PAY DEAL

Balot on industrial action after below-inflation offer

By Alison Stacey

Nurses in England are being balloted on their willingness to take industrial action following a below-inflation pay offer by the government.

The RCN said ministers had misjudged the mood of the nursing workforce with their rise of around 4%, describing it as a ‘grave misstep’.

An emergency meeting of the college’s ruling council agreed that members in England should be balloted on industrial action.

The move comes amid rising anger among nurses and the wider public sector over pay and staffing issues – and growing public support for action, including a strike.

Under the pay award for 2022-23:

» Nurses on Agenda for Change bands 6 and 7 will receive a 4% increase.

» Newly qualified nurses on band 5 will get a pay rise of 5.5%, with earnings increasing from £25,655 last year to £27,055. All pay rises will be backdated to April 2022.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) did not clarify whether nurses on higher bands would receive a realistic bursary, ‘we do not invest in the future workforce – whether then they need to think about how they will do nothing to help to recruit or retain more nursing staff where you work. It does not recognise the skill and responsibility of the job you do. Sadly, it will not keep patients safe.’

Health and social care secretary Steve Barclay claimed that offering high pay increases driven by inflation ‘would have a worse impact on pay packets in the long run’.

The government said its offer reflected the recommendations of the independent NHS pay review body (RB).

The RB covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but a final decision on pay rests with the devolved governments.

In Scotland NHS staff have been offered a pay increase of 5% for 2022-23 and they are being balloted on next steps.

RECRUITMENT

Sharp fall in nursing degree applications ‘cause for concern’

Applications to university nursing courses have dropped, with a sharp fall in the number of mature students seeking to enter the profession.

Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service show overall applications to nursing courses for the June 2022 deadline were down 8% on those for 2021, from 56,630 to 52,150.

Applications from those aged 25-29 fell by 21% from 7,550 in 2021 to 5,930 in 2022 – although there was a small increase in applications from 18 year olds.

RCN general secretary Pat Cullen said: ‘An 8% drop in applications to nursing courses across the UK is a real cause for concern amid a workforce crisis that is compromising safe patient care. With the biggest drop in mature student applications, financial pressures are at play and the prospect of taking on more debt when inflation is soaring is a bridge too far.’

The data also shows about 5,000 fewer female applicants than last year. And while international applications increased by nearly 1,000 overall, UK applications dropped by 5,400 – or 10%.

The figures come as health leaders warn the decision to scrap BTEC qualifications in health and social care – one of the main routes into nursing – could damage the recruitment of potential nursing students.

The efforts of nurses during the pandemic sparked a surge in interest in becoming a nurse, but the increasing strain on health and care services is putting new recruits off, according to Birmingham City University associate professor and head of the department of adult nursing Kevin Crimmons.

‘If the government is serious about addressing the alarming vacancy levels then they need to think about how they invest in the future workforce – whether that is paying tuition fees or providing a realistic bursary,’ he said.