

Frontline public sector workers acted as ‘shock absorbers’ of the austerity cuts to local government budgets



Drawing on qualitative evidence with frontline workers in four UK local authorities significantly impacted by austerity, [Annette Hastings](#) and [Maria Gannon](#) explore coping mechanisms developed by workers to manage resource restriction.

Have the UK’s front-line public service workers ever been better understood or valued than during the COVID-19 pandemic? Perhaps a sea-change in how we regard the ‘key work’ performed not just by health and care workers, by teachers and police officers, but also by legions of council staff – social workers, housing officers, bus drivers, refuse collectors and cemetery workers – will be a legacy of the pandemic period. Indeed, the Local Government Secretary went as far in his support to [characterise local government](#) as the ‘fourth emergency service’ and its staff the ‘unsung heroes’ of the pandemic.

Of course, underlying such appreciation is recognition of the actual dangers that many frontline workers have faced when required to leave the safety of their homes to do their jobs. It’s important to recognise that higher illness and death rates have impacted on staff beyond the health sector, [affecting council care workers, bus drivers and others](#). The pandemic has undoubtedly created a sudden, unprecedented shock to the experience of local government work – a shock which is widely recognised. However, the impacts on workers and their workloads of the decade of austerity cuts that preceded the pandemic are less well known and understood.

In [research with frontline council workers in England and Scotland](#), we found that they had acted as ‘shock absorbers’ of the severe cuts to local government budgets that took place in the first five years of austerity. We found that local government work had become more precarious, intense, and demanding as austerity began to bite – a phenomenon experienced internationally [according to Guy Standing](#). Insecurity had led research participants to accept pay cuts and downgrades with some, including low-paid home care workers, noting the impact of changed terms and conditions such as the loss of an essential car user’s allowance. [Recent research by the Guardian](#) found that low-paid key workers on the COVID-19 frontline cannot afford an average priced home in 98% of the UK.

In our research, we talked to library staff, housing officers, social workers and street sweepers amongst others about their experiences of providing council services in a period when [half a million of their co-workers had lost their jobs](#). This work identified three ways of coping with staffing cuts, office closures, and burgeoning workloads: resistance, adaption, and absorption.

[Resistance and adaption](#) are strategies [recognised in previous research](#) as ways that public service workers cope with resource constraint, with situations where the demand for a service exceeds the capacity of staff to deliver it, or with managerial, organisational or political imperatives that conflict with what workers hope to achieve by working in public service. A few of the council workers who participated in the research told of how they attempted to resist the effects of budget cuts by continuing to do aspects of their jobs previously considered good practice, but now deemed unaffordable. A social worker, for example, told of how she still accompanied vulnerable clients to medical appointments in an attempt to ‘join up’ service provision.

Coping by adapting to, rather than resisting, the ‘new normal’ was more usual, however. Sometimes, adaptations were creative and potentially more effective, such as delivering family outreach services in local parks rather than in costly indoor venues. More often, adaption was described as just ‘getting on with’ working in ways considered to be sub-optimal: abandoning response targets, referring clients to other departments, accepting staff and service cuts. For instance, a second social worker told of how she had been re-located to a city centre open-plan office when her neighbourhood office was closed, leaving her the choice of discussing sensitive issues with clients face to face in an open-plan setting or resorting to telephone-only interactions.

However, it was the testimony of a wide range of staff that they had simply absorbed the implications of austerity cuts that was most striking – and seemed to characterise ways of coping with austerity specifically. Workers in children's centres spoke of taking on 'more responsibilities, mopping up redundancies, (of having their) job descriptions widened'. Librarians spoke of working 'a damn sight harder' and housing officers of working in a state of high alert: 'fire-fighting rather than working in a pro-active manner'. Many participants in a range of roles worked outside paid hours – often in an attempt to relieve stress – while others noted impacts on their health, feeling 'battered and bruised', 'tearful and unhappy ... drinking and eating more and exercising less'. An advice centre worker lamented 'Nobody ever says "you look well"'.

Indeed, those working with vulnerable clients with complex problems who had suffered from austerity more broadly – advice centre staff, social workers, housing officers – seemed to have absorbed an austerity 'double whammy'. One advice centre worker recounted:

people are coming to us at the end of their tethers ... I don't think we've ever had people quite as bad as we have at the moment ... this last year in particular has been really, really hard on people, we are inundated with people coming in now.

And a children's centre worker, who was in the process of re-applying for her job, revealed the strain of managing her own stress while working with vulnerable families:

All that stress hanging over you And for us working with families with young children where it's like happy smiley faces all day long, that's an added pressure ..., because you don't want the families to experience what's going on in the office, so you're having to try double.

As politicians and policy makers grapple with how to cover the 'costs of Covid', it would be wise to consider the cumulative impacts of austerity and the pandemic on public services and those who deliver them. Frontline public sector workers have effectively absorbed the effects of both a decade of austerity and of a 'once in a hundred years' pandemic. Whether they should, and how they could, be expected to bear the effects of [yet more austerity](#) has to be at the centre of debate.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in Local Government Studies.

About the Authors



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