

Stress Risk Assessment in Local Authorities: Problems and Potential Solutions

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QoWL Ltd is a university spin-out company and research organisation based within the Applied Psychology Unit at the University of Portsmouth.

QoWL (<http://www.qowl.co.uk/index.html>) carries out research and provides services to help organisations assess and benchmark their stress management performance and make positive changes to improve the quality of working life for employees.

Introduction

The main aim of this white paper is to highlight some of the key issues associated with the assessment and management of stress risks in local authorities.

Secondly, based on experience, I would like to offer some practical advice and guidance what to do to and what not to do to achieve good outcomes. This is not meant to be an exhaustive guide, and readers would be wise to consult the Health & Safety Executive's website on stress (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>) for important background information on stress as a risk to the health and well-being of employees. In particular, I recommend you take a look at the sections on the Management Standards, which explains HSE's rationale behind stress risk assessment and the framework they recommend you should use.

In the current economic environment, where local authorities are under increasing pressure to deliver high quality services, ever-more efficiently and at reduced cost, the stress both on local authorities themselves and on their employees is bound to increase. As a result, there is a real need to provide some simple guidance on this important topic.

I hope this white paper clarifies some of the key issues with regard to stress risk assessment and helps you think about out what you need to do and why. If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this white paper in more depth, please feel free to contact me directly by email or phone with any queries you have. My contact details can be found below in the footer.

Stress Risk: a Very Serious and Expensive Problem for Local Authorities

In this first section of the white paper, I would like to put stress in context as a risk factor for local authorities.

Stress as a risk to health, attendance, recruitment and retention

Stress is the number 1 work-related health hazard* in the local authority sector. As a result, stress is a hugely expensive problem (see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress/index.htm>), not only because of the associated sickness absence (frequency and length of absences are both costly problems), but also because of the recruitment and retention problems' stress causes.

[*]Just in case you are not familiar with the language of risk assessment, a 'hazard' is something that has the potential to cause harm to someone's health and well-being. In the stress research field, the term we normally use for such psychosocial hazards is 'stressors'. 'Risk' is essentially the likelihood of that harm occurring. Of course, with stress, where it is difficult if not impossible to eliminate the risk, our aim is to *minimise* the risk.]

Stress as a risk to employee engagement and performance

Secondly, and something which is often overlooked, is that stress also impacts on the positive aspects of work, such as enjoyment and engagement. If anything, this is more worrying, because these are the aspects that make people feel work is worthwhile, rewarding and motivating. So performance and productivity both suffer as a result of stress.

It clearly makes economic sense therefore to manage and minimise the risk of stress in local authorities, especially with the pressing need nowadays to make efficiency savings and cut costs in the sector.

Stress as a legal risk

Thirdly, local authorities are arguably a 'special case' where stress risk is concerned. They are more *at risk* than most other types of organisation of legal problems that are stress-related. There are a number of reasons for this: For example:

- Local authority employees do a huge variety of different jobs and some of those jobs are acknowledged to be the most stressful in the UK, such as social care work and teaching.
- This means there is a greater risk of stress-related illness, which can become prolonged and potentially disabling if stress problems are not identified and tackled at an early stage.
- Local authority trade unions have understandably become very stress-aware and have developed strong relationships with legal firms that specialise in such cases. It's no surprise then that most of the high profile legal cases involving stress have been in the local authority sector.
- As a result of the increased stress risk, local authorities have been much more likely to be inspected by HSE than other types of organisation, and are more likely to be on the receiving end of improvement and/or enforcement notices.

Why haven't local authorities effectively assessed and managed stress risk before now?

I want to emphasise firstly that, in my experience, the vast majority of HR and Health & Safety professionals in the sector are acutely aware they need to do something about stress, but the problem has really been about *what* to do, and *how* that will minimise the risks.

Most local authorities have done 'something on stress' at some point. For example, in your organisation you might have:

- Run some workshops on stress management for staff
- Held complementary health taster sessions such as massage or aromatherapy
- Introduced an Employee Assistance Programme or Counselling Service
- Carried out a stress survey or run a focus group

All of these interventions are good in their way, but they do not solve the risk assessment problem, nor do they address the causes of stress. Ironically, they can also lead to something that is very dangerous, which I call the 'tick box mentality'.

The 'tick box mentality' is so risky, because it relates to the feeling that 'we've done something on stress' (and therefore have 'ticked the box'). This leads to a form of complacency that can ultimately lead to negligence on the part of an employer.

For example, when people start getting sick with stress-related illness in part of the organisation, the employer pats itself on the back and says to itself: "We don't need to worry because we have done something on stress. We're covered". This of course increases the likelihood of employer inaction and a failure to address the problem, with serious consequences for the well-being of the individuals affected and for the employing organisation.

So historically, there has definitely been a realisation that stress is something 'we need to do something about'. But at the same time, there has sometimes been a lack of understanding of *stress as a risk*, and of what is needed therefore to *systematically* assess and manage that risk.

How can these problems be prevented?

To prevent this scenario, all that is required is to follow a logical and coherent stress risk assessment process.

What is a stress risk assessment?

I should start by clarifying what stress risk assessment is not. A stress risk assessment is not a survey, and neither is it a focus group. Nor is it workshop, or a stress awareness session, or any other specific stress management intervention for that matter.

However, a stress risk assessment may *involve* a survey to assess stress in the organisation, or a workshop to tackle a stress problem identified. The key point though is that a stress risk assessment is not one intervention. It is, like any risk assessment, a *process that involves a number of steps or stages*.

To give it a fuller definition, I would say that:

"A stress risk assessment is a process with a number of stages that has the ultimate aim of preventing and/or reducing stress at work so that the risk to the health and well-being of employees is minimised."

What is the process?

HSE outline a 5-step process that has a pre-stage, so really there are 6 stages in the process:

- Pre-stage - Preparation
 1. Identify the risk factors
 2. Who can be harmed and how
 3. Evaluate the risks
 4. Record your findings
 5. Monitor and review

HSE explain these stages pretty well on their website (see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>), although in practice there is sometimes confusion about what is required at each stage and why. That's inevitable: HSE has a huge audience, from tiny firms to huge conglomerates, so they have to keep it simple, and the guidance is sometimes too basic for larger organisations like local authorities.

Key stress risk assessment issues

To help, I would like to offer some practical advice and guidance around some key issues, based on my 12 years' experience as a consultant in this field. I've structured this advice around a number of key issues that you need to address as you work through the process. Some of these relate to external support that may help your organisation.

The key issues I'm going to cover are:

- Securing top management commitment
- Training for Steering Group members
- Sources of data and gathering the views of employees
- Use an appropriate survey
- The survey tool needs to ask the right questions
- Use an external, credible survey provider
- External benchmarking is important
- Internal benchmarking is also important
- Survey follow-up: it's not just about focus groups
- The need for local action on stress
- Managers, working with their staff teams, hold the key to good outcomes
- The importance of keeping good stress records
- Evaluate and review your stress risk assessment process

Securing top management commitment

Although this is strictly speaking not part of the standard risk assessment process, securing top management commitment is absolutely vital to the success of the process.

Without such commitment it is very difficult to secure the time and resources necessary to carry out the task, and even more difficult to subsequently make the changes necessary to achieve improvements. At the very least, you need to have a champion with sufficient clout in a very senior position to bring other managers on board and 'make it happen'.

I can tell you from experience that it can be *very difficult to get this commitment internally*, unless the initial impetus comes directly from the top e.g. from the Chief Executive. Sadly, senior managers often will not listen to their junior colleagues nor act on their advice, even where they are acknowledged specialists in their field such as Safety Officers, Occupational Health Advisers, or Human Resources Managers.

The best answer to this problem therefore is usually to have a credible, external expert come and present to the senior management team. Senior managers are much more likely to pay attention to such an approach. An external expert can usually speak credibly and authoritatively about organisational stress, what is involved in the risk assessment process and why. He/she can also explain the benefits or 'return on investment' from following the process. The presenter can also explain in vivid terms to senior managers about what can and does go wrong when stress issues are ignored. Such training for senior managers raises awareness and generates commitment to act.

Training for steering group members

Usually, a steering group or similar has been set up to oversee and co-ordinate the stress risk assessment process. The members of that group may have some basic knowledge and awareness of stress issues, but it's likely that levels of knowledge will be variable, and members will know about different aspects.

An important point to make is that we already know what the stress risk factors are. They are laid out in the Management Standards framework <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>.

So what is usually helpful at this stage is some training for the steering group. Usually half a day (possibly up to a day if members need more input) is sufficient to raise awareness and understanding of the Standards, what they mean and how they can be used as the framework for the stress risk assessment process. Such training, which can be done in half a day to a day, helps to achieve a *consistent level of understanding* amongst steering group members, who are naturally coming from different points and agendas. The training can also be valuable in facilitating communication and answering questions that steering group members have about the stress risk assessment process, the tools used and so on.

I have helped many steering groups with this kind of training, so if you think it might help or would like to discuss this, please contact me directly.

Sources of data and gathering the views of employees

Most organisations potentially have several relevant sources of 'hard' stress-related data that can be helpful e.g. absence data, staff turnover data, accident data, exit interview data. All can be helpful in identifying problem or 'hot-spot' areas in the organisation.

However, historically, local authorities have not always had reliable methods for gathering and evaluating such data, so you need to be very careful if you use such sources.

Secondly, such data are only helpful up to a point. They cannot be a substitute for having some systematic means of *gathering the views of employees*. For that you need to use a different approach such as a survey. It's important to emphasise that without some reliable method of gathering employees' views, what you're doing could not justifiably be called a suitable and sufficient 'stress risk assessment'.

Use an appropriate survey

In practical terms, you therefore need to carry out some form of survey that is *inclusive* so that *all employees* have the opportunity to take part. I would strongly recommend that you do not use focus groups for stress risk assessment, at least at this stage, because they can never be inclusive enough. Unless of course you run huge numbers of focus groups, which is complete madness because of the cost.

The survey tool needs to ask the right questions

An important question is what kind of a survey? Well, to quote HSE, your survey method or tool needs to gather data on '*all aspects of the work organisation or environment that are known to be risk factors for work-related stress*'.

That almost certainly means that a general staff survey would not and could not constitute a suitable and sufficient stress risk assessment, because general staff surveys have a different remit (see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/equivalence.htm>). General surveys are used to gather attitudes and opinions and are usually not specific enough about stress or well-being. This is a really important point. Most surveys are not appropriate because they don't ask the right questions!

So what you need is a survey tool/approach that does include the right questions. Fortunately, HSE, with their Work-Related Stress Indicator Tool, has produced a set of 35 questions that you can safely guarantee covers all aspects of stress at work, because that is what it was designed to do.

This is why we include the full HSE scale in our survey tool (see http://www.qowl.co.uk/qowl_survey_overview.html) and in all of our survey work at QoWL. My advice would therefore be to make

sure you use those questions, or at least make sure they are included in any survey you are carrying out, if you want to use it for stress risk assessment purposes.

Some organisations go down the route of adding their own stress questions. But beware; if you try to make up your own questions, you can face all sorts of methodological problems, such as whether your questions are reliable or valid. You are far better to use a survey tool and questions that have already been tested. Recently, my academic colleagues at the University of Portsmouth were involved in a review of the HSE Stress Tool, so we know it is a good tool for assessing work-related stress (the link to this research is <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all?content=10.1080/02678370802166599>)

Use an external, credible survey provider

Who should carry out the analysis? It is possible to do it all yourself using HSE's stress tool, and a number of organisations have done this. But there are some good reasons not to, for example:

- Employees can be very cynical and suspicious about internally conducted stress surveys, which can influence response rates and the way people answer the questions (often negatively).
- Managers, employees and their representatives are usually much more comfortable if the analysis is carried out by independent experts. Independent analysis is also more likely to be trusted and acted upon.
- Internal analysis, especially for people unaccustomed to this task, is very time-consuming, taking people away from their regular jobs. It is therefore usually more cost-effective to use external consultants that know what they are doing to do the survey and analysis.
- Internal analysis generally does not permit external benchmarking. For example, one of the major problems with doing it internally is that you can only benchmark against the general working population benchmark provided by HSE, and not a sector-specific benchmark.

External benchmarking is important

This last point about external benchmarking is vitally important, in determining whether or not you have stress problems in the organisation, and the extent to which you need to make changes.

There have been some problems with scoring and benchmarking since the Management Standards were introduced in 2004. HSE have provided working population benchmarks and an analysis tool but sometimes this has not provided a realistic picture of where the organisation stands in terms of its stress management performance.

This is why at QoWL we use sector benchmarks wherever possible for stress and well-being factors, and also why we present the results in a different way, which enables a more valid analysis and comparison to be made.

Help with analysing stress data is recommended in order to avoid making incorrect interpretations, which could result in prioritising the wrong issues.

Internal benchmarking is also important

Of course, external benchmarking is one thing, internal benchmarking is quite another. A secondary goal of your stress risk assessment should be to establish how different parts of the organisation compare *with each other* on different stress factors and with the organisation's own benchmark.

[Please note, you can only calculate and use your own benchmarks once you have surveyed your employees. At QoWL, we use the organisation's own benchmark data to produce supplementary departmental reports that compare the department's stress management performance to other departments and to the organisation as a whole. This is very different to external benchmarking, where you are comparing the performance of the organisation against that of similar organisations in the sector or the working population as a whole.]

For example, in our recent research within the Higher Education sector, we found very significant differences between departments, faculties, and occupational roles, and having a clear picture of such differences helps enormously in deciding what you need to do.

Here is a quick summary of key points related to surveys and gathering the views of employees:

- It can be helpful to look at 'hard' data but do not rely solely on it and take care with interpretation. You must also gather the views of employees.

- Use a survey tool like ours that includes HSE's stress questions to make sure all aspects of stress are covered.
- It's usually best to use a credible, external provider for the analysis and benchmarking, because of cost-effectiveness, employee cynicism, independence, and benchmarking reasons.
- Make sure you look at both internal (staff groups) and external benchmarking (sector) comparisons

Survey follow-up: it's not just about focus groups

If you look through the HSE website, you would think that running focus groups is the most important action in following up a survey. Focus groups can definitely help here, because they involve staff in discussing the problems. But I think this emphasis on focus groups misses the point somewhat and I'd like to give you a different slant on what's really important at this stage.

The survey helps with finding out what the big problems are: the main organisational issues and perhaps also the main issues in different parts of the organisation. It's a big picture, *organisational* stage. But now you need to decide what to do with the results, and especially what you are going to do *locally* to make improvements.

The need for local action on stress

To me, the emphasis on focus groups can be a bit of a red herring. What's needed here is local involvement and ownership of problems, local solutions generated, locally implemented. That can be achieved in a number of different ways, not just by using focus groups, although they can definitely help.

Say for example you have compared departments as part of your stress analysis, which would be a sensible thing to do. Your consultants may have helpfully provided you with *departmental reports* so that local managers and staff can see at-a-glance what the key issues are for their dept, and how they compared to other departments and to the organisation as a whole.

Then the task becomes one of how best to take those departmental results, and involve managers and staff in generating action plans local solutions.

Managers, working with their staff teams, hold the key to good outcomes

Line managers are hugely important to achieving good outcomes. Such managers working with their staff teams can really make a difference. Local service managers in turn need to be supported by their managers (e.g. directors of service) and support departments (e.g. HR, training) and encouraged to take ownership of their results and responsibility for making improvements.

Focus groups (usually made up from staff at a similar grade) can help as a means by which results can be discussed, problems solved and solutions generated. But they are not the only way to achieve a good outcome locally and it is important not to overlook the importance of managers in implementing changes.

Line managers need to be involved, primarily because they will be the people who will *implement local action plans* (solutions). What we have found to work best is where *managers and their staff teams* have a clear 'focus' like a departmental report that shows a clear picture of where they stand relative to the organisation and its constituent parts.

To make real, sustainable, and practicable changes, requires that managers and staff work together to produce solutions. The danger I have found with focus groups is that managers can be too detached from the process.

I should say at this point that I believe very strongly in involving staff in problem solving and the action planning process. As a former NALGO Shop Steward back in the 1980s, I was involved at the blunt end in disputes with management in local authorities, so I'm acutely aware how important it is to involve and consult staff through the use of focus groups or similar structures. But too often, the importance of involving line managers is overlooked in the stress risk assessment process and that is a mistake. They need to be respected, on board, supported, listened to and encouraged. Without their goodwill and efforts, stress problems identified cannot be effectively tackled.

What often happens is that a survey is done, which is led by HR and organisation-focussed. Then focus groups are held, which are very much employee-focussed. But line managers, the people in the middle that make things happen, are somehow missed out. As a result, there can be a lot of talking but not a lot of local action.

What also helps generally is appropriate *training for all line managers*. Such training equips them with the awareness, knowledge and skills to work with and listen to their colleagues, in order to make changes that prevent and reduce stress and enhance well-being at work. In my experience, such training for managers is the single most important and cost-effective, organisation-wide intervention.

In the past few years, HSE have sponsored research into management behaviours or 'competencies' that both cause and prevent stress at work, and as a result a Stress (Line) Management Competency tool has been developed. Training for managers should include such competencies.

(see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm>)

Another key aspect of stress management training for managers relates to the Management Standards. If you read through the Standards you'll find a recurring theme. In each of the categories, part of the standard is that '*systems are place locally to respond to individual concerns*'.

Inevitably, managers have a key role both in the early identification of stress problems, and in developing appropriate responses and solutions to these individual concerns. Of course, some stress issues that individuals experience are outside the remit of managers. But even so, often there are practical steps a manager can take to minimise individual vulnerability, even where the underlying causes of stress are *not* work-related. Training can help managers understand and follow a simple *risk management process* they can follow to manage and minimise risk, when stress problems do occur.

A survey, because of issues of anonymity and confidentiality cannot and indeed should not identify individual stress problems or even small team issues. So, in order to effectively manage stress risks on an *ongoing* basis, managers need to be involved and develop/use appropriate skills and competencies. Hence, it's vitally important to realise that a survey can only ever be part of the process. It provides a picture or 'snapshot' of organisational health at a moment in time, which is undoubtedly valuable but has obvious limitations that need to be taken into account. The survey is not 'the answer'. In a stress risk assessment process, a combination of organisational assessments and local management action is what works best.

As you can see, there are a number of important issues that are related to line management and these all have implications in terms

of training. If you would like to discuss these issues, or how training for managers might help, please contact me directly.

The importance of keeping good stress records

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of keeping good records when it comes to assessing and managing work-related stress. I don't just mean in terms of the survey (usually of course there will be reports of some kind), but also:

- Action plans (e.g. organisation-wide, departmental) developed as a result of the survey.
- Evaluations of any interventions introduced.
- A record of stress problems identified locally.
- How such local issues were managed.
- Do bear in mind though that you need to be aware of, and follow, data protection guidelines, especially with regard to individual stress issues

As a consultant, I have personally been involved in the aftermath of situations where managers kept no records of how a stress case had been dealt with. I can assure you that Courts and Tribunals take a very dim view of managers who enter the witness box and can't remember, nor are able to provide any records of, how a work-related stress problem was dealt with. Such situations usually result in a negative and costly outcome for the employer.

There are some important considerations with regard to recording:

- First, there is the need to make sure everyone involved knows the *importance* of keeping appropriate records.
- Secondly, there is a need to make sure you have appropriate *tools* for record-keeping e.g. stress risk assessment forms, stress action planning forms.
- Thirdly, there is the need to make sure those who need to (e.g. line managers) record relevant information in a *consistent* and accurate way in accordance with data protection guidelines and the needs of the situation.
- This usually requires that all those who have a role in recording stress-related situations receive appropriate training.

Evaluate and review your stress risk assessment process

Evaluation, sadly, is often overlooked. It's convenient and surprisingly easy to 'forget' about evaluation. After a survey and immediate follow up, people quickly get caught up in day-to-day operations, or become 'too busy' etc. However, it really is a waste if you do not properly evaluate whether your stress management actions have yielded good outcomes, and produced a return on your considerable investment in terms of time and resources. And remember that if you do not evaluate and review, you have not completed the stress risk assessment process.

I have some basic tips on evaluation that may help:

- Firstly, make sure you do evaluate. Don't miss this vital step.
- Secondly, use a good survey tool that has good test-retest reliability. A reliable tool is one that can be successfully used again and again to measure the same things – in this case, measuring work-related stress and well-being factors. If you work with consultants, ask them about this. They should be able to provide you with evidence about the test-retest reliability of their tool. However, do not just rely on the survey for your evaluation. It's better used as part of the evaluation process, not the whole thing.
- Thirdly, think before the start of the process what would represent good outcomes for your organisation, as that will help you decide what and how to evaluate the process later on. So, for example, if a reduction in stress-related absence is an important outcome, you will need to make sure you have an effective means to measure stress-related absence, before and after. If you don't have an appropriate measurement tool currently, then either you have to find one, develop one, or measure something that's easier like overall sickness absence.
- Fourthly, it's better to look at a range of outcomes and take a more 'holistic' view when you evaluate. This is important because if you only look at one or two outcomes, you may get very misleading results. For example, one of your outcome measures may be disproportionately affected by something that has happened locally just before measurement such as a departmental restructuring. In such circumstances, a narrow view may result in an unfairly negative evaluation of the overall process.

- Finally, remember that you are evaluating the whole process, so don't forget that this involves both what you have done across the *whole organisation*, and what has been done *locally*. So for example, if you may have introduced stress training for all managers, an organisation-wide intervention, so you'll need to evaluate that training. But locally, within a department say, specific action plans may have been developed to address the specific stress problems identified there. Such local interventions will need to be evaluated too.

The last points I want to make are about review. It can sound from the above that stress risk assessment has a beginning, middle and an end. But that is not strictly true – it is really an ongoing process of *continuous improvement*, and this is especially true, with local action plans.

Evaluation should naturally lead to reviewing what has been done and what needs to be done next to make further improvements. What's worked and led to positive changes? What hasn't worked so well? What can be tweaked to make sure it works better to prevent stress and boost well-being at work?

I would like to emphasise again how important line managers are to this process. They need to be fully involved in the evaluation and review processes and to be empowered to make changes that make a difference.

How QoWL can help with work-related stress issues

There are a number of important ways we can help local authorities with the stress risk assessment process and with tackling work-related stress and well-being issues in general, for example:

- By providing practical advice and access to recognised experts in the field. Even if we can't help directly, we'll know someone who can, as we belong to a network of specialist providers in the stress and well-being area.
- By using our QoWL survey tool and specialist survey services to provide your organisation with analysis of stress (HSE factors), quality of working life factors and a wide range of workplace well-being outcomes.
- By providing specialist training and consultancy, such as:
 - Stress risk assessment training and consultancy (including appropriate stress risk assessment tools)
 - Stress policy development training and consultancy (including policy templates)
 - Strategic training on managing stress risks for senior managers
 - Training for steering groups who are tasked with co-ordinating stress/well-being policy and overseeing the stress risk assessment process
 - Stress/well-being management training for line managers (including stress risk management tools)
 - Stress management training for staff e.g. tools and techniques for managing your own stress
- By providing access to services that address the causes of stress such as:
 - Facilitation of focus groups and action planning
 - Conflict resolution
 - Crisis management

Please don't hesitate to contact me, Alan Bradshaw, directly for advice and/or for further information on any of the services above. I'll be happy to help. For further information on QoWL, please consult our website. Our contact details are listed in the footer below.

Alan Bradshaw, May 2009