**How can B&NES council avert the Sirona care worker strike?**

**Background to the strike**

120 Sirona care workers are set to take strike action at the start of June. These staff, mainly women earning little more than the minimum wage, work in residential and extra care for older people in Bath, Keynsham and Midsomer Norton.

The strike is happening because Sirona management plan to make care workers choose between a pay cut, or working longer hours. Even working longer hours will in practice result in a loss of earnings to the workers, because they will be less able to take up bank work or other sources of second incomes.

The specific plan would see a thirty minute “unpaid break” inserted into most shifts. But in many cases the shift would not be extended to take this into account. Instead the thirty minute chunks will accrue over time, so care workers will essentially do shifts for free. Some are predicted to be liable for up to sixteen extra unpaid shifts each year.

To make this change Sirona asked these workers to sign new contracts. Care staff have refused to do so en masse, so Sirona now say they will dismiss and re-engage all the staff to force them onto the new contracts.

In response to this, care workers in UNISON have voted overwhelmingly (95%) to strike.

**Why is Sirona cutting pay for care workers?**

Sirona have handled the situation badly, failing to provide information to care workers in a timely fashion and putting undue pressure on them to sign the new contracts before they have the full facts available.

But UNISON does not believe that responsibility for this situation sits with Sirona. The problem exists because B&NES council cut £215,000 from Sirona’s budget. UNISON understands Sirona has less money to work with. To avert the strike, B&NES council needs to provide sustainable funding for Sirona. UNISON has already agreed some cost saving plans with Sirona, so additional investment of just £170,000 would protect the incomes of the care workers and the service for the individuals in care.

**What have B&NES council officers said about the cut?**

In a letter to Wera Hobhouse MP, B&NES head of healthcare commissioning Jane Shayler wrote “*Council funding allocated to the provision of these services has not been reduced... it was necessary to remove the funding associated with these services from the funding envelop [sic] for those services which did transfer to Virgin*”.

This statement seems to obscure the issue. The overall funding envelope may be the same, but Sirona’s budget has clearly been reduced, which has led to the pay cut and now a strike.

Ms Shayler goes on to write that the pay cut is necessary “*to bring them in line with more recently recruited staff and, indeed, the Terms and Conditions of other similar care staff employed in the care sector*.”

Unfortunately this is also mistaken. There is no comparator group of staff who already have this unpaid break arrangement in extra and residential care. Even if there were, the council should equalise up conditions up, not pursue a race to the bottom for these already low paid staff.

Furthermore, Sirona is already struggling to fill vacancies because its pay and conditions are worse than other care firms. Bristol City Council, a key source of competition when recruiting care workers, has instructed its care providers to pay an average of £9 per hour. If this pay cut goes through, Sirona will lose staff and struggle to hire enough people to maintain safe staffing levels in the near future.

**What will this mean for care workers?**

Care workers do not want to go on strike but they cannot endure the conditions proposed by management. The shift changes present a number of problems

* The impact on the workers’ already precarious finances. They are low paid, living in an area with a high cost of living. They cannot afford to turn down the extra shifts.
* UNISON members have told us they are already forced to use food banks because their wages do not cover the essentials.
* Even if they do take the extra shifts, this means the workers cannot make up their incomes using bank shifts, unsocial hours shifts, or other second jobs.
* The impact on caring arrangements. The staff are almost all women and a very high percentage having caring responsibilities of their own, either for children, for elderly parents, or for both. They will be faced with unaffordable extra childcare costs or in some cases simply have to leave if the changes go through.

**What should B&NES council do to avert the strike?**

UNISON has already taken part in conciliation talks with ACAS and Sirona to try to find a resolution. But with Sirona refusing and unable to take the shift changes off the table, the care workers cannot see a way forward.

The only sustainable way forward is for B&NES council to put Sirona on a realistic level of funding. Not only is it unjust of B&NES to pass on a funding cut and expect the lowest paid, but most vital staff to shoulder it, it is also counterproductive to delivering high-quality care as it will exacerbate recruitment and staff turnover problems.

UNISON recommends B&NES council immediately provide funding for 2018/19 so Sirona can gain breathing space to address the problem. In the longer term, B&NES council can look to the following sources for funds:

* £3.9m raised by a planned 3% social care precept on council tax in 2018/19 (with another 1% planned in 2019/2020)
* £733,000, unallocated from the 2017/18 adult social care support grant
* The Better Care Fund and improved Better Care Fund, the latter of which amounts to £3.428m (2017/18); £2.063m (2018/19); and £1.028m (2019/20)
* £1.5m in the revenue budget contingency reserve for 2018/19 (up from £1m)
* £12.2m in the general reserve, which is £300,000 above the lower threshold amount

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