1. GMB Scotland is Scotland’s campaigning trades union representing members in every part of the Scottish economy and one of the major trades unions representing Scottish local government workers. Local councils deliver the public services which people rely on such as roads and refuse, housing and homecare, as well as the services which can transform life chances like education, community and social work.

2. Councils are important sources of employment in very many Scottish communities and the wages of local government workers are as critical a variable to local economic success often as local taxes. Council workers are committed to making communities and lives better; in return GMB Scotland believes that they deserve a fair deal. Since devolution, local government has lost power and influence and since the financial crash of 2008, local government workers have experienced their standards of living declining markedly as a result of pay restraint and increasing burdens upon them caused, in the main, by significant workforce reduction.

3. GMB Scotland has argued that the 2017-22 term of office for councillors will define local government in Scotland for a generation. Over recent years, the UK government’s wrongheaded embrace of austerity, combined with the relative de-prioritisation of local government in Scottish budgets has meant that it is council finances, and council workers, which have borne the brunt of cuts in public services. This was only exacerbated by the decade-long Council Tax freeze which benefited the richest most. The result has been the loss of tens of thousands of jobs. Those left face escalating workloads and attacks upon their terms and conditions, whilst the public lose out with the services they rely on cut, charged for, or simply withdrawn altogether. The result is Scotland’s austerity shame; undervalued and overworked council staff, uncollected bins, potholed roads, pit-stop homecare, closed community facilities, increasing charges to service users and a much publicised widening attainment gap in our schools.

4. Often the worst effects of the council cuts is felt be low-paid workers delivering services like care, cleaning and catering. One of the results of the recruitment freezes across Scottish local government is not only unfilled posts but also an increasingly ageing local government workforce. With many women, in particular, who are employed by councils, also themselves reliant upon the same local services that are being cut back to allow them to be at work at all. This can be because of their own burden of care for other family members, including elderly parents, children and grandchildren.

5. GMB Scotland has surveyed our members across Scottish local government. Some of their most recent real experiences of what the cuts have meant in their local authority include:

6. Increased fly tipping in East Ayrshire, (and expenditure to tackle it), as a result of closing a local recycling centre. Similarly in neighbouring North Ayrshire local
recycling facilities have seen their hours of access restricted. Also in East Ayrshire, we have been told by individual council workers that they have felt intimidated into forgoing contractual overtime and holiday payments by threats of service reductions or further job cuts. In Glasgow City, GMB members in homecare and other services are still campaigning for a just resolution to the authority’s long running equal pay scandal. Whilst members in refuse and environmental services have been forced to run a campaign “Dirty Cuts” to expose the reality of trying to maintain anything close to minimal standards for the public. Aberdeen City and Edinburgh City are once again embarked upon authority wide consultations to identify which remaining services can be withdrawn or charged for. East Renfrewshire is proposing massive cuts to their roads maintenance budget. School support staff have been reduced across Scotland, but particularly in North Lanarkshire. GMB Scotland has exposed rising incidences of violence and aggression against pupil support workers in almost every authority. Support staff are the unsung heroes of Scottish education, but feel themselves to be second class citizens in Scotland’s schools. They have told GMB Scotland that the worst problems they face are a direct result of lack of time to spend with pupils in need of extra support because of a rising demand which has been unrecognised in terms of extra, or even maintained, provision. In South Lanarkshire, those employed in cleaning and catering, generally amongst the lowest paid workers in local government, have saw their hours cut and requirements to move between more schools leaving them out of pocket, stressed and demoralised.

7. The overarching element to all of this is, of course, pay and the brutal reality of rising bills and prices alongside real term declines in wages. Whilst the prioritisation by the local government trades unions of the Scottish Local Government Living Wage, with appropriate uprating, for the very lowest paid has offered a degree of protection to those with least. The reality is that we have reached the end of the road in what can be accepted within the financial settlement that is being provided to the sector.

8. It is unsurprising that morale is low amongst local government workers in Scotland but it is also necessary to highlight that cynicism about service change is heightened. At the national level, this is not helped by the quality of the debate over the Scottish local government budget which has been marked by a refusal to acknowledge the reality of council cuts by too many national politicians.

9. Fraser of Allander have concluded that funding for Scottish local government has reduced by 9.5% since 2010/11, equivalent to around a £1billion in real terms. Yet, in political debate, revenue and capital budgets are regularly confused and ring-fenced funding, (the Pupil Equity Fund, by way of example), are misconstrued, by some, as general increases in available finance. The description of last year’s final Scottish budget as delivering increased resources when it should more accurately have been described as being an adjusted level of reductions continues to be particularly strongly rejected by our local government reps.

10. In the Scottish Budget for 2018/19, Scotland’s national politicians face a stark choice about the future for Scottish local government. But, too many Scottish council workers feel that they are out of options as they strive, and struggle, to maintain local public services and make their own modest ends meet.