

Human Costs of Austerity in the Voluntary Sector

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In times of economic hardship, the voluntary sector is dealt a double blow: its access to funding, and also, it is called upon to help those most impacted by public sector cuts. The austerity measures following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis are a clear example of this. Following the cuts, many charities found their funding severely limited¹, and simultaneously the cuts led to soaring unemployment², creating heightened demand for services³. The voluntary sector had less money and a greater requirement to spend it.

Here, I share some of the experiences of voluntary sector managers, workers, and volunteers from charities in the North-East of England during austerity. Robert (charity manager), described the situation in a way that demonstrated his frustrations:

"The government cuts are to blame. What the hell did they think would happen when hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost and services cut to the bone? How did they expect services to operate, or people pay their bills and put food on their tables?"

From my conversations, it became clear that austerity's impact was not just financial. Susan (charity manager) described how her organisation's ability to deliver services suffered, "At first, we took a knock in donations and then other sources of funding." She continued, "We deal with hidden emergencies, people in crisis... in one way or another, the third sector picks them up."

Voluntary sector organisations exist to help others, therefore, when demand for help increases, organisations feel compelled to find ways to meet that demand. Keith (charity manager), another of my participants, made similar comments: "Unfortunately, because of the ethos of the voluntary sector, they feel they have no choice to extend their services to protect the people."

Alison (charity manager) described the increased workload her organisation experienced, "The amount of work has increased because the public rely on us to cover much of the work that government welfare agencies previously carried out."

During austerity, organisations responded by trying to protect services as best they could, but this was often at the expense workers. They reduced staff, increased workloads, and eroded employment conditions. Susan described how it felt at that time: "We were left to plug the welfare holes with no extra money. It's basically forcing everyone to work harder for free or get out."

These pressures manifested in increased workloads, longer hours, unpaid overtime, and pressure to skip breaks, as Robert described: "Most people in the sector do extra hours, unpaid, paperwork at home. The numbers of people we see have increased, and we don't have time to complete the paperwork." You might expect some voluntary work from committed staff, but here it is becoming expected and necessary.

Susan described a similar situation, "I regularly work extra hours just to meet deadlines or take work at home, and I don't get paid for it." There were not enough hours in the day to get through everything that had to be done.

Working conditions deteriorated significantly after austerity was introduced. By 2015, 93% of public and voluntary sector workers were stressed because of their jobs⁴. Robert described his own experience: "The increased workload was putting strains on family life and other outside commitments."

Such working conditions destabilise workers' work-life balance, which can manifest as physical or psychological ailments. Diane (charity manager) suffered health problems due to her workload:

"I had to take time off because of severe headaches. The first time, I was off for almost four months, then after that, it was a couple of weeks here and there. I had all sorts of tests, but in the end, it was put down to work-related stress because of all the long hours I was working."

Working environments and conditions that deprive employees of their breaks are not something one would associate with the voluntary sector. As well as being illegal, it can be stressful, exhausting, demoralising, undermine working relationships, and induce undesirable behavioural patterns⁵. However, workplace stress is often difficult to identify until it manifests into physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms⁶.

As a result of austerity, the voluntary sector became fragmented and stretched as it tried to plug the holes in welfare provisions. Those working in the sector focussed on trying to stay employed while at the same time facing increased workloads and possibly doing the work of two or more people. These reports of increased pressure, extra hours, low wages, and strains on family life demonstrate that the expectations placed on employees increased to the point where employee well-being and health suffered.

Ronnie (charity manager) commented that working in the voluntary sector has changed for her: "I have been working in the community sector for 40 years. I've seen plenty of changes over that time, but in the past few years since the government cuts, it's lost something."

These accounts demonstrate the multifaceted effects of austerity, which can be traced back to economic impacts but have reached far beyond them. Initially, these policies gave rise to higher unemployment, but beyond that, the voluntary sector felt compelled to fill the gaps left by a retreating public sector. The need to help others stretched voluntary sector organisations almost to breaking point, and they responded by asking increasingly more of their staff and volunteers. A combined desire to help others and to maintain their own employment gave workers little choice but to persevere, but at real costs to their well-being, which is still felt today. The voluntary sector 14 years after the introduction of austerity feels utterly different from that many of my participants spent their careers working in.

References

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