THE CPO PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION SERIES

CPO CARE PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION

What Is in a Name? Establishing a Professional Identity for Adult Social Care

A position paper from the Care Professional Organisation

THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION

"Care Professional" should become the nationally recognised professional identity of the adult social care workforce, sitting alongside — rather than replacing — occupational job titles and the everyday language chosen by people who draw on care and support.

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“A National Care Service should not only organise services nationally. It should recognise the people who deliver them as members of a profession.”

Care Professional Organisation

This paper develops the argument made in the CPO’s first position paper, Professional Recognition is the Missing Pillar of Adult Social Care Reform. It proposes a national professional identity and a clear terminology framework for the adult social care workforce in England.

FOREWORD

Why names, identity and recognition matter

Language shapes how work is understood. In adult social care, the words used to describe the workforce influence public perception, professional confidence, recruitment, career ambition and the value society places on the work itself.

The term “carer” is familiar, widely used and often chosen naturally by people who receive support. It also carries warmth, trust and human connection. Those qualities should not be dismissed. However, the same term is used for family members, friends and other unpaid carers, as well as for people employed to provide care and support. Its breadth can obscure the distinction between an important personal relationship and skilled professional practice.

The challenge is therefore not to prohibit everyday language or impose a single job title. It is to create clarity. Care Worker, Support Worker, Personal Assistant, Enhanced Care Worker and many other titles describe particular jobs. “Care Professional” can describe the shared professional identity that connects them.

This paper proposes that government should make that identity a significant part of adult social care reform in England and of the development of a National Care Service. National standards will be stronger when they are connected to a recognised professional community, shared ethical expectations, continuing development and visible accountability.

The proposal is evolutionary rather than disruptive. It respects the language used by people who draw on care and support, preserves the flexibility employers need in naming roles, and creates a clearer public distinction between unpaid caring and paid professional practice.

Paul Featherstone
Founder, Care Professional Organisation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A National Care Service needs a national professional identity

The Government has committed to building a National Care Service in England, underpinned by national standards. At the same time, the Care Workforce Pathway now provides a universal career structure that sets out the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required across adult social care roles.

These are important developments. Yet one element remains unresolved: the workforce still lacks a clear, nationally recognised professional identity that is distinct from individual job titles and from the broad term “carer”.

The CPO proposes a simple three-part model:

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY	Care Professional: the overarching designation for a person who delivers paid adult social care and support in accordance with recognised standards, values and responsibilities.
OCCUPATIONAL TITLE	Care Worker, Support Worker, Personal Assistant, Enhanced Care Worker, Senior Care Worker and other titles that describe a person’s particular role, responsibilities or setting.
EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIP	Carer: a familiar and legitimate term that may be used by a person receiving support, and a general term particularly associated with family, unpaid or informal caring.

This approach does not seek to control how people speak. Nor does it require employers to abandon familiar job titles. It establishes a professional identity above those titles, in the same way that a broad profession can contain many roles, specialisms and employment settings.

THE POLICY ASK

Government should recognise “Care Professional” within the design of the National Care Service, commission a co-produced national framework defining professional identity, occupational titles, standards and routes to recognition, and formally establish the role of an independent professional body to steward that framework. The CPO should be invited to demonstrate its readiness to fulfil that role through an open, accountable and public-interest process.

One word is being asked to carry too many meanings

“Carer” can describe a spouse supporting a partner, an adult child caring for a parent, a friend providing unpaid help, a paid homecare worker, a residential care worker or a support worker. Each contribution matters, but they are not the same relationship and do not carry the same employment, competence or accountability framework.

The result is ambiguity. The public may not readily distinguish between informal caring and professional practice. People employed in care may find that the complexity of their work is reduced to a generic label. Family and unpaid carers may also feel that their distinct role and experience are blurred with those of the paid workforce.

The problem is not the word itself

The CPO is not arguing that “carer” is an inappropriate term in all circumstances. It is often the language chosen by people who draw on care and support, and that choice should be respected. The concern is whether a single broad term can adequately express professional knowledge, judgement, accountability and development.

Job titles alone cannot create a profession

The sector contains many occupational titles. These titles evolve according to service model, setting, employer and the preferences of people receiving support. That flexibility is valuable, but it means no single job title can provide a common identity across the workforce.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

Language can describe three different things: the relationship a person experiences, the job an employee performs, and the profession to which the practitioner belongs. Adult social care needs language for all three.

Relationship, occupation and profession should be distinguished

The following framework is proposed as a basis for national consultation and co-production. It is intended to clarify meaning, not to restrict the language individuals choose to use.

TERM	STATUS	PROPOSED DEFINITION
Care Professional	Professional identity	A person engaged in paid adult social care or support who applies recognised knowledge, skills, values and behaviours; works in a person-centred and ethical way; is accountable for their practice; and maintains their competence through learning and development.
Carer	Everyday / relational term	A person who provides care or support because of a family, personal or informal relationship. The term may also be used in everyday speech by a person receiving support to describe a paid worker.
Unpaid Carer / Family Carer	Specific relational status	A family member, friend or other person who provides unpaid care or support outside a paid employment relationship.
Care Worker	Occupational title	A paid worker who provides practical, personal and emotional care to enable people to live safely, with dignity and as independently as possible.
Support Worker	Occupational title	A paid worker who works alongside a person to promote choice, independence, participation, inclusion and achievement of personally defined outcomes.
Personal Assistant	Occupational title	A person employed directly, or through an arrangement controlled by the individual, to provide personalised care and support in accordance with that person's choices and priorities.
Enhanced Care Worker	Occupational title / career level	A care professional who undertakes additional or more complex responsibilities and demonstrates enhanced knowledge and competence within an agreed scope of practice.
Senior Care /	Occupational title / career	An experienced care professional with

TERM	STATUS	PROPOSED DEFINITION
Support Worker	level	additional responsibility for coordination, mentoring, supervision, quality or practice leadership.

These definitions should be tested with people who draw on care and support, unpaid carers, the workforce, employers, commissioners, trade unions, professional bodies and organisations representing different communities and service models.

Professional identity must be grounded in practice, not branding

“Care Professional” should not be a cosmetic re-labelling of existing work. A credible professional identity must describe the standards, responsibilities and conduct expected of those who use it.

PROPOSED DEFINITION

A Care Professional is a person who delivers paid, person-centred adult care and support; applies recognised knowledge, skills, values and professional judgement; promotes rights, dignity, choice, wellbeing and independence; is accountable for their conduct and practice; and commits to continuing learning and development.

Core characteristics

PERSON-CENTRED	Works with the individual, respecting their voice, rights, preferences, culture, relationships and desired outcomes.
SKILLED	Applies knowledge and practical competence appropriate to the role, including recognition of risk, safeguarding and changes in need.
ETHICAL	Acts with integrity, compassion, respect, honesty and appropriate professional boundaries.
ACCOUNTABLE	Understands responsibility for decisions and actions, works within competence and raises concerns when necessary.
DEVELOPMENTAL	Maintains and extends competence through reflective practice, supervision, learning and continuing professional development.
COLLABORATIVE	Works effectively with families, unpaid carers, colleagues and health, housing and community partners while preserving the person’s voice.

This definition is deliberately broad enough to include different service models and occupational roles, but specific enough to distinguish professional practice from the general act of caring.

The professional identity should sit above role categories

The Care Workforce Pathway provides a strong foundation for a professional identity. It defines role categories and the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours associated with them. The CPO proposal does not replace that pathway; it gives the people progressing through it a shared identity.

Under this model, a person may enter the pathway as "new to care", work as a Care Worker or Support Worker, progress to an Enhanced Care Worker or Practice Leader role, and retain the overarching identity of Care Professional throughout their career.

NATIONAL FRAMEWORK	The Care Workforce Pathway defines career structure, role categories and expected capability.
PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY	Care Professional provides the shared identity connecting those roles across employers and settings.
PROFESSIONAL ASSURANCE	Standards, ethical commitments, continuing development and an appropriately governed register provide visible evidence of professional commitment.
EMPLOYER JOB TITLE	Employers retain flexibility to use titles that accurately describe services, responsibilities and local context.

THE ADVANTAGE

The pathway answers: "What role do I perform and what do I need to know?" Professional identity answers: "What profession do I belong to and what standards do I uphold?"

National standards require a workforce capable of carrying them

A National Care Service should do more than create consistency in access, commissioning or service standards. It should establish the workforce infrastructure needed to deliver those ambitions.

National service standards cannot be separated from the people who apply them in homes, care homes, supported living services and communities. A clear professional identity would help translate national standards into individual practice, accountability and development.

The CPO proposes that professional identity should be embedded through five functions

RECOGNITION	Formally recognise the contribution, skill and responsibility of the paid adult social care workforce.
STANDARDS	Connect the professional identity to nationally agreed practice, ethical and conduct expectations.
DEVELOPMENT	Link professional identity to the Care Workforce Pathway, qualifications, supervision and continuing professional development.
ASSURANCE	Create proportionate and inclusive routes through which individuals can demonstrate commitment to standards, including voluntary registration.
VOICE	Ensure care professionals participate directly in the design, governance and continuing development of the National Care Service.

This should complement—not substitute for—fair pay, secure employment, sustainable funding, strong leadership and safe staffing. Professional recognition cannot compensate for poor employment conditions, but reform will remain incomplete without it.

Professional identity requires independent stewardship

A national professional identity cannot be sustained by terminology alone. It requires an institution with the independence, legitimacy and capability to define what the identity means, maintain its standards and develop it in the public interest.

Government sets policy and legislation. Regulators oversee providers and statutory requirements. Employers organise services, employ staff and manage performance. Trade unions represent workers in employment matters. Each has an essential role, but none is designed primarily to hold and develop the shared identity, ethics and standards of a profession across employers and settings.

That is the distinctive function of an independent professional body. Adult social care should have professional infrastructure comparable in purpose—although proportionate to the sector—to that available to other recognised workforces.

DEFINE	Develop and maintain the national definition of Care Professional and the standards, values and ethical expectations associated with it.
ASSURE	Provide proportionate, accessible and portable professional assurance, including an appropriately governed register and routes that recognise experience and competence.
DEVELOP	Support continuing professional development, reflective practice, professional learning and career-long maintenance of competence.
REPRESENT	Provide an independent professional voice for care professionals in national policy, reform and public debate.
ENGAGE	Ensure people who draw on care and support, unpaid carers, practitioners, employers and system partners contribute to the continuing development of standards.
PROTECT	Act in the public interest through transparent governance, ethical expectations, appropriate concerns processes and clear separation from employer and provider interests.

The role proposed for the Care Professional Organisation

The CPO believes that this professional-body function should be formally recognised within the development of the National Care Service. It also believes that the Care Professional

Organisation should put itself forward to fulfil that role, subject to transparent assessment, robust governance, meaningful co-production and appropriate external scrutiny.

The CPO has been established for this purpose. Its existing and developing infrastructure includes professional membership, education, continuing professional development, ethical standards, professional advocacy and the Care Professional Register. These provide foundations on which a nationally recognised professional body can be built.

This is not a claim that professional identity should be owned by one organisation or developed without the sector. Professional standards must be co-produced and held in trust for the profession and the public. Recognition of the CPO should therefore be linked to clear tests of independence, accountability, inclusion, competence and public benefit.

THE CPO PROPOSITION
Government should recognise the need for an independent professional body for adult social care and invite the Care Professional Organisation to demonstrate, through an open and accountable process, its readiness to define and steward the Care Professional identity, maintain professional standards and support the profession in the public interest.

Change should be co-produced, proportionate and achievable

1 Commission a national conversation
The Department of Health and Social Care should convene people who draw on care and support, unpaid carers, workers, employers, trade unions, professional bodies, commissioners and educators to test the proposed terminology and standards.

2 Adopt Care Professional as an overarching identity
Government should recognise the term within National Care Service workforce policy while protecting the continued use of appropriate occupational job titles.

3 Publish a national professional framework
The framework should define the identity, values, ethical expectations, scope principles, accountability and commitment to continuing development associated with being a Care Professional.

4 Align the identity with existing workforce architecture
Implementation should build on the Care Workforce Pathway, the Care Certificate, qualifications, apprenticeships and employer development systems

	rather than create unnecessary duplication.
5	Establish the professional-body function Government should define the governance, independence, capability and public-interest criteria required of the professional body responsible for stewarding the Care Professional identity and standards.
6	Invite the CPO to demonstrate readiness The Care Professional Organisation should be invited to put forward its professional membership, standards, CPD and register infrastructure for transparent assessment against those criteria, with co-production and external scrutiny.
7	Develop proportionate professional assurance Government should work with the recognised professional body and appropriately governed registers to create accessible, portable and credible recognition, initially through voluntary routes.
8	Evaluate impact before considering protection Any future protected designation or statutory mechanism should follow evidence, consultation and impact assessment, with particular attention to workforce supply, equality, affordability and unintended barriers.

Professionalisation must not become exclusion

Professional recognition will succeed only if it is designed with the workforce rather than imposed upon it. It must recognise experience, avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and remain accessible to people entering care through different routes.

CO-PRODUCED	People who draw on care and support and members of the workforce should have equal influence over language, standards and implementation.
INCLUSIVE	Recognition should value experience and competence, provide accessible routes for migrant workers and avoid creating unnecessary academic barriers.
PORTABLE	Professional status and evidence of development should follow the individual between employers and settings.
PROPORTIONATE	Requirements should reflect role, risk and responsibility and should not duplicate employer, commissioner or regulator processes.
AFFORDABLE	The costs of recognition and development should not fall unfairly on low-paid workers.
EVIDENCE-LED	The impact on quality, recruitment, retention, confidence, equality and workforce supply should be independently evaluated.

What this proposal does not mean

It does not require people receiving support to stop saying “my carer”. It does not diminish unpaid carers. It does not require every employer to use identical job titles. It does not claim that a new name alone will resolve low pay, poor conditions or systemic underfunding. It proposes a common professional identity as one component of wider reform.

Eight actions for government and the sector

1	Make professional identity a National Care Service objective Include workforce professional recognition within the purpose and design principles of the National Care Service.
2	Recognise “Care Professional” nationally Use it as the overarching professional identity for paid adult social care practitioners, alongside existing occupational titles.
3	Agree a shared terminology framework Clarify the distinct uses of Care Professional, carer, unpaid carer, Care Worker, Support Worker, Personal Assistant and related titles.
4	Co-produce the professional definition and standards Ensure people drawing on care, unpaid carers and frontline workers shape the framework from the outset.
5	Integrate recognition with the Care Workforce Pathway Make professional identity visible across entry, progression, enhanced practice and leadership.
6	Formally establish an independent professional-body function Define the institution responsible for stewarding professional identity, ethics, standards, CPD, professional assurance and the voice of the profession.
7	Invite the CPO to put itself forward for recognition Assess the Care Professional Organisation transparently against agreed governance, independence, capability, inclusion and public-benefit criteria, recognising the infrastructure it has already established.
8	Create a route map for implementation Set out pilots, incentives, evaluation, funding and a timetable for national adoption, without imposing premature statutory barriers.

CONCLUSION

A name should express the profession we intend to build

The language of care carries history, affection and familiarity. It should not be changed carelessly or dictated without the involvement of those who use and experience it. But language also carries status, expectation and meaning.

“Carer” will remain an important and legitimate word. It describes personal relationships, unpaid contribution and, in everyday conversation, the person who provides support. Occupational titles such as Care Worker, Support Worker and Personal Assistant will also remain necessary because they describe different jobs and settings.

What is missing is the term that describes the profession itself.

Care Professional offers that identity. Properly defined and connected to standards, ethics, accountability and development, it can strengthen public confidence, workforce pride and career belonging. It can complement the Care Workforce Pathway and give the National Care Service a professional foundation as well as an organisational one.

This is not simply a proposal to rename the workforce. It is a proposal to recognise it.

A profession also requires an independent institution capable of safeguarding its identity and standards beyond any one employer, provider or government programme. The CPO is ready to put itself forward for that responsibility—not as the owner of the profession, but as its accountable steward, working with care professionals, people who draw on support and the wider sector.

A National Care Service should be built with care professionals, delivered by care professionals and sustained by a profession that people are proud to join.

Sources informing this position

Care Professional Organisation (2026). Professional Recognition is the Missing Pillar of Adult Social Care Reform, Position Paper No. 1.

Department of Health and Social Care (2026). Care Workforce Pathway for Adult Social Care: Overview. Updated 16 July 2026.

Department of Health and Social Care (2026). "Care or Support Worker" Role Category. Updated 16 July 2026.

Department of Health and Social Care (2025). Independent Commission into Adult Social Care: Terms of Reference. The commission forms part of the steps towards a National Care Service and is tasked with recommending a phased route to reform.

HM Government (2025–2026). Government statements on the development of a National Care Service underpinned by national standards and focused on quality, joined-up services, choice and control.

Care Professional Organisation. Care Professional Register and professional recognition framework.

This paper is a policy proposal intended to contribute constructively to the national conversation. Definitions and implementation arrangements should be subject to formal co-production, consultation, equality analysis and evaluation.

ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

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. The CPO is seeking formal recognition as the professional body responsible for stewarding the Care Professional identity, standards and professional development in the public interest.

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.

CARE PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION

www.careprofessionalorganisation.co.uk

Professionalising the care workforce through recognition, standards and development.

Revised draft prepared August 2026 for submission to the Independent Commission into Adult Social Care. This paper presents the policy position of the Care Professional Organisation and is intended to contribute constructively to public and sector debate.