

POLICY ESSENTIALS: ADULT SOCIAL CARE





ABOUT

The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 39 county and unitary councils across England. We are a councillor-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of our member councils and their communities to ensure they have a strong voice with national government, and to help deliver positive change for those authorities and the residents they serve.

The CCN aims to articulate the challenges and opportunities of its member councils, alongside their priorities, to the government and other key organisations. This is primarily done through original and impactful research across areas such as adult social care, children's services, housing and planning, and local government finance.

Building on our **Guide to CCN**, our updated series of **Policy Essentials** aims to give county and unitary councillors a short and concise overview of the most important policy issues facing their councils. This includes an overview of the key service responsibilities of councils; why it is a national advocacy priority for CCN; key developments in the national policy landscape; and CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities.

This Policy Essentials is focused on **Adult Social Care**. For more information on our policy work in this area, contact:



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What role do councils play in adult social care?

Adult social care is the support and professional help provided to help adults of all ages carry out essential tasks and live comfortably. This includes adults with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, frailty, mental illnesses, and substance misuse conditions.

Local authorities have a legal duty under the Care Act 2014 to assess and meet eligible needs, provide safeguarding, and shape the local care market. The aim of adult social care is to promote independence, dignity, and wellbeing, enabling people to live as safely and independently as possible in the place and community they call home, with the people and things they love, doing the things that matter to them.

The broad terms 'working age adults' and 'older adults' are used within adult social care. These usually indicate the age groups 18-64 and 65+. While there may be perceived differences in the approaches taken to working age and older adults, there is no formal or legal separation between systems of care. Everyone aged 18+ has the same rights and entitlements within the system.

In 2024/25, 35% of people receiving long-term adult social care in England were of working age. However, the complexity of their conditions and needs mean they account for nearly two-thirds of commissioned social care costs. Adults receiving social care can be supported through a variety of services and equipment, provided both directly by councils and by a network of providers across the private and third sectors. These include:

- **Nursing Care.** Specialised nursing support provided in a care home.
- **Residential Care.** Support provided in a care home.
- **Supported Living.** Accommodation with tenancy rights where care and support is provided.
- **Homecare.** Support to live independently at home and within the community.
- **Day Centres and supervised activities.**
- **Aids and home adaptations.** Equipment and installations designed to improve safety, mobility and independence.

If you have more than £23,250 in capital (including savings), then you generally fund your own care. Those with less may still be required to contribute towards the cost of care.



What are the key pressures in adult social care?

- **County areas face a tougher reality in delivering adult social care than metropolitan areas.** They have older and more dispersed populations, fragmented care markets, and higher costs of care for both working age and older adult care. Rurality and sparsity mean workforce recruitment and retention are even tougher challenges.
- **Demographic changes mean demand for care is increasing and will continue to do so.** The age structure of England's population is shifting toward older ages, and the older population is increasing. Healthy life expectancy in older age is declining, and the number of older adults living with long-term conditions is rising. The profile of need among working age adults is also changing. The percentage of people aged 16+ with at least one longstanding illness or condition has increased from 39% to 46% over the last decade.
- **Support for working age and lifelong disabled adults now accounts for two-thirds of councils' adult social care commissioned spend.** Spending for these individuals could top £17bn by 2030 – a 50% increase since 2024.
- In 2024/25, **1.4 million adults in England made 2.0 million new requests for adult social care support.** Around two-thirds (64%) of adults making new requests were aged 65+ and one-third (36%) aged 18–64.
- Of these new requests for care, **6.5% resulted in long-term care being provided.** A further 17.3% received short-term care services, and 20.0% received information and advice.
- Underpinning the increase in demand for care services has been a persistent workforce challenge, **with an estimated 65,000 vacancies in the care sector within county areas.**
- Nationally, council costs of delivering adult social care services will rise £13.3bn between 2025/26 and 2030/31. Over this period, PwC modelling shows **CCN member councils will witness the largest increase in spending pressures**, with the increase in costs totalling £6.3bn between 2025/26 and 2028/29.



What is the national policy context for adult social care?

- Over recent years, there have been welcome injections of additional funding for adult social care. However, while these have helped stabilise services, funding has been short-term, fragmented, and against a backdrop of increasing demand and significant cost pressures. More people are now receiving publicly funded long-term care than at any time in the last decade.
- All political parties recognise that adult social care needs investment and reform. Various proposals have been raised over recent decades, but ambitions have not been fully realised.
- The last substantive reform package was set out in *People At The Heart of Care* in 2021, including proposals to implement a 'cap on care costs' and new means test. However, the funding required to make the proposals deliverable was not fully identified and as such CCN reluctantly called for implementation to be delayed. The proposals were abandoned at the start of the current parliamentary term, and while CCN welcomed this decision, we have since been disappointed by the lack of concrete alternative plans.
- The Independent Commission into Adult Social Care was announced in January 2025 and is being led by Baroness Louise Casey. The Commission is set to report in two phases. The first is due by the end of 2026 and will set out the plan for how to deliver a National Care Service. The second will make longer-term recommendations for the transformation of adult social care, and will report in 2028.
- In March 2026, Baroness Casey noted: *"social care has never had its own creation moment... when the nation decided what it was for, what people should expect, or who should pay, and how"*, while highlighting the deep divides between health and social care. The Commission recommended six immediate actions, focused on dementia, motor neurone disease and adult safeguarding.
- The Casey Commission plans to facilitate a 'national conversation' on adult social care reform across the summer and autumn of 2026.
- The government's programme of local government reorganisation will also have significant impact on adult social services. CCN has set out wide-ranging evidence on the impact of excessive fragmentation and disaggregation of these services through the creation of new unitary councils at odds with the government's statutory criteria.



A spotlight on the adult social care workforce

- Adult social care faces persistent workforce challenges:
 - There are 1.6m filled posts in the adult social care workforce.
 - The vacancy rate (7.0%) is significantly higher than in the wider economy (2.4%).
 - Turnover is high, standing at 23.7%.
 - Care work remains among the lowest paid sectors in the economy.
 - Care workers with 5+ years of experience earn on average around 7p more per hour than care workers with <1 year of experience.
- The vacancy rate peaked at 10.5% in 2021/22, with international recruitment playing a large part in reducing vacancies since. It is the government's policy to improve domestic recruitment and retention in adult social care and reduce reliance on international recruitment.
- Pay and pay progression are key factors in the sector's ability to recruit and retain enough staff to meet adult social care needs. In response, the government has committed to bring in Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs) for adult social care workers.
- FPAs will set legally binding minimum pay and other terms and conditions for adult social care workers.
- The government is establishing an Adult Social Care Negotiating Body for this purpose, which will be a platform for worker representatives (unions) to negotiate with employers (providers).
- Despite employing care workers, being the largest commissioners of care in the country, and having market shaping responsibilities, there are no current plans for councils to be represented on the Negotiating Body.
- The government has earmarked £500m for improving pay, terms and conditions as part of the first fair pay agreement.



What are CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities?

CCN's Business Plan 2026/27 sets out the network's priorities for adult social care over the coming year. Our focus is on securing practicable reform through the Casey Commission, a sustainable workforce, and preventative neighbourhood and public health services. In particular, we will:

- Continue supporting the **Casey Commission** to shape proposals that **keep local government at the heart of delivery** and **recognise and respond to the challenges and opportunities for county areas**.
- **Further build the national evidence base on the unique populations, geographies, workforce and care markets of CCN members**, including producing a State of Care in Counties analysis – an analysis of relevant statutory datasets contextualised through a rapid literature review.
- **Promote a prevention-led care system with a strong focus on independence, reablement, and community-based support**, underpinned by a new phase of our research programme on working-age and lifelong disabled adults.
- **Protect and enhance preventative funding streams, especially the Better Care Fund**, by working with government to ensure reforms reflect the realities of county and rural areas, and prioritise council-led services that support independence and reduce demand.
- Continue to **support the ambition to deliver fair pay agreements** while maintaining the need for these to be **practicable, sustainable and fully funded**. County and rural areas have unique populations, geographies, workforces and care markets. It is essential that this knowledge and expertise is in the room during negotiations.
- **Continue to engage MHCLG and wider government departments on their programme of reorganisation**, advocating for evidence-based decisions and outlining the challenges of disaggregation of adult social care services. CCN will also enhance its programme of support, with an increasing focus on transition and implementation plans.

Read more about all our advocacy and research in the CCN Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27.





Reports

- CCN response to government consultation – Fair Pay Agreement Process in Adult Social Care (2026).
- Newton – Local Government Reorganisation – analysing the impact on people services (2026).
- Health and Social Care Committee Inquiry: Adult Social Care Reform – The Cost of Inaction (2025).
- Newton for CCN – The Forgotten Story of Social Care (2024).

Press Releases



- 27 January 2026 – Councils call for active role in negotiations to ensure government’s flagship care pay plan is affordable and workable
- 10 October 2025 – ‘Make or break’ for social care as councils warn of a ‘triple whammy’ of risks from government reorganisation plans
- 3 January 2025 – Independent commission on adult social care announced: CCN responds.
- 11 November 2024 – New analysis reveals two-thirds of social care commissioning budgets are spent on working age and disabled adults, as councils call for this ‘forgotten’ group not to be overlooked