

RCN Internal Summary – Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on Skilled Worker visas

1. Background

- 1.1. This report serves as a follow-up and is written on the basis of a report from the National Audit Office (NAO) released in March 2025. The RCN welcomed the findings of the NAO report, especially regarding the need for a joined-up approach to tackling migrant worker exploitation, strengthening sponsor compliance, and linking immigration and skills policy more closely.
- 1.2. The RCN's submission to the PAC called for a more fundamental reappraisal of the visa sponsorship system to increase flexibility for migrant workers and protect them from exploitation and destitution. The RCN continues to call for an urgent, government-led investigation into exploitation in the social care sector.

2. Exploitation of migrant care workers

- 2.1. **The PAC states that the Home Office opened the Skilled Worker route to care workers too quickly, without producing an impact assessment, and therefore failed to understand the risks of the sector.** Importantly, the PAC acknowledges that the sponsorship model, which the Skilled Worker system is based off, makes migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation, debt bondage, excessive working hours, amongst other forms of labour abuse.
- 2.2. **The PAC finds that the cross-government response to tackling the exploitation of migrant workers, specifically in the independent social care sector has been insufficient and, within this, the Home Office's response has been slow and ineffective.** It has not taken sufficient action to prevent exploitation in applicants' home countries and identify bogus agents, relying on sponsors complying with immigration rules. Importantly the PAC suggests that the Home Office has simply relied on sponsors' goodwill to comply with immigration rules as a preventative measure to exploitation, one which has been ineffective.
- 2.3. **Responding to widespread claims of migrants arriving in the UK without a genuine vacancy, the PAC noted that they were 'not convinced' by the Home Office's approach.** They cited evidence that sponsors who may be involved in illegal practices are less likely to comply with necessary checks and that many employers would have acquired sponsorship licenses before the Home Office tightened controls.
- 2.4. **Further, it is not clear whether arrangements to safeguard care workers whose employers' sponsor licence has been revoked—around 34,000 people—are working effectively.** The PAC understood that the Home Office works with local authorities but was unaware of how arrangements were working in practice or the adequacy of support provided. Evidence provided by the RCN obtained through a Freedom of Information request was cited to show how insufficiently the existing system was working.

Recommendations

- 2.5. The PAC recommends the Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) should: write to the Committee to provide more detail on the decision to end overseas recruitment for care workers; and work with DHSC to monitor how the route is being used during the transition period to 2028 and update the Committee on the impacts on the care sector. The RCN will monitor this correspondence and advise accordingly.
- 2.6. In response to increasing instances of exploitation in the sector, the Government has stated that the incoming Fair Work Agency, to be introduced by the Employment Rights Bill, will address such concerns. However, the agency is only expected to be established in 2026, with teething problems to be expected when amalgamating agencies. The PAC recommends that in the meantime, the Home Office work with relevant government bodies to establish an agreed response to tackling exploitation risks.

3. Management of Skilled Worker route

- 3.1. **The Home Office has not worked collaboratively with other departments to fully assess the impacts of changes to the Skilled Worker visa route on different sectors of the labour market and regions of the United Kingdom.** The Home Office forecast that it would issue 360,000 Skilled Worker visas (including dependants) over the three years to April 2024, but it issued 931,000. From when the government opened the Skilled Worker visa route in December 2020 up to the end of 2024, 1.18 million people applied to enter the United Kingdom via this route, including, 630,000 as dependants of the main applicant.
- 3.2. **The changes to immigration rules announced in the Immigration White Paper may have unforeseen consequences for domestic labour markets.** The government has recently announced the end of overseas recruitment for care workers, as part of its efforts to reduce net migration. With demand for social care to increase across the next 10 years, the PAC remains concerned about staff shortages within the sector.
- 3.3. **The Home Office does not know whether people on Skilled Worker visas are leaving the UK or staying to work illegally after their visas expire.** The evidence the Home Office use is predominantly airline passenger data, which they have not reviewed since the introduction of the route in 2020. This is particularly concerning as claims of people overstaying visas have been used to change immigration rules to deprioritise applicants from specific countries.
- 3.4. **The expansion of the Skilled Worker route saw an 80% increase in people staying permanently in the United Kingdom in 2024 compared to 2021,** and the number of people claiming asylum after entering on a Skilled Worker visa rising from 53 in 2022 to 5,300 in 2024. The Home Office reviewed the use of the route in 2022 but has not yet published its evaluation of the route, including whether it is meeting its objectives, the impact on skills shortages across different sectors of the labour market or regions of the United Kingdom, and whether the route has operated as intended.

