

## **Lifelong learning in Barnet – what a difference a year makes!**

When Branch Secretary John Burgess wanted to do something to address the lack of education and training opportunities for frontline staff, he was also aware of the recruitment and organising potential in learning. He encouraged Carmen Bruno, a graduate of UNISON's Return to Learn programme, to take up the post of Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator. Both were also keen to increase union density among school support staff while supporting them through the schools remodelling process. Little did he realise that what he started would lead to his Union Learning Rep (ULR) team winning the Get On in Local Government Union Learning Rep award in just over a year.

John and Carmen wanted to see staff who have been excluded from learning or struggled with it in the past discover how much fun it could be and what a difference it could make in their lives at work and beyond. They have witnessed members transformed through learning, who then get more involved at work and in the union as a result.

The branch quickly negotiated a learning agreement with London Borough of Barnet which includes three days a week release for the Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator and time off for learners. The branch also brokered a joint agreement with the borough and the College of North East London to deliver courses from the UNISON Learning at Work programme such as Skills for Life, ESOL and Return to Learn as well as Team Leadership and First line Management, with paid time off for learners.

Take up of courses was rapid, with over 100 employees taking part in a rolling programme during 2006. Arising from this 11 new Union Learning Reps (ULRs) came forward and were trained. The branch began by targeting frontline staff in the environmental services directorate, reaching out to a group of workers who traditionally were offered little training other than how to operate machinery for their job. Their partnership with London Borough of Barnet was further strengthened when they submitted a joint bid to the London Development Agency (LDA) for funds to embed a skills for life strategy across the whole of the organisation. Their next target is staff affected by schools remodelling so that they can not only cope with changes but get the best out of them.

Barnet Council recently agreed to sign up to the National Get On in Local Government Award. This award is only given to local authorities that can demonstrate a corporate commitment to addressing literacy, language, numeracy and IT skills (Skills for Life) for their staff. To mark this an Open Day is being held on 12 February when Leo Boland, Chief Executive, will formally sign up to the award. Staff across the borough have been invited and taster sessions and information on learning opportunities will be laid on to encourage more people into learning. The Council is keen to encourage more ULRs to come forward and the Open Day also offers an opportunity for people to find out more about the ULR role.

But Barnet Branch's success doesn't stop there. They have just heard that their ULR team has won the Get On Union Learner Rep award 2007. The award has been made to the whole team rather than an individual as the judges were so impressed with their outstanding teamwork and achievements.

Chandana Samyal, the Learning Manager at Barnet Council, feels the success of this initiative has hinged on engaging everyone, "from the Leader of the Council to the Service Directors, to the Service Managers who have to release employees to take part". Having targeted one service group, she is now looking forward to rolling the programme out very shortly to teaching assistants, catering staff, care workers, escort services and adult social services, in a way that meets both service needs and learners' needs.

This has been an 'open door' initiative driven by the UNISON branch and available to all employees. John Burgess is now counting the benefits of this approach in the transferable skills that learners have gained, the new ULRs recruited and the increase in branch membership: he reports that 130 new members have joined specifically because of the learning opportunities and the profile that they have given UNISON in the workplace. With results like that, one wonders where the branch will be this time next year.

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