

SARAH ATHERTON MP
Member of Parliament for Wrexham



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Eluned Morgan MS
Minister for Health and Social Services
Welsh Government
5th Floor
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Cardiff Bay
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14th December 2022

Dear Eluned

I am writing regarding both the nursing strikes in Wales, and locally the issues facing Wrexham residents in terms of accessing healthcare.

Healthcare is by far the number one issue in my inbox. With 1 in 4 waiting for an operation in Wales compared to 1 in 20 in England, it is no wonder that Wales feels let down.

Today, we see the first ever nursing strike. As a nurse myself, I can confidently say that striking is not in our nature. I understand nurses will have thought long and hard before voting to strike as this will inevitably impact waiting lists and accessibility to healthcare.

Of course, the NHS in Wales is devolved to the Welsh Government. The UK Government gives the Welsh Government £18bn annually to fund services in Wales, which is 20% more than England gets. In fact, this year the Chancellor committed an extra £1.2bn. This is the biggest funding settlement since devolution began in Wales.

As a nurse who trained at the Maelor in the nineties, most of those outdated structures remain in use and date back to 1930's when Wrexham's population was 93,000. It is now 136,000 and we are living much longer due to advancements in medical technology and medication. The building itself is outdated, with a 'rabbit warren' layout, which is no longer fit for purpose. Recent announcements of extra funding and service reconfiguration within the building will not address the major changes required in order to address health deficits in Wrexham. Last week, I called for a brand-new hospital in Wrexham, which many of my constituents and I believe will go a long way to deal with the health care failures in Wrexham.

Thanks to the UK Government's generous funding settlement to Wales, the Welsh Government has the money available to increase nurses pay, and/or build new hospitals. Prioritisation of spending is down to you and your colleagues in Cardiff.

When I returned to the wards during the Covid pandemic I saw first-hand how long and hard the nurses worked in very challenging working conditions. There was a visible lack of managers, sickness levels were high which increased pressure on the remaining staff and highly paid agency staff were brought in but not able to undertake many of the same clinical duties. I worked 12-hour shifts, in full PPE on a restricted Covid ward for net £14.37 per hour which I donated to the Maelor Voluntary Service.

So, I know exactly how undervalued and unsupported they feel by management. Nurses have consistently stepped up to support the Welsh health service during Covid, with very little recognition for the gravity of what they provided. Under-resourced, overworked, and undervalued, and increased pay alone will not solve the problems facing staffing in the NHS.

Turning to the strikes, I firmly believe that nurses do deserve pay that reflects their skills, dedication, and their commitment to the delivery of vital state services.

The Independent NHS Pay Review Body recommended a pay rise of between 4% and 5.5%, which under the Agenda for Change, the Welsh Health Minister agreed to in July of this year. It is within the gift of the Welsh Labour Government to offer an award higher than 5.5% if it sought fit and I urge you, as Health Minister to get around the table again with the Royal College Nursing (RCN) to continue negotiations on behalf of the profession and patients to try and prevent the next weeks strike day. There is, however, a huge disparity between the suggestion of 5.5% and the demand from the RCN for 19%. After the pandemic, and during this cost of living crisis we need to be careful to balance the pressure of inflation with fair pay rises, and 19% is too high. I have made this point to UK Government Health Ministers also.

As I am sure you agree, I very much hope that we can forge a path forward, in terms of pay and conditions. Our nurses are valued and to encourage the nurses of the future we need to make changes now.

Grateful for your consideration.

Yours ever

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Atherton', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Atherton MP
Member of Parliament for Wrexham