

In order to reform public services for the better, we must first tackle an outdated employment culture that is bad for both taxpayers and workers

Reform's [Will Tanner](#) argues that we need to look more critically at the employment culture of the public sector workforce in order to reduce absenteeism and increase productivity and morale.



Today thousands of union members will meet for the [143rd annual TUC Congress](#) in London amid increasing threats of industrial action and civil disobedience from union leaders. Over the next three days, they will discuss an agenda that opposes virtually any reform of public sector employment, including job losses, local autonomy over pay and conditions in schools, and the targeting of sick leave and absenteeism as “soft targets to save money”. While this agenda is not surprising, it does stand in direct opposition to the notion of better public services, for both the taxpayers that use them and the public servants that work within them.

As Reform's new report on the public sector workforce, [Reformers and wreckers](#), shows, many public services are currently handicapped by an outdated employment culture where what matters is how long you have been in the job, rather than how you perform in it, and where local managers are prevented from making the most from their staff. Just 40 per cent of public sector organisations use bonus schemes to encourage higher staff performance, compared to over 80 per cent in the private sector. 60 per cent of public sector organisations continue to pay by length of service, irrespective of performance, against just 8 per cent of private sector organisations.

The result of this culture is a poorly incentivised workforce where low productivity and low morale prevails. The [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has found](#) that public sector employees are often disengaged with their organisations and managers, while private and voluntary sector employees consistently register net approval ratings for their employment. Public servants are also far more likely to be absent from work, averaging just under ten days each a year, compared to under seven for their private sector counterparts.

However, a number of leading public service organisations are already tackling these issues and demonstrating that, even in times of straitened finances, transforming the workforce can have a marked effect on the quality of the service itself. At [Denbigh High School](#), situated in one of the most deprived areas of Luton, the introduction of a comprehensive continuous professional development for teachers has helped take pupil attainment of five A* to C grade GCSEs from less than 20 per cent in 1993 to 100 per cent last year. In Salford, the implementation of greater community policing and more efficient management has helped Greater Manchester Police to drastically improve response times to incidents and reduce the crime backlog by more than two-thirds in less than a year.

Furthermore, these visionary organisations show that improvements can be made with less staff. Merseyside Fire and Rescue, for instance, reduced the number of firefighters by nearly 40 per cent, from 1,500 to fewer than 900, in the decade to 2007. However, by shifting to a preventative service model, in which firefighters conducted home fire safety checks, installed smoke alarms and toured local communities to raise awareness among residents, Merseyside halved the number of domestic fires in the area. At the same time, Merseyside reduced the sickness absence among firefighters from 18 shifts a year to less than 5, saving approximately £2 million a year.

We all want better schools, like Denbigh High, more responsive policing, like Greater Manchester, and safer communities, like those served by Merseyside Fire and Rescue. If these are to become the rule rather than the exception, the Government, and the unions, must accept that the employment culture within services needs to radically change.