

Royal College of Nursing Briefing on the Westminster Hall debate on the potential merits of Government support for a certificate of common sponsorship – 22 January 2025

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the largest professional body and trade union for nursing staff in the world. We represent around half a million members who are registered nurses, midwives, students, and nursing support workers across the United Kingdom and beyond.

1. Background

- 1.1 Internationally recruited health and care workers make enormous contributions to our health and care systems and deserve greater flexibility in finding appropriate work that rewards them fairly. The RCN is concerned that the current system undermines the improvement of working conditions in the health and social care sector and increases the risk of exploitation.
- 1.2 According to the most recent annual report from the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 79,674 internationally educated nursing and midwifery professionals have joined the UK register in the three years to September 2024.¹ Skills for Care estimate that approximately 185,000 care workers were recruited internationally between 2022-2024.² More than 145,000 Health and Care Worker visas were issued to main applicants in 2023 alone.³
- 1.3 A certificate of sponsorship from a licensed employer is currently a mandatory condition of a skilled worker visa application, including the health and care visa. The RCN is concerned that certificates of sponsorship exacerbate the already unequal relationship between many migrant workers and their employers. Evidence from RCN members reveal that employers are using the threat of deportation to intimidate and exploit workers.
- 1.4 While employers do not have the ability to directly deport staff, termination of employment by a sponsor could lead to a worker's right to remain in the UK being removed if they are unable to find a new sponsor within 60 days. Migrant workers have often already incurred significant costs to relocate to the UK. The fear of losing their immigration status can therefore make it difficult for a worker to report exploitation.
- 1.5 The Migration Advisory Committee has recognised the increased risk of exploitation where the ability of migrant workers to switch employers is restricted. For particularly vulnerable workers such as live-in workers, MAC have previously recommended that sponsorship is provided by an umbrella body rather than by individual employers.⁴
- 1.6 In June 2024, the Labour Party commitment to investigate treatment of migrant workers in the care sector.⁵ The then Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, said "The government has turned a blind eye to widespread exploitation of migrant care workers, putting vulnerable people at risk and undermining our immigration system and standards." This was also supported by the Liberal Democrats.

2. RCN evidence of exploitation in health and social care

- 2.1. The RCN has received increasing reports of unethical and exploitative employment practices faced by internationally recruited staff in the care sector.
- 2.2. Multiple members have reported that their employers have threatened revoking sponsorship when issues and disagreements have arisen. One member reported being instructed to work on days that they were not contracted to. When the member raised their concerns, the employer informed them that they must comply, as 'we sponsor you'. Another RCN member said after a prolonged period of illness which required sick leave, management warned that their sponsorship would be withdrawn if they called in sick again.
- 2.3. RCN members have reported that coercive and threatening tactics have been used by employers to make international staff sign new, more restrictive contracts at the start their employment. One RCN member recalled that they were instructed to read and sign a different contract than they were originally offered within 30 minutes of arriving at the employer, or risk having their sponsorship revoked.
- 2.4. Another member reported that their job offer letter promised a £15 p/h wage for a nursing role once they were registered with the NMC, with the member working as carer until this was completed. However, management continued to employ the member as a care worker after they had received their NMC registration. The member reported that they were too afraid to raise this with employers, as other staff with the same issue have had sponsorships revoked.⁶

3. RCN calls to government

- 3.1 The UK Government must undertake a review into the work visa sponsorship system to evaluate both the risks it poses for migrant worker exploitation the benefits of alternative systems.
- 3.2 Consideration should be given to an alternative sponsorship system that would provide greater flexibility and safeguards for migrant workers and reduce the power of employers to weaponise the immigration status of their employees. All workers must be provided safe and decent working conditions, free from the presence of threats to their immigration status, excessive repayment fees, or other abusive labour practices.
- 3.3 The UK Government must deliver on its promise made during the general election campaign and investigate these practices. We cannot wait for the creation of a Single Enforcement Agency – which is being proposed in the Employment Rights Bill. All workers should be able to raise concerns about exploitation in confidence and without the threat of repercussion by employers.

4. Suggested questions to ask the Minister

- What assessment has the government made on exploitative practices experienced by internationally educated nursing staff?
- What progress has been made in investigating exploitation of migrant workers in the care sector as promised by the Labour Party at the general election?

- What assessment has the government made on the findings of the Migration Advisory Committee on the exploitation experienced by migrant workers, which is exacerbated when visas are tied to a single employer and switching is not allowed?

For further information, please contact, Liam Beattie, RCN Public Affairs Adviser, liam.beattie@rcn.org.uk

¹ [Registration data reports - The Nursing and Midwifery Council](#)

² [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England, 2024](#)

³ [Why do people come to the UK? Work - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ [Migration Advisory Committee: annual report, 2022 - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ Guardian, [Labour pledges to investigate treatment of migrant workers in care sector](#), June 2024

⁶ RCN analysis of RCN member enquiries (2020, 12; 2021, 34; 2022, 64; 2023, 121)