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ORGANISE GROW WIN

YOUR GUIDE TO BUILDING A STRONG UNION AT WORK

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ORGANISE. GROW. WIN.

Your guide to building a strong union at work

It's great you've joined Prospect or Bectu and decided to build a strong union at work.

This guide will give you some key tools to help you organise your colleagues together in your union, so that you can tackle the issues you're facing and get a better deal at work.

Organising at work is about talking to people who already agree with you and those who don't. It's about being strategic, having a plan to grow your membership, and engaging your members to achieve bigger wins.

Prospect and Bectu union officers – that's staff employed in your union – are on-hand to support your efforts, so reach out to them by completing the form at:

- **prospect.org.uk/get-involved-in-the-union/rep-registration-interest/**

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Build a stronger union

Learn how to identify workplace issues, recruit and engage members, have effective organising conversations, build campaigns, and win positive change together.

Make change happen

Whether you're a new member, representative, activist, or simply want to improve conditions at work, this guide gives you practical tools to organise and make change happen.

Taking your first steps...

You've joined and you might have reached out to a Prospect or Bectu officer. Now it's time to start talking to your colleagues...

- What matters to them at work?
- What do they value about the workplace?
- What would they change?

This will give you crucial information about what your union priorities are likely to be.

It also shows new or potential members that you're interested in improving things with them.

Ideally, you will come away with a list of issues – things that you and your colleagues would like to see improved at work.

Who else is a member?

Hopefully you'll have started to get colleagues thinking about joining Prospect or Bectu. Now it's time to systematically map out your colleagues, including who is or isn't a member. To start mapping, get a staff list (or make one) to plot out:

- Who you work with (all employees)
- Break the list down by:
  - Departments/teams.
  - Location at work - whereabouts on the site are they based? Do they work from home, hybrid, or fully on site?
  - Geographical location (if your employer has multiple sites).
- Who's already a Prospect or Bectu member and who do you need to recruit?

Drawing up a detailed list – mapping out who your members and non-members are – will help you decipher who you need to speak to and recruit to Prospect/Bectu.

Get other members involved with doing the mapping work with you, so they understand what it takes to grow your union.

Warning!

Membership of a trade union is protected data under GDPR, so keep your map of workers confidential and secure – keep it off your work system, password protect it, and limit who has access. Your Prospect/Bectu officer can give you more advice on this.

Pro tip...

Add more detail to your mapping!

Take the worker mapping you've done and add even more detail next to each colleague.

You could give workers a number or colour, to identify how supportive they are of unions or Prospect/Bectu. This will give you an idea of your most supportive colleagues and the colleagues you need to work on more.

Who are your leaders?

You might already be a Prospect or Bectu rep, which is great! Reps are vital to your organising efforts – union reps are members like you who pitch in their time to represent your views and lead the way on your campaigns. You should also identify **influential workers** at your workplace.

Within every workplace there will be one or two, or even several, 'influential workers' – (also often called 'organic leaders' or 'natural leaders'). Influence isn't about being the loudest or most outspoken. Some of your strongest allies will be quieter colleagues respected for their work, trusted for their judgement, and well connected. When they move, others move. Don't overlook them.

To find them, consider:

- Who has influence over others at work?
- Who do colleagues listen to and respect?
- Who already stands up for colleagues or raises issues in meetings with management?

Note: They might not necessarily be members of Prospect/Bectu yet and they might not seem supportive of your union, or unions in general.

It's vital to get them on board – they'll help you to grow your union beyond the initial supporters you've gained. You can use the conversations section in this guide to help persuade them to join your organising efforts.

Pro tip...

Take your mapping to the next level

Build on your mapping work to make your organising even stronger. Add even more detail such as:

- ★ Who would you consider to be an activist (i.e. those who you can rely on to help you with your organising work)?
- ★ Identify an influential worker (or 'organic leader') in each department/team or geographical location. Remember, they might not be a member of Prospect/Bectu yet.
- ★ Identify who gets on with who and allocate the best person to speak to each potential recruit. This is also a good way to spread the work between a few of you!

Language matters

It's important to use language that encourages people to join, participate in, and play a central part in your union and organising efforts. Members need to feel part of something, not that "the union" is an external organisation. Prospect/Bectu isn't separate from you – you are **your union!**

- Avoid "othering" – say "your union", not "the union".
- Encourage ownership – your colleagues should feel they're building their union together with you.
- Affirm their contribution, e.g. "Great work!" – they aren't only helping complete a task or favour, they are helping themselves and their colleagues!

Practice makes perfect

- Rehearse conversations using inclusive language (i.e., you/your).
- Apply the same tone and language choices in emails, flyers, and messages.
- Use role-play with fellow reps to build confidence.

Pro-tip...

Talk less, listen more

Listen actively – it's a good idea to do less talking and listen to what members have to say. You can structure conversations using the 'conversation' section of this guide (page 8).

Good example – "Your union needs you."

Bad example – "The union can do that for you."

Building momentum

Testing how much support you've got

A structure test is when you ask members and non-members in your workplace to do something specific.

You make a note of who has done it, and then it gives you an idea of how much collective power you have built in your workplace.

Structure tests can be a good way of:

- Increasing union membership and engagement in your union's activities.
- Promoting campaigns your union is working on and making members feel part of building your campaign.
- Providing useful data about how your members, and potential new members, feel about work.
- Helping you gauge how enthusiastic members are about taking action on a particular issue.
- Evaluating how a campaign is going.

When trying to increase membership in your workplace, a structure test can help you build momentum, while also giving non-members the chance to engage in your activity and helping persuade them to join.

Examples of structure tests

- ✓ Surveys.
- ✓ Wearing a union badge/t-shirt/hat.
- ✓ Attending an event/meeting/demo.
- ✓ Signing a petition or open letter.
- ✓ Taking a picture holding a campaign slogan.
- ✓ Agreeing to distribute flyers at work.

Pro tip...

Be systematic about your structure tests.

Add your tests to the worker mapping you've done previously. E.g. When someone's filled out a petition, add it next to their name on your worker map so you can track engagement.

Structure your conversations

You've mapped out who you need to speak to and who you need to recruit to Prospect/Bectu. You've also practised using the right words to talk about your union. Now it's time to have conversations with colleagues.

Your key activists (those who already agree with you/are pro-union) are great – you'll want to get them involved. But to move to successful collective action, you need to organise everyone – including those who are reluctant or resistant to your union.

Having a **structured organising conversation** is the best way to get someone involved in making change at work. It's your way to make sure the conversation leads to an action, to further your organising efforts.

Before you start, be clear on what you're trying to achieve.

1 Introduce the topic
(and yourself if you don't know them):

- Say why you're talking to them today.
- Ask them for three things they want to change at work and get details.
- It's important you wait for them to respond – don't fill the silence!
- If they can't think of three things, ask them to just think of one.

2 Educate

- Give information about Prospect/Bectu.
- Connect that information to their desired changes.
- Show how it could be different with examples of wins.
- Show how collective activity is the answer.
- Show how joining your union can help with their issue. *See example on p9.*

3 Ask them to take a specific action

For example:

- Sign a petition.
- Take a campaign picture.
- Vote in a ballot.
- Join Prospect/Bectu. *Always ask this as part of your conversation.*
- It can be a small action, including agreeing to speak to you again!

Ask them if they'll take the action. If necessary, leave a long silence to give them time to speak – don't be tempted to fill the silence!

HOW TO SHOW JOINING YOUR UNION CAN HELP WITH THEIR ISSUE

The person you are talking to says that pay is something they would like to change about work.

- **Explain to them how joining and participating in their union can help to address this problem.**
- **You could say, "By joining your union, you can help build collective activity and influence in your workplace. If enough people join, your union can seek to engage your employer in pay negotiations with your reps. You would then have a say in your pay and would vote on any proposed pay deals that come from those negotiations."**

REMEMBER...

Listen more than you talk!

4. **Connect their action positively from Step 3 to the plan to achieve changes at work.**
5. **Address any concerns if they have any.**
6. **Ask them to join Prospect/ Bectu if you haven't already done so.**
7. **Follow up with them (agree a time with them, e.g. in a week).**

Pro-tip...

It's okay to feel uncomfortable!

Organising or recruitment conversations can be daunting. We're often used to having polite chit-chat, not driving a conversation forward with a goal in mind! It's okay to feel uncomfortable when having a conversation. Speak to your Prospect/Bectu officer for more help on conversations, including bespoke training.

Keep people engaged

If your colleagues want change, they need to join and get involved.

Change doesn't happen overnight. Energy and focus can dip over time, so it's useful to keep reconnecting people to what matters to them and why it's worth staying involved.

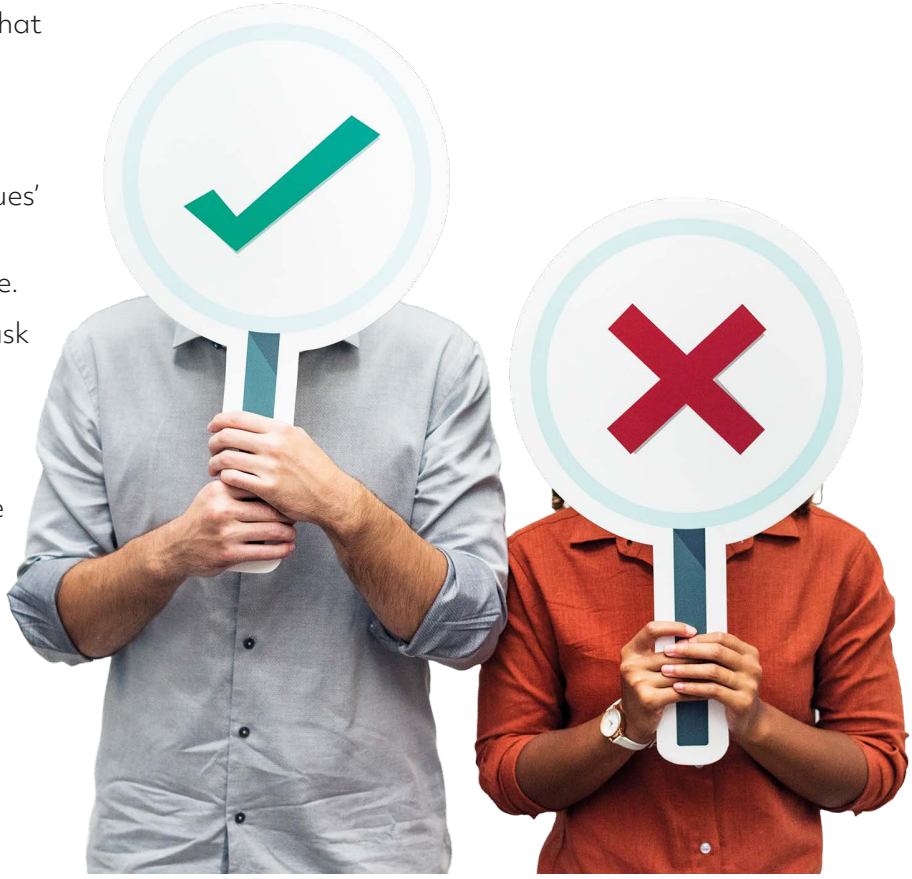
If members are frustrated about something, you can build hope that together, your union can tackle it, and you can move members to action. A bit of challenge can sometimes help people reflect and move forward, but it should always be thoughtful and grounded in what matters to them.

Do

- ✓ Encourage high, but realistic colleagues' expectations.
- ✓ Direct their energy towards their issue.
- ✓ Listen to what they have to say and ask open questions.
- ✓ Listen to their answers.
- ✓ Be prepared to respond to what you hear, including if this means a change of approach to reflect that you have listened and understood.
- ✓ Ask follow-up questions.

Don't

- ✗ Force your own thoughts and opinions on them.
- ✗ Interrogate them.
- ✗ Have more frustration than they do about their potential issues.
- ✗ Make assumptions about them or their experience and views.



This is all about rallying people to your union and campaign to make your workplace better. But what if your colleague continues opposing the idea of a union?

If a colleague is unsure or hesitant about getting involved, try not to get stuck in long debates but don't ignore their concerns either.

A helpful approach

- ✓ **Acknowledge** – recognise how they're feeling.
- ✓ **Respond** – address the concern clearly and briefly.
- ✓ **Refocus** – bring the conversation back to what matters to them.

Pro-tip...

Some great phrases to use are...

"**What's holding you back?**" *or*

"**What's preventing you from joining your union?**" *or*

"**How do you think you'll be able to change [your issue] if you don't join Prospect/Bectu?**"

Building your campaign plan

Following the previous steps will give you a strong structure. Now it's time to tackle the issues. To win the changes you want, keep being systematic – build a clear campaign plan around the issues you and your members identified.

- What's the objective? What do you want to achieve?
- Who's the target? Who can make decisions and get things done in the organisation?

Plan

- The actions you'll take – this is what you will do to put pressure on the campaign target and how will you involve members.
- Think about timescale, resources, involvement of members, and a back-up plan.
- Communication and engagement with your members are vital – make sure you have member meetings.
- Build in structure tests – this is a good way to evaluate your campaign as you go along, so you can adjust as you need.
- Keep adding to your worker map and keep using structured conversations to engage members and non-members.

Campaign ideas

★ **Getting an improved workplace policy, e.g. flexible working**

Treat negotiations on flexible working as an organising effort and to build a strong campaign and case studies. Use the steps in this guide to build towards an agreement—whether that's securing flexible working for all members or improving on the statutory minimum.

★ **Getting a pay increase**

Treat the pay negotiation process as a campaign using the steps in this guide. Start early – by building your union, promoting engagement and action, as well as solidarity, you'll have more chance of winning the pay award you want.

★ **Winning union recognition**

Union recognition is where your employer has a formal relationship with your union for the purposes of negotiating your pay, terms, and conditions. This means they'll negotiate with you. Your workplace might have union recognition already. The steps above will help you to make the most of your recognition agreement and make work better.

Or your workplace might have partial recognition or no union recognition at all. Use the steps in this guide to build a strong campaign to win union recognition.

Pro-tip...

There's help available in Prospect/Bectu

Your Prospect/Bectu officer is there to help your organising efforts at work, so use their expertise. They can help you with a campaign plan, get you signed up to training, and direct you to extra resources. You now have all the basics you need to get started. Make sure to keep evaluating your strategy and refer to this guide or speak to your officier if you need help.

Time to get organised!

Strength with recognition

The Employment Rights Act 2025 provides working people and their unions with new opportunities to strengthen organising, recruitment, and negotiation. These are key to re-balancing the relationship between workers and employers, ensuring that workers have a voice, are protected in safe and secure jobs and support raising workplace standards.

Under the Act, employers with 21 or more employees must give trade union access to the workplace, both in person and online. This allows unions to speak with workers, recruit members, and support and organise workers. The law also makes it easier for unions to gain official recognition by removing some of the previous voting barriers.

If you are building a campaign to gain or extend union recognition with your employer, these new legal tools can give you and your colleagues additional rights at every stage.

What new tools can you use?

From October 2026, you can work with your full-time officer to make an access request if it is difficult to reach or communicate with your colleagues.

- You could try to **engage your employer informally first** before making a formal request.
- An access request allows you to **connect with workers in the workplace**, helping you organise and grow your membership.
- This can be used as an **early pressure tactic**, giving you rights even before formal recognition is secured.

If you already have recognition for part of your workforce but want to organise colleagues outside your existing **bargaining unit**:

- You can also use an access request to reach and support those workers.
- This helps you **expand your organising base** and build a stronger case for wider recognition.

A bargaining unit is a group of employees who are treated as one group when negotiating with their employer about pay, working conditions, and workplace rules. For example, it could include all nurses in a hospital or all air traffic controllers in an airport.

Changes to recognition law

Union recognition legislation changed in April 2026, making the process less restrictive.

- You may now be in a stronger position to **approach your employer for voluntary recognition.**
- A voluntary agreement can sometimes be **quicker and more collaborative** than the statutory route.
- However, the statutory process remains an option if the employer refuses to engage.

Plan: how to use these changes in your campaign

- Identify where access to workers is currently limited.
- Use access requests to increase visibility and engagement.
- Build membership and demonstrate majority support.
- Use improved organising strength to push for voluntary recognition.

Structure tests

- How many workers engage once access improves?
- What do those workers we are accessing say is important to them?
- Does membership increase after new communication opportunities?
- Are more workers willing to publicly support recognition?

Pro-tip...

Your Prospect/Bectu officer can support you in using access requests and navigating the updated recognition process.

They can help you decide when to apply pressure, when to negotiate, and when to escalate.

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