

HTMS Ambassador Programme

Care Workers

Human trafficking & modern slavery (HTMS) is the exploitation of people through the use of threats, fraud, coercion or deception. Labour exploitation is a form of HTMS in which people are denied their basic rights in the workplace for the purpose of profit. It can happen in any industry and can affect people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. However, the risks are noted to be higher in the care sector than others due to the significant use of temporary labour and conditions of employment, coupled with low pay in a sector considered 'low-skilled' [1].

Care Workers

Care workers are required to look after individuals in need of round-the-clock care, whether that be in a residential home or in private homes. They provide all types of support from general wellbeing to personal and nursing care, and they support a number of individuals, which means they often work irregular hours and shifts.

Unseen, a UK based anti-trafficking charity, reports that 'persistent underfunding of the sector by successive governments has created long-term issues of low pay and poor working conditions' and with the estimated increase in demand for adult social care coupled with labour shortages, there is a reliance on overseas workers which has created opportunities for exploitation.

Health & Social Care Worker Visa Scheme

In 2020, the government launched the health and social care worker visa scheme to address staffing shortages. The visa allows medical professionals to come to the UK to work with the NHS, an NHS supplier or in adult social care - for care workers, the employer has to be registered with the Care Quality Commission and must provide a certificate of sponsorship for the role [2]. Under this visa, employees cannot apply for most benefits and cannot change jobs or employer without updating the visa. As of 2024, they are not allowed to bring dependants with them[3].

What was intended to address a labour shortage has since developed into an **exploitative practice**, with a significant number of cases reported of potential exploitation linked to the care sector. Due to the bureaucratic visa process, overseas workers applying for such care worker roles are unaware of UK regulations, employment rights and visa processing, and this opens them to risk of exploitation by scam individuals and agencies who charge exorbitant recruitment fees in excess of the actual visa cost. Such up-front recruitment fees leads to individuals incurring large debts and may even result in **debt-bondage**.

Workers may feel they are unable to leave their job due to mistreatment by the employer, or a violation of their rights, as they have no other form of income and their visa is linked to their employer. They may feel the need to continue in such employment to pay their debts, though for some it may be that due to the exorbitant fees charged and subsequent deductions for accommodation, food and transport, they may never be able to repay the debt.

REFERENCES:

[1] <https://www.unseenuk.org/reports/care-sector-report/>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/health-care-worker-visa>

[3] <https://www.gov.uk/health-care-worker-visa/your-partner-and-children>

Exploitative Practices

Unseen reported a 606% increase in the modern slavery care sector cases between 2021 and 2022, with figures continuing to grow. Some care workers are qualified nurses in their home countries, but on coming to work in the UK, they are exposed to exploitative practices, with some employers confiscating passports, refusing breaks and paying below minimum wage, as well as being abusive, including threatening to cancel their visas and have them deported, or threatening violence against their families in their home country.

There are also cases of care workers who arrived in the UK to find that they were offered fewer hours of work than initially agreed upon, and were left without accommodation, unable to support themselves on the little income they had. Additionally, it was discovered that some care providers had received more certificates of sponsorship than actual vacancies, leading to the revocation by the government of a large number of sponsor licences. Unfortunately, this exposed care workers to risk of further exploitation as they were left without work and accommodation, forced to find new employment within 60 days or face deportation.

The **Gang Masters & Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA)** is one of the agencies who has reported an increase in reports of labour abuse in the care sector, with a reported 61% of all reports received in the first quarter of 2024 having related to the care sector[4].

The Home Office has recently announced new measure to combat visa abuse and migrant worker exploitation, which will see businesses banned from hiring overseas workers if found to be in serious breach of employment law or in violation of visa rules: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-11-28/hcws263>

Guidance for international workers on sponsorship in the care industry

Justice & Care, a charity working to empower individuals and communities impacted by HTMS, has published an information and guidance booklet for care workers to help them know their rights, understand exploitation and identify where they can access support: <https://justiceandcare.org/app/uploads/2024/03/Guidance-For-International-Workers-in-the-Care-Sector.pdf>

If you are concerned about someone, seek help:

You are never wasting anyone's time if you raise concerns about possible harm.

If it is an emergency, call **999**

If you wish to report a crime anonymously, you may call **Crimestoppers: 0800 555 111**

You can also report any concerns to the **UK modern slavery and exploitation helpline**, a free 24-hour helpline where you will be able to discuss your concerns, receive advice and support.

You may call the helpline on: **08000 121 700** or you may visit the website and report your concerns online at <https://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/>

REFERENCES:

[4] <https://www.gla.gov.uk/whats-new/latest-press-releases/181024-exploitation-is-on-the-rise-in-the-care-sector>