

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

7 June 2023

Dear Ms Morrison,

Further to the REC's letter dated 25 May, we are writing again with a sense of real urgency and as a collective voice for each of the agencies who represent agency social workers and social work students. In the absence of any clarity from the Department, and with a few short weeks left until the 'ban' on the use of agency social workers is introduced, we urge you to scrap this unnecessary plan which will only worsen shortages, harm service-users, and won't actually result in savings in the longer term.

In every sector of the economy and every part of society, there is always going to be a need for rapidly deployed, short-term contingent staff. This is how you respond to sick leave or unexpected staff absences, and indeed crisis situations. And that is why agencies and their workers exist - to support public and private sector services to continue to deliver.

The crux of the staffing crisis affecting this sector is not the fault of agencies or agency social workers. For too long, social workers have seen their caseloads grow but with too little regard for how they are supported in their jobs, the working conditions they need to strike the right work life balance, or any improvements in their pay. And we know that it is a combination of these factors that is behind the decision many social workers take to work via an agency. As set out in our previous letter, our recent [survey with agency social workers](#), showed that flexibility, pay, and mental wellbeing are all crucial factors for choosing to work via an agency. Our survey also asked temps if they would be able to take on a permanent, full-time position if they had to - over 40% said no.

If these issues aren't fixed and there is not a proper examination of the reasons why people leave Trusts for agencies, there is no hope of making the profession more attractive or improving recruitment and retention overall. Getting to the solutions of this workforce crisis is something that can be done in partnership with the REC and our members. Recruiters are labour market experts and act as trusted advisors on staffing to a wide variety of clients very successfully every day. We have been offering to help all along but thus far, our request has been politely ignored.

Our greatest concern is to put the experience, safety and care of services-users at the heart of any workforce changes. Without agency workers, the biggest victims of the Department's proposed change will be the most vulnerable service-users. Banning agency social workers will not result in more substantive staff being available. Instead, it will leave the remaining permanent social workers with even bigger caseloads.

Agencies and their workers have been an essential pillar of the social care system, especially since the pandemic. Agencies have provided dedicated and experienced professionals to plug unforeseen staffing gaps in the permanent workforce. We are deeply disappointed by the lack of recognition for the value and contribution these hard-working professionals have made over the years. The planned proposal is a step backwards, and is being perceived as punishing the workers who choose a pattern of employment that gives them the flexibility they need, while enabling them to continue to do the job they love.



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We are also gravely disappointed that there has been no consultation, engagement or communications from any authorities to agencies regarding this significant measure. We understand that workers, service-users and Trusts have also been left with no opportunity to provide their views into this. No course of action will achieve its objective in any context if authorities fail to listen to the people and businesses directly impacted by it.

At this time of a cost-of-living crisis, we all understand the need to bring costs down, but as we have set out in this letter and previous communications, this ban won't tackle the fundamental issues in the social care workforce.

We request an urgent meeting to discuss how we can strengthen the permanent workforce while strategically embracing the contingent workforce that is vital to support them. The Department is unlikely to achieve its long term aims for the quality of social care provision alone and we are here to help. 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 Officer
Recruitment and Employment Confederation

Helen O'Kane
NW Recruitment Office Manager
NW Recruitment

Paul Crean
Chief Executive Officer
First Choice Selection Services

James Rook
Chief Executive Officer
Sanctuary Personnel

Richard Cunningham
Operations Director - Randstad Care
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Jonathan St Clare
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Chief Executive Officer
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