

Media Release



The Use of Temporary Nursing Staff in Northern Ireland

Annual expenditure on agency nursing staff in Northern Ireland has tripled in six years, reaching £162 million in 2024-25, with some hourly rates paid to nurses exceeding those paid in London. These are among the findings of a report published today (Wednesday 27 May 2026) by Northern Ireland's Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on "The Use of Temporary Nursing Staff in Northern Ireland" follows a 2020 Northern Ireland Audit Office publication on "Workforce Planning for Nurses and Midwives". Today's report notes that annual permanent nursing and midwifery staff costs reached a total of £1.1 billion in 2024-25 (the vast majority of these posts are nursing staff). The registered nursing workforce has increased since the 2020 NIAO review (from around 14,000 whole time equivalent nurses in March 2019 to around 17,000 at March 2025). Reported nurse vacancies have decreased by 45 per cent over the same period.

However, the report finds that major issues and challenges persist. It highlights that, in 2024-25, Health and Social Care Trusts spent £258 million on temporary nursing (and midwifery) staff, with more than eight million hours of temporary cover commissioned¹. Particular concerns are highlighted around a growing and costly reliance on agency staff. Over £160 million was spent on agency nursing staff in 2024-25, with expenditure levels having tripled since 2018-19. An agency nursing framework, introduced in 2023, has helped to largely eliminate the use of very expensive off-contract nursing agencies, a practice previously prevalent across Trusts. However, agency rates, introduced as part of this new framework, are substantially higher than in England, including London. For example, maximum hourly rates for Band 5 agency nurses are at least 35 per cent higher than in most of England, and can be up to 64 per cent higher in some cases.

Agency nursing remains significantly more expensive than other temporary nursing solutions. The report notes that, on average, agency nursing staff cost £11 per hour more than staff employed through Trusts'

¹ Figures on total temporary staff expenditure and total temporary cover hours include both private sector agency staff and staff sourced from Trusts' internal bank system.

internal bank system (these staff are employed directly by Trusts). It estimates that, had agency staff had been engaged at equivalent bank rates, the system could have saved up to £186 million over the last four years.

Weaknesses in workforce planning are also identified. While reported registered nursing vacancies have reduced in recent years, the report finds that vacancy data does not fully reflect workforce need. The number of reported registered nursing vacancies at March 2025 (1,178) reflects the number of funded job roles being actively recruited. However, the Department of Health estimates that an additional 2,195 nurses would be required to ensure safe and effective staffing levels. The report also found limited evidence underpinning decisions on the number of nursing training places commissioned, with adequate workforce planning absent.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"Nurses clearly play a pivotal role in our health and social care system, both in terms of their range and volume of direct contact with patients, and because they represent around a quarter of the system's overall workforce. While the use of temporary staff to fill short term workforce gaps is inevitable to some degree, this must be planned and managed effectively to ensure the long-term sustainability of services. "

"The introduction of a new agency framework has delivered some important improvements, but agency costs remain high and better value for money could be achieved. Today's report recommends that clear and targeted action is taken by the Department to reduce agency nursing usage and expenditure. Improved workforce planning is also required to identify workforce needs and establish a sufficient pipeline of appropriately skilled staff. This should entail greater use of more cost-effective solutions such as internal bank staff, as well as more accurate and complete workforce data. We have also recommended that the Department considers actions and approaches taken to tackle these issues in other UK jurisdictions such as Scotland and Wales, which have both reported significantly lower levels of expenditure on agency staff despite their larger populations."

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy,

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON WEDNESDAY 27 MAY 2026

efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.

2. The report will be available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk and is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Wednesday 27 May 2026.
3. The nursing and midwifery group includes registered nurses, midwives, and support staff. The vast majority of temporary staffing and spend relates to nursing, including support staff, not midwifery.
4. Band 5 nurses represent the majority of registered agency nurses used by Trusts in Northern Ireland.