Decent Work in Scotland: Thematic Report No 4

Scotland's local authorities: still 'bastions of decent work'?

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October 2018

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- A programme of placements and work-related learning and volunteering opportunities, enabling UWS students to contribute to the work of Oxfam and its community partners, while learning and developing their experience and skills;

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The Partnership publishes a series of Collaborative Research Reports, which are available on the Partnership's website (www.uwsoxfampartnership.org.uk).

Scotland's local authorities: still 'bastions of decent work'?

Executive Summary

Local authorities in Scotland have in the past been perceived as bastions of good practice when it comes to the provision of 'decent work'. However, changing times have seen local authorities faced with reduced resources and increasing expectations. There are concerns that decent work at local authority level is at risk in the current economic, social and political climate. This research investigates these concerns with a focus on how human resources and organisational development personnel in Scottish local authorities think about decent work, how familiar they are with the terminology around job quality, how much importance they attach to the implementation of decent work practices, and what they see as central challenges to providing and promoting decent work. The findings indicate:

- A perception among interviewees that local authorities are still 'bastions of decent work';

- An understanding of decent work among interviewees that is broadly in line with contemporary thinking about employment relations;

- Amongst interviewees, a strong interest in, and commitment to providing and promoting decent work;

- A belief that current work and employment practices within local authorities are consistent with the advancement of decent work;

- A desire that decent work practices be replicated by external stakeholders, including those involved in procurement processes;

- Evidence that local authorities view 'employee voice' mechanisms as key to advancing the decent work agenda;

- A belief that the responsibility for promoting decent work should be shared between employers, employees and other stakeholders, including trade unions.

These research findings are mostly good news for advocates of the decent work agenda. They show that those in key roles within the public sector are aware of their responsibility to contribute to high standards of job quality. It also seems encouraging that human resources and organisational development personnel in Scottish local authorities understand that 'employee voice' is important for ensuring that decent work is a reality in any kind of local authority job.

However, sustaining any achievements vis-à-vis job quality in local authorities is a major challenge given the increasingly difficult financial environment in which local authorities operate.

There are five recommendations emerging from the research:

- Recommendation 1: All stakeholders within local authorities should be self-confident, open and honest about the realities around 'making more work more decent'

- Recommendation 2: Human resources and organisational development managers should lead in realising decent work in practice and should help managers and employees to be aware of, and engage with, the concept of decent work

- Recommendation 3: Human resources managers should take 'bottom-up' ownership of the decent work agenda and use 'best fit' approaches within the diversity of local authority contexts

- Recommendation 4: Local authorities should communicate with each other to learn from best fit approaches to decent work

- Recommendation 5: Procurement processes should be 'decent work checked', in line with efforts taken by human resource managers to assure decent work.

1. Introduction

When talking about what 'decent work' meant for them, one interviewee – working in the human resources and organisational development team of a Scottish local authority – observed the following:

> 'We are trying to hold on to a very positive set of terms and conditions of employment under very challenging economic circumstances, and we're trying to hold onto it because of the public sector ethos' (LA12).

Many of the human resources and organisational development personnel in Scottish local authorities who were interviewed for this study shared this position and the assessment of the situation in which local authorities find themselves. This report unpacks and explores what this interviewee expressed so concisely with the goal of identifying recommendations that might help to protect, sustain and advance decent work in the Scottish local authority context.

1.1 Background

Research on 'decent work', a concept coined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in the late 1990s for measuring and advocating improvements in job quality, is timely and relevant. 'Decent work' is one of a number of terms (ILO 2001; Anker Chernyshev et al 2003; ILO 2008) operationalised for undertaking research on, and measurement of job quality (Warhurst et al 2012; Holman 2013). Related terms include fair work, quality of employment, quality of working life, quality of work, good jobs, better work, better jobs, dignity at work and fulfilling work. Despite there being no commonly agreed terminology, there are common themes and indicators arising around the use of these terms.

The ILO model of job quality is not just relevant for developing countries (Sehnbruch et al 2008) and has been the subject of research interest in Scotland (Sutherland 2011a, 2011b). Indeed, recent research in Scotland has demonstrated that decent work is far from a reality for everyone, be they employed workers or self-employed workers. Problems such as in-work poverty, precarious work and poor employment practices remain significant. In particular, it is the low-paid and low-skilled for whom the Scottish labour

market fails to provide decent work (Stuart et al 2016). Such research raises questions for further exploration, amongst them the absence or presence of decent work in the public sector and, more specifically, at the local authority level.

The public sector is a major employer in Scotland – its 543,000 employees account for 20.7% of total employment. Employment in local government is around 242,100, comprising 44.6% of the overall employment in Scotland's public sector (Scottish Government 2017a). Of all those in employment in Scotland, roughly 18% of men and 35% of women work in the public sector (Scottish Government 2017b) – since 2008, the female share of public sector employment has reduced more strongly than that of men (by 2.9% and 0.9% respectively) (Scottish Government 2017b). There is no doubt then, that public sector employment in Scotland is highly significant to the Scottish economy and employee relations in general, and also that the absence or presence of decent work has a significant gender dimension.

Local authorities are generally perceived to have a social responsibility that goes beyond mere compliance and statutory requirements, and which engages them in practices that further some social good (e.g. The World Bank 2002). Indeed, local authorities have a reputation for providing 'decent work' (Bloomberg 2016; COSLA 2017a). In Scotland, this reputation has been enhanced through a range of government initiatives. In 2016, the Scottish Government embraced the concept of 'decent work' when it adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In Goal 8, the UN declares that all signatories have agreed on the objective to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (UN 2014). Furthermore, the Scottish Government developed its own job quality agenda. In 2015, it set up the Fair Work Convention with the objective to 'drive forward the Fair Work agenda by producing a Fair Work framework for Scotland' (Fair Work Convention 2016). This was preceded by the establishment, in 2014, of the ministerial portfolio of a Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training.

No doubt, there is some momentum in the debate about job quality in Scotland. With its specific focus on decent work in Scotland's local

authorities, this report contributes to the debate. It also extends recent work conducted under the auspices of the UWS-Oxfam Partnership, in particular research investigating attitudes to decent work amongst private and public employers (Gibb and Ishaq 2016).

1.2 Research objectives

The core objectives of the research underpinning this report were: to establish deeper knowledge about the level of awareness and understanding of the meaning, of decent work among human resources and organisational development personnel in Scotland's local authorities: to explore the depth of their organisations' commitment to decent work and to understand better the challenges that the promotion and maintenance of high job quality faces in the current political, economic and social context. On the basis of these findings, recommendations will be made on how to address these challenges.

The rationale for involving this specific group of local authority employees in research on decent work is simple – they are in key roles when it comes to the actualisation of job quality and bear a significant responsibility in this domain. They are also key people with regards to insights into work practices and have experience with how employees, and also the unions representing them, think about job quality in their organisations.

1.3 Research methods

The report draws from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior human resources and organisational development personnel from Scottish local authorities. While interviews were sought from all 32 Scottish local authorities, individuals from nineteen local authorities agreed to an interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone or by Skype. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The interviewees are not a representative sample but are self-selected. That means that while no generalisations can be made, the interviews generated qualitative data to allow an insight into the thinking about job quality across a large proportion of Scottish local authorities.

Table 1 lists those nineteen local authorities which participated in the research; it also shows the approximate number of employees in each of these local authorities and classifies the local authorities as either predominantly 'urban', 'rural' or 'mixed', following a definition by the Scottish Government (2014). The study includes some of the biggest local authorities in terms of numbers of employees, including Glasgow City Council, and some of the smallest, including Shetland Islands Council. Lastly, the participating local authorities represent a wide geographical area.

Table 1: Approximate number of employees by participating local council (May 2017) and classification of local authority area

Local authority	Approximate number of employees*	Classification of local authority area**
Aberdeen City	8,000	urban
Aberdeenshire	15,000	rural
Comhairle Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council)	1,600	rural
Dumfries and Galloway	6,500	rural
Dundee City	7,000	urban
East Ayrshire	6,000	rural
East Lothian	4,500	urban/rural
East Renfrewshire	4,500	urban/rural
Fife Council	17,000	urban
Glasgow City	30,000	urban
Highland	8,000	urban/rural
Inverclyde	4,000	urban/rural
Midlothian	4,000	urban/rural
Perth and Kinross	6,000	urban/rural
Renfrewshire	7,000	urban
Scottish Borders Council	5,500	rural
Shetland Council	3,500	rural
South Ayrshire Council	5,000	rural
South Lanarkshire Council	14,000	urban/rural

Source: *Figures provided by individual local authorities. **Classification based on Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2013-2014 (Scottish Government 2014).

2. What is 'decent work'?

For the research underpinning this report, the decent work concept as operationalised by Stuart et al (2016) was applied, it being based on the broader job quality literature. Stuart et al, for their empirical research on what the low-paid in Scotland consider to be 'decent work', proposed that decent work has five dimensions: pay; work-life balance; intrinsic characteristics of work; health and safety; and terms of employment (see Figure 1). Each of these dimensions is matched with a number of indicators, totalling twenty-six (see Table 2). Applying these dimensions and indicators in their research, Stuart et al identified a set of priorities for decent work in Scotland; the five most important were a decent hourly rate; job security; paid leave; a safe working environment; and a supportive manager (see Table 3).

This perspective on decent work is an example of an 'intermediate' (Muñoz de Bustillo et al 2009) approach to measuring job quality. It sits between approaches using a single, simple proxy on the one hand, and approaches using a complex, comprehensive model, on the other. In the former case, a simple 'shortcut' approach defines an overall indicator of decent work or job quality. This is exemplified by studies that adopt 'job satisfaction' as an overall indicator or proxy for job quality (Muñoz de Bustillo & Fernández-Macías 2005). A more complex and comprehensive approach draws upon the social science literature on work and employment, and themes around the well-being of workers. This often combines different perspectives and disciplines leading to a long list of dimensions being identified as constituent elements of job quality (Ghai 2003; Bonnet et al 2003). Such complex concepts can be operationalised and quantified by either a system of indicators or a composite index. Examples include the OECD Better Life Initiative (2013), the Subjective Quality of Working Life Index (SQWLI, Brisbois 2003), and the Smith Institute's inquiry focusing on seven factors (Sweeney 2014).

For an intermediate model, respondents are typically interviewed and asked what they consider to be important for job quality. This qualitative approach provides a pragmatic way to identify and explore a modest though valid set of features of decent work (Burgess et al 2013; Antón et al 2012; Bescond et al 2003; Leschke et al 2008; Davione et al 2008).

Figure 1: Stuart et al's five-dimensional concept of decent work (2016)
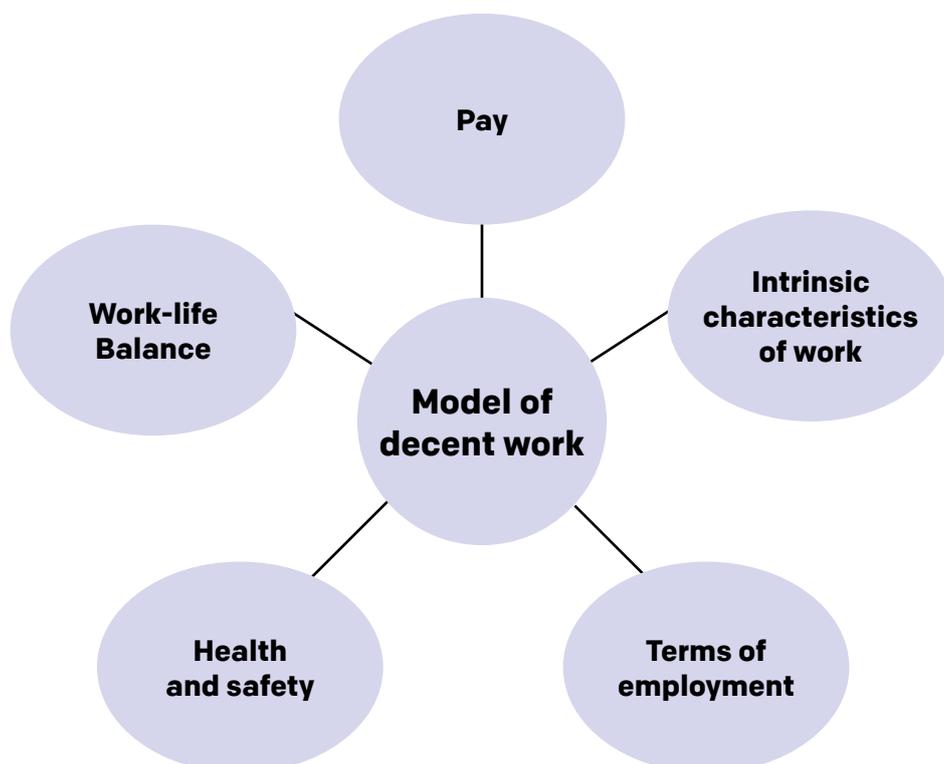
Table 2: List of indicators for each of the five dimensions of decent work (Stuart et al 2016)

Dimension 1: Pay
1. An hourly rate or salary that is at least enough to cover basic needs such as food, housing and things most people take for granted without getting into debt
2. Being paid fairly compared to other similar jobs
3. Being paid fairly compared to senior staff
4. Predictable take-home pay
5. Access to financial benefits beyond pay such as help with childcare and signposting to additional support such as tax credits

Dimension 2: Intrinsic characteristics of work
6. A supportive line manager
7. Ability to develop and use skills in current role
8. Supportive colleagues
9. Control and flexibility over how I deliver my work
10. Work that I believe is socially worthwhile
11. Work that provides me with sense of purpose and meaning
12. Varied work

Dimension 3: Terms of employment
13. Paid holidays and paid sick leave
14. Job security
15. Regular and predictable working hours
16. Available and effective representation to raise my voice within the workplace
17. Opportunities for promotion and career progression
18. Access to suitable and convenient training opportunities
19. A job in which there is no discrimination because of who I am

Dimension 4: Health and safety
20. A safe working environment free from physical and mental risk or harm
21. Appropriate support to help employees return to work following absence due to injury or ill-health

Dimension 5: Work-life balance
22. Enough time to do all the tasks required
23. Work that does not involve excessive working hours
24. Flexibility in choosing my working hours
25. A job that is easy to get to from where I live
26. An employer that does not expect me to arrive before, or leave after, my allocated hours, or undertake unpaid overtime

Table 3: key priorities for 'decent work' in Scotland (Stuart et al 2016)

1. A decent hourly rate
2. Job security
3. Paid leave
4. A safe working environment
5. A supportive manager
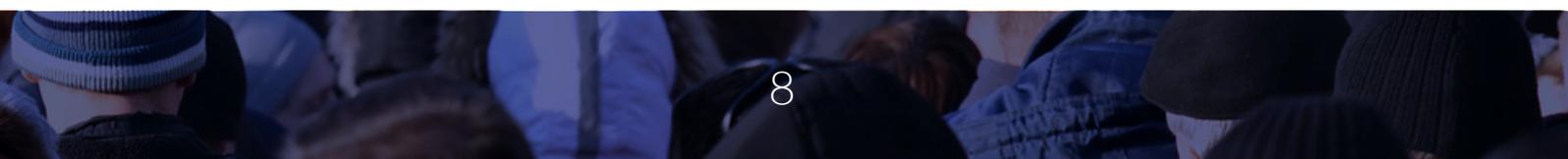
3. Findings

The main part of this report comprises the presentation and analysis of the interview data. It is organised according to seven themes which emerged in the interviews. To protect the anonymity of participants and ensure confidentiality, reference to local authorities and participants and quotes attributable to them are made using a number assigned to each local authority – e.g. local authority 1 as 'LA1' and local authority 2 as 'LA2'.

3.1 What does 'decent work' mean?
Interviewees were asked at the outset of the interview about their familiarity with the terminology of decent work, and to talk about what decent work meant to them.

Only around a third of the interviewees were familiar with the term. When asked to comment on what they thought of the term, regardless of whether they were familiar with it or not, most interviewees associated it with five key priorities: 'a decent hourly rate', 'job security', 'paid leave', 'a safe work environment', and 'a supportive line manager'. These were the same key priorities identified by the low-paid workers in the work by Stuart et al (2016).

A 'decent hourly rate', the most important factor for low-paid workers, was far more frequently mentioned than any other of the top five characteristics. This may be interpreted as local authority human resources personnel having a rather restricted and incomplete understanding of 'decent work'. However, the centrality of pay is easy to understand, as local authorities are committed to the national living wage while facing often highly-publicised challenges around equal pay (e.g. BBC 2017). How, in more detail, did interviewees respond to questions on 'what makes for decent work'?

> 'What comes to my mind, probably as a job analyst, is that you get paid fairly for the job that you do. We, within the council here, are very stringent in the job evaluation that we do and make sure that every job is evaluated looking across the whole organisation to make sure we've got equal pay' (LA15).

Although pay and earnings dominated initial responses, most interviewees subsequently acknowledged that 'decent work' went beyond just monetary aspects and that other aspects such as security, safety, work-life balance, equality and career progression were important as well:

> 'Decent work to me is about employees being paid for a fair day's work, it's about them having satisfying work, meaningful work' (LA1).

> 'It's ensuring that you are remunerating someone appropriately for the work that they're doing, but also that it is meaningful work, delivering a service or doing something that's actually contributing, and it's giving job satisfaction to whoever is doing the work' (LA11).

Job security as a priority for 'decent work' was referred to by 7 interviewees – just over a third of the total:

> 'Decent work would be employment that is secure' (LA9).

> 'I have seen the ILO website and I'm familiar with their definition of it. I have no problem with the definition. However, because it is global there are some things in there that we take for granted for example as a local authority employer, job security is almost par for the course and people already come to us because of that sense of security' (LA10).

A number of interviewees made reference to employees' ability to combine work, family and personal life, which links with the need for paid leave and 'a supportive manager' in the priorities identified by Stuart et al (2016), and with the work-life balance dimension:

> 'Flexibility within the workplace – it's not all about the pay that you get for a fair day's work. We have a number of policies within the council, like the family-friendly sort of policies, the work-life balance.' (LA7).

> 'It's about job security and family-friendly work-life balance type stuff, and your working environment and the actual kind

of job you do and the hours you work' (LA18).

The themes of equal opportunity and how employees were treated were mentioned, too:

'We understand decent work to mean […] fair employment policies and practices, including equality of opportunity in employment' (LA4).

3.2 Self-reflection: do local authorities provide decent work?

When asked whether interviewees would depict their council as a 'decent work' employer, most interviewees replied emphatically in the affirmative. When interviewees elaborated on the ways in which they thought of their local authority as a 'decent work employer', they argued along the following lines:

'Of course, working for a local authority, we adhere to employment legislation, we also have a trade union structure, which stands up and is a voice for the employees. We pay the living wage, we have good health and safety processes and procedures. So, I think in terms of the public sector, we provide decent work for our employees as far as we possibly could' (LA2).

'We respect the individual's rights. We meet our statutory obligations. We try and follow best practice which in most situations we're able to. We have decent conditions of service. We've adopted, for instance, the Scottish living wage. Look at workforce planning. We have got policies which are all written so that the employee knows where they stand and what will happen if they're going to be ill. So, there's clear guidance, clear policies for people to understand and follow and we try to follow them as managers as well. We have a health and safety section, so we're looking after employees' wellbeing' (LA5).

'I think that we have a good pay scheme. I think that people are paid fairly for what they do. We have really good terms and conditions. I know that we are heavily unionised, but I think that that's

important, to strike that balance but we, in HR, have a very good relationship with our trade unions, so where there might be a workplace issue we tend to talk first of all and try and resolve issues before they become big' (LA15).

Those who were less certain about the extent to which their organisation is providing decent work discussed concerns such as these:

'Our budget's ever shrinking, so we're having to do more with less all the time and that then also brings a level of uncertainty, whereas previously perhaps working for a council was always seen as a job for life, it's no longer that way. There isn't that security and we are looking at rounds of voluntary severance or early retirement more frequently' (LA1).

'The key pressure is always going to be financial. It is more with less. How do you continue to provide decent work, satisfying and engaging work, when you're asking more and more of your people and in turn, you know, the less amount you can give them as rewards so for example, things like changes to employee benefits legislation means that a lot of our employee benefits will be lost soon. Things like that make it more and more difficult to then engage with your staff, especially when they're saying things like, you know, more cuts in, more, more vacancies not being filled' (LA1).

'We're at the point [in terms of making cuts to service provision because of financial pressures] where there is a danger that some of those services may not be as neutral in their effective withdrawal, in terms of the effect on staff. So, for example, if we make savings in school cleaning, that's a predominantly female workforce and if we make savings in homecare, again predominantly female workforce. We're probably unable to stop repairing houses and repairing roads, predominantly male workforce and similarly, collecting refuse and other things, predominantly male workforce' (LA9).

3.3 Decent work: a priority issue?

The research explored the extent to which interviewees saw the provision of decent work as a priority issue. Following the initial questioning about familiarity with the term decent work, the interviewees were more fully briefed on its meaning. On that basis, many respondents viewed decent work as a 'high' or 'top' priority. Interviewees who viewed it as a high priority cited the importance of satisfied employees to the success of local authorities in meeting their objectives and delivering effective services to communities. Not prioritising decent work was viewed by some as endangering this:

> 'Our Chief Executive has a vision for the organisation where employees feel engaged, respected and understand their contribution to the organisation, so I think it's certainly very high on our agenda' (LA1).

> 'Obviously, you can't provide a service unless you have well-motivated and happy employees; so, I think we would put that quite high on our priority list' (LA2).

> 'I'd like to think, as a council, it's at the forefront of everything we do, is embedded through the workforce planning that we're now doing and the opportunities that we offer staff. I would say there's always the balance to get right between the business need and the individual's need and the resource needs to actually fulfil these functions because, obviously, we're serving the community and that's what all our work is based around in delivering those services' (LA16).

However, there were a few interviewees who were indicating that, due to current economic circumstances, they could not give such high priority to advancing the decent work agenda, and, in particular, the pay aspect:

> 'I wouldn't say it's the top of this list because, at the moment, there are clearly budget considerations' (LA6).

> 'Not a top priority as we are constantly firefighting, budgets are tight and our focus is on customer service. If everything was constant we could develop this concept' (LA18).

3.4 Responsibility for sustaining 'decent work'

Interviewees were asked about who should be responsible for decent work in their respective local authorities. The majority of interviewees were clear that it was a joint responsibility involving all stakeholders in the employment relationship, rather than just that of the employer's HR team:

> 'I think that it's the employer, employee, the trade union, customers, clients; everyone in that employment relationship is important because if any of those fall down or the relationship breaks that impacts on what you're looking upon as decent work then' (LA15).

> 'I think it's a joint partnership. I don't think it's one person's responsibility. I think it has to be done kind of collaboratively' (LA18).

However, a number of interviewees felt that the onus was primarily on the employer to ensure that 'decent work' was being progressed:

> 'I think because we are a political organisation our administration has a responsibility' (LA10).

> 'I would say that the employer has the responsibility to set the framework of every post and job, because obviously it needs to deliver on the outcomes' (LA16).

> 'It isn't just down to us, quite clearly, in the local government world. There's an organisation called Convention of Scottish Local Authorities who feed into the Scottish Government and they provide the 32 Scottish local authorities with a basic set of terms and conditions of employment which you can't reduce, but you can increase, and that's what we do' (LA12).

Interviewees were asked if they had considered the advancement of the decent work agenda via their procurement processes as this would give strong incentives to other stakeholders to ensure decent work, not least to the companies to which local authorities outsource work:

'It is important and although we don't insist yet that everyone who has a council contract actually pays the living wage, we encourage it. I think that in the future we would require them to probably pay the living wage. However, at this stage it's more encouragement rather than compulsion for contractors' (LA5).

'We have a procurement team. It's actually part of our legal team so it's called Legal and Procurement, so it is headed up by someone with a legal background who ensures that as best as they can that subcontractors and contractors are treating their staff in the way that we would want them to. At the moment we can't enforce that, but we do build into our contracts certain standards that need to be met' (LA7).

'Increasingly we're able to add things on to the tender document. For example: are you a living wage employer? We try to persuade, that's the best way forward. As far as the private sector is concerned we can't dictate it. We say that we would encourage this and that to happen' (LA12).

3.5 Challenges to decent work

Interviewees often spoke about the pressure on resources, in particular the strain on financial resources as the chief impediment to the delivery and promotion of decent work. They noted that sharply reducing budgets and threats to job security were creating a work environment that was not always conducive to positive employee relations:

'I would say the current financial climate is probably the main thing at the moment. We've got to ensure that we maintain the high standards for all our employees, and make sure that we are keeping engaged and keeping things updated and changing with the work flow as it comes in, because we manage change as well' (LA16).

'I think it's the old chestnut of budgets ever decreasing. I guess then we are trying to work with less but still provide services, so very real things like closing

some of our more rural schools which clearly has an impact on communities but also has a very big impact on the employment that we provide there' (LA17).

3.6 Strategies for implementing decent work

Whilst interviewees did generally 'buy into' the idea of decent work, they stressed both the importance of practically implementing policies in this area and the challenges in doing so. Interviewees identified multiple ways in which they felt their organisations were implementing measures to assure high job quality. The strategies include close engagement with employees, regular consultation with other stakeholders, and ensuring that employment legislation was being adhered to:

'I think for us it would be important to engage with people throughout the organisation and get their feedback on what decent work would look like to them and then I suppose the next important thing is getting management buy-in at all levels' (LA1).

'In terms of employment policies, they would fall within the remit of HR, so we would ensure that our employment policies are in accordance with legislation in the first instance and also look at best practice and benchmarking with other local authorities. And we would introduce or revise any policies in consultation with the trade unions so they have an input into policies' (LA6).

In terms of engagement with employees, almost all participating authorities carried out employee surveys as a mechanism for monitoring job quality. This was in addition to engagement seminars, focus groups and staff briefing sessions. There was also evidence of significant consultation with trade unions, whose strong presence in the majority of local authorities was evident from the testimony of interviewees.

3.7 Decent work for all?

As local authority employees work in a wide range of job categories, interviewees were asked about whether it was possible to achieve decent work in all types of jobs. Whilst the majority of

interviewees felt that it was possible to apply the characteristics of decent work across all employment, their response was tempered with the caveat that it was challenging to deliver on this in practice:

> 'All the different policies that we have in place, of course they apply to every single person in the council, but we also have to train people on these policies and check that these policies are being applied fairly across the council which is quite difficult. The difficulty is making sure that managers are trained well enough that they can apply the same rules for one as another' (LA5).

> 'It depends on the governance arrangements. So, you have got a culture that has been in place in the public sector for decades, and you've got governance arrangements that make decent work more likely to be the outcome. But this may not be the case outside the public sector. You have, in the public sector, stakeholders such as trade unions who have got a clear focus and their primary concern is decent work, but take them out of the equation and it is a totally different story' (LA12).

> 'If you look at some of our jobs like refuse collectors and bereavement services, that's not going to be exciting in any manner of means' (LA19).

The majority of interviewees feel that in principle it should be possible to achieve decent work regardless of job type. Equally though, some felt that in practice this was problematic, due to the wide range of jobs offered by authorities.

4. Summary and discussion

This research has investigated the views of senior human resources and organisational development personnel in Scottish local authorities, with the objective to better understand what they think about decent work, how familiar they are with the terminology around job quality, how much importance they attach to the implementation of decent work practices, and what they see as central challenges to providing and promoting decent work. The following discussion takes up the themes identified in Section 3 and analyses them in more depth.

Clearly, interviewees had different ideas about what decent work may mean – however, for all of them the rate of pay came first whilst other factors, such as supportive management, work-life balance and paid leave, also contributed to their understanding of decent work.

All interviewees shared an enthusiasm about local authorities' responsibility and ability to provide decent work. Indeed, many interviewees were convinced that their local authority already pursued working practices in line with the meaning of 'decent work' and should therefore be acknowledged as 'bastions of decent work'. A range of awards and accreditations received by a number of local authorities can be cited as evidence that this is more than self-regarding rhetoric and that some authorities are indeed engaged in 'good practice' initiatives – these may include the Scottish Living Wage Accreditation, the Healthy Working Lives award, the Investors in People standard, or the Stonewall Scotland Diversity Champion membership. How far these translate into actual job quality or its perception by local authority employees is a question which cannot be answered within the limits of this report. What is certain is that the interviewees also embraced decent work in a strategic manner, as they expected that a demonstrated commitment to decent work has a positive impact on employees in terms of boosting morale, motivation, commitment, loyalty and engagement.

A related challenge is that posed by the different employment types within local authorities.

While the majority of interviewees feel that in principle it should be possible to achieve decent work regardless of employment, some felt that this was difficult in practice – for example, they referred to employment around waste collection or cleaning as presenting particular challenges. Local authorities face shared challenges when it comes to the economic and financial climate. Years of public sector cuts have made the promotion of decent work more difficult. There are fewer resources - both financial and human - available for front-line services. A recent report by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) focuses on the resource pressures on local government (COSLA 2017b).

The interviews indicated that there is a view that a strengthening of procurement practices could provide an opportunity to advance decent work outside local authority employment, a view also expressed in the Scottish Government's review of procurement reform in the public sector (Scottish Government 2016). However, at least the interviewed senior human resources and organisational development personnel saw the procurement process becoming even more important during difficult economic times as local authorities are understandably keen on ensuring 'value for money'. In other words, whether or not contractors are providing decent work may not be central to procurement decisions in the future.

Also, those interviewed highlighted the limited powers local authorities currently have to compel companies contracted by them to offer decent work to their employees. EU procurement rules (e.g. EU 2014), the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 (Scottish Parliament 2014) and the Scottish Model of Procurement (Scottish Government 2018a) determine the room for manourvre. And while the Scottish Government has strategic objectives around procurement as a whole[1] which do address the issue of the living wage, they do not currently include the influence of procurement on wider job quality (Scottish Government 2018b). Despite these obstacles, almost all interviewees with experience of procurement practice stressed that they expected contractors to either meet certain minimum criteria in terms of job quality or at least to show evidence that they took such criteria seriously; however interviewees felt there was 'only so much they could do'.

When considering the issue of responsibility for advancing decent work within the local authority context, the findings indicate that employers do not want to have sole ownership of the task and believe that a successful implementation of the decent work agenda requires communication and collaboration with employees and their trade unions. Indeed, interviewees suggested that local authorities should work in partnership with employees and unions to minimise employee dissatisfaction. Such employee voice mechanisms (e.g. consultation and working in partnership at both individual and collective levels) generally lessen the likelihood of workplace strife (e.g. Ahmed and Baheer 2012). Further research has suggested that the presence of trade unions indicates that councils have created considerable opportunities for employee voice, and indeed that employee voice is a part of the culture and fabric of Scottish local authority employee relations (see Freeman et al 2007). Overall, the view was that responsibility for assuring decent work in local authority employment rests on several shoulders and that only a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach would generate an environment in which decent work can become a reality.

Decent work can be situated amongst broader organisation and employment themes, too. Of most relevance, perhaps, is the debate between those advocating 'best practice' and those advocating 'best fit' approaches (Purcell 1999; Stavrou et al 2010; Boxall 2018). 'Best fit' approaches influence organisations to make decisions about employment which are justified by being well-aligned with the organisation's strategic goals. 'Best practice' approaches are intended to provide standards which capture the policies and operations of the most successful organisations. 'Best fit' advocacy can be used to rationalise and justify a wide range of practices in employment. Some have found (Paauwe and Boselie 2003) that in the public sector context, best practice tended to prevail, partly because public sector employers sought to be seen to meet the highest standards, and partly because variations in strategic goals were limited. Today, with greater scope for strategic choice about how services are delivered by local authorities and driven by economic and social trends, local authorities are having to change their approach. The consequence of a turn towards 'best fit' can also affect the decent work agenda.

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[1]Amongst these are sustainability, access, efficiency and collaboration, savings benefits and also training for capabilities around procurement

5. Recommendations

This report opened with the statement made by one interviewee as to what decent work meant for their organisation and how difficult it was to make it a reality:

> 'We are trying to hold on to a very positive set of terms and conditions of employment under very challenging economic circumstances, and we're trying to hold onto it because of the public sector ethos' (LA12).

The public sector ethos itself may no longer provide sufficient vision, and a specific commitment to decent work in changing times is needed alongside a strategic approach to its realisation across the public sector workforce and, in the case of procurement, possibly even beyond it. In other words, a concerted and sustained effort on the part of local authorities is needed if they wish to remain a bastion of decent work and also continue to positively influence regional economies and employment cultures. The following five recommendations would support such an effort.

Recommendation 1: Be confident, open and honest

Local authorities should be confident about their decent work record, while balancing it with an awareness that not all is as good as it might be. They should also openly discuss problems in providing decent work for all employees, including financial constraints. Such discussions should not be taboo, but rather be seen as a sign of strength and commitment.

Recommendation 2: Make all managers advocates of decent work

The lead in advocating decent work should be with senior leadership and human resources managers, though not exclusively owned by them. Line and middle managers should be encouraged to be more aware of, explicitly consider and engage with a broad notion of decent work. This broader and encompassing approach might help reduce the risk of being only superficially concerned with awards and accreditations.

Recommendation 3: 'Bottom-up' ownership of the decent work agenda

A 'bottom-up' ownership of the decent work strategic agenda at the local authority level itself is the most productive path to sustaining decent work in the diversity of local authority contexts. Advocates of decent work should adopt such a 'best fit' approach and innovate in and for their local authority.

Recommendation 4: Learning and change

Local authorities should communicate directly about their 'best fit' approaches to facilitate learning and change with the aim of implementing the decent work agenda. While a best fit approach may raise questions about the role of standardised 'best practice' advocates in the public sector such as COSLA, it would turn local authorities into learning organisations and facilitate positive change.

Recommendation 5: Influencing job quality via procurement

Procurement processes should be 'decent work checked' to engage contracted employers outside the public sector in replicating standards and policies provided by local authorities internally.

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