Austerity and the assault on working time, workload and the work-life balance: the case of the British Civil Service

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The UK Civil Service

- 412,000 civil servants on a full-time equivalent basis and 447,000 on a headcount basis.

- Perform a wide range of jobs implementing central government policy (taxation; benefits; pensions; immigration; vehicle licensing; courts service etc.)

- Also Non-Departmental Public Bodies working at ‘arms-length’ from Government departments

- The average salary is £25,190, lower than both the public (£28,930) and the private sector (£25,240).

- Staff reductions - 67,000 between 2008-2013
Restructuring

• Breakdown of national structures – with departments giving birth to Executive agencies (Next Steps)
• Breakdown of uniform national pay and grading (Kessler et al, 2006) including increasingly punitive PM systems
• Privatisation and market testing (Ewing, 2007)
• Fragmented national fragmented bargaining (c.170 different bargaining units) with weak consultation arrangements at workplace level (legacy of Whitley)
• Casualisation in certain areas (use of agency workers)
• ‘Taylorist’ labour practices (Call centres, Lean production)
Public and Commercial Services Union

• one of the three main unions representing workers in Civil Service/NDPBs. It organises administrators, lower and middle management and some professional grades. Current membership is around 240,000.

• senior officials, NEC and many other committees under control of the Left (continuing influence of Socialist Party)

• focuses upon mobilise members to deliver industrial action (primarily through national disputes) over pay, pensions, redundancy and job losses – active organising strategy;

• ‘Alternative Vision’ places union in direct conflict with Coalition Government (check-off, facilities, anti-unionism)
The survey research

• Internet-based survey run July-September 2013
• 4827 responses (1.8% membership)
• Responses received from all Government Departments and many Executive Agencies, NPDBs and commercial companies (3.7%)
• 56.8% of sample have no caring responsibilities
• Comparator 2006 web-based survey with 1597 responses

• Key issues of arguing representativeness of surveys
  • Self-selection – over-estimate problems of workload
  • Reliability given relatively small response rates (especially 2006 – but see attached tables)
Key aggregate findings from 2013 survey

Increasing hours
• 52.0% of respondents work, on average, between 38 and 48 hours, even though only 11.8% are contracted to do so. More worryingly, 5.7% \( (n=276) \) work over 48 hours per week

Workload
• 73.3% state that their workload has increased in the previous year while only 4.3% of members have seen a decrease in their workload.

Work-life Balance
• 50.7% of respondents sometimes experience difficulties in achieving a WLB, but 21.0% find it difficult to achieve a balance at all.

Stress
• 22.4% of respondents suffer stress more than 50% of the time at work with 11.0% \( (n=505) \) experiencing stress over 75% of the time.
Working hours: 2013 survey

Figure 1 - Contracted and actual hours worked compared (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Contracted %</th>
<th>Actual %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 15 hours</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-21 hours</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-34 hours</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-37 hours</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38-48 hours</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 48 hours</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Contracted %
- Actual %
Examples of workload pressures

- Staff keep changing for various reasons, retirement, departure etc. It can often take up to a year for them to be replaced and the new people need training up and for several months new people only get half a case load. This has been an ongoing situation for years. We have not had a fully staffed and fully trained team for at least 5 years!

  Female administrator full-time working full-time in Yorkshire

- Covering the job of someone on maternity leave. They were going to recruit someone and it started as just 3 weeks cover but I have been doing her job as well as mine for 8 months. I am a fast worker however but I have felt under dreadful strain, affecting my health

  Female middle manager, working full-time in London & South East
Availability of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)

- Stress management training
  - 2006: 10.7%
  - 2013: 14.8%
- Employee counselling schemes
  - 2006: 2.9%
  - 2013: 6.5%
- Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines
  - 2006: 11.4%
  - 2013: 19.4%
- Agreeing objectives and targets
  - 2006: 9.4%
  - 2013: 13.4%
- Discussion of workload planning and allocation
  - 2006: 16.7%
  - 2013: 21.5%
- Help with childcare or elderly care
  - 2006: 28.3%
  - 2013: 35.9%
- Flexible start and finish times
  - 2006: 5%
  - 2013: 12.8%
- Job-share / Part Time working
  - 2006: 4.9%
  - 2013: 14.2%
- Term time only working
  - 2006: 22.3%
  - 2013: 29.9%
- Option to work from home at times
  - 2006: 35.6%
  - 2013: 60.3%
Use of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)

- Training / support in managing workload: 23.0% (2006), 28.9% (2013)
- Stress management training: 14.9% (2006), 23.4% (2013)
- Employee counselling schemes: 12.9% (2006), 21.0% (2013)
- Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines: 24.8% (2006), 39.3% (2013)
- Agreeing objectives and targets: 27.6% (2006), 42.2% (2013)
- Discussion of workload planning and allocation: 30.6% (2006), 37.3% (2013)
- Help with childcare or elderly care: 12.5% (2006), 23.2% (2013)
- Flexible start and finish times: 59.9% (2006), 69.4% (2013)
- Job-share / Part Time working: 14.7% (2006), 24.3% (2013)
- Term time only working: 4.7% (2006), 7.9% (2013)
- Option to work from home at times: 59.0% (2006), 65.2% (2013)

Legend:
- Orange: 2006 Available and have used %
- Blue: 2013 Available and have used %
Usefulness of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)
Reasons for not using flexible working practices

- Frightened to ask manager: 2.9% (2006), 10.0% (2013)
- Refused by manager: 4.1% (2006), 10.1% (2013)
- Would harm my career: 3.5% (2006), 10.8% (2013)
- Not available to my grade: 10.1% (2006), 17.3% (2013)
- Manage my work-life balance without such options: 20.8% (2006), 20.6% (2013)
- Cannot afford the associated cut in pay: 9.2% (2006), 23.3% (2013)
Examples of workload pressures

- **Objectives and targets are set without discussion. Child care problems and requests have been refused depending on the manager.**
  Female, middle manager working part-time in the North West with a child under 16

- **Discussions on objects and targets are simply discussions with individual staff having little real input - essentially the objectives are what you are told to do - the reality is that you will not achieve them all and this is understood by middle management.**
  Male middle manager working full-time in Scotland

- **My manager hates working from home, he calls us all skivers and lazy dogs**
  Male, BME middle manager working full-time in London & South East caring for an adult

- **Poor relationship with manager therefore would not consider asking**
  Female, BME administrator working full-time in NDPB in London & South East
Conclusions

• 2013 survey highlights increasing actual hours and an absence of effective mechanisms for members to be able to regulate their workload
  • Growing effectiveness of flexible working-time policies undermined by the increasing non-availability of these policies
  • Policies providing substantive contractual support for union members (part-time working, childcare support) much more effective than those procedural policies (workload planning and consultation)

• The situation means many members have difficulties securing meaningful a work-life balance

• The situation is unlikely to improve with the Cabinet Office seeking to implement further cuts to terms and conditions since the research was completed
Trade union responses

- Check availability of flexible working practices and monitoring use and rejection.
- Use the recent extension of the right to request flexible working to bargain for more transparent and fair practices.
- Use the research to limit attempts to impose contractual changes particularly legally protected groups.
- Monitor performance management outcomes.
- Conduct stress surveys and monitor stress-related sickness levels.