

Branch Circular: Covid-19 Update #1

The Coronavirus / Covid 19 crisis has massively impacted on all our lives.

Over the last two weeks the Branch has worked intensively to represent members who are required to attend work to carry out vital roles in the midst of this crisis, those who for the foreseeable will be working from home and those who on Government advice have had to self isolate if in a high risk group or have a particular health condition which means they are part of a group that needs to be especially 'shielded' from potential contact with the virus.

The Branch has also sought to ensure suitable arrangements are put in place for members who need to stay at home to support and protect others in their household whether their role allows home working or not.

We have been in communication with stewards and members in particular employers and services on arrangements for specific groups of members.

It is not possible to report in detail on all of them. However the purpose of this circular is to give every member an idea of the range of issues the Branch has been involved in supporting members across our employers and services by reporting on some particular areas.

At the end of the circular are a range of links to a wide range of information sources at national and regional level and how to best contact the Branch for advice support and representation.

Evelyn Doyle
Manchester UNISON Branch Secretary

SCHOOLS

We are in unprecedented times within our schools, with many of you going above and beyond to support your pupils, colleagues and wider school communities. The feedback we are getting from our support staff is that everyone in their schools are pulling together.

Schools remain open for those children who are identified as vulnerable and children of critical workers, but only if there is no alternative option. Government advice remains that "Every child that can be safely cared for at home – should be." While many of us are working from home, a lot of our members in schools are still going to work, with many being asked to volunteer in what would usually be their Easter holidays, to provide essential cover for key workers children.

Many staff in schools are on term time only contracts. This means that they are not contracted or paid to work during school closure periods. If term time only staff are required to work outside their normal contracted hours, i.e. in the school holidays, then they should be paid for this. There

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is specific NJC guidance on term time only working, which states, 'If term time only employees are required to undertake work outside of their contracted hours, they must be appropriately remunerated.'

The DfE has confirmed that schools will continue to receive their budgets for the coming year, regardless of any periods of partial or complete closure. It has also stated it will put in place a new process that allows DfE to reimburse schools for exceptional costs they face as a result of Covid-19.

The government has issued guidance making clear that all contractors (including catering, cleaning, IT and other suppliers of goods and services) will continue to be paid in full by public bodies during the partial schools closures. The government has introduced flexibilities for allowing payments in advance to ease any cashflow issues. Government advice is very clear that if you can work from home, then you should work from home.

Some of the regular meetings at which we support members, such as attendance meetings, grievances and disciplinaries, are being deferred while schools cope with this unprecedented crisis. Others are going ahead via remote conferencing and we've been getting used to this different way of working. Our schools team are receiving large volumes of queries and are doing our best to respond to them in a timely manner, your patience in this matter is greatly appreciated.

We continue to provide regular updates via our school stewards and contacts, if your school does not have a contact and you would like to receive these updates please contact us, identifying your workplace, via unison@manchester.gov.uk.

UNISON FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) for school staff can be accessed via this link: <https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/education-services/key-issues/covid-19-closures/>

Our Branch schools team are totally committed to providing you with support during these unprecedented times.

Cath Baggaley – c.baggaley@manchester.gov.uk

Jane Wilcox – j.wilcox@manchester.gov.uk

Rena Wood – r.wood@manchester.gov.uk

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

Libraries

Following discussions Libraries finally shut their doors for the foreseeable future on Monday ahead of the national shut down. This leaves a number of staff that could be deployed elsewhere for essential services providing all safety measures are in place.

UNISON will be in negotiations regarding any proposals to be put to members. Any member unsure about what they have been asked to do should contact their local steward or me directly.

Bereavement Services

May need some additional staff if demand increases. Vulnerable working from home.

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All other MCC departments carrying out city wide practices.

Housing Associations

All housing organisations have closed offices or are down to skeleton staff. Work on sites is limited to emergency repairs and Health and Safety inspections. All other staff home working.

Markets

Our council markets closed with the exception of New Smithfield market which is part of a food supply chain. Some issues over staff working on them in terms of numbers and social distancing which they are being addressed through changing working practices.

Any queries please contact **Pete Banks** - p.banks@manchester.gov.uk

CORPORATE CORE

We have the majority of staff now working from home in the Core.

ICT is working extremely hard to acquire and build equipment for staff to use from home to deliver services to departments and residents. At the moment staff are having to attend the office but are practising social distancing. They are doing a fantastic job keeping the council delivering. As soon as possible they will be working from home on projects to make our services even more flexible for the future.

The customer services counter is closed and staff are delivering services for residents via email. The contact centre is delivering an emergency contact service only. When non emergency contact is made, residents are directed again to the online service where the staff who are now working from home are able to resolve it.

The council has moved quicky to get everyone working from home to deliver for our residents and maintain services. I have received many enquires from individual members about working from home, medical adjustments, isolating because of symptoms or because of underlying medical conditions and also group queries around some of the logistics on home working.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

All staff in the GMCA other than fire staff are working from home.

Any queries please contact **Jane Slater** - j.slater@manchester.gov.uk

ADULT SERVICES

It has been an incredibly busy time in Adults as we transition to the safest ways of working possible, while still maintaining services for some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

While national government guidance has frankly been too slow in coming and often not precise enough when we have got it, we have worked with management to ensure that Manchester follows the best medical advice and considers the safety of members and service users.

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In the first instance, staff whose work can be done away from the office have been sent to work from home in order to help offset the pressure on health services that would come from the unmitigated spread of Covid-19. Where necessary I have been involved in negotiations around individual teams, particularly when members have raised concerns about whether it is necessary for them to be in the office to run a service. Please do get in touch if you have concerns about this. There will be ongoing conversations about this and changes are inevitable.

Obviously much of the work in Adults can't be done from home however, and the services are vital to our city. In these cases the conversations are about keeping as safe as possible as we continue to care, support and protect our service users. Proper risk assessment is what will keep people safe; so never worry about asking for this from your line managers and let me know if you have concerns. We can only do our jobs if we are kept safe and UNISON has and will continue to be involved in robust discussions about how we work through this unprecedented event.

The council will be looking next at how to use staff to support our services; this will need training and support. Do get in touch if you have worries about this that are not resolved by your managers. UNISON will be working throughout this with you to make sure that your concerns are heard and acted on.

Any queries please contact **Carl Greatbatch** - c.greatbatch@manchester.gov.uk

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Covid-19 has dramatically affected everyone both in their working and personal life.

The Branch are making every effort to support our members in the upheaval.

The vast majority of our members in Children's Services are essential workers providing much needed professional support for vulnerable people in Manchester.

The nature of the roles in this service mean home working for most is a challenge, as there is still a need for some activities to be done face to face, or from an office base.

The Branch are nevertheless working hard to ensure that we support our National Health Service and the health and safety of our members, together with that of service users by ensuring those who do not need to be at work are able to work from home.

Our aim is to support our members in ensuring those who need to self isolate are able to do so whilst looking at different ways of working to enable maintaining a service for the most vulnerable who can in times of a crisis fall in between the gaps in provision exacerbated by a decade of continuous Government funding cuts.

I have contacted members in each area of work and requested they pass on any concerns so I can personally deal with them. This is continuing on a daily basis as people's fears for the service users and their own loved ones increases as the full seriousness of this crisis unfolds.

The situation changes from day to day with the Government at first taking little serious action to combat the virus in the hope of developing a herd immunity and now a belated realisation of the vital

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need for a more coordinated community and essential workers response.

UNISON will be ready to support members whatever future developments may bring and ensure our members needs are properly considered along with delivering the best service that circumstances will allow.

Any queries should be referred to **Eddy Redmond** Assistant Branch Secretary.

Email: e.redmond@manchester.gov.uk

PRIVATE EMPLOYERS

The Manchester College

In line with national policy the Manchester College sites across the City are now closed.

Manchester Airport

Two of the three airport terminals have closed due to the mass cancellation of flights and the grounding of airlines.

Even at the remaining terminal passenger numbers are very low and rapidly dwindling.

This has had an enormous impact on airport workers and an initial agreement on staffing issues is due to be reviewed in the light of clearer details on the level of financial support from Government.

Gig Economy

Some Branch members are employed on contracts which provide little security and will not automatically be able to access support in the same way as other employees or those self employed and the Government must do more to support workers in this position.

FURTHER INFORMATION

It is difficult to believe that only a few months since the election of a Tory Government with a large majority in December we now see that Government forced to effectively nationalise the railways, centralise the NHS cutting aside Trusts, recognising the importance of public services and the need to work with trade unions and ditching austerity to massively intervene in the economy.

Whilst the crisis has left the Government any option but to move in this direction it will be difficult to see these measures being completely reversed but is an issue for the future.

The priority of the Branch is to support our members whether they are continuing to attend work, are working from home, or need to self isolate.

Any member who needs representation, advice or support should contact the branch via stewards, the branch officers or by calling or emailing the branch.

The Branch Executive will be meeting via Zoom to take decisions on any actions needed to support

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members during this period.

Further Branch circulars will be issued to keep members updated.

Even if self isolating alone the Branch is there to assist members wherever possible.

The following are some links for advice to members:

Manchester UNISON Contact Information

Telephone Number: 0161 254 7500

Email Address: unison@manchester.gov.uk

Branch Website: www.unisonmanchester.gov.uk

Twitter Feed: twitter.com/UnisonMcr

UNISONdirect

The UNISONdirect call centre will be closed from 5pm on 24 March 2020. There are a limited number of staff working from home and they will continue to help members through UNISON's online enquiries form <http://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/online-enquiries>

When members phone UNISONDirect, the greeting message will sign post them to the UNISON website for branch and region information. They will also be directed to UNISON's coronavirus webpage <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/> that is updated regularly.

Social Media

The social media accounts below are worth following for more information.

@UnisonMcr - our branch twitter account which will have regular updates during the crisis

@manchesterheal1 - regular updates for all UNISON health workers in Manchester

@NorthWestUNISON - official twitter account of the North West Region of UNISON

@unisontheunion - official twitter account for the national union