



Dishing the dirt

Cleaners in Scotland's public services speak out

August 2014

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Introduction

Long before most of us get to work – or after most of us have left our job a vital yet poorly paid and often overlooked section of the workforce are beginning their shift. It is a fact that cleaners are often neglected in discussions about workplaces yet, if they neglect their work, many other people's jobs rapidly become impossible and most public services become undeliverable.

This is applicable in almost any workplace or facility – but of course in many environments cleaners are the front line of hygiene and preventing the spread of infection.

UNISON Scotland has been surveying cleaning staff in areas where we organise to get a picture of how they are faring in the era of cuts and austerity. Through a combination of questionnaires filled in at work, interviews and online surveys we attempted to take a snapshot of a section of the workforce we all depend on.

The picture that emerges is one of a workforce largely, but far from exclusively, female, mostly part time, and trying simultaneously to deal with an increase workload and wages that don't go as far as they used to.

“The number of staff in our departments have decreased majorly over the past couple of years, yet our workloads have increased dramatically. We have already been told that we will not be getting an increase in staff yet the standard of work expected from us has always remained the same. How can you do your job properly without the right amount of staff?”

“Holidays and sickness are not always covered either. So you then have to work with even fewer staff and not always with the stores/equipment needed. We are not machines we are people and we need to be valued as such.”

Domestic Assistant, Hospital

The workforce

It's no real surprise that the majority of the cleaning workforce are female but it may come as a surprise that almost one in five (19%) of the respondents to our survey were male. (Fig 1)

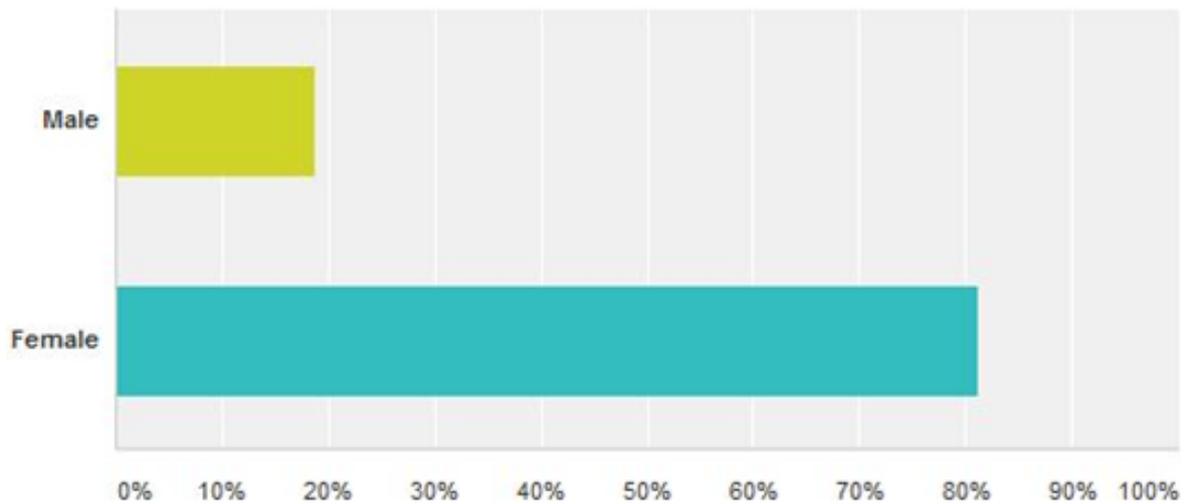


Figure 1: Gender

The age profile of respondents (Fig 2) conforms to the more general pattern of public services of an aging workforce.

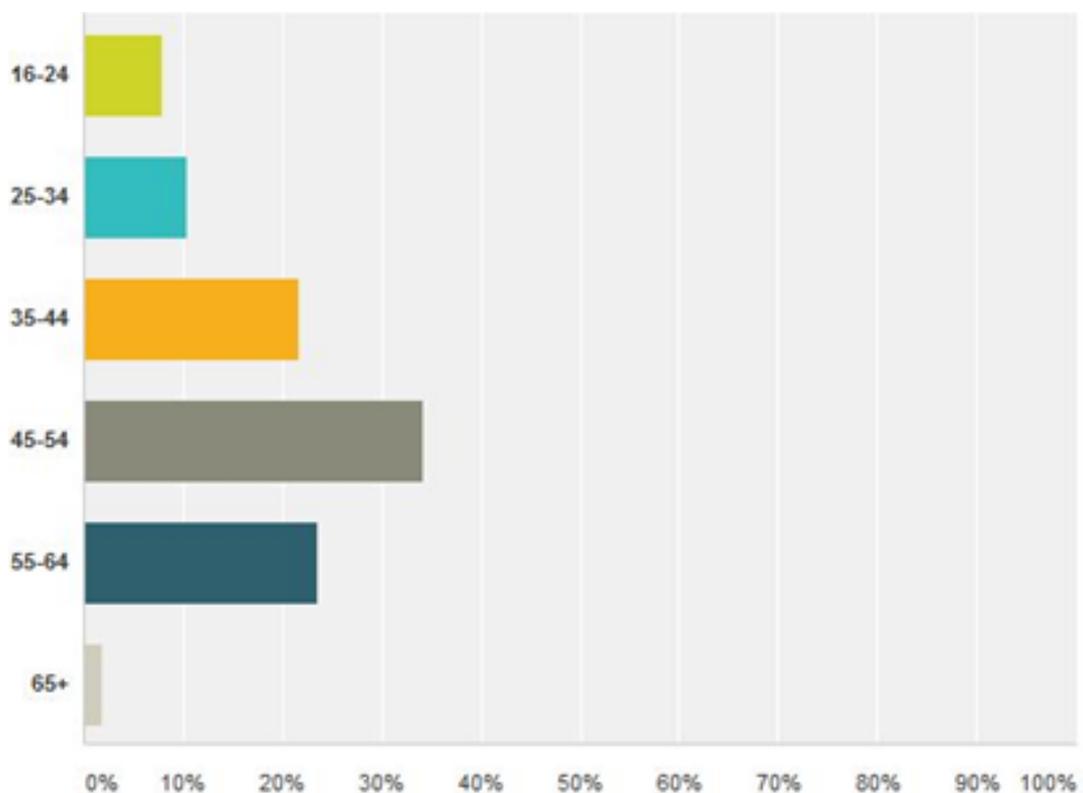


Figure 2: Age

Dishing the dirt - A UNISON Scotland survey of cleaners in our public services

The majority of respondents work part time with the average hours worked overall being 23hr. This of course covers a wide variety of differing contracted hours varying from 8 – 37.5 hr. Only 20% report regularly working over their contracted hours with average being 9hr. 23% of respondents said that they also had other jobs.

Our survey was conducted in workplaces organised by UNISON. As might be hoped in these environments, Zero Hour Contracts and casual contracts were a much smaller feature of the employment pattern than might be found in non unionised workplaces. Only 6% of respondents were on ZHC or casual contracts (Figure 3). It was in this segment that the only examples of workers with no regular base were to be found. The recent Equality and Human Rights Commission report, *The Invisible Workforce*, also found that ZHC's were rare amongst cleaners in public services.

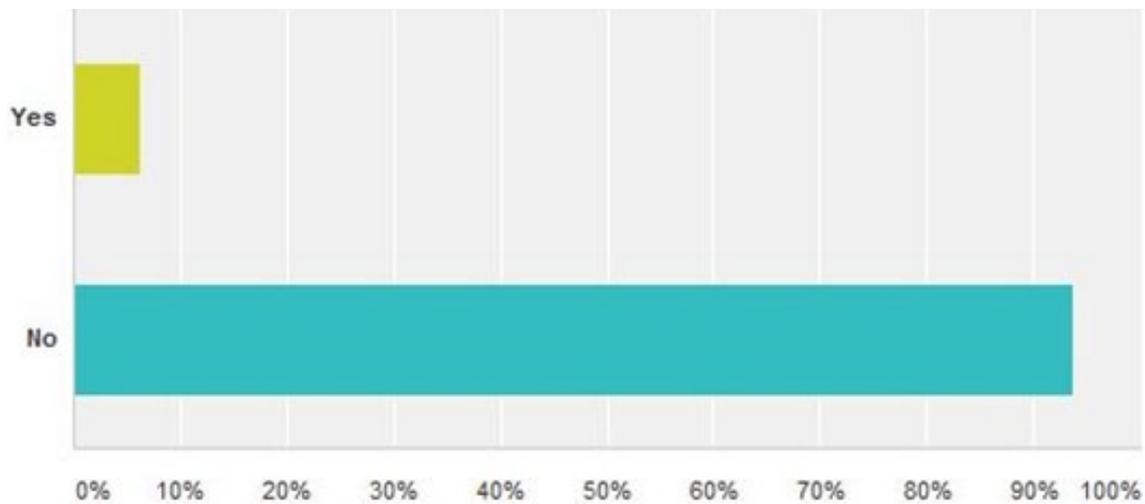


Figure 3: Zero hour contracts

Cutting costs - cutting standards

Many respondents tell us that cutbacks mean standards of cleanliness are declining. Across a range of environments there are complaints of either a lack of cleaning material or of switching to cheaper, less effective cleaning materials.

What the cleaners say

“No I don’t have the best of cleaning products, they changed to cheaper products so I feel I don’t get the best results as I would like.”

NHS cleaner

“We frequently have no cleaning materials; a shortage of plastic bags, mops, detergents, toilet rolls and hand towels. We frequently have to search for supplies which takes up a fair amount of your time.”

Local Govt Cleaner

“I don’t have great equipment, especially mop heads which are very stringy and worn.”

College Cleaner

“The lack of equipment is embarrassing.”

NHS cleaner

“Not allowed to use as much cleaning products like bleach, polish, just washing up liquid.”

Cleaner in Health Centre

“Many of our specialist cleaning products are no longer available, furniture polish, sanitiser, glass cleaner.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“Some of our cleaning products have stopped being supplied due to cut backs. We are told to use cold water or hot water with no product added. Hoovers fall apart and are held together with tape.”

NHS Cleaner

While complaints about the availability of equipment or cleaning products are frequent enough - more often mentioned is an intensification of work to the point where standards begin to slip. Over two thirds of respondents said that their workload had increased in the last three years. (Fig 4)

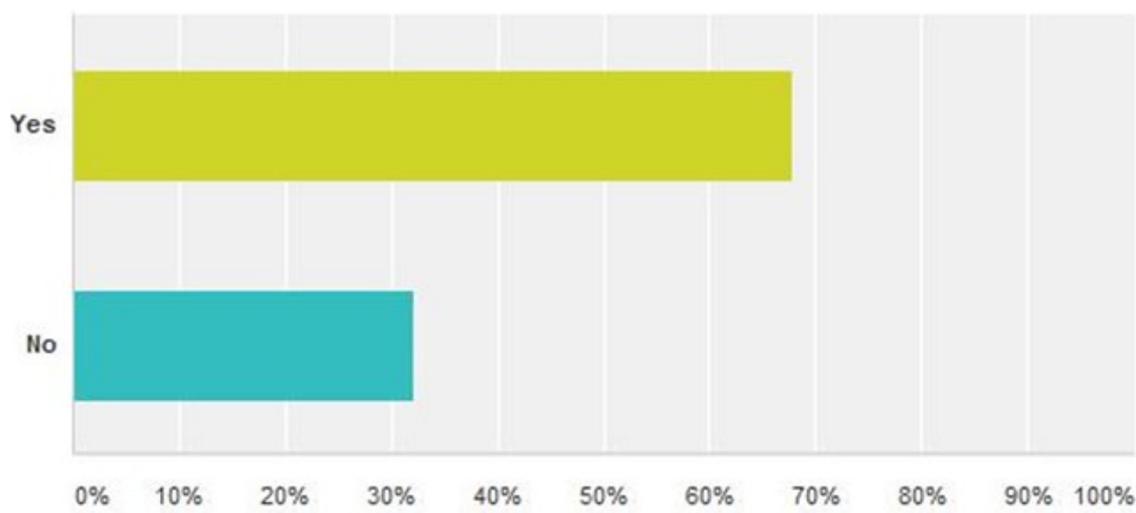


Figure 4: Has your workload increased in the last three years?

Usually this takes the form of increasing the area to be cleaned without any expansion of working time. The result is that areas are not cleaned to either the standards that cleaners are happy with or that the public should be able to expect.

What the cleaners say

“Where I had three hours to clean one department I now have to clean two departments in the same time. I often feel rushed to complete these tasks and therefore don’t feel like I do the best job in the time allotted. Sometimes I don’t have time to do the second department at all.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“Originally we had eight cleaners but due to cutbacks we now have five. It’s nowhere near enough to cover the size of the high school and with extensions and new rooms being built we don’t know how we are going to cope.

School Cleaner

“Not enough time for size of area to clean. Was six hours per day between two people, now only me on three hours per day. Raised concerns to supervisor but told just to use initiative and clean what looks dirty. Not constructive answer and adds pressure to daily tasks. I never feel area is clean enough for purpose because of lack of hours for area.”

School Cleaner

Under pressure

Pay in public services has stagnated in recent years either frozen or markedly below inflation. This has meant that for most people in public services wages have gone down by at least 10%. Even with the welcome application of the Scottish Living Wage in some sectors many cleaners have real earnings less than they were a few years ago. Our survey left us in no doubt that cleaners are finding it harder to make ends meet and optimism about the future is in scarce supply. Years of declining living standards have impacted on morale.

What the cleaners say

“Once the month’s rent and month’s council tax is paid we struggle until the next pay day. Never seem to get out of the bit as it all seems to go on electricity/food. There is nothing left for ‘treats’ for the wee one like days out.”

Hospital Domestic

“I do as much over time as I can, when I can but my husband and I still struggle.”

Hospital Domestic

“I worry every month about how the bills are going to be paid, and am constantly in my overdraft.”

College Cleaner

“I find it hard to make ends meet and never have money to spend on holidays, treats etc. I constantly worry about what will happen if I become too old to do all the physical work that I do, but there doesn’t seem to be an answer to this problem. I can’t afford to give up any hours or I won’t be able to pay my bills/debts. I’m 51 in September and just feel a bit more tired these days as I’m up at 5am for work then don’t finish till 8.30pm (I only have a few hours free in the afternoons). I wish wages would increase, then I might be able to give up some working hours, until then I’m trapped in an endless cycle of work.”

Domestic, Health Centre

“The cost of living went up but our wages haven’t. I have to buy cheaper foods now.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“My standard of living seems to be getting bleaker and I don’t think it will get any better.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“It has got worse in past three years. The wages don’t change but the cost of living just seems to go up and up. How can people live healthily when the healthy foods cost so much and the prices keep going up.”

University Cleaner

“Standard of living has changed a lot. I hope it will improve but wages do not go as far and this will not change for the better until food prices and fuel bills go down - these are essential items to live and during the winter sometimes it is like heat or eat.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“We both work for council so we not getting pay rise to compensate for the rise in cost of living. Food and fuel and power prices all rising higher than our pay.”

Council Cleaner

If the present doesn't lack for issues it isn't hard to see difficulties ahead for what is an aging workforce. 43% of respondents aren't in their occupational pension scheme (Fig 5).

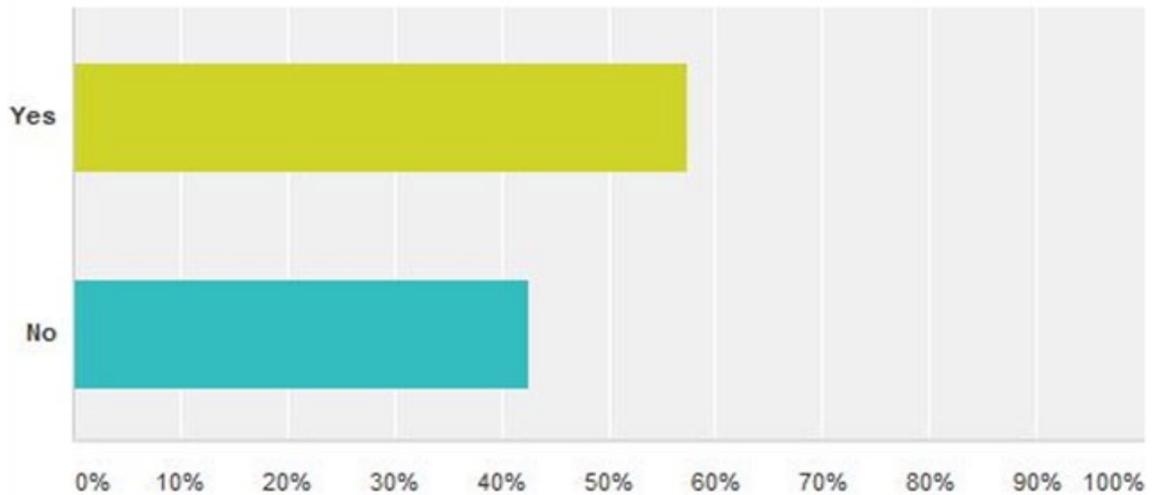


Figure 5: Respondents who are members of their occupational pension scheme

Another indication of the difficulties caused by the combination of standstill wages and rising prices is that of those who had joined the pension scheme but then subsequently stopped saving towards their retirement (Fig 6). Almost one in five (19%) of those not in the pension scheme have previously been members, but then stopped making contributions. This shows not merely the impact of declining real incomes but also points out that the short term attitudes prioritising cutting back will have serious long term consequences.

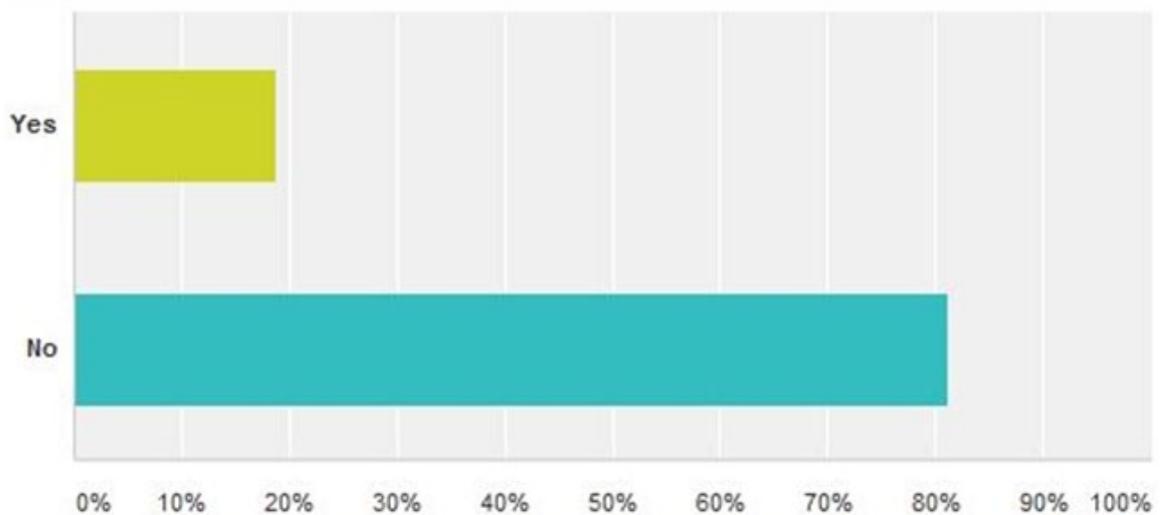


Figure 6: Respondents who have joined and then left their occupational pension scheme

Being valued at work

There is a stark divide in how most of our respondents feel about how they are regarded by others. On the one hand almost all of them report that when they come into to contact with the public or the wider workforce they, and the work they do is appreciated.

Interactions with management however, particularly (but by no means exclusively) those working in contracted out services, are a different matter. Here the perception reported is very much that cleaners are seen as a cost rather than a benefit. The value of their work being defined by how cheaply it is carried out rather than the standards it maintains. Representative views included:

What the cleaners say

“Loads of patients appreciate us but I certainly don’t feel valued by company with work load being put on us and if they valued us they would appreciate our concerns on this extra work being forced on us.”

Hospital Domestic Assistant

“Our employers keep telling us that we are valued but it sure doesn’t feel that way! The public usually have a little more respect for what we do and quite often express this, which is nice.”

Council Cleaner

“Not very often we get any positive feedback. Doesn’t seem to matter how hard you work, it’s never enough. Only really get comments if something’s wrong.”

College Cleaner

“More criticism than praise. This impacts on morale.”

Local Government Cleaner

“No, or the pay would reflect this.”

Local Government Cleaner

Better standards for cleaners - means better standards of cleaning

The most helpful thing that can be done to improve cleaners' working lives is pay them properly for the work they do. Employers could do this directly of course – and we would urge them to do so. But many cleaners' jobs ultimately depend on procurement exercises and it is here that public authorities can play a role. The recent Procurement Act passed by the Scottish Parliament allows public bodies to take the payment of a living wage into account in the issuing of contracts. This provision needs to become a key part of cleaning (and other) procurement exercises on the part of public bodies in Scotland.

The other issue flagged up in this survey is one that while concerning cleaners as workers, is a matter which goes far beyond them. Saving money via cuts in cleaning is a false economy. Reducing costs by either cutting back on cleaning materials and equipment or intensifying the workload of cleaners isn't a saving – it's a problem. Cleaning is, definitively, a labour intensive activity. This survey clearly shows that putting pressure on cleaners doesn't mean 'doing more with less'. It just means that less gets done. This is something that should certainly be of concern to those with a role in commissioning, who should pay close attention to how the standards being set are to be delivered. Concern should hardly stop there however; at root this an issue for anyone who expects that they and their family will use or work in facilities which are hygienic or safe. And that's all of us.

Cleaners matter – not just because they have as much right to dignity and respect in the workforce as any manager or Chief executive. But because the work they do is vital in every respect. They are a key aspect of any workforce or the delivery of any service. This should be recognised, by both ensuring that they are given the environment to do their job properly but also in recognising its value where it is most obvious – in their pay packets. Cleaners are Worth It.



WORTH *it*

Valuing public services and the people
who provide them



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

For further information contact
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