



Care
Professional
Organisation

Professional Recognition is the Missing Pillar of Adult Social Care Reform

A position paper from the Care Professional Organisation

**Professional recognition is not an optional extra.
It is a foundation of sustainable reform.**

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“Social care must not only recruit tomorrow’s workforce; it must build a profession they are proud to join.”

Care Professional Organisation

This first edition sets out the CPO’s position on why professional recognition must sit alongside funding, workforce capacity, quality and integration in the reform of adult social care.

Why this paper matters



Nearly ten years ago, I founded what is now the Care Professional Organisation because I believed something fundamental was missing from adult social care. We rightly spoke about services, funding, inspection and regulation, yet we rarely spoke about the people delivering care as members of a recognised profession.

Care professionals carry immense responsibility. They support people through illness, disability, frailty and some of life's most difficult moments. They exercise judgement, safeguard people from harm, administer medication, promote independence and build relationships grounded in trust. Yet the language used about the workforce too often reduces this contribution to a "job" rather than recognising it as professional practice.

That matters. When care is not seen as a profession, it becomes harder to attract new people, retain experience, create pride and establish clear expectations around standards, ethics and continuing development. It also weakens the public understanding of the knowledge, skill and responsibility that good care requires.

This paper reflects the reason the CPO exists: to help secure the recognition, respect and professional identity that care professionals deserve. It does not suggest professional recognition is a substitute for fair pay, good working conditions or properly funded services. Rather, it argues that reform will remain incomplete unless the workforce itself is recognised, supported and enabled to develop as a profession.

I hope this paper contributes constructively to the debate and encourages governments, employers, educators and sector leaders to think beyond filling vacancies. Our shared ambition should be to build lifelong careers and a profession that people are proud to join.

Paul Featherstone

Founder, Care Professional Organisation

Professional recognition must become a central pillar of reform

Adult social care is once again at the forefront of public debate across the United Kingdom. Governments are considering how best to reform services in response to increasing demand, changing demographics, workforce shortages and growing financial pressures.

Much of the discussion rightly focuses on funding, workforce capacity, integration with health services and improving outcomes for people who draw upon care and support. These are essential components of reform. However, another issue receives far less attention despite underpinning many of the sector's challenges: the professional recognition of the care workforce.

Across the UK, hundreds of thousands of people dedicate their working lives to supporting older people, disabled people and those living with complex health conditions. Despite the complexity, responsibility and value of their work, care professionals remain among the least professionally recognised workforces in public service.

Professional recognition is not simply about status. It is about creating a culture in which care professionals are trusted, supported, accountable and committed to continuing development. It can strengthen public confidence, professional identity, recruitment, retention and standards.

If governments are serious about creating sustainable, high-quality care systems, professional recognition must be treated as part of the solution rather than as an optional addition.

THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION

The future of adult social care will not be secured by reforming services alone. It also requires recognition, support and professionalisation of the people who deliver them.

Recognition is about standards, identity and confidence

Professional recognition is about far more than status. It is about creating a culture in which care professionals are recognised, trusted, supported, accountable and committed to continual learning throughout their careers.

When a workforce has a strong professional identity, individuals are more likely to see their work as part of a career rather than as a series of jobs. Shared standards, ethical expectations, continuing professional development and independent professional representation create a sense of belonging that extends beyond any one employer.

This matters to the public as well as to the workforce. People drawing upon care and support should be able to have confidence that those working with them understand their responsibilities, commit to professional standards and continue to develop their knowledge and practice.

RECOGNITION	The contribution and responsibility of care professionals are understood.
IDENTITY	Individuals see themselves as members of a wider profession.
PRIDE	Professional belonging strengthens confidence and commitment.
RETENTION	People are more likely to build lasting careers in care.
BETTER OUTCOMES	A stable, developing workforce supports higher-quality care.

Reform is incomplete without recognition

Current discussions about adult social care often concentrate on four broad priorities: funding, workforce capacity, quality and integration. Each is essential. Yet professional recognition underpins them all.

FUNDING	WORKFORCE CAPACITY	QUALITY	INTEGRATION	PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION
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Without professional recognition, it becomes significantly harder to attract talented people into care, retain experienced staff, encourage continuing professional development, embed standards, strengthen public confidence and create a positive professional identity.

Professional recognition should therefore not be viewed as an optional extra or a branding exercise. It is part of the infrastructure needed to create a sustainable, confident and respected care profession.

It also provides a bridge between workforce reform and public benefit. Recognition is meaningful only when it helps professionals develop, understand their responsibilities and deliver better care to the people who rely upon them.

Funding matters. Integration matters. Reform matters. But without professional recognition, the structure remains incomplete.

Professional recognition can be strengthened through more than one route

Professional recognition is sometimes assumed to require statutory regulation. In reality, professionalisation can be supported through a combination of regulation, voluntary registration, professional membership, ethical codes, recognised standards and continuing professional development.

These mechanisms perform different functions. Regulation protects the public by setting legal requirements and defining who may undertake particular activities. Professional bodies help define good practice, promote ethics, support learning and build professional identity. Voluntary registers can provide additional assurance by demonstrating that individuals have met defined standards and agreed to professional accountability.

The appropriate balance will differ across the four nations of the UK, reflecting their distinct systems of regulation and workforce development. The central principle, however, is shared: professional recognition should be treated as a continuing journey of development, accountability and excellence rather than as a single regulatory destination.

REGULATION	Legal protection, minimum requirements and public safeguards.
PROFESSIONAL BODIES	Standards, ethics, professional identity, representation and development.
VOLUNTARY REGISTERS	Visible commitment to defined standards and accountability.
CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT	Ongoing learning, reflection and improvement throughout a career.

Belonging to a profession must mean more than holding a job title

One of the defining characteristics of any profession is professional identity. People are more likely to remain when they feel they belong to something larger than their individual employer.

Professional identity develops through shared values, recognised standards, ethical practice, continuing learning, peer support and independent professional representation. These elements encourage people to see themselves not simply as employees, but as members of a profession committed to high-quality care.

Professional bodies can support that identity by providing continuity across employers, roles and stages of a career. They create a shared home for professional expectations, learning, recognition and collective voice.

From filling vacancies to building careers

The language used about the social care workforce often centres on shortages and vacancies. Those pressures are real, but treating the challenge only as a need to fill posts risks overlooking the deeper question of why people should choose care as a long-term career.

Governments and employers can fill vacancies. Professions build careers. A career offers identity, progression, recognised competence, development and a sense of belonging. Professional recognition helps connect these elements and gives people a reason not only to enter care, but to remain and grow within it.

A sector rich in purpose must also offer progression and recognition

Across the United Kingdom, social care faces one of its greatest long-term challenges: attracting, developing and retaining the workforce needed to meet growing demand. At the same time, many young people continue to struggle to find meaningful employment and careers that offer purpose, progression and long-term opportunity.

These two challenges should prompt an important question: why does a sector that touches every community and supports millions of people still struggle to attract enough people to build their future within it?

The answer is not simply about pay, although fair reward remains essential. Nor is it solely about working conditions. It is also about how social care is perceived.

For too long, care has been viewed primarily as a job rather than a profession. It is often seen as something people “fall into” rather than actively aspire to. This perception fails to reflect modern social care, where professionals exercise judgement, safeguard people, support independence and carry significant responsibility.

Younger generations are increasingly looking for careers that provide more than a salary. They want work offering purpose, opportunities for development, a sense of belonging and professional identity. Social care unquestionably provides purpose, yet it has too often failed to communicate progression, professionalism and recognition.

Professional recognition can help change that narrative. When care professionals are supported by standards, continuing development, ethical practice and independent representation, social care becomes more than employment. It becomes a career that people can be proud to choose and remain committed to throughout their working lives.

This is not only about attracting younger people. It is equally about retaining the experience, knowledge and leadership of those already working in care. A profession that recognises and invests in its people fosters pride, stronger identity and commitment, benefiting professionals, employers and, most importantly, people who rely upon care and support.

Professional recognition alone will not solve every workforce challenge. Competitive pay, good leadership, positive workplace cultures and genuine opportunities for progression remain essential. Recognition provides a foundation upon which those ambitions can be built.

As governments across the UK consider the future of adult social care, there is an opportunity to move beyond viewing workforce pressures simply as vacancies to be filled. The focus should be on building a profession that attracts talented people, supports lifelong careers and earns the recognition it deserves.

Social care must not only recruit tomorrow's workforce; it must build a profession they are proud to join.

Reform does not need to begin from scratch

Across the UK, professional infrastructure already exists and continues to evolve through the work of regulators, independent professional bodies, employers, education providers and sector partners.

Future reform presents an opportunity to recognise, strengthen and work alongside that infrastructure. Doing so would complement - not replace - existing regulation, inspection and workforce development arrangements.

The precise arrangements will differ between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, each nation has an interest in building public confidence, strengthening professional identity and ensuring that people working in care have access to standards, development and representation.

Professional recognition should therefore be seen as an investment in the long-term sustainability of the profession itself. It offers a practical route to improve how care is understood, how careers are built and how the public can be assured of professional commitment.

The CPO's contribution

The Care Professional Organisation is an independent professional body working to advance the recognition and development of care professionals. Its work includes professional membership, education, continuing professional development, wellbeing support, ethical standards and the Care Professional Register.

The CPO does not argue that one organisation or one mechanism can resolve the workforce challenge. It offers its experience and developing infrastructure as a constructive contribution to a much wider national conversation.

Five principles for future reform

1

Recognise professional identity

Professional identity should be recognised as an essential component of workforce reform. It strengthens public confidence, supports recruitment and retention, and encourages commitment to high standards.

2

Support independent professional bodies

Independent professional bodies contribute to standards, ethics, continuing development, professional identity and workforce voice. Their role should be recognised within a mature care profession.

3

Recognise the contribution of voluntary registers

Appropriately governed voluntary registers can provide assurance that registrants have committed to defined standards, ethical practice and continuing professional development.

4

Promote lifelong professional development

Continuing development should be recognised as a defining characteristic of professional practice. Investment in learning benefits practitioners, employers and people receiving care and support.

5

Ensure the workforce has a voice

Future reform should be shaped not only



for care professionals, but with them. Those delivering care every day bring invaluable insight into what works and what must improve.

CONCLUSION

A recognised profession is part of better care

The future of adult social care will rightly be judged by the quality of care experienced by people who rely upon services.

Achieving that ambition depends upon the people who deliver care every day.

Professional recognition is not about prestige. It is about creating the conditions in which care professionals are recognised, supported and empowered to deliver the highest possible standards of care.

It is not a substitute for fair pay, good employment, effective leadership or sustainable funding. It is a necessary complement to them - helping to create identity, accountability, confidence and careers.

Funding matters. Integration matters. Reform matters. But without professional recognition, one of the foundations of a sustainable care system will remain incomplete.

**Professional recognition is not an optional extra.
It is the missing pillar of adult social care reform.**

Care Professional Organisation



The Care Professional Organisation (CPO) is an independent professional body dedicated to advancing the professional recognition of the adult social care workforce.

Through professional membership, education, continuing professional development, wellbeing support, ethical standards and the Care Professional Register, the CPO works to strengthen professional identity, promote excellence in practice and champion the interests of care professionals.

The Care Professional Register is a voluntary register developed to provide a visible commitment to professional standards, ethical conduct and continuing development. The Register is currently progressing through the Professional Standards Authority's Accredited Registers programme.

CARE PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION

www.careprofessionalorganisation.co.uk

Professionalising the care workforce through recognition, standards and development.

First edition published July 2026. This paper presents the policy position of the Care Professional Organisation and is intended to contribute constructively to public and sector debate.