



A Tory MP has criticised the Chancellor's plans to introduce regional pay to the public sector, saying there is "no economic argument" to justify it. Hexham MP Guy Opperman said a nurse working in a deprived area should be paid more, not less, than someone in the same job in "leafy Surrey".

The 47-year-old, whose constituency is in Northumberland, is the North East's only Conservative MP and he is thought to be the first backbencher in his party to come out against the plan. Under proposed changes, locally-set pay rates for teachers, council staff and nurses could be introduced. That could mean years of pay freezes or even cuts for workers in poorer parts of the country.

Mr Opperman told the Newcastle-based Journal newspaper: "I see no economic argument for introducing regional pay. Our current pay system, which sets a base pay rate, already allows for adjustments in high cost areas like London. "To me someone working in the NHS in a deprived part of the North East probably deserves more pay, certainly not less, than a nurse in leafy Surrey." He said he feared regional pay would badly affect the North East economy by taking cash out of the area. Instead, he called for investment in manufacturing, exports and apprenticeships.

His comments were backed by union leader Kevin Rowan, regional secretary for the Northern TUC.

"We very much welcome his stance and we hope to hear from more people in constituencies that are particularly badly affected by this policy, such as the South West and Wales," he said. "We should have more politicians from across all the parties saying 'This is not the right policy'." Mr Rowan said regional pay was a false economy, unfair and would lead to the "best, youngest and brightest" staff leaving lower paid areas. He added: "The fundamental question is 'would this create private sector employment' and there is no evidence to suggest that is the case."

