



UNISON Yorkshire & Humberside Branch Communications Handbook



"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life."

— Brian Tracy

"A lot of problems in the world would be solved if we talked to each other instead of about each other."

— Nicky Gumbel

"Communication works for those who work at it."

— John Powell

"Make sure to communicate your idea quickly and keep it straight to the point."

— Paul Bailey

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

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What is a...

Branch Communications Officer

The branch communications officer's role includes:

- creating a positive image for the branch and wider union among members, potential members and the public
- producing newsletters and digital communication (including social media posts) for distribution to branch members
- supporting the branch's recruitment goals alongside UNISON's national and regional campaigns
- making sure that centrally and regionally produced publicity, communications and campaign materials are distributed as appropriate
- monitoring and liaising with local media

If you want to be a branch comms officer, you don't need to be highly skilled at social media, writing newsletters, websites or press work.

It's enough to have an interest and enthusiasm for how your branch communicates with members and potential members in your workplace.

What sort of things will I be expected to do?

Not many branch communications officers have full-time trade union release, so we know squeezing comms work around your substantive job is a challenge.

As you grow into the role, you'll see what you might want to concentrate on and this handbook will help. It's not a prescriptive list detailing what branches must do, but a guide showing what could be done, and how.

It's important that you take the lead within your branch, but it is the responsibility of the branch to support you. Your other officers should be providing you with content and stories to share in your newsletters or on social media. Give people tasks and ensure communications issues are on the branch agenda.

Effective communications need to be organised and planned, so you know what is being sent out, who your audience is and the aim of the communications.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I want to achieve?
- Who is my audience?
- How do I best connect with my target audience?
- What channels of communication am I going to use?
- How often will I be sending out messages?

Social Media

Social media is a key tool in communicating with members. Many branches in the region use Facebook, some use Twitter and others Instagram.

When choosing which social media platform you want to regularly post on behalf of the branch, take a look at what platform is most commonly used by your members.

To be effective, you should be posting every few days.

You are posting on behalf of the branch, not your own personal opinions. As well as posting information from your branch, you could consider the following:

- Short, positive profiling of officers / members
- Sharing local UNISON 'human' stories
- Photos of members going about their duties
- Promoting UNISON wins and regional campaigns
- Show the welfare support available to members:
unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/

UNISON guides

Step by step guide to setting up a branch FB page:
digital.unison.org.uk/news/2016/12/06/setting-unison-branch-facebook-page/

Dealing with private messages and comments on Facebook
digital.unison.org.uk/news/2016/04/18/listen/

How to set community guidelines
digital.unison.org.uk/news/2016/03/18/community-guidelines/

Online tools to help you schedule social media posts
digital.unison.org.uk/tools/#heading-3

Staying safe online
digital.unison.org.uk/news/2018/01/18/staying-safe-online/

Everything else digital.unison.org.uk/

Training

There are a number of social media training opportunities available via the UNISON Yorkshire & Humberside education team.

yorks.unison.org.uk/education-and-training/

Newsletters

Where branches have access to workplaces and where those members of staff are not using computers in their work, paper copy newsletters left in the depot or canteen or pinned to noticeboards are a good way to communicate how active the branch has been.

Reaching other UNISON members, you would probably choose to make your newsletters electronic, so they are uploaded to your branch website and social media and a link to the newsletter appears in emails to members (rather than as an attachment which might be blocked by an employer's IT system). Have a look at an example newsletter from Barnsley local government branch, Winter 2023:

UNISON Barnsley
Winter 2023
www.unison-barnsley.org.uk

Barnsley College – Strike Update

Support staff at Barnsley College were on strike for four days on 28th and 30th November, 1st and 4th December as their dispute over pay escalated. Please send messages of support to branchoffice@unisonbarnsley.org

Members had already taken seven days of strike action between September and November including a five-day walkout from Monday 6 – Friday 10 November. This is a result of the college's refusal to negotiate over pay.

The union understands that Barnsley College has received money from a £500 million government fund for colleges. However, due to its refusal to negotiate, UNISON does not know how much it has received or how it intends to spend it.

The union balloted staff in May as part of the dispute, with workers voting overwhelmingly in favour of strike action. The college then proposed a change to its pay structure, but said it would only be implemented if UNISON ended the dispute.

The proposals were never put to UNISON as a pay offer due to the college's refusal to negotiate pay locally – and the union was only told they'd been implemented we talks through arbitration services Aco.

UNISON Yorkshire and Humberside regional organiser Robin Symonds said: "As bills and other living costs continue to rise, Barnsley College refuses to negotiate a pay deal with its staff.

"Support staff at the college don't want to be standing on a cold picket line all week, but the college's refusal to discuss pay means they're left with no choice."

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Barnsley matters

Focus on pay

NJC Pay Award 2023

UNISON has been working on securing a fair pay increase for council and school workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland since the start of this year. The local government employers submitted a final pay offer of £1.905 on all NJC pay points (per rate) of for part-time and term time only staff. The three NJC trade unions (UNISON, GMB and Unite) met on early November and agreed to accept the pay offer for 2023.

The pay award will be backdated to 1 April 2023. If you have moved employers since that date, you can contact your old employer directly to enquire about receiving back pay, however please bear in mind that this will be determined at the employers' discretion. Unfortunately the branch is aware that some academics have refused to pay back pay to leavers.

We want to thank you for your patience while we have worked to resolve this year's pay dispute. We appreciate that the wait has been difficult and while this year's pay award is not as high as we would like, it is our immediate priority to get money into the pockets of our hardworking members as soon as possible. With the cost-of-living crisis continuing to affect us all, every penny counts – especially at this time of year.

Employers have been informed and are now working to get this pay award implemented as quickly as possible – the exact timing will depend on your employers' payroll deadline dates. Some employers have already paid this, Barnsley Council will pay the back pay in December's pay.

If you have any queries, please speak to your manager, HR or payroll in the first instance, before contacting the branch.

We are now looking ahead to building a strong pay campaign for 2024 and restoring council and school pay to a fair level.

United Learning

Received on 28th September 2023, the pay offer to staff on trust contracts comprised:

- A cost-of-living increase of £2,000 or 6.45% (whichever is greater)
- A minimum rate of pay of £11.75 Out of London
- A higher minimum rate of pay for Teaching Assistants (and similar) of £12.00 Out of London
- One extra day per year of annual leave
- Backdated to 1 September 2023
- A joint review of the support staff pay scale

The branch held an online consultation and the outcome from responses received was overwhelmingly to accept the offer.

Northern College

Due to longstanding financial difficulties, members at Northern College, have, in recent years, faced pay freezes and very small pay increases.

In April this year members rejected an initial pay offer of a one off, pro-rated payment of £500 and it was communicated to the college that we would be balloting members for industrial action. This resulted in a new offer from management in September, which was difficult

When planning a newsletter consider:

What is the goal? Goals might include to recruit new members, to increase activism and improve working conditions.

Who is the reader? You are likely to want to tailor your message depending on the audience. For example, what you write might be different if you are targeting active members or passive members of UNISON or potential members.

How regularly should newsletters be produced? There are plenty of demands on your time, so it's unlikely you will be able to produce a newsletter more frequently than three or four times a year.

Content has to be interesting and design should be attractive. Stick to a consistent font and size. Canva.com is an excellent free online design tool which has template newsletter layouts ready.

Think about theming your newsletter around a campaign, learning opportunity, or a particular time of the year.

Use a competition in newsletters as another way to update member contact details: win a voucher if you update details. A health branch ran a 'Tell us your NHS story' competition to win a £50 voucher; the responses will form one newsletter.

A branch website

Social media might be accessed more often by members, but a branch website is great for providing a hub of information for members that delves a little deeper into what the branch can provide and information on who are the branch officers.

Having a branch website is also important because we don't own social media and Facebook could at any time delete or block accounts. We are also at the mercy of Facebook algorithms. You can use your branch social media to drive people to your website.

They are attractive, easy to navigate and maintain. It's strongly recommended you follow this route if you're looking for a branch website. More details here: unison.site

To be effective, websites should be updated at least every few weeks. Coming up with new, interesting content is easier than you might think. You could write a monthly blog with the branch secretary or with different branch executive officers, introducing them and their roles; you can record your meeting dates and AGM and branch social events.

You can upload photographs from these events and thank people for attending as well as discussing local campaigns.

Emailing members

To be data protection compliant, communications officers should use UNISON's own membership system emailing tool to send bulk emails to branch members, rather than your own mailing lists.

Some branches have found email to be more effective at reaching members than social media, however it's worth checking if your emails are getting through some employer's spam filters. Would your employer include UNISON information in their own internal communications? It could be an email, newsletter or intranet page. Be creative.

It is recommended that branches keep in contact with their members on a regular basis, to let them know what you are up to. It's better to send short emails every week or two rather than a long email every six months. Don't overload members by sending them emails more than once a week.

Try and grab the reader's attention with the subject matter. Think about adding an element of fun and interaction as well. What about a quiz based on the email content? If you've got the budget, run email-only giveaways, such as providing desk fans for female members going through the menopause.

Branch guide to GDPR: uns.n.uk/2sOHgIN

Branch mobile phone apps

With more flexible/hybrid working, technology is becoming more important to stay in touch.

It's easiest to set up a WhatsApp group, as many members will already have the app on their phones. It's best to use WhatsApp for specific projects and keep groups time limited.

Make sure your members know how to change their WhatsApp privacy settings if they don't wish to be identified. faq.whatsapp.com

Creative ways to engage with members

We asked branches for some of the ways they were engaging members and supporting some of our very busy members:

- Branches delivered chocolates, coffee and alcoholic hand gel to workplaces during the pandemic.
- Launch a food bank for low paid members. Not only does this help our most vulnerable workers, it allows the branch to check and update membership details.
- Get a link to your branch on the employer's intranet.

Press Coverage

Press releases exist to share news about a topical issue or campaign your branch is working on. What you're sharing should be newsworthy—meaning there's a reason you're sending it at the moment you send it.

If you're writing a press release make sure you include the following:

- Write a clear, captivating headline
- Include the date and your location
- Quickly tell them what they need to know
- Then give more context
- Be honest and unbiased
- Eliminate jargon
- Include relevant and colourful quotes
- Sign off appropriately

Getting the word out there is important, but just as important is that you make sure people have a good impression of UNISON. Press releases serve as great opportunities to showcase your branch's voice and personality, and in that way shape how the general public views trade unions.

Member case studies can also add essential colour to UNISON press releases, so when you're thinking of publicising a story, include a quote from a member affected directly.

Once you've written your press release, send it to the regional press officer, Jack Goodman. He can proof-read it, and distribute to wider media networks.

Communications Hub

Looking for templates, social media guidelines or ideas for your own communications?

There's a site full of useful resources:

yorks.unison.org.uk/yorkshire-humberside-communications-hub/

What's next?

Don't just read this handbook in isolation, we want you to talk with other communications officers to share best practice tips and ideas.

Also, make sure to ask your branch secretary for more information on annual branch communications officer training. It's usually a two day residential course which gives you the chance to spend time with other communications officers and media experts.

Mentoring / shadowing

If you are a new communications officer and would like to shadow someone more experienced, talk to the region and see if they can help you out.

Contact us here: yorks.unison.org.uk/contact-us/

Important Contacts

Need help and support with press or media enquiries?
Contact the regional team: Y&H.Digital@unison.co.uk

Our regional press officer, Jack Goodman, can be contacted directly for advice on press and media work:
j.goodman@unison.co.uk

Alternatively, the national press team help manage media enquiries on behalf of the regions and co-ordinate press releases too. They can be contacted via email:
press@unison.co.uk

Got a story you want to share with the wider union? Ideas for content can be sent to: editorial@unison.co.uk

Any digital enquiries can be directed to:
digital@unison.co.uk

Got a question on social media? Alison Charlton is the national lead: a.charlton@unison.co.uk

Do you need something printing? Whether it's your latest newsletter, recruitment campaign poster or an AGM notice, the team at Dragon Court Print Services can help! Contact Damian or Richard: damian@unisonprint.co.uk or richard@unisonprint.co.uk



yorks.unison.org.uk

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