

10 questions about industrial action

1. Now the 3% award has been paid, what could an indicative ballot actually achieve?

Decisions about NHS pay are always a political choice and ministers are able to respond to our campaign.

2. Can industrial action deliver change?

When trade unions contemplate industrial action, it can put pressure on governments. RCN members took industrial action in Northern Ireland after many years of campaigning and secured improved pay levels and a commitment to safe staffing.

3. Why does voter turnout matter so much?

Before any action, there would need to be a 'statutory' ballot. The law in England says 50% of eligible voters must turn out to vote and there needs to be a simple majority in favour. For members in 'important public services' like the NHS, the law also requires 40% of all members eligible to vote – meaning eight in 10 of those who voted – vote in favour.

4. What could industrial action look like in practice?

If members decide to take action short of strike, they might work strictly to the terms of their contract – taking breaks and starting/finishing shifts on time. If they vote to strike, this is a complete withdrawal of labour for a period of time. It could see members on 'picket lines' outside workplaces.

5. What's the impact on patients?

Patient safety is always paramount, and this action could raise current standards of patient care. During any industrial action, patients would be protected and life-preserving services would be provided to the same level as Christmas Day.

6. Will I lose money if I go on strike?

An employer will withhold payment during strike action. Pension contributions will not be made on days members take part in strike action. The RCN has a strike benefit of £45 a day available to eligible members but it will not replace a member's full earnings.

7. Is this within our NMC Code?

The NMC says “nurses, midwives and nursing associates have the right to take part in lawful industrial action, including strike action”. The RCN will never ask members to act outside the Code.

8. Will I cover my colleagues’ jobs if I am derogated or decide not to take action?

Derogations ensure employers can maintain safe staffing levels by making a member or service exempt from taking part. Members who choose not to take part or are derogated to maintain services are not expected to carry out duties of colleagues. Local ‘strike committees’ ensure that employers make sensible calculations of the staff required.

9. Do we think the public would support us?

The public has demonstrated huge support for nursing staff and the campaigns on safe staffing and fair pay. They and patients pay a price when staffing levels are unsafe. Our commitment to safety is why we are considering action.

10. What about nursing colleagues working outside the NHS?

Improving NHS pay may have a positive consequence for pay in the independent health and care sector. Salaries for nursing staff in those settings must be at the very least on par with the NHS.