

## Branch Secretary's Report to Annual General Meeting – 2021

Paul Bishop

The year 2020 has without doubt been one of the hardest years in the working lives of UNISON members, particularly those keyworkers delivering frontline services, and the many others having to adapt to alternative ways of working.

Our members have put themselves at risk in protecting and caring for the most vulnerable, keeping communities safe and well, whether in social care, cleaning, schools, refuse collection, community safety and many more services, both in the council and also in the private, voluntary and independent sectors.

I know the levels of stress members have faced, worried about their health and that of their families, financial hardship, job cuts and redundancies. All our branch reps have worked incredibly hard to provide support for members during these difficult times. As well as supporting members with workplace issues, the branch has been working and campaigning to protect jobs and services across the council.

### **The Numbers**

Currently we have 2670 full working members, which represents an increase of 215 in the last year, or nearly 9%.

Of those 2670 members, 1492 work for the London Borough of Enfield with the remaining 1,178 working for the other 188 employers.

In addition we have 508 retired members.

Although still primarily a Local Authority Branch, we currently organise across 188 separate employers.

Total Branch membership is 3178, which is again a significant increase over the last 12 months.

### **Stewards/Activists**

We have currently 54 activists of which 24 are ERA-accredited stewards and 15 are Health & Safety Representatives. The Branch is currently trying to ensure all its stewards are ERA accredited. With regard to Health & Safety, we are trying to encourage more activists to undertake basic training.

We have a plan to run regular on-line meetings for Health & Safety Reps. throughout the year.

## **Case Work**

The amount of casework has increased dramatically over the last 12 months, mostly because of the pandemic. Representation of individual members is our core activity. We have represented approximately **267** members at disciplinary, grievance and other management meetings as opposed to 165 last year.

This has put an enormous strain on those undertaking casework. Apart from the number of cases it has been a significant challenge for everyone to adapt to supporting members virtually without the benefit of physical meetings.

Initially the London Borough of Enfield suspended all disciplinary and grievance processes during the first lockdown in March 2020. Other employers carried on undertaking physical and virtual meetings. During the summer the council meetings began on a virtual basis and have continued ever since.

The Branch has insisted to safeguard our activists and employees that all its representation is done virtually.

We estimate that over the same period we have given advice to members on over 1500 occasions. This highlights the extra workload and stress that our members are enduring as result of the pandemic. We always aim to give excellent support to all our members on any issues and are proud to assist. Our UNISON solicitors continue to represent members in a variety of legal matters. The help we give to individual members ranges from early intervention preventing the use of formal procedures to successfully pursuing litigation and resulting in significant compensation payments.

## **Welfare Support**

Our National Welfare Fund continues to support and make grants to members facing financial hardship. This has been extremely useful in providing emergency relief to our members in dire need due to being laid off, furloughed or simply dismissed as a result of the pandemic. While the LBE determined to protect all staff wages during the pandemic, many other employers did not offer such protection and many furloughed staff saw their wages drop to 80%. The Branch is now an official distributor of foodbank vouchers and has seen reliance on foodbanks increase by a massive amount since the middle of 2020.

## **I.T.**

During 2019 the Branch had embarked on a strategy of digitising its files. This was because we knew we would need to leave the Branch Office in 2020 to enable the removal of asbestos. This meant that we were able to respond effectively to the lockdown in March 2020. We refreshed our I.T. to enable all office staff to work from home and to access our virtual office.

All casework staff now have the ability to attend meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The Branch itself has invested in Microsoft Teams as its preferred method of communication.

## **Recruitment**

Most formal recruitment activity has stopped since March 2020 as it has not been possible to meet with potential members. Despite this we have seen the increase in membership outlined above.

Because of the increased workload on officers, it has not been possible to prioritise recruitment activities. Discussions have now taken place with the Regional Office and recruitment projects are now ongoing amongst the LBE's Housing and Library staff groups.

## **Branch Committee**

The Branch Committee meets every 4 weeks, currently virtually, in order to discuss the major challenges facing our members. All activists are members of the committee and are invited to attend.

## **Management Meetings**

UNISON meets every fortnight with the Head of H.R. and the relevant managers to discuss all proposed reorganisations and changes to policies that affect staff. This gives us the opportunity to challenge the plans and change the way things are implemented. We also meet regularly with both the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council to ensure that our members are represented at all levels.

## **New Ways of Working**

The LBE has over the last few years been looking at ways of consolidating its estate and moving interactions with the public away from using offices to instead using the internet and telephone.

The pandemic has moved this forward by years because the majority of staff had to work from home and public offices were closed. 'The Build the Change' instituted by the Council is forging ahead and looking to dispose of a number of Council buildings along with completing the refurbishment of the Civic Centre.

The Council has drafted the Smarter Working Policy which is likely to be introduced this year. The policy designates workers as home workers, those who have to come into work to do their job and the majority, who will work both remotely and in the office. UNISON and the other trades unions have been consulted on the policy but still have concerns about some of the proposals.

## **Looking forward**

The UNISON Branch and its members will have to contend with another year of massive change. It will be several months before it becomes clear when workplaces will reopen fully, if ever. The London Borough of Enfield will not ever bring all its staff back to the office, The future will be a blend of home and office-based working.

The UNISON Office is ready to reopen when restrictions are lifted but we will continue to run a paperless office and undertake much of the work online. Online

meetings and training sessions have proved successful during the pandemic and we expect to use them much more in the future.

All unions will be campaigning to ensure that their members will not be paying the bill for the pandemic in the form of further cuts to public expenditure. The LBE is expecting some difficult financial times as the government has already reneged on its promise to fund coronavirus.

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