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HSE facing bill of more than €720m for agency workers as thousands of staff jobs remain unfilled

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'Unacceptable' that HSE is spending €124m on agency nurses, while 1,096 funded posts are vacant, TD says

The HSE is on course to spend more than €720m hiring agency workers this year while not filling more than 3,700 staff jobs for which it has funding.

Agency workers cover a wide range of services and are hired daily to provide medical and nursing care, administrative duties, as well as general support and other patient care.

However, 3,743 full-time jobs that could be filled under the HSE budget are -vacant, raising major questions about the efficient use of public money and about disruptions to patient care with different people on duty.

The comprehensive data was released to Social Democrats health spokesman Pádraig Rice after he put a series of -questions to Health Minister Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

The data shows that, up to August, the HSE spent over €545m on agency staff, including €119m on medical and dental workers and €124m on nursing.

Mr Rice was told that last year the HSE spent €726m on agency staff.

The parliamentary response said 3,743 funded posts had not begun. Of those approved for last year, only 73pc have been onboarded.

Only 20pc of posts funded for this year have been onboarded as of September, Mr Rice, who is chair of the Oireachtas health committee, was told.

He said the information he received showed 3,109 previously filled posts were also vacant, meaning 6,852 were unfilled overall. "Finally, 749 of the 960 positions approved for agency conversion have been onboarded," he said.

The Cork South-Central TD added: "If the HSE continues with this level of spending on agency staff, it will exceed last year's colossal spend of €726m.

Health Minister Jennifer Carroll McNeill. Photo: Frank McGrath

"In the previous five years, over €3.3bn was spent on agency staff and there is no sign of this trend being reversed.

“Despite pledges to cut agency -spending, it continues to be a runaway train. At the same time, over 3,700 funded posts remain vacant.

“We now have the bizarre situation where the HSE is spending almost €124m on agency nurses, while 1,096 funded nursing and midwifery posts are vacant. This is utterly unacceptable.

It makes no sense to be paying exorbitant sums to agencies while funded posts are lying vacant

“It makes no sense to be paying exorbitant sums to agencies while funded posts are lying vacant.

“The Government needs to invest more in directly employed healthcare workers with good working conditions and opportunities for progression.”

The data supplied showed there has been a 24.5pc increase in staff in the HSE since the end of December 2019.

It’s total funded workforce this year is for 133,305 posts.

Between January and August this year, the biggest spend on agency staff of €165.7m went on hiring people for services in areas such as home support for older people, mental health and community care, €123.8m went on hiring nurses, with another €118.9m going to getting doctors and dentists to fill in.

A further €61.5m went on agency management and administrative -workers with the rest on paramedical and maintenance and technical workers.

Recruitment and retention of clinical, nursing and other key staff is a constant challenge

Although the HSE is under pressure to reduce its agency bill, it has risen from €349m in 2019, to €647m in 2023 to €726.3m last year.

Social Democrats health spokesman Pádraig Rice says the Government needs to invest in directly employed healthcare workers

In its response, the HSE said the “available supply in the labour market for health workforce continues to be a challenge. This is not unique to Ireland, but rather a global health workforce challenge”.

The spokesperson added: “Recruitment and retention of clinical, nursing and other key staff is a constant challenge and impacts adversely on the ability to maintain safe and effective services.

“Therefore, as part of the HSE’s overarching resourcing approach whereby direct employment does not meet the needs of service delivery requirements, agency staff are utilised.

“This can be for a variety of reasons, including sick absence replacement, both long- and short-term, to replace vacancies currently being actively recruited to and to replace maternity leave.

“There are also additional resourcing requirements with the replacement of lost hours in critical services areas following the reversal of the Haddington Road Agreement.”

The majority of agency spend is -salary and statutory pay costs such as PRSI and holiday allowance.

In line with the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act, agency staff have the right to the same basic employment conditions, this includes basic pay, shift premiums, unsocial hours and Sunday rates, the HSE said.

The HSE said it was working strategically with the Government and the relevant stakeholders to grow supply pipelines of workers “with the ambition of driving towards self-sufficiency and this is including additional pathways to education and the development of new grades to support service delivery”.

The spokesperson said: “However, it will be a number of years before the HSE will benefit from the increased supply of healthcare workers and in the interim, the HSE has engaged in a significant number of initiatives both to retain healthcare workers in Ireland but also to expand the available eligible pool both nationally and internationally.”