

HSE spends €17m on agencies outside agreement

● Temporary medical staff are supposed to be recruited from approved suppliers

SEÁN MCCÁRTHAIGH

The HSE had to spend over €17m on hiring agency medical staff outside permitted suppliers in 2020 because of the inability of approved agencies to provide the necessary manpower, an audit has revealed.

An internal audit report on expenditure on temporary agency medical staff found almost 20pc of all spending on agency staff was with 66 different suppliers who were not part of a national framework agreement.

When queried, the audit found no justification had been provided for expenditure of over €1.1m with a non-framework agency by the HSE's mental health services in the west of Ireland.

Similarly, spending of almost €750,000 on two non-framework agencies by HSE staff in Dublin was not explained.

The report found the level of assurance that could be provided about the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance, risk management and internal control systems on almost €89m spent on temporary agency healthcare staff during 2020 was "limited".

It warned the use of non-framework suppliers had led to issues such as not having contracts in place or contractual obligations like medical clearance and Garda vetting.

It also found several incidents where there was a relationship between approved agencies and non-framework suppliers that had been used by the HSE and hospitals.

The audit found the Ireland East Hospital Group spent €288,000 on a non-framework supplier which was a wholly-owned subsidiary of an approved agency.

Under a national multi-supplier framework, hospital groups and the HSE's community healthcare organisations (CHOs) use one principal supplier and up to four other agencies to hire temporary staff.

The two principal agencies are Nurse on Call and CPL Healthcare, while secondary suppliers are Direct Medics, TTM Healthcare and Locomlink.

The agreement covers the recruitment of doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants, social-care workers and allied health professionals, including radiographers and occupational health therapists.

The country's seven hospital groups and nine CHOs are divided into two lots so that the principal supplier in

one lot can only be a secondary supplier in the second lot.

The framework agreement requires the principal supplier for each lot to be offered the placement first before it is offered to any of the other approved suppliers.

"The use of agencies not included on the framework is not permitted," the audit noted.

However, it revealed a total of 51 non-framework suppliers were used in 2020 by HSE CHOs with three agencies receiving in excess of €1m each, with one being paid €2.8m.

The audit also showed that the hospital groups used the services of 28 non-framework suppliers, including 13 agencies also used by CHOs, with one agency receiving a total of €2.2m.

In contrast, two of the five approved suppliers were only paid a combined total of €598,000 – less than 1pc of all expenditure on agency staff in 2020.

HSE auditors said anecdotal evidence suggested that framework suppliers often struggled to provide nurses.

They said directors of nursing with the HSE and hospital groups would regularly revert to smaller agencies if they had built a rapport with them and had good previous experience with temporary staff from those agencies "in the hope of getting the same person".

The audit said the use of non-framework agencies on terms not covered by the agreement meant the HSE might not obtain "value for money".

It said the inability of two of the approved agencies to provide the required level of temporary staff increased the risk of adverse outcomes.

Auditors said the framework agreement should provide guidance for HSE staff on the use of non-framework agencies when approved agencies could not supply temporary staff.

The report noted that the audit had been prompted by a finding that an earlier audit of a hospital in the south-east of the country found that 75pc of its spending on agency staff, amounting to €1.6m, was with agencies outside the framework agreement.

The audit noted the figures did not include expenditure by the RCSI Hospital Group (which includes Beaumont Hospital, Connolly Hospital in Blanchardstown, Our Lady of Lourdes in Drogheda, Cavan General Hospital, and the Rotunda in Dublin) and the Children's Health Ireland Hospital Group as they did not provide requested information about their spending on agency staff.

The HSE said it had implemented the audit report's recommendation in the preparation of a new framework agreement.

The report showed the two principal agencies providing temporary healthcare staff were paid €47.1m and €17m in 2020.



Dublin-based letting agent Owen Reilly, right, says rental transactions are down 30pc on this time last year

Dublin's rental crisis 'worst it's ever been'

● Ten are chasing every one property for rent in Dublin's prime locations

NIAMH HORAN

The lack of rental homes in Dublin city is "the worst it has ever been" and due to get even worse before the summer months as the return to the office gathers pace, according to one of the capital's leading estate agents.

Owen Reilly, whose agency is based in Dublin's docklands, says he is now seeing an average of 10 people competing for one property in prime locations near the office district.

Speaking to the *Sunday Independent* this weekend, Mr Reilly said the latest statistics collected by his agency show rental transactions are down

30pc, when compared to January and February 2021.

"Dublin is going to deliver more office space this year than the Celtic Tiger years because a lot of offices were delayed over the last two years due to lockdowns and construction site closures," he said.

"Now a huge amount of offices will come on stream this year and all of these are pre-let, so that means that thousands of people returning to the offices will be looking for rentals at a time when supply is at its lowest ever. Right now my colleagues are seeing 10 tenants for every property."

The situation could deteriorate further in the coming months, he added. "What we are seeing today is the complete reversal of the availability of rental properties in Dublin during lockdown. Now tenants feel they don't have much choice and in some cases there can be a lack of quality, depending on your budget. This crisis is particularly pronounced at the middle

and lower end of the market where there are very few affordable rentals."

The rent race means people are going the extra mile in order to find a home in time for their office return: "We have people sending us emails, not on the back of any particular listing, but offering a CV about themselves and writing a note to say they are finding it very difficult and asking if we have anything. People are physically calling in to the office all the time wondering what we have. We have had calls from people who aren't coming back to Dublin until May and they are already emailing us asking if they can book something now for two months' time."

"Between now and the summer it is going to get even worse when all these large offices fully reopen. You are going to have people working in Grand Canal Dock coming in from Louth and north Co Dublin and Meath. It's already been happening with students and it is going to happen with workers."

Asked about the reasons behind the lack of supply, Mr Reilly cited small landlords exiting the market due to taxation, regulation and rising values. He said rent caps, though welcome for tenants, are causing people to stay longer in properties – the agency's average tenancy is 28 months compared to 14 months five years ago. In

addition, "more people are renting who should be buying but can't".

Asked whether investment funds are also exacerbating the problem in Dublin's prime locations, Mr Reilly said: "Unfortunately because these apartment blocks are so expensive to build the fund has to get a return and they tend to be higher than the average rent, but they free up accommodation elsewhere."

The company's latest data shows frustration among those hoping to sell their homes in Dublin. "Since the start of the year we are seeing a lot of people who want to upgrade or trade down, and they are extremely frustrated by the lack of what's out there. They want to sell but they are finding they have very few options, so low supply is creating further low supply."

"This could change in March and April, which are traditionally busy months for properties to come to market. But compared with the same period in 2020 our listings are 35pc lower," Mr Reilly said.

Statistics from the agency's transactional data since the start of the year show 74pc of buyers are owner-occupiers, 41pc of which are first-time buyers, 26pc are investors and a significant number – 64pc – are buying properties with no mortgage required, 85pc are Irish and the average purchaser age is 40. A decade ago the average buyer was 34.

Garda to be sentenced over sex abuse of sister

ALI BRACKEN

A retired senior member of An Garda Síochána, who led a number of major murder investigations, is due to be sentenced over the repeated sexual abuse of his sister, the *Sunday Independent* can reveal.

The officer has already appeared in court charged with the abuse of his younger sister, which is alleged to have taken place in the late 1970s.

The man, now aged in his mid-60s, was initially charged with 18 counts of "unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman known to be his sister" as well as 18 separate counts of indecently assaulting her.

His trial was due to get under way in December. However, he then entered a guilty plea to 10 sample counts of indecent assault and incest involving his sister.

He is due to be sentenced at the Circuit Criminal Court on March 14 in connection with the crimes. The former senior garda had already appeared in court a number of times in relation to his alleged crimes.

The State's case has been that the alleged abuse of his sister took place when he was aged 19 and 20, while his sister was in her teens. The abuse is alleged to have occurred in the south of the country over several years.

It is understood the former senior officer "rang around" some garda colleagues in recent weeks asking if they would provide him with a character reference. Such references are generally used by defendants at sentencing hearings to try and mitigate their jail sentence.

The former officer's sister came forward about the abuse when she fell seriously ill a number of years ago, it is understood. She made a "dying declaration" statement, which subsequently sparked the major garda investigation. The woman is still fighting for her life because of the illness.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in gardai being brought before the courts charged with crimes of a sexual nature, in line with a general societal increase in reporting of these crimes and subsequent criminal cases.

Last month, this newspaper revealed that a former garda in the west of Ireland has been charged with sexually assaulting a woman on two occasions at a garda station.

This married officer is also charged with harassing and stalking another woman. He has now been sent forward for trial in the circuit court, having appeared in the district court in January in relation to four charges.

He is charged with two counts of sexual assault on the same woman, which

allegedly took place on two dates in February 2015 at the garda station where he was then based.

He is also charged with harassing and stalking the same woman, as well as another, on dates in 2014, 2015 and 2017.

It is claimed he used coercion and his "position of power" as a member of An Garda Síochána to commit the alleged sexual assaults against the woman. Both alleged victims are foreign nationals.

The officer was previously arrested for questioning in connection with immigration offences.

He was questioned over allegations of taking bribes in return for stamping forms that allowed foreign nationals to stay in Ireland without the correct documentation. He was released without charge the next day.

It was as a consequence of that wide-ranging investigation that the alleged crimes he is now charged with came to light.

New pool given longer to make a splash after Templemore appeal

CIARAN O'NEILL

A council decision to limit the lifespan of a new swimming pool in Belfast has been overturned. Last year, Belfast City Council granted permission for the pool to be built in a vacant unit at Sydenham Business Park.

The facility is to be run by a charity, Templemore Users Forum Ltd (TUFL), which normally provides swimming lessons at Templemore Baths in East Belfast. The charity has been forced to find a new home because the historic baths is undergoing a £17m renovation.

However, as part of the planning permission for the new Sydenham pool, the council placed a three-year limit on how long the facility could operate because the business park was zoned for industrial and commercial use only.

Once the three years were up, the council said, the unit should once again be made available for its original use.

However, TUFL made an appeal which has been granted by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). It is a decision that will help secure the long-term future of the charity which has played a key role in keeping the Templemore Baths open.

The building, which opened in 1893, is the sole surviving Victorian public baths in Ireland and one of the few remaining in the United Kingdom that still delivers its original function.

Many of the landmark building's original features are to be restored, including the swimming pools, slipper baths and caretaker's house.



● Templemore Avenue Baths in East Belfast are undergoing a £17m renovation.

A new extension will provide an additional six-lane 25-metre pool, spa facilities and a fitness suite. Belfast City Council is investing £12m in the project, with the remaining £5m coming from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The extensive renovation work on the building is expected to be completed in 2023.

Before its recent closure to facilitate the work, TUFL would have used the Templemore Baths for up to 100 hours a week.

However, once the facility reopens, the charity said this will be reduced to 42 hours. This was the

reason behind its proposal to open the new pool at Sydenham.

In its original planning application, TUFL said the pool would only be used by members for scheduled swimming sessions and would not be open to the public.

The council approved the application in January 2021 but placed the three-year limit on how long the pool could operate.

"The proposed swimming pool use is not fully policy compliant. However, taking all the specific matters of this proposal into consideration it is considered, on balance, that the principle of the proposed swimming pool use is acceptable at this location for a temporary period only," a report by the council's planning department stated.

"A temporary approval will ensure the future protection of the land use for industry and commerce whilst providing temporary accommodation until the Templemore Baths are refurbished and the trust can relocate back to their original home premises."

The council said the Sydenham pool would be allowed to operate for three years from the date of the granting of the planning permission or within six weeks of the completion of works at Templemore Baths, whichever was the earlier.

However, TUFL appealed this requirement to the PAC. A Belfast City Council spokesperson said it would consider the contents of the PAC decision in "due course".

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