



Coleg Nyrsio Brenhinol
Cymru
Royal College of Nursing
Wales

Agency Nursing



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FAIR PAY FOR NURSING

TÂL TEG AR GYFER NYRSIO

Executive Summary and Recommendations

It is easy to see why nurses choose agency nursing. With better pay, more flexibility over hours and location, support with revalidation and access to training, and less requirement to respond to managerial pressures, agency nursing has become a popular alternative to being directly employed by the NHS. But agency nursing is costing NHS Wales a lot of money that would be better placed elsewhere – such as nurses' salaries.

What needs to change to make working for the NHS attractive again? We're calling on the Welsh Government to:

1

Increase nursing pay:

The Welsh Government needs to give nurses a pay rise 5% above inflation.

2

Flexible working:

Give nurses more flexibility over their hours and work location.

3

Career opportunities:

Improve access to continued professional development (CPD) and funded education courses.



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Agency nursing

Why registered nurses are choosing agency nursing

What is agency nursing?

Agency nursing refers to a nurse or healthcare support worker (HCSW) that works for a nursing agency, which is a private company. Agency nursing is used by the NHS and social care providers.

In 2021/2022 NHS Wales spent £140 million on agency nursing. This would pay the salaries of 5,167 full-time nurses.

So what is agency nursing and why does it cost so much money?

The majority of money spent by NHS Wales on agency nursing is for registered nurses. This paper will outline why registered nurses are choosing agency nursing and the implications this is having for NHS Wales and the Welsh Government.

Agency nurses can decide to work for an agency exclusively or they can be employed by an agency while also being directly employed by NHS Wales on an Agenda for Change contract. However, NHS Wales tries to discourage nurses from working for agencies with measures such as refusing to hire an agency nurse within a Health Board/Trust where they're employed on an Agenda for Change contract. This creates a situation of agency nurses travelling from London or Manchester to fill agency shifts in Cardiff or Gwynedd and vice versa.

You may have also heard the term bank nursing, which is different from agency nursing. Every health board has a 'nursing bank'. This is an internal NHS system used to respond to staffing requirements and last minute requests and it generally pays Agenda for Change band pay rates. A nurse employed by NHS Wales on an Agenda for Change contract can sign up to work 'bank' for the health board they are employed by or any other NHS employer. Some nursing staff only work bank shifts and these workers are on zero-hours contracts.

When a gap in staffing cannot be covered by permanent staff, the health board will look to cover the shift with bank nursing. If this is not possible, the health board will look to agency nursing, beginning with 'on contract' agencies (see page 5), and lastly 'off contract' agencies. The use of agencies has become increasingly common due to staffing pressures.

What are agencies offering that the NHS isn't?

From the perspective of the individual, agency nursing is very attractive. Agency nursing staff have better pay, more freedom over location and hours and there is generally less responsibility to address staffing shortages and internal challenges.



Flexible working A nurse is able to choose the hours and days they *want* to work. This makes agency nursing attractive for family life and those who want to spend time on their education.



Career opportunities An agency nurse can experience a variety of roles in different locations that may help them develop their skills and competencies.



Better pay Agency nursing offers better pay compared to the NHS. A nursing agency was offering £42.50 an hour for an ICU shift and £51 an hour for an A&E shift.



Improved work/life balance An agency nurse is able to choose their own hours and location, and with less stress, better pay and more career opportunities, their work/life balance is greatly improved.



Choose work location An agency nurse is not confined to one hospital or health board. They can choose the health board and even the hospital they want to work in.



Focus on patient care An agency nurse provides complex care for patients, but there is generally less responsibility and pressure to address staffing shortages, time pressures and increased workloads.

Many agencies offer significant benefits. For example, Hoop, a leading Cardiff-based recruitment agency, offers a £250 joining bonus, competitive weekly pay, a fast track application process (work within seven days), revalidation support and an out of hours support team.¹

Another agency, Thornbury, offers a 'refer a friend' scheme with a bonus of up to £300, support with revalidation, a COVID-19 response support team and would pay the nurse's Nursing and Midwifery Council revalidation fees (£120) if the nurse worked 18 shifts for the agency in the first year of joining the agency.²

On top of this, there are several benefits for the individual which contribute to an improved work/life balance. This includes better pay, more flexibility over hours and work location and less responsibility to respond to staffing shortages and time pressures.

“Joining Hoop as an agency nurse has increased my clinical knowledge. I have gained invaluable experience, and this has enhanced my patient and clinical practice skills. Best decision I have made.”

(Julie, RN, nursing agency)^{#1}

¹ <https://www.hooprecruitment.co.uk/specialisms/nursing-nhs>

² <https://thornbury-nursing.com/join-thornbury/why-join-thornbury/paid-nmc-fees/>

^{#1} Julie, Registered Nurse, Quoted from Hoop Recruitment, review here: <http://bit.ly/3EQVY7Y>

Career progress and the ability to complete postgraduate learning and continued professional development (CPD) should be central to a nurse's career. The ability of agencies to offer this support is pivotal to the success of agencies in recruiting nurses.

What are the implications for NHS Wales using agency nursing?

Agency nurses can be less familiar with their environment as they may not have worked in that area before. This means they will not be aware of the ward layout, where equipment is kept, health board procedure and protocol and the colleagues they are working with. This is less conducive to providing continuity of care for the patient and often means permanent nursing staff have to provide an induction into the clinical environment for agency nurses. This takes valuable time away from patient care.

Agency nursing is expensive for the NHS, as there is a higher cost to cover agency profit margins. How public money is spent should be a matter of public scrutiny.

For the financial year 2021/22 HEIW reported agency spend as £133.4 million. A Welsh Government Freedom of Information (FOI) request reported that it was £139.1 million. However, when RCN Wales put in a FOI request, per health board, the amount totalled £140 million.

This means, for the financial year 2021/2022, there are three different total figures, differing by almost £7 million. This should be addressed by Audit Wales to understand why the numbers differ.

The NHS agency spend clearly illustrates the heavy reliance on agency nursing and the fact that health boards cannot attract enough nurses to provide safe and effective care from their own directly employed workforce.

“My favourite thing...is I'm in control. So I can literally look on the Quick Nurse app in the morning and pick a shift if I want to work. I can spend more time with my family. If I want to go out for the day, I don't have to worry about booking annual leave because obviously, the shifts are all last minute.”

(Amy RN, nursing agency)^{#2}

“[Nursing] agency is an extremely professional and organised agency that looks after the nurses working for them. The contract centre is efficient and approachable at all times, and the training department is highly skilled with regular training opportunities.”

(Julie, RN, nursing agency)^{#3}

^{#2} Amy, Registered Nurse, Quoted from Thornbury Nursing Services, Testimonials, Available here: <https://thornbury-nursing.com/nurse-testimonial-videos/>

^{#3} Julie, Registered Nurse, Quoted from Thornbury Nursing Services, Available here: <http://bit.ly/3ERi765>

Health Board	Health Board FOI (21/22)	Welsh Government FOI (21/22)
Aneurin Bevan	22,834,507	22,832,000
Betsi Cadwaladr	21,096,490	17,245,000
Cardiff and the Vale	17,638,062	15,238,000
Cwm Taf Morgannwg	21,843,000	22,076,000
Hywel Dda	28,920,000	34,342,000
Powys	3,736,000	3,736,000
Swansea Bay	24,012,821	23,691,000
Total	140,080,880	139,160,000

In 2006, the Welsh Government implemented the first All Wales Agency Framework Contract, introducing capped hourly rates of pay a nursing agency could charge. Suppliers of agency nurses through the Framework Contract are referred to as 'on-contract' agencies, whereas those that are not part of the Framework Contract are 'off-contract' and can charge a higher premium. This contract has been renewed on several occasions.

A new All Wales Agency Framework Contract was signed in 2021 for the period 2021 to 2024, with the possibility to extend for an additional year. The Framework Contract continues to cap the hourly rates of pay for nursing agency. There are currently 147 agencies signed up to this contract.

NHS Wales is displaying a dangerous and growing reliance on agency nursing over its own workforce. If this trend continues, Wales will move to a situation where NHS Wales no longer directly employs staff to provide patient care and instead moves to a model in which most or all nursing care is outsourced to private companies. This is not a shift that should take place without a conscious government policy decision.



About the Royal College of Nursing (RCN)

The Royal College of Nursing is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing, representing over 465,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors, healthcare support workers and nursing students, including over 28,000 members in Wales. RCN members work in both the independent sector and the NHS. Around two-thirds of our members are based in the community. The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with National Boards in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in nursing practice and shapes health and social care policy.