



LR

ISSUE 28 **SPRING 2021**

MILLY JOHNSON: SPEAKING UP FOR READING

The power of learning
Changing the Fire Service for good

Create Your Own Future
Plan your next move with our new digital tool

Handling redundancies
We've got the support you need

Learning at a rate of knots
Reaching RMT members out at sea

unionlearn
from the TUC



FOREWORD

Kevin Rowan

Director of unionlearn

The new year has been rung in like no other in recent memory, bringing a fresh set of challenges as we deal with the latest demands of the pandemic. We remain profoundly grateful to all the key workers on the frontline who have kept us all going over the past 10 months. And we are keen to do our bit, too. Because one thing we know for certain is that there has never been a better new year to invest in our learning and skills.

We have a brilliant new digital tool, Create Your Own Future, that is already helping members design their own individual action plans to guide them towards the new jobs or new careers they want.

We have the suite of six bite-sized modules that are part of our Skills and Recovery online resource to help people take the next steps, covering searching and applying for jobs online, creating a digital CV and preparing for online job interviews, as well as career planning tools, managing change at work and green jobs.

And there are the learning opportunities we have created with our trusted partners. You can work your way through any of the six free online courses we've designed with The Open University (OU) to help you with your career, including Planning a Better Future. You can access the wide range of free courses on offer through The Skills Network, including business administration, customer service and team leading as well as specialist areas such as adult social care. And you can improve your English, maths and digital skills (among other things) through the mobile-friendly learning platform Wranx.

We know that 2021 is going to be another difficult year. We're proud of the work union learning reps have been undertaking to support their members through the pandemic. And we hope that all the Skills and Recovery resources we have developed will help more people successfully navigate the weeks and months ahead. 🌍

"THERE HAS NEVER BEEN
A BETTER NEW YEAR TO
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CHANGING THE FIRE SERVICE FOR THE BETTER

The FBU's Lifelong Learning Project has led the development of a new culture within the Fire Service, one that helps firefighters support each other through the mental health challenges that come with the territory.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL HERRMANN

The FBU's ULF project has not only helped firefighters develop themselves: it's helped transform the culture of the service



EVERY TIME A FIREFIGHTER ANSWERS AN EMERGENCY CALL, they have to be prepared for the worst. It may turn out to be a false alarm or a small-scale incident that only makes the local news. It may turn into a national tragedy like the Grenfell fire. But the threat to life and limb – for the public involved and for the firefighters themselves – hangs over every emergency and any firefighter can find themselves battling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a harrowing incident.

But up until comparatively recently, when firefighters were struggling with the stress and trauma that come with the job, the standard response was usually to help them drown their sorrows, says Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Lifelong Learning Project Manager Mark Dunne.

"The culture of the Fire Service was that if you were having a hard time, or if you've got all the stresses and worries that everyone else is going through in their life, the answer would be, 'Let's go for a pint,'" Mark says.

But looking for answers to mental health challenges in the bottom of a glass is a short-term solution at best that can lead to greater isolation and, however well-intentioned, isn't a genuinely inclusive approach to peer support.

And that's not to mention the health issues around alcohol misuse both for individuals and for the health service. Problem drinking is the biggest risk factor for early death, ill health and disability for those aged 15 to 49 years, while government estimates indicate alcohol-related harm costs the economy £21bn a year.

But there's been a substantial shift in the way firefighters support each other in recent years, Mark says. And that's down to the FBU Union Learning Fund (ULF) project's focus on mental health, which has led to its mental health awareness course being its most popular offering every year for the past eight years.

"I was having a conversation in my fire station on Merseyside the other week and we were sat round a mess table

“IN TERMS OF BREAKING DOWN THOSE BARRIERS AND FEELING COMFORTABLE WITH OUR EMOTIONS AND OUR HEALTH, THE FBU LEARNING PROJECT HAS LED THE FIRE SERVICE AND FIREFIGHTERS INTO THAT POSITION.”

– cups of tea, biscuits on the table – talking about how we were feeling and what was going on,” he says.

“It was mostly about Covid, but it was also about all our relationships – and that just wouldn’t have happened 10 years ago, it would have been ‘We’ll got for a pint’, which is not how we do things any more. We’ve got to the point now where we can be sober and have open and honest discussions about how we feel as human beings without our toes curling in our shoes or having to look the other way.”

It’s this huge change that Mark is most proud of when he thinks about the ULF project. “In terms of breaking down those barriers and feeling comfortable with our emotions and our health, the FBU learning project has led the fire service and firefighters into that position,” he says.

“And above everything else we’ve done in the ULF, that for me has been the number one success story, without any doubt at all.”

The 10-strong ULF project team is made up of five project support organisers (PSOs), four National Learning Centre staff and Mark himself.

The PSOs cover all 12 of the union’s English regions, which means most look after two and some take care of three.

“All the PSOs are all quite well known and well established now: if you mention one of the names, people will say, ‘They’re in our region’, or ‘I was online with them on a course the other day’,” Mark says.

“They use the FBU networks and the fire service networks to ask what’s going on, what do we need, what courses and qualifications would people like, and to generally promote the opportunities and qualifications on offer through the ULF project.”

One of the major successes that the project has been promoting in the last 12 months is its new e-learning Heat Illness Prevention and Awareness (HIPA) training project, a pioneering approach to tackling one of the key physical challenges of the job – overexposure to heat.

On average, firefighters risk exposure to excessive heat in one or two incidents a month but that figure can rise to five times a week for trainees, while their instructors can face extreme heat as often as 27 times in any one month.

Yet this major issue was barely being addressed before the ULF project took it on. “I’d had 27 years in the fire service at that point and I’d never had any official rehydration protocol training apart from breathing apparatus training and certainly no refresher training goes on for that,” Mark says.

That was why the union made a successful bid into the ULF’s innovation funding stream two years ago.

FBU National Officer Sean Starbuck had already been thinking about what the union could do about rehydration after hearing Alan Richardson and Emily Watkins from the University of Brighton discuss their research on the subject at a health and safety event.

So when the innovation funding opened up, he introduced Mark to the academics so they could discuss working together on a bid.

"We sat down in the café at Congress House with Alan and Emily and their eyes lit up when I said we were thinking of writing this bid because they already had eight years' worth of research on the subject and had been working with a couple of fire and rescue services," Mark says.

With Alan and Emily's help developing the material, and long-standing creative partners Beach Design in charge of the visuals, the HIPA training project went on to produce an e-learning package that has already helped train thousands of firefighters in England and across the UK.

The three modules of bite-sized information use short video presentations, quizzes and interactive games to help firefighters learn more about how to deal with heat stress and heat injuries; how to better control difficult environments; and what firefighters and instructors can do to prepare for and combat the effects of exposure to heat.

The next step was to develop a separate package to address the specific needs of women firefighters dealing with heat exposure, which was jointly financed by the ULF and the FBU.

"We asked a number of female firefighters if they'd be interested in doing some research with the University of Brighton and they volunteered to help because it was a very important piece of work for them: with the physiology of men and women being different, it needed to be done," Mark explains.

"The result was probably as ground-breaking if not more ground-breaking than the original HIPA package because not a lot of research had been done on the specific effects of heat on female firefighters at different age groups before," Mark points out.



The FBU's new e-learning package on Heat Illness Prevention and Awareness has helped train thousands of firefighters across the UK
© Getty Images

"NOT A LOT OF RESEARCH HAD BEEN DONE ON THE SPECIFIC EFFECTS OF HEAT ON FEMALE FIREFIGHTERS AT DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS BEFORE."

News of the HIPA projects has spread across the globe via the union's website and social media feeds as well as peer-to-peer contacts, with the result that the e-learning packages are currently helping firefighters in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, South Africa and the USA.

"International dissemination is all down to the FBU. Without us, and our officials and our members speaking about it, no one would know about it. Otherwise, we'd have an important, critical piece of research with a brilliant report that wouldn't be going anywhere," Mark says.

But the HIPA project was by no means the first time the FBU ULF team had developed innovative, learning-based solutions to issues facing firefighters.

Back in 2016, the project launched a Level 3 Personal Trainer apprenticeship

After completing an autism course through the FBU's friends-and-family offer, Leanne Naudusevics helped launch a football team for children with special educational needs © John Harris/reportdigital.co.uk



to help members continue to meet the physical demands of the job.

The 18-month programme represented a new way to support, encourage and enhance fitness on fire stations around the country and maintain required standards of fitness.

"When I originally said, 'Let's go for it!' I didn't have a clue about how much work that meant and how many hoops we would have to go through – or that some of those hoops would be set on fire towards the end and we'd still have to jump through them!" Mark laughs.

But it was a massive success. At one point, the union's learning project was working with 23 different fire and rescue services in England, offering access to gyms and classrooms and insurance that helped hundreds of firefighters improve their fitness levels and gain the knowledge and skills they needed to sustain longer and healthier careers and support their work colleagues.

"It was a lot of hard graft, it was many hours people didn't see, a huge learning curve, and the team – the PSOs and the

learning centre staff – were absolutely brilliant throughout," Mark says.

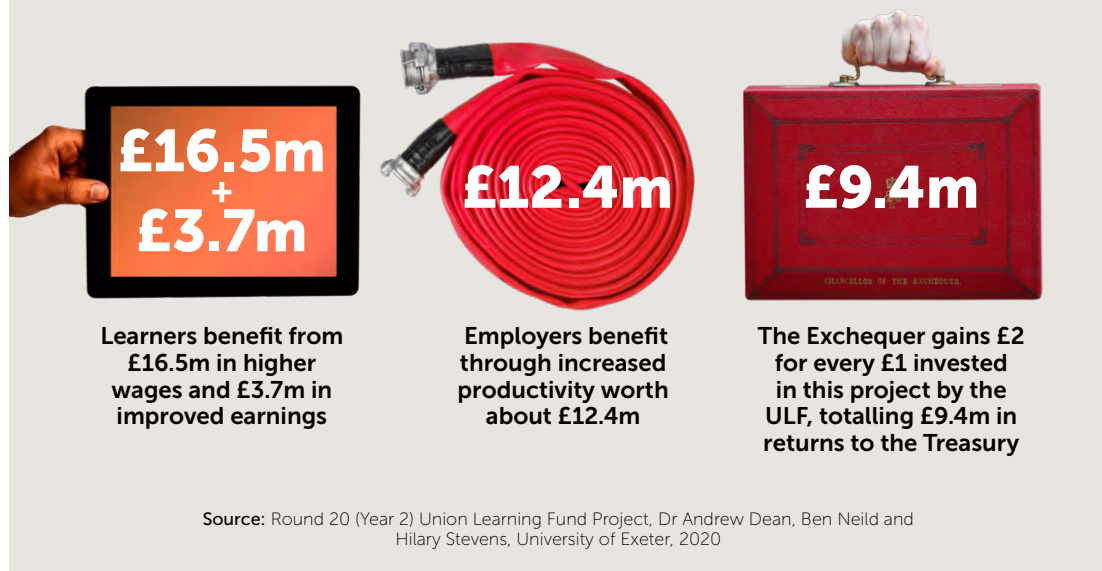
But the FBU lifelong learning project has not only worked to help firefighters develop their skills and progress their careers. The team has consistently opened up learning opportunities for family and friends of FBU members and developed close working partnerships with community organisations up and down the country.

For example, a couple of years back, Leanne Naudusevics enrolled on an FBU project Level 2 Understanding Autism awareness course that she heard about through her firefighter husband Dave to help the family better understand the needs of their autistic son, Charlie.

But she didn't stop there. Boosted by the knowledge and confidence she gained on the course, Leanne then went on to set up a football team for boys and girls with special educational needs, The Wigston Foxes.

Open to children from six to 12 years of age, the team is the only one in Leicestershire to focus solely on

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF FBU LEARNING



inclusive football – and it might never have existed without that original learning opportunity through the union’s friends-and-family offer.

And in Northumberland, the project has established a ground-breaking partnership with not-for-profit organisation Calmer Therapy, which was launched in 2015 to fill the gaps in provision for children with additional needs.

With the help and support of the learning on offer to its members through the FBU, Calmer Therapy has grown from a small parents’ group to a thriving organisation, with 3,000 members across the north-east.

PSO Ian Dick originally enrolled 50 Calmer Therapy members on the Level 2 Understanding Autism course in 2017.

The course proved so useful to the participants that the team went on to develop an all-encompassing care and education package that has benefited more than 1,000 community members since then. They have been enabled to have complete courses on Understanding Autism, Awareness of Mental Health Problems, Working with individuals with Learning Disabilities,

Understanding Dyslexia and Specific Learning Difficulties and Nutrition and Health.

Ian even joined Calmer Therapy members on the Great North Run last year to raise much-needed funds for the group.

Having the opportunity to take part in such life-changing courses through the FBU ULF project is massively appreciated by members of Calmer Therapy.

“For most of our children with hidden disabilities such as autism and ADHD, the biggest barriers in life will be the ignorance of other people. High-quality learning for parents, public servants and all members of the community is so important to improve the lives of our most vulnerable children,” says member Jac Moody.

“As parents of a child with autism, it was most useful for both my husband and I to do the training in autism course made available via the FBU and Calmer Therapy. There was so much encouragement and support too – the very best kind of training.”

For Mark himself, this is what FBU lifelong learning is all about – being able to help people, whether they are parents

Learning not only improves our knowledge and skills but also helps us develop as human beings, says FBU Lifelong Learning Project Manager Mark Dunne (centre), pictured with some of his colleagues at the fire station in Speke, Liverpool



of autistic children or firefighters looking to boost their skills or meet the physical and mental demands of the job.

That drive to help has been a golden thread through Mark's work life, whether as a firefighter when he joined the service at the age of 20, as an FBU official in his 30s or as a member of the ULF project since hitting 40.

"I'd never thought about it until I had a conversation recently with a friend of mine who said, 'Everything you've done since the age of 20 has been about helping people,'" Mark says.

And first as a PSO for three years and then as project manager for the past five, Mark has taken every chance he can to develop his skills so he can improve the support he offers learners.

"I have accredited qualifications as a dyslexia support adviser and a dyslexia workplace adviser and in information advice and guidance, equality and diversity, mental health awareness, health and nutrition Level 1 and Level 2 and personal training adult apprenticeship Level 3," he says.

But the qualifications are only half the story. Mark firmly believes that all the

"LEARNING HAS SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGED ME INTO A BETTER PERSON – MORE PATIENT, MORE UNDERSTANDING, MORE THOUGHTFUL, MORE CARING."

learning he has undertaken in the past eight years has not only improved his knowledge and skills but helped him develop as a human being.

"Learning has significantly changed me into a better person – more patient, more understanding, more thoughtful, more caring – and never mind all the Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications I've done myself, for that I have the ULF to thank," he says. 🍷



YOUR FUTURE IS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Create Your Own Future is a brand new tool from unionlearn aimed at workers at risk of redundancy or looking to change career. With its help, they can map out an action plan and stay motivated to reach their goals.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY

PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

EARNERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE AT RISK OF REDUNDANCY, can plan their route from the job they have now to the work they want to do in future with the help of unionlearn's cutting-edge new digital tool, Create Your Own Future.

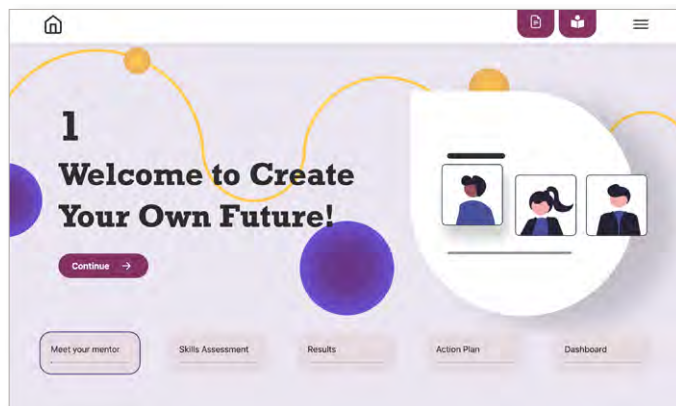
With a virtual mentor by their side throughout their journey, they can identify what motivates them and pinpoint how to improve their career adaptability through learning.

Create Your Own Future also uses nudges, notifications and game mechanics to help keep learners engaged and motivated and they can also review their progress at any time, either by themselves or with the help of their union learning rep (ULR).

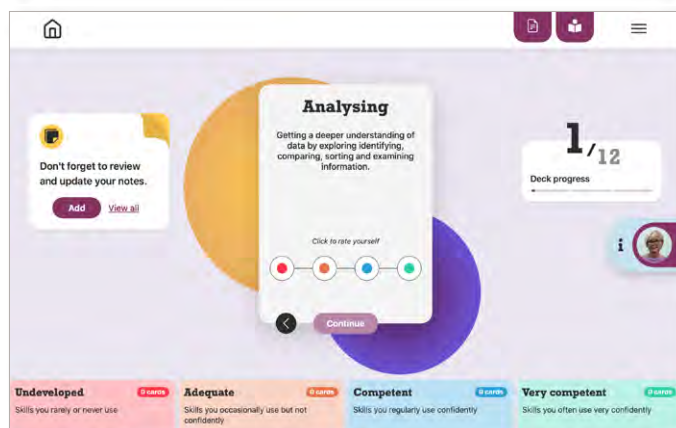
Learners can work their way through the programme independently, particularly if they already feel confident using digital tools – and if they don't, there are digital skills courses within the programme to help get them up to speed.

But ULRs can also lead learners through the new resource in one-to-one sessions or in groups, whether that's face to face (when that becomes possible again) or online.

Create Your Own Future was developed for unionlearn last



Learners can identify how to make themselves more adaptable in the face of change with the help of the new digital tool, Create Your Own Future



year by learning technology provider Saffron Interactive, after a successful bid to the CareerTech Challenge Fund.

The fund is an innovation programme jointly run by the Department for Education (DfE) and the independent innovation agency Nesta, which was originally launched as the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts in the same year as the Union Learning Fund (ULF), 1998.

Saffron was so passionate about the project that it was able to deliver the brand new tool

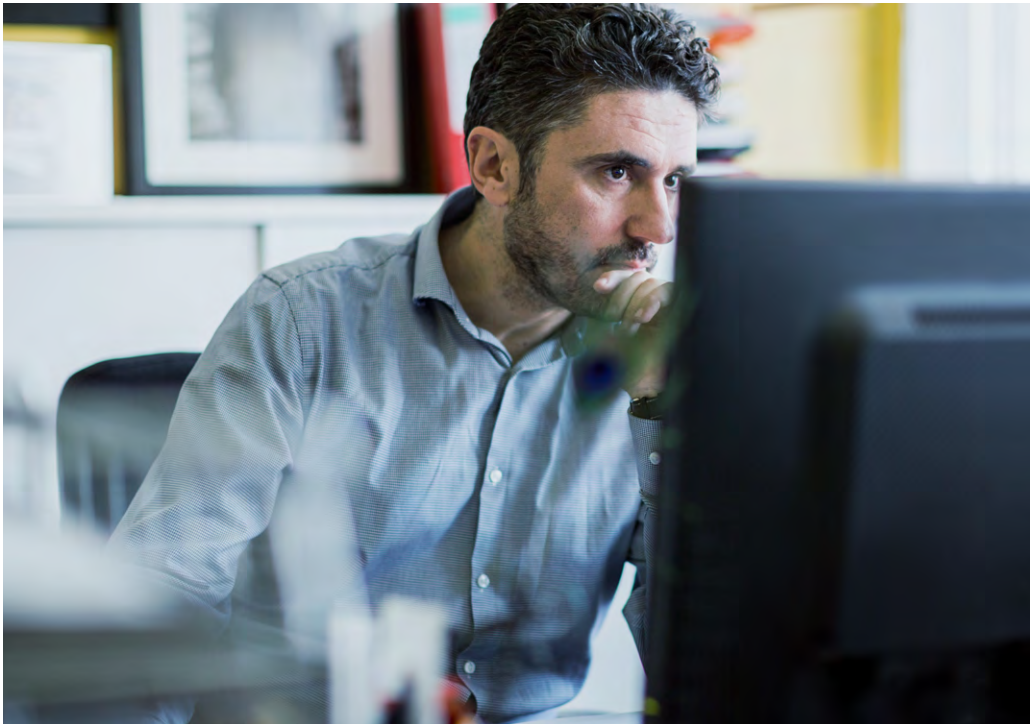
within just eight months of the announcement of the funding, despite inevitable delays caused by the pandemic.

"When Covid happened, what dawned on us at the time was that this was an amazing opportunity to really make a difference," says Saffron CEO Noorie Sazen.

"So that made us raise our aspirations even further, as we knew this was not going to be a one-off programme but it would probably be needed for some time."

With a focus on motivation in all its projects, Saffron dug deep into how and why

Getting to grips with what motivates us to make a change at work is becoming increasingly important as the fourth industrial revolution rolls on



people move from one role to another, one job to another or one career to another.

Getting to grips with what motivates us to make a change at work is becoming increasingly important as the fourth industrial revolution rolls on. With the job for life looking ever-more unusual as the twenty-first century advances, forecasters are now predicting we can expect to try 10 different careers over a working lifetime.

Since the evolution of work makes career adaptability ever-more essential, the project team based its approach on the six 'C's of a flexible mindset:

“LEARNERS CAN WORK THEIR WAY THROUGH THE PROGRAMME INDEPENDENTLY, PARTICULARLY IF THEY ALREADY FEEL CONFIDENT USING DIGITAL TOOLS.”

- **concern:** are learners concerned about their future?
- **control:** do learners look ahead and plan for what might come next?
- **curiosity:** do learners imagine and explore different scenarios that could open up new possibilities?
- **confidence:** do learners believe in themselves and their ability to pursue their goals?
- **commitment:** are learners committed to the programme since adapting to change is hard?
- **capability:** do learners have the resources to be career-flexible?

The first four 'C's were originally identified by career construction theorist Mark Savicaks; the fifth by Professor Jenny Bimrose of the

“THE IDEA IS THAT THE MENTOR IS SOMEBODY THERE TO HELP THEM WITHIN THE PROGRAMME BUT ALSO DIRECTING THEM TO SEEK SUPPORT ELSEWHERE FROM ULRs OR FROM THE NCS.”

University of Warwick; and the sixth by the Saffron project team.

As Noorie says, ULRs are already using this kind of approach, even if they wouldn't necessarily call it that. “In all of our discussions with learners, with ULRs, with unionlearn and with the many charities that we spoke to, all of them were practising this in any case,” she says.

The new tool uses a four-stage journey:

- meet your mentor
- assess your skills
- look at the results
- draw up an action plan.

First, learners choose one of four different virtual mentors, videobots that mimic the interactive conversations they might have with a ULR or other union rep, rather than animated guides through the programme.

“These characters came out of the research we did with the focus groups and ULRs to find the kinds of characters that will really give that human connection to the learners,” says Project Manager Ben Broadribb.

“This gives them someone who's not just a presenter or delivering instructions throughout the course but somebody they can feel a connection with in the way they would if they were speaking to somebody face to face,” he says.

That means they can have interactive conversations about their development at their own convenience, in addition to the support they can ask for outside the programme from their union learning representative (ULR).


The virtual mentors are not intended to supplant the key role of the ULR in learners' development, Ben adds.

“The idea is that the mentor is somebody there to help them within the programme but also directing them to seek support elsewhere from ULRs or from the NCS: signposting is included in the course all the way through and encouraging them to get support from friends and family – whoever they have.”

Brought to life by actors (all of them Equity

members, of course), the videobots are characters with their own individual back-stories that Saffron crafted through research with the focus groups of ULRs that helped with every step of the development of the new tool:

- Mike Green is a 29-year-old community transport worker who has experienced redundancy and wants to secure his family's financial future.
- Susan Smith, 52, who had been working as an admin assistant but wanted a new challenge and is now working as a project manager.
- Javed Khan, Jay to his friends, is currently working as a security consultant and aged 55 is focused on being able to enjoy a comfortable retirement with his grandchildren.
- 27-year-old single parent Alisha Bailey wanted to secure a stable career to support her young son, so progressed from working in a food factory to training as a nurse.

A woman wearing a maroon hijab and glasses is shown in a close-up shot. She is holding a smartphone in her right hand and gesturing with her left hand as if in a conversation. She has white earbuds in her ears. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with large windows and structural elements.

“ONCE YOU’VE CHOSEN YOUR MENTOR, YOU TALK TO THEM ABOUT YOUR CURRENT SITUATION AND WHAT YOU’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT IN TERMS OF NEXT STEPS TO TAKE.”

“ONE MASSIVE PLUS ABOUT THE PROGRAMME IS THAT THE TOOL CAN SUGGEST CAREER OPTIONS MATCHING YOUR SKILLS THAT YOU MAY NEVER HAVE CONSIDERED YOURSELF.”

Once you've chosen your mentor, you talk to them about your current situation and what you've been thinking about in terms of next steps to take. While the mentor speaks in pre-recorded video segments that are all captioned, you can reply by typing or recording an audio or video response.

You then move on to the next stage of the journey – your skills assessment. This is a set of 36 cards to help you assess where you are in a range of areas that will be familiar to anyone who has used unionlearn's popular Value My Skills cards or the digital tool.

For each card, you mark your skills in that area (eg money-management, following instructions) as undeveloped, adequate, competent or very competent (as with Value My Skills).

You can ask for support from your mentor at any time during the assessment. Or you can take a break and get in touch with your ULR.

Once the assessment is completed, you progress to the next stage: looking

at your results in full.

The personalised results match your strengths to more than 1,500 job profiles on the National Careers Service (NCS) website, as well as to the learning resources that may be appropriate for your development.

One massive plus about the programme is that the tool can suggest career options matching your skills that you may never have considered yourself.

That's what unionlearn National Projects Officer Jane Warwick discovered when she worked her way through the programme in order to familiarise herself with all the different aspects of the new tool.

Jane's personalised results matched her familiarity with employment law and interest in people's development to a possible career in human resources, something she'd not thought about before but which made perfect sense.

More surprisingly, the programme also suggested she could look into becoming a funeral director, an option she'd

never dreamed of but which, on reflection, also suited both her organisational abilities and her people skills.

To move on to the next stage, you choose at least two roles and two courses to contribute to your action plan. You can come back to change your mind later and choose more or different roles or courses.

You then move on to the final stage – the action plan. This is not set in stone: it's a working document that learners can return to as often as they need to update it as their circumstances change, their skills develop or they identify new opportunities.

You're then taken to the dashboard, which is where everything comes together – your action plan, your notes, your pinned careers and any milestones you reach.

Because the tool has been designed to help keep learners motivated, it schedules an evaluation conversation with your mentor that happens 12 weeks after the initial registration or once a set

Create Your Own Future can be a positive force for change in so many lives



number of action plan points have been reached.

The conversation looks at what you have been focussing on in your journey but also returns to the questions you raised at the beginning.

Unionlearn Service Team Manager Ian Borkett is delighted with the way the tool has turned out.

“This exciting and innovative programme will be an invaluable resource for union learning reps’ work in supporting workplace learners and an enormous help to workers looking to retrain or change career,” Ian says.

“As more workers become unemployed or at risk of redundancy due to the economic downturn, never has there been a more crucial time

“NEVER HAS THERE BEEN A MORE CRUCIAL TIME FOR THIS KIND OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY TOOL.”

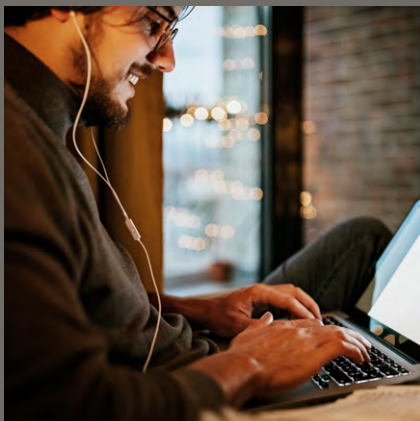
for this kind of career adaptability tool.”

The Saffron team is equally happy to have brought the project out into the world at a time when so many workers can benefit from its support in helping them reframe their ideas about where they could work next.

“Our fundamental mission was to utilise the most cutting-edge technology to create a solution that was effective at providing a

life-like conversation with a mentor, but could be applied at scale, given the current economic climate,” says Noorie.

“We’re thrilled that users can now access the platform and that Create Your Own Future can be a positive force for change in so many lives.” 🌟



HANDLING REDUNDANCIES IN THE COVID ERA

If your employer is looking to start a redundancy exercise, we've got the support you need to make sure they consult properly and design a fair process, free from discrimination.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

UNIONLEARN HAS PRODUCED A NEW BOOKLET, *Handling Redundancies: a guide for union reps*, to help ULRs and all workplace reps support their members through every stage of the redundancy process.

Written with the help of the Labour Research Department (LRD), the authoritative guide is designed to help workplace reps support members through every stage of the redundancy process and specifically addresses the challenges of the Covid era.

The booklet highlights the vital role ULRs can play, in collaboration with other reps, in helping workers at risk of redundancy by surveying their learning needs, liaising with the employer and consulting with learning providers.

It also includes an illuminating case study of how Unite's lifelong learning team helped Thomas Cook staff when the travel firm collapsed in 2019, by organising information and advice sessions, help with CV writing, English and IT courses and a new partnership with distance learning provider The Skills Network.

Union branches dealing with collective redundancies should always involve their ULRs in collective consultation



meetings, says LRD employment law specialist Nerys Owen.

"I think it's a good idea to make sure you've got your union learning reps in your collective consultation meetings right from the very beginning," she says.

"And if it's a very large-scale redundancy exercise in an industry where it's likely that people are going to have to be reskilled, you might want to set up parallel high-level negotiations specifically on learning and skills that involve ULRs and senior management and the Jobcentre Rapid Response Unit."

But if learning reps are to be involved in consultation and negotiation meetings, in addition to keeping in touch with all employees at risk of redundancy, including those on different shifts and those on maternity leave, that is likely to involve the need for additional facility time throughout

"IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO MAKE SURE YOU'VE GOT YOUR UNION LEARNING REPS IN YOUR COLLECTIVE CONSULTATION MEETINGS RIGHT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING."

the redundancy process, Nerys points out.

The need for the kind of detailed information and advice contained in the new booklet could not be more urgent, given the scale of the redundancies crisis.

According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the pandemic had removed 819,000 employees from company payrolls by November last year. And Citizens Advice reported in August that it was at that time fielding redundancy-related calls every two minutes.

Of course, the effect is not uniform across the economy. Certain sectors like hospitality, retail and

BME and disabled people have lost income compared with their white/non-disabled counterparts during the pandemic



the arts have been hit particularly hard.

Neither is the employment pain distributed unevenly across society. People with protected characteristics are losing out at the highest rates, especially Black and minority ethnic (BME) and disabled people.

32 per cent of BME people have lost income during the pandemic, compared with 23 per cent of white people, according to the Runnymede Trust/ICM survey *Over-exposed and Under-protected: the devastating impact of Covid-19 on Black and minority ethnic communities in Great Britain* (August 2020).

And this is a group that entered the pandemic with fewer

resources than its white counterpart: for every £1 of white British wealth, Pakistani households have around 50p, Black Caribbean households around 20p, and Black African and Bangladeshi households approximately 10p, according to the Runnymede Trust report *The Colour of Money* (April 2020).

Disabled people have also experienced greater hardship than their non-disabled colleagues. 20 per cent of disabled people are financially worse off since the start of the pandemic, 24 per cent have had their working hours cuts, and 40 per cent feel at greater risk of redundancy due to employers judging them on the basis of their disability, according to *Locked Out of the Labour*

Market (Leonard Cheshire, October 2020).

And both groups have of course been over-represented among the dead. Two-thirds of people who died from Covid in England and Wales were disabled. And all ethnic minority groups other than Chinese have had a higher death rate than the white population, with Black African men faring the worst, 2.7 times less likely to recover compared to white counterparts.

The pandemic has also increased pressures on women, especially working mothers, according to evidence presented to the Women and Work All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), from the challenges of working from home

“WHEN EMPLOYERS TAKE JOINT DECISIONS THAT ARE BASED ON CONSULTATION WITH TRADE UNIONS, THOSE DECISIONS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE FAIR, NON-DISCRIMINATORY AND SAVE JOBS.”

without childcare, to biased furlough and redundancies, to the disproportionate number of deaths of Black and Asian women.

It's these realities that make it even more crucial for employers to work with their trade unions when they believe redundancies are necessary, says Nerys.

“When employers take decisions at speed and under stress, they are much more likely to result in discrimination bias and unfairness and frankly we're already seeing this play out in some of the responses to the pandemic in terms of redundancies,” Nerys says.

“But there's a flipside to that, because we know when employers take joint decisions that are based on consultation with trade unions, those decisions are much more likely to be fair, non-discriminatory and save jobs in the long term.”

Collective consultation is the key, Nerys says. But for it to be meaningful, the employer must bring the union up to speed about the state of the business by disclosing

current performance data such as footfall decline, lack of orders, breakdowns in the supply chain and the impact of regional or national Covid restrictions.

While employers would usually seek to keep such sensitive information confidential, they must share it with the workplace reps during a redundancy consultation.

“If you don't have that knowledge, you can't be consulted meaningfully and you can't make suggestions going forward,” Nerys points out.

Employers must also be open-minded enough to be able to listen to other voices and take on different ideas – even if both sides are gathering around a virtual table, rather than a piece of real-world boardroom furniture.

What's important is that if employers fail to meaningfully consult, they leave themselves open to the threat of what's called in law a 'protective award', which means a tribunal can award up to 90 days' pay for each employee who is made redundant.

Employers' sole defence is if they can establish there are 'special circumstances' that made consultation impracticable – and there is debate about whether the pandemic qualifies as a special circumstance, Nerys points out.

“Obviously Covid is unexpected – nobody saw it coming – but we've had several months now, there's been time to prepare, there's been furlough, there's been financial contribution from the government,” she says.

“Let's say it is a 'special circumstance' to some extent: that's still not a 'get out of jail free' card for the employer because they still need to show they've done what they can in the time available.”

Neither should the challenge of organising Covid-secure consultation and negotiation allow employers to duck their responsibilities.

“If you're going to have virtual collective consultation meetings, you have to agree arrangements to make sure they are effective and support genuine

Traditional face-to-face consultation may work better if you can do it in a Covid-secure way



consultation because consultation is a two-way active exchange of views as if you're round a table," Nerys says.

"You may be better off with traditional face-to-face consultation, if you can do it in a Covid-secure way, or some combination."

It's also vital to remember that virtual meetings can be much more tiring than real-world meetings, partly while we're all still getting to grips with the demands of the various different platforms.

That's why Nerys recommends union reps organise a dry run using whatever platform has been chosen to host the consultation and negotiation meetings.

"I think it's sensible to do a practice run so you familiarise yourselves with

how it works, and decide whose role is what," she says.

With the pandemic exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, unions can ask their employers to submit their redundancy plans to an equality impact assessment.

"It's not complicated: it's just about thinking in a structured way about how these redundancy proposals are impacting on protected groups; why is that happening; and what can be done about it," Nerys says. "Then you have to make sure it's implemented and not just a tick-box exercise."

Unions can also ask that managers in charge of the selection process undertake training in equality and unconscious bias with a Covid focus to make sure they know how

"IT'S SENSIBLE TO DO A PRACTICE RUN SO YOU FAMILIARISE YOURSELVES WITH HOW IT WORKS, AND DECIDE WHOSE ROLE IS WHAT."

to design a system that avoids discrimination.

Similarly, unions can call on their employers to risk-assess their proposals for their mental health impacts, especially on people who are isolated because they are working from home. "They need support for isolation

and the distress they're under: the employer has a duty of care to look after people's mental health and they need to remember that," Nerys says.

Most importantly, ULRs and other union reps involved in collective consultations need to prioritise their own mental wellbeing. "Look after yourself: you need to draw support from your colleagues, from the trade union – I don't think anyone expected to be doing this in a pandemic," she says. 🍷

Download the new unionlearn guide *Handling Redundancies*

Watch the webinar *Handling Collective Redundancy*

Download the Citizens Advice booklet *An Unequal Crisis*

ONLINE REDUNDANCY SUPPORT FROM UNIONLEARN

You can find links to national and regional support with redundancy on the dedicated 'Redundancy support and resources' page on the unionlearn website.

National organisations that can help members at risk of redundancy include Acas, Citizens Advice, the Money Advice Service, the National Careers Service and the TUC.

The regional pages are subdivided by county: for example, within the North-West pages, you can choose to look for resources in, for example, Greater Manchester, which include The Growth Company's Skills Support for Employment offer and Mantra Learning Job Gym's funded training for unemployed people and those earning less than £17,500 a year.

Unionlearn has also used official government big data to generate job demand and projected occupation growth specific to each region. That means you can find out which jobs are forecast to grow the most in the coming years, and which occupations are expected to be least affected by unemployment.



[Find out more here](#)



INVESTING IN THE POWER OF READING

Milly Johnson was inspired to write her Quick Read by a visit to a women's prison in Yorkshire, where she learned about the life-changing potential of developing strong literacy skills.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTOGRAPHY KEVIN GIBSON



ANYONE LUCKY ENOUGH TO WITNESS MILLY JOHNSON'S BARNSTORMING SPEECH at unionlearn's annual conference in November knows the bestselling author is a powerful advocate for adult literacy.

As she told the hundreds of online participants at the event, her passion was ignited when she visited New Hall women's prison in Wakefield a couple of years ago, through an initiative set up by The Reading Agency.

That's where Milly learned how poor reading and writing skills had shaped the life chances of so many of the women she met that day. 47 per cent of women entering prison have no qualifications, and more than 75 per cent operate at below literacy levels Level 1 (the benchmark for being able to progress in employment), compared to 16 per cent of the general population.

They have also faced far higher rates of disadvantage than the rest of the population:

- 81 per cent of women prisoners were unemployed before being taken into custody (compared to 7.7 per cent of the wider population).
- 49 per cent suffer from both anxiety and depression (compared to 15 per cent of the wider population).
- 53 per cent suffered abuse as children (compared to 20 per cent of the wider population).

"I learned from the prison officers that a lot of the women would say, 'I'm not coming in here again ... that's it ... I'm done ... you won't see me again.' And they go back in. And the reason so many are stopped from changing their lives is simply low literacy levels," she told the hundreds of online conference participants.

"They go back into the community armed with good intentions but their choice of jobs is limited because they left school with no exams, they can't fill



"WE'RE ALWAYS LEARNING WHEN WE READ, WE'RE ALWAYS PICKING THINGS UP."

in application forms, so they gravitate back to their dysfunctional comfort zones and the cycle begins again. And until I'd been into New Hall, I hadn't comprehended how important the skills of being able to read and write were."

As a result of her epiphany, Milly set herself the task of making a note of every time she used her reading and writing skills in a single day. It turned out to be a very long list, starting with the dosage on the tablets she takes every morning to labels on supermarket food and checking the listings for the timing of her favourite TV programmes.

We all need to be able to do all this and more to successfully navigate the twenty-first century world.

But reading also teaches us about our own experiences and those of other people around us, as Milly points out. "We're always learning when we read, we're always picking things up, all these little neurons are connecting about the consequences of actions – and if you don't read, you miss out on so much," she says.

“I VERY MUCH HAD THOSE WOMEN IN NEW HALL IN MIND WHEN I WROTE THE BOOK; THAT’S WHY THE STORY IS ABOUT FRIENDSHIP BECAUSE WOMEN’S FRIENDSHIP REALLY DOES HELP YOU.”

And we all need to make connections through reading – whether that’s when we’re turning the pages of one of Milly’s novels or whether (as happens to Lara in Milly’s Quick Read) we’re making connections between scenes from our past and a painting in a gallery.

One vital thing missed when people don’t read is the power to name what’s wrong in their own lives – something Milly discovered when drawing on her own experience of an abusive relationship to write characters caught up with controlling partners.

“I’ve had women who wrote to me who did not realise they were living the template of abusive relationship until they saw it written down and thought, ‘That’s happening to me and the author is saying that woman is abused’,” Milly says.

“One woman said, ‘I got out of that relationship and that’s down to you’ and it’s a massive compliment.”

“You see other people’s lives in books and you relate them to your own ideas of what is normal and I’m afraid when I went into prison, I saw how many women’s idea of ‘normal’ were right over here,” she gestures, drawing her hands as far away from the centre of the screen she’s talking through as she can.

Milly had noticed all the Quick Reads on the shelves in the prison library as part of her visit, being well aware of the publishing industry initiative that unionlearn and ULRs have been supporting since it launched in 2006.

So when The Reading Agency asked if she would contribute a title to the 2020 collection shortly after she’d

returned from New Hall, she leaped at the chance. “I didn’t have to think about it because all this was spinning round in my head, so I said, ‘Count me in’.”

And it was the women she met at New Hall that Milly was thinking of when she wrote *The Little Dreams of Lara Cliffe*, published as part of the return of Quick Reads last year.

“I very much had those women in New Hall in mind when I wrote the book: that’s why the story is about friendship because women’s friendship really does help you,” she says.

Although Milly already had the germ of the idea for the story before she got down to work on the typescript, she admits she took a little time to get into the writing groove.

Onboard with the Quick Reads mission of writing accessibly for emergent adult readers, Milly’s first



attempts came off a bit too Janet and John for her own liking, she laughs. "“You start off saying, ‘What word can I use instead of this one?’ But then you realise you also have to use words they can work out and slot into their vocabulary,” she says.

“It was a like a giant puzzle in the end and one I realised that the more I got into it, I thought I’d love to write more of them.”

The Little Dreams of Lara Cliffe opens with the title character and three of her best friends taking the ferry to Amsterdam to celebrate Lara’s upcoming wedding to self-employed builder Freddie.

But when the four thirty-somethings check out the band onboard, Lara recognises the guitarist, even though she hasn’t seen him for more than a decade. It’s Danny, who proposed to her all those years ago only to break up with her three weeks before the wedding.

As the four friends explore Amsterdam in the middle part of the book, Lara has to work out why fate has thrown her back together with the man who broke her heart.

Milly reveals that the story unfolds in several of her own personal favourite spots in the Dutch city, including the Anne Frank House, the Van Gogh Museum and the café at the Nieuwe Kerk on Dam Square.

It’s a tale about unreliable memories, big dreams and little dreams and, above all, about female friendship (neither steady Freddie nor rocker Danny get anything like the ‘screen time’ that the fab four do).

“I like to write about the extraordinary things that happen within the parameters of ordinary life,” Milly says. “You can have an ordinary life and it can be totally and utterly satisfactory and fun and wonderful. You don’t have to think, ‘If I don’t have money, if I don’t have a massive house, if I don’t have a massive car, my life isn’t worth living’.”

“ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES IS ME READING ALOUD FROM AN ENID BLYTON BOOK THAT MY NAN HAD BOUGHT ME AND HER SAYING, ‘YOU NEED TO READ IN YOUR HEAD, NOT ALOUD.’”

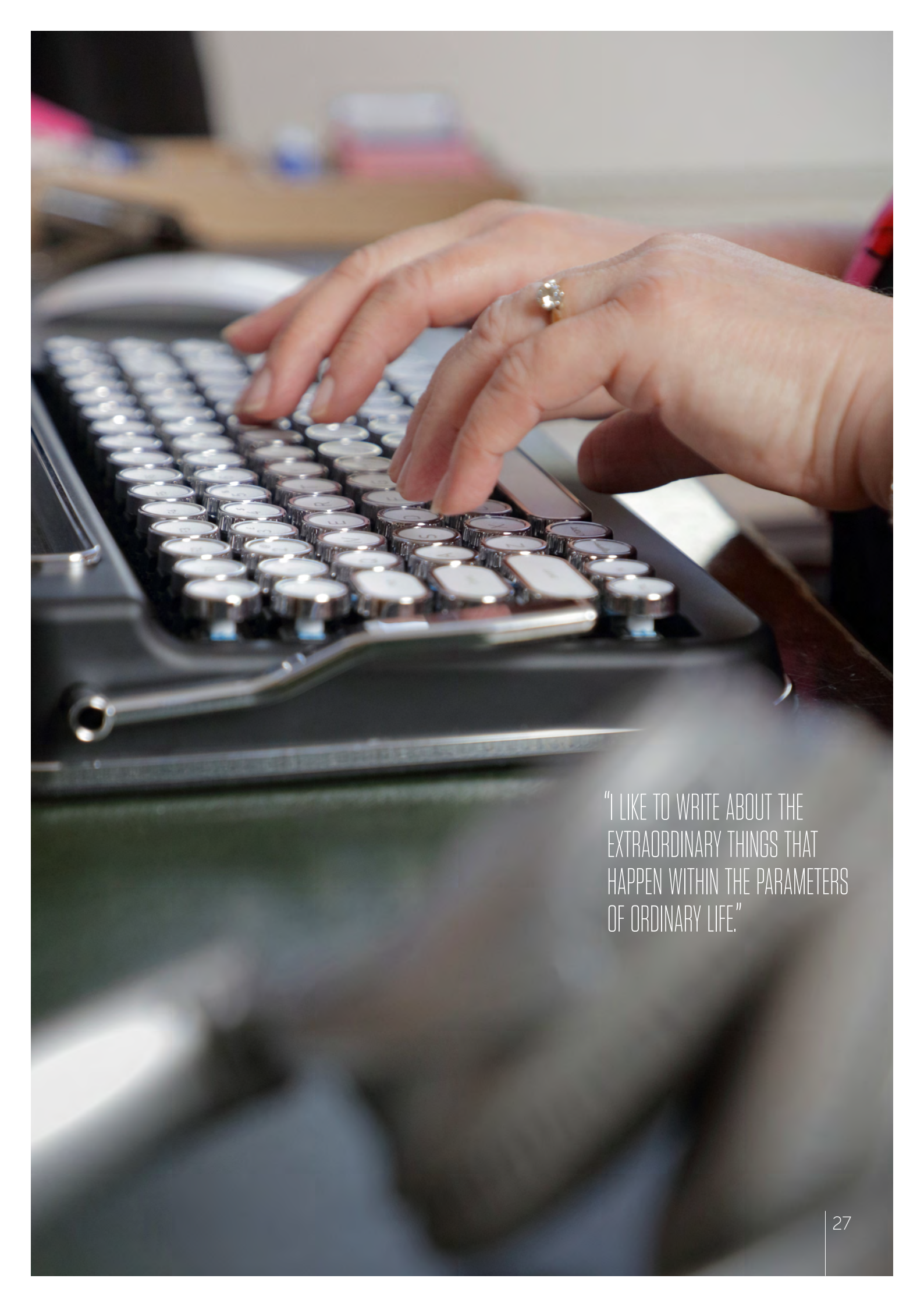
She herself came from very ordinary beginnings in Barnsley, where she still lives today. Both her Scottish mother and her Yorkshire father were working in factories by the time they were 14 years old, although her dad would spend most of his working life as a bank clerk and her mum as a dinner-lady.

And while her parents were rarely to be found with their noses in a book, her grandparents often were. “My grandparents were massive readers, they were always in the library,” Milly says. “My granddad used to read large-print cowboys and my nanna was a Mills & Boon aficionado!”

And they didn’t only take her to the library with them and buy her books of her own, they also helped her develop her reading skills.

“One of my earliest memories is me reading aloud from an Enid Blyton book that my nan had bought me and her saying, ‘You need to read in your head, not aloud,’” she recalls.

Milly became the first person in her family to go to university when she left school in the early 1980s. Although she was offered a place to study English at Cambridge, she turned it down in favour of a degree in drama and education at the University of Exeter.



"I LIKE TO WRITE ABOUT THE
EXTRAORDINARY THINGS THAT
HAPPEN WITHIN THE PARAMETERS
OF ORDINARY LIFE."

"Because of the working-class thing, I felt I wasn't quite Bohemian enough to do the full drama degree so I combined it with teaching," she says.

Nevertheless, she dreamed of gliding smoothly from her graduation ceremony onto the red carpet of an awards evening.

"In my head, I'd pictured myself as going from being a student to picking up my Oscar and hadn't realised what the actual life of a jobbing actor and actress was," she recalls.

What set her right on that count was less the content of the degree and more the connections she made with actors filming on location in Wales who came to stay in the hotel where she worked in her summer holidays.

The one who made the biggest difference was Shirley Stelfox, who had established herself by this time with a string of TV roles in iconic shows like *Coronation Street*, *Juliet Bravo* and *Bergerac* and would later go on to play Edna Birch in *Emmerdale* for 15 years before her death in 2015.

Having taken Milly with her on a film shoot and clocking the youngster's disappointment at what it actually involved, Shirley asked Milly what she really wanted to do with her life. And that's when it all came tumbling out. She wanted to write. She'd always wanted to write. But with one of her friends at school scooping up all the literature prizes year in, year out, Milly had come to the conclusion she herself would never be good enough.

Shirley was having none of this. "She said, 'All the people here, on the shoot, some will fall by the wayside, some will make it big, but they've all given it their best shot,' Milly remembers. "Now go back to university and put your whole heart into what you want to do!"

The pep talk turned her life around (she cited the impact of that life-changing advice when she spoke at

Shirley's memorial in Leeds Minster four years ago).

Not that it turned her overnight into the best-selling novelist she is today. Far from it. Milly spent the best part of the next two decades in all sorts of work before she signed her first two-book deal at the age of 40.

Now, 17 novels and one Quick Read later, she's become a formidable advocate for extending the benefits of reading to everyone.

"Reading is the key to a life enriched," she told the unionlearn conference.

"It will stop all those women in prison going out and becoming repeat offenders because they can get out of these dysfunctional cycles. It's the key to a life happier and more fulfilled, life with more choice and less stress and it will and does start for many with one of these little books. Tell me a better investment than that."

After Milly finished, unionlearn board chair Mary Bousted – an English teacher herself by training – said she's never heard "such a fantastic exposition about the power of reading".

But Milly had no clue her speech had gone down so well (anyone catching up with it on the unionlearn YouTube channel should be forewarned they may well feel the urge to leap up from their home-office chair and cheer at the end).

"I had no idea. None at all, I'll be perfectly honest. But you can thank the ladies of New Hall for that then, because they opened a door in my head and made me see how important reading is, how it can change the course of someone's life – and that is massive," she says. 🍷

CLOSING THE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

Millions of people still struggle to use their smartphones for more than making phone calls. Which makes life very difficult when they need to find a job. That's why Community's ULF project is so crucial for members like Stuart Clarke.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN HARRIS/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

Stuart Clarke had worked at Barker's shoe factory for 25 years before he was made redundant last summer



ANYONE MADE REDUNDANT THESE DAYS BETTER HAVE A SMARTPHONE, a computer and some pretty well-developed IT skills. Because if they don't, they will have trouble looking for work, applying for jobs and claiming benefits before they find something.

Jobcentre Plus staff might help them put together a generic CV. And family members may be able to help with email and internet support – if they have access to the hardware and the skills to use it themselves. Other than that, they're on their own.

But what if they don't have any of that support? What if they've never needed a smartphone? What if there's no computer at home and no one to help? What if they have a learning difference like dyslexia and aren't fluent readers?

That's what Community member Stuart Clarke had to deal with this summer, when he became one of dozens of people to be made redundant in the middle of the pandemic by luxury shoe-maker Barker's, in the Northamptonshire village of Earls Barton.

Stuart had worked for Barker's for the past 25 years – and not only on the shopfloor. Every Saturday morning, he would take his own garden tools from his home opposite the factory gates and spend four hours looking after the lawns.

"They said to me I was a good worker, so why did they get rid of me? It doesn't make sense. But what can you do? At the end of the day, you're just a number – that's all we are. It's their loss, I'm afraid," Stuart says.

When the redundancies were announced, Community Learning Organiser Mick Brightman invited anyone affected to come to the union office in the village to access

"THEY SAID TO ME I WAS A GOOD WORKER, SO WHY DID THEY GET RID OF ME? IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE."

Nine million adults are unable to use the internet or their devices by themselves
© Luis Alvarez/Getty Images



employability skills training to help them in the search for new work.

That was when Mick discovered Stuart wasn't set up with all the tools he'd need to rejoin the employment market in the digital era.

"I asked him if he had a mobile to bring it with," Mick says. "It was a JCB device from about 15 years ago with a SIM card inside made by Orange, which went out of business 10 years ago."

"So he doesn't have a mobile phone that works. He's restricted to a landline. And he's never had an email address."

This remains a lot more common than many might think. There are millions of people on the wrong side of the digital divide in this country, even now.

Yes, the number of internet non-users has been substantially reduced in the last decade, thanks in part to the efforts of union learning reps, the Union Learning

Fund (ULF) and individual learning projects like Community's.

But there are still 5.3 million adults in the UK (10 per cent of the adult population) who have never logged on to the internet, according to the **Office for National Statistics**.

And around nine million adults (16 per cent) are unable to use the internet or their devices by themselves, as estimated by the **Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020**.

In addition to his lack of experience with IT, Stuart also has trouble reading and writing, as Mick found out when he handed him one of the union's beneficiary forms (which collect data for the ULF project).

"When Stuart came in, I had a conversation with him and got him to fill in a beneficiary form. But I could see he

"HE DOESN'T HAVE A MOBILE PHONE THAT WORKS. HE'S RESTRICTED TO A LANDLINE. AND HE'S NEVER HAD AN EMAIL ADDRESS."

was struggling to read it so I helped him complete it," he says.

Knowing Stuart was not a fluent reader meant that, when he returned to The Grange for the employability skills course, Mick was able to alert the tutor to his additional needs, and he also sat in on the course and helped him out where he could.

The course itself was delivered by TCHC, a training provider based in Watford that has been delivering English, maths and IT courses with Community for the past year or so.

"At the end of the course, we made sure he had everything he needed, all the phone numbers for the Jobcentre, all the websites," Mick says.

"We thought he could use them if he had a family member that could get on the internet but it turns out none of his family are younger than him and even uncles and nephews are not really computer-savvy."

After the course, Stuart asked if Mick could help him with his reading and writing – to which the answer was, "Yes, of course".

Stuart's struggles with literacy go back to his school days. He attended the same special school that his older brother Bruce went to, even though Bruce is learning disabled and Stuart is not. "They didn't really bother with me at school and didn't teach me to read," he recalls.

So the first thing Mick did was set up Stuart with an email address so he could enrol on Learn My Way, the popular suite of introductory IT courses that has helped thousands of union members over the past eight years.

He then asked the union's IT department to find a computer for Stuart to use at The Grange.

And whenever Stuart turned up to work his way through the courses, Mick would help him navigate his way round the computer and read out the questions for him when necessary,

"AT THE END OF THE COURSE,
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although it was, of course, Stuart who completed the answers himself.

"He was keen because he'd come to The Grange maybe two or three times a week and he'd be here for two or three hours each time," Mick says.

But even though he completed Online Basics and Using Your Computer or Device, Stuart is the first to admit that he still struggles with his IT skills.

"When Mick was there reading things out to me, I could do it then, but if you put me on a computer on my own, I wouldn't know what to do," he says.

"That's not his fault, though!"

Mick hasn't only helped Stuart in terms of supporting him through the Learn My Way courses. He also helped him fill in his Jobseeker's Allowance forms so he could claim benefits while he was out of work.

And he was able to file a formal complaint with Jobcentre Plus after a member of staff (who turned out to be an agency worker) told Stuart he'd never get another job because of his literacy levels.

"I put in a formal complaint and Stuart was assigned a specialist employment adviser. But if it hadn't been for me being part of the union and him telling me what they said, nothing would have happened," Mick points out.

Mick has also helped him create a CV and sent it around to local agencies and potential employers, with some success.

"We submitted the CV to a recruitment agency and within a couple of hours

Thanks to the help of Community's ULF project, Stuart now has a job at a recycling centre



"I SPENT 25 YEARS IN A FACTORY AND THE MOST I EVER WROTE WAS 'M/C DOWN' FOR 'MACHINE BREAKDOWN' BECAUSE I COULDN'T SPELL 'MACHINE'."

they came back and said, 'This is great, can you send over more details?'," Mick recalls.

That contact led to a job in a canning factory, wrapping pallets and cleaning up. But it didn't work out because they didn't treat Stuart with respect.

"He did two days there, Friday and Monday, and then he phoned me on Tuesday to say he wasn't going back because they were all shouting and swearing at him, which does happen, particularly to agency staff," Mick says.

"And it's not that he doesn't want to work – he would work forever. They made him feel a failure, and that's not right: nobody, whatever their abilities, should be treated with anything other than respect."

Since then, the agency has found Stuart another job, this time at Davis

Commercial Services (DCS), also in Earls Barton, where he works in the recycling section, breaking up life-expired supermarket chiller cabinets and freezers.

"It's all right for now," Stuart says. "I'm 45, coming up 46. I wouldn't want to do it when I'm 50 because it's heavy work, banging all the fridges out. But it's all right for the time being."

Mick is happy to have helped Stuart on his learning journey, not least because he himself had his own struggles with reading and writing as a young man. "I spent 25 years in a factory and the most I ever wrote was 'm/c down' for 'machine breakdown' because I couldn't spell 'machine'," he recalls.

But after improving his own literacy skills so he could deal with the paperwork involved in being a union rep for the Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trade Union (KFAT, one of the predecessors of Community), Mick went on to help people return to learning first as a ULR and later while working for Steel Partnership Training (run by the ISTC, another predecessor of Community), Midlands unionlearn and now Community.

And, with all that experience behind him, Mick speaks with considerable authority when he says only a union learning project could have helped someone like Stuart.

"What other organisation could or would support someone like this?" he says. "Stuart is the kind of person you meet and you go, 'I want to help you, you deserve some help'. He's that kind of guy. But I don't think anyone else would do that – except us." 🍷

HELPING MARITIME WORKERS REACH CALMER WATERS

Learning at work has proven benefits to mental and physical health. But what happens when your workplace is out at sea? That's where RMT Learning comes in.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES



THE FURTHER WE MOVE INTO THE DIGITAL ERA, the more important it becomes that we all have access to high-quality broadband. And even more so in a global pandemic, when so much of what we used to do together in the real world – working, learning, even socialising – has had to move online.

But the maritime members of RMT knew all about the make-or-break value of broadband before many of the rest of us. They are the members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA, the civilian operation that provides logistical support to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines), ferry workers, dockworkers, divers, oil rig workers, wind farm maintenance staff and river cruise workers.

Whether they are bringing fuel to warships in some far-flung part of the world or providing lifeline service between remote islands off the west coast of Scotland, maritime workers have to deal with the challenges of isolation throughout their working lives – pandemic or no pandemic – as well as the irregular hours and shift patterns that come with the job.

With the proven benefits of learning for mental health, RMT



Wind farm maintenance staff and other maritime workers know the vital importance of having access to high-quality, stable broadband

“MARITIME WORKERS HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGES OF ISOLATION THROUGHOUT THEIR WORKING LIVES – PANDEMIC OR NO PANDEMIC.”

launched its new maritime learning portal earlier this year – an online resource that the union’s lifelong learning team had been developing long before the pandemic.

“Quite often it’s difficult for members to get to the union so the union is taking education to the members on a whole host of topics that will make us stronger as an organisation but will also offer benefits to members on topics such as IT, finance, pensions, health and safety, rights at work and social media,” explained National Shipping Secretary Darren Procter when the portal was launched in February.

With its mix of learning suitable for all RMT members and opportunities specifically targeting maritime workers, the portal has already proved successful.

But to reach its full capacity, it requires maritime workers to be able to access its resources as safely and straightforwardly as their land-based colleagues.

And that means high-quality broadband access is absolutely vital – whether maritime workers are committing time and energy to improving their skills through online learning or whether they are simply trying to stay in touch with friends and

RMT Maritime and ULR Support Learning Organiser Ivor Riddell has taken part in courses where maritime workers have struggled because broadband problems have forced them to switch off their laptop or tablet cameras
© RMT



family they don't see for weeks at a time.

"The internet is so dominant in everybody's life now: just try going a week without using it and see how you get on – you just couldn't function," says RMT Maritime Learning Organiser Gareth Jameson, who is currently seconded to the role from his RFA job.

That goes double for workers out at sea, he adds. "Our people on board, they're sat in a small cabin of an evening with nothing to do when we're in lockdown – because they can't go out, they can't do anything – so they really need this broadband," he says.

And when it comes both to promoting and accessing learning opportunities, the quality

of the connection and the bandwidth it can cope can make the difference between someone learning and someone not, Gareth points out.

"If you're telling someone about a course, the easiest way to do it is by email. But if they click the link and nothing comes up because their broadband's rubbish or it's just too slow, they forget about it and you've lost that person for that course," he says.

And when maritime members do successfully enrol, the quality of the broadband comes back into play during the course itself, as Maritime and ULR Support Learning Organiser Ivor Riddell points out.

"If you're in a port somewhere, it's usually a

bit easier, but once you're out at sea you're limited to whatever the company provides and traditionally that's not a great service," Ivor says.

"That means it's almost impossible at times if you're trying to download resources or even just interact on a course: I've been on courses a number of times when people have had to switch off their video because they don't have enough bandwidth to support it."

It's for these reasons that the 2021 RMT National Education Conference is expected to discuss launching a campaign to make access to broadband an industrial issue.

"It is an industrial issue, not just for seafarers but across the board,"

“THEY EXPECT PEOPLE TO BE COMMUNICATING ONLINE –
ESPECIALLY NOW WITH EVEN MORE PEOPLE USING ZOOM
AND TEAMS AND ALL THAT STUFF.”

Ivor points out. “They expect people to do a lot of training online, they expect people to be communicating online – especially now with even more people using Zoom and Teams and all that stuff – but actually the access to broadband for a lot of workers is rubbish, quite frankly.”

Recent negotiations by the union’s Scottish learning project succeed in securing access to corporate wi-fi for union learners on the Highlands and Islands ferry operator Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) earlier this year.

Scottish Learning Organiser Dan Henderson, who has been supporting CalMac learners for more than a decade, says the union had been trying to secure broadband access for learners for some time.

“The crew-use and the public wi-fi is good when you’re in the inner islands, closer to the mainland, but the further out you go, the patchier it gets,” Dan explains.

“The corporate wi-fi is stable enough for any learning environment and secure but we didn’t get access to it pre-Covid.”

But Dan has now successfully negotiated to get access to the corporate wi-fi and the corporate devices on board every CalMac ship.

This has meant that RMT has been able to continue to deliver a wide range of online learning to CalMac staff throughout 2020, despite the challenges of Covid-19.

Before the pandemic, the union had agreed with CalMac that when learners took time off to attend classroom courses on certain subjects where the employer had a corporate responsibility, such as mental health, the company would pay them for their time in the classroom and cover the costs of their travel and accommodation.

“We made a decision quite early in a development group with STUC that we were going to move forward by delivering courses through Zoom, Teams and Webex,” Dan says.

“Before Covid, we had been looking at a 16-hour coaching skills course for mentors of apprentices so, working with the providers, we decided that we were going to

attempt to do this online through Zoom.”

The course proved a success, delivered to 12 mentors over four two-hour sessions (two hours being the maximum learners can realistically deal with in a video-conferencing session).

The union has also delivered a mental health course using the same approach, using two presenters so that one of them was always available to support a learner in a virtual breakout room if a part of the course triggered any difficult emotions.

Delivery over video conferencing technology has opened up new possibilities, Dan points out. “In places like Coll and Tiree in the outer isles, we had people onboard these ships getting time off with pay learning on the corporate device – something we’d never done before and something we’ve never expected to do,” he says.

“We had three retail staff doing a coaching course on a boat that left Islay at 9.45: they started at 10 and they had just finished when the boat got in at 12.15.”

Raising awareness of mental health issues and promoting positive approaches to help maritime workers in particular through learning has been a top priority for RMT Learning on both sides of the border.

The circumstances in which maritime workers do their jobs make this especially important. While most of us can walk away from mental health struggle at work and find relief among family or friends, when maritime staff are on board for weeks at a time, their co-workers become their family and friends.

"In the maritime industry, when you're working two weeks on, two weeks off, for those two weeks you're on a ship, that's your family, so we became involved with our tutors and our education department early doors in getting people to feel comfortable to speak, to take away the stigma and discrimination," Dan says.

"Everybody's got mental health: at some point in your life it can be good, bad or indifferent. It's not a class thing, we all have it: life can be crap for all of us at some point. It's getting that message across – to everybody."

Dan speaks on this issue from his own experience. "I live with depression and anxiety and I speak to the people around me and

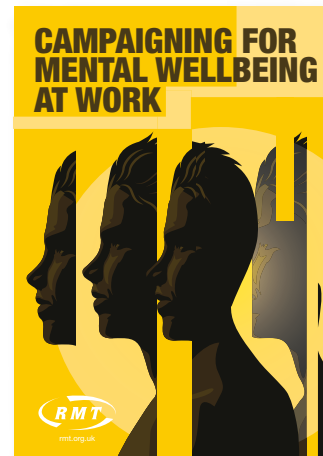
"THE BOOKLET IS A VITAL TOOL IN THE UNION'S DRIVE TO CHANGE THE WORKPLACE CULTURE AROUND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES THROUGH UNION ORGANISING."

that's been the biggest thing for me," he says. "It's about encouraging people to have someone you can speak to, for people to be there for other people, for people to ask that question, 'How are you doing?'"

That's why the learning team is making good use of a new RMT publication aimed at the entire membership, *Campaigning for Mental Wellbeing at Work*.

The booklet is a vital tool in the union's drive to change the workplace culture around mental health issues through union organising.

Around 300,000 people with a long-term mental-health condition lose their jobs each year, and at a much higher rate than those with physical health



conditions, the booklet points out.

And the economic costs are huge. Failing to effectively address mental health issues among their staff costs UK employers between £33m and £42m every year, according to the **Thriving At Work** independent review. And more than half of that is down to presenteeism, when individuals are less productive due to poor mental health despite spending more hours at work, with the rest due to sickness absence and staff turnover.

But while RMT backs the proposals in *Thriving At Work*, it argues that most employers are likely to implement them only if they are compelled to by strong and effective union organising.

It includes a case study of the mental health learning for RMT ULRs and frontline managers that Dan has put in place at CalMac, which is supporting a

change in culture within the organisation.

It also includes useful tips on how union reps can support members experiencing mental health difficulties, promote mental health learning in the workplace and build alliances with organisations that are expert in the field.

"We've found it a powerful booklet and something we're going to use going forward as a talking point to get the discussion going in the workplace," Ivor says.

With its maritime learning portal, the RMT's own mental health resources and guides produced by other organisations with the union's help, the union's learning team is set fair to play its part in further developing a culture of wellbeing, with an important place for learning, among its maritime members.

But to be successful, this culture of wellbeing cannot leave individuals

"WE'VE FOUND IT A POWERFUL BOOKLET AND SOMETHING WE'RE GOING TO USE GOING FORWARD."



HOW SEAFARERS CAN STAY BUOYANT

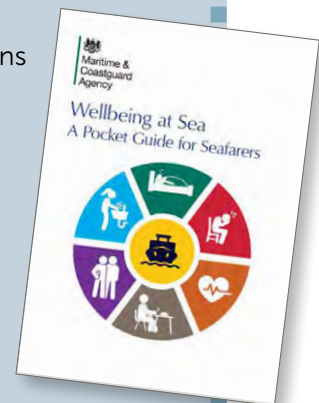
RMT has provided significant input into two recent publications aimed at maritime workers, which the learning team is now promoting.

First there is a pair of complementary booklets on wellbeing at sea produced by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency – *A Guide for Organisations* and *A Pocket Guide for Seafarers*.

"Our Assistant National Secretary Mark Carden made quite a lot of input to the booklets and we're organising around them but with add-ons of our own," explains RMT Maritime Learning Organiser Gareth Jameson.

The booklets cover a wide range of issues, including fitness and diet, general health, personal and social wellbeing, mental health issues, relationships and communication, with a focus on the specific circumstances of the industry throughout.

The RMT's input is clear from the opening pages of the organisations version, which signal an important step towards the kind of partnership approach that will be necessary to deliver mental health benefits for seafarers and the companies they work for. >>



“THE KEY FOR ME IS HOW WE TAKE IT FROM PICKING UP THE PIECES AND FIREFIGHTING MENTAL HEALTH TO ACTUALLY CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLBEING.”

to carry the burden, especially when so many of them are already struggling. What will make the difference is when employers are persuaded to take responsibility.

“The key for me is how we take it from picking up the pieces and firefighting mental health to actually creating a culture of wellbeing,” Dan says. “It’s having a structure within an organisation, that policy that everybody adheres to from the bottom to the top.”

And like learning, Dan believes mental health should be treated as core union business. “It’s about what we are: we’re trade unionists, we’re socialists, we look

» “Traditionally, wellbeing has been left to the individual, but while individuals do have a responsibility to take care of themselves, employers also have a responsibility to ensure that they create working and living environments that enable their seafarers to be safe, healthy and to thrive,” the booklet says.

Healthy crews, like those working within a culture of learning, perform better, the booklet says. “There are clear legal, moral and business benefits for looking after crew wellbeing. An investment and commitment to staff wellbeing can create long-term benefits for both the seafarer and the company.”

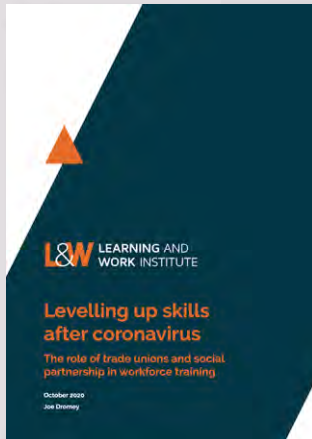
Mark has also had input into the development of a new standard for mental health training for seafarers produced by the Merchant Navy Training Board and the Maritime Charities Group. He was a member of the working group that developed the standard, which was published in summer 2020.

“Mental health awareness training is needed now more than ever and there are many reputable providers offering really good training courses but the majority of those courses are generic and really don’t address the specific issues facing seafarers,” explains Dr Chris Haughton, who wrote the guide itself.

“If you’re working at sea, you need a course that’s much more targeted otherwise it just won’t be relevant – that’s why we’ve developed the standard, setting out clearly what a good training course should cover.”

out for each other – our core value is we’re there for each other,” he says. “It’s trying to instil those values in everybody: ask the question, have the conversation, look after each other and look after yourself – probably now more than ever.” 🧡

NOTICEBOARD



LEVELLING UP SKILLS AFTER CORONAVIRUS

Learning & Work Institute, October 2020

Key message

Social partnership could help the government boost skills and prosperity across the UK after the coronavirus crisis, as significant evidence links trade unions and collective bargaining to higher employer investment in skills.

Key stats

- ▶ UK productivity growth has stalled since the 2008 financial crisis: productivity is now 12 per cent lower than it would have been had it continued to increase in line with the pre-recession trend.
- ▶ The lower the level of your educational qualification, the more likely you are to be at high risk of redundancy as a result of automation. 39 per cent of people with qualifications below GCSE are at high risk, while 87 per cent of people with degrees are at low risk.

- ▶ 11.7 million UK adults lack the basic digital skills needed for everyday life; 8.4 million working age adults in England are at or below Level 1 in numeracy; and 5.7 million working age adults are at or below Level 1 in literacy.

Credit to the ULF

“Government should ... continue to invest in the Union Learning Fund. Union learning should be a key part of the approach to levelling up skills after the coronavirus crisis, and adapting to a rapidly changing labour market.”

Where to find it

[Click here to download 'Levelling Up Skills After Coronavirus'](#)

A PLAN FOR AN ADULT SKILLS AND LIFELONG LEARNING REVOLUTION

Education Select Committee, December 2020

Key message

To respond to the significant challenges posed by the fourth Industrial Revolution, an ageing workforce, the skills gap, and Covid-19, there is a pressing need to ensure adult learners are equipped with the necessary skills and education to aid the economic recovery by being supported into upskilling and retraining throughout their working lives.

Key stats

- ▶ Adult skills funding has fallen by 45 per cent over the last decade
- ▶ Participation in adult learning has fallen to its lowest rate in 23 years
- ▶ 38 per cent of adults have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education.
- ▶ Those who do participate in lifelong learning tend to be wealthier, and they are more likely to already have a higher-level qualification. 92 per cent of adults with a degree-level qualification have undertaken lifelong learning over the past year compared to 53 per cent of adults with no qualifications.

Credit to the ULF

“The Union Learning Fund is a crucial programme for delivering workplace training. It has a strong track record of proven effectiveness and should be treated in line with other training providers in both the public and private spheres. It has a vital focus on tackling disadvantage, upskilling low-skilled workers, and offers excellent value for money. The department has not explained its rationale behind its decision to stop funding the Union Learning Fund. Unless this decision is reversed, we will see the brakes put on workplace learning, which will harm workers, employers and productivity.”

Where to find it

[Click here to read the full Education Select Committee report](#)

NOTICEBOARD

REPS TRAINING MOVES TO NEW PLATFORM

TUC Education has moved all its online learning to Stream, its new learning platform for union reps.

The new platform enables reps to design their own learning plans, makes it easier to find relevant content and includes chat functions that allow reps to communicate more with each other.

You can find almost all of the TUC Education online portfolio on Stream, including the popular Apprenticeships – Know your rights interactive guide, the Union Learning Advantage eNote and the self-study version of Union Reps Stage 1.

However, Union Learning Reps Stages 1 and 2 are currently being updated and will be added to Stream when they are finished.

If you had started one of the self-study reps courses on the previous TUC Education website, you will be able to continue once you register on Stream but you won't be able to see the progress you made there.

Where to find it

Click here to register for TUC Education courses on Stream

CAMPAIGN CALLS FOR NEW RIGHT TO LEARN

TUC President Gail Cartmail, former unionlearn Director Tom Wilson, former Education Secretary Estelle Morris and former shadow skills minister Gordon Marsden, along with many other leaders from across the education sector, have helped launch a new independent campaign, Right2Learn.

"Unequal access to education throughout life is a huge, growing cause of inequality in our country – with four million fewer adults participating in education now than in 2010," the campaign says in its launch statement, published in December.

"This sows division in our communities; entrenches low skills, low wage work and levels down the life chances of millions."

The campaign will shortly be publishing a Right2Learn manifesto, setting out its plan to establish a properly funded right to learn for everyone.

Its website includes a wide range of articles by supporters of the new campaign, including a detailed defence of the Union Learning Fund by Gordon Marsden.

Where to find it

Click here to find out more about Right2Learn

TRAINING PLANS FOR JUST TRANSITION

Unionlearn has produced two new Cutting Carbon, Growing Skills training sessions that ULRs, green reps or other activists can deliver to colleagues interested in exploring the connection between climate change and work.

The first one-hour training session covers moving to a net-zero carbon economy, how green skills impact the workplace and how responses to the climate emergency could impact jobs and skills of learners.

The second session goes into more detail and is designed to be run over a half-day. It will help learners conduct a skills survey, prepare for a green skills audit and put together a skills claim to present to the employer as part of a just transition strategy.

Both sessions include learner activities and point them towards relevant sections of the recent unionlearn publication *Cutting Carbon, Growing Skills*, covered in the previous issue of *Learning Rep*.

Where to find it

Click here to download both session plans

DIARY



NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK

8–14 FEBRUARY

This is the 14th annual campaign week around apprenticeships, which is another excellent opportunity for unions to shout about the great work they are doing in this area. This year's theme is #BuildTheFuture

Find out more here

What you can do

Unionlearn will be sharing stories about how unions and employers are working together to develop and deliver high-quality apprenticeships that help apprentices gain the skills and experience they need to progress their careers.

Get in touch with unionlearn's Apprenticeships Liaison and Promotions Officer Mark Rowe

with your stories that can be promoted across social media during the week to highlight the positive work unions are delivering in this area. **Send your details to Mark Rowe here.**

Make sure you tag in @unionlearn and use the hashtag #NAW2021 on anything you are sharing on social media in the run-up to – and during – the week.

Resources

Unionlearn's Apprenticeships Essentials is an all-in-one resource for apprentices and anyone considering an apprenticeship in England that includes guidance, interactive tools, bite-sized learning and a job search function. You can download it from the Apple App Store or Google Play. You can also access the apprenticeships essential resources through the unionlearn website.

Find out more here

Unionlearn has also collected together all the key information and advice about the impact that the pandemic is having on apprenticeships and what support is available in a single page on the website.

Find out more here

The National Apprenticeship Service has produced a toolkit for NAW2021.

Find out more here



Photography: Getty Images and Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

HEARTUNIONS WEEK

8–14 FEBRUARY

The TUC's fifth annual HeartUnions week will be sharing the stories of members, reps and activists to show exactly why unions are vital for everyone at work and encourage people who haven't yet joined to sign up.

Find out more here

What you can do

The TUC is keen to collect stories from reps and members who have stepped up and supported their colleagues over the last year during the pandemic. The aim is to share these positive stories to inspire more people to join a union and show the power working people have when they get together.

Tell your 2020 story by filling in a few details on this **online form**.

On social media, use the hashtag #HeartUnions to keep in touch with what the TUC and unions are saying and publicise your own activities.

Resources

During the run-up to HeartUnions week – and during the week itself – the TUC will be sharing stories that show unions' impact and sharing resources to help members and reps encourage more people to join a union.

Find out more here

DIARY



LITERACY WORKS WEEK

8–12 MARCH

It's unionlearn's annual campaign to support and celebrate all things reading, writing and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) in the workplace.

Find out more here

What you can do

The week kicks off on Monday 8 March with a writing workshop that will be both fun and easy for anyone to take part.

On Wednesday 10 March, it's the first ever unionlearn Punctuation Day with a webinar where you get answers to your punctuation conundrums from TUC grammar expert Rob Sanders.

And on Thursday 11 March, there's an online meeting of the trade union English, maths and digital network that ULRs and project workers are welcome to attend.

You can join in and tweet about activities you are running by using the hashtag #literacyworks and tagging in @unionlearn for maximum reach.

Resources

You can test your English levels and your knowledge of grammar on SkillCheck. The tool is available on the web and as an app that works on both Apple or Android smartphones.

Find out more here



The Reading Agency website has full details about the upcoming set of Quick Reads, due out in May, plus links to downloadable resources on its website.

Find out more here

To find out more about Literacy Works Week, **email Kirsi Kekki** or head over to unionlearn's Events page for registration details.

Find out more here