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Why do people leave jobs in adult social care?

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Recruitment status
Recruiting

Overall study status
Ongoing

Condition category
Other

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[X] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
The Leavers Study is a research project commissioned by DHSC as part of the Adult Social Care Workforce Research Partnership (Care Work) and the Policy Research Unit for the Health and Social Care Workforce. Its primary purpose is to investigate why people leave jobs in adult social care (ASC) or social work, how these reasons differ across occupations and demographic groups, and what subsequent employment or career paths people choose. The study also aims to identify factors that might have encouraged people to stay in the sector.

This research is relevant to workforce sustainability, policy, and the development of strategies to strengthen recruitment and retention in social care. Findings are intended to inform ongoing efforts to support the ASC workforce and to contribute to policy discussions at national and organisational levels.

This study aims to understand why people have left the ASC sector, how this varies by priority groups and learn what motivates them in their new employment/career paths/life chapters.

Who can participate?
Adult volunteers who left key ASC roles, including social workers, residential care workers (including assistants), domiciliary care workers (including assistants), and personal assistants.

What does the study involve?
In August 2025, Ipsos sent the wave two survey to the circa 3,000 wave one participants (44%) who consented to be recontacted for future research, and who had previously taken part in a 2023 survey on the care work–related quality of life of the ASC workforce in England. Only those still working in ASC were eligible to complete the wave two survey. Ipsos asked those who had left the sector for permission to keep their names and contact details for further research (until August 2027). Those who consent and previously worked in ASC will form the eligible sampling frame for this research.

Subject to the sample size available from Ipsos wave two screening, up to 40 interviews are proposed. All interviews will be conducted by an experienced researcher. Participants will receive study information in advance and will be asked to sign a consent form. All interviews will

be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring confidentiality, removing personal identifiers and using pseudonyms. An interview topic guide has been adopted to facilitate the interviews.

The five stages of framework analysis will be followed: familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation. This approach allows themes to develop from both the research questions and narratives of participants, which is particularly useful when anticipating differences between subgroups (e.g. roles and age groups). Transcripts and field notes will be saved and analysed using NVivo.

Analyses will be conducted on the quantitative data collected through the follow-up survey of the ASC workforce. The analysis will focus on the work-related quality of life (CWRQoL) among those who have left the social care sector. In the ASCOT-Workforce questionnaire, CWRQoL is conceptualised as one question per domain, with four response options corresponding to the following outcome states: ideal state (the person's needs and preferences are met), no (unmet) needs, some (unmet) needs (impacting the person's quality of life) and high (unmet) needs (potential to impact the individual's mental, emotional or physical health). The work expects people with poor outcomes (bottom two states in each domain) in CWRQoL to be considerably more likely to experience symptoms of burnout and stress, have a higher intention to quit and ultimately be more likely to exit the sector. How CWRQoL varies will be investigated by key characteristics of care workers, such as age, ethnicity, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and job roles. This will provide valuable insight into the groups of care workers who are at a higher risk of unmet needs and thus more likely to leave the sector. Care workers' intention to leave the sector will also be examined for their reasons for doing so, and the sectors they intend to move to and ultimately enter.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
There are no risks in this study that jeopardise the personal safety of participants (previous staff working in the social care sector). This study involves semi-structured interviews. The processes for consent will ensure that participation is voluntary. The interviews will be conducted virtually (online or by telephone) and will be conducted where it is most suitable for participants.

Some participants may experience an emotional response to discussing their reasons for leaving the sector or other challenging experiences. However, evidence from our prior studies using similar qualitative methods indicates that any emotional responses (e.g. frustration or sadness) are within the range of everyday experience. Qualitative interviews can sometimes prompt difficult reflections, but many participants report the process to be helpful or cathartic. Participants may pause or stop the interview at any time, with follow-up checks if needed. The study is designed to elicit reflective accounts of ordinary professional and lived experiences, not traumatic material. The research team therefore do not consider that this study poses a risk of harmful disclosures or psychological distress beyond everyday life.

Where is the study run from?
King's College London, UK.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
The Leavers Study started on 1st October 2025 and is expected to run until 31st August 2026.

Who is funding the study?
National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Health and Social Care Delivery Research Programme, UK.

Who is the main contact?
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159860

Study information

Scientific Title
Behind the decision to leave: understanding why people stop working in adult social care and social work

Acronym
The Leavers Study

Study objectives
- To identify the primary factors influencing people's decisions to leave adult social care (ASC) or social work, and to explore which factors were most significant, including what could have been done to convince them to stay.

- To explore where individuals who leave the ASC workforce typically go, and what motivates their choice of new employment or career paths.

- To understand variations in reasons for leaving the ASC workforce across occupations (e.g. care workers, personal assistants, and social workers), demographic characteristics (e.g. age and ethnicity), and care settings (e.g. domiciliary care and residential care).

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
approved 10/09/2025, King's College London Research Ethics Committee (King's College London Research Ethics Office, 3rd Floor, 5-11 Lavington Street, London, SE1 0NZ, United Kingdom; -; rec@kcl.ac.uk), ref: MRA-24/25-51360

Primary study design
Observational

Secondary study design
Mixed methods comprising a primary qualitative interview component and a secondary analysis of participants' survey responses.

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
The potential participants are those who previously took part in a national survey in 2023 about the care work-related quality of life of the Adult Social Care (ASC) workforce in England, but have since left the social care sector.

In 2025, Ipsos sent a follow-up survey to the circa 3,000 wave one participants who consented to be recontacted for future research. Only those still working in ASC will be eligible to complete the follow-up survey. Ipsos asked those who have left the sector for permission to keep their names and contact details for further research (until August 2027). Those who consent and previously worked in social care roles will form the eligible sampling frame for the Leavers Study.

Interventions
This is a mixed-methods study with a primary qualitative data collection and secondary analysis of participants' survey responses.

Participants
In August 2025, Ipsos sent the wave two survey to the circa 3,000 wave one participants (44%) who consented to be recontacted for future research. Only those still working in ASC were eligible to complete the wave two survey. Ipsos asked those who have left the sector for

permission to keep their names and contact details for further research (until August 2027). Those who consent and previously worked in eligible direct care roles (social workers, residential care workers (including assistants), domiciliary care workers (including assistants) and personal assistants) will form the eligible sampling frame for this research. DHSC, Ipsos and the King's Data Protection Office have reviewed and approved a Data Protection Impact Assessment.

Interviews
Subject to the sample size available from Ipsos wave two screening, up to 40 interviews will be conducted. The interviews will focus on four key social care roles: social workers, residential care workers (including assistants), domiciliary care workers (including assistants), and personal assistants.

The study aims to recruit a diverse range of participants across all groups, in terms of age, sex, ethnicity and geographical region. It will seek to recruit participants across different age groups, specifically, younger age groups (aged 34 and under at wave one) and middle and older age groups (aged 35 and over at wave one). This reflects the age group bands used in the wave one analysis, oversampling for younger age groups where retention is a particular challenge and policy priority.
All interviews will be conducted by an experienced researcher. Participants will receive study information in advance and will be asked to sign a consent form. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring confidentiality, removing personal identifiers and using pseudonyms. An interview topic guide has been developed to facilitate the interviews.

Analysis
Qualitative analysis of interview data:
The study will follow the five stages of framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994): familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation. This approach allows themes to develop from both the research questions and narratives of participants, which is particularly useful when anticipating differences between subgroups (e.g. roles and age groups). Transcripts and field notes will be saved and analysed using NVivo.

Secondary analysis of survey data:
Analyses will be conducted on the quantitative data collected through the follow-up survey of the ASC workforce in England commissioned by the DHSC. The analysis will focus on the work-related quality of life (CWRQoL) among those care workers who have left the social care sector. In the ASCOT-Workforce questionnaire, CWRQoL is conceptualised as one question per domain, with four response options corresponding to the following outcome states: ideal state (the person’s needs and preferences are met), no (unmet) needs, some (unmet) needs (impacting the person’s quality of life) and high (unmet) needs (potential to impact the individual's mental, emotional or physical health). People with poor outcomes (bottom two states in each domain) would be expected in CWRQoL to be considerably more likely to experience symptoms of burnout and stress, have a higher intention to quit, and ultimately be more likely to exit the sector.

The study will investigate how CWRQoL varies by key characteristics of care workers such as age, ethnicity, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and job roles. This will provide valuable insight into the groups of care workers who are at a higher risk of unmet needs and thus more likely to leave the sector. It will also examine care workers’ intention to leave the sector, their reasons for doing so, and the sectors they intend to move to and ultimately enter. It will look at the entire sample of care workers who have left (N=90) and a sub-sample which excludes those who have left because of retirement (n=61).

Study setting
This is a single-site study sponsored by King's College London, which is responsible for all aspects of participant recruitment and data collection. Participants will be asked to take part via email invitations. All interviews will be conducted remotely, either online via Teams or by telephone, according to participant preference. Remote data collection is appropriate for this study as participants are likely to be geographically dispersed across England and may have varying availability. Conducting interviews remotely therefore supports accessibility and flexibility for participants. There are no site-specific requirements associated with this study and its activity.

Intervention Type
Not Specified

Primary outcome(s)
1. The primary factors influencing people's decisions to leave adult social care (ASC) or social work, and to explore which factors were most significant, including what could have been done to convince them to stay measured using analyses of data collected during interviews and of the quantitative data collected through the follow-up survey of the ASC workforce at one time point

Key secondary outcome(s))
1. Where individuals who leave the ASC workforce typically go, and what motivates their choice of new employment or career paths measured using analyses of data collected during interviews and of the quantitative data collected through the follow-up survey of the ASC workforce at one time point

2. Variations in reasons for leaving the ASC workforce across occupations (e.g. care workers, personal assistants, and social workers), demographic characteristics (e.g. age and ethnicity), and care settings (e.g. domiciliary care and residential care) measured using analyses of data collected during interviews and of the quantitative data collected through the follow-up survey of the ASC workforce at one time point

Completion date
31/08/2026

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Individuals must have previously worked in a direct care role within ASC or social work in England and have since left the sector (as identified in the 2025 follow-up survey).

Healthy volunteers allowed
Yes

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
18 years

Upper age limit

80 years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
0

Key exclusion criteria
Still working in the sector

Date of first enrolment
24/11/2025

Date of final enrolment
01/05/2026

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
King's College London
Health and Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Policy Institute
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Sponsor information

Organisation
King's College London

ROR
https://ror.org/0220mzb33

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)
National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
Recordings of interviews will be securely stored on cloud servers at King’s College London and deleted once transcription has been completed. Identifiable (personal contact details and ID) and non-identifiable (anonymised transcripts) data will be stored separately. The research team will comply with all aspects of data protection. Access to personal/ identifiable information will be restricted to only those team members undertaking data analysis. Data will be stored in line with the King’s College London (KCL) Code of Practice on Data Protection. Appropriate storage, restricted access archiving of transcripts, and secure disposal arrangements for participants' personal information will be put in place. All digital information will be stored on a dedicated SharePoint at King’s College London, accessible only to the research team via password-protected login.
Anonymised research data will be stored securely in KCL systems and in a password-protected OneDrive/SharePoint for the KCL researchers who are involved in this study. These will be retained for 10 years. After this period, the data will be permanently deleted from all storage locations, ensuring that no copies remain accessible. Anonymised transcripts and documents will be deposited in King's Open Research Data System (KORDS): Access will remain for future research purposes; deletion will follow KORDS repository policies when appropriate, while maintaining compliance with ethical approvals.
Access to personal data will be strictly limited to the following groups, with access granted only where necessary for the conduct of the study:
1. The researchers leading the delivery of the study at King’s College London and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
2. Transcription service provider. Transcription will be generated through a King's College London-approved online platform or through a King's College London-approved transcription service; the audio recordings will be accessed by the transcription service.
3. Potential data sharing with Ipsos (commercial organisation). Ipsos administered the original survey on behalf of DHSC. They hold this data and will provide the contact list of eligible participants to the KCL research team. The data sharing agreement states that the KCL research team will keep a record of which participants have been approached, who declined, and who accepted, using pseudonymised ID numbers provided by Ipsos. In line with the KCL data

retention policy (pseudonymised data may be retained indefinitely), and with permission from DHSC, the KCL research team may relay this pseudonymised data back to Ipsos. The purpose of this is so that future researchers contracted by DHSC to conduct fieldwork with this sample can avoid repeatedly approaching or sampling the same individuals. The KCL research team will not share this data with Ipsos other than for this purpose, with permission from DHSC.

IPD sharing plan summary

Stored in non-publicly available repository