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Adult social care: Innovation in Practice

Staffordshire County Council's development of its strategic workforce planning

March 2026

Introduction

This Innovation in Practice case study outlines how Staffordshire County Council has approached the development of its strategic workforce planning for adult social care. It showcases the county's commitment to building a resilient, skilled and valued workforce through genuine system-wide collaboration, strong use of data and intelligence, and a shared vision across partners.

Staffordshire's approach demonstrates how long-term planning, co-production and practical, scalable solutions can help address some of the most persistent challenges facing the social care sector, while creating the conditions for sustainable improvement and innovation.

About the organisation

Overview

Staffordshire County Council leads the development of the Social Care Workforce Strategy in partnership with the NHS Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board (ICB), local care associations, independent providers, and education and training bodies. The council delivers a wide range of services for adults and children, supporting people with diverse needs across the county.

Size, location and type of services operated

The social care sector in Staffordshire is significant, employing approximately 21,000 people in adult social care alone. This includes:

- 11,500 staff in residential and nursing care
- 7,200 staff in home care services
- 950 staff in community-based services such as day opportunities
- around 1,400 personal assistants, supporting individuals directly.

The council works alongside a large independent sector, which provides the majority of care services, as well as voluntary organisations and specialist providers. Together, these partners aim to deliver high-quality, person-centred care that promotes independence, wellbeing and dignity.

Staffordshire's approach is rooted in collaboration and co-production, ensuring that decisions are shaped by the voices of people drawing on care, frontline staff and providers. The organisation is committed to innovation, digital transformation and workforce development, recognising that a skilled and valued workforce is essential for sustainable care.

Summary of the innovation

Staffordshire's social care sector employs around 21,000 people but faces persistent challenges with recruitment and retention. Turnover is 32.2 per cent and vacancies stand at 9.9 per cent, while projections show a need for 34,948 new recruits by 2032. Most of these will replace leavers rather than meet growth demand, which highlights the importance of retaining staff and a robust workforce plan to address this.

Pay remains low compared with other sectors, with independent care roles averaging £10.25 per hour and career progression pathways often unclear. These pressures have been intensified by COVID-19, changes linked to Brexit and the cost of living crisis. Providers report difficulties attracting staff, while employees cite pay and recognition as key concerns.

After COVID-19 a significant number of people left the sector, adding further instability. Maintaining momentum on workforce initiatives is difficult, particularly in a rapidly changing environment where strategic workforce planning must remain relevant and adaptable to the changing landscape of the sector.

The shared vision for the future is a social care workforce that delivers highly valued, innovative and sustainable care across Staffordshire.

How things were done differently

Staffordshire addressed workforce challenges through a comprehensive, system-wide strategy rather than isolated projects. This collaborative plan brought together the ICB, Staffordshire County Council, Skills for Care, the local care association, West Midlands ADASS, training providers and employers across adults and children's services. Work began three years ago and took 12 months to complete, culminating in a well-received launch event in 2023.

Success was driven by a commitment to genuine collaboration and co-production. Partners worked through joint workshops, surveys and governance structures that ensured accountability. Consultation groups and a steering group included people with lived experience, reinforcing the principle of coproduction. The process highlighted the importance of transparent communication, shared data and collective problem-solving, which built trust and momentum for long-term change.

A key ground rule agreed was that financial considerations would not be part of the discussions, removing potential barriers and enabling creativity. Partners also agreed to limit the number of priorities to avoid overwhelm and prevent progress from stalling. These approaches proved highly effective, with most actions in the plan having already been delivered, even those initially thought to be unattainable.

Andrew Jepps, Assistant Director of Care Commissioning, played a pivotal role in creating an inclusive and creative environment where all voices were heard and involved in shaping the plan. This commitment to inclusivity was key to the overall success of the strategy and its ability to remain relevant and future proofed.

The strategy combines long-term goals with practical measures, focusing on data-driven planning, digital innovation and clear career pathways. Staffordshire not only evaluated the current state of its workforce through surveys and focus groups, but also looked outward to learn from international models of care.

The Buurtzorg model of care from the Netherlands influenced thinking around reducing bureaucracy, building local teams with strong community connections and developing solution-focused skills within teams. This approach includes an emphasis on coaching and continuous improvement rather than command and control approaches, and co-producing solutions with both the workforce and people who receive support.

A key part of the process was a 'strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats' (SWOT) analysis. Staffordshire found:

- **Strengths:** Adult social care is a large and growing sector of the economy; the majority of the local workforce find social care a rewarding career; and the wider public's perception of the value of social care is improving since the pandemic.
- **Weaknesses:** There is a key labour and skills shortage in social care; a lack of sustainable, redirectable investment in social care; and a lack of awareness about social care career pathways and opportunities.
- **Opportunities:** New ways of working in the sector, including digital opportunities; strengths-based ways of working with a stronger role for the frontline; and a cross-sector partnership approach.
- **Threats:** Current competition with other sectors of the economy and relatively low rates of unemployment; work–life balance during peaks of demand; and the impact of the cost of living crisis.

Progress and impact since launch

Since the strategy went live in 2023, engagement has shown strong workforce advocacy: 78% of staff report being satisfied in their roles and 62% would recommend social care as a career, even though pay remains a concern. This positive sentiment is channelled through peer support networks and recognition schemes, and previously through the I Care Ambassadors initiative, which saw only limited formal engagement.

Providers have started adopting values-based recruitment, improving training offers and trialling low-cost retention approaches, including employee of the month awards. The partnership has also introduced data intelligence sharing and a Social Care Academy, which was created as a direct outcome of the strategy and now provides a central point for training and career development across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

The Social Care Academy offers free or funded learning opportunities, including online courses, virtual sessions and in-person training, for people aged 16 and over who live or work locally. The Academy brings together introductory programmes for new entrants, apprenticeships and specialist courses for experienced staff and registered managers.

Topics range from safeguarding and end-of-life care to leadership and digital skills. Learners can also build a career passport, creating a record of training that supports progression and mobility within the sector. This initiative reflects the strategy's commitment to improving skills, retention and recognition, and demonstrates the impact of collaborative action.

Survey feedback on the Staffordshire Social Care Workforce Strategy has highlighted that better pay and conditions, recruitment support through advertising and campaigns, and help with transport costs would make the greatest difference. Many organisations have already acted on these priorities, reporting improvements through enhanced pay, making staff feel more valued and offering support with travel costs.

The strategy also reflects national priorities, aligning with the Leadership for a collaborative and inclusive future report (the Messenger report), which emphasises the importance of strong leadership and positive action on equality, diversity and inclusion.

What inspired this approach?

The Staffordshire Social Care Workforce Strategy was driven by a combination of national priorities, local challenges and insights from those working in the sector. Nationally, reforms such as People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform and Our vision for a future care workforce strategy highlighted the need for a sustainable, skilled and valued workforce. These policy drivers created a clear expectation for local systems to act.

Locally, the evidence was compelling. Turnover in adult social care had reached 32.2%, vacancy rates were 16% and pay remained low compared with other sectors, averaging £10.25 per hour in the independent sector. Projections showed that Staffordshire would need more than 6,000 additional staff by 2024 and almost 35,000 by 2032 to meet demand and replace leavers. These figures underlined the urgency for a long-term solution rather than short-term fixes.

Direct engagement reinforced this need. Surveys and focus groups involving over 300 individuals and 60 organisations revealed that while most staff felt proud of their work and wanted to make a difference, pay and work–life balance were the areas of lowest satisfaction. Almost one in five respondents said they were likely to leave their role or the sector within a year. Organisations echoed these concerns, citing pay and travel costs as major recruitment barriers. Despite these challenges, the workforce expressed strong advocacy for the sector, which provided a foundation for change.

National research and examples of good practice also shaped the approach. Evidence reviews pointed to the importance of values-based recruitment, career progression pathways and mental health support in improving retention. Successful initiatives elsewhere demonstrated the benefits of coordinated training offers, digital skills development and campaigns to improve the image of care work. These insights informed Staffordshire's ambition to create a whole-system strategy that would integrate health and social care priorities and build resilience for the future.

Crucially, the view of people with lived experience was captured at focus groups, ensuring that the voices of people who draw on care and those delivering it shaped the plan. The team played a key role in creating an inclusive and creative environment where all perspectives were valued.

The skills element of the strategy also contributes to the broader priorities of the 'Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Skills Improvement Plan', which aims to support higher-skilled, better-paid and more productive jobs across the Staffordshire economy.

Ultimately, the decision to act was inspired by a shared recognition that social care is a vital and growing part of the local economy and community wellbeing. To secure its future, Staffordshire needed an approach that combined robust data, collaboration and innovation, while keeping the voices of the workforce and people who draw on care at the heart of the process.

How was the innovation developed?

The development of Staffordshire's Social Care Workforce Strategy was a collaborative, evidence-based process, designed to address systemic workforce challenges and create a sustainable future for care services.

Practical steps taken

The process began with a comprehensive engagement programme between June and July 2022, involving 323 survey responses (261 individuals and 62 organisations) and 70 participants in focus groups. This provided rich insight into workforce strengths, challenges and aspirations. As well as engagement, partners analysed local workforce data:

- 21,000 people work in adult social care in Staffordshire, including 11,500 in residential and nursing care, 7,200 in home care and 950 in community-based services.
- Turnover reached 32.2%, with 59% of leavers remaining in the sector and vacancy rates averaging 9.9%.
- Pay in the independent sector averaged £10.25 per hour, compared to £13.56 across all sectors locally.
- Projections indicated the need for 6,336 additional staff by 2024, rising to 34,948 by 2032.

Using this evidence, the partnership co-produced a strategy aligned with national reforms (People at the Heart of Care), focusing on four outcomes:

1. More resilience in the workforce
2. More effective recruitment
3. More effective retention
4. Innovative ways of working

Challenges and useful surprises

Developing the strategy was not without challenges. Pay constraints, travel costs and the perception of care roles as temporary jobs rather than long-term careers were persistent barriers. These issues were echoed by providers during engagement, alongside concerns about recruitment and retention pressures. Changing these perceptions and addressing these barriers requires time, consistent messaging and visible action to demonstrate that social care offers meaningful, skilled and sustainable careers.

Engagement revealed an unexpected strength in the workforce: strong advocacy for the sector. A total of 78% of staff reported being satisfied with their jobs and 62% said they would recommend social care as a career, even with concerns about pay and work life balance. Recruitment is often driven by word of mouth, with decisions influenced by whether people enjoy working in their team. This sense of pride and connection became a foundation for the workforce strategy and informed initiatives such as peer support networks and recognition schemes.

One area that proved less effective was the I Care Ambassador model. While there was initial enthusiasm and willingness to respond to calls for ambassadors, formal engagement was limited. Even with forward planning, attendance at events was low, largely due to staffing capacity and the difficulty of releasing people from shifts. A joint health and care ambassador group had been launched before the pandemic, but this was not sustainable for the same reasons. These experiences highlighted the importance of designing initiatives that fit operational realities and can be maintained over time.

Initial actions launched in the strategy

1. Improve the use of data and intelligence

- 1.1 Measure progress against outcomes annually
- 1.2 Update workforce demand projections annually
- 1.3 Review and agree priority training needs annually

2. Promote resources and support for providers

- 2.1 Promote the Health and Wellbeing Hub and other wellbeing resources.
- 2.2 Share good practice toolkits for recruitment and retention.
- 2.3 Develop peer support and networking opportunities.
- 2.4 Extend resources and support to personal assistants.
- 2.5 Expand mental health first aider training.

3. Develop an improved journey into work

- 3.1 Create an enhanced model for engaging schools and other entry routes, using technology and virtual experiences to make career pathways visible.
- 3.2 Encourage providers to offer more work experience and placements.
- 3.3 Increase apprenticeships, including Trainee Nursing Associates, supported by Health Education England funding.
- 3.4 Share toolkits and resources to support high-quality recruitment and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

4. Implement a coordinated approach to learning and development

- 4.1 Develop and promote local training offers for leadership skills.
- 4.2 Provide training for skills identified as quality challenges.
- 4.3 Offer training in strengths-based care, digital skills and technology use.
- 4.4 Scope the potential for a Social Care Academy to centralise training and development.
- 4.5 Create training pathways for people new to care, using offers created in partnership across health and social care, including the ICS's Work in Health and Care and the Care Certificate.

5. Improve the positive recognition of social care as a valued career

- 5.1 Extend training and development offers to the wider social care workforce.
- 5.2 Extend lifestyle benefits offers to the wider social care workforce.
- 5.3 Increase events and mechanisms to recognise best practice (e.g. The National Care Awards).
- 5.4 Create opportunities for frontline staff to act as trusted assessors and participate in multidisciplinary working.
- 5.5 Develop and implement support networks for key leadership roles, supported by partners across the health and care system.
- 5.6 Identify and progress reductions in bureaucracy where this does not adversely affect safe and effective care.
- 5.7 Across local and national networks, make the case for promoting social care as a valued career, and for a fair and sustainable funding approach for the sector.

6. Increase capability in digital and technology

- 6.1 Promote adoption of digital social care records, virtual multidisciplinary working and technology solutions.
- 6.2 Increase availability of high-quality digital skills training.
- 6.3 Encourage digital working practices across the sector.
- 6.4 Develop digital champions within the workforce.

7. Support improved recruitment and business continuity

- 7.1 Relaunch Staffordshire's I Care Ambassadors scheme.
- 7.2 Encourage values-based recruitment and inclusive practices.
- 7.3 Connect with national and regional recruitment campaigns.

- 7.4 Deliver coordinated recruitment campaigns across partners, focusing on new entrants, underrepresented groups and younger people.
- 7.5 Continue developing the NHS reservists model jointly with the NHS.

8. Reduce travel costs across the partnership

- 8.1 Explore options to subsidise or support transport costs.
- 8.2 Work with lifestyle benefits providers to offer transport-related deals.
- 8.3 Promote collaborative working between providers to reduce unnecessary journeys.

The development process demonstrated that co-production, transparency and shared ownership are essential for tackling complex workforce challenges and building long-term resilience.

Who has it helped or affected?

The Staffordshire Social Care Workforce Strategy is already making an impact across the sector, benefiting frontline staff, care providers and, ultimately, people drawing on care and support.

Frontline workforce

- Engagement showed that 78% of staff are satisfied with their job and 62% would recommend social care as a career, despite challenges around pay and work–life balance.
- Initiatives such as I Care Ambassadors, peer support networks and recognition schemes (e.g. employee of the month) have helped staff feel more valued.
- Access to professional development is growing, with the launch of a Social Care Academy offering a wide range of learning resources. Originally planned as a hybrid model, the academy now operates fully online, making training more accessible to the workforce. Opportunities include leadership development programmes, digital skills training and tailored learning pathways designed to support career progression and improve confidence in practice.
- Mental health and wellbeing support is being promoted through the Health and Wellbeing Hub and mental health first aider training.

Care providers

- Providers now have access to shared data and intelligence, enabling better workforce planning.
- Recruitment support includes values-based recruitment toolkits, advertising guidance and coordinated campaigns.
- Practical measures such as exploring travel cost subsidies and promoting digital innovation are helping providers address key barriers to recruitment and retention.

People drawing on care and support

- A more resilient workforce means improved continuity of care and reduced risk of unmet need.
- Digital adoption and technology-enabled care are enhancing the quality and efficiency of services.
- Strengths-based practice and integrated working are being embedded, ensuring that care remains person-centred and outcome-focused.

Early indicators of success

- Providers report improved collaboration and access to resources.
- Staff feedback highlights increased visibility of career pathways and training opportunities.
- The sector is beginning to shift perceptions of social care as a valued, professional career.

What practical steps helped make this possible?

Strong partnership working

Several factors enabled the development and early success of Staffordshire's Social Care Workforce Strategy. The strategy was co-produced through collaboration between Staffordshire County Council, the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care System (ICS), Skills for Care, local care associations, independent providers, education and training bodies, and the Department for Work and Pensions. This cross-sector approach ensured shared ownership and accountability, creating a foundation for long-term change.

Staffordshire's success demonstrates the value of fostering inclusive co-production. Key advice for other local authorities includes:

- **Recognise the wealth of knowledge in the room**: Joined-up working feels natural in Staffordshire, but it's important to acknowledge and celebrate this strength.

- **Be mindful of language and assumptions**: Ensure clarity for all partners to avoid misunderstandings.
- **Invest time and show up**: Making the effort to attend events in person builds trust and relationships.
- **Executive support matters**: Leadership backing reinforces commitment and momentum.
- **Listen and collaborate**: Ask questions that encourage shared problem-solving, for example, 'What could we do to help in our area?'
- **Build relationships intentionally**: As Martine Stokes (ICB) noted: "Skills for Care have been the glue to build the relationship to begin with."

Collective commitments

Partners agreed to:

- share what we know about the social care workforce
- review and learn from good practice
- evaluate ideas on how to build and support the workforce
- develop and take forward the strategy collaboratively
- understand how to monitor impact and measure success.

Shared vision and values

Partners united around a clear mission: to build a resilient, skilled and valued workforce capable of delivering high-quality care. This shared vision helped overcome organisational silos and fostered trust across the system.

Data and intelligence

Access to robust workforce data was critical. Skills for Care provided insights into turnover (32.2%), vacancy rates (9.9%), and qualification levels (only 50% of staff hold a relevant qualification). Local projections highlighted the urgency: 6,336 additional staff needed by 2024, rising to 34,948 by 2032. These figures informed priorities and helped partners agree on measurable outcomes.

Leadership and governance

Senior leaders championed the strategy, ensuring alignment with national reforms such as People at the Heart of Care. Governance structures supported decision-making and monitoring progress, while maintaining transparency and accountability.

Practical support and resources

Skills for Care played a key role by:

- providing toolkits for recruitment and retention
- supporting leadership development and mental health training
- Facilitating peer networks and promoting best practice.

The ICS contributed by promoting wellbeing resources and enabling digital innovation, while local providers shared successful initiatives such as employee recognition schemes and values-based recruitment.

Mindset and timing

The pandemic highlighted the essential role of social care and created momentum for change. Partners recognised that incremental improvements were not enough, and that a whole-system approach was needed to address structural challenges and future-proof the workforce.

What might others learn from this?

Staffordshire's experience offers valuable lessons for any organisation seeking to strengthen its social care workforce:

Engage widely and listen deeply

The strategy was shaped by 323 survey responses and 70 focus group participants, ensuring that frontline voices influenced priorities. Engagement revealed that while pay and work–life balance were major concerns, staff valued teamwork and the ability to make a difference – insights that informed practical actions like recognition schemes and peer support networks.

Start with a shared vision

A clear, system-wide mission, building a resilient, skilled and valued workforce, helped unite partners across health, social care, education and employment services. This alignment is essential for tackling structural challenges that no single organisation can solve alone.

Use data to drive decisions

Robust workforce intelligence provided urgency and focus. Knowing that turnover was 32.2%, vacancy rates were 9.9% and that 34,948 new recruits would be needed by 2032 helped partners prioritise actions such as improving recruitment processes, reducing bureaucracy and promoting career pathways.

Low-cost initiatives can make a big difference

Recognition schemes, such as employee of the month and simple 'thank you' gestures, improved morale and retention without significant cost. These initiatives demonstrate that cultural change does not always require large budgets.

Think long term, not quick fixes

Short-term recruitment campaigns alone cannot solve systemic issues. Staffordshire's approach combines immediate actions, such as promoting digital skills and reducing travel costs, with longer-term goals like establishing a Social Care Academy and embedding strengths-based practice.

Key insights and advice for other local authorities

- **Inclusive co-production requires time and active participation** – building trust and momentum takes commitment from all partners.
- **Recognise and value joined-up working** – this was natural in Staffordshire due to already existing strong working relationships but needs explicit acknowledgment elsewhere.
- **Clear language and shared assumptions are critical** – avoid jargon and ensure everyone understands the purpose and goals.
- **Skills for Care acted as the 'glue' in relationship building** – having a neutral, trusted organisation to connect partners is invaluable.
- **Executive-level support and in-person engagement strengthen collaboration** – visible leadership helps maintain focus and reinforces commitment across the system.
- **Adopt a mindset of 'What could we do to help in our area?'** – this question fosters collective problem-solving and shared ownership.
- **Remove financial barriers during planning** – agreeing early that funding discussions will not limit creativity encourages bold ideas and shared ownership.
- **Create a clear, easy-to-read strategy document** – accessibility and simplicity help partners and providers engage with the plan and take action.

What next?

Two years after implementation, Staffordshire's workforce strategy is entering a full review phase. Many actions have been successfully delivered, including the creation of the Social Care Academy, which now provides a central hub for

training, career progression and leadership development. Initiatives such as peer support networks and recognition schemes have strengthened morale and retention across the sector.

Adapting to new priorities

The policy landscape has continued to evolve since the strategy was launched, with new government initiatives shaping priorities. These include the ongoing neighbourhood approach and the commitment to a 10-year plan for health and social care. Looking ahead, the introduction of a fair pay agreement for the adult social care sector is expected, although it has not yet been implemented.

These developments require the strategy to remain flexible and future-proof. This means revisiting assumptions, updating workforce intelligence and embedding neighbourhood principles into workforce planning and integrated care delivery. It also means considering how fair pay commitments will impact recruitment, retention and funding models, ensuring these factors are reflected in future workforce strategies.

Scaling and refining what works

Successful initiatives will be scaled further, such as digital skills programmes, values-based recruitment and leadership support networks. The Social Care Academy will continue to expand its offer, ensuring pathways for new entrants and progression routes for experienced staff. There is also an opportunity to strengthen links with education providers and local employers to support sustainable recruitment.

Measuring long-term impact

The next stage will focus on deeper evaluation. Annual workforce surveys and outcome tracking will continue, but additional measures will assess cultural change, retention trends and the effectiveness of career pathways. This evidence will inform future investment and ensure actions remain aligned with sector needs.

How others can get involved

We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Staffordshire's approach was informed by international learning, including the Buurtzorg model of care from the Netherlands, which shaped thinking around integrated care and workforce flexibility.

Other areas can follow this example by drawing on proven models, adapting them to local contexts, and sharing insights through Skills for Care networks, Integrated Care System forums and regional events. Andrew Jepps, Assistant Director of Care Commissioning, also co-chairs the West Midlands ADASS Workforce Network, where collaboration remains central to success, and collective action will continue to be guided by the question: 'What could we do to help in our area?'

The review is not about starting again but building on achievements, adapting to new realities and maintaining a shared vision for a resilient, skilled and valued social care workforce.

Skills for Care involvement

Partners in Care and Health in partnership with Skills for Care

Working as equal partners, we at Partners in Care and Health (PCH) and Skills for Care collaborated to support Staffordshire through the review of their workforce plan. We delivered a programme of support focused on strengthening local workforce planning capability and encouraging forward-thinking approaches that will future-proof diverse priorities in adult social care, while also preparing for upcoming government initiatives.

As part of this support, we provided constructive external challenge and guidance to help refine the workforce plan and strengthen their strategic approach, offering targeted insight and supporting the development of a robust and sustainable workforce planning approach.

Key reflections

We helped shape the work by benchmarking Staffordshire's latest survey results against Skills for Care's Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set (ASC-WDS), providing valuable context for interpreting trends.

During the sessions, we explored how the lower response rate in their recent survey could be skewing the results. While headline figures appeared only slightly lower than previous years, we discussed how this might mask positive progress in some areas and why interpreting data in context is essential. This led to conversations about improving engagement and response rates to ensure a more accurate picture of workforce challenges and achievements.

Key themes and forward thinking

The sessions highlighted several areas for future development:

- accessible training resources for smaller providers to ensure equity in workforce development
- embedding co-production and empowering providers and teams, not just management, to shape solutions
- lifelong learning entitlement as a foundation for ongoing skills development and career progression
- technology as an enabler, with a clear role for ‘technology explainers’ to support adoption and accessibility
- succession planning and exit pathways to capture tacit knowledge from experienced staff before retirement
- reciprocal mentoring to bridge generational gaps, with younger staff supporting digital skills and older staff sharing experience
- training passports and competency tiers, supported by accredited provider lists, to build confidence and consistency across the sector.

We also discussed the importance of improving the sector’s image among young people. Currently, care is often perceived as a fallback option for school leavers. Staffordshire is already engaging schools through mock interviews and seminars, but the group agreed that more needs to be done to raise the profile of care careers. Ideas included the spread of immersive virtual or augmented reality experiences to showcase what working in care looks like, and sending teachers on work experience placements to challenge stereotypes.

SWOT reflections

Strengths:

- delivery of most actions in the original workforce plan, including the launch and success of the Staffordshire Care Academy and strong system-wide collaboration
- data-driven approach and strong co-production ethos.

Weaknesses:

- low survey completion rate (0.3% of workforce), impacting data reliability
- persistent perception challenges and limited engagement with personal assistants.

Opportunities:

- neighbourhood health and care integration
- coaching and mentoring networks, including buddy schemes for resilience and knowledge sharing
- use of technology and AI to enhance training and career pathways.

Threats:

- ageing workforce and reluctance in the sector to employ younger staff
- impact of changes to international recruitment
- challenges created by clustering and merging of ICBs
- ongoing perception of care as a backup career option.

Potential lines of enquiry for future focus in Staffordshire

1. Consider how major shifts will affect social care in Staffordshire over the next 5–10 years, including neighbourhood models, AI and changes to international recruitment.
2. Identify who it will be important to work with in a changing environment, and how the workforce can be supported to adapt.
3. Explore the opportunities, risks, challenges and threats created by current and emerging changes.
4. Reflect on the types of infrastructure or support that would enable people to work together, test ideas and learn from innovation.
5. Focus on how a future-orientated approach can be balanced with maintaining core fundamentals such as recruitment, retention and overall market sustainability.

Looking ahead

The group agreed that while many objectives have been achieved, priorities should now shift towards developing an improved journey into work in this sector, strengthening recruitment and retention strategies, and embedding innovative solutions such as training passports and digital learning hubs. There was strong interest in creating structured career pathways, supported by accredited training and flexible learning options, to attract and retain talent across Staffordshire.