

The Art of Finding and Keeping the Best Care Workers



Expert: **Neil Eastwood, Care Friends Founder & CEO**

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Building and retaining a great care team is one of the sector's biggest challenges. Neil Eastwood, founder and CEO of Care Friends, author of *Saving Social Care* and a King's Award-winning innovator, has helped thousands of providers rethink how they recruit and retain frontline staff.

In this conversation, Neil shares what the best providers do differently, from identifying the right candidates to harnessing employee referrals and creating experiences that turn great applicants into great hires. Let's dive in.



Q. It's widely known that care providers rely heavily on job boards when it comes to recruiting new care team members. In your experience, what's the biggest opportunity providers are missing in how they approach recruitment, and what does a smarter approach look like?

The biggest opportunity providers miss is over relying on job boards (so to the exclusion of all else) and, at the same, underinvesting in people. Especially in the first 90 days of employment.

Most providers spend £ thousands every year trying to attract complete strangers while overlooking the **people most likely to know somebody brilliant for care: their own workforce.**

In every social care labour market around the World I've studied, **word of mouth is consistently the strongest recruitment channel.** In care, it matters even more because this is values-led work.

Great care workers tend to know other kind, patient, emotionally resilient people. You rarely stumble into being exceptional at care - **values matter**. This is a differentiator from almost all other types of hourly paid work.

Yet many providers still treat recruitment as advertising rather than relationship-building. They post vacancies, hope for applicants from the local pool of active job seekers and then repeat the cycle when the inevitable early churn happens.

A smarter approach starts with asking: where do our best people actually come from? The best providers know their data. They track source of hire, **retention by source and cost per successful hire - not just applications**.

Job boards still have an important place, but they shouldn't be the entire focus of your sourcing strategy. If anything, they should support a broader ecosystem that includes employee referrals, community recruitment and faster candidate engagement.

My view is simple: **if your best care workers are not helping recruit your next best care workers, you are probably leaving one of your biggest workforce advantages untapped.**





Q. In terms of seeking the right qualities in a person that would make them ideal for care, what would these qualities typically be and how do you identify them? Can it even be spotted at the application stage?

One of the biggest mistakes providers make is **overvaluing paid care experience and undervaluing character.**

Experience in the role can help, of course. But all too often, the reason care workers are leaving their clients or residents for a similar role elsewhere needs probing. In addition, all providers have a training infrastructure, and skills can usually be taught easily to someone with the right character and motivation. **Values are much harder to teach.**

The qualities I look for are compassion, reliability, patience, emotional resilience, warmth and a genuine instinct to put others first. Care is emotionally demanding work. Kindness matters, but so does being dependable when things are difficult.

Can you spot this at application stage? Yes - but not from a CV or application form alone – especially now AI is creating so many of them.

I'm far more interested in behavioural clues than polished applications. Has somebody cared for relatives? Volunteered? Worked in hospitality with great feedback? Supported vulnerable people? Managed emotionally demanding situations?

The best providers also ask much better interview questions. Instead of asking hypothetical questions like, "What would you do if someone was upset?", ask: "Tell me about a time somebody needed your support."

Past behaviour tells you much more than future intention.

The best organisations hire for values and train for competence. I'd much rather hire somebody kind, emotionally intelligent and coachable than someone experienced but poorly aligned with the role. The exciting thing is our local communities are full of people like this. Don't just limit your search to those seeking their next job.



Q. You're a big advocate of employee referrals as a source of recruitment. Why do so many providers still treat this as an afterthought, and what does a genuinely effective referral programme look like?

I think part of it is habit and part of it is pressure.

Recruitment in care is often reactive. Registered Managers and internal recruiters are firefighting vacancies, so the instinct is to post yet another advert because that feels familiar and immediate.

The irony is referrals are often **the strongest-performing recruitment channel available.**

At Care Friends we've repeatedly seen **referred candidates stay longer, perform better and convert more successfully** because they enter the organisation more informed. Somebody has already explained the reality of care to them. Someone has hand-picked them for the role.

But many providers unintentionally sabotage referrals. Their referral programme is invisible, difficult to access, poorly communicated or applicants disappear into a black hole after being referred.

A genuinely effective referral programme is simple.



All colleagues know it exists. It's easy to participate. Communication is quick. Progress updates happen. Recognition matters.

Importantly, **the strongest referral cultures aren't built around money alone**. Yes, incentives help- but great care workers usually refer because they want high performing teammates, the best care for their clients and residents and want to help their friend find a role they will love.

Done properly, referrals become part of culture rather than a recruitment campaign wheeled out every few months.



Q. You're a strong believer in looking beyond traditional channels and into the local community to find people with a natural instinct for caring. What does a practical first step look like?

Start small, local and human. Now more than ever with the advent of AI.

Too many providers ask: "Where should we advertise?" when the better question is: "Where do naturally caring people already spend time?"

Schools, churches, community centres, volunteering groups, sports clubs, parent networks, hospitality workers, family carer support groups, the friends of the local hospice - these are all communities where caring, patient and service-minded people already exist.

Then stop relying solely on polished recruitment marketing. Real stories beat corporate messaging every time.

Ask frontline care workers to attend community events. Invite people to informal coffee mornings. Encourage employees to bring a friend to an open day. Put real care workers at the centre of recruitment.



The reality is very few people wake up and say, “I fancy a career in social care today.”

Much more often, somebody they trust helps them imagine themselves doing it.

That is such an important distinction.

The providers who recruit well understand this. Recruitment becomes about belonging, purpose and relationships - not just vacancies.



Q. How much difference does getting the candidate's initial experience right make to a provider's ability to hire?

Honestly, it makes a massive difference.

Candidate experience is one of the most underrated drivers of hiring success in care.

Think about it from the applicant's perspective. Somebody applies, hears nothing for five days, receives an automated email and struggles to get hold of anyone. What message does that send?



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Usually: this organisation feels chaotic or doesn't value people.

Care recruitment is fast-moving. Good candidates disappear quickly.

The best providers move quickly and communicate like humans.

They pick up the phone. They explain next steps clearly. They remove friction. They keep momentum going.

One provider told me their biggest improvement came from something incredibly simple: calling applicants within an hour of applying.

That one operational change transformed conversion.

Candidate experience matters because people assume recruitment reflects culture.

If recruitment feels warm, organised and respectful, candidates assume the workplace may feel similar.

If it feels slow and impersonal, they often walk away. And what's worse is local competitors – retail, hospitality and the like, usually run very slick recruitment operations, so we encourage our next wonderful care worker to choose a different, less fulfilling path.



Q. Many providers assume pay is the main reason people leave. Is that really the case?

Pay matters. Particularly in a cost-of-living crisis, it would be naïve to pretend otherwise.

But the evidence tells us it is rarely the whole story.

People often leave experiences rather than employers.

Feeling unsupported, undervalued, emotionally exhausted, poorly managed or disconnected from purpose matters enormously.

Across workforce research we repeatedly see themes like poor onboarding, inflexible rotas, weak management, lack of recognition and burnout showing up strongly. In 2023 Skills for Care identified that low pay was cited by 16% of respondents as a reason for leaving their previous role versus 30% for poor workplace culture or communication and 20% for burnout.

The encouraging part is this means **retention is more controllable than providers sometimes think.**

Funding pressures are real, but there are still many things organisations can improve.

Recognition. Flexibility. Better induction. Stronger frontline leadership. Listening. Predictability.

The best providers think beyond the question: “Why are people leaving?” Instead, they ask: **“Why would somebody genuinely choose to stay here?”** That mindset shift changes everything.

My belief is people make a choice to work in the care sector despite knowing it doesn’t pay well.

As a result, the minimum we can do as providers is make their workplace experience full of **appreciation, recognition and respect.**



 Ask the Expert





Q. What role does frontline management play in whether a care worker stays or goes, and is this an area the sector is investing enough in?

Frontline management plays an enormous role - probably bigger than many providers fully appreciate.

Care workers don't experience culture through posters on the wall or values statements in reception. **They experience it through the person they report to every day.**

A great frontline manager makes somebody feel supported, listened to, recognised and confident. A poor one can quietly drive disengagement and turnover incredibly quickly.

One phrase I often come back to is: ***people don't leave organisations, they leave managers.*** That may be an oversimplification, but there's a lot of truth in it as we saw from the Skills for Care in the previous question.

The challenge in Adult Social Care is that we often promote brilliant care workers into management or supervisory roles because they're deeply caring - but managing people requires a completely different skillset.

Suddenly, someone is dealing with conflict, performance conversations, rota pressure, emotional wellbeing, coaching and motivation, often with very little support or training.

So, are we investing enough? In many cases, no.

If I could wave a magic wand in workforce strategy, I'd invest far more in first-line leadership capability. Better onboarding conversations, coaching skills - communication, active listening, blame-free language and emotional intelligence among supervisors and managers would transform retention.



Because frontline managers don't just manage rotas and crises. They shape workplace culture with the behaviour they permit and the behaviour they expect – and how they live the values of the organisation.

And culture is one of the biggest determinants of whether somebody stays.



Q. Care Friends has now been adopted in over 2,500 settings across the UK, Ireland and Australia and won a King's Award for Innovation. What has the rollout taught you about how ready the care sector is to embrace technology as part of its workforce strategy?

The biggest lesson is that the **social care sector is far more open to technology than people sometimes assume** - but only when technology solves a real problem and doesn't add to the workload.

Care providers are busy, stretched and under huge operational pressure. Quite understandably, they're sceptical of anything that creates more admin or complexity.

So, the question isn't really: *"Is social care ready for technology?"*

The better question is: ***"Does this technology clearly help solve a significant problem?"***

If something saves time, improves recruitment, reduces agency reliance or helps retain staff, adoption tends to happen quickly.

Care Friends works because we didn't ask providers to reinvent behaviour - we digitised something they already trusted: word of mouth. We also added the ability to reward good work and recognise accomplishments instantly.

For decades, providers have known referrals work. We simply made them easier, measurable and scalable. That's actually a broader lesson for innovation in care.

The best technology doesn't force behaviour change for the sake of it. It strengthens good human behaviour that already exists.

I think social care is becoming increasingly evidence-led, commercially aware and open to innovation - particularly around workforce strategy because staffing is now such a defining challenge for quality and sustainability.



Q. With an ageing population and growing demand for care, the workforce challenge is only going to intensify. What gives you hope? And what one piece of advice would you give to every care provider listening right now?

What gives me hope is the goodwill and altruism both of the current workforce but also of those living in communities across the UK.

Every week I meet extraordinary care workers, registered managers and providers doing emotionally demanding work with huge professionalism, compassion and resilience. Despite all the pressures in the sector, there is still an enormous amount of humanity in care.

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I'm also optimistic because the best providers are getting smarter. They're becoming more evidence-led. They're measuring what works. They're improving candidate experience, using referrals better, thinking more seriously about culture and taking workforce strategy far more seriously than even five years ago.

There's definitely a growing recognition that recruitment and retention are core strategic issues, not just HR problems. If I had one piece of advice to every provider listening right now, it would be this:

Stop treating recruitment and retention as separate conversations.

The people you hire, where you find them, how you onboard them and how you make them feel in the first few weeks fundamentally shapes whether they stay.

Too often providers focus only on filling vacancies. The best providers focus on building teams over the long term. And great social care teams don't happen accidentally - they are built intentionally, one hiring decision at a time.



Find great people. Give them reasons to stay.

Building a strong care workforce takes more than filling vacancies. It's about creating the right environment for people to thrive, grow and deliver their best care.

Access brings the tools you need to support your workforce together, from rostering and planning to e-Learning and Technology Enabled Care.

Because the best care teams aren't just built. They're nurtured.

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