

## **UNISON REPORT: Councils at breaking point**

### **Introduction**

Austerity is failing local communities. Council services are in decline, people are at risk and staff are at breaking point. UNISON's survey of over 21,000 local council employees is the first to highlight the day-to-day impact of austerity measures across local services. From refuse collectors, to social workers, to senior officials; the experiences of employees at all levels in councils from across the UK are represented.

Growing numbers of children at risk aren't receiving help, visits to the vulnerable have been cut, libraries are having to accommodate the homeless, roads are in disrepair and the workforce is demoralised. It is clear that councils are at breaking point. Insufficient funds mean that one person can be doing the job of four, care packages for children and the elderly are having to be increasingly rationed, and residents don't receive the help they need at the right time.

With nine in ten council workers saying that they are not confident in the financial situation of their employer, and nearly eight in ten not confident about the future of local services, the case for more funding for local government could not be clearer. Without more money, services will continue to be overstretched and neighbourhoods will decline; the vulnerable will be put at further risk; and the workforce will suffer as skilled and experienced staff continue to leave as stress levels skyrocket.

The general public as a whole are also at risk now. With cuts to road and bridge maintenance, potholes in roads are left unfilled, and bridges at risk of crumbling. Crematoriums are not maintained, street lights stay broken, and parks are in disrepair as councils don't have the equipment or the staff to adequately maintain them. There are now over one million people with an unmet need for social care because councils don't have the resources to support them.

But there is some good news. People working in councils are loyal to the residents they work for, dedicated to trying to deliver the best service possible, and frustrated because they don't have the resources to meet the standards they set. Yet the message is clear. It has never been this bad.

Austerity is not working. In one of the richest countries in the world, it is shocking that councils can be so starved of funds – to the point that not even the workforce has confidence in the future of their employer.

UNISON is calling for the government to fund councils properly to reverse the crisis in local government outlined in this report. It is time to act. There is a human cost to cuts to local councils. This report makes clear the views and day-to-day experiences of those people who provide these vital services.

### **Survey findings**

## **Services are overstretched and neighbourhoods are in decline**

- 79% of local government workers do not think that services provided by their council have improved in the past two years
- 79% are not confident about the future of local services
- 58% say their council is not delivering quality services

The lack of resources due to budget cuts means that services cannot be delivered to an adequate quality.

*“Budget reductions over the last ten years have meant that there is just not enough money to provide basic services to a standard required by the statutory responsibilities of the council”* – environmental services worker, West Midlands.

*“Lack of resources has meant that we deliver a reduced service. We are doing our best to deliver a quality service, however, lack of budget means cutting corners... We are losing more and more experienced staff due to constant restructuring. Myself and many others are near breaking point! The public are demanding more, and government cuts mean we can't achieve what we believe to be great services. We have all have had to reduce our standards and when you have a great work ethic, this is demoralising. I know I am doing my best with what I have but what I have is reducing year on year and it is not good enough for our local communities.”* – facilities worker, North East.

*“I look after highway maintenance and our budget has gone down by 25% since 2010. The roads are crumbling but we don't have enough money to repair them and keep them to the standard we should expect. Residents complain but there's nothing we can do. It's getting to the point where we will have to start closing roads for safety reasons. However good our asset management plans are we need sufficient funds to carry them out.”* – highway maintenance worker, North West.

*“I work in libraries and we have suffered severe cuts to our own service and customers are now waiting longer to be served. We find it difficult to spend as much time with people as they deserve. We are also seeing the knock-on effect of other services being cut. We have always been a place where homeless and displaced people come, but this winter has seen a massive increase in homeless people coming to the library for help and some shelter. As staff, we are having to provide them with hot water and even our own lunches as they are so desperate. Others are coming in asking for help with filling in forms such as PIP assessments and we just can't help them. The local Citizens Advice Bureau has been cut so there are people who are desperate for help and we don't have any way of helping them. It's depressing.”* – libraries worker, West Midlands.

*“The standards to which cemeteries are maintained has dropped dramatically within the last two years and this is backed up by endless complaints from the public. I am ashamed of the current level of service we provide.”* – cemeteries worker, Yorkshire & Humberside.

## **Residents at risk**

- Only 14% of council workers are confident that vulnerable local residents are safe and cared for
- 67% don't think local residents are receiving the help and support they need at the right time
- 48% don't think their employer makes the right decisions for the public
- Respondents identify a lack of front line staff as the biggest challenge for their employer; followed by adult social care, safeguarding children and young people, the lack of housing options, children's services closures, homelessness, benefits (including the rollout of universal credit) and cuts to youth services.

*"As a social worker we try to assess need and plan support but there are no packages of care available for weeks on end, which means the person has to stay in hospital. It is also much harder to get funding agreed for 24 hour care from managers as they are also thinking about budgets rather than need."* - social worker, North West.

*"Safety is being compromised. Staff leave and are not replaced. Greater reliance on agency staff mean service users behaviour deteriorates. Consistency has disappeared. Managers have stopped listening and only care about balancing the budget, which is impossible."* - care worker, Scotland.

*"We have statutory deadlines to meet that have been shortened under the new code of practice and an increase in the number of children requesting education, health and care plans, but our budget for staff has been cut and we are unable to meet deadlines in a timely manner. We receive more complaints and tribunals as a result, costing the council more in the long run."* - administrative staff, South West.

The gravity of the failure to meet needs ranges from bin collection services reducing, to vulnerable adults suffering from unmet care needs and social isolation. Children's social workers, burdened with more paperwork as a result of staff cuts, are struggling to meet deadlines for casework and provide satisfactory care packages for the children and young people they work with. One park ranger reported doing unpaid overtime, as if they did not, two parks in their area would not be open, due to staff cuts.

Administrative workers are struggling to deal with council tax enquiries and collections, with one worker reporting that they deal with 60 calls a day, and another that staff cuts mean that council tax collection has fallen behind.

### **Staff at breaking point**

People working in local councils are loyal, hardworking public servants. Prevalent throughout the responses is the frustration that they are not able to deliver the best service possible to the public – hindered by budget cuts, staff redundancies, and impossible workloads.

*Delivering the best service possible for the public*

- 83% say that budget cuts in the past two years have had an impact on their ability to do the job the best they can
- 89% say that budget cuts have had a negative impact on staff morale
- 54% say their workload is unmanageable
- 63% are concerned about the financial situation of their employer
- 73% say that jobs have been cut in their department
- 60% do not feel secure in their job
- 60% work beyond their contracted hours
- 63% identify the lack of front line staff as the top priority
- 49% are thinking about leaving for somewhere less stressful
- 43% are thinking about leaving for a better paid job

### **The wider impact of austerity**

Government policy such as the introduction of universal credit (UC) has had a knock-on effect on local councils. Despite the added administrative burden of implementing UC, councils have not been provided with additional resources, resulting in high stress for both the individual claiming UC and for the worker dealing with it.

*"I am front line member of staff dealing face to face with the public for a range of council services and benefits. Staff have been cut and we are expected to assist with universal credit as the Department for Work and Pensions does not help customers. We suffer from abuse and violence from customers and have no security due to budget restrictions. In addition, our IT is poor as we are working on equipment that is obsolete and broken, and there are no funds to update systems. We are told to push customers to access services online and in this area there's a high migrant population who require translation services but we are told not to use them as there's no money. We are months behind in billing people for council tax because of staff cuts so revenue collection is poor. It is becoming a dire situation." - finance worker, North West.*

*"Universal credit has proved to be a minefield that no-one seems to fully understand especially people I work with." - local authority professional, Scotland.*

*"I work in housing benefit so the roll out of UC will affect our workload dramatically when it's fully implemented, so it's unknown at the moment how many staff will needed when this happens." - benefits officer, West Midlands*

### **UNISON's position on local government finance**

Local government has been the biggest victim of the government's austerity agenda, suffering billions of pounds of cuts. The amount of funding that local councils receive from Westminster has been cut in half over the last eight years. Earlier this year, Northamptonshire County Council effectively declared itself bankrupt, and it's anticipated that around 30 councils are under such financial distress that they will completely empty their reserves by 2022.

According to the Local Government Association (LGA) councils across England will need an extra £5.8bn by 2020 if they are to avoid cutting back vital services. Councils in Wales and Scotland also require substantial sums of money in order to meet their funding shortfalls.

The situation desperately needs addressing and **UNISON is calling upon the government to take the chance to increase investment in local authorities in November's budget.**

But the government can also take action **now**. As explained in this [UNISON paper from November 2017](#), councils are paying a sizeable proportion of the business rates they collect to the government (the central share of business rates). At the same time ministers are planning to cut another £1.3bn from the money councils receive from central grants next year as they move to end revenue support grant completely.

The central share of business rates is now more than the amount government pays councils via central grants, creating a surplus. The Treasury uses the surplus to support its spending across the rest of government, while local councils are left in dire financial straits. Along with the Local Government Association, **UNISON is calling for this money, amounting to billions of pounds, to be given back to local councils to try and help them cope with spending pressures, and to rectify some of the damage inflicted in recent years.**

## UNISON Local government survey 2018

### Questions and answers

**Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident in the financial situation of my employer?**

Strongly agree - 1.2%

Agree - 8.6%

Neither agree nor disagree - 27.3%

Disagree - 38.7%

Strongly disagree - 24.3%

**Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident about the future of local services?**

Strongly agree - 0.9%

Agree - 4.3%

Neither agree nor disagree - 16.3%

Disagree - 46.5%

Strongly disagree - 32.0%

**Question: Thinking about the past two years, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: *The quality of services delivered for the public has improved***

Strongly agree – 1.4%  
Agree – 4.9%  
Neither agree nor disagree – 14.3%  
Disagree – 44.6%  
Strongly disagree – 34.8%

**Question: Thinking about the past two years, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: *As a council, we are delivering quality services, despite budget restrictions***

Strongly agree – 4.1%  
Agree – 22.1%  
Neither agree nor disagree – 20.9%  
Disagree – 36.6%  
Strongly disagree – 16.3%

**Question: Still with the budget cuts in mind, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? “I am confident that vulnerable local residents are safe and cared for.”**

Strongly agree – 1.9%  
Agree – 12.0%  
Neither agree nor disagree – 31.8%  
Disagree – 38.7%  
Strongly disagree – 15.5%

**Question: Thinking about the past two years, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: “Local residents receive the help and support they need at the right time.”**

Strongly agree – 1.3%  
Agree – 7.3%  
Neither agree nor disagree – 24.4%  
Disagree – 46.0%  
Strongly disagree – 20.9%

**Question: Thinking about the past two years, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: “My employer makes the right decisions for the public.”**

Strongly agree – 1.8%  
Agree – 14.5%  
Neither agree nor disagree – 35.4%  
Disagree – 31.1%  
Strongly disagree – 17.2%

**Question: Which of the following do you think are the biggest challenges for your employer?**

- Benefits, including the roll out of Universal Credit (35.8%)
- Lack of housing options (43.8%)
- Road repair (40.6%)
- Homelessness (39.3%)
- Adult social care (61.4%)
- Safeguarding children and young people (47.0%)
- Children's services closures (40.4%)
- Lack of front line staff (63.6%)
- Cuts to youth services (35.9%)
- Other (13.5%)

**Question: Have the budget cuts these past two years had an impact on your ability to do your job the best you can?**

Yes – 83.0%

No – 17.0%

**Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?**

- Budget cuts have had a negative impact on staff morale
  - Strongly agree – 59.0%
  - Agree – 30.5%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 6.2%
  - Disagree – 1.8%
  - Strongly disagree – 2.5%
- My workload is manageable
  - Strongly agree – 1.8%
  - Agree – 22.0%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 22.9%
  - Disagree – 35.3%
  - Strongly disagree – 18.0%
- Jobs have been cut in my department
  - Strongly agree – 43.1%
  - Agree – 30.1%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 13.7%
  - Disagree – 9.8%
  - Strongly disagree – 3.3%
- I feel secure in my job
  - Strongly agree – 2.2%
  - Agree – 16.5%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 21.2%

- Disagree – 35.0%
  - Strongly disagree – 25.1%
- I work beyond my contracted hours
  - Strongly agree – 25.3%
  - Agree – 35.4%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 17.6%
  - Disagree – 17.3%
  - Strongly disagree – 4.4%
- I am thinking about leaving my job for something less stressful
  - Strongly agree – 19.7%
  - Agree – 28.5%
  - Neither agree nor disagree - 26.0%
  - Disagree – 19.5%
  - Strongly disagree – 6.3%
- I am thinking about leaving my job for something better paid
  - Strongly agree – 18.8%
  - Agree – 24.6%
  - Neither agree nor disagree – 30.1%
  - Disagree – 20.8%
  - Strongly disagree – 5.7%