



UNISON
Scotland

Registering our Concerns

A survey of registrars

February 2016

This survey is the latest report in our *Damage* series looking at the impact of austerity on public services and those who deliver them.

UNISON Scotland conducted a survey of members working as registrars/ in registration departments in January 2016.

Our survey shows that austerity is making life very difficult for our members in this sector and those who are legally required to use the service they provide.

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Introduction

This survey forms part of UNISON's *Damage* series looking at the impact of the Age of Austerity on services and those who deliver them.

The Conservative Government's Austerity programme will result in a further £2billion of cuts to Scotland's public services. The Scottish Government has chosen not to use its tax raising powers to mitigate the impact of these cuts. Sadly the cuts that services have already endured, since the banking crisis, are having a serious impact on public bodies' ability to deliver high quality services. While the salami slicing of services doesn't have the same impact in the media as closures of single employers our research shows that the cuts are and will continue to have just as serious an impact on service delivery, workers lives and Scotland's economy. These surveys aim to capture the detailed impact of cuts on services and the workers who remain.

This survey focused on members working in Registrars Departments in local authorities. This is where we register our births, marriages, citizenship and finally deaths. These council services take us from cradle to grave. Our survey shows that austerity is making life very difficult for our members in this sector and for those who the government has placed a legal duty to use the services they provide. Registrars provide a service for people at high pressure points in their life: a new child, marriage, citizenship and bereavement. The service is a gateway to a range of benefits, tax credits and services. Delays can cause financial hardship and stress. People deserve a quality customer service. These processes cannot be rushed, they need to be handled sensitively and accurately.

Key Issues

- Staff are under enormous pressure to deliver a high quality service with increasing demand and fewer resources.
- Budgets have been cut leading to job losses in registrars departments
- Delays have a serious impact on services users causing distress at a difficult time and delaying access to, for example, child benefit and organising funerals
- Job cuts in local government have led to registrars departments taking on wider customer service and other administrative roles
- Legislative changes have increased workloads for registrars departments
- These pressures are leading to long waiting times for service users.

Summary

This survey is part of our Damage series looking at the impact of austerity on public services and those who deliver them.

UNISON Scotland conducted a survey of members working as registrars/ in registration department in January 2016. Our survey shows that austerity is making life very difficult for our members in this sector and those who are legally required to use the service. Registrars provide a service for people at high pressure points in their life: a new child, marriage, citizenship and bereavement. The service is a gateway to a range of benefits, tax credits and services. Delays can cause financial hardship and stress. People deserve a quality customer service. These processes cannot be rushed, they need to be handled sensitively and accurately.

Most indicated that their team budget had been cut. When asked about budgets over the past 5 years, over 50% believed that budget cuts had been *very severe*, another quarter said the budget had been *cut* and 20% that budgets had *stayed about the same* over the same period. When asked specifically about their budget in the last year, 37% percent felt their team budegt had experienced *severe cuts* and 37% said their team budget had been *cut*, with 25% saying their team budget had stayed the same.

Respondents added that, while budgets had been cut and jobs lost, work had not disappeared and had in fact grown over the period. This was having a serious impact on the service they were able to provide to the public. In some areas people have to wait for as long as two hours to register a death.

Most respondents indicated that teams have lost two or three members of staff. These are small teams, so while we are not seeing job cuts in the numbers which generate headlines, it is clear that teams are struggling to meet demand.

Respondents also stated that their workload had also increased because of legislative changes and the introduction of new services.

Key changes to legislation and services

- Immigration/citizenship changes
- Changes to death certification: new checks post shipman
- New 'Tell Us Once' service
- Equal marriage, civil partnerships take up

In some authorities staff in registrars departments now taken on "customer service" roles and in other areas things like school placing request appeals and administration of burial grounds. So they now have an increased workload with less staff to undertake the work.

Members are telling us that there are queues of people waiting up to 2 hours to register a death or making an appointment to come back another day. This is stressful for people coming in to use the service and also for staff who are under pressure to deliver a prompt high quality service. Particularly for people who are already stressed and upset following bereavement. Telling someone they have been randomly selected for a double check on the cause of death and they may have to wait 2-3 days for a death certificate after they have queued for two hours to see you is a difficult task. Hearing it is even tougher. This work requires time and sensitivity, it cannot be rushed.

The Tell Us Once service was a great idea, it ensures that bereaved families don't have to deal with lots of public bodies but it has increased the workload of the person who is collecting and inputting the data. Trying to deal sensitively with a client, to get all the relevant data knowing there is a queue of people waiting is very stressful.

Pressure is also leading to more mistakes creating further delays. Those who take voluntary redundancy are more likely to be more experienced and to a certain extent higher grades leaving less experienced staff to take on that work. This can also lead to increased mistakes. Taking on wider customer service work also means you have less time doing the registrars work so take longer to build up experience and skills in that area. Cuts in wider administrative staff numbers also mean lots of staff doing much more of their own administration so increasing their work load. They are often slower at tasks than skilled admin staff again slowing down the process.

Staff are doing unpaid work to cover for extra workload: 25% doing unpaid work most weeks and 50% now and again. Many are not able to take time off built up under flexi policies as there is "never a quiet time" to do so. Work load pressures also leading to poor communication, not knowing what's going on also adds to stress.

As we gather information from our members about the impact of budget cuts on their ability to do their jobs, we see just how severe the situation is becoming. Staff working in registrars teams are working extremely hard to try to deliver a high quality service to members of the public who are in the midst of life's most stressful events. Like their colleagues in our earlier surveys they are struggling to meet demand due to staff shortages and lack of resources. Demand shows no signs of falling. We cannot pretend that the cuts are not hurting.

Survey

UNISON asked a sample of members working in local authority Registrars departments in January 2016 to take part in an electronic survey about the impact, if any, of cuts in local authority budgets on their departments. Members from 11 different authorities responded to our survey. Just over 40% of respondents had worked in their current post for less than five years: the rest had worked for a range of time between 5 and 31 years. Respondents included assistant registrars, registrars, senior registrars, deputy and chief registrars.

Budget Cuts

Most indicated that their team budget had been cut. When asked about budgets over the past 5 years, over 50% believed that budget cuts had been *very severe*, another quarter said the budget had been *cut* and 20% that budgets had *stayed about the same* over the same period. When asked specifically about their budget in the last year, 37% percent felt their team budget had experienced *severe cuts* and 37% said their team budget had been *cut*, with 25% saying their team budget had stayed the same.

Respondents added that, while budgets had been cut and jobs lost, work had not disappeared and had in fact grown over the period. This is due to internal reorganisation and legislative changes. This was having a serious impact on the service they were able to provide to the public. In some areas people have to wait for as long as two hours to register a death. While clearly they have the opportunity to make an appointment and return, that can be equally if not more difficult. As families live further apart people are often dealing with the death of a family member who does not live nearby. It is therefore difficult and in some cases costly to return to the local authority office for an appointment.

Members are also reporting that increased workload pressure is leading to more mistakes which then create further delays. There is also a great deal of stress involved in trying to take the extended time needed to gather the information for the Tell Us Once service or even more difficult that a client has been randomly selected for the extra checks on the cause of death (following the Shipman Review) and supporting people properly while knowing that there is a queue of other people waiting. In response to many different questions members are telling us that staff are leaving the service to find other work because of these pressures

Members were asked to comment further on their response. Comments include:

- Voluntary retirement offered to those over 50 and was taken up in stages. More than 10 people left leaving us with less staff and the same work load - told to do more with less. Other people have left through what they call natural wastage but it was just that the job had changed so much that they lost the love for the job. We are now at the stage where customers are waiting for 2hours to register a death. And now we are being told that we just have to deal with the changes and tough if we are not happy about it.
- Staff are stressed, there are not enough bodies to cover even statutory requirements of the job, mistakes are occurring frequently and the level of service provided to our customers has become quiet appalling at times.

- The Registrations have increased since 2006 although the staff have been reduced. Payment packages offered to staff therefore staff numbers reduced 3 although we have 2 trainee registration staff they need to be doing registration constantly to be able to deal with the enquiries dealing with the law and there does not seem to be enough staff to cover for the registration training.
- People are leaving and not being replaced - still expected to provide the same service, unable to cope with walk in customers people waiting up to 2 hours to see a registrar
- Stationery cuts no marriage certificate folders impacts on customers Marriage rooms in need of refurbishment a special day for couple but not so special a room to conduct the ceremony in.

“Several staff have left the department and not been replaced, workload has increased due to change in legislation but staff expected to [provide the same service] in the same amount of time”

Job Cuts

Most respondents indicated that teams have lost two or three members of staff. These are small teams, so while we are not seeing job cuts in the numbers which generate headlines, it is clear that teams are struggling to meet demand.

These comments are typical of the responses given.

- Over past 6 years we have lost half our staff due to voluntary redundancies and staff finding other jobs and there's roles have not been replaced.
- Yes-three Team Leaders. Also at least 2 experienced Team members have left and not been replaced

How has your workload changes over the last few years?

Job losses mean an increased workload for remaining staff. It is therefore no surprise that that 94% of respondents stated that their workload had increased *in the last few years*. As well as job cuts some teams have taken on wider customer service roles within the authority. Across all authorities a range of legislative changes have increased workload for registration departments.

Recent changes to registrars workload

- Equal marriage and civil partnership rights,
- New immigration and citizenship processes
- Tell Us Once service when registering a death
- Changes which add extra checks to death certification process following the Shipman inquiry.

While we fully support equal marriage rights and the opportunity to convert existing civil partnerships have increased demand for both licences and registrars to perform the ceremony. Changing immigration rules and patterns have increased work around citizenship. The Tell Us Once service means that when registering a death you only have to give information once and all other government departments are then given the information: cancelling pensions, passports, driving licences etc. This is a valued service saving people a lot of time and emotional stress at a difficult time; it has though added significantly to the workload of the person at the local authority who has to collect all the detailed information and then input it into the system.

While no one is complaining that extra checks have been introduced on doctors issuing death certificates, explaining to someone that they have been randomly selected for a check and the delay (of a few days) that this will mean before they can be issued to a death certificate and therefore organise a funeral needs to be handled sensitively. This takes time it is also stressful knowing that there is a growing queue outside.

Comments on the extra “registration” work include

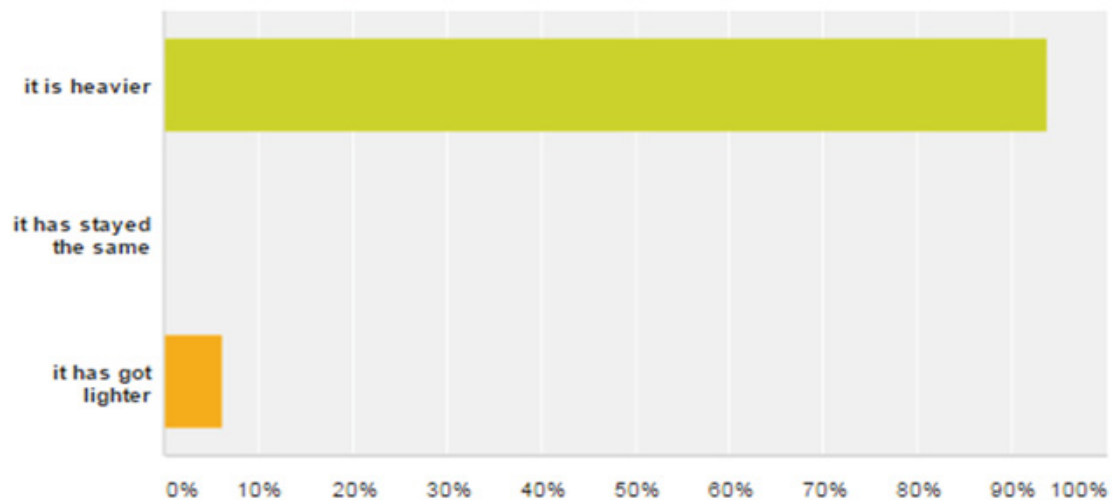
- increased responsibility; increase workload due to staff shortages and staff changing roles from registration to Customer First; there may be staff training as registrars but are always withdrawn to deal with phones, mailboxes etc
- Now doing Customer Service duties, dealing with the public face to face, phones, cash ups
- More pressure to take as many customers as possible again rushing and not giving the quality of service we have been known for in the past, when I raised this issue I was told that we now offer "a service" not a "quality service". Constantly being watched so that you don't take too long registering a death never mind if the person is distressed or maybe just not taking in what you are saying!!
- I am responsible for most of the registrations and registration enquiries at XXX just now. I am also the Team Leader supervising the reception and cash hall. I am responsible for the overseeing of the audit procedures in the cash hall and for producing the monthly cash hall reports. I am responsible for the training of assistant registrars in registration and also the Tell Us Once Service. I cover for the senior Registrar in XXX when he is on holiday dealing with placing requests and citizenship paperwork but find I am frequently called upon to cover Registration as there has not been enough staff allocated and as a result find I have to stay behind to deal with the work which would have been done earlier in the day had I not been called to do registration I am also responsible for doing the PRD's for my team which is sometimes difficult as I am just not responsible for registration but also for Customer Service officers. As customer First has a normal PRD plus Core Competencies it is double the work.
- When I started, I was doing a lot more ceremonies than I am now. The job was worthwhile and the continuity made for a feeling of belonging within the department. Since the Registration was linked with the Service Point, in-office staff have taken over much of the Ceremonies work. I therefore have only sporadic assignments which can easily result in 'being out of harness'.

“Now one person is doing the job that three or four members of staff used to do”

“We are having to do more admin work as we have lost admin staff and various other members of staff so instead of getting to do things properly they are rushed and sometimes not checked which then results in mistakes which in registration is not acceptable”

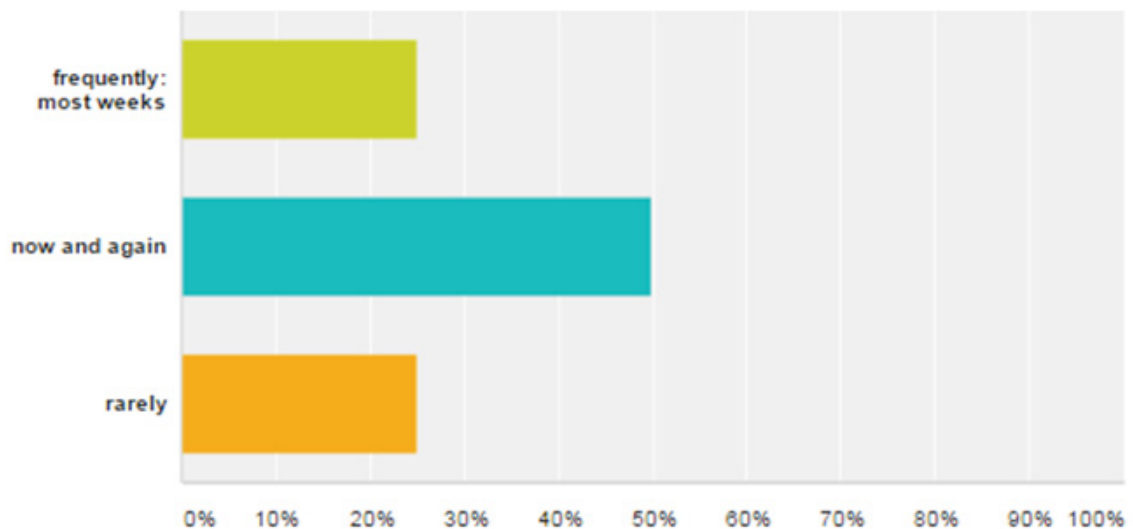
Members indicated that changes to teams in some areas meant that they were taking on other work particularly in customer service roles. Respondents comments include

- Customer Service duties
- Placing Request Appeals
- Reports for cash supervision of the cashhall and reception
- Administration for all of Moray Burial Grounds - 50+ cemeteries
- New online certificate ordering business with turnover around £150,000 per year.



In response to staff shortages and increased workload members are struggling to keep up with the level of demand and some also indicate that this pressure is increasing the number of mistakes make which again increases workload.

Do you regularly do unpaid extra hours to get work done?



A quarter of respondents stated that they worked extra unpaid hours most weeks to get work done and another 50% that they did this now and again. This again indicates the impact of cuts on the service they provide. People have to queue for substantial amounts of time or return for an appointment to meet legal requirements. These certificates are required in order to organise a funeral, claim child benefit and any tax allowances. In some cases it is inconvenient to wait or come back but when it comes to registering a death people are already under enormous stress. Some relatives do not even live in the area where they have to register the death and waiting or returning for an appointment is not just inconvenient but deeply distressing. Imagine sitting in a waiting area for two hours waiting to register the death of your child. This job requires time and sensitivity to deliver a high quality service. Funding cuts in registrars' teams are impacting heavily on members of the public and staff are also finding it difficult to provide the level of service that they know users deserve.

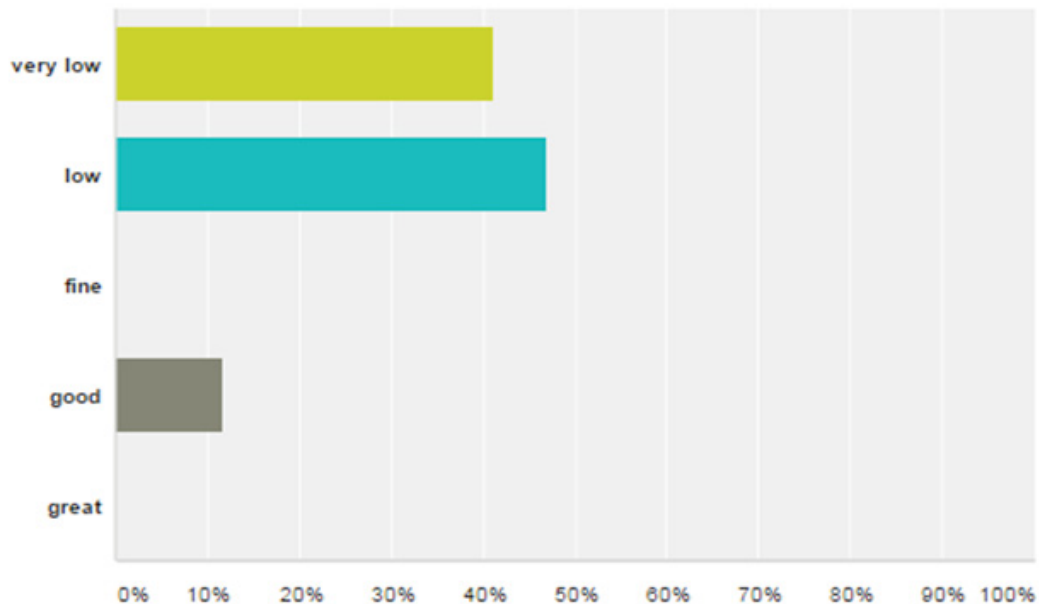
Comments:

- My job used to be varied and that made up for the poor pay but since April 2015, I am not using the skills I have learned over the past years and now concentrate on Registrations. All other work is at different centres for Taxis and Civic. With the introduction of the Review process for Death Registrations it is always possible for families to get agitated and annoyed if they are chosen. Rightly so. With the other offices closed the level of Registrations has increased and we often turn away customers as we rarely take them on a "drop in" basis as all appointments have been taken. The number of Saturdays other members work is steadily increasing outwith the agreed proposals and this leads to increased resentment.
- always losing flexi-time (lost 6 hours month of January) due to having to stay later to cover workload and not being able to get time to take flexi leave
- I cannot cope with my current workload and when I have to leave the office to conduct a marriage ceremony it holds me back and I also find it difficult to find time to make contact with the bride or groom before conducting the ceremony- poor customer service

"I'm pretty sure that every member of staff now are unhappy in their job, this was not the case a few years ago, we used to take pride in our job but no longer"

Staff Morale

Members are continually feeding back to us that they are under enormous pressure to deliver a quality service despite the cuts. When asked about team morale 41% described team morale as very low and 47% as low.



When asked to give a reason comments included:

- Staff not knowing what they are doing on a day to day basis; staff who are in training not feeling they are getting a fair crack of the whip and expected to just move back into a legal based service when they may not have worked in the service for some in months
- I feel morale is low as Assistant Registrars are expected to learn to perform a number of duties over and above the registration duties they feel that the standard of registration has dropped considerable as not enough time is given to the registration work. The error rate has increased since joining customer first as there is not always the opportunity to have Registrations checked before the page is signed.
- Everyday there is a problem with the main system used to register birth, deaths and marriages - this has been happening for several weeks every single day, this causes appointments to be late and for customers to have a longer waiting time. Very frustrating having to move computers at some point every day to try every attempt for the system to work again!
- More work - less staff - very stressed. I used to enjoy my job - I feel embaessed to work for this department now as the service is so poor. Extra work, no extra pay
- Staff are not happy as we are rushed off our feet day in day out. The work load seems to b getting heavier and heavier.
- Where people are more positive it was down to support from colleagues. A small number of colleagues who work well together and help each other out

No one who responded thought that morale would improve in the next few years with 70% stating it would get worse and the remainder unsure. Comments included:

- nothing seems to change; the service we are in seems to be a knee jerk reaction service rather than a planned one; they always seem to say; but this is exceptional circumstances; but these circumstances are going on for years now; when do they stop being exceptional
- Told at "team" meeting things only going to get worse. There will not be any more jobs created, and only more work will be given out. No chance of staffing improving
- I am hopefully taking flexi-retirement next year and this appears to have opened a can of worms. Management seem to be looking at this as a cost-saving exercise but the work still has to be done. I don't want to feel guilty about taking this flexi-retirement but we are a very small team, just 4.5 registrars, and it will cause an impact.

Pay

While the survey did not ask members directly about pay, the lack of any real wage rise alongside substantial increases in workload and changes to responsibilities was frequently raised in the comments sections. Members indicated that as well as the financial pressure they were experiencing due to this real terms pay cut, it also left them feeling undervalued and disrespected. Some stated that they were considering or were actually looking for new jobs or ready to take up offers of voluntary severance which they expected to follow from the next round of budget cuts.

- Workload is fine and new services introduced ultimately provide a better service for customer but unfortunately our poor salary at Grade 5 does not reflect the specialised role we provide this seriously needs to be reviewed
- the greatest damnation of the service is that if I could afford to I would leave; I never thought I would say that; there is an expectation that I will fix it and make it work which is becoming very tiring and I am not sure how long I can keep this up. Trying to train new staff who do not get the experience and succession plan for the future seems to be just words that are used but not delivered. The registration service is now taken as an admin job rather than a legal knowledge of the laws of Scotland and I cannot see this changing in the future
- I feel pay is a real concern and an overview of the whole pay structure of the grade would be great. In the present climate this will probably not be possible. It seems unfair that the staff have borne the brunt of the cuts with Higher Management completely unscathed. The staff are well intentioned and offices have a good sense of teamwork which is undermined by poor Higher Management.

Conclusion

As we gather information from our members about the impact of budget cuts on their ability to do their jobs, we see just how severe the situation is becoming. Staff working in registration teams are working extremely hard to try to deliver a high quality service to members of the public who are in the midst of life's most stressful events.

Like their colleagues in our earlier surveys they are struggling to meet demand due to staff shortages and lack of resources. Demand shows no signs of falling. We cannot pretend that the cuts are not hurting.

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