



# A New Framework For Organising

National Executive  
Council Statement  
to 2026 ADM



**This Union is only as strong as its membership.  
Well organised workplaces support strong  
collective agreements enabling us to get the  
best possible deal for our members at work.**

Usdaw has a proud history of running one of the most effective organising agendas within the Trade Union Movement, but we cannot afford to stand still. We know that within our agreements and across the sectors we organise there remain hundreds of thousands of workers who are not part of a trade union.

The Employment Rights Act will remove years of red tape on trade union organising activity and deliver important new rights for unions to meet and recruit workers in unorganised workplaces. This presents new opportunities, but also new demands on the Union. We are committed to supporting reps to take best advantage of these new rights while balancing the needs of our existing agreements.

In order to maximise the potential to grow our Union and improve the collective voice at work, it is essential that we renew our organising strategy to further build on the solid foundations established. Strong rep structures that reflect the diversity of our membership remain at the heart of creating a robust organising framework fit for the future.

# General Secretary's Foreword



This statement sets out the importance of renewing our organising agenda to prepare the Union for the opportunities and challenges we are facing in the future.

Usdaw has campaigned tirelessly for a new deal for workers and we can be proud of the part we have played working with a Labour Government to secure the much needed change our members deserve.

The Employment Rights Act delivers the biggest uplift to workers' rights in a generation, including Statutory Sick Pay from day one of illness, contracts that guarantee the number of hours you normally work, and new protections against fire and rehire. The Act also aims to redress the imbalance of power in workplaces by repealing years of damaging anti-trade union legislation and strengthening workers' ability to meet and speak with a trade union. The new right for unions to access workplaces has the potential to be transformative, reversing years of decline in membership – but we have to be prepared to use it.

The Union will need to carefully balance using these new rights with organising within our existing agreements. Every year, Usdaw reps and organisers must recruit over 90,000 members for the Union just to stand still. These efforts have stabilised our membership following the hit of the pandemic and retail sector crisis and we can be rightly proud of this achievement. But there is more work to be done to rebuild density in the 'Big 4' agreements, ensuring every worker is spoken to about joining the Union.

Of course, none of this is possible without Usdaw reps. Reps are the beating heart of this Union and the foundation of any successful organising strategy. The Union is committed to supporting every rep with the skills they need to recruit under new organising models. But in order to meet the challenges ahead, we need to encourage even more members to step forward and become active reps.

I believe the time is right to renew and refocus our organising agenda to make the most of all available opportunities to grow our Union and I am asking for the support of our incredible team of Usdaw reps to make this happen.

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Joanne Thomas". The signature is stylized and fluid, written over a horizontal line.

**Joanne Thomas**  
General Secretary

# Section One – Building a Stronger Union

## Why Organised Workplaces Matter

Organised workplaces strengthen our voice in the workplace to successfully negotiate safer, fairer, and more secure workplaces through collective bargaining.

We have been able to use collective bargaining to negotiate significant improvements for our members. For example:

- We successfully negotiated a new minimum 16 hours contract in Tesco from October 2022 for new starters. For those on existing contracts, everyone who wants to will be moved up to a minimum 16 hour contract as hours become available in stores, and people will also be moved onto contracts that reflect their normal hours.
- We won a Digitalisation and Automation Agreement in Next Distribution and Arla that ensures members are central to any decision on the introduction of new technology in the workplace.
- We have worked with a number of retailers to ensure they have appropriate policies in place to protect members against abuse, threats and violence. This includes reviewing reporting processes and working with a number of employers to ensure that workers are not required to open and close stores on their own.



## Recent Challenges

The retail sector crisis, the Coronavirus pandemic, and the cost of living crisis have impacted our organising capabilities. During the pandemic, our ability to speak with workers about the benefits of union membership was severely restricted. Limited workplace access and the intense pressure faced by many of our reps, who were focused on helping the country through the crisis, meant our organising work inevitably suffered.

The cost of living crisis has created a new set of challenges. High staff turnover has always been an issue in the sectors where we organise, but rising financial pressures mean more members are now changing jobs or moving into different industries and as a result, left Usdaw last year. This makes it even more important for us to show the real value of joining and staying in the Union.

These challenges have impacted our membership. At its pre-pandemic peak, Usdaw had around 440,000 members; that number has fallen to around 370,000. Over recent years, we have stopped this decline and now have a plan for growth. Any fall in membership weakens our collective voice in workplaces and therefore weakens our ability to deliver for members.

## Rebuilding

Rebuilding density starts with prioritising strong workplace organisation. This means identifying every organising facility and access right contained in our agreements and actively put them into practice. This is especially important within our 'Big 4' agreements, where longstanding working relationships have secured us enhanced access to organising facilities. We need to ensure that reps have regular, meaningful time to speak with colleagues, attend inductions, speak with every new starter and maintain a visible union presence in the workplace. By using these facilities consistently and effectively, we can strengthen our workplace organisation and grow union membership.

## The Importance of Usdaw Reps

Reps remain at the heart of our goal to build a stronger union. Their day-to-day support in the workplace shows the practical value of Usdaw membership. Reps listen to members, identify issues early and work with management to resolve problems. Reps also play a key role in recruiting new members and keeping colleagues informed about the Union's campaigning work. That is why Usdaw is committed to ensuring reps are well supported and fully trained, giving them the confidence and skills they need to represent members effectively. When reps are empowered in this way, workplace organisation is stronger, union activity increases, and membership grows.

# Section Two – Preparing for the New Deal

**The Employment Rights Act will deliver key rights that Usdaw has called for to improve working conditions and remove red tape on union organising, with the aim of improving worker voice and driving up terms and conditions at work.**

The Union has already started mapping sectors to identify priority targets for access and talking to employers in advance of access rights coming into effect. Negotiators are also looking at opportunities to extend recognition and improve existing agreements to ensure they go above and beyond statutory entitlements. Crucially we want to ensure all reps are equipped with the tools, information and skills they need to recruit and organise in new workplaces.

## **Getting a Foot in the Door**

Currently just 12% of private sector workers are union members, and over 80% of jobs in the private sector are not covered by collective agreements. This includes hundreds of thousands of members in retail, distribution and manufacturing sites run by employers who are at best resistant and at worst actively hostile to trade unions.

New rights outlined in the Act significantly widen our potential pool for recruitment and ability to build towards recognition agreements. Employers will be required to notify all workers of their right to join a trade union from day one of employment, rules around statutory recognition will be relaxed and the new right for unions to access workplaces will enable us to get a foot in the door to meet with, represent and recruit workers.

From October this year, independent trade unions will be able to request access to enter workplaces and employers will be under a duty to facilitate this in most circumstances. The number one reason most workers are not members of a trade union is because they have not been asked. The ability to meet and speak to workers in their place of work about the benefits of joining Usdaw is a game changer for increasing membership, building towards recognition agreements and ensuring workers' voices are heard on the issues that matter to them.

## Improving on Statutory Rights

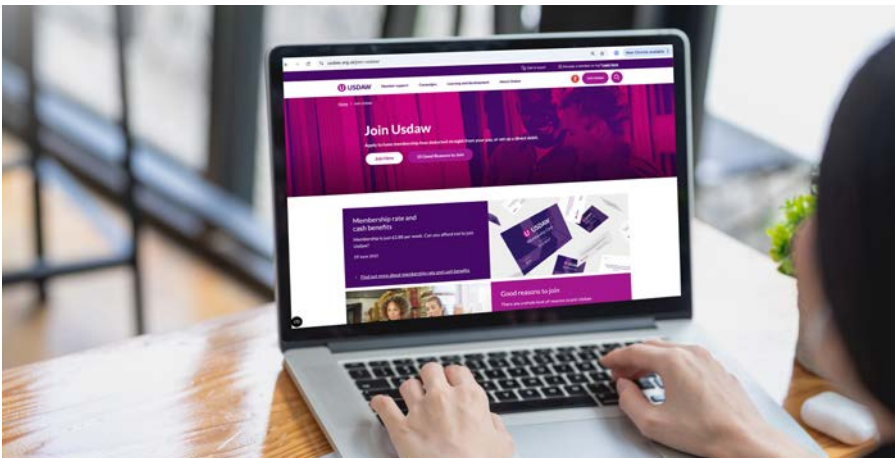
The Act also delivers on key Usdaw calls to improve employment rights and tackle unfairness at work. In April this year, Statutory Sick Pay was extended to 1.3 million low paid workers who did not previously qualify and waiting days were removed. Workers will also benefit from better protections from unfair dismissal, guaranteed hours, reasonable notice of shift changes and an end to exploitative zero-hour contracts.

This is the result of years of hard work and campaigning by Usdaw reps and members. Promoting these wins will be an important recruitment tool in conversations with non-members, highlighting the difference unions can make working with government to deliver the changes our members want to see. It also raises the floor for reps and negotiators in discussions with employers. For example, encouraging employers to improve on the minimum legal requirements by paying sick pay from day one at a worker's normal rate of pay.

## New Ways to Communicate

The Act includes provision for digital access rights which opens up new routes for the Union to communicate directly with workers through social media, webinars, online forums and by using other remote organising tools. We need to embrace technology alongside traditional face-to-face organising models to maximise opportunities to recruit new members, particularly young members and those in smaller workplaces who may prefer to engage digitally.

The Union now recruits around 15% of members online and this number has increased in recent years. Many reps already use social media networks to communicate with each other and keep members informed in their workplace. Expanding digital strategies for recruitment and organising is essential in order to connect with, and support workers effectively.



# Section Three – Equipping Reps with the Tools for Success

Reps are the foundation of our organising work. Usdaw reps are highly skilled and work hard every day recruiting, representing, organising and campaigning to deliver for the Union and its members.

It is vital that as our organising structure changes to meet the new opportunities, we bring our reps with us on that journey. We want to keep reps informed and skilled so they can feel part of the process and help us to deliver that change.

Organising workplaces and recruiting new members will only be a success if we are working effectively with our lay reps and give them the tools to work with officials to deliver the new framework.

## **New Reps Helping to Deliver the New Framework**

Since the Coronavirus pandemic, Usdaw has seen a reduction in the overall number of reps. Many reps understandably felt they had other priorities, both in the post pandemic era, and the cost of living crisis that came with it.

Action to address the drop in our rep population must be a priority. We are going to need a strong, active and skilled base of reps to support the Union to rebuild membership density within our agreements and grow our membership in new workplaces.

We know we have an untapped pool of talented members with the potential to be great reps. We also have skilled reps who have left due to the pressures seen in recent years, but who may be interested in getting back involved with the Union. Officials and experienced reps can help boost rep numbers by talent spotting members and identifying development and support needs.

We must also identify and target workplaces where we have significant numbers of members but no active reps, building on the success of previous campaigns. These workplaces are likely to have engaged members who are already supporting and recruiting colleagues, and who may be interested in taking on the role of rep with the right support in place.

## Recruiting in New Workplaces

As the previous chapter set out, the Employment Rights Act delivers new recruitment opportunities for our officials and reps. We are going to have access to sites and employers that we have not previously entered. Reps will be organising in businesses that are unfamiliar and potentially resistant to the way unions operate.

Navigating this challenge will be a new skill for many of our reps, and it is important that we quickly and effectively identify how best to support our recruiters to make the most of both physical and digital organising opportunities.

In existing workplaces, we need to be making full use of the organising facilities in our agreements, attending every induction and speaking to every new starter about joining the Union. Raising awareness of new individual rights will be a useful conversation starter and recruitment tool when talking to potential new members.

## Supporting Our Reps

The new organising framework provides the Union with many new opportunities, but, as with any change, there is also new information and skills to take on board.

It is vital that we identify development needs to support organising under the new framework and give our reps the tools they need to make the most of our existing agreements and the new opportunities to recruit that are arising.

In order to do this effectively we will:

- **Inform** – Ensure that our reps are provided with up-to-date and easy to digest information on the changes coming to workplace organising.
- **Listen** – Our reps know their workplaces better than anyone. We will seek feedback through our surveys and discussions to get their ideas and views on how we can best use these rights and build a stronger union.
- **Train** – We want our reps to feel confident organising under the new framework. Some of the changes may require additional training and upskilling for reps and we will provide that where necessary.
- **Support** – We must utilise our existing support structures, such as regional structures, rep forums and National Negotiating Committee reps to provide excellent peer support for our reps throughout the next 12 months and beyond.

# Section Four – Organising for the Future

**We cannot have a conversation about growing the Union without talking about developing participation amongst young workers. The retail sector employs high numbers of young people and around one-in-five retail assistants are aged under 25.**

Looking at our own membership, 16% of Usdaw members are under the age of 27, and just 5% of our reps fall in the same age bracket.

In order to properly reflect the sectors we organise in and our membership, we need to increase the numbers of young members and reps – demonstrating the importance of union membership, promoting opportunities to get involved and delivering on the issues that matter to them.

## **Campaigning and Delivering for Young Workers**

Many of the issues that affect young workers in Usdaw are the same as those faced by older workers. However, we know from surveying our members that there are specific impacts for young workers. Young workers are more likely to be on short-hours contracts, more likely to face violence and abuse from customers, and young workers, especially young women, are far more likely to face sexual harassment at work. Young workers can be particularly vulnerable and find it more difficult to speak up if they are being bullied or harassed, as they tend to have shorter service, limited workplace experience, and less secure contracts.

The Union continues to campaign and deliver results on these issues. We have successfully negotiated to remove lower pay rates for young workers from many of our agreements, and the Labour Government has committed to removing discriminatory age bandings in the minimum wage, after our campaigning. The Employment Rights Act, on which Usdaw has been working closely with other unions and the Labour Government, will bring in significant provisions to tackle both short-hours contracts and sexual harassment. Alongside this, the introduction of a standalone offence of assaulting a shop worker will protect our members of all ages from the abuse they currently face from customers.

We need to promote these wins through our workplace campaigns, online and in conversation with young workers – showing Usdaw is on the side of young workers and working to make a difference to their lives.



## Opportunities for Young Workers to Get Involved

As part of our strategy to reverse the decline in young worker membership and encourage more young reps to step forward, we can promote opportunities to get involved. Usdaw has established structures designed to reach out to young workers, help them find out more about the Union's work, get involved in Usdaw activity and develop their organising skills.

- **Regional Young Workers' Committees** – Each of Usdaw's seven regions has a committee that meets to talk about issues affecting young union members, giving them a real opportunity to get involved and influence the way the Union operates and engages young workers.
- **National Young Workers' Committee** – Each Regional Young Workers' Committee sends one member to sit on the national committee, who meet around four times a year to advise the Union on issues affecting young people and feedback the views expressed by young workers at a regional level.
- **Regional Young Workers' Get-Togethers** – Regions often run events for members and reps under the age of 27 to get more involved in the Union, sharing best practice and training in an informal environment.
- **National Young Workers' Weekend** – This annual get-together offers an opportunity for young members to learn more about the Union and our campaigning work, meet other young workers and enjoy a social event.
- **Political Representation** – There is a seat reserved for a young worker on each Regional Political Committee, allowing the political voices and particular issues of young members to be heard. Usdaw also sends delegates to the TUC Young Workers' Conference and nominates one of the members of the National Young Workers' Committee to sit on the Young Workers' Forum of the TUC.

# Section Five – Organising for Equality

**Trade unions need to take positive steps to encourage workers to join up and become members. Workers do not usually come knocking on the Union’s door – we have to go to them.**

We know that barriers remain for women, Black, disabled and LGBT+ members getting involved in the Union, and while removing these barriers is a priority, it also presents us with an organising opportunity.

Our equalities organising agenda is rooted in listening to members and campaigning on the issues that matter to them. This helps workers to see a place for themselves in the Union as members, activists and reps.

## **Equality in the Workplace**

Fairness, equality and solidarity are the foundation of the Trade Union Movement. Reps are standing up for workers at the sharp end of discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment at work every day.

Whether it is supporting disabled members to get reasonable adjustments, helping new mothers arrange their work around childcare, tackling racial and sexual harassment or promoting LGBT+ equality – workers need their union, and the Union needs workers.

Workplace campaigns like ‘Together Against Hate’, ‘Not All Disability is Visible’, ‘It’s Good to Talk’ and ‘Pride in my Union’ demonstrate allyship and open doors for reps to have conversations with potential members from different backgrounds about the benefits of joining.

Following years of Usdaw campaigning, the Labour Government is committed to tackling discrimination at work including action to close ethnicity and disability pay gaps, stronger protection from workplace harassment and a review of family-friendly rights at work. These are not only ways to engage with workers about the difference unions can make, but also a way to open up negotiations with employers about improving equality policies at work.

## Supporting and Developing Reps and Members

Equalities structures and events create space for women, Black, disabled and LGBT+ members and reps to connect with each other and progress and develop in the Union.

Regional Equality Forums take a lead in the equality work of each region - co-ordinating activity, get-togethers, running campaigns and sharing information. Reps sitting on the National Equalities Advisory Group (NEAG) make sure that equality issues are taken up at a national level. Annual get-togethers for Black and LGBT+ members bring workers together where they are guaranteed to be in a majority.

These structures have a strong track record of encouraging newer and younger members into union activity. Members have gone on to become workplace reps, Regional Councillors, National Executive Council members and Area Organisers. So it is a model we know works, but there is always more that can be done.

Promoting opportunities to get involved and support members to navigate any barriers they face to participation is crucial to ensuring our structures remain an effective vehicle to tackling under-representation.

## Breaking Down Barriers

Usdaw launched the Breaking Down Barriers Programme in 2022 to support Black reps to become more active and visible in the Union and develop leadership skills. Since its launch, the programme has shown how targeted action can make a real difference by supporting Black reps to flourish as leaders in the Union, with participants:

- Building confidence and improving their knowledge of the Union.
- Developing networks across the movement and understanding support structures.
- Progressing professionally, from active reps to supportive leaders and mentors for new activists in future years.

Usdaw remains committed to building on the success of the programme, so that more Black members can participate each year and that our Black activists continue to develop their networks in workplaces and regions to support the organising agenda.

## Why Representation Matters

Members and reps are significantly more likely to step forward when they see people who share their identity, background or experience already active in the Union.

When someone sees themselves reflected in leadership, it makes getting involved feel achievable, which is how we build a union that is truly representative of all our members. Representation builds trust.

Our strength lies in our members - ensuring that our reps and officials reflect the membership is essential to maintaining a modern and robust trade union.

# Section Six – Summary

**The landscape for union organising is changing. Renewing our organising strategy is essential to prepare us for the challenges and opportunities for growth in the future.**

Usdaw has proved we can adapt to organise in the most difficult circumstances. But if we are to return membership to pre-pandemic levels, we need to redouble our efforts to reach out to and recruit amongst the large numbers of non-members across our major agreements. We must make use of all the facilities available, attending every induction and speaking to every new starter not just to rebuild, but to actively grow the Union.

Upcoming changes offer the Union a new chance to make significant gains, with a higher statutory floor to negotiate from, and improved ability to recruit, organise and strengthen agreements. The right of access to workplaces, along with a simplified process for trade union recognition, present opportunities for us to expand into new workplaces and extend our collective bargaining coverage.

At the core of our organising strategy remains a strong team of Usdaw reps and activists, who are supported with the training, skills and tools they need to use new physical and digital organising models effectively. The Union is committed to increasing our rep base, ensuring that reps reflect our membership, so that every worker sees a place for themselves in Usdaw and is encouraged to get more involved.

This Union thrives when well-organised workplaces deliver the collective bargaining power we need to improve pay, tackle insecure work and continue to win for our members. The future of the Union depends on our ability to make the most of every organising opportunity available to us.

# A New Framework for Organising

Whether you are organising in your workplace, or recruiting members in new workplaces, here are some tips to support the organising framework and encourage more members to step forward as reps:

- Check your agreement. Are you using all of the available facilities?
- Talent spot, is there someone you think would make a brilliant rep? Speak to them about the role, encourage them and support them.
- Speak to all new starters and non-members about joining Usdaw and attend inductions to speak about the benefits of being part of the Union.
- Tell workers about the difference the Union makes for them and things we have won for members. Talk about our role in improving statutory rights. Sharing our successes makes us stronger.
- Organise campaign days to engage members and non-members on a wide range of issues so they can see that the Union is not just there for when things go wrong.
- Get involved in membership weeks, apply to join the Academy Programme or speak to your Area Organiser about opportunities to support the Union on Stand Down.
- Talk to young members about becoming reps and getting involved in Usdaw's young workers structures.
- Link with reps on your Regional Equality Forum to campaign on equalities issues and encourage under-represented members to get more involved.
- Promote the Union's Breaking Down Barriers Programme to Black reps looking to develop their skills and broaden their experience of union activity.
- Build networks with other reps in your store, area or region, share ideas and swap tips on what is working in your workplace.
- Explore opportunities for digital recruitment and organising using social media and online forums to promote the Union and connect with members.
- Look out for more information on access rights and support the Union to organise in new workplaces.



For further information on how to get involved in the Union visit:

[www.usdaw.org.uk/HowToGetInvolved](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/HowToGetInvolved)



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