

**Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#)  
ar y [gweithlu Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#)**

**This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care](#)  
[Committee](#) consultation on [Health and Social Care Workforce](#)**

**HSC 51**

**Ymateb gan: | Response from: Unison**

---



# UNISON Cymru/Wales response: A Healthier Wales – A Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care

UNISON House, Custom House St, Cardiff, CF10 1AP

UNISON Information Development Organiser

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 UNISON Cymru/Wales is Wales' largest public sector trade union with 100,000 members working in public services across Wales. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this workforce strategy for health and social care.
- 1.2 We represent full-time and part-time workers who provide public services in public, private, charity, and third sectors.
- 1.3 UNISON Cymru/Wales health members are from occupations across health services including: nurses and healthcare assistants; midwives; health visitors; administrative, finance and HR staff; ambulance staff including paramedics, technicians, control room and maintenance staff; allied health professionals; scientific staff; healthcare managers; estates staff including porters.
- 1.4 UNISON social care members include social workers and social care workers across residential and non-residential and domiciliary care services. Our members undertake roles in early years and childcare; mental healthcare; care for older people; disabled people's care; caring for people with learning disabilities.
- 1.5 UNISON broadly welcomes the Healthier Wales strategy. The strategy has been published in the extremely difficult context of the COVID pandemic. The pandemic has put enormous strain on health and social care services, and has underlined the importance of the workforce across these sectors.
- 1.6 The current workforce are extremely fatigued, stressed, and burdened by the additional work created by the pandemic. They have worked throughout an acutely dangerous and unstable period, with some making the ultimate sacrifice through loss of life because of COVID.
- 1.7 The strategy rightly acknowledges the importance of workforce investment, but there are broader points that also need to be reaffirmed.

- 1.8 It is important for UNISON to highlight from the offset that, for workers to feel truly valued and supported, pay, and terms and conditions of employment must accurately reflect the worth and value of the work that is undertaken across the sector. If the pay, working environment, terms and conditions are better for staff then standards will be driven up across the sector. Patient or client care will also improve with greater a more stable workforce.
- 1.8 UNISON continues to advocate the potential benefits of health and social care integration, however, it is of key importance that there is parity across the health and social care sector.
- 1.9 All too often, social care is the poor relation by comparison with the NHS – with workers experiencing poor pay, terms, and conditions of employment. Social care services are fragmented across Wales and there is an unstable workforce.
- 1.10 For the workforce strategy to be realised, there must be parity across the whole workforce. The current unstable conditions in social care also create instability in NHS services where patients cannot be discharged because of lack of social care provision in the local community, which in effect creates bed-blocking.
- 1.11 Furthermore, and with the ongoing theme of parity, it is essential the entire workforce across health and social care be given access to recognised trade unions. There are numerous current examples where private employers have prevented their workforce from having trade union access and where union members have had to seek support from their union covertly so as not to face repercussion from their employer.

## 2. Strategic Theme One: An Engaged, Motivated and Healthy Workforce

- 2.1 UNISON broadly welcomes the ambition and actions outlined in the first theme of the document. However, the workforce will never feel valued and supported unless their pay reflects their value.
- 2.2 NHS workers have experienced ten years of pay freezes and low pay awards. Pay in the NHS has not kept pace with inflation, and the cost of living continues to increase.
- 2.3 The situation in social care is even worse with workers providing high levels of complex and personal care for the minimum wage.
- 2.4 Without fair reward, it will not be possible for workers to achieve the ambitions outlined in this strategy. Work life balance is difficult to achieve when someone works 60 hours a week just to make ends meet.

- 2.5 As acknowledged in the strategy and by Welsh Government, fair work is more than fair pay, but the impact pay has cannot be underestimated, particularly for those experiencing in-work poverty.
- 2.6 UNISON welcomes the commitment to work with trade unions on the actions outlined, and the commitment to ongoing social partnership - but this must be meaningful and must operate at all devolved levels.
- 2.7 UNISON is a strong advocate of a Just and Learning culture. The development of a “Just and Learning Culture” has been explored in numerous health boards in Wales to improve organisational culture away from blaming individuals in the case of an incident, towards a more systematic exploration of what led to an incident. It seeks to move away from blame culture to a culture whereby professionals can learn without fear of retribution.
- 2.8 Given the impact the pandemic has had on staff, now would be the optimum time to try to implement a Just and Learning culture across NHS Wales, and this should be prioritised. We need a fuller understanding, where it has been piloted, of the impact it has had.
- 2.9 However, whilst a Just and Learning culture would be desirable within the social care context, it is important the strategy recognises that the starting point is vastly different. UNISON is clear, it is of key priority that proper industry wide collective bargaining is applied across the entire social care sector. Collective bargaining would at least begin to address the industrial recognition that social care workers need and would begin to address the challenge of coordinating improved standards across a sector which is hugely fragmented.
- 2.10 Furthermore, social care is highly skilled and increasingly complex. There is no one-size approach. People are living longer and with more complex health needs that need tailored support. Collective bargaining can help to properly recognise the skills and demands in care through properly negotiated terms, conditions and pay, which will in turn support fair reward. We cannot expect to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce for the long-term if we offer poor quality jobs, pay, terms and conditions. There must be a shift away from reducing costs, which inevitably leads to labour cost reductions, towards the delivery of quality care.
- 2.11 Staff wellbeing – the wellbeing of the workforce across health and social care is of paramount importance. The resilience of staff is, understandably, at a low given the experiences since March 2020. Many workers have suffered both physically and mentally because of the pandemic. Vacancy levels are high across the sector, putting additional pressures on an already strained workforce. Pay is clearly one factor that helps people to feel valued and UNISON has called for a fair pay increase for NHS workers and fair pay more broadly across the social care sector. The entire sector needs additional funding specifically for the purposes of increasing pay. In addition, workers need to have paid time to enable them to undertake training and development, with clear career paths and opportunities. In

addition to this and considering the trauma staff may have experienced over the course of the pandemic, it is crucial the entire workforce has access to mental health services and support where they are needed.

### 3. Strategic Theme Two: Attraction and Recruitment

- 3.1 Wales already has a careers service. It is not necessary to recreate a service specifically for health and social care. Instead, it is important to use the skilled careers workforce already in place and to ensure they have adequate funding and clear aims and objectives to take this important piece of work forward.
- 3.2 UNISON agrees with targeted recruitment schemes. The health and social care workforce is an aging workforce and more needs to be done to ensure it is an attractive sector to work in for young people.
- 3.3 Targeted recruitment must not, however, step out of any established bargaining arrangements. There must be a fair and level playing field, and it should be an aim to extend collective bargaining to encompass the whole health and social care sector in Wales. For health and social care to be attractive to workers, there must be fair and appropriate reward for the work undertaken in the sector.
- 3.4 UNISON remain unclear on what 'values-based recruitment' is, what values should be included, and how they can be measured as part of a fair, open and transparent recruitment process.
- 3.5 The current pay, terms and conditions for many social care workers are poor – meeting only the legal minimum standards. We need to encourage more workers into social care for the long-term and we need to ensure workers are fairly rewarded for their work. There are examples of good employers, but unless there are fair and decent sector standards across the piece, the sector will remain fractured and unstable.
- 3.6 Decent conditions of work and fair pay cannot be established without an industry-wide approach. Collective bargaining is urgently needed to drive forward the shared interests of employers, care recipients, and the social care workforce. True change can only be achieved on a collective basis as reaffirming rights and seeking fair reward on an individual worker or employer by employer will not create the wholesale change the sector needs. Fair pay must go beyond the real living wage and must be a proper, fully negotiated pay strategy that builds in differentials between roles in social care and recognises the differing levels of skills required and varying responsibilities, so promoting personal development and career pathways.

### 4. Strategic Theme Three: Seamless Working Models

- 4.1 The workforce must be given the necessary paid time and support to undertake training. The workforce must not be expected to subsidise the sector by attending the necessary training to create a seamless service in their own unpaid time or by paying for training.
- 4.2 A 'values based common induction programme' must refer to workforce rights, trade union access, and recognition. Taking student nurse training for example, trade unions are given direct access to student nurse intake and are afforded time to speak directly to student nurses about the benefits of belonging to a trade union. Students are actively encouraged to join and participate in a trade union. This type of arrangement across health and social care would demonstrate a commitment to the 'values based, common induction programme' referred to.
- 4.3 Trade unions must be involved at an early stage on extending and harmonising registration. UNISON is not opposed to registration, but it is essential the intentions and benefits of registration are clear and met.
- 4.4 To date, care workers experience of registration has been poor and there has been little benefit to workers, but they have incurred personal cost and believe the regulatory threat and possible punitive action weighs heavy on individuals. A comment from a carer at a recent UNISON event about registration was that: "It is used as a stick to beat us with." UNISON believes it is important to address these concerns before seeking to extend the register further.

## 5. Strategic Theme Four: Building a digitally ready workforce

- 5.1 The digital world is developing at pace, and this has been further promoted by the pandemic and the fast adaptation to different ways of working. Digital development must not be primarily concerned with cost cutting – there must be an appropriate use of artificial intelligence and robotics. The development of artificial intelligence must be ethical and socially responsible – it must be for the benefit of all, not only employers and commercial interests.
- 5.2 The workers voice is important as we move into a more digitally advanced workplace. It is important to ensure there is secure strong collective bargaining on technology and data. There must be more worker consultation on the development, introduction, and operation of new technologies.
- 5.3 Fairness and transparency must be built into the system. UNISON is already aware of circumstances where digital advancement has had a negative impact on staff. Workers need to know how their data is being used to inform AI powered tools, and workers must be aware when AI is operating and must consent.

- 5.4 Workers can be at the very heart of digital development if given the opportunity- helping to take forward proper workplace improvements that benefit services.
- 5.5 The Wales Union Learning Fund projects are an integral part of supporting the development of this work and can help to deliver a digitally able and confident workforce.

## 6. Strategic Theme Five: Excellent education and learning

- 6.1 As previously mentioned, widening access to education and learning must include a commitment to ensure the workforce is afforded paid time off to be able to complete the necessary training.
- 6.2 There are many members of the health and social care workforce who are low paid, have precarious job security, and simply cannot afford to finance their own continued professional development. This is a gender specific issue as it is predominantly women who operate under such conditions, and it is an issue that must be addressed if health and social care are to be the sectors of choice.
- 6.3 UNISON welcomes the commitment to apprenticeships and vocational education. The strategy should also take into consideration and properly utilise the Wales Union Learning Fund.

## 7. Strategic Theme Six: Leadership

- 7.1 UNISON recognises the role that leaders can play in helping to deliver a collective and compassionate workplace. However, there must exercise caution in ensuring workers operate within their role descriptions and are paid for the job they are doing. We must avoid grade drift, for example, in the NHS. Furthermore, given the experiences of the staff currently working in health and social care, it is important those workers are not overburdened at a time where they are already in crisis.

## 8. Welsh Government Programme

- 8.1 We expect to see legislation on public procurement and specifically on national framework agreements related to social care progress through the Senedd this term. It is essential this legislation go as far as possible for its potential to be a mechanism to help deliver fair work to be fully

realised. Scrutiny of such legislation is key to ensuring it properly addresses these critical issues within the care sector.

- 8.2 The actions appear silent on the issue of greening the workplace and promoting more sustainable solutions to workforce planning. Given the Welsh Government has declared a climate emergency, and has committed to embed the climate and nature emergency into everything we do, UNISON believes this should form a part of the workforce strategy for health and social care.

## 9. Additional specific areas

- 9.1 The absence of collective bargaining in the sector diminishes the worker voice. Trade unions have been raising issues of concern about the social care sector for many years. UNISON has consistently talked about the problem with fragmented services - the sustainability of the workforce, the sustainability of contracts, poor employment practices, workforce retention, increasingly complex care needs – for many years. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated the situation and truly brought to light the enormity of the problem.
- 9.2 This has been recognised by governments both on a UK and Wales basis, and we have seen numerous attempts to overcome these challenges including the infection control fund, and government awarded bonus payments.
- 9.3 The trade unions are not separate entities – the trade unions are the workers and had the warnings of the unions/the workers been heeded earlier then arguably social care would be in a much healthier position. The worker/union voice must not be ignored further – collective bargaining must be established across the whole sector.