

# Ceasing the use of Off Framework Agencies to Supply Nurses/ Midwives and Healthcare Support Workers to Health and Social Care

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) V9

### 1. What are the changes to the use of agencies to supply Nurses/Midwives and Healthcare support workers?

In October 2022, the then Health Minister Robin Swann announced measures to reduce spending on agency workers in Health and Social Care (HSC). This decision is supported by the Permanent Secretary, Peter May. This includes eliminating the supply of Nurses/ Midwives and Healthcare Support workers by agencies not covered by a Framework with HSC Employers, known as “off-Framework” agencies.

HSC organisations want to maximise the number of permanent/directly employed Nurses/Midwives and Healthcare Support staff in their workforces. When this is not possible, the use of agency workers will only be permitted for shifts that are hard to fill and only if the agency has been placed on the new **HSC Agency Workers; Nursing and Healthcare Support Framework** (“the *new* Framework”).

After a period of transition, under the new measures HSC organisations will **NOT** be permitted to engage Nurses/Midwives/Healthcare Support workers supplied by agencies that are not on the *new* Framework.

In short, what are called “off-Framework” agencies will not be used as set out in the Minister’s statement.

### 2. What is an Off-framework recruitment agency?

These are recruitment agencies that are not included on the *new* Framework. All agencies on the *new* Framework can be found **here**.

### 3. What is a Framework recruitment agency?

These are recruitment agencies that are part of the *new* Framework. **25** recruitment agencies for registered Nurses/Midwives and **20** recruitment agencies for Healthcare Support are included in the *new* Framework. Only agencies listed in the *new* Framework can be used by HSC organisations and must be registered with the RQIA. For a full list of agencies on the *new* Framework **click here**

### 4. When will the supply of Nurses/Midwives and Healthcare Support workers by off-Framework agencies stop?

The supply of these workers engaged through off-Framework agencies will begin to be phased out as part of the transition arrangements when the *new* Framework commences on **15th May 2023**.

## 5. Why is this being done?

The then Health Minister, whilst he fully recognised the vital contribution agency workers have played, considered that the growing cost of agency workers is not sustainable, particularly at a time when funding for health and other public services is under severe pressure. Agencies operating 'off-Framework' are not signed up to HSC organisations' terms and conditions of contract, which means they can charge higher fees than the 'on-Framework' agencies, as they are not bound by the contract rates. From 2018/19 to 2021/22; expenditure on Off-framework agency nursing supply rose from £27m to £101m, accounting for 72.5% of all agency spend for this group.

Reducing agency spend is not just about reducing costs.

The Permanent Secretary, Peter May in his statement 9 May 2023, has also reiterated "Our staff have told us that excessive agency use is unfair and impacts on morale. It is also the case that consistent clinical teams enhance patient safety."

## 6. What is the alternative to the use of agencies?

Building up our own substantive and sustainable workforce is the best way to ensure safe and effective care and is vital in order to rebuild our Health and Social Care services across Northern Ireland.

We are committed to working in partnership to improve and upgrade the use of Bank working, in the first instance within Nursing and Midwifery.

We deeply appreciate the commitment of our substantive workforce and we are determined to fill our vacancies and support our teams. Working together, we are also determined to implement the recommendations of the DoH/HSC Nursing and Midwifery Retention Report, March 2022. We will continue to work in partnership with Trade Unions to strengthen the workforce and ensure that staff feel valued, the benefits of working in HSC are promoted and understood by the entire HSC workforce.

We want to encourage more health workers to have a career and remain within the Health and Social Care System employed workforce. This brings a number of attractive benefits including job security, a HSC pension, flexible working arrangements, career pathways and development opportunities.

## 7. I am a HSC employee. Can I work for my organisation as an agency worker?

**NO.**

Under the *new* HSC Framework, it will not be possible for you to work an agency shift with a HSC organisation where you are currently employed, if you:

- Hold a substantive or Bank contract
- Have been employed by your current HSC Employer within the past 6 months

This forms part of the contract terms and conditions which the agencies have signed up to.

All staff are encouraged to join their Nursing and Midwifery Bank which offers flexible working arrangements for those staff who are unable to commit to working on a full time/part time basis.

**8. I am an agency worker, how can I be sure if I am engaged via an on or off-Framework agency?**

You should check the list of agencies on the *new* Framework. **Here**.  
If you do not see the name of your agency listed, then you are engaged via an off-Framework agency.

**9. I currently work for an off-Framework agency. What does this mean for me?**

If your agency is not listed on the *new* Framework then you are engaged via an Off-framework agency. Your placement with your HSC organisation via that agency will cease on the date confirmed to you by the agency, in accordance with the contract terms and conditions of your placement. We would advise that you make direct contact with your agency.

**10. I am an Agency Only Worker engaged by an off-Framework agency. How can I continue to work in HSC after my placement has ended?**

All agency workers are welcome to apply for direct employment with HSC organisations, should they wish to. HSC Employers regularly recruit for Nurses/ Midwives and Healthcare support staff and vacancies across HSC are advertised on our website at <https://jobs.hscni.net>. A link to all current vacancies can be found **Here**. The website details a range of attractive benefits that are available should you chose to join HSC as an employee.

**11. I am a Ward Manager of a specialist ward and frequently have difficulty in accessing agency workers with the skill set that I require. For this reason, I have frequently used our Trust staff who are employed by an agency as I can guarantee cover with appropriately skilled staff. Under the new arrangements, what steps can I take to cover unfilled shifts with appropriately skilled staff?**

In accordance with the *new* Framework, HSC staff cannot work an agency shift in their own organisation.

Staff should be encouraged to join their Bank to enable them to undertake additional shifts outside of their substantive area.

**12. I have been solely working through an agency for a number of years and I would now like to return to working within a Trust. How can I apply for employment within one of the Trusts?**

HSC organisations regularly recruit for Nurses/Midwives and Healthcare support staff and the vacancies across HSC are advertised on our website at <https://jobs.hscni.net> A link to all current vacancies can be found **Here**.

**13. I am considering leaving full-time employment from one of the local Trusts and begin to work through an agency on the *new* Framework. Will there be any restrictions placed on staff who resign from Trust contracts to begin working with an agency on the *new* Framework?**

**YES.**

Under the *new* Framework, it will not be possible for you to work an agency shift with a HSC organisation where you are currently employed, if you:

- Hold a substantive or Bank contract
- Have been employed by your current HSC Employer within the past 6 months

This forms part of the contract terms and conditions which the agencies have signed up to.

**14. I work on a ward that currently uses a significant volume of off-Framework agency workers. What steps are being taken to support this transition period to maintain safe staffing and protect services?**

All HSC organisations are taking steps to minimise disruption for wards and departments in the coming months, as the new measures regarding the use of agency workers take effect. This may include the use of Overtime or Additional Hours for substantive staff, use of staff through the Bank or through engaging workers through agencies on the *new* Framework.

**15. I am currently engaged through an off-Framework agency and would like to sign up to the *new* Framework – how do I go about this?**

The agencies on the *new* Framework are listed **here**.

**9 May 2023**