

Facility time

Stewards have a legal right to time to carry out their duties; although that doesn't necessarily mean any other activities. Facility time is time off from an individual's job, granted by the employer, to enable a rep to carry out their trade union role. In some cases, this can mean that the rep is fully seconded from their regular job, enabling them to work full time on trade union tasks. It can also mean an employer allows a rep to carry out trade union duties and activities, instead of their substantive job, for a certain amount of time per week or month.

The right to time off

In workplaces where the trade union is recognised, trade union workplace representatives have a right to paid time off for the purpose of carrying out their trade union duties or to take part in union training. This right applies to:

- workplace reps
- health and safety reps
- union learning reps
- information and consultation reps.

Duties covered

Workplace reps are entitled to paid time off to cover the following duties:

- trade union duties related to collective bargaining, on issues like: terms and conditions of employment; redundancies; job evaluation; family friendly policies; discipline; trade union facilities; and negotiating machinery
- Individual representation
- meetings with management and preparation for these meetings
- keeping members informed about negotiations

Benefits arising from the use of facility time

The use of facility time in workplaces where UNISON organises reflected Acas guidance on time off for union duties and activities. Four main benefits that arose from the use of facility time were identified:

- Provision of a ready-made structure for meaningful consultation and negotiation saving organisations money and providing reassurance to members that their views are valued in decision-making.
- Facilitation of partnership working with trade unions that improved workplace relations and the reputation of an employer as 'a good place to work'.
- Earlier intervention in relation to complaints, grievances and disciplinaries preventing escalation into more serious problems; thereby saving organisations and taxpayers money by reducing the impact on staff time and possible legal costs.
- Better communication to manage change during restructuring and redundancy processes; thereby improving understanding of decisions, minimising negative impacts and reducing the number of working days lost through industrial action.

The value of facility time in itself

In addition to benefits arising from the use of facility time, the time also had value in itself. The value of facility time in this respect came from better representation of members' views and improved availability of representatives to work with employers on areas of common interest.

Where reps were released or seconded from their substantive posts the quality of representation and availability of reps was further improved because reps were able to:

- (a) focus further on their duties;
- (b) prepare better for discussions with managers; and
- (c) build up relationships of respect trust with managers over time.