Parliament will debate plans to scrap the bursary for nursing students in England after an online petition, supported by the RCN, got more than 100,000 signatures in just three days.

The debate in Westminster Hall is scheduled for 11 January and follows a backlash by members.

In his Comprehensive Spending Review, Chancellor George Osborne announced that nursing students will have to pay tuition fees and use a loan from 2017.

RCN Chief Executive & General Secretary Janet Davies described the move as “a crushing blow” for the profession. “Bursaries aren’t a luxury, they’re a lifeline,” she said. “Our students don’t just apply to study nursing, they apply to train to be a nurse.”

Student activists were among hundreds to attend a protest outside the Department of Health earlier this month. Student member of RCN Council Sylvia Duval (pictured holding banner) said the proposals will affect students’ work causing them extra stress. “A nursing degree is not like other degrees,” she said. “You spend half your time in clinical practice working for the NHS. It affects your personal life and takes up your weekends too. There’s no time to earn extra money. Nurse training is a big sacrifice and you need the support of a bursary.”

While the Government has announced 10,000 additional training places during the course of this parliament, the RCN argues that prospective nursing students could be put off by the costs involved.

See page 2 for more.
The RCN is continuing its efforts to engage with the Government over proposed changes to student nurse funding in England. In advance of the plans being confirmed, the College worked tirelessly behind the scenes to prevent them coming to fruition.

Now, spurred on by the strength of feeling among members, the RCN is fighting harder than ever before to encourage politicians to listen. Meetings with MPs have been set up and the College is doggedly pursuing opportunities to influence the health minister.

“We'll not give up in our determination to get the best deal for nursing students,” said RCN Chief Executive & General Secretary Janet Davies. “As an organisation we don't want to ignore ideas and opportunities that could, if developed properly, result in a desperately needed increase to the nursing workforce. But the devil is in the detail. We must make sure we're at the negotiating table making our voices heard.”

Nursing students have been submitting their stories of financial hardship and reliance on the bursary in their droves via the Nursing Counts website. Members are encouraged to use a template letter on the site to contact their MP and express concerns.

RCN Student Council Member Brendan Garry (pictured) said: “These plans are going to massively affect nursing going forward. It’s all well and good opening training up to more students, but how are the required placements going to be supported? Will the quality of practical training suffer? There are all these factors to consider. I don’t think it’s been thought through.”

With nurses’ real terms earnings dropping 10 per cent in the last seven years, the RCN fears students will be taking on debt they can never repay.

Visit www.rcn.org.uk/nursingcounts

Safe staffing bill pressure

Wales is one step closer to becoming the first country in the UK with a legal duty on safe nurse staffing levels, thanks to the work of RCN activists and members.

Hundreds of emails and letters sent to Welsh Assembly members have seen the safe nurse staffing levels bill move through to the next stage in the law-making process. The bill had received unanimous support at the first stage but a crucial financial meeting was postponed and there was concern it would be left to flounder. However, the commitment from members in Wales to expressing the importance of the bill has meant the legislation has now advanced to the next stage.

The RCN is confident the bill, which aims to protect safe staffing levels in hospitals across Wales, will come into law next year.

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Centenary call for contributors

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of the RCN and the Activate team is looking for stories of how activists have made a positive difference to members' lives.

As part of the celebrations the College is searching for its longest serving activist. Could it be you? Do you know a rep who might be challenging for the title? Let us know via email at activate@rcn.org.uk

You can also get in touch with your stories of success as an activist over the years, or share your views on the future of activism and its importance to the RCN.

Whatever your perspective, be it influencing policy in your nursing specialty or making changes to protect the safety of members in your workplace, the RCN owes its past and future success to you.

Don’t hide your light under a bushel. Let’s use the centenary to shout loud and proud about the great work activists do. A selection of stories will be published in a special commemorative issue of Activate later in 2016 and promoted across the RCN’s social media channels throughout the year.

Make sure you make the most of opportunities to celebrate. A whole host of activities are planned for members to get involved with.

There’ll be 100 centenary branded events, an exhibition charting the College’s history, a special two-day professional conference and commemorative souvenirs to keep your RCN memories alive.

Visit www.rcn.org.uk/RCN100 to find out more and view centenary keepsakes for sale. A full range of merchandise, including jewellery, postcards, hoodies, mugs, pens and keyrings will be available from January.
The RCN estimates that 35,000 of its members could be affected by George Osborne’s decision not to put more money into social care as part of his Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Chancellor set out plans to allow councils to increase council tax by two per cent to cover the cost of adult social care, but the RCN believes this would only raise £2 billion if every council implemented it throughout the term of this parliament.

Care providers have stated it would take £6 billion to plug the existing gap in funding.

Clare Jacobs, RCN Employment Adviser, said: “The issue for members and reps is going to be about poor pay, terms and conditions, training, clinical supervision and leadership in social care. There will be inadequate funding to make improvements, let alone pay the new living wage.

“More critically it is about having to deal with employment transfers, redundancies and closures across the sector.

“For older people moved from their homes it will mean health deterioration and a hastening of end of life. It will do nothing to relieve bed blocking and will impact on overstretched community district nursing services.”

The news comes after Four Seasons Health Care, one of the UK’s biggest social care providers, announced it was closing 10 per cent of its homes in Northern Ireland.

Janice Smyth, Director of RCN Northern Ireland, said: “The patients being cared for in these homes have severe, complex needs and need round-the-clock care. There has been no planning for this sector in terms of its nursing workforce requirements and we fear there is worse to come. Vulnerable patients will suffer.”

RCN Council has authorised a request from the RCN in Northern Ireland to consult its members over industrial action.

The move comes after members expressed their anger over the lack of a pay award in Northern Ireland. It is the only area in the UK with no pay offer for nursing staff, despite salary increases being given to other public sector workers including teachers and police officers.

Chair of Council Michael Brown said: “We identified with the sense of unfairness felt by our colleagues in Northern Ireland. It is wrong that nursing staff there have been left for so long without an agreement. We fully support them in their negotiations to achieve a pay award, and have given them the authority to ballot if necessary for industrial action short of strike action.

“We agreed that any such action should be planned to ensure that patient safety is not compromised in any way.”

Speaking prior to the Council meeting, Janice Smyth, Director of the RCN in Northern Ireland, said: “Nurses are angry that more than halfway through the financial year, there is still no indication of a pay award. They’re working under extreme pressure in a system unfit for purpose.”

The decision to allow the ballot puts the RCN in Northern Ireland in a strong position as it seeks to negotiate a pay award.

RCN President Cecilia Anim has called on health chiefs to tackle how workplaces use energy, as she spoke at the People’s March for Climate Justice and Jobs in London. At RCN Congress earlier this year, members called on the RCN to lobby UK governments to take action to ensure that health and care systems tackle energy challenges of the future. Cecilia called on health care organisations to sign up to the Sustainable Development Plan which aims to reduce carbon emissions and minimise waste.

The fuel element of NHS mileage rates was reviewed in November. Although fuel costs have fallen this has not had an impact upon the rate paid per mile. This means that NHS mileage rates will remain at 56p/20p a mile. A further review will take place in May taking into account all motoring costs.

Chair of RCN Council Michael Brown and Vice Chair Lors Allford have both been re-elected unopposed to their positions for 2016 and 2017. Gill Cort has also been elected unopposed as Chair of Governance Support Committee. Voting has begun for the Chairs of Nursing Practice & Policy and Membership & Representation Committees and Chair of the Business Committee/Honorary Treasurer. Elected members will take up their positions from January 2016.
Activists are central to involving members in shaping RCN campaigns, says Chair of Council Michael Brown

“We must move forward and work together”

The ballot of junior doctors on industrial action received widespread media attention but one of the most striking things, from a union perspective, is the 76 per cent response to the ballot. That’s an incredibly high figure and one that should fill us with hope and ambition to achieve similar engagement on any issue concerning nursing staff. As representatives, we are central to ensuring members want to engage with the RCN.

The decision by the Chancellor in the Comprehensive Spending Review to remove bursaries for student nurses is one that cuts right to the heart of the future of our profession. We need to harness as much information as we can from mentors and student nurses to show the huge impact of this disastrous decision.

Meanwhile, the NHS Pay Review Body will make a recommendation on nursing pay early next year. We need to use the time between now and then to get members involved in our Nursing Counts campaign.

We know nursing staff are overworked, and taking the time to get involved may seem like an extra burden, but members’ voices are so important and persuasive in the media and with politicians. Encourage them to respond to surveys, show them the Nursing Counts campaign and ask them to share their stories. We can only make a difference when we stand together.

When night work starts affecting a worker’s health, what can be done?

In recognising that there are health risks linked with night work, employers must offer the worker a free health assessment before they become a night worker and then at regular intervals once they start working at night. As a general rule, these should take place once a year.

The health assessment is normally a questionnaire and it must be written by a qualified health professional. A worker does not have to take the health check offered.

Health assessments should not be disclosed by the health professional unless the worker has given consent. However, the health professional can disclose a simple statement that the worker is fit to carry out night work.

The worker must get a follow-up examination by a health professional if the health assessment identifies concerns. The employer must, wherever possible, offer suitable other work if a health professional says that a worker’s health problems are caused by, or made worse by, night work.

For more information see A Shift in the Right Direction, available to download from www.rcn.org.uk/publications using the code 004 285.

You can also speak in confidence to an RCN Direct adviser any time between 8.30am and 8.30pm, 365 days per year.
Representing BME members

When the RCN cultural ambassador programme was announced it was something I wanted to get involved in right away. It’s a role that came about because of concern about the over-representation of black and minority ethnic (BME) staff in disciplinary cases at work and to tackle discrimination towards them.

As a cultural ambassador, I act as an independent voice on any disciplinary investigation team, giving an objective view on the whole process to make sure it is run fairly and there is no bias.

I have been receiving training for the last 12 months and it could be a very important role in hospitals across the country. The problem I have found is getting recognition within the trust.

I’m working to develop channels of communication but that is taking time and when you’re dealing with discrimination cases it’s important to be able to pick them up early. But this is a role that will continue to develop as the Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) continues to have an impact.

I just hope it’s one that employers will get on board with and start to genuinely support rather than just being lip service or a box-ticking exercise. Cultural ambassadors can make a difference.

Bev Baker, steward and cultural ambassador at Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust

Fair dismissal after injury

Back in 2007 the Court of Appeal held that an illness or injury, resulting in lengthy absence from work and caused by the actions of the employer, did not mean that a subsequent dismissal for incapacity was unfair (McAdie v Royal Bank of Scotland).

Nevertheless, this may be taken into account when assessing the overall fairness of the dismissal, as required by the Employment Rights Act 1996. So the tribunal may take the view that in the circumstances the employer should, before dismissing, have “gone the extra mile”.

In L V M (2015) the tribunal, in a decision upheld by the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT), applied the principle above, and held that the dismissal was unfair. What is interesting about this case however, is that the employer didn’t “cause” the employee’s ill-health, but was held to have exacerbated the situation and prolonged her illness.

She had gone absent because of an altercation with another employee, including claims of harassment on both sides, that led to the involvement of the police. The EAT confirmed that the legal principle in McAdie could apply both to situations where the employer caused the ill-health, and where it exacerbated it.

A warning to employees

However, another recent judgment on sickness absence provides a warning to employees that their own response to an employer’s offer of a phased return to work may (inadvertently) trigger misconduct proceedings that are fair, despite some aspects of the handling of the sickness absence being discriminatory.

In Rochford v WNS Global Services (2015) the absent employee’s simple refusal to accept the offer, remaining at home and ignoring a disciplinary threat, was unreasonable, and a repudiatory breach of his contract entitling the employer to dismiss.
Taking your activist role to the next level and joining one of the UK representatives’ committees can seem daunting but shadowing can help you get a sense of what’s involved

Activists are key to the RCN’s success. You are the ones assisting members on the frontline and ensuring the reputation of the College is upheld. However, many of you say you want to be more involved in shaping the RCN’s objectives and long-term goals.

A way you can do this is by joining one of the UK representatives’ committees. But this can often seem daunting to the uninitiated and impact on already busy schedules.

Shadowing is a great way to get a sense of what being on a committee involves. You will see first-hand how the committee works; the issues it addresses; and how the individual members take the lead on different areas of work.

Being involved in UK representatives’ committees is a great opportunity for personal development, increasing your skills and experience as well as addressing issues in your workplace and health care settings across the UK.

The value of committees

Andrew Tumilson, a learning representative from Northern Ireland, recently took time to observe committee meetings and says he learned a lot about their value in bringing people together.

“Often we think we are isolated in our perceptions of situations in our roles but the reality is there are similar issues going on right across the United Kingdom.

“The experience of shadowing committee members at the UK Joint Representatives Conference in Belfast was an excellent experience for me. The whole team made me feel welcome, and explained how they work both in individual representative roles and collectively as a committee.

“It was clear that balancing time for work life, home life and RCN representative life can be challenging.”

Although it might seem like a large undertaking, Andrew says the benefits of being involved in a committee role are far reaching.

He says: “It provided me with the opportunity to network with experienced nurses from a range of clinical and non-clinical settings whose shared knowledge is beneficial when influencing policy and education at a local level.

Involvement that empowers

“It empowers you to become resilient and defend nursing. It makes you want to push for higher standards of care for patients, clearer guidelines for staff and more support for members and representatives.”

Graham Revie, Chair of the RCN Stewards’ Committee, says that shadowing a committee is an opportunity he wished he’d had before taking on the role.

“I think it would have been of great value for me to see how the committee meetings work and the undertaking involved. It probably equates to a commitment of around 20 days a year.

“I don’t want that to put people off. Being on a committee is a great way to develop your skills as an activist and widen your sphere of influence in improving the working life of the nursing family.”

If you are interested in shadowing or want more information, contact RCN Governance on governance.support@rcn.org.uk

There are currently vacancies on the UK representatives’ committees. See page 8 to find out more.
When problems become widespread in your area, working with your country or regional RCN office can have positive results

The NHS is clearly stretched and nurses are working extremely hard to cope, but sometimes it goes beyond the point of being manageable and members are compelled to speak out.

Recent developments in the health service in Cumbria have left members disillusioned, but when they began raising concerns to RCN representatives it became obvious the issues were widespread and needed a wholesale approach.

One representative, who asked to remain anonymous, says: “A lot of members were speaking out about the same, very worrying issues. It was clear the bigger picture couldn’t be dealt with by tackling each case one by one.

“I spoke to the regional officers and with the communications team they commissioned a survey which had some staggering results. It really made the trusts open their eyes and begin to engage with us.”

RCN Northern region surveyed members working at the North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust and Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust to gauge how endemic the discord in the workforce had become. The results gave clear and concise reasons behind the atmosphere within workplaces.

“The Safe to Speak Out survey found 84 per cent of respondents felt their working environment is not staffed to a safe level. Eighty-two per cent reported feeling stressed at work. The top three reasons for this stress were workload (91 per cent), lack of breaks (54 per cent) and bullying by management (43 cent).

Fifty-six per cent of survey respondents said they didn’t feel “in the loop” with regards communication flows in their workplace. Worryingly, the reason given for this was an “us and them” culture between trust management and frontline staff.

This powerful evidence has enabled the RCN to generate interest from directors and chief executives at the trusts, the local media and MP Jamie Reed.

RCN Northern Region Director Sarah Dodsworth is now in dialogue with the trust’s management to address the issues. “This survey gives us really strong information that we can use to build arguments to put forward to the trusts.

“We in the regional office, pulled the survey together and emailed out links but it’s the reps who have supported that on the frontline, talking to members and encouraging them to engage with it.

“I wanted to see reps carrying surveys into workplaces and being visible in the hospitals. Every member in the area received an email from us, but having someone there encouraging them to complete it makes it much more likely they will respond.

“This then gave us information we can use to stand up for our members. It’s about working in partnership.”

Since the RCN Northern region released the survey results, communication has been opened with the trusts, which are now working with the College to try and address the concerns raised.

Sarah says: “This felt like an old-school trade union approach but the feedback from representatives was really positive and I would encourage reps across the country to get out and meet their members and get a sense of what they can do to make a difference in their workplace.”
This month’s Tools of the Trade includes an updated Labour Research Department guide, which provides trade union reps with examples of best practice and practical guidance on what they can do to prevent bullying and harassment in the workplace. It outlines how reps can best support members who have been bullied or harassed. Visit http://tinyurl.com/qx746z8

Occupational injuries and new cases of work-related ill health cost the economy £14.3 billion, according to the latest annual statistics published by the Health and Safety Executive. The figures also show that an estimated 27.3 million working days were lost due to work-related ill health or injury in 2014/15. The annual report or an “at a glance” guide are available at: http://tinyurl.com/ovrxtkm

Also included is a news and comment blog about the UK trade union movement, managed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which aims to update reps on what unions are doing and developments in the movement. To access the blog and contribute your thoughts see: http://strongerunions.org/

For a list of all TUC blogs see: www.tuc.org.uk/blogs

Figures for the uptake of the annual flu vaccination are now available as flu experts warn that more workers need to have the vaccine in order to protect themselves and their patients. For further information including details of the Flu fighter campaign see: http://tinyurl.com/hf3ynjn

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The RCN Staff Awards for Excellence 2015 celebrated the outstanding contribution of staff at the College who have gone the extra mile to support representatives and members.

Ros Shaw, a Senior RCN Officer in Scotland (pictured right, next to steward Vicky Anderson who nominated her), walked away with this year’s prestigious RCN Members’ Award for Outstanding Customer Service.

Ros said she was almost speechless after winning the award: “This is such a lovely surprise. I was nominated by one of the best reps I’ve ever known. I couldn’t do my job without reps like her. It’s an absolute privilege to receive this award.”

The RCN Staff Awards for Excellence are made possible thanks to the support of external sponsors, with the Members’ Award proudly sponsored by Medisa: www.medisa.com

The UK Joint Representatives’ Conference will be held on 10 and 11 March next year and it’s time to get your applications in if you want to attend.

The event will be held at the Marriott City Centre Hotel, Queen Square, Liverpool, and with only a limited number of spaces available, applications must be submitted by 8 January.

The conference is a great opportunity to meet with other reps and discuss the major issues affecting activism across the UK. As with previous conferences, regions and countries have been allocated places in relation to the number of accredited representatives they have. Applications will need to be submitted to your region for approval.

Go to http://tinyurl.com/pdak34q for more information and to submit your application.

If you have any questions about the conference or the application process, you can email jointrepsconf@rcn.org.uk

You can go to www.rcn.org.uk/elections for more information and to find out how to apply or email governance.support@rcn.org.uk

Turn to page 6 for an in-depth feature on shadowing committees.