



**UNISON**  
*Scotland*

**Read it and Weep**  
**Scotland's library staff speak out**  
**September 2015**

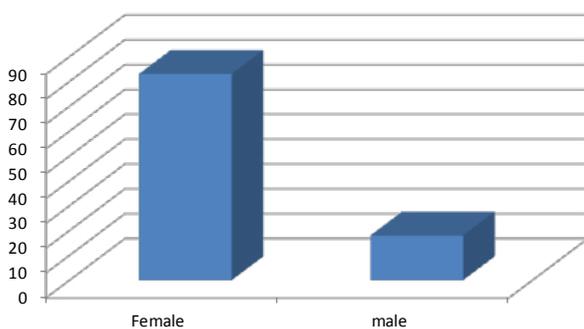
# Read it and Weep

## Scotland's library staff speak out

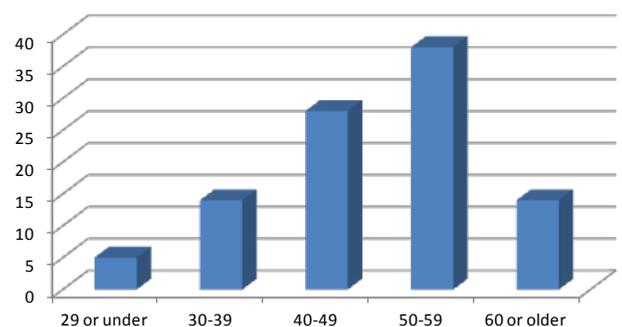
In a conversation with anyone who works in a library, and usually sooner rather than later they are likely to remark “..people think that all we do is put the books in alphabetical order”. This of course has never been the case – and the fast pace of change in library services in recent years makes it more inaccurate with every passing day.

This report is drawn from survey work done by UNISON amongst our members who provide Library services across Scotland . The vast bulk of those work in public libraries, but those surveyed also included library staff in Schools, academic institutions and a small number working in the NHS. The geographic and institutional spread of this membership is a testimony to the reach that libraries have across in Scottish life .

**Gender %**



**Age%**



We asked our members to outline their experiences in a sector that has experienced huge change in service delivery as well as being an all too obvious target for to budget cuts in many places . The picture they paint is one of widening responsibilities, increasing workload, greater strain and growing uncertainty. Work for many is becoming a less rewarding experience – and not just financially.

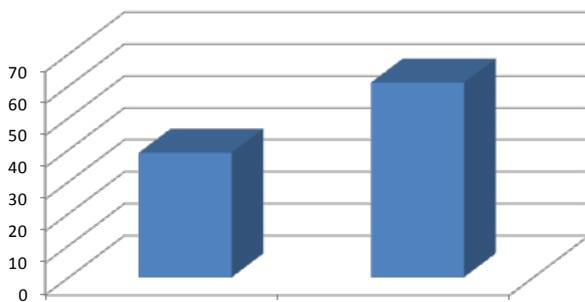
The Scottish Government took part in an exercise drawing up a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries for the next five years . This declared mission of Scotland's public libraries to be part “of a shared civic ambition to fulfil the potential of individuals and communities”. As those employed in our libraries find the gulf between what they could be doing and what they have to do as a result of tightening budgets growing ever wider.

# Read it and weep - a UNISON Scotland survey of library staff

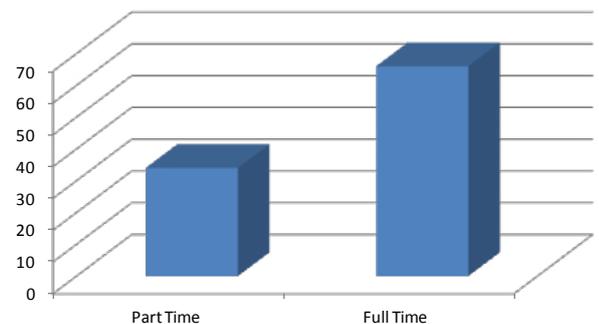
## The workforce

The library workforce is mostly full time with about 1/3 working part time. A majority are women and like much of the workforce in public services getting older, half of the respondents to our survey were aged fifty or older. Over one third of UNISON members report that they regularly work more than their scheduled hours. Although there are some respondents working considerably more, most people report that they are working an extra two to three hours a week. This appears not to be strictly down to choice as many report that “it’s the only way to get the work finished”.

**Working More than Scheduled Hours**



**Full or Part Time**



As in other areas of working in public services ‘austerity’ has presented not only in terms of a pay freeze, but also by reductions of staff. In our surveys three quarters say that there have been reductions in staff numbers in their workplace in recent years. This unsurprisingly impacts on workloads but (as discussed later) has meant an increase in ‘single manning’ in libraries which many find stressful .

## Working in libraries now.

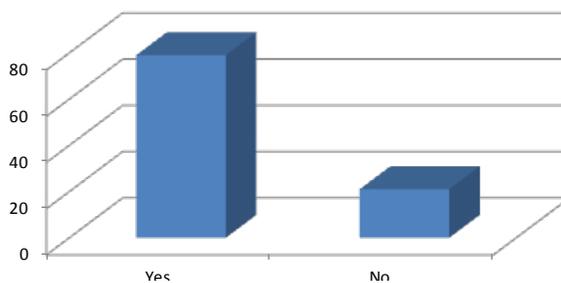
80% of our members say that they have experienced large changes in their job in recent years. In terms of tasks respondents fall into two distinct groups – the majority find themselves taking on a wider, sometimes much wider range of tasks. A smaller, but by no means negligible group report that they find themselves through cuts being forced back into performing only core functions. In the former case this is not accompanied by any staffing increase, in the latter it is often a consequence of staff reductions – so workload, but not wages, is increased in either scenario.

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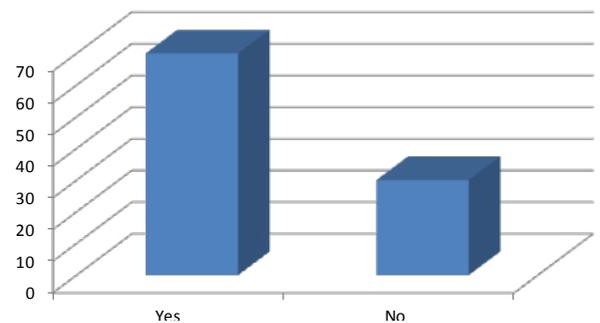
Libraries do a lot more than lend books, they have always been an information resource and hub ( and key in literacy promotion) There have of course been massive changes in how we access all sorts of information and libraries have adapted alongside this. Public libraries have also increasingly become part of a one stop shop approach as regards public services as one respondent put it In recent years their library has also taken up -

'Council payments e.g homeless rent, fishing permits, bulky uplift charges, fines, garbage bag sales. Assisting with bus pass applications. Assisting with on-line job searches / applications by members of public using library PC's. At select branches, scanning & submitting evidence for benefit claims.

**Has your job changed much in the last 3-5 years%**



**Changes in Public Attitudes %**



This expansion in services, and the shift to online provision of more traditional library services brings with it a need for continual on the job training. Around half of members state that the training they receive is inadequate. Failings differ; a general decline in face to face training in favour of online sessions is reported, cascade training where one member of staff is trained and expected to pass on their learning is also common. Staff are often expected by customers to be au fait with the often quite wide range of software on public access terminals.

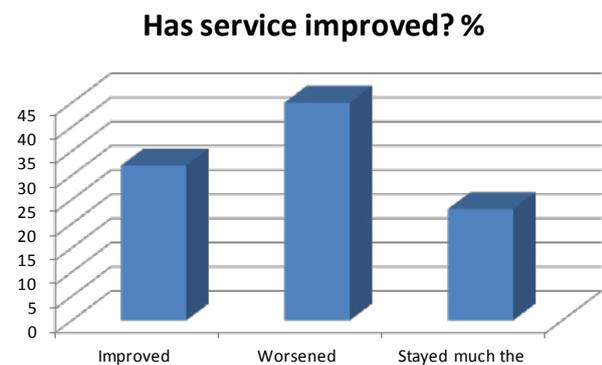
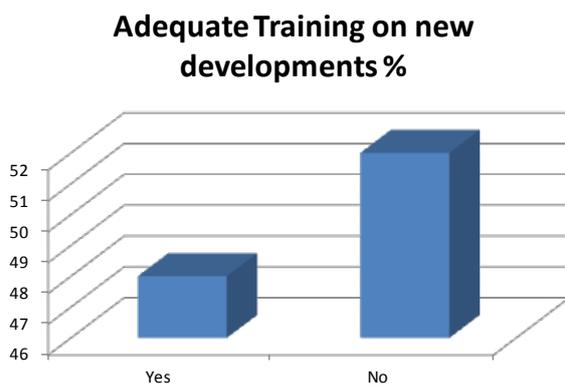
The most often pointed to reason for inadequate training is that there are simply too few staff – rotas are so tight that there is no scope for taking people off them for training. The idea that Libraries have been seen as an easy target for cuts in recent years is widespread. School librarians feel under particular threat – more than one notes that provision of a library service in schools is not statutory.

The tightening of resources , at the same time as an expansion of services haven't gone unnoticed by the public – 70% of staff reckon that public attitudes have changed . Staff report a varying mixture of sympathy and frustration on

## Read it and weep - a UNISON Scotland survey of library staff

the part of the public who are well aware that their service is being pared back – but are finding themselves inconvenienced.

The issue of having to deal with anti social behaviour is clearly both serious and growing for staff in public libraries. Expansion into provision of digital services means staff are expected to be able to solve problems for users which in some cases they are poorly equipped to do. They are also having to deal with a changing customer base. In our surveys staff frequently point out that libraries are where people deal online with a variety of public agencies over issues such as benefits. There are many accounts of customers taking out their frustrations on library staff interactions with the DWP or similar haven't gone the way they would like.



Allied to this is a big increase in lone working due to staff cuts many staff report how being uneasy at the single manning of libraries, particularly at night. This has expanded massively in recent years as staff numbers have gone down and is clearly an issue for many staff in many areas. (Quite separately to Anti social behaviour and violence, Single manning is also flagged up as problematic in terms of service delivery – as only one customer can be attended to at a time)

The use of volunteers is concerns staff. There is a long tradition of some use of volunteers in libraries but as employers look to make savings there is a feeling (expressed by around 40% of our respondents ) that attempts were being made to replace staff with unpaid labour. Some staff point out that as staff numbers are reduced it becomes not simply a case that volunteers are present but that without volunteers the work simply couldn't be done.

# What UNISON members say

## Changes in library work

- More work, less time and resources. More and more targets to reach.
- Diminished standards of service. Lack of professional training and management by "managers" who have little or no library training and fail to understand basic issues.
- Down to skeleton functions to keep service going
- We work alone much more, because of staffing levels. This means we are more stretched than we have ever been before, and sometimes have to limit how much time we can spend with a service user in order to serve more people. There is a much higher use of casual staff who we are expected to manage, regardless of job level.
- We have many more events to run. these have to take place regardless of staffing levels, because its so important for performance figures. We also provide many more new services such as hearing aid batteries, recycling materials and bus passes. These are all very popular and in demand, so we are a lot busier with less staff!
- My post has hugely changed - my area of responsibility has hugely expanded with no similar financial recompense. This is largely due to cost-saving & non-replacement of supporting posts
- We'll have gone from a staff of 7 in 2011 to a staff of 3 by November 2015. My job is now an amalgam of several posts, and thus more interesting. The downside (from the users' point of view) is that we have become a faceless library. They have to seek us out in offices now; the enquiry desk has gone.
- Our library service disbanded the "childrens team" meaning story times, arts and craft sessions and class visits are now carried out by regular staff and no increase to existing staff levels when such activities are carried out.
- Budget cuts and restraints make providing the excellent services customers are used to and expect from staff much more difficult. Reduction in book purchasing means customers are waiting longer for stock and so are prone to purchase the item themselves. Staff are spread thinly over the hours we are open frequently covering in other libraries due to sickness, meetings etc.

## Training

- Patchy. Training usually before new service is introduced, but rarely further training as procedures evolve, and rarely training for relief staff who are often working on their own and infrequently.
- We can't afford any e-initiatives I'm professionally interested in - web-based catalogue; e-books; Accelerated Reader, etc., and there is little to no training in Glow despite this VLE platform having cost millions - ie: it is VERY underused
- Training, if any, is usually brief if provided in person. Usually we only get written instructions which are often inadequate.
- I have had one training day in the 6 years I've been in post, and this was organised by librarians rather than line managers
- Most new things are leaned "on the job" as such, as there is no time for training.
- Self-teaching expected for most new introductions.
- Virtually no training because there are not enough staff to cover

# What UNISON members say

## Changing Public Attitudes

- public far more aggressive as not enough staff
- Expectations are higher, especially with regards to digital access
- They have higher expectations of what we should provide than we often can provide with current funding
- They see staff not properly trained to provide IT and get frustrated
- The public are noticing the budget cuts more each year, asking why they pay their council tax when services are being cut so severely. Customers are disgruntled and unhappy with the cuts in services and rightly so.
- I support a student population rather than the public. The long-enrolled students notice and complain about (in a supportive manner) the reduction in our service. I am worried that new students will know no different, and accept our reduced provision as fit for purpose.
- Families are positive about the kids craft sessions, bookbugs and family events. Lots of frustration about slow working computers, public printers not working etc.

## Anti Social behaviour

- It's part of working in a Public Library. What concerns me is Single Manning. If something kicks off there used to be enough staff in the room to help deal with it. Now staff feel very isolated and Not backed up by Management.
- Being single manned in my workplace especially during evening hours makes me feel very vulnerable. Winter time when the nights are darker are the worst.
- No attendants - any problems and staff at counter have to deal with it. Job centre send people to library to search online for jobs, they get frustrated and can take their anger out on us - they are frightened of job centre staff!
- I have personally had to manage several incidences of severe anti-social behaviour in the last two years, which have resulted in criminal prosecutions. Not pleasant at all.
- Working alone on a mobile library there is always the threat of being attacked by malcontents.
- We sometimes have quite aggressive customers, also people with special needs who need a lot of help and can be difficult to manage.

# What UNISON members say

## Volunteers in libraries

- Many of the jobs that used to be done during a regular day by staff such as shelf checking, book weeding engaging with the customers, event development etc are only done if we have a volunteer to cover.
- Although volunteers are not used at the moment. There have been offers to volunteer at the library. I think if this happens then it is a replacement of staff.
- Pupil volunteers deliver ICT sessions in place of staff. Staff are unable to support 1 - 1 sessions in some of our branches due to the volume of work.
- While I believe that volunteers are currently being used to complement staff, the lines become blurred when staffing is so tight and I worry about how volunteers might be used in the future.
- I recently managed to 'see off' an attempt to do exactly this; a volunteer to replace a HE level educated library assistant but the writing is on the wall...
- Do employers have a vision for the future?
- They have a vision but whether this is achievable is yet to be discovered
- As a Trust they are more interested in a vision for the leisure side
- Personally, I think they have set the library up to fail. And then they can cut the service with a clear conscience.
- I do not know what the management vision for libraries is I can't recall being informed of what it was I do think they have abandoned the concept that our core business is books
- It may be that there are strategies in place to try and get more people to make use of library services and facilities but I am not kept informed of this.
- Refinement and overhaul of services. Unfortunately these are also tied into savings resulting in the proposal to close 16, mainly small, libraries
- Our management have a clear vision of the future, enshrined in a Service Plan and Service Improvement Plan, but the council see reducing the number of libraries and opening times as a way to save money.. They think that everyone can buy books and that everyone has a computer and broadband at home. We offer so much more than that, and for those who cannot afford to buy books, and cannot afford a landline, broadband and a computer the library is essential, particularly for the unemployed and those on benefits who must now access the services they require on-line
- I think there is a vision, though I question the extent to which such a vision can be delivered given limitations. Many of the ideas being put forward are good on paper but the lack of adequate funding and the fact that these events have to be fitted in in addition to our existing responsibilities means that the execution is invariably lacking. I feel there's a "do more with less" ethos which is demoralising and runs the risk of diluting the service, doing many things badly instead of a few things well.

# What UNISON members say

## What could we be doing

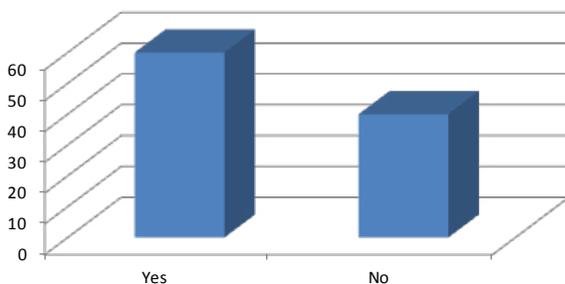
- Take into account the views and suggestions of those delivering on the front line with regards the future planning and implementation of Library services
- Give the running of the libraries back to people who have previously worked in one. Most of the libraries management now have little or no experience in working in or running a library
- Expansion is not possible without more staff and investment. There are services we would like to offer or offer in more quantities but are unable to do so
- Consult the front line staff on what needs doing to improve the service. They are the ones who know. It may not be anything drastic or very expensive but pragmatic changes in the way we do things are possible. Senior management must start going round libraries regularly to get a dialogue with the staff, emails and reports don't do it.
- Why is so little done by way of promoting the service. If we believe libraries are a public good why don't we advertise on radio and have membership drives.
- There seems to be a lot of talk about how the user experience is paramount and should drive library services until the users seem to want something that is too expensive or goes against the vision of the future (e.g. users preferring print resources to e-resources or preferring to have those books signed out by a person rather than a machine) so it would be good to do more to find out what users really want and genuinely try to meet those wishes
- If libraries are to be all things to all people (cafes, community centres, web cafes, children's day care centres etc.), then adequate funding and properly trained staff are needed to deliver these services. The alternative is to focus on delivering and improving the core library service, which I feel has been forgotten about to a considerable extent of late.
- Our employer needs to realise that a demoralised, stressed staff has far reaching consequences beyond just the well-being of the staff themselves. My impression is that morale is low, particularly in the libraries where Communities' presence is felt more, that staff feel undervalued and that their goodwill is being taken advantage of.
- More staff would be the first priority, or even just filling vacant positions in a timely fashion rather than leaving them empty for months. Less use of casual staff on zero hour contracts. While the casual staff are lovely people, they cannot be expected to learn the variety of services available in every location they are sent to
- Reinstated full time librarians in schools would be a help but it's unlikely to happen. Research on positive role of school libraries has been ignored by the Scottish government who pass the buck re staffing back to councils. The will to improve school libraries is non existent, which is particularly galling in light of the First Minister's recent comments about literacy

## Looking to the future

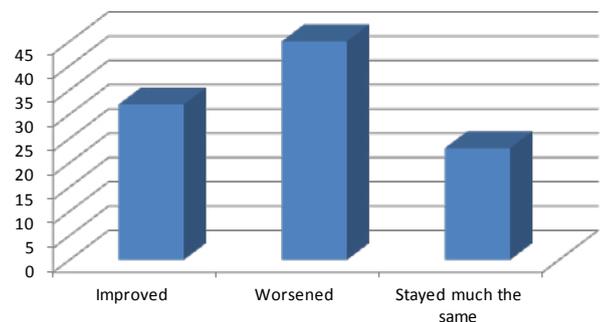
In much of Scotland – following the pattern in England - public libraries are no longer managed directly by councils but by trusts – particularly ‘Culture and Leisure Trusts’. Valid or not the view amongst many staff is that libraries are in this set up, something of a poor relation. This is put down to a number of factors, libraries generating little revenue in financially challenging times being one. Another is that many areas senior managers have no practical experience of libraries and staff believe that the service is misses out as a consequence.

Asking whether employers have a vision for the future prompts general responses usually framed around either a degree of disbelief that a vision exists or a knowledge that there is a vision, but little belief that it can be delivered

**Does your employer have a vision for the future?**



**Has service improved? %**



(nb This doesn't include those – and there were a disconcerting number - who suggested that their employers vision for libraries was 'closure').

The recent Scottish Government announcement that every child in Scotland will be given a library membership card is clearly worth welcoming as a step to promote libraries and indeed literacy (rates which are falling) . But it does prompt the question 'What is the point of a library card if there is no library? Or if the library you can get to has precious few books or other facilities'.

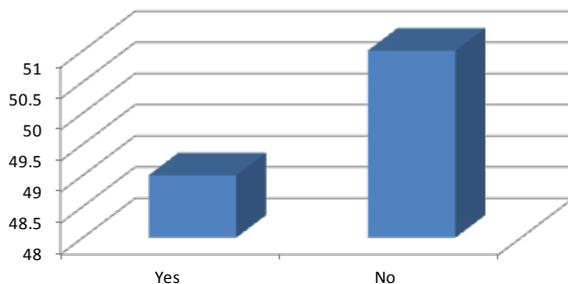
The idea of libraries being centres in the community, if not quite community centres , providing a hub for many functions is contained within the National Strategy for Libraries published earlier in 2015. In emphasising the community nature of library services reference is made to library services being “embodying the spirit of coproduction” and referencing The Community Empowerment

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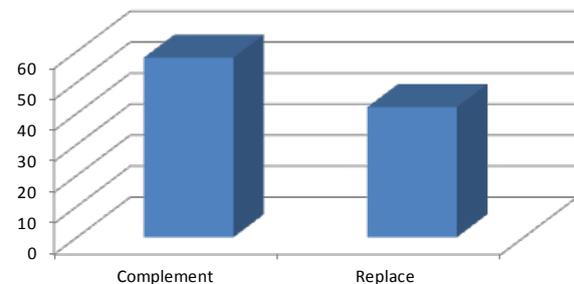
Bill currently going through the Scottish Parliament. The Bill concerns itself, amongst other things, with “enabling communities to take over publicly owned land and buildings.” Whilst UNISON Scotland has always promoted the idea of coproduction and the idea of service users and staff being involved jointly in the design of service provision, it is wrong to conflate this with ownership.

As UNISON have pointed out in our consultation on the Bill enthusiasm for ownership of facilities is slender. Leaving aside the (very real) staffing issues of communities taking on responsibility as employers; pension provision, career structure etc there are issues of how service standards are to be maintained. Already staff point to difficulties of keeping IT equipment running to acceptable standards, difficulties accessing training. Removing libraries from existing networks is unlikely to make resolving such issues any easier. Fragmented stand alone institutions are likely to lose out not just on economies of scale but also on capacity to plan and adapt in what is and will remain a rapidly developing field. If as the strategy suggests libraries are to be public service and community hubs they will need to be more , not less networked and coordinated. The overwhelming majority of staff are happy at the expansion of library roles

**Worries about Anti social behaviour and violence?%**



**Volunteers Complementing or Replacing Staff? %**



– although there is a degree of hurt and anger that this has often been at the expense of, rather than complementary to the core functions. Neither are staff lacking in ideas as to how the service can be developed and improved – although there is little sign of any serious engagement with staff on the part of employers in order to do so. Frustrations at lack of promotion of services on the part of employers, or interest thinking through services in the round are acute. This frustration is compounded by the knowledge that in order for our libraries to match anyone’s vision for the future – be that of staff, employers or even the Scottish Government then investment will be necessary and there is no belief on the part of the staff that this is likely. Confidence and morale suffer accordingly.

### **Read it and weep**

Libraries are a valued and vital cultural and community resource. If good intentions and fine words were reflected in budgets then our Library staff would be substantially happier than they are. Instead they cope daily with increasing workloads, widening responsibilities, and a more demanding set of customers . This is compounded by their own knowledge that it doesn't have to be like this – they know what they are capable of and how their service could be delivered better and adapted for the future. Government at all levels needs to start backing up their professed affection for libraries with the investment that the service requires to go forward. Library staff are understandably and rightly frustrated at the current state of affairs. They, and all of us, deserve better.

### **For further information contact**

**PUBLIC  
WORKS**

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