, including this in your listing is vital. The **average salary** remains at around £17,000 – roughly around the UK's **minimum wage**. But as more care homes have started to offer **wage increases** as part of their approach to tackling vacancies, potential candidates will be on the look out for this in new listings.

This doesn't mean your care home messaging needs to be dumbed down, but rather universally accessible. Make sure that all of the key details are covered: hours, rates, travel and any flexibility for shifts. If your job listing doesn't tell potential candidate this information in an instant, your job advert may be losing you recruits!



The candidate journey – an intrinsic part of your recruitment messaging

Your brand is not your logo – it is everything that someone experiences at every point of contact with your organisation. If you message that you are a great place to work, this will be completely undermined if candidates don't have a great experience through the recruitment process. Therefore, just as with increasing conversions of potential residents, to enable your care home to attract and secure the best candidates, it is essential to prioritise the candidate journey so this reinforces at every stage what a great employer you are.

Ways to facilitate the candidate journey include:

- Acknowledging their application and explaining any timelines in the recruitment process
- Organising their interview quickly
- Giving them a tour of the home, including explaining the culture and expectations to both parties can identify if this is a good fit for them
- Paying for DBS checks
- Ensuring an efficient new candidate application pack to make the application process smooth and fast

Appealing to and securing your ideal candidates

Knowing why your most valued staff stay with you will help you shape recruitment messaging that will appeal to more candidates like them. It's important to message key benefits and perks clearly, as candidates will want to be able to see how you compare to the competition, but whether your care home feels right to them will be as much an emotional decision as a pragmatic one, so creating a strong emotional connection can help you attract your ideal candidates. Showing the value you place on them as potential new team members by a smooth and welcoming candidate journey will help you secure the recruits who perform best in your interview process.



Optimise your care home job vacancy listings

Strategy 7 – Staffing Levels

When it comes to recruiting new care home staff, posting a job vacancy online is only ever half the battle. To get the greatest visibility from applicants and build up fresh interest for working at your care home, there are a few vital tips and tricks that can instantly optimise your vacancy listings.

How does your care home compare to the competition?

The first thing to check before listing a care worker job vacancy is how the competition have messaged themselves in other care home recruitment adverts. A lot of care home job listings tend to be very simply and similarly worded, due to having been copied from the same job description templates, or from having been recycled year after year. This can give care home owners and care management teams responsible for recruitment a great foundation of what the job market looks like to potential applicants, and where they can introduce their care home's point of difference.

You can quickly research the messaging of similar care work vacancy listings through job search websites, such as [Reed](#), or [Indeed](#), filtering the search results to cover your local region/s.

What is your care home's point of difference?

There are a number of key items that potential care work applicants will be looking for in vacancy positions, which are important to include if they are part of your care home's recruitment offering. These include:

- Higher than average wages
- Choice of shift hours
- Training support and experience
- Rewards for staff loyalty
- Compensation or support for worker travel
- Opportunities for career progression



Listing the perks and benefits that new care workers could be entitled to can increase the attractiveness of your recruitment adverts — as well as other experienced care sector staff looking to transfer and develop from their current positions. Having these desirable keywords in your job listing are also a great way of improving its visibility, as some people will be searching for particular benefits or salary ranges.

Finally, have you considered the care home's location? For rural areas, it may be beneficial to list the postcodes of neighbouring urban areas as well. This way, you can ensure that the advert is more likely to be seen by larger groups of people who may only be searching within a radius.

Increase your care worker vacancy's visibility

This one is simple: the wider you cast your net, the bigger the catch. While many care homes were often dependent on word of mouth and local recruitment agencies pre-lockdown, it now helps to be a little more tech-savvy to stand out from the competition.

To achieve as much visibility as possible for your recruitment listing, we recommend:

- Posting your vacancy to all job search websites that suit your region
- Advertise your care role for free on the government's '**Find a job**' service
- Investing in advertising with local media services, such as magazines, newspapers or online portals
- Regularly posting about new care worker opportunities via social media channels, or email newsletters
- Asking your existing care staff, residents and their families to share the listing as well

The importance of Search Engine Optimisation in vacancy listings

If you're not getting many candidates responding to your job adverts, it may be that the messaging isn't right (see Strategy 6, page 19), or it may be that your listing isn't optimised to get it in front of enough potential candidates. Digital job markets are effectively search engines, so it's important to play those Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) games, using the right keywords and catchment areas to ensure your job ad is seen ahead of those of your competitors.



Leverage alternative recruitment channels

Strategy 8 – Staffing Levels

Your staff and your organisation both have networks of friends, relatives and acquaintances, generally concentrated in the area in which they live. Leveraging these networks can give your recruitment an additional, low-cost boost.

As well as advertising on established job-search platforms, it's also worth thinking about other channels that may attract more accidental candidates than those who are specifically looking for a new job, who may be prompted by the right messaging to think of a return to the work place or a change of career.

The power of social media

Does your home do social media updates? Advertising vacancies on your profiles, such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn can get you in front of a different audience; encourage your staff to share, like and comment on these posts as it's likely that their networks include people like them, who may therefore be ideally suited to a role as a carer. If they tag friends that they know are looking for a new opportunity, your post will get directly in front of both these contacts and their wider network.

Use your website

If you're invested in a decent website, it makes sense to use this as an additional tool in your bid to find more, high-quality staff. Ideally, your website should be fully optimised for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) so it performs well in local online searches; if you've got this right, it will also mean that your recruitment page should perform well for people searching for local jobs in care. However, it will always be tough to try and compete with the SEO of the major job-search platforms, so make sure your careers page is rich in your target keywords to boost its chances of being seen by local job seekers. A key element of getting your recruitment SEO right is to emphasise your location with lots of references to your local area (although these need to look natural so they don't jar with potential candidates).



Old school strategy: banners

Also think about having a banner outside your home which could appeal to people passing by who may walk in to apply for a job. The key thing with banner messaging is that it has to have simple, large messaging, therefore a banner is not the place to provide lots of detail about the role and conditions; you need an eye-catching message that will prompt people to find out more. This is especially important if most of the people passing by your care home are in cars – they need to be able to understand the message and be compelled to act in a few seconds. As your message needs to be simple, a QR code to the recruitment page on your website can be a helpful tool to enable people to find out more easily.

As always, make sure reception staff are properly informed with information packs and application forms, so that potential candidates get a great first experience of your care home.

Open days

Recruitment open days can provide a low-cost way to attract a number of candidates. Leverage social media, local newspaper advertising and banners to let people know when it is. Then make sure candidates get a good experience of your home, with a gold-star tour and a chance to talk to existing, enthusiastic staff. Plus make sure you have some simple filtering processes in place to sort the wheat from the chaff so you can focus your managerial time on following up with the most promising potential recruits.

Nurture your own talent

The recruitment crisis in care is not likely to have a quick fix, so it's worth investing in nurturing your own talent. Work with local colleges or training organisations that offer social care courses to attract new recruits, and consider offering apprenticeships and internships to attract junior staff whom you can develop to become your stars of tomorrow.

If you offer nursing care and are based in England, nurturing your own talent might include offering positions for nursing associates, a new care role within social care settings created to bridge the gap between care assistants and registered nurses. Nursing Associates offer a new career route for ambitious carers who want to extend their skills and qualifications, while freeing up time for registered nurses to work at the upper limits of their registration, focussing on more complex care needs and leadership.

Multi-layered recruitment strategies access more networks of potential candidates

The vast majority of care home staff live within a fairly small radius around the home, therefore accessing local networks can help get your vacancies in front of local people who may be looking for a new opportunity but have not yet started formal job hunting, while nurturing career starters can help you develop a team that is vested in your culture.



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