



FORSA

Local Government Attitudes Survey

Contents

Foreword	3
Key highlights.....	4
Demographics of respondents.....	5
Gender	5
Age.....	5
Grade and role of respondents	5
Length of service	6
Working patterns	6
Workforce experience	7
The need for a fair and transparent job evaluation scheme	7
A lack of career progression for those in the sector	8
The impact of staff shortages	8
The cost of living	10
Achieving a healthy work-life balance	11
Abuse and personal safety in the workplace	12
Concluding remarks	15



Foreword

Local Government is involved in nearly every aspect of our daily lives, providing essential services that reach every citizen, from the youngest to the eldest members of our communities. Its direct involvement in our schools, homes, local services and public parks enriches our experiences of how we work, play and enjoy our local areas, and ensures that we, as citizens, have a voice in the delivery of these vital services. Local government presents the greatest interface between citizens and the State.



The important and valuable contribution of workers in local authorities across Ireland cannot be overstated. The provision of local services is a cornerstone of our society, without which many communities would suffer. Fórsa is proud to amplify the collective voice of workers in local government and local services, and to advocate for an improved system, not only for our members, but also for the public who rely on them.

This staff-attitudes survey is the most comprehensive ever undertaken in the sector, reflecting the lived experience of workers across our local authorities. Fórsa undertook this important piece of work in response to ongoing concerns expressed by those who work in local government and local services, and its results clearly illustrate the challenges and opportunities faced by workers daily. These findings help us to better understand the priorities for our members, where opportunities for improvement exist, and where action is needed.

It is without doubt that the sector has faced many challenges; shifts in population demographics, public spending, staffing levels, and public perception of public services continue to present an ever-changing landscape. Nonetheless, the sector has proven itself to be remarkably agile, responding with efficiency and professionalism to new challenges as they emerge. This was particularly evident in the Covid-19 pandemic community response spearheaded by local authorities all over the country. However, the sector still struggles with the fallout of the financial crisis, where 10,000 jobs were lost at the height of the crisis, resulting in grade drift and what has become glaringly obvious - the inconsistency of duties and responsibilities assigned to grades across the sector.

Workers have raised concerns around staffing shortages, being assigned responsibilities above their grade, and facing unsustainable workloads, all of which are impacting individual health and wellbeing. Additionally, they have highlighted instances of abuse they have faced in the workplace and have emphasised the need for greater supports to deal with abuse and difficult situations affecting their safety. What was once the employer of choice, this sector is now facing an existential recruitment and retention crisis in a number of local authorities. Our findings suggest that up to forty percent of workers in local government are searching for work elsewhere. This stark statistic raises concerns about retention issues in an already stretched sector.

Our members take great pride in their role in delivering public services. They are dedicated public service workers who strongly contribute to society, and whose work benefits our communities. As workers, they have a tripartite of interest in the conversation surrounding local government; firstly, as employees, secondly as taxpayers and thirdly and equally as important, as service users.

Whilst the research shows challenges, workers who responded have highlighted many positive benefits to working within local authorities. However, what stands out the most is the need for continued progress. Fórsa is ready to engage with management in local authorities to address the issues discussed here but that needs to be meaningful, constructive and solution- focused.

Fórsa is a union run by its members in the interest of its members.

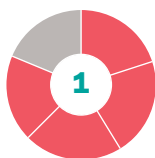
We value the important work undertaken by our members in the sector and the incredible dedication and commitment that they show. Your engagement with this attitudes and experiences survey has provided data that is both rich and informative and which will enable us to emphasise to management how these issues impact our members, as we seek to make the local government sector a better place to work.

In solidarity,

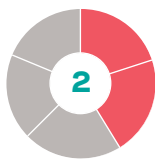
Richy Carrothers
Head of Local Government and Local Services

Key highlights

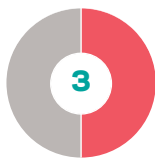
This report presents the findings of the largest attitudes and experiences survey conducted among Local Government workers in Ireland. Its findings identify a number of workplace issues affecting those who work in the sector, while also highlighting the importance of access to blended working, access to a four-day week, and career progression opportunities. The negative impact staffing shortages are having on the workplace environment, and the abuse faced by workers in carrying out their duties is also a prominent feature in the responses.



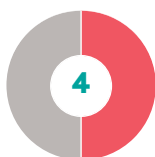
Four out of five workers across the local government sector would apply for a job evaluation scheme if it were available to them, a standard process which is already available to public sector workers in health and education and local authority workers in Northern Ireland and across Britain.



40% of local government workers are looking for a new job. Almost half feel that there are not enough opportunities to progress their career where they are based. Many respondents cited recruitment processes and the need for increased pay as other reasons for seeking alternative employment. The survey also evidenced that pay is of the most importance to those who enter the public service on lower pay scales.



Close to half of the local government sector are concerned about the potential for burnout, with just under a third indicating that the workload placed on them is unsustainable. This clearly demonstrates that the under-resourcing of staff continues to burden the workforce, who have taken on additional duties since the financial crash and have been keeping services afloat.



The opportunity to avail of blended working continues to be valued by workers in local authorities. **Almost half** of respondents agreed that good blended working options are available in their local authority. However, this highlights the need for a formalised approach to ensure access is widely available to all those employed in this sector.



Eight in every ten workers who interact with members of the public in the course of their work have had to deal with aggressive or abusive service users, leading workers to feel vulnerable in the workplace. Almost 60% did not receive access to additional support from their employer following violence and aggression in the workplace, while similar numbers stated that no risk assessment was conducted after incidents of abuse. There is a legal and moral obligation on the employer to ensure the safety and welfare of their employees, and any failure to do so is a clear dereliction of their duty.

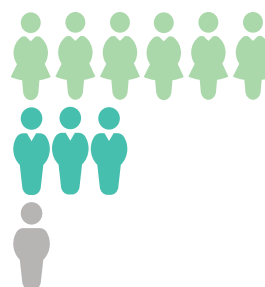
Demographics of respondents

The local government workplace experience survey was issued to Fórsa members on 17th November 2023 via email and remained open until 8th December 2023. The survey was carried out through Microsoft Forms and 2,128 responses were received.

Gender

Of the 2,128 survey responses, almost 64% (1,364) were from women and 33% (704) of responses were from men.

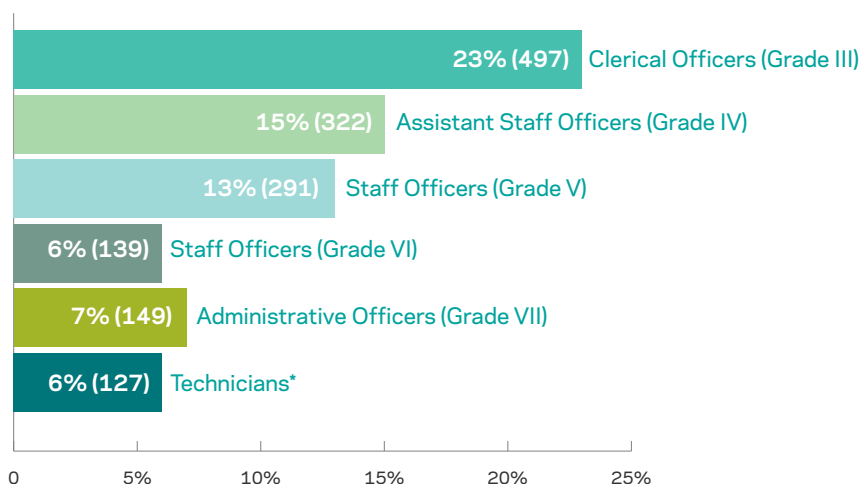
2% (44) of respondents preferred not to identify their gender, and eight responses came from workers who identified as non-binary.



Age

Age	No. of respondents
18-24	16
25-34	204
35-44	537
45-54	842
55-64	490
65+	35

Grade and role of respondents



*Inclusive of grades such as Chief Technician, Executive Technician, Senior Executive Technician, Site Technician Level 1, Technician Grade I and Technician Grade II.

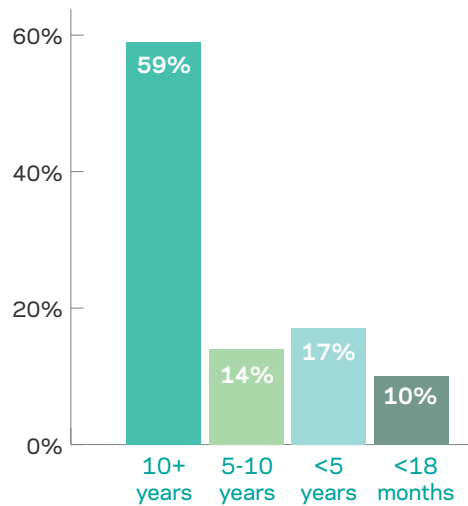
Other grades represented in the responses include: Library Assistant, Senior Library Assistant, Executive Officer, Senior Executive Officer, Librarian, Executive Librarian, Technical Support Officer, Housing Officer, Planner, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, and Fire Officer, among others.



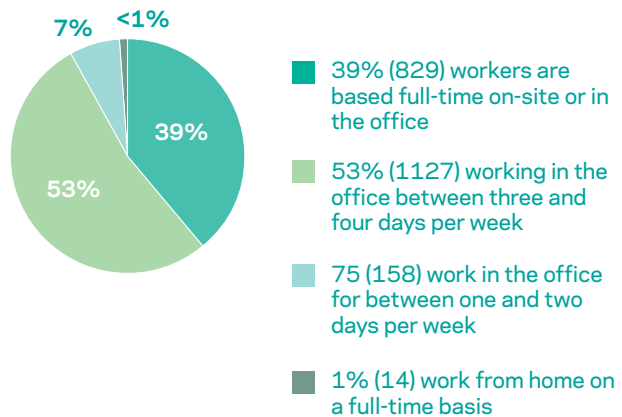
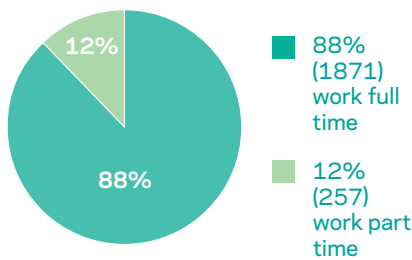
70% of those who participated in the survey interact with members of the public through their work.

Length of service

59% (1,253) of respondents have worked in local government for more than ten years. 14% (301) have worked in local government for between five and ten years, while 17% have worked less than five years and 10% are new to the workforce having worked in local government for less than 18 months.



Working patterns



Workforce experience

80%

of workers said they would apply for job evaluation if such a scheme were put in place by their employer

The need for a fair and transparent job evaluation scheme

The loss of 10,000 jobs across the local authorities after the financial crisis has created considerable issues for those who are now employed in the sector, more than a decade later. These significant losses meant the burden of ever-increasing workloads fell to those who continued to work in the sector. This has resulted in considerable grade drift in the sector, with many workers now carrying out duties at a higher level than the grade at which they are employed and paid. With this grade drift comes additional concerns, with local authority workers facing the harsh reality of being paid at different rates to their colleagues who perform the same role in a local authority elsewhere.

Fórsa has long advocated for the introduction of a job evaluation scheme for the local government sector. In Ireland, many Fórsa grades represented in the HSE and higher education have access to job evaluation. Such processes are also commonplace across Europe, and local authority workers both in Northern Ireland and across Britain have access to such a scheme. A fair and transparent job evaluation scheme would ensure that workers who have been delivering on duties and responsibilities above their grade are appropriately remunerated for their work. Without such a scheme, pay disparities will continue to exist across the local government sector, where workers doing the same work are paid differently depending on the local authority in which they are employed.

Retaining the existing talent in our local authorities is crucial to strengthening the sector, and regaining trust in local government and its service delivery. However, many of those employed in the sector are not satisfied and are actively seeking opportunities elsewhere. The findings related to seeking new employment are further discussed in the next section.

“

Feel I am doing the work of a Grade 4 even though I am a Grade 3. Constantly asked to do more due to staff shortage of Grade 4 in my department. Pay is not manageable with the cost of living in Ireland especially Dublin.

Clerical Officer, Grade 3

”

A lack of career progression for those in the sector

When asked if they were actively seeking work elsewhere, **40% of workers said they were searching for another job**. Just 13% of workers were looking for a new position within local government.

Almost half of those actively seeking work elsewhere referred to issues with career progression as a reason for looking for new employment. Many responses indicated that they had major concerns surrounding the recruitment processes in their local authority and that there are few-to-no opportunities for career progression. This suggests that while local authorities promote 'excellent career progression opportunities' in their recruitment campaigns, highlighting such as key to fostering employee development, the reality for current sector employees may be very different.

40%

of workers said they were searching for another job.

I love my job, in fact I am passionate about it, however, the lack of recognition of the burden of work, or the quality of work, the lack of support from the SMT is very disappointing.

Administration Officer,
Grade 7

I am currently in a role that is at the grade 5 level. There seems to be great disparity between my grade and equivalent roles in other local authorities. Many others who do my job are a grade 7... Effectively, I do the same job as other people for a much smaller salary.

Staff Officer, Grade 5

I like my job, but I know I am working at a higher grade without the recognition. What choice do I have but to move on, the promotional system is not fit for purpose.

Analogous Grade

The impact of staff shortages

Many challenges have presented in the recruitment and retention of staff in local authorities. Like in many other public service employments, this seems particularly prevalent in those cities where housing is more unaffordable than neighbouring counties. This is evident in significant underspends on salaries in recent years.

As previously discussed, the loss of staff across local authorities increased the workload burden and level of responsibility placed on remaining staff. Persistent staff shortages result in the same effect. While employees are doing their utmost to ensure the consistent delivery of quality local government services, there are some questions raised about the sustainability of such a model which relies so heavily on the goodwill of workers rather than having adequately staffed workplaces. Our collective aim to provide decent and quality employment, as well as efficient public service delivery, are intrinsically linked. Without decent terms and conditions to recruit and retain staff, public service delivery will ultimately be affected.

12% of workers referenced workload or staffing shortages for reasons why they want to move job.

66% Two thirds of workers said that the issue of staffing shortages is very important to them.

48% Nearly half of the survey respondents (48.1%) expressed concern about the risk of burnout, with 32.8% stating that the intensity of the workload is unsustainable.

This undue pressure is leading to workplace absences, with 17% missing work due to work-related stress or illness in the past year alone. Of those who have had to miss work, 40% missed eight days or more, while a further 30% missed between four and seven days, and 34% missed between one and three days.

Among concerns related to professional growth, staff shortages and work-life balance, 8% voiced issues related to management, and 7% referenced wanting to access improved options for blended working, flexible working patterns and family-friendly policies. Additionally, another 7% highlighted issues surrounding stress, burnout, and increased pressures.

“ *...because of staff shortages we are doing a few jobs and feel you can never catch up which is very stressful.* **”**

Assistant Staff Officer,
Grade 4

“ *Workload is unsustainable, my family life is suffering and it is affecting my sleep and mental health. Immediate line managers have been very good about workload but top management don't appear to care.* **”**

Senior Staff Officer, Grade 6

“ *I feel that staff in my Local Authority are expected to carry out tasks that would normally be carried out by higher grades, and also work caused by staff vacancies. It is not sustainable in the long term for existing staff or indeed the organisation.* **”**

Assistant Staff Officer,
Grade 4

The cost of living

For those considering leaving their jobs in the local authorities, pay featured as one of the factors. More than a fifth of workers referenced the need for improved wages and the impact of the cost of living on themselves and their families.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable relationship between the impact of the cost of living and the grades in which workers are employed. When asked about the importance of the cost of living, it was Clerical Officers who considered this issue most important.

While remaining a significant concern for all workers, the issue's importance steadily declined across the sector amongst those working in higher grades. This highlights long-raised concerns over the impact of the cuts to new entrants' pay introduced to public service pay scales in 2011. Building on the narrative presented in this report that the future of recruitment and retention of new staff is a concern, any future attempts to address these cuts to new entrants' pay would, certainly, go some way towards addressing this issue, as well as tackling some of the cost of living issues raised.

Meanwhile, those who are passionate about their work and, who are not actively searching for new employment opportunities are still open to moving should the opportunity for improved pay and support come along.

I have worked here for 17 years. I have never seen such rapid turnover of staff before. Our HR Department are recruiting constantly, however I feel they should be doing more to retain staff. The Housing Department are particularly struggling. I know of one staff member who worked there who gave up Grade 4 here to go to a Grade 3 in the HSE due to the pressure she was under.

Staff Officer, Grade 5

Staff shortages are having a detrimental effect on the morale of existing staff. Expectations to deliver more with less has gone beyond anything reasonable. Staff are leaving, sometimes on a sideways move because of it and Senior Management either don't realise or don't care.

Administrative Staff
Officer, Grade 7

Wages are too low for the cost of living crisis we face in Ireland. Starting salary for the work load needs to be increased. Staff shortage is major issue and adds more stress to an already stressful office.

Clerical Officer, Grade 3

“

Overload of duties on staff meaning it is difficult to do an effective job and deliver a quality service to those who need it most. In my organisation there is a lack of considered workforce planning, PMDS is failing, and new initiatives from the Housing Agency/Government Departments are loaded onto existing staff without any more resources allocated to deliver them. For example, increasing the income thresholds to allow more people to apply for social housing is welcome, but not one additional staff member was sanctioned to support the increased workload. Housing & homeless staff in particular, are experiencing major burnout at present.

”

Senior Staff Officer, Grade 6

Achieving a healthy work-life balance

Many factors enhance employee satisfaction, including access to blended and flexible working arrangements and the option of a four-day working week. The experiences of those who experienced flexible working options during the Covid-19 Pandemic are fresh in people's memories, providing a glimpse into what a more flexible, accommodating style of working patterns could be.

84%

84% of workers identified access to blended working as important or very important.

However, it is important to recognise where positive options are offered within local authorities. When asked if their employer offered good blended working options, 46% agreed. While this figure leaves significant room for improvement across all local authorities, it is welcome nonetheless that almost half of respondents are satisfied with their blended working options.

Looking towards the future of work, four-day working weeks are becoming increasingly popular across employments and are highly sought by staff. 78% are very favourable towards the implementation of a four-day working week.

While there are some opportunities for improvement of terms and conditions, it must be acknowledged that staff in local authorities noted some highlights of their employment. Just over 80% feel secure in their employment; approximately half feel they enjoy a healthy work-life balance; and a little over half agree that they can disconnect from work.

Abuse and personal safety in the workplace

Every worker has a right to feel safe in the workplace, and it is the moral and legal responsibility of employers to ensure that safety, and the health and wellbeing of their workers. This is laid down in law under the Health and Safety at Work legislation, and further supported under European and international law. Just over a year ago, the Government proudly ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Violence and Harassment in December 2022, committing Ireland to the creation of a world of work free from violence and harassment, based on dignity and respect for all. However, there has been a dereliction of duty from local authorities in providing a safe working environment, free from harassment and intimidation.

The convention provides a common framework to, in the first instance, prevent instances of abuse and, where such incidents occur, appropriately address them and effectively work towards the elimination of workplace violence and harassment.

Our members have expressed growing concerns about personal safety when interacting with members of the public, highlighting instances of anti-social behaviour and abuse.

Even those who haven't personally encountered such abuse expressed concern for their colleagues, particularly those in departments such as housing or libraries.



Eight in every ten workers who interact with members of the public through their work have had to **deal with aggressive or abusive service users.**



Over a third of these workers have indicated that they have **felt vulnerable in the workplace** due to violent or aggressive behaviour from the public.

“ Dealing with the public daily and the ever increasing anti social behaviour is stressful.

Some days I dread going to work because of it and have lost sleep over it. ”

Senior Library Assistant

“ Personal safety when dealing with the public is becoming a huge problem. Steps need to be taken to ensure workers have a safe place to work. ”

Librarian



58%

Among those who encountered abuse, 58% did not receive access to additional support following incidents.

Furthermore, 62% of workers reported that no risk assessment was carried out following incidents of abuse. 25% of workers who interact with the public have had to deal with elements promoting the far right, racist or homophobic agendas.

31% of respondents detailed the abuse that they have experienced or witnessed in the workplace as abuse experienced “over the phone” or “face to face” encounters, with racial abuse of colleagues also witnessed.

15% of respondents described a lack of support, including citing unsupportive management.

14% of respondents expressed that they would like management to take a more proactive approach in addressing abuse and the threat of the far-right.

5% stated that perpetrators of abuse face no consequences or are not adequately addressed.

5% of respondents are worried about the risk of working alone or not having a manager present should an incident of abuse occur.

5% of respondents expressed a need for further training related to dealing with abusive situations and aggression in the workplace.

The impact of this abuse on workers is significantly problematic. Failure to act and provide adequate support to address and mitigate this abuse and its consequences is a failure to abide by the legal obligations required of employers. The reputational damage incurred by organisations who fail to protect staff from these incidents will only exacerbate already existing issues in staffing shortages.

Given these concerns, Fórsa re-emphasises the need for management to engage with its employees and their representatives to identify risks of workplace violence and harassment and take measures for prevention and control.

Fórsa recognises that, in some local authorities, efficient policies and procedures exist for staff in dealing with violent agendas. 4% of respondents reported that they found management to be supportive when they had faced abuse or encountered situations involving far-right ideologies.

No provision of crisis management training, suicide intervention training or de-escalation training for frontline staff. No induction on safety procedures - lone working - fire procedures - alarm/panic button in meeting rooms.

Staff Officer, Grade 5

Local authorities have to take a far stronger stance on this than they have done to date. Being filmed at work, harassed at work, and being asked inappropriate questions are becoming far too commonplace.

Library Assistant

I have had objects thrown at me, threatened, shouted at, afraid to leave the building in case I am followed.

Assistant Staff Officer, Grade 4

The managers set a specific SOP in case of far right groups entering the library doors. We are to call the managers office with a specific code, exit through an electric key access door and the higher grade managers will be on the Library floor while other library staff are secure in an office with lockable doors and access to multiple exit points. I feel that having a solid plan like that makes me and other team members more secure, as there is a plan in place in case of something occurring. The presence of the Garda station mere minutes away makes it more secure and hopefully less a likely target.

Clerical Officer, Grade 3

Concluding remarks

These survey findings present a rich and detailed picture of daily life in a local authority. Fórsa is hopeful that these findings will prove useful to the members whose voices must be heard and to management in addressing these issues. Fórsa remains committed to an open and constructive process of collaborative problem-solving and we look forward to addressing these issues collectively.





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