Nursing unions hit out at ‘derisory’ NHS pay awards

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Nurses across the NHS in England and Wales have been left “disappointed and angry” following the latest pay deal, which has come after months of delays and is way below levels being campaigned for. Unions and other NHS staff representatives have told Nursing Times a 3% rise would make little difference to nurse wage packets and would do nothing to address the recruitment and retention struggles that are faced by the health service.

Governments in the two countries announced last month they had accepted the latest recommendations made by the NHS Pay Review Body and that nurses on Agenda for Change (AfC) contracts would see an uplift of 3% for 2021-22. Staff had been due a pay rise in April this year but have been forced to wait several months as a result of various delays amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the latest pay deal was above the 1% the Department of Health and Social Care in England had initially proposed, the 3% award still did not go far enough, according to the unions. They have said 3% would amount to a real-terms pay cut when inflation was taken into account. In contrast, the government has claimed the deal would equate to an additional £1,000 a year for the “average nurse”.

Meanwhile, back in May, the Scottish Government announced it would be implementing a pay deal that would see most AfC nurses receive a wage increase of 4.1% this year. However, after rejecting the offer, members of the RCN in Scotland are currently in a trade dispute with the government and NHS Scotland employers over the issue.

At the time of writing, nurses in Northern Ireland were still waiting to hear what pay deal they would be given. Evidence submitted to the pay review body by the country’s Department of Health suggested that enough money had been budgeted to allow for a 2% increase for staff on AfC and that a pay award above this would “require reprioritisation”. It is understood that Northern Ireland’s health minister Robin Swann is taking the review body recommendations to the minister of finance and wider executive.

The 3% deal in England and Wales is being “enforced” on NHS staff, rather than being put out as an offer to accept or reject, as is usual with the pay review body process. But, despite the lack of a formal consultation process, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Unison have said they want to hear the views of their members to inform what steps they take – and have not ruled out industrial action.

The RCN has already announced that it is planning a “summer of action” to protest against the deal. Demonstrations and events are set to be held across all four UK countries to continue its Fair Pay for Nursing campaign, which calls for a 12.5% pay increase. The college will also ask members for their views on the pay award and whether they believe it is acceptable. Having set up a £35m industrial action fund earlier this year, the RCN may also choose to ask its members to take part in an indicative ballot to gauge appetite for industrial action.

Meanwhile, Unison, which has been calling for a £2,000 pay increase for all NHS staff, has also launched a consultation to ascertain whether its members accept or oppose the 3% rise, and are prepared to take industrial action. A third union, Unite, has also confirmed that a consultative ballot for industrial action will be put to its members, as it decides the future direction for its pay campaign, which wanted a 15% or £3,000 pay rise.

Graham Revie, chair of the RCN Trade Union Committee and a senior charge nurse, described the “disappointment” felt by the union and its members following the 3% announcement. “This will not meet members’ needs, this will not meet the needs of recruiting and retaining staff in the NHS [and] it will certainly not do anything to address the tens of thousands of workforce shortages we have,” he told Nursing Times.

Likewise, Unison’s national nursing officer Stuart Tuckwood told Nursing Times that its members were “disappointed and angry” with the pay award, especially as it fell short of the 4% deal agreed in Scotland. He said members were concerned the government had “yet again failed to understand the work they do”.

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When asked about the likelihood of industrial action, he said it was “always a last resort” but that it could not be ruled out. He said he thought health professionals would be “very cautious” about taking such action because of the pandemic and a desire to avoid disruption to services and those they care for. But he added: “Having said that, there is a lot of anger and people feel frustrated at how they’ve been treated, and they also feel aggrieved that they are getting less than colleagues in Scotland. So, I wouldn’t underestimate the chances of it happening.”

Learning disability nurse Holly Turner, one of the leaders of the grassroots campaign NHS Workers Say No, went further and said “appetite was there” to go as far as striking in response to the settlement. The movement, which is made up of frontline staff, has been campaigning for a pay increase of 15%. Ms Turner told Nursing Times the 3% deal “comes nowhere near” what she felt nurses were owed “after a decade of pay restraints”. Speaking personally, she said the increase was “not really going to make any difference” to her wages, once the rise in inflation and bill costs were factored in.

Ms Turner described how members of the profession were “angry” and “worried”, while concerns about the number of staff wanting to quit had escalated. “Morale is already incredibly low [and] so, to know we’re not really receiving a pay rise, when you take into account inflation, I think it will make more people leave,” she said.

Since the announcement, engagement in the group, which is largely social media based, had “skyrocketed”, said Ms Turner. In the days after the news, it held a virtual rally with 150 nurses and colleagues who wanted to discuss next steps. Referring to strike action, she said: “I definitely think the appetite is there. People are angry, people are worried [and] people are frightened for the future.”

Meanwhile, the NHS Pay Review Body told ministers it had “particular concerns about nursing pay”. It questioned whether current AFC structures were still appropriate for nursing as a “modern graduate profession”. In its report, it highlighted that earnings in nursing “do not keep pace with other graduate earnings over the course of a career”.

Although nurses earned more than the average graduate in the first year after qualifying, their pay then falls behind as they become more experienced, it said. After 10 years, a nurse will be earning below the overall graduate median. This failure to keep up with wider wages “raises the question of whether the AFC system fully reflects the professional demands on nurses and their contribution to the NHS”, said the body.

Maggie Langley, a senior clinical research nurse in Nottingham, agreed that the system should be reviewed. She said she had been stuck at the top of band 6 for 20 years because she had not gone into management, noting that being a manager was not the reason she had wanted to become a nurse.

“Not all good nurses make good managers; it’s a different skillset,” said Ms Langley, who has been a nurse for 33 years. “Yet I have gained, through the years, so much more experience, so much more seniority, more skills that I keep adding to my portfolio, and I’m not rewarded for any of that. It needs looking at, definitely.”

Describing the 3% pay award as “derisory and bitterly disappointing”, she said she would still be left with no disposable income after covering her essential costs. She noted that, while at a pay rally recently, she had been asked whether she had needed to use a foodbank. Ms Langley said she believed the only reason she had not was because of the generosity of her family when she needed support.

With winter coming and Covid-19 still causing pressures, she said morale and motivation among the workforce was “on the floor” after the pay announcement. As a member of Unison, Ms Langley said she would consider strike action if she was presented with the option. “It’s not enough to clap,” she warned. “We get that the public, that’s all they had, but the government has more than that at its disposal. It has real ways of rewarding and helping us and supporting us, believing in us, valuing us. It is choosing not to do it – and that’s an insult.”

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