

What are the barriers and enablers for young people pursuing careers in the independent Adult Social Care sector within Cornwall?

Executive Summary

Adult social care (ASC) in Cornwall faces sustained workforce challenges, driven by rising demand, an ageing population, and an ageing workforce. Currently, only 8% of the local care workforce is under the age of 25, while a significant share is approaching retirement age. These trends mirror national patterns but are intensified in Cornwall by rurality, transport barriers, and a “super-ageing” population profile.

Although previous research has explored the experiences of young adults already working in care, far less is known about the perceptions of young people aged 16–18 who are still forming their career aspirations. Early perceptions are critical in shaping future workforce supply, yet adult social care is rarely positioned as a career of first choice within schools and colleges.

This research seeks to address this gap and understand how more young people in Cornwall can be encouraged to choose and be recruited into careers in adult social care. The findings will inform local workforce planning and the development of youth-focused recruitment and engagement strategies.

A central finding from engagement with young people and employers is the high degree of alignment between care providers’ perceptions and young people’s views. Both groups consistently identified stigma, low pay, limited awareness, and emotional demands as the main barriers to young people entering adult social care. Similarly, both emphasised the importance of support, flexibility, progression, and meaningful work as key enablers.

Stigma emerged as one of the most powerful deterrents. Adult social care is widely perceived as low status, poorly paid, and narrowly focused on personal care, particularly in residential settings. Providers described care as a sector people “fall into” rather than actively choose, with negative perceptions reinforced by families, schools, and wider society. Young people echoed this view. While many believed care work is important and deserving of respect, they also recognised that care workers are undervalued and underappreciated. Low pay and limited visibility of progression were seen as central to this lack of status.

Awareness of adult social care work opportunities among young people was limited and narrow. Most associated the sector primarily with care homes and older people, with little understanding of domiciliary care, supported living, or specialist roles. Knowledge of the breadth of career pathways was low, and many young people reported uncertainty about what adult social care involves or how to access it. Providers confirmed that despite some outreach activity in schools and colleges, awareness-raising rarely translates into applications, highlighting a disconnect between information provision and effective engagement.

Both providers and young people viewed care work as emotionally demanding. Providers raised concerns about young people’s maturity, resilience, and readiness for complex care situations, while emphasising that these challenges can be mitigated through strong induction and support. Young

people who hadn't made career choices yet similarly described care as stressful and emotionally taxing, often comparing it unfavourably with hospitality and retail, which were seen as easier and less pressurised.

Pay was the single most frequently cited barrier in the questionnaire and a major concern for young people. Adult social care was widely seen as unable to compete with other sectors offering quicker entry, fewer requirements, and immediate income.

Practical barriers were particularly mentioned. Driving requirements, rural geography, and transport limitations excluded many young people from domiciliary care roles. Lengthy onboarding processes, driven by safeguarding and compliance requirements, were also seen as discouraging compared with faster recruitment in other sectors.

Despite these barriers, this research identifies strong enablers. Supportive management, positive workplace culture, flexible working patterns, and visible progression routes were consistently associated with retention and satisfaction among younger workers. Young people prioritised fair pay, flexible hours, opportunities to help others, training, and clear progression. Providers emphasised professionalisation, structured pathways, and reframing direct entry level care roles as a foundation for access to wider career opportunities in health and social care.

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Overview

Adult social care in Cornwall faces significant challenges in attracting young people, despite growing workforce demand. This research explores the barriers and enablers influencing young people's interest in careers in adult social care, with a focus on those aged 16–18 who are still forming career aspirations. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines interviews with ten adult social care providers and questionnaires completed by 50 college students aged 16 to 18 in Cornwall.

The findings show strong alignment between providers' and young people's perspectives. Key barriers include negative sector stigma, low pay, limited awareness of roles, emotional demands, and practical challenges such as transport. Adult social care is often perceived as low status and poorly understood, particularly when compared with sectors such as hospitality and retail. However, enablers include supportive management, flexible working arrangements, clear progression pathways, and the opportunity to undertake meaningful work.

The research concludes that early engagement, improved awareness, and youth-inclusive employment practices are essential to positioning adult social care as a viable and attractive career option for young people in Cornwall.

Context

Adult social care (ASC) in Cornwall faces persistent challenges in attracting and retaining younger workers. Currently, only 8% of the Cornwall care workforce are under the age of 25, a proportion that broadly mirrors the local population demographic of 18–25-year-olds. However, this masks a deeper issue: younger people are not entering the sector in sufficient numbers to offset an ageing workforce, with over a quarter of ASC workers in Cornwall aged 55 or older ([Skills for Care, 2025](#)). The average age of a worker in ASC in Cornwall is 44. This creates a significant sustainability risk, particularly given that there are currently around 1,500 vacancies in the Cornwall adult social care workforce. As a substantial proportion of older workers approach retirement, these existing shortages are likely to intensify without a stronger pipeline of younger entrants. This mirrors national trends, where younger workers remain significantly underrepresented in the ASC sector, at 7% nationally ([Skills for Care, 2025](#)) ([The King's Fund, 2024](#)). Although research has explored the opportunities and barriers faced by those aged 18–24, little is known about the views of young people still in school or college who have yet to make career decisions. This represents a significant knowledge gap, as early perceptions may be crucial to shaping interest in the sector.

Cornwall's Adult Social Care Workforce Strategy identifies the recruitment of young people as essential to addressing long-term workforce sustainability, particularly in the context of an ageing workforce and increasing demand for care. The strategy highlights that the adult social care workforce in Cornwall will need to grow by approximately 30–35% by 2035, a target that is unlikely to be achieved without significantly increasing the number of young people entering the sector ([Cornwall adult social care workforce strategy, 2024](#)). The strategy also places strong emphasis on engaging with schools and colleges as a means of increasing workforce supply and improving long-term sustainability. The strategy highlights the importance of improving the image of care work among younger people and establishing clear pathways from education into adult social care roles. This focus on early engagement reflects recognition that attracting young people is essential to addressing current and future workforce shortages in Cornwall. This local strategic focus aligns with

the national Workforce Strategy for Adult Social Care in England, which similarly emphasises long-term workforce sustainability through improved attraction, early engagement, and the development of clear career pathways to encourage more people, including younger entrants, into the sector ([Skills for Care, 2023](#)).

Studies such as those by The [King's Fund \(2024\)](#) and [Browne Jacobson \(2025\)](#) highlight that ASC employers often value young people's energy, adaptability, and technological fluency. Many providers associate younger workers with "sparkiness," and a "can-do" attitude that can bring enthusiasm to care environments. Their familiarity with technology is seen as an asset for a sector increasingly reliant on digital systems. Younger care workers are also described as open to learning, socially aware, and strong advocates for equality and human rights. However, these positive traits are often overshadowed by concerns about reliability, limited life experience, and perceived immaturity. Employers also report tension between younger and older staff, particularly when experienced workers feel burdened with training responsibilities.

From the perspective of young care workers, care roles are often viewed as both rewarding and challenging. Research by [The King's Fund \(2024\)](#) found that while many young care workers experience satisfaction and pride from building relationships with the people they support, they also report exhaustion, long shifts, and limited recognition from management. Poor induction processes, lack of support, and bullying related to age are recurring issues ([Fisher, 2021](#)). Young people frequently enter the sector "by accident rather than design," with limited understanding of what the role involves, leading to "shock" and early burnout ([The King's Fund, 2024](#)). Similarly, [FE News \(2021\)](#) reported that under-20s have the highest turnover rates in the sector, at 42% - highlighting the difficulty of retaining younger recruits once they experience the realities of the job.

A number of structural and social factors contribute to these challenges. Nationally, care work continues to suffer from a poor public image, often perceived as low-status, low-paid, and lacking clear progression routes ([Montgomery et al., 2017](#); [The Guardian, 2017, 2019](#)). Parental and teacher influence can further reinforce these stereotypes, as studies show that most parents would not encourage their children to pursue a career in social care ([The Kings Fund, 2024](#)). In Cornwall, transport barriers and competition from other low-paid sectors such as hospitality compound these issues ([Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP, 2024](#)). Many young people remain unaware of local opportunities or perceive care work as limited to supporting older adults, rather than as a varied and skilled profession.

In addition to structural factors such as skills pathways and pay, growing evidence suggests that mental health and work readiness are central to young people's engagement with employment, particularly in the post-COVID era. Research by the [Institute for Employment Studies \(2023\)](#) indicates that many young workers experience anxiety, stress and low confidence in workplace settings, and a significant proportion value mental health support as a key factor when considering future jobs, with nearly eight in ten young people stating that such support would help them feel happier and more likely to stay in work. This aligns with broader trends showing rising work-related mental health concerns among younger cohorts and highlights that young people's transition into demanding roles, such as those in adult social care, may be influenced by their mental wellbeing as much as by traditional recruitment factors. As the adult social care sector itself reports high levels of burnout and poor wellbeing among its workforce, understanding and addressing mental health and work

readiness among younger entrants is increasingly important for effective recruitment and retention strategies

Efforts to engage young people have included outreach in schools and colleges, work experience placements, and national initiatives such as Step into Social Care and The Prince's Trust Health and Social Care Programme. These schemes have aimed to raise awareness and provide insight into care roles. [The Prince's Trust programme](#), for example, has successfully supported over 9,000 young people, many from deprived areas, into sustained employment in health and social care, demonstrating the value of targeted early intervention. Other recommended strategies include improving job advertisements to accurately reflect the nature of the role, strengthening induction and mentorship processes, celebrating good management, and tackling age-based discrimination within workplaces ([The King's Fund, 2024](#); [Social Care Recruiting, 2024](#)).

Proud to Care Cornwall has previously completed a targeted young people campaign to better understand young people's perceptions of adult social care through focus groups and a social media campaign. This included focus groups with Exeter University students, as well as discussions with young care workers, offering insight from young people external to the sector and those already experiencing it. Alongside this, a youth-focused digital campaign used social media platforms to drive young people to a dedicated landing page designed to raise awareness of careers in care and capture expressions of interest. Findings revealed that care is widely perceived as low-paid, emotionally demanding, and a "job of last resort," often associated primarily with personal care and end-of-life support. Participants voiced concerns about high responsibility, insufficient training, lack of support, and the potential impact on their mental health, frequently comparing care unfavourably with hospitality work, which was seen as easier and less pressurised. Key barriers included transport issues, poor sector image, fear of being left unsupported, and limited understanding of career progression. Despite this, young people also recognised that care could be meaningful and valuable for developing transferable skills.

Campaign evaluation showed strong engagement, generating over 15,000 visits to the bespoke landing page and a substantial rise in website traffic, particularly driven by Snapchat and TikTok. However, limited job availability and low provider engagement constrained the translation of interest into employment. Overall, the campaign demonstrates the importance of clear reassurance around training, mentorship, emotional support and career development, as well as authentic messaging that challenges stereotypes and presents adult social care as skilled, purposeful and a viable long-term career option. [Norfolk Care Careers](#) similarly launched a campaign targeting young people aged 16–24, which highlighted social media as the most viable route for engaging Gen Z audiences. The campaign emphasised the importance of showcasing the variety of roles within adult social care and involving current young workers to provide authentic, relatable representations of the sector.

Cornwall presents a distinctive case due to its rurality and "super-aging" population, which intensifies demand for care workers. There are less people in the working age population than the national average. Existing research has not focused on Cornish young people, nor on those who are aged 16–18 that are still forming career aspirations. Understanding how this group perceives adult social care, and what would make it an appealing option, is critical for long-term workforce planning. This research seeks to address that gap by exploring how young people in Cornwall perceive the sector, and what strategies could encourage them to consider adult social care as a career.

Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this research is to understand how more young people aged 16-18 in Cornwall can be encouraged to choose and be recruited into a career in adult social care. To be able to reach this aim, there are five main objectives:

1. What does current research tell us about perceptions of both young people and care providers in terms of youth entering a career in adult social care?
2. What are local care providers views on recruiting young people into their workforce?
3. What are the current perceptions of young people in Cornwall surrounding careers in the care sector?
4. What are the key barriers that can be identified that discourage young people in Cornwall from considering care-related careers?
5. How can findings from this research be utilised to develop practical recommendations for improving the attractiveness of the care sector in Cornwall for young people?

Methodology

Interviews with Care Providers

To understand local care providers views on recruiting young people into their workforce, ten semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) were conducted with providers across Cornwall. The aim was to explore employer perspectives on recruiting young people into adult social care, including perceived challenges, motivations, and potential solutions.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to include a mixture of home care, residential care, and supported living providers, ensuring a rounded view of the sector. Interviews were conducted either in person or virtually via Microsoft Teams and typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The semi-structured format provided consistency through a shared question guide while allowing flexibility for participants to expand on relevant experiences.

Questions focused on attitudes towards youth recruitment, barriers to employing younger workers, and strategies for attracting and retaining them. Examples include:

- How do you feel about recruiting more young people into adult social care?
- Are there any challenges or concerns you've experienced (or anticipate) when employing younger staff?
- From your experience, what motivates young people to stay in care roles once they've joined?
- Has your organisation tried any specific approaches to recruit young people?
- What changes/initiatives do you think are needed to encourage more young people into jobs in care?

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with consent. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection and participants were made aware of the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. The interview transcripts were analysed thematically,

following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework, to identify recurring patterns and insights across participants to identify key themes which are discussed within the next section.

It is important to acknowledge that the dataset of care providers was relatively small, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised across the wider adult social care sector. While the sample provided valuable depth and insight into local perspectives, future research could incorporate a larger and more diverse sample of providers to strengthen the robustness and generalisability of the findings.

Questionnaires with Young People

To gain insight into the perceptions of young people regarding adult social care careers, a questionnaire (Appendix B) was distributed to students aged 16–18 from Truro and Cornwall College. An opportunistic sampling approach was used, allowing participation from students who were readily accessible and willing to take part. In total, 50 responses were collected.

Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were outlined with the purpose of the research, and informed consent was obtained. All responses were anonymised to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest engagement.

The questionnaire comprised of 20 questions, combining closed and open-ended formats. The questions explored participants' current employment status, their awareness and understanding of adult social care, and their perceptions of the sector as a potential career path. Additional questions sought to identify factors that might encourage more young people to consider working in care, and where they would like to hear about opportunities.

The use of a questionnaire enabled the collection of a broad range of views, offering an overview of young people's attitudes towards adult social care to complement the perspectives gathered from care providers interviews. Responses were analysed descriptively and thematically, contributing to the triangulation of findings and supporting a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and enablers involved in recruiting young people into the sector.

While the questionnaire provides valuable insight into college students' perceptions, it may under-represent the views of young people who are disengaged from education, potentially overlooking a group whereby adult social care could offer accessible employment.'

A further limitation of this stage of the research relates to access to young people and the level of engagement achieved through the participating colleges. Access to participants was partly constrained by the accessibility of students and the level of communication and support from the colleges themselves, which limited the size and diversity of the dataset. Future research could aim to work more collaboratively with colleges and educational providers at an earlier stage to support wider distribution of questionnaires and improve participation across a broader range of students.

Findings

Thematic Analysis: Interviews with Care Providers

This analysis explores ten care providers' perceptions, experiences and recommendations regarding the recruitment and retention of young people into adult social care. Drawing on multiple qualitative interviews (Appendix A) with providers across care homes and domiciliary services in Cornwall, the data reveals a complex intersection of structural barriers, mainstream stigma, and organisational practice. While there is strong consensus that young people are vital to the future sustainability of the sector, providers repeatedly highlight that adult social care is still widely perceived as a job people 'fall into' rather than a long-term professional career.

The findings are organised into four overarching themes and related sub-themes.

Theme 1: Care providers perceptions of young people in ASC	Theme 2: Barriers to young people entering the sector	Theme 3: Enablers - What encourages young people to stay?	Theme 4: Initiatives to encourage young people into care roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •1.1 Recruitment of young people as a sector necessity. •1.2 Young people as a 'Blank Slate' and source of fresh energy. •1.3 Technological strengths. •1.4 Lack of maturity, life experience and professional readiness. •1.5 Care as a 'Stepping Stone'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •2.1 Stigma and Misconceptions around care work. •2.2 Early career guidance. •2.3 Driving restrictions. •2.4 Legal age-related restrictions. •2.5 Outreach without outcomes. •2.6 Longer onboarding process as a deterrent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •3.1 Recognition, support and workplace culture. •3.2 Flexibility and work-life balance. •3.3 Job security and stability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •4.1 Early intervention and awareness. •4.2 Challenging stigma and promoting positive identity. •4.3 Structured pathways and visual progression maps. •4.4 Professionalisation and sector recognition.

Theme 1: Care providers' Perceptions of Young People in Adult Social Care

1.1 Recruitment of young people as a sector necessity

Across almost all interviews, providers described the recruitment of young people as not simply beneficial but essential for the long-term sustainability of adult social care in Cornwall. Currently only 8% are aged under 25, while 25% aged over 55 ([Skills for Care, 2025](#)). Participants consistently framed young people as critical to addressing current and future workforce shortages, ageing staff profiles, and increasing demand for care services. There was a shared view that without greater

engagement of younger generations, the sector risks becoming unsustainable. This perception positions young people as crucial to the sector and the providers interviewed were open to them across the board.

1.2 Young People as a 'Blank Slate' and Source of Fresh Energy

A consistent strength identified across several interviews was the idea that young people enter care as a "blank slate". Providers noted that younger workers have not yet picked up negative habits from previous roles, making them more adaptable, open to training, and easier to shape into high-quality care workers. One participant highlighted that young people's recent experience in education means they are more accustomed to learning environments compared with older members of staff, which improves their receptiveness to training and development.

In addition, younger staff were widely seen as bringing new energy into teams. They were described as bringing enthusiasm, and different approaches to problem-solving, often 'shaking up' established routines and encouraging innovation. Younger workers were also seen as less judgemental and more socially progressive, with providers noting their greater comfort around diversity and difference, which was viewed as beneficial for resident relationships and inclusive care.

1.3 Technological Strengths

Several providers highlighted young people's fluency with digital systems as a significant advantage. Their confidence with technology was seen as improving efficiency in record-keeping and app-based care systems. This contrasted with some older staff members who sometimes struggled with digital processes, positioning young care workers as increasingly important in modernised care environments.

1.4 Lack of Maturity, Life Experience and Professional Readiness

Despite these strengths, providers frequently raised concerns around a lack of maturity and life experience. Care work was described as requiring emotional intelligence, resilience, and ethical judgement, particularly when responding to vulnerable adults and complex care situations. Younger people were perceived as more likely to find elements such as personal care, death, or emotional labour daunting.

There was also concern around motivation: providers distinguished between young people who wanted 'a job' and those who wanted 'a job in care'. The former were seen as more likely to leave early, treat the role casually, or lack emotional investment, reinforcing the perception of high turnover within younger cohorts. Multiple providers mentioned that young people were 'less aware' of the consequences on the rest of the team if they were late for work or did not show up at all, however it is important note that these individuals were often in the minority.

Communication was another area highlighted. Some providers noted that younger staff could be less confident in raising concerns and asking for support. This sometimes meant that issues went

unaddressed until they escalated. A small number of interviewees also observed that younger workers could appear more distracted, with specific mention of frequent mobile phone use during shifts. This was seen as potentially impacting focus and engagement with residents.

Other challenges included lack of resilience, difficulty managing responsibility at a young age, and needing more intensive mentoring and supervision compared to more experienced staff. However, most providers stressed that these challenges were not viewed as fixed traits, but as areas that could be positively addressed through strong induction processes, clear expectations, consistent boundaries, and supportive management.

This reflects organisational risk-aversion within a highly regulated sector that is shaped by safeguarding pressures. A few providers noted that they would favour an older candidate over a younger one due to these perceived traits. Overall, while concerns exist, providers largely agreed that with the right support, guidance, and workplace culture, these challenges can be effectively managed and should not act as a barrier to recruiting younger people into the sector.

1.5 Care as a ‘Stepping Stone’

A strong and recurring perception across interviews was that adult social care is frequently used by young people as a ‘stepping stone’ into other career pathways, rather than a long-term destination. Many participants acknowledged that while some young people do remain in care, a significant proportion use it as a foundation for future careers in nursing, psychology, social work, behavioural therapy and other health and social care professions.

Several providers described how young people often enter care with uncertainty about their long-term goals but gradually discover their interests through hands-on experience. For some, exposure to care work clarified their desire to move into specialist roles, while for others it provided structure, confidence and transferable skills that supported progression elsewhere. Skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, responsibility and safeguarding awareness were consistently highlighted as valuable foundations.

Importantly, this was not always framed negatively. Some providers viewed this progression as a positive outcome, with care acting as an entry point into meaningful careers. Several noted that young people often return to care during university breaks or after other employment. However, this framing may undermine efforts to present care as a destination career, reinforcing instability in the sector’s workforce.

Theme 2: Barriers to Young People Entering the Sector

2.1 Stigma and Misconceptions Around Care Work

Across interviews, stigma emerged as one of the most powerful deterrents. Care work, according to providers, is frequently associated with ‘bum-wiping’, and low status, with limited recognition of its skilled components and opportunities for career progression. Providers noted that this stigma is reinforced by wider society, families, teachers, and even educational institutions, which often steer young people away from care as a career option rather than presenting it as a valued profession.

This perception also extended to domiciliary care, which multiple providers emphasised that young people lacked an awareness of. Instead, their frame of reference was almost exclusively care homes, limiting their understanding of the diversity of roles within the sector.

2.2 Early Career Guidance

Participants repeatedly argued that awareness of careers in care needs to start much earlier than college level. By Year 10 and even Key Stage 1 or 2, young people begin forming ideas about what constitutes a 'real career'. As care is rarely presented alongside professions such as nursing, policing, or teaching, it becomes invisible as a viable option.

Many providers criticised the lack of accurate representation in schools and the focus on university routes, arguing that this fails young people who are better suited to vocational learning. Colleges were also described as focusing too heavily on nursing-home models, offering limited exposure to domiciliary care and real-world career opportunities in the sector.

2.3 Driving Restrictions

For domiciliary care providers in Cornwall, the requirement to drive and own a car was described as a major barrier. Young people often cannot access the role due to the cost of lessons, insurance, and business cover. This structural issue disproportionately excludes young people from being able to consider a job in care.

2.4 Legal Age-related Restrictions

Across the ten providers interviewed, there was notable variation in views regarding the appropriate age at which young people could be employed within adult social care. Some providers stated they were strictly limited to employing individuals aged 18 and over, often citing the nature of personal care, safeguarding responsibilities, and regulatory requirements as key reasons. Others indicated they could employ 17-year-olds, usually within clear legal boundaries and with additional supervision in place. A smaller number acknowledged that 16-year-olds could be involved, though typically in the context of work experience placements or apprenticeships linked to formal health and social care qualifications rather than substantive care roles.

One provider particularly emphasised that as long as they remained compliant with legislation and safeguarding standards, they were willing to implement the necessary procedures to support younger staff. This included adjustments such as shorter shifts and additional breaks, framing these measures as reasonable accommodations to provide early exposure to the sector.

However, this approach was not consistent across all providers. Several expressed concerns that such adjustments, especially shorter shifts and additional breaks, could create operational challenges. For these providers, accommodating younger workers was perceived as a practical drawback, making them less inclined to actively recruit under-18s.

The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 states that a young person may be employed from the age of 16 given that they are competent and appropriately trained and supervised. A CQC-registered provider can lawfully employ a 16 year old as long as the appropriate risk assessment is in place. They do not need to be enrolled in a health and social care course to be employed at an adult social care setting.

Overall, the findings show that there is no universal age at which providers believe young people should enter the sector. Views differed not only on the minimum age itself, but also on the route through which young people should become involved. While some providers were comfortable employing young people as direct employees from 17 or 18, others felt that younger individuals were more appropriately introduced through apprenticeships, work experience or placement schemes. This variation highlights a lack of consistency across the sector and suggests that pathways into care for young people are shaped more by organisational preference and capacity than by a shared standard.

2.5 Outreach without outcomes

A consistent finding across interviews was that many providers are already making active efforts to engage young people through college workshops, careers talks, job fairs and apprenticeship advertisements, including the use of platforms such as the [gov.uk apprenticeship website](https://www.gov.uk/apprenticeship-website). These initiatives were viewed as important attempts to raise awareness and challenge misconceptions about the sector, with providers describing regular attendance at colleges and schools to explain what care work involves and the career opportunities available.

However, despite this ongoing engagement, providers widely noted that these activities rarely translated into young people joining their workforce. While interest and curiosity were sometimes expressed at events, this did not often result in formal applications. Several providers described this as frustrating, particularly given the time and resources committed to outreach efforts.

This suggests a disconnect between awareness-raising and actual recruitment, indicating that while young people may become more informed about adult social care, barriers such as stigma, driving requirements, or uncertainty about the role, continue to prevent engagement from turning into employment.

Importantly, one provider emphasised that the responsibility lies with care organisations to reach out to young people, rather than expecting young people to come to them. They argued that providers must “go to where young people are” instead of relying on traditional recruitment methods that young people may never engage with. This highlighted a recognition that young people’s awareness of the sector is limited, and therefore waiting passively for applications is unlikely to address lack of engagement.

2.6 Longer onboarding process as a deterrent

Across the interviews, providers highlighted that the highly regulated nature of adult social care recruitment can create a significant barrier for young people entering the sector. While safeguarding

and compliance were universally viewed as essential due to the vulnerability of those receiving care, the length of time required to fully onboard a new employee was seen as discouraging for younger applicants who are often seeking quick entry into paid work.

Several providers explained that the recruitment process can take several weeks due to requirements such as background checks, references, training and compliance procedures. In contrast to other sectors such as retail or hospitality, where young people can begin paid work almost immediately, care roles require a longer lead-in period before an individual can start earning. This delay was perceived to reduce the attractiveness of care work, particularly for students or young people seeking short-term employment.

This suggests that while safeguarding must remain a priority, there may be value in exploring ways to better support young applicants through the onboarding process, such as clearer communication, early engagement prior to application, or pre-employment pathways that maintain interest during waiting periods. Addressing this barrier could play a key role in improving access of younger people within the adult social care workforce.

Theme 3: Enablers – What Encourages Young People to Stay?

3.1 Recognition, Support and Workplace Culture

Strong leadership and positive workplace culture were repeatedly identified as crucial to retention of young staff members. Young people were more likely to remain when they felt valued, supported, and listened to. Providers emphasised the importance of open communication, recognition (even small incentives), and management that ‘leads by example’.

Approachable leadership, transparency, and emotional support systems such as employee assistance programmes helped create psychologically safe environments where young staff felt respected rather than overwhelmed.

3.2 Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

Flexibility was highlighted as particularly important to younger workers by a large majority of providers, as they place large importance on work-life balance. Organisations that allowed adaptable rotas, predictable schedules, and negotiations around shifts were seen as more successful in retaining young staff. Fixed patterns, advance rota planning, and avoidance of back-to-back shifts contributed positively to job satisfaction by providers employing younger care workers.

3.3 Career Progression and Professionalisation

A central motivator was visibility of progression. Providers argued that many young people leave, or do not enter the sector, because they cannot see a future or career within ASC. Conversely, when clear pathways exist, from carer to senior roles, development and training, or management, retention improves.

Professionalisation emerged as a recurring solution: introducing degree-level qualifications, postgraduate routes, professional registration, and formal recognition of ‘social care professionals’ rather than ‘care workers’. This reframing challenges the perception of care as low-skilled and reinforces its legitimacy as a career.

3.4 Job Security and Stability

Several providers highlighted job security as a unique strength of the sector. Unlike many industries threatened by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), care was described as a ‘job for life’ with ever-increasing demand. This stability is currently under-promoted but could be a powerful attractor if better communicated to young people.

Theme 4: Initiatives to Encourage Young People into Care Roles

4.1 Early Intervention and Awareness

A strong recommendation was to engage young people earlier, ideally before GCSEs. Schools and colleges were identified as key sites for intervention. Providers suggested integrating care awareness into early education and career conversations, normalising it alongside more traditional professions.

Real-life testimonies from people who receive care were viewed as especially powerful in humanising the role and challenging stereotypes of both young people and parents.

4.2 Challenging Stigma and Promoting Positive Identity

Many participants emphasised the importance of reframing care as meaningful, skilled, and rewarding work. Care workers were described as ‘community heroes’, but this narrative is not sufficiently visible to young people. Media representation, social media presence (e.g. TikTok), and storytelling were seen as valuable tools in reshaping public perceptions.

4.3 Structured Pathways and Visual Progression Maps

The idea of visual ‘career maps’ or stepping-stone diagrams were suggested by some providers. These tools could help young people understand how care roles connect to broader career progression and provide tangible routes towards professional development. This approach ensures care is seen not as a dead end, but as a foundation.

4.4 Professionalisation and Sector Recognition

Providers consistently highlighted that importance of professionalising the care workforce and increasing recognition of the sector. Recommendations included:

- Developing degree and postgraduate qualifications in adult social care.

- Increasing collaboration with colleges and universities.
- Introducing sector registration similar to nursing.
- Framing roles as 'social care professionals'.

Such changes were seen as vital for boosting professionalism, improving retention, and making the sector more attractive to younger generations.

The findings reveal that care providers overwhelmingly support the recruitment of young people but recognise that systemic, cultural, and structural barriers continue to limit successful engagement. Young people are viewed as energetic, adaptable, and technologically capable, yet often constrained by perceived stigma, lack of awareness, and unclear pathways into the sector.

The most effective strategies identified are those that combine early engagement, accurate representation, structured progression routes, and strong organisational culture. The data suggests that care must be reimagined not as a fallback option, but as a respected, professional career grounded in skill, compassion, and stability.

Young People in Cornwall Questionnaire Responses

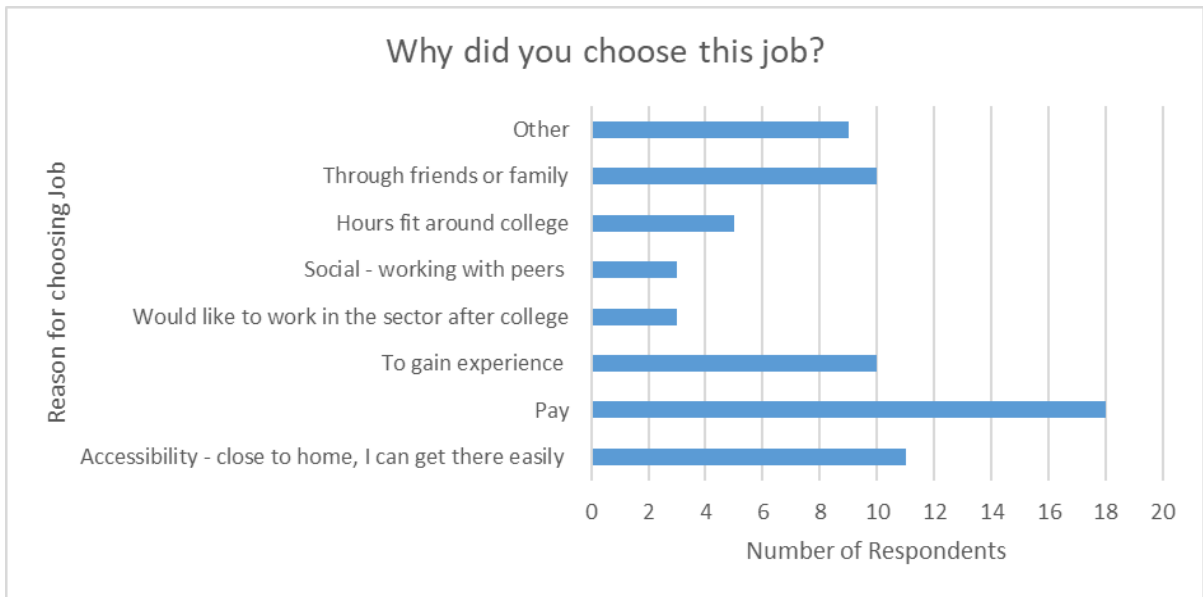
This analysis examines young people's experiences, perceptions, and awareness of careers in adult social care. Drawing on questionnaire responses (Appendix B) from 50 college students aged 16–18, the data provides insight into how young people navigate employment, how they perceive adult social care, and the factors that shape their interest in the sector. The findings reveal a blend of practical motivations, limited knowledge, and mixed attitudes; where care work is seen as important and rewarding, yet also demanding, emotionally taxing, and often undervalued. The analysis is organised into four overarching themes: young people's employment choices, their perceptions of adult social care, the barriers that discourage them from pursuing care roles, and the enablers that could increase their likelihood of considering a career in the sector.

Young People in Cornwall Employment Choices

Do you currently have a part time job outside of college? If yes, which sector is your job in?

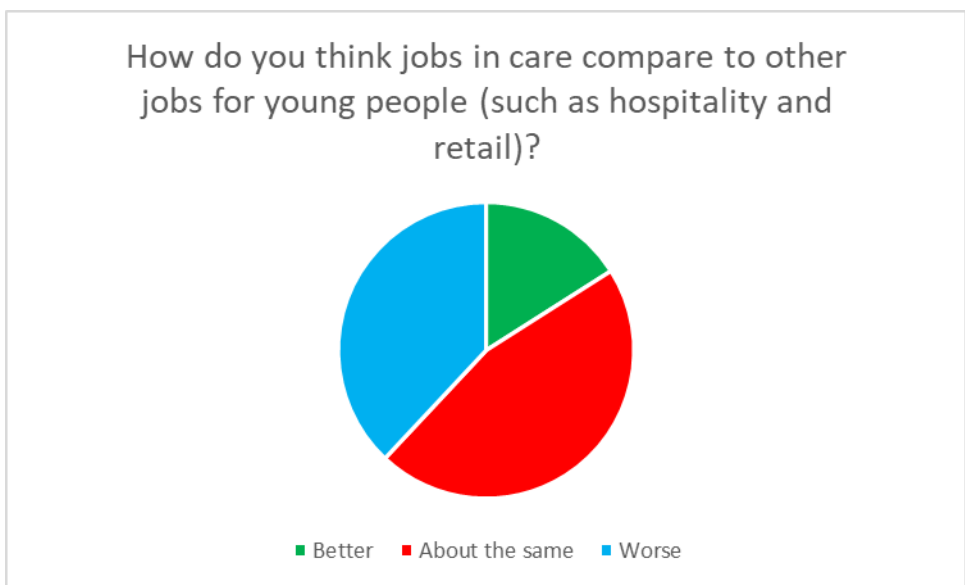
In this sample of 50 young people, 37 reported having a part-time job outside of college. Among those who were employed, the most common sectors were hospitality (24 students) and retail (8 students), with a small number working in areas such as tutoring or childcare. Importantly, none of the young people surveyed were employed within adult social care, which could impact responses.

Why did you choose this job?



The reasons students chose these jobs showed several recurring themes. The most frequently mentioned factor was pay, followed by influence from friends or family and the job being accessible or close to home. Some also highlighted flexible hours that fit around college and the opportunity to gain experience. Overall, employment choices were shaped largely by practicality and financial motivations.

How do you think jobs in care compare to other jobs for young people (such as hospitality and retail)?



Young people gave mixed views when comparing care work to other jobs, with many highlighting its emotional intensity and difficulty. Several responses described care roles as “hard work,” “harder,” “more stressful,” or involving perceived “longer hours” and “lower pay.” Some felt that the emotional and mental strain associated with supporting vulnerable people could “take a toll on your health,”

making care less appealing for younger workers compared with sectors like hospitality, which some described as “easier.” A few respondents also mentioned that people “aim for money,” suggesting that the financial rewards in other industries may be more attractive than those in care.

At the same time, a number of young people recognised positive aspects of care work. Several emphasised that it is “rewarding,” “important,” and offers the chance to “help someone that needs it” or “give back to the community.” Some felt that care roles differ from “normal jobs” because they centre on supporting people, and one respondent noted the “large variation of jobs” within the sector. Others believed that pay and hours in care can sometimes be beneficial compared with retail or hospitality, and that opportunities can grow from this.

A recurring theme was uncertainty or limited knowledge. Many young people simply wrote “not sure,” “?”, or indicated they lacked understanding of the sector. This suggests that for some, neither positive nor negative comparisons can be confidently made because they feel they do not know enough about care work. A few also noted that different jobs are “both as important,” “have advantages and disadvantages,” or “depend on what you want to do”.

Overall, the responses reflect a perception of care as meaningful but challenging work, with emotional pressure and difficulty often seen as barriers, and helping others recognised as its main strength.

Young People’s Perceptions of Adult Social Care

What comes to mind when Young People think of adult social care?

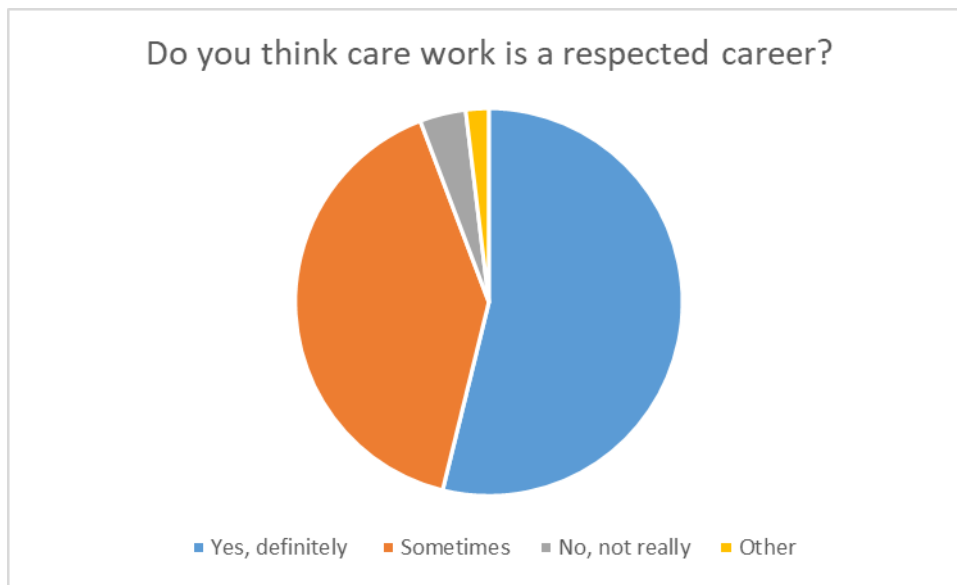
When young people were asked what comes to mind when they think of adult social care, the most common association was helping, supporting, and caring for others. Many respondents described adult social care as a sector focused on assisting people who ‘need extra help in their daily lives’, whether through practical tasks, emotional support, or enabling individuals to live more independently. The emphasis on helping those who are vulnerable, struggling, or living with disabilities appeared consistently across responses, reflecting an overall understanding of adult social care as a caring and community-focused profession.

A strong theme that emerged was the connection between adult social care and older people or care homes. Several young people specifically mentioned “old people’s homes,” “care homes,” or caring for the elderly, suggesting that their perception of the sector is heavily shaped by residential care. While some recognised that adult social care can also involve supporting working age adults with learning disabilities, mental health needs, or long-term conditions, the majority still associated the sector primarily with older adults.

Another pattern across responses was a limited or uncertain understanding of what adult social care involves. Some young people said they “don’t know much,” were “not sure,” or had “no experience with it.” A few responses demonstrated misconceptions or wider interpretations of the term, including references to ensuring families are safe, therapy, unsafe home environments, and even linking adult social care to the police, suggesting that for some, the concept blends with broader ideas of public safety or safeguarding. These findings highlight gaps in awareness and understanding of the variety of roles and responsibilities within adult social care.

Overall, the responses indicate that while young people generally view adult social care positively, as important, compassionate work that supports those in need, their understanding tends to be narrow and centred on older adults. Many lack detailed knowledge of the range of roles, settings, and career pathways involved. This suggests a need for clearer information and greater exposure to the wider adult social care sector to broaden young people’s perceptions and awareness.

Do you think care work is a respected career?



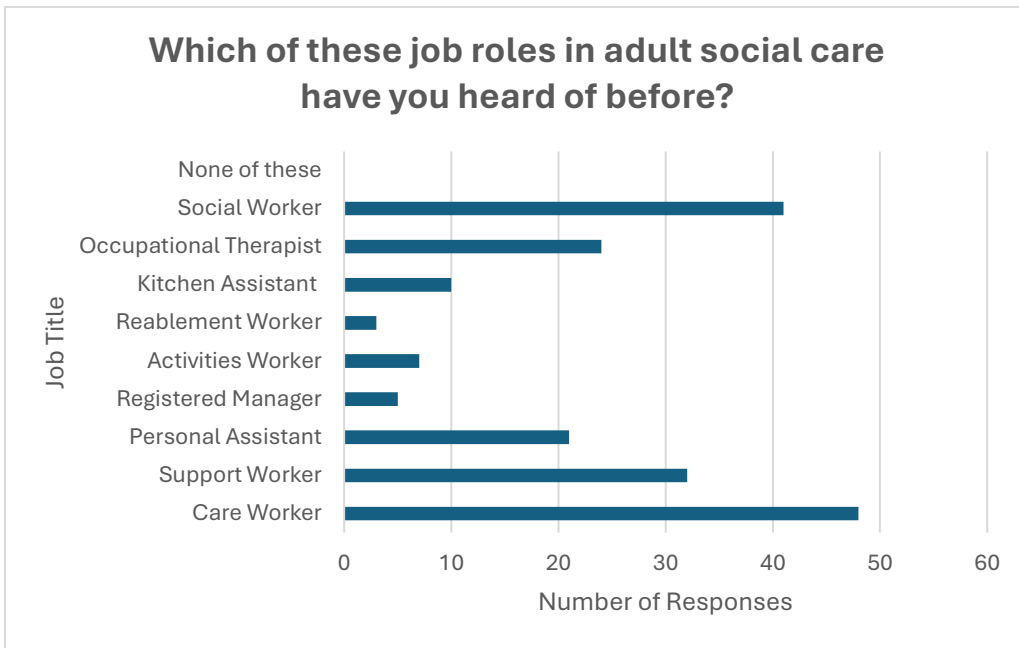
Young people expressed a mixture of positive and uncertain views about whether care work is a respected career. Many felt that it should be respected because it involves helping people, supporting those in need, and making a meaningful difference in individuals’ lives. Several respondents described care roles as important, hardworking, and emotionally demanding, and some said they personally respect carers. A few noted that care work can be respected in a similar way to nursing, suggesting that being compared to nurses elevates how people view the role due to the association with professional, caring responsibilities.

At the same time, a number of responses highlighted that care work is not always respected enough. Several young people felt that carers “don’t get the credit they deserve,” may be “overlooked,” or that their work often goes “unnoticed.” Some believed that the public isn’t always aware of what the job truly involves, leading to a lack of appreciation. Practical factors such as low pay and limited career advancement opportunities were also mentioned as reasons why the role may not be valued as highly as it should be, despite the demanding nature of the work.

A smaller group of respondents were unsure, stating that they “don’t know” or that respect “depends on the job” or the specific occupation within adult social care. This uncertainty suggests that some young people have limited understanding of the different roles within the sector.

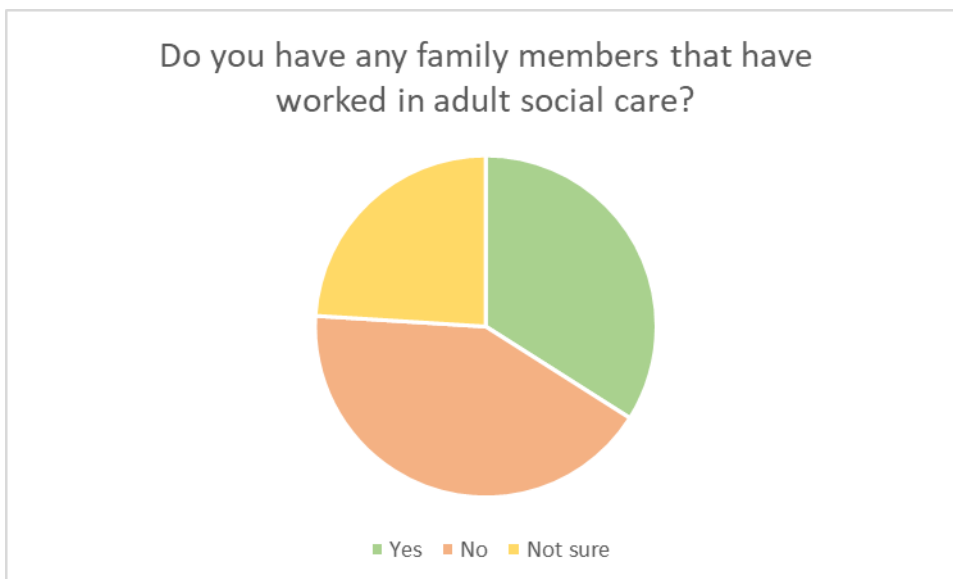
Overall, while many young people believe care work is important and deserving of respect, they also recognise that societal attitudes, lack of awareness, and structural issues like pay and progression can influence how respected the career feels.

Which job roles in Adult Social Care have Young People in Cornwall heard of before?



When young people were asked which job roles in adult social care they had heard of before, their responses showed familiarity with only a limited range of positions. The most commonly recognised roles were those that are typically more well known, such as care workers, social workers, and support workers. Some respondents were also aware of more specialist roles, including occupational therapists and personal assistants, though these appeared less widely known. Only a small number of young people were aware of roles such as activities workers, kitchen assistants, registered managers, or reablement workers. Overall, the findings suggest that awareness is strongest for the frontline roles most often associated with care, while knowledge of the wider variety of career pathways within adult social care remains relatively low.

Do you have any family members that have worked in adult social care?



Students with family members in adult social care tended to recognise more job roles. Respondents who answered “Yes” (they do have family in adult social care) appear more frequently in categories that list multiple job roles, such as combinations including Care Worker, Support Worker, Social Worker, or Personal Assistant. This suggests that first-hand exposure or family experience leads to broader awareness of the types of jobs within the sector. Furthermore, females in the study had heard of more job roles than males.

Barriers to Careers in Adult Social Care for Young People

What do you think may stop you and other young people from considering a job or career in adult social care?

Young people gave a range of reasons for why they might not consider a job or career in adult social care, but the most common barrier was clearly pay. Many respondents mentioned “low pay,” “the pay,” or concerns about income more generally. Some felt the job “might not pay very well to start with”. Pay was also sometimes mentioned alongside other frustrations, such as strikes or feeling unappreciated, suggesting young people see the financial side of the sector as both insecure and unrewarding. It is important to note that providers are contracted to pay the real foundation living wage, which is currently £13.45 per hour ([Living Wage Foundation, 2025](#)), whereas competing sectors such as hospitality and retail do not have to comply with this and therefore can pay a minimum wage of £10 per hour for young people aged 16-20. Therefore, young people aged 16-18 could earn more within a care role than other jobs for that age group, however, this is not widely advertised.

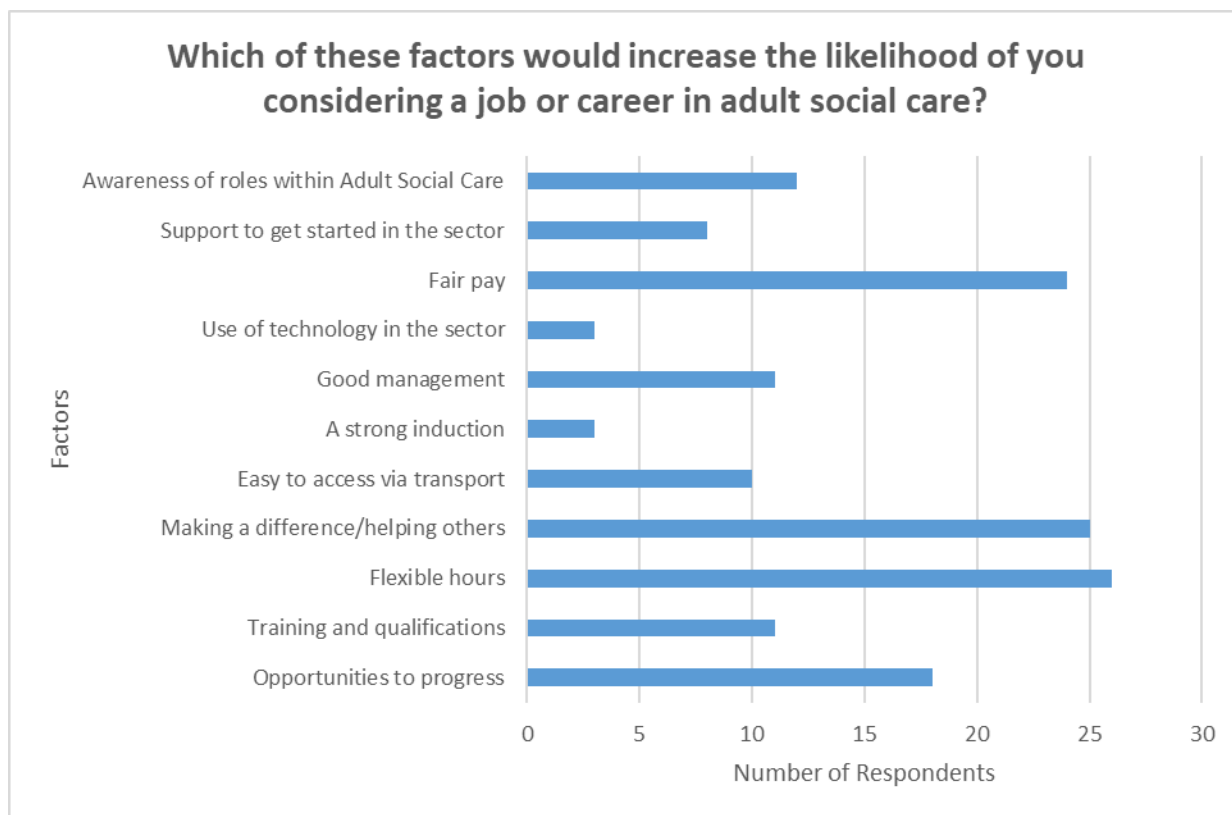
Another frequent concern was the stressful or demanding nature of the work. Several young people described adult social care as “stressful,” “hard work,” or “too difficult.” Others referred to the “intensity of workload,” the need for “a lot of patience,” and the possibility of a “mental toll on your health.” A few also noted that the job might involve seeing “not so pleasant things,” including domestic challenges, which contributed to their worries about the emotional strain of working in the sector. These responses suggest that many young people view adult social care as mentally challenging and potentially overwhelming.

A number of young people also highlighted lack of interest or personal fit. Some simply said they were “not interested,” that it was “not the career they want to do,” or that it “sounds boring.” Others viewed their own preferences or personalities, such as social anxiety, as barriers. A few responses also noted that they wanted to go to university, which isn’t typically required for a career in adult social care.

Finally, lack of knowledge and awareness appeared in multiple responses. Young people said they were “not sure,” didn’t know “where to start,” hadn’t “heard enough about how to get into it,” or didn’t fully understand “what it is.” Some also mentioned concerns about meeting requirements or not knowing enough about the subject in general. These comments show that uncertainty, confusion, and limited information continue to prevent many young people from seeing adult social care as a realistic or accessible career option.

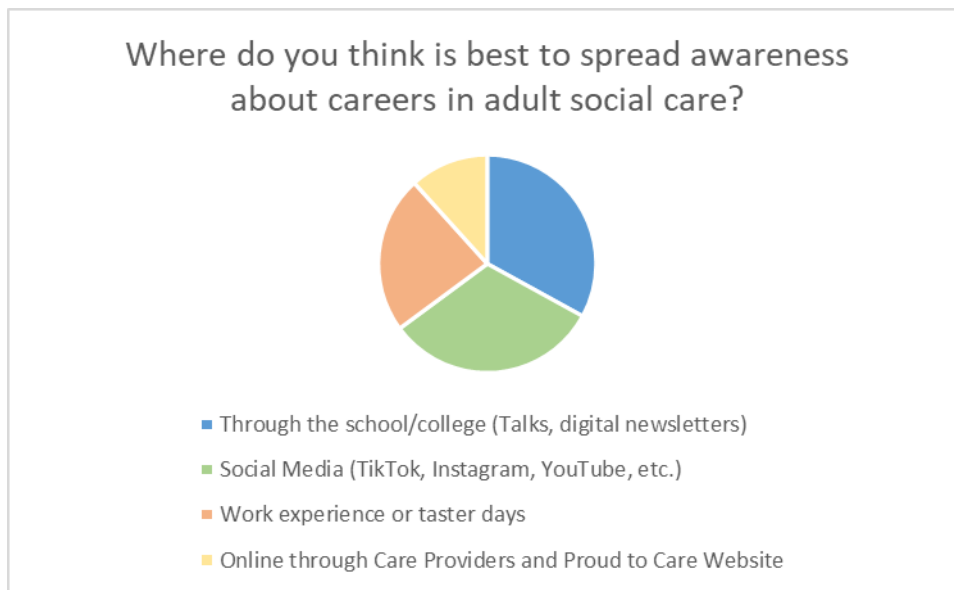
Enablers to Careers in Adult Social Care for Young People

Which of these factors would increase the likelihood of you considering a job or career in adult social care?



Because this was a multiple-choice question, many young people selected more than one factor that would increase their likelihood of considering a career in adult social care. The most commonly chosen options were fair pay, flexible hours, and the opportunity to make a difference or help others, indicating that young people value both meaningful work and practical benefits. A large number also selected opportunities to progress and greater awareness of roles within adult social care, showing that career development and understanding the sector are important. Other popular choices included easy access via transport, support to get started, and training and qualifications, highlighting the need for clearer pathways and accessible entry routes into the profession.

Where do you think is best to spread awareness about careers in adult social care?



95% of young people surveyed felt that awareness of careers in adult social care needs to be increased, and the multiple-choice responses show a preference for a range of engaging and accessible methods. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were selected most often, reflecting where young people naturally receive information. Many also identified schools and colleges (through talks, events, or digital newsletters) as key places to share career opportunities. Work experience or taster days were another popular choice, suggesting that hands-on exposure is important for building understanding and interest. A smaller but still notable group highlighted online information from care providers or career websites as helpful. Together, these responses show that young people favour a mix of digital, educational, and practical approaches to raising awareness of careers in adult social care.

If you could change one thing to make adult social care a more appealing career for young people, what would it be?

When asked what could be changed to make adult social care more appealing, the overwhelming theme across responses was better pay and benefits. Many students explicitly mentioned “the pay,” “better paid jobs,” “higher wages,” “more money,” or “wages and benefits,” showing that improved financial incentive is the single biggest change they feel would make the sector more attractive. Some also linked this to working hours, noting that improving “times working and money from it” would matter, and a few highlighted the importance of “flexible hours” as part of making roles more appealing.

Alongside pay, a number of students emphasised the need for greater awareness and understanding of adult social care. Suggestions included providing “more knowledge about it,” “more awareness of job roles,” “talks about how it can benefit you and others,” and giving clearer information about “alternate ways to progress.” Several young people also felt that highlighting the positive impact of the work or showing “the range of people who it would benefit” could help shift perceptions. A smaller cluster of responses mentioned improvements in respect for the profession, increased

accessibility, and support such as “access to counselling” or having “more accepting” environments. Many students were unsure, indicating ongoing gaps in understanding. Overall, the responses point strongly towards better pay, clearer pathways, greater awareness and improved support as key changes that would make the sector more appealing to young people.

It is important to acknowledge that a higher proportion of questionnaire respondents were female. This reflects, to some extent, the gendered nature of adult social care, which is already a predominantly female workforce within Cornwall and nationally. However, this imbalance has implications for the interpretation of the findings. Female respondents may be more familiar with, or socially conditioned to view, care-related roles as acceptable or appropriate employment, potentially leading to more favourable perceptions of the sector than might be expressed by male respondents. As a result, barriers linked to gendered perceptions, stigma for men entering care roles, or masculine norms surrounding emotional labour may be underrepresented within the data. This limitation suggests that the findings may more closely reflect female perspectives on adult social care and highlights the need for future research to explore male young people’s perceptions in greater depth.

Age appeared to influence openness towards careers in adult social care, with younger respondents demonstrating greater receptiveness. Questionnaire data showed that students aged 16–17 not only represented a larger proportion of the survey (85% of responses) sample, but were also more likely to express interest in adult social care roles, frequently selecting “somewhat likely” or “very likely”. In comparison, respondents aged 18 and above were more inclined to report lower levels of interest, with higher proportions selecting “somewhat unlikely” or “completely unlikely”. This pattern suggests that younger students may be more open to care careers before career aspirations become more fixed. The combination of both greater representation and higher openness among 16–17-year-olds strengthens the significance of this finding and underscores the importance of early intervention and targeted careers education to improve perceptions of adult social care.

Discussion

This section triangulates the findings from the interviews with care providers and the questionnaires completed by young people aged 16–18 in Cornwall. By bringing together perspectives from both groups, the discussion aims to identify areas of convergence and divergence, and to develop a more rounded understanding of the barriers and enablers influencing young people’s engagement with ASC. Overall, there is strong alignment between providers’ perceptions and young people’s views, particularly in relation to stigma, limited awareness of the sector, and the importance of pay, support, and progression. Where differences emerge, these tend to reflect differing positions within the system rather than direct contradiction.

Perceptions of Adult Social Care and Sector Stigma

Both datasets highlight stigma as a significant barrier to young people considering careers in adult social care. Providers consistently described ASC as being perceived as low-status and poorly understood, often perceived as basic personal care tasks and lacking recognition as a skilled profession. This stigma was seen as reinforced by families, schools, and wider society, contributing to care being viewed as a role that people “fall into” rather than actively choose.

Young people’s responses strongly support this view. While many recognised that care work is important and deserving of respect, they also acknowledged that carers are often undervalued and underappreciated. Several respondents noted that care workers “don’t get the credit they deserve” and linked this lack of respect to low pay and limited visibility of progression. This alignment suggests that providers’ concerns about stigma are reflected in young people’s own perceptions, reinforcing the idea that negative sector image is a well-established barrier to the sector.

Awareness and Understanding of the Sector

Limited awareness of adult social care emerged as a key theme across both the provider interviews and the young people’s questionnaires. Providers expressed that young people’s understanding of the sector is narrow and often limited to care homes, with little awareness of domiciliary care or the range of roles available. They also highlighted that existing outreach activity does not consistently translate into applications or sustained interest.

Young people’s responses closely mirror this perspective. Many associated ASC primarily with caring for older people in residential settings, and awareness of other roles was limited. Several respondents stated that they did not know much about the sector or were unsure how to access care roles. This triangulation suggests that while awareness-raising activities may exist, they are not currently resulting in a clear or confident understanding of adult social care among young people. As a result, uncertainty and lack of knowledge continue to discourage engagement with the sector.

Emotional Demands and Readiness for Care Work

Providers frequently raised concerns around young people's emotional readiness, maturity, and life experience. Care work was described as emotionally demanding, requiring resilience, confidence, and the ability to manage sensitive situations such as personal care and death. While these concerns were acknowledged, most providers stressed that they were not fixed traits and could be addressed through strong induction, supervision, and supportive workplace cultures.

Young people's responses provide further insight into this issue. Many described adult social care as stressful and emotionally challenging, with some expressing concern about the potential impact on their mental health. Care work was often viewed as more intense than other jobs typically undertaken by young people, such as hospitality or retail. This convergence suggests that providers' concerns about emotional demands align with young people's own apprehensions, indicating that emotional readiness is both a perceived and experienced barrier rather than a misconception.

Pay, Practical Considerations, and Competing Employment Options

Pay emerged as one of the most significant shared barriers across both datasets. Providers acknowledged that adult social care struggles to compete with sectors such as hospitality and retail, where young people can access quicker employment, fewer entry requirements, and immediate income.

This perspective was strongly reinforced by questionnaire responses, where low pay was the most frequently cited reason for not considering a career in adult social care. Young people often compared care unfavourably to other sectors, highlighting financial motivation as a key factor shaping employment choices. Practical considerations such as flexibility, accessibility, and transport were also influential, aligning with providers' concerns about driving requirements and rural barriers in Cornwall. Together, these findings indicate that adult social care is disadvantaged not only by perception but also by practical and structural factors that directly influence young people's job choices.

Enablers: Support, Flexibility, and Career Progression

There is strong agreement between providers and young people regarding the factors that could encourage greater engagement with ASC for young people. Providers emphasised the importance of supportive management, positive workplace culture, flexibility, and clear progression routes. These factors were viewed as essential for retaining young workers and addressing concerns around confidence, resilience, and commitment.

Similarly, young people identified fair pay, flexible hours, opportunities to help others, training, and visible progression as key enablers. Many expressed a desire for clearer information about how roles in adult social care can lead to development and future opportunities. Providers' characterisation of care as a 'stepping stone' aligns with this, suggesting that young people may be more receptive to the sector when it is presented as offering transferable skills and pathways, rather than as a single end-point career.

Early Engagement and Routes to Awareness

Both datasets emphasise the need for earlier and more effective engagement with young people. Providers argued that career awareness needs to begin before GCSEs, noting that by college age many young people have already formed fixed ideas about what constitutes a 'real' career. They also highlighted the need to engage with young people in spaces they already occupy.

This aligns closely with young people's preferences, with the majority stating that awareness of adult social care careers needs to be increased. Social media, schools and colleges, and work experience opportunities were identified as the most effective ways to share information. This triangulation reinforces the idea that responsibility for engagement lies with the sector, and that proactive, targeted approaches are required to improve understanding and challenge existing perceptions

Overall Discussion

Taken together, the triangulated findings show a high level of consistency between care providers' perspectives and young people's views. Barriers such as stigma, low pay, limited awareness, and emotional demands are recognised by both groups, while enablers including flexibility, support, progression, and meaningful work are similarly valued. Differences between the datasets tend to reflect positional perspectives rather than disagreement, with providers focusing on organisational challenges and young people emphasising personal fit and practical considerations.

Recommendations

Building on the findings from care provider interviews and questionnaires with young people aged 16–18, alongside existing evidence from the literature, this section presents a set of sector-relevant recommendations. These recommendations aim to address the barriers identified, while strengthening the enablers that encourage young people to actively choose adult social care as a career.

1. Develop Early, Structured Awareness of Adult Social Care in Schools and Colleges

Both providers and young people highlighted limited understanding of adult social care, particularly among those still forming career aspirations. Awareness-raising must therefore begin earlier and be embedded more consistently within educational settings.

- Adult social care careers should be introduced within schools before GCSE level, ensuring care is presented alongside more traditional professions rather than as an alternative or fallback option.
- Partnerships between care providers, local authorities, and schools could support structured careers talks, assemblies, and curriculum-linked sessions explaining what care work involves in practice.

- Colleges should be encouraged to offer practical, interactive sessions, including scenario-based learning and skills demonstrations, to help young people gain realistic insight into the emotional and practical aspects of care work. This could utilise VR.
- Clear information should be provided about the diversity of roles available within adult social care, moving beyond care homes to include domiciliary care, supported living, and specialist services.

2. Reframe Care as a Career of Choice

Stigma surrounding adult social care emerged as one of the strongest barriers across both datasets. Changing perceptions requires deliberate messaging that challenges stereotypes.

- Sector-wide campaigns should continue to prioritise social media platforms favoured by young people, such as TikTok and Instagram, to showcase real stories from young care workers.
- Content should highlight care as skilled, emotionally intelligent, and socially valuable work, while also being honest about its challenges, to build trust.
- The narrative of care as a “stepping stone” should be actively promoted, demonstrating how experience in adult social care can give key skills that lead to careers in nursing, management, and other professions. This may increase the number of young people applying for a job in ASC, who could discover it is a career they’d like to pursue.

3. Improve Job Advertising and Information to Reduce Practical Barriers

Young people consistently prioritised pay, flexibility, accessibility, and clarity when considering employment. This should be actively highlighted by providers in job advertisements.

- Clear guidelines should be developed for care providers on how to write youth-friendly job descriptions, including explicit information about pay, training, progression, shift patterns, and support. This could be in the form of a workshop or a digital guide.
- Job advertisements should include travel and transport information, particularly highlighting roles that do not require driving or are accessible via public transport.
- Providers should optimise job postings for mobile devices, recognising that young people primarily access job opportunities via smartphones and increase response times to applications.
- Advertising should clearly communicate flexibility, positioning care work as compatible with education, similar to hospitality roles often taken as “Saturday jobs”.

Improving the clarity and accessibility of job information would directly address the confusion and uncertainty expressed by young people and reduce early drop-off in recruitment.

4. Address Transport and Access Barriers in Cornwall

Driving requirements were repeatedly identified as a significant structural barrier, particularly for domiciliary care roles in Cornwall's rural context.

- Local partnerships could be explored between care providers and driving instructors to support young care workers in accessing discounted lessons or structured pathways towards gaining a licence.
- Providers should consider promoting non-driving roles, localised care rounds, or team-based approaches that allow young workers to gain experience without immediate access to a vehicle.

5. Strengthen Induction, Mentorship, and Youth-Inclusive Management Practices

Concerns around emotional readiness, confidence, and professionalism were shared by providers and young people alike. However, the findings clearly show that strong organisational support can mitigate these challenges.

- Care providers should implement enhanced induction programmes designed specifically for younger workers, gradually easing them into the role and setting clear expectations. Within this, providers could explicitly define how to approach complex situations and coping skills for the mental strain care work can have, particularly for young people.
- Structured mentorship schemes, pairing young staff with experienced colleagues, could support confidence-building, learning, and emotional resilience.
- Regular check-ins with managers should be standard practice to ensure young workers feel supported, listened to, and able to raise concerns early.
- Managers would benefit from rights-based and youth-inclusive leadership training, addressing age bias, employment rights, communication styles, and respect in the workplace. This could be implemented through programmes such as Proud to Care Cornwall's 'Registered Manager Development Programme' or individual workshops.
- Early career conversations to help map possible progression routes.

In addition to organisational-level support, there is a clear opportunity to strengthen peer-based support mechanisms for young people entering adult social care. Both provider interviews and questionnaire responses highlighted concerns around emotional readiness, confidence, and feeling unsupported, particularly during the early stages of employment.

- A Young People in Care Careers Network could be established at a local or regional level to provide a dedicated platform for young care workers early in their careers.
- This network could operate through a combination of virtual forums and in-person sessions, enabling accessibility for young people across Cornwall's rural geography.

- Sessions would offer a confidential, non-judgemental space for young care workers to share experiences, discuss challenges, and seek peer support without fear of workplace repercussions.
- The network could also include facilitated discussions, guest speakers, and practical guidance around managing emotional demands, workplace relationships and communication, and career development.

6. Make Progression Pathways and Professional Development Highly Visible

A lack of visible career progression was identified as a major deterrent for young people considering adult social care long-term.

- Clear, visual career pathways should be developed and shared with young people, showing progression from entry-level roles to senior, specialist, and leadership positions.
- Information about qualifications, apprenticeships, and funded training opportunities should be provided early and consistently through platforms young people engage with such as social media and through college communications.
- Providers should actively promote development opportunities as part of recruitment messaging, reinforcing care as a career with potential for progression and opportunity.
- Continued efforts towards professionalisation, including degree-level qualifications and professional registration, such as in Wales and Scotland, would further strengthen the legitimacy of adult social care as a profession.

Making progression visible aligns strongly with young people's desire for future security and achievement, while supporting workforce retention.

7. Promote Supportive Working Conditions

The findings highlight that flexibility, recognition, and wellbeing support are particularly important to young workers.

- Providers should promote youth-friendly working practices such as flexible shift patterns, fair shift swapping, regular training, and mentorship programmes.
- Wellbeing initiatives, including wellness benefits, employee assistance programmes, and recognition or reward systems, should be visible within recruitment messaging.
- Simple mechanisms such as suggestion boxes or feedback systems can help young workers feel valued and involved.
- Formal recognition for young people choosing a career in care should be strengthened through a Young Care Worker of the Year Award, embedded within the existing Proud to Care Awards.

Actively advertising these practices would help distinguish care work from competing sectors for young people such as hospitality and retail.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the barriers and enablers influencing young people in Cornwall when considering careers in adult social care, with a particular focus on those aged 16–18 who are still forming their career aspirations. By triangulating qualitative interviews with care providers and questionnaire responses from young people, the study provides an understanding of why adult social care continues to struggle to attract younger workers, despite growing workforce demand.

The findings demonstrate strong alignment between care providers' perspectives and young people's views. Both groups identified stigma, low pay, limited awareness of the sector, and the emotional demands of care work as key barriers. Adult social care is widely perceived as low status, poorly understood, and often reduced to narrow stereotypes focused on personal care in residential settings. This perception is reinforced through families, education systems, and wider society, contributing to care being viewed as a career of last resort rather than a proactive choice. For young people, these perceptions are compounded by practical considerations such as pay competitiveness, transport barriers in Cornwall, and competition from sectors such as hospitality and retail that offer quicker entry and perceived lower emotional responsibility.

At the same time, this research identifies a range of powerful enablers that could significantly improve young people's engagement with the sector. Both datasets emphasised the importance of supportive management, strong induction and mentorship, flexibility, and visible progression routes. Young people expressed a clear desire for meaningful work that makes a difference, but only when this is matched with fair pay, clear development opportunities, and reassurance around emotional support. Care providers similarly recognised that with the right structures in place, many of the perceived challenges associated with employing younger workers, such as confidence, resilience, and maturity, can be effectively addressed.

A key contribution of this research is its focus on early career perceptions. The findings suggest that by the time young people reach college age, many already hold fixed ideas about what constitutes a "real" or desirable career, often excluding adult social care. This highlights the importance of earlier, structured engagement in schools, alongside authentic youth-led communication through platforms young people already use. Importantly, the research reinforces that responsibility for improving engagement lies with the sector itself, rather than with young people alone.

Overall, this study concludes that attracting more young people into adult social care in Cornwall will require a coordinated, long-term approach that addresses both perception and practice. Reframing care as a skilled, respected, and progressive profession; improving visibility of career pathways; addressing practical barriers such as transport; and strengthening workplace culture are all critical steps. While systemic issues such as pay and funding remain significant challenges, the findings demonstrate that meaningful improvements can be made through early intervention, honest representation, and youth-inclusive employment practices. By implementing the recommendations

outlined, adult social care in Cornwall has the potential to shift from being seen as a fallback option to a viable and valued career choice for the next generation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Care Provider Interview Guide

1. How do you feel about the idea of recruiting more young people into adult social care? (Objective 2)
2. What are your perceptions of young people working in care? (Objective 2)
3. Would you offer jobs to college age students (16-18) alongside their studies? Why/why not? (Objective 2 and 4)
4. Are there any challenges or concerns you've experienced (or anticipate) when employing younger staff? (Objective 4)
5. Has your organisation tried any specific approaches to recruit young people? If yes, ask have they been successful, If no, ask why not, what has put them off? (Objective 5)
6. From your experience, what motivates young people to stay in care roles once they've joined? (Objective 5)
7. What do you think are the main reasons young people might leave the sector after starting? (Objective 4)
8. Do you think there needs to be an increased awareness of careers in adult social care for young people? Why/why not? (Objective 2 and 5)
9. Where do you typically reach young people when advertising or promoting care roles? (Objective 4 and 5)
10. What changes/initiatives do you think are needed to encourage more young people into jobs in care? (Objective 4 and 5)

Appendix B: Young People Questionnaire



Young People and Careers in Adult Social Care

The purpose of this questionnaire is to understand the barriers and enablers for young people pursuing a career in adult social care in Cornwall. These insights will support the Proud to Care team to suggest future recommendations for recruitment and retention. All responses are highly confidential and you have the right to withdraw your data at any time. Thank you so much for sharing your time to fill this questionnaire.
Any queries please contact - erin.chapman@cornwall.gov.uk

* Required

About you

Your information is highly confidential, and you have the right to withdraw your data at any time. Please contact erin.chapman@cornwall.gov.uk if you have any queries.

1. Do you consent to your answers being used as part of this research project? *

Yes

No

2. How old are you? *

15

16

17

18

19+

3. Are you currently in Year 11 or in College? *

Year 11

In College

4. Which course do you plan to study at college? *

5. Which course are you currently studying? *

6. What is your sex? *

For the purposes of this questionnaire, the term sex follows the definition used in the **UK Equality Act 2010**, as clarified by the **UK Supreme Court in 2025**. This means sex refers to biological sex as recorded at birth (male or female).

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other

7. Do you currently have a part time job outside of school or college? *

- Yes
- No

8. If yes, which sector is your job in? *

- Hospitality
- Adult Social Care
- Retail
- Tutor
- Cleaning
- Babysitter/Child Minding
- Other

9. Why did you choose this job? *

- Accessibility - close to home, I can get there easily
- Pay
- To gain experience
- Would like to work in the sector after college
- Social - working with peers
- Hours fit around college
- Through friends or family
- Other

Perceptions of Adult Social Care

As part of this research, we are interested in finding out what young people in Cornwall believe work in adult social care is. Please be as honest as you can, all responses are completely anonymous. Please contact erin.chapman@cornwall.gov.uk if you have any queries.

10. What comes to mind when you think of adult social care? *

Please write a few key words, or a couple of sentences that sums up your perception of the sector. There are no right or wrong answers.

11. Do you have any family members that have worked in adult social care? *

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

⋮

12. Which of these job roles in adult social care have you heard of before? *

Tick as many of the options that you have heard of before.

- Care Worker
- Support Worker
- Personal Assistant
- Registered Manager
- Activities Worker
- Reablement Worker
- Kitchen Assistant
- Occupational Therapist
- Social Worker
- None of these

13. How likely are you to consider a job or career in adult social care? *

	Completely unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Unsure	Somewhat likely	Very likely
How likely are you to consider a job in adult social care?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. What do you think may stop you and other young people from considering a job or career in adult social care? *

15. How do you think jobs in care compare to other jobs for young people (such as hospitality and retail)? *

- Better
- About the same
- Worse
- Other

16. Why did you give this answer? *

17. Do you think care work is a respected career? *

- Yes, definitely
- Sometimes
- No, not really
- Other

18. Why did you give this answer? *

19. **Which of these factors would increase the likelihood of you considering a job or career in adult social care? ***

Please pick all the options you feel apply.

- Opportunities to progress
- Training and qualifications
- Flexible hours
- Making a difference/helping others
- Easy to access via transport
- A strong induction
- Good management
- Use of technology in the sector
- Fair pay
- Support to get started in the sector
- Awareness of roles within Adult Social Care
- Other

20. **Do you think there needs to be an increased awareness of careers in adult social care for young people? ***

- Yes
- No

21. **Where do you think is best to spread awareness about careers in adult social care? ***

Please pick all the options that apply.

- Through the school/college (Talks, digital newsletters)
- Social Media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)
- Work experience or taster days
- Online through Care Providers and Proud to Care Website
- Other

22. **If you could change one thing to make adult social care a more appealing career for young people, what would it be? ***