

Scottish Hazards

Stress and Mental Ill Health in Public Sector Workplaces

(Executive Summary and Recommendations)



November 2018

Executive Summary

Of the 159 requests submitted, 96 provided full or partial responses, 63 provided costs for overall sickness absence of £421m for 2017/18, only 44 could break down costs relating to mental ill health. This amounted to £112.5m for 2017/18. A smaller number could identify costs relating to work stress. A separate calculation but included in these figures was carried out for health boards using the responses provided as well as information retrieved from the NHS Information Services Division, this is explained in the sections covering health boards.

Thirty organisations reported losing a combined total of 336,000 working days because of work-related stress.

Scottish Hazards believes these costs and the figure of days lost to be significantly underestimated due to lack of information held by employers on sickness absence costs and the number of large organisations that chose not to respond in any way to our requests.

There was a general increase in staff employed in leisure trusts, universities, colleges, schools outwith local authority control, health boards.

There was a reduction only in Local Government, in the 19 authorities that could provide information staffing numbers have reduced by 41,704 between 2005/06 and 2017/18

Very few respondents could provide costs specifically relating to workplace stress. Stress and mental ill health caused by work is included in sickness absence reporting in most organisations as part of a broader category including anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions.

From the information provided Scottish Hazards would suggest only 37% of the employers are carrying out adequate risk assessments using the HSE Management Standards, Work Positive or other appropriate stress risk assessment tool. This is substantially lower than the views expressed

by health and safety reps in the TUC survey where 46% of reps felt risk assessment were adequate.

Some employers reported carrying out individual risk assessments as and when required. This is entirely unsatisfactory, it is completely reactive, not preventative and suggests workplace stress is a problem for the individual, not organisational. Significant job losses in Scottish Local Government and increased sickness absence costs, even in organisations where staffing numbers increased, would suggest otherwise.

Other employers had carried out organisational stress risk assessments in the past but had moved to gathering information on stress from wider staff surveys seeking views on a wide range of issues related to their workers employment experience. This is not a risk assessment.

Others delegated the authority for carrying out stress risk assessments to managers of individual services, there was little evidence in such cases that risk assessments were being carried out, any necessary preventative action being taken or adequate mechanisms in place at corporate level to record activity of assessments carried out in this way and the implementation and success, or otherwise, of outcomes.

Recommendations

The figures gathered by Scottish Hazards are an indication of the burden placed on Scottish taxpayers to meet the costs of ill health in our public sector.

The real cost is likely to be far higher than we have been able to estimate as some organisations failed to respond at all and a large number did not hold information on sickness absence costs in any form, either for overall sickness absence or for absences related to stress and mental ill health.

Our analysis of the information does indicate a general increase in sickness costs, particularly in Local Government where austerity has hit hardest.

However, even in other areas where staffing has increased, such as in health and higher education sickness absence is still increasing. We need to examine the demands placed on public sector workers as well as tackling ill health at work and particularly ill health *related to work* if we are to reverse this trend.

It should also not be forgotten that it is not only employers who bear the cost of occupational ill health, the HSE¹ recently produced updated information based on the Labour Force Survey for 2016/17 showing that of the overall cost of £15bn for injury and illness caused by work, individuals suffer the greatest burden £8.6bn followed by Government £3.4bn and finally the employer £3bn.

The key to addressing work related ill health and injury at work is to create safer, healthier and fairer work for all. Employers should develop workplaces and workplace policies in consultation with their workers, policies that deliver opportunity for every worker and policies that provide secure, fulfilling and respectful work.

There should be a refocus on fairness and not the approach taken by many employers to manage sick workers by draconian workplace procedures such as sickness absence and performance management, procedures that are an anathema to fair work.

We also need to get a far more accurate picture of sickness absence, including differentiating between general ill health and work-related absence.

In order to reverse the trend of increased sickness costs, Scottish Hazards believes the Scottish Government need to develop some radical proposals including;

- Commissioning a study on the health economy of our workplaces to better understand the costs of occupational ill health to individuals, the Government and employers (public and private) and how investment in state delivered occupational health services may have an economic advantage for our country.

- To develop a preventative approach to tackling occupational ill health, investing in occupational health, reaping the benefits in later years. It is estimated that for every £1 an employer invests in occupational health they will get £8 back
- Creation of an occupational health and safety system based on some of the Nordic countries involving trade unions and employers from design to delivery. This should be a long-term strategy to include workforce planning and higher education to ensure demand for occupational health and allied health professionals can be met in future.
- Develop a model for reporting sickness absence data across all public sector employers to include staffing levels, incidences of absences related in injury and ill health caused by work, days lost as a result of work-related ill health and costs of general ill health and ill health related to work
- Public sector employers should have to implement the HSE Stress Management Standards and produce evidence that steps are being taken to tackle work related stress
- Public sector employers in Scotland should have to produce an annual report on working conditions, sickness absence and occupational health and safety.
- Putting occupational health and safety at the top of the Fair Work agenda by ensuring that private and third sector companies seeking public contracts can evidence fair treatment of all workers suffering ill health, whether work related or not.

Our full report that can be found on our website.

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ⁱ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/cost.htm>