Unions weigh up their options as midwives accept pension deal

By Tamsin Snow

Community nurses in the union Unite are expected to be among those taking part in industrial action this week to protest against pension reform.

The action comes days after the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) announced it is prepared to accept the government’s proposals on pensions, which will see the retirement age in the NHS rise to 68 by 2046.

The RCM board agreed last week to accept the offer, after 71.8 per cent of college members agreed to accept the deal in a ballot. The turnout was 20 per cent.

RCM director of employment relations Jon Skewes said the college’s board had accepted the offer ‘reluctantly’.

Results of Unison’s membership ballot, also published last week, show that 50.4 per cent are not prepared to accept the proposals.

Unison head of health Christina McAnea said the low turnout of 14.8 per cent, coupled with a close vote, gives the union no mandate to endorse the pensions offer, but equally no mandate to take further industrial action.

She added that the union will consider its next steps in talks with other unions.

Unite head of health Rachael Maskell said its members, who overwhelmingly rejected the pension offer, will be taking part in industrial action including regional rallies and picket lines, although she insisted that patient care would not be affected.

‘The reality is that our members are NHS professionals who put patients first,’ she said. ‘The vast majority will actually be working, but a range of activities will be taking place for them to take a part in.’

NHS Employers director Dean Royles said NHS trusts had not been given sufficient opportunity to plan for industrial action.

In a letter sent to human resources managers last week, he said that NHS trusts would be hard-pressed to notify patients of any possible changes to their service.

Advance warning

But Ms Maskell stressed that the union had met its legal obligation to send letters to all organisations employing Unite members seven days ahead of industrial action.

The RCN is still considering whether to accept or reject the government offer. More than six in ten of its members voted to reject the offer in February, but there was a turnout of only 16 per cent. RCN head of employment relations Josie Irwin said a number of meetings were planned for this and next month to take stock of ballots and decide on the next steps.

Health minister Simon Burns said reform was necessary because people are living ‘longer, healthier’ lives.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government will hold further talks on the pension offer with unions next week.

STAFFORD STAFF CELEBRATE INNOVATION

Nurses at Stafford General Hospital gathered last week to hear about innovations in nursing as part of a professional development day.

Cardiac nurse Elaine Khan said nurses were asked to write down improvements they could make within 48 hours as part of the event. The purpose of the day was to boost morale, while educating and inspiring staff at the hospital, which is the subject of a public inquiry into poor care between 2005 and 2009.

Ms Khan said she had introduced a resource room that stores educational materials on clinical care and is encouraging other wards to do the same.

Staff combined the event with a celebration of International Nurses’ Day, held on May 12, when nurses across the world will celebrate the profession.

Pictured at the event, from left, is RCN assistant officer Maria Lewis, staff nurse Jill Box and Ms Khan.

See pages 20 and 62