

Mr Peter Wilson
Interim Director of Operations
Business Services Organisation (BSO)
2 Franklin Street
Belfast
BT2 8DQ

10th November 2021

Dear Mr Wilson,

I am writing on behalf of healthcare staffing firms across Northern Ireland, to put on record our concern about the fourth extension to *Framework 486666 Agency Workers - Nursing and Healthcare Support Workers*.

[The Recruitment & Employment Confederation](#) (REC) is the voice of the recruitment industry, speaking up for great recruiters. While we represent a range of sectors, healthcare is one of our largest, with about 500 corporate members offering permanent, temporary, clinical and non-clinical health and social care professionals to the HSC, NHS, local authorities and care homes. Our diverse membership includes the NHS's ten biggest staffing suppliers as well as hundreds of SMEs; what unites them is their commitment to robust compliance standards (as required through REC membership), and their dedication to provide 24/7 staffing solutions to the HSC and the wider healthcare sector.

The recent framework change was communicated without a detailed explanation to firms as to why it was happening. In this letter, I am requesting that such an explanation is offered and want to share some feedback regarding the HSC's tender process, which we'd be more than happy to expand upon in a meeting. A copy of this letter has also been sent to Robin Swann MLA, Health Minister.

In October 2021, approved suppliers were notified that the existing framework for agency workers was to be extended for the fourth time until June 2022. As we understand it, the original agreement only allowed for three extensions and, following HSC's communication over the past 18 months, our members were expecting to see a new framework, to be launched in 2022.

Firstly, we would like to understand the background of the 'Regional Agency Reduction Implementation Group' cited by the Department of Health as the reason for the extension. Efficient spend of public money in healthcare matters to everyone – but targeting one type of spend without engaging the market is likely to damage supply and raise costs in the long run.

Secondly, there are two major issues with the unexpected fourth extension. The extension does not provide any opportunity or forum to discuss the price caps and rates with workforce suppliers. Assuming the intention is to maintain the current rates, this would put agency medical workers at a significant pay disadvantage and not reflect changes to pay inflation in the last three years. There are many reasons why health professionals actively choose to work via an agency – not least the flexibility it offers them and their family. Workers

have choices – and artificially low rates will simply lead to staffing gaps – not a major move to substantive, bank or other provision.

The other major problem is there are many agencies who are not on the current framework. There are excellent medical recruitment businesses who have been patiently waiting for the new framework so they can bid to become approved suppliers to HSC. This is an especially crucial point considering the acute labour shortages that health trusts across the UK are facing.

At the REC, we have frequently provided other framework providers with the facility for market engagement, and have opened up those conversations to agencies outside our membership. We would be more than willing to do the same for the HSC. Market engagement and open communication are imperative and a prerequisite in developing a workable framework in our experience.

Finally, I would like to raise covid enhanced rates for agency workers. The HSC Staff Recognition Payment of £500 was announced in July 2021 which agency workers also qualify for under the Agency Workers Regulations. Three months on, agency workers have not received this payment nor received any updates on when to expect this. Can you advise us when this will be passed on?

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters and how we can build towards a better partnership model for the framework extension and its next iteration. Over the pandemic, we have found that a true partnership approach between suppliers, Trusts and / or end-hirers, and framework providers has resulted in a much better working environment for all staff – working through some of the toughest times we have ever faced in the health and care sectors, better value for taxpayer's money and most importantly of all, better patient care. We look forward to hearing back from you. Ellie Goddard (ellie.goddard@rec.uk.com) in my office will be happy to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time.

Yours Aye,



Neil Carberry
Chief Executive