

Mr Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

8 December 2021

Dear Minister,

I'm writing to follow up on the [Recruitment and Employment Confederation](#) (REC)'s letter of 9 November to the Business Services Organisation (BSO), copy attached for your reference. In our previous correspondence, the REC raised a number of concerns, including in relation to the Covid-19 Special Recognition Payment (SRP) for Agency Workers. I am writing today to request an urgent meeting to discuss the SRP, and the instruction sent to many of our members, in more detail.

We are very grateful to your department for their work in securing such payment for the agency workforce. This is a big step in the right direction, and Northern Ireland is leading by example in including agency workers in the SRP. However, the current terms and conditions, as set out by the Department of Health (DH), have a number of partial and limited clauses that actually exclude the vast majority of deserving agency workers from the scheme. In addition, the timeframe for agencies to submit a claim is incredibly limited.

The first issue with the current scheme is the criteria of "qualifying workers" which, as it stands, only recognises a small portion of the agency workforce, excluding staff who worked unsociable hours, ad hoc shifts, and anyone who did not work with one 'host organisation' for a continuous 12-week period. For example, there are people who worked in one hospital but across different wards in a 12-week period. This group of workers don't qualify for the bonus under the current scheme. The very nature of agency work, particularly within the health service, at a time of significant challenge means that the majority of agency staff fall into these categories. These frontline medical professionals worked tirelessly in the fight against Covid-19 over the last 20 months, risking their own lives while saving others. They thoroughly deserve the SRP and should be recognised for their immense contribution throughout the pandemic.

Furthermore, the current terms and conditions of the scheme is not in keeping with a series of communications made to date by DH and Health Social Care (HSC) which repeatedly indicated that the scheme would be inclusive and comprehensive. As a result, many of the people who, rightly, expected to receive the bonus have been left feeling incredibly disappointed and agencies have been left to deliver the news. As you know, the value of the agency workforce, especially in the last 20 months, has been indispensable. **We urge your department to extend the scope of the SRP to include all critical workers, substantive or agency**, including those who worked ad hoc shifts, across multiple host organisations and unsociable hours.

The second issue is that the current scheme puts agencies at a significant disadvantage, having to carry out the arduous eligibility tasks and checks in very little time, and putting them at critical financial risk. Under the current terms, agencies are responsible for identifying the "qualifying workers" based on the criteria set by DH. Having had a look at the criteria and accompanying forms, this will be a lengthy process, which will require significant administrative time. Many medical recruitment businesses are small or medium-size organisations with limited resources

and the current timeframe is simply too short. In addition, the instructions state that agencies are to award the bonus to workers, prior to DH examining and granting at least a portion of the bonus to agencies – not to mention the reimbursable administrative fee to DH. These businesses simply do not reserve this level of cash exposure, particularly at this point in the year. Surely it is reasonable for DH to inspect the forms that agencies provide *before* any worker receives payment from any party. **As such, we urge you to closely review the clauses for SRP and produce fair guidance for agencies and agency workers so qualifying workers receive the payment *after* department checks are carried out.**

Lastly, agencies currently have until 31 December 2021 to process the documents. Taking into account the amount of administrative work this requires, and with holidays over the festive period, this does not appear a realistic deadline. **Therefore, we write to request an extension.** Without a deadline extension, it is likely that even the small proportion of qualifying workers will not receive the bonus.

We look forward to receiving your swift response. If you would like to arrange a meeting or call with our organisation to discuss these matters in more detail, Natalie (Natalie.wright@rec.uk.com) in my office will be happy to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time.

Yours sincerely,



Kate Shoesmith
Deputy Chief Executive

Cc: Sharon Gallagher, Chief Executive, HSC Board
Peter Wilson, Interim Director of Operations, BSO