

Aine Morrison
Chief Social Worker
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
Northern Ireland
BT4 3SQ

25 May 2023

Dear Ms Morrison,

I am getting in touch to request an urgent meeting to discuss what we understand to be the Department's message around the "banning" of the use of social workers employed by recruitment agencies in Trusts by 30 June 2023.

As the voice of the UK recruitment industry, [the Recruitment & Employment Confederation \(REC\)](#) speaks for great recruiters. We have over 3,000 businesses in our membership, all of whom commit to our robust compliance standards. Our members provide clinical and non-clinical professionals to local authorities, care providers and NHS Trusts as well as to the private sector, supplying valuable permanent and flexible workers across all bands and services. Our members include some of the largest suppliers of social work staffing, as well as hundreds of SMEs.

Our biggest concern is the negative impact a 'total ban' will have on service-users. If implemented, we believe this will immediately and negatively impact the quality and continuity of care available. It is likely to result in even more severe social worker shortages, with workers leaving the profession completely.

I understand one of the Department's objectives is to encourage social workers into substantive roles with Trusts and as taxpayers, we all fully appreciate the need to find cost savings. The likelihood of agency social workers leaving the profession entirely, rather than taking up a permanent contract, has been well-evidenced by the REC. [A recent REC survey](#) revealed that four in ten temporary social workers (42.18% of the respondents) would leave the workforce completely if further restrictions were made to their current pattern of employment. The same survey also revealed that many locums do not have an option to work in a full-time permanent role and working flexibly is their only way to continue their career.

Temporary agency workers provide vital support to so many families and communities, keeping the economy going day and night. The role of this workforce is especially important in social care. As you have indicated in [your own report](#), there is a large number of social worker vacancies across Northern Ireland – with over 400 as of December 2021 and this has more than tripled in the last five years. Temps are playing a critical role in filling these vacancies, while Trusts and their staffing partners work to find permanent staff. Without temps, service-users will be left without care. Your data also finds that the workforce is dominated by women and there is a high volume of (37%) over 50s. This is similar to our findings. But if changes are made as proposed, these are the workers that we are likely to lose first.

You will be aware of [the reform that the Department for Education \(DfE\)](#) is proposing in England. Based on this, one of the REC members – one of the biggest suppliers in Northern Ireland – surveyed their social workers. For this agency, 36% of their respondents fall within the 55+ age group. And 55% of the survey participants would seek to either retire early or leave the profession for an alternative sector if DfE's proposals were made.



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It is our experience that any changes to the use of agencies and temporary workers in the sector would be most effective with input from recruiters and agency workers. Since December 2022, we have been seeking clarity with the Procurement and Logistics Service (PaLS) colleagues at the Business Services Organisation (BSO). But in their response to us today, 25 May, they have said that “recent meetings with the Non-Medical Contract Adjudication Group have concluded that Social Workers will feature on the upcoming Framework”. In the meantime, we are being advised by our members that Trusts are saying to them they can no longer place agency social workers from 30 June and they are expressing serious concern about this measure for all the reasons we have outlined above.

With just five weeks to go, we are keen to work with the Department to urgently discuss how we can collaborate to tackle staff shortages, provide value of taxpayers’ money, improve care and not lose good social workers from the system. Recruiters are experts in workforce planning and can really help build proactive recruitment and retention strategies.

With that context, we would welcome the opportunity to explore these important issues with you in more detail. Ellie Goddard (ellie.goddard@rec.uk.com) in my office will be happy to arrange a meeting at the earliest availability.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Shoesmith
Deputy Chief Executive