‘Nursing is in crisis and we desperately need this pay rise’

After an online petition triggered a parliamentary debate on nurses’ pay, we ask staff about pressures they face and the changes they want to see

Nurses struggling to pay heating bills, turning to costly payday loans and pawning their possessions were discussed by MPs in an impassioned debate on NHS pay last week.

The discussion at the House of Commons took place on 30 January, following pressure from nurses and the RCN to scrap the NHS 1% pay cap.

Before the debate, nurses met their MPs face-to-face in an RCN-arranged lobby event, to talk about how they struggled to make ends meet.

The MP debate was prompted when a petition calling for the pay cap to be scrapped exceeded 100,000 signatures.

The online petition, started by community nurse Danielle Tiplady, argues that Agenda for Change (AfC) staff have experienced pay restraint since 2010 and have lost about 14% of their pay in real terms.

A total of 26 MPs spoke at the two-hour discussion.

The debate heard how nurses are facing serious financial hardship and being driven away from the profession, and that patient care is suffering.

The particularly high cost of living in London and recruitment difficulties faced by employers nationally were also discussed.

Newcastle North Labour MP Catherine McKinnell opened the debate with the financial concerns that nursing constituents have brought to her. She said the strain faced by nurses is a shameful situation.

The RCN’s 2015 employment survey found that 30% of nurses had struggled to pay energy bills and 14% had skipped meals.

‘Many have been pushed into poverty,’ Ms McKinnell said. ‘Staff report using food banks and hardship funds. Nursing staff deserve a pay award that reflects their knowledge, skills and dedication.’

Staff exodus

The debate heard that nurses are choosing to leave the NHS and work for agencies to receive better pay, which leaves the health service with high bills for temporary staff.

Nurses who attended the lobby described to MPs the day-to-day challenges they
Nurses at the House of Commons to lobby MPs before the debate

are facing, and how they and their colleagues feel they are being driven from the profession.

RCN Eastern area representative and neonatal nurse Amy Overend said she had used her annual leave to take extra shifts elsewhere to earn more money and has not had a holiday for four years. ‘It’s been a nightmare,’ she said. ‘I am struggling to live on my basic salary. Nursing is in crisis and we desperately need this pay rise.’

Health minister Philip Dunne told the debate that nurses receive good annual leave and maternity packages. He said the government had to make ‘difficult decisions’ about pay. The government’s official response to the debate said that NHS nurses employed between March 2010 and March 2015 had seen average total earnings increase by 2.2% a year.

Speaking to Nursing Standard after the debate, RCN head of employment relations Josie Irwin says she is encouraged by the number of MPs who attended, despite criticism from many nurses on social media at the sight of empty seats in the debating room.

But she is concerned by Mr Dunne’s response as he made no commitment to act on improving nurse pay. ‘There were lots of warm words about the NHS, but he then said there are circumstances beyond our control, which is a veiled reference to Brexit and the parlous state of the economy,’ she says. ‘Nice, mealy-mouthed words about how we would like to do something but cannot because of the state of the economic situation.’

The NHS Pay Review Body (RB) is expected to give its recommendations for AfC pay to UK governments at the end of this month. The announcement of a pay rise in England is usually made around the time of the budget, which is due to take place on 8 March.

Of Mr Dunne’s remarks at the debate, Ms Irwin says: ‘The central message was we cannot afford it.’

But she says the debate was an important opportunity for nursing voices to be heard, and urges the profession to keep contacting their MPs with their concerns. ‘We want the government to make the best response possible and be forced to listen to the RB, so please keep going.’

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Nurses speak out about what pay restraint means for them

Dane Thompson, London critical care nurse: ‘Nurses have been severely underpaid for far too long. My friends are leaving the profession and question me all the time about why I stay. I have no spare time at all, as it is all spent on shift or trying to prepare for the next shift and then studying for my master’s degree. Renting anywhere is impossible, so I live in the staff quarters on site. If I couldn’t do that I’d have nowhere else to go.’

Nasreen Rafiq, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent staff nurse: ‘It is getting harder and harder to recruit nurses at my trust, and all the while the amount of work we need to do is increasing and there are more targets to meet. It’s having a huge impact on nurses’ health. I really hope the MPs listen to us. Strike action is an option in future but there is a lot we can do before we get to that stage, including working to rule.’

Tricia Pank, former neurological nurse and King’s College London nursing lecturer: ‘For nurses in London the housing situation is dire, travel is expensive and time-consuming, the cost of childcare is prohibitive and many are having to use food banks to survive.’

Lisa Taylor, RCN South West region rep: ‘Nurses need to be paid what they are truly worth and be valued by the government. They should be living, not simply surviving. Show us you care about them and the wonderful job they do. If this debate doesn’t change Jeremy Hunt’s mind and the cap is not scrapped, then another year from now there will be fewer nurses – it’s that simple. But I don’t think this will end here, we are all so passionate.’