

# UNISON Retired Members National Conference 2024 - report back

■ By Maureen Wade

Chair, Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section

Our national conference took place on 8 – 9 October at Llandudno in north Wales. We sent four delegates this year – **George Lewis, Steffanie Williams, Alison Meredith** and myself, **Maureen Wade**. It was the first time at national conference for three of the delegates, and in total there were 442 delegates in attendance from across the UK.

Llandudno is a lovely place, very scenic and at our hotel we all had sea views, so a beautiful vista for us land-locked Brummies when we opened our curtains in the morning.

Unfortunately our resolution on Communications had been ruled out of order by the Standing Orders Committee, as had many other resolutions, so it was quite a truncated agenda, with only a limited number of motions up for discussion.

On the Tuesday, the main focus for us was attending the various Self Organised Group (SOG) meetings and the Panel discussions (*see reports overleaf*). There are SOGs for Black Members, Women, Disabled Members, and LGBTQ+. The Panel discussions were on a range of subjects: George attended 'Climate Change and Older People'; Steffanie attended 'Digital Exclusion': Maureen went to the WASPI campaign; Alison went to 'Mental Health and Older People', although only to find it had been cancelled. Other Panel discussions were on the *Pensions Update* and the *Local Government Disinvestment Strategy*.

Conference day itself on the Wednesday was chaired by **Steve North**, the President of UNISON nationally, who managed to get through all the motions on the agenda. This was obviously down to Steve's skills in the chair, but also because such a large number of motions – 18 resolutions and 9 Emergency resolutions – were ruled out of order by the

Standing Orders Committee.

A range of motions were on the agenda, but the big concerns were around Winter Fuel payments, pension poverty, pensioners and a National Care Service, and the NHS and so-called 'bed blocking'.

Conference began by overwhelmingly supporting Motion 10 on the **WASPI campaign**. This was followed by Motion 3 on **Pensioner Poverty**, which sought to increase the state pension to no less than 70 per cent of the living wage.

Motion 1 on 'Keeping retired members in UNISON', and Motion 20 on 'Communicating with Retired Members' addressed some of the issues Retired Members' branches have in accessing retired members and the difficulties with the GDPR process.

Motion 19 looked at **Digital Exclusion**, and the fact that many retired members do not have access to the internet, and increasingly cannot access banks or GP and health services. Motion 18 on 'end the crisis in **Delayed Hospital Discharges**, was close to my heart as a retired Hospital Social Worker.

Motion 11 on ending the difference in **State Pensions**, highlighted the inequalities in payment of those on old State Pensions and new State Pensions.

**Conference reports continued overleaf** ▶

■ The conference venue, the tranquil North Wales town of Llandudno



■ Birmingham delegates Alison Meredith, Maureen Wade, Steffanie Williams and George Lewis set off from New Street



## UNISON Retired Members National Conference report

The afternoon session saw the passing of Composite A, an emergency motion from Wales, the Retired Members' National Committee, North West region and Greater London, on the **Winter Fuel Allowance**, which understandably generated a lot of anger in the conference.

Motion 5 on equal pensions for **surviving spouses**, and Motion 9 on '**Retired Members Sharers** at UNISON National Delegate Conference', both came from our region and both were supported.

The conference then went on to discuss the following:

- Motion 8 – **Online Banking**
- Motion 12 – **Animal Care Charter**
- Motion 4 – **Maximising contributions** by Retired Members in branches
- Motion 16 – Changes to **Social Services**
- Motion 15 – the public service **telephone network**, and the consequences of getting rid of landlines
- Motion 2 – the desire to be both informed and effective, which called for access to **training for post holders** in Retired Members Sections

- Motion 6 – **Blue Light** discrimination
- Motion 15 – **public conveniences**
- Emergency Motion 3 – the **social care gap**.

All above were passed, with 19 motions passed in total during the day long conference.

Our national conference is allowed to choose two of the motions passed that day, to be put forward at UNISON's National Conference. Following a ballot the two chosen were Composite A on the Winter Fuel Allowance, and Motion 10 on the WASPI campaign.

A bucket collection was held to raise money for '**Medical Aid for Palestine**', and a photo was taken of those supporting the call for an immediate ceasefire in **Gaza** and **Lebanon**.



## SOG reports

### Women's SOG

By Maureen Wade

As usual this was really well attended, with standing room only. The meeting was chaired by **Rosie McGregor**, chair of the National Retired Members National Committee.

Yet again this year, only half an hour was allocated to the meeting, giving limited time for discussion, as well as fitting in electing two delegates to UNISON's National Women's Conference – Rosie McGregor and **Majorie Morrissey** from the West Midlands were duly elected by those present.

The next item was the Winter Fuel Allowance, and the anger in the room was palpable. Many expressed their anger and disgust that a Labour government was pushing many pensioners into poverty, with women pensioners being disproportionately affected by this decision.

Many women had attended a lobby of Parliament which had taken place on 7<sup>th</sup> October, which had been organised by the National Pensioners Convention in conjunction with the Unite and GMB trade unions, and Age UK. Women were urged to attend the next lobby of Parliament on 30<sup>th</sup> October, which is budget day.

Women from the WASPI campaign also expressed their anger that the new government were dragging their feet when it came to agreeing levels of compensation for those women born in the 1950s, who were not given notice by the Department of Work and Pensions of the change to their pension age. All present agreed to back Motion 10 on the WASPI campaign that was on the conference agenda.

Rosie also said that an emergency motion (Composite A) was being put together on the Winter fuel issue for the conference. The general consensus from the SOG was that UNISON nationally had been on the back foot in responding to the government's Winter fuel decision, and it needed to be challenging it like other unions.

### Disabled Members SOG

By Alison Meredith

The main issue raised was: 'why is it in Llandudno again?' Disabled members were promised four years ago it would not be, as it is not a suitable venue for people with disabilities.

For those coming by train, some people took several hours to travel to the conference venue, on train services where you could not book train seats in advance, which is very important for people with disabilities. The journey itself also meant having to swap trains every few stops.

Meanwhile, Llandudno itself - attractive town though it is - has little parking and hotels with steep stairs. The SOG chair said these points would be reported back.

The SOG went on to discuss people concern's about what the new Labour Government planned for PIP payments, attendance allowance etc.

### Black Members SOG

By Steffanie Williams

Once again, the point was made that we needed more than just 30 minutes for the SOG meetings at conference. There was no agenda nor feedback from the previous year's meeting, and time is also taken up by agreeing a chair for the meeting.

Someone needs to lead the group, especially for us first time conference delegates, with feedback from last year's SOG, so we know what went on.

We also discussed access to information about numbers of black members. How do we get more information, which we can then use to encourage more attendance.

Around 15 members attended, but most people were unsure of what to do. We hope to do better as a group in the future with more training, and shared knowledge. Even so, it was still a worthwhile experience.



# Panel Discussions

## WASPI campaign

By Maureen Wade

The discussion was led by **Angela Maddon**, chair of the WASPI national campaign.

She gave an overview of the 10 year campaign and how they sought to get compensation for women born in the 1950s, who were not adequately informed about the state pension eligibility age change from 60 to 66.

As a consequence they had not been able to plan adequately for their retirement, with some losing out as much as £47,000 in state pension.

Angela said this had affected 3.5 million women and that it is now estimated that 300,000 WASPI women had died whilst waiting for their pension injustice to be addressed.

The DWP have been found guilty of maladministration by the Department of the Health Services Ombudsman and had recommended compensation of between £1,000 - £2,995.

The Tories had failed to take on board this decision, even though the recommended figure falls way short of what women have really lost. Angela said they now have to focus on the new Labour government to address this inequality.

It was noted that the previous Labour Shadow Pensions Minister, John McDonnell, had promised £12,000 in compensation.

The campaign had met with the new Pensions Minister, Emma Reynolds, who listened to their arguments and said she would have to review all the evidence – concerns from the Panel discussion was that Labour may kick this decision into the long grass, or that any compensation will be means-tested.

The campaign are pushing for a lobby of Parliament on Budget Day, asking for an immediate settlement of £3,000 for all WASPI women. **Josie Irwin**, from UNISON nationally said that UNISON Retired Members National Committee would be sending out a letter to all branches that members can send to their MP, to

■ The Lauriston Court hotel where our delegation stayed - great sea views



## Digital Exclusion

By Steffanie Williams

The discussion opened with the Derbyshire delegate saying that if individuals did not have the internet in their homes, it's always useful to access the internet by other means. An example was given of a project by Cambridge County Council called 'CambWifi' which is free, and importantly secure, which is already available at around 200 public buildings across the county. This includes all Cambridgeshire Libraries and council offices, public leisure centres, children's centres, community centres and Park & Ride sites.

There are things that people can use, that are cheap or free, which not many people know about, so we should spread information about such access.

The delegate from the South West said it wasn't just physical access to the digital world, but the language used by organisations that many in the older generation don't understand. She said we needed to get services and organisations to change the language.

Leeds delegates meanwhile suggested that we should not give in to the new tech, which is taking the human touch out of every-day life. Nottingham delegates said we should use 'people power' to make changes, and work out a strategy where we can walk away, turning to services that are for our generation, and resist using organisations not willing to have us in mind when planning their services.

call for a full discussion in Parliament, and a vote to address this inequality, and compensate before any more women die.

WASPI women are also urging for a joint campaign and lobby with the Winter Fuel protests on 30<sup>th</sup> October.

■ **Birmingham UNISON Retired Members (and helpers!) collecting signatures in Birmingham for the Age UK petition on the day the government voted on the plan to cut Winter Fuel payments**



# Panel Discussions

## 'Climate Change and How it affects Older People'

By George Lewis

The Panel was made up of our Chairperson, **Rosie MacGregor**, and **Roger Banister** (Knowsley Branch), **Sam Young** (Age U.K. Wales), **Michelle Singleton** (UNISON policy office).

This was a very interesting discussion. Below is a summary of what was discussed and how we can help to prepare for it and reduce its impact on our lives:

### Problems caused by Climate change:

**Overheating:** Heat related deaths in Europe in 2024 were more than 44,000. In England there were over 2,900 deaths in 2023. 40-degree summers in Britain are likely to become more common. This is often exacerbated by poor housing, lack of proper insulation, causing overheating in the summer and damp in wet warmer winters. Older people often live in these houses where they may have lived for many years. These damp warmer conditions caused by global warming also bring a greater risk of disease such as malaria, dengue fever, Lyme disease etc. Again, older people are more at risk due to weaker immune systems.

### Worldwide problems:

**Food production:** Global warming has caused problems for farmers around the world. Some parts of the world are having wetter Springs, some are having cooler, dryer Springs. This creates problems for the farmers who are not sure how much of their crops will survive and this in turn causes food shortages and price increases, once again affecting older people who are more likely to be on a fixed income and are forced to spend more of their money on food.

**Migration:** migration around the world is increasing each year. The International Organization for Migration estimates that over the past decade 1.7 billion people have been affected by climate related disasters, including tropical storms, flooding, earthquakes, tsunamis. The 2022 flooding in Pakistan affected 33 million people. This causes people to emigrate and brings problems to themselves and to the new countries they arrive in. The only long-term solution is to build resilient localities, investing in local green projects, solar power, wind power etc.

**Flooding in the UK:** Manchester University research identified over 700,000 people in the 10% most vulnerable neighbourhoods in the UK, who are at risk of river, coastal or surface water flooding; this again will include many older people. As a result of a lack of flood defences, 5.2 million properties are at risk. Older people are more vulnerable due to mobility issues, reliant on public transport, requiring regular medicine, access to hospital, and many other difficulties caused by old age.

### Suggested solutions:

Here are some solutions suggested by the group, some more practical than others:

If your house is at **risk of flooding** have a plan. The government web site ([www.gov.uk/personal\\_flood\\_plan](http://www.gov.uk/personal_flood_plan)) has a check list giving lots of advice including;

- Protect important documents, keep them in a safe place in a waterproof container that is easy to get to in an emergency. This might include passports, insurance documents, medical cards, photos, other important documents.
- Contact details you might need, relatives, friends, medical providers etc.
- Floodline **0345 988 1188**
- Prepare a flood kit.
- What to do about pets.
- The government web site gives lots of practical info and is well worth a look at.

**Reduce, Reuse, Recycle** - the 3Rs. Encourage family members to do the same, especially grandchildren (they are the ones who will feel the greatest impact of climate change).

**Green Week** (7<sup>th</sup> – 15 July 2025) is the UK's largest community action group to fight climate change. Check the web site [www.greatbiggreenweek.com](http://www.greatbiggreenweek.com) and get involved.

**Become a 'Citizen Scientist':** Citizen science can play an important role in climate change research by providing data that can help sciences to understand the impacts of climate change. Have a look at their web site: [www.gvi.co.uk](http://www.gvi.co.uk)

**Join campaign groups** - such as Friends of the Earth etc.

**UNISON** are playing their part calling for 'No to Nuclear Energy', and campaigning for green energy projects to be built more quickly and for more public ownership of National Infrastructure, water, Railways etc.

I'm sure there are many more examples of how we can get involved, these are just a few. Overall, it was a very informative meeting, and I hope it's given you some food for thought.



## 'We're on our way home'

A GOOD time was had by our team in Llandudno and those who attended for the first time really enjoyed it.

This is despite a tortuous journey home, which involved our train breaking down, and several train changes.

Indeed, when we eventually got to New Street an hour and a half late, just to cap it all the escalator broke down midway!

A special thank you to George for becoming our impromptu porter.