

Lesley-Anne Henry
c/o Newsroom
Belfast Telegraph
124 Royal Avenue
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BY EMAIL

Dear Ms Henry,

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

I refer to your email dated 15 June 2011, requesting information about agency staff in the council over the past four financial years.

I can confirm that the council holds some of the information you have requested. The council has decided that it can disclose all the information it holds, and this is outlined below. Please note that if this information is to be published it should be attributed to being Belfast City Council's response to an FOI query.

Belfast City Council is the significantly largest council in Northern Ireland and provides a diverse range of services every day from street cleaning; refuse collection & disposal; recycling collection & disposal ; environmental health; dog & pest control; consumer advice; building control; community safety; parks and open spaces; indoor and outdoor leisure; local economic and tourism development; markets; licensing; registration of births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships; planning events across the city; and provision of public conveniences.

In order to meet its responsibility and deliver value for money serviced to the rate payers of Belfast we use our overall staffing budget of £84m in a number of ways i.e. through directly employing full-time, part-time, temporary and casual staff and using agency workers at over a hundred locations across the city (including community centres; leisure centres; cleansing depots; recycling centres and parks across the city, the Ulster and Waterfront Halls, Belfast Castle, Malone House; Belfast Zoo; and St Georges Market)

Agency workers are an essential means in most organisations to cover areas of temporary shortage, seasonal demands and short term assignments as it would be impossible to recruit and directly employ staff given the immediate/short term need. It is good practice to use agency workers in this way as it avoids the costs of recruitment and other additional staff on-costs.

In the council, total agency payments represent 4.5% of the annual salary budget.

The answers to your specific questions are outlined below:

1 How much BCC has spent on agency staff in the past four financial years 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10, and 2010/11?

	Paid to Recruitment Agency	Paid to Agency Staff	Total Cost
2007/08	£268,839	£4,138,366	£4,407,205
2008/09	£338,428	£5,209,579	£5,548,007
2009/10	£233,503	£3,594,419	£3,827,922
2010/11	£234,471	£3,609,311	£3,843,782
Total	£1,237,791	£19,518,439	£20,786,410

**Please note that “Paid to Recruitment Agency” column is the amount paid to the agency for services provided. The “Paid to Agency Staff” column shows the amount paid in salaries to agency workers.*

2 Breakdown from each of the council’s main departments of the amount spent on agency staff over the last four financial years 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10, and 2010/11?

The Council’s two main service delivery departments are Health and Environmental Services and Parks and Leisure constituting nearly 63% of the workforce

Department	Year			
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Health & Environmental Services	1,802,309	2,275,396	1,192,560	1,161,482
Parks & Leisure	1,337,902	1,763,967	1,513,475	1,507,389

3 How many agency staff have BCC employed over the past four financial years 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10, and 2010/11?

The Council does not hold the information in the format you requested as information provided by the agency to the council is on an expenditure basis.

4 How many agency staff does BCC currently employ and in what roles?

The number of agency staff working across all council locations varies depending on operational demands.

Based on the total number of hours worked across all council locations during May 2011, the number of full time equivalent agency workers was 170.

The main roles include:

- Administrative staff
- Bowling green cashiers
- Cleansing operatives
- Drivers
- Recycling advisors
- Recycling operatives
- Gardeners
- Cleaners

5 How many agency staff work at the Waterfront Hall, Malone House, Belfast Castle and Zoo?

Based on the total number of hours worked at the following locations, the number of full time equivalents working during May 2011 as follows:

Waterfront Hall = 2

Malone House/ Belfast Castle = 0.50

Zoo – 6.50

6 Who decides when to bring in agency staff and what is the criteria used to decide whether they should be used?

In order to ensure use of agency workers represents the best value for money to the ratepayers of Belfast and that front line service delivery is protected an authorisation protocol is used. This sets out who is responsible for approving the use of agency assignments as follows:

Type of cover	Authorisation
Short term agency resource to cover an established post, which is anticipated to be for less than one week	Manager with responsibility for the service
Agency resource to cover an established post, which extends, or is likely to extend, beyond one week and up to three months	Head of service
Agency resource to cover an established post, which extends, or is likely to extend, beyond three months, or when the cover is above the approved establishment	Director of department

Agency staff are used for the following reasons:

- short-term cover at short notice without which service delivery would be affected, for example LGV/HGV drivers, catering staff, play-workers, cleansing operatives, gardeners etc;
- short-term cover for a defined period, for example summer scheme staff and other seasonal workers;
- to cover established posts which are temporarily vacant or vacant pending a permanent recruitment, where it is not possible to cover the vacancy by any other means;
- to cover for posts / duties which are over and above establishment figures where the additional workload is of a temporary nature; and
- to cover for unexpected events or upsurge in workloads where it is not possible, for whatever reason, to cover the vacancy by any other means.

7 How many staff vacancies are there within Belfast City Council ?

The number of vacancies varies depending on a number factor i.e. turnover of staff and recruitment in progress.

Taking account of the recruitment during June and July 2011 there are approximately 120 vacant posts in the councils approved structure.

8 Are agency staff used to supplement current staffing levels?

Agency workers are used to cover areas of temporary shortage, seasonal demands and short term assignments as it would be impossible to recruit and directly employ

staff given the immediate/short term need. It is good practice to use agency workers in this way as it avoids the costs of recruitment and other additional staff on-costs.

9 Who has responsibility for managing the bill for agency staff?

The Director of each department is responsible for managing their overall staffing budget. This budget provides for staff salaries, overtime, agency and employer contributions.

10 Are there plans to reduce the number of agency staff being used by the council? Is so, why?

As part of the Council's ongoing efficiency agenda which has already achieved £12m of efficiency savings the Council is placing significant focus on ways in which to reduce all aspects of employee costs including expenditure on agency workers. The Council is therefore reviewing and analysing issues relating to employee costs.

If you are dissatisfied with how the council handled your request for information, you have the right to request that the Council formally review this decision. If you wish to do so, please write to the Records Manager, Belfast City Council, City Hall, Belfast, BT1 5GS.

Should you remain dissatisfied following the Council's internal review, you can seek an independent review from the Information Commissioner. Requests for an independent review should be made in writing to: The Information Commissioner, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. However I would advise you that the Information Commissioner has indicated that a review will not be undertaken unless the Council has first had an opportunity to re-consider its decision.

If you have any queries about this email, please contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Jill Minne
Head of Human Resources