

22,261 signatures on petition presented to Trust bosses at Antrim Area Hospital Cuts are 'a matter of life and death'

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THE Northern Trust was met last week with more than 22,000 signatures from members of the public who are vehemently opposed to proposed cuts which unions fear could lead to 'potential loss of life'.

As Trust top brass came out of a meeting at Antrim Hospital last Thursday, they were met by UNISON Joint Branch Chairs who handed over the petition and sought assurances that each signature would be recognised as an individual response to the consultation which ended that same day.

The depth of feeling comes after it was announced that £13m in savings must be made in the Northern Trust alone during the current financial year. Major proposed cuts to meet this target include the closure of acute beds in Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital, the reduction of elective day surgery in Mid Ulster Whiteabey Hospitals, and the closure of rehabilitation and stroke services in Whiteabey

Hospital, the containment of growth in domiciliary care packages and an increase in car park charges at two acute sites.

UNISON has stressed their firm belief that these proposals would potentially lead to longer waiting lists, gridlocked emergency departments, the loss of hospital beds and the potential for entire wards to close.

In just three weeks, the union collected 22,261 signatures which they say allowed those unable to attend public meetings or fill in consultation responses by themselves to express their concerns.

However, they also raised concerns over how the Trust Board, which will hold an extraordinary meeting this Friday (October 13)

to make their decisions, will have adequate time to fully consider all the responses.

Stephanie Greenwood, UNISON Joint Branch Chair and Chair of the Trade Union Side for the Northern Trust, demanded that the Trust addresses queries over pay for nurses and blasted their use of 'cheap labour' in the form of bank staff.

She also urged them to employ more permanent nurses to meet their needs, rather than 'block book agency staff and give them their choice of shifts'.

"The Trust has employed two senior nurse managers to workforce plan but what have they done other than take trips abroad at great cost to recruit a finite number of staff," she said as she waited to meet Directors last week.

Speaking exclusively to the Guardian at Trust Headquarters, Ms Greenwood stressed that in one morning, UNISON worked with the Trust to recruit 28 new nurses.

"They are out there to be hired if the Trust would go and hire them," she said, posing the question of why there is a state of 'nursing crisis'.

"What else could the Trust be doing? Cuts are not the answers. This is the time to invest in staff, not fire-

"They could pay staff their proper rates and stop the cheap labour of bank staff. They could upgrade the pay of nursing auxiliaries in line with their duties.

"Flexible working requests should be considered properly and they need to stop the perceived bullying and harassment going on in this hospital."

Thanking staff for their commitment, Stephanie stressed the pressure that employees are under and vowed union support for any staff impacted by these potential cuts.

She also reiterated her plea to the Trust not to discount the wishes of staff and service users.

She told the Guardian that UNISON was awaiting a response to a written query for confirmation of the actual amount needed to break even, admitting her

concern that 'it would be more than £13m'.

"The Chief Executive has a statutory duty to balance the books but he also has a statutory duty to provide safe patient care and we all have a duty to ensure that the vulnerable, the sick, the disabled and the lonely have their human rights upheld," she said.

"Let me be absolutely clear that this directive has come from the Department of Health and that is where people's anger should be directed.

"However, the Northern Trust Board and the non-executive Directors need to take cognisance, have some guts and not implement any of the proposed major cuts.

"These would lead to nothing but potential loss of life and a further demoralised workforce."



Trade Union Joint Branch Chair and Chair of the Northern Trust, Stephanie Greenwood and Co-Chair, Michelle McDonald hand the petition over to Northern Trust 'top brass'. Included are Wendy McGowan, Director of Medicine and Emergency Medicine; Elizabeth Brownlee, Director of Human Resources and Marie Rouison, Director of Women, Children's and Families' Department. GA412603DP



UNISON Northern Health Branch stewards, Angela Boorman and Jean Getty are pictured with the petition before it was handed into Northern Trust directors. GA412601DP



Some of those opposed to the proposed cuts were on site with banners at Trust Headquarters. GA412602DP