



Building stress: Overworked, stressed and stuck in the office

A UNISON survey of building control staff

June 2017





Contents

Introduction	3
Key issues	3
Summary	4
Building standards	6
The survey	6
Job cuts	9
Recruitment	10
Workload	12
Work changes	15
Time spent on site	17
Administrative demands	18
Public safety	19
Impact on members	21
Staff morale	22
Conclusion	23



Introduction

This report forms part of UNISON Scotland's Damage series. These are a range of reports on the impact of austerity on the delivery of public services.

This report contains an analysis of a survey of members working in building standards departments in local government across Scotland and information gathered via a freedom of information request to local authorities.

Key issues

- Almost half (47%), of those surveyed, felt they should spend a lot more time on site visits. Only 13 per cent felt they had the right balance between site visits and office time. The rest felt they should be on site more.
- When asked about budget cuts over the last five years 46 per cent indicated there had been budget cuts and a further 36 per cent that there had been severe cuts. There are 56 less staff working in Building Standards department now than in 2010.
- The overwhelming majority (89 per cent) feel that their workload has got heavier in the last few years.
- Nearly 40 per cent say that they work unpaid hours 'now and again' and a further 37 per cent state that they work unpaid hours 'most weeks' in order to get work done. This is highly technical work which requires detailed knowledge and attention to detail. Working long hours without breaks has a serious impact on people's ability to deliver to a high standard.
- Thirty-eight per cent of respondents described morale as very low and a further forty seven as low. Sadly a whole 78 per cent said they do not expect that to improve. Most believe that further budget cuts to local authorities, increased workload and the lack of a pay rise are the key reasons why they expect no improvement.
- Half of those who responded stated that workload was the reason for such low morale. Next came pressure and uncertainty about the future. Other issues raised were the lack of a pay rise in recent years and the focus on meeting the key performance indicators (KPIs).

Summary

This report forms part of our Damage series where we report on the impact of austerity on UNISON members and the services they deliver. Members in building standards tell us they are short-staffed, overworked, stressed and long overdue a pay rise.

UNISON surveyed members working in building standards departments in Scotland's local authorities throughout May 2017. Job titles included: team leaders, senior building standards officers, surveyors and building control surveyors. To supplement the information given by members we also placed a freedom of information request with all local authorities. We received responses from 30 of those authorities.

The Building Standards service in Scotland is currently provided by local authorities. The role is the processing of building warrants, therefore checking building design and construction. The Building (Scotland) Act also requires a Building Authority to ensure that a dangerous building is made safe.

Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents stated that there have been budget cuts this year and another 20 per cent stated that cuts had been severe. When asked about the last five years, 46 per cent indicated there had been budget cuts and a further 36 per cent that there had been severe cuts.

The freedom of information request indicated that there are 56 less staff working in the building standards departments now than in 2010. We asked members if there had been job cuts in their teams over the last year. Responses indicated that rather than redundancies, job cuts mainly came from non-replacement of those who retire or leave for other jobs. These are small teams where the loss of even one member has a substantial impact on the performance of the team. Jobs are being lost via voluntary redundancy alongside not replacing those who retire or move on to new jobs.

Members are telling us they are under severe pressure due to these staff shortages. Salami-slicing of services avoids headlines about service cuts but doesn't mean there aren't cuts. The long years of austerity are having a severe impact on our services and on the staff trying to deliver them with limited resources.

As the building trade recovers from the 2008 crash, there are increasing opportunities for those with the qualifications needed for building standards teams. While we didn't ask about pay, members consistently raise the cut in real pay they have experienced as a serious issue. Building standards teams are struggling to retain and recruit staff.

The freedom of information request indicated that there were 25 vacancies at various stages in the recruitment process. When asked about vacancies in their team, members said they felt employers were struggling to fill posts with 40 per cent saying it was hard to fill posts. Often recruits come from another authority but this of course creates a shortage in that authority.

Staff, in building standards, are under enormous pressure to deliver a high quality service. The overwhelming majority (89 per cent) feel that their workload has got heavier in the last few years.

Staff indicated that the extra workload has more than one cause. Staff shortages lead to both more work and the pushing down of more complex work on to lower graded staff. Even if there had been no staff cuts, new regulations and increased paperwork and tasks associated with new "e" systems would still have increased their workloads. The new e-building system is raised consistently as creating work rather than saving time. Members report being overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Cuts to administrative staff across local authorities are pushing work back onto the other staff. Cuts to so called backroom staff are not painless; they inevitably led to higher paid staff doing more administrative tasks at a higher cost and diverting them from what they should be working on. Overwork leads to missed deadlines but then they end up tied-up dealing with complaints about missed deadlines. This in turn leads to further missed deadlines. Being caught up in office work is also impacting on their ability to get out to building sites to work with builders to make sure they can get the build right in the first place.

Only 13 per cent of those who responded felt that they had the right balance between site visits and office time. The rest felt they should be on site more. Almost half (47 per cent) felt that they should spend a lot more time on site visits.

The most serious issue though is the level of risk created by building work not being carried out to a safe

standard. As the Cole report stated there seems to be a misunderstanding that Building Standards perform the role of a Clerk of Works. One member suggested that this should be a statutory role to ensure ongoing safety. There is no point in setting standards if there is nothing in place to ensure those standards are met. There are now more cases of building defects due to contractors not achieving compliance with the approved plans and British Standards. There is an obvious need for a relevant qualified person to be appointed to supervise the work on site for larger projects. This used to be done by a Clerk of Works, this should be a regulatory requirement.

It's not just about 'catching' those who try and cut corners. Their role should be to focus on supporting builders to get things right by providing advice and support.

Building standards are about public safety. Ensuring compliance requires visiting sites and it is very concerning that respondents do not feel they get enough time out on sites.

Members report that they are working unpaid hours in order to get their work done. Nearly 40 per cent say they do this 'now and again' and a further 37 per cent state that they work unpaid hours 'most weeks' in order to get work done. This is highly technical work which requires detailed knowledge and attention to detail. Working long hours without breaks has a serious impact on people's ability to deliver to a high standard.

Unsurprisingly, given the responses to our earlier questions, few respondents described morale in their teams as good or great. Where people did have positive comments it was about the people they worked with and the support they were able to provide for each other. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents described morale as very low and a further 47 per cent as low, and sadly a whole 78 per cent said they do not expect that to improve. Most believe that further budget cuts to local authorities, increased workload and the lack of a pay rise are the key reasons why they expect no improvement.

This report analyses members' responses to our surveys and allows you to hear directly from the workforce about what it's like trying to deliver high quality public services under austerity. The report reveals a dedicated workforce committed to ensuring public safety by ensuring that buildings meet the standards required but who are under enormous pressure. They feel exhausted, undervalued and are struggling to deal with the demands placed on them.

What the staff say

- *Too many builders take the easiest option available without following the warrant drawings, if you only see a building once it has been completed then a lot of potentially dangerous construction is hidden.*
- *Visits on site during works are important other wise it becomes a wallpaper inspection.*
- *Site visits are only a snapshot of the work in progress at that time. The next visit may not have seen defective work which is now covered by walls etc.*
- *It is on site and not in the office that, failing (or avoiding) to meet building regulations, result in consequences for the users or occupiers of buildings.*
- *We have been restricted to 1 morning per week on site. This is wholly insufficient to do our jobs. While we will never see everything, I now regularly have to sign jobs off when I have seen nothing at all.*
- *People are building without telling the council they started. Builders have got used to there being no available surveyors so they now crack on. When I started in building control that would seldom happen*
- *When I have been on site there are always construction issues that come up that would be hidden away - site agent require us to attend site to discuss matters walk around the projects . All too often I appear at the end of the project and notice issues that require to be resolved and the main complaint is that if I had attended sooner then it would have been dealt with in plenty of time. There are clerk of works being employed but they do not know enough about the regulations and fire etc which I have learned over the years ie a body of knowledge*

Building Standards

What do Building Standards do?

The Building Standards service in Scotland is currently provided by local authorities. The role was set out in the Building (Scotland) Act and is the processing of building warrants for checking building design and construction. The Building (Scotland) Act also requires a building authority to ensure that a dangerous building is made safe.

Building warrants

A key role is approving building warrants. This is the formal process which gives permission for a build to start. The building standards service has to check that the proposed building work meets all the regulations and standards. No building work should start until Building Standards have been notified and have issued a building warrant. Buildings Standards also issue the Completion Certificate which is required before any building is put to use.

Their role is not to check the standards of workmanship on site and anyone undertaking building work should employ their own professional advisor to undertake that role. Building standards have the power to take action where work is carried out without a building warrant or contrary to conditions. Building Standards are also responsible for dealing with dangerous buildings.

The Scottish government recently set out the terms of appointment¹ for each local authority to continue in its role as building verifiers. Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling were deemed not to have performed well and have only been appointed for one year.

Poor performance (1 year appointment) 1 May 2017 to 30 April 2018		
These authorities have not performed well and have shown excessive turnaround times and lower customer engagement.		
City of Edinburgh	Glasgow City	Stirling

Twelve authorities have been rated as 'good', this means they have 'shown weaknesses in one or more aspects' and have therefore only been appointed for three years. They are:

Good performance (3 year appointment) 1 May 2017 to 30 April 2020		
These authorities have performed well but have shown weakness in one or more aspects		
Aberdeen City	East Lothian	Scottish Borders
Clackmannanshire	Highland	Shetland
Dumfries and Galloway	Moray	South Ayrshire
East Dunbartonshire	Renfrewshire	West Dunbartonshire

The performance is judged against the Scottish Government's framework². Throughout our survey members mentioned the pressure to meet the indicators set out in the framework. They expressed concern that they were forced to focus on ticking boxes to meet the framework rather than the quality of their work. UNISON surveyed members working in building standards departments in Scotland's local authorities in June 2017.

¹ <http://bit.ly/2scKloc>

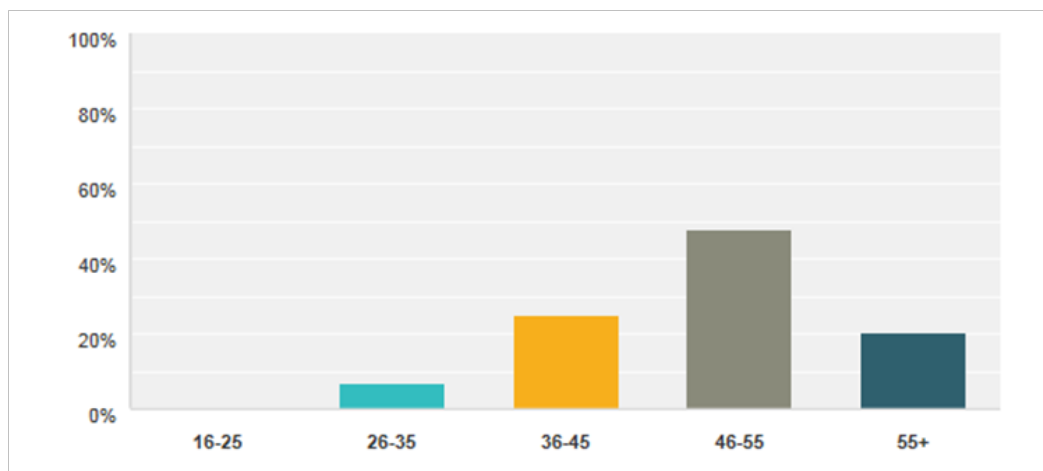
² <http://bit.ly/2scKloc>

The survey

Members who took part in the survey included: team leaders, senior building standards officers, surveyors and building control surveyors. To supplement the information given by members we also placed a freedom of information request with all local authorities. We received responses from 30 of those authorities.

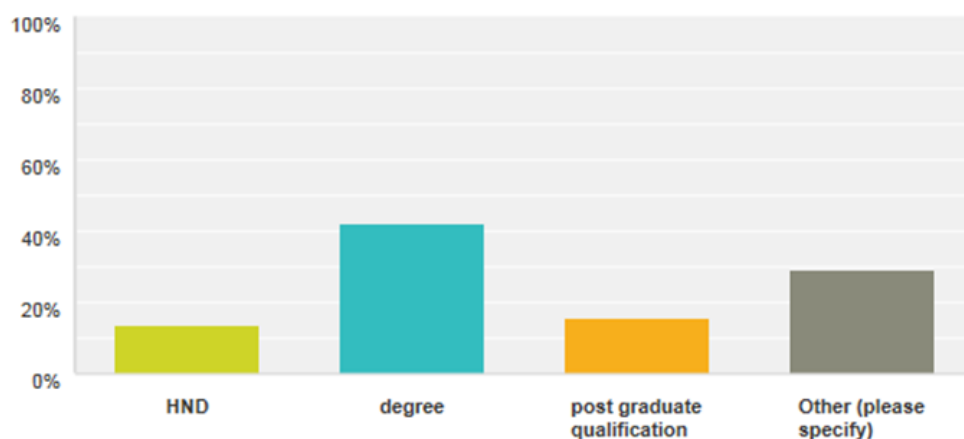
Age Range

The vast majority of respondents were over 45, in line with the public sector workforce in general³.



Qualifications

Respondents hold a range of professional qualifications to enable them to undertake this important role.

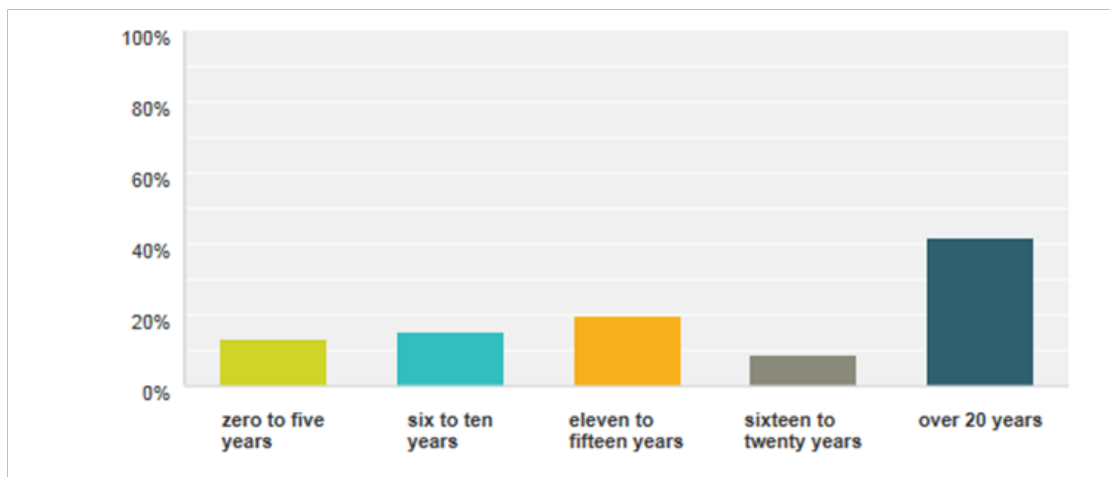


Others include memberships of professional bodies for example: RICS and CABE, some respondents ticked 'other' then indicated degrees, HND or certificates in building engineering, construction management or specific building standards qualifications e.g. a degree in building standards. Over 40 per cent of respondents had been working in their role over 20 years and over two thirds for over ten years. They have a great deal of experience in the sector which means they have a valuable insight into their workplaces. People with these qualifications are in demand. There are many opportunities for better paid work in the private sector. There is a real risk that without decent jobs and pay they will take up these opportunities.

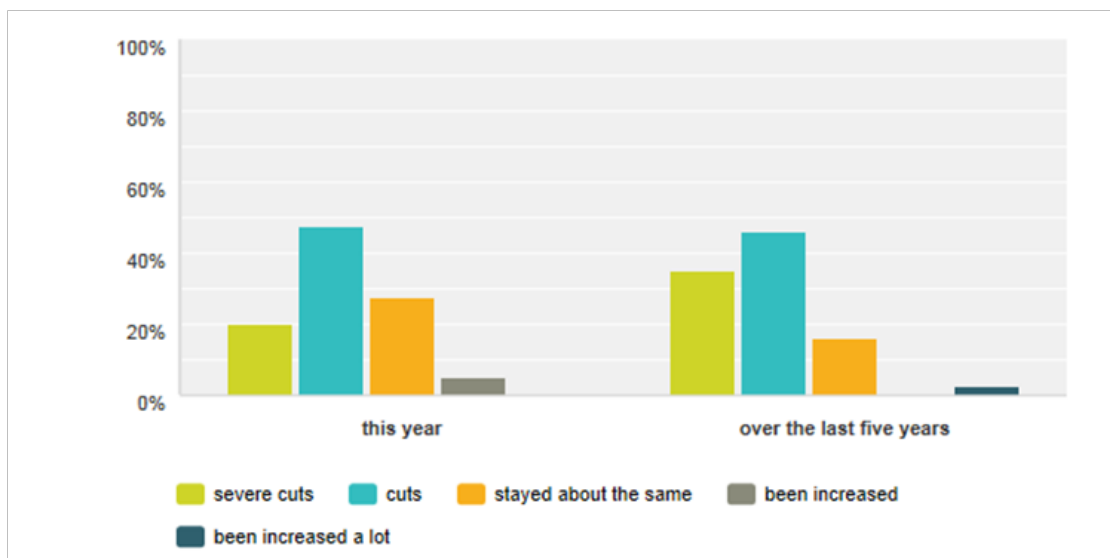
³ <http://www.unison-scotland.org/2017/06/14/the-ageing-workforce/>

The survey

How long have you worked in your current role?



Has your team's budget been cut?



Forty-eight per cent of respondents stated that there have been budget cuts this year and another 20 per cent stated that cuts had been severe. When asked about the last five years, 46 per cent indicated there had been budget cuts and a further 36 per cent that there had been severe cuts.

We attempted to get more detail on the budget cuts using a freedom of information request. We asked councils to give budget figures for building standards departments in 2007/8, 2010/11 and 2016/7. Sadly not all councils provided figures for the three years so we are unable to get the full picture. We only have figures for 22 councils for 2007/8. Across those councils the total budget in 2007/8 was 13,726,206 - this had reduced to £11,933,360 in 2016/7: a cut of £1,792,846.

Across that time income from fees has risen from £20,053,958 to £24,064,213. This figure is from 30 councils with only Glasgow and Fife failing to provide figures.

Job cuts

We asked members if there had been job cuts in their teams over the last year. Responses indicated that rather than just redundancies, job cuts mainly came from non-replacement of those who retire or leave for other jobs. The freedom of information request indicated that there are 56 less staff working in Building Standards departments now than in 2010 (these are figures for 28 authorities: two did not reply at all and two did not send figures for 2010). These are small teams where the loss of even one member has a substantial impact on the performance of the team. Jobs are being lost via voluntary redundancy alongside not replacing those who retire or move on to new jobs. Members are telling us they are under severe pressure due to these staff shortages. People are leaving for new jobs because of this pressure adding even more pressure to those left behind. Salami-slicing of services avoids headlines about service cuts but doesn't mean there aren't cuts. The long years of austerity are having a severe impact on our services and on the staff trying to deliver with limited resources.

What the staff say

- *There have been no job cuts in the last year but, in the previous year, a team member took early retirement and the post was discontinued for the purpose of savings, Consequently, this increased workload but safeguarded the posts of the remaining team members, at least in the short term.*
- *Staff left due to early retirement and staff who leave for other reasons have not been replaced.*
- *We have lost staff through retirement and these have left vacant posts. The remaining staff is expected to cope with the additional workload and pressures that this has created.*
- *3 surveyors have all left, 3 admin have left the dept.*
- *Non-filling of vacancies has created a reduction in staff numbers, this has increased stress levels and has had an impact on how we have performed in relation to response times.*
- *Numerous job cuts prior to the last year (voluntary redundancies). Over the last year we have recruited. New staff require training = more time taken from surveyors. Couple of resignations however over last year. Frozen trainee post removed from structure. We had been promised for the last two or three years that this post would be filled in order to relieve some pressure.*
- *Several vacancies have not been filled, some posts then deleted. The backlog of work is so high that staff are leaving or retiring early to get away from the stress and low morale. This piles on the pressure as replacement staff have little or no experience. XXXX Building standards is almost not functioning at all.*
- *When people leave they are not being replaced. Public Safety Officer is now being performed by a Senior Building Standards Surveyor which is pushing pressures and workload down onto other members of staff. Non senior members of staff are being pressured into taking on supervisory tasks.*
- *Post unfilled even though numbers of applications and fee income has increased. Remaining team members struggling to cope.*
- *The number of front line staff has been cut and one manager post has been lost. Vacant posts have not been filled or there are delays in filling posts when they become vacant. There has been a reduction in front line staff processing applications.*
- *Number of people leaving and retiring but positions not being filled. Impact on team picking up others work.*

Recruitment

As the building trade recovers from the 2008 crash there are increasing opportunities for those with the qualifications needed for building standards teams. While we didn't ask about pay, members consistently raise the cut in real pay they have experienced as a serious issue. Building standards teams are struggling to retain and recruit staff.

Our freedom of information request indicated that there were 25 vacancies at various stages in the recruitment process. When asked about vacancies in their team, members said they felt employers were struggling to find suitable people to take up any vacant posts that were being replaced, which adds to the difficulties with workload. Only four per cent of respondents indicated that it was easy to fill vacancies when they arose, while 40 per cent said it was hard to fill posts.

Often recruits come from another authority but this of course creates a shortage in that authority. Members indicated that agency staff were sometimes used to fill in. While this was an improvement on no staff, it means that they spent time training people who then move on.

What the staff say

Shortage of skilled people

- *Yes, if when posts are advertised it has been very difficult to recruit suitable people.*
- *Yes as above and seems difficult to recruit experience candidates.*
- *Difficult to recruit staff due to expertise required.*
- *Many vacancies (around 10?), difficult to recruit at mid level. Senior and trainee applicants more fruitful.*
- *Yes, it is extremely difficult to fill vacancies.*
- *Yes post filled by staff from an other bordering authorities.*
- *There has but very difficult to recruit suitably qualified people.*

Pay and conditions

- *The vacancies have been hard to recruit in the experienced range £26-32K and we just steal surveyors off other authorities. The £22-£26K range have attracted over qualified but with no experience staff.*
- *Very difficult, no training courses available in Scotland to train new staff and pay level is poor and no salary progression.*
- *Pay is low compared to private sector in similar roles and gap is increasing.*

Agency/contracts

- *Yes and replaced with staff we are required to train who are on short term contracts.*
- *For a fixed term of 18 months only.*

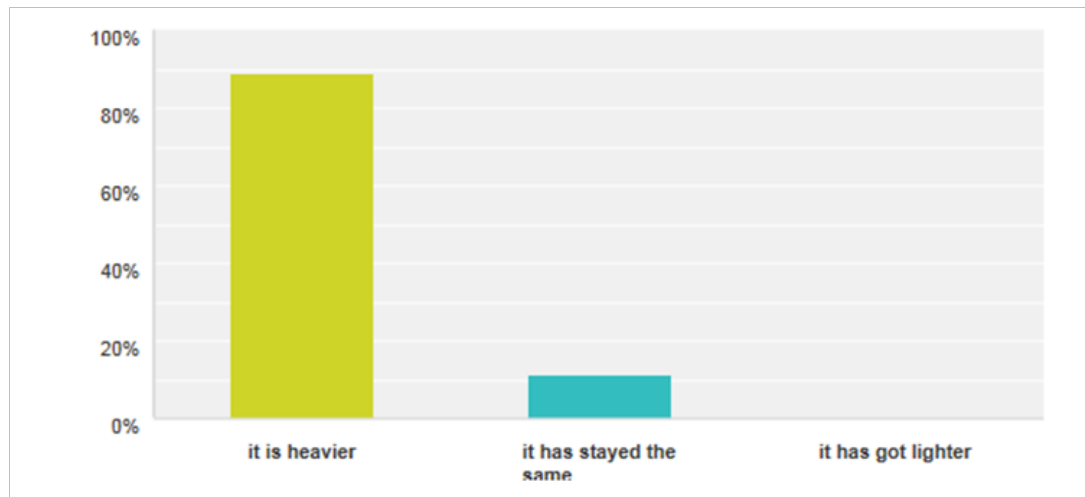


Lack of applicants

- *One vacancy with 2 applicants.*
- *There have been two vacancies filled around two years ago.*
- *Yes, posts have been filled but the number of candidates have been low.*
- *Yes, difficult to recruit.*

Workload

How has your workload changed in the last few years?



Staff in Building Standards are under enormous pressure to deliver a high quality service. The overwhelming majority (89%) feel their workload has got heavier in the last few years.

Staff indicated the extra workload has more than one cause. Staff shortages lead to both more work and the pushing down of more complex work on to lower graded staff. Even if there had been no staff cuts new regulations and increased paperwork and tasks associated with new “e” systems would still have increased their workloads. The new e-building system is raised consistently as creating work rather than saving time. Members report being overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Cuts to administrative staff across local authorities are pushing work back onto the other staff. Cuts to so called backroom staff are not painless the inevitably led to higher paid staff doing more administrative tasks at a higher cost and diverting them from what they should be working on. Overwork leads to missed deadlines but then they end up tied up dealing with complaints about missed deadlines. This of course leads to further missed deadlines. Being caught up in office work is also impacting on their ability to get out to building sites to work with builders to make sure they can get the build right in the first.

What the staff say

Impact on workload and stress due to the need to do work previously undertaken by better paid staff

- Carry out work that was previously given to senior staff who have been made redundant
- Workload previously dealt with by Team leaders and other member of staff
- Staff shortages, workloads increased due in part to less staff, reduced working hours, changed procedures, various workplace location moves, alterations to computer hardware and software (with teething problems and delays in getting systems functioning), moves to call centre style workstations and clear desk policies with inception of electronic submissions, assessment and inspections (without proper systems, hardware, training and resource to get systems running properly).
- A Building Surveyor (1) was one of the staff who left in March 2016. Another Building Surveyor (2) was given their post, and I was given work of Building Surveyor (2).

General increased workload due to staff cuts

- *Staff cuts result in workload getting passed on.*
- *Increased workload due to vacant posts being left unfilled.*
- *In the last 5/6 years the department lost 23 employees through natural wastage and retirements.*
- *It has increased substantially with the result that I cannot provide the same service that I provided in the past - in fact the service I provided is poor but I cannot do more than I am doing.*
- *More work and less staff to carry work out.*
- *2 surveyors covering an area previously served by 3 surveyors and an assistant. Workload has also increased over this time with the introduction of CCNPs, additional procedural activates such as time recording and electronic building standards.*
- *Even before losing a post surveyors had one of the highest application per surveyor ratio in Scotland. We are now getting back to pre downturn levels with less staff.*
- *It goes up and down but in the last few years it has been climbing steadily.*
- *It is simply heavier because there are less staff. This has had a terrible impact on the day to day working conditions.*
- *Restructure of department: formerly 3 seniors and 3 Building standards officers now 2 Seniors (one post vacant) and 3 Building Standards Officers.*
- *Because of staff shortages we have had to take on additional workload. There has been an upsurge in the Construction industry leading to an increase in applications. The Building Standards system has become increasing complex and more time consuming.*
- *More work less people to do it, the expected performance levels is always increased year on year.*
- *I have lost effectively one member of staff from my team each year over the last 5 years and this is down to efficiency saving within the Council. The workload has increased slightly over the same period of time as the construction sector appears to be picking up. Therefore with less staff doing the same or slightly more work each year has impacted on performance.*
- *The plan checking and inspection of buildings have become more complex over the years as more and more regulations are introduced in addition to more innovative buildings being constructed.*

Changes to regulations and increased administrative work

- *Computer software issues, new systems introduced by Gov, staffing problems etc all have caused workload increase.*
- *Staff shortages More work including swamped by emails. Less folk to do it. Longer less efficient processes involved (lots of admin tasks very little time to do technical tasks).*
- *More complex regulations (without a reciprocal increase in knowledge of applicants/agents), more data recording to report to the BSD (Scottish Government building standards division)*
- *Volume of phone calls, emails and admin has massively increased. Expected to be available 24/7 by customer.*

- 85% of plans have to be completed in 4 weeks , XXXX was 16% last year. By this time you spend most of your time fielding complaints or requests by phone and email rather than doing the work. Applicants were told not to contact us for the first 12 weeks.
- We are inundated - if I was to answer every phone message and email I got, I would never be able to get any actual work done. This is a vicious circle as the longer applicants wait the more they are inclined to email or call for updates. The current focus on getting first reports out for new applications only amplifies this by getting more applications into the system without getting any more cleared at the other end. Management are targeting figures and not the problems that lead to the poor figures.
- The introduction of eBuildingStandards and the poor performance of the section has resulted in a huge increase in complaints, email submissions for information and enquiries from Councillors, MSPs and MPs
- We're unable to meet statutory timescales, but are expected to improve our customer contact despite being unable to carry out basic duties in the amount of time we have.
- The procedures involved are greater due to performance framework and legislative changes. The amount of work in real task terms has increased and corporate policies are working against our ability to react with the speed required and to have the information and cars etc to hand at short notice.
- The number of cases per head is similar to that before the downturn in the economy, the additional work is around the recording and collecting of data that is reported to the Scottish Government. The administration processes have significantly increased.
- Less staff, more work. E-mail system has recently been a burden with individual e-mail addresses sent out on letters. The sender expects an instant response.

Work changes

How has the work you do changed in the last few years?

Similar issues were raised regarding the increased workload from email, administrative tasks and e-building. Members said they spend less time on what they feel is their actual job and the purpose of their department and more time on paperwork and emails. There seems to be a particular pressure to tick boxes for performance indicators rather than do work that would actually improve the quality of the service. The performance indicators are what the Scottish government uses to judge and then appoint individual local authorities as building standards verifiers.

The Scottish government recently set out the terms of appointment⁴ for each local authority. Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling were deemed not to have performed well and have only been appointed for one year.

Poor performance (1 year appointment) 1 May 2017 to 30 April 2018		
These authorities have not performed well and have shown excessive turnaround times and lower customer engagement.		
City of Edinburgh	Glasgow City	Stirling

Twelve authorities have been rated as “good”, this means they have “shown weaknesses in one or more aspects” and have therefore only been appointed for three years. They are

Good performance (3 year appointment) 1 May 2017 to 30 April 2020		
These authorities have performed well but have shown weakness in one or more aspects		
Aberdeen City	East Lothian	Scottish Borders
Clackmannanshire	Highland	Shetland
Dumfries and Galloway	Moray	South Ayrshire
East Dunbartonshire	Renfrewshire	West Dunbartonshire

It is therefore no surprise that managers focus on ticking the indicators boxes. The future of the whole department is at stake. There needs to be a better way of driving quality improvement. These tick box exercises become just that and divert people from delivering on the important parts of their jobs.

What the staff say

- *Yes. It has become evident that we are spending an ever increasing amount of our time recording and justifying what we do as opposed to actually doing it.*
- *More focus now on performance indicators than service to the public.*
- *From a professional service to chaos.*
- *There is clearly an issue of “failure demand” where increasingly time that could be spent getting things right is taken up dealing with the administration of a complaints system.*
- *More admin and dealing with complaints, less time on site, less time doing the ‘job’.*
- *Less time on Site.*

4 <http://bit.ly/2scKloc>

- *Yes. I was promoted from a front line Senior Surveyor post to Team Manager. I spend most days responding to emails and complaints*

Members also feel that the changes in regulations have increased workload without any extra staff to undertake that work.

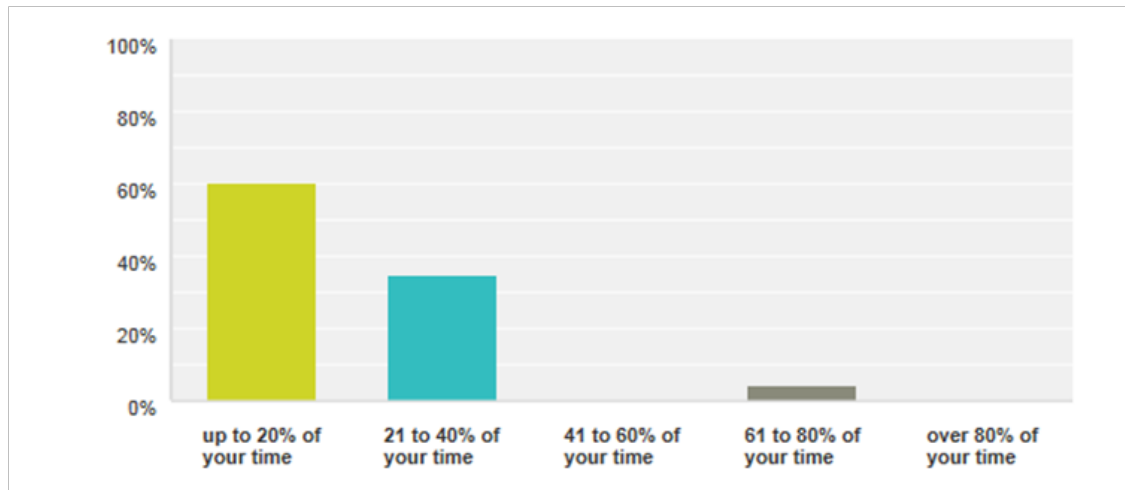
- *Other than the regular changes to the building standards there is much more administration work associated with each building warrant submission.*
- *We have a much heavier inspection workload due to regulatory changes. Also the building regulations get more complex every couple of years and the burden put on building standards to further the governments climate change targets is putting additional complexity into the warrant process*

In response to this question members again stated that the changes meant they spend less time on sites and more time at their desks.

- *A lot more paperwork involved and less site visiting and also fact we are turning to Agile Working.*
- *Site visits are non existent now or at the least very rare for Surveyors*
- *We do not provide the level of service we used to. Lack of site inspections is concerning.*

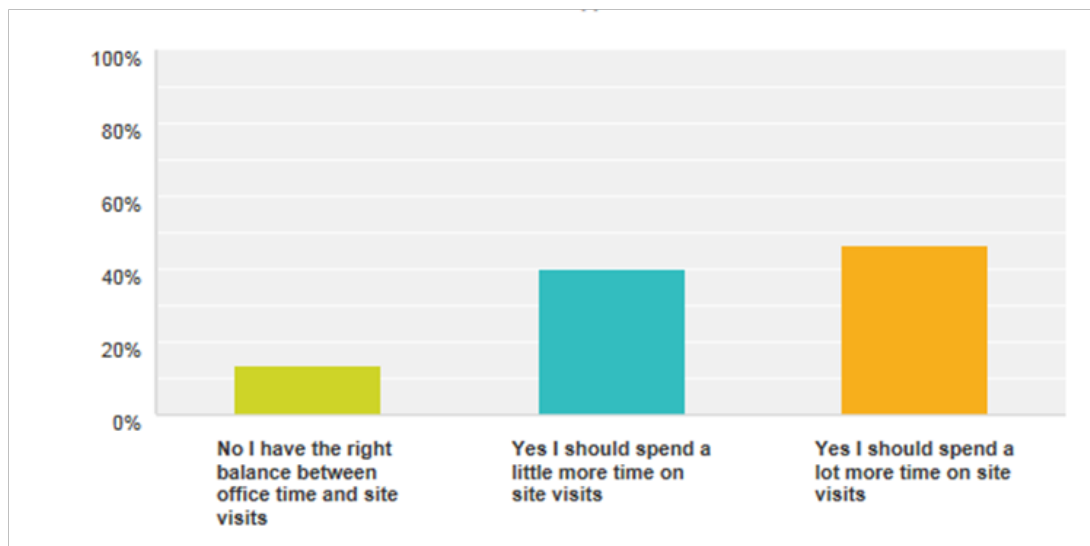
Time spent on site

How much time do you spend out on sites now?



Members were asked about how much time they actually spent out on sites. This work should involve both working in collaboration with builders to ensure they are able get things right before they start and checking compliance. The vast majority (60 per cent) spend less than 20 per cent of their time out on sites. Another 35 per cent were out for 21-45 per cent of their time, and five per cent were out 41-60 per cent of their time.

Do you think you should be spending more time out on sites?



Only 13 per cent of those who responded felt they had the right balance between site visits and office time. The rest felt they should be on site more. Almost half (47%) felt they should spend a lot more time on site visits.

Many were very concerned about this issue. Building Standards have a critical safety role and as the findings of the Cole report into schools shows we need to do much more to ensure building safety. The report points out that there is a widespread misunderstanding of the role on Building Standards teams and it is not their job to check the quality of workmanship on a site. That does not mean that they do not have a vital safety role and they need to have the time to visit the sites to undertake their role.

Administrative demands

As we saw in responses to earlier questions, members feel they are too often focused on meeting the administrative demands of the performance management system rather than the parts of their jobs that matter. And many feel overwhelmed by paperwork.

What the staff say

- *Construction compliance and notification plans for each building warrant application which have been introduced fairly recently require more inspections require more time on site. Targets (both in house and set by government) for responding to building warrant applications don't always allow enough time for inspections to be carried out.*
- *We have had to make fewer visits than we may have in the past simply to get through the workload in the office, as KPIs (which all measure our office based tasks) are the be-all and end-all in the Scottish Government's eyes.*
- *Too much time spent justifying existence by putting importance on the production of statistics, in particular the constant threat of losing verification role is counter productive. More time should be spent inspecting construction works. Note enough time to be on site due to pressures of paperwork within the office.*
- *We are on a half day a week site inspection, the government want sufficient inspections to act as a deterrent to poor building work, this would require inspections to work as it is being carried out. This is not happening. There is a lot you can cover up with wallpaper and a coat of paint.*
- *There is that much paperwork nowadays that I find even when out on site I am having to bring files out of the office to work on when sitting in the car in a parking space. Also the amount of paperwork and checks you need to do before issuing a Completion Acceptance has increased 10 fold resulting in a Surveyor having to check paperwork carefully before leaving site to ensure that the right information has been collated.*
- *The job is becoming increasingly office based and more time consuming leaving less time for site inspections which leads to areas of work not being inspected which can lead to potential problems being missed.*
- *If more time was spent on site it'd be impossible to keep up with the workload in the office.*

The most serious issue though is the level of risk created by building work not being carried out to a safe standard. As the Cole report stated there seems to be a misunderstanding that building standards perform the role of a Clerk of Works. One member suggest that we this should be a statutory role to ensure ongoing safety. There is no point in setting standards if there is nothing in place to ensure those standards are met.

There are now more cases of building defects due to contractors not achieving compliance with the approved plans and British Standards. There is an obvious need for a relevant qualified person to be appointed to supervise the work on site for larger projects. This used to be done by clerks of works, this should be a regulatory requirement.

- *Too many builders take the easiest option available without following the warrant drawings, if you only see a building once it has been completed then a lot of potentially dangerous construction is hidden.*

Public safety

It's not just about "catching" those who try and cut corners. Their role should be to focus on supporting builders to get things right by providing advice and support.

Building standards are about public safety. Ensuring compliance requires visiting sites and it is very concerning that respondents do not feel they get enough time out on sites.

What the staff say

- *Visits on site during works are important other wise it becomes a wallpaper inspection.*
- *Site visits are only a snapshot of the work in progress at that time. The next visit may not have seen defective work which is now covered by walls etc.....*
- *It is on site and not in the office that, failing (or avoiding) to meet building regulations, result in consequences for the users or occupiers of buildings.*
- *We have been restricted to 1 morning per week on site. This is wholly insufficient to do our jobs. While we will never see everything, I now regularly have to sign jobs off when I have seen nothing at all.*
- *People are building without telling the council they started. Builders have got used to there being no available surveyors so they now crack on. when I started in building control that would seldom happen*
- *When I have been on site there are always construction issues that come up that would be hidden away - site agent require us to attend site to discuss matters walk around the projects . All to often I appear at the end of the project and notice issues that require to be resolved and the main complaint is that if I had attended sooner then it would have been dealt with in plenty of time . There are clerk of works being employed but they do not know enough about the regulations and fire etc which I have learned over the years ie a body of knowledge*
- *If you are not out on site the public will ignore you even when you phone them there is always a promise but when phone goes down nothing usually happens.*
- *Current high work loads have prompted management to restrict site time from 2 days a week to half a day a week. Not sufficient if housing sites and large commercial jobs are getting to critical inspection times. We are trying to accept more photos and videos instead.*
- *It would allow more items to be inspected and less chance of problems arising*
- *Feel we're only getting to final inspections by which time the important parts of the warrantable work, ie structural, drainage, disturbance to separating floors / walls have been covered up. Photographs do not tell the full story and are a poor substitute for site visits and discussions with builders*

We also asked members if they were under pressure to undertake work they were not qualified to do. Most responded that their issues were more about the heavy workload than their ability to deal with the actual work job content. Some did indicate that they were taking on work on bigger more complex jobs that would previously have been done by someone at a higher grade. Another issue raised was that many felt that HR and administrative task that would have previously been done by other HR and admin teams in their authority were now their responsibility. This is something we see time and time again where job cuts to support teams just push work elsewhere in an organisation. This often leads to tasks being undertaken by higher paid staff than those lost.

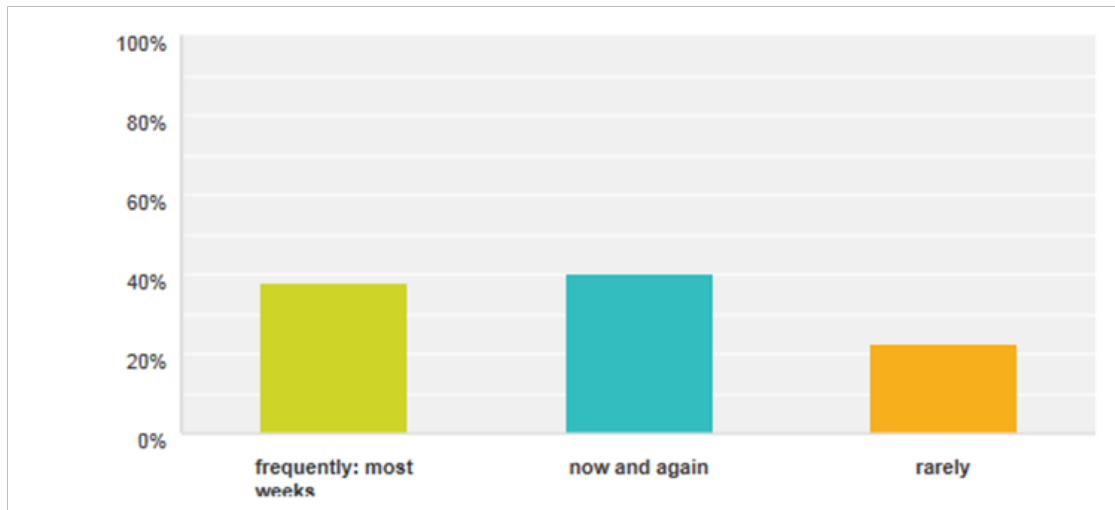
Worryingly, some did indicate that they needed more training and support for some of their responsibilities including fire safety.

- *Yes there is a lack of training in certain areas of the regulations.*
- *Fire engineering submissions for public buildings and large non domestic buildings. Do not have the knowledge to challenge a Fire Engineers solution unless it conflicts with the current Building Standards Regulations. Structural Design Certificates. These are issued by Structural Engineers we are not permitted to comment on these.*
- *Yes. Health and Safety aspects of my work. I am not qualified in this. Also, do a lot of our own admin work now which was previously done by others.*
- *Because of lack of qualified and experienced staff we are frequently involved in large complex jobs with minimal back up.*
- *Yes. Due to us losing and not replacing structural engineers (we only have 2 part time engineers instead of 3 - 4 full time engineers, we now have to try to make initial structural assessments to building designs. No surveyor is qualified so more margin for errors to occur.*
- *Yes, there's very limited double checking of work I may not have undertaken before.*
- *Yes all the time. We have a new SER scheme in place yet the departments management have not sat down with the surveyors and explained how they now work. There is inadequate training in SAP; the inability to check U value calculations.*
- *Yes. There are a number of specialised topics/disciplines that have gradually been introduced over the years that I feel I have had insufficient training. Some significant effort has been made to cover off some of the specialisms but not across the whole spectrum.*

The Cole report highlighted problems with the Certificate of Completion. We did not ask about this in our survey but, in our discussions around survey design, a member did indicate that buildings are still being opened and used before the issue of the Completion Certificate - which is a clear breach of the 1959 and 2003 Building (Scotland) Acts.

Impact on members

Do you regularly work unpaid hours to get your work done?



Members report that they are working unpaid hours in order to get their work done. Nearly 40 per cent say they do this 'now and again' and a further 37 per cent said they work unpaid hours 'most weeks' in order to get work done. This is highly technical work which requires detailed knowledge and attention to detail. Working long hours without breaks has a serious impact on people's ability to deliver to a high standard.

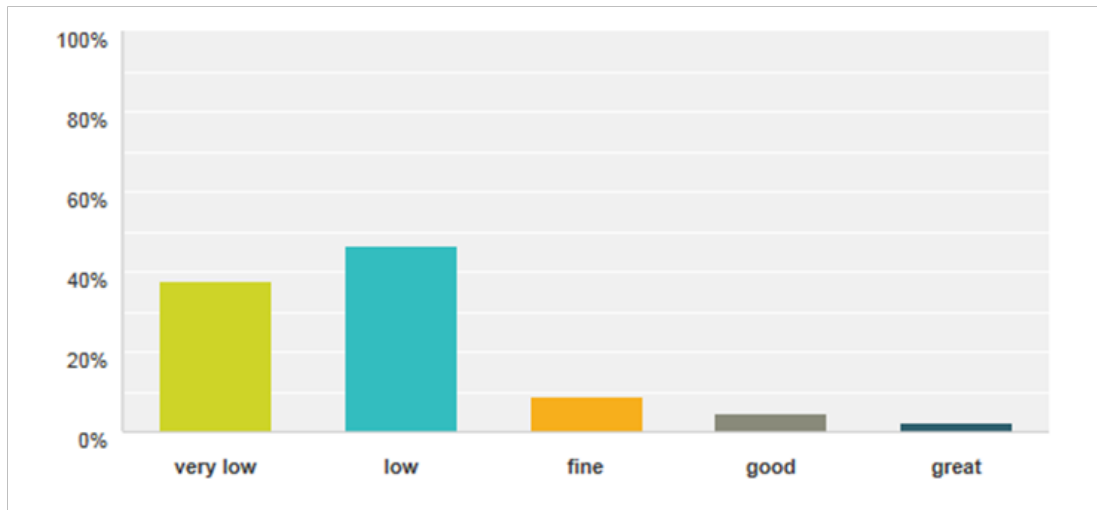
The most common form of unpaid work is skipping breaks with members working through lunch. Respondents blamed staff shortages for their high workloads. Some members indicated that despite having a 'flexi system' they are often unable to take back the time they have accrued because of their workloads.

What the staff say

- *Applicants, agents and building contractors have a high expectation of the Building Standards service but due to staff shortages, workloads etc, this is often not met. This results in stressful situations arising on a regular basis as surveyors get constant emails, phone calls, etc, from irate customers pressuring them for answers, better performance etc.*
- *Seriously under staffed.*
- *The department is broken and current measures to meet targets for first reports (overtime) are only going to paper over the cracks. Serious investment in staff is required to tackle the workload.*

Staff morale

How would you describe morale in your team?



Unsurprisingly, given the responses to our earlier questions, few respondents described morale in their teams as good or great. Where people did have positive comments it was about the people they worked with and the support they were able to provide for each other.

Thirty-eight per cent of respondents described morale as very low and a further 47 per cent as low, and sadly a whole 78 per cent said they do not expect that to improve. Most believe that further budget cuts to local authorities, increased workload and the lack of a pay rise are the key reasons why they expect no improvement.

Half of those who responded stated that workload was the reason for such low morale. Next came pressure and uncertainty about the future. Other issues raised were the lack of a pay rise in recent years and the focus on meeting the key performance indicators (KPIs).

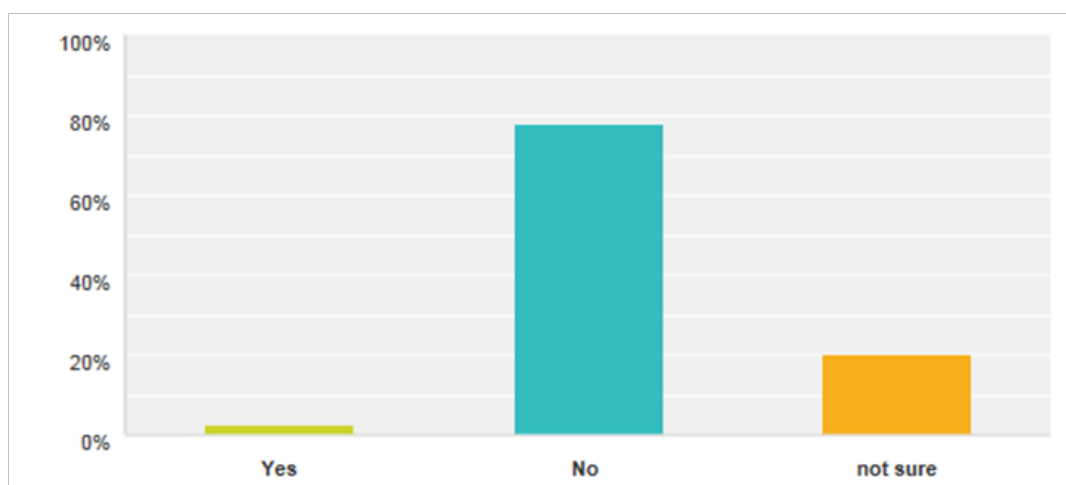
What the staff say

- Due to vacant seniors post, officers have increased workload and are still expected to meet in house processing targets. All major projects have been re allocated to myself as remaining Senior Officer therefore I feel under greater pressure due to increased responsibility, especially looking after more complex applications. Not only that the pay freeze/minimal pay increase and job evaluation experienced over the last few years now means I don't believe my salary is commensurate with the responsibilities I now have.*
- We are all struggling to meet customer expectations. We feel forgotten. The focus (and budget it appears) is being spent on the "sexy" things like the city deal team, city of culture bid. As long as we under the (ultimate) management of planners, who otherwise don't get involved in the day to day running of building standards, we will always be second best. Most of the income we generate gets spent elsewhere. Some years we make a substantial profit, but very little extra money is invested in the section.*
- Barrage of complaints from customers, unrealistic customer expectations not being adequately addressed by management, too many years of poor management making unnecessary changes or not making changes quickly enough, lack of internal promotion into vacancies.*

- *There's too much work, too little time to meet with applicants and builders, too many emails and phone calls to respond to, taking away from concentration on warrant assessments, endless checklists and cumbersome computer systems, pressure from management to improve customer contact.*
- *All colleagues are struggling with the work and the lack of support offered by the management above them. The management are extremely fortunate to have a team of surveyors with a professional attitude otherwise things would fall apart. In XXXXX the team have worked extremely hard to keep things running smoothly, testimony for being granted 6 years verification and yet we are paid a full grade lower than our counter parts in other Local Authorities. No recognition other than a 'thank you'.*
- *Staff shortage and heavier workload.*
- *Service redesign on going, pressure to hit targets with an increasing workload.*

Uncertainty about the future was particularly high for those respondents whose employers had not been appointed for the full six year term. These teams are already facing a challenge recruiting and may find more staff taking up better paid and better resourced jobs in the private sector.

Do you expect morale to improve in the next few years?



Conclusion

UNISON surveyed members working in building standards in May 2017. We asked them a range of questions about the impact of public sector budget cuts on themselves and the work that they do. This report analyses their responses and allows you to hear directly from the workforce about what it's like trying to deliver high quality public services under austerity. The report reveals a dedicated workforce committed to ensuring public safety by ensuring that buildings meet the standards required but who are under enormous pressure. They feel exhausted, undervalued and are struggling to deal with the demands placed upon them.

ESSENTIAL COVER WHEREVER YOU WORK

Worried about your job in today's uncertain times? If you work for a private company or voluntary sector organisation providing public services, **now is the time to join UNISON.**

Every member, wherever they work, receives our full range of member benefits and services which includes:

- advice, support and help when you need it at work
- a helpline that is open until midnight
- legal help for you at work and your family at home
- financial assistance and debt advice in times of need
- compensation for accidents and injuries at work.

And we offer a range of exclusive member discounts that can save you and your family money when you are shopping, buying insurance or looking for a holiday.

And you get all this from as little as £1.30 a month – depending on how much you earn.



UNISON – essential cover for you

**For further information contact:
UNISON Scotland's Bargaining and Campaigns team on 0141 342 2811**

Published by UNISON Scotland's Bargaining and Campaigns team, UNISON House, 14 West Campbell Street, Glasgow, G2 6RX
June 2017

Join online at joinunison.org or call free on 0800 171 2193