

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROZANNE FOYER (STUC)

1. I am Rozanne Foyer, General Secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), my office address is STUC, 8 Landressy Street, Glasgow.
2. I make this statement on behalf of the STUC in response to a letter dated 9 January 2023 sent on behalf of the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (the "Inquiry"), pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006
3. This statement is made for the purposes of Module 1 of the Inquiry which is examining emergency preparedness, resilience and pandemic planning.

4. Introduction

The STUC is an independent Trade Union Centre to which independent trade unions affiliate their Scottish membership. The STUC is the national lobbying, campaigning and co-ordinating body for trade unions in Scotland and represents over 545,000 trade union members via their affiliated trade unions.

5. Workers across Scotland faced huge challenges both personally and in their working lives as the pandemic escalated and unprecedented action was taken to restrict individuals movements, introduce lockdowns and close large parts of the economy. Workers in essential services including health, social care, transport, education, emergency services, energy, retail and local authorities were called upon to work in the frontline, often putting themselves and their immediate families at risk.
6. Scotland's pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic was significantly impacted by years of underfunding across Scotland's public services. Since 2010 the UK Government had adopted an austerity programme in theory to cut government debt. This programme resulted in cuts to government budgets, freezing or cutting benefits, increasing selected taxes and holding down public sector pay. The resulting reduction in budgets and staffing levels across the public sector in Scotland created conditions which hampered pandemic responses in health, social care, education, transport, emergency services and local authorities.
7. The STUC's main remit for commentary on pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience relates to the Scottish Government and local authority budgets.

8. The Structure and role of the STUC

The STUC is an independent Trade Union Centre to which independent trade unions affiliate their Scottish membership. The STUC represents over 545,000 trade union members in Scotland from 42 affiliated trade unions and 20 trade union councils and is governed by the STUC General Council who are elected annually at STUC Congress.

9. The STUC is the national lobbying, campaigning and co-ordinating body for trade unions in Scotland. The constituted purpose of the STUC is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the Trade Union Movement in Scotland reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens. This is supplemented by the STUC's Vision and Mission:

- to build a strong, influential and globally aware trade union movement that champions equalities & delivers a fundamental shift in wealth, wellbeing and power towards workers, our families and communities in Scotland & beyond;
- to support our affiliates to educate, agitate, organise and build a movement for change in our workplaces and communities.

10. The STUC focuses campaigns and lobbying on all devolved matters including education, health and social care, local government and transport.

11. The STUC maintains a formal relationship with the TUC, Wales TUC and Irish Congress of Trade Unions through the Council of the Isles. The STUC works in partnership with the TUC on non-devolved areas of policy. The STUC also lobbies and campaigns directly with Westminster on UK non-devolved policy issues when deemed necessary or appropriate by our affiliates.

12. The STUC was established in 1897 and is a key civic organisation in Scotland. Successive Scottish Government's since devolution in 1999 have actively engaged with the STUC, albeit taking a variety of approaches. The current Scottish Government has a stated aim for Scotland to become a leading Fair Work nation by 2025¹. This framework identifies the value placed on trade unions as the effective voice of workers

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fair-work-action-plan-becoming-leading-fair-work-nation-2025/documents/>

in Scotland and provided the backdrop to initial joint responses to the pandemic by Scottish Government and the STUC.

13. The Readiness and Resilience of Public Services

At the start of the pandemic Scotland's health, social care, local authorities and other key public services were already struggling. Staffing levels had been cut across devolved public services including the civil service, other public bodies, , colleges, local government and schools. The UK Government's austerity programme slashed government spending across departments and reduced the Scottish Government budget year on year.

14. Scottish Government spending decisions had also resulted in cuts to local authority budgets at a higher rate than the reduction to the Scottish Government budget. COSLA represents local authorities across Scotland and reported in Fair Funding for Essential Services:

*"In the last 5 years, the Scottish budget has reduced in real terms by 0.4%. Local Government budgets have reduced 10 times that much by 4%."*²

15. In the same publication, COSLA reported that:

"the workforce had fallen by 15,000 in the last 5 years" and warned "there is no room left for manoeuvre".

16. This evidence aligns with reports by Unison Scotland who conducted a series of surveys of members working in local government which showed the impact of the budget levels on services and workers. Unison Scotland represents over 150,000 members and is the largest union in local government in Scotland. Unison reported that:

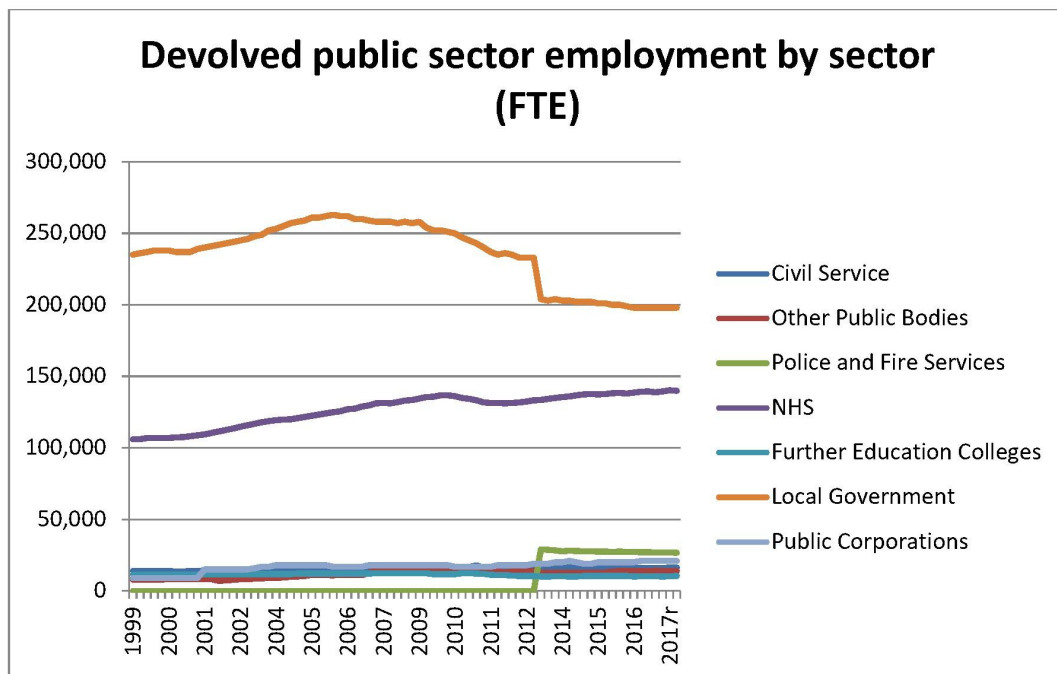
"cuts to staffing and increased workloads are placing enormous strain on staff. The majority of members report that their workload is growing and that they are working long unpaid hours and skipping breaks to try and maintain a quality service.....Moral is very low, staff feel undervalued and exhausted by the efforts they put in to maintain services. The loss of business support staff means that many spend time on admin tasks when they should be focusing on other parts of their jobs which would provide a better service to the public. Salami-slicing of services avoids headlines but the long years of austerity

² https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18225/fairfundingforessentialservices2019-20v2_1.pdf

are having a severe impact on our services and the staff trying to deliver them with limited resources.”³

17. The STUC reported in our “Budget Briefing” on the Scottish Government budget for 2018/19 that:

“almost a decade of cuts and austerity have shrunk the public sector and put an ever increasing strain on the public sector workforce. Scotland’s share of the public sector has fallen to 21.5% from a high of 26.9% in the first quarter of 2010. Within these public sector job losses, local government has been disproportionately impacted. From a high of 325,000 in the first quarter of 2006 (295,000 excluding police and fire service), there are now only 245,000 local government employees. Excluding the reorganisation of the Police and Fire Service, this represents a cut of 17% and the loss of 50,000 employees. Full time equivalent figures show a similar picture, falling from 260,000 in the first quarter of 2006 (234,000 excluding police and fire service) to 198,000 in 2018.”



STUC analysis based on Scottish Government data.⁴

³ <https://unison-scotland.org/wp-content/uploads/UNISON-Scotland-response-LG-sustainability-Aug-2019.pdf>

⁴ Data used to create the tables in this report is taken from Scottish Government (2018) ‘Public Sector Employment Tables’: <https://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Labour-Market/PublicSectorEmployment/PSEwebtables>

18. In 2019 the Fair Work Convention published their report on social care in Scotland, “Fair Work in Scotland’s Social Care Sector”.⁵ The report outlined the main challenges in social care including the undervaluing of social care work, low pay and problems with recruitment and retention. The report reflected on the impact of austerity on the sector:

“It is widely accepted that the social care sector is facing severe challenges due to austerity. It is also working to meet the needs of an ageing population that is living longer, but with more complex needs. Evidence taken by the social care working group was that 200,000 people receive adult social care services annually, with 100,000 people receiving half of the total health and social care budget: most are accessing many different aspects of the health and social care system.”

19. Further the report detailed the complexities in the mixed market economy of social care, the changed role of local authorities in delivering care and the challenges in commissioning and procurement where both voluntary and private providers reported budget pressures due to procurement processes. These factors led to a variety of challenges including a “disconnect between strategic planning, service commissioning and procurement approaches” and a system that “creates and relies upon competition has, according to some stakeholders, accelerated a ‘race to the bottom’ as providers compete to win contracts.”

20. The structural complexity and use of private profit-seeking providers in social care undermines the stability of the sector and did not provide a resilient basis for the sector when the pandemic arrived.

21. One specific area that we know Scottish Government did not prepare for was the supply and provision of PPE. The STUC were aware of reports from trade unions at an early stage of the pandemic that staff in a variety of settings were not receiving PPE. This was raised with the Scottish Government frequently in meetings including with Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, on 24 March 2020, when we made her aware that ambulance workers were about to run out of masks.

22. The concerns around PPE did not only apply to health and social care as we reported the ongoing issue surrounding postal workers and the lack of PPE at a meeting with Fiona Hyslop on 3 April 2020. It was reported that there had been a number of walkouts

⁵ <https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Fair-Work-in-Scotland%E2%80%99s-Social-Care-Sector-2019.pdf>

at Royal Mail as managers were informing postal workers that PPE was not required and washing hands regularly should be sufficient. Postal workers provided essential services and as key workers needed to have full access to PPE for their health and safety.

23. We now understand that the Scottish Government had failed to implement all the actions identified in previous pandemic preparedness exercises. Audit Scotland reported in February 2021 that following pandemic preparedness exercises some areas identified became significant challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the need to ensure the availability and correct use of PPE. The report noted that action to resolve this was not taken:

“Access to, and training in, the use of PPE were identified as areas requiring improvement. The Flu Short Life Working Group identified a priority action in relation to clarifying access to the PPE stockpile. This was required to be completed by March 2018. The Scottish Government planned to include this in the flu pandemic guidance that was being developed for health and social care. The FSLWG also identified raising awareness of the type of PPE required and fit testing for staff as priorities. In March 2018, however, findings from Exercise Iris again highlighted the need for substantive progress in the area of PPE availability and use across Scotland.”

24. There are grave lessons to be learned about the impact that years of budget cuts and austerity policies had on the resilience of our key public services like social care and health services to deal with a pandemic. As evidenced by the staffing issues and lack of adequate PPE etc, this impacted greatly on effective service delivery at a peak and extremely critical time. We witnessed public service workers risking their lives, and that of their families, to protect their communities often without the necessary protection, payment or recognition.
25. When reviewing the economic planning, including capacity and spending commitments, we believe that years of UK Government austerity along with the Scottish Government's failure to invest in public services, especially local authorities, and public sector workers led to a lack of resilience and effectiveness in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

26. Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Roz Foyer

Dated: 27th April 2023