

UNISON Retired Members National Conference 18-19 October, Telford

Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section Delegates' Report



Birmingham delegates Liz Hobbs, Maureen Wade, Brian Allbutt and Eleanor Dixon

By Maureen Wade

The UNISON Retired Members National Conference was held in Shropshire this year, and I am happy to report that we sent a delegation of four – myself, Brian Allbutt, Eleanor Dixon and Liz Hobbs.

We all contributed to the event by attending the individual 'Self Organised Groups' (SOGs) and also participating in the Panel Discussions. This was the first time some people had attended a national conference and they made fantastic contributions, by moving conference motions and contributing in motion debates.

On the first day of conference, the timetable focussed on the individual SOGs as well as a Panel Discussion on 'The Cost of Living Crisis and Older People'.

I attended the Women's SOG, and I am glad to report that this year it was better organised. The event was primarily chaired by Rosie McGregor (the National Chair of UNISON Retired Members), and we were introduced to candidates who were standing for the Women's Conference, with statements from all those standing.

The focus at this SOG was Pensioner Poverty, but more specially the issues around the WASPI Women, and the anger from delegates that the Government has not responded to the report from the Ombudsman which made it clear that women born in the 1950s had not been adequately informed about the change in the State Pension eligibility age and so have been disproportionately affected in terms of experiencing poverty.

In addition, there discussions on the gender poverty pay gap and the threat to the Triple Lock. The Women's SOG also expressed its solidarity with the women who are struggling for freedom in Iran, alongside the need for us all to support workers currently undertaking industrial action – many Retired Members had shown support with RMT strikers, and the talk was very much that their struggle was also our struggle.

Panel Discussion

I chose to attend the group on Social Care, chaired by Linda Richards (UNISON Retired Members National Committee), where the speaker was Gavin Edwards, the UNISON full time official who leads on Social Care.

Gavin spoke of the crisis in our Social Care system, and with 1.6 million people employed in Social Care, this sector was a priority for our union, especially in light of the 10,000 who lost life during the pandemic, with no proper PPE, no testing capacity, and also no proper sick pay in place resulting in infected people going into the workplace.

He spoke of the acute underfunding of the sector, now at £13 billion, down from £21 billion – that is, funding levels down to what they were in 2010, but with increased demand for services.

Local authorities do not have the monies leading to a fragmented service, privatised with 52% of UNISON care staff being employed in the private sector where profit is the major driver, with staff on zero hours contracts, working 12 – 14 hour shifts with no proper sleep-in allowances.

The 'Skills for Care' organisation estimated a 10% vacancy rate – 165,000 vacancies - in the care sector, with carers sprinting between calls, no travelling time payments and minimal call times, resulting in the normalisation of misery.

A lively discussion followed with members reporting on the situation in their areas, in relation to GP wait times, and the long waits for Care Assessments and Care Packages. There was also discussion about the fight of Residential workers at St Monika's Care Home, who are fighting for union recognition, and improvements in their pay and hours worked. It was agreed by all that there was a need for a National Care Service that was publicly funded.

To this end Gavin said that UNISON has commissioned the Fabian Society to produce a report to put the case for this, which should be published in 2024. He also emphasised the work that UNISON was doing with local authorities, to sign up to the Ethical Care Charter.

Wednesday Conference

The focus on Wednesday's agenda was on motions submitted to conference – there were 31 up for discussion, including our own submission on Integrated Care Systems. In terms of focus of the conference, it would be fair to say that the cost of living crisis was a major priority, and the impact it was having on the retired community, as well as the 167,000 UNISON members.

The motions up for discussion included:

- Individuals being forced to chose between 'heating or eating'.
- Public Transport and Bus Passes, and the threat to this concession.
- The threat tp free prescriptions and the moves to raise the entitlement age from 60 to 66.
- The threat to the Triple Lock, and that the government may renege on this commitment, pushing more pensioners into poverty.

Conference also discussed the crisis in social care and the need to invest in social care, and our own motion on Integrated Care Systems, moved by Liz and Brian, and which was passed.

I managed to speak in the debate relating to Prescription Charges, as well as the debate on Campaigns and Communication where there was some criticism that nationally not enough was done to keep in touch with members during the pandemic. I spoke about our experiences in the Birmingham branch of keeping the branch together with Zoom meetings and the newsletter, throughout the pandemic.

I'm also proud to say that our delegation intervened in the debate on trying to get a motion on Trans Rights ('Louder & Prouder') onto the agenda. We were not successful but it laid down a marker of what our branch stands for.

Conference is allowed to choose two motions to go towards National UNISON Conference – we chose to support our own resolution on Integrated Care Systems, as well as Motion 27 on Retired Members representation on the National Committee ('Rule D').

The motions chosen by conference were Motion 27, and Motion 14 on the urgent need for reform and increased investment in social care.

In all this was a good conference. Next year's event will be in Edinburgh. I hope we will get people who are eager to attend. Thank you to my fellow delegates, it was good to have the company!

By Eleanor Dixon

Firstly, I must say thanks to Liz for her support in travelling to and from the Conference with me. It was my first Conference and I was surprised by the number of Retired members who attended. This was a lovely experience for me.

I attended my first SOG group session on Black Retired members, and was disappointed there was no Chairperson and no one knew what was to be happening. It ended in individuals taking contact information - because of no organisation, we had no Issues to raise. It was agreed that Black Retired members have to get Issues raised at these Events and get mentioned in Unison's magazine.

The 2nd group I attended was Interesting - it was entitled 'There for you'. It was very informative about Welfare and help with small grants that are available for those who qualify, as well as assistance with Technology. It was well attended.

By Brian Allbutt

This was my first time as a delegate to the UNISON Retired Members Conference and my first time to Telford- So two of my "things to do before I die" ticked off the bucket list in just two days! Thank You Maureen.

Some General Comments

I thought the conference was quite well organised apart may be for the catering arrangements, which did seem a bit inadequate and I thought the conference Chair was excellent.

With 31 motions on the agenda, all calling for action by the National Retired Members Committee: to work with other organisations such as the National Pensioners Convention and to lobby, raise awareness, campaign, inform, educate, organise and lead.

So how confident am I that the UNISON National Retired Members Committee will act on these 31 motions – all but one passed in my recollection- and now firm Resolution commitments. Well not very and other delegates, judging by some of the contributions from the rostrum, would agree.

That is why I think the two most important motions passed by delegates at the UNISON National Retired Members Conference were Motion 18 from Enfield Local Government and Motion 20 from Hampshire, with amendments to both from West Midlands Region.

Motion 18: “More consistent support for retired members activity” raises concerns about the decline in activity of UNISON Branch Retired Members Section and calls on the National Retired Members Committee to

- Conduct a survey across UNISON of Branch Retired Members Sections -reporting back to the 2023 National Conference.
- Support the development of Branch Retired Members Sections
- Improve recruitment to Branch Retired Members Sections.

I recall a conversation Maureen and myself had with a delegate from Glamorgan over the total lack of support or even contact for their Retired Members Section from their UNISON Region.

The Hampshire motion “Campaign Communication” calls for the National Retired Members Committee and UNISON’s National Executive Committee to improve communication with Retired Members Sections and UNISON Regions, particularly with regard to campaigns concerning retired members.

A number of delegates shared their frustration at the rostrum, over the lack of effective communication; with some saying they get more information from the National Pensioners Convention than they ever get from their own UNISON Regions or the National Retired Members Committee.

Discussion Groups

I attended two Discussion Groups, the Disabled and LGBT+. And I want to reflect here on the LGBT+ discussion group and in particular, the motion from the West Midland Region “Trans Equality in Retirement” ruled “Out of Order” by the Standing Orders Committee (SOC).

The ruling of the SOC was that the motion was “not specific to Conference”, when quite clearly it was. The motion calls on the UNISON National Retired Members Committee “to support trans equality and trans rights among older members”. Whether delegates agreed with the motion from the West Midland Region “Trans Quality in Retirement” is hardly the point; delegates should have been given the opportunity to discuss it.

Our delegation was asked by Bob Deacon, on behalf of the West Midland Region, if we would be prepared to move “Reference Back” of that section of the SOC report to conference concerning the motion. After discussion, we agreed to support calls for “Reference Back” and Maureen and myself did in fact move “Reference Back” on behalf of Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section.

Unfortunately, after three successful calls for the West Midlands motion on “Trans Equality” to be moved and debated at the conference with overwhelming support; the SOC were able to get conference support finally for their decision to Rule the Motion Out of Order.

As a Gay man and first-time delegate to the UNISON National Retired Members Conference, I have to say, in my view, the decision taken by members of the SOC on the West Midland Regional motion,

were determined by prejudice and ignorance and not transparent and open discussion and debate, and certainly not in the interest of those retired members of UNISON who are Transgender retirees.

By Liz Hobbs

Disability self-organised group

We were fortunate with our group, that someone had volunteered/been identified beforehand, to chair our meeting. I was so taken by having a personal stenographer who transcribed all the comments made of delegates onto a small screen just for me, that I made few notes of this session! As someone with hearing loss, I wasn't used to having such first class treatment.

At the session people talked about the Disability Rail card that you can buy. You are eligible for this if you claim one of various benefits about disability or have a hearing or visual impairment. It gives you 30% off your fare for you and someone travelling with you so if you do just 1 long journey by train or use the train frequently, you tend to get your money back from buying the card. It's worth checking if you might be eligible if you have a disability.

There was support for the RMT campaign opposing the closure of railway station ticket offices, given the impact this would have on accessibility. There was some concern about the accessibility of the conference venue. Some delegates also raised concern over the lack of access to some Unison offices & a lack of support for retired members' branches. This highlights how we are fortunate in Birmingham with the support we get from the Unison office here.

Integrated Care Systems

Our branch proposed a motion on Integrated Care Systems, brought in with the Tory Governments' new Health and Care Act, July 2022. Brian Allbutt & I proposed/seconded the motion which was passed without any opposition.

Clinical Commissioning groups have been merged into fewer & less locally accountable organisations, Integrated Care Boards. These have acquired responsibility for strategic planning.

The Boards are of concern because they

- have a limited role for Local Authorities
- create the weakest ever local voice for patients, the public & health workers seeking to defend services against cuts & press for the services that are needed
- the Chairs are appointed centrally by NHS England & answerable only to that body.
- give sweeping new powers & controls for the Secretary of State but nothing is said about the duty of government to provide a universal health service nor for sustainable funding for NHS nor Care Services.

Competitive tendering is to be the exception, not the rule, under the new Act. During Lockdown, £millions of government i.e. our monies, was wasted when contracts went to favoured private firms with competitive tendering. Corruption or misuse of public monies will happen with less competitive tendering when private firms are used.

Integrated care will bring new openings for private contractors. 'Partnership with private companies' aims to encourage privatisation with firms being able to cherry pick work.

Mental Health Services, already grossly underfunded, are in danger of being sidelined by large acute Trusts.

In 2017 the National Audit Office warned that integrated care systems won't work with severely underfunded & understaffed services. Under successive Tory governments our NHS has been & is grossly underfunded with 1,000s of vacancies.

Our motion called on the Retired Members Committee to campaign with all appropriate organisations to stop the consequences of the new Health & Care Act. It calls for campaigning for

- a commitment that the ICS will maintain a comprehensive health service, free at the point of need, accessible to anyone at the time when they need health care or treatment, with priority based on clinical need.
- representatives from private sector organisations should not be on any ICB or committees
- a commitment that NHS providers are the default providers of health services, care & treatment
- any contracts continuing to be awarded to the private sector must be vigorously scrutinised with Compulsory Competitive Tendering.
- Hospital patients being entitled for a full assessment of their ongoing medical & social needs prior to discharge
- carers' needs & role are assessed
- independent annual reviews of workforce shortages
- resistance to de-professionalism & deregulation of the workforce. This puts profits before the needs of people.

Below: Liz moving the motion at conference

