

Getting active in UNISON - a report on UNISON's young members

Introduction

In November 2020 as part of the TUC Young Workers Month UNISON surveyed all our young members. The survey covered both young workers' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and their experiences of being active and involved in UNISON. This report addresses the findings on young members' involvement and activity within UNISON and makes some recommendations for encouraging young workers to be more active within the union.

1,148 young members responded to our survey which ran online from the 1-30 November 2020 inclusive. Members from all service groups and regions were represented. The full questions can be found as an appendix to this report (p.9).

Joining UNISON

A large majority (57%) of those responding had been members of UNISON for less than a year. In part this reflects the increase in union membership following the coronavirus pandemic.

The main reasons young members gave for joining UNISON were 'I wanted to join in case I had problems at work' (75%) and 'I think it's important to be part of a union wherever I work' (62%). This bears out research carried out by the TUC and others that young members are generally favourable to the idea of trade unions:

I began campaigning outside of work and realised it was the best way to make change.

In light of the pandemic I wanted to be connected to other employees and their concerns.

I have been supported by UNISON in a previous work place

However, the importance of asking people to join is underscored by the number of young members who joined because they were asked to by a friend at work (26%), by a workplace rep (13%), and because they wanted to support campaigning and negotiating in their workplaces (13%). Young members also mentioned being encouraged to join by family members, visits from UNISON reps to education open days, and concerns about how their employers were responding to coronavirus as reasons to join.

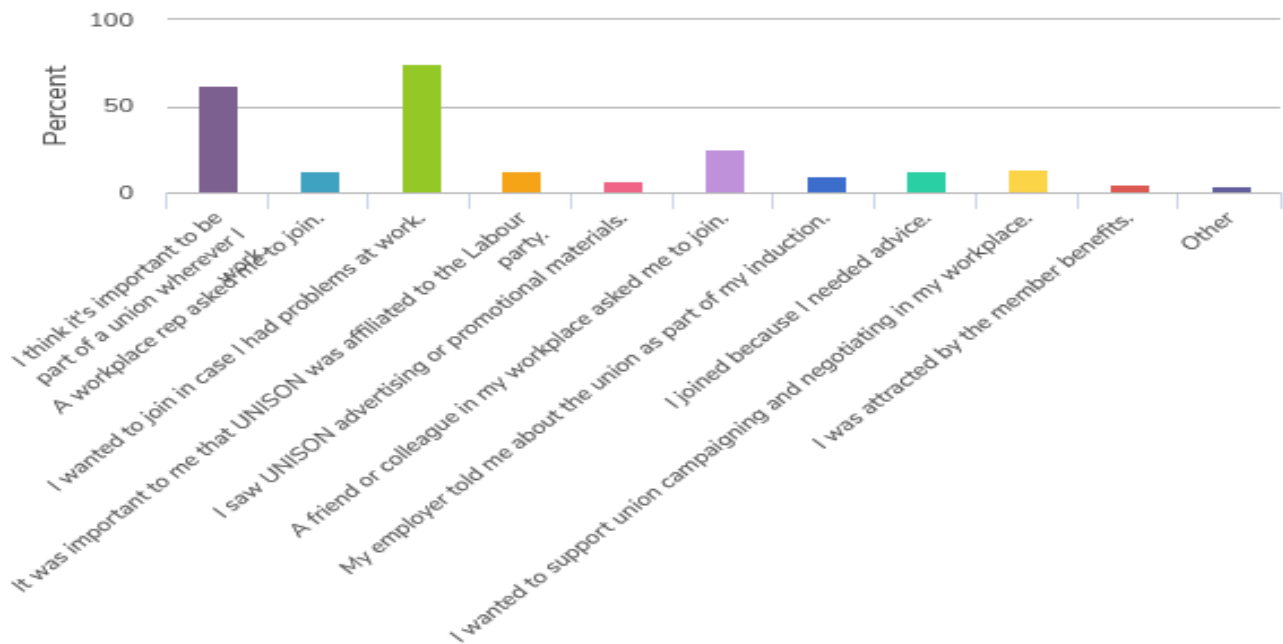


Figure 1 - Why did you join UNISON?

A large majority (83%) said that UNISON was a recognised union in their workplaces.

UNISON activities and campaigns

When it comes to being aware of UNISON activities and campaigns, branch communications are the most important way that young members hear about what's going on – although UNISON regional and national communications are important too.

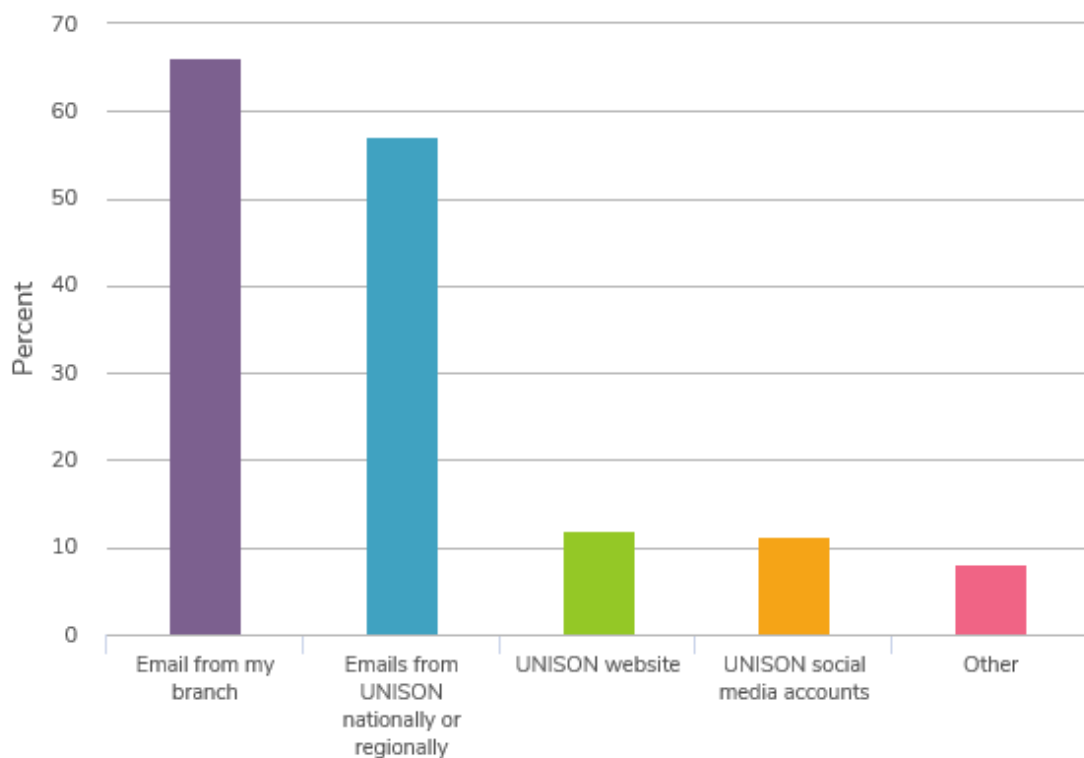


Figure 2 - How do you hear about what's going on in UNISON?

Perhaps reflecting the fact that many of those surveyed had not been members for more than a year, the large majority (70%) of young members said they were “not very active” in UNISON, with less than 7% saying they were “quite active” or very active”. However, this doesn’t reflect a lack of enthusiasm with many young members commenting that they would like to be more active:

I am not yet active in UNISON but would like to be - I am not sure where to start.

I'm so new this [survey] is the first thing I have been able to take part in. I hope to be an active member in the future

Not yet participated as I am a new member but interested in participating soon

Of the activities that young members had already participated in, the most frequent was a workplace meeting (32%), followed by educational or training activity (26%), and a branch meeting or AGM (19%).

Other activities mentioned including voting in internal elections, participating in UNISON surveys, voting in internal elections, and social events such as Christmas parties.

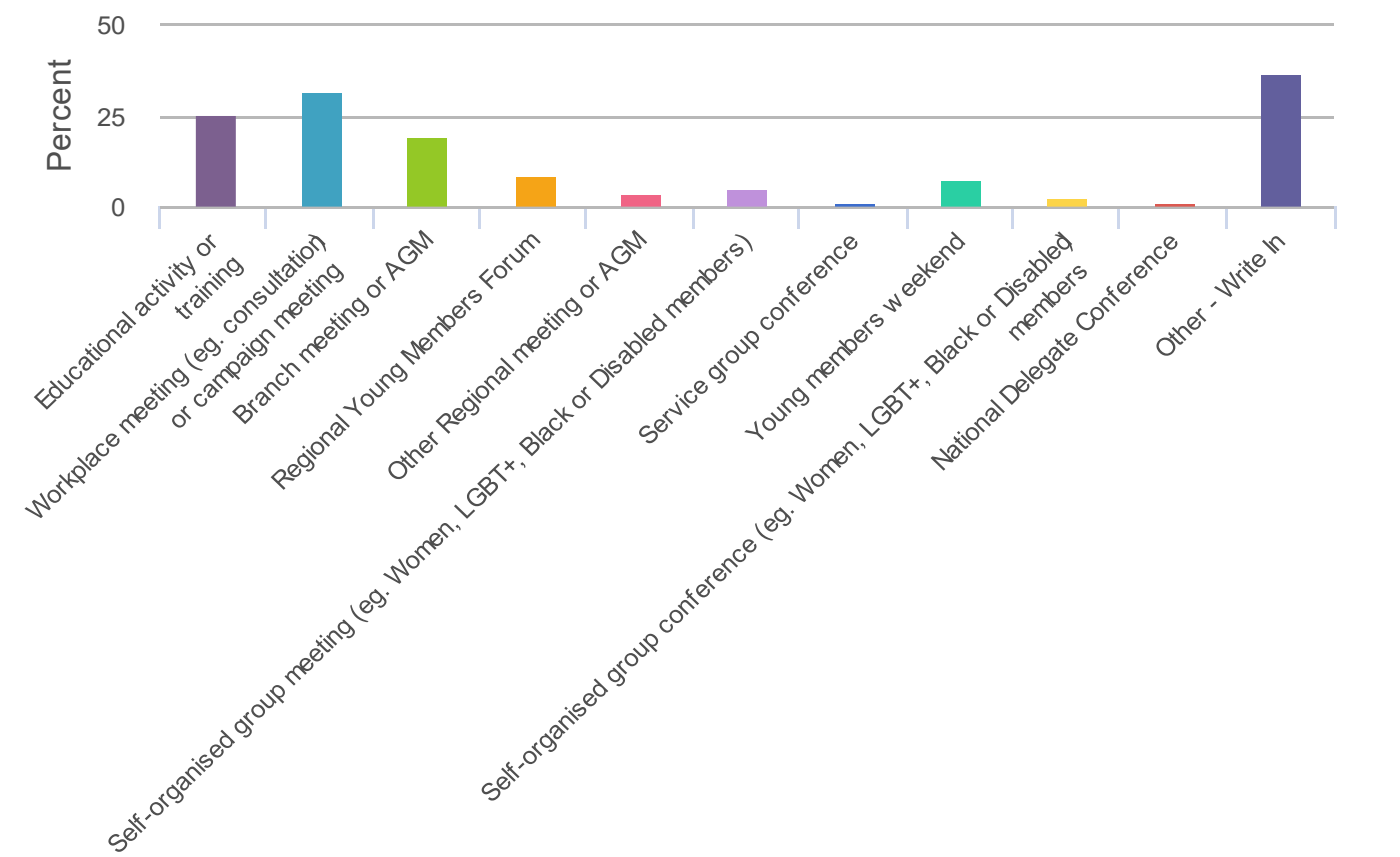


Figure 3 - Which of the following UNISON activities have you taken part in?

Young members are interested in UNISON’s educational and learning offer, with many young members saying they would be interested in taking part in ‘educational activity such as confidence building or interview skills’ (51%), ‘Trade union training such as steward or health and safety rep training’ (32%), or ‘Political education such as political history or getting involved in local politics’ (27%).

Young members are also very enthusiastic about UNISON's campaigning activity, with 52% of young members saying they would be interested in campaigning on workplace issues, and 28% saying they were interested in campaigning on other political issues such as the environment.

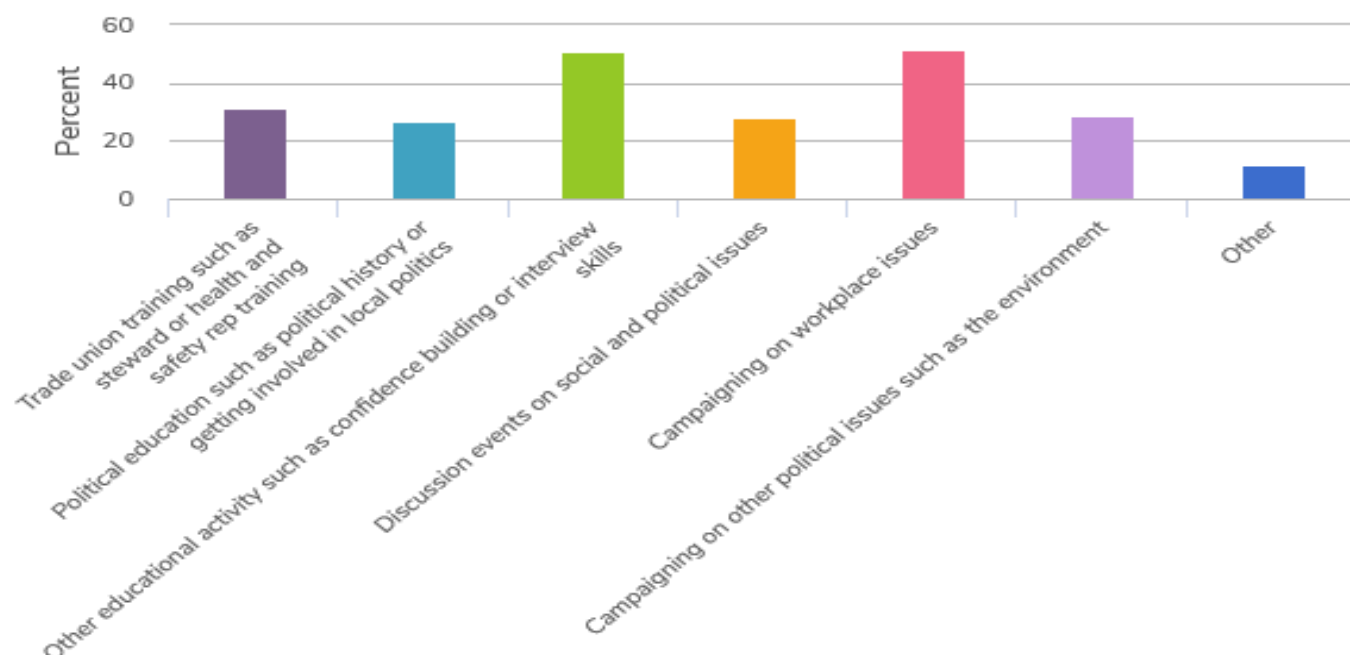


Figure 4 - Which of the following would you be interested in taking part in as a young UNISON member?

Some of the topics suggested for campaigning, discussion and political activity include:

Accessibility; bullying in work; building union power in the workplace; environment; equality; homelessness; combating workplace stress; fair treatment of younger staff; mental health; childcare fees; workplace democracy; solidarity.

51% of young members said they would be enthusiastic about events aimed at young members, and 41% of young members saying they would be interested in education and training. Young members also showed strong support for online events, with 51% saying that they would be keen to see more online events. However, 20% of young members said they would find clearer explanations of trade union processes and language helpful, and 24% of young members said meeting needed to be held at different times, with 17% of young members asking for meetings to be held in more accessible spaces.

Other comments included:

If I knew about the events and meetings taking place. I didn't know about half of the events and meetings until I'd taken this survey.

Knowledge that friends/colleagues would also be attending so I knew people there

When you join you should be informed of ways you can stay in touch with UNISON activities. I rarely join in events as I don't know much about when they are e.g. emails etc

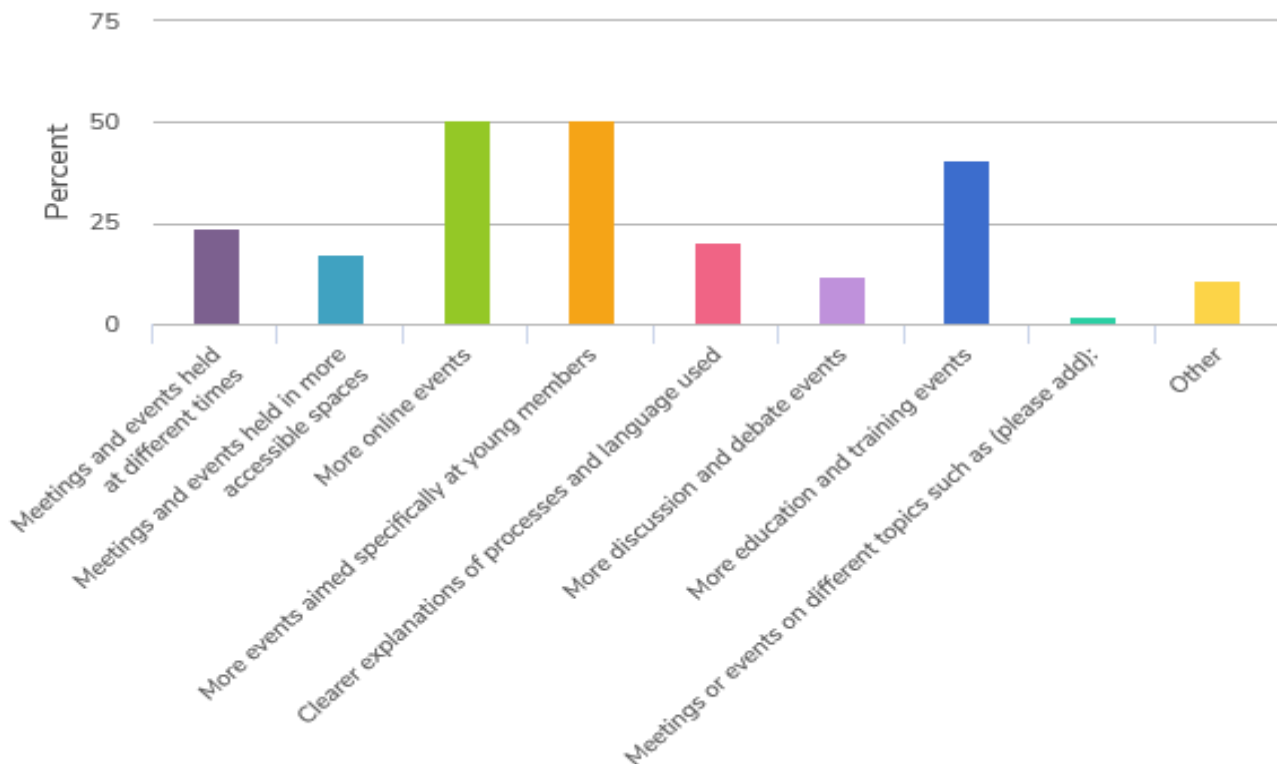


Figure 5 - What would make it more likely that you would take part in UNISON activities?

In general, young members felt positive about the UNISON activities they had taken place in – with a significant number of comments adding that although they had not yet been active, they were looking forward to taking part in activities in the future.

I have not yet been active in UNISON as I am a new member, but I am considering becoming a UNISON rep in my workplace.

I have not been a member of UNISON for very long but have been a great help with negotiations in work at the moment and have kept us up to date, much more than our company

The union has been supportive, encouraging and a safe space. Also a way to connect with different people at your workplace but not in your department

I like the feeling of security, particularly being an apprentice. I have recently got a full time position in my team but if I hadn't, I may have needed the support.

Some of the key issues mentioned (both positively and negatively) were communication with members. Young members are much more likely to feel positive about getting involved with UNISON activities if they are kept aware and up to date with what is going on in their workplaces:

Very informative, constantly aware of what the union is doing and campaigning for.

My experiences with UNISON have been positive so far, but I do believe my branch could do more to more to engage with young members and also communicate on other issues, such as social and political ones, rather than just those that affect our workplace

I haven't been with UNISON long, but wouldn't know where to start or what to do if I wanted to be more involved

The meetings I have attended have been very informative and useful in understanding wider concerns and structure issues within my work place. As I am a relatively new member it would be ideal if meeting requests could send more information about what the meetings will entail before.

Young members sometimes mentioned being intimidated by UNISON or worried about what would be involved if they attended meetings or took part in other UNISON activities:

I want to be more involved but it feels quite intimidating as a young person. Also I'm often unsure if my issues are priority compared to those with children/more in need of support

It's been good and nice to meet people and get right in, but there's a lot going on that I really don't understand

I'd like to be more active in UNISON and think it would be a good way to socialise with colleagues. But I'm not sure who else is part of the union and don't feel confident bringing it up during normal work hours. I'm not sure how to talk about union activities like meetings and training with my boss.

A breakdown of the statistics shows that these kinds of comments are more likely to be made by young women, young LGBT+ and young Black members.

Representation

A majority of young members (59%) said they would know who to contact if they had an issue at work, with 31% of respondents saying they had contacted UNISON for help in the past. The overwhelming majority of those who had needed help (84%) had contacted a local branch representative:

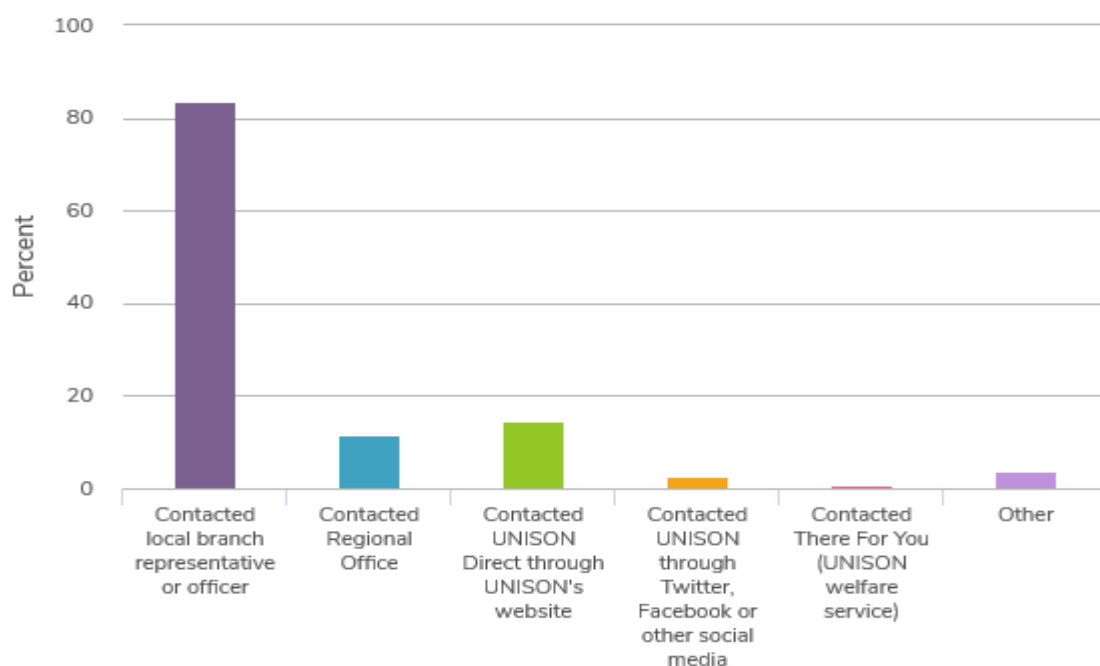


Figure 6 - when you needed help from UNISON, who did you contact?

Most of those who had sought help or advice from UNISON said they were happy with the help they had received, with 75% of young members saying they were ‘very happy’ or ‘quite happy’ with the support from the union.

UNISON have been so helpful during the staffing restructure we went through and I'm so glad I was a member. Our rep has been outstanding.

UNISON has been available for advice when I really needed it with work issues. I have felt I have great support by the union when I have felt vulnerable or worried about any issues I have when I was off very unwell.

The most frequent reasons for seeking help from UNISON were: stress or another mental health issue (23%); bullying and harassment at work (23%); and changes to terms and conditions (20%). This is in line with previous surveys of young members and other research, which finds that mental health and bullying are two of the key issues experienced by young workers.

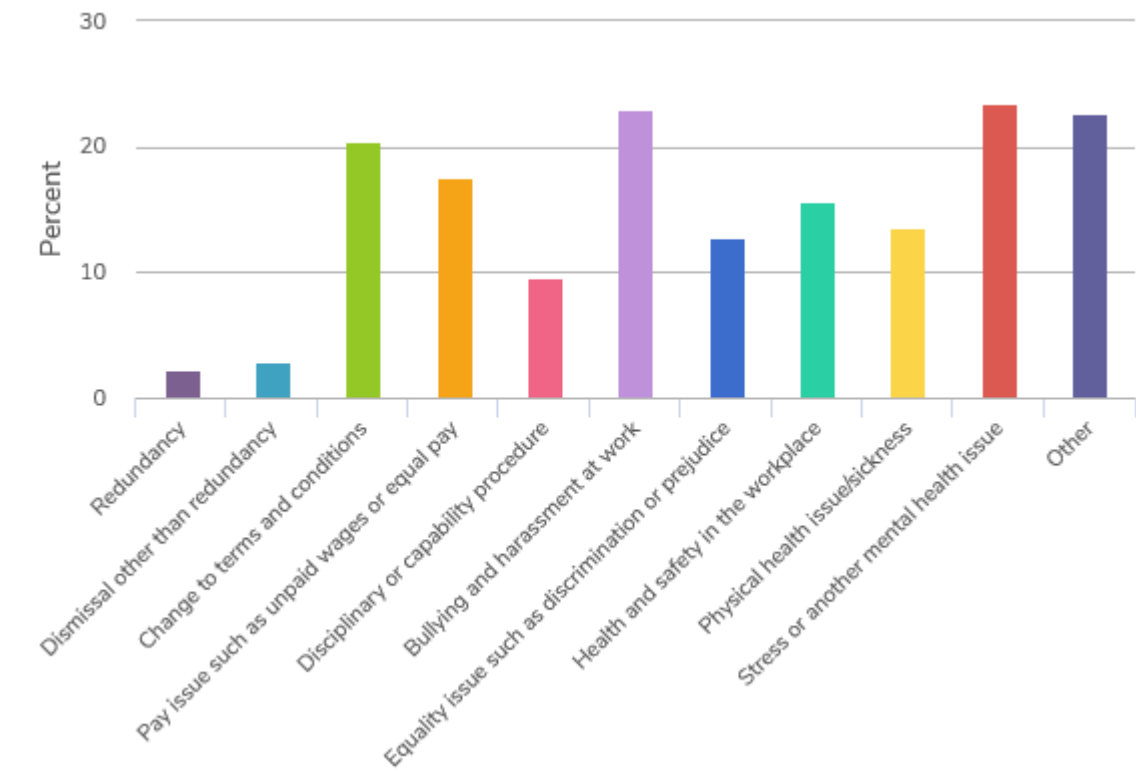


Figure 7 - Why did you get need help from UNISON?

Conclusions and recommendations

UNISON’s young members feel generally positive about the union and there are a number of simple steps that branches and regions can take to promote activity and participation among our growing numbers of young members.

Based on the findings of the report we make the following recommendations to UNISON branches wanting to build organisation and involvement among young members:

- Personal contact is essential – make sure new young workers are being asked to join, and invited to participate in UNISON activities, ideally by other members in the same branch.
- Young members feel positive about the union but can sometimes feel intimidated or anxious because they don't know what to expect. Branches could try buddy systems, mentoring for young activists, or holding events specifically aimed at welcoming new and young members.
- Worries that events will be intimidating are more common among young women members, young LGBT+ members, and young Black members. Branch self-organised groups can consider what they can do to encourage young members to take part in UNISON activities.
- UNISON's educational and learning activities are particularly popular with young members, whether that is trade union or political education, or other learning activities such as skills development, confidence building or career-related education.
- Communication is key with many young members expressing enthusiasm about the union but concern about not knowing who to get in touch with, or what is going on. Many of the most positive remarks about UNISON referred to good branch communications and being aware of what was going on in the workplace and in the local union branch.
- Bullying and harassment and mental health continue to be key issues for young workers in UNISON. Branches may want to consider whether they can engage young members in negotiating new bullying and harassment policies, or in addressing mental health issues in the workplace.

After all, when UNISON successfully engages with young members and brings them into the union, it can be a truly rewarding experience:

I have enjoyed all events that I have been involved with so far!! I have been newly appointed to a committee role within LGBT+ group and I am looking forward to this!

During my time in UNISON so far, I have been supported to grow and develop from someone with no knowledge of unions, to being an active member holding several roles during the years in both my branch and region

I have a lot to thank you UNISON for, it has given me a network of contacts and friends who I can turn to, and has provided me with experiences such as conferences that have made me a more confident person.

Josephine Grahl
UNISON National Officer for Young Members
January 2021

APPENDIX – UNISON young members survey 2020 full survey questions

An asterisk (*) indicates a mandatory question.

Introduction

1) This survey is for members of UNISON only. Are you a UNISON member?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

2) Young members in UNISON are defined as all those aged under 27. Are you aged 26 or under?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

About your job

3) What UNISON service group are you in?*

☐ Local Government

☐ Health Care

☐ Police and Justice

☐ Higher Education

☐ Community (includes voluntary, charitable and housing associations)

☐ Energy

☐ Water, Environment and Transport

☐ Not sure

4) Do you work in the NHS?*

☐ Yes - I'm directly employed in the NHS

☐ Yes - I'm NHS agency or 'bank' staff

☐ Yes - I work for a contractor in the NHS

☐ No

5) Do you work in a school?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

6) Do you work in social care?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

7) Which UNISON region or devolved nation are you based in?*

☐ Cymru/Wales

☐ Eastern

- ☐ East Midlands
- ☐ Greater London
- ☐ Northern
- ☐ Northern Ireland
- ☐ North West
- ☐ Scotland
- ☐ South East
- ☐ South West
- ☐ West Midlands
- ☐ Yorkshire and Humberside
- ☐ Not sure

Your job

8) What kind of work contract do you have?*

- ☐ Permanent, full time (35 hours a week or more)
- ☐ Permanent, part time (less than 35 hours)
- ☐ Temporary, full time (35 hours a week or more)
- ☐ Temporary, part time (less than 35 hours)
- ☐ Casual or zero-hours contract
- ☐ Not sure

9) How long have you worked in your current job?*

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ More than 2 years

10) Are you an apprentice?*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11) Are you in training or education?*

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I am a student nurse or health professional.
- ☐ Yes, I am in some other kind of education or training. (Please give details.):

Your experiences during the pandemic

12) During the Covid-19 crisis, which of the following describes how you have been working?*

- ☐ Working in my usual workplace all or most of the time
- ☐ Working at home all or most of the time
- ☐ On special paid leave all or most of the time

- ☐ On furlough all or most of the time
- ☐ On occupational sick pay all or most of the time (higher rate sick pay)
- ☐ On statutory sick pay (SSP) all or most of the time (£95 a week)
- ☐ A mix of some of the above
- ☐ Other (please state): _____

13) If you continued working during the Covid-19 pandemic, which of the following were you affected by? Tick all that apply.*

- ☐ Lack of PPE or inadequate PPE
- ☐ Lack of risk assessments or inadequate risk assessments
- ☐ Removal of reasonable adjustments
- ☐ Lack of other necessary equipment
- ☐ Lack of training
- ☐ Lack of testing for Covid-19
- ☐ Understaffing in your workplace
- ☐ Lack of support from management
- ☐ Isolation due to working from home
- ☐ Redundancy
- ☐ Loss of hours
- ☐ Other: _____

14) Do you think your employer responded well to the risks coronavirus poses to staff?*

- ☐ Yes, very well
- ☐ Yes, quite well
- ☐ Neither well nor badly
- ☐ No, not very well
- ☐ No, very badly
- ☐ Not sure

15) Was your mental health affected by lockdown measures and the Covid-19 pandemic?*

- ☐ Yes - my mental health was seriously affected
- ☐ Yes - my mental health was slightly affected
- ☐ No - my mental health was not affected
- ☐ Not sure

16) Have you been affected by any of the following during the coronavirus pandemic? Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Cuts to your benefits
- ☐ Cuts to your wages
- ☐ Difficulty with housing such as overcrowding or eviction
- ☐ Job loss
- ☐ Loss of hours or pay
- ☐ Difficulties coping with caring responsibilities
- ☐ Other: _____

17) When you think about the future, what are your biggest concerns?

Your involvement in UNISON

18) How long have you been a member of UNISON?*

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years
- ☐ Not sure

19) Why did you join UNISON? Tick all that apply.*

- ☐ I think it's important to be part of a union wherever I work.
- ☐ A workplace rep asked me to join.
- ☐ I wanted to join in case I had problems at work.
- ☐ It was important to me that UNISON was affiliated to the Labour party.
- ☐ I saw UNISON advertising or promotional materials.
- ☐ A friend or colleague in my workplace asked me to join.
- ☐ My employer told me about the union as part of my induction.
- ☐ I joined because I needed advice.
- ☐ I wanted to support union campaigning and negotiating in my workplace.
- ☐ I was attracted by the member benefits.
- ☐ Other: _____

20) Is UNISON a recognised union in your workplace?*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

21) How do you hear about what's going on in UNISON? Tick all that apply.*

- ☐ Email from my branch
- ☐ Emails from UNISON nationally or regionally
- ☐ UNISON website
- ☐ UNISON social media accounts
- ☐ Other: _____

22) How would you describe your level of involvement and activity in UNISON?*

- ☐ Very active - I regularly participate in UNISON activities and/or hold an elected role
- ☐ Quite active - I often participate in UNISON activities
- ☐ Occasionally active - I have taken part in UNISON activities and will do again

☐ Not very active - I don't often take part in UNISON activities, or never do

☐ Other: _____

23) Which of the following UNISON activities have you taken part in (in person or online)? Tick all that apply.

☐ Educational activity or training

☐ Workplace meeting (eg. consultation or campaign meeting)

☐ Branch meeting or AGM

☐ Regional Young Members Forum

☐ Other Regional meeting or AGM

☐ Self-organised group meeting (eg. Women, LGBT+, Black or Disabled members)

☐ Service group conference

☐ Young members weekend

☐ Self-organised group conference (eg. Women, LGBT+, Black or Disabled members)

☐ National Delegate Conference

☐ Other - Write In: _____

24) Which of the following would you be interested in taking part in, as a young UNISON member?

Tick all that apply.*

☐ Trade union training such as steward or health and safety rep training

☐ Political education such as political history or getting involved in local politics

☐ Other educational activity such as confidence building or interview skills

☐ Discussion events on social and political issues

☐ Campaigning on workplace issues

☐ Campaigning on other political issues such as the environment

☐ Other: _____

25) What would make it more likely that you would take part in UNISON activities? Tick all that apply.*

☐ Meetings and events held at different times

☐ Meetings and events held in more accessible spaces

☐ More online events

☐ More events aimed specifically at young members

☐ Clearer explanations of processes and language used

☐ More discussion and debate events

☐ More education and training events

☐ Meetings or events on different topics such as (please add)::

☐ Other: _____

26) Please tell us more about your experiences of being active in UNISON:

Help and support from UNISON

27) If you needed help from UNISON, would you know who to ask?*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

28) Have you ever got in touch with UNISON to ask for help, advice or support?*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

29) Who did you contact?*

- ☐ Contacted local branch representative or officer
- ☐ Contacted Regional Office
- ☐ Contacted UNISON Direct through UNISON's website
- ☐ Contacted UNISON through Twitter, Facebook or other social media
- ☐ Contacted There For You (UNISON welfare service)
- ☐ Other

30) Were you happy with the support or advice you received from UNISON?*

- ☐ Very happy
- ☐ Quite happy
- ☐ Neither happy nor unhappy
- ☐ Quite unhappy
- ☐ Very unhappy

31) Why did you get need help from UNISON?*

- ☐ Redundancy
- ☐ Dismissal other than redundancy
- ☐ Change to terms and conditions
- ☐ Pay issue such as unpaid wages or equal pay
- ☐ Disciplinary or capability procedure
- ☐ Bullying and harassment at work
- ☐ Equality issue such as discrimination or prejudice
- ☐ Health and safety in the workplace
- ☐ Physical health issue/sickness
- ☐ Stress or another mental health issue
- ☐ Other: _____

About you

32) How do you describe your gender?*

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ In another way
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

33) How do you describe your ethnic origin?*

- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Asian other
- ☐ Bangladeshi
- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Pakistani
- ☐ Black African
- ☐ Black Caribbean
- ☐ Black other
- ☐ Black mixed heritage
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Irish
- ☐ White UK
- ☐ White other
- ☐ Other mixed heritage
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other : _____

34) Would you describe yourself as a disabled person?*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

35) LGBT+ member organise together in UNISON so this is a grouped question on sexual orientation and gender identity. Would you describe yourself as (tick all that apply):

- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Other sexual orientation
- ☐ Transgender or having a trans identity
- ☐ The gender you were assigned at birth
- ☐ Other gender identity
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

36) How old are you?

Can we contact you?

37) Can UNISON contact you to ask you about your responses to this survey?

() I am happy for UNISON to contact me.

() I would prefer not to be contacted.

38) My email address is:

Thank You!
