

Effects of Cuts in Local Authority Planning Departments

Introduction

Severe cuts in Local authority planning departments are leading to potential safety risks for the public, reducing the quality of the service delivered and worsening inequalities. These are the results found by a survey UNISON Scotland has conducted amongst our members in planning departments. Alongside the service cuts members report decreasing morale and rising stress levels as a result of cutbacks.

Member Survey

Our members in planning departments include planners, architects, archaeologists, clerks of works, building standards officers, pest control officers.

Staff answered multiple choice questions on the level of cuts, the expected level of future cuts and the impact of cuts on the public and on staffing levels.

On staffing levels, we asked for a description of the levels of reductions over the past 3-4 years. Almost 60% described the level of cuts as 'major' or 'severe' and 53% believed there were further major or severe cuts still to come. On the impact on the public, 87% overall believe the service provided to the public is being adversely affected.

We also asked for descriptions of the types of cuts in service that were being experienced; the impact of safety on the public and the impact on both the working conditions of our members and the effect on their well-being.

Impact on Services

Amongst service impacts listed by members in differing areas were an ending of pre-warrant inspections with fewer building/refurbishment projects being undertaken. Fewer departments were meeting deadlines for applications and other targets. Decreasing staff numbers mean that charges are also either rising or being imposed in new areas such as for pre application advice or for dealing with insect infestations.

Staff reported that a necessary focus on processing individual applications meant that essential policy work is being neglected with potentially far reaching effects for communities. A lack of planning policy leaves open the possibility of the wrong development in the wrong place as well as the missing of opportunities. A reduction in the scope of some departments was pointed out as they gave up on non core activities. The cutting of area planning functions was highlighted. These are not statutory but provide hugely valuable



KEY POINTS:

- Cuts are having a major impact on staffing levels in planning departments across Scotland.
- Cuts are having a major or serious impact across all aspects of the planning service.
- Safety to the public is being compromised due to the cuts
- Development opportunities are being missed
- Staff are suffering from low morale and increased stress



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services to communities. The lack of this service will worsen inequalities across neighbourhoods. The view was strongly expressed that if the aim was pursuing a strategy of social justice these services should be receiving investment not cuts.

It was pointed out that departments are struggling at the moment - a period of minimal economic growth and a downturn in the construction industry - many felt that existing staff would be unable to cope if construction worked picked up, with a consequential impact on economic recovery.

Some potential safety risks were thrown up - one authority was reported as having effectively abandoned its asbestos register. There were reports of increasing numbers of properties either having either out of date electrical certificates or no certificate at all.

In their capacity as custodians of the built environment planning staff flagged up the impact cuts in other areas are having, such as lower levels of housing repairs meaning greater numbers of callouts to dangerous buildings.

Problems for Staff

Staff reported a variety of serious problems, mostly but not exclusively, centring around workload pressure. This is the result of decreasing staff numbers - either through redundancy or leaving vacancies unfilled. Professional staff in particular find it more difficult to work to the required standard when they have to pick up work previously done by admin staff.

The loss of experienced staff is flagged up in a number of departments, with members saying that they are expected to take on tasks that are senior to their job role and grade or simply that too few qualified staff in place to carry out the required work. The problems inherent in working above grade were compounded when complaints of difficulties in accessing further training which were also reported are taken into account.

There were reports of very high levels of stress due to increased workload. There are a variety of reports of staff approaching management about unmanageable workloads, this not being dealt with resulting in long term sick leave due to stress (with the work then falling to remaining colleagues!).

Cutbacks in essential car user allowance are also impacting on planning staff.

Action for Branches

- Arrange to meet with members/stewards in Planning Departments
- Ascertain what particular problems are being experienced in your Council
- Investigate with employers the possibility of increased staffing in areas where this is causing difficulties in delivering the service
- Arrange for Health & Safety Officer to look at increases in stress and address these with employers



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