Meeting Arrangements Workstream:
Recommendation One

Introduction

As demonstrated throughout the surveys, focus groups and feedback discussions, the way in which meetings have been held in the past has prevented some of our members from participating. The Working Group acknowledged that we need to explore new ways of working to make it easier for a wider group of members to get involved. All audiences said TIME was the key barrier to participation (75%).

The overwhelming evidence was that to make meetings more accessible, people wanted to see more virtual meetings in future and liked the changes to accommodate these, including more structured and purposeful meetings encompassing shorter, timed agendas and regular breaks. All audiences (66%) supported much greater use of virtual time limited meetings.

Activists reported difficulty in getting Facility Time due to the diversity of our membership, particularly for our members in the private and community sector as well as women members. This is compounded for those with caring responsibilities.

As a result, the working group agreed to take forwards the following recommendation:

Recommendation 1. The Regional Constitution be amended to require that at least 50% of all regional meetings take place virtually.

Following this, the project lead has since done further exploration and how this recommendation could be implemented.

Analysis

The 2020 committee cycle was limited due to the onset of the pandemic, the changes to ways of working and in recognition of those members providing frontline services. The 2021 committee cycle has provided additional data on participation in virtual meetings, we must continue to capture this data in an accessible format in the future to allow for effective monitoring and support discussions using the *Framework For Setting Meeting Dates* (to be agreed).

Regional Council AGM is the most important democratic decision-making body in the region. In 2019, of the possible total of branch delegates that could have registered only 34% of possible delegates were registered, and of those only 60% attended or 21% of the total number of possible delegates. In 2021, of the possible total of branch delegates that could have been registered only 47% of possible delegates were registered, and of those only 68% attended or 32% of the total number of possible delegates. Whilst this does demonstrate a considerable increase in both registration and attendance, it also demonstrates a significant number of branches

either sending no delegates or unable to send their full entitlements. It also suggests that some branches are registering delegates who then choose not to attend.

Whilst the AGM is usually one of the better attended meetings and there has been a steady increase in attendance over the past three years, the virtual format support both attendance and participation leading to a 46% increase in attendance. Additionally, the feedback survey following the AGM demonstrated that the virtual format supported the increase in attendance, with 83% of respondents stating that a virtual AGM was easier to participate in than a physical AGM, 96% stating that the agenda was easier to follow, 92% stating that having a start and end time made it easier to participate and 92% stating that they wanted to keep electronic voting in the future.

Additionally, the second Regional Council Meeting of the year, usually held in May, has traditionally struggled with quoracy and been poorly attended, with only 31 attendees in 2019. Conversely, the virtual regional council meeting held in May 2021 was very well attended and had 81 attendees- one more than the 2019 AGM and a 161% increase in attendance.

Regional Committee is the operational body that enacts policy set by Regional Council and is the second most important democratic body in the region. This committee benefitted greatly from the introduction of virtual meetings, with a significant increase in attendance.

	First Meeting	Second Meeting	Third Meeting
Physical 2019	17	23	20
Virtual 2021	32	40	31
Increase	88%	74%	55%

The Regional Strategic Committee each saw an increase in attendance at meetings. Finance Committee had an impressive 140% increase in attendance, P&C had a similarly impressive 117% increase. E,T,D had a slightly lower 40% increase in attendance.

The Regional Self Organised Group committees have seen an overall increase in attendance at meetings and AGMs, with some significant increases. For example, RWC AGM attendance increased from 23 to 88 (or a 283% increase).

The Regional Service Group committee cycles have largely resumed as previously. The majority of committees have seen an overall increase in attendance at meetings and at AGMs, with Higher education a notable example (120% increase), with some outliers. For example, whilst Local Government Committee saw a significant decrease in AGM attendance (-34%) whilst seeing an overall increase in attendance at meetings (11%). Community Committee was also an outlier which saw an equal number of attendees at physical and virtual meetings.

Hybrid Meetings

Whilst there has been a demonstrable improvement in participation and attendance due to virtual meetings, feedback has also indicated that the physical format is preferred for some meetings such as educational briefings, strategy development and governance matters and therefore the suggestion is to allow committees to continue to make informed decisions, using the framework for setting meeting dates, on the best format to encourage the widest participation.

Where it is necessary to hold a physical meetings, we want to ensure that these are accessible to the majority of members. One option that has been discussed previously has been the possibility of hybrid meetings.

Hybrid inequality is an issue that has begun be raised as a concern, particularly amongst women, and for those that may be unable to participate in physical meetings, either due to caring responsibilities, disabilities, lack of facility time or carrying out frontline roles, such as teaching assistants, nurses and care workers. First and foremost is presence disparity. This is what occurs when we join a meeting as a remote participant when most of the other participants are together in a room. The person joining remotely can't necessarily see all the attendees, any papers being circulated or flip charts or boards being used, it's harder to get your voice heard and some have reported being forgotten that they were present.

Studies suggest that we tend to be biased towards people we are physically near, and that we tend to attribute positive behavioural traits to people we can see working – in a way that might work against those who aren't as visible as others. Presenteeism is an issue that has long been fought against by UNISON, particularly in regards to the impact on career progression and the gender and disability pay gaps, but that also has consequences for UNISON as a democratic organisation. There are issues about voice and fairness in hybrid meetings – people being able to be heard and put their views across in the same way as those who are co-located can, as well as being recognised for their contributions equally to those in the room. The participation project has been developed by the working group to break down existing barriers, the introduction of hybrid working risks further reducing the visibility of those from underrepresented groups and all the associated issues this brings.

Additionally, the project has highlighted the importance of networking to both supporting activist development, building confidence and for promoting participation and ensuring that this is open, consistent and particularly supports those that have not previously participated to gain confidence in participating in meetings. However, hybrid meetings potentially risks a two tier approach to networking. Those able to attend in person will be able to start to chat before the remote meeting opens or carry on discussions after the meeting finishes. Visual aids in the room aren't accessible to every participant. Side conversations can't be heard by everyone. Body language, already harder to read in an online meeting, is further reduced if remote participants can't see everyone in the physical room. These issues risk making meetings harder than they were before the pandemic – something the working group has worked hard to prevent.

It is clear that although physical meetings have contributed towards limiting participation, they must continue to play a role moving forwards and a hybrid approach to those meetings that have to go ahead as physical meetings does provide an opportunity for those who are restricted to participate. Therefore, for the majority of business oriented and decision or policy making meetings, virtual meetings should take precedence and the use of hybrid meetings should be restricted as far as possible.

Consequently, where meetings must take place as a physical/hybrid meeting, robust measures need to be put in place to ensure that hybrid meetings are as inclusive as possible and significant additional work would need to be undertaken to allow this to take place.

Currently, UNISON South East Region does not have the capability to facilitate hybrid meetings on any scale. The meeting rooms in Guildford and Brighton do not have the sufficient capability to hold hybrid meetings and significant investment in technology, both software and hardware, would be necessary to ensure that every participant was able to see each other, hear each other and allow the chair to facilitate the meeting in a fair and equitable manner- for example, upgraded wifi capacity, screens for all participants within the physical meeting, microphones and speakers for all participants, investment in facilitative software etc. This is beyond the remit of the Participation Project and the Region.

Should the investment become possible in the future, ensuring inclusive hybrid meetings would need to be a priority. This would include Chair's training to ensure all chairs feel comfortable and confident in facilitating meetings, whether they themselves are present remotely or physically, and likely changes to both the Access Guidelines and Working Together Guidelines as well as enhanced committee discipline to prevent any side conversations, distractions and an open and inclusive approach to contributions, with mindfulness of the impact of presence disparity or presenteeism. It's likely additional resource in terms of staffing would also need to be considered for larger meetings in order to support the Chair in maximising inclusivity both virtually and physically in addition to the existing complement of Committee Secretary, Administrator and Technical & Access Facilitator. Training for all committee members would therefore need to be provided to ensure that any unconscious biases towards presence disparity were fully understood and mitigated against particularly in regards to democratic processes.

There would also need to be agreed robust monitoring and evaluation processes in place to ensure that there was no negative impact on those that hybrid meetings are most likely to benefit- those already underrepresented within UNISON- for example those with caring responsibilities, disabilities or in vital frontline roles or within limited access to facilities time- often women, disabled members and those in low-paid roles.

Proposed rule change

Insert new section 18

18. __Meeting Arrangements__

At least half of all meetings per annual cycle of the Regional Council, Regional Committee, the Strategic Committees, Standing Committees, and the Sub-Groups will take place virtually using video conference software.

The Regional Council's expectation is that all other groups recognised at a regional level (as detailed in section 17) follow the same pattern.

Re-number subsequent sections accordingly.

Conclusion

Alongside the demonstrable increase in attendance and participation outlined above, feedback from committee meetings and Chairs, focus groups, surveys and anecdotal evidence has supported the greater use of the virtual meetings, with one disabled member commenting "*Virtual meetings and events has opened things up for me and I'm no longer a second class citizen because of my disability*".

Discussions with committee chairs and feedback sessions at committees has demonstrated an overwhelming support for virtual meetings as suitable for conducting the majority of business, with support for considering the substance of the meeting in relation to the suitability of a virtual or physical format. For example, education activities, policy development, governance matters. Whilst the overall objective should be to ensure that physical meetings can be accessed remotely, this must be in an inclusive way to prevent undermining the objectives of the participation project. Further investment and additional reviews must take place before this is possible and the proposed rule change allows for this possibility in the future.

In the meantime, ensuring that all committees take a considered approach to determining meeting format and that at least half of all meetings are virtual and accessible to the majority of members must remain a priority for the Participation Project.

Recommendations

1. The Working Group endorse the wording of the rule change set out above to be proposed to Regional Council AGM 2022.
2. Regional Council AGM 2023 to review and receive an updated report on the ability to utilise physical meetings as hybrid meetings. This is subject to technological investment, training for chairs and committee attendees, appropriate changes to the access guidelines and working together guidelines. This should be built into the Participation Project Monitoring and Review period.