Wellbeing at work

Public sector resilience in a time of change

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Introduction

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Editors Jane Dudman, Sarah Jewell
Production editor Sam Noble
Picture editor Tracey Tomlin
Cover illustration Owen Davey/Folio illustration **Contact** Chris Iggulden (chris.iggulden@theguardian.com)

Pressure tells
Identifying and coping with public sector stress
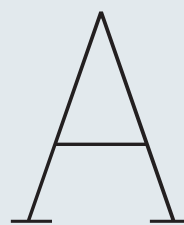
A bit of pressure is, apparently, good for human beings. It energises us to get things done. But when pressure tips over into unrelenting stress, as it has done in so many public sector workplaces, it has to be taken seriously as a health issue.

This supplement looks at the stress facing people who deliver public services and how they deal with it. As Mind's Faye McGuinness explains, the worst thing about coping with stress can be the "drip-drip effect" from a number of factors, including heavy workloads, long hours and, for some, shift patterns.

From resilience training for Croydon council staff, to NHS England's programme to improve staff health through health checks, access to early physiotherapy and better food onsite, many public bodies are starting to realise the benefits of supporting their staff through change. The results can be significant: 94% of the 6,400 staff surveyed by Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust now think their employer is taking positive action on health and wellbeing.

While workers in emergency services are twice as likely as the general population to report mental health problems, they can now get support from a specific support line, the Blue Light programme.

And while Professor Cary Cooper has sage advice about the toll of today's "always-on" culture on our ability to down tools and relax, there is plenty of advice and practical information available. The finding that people immerse themselves better in their work tasks after having sex - an effect that lasts up to 24 hours - may be of particular interest.

Jane Dudman

Acknowledge and address

High-profile accounts of mental health problems could help all public servants get the support they need, says **Jane Dudman**

"For me, it has never been more important to focus on personal wellbeing and resilience," says Carolyn Wilkins, chief executive of Oldham council. She adds that while working in local government at a time of significant change is challenging and complex, it also brings opportunities for staff and communities to do things differently.

Budget cuts have seen the number of staff employed by the UK public sector levels fall from 6.3 million in December 2010 to 5.4 million in December 2016. But it's not just losing jobs: changes to terms and conditions have substantially worsened pay and pensions. A recent report from the Resolution Foundation pointed out that as pay restraint and inflation eat into their take-home pay and living standards, wages for public sector staff will, by 2020, be as low as they were in 2005.

Many of the public sector workers who have contributed to the Guardian's Letter to the Public series have highlighted the stress they are feeling. One local government PR officer said that her job - to put a positive spin on council cuts - felt "soul destroying".

But it is not all gloom. Wilkins says a sense of belonging to a strong team is crucial to being resilient. She's put in place a number of programmes for her staff, including the Fit for Oldham initiative, launched in 2016, that supports physical and mental wellbeing, using the council's own resources, like parks, libraries, public health and music service. "We also need to make sure we invest time in things that energise us," says Wilkins. "For me, this can be time with different people, but spending time outdoors is also important." She runs three or four times a week - "mainly in the dark and rain at the moment".

Many employers in the public and private sectors are keen to improve employee engagement and productivity, and reduce sickness absence. On that, at least, they are winning: the Office for National Statistics stats show British workers now take less time off sick than at any time over the past 25 years.

Local government officer Joanne Fry agrees with Wilkins about the need to focus on resilience. She says it can be very demoralising for people who joined this sector to use their skills and expertise to help people to have to face the harsh realities of cuts to services. For Fry, writing a blog about the professional and personal challenges helps her get some perspective, while "reaching out to colleagues and other professionals on social media is a good way to feel supported."

Even the civil service, which has traditionally focused on dry achievement targets rather than how its staff feel, now uses its annual civil service survey to measure employee engagement and how staff feel about their managers.

And there are signs that wellbeing and resilience are being taken seriously now. Prince Harry's recent revelation of the anguish and toll caused by his mother's death has been welcomed by mental health experts and is part of a more open society that is good for employees and bosses. Once, it would have been unthinkable for MPs, as public servants, to admit to mental health issues, as four Conservative MPs did in parliament in 2012.

Similar, it was ground-breaking only three years ago for then civil servant Louise Kidney to write openly about her experience of autism. But being open about mental health at work has, thankfully, become more acceptable for public staff, and there are now several initiatives to support many of those facing everyday stress as a result of their public service, such as Mind's Blue Light support line for emergency service workers.

MPs have been praised for acknowledging the challenges of mental health and alcoholism
PA Wire

Peak performance in a time of turmoil
Hayley Lewis

As an occupational psychologist and former local government employee, I know the challenges facing public sector staff right now. This is a time of immense change and turmoil and it's important for us to help employees develop resilience in the face of insecurity and change.

In Croydon, the London borough where I used to work, they have been putting this theory into practice. In 2010, the authority, which is the largest employer in the borough, agreed on a major reform programme that it hoped would save millions of pounds over a five-year period, while giving residents greater choice, access to better-integrated services, and opportunities to get more involved in designing and delivering local services. The project included closing dilapidated and costly civic offices.

The council knew managers and staff would be under pressure during this period, so it provided resilience training for all its workers; over two years, more than 100 senior managers went through the training, as well as about a quarter of

> **Despite major change, there was no drop in effort levels**

frontline staff and a quarter of middle managers. The result? A staff survey showed that there was no drop in levels of extra effort by staff. Employees thought there was an improvement in how change was managed and 79% felt able to retain or develop a good work-life balance. During the same period, complaints dropped by half and customer satisfaction increased by 5%.

Hayley Lewis is a chartered psychologist and the founder of Halo Psychology, a consultancy specialising in organisational change and performance

Smarter working to save time and cash

Stress and its effects are a very real threat – but a few simple remedies can build resilience, says Victor Smart

Everyone from social workers to senior judges can find themselves suffering with stress. And yet people can usually cope with bouts of short-term stress in the workplace so long as they are well supported and get recovery time. So the aim is to retain – or regain – that inherent ability to bounce back.

The experience from central civil service is encouraging. Staff numbers and budgets have been cut in nearly all departments while workloads have risen and new Brexit departments set up – and yet the latest Cabinet Office employee survey shows staff engagement ratings rose in nearly every department.

Faye McGuinness, from mental health charity Mind, says that although the police are cited as a resilient group, they pay a price for their macho culture and reluctance to share problems. She says blue-light workers as a whole are twice as likely as the general population to report mental health problems: "For

Blue-light workers are twice as likely to report mental health problems

emergency services the worst thing can be the drip-drip effect from a number of factors, including heavy workload, long hours and shift patterns. Little stresses accumulate – and then witnessing a traumatic event can trigger something."

Stress itself is not a mental health condition, but chronic stress can lead to anxiety or depression. Yet, according to

resilience psychologist Ivan Robertson, people can cope with even long and severe adversity – so long as they have a clear idea of what they and their teams are striving to achieve.

One of the key things organisations can do is give staff access to individual resilience training and staff assistance hotlines. Equally important is developing – and, far tougher, living by – organisational policies on bullying, whistle-blowing, dignity at work, remuneration and work-life balance. Smarter work design and flexible working hours can also help, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

For individuals the advice is predictable: eat and sleep well, moderate your caffeine and alcohol intake, and exercise. Less familiar is a Journal of Management study that found married workers immerse themselves better in their work tasks after having sex – an effect that lasts up to 24 hours. Mindfulness exercises at work can help us stop our thoughts going around in circles. And signing up as a mental health "first aider" – to help colleagues – is beneficial to both parties.

Ultimately, leaders must build a purposeful organisational culture where all staff have a space to be open and honest – one that gives individuals the confidence to acknowledge and talk through their problems.

Back on track

'The sooner you get people into those systems, the sooner they'll be back at work'

With 6,400 staff, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS foundation trust is one of the largest mental health trusts in the country. Jacqueline Tate, workforce projects manager, says working there can be highly stressful, because it's a "moving environment – there's constant restructuring going on". Clinical staff, she adds, have to deal with a "particularly difficult" client group.

Aware of the stress staff were experiencing, the trust introduced a system three years ago, whereby if a staff member goes off sick with a stress-related condition, their manager has

to contact them within 48 hours. If it seems unlikely they'll be able to return within two days, the staff member will be referred immediately to the occupational health team, which then directs them to the trust's in-house counselling service or, in more serious cases, psychotherapy.

"The sooner you get people into those systems, the sooner they're going to be well enough to come back to work," says Tate.

The trust is taking multiple approaches to helping staff cope day-to-day, including sending out a monthly newsletter that offers tips on looking after mental wellbeing and providing an online checklist for staff to help identify whether they're stressed. A face-to-face resilience training programme is being piloted, while mindfulness training – also face-to-face – has been introduced in parts of the organisation and will later be rolled out more widely.

The interventions have had a positive, if modest, impact: between April 2013 and January 2017, the trust's sickness rate reduced from 6.25% to 5.42%, and the occupational health

> **People don't like to admit to feeling stressed**

team has found that far fewer staff are now mentioning stress at work as a problem. The latest staff survey showed that 94% of staff think the trust takes positive action on health and wellbeing.

Efforts to encourage staff to seek help are a long-term project, says Tate: "It's improving, but it's a sensitive area – people don't like to admit to feeling stressed." **Kim Thomas**

NHS stress-management measures have had a positive effect

A very public sector malaise

Employment levels are down and absence is higher than in the private sector, says Dawn Foster

The public sector currently employs just over a sixth of working people – 5.44 million people compared to the private sector's 26.42 million. Generally, public sector employment has been falling in recent years, due to cuts to central and local government, with only a few exceptions in health and education. Public sector employment was boosted at the time of 2008 financial crash, then peaked in September 2009 – partly due to English housing associations, Lloyds Banking Group and Royal Bank of Scotland moving to the public sector. Since then, however, public sector employment has fallen by 15.5%, equating to the loss of nearly 1 million public sector jobs. And since June 2012, there have been fewer public sector employees than there were in 2008; this number continues to drop year on year.

Nearly all public sector jobs are split into two categories: local government and central government. Local government employment, which has been falling since 2010, currently stands at 2.18 million, while central government accounts for 2.95 million public sector jobs.

The NHS employs 1.59 million people, accounting for 29% of all public sector employment, meaning staffing is at its highest level since comparable records began, in 1999. In the UK police service,

Below: 73% of public sector workers take a day off for stress, compared with 42% in the private sector
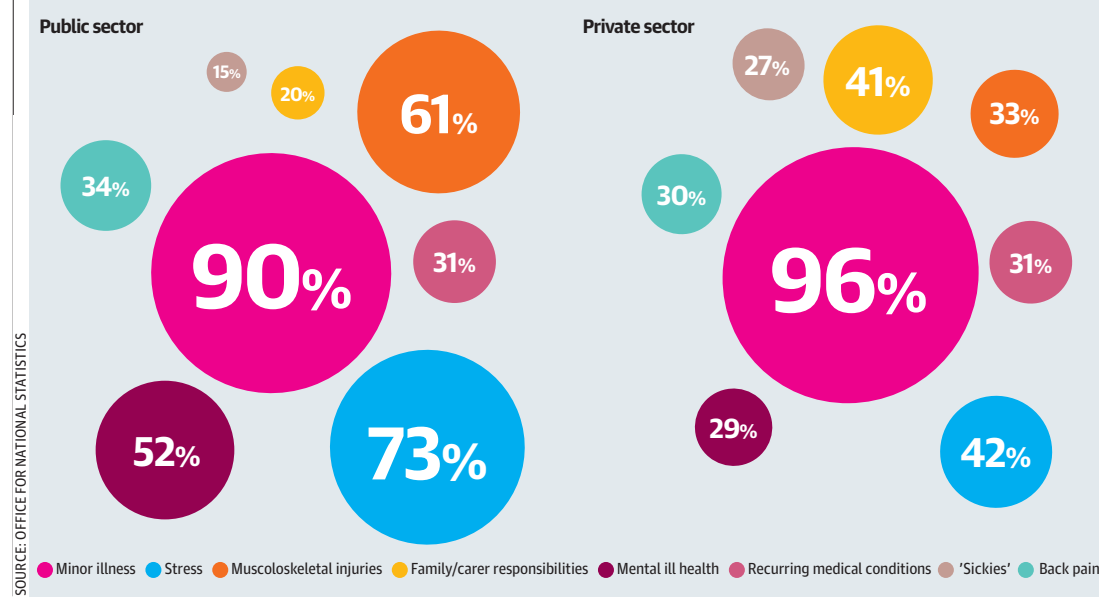
where numbers have been steadily decreasing since 2009 due to budget cuts, 245,000 people are employed. The civil service has also been shrinking steadily since 2005: it currently has 416,000 people on its books.

The number of people in public sector employment varies across the UK: in Northern Ireland, almost a quarter (24.8%) of people are public servants; 21% of Scots and 20.8% of people living in Wales. London has the lowest rate of public sector employment of any English region at 14.5%, while the North East at 20.2% has the highest. The disparity between sickness rates in the public and private

sectors is often used as a political football: public sector employees take an average of 8.5 sick days a year, per employee, 3.3 days more than those in the private sector. Research suggests several reasons for the disparity: the public sector employs more women with poorer than average health, and incorporates many roles that have higher risk of workplace injury or illness. Minor illnesses top the list of reasons for absence, followed by stress, musculoskeletal injuries and mental ill health, with many employees reporting higher levels of stress in the past few years – unsurprising, given the level of redundancies and internal upheaval.

Public v private sector Key reasons for staff absence

Public sector

- 15%
- 20%
- 61%
- 34%
- 90%
- 31%
- 52%
- 73%

Private sector

- 27%
- 41%
- 33%
- 30%
- 96%
- 31%
- 29%
- 42%

Minor illness | Stress | Musculoskeletal injuries | Family/carer responsibilities | Mental ill health | Recurring medical conditions | 'Sickies' | Back pain

Who nurses the doctors?

Short-term responsibility to patients and overwork get in the way of health professionals taking care of themselves, says **Sarah Johnson**

When Laura-Jane Smith took time out of her clinical training for a PhD, she found she was constantly unhappy, and suffered from palpitations, nausea, severe headaches, and breathlessness among other physical symptoms.

The hospital doctor's days were dominated by negative thoughts. She recalls: "I once walked for 30 minutes with 'I hate my life. I hate my life' on a loop of internal monologue that I feared had no end." Eventually, Smith was diagnosed with depression and anxiety and ended up leaving the PhD.

She is not alone. Countless healthcare professionals suffer from burnout, depression, anxiety and addiction. Estimates from Public Health England put the cost to the NHS of staff absence due to poor health at £2.4bn a year - excluding the cost of agency staff to fill in gaps and the cost of treatment.

In his independent review looking at the impact of staff health on NHS performance, former medical director Steve Boorman, who is honorary professorial fellow of the Royal Society of Public Health, found that health workers often did not prioritise their own health. "They did not want to take time off as they felt patient care would suffer when temporary cover was needed to replace them," he explains.

Dr Clare Gerada, medical director for the NHS Practitioner Health

> ❝ I had 'I hate my life' on an internal monologue ❞

Dr Laura-Jane Smith found art relieved her depression

Programme, explains why this is so: "You only have to look at what you're trained to do as a doctor or a nurse. You're trained to put patients first and to put their needs above your own."

NHS England now has a specific programme, supported by chief executive Simon Stevens, that advocates health checks, access to early physiotherapy and mental health support, and improvements in food available on site and staff vaccination uptakes. But Boorman admits that progress is inconsistent and staff health is still a low priority for leadership and for NHS staff themselves.

"Good staff health isn't about token Zumba classes or lettuce leaves for the worried, but about helping people understand the impact poor health may have on themselves, their family and those around them - in the case of NHS workers, the vulnerable patients that need care," he points out.

Smith, who is back at work after seeking help from the NHS Practitioner Health Programme and undergoing therapy, says that finding a space in life for creativity also helped her.

Anxious to prevent a relapse, she has made herself a number of promises: "I will take all my annual leave, I will say 'no' more often to extra work tasks, I will value activities that make me happy. By making time for the things that recharge me, I am now more effective - a better colleague and a better doctor."

ANNA GORDON

Are we digitised to death?
Cary Cooper

The digital world has taken over all our lives. Sometimes that's for the better, but there are also unintended negative consequences.

Apps, social media, emails and the like have made communications much simpler and quicker - but, on the flipside, have made human contact at work less likely. Dramatic cuts to the public sector workforce in local government, central government, the health service, the police and many others, have, in many cases, doubled individual workloads.

Many of these bodies have turned to the digital world to deal with the public, and even one another - emailing people in the same office rather than talking to them. It's a dystopia foreseen way back in Albert Einstein's day when he wrote: "I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots."

Mobile phones now have such a wide variety of apps, many of which just distract us away from interacting with our colleagues - and that could, in the long run, be used as manipulative management tools. Look around the canteen at lunchtime - if people even have time to eat away from their desks - and you'll see people on their mobiles tweeting, Facebooking and texting, sitting opposite another who's doing the same. Is this really good for building a work community? Is this a culture that enhances our wellbeing and colleagueship?

The recent law passed in France, making it unlawful in both public and private sectors for managers to send emails outside of office hours, blazes the trail here. It can't realistically be enforced, but it sends a clear message to

> ❝ Einstein foresaw it: 'We will have a generation of idiots' ❞

employers about how they should use the digital world. Already, businesses such as VW block emails at night. And Liverpool council's initiative to prevent email communication between staff - albeit only on Wednesdays - was implemented back in 2002.

But the public sector needs more innovative solutions to delivering better public services, which means more face-to-face interaction. There is an old Chinese proverb about society more generally but applies to the workplace as well: "If you are planning for one year, plant rice. If you are planning for 10 years, plant trees. If you are planning for a hundred years, plant people."

Professor Sir Cary Cooper, CBE, is the 50th anniversary professor of organisational psychology and health at the Alliance Manchester Business School and president of the CIPD