

# Thinking Outside The Box

Carolyn Downs, Lancaster University Management School, tells us more about the Helpcare project - an international initiative designed to tackle recruitment and retention issues in the care sector.

Recently, Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, appeared before the House of Commons's Health Select Committee to answer questions about the care crisis. The crisis is very real and is facing care homes and domiciliary services in all areas of the country. The UK is facing a shortfall of 200,000 carers in the next five years, and it is predicated by the International Longevity Centre and Independent Age that the problems recruiting and retaining care workers will lead to a shortfall of up to one million in the next 20 years as the number requiring care continue to increase.

Jeremy Hunt's solution to the care crisis was somewhat simplistic. He said the care crisis was an excellent profit opportunity for entrepreneurs and expects that the profit opportunity will attract sufficient investors to solve the difficulties identified by the health committee. Unfortunately, the minister did not address key issues concerning those commissioning care and running or working in the care sector.

There are a raft of problems that urgently need policy direction and funding. These include the impact of the cost of the increased minimum wage on the care sector, the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff, the issue of 91,000 non-EU migrant care workers in the UK potentially facing deportation because they do not earn above the new £35,000 threshold and the new Care Certificate.

Lancaster University are working with partners in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Poland to address the issues around recruitment and retention in the care sector - particularly looking at the

potential for professionalising the care workforce and providing clear career pathways through care work.

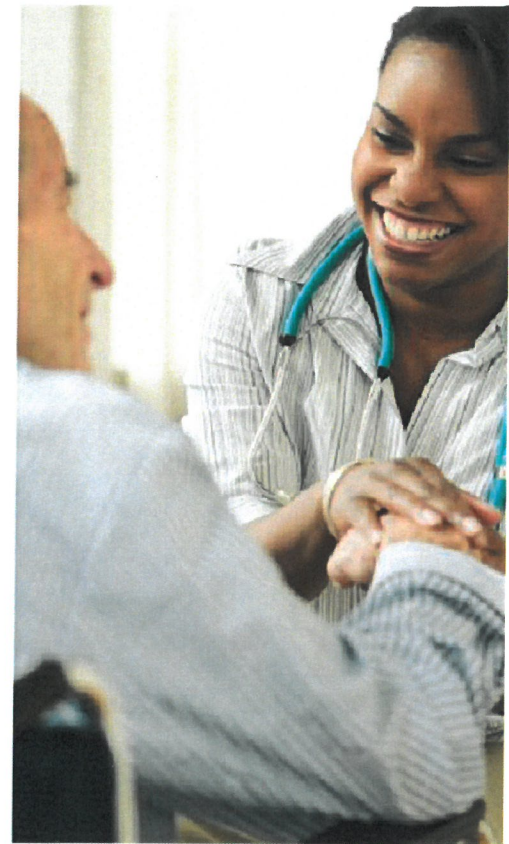
The Helpcare project aims to provide a new framework for the professionalisation of care work and has just reached the halfway point. To date we have collected data from over 500 carers. We also have 15 carers supporting the project through acting as co-researchers, sharing their expertise within the sector with the project team and interviewing older people and working with care users, the care sector (private and public) and third-sector organisations.

We have identified that while carers value highly the service they provide for clients they feel under-valued by employers, families of those they care for and wider society. One commented: "I am proud of myself, I do a difficult job and do it well, but when it comes to telling others what I do, I'm embarrassed, I say, oh, I'm only a carer."

Other carers tell us that while they love their job they experience very high levels of stress, especially where domiciliary care is being provided, and no travel time between calls is paid for.

Older people told us they would prefer to be cared for by family, but recognise this is often an unrealistic expectation. They wanted continuity of care, and time for social exchange with the person providing care, meaning rushed, shorter visits in the home were disliked.

Employers have flagged up a range of difficulties with recruitment and retention with the implementation



of the new Care Certificate. This was designed to better ensure minimum, common standards of induction and to be transferable between employers. However, the care certificate is not an accredited qualification, and there is no external verification of the certificate. Therefore, employers are reluctant to employ people without them re-doing the Care Certificate, because, as one of our advisory board told us, 'some companies are paying lip-service to the training, they just sit the staff on a computer, and leave them to it'. The certificate is not mandatory, the Care Quality Commission cannot enforce it, and there is not a guarantee of quality.

Helpcare aims to set out a framework for an education and training programme for care workers, based on our research findings, that will provide level 1 through to level 5 qualifications (level 2 is equivalent to GCSE, level 5 is equivalent to a foundation degree), with the intention that this should focus on Work-based Learning approaches, having a formalised structure for care workers across a range of levels will assist in raising the status of the profession, in a way similar to the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status in 2007 helped the professionalisation of nursery care and led to the professional role of Early Years Practitioner.

[www.helpcare-project.org](http://www.helpcare-project.org)