

# UNION MODERNISATION FUND

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Innovation & Skills

NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS (NUT)



# National Union of Teachers (NUT)

## Introduction

The National union of Teachers (NUT) had been communicating with its lay officers and 26,000 school representatives through the post and by phone. The development of an online virtual web-based community was a natural next step; being able to fund this as a Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) project was an ideal opportunity, at the right time.

## Why this project?

The focus of the UMF project was to establish a web-based interactive resource centre, 'Hearth', to support lay union officers and NUT school and college representatives. It had the potential to transform communication between the union and its officers and reps, as Arthur Jarman, then Assistant Secretary, Membership and Communications, explains:

*'We knew that a multi-functional website would make the perfect forum for our union reps. They would be able to interact and share best practice, download new, up-to-date documents, improve their IT skills and scrutinise elements such as the national training programme, to make sure there's an appropriate focus on the school rep's role. It would also encourage school reps, particularly in larger schools, to share their experience of the role. What's more, with access to a forum, the NUT would be able to keep tabs on the members' issues that are most pressing. And communication links between local offices, members and head office would be speeded up exponentially.'*

## Background

- The NUT is both a professional association and a trade union.
- Its nine regional offices and its Wales Office provide members with a unique service.
- With experienced professional and legal staff at each centre, it makes available to its members a direct personal service providing legal and professional advice, guidance and support.
- There are more than 5,500 NUT school representatives.

Specifically, the project was to achieve the following:

- Create an online reference library – 'the knowledge' – comprising NUT guidance and resources for officers and staff.
- Provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information amongst officers, to share best practice.
- Create an online virtual office for officers, where they could access downloadable and customised templates for correspondence, newsletters, information and other resources to make them more effective in their role as union officers.
- Integrate the membership database onto Hearth and granting officers quick and unrestricted access to members' data.

## Methodology and outcomes

The union engaged the services of outside companies to carry out the design and content management of Hearth. The site was built on a content management system using open software called Drupal, which enabled it to be more interactive, informative and dynamic. It also meant that others could easily adapt features to their own use.

### The website

Hearth is a closed website, which requires registration and creation of user accounts. It's available to all division and association officers, treasurers, learning reps, health and safety advisers, members of various advisory committees, including young and retired teachers, caseworkers and NUT staff.

Registered users' details are verified and accounts activated by the Web Editor before users can access Hearth, thus ensuring that only eligible officers have access.

The site has an easy vertical menu navigation structure which consists of sub drop down menus which include, among others, the homepage, a news centre, officers' directory, workshop, learning centre, campaigns information, help and support, blogs and the forum.

- The **knowledge** section contains guidance materials on policy and casework, with a wide range of subjects such as employment, education and related policy and dispute resolutions.
- As a campaigning union, it was important to carry a section specifically for information on ongoing **campaigns**, along with leaflets and advert templates, which division and association officers can adapt for local use. Users also have the facility to upload their own campaign and template materials on Hearth, for other officers to view and use.
- The **blog and forum** facilities were created initially in part to provide a space for critical reflection on the development of the project. Phil Katz, Project Manager and Principal Officer, Communications, explains:
 

*'The interactive forum has developed greatly and allows online discussion amongst officers. Forums are not moderated and appear instantly on Hearth. Registered users can read, post topics and reply to existing topics. The forum is regularly checked to ensure that no inappropriate blogging takes place. There is also the facility to run closed forums which only officers within the restricted group can see and use – such as young teachers' advisory committee members, the mental health and safety working party and the health and safety working group.'*
- Hearth's **news centre** houses circulars from the union to divisions and associations officers on matters arising, as well as press releases for England and Wales, NUT newsfeed, and Executive news.
- The **workshop** section acts as a virtual office for local officers. It has a range of model letters, various newsletter templates, logos and royalty free images. Campaigning materials, including PowerPoint presentations and facilities to lobby Members of Parliament and Members of the Welsh Assembly, are available for officers to adapt for their local use.
- Hearth has an online **learning centre**, which lists all available courses, seminars and conferences organised by the union for officers and members. Officers can view course details and apply for courses online. This section also contains resources that officers need for organising local training courses – such as the training handbook, training modules and case studies. Details of the union's training programme and courses in continuing professional development are also available, with added support for

union learning reps, health and safety advisers, division and association secretaries and treasurers.

- An **instant messaging** tool offers real-time communication and allows direct live text conversations between registered users. It supersedes the pace of email and has greater security. Officers can now send a message to other officers using the messaging facility. Says Phil:

*'This facility has undoubtedly improved communication amongst officers and has saved time and money.'*

- The **officers' directory** contains a list of all 2,450 NUT local officers and their contact details. It's fully searchable by surname, postcode, local authority, association, division, district, regions/Wales, and position held. This directory is linked to the messaging tool, so that officers can send a message to all officers, a group of officers or an individual officer.
- A **Meeting Finder** section has been created exclusively for Executive members, with the monthly timetable for the Executive meetings, meeting room details, committee agendas and papers. This has proved a real bonus:

*'Officers can now access online committee papers without being burdened with bundles of papers. In the future, members of the Executive will be given the option to opt out of paper circulation altogether, which will save resources and costs.'*

- The **events calendar** includes all national union events, including members' and officers' training, conferences, meetings and union-wide regional and Wales activities. The calendar can be filtered by event type and upcoming events are displayed on the homepage to act as a quick reminder.

- The **quick member enquiry** allows a search on Hearth for a single member across the entire membership database. Information is retrieved through the 'redback object' from the membership server to Hearth.
- The **query** feature displays members' home and school information as well as their subscription and association details. A member can be searched by membership number, surname and postcode. A search by school is available whereby the system displays all NUT members in a particular school, which will enable officers to check and verify the identity of members in their areas before providing them with union assistance.
- There is also a **reporting** tool for divisions and associations, which enables certain division and association post holders to retrieve predefined reports set up by the union's Record and Subscription Services (RSS) to answer questions such as: "What is my Association membership?" "Who is in the Leadership Group?" "Which of my members are retired?"
- The **generic email** system for officers was originally in a stand alone web page but has now been integrated into Hearth. More than 1,200 union officers now have generic email accounts:

*'The email integration onto Hearth involved the transfer of all officers' files, including the officers' address book. It's now a sophisticated system which includes all the features requested by officers. In addition to the basic features, they also have options to change their message display settings, set up filter rules, and add their signature to messages. The system also has Help topics, along with FAQs.'*

- **NUTv** is a video casting facility hosted on the NUT server, with videos posted on YouTube. Video clips of speeches at conferences, the General Secretary's message to teachers on major campaigns, CPD training events and other NUT events can now be viewed this way.
- Within Hearth are **closed group** sections, which only group members can access. These include:
  - Executive members;
  - Young teachers;
  - Health and safety working party;
  - Mental Health working group;
  - Staff.

## Training

Over the two-year period of the project, various workshops and presentations took place at NUT headquarters and regions throughout the country. The training, workshops and presentation sessions focused on how to get the most from the website. Hearth has also been incorporated into officers' training courses, such as the division secretaries' briefing, learning reps' course and an ICT course.

## Publicising Hearth

Monthly Hearth newsletters have been produced and sent to all registered users, to alert them to new items on Hearth. 'Hearth news special' is used to alert users to items that are particularly important or pressing. Says Phil:

*'We have worked consistently through presentations and training to take the Hearth users along with us. The training, workshops and presentation sessions enabled us to sell the concept of Hearth and its benefits to officers. Officers responded positively and appreciated the time-saving benefits of the various new online facilities.'*

## Lessons learned

### Maintaining a high profile

At the start of the project, a particular challenge was getting officers to register for Hearth. Although the number of registered users and returning visitors on the site has exceeded expectations, the union is still working to engage all officers.

*'Users need to be reminded constantly of the website and what it has to offer. Integrating the officer generic email into Hearth and sending union circulars with document links on Hearth has helped us to achieve this. The monthly newsletter also acts as a reminder to users.'*

### Keeping it relevant

The site needs to be relevant and current to officers' needs so that they have reason to visit it regularly. A 'what's new' feature is available on Hearth for users to browse recent additions to the site.

*'The union runs various campaigns, so it's not too difficult to provide new and interesting materials via the site.'*

### Perseverance pays

Getting some of the features right on Hearth, such as the email, was 'a real challenge'.

*'The constructive criticism received helped us to work harder and come up with a more sophisticated system, which officers now use in increasing numbers. Dealing with the issue of spam in inboxes was, and is still, an ongoing challenge as it's impossible to eradicate completely. However, we have managed to keep this under control by investing in spam software that filters and minimises the number of spam messages that go through the server.'*

## Build in flexibility

Time scheduled for some work was difficult to adhere to during the project. Some work took longer than anticipated to implement, such as the quick member enquiry and reporting tool. Plenty of time needs to be allowed for unforeseen delays.

## Looking ahead

Hearth has opened up new possibilities for the NUT. The following projects, all driven through Hearth, have been spawned by the UMF project:

- **Fairer Futures project** – a Hearth version created to facilitate this UMF-funded project for equality officers;
- **Hubble** – a new search engine to operate across the NUT web network;
- **Knowledge II** – a new range of frequently asked questions-based advice, provided using a novel, dynamic graphic interface;
- **Caxton** – a document ordering facility, with a print service and mail out facility, integrated into the workshop.

## Conclusion

The Hearth project achieved its aims and objectives and has developed as a very successful online resource centre, which has been 'invaluable to union officers'.

Arthur Jarman sums up:

*'We're very pleased with the results, having produced a useful and stylish online resource centre which supports our lay union officers and NUT school and college reps. Union officers now have quick access to up-to-date information and guidance. And online access to these and other materials now saves time and increases efficiency and effectiveness of union officers. It really has transformed communications between the union, its officers and reps. The number of registered users on Hearth has exceeded our expectations and more and more officers and staff are using the website, more frequently.'*

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