

Affects of austerity in the third sector

Fiona Duncan

Austere capitalism is a catalyst for worker stress and ill health in third sector spaces

Relations between the state, market and third sector are in many ways like those between tectonic plates - continuously shifting and often uneasy. Each sector influences and shapes the others, creating tensions, convergences, divergences and transformations. In Scotland, the third sector is sculpted by the policies and priorities of both the UK and Scottish governments; and the decisions made at these levels affect the funding received and services delivered, as well as determining the bureaucratic mechanisms through which the third sector maintains its existence. This reliance on the state and - at its most stable - the five-year electoral cycle severely restricts the possibilities for securing much-needed long-term investment into communities that have been wounded by four decades of austere financial cuts in the name of reducing deficits. Politicians like to claim that austerity, as an economic project, has ended. But the social, economic and cultural consequences persist, and are pervasive; they have been engaged in political rebranding rather than real change.

Third-sector organisations that seek to mitigate the harm caused by austerity policies are particularly vulnerable to these political cycles. Funding tends to be awarded in annual or three-year blocks, and this strongly affects their organisational structure: the short-term nature of decision-making embeds a fear of running out of money, normalises a lack of job security, and leads to a constant threat hanging over most service provision. The precarity caused by fluctuating funding cycles and anxieties around both under and overspends is compounded by pressure to deliver

Affects of austerity in the third sector

ever-increasing outcomes to reflect value for money, and this has led to worker burnout and stress. This article is based on my MRes research exploring the affects of austerity for third-sector colleagues through focus groups based on collaborative zine-making, the aim of which was to facilitate relational and participatory responses.¹

Skint and stressed

The funding frameworks within which third-sector organisations operate create a power dynamic that allows the state to manipulate and influence community work, as well as those who work in these spaces. The ongoing consequences of the UK government's austerity project are multi-scalar, as local councils and government departments have faced violent budget cuts in education, welfare, housing and other services - underpinned by a constructed narrative of the need to tackle deficits, the bloated nature of welfare states, and economic growth as being our most salient collective goal.²

Austere conditions have entrenched inequalities, exacerbated the impacts of exclusionary and uneven policies, and driven households into poverty.³ The Scottish government estimates that 24 per cent of children and 21 per cent of working-age adults in Scotland are currently living in relative poverty after housing costs, and despite its interventions and cash-first approaches there is no sign of imminent alleviation.⁴

The Scottish government disseminates over £1 billion to the third sector, facilitated directly, through the government, or indirectly, through local authorities and external organisations tasked with overseeing grant-making. Each source of funding comes with its own bureaucracy of multi-staged online applications, budget submissions, and monitoring and evaluation requirements: most of my own time at work is spent managing the administration of various grants. As one colleague pointed out: 'we'd rather see someone spend 40 per cent of their time doing funding applications rather than their job'.

The implications of the funding structure percolate down through third-sector organisations, from senior managers who are under pressure to cover staffing costs and keep the doors open, to frontline workers who are worried about whether they will have a job at the end of the financial year. It shapes how we deliver our

Soundings

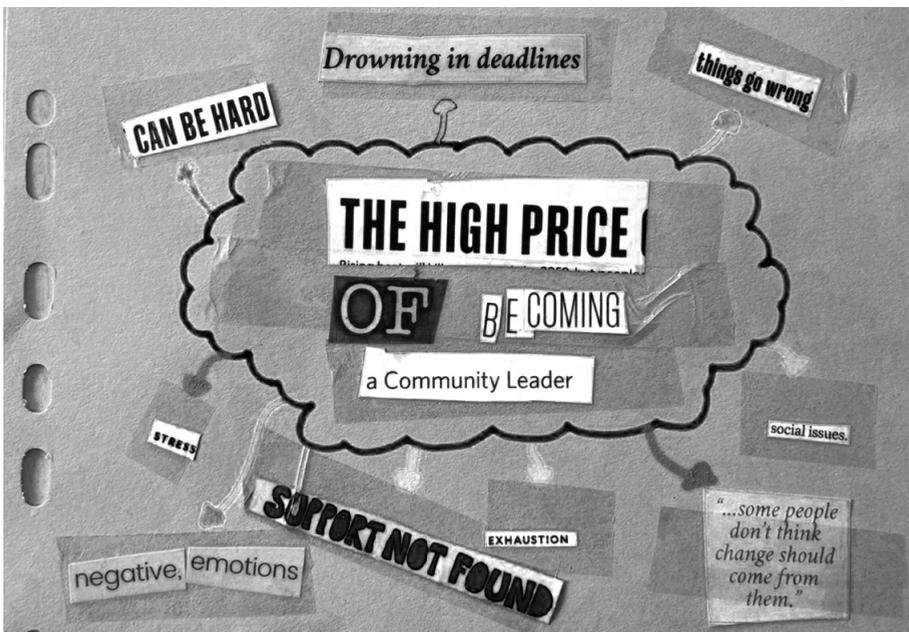
services, which tend to operate year-to-year, and makes it impossible to plan or invest in long-term interventions. As another third-sector worker noted: 'the funding makes it difficult for everyone to receive the same standard of care, and everyone is just muddling along, firefighting, and it's not fair'. The paperwork produced through these funding infrastructures is extremely frustrating for frontline workers, especially since the administrative processes often consume more money than the funding at stake - as with fuel bank applications, for example, which pass from frontline workers to staff at the fuel bank for approval, before being processed by the company which texts codes for people to redeem in exchange for energy supply. As one participant observed, the cost is 'often higher than the value of the fuel bank voucher'. Our applications for funding for cases of urgent need are often processed at a glacial pace; funding bodies, on the other hand, can create a sense of urgency throughout a whole organisation with a single email, due to our dependency on them, and the need to align with their priorities.

The short-termism of funding is reflected across the sector in terms of expectations: two workers in the field of mental wellbeing referred to their organisations as offering 'short-term services'. One such service offers 'access in-the-meantime' encounters for people on very long NHS waiting lists, the funding for which requires time-consuming evaluation exercises. In the words of one worker in this field: 'It's now mandatory to complete wellbeing toolkits after every session. It's patronising to ask people, "has your life improved since you've seen me twice?" The answer is "no"'. Another worker pointed out that benefits from community wellbeing projects are not always immediate, or visible, telling us about meeting someone they had worked with sixteen years later, who had said 'I just want to thank you for your patience and kindness. You taught me to appreciate that I could do things, and I could academically achieve'. Another colleague agreed: 'it's years later you see the return of investment in people - you don't build self-esteem across a few sessions'. Third-sector workers are fully aware that current systems are not geared towards equipping communities to deal with the effects of long-term disinvestment; as someone commented: 'you can't combat forty years of a community being torn apart with a three-year funded project that shuts down at the end of the funding cycle'. The sense of urgency manufactured by this funding model, and the power dynamic it compounds, undermines any chance of delivering the kind of political or revolutionary impulse that some third-sector organisations were able to create in the past, and limits our imaginaries of the future.

Affects of austerity in the third sector

On emotions

My research recognised the personal impact of working in the third sector; it reflected on the affects and emotions discussed and expressed in the focus groups, and considered the ways in which these are embedded in, and (re)produced by, the third sector itself. It looked at the feelings such as vulnerability, guilt, discomfort and failure that were identified by many participants in the focus groups. And it explored people's own positionalities within the spatio-temporalities of austerity, reflecting on the ways in which these externalities influence how we feel about, and interact with, ourselves and each other. The affective consequences of working through these austerity-shaped spaces can be seen not only in the physical and mental repercussions they engender, but also in the anticipation of illness.



'Mine is really negative ... I didn't mean it.'

Vulnerability and expectations

The zine page shown in Figure 1 is a good illustration of the complexities of working in communities; it highlights the often messy and contradictory feelings expressed by people in spaces of care, by workers and the public. It expresses the feeling of

Soundings

rejection that often arises from the public's perception of the role of third-sector workers. Expanding on the zine content they had produced - 'some people don't think change should come from them' - the participant explained that they were frustrated by the seemingly opposing behaviours of people who expected change to be driven by community workers, while also resisting change. 'They don't see what happens in the background ... there's just an expectation and when you don't meet that expectation, we get the blame'. In another focus group, someone commented: 'Public servants are now seen as scroungers, skivers and timewasters ... that's the language that's being used constantly'. Participants also commented on the high expectations of the public:

RD: I do feel like people have very high expectations when they get referred here because we do offer so many services but we actually can't fix everything'

KC: Right. We don't control how many houses are getting built.

This feeling of frustration is widely shared. One participant's response was: 'I always hear that there's nothing to do or nowhere to go and you know ... this community is lucky to have this organisation. There are communities nearby that have nothing, and this isn't one of them.' I also recognised this feeling, commenting that: 'every time I suggest something new - like install a bike rack, or put up a polytunnel - everyone is always so negative, and says it will never work.' Reflecting on this encounter afterwards, I realised that these kinds of sensitivity tend to be heightened when we hear criticism when we are trying to do what we perceive as 'good', or to make 'progress'. *Everyone* didn't grumble about the new bike rack - it was one person who rattled me, because, as my colleague noted, they hadn't seen the time and work that had gone into its existence. I raised this with them later, and they agreed: '99 per cent of people are open to new things, but you get that 1 per cent who don't want change, and that's what you remember. It can just take one person to make a comment out of 150 folk and it ruins your day.' Perhaps these feelings - of vulnerability, of inner negativity - are shared experiences for workers and the public in the socio-spatial environment of the third sector, but they emerge for subjective reasons. During the focus groups there were nuanced conversations around these subjectivities, and the ways in which engagements with violent temporalities, precarity and imposed scarcity can also shape our imaginaries of the future.

Affects of austerity in the third sector

KC: The narrative becomes people have to be resilient, and to show resilience they have to have this inner negativity, so if the worst happens it's okay - they expected it. It shows the inequalities again.

RC: They have to show that vulnerability of being excited about it, and then when it's taken away again it's like a hit.

KC: It's okay, we always think of the worst.

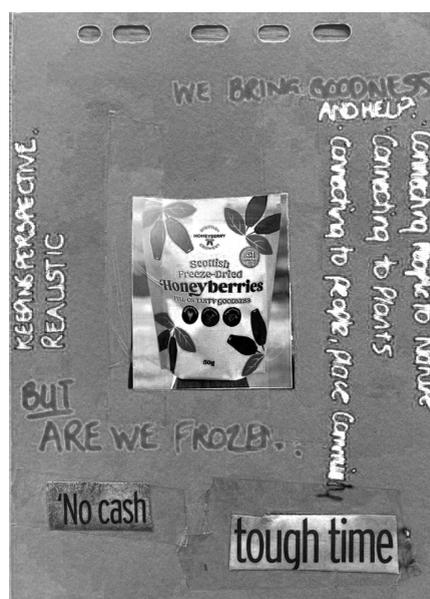
AC: Think of the worst, hope for the best.

KC: Most of the people we work in communities with have that kind of outlook.

Other workers expressed their feeling of being 'suspended' within the daily rhythms of their workplaces, which temporally shaped our present and potential selves; they considered themselves to be 'frozen' due to 'no progress being made' and 'so much talking and debates but nothing actually gets actioned'.

The zine page in image 2 mirrors this participant's internal management of expectations for the present and the future: 'I just look at these Scottish freeze-dried honeyberries and think ... are things frozen in time? We bring goodness like a berry does, to the job, but then we are still frozen'. Its suggestion of keeping a realistic perspective of what's achievable, due to funding parameters, as well as the tough time resulting from 'the fallout from the shit politics that's went on for the last years', vividly expresses the truncated sense of futurity recognised by workers in other focus groups. In reflecting on a relational space of care in which care doesn't flow from the 'carer' to the 'cared

for', or, in this context, the 'community workers' to the 'service users', the shared experience of vulnerability is exposed. AC and KC (quoted above) were raised in, and now live and work in, the communities they refer to in discussing the connections between vulnerability and negativity. None of us exists in a vacuum



QE's zine page

Soundings

where we go to work and fulfil a role that is sealed off from the external forces that would otherwise shape our everyday. Any ethics of care needs to acknowledge that our identity and nature are determined through our relations to others; and so, in these spaces of care and dependency, we are not carer/cared-for but instead interdependent and vulnerable. As Jonathan Herring, drawing from disability geographies, recognises: ‘vulnerability and dependence are not only inevitable parts of humanity; they are to be greatly welcomed. They are virtues, not vices’.⁵

The zine page in image 2 expresses a recognition of the parameters of the socio-spatial environments where we work, but also the opportunities. The participant who created it commented: ‘I’m not going to be able to make everything better, but I know I can help in a small way to connect people with nature, people, plants, place and their communities’.

Within these ‘suspended’ violences, and while temporally ‘frozen’, our strength lies in our vulnerability, alongside the compassion and trust that vulnerability requires of us. This gives us an opportunity to resist the hegemonic neoliberal discourses of the individual, and instead ‘compels us to focus on interactive, co-operative solutions’; and ‘encourages creativity in finding new ways of overcoming our human limitations’.⁶

Discomfort, guilt and failure

‘I put the flowers because I think things can grow from discomfort.’

The third-sector worker demographic in Scotland skews white, female and educated. All focus group participants were white, and nine out of thirteen of us had attended university. Feelings of guilt and discomfort were discussed during all focus groups - across different scales of the third sector, but united by what, ultimately, invoked the feelings of guilt: distances between community workers and the community in terms of social, cultural and economic capital, and a sense that we had failed to deliver change. One participant commented: ‘part of my discomfort is that I’m a white person in an anti-racist organisation which is black-led ... then again I think white people have a role, especially in Scotland, in anti-racism as well, so there is a lot of navigating through that.’ Another participant discussed the situational complexities of their publicly-funded research role:

Affects of austerity in the third sector



'I put the flowers because I think things can grow from discomfort'

We seemed to catch a group of people who were at an interesting bit of life but, without cash, you have to be resilient. The difference between us was so stark because they didn't have any money, they didn't have access to cash, stuff was happening all the time with Department of Work and Pensions and stuff like that. It felt like the work I was doing was bullshit at times harping on about human rights and stuff like that. I don't think I ever felt totally comfortable with that. I wonder if I contribute enough to tackle an issue - I don't know - probably not.

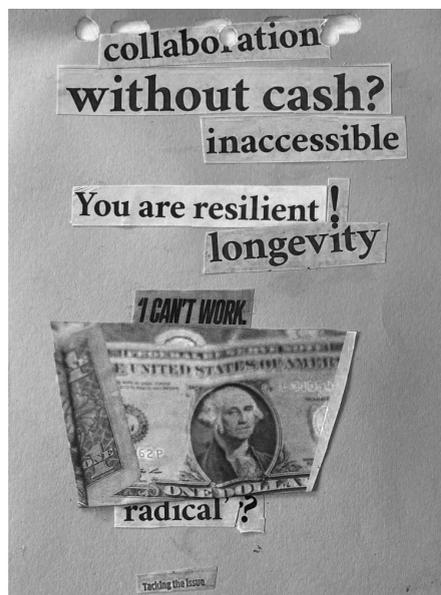
This participant's guilt coalesces around class distinctions, how they represent themselves and others across different spaces, and around 'failing' those they co-produce research with - something which resonates across focus groups.

CM: Am I just wasting people's time? The research thing is really hard.

AB: Loads of folk said taking part in this research was really important for bringing about change, while I'm thinking 'we've got fucking no chance'.

PA: I felt like I was part of the problem because I was working with

Soundings



young people towards a positive destination but I knew some of those people were likely to be stuck in low -aid work and the structures weren't changing.

The connected concerns of 'parachuting' or 'helicoptering' into communities you don't live in was discussed, framing the spatial tensions between communities and workers who don't live there, due to the 'professionalisation' of the third sector: 'You now see middle-class folk going into communities like Castlemilk and then leaving the place

at night, so they aren't having to live with the changes they are putting into place'. A participant in another focus group, who works in healthcare, agrees:

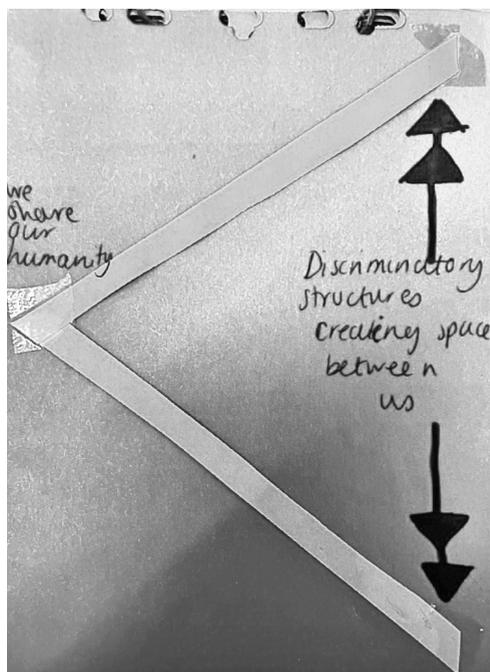
I get to know the patient better. GPs drive in, clinically diagnose people, and drive out again. They don't get to the root cause - just putting a plaster on it.

There was some dispute around this discourse. One participant, although noting that they live in Govan, and often observe the subway as 'so busy at 5 o'clock with third sector workers hoofing it out of there', also argued that: 'you don't need to be from a geographical area to do good work there but you do have to have an understanding. I think that's where the line is sometimes a bit more blurry.' Another participant demonstrated this in their zine contribution:

It's not that we don't have similar experiences of people working with you, it's just that when you're working with particular groups who are marginalised there is such a gulf. When I was doing this I was thinking about my positionality in this job, and how sometimes I'm very aware of what I don't know.

Affects of austerity in the third sector

My own feelings of guilt and failure are grounded in the sense of powerlessness discussed by many participants. Holding the knowledge that education, personal opportunities and professional experience has produced is a privilege, but it is also a double-edged sword: I am aware of the political parameters that restrict change, but the role of community work is to support people. Theories around what support should look like often change, and are full of jargon - capacity or resilience building, direct support, empowerment or enablement - but they can



seem irrelevant when you are faced with bureaucratic dead-ends blocking change that could ensure everyone is fed, warm and sheltered, and instead are involved in interventions that are immediate, urgent and marginal. This sense of powerlessness is confirmed by participants discussing issues around social housing, and living conditions for those seeking asylum. As a participant who works for a mental wellbeing organisation comments: '90 per cent of people that have been referred to me are suffering mental health issues due to housing. I can't provide solutions - I can't get you a house'. The striking affect of this whirlpool of guilt, formed through feelings of powerlessness, not meeting expectations, and the pervading social inequalities which skewer our everyday encounters, is conveyed in this comment from a participant:

I feel like it broke my heart. Something broke. I can't make change here, and I can't do it even with all these resources and things available to us. It was a watershed moment of heartbreak - this didn't work the way I thought it did.

Soundings

I've included here the poem referenced in image 6, as it offers a succinct account of one of the sources of this sense of guilt, discomfort and failure in the third sector. It holds a mirror up to our inefficacy - as degree-holding individuals who are failing, collectively, as a sector, in our moral ethic of care.

liaison coordinator

Tom Leonard

efturryd geenuz iz speel
iboot whut wuz right
nwhut wuz rang
boot this nthat
nthi nix thing

a sayzti thi bloke
nwhut izzit yi caw
yir joab jimmy

am a liason co-ordinator
hi sayz oh good ah sayz
a liaison coordinator

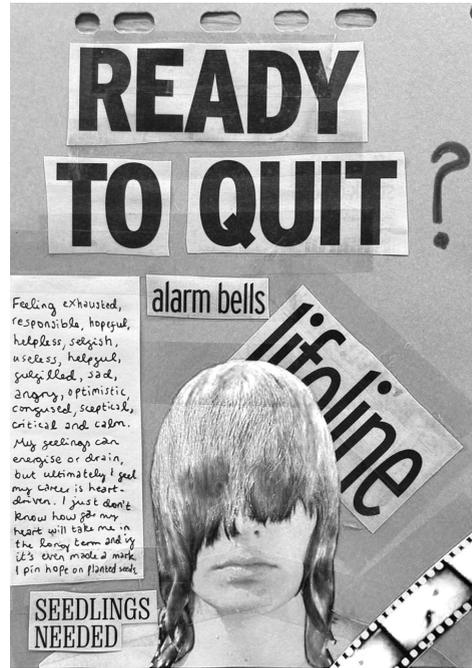
jist whut this erria needs
whut way aw thi unemploymint
inaw thi bevvyn
nthi boayz running amock
nthi hoosyz fawnty bits
nthi wummin n tranquilisers
it last thiv sent uz
a liaison co-ordinator

sundy wia digree
in fuck knows whut
getn peyd fur no known
whut thi fuck ti day way it.⁷

Affects of austerity in the third sector

Quitting, burnout and illness

Burnout - a collection of symptoms including feeling mentally drained, experiencing physical symptoms like stomach aches, and feeling irritable and anxious - is an increasingly recognised issue within the third sector. A recent Unite survey, in which I participated, reported that 69 per cent of third-sector workers are experiencing anxiety, connected to an excessive working culture, with seven out of ten regularly working a 50-hour week.⁸ In all the focus groups, participants highlighted the different ways through which burnout and illness percolate through their professional and personal lives.



'My career is heart-driven, I am just not sure how far my heart can take me in the long term.'

Anecdotal discussions around sickness suggest that third-sector workers prioritise workloads over wellbeing, and feel a strong sense of responsibility around their provision of care. Working in what was considered a 'lifeline' service, because the responsibility 'is always there', one participant recalled their role as a key worker during the Covid-19 lockdown periods, describing their struggle with 'vicarious trauma after that, because the people I spoke with didn't have their usual support system, and because we were also navigating that difficult time'. They recognised the delayed affects - or delayed cognition of them - of working in the stressful, highly emotional environments of lockdown, while living themselves through lockdown; 'you're still a lifeline even if you're drowning, and, thinking of that time, I really was'. As a participant in another focus group empathised: 'more and more pressure [was] put on them all the time and maybe [they] find themselves in a difficult space where it's hard to say you're struggling when you're working with people whose situations are maybe more difficult than yours'. This guilty comparison between workers and the people utilising the services their work provide is once more revealed, and gives

Soundings

a deeper understanding of the impact of a sense that their own absence leaves a gaping hole in service provision.

AB: In terms of burnout, the moment you stop working the moment people stop getting help, so you end up increasing the hours you're doing, taking your laptop home at night. I've had a wee taste of that like 'I just need to do this tonight and that's the way it is'. I think there must be people who do that all the time and are just carrying the load on themselves. How do you say no to folk?

PA: I think that's one of the things that sprung up during Covid as well, being so community-centred and providing food parcels or whatever, but then that crisis has never ended. Continuing to provide those same services but you are now like back at work, or working for them and underpaid, and these gaps in care are still there. I was thinking about the strain of living and working in the same community.

The normalisation of burnout within the sector has partly been embedded by an expectation that workers will manage an excessive workload through an individual effort, rather than an effort to address broader workplace or structural issues; Unite have called for workplace legislation around stress and psychological risk, recognising worker dedication is exploited by management.⁹

Not only are workers *actually* becoming ill, they are also worried *about* becoming ill. The temporalities of illness, induced by increasing material and emotional workload expectations in the third sector, are here highlighted by one of the participants:

Working, long-term, for me, is becoming more and more difficult as I get older. I've been under a lot of pressure the last six months in lots of different ways, and I do walk in the forest every day, I watch Springwatch when it's on, I'm doing all these things and it's to mitigate how I'm feeling. I think if I worked long-term on the frontline ... I'm pretty burnt out at the moment and I'm scared of getting ill. That's the proper truth.

The anticipatory fearful emotions around burning out, and the looming threat of

Affects of austerity in the third sector

sickness, are controlling and modifying this participant's present behaviour. While our society frames this as self-care - the participant referred to their zine page as 'self-obsessed', while another considered her burnout as being 'selfish' - someone else suggested that this individualised notion of care is a product of neoliberalism, and that healing, and looking after each other, is a collective and mutual endeavour: 'Walking into a bookshop, it's all about self-help and meditations, and that's all there has been for thirty to forty years. There are no books about helping other people, or each other, and that narrative comes from Thatcherism telling everyone there's no collective, only individuals'. The related condition of isolation further compounds present-day orthodoxy about the individual, as increased workloads, financial pressures and cultural shifts towards home-working reduce opportunities for connection. In one focus group I commented:

I find where I work isolating - I'm not based in town and I don't bump into colleagues outside of work. It takes a lot of effort to build connections, as the community I work in has no social spaces, and everyone is too wiped, or has no energy left, for another work activity. I stopped attending networking meetings after Covid, as I'm too busy here.

Others mentioned the increasingly isolated nature of community work: one participant, who works alone in environments where they 'go to work, speak to clients and leave, and don't speak to another soul', and who also runs drop-ins across the city, described how this produced a 'nomadic feeling' due to their contract-based role. The increasingly common - and precarious - position of working as a freelancer further entrenches money worries, concerns about getting sick and social isolation, given that employing organisation has no responsibility for sick, holiday or maternity pay, and no obligation for contributing to a pension - further entrenches money worries, concerns about getting sick, and social isolation. The freelancer quoted above explained that, in addition to their third sector roles, 'I had to start working privately. I couldn't keep my head above water. I'm scrambling.' Another participant, who operated remotely in Glasgow for an English organisation, and without a line manager, for three years, described their feelings of isolation as socio-spatial: 'Everyone, apart from three of us in Scotland, are attached to a location and that's hard. Any team meetings you attend they are talking about things that have nothing to do with your role'. They highlighted the 'consuming'

Soundings

tension that exists when you are working nomadically while in a place-based community outreach position, and how you 'lose your sense of belonging yourself'. The external factors which create this feeling of isolation, and of non-belonging, are apparent: changing labour relations through austerity have seen an increase in fixed-term and freelance contracts which produce precarity, while funding pressures, cascading down from cuts to local government budgets, have shaped workplace decisions around office locations and staffing.¹⁰

On affectual and emotional encounters

In this analysis of emotional geographies, I have tried not to represent affect or emotions as being either positive or negative, and not to impress language on them which wasn't said, for it is not always possible to precisely define an understanding - it is often expressed subjectively. Recognising that we *feel* austerity's presence, and know it's there, shifts our concepts of austerity beyond what can be empirically documented or critically analysed. Instead, I have tried to illustrate the ways in which austerity has been collectively felt, and how these shape our capacity - or how we perceive our capacity - to act. Through running these focus groups, and providing space for people to share, create, think and breathe, I hope to have carved out my own quiet resistance - a space to feel belonging, kinship and a sense of being witnessed, within a society which prioritises the individual and the quantifiable. I hope the care I have tried to demonstrate can be framed as radical; as offering an opportunity to push back against the pervasive and violent structures of our everyday lives. These encounters reflect the ways in which socio-political forces shape the actions and interactions of people operating in and moving through third-sector spaces, amid the entanglements and restrictions produced by a web of structural issues; and they also show how deeply these are felt and experienced by third-sector workers.

Fiona Duncan is a third-sector worker based in Glasgow and is interested in relationships across politics, communities and place.

Notes

1. Participants were provided with topic prompts, rather than questions, which were based around broader research questions and provided sociopolitical context for the

Affects of austerity in the third sector

zine-making element. Participants committed to contributing at least one page to the collective zine. Numbers were limited, with up to six participants per focus group, to give everyone the opportunity to present their Zine pages and allow time for group discussions within the two-hour timeframe. After our zine pages were completed, we spent thirty minutes engaging in a 'show and tell' style discussion, talking through what we had created. This provided participants with an opportunity to discuss the research topic with other participants, and a peer-to-peer opportunity to create visual and additional insight beyond language.

2 Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013.

3. Thiemo Fetzer, 'Did Austerity Cause Brexit?', *American Economic Review*, Vol 109 No 11, 2019, pp3849-86.

4. The Scottish Government, *Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-2023*, Edinburgh, The Scottish Government 2023: <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/>.

5. Jonathan Herring, 'Ethics of Care and Disability Rights: Complementary or Contradictory?' in Loraine Gelsthorpe, Pratheepan Mody and Ben Sloan (eds), *Spaces of Care*, Oxford, Hart Publishing 2020.

6. Jonathan Herring, see note 5.

7. Tom Leonard, liaison coordinator, from *Ghostie Men*. We have sought permission to reproduce this poem from the Leonard estate but as yet received no response.

8. Mind, 'Challenges in Lived Experience Work – I Feel Burned Out', last modified 2024: www.mind.org.uk/workplace/influence-and-participation-toolkit/overcoming-challenges/i-feel-burned-out/.

9. Unite the Union, 'Not-for-Profit and Charity Workers Anxious, Overworked and Underpaid Warns Unite', last modified May 2024: www.unitetheunion.org/news-events/news/2024/may/not-for-profit-and-charity-workers-anxious-overworked-underpaid-warns-unite.

10. Rob Calvert Jump, James Michell, James Meadway and Nini Nascimento, *The Macroeconomics of Austerity*, Progressive Economy Forum, 2023: https://progressiveeconomyforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/pef_23_macro_economics_of_austerity.pdf.