

Counting the cost



**Transactional staff
in Scotland's
public services
speak out**

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Introduction

UNISON Scotland has surveyed our members working in transactional jobs across Scotland's public services. They are the staff who take the money, outline what the charges are and explain the bill. We wanted to find out how their working lives had been changed in a climate of 'austerity' and increasing demands for efficiency.

This is the latest in a series of such surveys undertaken by UNISON Scotland - recent other reports have examined staff working in waste management and mental health services and as hospital porters.

This report varies in form from those studies in that we did not specifically ask this group of staff the impact that stagnating wages has been having on their standard of living. This issue is well covered in our previous reports which tell an identical story of money going less far, of lack of holidays, of struggling to make ends meet, having to exert real care when shopping, of increasing personal debts and so dismally and disgracefully on.

The transactional staff surveyed here work on similar grades and in similar workplaces to the subjects of previous studies. It was felt that for those who have not yet grasped that life has got considerably harder for workers in public services in recent years - one more example was unlikely to be persuasive. Instead this report focuses more closely on the working environment.

The Transactional Workforce

“Transactional workforce” is the term we use to describe that broad grouping of staff who interact with the public at the point where money is changing hands - either tax is being levied or charges paid. This includes (but isn't limited to) insurance clerks, cashiers, contract clerks and assistants, revenue assistants, finance and accounts clerks and counter service assistants. The majority of survey respondents work in local government and were overwhelmingly (90%) female.

The importance of this group of staff has grown in recent years as many public service providers have had to focus more on revenue collection from service users and the public as a consequence of so-called austerity cuts. This is particularly the case in local government.

Support from the Scottish Government for Local Government declined by 8.5% in real terms between 2010/11 - 2013/14.

http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2015/nr_150305_local_government_overview.pdf

Combined with a centrally imposed Council Tax freeze this has put council finances under unprecedented pressure.

This in turn has increased both the importance of and pressure on transactional staff. They have been in the front line as councils seek to compensate for this loss of tax revenue by increasing revenue gathered by other means, principally new or increased charges. Audit Scotland's assessment of the Scottish Government local financial returns shows that councils raise over £1.3 billion (2012/13 figures) through charges equivalent to over 50 per cent of the amount they raise through Council Tax.

http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2013/nr_131031_hcw_charging_services.pdf

In addition to this they are often the point of contact as the impact of cuts in services becomes felt. This is a facet explored in the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report The Cost of the Cuts.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/cost-cuts-impact-local-government-and-poorer-communities>

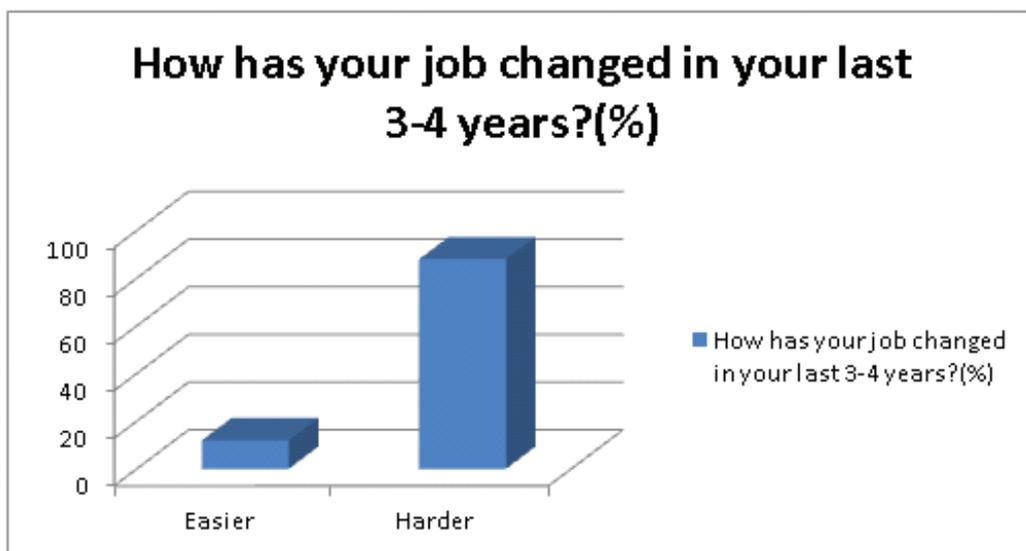
What our survey shows is a workforce who are feeling the cost of the cuts both in terms of the frustrations of the public they deal with and within their own workplace as managements interpret efficiency as meaning cost cutting rather than taking a more holistic view as to how services could be redesigned to be more effective.

Doing the job

Staff are unequivocal about their jobs becoming more difficult in recent years. No fewer than 88% of our respondents said that their working life had become harder rather than easier in recent years. Respondents list pretty much every conceivable method that an employer can use to squeeze more work out of a workforce; reducing staff numbers, reducing hours but with same work load, increasing the range of duties, having people on lower grades cover the work of higher grades, and failing to replace staff off on long term sick leave.

It is probably unnecessary to add that not all of these are mentioned in isolation. The overall tally for those reporting an increasing workload (during a period where pay has been all but static) is 87% with a mere 6% reporting an easing of workload.

Also mentioned fairly frequently is an increase in internal reporting and accounting. Demands for management reports are an increasing burden for some staff widely felt to be both pointless and a distraction from more useful work.



What the staff say

We have increased work load with less staff.

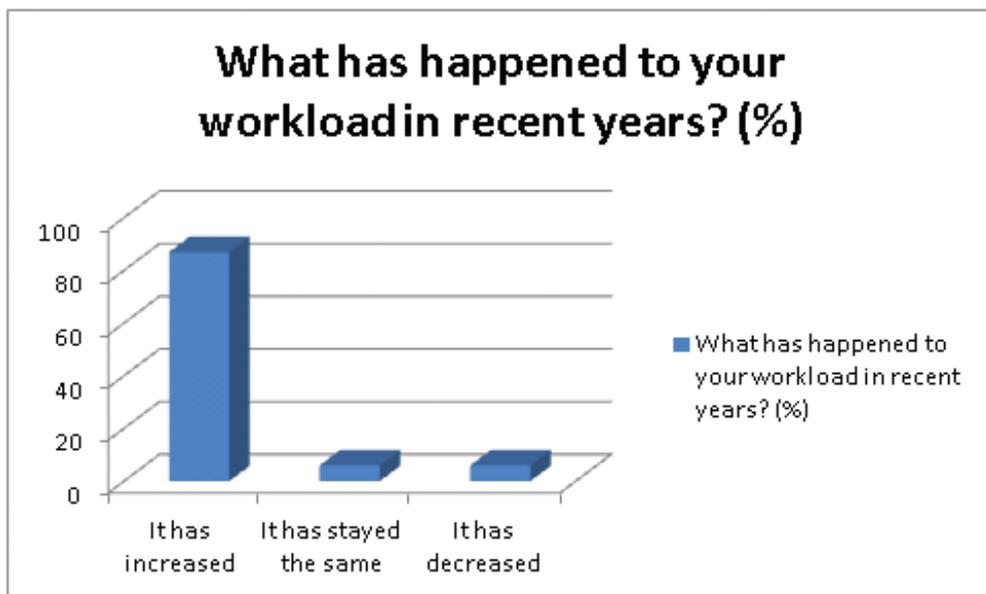
More crossing 't's and dotting 'i's, some of it is back covering, it's possibly a good thing but it takes longer. Some of it though is just over the top and doesn't make sense

Expected to do more.

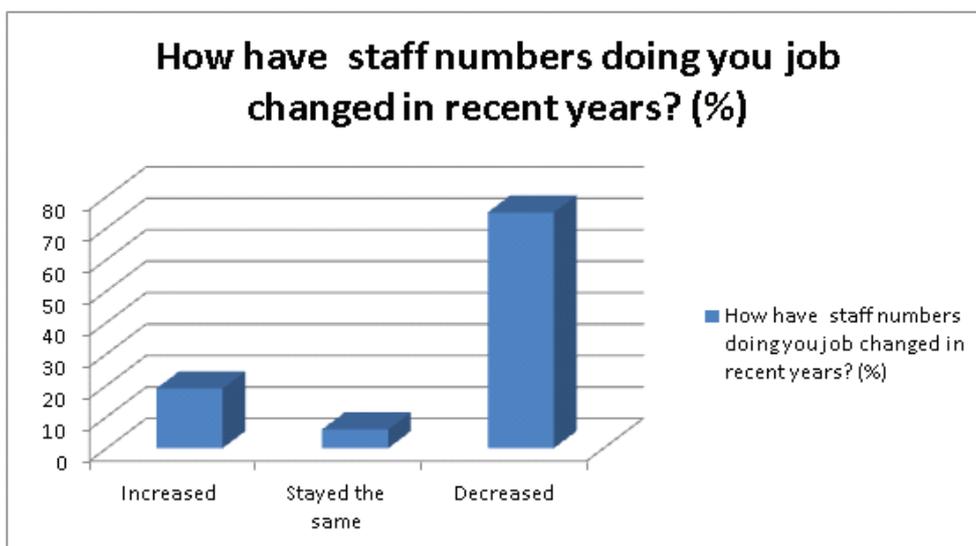
Staffing levels have reduced within the department which increases the workload

Our hours have been reduced from 37.5 to 22 by management and still expected to do same work

Impact on workloads

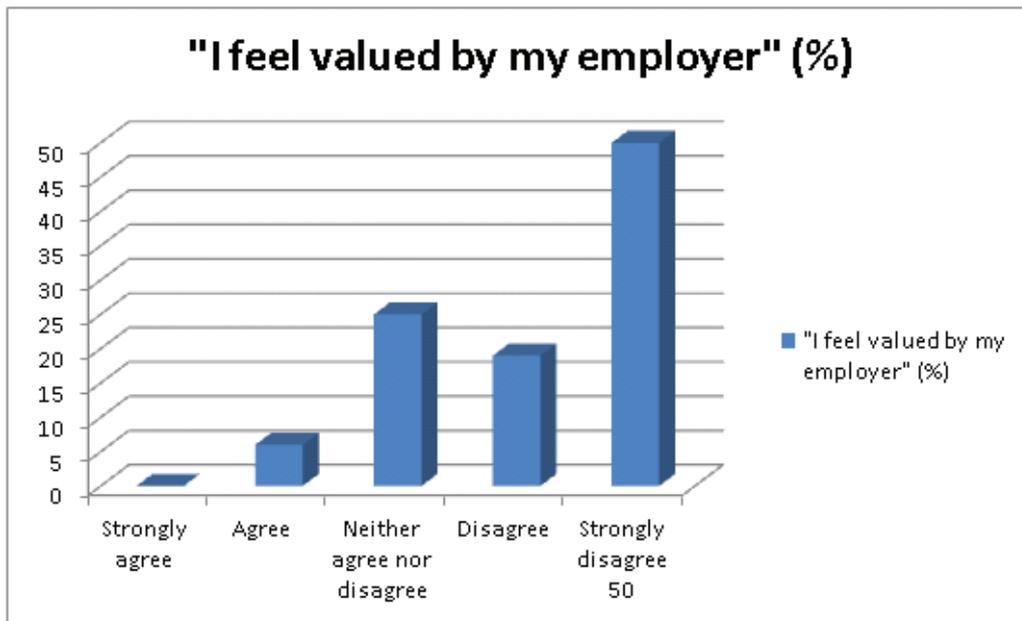


Whilst the overall trend of staff numbers is unquestionably down there was a noticeable reporting of staff numbers increasing in some workplaces (18%). This perhaps reflects the extension of charges and the necessity to keep bringing the money in. There seemed however little sign that the increases had helped reduce workloads.



Another factor increasing workload has been that new or more complex charging regimes need to be explained to the public – as task which as some point out can conflict with targets to deal with inquiries in a specified time.

Morale



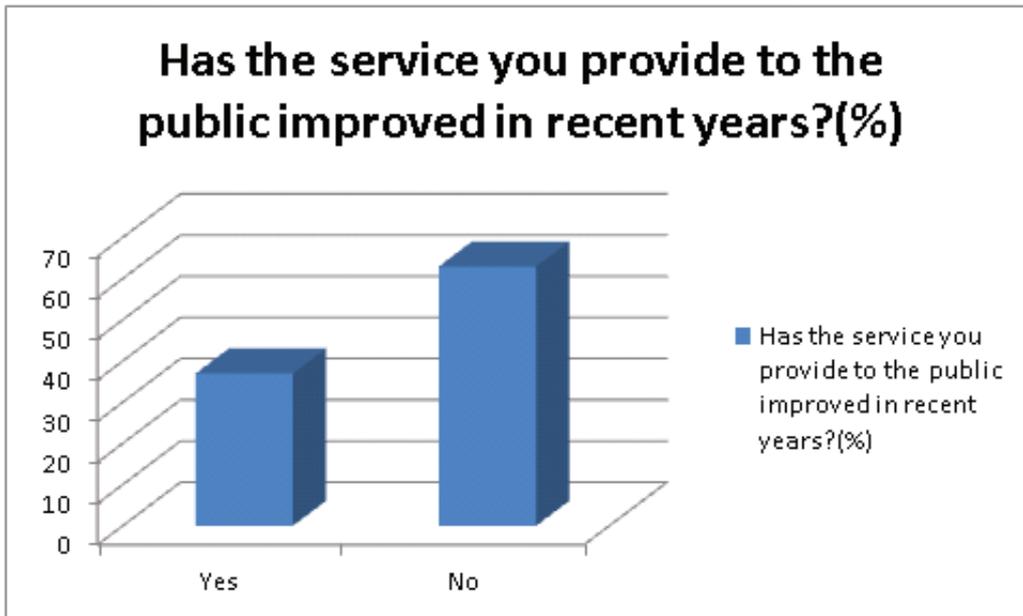
Perhaps unsurprisingly staff morale is not high. Greater demands at work failing to be matched with greater pay combined with a more target-driven culture imposed by management does not make for a contented workforce. Even taking this into account our survey results make for fairly bleak reading 69% disagreed (and most of them strongly disagreed) with the ‘statement I feel valued by my employer’. Much of this stems from the increased demands, but some staff are clearly unhappy with a more target-driven culture in their job. Objections vary but it appears that for some it is the manner of the imposition of the methods as much as the new methods themselves which are a cause of unhappiness. More than one respondent comments that while their employer sets great store by levels of ‘customer satisfaction’ the well being of the staff seems to be of no consideration whatsoever.

What the staff say

Delays in processing causes excessive counter and phone enquiries from both customers and landlords. It is a vicious circle as the people who answer the enquiries by phone and at the counter are the processors.

We are often kept back until after 5pm due to customers waiting as the doors don't close until 5pm. We are verifying and processing claims while answering a busy phone which breaks concentration and asks for errors to be made

The other side of the counter



A clear majority (63%) believed the quality of service they were providing to the public was going down, for reasons previously mentioned. A perhaps surprisingly high 37% felt that they were delivering a better service than previously (it should be said that no clear set of explanations emerged from the survey as to why this was thought).

What the staff say

You have to make full explanations of any changes to the service as the customers are not aware of them

Excellent customer service is at the forefront of the council aims. Staff welfare is definitely secondary and we are pushed and pulled in all directions.

Because we are being forced to deal more quickly with customers to meet targets you sometimes don't get a chance to explain things fully - so people only get the information they need right there and then, but then have to come back on the phone later.

Just over half (53%) of staff claim to have detected a change in how they are treated by the public. They point to a number of factors causing this, some driven by internal changes, others external. Internal changes which cause friction between public and staff are more often put down to expanded roles rather than simply increased workload. For example, having to process claims or orders as well as deal with inquiries about them when previously these would be separate roles - delaying both and causing frustration at the other end of the line.

External factors too are pointed up. Staff are in the position of having to explain that services previously free at the point of need are now charged for or that previous charges have either gone up dramatically or are now part of a more complex charging regime. Resentment at this turn of events is far more likely to be directed at the staff who are bearing this bad news than the political decision makers who are responsible. Reports of anger and levels of aggression are common.

Wider changes such as changes to the benefit system are also flagged up as having a bearing on attitudes. Many of the staff surveyed said it is clear that some people are desperate and this is reflected in their attitude to staff - this is particularly pronounced where staff are for example processing rebates or refunds. Changes to the benefit system have had an impact on staff well outside those (such as Housing Benefit staff) who might be expected to be immediately affected. Sudden and severe drops in household income add an urgency to interactions with staff who have any financial role at all and this is reflected in the impact of increased stress reported by those staff

What the staff say

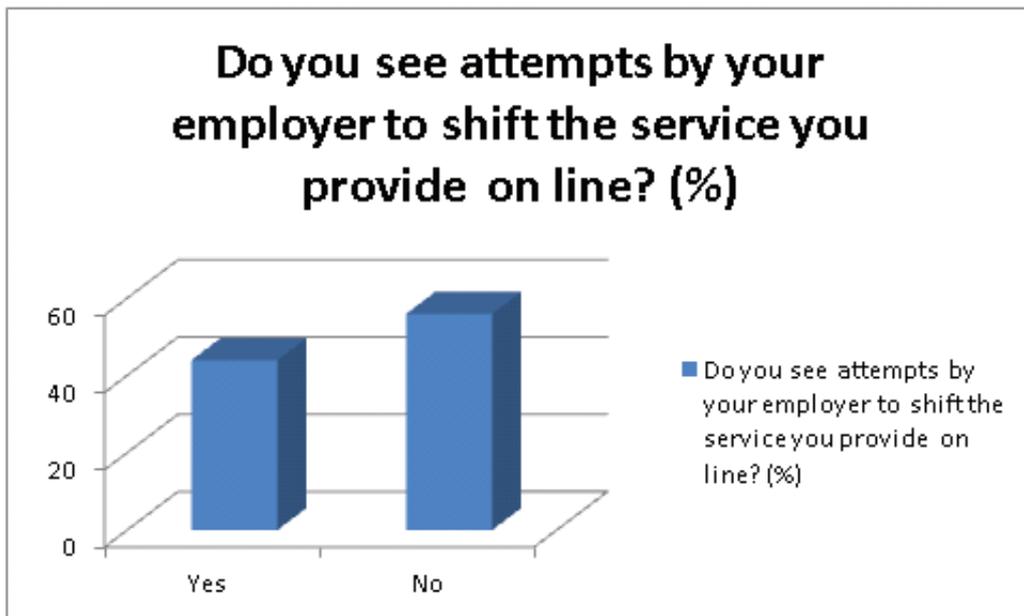
Customers feel they are being short changed for the services they receive. The service doesn't change but costs rise and people are struggling to pay.

People are more angry and aggressive than they used to be.

No one's wages are keeping up with inflation. They just don't have the extra income to pay for the increases which is putting them into debt. I'm not surprised people aren't happy

Public under pressure with cost of living which they then pressure staff to get reductions applied quicker.

The future



We asked staff if their employer had been looking to put the service they delivered online. This was seen by many staff as simply a trend which is part of 'the way we live now'. Others made the point that the vulnerable nature of the people they dealt with either made a shift to online either impossible or fraught with difficulties.

Several respondents made the point that whilst many people enjoy unrestricted internet access a significant number do not - and that publicly available sites for them to access online services such as libraries or publicly run projects are themselves being targeted for cuts. This they argued meant that a shift to online as opposed to in person services were more problematic than managements might think.

Conclusion

In a more general sense it is the case that far more often than not 'efficiency savings' have not meant service redesign to more effective use of resources.

It's been more a case of salami slicing, more pressure and failing the public.

"Efficiency' and 'cheaper' are not synonyms. That budgets across public service organisations are under pressure is something of an understatement. In such circumstances to achieve actual efficiency savings requires cooperation and staff engagement and cooperation, rather than imposition.

One of the failings has been the imposition of a false separation between so-called front line and back office functions rather than a proper examination of systems and services as a whole.

UNISON Scotland has examined this issue in an in-depth report 'The Front Line Starts Here' produced with the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE).

http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/publicworks/thefrontlinestartshere_mar2012.pdf

The variety of transactional staff in Scotland's public services are feeling under the cosh. They are often bearing the brunt of others frustrations with cuts and cost cutting while the quality of own working lives deteriorates.

Through no fault of their own they are placed between the rock of unmet public need and the hard place of imposed cost cutting - and they are very definitely counting the cost.



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Valuing public services and the people
who provide them



For more information on UNISON's Worth It campaign
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/worthit

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