Working for the Agency

The Role and Significance of
Temporary Employment Agencies in the
Adult Social Care Workforce

Final Report

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Executive Summary

I: Introduction

Commissioned as part of the Department of Health's 'Social Care Workforce Research Initiative', this report describes the role and significance of temporary employment agencies in the adult social care workforce in England; assessing what progress is being made toward achieving the policy goal that by 2020 social care employers will no longer need to rely on temporary agency staff to cover tasks that would be normally carried out by a permanent social worker (DfES/DH 2006).

The research draws together evidence from a variety of sources including: a survey of local councils in England with adult social services responsibilities (n=151); case studies of progress in three localities; qualitative interviews [with social care managers responsible for procuring agency staff (n=18), recruitment consultants and employment agency managers (n=15); and agency workers, both qualified (n=45) and unqualified (n= 15)]. Service users and carers were involved in the study by means of two 'expert seminars' (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005).

2: What measures are being introduced to reduce over reliance on agency workers?

A key finding of this study is that very few participants had heard of 'Options for Excellence' and this was clearly not the main driver behind changes to practices in the procurement and management of agency staff. The key driver was the need to make efficiency saving across the local council and recognition that contingency working was one area where such savings could be achieved. Eighty per cent of respondents in the survey reported that their department had implemented strategies to reduce the use of agency workers. Those who had not, thought such measures unnecessary because expenditure on agency working in their authority was minimal. The establishment of staff banks and managed vendor schemes were seen as

making up the most important components of their strategy. Managed vendor schemes had been introduced by nearly three quarters of respondents and staff banks by well over a quarter. It was suggested by social services managers in the interviews that staff banks are often subject to the same challenges as mainstream recruitment and retention with the consequence that they do not always provide a complete solution to managing staff shortages.

As touched upon above, the high number of councils implementing vendor management reflects that in most instances, reducing the costs associated with agency working rather than the use of agency workers per se has been the main driving force behind much of the activity targeted on agency working. In both the survey and the case study sites, examples of other means of reducing over reliance on agency workers were rare but included: the establishment of dedicated peripatetic or 'relief' teams whose members went wherever they were needed; asking staff to take on extra duties; plans to reduce sickness rates; and the introduction of flexible working arrangements in the form of zero hours contracts.

3: The impact of vendor management

A managed vendor service acts as an interface or broker between the local council and employment businesses. There is good evidence that such schemes can deliver efficiency savings to local councils (IDeA, 2005/6). In our survey, almost 60 per cent of respondents reported that their expenditure on agency working in 2008-2009 was either less or the same as their expenditure in 2007-2008. Among those who had spent more in 2008-2009, an important reason for increased expenditure on agency workers was if the authority had been involved in re-provisioning services. However, in the context of the continued (Hall and Wilton 2009) and anticipated pressures (Bundred 2009) on local authority expenditure, almost two thirds of respondents anticipated that they would be spending less on agency workers in 2009-10 and nearly a third thought that it would be the same. Only one respondent thought it would increase.

Employment business managers argue that vendor management has reduced margins to such an extent that key quality components of their service are under threat (such as the ability to meet the demand for more and more safeguarding checks and to provide good support to social workers while out on placement). Employment business managers also felt that their professional skills and expertise in addressing recruitment and retention issues are generally undervalued by local councils and that they are rarely included in workforce planning or treated fairly as 'ethical businesses:'

> 'I know local authorities that are struggling to fill their permanent roles and I have got the perfect candidates. However, the local authority policy is that they can't use agencies for permanent recruitment. When they can't fill a post they just keep spending another £20,000 on putting an ad out. It doesn't make any sense... I wish they were keener for partnership working with us rather than being so against us.' (Recruitment Consultant)

4: What is over reliance on agency workers?

In the literature, agency working is often viewed as posing risks to service users (Carey, 2008). However, most of the social services managers we interviewed saw agency working as playing an important role in 'keeping the show on the road'. They described how because of the cost implication all other options for managing staff shortages would need to be exhausted before contacting an agency. Once on placement, good agency social workers were thought to be able to get through high volumes of work and could refresh teams by bringing in new skills and insights from other areas. Agency workers themselves point to the many advantages agency working can bring, not just in terms of flexibility but also in opportunities for broadening their practice experiences. This was especially the case for newly qualified social workers, who were often using agency work to give them the experience and insight they needed to find and secure the right permanent job.

An interesting finding of our study is that, while staff shortages continue to be the main reason for using agency workers, agency social workers are

increasingly being brought in to manage specific projects or pieces of work (for example, to tackle a waiting list) rather than just to fill a vacancy or provide cover in an unspecified way.

> 'The way we use agencies in this local authority is very well planned…
> I have never had to suddenly say we are short we need to get a locum
> in.' (General Manager Adult Social Care)

Where agency working was viewed less positively was in situations where a particular team or department had become unbalanced with more agency workers than permanent staff. Such circumstances were thought to be symptomatic of underlying organisational issues (such as on-going restructuring process or a lengthy recruitment freeze) which had caused too many permanent staff to leave and then not to be replaced.

> 'Many teams which rely on agency staff are dysfunctional. They are
> characterised by poor management practices. In these teams, many
> permanent staff are 'burnt out' and the overall culture or working
> environment is poor.' (Social Worker)

Significantly, it was this imbalance (rather than agency working per se) which was perceived to threaten continuity of service and to put service users at risk. Such situations were dangerous because of the potential for a high turnover of agency workers who could leave at much shorter notice than their permanent counterparts:

> 'I had one particular assignment where I actually only did a few days
> [and left]. Unfortunately it was in Children and Families… It was very
> much here is your case load - an extensive case load - get on with it. I
> didn't like the practice. I felt very unsafe...' (Agency Social Worker)

A significant safeguarding issue to emerge in the study is the practice whereby agency social workers are given complex case loads (usually those no one else in the team wants to deal with) and then routinely denied access to the same level of induction, training and supervision as permanent colleagues. This is justified on the grounds that they are "agency". For newly qualified social workers the lack of induction is also a significant issue. The expectation is that they would be able to "hit the ground running" in the same

way as their more experienced agency colleagues. Overall, we would conclude that it is the poor management of agency workers rather than agency working itself which poses a risk to service users.

5: What is under reliance on agency workers?

In relation to agency working in the care sector, a slightly different set of issues emerge. For statutory services decisions about when to use agency staff are often based around safeguarding issues and the point at which service users and carers may be put at risk if a staff shortage is not filled by the use of an agency worker.

> 'If you need to get [a service user] out of bed then you need someone there immediately. Whereas the services I provide don't necessarily need that immediate response so we are able to manage [staff] absences more easily than perhaps the other services who will need to use agency workers'. (General Manager Adult Social Work Team)

However, the same principle is not consistently applied across the private care sector, where the overriding consideration is often cost control, meaning that in some organisations agency workers are not used even when staff shortages have become acute.

It is also the case that, in some geographical areas, there are no employment agencies which can supply the care sector. For social care commissioners, this suggests that asking questions about the management of staff shortages is a key safeguarding quality indicator as is ensuring contracts with care providers are adequately financed to ensure appropriate staffing. Having an understanding of what provision is available in the employment business sector locally and having a partnership relationship with professionals therein would also seem to be an important but often neglected component of workforce planning.

6: What can we learn from agency workers about recruitment and retention?

Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) suggest that local councils are no longer the attractive employers of choice and that agency working represents an escape from the deteriorating conditions of employment therein. Certainly, the accounts of the agency social workers we interviewed convey a very strong message about the need to improve pay and conditions in the sector as a means of retaining staff and reducing over reliance on agency workers:

> 'I support the idea that social services should use less agency staff but I think if you don't look after your own staff in terms of conditions and money then you will need them.' (Agency Social Worker)

However, with the exception of those approaching retirement, most of the agency social workers we interviewed did not see agency working as a long term career option and most did want to return to permanent employment within a local council. Significantly, what often translated the intention to go back into permanent employment into an actual decision to so what was the perception of having found the right team:

> 'I have worked in some great teams and I have worked in some dreadful teams… I have had some good managers, some very good managers and some absolute stinkers. I fell on my feet here finding a good team and a very good supportive manager and the opportunity came up for permanent post and I went for it.' (Agency Social Worker)

When discussing recruitment and retention, the accounts of agency social workers are littered with references to (usually poor) management, not being listened to and 'office politics'. More so than pay, case load (or deteriorating conditions per se) it is these relational or 'emotional loyalty' issues that are most often pinpointed as the main reason why people seek to re-position themselves within the sector: to leave permanent employment and go agency; to swap agency placement; or to stick with a placement and go permanent. In terms of the implications for workforce development, these findings suggest that much more might be done under the banner of team building, leadership and management development. Research shows that these issues are currently overlooked in most recruitment and retention

strategies in favour of financial incentives (Barstow, 2009). While 'golden hellos' may appeal to 'gold collar workers' our study suggests that most agency workers do not to see themselves in these terms:

> 'I am going now to work in a permanent position in a relatively poorly paid London borough but I like the job and the people and the managers; they are a great bunch of people; they are a bit of an old fashioned social work team but they do understand twenty first century social work, the post will be right for me, I know it.' (Agency Social Worker)

7: Conclusion

While there is clearly widespread commitment to tackling the issue of agency working at a strategic level, poor workforce intelligence (Morgan, Holt and Williams, 2007, Evans and Huxley, 2009) means that it is not yet possible to gauge the effectiveness of the measures described above. We will need to wait for the next National Minimum Data Set (NMDS-SC) for conclusive evidence of any downward trend in the numbers of social care staff employed in the bank, pool and agency sector (currently standing at 5.6%).

While the survey responses indicate that good progress is made at the level of delivering efficiency savings, there are however, questions as to whether this is linked to genuine progress at the level of tacking the underlying recruitment and retention crises or simply the outcome of treating agency workers as a 'variable cost'.

> '[Local councils] tend to go round in cycles, so they will put a recruitment freeze on locums, saying that they are only going to recruit permanent members of staff through their own campaigns… It's really strict and then six months later they realise that people have left or that they haven't been able to recruit and then go back to using agency staff again.' (Recruitment Consultant)

It is the prediction of the industry body, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2009) that reliance on agency working in nursing and social care is likely to increase if recruitment to the sector remains challenging. Our

findings suggests that so long as procurement is not driven solely by the logic of cost minimisation and that there is good strategic and operational management of agency workers in the workplace then this need not necessarily be viewed negatively.

Key Policy Recommendations

- In terms of developing future policy guidance on agency working, the employment business sector should be recognised as a potential partner (perhaps through representation from ASWEB).

- Agency workers should be recognised as an important component of the social care workforce. Guidance on managing agency workers in the light of the current legal situation is needed to clarify what constitutes good practice with respect to standards for induction, training and supervision.

- More research and development work is needed to explore different methods of managing staff shortages.

- The views of agency workers support other research findings on recruitment and retention. Namely that to tempt agency workers back into permanent employment, good management practice is key especially as regard supervision, appraisal, flexibility, career progression, training and qualifications and team building.

1: Introduction

1:1 Overview

There is concern that councils across the UK are increasingly reliant on agency staff to meet the growing shortages of social workers. It is argued that this is an inefficient way of operating which is costly, time consuming and likely to throw up problems of continuity, communications and consistency for service users and carers (Batty, 2009). In 2006, 'Options for Excellence – Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future' (DfES/DH 2006) set out an ambitious programme to reduce over reliance on temporary agency staff. By 2020 it is expected that social care employers will no longer need to rely on temporary staff to cover tasks that would be normally carried out by a permanent social worker. Since then, although neither the government's adult social care workforce (DH, 2009) nor the children's workforce (HM Treasury, 2007) strategies specifically focus on targets in reducing agency working, both highlight the importance of improving retention, indicating that policy is still aimed at finding longer term strategies for building the social care workforce. The overall aim of this study is to assess what progress is being made toward achieving the policy goal of reduction of agency use in adult social care in England. The study commenced in July 2007 and was completed in July 2009. It is one of three projects on recruitment and retention commissioned by the Department of Health as part of the Social Care Workforce Research Initiative.[1]

The aims of the study are:

- To explore how local councils with adult social services responsibilities are implementing 'Options for Excellence' and what if any, impact this is having on the day to day procurement and management of agency staff.

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[1] See http://www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/sspp/interdisciplinary/scwru/researcc/

- To assess the impact of 'Options for Excellence' on the employment businesses sector and what, if any, role the sector is likely to play in the social care workforce of the future.

- To gain a better understanding of the motivations, work histories, and future employment plans of staff choosing to work in the agency sector. This includes: newly qualified social workers, social workers, occupational therapists and unqualified social care workers.

Within social care, the term 'agency' is often used in ways that do not distinguish between employment agencies and recruitment businesses concerned with the provision of staff (on either a temporary or a permanent basis) and service providers contracted to provide services on behalf of the council. It should be noted that service provider agencies are **not** the focus of this study. This study is concerned with the provision of staff and not the provision of services.

In the remainder of this section we outline the study methodology, discuss the policy background and review what is already known about agency working in social care. In Chapter 2, we 'drill down' to describe what progress is being made to implement 'Options for Excellence' across three case study sites; exploring some of the different strategic arrangements and operational management practices that have evolved in response to the push to reduce the over reliance on agency staff. The case study findings are then contextualised by means of a survey of all local councils in England (with adult social services responsibilities) exploring: (i) reasons for using agency workers; (ii) methods of procurement; (iii) current and previous expenditure on agency workers. In Chapter 3, we explore the impact of 'Options for Excellence' on the social care employment business sector, questioning what, if any, role the sector is likely to play in the social care workforce of the future. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, we explore what motivates different groups of social care workers to work for temporary employment agencies, their career histories and what, if anything, might tempt them back into permanent employment. Finally, we draw some overall conclusions about the early implementation of 'Options for Excellence', and suggest where future policy on agency working might be most usefully targeted.

1:2 Methodology and data analysis

The research strategy was designed to ascertain a comprehensive picture of agency working (both qualitative and quantitative); exploring the impact of 'Options for Excellence' from the perspective of three different stakeholder groups: social care managers; agency managers/recruitment consultants; and agency workers. Ethical approval for the study was secured from King's College London Research Ethics Committee and approval for the survey was secured via the Association of Adult Directors of Social Services (ADASS).

The research comprised three distinct phases. In Phase 1 we undertook case studies on progress to implement 'Options for Excellence' across three local council sites (including interviews with managers working in social care). In Phase 2, we carried out in-depth qualitative interviews with agency managers and agency workers. In Phase 3, we surveyed all local councils in England on their use of agency workers. The interview schedules and survey were devised based upon themes identified in the existing research literature on agency working (for example, Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006; Carey, 2007) and on what service user and carers want from social care workers (Beresford *et al.*, 2005; Davis and Littlechild, 2008; Glynn *et al.*, 2008), policy documents on the social care workforce (Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Department of Health, 2009) and publications by employers (Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2006; Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government, 2007; Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2007; REC Industry Research Unit, 2009).

When the study began there was very little intelligence available on the employment business sector. The preparatory stage of the study involved a literature review (see Appendix 1 for search strategy) and then a mapping exercise in order to estimate in so far as possible the number and type of employment businesses providing staff to the social care sector in England. The mapping exercise was underpinned by a systematic search strategy (see Appendix 2) and the results were compiled as a database. The database was used to recruit participants to the study and also as a way of monitoring the impact of 'Options for Excellence' (working on the assumption that over the life time of the project we might expect to see a decline in the number of specialist employment businesses as social care managers reduced their

over reliance on agency staff). However, the database was rendered largely redundant as towards the end of the research, the industry body, the 'Recruitment and Employment Confederation' (REC) (www.rec.org.uk) commissioned its own research to produce the first ever 'sector profile' for agency working in nursing and social care (REC, 2009). This provides for a more robust and reliable picture of the state of the sector, confirming the general direction of travel indicated by our own database findings.

In Phase One of the research we carried out a short piece of fieldwork in three case study sites to describe the progress that was being made by local councils to implement 'Options for Excellence'. Fieldwork in the case study sites included documentary analysis of local strategic documents (e.g. workforce development strategies) and in-depth interviews with eighteen managers (minimum five interviews per site) working in a diverse range of strategic and operational roles in adult social services and the independent and voluntary sectors (see Appendix 3 for participant profile and Appendix 4 for topic guide). Some of the managers we interviewed were themselves agency workers. The three case study sites involved in this exercise were selected principally for convenience as a means of making the most of some 'good contacts' within the local councils. This conferred a level of access that might not have otherwise been possible. The fact that a survey of local councils was also planned eased concerns about the need for the case study sites to be representative of a wide range of different issues. However, the three areas selected were geographically diverse, representing an urban [outer London] council area (Site 1), a metropolitan council area (Site 2) and a rural council area (Site 3). More information about agency use in the sites is given later in the study. Because agency working can attract adverse publicity, the local councils and participants therein were given assurances that they would remain anonymous within the report.

To explore how the employment business sector was responding to the likely challenges posed by 'Options for Excellence', Phase Two of the research involved in-depth face to face interviews with fifteen recruitment consultants and employment business/agency managers (see Appendix 5 for participant profile and Appendix 6 for topic guide). The agencies were approached opportunistically, exploiting known contacts where they existed, and included both small local operators and some of the larger national chains. Some

agencies were specialist providers of qualified social workers and some were providers of all kinds of staff which included social care workers. One of the researchers also met with the Association of Social Work Employment Businesses (ASWEB) to explore if the qualitative information generated in the interviews was broadly representative of the wider industry viewpoint.

Phase Two also included in-depth qualitative interviews with sixty agency workers. We interviewed: thirty qualified social workers; ten recently qualified social workers (who had graduated in the last two years); fifteen unqualified social care workers; and five occupational therapists (See Appendix 7 for topic guide and Appendix 8a/8b for participant profile). A postgraduate student worked as part of our research team and, for the purposes of a dissertation, explored if agency working held any special appeal for those social workers engaged in the higher risk occupations such as approved mental health social work. To allow for this comparison, the sample of thirty qualified agency social workers was sub-divided equally between those who were 'Approved Mental Health Social Workers' (ASWs) and those who were ordinarily qualified working across the full range of adult care specialisms (learning disabilities, older people and so on).

Because of difficulties encountered in locating occupational therapists and recently qualified social workers we were not able to meet our target of seventy-five interviews. Recruiting agency workers was one of the most challenging aspects of the study. This was despite offering a £10 voucher and a certificate which could be used as evidence of continuing professional development (CPD). According to the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) agency workers are a 'hard to reach audience' for research purposes, mainly due to their mobility (REC, 2008).

We first tried to recruit agency workers working in the three case study sites via the social care managers we interviewed. This yielded a good response in two of the sites, but only one agency worker agreed to be interviewed in the site where agency use was relatively low. When we had exhausted the supply of agency workers linked to the sites, we then contacted the agency managers we had interviewed in stage two and asked them to forward information on our behalf. The response was variable between agencies. In particular, occupational therapists seemed not to be registered in any great

numbers with many of the agencies we were in direct contact with, which in turn seemed to make their recruitment to the study doubly hard.

In order to recruit recently qualified social workers who had become agency workers, we wrote to all students graduating in social work (in 2008) from the local university in Site 3. This yielded very few responses (1 interview out of 35 contacts) so we did not repeat the exercise in the other two sites.

Finally, we emailed all 132 agencies registered on our database (those holding REC membership) and asked them to pass on information about the study to their agency workers. Again this yielded very few responses though the small number of agencies that did respond did offer us considerable help.

In retrospect, it seemed that the most effective method of recruiting agency workers was 'snow balling' whereby one agency worker offered to introduce us to his or her colleagues. While there are methodological limitations to this approach in that participants obtained through this method may show more similarities to each other than exist in the wider population, this technique is widely recognised as a legitimate and effective way of reaching hard to reach groups (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Becker and Bryman 2004). Overall, the final sample does cover a broad range of agency workers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and area of specialism but this was achieved more by chance than design given the difficulties we experienced in recruiting sufficient numbers (see Appendix 8a and 8b for participant profile).

The interviews with agency workers explored the participants' employment history, receipt of education and training, motivations for working for agencies, satisfactions/dissatisfactions with their employment and future career plans (see Appendix 7 for interview schedule).

In the final stage of the research, carried out in June 2009, a postal survey (see Appendix 9 for the survey questionnaire) on the use of agency staff was sent to directors of adult social services in England (n=151) identified through the membership list published on the website of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services. This resulted in 33 responses. A further 23 replies were received after an email reminder, resulting in an overall response rate of 37 per cent. At least three returns were received across each of the nine Government Office Regions (GOR) and returns were received from county

councils, metropolitan boroughs, and unitary authorities. It was considered that it would not be effective to issue any further reminders as our survey coincided with a consultation on shortages of social workers in adult services (Barstow, 2009 unpublished) being undertaken by Skills for Care. The small number of authorities for whom we received a return means that the findings from the survey cannot be viewed as generalisable but they offer an indicative and current picture on the use of agency workers in adult services.

Numerical data from the survey was analysed using SPSS version 16 using a combination of bivariate and non parametric statistics. More sophisticated methods of data analysis were not suitable, given that almost all the variables were at the nominal and ordinal level and were not normally distributed. Open ended questions were analysed thematically in order to identify the overarching themes and the frequency of each type of comment.

The interview transcripts were also analysed thematically in three stages in which descriptive coding was followed by interpretative coding in order to identify the overarching themes (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003; King and Horrocks, 2010). This process was also guided by existing published research which were used to identify potential explanatory factors. For example, Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984, 1991) was useful in distinguishing between structural influences on agency working – for example, wage levels in the local economy and individual agency, for example, seeking more flexible hours or working than those available in standard permanent employment contracts. Other influential theories were those of the 'hiring queue' (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003) and the interaction of employers' ethnic preferences with the over-representation of people from minority ethnic groups in the temporary or contingent labour market (Conley, 2002; Conley, 2003) and the good jobs/bad jobs (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) theories about dual labour markets in which jobs with benefits such as pension rights, holiday entitlements career progression are contrasted with those in which these are not available.

The views of service users and carers on agency working and the importance of continuity of care are well known and are key drivers behind the policy directives encompassed in 'Options for Excellence' (DH, 2006). For this reason, the Department of Health did not commission us to gather further

data on this topic. Instead service users and carers were involved by means of two 'expert seminars' (Arksey and O'Malley's 2005). One was held mid way through the study to discuss interim findings and another one was held at the end of the study to discuss a draft of the final report. Fourteen service user and carers were invited to the seminars (drawn from the Social Care Workforce Research Unit's Service User and Carer Advisory Group) representing a wide range of different interests (older people, disabled people, people with mental health problems and carers). The format of the event was a presentation of the findings followed by discussion. The seminar participants (many of whom are well known campaigners and champions of the service user movement) recognised that workforce planning was not a policy arena that they were familiar with or had previous experience of being involved in (in the same way for example, that some of the participants had been very involved in working groups linked to the implementation of the National Service Framework for Older People).[2] The main outcome of the seminars was therefore more in keeping with 'capacity building' in the sense of providing service users and carers with new information and insights which they could then take back to there own networks to find out what was (and what should be) happening in this hitherto *'invisible area'.*

1:3 Policy background

In July 2005, the Government announced a review of the social care workforce in England to be led jointly by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health. The 'Options for Excellence' review (DfES/DH 2006) was established with three key aims: first to feed into the implementation of the children's workforce strategy and the white paper 'Our health, our care, our say'; secondly to produce an analysis of the economic and social case for investment in the social care workforces; and thirdly to set out a vision for the social care workforce to 2020. In particular the review was asked to bring forward recommendations in order to increase the supply of all workers within the sector, such as domiciliary care workers, residential care

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[2] For a discussion of service user involvement in strategic planning see Cornes et al. (2008).

workers, social workers and occupational therapists, and to look at measures to tackle recruitment and retention issues. According to Norris (2007) one of the biggest challenges facing social care commissioners is whether services can recruit and retain quality staff that stay long enough to provide consistent care to service users. By 2020 it is expected that employers will no longer need to rely on temporary agency staff to cover tasks that would be normally carried out by a permanent social worker.

Key to achieving the policy goal of reducing over reliance on temporary staff supplied through private employment agencies is the implementation of measures to improve recruitment and the retention of staff in permanent employment. 'Options for Excellence' outlined a number of key strategies. This includes: publicity campaigns to raise awareness of the work that the sector does and to improve its image; research into the links between rewards offered in the sector, addressing recruitment and retention difficulties; enhancing the role of support staff and promoting ethical international recruitment (the subject of another research project in the Social Care Workforce Research Initiative). It also acknowledged the need to promote a professional approach to improve continuity of care, enabling one person to co-ordinate the delivery of multiple services, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of the social work role by giving individual workers more autonomy (DfES/DH 2006 p46).

'Options for Excellence' promoted social enterprise and encouraged local commissioners to support the development of local and regional 'not for profit' employment agencies alongside more traditional staff banks and pools. A well cited example is the Brighton Care Crew. This is a relief pool of care workers who operate right across the Brighton and Hove locality in much the same way as an agency but at a much reduced hourly cost (IDeA, 2005/6, DfES/DH, 2006).

The first interim report on the implementation of 'Options for Excellence' (DH, 2008) suggests that some early progress has been made with recruitment and retention but that significant challenges remain. For example, it was reported that in 2007 there had been no increase in the number of students applying to the new social work degree courses as compared to the previous year. As regards the national social care recruitment advertising campaign of

2008, another Department of Health (2006) report suggests that an earlier £1.5 million campaign may not have been effective in attracting new workers into domiciliary care. In the interim report (DH, 2008) there is no mention of what progress is being made to reduce overreliance on temporary agency staff.

In 2009, a new workforce strategy was launched for the adult social care workforce in England. 'Working to Put People First' (DH, 2009) takes forward a number of key themes around: leadership; recruitment and retention; workforce remodelling and commissioning; workforce development; joint and integrated working; and regulation. There is a particular focus on the implications of personalisation and the development of career pathways for 'Personal Assistants'. A new £75 million scheme, called Care First, is also announced; it will offer 50,000 traineeships in social care for young people who have been out of work for twelve months. In terms of implementation, the strategy outlines plans to develop an Adult Social Care Workforce Compact – a new agreement and agreed way of working between the Department of Health and its main social care workforce partners, setting out the contribution that each will make to the co-production of 'Putting People First.' 'Working to Put People First' makes no mention of agency working beyond acknowledgement that 6% of the total social care workforce comprises 'agency and non-directly employed staff'. As shown in Figure 1 below, employment businesses are not currently included on the Department of Health's organisational map of the social care system as it relates to the social care workforce and it is unclear if and how they will be represented in the new compact arrangements.

The other key policy development that took place during the life of this project was the establishment of the Social Work Task Force with a remit to undertake 'a nuts and bolts review of frontline social work practice and make recommendations for immediate improvements to practice and training as well as long-term change in social work' (Hansard, 2009) in the light of continuing concerns about social work recruitment and retention and widespread disquiet about politicians, the media, and the general public about whether the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P') could have been preventable. The Task Force produced three reports during its year-long enquiry (Social Work Task Force, 2009b, 2009c, 2009a), focusing on aspects

Figure One: Map of the Social Care System as it Relates to the Social Care Workforce in England
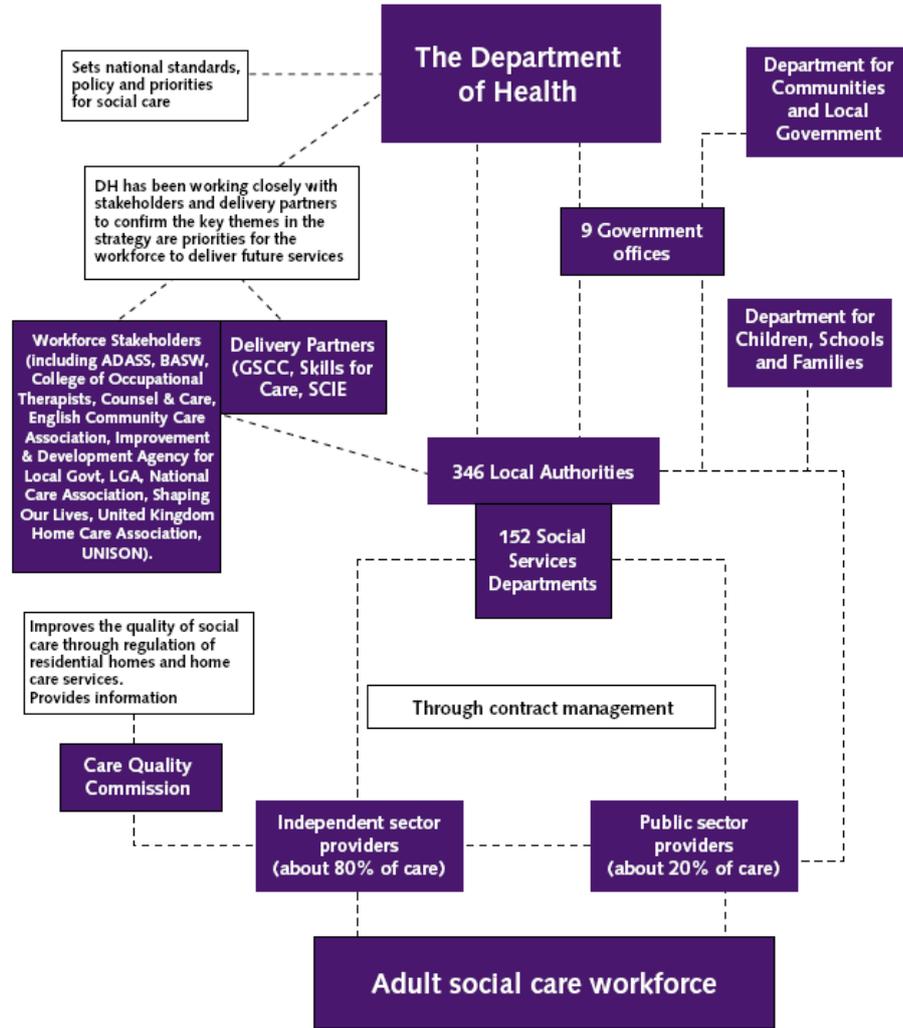
Source: Department of Health 2009

such as the quantity and quality of applicants for places on social work qualifying programmes social work, recruitment and retention, and social workers' workloads. Of the 15 recommendations produced for the final report (Social Work Task Force, 2009a), the two that probably have the greatest implications for the use of agency workers are recommendation 14, a new system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social work, aimed at reducing fluctuations in the numbers of social workers in the workforce, and recommendation 10, the creation of a single, nationally recognised career structure for social work, which in theory might reduce the number of social workers choosing agency work as a way of increasing their income in local authority Children's and Adult's departments where there are few opportunities for career progression. Work undertaken for the Task Force (Baginsky *et al.*, 2010) confirmed the picture presented in this report that Children's Services make greater use of agency social workers but that it can be an important area of expenditure in some Adult Services departments.

Responding to the Task Force, the previous government (HM Government, 2010) established a Social Work Reform Board to take forward the work of the Task Force in a cross government way. At the time of writing, the Reform Board has yet to report to the coalition government. It is thought that the Reform Board will work alongside (Garboden, 2010) the separate Munro review of children's social work and child protection services (Department for Education, 2010) due to report in April 2011.

1:4 Agency working in the NHS

There is a more established tradition of using bank and agency workers in the NHS than in social care and it is worth briefly summarising parallel policy developments because of the close relationship between 'nursing and care' (the two are often amalgamated in the organisation of the employment business sector). Because of concerns about cost and patient safety (see, for example, Purcell et al., 2004) a number of initiatives have been introduced over the years to reduce over reliance on temporary staff. The most well known of these is 'NHS Professionals', a national staff bank which was established as an alternative to commercial employment businesses.

However, according to Unwin's (2009) review of developments in the sector, this remains a costly and unproven initiative. Furthermore, a House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Report (2007) has revealed a continuing lack of success in the management of agency and bank nursing, finding that the amount of money spent on temporary nursing staff has declined slowly despite an increase in the numbers of permanent staff. According to a recent news report in the Health Service Journal (Santry, 2009), Trusts are once again being urged to control agency staffing costs as figures reveal the first rise in long term NHS vacancies for five years. Local targets have been set at around 3% for agency expenditure with some Trusts now reporting increased expenditure at 11%.

1:5 Statistics on agency working in social care

Recruitment and retention are the focus of another study in the 'Social Care Workforce Research Initiative'. Suffice it to say here that the National Minimum Data Set for Social Care [NMDS –SC] reports vacancy and turnover rates for staff in adult social care in England at 8.4% [1 in 12 posts vacant]. This is double the rate for all other types of industrial, commercial and public employment (Eborall and Griffiths, 2008).

In April 2009, 151 Directors of Adults Social Services in England were surveyed by Skills for Care, ADASS and the Department of Health on a range of issues relating to the shortages of social workers in adult social care (Barstow, 2009). This survey puts current vacancy rates at less than 10% and identifies specific vacancy problems in the area of mental health (mentioned by almost 1 in 10 councils) and finding experienced staff (mentioned by 1 in 5 councils). Turnover rates were not felt to be an issue by the majority of councils, with a small number of councils experiencing a high level of turnover. It is noted that there may be a north/south divide when it comes to turnover rates, with Northern councils experiencing more stability in the workforce (based on a small number of responses).

In the private sector, staff shortages are often dealt with by the use of paid or unpaid overtime (Hall & Wreford, 2007). However, few social services departments condone the use of overtime and most make use of agency staff

to cover staff shortages instead (Barstow 2009, Morgan, Holt and Williams, 2007). However, capturing accurate information about the use of agency staff in social care poses data collection problems for local councils (Morgan, Holt and Williams, 2007, Evans and Huxley, 2009). According to Barstow (2009), the heaviest users of agency or temporary staff (i.e. councils using more than 10 temporary or agency staff, or with a significant proportion of staff employed on a non permanent basis) are either in London or near London. The council with the highest rate of agency use in this survey was an outer London Borough where agency staff constituted 22% of the total adults' social work team (which had 65 staff in total). UNISON recently suggested that in one small London borough the figure was as high as 42% (Batty, 2009).

The 'Respect and Protect' report published by the Local Government Association (2009) highlights that, more so than in adults' services, agency staff comprise a significant proportion of the children's social work workforce, especially in London where they account for 1 in 5 workers. This reflects that recruitment and retention of children's social workers are shown to be more challenging than for any other job within the local authority workforce, bar none.

The third Skills for Care report undertaken by Eborall and Griffiths (2008) is important because it establishes a baseline figure for future monitoring of agency use in social care. In the last report, of an estimated 1.39 million people in paid employment in adult social care in England, in 2006-7, 78,000 (5.6%) were bank, pool and agency staff. At September 2006, local councils employed 217,000 social services staff (excluding those working in areas specifically for children and families). Of these, 11,200 (5.2%) were agency staff working mainly (as care workers) in residential care and (social workers) in field social work. Earlier figures from the Employers' Organisation Social Care Workforce Report (2004) suggest that in 2003, 2% of the total local authority workforce were long term agency workers. In 2004 the figure was 3.3%. Analysis of the GSCC's social care register at March 2007 suggests that of the 76,300 registered social workers, 6% were employed by agencies (Eborall and Griffiths, 2008).

In the independent sector, of 584,000 workers, 33,000 (5.7%) were bank and pool staff and 10,000 (1.7%) were agency workers. Recruitment and retention problems are known to be particularly acute in the domiciliary care sector (Eborall and Griffiths, 2008).

In terms of expenditure, between April to September 2001, local authority social service departments in England spent £74 million on long-term agency costs. For the same period in 2004, the figure rose to £151 million (LAWSG, 2005). A recent estimate by one local council in England calculated that it costs £14,400 a year more to employ an agency worker rather than a permanent social worker (based on figures for a newly qualified worker) (Sefton Council, 2008). According to Douglas (2003) fees in London are 'not far short of institutional extortion'.

1:6 The agency workforce

The exact size and composition of the social care agency workforce are difficult to assess (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2008). In the UK, the agency workforce is often described as the 'invisible workforce' (London Centre for Excellence, 2007). As noted above, the first tracking survey to focus on agency workers working in the 'Nursing and Social Care Sector' was recently published by the industry body, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2009). This survey of member agencies and their workers reveals that:

- 75% of agency workers working in the 'Nursing and Social Care Sector' are female (as compared to 58% for the temporary workforce as a whole)

- This workforce tends to be older than other sectors, with 30% aged under 34 years (as compared to 45% for the temporary workforce as a whole).

- 74% of 'Nursing and Social Care Agency Sector Workers' are of UK origin (as compared to 83% for the temporary workforce as a whole)

- Of non-UK workers, about half come from Africa, a much higher proportion than other sectors.

- 45% of workers in this sector have been working on a temporary basis for over two years (as compared to 30% for the temporary workforce as a whole).

- 50% of agency workers working in social and personal care say they earn more than as agency staff than they would if they were permanent (as compared to 19% for the temporary workforce as a whole).

In terms of agency social work specifically, Table 1 below presents a demographic profile of qualified social workers registered with one large London agency (a branch of a large national chain).

Table 1: Profile of Agency Social Workers Registered with One London Agency

Ethnicity		Gender		Age	
White British	83	Male	167	18-25:	135
Black British	228	Female	390	26-35:	110
Black African	176			35-45:	198
Asian	13			46+:	114
Other	57				
Time with agency		**Experience**			
Less than 1 year:	67	Newly qualified:	96		
1-2 years:	114	1 year +:	166		
2-3 years:	133	2 years +:	202		
3-4 years:	147	3 years +:	93		
4 years +:	96				

In social care, the agency workforce is very diverse, ranging from experienced professionals providing managerial expertise or consultancy at senior levels to part time or one off workers in care homes or domiciliary settings. Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) estimate that approximately half of all contingency workers in English social services are professionally qualified social workers, the majority being employed in higher profile (higher risk)

services for children and families with the vast majority based in London. More recently, the Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group (2007) found that 33.9% of agency staff in children's social care were field social workers, while in adult social care, 16.4% of agency staff were field social workers.

United States (US) research has highlighted both the ways in which temporary workers differ from 'traditional' employees but also the difficulties in making generalisations about the sector (Cohany, 1996). Information that compares contingent staff with permanent employees is rarely available. As a result, there is an inability to address whether there are issues with gender or race equality on an aggregate level of positions held by agency workers (London Centre for Excellence, 2007). Little is also known about the extent to which agency working contributes to the operation of a dual labour market in social care in which there are strong contrasts between a minority of comparatively well remunerated and highly skilled workers (for example, those providing specialist advice and consultancy) and the majority who are not (Ungerson, 2000). Based on research in two local authorities, Conley (2002, 2003) suggests that workers employed on a temporary basis (either from agencies or on temporary short term contracts) are more likely to be younger, to work part time, and to be of a different ethnicity to their counterparts on permanent contracts. While temporary work provides them with additional choice and flexibility, Conley suggests that this poses a threat to equal opportunities, given that women, people from minority ethnic groups, and people with disabilities are over-represented among people employed on a temporary basis.

1:7 Impact on services

Changes within the labour market and moves from standard full time permanent employment to a plethora of contingent working arrangements have been the subject of much academic interest (Gamwell, 2007). However, there is very limited evidence on the impact of agency working in social care (Unwin, 2009). In exploring the consequences of agency use in social care, Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2008, p. 341) reveal a mixed picture of both the costs and the benefits. On balance for employers, they conclude that both the

direct and indirect costs of agency working in core professional services outweigh the benefits:

> 'On the one hand, agency workers [played] an important role in covering for vacancies and therefore helped to maintain levels of service delivery… Against this however, were some significant costs relating to both rising fee levels and operational concerns… while agency workers helped to relieve the work pressure on permanent staff, our cases reveal how they could also increase it (in the form of additional coaching and supervision) possibly with negative consequences for the morale and stability of the social work team.'

In their study of workforce planning in the West Midlands, Morgan, Holt and Williams (2007) conclude that while temporary agency staff have proved to be a valuable, flexible part of the workforce, concerns have been raised about variable recruitment and monitoring standards, higher costs and the ability of current recruitment and selection procedures to meet European Directive standards for agency work. A *Community Care* news report raised concerns about the failure of some employment agencies to carry out appropriate checks and to pick up inconsistencies in CVs, especially as regards staff recruited from overseas:

> 'The transient nature of agency work means people can move from place to place evading detection' (Gillen, 2007 p.14)

According to Douglas (2003), reliance on agency workers has led not only to increasing costs but also unreliable and poorer services. Carey (2006 p.9) charts the impact for users and carers as follows:

> 'Inevitably, contact with clients and informal carers tended to be both brief and formal for most locum workers… As one worker suggested her contact with clients tended [to comprise] 'one visit, one form' epitomising the generally unfulfilling procedural and 'mechanical relationship.'

In a *Community Care* news item, Unity Sale (2007) reports that the former Commission for Social Care Inspection had begun to monitor how local

councils use agency social workers and the impact this is having on service continuity. The implication is that personnel departments and social services departments more generally, as well as recruitment agencies, will have to place more emphasis on hiring skilled and qualified agency social workers and supervising them.

In their conclusions, Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2008) see agency working as posing a very real threat to the fabric of public service delivery, creating a downward spiral in which permanent employees leave to become agency workers to reap the benefits of agency employment. 'The suggestion here is that once they have emerged the problems could become damagingly self-perpetuating.' (p.342). They view the institutionalisation of agency working into local managers' employment practices as an extremely bleak scenario.

In escaping this scenario, Evans and Huxley (2009) argue that if staffing issues in social work are to be managed effectively in the longer term, *ad hoc* solutions such as agency working need to be replaced by more effective workforce planning, and the introduction of evidence–based initiatives aimed at recruiting, retaining and supporting staff in what is an emotional and pressured role.

1:8 Summary

In this section we outlined the research methodology and provided some background information about what is already known about agency working in social care. The consensus in the literature seems to be that when it comes to agency working, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Government policy has responded by encouraging local councils to reduce over reliance on agency staff, to look at recruitment and retention, and to develop staff banks and not-for-profit alternatives to the use of private employment businesses. While the overall picture is difficult to assess because of poor workforce intelligence, early indications are that some progress is being made toward achieving these goals but that there is still some way to go. As the government is now looking toward the implementation of personalisation the policy focus on workforce seems to have shifted with the consequence that reducing over reliance on agency

working is no longer prioritised in quite the same way. Nevertheless, it remains a topic which frequently captures the media headlines;

> 'An under fire social services department spent nearly £1.5 million on agency staff in just six months… This is equal to £5,500 per agency social worker per month – it should cost about £2,000 for each social worker… [A local councillor] who wanted to see how successful the council's recruitment campaign had been, branded the findings shocking…'

> Local Newspaper Report, 15th April 2009

2: The Procurement and Management of Agency Staff

'It is unlikely that the use of agency staff will ever be eradicated, as they perform an important role… Councils need agency workers'

(Local Government Association spokesperson quoted in Batty, 2009)

2:1 Overview

In this section, we describe what progress is being made by local councils in England to implement 'Options for Excellence' with regard to reducing over reliance on agency staff. In particular, we focus on the strategic arrangements that have been put in place for the procurement and management of agency staff. In relation to the case study sites, we also explore the practices of front line managers and team leaders who have responsibility for managing staff shortages and for managing agency workers on a day to day basis. This information is then contextualised in terms of the findings of a survey of all local councils in England (with adult social services responsibilities) exploring: (i) reasons for using agency workers; (ii) methods of procurement; (iii) current and previous expenditure on agency workers.

2:2 Case study findings

As noted in the previous chapter, the areas selected for the 'drill down' exercise are geographically diverse, representing an urban [outer London] council area (Site 1), a metropolitan council area (Site 2) and a rural council area (Site 3).   On the basis of the figures available from the National Minimum Data Set – Social Care [NMDS-SC] (see Table 2 below), all three councils have comparable rates of agency use that are below the national average (currently around 6%, DH, 2009).

Table 2: Profile of Local Council Case Study Sites (Based on Figures from NMDS-SC Local Authority Area Profile for All Social Care Sectors – Sector Sub-analysis 2006/7)

SITE PROFILE	Vacancy Rate	Staff Turn Over	% Temporary Staff
Site 1: Urban area, part of the outer London conurbation. Number of Bank Staff = 218 Number of Agency Workers = 77 Number of Employment Agencies* with Offices Based in the County Boundary = 8	4.8%	11.2%	4.8%
Site 2: Metropolitan area, south of England. Number of Bank Staff = 31 Number of Agency Workers =46 Number of Employment Agencies* with Offices Based in the County Boundary = 4	2.8%	20.6%	4.8%
Site 3: Rural area, north of England. Number of Bank Staff = 152 Number of Agency Workers = 40 Number of Employment Agencies* with Offices Based in the County Boundary = 0 *NOTE: The local authority adult services did not make return to the NMDS –SC for 2006/2007*	3.4%	16.8%	4.1%

Agencies registered on the Recruitment and Employment Confederation membership database

2:2:1 Strategic management of agency working in three case study sites

'The area of temporary and agency staff is another that can benefit significantly from innovative approaches and new technology. With UK councils spending almost £2bn on such staff, the current economic climate will apply pressure to realise savings.'

(Hampson, 2009)

Very few social services managers interviewed for this study (working at both strategic and operational levels) had heard of 'Options for Excellence' and of the targets set with regard to reducing over reliance on agency workers. While there was much activity across the three case study sites with respect to addressing the recruitment and retention crises more generally, there were no strategic working groups[3] looking specifically at the issue of how to better manage staff shortages with a view to reducing over reliance on agency workers. Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) make a similar observation. They note that in the NHS, attempts to reduce demand for agency workers has focused on internalising flexibility through the greater use of in-house nurse banks or teams of multi-skilled pool nurses. By contrast, in local authorities, more attention has been paid to improving the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers. As regards measures to address recruitment and retention, initiatives included in the three case study sites included: local advertising campaigns; retainer schemes to encourage social workers to stay in post after qualifying; care champions making presentations to encourage people to consider a career in social care; role re-designation (effectively down grading certain posts where it is not possible to secure a qualified worker); international recruitment; and traineeships whereby local councils fund students or existing employees to undertake the social work degree on the contractual basis that they will then work for the council for a period of two years.

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[3] Discussing developments in the NHS, Kirkpatrick et al., (2009) describe how one Trust had established a "Temporary Staffing Reduction Group".

When it came to agency working it seemed that he most significant spur for change had been the Gershon review of 2004 which identified contingency work as a key area where efficiency savings could be made. Traditionally, many local councils obtained temporary agency staff through a number of suppliers, often on an *ad hoc* uncoordinated basis with individual service managers contacting individual agencies and making their own arrangements (IDeA Knowledge 2005/6). In many cases this proved costly and resource intensive. According to the London Centre of Excellence (2007), costs can vary significantly across the sector. For example, some agencies charge 50% commission of the workers' wage per hour, while others charge around 14% or lower.

> 'During our mapping exercise [of agency use], to our shock and horror, we discovered there were big variations in prices. Some recruitment agencies had negotiated different prices with different managers for the same work, without managers realising'

> James Reilly (Director of Community Services, Hammersmith and Fulham Council) quoted in *Community Care*, 14.9.06

In terms of controlling costs, achieving cashable savings and driving-up quality in the private employment agency sector, many local councils have introduced so called 'managed vendor schemes'. These have their origins in the manufacturing and construction industries and have been heavily promoted by government service improvement agencies. The tool kit produced by the London Centre of Excellence (2007) is seminal in this respect and builds on earlier work by IDeA (www.idea.gov.uk). A managed service is one that acts as an interface or broker between the council and employment agencies. It avoids the need for individual service managers to 'ring round' all the different agencies acting as one point of contact for all agency worker procurement. There are four principal types of scheme:

Vendor Neutral Managed Service (brokerage service)

Authorities employ a third party organisation or broker to negotiate and manage agency contracts on their behalf. It is the responsibility of the broker (the vendor neutral company) to enter into contracts with a wide range of supply agencies, re-negotiating charges and rates and undertaking routine monitoring and inspection (checking procedures for CRB checking, insurance etc). Agencies are scored and compete for business through the managed service. The vendor neutral managed service does not supply staff as an agency so that it can be "neutral" in selecting agencies and candidates.

Master Vendor Managed Service

The master vendor also acts as a broker as described above, but supplies candidates directly – candidates from the master vendor are usually given priority before recourse to other employment agencies.

Internally Managed Service

Here, a new department is created within the local council that will act neutrally in choosing suppliers, the same as a vendor neutral managed service.

Partially Outsourced Human Resources Managed Service

In this model all recruitment is outsourced, both permanent and temporary. For temporary recruitment, the managed service acts as a master vendor.

(London Centre for Excellence, 2007)

Initial reports of the implementation of managed vendor schemes have been promising (IDeA 2005/6; Hoque, et al., 2008; Kirkpatrick et al. 2009). According to London Centre of Excellence (2007) cashable savings on agency expenditure can be in the region of 3-10%. This is because the managed vendor is in a powerful position to negotiate with agencies for better rates of commission and will ensure accuracy of all charges (previously agencies were thought by some to overcharge on the employers element of National Insurance (NI) payments). Finally, such schemes are also thought to facilitate improved practice because the managed service will audit agencies to ensure they have appropriate insurance and that they follow proper procedure to ensure that candidates are CRB checked and eligible to work in the UK. Where there is evidence of poor performance, agencies can slip down the managed service list of 'preferred providers'. There is scope then to drive up quality by putting some agencies out of business. In one London Borough it is reported that many of the agencies relied on before the contract are no longer heavily used. Potential issues raised through monitoring include the discovery that some 'temps' are ineligible to work in the UK while some workers are signed up to multiple agencies and were therefore working over legal working limits (Commissioning News, 2007).

As the summary profiles below illustrate, across all three case study sites, it would seem that most activity has been targeted at reducing the costs associated with agency working, rather than reducing the use of agency workers per se. All three sites had introduced procurement management schemes, though Site 3 had recently withdrawn from its scheme:

Site 1

In 2007, Site 1 appointed a private company to deliver a neutral vendor service or 'single ordering portal' for all temporary staffing requirements across all council departments. Prior to appointing the private company, Site 1 dealt with around 75 recruitment agencies which was both time consuming and costly. The private company negotiates standardised rates across local recruitment agencies on behalf of the council and has put in place a scorecard rating system through regular performance-related audits. Invoice

processing requirements are almost completely eliminated with a single weekly invoice outlining total weekly spend on temporary labour being produced. Main advantages of the scheme are improved corporate control over the use of agency staff and management information on demand which will help to reduce reliance on agency staff. When the scheme was introduced staff who were involved in engaging temporary staff attended a training session on the new arrangements. The new arrangements meant that it was no longer possible for staff to engage interim staff by contracting agencies direct. One media report in the professional press suggests that that the project is on target to deliver £250K savings in 2007/8 and a further £300K in 2008/9.

Other measures introduced in the current strategic planning period (2007-2010) which may have an indirect effect on reducing temporary staffing include: a reorganization of the HR division creating a 'consultancy model' aligning workforce planning to corporate strategic objectives; recognition of falling behind with recruitment in social care; and a plan to reduce sickness rates (with sickness rates falling from 12.5 days in 2005 to 7 days in 2007).

Site 2

In March 2006, Site 2[4] launched a 'Neutral Vendor' service for the hiring of temporary agency staff. Prior to this the council had a preferred supplier list with fourteen contracted agencies in place. However, the council had spent 4.5 million in the previous year with over 70 agencies. Prior to this:

- the council was hiring agency staff on the agencies' terms and conditions;

- there was no real staff accountability to use contracted agencies;

- twenty percent of all ordering was non-compliant;

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[4] This information is reproduced from a case study report produced for one of the Regional Centres for Excellence.

- there was no real monitoring of the service;

- mark up over pay rates varied from 32 to 63 percent;

- no proof of checks were undertaken, for example, CRB checks and qualifications.

A consultant was brought in to research the options available to the council prior to starting a tender process. A number of councils were visited operating both a Master and Neutral Vendor service. After careful consideration of the two models a recommendation was made that the council as well as continuing with a preferred supplier list should tender for a Neutral Vendor service. It was anticipated that the benefits for the council would be:

- a single point of contact for all agency staff bookings;

- the opportunity to reduce the level of mark up over pay;

- the ability to receive management information on use, cost and quality across the council;

- to manage risk more effectively;

- to reduce the reliance on agency staff by planning recruitment and promoting greater use of the in house relief pools.

As well as anticipated benefits for the council there were also anticipated benefits for the agencies providing temporary staff. For the first time there would be visibility of all council temporary staffing requirements. Agencies could respond to all requirements through the new service and would then be tiered according to cost, quality and speed of supply. Agencies now receive regular feedback on their performance, measured against other temporary staff agencies. The contract also enables smaller agencies to provide and compete on an equally basis with larger agencies with help and assistance provided to encourage continuous improvement.

In terms of outcomes, overall mark-up over pay rates has been reduced and projected savings in the first year were in excess of £300,000. The management information generated through using this procurement model is said to be invaluable. It helps to identify and support managers who are

having recruitment difficulties and to reduce the risk of non-compliance with various government regulations and requirements. Although the service has yet to achieve its target of eliminating all vacancies, this has been reduced to less than 0.5 percent of the total number of bookings, a 'fill rate' that had previously never been achieved.

Site 2 also operates a staff bank launched in 2002 for the supply of unqualified social care workers to work across a variety of adult social care settings. A news report issued by the council in August 2008 noted that the restructuring of home care services, along with greater use of the staff bank, had resulted in savings of nearly £1 million.

Site 3

Site 3 outsourced both its permanent and temporary human resources (HR) management to a private sector company. In March 2009 the HR department was brought back in house and the council now operates a preferred provider list for the procurement of agency social workers. The preferred supplier is a large recruitment agency (national chain); however, managers can approach other agencies if they appear to give better value and have social workers available to start. There are no formal written procedures on using agency staff.

In seeking to reduce overreliance on agency staff, the other principal development here has been an in-house adult social care 'bank scheme'. There are currently 35 on the Bank (Social Workers, Social Care Workers and Occupational Therapists), with another three currently going through the application process. Over the last two years specific Bank adverts have been placed on the council website. An agreement has recently been made to allow managers to offer unsuccessful applicants the opportunity to work on the bank (if they reached the appropriate benchmark). Currently, the bank is targeting recently graduated social work and OT students and staff applying for early retirement. Bank staff are employed on a fixed term contract which can be up to 12 months.

Due to the reorganisation in human resource management and changes to the payroll system the council is currently working to resolve some data collection problems. As a result, there is only limited information available on vacancy rates, agency and bank use and expenditure.

2:2:2 Operational managers' views on the role of agency working

Although the findings of the NMDS-SC (Eborall and Griffiths, 2008) suggest that the three case study sites have comparable rates of agency use, all under the national average, interviews with team managers working in the local council social services departments suggest a different picture. In Site 1, in mental health services especially, team managers report very high rates of agency use. In some teams agency social workers make up more than half

the team. In Site 3, agency use was perceived to be on the increase but not at levels to cause concern. In Site 2, agency use was perceived to be low across all social services teams. In the physical disability team for example, comprising 12 members it was reported that there had been 7 agency social workers in the last 3 years. Across all the sites there was awareness that the pattern of agency use was constantly changing:

> 'We have got locums and we have had agency staff. Percentage wise, we have a low percent, but I guess that does fluctuate over the years. I have been working for the council for ten years and I guess there are arid times and times of plenty. Now seems to be a time of plenty.'

> General Manager Adult Social Care (Site 2)

Reaffirming the point made earlier about the need to improve workforce intelligence both locally and nationally, good information is rarely available to frontline managers to help them anticipate and proactively manage these changing patterns and trends:

> 'About two years ago we were having a problem with recruiting social workers, not just in our team, across [the council]. But more recently we haven't had a problem and we have had very few vacancies. [Researcher: What would you put that down to?] I don't know because I think anecdotally we don't pay more than our neighbours in fact we may pay a bit less, and we certainly pay a lot less than London, so you could just travel up to London and earn quite a lot more money if you wanted to cope with the train journey. So I don't know why, there was certainly a dip in recruitment when we couldn't get social workers and then suddenly we could. Might be partly because we had seconded people, unqualified people within the service to train and then come back. Then we started to get a bit worried that we might be training too many – and now of course with the personalisation agenda we don't know how many social workers we are going to need in the future. It really needs to be a bit more projected.'

> Manager of an Integrated Learning Disability Service (Site 2)

According to the London Centre for Excellence (2007), the main reason why local councils use agency staff is an inability to recruit permanent staff. Where services have a statutory requirement leaving positions unfilled is not an option. These positions are often classified as 'hard-to-fill' and may exist because of lack of capacity or skills in the market. Other reasons cited for using agency staff include:

- **Flexibility**: managers cannot merely rely on permanent staff for work as there are often peaks and troughs in workloads

- **Covering sickness**: agency workers are often used as a stop gap because it is impossible to predict when ailing workers might return

- **Time-to-Recruit**: Needs for agency workers range from next day availability to within hours in the case of having to cover a position if someone phones in sick. As the time from advertisement to permanent employment ranges from 6 weeks to 3 months, depending on the checks required, it is much quicker to phone an agency to cover the position. If poor performance is an issue, it is in theory much easier and quicker to remove an agency worker rather than a permanent one

- **Cost:** Contrary to popular media portrayal it may actually be cheaper to engage agency staff rather than permanent employees, particularly for lower paid workers. This is because in general, agency workers are not paid for sick days above statutory requirements and are not given access to local government pension schemes or subject to pay rise reviews.

(London Centre for Excellence, 2007 p 7-8)

Across the adult social services departments in three case study sites, managers linked their reasons for using agency staff to most of the factors described above (especially difficulties in recruiting permanent staff and 'time to recruit'). However, many other specifically local circumstances came into play. In Site 3, for example, geography is perceived to play a big part in making recruitment to certain social work teams difficult. Teams that are in the remoter areas of the county (situated over an hour from the nearest

motorway) struggle most to recruit staff. Indeed, it is the case that agencies also find it hard to supply staff to these areas. In Site 1, issues of location, pay and organisational culture are thought by some managers to intersect to make for a particularly difficult situation:

> 'Recruiting Approved Social Workers (ASWs) has been difficult. I think we must have 10 or 12 agency ASWs at any one time … It just highlights the fact that we can't recruit. A lot of people look for jobs on the internet and if you compare [Site 1] to some of the other neighbouring London boroughs you would get £3000 less… So you have to be thinking what is the incentive to come to [Site 1]? I also think the way services are run here are backward and old fashioned as compared other areas.'

> Team Manager Mental Health Liaison Service (Site 1)

While agency working is most often thought of as a *post hoc* solution for managing the recruitment and retention crises there are, however, instances where agency workers are sought as a means of undertaking work that permanent members of staff do not wish to undertake or bringing new and different skills into a team. In Site 2, there was a strong culture of bringing agency workers in to manage a specific piece of work, such as tackling a waiting list, rather than using them in an unspecified way to 'plug a gap':

> 'The way we use agencies in this local authority is very well planned… I have never had to suddenly say we are short we need to get a locum in… Presently we are looking at a specific piece of work and we are trying some new ideas out. Perhaps agency staff may be best positioned to do that because they haven't got the baggage or the resistance that traditional staff have so they come with a freer mind, they are more compliant … [Teams] can get quite stagnant… agency workers bring news of what's going on over the hill… Having that injection of freshness and difference into the team is quite a good thing… They ruffle a few feathers and that isn't always a bad thing'.

> General Manager Adult Social Care - Sensory Impairment (Site 2)

According to another manager:

'I don't think that you necessarily have to have a completely permanent workforce, I think there is some value in having people who are short term and potentially more flexible, I don't know in terms of how I would cut that… maybe 80/20 [permanent/agency]… I like to see a bit of a mix.'

Manager of an Integrated Learning Disability Service (Site 2)

Used in a well planned way it is felt that agency workers can 'fit in' seamlessly within the rest of the team:

'I think I am fairly fortunate in working with teams that are mainly supportive. I don't think we have any adverse dynamics going on. My experience is that [the team] are very open to locums and very supportive. Especially if they stay a long time we forget that they are a locum.'

Team Manager Physical Disability Team (Site 2)

Indeed, because of the potential benefits to teams in terms of easing case loads and workloads, some managers may be reluctant to let go of their agency workers:

'We usually underestimate how long they will be with us…You may think they will be with you for three months but invariably that stretches over 6 months… I think it stretches because having additional resources in your service means that you can do lots of positive things in terms of getting through the work and you are likely to want to extend that as long as you possibly can.'

Team Manager Physical Disability Team (Site 2)

During the research, some arguably less legitimate management practices came to light as regards the use of agency workers. As Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2007) point out, agency workers are often viewed as a 'variable cost'. For example, agency workers themselves report that toward the end of a financial year, if budgets are tight they will be released from their contracts only to be brought back in the new financial year to tackle the waiting lists that have built-up in their absence. One area which causes operational

managers particular frustration is where agency workers are needed because 'normal' recruitment processes are frozen or unnecessarily lengthened:

'There were massive staff shortages and the managers could not make decisions because there was a re-organisation going… It was obvious that in twelve months you were still going to need the post, but they were unable to advertise, they were frozen in time. The sad thing is then huge amounts of money are then spent on agency workers and [service users and carers] don't get a relationship because the social workers are moving around all the time'.

Agency Worker (with experience of interim management in Site 3)

'[Local councils] seem willing to freeze posts and throw hundreds of thousands of pounds a year at agency workers'.

Mental Health Liaison Worker (Site 1)

From a strategic management perspective such practices are justified on the grounds of affording 'head room' and flexibility to allow for the implementation of new or different ways of working. However, some operational managers are of the view that constant re-organisations and/or poor strategic management can easily tip the balance with too many permanent staff leaving (most likely because of the poor organisational culture and failure to address issues such as pay and terms and conditions) and too many agency workers coming in:

'[Discussing over reliance on agency workers] usually, this is a culmination of constant senior management reorganisation. It influences the managers' ability to make long term permanent post decisions, so you find that some teams have an agency worker for say two and a half years which doesn't seem appropriate… If you have too many agency workers then the [permanent staff] in the team think [the agency workers] are getting paid £30 an hour, I only get paid £14 - I had better become an agency worker. It can be very negative… They [agency workers] become the more dominant influence on the team'.

Agency Worker (with experience of interim management in Site 3)

'From having a very stable ASW (mental health social worker) workforce people have moved on and we have become quite reliant on locum workers which without any disrespect to individual locum workers has put the service somewhat at risk… Locum workers have the freedom to move quite quickly but that poses a risk for our service because there is always the risk that somebody may come in one day and say actually I am not going to be here at the end of the week.'

Manager Adults Care Management Team (Site 1)

2:2:3 Managing staff shortages

Asking staff to take on extra duties, have increased case loads, do overtime, peripatetic working and skill mixing are some commonly used approaches to managing staff shortages. However, these are not always appropriate and can be difficult to implement:

'We tried to do some skill mixing and to move people around to cover for some long term sick by asking some of the South Team [to travel] We were more than willing to pay the extra costs in petrol because [the social worker] would be travelling from his base to a different base. But in order to do it, he just wanted so many other things like [a 10am start because of the extra hour's travelling]. There is no compromise and that's why we have agency staff in the [remoter parts of the county].'

Learning Disabilities Manager (Site 3)

According to a survey of employers carried out by REC (2009), employers in the 'Nursing and Social Care Sector' more than any other are concerned with the stress that would be experienced by the existing workforce if no agency staffing was available, as they would expect to cover the need by re-allocating work among existing staff. Nevertheless, when it comes to

managing staff shortages, agency workers are often a last resort. This is largely because of the cost:

> 'When I was running the Community Mental Health Team, I really tried to get the team to struggle along. If somebody left and we were recruiting I would do my damndest not to get in an agency worker on principle… I did get an agency worker in when I really had to, but if the team felt they could carry things on for a couple of months we would. I don't like the thought of agency workers working alongside [permanent staff] and getting paid £10 [an hour] more – I just don't feel comfortable with it.'

> Team Manager Mental Health Liaison Service (Site 1)

> 'When I have got staff who are sinking, I will put agency staff in. But I will always look to find alternatives first.'

> Learning Disabilities Manager (Site 3)

Significantly, staff banks are rarely seen as providing a total solution to staffing shortages in that they can often be subject to many of the same recruitment and retention challenges as mainstream services. In both Sites 2 and 3, for example, managers working in the field of learning disabilities often have to resort to private agencies as the internal staff banks cannot easily provide staff with the relevant skills:

> 'The Bank is the first preference because obviously it is cheaper [than an agency]. We have a staff bank here and it has just had a big recruitment drive at the Care Fair. We have got a lot of people on the Bank because of that. However, we only have one person on the Bank who is interested in working in Learning Disabilities'

> Learning Disabilities Manager (Site 3)

For operational managers, a key decision in the management of staff shortages is the point at which it becomes necessary and appropriate to procure an agency worker:

'If you need to get [a service user] out of bed then you need someone there immediately. Whereas the services I provide don't necessarily need that immediate response so we are able to manage [staff] absences more easily than perhaps the other services [who will need to use agency workers].'

General Manager Adult Social Work Team (Site 2)

'I would have to justify [to my managers] why it was urgent [to get an agency worker in]. It could potentially be urgent in terms of our safeguarding responsibilities. If we are very thin on the ground with our social workers we won't have enough people to do those alerts when they come through, so I don't think I would have a problem getting agreement but really what I would be aiming for would be to get the recruitment [of the permanent worker] through'.

Manager of an Integrated Learning Disability Service (Site 2)

[Researcher: Is **not** using agency staff ever an option?] 'No, if we didn't we would be putting people's lives at risk.'

Team Manager Physical Disability Team (site 2)

In Site 3, among privately owned domiciliary and care home providers (unqualified) agency care workers are rarely if ever used to manage staff shortages. This is because of the cost implications and the lack of availability of local employment businesses able to provide care staff. Managers argue that this is not a safeguarding issue because the staff shortage will always be managed somehow. The senior managers we interviewed said they will if necessary deliver 'hands on care' themselves. On one occasion the care home manager had worked four consecutive nights and days without any time off. More often than not, however, staff shortages are managed by asking other workers to do extra work. However, this can easily tip into a 'retention issue' because of the pressure this puts on permanent staff. In Site 3, the private sector does not have access to the local council staff bank which serves only the council owned care homes and domiciliary care services.

2:2:4 Issues in the procurement and management of agency staff

Once the decision is taken to procure an agency worker, there are various controls managers must to go through, usually with their own managers, to secure approval. However, most of the operational managers we interviewed were not aware of the strategic intentions or the finer detail behind the various procurement management schemes:

> 'What we have got within the authority is... I don't remember the expression… almost like a preferred agency [Researcher: A managed vendor?] Yes, that's it. We go through them and we know that all the checks have been made and that all the right things are in place. It sort of controls the way of working with agencies… [Researcher: What do you do then?] I would contact [the vendor] and I would explain to them what we were looking for and what particular skills and experience we wanted… They send a collection of CVs which I will look at with one of the seniors… We then get back to [the vendor] and say we would like to interview these three or these two people or whatever.'

> Manager Physical Disabilities Team (Site 2)

Very few negative concerns were raised among managers about having to use an intermediary service. One domiciliary care manager (employed by the council in Site 2) described how the managed vendor sometimes provided care staff whose CRB checks had not been properly verified, and that some of the staff supplied were not equipped with the training and skills requested (for example, in using a hoist or manual handling). The only other issue raised related to an administrative mix-up in which an invoice was incorrect.

On the whole, managers seeking to recruit qualified social workers felt that employment businesses could source staff of a high calibre. In Site 2, there was even competition between social services managers for one or two of the most experienced locums:

> 'In my experience, not just here, but generally the quality of most agency social workers is very high. I can't remember having an issue

with an agency social worker in regard to their work, haven't done for a long time anyway'.

<div align="right">Manager of an Integrated Learning Disability Service (Site 2)</div>

The same manager however, thought that (unqualified) agency care workers procured to work in learning disability services very often did not have the appropriate skill levels. The same problem was also reported by managers with commissioning responsibilities for learning disabilities in Site 3:

'If they are sent from a nursing agency they may be very good at physical care but they can't manage the learning disability challenging behaviour… The standards definitely drop when you get agency staff in. There seems to be a critical point [Researcher: So how do you know standards drop?] We get more safeguarding issues… [In one case] an agency worker had been trying to get a [service user] to take his medication. He wouldn't take the tablet so she crushed it up and put it in a yogurt. [Meanwhile another service user] came along and picked up the yogurt with the medication in it. What the agency worker did was a perfectly sensible reaction I suppose, but she tried to grab the yogurt off him and when he wouldn't let go of it she pushed him quite forcibly. He fell over and it was reported to me and so that becomes a safeguarding issue. It's not her fault, because she is not trained to deal with those situations… She didn't understand behavioural management because she was used to dealing with frail elderly individuals who would never have made a grab for something like a yogurt pot, not a six foot young man.'

<div align="right">Learning Disabilities Manager (Site 3)</div>

Most managers asserted that they did not treat their social work agency staff differently to permanent staff when it came to induction, training and supervision. However, it seemed that agency workers were not quite entitled to everything:

'We give the same supervision to out agency workers as we give to other staff and, if they are with us for some time, the same training opportunities… If it was a kind of £300 external conference or

something chances are that it wouldn't be possible, but with most of the relevant internal training, yes they would be included in that.'

Team Manager Physical Disability Team (Site 2)

In terms of induction, some managers felt slightly aggrieved that they could invest a lot of time at the beginning of the agency worker's placement for what might only turn out to be a few months work in return. For newly qualified agency social workers especially there was recognition among managers that when they were brought in 'to make the numbers up' they may not get mentoring and that supervision may not be entirely adequate. Indeed, over and above professionally based competencies and skills, agency workers are expected to have other attributes which will enable them to 'hit the ground running':

'I would say the agency staff we have had, can get on with the job. They can pick up the strings and they tend to have a good savvy of the local authority culture without all the trappings… They are people who can really plough through the work and can sort of change course at a moment's notice. That's what they have been used to doing - adaptable - chameleon like I suppose'.

A similar expectation is made of (unqualified) agency care workers and it is noted that where they are brought in at short notice to work a night shift, for example, then there may be occasions where there is no supervisor on duty and they will be expected to work alone.

Finally, another important function of agency working which is often overlooked is that it can hold the key to finding permanent staff. Agency working is often used as a 'work trial' by both prospective employers and employees. According to a survey of agency workers (working in all sectors) registered with the Recruitment and Employment Federation, 3 out of 5 are seeking permanent employment (REC, 2008):

'It's a way that an employer can 'try before you buy'… We have agency staff that we think are fantastic and we would encourage them to stay and there are other people that you just wouldn't want'

General Manager Adult Social Care (Site 2)

For care workers especially, 'bank work' is recognised as an important route into permanent employment:

> 'Quite a lot of people are using [the staff bank] as a way in to what they see as permanent posts within the council… They know that if you do a couple of years on [the bank] you probably more in tune with the organisation and more likely to get a job… [It's seen] as a way in. So we lose people from the bank into permanent posts'
>
> Manager of an Integrated Learning Disability Service (Site 2)

2:3 Survey findings

2:3:1 Use of agency workers

Ninety two per cent (n=51) of the responding authorities had used agency workers in the 2008-2009 financial year. Table 3 shows that, while they were most frequently recruited to cover social work posts – just one of the participating authorities using any agency workers in the past year reported that they had not used agency social workers - other types of agency worker had also been sought. Although much research attention has focused on agency social workers (Carey 2006, 2007; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006), it is striking that almost two thirds of respondents had used agencies to cover for care worker and administrative or ancillary posts. In part, this is likely to be explained by the need to ensure that the quality of in house provision was not affected by shortages of care workers, domestic, catering and transport staff. However, the use of agency workers in administrative roles may reflect the need to ensure that all information is documented on electronic information systems. In terms of professionally qualified staff, the use of agency occupational therapists was considerably less than that of social workers. Social work assistant/community care workers were used least frequently, with only just over a third of respondents using agency workers to cover for these posts.

Table 3: Use of agency workers in 2008-2009 financial year

Type of agency worker	Percentage reporting using	n
Social worker	*96*	50
Administrative or ancillary posts	*68*	38
Care assistant/support worker	*67*	35
Social work assistant/community care worker	*50*	26
Occupational therapist	*46*	24
Other kinds of social care worker	*43*	24
Total using any sort of agency worker	**92**	**51**

Overall, the mean number of types of worker recruited was 3.8 (SD1.5), with less than 20 per cent only needing to recruit one or two types of agency worker.

2:3:2 Expenditure on agency workers

Reported expenditure on agency working in the 2008-2009 financial year ranged from £50,000 in one small unitary authority to £5.5 million in one London borough. The average spend per authority as a proportion of the adult social care staffing budget was eight per cent. In view of the regional variation in vacancy and turnover rates in local authorities (Commission for Social Care Inspection 2009) it was unsurprising that, among those authorities for whom we had information, average expenditure on agency workers in London was, at 17 per cent, double the average. By contrast, authorities in the North East spent, on average, just four per cent. There was a moderate correlation ($\rho=0.481$, $p=0.001$) between the proportion of the staffing budget spent on agency working and the number of types of agency workers used and a smaller correlation ($\rho=0.369$, $p=0.04$) between the

proportion of the staffing budget spent on agency working and the reported vacancy rates for social work posts obtained by UNISON (2009). This seems to suggest that local authority expenditure on agency workers is not solely accounted for by vacancies in social work posts, as we shall discuss further below.

2:3:3 Reasons for using agency workers

Table 4 shows the different reasons that were reported for using different types of agency worker. It suggests that agency workers were employed for a variety of reasons. In the case of professionally qualified staff, such as social workers and occupational therapists, difficulties in recruiting permanent staff or needing to fill a post quickly were the most frequent reasons for employing agency workers. Sometimes this reflected difficulties in recruiting to a certain type of post, such as mental health social workers, but sometimes it reflected more general recruitment issues.

By contrast, difficulties in recruiting permanent care worker posts were reported less often – presumably because care worker posts in local authorities tend to be better paid than those in the private sector (Skills for Care 2009). An emerging trend seemed to be the use of agency workers on specific tasks or projects (for example, to ensure that reviews were up to date) or when services were being reconfigured – for example, to provide continuity while in-house provision was being closed or transferred from local authority ownership. Examples of 'other' reasons for agency workers included maternity leave.

Table 4: Reasons for recruiting agency staff

Reason	Responses		Percentage of responses
	N	**Per cent**	
Social workers			
Difficulties in recruiting permanent staff	39	*25*	*80*
To fill a post quickly	38	*25*	*78*
Sickness cover	32	*21*	*65*
For a specific task or activity	34	*22*	*69*
Other reason	11	*7*	*22*
Occupational therapists			
Difficulties in recruiting permanent staff	22	*27*	*92*
To fill a post quickly	20	*24*	*83*
Sickness cover	20	*24*	*83*
For a specific task or activity	17	*21*	*71*
Other reason	3	*4*	*13*
Other social care workers			
Difficulties in recruiting permanent staff	26	*22*	*68*
To fill a post quickly	31	*26*	*82*
Sickness cover	31	*26*	*82*
For a specific task or activity	24	*20*	*63*
Other reason	6	*5*	*16*

*This table is based upon multiple responses so percentages will exceed 100%.

2:3:4 How agency staff were recruited

Consistent with the evidence reported earlier in this chapter, the most frequent arrangement by which agency workers were recruited was through a managed vendor scheme, used by almost three quarters of respondents (Table 5). Over a third used an in house bank of staff and a quarter allowed managers to recruit from agencies directly themselves. Examples of other arrangements were rare but included the establishment of dedicated peripatetic or 'relief' teams whose members went wherever they were needed and the introduction of flexible working arrangements in the form of zero hours contracts. Although just over half of respondents had just one method for recruiting agency workers, usually through a managed vendor scheme, the remainder used a combination. The most frequent combination was the use of an in house bank and a managed vendor scheme.

Table 5: Arrangements for recruiting agency staff

Arrangement	Responses		Percentage of responses
	n	**Per cent**	
Managed vendor scheme	38	*49*	*73*
In house bank or pool	19	*24*	*37*
Manager chooses agency(ies)	13	*17*	*25*
Any other arrangement	8	*10*	*15*
Number of responses excluding missing values	78	*100*	*150**

*This table is based upon multiple responses so percentages will exceed 100%.

2:3:5 Strategies to reduce use of agency workers

Over 80 per cent of respondents reported that their department had implemented strategies to reduce the use of agency workers. Those who had not thought such measures unnecessary because expenditure on agency working in their authority was minimal. The establishment of banks and managed vendor schemes were seen as making up the most important components of their strategy. In addition, the three most frequently reported other ways of reducing the use of agency workers were through improved monitoring and reporting systems, strategies to reduce sickness and absence, and restrictions on the number of post holders who could authorise expenditure on them. Systems for increasing the number of permanent staff were tailored to take account of the posts that needed to be filled. Thus, in one instance, international recruitment of social workers was used to help counter a shortage of mental health social workers while in another, recruitment to support worker posts was improved by increasing the number of full time contracts. These developments were generally viewed as part of a wider strategy to improve recruitment and retention.

The effectiveness of these strategies was indicated by the fact that almost 60 per cent of respondents reported that their expenditure on agency working in 2008-2009 was either less or the same as their expenditure in 2007-2008. Among those who had spent more in 2008-2009, an important reason for increased expenditure on agency workers was if the authority had been involved in re-provisioning services. In these instances, for example, agency workers were used as a way of ensuring continuity in staff while a service was being run down. However, in the context of the continued (Hall and Wilton 2009) and anticipated pressures (Bundred 2009) on local authority expenditure, almost two thirds of respondents anticipated that they would be spending less on agency workers in 2009-10 and nearly a third thought that it would be the same. Just one respondent thought that it would increase.

2:4 Summary

'Agency workers will always be with us… They are the only way to keep the show on the road and to keep those gaps filled'

General Manager Adult Social Care - Sensory Impairment (Site 2)

Across all three case study sites there was little awareness of and, as result, very little activity linked to 'Options for Excellence' and the targets that had been set with regard to reducing over reliance on agency workers. The high number of councils implementing vendor management reflects that in most instances, reducing the costs associated with agency working rather than the use of agency workers per se has been the main driving force behind much of the activity targeted on agency working. In both the survey and the case study sites, examples of other means of reducing over reliance on agency workers were rare but included: the establishment of dedicated peripatetic or 'relief' teams whose members went wherever they were needed; asking staff to take on extra duties; plans to reduce sickness rates; and the introduction of flexible working arrangements in the form of zero hours contracts.

Among social services mangers working in the three case study sites, agency workers were thought to play an important role in 'keeping the show on the road'. Managers used agency workers in a measured way, exploring other alternatives to engaging with them because of the cost implications. In the fieldwork sites and further afield, there is now evidence to suggest that the introduction of managed vendor schemes is working positively to control costs. Agency workers were thought able to refresh teams by bringing in new skills and insights from other areas. When used appropriately, they were thought to integrate seamlessly into the wider team. Significantly, agency working was an important means by which managers were able to find permanent staff. Overall, from the perspective of social services managers, when managed well, the advantages of agency working seemed to outweigh the disadvantages.

Where agency working was viewed less positively by some managers, this seemed to be a symptom of underlying organisational issues rather than an

issue with agency working itself. The clearest manifestations of this were teams in which the balance had tipped, with more agency workers in post than permanent staff. This put services at risk because agency workers could leave at short notice, and often did so because they were not immune to the adverse issues which may have promoted the departure of permanent staff in the first place. In this sense, the issue of reducing over reliance on agency staff becomes one of addressing the root of the problem, which lies with the strategic management of the organisation itself.

For policy, the most pressing issue however may be about defining what is sensible and appropriate use of agency staff? For statutory services decisions are often based around safeguarding issues and the point at which service users and carers may be put at risk if a staff shortage is not filled by the use of an agency worker. The same principle is not consistently applied across the private care sector, where the overriding consideration is often cost control, meaning that in some organisations agency workers are never an option. For health and social care commissioners, this suggests that asking questions about the management of staff shortages is a key safeguarding quality indicator, as is ensuring that contracts with care providers are adequately financed to ensure appropriate staffing and workforce management.

3: Role of the Employment Business Sector in the Future Social Care Workforce

'There are four generic perceptions of recruitment companies which influence how the Department of Health engages with them: recruitment companies over charge; recruitment consultancies fail to deliver; recruitment companies don't understand the NHS; and what recruitment companies do is easy.'

(Wheeler, 2008 p8)

3:1 Overview

In this chapter, we explore the impact of 'Options for Excellence' and the introduction of managed vendor schemes on the social care employment business sector, questioning what, if any, role the sector is likely to play in the social care workforce of the future. First we present evidence from the industry body, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) which has recently published the first business sector profile for agencies working in the field of nursing and social care. We then draw on the findings of interviews with fifteen employment business managers and recruitment consultants (see Appendix 5 for participant profile) to explore these developments as they relate specifically to the field of social work and social care.

3:2 The employment business sector

Social work agencies began to appear in Britain in the 1990s at a time when social services departments began to experience recruitment difficulties (Unwin, 2009). The employment business sector remains a significant yet little understood component of the qualified and unqualified social care workforce. The employment agency and employment business sector have a particularly shadowy relationship with the rest of the social care sector, which

results in limited information about its national presence. In the past, the sector's response to traditional research methods, such as postal surveys, has been poor (Social and Health Care Workforce Group, 2002; TOPSS England, 2003). For example, an attempt in 2002-03 by the TOPSSE/REC Task & Finish Group to conduct a postal survey of agencies resulted in a very disappointing response rate of fewer than six per cent, with the data being considered inadequate for statistical analysis. A further difficulty stems from the need to find an agreed definition of the term 'agency'. Under the Employment Agencies Act 1973, there is an important distinction between employment *agencies,* whose purpose is to find workers employment or to supply employers with workers for employment by them, and employment *businesses,* who hire out workers on a temporary basis. Generally, the term 'agency worker' is used as shorthand to refer to workers who contract with an agency but carry out work not for the agency but for the agency's client with whom they have no direct contractual relationship. There are legal complexities about the precise status of people working for agencies, such as whether they are the employees of the agency or of the client (Laflamme & Carrier, 1997).

The first stage of this research involved a mapping exercise in order to locate employment businesses and agencies supplying workers to the social care sector in England. The search strategy (detailed in Appendix 2) identified 199 agencies in a 'snapshot' taken in August 2008. Table 6 shows the geographical distribution and spread with the strongest concentration of agencies based in Greater London. Agencies vary considerably in terms of their size and degree of specialisation. According to one profile of the employment business sector as a whole (REC, 2009):

- 45% of agencies have between 1-100 registered workers

- 34% have 101 – 500 registered workers

- 21% have 500+ registered workers

Table 6: Snap Shot at August 2008 of the County Wide Distribution of Employment Agencies in England Providing Care Workers (Qualified and Unqualified to the Social Care Sector)

	Agencies Registered with the Recruitment and Employment Confederation*	Other Agencies Identified – Not listed on the REC Database	Total
Avon	2	4	**6**
Bedfordshire	3	1	**4**
Berkshire	2		**2**
Buckinghamshire	4		**4**
Cambridgeshire			
Cheshire	5	1	**6**
Cleveland			
Cornwall			
Cumbria			
Derbyshire		1	**1**
Devon		1	**1**
Dorset	2	1	**3**
Durham			
East Sussex	2	2	**4**
East Yorkshire	1		**1**
Essex	10	5	**15**
Gloucestershire	1	1	**2**
Greater London	36	16	**52**
Manchester	1	3	**4**
Hampshire	1	3	**4**
Herefordshire			
Hertfordshire	6		**6**
Kent	5	6	**11**
Lancashire	2	2	**4**
Leicestershire	2		**2**
Lincolnshire	2		**2**
Merseyside	3		**3**
Norfolk			
North Yorkshire			
Northamptonshire	2	1	**3**
Northumberland	1		**1**
Nottinghamshire			
Oxfordshire	2		**2**
Rutland			
Shropshire		1	**1**
Somerset	1		**1**
South Yorkshire	2		**2**
Staffordshire	3		**3**
Suffolk		2	**2**
Surrey	6	2	**8**
Tyne and Wear	1	1	**2**
Warwickshire	1		**1**
West Midlands	2	3	**5**
West Sussex	3		**3**
West Yorkshire	2	2	**4**
Wiltshire	4		**4**
Worcestershire	1		**1**
Scotland	3	2	**5**
Wales	5	3	**8**
Northern Ireland	1	1	**2**
Location not known		2	**2**
Total	**132*** [Plus a further 61 agencies for which no identifying details are given on the REC database = Total = 195]	**67**	**199**

* See next section for details of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation

Most agencies providing unqualified social care workers are principally 'nursing agencies'. Very few of the agencies identified are so called 'boutique sector specialists' concentrating on the provision of qualified social workers (one specialist social work agency database www.agencycentral.co.uk listed 19 agencies [Accessed 11.8.08]). Many of the well known employment agencies to be found on the high streets are companies belonging to multinational corporations. According to Carey (2004) one consequence of this is that significant amounts of capital from the UK public sector are being transferred as 'profits' to the US.

3:3 Governance and regulation

Agencies with the exception of those providing 'nursing and domiciliary care' are not required to be licensed. Agencies must comply with the Employment Agencies Act 1973 and the conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Business Regulations 2003. This imposes a duty to carry out checks on those working with vulnerable people. The sector is inspected by the government's Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate who can impose fines on agencies who do not fulfil this duty.

The Recruitment and Employment Federation (REC) is the trade body that supports and represents the recruitment industry. It was launched in January 2000. The REC's membership is made up of over 8,000 recruitment agencies and businesses (corporate members) and 6,000 recruitment professionals (individual members). There are number of sector specific groups. The Nursing and Social Care Group was set up to provide support for recruitment agencies specialising in social care, domiciliary care and healthcare. All members of the Nursing and Social Care Group are required to comply with the REC Code of Professional Practice (http://www.rec.uk.com/regions-sectors/sectors/nursing_social_care/code-of-practice [Accessed1.6.09]).

The REC also accepts complaints and queries in regards to the standards of best practice by its members. In 2007, the REC received 8 complaints about

members in the REC Nursing and Social Care Sector.[5] The problems highlighted included problems with payment, issues around the portability of CRB checks and receiving unsolicited mail despite requests to stop (http://www.rec.uk.com/_uploads/documents/2007Report.pdf.   [Accessed 1.6.09]).

For reasons which will be discussed in a moment, a new trade association, the Association of Social Work Employment Businesses (ASWEB) (www.asweb.org.uk) was launched in April 2007 to represent the interests of social work employment businesses and has recently issued its own set of professional standards.

3:4 Impact of 'Options for Excellence' on business confidence

For managers of specialist social work agencies, the impact of 'Options for Excellence' in seeking to reduce overreliance on agency workers could have been potentially very damaging, given that the business is often spilt between local councils and voluntary and private sectors, with around 80-95% of business coming from local councils. However, very few of the agency managers/recruitment consultants we interviewed were aware of this document perhaps confirming their general exclusion from local social care workforce policy and planning. Furthermore, none of the agency managers we interviewed had detected any specific activity on the part of local councils to permanently reduce over reliance on agency staff. For most agency managers it was pretty much business as usual, which meant negotiating the cyclical pattern of belt tightening and loosening:

> 'They tend to go round in cycles, so they will put a recruitment freeze on locums, saying that they are only going to recruit permanent members of staff through their own campaigns... It's really strict and then six months later they realise that people have left or that they haven't been able to recruit and then go back to using agency staff

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[5] Figures for 2008 are not currently available.

again. So it is just kind of cyclical. They all take turns in doing it so I won't take [Options for Excellence] too seriously'.

<div align="right">Recruitment Consultant (8)</div>

These qualitative findings are borne out through other sources. The REC membership database shows that the number of agencies registered with the 'Nursing and Social Care Group' has remained largely unchanged from previous years, suggesting that 'Options of Excellence' has not had an impact on employment businesses operating across the UK. In August 2007, there were 194 members registered with the Nursing and Social Care Group. In August 2008, the figure was 193 (www.rec.co.uk [Accessed 8.8.08]). In June 2009, the figure had remained static at 193 (www.rec.co.uk [Accessed 2.6.09). Repeat searches of some of the specialist social work data bases accessed for the research mapping exercise reveal a slight increase. For example, www.agencycentral.co.uk listings of social care agencies had increased from 19 [Accessed 11.8.08] to 21 [Accessed 2.6.09].

In May 2009, the REC published the first sector profile report for the 'Nursing and Social Care Group'. This is intended to assist agencies in business planning. According to a survey of employment business clients carried out as part of the exercise, 56% of social/personal care employers envisage that their future use of agency staff will stay the same, 32% think it will decrease and 7% think that it will increase (with 5% don't know). Table 7 below shows the business confidence rating. On this assessment, the sector scores 7 out of 10. This means that in comparison with other sectors, it is still considered attractive for investment in that it continues to offer opportunities. Significantly, REC's overall projection is for an increased reliance on bank and agency staff in nursing and social care:

> 'Recruitment into the [nursing and social care sector] will continue to be challenging and demand more innovative strategies as well as models for sourcing and skill development e.g. increased reliance on bank and agency workers'.

<div align="right">(REC, 2009 p.6)</div>

Table 7: Business Confidence Rating = 7/10

Factor	Meaning	Rating	Score
Scale	Number of employers and size of workforce	High	2
Diversity	Range of skills, roles, job types	High	2
Growth	Evidence of continuing expansion	Medium	1
Resilience	Likely impact of economic downturn	Medium	1
Accessibility	Ease of entry, access to opportunity	Medium	1

REC (2009)

3:5 The impact of vendor management

As noted above, in April 2007, fourteen specialist social work employment agencies joined forces to launch a new trade association (The Association of Social Work Employment Businesses [ASWEB]). This was mainly in response to the adoption of the managed vendor schemes described in the previous chapter. ASWEB believes that standards are slipping since councils have adopted managed vendor schemes (Hunt, 2008). Many of the agency managers/recruitment consultants working for specialist social work agencies are themselves qualified social workers and they argue that an in-depth knowledge of the discipline being supported is vital to providing the accurate service both clients and candidates demand. The problem is that under managed vendor rules, agencies can no longer speak directly with hiring service managers. Thus, rather than being able to specify precisely the type of practitioner they need to work with a specific client group, recruitment is often reduced to finding the quickest and cheapest applicant. In particular, ASWEB argues that such an approach takes no account of service users' needs and the specialist skills that may be required to address them (www.asweb.org.uk [Accessed 20.8.08]). The interviewees in this study wholeheartedly supported this view:

> '[Discussing vendor management] from a commercial agency point of view we probably get access to more jobs, but you get poorer job quality. We will be informed that a qualified social worker is required for children's services but that might be as much information as we get. Before we would find out about the team, the type of person

wanted, what experience was needed. The detail would be a lot clearer and therefore our matching and recruitment skills were of much more benefit. We certainly notice now that it is a volume driven business now with scant regard to quality…'

Recruitment Consultant (5)

'Because we are qualified social workers ourselves… we know the job, we know the language and we can match and communicate directly with the people who need the staff. But if there is somebody in between it introduces risk… I do know of competitors who have teams who are just scatter-gunning CVs and that's a long way off spending two hours interviewing somebody and then having a relationship with a manager that you know very well and speaking to them and fully describing to that manager what this person - who you know very well - is and what their capabilities are. So there is a loss there.'

Agency Manager (9)

Interviewees described how being a 'recruitment consultant' in the field of social work is different to that in most other commercial sectors and why therefore it was important to have professional, well qualified staff in the role:

'[Being a recruitment consultant in] social work is quite different to most other sectors because of the nature of the work that social workers do. You know… high case loads, very stressful, very pressured and often emotive. If it helps them to ring us at the end of the day and off load… it's fine with us. It's just as part of our service. Aftercare is a big part of it.'

Recruitment Consultant (8)

'We do see them as our employees… We sometimes call ourselves social workers for the social workers. We are the ones that they can ring up… We are more of support network for them really.'

Recruitment Consultant (10)

There is good commercial sense in developing strong relationships between recruitment consultants and agency workers in order to ensure retention and loyalty to a particular employment business and, indeed, to the social care workforce itself:

> 'I get stacks and stacks of feedback from [social workers] who would otherwise not necessarily be working in the profession who do come back and work for the agency and find it fulfilling. So we keep people in the industry who wouldn't otherwise be there…

<div align="right">Agency Manager (9)</div>

While eight to nine months is described as the average length of time a worker will stay in agency work, most recruitment consultants had their 'star' agency workers who had remained with them for many years, perhaps eight or nine years on and off. In turn, most agencies described how they provided access to training and other benefits in much the same way as would a permanent employer:

> 'I have always taken the view that if someone comes to work for you as a locum it's a career choice and that their time with us should add value to their career and value to the people they work for. So I have always taken a robust approach to professional development. I guess that's a commercial thing. The better our training and development programmes the more we can place people. It also makes sense because we have a more motivated workforce.'

<div align="right">Agency Manager (4)</div>

From the perspective of the recruitment consultants we interviewed, the key criticism of managed vendor schemes is that they have effectively de-professionalised their 'job role', turning it into an essentially unrewarding administrative task:

> 'Over the last two to three years [because of the move to managed vendors] we have had to change the way our staffing structure works. Rather than have business development consultants or sales consultants we need a lot more service [admin] people and resourcing consultants… We can't go out and sell, we can't go out and speak to

our clients and really get to grips with what they need from us, instead we get 50 jobs a week by e-mail just in London and we have to use all our time and effort on sorting [through CVs].'

Recruitment Consultant (8)

'We have moved now to working with managed vendors. It is easy work because we don't need to do much more than screen our locums, check their paperwork and then submit them electronically for positions as they arise. Recruitment used to involve selling, but these days it doesn't and as long as you have competent administrative staff, that's really all you need'.

Managing Director (13)

According to one agency director who has published an insight into the workings of the recruitment industry (Wheeler, 2008), the problem is not so much with the concept of vendor management (which can have many 'back office' advantages such as a single point of contact and a streamlined administrative system) but with the more recent push to drive down costs to an unrealistic level. As public sector clients receive proportionately less central government funding, vendor managers as commercial organisations in their own right must increasingly seek to meet their own financial objectives by reducing the prices that they are willing to pay to agencies. According to Wheeler (2008 p24) there is an urgent need to challenge the perception that employment businesses are charlatans who have been routinely over charging for their services:

'The negative PR and spin surrounding agency spend should be challenged… The factual "premium" born by the [client] for agency locums is approximately 3-5%[6] of the total spend. It should be clearly

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[6] Example of how an agency charge rate of £35.51 per hour is broken down:

[Hourly pay rate = £24.00] + [NI @ 12% = £3.07] + [WTR (working time regulation grants temporary workers the same paid annual leave entitlements as permanent staff) @10.7% = £2.44] + [Gross Margin = £6.00 (When overheads are deducted net profit is £1.20)] = £35.51

communicated to all parties in order that a balanced judgement can be reached.'

It is argued that the drive to reduce costs to an unrealistic level is already impacting on recruitment businesses' abilities to work in an ethical way and to provide compliant, safe professionals:

'Once working, [locums] must be supervised and spoken to at least once a week. Concerns must be identified at the very earliest point and assistance provided to rectify these. The process requires a proactive approach (multiplied by the numbers you are supporting), which is extremely time consuming and expensive. To fail to deliver this level of support leads to broken bookings, disrupted departments, unhappy locums and concerned managers. Where charge rates are unrealistically low, it is this essential part of a recruitment service which is quietly removed…

(Wheeler, 2008 p9)

This point was reiterated in the interviews:

'We have to do more safeguarding and as a result our costs are increasing, however [our income] is being reduced and those two don't really match up… Safeguarding for a social work specific recruitment company is about ensuring that the social worker we have is fit for practice and that that all background facts add up… you know everything like visa, ability to work in UK their ID, GSCC registration, CRB… The skill of the [recruitment consultant] is having the experience and knowledge of social work to pick up the gaps that somebody else might not see…I don't think the cost saving is real because the quality of the service is not of the same standard. Managed vendors provide a fast cheap poor quality option.'

Recruitment Consultant (5)

'I think social services departments are being pressurised into doing things by price and even though they have a commitment to quality they are allowing themselves to be going down a procurement model

rather than a human resource model. A procurement model is based on the lowest price and that is a risky route'.

<div align="right">Agency Manager (9)</div>

A recurrent theme in the interviews with agency managers is how employment businesses face similar challenges to mainstream human resources when it comes to recruitment:

'Early on in our business we used to encourage newly qualified workers to use us to get a bit of experience and then to get a permanent job if they were happy with the organisation… I think from a social worker's point of view that can be a good route in. Commercially we have had more difficult years and now we are taking a less generous stance and are keener to hold on to them.'

<div align="right">Agency Manager (9)</div>

'When you get a good one – a good old fashioned child protection front line social workers – they are like gold dust. You know you are guaranteed to get them work. There is a big massive need at the moment for mental health social workers and we just can't find any at all.'

<div align="right">Recruitment Consultant – National Chain (10)</div>

Wheeler (2008) makes the point that by the time an employer comes to an agency, traditional avenues of recruitment will have failed. It is important to recognise, then, that the successful recruitment consultant is likely to be deploying some highly specialist skills to recruit and retain 'hard to find' candidates. Indeed, one recruitment consultant we interviewed was keen to make the point that local councils could make much more use of employment businesses' specialist knowledge and skills to help tackle the recruitment and retention crises more generally:

'The other [commercial divisions of the employment business] provide both temporary and permanent staffing solutions… but that has never got off the ground in social work… [In providing staff for permanent contracts] we are not talking extortionate money. The average fee is

between £3000 to £6000 and that's a one off fee. They don't have to pay if I can't find anyone… I know local authorities that are struggling to fill their permanent roles and I have got the perfect candidates. However, the local authority policy is that they can't use agencies for permanent recruitment. When they can't fill a post they just keep spending another £20,000 on putting an ad out. It doesn't make any sense... I wish they were keener for partnership working with us rather than being so against us'.

Recruitment Consultant (10)

An agency executive commenting in a Health Service Journal (Santry, 2009) news report makes a very similar point when discussing the recent upward trend in agency use across the NHS:

'Instead of being brought into the discussion on how to fill the gaps, agencies are being left out on their own… Sometimes we are seeing a hostile and aggressive approach to agencies which is counterproductive… We are recruiting from countries in the world that the NHS would never have thought of and being extremely innovative.'

Indeed, while the official line may be about reducing the use of agencies, one agency manager described how many front line social services managers are only too aware of the cost effectiveness and benefits associated with using an employment agency instead of their own human resources departments:

'I certainly know a lot of managers who are fed up with [in-house] recruitment and the difficulties associated with it… it takes so long and there are all these hurdles they have to jump over… They are actually realising that the cost between permanent and temporary workers is not that great'.

Agency Manager (11)

If the current trend of driving prices down to an unrealistic level continues, Wheeler (2008) argues that much of the expertise to be found within employment businesses will be lost to the system as lower job satisfaction leads to higher staff turnover. In turn, as was the case in the NHS where

some of the earlier master vendor schemes cut overhead costs too drastically, it may become impossible to supply enough candidates to achieve the so called 'fill rates' (i.e. the problem of staff shortages is exacerbated). Indeed, there were already concerns that managed vendor schemes are damaging the attractiveness of agency work because of the fixed prices that are now being paid often based on the qualification held, but disregarding the portfolio of experience that could surround it:

> 'We used to offer our workers a cost of living increase each year but we can't do that anymore with these [master vendor] agreements in place…I have got workers that are ringing me up every April saying where is my cost of living increase and they are finding it very difficult to understand that that is not in our control any more even though we are their employer we don't have any influence over that - there is absolutely nothing we can do.'

> Recruitment Consultant (10)

> 'The biggest losers are the locums and the biggest winners are the companies that set up these umbrella arrangements… '

> Agency Manager (9)

3:6 Agencies providing unqualified care workers

Unqualified agency care workers are usually procured through medical recruitment agencies often alongside nurses and other medical staff or through generic employment agencies:

> 'We do everything, office staff, driving, industrial the whole lot… and about 70% care. [Researcher: What would be a typical qualification of one of your workers?] I say care - within that there is a lot of domestic workers, kitchen staff, cooks, everything required to run a care home… I would say 70% of our clients are private residential homes… We do older people, learning disabilities and everything.'

> Agency Manager (6)

There can also be a blurring of boundaries where agencies are both employment businesses and 'domiciliary care agencies' providing both services and temporary staff:

> 'We have had 95% of our [temporary] care workers for the last four years. [Researcher: So… it's actually quite a permanent job?] Yes. You see, we're in a catch-22 situation… we'd like to bring them on a fixed hour permanent basis, if you like, but local authority boundaries and parameters change so frequently – one minute you've got the work, the next minute you can't, and then we're left in the lurch. So what we do, we tend to say, "Okay, we've got 40 carers, we're going to bombard them with the hours that they want, up to 45/50 hours per week..". It's pointless bringing on 100 care workers and we've only got sufficient work for 30, because they will leave.'

> Recruitment Consultant (15)

The agency managers supplying unqualified care workers described business as generally steady or good and none had detected changes which might be linked to 'Options for Excellence'.

> 'I definitely haven't noticed less usage [of agencies] and I think I have come across less comments along the lines of "An agency is the last resort." It feels much more as if people have understood the concept and are more confident in our service … perhaps [now that they have used our agency] they don't feel that they are ringing up some fly by night operator. I think I have had less resistance from places but that is not necessarily speaking about government bodies.'

> Agency Manager (3)

One agency manager described how they were doing 'sufficient volumes' to employ two mini-bus drivers to bus staff into the care homes. Here, the perception was that working in a care home environment was so monotonous that the retention crises would never be resolved:

> 'All the [care homes] we supply on a daily basis are constantly recruiting. It would be cheaper for them to employ someone full time, but the trouble is that no one sticks to the job… If you put somebody

in doing laundry in a care home day-in-day-out how long are they going to do that for? How long are they going to cut up the same vegetables every day and wash plates? People don't stick at jobs like that. So, there will always be a space for agencies because if I put someone in there two days, then send them somewhere else to a do a different job then they are happy'.

<div align="right">Agency Manager (6)</div>

While there was some experience of staff banks these were not generally thought to pose a threat to the business of the private employment agency. While they were recognised as potentially useful solutions for larger organisations such as the NHS, they were not thought to be practical for smaller organisations (such as groups of four or five nursing homes) because they would not be able to provide sufficient work for the workers registered with them. In these circumstances agencies were thought to be cheaper and more practicable.

One manager had experience of delivering unqualified care workers through a managed vendor scheme and again the problem identified was not being able to have direct contact with the clients:

[Researcher: How important is that personal relationship with the care home managers?] Very important, and that is where you miss out with the managed vendor because I don't know any of the clients. I can't visit any of the homes, I don't know where my staff are working, I don't know the culture of the place, and I don't like that… We get staff coming back saying we don't like working there it is really awful blah blah… and we can't say anything. They think it's our fault and go off to work for another agency.'

<div align="right">Recruitment Consultant (7)</div>

The main challenges perceived to be impacting on the employment business sector as it relates to social care were around the increasing cost of compliance (of getting CRB checks done) and checking the legal status of migrant workers. One of the main issues was that by time the agency had

carried out a CRB check (usually at their own expense) the worker would have disappeared.

3:7 Summary

In this Chapter, we have provided an 'insider view' of the employment business sector as it relates to social care and a counter argument to the policy discourse surrounding the need to reduce overreliance on agencies. We have also explored the limited impact of 'Options for Excellence' in terms of business confidence ratings and the industry projections that nursing and social care employers will increase their use of agency workers as recruitment becomes more rather than less challenging.

However, far more than 'Options for Excellence', it is clear that managed vendor schemes are perceived to be having a significant and negative impact on the industry by de-professionalising the role of the recruitment consultant and reducing the quality of the employment services that can be offered.

What emerges from the study is a clearer picture of role of the recruitment consultant in social care. The role is perceived to be substantially different when applied to social care as compared to other recruitment industry sectors because of the need to combine both generic human resource management skills with more traditional aspects of social work management such as providing supervision and support to (agency) staff working in the tough and highly charged environments associated with front line social work. Indeed, many of the recruitment consultants in this study were themselves qualified social workers and often saw themselves using their social work skills to the full in supporting 'their' agency workers (in much the same way as would a permanent manager). Managed vendor schemes threaten this role at a number of levels. First, they place a barrier between the recruitment consultant and the social care manager. The argument is that without this direct contact it becomes very difficult to ensure a good fit between the placement and the candidate, threatening poorer services for service users. Master vendor schemes are said to be concerned only with finding the 'cheapest and quickest applicant'. Second, master vendor schemes are perceived to be squeezing employment businesses margins to an

unacceptable level while making ever greater demands in areas such as 'safe guarding'. As margins shrink, the volume of the business needs to expand with the consequence that the quality aspects of the employment business service (such as providing good support to agency workers out in the field) are 'quietly removed'.

Overall, employment businesses feel that their professional skills and expertise in addressing recruitment and retention issues are generally undervalued by local councils and that they are rarely treated fairly as 'ethical businesses'. According to Barstow's (2009) aforementioned survey of 151 councils, it is interesting that only 2 mentions are made of working with recruitment agencies to address recruitment issues. From the perspective of employment business, the main policy message is then about the need for fairness (that a realistic and proportionate level of profit is essential to provide an equally proportionate effective service) and the potential for more rather than less partnership working in the social care workforce of the future:

> 'When considering how best to secure flexible locum support it should be acknowledged that recruitment agencies, when used in a balanced fashion, provide a valuable service across all sectors'.

(Wheeler, 2008)

4: Agency Workers with a Professional Qualification

'I have done a little bit of everything [as an agency worker] … I enjoy it no end, it has been a fantastic experience for me, both in terms of enriching me professionally and personally.' (ASW 6)

4:1 Overview

In their study of agency social workers in three case study sites in England, Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) suggest that that for one reason or another, professionals who once valued and actively sought standard (long term permanent) contracts now seem to be opting for some kind of alternative. They discuss whether the retreat from permanent employment can be explained in terms of so called 'portfolio careers' and the 'free agent' perspective (pull factors), or whether such moves reflect an attempt to escape from deteriorating conditions of work in public organisations (push factors). In the free agent perspective, it is argued that an elite minority of highly skilled experts or 'gold collar' workers can now secure a variety of benefits (financial and otherwise) by working outside of conventional organisational hierarchies. The social workers they interviewed, including those who were newly qualified, reported being able to greatly increase their income – by as much as £5000 per annum – by undertaking agency work. While labour market scarcity has placed professional social workers in a very strong position as 'gold collar' workers in some areas, they suggest, however, that deteriorating organisational conditions are key influences on moves into agency work, and perhaps also decisions to leave public service employment altogether. They conclude that, arguably, it is only by addressing these broader issues that lasting solutions will be found.

In this chapter we aim to contribute to this debate through an analysis of forty-five in-depth interviews with qualified agency social workers (see Appendix 8a for participant profile). By way of a comparison, we also include findings from a small number of interviews with five occupational therapists who were also working as professionally qualified agency workers in social

care. We focus in particular on the implications for recruitment and retention, and for future policy on managing agency working.

4:2 Pathways to agency working

In keeping with the findings of earlier research (Carey, 2003, Kirkpatrick and Hoque's, 2006, Gamwell, 2007) most of the agency social workers we interviewed did not regard agency work as a long-term career option. Agency work often seemed to fit conveniently into participants' career pathways. Some examples include:

- Working as an unqualified agency worker leading up to or while studying for a social work degree or other qualification.

- Undertaking agency work on graduation because of difficulties or worries about not being able to find a permanent post.

- Undertaking agency work as a way of escaping from a permanent job, but with full intention to go permanent again in the near future when a more suitable post had been found (often using agency work as a way of testing if you would like to work somewhere permanently).

- Undertaking agency work to try out new areas with a view to a career change.

- Undertaking agency work in addition to full time permanent employment to earn extra money.

- Undertaking agency work as a life-style choice (working as and when required to fit round other hobbies and interests).

- Undertaking agency work in retirement (or leading up to retirement).

Where participants are nearing retirement age then the situation is somewhat different. For one participant working as an agency social worker in a local authority it was not possible to return to permanent work therein because he had retired early and would lose the benefits that had been conferred. Another participant who had left permanent local authority employment in his

early fifties was working as an interim management consultant and was one of the few participants in our study who might be called a *bone fide* 'gold collar' worker. According to Handy (quoted in Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006) 'going portfolio' means exchanging full time employment for independence, in effect managing one's own career through a series of short term assignments in different organisations and locations.

The advantages and disadvantages of agency social work are well documented in the literature:

> 'Supporters of agency social work will point to its flexibility, both for employer and "privileged" employee, its task-centred fit with the target-driven culture of performance management and will argue that the ability to work for a number of different employers adds a depth of experience and richness to a social work career... Critics of the agency way of working will point to the divisive nature of differentiated terms and conditions and to the fleeting nature of agency social workers' contact with teams, service users and communities' (Unwin, 2009).

Indeed, while the prospect of lucrative pay is often a significant draw into agency work, most agency workers are keen to highlight that the increased financial benefits are not in reality all that great:

> 'We get a little bit more but you have to put that aside to cover sickness, your pension and to cover holidays, and you pay your own taxes… Before I came here I was in [name of county] and I was paid top whack but the drawback was I spent four hours every day driving there and back. So in a sense, yes I get more money but I don't actually – health and wear and tear on the car. People will say agency workers get a good whack but when you actually weigh it all up long term it's not.' (ASW 8)[7]

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[7] Key to interview acronyms: ASW = Approved Social Worker; SW = Social Worker; NQSW = Newly Qualified Social Worker; OT = Occupational Therapist; CW = Unqualified Care Worker

With few exceptions, participants in this study viewed their employment status as 'agency workers' in very positive, almost emancipatory, terms. The main advantages were seen to be flexibility and choice over when and where you worked and perhaps most important of all, the ability to 'escape' or re-position oneself within the sector:

> 'There is the flexibility aspect. It's almost like being at a buffet. You can try little bits and different pieces… if you don't find it is for you or if you don't like the nature of the team you can make your excuses and move on somewhere else.' (SW 20)

> '[Researcher: What attracted you to agency work?] You have much more control over your situation. To a degree, you can pick and chose… If the ship is not very nice you can just leave and walk away from it. You are your own master …There are a lot of frying pans out there that are at boiling point and I am not going to walk into a frying pan and work myself silly for peanuts.' (ASW 15)

> 'I had one particular assignment where I actually only did a few days [and left]. Unfortunately it was in Children and Families and that reinforced my view of Children and Families these days. I don't like it, it doesn't suit me and I am too old for it. It was very much here is your case load - an extensive case load - get on with it. I didn't like the practice. I felt very unsafe... I have found that in Children's and Families there has been a different edge.' (SW 28)

Significantly, what often seems to translate the intention to go back into permanent employment into an actual decision to do so is the perception of having found not just the right job but the right team:

> 'I am going now to work in a permanent position in a relatively poorly paid London borough but I like the job and the people and the managers; they are a great bunch of people; they are a bit of an old fashioned social work team but they do understand twenty first century social work, the post will be right for me, I know it.'(ASW 23)

> 'I have worked in some great teams and I have worked in some dreadful teams… I have had some good managers, some very good

managers and some absolute stinkers. I fell on my feet here finding a good team and a very good supportive manager and the opportunity came up for permanent post and I went for it.' (SW 20)

'I got back into agency work last May… I wasn't very keen on the [first] placement. The dynamics didn't suit me…I am not paid for office politics so I left... Then I came here. I really like this team. It is a lovely team and we all get on with what we have to get on with… I was due to leave but my agency phoned me to say [the team manager] is not letting you go… I am wondering if she is planning to offer me something permanent.' (SW 22)

The other key driver which pushes agency workers back into permanent employment is the fear that agency work might dry up. This was a particular concern for the ASW's in the study who feared that they might not be in such demand as agency workers once greater numbers of health professionals are trained as 'Approved Mental Health Practitioners' (AMHPs) and can undertake part of their job role:

'I am looking actually at finding a permanent job, I feel in the future with the training of new AMHPs the day of the agency worker will disappear. The market will be flooded which would force me to seek more full time appointment.'(ASW 13)

One participant described how he lived by the 'seat of his pants' in that there was always the threat that agency work might dry-up:

'You don't know whether in fact you are going to be out of work in a week's time or not and all the time you know that local authorities cannot see ahead longer than a horizon of maximum six months and they just hope they can renew a contract in six months time and give you work'. (ASW 5)

With one exception, agency workers were not aware of the implications of 'Options for Excellence':

'What are my plans for the future? Well I think this time last year I was going to throw myself into doing agency work and being self employed totally. But since this time last year the work has changed a

touch. The economic climate means there is a cut back in agency workers. I know that social policy in terms of what the Government wants is to discourage agency workers. I am not sure that is feeding back into local authorities. I think local authorities are looking at the monetary side of it at the moment and financial side of it, so [agency work] is almost on the back burner at the moment. There are a few jobs going around and I am applying for substantive posts again'. (SW 29)

4:3 Induction, training and supervision

All the agency workers in this study commented that with most placements there is usually very little in the way of induction. It is asserted that one of the expectations of hiring an agency worker is that they will 'hit the ground running':

'[When you are an agency worker] doing the actual work doesn't feel any different but you have to hit the ground running. If you are not experienced it would be very difficult. You don't get the same induction; you are expected to know everything straight away.' (SW 23)

'[Researcher: were you offered any induction?] No. I was working within the first twenty minutes of arrival… In locum work you are not really assessed - you are just seen as competent and if you didn't perform well in the first two days then you would be out'. (ASW 7)

The extent to which training and supervision are offered to agency workers also varies from placement to placement. However, most of the agency workers we spoke to felt that they were discriminated against in terms of not being able to access the same level of training and support as their permanent colleagues. Again, this is often just accepted as part and parcel of what it means to be an agency worker:

'When you work as a locum the employer doesn't really see you as part of the team… Whereas working in local authority your progress and development is taken on so your boss wants to talk about your

progress from now for the next twelve months and sort of make an appraisal of where you are going. Whereas as a locum you are lucky to get any sort of training, or any meaningful supervision, the focus is on getting you just to clear work not on focusing on your own development'. (ASW 7)

'In my placements I have had supervision but not nearly enough supervision. I think the expectation is that locums can do the job. This maybe the case but we still need regular supervision so that we are able to provide good service to our clients' (ASW 13)

Some councils are however, known to be better than others:

'As a locum I have worked for two boroughs. [Borough 1] didn't offer me any training… When I asked them to pay for an AHMP refresher course they told me to go to my agency. But [Borough 2] are very good on training to refresh our skills and our practice which is brilliant. I don't think many other authorities would do that' (ASW 13)

Another disadvantage of being an agency worker is that they are often given the jobs no one else wants. A high expectation is also placed on agency workers as regards the amount of work they must get through when compared to their non-agency colleagues:

'Sometimes you can be given an unrealistic case load. You are expected to do the stuff that sometimes other people don't want to do… They look at your CV and say "oh right you can do that" and all of a sudden you have got this big complex caseload'. (ASW 7)

'Full time members of staff use and abuse us by giving us all the gritty nasty horrible jobs and the clients they don't actually want to deal with themselves.' (ASW 16)

'I have noticed with agency workers who I have come across who may be newly qualified… they are given all the rubbish to do. You know all the low level stuff, basically almost support worker type tasks' (ASW 6)

Working for the Agency

Indeed, agency workers often find it difficult to integrate fully within the team and often face resentment and hostility from colleagues:

> 'I felt that as an agency worker you are slightly detached from the team, you are not viewed as a permanent team member. I think that can have its advantages and its disadvantages. Certainly the disadvantages are that you don't feel part of the collective, you are not recognised as part of the team even though you are there and you perform your function and your duties. But on the plus side you tend to be less drawn into the politics of the team and the more difficult personal relationships that can occur.' (SW 20)

> 'Basically people in teams don't really see you as part of their team if you are working as a locum. They just think you are there for the money and getting paid twice as much as them for the same kind of work. There's a little bit of resentfulness as well' (ASW 7)

> 'A lot of the local authorities, they don't like agency workers, they need us but they don't like us. There is a lot of resentment about the money and we get paid.' (SW 21)

> '[Researcher: did they welcome you to the team?] Not as warmly as I would like but everywhere I go it is a mixed bag. I mean I am very work centred and sometimes you know I might have a little small talk with them, because I wouldn't want people to think I was anti social, but I really am conscious I don't want to get into the office politics as to who likes who and who likes what and management and whatever. I just try my hardest to be neutral because I have a job to do. I want to get paid and I want to have a reference at the end… There are other issues as well… there is racism everywhere I have been on placement.' (SW 22)

Agency workers were likely to receive a more warm welcome where they were they visibly seen to be helping relieve pressure on a team:

> 'The team was not very organised when I first came and had a lot of problems. I think because they needed locum worker they were more appreciative of me.' (ASW 14)

There were also examples of fitting in well because some teams comprised mostly of agency staff:

'The teams I have been in for the last couple of years have had a larger proportion of locums to permanent so it hasn't been that difficult settling in.' (SW 21)

4:4 Support provided by employment businesses

As described in the previous chapter, recruitment consultants felt that they played an important role in supporting their agency workers, as one participant put it, 'acting as a social worker for the social workers'. However, from the perspective of agency workers themselves, most felt largely unsupported by their agencies. According to one participant, 'Agencies are glorified salesmen.' (SW 20) Once on a placement, they saw the main role of the recruitment consultant as largely administrative:

'My agency phones me on a weekly basis, just to find out my hours. They don't ring me to find out if the placement is going OK. They don't ring me to find out if there are any issues that have come up. I think my agency in particular is quite bad because other agencies that I know of they have been more supportive of their workers'. (SW 21)

'I think I have worked for about four different ones. The one I am with at the moment seems to keep in the background... With some agencies you are very much their businesses and you are a commodity which they hawk around and sell. I did worry about that at first, it didn't suit me as a person, but I think you will find that the bigger agencies are a bit more professional in how they treat us and a bit more professional about their expectations of employers. There are a few fly by nights and it's a shame because they can give the whole thing a bad name'

There were exceptions and some good practice was identified, especially as regards the importance of recruitment consultants having an understanding of the social work profession:

'I find the agency I am with very supportive. They haven't all got the professional knowledge… I have always been surprised there aren't enough agencies where their consultants are social workers or have a social work background.'(ASW 6)

'I belong to a very well known agency very much linked to the British Association of Social Workers. They are quite proactive in education, but I have never really found other agencies to be so proactive.' (ASW 15)

In the accounts of the agency workers, few mentions were made of the impact of master vendor schemes. However, one participant did stress the important of the role of the recruitment consultant:

'Recruitment and selection could be better…There should be more rigour from the agencies about the kind of people that they employ. I was newly qualified myself once, and so we all were, but I think there should be more done in terms of putting more experienced people in posts. There should also be more rigour in terms of identifying the clear role of that agency worker. I have found my best experiences have been where I have actually been told - there's the job, this is what we want you to do and let's be specific about how your assistance will help us during this period'. (ASW 6)

4:5 Newly qualified social workers

Although newly qualified social workers comprised a small proportion of the social workers interviewed as part of this study, there are important policy and methodological reasons for including separate information on their experiences of agency working. Firstly, existing research (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Morgan *et al.* 2007; Wallis-Jones and Lyons 2003) has noted the number of newly qualified social workers choosing to work in employment agencies and suggested their motivations for doing this may differ from their more experienced counterparts. Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) found that agency work appealed to them as it afforded opportunities to explore different options and locations before opting for a permanent post. In a survey of

agency workers in the West Midlands, influences toward agency work upon graduation were found to include higher rates of pay, flexibility of working, immediacy of employment, help in finding work, experience of a variety of settings and no wish for permanency of employment (Morgan, Holt and Williams, 2007). In Carey's study (2006) one recently qualified agency worker reflected upon her initial lack of confidence in relation to her role as a care manager owing to what she described as the 'poor placements' she had experienced on her Diploma in Social Work qualifying programme. She felt that this problem had been quickly resolved after a year working as an agency worker because of the opportunities it afforded to work with so many clients, carers and other professionals. At the same time, other reports from newly qualified social workers working as agency staff have expressed the view that it is potentially de-skilling because of the lack of access to training and the tendency to give agency workers the more routine office based jobs (Carey 2007; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008). Wallis Jones and Lyons (2003) suggested that newly qualified social workers working for agencies tended to be slightly older than their counterparts in permanent posts but were unsure whether this was because they found it harder to obtain permanent posts in their specialism of choice or because older recruits are more experienced and confident and chose agency working as a way of increasing their chances of finding innovative new posts.

Secondly, the work of the Social Work Task Force (2009) and the establishment of newly qualified social worker pilot schemes in both services for children (Children's Workforce Development Council 2009) and for adults (Skills for Care Undated) have highlighted the continuing policy interest in the extent to which newly qualified social workers, employers, and people using services and their families feel that their studies have prepared them for future employment. In this respect, there is an overlap between this study and another project funded under the Social Care Workforce Research Initiative – *Into the Workforce.*

An important theme for all the newly qualified social workers interviewed was the need to find employment as soon as possible after graduation. To this end, they reached agency working by two different routes. The first occurred where participants had been unable to find permanent employment:

'I didn't really know much about agencies. I had heard bits at University but not a lot, so I basically did some research on the internet and found all different social care agencies that way…It was because there were no social work jobs around at that time, so really [I] didn't have much choice.' (NQSW1)

The others already had experience of agency work through working as a care worker. In this sense, as the next chapter will show, their experiences had much in common with those who were working as care workers in order to finance their studies:

'I finished my placement in May… and then, I don't know why, the graduation was in December…so in between that time…because I didn't have my GSCC registration…I did a lot of agency work, but not based around social work. It was mostly what I was doing before, like family support, nursery work.' (NQSW3)

All participants spoke of the advantages of agency working in terms of increased pay, particularly for those who had acquired debts while studying:

'I needed the money – decent money!' (NQSW4)

However, pay alone was not the only benefit of working for an agency; it also offered opportunities to acquire experience in a variety of fields:

'The pay is excellent and the freedom - especially as a newly qualified - to try something different and get a feel for where you feel best placed to settle down.' (NQSW5)

In contrast with agency workers whose experience and expertise offered a premium for which employers and agencies were willing to pay, the newly qualified social workers interviewed accepted that their lack of experience meant that they had not been successful in applying for permanent posts:

'I think I got rejected five times because they said, "Oh, you know, you're newly qualified. You don't have the experience. You look like you're going to be learning, but we want somebody who can just come in, get on with it, and we don't have to bother with much."

That's all the comments they were giving back to my agency.' (NQSW3)

'I moved to…London to live with my partner and applied for a few positions in [various boroughs and surrounding county councils] and was not invited for any interviews. I therefore applied [to] approximately seven agencies as I started to become quite concerned that I would not get a qualified position…A lot of the agencies suggested I do unqualified for approximately a year also - most London boroughs advertise a newly qualified position as having had 18 months post qualifying experience!' (NQSW5)

The need to acquire experience in different specialisms was thought to be especially important for those who had not undertaken practice placements in the area in which they wanted. For example, one informant wanted to work in adult services but had undertaken practice placements in children and families teams.

The comments participants made about employers' preference for more experienced workers highlighted the tensions that exist between employers' expectations about what social workers recruited from agencies should be able to do and the actual level of experience among participants. Participants recognised that experiences could be variable and that sometimes their individual treatment reflected wider problems within the organisation that had employed them as an agency worker:

[The council] who I work for at the moment [are] brilliant. My manager is supportive…and yes the team are welcoming…and you know I do really feel valued as a worker. However [my previous job] was completely the opposite. I didn't have any induction, any sort of training. I was given a huge caseload to manage for two days a week and you know to the point that I felt that it was unreasonable for me to do that amount of work in the time I had…If the team is not managed well…and everyone is disgruntled then, yes, you end up in that as well.' (NQSW2)

Similarly, another participant reported that he had received no induction and 'just cracked on with it' (NQSW6). Indeed, as time went on so many other

members of the team were also from agencies he was, in effect, one of the more experienced members of the team.

In contrast to the idea of agency working as a 'retreat from permanent employment', with one exception, participants had either applied or intended to apply for a permanent post, despite the impact that they thought this would have in terms of their levels of pay in the short term. Permanent contracts of employment were thought to be preferable in terms of increasing job security, career progression, and reducing the time they spent on travel.

In summary, while newly qualified social workers shared the views of participants who were more experienced in terms of the advantages of agency working in terms of pay, flexibility, and variety, they differed in terms of how they located it in terms of their long term career plans. Newly qualified social workers saw agency working as a short term solution to finding paid work and acquiring different types of experience. However, they did not envisage making a long term commitment to working for a particular agency.

4:6 Occupational therapists

Historically, there have been longstanding recruitment problems in recruiting sufficient occupational therapists, although demand for their services is projected to rise as a result of increases in the number of ageing people with disabilities (Riley *et al.* 2008). However, unlike nursing or social work, until Riley and colleagues' study (2008) of occupational therapists in local authorities, there has been comparatively little recent research into the occupational therapy workforce and, so it would seem, none on the experiences of those working for agencies. The difficulties in recruiting occupational therapists for this part of the study are consistent with the evidence from the survey that local councils recruited fewer occupational therapists from agencies than other types of worker. While this means that the sample is extremely small, their experiences are of interest in view of the lack of published information from alternative sources.

A seemingly important contrast between the experiences of occupational therapists and of social workers has been the history of providing freelance

and locum posts within local authorities which mean that it has always been possible for workers to acquire control over where and how they worked:

> [After qualifying, I had a permanent post]. Then I actually did go and work for an agency after about three years… Then I went into local authority and I was permanent… At that point, I [emigrated]… When I came back… I went back into local authorities and I was agency for a while working for a small agency but most of the time I was permanent… [I've had a variety of jobs]… Some of the time I've worked for locums, a lot of the time it's been permanent jobs, and then the last 10 years… I was freelance… when I was self employed, I got a bit tired of keeping all the receipts and all that stuff… [Now I am with an agency].' (OT1)

> 'I have been an OT since [early 1990s] I think, agency and permanent… The first post I had was with an agency, and then it was permanent, and then it went back to agency. Fluctuating but always in [this specialism].' (OT4)

In common with some care workers, as the following chapter will show, agency working could also be combined with posts for which participants had a permanent contract of employment. This allowed them to combine job security with an opportunity to be paid at more than their usual hourly rate:

> 'I will continue in my permanent position for the time being and review it as and when needed. The extra money that is available to locum is attractive but the security of full time work is more important… Many colleagues who have been locums… agree that it is fine when you are in work - the money, the locum pay, is fantastic but the security is the down side and they never know when they are going to be out of work.' (OT2)

There also seemed to be a difference between the priorities of younger and older participants. For the more experienced occupational therapists, agency work offered greater autonomy and they were less likely to consider taking a permanent post whereas for younger workers there were pragmatic reasons for working as an agency worker, as for instance, among one internationally recruited worker who ultimately intended to return to her country of birth:

> 'The advantages of working for an agency are the flexibility, in terms of being able to give a week's notice and move to a different position, a different job. There's a higher pay rate than if you were a permanent position, although, I guess, I've talked about it with colleagues…and by the time you work out holiday pay and everything, it doesn't actually work out to be much different, whether you take a permanent or a contractor role. So, aside from the pay, which doesn't prove to be more, it is the short term contracts. I guess…If you want to take a holiday for six weeks, you can do that.' (OT3)

Analyses of this small sample suggested that while occupational therapists shared the views of other participants that agency working offered greater flexibility for more pay, it also appeared that age, rather than professional background, may have had greater influence upon participants' experiences. Thus younger occupational therapists, like newly qualified social workers, may look to agency working as providing a flexible solution to their current priorities, among older workers, a preference for agency working may reflect a deeper wish for greater autonomy over their professional lives. However, this would need to be investigated in further research.

4:5 Discussion

A recent survey of agency workers working in nursing and social care undertaken by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2009) would seem to support many of the key qualitative findings above: that that there is a high level of job satisfaction to be gained from being an agency worker; that most agency workers are satisfied with their pay rates; and that 13% of agency workers in the sector express a wish to see their agency provide them with more training, a number that is double across the other sectors.

The findings also lend further support to Kirkpatrick and Hoque's (2006) view that agency social work is better understood as an escape from deteriorating organisational conditions rather than a means to becoming a 'free agent'. Pulling together the literature, Unwin (2009) charts how increasing workloads; resource shortages; constant reorganisations; political interference; negative

media portrayal; and the falling value of pension schemes, no longer make local government the attractive employer of tradition, leading to the creation of a local authority workforce with high levels of stress and low levels of morale. In the accounts of the agency social workers there is a very clear message about the need to improve pay and conditions in the sector as a means of reducing overreliance on agency staff:

> 'I support the idea that social services should use less agency staff but I think if you don't look after your own staff in terms of conditions and money then you will need them.' (ASW 23)

However, our analysis also allows us to pin point some quite specific measures which might usefully be prioritised to address the current situation amid ever increasing resource constraints. Certainly there is a strong element of 'escapism' in the accounts of agency social workers; however it is clear that this is related more to certain kinds of organisational cultures rather than deteriorating conditions *per se*. More specifically, the accounts of agency social workers are littered with references to poor management and 'office politics' which might usefully be seen as a synonym for lack of team cohesion and development. Indeed, more so than 'pay' or 'case load' it is these relational issues that are often pinpointed as the main reason why people seek to re-position themselves within the sector: to go agency; to swap placement; or to stick with a placement and go permanent. However, as shown in Table 8 overleaf, local council workforce strategies designed to tackle recruitment and retention appear to overlook these seemingly fundamental issues, with very few measures targeted at areas such as team building, leadership and management development. While it might be argued that the experiences of agency social workers are not representative of the wider social work workforce, our findings suggest that they are not in fact 'a breed apart' but workers moving in and out of permanent and temporary employment. Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) make the key point that agency work represents a kind of pressure valve – a method of recycling people by allowing those who are disaffected to remain in the profession. Overall, our argument is most eloquently summed up by one participant:

> 'Many teams which rely on agency staff are dysfunctional. They are characterised by poor management practices. In these teams, many

permanent staff are 'burnt out' and the overall culture or working environment is poor.' (SW 26)

Table 8: Local Councils' Approaches to Recruiting and Retaining Staff (Reported in Barstow, 2009)

	no. of mentions	% (93 respondents)
Training		
Secondments for social work degree/'grow your own'	20	21.5
Career development/training (general mentions)	11	11.8
'Emerging Leaders programme'	2	2.2
Financial		
Make sure salaries in line with neighbouring authorities	14	15.1
Payment increments	13	13.9
'Golden Hello' (ranging from £1k-£4k)	11	11.8
Relocation package	6	6.5
Retention allowance	3	3.2
Car loans/allowances	3	3.2
Subsided home ownership scheme	2	2.2
Season ticket loan	2	2.2
Work environment		
Offer flexible working	8	8.6
Increase leave allowance	2	2.2
Advertising		
Recruitment fairs	10	10.7
Advertise nationally	10	10.7
Advertise on council website/internet	9	9.7
Advertise locally	7	7.5
Continuous rolling advertisement	8	8.6
Recruitment micro site	4	4.3
Other		
Develop relationships with local universities	9	9.7
Recruit from abroad	8	8.6
Persuade temporary/agency staff to become permanent	4	4.3
Recruitment agencies	2	2.2

Barstow (2009)

Furthermore, while it is suggested that 'agency working' itself poses risks to service users (Carey, 2008), these risks might also be more usefully understood in terms of poor management practice. The most pressing safeguarding issue would seem to be the fairly widespread poor practice in which the most complex cases are allocated to those team members who are

then routinely denied equal access to induction, training and supervision on the grounds that they are 'agency';

> 'What my manager has done, because she like myself is a locum, is take on board all the complaints… She has a very open door policy. She says to people "before you leave come and talk to me. Tell me why you are leaving. What could we do to make it better?" One of the things she is saying now is that when locums come into the teams we should have an induction no matter how brief, we should tell them all about the training and we should gradually introduce cases, not load them up on the same day… and that seems to be working because we are now in a position where we have taken in agency workers like myself and we are integrating them into the system.'

5: Agency Care Workers

5:1 Overview

Although the literature on qualified agency social workers has increased (Unwin, 2009; Gamwell, 2007; Carey, 2007; Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2008), little research has looked at the perspectives of agency care workers. For example, only six per cent of the jobs done by participants in a study of care workers (Hall and Wreford, 2007) involved agency working. In other studies, with a few exceptions (for example, Cangiano et al., 2009), agency care workers have either been excluded or they have failed to distinguish between care workers employed by temporary recruitment agencies and those with permanent or fixed term contracts. In the limited literature that exists, contrasts have been drawn between so-called unskilled or commodified care work and the comparative privileges held by the minority with professional qualifications or specialist experience (Unwin, 2009; Ungerson, 2000). In this context, this chapter will suggest, firstly, that for some people agency care work offers a way of acquiring greater autonomy over their working lives; and that where agency care work is the means by which people make a transition to a more skilled occupation, the distinction between professional and non professional occupations becomes more blurred.

A total of fifteen agency care workers were interviewed through a combination of individual face to face interviews (n=7), telephone interviews (n=2) and one group interview (n=6). Strikingly, with one exception, all of the participants were women. However, their age and ethnic background were more diverse (Appendix 8b shows the age and ethnic distribution of the care workers who took part in the study). The ages of the participants ranged from those in their early 20s to a woman in her 50s. The majority defined themselves as Black Africans.

Participants' backgrounds reflected the picture presented by agency managers who commented that women, particularly those from minority ethnic groups and/or those with school age children, predominated in their workforce. Researchers have suggested that there are important reasons

why agency care workers may have a slightly different profile from that found in the social care workforce as a whole. Firstly, it has been suggested that people from minority ethnic groups are over represented among agency workers (Conley, 2002; Conley, 2003). Secondly, there are proportionally more migrant workers (that is those who were born abroad and who moved to the UK as adults) working in social care than in the UK labour market as a whole (Cangiano et al., 2009) and that, of these, proportionally more seem to be employed in agency working (Jayaweera and Anderson, 2008).

5:2 Advantages and disadvantages

Without exception, participants reported that their main reason for choosing to work for an agency was the flexibility that this offered in terms of the hours that they worked each week. As is well known, many women, in particular, combine paid care work with unpaid caring responsibilities for children (Hall and Wreford, 2007) and adults (McFarlane, 2001). For many participants, agency working gave them greater control over the hours they worked when compared with a permanent contract, as one participant remembered:

> 'I found that company very demanding, and not very sympathetic or helpful when you have children…One day I…needed to have half an hour off so I could take them to school and they just made me feel that big and had me in tears…so that is when everything started going downhill and I thought I needed to leave…I mean I was only contracted to do twenty hours, but they were just all the time on the phone. They would phone you at 9pm at night, 'Can you start at 7 in the morning?'… [One time] I was in hospital…and they were phoning [me], asking [me] to go to work.' (CW10)

Similarly, another participant commented that agency working enabled her to spend more time with her family when compared with her previous job in which she had a permanent contract as a night care worker. Furthermore, by doing this she also acquired greater control over the intensity of the work she did:

'And my husband, he was actually complaining because I was doing four continuous nights and it was actually kind of heavy where I was working, so it was stressing me…Because of the workload which was becoming too much for me…I had to quit the permanent.' (CW6)

Younger participants without children shared the view that agency working offered the advantage of flexibility but, for them, what was important was the greater autonomy that they had:

'The main advantage for me really is the flexibility of picking the shifts you want to do when you want to work, and I like travelling a lot, so you know I don't have to give notice. I can take a month off, I can just go if I want. Just really not being tied down is what I like about it the most.' (CW14)

'I don't have to be compelled to the rota, I can chose the time I want to work and the time I want to work like time to do my own personal thing so it gives me that flexibility of time. That is why I decided to join the agency – [I could get] full time employment as a support worker but I am not ready to take it up yet.' (CW11)

Participants recognised that working in this way also had its disadvantages – namely in terms of limited benefits such as sickness or pension entitlements. At the same time, some participants pointed out that they often earned more for working weekends or unsocial hours than those on permanent contracts because, unlike many employers, the agency would pay enhanced rates at these times.

5:3 Pathways to agency working

Participants described a variety of ways in which they had come to work for an agency. It is thought that the majority of care workers enter care work in their 30s, having already experienced work in other occupations (Skills for Care, 2008). In most instances, they had tried other occupations in which women predominate, such as retail or hospitality:

'When I came into this country I was staying with my sister who was doing care work, so she was explaining to me what kind of a job she was doing and I thought, 'no', so I worked with (an) agency but in hotels and then I didn't enjoy it…as much as I thought I was going to, so I thought, 'Let me try the care work,' and then I ended up in care work.' (CW2)

However, for three young graduates, agency working in social care was a way of finding paid employment which they thought would give them higher job satisfaction than other types of office-based work but, at the same time, in which they would not be disadvantaged by lack of experience. Another participant was a student nurse who used agency working as a way of supplementing her NHS bursary. This highlights how employment agencies may act as an entry point into social care, especially as many employment agencies have a high street presence so they are more visible to potential new recruits than other types of employer.

5:4 Patterns of agency working

A clear finding that emerged from the interviews was that there does not appear to be a single pattern of agency working but that workers use agencies in different ways, depending on their circumstances. The most frequent model was for participants to use agency working as a way of combining part time paid employment with unpaid care. Although numerically women with young children comprised the majority of this group, there was also an older spouse carer among those interviewed. A smaller group used agency working as a way of supplementing part time paid work elsewhere for which they had a permanent contract. This allowed them to increase their income but also meant that they retained some flexibility over their working hours. Two participants used agency work as a way of combining part time paid employment with study or other interests. The final group were in full time paid employment where, to all intents and purposes, they had a permanent contract with the agency.

Another source of variation among participants was the extent to which they worked regularly in the same place or with the same clients. In areas where

recruitment difficulties were common, distinctions between working for an agency and having a permanent contract of employment were blurred:

> 'I did a degree in health and social care and after I did my degree I wasn't actually sure which route I wanted to take, so I thought the best way to get experience would be to join an agency so I joined a health and social care agency, which was what my degree was in, and I worked in different areas. I worked in learning disabilities, elderly, mental health, and I worked in one particular place in mental health which I really, really liked. They offered me quite a lot of shifts and I ended up working there [as a crisis support worker] for four years, so really that is my employment history.' (CW14)

In another instance, regular working at the same place led to an offer of a permanent contract. Where service users were self funding or on direct payments, they could choose to 'buy in' the same worker from the agency so some workers could choose to work with the same person or people each week. Others preferred the variety:

> 'It's really interesting because you go to different places, whereas if you're in a permanent job you're stuck with the same [service user] group…With [the] agency, you go to different places so you're more experienced I suppose, or more exposed to different client groups which other people aren't really.' (CW4)

Existing research (Conway and Briner, 2005) has highlighted the importance of the psychological contract between employers and employees which exists in conjunction with a formal contract of employment. Although, with one exception, participants were not formally contracted to work for a particular agency, what was clear was that some workers and some agencies could develop relationships in which workers and agency felt a clear sense of responsibility to each other. A key factor was the extent to which agencies respected workers' reasons for being unable to work in a particular place or time:

> 'It just depends on the agency, because, to be honest, I've worked with other agencies here, when they ask you to go and do a shift

and you said no, they'll punish you for a week without giving you shifts.' (CW1)

In this sense, workers would trade disadvantages in terms of pay against advantages such as a sense of reciprocity or being responsive to workers' preferences:

'Like I say if you want to take time off you know they're very, very flexible. They can easily get someone to cover your shift, and when you come back you don't lose your clients [to another worker] - they're still there. So that's one good thing that they do, and they're very accommodating I would say.' (CW7)

'I wasn't really specially looking for temporary work but I just thought the people that came in they were really nice… I've only ever worked for this agency - no I did, I worked for another agency and what I didn't like about it is, I didn't like where you were sent. It was far too far [away].' (CW8)

5:5 Training, induction and supervision

It has been suggested (Gospel and Thompson, 2003) that one of the clear benefits from the establishment of the National Minimum Standards developed after the passage of the *Care Standards Act 2000* has been the greater attention paid to training within the care sector. One participant compared the current situation with that which had existed in the past:

'Now we're having a lot of training, we never used to have a lot… Lately we've had the first aid here, we've had moving and handling, we've had food hygiene. I'm actually supposed to be doing the NVQ at the moment but I've sort of had a break and stopped in between.' (CW8)

Another participant said that the agency had sponsored her to do a distance learning course at the local college of further education. However, a contrast between agency care workers and agency workers in professional

occupations was the extent to which they were offered 'on the job' training in the workplaces in which they worked:

> 'The other day, I [had been] in for the first shift the previous day, so [a member of] staff came and she was like, 'Can you go and do, blah, blah, blah,' then I said, 'Yes, but do you mind telling me, or maybe can I have the books to read what I am supposed to do?' And she was like, 'I thought you said you did a shift here,' and I said, 'Yes, that was once for a few hours.' I couldn't catch up with everything and I worked with someone else not this person.' (CW3)

At its most extreme, the interaction between workplace culture and the standards that were expected produced dilemmas when practices in a workplace conflicted with what they had been taught. In these circumstances, workers had to balance the risk of being held responsible for an accident or risking not being offered work in a particular establishment:

> '[You might] be told maybe to use a hoist. You say, 'No, I was not trained to use a hoist alone,' but they tell you, 'In this place we use the hoist alone, you can use it alone,' but you say, 'No, I have not been trained and I cannot use it,' so they say, 'You have no training. You don't want to use it. Go home.' So the next thing they will call your agency [and say], 'Don't send this person to this place [again].' (CW5)

> 'So if I go in and say, 'I'm not going to use the hoist on my own because the law says two people need to use a hoist. What if something happens?' and everything that we've been taught… or you're supposed to use gloves and they're not providing you with gloves and if you can challenge them and say, 'Well, we do actually need gloves. Can we have some gloves?' So they think, 'Oh, are you getting too big headed,' or something, and they'll like, 'Oh, we don't want you there.' But you're actually standing up for yourself because there's actually nobody to protect you really. As she said, if they phone the office and say, 'Oh, we don't want that person,' nobody is really going to phone and find out why, what

happened. So you need to cover your own back because nobody else is really going to cover it.' (CW4)

5:6 'Fitting in'

An important theme for the care workers was the sometimes uneasy relationships that they had with other staff with whom they worked, especially those on permanent contracts:

> 'Sometimes you don't feel the work is so [difficult] because [the other staff] will respect you, no matter your colour, no matter what, at least they will respect you… And then [in other places], your colleagues, they know your name, but they will be going, 'Oh, it's that agency staff' which is very irritating, they should call you by your name… because… I'm not an agency, I'm [first name]… Personally, then you would feel, 'Okay, then it's [because I am from an] agency,' but they look at my colour as well, then you take it maybe from there. You're thinking, 'Well, maybe it's racism, maybe it's not, it's that word "agency".' (CW5)

5:7 Summary

Interviews with the agency workers revealed the variety of ways in which care workers used agency working as a way of enabling them to combine paid employment with other commitments in their lives such as caring responsibilities or study. In many instances, working at the same workplace or with the same individual service users gave workers similar continuities to those obtained through a permanent contract of employment. The interviews also indicated the balance between structure and agency (Giddens, 1991) in which care workers seek to obtain some control over the ways in which they work.

6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6:1 Overview

In social care, polices and practices have been developed aimed at: managing the procurement of agency staff (primarily to reduce the costs associated with agency working); and reducing the demand for agency staffing (primarily through measures to address the underlying recruitment and retention crises). This indicates a shift away from the un-coordinated and often haphazard approach to temporary staffing in the past toward a planned approach in which there is some deliberation over and deliberate intention around agency use (Kirkpatrick et al., 2009). While some progress has been made to move away from *ad hoc* solutions toward more effective workforce planning, it would seem that 'Options for Excellence' has not been the driving force behind this as compared to the pressure to deliver efficiency savings more generally. Very few social services managers interviewed for the study (working at both strategic and operational levels) had heard of 'Options for Excellence' and of the targets set with regard to reducing over reliance on agency workers. Significantly, while there was much activity across the three case study sites with respect to addressing the recruitment and retention crises more generally, no strategic working groups had been set-up to look specifically at the issue of how to reduce over reliance on agency workers.

6:2 What measures are being introduced to reduce over reliance on agency workers?

In the survey, 80% of respondents said that their local council had introduced measures to reduce the use of agency workers. Procurement management or vendor management schemes had been implemented by almost three quarters of respondents while over a third had developed an in-house staff bank. Although just over half of respondents had just one method for recruiting agency workers, usually through a managed vendor scheme, the

remainder used a combination. The most frequent combination was the use of an in-house staff bank and a managed vendor scheme. A very similar pattern was in evidence across the three cases study sites as regards a mix of vendor management and in-house staff banks.

As touched upon above, the high number of councils implementing vendor management reflects that in most instances, reducing the costs associated with agency working rather than the use of agency workers per se has been the driving force behind the developments taking place with respect to agency working. In both the survey and the case study sites, examples of other means of reducing over reliance on agency workers were rare especially when it came to innovative ways of managing staff shortages. Examples included: the establishment of dedicated peripatetic or 'relief' teams whose members went wherever they were needed; asking staff to take on extra duties; plans to reduce sickness rates; and the introduction of flexible working arrangements in the form of zero hours contracts. It may be that management of staff shortages in social care is an area for further research. Qualitative data from the case study sites indicated that managers often found these measures difficult to implement. Indeed, staff banks were rarely seen as providing a total solution to staffing shortages in that they were often be subject to many of the same recruitment and retention challenges as mainstream services.

In the case study sites, different measures to address the underlying recruitment and retention crises seemed to have been implemented far more readily. Measures included: local advertising campaigns; retainer schemes to encourage social workers to stay in post after qualifying; care champions making presentations to encourage people to consider a career in social care; role re-designation (effectively down grading certain posts where it is not possible to secure a qualified worker); international recruitment; and traineeships whereby local councils fund students or existing employees to undertake the social work degree on the contractual basis that they will then work for the council for a period of two years. However, despite these best efforts, our survey suggests that staff shortages remain as the most frequent reason for using agency staff. This is consistent with other reports (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2009, Skills for Care and Development, 2009) which suggest that councils still have 'hard to fill

vacancies' and skills shortages in terms of the need for social workers. It is not surprising to find then that in our survey of councils with adult social care responsibilities, ninety two per cent (n=51) of the responding authorities had used agency workers in the 2008-2009 financial year.

6:3 The impact of vendor management

The implementation of vendor management in social care would appear to be delivering the same kind of gains and loses as have already been documented in health care. As Hoque et al. (2008) conclude for the NHS, 'While [vendor management] may well minimise costs for employers and scope for provider opportunism, this can be at the expense of undermining relationships between line managers and agencies and the associated capabilities to offer more customised provision than existed previously'. In our survey, almost 60 per cent of respondents reported that their expenditure on agency working in 2008-2009 was either less or the same as their expenditure in 2007-2008. Among those who had spent more in 2008-2009, an important reason for increased expenditure on agency workers was if the authority had been involved in re-provisioning services. However, in the context of the continued (Hall and Wilton 2009) and anticipated pressures (Bundred 2009) on local authority expenditure, almost two thirds of respondents anticipated that they would be spending less on agency workers in 2009-10 and nearly a third thought that it would be the same. Only one respondent thought it would increase.

At the same time, employment business managers argue that vendor management has reduced margins to such an extent that key quality components of their service are under threat (such as the ability to meet the demand for more and more safeguarding checks and to provide good support to social workers while out on placement). Employment business managers also felt that their professional skills and expertise in addressing recruitment and retention issues are generally undervalued by local councils and that they are rarely included in workforce planning or treated fairly as 'ethical businesses'. Among recruitment consultants and employment business managers, the call was for greater partnership working perhaps reflecting the

sense in which the current implementation of vendor management has been captured by the logic of cost minimisation. Here, the focus is not so much on building relationships and customising placements, but on mass resourcing solutions and on high volume Fordist-style service delivery (Hoque et al., 2008).

Indeed, an interesting finding of the study is that managers working in social services with responsibility for procuring agency staff did not support the views of the agency managers and recruitment consultants as regard the impact of vendor management on the quality of service being provided. Davis-Blake and Broschak (quoted in Kirkpatrick et al. 2009) note that agency workers are often treated as commodities that can be ordered in much the same way as one orders spare parts for a piece of office equipment. In this sense, social work managers may not concern themselves with vendor management in the same way that they may not take an interest in who supplies and services the office photocopier. In relation to the NHS, Hoque et al. (2008) note that the role played by finance and procurement managers in decisions concerning agency staff had increased, while line (and perhaps HR managers) had lost ground.

6:4 Agency working in the statutory sector

In the literature, agency working is often viewed as posing risks to service users (Carey, 2008). However, most of the social services managers we interviewed saw agency working as playing an important role in 'keeping the show on the road'. They described how because of the cost implication all other options for managing staff shortages would need to be exhausted before contacting an agency. Once on placement, good agency social workers were thought to be able to get through high volumes of work and could refresh teams by bringing in new skills and insights from other areas. Agency workers themselves point to the many advantages agency working can bring not in terms of flexibility but also to the opportunities for broadening their practice experiences. This was especially the case for newly qualified social workers who were often using agency work to give them the

experience and insight they needed to find and secure the right permanent job.

An interesting finding of our study is that, while staff shortages continue to be the main reason for using agency workers, agency social workers are increasingly being brought in to manage specific projects of pieces of work (for example, to tackle a waiting list) rather than just to fill a vacancy or provide cover in an unspecified way. This was considered to be 'good practice' in the management of agency social workers.

Where agency working was viewed less positively was in situations where a particular team or department had become unbalanced with more agency workers than permanent staff. Such circumstances were thought to be symptomatic of underlying organisational issues (such as an on-going restructuring process, a lengthy recruitment freeze or poor management) which had caused too many permanent staff to leave and then not to be replaced.

Significantly, it was this imbalance (rather than agency working per se) which was perceived to threaten continuity of service and to put service users at risk. Such situations were dangerous because of the potential for a high turnover of agency workers who could leave at much shorter notice than their permanent counterparts. Indeed, one of the main advantages of being an agency worker was the scope it left for 'moving on' if conditions were too adverse.

A significant safeguarding issue to emerge in the study is the practice whereby agency social workers are given complex case loads (usually those no one else in the team wants to deal with) and then routinely denied access to the same level of induction, training and supervision as permanent colleagues. This is justified on the grounds that they are "agency". For newly qualified social workers the lack of induction is also a significant issue. The expectation is that they would be able to "hit the ground running" in the same way as their more experienced agency colleagues. Overall, we would conclude that it is the poor management of agency workers rather than agency working itself which poses a risk to service users. Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) suggest that while some social care managers have been keen adopt

HR practices that might help to improve the management of agency workers implementation has been hindered by concerns regarding employment liabilities. The rules state that if an agency worker has been in post for twelve months and is deemed to be an 'employee' rather than a 'worker' (as determined by the way the agency worker is treated by the client organisation), they are entitled to unfair dismissal and a permanent post should they request one. This has led to reluctance among some social care managers to offer agency workers the same training and opportunities as permanent members of staff.

6:5 Agency working in the care sector

In relation to agency working in the care sector, a slightly different set of issues emerge. For statutory services decisions about when to use agency staff are often based around safeguarding issues and the point at which service users and carers may be put at risk if a staff shortage is not filled by the use of an agency worker. However, the same principle is not consistently applied across the private care sector where the overriding consideration is often cost control, meaning that in some organisations agency workers are not used even when staff shortages have become acute.

It is also the case that, in some geographical areas employment agencies do not exist which can supply the care sector. For social care commissioners, this suggests that asking questions about the management of staff shortages is a key safeguarding quality indicator as is ensuring contracts with care providers are adequately financed to ensure appropriate staffing. Having an understanding of what provision is available in the employment business sector locally and having a partnership relationship with professionals therein would also seem to be an important but often neglected component of workforce planning.

6:7 What can we learn from agency workers about recruitment and retention?

Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) suggest that local councils are no longer the attractive employers of choice and that agency working represents an escape from the deteriorating conditions of employment therein. Certainly, in the accounts of the agency workers we interviewed there is a very strong message about the need to improve pay and conditions in the sector as a means of retaining staff and reducing over reliance on agency workers. However, despite this stark warning, with the exception of those approaching retirement, most of the agency social workers we interviewed did not see agency working as a long term career option and most did want to return to permanent employment within a local council. Significantly, what often translated the intention to go back into permanent employment into an actual decision to so what was the perception of having found the right team. When discussing recruitment and retention, the accounts of agency social workers are littered with references to (usually poor) management, not being listened too and 'office politics'. More so than pay, caseload or general perceptions of a deterioration in working conditions, it is these relational or 'emotional loyalty' issues that are most often pinpointed as the main reason why people seek to re-position themselves within the sector: to leave permanent employment and go agency; to swap agency placement; or to stick with a placement and go permanent. In relation to social care, these findings resonate with national research commissioned by Skills for Care (Lucas et al. 2009) which notes that, problems with retention appear to be linked more often to management relationships, styles and techniques and competence rather than to workplace, the job role or the service user group. A key recommendation of this study is that managers should focus on human resource practices critical to recruitment and retention. These include supervision, appraisal, flexibility, career progression, training and qualifications. Research also shows that these issues are often overlooked in recruitment and retention strategies in favour of financial incentives (Barstow, 2009). While 'golden hellos' may appeal to 'gold collar workers' our study suggests that most agency workers do not to see themselves in these terms.

6:8 What progress has been made to reduce over reliance on agency staff?

Poor workforce intelligence (Morgan, Holt and Willaims, 2007; Evans and Huxley, 2009) means that it is very difficult to accurately gauge the effectiveness of the specific measures that have been introduced to reduce over reliance on agency workers. It is only recently that the third Skills for Care report undertaken by Eborall and Griffiths (2008) has established a baseline figure which will allow for the future monitoring of agency use in social care and we will need to wait for the next report for conclusive evidence of any downward trend in the numbers of social care staff employed in the bank, pool and agency sector (currently standing at 5.6%).

While the survey responses indicate that good progress is made at the level of delivering efficiency savings, there are however, questions as to whether this is linked to genuine progress at the level of tackling the underlying recruitment and retention crises or simply the outcome of treating agency workers as a 'variable cost'. It was reported in the interviews that councils tend to go through a cycles of 'belt tightening' and 'belt loosening', put a recruitment freeze on agency staff only to lift it a few months later when budgets allow. However, the current financial situation means that 'belt tightening' will be the most likely scenario in the short to medium term.

Significantly, it is the prediction of the industry body, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2009) that reliance on agency working in nursing and social care is likely to increase as recruitment to the sector will remain challenging. This suggests the importance of keeping agency working high on the policy agenda. Indeed, there is the argument that councils will always need agency workers. Our findings suggests that so long as procurement is not driven solely by the logic of cost minimisation and that there is good strategic and operational management of agency workers in the workplace then this need not necessarily be viewed negatively.

Key Policy Recommendations

- In terms of developing future policy guidance on agency working, the employment business sector should be recognised as a potential partner (perhaps through representation from ASWEB).

- Agency workers should be recognised as an important component of the social care workforce. Guidance on managing agency workers in the light of the current legal situation is needed to clarify what constitutes good practice with respect to standards for induction, training and supervision.

- More research and development work is needed to explore different methods of managing staff shortages.

- The views of agency workers support other research findings on recruitment and retention. Namely that to tempt agency workers back into permanent employment, good management practice is key especially as regard supervision, appraisal, flexibility, career progression, training and qualifications and team building.

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Appendix 1: Literature Review Search Strategy

The literature review was accomplished by searching the following databases: Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Social Care Online (SCO), Sociological Abstracts (SA) and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS). In addition to the academic literature, particular attention was paid to the web site material linked to service improvement agencies namely the Care Services Improvement Partnership (www.csip.org.uk) and IDeA Knowledge (www.idea.org.uk). Other official sources searched included the Department of Health (www.dh.gov.uk), Skills for Care (www.skillsforcare.org.uk), Commission for Social Care Inspection (www.csci.org.uk), General Social Care Council (www.gscc.org.uk), and the British Association of Social Workers (www.basw.co.uk). The search terms used were:

agency-staff agency-social-work$ agency-care-work$ agency-working agency-work$ agency-workforce	interim-staff interim-working interim-work$ interim-workforce
temporary-social-work$ temporary-care-work$ temporary-workforce	temp$ temporary-employment temporary-employment-agency
contingency-staff contingency-social-work$ contingency-employment	contingent-social-work$ contingent-care-work$ contingent-workforce
casual-staff casual-employment casual-care-work$ casual-social-work$	locum-staff locum-social-worker$ locum-employment locum-work$
transient-staff	

The search of the academic databases revealed 266 records for which abstracts were attained. Of these 41 full articles were retrieved. Most records were not relevant as they related to other kinds of agency working (e.g. multi-agency working). Furthermore, many of the records were news reports form the professional press (e.g. *Community Care*, *Nursing Times*) rather than peer review articles.

Appendix 2: Systematic Search Strategy Used in Mapping Exercise

The first stage of the research involved a mapping exercise in order to estimate in so far as is possible the number and type of employment businesses operating in social care in the UK. We identified a total of 199 employment business on the basis of a systematic search which comprised:

1. Monitoring of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) Register of agencies in the Nursing and Social Care Group.

2. Searching Yellow Pages and other electronic databases (e.g. Agency Central).

3. Monitoring of advertisements in the professional press (Compass, Community Care, etc) and general alertness to any agencies identified during the lifetime of the research project.

4. Compilation and maintenance of a database.

1) Findings from the REC Register

The REC web site provides access to a membership database which lists the contact details for registered agencies. The introductory page gives overview details. In August 2007, there were 194 members registered with the Nursing and Social Care Group. In August 2008, the figure was 193 [www.rec.co.uk [Accessed 8.8.08]. However, the membership database itself lists contact details for only 132 entries. As 61 registered members are unidentifiable, these are noted but excluded from the research database (though it is likely that they will have been picked-up through the further searches listed below).

2) Online databases

Yellow Pages (www.yell.com [Accessed 10.8.08])

The search terms [social-care-temporary-employment-agency$] and [locum-social-care$] led to a specialist classification on the Yell website entitled 'Home Care Services; Nurses Agencies and Care Agencies'. Here, there were 3,752 listings (if agencies had offices across the UK, they were repeat listed in the database). This included agencies supplying permanent nursing and care staff to local councils etc. To identify agencies working specifically as employment businesses or those advertising the supply of 'temporary workers' we then searched the service descriptions for each listed agency. Across all Yell databases it was only possible to search the first 100 listings (10 pages) as access was not permitted beyond this. This search identified 13 agencies supplying 'nursing and care'. Only 1 listed agency in this section specialised in 'social work and social care'. Of the 13 agencies identified, 3 were registered with the REC and therefore already included on our database.

We then refined the search terms to identify any further agencies not already listed. The search terms: [social-care-recruitment-consultant$] [social-work-recruitment-consultant$] [social-work-temporary-employment-agency$] [social-care –contingency-work$] [social-work-contingency-work$] and [locum-social-worker$] led to the main database of recruitment consultancies working in all employment areas across the UK. There were a total of 18,228 listings. Searching of the service descriptions for the first 100 listings (for each search term) revealed a further 18 agencies not already identified. Of these 5 agencies were REC registered and therefore already included on our database.

Agencysocialcare.com (www.agencysocialcare.com [Accessed 12.8.08]).

 This commercial web site was launched in January 2008 providing a directory of social care recruitment agencies, listing the benefits of each; an email job alerts service; a CV uploading facility and a free job finding service This dedicated site listed 28 social care recruitment agencies. 4 were REC

registered. Of the remaining 24 listed agencies, 23 were not already known to the research database. The site is no longer accessible.

Agency Central (www.agencycentral.co.uk [Accessed 11.8.08])

Search of Agency Central's social care category ('All Social Care Skills Recruitment Agencies') revealed 19 listings. Seven listings related to social care agencies. The remainder were generic recruitment consultancies (which did not mention social care in their service descriptions). Of the 7 social care agency listings, a further 2 agencies were identified which were not already known to the research database. Neither of these appeared in the REC membership database, though one did claim REC membership.

Compass (www. Compassjobsfair.com) and **Agency Seeker** (agencyseeker.co.uk)

'Compass Guide to Social Work and Social Care' lists 5 recruitment consultancies in its 2008 directory. One further agency was identified for the research database. It was not REC registered. The Compass website also linked to another website (www.agencyseeker.co.uk). Classifications for 'social workers' and 'other social services' led to the identification of 6 listings. Four were generic recruitment agencies which did not refer to social care and social work in their service descriptions. Of the 2 remaining, 1 was not already known to the research database.

3. Professional Press and Other Sources.

During August 2007- August 2008 around twelve recruitment agencies ran adverts in *Community Care*. All were specialist social care agencies providing access to qualified social workers. 4 were REC registered. Of the remaining 8, 6 were not already identified on the research database. Search of the *Community Care* Website directory revealed 1 further agency not already known to the database.

Appendix 3: Participant Profile for Social Services/Social Care Managers

Job Roles
[Male n = 6 Female n = 12
Mental Health Team Manager
Mental Health Hospital Liaison
Senior Manager - Adults
Team Manager – Assessment & Care Management
General Manager
Team Manager – Physical Disabilities
Home Care Manager
Team Manager – Learning Disabilities
General Manager - Adults
Home Care Manager
Team Manager - Sensory Impairment
Workforce Development
Learning Disabilities – Senior Manager
Voluntary Agency Manger
Workforce Development
Home Care Manager
Home Care Manager
Care Home Manager
Total Participants n=18

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule for Social Services/Social Care Managers

What is your role in [insert department]?

(Strategic Commissioner Level)

- How does your department procure temporary/agency/interim staff?

- What percentage of your workforce is supplied through temporary employment agencies?

- What did your authority spend last financial year on agency workers?

- Is this seen as problematic?

- What are the possible reasons for using agency staff? Explain any under reliance/over reliance?

- What are the advantages of using agency staff?

- Which agencies do you work with – what is the range locally – private or non-profit?

(Team Leader Level)

- How are decisions made about the need to use an employment agency?

- What is the process a team manager might go through to procure a worker form an agency?

- What are the issues for day to day management and supervision of agency workers?

- What are the implications for the wider staff team?

- How many temporary workers chose to become permanent employees with your department?

Are you aware of "Options for Excellence" and the requirement that local councils with social services responsibilities reduce their reliance on agency staff provided through private employment agencies? [If yes]

- What progress is being made locally to implement Options for Excellence?

- What are the barriers? [e.g. local issues in recruitment and retention]

- Has any work being carried out to promote the development of not for profit agencies?

THANK YOU

Appendix 5: Participant Profile (Recruitment Consultants and Employment Business/Agency Managers)

Job Role Male n=10 Female n=5	Agency Type
Managing Director	Single Operator /Specialist Social Work
Recruitment Consultant	Single Operator/ Specialist Social Work
Manager	Single Operator/ Nursing and Care
Recruitment Consultant	Single Operator/ Specialist Social Work (Interim Management)
Recruitment Consultant	Single Operator/ Specialist Social Work
Owner/Manager	Single Operator – Nursing and Care
Recruitment Consultant	National Chain – Social Care Division
Recruitment Consultant	National Chain – Social Work Department
Agency Manager	Single Operator – Specialist Social Work
Recruitment Consultant	National Chain – Social Work Department
Manager	Single Operator/ Specialist Criminal Justice
Managing Director	Single Operator/Specialist Social Work
Managing Director	Single Operator/ Specialist Professions Allied to Medicine
Recruitment Consultant	National Chain – Social Work Department
Recruitment Consultant	Single Operator – Nursing and Care.

Appendix 6: Interview Schedule for Recruitment Consultants and Agency Managers

Could you please give some background details about your agency?

- National chain or single operator?

- Year established?

- General employment/ social care specialist?

- Links with any trade agencies or networks?

What is your role in the agency?

Which types of employer use your services?

- Local authority, private care homes, voluntary agencies or others?

- Volume/Pattern of business

- How are your services procured (e.g. through individual managers contacting you directly or through intermediaries (master vendor type schemes)? How does this work?

What are the benefits of using an agency such as this?

How do you recruit staff?

- Are there any difficulties/shortages associated with particular staff/professional groups?

- Do you keep records on gender/age/ethnicity of those registering with you? Are there any discernable trends?

- Which are the hardest posts to fill and which are the easiest?

- In your opinion, why do people choose agency work?

- On average how long do people stay registered with your agency?

- What training and support is provided to Agency Workers?

Does your agency recruit international staff by going abroad, advertising internationally, on the internet etc?

- What countries do you recruit from?

- Do you experience any issues with work permits?

- What about criminal record checks?

- Have you noticed any trends regarding international workers?

Are you aware of "Options for Excellence" and the requirement that local councils with social services responsibilities reduce their reliance on agency staff provided through private employment agencies? [If yes]

- How is this being implemented locally?

- What are the barriers?

- What are the implications for your agency?

THANK YOU

Appendix 7: Interview Schedule for Agency Workers

Can you tell me about your employment history?

What attracted you to temporary work?

Can you tell about your experience as an agency worker?

> What are the advantages?

> What are the disadvantages?

>> - Work life balance
>>
>> - Flexi-security
>>
>> - Job satisfaction
>>
>> - Induction
>>
>> - Fitting in

What education and training have you done while working as an agency worker?

What are your plans for your future career?

- What if anything would tempt you back into permanent employment?

Are you aware of "Options for Excellence" and the requirement that local councils with social services responsibilities reduce their reliance on agency staff provided through private employment agencies? [If yes]

- What are your views on this?

- How is this being implemented in your area?

THANK YOU

Appendix 8a Participant Profile (Professionally Qualified Agency Workers)

KEY	Female	Male	Total
Approved Social Workers (ASW)	9	8	17
Other Qualified Social Workers	9	4	13
Newly Qualified Social Worker	8	2	10
Occupational Therapists	4	1	5
TOTAL	30	15	45

Ethnicity	Age group				Total
	20-24	25-40	41-50	51+	
White British		[1] [2] [6]	[2] [1] [1]	[5] [2] [1]	
Asian		[2] [1]	[1]		
Black Caribbean/Black British		[1] [2] [1] [1]	[2] [2]	[2]	
Black African		[3] [1] [1]			
Other		[1] [1] [1]	[1]		

Appendix 8b: Participant Profile (unqualified care Workers)

Ethnicity	Age group				Total
	20-24	25-40	41-50	51-60	
White British		2	1	1	4
Asian	1				1
Black Caribbean/Black British			1		1
Black African	1	6	2		9
Totals	**2**	**8**	**4**	**1**	**15**

Appendix 9: Survey Questionnaire

SOCIAL
CARE
WORKFORCE
RESEARCH
UNIT

KING'S
College
LONDON

Working for the Agency:
the Role and Significance of Agency Working
in the Social Care Workforce

Questionnaire for Local Councils with Responsibilities for
Adult Social Care or Joint Adult and Children's Departments

Page

PLEASE READ THESE IMPORTANT NOTES BEFORE COMPLETING THE SURVEY:

The role played by agency workers in the provision of social care services is attracting greater attention. By agency workers we mean 'temps' or 'locums' employed temporarily through employment agencies. These may include team or operational managers, senior practitioners, social workers, occupational therapists, care managers, community care workers, and any other social care workers whom you have recruited through an employment agency or in-house 'bank' scheme. It is not about workers employed by service providers contracted to provide services on behalf of the council or workers employed directly by the council on permanent or fixed term contracts of employment. If you have any questions about the survey or completing the questionnaire please email scwru@kcl.ac.uk or telephone 020 7848 1782.

1a) Has your organisation used temporary 'agency staff', including those working for an in-house agency or bank either within the last financial year (April 2008-March 2009) or the current financial year (April 2009 onwards)?

Yes ☐　　No ☐

If your organisation has not used agency staff during this period, then the survey is now complete. Thank you. Please turn to page 4 for details on returning the questionnaire.

1b) If yes, please give further details below.

Type of post	No	Yes
To cover social worker posts*		
To cover occupational therapy posts		
To cover social work assistant or community care worker posts		
To cover care assistant or support worker posts		
To cover any other kinds of social care worker post		
To cover any other type of administrative or ancillary post paid for by the social care budget		

*This also includes care manager posts filled by people with a social work qualification.

Please turn over

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

2. What are the main reasons for employing temporary agency staff?

Please rank the options listed below (difficulties in recruitment, filling a post quickly, covering for sickness, and other reasons) in order of 1-4, with 1 being the most frequent reason for using agency staff and 4 the least frequent reason for using temporary agency staff. Please give information in relation to all agency staff used if possible.

Reason for using ranked between 1-4	Social Workers	Occupational Therapists	Other Social Care Workers	Any additional comments
Because of difficulties in recruiting permanent staff				
Need to get a post filled quickly				
To provide sickness cover				
To undertake a specific task or activity (e.g. to work on an identifiable project)				
Other reason (*Please give details below*)				

4. How does your organisation manage the procurement of temporary agency staff? *Please answer yes or no to each of the following options.*

Type of agency arrangement	Yes	No
There is an in-house staff pool or bank		
It is down to individual service managers to approach an employment agency of their choosing		
We have a managed vendor scheme * In such schemes social care service managers have one point of contact for the procurement of temporary agency workers. Agencies are scored and compete for business through the managed service.		
Any other arrangements (please give details):		

5. Has your organisation introduced any specific strategies or targets to reduce reliance on temporary agency staff?

Yes ☐   No ☐

> If yes, please give details and attach any supporting papers if possible.

6. Approximately how much did your organisation spend on adult social care staffing in the financial year April 2008-March 2009) INCLUSIVE of temporary agency staff to the nearest £100,000?

7a. Approximately, how much did your organisation spend on temporary agency staffing for adult social care between April 2008- March 2009 to the nearest £100,000?

7b. How did your organisation's spend on temporary agency staffing costs for adult social care in the financial year 2008-2009 compare with the amount you spent in the previous financial year (2007-2008)?

Less ☐   About the same ☐   More ☐

7c. How do think your organisation's spend on temporary agency staffing costs for adult social care in the financial year 2009-2010 will compare with the amount you spent in 2008-2009?

Less ☐   About the same ☐   More ☐

7d. What is the reason for this?

In case we need to clarify anything raised in the survey, please may we have your permission to contact you?

YES ☐   NO ☐

If yes, please let us have your contact details.

Name	
Job Title	
Organisation	
Address	Postcode:
Telephone	
Email	

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE

Please return in the stamped address envelope provided to:

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London WC2B 4LL