Health and Care Worker visa or Skilled Worker visa for UK employers

Understanding the two main work visa routes for hiring from overseas

Employers in the UK who want to recruit staff from outside the country often face a choice between two visa categories: the Health and Care Worker visa and the Skilled Worker visa. Both routes allow a worker to fill a genuine vacancy at a UK organisation, but the eligibility rules, costs and compliance duties differ. Knowing which one fits your situation can save time and prevent errors during a sponsor licence application.

The Skilled Worker visa replaced the Tier 2 (General) visa in 2020. It is the standard route for most skilled roles across all sectors. The Health and Care Worker visa is a sub-set of the Skilled Worker visa, designed specifically for jobs in health and social care. It offers certain benefits that the main route does not, but it also carries restrictions on the types of roles and employers that can use it.

How the two routes differ at a glance

The main difference is the occupation code. A Health and Care Worker visa only covers jobs in specified health and social care occupations. These include doctors, nurses, midwives, allied health professionals, care workers and senior care workers. The Skilled Worker visa covers a much wider range of occupations, from IT specialists and engineers to chefs and financial managers, provided the role meets the required skill level (RQF3 or above).

Another key difference is the salary threshold. The Skilled Worker visa generally requires a minimum annual salary of £26,200 or the going rate for the occupation, whichever is higher. The Health and Care Worker visa has a lower minimum salary of £23,200, though the going rate still applies for most roles. This lower threshold can make care sector recruitment more feasible for employers operating on tight margins.

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The immigration skills charge is also treated differently. For the Skilled Worker visa, employers must pay a levy of £1,000 per year for each worker (or £364 for small charities and sponsors). The Health and Care Worker visa is exempt from this charge, which can reduce the overall cost of sponsorship significantly over the visa period.

Workers on the Health and Care Worker visa also pay a reduced immigration health surcharge, currently £470 per year instead of the standard £624. That saving is for the applicant, not the employer, but it can make the offer more attractive to potential recruits.

When to use the Health and Care Worker visa

This route is best suited to organisations whose primary business is health or social care. That includes NHS trusts, independent hospitals, care homes, domiciliary care agencies and other registered care providers. The role must be in an eligible occupation, and the employer must be able to demonstrate that the vacancy is genuine and that the worker will be employed in that occupation.

If your organisation provides non-clinical roles within a care setting - such as a cleaner, cook or administrator - those posts are not eligible for the Health and Care Worker visa. They would need to go through the Skilled Worker route instead. Similarly, if the role is in health but not on the eligible occupations list (for example, a healthcare assistant in a role not classified as a senior care worker), the standard Skilled Worker visa may be the only option.



One point to watch is that the Health and Care Worker visa does not lead to settlement in the same way as the standard route. Workers can apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years, but the route is currently under review, and the conditions may change. For now, it remains a viable option for long-term recruitment in the sector.

When the Skilled Worker visa is the right choice

The Skilled Worker visa is the default route for any employer who needs to hire a skilled worker from overseas but does not qualify for the health and care exemption. It covers a broad range of occupations and is suitable for most businesses, from tech startups to manufacturing firms, retail chains and professional services.

If your organisation is not a registered health or social care provider, or if the role you are filling is not on the health and care list, you must use the Skilled Worker visa. Even if you are a care provider, you might still choose this route for roles that fall outside the eligible occupations, or if you prefer not to limit the worker to health and care employment.

The Skilled Worker visa also gives more flexibility in terms of job changes. A worker on this visa can switch employers more easily, provided the new role is also eligible and the new employer holds a sponsor licence. Health and Care Worker visa holders are restricted to health and care roles, which can make switching jobs harder if they want to move into a different sector.

Before making a decision, check the current occupation codes and salary thresholds. The Home Office updates these periodically, and a role that was eligible last year may no longer qualify. A mistake in the occupation code or salary can lead to a refusal, and if the error is discovered during a compliance visit, it could affect your sponsor licence.

For guidance on which route suits your organisation, you can speak with Adamir Immigration Solicitors London. Their team can review your vacancy, check the occupation code and advise on the most appropriate visa category. They also assist with sponsor licence applications and ongoing compliance duties.

Adamir Immigration Solicitors London is also on Facebook.

What both routes have in common

Despite the differences, the two visa types share many features. Both require the employer to hold a valid sponsor licence. Both require a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) to be assigned to the worker before they apply. Both require the employer to carry out right to work checks and to keep records of the worker's employment.

Compliance duties are the same for both routes. You must report any changes in the worker's circumstances, such as a change of job title, salary reduction or early departure. You must also keep copies of the worker's passport, biometric residence permit and contact details. Failure to meet these duties can result in your sponsor licence being downgraded or revoked.

The genuine vacancy requirement applies to both routes. The Home Office expects the role to be real, the salary to be in line with market rates, and the worker to possess the necessary

skills and qualifications. If the Home Office suspects the vacancy is not genuine - for example, if the job does not exist or the salary is artificially inflated - it can refuse the application or take compliance action against the sponsor.

Making the choice

Start by identifying the occupation code that matches the role you want to fill. If the code is on the health and care list and your organisation is a registered care provider, the Health and Care Worker visa will probably be the more cost-effective option. If the code is not on the list, or if your business is outside the care sector, the Skilled Worker visa is the only route available.



Consider the long-term plans for the worker. If you expect them to stay in the same role for several years, the Health and Care Worker visa's lower costs are attractive. If you want the flexibility to move the worker into a different role or if they may want to switch employers later, the Skilled Worker visa offers more freedom.

Remember that the immigration skills charge exemption and reduced health surcharge apply only to the Health and Care Worker visa. For a single worker over a three-year visa, the savings

can amount to several thousand pounds. For a care home hiring multiple workers, the total saving can be substantial.

But do not let the cost saving be the only factor. If the role is not genuinely eligible for the health and care route, using it would be a compliance breach. The Home Office can refuse the application, and if it finds that you deliberately assigned a CoS under the wrong category, it could revoke your sponsor licence and ban you from sponsoring for a period.

For employers who are unsure, it is wise to get professional advice before submitting a sponsor licence application or assigning a CoS. Adamir Immigration Solicitors London can help you determine the correct route and ensure your application is compliant. Their office is located at Unit-1, 5 Norman Rd, London N15 4ND, UK, and they can be reached at +44 20 3302 0074.

The choice between a Health and Care Worker visa and a Skilled Worker visa depends on your sector, the role you are filling and your long-term plans. By understanding the differences and checking the latest Home Office rules, you can make an informed decision that supports your recruitment needs while keeping your sponsor licence in good standing.