

Splitting up the NHS team: Consultation on a separate pay spine for nursing (England)

January 2024

This briefing is to support UNISON Health branches and organisers in England in responding to queries about the consultation on a separate pay spine for nurses in England.

Please use this briefing to support discussions and engagement with nurses and wider NHS staff.

We have published an initial response at <https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/health-care/big-issues/splitting-up-the-nhs-one-team/>

Individuals can respond to the consultation if they wish; the Health team will welcome feedback from branches to support our organisational response to the call for evidence.

Please share any feedback with h.group@unison.co.uk

What is being proposed?

The Government has launched a call for evidence to support the consideration of proposals which would create separate pay arrangements for NHS nurses in England, splitting up the NHS team.

You can read the consultation here – <https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/separate-pay-spine-for-nursing/separate-pay-spine-for-nursing>

None of the devolved administrations have expressed any interest in pursuing this policy.

Why is this happening?

During last year's pay dispute, in separate talks with the Royal College of Nursing, the Government agreed to consider the possibility of introducing a separate pay spine for NHS nurses in England.

This proposal was not part of the official offer on which UNISON members voted in March 2023. UNISON members voted to accept the improved pay offer that was negotiated for 2022 and 2023 - 2024.

What would this mean?

The Government consultation is asking for views from organisations and individuals to better understand the potential risks and benefits around the introduction of separate pay arrangements for nurses.

In the call for evidence the Government sets out two broad options which could be used to implement the policy. The first would be to introduce a separate nursing pay spine within the existing AfC contract. The second would be to introduce a new, separate contract for nursing staff with its own terms and conditions and a new collective bargaining structure.

Implementing either option would undoubtedly be profoundly complex and time consuming; bogging down trade unions and the NHS in complicated negotiations. This would prevent us from making progress on other issues such as ensuring the correct banding, improving overtime rates and reducing the working week.

There has been no indication that separate pay arrangements for nurses would mean an increase in funding for NHS pay, nor would it necessarily mean a greater share of the funding for nurses. Separating nurses from current bargaining structures would greatly weaken the collective bargaining power of NHS unions, making it harder for us to win pay rises for all in future.

Who would be included in the separate pay spine?

The call for evidence does not make it clear whether the proposed separate arrangements would be limited to just registered nurses. It is also unclear how pay would be determined for job roles which are open to nurses and members of other occupational groups.

We believe everyone in the NHS team is important and deserves fair pay, recognition and opportunity.

Why is UNISON opposed?

Our Nursing and Midwifery Committee, made up of elected nursing representatives from across the UK, opposes this policy; and UNISON Health Conference 2023, the largest national gathering of NHS staff, voted unanimously to campaign against this move.

We believe the policy is divisive, would undermine trade unions and hamper attempts to improve NHS pay.

The policy:

- ☐ Would not increase the overall commitment to spending on NHS pay.
- ☐ Would lead to greater inequalities in NHS pay. Current arrangements ensure equal pay for equal jobs. Separate, complex arrangements for nurses could lead to unjust and unequal pay differences between different staff groups.
- ☐ Would collapse collective pay bargaining in the NHS. Other occupational groups would likely also demand separate arrangements, ending our One Team approach to pay and dividing the workforce irreparably.

You can read why UNISON nurses are speaking out against these proposals here - <https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/health-care/big-issues/splitting-up-the-nhs-one-team/>

What is our approach to improving pay for nurses?

The underlying issues raised by nurses are real and urgently need to be addressed. The best chance of doing this is together - using our collective strength.

As we go into the next pay round, nurses pay issues are at the heart of our priorities, including:

- ☐ Grading nurses properly, with reward that reflects modern nursing skills and experience
- ☐ Ensuring experience and promotion are well rewarded looking at particular pressure points – for example progression within band 5 and band 6, and promotion incentives including from band 7 to 8a
- ☐ Resourcing the outcomes of the NHS Staff Council nursing and midwifery job profile review and the 2022-24 pay deal commitment to improve nursing career progression
- ☐ A proper pay rise which makes a significant and real improvement to the pay of all NHS staff
- ☐ Commitment to talks on shorter working week based on no loss of pay – in order to reduce the damage to staff and waste to the service of high stress and burnout

What is UNISON doing for nurses in the NHS?

We extensively surveyed our UNISON nursing family recently. They told us:

- Nurses are struggling constantly with unsafe staffing levels
- Nursing jobs are growing more complex and they are acting with more autonomy
- Nurses are taking much more responsibility for leading teams, as well as supervising and educating students and junior staff

We recognise there is significant frustration amongst nurses and agree there are urgent problems with lack of recognition, poor promotion opportunities and a lack of reward for progression, which must be fixed.

Our Nursing and Midwifery Committee is overseeing an ambitious programme of work to tackle these issues:

- Our 'Only Enough is Enough' campaign is growing and supporting nurses to challenge unsafe staffing levels at work – Read more here <https://www.unison.org.uk/only-enough-is-enough/>. We'll be expanding this campaign to more hospital sites and NHS organisations in the coming year.
- We're negotiating with the NHS, following industrial action last year, on better career progression for nurses. We're using evidence members have given us about how jobs have evolved to argue for better career options and automatic career progression for nurses.
- We're leading a review of the national nursing and midwifery job profiles. Nursing and midwifery members can join our upcoming seminar to discuss this work and share experiences on job evaluation here – <https://www.unison.org.uk/events/grade-us-right-improving-job-evaluation-for-nurses-and-midwives/>
- We're working to improve preceptorships and the support for newly registered nurses. Our joint campaign with the Florence Nightingale Foundation and the Nursing Times has engaged with thousands of nurses, with significant progress being made across the UK on preceptorship programmes and policies.
- We're supporting internationally educated nurses to fight for dignity and ensure fair treatment in their recruitment and employment. Our Overseas Nurses' Network means UNISON nurse leaders are driving our work to support our colleagues and ensure all are fairly treated. Read more- <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2023/10/overseas-nurses-gather-for-empowering-day/>

Complex and lengthy negotiations about separate pay arrangements will distract from these goals, weaken trade unions and divide the NHS team.

We're stronger as One Team – let's improve NHS pay together.

UNISON Health Team. 17 January 2024.