

Justice Committee

Scottish Government Draft Budget 2018-19

Written submission from the Public and Commercial Services Union

1. The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) is the largest union within the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS). Representing people across various grades, we are the largest collective voice of workers in the service and we welcome this opportunity to make the following submission on behalf of the Branch in COPFS.

Pay, Staffing and Office Locations

2. Low morale in the service is exacerbated by chronic underfunding which means
 - Staff have seen low pay awards and reducing living standards over a substantial period of time.
 - A failure to fill posts has led to staffing shortages and pressures on the workforce further damaging staff morale.
 - The threat of office closures has contributed to stress and anxiety in the justice sector.
3. It is our belief that morale has never been lower amongst COPFS staff. The main reasons for this are staff being underpaid and increasingly overworked.
4. This union welcomes the lifting of the Scottish Government's 1% pay cap which has seen our members' standard of living increasingly drop. Many members are now facing severe hardship as a direct result of years of austerity and underfunding. Public services have been deprived of real investment for the last decade and COPFS staff have suffered accordingly as pay has been squeezed.
5. The lifting of the pay cap is a start but the Scottish Government should note that an 'inflation-plus' wage rise is very much required in 2018 to help alleviate this situation and a sufficient increase in budget should be made available to COPFS to address the crisis in our members living standards.
6. It should be noted that in the recent 2017 people survey results, when staff were asked: 'I feel that my pay adequately reflects my performance', only 19% gave a positive response to this, meaning that the overwhelming majority of COPFS staff feel undervalued and underpaid.
7. Like most Departments and Agencies COPFS has taken the approach of achieving savings by cutting staff, despite the Scottish Government commitment to no compulsory redundancies. When posts are vacant they are not always filled, or are filled with someone on a lower grade. Abolishing a post is making it redundant whether it is currently filled or not, and posts should not be regraded without proper consultation and Job evaluation exercises being carried out.

Downgrading work also increases the risk of equal pay claims and the potential costs and reputational damage that would bring to a justice body. Staff cuts bring further pressure on staff through increased workload and has led to our concerns that staff health and well-being is suffering. We believe this is leading to increasing levels of absence through 'work related stress' across all levels of the department. It isn't just wrong that staff are facing worsening health as a result of cuts it is also a false economy as increasing sick absence leads to reduced numbers available to deliver the service.

8. COPFS has also sought to make savings through reducing its estate which has meant closing office locations. It cites budget constraints and the high cost of rent. However, the way it has been done seems extremely short-sighted. The savings from paying less rent do not seem to have been weighed against the future costs of staff constantly travelling to still-active courts in other locations to cover daily business, not to mention relocation and refurbishing costs. This is also causing stress and anxiety to staff through moving them to offices in other areas and increasing the time it takes them to travel to and from work, not to mention the reduced service and inconvenience office closures means for the general public.
9. PCS remains concerned over the amount of money spent on Information Technology (IT) contractors. As reported previously to the committee, PCS still notes that there seems to be very little 'transfer of knowledge' from contractors to our IT staff when carrying out major work. This means that we are constantly paying a high level of expenditure for contractors at a premium rate. We would have hoped that COPFS would have arranged more skills/knowledge transfer in an area where expense can be considerable. This would be more economical for the service in the longer term, as well as providing skills to staff in house.
10. It is the view of our union that, where possible, resources should be spent on staffing and rewarding staff fairly, allowing them to do their important jobs with the best tools and technology available.

Conclusion

11. As we say above our members want to deliver a world class service to the Scottish public but the chronic underfunding of the service hampers this. While we have recognised that there are some things which can be done more efficiently and deliver better value for public money, it remains the case that COPFS must be properly funded now and in future. The Scottish Government cannot deliver justice on the cheap nor can it transfer the burden of cuts onto staff and still expect them to deliver the quality of service the Scottish public deserves.
12. COPFS must be allocated a budget which allows it to provide a service fit for purpose with sufficient numbers of staff who are fairly rewarded.

PCS Union
12 December 2017