



[Dr Steve French](#)

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Austerity has triggered DWP staffing crisis, research finds

The persistent assault on the pay and working conditions of civil service staff since 2010 under the banner of austerity has triggered a series of staffing issues, says leading academic Dr Steve French who conducted research into the DWP's staffing crisis on behalf of PCS

Steve from Staffordshire University's school of justice, security and sustainability conducted the research as part of our [ongoing DWP staffing campaign](#) which demands additional easements are introduced in the short term and 30,000 additional staff in the longer term to fix a broken system.

As part of the campaign, last month PCS officials handed over a dossier at DWP HQ detailing the near collapse of benefit services and deliberate neglect of the most marginalised in society. The [50 testimonials of PCS members working in DWP](#) contained in the dossier are shocking and, taken together, provide evidence of an employer in crisis.

Staffing at the heart of DWP problems

At the heart of the problems facing the DWP is staffing, with conservative employer estimates identifying staffing levels at least 20% below minimum requirements to deliver this crucial public service (DWP strategic resourcing meeting with departmental trade union side – 9 November 2023). The persistent assault on the pay and working conditions of civil service staff since 2010 under the banner of austerity has triggered a series of staffing issues.

Pay levels, often set just above National Minimum Wage levels and low enough to require employees to claim benefits to supplement incomes for skilled jobs requiring sensitive and significant decision-making responsibilities, are simply not attractive to recruit and retain staff, and this lies at the heart of the DWP's staffing crisis.

However, understaffing sets in motion a series of related problems that add to the dysfunctionality of the service. Remaining staff are expected to increasingly take on additional work as a way of 'fixing' the problem of severe understaffing. This has additional negative impacts on the department. Firstly, staff workload becomes unsustainable, leading to stress, sickness absence and turnover.

[TUC safety representative surveys](#) have consistently identified stress as the major issue facing staff in central government, while in 2022 [the DWP has the third highest level of average working days lost](#) across the civil service, rising from 6.4 to 8.9 days between 2021 and 2022 with higher levels of average days lost due to mental health (2.8 days in 2022 compared to 2.3 across the civil service).

Papering over the cracks

As managers try to paper over the cracks, the department risks further issues in terms of employment law breaches, notably in relation to its failure to meet its duties under the Equality Act, and specifically in its treatment of disabled staff and the failure to provide, or in cases even to withdraw, reasonable adjustments. In this respect the DWP has a track record of failing to handle workplace disputes, as between DWP between 2016 and 2019, [it lost more tribunal cases](#) than any other employer over disability reflecting a lack of capability and conviction within senior management in the department to resolve workplace issues, and in turn impact on operating costs for the DWP in paying for legal support when defending cases as well as [paying compensation in the cases they \(frequently\) lose](#).

Affecting vulnerable people

Of course, the significance of this crisis is that it affects member of the public that require support. As labour shortages in key areas of the economy persist, and while government ministers decry levels of migration into the UK, understaffing in the DWP limits the backing given to those requiring support to enter or re-enter the labour market. And during the worst cost of living crisis on record, cuts to the DWP service disproportionately [affect the most vulnerable members of the public](#) requiring support for essential benefits, especially given the complexities of, and problems with, implementing Universal Credit.

However, a further consequence of the staffing crisis in the DWP and the spiral of employment issues that arise from it, is the signals it sends to employers and the wider public. The message is clear, if the DWP does not support its disabled staff why should other employers, and what level of support can be expected for disabled claimants? If the DWP does not seek to resolve workplace employment disputes, then why should other employers?