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**NHS staff ‘unsocial hours’ payments under threat**

Department of Health proposes radical cost-cutting changes to shift-patterns of staff in England.

Ambulance staff could find their out-of-hours agreements bought into line with other staff under Department of Health proposals.

NHS staff in England could lose their extra “unsocial hours” payments for working Saturdays and Sundays, under radical changes to shift-patterns aimed at keeping down the costs of running 24/7 health services.

The move is among options being considered to bring about a big reduction in night and weekend pay made under “archaic and out-of-line” contracts. A Department of Health submission to the pay review body for most non-medical staff says unsocial hours and shift work, not counting overtime, already costs £1.8bn a year for such workers.

Options outlined by the department include removing unsocial hours payments for working on Saturdays and Sundays; only axing those for working Saturdays; lowering rates for Sundays and bank holidays; changing night-shift starts from 8pm to 10pm; and “rewarding” staff for flexibility in working hours, perhaps along the lines of the AA, where pay levels reflect how readily staff are prepared to work any shift within a 24-hour period.

Changes also need to be made in the way staff move up pay scales to make them “more affordable”, the department says.

UNISON, the public services trade union, suggested the proposals could be “the final straw” in retaining, let alone recruiting, staff.