



Time to speak up

Standfirst: Public sector managers are increasingly anxious about the impact of cuts, a poll for the TUC shows. Cutting back on public services at a time when they are needed most will not only have dire social consequences but also hamper economic recovery, argues Brendan Barber

It will not have escaped the attention of anyone working in local government that politicians appear determined on cutting their budgets as a consequence of a crisis that originated in the banking sector and is by no means of their making.

There is widespread despondency among those working in public services, which seem almost certain to be sacrificed to a greater or lesser extent in order to tackle the fiscal deficit – despite increased demand for those very services.

A poll conducted for the TUC by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) found that 70% of public sector staff think the public sector is becoming more important to the general public as a result of the recession and 92% say the recession has increased pressure on services. Yet, more than half of the 2,000 respondents are expecting cuts and 81% fear this will mean poorer services.

The TUC commissioned the survey for its Touchstone publication *Speaking up for Public Services - The Vital Role of the Public Sector in and Beyond the Recession*. The pamphlet argues that slashing public jobs and services does not make economic sense. Fewer jobs mean both the tax base and demand for goods and commercial services are weakened further and the downward spiral is perpetuated. By contrast, a vibrant public sector provides an anchor in the boom and bust cycle. Boundaries between the public and private sectors have also become increasingly blurred; so interdependence between the two mean reductions in public spending will inevitably be felt by private enterprise.

Maintaining public investment is vital both in getting the UK through the recession and in creating a competitive world-class economy beyond the current downturn. The pamphlet draws upon lessons learned from historical and international experiences to show how Keynesian-style investment in infrastructure and services can create a virtuous cycle. This 'multiplier effect' means public employment and procurement spend feeds directly into the wider social and commercial economy.

The pamphlet also shows how the impact of mass unemployment on health, families and crime has tangible financial as well as social costs ultimately, borne by the public purse. Unemployment costs the UK billions in terms of both benefits payments and the long-term negative impacts of social breakdown on crime, education, housing, family problems, health inequalities, life chances, educational attainment and community cohesion. What's more, any downturn affects the worst

off disproportionately at a time when the UK is already top of the European league for inequalities.

Over half of the survey respondents said they felt anxious about job security, with many reporting redundancies and restructuring in their organisations. But no-one is suggesting that public sector staff should in any way be featherbedded or have an easy ride. Of those polled, 78% think the role of the public sector is changing as a result of the recession. Vast efficiency gains have been made and 41% of the managers in the APSE survey think further savings are possible without impacting on jobs or services.

Waste must be reduced and maximum value squeezed out of every public pound. There is clear evidence of service improvements by councils and other public bodies following investment in recent years. This progress must be built upon and resources targeted to their utmost effect. To achieve maximum value, the focus must be on genuine long-term outcomes rather than bureaucratic, market-based outputs.

Public sector workers need to speak up in the hope that politicians listen before it is too late. Cuts will cause untold social and economic damage. The fact of the matter is, as a nation we can't afford not to invest in our public services and infrastructure if we want to compete on the global economic stage.

Brendan Barber is General Secretary of the TUC. *Speaking up for Public Services - The Vital Role of the Public Sector in and Beyond the Recession* is available to download free at: www.tuc.org.uk/touchstone. Hard copies cost £10 and are available from TUC Publications 0207 467 1294.

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