

22.03.01

11 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding staffing pressures at the General Hospital (OQ.32/2022)

Will the Minister explain the current situation within the General Hospital in terms of any staffing pressures or shortages and state how many staff, if any, are currently suspended?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

During 2021 there were 192 leavers from Health and Community Services out of total staff numbers of 2,476. This gives a turnover rate of just over 8 per cent and this compares with the turnover rate of 9 per cent in the department in 2020 and it also benchmarks with the Government of Jersey, which was 9 per cent in 2021 and benchmarks with the N.H.S. (National Health Service), which varies between 7 per cent and 14 per cent, but is on average 10 per cent. There continues to be pockets of services with large levels of vacancies, so it is not the case that across healthcare there are any significant pressures, but in certain pockets. Specifically in theatres and in radiography teams and some medical roles. They are in the main long-term vacancies in hard-to-fill areas, which are recognised as such in the U.K. and other jurisdictions. Purely because a vacancy exists does not mean that the role is not being covered because we employ temporary workers, either on agency or locums, to cover any roles that are patient-facing roles, which alleviates the impact of the vacant position and reduces pressure on the service. Finally, the last part of the Deputy's question, the department currently has less than 5 staff suspended, but the roles that impact on patients continue to be covered.

3.11.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me in the age that we now live in, in the world of dis-misinformation in the public sector, that it is important that his department put fact out as quickly as possible when challenged in the public sphere?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is and I want to increase the information available to reassure members of the public that we do not have significant staffing pressures in our hospital in general terms. I referred to the pockets of services where there are pressures. Part of the difficulty lies in the collection of data, which has been recorded by different teams. So we are trying to draw together data that is kept in finance by management teams and human resources and validate that data sources and reconcile numbers. That is why in the past it has been difficult to come up instantly with clear figures. So it is anticipated the work will be finished by the end of March and then we will be able to be out there with the figures and provide what we are assured is an accurate overall vacancy position.

3.11.2 The Connétable of St. John:

The Minister has previously said that vacancy levels are 5 per cent and yet freedom of information answers have rated them at 353 vacancies, which is a vacancy level in excess of 14 per cent. Can the Minister confirm how many vacancies there currently are within H.C.S. (Health and Community Services)?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes. Of course on previous occasions I have been asked for vacancy levels at that time. The answer I have given today is over a year, over 2021. Yes, because of the answer I have just given to Deputy Pamplin, sometimes it depends on the question, but sometimes it depends on the source of the

data, because within H.C.S., and I think this is across Government also, a finance team might keep some records, human resources would keep other records, and they are not necessarily collated and reconciled. That work, I am pleased to say, is now going on. So it will be possible to provide an accurate vacancy figure, which all teams in the department will know is the right figure.

3.11.3 The Connétable of St. John:

Can the Minister confirm if he is aware of any consultants who are on restricted duties where locums are carrying out clinics previously run by permanent employees?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am not going to comment on individual employment issues. As I have said, locums do continue to cover patient-facing roles where staff are suspended.

3.11.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister inform Members what the total bill ongoing for 2021 is on the reliance on banks for locum staff?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I recall that answer was given in a written question the Deputy asked just a few weeks ago. I do not have it to hand but it was in any event a very detailed chart setting out the figures paid. I would refer him to that answer.

3.11.5 Senator K.L. Moore:

I can perhaps assist the Minister because in that written question I do believe that the monthly sum for payments to locums was on average about £1 million a month. In light of that response, I would like to ask the Minister whether he considers that is an appropriate state of affairs for our hospital and delivery of health services? What is being done to deliver improvements?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is the case that, in every health service across the western world it seems, it is a practice that locums are employed and it is important as we have absences caused either by illness or vacancies, as people move on, or indeed shortage and inability to recruit at any given time. It should be remembered that just because money is spent on locums does not mean that is an additional cost because we would normally be paying salaries, pensions, social security, which of course are not being paid while a payment is made to a locum.

[11:30]

I can understand the desire always to have permanent staff, and that is what the department aspires to. We have achieved, particularly in the field of agency nurses, a very significant reduction in the cost and the recruitment of those. So it is always the case that we are seeking to fill permanent posts but I think it would be impossible to say that any health service could operate without locum cover. These locums are excellent people, they do provide a service, they are carefully monitored and they are a valuable adjunct to our staff.

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Senator Ferguson, you indicated you wanted to ask a question, but I had already called the final list on that question I am afraid before you indicated. Question 15 falls away in the absence of Deputy Gardiner.