COVID bonus extended to charities and others

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Nurses delivering NHS services who work for social enterprises, councils and charities in England will finally get the ‘COVID backlog bonus’, after the government announced it will fund the one-off payment.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DH) said eligible organisations can apply for funding to help deliver the one-off payment—worth between £1,655 and £3,789 for full-time staff, depending on pay band—which was agreed as part of the NHS pay award earlier this year.

The DH said it has ‘listened to concerns’ about providing the payment in the ‘current economic circumstances’ and has decided to make funding available to help deliver it.

RCN director for England Patricia Marquis said: ‘This significant progress is not before time. In the four months after the one-off payment was given to the majority, we have campaigned alongside the nursing staff who were left without.

‘Pay uplifts and any one-offs should, as a rule, go to all who deliver NHS care and not leave some people behind through contractual technicalities. The department must provide clarity on who will receive the funding.’

In March the government published its ‘pay offer in principle’, which stated that ‘all staff’ on Agenda for Change (AfC) contracts would receive the bonus. However, the government later qualified that this only covered those on AfC contracts who are directly employed by NHS trusts.

Ministers claim the criteria were agreed during negotiations, but both the RCN and Unison dispute this.

Speaking about the latest one-off payment, former health minister Will Quince said the decision ‘will ensure hardworking healthcare staff and the organisations they work for are not financially disadvantaged as a result of the NHS pay deal and means they will receive their backlog bonus for their efforts during the pandemic’.

However some staff working exclusively in the NHS bank will still miss out on the payment, as they are employed on flexible, locally managed contracts, which means they have local terms and conditions.

Unison head of health Sara Gorton called on the government to end the ‘two-tier employment scandal’. ‘Sadly this won’t stop thousands of contractors and bank providers from ignoring calls to do the right thing by paying the lump sum to outsourced and temporary staff in the NHS,’ she said. ‘Many of these workers are on low wages and insecure contracts.’

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NHS culture

Letby inquiry will investigate issues ‘from ward to boardroom’

The senior judge leading the inquiry into the crimes of Lucy Letby has said she is committed to investigating issues ‘from the ward to the boardroom’, insisting ‘NHS culture must change now’.

Announcing the inquiry’s programme of work on 22 November, Lady Justice Thirlwall urged all nurses and managers working in NHS neonatal units across England to complete an anonymous survey on NHS culture to aid the inquiry, including whether trusts should consider using CCTV in neonatal wards.

The Court of Appeal judge is tasked with examining events at the Countess of Chester Hospital leading up to the murders and attempted murders Letby committed while she was employed there as a neonatal nurse, and how she was able to repeatedly kill and harm babies.

The inquiry will also consider the experience of babies and parents named in the case, the conduct of staff and the structures for raising concerns, and the effectiveness of governance and external regulation.

Speaking in her first public address since the inquiry was launched, Lady Thirlwall set out a timeline ahead of its first public hearings, which are currently planned for autumn 2024 and will take place in Chester.

As well as the survey for neonatal nurses, a separate questionnaire has been sent to every hospital in England that has a neonatal unit. It asks whether neonatal units have CCTV and, if not, whether its use has been contemplated.

Lady Thirlwall said she will be reflecting on previous cases and their subsequent inquiries, such as that of former nurse Beverley Allitt, who was convicted of killing babies in the 1990s.

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