

Dee Mardi, Chair Essex and Hertfordshire Branch
Report of Equity Conference, Durham 2026

Conference 2026 was full on. Exhausting. Enriching. Informative... and so worthwhile for the benefit of every Equity member.

Day 1 Saturday 9 May 2026, 2pm start.
The conference was signed and captioned.

Our President Lynda Rooke warmly welcomed everyone and commended the Durham miners. Here are some of the things she mentioned:

The captioners are real people not A.I.

PACT negotiations are ongoing, they've been going on for two years. She mentioned: 97.6% turnout for the A.I. indicative ballot, and there's been another one for the West End workers. Similarities of concerns and issues are across the UK.

Durham pride performers now work under the certainty of an Equity agreement.

Staff worked really hard to retrieve lost £70,000 income.

Manchester pride will resume in 2026.

Birmingham Ballet dispute, WNO, and Scotland Opera's success securing holiday pay after 20 years of the company avoiding.

Butlins performers asked to double and triple up on jobs, and that Equity staff are now visiting the sites looking at their conditions.

Huge concern is the 40% reduction in jobs due to arts cuts with a threatened with 100%.

Lynda quoted Picasso "Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life."

New activists standing for Equity elections.

Council and Officers are firm in their commitment to challenge Spotlight's tax on hope.

The abolish audition fees campaign still continues.

Lynda confirmed she will be serving as President for a further term, to rapturous applause and cheers.

Acknowledged Plaid Cymru is the power in Wales.

She praised those standing in elections.

Said "Culture is work."

Far right's policy is incompatible with Equity's objectives and stated reasons as we gave out at previous branch meeting.

That Art's funding will disappear.

We are non-party affiliated but are a trade union so must stand up for members.

She thanked all the unions' officers, General Secretary etc.

Lynda received a standing ovation.

We heard Motions on Equality and Inclusion

Motion One London North Branch and selected by regional meeting, was passed unanimously with conference calling on Council (in consultation with relevant committees) to organize a meeting slash forum with casting directors and agents to discuss how to improve and clarify self-tape instructions to ensure castings are inclusive. This being particularly important for neurodivergent actors; need to know which character and type of shot to film.

Motion 2. Deaf and Disabled Members Committee was passed unanimously. This urges Council to publicly recognise the Disability Conscious Casting Framework as best practice for the casting of disabled roles and and to really get behind that. Things said included “Disability is not a costume.” “Against disability mimicry.” “We should be playing all parts, not just disabled.” “Nothing about us without us.”

Motion 3. Race Equality Committee passed unanimously. This focused on the sustained and escalating pattern of violent disorder and intimidation members have been experiencing. And calls upon Council to devise a strategy to allow Equity to work closely with theatres, venues and production companies to develop and implement specified safeguarding arrangements that are operational and practical. And to include in this strategy a focus that theatres, venues and production companies adopt, actively implement, and regularly review comprehensive anti racist policies and monitor compliance and challenge failures where such policies are absent or ineffective. Comments included “Upside down world.” “Art is what reflects society. Artists there to reflect society.” In respect of anti-racism “Train your eyes to see those affected by it.”

Motion 4 Women’s Committee The government is consulting on provisions in a new Employment Rights Act, including improvements on a range of rights that disproportionately affect women. Statutory right to bereavement leave, including the loss of a child of under 24 weeks; Strengthened rights to Maternity. Pay and leave; And the right not to be discriminated against and dismissed on the basis of pregnancy and maternity issues. Conference calls on Council to lobby the government to consult on how the above rights could apply in the creative industries for freelancers.; Carry out a properly funded research project on how the above rights function in our industries, make recommendations for reforms, and research evidentiary case studies; and join with other unions representing gig economy workers to present a joint approach. Comments: “working class people deserve the time to grieve”. “Pregnant performers routinely do not submit, are not submitted by agents, and are not chosen.”

Hearing this in 2026 caused me to put up my hand and speak in favour of the motion, about receiving this treatment personally in 1997, and here we are all these years on and it's still going on...

Passed unanimously.

Adam Adnyana, Assistant General Secretary Live Performance spoke. Please refer to his report in the annual 2025 report.

Variety

Motion 5: Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee, was passed unanimously.

The London Nightlife Survey found many members face unacceptable conditions at work and feel unsafe. Council is called upon to look at further actions, such as workplace agreements, to protect these workers at their workplaces and when travelling to and from work, and in line with the new duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment at work.

Live Performance

Motion 6 Stage Management Committee highlighted all the job stage managers are called upon to do, often at the last moment, that is beyond the remit of their work, expertise and without further remuneration. The issues are with large companies (who deny other workers the opportunity to work) rather than small companies on low budgets. Passed unanimously.

Motion 7 Directors and Designers Committee Focused on that inadequate remuneration is a shared issue for theatre workers of all disciplines. This motion was passed unanimously with conference agreeing united we bargain, divided we beg. Council is now called upon to pledge its full support to all creative team disciplines Equity represents in seeking substantial, groundbreaking uplifts to minimum fees along with comprehensive improvements to other terms and conditions; Participate in wider trade union movement initiatives on improving the statutory rights of the genuinely self-employed; And develop specific “creative team” member materials and briefings for local and national decision makers in equity lobbying and campaigning over arts funding.

Motion 8 South Wales Branch (and selected by the Wales National Meeting) raised issues about A.I. generated patients replacing actors in medical education and communication skills training, affecting members' livelihoods and undermining the quality and safety of medical training. Passed unanimously, Council will support the establishment of a Medical Role-Players Network, piloted in Wales, provide guidance of

AI use in medical training to complement the Best Practice Guide including model contractual protections and minimum standards and so on...

A speaker from the floor asked a doctor their perspective during filming: against A.I.

Motion 9 Stage Actors Committee largely focused on championing sector-wide cultural change including job-sharing, flexible and family-friendly practices. Also passed unanimously.

Motion 10 Singers Committee Calls on Council to continue lobbying work to protect and expand freedom of movement for singers. And other performers and creative practitioners who are reliant on overseas work for their income, including lobbying to improve the process of acquiring A1 forms from HMRC.; Continue lobbying work at local, regional and national levels to protect and further arts funding. Including those institutions which engage singers of opera and classical music; Explore the creation of a Singers passport style arrangement with other unions overseas, enabling Singers to access support from sister unions when working internationally. Passed Unanimously.

Motion 11 Opera Houses Deputies Committees Passed unanimously this motion called on Council to continue fighting against cuts to public funding of the arts, better financial arrangements for parts and covers, and acting up (stage managers) and to move companies currently not using union agreements to use to protect Equity's opera force.

Comment: "We are a pillar that support mental health, therefore we should receive Arts funding."

Peter Keele was announced as an Honorary Life Member.

A mad dash by coach to the Radisson Hotel, quick shower, change and back to the Miners Hall for a spot of looking around and history, food, chat, speeches and great brass band music!

Daniel Y Loh became a Honorary Life Member

Day 2 Sunday 10th May 2026, 9.30am start.

Started with a short film about what Equity's been doing over the year.

Louise McMullan Deputy General Secretary

Please refer to 2025 Guild House report for specifics but in short she mentioned Variety networks and Variety branch officers... feeding in new young members enriching them,

the new Staffordshire and Black Branch, A.I., PACT, Continuing dramas, Audio success, Greenfields sectors, and thanked all those who contributed...

Motion 12 Kent Branch (and selected by the East and SE Regional Meeting) called on Council To develop clear and comprehensive guidance on members' engagement with vertical drama productions. These are micro dramas, vertically shot on a phone, lasting one to three minutes, part of a series. Every 90 seconds is a drama. The big networks, Disney Plus, Netflix etc have all built departments to make these. Vertical dramas are here to stay. Template contracts are needed. The dramas are usually aimed at women over 44 years of age. The artists get paid very little, but the speaker said they know have someone who has paid £5000 for a subscription! The motion was passed overwhelmingly with one abstention.

Motion 13: Audio Committee Passed Overwhelmingly, 5 against, 9 Abstentions. The use of A.I. is decimating the audio sector. Performers are entering into exploitative contracts and the producers profit from that. Payment to voiceover actors is a fraction of a fraction. £1300 is the Equity minimum but in reality only £10 is earned for the same book audio work. Elevenlabs is using voice clones; each use is a job loss. Go to the A.I Toolkit on the website. A speaker quoted someone "Who's gonna pay the taxes when we're all sat at home in our pants!" There are loads of false promises being made about income from subscriptions. The companies are not getting the subscribers they say they will get, so voiceover artists are not getting the extras for usage. Read, read, read your contracts! There was one brave representative against this motion, who was well applauded. She loathes AI and gave 100% solidarity but said AI models only need to scan you once and they've got you. Unless we get our incomes from contracts that will pay us for lives, it's not worth it, so she was against any contract. Another speaker mentioned we need to get the writers on our side. In the right of reply, it was stated this motion seeks contracts that give you full control about usage, protective and ethical conditions. Conference calls on Council to create a template contract for voice and/or likeness licensing; and use this to approach leading AI companies like ElevenLabs in order to formalize their procurement process and put a stop to their back door deals with unscrupulous intermediaries.

Motion 14 Continuing Drama Deputies Committee Passed overwhelmingly 1 abstain. Conference calls on Council to advance the demand, as part of Charter Renewal, that the BBC is obligated to produce a continuing or returning drama series that films for more than six months of the year in each of the Ofcom regions. This would mean 2 new productions- in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We learned the BBC contributes £5 billion to UK economy annually. Hywel Morgan seconding said "book the actors in the area the writers write about!" Another

representative gave concerns about Americanisation and that the money is not coming back into British productions to support British actors.

Motion 15 Screen and New Media Actors Committee was passed unanimously. This motion and speakers' points echoed issues raised at our branch meetings about Supporting Artists being asked on the job to do the work of a featured artist without being re-contracted, coached by those working with the actors to react emotionally, to do activities that should be done by stunt artists, and treated poorly generally... It specified ways the union can support in educating our members, advising how to deal with these situations, and working with the main agencies who engage SA's to get notification from them of wrongdoing.

Paul W Fleming, General Secretary

As last year Paul made a point of saying his speech was only to introduce the 2025 annual report.. 😊

His speech included: the significance of the Durham Miner's Hall to this conference. Equity's largest membership group is age 28 to 40 year olds compared to average union of over 50s.

We have to be an accountable union.

We welcome 124 new members a week.

To those who don't like Equity's campaigns he kept repeating: is that how you feel... (if you are affected by the circumstance)

We are shifting our members to a culture of resistance rather than maintaining resilience.

We will run a deficit this year of £500k.

Theatre work has reduced by 40% since 2017.

Equity gave to the RMT Union a week's wages of a West End worker.

Staffing is a serious investment to dealing with the challenges.

The rise of the far right... the far right is Reform... we oppose what they threaten to do.

Called on Keir Starmer to set out a timetable to resign! Blamed him...

But... we have no affiliation to any party.

Paul gave strong and dedicated leadership which was received with rapturous applause and standing ovation.

Motion 16 South Yorkshire Branch and Surrey & Berkshire Branch (composite) (and selected by the NE, Yorks and Humberside, and East and SE Regional Meetings respectively) passed unanimously with the amendment by Council this motion raised issues about "pencilling" and calls on Council to advise members that Equity opposes the practice of so-called pencilling and develop a new member of

Education campaign about their contractual rights in the casting process; support members on an individual basis, who are abused by the practice of so-called 'pencilling'; and start a member campaign aimed at producers, engagers, Agents and funding bodies to end the practice of pencilling.

Motion 17 LGBT + Committee. The Council amendment was passed overwhelmingly with 2 against, and 4 abstentions, and relates to the membership of and support of sex workers who undertake performance work. Paul Fleming stated that currently Equity membership is for scripted and choreographed sex work but will open up discussions about non-scripted and non-choreographed.

Motion 18 Scotland National Committee (and selected by the Scotland National Meeting). Creative Scotland needs to be held to account for closures to creative arts spaces. And in support, an East Midlands rep said that similarly Northampton Council had £25,000,000 budget for arts, which got swallowed up in the building of a space subsequently rented for offices, retail etc. The motion was passed unanimously to protect artists and their spaces and budgets so that artists have somewhere to go and create and work, and provide for the community.

Motion 19 International Solidarity Committee. The proposer said "There's a fear to speak out as an individual. Collective action is more powerful than individual." Conference unanimously voted to urge an Equity lobby of the UK Parliament. In partnership with other cultural organizations, including Sport, to demand that the British government oppose conflicts in Sudan and Palestine, including a call for UK sanctions to be applied to states., corporations, and entities profiting from these conflicts, funding them, or supplying weapons.

Motion 20 Northern Ireland International Committee (and selected by the NI National Meeting)

Passed unanimously. This motion arose from a Drag Story Time event in Belfast Library being picketed by protesters claiming to be 'keeping their children safe' and accusing performers of inappropriate activity. This was then picked up by a minister who in effect seized the opportunity to slam the use of funding for this and other artistic projects. Conference unanimously passed agreement asking Council to mount an equity campaign against political interference in the funding and delivery of the arts across the UK. The arts must develop free from censorship and political control. Ministers should champion the arts, not undermine them.

Sian Jones, Assistant General Secretary Policy and Communications

colder! A few glasses of red wine helped though! The atmosphere was amazing, conversations and shared values were flowing. The food... ok, of sorts. Mucho motions discussions in the bar back at the hotel.

Day 3 Monday 11th May 2026, start 9.30ish... Unfortunately, some disabled members were late into the hall due to the bus drivers deciding not to drive/reverse the coaches up the hill and the lift not working. They were very put out by and complained about the General Secretary hurrying up everyone to get seated so conference could resume to get all the business done. The atmosphere was not good for a while, but I think it likely he had not been informed of the extent of how it affected some with health/mobility issues and those who became concerned later when he announced a minibus instead would take them to the station having left their cases on the large coach as told to by the driver.

Lynda Rooke announced she must step out for a hour during the morning during which Jackie Clune would and did chair the conference.

Mary Kelly Foy, Labour MP for City of Durham, also a Unison and Unite Member.

Stated her support for justice, RMT etc. Thanked us for Durham Pride contribution. Said a year in Reform County Council and they decided to cut Pride budget. She informed us of the Miners' contributions to local Arts Culture, spaces, schools, communities, brass bands and Arts Culture matter to Durham people. Despite Reform, Durham intends to welcome migrants. Social Security does not understand how we work. Model of employment does not reflect the value of uscreatives/entertainers. Technology shouldn't come at the expense of workers. I think she said in the UK only 0.2% of GDP (figure needs checking) spent on Arts and Culture.

Paul Novak General Secretary of the T.U.C.

"It's time to stop this brave almost dystopian world of Tilly Norwood".

(FYI if you don't know, Tilly Norwood is the World's first AI actress.) He supports our aims. Our industry is undergoing profound change. TUC priorities 1) making sure the government delivers its promise to make work pay. Sick pay from day 1, guaranteed hours, right to work flexibly, to access digital... TUC will work with Equity about royalties to ensure self-employed work is good work. 2) deliver from its priorities in 2024 lifting on 2 child benefit 3). Must deliver that change cos of the far right

There is a gap between what Farage says and does.

Equity Motion to the TUC Motion 29 was passed unanimously. More tech means less pay but this motion seeks to reverse. The Danes are rectifying this in Personality Rights.

The motions says Congress Calls on the TUC to lobby the government to introduce personality rights, to give performers a clear route to control and license digital replicas within agreed remits, and to give all individuals a clear right to object to a harmful digital replica; lobby for new rights to be enforceable via mechanisms familiar to copyright enforcements, such as notice and take down and compensation for commercial uses; Support licensing for any new rights via existing collective bargaining mechanisms.

Motion 21 Bristol and West of England Branch (and selected by the SW Regional Meeting) was passed unanimously to develop a Pay the Act campaign.

Motion 22 Student Deputies Committee passed unanimously. Another motion focused on calling on Council to support local campaigns to oppose fee increases, cuts, and increasing barriers to access performing arts education, and to campaign with others for public funding and to increase top up funding for performing arts courses. "Arts courses are not Mickey Mouse courses!"

Motion 23 Young Members Committee calls on Council to survey the membership and collect data about the problems of open casting calls on young members, provide draft guidance concerning, and campaign targeting casting directors to drive up the conditions. Passed unanimously.

Motion 24 London South Branch (and selected by the London Regional Meeting) Carried overwhelmingly, 1 against, 2 abstentions. (Please read full motion for information but in essence seeks working with other parties and candidates favourable to our union policy. The proposer said "we shouldn't take politicians word for it... prove it and we hold you to it."

The West End Negotiations Party (Andrew, Jasmine and Rozhain) spoke to us about Pay Up! Campaign in the West End.

David John, Honorary Treasurer and founding member of Equity Class Network. Please refer to the annual accounts document. Stable and secure financial situation. Thanked Beccy, Daniel and Gareth.

Income minus expenditure = operating surplus which for 2024 was £186,003 and for 2025 is £91,286 after exceptional legal costs £275,000 (Spotlight case). Current legal advice is real prospect of success in the appeal. Net assets 2024 £22,501,899 and 2025 £23,244,492.

Beccy Reese Assistant General Secretary (Operations)

See annual report. Distribution work £15,000,000, Launched loyalty checker tool. Extensive review of data systems being done internally not externally in members' best interests.

New phone system, upgraded wi-fi, new office in Bristol ready for recruitment, Cardiff office in the Unite Building. We have our own social security and tax team which is unique across unions. 2025 aim to strengthen systems. Thanked staff...

Motion 25 Merseyside and Cheshire Branch (and selected by the NW Regional Meeting). Conference unanimously passed this motion calling on Council to seek to enshrine arts funding as a statutory obligation for councils and regional authorities, ensuring that multiple theatres across each region can continue their vital work within communities.

Motion 26 Dance Committee was passed unanimously seeking recognition of movement directors in relevant agreements, and that they and choreographers and more have their contributions protected and credited, with creative and material parity between them and other department heads/creative team leaders.

Motion 27 West End Deputies also passed unanimously calling on Council to help bring about resources to enable members to better understand their payslips and pension statements and so challenge and get rectified any discrepancies...

Motion 28 East Midlands Branch (and selected by the Midlands Regional Meeting) on transport and travel costs and looking into the possibility of an Equity Travel Card was remitted to Council by Council due to the need to conclude conference matters and annual report and accounts. Since then, Caron Lyons has emailed "Following conversations with the General Secretary and Midlands office we have been invited to submit supporting materials, including prepared speeches, statements, testimonies and supporting arguments, for circulation to Council ahead of 9 June meeting. We are therefore asking for short written statements from members, branches, representative, and supporters who feel that transport and mobility barriers affect members and the wider creative workforce..."

The 2025 annual report and accounts were each passed.

The conference closed at 12.31pm

Phew!

