



UNISON Scotland Evidence
Education and Skills Committee
Professor Cole's report into school closures

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. We are the largest trade union public services representing a range of staff in schools and in Building Standards departments in local authorities. We therefore welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the committee.

Evidence

The Cole report raises a range of issues which are relevant not just to public sector building projects but to the safety of all building work in Scotland. Concerns go beyond new building projects and include the ongoing maintenance and safety of existing structures.

UNISON believes that much more work needs to be done to ensure that the issues raised in the Cole report are being dealt with across the whole construction sector.

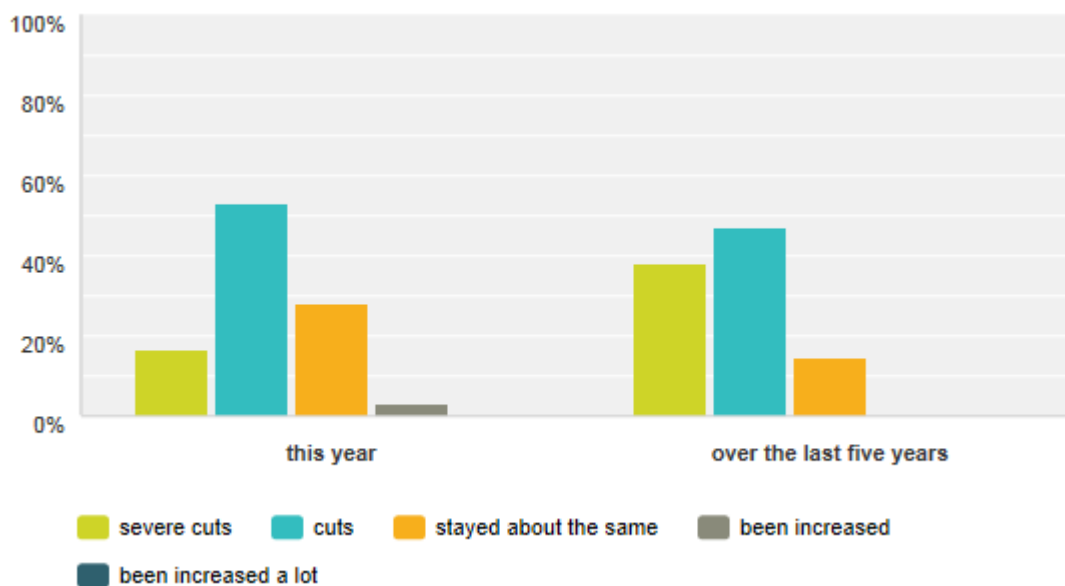
There needs to be much more clarity round and scrutiny of:

- **Quality of the contracts**
- **Role of independent certifiers**
- **Preparation and maintenance of "as installed" records**
- **Adequate independent scrutiny**
- **Council resourcing of projects**
- **Role of building standards**
- **Management and maintenance of school building**

While the Cole report is extensive this evidence will focus on Building Standards teams and PPP/PFI.

UNISON is currently undertaking research on the impact of cuts on Building Standards departments. Sadly, in terms of this evidence, we are in the early stages of our research. We have used the early responses to inform this evidence and will of course publish the full report in due course.

The ongoing cuts to local government are clearly causing difficulties across all services and Building Standards Departments are also feeling the pain. Over 50% of respondents, to our survey of members in building standards teams, report budget cuts this year and 16% say that cuts had been severe.



Members, responding to our survey, tell us that in some areas the slump in new building work which took place after the financial crash is now over and they are now expected to deal with a growing workload with fewer resources. Members feel under pressure trying to complete work to both the deadlines and standards required.

Initial responses to our survey do show that Building Standards departments are now focused on the approval of warrant drawings and meeting the initial response deadline. Many feel that the pressure to meet performance indicators prevents them from focusing on the quality of the work that they do. In particular they do not have time for “preventative work”. This is particularly disappointing as focusing on prevention was one of the key recommendations of the Christie Commission on public service reform.

Many suggest the new e-building standards system far from making things more efficient has just created work. They feel swamped in administrative tasks rather than out and about supporting those doing the building work to get things right.

Members indicate that they spend much less time out on site visits than in the past. They feel their jobs have become desk bound focused on paperwork or looking at drawings rather than checking if the building work meets the drawings presented. This backs up the findings of the Cole report. Respondents indicate that while they can sign off drawings as safe, builders often do “whatever is easiest at the time” rather than follow the plan that has been submitted. Members feel that the site visits they do get to make are often far too late in the process for the issues they should be checking for to be spotted. As one member stated

“there’s a lot you can cover up with wallpaper and a coat of paint”

Structural problems, like those in the school walls as well as drainage problems, and disturbances to walls and floors, can only be spotted early in the build.

As the Cole report also states there is a clear issue with limited resources of qualified staff in building standards. This has a number of causes. The cuts mean that it is the most experienced/older staff that tend to take voluntary severance when offered. This means the teams lose experience when in fact staff shortages make experience even more necessary. Survey respondents tell us that construction work is picking up in Scotland and so they are struggling to recruit and retain staff in the given the opportunities available in the private

sector often with better pay and less pressure. The ongoing pay freeze in the public sector is also an issue which means that the staff do not feel valued. This impacts heavily on team and individual morale

Members also indicate that they have concerns that the long term budget cuts across the public sector mean are impacting on the ongoing maintenance and therefore safety of public buildings. Many buildings, including schools, are either Victorian or built in the 1960s. They require work to ensure that buildings are “wind and watertight” and are safe to use. Spending cuts can mean that problems that would be reasonably cheap to fix now are being delayed. This could lead at best to much more expensive work in future or at worst a serious accident.

As the Cole report highlights there seems to be a widespread misunderstanding of the role of Building Standards departments. They are not the “Clerk of Works” for any building project. Investing in resources in building standards teams while important will not in itself prevent the problems raised in the report from re-occurring there isn’t sufficient oversight of the day to day building work as it is being done.

The Cole report states that the embedment of the wall tiles was not an area that would normally be checked by building standards. A Clerk of Works is a vital role still needs to be undertaken whether the project is funded by the public purse or private companies. This is the person who should be on site checking that all work is carried out to the correct standards. Some members go as far as suggesting that there should be legislation to make this role compulsory on any building job above a certain size. UNISON believes that this has reasonable merit and should be further investigated.

The Cole report highlighted problems with the Certificate of Completion. We did not ask about this in our survey but in our discussions round 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.

Feedback from UNISON Health and Safety Stewards on Schools

Gas supply

Contractors supplying gas to the science department as part of a new built school did not follow the manufacturers’ instructions regarding the jointing of pipework. The integrity of the pipework was therefore compromised and couldn’t be used. It was only by coincidence that the Council’s Maintenance officer noticed the jointing compound and questioned the contractors upon its use. The contractors are currently rectifying the pipework.

Silica dust

A newly built school was subject to a number of complaints regarding excessive dust. The interior finishing of the school was designed to have a natural effect i.e. bare concrete, but it had no sealant. As a consequence there is reportedly a significant amount of dust which is re-circulating within the School and members are concerned over silicate dust.

Chemical Stores/Lab Preparation rooms

Scottish, Schools, Education, Research, Centre SSERC is a local authority shared-service providing support across thirty-two Scottish education authorities and produced a number of documents relating to health and safety. In nearly all cases of new build schools the labs and chemical storage rooms fail to achieve many of the health and safety standards suggested by SSERC. Ventilation, temperature control, emergency escape designs are some of the main issues. The contractors have argued that the design and construction meet the requirements of building control specifications and are reluctant to change anything. SSERC inspectors have

visited the school in one case and produced a report outlining the design concerns. It is also worth noting that HSE would also take cognisance of the SSERC guidelines as they are specifically aligned to Health & Safety best practice and guidance. The issue is currently on-going.

In respect of Health and Safety the potential outcome of these examples could be significant. Not only in terms of their severity, but also the numbers of individuals involved.

PPP/PFI

While UNISON opposed PPP schemes from the outset, we accept the findings in the report that PPP was not in itself the cause of the problems found. Problems like those identified can occur with any construction project which is why proper regulation and adequate funding for those tasked with ensuring the regulations are met are so crucial. We do believe that there are some reasons why such failures are a bigger risk in PPP schemes.

Firstly, the construction company in a PPP scheme is almost always an equity partner of the SPV running the scheme. In effect this means they are both the client and the contractor. Unlike conventional procurement, there is no council or other public service provider performing the supervisory client role.

Secondly, there is a profit incentive to keep costs to the minimum. Any saving that the construction partner can make, increases profits to both the construction company and the other SPV partners. There is therefore a stronger cost saving incentive than in conventional procurement.

Thirdly, many PPP schemes have been under pressure to cut costs late in the project because of budget overrun. We know that this has resulted in specification cuts, such as fewer beds in PPP hospitals and the loss of planned teaching areas in PPP schools. There is bound to be a concern that this may drive construction changes as well.

Fourthly, PPP schemes tend to use standard designs to keep architectural costs to a minimum. This has been criticised on aesthetic grounds because designs don't always reflect the local setting. It also means that a design feature that fails, could have implications for not one building, but many.

Conclusion

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON members are the key staff delivering public services across Scotland. They have a unique perspective as tax payers, service users and in service delivery and are therefore well placed to contribute to the policy making process in Scotland. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the committee on their behalf.

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