

## **THE FORGOTTEN WORKFORCE: RECRUITING AND RETAINING PERSONAL ASSISTANTS**

Results of a survey of people supported by a personal assistant



There are around 70,000 people in England who draw on care and support and employ a personal assistant (PA), usually through taking a direct payment or personal health budget. What was their experience of recruiting and retaining a PA between March 2020 and the end of January 2022?

TLAP and the LGA, together with the Survey Design Group, carried out an online survey with people supported by a personal assistant to explore the issues they faced. Nearly 1,000 people participated – a very good response.

People told us that PA recruitment has got harder, both in terms of a shortage of applicants and their suitability for the work. Low pay, poor terms and conditions, and restrictions on what people can pay are the primary drivers for this, alongside the challenges of the Covid pandemic.

### **Key survey findings**

**77% of people who had needed to recruit a PA had found it more difficult**

**69% said people were taking jobs with better pay rather than PA jobs**

**59% think it's harder to find PAs with the right skills, values or training**

**“ [I] worry about them leaving, worry about paying them enough so they don't leave, trying not to do anything that may get their back up so they leave. ”**

**Of those who needed to use agencies, 66% think it's been harder to find workers, and 62% have found it more expensive**

**Low pay, poor terms and conditions and insufficient hours were key factors in PAs leaving**

**44% of people think it's been harder to retain their PAs since March 2020, whilst 47% said it was about the same**

**88% detailed multiple negative impacts on them of the pandemic**

### **Based on what people told us:**

- ▶ Low pay significantly outstripped every other factor people said is making PA recruitment more difficult.
- ▶ Low pay is linked to poorer terms and conditions for PAs compared to others working in the care sector/NHS. These issues deter people with the right skills, values, experience and training from working, or remaining in work, as a PA.
- ▶ The system is not working for many as intended under the Care Act, where people's PA support is funded by councils (through a direct payment) or the NHS (through a personal health budget).
- ▶ There are severe shortages of PAs. People's quality of life and mental and physical well-being have been affected by shortages of PAs, as well as the pandemic.
- ▶ The job of a PA is not socially valued or well understood; this contributes to recruitment difficulties.
- ▶ On the positive side, people supported by a PA are more likely to retain their PA than employers in other parts of the care sector.

## Headline recommendations



*“ PAs do a fantastic job, a lifeline to families. Without them we’d have more families moving family members into care homes. PAs are the forgotten and a light needs to be shone on them now. ”*

*“ No one with the right skills will work for minimum wage, so as soon as I think I have found someone I lose them as they can’t afford to live on the given wage. ”*

The recommendations in the report come from the findings of the survey and are grouped into four themes: funding; support for people who employ personal assistants; information and advice; and quality assurance and oversight.

- ▶ The most urgent action is for funders to enable PA pay to reflect local market conditions.
- ▶ Greater transparency about how direct payment or personal health budgets are arrived at is needed, and this should include the costs related to finding and employing PAs.
- ▶ Funders should place fewer restrictions on how direct payments and personal health budgets can be used by people supported by a PA.
- ▶ Local and central government and the NHS need to offer more help with PA recruitment, training and employment advice.
- ▶ Commissioners need more quality assurance and better oversight of their local PA market. They should be also proactive in checking the quality, reliability and standard of support from those they commission to assist people supported by PAs.

The **full report** shines a light on the needs of people who employ personal assistants, recognising the valuable role they play as part of the wider social care workforce. The detailed findings and people’s personal experiences bring to life many of the points in the survey, which should be required reading for social workers, commissioners and those who work with direct payment recipients.