



## Extended Research Article

# Attracting, recruiting, and retaining registered nurses and care workers in care homes: the REACH realist review

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## Scientific summary

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# Scientific summary

## Background

Social care staff shortages are having a detrimental impact across the health and social care system. There are reports of care homes closing, stopping nursing services, and there are care homes not admitting new residents because of challenges with staff shortages.

*Research aim:* to develop an explanatory framework (underpinned by programme theories) of effective strategies to attract, recruit and retain registered nurses (RNs) and care workers working in care homes.

## Research objectives

1. Identify strategies to attract, recruit and retain staff, and develop initial programme theories (IPTs).
2. Identify the outcomes underpinning effective (and ineffective) strategies.
3. Identify the context and underlying mechanisms that generate outcomes.
4. Search for evidence which tests and refines theories.
5. Identify and explain the cost (e.g. time) and consequences (outcomes) of theories.
6. Bring the theories together into an overarching explanatory framework.
7. Develop guidance explaining how to successfully attract, recruit and retain RNs and care workers.
8. Prioritise RNs' and care workers' voices as experts throughout the process.

## Methods

A realist synthesis approach was used to identify strategies used to attract, recruit, and retain staff, and develop programme theories explaining how and why the strategies work, for whom, the conditions needed, outcomes to be expected, and the costs involved. Four steps were followed:

1. During the first step, IPTs were developed using data gathered from:
  - a. theory gleaning interviews with RNs ( $n = 5$ ) and care workers ( $n = 8$ ), exploring why staff were attracted to care home work, experiences of recruitment and induction, and the reasons why he/she intends to stay or leave.
  - b. consultation meetings with sector stakeholders ( $n = 10$ ). Stakeholders commented on the scope of the review, outcomes underpinning attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff, the conditions needed, contextual factors and the staff groups to consider.
  - c. scoping literature search on academic databases and Google (Google Inc., Mountain View, CA, USA) searches retrieved 1033 records of which 50 records contained relevant data.

The data were used to identify practical strategies used to attract, recruit, and retain staff ( $n = 22$ ), and IPTs were developed for each. The 22 IPTs were reviewed by the study team and after discussing the clarity/logic and the relevance/importance, the IPTs were reduced to 15 IPTs. The 15 IPTs were reviewed by sector stakeholders ( $n = 34$ ) and 10 IPTs prioritised for further testing and refining (steps 2–4). The prioritised IPTs were focused on staff recruitment and retention (and not on attracting staff) – these were taken forward for further testing and developing.

2. During step 2, academic databases and social care websites were searched for evidence.
3. Step 3 involved screening/selecting articles from the records retrieved during step 2, and extracting and analysing data from included articles. When screening records, the rigour and relevance of articles were rated. To assess rigour, the appropriateness of methods used in research, and the plausibility and transparency of grey literature were assessed. When assessing relevance, articles were rated on a scale, and only *very relevant* articles were included ( $n = 153$ ). Very relevant articles were those containing content relevant to one or more IPT(s) and with content

describing causal linkages between two or more components of IPTs. Data analysis involved extracting data with causal linkages and beginning analysis with assigning codes using both inductive and deductive reasoning.

4. During step 4 the data were brought together to test and refine the IPTs, using the evidence to shape, refine and provide a narrative synthesis around each strategy – describing what the strategy involves, why and how it works, for whom, the conditions needed, the expected outcomes, and the associated costs. Programme theory drafts were sense checked and refined by sector stakeholders, using both online and in person meetings in care homes. The final programme theories were examined side by side to examine if and how the individual strategies/programme theories interacted. The links between strategies (and accompanying programme theories) were illustrated using an explanatory framework. Existing and established human resource (HR) and employee management theories were used to further explain the explanatory framework.

## Results

During step 1, strategies used to attract, recruit, and retain RNs and care workers in care homes were identified and IPTs developed for each ( $n = 22$ ). Ten IPTs were prioritised for testing and refinement, these focused on recruitment and retention: staff recognition, flexible working, career development, salary package, early investment, induction, continuous feedback, caring community, effective interviewing and listening to all staff. From the focused literature searches, 153 records were rated as very relevant and used to test and refine the prioritised IPTs. Throughout the testing and refining process, the theories were collated and combined into five: effective interviewing, career development, reward and recognition, promoting work–life balance, and caring conversations. These strategies and programme theories are summarised below.

### Effective interviewing

Staff trained/experienced in interviewing create a professional and welcoming environment. Interviewers assess the applicants' values, learn about the applicant and set realistic expectations of the job role. This offers knowledge, awareness and information to the applicant about the job role, and interviewers assess their suitability and motivations. This develops confidence in the decisions made (for both the interviewer and applicant) and the applicant starts to build a connection to the care home. This is particularly important for applicants new to care, whose first language is not English, and/or if they lack confidence. Resources needed include trained interviewers, their time for carrying out interviews, the time of involving residents, families and front-line staff, interview templates, and realistic job previews.

### Reward and recognition

Using relational strategies (e.g. positive reinforcement, listening to care workers and 'pitching in'), well-being strategies (e.g. promoting self-care and well-being ambassadors) and financial strategies (e.g. paid time off, perks, salary increases) in an inclusive and equal way helps to retain staff through increasing motivation, productivity and job satisfaction. This strategy helps staff to feel supported, listened to, respected, and valued, and adequately compensated. All staff benefit from this, and in particular staff with poor mental health and staff new to care work. Resources needed include staff time for relational strategies, training for developing well-being ambassadors (and time for carrying out this role), resources for accessing external mental health support, and funding (and staff time needed to administer) for providing financial strategies.

### Promoting work–life balance

Providing flexible working options (e.g. shorter shifts) to accommodate different personal circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities outside of work) helps develop job satisfaction and commitment, and reduces staff absence. This provides a sense of work–life balance and staff feel listened to, valued and respected. This strategy works when care providers work on understanding and accommodating individual staff circumstances in a fair and inclusive way, have

policies/procedures focused on staff well-being, and when management staff are trained in enacting the policies/procedures. Adequate staffing levels and having staff available to cover shifts are also needed for this strategy to work well. Resources needed include flexible working policies, senior staff time to facilitate, co-ordinate, and put policies into practice, and funds may also be required for arranging staff cover.

## Career development

New starters require comprehensive inductions, and early career staff develop competencies through formal courses and on-the-job learning. At mid-advanced career, staff mentor early career colleagues, while continuing to refresh competencies with formal courses and advanced learning in specific topics. Supporting staff to pursue additional qualifications can also lead to staff promotion. Giving staff opportunities for career development helps to prepare staff and develop commitment and job satisfaction. This also helps promote quality of care for residents. Care home managers are key to giving staff access, protected time, and support to undertake career development opportunities. Resources to consider include the cost/fees of formal courses, support for front-line staff undergoing training, senior staff time for organising and co-ordinating formal training, time away from care duties, and the subsequent time/support needed to put learning into practice. Front-line staff taking up a mentor role require time and support for training for/carrying out the role, and formal recognition for taking on additional responsibility.

## Caring conversations

Regular informal conversations with care home managers create opportunities for staff to share concerns and seek support, and in turn staff respond to and act on the feedback. This leads to enhanced performance, emotional well-being, and job satisfaction. Managers have a key role in enabling this strategy to work. Managers need to (a) be visible, available and approachable; (b) role model positive and supportive working environments; and (c) ensure all staff feel included. Adequate staffing levels are also needed, and staff relationships are built through staff consistency. All staff benefit from this, and in particular, those new to care homes, younger staff, and staff with poor mental health. The resources needed for this strategy include staff (management and frontline) time, skills (for management staff), and space for engaging in caring conversations.

## The REACH explanatory framework

These strategies do not operate independently; they interact and work together. Across four strategies, a sense of inclusion and fairness and supportive leadership were key for enabling these to work: career development opportunities, promoting work-life balance, reward and recognition and caring conversations. Effective interviewing ensures new recruits have accurate expectations of the work, and loyalty is developed through fulfilling the 'psychological contract' set at interview. Opportunities for career development, rewarding and recognising staff, providing flexible working options, and supporting staff with caring conversations all contribute to staff feeling listened to, respected, and valued, which in turn develops job satisfaction. These strategies also help to provide staff with positive experiences, which are reciprocated over time with staff commitment and loyalty. In addition, supporting staff with caring conversations and providing opportunities for career development contribute towards empowering staff.

## Conclusions

This is the first realist synthesis of the literature in this field. We have identified real world practical strategies used to recruit and retain RNs and care workers in care homes: effective interviewing, career development, reward and recognition, promoting work-life balance and caring conversations. We have used existing evidence (and stakeholder input) to explain how and why these strategies work, the conditions needed, the outcomes to be expected, and the costs involved. Where evidence was available, we also describe the staff characteristics for whom these strategies are important.

The care home (and the wider social care) sector has been a difficult policy area for many governments over the past 30 years, and for this reason there is a history of being overlooked by policy-makers. It is imperative that evidence-based solutions developed to address the challenges faced by the sector are shared widely with central government and policy decision-makers. The strategies put forward are underpinned by a large, diverse and international evidence base. Providing solutions based on evidence is important for future policy-making, commissioning, funding and impact. Understanding how to attract new staff to the social care workforce remains an important research gap.

## Study registration

This study is registered as PROSPERO CRD42021261112.

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