Zero hours contracts.



Peter Carter

I read with interest and some concern about Angela Rayners plans to outlaw zero hours contract.

The theory and the principles of this at first sight appear reasonable.

Who could disagree that staff such as nurses should not be given a guarantee of work and enjoy all of the benefits and protections afforded to contracted staff.

However, when you scratch below the surface it is clear that this has not been properly thought through.

It is a catchy policy that will gain applause at the annual Labour party conference but is a potential vote loser and will give employers significant problems.

When I was CEO of the Central & North West London NHS Trust we had a large nurse bank.

These were nurses who for a range of reasons such as child care, looking after elderly relatives or had husbands, wives or partners who had jobs that required them to work away from home at variable times thus making it difficult for the nurse to commit to contracted hours.

Many of the nurses on our bank also needed term time only working arrangements.

The coordinator of the bank had a well-oiled system whereby nurses could let her know their availability each month.

It was not unusual, for example, that in some months a nurse could commit up to 15 shifts but then the next month might not be able to work at all or maybe a handful of shifts.

In addition, there were a number of nurses who were prepared to be called at short notice to cover a shift when a contracted nurse had called in a short notice because of issues such as a child's illness and could not work.

One of the challenges for NHS managers is the unpredictability of workload.

An outbreak of an infection that might require a ward to be isolated. A major incident that requires an immediate injection of staff, an upsurge

in staff sickness particularly during the flu season are just three examples of the unpredictable nature of running NHS Trusts.

The nurse bank is a “win win”. The Trust has easy access to a bank of nurses and the nurses themselves could work flexibly but bring in an income.

If this proposal goes ahead then many nurses who cannot commit to a contract will sign up with nurse agencies.

Trusts will still be able to fill gaps, particularly at short notice but they will incur the agencies placement fee.

Currently many Trusts are struggling to balance their books and many have resorted to recruitment freezes.

Who would have imagined we have the spectre of newly qualified nurses who cannot secure jobs.

The situation is not good and there is no immediate prospect that the it’s going to get easier in the short to medium term.

I would urge to Government to listen to the *NHS Alliance* and drop this proposal.

If it goes ahead, it is inevitable that it will place a further strain on the already stretched NHS finances.

This is the unintended consequence of a policy that appears attractive in theory but does not pass the reality test.

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