

FACTSHEET: Trade unions and professional associations for social workers

Q What do trade unions do?

Trade unions have a special status in law which gives us rights and powers which professional associations don't have. These are summarised below.

Collective rights

Employers have to work with recognised unions to:

- negotiate pay, conditions and key policies
- inform and consult over changes at work such as restructuring, redundancies, transfers, and pension scheme changes
- ensure that the health and safety of the workforce is protected

Trade union representatives have the right to consult with our members in order to fulfil these roles – so through the union you get to have a say over what happens at work. On big issues such as pay negotiations, members may be formally balloted.

Trade union health and safety representatives have a special status in law allowing them to investigate members' complaints and carry out health and safety inspections in the workplace.

Individual rights

As a trade union member you have the right to be accompanied by your trade union representative in any grievance or disciplinary hearing at work.

There are also rights which protect you from being victimised or disadvantaged because you are a trade union member or activist.

Q Why UNISON?

UNISON is a trade union 1.3 million strong representing members in all the major public services. We have **over 40,000 social workers** in membership mainly working in local authorities, NHS Trusts and the voluntary sector. We are the main trade union recognised for social workers in the UK. We negotiate on pay and conditions of service at national and local level and provide individual advice and representation to social workers.

We also **campaign on social work issues** and represent social workers to government, policy-makers and in the media. We are key players in the social work reform initiatives underway in all four UK countries including the Social Work Reform Board and Changing Lives programmes.

Because we are the biggest public sector union we have a comprehensive **network of local branches and stewards in every area**, there to advise, represent and support members and negotiate with local management on workplace issues. Many of our stewards and activists have a social work background – so they can provide tailored advice and support. Our representatives deal with a wide range of issues for social workers including workload, stress, capability, and safety issues such as threats and working alone.

UNISON membership also gives access to **legal advice and representation**, including at employment tribunal, if you have problems arising from your employment.

If you have a problem with your **professional social work registration** you will receive advice and support through UNISON, and if you get called to a hearing you will be represented by one of UNISON's specialist case officers.

Challenging discrimination and winning equality is at the heart of UNISON's policies. So we have a network of equality representatives and we actively campaign for equality in the workplace and in the wider world.

UNISON makes sure **everybody has a voice** in the union. Our 'self-organised groups' include those who are traditionally under represented: young members, retired members, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members, disabled members, women in UNISON, and black members.

UNISON members are entitled to a wide range of other benefits including **special deals** on insurance, financial services, breakdown cover and Open University courses. We also have a registered charity, UNISON Welfare, which is a free confidential personal advice and support service.

Q What do professional associations do?

Professional associations exist to promote the professional values, standards and standing of their profession. They produce journals and advice and guidance on professional issues, run conferences and promote continuing professional development opportunities. They also support research and promote best practice.

They do not have the special status of trade unions in relation to rights at work, and do not tend to have local representatives in the workplace in the way that trade unions do. However many run advice services for their members covering professional issues. Policy-makers and employers often consult with them.

The main professional association for social workers in the UK is the British Association of Social Workers which has around 12,000 members.