

Councils on the brink survey

Introduction

A UNISON survey of councillors in England, Scotland and Wales on their experiences and views of cuts to council budgets has provided a damning insight into the state of local authority finances. It reveals there is not enough money to keep essential council services running.

The survey is based on responses from more than 700 councillors from across the political spectrum. It gives a stark warning, in the wake of the financial crisis at Northamptonshire County Council, that local residents could lose essential services. This could be the scenario if the government does not act immediately by providing more funding.

Councillors are at the heart of decision-making, and therefore well-placed to witness first-hand the effects of austerity, the cuts to local government and the challenges facing councils.

Nine in ten say that local councils need additional funding, three-quarters say their council does not have enough resources to deliver for residents, and seven in ten that young people do not have the services they need.

This has prompted outcry from across parties, even from Conservative councillors. Less than one in five say they have enough resources to deliver on their promises, and only a third of councillors say their authority has helped more local residents in the past two years.

Furthermore, the crisis in adult social care is now widely recognised, with almost three quarters (73%) of councillors identifying it as the biggest challenge. But the lack of housing options, universal credit, and road repairs rank high on their agenda.

Councillors are, however, confident in the role that councils play in local communities. Eight in ten (82%) say that they feel their council makes a difference to their community. This indicates that, with the right resources, councils can continue to play a formative role in communities.

UNISON is campaigning for more money for local councils in the Budget. The situation desperately needs addressing, and UNISON is calling upon the government to acknowledge the crisis by increasing investment in local authorities.

About the survey

The survey was carried out in July and August 2018 and received responses from 719 councillors. More than half (55%) identified as Labour Party councillors, 20% as from the Conservative Party, 12% from the Liberal Democrat Party, 9% identifying as 'other', 2% Green, 2% Scottish National Party, and 1% Plaid Cymru.

Findings

Councils are being forced to cut vital front-line services

"Council services cover such a wide range of services from birth to death and everything in between. The financial cuts are affecting front line services and it is impossible to sustain." Conservative councillor, Hawick, Scotland

"We have lost over £50m in the last four years from our budget. Staff have been cut, which puts extra pressure on those that manage to hold on to their jobs. Residents are asked to pay more even when

they work full time and have had no pay rises in years. Child poverty has increased which greatly saddens me no child or young person should have to suffer like this." Labour councillor, London

Councillors are clear – residents can't get the services they need. Councils are hamstrung in their efforts to support people in their local community because of cuts including to homelessness services, careers advice for young people and housing support.

- Less than one in five (18%) think the quality of services for the public has improved.
- Only 37% say that their council has helped more local residents in the past two years.
- Only one in three (34%) say that local residents receive the help and support they need at the right time.
- Seven in ten (72%) say that young people do not have the services that they need.
- Less than two fifths believe vulnerable local residents are safe and cared for by the council.

Resources are at an all-time low

Cuts have hit all councils. But the impact depends on the type of authority and where it's based. Many councillors in district councils felt that while they had suffered from cuts, unitary authorities and county councils had been pushed over the edge. They are fearful of reaching the same crisis point as councils like Northamptonshire.

"The austerity agenda has severely affected the delivery of services. It has created the biggest crises in local government funding in our generation." Labour councillor, Wales

"Everything is under strain. We have enhanced efficiency and maintained services. We need to find more income to enhance future prosperity." Conservative councillor, Tunbridge Wells

"At some point if councils don't receive support either council tax will have to rise or there will need to be drastic cuts in services" Labour councillor, Crawley

"There is clearly an agenda to undermine local government despite warm words about devolving powers. Areas that are deprived are being hit harder than affluent areas. An area like mine will not be able to raise high amounts from business rates." Labour councillor, Rotherham

- Less than one in five (18%) say they have enough resources to deliver on their promises.
- Eight in ten (79%) say that budget cuts these past two years have had an impact on their council's ability to provide good quality services for constituents.
- Three quarters (75%) say their council lacks the resources to deliver for residents.
- Just over three quarters (76%) say that budget cuts have impacted on the delivery of local services.
- Sixty-two per cent said their casework has increased as a result of budget cuts.

There is a crisis of confidence over the future of councils

"Fewer front-line staff coupled with an ageing demographic do not provide confidence." Conservative councillor, Scotland

"The driver for my concern over council finances in the future is the complete vagueness from the government on the status of revenue support grant and the level of business rates retention. This indecision is certainly responsible for concerns over two elements of the council budget right now."

But the fact we cannot plan with confidence the budget forecasts after 2020 at this point is deeply worrying." Labour councillor, London

Uncertainty in Westminster over future funding arrangements, as well as a sustained fall in revenue for councils, means that less than one in five councillors are confident about the future of local services. Only one in four (26%) are confident in the financial situation of the council.

It is widely known that, in cases like Northamptonshire and Somerset County Councils, the authorities are already deep in crisis. They're having to make swingeing cuts and reorganise to meet their financial challenges. For less severe cases, the UNISON survey finds councillors having reached the limit of cuts that can be made, and fearing making cuts to statutory services.

When asked what the biggest challenges were for the council, councillors responded as follows:

- adult social care (73%)
- lack of housing options (61%)
- benefits, including the roll out of Universal Credit (57%)
- road repair (50%)
- safeguarding children and young people (47%)
- homelessness (43%)
- lack of front line staff (43%)
- cuts to youth services (42%)
- children's services closures (31%).

"We've seen cuts to youth services, cuts to libraries, dangerous roads not being fixed, street-lights turned off. I was cycling home late the other night and was increasingly concerned that I would hit a pothole on the pitch-dark roads." Independent councillor, Peterborough

"Officers are doing their best to mitigate the effects of cuts and succeeding in some areas. However, there has been an impact including responses of call centres, children's centres and library provision. Preventative services such as grants for voluntary groups have all been greatly reduced." Green Party councillor, Bristol

"It is painful and terrifying having to decide which essential services to cut from next, and we're acutely aware our citizens are missing out. It's very scary to think about the increasing crisis in mental health and the people falling through the gaps created by these cuts. As a local councillor, you're constantly aware people are getting less and less despite council tax being raised, and you're forever playing catch up." Labour councillor, Salford

"We have had some of the biggest cuts in the country and the introduction of universal benefits has created more demand for services. I have had to deal with more evictions than ever as some clients have had their benefits cut or cancelled." Labour councillor, Rochdale

Conclusion

UNISON is urging the government to listen to councillors ahead of the Budget, and provide much needed additional funding for local councils.

The government continues to cut revenue support grant to councils, while the central share of business rates they collect from local government increases. UNISON is calling for this [growing surplus](#) to be redirected back to authorities so it can be used to support the provision of vital services.

For more information on the impact of cuts to local government, please read UNISON's report [Councils at Breaking Point](#), based on a survey of 21,000 council staff that took place in June 2018.