



SWAAHB AGM

Women's Conference 2026

ALICE FOXEN & EMMA ROBINSON

SUMMARY - ALICE

Women's Conference 2026 was opened by our New General Secretary – Andrea Eagen. She's the first lay person to be elected into this role.

Andrea spoke proudly of what women have achieved so far – we've changed legislation, fought for equal pay claims, organised and stood united together.

The conference [welcomed Lucy Powell](#), deputy leader of the Labour Party. She spoke about Labour's extension of free school means to half a million more children, ending zero hours contracts, building more social housing, the introduction of free 30 hours of child care from 9 months old, and the first ever strategy to end violence to women and girls.

Usual conference business began after guest speakers, we heard motions on all things that affect women. Some of which were similar to previous conference motions, which as a group we found sad that these issues are well known and yet have still not reached acceptable levels or ceased to be of concern. Examples include the gender pay gap – women earn 15% less than men. This figure only worsens if you're a Black or disabled woman.

Other points to note included a survey of 12,700 people, confirming that women's health is still poorly understood and supported.



Shockingly and sadly, we heard from trans woman, who still feels that they need to explain that trans rights and women's rights are not competing with one another. This reminded myself of Black Lives Matter and the saying 'equal rights for them, doesn't mean less rights for you, it's not pie'. Trans rights do not take anything away from women's rights, we want to build a society where everyone can be free from violence. UNISON President [Catherine McKenna spoke](#) similarly on trans rights, stating that is a trade union issue.

Catherine promoted women in health and safety, and encouraged more participation in the form of safety reps and the applicable parts of Health & Safety at Work Act 1974. In 2023, the [TUC reported](#) than only 20% of union safety reps are women.

The entire room of hundreds of women gasped at a healthcare assistant who reported that their ward requires them to have evidence of a doctor's note to justify them wearing a scrub top to maintain an acceptable working temperature.

The first day of conference's chair kept us entertained and interacting, making jokes and ensuring that delegates and speakers felt welcomed.

Over the conference days, there were more shocking stories that filled the hall - women sharing their experience of their sponsorship and the threat of losing what they've worked so hard to achieve. After 10 years of working in the UK in the care industry, and they still don't have access to support such as child benefit.



HEALTH SERVICE GROUP MEETING - EMMA

Day 1 closed with the sector group meetings. The health sector had chosen a theme of sexual safety. The content of the meeting was sadly lacking as it had assumed a start point of the audience having very little knowledge on the subject. Considering that sexual safety has been a hot topic for several years now I found this disappointing. A large amount of data was shared and consistently the ambulance service was shown to have a very large problem with sexual safety. I don't dispute this, but what I do dispute is the lack of detail and explanation provided for some of the data shared – for Trusts and organisations reporting very low figures of sexual misconduct are the figures a true reflection of the situation or are they more indicative of under reporting? Why did ambulance sector data rise the year after we signed the Sexual Safety Charter? I know this was due to an increase of reporting, including some that was historical. I raised both concerns with the Chair. I shared that I was disappointed that the presentation was made without someone having reached out in advance to understand some of the background detail. I also took the opportunity to share some of the progress that we as a Branch have made in this space through our partnership working, and our ongoing plans and priorities.

MOTIONS OF INTEREST - EMMA

Many of this year's motions were topics that we are all familiar with and despite having been raised and passed previously are still very real issues. As a group we were all struck by the reality of the motion "The unfair impact of 'no work from home' for lower graded roles". The motion spoke to the fact that majority of lower graded roles (cleaners, HCAs, school caretakers etc.) cannot physically work from home when they have a minor illness and therefore trigger a sickness meeting and its consequences.



In contrast, those in positions where 'work from home' is an option can avoid hitting a sickness trigger by continuing to work on lighter duties from home. We have a similar situation here in SWAST and it's not necessarily driven by grade, but by role – if you're out on the road you cannot choose to work from home. We are working within a 2-tier sickness process but we are covered under one policy. How can that be fair? This motion promoted a member to speak against the motion (the only one of the conference!) who made a fair and valid point – no one should be at work

(whether in a work designated location, or at home) if they are not fit for work. They should be encouraged to take the time they need to recover and not feel pressured to continue working because of a punitive system.

Certificate of sponsorship (CoS) visas were the topic of several of the motions, in differing forms. People on CoS visa often face a range of practical and financial barriers that can make settling into life and work in the UK challenging. Many encounter limited flexibility due to strict visa conditions tied to a single employer, which can restrict career mobility and make it difficult to adjust working patterns to family needs. Accessing childcare can be particularly difficult; high childcare costs, limited availability of places, and the fact that some government funded childcare schemes are unavailable to people with certain visa types all create added strain. These challenges, combined with navigating a new country's systems, housing requirements, and support networks, can place significant pressure on visa holders and their families.