



## **MAXIMIZING MEMBER PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL MEETINGS**

Following the extraordinary work of the NEU during the pandemic, digitally at least, members are better connected with the union and each other than ever before. As we move back towards in person meetings, consideration must be given to how we build on this engagement with members, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

NEU is a member led union, and members should feel that they are part of decision-making processes – that they are seen, and their voices heard. Making our meetings more accessible and inviting to members will build union strength in workplaces and lead to better outcomes for NEU members and of education. We need to ensure local meetings are as inclusive and representative of our wider membership as possible. Inclusivity will not only strengthen our democracy but also enhance the impact we have on the education workplace and beyond.

As Covid has taught us, member engagement begins in the workplace. Successful organising around times of crisis builds workplace activism and engagement. In time of crisis members not only look to us for direction and guidance, but also look to take greater control of their working lives and to secure and shape them through union activity. Organising around member-led issues sustains the union and renews our sense of purpose as we remain committed and relevant to the needs of the profession.

For branches and districts to strengthen ties across workplaces clusters, MATs and rep networks, it is vital that workplace reps and members attend and take part in local meetings. Attending a local branch or district meeting is the next step for workplace activists and should be a place where they are welcome and feel connected to the discussions taking place.

At the very outset it is worth recognizing that women make up 76% of NEU members. Whilst this proportion is closely reflected amongst workplace reps (70%), it is not so well reflected in leadership or decision-making positions. Perhaps most pertinently for local meetings, women currently only make up 47% and 45% of District and Branch Secretaries respectively. This is a significant representation gap.

We must be alert to representation gaps affecting other sections of our membership too – black, LGBT+ or disabled; sectors and roles; new and young professionals. Any gap in representation undermines our inclusivity, our democracy and ultimately our impact.

Barriers to engagement will often be highly contextual. For instance, the reality for most women is that they assume responsibility for the majority of the physical and mental tasks in the home, including taking on primary responsibility for caring for others. Couple this with the pressure of workload for educators it is easy to understand the reluctance to take on the additional commitments of union work. Members and activists from other underrepresented groups will face different but similarly significant barriers to getting more involved. Our task is to identify these barriers and do whatever we can to remove them.



More generally, feedback from members and activists tells us that the local branch and district meetings can be difficult to navigate, processes or language used in these spaces is not always clearly understood and act as barriers to participation both in the meeting and the union more widely. There is a need to balance some traditional functions of our meetings (e.g. minutes and reports) with the need to welcome, engage, empower new activists and future leaders, particularly those from underrepresented groups. That will mean trying different approaches.

The guidance provides some best practice guidance for maximizing member participation in our local meetings. Most of the suggestions apply irrespective of whether your local meetings are held in-person, online or as a hybrid of the two. The guidance should be read alongside the associated protocols provided for each of these meeting formats.

The guidance is a 'starter for ten'; it is not meant to be the final word. Quite the opposite. We would like to hear what works for you too. And what does not. The guidance concludes with an Appendix of case studies; we would like your input to add more.

## **BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE**

There are many ways to reinvigorate meetings. Listed below are just some ideas to begin to address the reason that members may not be attending. Revisit this list regularly and talk to your members about what they want to get out of it. One branch (included in our case studies) regularly surveys members about what they are interested in so that they can be sure that what they put together appeals to their members and catches their interest.

- **Be clear about the purpose and remit of your meeting**

Remember, the functions of the branch and the district differ so if both meetings are held on the same day, there needs to be a distinction between the business of each group. Details of purpose and remit are set out in the Model Branch and District rules, and you can seek support from your regional/Wales office.

- **Ensure discussions are relevant and interesting to members**

Holding an issue-based meeting is the most tried and tested way to appeal to new, or inactive members. Just as we saw during the pandemic, when issues are widely and deeply felt, members not only reach out to the union for guidance and advice, but also as a collective vehicle to achieve change. This gives us an opportunity to engage members in the resolution by instilling and developing a sense of agency.

Meeting agendas should discuss issues from the workplace in this context. Members should lead on setting the agenda and in the discussions about the issues that affect them. The issues about which members are interested vary- members are a diverse group, with different experiences and priorities depending on age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, phase, disability, political interests and their job. Sharing ideas about which workplace experiences are topical and widely appealing will increase attendance and participation.



Reflect on discussion at your meetings: Who does this appeal to and how will you know that you've have got it right? Workplace reps can provide a good sounding board for current 'hot' issues that members are talking and/or concerned about.

- **Reflect on the make-up of your branch/district**

Do the people attending meetings reflect the make-up of your wider membership? Or even of your rep cohort?

Mapping your district/branch by equality strand will allow you to understand what needs to change. Look at how many women, Black, LBGT+ and disabled members sit within your local area and assess whether the people attending the meetings reflect the membership. Think about sectors and roles too. This is a starting point from which you can discuss and plan what you need to do to encourage members from underrepresented groups to attend.

- **The role of the Chair is vital**

If your meeting is led by men, how do you know that women identify with the issues being discussed? Consider who normally contributes to the meeting and who speaks first. In order for more women to take up space, space has to be made available. The same goes for other under-represented groups.

The Chair should seek a balance of speakers that reflects the make-up of our membership. It may take some time to achieve this balance. If men are usually the first to speak up, allowing women the first opportunity to speak will encourage more women to speak. Monitor the amount of time given to speakers and ensure a balance in this too by taking contributions from those that have not spoken yet. Ask those who have spoken to wait until we have heard from everyone else that wished to contribute. Think of this a queueing system. Once a speaker has had their turn, they go to the back of the queue. The Chair should also consider giving priority to new/first time speakers.

- **Start and finish times**

When sharing details of the meeting, publish the start and end time. This will make it easier for members to plan their time and other commitments around the meetings. The chair must make sure that the meeting is kept to time and does not over run.

- **Make meetings inspirational and union-building!**

Make an event of local meetings by inviting contributions from guest speakers. Invite speakers from local trades council, sister unions and like-minded organisations to share their knowledge and experience. Local, national and international activists and campaigners can share their experiences of organising and building their union that will inspire our activists and build solidarity. Consider providing an opportunity for training or CPD as part of meeting. This can link to current campaigns or be specific to local issues. Tap into the expertise of the members themselves. Talk to your regional office for other ideas.



Advertising speakers or CPD in advance and giving some detail about their contribution can encourage more members to attend local meetings. Consider which medium is most successful for sharing with members and make use of social media platforms to advertise the event.

- **Keep reports to a minimum**

Written reports are an important element of the unions work and ensure accountability. However, for members and new activists, listening to reports that have already been submitted in writing can feel bureaucratic and off putting. Instead, officers should read reports in advance and conclude agreement quickly at the start of the meeting, or in a premeeting - without reading aloud from the report.

- **Avoid jargon**

For new activists who are looking to get involved at a branch and district level, union jargon can be confusing and off putting. In order to make our meetings welcoming we should try to avoid using it, and at least make sure we explain it so that everyone is able to follow the points being made. Union business should be completed early and on time to allow for discussion of issues and ideas from the workplace to take place.

- **Digital access to meetings**

The need to conduct meetings online has had many benefits, not least that it has given access to NEU members that previously were not able to attend. There are many reasons why members may prefer meetings online. The elimination of travel (time, distance and access to transport) means that meetings take up less time in the evenings or at weekends. Online meetings also mean that women with caring responsibilities do not need to make alternative arrangements, which can be difficult and costly.

Many women members tell us that this is the only way through which they have been able to attend the meetings they knew they were missing. Returning to face-to-face meetings is something that most of us are looking forward to when it is safe, however; if we do not offer access to the union in a way that fits around women's busy lives and many responsibilities, we will lose this engagement. We must also consider the benefits of digital engagement for disabled and CV or CEV members that online participation offers.

See associated guidance and protocols for online and hybrid meetings.

- **Childcare and carer payments**

This does not apply to all women members, but those that need to pay for care in order to attend union meetings should be supported. Providing childcare/creche facilities at larger meetings and training events can be more cost effective than individual claims and is good practice for enabling parents to take part. Also consider the need for refreshments for all participants.

- **Welcome and mentor new attendees – before, during and after**



Whether in person or online, attending meetings of established branches or districts is daunting for many. Having a nominated person/mentor who ensure someone says 'hello' to first-time attendees and through which they can ask questions is an important part of activist development generally. Try to partner new participants with more experienced members who can guide them, support them and connect them with other activists. Mentors should follow up with new activists after the meeting to offer further support.

- **Meeting venues**

When choosing a venue for in person meetings there are a number of things to think about. Consider the risks to Women, Black, LGBT+ and Disabled members:

1. Is there a public transport link close by, and is it well-lit and a reasonable walking distance from the venue?
2. Is there a car park that is very close by and well lit?
3. Is there good and reliable Wi-Fi signal and charging points within the venue to enable virtual participation?
4. Is the venue fully accessible to disabled people?

*September 2021*



## **APPENDIX: CASE STUDIES**

### **Tower Hamlets**

Democratic behaviour - the meeting is for reps and members to discuss issues. Committee members (14) each have a patch to cover – call all reps on a regular basis to see how things are going and offer support. Reps know who the committee members are and have a relationship with them so meetings feel less daunting. Meetings set out in cabaret style so people can talk to each other, and nobody sits alone. Ideas are shared at the table and then with the wider meeting.

Decisions are made democratically. Anyone that has never been to conference before has an opportunity to go. Anyone interested in an issue or campaign is given the opportunity to be involved and nobody has to prove themselves before being given a chance to attend events or conferences. We are open about strategies and share our knowledge of union workings, we are open about reasons for recommendations from the committee.

Survey all members about meetings every few years. Meetings are themed around the responses to make it relevant and interesting. Meeting run to time and childcare is provided or paid for and food is available too.

We tried moving the meeting to different times and days of the week, but actually this doesn't work. Members like to know when the meeting is happening. Moving it did not allow more members to attend, it just proved to be confusing.

### **West Hampshire District and Hampshire branch**

We start meetings at 7.30pm so that members with young children and caring responsibilities can do meal and bedtime before they come. We used to do 5.30pm, but changed this to accommodate these members.

We have paid for babysitting in the days of in person meetings. For teenagers, we have sometimes allowed them to be present and provide food for the children concerned. Anything to keep union involvement going for our women members with caring responsibilities.

When we have our Regional Council on a Saturday in Hamilton House, we sometimes pay for a family travel ticket so that members can bring their children and partner if they have one. It means that after the meeting, the weekend can resume for those families, and they can do a London day out if they want to. It also means that members are more likely to come to the meetings and see how the union democracy functions. They connect with other activists and build networks and it also means that our meetings are quorate.

During the lockdown, members with young children have told us that zoom meetings have been really good for them. It means less time away from home and they can participate in a meeting they would otherwise have missed.



## **Portsmouth**

Our members have an opportunity to see that the committee looks and sounds like them. We hold our meetings before or after a CPD session which women are very interested in. We try to make our meetings informal and collaborative. Nobody is allowed to dominate the space because discussions happen in small groups or breakouts that encourage people to make connections and everyone participates.

Long agendas with lots of jargon and reports from officers does not appeal to most people, and it can put them off if they feel like the matters for discussion don't affect or impact them. We chose one issue for discussion in the meetings. Something that women are interested in and is relevant to them. They know what the meeting is about and why they are going.



### **Black Educators East London Group**

After members has attended the Black Educators Conference, we make contact and talk to them about their experience. We introduce them to the local BOF rep and make connections with other activists that look like them. This is exactly how it developed for the Black Educators East London Network. Going to a local meeting can feel like too much, like it's not always safe or open to the issues experienced by Black educators, so not many of us went to the local meetings.

We organised ourselves into a network of supportive activists. We discussed our issues and came to understand what we needed to do about them as a collective. Having a space to share our stories, showed other Black Educators that they were not alone. That they had a place in the union and that we could make a positive change if we worked together as allies. We did this through small networks of women, forging links with one another in a supportive and active way. We went from a handful of women to more than 80 educators in a short space of time. We put on events in a local school to build the networks and invited women and men speakers to share their struggle with us and to inspire activism.

Across the region, women from this network have found a voice and have been empowered and encourage to engage with local democracy. Some are now local leaders, BOFs, activists and speak up.

It is worth remembering, you do not have to be the leader in every debate. Women do not need to be shown the way, men need to listen. Women know what they need so ask, don't tell. When women are empowered to speak, all you must do is truly listen and give some space for us to speak and support us to achieve our dreams.