

Working for the Agency

The Role and Significance of
Temporary Employment Agencies in the
Adult Social Care Workforce

Summary



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Introduction

Commissioned as part of the Department of Health's 'Social Care Workforce Research Initiative', this research explored what progress is being made toward achieving the policy goal that by 2020 social care employers will no longer need to rely on temporary agency staff to cover tasks that would be normally carried out by a permanent social worker (DfES/DH 2006). The study also explored safeguarding issues and why some social workers and other social care staff chose to leave permanent employment to become 'agency workers' and what, if anything, might tempt them back into permanent employment.

Method

The research drew together evidence from a variety of sources including: a survey of local councils in England with adult social services responsibilities (n=151); case studies of progress in three different localities; qualitative interviews [with social care managers responsible for procuring agency staff (n=18), recruitment consultants and employment agency managers (n=15); and agency workers, both qualified (n=45) and unqualified (n= 15)].

Progress

In our survey, ninety-two per cent (n=51) of the responding authorities had used agency workers in the 2008-2009 financial year. In the case of professionally qualified staff, such as social workers and occupational therapists, difficulties in recruiting permanent staff or needing to fill a post quickly were the most frequent reasons given for using agency staff.

Eighty per cent of local councils reported that they had implemented strategies to reduce the use of agency workers. The establishment of staff 'banks' and managed vendor schemes were the most important components of their strategies. Managed vendor schemes use an intermediary or a third party to negotiate with employment agencies on behalf of local councils. There is good evidence that such schemes work to reduce the costs associated with using agency workers. Sixty per cent of respondents reported that their expenditure on agency working in 2008-2009 was either less or the same as their expenditure in 2007-2008. However, employment business (agency) managers cautioned that vendor management is reducing margins to such an extent that key quality components of their service are under threat (such as the ability to meet the demand for more safeguarding checks).

Safeguarding issues

In the literature, agency working is often viewed as posing risks to service users (Carey, 2008). A significant safeguarding issue to emerge in this study was the practice whereby agency social workers are given complex case loads (usually those no one else in the team wants to deal with) and then routinely denied access to the same level of induction, training and supervision as permanent colleagues. This is justified on the grounds that they are "agency". For newly qualified social workers the lack of induction is also a problem. The expectation is that they would be able to "hit the ground running" in the same way as their more experienced agency colleagues. Overall, we argue that there is an urgent need to review the way in which agency workers are managed in the workplace.

What can we learn from agency workers about recruitment and retention?

The agency social workers we interviewed sent very strong message about the need to improve pay and conditions in the sector as a means of retaining staff and reducing over reliance on agency workers. However, with the exception of those approaching retirement, most of the agency social workers interviewed did not see agency working as a long term career option and most did want to return to permanent

employment within a local council. Significantly, what often translated the intention to go back into permanent employment into an actual decision to do so was the perception of having found the right team:

'I have worked in some great teams and I have worked in some dreadful teams... I have had some good managers, some very good managers and some absolute stinkers. I fell on my feet here finding a good team and a very good supportive manager and the opportunity came up for permanent post and I went for it.' (Agency Social Worker 20)

When discussing recruitment and retention, the accounts of agency social workers are full of references to (usually poor) management, not being listened to and 'office politics'. More so than pay, case load (or deteriorating conditions *per se*) it is these relational or 'emotional loyalty' bonds that are most often pinpointed as the main reason why people seek to re-position themselves within the sector: to leave permanent employment and 'go agency'; to swap agency placement; or to stick with a placement and 'go permanent'. In terms of the implications for workforce development, these findings suggest that much more might be done under the banner of team building, leadership and management development. Research shows that these issues are often overlooked in most recruitment and retention strategies.

Conclusion

It is the prediction of the industry body, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2009) that reliance on agency working in nursing and social care is likely to increase if recruitment to the sector remains challenging. Our findings suggests that so long as procurement is not driven solely by the logic of cost minimisation and that there is good strategic and operational management of agency workers in the workplace then this need not necessarily be viewed negatively.

'It is unlikely that the use of agency staff will ever be eradicated, as they perform an important role... Councils need agency workers.'

(Local Government Association
spokesperson quoted in Batty,
2009)

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