

Organising for equality

UNISON guidelines on
self-organisation

UNISON **EQUALITY**



Foreword



UNISON is committed to achieving equality for all. One of the ways UNISON promotes equality is through self-organisation. Self-organisation brings together members from certain groups that face discrimination – women members, Black members, disabled members and

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members.

Self-organisation helps the union identify and challenge discrimination and build equality. It can be a way for members to get involved in the union, developing skills, expertise and confidence.

The guide explains UNISON's policies on self-organisation and how members can get involved.

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UNISON general secretary

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1. INTRODUCTION

Equality: central to our aims and objectives

UNISON is committed to achieving equality in our workplaces, in our union and across society. Equality is a high priority in our negotiating and campaigning work. People have the right to be treated with dignity and respect at work, to do their job to the best of their ability, free from discrimination and harassment. UNISON has been at the forefront of campaigns for equal pay, rights at work for same sex partners, gender recognition and access to work for disabled workers. Tackling racism remains a key priority. We want all our members to be involved in the union and have their voices heard.

UNISON is a membership organisation, a provider of services and an employer. In all these roles, it must comply with equality law and strives to be a best practice organisation. This applies at national, regional and branch level.

Part of UNISON's approach to achieving equality is the organisation of groups of members who may themselves face prejudice and discrimination. UNISON has four self-organised groups – for women members, Black members, disabled members and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) members. Self-organised groups work in partnership with other parts of the union to identify and promote our equality agenda.

Organising – the number one priority

Working on issues that do not directly involve and engage members will always be less successful than when members take ownership of an issue. This means organising. The UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice advises that a successful organising approach is one that:

- involves members in identifying issues, finding solutions and dealing with problems
- recruits, trains, and supports more active and confident representatives from among every work group and workplace
- takes a “what can we do about it” approach, rather than “leave it with me to sort out” one
- resolves most problems locally and speedily

because they are identified sooner

- builds confidence among members about what they can do with our support and guidance
- reaches out and inspires non-members to join UNISON
- leaves members feeling good about the union and ready to recruit others
- means trades unionism that has a political consciousness and is grounded in collective action, not individual and/or legal action
- ensures a legacy of organised workplaces.

Why self-organisation?

Trade unionism is all about organising workers around a common experience. We organise members in a number of different ways, such as by employer, by occupational group (home care workers, police staff, teaching assistants and so on) and by geography. Self-organisation is members organising around their experience of prejudice and discrimination. Because prejudice and discrimination are deep-rooted in our society, women members, Black members, disabled members and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members have traditionally been less visible in trade unions and under-represented in democratic structures. Self-organisation offers a way to address this.

It is sometimes thought that because the members of self-organised groups meet separately, self-organisation is separatism. It is not. UNISON's self-organised groups are a well-established part of our organisation. They are actively involved in all the union's mainstream work. They have a valuable role in ensuring that the union identifies and takes up equality issues, actively challenges discrimination and that our democratic structures reflect the whole membership.

Self-organisation strengthens UNISON. Self-organised groups may be the first point of contact with the union for members and potential members. Many members who become involved via a self-organised group go on to hold senior positions at branch, regional and national level.

Self-organisation can and should be a vibrant and dynamic part of UNISON: welcoming new activists, encouraging participation and helping members take on other roles in the union.

All UNISON members share responsibility for equality. Members who are not themselves part of a self-organised group may have important branch equality roles, as workplace equality reps or branch equality co-ordinators. They will work closely with the self-organised groups, but self-organised group membership is only for members who identify as part of that group.

Our four groups

Language and terminology are important but evolving. Our four self-organised groups are open to all members who identify as:

Black members: in UNISON 'Black' is used to indicate people with a shared history. Black with a capital 'B' is used in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities in today's society.

The terms 'minority ethnic' and 'ethnic minority' are in widespread official use today. However, these have clear disadvantages in terms of the connotations of marginal or less important. Also, in many neighbourhoods, towns and cities in Britain it is statistically inaccurate or misleading to describe Black groups as a minority. Using Black is about creating unity in our fight against racism.

Disabled members: in UNISON, we adopt the social model of disability, which says that disability is caused by barriers in society. These barriers generally fall into three categories:

- the environment – including inaccessible buildings and services
- people's attitudes – stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice
- organisations – inflexible policies, practices and procedures.

The medical model of disability suggests that by fixing their body, disabled people will be able to participate in society like everyone else. This is an

outdated model that is not supported by disabled people, disabled people's organisations or by UNISON.

Using the social model helps identify solutions to the barriers disabled people experience. It encourages the removal of these barriers within society, or the reduction of their effects, rather than trying to fix an individual's impairment or health condition.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members: In UNISON, we recognise that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members face many similar issues at work and in society and have a history of organising together. We believe LGBT people are stronger together. We also recognise the specific needs of lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people, in all their diversity.

Lesbians and gay men are those who are attracted to people of the same gender. Bisexual people are those who feel attraction to more than one gender. Transgender people are those whose gender identity differs from the gender they were labelled at birth.

Within our LGBT groups, we organise specific meetings for bi members and trans members. We also hold meetings for Black, disabled and women LGBT members.

Women members: in UNISON, all members who identify as women are welcome in our women's group. We recognise that women often experience multiple discrimination: they may also identify as LGBT, Black or disabled.

More than three quarters of our members are women, but they are still under-represented in UNISON's structures, as stewards and branch officers. This is why UNISON's rules on proportionality still have an important part to play in our organisation. Despite more than 40 years of equal pay legislation, women still earn less than men and most of our women members are low paid. So we have a particular focus on encouraging low paid and part-time women to become involved.

Self-organisation, proportionality and fair representation

UNISON’s commitment to structures that represent our diverse membership is written into the rules. The rule on proportionality says that structures and activities at branch, regional and national level should represent women and men in fair proportion to their membership. Nationally, UNISON’s membership is over 75% women.

The rule on fair representation says that structures and activities should include members taking into account factors such as age and low pay, the balance between part-time and full-time workers, manual and non-manual workers, different occupations, skills, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. This is not an exhaustive list – it is about the principle of inclusion.

By bringing traditionally excluded groups into UNISON, self-organisation helps all parts of the union meet fair representation and proportionality.

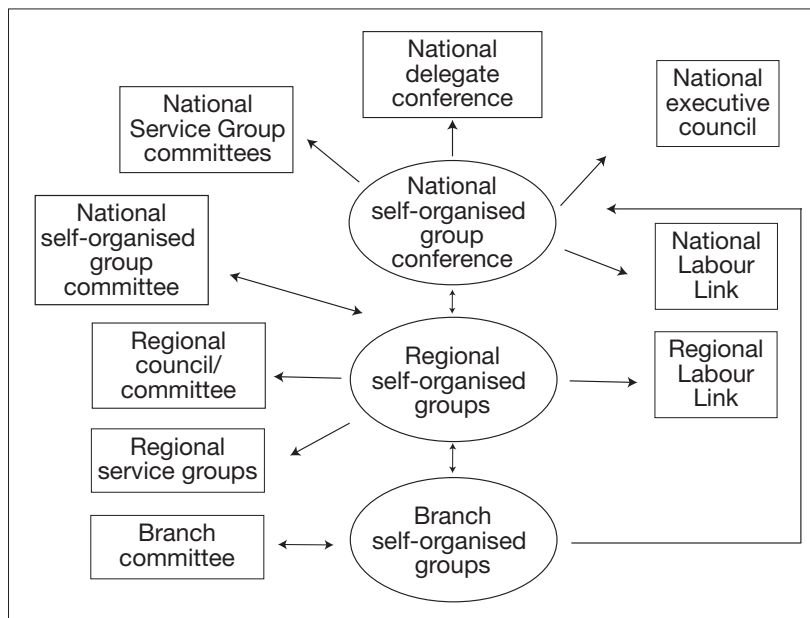
The principles apply equally to the internal organisation of self-organised groups themselves, so for example the women’s self-organised group should represent the broad diversity of women in UNISON.

Competing priorities

UNISON is a large, diverse and complex union. With well over one million working members, we pursue a wide range of organising, negotiating and campaigning issues.

Each year, following the union’s national delegate conference and a period of consultation, the union agrees national objectives and priorities for the forthcoming period. Only by prioritising, by focusing on these agreed objectives, can we ensure that all parts of the union support key initiatives and that the work we do, we do well. Self-organised groups, like other UNISON structures, develop their work in the context of these priorities. This ensures that the self-organised groups’ work can feed into the rest of the union and that all the union’s work has a strong equality dimension.

How does self-organisation link with the rest of the union?



2. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURES

Local level: branches

All UNISON members belong to a local branch. This is the main point of union organisation – indeed most members only ever have contact with their local branch. Branches often include members working for a number of different employers.

Members come together in branches to discuss issues of common concern. Branches are expected to encourage self-organisation as part of the branch development and organising plan. They can do this by:

- providing opportunities for members of the four groups to meet
- promoting self-organised group events and meetings – not just to known members of self-organised groups but to all potential members (in effect, all members of the branch)
- negotiating paid time off for members to attend these meetings. Members often have problems securing this even though they are likely to be discussing terms and conditions (detailed advice in the UNISON Facility Time guide for branches)
- providing resources and support for the groups, including finance (See section 4)
- ensuring that the self-organised groups are appropriately represented on the branch committee and actively involved in the branch's mainstream recruitment, organising and bargaining initiatives
- exploring and supporting self-organisation as a joint branch initiative, within a town for example, where the branch has not been able to set up a group on its own
- notifying the regional office when branch self-organised groups are established, including details of the point of contact
- being clear about the role and responsibilities of self-organised group reps and activists – there is more information on this in section 5 of this guide
- expecting regular reports from the self-

organised groups, including updates on the work programme and levels of participation

- encouraging members to participate in branch, regional and national self-organised group meetings and conferences. Not everyone who wants to go to a national conference can go – it is reasonable for branches to set limits on numbers, but opportunities should be publicised widely, in good time.

Only a small number of branches have all four self-organised groups established and functioning with regular meetings. There may be only a few known members of a particular self-organised group active within a branch. But there will certainly be other potential members in every branch. Different types of organisation work well in different circumstances. Section 5 of this guide looks at some of the options.

Every branch must keep self-organisation and equality on the agenda. Keep looking for ways to promote UNISON's policy, publicise regional and national self-organised group information and involve more members.

Where no branch self-organised group exists, branches are encouraged to develop a plan of action. This may include co-opting individual members onto the branch committee as a step towards a functioning group.

Branch equality co-ordinator

The branch equality co-ordinator is a post set out in the UNISON rule book and has a number of important functions. They do not have to be the fount of all knowledge on every equality issue, nor do they carry sole responsibility for the branch's equality work. Everyone shares responsibility for tackling prejudice and discrimination and promoting equality.

The role of the branch equality co-ordinator is to co-ordinate and monitor this shared responsibility. They do this by:

- being an identified and well publicised point of contact in the branch for equality issues

- collecting and sharing information on equality issues, including information from the regional and national self-organised groups
- making sure other branch officers and the branch committee consider the equality dimensions of everything they do
- making sure equality is raised in all collective bargaining – not just in bargaining on ‘pure’ equality issues
- encouraging and supporting the development of branch self-organised groups on behalf of the branch committee
- having a co-ordinating role between the self-organised groups, and between the self-organised groups and the rest of the branch
- making sure new recruits know about UNISON’s commitment to equality and opportunities to participate in self-organisation
- advising the branch officers and branch committee on the development and monitoring of an action plan to achieve proportionality and fair representation
- co-ordinating the development and training of members from under-represented groups.

Self-organised group representatives

Where there is a recognised branch self-organised group, the group may elect a representative on to the branch committee. Some branches have created posts such as branch women’s officer or branch Black members’ officer, even though there is currently no functioning self-organised group, to provide a point of contact. Although these posts are not a rule book requirement, they may work well locally. Either way, someone holding the post of disabled members’ officer should themselves be a disabled member – and so on for each of the four groups.

Where the branch has these extra posts, the branch equality co-ordinator has an important co-ordinating role. This is not about adding an extra bureaucratic layer, but about making sure it all works together well.

Regional level

UNISON has self-organised group structures in each of its 12 geographical regions. Your regional office can advise how to contact these groups, usually via a member of the regional organising staff. UNISONdirect can put you in touch with your regional office (See section 7).

Groups in different regions have developed their work in varying ways. The four groups and the various regions are not all the same and it is right that there should be flexibility in how they operate. For example, the women’s group may organise in different ways because the majority of UNISON members are women.

However, there are certain principles of good practice. Each group should:

- have an annual open meeting at which elections are held, including representatives to their national self-organised group committee; the group may elect a committee to carry out its work during the year; open meetings should be publicised to all branches in the region and branches urged to send members to them
- have a written constitution, endorsed by the region
- draw up an annual work programme, linked to the union’s agreed objectives and priorities for the year
- receive funding from the region to deliver this work programme, in line with the objectives and priorities
- send representatives to the regional council and regional committee, and any other regional body on which it has seats, such as service group and Labour Link committees
- encourage participation at its national self-organised group conference
- liaise with the other regional self-organised groups
- communicate with members and branches during the year.

Most regional groups hold open meetings and events during the year, in addition to the meeting for elections.

As well as the union's current objectives and priorities, the group will look at the decisions of the most recent national self-organised group conference when drawing up their work programme. A work programme will typically include:

- recruitment initiatives, eg via regional community groups and events
- organising, such as mapping and supporting branch self-organised groups and building fair representation and proportionality within the group
- working with branches and the region's service groups in drawing up the negotiating agenda at local and regional level
- campaigning on regional and national issues with an equality dimension
- working with community and other campaign groups
- involvement in training and development of UNISON activists.

Regional self-organised groups can submit proposals to their regional council and regional committee.

Regional groups have an important role in encouraging and supporting new activists getting involved in the union beyond the branch level. Groups often demonstrate a healthy balance of experienced and new activists working together.

Regions also have an important role in reviewing how self-organisation is working at branch level and should keep records of branch self-organised groups. Branches should inform regions when a group is formed and provide contact details. Mapping of local self-organised group activities by regions will identify areas in need of development.

National level

Each of the four self-organised groups has a national committee and an annual conference.

National self-organised group conferences

The conferences provide a forum where members can receive and share information, debate issues and set priorities for the coming year. They also provide a good introduction to national UNISON conferences. Although self-organised group conferences do not make policy for the union, they have an invaluable role in identifying key equality issues for the attention of the wider union, as well as encouraging participation. The conferences give guidance to the national committee for their self-organised group and may call for issues to be raised with other parts of the union. There is more information on how UNISON policy is made and changed in section 3.

Branches and regions are encouraged to support members' attendance at self-organised group conferences. The experience of attending a conference, particularly for new activists, can inspire members to become more involved in the union. Delegates do not attend such events as "individuals" but rather as representatives and delegates of their nominating body, usually the branch or regional self-organised group. Costs for conferences should be identified and budgeted for at the start of the year, as part of the branch or region's overall work programme.

Branch and regional self-organised groups may send motions to their respective national self-organised group conferences. Self-organised groups and branch committees should work closely together, identifying workplace issues requiring policy development or wider union initiatives. Branch self-organised groups should notify their branch committee about motions before submitting them.

Delegates to the conferences should provide reports back to the branch or other nominating body. This can be without any breach of confidentiality (See section 3).

National committees

Regional groups elect representatives to their national committees, which usually meet four times a year. Each national committee draws up an annual work programme linked to the union's current objectives and priorities and the decisions

of the group's conference. The committees submit an annual report to their group conference and the union's national executive council (NEC).

National self-organised group committees work with other parts of the organisation to ensure that equality issues remain at the forefront of the union's organising, bargaining and campaigning agendas. Their representatives meet regularly with senior members of the NEC and they work closely with the national service groups. They may refer matters directly to the NEC and the NEC's strategic committees. Their views are sought in union-wide consultations and they are represented on many of the union's working parties.

The national self-organised groups may submit motions and send delegates to National Delegate Conference and to each of the service group conferences – the key policy making bodies of the union.

Labour Link

The self-organised groups work closely with Labour Link on their equality campaigns. The national committees raise issues directly with the Labour Link team, who then facilitate briefings for the Labour front bench and our linked MPs on legislation and areas that need legislation. Meetings are also arranged between SOG representatives and parliamentarians.

A number of regions have seats on their Labour Link committees for self-organised group representatives. Other regions have regular meetings and co-ordination with the self-organised groups in order to take up their priorities.

TUC

Many of the equality issues we address have wide implications. Action at TUC level, supported by other unions, can have great impact. We work closely with the TUC in all equality areas.

The TUC has its own equality conferences and committees for race relations, women, disability and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. These are not self-organised groups – the conferences and committees may include

members who are not themselves part of the group. UNISON sends delegations to all the TUC equality conferences and has been successful in having members elected to all the committees.

Increasingly, equality forums are also developing at regional TUC level. Regional self-organised groups are encouraged to get involved in these.

3. RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN UNISON AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Self-organised groups cannot operate in isolation. Their purpose is to inform and strengthen the wider union.

Self-organisation – like all our union organising - is very much a collective response. It is not about individuals becoming a self-appointed mouthpiece. Self-organised group members attending meetings of other bodies are representing their nominating body. It is not normally appropriate for people to “self-nominate”. Representatives should always provide reports to the body they represent.

The principle of accountability for representatives of self-organised groups is the same as that for the rest of the union. At each level the groups are accountable, whether to the branch, the region or nationally, like every other part of our union.

The guiding principle is that representatives are accountable to the group that elected them to that position. In self-organisation, lines of accountability are not always directly from workplace to branch, to region and to national. For example some regional self-organised group AGMs are only attended by branch delegates. Others are open to any member who identifies as part of the self-organised group in the region.

National caucus or network meetings - for example for Black disabled members or for transgender members – are organised to address issues of under-representation within self-organised groups. Caucuses play an important part in reaching the full diversity of members and making sure our equality work reflects all members’ issues.

Caucus organisation varies between self-organised groups. Members apply to attend national caucus meetings directly and are not elected by their branch or region. However, a key purpose of the meetings is to encourage the members to get involved in their regions and branches and to develop as activists. This has a proven success rate. The national caucus or network meetings may elect representatives to their national committee.

Self-organisation is effective where there are strong channels of communication and reporting. Information from the national committees should be communicated to regional self-organised

groups so that the national work programme can inform regional initiatives. Regional groups must make sure their national committee has up to date contact information and regular reports of their priorities and activities.

In the same way, regional self-organised groups should communicate with branches and branch self-organised groups, and branches should keep regional groups informed of contacts and developments.

Caucus representatives on national self-organised group committees feed their group’s issues into the national committee and report back via national e-bulletins, newsletters and the annual report. They also report to the next national caucus meeting.

Planning branch equality work

It is important to remember that self-organised groups are a part of the branch, not separate from it. Branches and self-organised groups should agree annual equality work programmes, linked to current national and branch priorities. Proper planning means that resources, including finance, can be available when needed.

It is essential that there is a good flow of information between the groups and the branch committee and that initiatives complement and feed into each other. Requests for financial support will be considered by the branch committee in the context of the union’s priorities and agreed work programmes. As well as regular communication with the branch committee, self-organised groups should provide an annual report to the branch AGM.

All parties should agree early on what responsibilities may be delegated by the branch to the self-organised group, what are the reporting lines, and generally how working relationships will operate.

Branches are encouraged to send delegates to the national self-organised group conferences. They can also elect representatives to regional self-organised group structures, as set out in regional rules. Self-organised groups and their delegates, however, remain accountable to their branch so arrangements should be in place for regular feedback and accountability from self-

organised groups and any representatives to other bodies.

Confidentiality

Issues of confidentiality may arise in relation to self-organised groups. Members may wish to participate in a particular group without those outside the group knowing. This may be the case, for example, for a lesbian member who is not out at work about their sexual orientation. Every effort should be made to protect people's confidentiality and ensure this is not a barrier to participation.

There need be no conflict between protecting people's confidentiality and ensuring accountability. Arrangements can be made to enable participation and reporting back via a third party, such as the self-organised group representative, branch equality co-ordinator or regional contact officer. Members' names do not have to be included in reports of activities.

Where members' attendance is facilitated via a third party to protect their confidentiality, it is essential that the branch committee knows it does have members participating, without the members themselves being identified. Only via such communication can equality initiatives be understood and supported by the wider union.

Planning regional equality work

Each regional self-organised group should draw up an annual work programme based on the union's agreed objectives and priorities, the region's current priorities and the decisions of the national self-organised group conference. This work programme should be agreed by the region, along with the necessary resources to deliver the work.

Success in delivering a work programme is much more likely where different groups' initiatives complement each other. Good practice has been established in some regions of regular meetings between self-organised group representatives and the regional leadership. There are many positive examples of the four self-organised groups working together on common initiatives. The work of the self-organised groups should be publicised within the region and inform the region-wide equality agenda.

Regional self-organised groups may feed directly into regional service group committees on bargaining issues. They have seats on all regional health committees. Representation on other service group committees varies between regions and service groups. A degree of flexibility is appropriate but all regional service groups should have equality on their agendas and communicate with the regional self-organised groups.

Regional self-organised groups will also work closely with other organisational strands such as education and training, regional young members groups and regional retired members groups.

Representing members

When members need union representation on a workplace matter this is usually provided by their elected workplace representative or steward. All union reps should be competent and confident in carrying out their role and able to deal with all issues of equality and discrimination, while knowing how to access specialist advice when needed.

Sometimes a member may ask to be represented by someone other than their workplace rep. For example, a Black member may ask for a rep who is themselves Black or a gay man may want to be represented by another gay man. This is understandable, but all UNISON reps should be able to deal with the range of issues that arise. One option is for a member of the self-organised group or the branch equality co-ordinator to work with the steward and member and remain involved throughout the process. However, everyone must clearly understand that only one representative acts for the member – the steward.

Detailed guidance on this is provided in the booklet *Representation: a UNISON Guide*.

UNISON reps should together reflect the wider membership. Many members who first got involved through self-organisation have trained to become accredited workplace reps. This benefits us all and is to be much encouraged.

How UNISON policy is made and changed

The framework for how UNISON policy is made and changed is set out in the union's rule book, and explained in the *Democracy in UNISON Guidelines*.

All principal UNISON policy is determined by UNISON's National Delegate Conference, the only body that can give instructions to the union's NEC. Each national self-organised group can submit motions and rule amendments and elect delegates to the conference.

Between conferences, the NEC has responsibility for the general management and control of the union.

Self-organised groups, like branches, regions and service groups, can develop their own policy within their own sphere of influence, as long as this is within the framework of the policy established by National Delegate Conference and any guidelines laid down by the NEC.

The Democracy in UNISON Guidelines say, as a general guide, that the appropriate sphere of influence for the self-organised groups is "employment and citizenship issues covered by the group". All UNISON members share a collective responsibility to promote the democratically agreed policies of the union.

If a self-organised group wants a change in UNISON policy, it may submit a proposal to National Delegate Conference and seek the support of branches, regions, the NEC, other self-organised groups and the young members and retired members forums.

UNISON is a representative democracy. Members elect other members to represent their interests, views and concerns in branch, regional and national forums, as well as to external bodies. Branches should make sure that election of all representatives is on the basis of the widest possible participation and must ensure elected representatives take their role as spokesperson for the wider membership seriously, by identifying members' views, expressing these, and reporting back.

Monitoring

Monitoring of UNISON's membership and structures enables the union to review progress and develop strategies for improving participation and fair representation.

Some monitoring information is included on UNISON's online membership system, with other information such as access requirements. Branches should encourage members to make sure their membership information is up-to-date and complete. You can update your own personal information at unison.org.uk/my-unison.

All parts of the union are encouraged to monitor and evaluate membership of committees and attendance at events for proportionality and fair representation.

You can get a copy of the standard monitoring form for committees and events from equality@unison.co.uk.

4. RESOURCING SELF-ORGANISATION

If self-organisation is to be effective, it needs proper resourcing. This includes people, information, training, facilities and money.

Funding

To start with the money – funding for self-organised group activities should be built into budgets from their first draft. At branch level, building self-organisation should be part of the joint branch assessment, with appropriate funding linked to proposed activities. Self-organised groups should be involved in devising and delivering branch priorities.

Branches should encourage members to participate in regional and national self-organised group meetings and conferences. It is reasonable for branches to set limits on numbers but lack of funding should not prevent at least some level of participation. The dates and arrangements for national self-organised group conferences are publicised well in advance, to enable branches to plan attendance. Delegations should be in accordance with UNISON's scheme of branch representation, which aims to make sure our rules on fair representation are met.

Any branch that would incur financial difficulties as a result of sending representatives to a national self-organised group conference can apply to UNISON's finance officer for additional branch funding. Branch delegates to self-organised group conferences should be given the same level of subsistence as branch delegates to other UNISON conferences.

At regional level, funding will be linked to an annual work programme, agreed with the region. Self-organised group activities are an integral part of the union's work and should be funded alongside other regional structures.

Attendance at national caucus or network meetings, annual meetings held to address fair representation *within* self-organised groups, is funded nationally. This is because members apply to attend directly and are not elected by their branch or region. Members attending these meetings are encouraged to get involved in their branch and regional groups.

Resources and facilities

Self-organisation should not be confused with 'do-it-yourself'. Self-organised groups have the same need and right as other parts of the union to access facilities and resources, including the support of paid union staff. This may include meeting space, mailing facilities, administrative support and policy advice.

Like all parts of the union, self-organised groups must ensure their meetings are accessible to all members. However, it is likely that self-organised groups may have a higher proportion of members requiring crèches or carer expenses, personal assistance or induction loops, Braille services and so on. This must be allowed for when drawing up budgets. Providing disabled members with full access to meetings and information is not just good practice – it is a legal obligation. There is more information in section 5 of this guide.

Time off

One particularly valuable resource is time off agreed with the employer for trade union duties and activities. UNISON's guidance to branches on this – *Facility Time* – emphasises the importance of spreading agreed time off as widely as possible among reps.

Branches are urged to negotiate paid time off for trade union duties and activities for self-organised groups wherever possible. Employers should be reminded – where necessary – that the law requires public bodies to take steps to promote equality and eliminate discrimination.

Information

A theme running through this guide is the need for an excellent two-way flow of information between self-organisation and the rest of the union. Self-organised group members are not only interested in equality issues; all parts of the union should be kept briefed on the priorities and activities of the self-organised groups.

Information about self-organisation should be included on noticeboards and in branch and regional newsletters, with details of how members can get involved. Details of how members can

access information directly, such as the UNISON website, should also be included.

Information needs to be accessible. The union will only attract new activists and be informed with a strong disability perspective if people are confident they will be able to participate in discussions and get information in the format they need. Local organisations of disabled people may be able to provide services along with commercial enterprises. You can get further advice from UNISON's Membership Participation Unit (See section 7).

Access to training

People can be apprehensive about getting active in the union because they feel they are not experts in workplace rights or equality issues. In reality, getting involved in the union gives access to a wealth of training opportunities.

Self-organised groups should be consulted when drawing up training programmes and representatives encouraged to apply for training. Many regional self-organised groups work with their regional education officer to plan courses aimed specifically at self-organised group members, as well as equality courses for the wider membership.

5. GOOD PRACTICE – GETTING ORGANISED

Setting up a branch self-organised group

Local self-organised groups may start off small. Talk to members about the issues they are facing in the workplace and whether they would be interested in meeting with others to discuss them. Some branches have found that anonymous surveys, seeking information on what issues interest members, have been a catalyst for the creation of a branch self-organised group.

You may be able to find a topical subject to raise interest in a first meeting. This might be a change to workplace rights affecting members, a new employer's policy out for consultation, or the motions for the national self-organised group conference.

Once there is a spark of interest, use the resources of the branch – newsletters, social media, notice boards and workplace reps – to spread the word and encourage members to get involved. UNISON regional offices should be able to assist branches in getting started, but success in setting up a branch self-organised group is mainly based on the same principles that work for all union organising.

Involving all

Meetings should be widely advertised. Do not make assumptions about which members will be interested in a particular group - just because a member is a woman or Black, does not necessarily mean they will want to be involved with self-organisation. Other Black and women members will want to. Some branches may believe they have no lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender members - this will certainly not be true. Members may not be out about their sexual orientation or gender history but very interested in getting involved in a group, if they can do this on a confidential basis. The only way to reach all potential members is to publicise self-organised group information to every member of the branch.

Meetings should take place at times and in venues that suit as many people as possible, but particularly those who have been traditionally under-represented, such as part-time and shift workers, members with caring responsibilities and disabled members. It may help to rotate

the timings and venues and it is essential that meetings are advertised well in advance. Branches have a responsibility to ensure all their members can participate and to provide the resources to make this possible.

Retired members from self-organised groups are encouraged to get involved in retired members organisation. They can also participate in open meetings of branch and regional self-organised groups as long as they do not vote on matters relating to pay and conditions or vote for positions outside retired members organisation.

Meetings usually benefit from being informal, though members will want a clear sense of what the meeting and the group are setting out to achieve. Informality is not the same as a free for all: make sure all can participate in and contribute to the discussion.

Disabled members access

Remember that access is not just an issue for the disabled members group: there will be disabled members in all the self-organised groups. The Equality Act requires unions, as well as employers and other service providers, to ensure they do not discriminate against disabled members.

If there is an access issue, the union must make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, such as providing extra help or providing services in a different way. Access is about far more than wheelchair ramps. Key points to remember include:

- not making assumptions – disability takes many forms
- asking members what access needs they have
- ensuring confidentiality
- planning ahead
- making sure local negotiators can consult with disabled members so agreements with employers are equality-proofed.

If at first you don't succeed

Don't be discouraged. The reason we have self-organisation is because we recognise these groups of members are not traditionally active in trade unions. This will not change overnight. There are some barriers to involvement that we can reduce but not entirely do away with. Any group may need more support and resources early on to help it get off the ground.

Do not aim too high. Members lead busy and complicated lives and few will welcome lots more meetings. Even one meeting a year, perhaps in the lead-up to the national self-organised group conference, can help keep members informed and involved and make sure self-organised group issues are being fed into the branch.

In some cases it may be more practical for members from a cluster of branches in a particular geographical area (such as a town) to meet together and establish informal networks. Any UNISON structure outside the traditional branch/regional model needs careful thought about how it will be resourced and who the group will be accountable to. For assistance and guidance on this, speak to your regional office.

Check list for branch groups

Where a branch self-organised group has been established, there should be:

- widely advertised meetings which members are able to attend fairly easily
- other methods for involving members who cannot attend meetings, such as newsletters and consultations
- an annual meeting to elect officers and representatives and receive reports of the year's activities
- elections conducted in accordance with fair representation and proportionality
- participation on the branch committee, including the notes or minutes of meetings (while protecting confidentiality, if necessary)
- two-way communication with the regional self-organised group.

Key tasks of branch self-organised group officer

Together with any branch self-organised group:

- Publicising and promoting UNISON's commitment to equality
- Encouraging workers from the disadvantaged groups to join UNISON
- Keeping self-organised group members informed
- Organising branch self-organised group meetings and events
- Being the two-way link between self-organised group members and the branch committee
- Publicising regional and national UNISON self-organised group information in the branch
- Participating in any employer staff network
- If possible, participating in the regional self-organised group(s)
- If possible, organising branch participation in the annual national self-organised group conference(s)
- Reporting on self-organised group work at the branch AGM.

Recruiting new members

Self-organised groups have an important role to play in recruiting new members to our union. Many people join simply because someone they know asks them to. If people have doubts about the traditional image of trade unions they may be encouraged by someone like themselves who is already part of the union.

Self-organised groups can help get UNISON information out to community groups where there are many potential members. It is essential that this information includes a clear statement of our commitment to equality and practice of self-organisation with details of how to get involved.

Self-organised groups can also identify issues of interest to groups of potential members in the workplace. They may suggest a speaker, provide specialist information, or identify a particular campaign or bargaining issue. In all this, they will work closely with the branch committee, making sure equality is at the heart of the agenda.

Every UNISON member should be involved in recruiting new members to the union. This is a priority if our union is to remain strong and to grow.

6. WHAT THE RULEBOOK SAYS

Self-organisation is written into our union's rules.

Rule D 4.2:

The purposes of self-organisation shall be, within the framework of the Rules of the Union, to assist the union to:

1. promote the union's equalities and bargaining agenda
2. defend jobs, terms and conditions and services
3. build its density and have a strong and dynamic presence in the workplace.

Rule D 4.3:

To this end, self-organised groups shall:

1. Meet to share concerns and aspirations, and establish their own priorities
2. Elect their own representatives to other levels of self-organisation and to other appropriate levels of the Union's organisation
3. Have adequate and agreed funding and other resources, including education and training, access, publicity and communications
4. Work within a flexible structure to build confidence and encourage participation and provide opportunities for the fuller involvement of disadvantaged members
5. Work within the established policies, rules and constitutional provisions of the Union.

Branches

Rule D 4.5:

Where such recognised groups exist at branch level:

1. they may elect representatives to the branch committee in accordance with branch rules
2. they may formulate proposals, motions and other initiatives for branch meetings or at the branch committee

3. reports on their activities shall be included in the annual report of the branch
4. the branch shall give them financial support within the Union's guidelines.

Region

Rule D 4.6:

1. a regional committee for each group may be created, consisting of representatives of each relevant group at branch level, and the regional women's committee shall also include women members of the regional committee
2. a regional group may formulate proposals, motions or other initiatives to the regional council or regional committee
3. a regional group shall be represented on the regional committee by a representative with full voting rights
4. a regional group shall appoint one or more delegates of the regional council as may be approved by the national executive council
5. a report on the regional group activities shall be made to the annual meeting of the regional council
6. the regional council shall give a regional group financial support within the union's guidelines.

National

Rule D.4.7:

1. the group may establish a national committee, as well as a national conference or national meeting of representatives from branch and regional groups
2. the group's national committee shall consist of no more than two representatives per region, except where the distribution of members merits an additional representative
3. the national executive council shall have the right to send women members of the national executive council to the national women's committee and conference

4. a national committee or national conference may send motions, proposals or initiatives to the national executive council
5. the group may, subject to the union's rules, send delegates and motions to the national delegate conference and to each service group national conference
6. the group shall provide an annual report of its activities to its conference and the national executive council
7. the national executive council shall give a national group financial support within the union's guidelines.

7. WHO CAN HELP

The first point of contact for members is usually their branch. Most branches have an equality co-ordinator who can provide information on self-organisation at branch, regional and national level. They can also advise and assist in getting a group together in the branch.

If there is no one in your branch with experience of self-organisation, contact your regional officer or regional self-organised groups. There will be a named officer contact for each regional self-organised group amongst the paid staff in your regional office.

For contact details for your branch or region, phone UNISONdirect by telephone or online form. UNISONdirect is a helpline for members, stewards, potential members and the general public

- Tel: 0800 0 857 857
- Textphone: 0800 0 967 968 (freephone)
- Online form (search 'general enquiry' at unison.org.uk)

Lines are open from 6am to midnight on Monday to Friday and 9am to 4pm on Saturday. Outside these times, you can leave an answerphone message and UNISONdirect will call you back.


You can get specialist equality advice from the membership participation unit at the UNISON Centre in London:

Membership participation unit

UNISON
130 Euston Road, London NW1 2AY
020 7121 5152
equality@unison.co.uk

There are lead officers for each self-organised group in the membership participation unit:

Black members:

Khadije Campbell
020 7121 5398
blackmembers@unison.co.uk
 @BlackUNISON

Disabled members:

Gloria Foran
020 7121 5785
disabilityissues@unison.co.uk

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members:

Carola Towle
020 7121 5241
out@unison.co.uk
 UNISON LGBT
 @UNISONlgbt

Women members:

Sharon Greene
020 7121 5355
women@unison.co.uk
 UNISON women
 @womeninUNISON

UNISON's website has information and news on equality and for each of the four self-organised groups: unison.org.uk/equality

UNISON information and publications

The self-organised groups produce regular newsletters, e-bulletins, an annual report and organising, bargaining and campaign materials. These are available online or from the membership participation unit.

The publications referred to in this guide are listed below. Each includes details of further resources and information.

To order publications with a stock number go to the online catalogue on the UNISON website unison.org.uk.

- UNISON rule book – stock number 0834
- Code of good branch practice – stock number 0717
- Guide to equality in UNISON – stock number 2778
- Branch development and organising web toolkit: unison.org.uk/core-branch-resources
- Democracy in UNISON – stock number 2076
- Representation: a UNISON guide – stock number 2426
- Facility time guidance – stock number 3084



UNISON has more than a million members delivering essential services to the public. Services that protect, enrich and change lives.

We want to see changes that put people before profit and public interest before private greed. Join our campaign to create a fairer society.

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