

**This is the year of**

# **UNISON College**

**U**  
**LEARN**  
2022





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## UNISON ULEARN MAGAZINE

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# Making 2022 something special



## WELCOME TO THIS

year's ULearn, an issue that showcases more than ever the fantastic learning activity that's happened over the past year.

It's been a challenging year, but UNISON has risen to the challenge. 2021 saw us not only restoring a full programme of activist training and replicating the comprehensive online member learning offer we introduced in 2020, but also building on both of those to expand UNISON learning even further, as you'll see in this magazine. I couldn't be prouder.

I want to pay tribute to the UNISON learning reps, branch education coordinators, lifelong learning coordinators and regional and national staff who have made it all happen.

This is also an appropriate moment for me to thank Chris Tansley and Margaret McKee, the outgoing chair and vice-

chair of the Development and Organising Committee (which oversees UNISON learning and education), and Roger McKenzie, former assistant general secretary, for all the work they've done over the years to put UNISON learning in the strong position it is today.

But we're looking forward, too, and in this issue, I'm

delighted to introduce the UNISON College – one of my most important election pledges and one which will come to fruition this year.

I have a great team working to deliver this, headed by Assistant General Secretary Jon Richards and Head of Learning and Organising Services Teresa Donegan, with the support and encouragement of the Development and Organising Committee, led by Chair Andrea Egan and Vice-Chair John Jones. Look out for more on the College as we move through the year.

Let's build on the successes of the past and make 2022 the first year of something truly special.

**"I'm delighted to introduce the UNISON College - one of my most important election pledges and one which will come to fruition this year"**

*Christina McAnea*

**Christina McAnea,  
General Secretary ✨**





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# Supporting you with the learning you need

General Secretary Christina McAnea explains how the new UNISON College will offer every member the chance to get on in their personal lives, in the union and at work.

## **UNISON MEMBERS**

have always been at the heart of everything our union does. As we are an ambitious and dynamic union, and we know that all members need to keep pace with the world of work, we must make sure we support you through challenging and changing times.

We built our union on the understanding that lifelong learning would always be

essential for our future.

From branch level, through to our regions, in our self-organised groups and nationally, education features in everything.

It's a service to members, of course, but knowledge also gives us the power to organise and mobilise for growth in our union and positive change in the workplace.

That's why I promised in

my manifesto that I would establish a UNISON College.

It will ensure that we make a huge leap of progress to get us through a turbulent time of swift changes brought on by the pandemic, and years of attacks on public sector funding and workers' rights from successive governments.

You might be a member who doesn't have the time yet to be active, or you might already be active as a Steward or Branch Officer.

You may already be taking on the responsibilities as a Union Learning Rep, Branch Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator, Education Co-ordinator, or be serving members as an elected member on one of our lay committees.

Whoever you are, we will always make sure you have access to the training and education you need

to secure your future at work and give you the confidence to participate and get active in UNISON.

The UNISON College will not only build on the great work that is already going on across every region in the UK.

It will also offer new learning opportunities and new ways of learning with an ambitious target of trebling learning opportunities for members and activists.

The UNISON College will be an integral part of UNISON, built on UNISON values, that will:

- \* help build organisation, membership and activists
- \* provide new and expanded learning opportunities for all UNISON members
- \* bring together

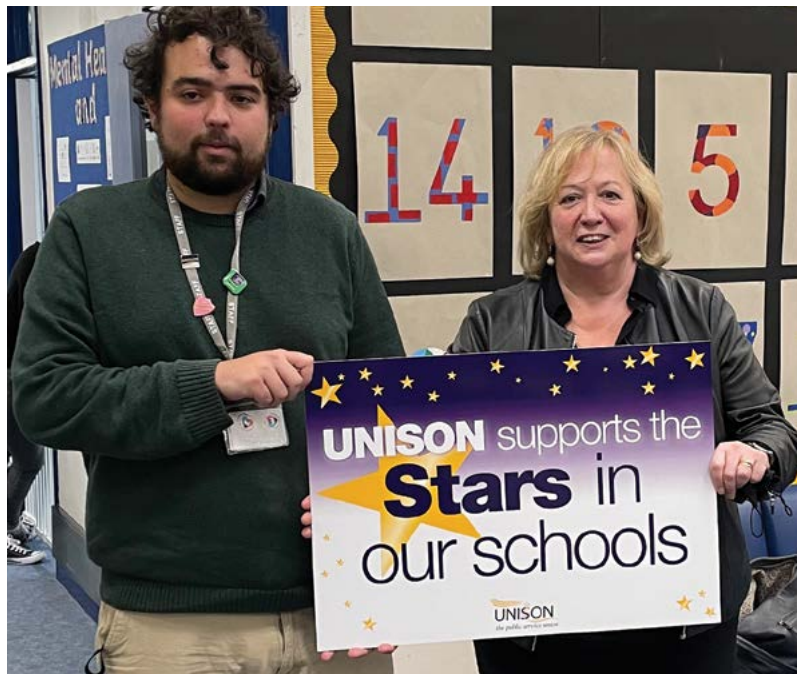
learning of all kinds

\* offer every member the chance to get on in their personal lives, in the union and at work.

Scoping work and planning were carried out last year, and this year we are launching this exciting and bold initiative, and we will continually listen to what you – our members and activists – want and need.

We will make sure we evaluate it at every stage, to make sure it is delivering for all members; that our partnership organisations are offering value for money; and that the outcomes are contributing to the progress we need to see as a union and as a wider trade union movement. \*

**“Knowledge also gives us the power to organise and mobilise for growth in our union and positive change in the workplace”**





# Michael Rosen thanks incredible NHS staff

The best-selling writer told an Eastern Region online event that NHS workers looked after him brilliantly when he contracted Covid in the first weeks of the pandemic.

## **MORE THAN 100**

members tuned in to an Eastern Region online event in May to hear poet Michael Rosen describe the “overwhelming, amazing, incredible” care NHS staff provided while he was battling Covid in intensive care.

Michael denounced the government’s 1 per cent pay offer as “an absurd joke” when the dedication of NHS staff helped thousands of people like him survive.

Hospitalised early in the first shutdown, Michael was placed in an induced coma for 40 days at the Whittington Hospital in north London. Through that time, staff did everything they could to help him pull through – including talking to him and keeping a diary of his care journey.

“This level of care is beyond my comprehension,” he said. “The idea that these complete strangers are doing that for me is overwhelming, amazing, incredible.”

The event was organised by the Eastern Region as an innovative way of engaging with members during last year’s consultation ballot on NHS pay, explains Eastern Regional Organiser Cheryl Godber, who also leads on activist education in the region.

In addition to the 100-plus participants on the night, another 600 have since watched the video of the event on UNISON’s YouTube channel.

“What we were trying to do was be creative about ways of getting members to



participate in that ballot, and I felt that NHS workers needed to hear from somebody well known like Michael about his appreciation for how they cared for him,” Cheryl says.

“And you can tell by the comments that have come back that we succeeded, that people really appreciated Michael taking the time to do it because he remains so grateful to the NHS.”

Feedback has been enormously positive – from people who took part live on the night and from members who have caught up with the event on YouTube or read the detailed account of it on the UNISON website.

“It was such an enjoyable evening, filled with such humanity,” said Claire London, who is Associate Director of Learning and Organisational Development



and a superb supporting tool for the campaign.”

Sara Gorton, who conducted the interview, enjoyed meeting the former children’s laureate, whose books her teenage child loved when they were growing up.

“It was lovely to meet him and also hear about how much he valued the treatment and care he’d had,” Sara said.

“I was particularly struck by what he said about being treated as an individual, which made me realise how important our campaigns are to allowing staff the time and capacity to treat patients as people and not just cases.”

Earlier in the pay campaign, Cheryl helped four of the region’s branches to organise an online panel on NHS pay, where the chairing duties were shared by two women who were well-known in different ways to participants.

One was Ipswich nurse and Cambridgeshire

### CHECK ONLINE

\* Watch the Michael Rosen interview on YouTube: <https://bit.ly/3EvVzF8>

\* Find out more about Michael on his website: <https://www.michaelrosen.co.uk>

and Peterborough Community and Mental Health Branch Secretary Heather Bennett, who has been active throughout the pay campaign.

The other was Jackie Weaver, the chief officer of the Cheshire Association of Local Councils, who became a viral sensation after helping Handforth Parish Council’s notoriously bad-tempered Zoom meeting last February. \*

at Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust.

And Scottish Health Care Branch Secretary Tam Hiddleston said: “I found it quite excellent and powerful viewing

**“I felt that NHS workers needed to hear from somebody well known like Michael about his appreciation for how they cared for him”**







# Taking learning to the streets

Street and estate cleaners at Southwark Council have been developing their English, maths and digital skills thanks to the dedication of ULR Bridget Galloway.

## WHEN SOUTHWARK ULR

Bridget Galloway had to travel to Jamaica for a funeral last year, she didn't want her absence to disrupt the teaching she'd been delivering to a group of street and estate cleaners at the council.

So while she was away, Bridget delivered online sessions from the island to make sure the learners didn't lose their momentum, even though the five-hour time difference meant a very early start for her.

"I love these guys, they are committed to the classes, so I thought I would make the effort to get up early!" Bridget laughs.

Many of the 650-plus workers at the council's waste management depot on Sandgate Street need help to improve their English, maths, English for Speakers of Other Languages and

digital skills but have never had their learning needs assessed before.

"The workers are mostly Black and minority ethnic but there are also white English colleagues in their 50s and 60s who do not know how to read," Bridget says.

"There are those who believe that the workers are just there to clean, and then they go home but I believe that if someone's been working here for 20 years and they haven't been taught to read, that's a dereliction of duty by the employer."

Bridget needed persistence to get access to the workers. But she eventually began regular face-to-face lessons in a training room onsite at the end of May last year.

Because of scheduling problems, Covid and the size of the room, she has ended up working with a small group



PHOTO: © JESS HURD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

of four committed learners – Joanne, Christopher, Wayne and Kevin.

"It's been a journey with the four of them but they've been brilliant – trust me, they've been absolutely brilliant," Bridget says.

After working through

**"It's been a journey with the four of them but they've been brilliant - trust me, they've been absolutely brilliant"**





initial assessments of their individual skill levels, Bridget started off by asking the learners to choose a Quick Read they were interested in.

They would all then read a chapter by themselves and bring anything they didn't understand back to the next class. That way, everyone could learn from looking at each person's individual issues.

As well as the Quick Reads, the learners each had their own dictionary, grammar and punctuation books and maths wallcharts, all paid for by the branch.

After introducing further literacy training and maths into the mix, Bridget then added digital skills as well. Because there were no computers available in the training room, she brought her work laptop, her personal laptop and her own tablet to help get the learners started.

"I'm really proud of Christopher because when I met him first he said, 'I can't read' and now he's reading – he's the one who's progressed the most," Bridget says.

Christopher's managers have noticed the change in him since he has learned to read for the first time. "His managers, his supervisors – they're all saying how Christopher has improved," Bridget says.

Joanne has progressed by committing to her learning between classes, Bridget says.

"Every instruction I give Joanne, she follows it to the letter: when I say, 'Go home and do homework', she comes back next week and it's all done – that's why

she's progressed so fast."

But all the learners can see new possibilities since starting the classes. Bridget is helping Wayne start to gain the electrical and plumbing skills he wants and guiding Kevin through the theory workbook to prepare for his driving test.

Supervisors Liz Moffatt and Yvonne Bastie have been very supportive, Bridget says. Liz loaned her work laptop to learners for the digital skills sessions, they've both helped with admin tasks such as photocopying materials for learners.

"The support from those two supervisors has been brilliant – I couldn't have done it without Liz and Yvonne helping," Bridget says. \*



**Bridget (above left) with learners Christopher and Joanne**



# Spreading the message about mindfulness

Carol McGrath has become an accredited mindfulness practitioner so she can help members deal with the mental health challenges of the pandemic.

## LEEDS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Branch Lifelong Learning Coordinator Carol McGrath completed a mindfulness course last summer so she could share the benefits of meditation with her co-workers.

Already a qualified yoga teacher, Carol is now putting her knowledge of both practices into regional online workshops to help members improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

When Carol researched the

**“In these times, compassion for yourself and for others being a crucial part of the programme really reached out to me”**

various different mindfulness qualifications on offer last year, it was the accredited course from Mindfulness UK that caught her attention.

“The full title was The Integrating Mindfulness and Compassion Qualification and what really inspired me was the compassionate side,” Carol says. “In these times, compassion for yourself and for others being a crucial part of the programme really reached out to me.”

After completing the

**“Our members are going through a really difficult time worrying about jobs, worrying about their physical and mental wellbeing”**

qualification in the summer, Carol then worked with Regional Learning and Development Organiser (RLDO) Rose Bent to develop online mindfulness and yoga workshops that they could pilot in the region.

The first mindfulness workshops proved very popular with the members who took the opportunity to experience 30 minutes’ meditation in the middle of the working day.

“Our members are going through a really difficult time worrying about jobs, worrying about their physical and mental wellbeing, so we’ve had really positive feedback from people that taking some time out is what they need to be doing right now,” Carol says.

“Mindfulness is about living in the moment and appreciating the moment rather than just rushing headfirst into what’s next and being overtaken by stresses and anxieties,” Carol says.

## **WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?**

Mindfulness is a technique that involves making a special effort to notice what’s happening in the present moment (in your mind, body and surroundings) – without judging anything.

Mindfulness has proven benefits for wellbeing, with studies showing that people who practise it regularly can improve the way they manage stress, anxiety and depression.

But it also has proven health benefits for people living with long-term physical conditions as well. More than 100 studies have tracked consistent improvements in mental health and wellbeing (reduced stress, anxiety and depression) for people living with poor physical health.

Carol is also delivering yoga workshops online now – something she knew could be done because her diploma had to be moved online at the beginning of the pandemic.

“Now that we’ve started yoga as well, they will work well together with the mindfulness workshops and hopefully we’ll see people’s mental health massively improving,” she says.

Offering the courses online means the branch can secure greater engagement from members, and Carol is looking at offering evening as well as lunchtime sessions.

“I’m seeing more people now who I probably wouldn’t have been in contact with if it had been face to face – it’s more inclusive because you can catch everybody at a time that works for them,” Carol says.

“People working from home

can take part in these activities in their lunch break or when they’ve finished work so they don’t have to worry about travelling to a venue or being in a room with people – they can do it within the comfort and safety of their own home.”

The branch has been able to work closely with the authority on the wellbeing of staff, partly because the council officer who looks after the learning agreement (which covers wellbeing) also works on the council-wide wellbeing strategy.

“Leeds City Council has taken onboard that what’s been happening with the pandemic has had a massive impact on people’s wellbeing and they’ve recognised how people can look after themselves by getting involved in things like yoga and mindfulness,” Carol says. ✨





# Supporting trans staff through learning

The WULF team has laid on trans awareness training for all the staff at a rural Welsh school where a member has come out as trans.

## WHEN LEARNING SUPPORT

Assistant Dan Phillips told his Pembrokeshire school he was coming out as trans, UNISON's Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) team helped organise trans awareness training for all 220 staff.

As well as educating all Dan's co-workers, the training programme has now embedded trans awareness into the curriculum for all 1,200-plus pupils, with new resources available for everyone at the school.

Dan approached Haverfordwest High Business Manager Julie Foss (also a UNISON member) about his transition last year. Finding that there were no policies in place to support him,

Julie approached the Pembrokeshire County Branch for help.

As Chairperson Manuela Hughes (right) knew the WULF project was already organising trans awareness training through LGBTQ+ charity Mermaids, she contacted Project Manager Jenny Griffin to bring the WULF team onboard.

The school, the branch and the WULF team were able to work with Mermaids, whose staff delivered a bespoke trans awareness training programme to the entire school staff. The series of online workshops finished in September.

"It was enormously helpful when UNISON were able to offer the awareness training,"



**"The training programme has now embedded trans awareness into the curriculum for all 1,200-plus pupils"**



Dan says. “You don’t know how people are going to take this, so even though it turns out everybody has been really nice about it, it was really reassuring to know the union were behind me.”

With the union and the school taking responsibility for training staff on the reality of trans lives, Dan didn’t have to shoulder the burden of addressing issues that his transition might prompt among his colleagues by himself.

“I still have people asking me questions but they tend to be more about my own personal journey rather than issues in general,” Dan says.

And as a result of her positive experience of working with the branch on learning, Julie Foss has stepped up to become a union learning rep at the school, as well.

When Dan was growing up in rural Pembrokeshire, the lack of representation of trans

**“It’s early days but I think it makes a difference for LGBTQ+ young people to know that they are supported”**

people in general – and trans men in particular – meant it took him a long time to fully understand who he was.

“When I was growing up, I didn’t even realise trans was a thing you could be, especially because pretty much all the representation of trans people in the media – if it existed at all – tended to be the other way: you never saw trans men,” he recalls.

“I’d always felt there was something a bit different about me but it took me a while to work out what that was – as I got older, basically

the internet was my saviour!”

One of the spin-offs of the awareness programme at the school is that the next generation of trans and non-binary children may not feel so isolated, especially since Dan has helped launch an LGBTQ+ club at the school, called the Rainbow Room, with the help of one of the school counsellors.

“It’s early days but I think it makes a difference for LGBTQ+ young people to know that they are supported and recognised within the school and to find their own community within the school, which I think is invaluable,” Dan says.

Jenny Griffin says the awareness programme has been able to engage not only school staff but also pupils and the wider local community – and all because everyone involved collaborated so effectively on the initiative.

“In another paradigm, someone like Dan could have said, ‘This is happening’ and the school could have said, ‘Thank you for letting us know’ and it could have all stopped there,” Jenny points out.

“But at Haverfordwest, everyone worked in partnership to get the most out of it, so as well as supporting Dan, we’ve raised awareness among staff and pupils, which has had a wider impact on the local community. And that shows what you can achieve when you all work together.” \*



# Telling the stories of Black Britons



Celebrated TV documentary-maker David Olusoga helped members in the South East region deepen their understanding of Black history at an online event last October.

## **MORE THAN 50 MEMBERS**

in the South East learned about some of the forgotten chapters of Black British history at an online event featuring a keynote address by leading historian and TV presenter David Olusoga as part of Black History Month (BHM) in October.

David discussed how British taxpayers only paid off the compensation awarded to British slave-owners after abolition in 2015; how Black people had been part of British society for centuries before the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948; and how little Black history is taught in schools, beyond a

few individuals such as Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela.

Before David spoke, two members of the regional Black Members' Committee (BMC) gave short presentations about Black British activists who had inspired them.

Bill Acharjee, from the University of Brighton, recalled Paul Stephenson, one of the leaders of the 1963 Bristol bus boycott that defeated racist employment practices at the publicly-owned bus company – practices that were originally supported by the bus workers' union at the time.

"Bill spoke about how Paul and everyone involved in the boycott had been so brave to stand up for themselves before the company eventually backed

**"Little Black history is taught in schools, beyond a few individuals such as Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela"**





down,” says South East Area Organiser (Education and Equalities) Vicki Gibbs.

And P.K. Kulasegram, from the University of Oxford, chose as their inspiration the contemporary trans activist Monroe Bergdorf, whose anti-racist campaigning cost her a modelling contract with cosmetics giant L'Oréal.

“It was a really interesting and informative presentation that led to a really valuable conversation about the levels of aggression and violence that trans women face,” says Vicki.

**“It was a really interesting and informative presentation that led to a really valuable conversation about the levels of aggression and violence that trans women face”**

## **DEVELOPING BLACK LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

With the help of Rosita Ellis, who chairs the South East Region Black Members' Committee, the region also organised a one-day Black Leadership Skills course as part of Black History Month, hosted by Regional Education Officer Sam Raymond.

Attended by around 20 members, the one-day course aimed to give participants the knowledge, skills and confidence to become more active in their local branches.

With a mix of plenary and breakout sessions on Teams, the course encouraged members to identify the skills leaders need; which leadership styles work best in different situations; and how to overcome the particular barriers faced by potential Black leaders.

It also looked back at the personal qualities of Black leaders in history, including trade union activists like Jayaben Desai, who led a group of mostly Asian women workers during the monumental Grunwick dispute in Brent, north London, in the mid-1970s.

“There were a lot of people who hadn't been at previous events who were really engaging and very vocal, so I'd like to think we're going to get some more people stepping up and becoming more active as a result of attending the course,” says Sam.

“They all know they're part of the union who need representation at all levels of the union because fair representation is what UNISON is all about.”

After David's presentation, the participants worked together in five breakout groups to discuss what UNISON could do over the next year – suggestions that the BMC took into account when it developed its action plan for 2022 at its meeting in November.

The event also featured

a Black British history quiz, with Rihanna Blanchard from Berkshire Community Healthcare branch winning a book token for getting the most correct answers.

“The whole event went down a storm,” says Vicki. “People were excited to meet David but the whole thing went down really well.” \*



# Helping your branch stay ahead of the game

If you're a people person who would enjoy helping reps and activists develop the skills they need to deliver for their members, then Branch Education Coordinator could be the role for you.

## BRANCH EDUCATION

Coordinators (BECs) make sure that all new reps get the training they need to carry out their role and all existing reps get the opportunity to update or refresh their skills as and when they need to.

By ensuring every local activist is equipped for the challenges they are likely to face, BECs can help build a branch that is ready for pretty much anything when it comes to supporting its members.

"Branch Education Coordinators play an absolutely crucial role in their branch," says Education Officer Sarah Hayes.

"It's not simply about finding the right course for the right activist – it's about seeing

**"And as well as all the standard courses, we can create bespoke courses to make sure they have whatever skills their activists need"**



how they get on through that course and then, at the end of the course, identifying the next steps for them as well."

The BEC also helps new reps by developing a buddying and mentoring plan for them. And they make sure they have all the information they need such as the stewards' handbook, the UNISON rulebook and any local agreements such as a learning agreement.

By organising training for new reps and helping more established reps update their skills, the BEC helps the branch stay ahead of the game.


When a branch is organising a pay campaign, for example, the BEC can make sure that



### CHECK ONLINE

\* Could Branch Education Coordinator be a role you'd enjoy taking on? Play our Activate! game and to find out more:

 <https://e-learning.unison.org.uk/>

\* Download the newly updated Branch Education Coordinator Starter Pack from:  <https://bit.ly/3A0Y54J>

every activist has all the skills they need, whether that's at the negotiating table itself or to keep members engaged through digital organising or communications skills.

"Where there's been a BEC involved from the start of a pay campaign, you can see the very clear payoff in

that they've been able to help train the negotiators and equip other key activists with the campaigning skills they need," Sarah says.

Similarly, when a branch wants to make a concerted push to persuade their employer to do more to look after members' wellbeing, the BEC can identify the most effective mental health course for health and safety reps to give them that extra string to their bow. Or when a branch wants to do more to tackle the climate emergency, the BEC can find the right course to give reps the up-to-date skills to help green their workplaces.

One of the huge benefits of the way UNISON works is that BECs can access a wide range of support to help

them, Sarah points out.

"The branch education coordinator has the support of the region and the support of ourselves in Learning and Organising Services (LAOS)," she points out.

"And as well as all the standard courses, we can create bespoke courses to make sure they have whatever skills their activists need."

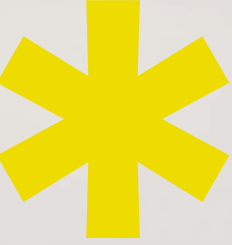
BECs should contact their organiser or regional education team to see what can be put together.

LAOS has also recently updated the Branch Education Coordinator Starter Pack, which contains all the information a BEC needs to carry out the role, from how to keep training records to managing the branch education budget. It also includes useful templates for activist training records, learning needs questionnaires and planning branch education events.

Sarah suggests trying the e-learning module Activate! to see if BEC could be the role for you.

"We'd encourage every branch to have a branch education coordinator," Sarah says. "I can't stress enough how strategically important the role is because supporting our reps and developing their skills can only help grow the union and encourage more members to participate." \*





Samantha Rutherford is studying to become a qualified nurse, with the help UNISON offers members in Northern Ireland.



# Supporting members into nursing

## NORTHERN IRELAND

home care worker Samantha Rutherford is embarking on a nursing degree with The Open University (OU), the latest stage on the learning journey she was able to re-start through UNISON.

After working in domiciliary care for 15 years, Samantha returned to learn through the union in 2017 by taking the chance to enrol on the OU's K101 Introduction to Health and Social Care course.

It was the first learning she'd undertaken since leaving school at the age of

**“We have a series of learning agreements with employers that allows students paid leave to study as well as travel time and mileage”**

16 with two GCSEs. “I ran around with the wrong crowd and there was no support at home so my experience of school was negative, definitely,” she says.

“The K101 was hard: I had no idea about all the referencing you had to do but I got through!” What made it even harder was that Samantha had started night classes to gain the Level 2 maths qualification she would need to train as a nurse at the same time.

Being able to access all the additional support that UNISON is able to offer members enrolling on what is now the K102 made a massive difference, she says.

“I had a tutor that I met once a month with the rest of your classmates to go through a few things and he was always there when you needed him – he wouldn't

give you any wee hints or tips but he would be an ear to listen,” Samantha says.

“It made a big difference because there was no one else that I knew who had done the K101.”

UNISON offers extensive additional support to members on the K102, explains Regional Education Organiser Caitlín NiChathail.

“What UNISON students get that others on the K102 course don’t get is that we have a series of learning agreements with employers that allows students paid leave to study as well as travel time and mileage to attend the course,” Caitlín explains.

“Additional to that, on top of the study they get through the OU, we employ tutors separately on a freelance basis to offer wraparound study skills support to ensure people make it because many of the people going on the K102 left education a long time ago.”

The feedback from students underlines the importance of the wraparound support, which many members say makes the difference between them dropping out and having the confidence to continue studying.

And the additional support doesn’t stop there. When students complete the K102 module, UNISON then offers interview skills sessions to

help them prepare for the interview they will need to do to be accepted on the nursing degree course.

Having completed the K102 herself, Samantha went back to take the Diploma in Health and Social Care, and the Level 2 qualification felt like a breeze after studying at Level 4. “I’d done the hard before I’d done the easier, if that makes sense,” she says.

Samantha is now progressing to her nursing degree qualification through the OU – something that she has dreamed of doing for many years.



“I’ve always wanted to be a nurse but at the age of 20, I fell pregnant with my son,” she says. “So I promised myself that I would progress further once he started secondary school.”

Advancing on her learning journey has also given Samantha the confidence to become active in UNISON, first as a health and safety rep and then as joint chair of the UCHT Branch – a role she’s stepped down from now she’s starting her degree.

“Back in school, I was never very confident, I wouldn’t have said boo to a goose,” she recalls. “But I definitely think doing the courses has given me the confidence to think ‘If you can do this, you can do most things in life’ – so it did help.” ✨

**“I had a tutor that I met once a month with the rest of your classmates to go through a few things”**



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# Collina wins national TUC learning rep award

A UNISON ULR with a passion for equality is the TUC's Learning Rep of the Year.

## **LOUGHBOROUGH**

University ULR Collina Angus was named Learning Rep of the Year at last year's annual congress of the TUC, in recognition of her successful integration of learning and equalities issues.

"I was so glad to be nominated and then forgot all about it, so when I got the call I was so surprised and then I was really pleased," Collina says.

"It was quite a shock but

**"I got a real passion for learning so when the person who had been doing it was going to stop, I didn't want it to stop, so I took up the position myself"**

it was really nice to know that what I've been doing has been appreciated and valued – it was lovely."

Collina took on the ULR role five years ago, in the first year after she started working as a programmes administrator at the university.

"I had quite a few UNISON representatives in my office and I really enjoyed the work they were doing and was going to a lot of



their events,” she says.

“I got a real passion for learning so when the person who had been doing it was going to stop, I didn’t want it to stop, so I took up the position myself.”

Collina is focused on offering learning that her members will be interested in, so based on feedback and surveys, she’s organised courses like Dealing with Difficult Conversations for managerial staff and Aggression in the Workplace for security staff.

She also knows that organising themed events around awareness campaigns has proved a popular way to engage people in informal learning and an effective method for raising the branch’s profile and boosting recruitment.

This approach has proved especially effective on equality, which is a passion for Collina, who lives with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Last year, the branch:  
 \* marked LGBT History Month with a talk by Loughborough English lecturer Dr Sarah Parker on LGBT+ love poems through the ages;  
 \* celebrated International Women’s Day with Dr Cheryl Travers, another lecturer at the university,

delivering a presentation on communication skills;  
 \* invited Leicester-based multi-disciplinary artist Carol Leeming to give an introductory survey of Black history to mark Black History Month.

Collina helped found the county-wide ULR forum, and its meetings have helped her develop as a ULR. “Just listening to other people’s ideas, hearing about things they’ve been doing, gives you so much inspiration and shows you what’s possible in your own area,” she says.

“We’re also able to lean on each other and learn from each other – it’s been massively beneficial.”

Collina was heavily involved in the development of the forum’s joint plan on learning last year, which included sessions on mental health in the workplace, bystander

**“I had quite a few UNISON representatives in my office and I really enjoyed the work they were doing”**

### CHECK ONLINE

\* You can watch some of the online events Collina has organised at: <https://bit.ly/31zY22G>

\* There’s a short interview with Collina and the all the other TUC 2021 award-winners video at: <https://bit.ly/3DqH7g7>

training and dealing with difficult phone calls.

The new plan that the forum was developing as *ULearn* went to press will include topics such as practical sustainability.

Developing her skills as a learning rep for the past five years has made a massive difference to Collina’s self-confidence, she says, which has led her to take on the role of branch chair, in addition to her ULR and equality roles.

“If you’d met me five years ago, you’d have seen that I wasn’t comfortable at all but doing this role and having such a passion for it has really brought me out of my shell,” Collina says. “And then when I won the TUC award and did the videos and interviews that came with it, that boosted my self-esteem and my belief in myself, which is great.” \*



# Getting to grips with digital skills

Marcus Sharp is helping members in Nottingham's parks department get more out of their digital devices.

## TAKING A DIGITAL

Champions course last year gave Nottingham union learning rep Marcus Sharp the confidence to help a member make a successful personal injury assistance claim online.

Marcus, who trained as a gardener and works as a public realm operative in Nottingham City Council's parks department, became a ULR and a workplace rep at the same time five years ago.

"I like helping people – that's one of the reasons I became a rep – and the roles complement each other," he says.

It was Regional Learning and Development Organiser (RLDO) Gavin McCann who suggested Marcus enrol on the Digital Champions course. And he's happy that he did because he got so much out of it.

**"Because the course is designed to be completed in bite-sized sections, Marcus was able to fit in the learning between his work his union roles and his family commitments"**

"I think it's one of the best courses I've been on," Marcus says. "The way the economy is moving now, we've all got to have digital skills – in our department we've all been handed tablets that we do everything on now."

Because the course is designed to be completed

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in bite-sized sections, Marcus was able to fit in the learning between his work, his union roles and his family commitments (he has two young children).

Marcus was in a meeting with members from a different yard to the one he's based in when one of them took him aside to reveal his poor grasp of digital skills.

"The first thing I did was help him set up his mobile banking and then he told me about his injury," he says.

The member had had an accident at work as a result of lack of training with a piece of equipment. He wouldn't even have known he could make



## GETTING ON AT WORK

More than 400 members in the East Midlands have completed online skills checks through the region's Get On At Work project since it was launched in October 2020.

And once they've identified their English or maths skills levels, learners can then go on to enrol on a course to gain a functional skills qualification – now essential when applying for jobs requiring English and maths GCSEs or equivalents.

Between them, East Midlands learners achieved more than 100 functional skills qualifications last year both through Get On At Work and the separate learning programme that the Northants ULR team runs with Northamptonshire Adult Learning Service.

"The project has been a success because it's set up to provide easy access to courses that give people more confidence in their abilities when so much is uncertain," says Regional Learning and Development Organiser Gavin McCann.

With the digital divide making it ever more important to have ULRs in place to offer face-to-face support, Gavin is very glad that the region has been able to help train dozens of new learning reps.

Last year's total of 55 new ULRs completing their training is the region's largest cohort in five years.

a claim through UNISON, let alone a successful one, without Marcus's help.

"We just did a couple of half-hour sessions, we sorted out his claim online and now he's away," he says.

"He's bought himself an iPad and now you can't keep him off Facebook even though he'd never been on it before!"

More and more members are coming to Marcus looking for his help with improving their digital skills. "I do little workshops in my dinner time," he says. "They come and see me and I'll get the

council laptop out and show them how to do shopping safely online when they're on eBay and things like that." \*

**"More and more members are coming to Marcus looking for his help with improving their digital skills"**





Lesley Lancelott is using her experience as a survivor to support people who are controlled and abused by their partners.

# Standing up against domestic abuse



## WHEN THE NORTH

West Regional Women's Committee (NWRWC) was putting together an event on domestic abuse last autumn, someone in the online planning group suggested asking a survivor to speak.

That's when Manchester Branch activist Lesley Lancelott spoke up. "I'll do that if you want," she said. It was the first time she'd revealed to anyone outside her close family that she'd endured domestic abuse as a young woman.

"Everyone on the call looked a bit surprised and I realised that because I look confident in a trade union sense, no

**"Part of me always knew it wasn't my fault but I definitely modified my own behaviour and I managed situations to reduce his trigger points"**

one thought for a minute that what I was bringing to the discussion was personal experience," says Lesley, who chairs the branch women's self-organised group and is a member of the NWRWC.

"And that made me think that if there's somebody on the seminar experiencing domestic abuse who feels like she's on her own, like she's the only one, then I have a responsibility to speak out."

Now in her 60s, Lesley was a teenager when she met and married the man who would go on to violently control her behaviour from the moment she became pregnant with the first of four children.

“The response I got from my extended family was, ‘These things happen, you have to learn how not to set him off,’” Lesley recalls.

“Part of me always knew it wasn’t my fault but I definitely modified my own behaviour and I managed situations to reduce his trigger points,” Lesley says.

With nowhere to go for support (her mother had left the family home when Lesley was 10 and her father was an alcoholic),

Lesley endured a decade of domestic abuse until she could finally take no more.

“One of the reasons I left when I did was my kids were coming of an age where they understood what was going on,” she says. “I didn’t want my two girls thinking that was their role in life and I didn’t want my two boys to grow up and become the kind of people who treat women like that.”

She succeeded on both counts: her daughters won’t stand for bad behaviour from anyone and her grown-up sons are still openly affectionate with her in public.

Becoming a single mother in the early 1980s, Lesley

## MERSEYSIDE TU ED MOVES HOME

Five UNISON members were some of the very first learners to enjoy face-to-face courses in the new home of Merseyside Trade Union Education in the autumn.

The three-day Mental Health Awareness course took place shortly after the department had moved from its previous home in the Cotton Exchange building on Old Hall Street in Liverpool to the Birkenhead campus of Wirral Metropolitan College.

Four of the UNISON members on the course came from the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, including ULR Norman Hunter.

“Too many organisations put on stress awareness training to help individuals look after their mental health but they don’t look at what’s causing the stress,” says Norman.

“What this course was good at was looking at what causes stress in the first place and making sure you have the policies and procedures in place to reduce the impact on people’s mental health.”

**\* Merseyside Trade Union Education’s new address is: 3rd Floor, Hamilton Campus, Wirral Metropolitan College, Birkenhead CH41 4AD.**

**“I didn’t want my two girls thinking that was their role in life and I didn’t want my two boys to grow up and become the kind of people who treat women like that”**

was encouraged by friends to enrol as a mature student at what is now Manchester Metropolitan University. It wasn’t just about the qualification: her student grant was worth more than the dole.

It was in the final year of her General Arts degree that Lesley started work for Manchester City Council (“fear of debt drove me into work because I couldn’t afford an overdraft,” she says).

Starting work as a care

continued overleaf ►

continued from page 25

assistant, Lesley became a rep within a few months of joining NUPE (one of the forerunners of UNISON) and, after moving into a new job in the housing department, she remained active on joining NALGO (another forerunner).

“Becoming a rep saved my life – there is something about standing up for other people that gives you the strength to stand up for yourself,” she says.

For Lesley, domestic abuse is a union issue because anyone experiencing violence in the home is likely to struggle at work, which could eventually lead them into a disciplinary hearing.

“The trauma of domestic abuse impacts on the way somebody works,” Lesley points out. “As trade unionists, we have to be saying, ‘You can tell me the real reason you can’t concentrate, why you’re smiling through gritted teeth, why you can’t take time off work even though you’ve got a broken rib’.”

Last autumn’s lunchtime event, the very first to be aimed at both activists and HR officers, worked extremely well, according to Area Organiser and Women’s Officer Jennifer Walley.

“The positive feedback following the event included comments such as ‘thought-provoking’, ‘emotional’ and ‘powerful’,” she says.

And it’ll be no flash in the pan, Jennifer says. “This was

an event devised, developed and delivered by grassroots women, some of them new to the committee and, in time, the work they’ve started is going to make a massive difference to the lives of other women (and men).”

Lesley’s contribution to the campaign has proved invaluable, says Jennifer says. “She is a truly amazing person. The work she does is phenomenal. And the women I put in touch with her all say she is a great mentor.”

This year, the committee is planning to buy domestic abuse resources for a library the committee is opening within UNISON’s North West Regional Centre.

And all the regional SOGs are working together to deliver a workshop on Workplace Organising Against Hate

**“The positive feedback following the event included comments such as ‘thought-provoking’, ‘emotional’ and ‘powerful’”**

**The Freedom Programme employs an independent domestic violence advisor (IDVA) to help women to take out non-molestation orders via email and telephone and is happy to help UNISON members. Helpline: 01942 262 270**

Crime at the North West Skills For Strength event in March, with the women’s committee focussing on domestic violence.

One of the key goals of the campaign is to convince employers in the region that their duty of care to staff should include adoption of a clear workplace domestic violence and abuse policy – something just 5 per cent of employers have agreed right now.

For Lesley, what’s important is being able to help people who might be going through anything like what she endured when she was growing up.

“People have said to me that I’m brave but I’ve been that frightened woman in the corner and I’m not going back there – and I won’t see anybody else there either,” she says.

“If I find out a manager is picking on a frightened woman in a corner, they’re in for a big shock because that woman has got the weight of the union behind her – and I’m the bloody union, don’t mess with me!” ✨

# UNISON helps turn Northern region red

Northern Regional support helped make last year's Wear Red Day the most successful yet.

## BRANCHES ACROSS THE

Northern Region staged events to support Wear Red Day last year, the awareness event run every year by Show Racism the Red Card (SRtRC).

They helped the anti-racism charity hold its biggest yet Wear Red Day in October, when more than 250,000 people across the country showing their commitment to combatting racism by wearing something red.

The region's active promotion of the day on social media helped push SRtRC achieve its highest trending position on Twitter, with the #WRD21 hashtag reaching as high as number three on the day.

Darlington Branch held



a successful event at the headquarters of the Arthur Wharton Foundation, the charity that celebrates the achievements of Victorian sporting hero Arthur 'Kwame' Wharton.

Arthur was just 18 when he moved to Darlington from his native Ghana in 1883, and went on to become the first Black professional footballer, a champion cyclist and the first official fastest man with a record time that stood for 30 years.

Newcastle City Branch hosted an online event open

to all members in the region with speakers including Newcastle upon Tyne Central MP Chi Onwurah and former Newcastle United goalkeeper Shaka Hislop, who is now Honorary President of SRtRC.

Several landmarks were illuminated in red to mark the occasion, including Middlesbrough Town Hall and the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, joining landmarks throughout the UK including Birmingham Utilita Arena, Glasgow Hydro and the London Eye. ✨





# Wales team wins Inspire! award

The swift and effective response to the pandemic from the Wales Union Learning Fund project won praise from the Learning and Work Institute Wales.

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## CREATING A DIGITAL

learning package to help key workers do their jobs safely during Covid has won an Inspire! Adult Learning Award for the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) project team.

Presented at an online event in September, the Skills for Work award was shared with nursing students at The Open University Wales and homeless charity The Wallich.

Determined from the outset of the Covid crisis to do everything they could to help, the WULF team was able to swiftly

adapt to the challenges of online delivery thanks to its mix of knowledge and skills, says Project Manager Jenny Griffin.

“Each of us has brought something different to the table, which is why we were able to move so quickly and why it has been so successful,” she says.

The team and the tutors all worked incredibly hard to ensure NHS staff, social care workers and other public service frontline staff gained the skills they needed to continue to support the people relying

on them – while minimising the risks of contracting or transmitting coronavirus.

Since March 2020, the project has supported more than 2,500 frontline workers through a programme of webinars and e-learning and helped many of them access other learning opportunities with learning grants.

“It felt absolutely fantastic to find out we’d won the skills award,” says Jenny. “To get that recognition was not just for us but also for the hard work of our learners and tutors in adapting to online delivery.” ✨

# Reaching members with digital tools

There's a new suite of workshops from LAOS that is helping activists organise and campaign on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

## ACTIVISTS WHO ARE

keen to raise their game on digital organising have been enjoying a new suite of five linked workshops designed and developed by Learning and Organising Services (LAOS).

In the West Midlands, more than two dozen activists worked their way through the first self-guided e-learning module, which introduces key concepts around digital organising and ensures activists know how to protect members' personal information.

And then each of the three tutor-led workshops in the region (which covered social media, online meetings and digital campaigning) all attracted around a dozen participants.

"They definitely made people appreciate that it makes sense to use

these digital tools," says West Midlands Regional Learning and Development Organiser (RLDO) Gurdeep Singh.

"By the last workshop, people could see the benefits of engaging with the wider membership in this way both for themselves as reps and for their branches as well."

As well as learning inside the sessions, activists could also ask questions about specialist issues for follow-up afterwards. That meant that if they wanted to know, for example, about developing their branch presence on Twitter, the region could then put them in touch with the best person to help outside the session.

"I think that it's really important that the union continues to develop how

## UPDATE YOUR ORGANISING SKILLS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

The full suite of five workshops covers:

- \* social media tools – popular platforms, their different demographics, and how to encourage engagement
- \* taking online meetings – different platforms, good practice, overcoming restrictions
- \* digital campaigning – what makes a good campaign, putting digital tools to work
- \* organising online – using digital tools as part of an organising strategy
- \* staying safe online – good practice, dealing with unpleasant encounters, wellbeing and switching off.

➔ <https://bit.ly/33wLqKP>

we communicate with our members and how we increase participation among the membership," says Gurdeep.

"With a lot more people working from home and many lone workers not seeing anyone from UNISON, it's absolutely crucial that we embrace these digital tools and use them to our advantage." \*



Members and reps in the South West have been getting to grips improving how they can support people with dyslexia, dyspraxia and other neurodivergent experiences.

# Celebrating our neurodiverse members

## THE SOUTH WEST

learning team has helped members and reps learn more about neurodiversity through two online sessions delivered in partnership with the disabled-led social enterprise Diversity and Ability (D&A).

Roughly 15 per cent of people in the UK are neurodivergent, which means they learn, store and process information differently from the way society expects. They can be autistic or have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia or dyspraxia.

More than 50 members took part in the first virtual lunch'n'learn in November,

**“More than 50 members took part in the first virtual lunch'n'learn in November, which looked at the barriers faced by neurodiverse people”**

which looked at the barriers faced by neurodiverse people in the workplace, the impact on their mental health, and how workplaces can be set up to celebrate and include them.

“We had a really wide variety of members, from the north of the region to the bottom end of Cornwall, and from a range of employers in local government and schools,” says Regional Learning and Development Organiser Natalie Chadwick.

people that we work with, so let's hone in on their talents and celebrate their differences, which was really good and very UNISON!" Natalie says.

Later the same month, the regional learning team brought in D&A's Jesse King and Chris Jenkins to deliver a workshop for reps that looked in detail at supporting neurodiverse members in the workplace – something that more and more reps are doing.

The 13 activists who took part came from local government, higher education, the Environment Agency and the police service.

"The people who work for D&A have got lots of personal experience that they can share with the reps about how someone who is neurodiverse

might feel going through, say, change at work," Natalie says.

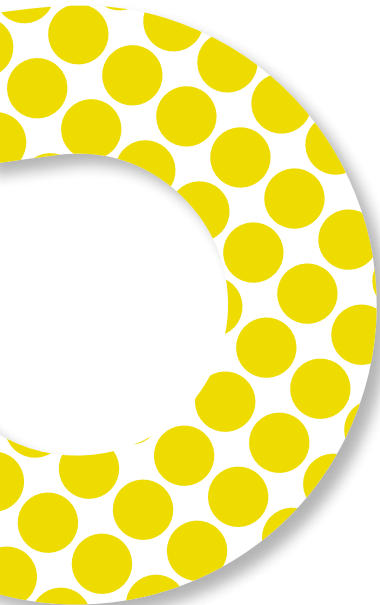
"And a few of the reps were bringing in some real life situations of how they're currently supporting members who are neurodiverse who aren't being supported by their employers."

Natalie was really happy with the feedback from the workshop. "People said things like, 'enthused, educated and empowered' and 'included, positive and inspired' and 'hungry for change', so we saw how the session had captured what we wanted, which was really fantastic," she says.

The regional team is now looking into how to build on the success of both pilot sessions and will be working with D&A to make some tweaks to the reps' workshop before running it again.

Meanwhile, participants from both the webinar and the workshop have already been spreading the word about neurodiversity, with some contacting the team about running similar sessions in their own workplaces.

"We've already had requests from a couple of local government branches who have said, 'We think our employer would benefit from teaming up with UNISON to offer the wider staff group this kind of learning'," Natalie says. ✨



"Lunch'n'learns mean we can reach people who might not have done anything with UNISON before, who can learn a bit more about the union as well as learning about what we're teaching on the day, which is really cool."

Nikita Montlake from D&A packed a huge amount of information into the 90-minute webinar, as well as fielding questions members put to her using the chat function.

"It was really celebrating that we have neurodiverse

**"A few of the reps were bringing in some real life situations of how they're currently supporting members who are neurodiverse who aren't being supported"**





They may no longer be working but Surrey County Branch retired members are keen to continue developing their skills so they can keep contributing to the union.



## Helping retired members keep on learning

### **RETIRED MEMBERS IN**

the Surrey County Branch are so determined to keep developing themselves that they have invited speakers from Learning and Organising Services (LAOS) to their online meetings not once but twice in the past year.

Learning & Workforce Development Officers Oreleo Du Cran and John Finnegan have both talked to the Retired Members

**“Before the pandemic, the group would hold regular face-to-face meetings in Guildford and organise fun social activities”**



Group, alerting them to all the learning opportunities that are available to all UNISON retired members.

Before the pandemic, the group would hold regular face-to-face meetings in Guildford and organise fun social activities, including walks with a pub lunch or visits to attractions like the motoring and aviation museum at

Brooklands in Weybridge.

When Covid forced the group to call a halt to all of that, Retired Members Secretary Ginny Eaton re-started regular meetings on Zoom.

Ginny has been secretary for the past four years, using many of the skills she developed over the last decade of her working life, when she undertook a range of roles for the branch while on full-time release from her job in a special needs school (she was active at regional level, too).

Once the virtual meetings started, Ginny realised that one of the upsides was that significantly more people could join in.



**“Once the virtual meetings started, Ginny realised that one of the upsides was that significantly more people could join in”**

Zoom meant that some of the more far-flung members now living outside Surrey could take part for the first time, while the accessibility of virtual meetings helped disabled members to take part, as well.

“Prior to Zoom, I would often miss events as I would not be well enough to attend in person,” says Donna. “The retired members meeting went onto Zoom and I was no longer restricted by being able to manage the walks to buildings, allergy or infection risks or simply stairs.”

Speakers at the online meetings have helped retired members find out more about local, regional and national issues. Branch Secretary Paul Couchman came to discuss how the branch had responded to the pandemic, while Regional Officer Debbie Monksfield spoke about her priorities for the year ahead.

John was the first speaker from LAOS to address the retired members group at the beginning of last year.

“It was a really nice space for them to tell me about some of their issues as retired members and the type of learning they were after,” he says.

“They were quite surprised that as retired members they still had access to our member learning opportunities.”

Ginny agrees that the members hadn’t realised

there were so many learning opportunities that were open to them. “We didn’t know there was so much available to retired members, so that was very good – John was quite inspirational,” she says.

When Oreleo spoke to the retired members at the end of last year, he found they were particularly interested in opportunities to improve their digital skills – something Ginny herself says she would like to expand.

“I’m in my 70s now and not very good on IT,” she says. “It’s very difficult when you haven’t grown up with it like younger people have, so anything that can help us along is good.”

Oreleo, who also talked to the group about how they could use UNISON learning resources to improve their money management and budgeting skills, was impressed with how the retired members were interested in remaining part of wider branch life.

“Some of them have been retired for many years and some of them more recently but as a group of people they were still very organised and they still wanted input into their branch,” Oreleo says.

“They were very keen to keep up with the branch and how they could help younger people in the branch and give back, which I think is fantastic.” ✨



# A lifeline to improve mental health

Highlands and Islands members have been learning effective ways of tackling the mental health challenges of the pandemic on a popular online course.



## UNISON MEMBERS

from all sectors across the Highlands and Islands have been developing their understanding of mental health through a virtual course that has proved very popular through the pandemic.

NessCare Training Manager Audrey Lee, who has delivered the Mental Health Awareness course 10 times in the past 20 months, has noticed how the profile of learners has changed over that time.

“Before the pandemic, it was mostly health and social care,” Audrey says. “But since the pandemic,

they’ve come from across the board where UNISON are involved, including the police and the fire service.”

This change is no surprise, when so many people are experiencing the mental health challenges of working from home – whether they are isolated and living alone or stressed by having to juggle work and family commitments in the same space.

“When I start the session, I always ask people to introduce themselves and what’s led them to the course,” Audrey says.

“Since the pandemic, it’s been much more that people

are coming for themselves and for their families, particularly if they’re working from home and not seeing their colleagues face-to-face as much as they were.”

The virtual course is significantly different from the face-to-face version that Audrey originally designed and delivered. It’s now very much focused on helping learners improve the way they face the mental challenges of the Covid era.

“I’ve taken it away from a more generic understanding of mental health to focus particularly on anxiety, depression and stress, both personal



stress and workplace stress,” Audrey says.

“So we’re focusing on what people can do pragmatically to help themselves and looking at what is available in terms of support from voluntary and professional organisations in different areas of Scotland.”

Audrey is able to bring her own experiences into the two-hour course, having worked as a mental health nurse for more than a decade before moving into the training sector in the early 2000s. She achieved a Level 4 in Learning and Development in 2006, launched NessCare five years ago and has been working with UNISON for the past three.

“I’ve got a lot of experiences and examples I can share and also people bring their own experiences, as well – they feel quite comfortable using the chat function, which is really important,” she says.

UNISON learners are clearly benefiting from what they learn on the course, according to the feedback they leave afterwards. “People say they’ve got a lot out of it, they’ve learned a lot of new information and they have new strategies they can use to help themselves,” Audrey says. \*

# Managing your money

Close to 200 members joined a one-hour webinar in September, which was delivered by The Money Charity on behalf of Learning and Organising Services and There For You, the UNISON charity for members going through financial and emotional difficulties.

The Money Charity tailored the content of the webinar to help members manage their money better, stay on top of their finances and plan for the future. They

also offered some of the latest money-saving tips.

The webinar covered: becoming more financially resilient; why budgeting and keeping track of your money is important; credit options and debt management; and the benefits of saving. It also included information and support from UNISON and other organisations.

🔗 Catch up with the recording: <https://bit.ly/3frce11>

## SUPPORT FOR UNISON MEMBERS

Grants of up to £350 are available from the COVID-19 Response Fund to help members whose household incomes have been affected by the pandemic. It’s quickest to apply online. But if you’re unable to do that, email [covidgrantenquiries@unison.co.uk](mailto:covidgrantenquiries@unison.co.uk) with your name, membership number and address and There For You will post a form to you.

UNISON’s free Debtline service is available to help members manage their money and take control of their debts. Call **0800 389 3302** (freephone number).

🔗 The UNISON Benefit Calculator helps you make sure you’re getting all the help you’re eligible for. It usually takes just 10 minutes to complete online. <https://unison.entitledto.co.uk/home/start>

🔗 Find out more about support from There For You: <https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/financial-assistance/>





When Babs Hennessy discovered that a woman from her town had survived imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, she set out on a journey that would reveal an incredible wartime record.



# Honouring the memory of a Wigan war hero

## **FORMER LIVERPOOL**

Branch Secretary Babs Hennessy is campaigning for a memorial to Mary O'Shaughnessy, a disabled Wigan woman whose wartime record of anti-fascist resistance deserves much wider recognition.

Babs first came across references to Mary in 2018, when she was reading a book about the notorious women's camp in Ravensbrück, where Mary

**"I was so amazed that a local woman had been held in a Nazi concentration camp that I wanted to find out more about her"**

survived 12 brutal months of imprisonment before the end of the Second World War.

"I was so amazed that a local woman had been held in a Nazi concentration camp that I wanted to find out more about her," Babs says.

"I was expecting to find the story of a woman who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but I couldn't have been more wrong – the more I found out, the more extraordinary

Mary's story became."

Babs has been piecing together details about Mary's wartime record with the help of material she uncovered online, surviving members of Mary's family and the Wigan and Leigh Archive Service.

Mary was born in Ashton-in-Makerfield in 1898, the eldest child of Dennis and Mary O'Shaughnessy. Her father was a coal miner and an activist in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, forerunner of the once-mighty National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Born with a foreshortened left arm and fitted with a prosthetic hand as an adult, Mary left England in her early 20s to work as a nanny in France, which is how she came to be living in the western city of Angers at the beginning of the German occupation.

Although she held an

Irish passport (and Ireland remained neutral when war broke out), Mary soon became involved in the highly dangerous operations to spirit stranded military personnel back to Britain.

It was a French doctor who first asked her for help. He had had to amputate the hand of an injured British pilot and asked Mary to visit him. The doctor was hoping that Mary's experience of living with a similar impairment would encourage

the airman to believe he could do the same.

After several visits, Mary discovered that the Nazis were planning to seize all Allied military personnel at the hospital where the pilot was recovering. She volunteered to help smuggle him to safety in Marseille, from where he made it back to the UK.

continued overleaf ►

**CHECK ONLINE** ↗

Find out more  
on Facebook:

<https://bit.ly/3oqA82B>



**"Babs has been piecing together details about Mary's wartime record with the help of material she uncovered online"**

Mary (above in black at rear) with blood dripping from her mouth, while a smiling guard looks into the camera and (below right, holding a handbag), with some of the paper visible that prisoners stuffed under their clothes to look healthy enough to avoid selection for the gas chamber.

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Babs thinks that it was through this operation that Mary first came into contact with the French Resistance. She seems likely to have worked with the Pat O'Leary Line, the operation that helped stranded Allied soldiers and airforce personnel evade capture by the Nazis.

Mary also began work for MI9, the wing of British military intelligence that helped thousands of Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and downed aircrew escape to Britain. That was established when Babs found her name on the MI9 payroll.

Betrayed to the Gestapo in early 1944, Mary was sent to Montluc prison in Lyon, where she was held for a total of 19 days.

**(Right) Liverpool Evening Express, December 1945**

**“Mary arrived in May 1944, the camp was severely overcrowded and the prisoners were forced into long days of very hard labour”**

But despite 10 days interrogation and torture, Mary never gave a scrap of information to her captors. Once they accepted they could not break her, they forced her and hundreds of other women into a cattle truck bound for Ravensbrück.

Originally built in 1939, by the time Mary arrived in May 1944, the camp was severely overcrowded and the prisoners were forced into long days of very hard labour and systematically under-nourished.

Mary managed to endure the next 12 months in the camp, living in constant fear that the discovery of her impairment would mean she would be marked for death (see sidebar).

Finally rescued by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945, Mary weighed just five stone (32 kg) when she was repatriated to the UK.

In recognition of her work in helping to save the lives of RAF aircrew, Mary was made an honorary member of the RAF Escaping Society after the war – the only recognition she received, so far as Babs can find out.

“After the war, Mary wanted to write a book to tell people what had happened but she was told that the public were war-weary and no one would believe the Germans would do this to people,” Babs says. “I’ve wanted to get her story out to a wider audience to give her a voice.”

Babs delivered her first talk about Mary during the Ashton in Makerfield Musical and Cultural Festival in 2019.

“I thought I’d be lucky if 10 people turned up,” she says. “But 50 people came and they all invited me to speak to the different groups they were members of – and it’s snowballed from there,” she says.

Last year, Babs helped the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority



**“She made an extraordinary choice to help save the lives of other people, despite the risks to herself - it's an incredible story”**

Branch mark the 76th anniversary of the liberation of Ravensbrück with a well-attended online event about Mary's bravery in war.

And now Babs is part of a local campaign to install a memorial bench in Ashton to help preserve Mary's memory in the area where she grew up.

Babs believes that Mary's story is not simply about honouring the past – it's also a reminder about the importance of taking a stand today.

“Mary could have chosen to look the other way, not to get involved and try to live her own life. But she made an extraordinary choice to help save the lives of other people, despite the risks to herself – it's an incredible story,” Babs says.

## MARY IN HER OWN WORDS

These are a few short extracts from the sworn affidavit Mary made on her return to England documenting her experiences at Ravensbrück.

“On or soon after arrival we were forced to strip naked, our clothes were taken from us, we were forced to take a shower bath and were then issued with prison uniform which consisted of chemise, knickers and thin cotton dress. It was at this time that many women internees had their heads shaved but I managed to avoid this ....

Soon after my arrival in Ravensbrück a system of pink cards was instituted whereby internees were issued with a pink card if they (were) considered unfit to work either by reason of old-age, sickness or infirmity ... it was soon common knowledge that holders of pink cards were scheduled for the gas chamber.

On one occasion, while I was in the hut of which Ann Seymour Sheridan was Block Alteste (senior) ... an SS male guard, notorious for his brutality and also for his job which appeared to consist mainly in making selections for the gas chamber, came to a parade for which a roll had been called and issued orders that all women on parade should strip to the waist .... I was able to avoid this parade by the good offices of Ann Seymour Sheridan who, after the roll was called, was able to get myself and others in the Block and hide us under a bed in the far corner. Had I been present and subjected to this selection I would certainly have been selected on account of my artificial arm.”

Mary O'Shaughnessy, 29 December 1945

“But there's a wider relevance as well: when you look at what's happening in the UK and Europe and America, particularly with

the hostile environment around asylum-seekers and refugees, you can see that Mary's story is also a warning from history.” \*



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