**Branch Chair’s Report**

Looking back over my report from last year it’s strange to think how similar this one is going to be but in many ways that probably shouldn’t be surprising. Once again we find ourselves in a situation where public-sector workers are increasingly hard-pressed, our budgets continue to shrivel in real terms, the ability to provide vital public services further disintegrates, and our overstretched and overburdened members continuing to face the public outrage that is following this.

Rather than it be a story spun of the blame laying with Covid and restrictions this year we saw a story of it being the fault of war and inflation. The truth however, as the council itself frequently acknowledges, is that central government cuts made for nearly a decade and a half now are coming home to roost more and more which this time are in the form of frankly life-changing decisions having to be made when it comes to adult and children’s services, though no area of the council can currently be described as looking healthy when it comes to resources.

To tie with that nationally we face the dire consequences of a Conservative government that is in the last year of its life and is very much aware of that, with it desperately seeking to enact every right-wing libertarian fantasy it can before the show’s finally over and worker’s rights and the few remaining bits of the public sector they haven’t flogged yet firmly in their sights.

At least however there have been one major positive for our members in recent months. After the absolute farce that was the handling of the 21/22 pay award, the award for 22/23 was frankly a resounding success compared to recent years with our initial headline demand of an at least £2,000 increase to all pay points being effectively met with the final agreement being £1,925 to all pay points. This increase has also just been offered again for 23/24, which if accepted would mean that for the first time in several years members can expect their monthly pay packet to increase from almost day one of the new tax year and will hopefully reduce financial concerns many had as negotiations dragged on in prior years. The forward picture for the 24/25 award is at present unclear but given likely increases in the National Living Wage that are expected for April 2024 a similar award would be considered realistic for that year as well, which if that is the case would mean that since 2021 our lowest-paid members will have seen their pay increase by almost a third (and that’s excluding any yearly increment).

However that is likely to be the only bright light in a year that will continue to be dark elsewhere, with challenges coming up likely to include:

* Devon County Council’s internal structures are likely to continue undergoing major shifts as the year goes on as it has to make savings in several departments. This is likely to again see increased demand on reps from concerned members.
* There is a potential increase in the amount of hostility public-facing staff face, especially within Highways, as extremist conspiracy theories around “net-zero” and “15 minute cities” continue to grow at an alarming rate. This will need to be monitored as the year goes on and may need discussions with the council regarding the safety of staff.
* The economic fallout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is now likely over, with the “new normal” settling in and many household costs unlikely to continue to see large rises meaning a quick fall in inflation (which is measured by a 12 month comparison). However those exposed to sharp increases in interest rates (such as those with tracker mortgages or in private rental accommodation) are likely to still face increased financial instability after an already tough year on household finances.
* Within UNISON itself it is depressingly likely to be another bruising year when our attention should be focused outwards as internal factional spats continue with the ongoing NEC elections, with many of the issues from last year’s National Delegates Conference also going unresolved.

**Michael Daniell**

**Branch Chair**