

Workers at breaking point survey

Introduction

People working in local government are loyal, hardworking public servants. But they face overwhelming job pressures because of staff shortages and cutbacks.

UNISON surveyed council workers to identify the issues they are dealing with on a daily basis.

The results show that austerity is not only hurting local residents and services but those delivering those services too. Many council workers find themselves in low paid, high stress employment where unpaid overtime is normal.

They are resorting to using food-banks, taking out payday loans and accessing state benefits in order to make ends meet. Morale is low and, with the chronic underfunding of council services continuing, the workforce keeping services afloat is at breaking point.

About the survey

The survey was carried out in June 2018 and received responses from more than 21,000 council workers across the UK including refuse collectors, youth workers and social workers.

Findings

Council workers are facing intolerable work conditions

Council workers are committed to delivering the best service possible for the public. However, the survey findings highlight how they are struggling to cope with intolerable work conditions:

- Over four fifths (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.
- Almost nine in ten (89%) say that budget cuts have had a negative impact on staff morale.
- Fewer than one in four (23.8%) say that their workload is manageable.
- Only one in ten are confident in the financial situation of their employer.
- Almost three quarters (73%) said that jobs had been cut from their department.
- Six in ten do not feel secure in their job.
- Six in ten work beyond their contracted hours.
- Almost two thirds (63%) identified the lack of front line staff as the top priority.
- Nearly half (49%) are thinking about leaving for something less stressful.
- More than two in five (43%) are thinking about leaving for something better paid.

Council workers are CASH poor

Earlier this year, UNISON and other unions negotiated and agreed a two-year pay deal for more than one million local government workers. This meant a 2% pay rise each year for most and a boost of more than 15% for the lowest paid.

But for years before this council staff have seen their pay frozen and then increased only below the rate of inflation. This survey finds that council workers are living in poverty. They are cash poor and many are struggling with high levels of stress and mental health issues.

Over the last two years:

- Over a third (36%) have used credit cards to make ends meet
- More than a fifth (22%) have asked for financial support from family or friends
- Almost one in ten (8%) accessed state benefits (housing, universal, tax credit)
- 6% have pawned possessions
- 6% have remortgaged their homes, or have downsized or moved to a cheaper property
- 4% have used a payday loan company
- 4% have had rent arrears
- 3% have had to rent out a room for extra income
- 2% have used a food bank

“When my tax credits and child benefits run out, I don’t know how I am going to support myself and two teenagers... I am in disbelief that my wages don’t cover my outgoings well enough.” – Care Worker, Norfolk

Council workers are TIME poor

When asked how many additional hours they were working, we found that each week:

- One in ten (11%) work more than 7 hours unpaid overtime
- One in five (20%) work between 4 to 7 hours unpaid overtime
- Three in ten (29%) work up to 3 hours unpaid overtime

This culminates in three in five council workers working beyond their contracted hours, without being paid. Disregarding the effect on their personal lives, unpaid overtime becoming the norm, combined with rocketing workloads due to staff cuts, is having a stark effect on the mental and physical health of council workers.

*“We don't carry out enough inspections or investigate complaints so **people aren't protected...** We have less qualified staff as they all leave for higher paid jobs and fewer staff end up doing more work while under massive work pressure. One senior officer suffered a stroke as he was trying to cope with managing massive cuts and maintaining the service.”* – Trading Standards

Council workers health is at risk

Despite the low wages in local councils, employees are more inclined to leave because of stress than pay with almost half (49%) of local council workers are thinking of leaving for something less stressful.

*“I'm now stretched beyond capacity, morale is low and I'm **physically and mentally exhausted**, so are my colleagues, we are ready to crack”* – Adult care worker - Dundee

This is because often, due to severe staffing reductions, they are doing the jobs of two or more full-time employees on decades-old IT systems that regularly break down, making it all but impossible for them to meet the needs of residents.

*“Our staff numbers have reduced to the point that we cannot cope with the workload and cracks are now becoming apparent. Safety has been compromised and **staff are at breaking point**. One has recently put in their notice because they just can't take any more. They have no job to go to, but want to leave anyway to save their sanity. This person will not be replaced and their workload will be added to everyone else's. We are a passionate team who support each other and try our best to provide a good service to the public but **this is becoming impossible**.”* – North East, Environmental Services

The wider impact of austerity

Government policy such as the introduction of Universal Credit has had a knock-on impact on local councils.

“Universal credit has proved to be a minefield that no-one seems to fully understand esp people I work with.” – Local authority professional

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 workers dealing with it.

*“I am front line 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 DWP do not help customers. **We suffer from abuse and violence from customers** and have no security due to budget restrictions and our IT is poor as we are **working on equipment that is obsolete and broken** and there are no funds to update them.”* – Finance worker

Conclusion

Local government has been the biggest victim of the Westminster Government's austerity agenda with the amount of funding that local councils receive from Westminster having been cut in half over the last 8 years (equating to billions of £s of cuts). Northamptonshire County Council earlier this year effectively declared itself bankrupt and it is 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 in order to stop having to stop 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 do so in this year's Budget**.

At the moment a significant number of councils are still paying a sizeable proportion of the business rates that they collect to the Government (the central share of business rates) whilst the Government is also moving to end the amount of money councils receive via central grants. This central share of business rates is then used in turn by the Treasury to support their spending plans

across the rest of Government whilst local councils are in dire financial straits. Along with the LGA, UNISON is calling for this money, amounting to billions of pounds, to be re-diverted back to local councils in order to try and help rectify some of the damage that has been inflicted in recent years.

The background and rationale to this idea are explored in this [UNISON paper from November 2017](#). Improved public sector funding in Westminster will also result in more money going to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland via the Barnett Formula.