



**THE BURNOUT PANDEMIC**  
The causes and impact of staffing shortages  
A UNISON survey of social care staff

February 2022

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# Introduction

UNISON represents over 10 000 members delivering social care in the public, private and third sectors, both care at home and residential care. As part of our Care Workers for Change campaign we surveyed our members to find out about their direct experience of staffing shortages, what they think are the causes, and what the impact is on themselves and the people they look after.

The social care sector was woefully under-prepared for the pandemic thanks to a system which had been underfunded, undervalued and ignored by governments for years. Care workers and the vulnerable people they look after paid the price for that during covid.

As our survey results show, more than eighteen months down the line, social care staff are now experiencing a burnout pandemic.

# The survey

An email was sent to members who work in social care in early October 2021 asking them to take part in an e-survey. The survey was promoted to members through UNISON's Care Workers for Change group and social media as well as through UNISON branches. Members were also encouraged to pass the survey link to non-members to give them the opportunity to take part.

## Main findings

### There is a staffing crisis in social care:

- 96% of social care staff who took part in our survey said their employer is currently short staffed, and;
- 90% said they are concerned about Safe Staffing Levels in their workplace.

### Social care staff say the main causes of the staffing shortages are:

- Sickness absence (76% of staff who took part)
- low pay (69%); poor conditions of work (31%) and lack of any career path (24%) in return for a very challenging and demanding role;
- not having a voice at work including over rota issues (48%) and how the team runs (37%).

### Staff say the main reasons for people being off sick are:

- Stress and burnout (cited by 85% and 72% of participants),
- Covid (45%) and Long Covid (22%).
- Just 1 in 10 said it was due to Brexit.

### Social care staff say because of staff shortages:

- 49% feel pressured and 11% say they are forced to work extra or longer shifts;
- almost 60% of staff say they are close to burnout;
- Nearly half say that their family time is affected.
- Almost 1 in 4 say they have been refused annual leave.
- 27% say health and safety procedures are not being adhered to.

### Staff are already bailing out of the care sector because of the pressure they feel under to cover staff shortages.

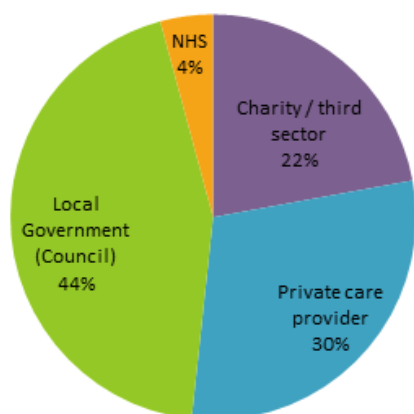
- 1 in 10 are actively looking to leave (11%) and
- A quarter are considering leaving if the pressures don't ease (24%).
- some of those who took part had recently left social care for other sectors.

# Who took part?

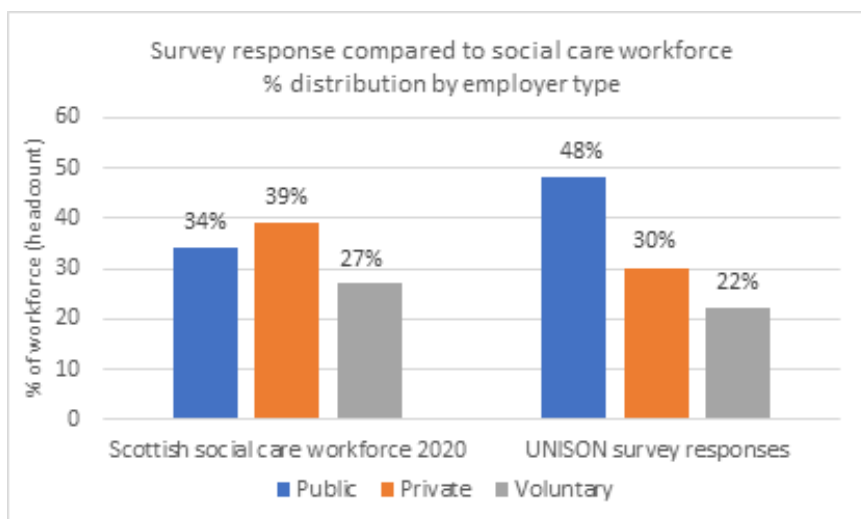
More than 2,500 social care staff took part in our survey, 85% of whom were women. They work for every type of provider: public, private and third sector. Staff from all 32 local authorities and from 11 health boards took part.

Staff responsible for managing social care services also replied to the survey - 13% of the responses were from social care team leaders, supervisors or managers.

Social care members who took part in the survey - where do they work?



In 2020, 39% of Scotland's social care workforce worked in the private sector, 34% in the public sector, and 27% in the voluntary sector (Scottish Social Services Council, 2020 Workforce Data). In our survey almost one third of people who took part (30%) worked for private care providers. The largest share of responses came from staff with local authority (44%) and NHS care providers (4%) and around 1 in 5 (22%) worked for voluntary sector providers.

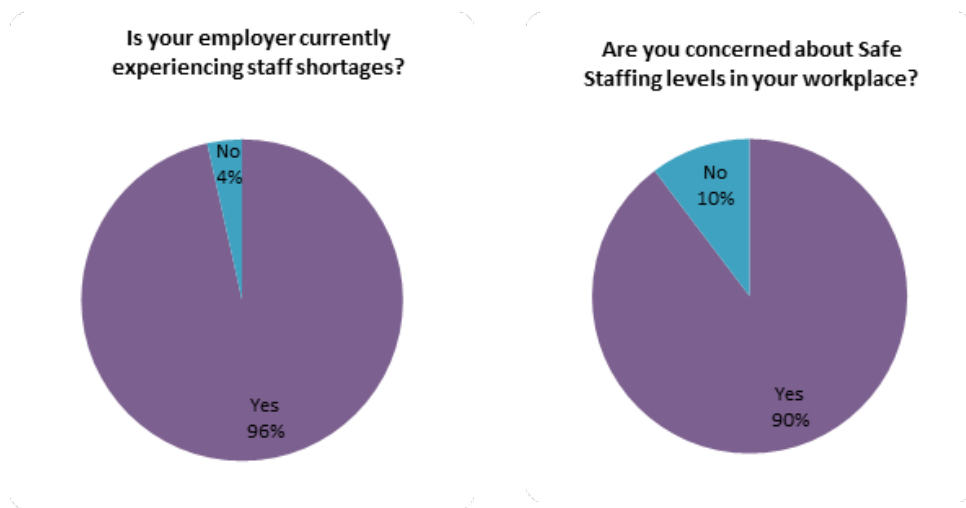


Source: Scottish Social Services Council

# The Staffing Crisis

The scale of the staffing crisis in social care is clear:

- 96% of social care staff who took part in our survey said their employer is currently short staffed, and;
- 90% said they are concerned about Safe Staffing Levels in their workplace.

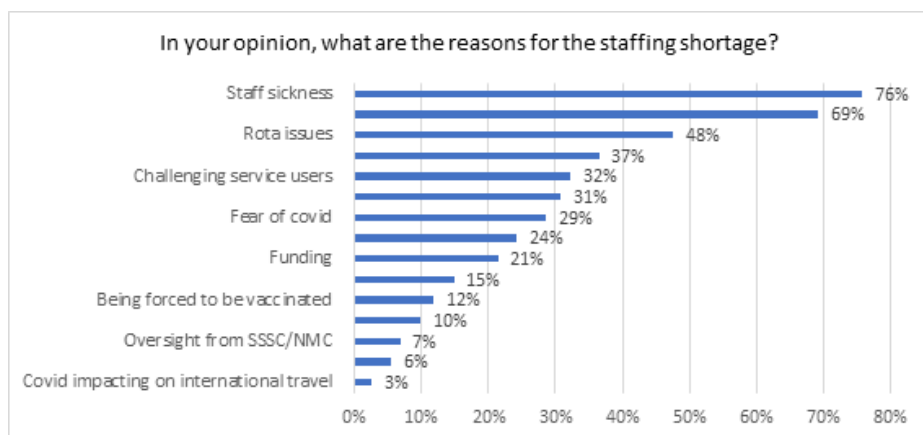


## Reasons for the staff shortages

Social care staff say the staffing shortages are due to:

- sickness absence (76% of respondents);
- low pay (69%); poor conditions of work (31%) and lack of any career path (24%) in return for a very challenging and demanding role;
- not having a voice in how things are run including rota issues (48%) and not having a say in how the team runs (37%).

They say this combination is driving people out of social care and putting people off from entering.



### Care workers say...about their own health

- *We are already understaffed and sickness has made the situation worse. Because we had Covid in the service we are unable to use agency workers so have struggled to cover the shifts ourselves*
- *due to burn out in staff immune systems are low and they are contracting other illnesses*
- *people who have worked all the way through on the front line are tired, fatigued, demoralised- where is the pay! coming into winter this is a cocktail for sickness*
- *we went out filled with fear what if we catch COVID pass it on to our family or any of our clients with no support or well fair checks asking how we are as a result for the first time in my life I suffered really bad mental health problems due to work related stress.*

### Care workers say...about low pay:

- *My son (20, student) has gone from £8.80 to £12 an hour for working in a bakery. I'm 54, working my butt off, for £9.50.*
- *Financially Money is tight and I struggle every month to get by and to keep myself from having to go to a food bank.*
- *Fair pay so myself and my partner could have family time , as hourly rate is so low we average on 60 hrs per week.*
- *you get paid more to stack shelves than to help someone live their life to the best possible standard possible.*
- *the money that we get is degrading for what they expect of us.*
- *Workers can earn more working in retail without having the responsibility of vulnerable individuals lives constantly on their mind.*
- *Carers should be paid a better wage than Aldi, Lidl, shop workers bus drivers. We keep there family members safe from all aspects of harm, covid, neglect, abuse, etc we deal with challenging behaviour self harm and medication no matter if your exhausted or not and if you get it wrong it's your own sssc that's up in the air.*
- *I feel that campaigning for seniors to be paid for their overtime and not have to take it in TOIL which is impossible to take due to shortages, this often means we work between 50 to 80 hours per week and we are only paid for our salaried hours of 37*

Balanced against this is the highly demanding and complex nature of care work: 32% said that challenging service users and violence against staff (15%) contribute to the staffing shortage.

### Care workers say...about the demands of the role

- *Not enough staff to cover the high care needs of these residents that are coming into these homes nowadays as most are end of life and are needing 2 due to their physical and mental mobility it is certainly not residential these days its hospital care without the nurses as most residents have lost their skills due to their illness they have that's why there are staff shortages the job is to heavy and people dont want to take it due to this and its a stressful environment people cant handle very high demanding job*

- *Constantly increasing levels of dependency with no associated increase in resources.*
- *We have permanent online learning, we have to do service users care plans and attend courses We also have to do our normal job cleaning, cooking, which is non stop, also supporting service users with medication which all has to be recorded , we are expected to do too much for too little*
- *2 staff members are not enough as high care needs not residential the homes are more mini hospitals with the residents we are now getting their physical needs are greater so are their mental needs we need more help as we dont stop in these units*

A major reason for staff leaving is the way that care work is managed, and staff feeling they have little control over how they work. Among the top reasons cited for staffing shortages were rota issues (48%) and not having a say in how the organisation or team runs (37% of those taking part).

Only 10% of staff thought that Brexit was a reason for the staffing shortage.

### **Care workers say...about the culture of management**

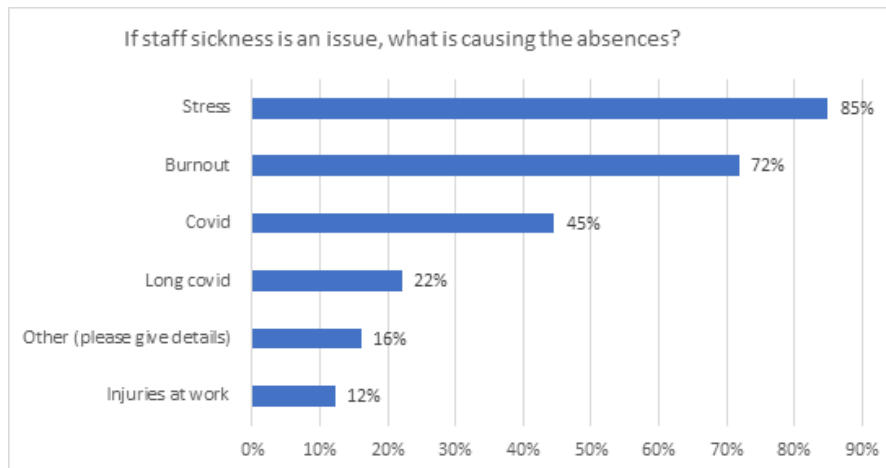
- *Team leaders do not listen they send you everywhere*
- *Staff shortages are mainly down to management not listening to their staff and treating them appallingly.*
- *Staff feeling undervalued, not listened to, constant issues with schedules, lack of travel time, moving and handling issues not being addressed, no clarity from management. Being expected to get on with it no matter how many impossible situations you are put in to.*
- *We lost 11 members of staff in 5 weeks due to the way the home is run, ie we are not listened to when we report a decline in mobility or when we raise our concerns that we do not have enough staff in order to assist our residents the way they deserve*
- *Fed up with everything rules regulations policies procedures these people are people and we carers are not allowed to care, the caring side has been taken away all just about money now not a nice place to work!!*
- *We are being bullied into more and more paperwork and less staff looking after more residents. Now we are told there isn't going to be a Christmas rota and if staff don't turn up, we will get reported to SSSC.*
- *Change the lengths of shifts, it's always the same issue that makes good workers leave. I can be on shift for 29 hours at a time and genuinely feel this is inhuman, no other sector would expect this and consider it 'normal'.*



# Main causes of sickness absence

Staff say the main reasons for people being off sick are:

- Stress and burnout (cited by 85% and 72% of participants),
- followed by Covid (45%) and Long Covid (22%).



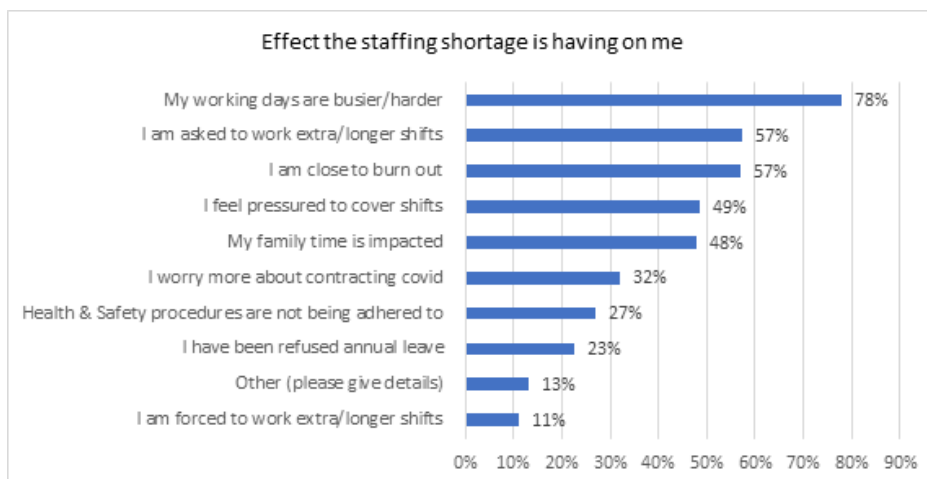
## Care workers say...about burnout

- *Help us before we get burnt out cos personally I'm on the edge and feel nobody cares*
- *Staff are emotionally exhausted and feeling the constant pressure of having to sacrifice the care as a result of the massive workload.*
- *Get us help soon !!, it will be too late, if its not sorted NOW!!*
- *This has been going on for too long. We are all burnt out, stressed and feeling under so much pressure.*
- *Some carers are working 18 - 20 days in a row. I don't think that should be allowed. Pressure, fear of burning out. Management should not be letting this happen. Shifts being split because there is no staff to cover. Everyone under pressure. Knowing there is support from the Union is welcoming.*
- *Staff shortages are throughout the team, carers day & night , kitchen & domestic, the same colleagues are digging deep & mucking in but are in danger of becoming burnt out .*
- *I am looking at when I can afford to retire, at over 60 years of age and worked for 27 years this is the worst things have ever been.*

# Impact of the staff shortage on workers

Social care members who took part said that staff shortages mean there is an even heavier workload on those who are left.

- Social care staff are under pressure to work even harder and longer to make sure that vulnerable clients receive the support they need.
- The majority said they feel either pressured or forced to cover for staff shortages at their work.



As a result of the staff shortage:

- almost 60% of staff say they are close to burnout;
- 49% say they feel pressured and 11% say they are forced to work extra or longer shifts;
- Almost half say that their family time is affected.
- Almost 1 in 4 say they have been refused annual leave because of staff shortages;
- 27% say health and safety procedures are not being adhered to.

The high levels of stress created by a highly pressured short-staffed working environment can over the long term create burnout. Employers have a legal duty to tackle the root causes of work-related stress. In our survey more than a quarter said that health and safety procedures are not being adhered to because of staff shortages.

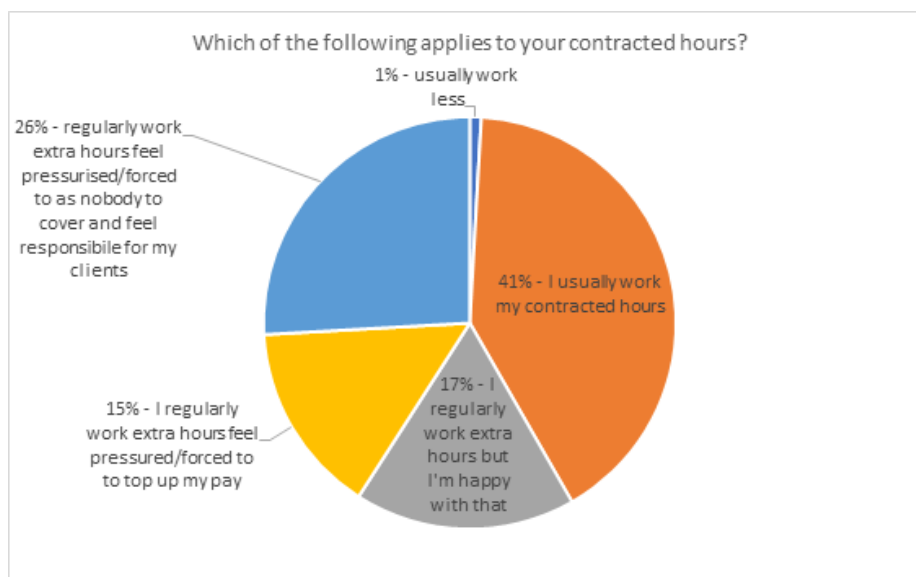
Eighteen months of overwork and the stress and anxiety of the pandemic have taken their toll on care workers' mental and physical health. One main theme from the survey is the undermining of people's physical health making care workers more susceptible to illness.

# Working hours

41% of social care staff say they usually work their contracted hours; 17% said they regularly work more than this, but they are happy with that.

However, 42% of social care staff say they regularly work more than their contracted hours because they feel pressured or forced to do so. Of those who regularly work more than their contracted hours:

- 15% said they do so because they feel pressured/forced to top up their pay;
- 26% say they do so because they feel pressured/forced to by their employer as there is nobody to cover and they feel responsible for their clients;



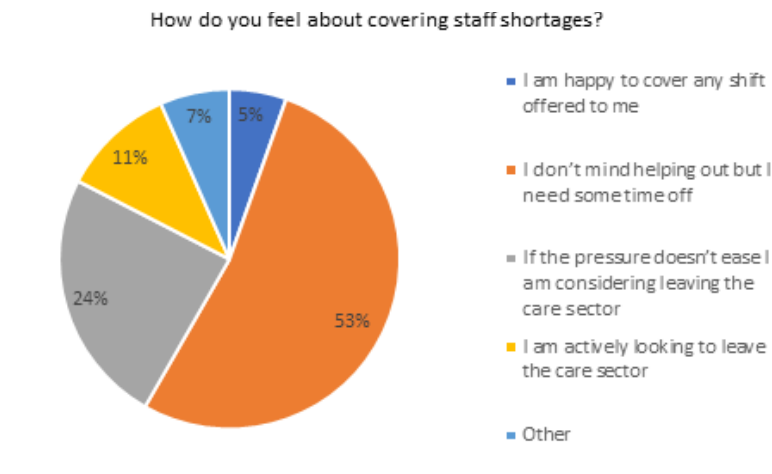
For this group under staffing means excessively long working hours and excessive levels of overtime working for some people in order to provide cover, all paid at basic rate with no overtime rate. Home care workers report not even being able to get a toilet break while out working as they struggle to get from client to client on time. Staff described the impact on family life of rotas which mean people work almost every weekend and every Christmas and all at the basic rate of pay.

## Care workers say...about covering for staff shortages

- *I need the extra money so pick up a couple of extra shifts a month, but looking after 36 residents with 2/3 staff is too much!*
- *There is no focus on the existing carers except for them to work more to help out. It's too bad if we are ill because we re expected to work and are made to feel guilty if we call in sick. We are made to feel guilty if we refuse extra shifts and we are made to feel guilty if we complain about the extra visits/workload that is heaped on to us because of a lack of staff.*
- *I feel this sector is so underpaid that the staff are working themselves into the ground to make ends meet and also we try and help where we can but it's been worse since Covid hit the uk and the affects are still being felt today over worked and severely under paid staff*
- *I do not mind covering but I also need time off, I am considering leaving, we are under so much pressure, not only are we short in the care side, we have no cook in the kitchen and care, Kp, cleaners are in the kitchen cooking which to me is quite concerning*

# Providing cover

One in 20 who took part in the survey (5%) say they are happy to cover any shift offered, usually because they need the money and are on zero hours or have a part-time contract when they would prefer to be full-time.



While most social care staff want to help, people are already bailing out of the care sector because of the pressure they feel under to cover staff shortages. More than 1 in 3 staff (35%) say they are either actively looking to leave (11%) or are considering leaving if the pressures don't ease (24%). Some of those who took part in the survey had recently left.

## Care workers say...about leaving social care

- *I don't mind helping out but I am also looking to leave the sector as I cannot continue in such a low wage, undervalued position where I am honestly just a number and replaceable*
- *I have now left the private social care industry and I will never return to that industry again due to lack of support during this pandemic and unrealistic demands of staff suffering with unresolved grief, burn out and in many cases PTSD due to the extreme levels of workplace stress over the last two years.*
- *I have actually left the care sector 3 weeks ago and now work nights in a petrol station. I am now on better pay with A LOT less stress*
- *Staff are leaving now that there are other jobs available & only joined the care sector because there were no other jobs. New staff not being recruited*
- *Some carers started during covid and were not given proper training and were put under pressure in the positions they were given*

Over half of staff who took part (53%) say they don't mind helping out but they also need their time off. A common theme was that if you offered to work an extra shift or take on extra visits on one occasion then that would become the norm, and you'd be pressured to do even more. Many also said they were motivated to provide cover because they were worried or anxious about the clients and wanted to make sure they had consistency of care.

Staff said they already face severe pressures during their contracted hours. For staff with caring responsibilities or health conditions or who are older it is just not possible to work extra hours to cover staff shortages. Many of these staff said they were in their late 50s or 60s or had caring commitments to family members, were pregnant or had underlying health reasons which made it very hard to work more than their contracted hours.

Many staff indicated that they are not paid for overtime but allowed time off in lieu, which they are

never able to take. Or if they are paid for working beyond contracted hours then they can wait weeks to receive payment or find their wages are incorrect.

The increasing demands and responsibilities of the job are an important factor in burn-out. Staff are not just over stretched they are often caring for people with very complex needs.

### Care workers say...about being asked to cover shifts

- *I don't mind covering an occasional shift. But if you cover one it's expected of you to cover all the time.*
- *Due to being exhausted on shifts I don't cover extra shifts it is so full on and not enough breaks on 12hr shifts*
- *I have refused to do overtime only my contracted hours the more we cover shifts the more the company expect us to do so and do not recruit more staff*
- *Already work 3 12 hour shifts, at 59 years of age, find it too difficult to do more.*
- *I'm heavily pregnant and forced to work 12 hour shifts*
- *I am reluctant to cover extra shifts due to fatigue from all the cover during the pandemic and I have care responsibilities in my own family when I am not at work. I am more tired because of the impact of the pandemic*
- *I dont feel happy because I lack proper rest days*

## The impact on care quality

Social care staff say understaffing is having a serious negative impact on the quality of care being provided to vulnerable people. The strain of seeing individuals' needs not being properly met weighs heavily upon care staff. Staff say they are also being placed in unsafe situations with clients due to being overstretched and understaffed. UNISON members want their trade union to speak out publicly about this.

### Care workers say...about their concerns for individuals receiving care

- *Be aware that residents needs are being neglected or compromised due to staffing levels health and safety issues*
- *staff cut backs have put a major strain on us and made it difficult to deliver a decent quality of service to our service users. The stress that comes with this has had such a negative effect on staff, sometimes breaking down in the workplace.*
- *when someones at end of life we should also have extra staff member to sit with that resident which is not happening as when 2 staff are on shift 1 cant come off the floor as the other one would be left with everything to do*
- *the level of residents needs within a 15 bedded unit with 2 staff are just managing the basic needs be met at present. There needs to be 3 staff per unit to offer a better quality of life within residential care. Ie quality time 1-1, activities, motivate, emotional support.*
- *in a nutshell feel we are now being run as a business not a charity where the feelings if the people we support are no longer important..as long as the shift is covered doesn't matter if the person who is being supported doesn't like them .*

# Regulation of care providers

Our social care members say understaffing is the business model for many care providers and that this was the case long before the covid pandemic. Care staff say there needs to be stronger regulation and action to enforce safe levels of staffing.

- *The owners of Care Homes MUST be held responsible if they WONT employ the correct amount of staff required.*
- *Ensure the care inspectorate actually looks at staffing levels. Care homes have always worked with the minimal levels*
- *Address the referral system, it seems organization can take on referrals without checks on whether or not they have the staff numbers or competency to care for the individuals they take on*
- *when homes are so short of staff is this not breaking the health and safety laws*
- *Talk to companies they are trying to get the most amount of work out of the least amount of staff to maximise profit.*
- *Target care commission to increase the minimum staff requirement of resident to staff ratio, as private sector always work with least amount of staff they can get away with.*
- *Implement guidelines for employers to enforce to ensure safe staffing levels are adhered to*
- *Put something in place so it's mandatory that staffing levels do not fall below a safe minimum level*
- *Don't include nurses in minimum staff to resident ratio, as with best will in the world, they can never be free to carry out basic care needs*
- *think the private sector needs to be abolished...in my unit nearly all my team have handed in there notice or quit, my notice goes in tomorrow with immediate effect I will not go back, my mental or physical health can't do it any more*

## Conclusion

The testimony from UNISON members in this report should be sobering reading for everyone in our society. However, we believe that given the depth of the crisis in social care the Scottish Government, commissioners, and employers in particular need to take a long hard look at what can be done to suitably reward our members at work. How can anyone reading this not be compelled to do everything within their power to find a solution to these problems?

UNISON has a solution. UNISON's aim is to build our members' power in the social care sector from the ground up, locally to nationally, culminating in securing sectoral bargaining in the proposed National Care Service. Success here will ensure UNISON members receive better pay, terms and conditions, job security and RESPECT at work, steering the sector away from the current crisis to a truly effective service that delivers for both the people using care in Scotland and the people delivering the care.

This is a time of great opportunity; the Scottish Government has just completed their consultation on the National Care Service. There is no better time for UNISON members to begin shaping the future that they wish to see in Social Care. There is no better time for Government to listen.

If you are a UNISON member in social care: find out what's happening at our Care Workers for Change Facebook Group or contact [L.Regan@unison.co.uk](mailto:L.Regan@unison.co.uk) for more information on getting active.