

Charting the rise of in-work poverty: the case of care workers in Yorkshire

PROWSE, Peter <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0103-1365>>, PROWSE, Julie and SNOOK, Jeremy

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

PROWSE, Peter, PROWSE, Julie and SNOOK, Jeremy (2018). Charting the rise of in-work poverty: the case of care workers in Yorkshire. In: Work, Employment and Society Conference, Belfast, 12 Sep 2018 - 14 Sep 2018. (Unpublished) [Conference or Workshop Item]

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Between 1985 to 2014 the number of people aged 85 and above doubled from 700,000 to 1.5 million (Keynote, 2016). For individuals requiring social care, most is now delivered by private companies whose workforce is projected to increase (Gardiner and Hussein, 2015). The Low Pay Commission expressed concern that Government reductions in Local Authority funding would affect paying the national minimum wage (Low Pay Commission, 2015:216). Estimates suggest an increase in the national minimum wage would affect 275,000 care workers and require additional funding of between £753 million to £1 billion (UKHCA, 2015) this paper presents findings examining employers' and unions' views of pay and working conditions in social care and more importantly, the lived experiences of care workers' working in Yorkshire.

Methodology: Three Phases

Phase I: A focus group examining funding the care workforce comprised of trade union, local authority commissioner for care homes and 3 care home managers.

Phase II: In-depth interviews conducted with two small, regional (for-profit) care home owners and a national care home Director and eight GMB union representatives recruiting in the care sector examining pay and working conditions in the care sector.

Phase III: Interviews with 29 care workers in 14 separate care homes exploring three areas. First, care workers' roles and work, second, issues of pay and conditions and finally, their experience and knowledge of low pay and conditions.

Findings

Employers acknowledged the need to increase wages and provide better working conditions, but argued financial constraints set by local government limited their capacity to improve pay and conditions. While a shortage of care workers and the challenges of funding the national minimum wage are key issues.

Union representatives note care workers' roles are expanding however; this additional responsibility was not reflected in their pay or conditions. The GMB is campaigning and targeting the care sector to raise the issue of the 'real' living wage recommended by the Living Wage Foundation to recruit and retain members (Prowse and Fells, 2016).

Care workers enjoy many aspects of their work, but undertake a wider range of tasks and roles and these continue to expand within an environment of staff reductions and workforce pressures. They felt low pay, limited promotion opportunities, fixed contracts and no opportunities to increase pay and conditions, despite undertaking additional training, are significant constraints to the job.

Disparity in pay rates is evident for young workers aged fewer than 25, and also for newly recruited care workers who are paid lower rates of pay and reduced conditions compared to existing care workers. Some care companies are now unilaterally varying terms and conditions for existing employees. The findings highlight an increasing trend towards in-work poverty (IWP) for care workers as pay and conditions are reducing.

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