

Scottish Hazards

Stress and Mental Ill Health in Public Sector Workplaces



November 2018

Introduction

Stress in the workplace has become the biggest singular concern of trade union health and safety reps according to the latest TUC biennial report of reps; “Focus on Health and Safety”ⁱ

Unsurprisingly, there has been a significant increase in reps from UK public sector employers reporting stress as a top five health and safety concern.

The increase amongst reps working in Local Government is particularly concerning and the report highlights that;

“Concern over stress and bullying/harassment, already high in 2016, have now become even more widespread. The proportion of representatives citing stress as a top-five concern is up from 72% to 80% and those citing bullying and harassment is up from 54% to 63%”.

The impact of ideologically unsound austerity measures has not only had a devastating impact on the quality of our public services but, far more importantly, public sector cuts are harming the health, safety and wellbeing of workers seeking to deliver these services with a vastly reduced workforce and increasing demands placed upon them by employers.

Scottish Hazards submitted requests under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 to all organisations covered by the lawⁱⁱ where we were of the view that organisation had a significant number of employees or the services such as provision of additional support needs in education or secure accommodation may suggest more stressful work environments.

Our questions were designed to gather information on staffing levels, sickness absence costs, costs in relation to work related stress, whether they had carried out an organisational stress risk

assessment and the steps organisations had taken to manage stress and mental wellbeing in the workplace.

The questions asked were:

- 1) Numbers of staff employed in financial years 2005/06 and 2017/18
- 2) Numbers of stress related absences in the financial years 2005/06 and for 2017/18
- 3) Absence costs incurred in relation to all sickness absence for financial years 2005/06 and for 2017/18
- 4) Absence costs in relation to stress related illnesses for the same periods, 2005/06 and 2017/18
- 5) Information on steps that your organisation has taken to manage stress at work such as implementing the HSE Stress Management Standards
- 6) The date that your organisation first carried a workplace stress risk assessment and dates of subsequent review.

It became apparent when preparing the requests that information for 2005/6 would not be available in some instances. For example, some organisations such as Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as well as Further Education Colleges were not in existence in 2006 and it was not felt appropriate to seek information on their legacy organisations.

In such cases the request has been amended and the date of the baseline information amended accordingly, the dates of periods relevant to the information being requested will be outlined in the section of the report covering each sector.

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.

Our analysis of the responses to our requests for information are detailed on the following pages.

Local Government

Requests were submitted to all 32 of Scotland's Local Authorities and Scottish Hazards received 30 responses. Information requested was for financial years 2005/06 and 2017/18

Only 19 could provide information on staffing levels going back to 2006, showing that in these authorities numbers employed had fallen by 24.8%. Glasgow City Council with 48% reduction of staffing was highest and significantly more than second placed Angus District Council (27.5%) and Aberdeen City Council (26.4%).

Only 4 had shown increases in staff numbers; Orkney (8.6%) Aberdeenshire (6.9%), South Ayrshire (5.4%) and West Lothian (0.7%).

Eight authorities could provide comparison figures for incidences of stress for the years requested, 6 had shown significant increases while 2 had witnessed a reduction.

Glasgow City Council, on the figures provided appeared to show a reduction of 37.7% in incidences of stress although this had to be taken in connection with the vastly reduced numbers of staff employed. Therefore, Glasgow City Council were excluded from the overall comparison and their stress incidences were calculated as a percentage of staff employed in each of the years. For 2005/06 this amounted to 10.5% for 2005/06 and 12.7% in 2017/18.

The remaining 7 authorities showed increases in incidences of stress related illness except for Falkirk Council where a small reduction of 20 was reported. Overall there was a net increase in stress related absence of 87% in the remaining authorities, from 3252 in 2005/06 to 6094 in 2017/18.

Overall sickness absence costs over the period rose by 20.8% in the four local authorities that could provide information for the years requested. Three authorities, Angus District Council, Falkirk, and

South Ayrshire had seen sickness absence costs rise by 32.4%, 26.4% and 17.4% respectively, while Scottish Borders Council had witnessed a minimal (0.02%) reduction in sickness costs.

Sickness absence costs for 2017/18 amounted to £90m for 19 local authorities that provided responses to Question 4, of these 15 were only partial responses as figures for 2005/06 were not held. Of the four who could provide the earlier information requested sickness absence costs had increased from £14.8m to £17.8m, an increase of 20% the costs per member of staff has almost exactly doubled from £425 to £875 per head in each of these authorities.

Only Falkirk Council could provide figures for costs relating to stress and mental ill-health absences for the two years requested. Figures provided showed a huge increase from £0.9m 2005/06 to £1.6m in 2007/18.

Ten authorities provided responses to Question 4 on costs of stress related illness in terms of working days lost, (Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross, Renfrew, Scottish Borders Council and West Dunbartonshire). In total 116,853 working days were lost due to absence resulting from stress and mental ill health in 2017/18.

Stress risk assessments were carried out across 18 local authorities, 13 authorities did not or could not provide enough evidence that corporate risk assessments had been completed, 1 had carried out an assessment across all its services in 2006 but did not provide evidence of any reviews.

Supporting documentation provided by many of the local authorities evidenced stress policies and other supports such as employee support and counselling services and self-referral to occupational health services.

Leisure Trusts

The outsourcing of council services to arms-length organisations is a relatively new development therefore Scottish Hazards sought data from 2014/15 and 2017/18. Responses were received from 8 of the 18 requests.

Total numbers employed has increased from 2912 in 2014/15 to 2333 in 2017/18 a rise of 24.8%.

The organisations providing responses would mainly fall within the definition of a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) except for Edinburgh Leisure and Enjoy East Lothian with 1002 and 358 employees respectively.

Incidences of stress related absences in these two organisations has almost doubled from 23 to 54, the amount of days lost in 3 other organisations due to stress and mental ill health (East Ayrshire, Renfrewshire Leisure and West Dunbartonshire Leisure) amounted to 3609.

While overall sickness absence costs have fallen from £492,630 to £325,853 (a 33.8% decrease) sickness absence costs relating to stress and mental ill health have more than doubled from £36,557 to £84,496 (131%)

In two organisations incidences of stress absences remained the same over the period but stress and mental ill health costs have increased, in another authority incidences of stress and mental ill health absence have more than halved but costs were consistent across the years requested. This would indicate that workers suffering from stress and mental ill health are requiring more time off their work to recover.

Evidence supporting organisational risk assessments was varied with half saying assessment had been done and were reviewed

periodically and the other half carrying out individual assessments after the event, i.e. after the illness has occurred.

Universities

In the education sector, universities, colleges and schools outwith local authority control information was sought for the years 2014/15 and 2017/18. Notwithstanding the fact that higher education institutions were in existence in 2005/06, amalgamation of further education colleges and lack of knowledge of the schools in question made it more practical for comparison to be made over a shorter period.

From information provided by the 9 universities who responded, the general increasing trend in sickness absence cost and stress and mental ill health related absences witnessed elsewhere was shared in the higher education sector.

There had been an increase in staffing levels of 6.7% with 7 of 9 responding showing small increases apart from Robert Gordon University and University of West of Scotland who reported a small reduction in staffing numbers.

Of the increases the most noticeable were University of Highlands and Islands (49%) University of Edinburgh (13.4%) and University of Stirling (11%).

Three institutions reported stress and mental ill health resulting in a total of 6196 days lost from work.

Overall costs of sickness absence for 2014/15 and 2017/18 were provided by 6 universities and 5 could provide information on costs related to absences for work relating to stress and mental ill health.

Costs for sickness absence in the 6 universities providing information had risen from £10.4m in 2014/15 to £11.55m in 2017/18. Of the 5

who provided costs in relation to stress and mental health costs had risen from £1.1m in year 2014/15 to £1.4m in 2017/18. These amount to increases of 11.1% and 27.3% respectively.

The largest increases in general sickness absence costs over the period in question were in Edinburgh (26.4%) where incidence of stress had doubled, Napier University (16%) and University of Highlands and Islands (13%). UHI showed an increase in staff numbers over the period of 49%, a significantly higher staffing compliment perhaps being the reason for increased sickness rather than an unhealthier working environment.

The University of Stirling reduced sickness absence costs over the period but provided information in respect of costs for stress and mental ill health indicating a 70.4% increase in this area compared to a 10% reduction in overall sickness costs.

Reductions in costs for stress and mental ill health were reported by 3 institutions, UHI (25.4%) against an increase of 13% in overall sickness reported above, Robert Gordon University 9.9% and University of West of Scotland (8.9%).

Evidence was provided showing good practice particularly in University of West of Scotland where corporate ownership of stress risk assessments and implementation of preventative action was evident, 3 provided information showing organisational risk assessments had been carried out over several years.

A further 3, Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian and Abertay University had carried out stress risk assessment in the past but now included this in a broader staff survey. Scottish Hazards does not believe organisational risk assessments should be included in staff surveys as this undermines the important emphasis placed on the need to tackle workplaces stress. There is a legal obligation placed on employers to manage workplace hazards including stress and we

would question the effectiveness of any risk assessment where the information has been gathered as part of a wider survey.

Further Education Colleges

Responses were received from 14 of Scotland's 20 Further Education Colleges, staffing numbers had increased by 3.9% with small increases across many colleges apart from Glasgow School of Art, reporting a 54.3% increase in staffing numbers and Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (26.43%). Colleges reporting reductions in staff numbers included Fife (19.9%) West Lothian (19.2%) and Glasgow Kelvin (14.0%).

Overall sickness absence costs for 2017/8 amounted to £6.68m, with West College Scotland estimating costs in their college alone at £2.5m. Six colleges provided information allowing for comparison between 2014/15 and 2017/18. In these colleges one, Glasgow Clyde had reduced sickness absence costs by almost half (43.3%), all the others where we can make a comparison showed increased sickness absence costs ranging from Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (26.4%) to Scottish Borders College (9.2%). Newbattle Abbey College reported sickness absence cost increase of 68.3% but this was discounted from the comparison because of the size of the organisation: with only 42 staff, one long-term illness could account for any increase. The reduction in overall costs could be wholly attributed to Glasgow Clyde reporting a reduced spend on sickness absence over the period of £996,462, extracting this from the comparison would result in increased costs in the 4 remaining colleges totalling £269,303, an increase of 12% on the previous years requested.

A net reduction of sickness costs related to stress and mental ill-health of 48.9% would appear to be the case from the figures provided by 5 colleges covering both years requested. Again, this can

be mostly explained by the reduction in Glasgow Clyde of £386,000 (76.1%), however in the remaining colleges costs in relation to stress and mental ill health showed a downward trend of 19.75% with Forth Valley College being the exception increasing from £85,452 to £173,637 (103%).

Evidence of stress risk assessments being carried across organisations by 7 of the colleges responding, of the remainder 3 carried out individual assessments after stress or mental health absence (after the event), the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland reported they would be carrying out their first organisational risk assessment this year.

Schools

Information was requested from schools outwith state control providing education services to Local Authorities such as additional support need and secure accommodation. Requests were submitted to 34 organisations and only 8 responded.

Of those responding the information in most cases was incomplete, not allowing any real conclusions to be drawn from the information provided.

However, 5 organisations provided responses to suggest a small reduction in overall sick pay with 2 showing increases in relation to costs associated with absences relating to stress and mental ill health.

Health Boards

Scottish Hazards requested information relating to absence costs for the period years 2005/06 and 2017/08, 18 requests were submitted, and we achieved a 100% response rate.

There was an increase in staffing numbers of 8469 (6.5%) with Shetland Highland and NHS 24 seeing the biggest increases.

The only health board responding in full was Ayrshire and Arran where incidences of stress and mental ill health had increased from 941 to 1473 up 56.5%, overall sickness absence costs rose 47% from £14.3m to £21m and a rise in costs related to absences as a result of stress and mental ill health from £2.2m to £5.4M an increase of 145.4%.

Argyll and Arran are undertaking action to remedy work related stress. Under the auspices of the Partnership for Health and Safety in Scotland (PHASS) they are taking forward a specific action under the PHASS action plan

Most health boards directed us towards publicly available information on the NHS Information Service Division (ISD) websiteⁱⁱⁱ, this not only allowed us to find staffing numbers but also to estimate sickness absence costs and an approximate indication of costs related to stress and mental ill health costs.

Overall sickness absence costs were calculated using information on the overall pay bill^{iv} and sickness absences rates available from the ISD^v.

Total staff costs amounted to £5.7billion, using an average of all the sickness absence rates of 5.24 % results in an absence cost of £298,680,000. The information provided on overall absence and costs relating to stress and mental ill health would suggest approximately one third of all sickness costs related to stress and mental ill health, using this assumption stress and mental ill health cost NHS Scotland approximately £98,564,000 in 2017/18.

Other Public Bodies

We submitted a further 18 requests to organisations including the Scottish Government, COPFS, Scottish Parliament, Prisons, Executive NDPBs and Government Corporations.

The following is a summary of the information received.

The Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and COPFS reported 6542 days lost to stress and mental ill health) and 778 incidences stress and mental ill health absences; 635, 58 and 85 respectively

Only the Scottish Parliament appeared to demonstrate adequate organisational risk assessments taking place.

The Scottish Government includes questions based on HSE Stress Management Standards in the annual Civil Service People Survey^{vi}. As stated elsewhere Scottish Hazards does not view this as a risk assessment although the response stated that business areas review and act on results of the survey.

The survey results for the 2017 survey reflect that only 49% felt that senior managers would act on the result of the survey and a smaller amount (37%) believed positive actions had followed on from the 2016 survey. Significantly 23% of respondents did not believe managers would act and stated that they had not noticed any positive action from the previous survey.

Scottish Hazards will be seeking views from civil service unions on the effectiveness of managing stress through a broader based people survey. This practice was reported in many of the responses and Scottish Hazards does not believe effective management of workplace stress can be done in this way.

The COPFS has a Stress Policy and managers are trained to carry out risk assessments on an individual basis, providing another example of the condition being managed reactively rather than proactively.

In another group consisting of National Galleries Scotland, National Museums of Scotland, Royal Botanic Gardens of Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Scottish Canals and Scottish Water an increase in staff numbers of 11% was noted.

Total sickness absence costs for 6 out of 7 of these organisations amounted to £5.16m. The National Museum of Scotland did not hold this information. In 5 organisations recording absence data stress and mental ill health they reported costs in this area of £0.45m in 2017/18.

As in other areas responses were not complete but suggest an increasing trend in overall sickness absence costs and those relating to stress and mental ill health.

In Scottish Prison Service staffing numbers had increased by 8.3%, while incidences of stress related and mental ill health absence increased from 159 in 2011/12 to 286 in 2017/18 up 80%. Overall sickness absence costs rose accordingly from £4.0m to £7.4m (85%), costs related to stress and mental ill health increased from £0.5m to £1.2m (140%).

The response from Police Scotland showed an overall reduction on staff numbers from 23,231 to 22,369 between 2013/14 and 2017/18, most of this reduction impacting on civilian staff and not police officers.

Incidence of stress had risen from 1062 to 1175 between 2015/2016 and 2017/18. Again, this impacted more on civilian staff increasing from 367 to 448, up 22%, in comparison incidences of stress and mental ill health in police officers had increased from 695 to 727 (4.6%) in the same period.

Conclusion

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 HSE^{vii} 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.

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ⁱ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Safety%20Reps%20report%202018.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/pdf.php?type=csv>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Workforce/Publications/2018-09-04/Overall_Trend_J2018.xls

^{iv} http://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Finance/Publications/2017-11-21/Costs_R700_2017.xlsx

^v https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Workforce/Publications/2018-06-05/Sickness_Absence_M2018.xls

^{vi} <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00527770.pdf>

^{vii} <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/cost.htm>