

**Submission
No 247**

**THE SAFETY AND QUALITY OF HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDED BY NORTHERN
BEACHES HOSPITAL**

Organisation: Unions NSW

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**Submission to the NSW Legislative
Assembly inquiry into the safety and
quality of health services provided by
Northern Beaches Hospital**

About Unions NSW

1. Unions NSW is the peak body for trade unions and union members in NSW. We have 47 affiliated trade unions and labour councils who collectively represent over 600,000 union members and essential workers in all industries in NSW.



Introduction and Summary of Recommendations

2. This submission makes the following recommendations:
 - a. The NSW Government should enter a consultation process with workers, unions and other key stakeholders to develop a roadmap for returning the Northern Beaches Hospital to public ownership.
 - b. The NSW Government should legislate against any future public-private-partnerships for public hospitals.
 - c. The NSW Government should take immediate steps to improve the safety and working conditions of staff at Northern Beaches Hospital.
 - d. All worker's pay and conditions should be protected and not reduced due to any transition of employment to another entity.
 - e. Any future arrangement should avoid a two-tiered system of employment conditions between public and private employees within the hospital.
3. Unions NSW has had the opportunity to review the submissions made by two of our affiliates, the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF) and the Health Services Union (HSU), and supports their recommendations.

Returning Northern Beaches hospital to public hands and preventing future public-private-partnerships

4. There is a clear public health case for returning Northern Beaches Hospital (NBH) to public hands and preventing future public-private-partnerships (PPPs) for public hospitals.
5. In February 2020, the Legislative Council committee conducting the inquiry into the operation and management of NBH released its final report. The report linked the hospital's life-threatening issues with patient care to its status as a public private partnership (PPP). The report concluded:

'It is clear to the committee that the private status of the hospital has permeated every aspect of Healthscope's management of the Northern



Beaches Hospital...almost every issue examined in this inquiry seems to link back to the PPP [public private partnership].'

(NSW Parliament 2020, p. 164).

6. The Committee continued:

'the serious and multifaceted consequences that have arisen from this PPP highlight that the government should simply not enter into any PPPs for future public hospitals.'

(NSW Parliament 2020, p. 165).

7. Unions NSW supports recommendation 22 of the Committee's final report:

'That the NSW Government not enter into any public private partnerships for future public hospitals.'

(NSW Parliament 2020, p. 166).

8. Since the Legislative Council inquiry in 2020, patient care at NBH has not sufficiently improved. In April 2025 the NSW Auditor General released a report on its performance audit of NBH. The report concluded:

'The Northern Beaches Hospital public-private partnership is not effectively delivering the best quality integrated health services and clinical outcomes to the Northern Beaches community and the State'

(NSW Auditor General 2025, p. 1).

9. In response to the report, Healthscope expressed their willingness to *'collaborate with the Government for the early handback of the public hospital'* (Healthscope 2025).

10. Since making this statement, Healthscope have entered receivership, casting further doubt on their ability to improve NBH to the level necessary to satisfy community expectations.

11. Based on these factors, Unions NSW makes the following recommendation:



Recommendation 1: The NSW Government should enter a consultation process with workers, unions and other key stakeholders to develop a roadmap for returning the Northern Beaches Hospital to public ownership.

12. Based on the experience of NBH and the recommendation of the 2020 Legislative Council inquiry:

Recommendation 2: The NSW Government should legislate against any future public-private-partnerships for public hospitals.

The NSW Government should take immediate steps to ensure safe working conditions for staff

13. There is also an urgent need for the NSW Government to act now to ensure that staff have safe working conditions – an important lever for ensuring patient wellbeing.
14. Immediate steps need to be taken to address the following operational issues within the NBH:
- a. Increase staffing to safe levels,
 - b. Implement safe rostering,
 - c. Invest in training and workforce development,
 - d. Improve risk management and incident prevention processes including electronic systems issues, and
 - e. Ensure adequate funding and resourcing.
15. The PPP model of the hospital has contributed to the degradation of services and safety within NBH. For example, as a PPP the NBH is not required to implement the NSW Government's Safe Staffing Levels initiative. The Safe Staffing Levels initiative introduces minimum staffing levels, intended to result in more nurses and midwives in NSW Health public hospitals. Safe staffing levels should also be a priority for all other professions and grades within the



hospital. The lack of such an initiative at NBH not only risks patient safety but also the safety of staff who are exposed to the serious physical and psychosocial hazards that arise from understaffing in a hospital setting.

16. There is an urgent need for the NSW Government to meet with unions to ensure work health and safety is properly managed at the hospital prior to its return to public ownership.

Recommendation 3: The NSW Government should consult with Unions NSW and health unions on the immediate steps necessary to improve the safety and working conditions of staff at Northern Beaches Hospital.

Maintaining staff pay and conditions

17. A successful transition to public ownership will be supported by hospital staff who are valued and consulted during the process. A crucial aspect of this is the pay and conditions of NBH staff. These industrial matters should be clarified early to provide certainty for staff going forward.

Recommendation 4: The NSW Government should commit to all workers' pay and conditions being protected and not reduced due to any transition of employment to another entity.

Avoiding a two-tiered system of employment and patient care

18. In its final report, the Committee for the inquiry into the operation and management of NBH raised concerns about evidence it received regarding a two-tiered system of patient care operating at NBH (NSW Parliament 2020, p. 99). According to one community member who attended the hospital, *'Our treatment improved markedly when we shifted from public to private patient care – I feel sorry for the public patients'* (NSW Parliament 2020, p. 75).
19. It is crucial that a two-tiered system of patient care is not reproduced through a two-tiered employment model following the transition of the public hospital into public ownership.



20. As staff pay and conditions are a direct driver of staffing levels and service quality, a two-tiered employment system between the public and private hospitals would undermine patient care equity.

Recommendation 5: The NSW Government should avoid a two-tiered system of staff pay and conditions between the public and private hospital at any point.

References

- Healthscope (2025), *Healthscope statement regarding Audit Office review of Northern Beaches Hospital*, accessed 30 May 2025, <https://healthscope.com.au/news-media/Healthscope-statement-regarding-audit-office-review-of-northern-beaches-hospital>.
- NSW Auditor General (2025), *Northern Beaches Hospital: Performance audit*, accessed 30 May 2025, <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/our-work/reports/northern-beaches-hospital>.
- NSW Parliament (2020), *Operation and management of the Northern Beaches Hospital*, accessed 30 May 2025, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2524>.

