

Management myths about the “need” to breach the junior staffing cap and Unite’s response

1. “Staff cannot enter the organisation as Project Workers”

FALSE – people have been entering the organisation for decades at this level. Management are twisting facts to suit their arguments – and Unite will continue to expose these untruths for what they are.

In order to protect the job security of our Project Workers and stop St Mungo’s joining the race to the bottom, Unite made an agreement, following a consultative ballot for industrial action, which included provision that a) junior level positions would never exceed a ratio of one junior worker for every four project workers, and b) no project worker would ever be demoted to a junior worker through restructuring.

When Unite made the agreement with St Mungo’s, we were told that it would last forever. Now, senior management want to breach the above provisions of the agreement. Unite is clear that the reason for this is nothing other than to obtain a cheaper workforce.

A trend has been witnessed across the supported housing sector for several years whereby the number of decently paid frontline workers has declined wherever there has been a weak union presence, and we are determined to stop this happening here.

St Mungo’s have provided a single example of a project where they say that their proposed staffing structures work: Hope Gardens. There is no good reason why Hope Gardens could not have four project workers, one duty worker and one project admin worker in compliance with our junior staffing cap agreement.

It must be a great structure, we’re told, because St Mungo’s have produced three nameless testimonies of staff. **Yet not a single one of these testimonies comes from a current Duty Worker, let alone a Duty Worker who previously lost their job as a Project Worker.**

2. “St Mungo’s only ever places anyone in a lower graded role if they voluntarily apply”.

The above is a requirement of the staffing cap agreement: **the agreement prevents Project Workers being demoted to junior worker positions.** We have repeatedly requested that senior management confirm that the relevant clauses of the agreement in this respect are retained and they have repeatedly refused to do so.

Whilst it may currently be the case that very few employees facing restructuring apply to be assimilated into a lower graded role, this will change dramatically if the protections granted by our current agreement are lost, in which case many staff will apply to lower graded roles as the only option to continue their employment and avoid redundancy.

If there is any frontline worker at St Mungo’s in doubt about what would happen if there was no junior staffing agreement, they need only look at the example of night project workers. In a short space of time, and service by service, these positions have largely been replaced with night concierge. Unite has learned the lessons of night worker deskilling and will not stand by and allow this to happen again.

3. “St Mungo’s cannot recruit to fill vacancies”

An initial response to senior managements claims that they cannot fill vacancies is that they should ensure they are advertised, unlike the fourteen Haringey Project Worker positions that they say just

cannot be filled and are still not currently advertised, despite the union flagging this up several weeks ago.

Where Project Worker positions are advertised, management has had to admit that there are nine applicants per vacancy.

Comments such as “It is unlikely that as many as half the interviewed candidates will be appointable” support a view that Helen Giles’ skills and prior experience criteria for a £24,616 role are somewhat unrealistic. It should be obvious that it is harder to attract good candidates to positions that pay £18,426 rather than the current Project Worker starting salary of £24,616.

We can also address the false claim from senior management that “There is unlikely to be sufficient staff already working in the sector to meet demand”. This argument rests upon an incorrect assumption that the sector as a whole is growing, which is certainly not the case following years of austerity cuts to supported housing services.

4. “Having more junior positions is good for diversity”

Unite challenged Helen Giles on these comments when she attempted to rip up our junior staffing agreement five years ago following the St Mungo’s – Broadway merger. We asked her what she meant by it then, she could not provide any satisfactory response, and so it is quite astonishing that senior management want this argument to surface again.

Unite is clear: St Mungo’s doesn’t have a diversity problem that will be solved by having more “diverse” members in lower paid roles. St Mungo’s, like much of this sector, has no problem with “diversity” amongst its frontline workforce, and particularly amongst those positions that are the lowest paid.

It does however have a massive equalities problem in terms of ethnic minority representation dramatically falling when we consider more senior roles. Dealing with that problem requires an end to the nonsensical and reactionary views espoused by an all-white top team that “diversity” is about creating more poorly paid jobs for the “diverse” to work in.

5. “We need more lower paid roles to satisfy St Mungo’s ambition to grow”

Just last year Unite were told - despite all the available evidence showing that contract income had almost doubled during the life of the current agreement - that St Mungo’s staffing structures were uncompetitive and the business was at risk.

Jumping forward a few months, we are now given the conflicting justification that “The challenge of sourcing the required volume of high quality staff is greater now than it has ever been due both to our size and ambition to grow more services”.

Unite is clear that this new reason is no justification in breaching our agreement. **An ambition to grow is no justification for a reduction in service quality and deterioration in staff terms and conditions.**

Where this is the result it is in the interests of staff and clients alike that senior management are once again robustly reminded of the need to put the quality of our organisation first.

Some of the correspondence Unite has received from members in relation to the junior staffing cap proposals:

"Secondly, there is serious concern from our team regarding the effect that having support assistants in place of project workers would have on the quality of support provided. We would welcome support assistants at Redacted as an addition to our existing team of case workers to augment the work we strive to do, but certainly NOT in place of case workers, (we are barely able to keep on top of our work obligations with 2 experienced staff on duty). Even in the scenario where we have support assistants in addition to the current staffing ratio, we fear that when a case worker leaves their post, they would not be replaced in a like for like fashion, as there would be 'enough bodies on the shop floor to cope'.

Thus begins the erosion of pay for the work role. There are some members of the team who have worked in the care/support sector for many years and have seen this tactic used by unscrupulous organisations both here and in other parts of the country, whereby despite repeated assurances to the contrary, the roles of project worker and assistant become conflated, which leads to a higher turnover of staff until all roles become paid at the support assistant rate.

The rate of turnover of staff increases, the quality of support/care decreases to dangerous levels until it one day appears on the news, as in the case of Winterbourne View. It does then pose the question, who stands to gain from such reckless and self-destructive policy? Certainly not clients nor front line workers."

"It's pretty astonishing that Senior Management yet again are putting forward arguments to essentially cut frontline wages. The very fact this is happening adds further weight to the growing suspicions across the front lines of the organisation that not only are senior management out of touch, they also do not really care about their frontline staff.

Their familiar ploy of talking about median pay scales is something of a red herring because it doesn't take into account wages in real terms. That is to say, a 5% cut to a Project Worker's wages makes far more 'real life' difference to that person, than it would a 5% cut to a senior manager's wage, who is earning well over 50k (or even over 100k).

Another red herring is the idea that if senior managers are not paid at the median rate, they will not be able to attract the best calibre of employee at the top level. This is nonsense. If someone wants to make 'big money' in Finance or HR, for example, they can go and work for a bank and earn far, far higher wages than in the public/social care sector.

No-one chooses to work in social care for the money – they do it because they want to make a positive difference to people's lives. Therefore true leaders in our field would be willing to take a pay cut or slightly lower wages, if it were for the greater good. Senior managers are happy to use this 'median' excuse because it allows them to earn higher wages".

"The increasingly 'nasty' public image Mungo's is creating for itself (working with border forces, etc. etc.), one would think that those in the PR department of the organisation would think that cutting frontline wages would simply add further fuel to the idea that it's becoming the 'nasty' charity."

"We find ourselves in a situation where senior management are overseeing an increasingly 'top down' approach to frontline services; complaints to the charities commission; special measures put on services they were responsible for; PR disasters; and where central services are becoming increasingly bureaucratic and faceless; where senior management are nowhere to be seen (except at tokenistic, occasional team meeting appearances, where the same lines and hollow gestures are trotted out); and yet at the same time they expect the frontline staff - the ones who really know the people we serve and do the service we promote - the ones who are doing their jobs - to take a pay cut?!"

"Junior Staffing Cap: The gap between how much senior management is earning and what front line is earning is simply unfair and creates a very low morale. It also reflects badly on organisation which already has been quite badly portrayed in the media.

It is simply not right that the chief of a charitable organisation is receiving such a high salary and then introducing cuts in antisocial hours for staff and is pushing for junior staffing cap and increasingly offering worse conditions and benefits to front line workers who often risk their health, safety and wellbeing in order to support very vulnerable and marginalised people.

I'm in agreement that St Mungo's remains competitive and successful in securing contracts without having to make such drastic changes to salaries and roles they offer. Such strategy is driving the salaries down across the sector and is a known practice for companies who employ cheap and low skilled workforce pushing out skilled workers who rightfully expect quality working conditions and remuneration".