



Northumberland

County Council

Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 11 JULY 2023

Update on pressures in adult homecare services

Report of: Councillor Wendy Pattison, Portfolio Holder for Caring for Adults

Responsible Officer: Neil Bradley, Executive Director of Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing

Purpose of report

1. This report describes the current difficulties facing adult homecare services in Northumberland, steps that have been taken to resolve these difficulties and the plans in place that aim to resolve workforce shortages in that sector.

Recommendations

2. Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to: -
 - 2.1 Receive this report for information on the current issues with homecare in Northumberland and,
 - 2.2 Note the initiatives proposed to try to resolve workforce shortages.

Link to Corporate Plan

Tackling inequalities

3. The use of the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund aims to address current issues which prevent the Council from arranging care and support needed by disabled people in a timely way. They will also increase the incomes and status of care workers who are currently low paid.

Encouraging growth

4. Grant expenditure will be on locally-based services whose workers are likely to live in Northumberland.

Best Value

5. The proposed approach is designed to ensure that maximum benefits for people in need of care and support are achieved from the grant funding.

Key issues

6. Home care offers a vital service to people who are assessed as needing additional assistance to remain independent. Providers offer care and support through regular visits to the homes of older people and others who are ill or disabled. Whilst the tasks can vary depending on need, they typically include assistance with dressing/undressing, personal hygiene, provision of meals and mobility around the home. At the time of writing this report in May 2023, there were 2,074 people funded by the NHS and adult social care receiving almost 30,000 hours of homecare per week in Northumberland through the Council's main contract arrangements.
7. There have been difficulties in arranging homecare services for a significant number of people due to workforce shortages and since the summer of 2021 there has typically been around 200 –220 people that the council has assessed as requiring homecare whom we have not been able to source homecare. This number went as high as 270 at one point in 2022.
8. Workforce shortages in social care are a national problem and our neighbouring local authorities are facing similar difficulties.
9. The problem appears to be worse in more rural areas generally, including the most rural parts of Northumberland.
10. Northumberland County Council has implemented some initiatives over the past 18 months to try to resolve workforce shortages, including funding incentives to increase carer pay rates and work with providers on upskilling their management teams and improving their recruitment programmes. Whilst this support appears to have arrested the growth in the shortfalls of available care, it has not increased the workforce enough to enable our social care providers to pick up significantly more homecare packages.
11. The council will be using additional funds from the latest Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund 2023/24 to attempt to make it more attractive to work in homecare and increase the size of the workforce.

Background

- 12.1 Like most local authorities, Northumberland County Council outsources its home care provision for adults to independent sector providers. The home care contract arrangements in Northumberland have divided the county into 10 geographical areas. Each area has one organisation identified as the "Tier 1" provider which is given the first option to pick up new work in the area. Below Tier 1 there are two further tiers of providers that are given the opportunity to pick up work not collected by the Tier 1 provider. The current contract arrangements have been in place since April 2019 and there are more than fifty providers listed on the Council's dynamic purchasing system. Those providers are all different shapes and sizes ranging from the largest which employs 370 staff to some small organisations that operate with a

handful of care staff. This list is subject to some change as providers enter and leave the homecare market in Northumberland.

- 12.2 Home care service providers in Northumberland have experienced difficulties in meeting demand for services due to the lack of available staff. This problem has persisted since the summer of 2021 and officers can link the start of the issue to the reopening of businesses following the Covid-19 pandemic. Since that point the numbers of home care packages that providers could not immediately pick up built up quite quickly. This rose over a few months to around 200 people for whom the council cannot arrange all or some of the home care package that residents have been assessed as needing. The number did get as high as around 270 at one point in 2022 but has generally stayed between about 200-220 packages over the period.
- 12.3 The packages are predominantly for older people who need care as that is the highest volume of work that is picked up by home care services. All those who are waiting for care have temporary arrangements in place. Some are being supported temporarily by staff from the council's Short-Term Support Service which is a more expensive specialist service whose normal function is to work intensively with people to reduce their need for long-term care. Others have chosen to live at home without the support they have been assessed as needing (often with short time higher levels of family support) or move temporarily into a care home which often provides a higher level of care than they require, whilst others have remained in hospital longer than required. Council officers make checks on the welfare of the people on the list to ensure they are safe and to establish whether they still require the identified level of homecare.
- 12.4 Even when the homecare system is operating well there are likely to be some people for whom care cannot be arranged without a short delay, because of a temporary mismatch between needs and available care workers in the local area where they live, or because their needs are particularly complex or specialist. However, this current situation is unprecedented. Historically it would have been seen as seriously concerning if there were as many as fifty care packages outstanding at any one time, and that would have been seen as a reason to take urgent steps to improve the capacity of services in the areas where delays were greatest. But the current difficulties are not unique to Northumberland and similar issues appear to be being experienced by most local authorities in England at present.
- 12.5 There have been a number of initiatives introduced to improve the situation and increase the workforce in homecare services. In November 2021 the government recognised the high level of pressure on staffing in social care services and introduced a Workforce Recruitment and Retention Grant which was used in Northumberland to pay a bonus to homecare staff who remained in employment throughout the winter. The local NHS and Northumberland County Council has also used grant and health funding at different points to bring forward pay awards for frontline homecare workers. Neither of these measures brought significant numbers of new recruits to the care workforce although some providers have reported that the initiatives did help to retain existing staff.
- 12.6 The most significant of the council's initiatives was the offer of increased fees to those social care providers (across all service types, not only home care) who signed up to the council's wage support scheme which was set at the rate of the Real Living Wage. This is a higher rate of pay than the National Living Wage, which was previously used as the basis for fee uplifts in Northumberland. This initiative

was approved by the council's Cabinet in January 2022 and implemented from April 2022. It was well received by social care providers, however, through unfortunate timing it appears that the intended financial impact for social care staff was offset by the impact of the cost-of-living increases that have hit the economy over the past year. This measure has not generated a significant increase in the homecare workforce, although as with the other initiatives, it is generally felt that it has assisted in stabilising a deteriorating position.

- 12.7 A variety of other kinds of support have been offered to providers in addition to funding for wage increases. These have included building links with job centres, publicity through recruitment campaigns, use of the council's social media to advertise vacancies, job fairs, and direct advertising through the council's social media platforms. Officers in Adult Social Care have delivered training courses to develop skills and resilience amongst managers in homecare services in order to improve retention rates. There has also been training aimed at trying to help providers develop their culture through their own recruitment programmes to attract the strongest candidates for roles. Officers have also been working with providers to promote "refer a friend" schemes/initiatives which have been found to be successful in some other parts of the Country. At a regional level the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) have been active in supporting local authorities in the above initiatives as well as through a working group focused on workforce. They have increased officer time dedicated to workforce initiatives as well as offering specialist support on specialist areas like overseas recruitment.
- 12.8 While the greatest capacity problems have consistently been in home care, some other social care services have also started to report difficulties with recruitment and retention, including older persons care homes and specialist learning disability and mental health services. However, these difficulties have had less impact on our capacity to arrange support for people.
- 12.9 Despite the initiatives described above the difficulties in securing homecare packages have continued into 2023 with limited change in the workforce situation and the list of outstanding care packages remaining at around 200. There have been some reductions in April and May of this year with the number reducing to 170 at one point, but it is too early to say whether this may be the start of a sustained improvement in recruitment and retention of care workers. There continue to be reports of staff shortages across all types of social care services nationally although homecare has historically been a more difficult service to recruit to. The workers are community based and often work on their own without supervision and support on hand. The equivalent role in a care home is not required to travel during the working day, and care home staff will have peer and management support on hand to help them deal with the difficulties that can arise when delivering social care. As one of the council's contracted care providers has pointed out, domiciliary care is unusual in being a job in which low-paid workers are commonly expected provide themselves the vehicle which they need to undertake the job.
- 12.10 At the start of April 2021, the number of care workers reported by the home care services based in Northumberland which accept referrals from the Council was 1553. By 1 October, the reported number had fallen to 1393 and by 31 March 2022 the figure was 1377. Most of this fall took place after Covid "Freedom Day" in July 2021 but it is concerning that the trend has continued despite additional support and incentives being in place to assist with recruitment and retention throughout the

period from November 2021. The comparable figure at 31 March 2023 is 1317, though comparisons may be slightly distorted by the arrival of some new home care providers whose registered bases are outside Northumberland and not included in the figures.

13. Homecare supply and demand

13.1 In addition to examining recruitment and retention issues, officers have reviewed demand for services and it is apparent that the high number of packages that cannot be picked up is not the result of an increase in demand for services that providers have been unable to meet. The average number of people referred for homecare packages per month since December 2020 is 398 and the average number of people whose packages were picked up by providers is 260 per month for the same period. From September 2021 the number of referrals picked up per month is 227 out of an average of 336 referrals illustrating there has not been a significant increase in demand.

13.2 The table below shows the number of hours of homecare delivered as at 1 April for the last 5 years. This shows a decline in the number of hours of homecare being delivered since a peak in April 2021 when providers were delivering over 3,000 more hours per week than they are currently able to. In April 2021, whilst delivering 3,000 more hours than providers are currently, there were only twenty-four packages on the list of outstanding packages. One of the unexpected short-term impacts of the Covid pandemic was that some people laid off from work in hospitality and tourism moved into care work – but as pandemic restrictions ended, many moved back into their previous areas of work.

13.3 Number of homecare hours delivered per week by providers on the council's main contract:

	Weekly hours delivered
1 April 2019	28,775
1 April 2020	28,937
1 April 2021	33,194
1 April 2022	29,061
1 April 2023	29,919

13.4 The number of packages picked up for the first three months of 2023 were higher than the average for the whole of the previous calendar year and one reason for this appears to be the arrival of three new providers that specialise in recruiting workers from abroad and bringing them to the UK under sponsorship arrangements.

14. Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund

14.1 Northumberland County Council has been allocated £3.56m of grant for Market Sustainability and Improvement in 2023/24 with a further £5.35m for 2024/25. The main purpose of the grant is to enable local authorities to make tangible improvements to adult social care, in particular to increase social care capacity. The

council's Cabinet agreed on 9 May to proposals to spend £2m on new support for domiciliary care providers, in addition to using the grant to continue a scheme introduced last year to fund increased mileage expenses for home care workers. Of the new £2m, £1.5m is allocated to support an immediate increase in the minimum sum paid to home care workers, over and above the increase previously agreed, to a level of £12.00 per hour. This will be introduced from 1 July 2023, establishing a differential above the "Real Living Wage" rate (currently £10.90) that is available to care workers in all services in Northumberland whose providers have signed up to the Council's Wage Support Scheme. A further £500K is provisionally allocated to fund the introduction of a "Northumberland Home Care Worker Guarantee" to be implemented from 1 October 2023, details of which will be developed in consultation with home care providers. In a full year these two schemes are projected to cost an additional £3m.

- 14.2 The revised rate of £12.00 per hour would establish a differential compared to the statutory National Living Wage of over £1.50 per hour. A differential on that scale was being paid between December and March this year, supported through grant funding from the Adult Social Care Discharge Fund, and we have been told that during that period there was perceived to be a significant increase in the number of people applying to work in home care, which reduced from 1 April when the differential returned to a lower level (currently the Real Living Wage rate is 48p per hour above the National Living Wage).
- 14.3 The Northumberland Home Care Worker Guarantee will introduce a set of standards for employers of home care workers within Northumberland and will be developed in consultation with home care providers, with the aim of implementing it from 1 October. The expectation would be that this would include some commitments, for instance about greater stability of income and possibly pay increases for staff continuing in the role for more than a specified period, which would give rise to additional costs for providers. It is proposed to allocate a provisional sum of £500K in the current year (£1.0m in a full year) to meet these additional costs. Assurance arrangements would be introduced at the same time, and there would be a publicity campaign to bring the new standards to the attention of existing and potential future care workers.

15. Future work on recruitment and retention

- 15.1 Officers are currently considering other options to improve recruitment and retention through other initiatives including overseas recruitment. There are some care providers in Northumberland that have already begun to source care staff from overseas which is showing some early signs of a positive impact. There are three home care operators that have joined the councils contract arrangements that are sourcing their staff from abroad and there are some early indications that these providers have been able to pick up significant numbers of homecare packages although further analysis is required to see if this can be sustained over a longer period of time. Additional work will be carried out to ensure compliance with Home Office conditions on salaries and number of hours worked, as well as ensuring quality standards are maintained in service delivery. Some care home operators are also recruiting staff from abroad and in the North East region ADASS has funding to

support overseas recruitment initiatives and help councils ensure the best use is made of this opportunity.

- 15.2 Another initiative that officers are considering is the potential development of a Care Academy which have been set up by seven of the region's twelve local authorities. The established academies vary in size and remit and focus on many of the initiatives that Northumberland County Council are undertaking but have a dedicated staffing resource that enables them to deliver initiatives on a bigger scale, as well as providing a route to marketing employment in the care sector. Officers have been monitoring the impact of existing care academies before deciding whether to recommend that resources be committed to this and are drawing up options for developing one in Northumberland which includes the possibility of doing this jointly with the NHS. The development of a care academy in Northumberland could also help to support the investment and planned improvements to working in the home care sector that will be made through the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund.
- 15.3 Some local authorities have developed "care academies" which are essentially staff teams working wholly on social care recruitment and retention initiatives and Northumberland is considering the merits of this approach and the resources it would require.

16. Summary

- 16.1 It can be seen from the information above that Northumberland and Councils generally remain in a really difficult position in relation to recruitment into the adult home care sector. At this point, there are limited signs of improvement despite a number of initiatives, both financial and non-financial, to support the sector. The situation is proportionately worse in the rural areas and this is due to the fact that there are generally fewer people of a working age to recruit from, as well as increased travel costs for workers.
- 16.2 In terms of further action, aside from what has been described above within this briefing, officers are constantly sharing information and ideas with other Local Authorities and considering all options. There is a need to give the latest initiatives, particularly those linked to the immediate decisions around the use of the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund, more time to see if they can have an impact.

Implications

Policy	The Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund (MSIF) consists of funding which was originally announced as support for the Government's charging reform policy; its revised purpose is a more basic one of ensuring that care services are sustainably funded and have sufficient capacity to meet assess needs.
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Finance and value for money	All commitments described in this report can be met within the Council's allocation of MSIF funding for 2023/24, and their full year effects can be met within any likely allocation of the grant for 2024/25, with a comfortable margin. The assumption has been made that equivalent funding will continue to be available in subsequent years.
Legal	The council's contracts with homecare agencies will be varied to reflect the initiatives introduced by the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund. The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 confirm that the matters within this report are not functions reserved to Full Council.
Procurement	The proposals in this report would be implemented through variations to the Council's existing contracts for home care.
Human Resources	Some additional staffing capacity may be required to implement the proposed assurance arrangements for the treatment of home care workers and if adult services develop a care academy.
Property	No implications have been identified
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes No N/A	The proposals are designed to increase the capacity of care services to meet the assessed needs of people with a disability or illness. They are expected to have positive consequences for disabled people; other impacts linked to protected characteristics are more difficult to assess, though we know that the home care workforce is disproportionately female. A full impact assessment would not be expected to identify significant further issues.
Risk Assessment	A full risk assessment is not required.
Crime & Disorder	No implications have been identified
Customer Considerations	Current capacity issues in home care are leading to a situation in which a substantial number of people with care and support needs, and their families, partners or other carers, are having to put up with unsatisfactory support arrangements which they would not have chosen.
Carbon reduction	No implications have been identified

Health and wellbeing	Ensuring that care services have sufficient capacity to meet needs is important both for the health and well-being of service users and the efficient use of hospitals.
Wards	All

Background papers:

There are no background documents for this report within the meaning of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985.

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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