PARTICIPATION PROJECT REPORT
CONSULTATION AND OUTCOMES

Background

The consultation involved five main strands:

1. Branch survey
2. Members survey
3. Talking to branches with limited involvement in the regional structures
4. Talking to each of the self organised groups (SOGs), Young Members and Retired Members.
5. Focus Groups

In addition to this, feedback was included from various other members meetings across the region. It was noticeable that despite the varied groups involved, the themes across all groups were consistent.

Summary of Findings

Branch survey findings

As part of the SE participation project, a survey was sent out on 3 December to all branches in the region with a closing date of 6 January. Thirty-eight branches responded with a total of 53 activists from those branches. This is a turnout of around a third of branches. We will follow up with those branches that did not respond.

Based on the information provided from the branches that did respond, some clear themes emerged from the survey.

Time was highlighted as the biggest barrier to participation. The advent of virtual, time-limited meetings, though born out of necessity in the pandemic, has been a very positive development and one that two-thirds of respondents would like us to incorporate into future ways of working.

The second clear concern raised by participants and on which they wanted to change was the issue of the same people speaking all the time at regional meetings and the need to provide more opportunities and support for all delegates to speak at meetings. As a diverse union, we need to ensure a diversity of experiences and background of those empowered to speak and influence meetings to strengthen our decision-making and policies and be representative of the whole membership.

Finally, an induction programme for new activists was popular to explain some of the language and processes. This matches feedback from some of the branches that are not currently participating in the region.

General overview

Around 50 percent of respondents to the survey was from Branch Secretaries. The next quarter was Branch Chairs and 13 percent and 9 percent from Treasurers and Womens Officers.
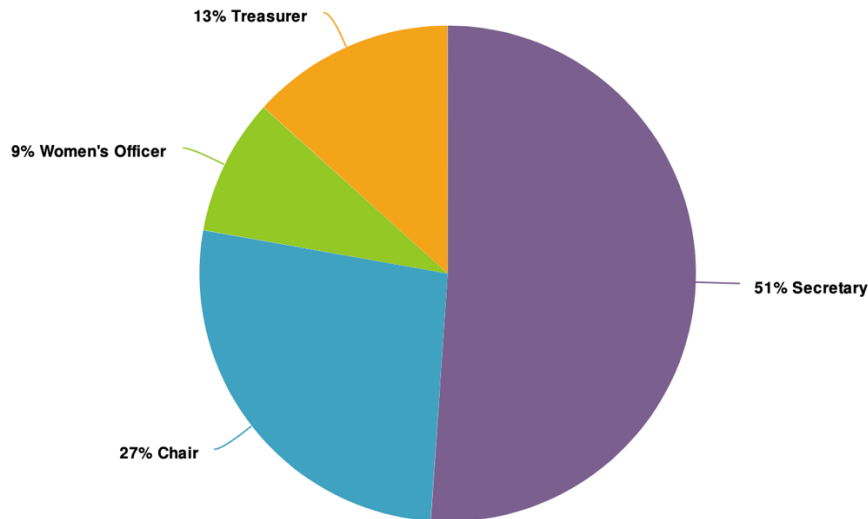

The survey shows the wide difference in regular attendance at branch meetings ranging from 4-22, although this also relates to the size of branches.

The question on branch activities showed that local campaigning activities and steward development are the most popular with members, closely followed by member learning and social events.
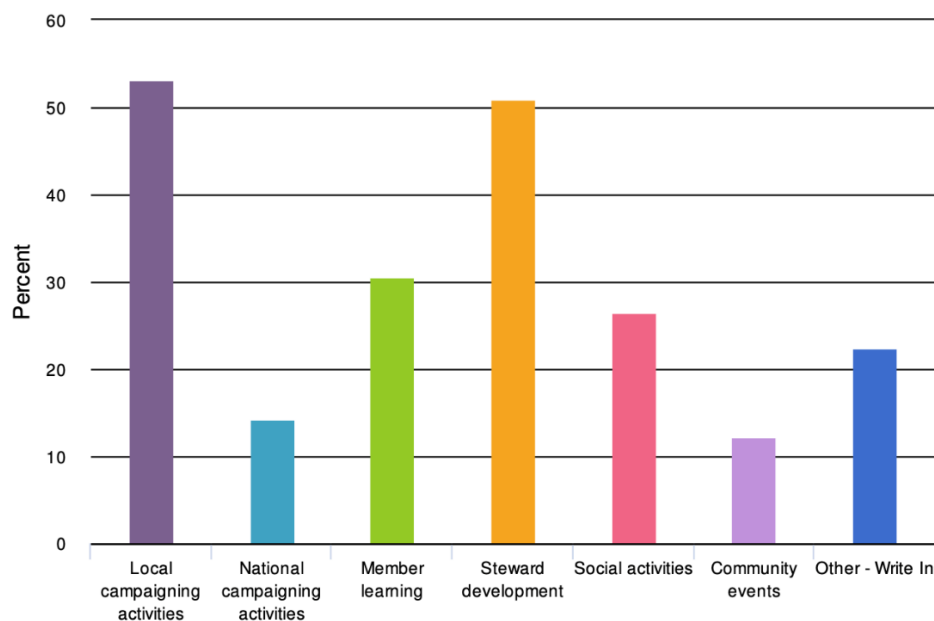

It is of concern how low national campaigning events comes in the list, and we may need to review how we engage members on national campaigns.

The question on barriers to participation shows that by far, the most significant barrier to participation is members time constraints, followed by concerns regarding the location and timing of meetings.
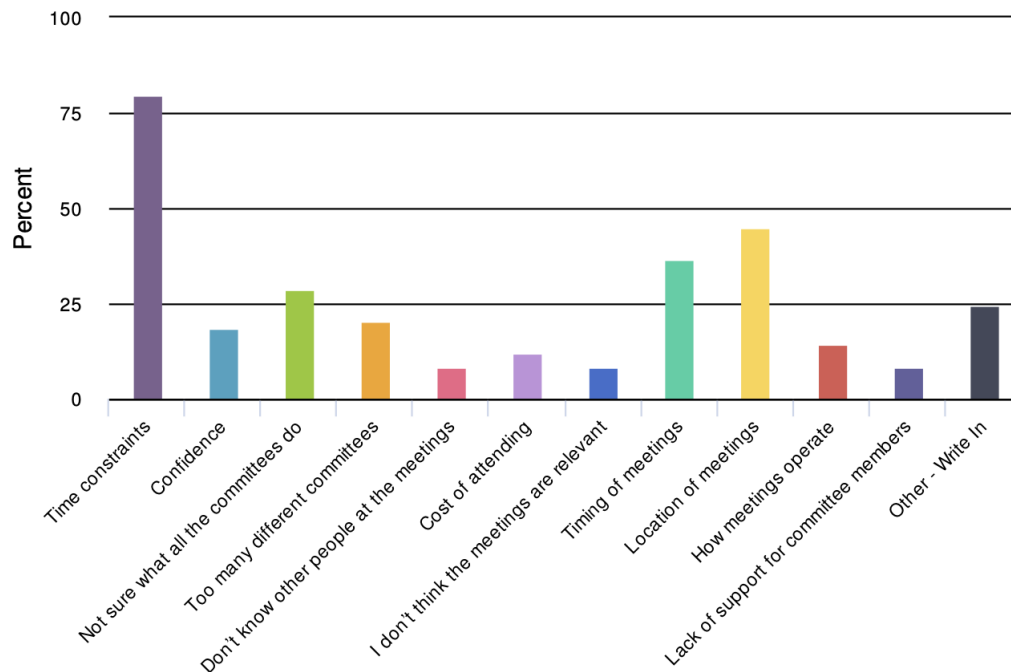
The positives from regional council meetings were interestingly relatively evenly spread between representing members at 'the regional level, networking with other union members, finding out more about what's happening across the region, and participating in democratic decision-making.
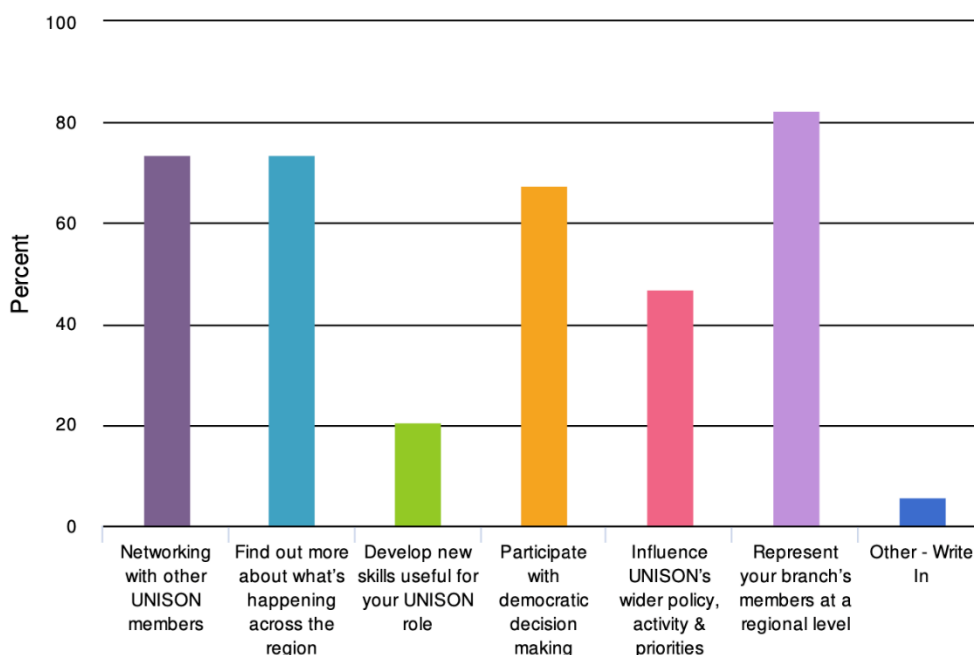
The negatives were that the same people speak all the time, too far to travel to and too political and a desire for more education sessions and more relevant speakers.
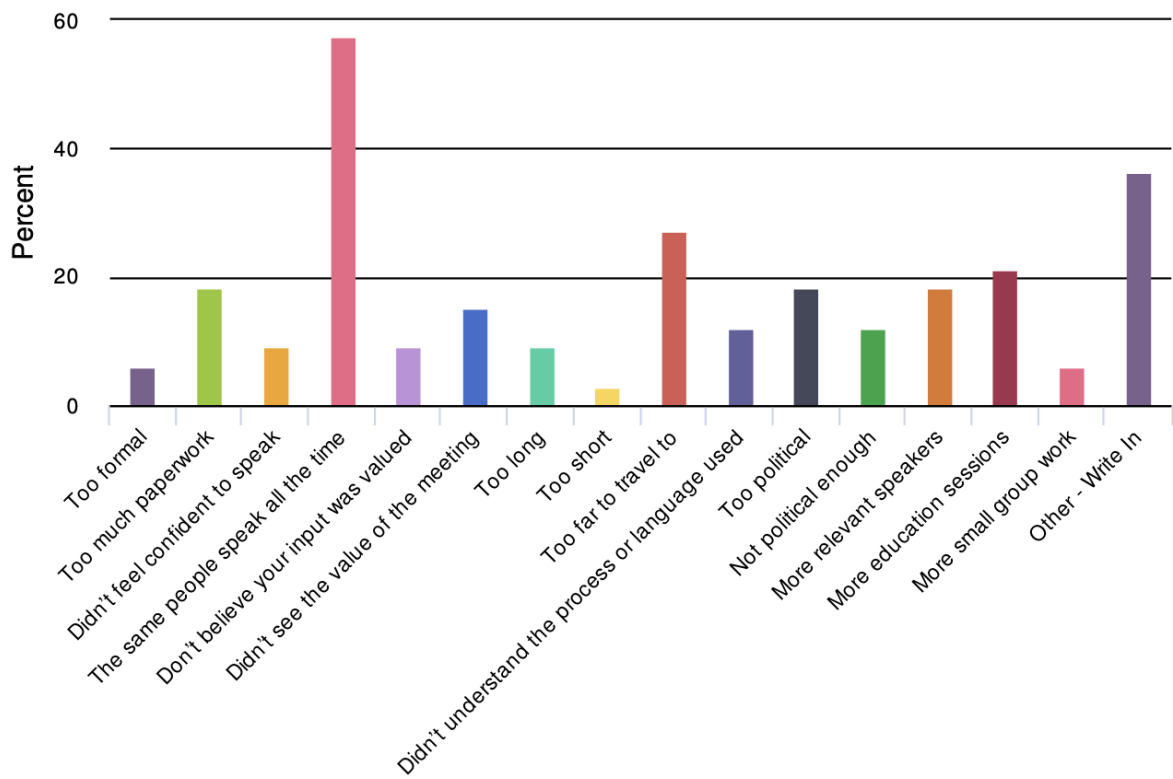
Two-thirds of respondents to the survey wanted to see more use of video conferencing, over half of respondents wanted to see inductions for new members, a third wanted more opportunities for all delegates to speak, and other responses included different locations and timings and shorter meetings.
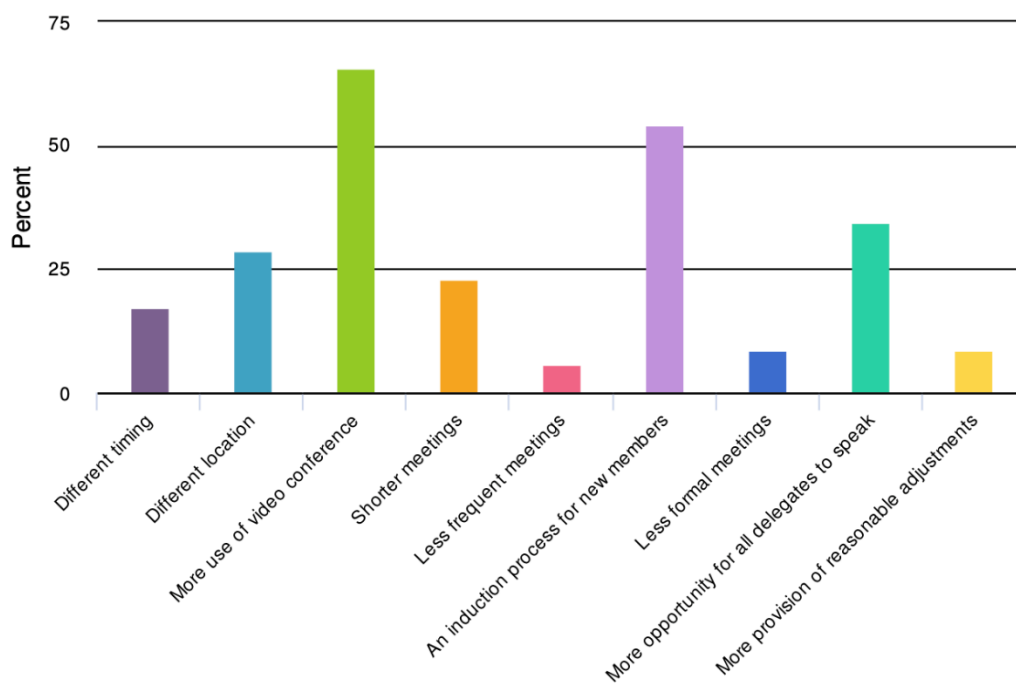
When asked to give one word to describe regional meetings and the overriding response was 'boring'. This suggests that we need to review how regional meetings are run, the content of the agendas, format and opportunities to participate in meetings in future.

Self Organised Groups Members Survey

A survey was sent out by each of the self-organised groups and young members to encourage feedback directly from members. The survey closed on Friday 26 February, and we had nearly 300 responses. While a high proportion of those members responding came from our most active branches, many also came from branches currently not fully active in the regional structures.

Similarly to the branch survey, the issue of time as the most significant barrier to participation came out clearly, and so did the preference for virtual meetings. There is also a general lack of understanding of our structures and processes.

General overview
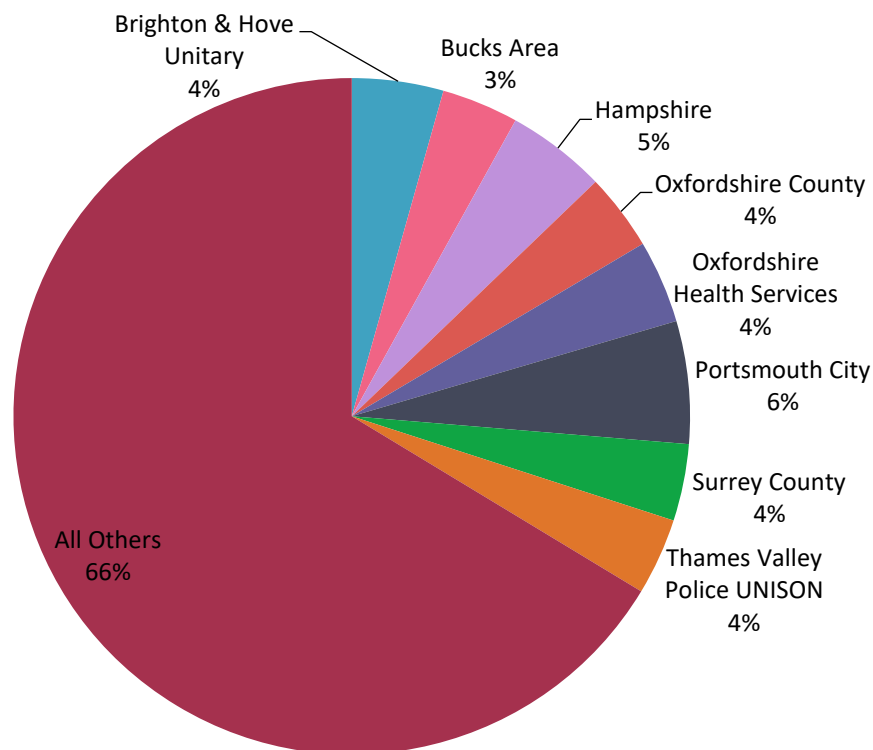
Many respondents were either ordinary members, stewards or hold branch officer positions, including equality and health and safety reps.

Equality Breakdowns

We had specifically pushed the members' survey to our members in the self-organised groups and young members, which is largely reflected in the respondents' breakdown, except women and possibly Black Members, the other groups are over-represented in comparison to our membership. This comes with a health warning because while gender and age are collected by the RMS system, the other characteristics are not. However, ONS figures show that for the SE 14.8% are BAME and 19 % are disabled and nationally, it estimates that LGB (not LGBT+) at 2%.

Barriers to branch participation
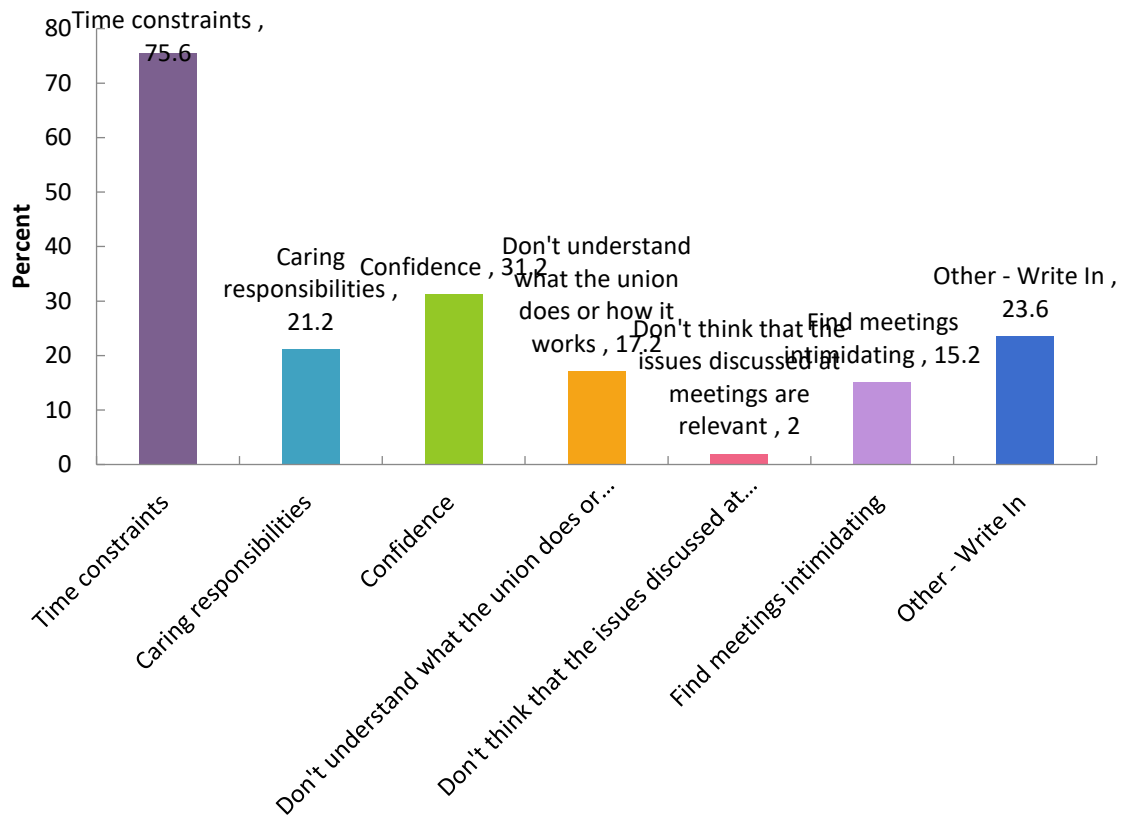
Similarly to the branch survey, the members survey shows that by far, the most significant barrier to participation in the branch is time. Confidence and caring responsibilities also feature as key barriers. Many respondents also said that they didn't understand what the union does or how it works and found meetings intimidating. On a more positive note, only 2% of respondents felt that the issues discussed at branch meetings were irrelevant.

In terms of other, 'Fatigue' rated highly amongst the responses and some concerns with branches that are not relevant to the outcome of the survey but that will need to be followed up by the region.

Barriers to involvement in regional activities
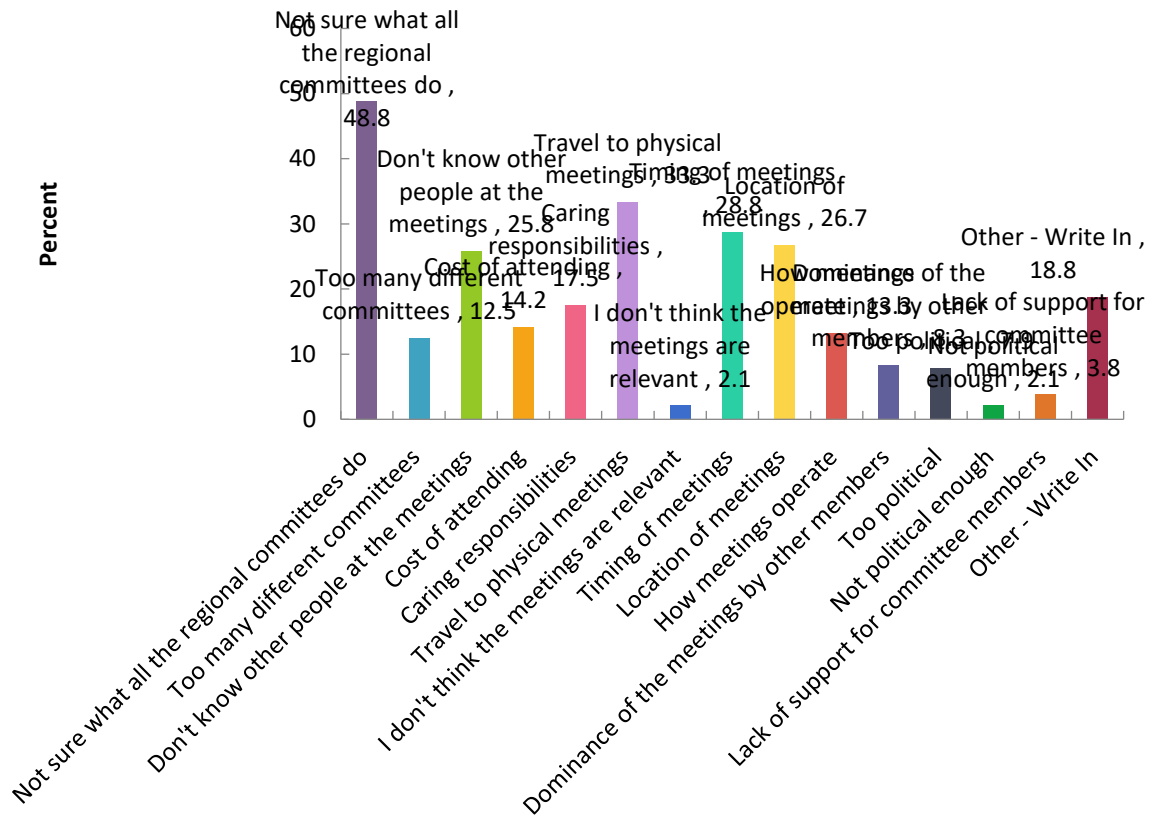
The main barrier to participation in the region seems to be a lack of understanding of what all the regional committees do, their purpose and remit are unclear, with nearly half of respondents citing that as a barrier, then the issues of travel to physical meetings, timings and locations of meetings. There are also concerns about how meetings operate, the dominance of other members at meetings, and some felt that the meetings were too political. Only a small number of respondents felt unsupported or that meetings were not political enough. In terms of other; 'anxiety' rated highly, and so did language used and a lack of understanding about how the region works.

Positives about regional activities
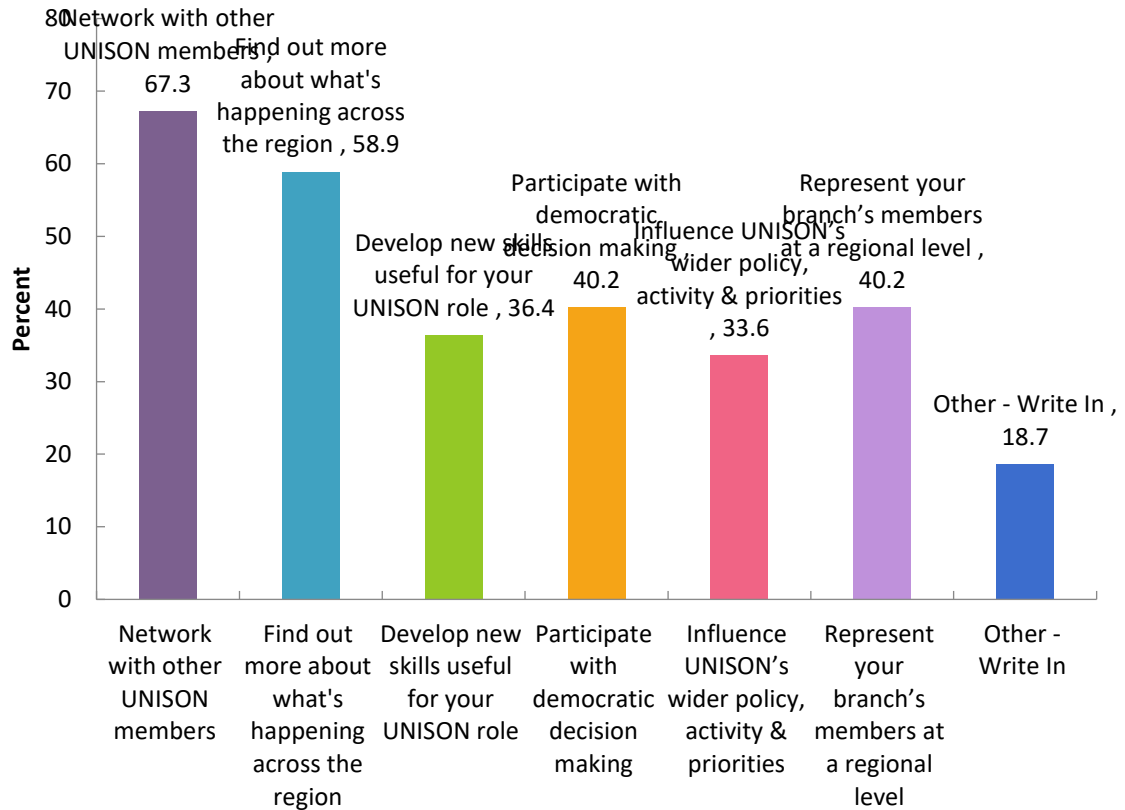
The good news is that over two-thirds of respondents enjoy the networking aspect of regional meetings, and nearly 60% enjoyed finding out more about what's happening across the region. 40% of respondents enjoyed the democratic element of the meetings and representing their branch members at a regional level. Over a third enjoyed developing new skills as an activist, and nearly the same amount enjoyed influencing UNISON's wider policy, activity and priorities.

Suggestions for change or elements of regional meetings that respondents did not enjoy
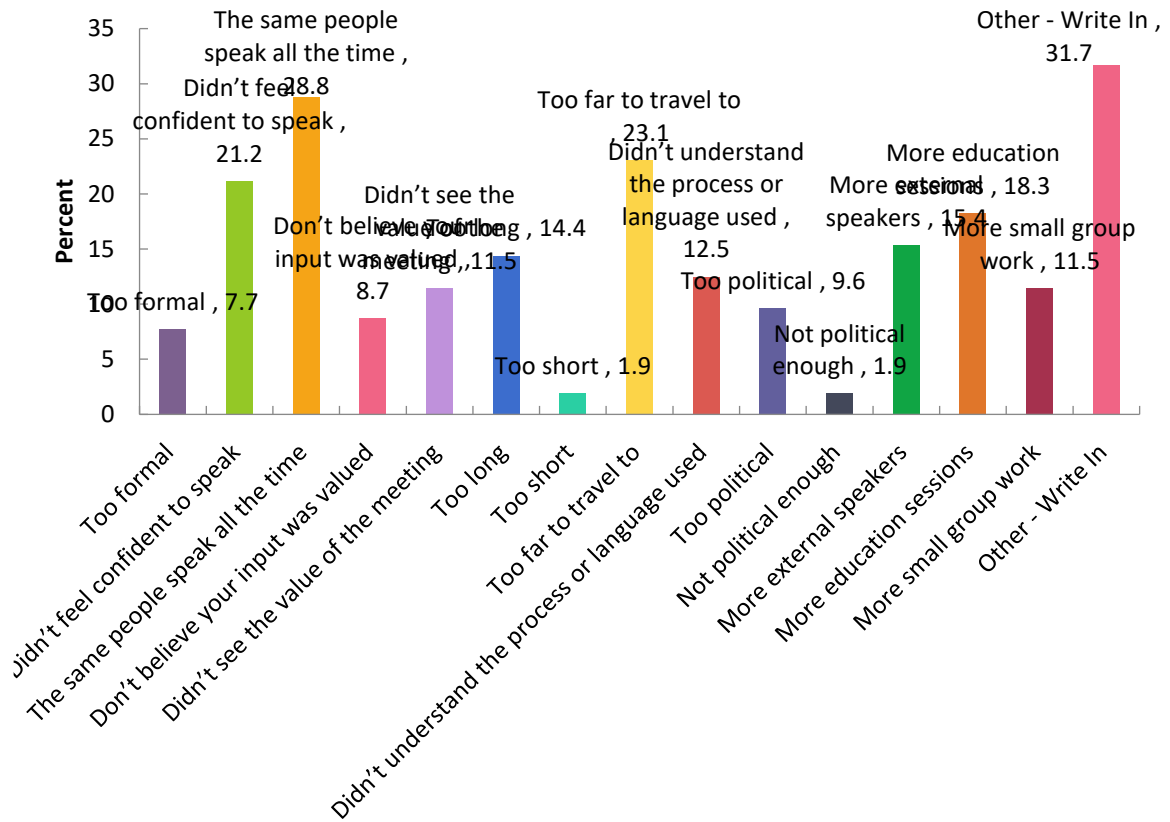
The top concern was the same people speaking all the time, similar to the branch survey. Travel to meetings and confidence came in second and third. Nearly 15% of respondents felt meetings were too long, nearly 10% felt they were too political, 11% didn't see the value of the meetings, 9% didn't feel their views were valued. There was support for more education sessions, more external speakers and more small group work. In terms of other they included: concerns around the amount of paperwork and feeling excluded.

Suggested changes
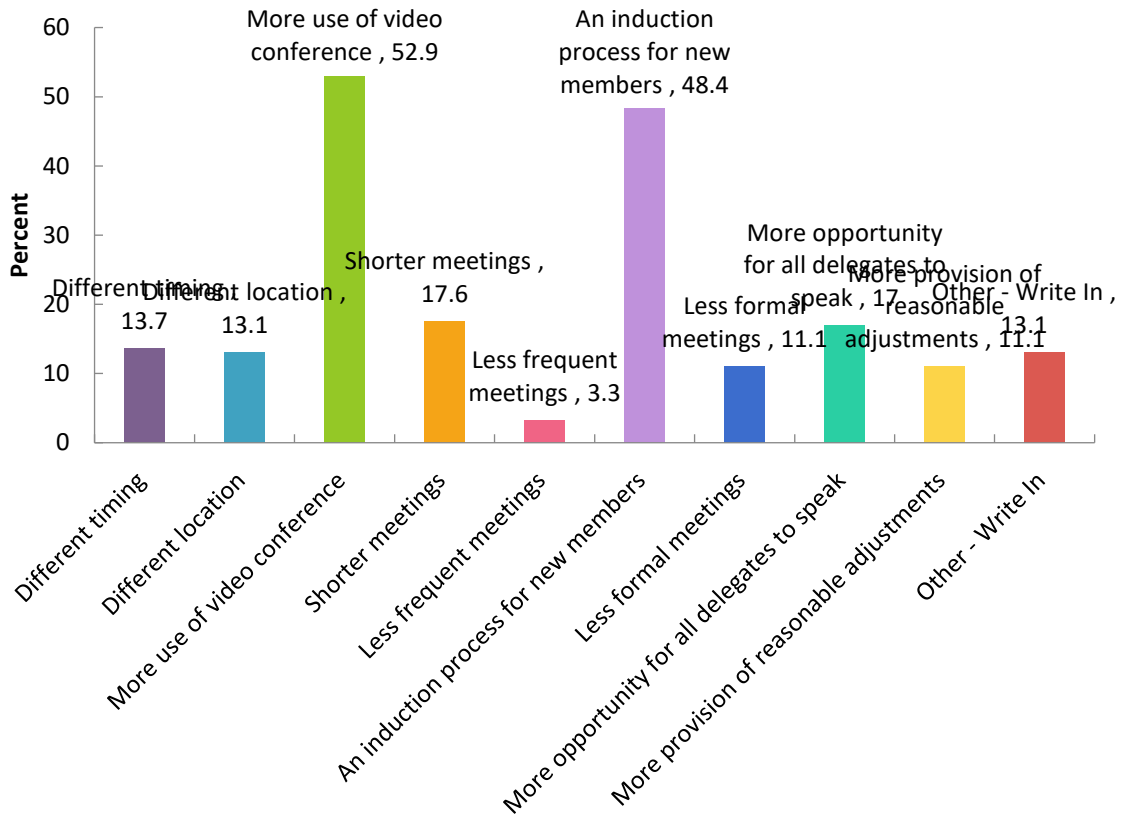
Half of respondents' clear top two answers were more use of video conferences and an induction process for new members. Shorter meetings and more opportunities for all delegates to speak were supported by 17%. Different timings and locations, less formal and more provision of reasonable adjustments were also flagged as issues needing to change. Others included have different themes aimed at specific audiences, more communication before and after meetings and tips on what to expect at the meetings for new attendees.

The desire to maintain the use of virtual meetings after restrictions end came across very strongly, as did more materials to explain our processes and structures.

Feedback from the focus groups

The plan was to hold 8 focus groups as follows:
- New members
- New activists
- Members that had accessed member learning
- Black Members
- Disabled Members
- LGBT+ Members
- Women Members
- Young Members

The WG agreed on criteria for these groups to ensure that they were a representative cross-section of our membership. Unfortunately, we had a very low success rate at securing participants for the disabled and new members groups and we have therefore postponed them. We are confident that the voices of both disabled and new members were heard in the series of focus groups as many of those attending the other groups self-identified as either disabled or young or, in some cases, both.

The other focus groups went ahead with some really interesting members and activists who provided constructive criticism and ideas for change. The feedback was as follows:

Barriers

- Time was identified by everyone, which included caring responsibilities, workload, travelling to physical meetings and general exhaustion.

- A lack of understanding of how to get more involved or what the various committees do.

- Fear of volunteering, one participant described it as 'a slippery slope', 'scary' 'need support'.

- Feeling on the outside of a group where everyone knows everyone and everything.

- Formality puts people off and an increase of informal sessions would be welcomed.

- Negativity puts people off, it was generally felt that coming together to inspire each other with the positive things that they had done would be more attractive to members.

- Members need to feel that their contributions are valued and that they will benefit from attending a meeting, understanding the purpose and remit of the meeting in advance.

Format of meetings

There was universal support for the use of virtual meetings to allow easier participation than physical meetings.

Some participants expressed an interest in holding physical meetings again once lockdown was lifted, but more for networking and training.

There was a general view that meetings were boring, and one participant said they had been to a regional meeting on a Saturday and "would never get that time back! And would never go back to another!"

While it was accepted that there was a need for some formal business, the balance needed to change in favour of more interesting sessions that should include inspirational speakers, training sessions and a social/networking element.

One participant suggested the idea of having people specifically tasked with welcoming attendees at meetings and ensuring that they have everything they need to participate.

It was suggested that you could have 30 mins max of formal business, 30 mins of either speakers, learning or sharing of experiences and then 30 mins drop-in advice sessions, followed by a social event or activity.

It was felt that equality was too far down the agenda and should be at the top, rotated around the various groups.

Greater use of informal or drop-in meetings was popular with participants, particularly around service group issues. To provide mutual support to members and provide advice on specific areas relevant to activists and members.

One suggestion was for pre-recorded contributions for those unable to attend or not confident to speak in person.

Other ideas to improve participation

Mentoring –
All members wanting to get more involved and attend meetings for the first time could be offered the support of an experienced lay member or regional staff member.

Guidance -

Before each meeting, guidance could be sent out explaining how the meeting will work and provide a glossary of terms.

Very short 'how to' guides could be produced to explain some of the basic processes such as submitting a motion, how to submit a bid for funds etc. and the different roles such as Convenor, Chairs of Committees, branch positions.

Various explainer videos could be produced to explain the basics such as what do unions do, how to get involved, support available, job descriptions for the different roles.

Starter packs for activists getting involved at regional level for the first time with model report proformas, glossary, how-to guides etc.

Issues

It was suggested that the agendas needed to focus on issues that affected members across the service groups, such as mental health, menopause, pay, housing, disability, H&S compliance, redundancies, pensions and employment law advice.

It was also suggested that we have themed months where we focus on a particular issue or equality strand.

Alternatively, it was suggested that we poll members for issues to discuss.

Communications

Increased use of technology to communicate and facilitate involvement in the union, including an App, in the same way that you have one for banking etc.

Increased communications before and after meetings. One person suggested doing trailers for meetings like the AGM to highlight what will be discussed. Another said regular follow up reports to show that the meeting resulted in actions. 'You said. We did'.

Targeted materials for equality groups and YM were popular suggestions and producing a
list of specific ways in which members can get more involved. A recurring theme was the appeal of sharing success stories.

Summary of focus groups.

The focus groups were incredibly positive and humbling affairs. They nearly all had very positive experiences of the union, and in particular, the self organised groups. Almost all were happy to get more involved in some way or another but wanted to see certain changes to the way in which we worked to make it easier for this to happen. They wanted to know more and needed more support. They all really appreciated being listened to and asked for their views and ideas. Most were keen to be involved again in the next steps of the project when proposals are developed to make changes to how we work.

ADDITIONAL CONSULTATIONS –

As well as the agreed surveys and focus groups, the project lead has attended various branches, self organised groups and met with Chairs of Committees. The feedback from them was similar to those expressed via the other consultation methods, which further demonstrates the importance of taking this feedback on board. Clearly, the feedback from the Service Groups were a slightly different focus with one of the issues discussed was the diversity of membership within service groups and the need to look at how we best ensured that all voices in these groups were heard, for instance, those in schools, care homes, and probation. This may require a further review of branch and regional structures and possible trials to create structures that allow the more marginalised members to come forward.

As with all of the responses to the consultation, the various groups all talked about the difficulty of lack of time and in particular, travelling to physical meetings often far from home.This is something that seems to be getting worse not better and that trend is likely to continue post-pandemic. Again, the move to shorter virtual meetings has been welcomed as a positive development.

The smaller service groups, in particular Police and Justice and Business and Environment, felt marginalised in favour of the dominant local government branches. Many felt that there needed to be a greater focus on issues relevant to the smaller service groups, such as workplace or equality issues that cut across all groups.

Many people raised concerns about the too political focus of discussions. They said that talk of strikes and militancy is off-putting to some. Everyone agreed that the way in which issues were facilitated and discussed was important. Unconstructive conflicts between different groups put people off, and more positive, cooperative discussions were most appealing.

The issue of how meetings are Chaired is of huge importance to ensure that new members are made to feel included and valued and to avoid personal conversations that make references to things in the past that others may not be aware of. This can be different across committees and needs to be consistent. Increased training for Chairs, with a focus not just on the mechanics of chairing but also on how to be more inclusive, was raised. The importance of ensuring that all voices get heard, not just the 'usual' dominant characters came up from numerous members, and that these voices were diverse. Fear of 'backlash' over contributing an alternative or different view to the majority was also raised, particularly if discussions were dominated by the same people or used language they were unfamiliar with. Hearing from someone that they recognised as similar to themselves gave encouragement to them to also contribute.

As with the surveys and focus groups, it has become clear that we need to better explain our language and processes both before and during the meetings. Many wanted support for activists in understanding how to affect change in the union.

There was a lot of support for an improved induction process for new activists signposting the way to all the support and training available to activists, including motion writing (or how to make a change), dealing with paperwork and public speaking. It was suggested that the inductions and training could all be virtual to make it easier for activists to attend and for it to be delivered quickly.

It was suggested that we could produce more user-friendly short guides to some of our processes and procedures and explainer videos recorded by a representative cross cross-section of members.

Social and informal networking was suggested as another way to get people more involved before encouraging them to become more active.. It was also suggested that more women's or young member-only meetings and training might be a way to get more women or young members involved initially.

The benefits of reviewing the service group and self organised groups constitutions was discussed with the Regional Service Group Chairs and others to harmonise and simplify wherever possible, to make it easy for members to learn our processes for one group and apply it to getting involved in other areas of the organisation. This could empower members to get more easily involved in policymaking as the current differences cause confusion, particularly for newer activists.

Additionally, it was raised that the purpose of some committees was unclear or even misleading, with members feeling they had signed up for one reason and were then part of something entirely different. It was also discussed that there appeared to be an overlap of remit between several committees and it was unclear how they should interact.

Timings of meetings will always be hard due to the size and diversity of our membership, so it was felt that there needed to be varying times to allow people to attend at least some of the series of meetings. Balanced with the need to schedule meetings well in advance to allow members to plan and arrange time off and to allow time in advance of meetings to consider any paperwork. Greater use of surveys was desirable to identify the most optimum date and time for meetings.

The issue of non-core employers and in particular private sector members and how we could better support and involve them in our structures and decision making. It's clear that there is currently a two tier system where some members find it harder to access the support of the union and become involved in our democratic decision making structures both at branch and regional level.

Greater use of networking activities to allow members to interact and get to know other activists and see the union as a family and community that they and their families would want to be part of.

Final comments and next steps

The findings are broadly positive in that there are many suggestions about how we could improve how we work to enable a broader group of members to get more involved in our activities and, in particular, our decision-making at regional level and an overall indication that people would like to get more involved. What's clear is that participation levels are largely driven by barriers to participation rather than lack of willingness to become more involved in the union.

While there has been some constructive criticism of how we do things now that must be taken on board, there have also been many positive suggestions as to what changes could be made, with the majority of the changes straightforward and manageable. It is clear that if we can review our structures and practices as the review has tasked us to do, we can encourage more people into activism.

The next step is to digest this information, consider the suggestions made and think about how we could make changes to our communications, our language, our

meetings, our support for new activists, our constitutions and potentially our structures to allow more of our members to become fully involved in our decision making processes.

Issue for consideration

Based on these clear outcomes, there are several areas for consideration on how we could review what we currently do to enable and encourage greater and increased participation:

- How do we arrange our meetings to ensure the widest levels of participation? This could include considering:
    - Physical, virtual
    - Timings of meetings
    - Length of meetings
- How do we conduct our meetings to ensure everyone can engage and participate? This could include considering:
    - Format, including balance of formal business, speakers, learning sessions
    - Chairing
    - Topics of discussion
    - Networking opportunities
- How do we better communicate our structures and processes?
- What mentoring for activists and other support materials could we deliver to support this?
- How do we ensure all areas of our membership are equally able to participate, particularly growing areas like schools, probation, community and private sector workplaces?
- How do we review the language, format, operation and fundamental elements of all the regional constitutions to introduce greater consistency to enable easier participation and understanding across and between groups?
- How can we review our committee structures and remits to ensure they are fit for purpose?