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Why public service support staff
need an alternative to austerity

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Foreword



After nearly a decade of austerity, public services have been pushed to the brink – and all too often support staff have suffered the brunt of the punishment. A crisis they played no part in causing has led to unprecedented pressure for millions of public service workers.

And as this report shows, the all too often forgotten people working across our public services are at breaking point.

Clerical staff in schools, hospitals and local government who ensure that we receive the support we need. Cleaners who ensure that our public spaces are safe and hygienic. Catering staff who go the extra mile to support patient, child, teacher or nurse. It's those who fall the wrong side of the politician's false divide between "frontline" and "backroom" staff who often face the biggest cuts, the greatest number of job losses and the greatest increase in pressure to deliver.

As Britain's biggest union for public service workers – a huge proportion of whom work as support staff – UNISON has always stood up for everyone who support our communities. Whilst successive governments have used the austerity years to repeat the false narrative that only certain public sector jobs matter, we have always consistently and loudly argued that all public sector jobs matter, that there are no "non-jobs", and that public services, especially local services, are struggling to stay afloat due to job cuts and service cuts.

A response from all levels of government is now long overdue. All public service employers have a duty of care to staff and service users alike to resolve the support staff crisis as a matter of urgency. This must include appropriate levels of funding, commitment to leading by example, improved access to training and listening to the workforce. An incredible amount of damage has been done already – but it is not too late to stop the rot if real action is taken.

The alternative, already manifesting itself across the country, doesn't bear thinking about.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dave Preets." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

UNISON
general secretary

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Executive summary

This report is based on an online survey of 1,000 support staff who are UNISON members working in public services across the UK, and analysis of ONS jobs data. Its findings should ring alarm bells in Westminster, Whitehall, devolved administrations and the offices of all public service employers, in the NHS, local government, education and policing.

With the number of people employed in the public sector now at the lowest proportion of those in paid work since comparable records began,¹ those who are left find themselves overworked, undervalued and deeply concerned about the impact that worsening working conditions are having on service quality and service delivery.

The situation in many workplaces is reaching crisis point. Eight out of ten say that morale in their workplace is at rock bottom due to poor management, excessive workloads and low pay.

Nearly seven in ten respondents to the survey said the situation is getting worse and that workloads are increasing. Many commented that in order to keep services going they had to cover for colleagues off sick. The extra work was often unpaid and some support staff said they were working beyond their pay grade without the necessary training. Others report they have to take on additional work, previously carried out by colleagues who have been made redundant. Some say that the situation is so bad that public safety is at risk.

The situation is made worse by the fact that support staff are forced to work overtime without being paid. More than four out of ten support staff reported that most weeks they work overtime without being paid. Over half work unpaid overtime every month. Estimates using the Labour Force Survey suggest that support staff are providing over 40 million hours of unpaid work a year.

Confidence of support staff in their management is worryingly low. Throughout the survey respondents continued to identify “not being valued by management” as the main reason why they feel they are being treated unfairly. This is understandable given staff shortages, increased workloads and pay restraint. Three quarters of those surveyed said they were working harder than a year ago, but because of cuts and the way in which work was organised the same percentage felt they were not doing so more productively.

Support staff said when they raised this disconnect, and other frustrations, with their manager they were routinely ignored. Two thirds of support staff said they their views were not listened to as much as those on higher pay grades. The overall effect on support staff is predictable. Morale is at rock bottom and around a third of all support staff said they were actively looking to leave their job. Another third were considering leaving.

Anecdotal evidence from the survey suggests that some support staff are approaching a tipping point at which extra workloads, the lack of work progression and pay restraint will start to have a significant and cumulative negative effect on services. The survey unequivocally showed that support staff share a strong public service ethos and deep commitment to what they do, but are deeply unhappy about the pressures they are being put under.

A high staff turnover rate and growing staff resentment all conspire to damage service delivery and make it harder to achieve efficiency gains. As the survey indicates, the constraint on achieving workplace improvements is not the introduction of new technology – which is not seen as a problem by most support staff – but poor management and low pay.

This crisis in the workplace for support staff also has wider implications, encouraging a general lowering of employment standards – exacerbated by the pressure on public bodies to outsource.

¹ There are now close to half a million fewer people working in public services than in 2010 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/bulletins/publicsectoremployment/december2017#private-sector-employment-increases-to-record-high>

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Rather than acting as a driver for improving working conditions in the wider labour market, the public sector is fast gaining a reputation as a poor employer. In the context of the government's policy goal of securing good work and better jobs for everyone this situation could not be more contradictory. Brexit could also have an added negative effect given the reliance on EU workers to deliver public services, although the majority of support staff are still unsure as to what the impact would be.

The highlights of the survey are:

- 80% of respondents described morale in their workplace as low or very low. Almost half (47%) said it was very low and less than 5% said it was high or very high.
- Over half of support staff (52%) who stated that morale was low said the main reason was not being valued by their manager. Other main reasons were low pay (41%) and workload issues (36%).
- Staff felt undervalued by colleagues - almost half (48%) of respondents felt senior and 'frontline' colleagues viewed support workers' jobs as "not critical".
- Three in ten respondents (30%) were actively looking to leave their job and a third (33%) were considering leaving.
- Three quarters of the respondents said that over the last year they frequently felt stressed, anxious or worried about work.
- When support workers were asked why they wanted to leave, the main reasons were: not feeling valued by management (34%); low pay (21%), lack of a decent pay rise (16%), stress at work (16%) and workload issues (9%).
- Support workers overwhelmingly said things were getting worse, nearly seven in ten (68%) stated that the service in recent years was worse or a lot worse.
- Increased workload was cited by eight in ten as a reason why the service was worse, followed by two in three citing the quality of management.
- More than four out of ten (44%) said they worked unpaid overtime most weeks. Many of these workers are probably being paid below the statutory National Living Wage.
- The vast majority of respondents (77%) felt they were working harder than a year ago, 45% said they were working much harder.
- Despite working harder 35% said they thought they were less or much less productive, and 36% feel that productivity levels were the same.
- Support workers said they were not listened to as much as those on higher pay grades - two thirds thought "much less" and a quarter "less". Nine in ten workers saw technology increasingly being introduced into their workplace as inevitable. However, six in ten, saw it as necessary to delivering a better service.
- Only 15% of respondents saw technology as a threat to their job. But seven in ten said they felt they did not have enough of a say over its introduction and implementation.
- Around 5% of support staff, such as teaching assistants and nursing auxiliaries, are EU nationals. Survey respondents were unsure of the impact of Brexit, with 45% stating they did not know what the effect would be.

Recommendations

The conclusion from the survey is clear. The government, devolved administrations and all public service employers need to develop a new agenda for public services that addresses the cumulative impact of austerity and which recognises the centrality of both support and ‘frontline’ staff to service delivery. This is a vital step in improving productivity and service outcomes. Added to this a new focus is required on the role of public service employment in delivering the good work agenda in the tighter post-Brexit labour market.

Specific measures should include the following.

1 A commitment from government to properly fund the jobs and pay needed to guarantee safe, high quality public services

The principle guiding government should be to always ensure that there is funding in place to guarantee high quality services that respond to actual need. This must include the funding for appropriate staffing levels across the entire public services staff team

In some instances after years of cuts this commitment should involve urgent measures to fill vacant/frozen posts. In all cases it should mean making sure that future pay rises are properly funded. The 2018 pay rises have made a difference. However, the longer term damage to incomes experienced since 2010 need to be repaired if the issues identified in this document are to be addressed.

Whilst it is recognised that this recommendation has budgetary implications, it should also be recognised by government that the status quo is a false economy in terms of public service productivity. To use the NHS as an example, clinical staff such as nurses are increasingly pulled away from the jobs they are supposed to be doing in order to cover administrative tasks as a result of cuts to support staff. This has a negative impact on workplace productivity and leads to de-skilling concerns for those on the higher bands.

2 The government working with employers and unions to ensure that public services are leading by example on the good work agenda

The government has invested a great deal in the notion of good work. It is one of the pillars of the industrial strategy, with the government stating that it is accountable for making progress on the goal of good work for all. However, if the government wants to be taken seriously by employers and employees across the economy, it also needs to practice what it preaches. As this survey demonstrates, at the current time it clearly does not.

Leading by example should include working with unions and employers to address the issues highlighted in this survey, and looking at how creating good working conditions in the public services can create benchmarks on everything from pay and pensions through to training and progression. This could then be promoted in local labour markets and the economy overall.

3 Public service employers taking immediate measures to improve access to training for support staff

The survey clearly demonstrates the commitment of people working across the public services to doing their jobs well and embracing new technology. However, whilst data shows that the public sector provides more training for employees than the private sector (21% versus 15% of received workplace training in the last week), this does not appear to extend to lower skilled occupations. Training opportunities for support staff must be expanded. As well as boosting productivity, it will also create opportunities for staff progression (e.g. Healthcare assistants training to become nurses).

4 A renewed commitment from employers to listen to and engage with support staff

There is growing evidence that an engaged and involved workforce delivers better outcomes, not just for employees but also for the service. So, staff views about being undervalued and overlooked should be a top priority for public sector employers. As this and previous UNISON surveys have

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shown, improvements are possible. Support staff want to do a good job as a part of service delivery team, but will continue to feel second class workers while they are routinely mistreated and ignored. Employers need to work closely with unions at local levels to improve channels of communication and ensure that all staff are genuinely involved together in the conversation about improving services and addressing challenges. UNISON has long championed “co-production” where service users and staff are recognised as expert contributors to establish efficiency, best practice and outcomes. Alongside the other proposals included here, government and employers should look further at facilitating “shared solutions” approaches, where stakeholders, including support staff, are brought together to discuss barriers and improve outcomes.

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Introduction

“Headline news is always about nurses and doctors but, they cannot work without support services”

(NHS support worker)

When people think of public services and public servants, they think of the police officer on the beat, the nurse or doctor caring for the sick, or the teacher educating our children. But, these ‘frontline’ public service staff are part of a team of workers who collectively and collaboratively provide the services we need. That team involves all employees, including support staff – the porters, cleaners, IT staff, receptionists, secretaries, teaching assistants and other operational and administrative workers.

Yet, despite the contribution that support workers make they rarely get a mention in debates about the future of public services and are all too often overlooked by politicians and the media. And when they are acknowledged, support staff are often seen as an easy, ‘least resistance’, cost to be cut, rather than part of an cooperative team.

The government’s ambition to reduce funding and roll back the public sector has significantly affected support staff. Staffing levels across the public sector have been cut, and their roles have not been spared. This has been coupled with real terms pay cuts.

The net effect of relentless fiscal austerity is a smaller, lower paid workforce, with support staff being forced to take on more tasks – usually unrewarded for doing so. Across the public services these pressures on support staff threaten to compromise service quality and undermine service delivery. In some services, like healthcare, staff shortages and increased workloads, can mean precious clinical time lost and patients’ lives placed at risk.² In others, support staff are forced to cover for other employees who are on sick leave because of stress at work, or take on additional work previously carried out by colleagues who’ve been made redundant.

“I feel undervalued and underpaid for the workload I do, can’t wait to get out”

(Local government support staff)

The situation is made worse by the way in which public service employers seem unable to fully engage with support staff and trade union representatives in the productivity and efficiency agenda, something that was called for in the government-backed Carter Review into efficiency in English hospitals.³ The evidence from this and other surveys suggests that staff want to be involved in the workplace decisions that affect them, and believe that a stronger voice at work would help, not hinder, efforts to improve efficiency.

However, as this survey shows, the mood at the workplace among support staff is a mix of anger and frustration, with confidence in senior managers at a worryingly low level. Support staff say they feel frustrated and ignored. As one respondent to the survey put it, “It is useless to say anything because nobody listens”.

The vast majority of support staff say they feel overworked, undervalued and underpaid, and the anecdotal comments reported in this survey suggest the situation is getting worse. Support staff are committed and understanding of the need for change, but most are worried about their working conditions and workloads and are struggling to cope with years of pay cuts. A failure to acknowledge this will not only further undermine employer and employee efforts to improve services, but also weaken the public’s confidence in our public services.

² A recent dossier of 18,000 submissions of nurses by the Royal College of Nursing showed that patients are being put at risk due to constant staff shortages (Observer, 13 May 2018)

³ *Carter report on Operational productivity and performance in English NHS acute hospitals: Unwarranted variations, 2016*

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About this survey

This online survey of UNISON members has been conducted against the backdrop of the crisis in public services. The focus is on support staff and how fiscal austerity and public service reforms have had an impact on their jobs.

Support staff is a contested term, but generally understandable.⁴ In the survey the term refers to those who are providing support to other staff (both in 'frontline' support roles and those performing administrative tasks), without whom the service would not function.

The survey is based exclusively on staff who self-identified as support workers, was one of the largest of its kind. It attracted 1000 responses from UNISON members. The breakdown of responses was: healthcare (37%), education (35%), local government (19%), police and justice (4%) and other support staff (5%).

The survey, which forms part of UNISON's Public Services Champions campaign⁵, complements previous UNISON staff surveys, such as the NHS, further education and local government staff surveys. Many of the findings also relate to UNISON's 'One Team' campaign, which seeks to raise the profile and public understanding of NHS support staff.

The aim of the survey was to capture the views and experiences of support staff, place a spotlight on the main concerns at work and frame recommendations for addressing the challenges faced. As such, the quantitative questions focused on job status, pay, workload, morale, voice at work, productivity, service delivery and a few more general issues, such as attitudes to new technology and Brexit. The survey also included a qualitative open-ended question, responses to which are captured in the quotes.

The commentary on the survey includes references to other workplace surveys, such as the Workplace Employment Relations Study and Labour Force Survey.

The Smith Institute and UNISON would like to thank all the workers who completed the survey. We are also grateful for the thoughts and comments from those who attended the roundtable discussion on the survey findings.

The survey context: fewer workers and pay cuts

The context for the survey is the unrelenting impact of austerity. A decade after the financial crash the survey was undertaken against the backdrop of the government's continuing austerity programme.

This impact is particularly noticeable when profiling the numbers working in the public sector and in support staff roles. Staffing cuts have been uneven, with the largest reductions in local government, education and the police force.⁶ Overall, the number of people working in the public services has fallen from 22% of the UK workforce in 2010 to 17% today - a reduction of half a million jobs. The cuts in manpower have been disproportionately targeted at support staff. For example, there has been a 10% cut in the number of people working in NHS property and estates such as caretakers, laundry and catering workers.⁷ There has also been significant targeted reduction in the number of support staff working with the most vulnerable, including those with learning disabilities and mental health problems.⁸ In police forces, community support officers have been cut by 40% from 2010 to 2017.

⁴ For some public services, such as policing, support staff are viewed as 'frontline' staff in their own right and are increasingly the lead staff in some policing teams

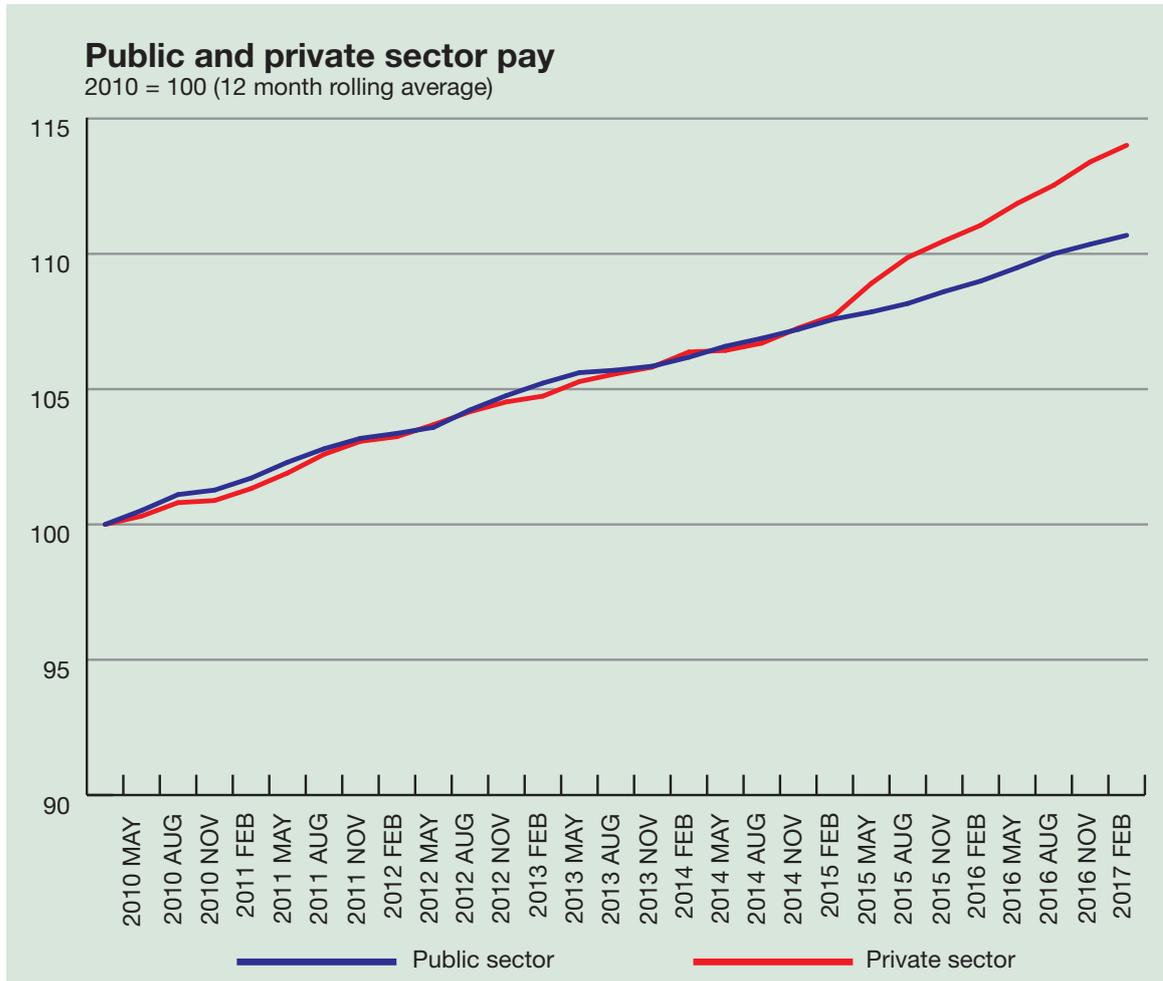
⁵ <https://www.UNISON.org.uk/our-campaigns/public-service-champions/>

⁶ ONS, Public Sector Employment

⁷ NHS Digital, NHS Hospital & Community Health Service (HCHS) monthly workforce statistics - Provisional Statistics (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2017)

⁸ NHS Digital, NHS Hospital & Community Health Service (HCHS) monthly workforce statistics - Provisional Statistics (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2017) Shows a fall in those working in Community Learning Disabilities, Other Learning Disabilities, and Community Psychiatry

In addition to a reduction in the headcount, public sector pay has fallen in real terms over the past eight years and since 2015 has lagged behind the private sector.⁹ Despite the 2018 pay awards in health and local government, it is the longer term downward trend in pay that sets the scene for the survey questions and answers, which address the issue of support staff pay in regard to views on workload, morale and service delivery.

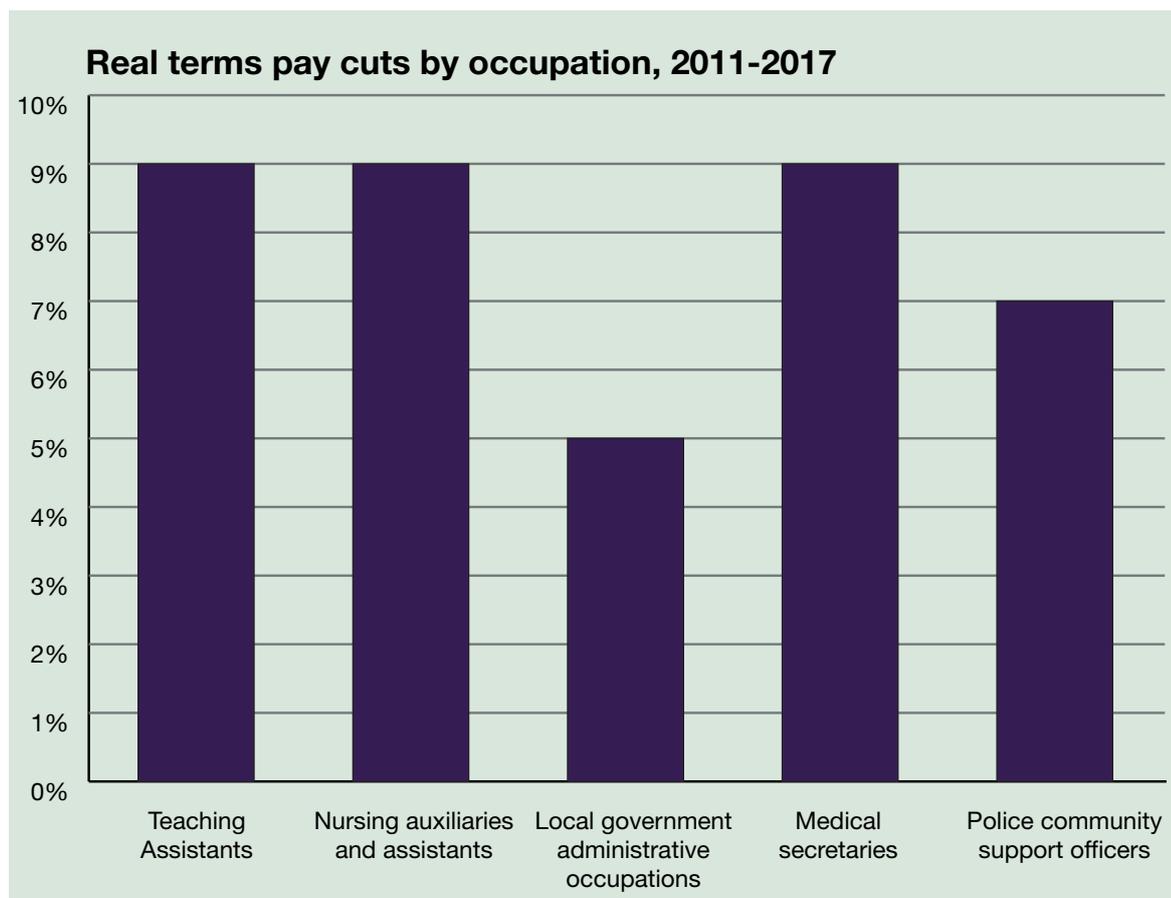


Source: Smith Institute calculation based on ONS data tables: KA4U and KA4O

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⁹ Real terms weekly pay has fallen from around £510 to £493 from May 2010 to February 2017.

Real terms hourly pay for support staff is down on 2011 by 9% for teaching assistants, medical assistants, and nursing auxiliaries and assistants. Average pay was also cut for local government administrative occupations and police community support officers.



Source: Smith Institute's calculation based on mean hourly pay for all workers taken from ASHE 2011 and 2017 and adjusted by CPIH

Analysis of the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings highlights the extent to which those performing key support roles in our public services are low paid. For example, over half (52%) of teaching assistants are low paid (at two thirds of average hourly earnings). In health over a third (37%) of nursing auxiliaries and assistants are low paid, while 80% of school midday and crossing patrol workers are low paid.

Pay cuts at this level are particularly hard for those on low pay with rising bills and little income to spare. These figures are higher still for the number paid below the real living wage.¹⁰ Almost seven out of ten (68%) teaching assistants are paid below the living wage, four in ten (41%) nursing auxiliaries and assistants, and eight in ten (83%) school midday and crossing patrol workers. Even for local government administrative occupations, which includes higher grade roles, around one in seven (14%) are paid below the living wage.

Low pay has forced many public workers to take on extra work. According to the Labour Force Survey around 5% of public sector workers have a second job, compared with 3% for the whole of the labour market, equal to 330,000 workers.

Looking at the different occupations, support jobs have a much greater prevalence of people working more than one job. For example, around 7% of teaching assistants have more than one job. Furthermore more, around one in twenty teaching assistants are also seeking additional work.

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¹⁰ The UK independent Living Wage is £8.75 per hour (and £10.20 in London)

Low pay alongside the cuts to pay and workforce numbers has also to be contextualised by rising demand. For example, in the education sector pupil numbers have been risen by 7% since 2010.¹¹ Meanwhile, for the NHS elective general and acute admissions (FFCEs) are up 15% since 2010.¹² This additional pressure on staff is also evident in the following survey results.

Morale and unfair treatment

Concerns about low morale within the public sector have been evident for some time. One of the government's 2011 WERS reports, for example, refers to the negative psychological impact on employees who keep their jobs but experience a decline in morale, increased stress and higher sickness rates.¹³ Commentators point out that in an era of austerity and outsourcing it is far from easy to maintain motivation and morale amongst staff that demonstrated commitment and built up areas of expertise.¹⁴

The obvious link between low pay and deteriorating working conditions and poor morale was evident in the survey. For some the problem was made worse by excessive monitoring and management intransigence about work intensification.

“I have worked in the NHS for 36 years and during this time I have never felt as demoralised, demotivated, undervalued and underpaid as I do now”

“The school I work in is becoming an academy. I feel undervalued and my working conditions have considerably worsened. I work much longer hours for considerably less pay!”

“Domestics are treated poorly, underpaid, undervalued, and excessive monitoring all on a near minimum wage”

Morale at the workplace was reported to be at a very low ebb. Eighty per cent of respondents described morale in their workplace as low or very low. Almost half (47%) said it was very low. Under 5% said it was high or very high.



¹¹ DfE Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2017 - National Tables

¹² NHS England: Monthly Activity Return: April 2008 to March 2018. Data for April 2017 to March 2018 Elective G&A Total Admissions (first finished consultant episodes)

¹³ The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (Economic and Social Research Council/Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service/National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2013)

¹⁴ See ACAS discussion paper by Stephen Bach, 2011

The respondents felt that low morale was commonplace and hitting new depths. Support staff not only felt undervalued but presented a strong sense of unfair treatment compared with higher grade staff.

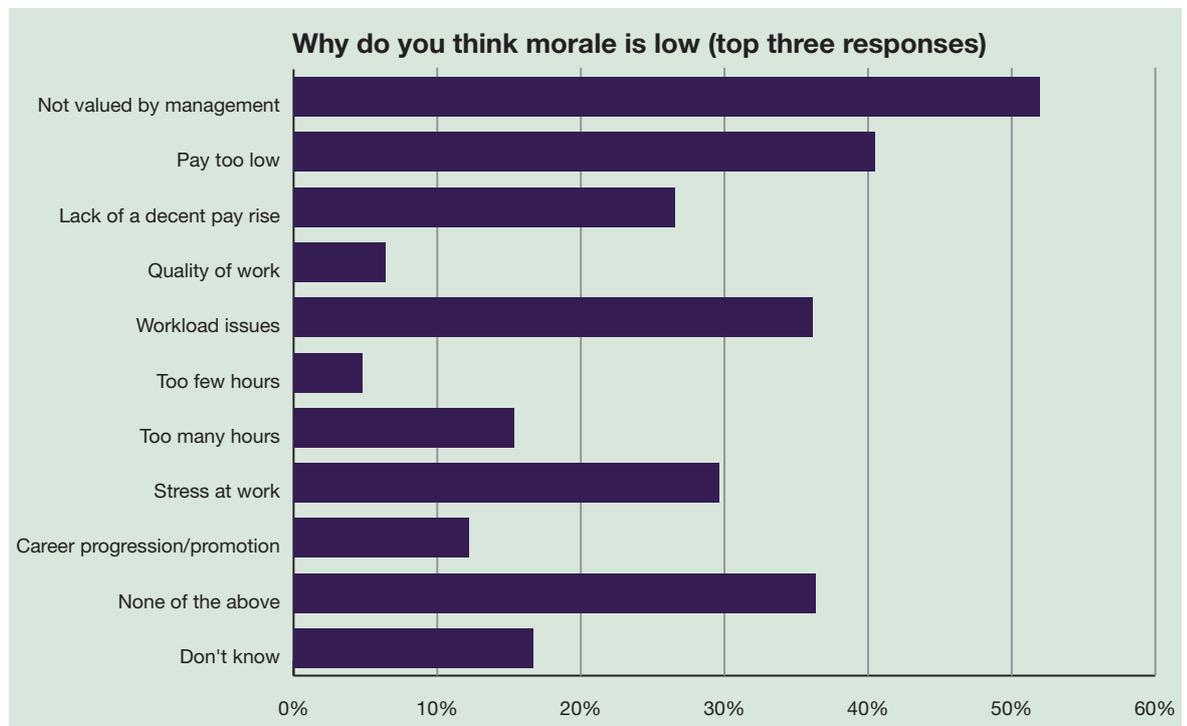
“Low morale used to be the norm, but now we just don’t have any morale.”

“In 13 years I have never seen morale as low as it is in my department right now.”

“Senior management are always talking about cut backs and possible redundancies, expecting support staff to work more, even unpaid, and without a pay rise, yet senior staff seem to delegate work out and get a pay rise. It’s disgusting and unfair, lowering morale and clearly showing a lack of respect for their staff.”

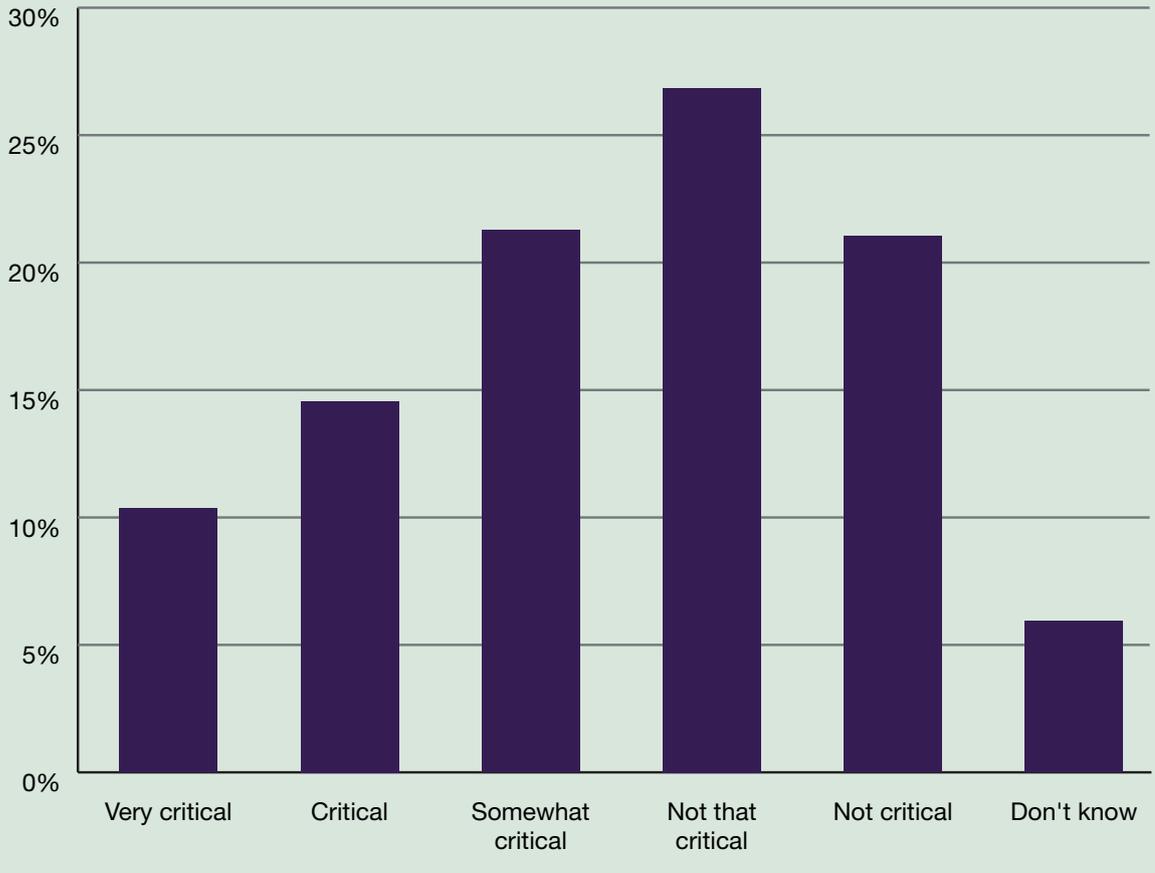
The principal explanation as to why support staff think morale is low was a strong sense of not being valued by their manager — over half of respondents placed it in their top three responses. This was closely followed by pay being too low (41%) and workload issues (36%).

For those in health and local government, workload pressures and stress were more prominent than those working in the education sector, where low pay had a bigger score. Nevertheless, across the board “not valued by management” scored the highest.



This feeling of being undervalued was also evident when support workers were asked about how colleagues in senior positions and ‘frontline’ job roles saw their role. Almost half felt senior and ‘frontline’ colleagues viewed support workers jobs as either not that critical (27%) or not critical at all (21%).

How much do you think those with frontline job roles and those in more senior positions in your workplace see your role as critical to the service being delivered?



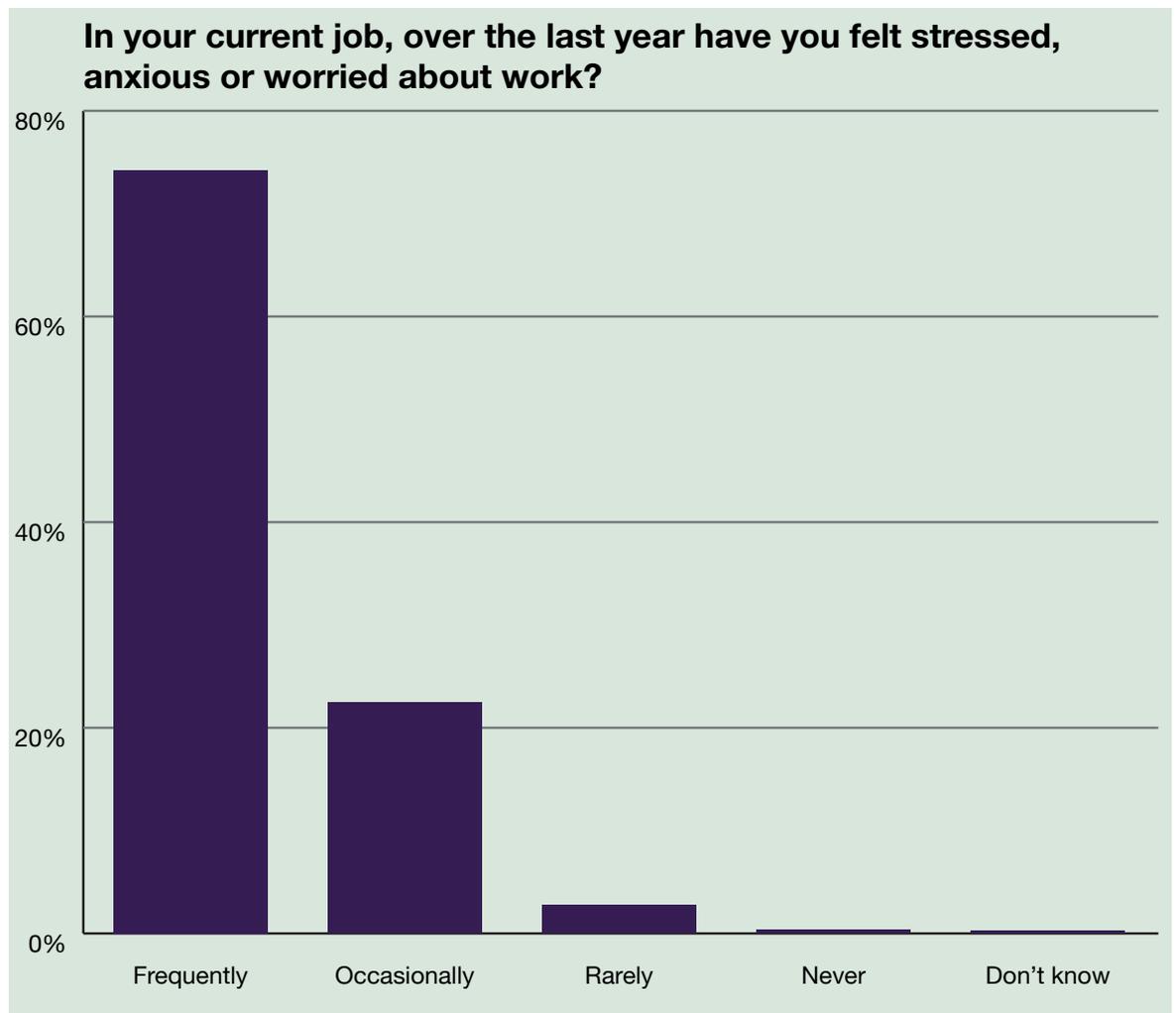
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Stress at work

A recurring theme of the survey is the strain that austerity is placing on support staff, who are among the lowest paid workers in the public sector. The majority of respondents complain that workloads have increased and that support staff are regularly left covering for colleagues who were off on sick leave owing to stress at work.

“As a support worker looking after adults with learning difficulties staff are extremely overworked and definitely stressed. When I started in 2006 you were employed to support people but now we are also doing the team leaders work as well as our own”

Three quarters of the responses said that they frequently felt stressed, anxious or worried about work over the past year. Twenty per cent said they occasionally felt that way. Hardly anyone said they never or rarely felt that way.



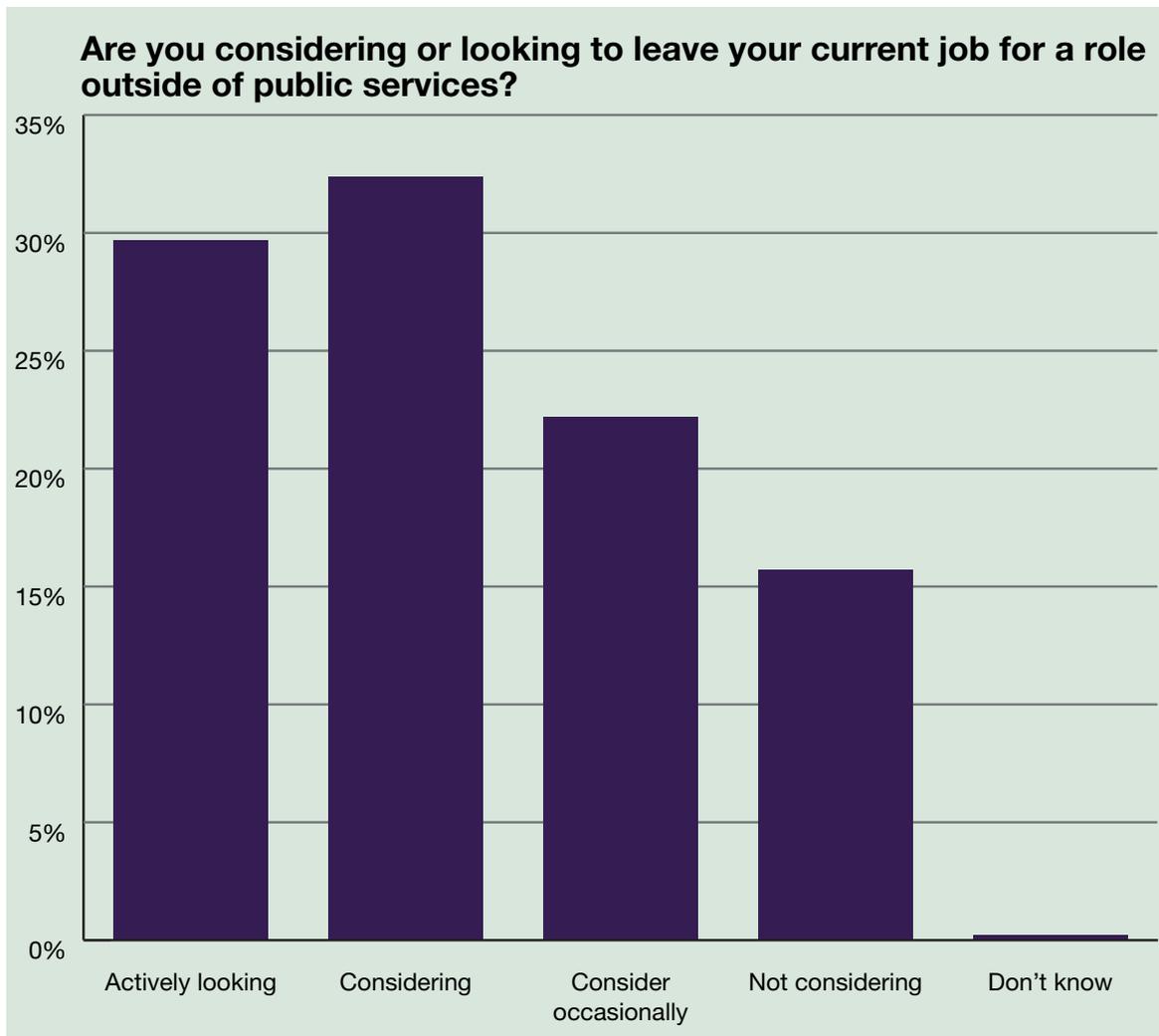
“Less money, more responsibility, less staff - everyone is stressed but we love our jobs and what we do. We want to provide a good service.”

“My role has changed over the past few years as children with more complex needs are in mainstream schools. My role is increasingly demanding and I feel extremely stressed every single day.”

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Staff retention

One of the most worrying responses from the survey was how many support workers wanted to leave their current job for a role outside public services. Three in ten respondents (30%) were actively looking and a third (33%) were considering leaving. These findings echo previous surveys by UNISON.¹⁵



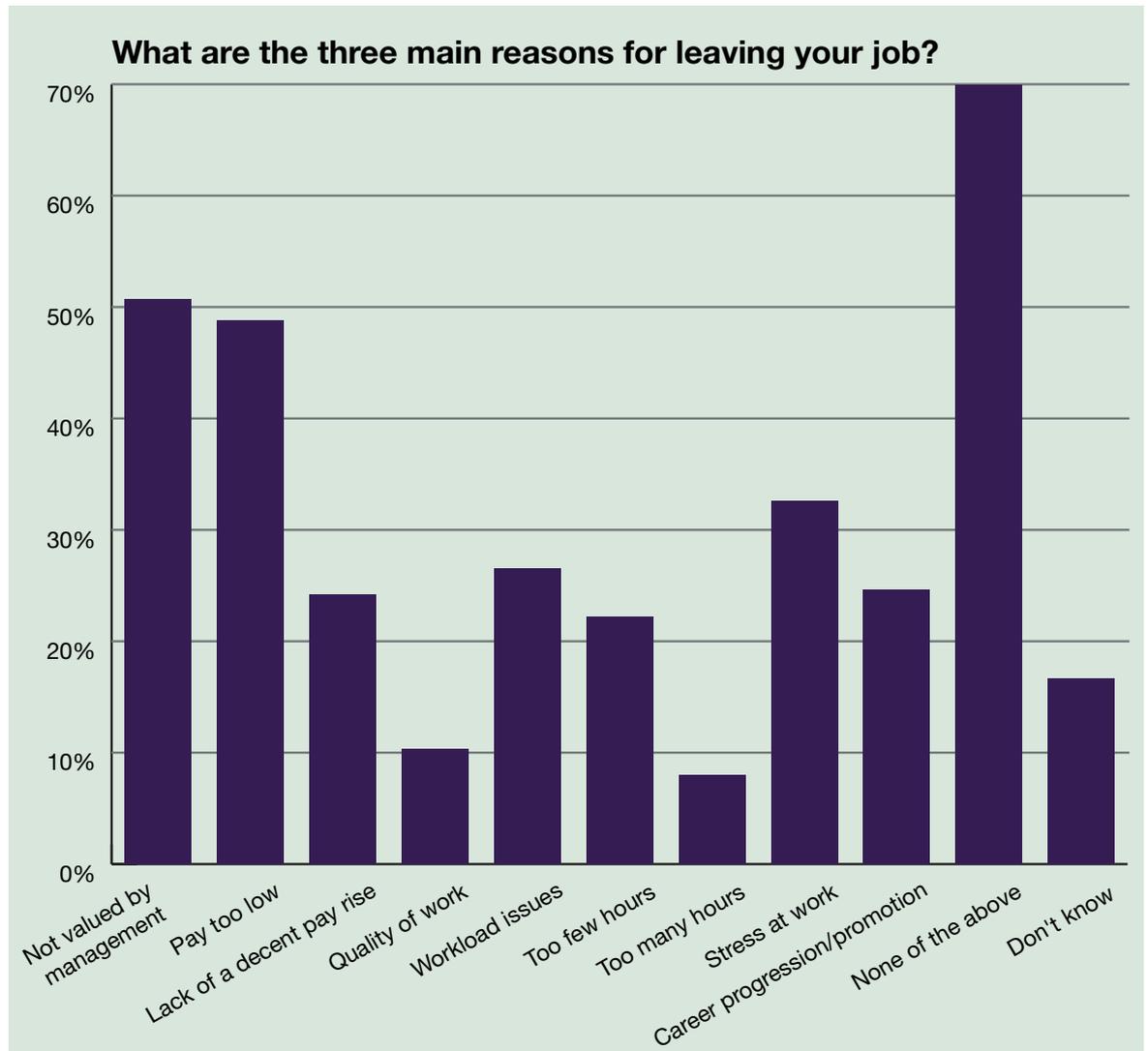
This high proportion of workers looking to leave their job is also observable in the government's Labour Force Survey. For all public sector workers, around 6% of people are looking for replacement jobs. However, for those in lower grade roles¹⁶ this rises to 8%. It is also higher than average for certain support functions such as elementary security (security guards, school crossing), other elementary services occupations (including porters), and administrative occupations: government and related organisations.

When support workers were asked why they wanted to leave, the main reasons given were similar to why morale is low: not valued by management (34%); pay too low (21%), stress at work (16%), lack of a decent pay rise (16%) and workload issues (9%).

¹⁵ See Incomes Data Research survey Under pressure, underfunded and undervalued: UNISON members keeping communities together, 2016 : this survey of UNISON members working in councils and schools showed that around 60% had considered looking for another job of which 40% were actively looking.

¹⁶ Standard Occupational Classification 7, 8 and 9

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Impact on services

Feeling undervalued by managers, low morale, stress at work, low pay and the other issues mentioned in the survey inevitably have impact on services. This can be seen in public opinion polls. Recent Ipsos Mori polling, for example, found that nearly two in three people think public services have got worse over the last five years (up from 40% in 2012). Public pessimism about the future of the NHS, policing and education are also at record lows.¹⁷

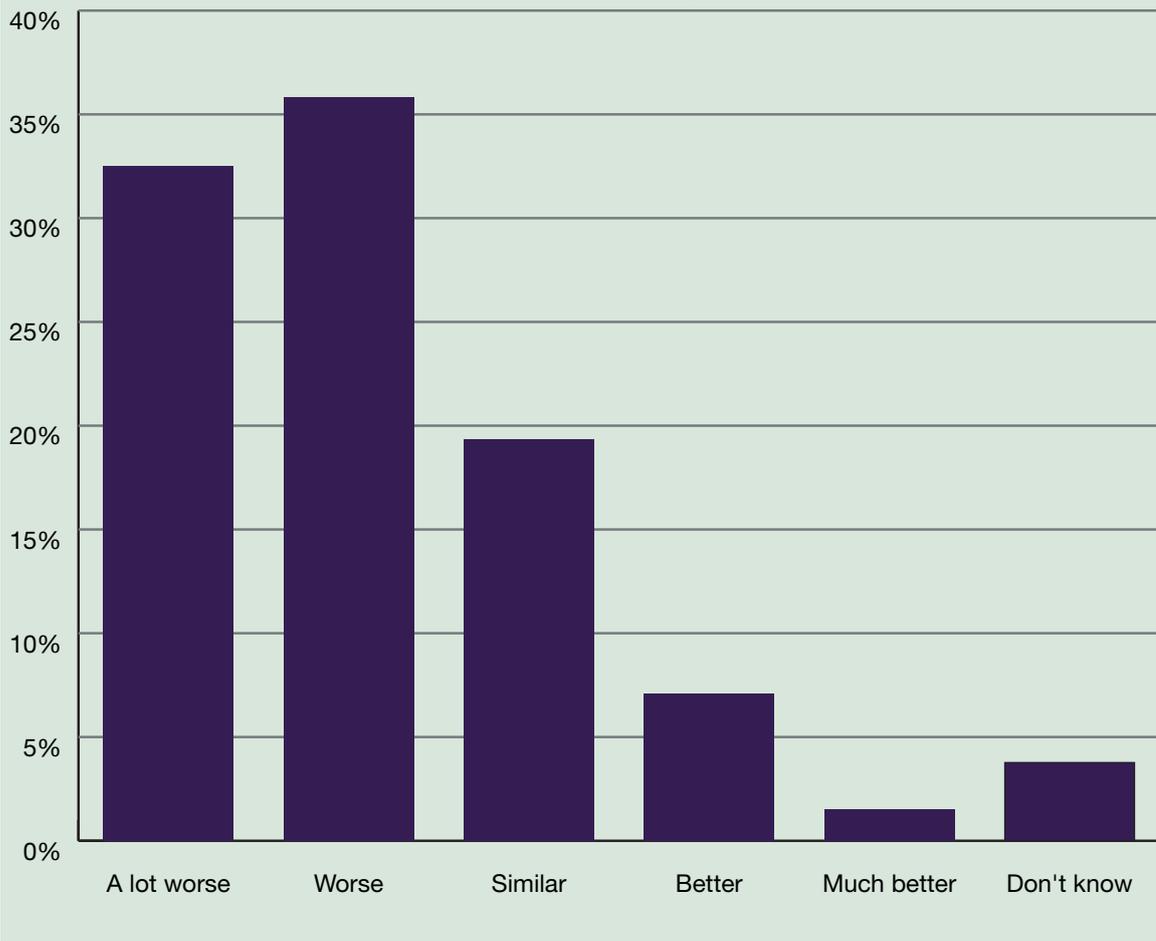
“Cutting support staff is a false economy, without the admin and organisational staff, the frontline crumbles.”

Support workers surveyed overwhelmingly felt things were worse: nearly seven in ten (68%) stated that the service in recent years was worse or a lot worse. This was felt across the board, although lower amongst those working in education (56%) compared with those in health (75%) and local government (72%). Overall, under 10% of respondents said they thought the service had improved.

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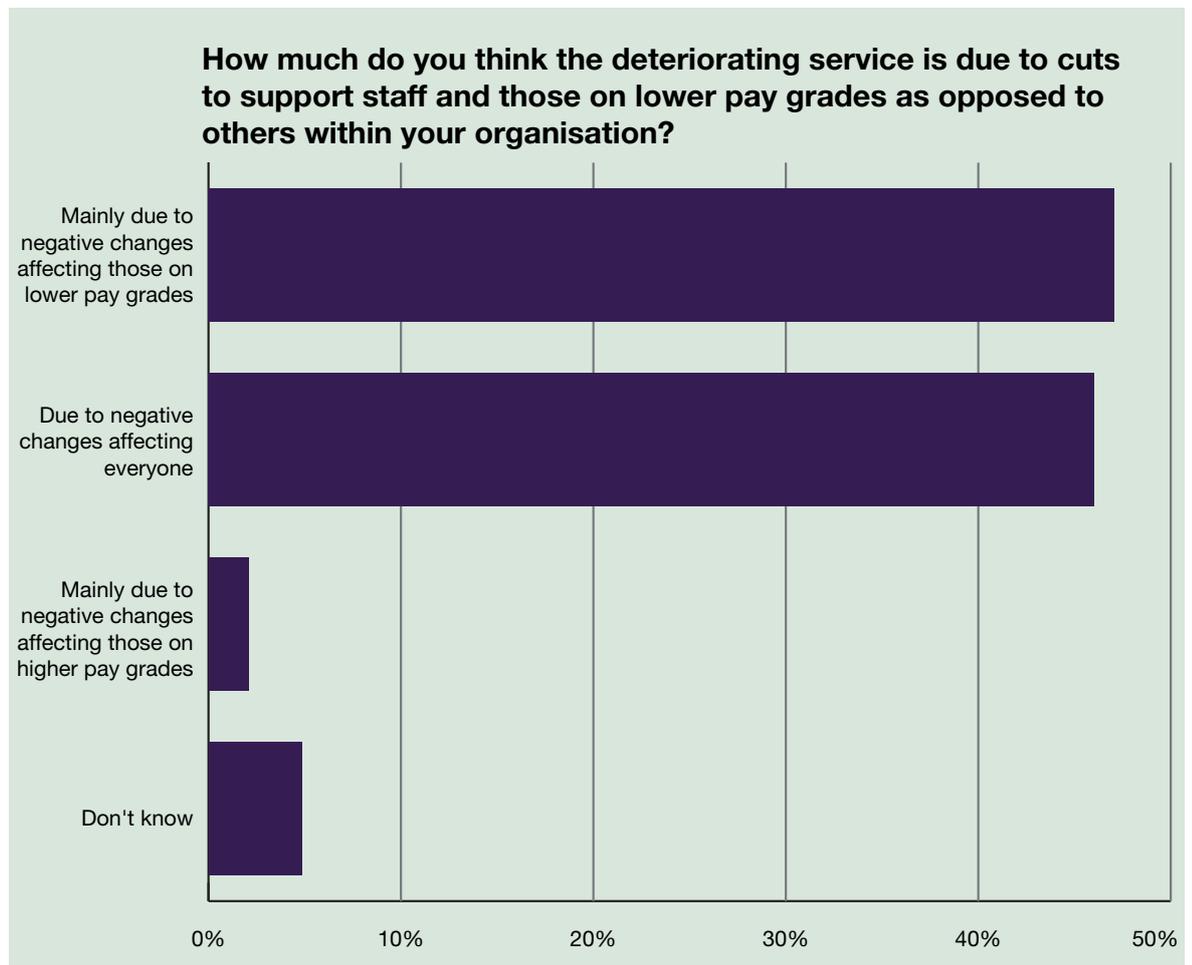
¹⁷ Ipsos Mori, “Levels of pessimism for future of NHS, policing and education highest for 15 years” <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/levels-pessimism-future-nhs-policing-and-education-high-est-15-years>

At your workplace do you think the service being delivered has got better or worse over the last few years?



The sense of deteriorating services was higher amongst respondents from those in healthcare (75%) and local government (72%) than education (55%).

Around half of respondents (47%) felt the decline in services was mainly due to negative changes affecting those on lower pay grades. A similar proportion felt it was due to negative changes affecting everyone. Relatively few felt it was due to changes affecting those on higher pay grades, perhaps reflecting the perceived unfairness in how austerity has affected different public sector workers, and the sense that low-paid support workers feel undervalued by their employers.

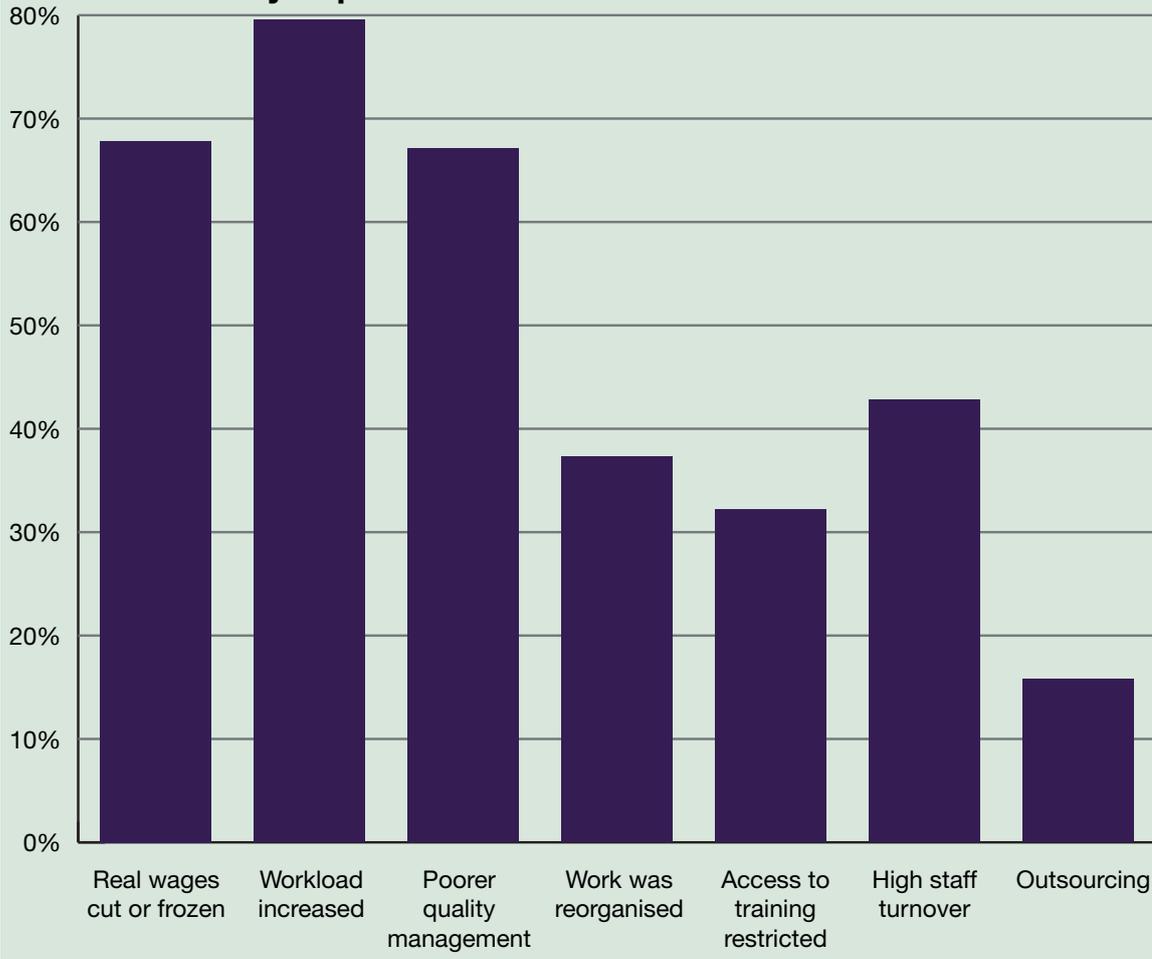


“The service given by support staff is overall less effective due to reduced manpower and some remaining staff having to take on duties and roles they are not familiar with.”

The impact of austerity was evident in the main reasons why support workers felt services had deteriorated. Increased workload topped the list of concerns, alongside poor-quality management and real wages being cut or frozen. Over 40% identified high staff turnover and around a third chose the way work was reorganised and restricted access to training.

Some of the survey respondents claimed that the combination of funding cuts and acute workload pressures risked jeopardising public safety.

At your workplace do you think any of the following have made the service you provide worse?



“The amount of work I am expected to meet by management with so many targets is a dangerous way to work and delivers a poor service.”

“Cuts to local government are endangering public services and in some cases actual lives.”

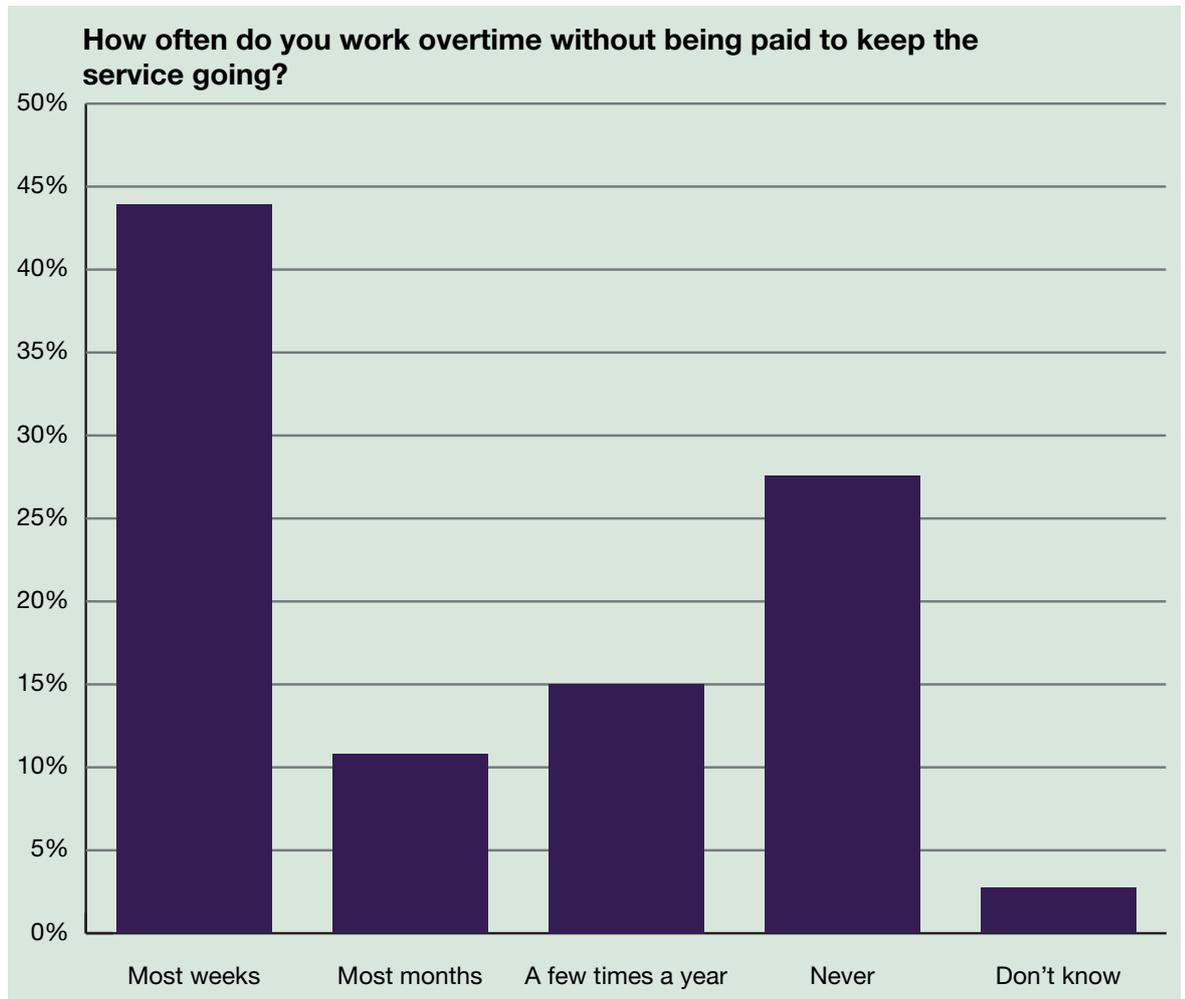
Unpaid overtime

Workload pressures show themselves in the overtime undertaken to ensure services are delivered. This is all too often unpaid. More than four out of ten support workers stated that they worked overtime without being paid in order to keep the service going. This echoes previous UNISON surveys, such as UNISON Scotland’s poll that reported that 40% of support staff regularly carry out unpaid work to meet workloads.¹⁸ Similar findings were reported by recent Local Government Association’s research of social workers, who were having to work long hours without breaks in order to protect the vulnerable children on their patch.¹⁹

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¹⁸ UNISON Scotland, Hard lessons: A survey of Scotland’s school support staff, 2017

¹⁹ LGA analysis of adult social care referrals, 2018



Respondents were concerned that unpaid overtime was affecting their health and work-life balance. Understandably, this was cited as a cause of growing resentment.

“Last term I worked over 100 hours of unpaid overtime due to everything that is expected from me. This has led to a deterioration of my quality of life and no longer wanting to work in public service due to the negative impact on my health and wellbeing.”

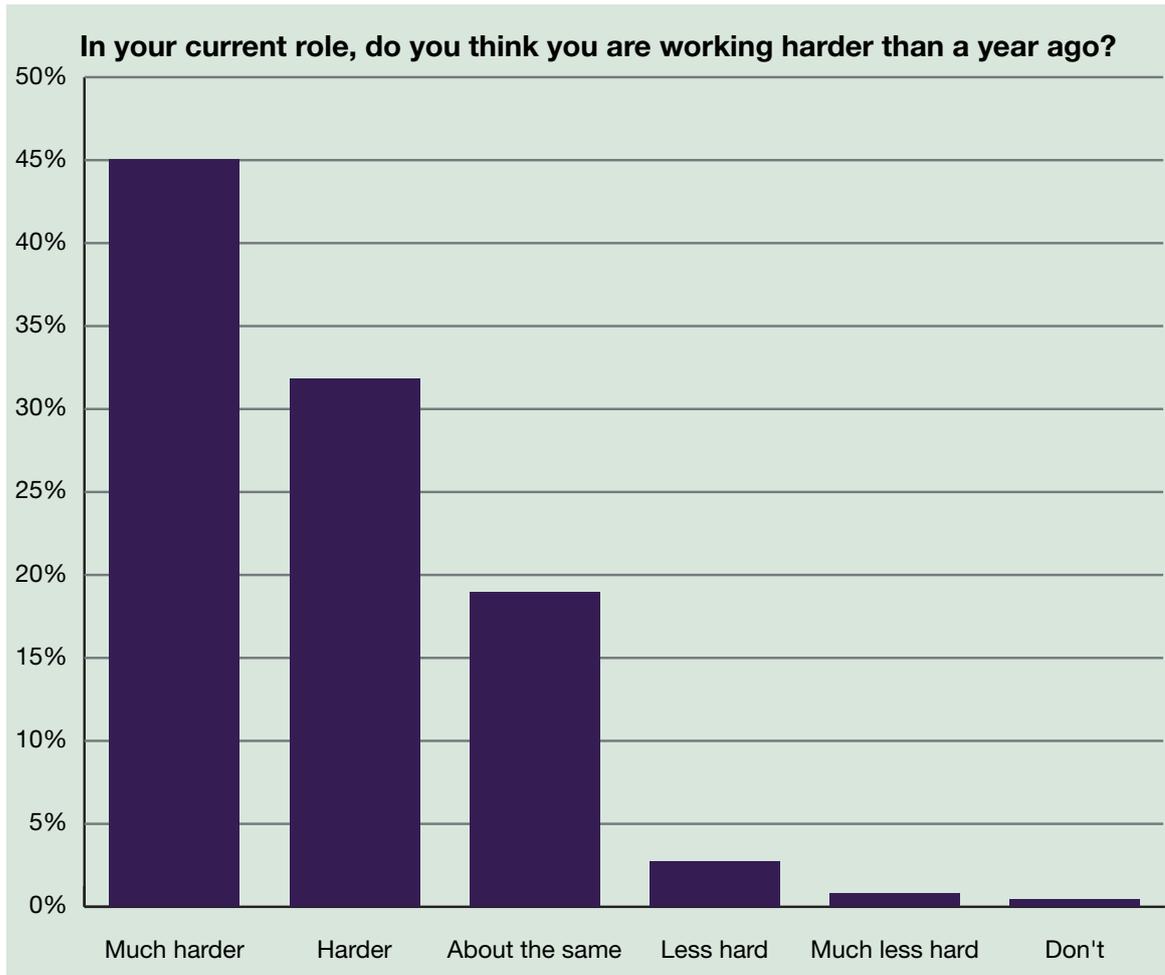
“If I tot up unpaid overtime I am below minimum wage for a job I am over qualified for. I am not allowed to progress despite my qualifications exceeding my role.”

The data suggests that part of the way the reduction in staff numbers has been absorbed is through workers putting in additional unrewarded hours to keep the service going. This is running at high levels in some support staff occupations. According to the Labour Force Survey, the combined average overtime of those in childcare and related services within the public sector (which includes teaching assistants, secretarial workers and those in public sector administrative occupations) equates to 40 million hours of unpaid work a year (or 25,000 full time workers). This is especially worrying given lower levels of pay in these occupations. Indeed, on these trends there is a risk that employees will in effect be paid below the statutory national minimum wage.

Working harder

The survey clearly shows that large numbers feel their workload has increased. The vast majority of respondents (77%) said they are working harder than a year ago. Forty five per cent said they are working much harder. This is evident in other studies of work intensification. Analysis of the Skills and Employment Survey (2006-12), for instance, found work intensity rose faster in the public sector. Over the longer term, the study found:

In 1992 around three in ten of all workers strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. However, by 2012 the proportion had risen to over half (53%) of the public sector and around two-fifths (42%) of the private sector.²⁰

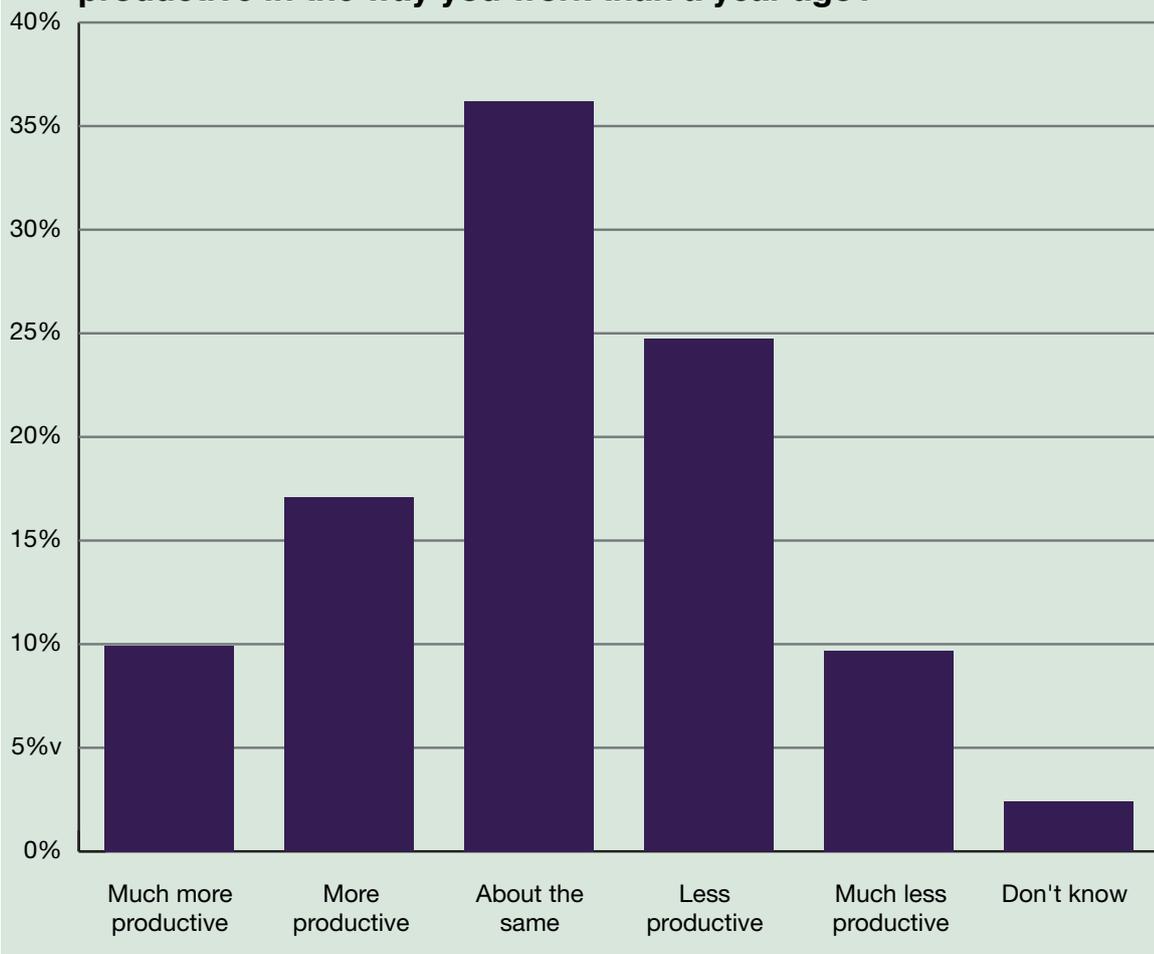


Despite working harder only 10% said they felt “much more productive” than a year ago and 17% “more productive”.

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²⁰ Felstead, A Work Intensification in Britain - First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey, 2012 (2012, Cardiff University)

In your current role, do you think you are more or less productive in the way you work than a year ago?



Around 35% said they felt “less productive” or “much less productive” than a year ago, and 36% said productivity was “about the same”. Similar responses were identified in a previous Smith Institute report on employee attitudes to productivity at work.²¹

The fact that only a quarter of respondents thought they were more productive in their work than a year ago should be a concern for organisations that have predicted cost savings connected to year on year productivity gains.

Support staff are working harder, but the majority do not perceive any tangible benefits – for themselves or the organisation. Indeed, many respondents commented that cutting support staff and ignoring workplace concerns, such as poor management, are undermining efforts to improve service delivery.

“The service given by support staff is overall less effective due to reduced manpower and some remaining staff having to take on duties and roles they are not familiar with.”

“My personal experience is that wrong decisions are being made by people who do not know or fully understand the structures required to provide a cost effective service.”

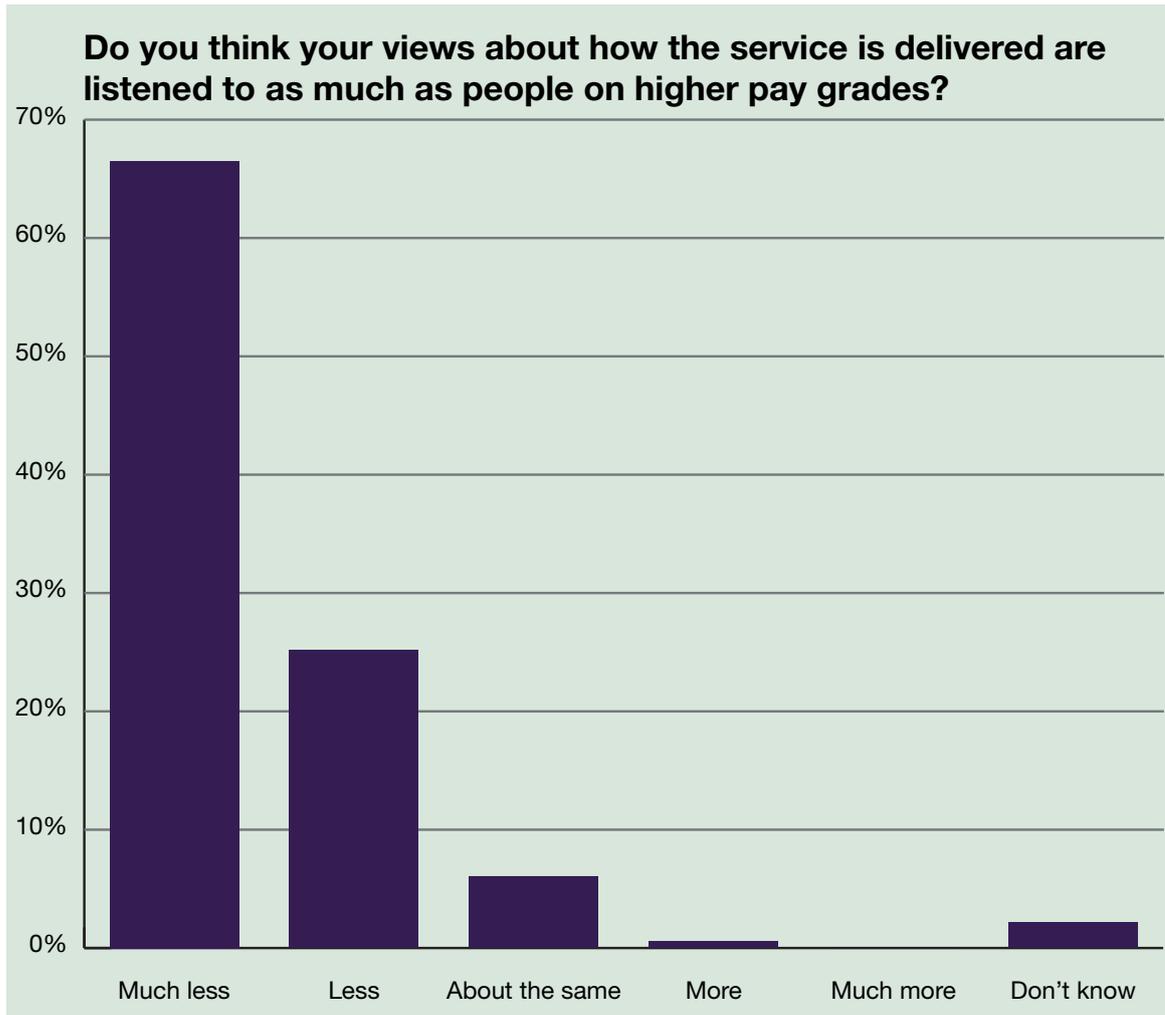
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²¹ Smith Institute, Welfare, working harder not smarter: the employee contribution to meeting the UK's productivity challenge, 2016

Voice at work

There is a growing evidence base, including from government (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) that improved management practices have a statistically positive impact on productivity. This includes how organisations and firms promote and reward employees based on their efforts and provide adequate training opportunities.²² There is also substantial evidence that highlights the relationship between HR practices, employees being listened to, and positive performance and outcomes.²³

Support staff overwhelmingly feel their views are not listened to as much as those on higher pay grades. Two thirds (67%) think “much less” and a quarter (25%) “less”.



The comments from respondents highlighted the strength of feeling about not being listened to and often ignored.

“Management pretend to listen to us, but do nothing to reduce our impossible workload.”

“People doing the job are not listened to.”

“Cuts to admin staff continue and we are now at the stage where we are being asked to drop our standards in order to take two more secretary caseloads on, and no manager will listen to our grievances.”

²² ONS, Management practices and productivity in British production and services industries - initial results from the Management and Expectations Survey: 2016, 2018

²³ See for example, Professor Stephen Wood, Increasing workplace productivity through employee involvement, in IPA, Involvement and productivity – the missing piece of the puzzle? 2016; and Kings Fund Improving NHS care by engaging staff and devolving decision making, 2014

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Skills training

Providing skills training can improve both service quality and efficiency while offering staff the opportunity to develop their career and progress. It also signifies to employees that they are valued and that the organisation is a 'good employer'.²⁴

However, concerns about the lack of training were identified in the survey by a third of those who felt the service had deteriorated. This reflects previous UNISON surveys, such as the NHS survey which showed that staff (in bands 2&3) felt learning and development opportunities were bad or poor, and UNISON's 2016 survey of members in councils and schools which reported that 41% of respondents had received no training in the previous 12 months.²⁵

Although the public sector provides more training for employees than the private sector (21% versus 15% of received workplace training in the last week), this does not appear to extend to lower skilled occupations. For those in standard classification occupations 7-9 (sales and customer service occupations, process, plant and machine operatives and elementary occupations) there is slightly more chance of receiving training in the private sector (8.5% v 7.7%). There have also been concerns raised about the quality and length of training, something evident in previous studies into how the public sector has coped with austerity.²⁶ Alarmingly, this is happening at the same time that some support staff are being asked to step up into more senior roles that they are not trained for.

“The lowest paid staff are continually absorbing more elements from the roles of higher paid staff, often with a shocking lack of relevant training.”

“Unqualified social work assistants are now being forced into doing the job of qualified social workers. But they have no access to additional training.”

“Due to budgets and reorganisation training programmes are being shortened and standards dropped, meaning more risk and danger for some tasks.”

This should be of particular concern. A recent survey by UNISON showed that healthcare assistants are expected to do the work of nurses without adequate training or proper supervision.²⁷ Nearly two thirds (63%) said they were left to care for patients without enough support from doctors and nurses. Worryingly, almost two in five said they did not feel confident that those they are caring for are safe.

New technology

Around 90% of support workers saw the introduction of technology into the workplace as inevitable. Only 15% saw technology as a threat to their job, although comments from some respondents suggested that new technology (related to administrative functions) can be a distraction from their job. Others stressed that the introduction of technology can result in a poorer service, especially if accompanied by staff cuts and poor management.

“[We need] time with patients and not at computers”

Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (62%) said technology was “necessary to delivering a better service”.

²⁴ Jewson, N and Felstead, A, Training in the public sector in a period of austerity: the case of the UK, Journal of Education and Work (2014)

²⁵ UNISON, Learning and development opportunities in the workplace for the operational services sector, 2017 Survey

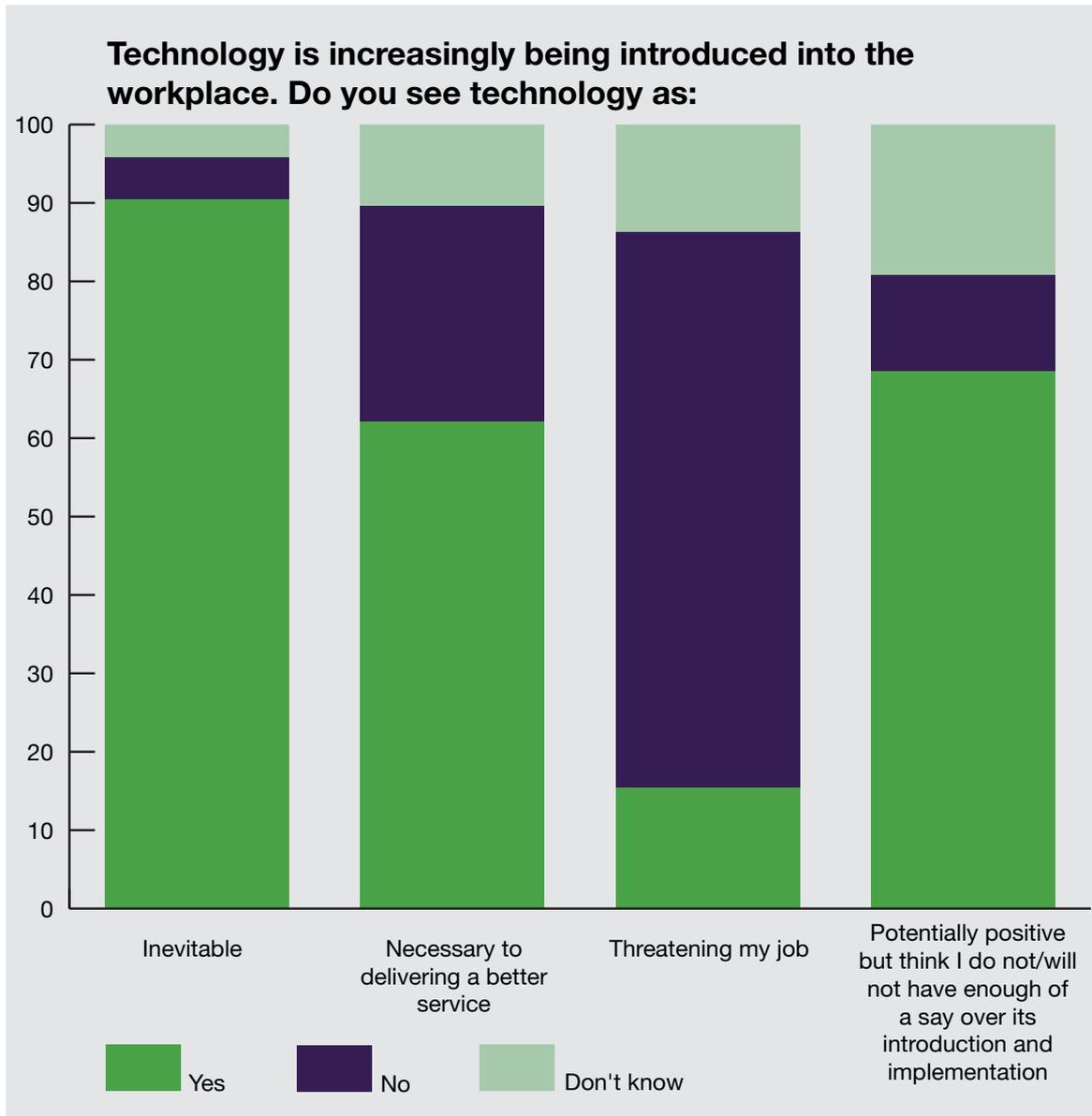
²⁶ According to WERS 2011 a third of managers in the public sector stated that they had reduced expenditure on training. This compared with 14% of managers in the private sector.

²⁷ UNISON survey of nearly 2,000 healthcare assistants, 2018

“Admin staff are under constant threat of losing their jobs because of technology.... secretaries do a wonderful job... They take telephone calls from patients who are usually frustrated at being bounced from pillar to post on automated systems”

Despite talk of the potentially negative impact of technology on employment respondents felt that it was not a serious threat. This may be because of the types of roles being performed by support workers. However, there were some specific concerns over job losses and threats to existing work tasks. Those in local government, for example, were more likely to see it as threatening their job (31% versus 16% across the survey).

Success of new technology will depend on how well workers can use it to improve service quality and efficiency. However, as in earlier questions about not being listened to, the majority of support workers felt they would not have a say over the way technology is introduced in their workplace.



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Brexit

The impact of Brexit hangs over any discussion about the future of our public services and tomorrow's labour market. The final shape of the deal or, indeed, any transitional agreement is far from clear. However, there have been official statements that the government would seek to limit immigration once the UK has left the EU.²⁸

If tight controls are implemented, this could have a direct impact on the recruitment and retention of public service staff, including support staff. According to the Labour Force Survey, at the start of 2017 over 3% of all public servants were EU nationals (approximately 180,000 workers). There are, however, variables within sectors. For example, within the human health sector around 5% of employees are EU nationals.

For those in support roles the data shows the contribution to certain sectors. In education, over 20,000 EU nationals work as teaching assistants and educational support assistants. Equally for nursing auxiliaries and assistants, around 5% of the workforce are EU nationals, which is around 16,000 workers.

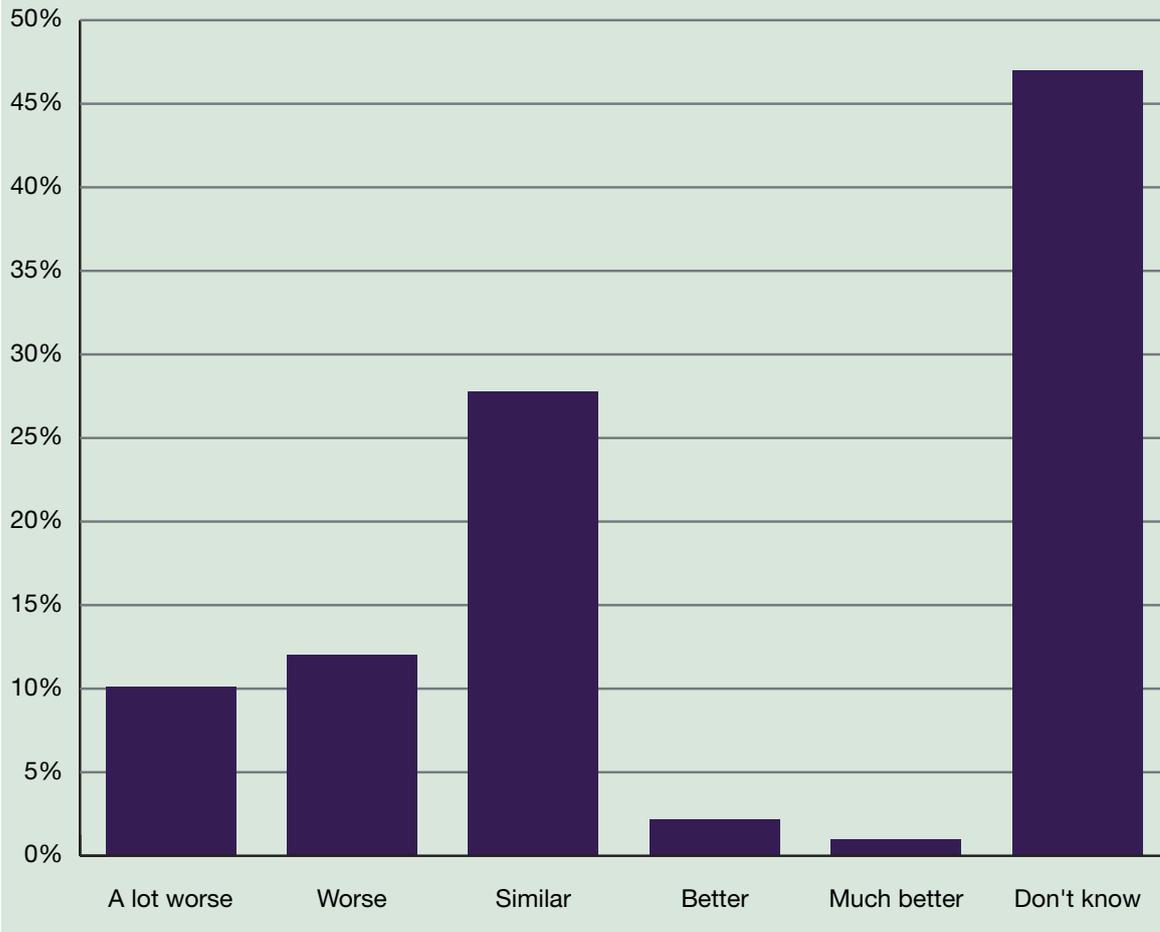
		FTE (full time equivalents)		Head count	
Teaching assistant	Total	265,794	100%	323186	100%
	UK	252,736	95%	305085	94%
	EU	10,035	4%	13558	4%
	Non-EU	3,023	1%	4543	1%
Educational support assistants	Total	156,323	100%	182280	100%
	UK	144,436	92%	170245	93%
	EU	9,477	6%	9624	5%
	Non-EU	2,411	2%	2411	1%
Nursing Auxiliaries and assistants	Total FTE	264,866	100%	313327	100%
	UK FTE	239,066	90%	282464	90%
	EU	13,727	5%	16030	5%
	Non-EU	12,072	5%	14833	5%

Source: Author's calculations based on Labour Force Survey April to June 2017

The survey showed that on Brexit the main feeling was one of uncertainty. When asked whether Brexit would make their work better or worse, nearly half (47%) said they did not know. Nearly one in three (28%) said it would be similar. Two in ten felt it would be worse, but very few felt it would make their work better.

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How do you think Brexit will affect your work? Will it make your work:



Despite the reliance on EU workers to deliver public services, support workers remain undecided about the impact of Brexit.

“Brexit will affect [our] research grant and therefore research staff funding. Funding has already been cut in research lead[ing] to cut of posts, but workloads have increased.”

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Conclusion

The high quality public services we all want are reliant on the efforts, talents and commitment of all staff. If support tasks are not performed then doctors, teachers and police officers can't do their work: A patient cannot be operated on unless they are transferred from a ward to the theatre, appointments cannot be made and met without secretaries and receptionists. Yet despite the essential tasks these workers perform, this survey shows the extent to which support staff feel like second class employees within what should be one team.

New pay settlements for public sector workers may go some way to rebuilding trust and boosting morale. However, in most sectors more is needed for real wages to catch up with ground lost since 2010. Furthermore, the strength of feeling beyond pay revealed in the survey would suggest fresh efforts are required to improve morale and staff relations. The fact that so many staff felt stressed and not valued by management should be an urgent concern for employers.

There are some grounds for optimism. The survey findings make clear the commitment and ethos of public sector workers. They clearly demonstrate that support staff are willing to embrace and adapt to workplace change, including the introduction of new technology. These should be viewed as positives from which to deliver quality public services that meet growing demands and expectations.

Nevertheless, if these positives are to be built on then the survey would suggest that the starting point would be for government and public sector employers to listen to support workers and fully recognise and value the contribution they make. The widespread lack of employee voice, especially around productivity improvements, is counter-productive, and for senior management not to grasp that is perhaps indicative of a wider industrial relations problem.

The warning signs for public service employers and the government are flagged up in this survey. To ignore them will leave public services in an even weaker position. The risk of continuing with the status quo is that the public sector will fall short of its reputation as a good employer and service quality will inevitably suffer as a result.

What does the survey tell us?

- Support staff feel that much more needs to be done to recognise and value the effort and the commitment and contribution they make.
- Just because support staff are often not viewed as 'frontline' staff does not mean they are not stressed. Increased workload and more responsibility for no additional reward adds to the sense of not feeling valued and is leading to people feeling worried and anxious about their work.
- A workforce that is stressed and feels undervalued is not the foundation for healthy staff or excellence in public service delivery. It runs against the very purpose and ethos of the health service and other public services.
- Feeling undervalued alongside low levels of workplace morale is encouraging large numbers of support workers to look to change their job. High staff turnover will have a negative impact on service quality and erode organisational memory.
- Most support staff believe services have worsened. The impact of austerity seems apparent as workload issues are most commonly cited. The sense of being stretched thinly when coupled with falling real pay is given as a main reason for people feeling undervalued.
- Improving the quality of management is viewed by support workers as important, not least in relation to their own productivity, being listened to and being valued.
- The commitment to public service is demonstrated by the growing numbers working unpaid to keep services going. However, there is a real danger that those on low incomes are in effect being paid below the National Living Wage as a result.
- Support staff feel their views about maintaining and improving services are ignored. Disengaged and unengaged workers are less likely to deliver better services, and this adds to the sense of feeling undervalued.
- Support staff are not opposed to new technology, but think their views on its introduction will be ignored.
- Public sector employers are much better at providing training than their private sector counterparts. However, this is only true of those in higher occupational roles. There is a large training gap within the public sector, which makes support staff feel less valued and is likely to hinder efforts at enhancing service quality.

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