

## **Conference 2021 Opening Address: Tim Rose, General Secretary, NGSU**

### **Introduction**

Welcome – whether you’re a regular Conference attendee; joining as a Rep or a member for the first time or if you’re an interested observer – welcome one and all.

In recent years it’s fallen to me to kick-off proceedings by going through the housekeeping arrangements for our Conference venue but as we’re all joining from different locations – homes, offices, and branches, I’ll simply say, ‘I hope you’re sitting comfortably’!

We are doing things differently this year, but the intent is still the same. To listen to the views of our members; discuss the issues that are impacting on them at work and, with our Representatives, identify what our priorities should be for the next two years. It’s an important event in helping to determine how we engage with Nationwide; deciding what we want to achieve and how we will stay connected and relevant to our members.

As I said at the end of the video, we’re going to look ahead to the future. The world of work is changing in ways that we couldn’t have imagined or, at least, we couldn’t have anticipated the pace of change. Over the next two and half days we will explore some of the issues with our guests from Nationwide and our focus is going to be on the impact for our members – most of who are Nationwide employees.

### **About NGSU**

But I want to start by talking about NGSU.

Next year we will celebrate the Union’s 50th anniversary. Fifty years of the Society’s employees coming together to have a voice within the organisation.

We can trace our history back to July 1972 when the Nationwide Building Society Staff Association was formed. And over the years, we have been pleased to join with the Staff Associations and Unions from the Anglia, Portman, Dunfermline, Cheshire and Derbyshire Building Societies – and to welcome their members. A true ‘union’ of employees coming together for a common purpose.

In 1996 we changed our name to Nationwide Group Staff Union embracing our independence that allows us to speak-up for our members without fear or filter.

### **We’ve made a difference**

Nationwide is recognised as a good employer, and I think it’s fair to say that NGSU has played its part in helping to shape the organisation and earn that reputation. For fifty years, we’ve been working in a robust partnership with Nationwide to develop a strong people proposition.

We have been a force for good and influenced many positive outcomes for our members and all employees at Nationwide. Here's just a few examples:

It was NGSU that first set up Diversity Advisory Committees – in 2003 – a forerunner of the Employee Networks that perform good work today in promoting inclusion and diversity.

Our Age Committee successfully campaigned to end the compulsory retirement age at Nationwide, well in advance of Age Discrimination law requiring employers to justify ending employment at a set age.

Our Ethnicity Committee raised awareness through a series of campaigns, seeking to change attitudes, at a time when 'equal opportunities' was really only a logo that appeared on job bulletins.

Our Disability Committee demonstrated the difficulties in wheelchair access even in the most modern of buildings, like Nationwide House.

Our LGBT Committee led a debate at the TUC Congress about gay rights.

So much good and pioneering work, now handed on to Nationwide's Employee Networks, and it's good to see them thriving and being supported by the business. We can be proud that their origins are from the Union and the work of our members.

Our focus on Equality, Inclusion and Diversity remains strong – encouraging Reps and members to join the Networks but also revitalising our own Equality Rep network and establishing our new Young Workers group.

There's still much to do in creating an inclusive and diverse workplace and NGSU has a part to play – helping to develop good policies and giving an honest appraisal of success and sharing insight about areas for improvement.

Flexible working and family-friendly-policies are currently topics that are high on the national agenda.

This Conference has been instrumental in calling for change and driving enhancements. The move to 22 weeks maternity leave at full-pay was announced at our Conference in 2017 and the ambition of 26 weeks at full pay was realised as part of the 2019 pay review. Paternity leave also being extended to six weeks at full pay.

And it was a NGSU member who highlighted some of the issues arising from premature births – so much maternity leave used up before she was able to take her baby home. NGSU put it on the agenda – and thank you to Nationwide for responding and developing a leading-edge policy with more leave support. It's a good example of the way we work, partnership in action and at its best.

Extending enhanced pay to Shared Parental Leave - still remains a goal set by Conference.

It was NGSU who led the development of the Domestic Violence Policy – understanding that it was a workplace issue, back in the early 2000's. Regrettably, it is an issue that is still with us today and number of cases has risen in Society at large during the pandemic. An important Policy and sadly still needed.

In Spring 2017 we started a conversation – 'Menopause Matters' – about increasing the awareness of the support women need at work. And now it's firmly on the agenda and receiving the attention it deserves.

And we're currently talking to the business about providing more support for employees who are facing gambling addictions.

Real issues, affecting real people, at work.

During this year we have seen many employees leave by means of redundancy. Some held over from last year, and some new and on-going change programmes. It is a worrying and anxious time for many but, for some, it's an opportunity to move on and take a new direction in life – but all leaving with good severance terms and outplacement support.

Good terms that have their origin in the Security of Employment Agreement, known as SERA to those of us who go back that far – a landmark agreement negotiated between NGSU and Nationwide and that has provided a much-needed financial cushion at a time of uncertainty.

And over these 50 years we have supported thousands of union members, at disciplinary, capability, ill health hearings and grievance meetings and given many, many more, advice about their terms and conditions. Giving them support and confidence to raise issues and concerns themselves.

When coronavirus struck, and for logistical reasons AskHR were unable to take phone calls – we kept our phone lines open and talked to hundreds of members who were worried about the pandemic and keeping safe at work; helping them understand the support and time-off arrangements. All the time, talking to the Business about the types of concerns being raised and helping to shape the response.

And the list goes on – our role in pay negotiations – there's been an annual pay increase for most employees in all the years I can remember – and through some tough times like the financial crisis and pandemic – when there have been pay freezes in many companies and sectors. I've been on both sides of the negotiating table, as Employee Relations Manager in HR and as Assistant General Secretary and now as General Secretary for the Union. No one should doubt the role the Union plays in seeking fair pay and rewards.

So why am I sharing these examples?

Well, I think it's important to remember what we've achieved and take confidence from this because we still have a role to play in making Nationwide the best possible place for our members to work. And it's currently a challenging time for many – so we must be there for

them. We must be as relevant and influential today and into the future, as we have been for the past 50 years.

And we will.

## **Pandemic**

I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on the last 18 months and the pandemic. It has had a profound impact on each and everyone of us and has affected so many aspects of our lives.

Some of us have lost loved ones; had family in hospital or care homes and been unable to see them during their time of need; being confined to home and isolated; not going out with friends; feeling anxious about work. We will look back on this as such a significant time and one when many of us took the opportunity to reflect on our own lives and review our perspectives and priorities.

And in the context of work, and Nationwide, it has accelerated change - in the branch network, with more customers turning to mobile banking, and across the board it has been a game changer in the way we think about flexible working.

This is why we have chosen 'The Future of Work' as the overarching theme for our Conference – it's so important that we think about the challenges now and those still to come.

## **Key Workers**

We've come to associate particular words with Covid – 'social distancing', 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and 'PPE'. 'Unprecedented' – a well-used word to describe events. And of course, 'Key Workers'.

Key Workers – some of the people we depend on the most. They've always been there but not always recognised or valued. Those working in health and social care – the brilliant doctors and nurses and other clinicians but also the amazing support staff who keep our hospitals and care homes running. The supermarket workers keeping access to food (and toilet rolls); the drivers delivering the goods to the shops, the people to take away our rubbish and recycling. It's a long list. The people we depend on for so much – yet often the least valued and lowest paid.

And of course, we have our own Key Workers at Nationwide. Providing access to money is an essential service and the people who work in the finance sector, are Key Workers.

Bank and Building Society employees don't often get a mention when the politicians and the media talk about Key Workers - but we know they are, and the effort it's taken to keep access to money and services available.

At Nationwide, there is a list of thirteen Key Worker categories. Employees working in branches and contact centres; member service and complaints; supporting BACS and CHAPs payments; lending services; collections and recoveries; Treasury; Finance; IT operations and support; payroll; property services and cleaners - and the Leadership Team. Too many to mention them all (sorry if I've missed your role), but everyone, whether their role features on the list or not, has played their part – brilliantly.

But I would like to call out our colleagues in the branch network. I think they've had a uniquely different and difficult experience through the pandemic. They've had to face the commute in to work; keeping branches open; being face-to-face with the public; wearing visors and masks all day; cleaning all the surfaces and equipment; managing the door to maintain the occupancy limits; managing the queues outside.

And then, after the stress and anxiety of all that – taking calls, supporting the contact centres and digital services. Often with reduced resources too – with some colleagues shielding; colleagues in some roles unable to be branch based; and covid and caring responsibilities increasing the absence rate.

And in addition to that, many have had to contend with appalling abuse and violence from some customers. USDAW the shop workers union has been active in calling for more legal protection of retail workers and Nationwide has been strong in this debate too. And for good reason.

Looking at Nationwide's submission on this issue to the Home Affairs Select Committee, the Society notes that the number of incidents of verbal and aggressive behaviour, between December 2019 and July 2020, increased by 300% and gave some shocking examples: 34 threats to kill, 26 members of staff assaulted, and 26 'covid related' incidents – where Nationwide members have come into branch and spat at colleagues.

It is unbelievable and completely unacceptable that some of our colleagues have to face this abuse.

It's not just confined to branches; our colleagues in contact centres; collections and recoveries; member service – many teams in direct contact with customers having to contend with verbal abuse.

So, coping with covid has been a monumental effort – by everyone – but particularly the branch teams.

### **Kindness and Tolerance**

Some good things have emerged from the pandemic. People coming together to support each other – with more kindness and tolerance. And we must hold on to these values because they are fragile. We saw, in the US, the murder of George Floyd and how it resonated across the world, and with it, the realisation that we have so much more to do to create a truly inclusive and caring world.

We all have a part to play – let kindness, tolerance; respect; dignity; inclusion be the values we take into the future.

## **The Future of Work**

And so - to the future.

## **Branches**

The branch network is changing. It must change because there is an unescapable truth that more and more customers are turning to mobile and online banking and footfall is in decline. But branches still have an important role. There's still a demand for face-to-face help and guidance and support with complex issues. And of course, there is demand for access to cash, and the Government is currently consulting about taking powers to guarantee access. So, finding a way through to maintain a sustainable branch network, when there are competing pressures, is complex.

The current pilot of 'multi-skilled' branches offers one way forward. We're monitoring that closely and what's clear is, to be successful, it needs the right technology; effective training and recognition for being multi-skilled. I think it's real challenge.

We know from feedback from branch reps and members, and from our branch survey, that it's still tough in branches. We're hearing a lot about the pressures of coping with stretched resourcing and the number vacancies; the impact this has on wellbeing; concerns about speaking-up; questions about pay in a multi-skilled environment and where roles are expanding.

## **Homeworking**

The other big change is the way many of us will now work.

The option of having choice of working at home, in an office or combination, is a cultural shift that would have probably taken years to make without the impulse provided by covid and lockdown. We support the approach Nationwide has adopted – work is what we do, not where we go. And we all should seize this moment to transform the way we work.

Many of us have been working from home for the past 18 months, so it no longer feels new, but I think we are still at the beginning of this journey. The move back to the office has been slow and cautious – rightly so – and so we've yet to establish a rhythm of how hybrid arrangements will work. But the time does feel right to set out some principles and guidance that will help give some clarity around expectations and working arrangements. We're currently working with the Policy Team in People & Culture to begin to sketch out a framework.

There are plenty of issues to think about – what is the contractual place of work and what does that mean for mileage claims and eligibility for London Allowance; what are the long-

term impacts on wellbeing; will it impact on development and promotion - will being out of sight, mean being out of mind?

How do we manage presenteeism – it's so easy to work outside of conventional working hours – great if that enables you to balance work and home life but we must make sure that Working from Home doesn't turn into Living at Work. What does it mean for inclusion and diversity – if you need a suitable and designated space at home, will that exclude some groups?

There's plenty of research that shows women, in our wider society, have been impacted more by covid and all that has gone with it – still undertaking the majority of childcare – how do we ensure there are no long term adverse implications from hybrid working for women?

What does it mean for sustainability – less travel for sure, but are there other implications from so many working at home? And we're hearing feedback from members about energy costs – will that influence where people choose to work? How does the equation of increased utility bills but lower commuting costs work out? Do the wider benefits of a better work-life balance outweigh cost considerations?

The experience is going to be different for everyone and we certainly don't have all the answers. We'll talk more about this later this afternoon.

## **Climate Change**

Alongside all this change, we face the most significant issue of all – climate change. It will have an impact on everything we do, including work. We must all hope that world leaders, gathering for COP 26 in Glasgow next month, take the decisive action necessary to limit emissions and the rate of global warming. But we can't just leave it to them. We must all do our part.

And with this in mind, we'll be forming a group of Reps and Members to think about climate change action – to help us shape how we respond in NGSU; influence the response at Nationwide and help us make the right choices in our personal lives. If it's something you're interested in getting involved with – let us know and we'll be in touch.

## **Closing**

My allotted time coming to an end, and so I'll draw things to a close.

A union is about its members', and we have more than 12,000 – two-thirds of Nationwide employees are members of NGSU. And we have a 170 union Reps in all parts of the business. So, I speak to you all – members & reps – we have a voice and a contribution to make about how we work; how we're treated at work; and how we develop good and sustainable jobs and a greener future.

Let's use this Conference to re-energise what we do – so please contribute; ask questions; send us your feedback and ideas; join-in by becoming a rep or engaging with your local rep. And if you're not a member – please join and help us in this work.

There are lots of challenges ahead and we must keep on doing what we've done for the past 50 years – and it's what I said when I closed Conference 2019.

We must Listen to Our Members; Speak up on their behalf and Be Heard.

LISTEN; SPEAK-UP; BE HEARD.

Let's start the conversation...

Thank you.