

Social work at breaking point

“If we treated people with broken legs like we treat people with broken minds there would be a national outcry. It is an utter scandal” - social worker, Leeds.

Last year 1,000 social workers across the United Kingdom responded to UNISON’s local government-wide survey on the impact of cuts to local councils.

The results are indicative of a crisis in social work. Only 3% of social workers think the quality of services delivered to the public has improved in the past two years. And 95% say cuts in the past two years have had an impact on their ability to do the job.

With social workers consistently describing their work as being in a state of crisis, policymakers should take note. Eight in ten social workers are doing unpaid overtime in order to keep the service going, and over half are thinking of leaving for something less stressful. This is despite taking pride in their roles as social workers, working with vulnerable people to try to improve their lives for the better.

Social work is in a complex position. From a lack of resources within the service itself, to the impact of wider austerity on social services, the problems are manifold – but the solution is more straightforward. It is clear the underfinancing of social services, and the wider community services on which social workers rely, are the principle issues crippling the system.

Lack of prevention is leading to crisis

Eight in ten social workers say local residents are not receiving the help and support they need at the right time – meaning that lack of intervention leads to crisis, making the jobs of social workers much harder. Cuts to ‘early help services’, parent groups and mental health services mean that social workers encounter individuals or families when they are at breaking point.

Only 12% say their council is helping more local residents. Financial cuts within social work mean fewer social workers, which in turn means cases are assessed on cost, rather than need. This again works against preventative work, with crisis cases the easiest to justify.

“We are now making decisions based on what we have available or can afford, rather than what a child needs, or stalling where possible to allow a child to reach an age where they no longer qualify for a service” – social worker, Crossmichael, Scotland.

“A child who I work with has entered the care system because of a lack of early-help measures and now requires secure accommodation due to his emotional and behavioural problems. But due to a lack of secure bed availability across the country he is currently placed in a non-secure residential home, the only one in the country that would take him. Due to the risk of him harming other children, we are now paying an extortionate price to keep the other beds in the home free. This child of 13 continues to go missing frequently, attacks staff and smokes cannabis. His needs are not being met” – social worker, London.

“Working as a social work manager my working life has never been so crisis-driven with little opportunity to reflect on the service we are trying to provide. We are working with fewer resources

and I believe vulnerable children and families are now suffering because of this imposed austerity” - social worker, Glasgow.

Individuals and families are not having their needs met

- Only 12% say their council is helping more local residents.
- Almost two thirds (63%) say that the council is not delivering quality services.
- Eight in ten (80%) social workers say local residents are not receiving the help and support they need at the right time.
- Only 14% think that their employer makes the right decisions for the public.

With an ever-increasing focus on budget needs, rather than the needs of service users, social workers describe the loss of a ‘person-centred approach’. Cuts to car allowances prevent social workers being able to take out users. The shortfall in funding for adult social care has had an impact on their ability to provide support for hospital discharges as well.

Unfilled vacancies and poor retention rates mean case loads are sky-high. One social worker in the survey described a case load of between 80-100 cases.

“I have worked in direct services for over 25 years and I have never seen such pressure on services and workers before. Service users, their carers and families are not being given the support, dignity, respect or compassion desperately needed during their difficult times, and staff feel helpless. There is nothing more we can do to alleviate suffering” – social worker, Beckenham.

“Psychiatric beds have been cut which has an impact on service users who are languishing in the community with little or no support” – social worker, Padiham, north west England.

“I work in the substance abuse service and we are no longer able to give individuals the chance of residential rehabilitation with which, in my years as a care manager in this field, I have had far more success for clients than community support” – social worker, Aberdeenshire.

The wider impact of austerity

Social work depends on access to a multitude of services, and cuts to these services are undermining the work social workers do. Staff spoke of a lack of voluntary, charitable and private sector services for referrals, due to funding cuts. These include clubs for disabled children, youth clubs, hostels, counselling and mental health services, parent groups, youth groups, and children’s centres.

“We struggle to deliver vital services to young children and families because of the cuts. Nurseries are closing down, contact centres are shutting. There is a complete lack of venues to do direct work with families” – social worker, Worsley, north west England.

“Local children's centres are being closed that offered a lot of informative sessions and drop-in services for first-time mums and teenage mums, and as a result we are seeing more referrals for parents who are not able to cope or manage” – social worker, Wallasey.

The crisis in the benefits system is adding further strain. Universal credit roll-out has seen a rise in homelessness and increased poverty. In some cases, families are being relocated to other counties when facing homelessness – relocation means the link with their social worker is lost.

“I have seen people sanctioned with no food and no money to feed their children or to put on the gas and electric more frequently in the past three years than I ever have in my lengthy social work career – and it feels like it is getting worse” – social worker, Hull.

Cuts to policing mean longer waiting times if social workers need help dealing with violent individuals, putting both the social worker and the user at risk. Reductions in the NHS means it is even more difficult to get the medical support users so desperately need, ranging from arranging a simple GP appointment, to securing a bed for psychiatric patients.

The housing shortage and cuts to housing benefits are also placing a strain on social services.

“We see housing departments too stretched to offer families realistic housing opportunities so more families are forced into private rental accommodation or are becoming homeless. This is particularly problematic in the south east of England where there is a crisis in affordable housing, which leaves even working families unable to afford suitable housing and terrified of sudden rent increases or evictions” – social worker, Guildford.

Social workers at breaking point

- 68% of social workers say there have been job cuts in their departments.
- Fewer than one in five say their workload is manageable (17%).
- Under a third of social workers feel secure in their jobs (30%).
- Four fifths (80%) are working beyond their contracted hours.

Social work teams have members on sick leave because of stress, due to unfilled posts and high turnover in a profession that is demoralised in the current climate. Nine out of ten (92%) say budget cuts have had a negative impact on staff morale.

Stress and anxiety stem from numerous factors – in some places, a punitive management culture driven by targets and financial needs; in others, unmanageable workloads and a feeling that service users are being let down. Consistently, social workers describe the anxiety they feel from not being able to meet the needs of the clients with whom they work.

More than half (56%) say they are thinking about leaving the profession for something less stressful – while 35% say they are thinking of leaving for something better paid. This highlights how critical stress is to the roles of social workers.

Sky-high caseloads are affecting quality of care

“Caseloads have increased and resources are decreasing. My current caseload is 44 which is unsafe, I've raised this and been ignored. I'm so stressed by the job that I'm considering a career change. I can't be the face of a failing service anymore” – social worker, Basildon.

“High case loads and limited resources to support me in my job, as well as support services available for families, leave me stretched physically in terms of time and availability, but also emotionally. It leaves more room for mistakes when working with vulnerable children and families” – social worker, Liverpool.

Unpaid overtime is keeping the service going

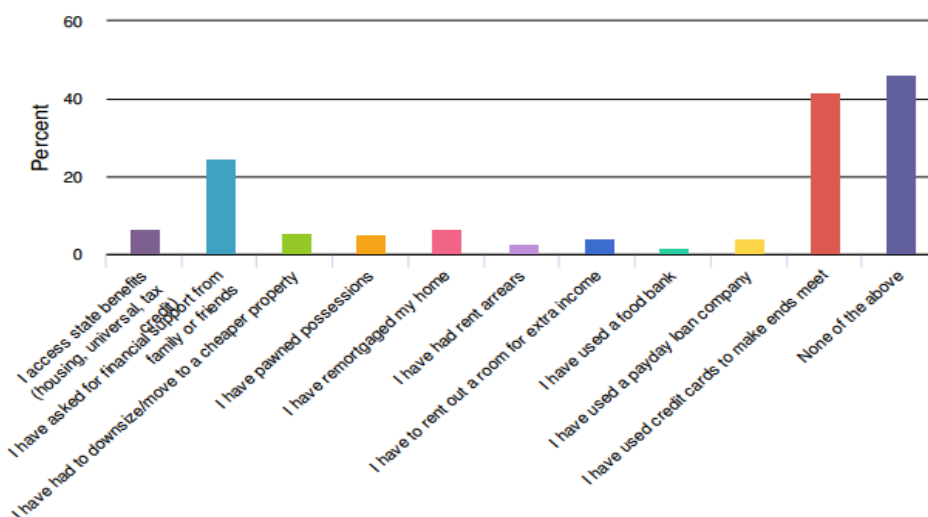
Eight in ten social workers are working unpaid overtime to keep services going. One in four are working more than seven hours overtime each week. A third work four to seven hours overtime and one in four do up to three hours weekly. Unmanageable workloads, paperwork and staff absences all contribute to the necessity of overtime – as do the time pressures of preparing reports for safeguarding meetings and courts, the challenges of dealing with clients with complex needs and emergencies that arise. Where TOIL (time off in lieu) may be available, it is sometimes impossible to take because of the heavy workloads, leaving social workers burnt out.

“You can't just walk out of the door when someone's life is at risk. There is so much that has to be done, if you leave it, you end up doing it the next day” – social worker, Blackpool.

“As a child protection social worker, I have to see the children and families I work with to understand the issues, provide support and prepare an effective plan to bring about change, and address safeguarding issues. This means paperwork is often completed in my own time to maintain deadlines and ensure that records are up to date. If a child I worked with ever reads their case file, I want them to know I cared, knew them and made decisions based on evidence and with their best interest at heart... It is soul-destroying when the thought of taking leave causes stress because of the impact this will have on day-to-day case management” – social worker, Chard.

“The most fundamental issue causing this is a lack of social workers due to reduced funding for local authorities. All my colleagues work unpaid overtime and are still unable to complete 100% of the workload. No amount of restructuring or policy change will resolve this” – social worker, London.

Social workers are resorting to food banks, payday loan companies and pawning possessions



Source: UNISON's survey of local council workers, June 2018

Future of local services

- Fewer than one in 25 (3.7%) social workers are confident about the future of local services.
- Fewer than one in seven (16%) are confident vulnerable local residents are safe and cared for.
- One in 20 (5%) social workers are confident about the financial situation of their employer.
- More than half (56%) are thinking about leaving their job for something less stressful.

Without additional funding and resources, the crisis in social services will only worsen – with the risk of an exodus of social workers leaving because of stress.

“Despite the cuts, I know how hard people are working to make the best of a bad situation. People are going above and beyond to make sure that service users are safe and cared for and that makes me proud. We as staff deserve better conditions for this reason” – social worker, Liverpool.

“I'm really proud to work hard for my local council providing the best service possible; unfortunately the best possible service isn't sufficient because of cuts to services for the person trying to access them. They also fall short of what I expect as a professional. It feels like it's been at breaking point for the last two years and it is incredibly draining” – social worker, Bristol.

“Social workers are proud of working in public services but the job is compromised by the impact of the cuts and the feeling that we are being run down to make way for privatisation” – social worker, Birmingham.

Conclusion

The government needs to listen to UNISON's call for more money for local councils and fund local services properly across the board. Social work is a key example of the interdependency of services. If the government is serious about taking care of vulnerable people, it should invest in local services and in the dedicated staff who keep people safe and healthy, and keep communities running smoothly.