

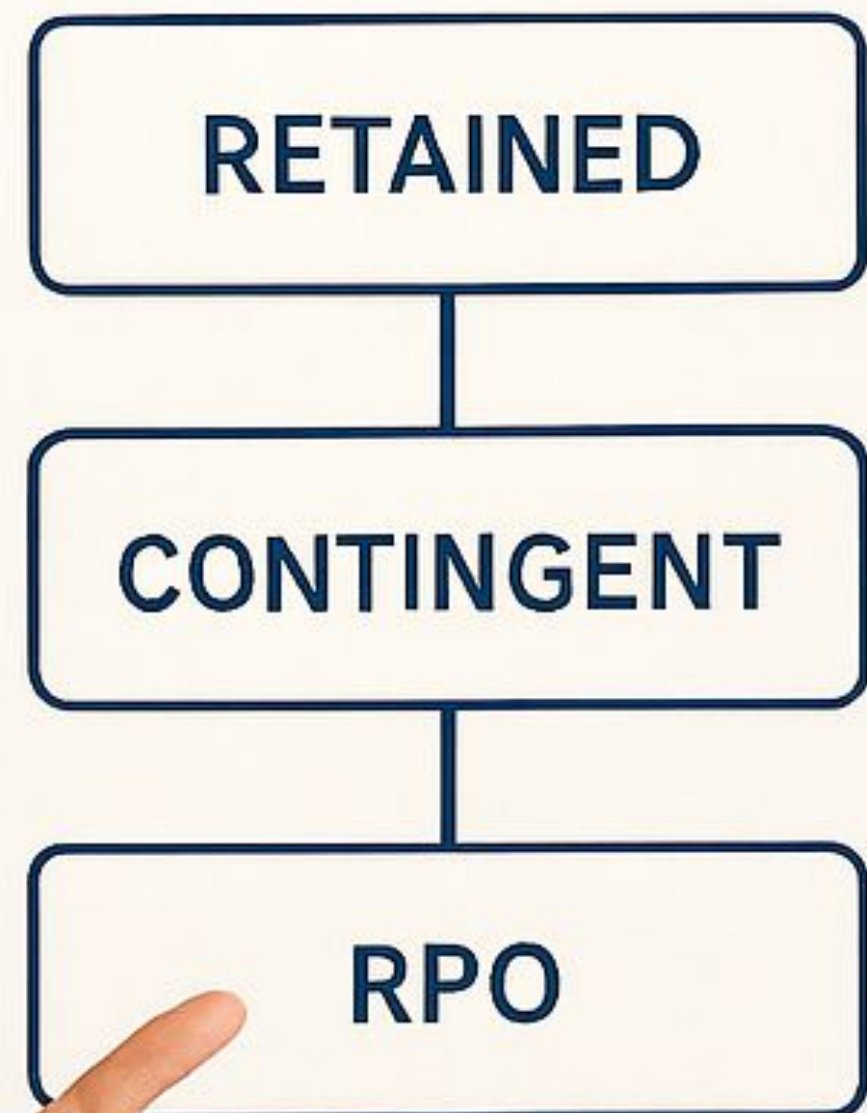


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Which Recruitment Model Is Right for Your Care Service?

Retained, Contingent, or RPO

- ✓ Compare recruitment models
- ✓ Avoid 7 costly hiring mistakes
- ✓ Choose the approach that delivers safer staffing and better outcomes





The Care Staffing Model Dilemma

Recruitment in health and social care isn't merely filling vacancies; it is safeguarding residents, protecting continuity of care, and sustaining a compassionate, compliant workforce. For registered providers and care home managers, every hiring decision touches safety, wellbeing and regulation.

Choosing the wrong recruitment model compounds risk. The typical downstream effects include:

Mis-hires who leave within months, forcing repeat recruitment and disrupting continuity of care

Increased CQC scrutiny due to inconsistent staffing, agency dependence, and gaps in competence and training records

Overworked teams, higher sickness and burnout, and avoidable usage of premium-rate cover

This guide helps you match recruitment approach to role criticality, volume, timescale and risk tolerance. You will learn when to deploy retained search for senior or sensitive posts, where contingent suppliers make sense for immediate cover, and how RPO creates a stable pipeline across multiple homes. Throughout, we connect model choice to safer staffing, better outcomes, and a calmer leadership workload.

i Key idea: Align the recruitment model to risk, not just cost. Prioritise safety, consistency and CQC readiness.



The 3 Recruitment Models Explained

Healthcare hiring typically employs three distinct models, each suited to different organisational needs and strategic objectives. A clear understanding of their specific strengths and ideal applications is crucial for preventing misapplication of resources, avoiding wasted expenditure, and ultimately securing the right talent for your care service.

Retained Recruitment

This is an exclusive, high-commitment search model primarily used for critical and senior roles such as Registered Managers, Clinical Leads, senior nurses, and specialist practitioners. Organisations typically pay an upfront fee to secure the recruitment firm's dedicated resources and expertise. The emphasis is heavily placed on thoroughness, discretion, and finding candidates who not only possess the required skills but also demonstrate a strong cultural fit, align with your organisational values, and uphold the highest standards of compliance integrity. This model ensures a comprehensive market mapping and a deeply vetted shortlist, significantly impacting long-term leadership stability and CQC readiness.

Contingent Recruitment

Operating on a "no hire, no fee" basis, contingent recruitment is widely adopted for its speed and flexibility. It's particularly useful for quickly filling speed-sensitive requirements, covering ad hoc shifts, or backfilling common roles that frequently arise in care settings, such as care assistants or junior nurses. With this model, multiple agencies may be competing to fill the same role, often resulting in a high volume of candidates. While this can offer rapid solutions, it places a greater onus on your internal team to maintain rigorous vetting standards and process discipline to ensure candidate quality and compliance. The focus is on rapid placement, sometimes at the expense of deeper cultural alignment or long-term retention.

RPO (Recruitment Process Outsourcing)

RPO involves the full or partial outsourcing of your organisation's entire recruitment function to an external provider. This strategic partnership can encompass everything from talent attraction and sourcing to screening, interviewing, onboarding, and even employer branding. It is an ideal solution for multi-site providers looking to standardise their hiring practices, or for organisations experiencing significant growth phases where consistency, candidate experience, and data-driven insights are paramount. RPO delivers economies of scale and a more predictable cost model for volume hiring.

- Retained = depth, certainty, and strategic impact for critical leadership roles.
- Contingent = speed, flexibility, and cost-efficiency for immediate or routine staffing needs.
- RPO = scale, process optimisation, and brand-led consistency for holistic talent acquisition.

Subsequent sections will delve deeper into when and why to use each model, highlighting common pitfalls to avoid, and outlining a rigorous methodology for selecting the most appropriate approach for every unique hiring need within your care service.

Retained Recruitment – When Quality Matters Most

Retained recruitment is the gold standard when failure is unacceptable. For Registered Managers, Clinical Leads, and scarce specialists, the wrong appointment can jeopardise safety, culture and CQC outcomes. Retained search secures dedicated market coverage, discreet outreach to passive leaders, and rigorous shortlisting anchored in competencies and values.



- Leadership or specialist roles where compliance and cultural fit are vital
- Limited talent pools demanding headhunting and nuanced engagement
- Situations where repeated failed hires are inflating true cost

What's different: discovery-driven briefs tied to service improvement plans; structured assessment against leadership behaviours; deep referencing; and proactive counteroffer risk management. Expect transparent reporting on longlists, pipeline velocity, and candidate experience so you maintain governance oversight.

- ✔ **Outcome to expect:** Higher completion rates, longer tenure, faster stabilisation of teams, and clearer evidence for CQC on safe recruitment.

Strengths

- 90–95% completion
- Passive candidates reached
- Robust compliance checks

Considerations

- Upfront fee
- Longer lead time than contingent
- Make sure the agency offers a guarantee on retention




Contingent Recruitment – Fast but Variable

Contingent recruitment trades commitment for speed. It can be effective for immediate shift cover, seasonal peaks, or common roles where your internal team owns robust vetting. Because agencies are paid only on success, they prioritise active candidates and quickest placements—useful, but quality varies.

- Immediate shift cover and backfill
- Short-term or seasonal demand spikes
- Roles where in-house compliance and onboarding are strong

Drawbacks include lower completion rates, limited passive market reach, and the risk of multiple-agency chaos—duplicate CVs, mixed messaging to candidates, and fee disputes. Without disciplined requisition control, contingent supply can increase churn and agency dependency.

 **Guardrails:** Use a preferred supplier list, standardised brief, single point of contact, and measured SLAs (time-to-submit, fill rate, compliance pass rate).

- **Pros**

- No upfront cost
- Speed for simple roles
- Flexible capacity

- **Cons**

- 10–20% completion
- Variable candidate quality
- Higher turnover risk



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RPO – Scaling Made Simple

Recruitment Process Outsourcing (RPO) transforms hiring from reactive firefighting into a managed, branded system. Your partner embeds processes, tools and people to run sourcing, screening, interview scheduling, compliance collation and onboarding—end to end or modular.

- Opening new homes or services with predictable ramp-up
- Large multi-site recruitment programmes
- Maintaining steady staffing levels and reducing agency reliance

Benefits include unified employer branding, consistent candidate experience, and real-time dashboards on pipeline, time-to-hire, and compliance readiness. With standardised interviews and structured onboarding, attrition in the first 90 days typically falls. Managers gain time back to focus on care quality and coaching.

i Commercial models range from monthly retainers to project-based fees. SLAs should tie to fill rate, quality-of-hire, 90-day retention, and hiring manager satisfaction.

01

Scoping

Workforce plan, volumes, roles, sites, and timelines.

02

Build

Employer brand assets, attraction channels, screening toolkit.

03

Run

Weekly cadence, SLA reporting, continuous improvement.



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7 Hiring Mistakes Costing You Time, Money & CQC Points

1. Chasing speed over fit
2. Letting multiple agencies compete without control
3. Relying solely on job ads
4. Ignoring passive candidates
5. Underestimating cultural fit
6. Skipping structured onboarding
7. Using the wrong recruitment model for the role

Each mistake increases turnover risk, inflates recruitment spend, and strains teams. A mis-hire can cost 30–50% of annual salary once you include repeat fees, training, supernumerary shadowing, and lost continuity. For the CQC, inconsistent staffing, insufficient induction, or gaps in training evidence signal avoidable risk.

Governance

Define requisition ownership, brief standards and sign-off.

Attraction

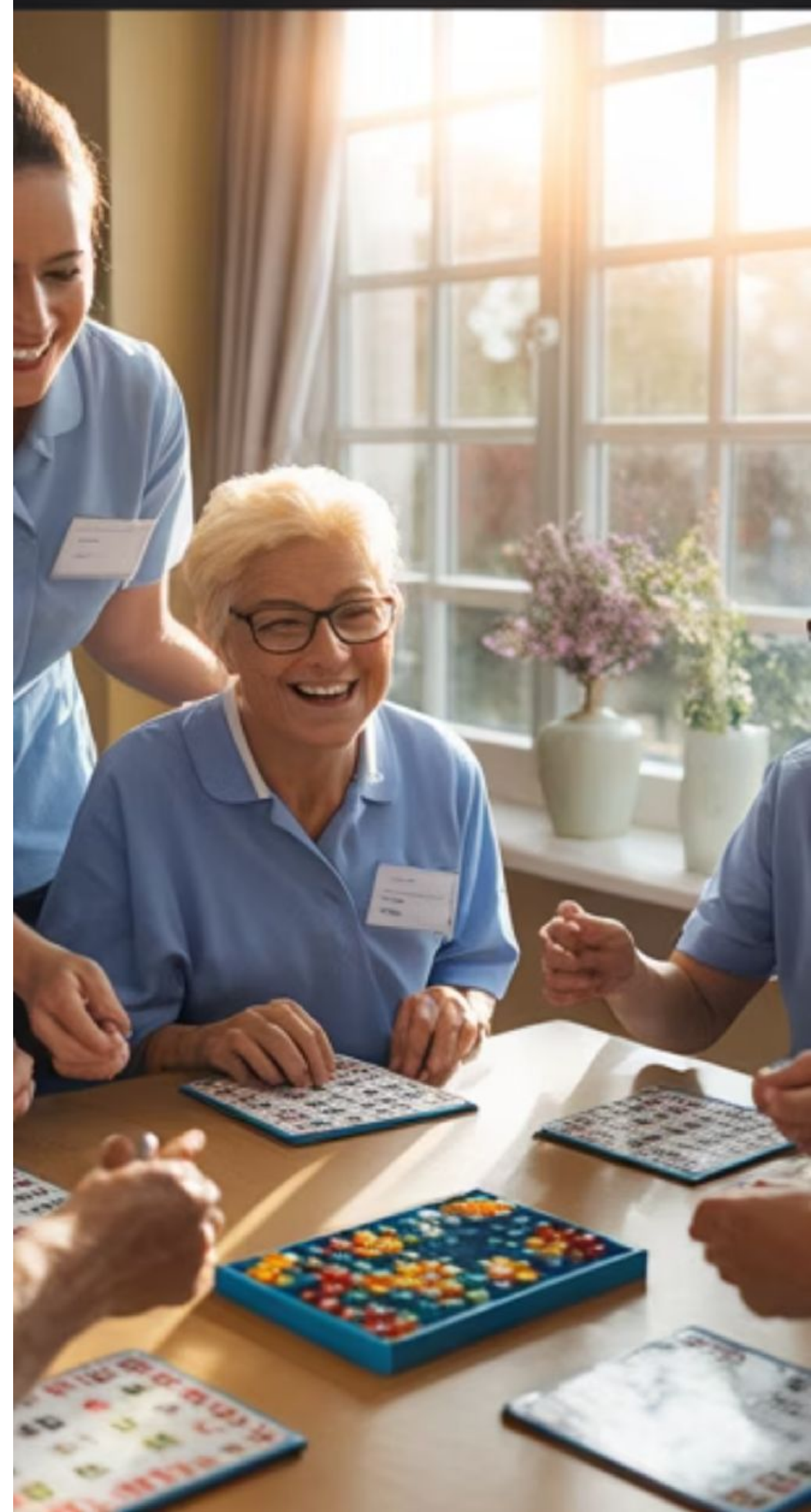
Blend ads with talent pooling and passive outreach.

Selection

Structured interviews, values assessment, clinical validation.

Onboarding

Day-1 readiness, buddying, 30/60/90-day check-ins.



Retained vs Contingent vs RPO – Side-by-Side

Feature	Retained	Contingent	RPO
Commitment	High	Low	Medium
Completion Rate	90–95%	10–20%	70–80%
Candidate Quality	High	Variable	Moderate
Speed	Medium	Fast	Depends on scope
Cost	Upfront	Pay-on-hire	Monthly/project

1

Use Retained for

Leadership/specialist roles and turnaround situations.

2

Use Contingent for

Immediate cover where vetting is in-house and robust.

3

Use RPO for

Multi-site scaling and consistent brand-led hiring.



Real-World Healthcare Scenarios



Retained: A care home group required a new CQC-registered manager after a difficult inspection. The existing leadership instability was impacting staff morale and resident care, making the need for a high-calibre replacement urgent and non-negotiable. A retained search mapped competitor leaders, engaged passive candidates through discreet outreach, and delivered a rigorously vetted shortlist in three weeks.

The successful manager, known for their strong CQC track record and leadership skills, started in just five weeks. Service leadership quickly stabilised, leading to a noticeable improvement in care quality and staff retention. The subsequent CQC visit specifically noted improved governance and safer staffing levels, directly attributing these enhancements to the new leadership and robust recruitment process.

Contingent Pitfall: Under severe pressure to fill three critical carer posts due to unexpected departures, a provider briefed five different agencies simultaneously, hoping for a quick fix. This fragmented approach led to a chaotic influx of unvetted CVs, duplicate submissions, and inconsistent messaging to potential candidates.

Tragically, all three hires sourced through this method left within two months, citing poor cultural fit and inadequate support. This resulted in significant financial losses - roughly £12,000 in agency fees and repeated training costs, and severe continuity disruption for residents.

RPO: Faced with the ambitious task of launching three new care homes simultaneously, a provider needed a scalable and consistent recruitment solution to staff hundreds of roles before opening day. They implemented a 6-month project Recruitment Process Outsourcing (RPO) model, embedding a dedicated team to manage the entire hiring lifecycle.

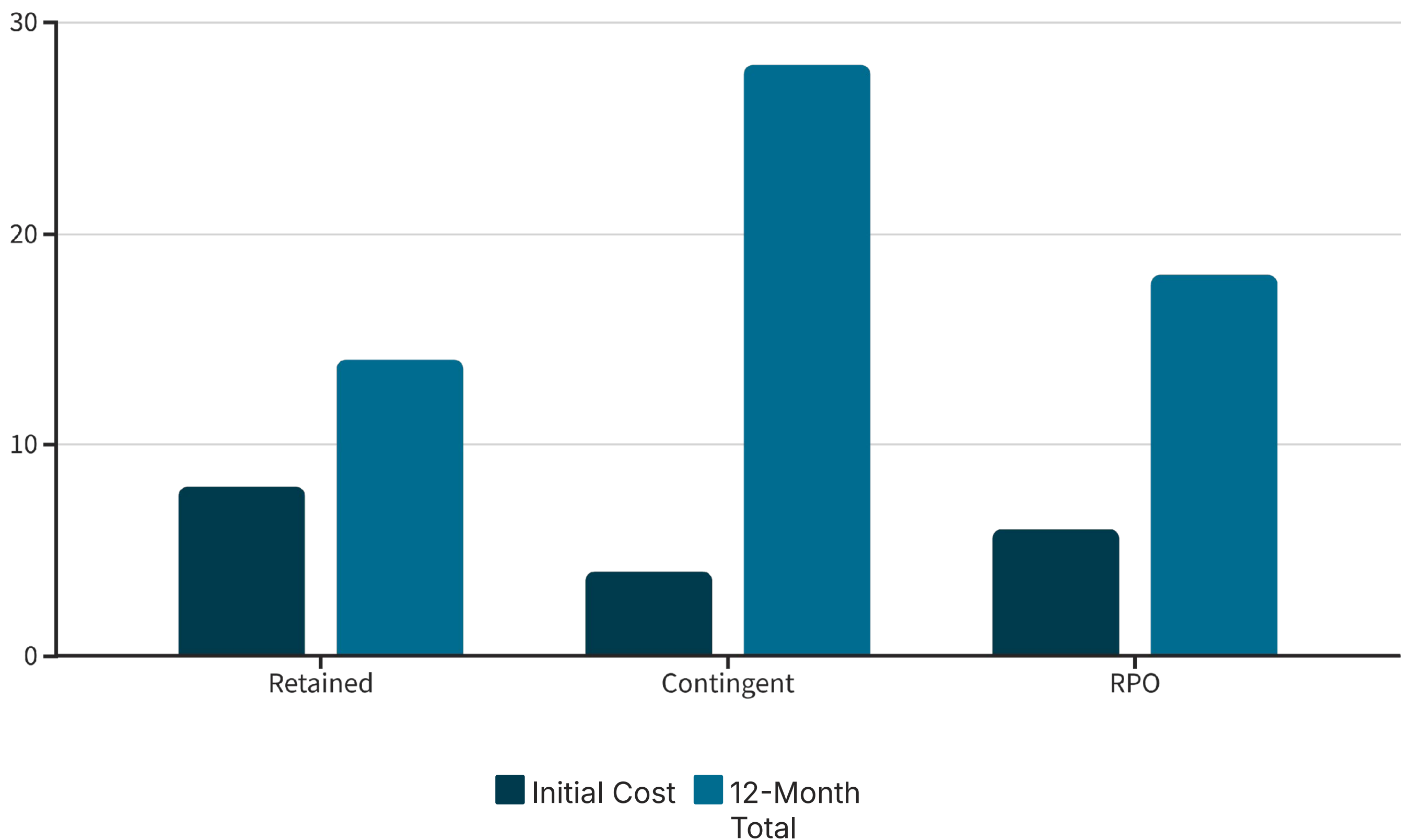
The outcome was transformative: 80% of all required roles were successfully filled before the new homes opened, ensuring a smooth and safe launch. Furthermore, 90-day retention rates increased by an impressive 18%, indicating a significant improvement in candidate quality and cultural alignment. Hiring managers also experienced a 30% reduction in administrative burden, freeing them to focus on operational readiness.




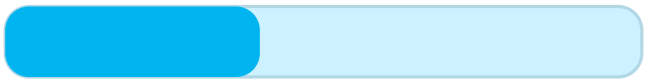
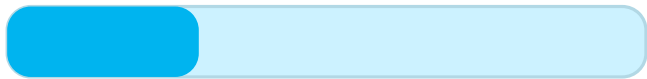
Lesson: Match model to mission—criticality, volume and timing determine the smartest route.

Cost vs Quality – The ROI Equation

Lower upfront fees rarely equal lower total cost. The full cost of a poor hire includes repeat recruitment, training, supervision time, compliance delays, agency backfill and reputational impact. Conversely, higher-quality hires from retained or RPO channels deliver longer tenure, fewer incidents, and better resident outcomes—benefits with tangible financial value.



Interpretation: Contingent appears cheaper initially, but total cost often rises due to higher turnover and administrative drag. Retained and RPO incur more structured investment upfront yet reduce rework and reliance on premium cover.

 70%	 40%	 30%
<p>Tenure Uplift Quality selection increases year-one retention.</p>	<p>Time Saved Manager hours reclaimed via streamlined process.</p>	<p>Agency Cut Reduced agency usage under RPO models.</p>



Which Model Should You Use?

Choose based on role risk, volume and timeline.

Retained

Key leadership and compliance-critical roles where cultural fit and governance are pivotal.

Contingent

Immediate, low-complexity shift cover when your internal vetting and onboarding are robust.

RPO

Multi-site scaling, new home launches, or continuous high-volume hiring with brand consistency.

Decision tip: If the wrong hire risks CQC non-compliance, choose retained.

Decision tip: If the need is urgent and routine, use contingent with tight SLAs.

Decision tip: If you're scaling across sites, implement RPO.

🔍 Still unsure? Book a short discovery to map model-to-role across your workforce plan.



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Final Thought & Free Strategy Session

Hiring in healthcare is about safety, stability and trust. The wrong model leads to poor hires, higher turnover and escalating agency spend—pressure that erodes morale and risks your CQC rating. The right model strengthens teams, improves retention and outcomes, and reduces operational stress.

- Strengthen your team with model-role alignment
- Improve retention through structured selection and onboarding
- Reduce cost by lowering rework and agency reliance

Book your free strategy session today to benchmark your current approach and design a recruitment roadmap aligned to your growth and CQC goals.

[Book Session Here](#)

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