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## **Employee well-being strategies in the social care sector: evidence and critique**

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The working conditions of paid social care workers remain of critical concern, given that this workforce is subject to low wages, poor terms and conditions, work intensification, and violence. Providing decent work within the realm of paid care work remains highly challenging, with workers facing considerable threats to their well-being. Alongside this backdrop, the employee well-being agenda has gained considerable traction in recent decades, promising to deliver considerable benefits, such as improved performance, increased productivity, higher employee retention and reduced sickness costs, with mutual gains for employees (Guest, 2017), yet, these initiatives have received only very limited critical analysis (Foster, 2018).

This study investigated employer approaches to managing employee well-being within the social care sector in the UK. Case studies of two large social care charities operating in the UK were conducted. In total, forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior management, HR practitioners, line managers and frontline workers. The findings show that the management teams of both case study organisations viewed employee well-being as a key strategy through which cost efficiencies could be made. In this highly marketized context, the employers were under pressure to deliver the higher rate Living Wage, and so sought to make savings on absence costs, as well as lowering recruitment and retention costs. Well-being was therefore viewed as a strategic tool that could deliver these benefits, through a range of HR practices and through enhancement of the employer brand. However, employees continued to be subject to high job demands, work intensification, long and anti-social working hours, and on some occasions, violence. Often HR practices that were meant to improve well-being, such as training, increased job demands rather than improving well-being. Furthermore, basic safeguards to protect employee well-being and prevent burnout were absent. Furthermore, often poor employment practices were relied upon for the running of services. As such, this business case approach to the adoption of well-being strategies in these cases treats employee well-being as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Instead, HR practices were used to extract maximum value from employees, under the rhetoric of 'well-being', with very little by way of 'mutual gains'. Much of this was rationalised by senior managers as an inevitable consequence of marketisation.