Local government workers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland have slammed this year’s below-inflation annual pay award, but stopped short of outright industrial action at this stage, putting employers and the government in the ‘last chance saloon’ over pay.

"Members have told employers that this critically important issue won’t go away," UNISON head of local government Heather Wakefield said after a narrow majority of members voted in favour of action in a ballot which saw a 24.4% turnout.

The ballot closed last Friday, 26 October, and saw 144,719 valid ballot papers returned, with 74,631 members (or 51.6%) voting for action and 70,088 (48.4%) voting against. The ballot result was considered by the union’s NJC committee and local government service group executive today. The NJC committee welcomed the majority vote in the ballot by members for strike action in the current pay dispute.
But it overwhelmingly voted for a statement which read:

"However, in all the circumstances, including the narrowness of the majority and the size of the poll, this result does not constitute the basis for viable industrial action to break the government’s pay policy."

The NJC committee therefore agreed to:

- conclude the 2007/8 pay deal as soon as possible based on the offer made on 24 August;
- co-ordinate with other public-service unions regarding over the 2008 pay round;
- to start a campaign for 2008 based on securing fair pay and conditions improvements for and defeating plans to attack national conditions and negotiating machinery.

"Members have told employers that this critically important issue won’t go away," said Ms Wakefield.

More than 69% of those affected by the award earn just £15,825 or less a year - around £8,000 less than the national average.

These include home care workers, teaching assistants, environmental health officers, park and street wardens, housing officers, librarians, refuse collectors, school cooks and many other unsung workers. And these poorly paid staff face steep living cost rises that have far outweighed their annual pay awards of well under 3% during the past three years.

"This is effectively our members’ fourth consecutive annual pay cut and they have decisively put government and local authority employers into the ‘last chance saloon’. "Since 2003 local council workers across the UK have seen their pay packets falling further behind the rise in living costs, and thousands of low-paid staff suffer chronic financial hardship.

"Our members are not the faceless pen pushers some would have you believe. They are our community champions – the legions of people that deliver vital services to our neighbourhoods, often in high pressure and even hazardous circumstances.

"Now they have resoundingly warned employers’ to value them more.

"We will shortly be submitting our claim for the 2008 pay round. Next year, we expect the employers to end their bargain-basement treatment of our members once and for all."