

Under Cover

NCOA: Protecting those who protect the public

Issue 18 / Spring 2023

UC TALKS TO THE DG

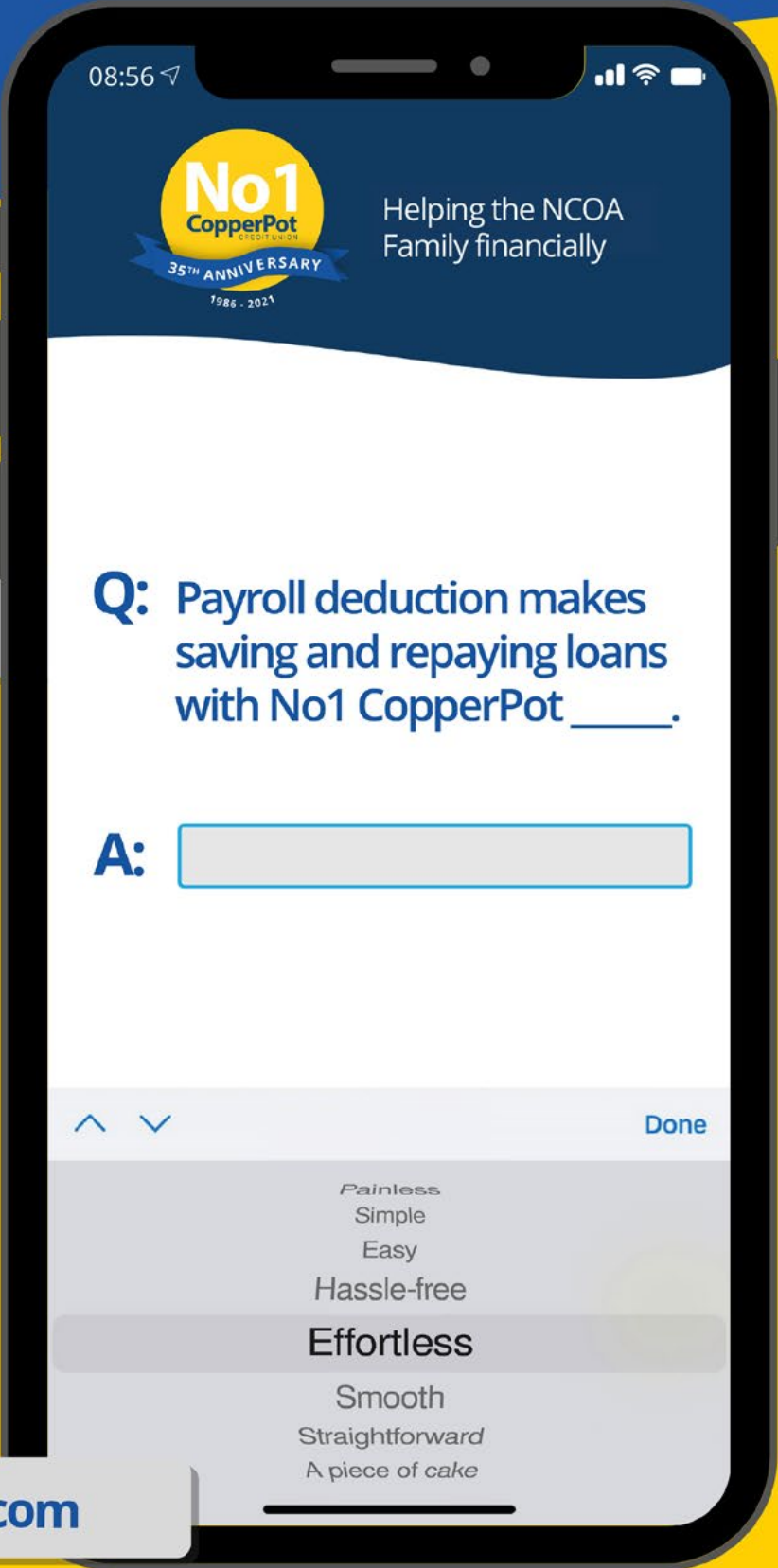
**Under Cover magazine speaks
with Director General Graeme
Bigger about NCA pay and
conditions, Agency culture,
and the challenges ahead**



**2023 PENSION CHANGES ■ PAY UPDATE ■ ALLYSHIP & DIVERSITY ■
WHAT'S UP WITH WHATSAPP? ■ THE COMPLEXITIES OF ADOPTION ■**



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Under Cover Magazine
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Under Cover is the official magazine of the National Crime Officers Association (NCOA), a trade union formed to focus on the needs of members of the National Crime Agency (NCA). Views expressed in this magazine are those of officers, committee members or representatives unless otherwise stated.

Contributions may be sent in confidence to the Editor at **Under Cover** Magazine, 1 Dundonald Avenue, Stockton Heath, Warrington, WA4 6JT

The Editor reserves the right to amend or edit all material as necessary, and where possible, with the consent of the contributor. **Under Cover** Magazine would like to thank everyone involved in producing this magazine, especially advertisers and those kind enough to make a contribution.

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Pay debacle exposes key failings

We could not pass up the opportunity in this edition to mention the wholly unsatisfactory 207-day delay to our members' 2022 pay award. Shockingly, this saw NCA Officers across various grades turn to the NCOA, rather than the Agency, for vital financial assistance to make ends meet!

Assistance was provided because of the unacceptable debacle around the same process that saw our police colleagues paid on time six months earlier. Most notably, the NCOA exposes the deep-rooted problems with the independence of the pay review body (NCARRB), which simply must change to regain any credibility in the annual pay negotiations.

Once again, the NCOA is highlighting the dangers of inappropriate use of social media, and in particular, the encrypted messaging of WhatsApp. The IOPC's unambiguous clarity on what is unacceptable should leave members in no doubt around its use in the law enforcement environment.

It's no surprise then that when Graeme Biggar chose to speak exclusively with **Under Cover** about his challenges as the first Director



General from a non-police background, his three to five-year plan, and the Agency moving to Stratford, he was at pains to stress that some of the existing culture within the NCA must change. Graeme admits that although some areas of work have improved, the results are telling him

that the Agency must do better. The hotspots identified by the NCOA several years ago still exist.

Under Cover again also highlights the extraordinary stories of members with family challenges outside of work and those who go that extra mile to serve their community without expectation of reward.

Please remember that this is your unique member magazine covering a wide range of appropriate topics and articles to suit all members, and I urge you all to read, enjoy and contribute. If you have an issue that you would like to highlight, please contact **Under Cover** magazine at membership@ncoa.org.uk

Simon Bashford

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Our thanks to ACAS

The NCOA wanted to give a little something to the helpful staff at ACAS in Nottingham who provided their facilities for our Annual Delegates Conference in October last year.

The staff didn't hesitate to say vouchers donated to a local foodbank at Rushcliffe would be their preferred choice of 'thank you' gesture. NEC officer Andy Myers ensured £250 of Tesco vouchers was used to buy food for their bumper Christmas delivery, targeting their largest number of users to date.

Fran Judge – who helps at Rushcliffe – told us: "With your generous support we were able to deliver not only essentials but also some festive treats,



such as chocolates and mince pies, to 57 families (175 individuals). We are an entirely volunteer-run organisation, so the generosity of business and individuals is what keeps us going."

NCOA secures pay uplift for student placements

Not widely known is that the NCA offers several internships and student placements, all of which are paid. Third-year university students can apply to complete a one-year work placement as part of their degree course.

These students, many of whom are NCOA members, work alongside NCA officers on some of the most specialist teams, including the Major Crime Investigative Support Unit, providing expertise to police forces dealing with complex crimes such as serial sexual offences and 'no body' murders.

Following a challenge by the NCOA Pay Team, the Agency has

now agreed that NCA students will move immediately to the Grade 6 pay scale. The change will mean that NCA Students move from earning around £16,000 per year to over £21,000; they will also be entitled to receive any future pay awards.

Clear misconception

The Agency also agreed to backdate payments for all current NCA students to the point they joined the Agency.

NCOA National Officer Steve Bond says: "We are pleased to secure this substantial pay uplift for our members who are NCA students. As we pointed out in our discussions

with the Agency, there was a clear misconception from some in the Agency who presumed that the students were living at home with the support of parents.

"Our research showed that this was not the case and in fact, had the Agency not acted swiftly following our challenge, the Agency would have been paying these officers below the National Living Wage.

"The work of the NCOA in securing this uplift makes it more likely that the experience of students in the NCA will be positive, increasing the chances that they will seek full-time positions in future."

House of Commons response to menopause recommendations

The Women & Equalities Committee of the House of Commons has published its response to an independent report proposing various changes to employment law and practice to help women going through menopause.

Most recommendations are not being adopted by the Government – including producing model menopause policies for employers – seemingly on the basis that lots of employers already have menopause policies.

The Agency has a guidance note (HR08 GN10 – Menopause and the Workplace) including a menopause toolkit for officers and managers. This helpful position is a step in the right direction of incorporating the

menopause awareness into an appropriate policy.

It's extremely disappointing that the Government has also declined to commission a pilot with a large national employer on 'menopause leave', and most significantly, declined to amend the Equality Act 2010 to introduce a new protected characteristic of menopause, or introduce a new duty to make reasonable adjustments for menopausal employees.

In what many consider to be a token gesture, the Government is supporting one proposal to introduce a national 'Menopause Employment Champion' to produce a report every six months on the progress made to support those going through the menopause.

NEC elections: have you got what it takes?

Elections to the NCOA National Executive Committee (NEC) take place every three years to enable us to deliver continuity and consistency across the various business engagement areas.

While COVID-19 played its part in upsetting the timetabling of NEC elections in 2020, we are now operating in full 'business as usual' mode with a scheduled election process due to be concluded by July this year.

There are seven positions open to any current rep which make up the structure of the NEC and securing a place is open to all members (not

including SCS Grades) who are successfully nominated and meet the qualifying criteria. Since our inception almost 10 years ago, the work of the NEC has been pivotal to our success and has helped establish a successful and highly professional engagement platform with your employer.

While some of the work is covered by existing facility time arrangements (ie the Agency permits you to do it in their time), it goes without saying that the NEC relies on the commitment and determination of those who are happy to take on

this additional role alongside demanding 'day jobs'.

Ideally (although not essential) a candidate will be able to demonstrate a sound knowledge and experience in matters relating to NCOA activities and duties, and an acceptance that they will need to attend all requisite training courses to enable them to perform the role effectively.

All information for candidates who may be considering applying to join the NCOA's governing body will be communicated on the NCOA website www.ncoa.org.uk/ news in May.



Travel and subsistence update

In the last edition of **Under Cover**, we reported our proposals to make the NCA's subsistence regime fairer, which included:

- shortening the first rate to 4-8hrs and the second to 8-12hrs
- the introduction of a missed breakfast allowance at the same rate as the 5-10hrs rate, for times when an officer is away from the office for more than five hours and leaves before 0600
- clarity for claims when officers work a full day and stay overnight, ie, being able to claim 12hrs rate and overnight meal.

We intend to engage extensively with the Agency on these three



points as part of the annual review of travel and subsistence rates agreed between the Agency and the NCOA.

We are also happy to report that one of our proposals has already

been achieved, namely an uplift of the 'additional hours at an officer's usual place of work' rate from £4.70 to the same as the 5-10hrs subsistence rate (in future this rate should track along the lower subs rate).

In addition to this, following engagement with the Agency, a modest uplift in the subsistence rates has now been agreed and implemented. The new rates are: 5-10hrs – £6.50, 10-12hrs – £12.00, 12+hrs – £17.50.

We will update members with the progress of further engagement on subsistence as we strive to ensure that you are not left out of pocket as a result of working away from your usual place of work.

New South-East Allowance makes no sense

Since 2014 the NCOA has been consistent in making the case for a review of the Geographical Allowances for NCA officers working in the London and South-East Area. Throughout this period the NCA Remuneration Review Body (NCARRB) has acknowledged our common-sense solution, and has also been pushing the NCA to share its future plans.

It was clear to all involved that the NCA's piecemeal policy advocating payment of a geographical allowance on a site-by-site basis was never going to stand scrutiny. This is important when the lease on Spring Gardens expires, and more than a quarter of the NCA workforce moves to the recently announced Stratford site.

The delayed publication of this NCARRB report recommendation adds confusion to the mix:

Recommendation 3. We recommend that London Weighting and South-East Allowances for 2022/23 for NCA officers within our remit group should increase by 5% from 1 August 2022.

How can you recommend an increase to an NCA allowance which is not an embedded allowance within the existing Agency pay structure?

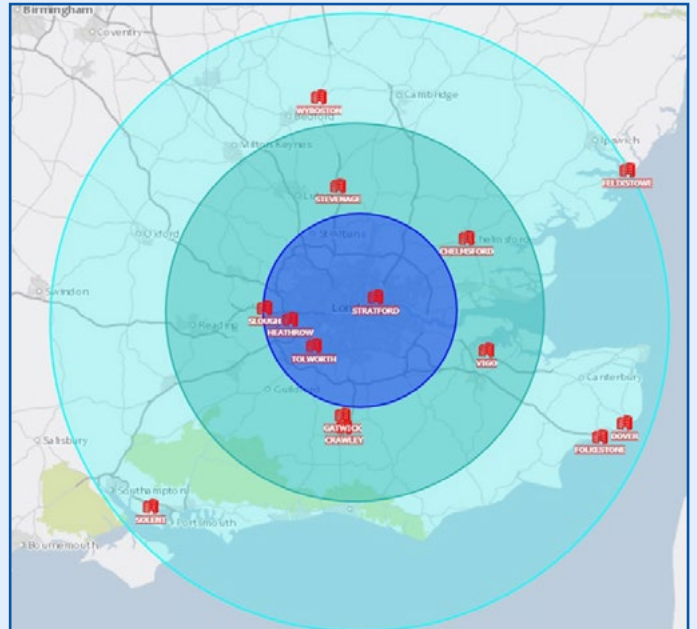
“ How can you recommend an increase to an NCA allowance which is not an embedded allowance within the existing Agency pay structure? ”

Despite that (and following several challenges by us), the subsequent imposition of the NCA Pay Award for 2022/23 advised NCOA members that: “The Government and NCA accepted the NCARRB recommendation for an increase to our London Weighting Allowance which will rise by 5% to £3,595.

“The NCARRB also recommended that the location allowance to be applied to employees working at our Stevenage and Chelmsford offices is also increased by 5%. This South-East Allowance is set at 80% of the London Weighting Allowance and this year will be worth £2,876.”

Fundamentally, our questions are as follows:

- Why didn't the NCARRB recommend the introduction of a new South-East Allowance rather than recommending an increase?
- What's the rationale for setting this new allowance at 80% of the value of the current London Weighting Allowance?
- Why is the allowance titled as the 'South-East Allowance' when it is only targeted at officers at Stevenage and Chelmsford?



- Having introduced the new South-East Allowance, what are the Agency's long-term plans for geographical allowances?

The NCOA has asked these questions of the Senior Leadership Team, who have compounded the confusion with the following response: “The NCA is very unlikely to be able to introduce any regional payment outside of the annual pay award, so we are keen to include the payment in this year's settlement in order that the decisions do not have to wait until 2024.”

While it quickly became clear that the NCA was content to proceed with the introduction of the South-East Allowance, the mechanism to do so was not clear to us. We therefore sought sight of the advice the Agency had apparently received from the NCARRB (via the Office of Manpower Economics Secretariat) with regards to the confusion arising from the flawed recommendation. The Agency has declined so to do.

We have also written to the NCARRB Chair and await a response to provide some clarity on the clumsy introduction of a new Agency allowance which may have a huge impact moving forward for anyone currently in receipt of London Weighting.

The NCOA has long been advocates that our members at Stevenage and Chelmsford should receive a geographical allowance, but one pitched at the current NCA London Weighting Allowance level. It is the NCOA's Zonal Model for Geographical Allowances which would deliver fairness of an uplift to those members working in inner London (in line with payments received by Metropolitan and City of London Police comparators), and recognition there are additional costs to working across the whole of the South East.

Important to **RAISE** awareness

The 'RAISE' Inclusion Learning Programme was designed and developed to support the NCA's ambition to create our 'One NCA' inclusive culture, where we all play our part, live our FIRST values, and follow our Code of Ethics.

The programme comprises five different elements – Respectful relationships, **Allyship**, **Inclusion**, **Safe spaces** and **Education**. For those with access to the NCA intranet, you can find more detail about these different elements on the HR Inclusion, Culture and Engagement (ICE) Team pages on the People Hub.

Sara Miles, Head of ICE, describes the allyship session as: "A two-hour workshop that creates a space for us to connect and to learn about how we can actively support and stand up for others. It's an opportunity to reflect on our own experiences and patterns of behaviour, while learning about allyship skills and understanding how we all play our



part in creating our 'One NCA' inclusive culture.

"The feedback received has been overwhelmingly positive, with people really engaged in the session conversations. We share regular updates on the intranet publicising our progress, and report into the Race Equality Working Group.

"But it is our volunteer facilitators who are just fantastic, as they have brought allyship to life within their Commands. Without their enthusiasm and the proactive

senior leadership engagement, this programme would not have been as successful as it has been so far, and I would like to thank them for all their hard work!

"Hopefully we can all agree that making inclusion a priority is for every one of us and we encourage NCOA members to get involved. In April there will be a discussion at the Race Equality Working Group to agree the next steps for the RAISE Inclusion Learning programme – so watch this space!"

Greater the diversity, greater the representation

We want to hear from you! At the NCOA, we believe it's important to have a network that is fully representative of our membership. Just as the police service and the wider Civil Service aspire to represent the communities they serve, it's also the aim of the NCOA.

At the NCOA we recognise that, while we are very lucky to have many fantastic reps with a wide range of skills and experience, there is still scope for our Rep cadre to be more diverse.

The NCOA is aware it is disproportionately under-represented with workplace representatives from a non-operational background, who are female, who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ and

representatives with disabilities.

Only by recruiting more Reps with these characteristics can we demonstrate our understanding of the issues that impact on all our members and ensure fair treatment irrespective of role, gender, race, disability, religion, age, gender reassignment or sexuality.

If you feel you have something to offer to help us achieve our aspiration to improve the diversity of our trade union, we want to hear from you! If you are thinking of becoming a Workplace Rep, please contact NCOA Membership, any current Workplace Rep or any of your National Executive Committee for an informal chat. Contact information can be found at www.ncoa.org.uk/how-to-contact-us/



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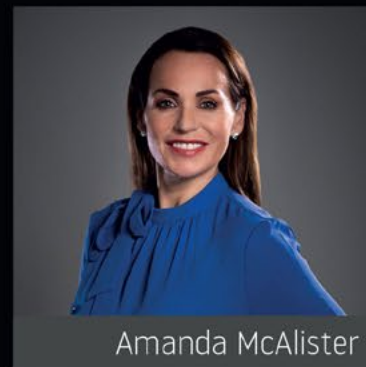
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So, what's up with WhatsApp?

For those with an uncontrollable urge to scroll in the hunt for the latest news, the upsurge in WhatsApp-linked discipline cases within law enforcement won't have escaped your attention.

The app first entered the market in 2009, and its promise of end-to-end encryption and an ability to work across operating systems saw it emerge as the app of choice for social and private messaging.

The growing reliance on comms technology has seen both the law enforcement community and criminals favour the app, with the apparent guarantee of privacy through encryption sealing the deal.

However, while encryption is guaranteed, privacy is not. A number of people have fallen foul of using the app by failing to distinguish between work and social-related messages, and failing to recognise that as a law enforcement professional, your actions on the app (on or off duty) may be subject to scrutiny – especially when the phone you use is owned by your employer.

High-profile investigations

In 2021, following several high-profile misconduct investigations focused on WhatsApp messaging by police officers, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) identified potential risks, including sharing information on an incorrect 'group chat' and disclosing details to the wrong people.

This is compounded when officers communicate with large community groups and where the mobile device/phone is used for both personal and professional purposes.

It made nine recommendations to police forces in England and Wales to ensure a consistent approach to the use of WhatsApp (and other messaging apps) for work purposes.

Given the fact that the IOPC

also covers those working within the NCA, we have reached out to the Agency for guidance on whether they intend to adopt these recommendations (which include finding ways to monitor the use of WhatsApp and other instant messaging applications), or whether they will provide bespoke guidance of their own.

While we are hopeful the majority of our members think very carefully



about what they write or send in any WhatsApp message (especially on an Agency device), we are not naïve, and it's a sad fact that inappropriate messages will be sent by a small minority who believe they are protected within the privacy of the app. This is borne out by a number of Agency investigations of which we have been made aware, particularly in the last two years.

The IOPC has made it abundantly clear that some officers have been foolishly making "risky assumptions" that unacceptable posts were safe inside private WhatsApp chats.

Claire Bassett, the IOPC's Deputy Director General, has provided unambiguous clarity that WhatsApp messages not directly reported as part of an original allegation or referral, often emerge as part of unrelated investigations: "If we have an incident where we end up seizing someone's phone, we will see what

WhatsApp groups they're in, we'll see more content and things will mushroom."

Ms Bassett also warns that officers who fail to report inappropriate messages in WhatsApp groups can also face disciplinary action: "It's important that fellow officers realise that turning a blind eye isn't acceptable, and we will see if a meme has been shared, or if they've looked at an offensive image and decided to do nothing."

Business and pleasure

So, what's up with WhatsApp? Absolutely nothing – so long as you remember the old adage, 'Never mix business with pleasure', has never been more relevant. It's also crucial to live by this saying when using someone else's device.

In the absence of Agency guidance (for now at least) it seems common sense that you should not use the work phone for social stuff and never send sensitive information or intelligence from, or between, any devices (work ones in particular) without the express permission of your employer.

Finally, the IOPC has warned that officers should be seen to adhere to all official standards of professional behaviour and be aware that even posts on private or anonymous social media accounts can result in misconduct proceedings.

As a workforce operating at the pinnacle of UK law enforcement and governed by both the NCA Code of Conduct and the Civil Service Code, the expectations of you as employees are very high. While it makes sense to separate work and personal communications, just be mindful that you are never really 'off duty', and potential public scrutiny should always be in the back of your mind when considering using these types of useful messaging apps.

Is the Government's **Anti-Strike** Bill

The 2022 pay award chaos saw the NCOA explore all options to make it clear that our members were unhappy at a pay delay in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. Given both the non-powers/powers split, and the restrictions in place through the Crime and Courts Act, withdrawal of goodwill seemed an appropriate mechanism to vent frustrations without breaking the law or breaking up our diverse membership group.

Beyond the unique legislation affecting some of the NCA workforce, the raft of existing labour laws aimed at controlling industrial action means taking strike action requires a great deal of work (and strength of feeling) to clear the legal hurdles already in place.

For some time, the Government has considered this legislation has kept the unions in check – until the cost-of-living-crisis and below inflation pay rises delivered its own winter of discontent.


Notwithstanding this, many MPs are asking the Government to reconsider its recent legislation aimed at restricting unions and employees' ability to strike, warning the legislation would likely put the

“ It's time for ministers to go back to the drawing board, not plough on with a dog's dinner of a policy that will do nothing to resolve disputes and instead risks pouring petrol on the fire.”

Lawful industrial action has recently taken hold across the public sector with a significant impact and in most cases, with massive support from the public. The Government's response? More Draconian legislation.


UK in breach of the European human rights rules.

Civil Service unions have attacked the legislation, introduced by Business Secretary Grant Shapps, and the opposition has declared its




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in contravention of the ECHR?

intention to repeal the bill if they succeed at the next general election.

In a statement, the Government said the new laws have been introduced “to ensure that striking workers don’t put the public’s lives at risk and prevent people getting to work, accessing healthcare, and safely going about their daily lives.”

It added that it would consult on minimum service levels for fire, ambulance, and rail services, and expected these sectors to “reach a sensible and voluntary agreement between each other on delivering a reasonable level of service when there is strike action”, although the Bill allows the Government to set minimum service levels “should that become necessary”.

ECHR contradictions

Mr Shapps said: “We do not want to have to use this legislation unless we have to, but we must ensure the safety of the British public.” Sectors covered by the legislation would include health, border security, fire and rescue, and transport.

Trade unions and opposition parties believe the reforms are wholly unnecessary if public sector workers, including those in the NCA, were able to secure fair and affordable public sector pay settlements for 2023 to 2024. Trade unions, who already need to meet strict criteria over balloting members and giving employers due notice of strike action, would face severe financial penalties for failing to comply with the new Bill.

The Government already has the authority to



limit the effect of strike action where it can demonstrate that its action is lawful, necessary and proportionate in order to:

- protect national security or public safety
- prevent disorder or crime
- protect health or morals, or
- protect the rights and freedoms of other people.

However, many believe the new Bill will contravene the rights of freedom of assembly and association contained in Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR): “Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

“No restrictions shall be placed on the exercise of these rights other than such as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of

others. This article shall not prevent

the imposition of lawful restrictions on the exercise of these rights by members of the armed forces, of the police or of the administration of the State.”

Labour’s deputy leader Angela Rayner described the legislation as “a shoddy bill that is not just unworkable but likely unlawful”. She added: “It’s time for ministers to go back to the drawing board, not plough on with a dog’s dinner of a policy that will do nothing to resolve disputes and instead risks pouring petrol on the fire.”

Draconian measures

The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill is through to its third reading in the House of Lords. With the UK facing more industrial action, it might be questioned why the Government is so opposed to trying to meet demands for fair pay and pensions, preferring to introduce Draconian measures that further limit the rights of public sector workers.

Time will tell which party will be in power beyond 2024, and this controversial legislation will no doubt be the focus of debate in the run in to any election. Within the NCOA we have first-hand knowledge of how restrictive industrial action legislation removes many of the bargaining chips which have delivered successes where no restrictions exist.

Although, when reflecting on our recent withdrawal of goodwill, ‘there’s clearly more than one way to skin a cat’ (lawfully of course). We watch with interest.



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NCOA actively participate at the ACAS Restructuring and Redundancy Conference

Following an enforced gap because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 8 March 2023 saw the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) hold its first 'Navigating the Challenges of Redundancy' conference for three years, and the NCOA were there.

Appropriately the conference was held in Manchester where in 1837, the first Trade Union Congress was formed following the amalgamation of the United Trades Council of Manchester and Salford and the Glasgow Cotton Spinners.

Inequality and exploitation

The venue of the conference was the Manchester Museum of Science and Technology, which not only celebrates the tremendous wealth the Manchester textiles industry brought to some people, but recognises the importance of trade unions in protecting workers from inequality and exploitation.

When in 2022 the then Secretary of State for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, Jacob Rees-Mogg, announced Civil Service reforms which would have resulted



in a loss of 91,000 civil servants by 2025 and a reduction in the NCA headcount, the NCOA advised the Agency of its absolute rejection of any planned compulsory redundancy of any members.

While the Agency was being forced to model the three scenarios – 20%, 30% and 40% cuts to headcount – the NCOA was unambiguous in reminding the Agency that any reduction in the size of the Agency would have significant impact its ability of the Agency to deal with the impact of serious and organised crime on communities in the UK.

NCOA delegate Steve Bond was both visible and vocal as conference was reminded that while voluntary schemes may seem more attractive, leaving under such schemes is still a dismissal of a worker and not without risks.

Alternatives to redundancy

Alternatives to redundancy should always be considered, including:

- advertised jobs being withdrawn if no guarantees are given recruitment won't impact negatively on the job security of NCOA Members
- no extensions to fixed-term contracts or secondments.

While the initial threat of the Agency decreasing in size has passed, it is inevitable that future financial pressures placed on the Agency may result in difficult decisions and some work being deprioritised.

As Steve and his fellow delegates made clear, restructuring does not have to inevitably lead to redundancy. The NCOA position is equally clear: our members are the future of the Agency, investing in them and retraining where necessary is always the best solution!

Collective consultation



Consultation must begin "in good time", with either employee reps or union and before the first of the proposed dismissals takes effect:

At least 30 days where 20-99 redundancies proposed over 90 days or less

At least 45 days where 100 or more over 90 days or less

Requirement to notify the Redundancy Payments Service before consultation starts

‘Elements of our culture pockets it’s really bad’

Under Cover magazine spoke with NCA Director General Graeme Biggar about his views on pay, conditions and culture in the Agency

UC: It’s a large pair of shoes to be to be walking around in as head of the NCA; give us a little flavour of why you took the job.

GB: Frankly, because of what it is – a massive job. I mean, the whole thing has been a kind of roller coaster for me, but why did I apply in the end?

I think doing the interim job [after Lynne Owens’ retirement] and getting into it helped me think it through and put me in a position where my answer was absolutely yes, I could do this, and absolutely yes, I want to do this – because what we do really matters, and there’s so much potential to do it even better. But you’re right, they are certainly big shoes.

UC: What’s unique about this role compared with others?

GB: I’ve worked in several other senior positions, but serious and organised crime does just hit people throughout the country in a way that is more direct than some of the issues I’ve worked on before.

I grew up in the Ministry of Defence where overseas conflicts can feel very distant from day-to-day life in the UK. I worked on counter-terrorism; that’s both dreadful and fascinating, and great work, but it’s rare and affects fewer people directly. Serious and organised crime is just that chronic thing affecting everyone in communities across the country, and we can have a direct impact on it and make people safer.



UC: Your background as Director National Security at the Home Office and Chief of Staff to the Defence Secretary is well known; did you read into the fact, or have any opinions either way, that your appointment was the first non-police appointment to that role?

GB: I was conscious of that when I applied. I had come to the view that the DG didn’t need to be a police officer every time. I think one advantage of my appointment is that I am not a police officer because it demonstrates to the Agency, and to the stakeholders, that we are an agency of different professions, that all of them are important, and any of them could have the skills to lead

the Agency. We are more than just a police force and symbolically I think my appointment demonstrates that.

UC: What do you think is the biggest challenge in the next three to five years?

GB: Focusing our efforts on what’s really going to make the most difference. Sometimes we can get overly obsessed about numbers of disruptions. I love disruptions, but of themselves they’re not necessarily changing anything fundamentally.

So it’s important for us to be collectively thinking about where we’re going to have the biggest impact. Upstream, overseas and online, pushing our effort into those

are brilliant – but in

spaces more so that we have a distinct niche from policing and are doing things that other people can't, and to make a genuine difference to the public of this country.

Another one of the biggest challenges we've gone through is our technology. You can come into this Agency and find bits of capability that are well beyond what police forces have, and you can find tiny bits of capability that are beyond what UKIC can do. But our core IT infrastructure is behind where those organisations are. That's not where we want to be, and we have got to fix that – hence the importance of our digital transformation.

The third area is around our officers, which of course is massively relevant to you [NCOA]. We've got to get the right people into the organisation, in the right numbers. So, lots of work to improve our recruitment and 'attraction'.

Crucially, we want to do more to develop and empower everyone in the Agency. We want to build our learning and development offer and set out clearer career pathways for officers. We've got the intent to do it, but it's not materialised as much as we would like. There are some pockets of brilliant learning and development and career pathways, but not across the board.

And then it's either part of people or it's a fourth area, but it's our culture. There are some elements of our culture that are brilliant but there are pockets where it is really bad... we need to address that and address it unapologetically!

UC: On pay and conditions
Graeme, are your staff across all grades paid enough?

GB: We've got two pay challenges; the long-term issue of how our pay compares with the markets we

compete in, where the picture is mixed, and the shorter-term issue of inflation, which has hit everyone.

Inflation has been the priority this year. That's why we worked so hard to get to the pay deal that we have now got. A lot of people in the Agency have been frustrated at the pace of it, but it has been hard graft to get to the position we have, and it was touch and go.

I'm genuinely delighted that we've managed to secure that. I'm not saying it's enough, but of the options open to us, it is absolutely the best we could have done for this year.

The broader challenge is how our pay compares with the markets. In some areas – for some professions – we pay the same or more than public sector counterparts. It would be hard to argue for an increase there.

That's not a very comfortable thing for a leader to say, it's much easier to say everyone must be paid more, but it's true. There are other areas – very important areas (including, but not only, investigations) – where we don't

pay the going rate, and I don't think that is sustainable for the Agency.

We offer a different kind of career to policing, with being able to work continually on the biggest, most interesting jobs, and for those people who are interested (which is most), it's a big attraction.

We're not doing the kind of routine shift patterns that constables in policing across the country are doing. I've had several NCA officers saying, 'if the pay was the same, I'd much prefer to be in the NCA', even with the pay being a bit less.

But I would like to get us to a position where we match the public sector markets that we compete in, like policing, for the equivalent jobs in the NCA. That's a big ask of our budget, of the Home Office and of the Treasury. And I can't promise we can make it happen. But it is the aim.





NCOA

National Crime Officers Association
The Trade Union of the NCA

INSURANCE BENEFITS TRUST

SCHEME BENEFITS with effect from 1 June 2022

Member to age 65

Life Insurance	£100,000
Terminal Prognosis Advance on Life Insurance	20% of sum insured
Permanent Total Disablement (due to accident)	£100,000
Accidental Loss of Use Benefit	£20,000
Critical Illness	£12,500
Child Critical Illness	£2,500
Child Death Grant	£3,000
Hospitalisation Benefit up to 5 nights	
Accident/incident/emergency admission	£50 per night
Planned admission after first 3 nights	£50 per night
Sick Pay Benefit (H.O. Condition 5 of Service)	
Half Pay up to 26 weeks	20% Scale Pay
No Pay up to 26 weeks	50% Scale Pay
Family Travel Policy Worldwide	
Mobile Phone Insurance	Member & Partner
Dental Emergency and Injury	Member & Partner
Home Emergency	Included

CALENDAR MONTHLY SUBSCRIPTION

£31.95

Spouse or Cohabiting Partner to age 65 of Member

Life Insurance	£50,000
Terminal Prognosis Advance on Life Insurance	20% of sum insured
Critical Illness	£7,500

CALENDAR MONTHLY SUBSCRIPTION

£10.95

UC: Talking about staff, how is the move to Stratford going to impact genuinely on staff?

GB: It's been the hardest single decision I've had to make as DG. One of the other ones was whether to fight the battle around pay, because obviously we've delayed people's pay rise by fighting the battle.

Now I'm glad we did, but that was a risk. But the HQ decision was really tough. I think that for the NCA for the next 10 years and beyond, it's absolutely the right decision.

So what's it going to mean for officers? For some officers, they will conclude – as happens in any kind of job move – that it doesn't work and that the commute becomes too long.

At that point, we'll look to see whether there are jobs for them in Tolworth, in Crawley or Slough and Heathrow etc, that could accommodate them, and we do have vacancies there. But some officers will leave, we must accept that and will regret it absolutely.

“ There is such amazing work happening all over the place. I love it when we do something that no-one else can do, and you can see it has made a real difference to keeping the public safe. And I love it when I see officers going the extra mile to support each other.”

But I think the vast majority will come, and obviously new people will join the Agency as well. And they will have a workplace that is fit for a National Crime Agency in the 21st century. I want our officers to walk into their workplace and feel proud and think, I work for a national agency that does brilliant work. I want our officers to be able to host visitors and be proud of the facilities we are hosting them in. Endeavour Square gives us that.



UC: The Civil Service People Survey results, are we looking to improve those?

GB: We absolutely must improve. I think there's some macro things that come out of that about pay and technology, and about the mission and the clarity of the organisation. And we'll be coming out with a

strategy soon; the bare bones of it are fairly clear from everything we've said before, but that will provide a kind of a guiding light for the organisation that perhaps has been missed recently.

But also, when you burrow down into the survey, you see some areas which have gone up. Some command areas have gone up in recent years and some have stayed relatively low where they've got particular challenges. We really need to tackle what it's telling us,

and that goes back to my point about culture earlier, that we do have pockets where it is just not acceptable. Looking at the hot spots has been something the NCOA has been urging us to do, and you are absolutely right.

UC: What makes you proud?

GB: So many people around the Agency. There is such amazing work happening all over the place. I love it when we do something that no-one else can do, and you can see it has made a real difference to keeping the public safe. And I love it when I see officers – whether managers or not – going the extra mile to support each other, to help each other develop and give of their best.

UC: What does a Director General do 'off-duty' to relax from the demands of such a role?

GB (who smiled before answering!): I have three children and a wife who pay no heed to the fact I am the Director General. Like many parents, I'm the weekend taxi, but when I get time to myself I enjoy the countryside and walking. I play the piano badly and sing in a choir. I love reading. And I spend far too much time watching Netflix (other streaming services are available).

Pay award delay highlights

It was a whole six months, three weeks and three days before the 2022/23 pay award finally hit members' bank accounts. In facing the cost-of-living crisis head on, it was left to family, friends and the NCOA itself, to step in to support some of our members who, as a result of the delay, were placed in real financial difficulty.

The fact that the NCOA quickly introduced a hardship fund when the Agency could not deliver a pay award was a shocking reflection of this chaotic process. Nevertheless, it was wholly necessary to support NCA officers who, through no fault of their own, found that their monthly outgoings outstripped their income.

'Complex' system

Projecting a supposed 'complex' differentiated system by which members' pay awards are decided as being part of the 2022/23 pay problem, belies successive and successful pay rounds since 2013.

“ The fact that the NCOA quickly introduced a hardship fund when the Agency could not deliver a pay award was a shocking reflection of this chaotic process. Nevertheless, it was wholly necessary to support NCA officers.

While the specific terms of reference of the NCA Remuneration Review Body (NCARRB) are to advise the Government on the pay and allowances of NCA officers designated with operational powers, since 2013 the agreed recommendations of the NCARRB have, by accepted and established convention, delivered the pay award for all NCA officers.

Associating the delayed pay award



with changes in government, or the sad death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, ignores the simple fact that there are eight 'independent' pay review bodies (PRBs) reporting on a range of public sector organisations. It was only the NCA pay award which was delayed six months, three weeks and three days.

Ingenuous would have been for the Agency to admit its proposed

in a generation, ministers still hide behind the sanctity of 'independent' PRBs. But in truth, PRBs are not independent; it is the Government that makes the decisions on pay using the PRBs as camouflage.

Bogus criteria

Year on year the Home Secretary sets the remit of the NCARRB, with the spending parameters set by the Treasury; the Agency submission is only submitted when agreed by the same Home Secretary, and once the recommendations are published, it is the Home Secretary who then decides whether to accept them or not (so long as the Treasury are happy too!).

Amongst the NCARRB assessment criteria is the current financial situation of the NCA and what may be needed to recruit, retain and motivate staff. But these criteria will remain bogus so long as the Government continues to set a fixed spending envelope for public sector organisations like the NCA, with a defined pay rise embedded within.

As our members have witnessed, even when additional uplifts are recommended in order to maintain a

lack of PRB independence

“ There are eight ‘independent’ PRBs reporting on a range of public sector organisations. It was only the NCA pay award that was delayed for six months, three weeks and three days.

comparative pay position with other organisations such as the police, no additional funding is provided – or even asked for! Consequently, the Agency budget gets stripped, work deprioritised and more significantly this year, the ability to expand Spot Rates crashes and burns.

NCOA members would not have wanted to withdraw goodwill in the same way many other public sector workers would not have wanted to take industrial action.

But workers are left with no choice when the Office of Budgetary Responsibility forecasts that eight years of economic progress has been all but wiped out, and spiralling inflation is likely to have the largest hit on British household finances since records began in 1956.

If the Government continues to hide behind PRBs by restricting the ability of public sector employers such as the NCA to negotiate with their trade unions, acknowledging all the facts – including the cost-of-living crisis – then discontent is likely to be the only outcome.

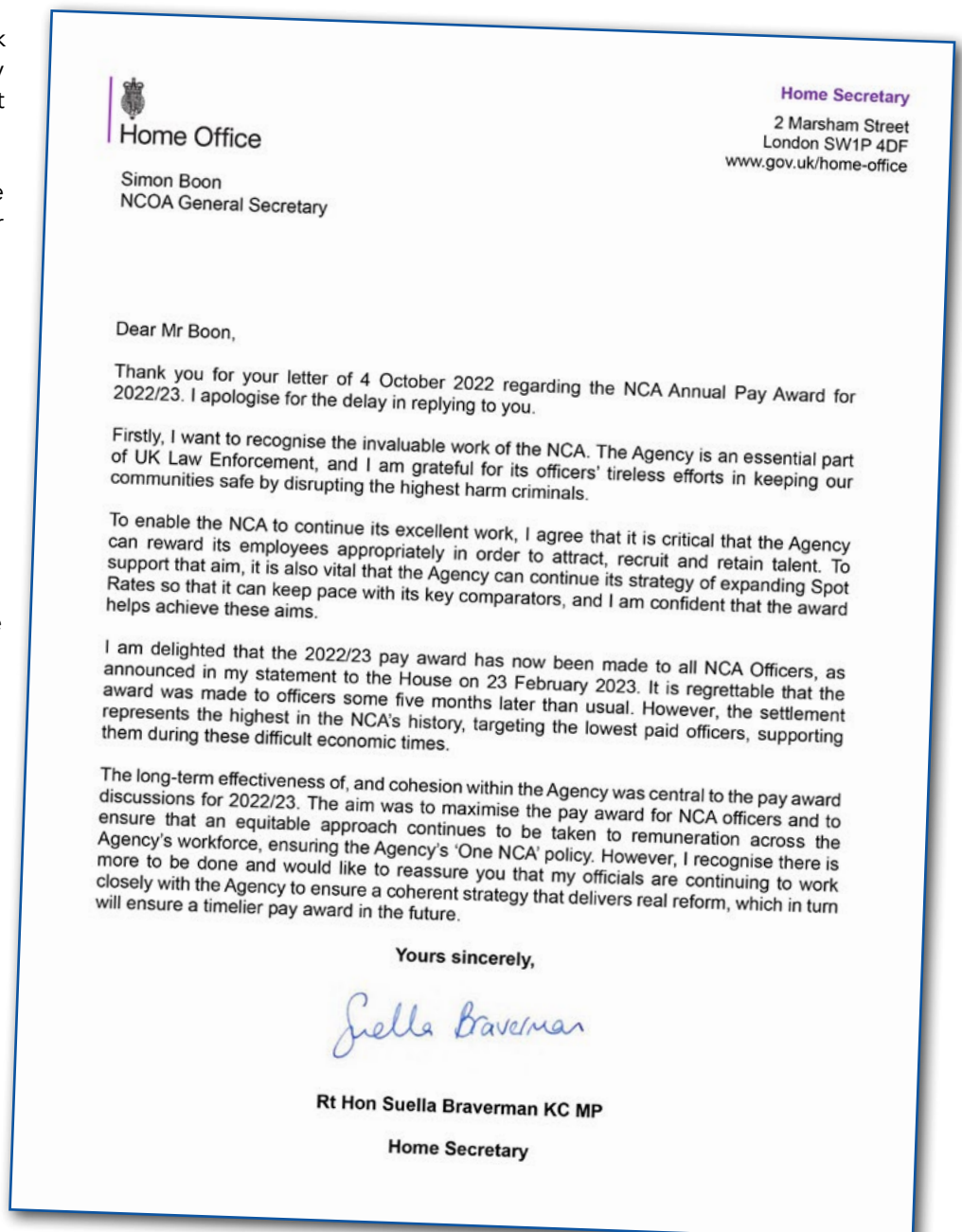
Equitable pay award

While the remit for the 2023/24 pay round has not yet been published, it seems unlikely that the Agency will receive the additional funding it clearly requires to complete its pay reform process. It was hoped that this would see pay for our members at least equitable with comparator organisations.

Looking forward, our members

should at least expect that the debacle of the delayed 2022/23 pay award is not repeated, that the next

pay award is actually in place for payment from 1 August 2023, and that the commitment made by the Home Secretary in her recent letter to NCOA General Secretary Simon Boon is honoured: “To ensure that an equitable approach continues to be taken to remuneration across the Agency’s workforce, ensuring the Agency’s ‘One NCA’ policy.”



2023 Pension changes are finally taking shape

In 2015 the Government introduced reforms to public service pensions. Most public sector workers, including NCA officers, were moved into reformed career average revalued earnings (CARE) schemes. Although some officers are members of equivalent police pension schemes, the principal pension scheme within the Agency is Alpha.

In 2018, the Court of Appeal ruled that the rules put in place in 2015 to protect older workers by allowing them to remain in their original scheme were discriminatory on the basis of age. Since then, the Government has taken steps to resolve the discrimination by making public pension scheme provisions fair to all members.

In July 2020, HM Treasury consulted on remedy proposals and announced that it would be delivered in two parts; the first part was completed last year, with all active members now moved across to the Alpha Scheme (or the Police CARE Scheme as applicable) from 1 April 2022.

The second part is to 'remedy' the discrimination that occurred between 2015 and 2022; in February 2021 it was confirmed that affected members and fully protected members will be able to choose between which pension benefits they would prefer to receive in respect of contributions made between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2022.

This choice will not have to be made until the point you decide to retire. At that time, you will be able to look at benefits due under either your original scheme or the subsequent CARE scheme provisions, and select the one which benefits you most. This is known as the Deferred Choice Underpin (DCU) and the 'remediable service remedy'.

While there is certainly more clarity on what will happen to tackle the discrimination of 2015, in order to deliver this, the Government is currently working on new scheme regulations – The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Remediable Service) Regulations 2023 – to make it happen.

The regulations (currently in draft form) are the legislative completion of the 2015 remedy process. There are four main policy areas covered which must be in place no later than the 1 October 2023:

- Managing the consequences of the 'rollback' provisions of the Public Service and Judicial Offices Act 2022 (this provides the legal framework to address the discrimination), which have the effect of treating active and deferred unprotected and taper protected Alpha pension scheme members as if they had never left the legacy schemes for the remedy period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2022.
- Following rollback, around 420,000 Civil Service members (unprotected and protected – including taper) will be offered a choice of benefits for their remediable service.
- Put in place an immediate choice remedy solution for those whose benefit entitlement has already arisen, including those who have received benefits or died within the remedy period, estimated to be nearly 120,000 members.

- Put in place deferred choice provisions, to allow members to make an informed choice of the benefits they wish to receive at retirement or when benefits are brought into payment.

While the NCOA is involved in regular meetings with the Cabinet Office on the pensions remedy, a public consultation has been published for the detailed changes needed to carry out the McCloud remedy for affected Civil Service Pension Scheme members.

This consultation will run until 14 May 2023, and seeks your personal views on the proposed scheme regulations required to implement the retrospective aspects of the McCloud remedy. The questions are quite straightforward:

- **Question 1:** Do you agree that these arrangements are fair and will meet the policy intent to end the discrimination identified?
- **Question 2:** Are the draft regulations sufficient for the purposes of implementing the remediable service remedy?
- **Question 3:** Do you have any concerns that the proposals could result in individual groups being disproportionately affected by the proposals?

While you may choose not to take part in the consultation exercise, I would encourage you to head to www.gov.uk/government/consultations/civil-service-pension-scheme-2015-remedy-mccloud-regulations and take a look at the regs yourself. They lay out in far more detail than this article allows the numerous issues which may affect your individual and unique pension provisions and requirement – including AVC's, ill-health retirements, retirement prior to October 2023, and tax implications, to name but a few.

General Secretary Simon Boon



Adoption: The complexities around this compassionate commitment

Faye Lowe, NCOA NEC officer, qualified counsellor and therapist, offers an insight to this little-known area

I feel very lucky to work in a field that I absolutely love and I find it a real privilege working with my clients. I recognised early on that I had a real interest in childhood trauma after noticing that many of my clients' issues had stemmed from traumatic childhoods.

I embarked on training in complex PTSD to ensure that I was working safely with my clients, as it is important to have an in-depth working knowledge of trauma, and for many survivors, talking in detail about their traumatic experiences can re-traumatise them.

“ I learned how hard the adoption process is, with incredibly in-depth assessments, and the impact this can have on an adopter.

In learning to work with adoption, therapists are legally required to undertake specific training. This is something that piqued my interest as the process of adoption can be traumatic for all involved, with many children having traumatic experiences before they are placed with their adoptive family.

I was initially concerned about the commitment as I work 30 hours a week for the NCA; I am the National Health and Safety Officer for the NCOA, I have a teenage son, and I also have ME, so balancing all these demands did concern me. However, once I embarked on the adoption course, I was immediately drawn in and I loved every minute of it.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, abandoned children and babies were sent to workhouses; in the 18th century, the mortality rate of children in workhouses was as high

as 90%. The situation for abandoned babies and children was dire for hundreds of years, and only really started to improve after the Second World War. Even then the situation wasn't ideal, with a real stigma for both adopters (parents adopting children) and the adoptees.

The process only started really improving in the 1980s and again in the early noughties, and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 is where the needs of the child were really prioritised for the first time.

As part of the course, I focused on how I can support clients who

are affected by adoption. I learned why a child might be placed for adoption and why people may choose to adopt, and the journey for all involved. I heard from a birth mother, a birth father, an adopter, and an adult who was adopted as a child. It is important to hear these stories, to have a deeper understanding which allows me to empathise with my clients.

Some of my training was extremely moving. I learned how hard the adoption process is, with incredibly in-depth assessments, and the impact this can have on an adopter.

I learned how important it is for adoptees to know their identity; it can be damaging for an adoptee to have little understanding of their background, so adoptees are told their background from the start, with many having a book of their life story.

Contact can take place between adoptees and their birth family, via 'letterbox contact'. A birth parent can write to their birth child, and the adoptee can write to their birth family. If the adoptee or birth parent does not want to receive contact, these letters are held by social services, should the adoptee or birth family change their mind.

I learned so much from this course and I am really looking forward to working with adults who are affected by adoption. If you have been affected by adoption and would like some more information, please visit <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do>

Too many cooks? Not in this case!

What does a former chef do when he joins the National Crime Agency? He spends his spare time cooking for those more needy!

Stovewood officer (and father to a four-year-old) Russell Tipton has been volunteering at a soup kitchen in Southport for over a year. He carefully prepares all the food at home and takes it to the distribution centre as the basic cooking facilities at the centre means there is only kitchen space to keep the food warm.

Russell cooks meals for about 50 people at a time and curries, stews and pasta are all staple favourites, providing them with a hot substantial meal. He puts the meals into containers, like a 'takeaway', and all are provided with a drink to go.

Russell's kindness provides a service not only for the homeless of Southport, but also local families in need. He became involved in this wonderful work as he wanted to help his local community, and he found this an easy way to do so; he sometimes takes his young son with him to the centre, to teach him about helping



those not as fortunate as himself. Well done to Russell and all at the Southport Soup kitchen.

The NCOA is proud to support Russell in his work and if readers would like to do so, please visit www.southportsoupkitchen.wordpress.com/ which gives more details and ways to donate.

NCOA ULR Pete obtains his L4 OU Diploma

In March the NCOA's Union Learning Representative (ULR) Pete Almond successfully completed a Level 4 Diploma in Learning & Development with the Open University, which certified him as an accredited trainer.

Pete's diploma, which was funded by the NCOA, qualifies him to become our in-house trainer, while expanding his skills, knowledge, and experience for his role as our ULR. Historically, we have delivered our training by utilising NCOA workplace reps who were accredited trainers due to their roles in L&D. However, Pete has been able to take over the design, development, and delivery of all training for our workplace reps.

Last year he redesigned and delivered the training pathway for new workplace reps which received overwhelmingly positive feedback. He is now working on implementing a new regime for Continuous Professional Development.

Obtaining a diploma is a significant achievement that represents hard work, dedication, and a commitment

to learning. For Pete obtaining this qualification is a testament to his tenacity, despite the challenges he faced along the way.

“Having dyslexia can make things harder, but it doesn't have to be a barrier. With hard work and determination, anyone can achieve their goals.”

He is no stranger to academic success, having previously earned a first-class undergraduate degree in computer science and a master's degree in computer forensics, both with high distinctions. However, Pete's latest achievement was not without its hurdles.

As someone who suffers from dyslexia and autism, Pete faced unique challenges. Balancing his duties as an NCA investigator, his responsibilities as the NCOA's ULR, his personal life, and the complications of his disabilities, made the journey even more challenging. When reflecting on

his experiences, Pete emphasises the importance of perseverance and resilience. "It wasn't easy," he says, "but I knew that I had to keep

pushing myself if I wanted to achieve my goal. Having dyslexia can make things harder, but it doesn't have to be a barrier to success. With hard work and determination, anyone can achieve their goals."

Pete's achievement is an inspiration to anyone facing challenges in pursuing their educational goals. His commitment to lifelong learning and dedication to his profession have earned him a well-deserved qualification, and we congratulate him on his success, thank him for his commitment to the NCOA, and wish him all the best in his future endeavours.

World Cup – from **Wales** to **Qatar**

Former Welsh footballer (and NCOA National Executive Member) Alan Goodwin on why the pull of the recent FIFA World Cup was just too much

The inevitable struggles with doing the right thing, considering Qatar's record on human rights, festered in the background following Wales' 1-0 defeat of Ukraine to qualify for the 2022 World Cup finals in December. But the 64-year wait was too great a pull. The phone was red hot, and we had our tour team together – an NCA officer, a surveyor, a couple of civil servants, an IT specialist, and a Welsh pop star!

The old enemy

As most countries had already booked their accommodation and transport, we knew it would be a challenge, so we embarked on some rapid research and the formation of plans B, C and D (the consequence of managing the UKICB's Business Continuity plan). The draw was made, and it was somewhat inevitable that together with USA and Iran we would be pitched against the old enemy – England!

My thoughts immediately went back to May 1983, Wales v England Under 18s hosted at Shrewsbury Town's ground before several thousand fans, where a fresh-faced Alan Goodwin led the Welsh attack. Sir Bobby Robson was guest of honour that day and the English team was packed with an array of talent who went on to greater things. We lost 5-0, and seven months later I was walking the beat working night shifts in Colwyn Bay. Yma O Hyd – a chance to put that one to rest.

Travel out to Qatar was a tough one, but we eventually arrived in Doha to inevitable glorious sunshine and an array of different cultures and fans. Everywhere you looked – Argentina, Senegal, Belgium, Morocco, Brazil – the atmosphere was electric, underpinned by a 21st century, air-conditioned



underground network that made travel so easy.

The question of beer had been subject of much debate; prices were predictably high and only available at a few select venues, so the plan was a few beers for the first five days and then teetotal for the remaining five. That worked great for the first five days, but not for the remainder of the tour!

Our first match was against a feisty, clever USA side who dominated the first half and held a deserved 1-0 lead. The Welsh team finally turned up for the party in the second half, equalising and grabbing a point.

The following evening, we attended a 'Meet the Legends' event being hosted by several ex-internationals and a surprise appearance from Dafydd Iwan. I contemplated telling him that I was a Welsh pop star and I'm my friend (the real pop star) worked for the NCA, but I knew that would come back to bite me. What did come back to bite us was all the speculation that night as to how many we could put past Iran the

following day, as goal difference could be important; we lost 2-0.

Lay the ghost to rest

One of the interesting aspects of the tournament was the number of neutrals who turned up to watch matches, so the complimentary flags were a great idea. I donned my Australian and Costa Rican flags on respective days and they both secured 1-0 victories – that was an omen, a 1-0 victory against England meant we would qualify, and I could finally lay the ghost of 1983 to rest.

Sadly, reality set in and we were thumped 3-0, forcing us to wave goodbye to Qatar with a heavy heart. The flight and drive home proved a challenge, but we left Doha with some amazing memories and the privilege of having taken part in a spectacular global event. Chances like this do not present themselves every year or every 10 years... or even 50 years if you are Welsh.

But never forget, Yma O Hyd – go on, Google it, you know you want to.

I beat those Winter Blues with Red January

Michelle Murray at Stovewood turned her winter from blue to red when she took part in the Red January challenge.

This year's Red January charity was Sport in Mind, the UK mental health charity that uses sport and physical activity to improve the lives of people experiencing mental health challenges.

Michelle told **Under Cover**: "I struggle daily with a mental health disability, and I have found that physical exercise really helps my mental health and mood, in addition to medication I am prescribed."

Michelle, who completed some form of exercise every day to keep moving during January, continued: "It's not always easy to run or walk on dark, cold, often wet or icy mornings and evenings, or force yourself to the gym. I am intending to run 100km and walk 100km, and cross train with some gym and swims; additionally I'm hoping to lose 7lbs in weight.

"My favourite day so far was taking part in the challenging Sheffield Round Run, which is approximately 24km and 600m of elevation on trails and parks around the city. On the day it was a total mud fest and my partner and I managed to get round with only one fall and a near miss, in a respectable time of 2hrs 43mins.

“ I struggle daily with a mental health disability, and physical exercise really helps my mental health and mood, in addition to medication I am prescribed.”

"I've also managed to get out on a number of hikes in the Peak District on weekends for longer walks and lots of elevation, including a snow-clad Kinder Scout, and Win Hill from Ladybower via the notorious Parkin Clough. Daily walks and pre-work runs also helped tot the kilometres along.

"As of January this year, I have exercised in some form daily, walked 92km and run 64km. In addition to this, I have attended gym and swimming sessions."

Congratulations to Michelle and her worthy cause. If any members would like to support Michelle's charity, please visit <https://join.redjanuary.com/fundraisers/michellemurray/red-january>



Caring for a **child** with **cerebral palsy**

Becky Morrison balances just that with a busy day job in the NCA

My life changed dramatically in March 2020, when I contracted Covid-19 at 35 weeks pregnant. My little boy, Rafael Apollo, arrived in the first week of the UK lockdown via emergency C-section.

It was a hugely scary time, as I gave birth alone and was then whisked off to a room by myself, while I waited for a confirmed negative Covid test before I could join the other mums on the maternity wing (this was before there was such a thing as the instant test results we have now).

I finally got to meet Rafael after 48 hours and I'll never forget finally holding him; he was so beautiful, I was absolutely besotted. But it was apparent after a few days that Rafael was not well. We discovered he had suffered a bi-lateral stroke and had extensive brain damage. It was a huge shock, I wasn't prepared and didn't understand the full extent of what it would mean for Rafael and our family.

Lasting damage

As time progressed, the stroke has showed clear signs of lasting damage. He has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, which has left him with no functional use of his body, and he is non-verbal. He struggles with feeding, he will only take limited amounts orally and his vision has been affected. His cognitive ability is around the age of a three-month-old.

However, the joy he brings us when he smiles, and the belly laughs he lets out when he is being tickled, are priceless. He is a happy soul and he taught us exactly what is courage, strength and resilience; I feel incredibly lucky to be his mum.

Rafael attends nursery four days a week, which gives me the opportunity to continue to work at the NCA. It also allows me a little



and the admin that is associated is overwhelming, and is very much a full-time job itself.

A school mum recently introduced me to the charity Harry's Pal's (www.harryspals.co.uk). It offers respite breaks and counselling/therapy services to families who need it. The charity is also a keen advocate for carers and disabled people and campaign for change so that better support is offered to families affected by disability.

Emotional impact

We often put our needs last, which is what many parents do with a young family. But this is escalated when there are pressures from caring for a severely ill or disabled child, as there never seems to be a time to put yourself first.

The impact on our emotional and mental health has really taken its toll over the years, so I decided to reach out and the charity has agreed to support us with finding a therapist

“The joy he brings us when he smiles, and the belly laughs he lets out when he is being tickled, are priceless.”

time during the day where there is some respite from my caring duties. I have two other children – Evie (aged seven) and Xander (five) – so life is very hectic! They love to interact with Rafael and enjoy showing him the sensory toys and lights. He really enjoys music, and the sparkly lights always get a big smile.

Having a child with a disability can be emotionally, mentally and physically demanding. As a carer I have found the experience to be isolating and have often felt it hard to reach out for help. The amount of medical appointments Rafael has

who is right for our needs, so that my husband and I can deal with the trauma we have experienced, adjust to our new reality, and build a strong foundation for our family's future.

We are so grateful for Rafael and despite the challenges, it is massively rewarding, knowing that we are making a noticeable difference to the life of our little boy. Giving him every opportunity for him to reach his full potential is a feeling that is hard to beat.

Please visit www.harryspals.co.uk to find out how you can join the NCOA in supporting this incredible charity.



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