



SOCIAL CARE

UNISON Social Care Seminar
Report and Actions



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A one-day seminar on social care was held at the UNISON Centre on 16 January 2018.

The seminar was called by the NEC's Service Group Liaison Committee in response to various conference motions calling for further action to join up the union's work on social care – both residential and homecare – that cuts across different service groups and affects each of the four nations of the UK in different ways.

All UNISON regions attended, along with members from the Local Government, Community and Health service groups and the Private Contractors national forum.

The Westminster government will shortly publish a Green Paper on the future of care and support. While this will apply only to England and only to the care of older people, the union's response will need

to recognise the bigger picture and set a consistent course for UNISON interventions in this area.

The seminar therefore provided a timely opportunity to assess the current state of the sector, how well-placed the union is to represent the needs of members and potential members, and what actions must be taken to strengthen the UNISON offer and provide a coherent response to the Green Paper.

This report provides a brief summary of the key content of the seminar and includes a number of actions for the union suggested by discussions that took place on the day. Regions and service groups are invited to provide comments on these and the Service Group Liaison Committee will then consider the actions and feedback received.

The importance of social care and the role of unions

UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis opened the seminar by highlighting how vital the care sector is for our society and our economy. “Our government and our country must show they care about those who care for our loved ones,” he said.

Dave highlighted the success of UNISON campaigns for better wages and rights for care workers, but called for a grown-up public debate on fair funding for social care. As the union enters its 25th year, he emphasised the importance of UNISON being fit for the future and the best possible union for members working in social care.

Professor Shereen Hussein of Kings College London provided a perspective on the importance of care workers joining a trade union, in light of the poor working conditions her research uncovered.

Her presentation highlighted the need for unions to mobilise the workforce in pursuit of better outcomes for care workers, including proactive work to bring the voices of care workers – largely low-paid women – to the debate.

Care workers for change

UNISON regional officer Kevin Lucas gave a presentation about the union’s “Care Workers for Change” project in the North West. This highlighted the often dire circumstances of the typical care worker and the debt-fuelled ownership models used by a number of providers.

The region’s campaign consisted of an intensive series of site visits and the use of a postcard campaign focusing particularly on the need for fairer funding. This was followed with a tougher approach at more hostile employers.

The results have been encouraging, with more than 2,000 new members, many more active members, and improvements in retention and workplace density. Other regions reported trialling similar campaigns.

Discussion groups

The seminar split into groups to hear briefings on a number of key issues within the sector and to discuss the UNISON response.

These included a session on the experience of organising in private care providers and one on UNISON learning in social care.

There was another session looking into the impact of EU exit on care workers, which highlighted how dependent social care is on non-UK workers and the damage that could be done if European migrant workers are lost to the sector.

There was a further session on ensuring employers comply with the national minimum wage, which looked into the failure of many providers to pay for travel time in homecare and the current situation with sleep-ins in residential care, in which enforcement action has been suspended by the government.

The union’s pioneering legal work was highlighted, alongside the need for payslip transparency, but also the fact that ultimately what is needed is wider system change and a fairer funding regime.

Tackling the crisis in social care

After lunch the seminar heard a series of presentations as part of a panel on “tackling the crisis in social care”.

A common theme from the devolved nations was the issue of health and social care integration, which has existed in Northern Ireland since the 1970s and is being attempted in different ways in Scotland and Wales.

And, while social care is a devolved issue, the sector is still at the mercy of the UK government when it comes to overall funding levels.

The seminar heard about the success of the union’s Ethical Care Charter, which now has 36 councils signed up to it (all Labour), and the development in 2017 of the Residential Care Charter. (Since the seminar the first non-Labour Council, York, has signed up.)

More than 80% of social care workers are now employed by independent sector providers, so organising and representing members working for private contractors or in the community and voluntary sector is an increasingly important part of the union’s work.

The seminar also heard about successful campaigns that have taken place in provider organisations, including Four Seasons where collective bargaining has been established.

Workshops and suggested actions

The seminar ended with a number of workshops looking into key priorities for the union, with the themes and actions below emerging.

Making the case for social care

- UNISON should work with others to highlight the value of social care to society.
- We need to raise the public profile of the sector and the esteem in which it is held.
- And a crucial part of this is seeking to elevate the status of the social care workforce.
- Fair funding is of paramount importance, so the union needs to be able to present a coherent position on the various approaches to improving the funding of the sector.

Overcoming fragmentation and ending exploitation

- UNISON should expose the disparity between staff exploitation and the profits some providers are able to make from the sector, including those guilty of tax avoidance.
- Extra funding has to be accompanied by wider changes – to overcome fragmentation and to ensure new money does not just end up in the pockets of private equity bosses.
- Regulation is essential, but regulators need to be strengthened so that they are better equipped to intervene in the market and to ensure that councils monitor providers' delivery of contracts.
- The Labour election manifesto emphasised the importance of in-house services and collective bargaining to allow workers to assert their own rights – in-house options, good standards in procurement and sectoral bargaining are needed in social care.

The UNISON offer

- We need to be seen as the union that offers care workers a voice and support: "UNISON is on your side".
- The union should celebrate the work of its social care members...
- ...But also have a clear focus on getting workers justice in the workplace.
- UNISON should give vent to members' frustration that they do not feel able to do the job the way they want to.

- We also need to focus on practical issues that all workers in the sector can relate to – such as pay, training, uniforms and payslips.
- Learning and education is an area where UNISON can offer real value, given the lack of training that many care workers are able to access.
- Our social care resources should feature in one place on the website, so that members have a one-stop shop, regardless of which service group they have been allocated to.

Organising and servicing

- Continuing to expand our organising work is important, but we must not lose our focus on servicing members once they have joined.
- We should survey our social care members more comprehensively to understand their main concerns and ensure we are better able to target our work in future.
- We need to look at what methods we use to organise particular groups of workers – such as those on zero hours contracts and migrant workers.
- Nationally we should seek to build on the work around the UNISON care charters and the best of campaigning approaches such as those used in the North West, but also the successful organising initiatives in private companies.
- The forthcoming UNISON strategic review needs to be informed by key issues emanating from the seminar – such as the nature of the social care workforce, how we organise in the sector, and whether our existing structures are fit for purpose.

