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“We need to crack on”

The energy sector workforce is changing. It is estimated that more than a quarter (27%) of workers in the utilities sector will retire in the 2020s. And that up to 725,000 more jobs could be created by 2030. UNISON members shared their ideas for a just transition to net zero at the recent energy seminar.

Dealing with difficult calls

UNISON and other unions are working with EDF to support advisors with difficult calls. To do this, they have established a forum called *Protecting Our People*, which includes UNISON and other trade union reps, workers, staff from human resources, operation managers and directors.



Meeting the members

Dave Tasker, UNISON lead rep for National Gas Transmission says that he has always believed in the work of the trade unions and what they have achieved for workers over the years.



A year of challenges and change

Energy workers are at the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis – both as members and consumers – says national secretary and national energy lead Donna Rowe-Merriman.

As we approach the end of 2023, we can look back on a year which has seen both new changes and ongoing challenges for our UNISON energy members.

It has been a year which has demonstrated the importance of our union's presence in a sector that is so often turbulent, and frequently the focus of much public and political attention.

The cost-of-living crisis, which has so defined the last year and preoccupied the minds of so many working people across the country, is still with us. It continues to put a huge strain on household budgets and the effects of so many months of historically high inflation rates and rising prices will be felt for some time yet.

UNISON energy members are well aware of this. As consumers, they face the challenges of rising costs themselves.

Increasingly too, our members, who work for energy suppliers in customer-facing roles, report an alarming increase in calls from customers expressing deep anxieties about their financial situation because of rising energy costs.

Our energy members are often at the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis, both as consumers and workers. Read about this on pages 4/5 and about the difficult and increasingly frequent interactions they have with customers facing tough financial circumstances on page 10.

Of course, the cost-of-living crisis is linked with the energy crisis. The soaring costs of domestic energy have been exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine and have left the UK's domestic energy security particularly exposed. However prior to the conflict, there were years of ineffective government policy and regulation of the energy market. This lack of

progress and vision on initiatives, such as home insulation and sustainable energy, means that today the UK still has some of the least energy efficient housing stock in Europe.

This slow pace of decarbonising domestic energy and heat generation – particularly in the light of the UK's commitment to meeting net zero emissions targets by 2050 – and the need for greater commitment and ambition is clear.

Earlier this year, UNISON launched a new report, *Gridlocked: How UK Energy Policy Fails Working Families*. It surveyed thousands of UNISON members, who are homeowners, and found that working people on lower and middle incomes across the country are more than willing to make changes to their homes to make them greener and more energy-efficient. Yet current government policy is not providing the support needed to make this happen. With energy high up the public agenda and a general election fast approaching, the report argues that, whichever political party wins the election, they will need to put the support in place to allow everyone in the UK to work together to achieve net zero, to increase UK energy security and to drive down costs.

As a final point, earlier this year we saw the departure of Matthew Lay from UNISON. Matt was senior national officer for energy for many years and was not just well-known across the energy service group, but was well-liked and respected across the union and by industry employers as well. He will be missed by members, colleagues, and all those who worked with him. We all wish him the very best for the future.

Donna Rowe-Merriman
National secretary and
national energy lead

Our energy members are often at the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis, both as consumers and workers

The cost of energy crisis

High energy bills are here to stay and universal support is finished. So what needs to be done to protect vulnerable customers?



Last year, the Government spent around £60 billion of tax payers' money to try and ensure people could keep their lights on and their homes warm.

"This was an absolutely eye-watering amount," said Dan Meredith, E.ON's policy and public affairs director speaking at the recent UNISON energy seminar. "That's in the region of the total welfare state budget for a year – or almost as much as the complete budget for education."

When Russia invaded Ukraine two years ago, the wholesale cost of energy soared. Europe's over-reliance on Russian energy was exposed and due to a lack of supply, demand for oil and gas from other countries soared. This led to a massive hike in wholesale prices, which put customers' bills through the roof and unprecedented billions in profits for the oil producers.

The government's universal support last winter helped everyone with their bills. The problem now though is that government spent £60 billion on universal support to buffer the worst of the price rises and has absolutely nothing to show for it. The nation is no better protected now against an energy crisis than it was

two years ago and the public purse is a lot poorer.

This money has literally "gone through the roof" because domestic homes in this country are some of the worst insulated in Europe.

"Moving forward, energy efficiency should be a no-brainer," said Dan.

"Not only will energy efficiency keep the nation safer from external crises, but it has additional political benefits, such as reducing the cost of living and improving health outcomes."

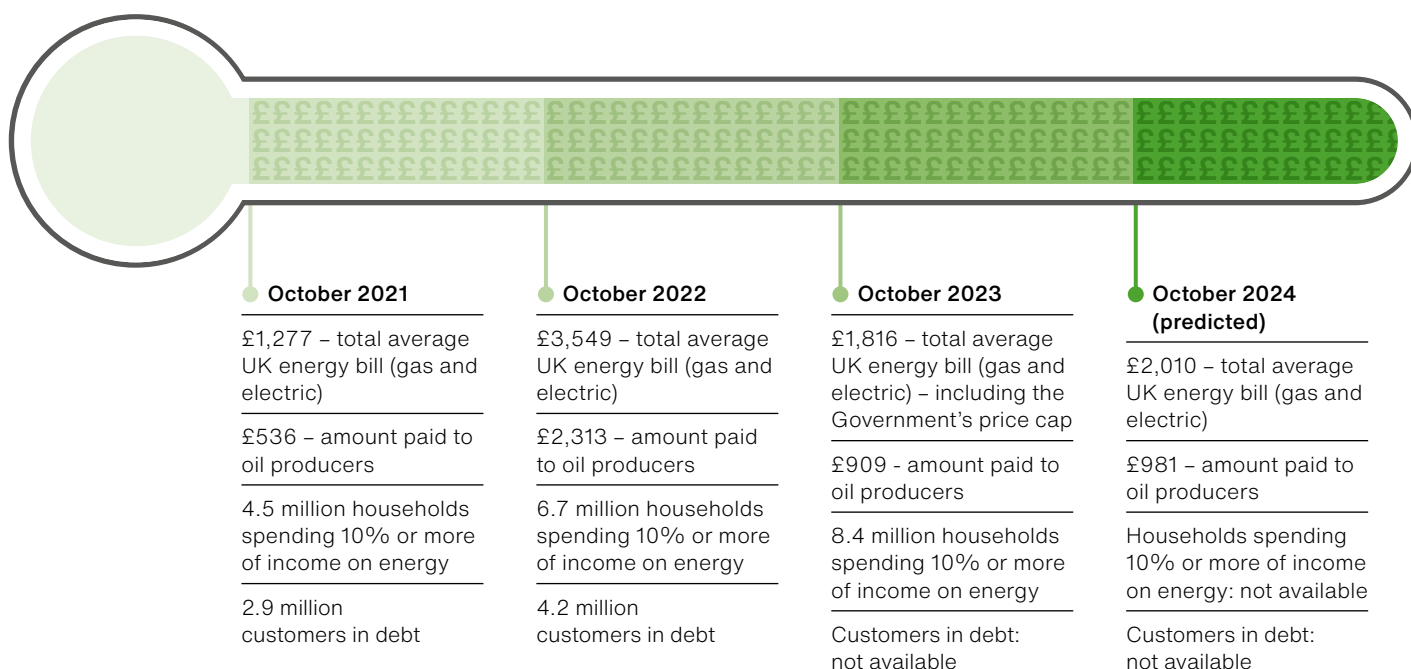
Background

Between 1970 and 2020, domestic energy bills in the UK remained pretty constant. The average bill was around £1,000 a year and was kept in place by steady global prices. But then the market exploded two years ago with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Europe's over-reliance on Russia's oil and gas and Britain's failure to invest in green energy at the consumer level – have all left us ill-prepared for the recent hike in energy prices," said Dan.

"In addition, the way the retail market was set up in the first place and weak regulation has been pretty much a disaster. The failure of all those smaller companies that started up and then went bust is now being

The number of customers in debt has increased from 2.6m in 2012 to 4.2m in 2022



Total residential debt is predicted to rise from approximately £3m in 2020 to almost £12m in 2024

paid for by all of us on our bills – and we'll be paying for a very long time.

"The landscape has changed forever and it isn't a good place to be. For the foreseeable future, the average energy bill is going to remain double what it was a couple of years ago at around £2,000. Now with problems in the Middle East there is even more uncertainty. It is impossible to predict what is going to happen in the future, but it is likely that global prices of oil and gas will rise again," said Dan.

What needs to be done

With poorly insulated homes, a domestic market run on fossil fuels and an over-reliance on imported gas and oil – the UK needs an overarching energy policy for the UK urgently. "We need a national programme to reduce demand and improve energy efficiency," said Dan.

For customers, Meredith says that there needs to be an effective safety net so all households are able to live in a

warm home, but that the continuation of universal taxpayer support is a waste of scarce resources.

"Future support should be targeted at those that need help the most through a social tariff. This way, everyone should be able to afford to heat and power their homes," he continued. "With the typical household bill of £2,000, energy debt will increase unsustainably unless support is provided."

According to Citizens' Advice, households seeking help with energy have already increased by 43% this year to April – compared with last year. This includes concerns about being able to pay their bills, debt recovery action, and issues with billing and customer service.

This social tariff could be delivered via the energy bill using existing industry processes, such as:

- ▶ the Energy Bill Support Scheme (EBSS) – which gave every household a £400 discount on their energy bills for winter 2022 to 2023.

- ▶ the Warm Home Discount (WHD) scheme, which supports those on low-incomes, those who are vulnerable to cold-related illness and those living in fuel poverty.

"The Government has the power to flex the Warm Home Discount (WHD) in scope and scale this winter," stated Dan. "Over time, targeting could be improved through data sharing to ensure support is provided where it is needed most."

"We need to level up. Households in 37 of the 40 most marginal constituencies are more likely to live in the least efficient homes (rated EPC D and worse) and be on low incomes or out of work."

"We live in an uncertain world where energy prices are volatile and the number of people in debt due to fuel poverty is increasing each year," Dan summed up. "Energy efficiency with focused support aimed at households on the lowest incomes has to be the way forward."



Improving your work/life balance

Check your rights to flexible working and reasonable adjustments to make sure you're getting the best from your employer.

Have you got your work/life balance right? And why is it important? These were the questions posed by UNISON's Equality Officer Josephine Grahl, at the energy seminar recently.

"A healthy work/life balance can mean different things to different people, but the ideal situation is when you feel content and in control of both areas of your life," she explained.

Whatever form the work/life balance takes though, it is most definitely an equality issue disproportionately affecting women, Black workers and disabled workers. "With women still doing the lion's share of caring responsibilities, it is not surprising that they face greater difficulties."

There is evidence too that Black workers are more likely to leave a job if it doesn't meet their flexible working needs. UNISON's Black Members' Committee is now looking to commission further research in this area to learn more about the issues and how they can be addressed.

Flexible working

UNISON believes that flexible working should always be an option for all workers, and since the pandemic, work patterns have changed dramatically. There are now more than twice as many people working from home and patterns since lockdown are still bedding in.

Flexible working can take many forms, which can all help meet the needs of workers.

These include:

- ▶ compressed hours (working longer hours so that workers have specific times off work)
- ▶ part-time working or less hours
- ▶ flexible start and finish times
- ▶ job sharing
- ▶ working from home either all or part of your hours
- ▶ annualised hours
- ▶ term-time working.

"Being in a trade union is definitely good for work/life balance and it very important that workers are aware of their rights," continued Josephine.

In UK employment law, there is a 'right to request' flexible working if you have been in your job for at least 26 weeks. Your employer must consider your request fairly and respond within three months.

"It's not particularly strong legislation, as employers are not under obligation to grant flexible working.

"But if employers do refuse flexible working, they do have to give a fair reason. In 2024, the law will change to give employees more rights – with the right to request flexible working from day one. Being a UNISON member too, you're much more likely to get better pay and conditions, than the statutory minimum," she said.

Reasonable adjustments

Legally, disabled workers have much stronger rights to request flexible working. This is called "reasonable adjustments" and employers are required to make changes in the workplace or to a workplace policy,

so that disabled workers and job applicants can fulfil their role.

"Whether you want to work from home or be in the workplace, you have a right to expect your employer to make the reasonable adjustments necessary if you have a disability," said Josephine.

"For years, disabled workers wanting to work from home were told that they couldn't do it and that reasonable adjustments couldn't be made," she continued. "Now it's the norm. Companies have realised that the world does not fall apart when workers are left to get on unsupervised with their work at home."

Signs of a good work/life balance include:

- ✓ meeting your responsibilities at work and still having time for family, friends and hobbies
- ✓ having enough time to sleep properly, exercise and eat well
- ✓ not worrying about work when you're at home

Signs of a poor work/life balance include:

- ✗ an unmanageable workload
- ✗ unreasonable work expectations (eg that staff can be contacted out of hours).
- ✗ a culture of long hours/presenteeism
- ✗ poor management
- ✗ no or little control over shift patterns
- ✗ not enough time for caring responsibilities, such as children or elderly parents



Working for the workers

UNISON's energy members are led by Donna Rowe-Merriman, national secretary for business, community and environment. Responsible for members across a wide range of sectors, Donna is passionate in her role to create a fairer, more equal society.



It's no coincidence that companies that recognise trade unions have better pay, better work conditions and better outcomes for their workers.

"We bring the issues to the table and work collectively to improve workers' pay and conditions," said Donna, speaking recently.

"These are hugely challenging times for our members. The cost-of-living crisis is putting all workers under incredible pressure and we're working to get the best possible deals we can for all our members."

Today Donna leads around 180,000 members across the business, community and environment sectors. This covers energy companies, the water industry, regulatory bodies like the Environment Agency, as well as the community and charity sector. It also covers the large corporations, like ISS and Compass, and smaller companies that take on public contracts in catering, security, school meals and cleaning. It is a huge role.

"Basically, my remit covers members who are not directly employed by the public sector but who deliver services to the public – and this includes the big energy and utility companies."

It's all a very long way from when Donna first became an activist with the National Union of Students (NUS). "That was my first involvement with trade unionism and then, when I got a job as a benefits advisor at Nottingham City Council, I became a member of UNISON. That was in 1995, and I am immensely proud that I was responsible for organising my first strike there," said Donna. "I organised a creche so that parents could have their children looked after while they were on the picket lines."

Donna then went on to become a branch chair and, from there, regional organiser with East Midlands region. "I've worked in every sector

that UNISON organises in, including energy, during my career," she continued. "For about ten years, I worked with UNISON Power and became lead negotiator with national companies, including E.ON, Siemens and some other metering companies across the country. Dealing with private business was a somewhat different challenge to the public sector. Whether it was pay bargaining, job evaluation, the harmonisation of terms and conditions, it covered so much."

Then in 2021, Donna was appointed as national secretary in the Business, Community and Environment Unit, and is the first woman to hold this post.

"It makes me feel proud to be first woman to hold this role. I am very aware though that the union has been heavily involved in promoting women in senior positions across the organisation for years.

"This role covers so many sectors within UNISON. I lead a team with a huge breadth of knowledge and experience."

When asked, looking ahead, what Donna sees as the key issues for the energy sector, she said that addressing what Just Transition means has to be top of the list.

"Our members in the energy sector are at the cutting edge of delivering net zero, but there needs to be much more discussion and engagement with politicians and policy makers about what it actually means for workers. At the moment, Just Transition means a lot of different things to a lot of different stakeholders."

"There needs to be an energy reset which covers equity, engagement, training, sustainability, how we bring new people into the industry, and how we support and maintain the roles of those who have been in the sector much longer."

We need to crack on

The domestic market in the UK accounts for 14% of carbon emissions. Here UNISON members share their priorities to create a greener domestic market.

Despite constant government rhetoric, 99% of homes in Britain are still heated by fossil fuels and the UK has the worst insulated homes in Europe.

UNISON members from across the sector met with Juliet Philips from green think-tank E3G recently to discuss the challenges and opportunities for a just transition to net zero.

“The Climate Change Committee and the National Infrastructure Commission both say that we need to crack on and do more, as we’re still making very little progress,” said Juliet.

“We can get to net zero, but we’re really going to have to rack up our efforts if we want to get on track for clean heat. In the 1970s, Britain converted 13 million homes from town gas to natural gas. Then in 2005, we shifted to condensing boilers. Both schemes required a national change and saw big employers having to commit to training engineers to get them ready for fitting. But they delivered and it proves it can be done.”

Skills

The energy sector workforce is changing. It is estimated that:

- ▶ more than a quarter (27%) of workers in the utilities sector will retire in the 2020s.
- ▶ up to 725,000 more jobs could be created by 2030. (ECIU 2023).
- ▶ this combination of new jobs and people leaving the industry means that the sector will need to replace or retrain 48% of the current workforce (around 277,000 jobs) by the end of the decade.

“If companies work with the unions, we can ensure there is training and support in the right areas. Where there are well-rewarded jobs with proper training, people will want to take them up. People want to develop themselves,” said Steve Dickson from British Gas.

“As a union, we need to make sure the profits are going to the workers and not going to pay some company

director earning a six-figure salary. That's why the green agenda needs to be government-led."

E:ON estimates that the retro-fitting of all homes to comply with EPC C by 2035 could create 150,000 jobs and add £47 billion to the UK economy.

"Germany, Poland and Denmark are storming ahead with the installation of heat pumps, but we've got a long way to go. There needs to be more focus on training and skills," said Juliet.



Lack of focus

In the UK, there are a number of grants in place to help reduce domestic emissions, such as the Boiler Upgrade Scheme (BUS), and the Great British Insulation Scheme. However take up is poor.

"The policies and schemes that are in place, are often confusing, unclear or short-term," said Tracey Wainwright of EDF Energy Northern branch and member of UNISON's National Executive Council. "Customers don't understand what's on offer and don't trust the energy companies to deliver them."

Issues with the current schemes include:

- ▶ Inconsistency – the government keeps changing the schemes available. Companies are not investing in them as they could lose a lot of money if policies are changed again.
- ▶ Trust – customers do not trust the energy companies for advice as they profit by the sales.
- ▶ Information – there is no central body providing unbiased information, where the public could go for impartial advice.

"We definitely need much longer-term planning," said Juliet. "In addition, a lot of the schemes in place have been very problematic and have bureaucratic paperwork, which puts a lot of people off."

Nick Davies, British Gas Cymru/Wales branch, added that it would make sense for local authorities to lead on just transition. "All local authorities should have a dedicated department where customers know they will get clear, unbiased information to avoid scams and poor schemes."

A just transition

Delegates expressed concern about the lack of support for those on low incomes and in poorer households. At present, those who can least afford high energy bills are paying the most for their gas and electricity each month. They also have the worst insulated homes.

Another concern is customers living in rental properties. "These customers face some of the worst difficulties," said Katie Lawton, EDF branch. "Even if landlords qualify for a lot of the schemes on offer, they do not have the incentive to make changes because they won't benefit from the savings. There's not enough of a push to get landlords interested. Whatever schemes are in place, we need to make sure that those on the lowest incomes and in the poorest housing receive the greatest incentives."

Stephanie Stoker, British Gas Yorkshire and Humberside branch, added: "We need to get more legislative. I think there needs to be a law to make landlords comply. Just as they need to provide gas and electric safety check certificates, they could be forced to comply with insulation regulations."

"In addition, all new homes should be built with all the latest kit. Builders should be forced to provide new homes with electric vehicle sockets, solar power panels, boilers that can use gas and hydrogen."



From top: UNISON reps, Nick Davies, Tracey Wainwright and Steve Dickson. Pictured bottom: Green think tank E3G's policy officer Juliet Phillips.

Dealing with difficult calls

UNISON and other unions are working with EDF to support advisors with difficult calls. To do this, they have established a forum called *Protecting Our People*, which includes UNISON and other trade union reps, workers, company directors and operation and human resources managers.

"The massive hike in energy prices in 2022 led to an increase in calls to customer services from worried, angry and vulnerable customers asking for help. Some of those calls weren't very nice, particularly the ones where customers are deeply distressed or suicidal," said Dawn Wainwright of EDF.

"The company already had a system in place to report abusive customers, but this forum provides a much higher level of support for workers."

Initiatives introduced to support staff include:

- ▶ A dedicated support phone line, that staff can call when they've been speaking to an angry or distressed customer. Managers are then obliged to listen back to the calls and if the call was abusive, to contact the customer directly informing them that they will be banned from phone communication if they don't amend their behaviour.
- ▶ A confidential phone app called *Ask Emma*, which signposts staff having emotional or financial difficulties for support.
- ▶ Information and advice on the intranet about how to handle distressed or abusive customers.
- ▶ The right to take a break after an

abusive or distressing call and/or a referral to one of the company's mental health workers.

- ▶ Voice recognition and markers on accounts where callers have been abusive – to forewarn advisors.
- ▶ A block on abusive callers so they can only contact the company digitally.
- ▶ Posters and publicity around the workplace promoting the scheme.

"Sadly we are starting to see an increase in such calls again as temperatures fall and the days get shorter," said Dawn. "The policies in place have vastly improved the situation, but it is an evolving process."

"Most of the big companies have some policies, but they're of varying quality. As a member of the energy group executive, we're keen to share best practice and to promote robust support for advisors across all companies."



"There's been an increase in calls from worried, angry and vulnerable customers asking for help," says UNISON rep and customer advisor Dawn Wainwright (above).

The right to disconnect

The increase in home and flexible working has left many people feeling that the boundaries between home and work have become blurred and UNISON members are demanding the 'right to disconnect from work'.

This is defined as "the ability not to engage in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or messages during non-work hours".

The campaign has come from UNISON's National Young Members' Forum, who carried out a survey on the *Right to Disconnect*. It found that:

- ▶ 80% of young members said they'd experienced a mental health problem in the last year.
- ▶ Of those, around 80% said their mental health problems were caused by work, or related to work.
- ▶ 70% often feel stressed at work.
- ▶ 60% agree that "no matter how hard I work, it's difficult to get everything done".
- ▶ 58% "find it difficult to switch off from work at the end of the day".

The right to disconnect is already law in France, Italy, Spain and Ireland. Canada is considering introducing legislation. The National Young Members' Forum is now launching a *Right to Disconnect* campaign asking members to write to their MPs to make it a law here too.

"Some employers do have policies on the right to disconnect, but they're inconsistent and often not strong enough. At UNISON, we're working to improve these and to ensure they are included in all workload agreements," said UNISON's equality officer, Josephine Grahl.

Award winner

The Mike Jeram Trophy is awarded each year to the branch which recruits the most members, and it was won this year by National Grid.

"This is such a surprise!" said Miriam Latona (pictured centre) speaking at the presentation. "We are absolutely delighted." Pictured to the left and right are: Peter Read and Phebion Mudoti.



“

I've always believed in trade unions

Meet Dave Tasker, UNISON lead rep for National Gas Transmission talking about his passions, his role, his politics and his hobbies..



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How did you first get involved in UNISON?

I have been a union member for all my working life – over 40 years. I was previously a member of another union, but they had very few members and no reps in my area of the business. I was getting no updates or ballots from them which was frustrating.

About six years ago, UNISON had a recruitment event in the office and I got talking to the branch chairman. I transferred to UNISON and was then asked if I would consider becoming a rep. I agreed and completed the training and have now been a rep for around five years.

Why is being part of UNISON important to you?

I've always believed in the work of the trade unions and what they have achieved for workers over the years. As UNISON's lead rep for National Gas Transmission, it gives me a great opportunity to meet with members and find out what is important to them. I am then able to meet with other reps and senior management and discuss issues and influence policies that improve conditions for the whole workforce.

What is your role at National Gas?

I am a network controller at National Gas Transmission in Warwick. My job is to assist with planning maintenance activities on the National Gas Transmission System. I issue permits for work and review and approve maintenance procedures. I am the network control team leader for West Area transmission so mainly concentrate on maintenance operations in the west of the country. However I do also raise permits and advise on maintenance work across the whole of the UK.

Are there any particular highlights in your trade union career that stand out for you?

National Gas is now a separate

company to National Grid, so from this year we have to negotiate separately on pay. I was part of the joint trade union representation for the annual pay talks for the first time this year. The salary increase that we negotiated was accepted by all the unions at the ballot, which was satisfying.

As part of the settlement, we agreed to meet with the company to devise a new simpler performance-related pay framework to replace the over-complicated current system. The scheme that we devised was again accepted by all unions at the ballot.

Why should workers join UNISON?

I find that workers in general are not as aware of the work of trade unions as they used to be. I try to encourage all staff, new and old, to attend our UNISON recruitment events. We are the biggest union in National Gas and are the best equipped to assist with individual and collective workers' issues. I think that it's reassuring to know that you have someone in your corner to speak up for you when you need help.

Tell me about your Labour Link role?

I am trade union liaison officer (TULO) for my local branch and constituency Labour Parties. It seemed to make sense to complete the loop, and so I put myself forward to be UNISON Labour Link officer for the National Grid Energy branch. I attend West Midlands Labour Link meetings as a visitor, although I don't have an official position in the group.

How do you relax when you're not at work?

My wife is a district councillor so we try to support civic and community events around our home town of Evesham. I enjoy watching rugby and also enjoy live music and attend lots of live concerts and festivals. We are keen vinyl collectors too and can often be found browsing record shops and second-hand shops for interesting records.

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£11,001 – £14,000	£7.85
£14,001 – £17,000	£9.70
£17,001 – £20,000	£11.50
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