

2571/PL/MJ

27 January 2021

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer



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Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Dear Chancellor

I am writing to you concerning the imminent withdrawal of funding to Union Learning and the negative impact this will have on key skills learning in the retail workforce. The Government has announced that despite budgeting for the Union Learning Fund (ULF) until March 2022, it will be withdrawing all funding from March 2021. I am asking that when you are drawing up the Budget that you identify £12 million that will maintain funding for the Union Learn Fund.

The trade unions use ULF funding solely to promote lifelong learning and persuade and support workers back into learning, and who then gain qualifications in core subjects such as Maths, English and IT. None of this funding is used to finance other trade union activities.

Each year around 200,000 workers are supported into learning or training with union support through the ULF. These learners undertake all sorts of job-relevant learning and training, including basic literacy and numeracy, ICT skills, vocational training, and continuing professional development. Through ULF, unions also successfully support many government flagship schemes in the workplace such as apprenticeships, traineeships and the new kickstart scheme.

Usdaw receives £860,000 of this funding. We have used this funding to pay for retail workers to be seconded from their jobs to promote lifelong learning among retail, distribution and food production workers. In total the Usdaw ULF project signed up over 17,500 workers in some form of learning. For most workers, these learning opportunities provide them with basic skills in English, Maths and IT essential to their employability. For many of our members, this will have been their first engagement with any form of learning since leaving school.

Over the last three years, Usdaw has also developed our online Learning Gateway guaranteeing every member access to learning, much of which is subsidised. The Gateway currently offers over 1,000 online and distant learning opportunities ranging from informal learning to degree level qualifications. Last year, it attracted over 24,000 views from members and is on course to double that over the current year.

Usdaw has developed learning agreements with over 20 major employers and, through the ULF, we have developed more than 60 workplace learning centres. These centres are established with the money from the ULF, and then employers take on the responsibility for upkeep and maintenance of the facilities.

Usdaw has successfully worked with a range of different employers to deliver lifelong learning. The Union has worked with companies such as DHL, Argos, Tesco, Next, Poundland, Morrisons, Muller Milk and 2 Sisters food group among others.

Union Learn Funding is vital to supporting Usdaw's Lifelong Learning initiatives, such as workplace Learning Centres, Mobile Union Learning Reps and promotional activity such as the 'Check-Out Learning' campaign. Without this funding these lifelong learning projects are not viable and will be closed down.

The Government has announced a Lifetime Skills Guarantee. Substantial investment is being promised through the National Skills Fund. Only last week the Skills for Jobs White Paper was published. Improving the UK workforce's skills and basic qualifications is going to be centrally important to the future of the economy. However, having the courses available and funding training opportunities, is not going to be effective, unless people take up these places.

A central aim and strength of Union Learning is persuading and supporting workers to access lifelong learning. We need to have the right people in the right place to encourage the workforce to take up the offer of basic training. Union Learning is in the right place and has the right people to deliver on lifelong learning in the workforce. If the Government is serious about lifelong learning and improving the skills and qualifications of the UK workforce then ULF should be maintained.

The Government have committed to a National Skills Fund of £2.5 billion and yet say they cannot find £12 million for the Union Learn Fund. This seems to be a case of the Government turning its back on these successful lifelong learning projects, simply because of the connections to the trade union movement.

In conclusion, in the Budget, I would urge you to identify £12 million to maintain funding to the Union Learn Fund.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

PADDY LILLIS
General Secretary