



Preparing your Branch Annual General Meeting

Introduction

Branch Annual General Meetings are important, they provide an opportunity for members to elect their representatives, scrutinise and challenge branch finances and help to set the objectives and priorities for the year ahead. If done well they serve as a catalyst, helping bring members together to build stronger organisation.

AGM's must be held in the first quarter of the year between January and March. Normally they follow a traditional model with members attending in person but due to Covid the NEC has agreed that branches can hold AGM's on-line. Even if your own branch rules don't provide for this the NEC decision allows you to conduct your 2021 AGM online.

Branches are still permitted to hold meetings in person but only if they demonstrate the ability to do so safely. This is a challenge. Even if a Covid secure venue could be found, and all of the rules on social distancing fully observed, a large section of members will be understandably nervous participating in group meetings. We therefore anticipate that almost all 2021 AGM's will be conducted on-line.

Given the experience gained over the past few months we are very confident on-line meetings can be a positive experience providing the opportunity for all members to participate.

This guide incorporates some ideas of how to plan for your AGM, how to conduct the meeting on line, and what pitfalls you might experience.

Guidance Holding Meetings

A useful starting point is to think about some of the barriers that prevent people participating in on-line meetings and have a strategy to overcome them where possible.

These can include:

Gaining access - not everyone has a computer or tablet although increasingly most people will have access to a smart phone. Don't assume members will know how to access the meeting, your joining instructions will need to be clear and easy to understand. You should provide support in advance and on the day of the meeting to assist people.

Timing of the meeting - planning the time of the meeting is always important. Think about parents with care responsibilities, shift workers, and members who will find it difficult to take time off work and plan your meeting so you can attract the best levels of participation.

You can hold more than one meeting, these are known as aggregate meetings. More information can be found in the Code of Good Branch Practice to help you understand how to conduct aggregate meetings.

Length of the meeting - Its no fun sitting in front of screen for long periods of time. Ideally try and keep the meeting to 90minutes or less and schedule a 10min break. You will need to think about this when planning your agenda.

Accessibility - on-line meetings present a whole new set of barriers for Disabled members. Doing all that we can to ensure all members can participate is central to our values, so don't forget to ask members to highlight any adjustments they require. If you need assistance to support adjustments speak to your Regional Organiser.

Have a backup - technology can go wrong so have a back up just in case the worst happens. Have an alternative platform that you can switch to quickly with an agreed plan of how to do this.

AGM Business

UNISON Rules set minimum requirements for AGMs. Every branch must hold an AGM in the first quarter of the year, all members must be invited to attend, and the agenda should include:

- Election of the Branch Committee. This includes Branch Officials, workplace stewards, Health and Safety, and other reps like Union Learning Representative.
- Proposed changes to Branch Rules
- Branch Officers Annual Report
- Approval of the Audited Branch Accounts
- Adoption of the Organising Framework and Budget
- Approval of Honorary.

Further reading - Rule G.3, UNISON Rule Book.

In addition the branch can invite members to submit motions which help to establish branch policy, or help shape objectives and priorities.

A model agenda is included at the end of this guide which has been designed to complete all of the required business within 90mins.

The Branch AGM provides members with the opportunity to elect their representatives. Conducting elections isn't easy during an on-line meeting. So don't leave it until the day, if you have contested positions that require an election, complete the process before the AGM.

For those members where we have an email address electronic ballots can be held using software such as surveygizmo (Alchemer). Members without an email address must be included, you will therefore need to supplement your online ballot with a postal ballot.

The Regional Office can help manage all of the communications for your branch AGM. This includes the meeting invitation, agenda and associated documents and the conduct of ballots.

If you require assistance you can speak to your Regional Organiser.

AGM Timetable

Your branch rules should include a timetable for your AGM which will still apply. However, the National Executive Council has agreed that the **requirement to provide 12 weeks notice of the AGM can be reduced to 8 weeks.**

The NEC have also stipulated a member of Regional Staff should attend all onling meetings.

For example

| | |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| Week 8 | Calling Notice (all members) |
| Week 8 - 6 | Candidate nominations |
| Week 6 - 5 | Ballot Preparation |
| Week 4 | Ballot Starts |
| Week 4 - 1 | Ballot Period |
| Week 3 | Motion & Rule Change Deadline |
| Week 2 | AGM Papers distributed |
| Week 1 | Close of ballot |
| Week 0 | AGM |

10 Point Plan to a successful AGM

1. Agree timetable and date of the AGM. Appoint a Returning Officer to conduct any contested elections, this can be your Regional Organiser or a senior branch official who is not a candidate.
2. Agree which video conferencing platform to use for the meeting and plan your agenda. Have a backup just in case.
3. Calling notices for the AGM must be sent to all members at least 8 weeks before the meeting. This should include an explanation of the meeting, the date and time of the meeting, joining instructions, election procedures for all positions, invitation for motions and rule changes.
4. The calling notice should include a proforma for members to complete if they wish to stand for a position or want to nominate another member. Candidates should be asked to provide an election address of no more than 500 words with their nomination to prevent any unnecessary delays to the ballot process.

5. Once the nomination deadline has closed if positions are contested an electronic ballot (postal ballot for those without email addresses) must be held in advance the then ratified at the AGM. All non contested positions must be ratified at the AGM.
6. Allow a minimum of two weeks for ballot preparation. You can request support from the Regional Office who help you with administration of the process. Please note lots of branches will be asking for support around the same time, so earlier you can plan the easier it will be for the Regional Office.
7. The election period should last for a minimum of three weeks. Allow time between the close of the ballot and the meeting to resolve any issues that may occur.
8. Nominations for branch officials cannot be taken at the meeting this should be clear in the calling notice.. This is because of the requirement for voting to take place by secret ballot. Nominations for vacant seats can be dealt with immediately following the meeting and ratified at the first meeting of the new branch committee.
9. Please note the minimum timescale to run a full election process is now eight weeks.
10. If you're planning to invite a guest speaker so make sure you invite them early and advertise this in the calling papers.

Accessibility and barriers to participation

When planning the AGMs you should consider how to encourage members to participate and remove barriers to participation. You should invite members who require adjustments to discuss their needs.

Keeping the online space safe

We are all familiar with face to face meetings where its relatively easy to check members eligibility to attend. Not so straightforward to do this with online meetings.

It is still important to ensure that only eligible members attend. The attendance will need to be recorded in the minutes and count for the quorum.

Checklist for authenticating members:

- Most online meeting platforms allow you to set rules before people are permitted to join. This can include asking for names to be displayed.
- Where participants do not have access to a camera or would rather participate without video you should ask them to introduce themselves.
- Members who join as a group should be invited to identify themselves individually.
- The Chair should ask anyone who is not a member

to identify themselves and ask the reason for their attendance, where necessary they should be asked to leave.

Quorum (minimum number participating)

A quorum is the minimum number of members who must be at a meeting before business can be transacted. The quorum ensures decisions taken are supported by a minimum number of branch members.

Normal quoracy rules apply as per branch rules.

If your meeting doesn't reach the quorum decisions around motions, finance, honorarium and rules cannot be ratified.

You should ideally wait 10 minutes to see if quoracy can be achieved. If quoracy is not reached, rule book decisions will have to be determined by another quorate meeting or handed to Regional Committee. You can get further guidance from your Regional Organiser where necessary.

If you have decided to hold aggregate virtual AGMs, you must ensure that no one is 'double-counted'.

Running the meeting

The Chair of the Branch is responsible for the conduct of business and will be supported by the Regional Organiser where required.

Have a plan so you know in advance how conduct the meeting. Remember we want to encourage participation, provide members with an opportunity to ask questions or make statements, but to do so in a managed way.

Keep mic's muted if not speaking, blur backgrounds, and don't shout. These are good tips to help everyone get the best from the meeting.

Use the 'raise hands' feature and wait to be invited to contribute it's much better than people jumping in.

Have a rule on how the 'chat function' will be used. It maybe useful to have someone responding to chat messages during the meeting.

It is normal practise in AGMs for the majority of business to be conducted by a show of hands. Each item should be voted on separately and in order as would be the case in a normal AGM

Agree in advance how votes will be taken.

If motions are to be heard or rule changes debated, set the rules of debate in advance this includes the time allocated for the debate and the time for each speaker.

If a vote takes place, request everyone who is in favour uses the 'hands up' feature and give enough time for people to do so. Then ensure all hands are down before asking for those against and repeat to ask for any

abstentions. Once this is completed, ask each member who has identified as being unable to use the hands up feature in turn and by name, to state clearly whether they are for, against or abstain.

Deciding between physical or online AGMs

UNISON follows government guidance on public health matters and prioritises the safety of members and staff.

Current guidance states that those who can work from home should do so, and many employer risk assessments will limit the number of people in a single meeting, limit visitors, prevent colleagues from mixing outside of bubbles or have other restrictions making large meetings like AGMs difficult.

Additionally, the majority of branches are multi-employer, and therefore it may be difficult for members outside of the main employer to attend as well as regional staff. Many venues are not accessible so finding a room suitable to hold a face to face AGM could be a challenge.

Members who are vulnerable face increased risk in the workplace and community. Additionally, many members with caring responsibilities are continuing to balance this with work commitments.

Finally, we are the public service union, many of our members are working on the front line supporting vulnerable people in the community and in hospitals, or other settings. We have a responsibility to ensure that we do not do anything to compromise their safety.

Some smaller, socially distanced branch committee meetings have been able to take place but the AGM could attract more members representing a higher risk.

If you are planning to hold a physical AGM you must inform your RO immediately and be able to demonstrate that it will be safe, that all members will be able to participate without barriers, and that you comply with government guidance.

If this is not possible then the AGM will need to be moved on-line.

Annual Financial Returns (AFR)

Branches are required to complete AFR's as normal which must be audited and approved by the AGM before 15th March 2021.

UNISON's finance department recently circulated a questionnaire to all Branch Treasurers to help determine where support is required. If you require any support or guidance completing your Annual Financial Return the finance department are there to help you through the process.

Assistance with the completion of the AFR process can be obtained through the OLBA or IMPs helpline.

Honorarium

Rules for the payment of honorarium remain unaltered and are set out in the NEC Scheme for Honorarium. In brief, the guidance states:

- There is no obligation on a branch to pay honoraria as they are entirely discretionary and there is no contract of employment – written, oral or implied.
- To pay honoraria a branch must make a general provision to do so in its model rules.
- The amendment to branch rules must be agreed by a quorate general meeting of the branch.
- The branch must register its amended rules, as approved by a quorate general meeting, with the region.
- Each year the branch committee must ensure their honoraria proposals are discussed as part of their organising framework.
- Any activist holding more than one post can only receive an honorarium for one post. In reality this will usually be the post with the highest payment.
- Honoraria payments should be reasonable and commensurate with other activity within the branch.
- In cases where honoraria proposals exceed 10% or produce a deficit budget they would be referred to the appropriate regional committee group with delegated responsibility for discussion and decision.
- Branches must be given the opportunity to present their reasons why the intervention level has been exceeded.
- Regional committees will be advised that they will need to make a decision so that all references are decided before the Branch AGM is held.
- Each year the branch committee must submit full details of their honoraria proposals to the annual meeting of the branch. This must include the name of post holder, their post and the amount that is proposed.
- The branch proposals can only be approved if the annual meeting is quorate.
- If the proposals are approved by the annual meeting, the branch will submit details as advised by head office.
- If the annual meeting rejects the branch committee proposals this decision binds the branch and no honoraria payments can be made.
- In exceptional circumstances and where there is a fundamental disagreement between the branch, region and /or regional committee the matter can be escalated to FRMC.

Organising Framework

Regional Organisers will be inviting you shortly to complete the organising framework for 2021. This is a joint exercise helping the branch to develop a plan supporting the Union's priorities and objectives for 2021. The plan will need to be submitted and approved at the AGM.

Conclusion

This guidance will help ensure that virtual AGMs are able to take place in the spirit of the Code of good Branch Practice and in line with UNISON rules, whilst also adapting an approach suitable for video conferencing platforms, and ensuring all members are able to participate in this important democratic process.

If you are concerned that any of the above conflicts with your existing branch rules or you are unable to comply, please speak to your Regional Organiser about how to ensure all members will still be able to participate.

Dear Member

Annual General Meeting

I am writing to invite you to the [add branch name] Branch Annual General Meeting (AGM) which will take place online due to the current health protection measures.

The AGM is an important meeting for all members. It provides an opportunity for you to ask questions about the work of the union, you can see how branch finances have been used and you can help to set policy and agree priorities for the year ahead.

The AGM also provides an opportunity for you to elect officials to lead the branch and represent your interests.

Hold the date

[add date and time]

[add details of the online meeting platform]

A link will be sent to you closer to the date of the meeting.

Technical Details

[add platform] can be accessed on a computer, tablet or mobile phone. You may wish to install the application beforehand.

Please click [add link here] for full information on how to access [add platform details]

If you are unable to access [add platform] you can 'dial in' to the meeting using a phone number and code. Please advise as soon as possible if you require this access.

Electing your Branch Officials and Workplace Reps

One of the most important functions of the AGM is to elect officials to lead the branch for the year ahead. A whole range of different jobs are available in the branch each one of carries a really important set of responsibilities. Whether you're face to face with managers in negotiations, representing members in a disciplinary, or helping members with a welfare claim, all are necessary to create an effective union team.

Election of Branch Officials

You can nominate yourself or other members for any of the following roles:

[Branch officer posts with role description]

Election of Workplace Stewards

You can nominate yourself or other members for any of the following roles:

[Workplace steward details, role profile]

Election of Health and Safety Rep

You can nominate yourself or other members for any of the following roles:

[H&S Rep's and role profile]

If more than one nomination is received an election will be held where all members of the branch are invited to vote to select the preferred candidate.

In the event of an election voting papers will be circulated in advance of the AGM and returned before the AGM with the outcome announced at the AGM.

Motions and Rule Changes

If you would like to submit a motion for consideration or a change in the rules of the Branch please do so by [add date] and details where to submit.

Access Requirements

We recognise that to ensure all of our members can fully participate it may be necessary to make adjustments, if you require any adjustment please contact the branch and we will discuss your requirements.

We hope you will come along to the AGM we're certainly very keen to see you.

Kind Regards

[Add name]
Branch Secretary

TEMPLATE AGENDA

| | | | |
|-------|--|---|--|
| 09:50 | AGM REGISTRATION OPENS Recap on how [IT platform] works & functionality to be used | Meeting Facilitator | |
| 10:00 | WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS | Chair | |
| 10:05 | ELECTION RESULTS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratify results of all uncontested elections • Ratify results of all contested elections • Inform members of vacant posts and encourage to nominate after AGM | Secretary | |
| 10.25 | ANNUAL REPORT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair • Secretary • Other Election Positions | Chair & Secretary Move and Questions | Appendix A |
| 10.35 | FINANCE & ACTION PLAN <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance Report 2020 • Audited Accounts 2020 • Budget 2021 • Honorarium • Organising Framework 2021 • | Treasurer & Secretary Move & Questions | Appendix B Appendix C Appendix D Appendix E |
| 10:55 | COMFORT BREAK | | |
| 11.00 | GUEST SPEAKER | | |
| 11:10 | RULE CHANGES TO BRANCH RULES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule change 1 • Rule change 2 | Mover, speakers for and against | Appendix F |
| 11:20 | MOTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motion 1 • Motion 2 • Motion 3 | Mover, speakers for and against | Appendix G |
| 11.30 | CLOSING SUMMARY Confirm any actions and summarise outcomes | Chair & Secretary | |
| 11.30 | AGM CLOSE | | |

Chair's Checklist:

At the start of the meeting there will be a five-minute section for the Chair to introduce the following:

- Welcome members and guests
- Provide a summary of the agenda
- Explain working together guidelines and access guidelines for virtual meetings
- State rules of debate (speaking times), processes for participation (use raise hands, wait to be invited to speak, mics off, don't shout) and explain time of the break
- Explain timed agenda
- Explain that the meeting will end at the stated time.
- Ask people to raise any technical or access issues in the chatbox for support.

Ask the following:

- anyone dialling in to identify themselves
- anyone who's name is not clearly displayed to identify themselves
- anyone who does not have their camera on to identify themselves
- anyone who may be sitting with multiple people on screen but only one screen name to identify themselves
- anyone who is not a member to identify themselves and their reason for being in attendance, asking them to leave if necessary.
- anyone who is unable to use the 'hands up' feature to identify themselves
- Have a list of those who are unable to use the 'hands up' feature because of any of the above as well as those who are excluded from voting.
- Explain that voting will take place via the 'hands up' feature. Everyone who has identified themselves as being unable to use this feature will instead be asked after the 'hand up' vote how they wish to vote via a 'roll call'.
- Check that the meeting is quorate before you begin. If it is not quorate, wait ten minutes and then close the meeting, informing attendees of the new meeting date.

During the meeting:

- If members wish to speak they should use the raise hand feature and wait to be called upon by the Chair.
- If members are using a device with no 'raise hand' function, they should indicate they wish to speak using the chat box function.
- If a vote takes place, request everyone who is in favour uses the 'hands up' feature and give enough time for people to do so. Then ensure all hands are down before asking for those against and repeat to ask for any abstentions. Once this is completed, ask each member who has identified as being unable to use the hands up feature in turn and by name, to state clearly whether they are for, against or abstain.
- Contributions should last no more than three minutes or in accordance with the motions and rule change debate time limits.
- The Chair should interrupt if they go over this time.
- The Chair will prioritise first time contributors before calling on anyone who has already spoken.
- Ending the meeting
- The Chair will provide a meeting recap at the end of the meeting, to confirm any actions and thank members for their attendance
- Dependent on the video conferencing platform, the branch officer that set up the meeting should then end the meeting for all attendees to prevent any third parties hijacking the meeting.

