



Pay in the adult
social care sector in
England, as at
December 2025

March 2026

Foreword from our CEO

The 1.5 million people who work in adult social care are vital to our society and our economy. We believe that care workers should be appropriately rewarded - in a way that supports career progression, learning and development and recruitment and retention.

However, the current situation is that social care roles are among the lowest paid in our economy. Low levels of hourly pay, combined with a lack of pay progression for experienced care workers, make it harder to attract and keep good people.



We may need up to 470,000 more posts by 2040 if we're to keep pace with the projected growth in the number of over-65s in the population alone. And that's on top of the need to fill the vacancies we currently have – with a vacancy rate around 3 times that of the wider economy.

While improving pay won't solve all the challenges the sector faces, pay has a significant influence on the wider quality of social care roles. We know that it's one of the things that affects staff turnover – with a 23.6% turnover rate among care workers paid up to 20% below the local authority average, compared with 28.1% turnover for people paid more than 50% below it.

A key recommendation in the [Workforce Strategy](#) for Adult Social Care is joined-up, consistent action to improve pay, terms and conditions for care workers over several years. To that end, the government's plans under the Employment Rights Act for a Fair Pay Agreement, arrived at by a new negotiating body, represent a significant step forward.

We believe that improvements in pay need to be part of a wider response to stabilising the workforce and supporting the sector to meet increasing needs.

The care provider market is extremely fragile, so increasing costs in one area has the potential to create issues elsewhere. For example, an increase in the minimum wage for care workers has the potential to squeeze differentials for experienced staff even more – unless minimum pay is considered alongside pay and career progression and is supported by consistent commissioning standards and funding.

On its own, improved pay is vulnerable to competition from other sectors, which can simply increase their own pay in response. But linking improved pay with wider terms and conditions and the Care Workforce Pathway – which can be expanded as necessary – will ensure that adult social care is an attractive career that's rewarding in every sense.

Professor Oonagh Smyth CBE
Chief Executive, Skills for Care

Key findings, December 2025

£12.60

care worker median
hourly rate

26%

of care workers were on
the wage floor

48%

of workers were paid
below next NLW

Current levels of pay and trends

- The median hourly rate for a care worker in the independent sector was £12.60 as at December 2025 (39 pence above the NLW of £12.21). This varies across the regions, with the highest median hourly pay rates recorded in London (£13.00) and the lowest in the West Midlands (£12.45).
- In December 2025, the nominal median care worker pay had increased by 5.0% (60 pence per hour) since March 2025. The average care worker was better off, in real terms, by 26 pence per hour (2.1%) than they were in March 2025.

Side effects of the increasing wage floor

- The proportion of care workers being paid on the wage floor (those on or within 10 pence of the NLW) was 26%. This proportion decreased between March 2020 and March 2025 (from 34% to 22%). However, between March 2025 and December 2025, the proportion of workers on the wage floor increased from 22% to 26%.
- Experienced care workers (those with 5 or more years in the sector) are paid just 10 pence more on average than care workers who are new to the sector, an increase from 6 pence in March 2025. Prior to March 2017, this gap was much larger and experienced care workers earned between 26 pence and 37 pence per hour more.
- 49% of care workers were paid below the Real Living Wage (£12.60 outside London / £13.85 in London) in December 2025.

The impact of the new NLW rate from 1 April 2026 (£12.71)

- As at December 2025, over half (48%) of all independent sector workers were paid less than the April 2026 mandatory NLW rate (£12.71). This equates to around 640,000 filled posts being directly affected by the next increase in the NLW.
- 90% of adult social care providers in the independent sector in December 2025 were paying at least some of their workers below the April 2026 mandatory NLW and would be directly affected by its introduction.

Contents

Foreword from our CEO	2
Key findings, December 2025	3
Introduction	5
The National Living Wage and the Real Living Wage.....	8
Pay periods used in this report	8
Increase in National Insurance Contributions (NICs).....	9
Employment Rights Bill.....	9
1. Current levels of pay and trends	12
1.1 Care worker hourly rate distribution, as at December 2025	13
1.2 Median care worker hourly rate trends	15
2. Side effects of the increasing wage floor	18
2.1 Care worker real term hourly rate change	19
2.2 Care worker pay by experience in the adult social care sector	19
2.3 Proportion of care workers on the wage floor	20
2.4 Comparison to household expenditure, by region.....	23
2.5 The Real Living Wage	23
2.6 Pay differentials between care workers and senior care workers	24
2.7 Under 21s	25
2.8 Comparison with other sectors	25
3. The impact of the NLW rate from April 2026 (£12.71).....	30
3.1 Adult social care providers.....	31
Glossary.....	32
Further resources.....	35

Introduction

This report draws on the latest available independent sector pay data from December 2025 to provide an up-to-date analysis of pay levels and emerging trends across the adult social care sector. The report covers current rates of pay as well as trends, side effects of the increasing wage floor and the impact of the new National Living Wage (NLW) rate of £12.71.

The pay rates in this report are estimates of care workers' standard hourly rates. It is acknowledged that care workers, particularly in domiciliary care can have higher pay rates for working unsocial hours or for different care activities. For example, weekend rates, bank holiday rates, waking night rates, shift cover rates and higher rates for more complex care. Additionally, some care workers are not always paid (or are paid less) than their standard hourly rate for travel time, waiting time or for training.

The NLW increased on 1 April 2025 from £11.44 to £12.21 per hour for workers aged 21 and over and from £8.60 to £10.00 per hour for those under 21. Independent sector care worker hourly rates are the main focus of this report, as well as differentials with other job roles in the adult social care sector. This report analyses pay data as at December 2025. Occasionally data from other periods has been used for comparison with external data sources – where this happens it is clearly labelled.

Data from the Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set (ASC-WDS) is used to produce workforce estimates through established modelling methods. For information about the methodology used to create these workforce estimates, visit [our website](#). Figures are rounded, so some percentages may not total 100%.

The ASC-WDS is an online data collection service that covers the adult social care workforce in England. The ASC-WDS is completed by care providers (employers) on behalf of their workplace and staff. As at September 2025, there were 20,900 adult social care establishments using the ASC-WDS service and supplying information on over 730,000 staff records. For more information about our data collection, visit the [ASC-WDS website](#).

Analysis of the financial year 2024/25 can be found in Chapter 5 of our annual report [The State of the Adult Social Sector and Workforce in England](#), published in October 2025. Analysis of the financial year 2025/26 will be published in the annual update in October 2026.

In 2023 Skills for Care was added to the [Official Statistics Order](#) and became an official statistics producer. This means that all official statistics produced by Skills for Care's Workforce Intelligence team will include oversight from the [Office for Statistics Regulation](#) (OSR), ensuring that we follow the Code of Practice for Statistics. Our Workforce Intelligence Analysts are committed to the three pillars of trustworthiness, quality and value, and to the principles of the Code of Practice for Statistics. See our website for our full [statement](#).

Please note, a glossary of terms used in this report can be found in the [Glossary](#) section at the end of this report, we also have a [Glossary page](#) on our Workforce Intelligence website.

The National Living Wage and the Real Living Wage

The National Living Wage (NLW) was first introduced on 1 April 2016 at £7.20 per hour for workers aged 25 and over. Over time this has increased and in 2021 the age threshold was reduced to 23 years. From 1 April 2024 the age threshold was reduced again to 21 years. The current NLW increased by 6.7% (77 pence) on 1 April 2025 from £11.44 to £12.21 per hour. As of 1 April 2026, the NLW rate will be £12.71 per hour for workers aged 21 and over, an increase of 50 pence (4.1%).

The Real Living Wage (RLW) is set by the [Living Wage Foundation](#) charity and is separate to the National Living Wage. The equivalent Real Living Wage rate to the £12.21 NLW rate used throughout this report is £14.80 in London and £13.45 across the rest of the UK.

Pay periods used in this report

We have used the most current data (December 2025) in this report as far as possible. However, when making comparisons to external data, we have used March 2025 data to make direct comparisons.

The ASC-WDS data used in this report has been split into time periods to reflect the National Minimum Wage (NMW; used prior to the introduction of the NLW) or NLW in place at the time. April 2016 to March 2021 covers the NLW for workers aged 25 and older. On 1 April 2021, the NLW became applicable for anyone aged 23 or over and from April 2024, workers aged 21 were paid the NLW.

The latest local authority sector data was collected in September 2025. The majority of local authority sector care workers were already paid above the 2026 NLW (£12.71). As a result, this report will focus on the adult social care filled posts in the **independent sector only**.

Table 1. Time periods used in this report

Time period	Referred to as	National Minimum Wage/National Living Wage	Real Living Wage – UK / London (announced each autumn)
Oct 12 to Sep 13	2012 NMW	£6.19	£7.45 / £8.55
Oct 13 to Sep 14	2013 NMW	£6.31	£7.65 / £8.80
Oct 14 to Sep 15	2014 NMW	£6.50	£7.85 / £9.15
Oct 15 to Mar 16	2015 NMW	£6.70	£7.85 / £9.15
Apr 16 to Mar 17	2016 NLW	£7.20 (NLW introduced)	£8.25 / £9.40
Apr 17 to Mar 18	2017 NLW	£7.50	£8.45 / £9.75
Apr 18 to Mar 19	2018 NLW	£7.83	£8.75 / £10.20
Apr 19 to Mar 20	2019 NLW	£8.21	£9.00 / £10.55
Apr 20 to Mar 21	2020 NLW	£8.72	£9.30 / £10.75
Apr 21 to Mar 22	2021 NLW	£8.91	£9.50 / £10.85
Apr 22 to Mar 23	2022 NLW	£9.50	£9.90 / £11.05
Apr 23 to Mar 24	2023 NLW	£10.42	£10.90 / £11.95
Apr 24 to Mar 25	2024 NLW	£11.44	£12.00 / £13.15
Apr 25 to Mar 26*	2025 NLW	£12.21	£12.60 / £13.85
Apr 26 to Mar 27	2026 NLW	£12.71	£13.45/ £14.80

* This report focuses on data in this period.

Increase in National Insurance Contributions (NICs)

From 6 April 2025, UK employers' (secondary) [Class 1 National Insurance Contributions](#) (NICs) increased from 13.8% to 15.05%. The Secondary Threshold at which employers start paying NICs on a worker's earnings also fell from £9,100 to £5,000 a year, meaning employers now pay the higher rate on all earnings above £5,000.

Based on December 2025 estimates, this change will mean employers will pay NI on an estimated additional 23,500 workers and a higher rate for all eligible workers. Adult social care employers will face increased costs to accommodate the increase in NI for their workers. To help smaller employers, the Employment Allowance, which supports eligible employers to reduce their NI liability, increased from £5,000 to £10,500 from 6 April 2025, and the previous £100,000 employer NICs liability cap for eligibility was removed.

Employment Rights Act

The Employment Rights Act became law on 18 December 2025. It aims to enhance the rights of employees, including guaranteed hours for workers on zero-hours contracts and entitlement to Statutory Sick Pay from the first day of absence. The Government has published a [roadmap for delivering change](#), which gives further detail about the steps required to implement the Act. Skills for Care will continue to monitor workforce metrics that could be affected by the Act, such

as zero-hours contracts, enhanced Statutory Sick Pay and pay.

Fair pay agreements

Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs) are sector-wide agreements that set out minimum pay, terms and conditions for all workers within a given industry. The Government's plan is to make FPAs legally binding. The purpose of an FPA in adult social care, by establishing fairer and more predictable conditions, is to create a consistent baseline of employment standards across the workforce, helping to reduce low pay, improve job security, and support recruitment and retention.

By providing a guaranteed foundation of fair pay and employment conditions, FPAs are designed to make roles in the sector more attractive and sustainable. This approach seeks not only to improve the working lives of care staff but also to enhance the stability and quality of services delivered to the people who rely on them.

The introduction of FPAs has significant implications for the adult social care workforce and providers. For staff, FPAs are expected to deliver greater consistency in pay, predictable working patterns and stronger entitlements to training and development. For employers, FPAs will likely increase baseline staffing costs but may also support improved recruitment and retention, reducing reliance on agency staff and turnover-related expenses. From a systemwide perspective, higher employment standards are anticipated to enhance the quality and continuity of care, although implementation will require careful planning to balance workforce investment with financial sustainability.

In England, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Business and Trade have commenced the engagement process with the sector and trade unions. They have published an [impact assessment](#) and a [factsheet for social care negotiating bodies and fair pay agreements](#), that says that the scope of the FPA process is yet to be determined, and the details of individual FPAs will be subject to the negotiating process.

On 30 September 2025, the Government [announced](#) that £500 million will be invested into the FPA for adult social care workers. The Adult Social Care Negotiating Body will be established through regulations in 2026 – with the first Fair Pay Agreement coming into force in 2028. The Government has recently carried out a public consultation on the Fair Pay Agreement – details of this can be found on their [website](#).

Care worker vs support worker pay rates

This report focuses on care worker pay only. In June 2024 the job role support worker was added to the ASC-WDS. Since the introduction of this role in the ASC-WDS we have seen

some staff records updated to more accurately reflect the worker's role. This has resulted in changes to the number of care worker filled posts, as staff have been re-coded to the support worker role. It should be noted that some of these workers that have been re-coded will also have been genuine job role movements or promotions.

This recoding of job role has caused some slight discontinuity in trends for the care worker job role since 2023, however pay rates for care workers and support workers are similar, therefore this change has not significantly impacted the trend for care worker pay shown in this report. Table 2 shows the pay percentiles for care workers and for the group care workers and support workers in December 2025, median pay was £12.60 for both, demonstrating the similarity between both job role options.

Table 2. Care worker and support worker vs care worker pay percentiles

Percentile	Care worker and support worker	Care worker
10	12.21	12.21
20	12.24	12.25
30	12.35	12.39
40	12.50	12.50
Median (50)	12.60	12.60
60	12.80	12.82
70	13.00	13.00
80	13.20	13.29
90	13.85	13.91

1. Current levels of pay and trends

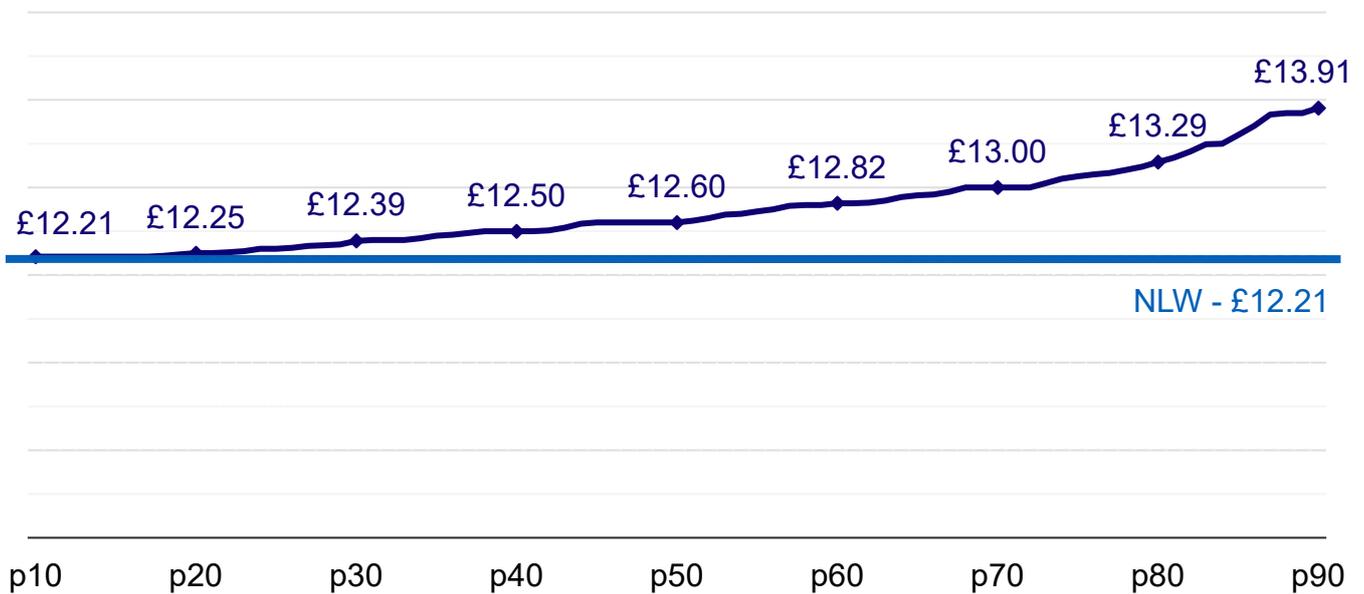
1.1 Care worker hourly rate distribution, as at December 2025

Chart 1 shows the hourly rate distribution for all care workers as at December 2025. The median (p50) refers to the hourly rate at which half of care workers earned more than that amount, and half earned less. The 10th percentile (p10) is the value at which 10% of care workers earned less than that value and 90% earned more.

The median hourly rate for a care worker in the independent sector was £12.60. Around a quarter (26%) were paid within 10 pence of the 2025 NLW rate of £12.21. The hourly rate difference between a top 10% earner (£13.91) and a bottom 10% earner (£12.21) was £1.70 per hour.

Chart 1. Care worker hourly rate distribution, December 2025

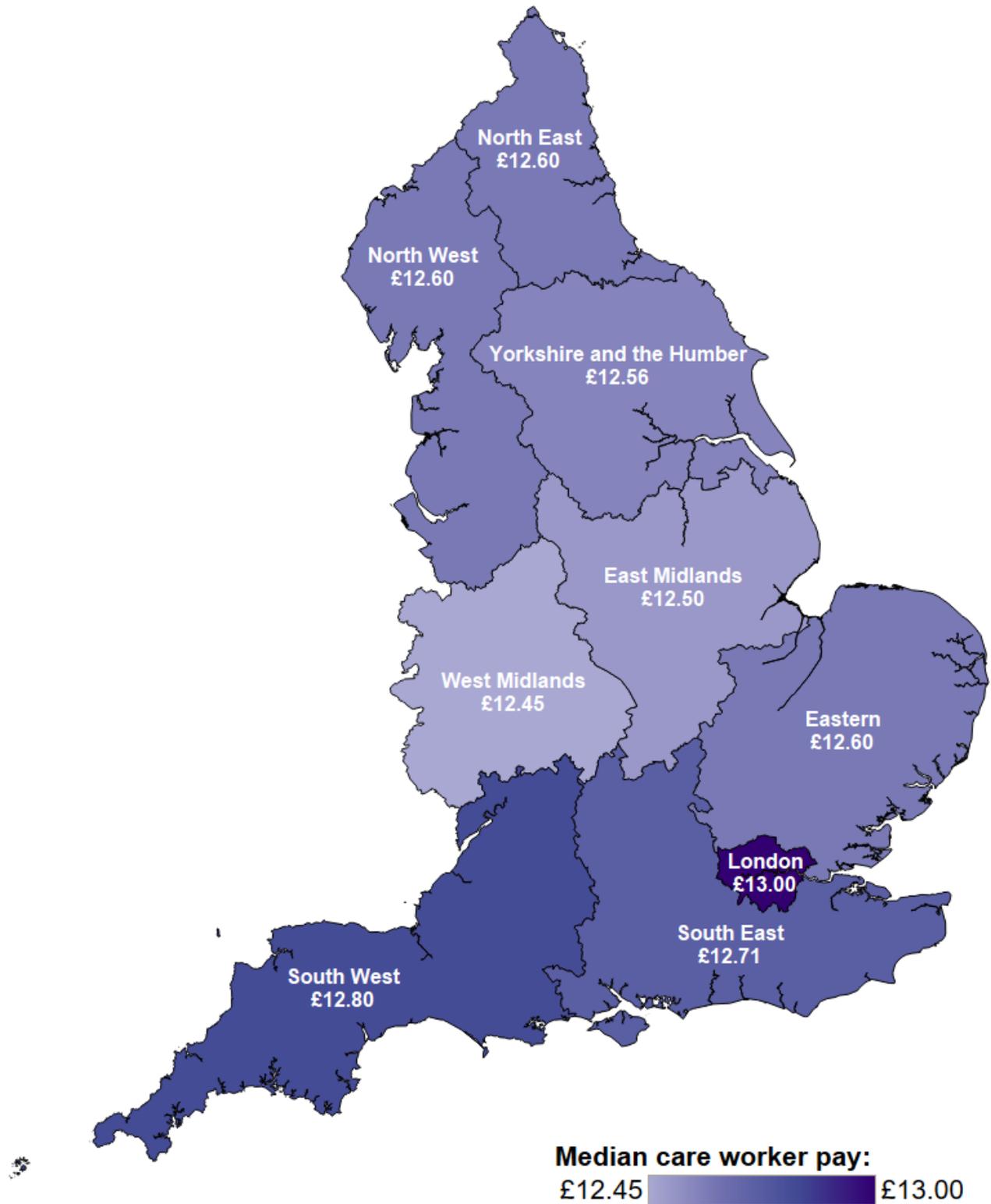
Source: Skills for Care estimates



Map 1 shows that there was regional variation in median hourly pay rates, with the highest recorded in London (£13.00) and the South West (£12.80). The lowest median hourly rates were recorded in the West Midlands (£12.45) and the East Midlands (£12.50).

Map 1. Median care worker pay by region, December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



1.2 Median care worker hourly rate trends

This section looks at the trend of median care worker hourly pay rates since March 2017 in both 'nominal' and 'real term' pay rates. 'Nominal' pay shows the pay rates as they were at the time. 'Real term' rates are adjusted to take inflation into account (calculated using the [Consumers Price Index](#) (CPI), the official measure of inflation of consumer prices in the UK) and are expressed in December 2025 prices.

Chart 2 below shows that median nominal care worker pay increased steadily from £7.50 in March 2017, to £12.60 in December 2025, a 68% increase. The average care worker was also better off in real terms by £2.38 per hour (23%) in December 2025, than they were in March 2017.

The nominal median care worker pay increased by 5.0% (60 pence per hour) between March 2025 and December 2025. This increase was higher than the rate of inflation over the same period (2.8%) and as a result real term pay was up by 2.1%. This means that the average care worker was better off in real terms by 26 pence per hour than they were in March 2025.

Chart 2. Care worker nominal and real term hourly rate, March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates

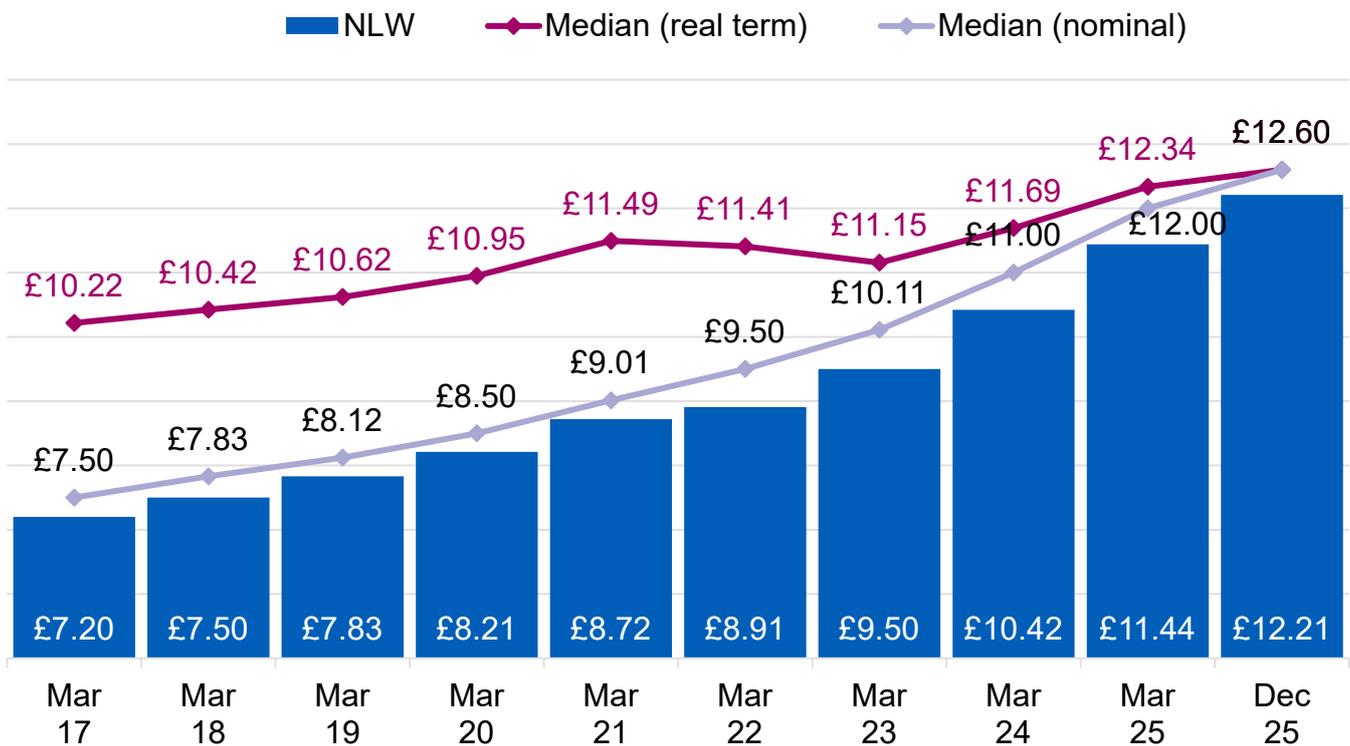


Chart 3 below shows the change in care worker nominal median hourly rate, compared to nominal changes in the National Living Wage (NLW). The nominal care worker hourly rate usually increases each year by a similar amount to the NLW increase. However, between March 2021 and March 2022 the change in nominal median hourly rate (5.4% increase) was larger than the nominal change in NLW (2.2%).

Vacancy rates were high in this period, reaching a peak of 10.5% in 2021/22. Anecdotal evidence provided to Skills for Care suggested some care providers responded to rising staff vacancies by increasing wages to attract and retain more staff. This appears to not have continued after March 2022 as nominal pay increased at a similar rate to the NLW until the latest period.

Vacancy rates include posts that are vacant in the short term due to recent or anticipated staff turnover, as well as posts created by employers who want to expand and grow their businesses. It also includes more persistent vacancies where the offer to potential staff is not sufficiently competitive in the local labour market. As such, not every vacant post represents an issue in terms of workforce supply.

Between March 2025 and December 2025, the NLW increased by 6.7% in nominal terms whilst the nominal median care worker pay increased by 5.0%. The percentage increase in median pay is the smallest it has been since March 2019 to March 2020. The gap between the two increases was the largest over the reporting period, indicating that employers were less able to increase wages in line with NLW growth than in previous years.

Some employers have reported to Skills for Care that keeping up with NLW increases has been a challenge, especially alongside other rising costs to their business and the implications of the change to employer National Insurance contributions.

Chart 3. Change in care worker nominal median hourly rates compared to nominal change in the NLW, March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates

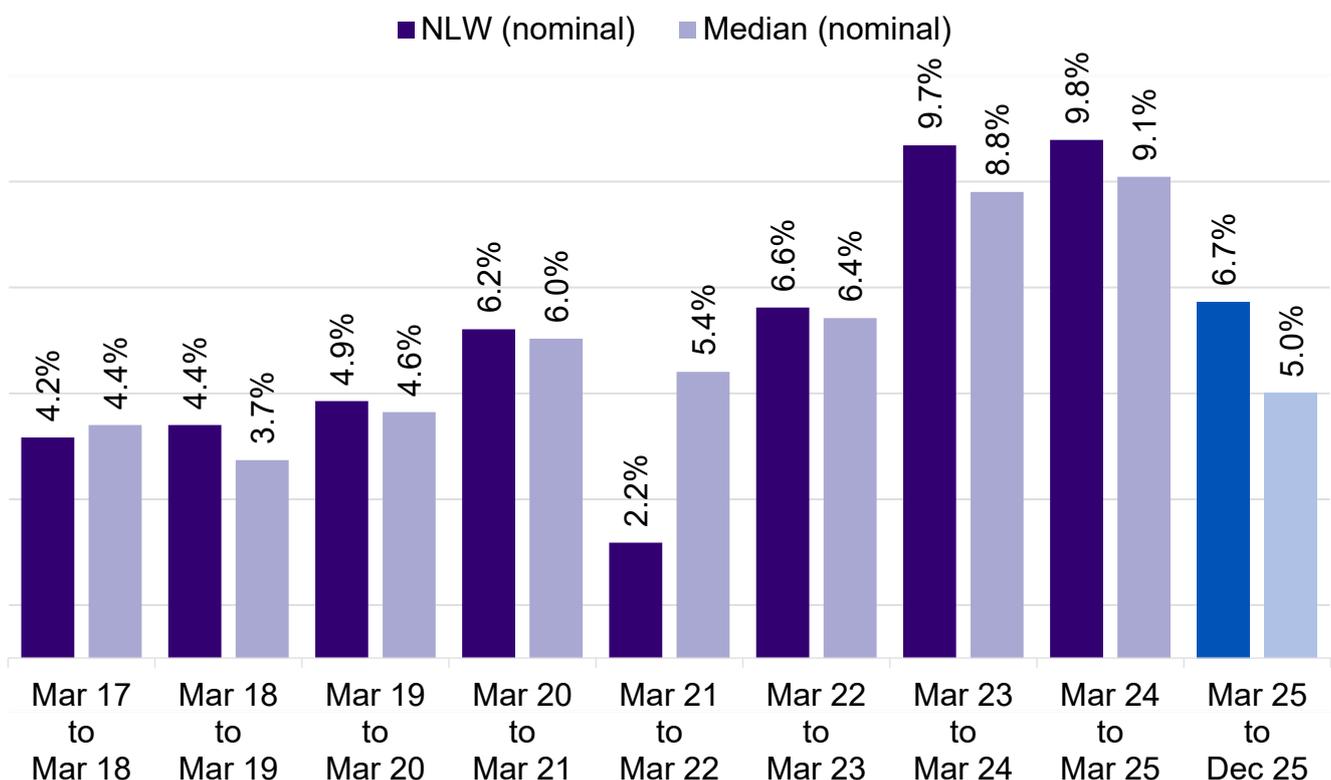
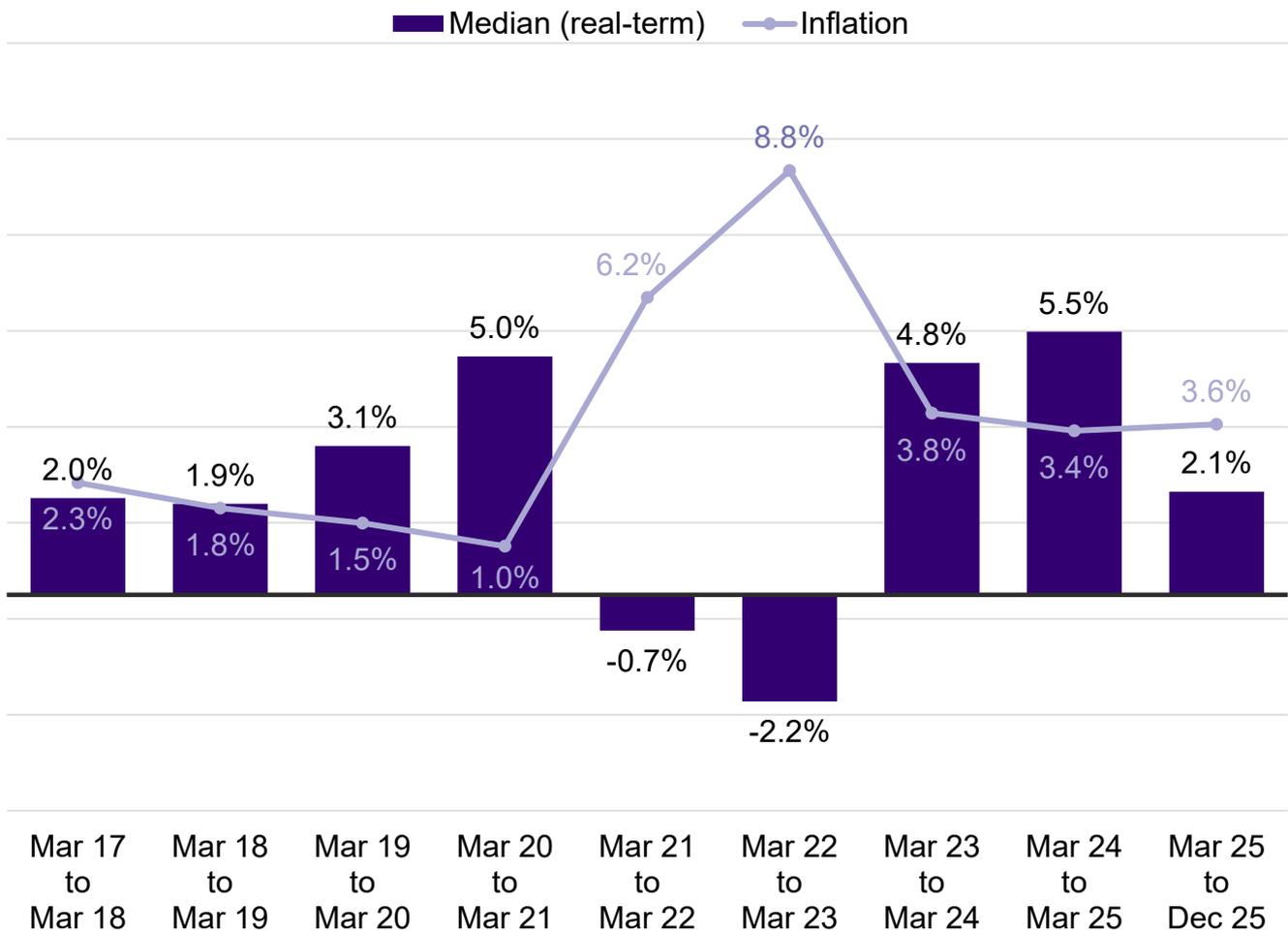


Chart 4 below shows wages for care workers have increased in real terms from March 2017 to December 2025. Inflation reached a peak of 8.8% between March 2022 and March 2023, before falling to 3.6% in the period from March to December 2025. The largest median real term pay increase across the reporting period occurred between March 2024 and March 2025, at 5.5%. Although inflation remained similar from March 2023 to December 2025, real term wages still rose by 2.1% between March and December 2025.

Please note that inflation is normally calculated year-on-year; however, in this instance we are using a reduced period for both pay growth and inflation, which are both likely to be higher over the full year.

Chart 4. Change in care worker real term median hourly rates compared to the rate of inflation, March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



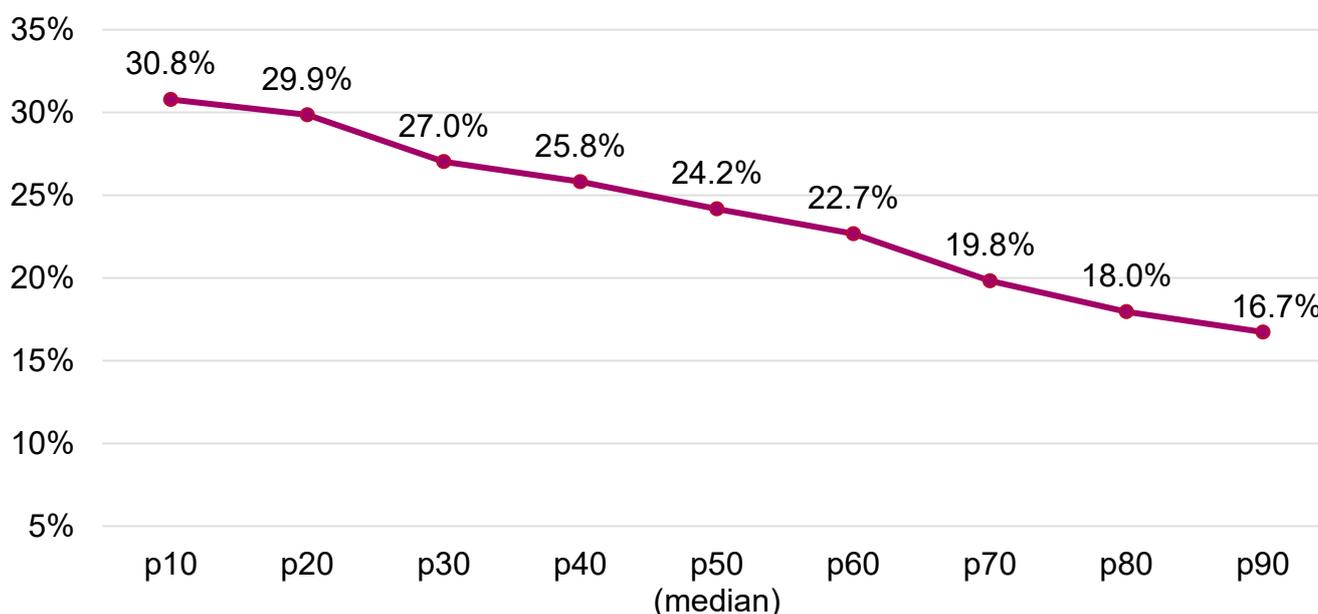
2. Side effects of the increasing wage floor

2.1 Care worker real term hourly rate change

Chart 5 shows that the real term hourly pay for care workers among the bottom 10% of earners increased by 30.8% between March 2017 and December 2025. This was much greater than for those care workers higher up the pay ladder, where the top 10% of earners increased by approximately 16.7% in real terms. With the increasing wage floor, some social care providers have not maintained the pay differential, with funding going towards increasing the hourly rate of the lowest paid workers and higher paid staff receiving slower pay growth.

Chart 5. Care worker real term hourly rate change by percentile distribution, March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



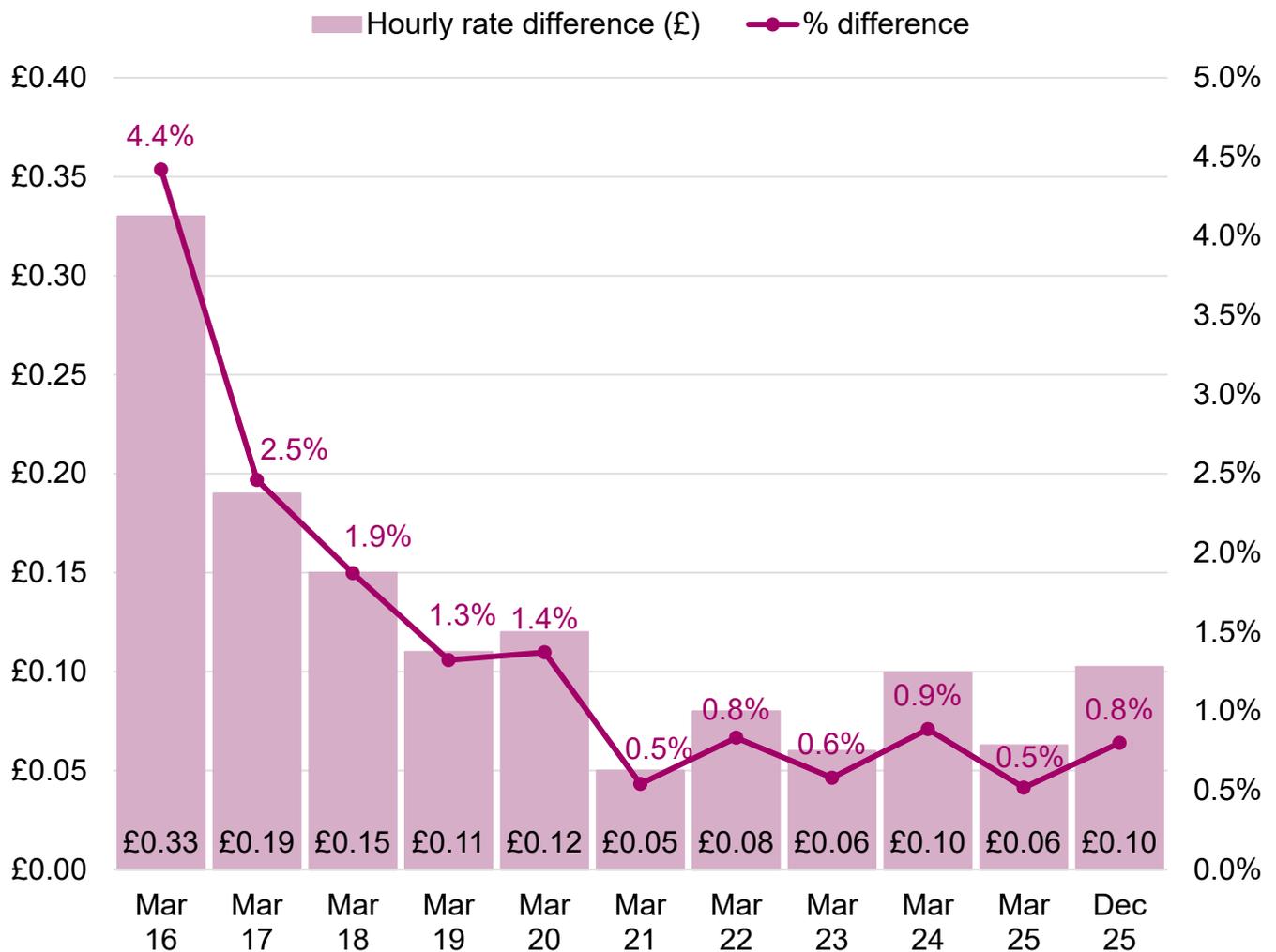
2.2 Care worker pay by experience in the adult social care sector

Chart 6 below compares the hourly rate of care workers based on their experience in the adult social care sector. In March 2016, care workers with five or more years of experience in the sector could expect an hourly rate which was around 33 pence higher on average, than a care worker with less than a year of experience. However since March 2016, the experience pay gap has reduced to 10 pence (or 0.8%) per hour as at December 2025. Between March 2021 and December 2025, the experience pay gap has fluctuated slightly between 5 pence and 10 pence since 2021.

It will continue to be challenging for providers to reward workers with more experience, greater responsibilities, or those who are more qualified and are already paid above the NLW rate as the NLW rate continues to increase.

Chart 6. Average care worker pay by experience in the sector (less than one year vs five years or more), March 2017 to December 2025

Source: ASC-WDS unweighted data, March 2016 to December 2025



2.3 Proportion of care workers on the wage floor

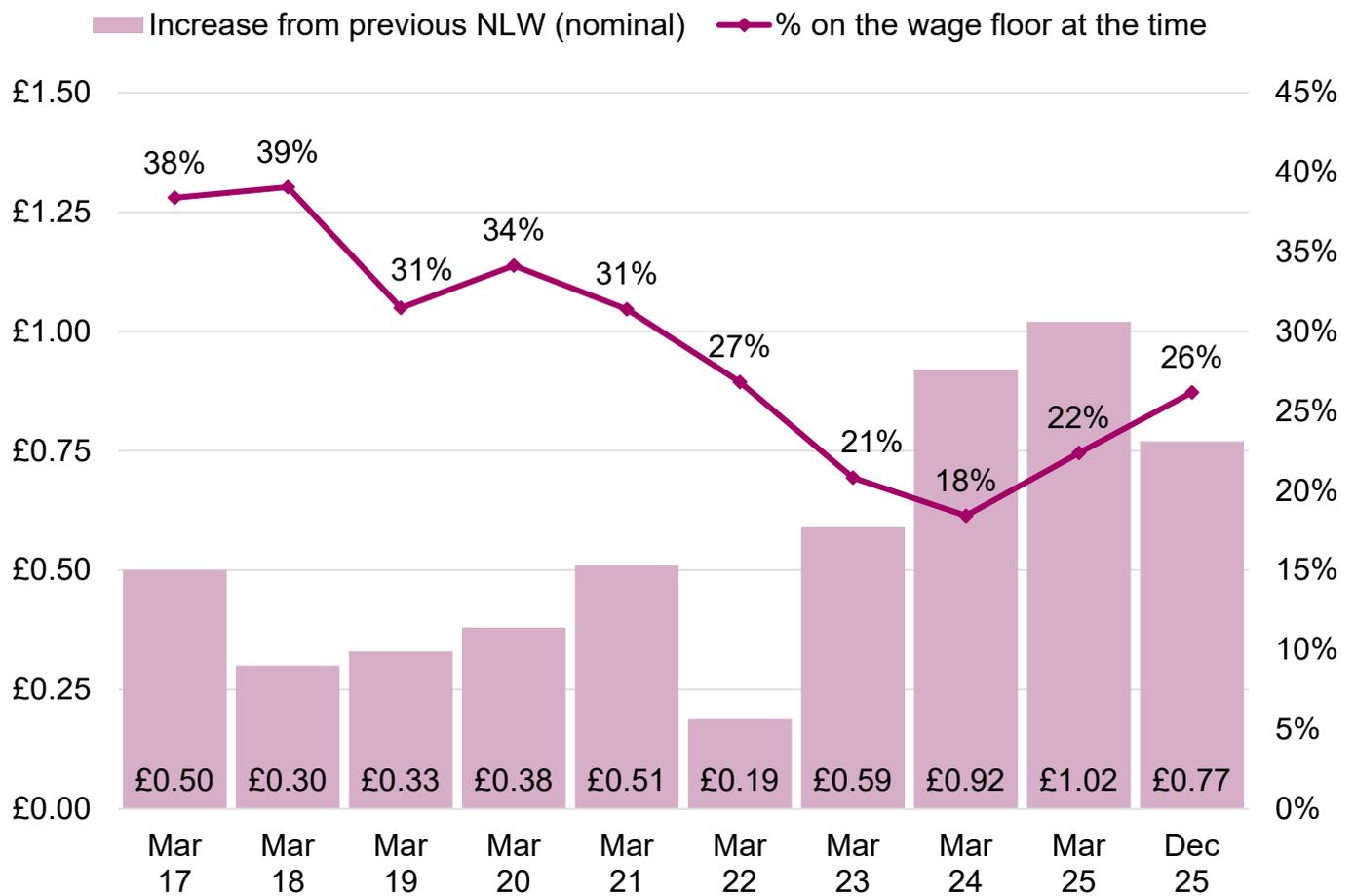
Another potential side effect of the larger NLW increments is a higher proportion of care workers on the wage floor. The wage floor refers to workers who are paid within 10 pence of the NLW.

Chart 7 below shows the nominal NLW increases and the proportion of workers on the wage floor between March 2017 and December 2025. Data prior to March 2017 are not included in the chart below, however after the introduction of the NLW in April 2016, the proportion of care workers on the wage floor increased from 24% in March 2016, to 38% in March 2017.

Between March 2021 and March 2024, the proportion of care workers on the wage floor has typically decreased, reaching 18% in March 2024, the lowest proportion since 2016. Since March 2024 this increased to 26% by December 2025. The proportion of workers on the wage floor was higher in December 2025 compared to March 2024 and March 2025, despite a smaller increase in NLW.

Chart 7. Proportion of care workers on the wage floor, March 2017 to December 2025

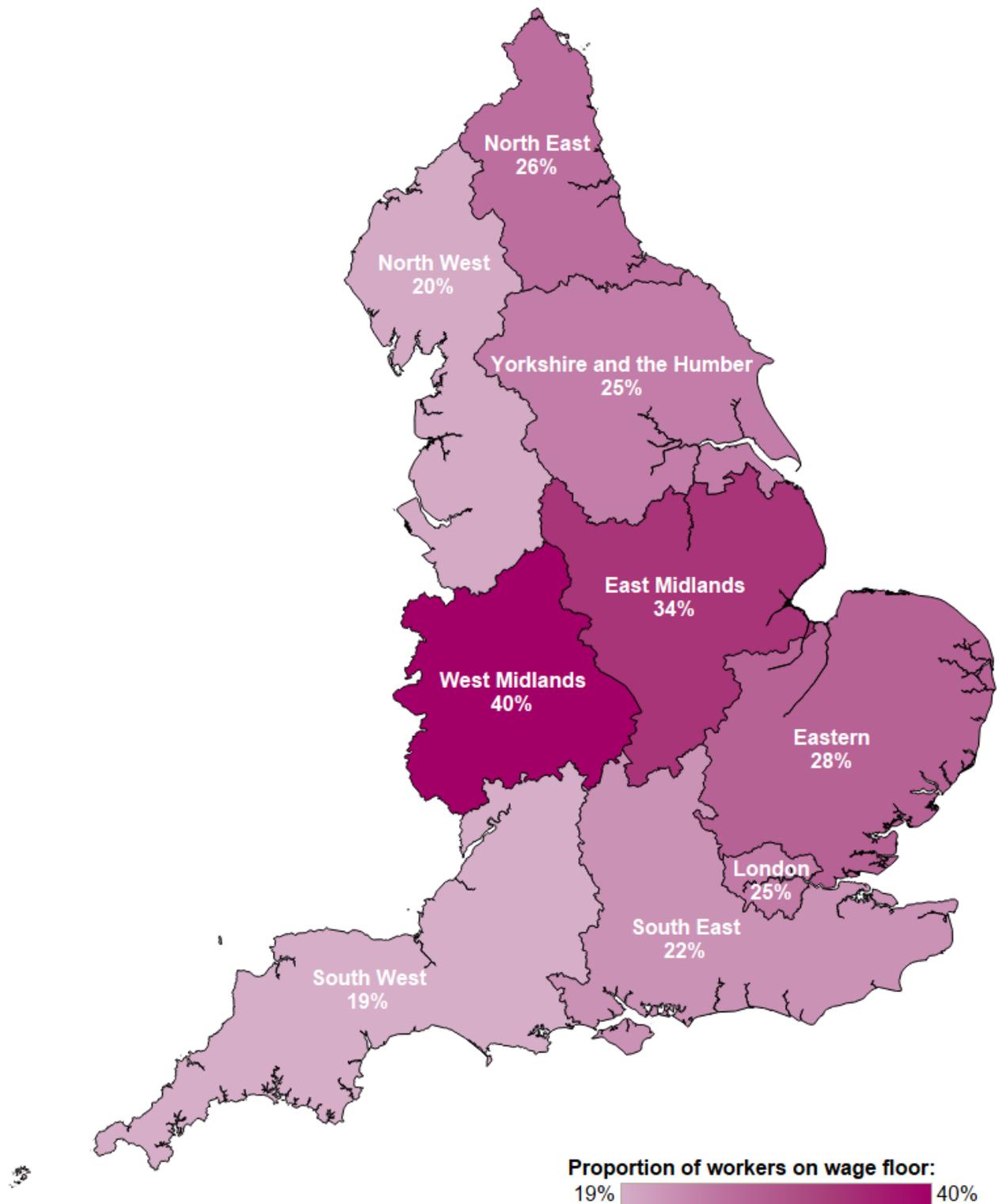
Source: Skills for Care estimates



The proportion of care workers on or under the wage floor varied greatly by location. Map 2 below shows the proportion of care workers who were paid on the wage floor by region. The West Midlands (40%) had the highest proportion of care workers being paid on the wage floor overall while the South West (19%) had the lowest proportion.

Map 2. Proportion of independent sector care workers who were paid on the wage floor by region, December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



2.4 Comparison to household expenditure, by region

Table 3 compares the average weekly take-home pay of a care worker, to the [average weekly expenditure](#) per person (used here as a proxy for the cost of living) at regional level.

The table shows that, in general, average care worker pay varies according to the cost of living in each region, i.e. care worker pay is higher in regions where the cost of living is higher. However, the cost of living shows more regional variation than care worker pay. As a result, in regions where the cost of living was lower (e.g. the North East), average care worker pay was relatively high compared to the cost of living.

Table 3. Weekly take-home pay of a care worker vs weekly expenditure per person, March 2024 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates and ONS data*

Region	Average weekly expenditure per person	Average weekly take home care worker pay	Difference
North East	£226	£406	£180
London	£271	£438	£167
North West	£245	£409	£164
West Midlands	£241	£400	£159
East Midlands	£238	£397	£159
Yorkshire and the Humber	£251	£398	£147
Eastern	£276	£411	£135
South East	£300	£413	£113
South West	£289	£397	£108

* Note: We have adjusted ONS data to account for inflation (CPI) between March 2024 and December 2025.

2.5 The Real Living Wage

The Real Living Wage (£12.60 in 2025/26) is a voluntary hourly pay rate, independently calculated by the [Living Wage Foundation](#), based on the actual cost of living in the UK. It's higher than the mandatory National Living Wage (£12.21 in 2025) and is paid by employers who choose to pay more than the legal minimum.

Although the wage floor is increasing and boosting the pay of most care workers, 49% of care workers were paid below the Real Living Wage in December 2025. This was a higher proportion than in March 2025 (46%).

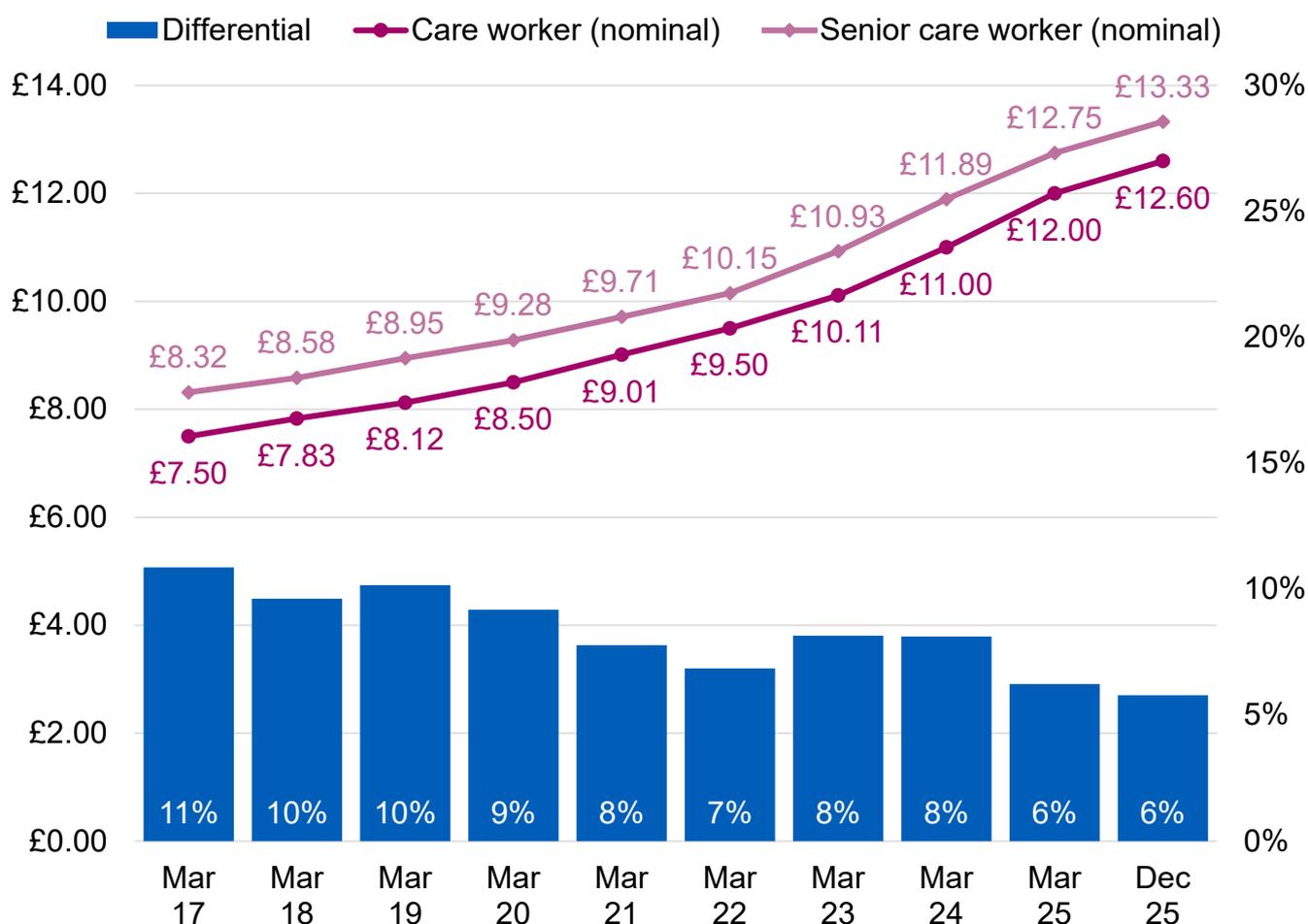
2.6 Pay differentials between care workers and senior care workers

In addition to social care employers funding the pay rises of the lowest paid workers to comply with the NLW, they are likely to try to increase the pay of other workers to maintain the pay differentials between job roles and other providers. This section investigates the median hourly rate and pay differentials between care workers and senior care workers.

Over the period from March 2017 to December 2025, care workers received an hourly rate increase of 68% (£5.10), while senior care worker hourly rates increased by 60% (£5.01). Chart 8 below shows that senior care workers were paid 6% more than care workers in December 2025, this has decreased consistently from 11% in March 2017.

Chart 8. Median senior care worker and care worker nominal hourly pay trend and differential, March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



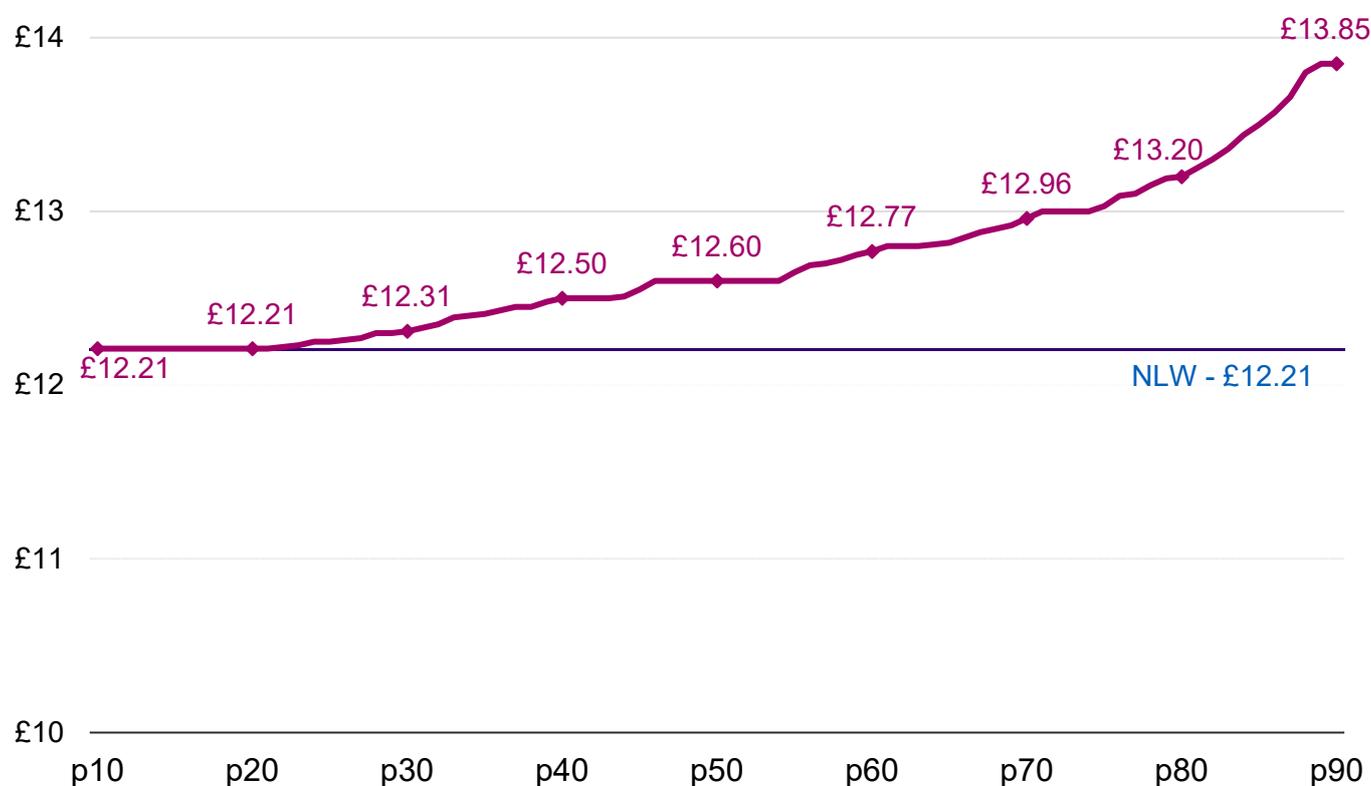
2.7 Under 21s

Approximately 2% of the adult social care workforce were aged under 21 years in March 2025 (2% of care workers). These workers were therefore not entitled to the 21 and over NLW pay rate of £12.21. The NLW for workers under 21 was £10.00 per hour.

While not directly benefitting from the NLW, over 90% of care workers under the age of 21 were paid at least £12.21 per hour. This is clear evidence that social care employers are voluntarily rewarding workers aged under 21 with an increased rate of pay, as well as those aged 21 and over.

Chart 9. Care workers aged under 21 hourly rate distribution, December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



2.8 Comparison with other sectors

Social care has been defined as a low-paying industry by the [Low Pay Commission \(LPC\)](#) every year since the 'First Report of the Low Pay Commission' on the National Minimum Wage in 1998 and remains so in their latest report in 2025.

The introduction of the NLW and its subsequent increase will have the most significant impact on the lowest-paying sectors. Unless the higher-paying sectors can increase wages at the same rate, adult social care will become proportionally closer to these other sectors in terms of pay. As the NLW rate continues to increase, more sectors are likely to begin to cluster close to the NLW rate. This could reduce the issue of pay as a barrier to entering the adult social care

workforce. However, it could equally mean that roles in other sectors with low pay will grow closer in pay to social care filled posts than they were before.

Chart 10 below compares median care worker hourly pay to some of the other lowest paid jobs in the wider UK economy (as defined by the Low Pay Commission), as well as healthcare assistants (HCAs) due to the similarities in the roles. The band 2 HCA role is similar to the care worker with slightly more clinical exposure whilst the band 3 HCA role may have more advanced observations, some clinical tasks and more autonomy with supporting care planning. An outline of the roles and responsibilities of a HCA can be found on the [NHS website](#).

Although these sources ([ASC-WDS](#), [ONS](#) and [NHS](#)) were published at different times the data collection periods overlap and are therefore comparable. As at December 2025, median care worker pay (£12.60) was 16 pence above the 10th percentile across the whole economy, but it was 63 pence below the 20th percentile.

As at December 2025, median care worker pay was 19 pence higher than kitchen and catering assistants and 9 pence higher than band 2 HCAs, both for those new to their role and those with more than two years' experience. Median care worker pay was 4 pence lower than the pay of cleaners and domestics, and 1 pence lower than sales and retail assistants.

The largest pay gap was with band 3 HCAs; those who were new to their role earned 15 pence more than the median care worker, while those with over two years' experience earned £1.00 more.

This analysis was previously shown for the 2024/25 financial year in Chapter 5 of our annual report [The State of the Adult Social Sector and Workforce in England](#), published in October 2025. There is little difference in the findings, however the difference between median hourly pay for care workers and Band 3 HCAs new to the role decreased from 31p in the previous analysis to 15p in December 2025.

Chart 10. Median independent sector hourly care worker pay in adult social care and selected low paying jobs across the wider UK economy, as at December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates, ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earning (April 2025) and NHS agenda for change pay data (2025/26)

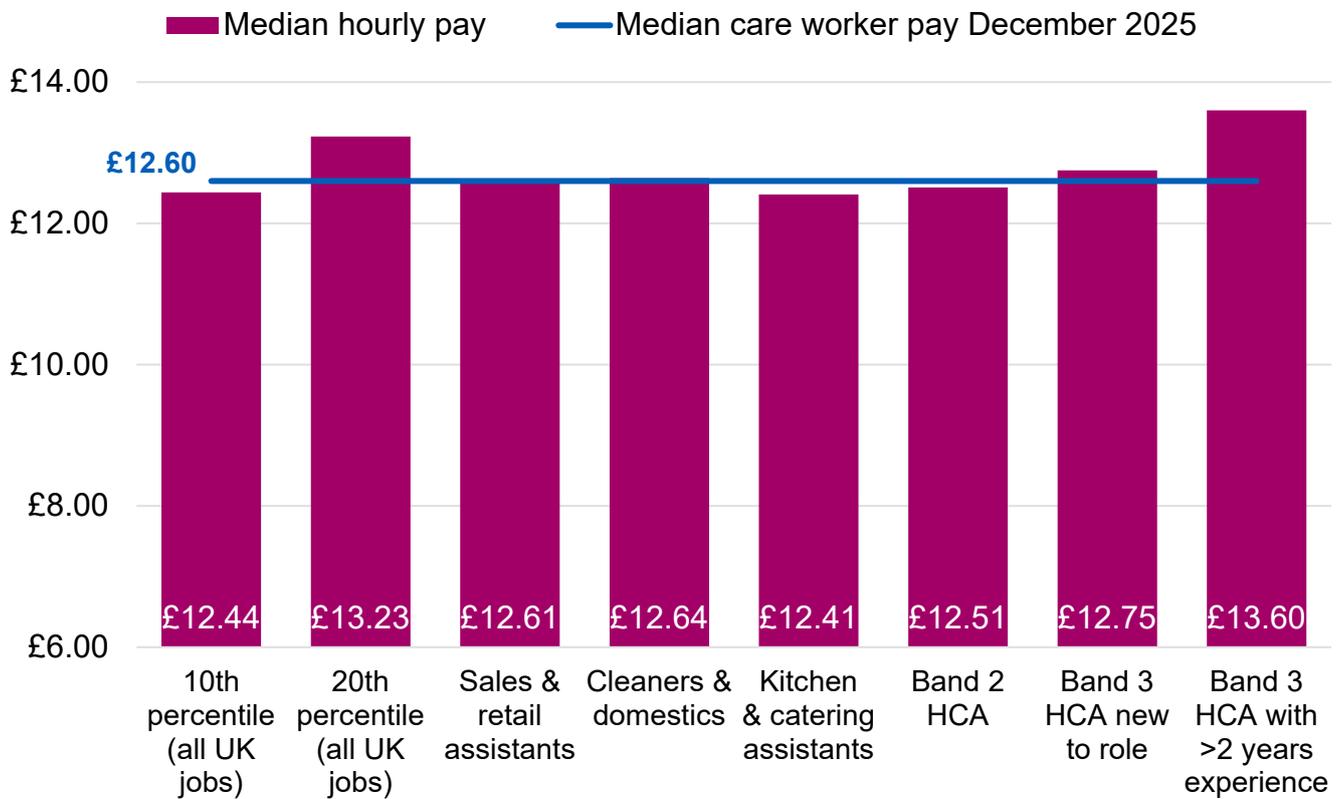


Chart 11 below shows the percentage change in nominal pay for the same job roles as in Chart 10, between 2024/25 and December 2025. Independent sector care worker pay was derived as at March 2025. Comparable data from the ONS (April 2025) and NHS (2025/26) have used the most recent available. The care worker median pay increase (5.0%) was lower than the increase for the 10th percentile (6.9%) and the 20th percentile (5.8%). This was similar to, but slightly lower than, sales and retail assistants at 5.4% and cleaners and domestic workers at 5.6%.

Although HCAs are paid more, their pay increase was much lower compared to the other listed job roles. Band 2 and Band 3 HCAs new to the role and HCAs with more than 2 years of experience had an increase of 3.6%. Of all the listed roles kitchen and catering assistants had the highest hourly rate increase at 6.6%, this was just below the bottom 10% of pay across the whole economy (6.9% increase).

Chart 11. Percentage change in independent sector nominal median care worker pay compared to other job roles, March 2025 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates, ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earning (April 2025) and NHS agenda for change pay data (2025/26)

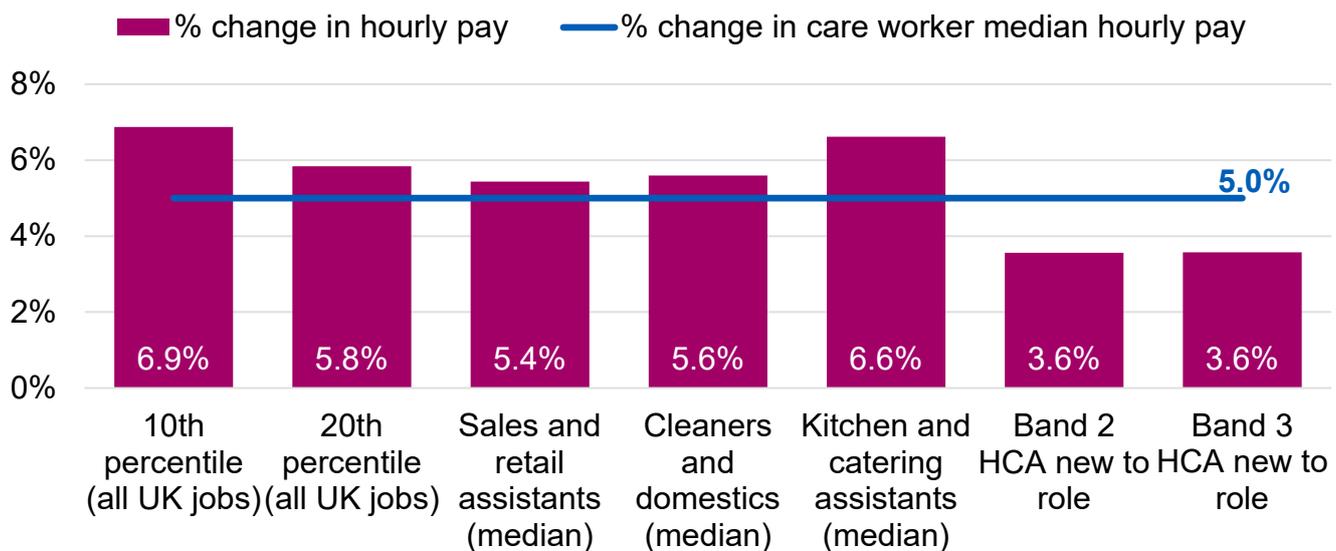
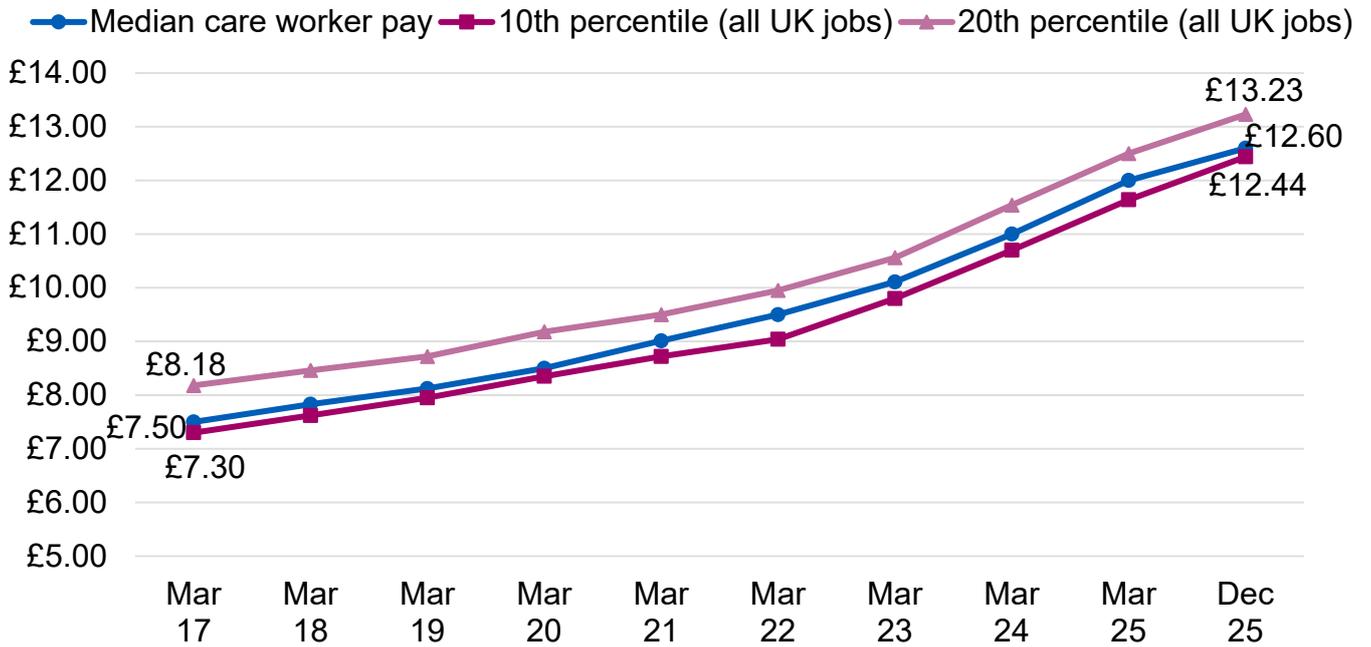


Chart 12 shows the trend of median care worker pay compared with the 10th and 20th percentile across the whole UK economy between March 2017 and December 2025. Median care worker pay was closer to the bottom 10% of pay across the whole economy in December 2025 than in March 2025. An update of March 2026 data will be available in the next [‘The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England’](#) report, due to be published in October 2026.

Chart 12. Nominal median independent sector care worker pay compared with 10th percentile (all UK jobs) and 20th percentile (all UK jobs), March 2017 to December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates, ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earning



3. The impact of the NLW rate from April 2026 (£12.71)

On 1 April 2026, the mandatory NLW will increase to £12.71 for workers aged 21 and over.

Chart 13 shows that as at December 2025, just under half (48%) of independent sector workers, including (55%) of care workers, were paid less than the upcoming mandatory NLW rate. This equates to around 640,000 filled posts directly affected by the upcoming increase in the NLW, including 495,000 care worker filled posts.

Many of the 52% of workers that were already paid on or above the 2026 NLW rate prior to its introduction may also receive a pay rise if pay differentials are to be maintained.

Chart 13. Hourly pay distribution of workers prior to the 2026 NLW, December 2025

Source: Skills for Care estimates



3.1 Adult social care providers

As at December 2025, around 90% of adult social care providers in the independent sector were paying at least some of their workers below the upcoming mandatory £12.71 NLW and will therefore be directly affected by its introduction. The remaining providers may also be indirectly affected if they want to maintain the pay differential between themselves and other employers, as well as between job roles within their own organisation.

On 6 April 2025, changes to UK employers' National Insurance contributions (NICs) meant that adult social care employers now face increased costs to accommodate the increase in National Insurance for their workers. At the same time, Employment Allowance increased, minimising the impact on small businesses Skills for Care will continue to monitor the status and effects of these changes.

Glossary

10th and 20th percentile

Percentiles are used to analyse a range distribution. The median (average) is the middle, or the 50th percentile (p50), meaning the pay at which half of care workers earned more than that amount, and half earned less. The 10th percentile (p10) is the value at which 10% of workers earned less than that value and 90% earned more. The 20th percentile (p20) is the value at which 20% of workers earned less than that value and 80% earned more, and so on.

Consumer Price Index (CPI)

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is the official measure of inflation of consumer prices in the UK. We apply the percentage change in the CPI between the latest period and each historical period to adjust historical pay figures for inflation. This allows for comparison in real terms.

Median pay

The median is a type of average - it indicates the middle value of a range. The median is different from the mean average, which is calculated by summing all the values in a range and dividing by the number of values.

National Living Wage (NLW)

The National Living Wage (NLW) is set by the Government and is the amount of money per hour employed workers are legally entitled to. It was first introduced on 1 April 2016 for workers aged 25 and over. In 2021, the age threshold for the NLW was reduced from 25 years to 23 years. This was reduced further in 2024 to 21 years.

Nominal pay

'Nominal' pay shows the actual pay rates as they were at the time. This isn't adjusted for inflation.

Real Living Wage (RLW)

The Real Living Wage (RLW) is set by the [Living Wage Foundation](#) charity each Autumn and is separate to the NLW. This is a voluntary scheme which employers can sign up to; the hourly rate is independently calculated to reflect the basic cost of living.

Real term pay

'Real term' pay means that pay rates have been adjusted to take inflation into account. Inflation adjustments have been calculated using the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the official measure of inflation of consumer prices in the UK. Inflation adjustments are expressed in prices in line with the latest reporting period i.e. if the latest analysed data is from December 2025, adjustments will be expressed in prices as at December 2025.

Wage floor

The wage floor includes any worker who is paid no more than 10p higher than the National Living Wage (NLW) at the time of data collection.

Workforce estimates

We use data collected by the ASC-WDS to create workforce models that, in turn, allow for estimates of the whole adult social care workforce to be produced. We use ASC-WDS data to make estimates of workforce characteristics (e.g. demographics, pay rates, employment statuses) for each geographical area, service type, employer type and job role combination that we report by. These estimates are then 'weighted' according to the coverage/completeness of ASC-WDS data for the sector in each of the above areas. For example, an area with 50% coverage would use more weighted data in the final analysis than an area with 90% coverage. Using this methodology allows for the analysis to be representative of all adult social care workers, even if the ASC-WDS contains uneven levels of data coverage.

The ASC-WDS is a mandatory return for local authorities and is non-mandatory for the independent sector; therefore, it doesn't have 100% coverage of the adult social care sector. However, it does have a sufficiently large sample to provide a solid basis for creating reliable and precise adult social care sector and workforce estimates at both a national and local level.

Skills for Care is confident in the quality of these estimates and the methodologies used have been peer reviewed by universities and an independent statistician. For a detailed methodology of how these estimates are produced please [visit our website](#) to read more.

Further resources

Our workforce intelligence publications

As a producer of official statistics, we provide outstanding workforce intelligence that the Government, strategic bodies, employers, and individuals rely upon to help them make decisions that will improve outcomes for the people who use care services. This section provides an overview of some of the reports and resources published by our Workforce Intelligence team. To access these reports and visualisations, please refer to the relevant pages on our [Workforce Intelligence website](#).

The size and structure of the adult social care sector and workforce in England

This report provides estimates of the number of organisations and establishments involved in providing or organising adult social care, as well as the size and structure of the workforce, including people and filled posts estimates, trend data, and future projections. To access this information, visit [our website](#).

Regional information

There are three pages of [regional information](#) on our website, providing an annual overview of adult social care services and the workforce in each region:

- a visualisation looking at the workforce in each region area, one at a time
- our comparison report comparing key variables across the nine regions
- individual regional written summary reports, summarising the workforce statistics.

Local area information

There are various pages on our website showing local area information. These are split by either local authority area or NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) geographical area.

- individual local authority or ICB area pages: looking at the workforce in each area, one at a time
- our comparison reports comparing key variables across local authority or ICB areas
- individual area written summary reports, summarising the workforce statistics
- our 'My ICB area (MH and LD&A)' report showing the latest information from the ASC-WDS for the mental health and learning disability and/or autism workforces, split into ICB areas.

Key topic areas

We also produce information on popular topic areas. Each topic includes a summary of the workforce information available, and signposts to other relevant resources.

- workforce tracking of key metrics
- learning disability and/or autism workforce
- apprenticeships
- pay rates
- individual employers and personal assistants
- nurses in social care
- recruitment and retention
- registered managers
- social work
- workforce nationality and international recruitment
- Factors affecting staff turnover.

To access these topic pages, visit [our website](#).

Adult social care workforce estimates and data downloads

Throughout this report we have presented analysis from our workforce estimates. To support this publication, we've published several additional Excel spreadsheets to provide further detail.

The 'Statistical appendix – adult social care workforce estimates' spreadsheet includes information on the size and structure of the workforce, recruitment and retention, employment characteristics, demographics, pay rates, qualification and training information and workforce projections. Each of these areas are split by region, sector, service, and job role.

We've also published 'Data download' spreadsheets which provide more granular information. These files are designed for analysts to interrogate the data at a national (England), regional, local authority and/or ICB area level. A trended data download is also available, showing key variables trended from 2016/17 to 2024/25.

To access all of these files, visit the [data downloads](#) page of our website.

Commission our services

Our Workforce Intelligence team are the experts in adult social care workforce insight. The data we collect in the ASC-WDS gives an unrivalled overview of the adult social care workforce in England. Beyond the wealth of information already available publicly on our website, you can commission the services of the Workforce Intelligence team to produce bespoke reports and analysis for your organisation or area.

How we can help you

- We can partner with you or form part of your project team on tenders and bids. By using our expertise and sector knowledge, we can add value to your research or project.
- We can use advanced analytics techniques to help you understand how key outcomes such as CQC ratings, turnover or vacancy rates can be improved.
- We can produce bespoke reports and analysis to help you solve problems and provide data solutions to help you improve your services.
- We can provide a detailed analysis into the adult social care workforce in your local area or look at performance in comparison to other areas.
- You can request a feed of data to enhance or improve a product or service.

In addition to the information on our website, we also have a dedicated Workforce Intelligence LinkedIn showcase page. The page will help you to discover the latest insights into the data, reports and visualisations we publish throughout the year. We share how that data is being used by the Government, think tanks, the media and other organisations we work with to inform debate and support decision-making. To learn more, visit our [Adult Social Care Data LinkedIn page](#).

Our values as producers of official statistics

Skills for Care is guided by core values. Throughout everything we do, we're inclusive, motivated, passionate, ambitious, collaborative and trustworthy. For more information about the Skills for Care strategy, our vision, mission, values and plan to achieve our mission, visit [our website](#).

All analysts leading on the production of this report are certified statisticians, meaning we work to the standard of the 'five safes'. We always make sure that our research and outputs are appropriate and trustworthy, and that there's no risk of misuse or confidentially breach. When creating outputs, we always adhere to statistical disclosure controls.

As a Workforce Intelligence team, we:

- help people to understand what's already available without commissioning our services and what options are available
- aren't selling the data - we're selling our analysis and sector expertise
- carry out bespoke work in particular areas that we can't cover in general outputs
- have a 'good for the sector' aim on all projects we work on
- channel any money we earn straight back into the sector.

In 2023, Skills for Care became an official statistics provider, having been added to the [Official Statistics Order 2023](#). We, Skills for Care's Workforce Intelligence team, are committed to the three pillars of trustworthiness, quality and value, as well as to the principles of the Code of Practice for Statistics. Visit our website for our full [statement](#).

For more information about the services listed above, please email: analysis@skillsforcare.org.uk.



Skills for Care

West Gate
6 Grace Street
Leeds
LS1 2RP

T: **0113 245 1716**

E: info@skillsforcare.org.uk

skillsforcare.org.uk



facebook.com/skillsforcare

linkedin.com/company/skills-for-care