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Juggling responsibilities during Covid: 'It's been testing, but worth it'

Gemma Criddle is branch secretary at PCS Bristol and Reading Revenue and Custom. Like many activists, she has spent the last year juggling working from home, home-schooling, and personal health concerns, while continuing to represent members and help keep the branch running under testing circumstances. She explained about spinning plates, having wobbles and reminding herself why she does it all.

As well as being branch secretary I am also on the PCS regional health and safety committee, and I lead on equality in our branch, as well as doing personal casework. Our branch organiser left a few months ago so I also set up our AGM, which certainly came with its own set of challenges this year! We've got a new branch organiser now which is great.

I've also been sorting out training for new reps and working out how best to use our advocates in the current circumstances. We're mainly asking them to keep the conversations going with members and refer any issues to the branch executive committee. It's much harder not being in the office, as you miss those conversations that you'd normally just get wind of, and it can be more challenging to build that rapport and break down any barriers people have towards coming to the union with their concerns.

We're staying in touch via personal email addresses where appropriate and that has generated interest and conversations. PCS Digital has made it considerably easier to track new members and leavers, so our comms are up to date and the app helps to spread the workload as well. It gives local reps more autonomy. We also tested the Chatter function's beta version and I'm looking forward to that being rolled out.

To help keep recruitment up we've recently secured a slot on the virtual induction sessions for new staff, and that's also opened the door to people in other parts of

the business asking us to do PCS sessions with their new people.

For example, we run a session called 'How Not to Get Sacked', which teaches people about their rights and responsibilities, and use it as a tool to recruit by emphasising that the best way to protect yourself is to be part of a union. It's a lot more light-hearted than it sounds.

We're also focusing on retaining the many new members we have had through the recent pay ballot. After the result we sent everyone an email straightaway.

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Covid has been a testing time. We've had some complex personal cases – some people have been on health-related special leave the entire time because of issues with equipment. Many people are coming to us with issues about their physical and mental health as well as H&S issues. We try to identify the trends and generalised issues to target interventions.

We have had a load of new reps who have really committed themselves to training. While it's been really hard, it's been a reminder of how powerful we are as a collective.

From a personal point of view, I'm in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) category, so have been working from home. Shielding makes it difficult as there is no opportunity to interact with members or reps face-to-face.

I'm also a single parent to my 13-year-old daughter. It's definitely been challenging but the school got a grant which means all the kids have iPads and are using MS Teams. We use that too so I could deal with her questions about it – now she is teaching me about all the features it's got! She's very motivated and wants to get her work right – it certainly challenges me as a parent, trying to cast my mind back to Shakespeare, algebra and the like.

Incredible wins

I've had my moments over the last year. I've juggled everything with difficulty and sometimes insanity. Sometimes the work requires huge commitment. I try to draw boundaries for myself and try to remain honest. I occasionally get frustrated at BEC meetings. But we're all quite mature and respectful and when we are cheesed off, it's about having an open and honest conversation.

There are times when I have my wobbles and I think I want to throw the towel in. I have a cry and wonder why the hell I am doing this!? But then I say to myself 'what would life be like without PCS?' In those moments, I reach out to experienced reps, who support me, reminding me of some of our significant cases and campaigns. It helps to remind yourself why we do it – we have had some incredible wins, including getting a member's job back along with a large settlement and backpay for a wrongfully denied promotion.

Working with people who are prepared to give the level of commitment they do makes a massive difference, and I know they have got my back. It's worth it.