

Agency staffing in the NHS

Is the NHS too reliant on agency workers?

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Overview and current situation in the NHS

- The NHS provides a wide range of healthcare services across the UK (Khan, 2023).
- It is funded through general taxation and offers free health care (Khan, 2023).
- Since its establishment in 1948, the NHS has experienced growing pressures and challenges (Greener, 2024).
- In recent years, experts have warned that the NHS is approaching a state of crisis due to increasing demand and limited resources (Greener, 2024; Hunter, 2023).
- An ageing population, rising levels of long-term illness, and higher rates of chronic disease have significantly increased the demand for doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals (Jones, 2024; Herrick, 2025).
- Current estimates suggest shortages of 40,000 **doctors** and **25,600 nurses** across the NHS and staff turnover is high (Allen, 2025; Russo, 2023; BMA, 2025; Pradhan, 2025).
- Currently the NHS has been heavily relying on agency to upkeep the workload (Pradhan, 2025).

Issues with hiring agency workers

- **High Costs:** Agency staff are significantly more expensive than permanent staff (Pradhan, 2024).
- Agency staffing are costing £280 million annually in Wales from reports from 2023-2024 (Gov.Wales, 2024).
- **Inconsistent Quality:** agency staff can have different training compared to staff working in the NHS (Beauvais, 2024).
- A lack of familiarity with NHS systems, and levels of experience can affect the quality of care (Beauvais, 2024).
- Flexible hours among agency staff can complicate monitoring making difficulties in addressing individual performance and any lapses in the quality of care given (Beauvais, 2024).
- **Patient Safety Concerns:** Frequent turnover and lack of continuity can impact patient outcomes and team communication (Baker, 2023).



Why is the NHS relying on agencies?

- **Staff shortages** caused by increasing demand and insufficient recruitment (Beauvais, 2024).
- **Early retirement** among doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers (Moberly, 2023).
- **Healthcare professionals leaving** for better pay and working conditions in the private sector or abroad (Vries, 2023).
- **Burnout and stress**, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in higher sickness, absence and turnover (Vries, 2023).
- Combined, these issues leave the NHS facing serious and persistent understaffing, often forcing hospitals to rely on agency doctors and nurses to maintain safe service levels (Beauvais, 2024; Vries, 2023).

How much agencies cost the NHS

- The NHS spent £3 billion on agency staffing between 2023 and 2024 (Gov, 2025).
- Some agencies have charged up to £2,000 for a single shift (Gov, 2025).
- Investigators also found that in 2022, some hospitals in England paid agencies as much as £5,200 for one doctor's shift (UK Parliament, 2023).
- These high costs place additional pressure on NHS budgets and divert funding away from long-term workforce investment (Pradhan, 2024).



NHS Staffing Crisis (England)

Source: Nuffield Trust

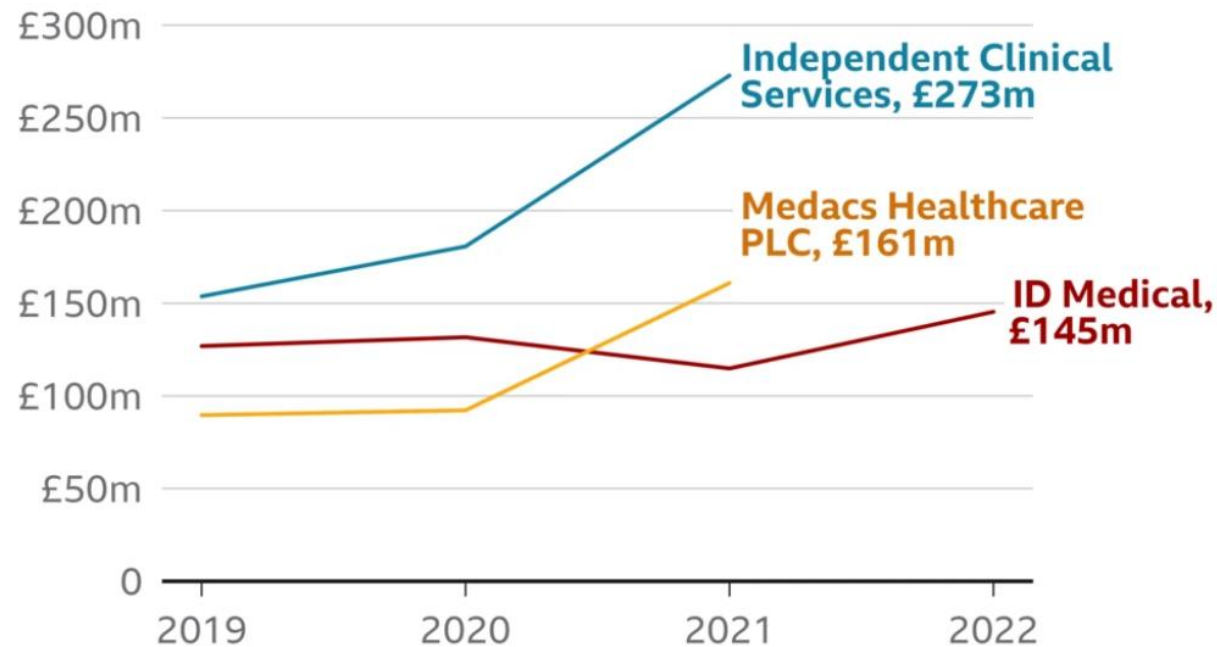
12,000

doctors needed



Turnover increasing for firms providing agency workers to the NHS

Turnover of selected firms by year accounts filed



Note: Not all firms filed accounts on the same date. Some data not available for 2022

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-65042658>.

The NHS methods of tackling the use of agencies

- There is publications set out for rules for trusts on the expenditure on agency workers (NHS England, 2025).
- **These rules are put in place to:**
 - Reduce overall agency spending (NHS England, 2025).
 - Increase transparency around agency costs (NHS England, 2025).
 - Assure improved quality of agency work (NHS England, 2025).
 - Encourage agency staff to move into permanent roles (NHS England, 2025).
- **Price caps and spending limits**
 - The NHS has put in place price caps on hourly rates; trusts are expecting to reduce the rate by 30% (Gov.UK, 2025).
 - As a result, £1 billion reduction in the crackdown of the reliance on agency in 2024 to 2025 (Gov.UK, 2025).
 - The Government is focusing on 4% pay rise to doctors, GPs, and specialist (Gov.UK 2025).
 - Nursing, ambulance staff, and midwives will see 3.6% salary increase (Gov.UK, 2025).



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