TRAFF FACES GRIEVANCE AS UNIONS BATTLE PAY PENALTY FOR SICKNESS

Unions have challenged a foundation trust’s decision to penalise staff for taking sick leave.

Leeds Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, has outlined plans stating staff will not receive annual pay increments if they do not have a ‘satisfactory’ attendance rate over 12 months. It is the latest of a number of trusts that are targeting pay increments to save money.

Proposals also suggest staff will be denied increments if they do not attend mandatory training and are unable to demonstrate improved skills and knowledge in their appraisals.

The measures came into effect for new staff at the start of this month and the trust plans to introduce the changes for all employees in September. The trust has already stopped paying an unsocial hours supplement to new staff during any periods of sick leave.

Unions have begun a formal grievance process against the trust and are in negotiations over the measures.

The trust is on a list compiled by health unions of organisations that appear to be moving away from Agenda for Change (AfC) terms and conditions.

An RCN Yorkshire and the Humber spokesperson said: ‘Unions have already voiced their disapproval of the changes’. He added that he hoped the negotiations ‘will reach a meaningful conclusion’.

A trust spokesperson said it is in discussions with unions about the unsocial hours pay supplement and how it defines ‘satisfactory’ attendance.

He said: ‘The aim of these measures is to support staff at work while maintaining a quality service and preserve jobs in a challenging financial environment.’

SEPARATE TALKS AGREED FOR NHS PENSION SCHEME

The RCN and other health unions are to take part in talks about how public sector pension reforms will specifically affect the NHS scheme.

Separate talks were ordered last week after an agreement between the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the government. Public sector-wide talks will continue in parallel.

The move will mean separate negotiations on schemes for the NHS, police and local government and comes at a time of growing unrest among public sector workers about the future of their pensions. A march against changes to their schemes attracted thousands of protesters last month, including nurse lecturers.

RCN senior employment relations adviser Gerry O’Dwyer said: ‘Nursing is a demanding profession and the health service is a unique working environment and we believe that negotiations based on the needs of nursing staff, and the physical and mental demands placed on our members, is essential.

A Department of Health (DH) consultation that will examine proposals to increase NHS scheme members’ contributions from April is due to start this week. It will only relate to contribution increases for the first year of the scheme.

Recommendations for changes to public sector pensions were set out by former health minister and Labour MP John Hutton in a government-commissioned report published in March.

Lord Hutton suggested nurses’ pensions could be based on career average pay rather than their final salary and that employee contributions could rise by 3.2 per cent over three years.

Around 1,200 RCN members have already responded to the college with comments about the proposals.

Health secretary Andrew Lansley has criticised the proposed pension reforms in a letter to the Treasury, written in May and leaked to the Daily Telegraph this week.

Mr Lansley said the proposed measures are ‘inappropriate’ and ‘unrealistic’, and warned that they are likely to hit women particularly hard.

A DH spokesperson said: ‘Things have moved on since the letter was written. Last month the government set out its commitment to protect the low paid and ensure low and middle income earners receive a pension at retirement broadly as good as they get now.’

RCN general secretary Peter Carter said: ‘We are pleased to see Mr Lansley acknowledges just how damaging these proposed pension changes could be to dedicated nurses, particularly the idea that staff could need to work a full 48-year career to receive a full pension.’