

A large number of small, black silhouettes of people in various walking poses are scattered across the white background, creating a sense of a busy crowd or a community in motion. The silhouettes are most densely packed in the upper half of the page, around the main title, and become sparser towards the bottom.

Community and voluntary services in the age of austerity

UNISON voices from the frontline

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Foreword

by Dave Prentis, UNISON general secretary

UNISON has been at the forefront of the campaign against the disastrous and unnecessary effect of austerity on the economy and on the public. We have always campaigned alongside our communities for equality and social justice. But our focus is now clearly on defending the essential services on which our communities rely, many of which are provided by housing associations, charities, and not-for-profit organisations.

Workers, UNISON members, are the lynchpin of these services. But they are increasingly bearing the brunt of austerity as they work longer hours, for less pay, in more difficult conditions and with less support. Their reservoir of goodwill is being exhausted as they struggle with intolerable levels of stress and the everyday effort to provide for their families.

This report lays bare the impact of austerity on services provided by the community and voluntary sector and on the workers for whom providing a service is not just a job, but part of a deep personal commitment to the people they support. It is a wake-up call for politicians and society at large that workers in the community sector are approaching crisis point, and it is time to take notice.

Introduction

The community and voluntary sector looks after the disadvantaged and vulnerable. Courageous and hardworking people dedicate their lives to the public good by choosing to work in the sector – knowing there will never be stratospheric bonuses and rarely great career opportunities.

But after three years of austerity, is the sector still able to deliver? And what is the effect on those holding services together at the frontline?

Chief executives speak for their organisations and campaigning organisations represent service users. But UNISON – the biggest trade union in the sector – has talked to our members to bring an authentic voice from the workers about the impact of austerity on the services they deliver and on themselves.

Background

UNISON is the biggest union in the community and voluntary sector, with over 60,000 members working in charities, campaigning organisations, and housing associations.

Our members told us that service users were suffering, but they were worried that some charities were reticent about speaking out. Many charities are now financially reliant on contracts from the public sector, but commissioners think twice about awarding a contract to an organisation that might highlight problems with them. Some politicians have also condemned charities that raise awkward issues, saying they have a 'political' agenda.

Members also told us that their colleagues were struggling just to get by, facing pay cuts, understaffing, sinking into debt and dealing with rising levels of violence and aggression.

In July/August 2013, UNISON conducted a web-based survey of our members in the community and voluntary sector, to get a better picture and 2,978 responded. We asked questions about the current state of the service they work in – be it for children, disabled people, housing, rights and advocacy, or other services – and the impact on themselves.

A step forward

UNISON recommendations

The words of the workers and statistics from the survey are set out in the following pages. But the deep concerns that they express about the fragile quality of services call for strong policy responses. Much power is vested in the hands of public sector commissioners, but some of the recommendations will require statutory backing to prevent decent conditions for the workforce being regarded as an unaffordable luxury.

1. There are major and growing problems faced by the most vulnerable in our society as public services retreat. These are not being recognised in any systematic way, although this survey provides some evidence of them.

- A major commission of inquiry should be established to examine the impact of austerity in the community and voluntary sector, seeking evidence from stakeholders including frontline workers.

2. The lid needs to be permanently lifted on service delivery so any risks to vulnerable people can be highlighted.

- There should be legal protection for charities that whistleblow about the quality and level of funding of services they are asked to deliver.

3. There is clearly a huge problem with understaffing and high stress for staff.

- Commissioners should include a publically available assessment of estimated staffing levels and working hours in all contract tenders.

4. Changes to the welfare system are having a huge impact on people's ability to access decent, affordable housing.

- There should be a review of how, in practice, the state ensures the basic human right to housing. It should specifically include the impact on young and disabled people, the housing benefits system and sanctions regime.

5. Low pay is at epidemic proportions.

- The living wage must be made a minimum floor for pay in the sector.

6. Zero hour contracts are prevalent in the sector, and often represent bad practice.

- Workers on zero-hours contracts should be given a free choice to convert their regular working hours into an 'annual hours' contract.

7. The voice of workers is not being heard, and morale is verging on free-fall. Many workers feel intimidated against speaking out.

- Employers must be expected to take a positive attitude to inviting trade unions in to provide an independent voice for their staff

8. Public sector commissioners have driven down costs to an unsustainable level, and the community and voluntary sector is facing some of the worst impacts of austerity.

- Contracts for services should include the full actual staff costs of that contract, and an allowance for support costs to deliver the service ('full cost recovery').

9. We know the existing community and voluntary sector workforce faces huge problems, but we should avoid these being replicated in the new wave of mutuals/social enterprises that changes in procurement law will encourage.

- Rigorous additional workforce protections should be built into contracts restricted to start-up mutuals and social enterprises.

In our own words

About austerity

“There is a lot more additional stress on our service users. We carry out harm reduction and counselling with people who have drug issues and they are often a lot more anxious and stressed out due to threats of cuts to their benefits, this could lead to them using drugs again as a way of self medicating.”

Community worker from Scotland

“There are fewer resources and no explanation when there is a in reduction of services. Users have less chance to go out, have to wear second hand clothes, have no transport, and blind people now have to buy their own white sticks when they lose them.”

Disability worker from the East Midlands

“We are a respite service for children with autism, challenging behaviour and profound disabilities. Due to financial pressures we have to combine more vulnerable children with children with challenging behaviour. It creates an unsafe environment for both the child and the staff. There have been medication and other errors due to time pressure.”

Children’s worker from the South West

“Tenants don’t have the means to buy the basics. There is overcrowding, and they are unable to afford to move to a house that would accommodate the family size more appropriately.”

Housing worker from Cymru/Wales

“I’ve worked for various citizens advice bureaux for more than 20 years, and it is my firm conviction that in the last couple of years the amount of deprivation, hardship and abject poverty has increased beyond belief. I would never have conceived it possible that a major part of our workload would be the giving out of food parcels. People simply can’t afford to eat.”

Advocacy worker from the North East

“Volunteering greatly benefits our mental health clients rehabilitation, but many volunteer co-ordinator posts are being cut, or made into volunteers themselves. This means vulnerable people don’t get the support to become volunteers – that first step on the ladder back into paid work.”

Community worker from Yorkshire

“More people struggling to budget effectively and falling into debt. More people are turning to pay day loan companies to pay bills and rent. Fewer aids and adaptations are being carried out leaving people at risk in their homes and communities due to budget cuts.”

Housing worker from the West Midlands

“The clients progress when there are staff that understands their daily needs, but high turnover of staff means that workers are inexperienced and these daily needs are not being met. The cuts mean we are seeing more boredom and behavioural problems.”

Disability worker from the North West

“The welfare changes mean vulnerable people are being pushed into unsupported employment – this leaves them vulnerable and places their employment at risk.”

Disability worker from Greater London

“Less funding means fewer staff, a more targeted approach to work, and less time with individuals. The Welsh Government has cut Communities First funding, and have only given short-term funding, which doesn't allow for us to provide a quality service.”

Community worker from Cymru/Wales

In our own words

About ourselves

“Morale is at an all time low, money is not there to upgrade our building, for extra work, repairs or training and it’s been hard struggling to pay bills with no pay increase in 8 years.”

Community worker from Northern Ireland

“I am much more stressed out than I was pre-2010, I am constantly worried that myself and my child will not be able to survive and with debt constantly mounting up, it makes every day life a real struggle.”

Community worker from Scotland

“My employer should acknowledge that work is not the sole priority and people have lives outside of the work we do. We need some clinical supervision to help with the stress of the job – the increasing stress levels and making me feel unconfident in the work I am doing.”

Children’s worker from Eastern England

“Everyone feels less safe in their jobs – the employer has too much power and staff are less likely to say what they really think. Working conditions are getting worse.”

Housing worker from the South East

“We are facing more bullying from management, and an expectation that staff will do more for less.”

Disability worker from the East Midlands

“All staff in my office have a huge amount of TOIL [time off in lieu] because we have too much to do and senior management refuses to get more staff. I’m told this is the same across the organisation. It breeds stress, resentment and unsociable working hours and a feeling that there is no light at the end of the tunnel.”

Housing worker from Cymru/Wales

“As a person who works in the charitable sector, we don’t expect to be rich or even comfortable in terms of pay. But year-on-year with no cost of living pay increase impacts more. We’re in work to make a difference in people’s lives but there’s so much less support available for the people we serve. It’s difficult on an emotional level, which is draining on all levels.”

Advocacy worker in Greater London

“I’ve worked for the employer for 20 years and there is no loyalty. If they could get rid of long-term – more expensive – employees and replace them with lower paid staff they would. It is really stressful having to constantly worry about job security. They change our contracts and terms of employment with no consultation.”

Disability worker from Greater London

The impact on service users and the workforce

The services – housing

UNISON has tens of thousands of members employed by housing associations, providing social housing to those in need and often providing social care to the tenants as well.

Austerity has reduced house building with a 63% cut in capital financing available for new social housing. It has also affected many housing associations by reducing funding for the Supporting People programme for social care. But the biggest impact welfare has been the raft of welfare benefit changes, reducing rental income.

The human side of this is an increase in problems facing vulnerable social housing tenants. ‘Extra’ facilities that make life decent – such as play schemes and community centres – are being cut, and partly as a result social problems are rising. Tenants are facing unemployment and under-employment, rising debts, and confusing and punitive welfare changes. These all make it harder to keep up with the rent – often resulting in people being forced to leave their homes.

And pressure on hard-pressed housing workers continues to build.

.....
73% report more tenants are falling behind with their rent
.....

35% said the top reason was the bedroom tax.
.....

The next most common reasons were:

- complex benefit changes
 - the rising cost of living
 - under-employment and un-employment
 - financial hardship.
-

50% have seen an increase in tenants being evicted or forced to move because of financial pressures.
.....

37% have seen a reduction in non-statutory services (such as play schemes and community centres).
.....

58% report more debt management advisors being employed by their housing associations.
.....

43% report a rise in anti-social behaviour from tenants.
.....

The services – for children

There is a wealth of experience in the community and voluntary sector in providing services for vulnerable children. But much of the funding for these services now comes from contracts from local councils. Austerity has been driving funding down to rock bottom.

Although staff have to be physically present to care for children, the facilities and resources they need to do this well are dwindling. A concerning number of staff report problems in high-risk areas, and many believe children are slipping through the safety net.

72% are concerned that children may be slipping through the safety net.

High risk areas are seen as:

.....
15% do not have enough time to monitor children and follow up concerns of neglect or abuse.
.....

14% report an increasing risk in administering medications.
.....

36% do not have enough time to prepare risk assessments and support plans.
.....

55% can now provide fewer resources (such as toys).
.....

52% can now only provide fewer outside activities (such as visits).
.....

Since austerity

.....
43% have less time to spend with each child.
.....

The services – for disabled people

Disabled people's organisations have been prominent in highlighting the hurt that welfare changes are causing to individuals. But austerity cuts to services provided by the community and voluntary sector are also having a big impact. As staff have less time to spend with service users, they become more socially isolated and suffer - hidden away from society. More clients are being moved into 'the community', out of sight and out of mind. In a people-centred service, high staff turnover is making life still harder.

.....
67% say clients are being left at risk because their care package has been reduced.
.....

46% are seeing more clients moved into "the community" without proper support.
.....

59% report that service users are becoming more socially isolated, and 67% of these are concerned that this results in self-harm and depression.
.....

48% of staff report less time with each service user.
.....

41% are not able to provide clients with all the help they need.
.....

43% believe that less frequent care reviews are leading to inadequate support.
.....

41% report delays in replacing faulty equipment.
.....

57% are concerned about high staff turnover.
.....

The services – rights and advocacy

UNISON's members working for advocacy and campaigning organisations help make sure people can exercise their legal rights. They ensure that marginalised communities get their voice heard on vital issues. But the support they can offer is being reduced in a number of ways, and austerity cutbacks mean many organisations are focusing more on providing contracted services to public bodies rather than campaigning.

.....
80% say it is getting harder for clients to get representation and advocacy, as well as basic advice.
.....

.....
77% say clients are having to phone up or go online more rather than get help face-to-face.
.....

.....
57% say services being centralised, so clients have to travel further to get help?
.....

.....
77% identified specific groups that are losing out – the main ones being disabled, elderly and black and minority ethnic people.
.....

.....
38% of staff said their employers were prioritising services on contracts to public bodies over campaigning and advocacy.
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Other services

Workers in the many other services in the community and voluntary sector also expressed their concern about being able to do a good job.
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.....
43% of respondents said they had less time with each service user.
.....

.....
Only **40%** said they were able to provide service users with all the help they need.
.....

The workforce – finances

Because most services provided in the community and voluntary sector are focused on people, the financial impact of austerity cuts have fallen very directly on the workforce. Low pay is endemic, and an increase is not even on the agenda for many workers whose pay is actually going down – and that's before taking account of rising prices. All this adds to rising levels of personal debt and long-term financial hardship felt by workers in the sector. Many are having to take second, third or even fourth jobs, while zero hours contracts are spreading.

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In the last year, 21% reported that their take-home pay had decreased.
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49% said their pay had remained the same.
.....

24% of staff don't get paid the living wage.
.....

The average level of personal debt is over £2,000.
.....

18% reported they were over £10,000 in debt.
.....

24% have more than one job.
.....

5% have four or more jobs.
.....

9% are on a zero hours contract.
.....

The workforce – wellbeing

Under-investment in services, in a social climate where more users need greater support, is resulting in severe under-staffing and some users taking their frustration on staff. While a strong public service ethos has traditionally meant workers would 'go the extra mile', austerity has pushed this to the extreme and it is clearly having a huge detrimental impact on individuals' wellbeing – their morale, stress, health, and safety. Although the survey did not explicitly ask about bullying, there appears to be a significant problem with aggression from managers, and many staff are now reticent about flagging up problems with their service. Although most staff seem to be getting some job-related training, overall it is not surprising that many are intending to leave their current jobs.

.....
55% work more than their contracted hours.
.....

45% of these did unpaid overtime.
.....

24% are working longer than a year ago – an average of 3½ hours more per week.
.....

40% said their current state of morale was poor or very poor.
.....

59% said this was worse than before austerity (13% said it was better).
.....

74% were stressed because of their work.
.....

56% said this was worse than before austerity (11% said it was better).
.....

78% had gone into work while unwell (since austerity began).
.....

46% have experienced an incident of violence or aggression at work since 2010, 64% of incidents involved service users.
.....

28% feel threatened by violence or aggression at work.
.....

20% of reports of aggression said it came from colleagues – mostly from managers.
.....

23% of staff said they would not feel confident telling senior managers if there was a problem with the quality of their service.
.....

17% still feel they need training in key areas for their current job.
.....

.....
81% have had some job-related training in the last year?
.....

29% were intending to leave their current job during the next year (39% were not).
.....

Notes

UNISON is the leading public service union representing people who work in the community and voluntary sector. If you would like to contact UNISON about this report or other issues around the voluntary and community sector please email cvsector@unison.co.uk or write to UNISON Community Service Group, UNISON, 130, Euston Road, London NW1 2AY.

UNISON's 1.3 million members deliver public services across the UK. Our members work in health, education, local government, police and justice and the community and voluntary sectors, as well as in utilities and private companies. To find out more visit unison.org.uk

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