

The characteristics, role and activities of UNISON stewards

As depicted by the 2001 UNISON Representatives Survey

Allan Kerr
Linda Perks
Jeremy Waddington

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Executive Summary

Who are stewards?

The typical steward was male, working full-time and had been a member of the union for 17 years, nine of those years as a steward. He was most likely the only candidate for the post.

Fifty five per cent (55 per cent) of stewards were men compared to 33 per cent of members who are men. The average age of a steward was 47 years old. Less than one-tenth (7 per cent) of stewards were part-time workers. By contrast, just over one fifth (21 per cent) of members were part-time workers

Elections and representation

Six out of ten stewards were either appointed or the only candidate for the position. Just over a third of stewards had either an ideological commitment to trade unionism or a desire to help others. Nearly a third stood for the position either because no one else wanted the job or so that his or her workplace had a representative. A steward had an average constituency of 32 members spread over five workplaces. In four out of ten workplaces where we have a steward, we have only a single steward.

Duties

Stewards spend most of their time helping members with their problems and keeping them informed. Members most often sought advice from stewards about problems with management. Stewards with paid release spent significantly more time in meetings with management and negotiating collective issues than stewards without paid release.

Support for stewards

Stewards receive most of their information through UNISONfocus, from their local branch, through UNISON circulars and from the UNISON journal. Branch and workplace meetings were the most useful source of information. When asked how UNISON could improve their effectiveness stewards identified improved guidance on legal and employment issues, and improved access to advice and information.

Why members are not becoming stewards

Stewards and members agreed that the job took too much time. However, stewards said they thought the job involved too much responsibility for most members and might damage their career prospects. Members on the other hand said that a lack of knowledge about unions deterred involvement, as did a lack of interest.

Paid release and facilities

Very few stewards (7 per cent) were on full-time release and the average weekly paid facility time was 4 hours. Almost a quarter of stewards had no paid facility time. In small workplaces, stewards were much less likely to have paid release for their duties than stewards in large workplaces. Similarly, stewards in large workplaces were much more likely to have access to good facilities than stewards in small workplaces. The survey evidence supports the view that union influence in the workplace depends on paid facility time and concrete management support in the shape of good facilities.

Workplace organisation and branch performance

Stewards and members disagreed over the assessment of workplace organisation and branch performance. Although stewards were more dissatisfied than members with workplace employment relations, they were more optimistic in their assessment of union performance in the branch and workplace.

Branch functions

Stewards and members agreed that the four key functions of a branch are:

- Representing individual members over grievances, disciplinary cases and other matters;
- Local negotiations on conditions, pay, contracting out and employment changes;
- Health and safety; and
- Regular communication with members.

Conclusion

The general impressions of stewards gained from this survey are of a group of dedicated people, keen to support their members and hard working. They generally feel supported by management, but consider the union could do more for them.

Policy recommendations

Recommendation one

The role of UNISON stewards has been changing as part of the programme of developing an organising union. The pathway to becoming a steward has also been changing. Notwithstanding these changes, UNISON has a shortage of stewards. Our first recommendation is that the union should recruit more women; part-time workers; black members; and young members as stewards, in particular in small workplaces. UNISON should also explore how to continually renew and refresh the steward base.

Recommendation two

As nearly a quarter of stewards do not receive paid release, there is a strong case to be made for more paid release and a review of its allocation. As part of the review, UNISON should examine how to obtain more paid release through collective bargaining, use of employment law and other means.

Recommendation three

Our third recommendation is to tackle the question of support for stewards. A number of measures, which include a new stewards' handbook and the revamped UNISON website, have been taken to improve the quality of support stewards receive. Notwithstanding these steps, UNISON should use focus groups to investigate further the nature of support that would increase the effectiveness of stewards

Recommendation four

Our fourth recommendation is that the union should press employers to offer better facilities in workplaces for stewards, in particular in small workplaces. Our recommendation could form part of a strategy to establish new recognition agreements or improve existing agreements.

Recommendation five

The findings confirm that the move to an organising union is a steep learning curve for stewards and members. The research reveals that there is a difference, in some areas very marked, between the views of stewards and members over branch performance and workplace organisation. These views may be accounted for by different degrees of participation in the union. They indicate the progress UNISON needs to make towards achieving an organising union. UNISON should continue to keep the process of organisational change under review and modify plans and processes accordingly.

Recommendation six

The research reveals that members do not know enough about the role of a steward to become involved and that being a steward is time consuming. Our final recommendation is that UNISON should review how to promote and publicise the role of a steward to encourage more members to become stewards. It will generate greater membership participation, which is a key component of an organising union. The union should also advocate team working and job sharing between stewards to increase efficiency, alleviate workloads and share responsibility.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to describe the characteristics, role and activities of UNISON stewards. We also present a portrait of workplace employment relations. This report is based on data from a sample of 3,164 stewards, which was collected by a postal survey of 15,000 stewards in 2001. As part of this report, we were able to compare the views of stewards and members on local workplace organisation. The latter data is taken from the UNISON 2000 Membership survey. UNISON and the Employment Studies Group of the Manchester School of Management, UMIST, carried out the research. Allan Kerr, Linda Perks and Jeremy Waddington undertook the research project¹.

The role of a steward is a complex and demanding one. Their main functions were to:

- represent members over grievances and disciplinary matters;
- negotiate on pay and conditions;
- act as a communicator between members and the employer and between members and the union; and
- act as local workplace leaders.

Their role was shaped by the concerns and needs of the members they represent, but their function was also shaped by the organisations in which they work.

Who and where are UNISON stewards?

The typical steward was male, working full-time and had been a member of the union for 17 years, nine of those years as a steward. He was most likely the only candidate for the position.

An estimate made in 2001 from RMS data put the number of stewards in UNISON at 27,000. The survey showed that 45 per cent of them were women compared to 67 per cent of members who are women. This shows a gender imbalance between stewards and members. Fifty five per cent of stewards in our sample were men, which is 22 percentage points higher than the proportion of union members who are men. In the health service 52 per cent of stewards were women but only 42 per cent in local government. The average age of a steward was 47 years old. A quarter of stewards have been in the union for more than 20 years, 60 per cent for 10-20 years, and just over 10 per cent for less than 10 years. Only 4 per cent have been in the union for less than 5 years. On average, stewards have been in the union for 17 years, and had represented their members for 9 years, which gives some indication of how long it takes to become a steward.

Only 7 per cent of stewards work less than 30 hours a week, just over 20 per cent work between 30 – 36 hours a week and 60 per cent work between 37 –

¹ Allan Kerr is Head of Organising and Recruitment for UNISON. Linda Perks is Head of Structural Development for UNISON. Jeremy Waddington is Reader in the Employment Studies Group of the Manchester School of Management, UMIST and is a Project Co-ordinator for the European Trade Union Institute, Brussels

40 hours a week. By contrast, the proportion of members who work less than 30 hours a week was three times higher than that of stewards. A similar proportion of members and stewards work between 30 – 36 hours a week and 45 per cent of members work between 37 – 40 hours a week. The evidence indicates a marked under-representation of stewards among part-time workers.

A further way of capturing this is to look at the income of members by the New Earnings Survey classifications and see how this is associated with the income of their stewards. Table 1 shows the income of stewards by gender and compares this with the income of members. The proportion of female stewards earning less than £11,892 was more than double that of male stewards. By contrast, the proportion of male stewards earning more than £28,411 was three times that of women stewards. This pattern reflects differences in the gender composition of employment. More importantly, Table 1 shows that the proportion of members earning less than £8,379 was more than three times that of stewards. The evidence confirms an imbalance in the hours of work of stewards when compared with members and that stewards are better paid than members.

Table 1: Income of stewards and members

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>
	% of stewards	% of stewards	% of stewards	% of members
Under £7,280	0.3	6.6	3.1	14.0
£7,281 to £8,379	1.4	4.9	2.9	5.2
£8,380 to £11,892	9.2	13.7	11.3	18.8
£11,893 to £15,203	17.9	25.1	21.1	21.2
£15,204 to £21,115	32.0	30.1	31.2	22.4
£21,116 to £28,410	31.4	17.0	24.9	14.3
More than £28,411	7.7	2.6	5.4	4.0

We analysed the occupations of stewards according to the Standard Occupational Classifications. Table 2 shows the composition of stewards by occupation and gender and compares this with the composition of union members. Stewards were employed across eight out of the nine occupational classifications, with associate professional and technical staff, mainly nurses, technicians and community and youth workers being, by far, the largest single group. The proportion of stewards employed as associate professional and technicals was about double that of other groups of union members. The proportion of stewards employed as managers, administrators and professionals was greater than that of members. By contrast, the proportion of stewards who were clerical staff, care assistants, and teaching assistants was less than that of members. Nearly a third of stewards (29 per cent) held another office in the union.

We analysed stewards' views on their current job. Nearly 80 per cent of stewards said their job was interesting and enjoyable and a similar proportion said that their job made them feel that they had accomplished something worthwhile at work. Just under half felt that their job made full use of their talents and skills, and a similar proportion said their job enabled them to learn

Table 2: Stewards and members by occupation

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>All</i>
	% of stewards	% of stewards	% of stewards	% of members
Occupation				
Managers and administrators	16	12	14	10
Professional	13	8	11	10
Associate professional and technical	30	33	31	24
Clerical and secretarial	11	22	16	24
Craft and related	4	0	2	2
Personal and protective services	15	18	17	24
Plant and machine operatives	5	2	3	1
Other occupations	6	5	6	5

new skills and develop their abilities. However, nearly three quarters of the stewards expressed the frustration that their job did not offer opportunities for advancement at work. Only half of the stewards felt that their job was secure and just over 80 per cent said their job was stressful. The proportions of stewards' answers to these questions were similar to the responses given by members in the UNISON 2000 Membership survey. Different views on jobs do not appear to prevent individuals from becoming stewards.

Normally, union recognition cannot be pre-supposed from union presence. However, union recognition is predominantly a public sector phenomenon: in our survey, nearly 97 per cent of workplaces had recognition. One reason why UNISON may not have been recognised in the other workplaces is the growth in private companies and voluntary & community sector employers providing public services.

Less than half of all workplaces (43 per cent) with a steward relied on just one member to fulfil this role. Only a third of workplaces in the health service had one steward whereas the proportion in local government was 46 per cent. The character of representation is likely to be different, for example, in cases where one steward covers 100 members compared to one covering 20 members. On average, each steward represented 32 UNISON members. This figure may underestimate the actual number of people that the stewards represent given the possibility that some non-union members may be "free-riders", benefiting from the activities of the steward (Cully *et al.*, 1999). We would expect to see variation in the ratio of members to stewards according to the number of employees at each workplace. With more employees to select from, large workplaces should generate more stewards, which would tend to make the ratio smaller (Brown *et al.*, 1978). Offsetting this are economies of scale that arise once a "critical mass" of stewards exist (Cully *et al.*, 1999). The second factor outweighs the first, and this is confirmed in Table 3. The ratio of members to stewards in the largest workplaces was a little under twice that in the smallest.

Table 3: Number of members and workplaces per steward by workplace size

	<i>Members per steward</i>	<i>Workplaces per steward</i>
	Mean	Mean
Workplace size		
10 or less employees	22	8
11-20 employees	23	5
21-30 employees	20	4
31-50 employees	39	4
More than 50 employees	41	4

Note: Figures are based on stewards representing no more than 100 members and at a maximum of 50 workplaces

We also found a variation in the ratio of workplaces to stewards according to size of workplace, Table 3. The ratio of workplaces to stewards in the smallest workplace is twice that in the largest. On average each steward represented members spread over 5 workplaces.

Policy recommendation
Recruitment of stewards
The research reveals that UNISON has a shortage of stewards. The union should recruit more women; part-time workers; black members; and young members as stewards, in particular in small workplaces. UNISON should explore how to continually renew and refresh the steward base.

Election and tenure of stewards

Stewards were asked what the main reason for becoming a representative had been. Table 4 shows the reason for becoming a steward. The largest proportion of stewards gave a strong commitment to trade unionism as the reason for standing. However, a larger proportion of men (26%) than women (18%) gave this reason. Just over a third of respondents had either an ideological commitment to unionism or a desire to help others.

Table 4: Reasons for becoming a steward

	<i>All</i>
	%
Management were treating UNISON members unfairly at my workplace	8
No one else wanted the job	11
I am strongly committed to trade unionism	23
I was asked by work colleagues	18
To help other UNISON members	12
So that we have a representative at my workplace	21
I have a strong believe in the values and ethos of UNISON	4
Another reason	3

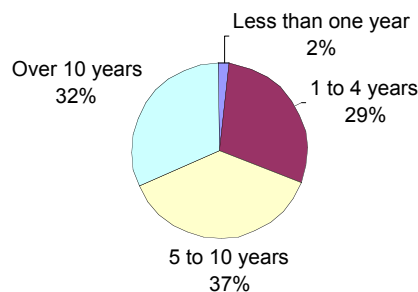
Table 5 illustrates the ways in which a steward arrives in post. Six out of ten stewards in our sample either went through no form of election or were the only candidates for the job. In local government, half the stewards were the only candidates and 40 per cent were elected. By contrast, just under a third of stewards in the health service were the only candidate and half were elected.

Table 5: How stewards are elected or appointed

	Local Government	Health	All
	%	%	%
Elected by show of hands	19	30	22
Elected by workplace ballot	18	19	18
Elected by postal ballot	3	2	2
The only candidate	49	30	44
Appointed	11	19	14

Stewards were asked how long they had been in the post. The results are reported in Figure 1. A third of stewards had held the post for more than 10 years, yet only 2 per cent of the stewards had held the post for less than a year. The average length of service was 9 years. UNISON needs to find a method of continually renewing and refreshing the steward base.

Figure 1 Length of tenure



Role of a steward

Time spent as a steward

Stewards were asked how much paid release the employer gave them to conduct their duties. The results are reported in Table 6. Almost a quarter of stewards were not given paid release; and a further 18 per cent only received one hour or less per week. By contrast, 7 per cent were on full-time release. Nearly a third of stewards in the health service did not have paid release, but 9 per cent were on full-time release. Less than a fifth of local government stewards did not receive paid release and 7 per cent were on full-time release. Stewards spent an average of 4_ hours of their own time on union business. Stewards in the health service on average spent more of their own time (6 hours) on union business than stewards in local government do (3_ hours). One suspects that this is largely because fewer health service stewards receive paid release. Nearly one in three stewards in small workplaces (0-50 employees) did not have paid release.

Policy recommendation

Paid release

There is a strong case for more paid release and a review of its allocation. As part of the review, UNISON should examine how to obtain more paid release through collective bargaining, use of employment law and other means.

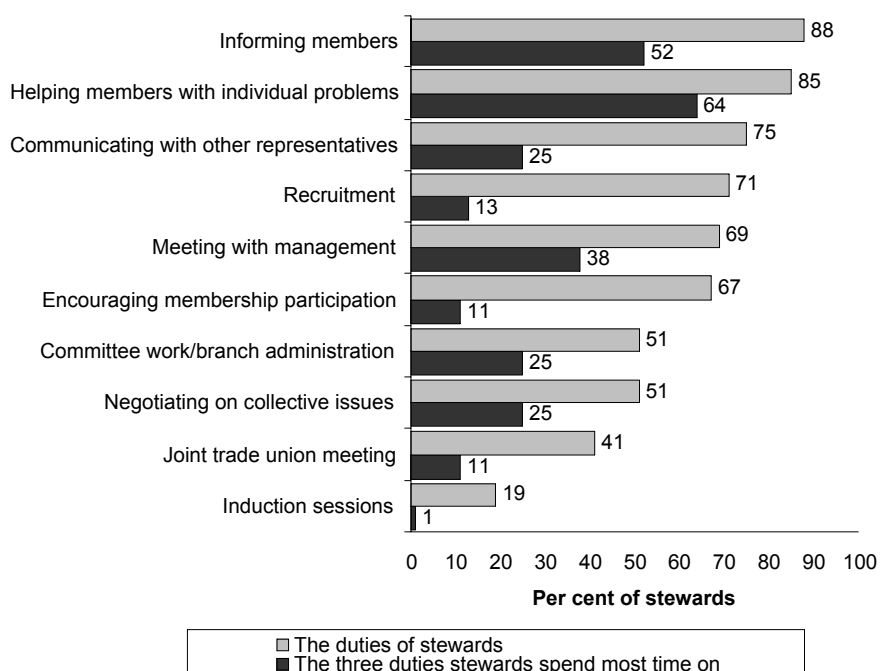
Table 6: Amount of paid release per week, by industry and workplace size

	Local government	Health	All	Workplace size 0-50 employees	Workplace size 51 or more employees
Hours	%	%	%	%	%
0	18	30	23	29	19
0.25 – 1	21	12	18	19	17
1.25 – 2	17	11	15	15	15
2.25 – 3	8	8	7	10	7
3.25 - 4	7	6	7	5	7
4.25 - 5	3	4	4	3	5
More than 5	19	20	19	13	22
Full-time	7	9	7	6	8

What do the stewards do?

Relatively little research has been done on the role and activities of stewards. Our questions to stewards were designed to explore these issues and we

Figure 2 The duties stewards are involved in and the three duties they spend most time on



report on the results in this section. Stewards were asked what duties they were involved in each week in the workplace. The results are reported in Figure 2. They are involved in a wide range of activities from informing members (88 per cent) to attending induction sessions with new employees (19 per cent).

Stewards were asked on which three duties they spent most time. Two duties dominated all others: helping members with individual problems (64 per cent) and informing members (52 per cent). Of particular note was the relative lack of importance given to the recruitment of new members (13 per cent) and membership participation (11 per cent), both of which are characteristics of an organising union.

The research reveals that stewards have different roles according to the amount of paid release they receive from their employer. The role of a steward with no paid release was that of an advisor and communicator. Conversely, the role of a steward with paid release was that of an advisor and negotiator. Those stewards with paid release were more likely to spend time dealing with management, as shown in table 7. For example, five out of ten stewards with paid release spent time in meetings with management, twice the proportion with no paid release. Similarly, those with paid release spent nearly three times more time than those without paid release on negotiating collective issues. Conversely, six out of ten stewards with no paid release spent time informing members, one and half times the proportion with paid release. This result reflects the tension within the organising model. On the one hand the union is asking stewards to help members with individual problems and keep them informed and on the other hand is asking them to take more responsibility for negotiating collective issues.

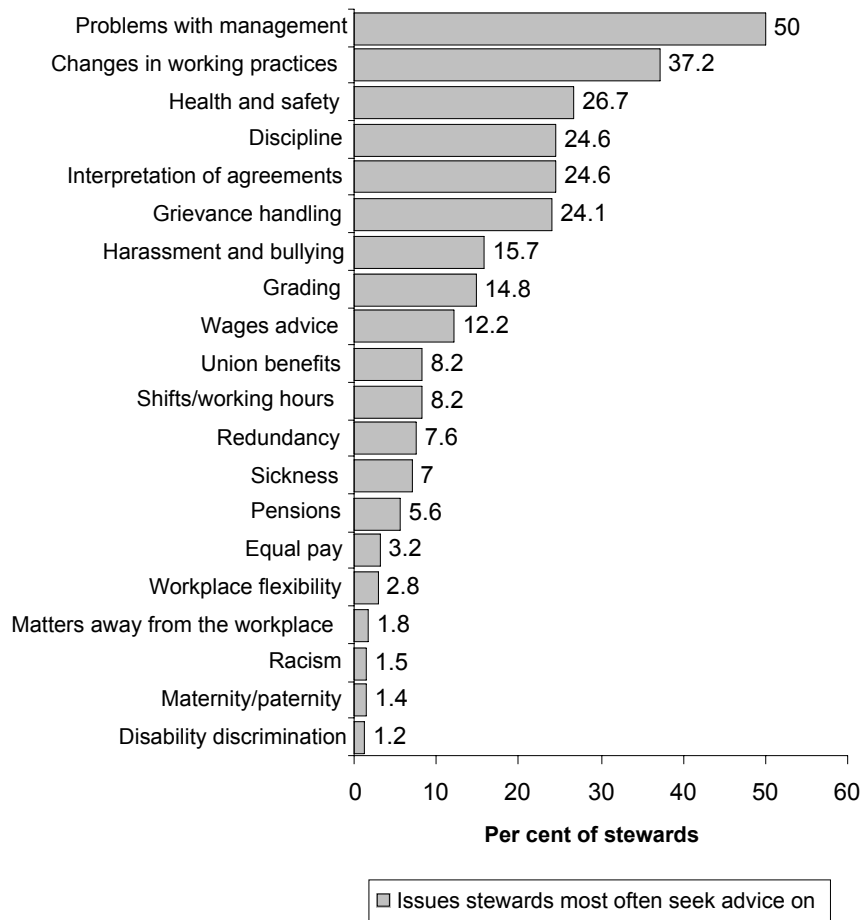
Table 7: The three duties stewards spend most of their time on, by paid release

	<i>No paid release</i>	<i>More than 2 hours paid release</i>
	% of stewards	% of stewards
Helping with individual problems	60	71
Informing members	57	42
Meetings with management	25	50
Negotiating collective issues	14	35

Issues members and stewards sought advice on

We then asked stewards, which were the three issues members most often sought advice from them on. One issue stood out: problems with management (60 per cent). Of the remainder, problems surrounding changes in working practice (34 per cent) was the next most commonly mentioned issue (local government stewards: 37 per cent – health service stewards: 26 per cent) followed by issues around health and safety of members (33 per cent) and discipline (31 per cent). Similarly, figure 3 reports on the three most common reasons for stewards contacting UNISON (branch, UNISONdirect or regional office). They were problems with management, half (50 per cent) of the stewards reporting in this way, changes in working practice (37 per cent) followed by a clutch of other reasons including health and safety of members (27 per cent), interpretation of agreements (25 per cent) and discipline (25 per cent). The least common reasons for contacting UNISON were racism (2 per cent), disability discrimination (1 per cent) and maternity or paternity advice (1 per cent). A comparison between the issues members and stewards sought advice on reflects the difficulty stewards experience dealing with them and indicates a priority for the steward training programme.

Figure 3 The three issues stewards most often seek advice on

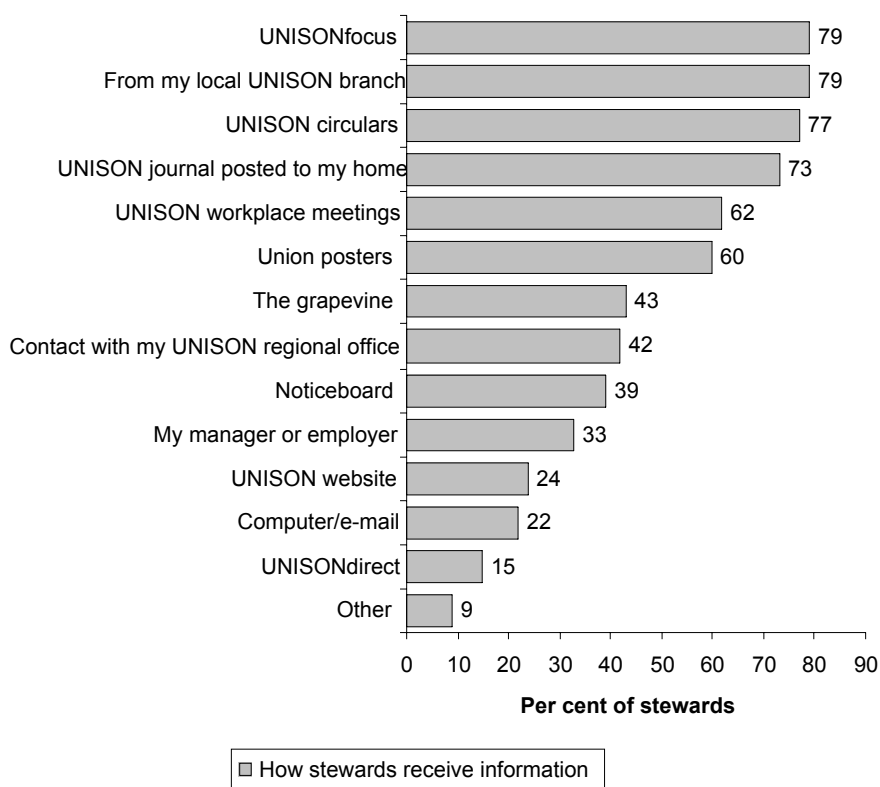


Communicating information to members

One of the functions of a steward is to act as a channel through which information flows between members and management, or between members and the union itself. The most common way in which stewards conveyed information to members was by “word of mouth”. Fifty six per cent spoke to members once a week or more (local government stewards 54 per cent – health service stewards 67 per cent) rising to 83 per cent of stewards who spoke to members more than once a month. In earlier research, we found that members, in particular women, were dissatisfied with the extent of contact with branch officers and stewards (Waddington and Kerr, 1999). Members would like greater contact with stewards than they currently have. Several factors influence the shortfall in contact that members experience. Firstly, the difficulty in recruiting more stewards, secondly, the difficulty in obtaining paid release and thirdly, the number of workplaces and employers that come within the scope of individual stewards has increased. We also found that the extent of satisfaction among women on contact with stewards was markedly lower than that among men. This result suggests that either women prefer more contact with stewards than men, or that women are more likely to be ignored by the predominantly male stewards, or that the difficulties of contacting women in part-time jobs have yet to be overcome.

While word of mouth was the most common means of communicating with members, other means, such as the telephone and notice boards were also widely used. Just over a third (37 per cent) of stewards used the telephone more than once a week (local government stewards: 35 per cent – health service stewards: 45 per cent) and a fifth (21 per cent) used workplace notice boards. Nearly half of the stewards (45 per cent) used newsletters at least once a month and a similar proportion used meetings (42 per cent). Around one in ten stewards (11 per cent) used e-mail to contact members at least once a week. Stewards in local government (41 per cent) use e-mail more often in a period of a month than stewards in the health service (22 per cent). A difference in the manner of communication emerges between large and small workplaces. Stewards in large workplaces are more likely to use e-mail more than stewards in small workplaces do. However, stewards in small workplaces are more likely to use newsletters, and meetings to communicate with members.

Figure 4 How do stewards receive information from the union



Provision of information to stewards

In discussing the activities undertaken by stewards, we have explored their duties, but have paid no attention to the support the union offers them. Figure 4 reports on how stewards receive information. They receive information in a variety of forms; the most common was through UNISONfocus (79 per cent), from the local branch (79 per cent), through UNISON circulars (77 per cent) and via the UNISON journal (73 per cent). At the opposite end of the scale was e-mail (22 per cent) and UNISONdirect (15 per cent). A way of capturing the usefulness or otherwise of the information is to use a utility rating as

shown in Table 8. (The utility rating is the number of stewards who find the information useful and interesting divided by the number of stewards who say they receive the information from that source expressed as a percentage). What will not come as a surprise was that stewards found the most useful and interesting information on issues came from the local branch (71 per cent). Next came workplace meetings (58 per cent) and contact with the regional office (53 per cent).

Table 8: Usefulness of information

<i>Information</i>	<i>Utility rating</i>
	%
From my local branch	71
Workplace meetings	58
Contact with my regional office	53
Circulars	47
UNISON website	42
UNISONfocus	38
UNISON magazine	32
Computer/e-mail	31
My manager or employer	31
Grapevine	29
Notice board	20
UNISONdirect	16
Union posters	13

Note: Respondents were asked to select the three most useful/interesting sources of information

We asked stewards how UNISON could improve their effectiveness in the workplace. They were asked to rank the kinds of support that would increase their effectiveness from a list of eleven options. Table 9 reports the results of this question. The kind of support in most demand was improved guidance on legal and employment issues (54 per cent). Next came improved access to advice (53 per cent) with asking for improved access to information (50 per cent) close behind. The least demand was for better administration of benefits and services (21 per cent) or a wider range of membership literature (25 per cent).

Table 9: Kinds of support that would increase the effectiveness of stewards

	%
Improved guidance on legal and employment issues	54
Improved access to advice	53
Improved access to information	50
More support for the conduct of elections	46
Better training of UNISON representatives	42
Better communication by UNISON	40
More accurate and up-to-date membership advice	40
Improvements in the form in which information is provided	39
Improved facilities at the workplace	36
Wider range of membership literature	25
Better administration of benefits and services by UNISON	21

Policy recommendation

Support for stewards

The research reveals that stewards spend much of their time on negotiating and representative activities. A number of measures, which include a new stewards' handbook, a revamped website and a more focused approach to steward training, have been taken to improve the quality of support stewards receive. Notwithstanding these steps, UNISON should use focus groups to investigate in greater depth the nature of support that would increase the effectiveness of stewards

Relationship with other representatives

Stewards were asked how often they contacted other UNISON representatives in the course of their union activities. Over a third of stewards (37 per cent) were in contact with branch officers once or more in a week, though a substantial minority (18 per cent) met them less than once a month. A third had met a senior steward once or more a week, with a minority (15 per cent) meeting them less than once a month. Most stewards did not have much contact with their regional office. Twenty eight per cent made contact less than once a month and a third never did (local government stewards: 39 per cent – health service stewards: 22 per cent). Overall, the research reveals that stewards share decision-making and problem solving with other lay officials, which is one of the characteristics of an organising union.

Stewards' relationship with management

The preceding analysis assumes that stewards are carrying out the functions required of them by the members they represent. Yet, how they exercise their representative role may be shaped and constrained by management. To begin with, Figure 5 reports on employers' attitudes towards the union. Nearly three quarters of the stewards felt that employers had a positive attitude. By

Figure 5 Employers' attitude towards the union



contrast, less than 8 per cent said their employers had a negative attitude. We also found that stewards working for private contractors held similar views. We might have expected that managers in these workplaces held less favourable views towards the union. This might be true in the case of contractors who do not recognise the union.

An obvious way for employers to provide support is through the provision of facilities, and the extent of this is shown in Table 10. A third of stewards said they had good office space to conduct their duties, but 20 per cent were left in the difficult position of working without access to private office space (these are stewards who work in small workplaces). Of the other facilities we asked about, most stewards had adequate access to a telephone (63 per cent), but fewer said they were able to access a computer (45 per cent) at work. Only 23 per cent said employers gave them regular notification of new employees and 21 per cent said the employer did not tell them. Apart from the provision of administrative facilities, we measured concrete management support for stewards in other ways. These were related to the management support for the role and activities of stewards. For example, six out of ten stewards (59 per cent) were given adequate time with pay to conduct their union duties, but one in five (17 per cent) did not receive sufficient time. There was stronger management support for attendance at UNISON training courses (66 per cent)

Table 10: Facilities available to stewards

	Facilities				
	<i>Very good</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Bad or very bad</i>	<i>Not provided</i>
	% of workplaces	% of workplaces	% of workplaces	% of workplaces	% of workplaces
Notice boards	21	41	24	8	6
Facility time for representatives duties	17	42	25	13	4
Paid time-off for UNISON training	19	47	24	8	3
Notifying the union of new employees	6	17	29	27	21
Provision of office space	9	25	26	20	20
Mail and post facilities	15	43	26	7	10
Telephone	18	47	22	5	8
Computer/e-mail	12	33	23	11	21
Meeting room	15	40	24	9	12

Stewards with good facilities were much more likely to be found in large workplaces. Stewards in small workplaces (less than 25 employees) were less likely to have access to notice boards, mail and post facilities, meeting room and IT facilities.

Policy recommendation

More facilities

UNISON should press employers to offer better facilities in the workplace for stewards; in particular in small workplaces. Our recommendation could form part of a strategy to establish new recognition agreements or improve existing agreements.

Table 11 reports on the results of eight questions where stewards and members (Taken from the 2000 UNISON Membership survey) were asked to judge workplace management and the effectiveness of the union in the workplace. On the majority of issues relating to the management of the workplace, more members than stewards agreed with the statements. Over half felt that their workplace was well managed, a similar proportion said

management–employee relations were good and over a third felt that pay was reasonable. On issues relating to the effectiveness of the union in their workplace, more stewards than members agreed with the statements. Nearly three quarters of stewards said their workplace was well organised and about half said the union had influence and power in workplace. This maybe due to a combination of factors: a reluctance to be self-critical, a question of judgement and an appreciation of what would define a well-organised workplace. In contrast, members may have unrealistic expectations about the concept of a well-organised workplace.

Table 11: Stewards' and members' relationship with management

	<i>Stewards</i>	<i>Members</i>
	<i>% of workplaces</i>	<i>% of workplaces</i>
<i>My workplace is well-managed</i>		
Strongly agree	5	9
Agree	36	43
Disagree	44	35
Strongly disagree	15	13
<i>My workplace is characterised by good management-employee relations</i>		
Strongly agree	4	9
Agree	40	43
Disagree	44	36
Strongly disagree	12	12
<i>Pay levels at my workplace are reasonable or on the high side</i>		
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	29	35
Disagree	51	46
Strongly disagree	18	16
<i>Management has successfully prevented the union from influencing key decisions</i>		
Strongly agree	9	10
Agree	34	32
Disagree	47	50
Strongly disagree	10	8
<i>I expect job losses at my workplace</i>		
Strongly agree	10	11
Agree	31	30
Disagree	45	49
Strongly disagree	14	10
<i>Unions at my workplace have too little power or influence</i>		
Strongly agree	12	15
Agree	43	47
Disagree	41	34
Strongly disagree	5	4
<i>The union is well organised at my workplace</i>		
Strongly agree	10	5
Agree	62	40
Disagree	25	41
Strongly disagree	3	15

We also found that workplace management and the effectiveness of the union varied with the size of the workplace. In small workplaces (less than 25 employees), stewards were more likely to say that their workplace was well managed and that there were good management-employee relations. Offsetting this was the admission that the union had less influence over key decisions in their workplace. By contrast, stewards in large workplaces were much less likely to say that their workplace was well managed or that employee-management relations were good. Nevertheless, they did feel they

had more influence over management decisions. Perhaps, more surprisingly, stewards in both small and large workplaces felt that their workplaces were well organised.

Comparing stewards and members views on local organisation

Key branch functions

We began by looking at the functions of the branch and asking stewards to identify the four most important functions for a branch to undertake from a list of fourteen functions identified by the NEC as essential to branch development. An identical question was asked in the UNISON 2000 Members survey. There was no disagreement between stewards and members about the four key functions. Stewards (68 per cent) and members (75 per cent) felt that representing individual members over grievances, disciplinary cases and other matters was the most important function of a branch followed by local negotiations on conditions, pay, contacting out and employment changes with support from 52 per cent of stewards and 66 per cent of members. Next came negotiations on health and safety and regular communication with members. The largest difference between stewards (41 per cent) and members (11 per cent) was over recruitment, retention and organisation of members and activists.

Branch performance

We also examined how stewards and members viewed the performance of their branch by asking them to rate the performance of their branch on the fourteen functions identified by the NEC. Table 12 presents the results, showing how branches are rated according to *very good or good, intermediate, weak or very weak and don't know*. Overall, on each of the branch functions, more stewards than members agreed with the statement that performance was very good or good.

Looking at the four most important branch functions identified by stewards and members we found that on representation of individual members over grievances, disciplines and other matters 80 per cent of stewards rated branch performance as either very good or good. By contrast, only 45 per cent of members did. On local negotiations on conditions, pay, contracting out and employment changes, 63 per cent of stewards said the performance of their branch was either very good or good. Conversely, only 34 per cent of members did. Similarly, seven out of ten stewards gave their branch very good or good for their performance on health and safety. By comparison, members only gave 37 per cent. Finally, on regular communication with members 58 per cent of stewards rated branch performance either very good or good. By contrast, only 31 per cent of members did. In earlier research, we found that the provision of information was poorly received by members (Waddington and Kerr, 1999). In a well-organised workplace, stewards and members should give the provision of information the same performance rating.

We examined how local government and health service stewards viewed the performance of their branch. We found that on the recruitment, retention and

Table 12: How stewards and members rate the performance of their branch

	Stewards	Members
	% of branches	% of branches
Local campaigning and political activity		
Very good or good	41	21
Intermediate	27	24
Weak or very weak	26	19
Do not know	6	36
Ensuring information flows to and from regional level		
Very good or good	50	24
Intermediate	29	22
Weak or very weak	17	23
Do not know	4	31
Welfare responsibilities		
Very good or good	53	27
Intermediate	28	21
Weak or very weak	12	13
Do not know	7	39
Education and training of activists		
Very good or good	58	16
Intermediate	27	19
Weak or very weak	13	15
Do not know	2	50
Recruitment, retention and organisation of members and activists		
Very good or good	45	15
Intermediate	35	21
Weak or very weak	17	21
Do not know	3	43
Promotion of UNISON's values and aims		
Very good or good	48	27
Intermediate	31	24
Weak or very weak	18	21
Do not know	3	28
Development of self organisation for groups of members		
Very good or good	27	10
Intermediate	30	20
Weak or very weak	35	23
Do not know	8	47
Representation of individual members over grievances, disciplines and other matters		
Very good or good	80	45
Intermediate	12	17
Weak or very weak	6	14
Do not know	2	24
Regular communication with members		
Very good or good	58	31
Intermediate	25	25
Weak or very weak	16	31
Do not know	1	13
Fair representation and proportionality for all members		
Very good or good	60	30
Intermediate	26	21
Weak or very weak	10	14
Do not know	4	35
Local negotiations on conditions, pay, contracting out and employment changes		
Very good or good	63	34
Intermediate	21	23
Weak or very weak	13	23
Do not know	3	20
Enabling the participation of members in the democratic processes of UNISON		
Very good or good	51	25
Intermediate	29	24
Weak or very weak	16	16
Do not know	4	35
Administrative functions – membership records, accounts, etc		
Very good or good	59	22
Intermediate	22	20
Weak or very weak	13	11
Do not know	6	47
Ensuring health and safety of members		
Very good or good	69	37
Intermediate	21	20
Weak or very weak	7	14
Do not know	3	29

organisation of members 52 per cent of health service stewards rated performance either very good or good. By contrast, only 43 per cent local government stewards did. On the other branch functions, there was no significant difference between the two groups of stewards.

Policy recommendation

Branch performance and workplace organisation

The difference in views between members and stewards may be accounted for by different degrees of participation in the union. They indicate the progress UNISON needs to make towards achieving an organising union. UNISON should continue to keep the process of organisational change under review and modify plans and processes accordingly.

Numbers of stewards and reasons for lack of them

A measure of the quality of local organisation is the number of stewards in the workplace. Stewards were asked if there were enough of them to adequately represent members; over a third (38 per cent) agreed with the proposition. Of the stewards that said no, 42 per cent said that being a representative was too much of a responsibility for many members. A similar proportion of stewards felt that it was too much of a time commitment. Just over 30 per cent took the view that it would damage a person's career prospects.

As part of the 2000 UNISON membership survey, members were asked a similar question; only 28 per cent said there were enough stewards in their workplace. By contrast, the main reason given by members for insufficient numbers of stewards was that being a representative involved too much of a time commitment (51 per cent) closely followed by people did not know enough about trade unions to become involved (members 44 per cent; - stewards 17 per cent). Next came lack of interest in trade unions (members 41 per cent; stewards 27 per cent).

Policy recommendation

The role of the steward

The research reveals that members do not know enough about the role of a steward to become involved and that being a steward is a time consuming occupation. Our final recommendation is that UNISON should review how to promote and publicise the role of a steward to encourage more members to become stewards. It will generate greater member participation, which is a key component of an organising union. The union should also advocate team working and job sharing between stewards to increase efficiency, alleviate workloads and share responsibility.

Workplace organisation

In the preceding sections, we examined how stewards rated branch performance on selected functions. We looked at how stewards' rate local workplace organisation taking into account the effort UNISON is putting into improving organisation and representation functions by encouraging greater

membership participation. The results are shown in Table 13. On each of the questions, more stewards agreed with the statements that their branch was either very well or fairly well organised than disagreed. However, a third of stewards felt workplace organisation was only average.

Table 13: How stewards' rate local workplace organisation?

	<i>Very well organised or fairly well organised</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Not very well organised or not at all well organised</i>
	% of workplaces	% of workplaces	% of workplaces
The number of representatives	50	31	19
The training of representatives	54	29	17
The provision of facilities time for representatives	42	30	28
Stewards' organisation/networking	47	33	20
Branch support for workplace organisation	49	31	20
Branch support for self-organised groups	31	36	33
Relations between UNISON regional officers and workplace representatives	44	25	31

Conclusion

Our research reveals that some UNISON organised workplaces are either inactive or neglected. How this arises is due to a combination of factors. Almost a quarter of stewards have no paid facility time and in four out of ten workplaces, we have only a single steward. In nearly half the workplaces, the steward was the only candidate for the job. We saw that stewards and members disagreed over the assessment of workplace organisation and branch performance. Although stewards were more dissatisfied than members with workplace employment relations, they were more optimistic in their assessment of union performance in the branch and workplace.

What makes the union effective in the workplace? The evidence presented earlier clearly points to the union in small workplaces having less influence with management than the union in large workplaces. Our evidence suggests that paid release is a prerequisite. In small workplaces, stewards were much less likely to have paid release for their duties than stewards in large workplaces. Similarly, stewards in large workplaces were much more likely to have access to good facilities than stewards in small workplaces. Union influence based on the evidence presented here depends on paid facility time and concrete management support in the shape of workplace facilities.

It is difficult to establish why members wait an average of eight years before becoming a steward. However, we were able to probe this issue further with a series of statements put to stewards and members. We found that stewards and members agreed that the job of a steward took up too much time. Nevertheless, stewards went on to say they thought the job involved too much responsibility for most members and might damage a person's career prospects. Members on the other hand said that a lack of knowledge about unions deterred involvement, as did a lack of interest.

To sum up, the general impression of stewards gained from this survey is of a group of people who are committed to the principles of trade unionism and are

keen to support their members. However, at the same time they do not always appreciate the scope available for improving workplace and branch organisation. They feel generally supported by management, but consider the union should give them more support.

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