



Local Government Service Group Executive

Event: SGE Meeting

Date: 6 February 2025

Attended by Regional Delegates:

Rob Turner: Cambridgeshire County

Sue Hayden: Uttlesford

The meeting was hybrid with both Regional delegates choosing to join on-line. The SGE meeting coincided with Eastern Regional Council, we both sent our apologies

The agenda was packed, as follows:

1. MINUTES

- a. To receive the minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2024 (Appendix A)
- b. **Matters Arising**

2. CHAIR'S REPORT

To receive a report (Appendix B)

3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICE GROUP CONFERENCE 2025

- a. To consider draft SGE motions to Service Group Conference (Appendix C).
- b. To consider the following:
 - i. Fringe meetings
 - ii. Presentations
 - iii. Guest speakers
- c. To nominate two SGE / Platform Liaison reps

4. NATIONAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE 2025

To elect two Service Group representatives to attend National Delegate Conference

5. SERVICE DELIVERY AND ANTI-PRIVATISATION ISSUES

- a. To receive a report on the Local Government Funding and Cuts campaign (Appendix D)
- b. To receive a report on the Local Government Service Champions Campaign (Appendix E)
- c. To receive a report on Service Delivery issues (Appendix F)
- d. To receive a report on the English Devolution White Paper (Appendix G)

6. SERVICE CONDITIONS AND RELATED ISSUES

- a. Local Government Pension Scheme Report
To receive a report (Appendix H)
- b. To receive a report on Equalities and Diversity issues (Appendix I)
- c. Equal pay campaign

To receive an update on recent developments and activities on equal pay (Appendix J)

7. EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES REPORT

To receive a report (Appendix K)

8. LABOUR LINK BRIEFING

To receive a briefing on the work of Labour Link and discuss how the SGE and Labour Link can work together

9. MEP PRESENTATION / BRIEFING

To receive an update on the Member Engagement Programme

10. UPDATE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT APPRENTICES / APPRENTICESHIPS

To receive a report (Appendix L)

11. CLIMATE CRISIS

To receive an update (Appendix M)

12. RECRUITMENT AND ORGANISING REPORT

- a. To receive a report on the joiners and leavers statistics (Appendix N)
- b. To consider a motion submitted by the West Midlands Regional Local Government Committee (Appendix O)

13. SGE DEVOLUTION WORKING GROUP

To receive a report from the working group meeting held on 27 January.

14. SECTOR COMMITTEES

To receive sector committee reports (Appendix P)

15. OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

a. **Housing Report**

To receive a report (Appendix Q)

b. **Social Work Report**

To receive a report (Appendix R)

c. **Social Care Report**

To receive a report (Appendix S)

d. **Public Health**

To receive a report (Appendix T)

e. **Fire and Rescue Report**

To receive a report (Appendix U)

f. **National Health and Safety Committee**

To receive a report (Appendix V)

16. INDUSTRIAL ACTION REPORTS

To receive a report (Appendix W)

17. NEC REPORT

To receive a report

18. SERVICE GROUP BUDGET

To receive a report on the Service Group budget (Appendix X)

19. ATTENDANCE RECORD

To note the attendance record for SGE meetings (Appendix Y)

20. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday, 3 April 2025 – HYBRID

This is a report of the main issues discussed at the last LGSGE meeting held on 6 February 2025. We hope you find it interesting.

Funding and Cuts

Since the last Service Group Executive meeting the Provisional Local Government Financial settlement in England was announced in December along with draft budgets by both the Scottish and Welsh governments

In addition to what was announced in the recent Autumn Statement, councils in England were awarded a further £700m in the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement. This was made up of an extra £200m in adult social care funding and around £500m to support councils with the costs associated with the increase in employer national insurance contributions, alongside a small uplift in the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant.

The Scottish Government promised councils a £1bn uplift in funding when compared to their 2024/25 funding settlement and ended its council tax freeze policy when they announced their draft budget in December. In Cymru/Wales, the Government's draft budget in December resulted in a 4.3% increase in the settlement to Welsh councils being proposed.

These modest increases in funding are not enough to relieve the growing pressures and levels of demand that councils are continually experiencing nor repair the damage inflicted after over a decade of savage cuts.

Several councils have indicated that they are experiencing severe levels of financial distress, with Worcestershire, Flintshire and Somerset Council all raising the prospect of potential bankruptcy in the near future unless more central government funding is forthcoming. The director of local government finance at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, also recently indicated in a speech that he anticipates a "high number of councils" will have to seek Exceptional Financial Support in the financial year 2025/26.

These underwhelming financial settlements increase the importance of the outcome of the upcoming Spring Spending Review. To help safeguard jobs and services it is imperative that as many UNISON activists as possible meet with and lobby their local MPs on the need for greater levels of council funding. The wider sense of economic pessimism that the UK is facing only adds greater impetus to this work. The service group has been providing members and branches with guidance on how to effectively lobby MPs and we hope that SGE members can play a leading role in their regions to support these efforts.

UNISON is keen to stress to MPs just how important a role local councils will play in helping the Government secure its ambitions to improve the country; from driving economic growth, solving the NHS crisis, through to tackling crime and reducing carbon emissions. Information on how to help convey these messages has been incorporated into our lobbying guidance.

We also want to convey to MPs how local government cuts often result in greater costs being borne by other elements of the public sector. A report by the Institute for Financial Studies in 2024 estimated that for every pound spent at its peak in 2010, Sure Start council run children's centres averted approximately 19 pence in public spending on youth justice and children's social care, equivalent to £500 million (in today's prices) of savings per cohort attending at the time. A 2024 report from Warwick University compared neighbours who were and weren't affected by almost a third of youth centres in London closing. The teenagers affected did 4% worse in exams and were more likely to commit crimes, costing the country nearly £3 for every £1 saved.

Work is ongoing to try and get other organisations to support our lobbying efforts. In February we held a roundtable event at UNISON Centre (featuring senior UNISON activists) alongside APSE and Staffordshire University as a starting point for discussions about the future of local government finance, and how we can work together to influence the Government.

We have also been successful in acquiring funding for a new round of training for branches and organisers on local government finance – details will follow.

Pay

NJC – England, Wales and Northern Ireland

The pay claim for 2025 was submitted on 31 January 2025. It calls for **an increase of at least £3,000 on all spinal column points**, from 1 April 2025. In addition, the claim calls for:

- ❖ A clear plan to reach a minimum pay rate of £15 an hour
- ❖ One extra day of annual leave for all staff
- ❖ A reduction in the working week by two hours, with no loss of pay
- ❖ The ability for school staff to take [at least] one day of their annual leave during term time, with no loss of pay

The campaign in support of the claim has been launched, with a wide range of resources, materials and events available with more to follow.

The Employers' Side is hosting briefings from mid February until mid March, to get the view of local authorities on what offer should be made. We are urging the Employers to make an offer as soon as possible after that, and to engage in meaningful negotiations.

As we build the campaign, it is of course vital that members, branches, regions and the national union work together to push the employers to make a decent offer, and to demand full funding for local government pay from central government. Throughout the NJC campaign we will be providing a range of resources to assist in that work. We also need to use the pay campaign to recruit members and new activists, so that we can build our collective strength as we fight for fair pay.

SJC – Scotland Included for completion:

Summary of the claim, submitted 17 January 2025:

- ❖ A one-year settlement from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.
- ❖ A 6.5% increase to all spinal column points and related allowances, crucial for restoring pay levels and making significant progress towards UNISON claim for a minimum pay rate of £15 per hour.
- ❖ Parity with other local government bargaining groups, ensuring no less than equal treatment.

This claim is not just a request but a necessary step to address the severe erosion of pay and to ensure fair compensation for all Local Government workers.

Education and Children's Services

The last SGE received a report on progress towards reinstating the last Labour Government's social partnership improving education together. In January UNISON signed up to the 'Improving Education Together' (IET) agreement – the new iteration of the social partnership forum that existed under the last Labour Government. The agreement brings together the Department for Education, trade unions and employer organisations, and provides a mechanism for us to seek to work together with the other organisations – and the government – to seek to influence policy and future legislation, as well as getting early notification of forthcoming changes and providing a clear route to raise issues. Within the partnership, UNISON would of course only sign up to agreements that are within UNISON policy, and if issues arise on which we don't have policy, there would be full consultation with lay committees/chairs.

The chairs of the SGE, Schools Committee and FE & 6th Form Committees were consulted, before we signed, with the SGE Chair agreeing chair's action to approve signing due to the timescales involved. Governance of our work in the partnership will be through the SGE and the Schools and FE & 6th Form Committees as appropriate.

The IET board has agreed that three areas for initial work will be the workforce, accountability and SEND. Work on these should begin soon. There is agreement that none of this work can cut across any existing or future structures for actual collective bargaining, such as the NJC, the SSSNB or the School Teachers Pay Review Body.

Schools

UNISON continues to be at the forefront of work to reinstate the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) that will decide pay, terms and conditions for school support staff in England.

The legislation was included in the Employment Rights Bill, published by the government in October 2024, and the Bill is now making its way through parliament,

with Royal Assent anticipated in early summer. UNISON gave evidence to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee, highlighting the potential for the SSSNB to make a real difference to members.

UNISON sits on the SSSNB working group co-ordinated by the Department for Education (DfE), along with employer bodies and other key stakeholders, and is currently discussing a number of key issues in relation to the set up and work of the future SSSNB. Work is beginning to be broken down into strands which will begin to address the many detailed areas of work that need to be progressed, including the constitution of the SSSNB board, role profiles and job evaluation, transition/protection arrangements, and national contracts and term time working. There will be lay involvement in all of these areas, and at the time of writing discussions were ongoing with the Chair of the Schools Committee about this, with the Committee due to discuss it at its meeting in early February.

As reported to the last SGE meeting, it is expected that the first pay round that will be conducted through the SSSNB will be 2027/28, but a large amount of work on role profiles, JE and transition will need to be done before that.

While the Bill makes its way through parliament, the Government is due to launch a consultation in the spring on the definition of support staff for the purposes of the SSSNB, so that secondary legislation can be issued on this subject once the Bill becomes law. UNISON has already given detailed comments on the definition to DfE, and will be responding to the consultation. Discussions are ongoing between DfE and the Welsh Government about the possible role and involve of Cymru/Wales in the SSSNB. See below in the Cymru/Wales section for more details of UNISON's consultation of members on this.

Internally, we have worked with the Strategic Organising Unit to create an organising plan based around the likely legislative timeline of the SSSNB to recruit members and get them involved.

The SGE and sector committees will also need to consider any potential changes that may be needed to UNISON's structures, and a motion for Local Government Conference was agreed by the SGE. . Ultimately members will be given a final say on the overall proposals.

Discussions continue between the NJC unions and the NEU, to try to resolve issues without the need for a formal hearing, regarding the NJC unions' further complaint about the behaviour of the NEU, submitted in summer 2024. That complaint took the form of a request that the 2023 TUC Disputes Committee be re-convened, due to the NEU's continual flouting of the 2023 Final Award: by passing policy committing it to organising school support staff, and by promoting a ballot of school support staff members; and locally, engaging in a range of activities intended to grow NEU's membership and in many cases prevent UNISON and other recognised unions from doing so. All of these activities represent a breach of the agreements that are in place, and the 2023 Final Award.

We are dealing with a number of concerning restructures in the OCL national Multi Academy Trust (MAT) and we are working closely with UNITE and GMB to organise on the ground to oppose cuts. Branches and members meetings are being organised as part of this campaign.

We are meeting with the other unions to update our campaign materials to support branches opposing academisation locally.

We are hosting a joint webinar on the campaign for Clean Air in Schools on 5 March – details will be sent out to branches in early February. We are also providing evidence to the TUC relating to education for a number of the Covid Inquiry modules.

UNISON has published updated guidance on supporting pupils with medical conditions given the increasing demands on members to provide health care and the legal issues around this. Whilst aimed at UNISON branches, this document can be shared locally with Local Authorities and Integrated Care Boards since the content is relevant to all.

UNISON has updated and reissued its model policy for preventing and dealing with violence in schools, along with a new guide for organisers which was developed alongside the Strategic Organising Unit and the national Health & Safety Unit. The 5-phase plan provides an organising framework to work with schools in way that engages members and builds UNISON organisation and strength, to ensure we win and sustain change to safeguard school support staff and prevent violence and abuse at work.

The annual UNISON school support staff seminar is scheduled to take place on 30 April in Bristol.

Cymru/Wales

Cymru/Wales Region has identified schools as an organising priority for the coming year and we are currently in the process of devising the strategy which includes increasing UNISON's membership among school support staff, addressing challenges in the sector and continuing to engage with members and non members to gather information to support our strategic direction and use our communication channels to agitate and organise in schools. The focus in the first instance concentrates on the continuing work on the phasing out of Level 1 TA roles, improving workplace safety, and advocating for better pay, conditions and professional development. Additionally the strategy includes activities to empower activists and leaders and recruit new workplace representatives/leaders, fostering a stronger activist network.

The subsidy towards registration fees for learning support workers in Wales of £30, meaning registrants pay £15 per year, will no longer be paid by the Welsh Government. We have written to the Cabinet Secretary to express our concern, requesting that the subsidy be reinstated. If it is not, we will be campaigning about this and exploring whether registration has brought with it any real benefits for LSW's.

The increased workload and responsibility placed on members as a result of the Additional learning needs (ALN) Act means many are working outside their grade. The new system is being phased in and already members are experiencing increased demands and expectations without training or reimbursement for the work they are undertaking. In a recent questionnaire, many members reported doing the work of the ALNCo. Teaching unions are also challenging Welsh Government in relation to workload as a result of the Act and we are working on a joint approach to apply pressure for change.

The Region is currently consulting members to ascertain their views on whether we lobby for schools support staff in Wales to have a similar body as SSSNB, or possible admission into the England body, or to remain in the NJC. The three week consultation concludes on 14 February and will be supported through social media campaigns, a webinar and school visits. The plan has been shared with the school forum and LG committee and has received their approval.

In order to gather evidence of the impact of Covid on schools for pupils and our members, two sessions were held on 18 January for members to have the opportunity to share their experiences and have their voices heard. The information provided was powerful and emotive and will be used to help shape our submission. A further online session is being planned for a weekday after school. Questions were determined in advance, covering areas such as PPE, support from Head Teachers and senior leadership teams, concerns for safety, challenges, advice, different expectations for TA's and teachers and how this experience has impacted on pupils.

The Schools Forum met on 16 January. Feedback was gained from participants for the Covid inquiry and the TUC delivered a workshop on the "Unions and the world of work" programme which is being rolled out to pupils in key stage 4 and post 16. The next forum is scheduled for the spring term.

Further Education

Campaign and policy work in further education is focussing on stress caused by high workloads in colleges and improving the terms and conditions of contracted-out staff with a view to ultimately preventing outsourcing or bringing services back in-house.

We have produced and signed off our 'Vision for FE', which summarises our members' priorities and will be used in political lobbying and our 'Just Transition to Net Zero' in England, which will be used to improve joint working between the unions and employers in moves towards greener colleges.

Careers

A survey of careers staff has been launched to gain data that will inform campaigns for 2025, in particular a pay campaign. The survey will also be used to canvass members' views on emerging use of new technologies and AI in careers services.

English Devolution White Paper

The government has now published English Devolution White Paper and is currently consulting on this.

The English Devolution White Paper does not directly emphasise the role of trade unions in its proposals but implicitly recognises the importance of collaboration with key stakeholders in achieving its goals.

UNISON has set up an English Devolution project group to develop cohesive organising, bargaining and political strategy in relation to English regions devolved structures. The project will bring together regions, policy and bargaining to develop a comprehensive strategy and plan across English region's devolved structures. Local Government is represented on the project team. The project group will report to the NEC's Policy Development & Campaigns Committee and the Service Group Liaison Committee.

UNISON [issued a press release on 16 December 2024](#), saying councils are at breaking point. After years of damaging austerity, investing in services and staff must be central to any reform in the White Paper.

In January, UNISON met with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MGCLG). We asked about TUPE and how staff transfers from one employer to another will be managed, funding and capacity within local authorities to deal with a huge reorganisation, outsourced contracts, and local authority trading companies. We also raised the NJC, the Employment Rights Bill, and social care.

English Devo White Paper

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

English Devo (UNISON) Link Tree

<https://linktr.ee/engdevo>

Equal Pay Campaign

As part of the work to provide support to regions and branches on identifying potential equal pay issues and promoting UNISON as the union best placed to pursue equal pay cases, in December a webinar took place for regional staff.

The webinar received a detailed presentation from officers in the Local Government and Legal teams on the background to equal pay, and what to look for when pursuing potential cases. There were presentations on recent case studies: Birmingham and Sunderland.

The seminar discussed what support regions and branches need, and what further communications resource are needed on top of those developed over the last year.

- ❖ Produce a simple audit – four or five questions – where are the risks?
- ❖ A ‘first steps’ toolkit – including a simple audit (four or five questions) to help branches and organisers identify where the equal pay risks are
- ❖ Refreshed briefings for branches and organisers on the basic principles of single status and job evaluation
- ❖ Training on equal pay basics – to sit alongside the current training on the various schemes
- ❖ Review the comms materials we have
- ❖ Recognition that we are fighting on multiple fronts in local government

We continue to work with regions and branches on equal pay cases in a number of local authorities.

Local Authority Trading Companies (LATCs): Impacts on Staff

UNISON commissioned research on the impact of LATCs on the pay and the T&Cs of our members across the UK. That research was published in the Municipal Journal (local government trade press) on 15th January.

The full report - <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2025/01/622-LATC-report.pdf>

Key findings are:

- ❖ 62% of UK councils own LATCs;
- ❖ there over 850 LATCs throughout the UK; over half of these are property holding and/or investment vehicles that do not employ people;
- ❖ 384 LATCs employ people;
- ❖ over 91,000 people work for LATCs, 4.6% of the combined local authority workforce;
- ❖ 79,791 of these workers are employed by 105 large LATC employers (companies with more than 200 workers) providing services across 82 local authorities.
- ❖ the majority of large LATC employers provide leisure, housing or social care services, but waste and facilities management also feature;
- ❖ over half of a sample of 77 large LATC employers do not use the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) or just have it for TUPE'd workers;
- ❖ out of a sample of 42 large LATC employers, over half do not follow council pay scales.

Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS)

Stage 1 of the pensions review covers the LGPS and DC pensions consolidation. The consultations closed on 16 January – the UNISON responses are available here on the [LGPS](#) and [DC consolidation](#). A paper on the LGPS is included in this report below.

In December, the government announced a delay to stage 2 of its pension review which is concerned with pension adequacy. UNISON is very concerned about the inadequacy of much individual DC provision and the very low level of compulsory employer

contributions – just 3%. Speculation suggested that the rise in NI employer contributions announced in the budget in October and to be introduced from April will make the government reluctant to compel employers to pay higher employer pension contributions in addition. UNISON understand that this is a postponement rather than an abandonment of the adequacy review, and would want the government to address this.

The government also announced that the compensation for WASPI women recommended by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman would not be paid. This was a surprising and hugely disappointing decision and UNISON publicly criticised the government for this.

In January 2025, a new pensions minister was appointed following the promotion of Emma Reynolds in a minor reshuffle. He is Torsten Bell, until recently the Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation which focuses on low and middle income groups. Before becoming an MP, Bell recently published a book which contains his thoughts on some key pension policy issues, so we know that: he would like the state pension and all benefits to be uprated with earnings, he supports an increase in minimum employer contributions from 3% to 6%, he recognises how DC pensions transfer risk from firms onto individuals which they cannot possibly manage. UNISON will be seeking an early meeting with Torsten Bell.

UNISON has responded to the HMRC technical consultation on [inheritance tax](#) on pensions. One point that is emphasised is that the payment of death in service benefits to bereaved dependents should not be delayed.

We are aware that some employers in the LGPS who are not required to offer the scheme by the regulations, are deciding to leave. The employers concerned are typically housing associations, higher education institutions and charities.

A training event was held for activists in Scotland in December 2024 on this theme, reflecting a particular concern about the issue. Participants included UNISON reps on pensions fund boards. Scenario-based group activities were devised and piloted at the event to promote discussion. Key points were circulated after the event highlighting areas to be explored in a union response to such a proposal including: possible protections for formerly transferred staff, contractual entitlements, the fund's position on exit payments, the expected level of employer contribution savings, the detriment to directly affected staff and the inadequacy of DC arrangements. The event received positive feedback and could be adapted for regions or service groups.

The report to the Policy Development and Campaigns Committee and the Service Group Liaison Committee set out following key points:

- ❖ LGPS funds are in good health. Most are in surplus, having enough resources to meet all their current obligations. There are no proposals to change the benefits which members receive

- ❖ But since they have some £400 billion in assets, the Government is keenly interested in the way in which these assets are invested. It is consulting in England and Wales on requiring all assets to be invested through pooling companies, and encouraging more investment benefitting local economies
- ❖ Increasing pooling risks diminishing member engagement and the potential of funds to pursue effective responsible investment strategies. Our response needs to emphasise the importance of member involvement, with funds retaining strategic decision-making over investment

The Government's consultation can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-government-pension-scheme-england-and-wales-fit-for-the-future/local-government-pension-scheme-england-and-wales-fit-for-the-future>

Equality and Diversity

The Service Group has continued to work with all the Self-Organised Groups and the young members forum on securing the legacies of UNISON's 2019 Year of Young Workers, 2022 Year of Disabled Workers, 2023 Year of Black Workers and most recently the 2024 Year of LGBT+ Workers

At the Local Government SGE meeting in November 2024, SGE members agreed that we work with UNISON's Learning and Organising Services to run a bespoke online workshop about what intersectionality means, why it is important and what we should be doing to raise awareness among LG members and activists. The online workshop will be held on 12 March at 12pm – 1.30pm. So far, approximately 25 members have indicated an interest in participating in the online workshop, but if any SGE member hasn't yet done so and would like to participate please email m.bailey@unison.co.uk as soon as possible.

The National Disabled Members Committee has sent an updated version of the model motion to be sent to all local government branches to help persuade local government employers to adopt the [Disability Employment Charter](#) and use it as a bargaining and negotiating tool to promote disability rights in the workplace. Branches will be asked to provide feedback about how successful they have been in getting their employers to adopt the Charter by completing our [online survey](#)

During the TUC month of Young Workers Month in November 2024, a special young workers' circular was sent to local government branches and activists which signposted activists to use [UNISON resources](#) to support campaigns on the [key issues](#) that matter to young people

We sent out an online survey in October to gather information about our members' experiences of the menopause and to what extent they are supported in local government workplaces. The survey findings will be published soon

An online survey on misogynistic behaviours and sexual violence against women in the workplace was launched and sent out by various means in October 2024 and is now closed for further responses. A report of the survey findings with key recommendations/next steps for the SGE to agree, will be sent to SGE members separately before the meeting

Apprenticeships / Apprentices

During National Apprenticeship Week we wanted to see more local government employers signing up to, and more branches using the [UNISON Apprenticeship Charter](#) as a campaign tool to ensure apprenticeships deliver a positive outcome for both apprentices and employers. It spells out both what rights apprentices should have, and what responsibilities employers owe them, with the aim of creating apprenticeships that work for everyone.

Apprenticeships and skills programmes are a key element of the government's aim of boosting opportunities for young people following the [announcement of apprenticeship reforms in England](#). Skills England, the government's new body for the skills system will play a crucial role in determining which types of training will be eligible for the expanded '[Growth and Skills Levy](#)'.

The next meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Apprenticeships will take place on 30 January. The Interim Chair of Skills England, Richard Pennycook CBE, will set how Skills England intends to work with stakeholders to deliver skills reforms and improved apprenticeship and technical educational pathways for both young people and adults alike.

The most recent meeting of the APPG on Apprenticeships took place on 16 December 2024. Baroness Jacqui Smith, Minister for Skills (who leads on Labour's Skills reforms in the House of Lords) set out the government's vision for apprenticeships. Baroness Smith reiterated several key points and highlighted underlying issues within the current skills and apprenticeship system. Baroness Smith said the Government remains committed to improving apprenticeships and intends to make them more flexible.

Baroness Smith provided oral evidence on the findings from the Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training inquiry at the end of November. You can read or listen to the meeting here <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15062/html/>.

Social Care

UNISON recently undertook a survey of its migrant care workforce to shine further light on the horrendous levels of exploitation that many of them are experiencing. A report on the findings will be issued soon.

The Westminster Government announced that an independent commission into the future of social care in England will begin in April but not fully report until 2028. UNISON has stressed how the commission must work to a strict timeframe and focus on how to

establish a national care service, not discuss whether to create one. Urgent work to deliver a fair pay agreement must also be delivered without delay. Both major reforms are vital to retain and recruit skilled staff, and to support those they look after.

UNISON branches were recently encouraged to work with local councillors to get a motion passed in a full council meeting expressing support for UNISON National Care Service campaign.

Housing

UNISON ran a survey aimed at members working in housing (Local Authorities, ALMOs and Housing Associations) during the winter of 2024. The survey closed just before Christmas. The results have been collated and a report is now being written.

The survey was very successful, achieving a response rate of 1,135 housing members. Approximately 100 of those members gave their consent to be contacted by UNISON for future press, editorial and case study work.

UNISON's press team will be working on a release aimed at trade press within the housing sector and local government, covering the headline findings of the survey. Until the press release has been issued, we cannot share the survey results. Once survey results are released, a short presentation could be made to the next SGE meeting

UNISON responded to a government consultation on reviewing and reforming the Right to Buy (RTB) in England. RTB has already been abolished in Scotland and Wales - and scrapping it in England is something UNISON has long campaigned for. Instead of outright abolishing RTB in England, the government are looking at options to reform RTB so that it is less damaging on the provision of social housing in England.

UNISON recommended (in the consultation) that if RTB does continue to exist, albeit in a reformed and more limited way, then the core decisions around those changes (and how it is implemented locally) should be down to local councils, who should have the delegated power to review, reform or even pause RTB in order to answer their own local housing needs. UNISON argued that this fitted well with the government's wider devolution proposals for English local authorities, placing more power in the hands of councils.

UNISON is developing a potential project with APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence), looking at examples of insourcing within social housing. In the late 90s and into the early 21st century, stock transfers were common among local authorities. This mechanism allowed council tenants to vote on whether they wanted council homes to be transferred out of the council's control and to be run by either ALMOS or housing associations.

The ongoing housing crisis (and commercialisation of the housing association sector) has led some authorities to bring their former housing stock back in-house and under council control. This is a significant form of insourcing - something that UNISON

campaigns for across all public services and particularly in local authorities, following years of rampant outsourcing during the austerity years. If the project seems viable and useful for our campaigning and organising needs, we will commission APSE to carry out the research and to work with us on a report that can be used to promote housing insourcing within local authorities.

Regional organising staff have raised concerns about a regulatory change, requiring a new level of competency certification for registered building control officers and inspectors in local authority housing services. Many experienced staff and members working in this field have reported feeling unsupported, with both local and national employers effectively washing their hands of any support or resources to help staff access the training and development needed to gain their new competency certification. A meeting is happening on 11 Feb, where UNISON will consider what support we can offer to members in this situation and what pressure we can put on local and national employers to do more to support their staff.

Public Health

People in the poorest areas of England are diagnosed with illness, on average 10 years earlier, than those in the richest areas. Those in the most deprived areas can expect to live more than 18 fewer healthy years than those in the least deprived areas. Conditions such as chronic pain, COPD, alcohol problems, anxiety and depression, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes are at least 50% more prevalent in the most deprived areas of England.

Some barriers to accessing healthcare in the UK include: Lack of a permanent address, poor living and working conditions, isolation, uncertain immigration status, exploitation, language difficulties, poverty and hunger. The Kings Fund has looked in detail at the major issues.

Poor diet, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol consumption and smoking – are linked to ill health and premature death. A study in 2008 found that, after following up its cohort for 11 years, an individual with all four risk factors had a four-fold risk of dying compared with someone who ate well and was active, and didn't smoke or drink to excess.

The Department of Health and Social Care and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities have roles to play in focusing research into multiple unhealthy risk factors. Local services should be supported by evaluating their impact on multiple risk factors and to facilitate the sharing of new knowledge generated from evaluation.

Inequalities in health reflect the inequalities in society at large: they are closely related to personal and socio-economic factors, such as income, education, housing, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, geography and social inclusion.

The Kings Fund has found that Health inequalities are the result of differences in health status (eg, life expectancy), access to care, quality and experience of care, behavioural

risks to health (eg, smoking), and wider determinants of health (eg, quality of housing). The groups who often experience the worst health include (but are not limited to) [black and ethnic minority groups](#), [people sleeping rough](#), [people living in poverty](#), [disabled people or long-term health conditions](#), and those who are part of the [LGBTQ+ community](#).

Over the past five years, The King's Fund has heard from lots of different people who experience the worst health outcomes about their experiences of using health and care services in the UK. These are some of the common themes in the stories they shared:

- ❖ discrimination and racism
- ❖ not being treated with empathy or genuinely listened to
- ❖ lack of communication from services
- ❖ feeling of powerlessness
- ❖ practical barriers, eg, travel costs
- ❖ shame and stigma
- ❖ services not being flexible, holistic or inclusive enough
- ❖ lack of trust and engagement due to negative experiences in the past.

Social Work

In 2024, Social work students were included for the first time in UNISON's annual organising plan. This meant they were one of the key groups that regional organising staff were expected to recruit over the course of the year.

To support this recruitment, UNISON's local government service group provided a variety of national resources for regions to access. This included leaflets/literature, a social work short film, a national UCAS e-mail campaign and a supply of social work dictionaries for each region (to use as a recruitment incentive for new sign-ups).

UNISON recruited 364 student social workers in 2024. This was slightly below the number recruited in 2023 (383) but well above the numbers recruited in 2021 (183) and 2022 (322).

One of the biggest barriers that regional staff reported, was their struggle to access a budget to support recruitment. Even in the more successful regions, organising staff said that they had to make do with existing resources or come up with inventive methods that had little or no financial cost attached to them. National staff will be sharing this feedback with senior management and with the strategic organising unit.

Regions reported that the social work dictionary incentive was particularly popular - and so successful that some regions had to order more copies when they ran out. Regions are extremely keen to place their orders for 2025 via the service group ASAP.

The service group will continue to provide new resources to support regional recruitment efforts. One of the key projects planned for 2025 is a new short film focused on social work students in UNISON. Another new initiative (which was suggested by

regional staff) is to set up a SharePoint library for social work student recruitment. This is an online resource that can only be accessed by UNISON staff, where regional organising staff and national staff can share documents and best practice resources to support recruitment.

A successful national social work seminar was held on 23 November in London. The seminar will be held again in autumn 2025. The Forum sees the seminar as a great way to build up our regional organisation.

The National Officer is discussing with Press Office running a specific UNISON survey on issues of intimidation and violence experienced by social work staff because of home visits. The intention is to show a spotlight on the difficult working conditions social workers have and the need for a positive image of social work and social workers.

UNISON is represented on the National Workload Action Group (NWAG) established by the Department of Education to provide expert guidance to support councils and social workers to reduce workload. This Group has been meeting for two years and has now finished its work. A report will be submitted to DfE in March. This will cover recommendations on: Supervision; Workload and case management; Managerialism and admin support; Hybrid working and digital practice

The National Officer represents UNISON on this sub group which covers registered professionals in adult social care - nurses, social workers and occupational therapists. UNISON, LGA and BASW reps on the Sub Group were approached about the Sub Group having a discussion on whether social workers fall within scope of the new Social Care Negotiating Body. The National Officer advised that UNISON's general position is that the new social care negotiating body and subsequent agreement should not cover those workers already included in existing national bargaining/pay negotiating arrangements e.g. NJC or Agenda for Change. Our aim being to extend national collective bargaining to those care staff who currently have nobody making the case for them. The technicalities of how this is achieved is something which still needs to be worked out. This being said, social workers must be part of the wider discussions on adult social care and we will be promoting this. ADASS notified its members of UNISON's position in their New Year bulletin.

As part of our manifesto pledge to promote a positive image of social work UNISON sponsors the Adult Team of the Year. The 2024 award was won by the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust.

The Social Work Forum has agreed to hold webinars on the following topics: Haven guidance; Direction of children's social care; SWE CPD peer reflection for UNISON officers on full time release; Neuro diversity; and Student study skills, placement dos and don'ts.

The Scottish Government announced that they were delaying their National Care Service Bill ahead of Stage 2 and look likely to drop their proposals to set up a NCS. If this is the case, it will be a victory for UNISON Scotland who have campaigned against

the proposed model of a NCS. Unfortunately progress towards sectoral bargaining for social care has been very slow and is now being looked at in line with the UK Government's proposals for Adult Social Care in England.

Proposals to establish a National Social Work Agency, which UNISON Scotland have supported, are still alive but we await updates on how they now wish to proceed.

Our Social Work Issues Group recently published a report on Care Management, following a survey of members. <https://unison-scotland.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-UNISON-Care-Management-web.pdf> This criticised the current Care Management models that deny social workers capacity for a personal skills, human rights approach to assessing need and supporting service users and is more about rationing resources. This has been well received by members and by Social Work Scotland. The group held a conference and launched a charter of demands to address the Social Work crisis and have engaged with the Government, SWS and CoSLA to pursue these. <https://unison-scotland.org/wp-content/uploads/Demands-for-social-work-crisis-24-10-24.pdf>

Fire and Rescue

In December 2024 the Fire and Rescue Forum launched a range of new resources to assist organising in fire and rescue services.

There is now a new UNISON landing page for fire and rescue [Fire and Rescue | UNISON National](#). News items and new resources will be uploaded there.

A new UNISON Fire and Rescue recruitment and organising guide has been produced. It can be accessed online at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/12/Fire-and-rescue-recruitment-guide.pdf>

This is for branches and regional colleagues to use when visiting fire and rescue workplaces.

We have produced a range of UNISON fire and rescue branded items, including pens, water bottles and notebooks. We have sent a small supply to each region, and branches will be encouraged to order further supplies to use when visiting fire and rescue workplaces.

We hope all of these are useful and help to raise the profile of fire and rescue membership within UNISON.

Local Government Conference 2025

The SGE discussed Conference and agreed to submit motions on the following topics:

- ❖ The School Support Staff Negotiating Body

- ❖ Local Government Funding and Cuts
- ❖ Social Care
- ❖ Artificial intelligence and its impact on local government workers
- ❖ Job evaluation and equal pay in local government
- ❖ A New Negotiating Body for Early Years Workers
- ❖ Supporting Migrant Workers in Local Government
- ❖ Proposed LGPS investment and governance reforms: the need for accountability to scheme members
- ❖ English Devolution: impact on the workforce

The LGSGE also considered possible topics for fringe meetings and initial ideas for guest speakers.