



UNISON's consultation on how NHS pay rises should be set

FAQs

1. Why is UNISON talking about changing the system that sets NHS pay awards?

The default system for setting annual pay increases for the NHS is through a Pay Review Body (PRB) which makes recommendations to governments. Governments then decide whether to implement, reject or modify the recommendations. This was meant to create an independent element to avoid disputes over NHS pay but it also provides governments with a process to hide behind when it suits them.

UNISON always consults members on the PRB outcome but, as the system is not based on negotiations, members do not have the chance to accept or reject.

After the experiences of the last decade UNISON members have told us they have lost confidence in the PRB system and that when the union was able to negotiate on their behalf (such as the 2018 three-year deal), they felt more involved, it was fairer and more transparent.

So, the union now wants to explore whether we should actively push to change the system – moving away from the PRB in favour of annual NHS pay negotiations. Unions call this 'collective bargaining.'

2. Who would we need to convince to get a change to the system?

The current PRB system is wrapped up in legislation and written into the 'Agenda for Change' handbook that contains your terms and conditions. A change would need to be formally enacted by the Westminster and relevant devolved governments. Simply put, we would need to convince the Prime Minister and First Ministers. We would also need to get agreement from bodies representing NHS employers and from the other trade unions representing NHS staff.

3. What are we doing about pay in the meantime?



We know members are being hit hard by the cost-of-living crisis – which comes on top of years of below inflation pay increases. This is causing major damage to living standards and worsening NHS staffing shortages just as the service is facing enormous challenges.

UNISON will use any and every opportunity to fight for the above-inflation pay rise you need – including giving robust evidence to the Pay Review Body as well as lobbying government and employers directly. More details on this year's Put NHS Pay Right campaign are [here](#) (For devolved campaigns see regional websites).

4. How can I get involved in the discussion?

UNISON branches will be coming together at regional level to discuss changing the system. Central to this discussion will be:

- How change could be achieved
- A comparative analysis of the PRB and collective bargaining
- How it might alter the way the union works.

You can contact your branch to let them know your thoughts. And make sure you get involved with this year's Put NHS Pay Right campaign for an above-inflation rise.

5. How exactly does the PRB work?

The NHS PRB is an advisory body consisting of 'experts' in the fields of workforce planning, economics, HR and industrial relations. They are appointed following a public appointment process on a three-year cycle. They are responsible for:

- making recommendations on pay and conducting research
- visiting trusts and health units to meet staff and managers to gather information and views on pay and related issues

The PRB receives evidence from trade unions, employer bodies and governments before reporting its recommendations. It is required by government to consider the recruitment and retention needs of the NHS; staff motivation and morale; and affordability within the financial circumstances of the government.



PRB recommendations are advisory. Therefore, governments are under no obligation to accept them. Once governments have made their decisions, they publish these along with the PRB's report in full.

6. Is the PRB independent?

The extent to which the PRB is truly independent is open to question. It acts upon a remit that must be provided by government and governments hold the reins when it comes to deciding what is affordable. This was particularly evident in the 2011 to 2018 period where pay was either frozen or the PRB simply recommended the government's 1% pay cap.

However, the PRB has on occasion made decisions not to support government agendas e.g., declining to support government attempts to move to regionalised pay.

7. What is collective bargaining?

Collective bargaining is when unions, employers and governments hold negotiations on pay, terms and conditions. The process usually involves unions consulting members and then submitting a pay claim on their behalf. Then talks take place and offers are made. Final offers are usually put to union members to decide whether they want to accept or whether they want to take action to try and win improvements.

UNISON's negotiating principles are determined through democratic processes including at our Health Conference and via the Health Service Group Executive (HSGE). The HSGE is our lead committee of elected health workers.

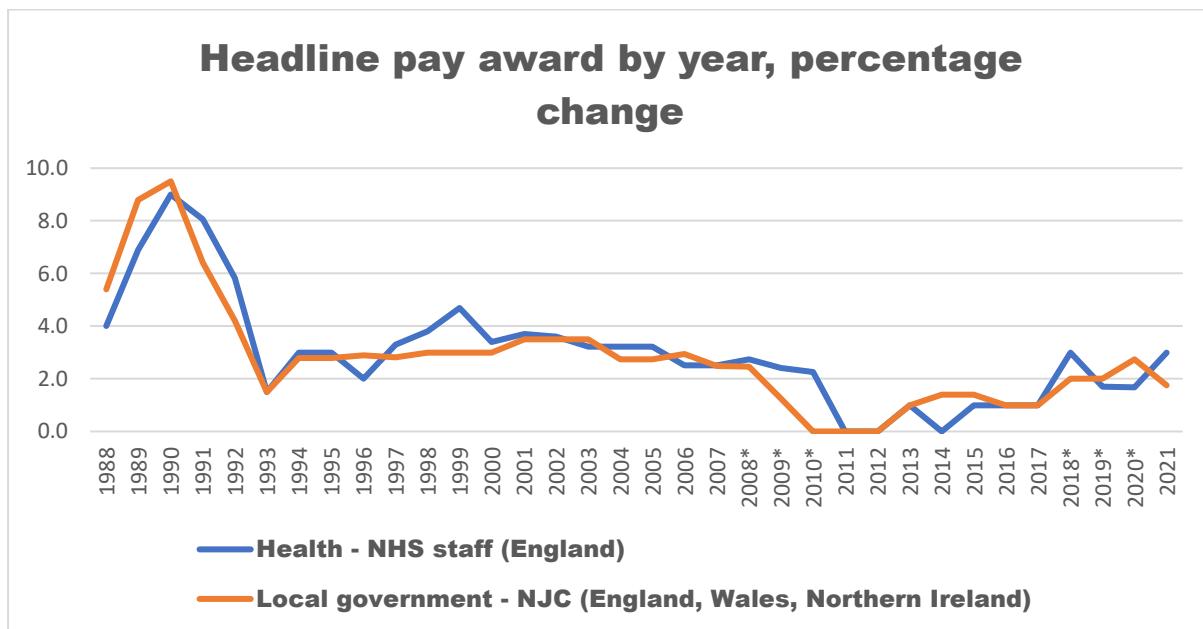
8. Would collective bargaining deliver better outcomes for NHS pay?

On headline pay awards it is difficult to say. Direct negotiations in health have been infrequent and have been tied up in more complex deals to restructure pay bands. However, we can make an indirect comparison with the Local Government National Joint Council which bargains collectively on annual pay rises.

The graph below compares the pay outcomes between the NHS (mainly PRB) and Local Government (collective bargaining). The outcomes illustrated in the graph follow broadly the same trend and produce similar results. This indicates that government funding policy is the dominant factor rather than the method of determination (PRB vs collective bargaining).



It is important to note that the graph only shows headline pay awards. It does not reflect the important progress made on the more specific issues that matter to members such as tackling low pay, improving annual leave and maternity provision. It is much easier to deliver on these when we have been able to collectively bargain.



**NHS pay changes in the 2008-10 and 2018-21 periods involved collective bargaining*

9. What will happen after the consultation?

UNISON's lead committee of elected health workers will look at all the feedback from regions and branches and make an assessment about how far and how fast to push for any change. Decisions will be brought to UNISON's Health Conference in 2023. In the meantime, we will use any process available to us to push for a decent pay rise for health staff.

Acronym Buster

- PRB – Pay Review Body**
- CB – Collective Bargaining**
- AfC – Agenda for Change**



HR – Human Resources