The UK pay picture

Nurses are still awaiting a 2024-25 pay offer, with the announcement of a UK general election set to cause further delay. The NHS Pay Review Body (RB), which makes pay recommendations for most Agenda for Change (AfC) staff in the UK, is considering evidence from staff side unions, the government and NHS Employers. While the RB may publish its recommendations, rules restricting government announcements during an election campaign mean any ministerial response would have to wait until after the 4 July results. The RB will make separate recommendations for Wales and Northern Ireland, based on evidence from the governments and unions there. The Scottish Government, which has undertaken direct negotiations with unions representing AfC staff since 2018, has yet to commit to a timescale for 2024-25. We look at how the picture differs in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, including last year’s offer.

Northern Ireland

The 2023-24 deal:

5% consolidated (permanent) pay rise, backdated plus £1,505 one-off payment

Until February this year, nurses in Northern Ireland remained the only ones in the UK without a pay offer for 2023-24, or an improvement on the initial £1,400 offered for 2022-23. Absence of a functioning government in the previous two years meant unions had been unable to negotiate an improved deal. However, with the power-sharing government restored, a pay offer was finally made to nurses and other AfC staff on 26 February, consisting of a consolidated pay increase of 5% and a non-consolidated payment of £1,505. In March, 56% of RCN Northern Ireland members rejected the offer, which fell short of pay parity with nurses in England, where the non-consolidated element was between £1,655 and £3,789, dependent on band. However, as a majority of unions voted to accept, the deal was implemented and payment backdated to April 2023.

Wales

The 2023-24 deal:

5% pay rise, plus non-pay elements such as enhanced flexible working, overtime payments, and proposal of a 36-hour week

While the government’s offer of a 5% increase for nurses for 2023-24, along with some non-pay elements, was accepted by unions under the NHS Wales Partnership Forum in May 2023, RCN Wales members rejected it. As a result of further strike action, the Welsh Government invited RCN Wales into further negotiations on the non-pay elements. RCN Wales members’ dispute with the government ended as a result of these negotiations, after the majority voted to accept an enhanced offer on non-pay elements (pay was excluded from that ballot, as the 5% offer had already been accepted by unions). This revision included a reduction in patients being cared for in inappropriate areas such as corridors, improved flexible working arrangements, overtime payments, proposal of a 36-hour working week and advanced rostering.
The UK pay picture – and why it varies

Scotland

The 2023-24 deal:

6.5% pay rise on average, plus a review of protected time for statutory, mandatory and profession-specific learning, review of band 5 nursing roles and a 30-minute reduction in the working week

Scotland was the only country to avoid industrial action over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 pay awards. Following nurses' rejection of the initial 2023-24 offer, unions including the RCN achieved a mandate for strike action, which led to further negotiations. Nurses, including RCN members, then voted by a narrow majority to accept a revised offer. This delivered an average pay rise of 6.5% for 2023-24, making nurses in Scotland the highest paid in the NHS. One of the factors that secured the deal was the government's agreement to review aspects of Agenda (AfC) for Change for nursing staff, including working conditions and pay. The recommendations from that review include protected time for statutory, mandatory and profession-specific learning, a review of band 5 nursing roles and an initial 30-minute reduction in the working week, which began on 1 April this year.

England

The 2023-24 deal:

5% consolidated pay rise

plus one-off payment of £1,655-£3,789

plus consideration of a separate pay spine for all nursing staff and a safe staffing policy framework

In May 2023 the pay offer for NHS staff in England was accepted by the majority of unions (eight), following unprecedented strike action by nurses. Members of the RCN as well as four other unions had voted to reject the offer, which was thereafter implemented by the government. The offer, made in March 2023, was in addition to the pay rise AfC staff had already received for 2022-23. It consisted of a one-off payment for the 2022-23 financial year, worth between £1,655 and £3,789, and a 5% consolidated pay increase for 2023-24 for those at or above point 2 of band 2. The government also set out a series of commitments on pay, terms and conditions – including a specific commitment to consider a separate pay spine for nursing staff, a proposal currently under consideration. In addition, it committed to a national, evidence-based policy framework on safe staffing, drawing on legislation that exists in the rest of the UK and internationally. Other commitments include permanently suspending NHS pension abatement rules, so those returning to work are incentivised to stay in the workforce.