

Two large, blue recycling bins with red latches on their lids are shown side-by-side. The bins are set against a background of a grey metal mesh fence. The left bin has the text "Dumped on:" printed on it, and the right bin has the text "Working in Scotland's waste management services" printed on it.

**Dumped
on:**

**Working in
Scotland's
waste
management
services**

**A UNISON Scotland survey
January 2015**

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Introduction

Waste management is one of the least considered but most essential of public services. Most of us take for granted the fact that we can take out our rubbish and at some point in the near future the bins will be emptied. Even the arrival of the age of recycling and the requirement of sorting refuse into different bins has done little to alter this.

This vital public service of waste collection and waste management needs a skilled and engaged workforce: in strategic decision making, enforcement, through local authorities and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, service delivery and in educational/ awareness-raising work. UNISON members in local government and across public services perform a range of these waste management roles. This report focuses on those working in local government.

Through a mixture of survey and interview we spoke to UNISON members working in waste management asking them a series of questions about their working lives, how their jobs had changed in recent years and what they felt were likely developments. UNISON has members working at every level in waste management. This study contains views from refuse loaders to senior area waste managers.

In certain respects this study reflects previous surveys of sections of UNISON members (hospital porters, occupational therapists, housing staff, cleaners). Like those workers, UNISON members in waste management tell a story of increasing pressure of work at the same time as the value of wages decreases. This survey however did contain an unusual optimistic note in that some respondents did express a degree of confidence that their service would improve in the coming years - although it should be noted that this was a minority view and far more likely to be expressed by those in managerial grades.

Managing waste is not just central to environmental health - it is also seen as central to the health of the environment. Consequently as issues of climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions have gained greater importance so what is expected of waste management services has changed. Whilst details and targets varied, there is a clear trend linking the Scottish Executive's [National Waste Plan](#) of 2003 and the current Scottish Government's [Zero Waste Plan](#) Zero Waste Plan published in 2010. These plans and the European Directives which informed them aim to reduce landfill and increase recycling and greater segregation of waste. These all require changes in the delivery of the service.

In more recent years as council finances have tightened, budgets for waste management (like other services) have been squeezed - further adding to pressures on the workforce.

Working harder - getting less

Like other local government workers those in waste management have suffered years of either zero or below average pay rises. In our survey staff at all grades, even managerial, report having to make efforts to economise. Almost all of the manual workers who responded said that they took overtime shifts when they were available, many saying that they were an important part of being able to make ends meet. Levels of overtime worked were fairly high with reports of regular overtime being worked from four to 10 hours a week.

This decline in reward has not been matched with a reduction in expected effort. Quite the contrary, as new initiatives and declining staff numbers combine to make jobs more demanding than before. Vehicles are sent out with fewer staff - but the same route to cover as before. Others report the sharing of tasks amongst smaller numbers of staff.

The general picture is one of a workforce under pressure in and out of the workplace.

What the staff say

We are shopping around for food, fuel, clothes - to get the best deals, no holidays, having to keep cars longer.

All waste crews have been cut to the bone. Vehicles regularly break down, and go out with driver plus 1 loader rather than 2, but still expected to complete routes.

Restructure has widened my role and lowered my grade. So, more work and less recognition.

Vacancies have not been filled but offered as cost savings. So work of senior positions passes to us.

The changing environment of waste management

Local authorities are responsible for waste management, but they do so under a strategic plan laid down by the Scottish Government - the Zero Waste Plan published in 2010. This in turn reflects the necessity to apply the European Waste Framework Directive. The Zero Waste Plan aims to be an economic strategy and a resource strategy, not just a waste strategy. (It also embraces all waste not only that handled by local authorities.)

The impact of this on the waste management services has been profound. Far from disposal being the object of waste management as it was in the past, disposal is now explicitly described as the least desirable of possible outcomes. Instead this comes as a priority, backed by targets for 'preparing for reuse' and recycling. It is these measures which have been behind the progressive introduction of increasingly separate bins for refuse.

Waste management teams now have to collect materials separately and ensure a destination for them. Councils are subject to increasingly strict rules about what may be sent for landfill or incineration (eg by 2020, no biodegradable material may be sent to landfill). In recent years, prohibitions have been put in place preventing recyclable material being landfilled, and collection services for dry recycling and food waste have had to be put in place for householders.

The difficulty of achieving this in a situation of contracting spending has been demonstrated by the inability of many councils to **meet existing targets** meet existing targets. Also - as **Audit Scotland** Audit Scotland has pointed out - the cost of recycling increases with the rate of recycling - as it inevitably involves extending schemes into areas where it becomes more difficult (eg very rural areas or high rise housing).

What the staff say

More focused on monitoring waste/ recycling than on educating the public.

Originally had 12 adviser posts... Now just been reduced to 3 advisers and processes changed to allow customers to self assess for many services.

Impact on staff

Clearly these changes require new ways of working and put burdens on the staff. Changes require more interaction - and education of householders and businesses, operation of new equipment.

Respondents to our survey point to a number of areas where the introduction of systems and processes to meet new demands have seemed either ill thought through or rushed.

Complaints of a lack of consultation and involvement are common, as are observations that in order to meet new requirements routine work gets neglected.

What the staff say

There are the same number of workers in our team but the workload seems to be gradually increasing as the pressure increases to reach recycling targets but with less money to do so.

We just get on with it although introducing new recycling initiatives while trying to do the day job can be very stressful at times.

Rubbish is a risky business

Waste management and recycling ranks amongst the UK's most hazardous occupation. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) says **between 2004/5 and 2011/12, it received reports of 97 workers and 19 members of the public being fatally injured - and 3,722 employees suffering major injuries - in waste and recycling activities**, making it one of Britain's most dangerous sectors. They are currently due to publish a blueprint for addressing the 'terrible toll of death, injury and ill health in the waste and recycling industry'.

Staff tell varying stories around their own experience of health and safety. Almost all said that their personal protection equipment (PPE) was adequate for the job they do, but there were a number of reports that in the event of the items needing replaced - through normal wear and tear - getting replacements was often a slow process.

Perhaps more worryingly in a service undergoing rapid change as a consequence of both increased demand and tightening budgets was a lack of awareness of any risk assessments before changes and innovations have been introduced. Very few staff report even knowing about any risk assessment being undertaken before changes are introduced into their job - far less involvement.

What the staff say

They are tearing up existing risk assessments. ie we are supposed to visit customers in pairs, now there are no enough of us to do so. We are expected to carry out risk assessments for an assisted lift service without proper or adequate training.

Concerns of working environments raised for several years [but it] takes intervention of HSE to improve.

The future of waste management

Two things are clear about the future of waste management. One is that the amount of waste which will be required to be reused or recycled will continue to rise. As well as the existing regulations, the concept of the even more exacting **circular economy** circular economy - which aims for even higher levels of reuse – is being floated. The second is that budgets will come under further pressure in the immediate future. Councils are already struggling to balance their budgets as they bear the brunt of cuts in overall expenditure. Within local government budgets there is little sign - despite increasing regulatory pressure - that councils seem in any way inclined to protect waste management spending.

Given that change requires investment in both capital spending and staff, as new processes and procedures and equipment will be involved, there is a conflict between these two objectives. In canvassing the views of the staff there was a clear dichotomy between managerial and other grades of staff. Managers looked to the vision of a leaner and greener future, (mostly) acknowledging current difficulties but hopeful that what would emerge would be a service better both for citizens and for the environment. Manual and administrative grades, informed by their experience of the last few years were markedly less optimistic. They fully expected any further changes to be at their expense in terms of intensification of work. As staff numbers are reduced (or as tasks increase) this will involve the public having to do more of the work themselves - which will involve a greater effort at education - but advisory staff are seen as targets for staff reductions.

What the staff say

All the tasks that have been neglected will become issues. Ambitious targets will be difficult to reach. Staff will become even more demoralised.

I think we will lose frontline staff such as bin men and possibly admin staff.

More reorganisations to meet increasing budget cuts

Conclusion

Waste management staff are vital to any kind of civilised life.

As we become ever more aware of the need to conserve resources their functions are becoming more of a social and political issue. This is not being reflected by how they are funded or treated and most definitely not in how they are paid.

Waste management services matter - and so do the people who provide them. They deserve better than being dumped on.



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Valuing public services and the people
who provide them



For more information on UNISON's Worth It campaign
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/worthit

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