Stress in the Workplace Survey

A survey of Aberdeen City Council UNISON Branch members was carried out on the factors that cause workplace stress, this report contains the results and outlines some measures for the future.

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Aberdeen City Branch - UNISON
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Executive Summary

Over the past two years, Aberdeen City Council has been going through a process of transformation, through the implementation of the Target Operating Model and the digitisation of services. These measures were designed to meet the growing financial constraints on local government funding and make the delivery of services provided to the citizens of Aberdeen more efficient.

To achieve the Administration's statutory requirement to produce a balanced budget, the Council administration set out the goal of reducing its budget by £125 million over five years through a programme of rationalisation of staffing, digitisation and automation of service delivery. That aim has been facilitated by the use of Voluntary Severance and Early Retirement [V.S.E.R] to reduce staff numbers.

What has become evident to the UNISON Branch is that while it supports the efforts of the Council administration to rationalise in its attempts to achieve a balanced budget and financial stability, there is a growing burden on staff who remain in the Council's employment to do more, and pick up the tasks of those who have left the Council.

The net effect of this has been an increasing level of stress on staff. This survey is an attempt by the local UNISON Branch to provide a quantitative analysis of the stress levels and provide some qualitative evidence of the impact on staff.

Quotes About Stress

"As others have grown more intelligent under stress, I grow heavy, as if I were an animal on a chain."
— **Lillian Hellman, An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir** "

"The mind can go either direction under stress—toward positive or toward negative: on or off. Think of it as a spectrum whose extremes are unconsciousness at the negative end and hyperconsciousness at the positive end. The way the mind will lean under stress is strongly influenced by training."
— **Frank Herbert, Dune**

"The biggest enemies of willpower: temptation, self-criticism, and stress. (...) these three skills —self-awareness, self-care, and remembering what matter most— are the foundation for self-control."
— **Kelly McGonigal, The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It**

"Stress is the trash of modern life-we all generate it but if you don't dispose of it properly, it will pile up and overtake your life."
— **Danzae Pace**

"Being under stress is like being stranded in a body of water. If you panic, it will cause you to flail around so that the water rushes into your lungs and creates further distress. Yet, by calmly collecting yourself and using controlled breathing you remain afloat with ease."
Alaric Hutchinson, Living Peace: Essential Teachings for Enriching Life

Contents

Definitions

Stress:

Stress has several definitions, the most commonly recognized are:

- *'Stress, is defined as the <u>'adverse reaction</u> people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.'* – **ACAS**
- *'Stress is the <u>feeling</u> of being under too much mental or emotional pressure.'* – **NHS**
- *'By **definition, stress** is any uncomfortable <u>emotional experience</u> accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological and behavioural changes.'* – **American Psychological Association**

The common theme is that stress is a reaction to external pressures. External pressures come from a variety of sources. The need to conform to the standards of society, the demands of home and family life to provide, and the pressure for work situations as we try to earn a living all add to the pressure that generate stress within us.

Life is a balancing act, where the pressures and external forces combine to generate pressure on the individual.

The H.S.E defines signs of stress on the individual manifesting as

- mood swings
- being withdrawn
- loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- increased emotional reactions – being more **tearful, sensitive or aggressive**
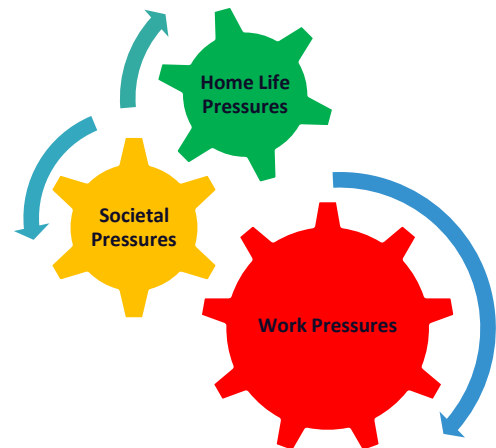
Stress affects people in different ways, what triggers stress for one person may not be the same for another. Stress may present itself as one or all the signs defined above or through examples of the following where an employee may:

- take more time off
- arrive for work later
- be more twitchy or nervous

HSE Stress Management in the workplace factors

The HSE has carried out extensive research on the factors that contribute to stress within the workplace, and have defined six factors that combine to generate stress at work.

- **Demand** – managing the workload, conflicting demands, unrealistic timescales and emotional demands
- **Control** – how much say a worker has in the way they do their work
- **Support** – the support and encouragement provided by employer, manager and colleagues
- **Relationships** – positive working environment, procedures for managing conflict, dealing with unacceptable behaviours
- **Role** – managers ensuring workers understand their roles, and that their roles do not conflict
- **Change –** how employers manage and communicate organisational change.

When a job role is being designed it is important to look at the design to incorporate the factors displayed above.

The World Health Organization has long recognized the notion of a 'healthy job', which is defined in part as follows:

> *'A healthy job is likely to be one where the pressures on employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and to the support they receive from people who matter to them.'[i]*

The working environment, how a job is constructed and the awareness of management and organizations to their workforce are key to managing stress.

How the survey was constructed.

The survey was built around the six factors the HSE identified, with simple questions where respondents can score on a scale of 1 to 10 about how their situation is reflected in the question.

Respondents were asked to indicate what Function within the Council's structure they worked within; an optional field was also included to allow members to indicate the cluster they were based in.

An additional field was included to allow members to make comments that they felt were appropriate. These responses will allow the survey to be used to generate some qualitative information in addition to the quantitative information that is generated from the scoring of the six questions.

Responses were collected for the most part online using a survey tool; some responses were collected at several stalls organized by Unison.

Survey Statistical Returns

Between the online survey and the forms collected on a series of stalls, the response level was 18%. 75% of all responses were complete, with 25% only partially completed.

For the most part, members responding answered questions 1 to 6 fully, with partial responses around the additional qualitative questions and the optional questions around the service they work within.

Coverage

The chart below shows the spread of responses by function.
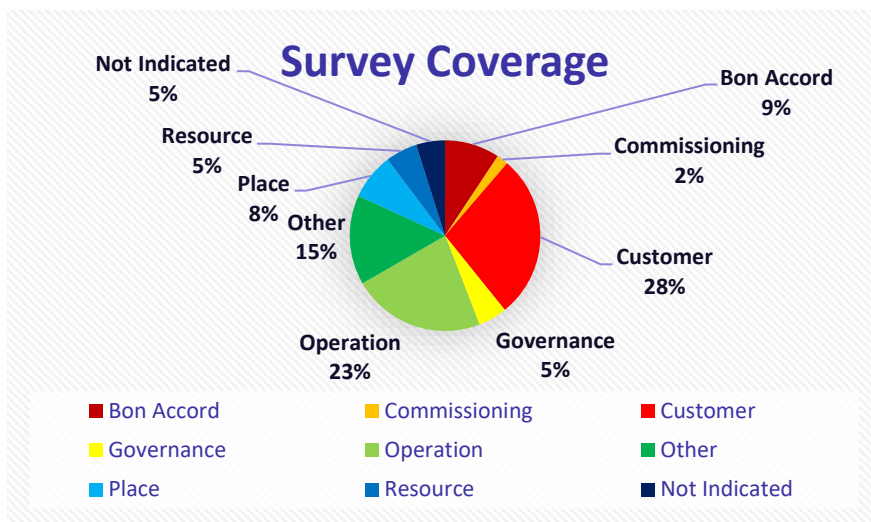
Function	Total
Bon Accord	19
Commissioning	4
Customer	57
Governance	10
Operation	46
Other	31
Place	16
Resource	11
Not Indicated	10

Members within the Customer and Operations functions provided the bulk of the responses. As the largest functions within the organization this is consistent with the make-up of the Council. Returns were collected online for the most part using the SurveyGizmo site, although several returns were collected from stalls held to advertise the survey.

There were high numbers of responses from the Place and Resources functions compared to the numbers of staff within those functions.

Responses to questions:

Question 1: Demand – managing the workload, conflicting demands, unrealistic timescales and emotional demands. To what extent do you feel you are under excessive demands at work?
[1 low to 10 high].
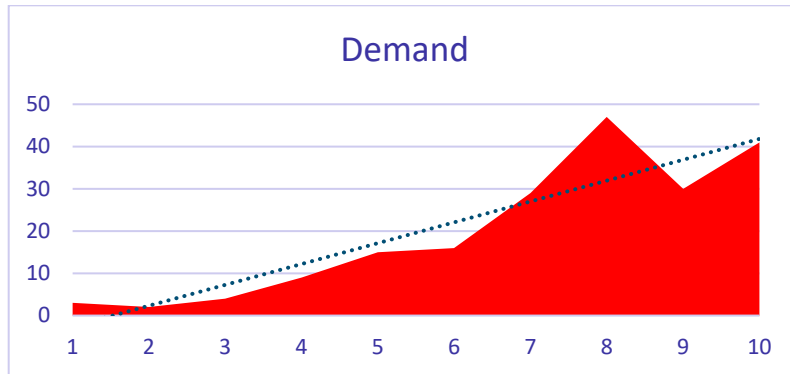
The chart shows that most members who responded feel under increasing levels of demand.

Increasing workloads due to staff reductions is increasing the pressures on staff, and as a result increasing levels of stress.

Additional comments made by staff, who scored the question 5 or higher.

- *'Despite high work stress; there is very little options provided to manage work in manner to suit individual needs.' [Function: Customer]*
- *'We are under a lot of stress at work as we get no travel time, so you might have one person in Milltimber and have to be at another service user in town at the same time. This goes on for my whole shift, we find ourselves rushing our work to get finished and on to the next one.' [Function: Bon Accord]*
- *'There is no regard given to the excessive workload. IT changes are sporadic with limited guidance/ support and it is changing all the time.' [Function: Place]*
- *'Digitisation has made our job harder, we are no longer able to contact other departments directly and we have had additional tasks added which take us away from other things. It is difficult to find any time to undertake work for training since the staff levels have reduced and as frontline staff people are often working alone.' {Function: Operations – Cluster: Libraries]*
- *'After VSER and the decimation of Digital and Technology, there is zero understanding within the dept of rocketing workloads, or even any structure within which would deal with such issues. Stress levels are at an all-time high.' [Functions: Customer – Cluster: Digital and Technology]*
- *'Money and resources are found for non-essential elements of the council to the detriment of the essential areas.' [Function: Place – Cluster: Building Services]*
- *'Staff retention is a problem and staff replacement is deliberately delayed to save money but this results in higher levels of stress for the remaining staff.' [Function: Place – Cluster: Building Services]*
- *'Working on the frontline of a school means you have to deal with unhappy parents, pupils and staff. The reduction in staff at Marischal College and elsewhere has had a significant effect not only on our workload but on what we have to put up with every day. Waiting for Accord cards, IT helpdesk, etc., which is not the fault of the staff left in these departments. Our 2 schools amalgamated last year and my workload has more than doubled but I still only have the same number of working hours. As I can see no light at the end of the tunnel I am currently working my notice period.'[Function: Operations]*
- *'Aberdeen city council and the health and social care partnership continue to increase worker caseload and fail to supply adequate technology to facilitate this with only a few very dated laptops limiting flexible working options.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: AHCSP]*
- *'There is also a huge increasing focus on meeting 'targets' rather than supporting people. This leads to poorer worker performance due to increased stress and pressure from areas often not actually even linked to the clients themselves but the doing your own admin tasks, the stats recording, the poor IT systems and other non-client tasks that were previously dealt with by other departments.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: AHCSP]*
- *'Company do not realise that we have a life , family and commitments that are important' [Function : Bon Accord Cluster – Care at Home]*

Demand scoring by Function
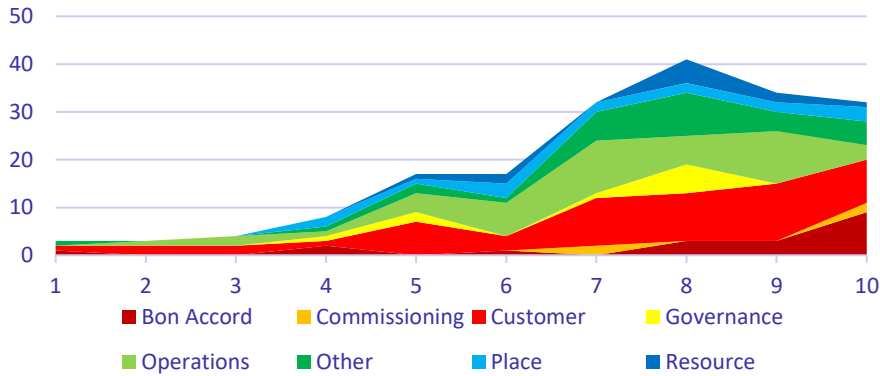
Analysis:

The results show that members, over the last period, are feeling the effects of increasing demands on their roles as a result of the changes the Council has brought in over the last two years.

The graph shows that very few members feel that they are not under excessive demands. 16.18% of respondents scored the question with a 5 or less, leaving 73.82% scoring above 5. 37.73% scored 7 or higher.

The table below displays the responses for the membership groups:

To what extent do you feel you are under excessive demands at work? [1 low to 10 high].

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Totals
1	1		1			1			3
2			2		1				3
3			2		2				4
4	2		1	1	1	1	2		8
5			7	2	4	2	1	1	17
6	1		3		7	1	3	2	17
7		2	10	1	11	6	2		32
8	3		10	6	6	9	2	5	41
9	3		12		11	4	2	2	34
10	9	2	9		3	5	3	1	32
Totals	19	4	57	10	46	29	15	11	

From the spread of responses across the core groups, excessive work demand is an issue across the Council as reflected by the spread of the membership.

The release of staff for VSER was made under delegated Authority Business Cases. No job evaluation or proper matching to assess the demands on the remaining staff who were being allocated additional tasks was carried out. Training of staff to pick up the additional tasks was not always possible, due to the speed at which staff left under VSER.

Where workload has been distributed across the remaining staff after VSER reductions, from the process adopted by the Council, it is unclear as to what job design considerations were made in distributing the workload. The net effect is increasing numbers of staff feeling the effects of being asked to carry more and more work.

Anecdotal Evidence:

Increased Workload with no adjustments: A number of respondents commented that they had experienced increased workload as a result of having to pick up the workload of staff who had left under VSER, without there being any guidance or instruction as to how this increase could be managed.

One member, from within Bon Accord Care, cited no allowance being made for travel time between tasks. Having to travel between house calls without any allowance for the travel time.

Another member working within the school's system cited the increases in workload as a result of reductions in staff centrally, and the need to handle customers who have not had a good experience as a result of delays due to shortages in other areas. Delays within other services that are impacting on the schools' service, causing complaints that staff are having to manage. There were also comments about schools merging and the increased workload being handled by fewer staff.

Digitization, IT Systems & Technology: One respondent, from the Library service, suggested that digitization had made their job more difficult as it changed the way they communicated with other departments. Additionally, changes to work practices as a result of digitization had impacted on their role.

A few members cited changes to IT systems being rushed through, without adequate communications and training. Also, the age of equipment and the lack of suitable equipment hampering staff's ability to do their jobs effectively.

Target Driven Management: A member in the Health Care partnership mentioned that the service is being driven by targets, and not by an ethos of supporting people, which is increasing the stress levels for staff.

A poignant comment from a member of the Care at Home staff within Bon Accord Care mentioned that the organisation does not consider the work life balance of its staff.

Use of resources and priorities: One member commented on the use of resources for non-essential services and vanity projects, as opposed to the funding of essential work.

Staff Recruitment and Retention: This was also cited as an issue, delaying staff replacements and little effort being made to retain staff was impacting the remaining staff in their ability to cope with the demand on services.

Question 2: Control – how much say a worker has in the way they do their work.
How much control do you have over your work? [1 no control, 10 total control].
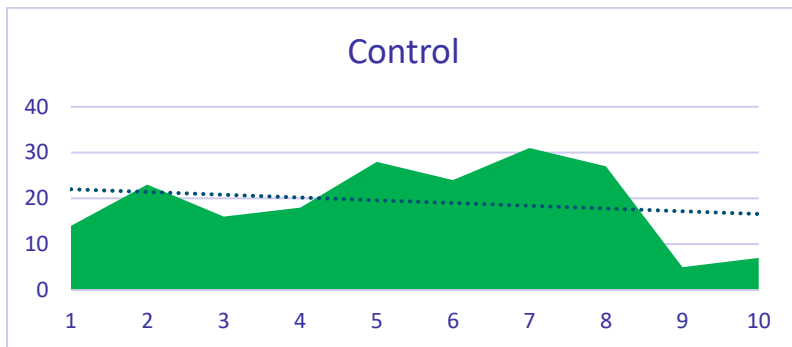
Control

The chart indicates that most members feel they have little control over the way they do their work.

There is an indication that a group feel they have a degree of control, but very few feel they have high levels of control over their workloads.

[11 respondents chose not to score this question]

Comments by responders who indicated they have little control over their workload, or the way they work.

- *'To manage my high work load I frequently work late into the evenings and on weekends. ' [Function: Operations]*
- *'The work stress is top up with more managerial bureaucracy to focus on service delivery where decisions are made at discretion of manager with no one to question and staff given little autonomy to work'. [Function: Customer]*
- *'Service managers keep changing procedures and policies. Pay lip service to how much stress department is actually under, pretending to listen but obviously not.' [Function: Operations – Cluster: Care Management]*
- *'I am sick and tired of being told by other managers how to do my job, yet my own manager has no issue with my performance. Time and time again my role is swamped with picking up the mess left by other teams, since the restructuring this has only got worse' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Digital and Technology]*
- *'Budget cut in Education badly managed has left me in a position where my job will not exist. No idea if relocating or redundant. Left in limbo'. [Function: Operations]*
- *'There have been times I've been set priorities by my line manager only for another manager to dump their priorities on me at the same time and confusion then reigns.' [Function: Customer= Cluster: Digital and Technology]*
- *'Being kept in the dark the not knowing what is happening. All this change was meant to be done and up in running from October 2019. Been aware that mangers have had some meetings not sharing any info I have asked. Find this very unsettling as I have been through the cutbacks before back in 2009' [Function: Operations – Cluster: Integrated Children's Services]*
- *'The whole reorganisation has been incredibly badly organised, arse about face, and has not included proper risk assessments (particularly for stress), staff resource planning, and no accounting for legislative requirements. Decisions have been made by out of touch and unqualified managers. Information from consultants associated with private companies looking to put in bids on spun out services has been used with barely any question, as a basis for decision making.' Function: Place]*
- *'The new six figure layer of management that has been introduced is not only wasteful but counterproductive.' [Function: Place}*
- *'Gallery and Museums are going through a huge level of additional demand and change. Museum Assistant Supervisors have experienced extreme pressures with very little support, from the top or the organisation down.' [Function Place]*

Control by Function
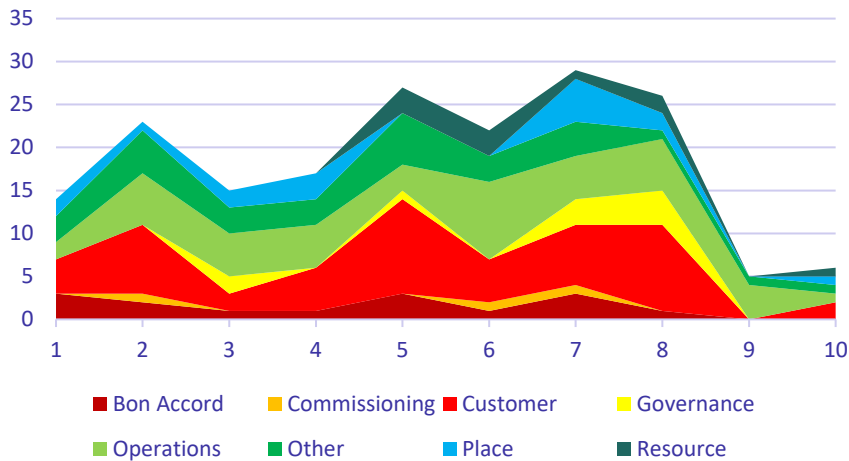
Analysis

52% of respondents score the question 5 or less, suggesting that they felt that they had less control than they would prefer.

Only 6% scored the question 9 or above indicating a high level of control on their role.

Respondents from within Bon Accord Care did not score the question above 8, indicating that there were few who felt they had total control over their workload. The same was true of staff within Governance and Commissioning.

How much control do you have over your work? [1 no control, 10 total control].

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Total
1	3	0	4	0	2	3	2	0	14
2	2	1	8	0	6	5	1	0	23
3	1	0	2	2	5	3	2	0	15
4	1	0	5	0	5	3	3	0	17
5	3	0	11	1	3	6	0	3	27
6	1	1	5	0	9	3	0	3	22
7	3	1	7	3	5	4	5	1	29
8	1	0	10	4	6	1	2	2	26
9	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	5
10	0	0	2	0	1	1	1	1	6
Total	15	3	54	10	46	30	16	10	

It is clear from the scores that very few staff feel they have total or near total control of how they can handle their workload. Managers who are increasingly under pressure tend to micro-manage staff.

An article in the HR Gazette, '*The Effects of Micromanagement on Employees' Mental Health'* (Wollfe, 2019), suggests that micromanaging staff wastes time, peering over staff's shoulders will distract staff and disengage them. We have all seen examples of micro-management; we know the added stress it brings and the friction it can cause in the relationship between worker and manager. Staff are left feeling inadequate, untrusted and devalued, all elements that will add to job stress.

Wollfe, S. (2019, June 19). *The Effects of Micromanagement on Employees' Mental Health*. Retrieved from HR Gazette: https://hr-gazette.com/micromanagement-mental-health/

Anecdotal Evidence:

Managing Workload: One member, in Operations, indicated that they worked evening and weekends on a frequent basis to keep up to date. Several staff visit the stall which were held in Marischal indicated that they worked in the evening and weekends to keep up with their workload.

Bureaucracy & Management Practices: A member within the Customer function indicated that levels of management bureaucracy have increased and have impacted the levels of control staff have on their roles. This is further intensified by suggestions by a member within Operations of constant changes in processes and procedures by service managers.

Blurred lines of responsibility: Members within Digital and Technology within the Customer function mention being given conflicting priorities by managers as hampering their job roles. Members are citing having priorities set by their line manager only to have them changed or replaced by other managers.

Communications: One respondent indicated that the lack of communication, '*being kept in the dark*', was a cause of stress. The great dangers when there is little communications from management is that staff will fill the gaps with rumour and speculation which adds to the stress and anxiety levels.

Combining responses for Demand and Control

Levels of Demand / Levels of Control
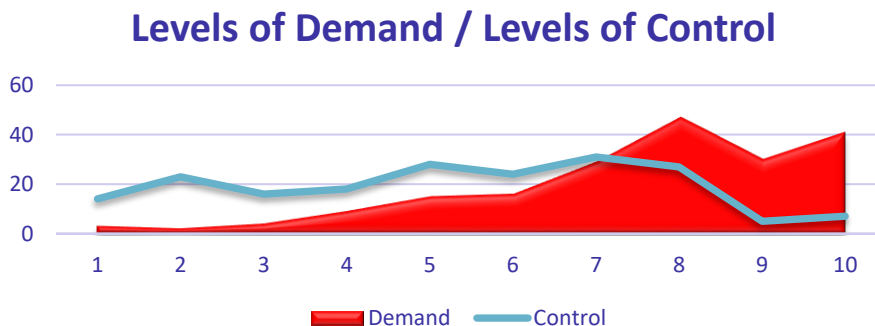
When the responses for demand and control are combined, it becomes clear that the higher demand staff feel they are under, the less control they feel they have.

The results indicate that the more demand staff feel they are under the less control they feel they have. Clearly in areas where there is a high volume of activity such as front-line services, the combination of demand and loss of control will be contributing to the levels of stress being felt by staff.

When the feeling of not being sufficiently in control of your workload is compounded with the blurring of managerial responsibilities and conflicting demands being made by multiple managers, as indicated by some of the responses, the levels of stress members encounter increases.

One reaction from management when faced with reducing resources to satisfy high demands for services, is to try to generalize staff job roles. In some instances the anecdotal evidence collected through talking to members at stalls indicates that this seems to be the case, but without proper recourse to job design and evaluation principles this can be a source of stress for staff, who are asked to handle tasks they are not trained for.

Question 3: Support – the support and encouragement provided by employer, manager and colleagues. How supported by the employer do you feel at work? [1 no support, 10 fully supported]
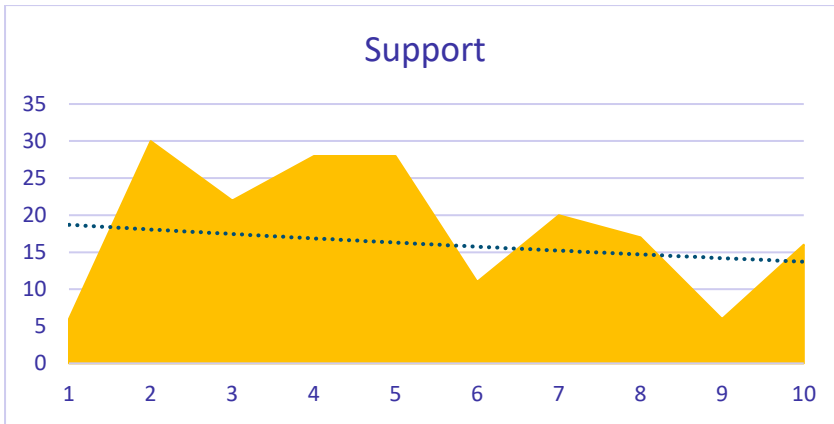
Support

The chart shows that members feel that they have low levels of support from the employer to do their jobs.

Comments by responders who scored the question 5 or less

- *'I believe that levels of stress are high in the organisation because managers have a workload that is too high and therefore, they do not have sufficient time to support staff. The lack of support provided means that problems aren't solved quickly, more problems are created and therefore stress levels escalated. ' [Function: Operations]*
  'its the lack of information and no one knows where to find it on line and everyone is too occupied to help you 3 full time members of staff are leaving our team on the 18 th and no one telling us how that's going to turn out STRESS' [Function: Operations- Cluster Education]
- *'In general workload is a constant on of what is urgent rather than planned which increases stress trying to cover a workload which is not capable of being covered.' [Function: Resource]*
- *'I am increasingly concerned by the anecdotal evidence of the high number of colleagues who are on medication to deal with stress. While I recognizing that ACC is concerned about stress, they are more focused on alleviating the symptoms than addressing the root causes. [Function: Commissioning]*
- *'We are expected to cover another person's role for up to 2 weeks at a time. It's very stressful.' [Function: Operations]*
- *'Despite high work stress; there is very little options provided to manage work in manner to suit individual needs. The work stress is top up with more managerial bureaucracy to focus on service delivery where decisions are made at discretion of manager with no one to question and staff given little autonomy to work.' [Function: Customer]*
- *'The questions on management understanding. I think they do understand the impact and pressures. However, if you were in their shoes you would see very little disruption to services and see it as a success.' [Function Customer – Cluster: Customer Operations]*
- *'I'm sick and tired at the treatment handed out by a manager who isn't even my line manager, the constant belittling is causing unnecessary stress and anxiety. Especially when they try to attempt to decide what my work priorities are, completely undermining my own line manager. Any time I raise it, it's just dismissed.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Digital and Technology]*

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Totals
1	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	6
2	4	2	8	1	6	7	2	0	30
3	2	0	1	2	7	6	2	1	21
4	3	0	9	3	7	1	3	1	27
5	2	0	9	1	7	3	2	4	28
6	0	1	5	0	1	1	1	1	10
7	1	0	8	3	4	2	1	0	19
8	1	0	2	0	6	3	3	1	16
9	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	1	6
10	2	0	5	0	5	2	1	0	15
Total	18	3	50	10	44	29	15	9	

The responses indicate that members do not feel supported by the employer. 61% of responses scored the question 6 or less, with 42% scoring 4 or less. The graph above showing the spread of responses across the functions indicates that this feeling of lack of support is not restricted to anyone function.
The lack of support tied to high demand levels will leave staff with a feeling of isolation. When this is added to the feelings of lack of adequate control over workload, the net effect will be to increase levels of stress on staff.

Anecdotal Evidence

Pressure on Managers: From the comments from staff within the Operations function, there is a recognition that their managers are under excessive pressure of work, which makes providing support for staff difficult. The knock-on effect is that staff are unable to get the guidance they require to resolve issues, so adding to stress levels.

This, although not reflected directly in survey responses, is something that some members who attended the stalls indicated.

Lack of Resources: Respondents in several functions recognize that the lack of support is tied to the lack of resources, following decisions to release staff through VSER. One comment notes that although there is recognition that the organization is aware of this issue, it is only looking at the symptom and not addressing the root cause.

No time to be supportive: One respondent in the education sector cites that the lack of staff and the excessive demands means that there is no time for staff to support each other.

Lack of management support: A respondent in Customer, operations made the comment that they feel managers do understand the impact but have to deliver results and have no time or incentive to be supportive.

Question 4: Relationships – positive working environment, procedures for managing conflict, dealing with unacceptable behaviours. Do you feel the working environment is a supportive place? [1 not supportive, 10 very supportive].
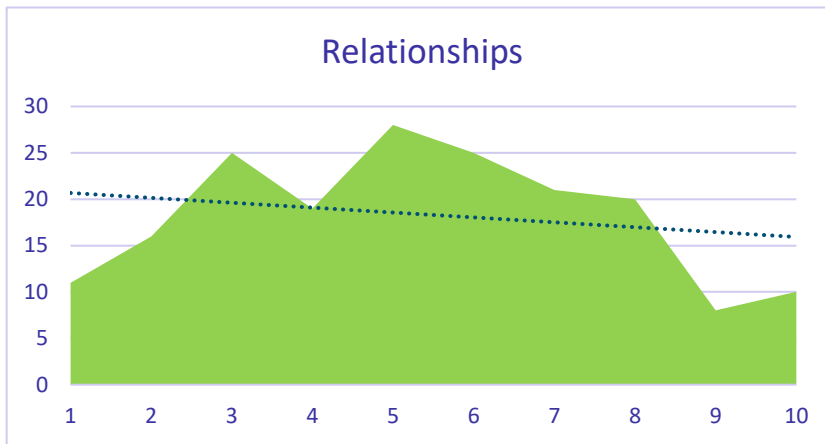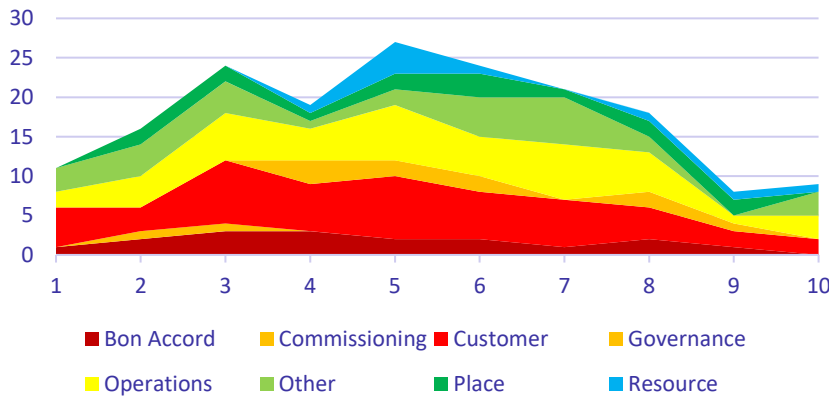
Relationships

Most responses scored the question 5 or less. This indicates that members are concerned about relationships in the workplace, seeing them as less than supportive.

- *'My immediate colleagues are supportive the team I am in work well together. There are tensions within the wider service as communication is poor. [Function: Customer]*
- *'The attitude toward change is also negative and this does not help.' [Function: Customer]*
- *'Service supervisor & management are too friendly with each other, no support at all we get told to do it and get on with it , left in building from 13.30 till 18.00 and expected to deal with things that arise, and cover 9 tea calls within that 2 hours. Think Bon Accord needs to get rid of some management and employ more support staff at a cheaper rate.' [Function: Bon Accord]*
- *'It's clear there is a total disconnect between the management team as they are only interested in getting one over the other and none of them seem to be on the same page. The last restructuring seemed to be designed for one manager who now does whatever they want regardless of the impact on the floor. It's a disgrace and would never be allowed in the private sector.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Digital and Technology]*
- *'Management like to say that they are supportive, and like to send emails about support things, but if you raise something you need you are told "no". They "talk the talk" but don't "walk the walk". '[Function: Customer – Cluster: Revs and Bens]*
- *'Very poor work environment, lack of cohesive teamwork. Lack of leadership. Communication is appalling. There is more than a hint of favouritism, staff being overlooked in favour of 'lapdog' employees.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Digital and Technology]*
- *'Relationships between staff are a cause of stress. A small group of permanent long-term staff who are set in their ways dominate the culture and exclude newer staff.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Education].*
- *Management is great in terms of driving forward new initiatives and supporting me in my role but there is a culture of fear in terms of job security and not wanting to rock the boat. My fixed term contract has been renewed every six months for the past three years but I worry that if I raise issues, it won't be renewed. I am taking a course part time to gain more job security. I worry about my maternity rights and ability to get a mortgage.*
- *The absolute apathy of some workers "We've always done it this way.." is as bad as managers with no clue. What is the issue around new tech how about learning to evolve instead of going out your way to remain with how things were done in the 1970's.'[Function: Operations]*

Do you feel the working environment is a supportive place? [1 not supportive, 10 very supportive].

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Total
1	1		5		2	3			11
2	2	1	3		4	4	2		16
3	3	1	8		6	4	2		24
4	3		6	3	4	1	1	1	19
5	2		8	2	7	2	2	4	27
6	2		6	2	5	5	3	1	24
7	1		6		7	6	1		21
8	2		4	2	5	2	2	1	18
9	1		2	1	1		2	1	8
10			2		3	3		1	9
Grand Total	19	4	57	10	46	31	16	11	

Responses to Is it a Supportive place to work -   by Function

60% or respondents scored the question 6 or below, indicating that relationships were not the best.

Just below 20% scored the question 8 or above. Again, the scoring was reflected across most functions.

Toxic workplaces have been a concern of trades unions for some time. Academics researching in this field, have characterized **Toxic Workplaces**, as being places where significant drama, infighting and personal battles are prevalent [1]. The author identified the behaviour of toxic employees as using *'unethical, mean-spirited and sometimes illegal means to manipulate and annoy those around them; and whose motives are to maintain or increase power, money or special status or divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds'.*

Other academics have defined a toxic workplace as those where negativity impacts productivity.

Where job insecurity exists, as a result of staff not knowing where the cuts will impact next, albeit real or imagined insecurity, with the next round of savings predicted as being in the region of 20% in terms of staff, examples of bad behaviours exists within the workforce. The branch has seen several examples of the tensions caused between members due to the current uncertainty generated by financial constraints.

Toxic workplaces where staff are not supportive of each other will bring a different level of stress to the picture. Where people feel that they are fighting for their jobs this adds to the tensions through job insecurity.

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[1] Durré L Surviving the Toxic Workplace: Protect Yourself Against Coworkers, Bosses, and Work Environments That Poison Your Day (2010)

Anecdotal Evidence

Communications: A member in the Customer Function commented that relationships within their immediate team were good, but the lack of communications on what is happening has a negative effect on the relationships within the wider service. This is a reaction to the way communications are handled by the service management team.

Poor communication is also cited within the Customer Function, specifically in the Digital and Technology function, where members are suggesting a disconnect between management and staff.

Management Styles: Within several functions' respondents have referred to the behavior of management teams.

One respondent, within Customer and Revs & Bens mentions management '*talking the talk but not walking the walk',* by sending supportive emails but not following through.

In the digital and technology cluster a respondent cites the level of favouritism as impacting on staff relationships.

Resistance to Change: Several respondents refer to resistance to change in different forms.

A member who works within the Customer function makes the direct statement that attitudes toward change are poor and unhelpful. From within Operations is mention of the 'apathy' of staff towards change, by clinging to the way they have always worked.

Being wedded to past working practices is also mentioned by a member within Customer and the Education cluster, but this is tied to the notion of long-standing permanent staff dominating the culture and excluding newer staff with other ideas from discussions.

Cross Referencing Support/Relationships
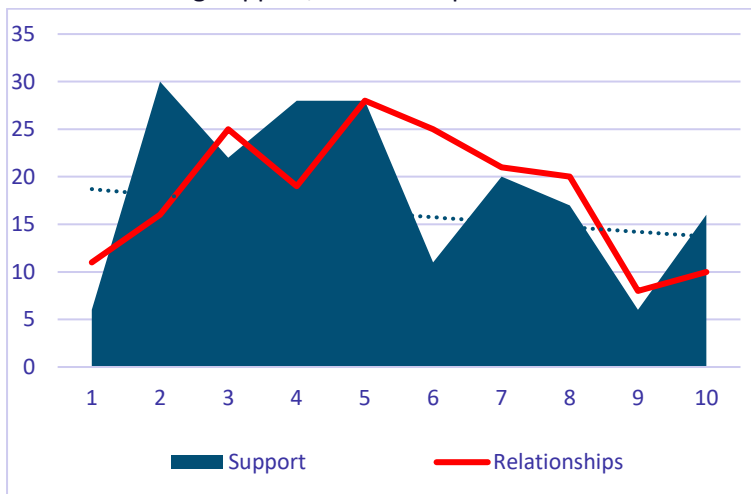
Cross referencing the responses for Support and Relationships, shows some correlation, but when trend lines are added to the graph a much tighter match is evident.

This is to be expected as the level of support a member of staff feels from colleagues within the organization, will be partly a function of the relationships they enjoy.

Question 5: Role – managers ensuring workers understand their roles, and that their roles do not conflict. To what extent do you think your manager understand your role? [1 none, 10 totally]
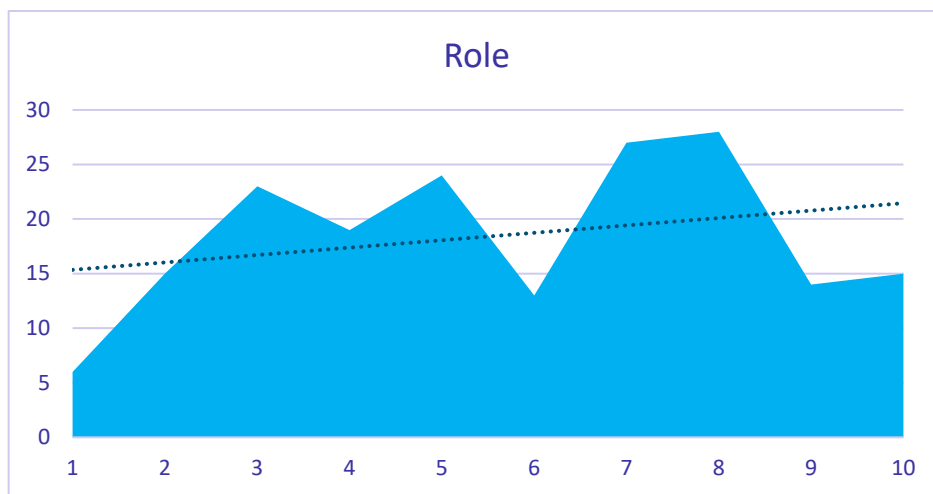
The graph indicates that respondents feel their managers do to some extent understand the role staff play.

From the additional comments staff suggest their managers are also under pressure to deliver which impacts the support they can give.

- *There is also a huge increasing focus on meeting 'targets' rather than supporting people. This leads to poorer worker performance due to increased stress and pressure from areas often not actually even linked to the clients themselves but the doing your own admin tasks, the stats recording, the poor IT systems and other non-client tasks that were previously dealt with by other departments.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: AHCSP]*
- *'I've recently left employment with ACC as I felt that the atmosphere within the team, demands on workers, conflicting instruction and lack of support and respect for our team was unacceptable.' [Function; Operations – Cluster: Social Work]*
- *.'The mantra of 'business as usual' is a total lie. Some managers just expect us to chop and change what we do sometimes on a whim' [Function: Place]*
- *'I do not think that managers fully appreciate the affect that changing roles have on other staff i.e. my line manager changed a year ago, effectively putting two roles together. The not on effect is I feel generally unsupported and left to get on with things. Immediate colleagues/my reports are supportive but I generally feel totally adrift.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Early Intervention]*
- *'I am very stressed, not about my current job but my future job role. I have had an interview regarding they were going to replace my job role with a promoted post. However it feels like the post instead of being pushed out to the people doing my job it has been pushed out to the whole group through all the city. Which means there are potentially more applicants than posts. What happens to my job role if I am unsuccessful?!?!?' [Function: Operation – Cluster: Education]*
- *'Management is great in terms of driving forward new initiatives and supporting me in my role but there is a culture of fear in terms of job security and not wanting to rock the boat. My fixed term contract has been renewed every six months for the past three years, but I worry that if I raise issues, it won't be renewed.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Education]*
- *'stress at work has now resulted in both mental and physical health problems which causes more stress performance and budgets have taken priority over quality of service for staff and service users' Function Bon Accord]*
- *'I think there is a lot of individual stress related to wider work issues, such as pay not keeping up with the rising cost of living and people struggling to make ends meet from month to month. Flexible working and open plan offices can also cause stress to some people as there is the expectation that to get a desk you need to be in as early as possible. 'Function: Place – Cluster Transport Strategy and Programmes]*
- *'We are under a lot of stress at work as we get no travel time, so you might have one person in milltimber and have to be at another service user in town at the same time. This goes on for my whole shifts, we find ourselves rushing our work to get finished and on to the next one.' [Function Bon Accord – Cluster Support Worker]*

To what extent do you think your manager understand your role? [1 none, 10 totally]

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Total
1	1	1	1			3			6
2	1	1	3	2	3	3	1	1	15
3	4	1	4	1	4	6	2		22
4	2		8		5	2	1		18
5	4		5	2	7	3	1	1	23
6	1	1	3		2	2	1	2	12
7	1		9		5	4	4	4	27
8	1		7	4	8	3	2	2	27
9			5		5	2	1		13
10	1		4		5	2	2	1	15
Grand Total	19	4	57	10	46	31	16	11	194

Aggregated Responses on Role
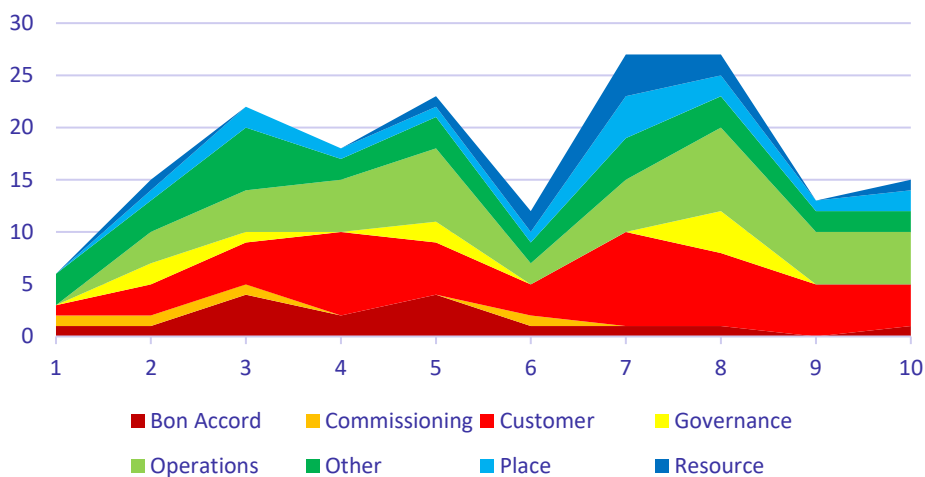
The construction of a job role is something that needs careful consideration and the application of best practice principles.

Within ACC Job Evaluation techniques are used to ensure that the job is constructed in the correct way, and that the correct pay for the job is correct.

Good job design should consider:

- Allow for employee input. Employees should have the option to vary activities according to personal needs, work habits, and the circumstances in the workplace.
- Give an employee a sense of accomplishment.
- Include training so the employee knows what tasks to do and how to do them properly.
- Provide a good work/rest schedule.
- Allow for an adjustment period for physically demanding jobs.
- Provide feedback to the employees about their performance.
- Minimize energy expenditure and physical requirements.
- Balance static and dynamic work.
- Be an ongoing process.

What has happened within ACC with VSER, is that job roles have been lost. When an employee is granted VSER, their role is removed from the establishment, unless a '*bumped redundancy*' is agreed where another post is sacrificed for the post in question. Although job roles have been lost, workload has not gone and tasks are redistributed to remaining staff, without the proper recourse to job evaluation or job redesign, resulting in roles being changed and staff being subjected to excessive demands and stress.

Anecdotal Evidence:

Focus on Targets and Not Quality of Service: One respondent within the Customer function and the AHSCP indicated that there is an increased focus on target hitting. Within this field of activity, the driving force is providing support services for clients and not merely hitting totals and metrics. This will cause staff stress as they feel they are not really delivering quality service through their role.

A member within Bon Accord expressed the opinion that performance targets and budgets had replaced the need to deliver a quality services impacting staff job satisfaction.

Effect of changing the nature of job roles: members have indicated through their comments that the constant changes which their job roles were being subjected to, has impacted their stress levels.

One respondent from the Customer function and Early Intervention cluster expressed the opinion that they felt that their managers were unaware of the stress that constantly changing the nature of their job roles was having. This left the member feeling unsupported and feeling '*totally adrift*'.

Another response showed that a member had recently left their job role as they were subject to changing instructions and increasing demands. They also indicated that a lack of respect for their team's role was impacting morale.

Job role security: The impact of the constant requirement to make financial savings is having an impact on staff. One member within Education expressed they were stressed due to the feeling of insecurity associated with their role, because of changes to the job role which effectively combined their role with another forcing a competitive selection process.

Another member who was on a fixed term contract expressed feelings of insecurity due to the need to make savings and the fact that their role could disappear at any time, in spite of their fixed term role having been renewed every six months for the last three years.

Job Evaluation, Design and Working Environment: A member within the Place function cites the failure of pay to keep in line with cost of living, and the office environment as adding to the stress levels. Open plan areas with a lack of quiet space as the organisation seeks to cram more and more people into the facility at Marischal College.

A support worker from Bon Accord care commented on the lack of travel time between jobs, which shows that the allocation of work and the design of the role is adding stress to staff.

Question 6: Change – how employers manage and communicate organisational change. How well do you think the employer understand the stress caused through organisational change?
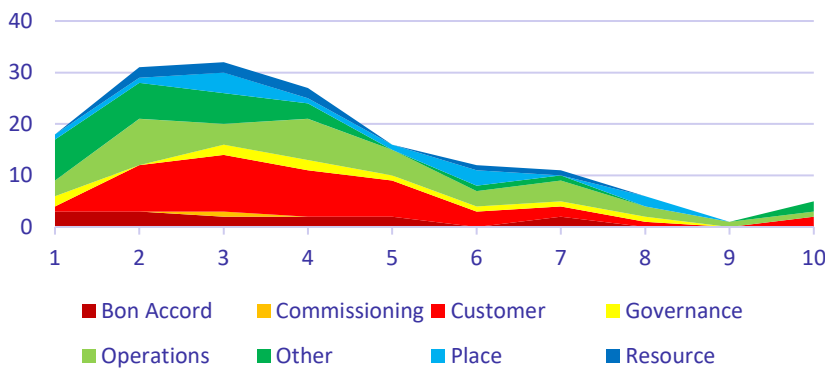[1 not at all, 10 totally understands]
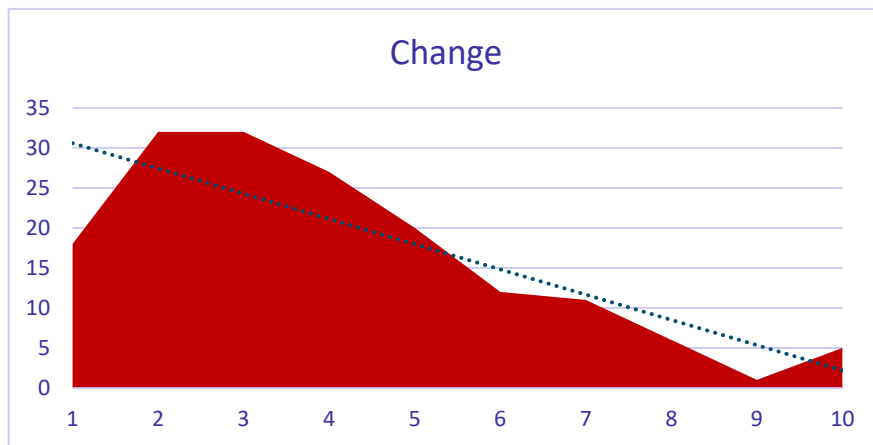
83% of respondents scored the question 5 or less. 40% scored the question 3 or less. This is a clear indicator that staff feel they working under excessive work demand,

- *'Being kept in the dark the not knowing what is happening. All this change was meant to be done and up in running from October 2019. Been aware that mangers have had some meetings not sharing any info I have asked. Find this very unsettling as I have been through the cutbacks before back in 2009.' [Function; Operations- Cluster: Integrated Children Services]*
- *'There is a complete lack of proper resources to cover for the reduction in staff and it is simply left for the remaining staff resource to soak up the work left over due to voluntary severance etc., the current situation is not sustainable either for the proper delivery of Council services or the individual staff now left on the front line. ' [Function: Resource]*
- *'In general workload is a constant prioritisation of what is urgent rather than planned which increases stress trying to cover a workload which is not capable of being covered.' [Function: Resource]*
- *Really glad that the Union are taking a serious look at the effect our employer is having on its staff mental health. [Function: Customer]*
- *'Too many initiatives ongoing, often with overlap. Stretched resources with virtually no understanding of the strains that puts on staff.' [Function: Customer]*
- *'Outsourcing and moving operations to arm's length organisations (e.g. Sport Aberdeen) makes things even worse. At least there's a smidgen of oversight within the council but this disappears when operations are moved off the books. - And don't mention the missing inventory or the H&S issues. No, just hand over more council operations, staff and facilities to them.' [Function: Operations]*
- *'The changes that are constant, are having a negative effect on everyone. Changes are never for the benefit of staff, always someone in management thinks up something and implements it without knowing anything about the actual subject.' [Function: Customer – Cluster: Housing]*
- *'We are not asked about changes to work rotas, we are told that is what we are doing. Our home life and family commitments are not considered. Service users and support workers are not listened to.' [Function: Bon Accord]*
- *'I think everyone recognises the need for change. However, it seems very short-sighted to adopt an approach that looks only at the (£) bottom line. Staff are being allowed to go but the workload remains. We are returning to the days where services have to be experts in all areas (e.g. HR, finance, procurement) and managers are overpaid.' administrators. Also, there is no resource to support or deliver opportunities for change which would deliver real results. Function: Operation]*

How well do you think the employer understand the stress caused through organisational change?

Response	Bon Accord	Commissioning	Customer	Governance	Operations	Other	Place	Resource	Total
1	3		1	2	3	8	1		18
2	3		9		9	7	1	2	31
3	2	1	11	2	4	6	4	2	32
4	2		9	2	8	3	1	2	27
5	2		7	1	5		1		16
6			3	1	3	1	3	1	12
7	2		2	1	4	1		1	11
8			1	1	2		2		6
9					1				1
10			2		1	2			5
Grand Total	19	4	57	10	46	31	16	11	

Aggregated Responses to Change Question

Legend: Bon Accord, Commissioning, Customer, Governance, Operations, Other, Place, Resource

Question 6 on how well staff felt that the employer understood the effects of the changes they are making brought the strongest reaction from respondents.

61% of respondents scored the quest 5 or less, 40% scoring 3 or less. The scoring was consistent over the functions.

With any change process there are models which can be applied. One of the most recognized models is that of J P Kotter, a professor at Harvard University. He identified an 8-step process for change.

The stages shown on the right are the stages defined by Kotter and are those which organizations who successfully handle change use.

The important ones are '*Form a powerful coalition*' and '*Communicate the vision*'.

Basically, management working with staff and the Unions to work through issues but making sure the purpose and aim of the change is clearly understood by everyone in the process.

8 step change model by John Kotter
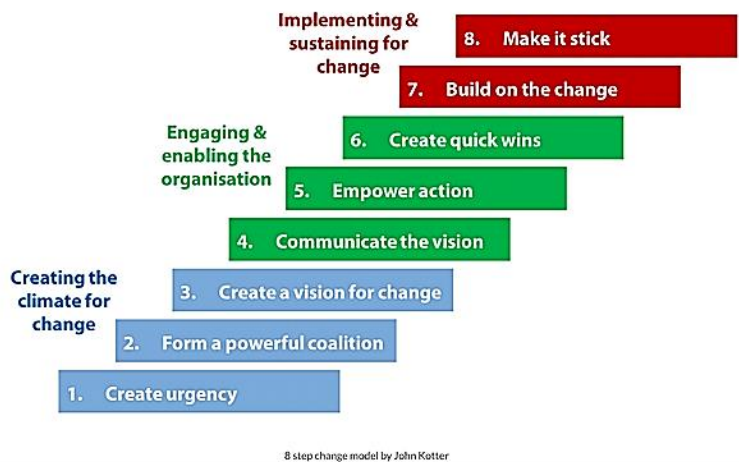
Anecdotal Evidence:

Communications: This is a critical issue- respondents are talking about 'being left in the dark'. The suggestion from some respondents is that changes are '*never for the benefit of staff*' reinforces the notion that the vision for change is not being communicated.

Resources: One of the themes of respondents is the lack of resources to cover the workload. From the Resource function came the comments that there is a lack of resources to cover the work left behind through VSER. From the Customer function came the comment that there are too many initiatives ongoing.

The respondent from the Customer function makes note of the fact that initiatives are overlapping, coordination of effort seems to be missing. This suggests that the lack of communication of the vision is more widespread than just staff at the lower echelons of the council.

Prioritisation of work: One respondent has commented that due to the lack of resources following VSER the prioritisation of work is being carried out on an urgent basis first, leaving simpler tasks to build up. This tied with the lack of control staff must prioritize their own work will inevitably lead to increased stress levels.

Work life balance: A member from Bon Accord has indicated that rota changes were made without staff consultation, and this has affected work-life balances.

An American study carried out by Harris Poll and reported by the American Psychological Association in 2017 identified a strong linkage between organisational change and workplace stress. The survey found that workers who had recently or were going through a period of organisational change were twice as likely to report instances of chronic workplace stress (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Members within Aberdeen City Council have been on an annual journey of organisational change for the last three-years. This now seems to be an ingrained process. The cumulative effect of the uncertainty that this continual change brings has been added workplace stress, depression and anxiety.

There are methodologies for handling change with the council needs to buy-in to minimise the effect.

American Psychological Association. (2017, May 24). *Change at Work Linked to Employee Stress, Distrust and Intent to Quit, New Survey Finds*. Retrieved from American Psychological Association: https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/05/employee-stress

Conclusions:

The headline results from the survey are:

Demand	Members feel they are under excessive demand
Control	Members feel that they don't have enough control of how they do their work
Support	Members don't feel that they are adequately supported by the employer
Relationships	Members feel that relationships at work are not supportive and less than ideal
Role	Members have some doubts that their managers understand their roles
Change	Members are clear that the employer does not understand the stress that their approach to change is putting them under.

When asking questions around stress at work at a time of major transformation and change brought about by financial constraints, then these headline results could have been predicted. Staff are struggling to cope with the extra workload that they are being asked to service as the effects of staffing reductions through VSER have impacted.
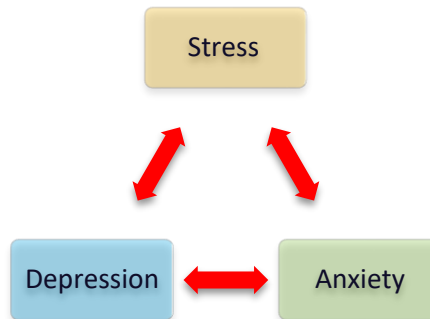
Stress, Anxiety and Depression [Common causes of Psychological Illness] are conditions which staff can experience as a result of the workplace environment. Untreated these conditions can impact on a person's mental health wellbeing. Our mental health wellbeing is not a constant, we move across the spectrum of conditions through time.

The results of the survey questions clearly show that *members are experiencing high levels of stress* in their working lives. The additional comments entered by *members also show a level of anxiety about their job security*. Sickness absence data shows that *Psychological illness is the highest single category of absence across the authority, of which depression will play a major factor*. What is clear is the process of staff reduction through V.S.E.R is a contributory factor, by adding additional demands on staff in their daily jobs.

Digitization and automation have not kept pace and balanced out the increased demand the staffing reductions have created. Bringing in outside consultancies and expertise to speed up the process, such as Microsoft will implement solutions quicker, but they are not a permanent resource. Substantive Council staff need to take up the reigns and go forward with the solution.
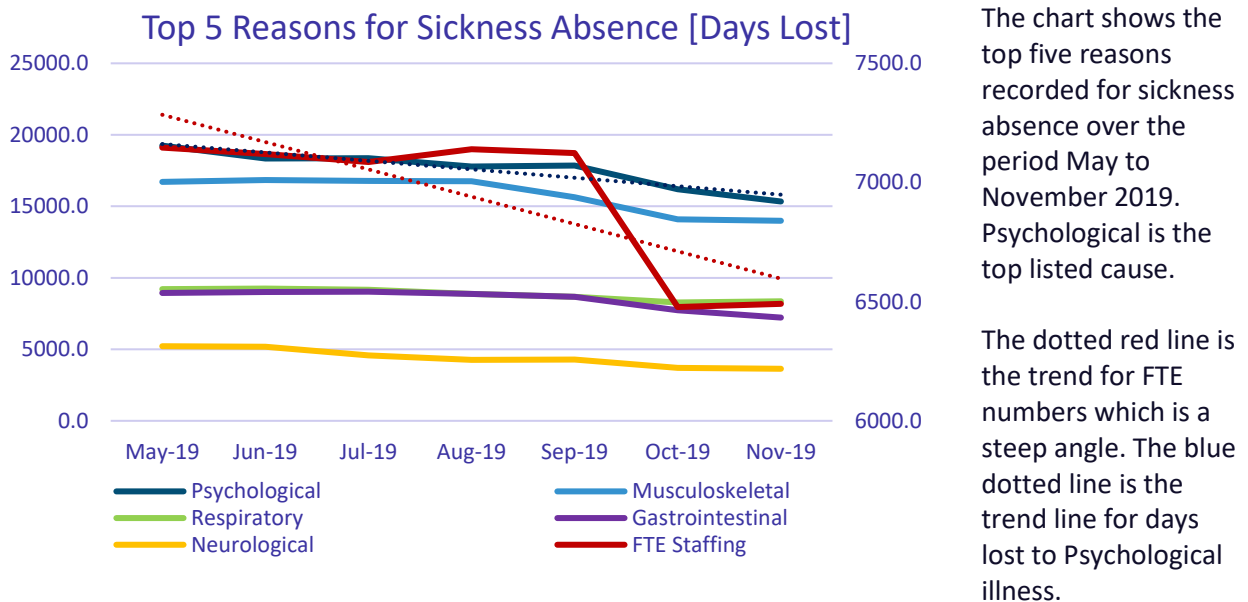
Within the context of the Authority's financial situation, UNISON has always recognized the need for change to help with the financial constraints which the funding of local government from the Scottish Government has brought about. UNISON has recognized the need to improve the way the Council works, the need to make services efficient, but also recognizes the need to follow long established policies and procedure.

What is clear from the survey that the policy of V.S.E.R while it may be making the budget saving required to help the authority achieve its statutory requirement for a balanced budget, this is having an adverse effect on staff by elevating levels of stress.

The authority has taken the positive step of implementing a Mental Health Action Plan which is commendable, but ultimately is reactive. The UNISON Aberdeen City Branch took the step in November 2018 of training a group of stewards and officers as Mental Health First Aiders, which again is a reactive measure.

Correlation with Sickness Absence and staffing numbers

Looking at the figures for the six-month period between May 2019 and November 2019, there is a correlation between the sickness absence figures and the stress levels indicated by the survey results.

Top 5 Reasons for Sickness Absence [Days Lost]

— Psychological
— Respiratory
— Neurological
— Musculoskeletal
— Gastrointestinal
— FTE Staffing

The chart shows the top five reasons recorded for sickness absence over the period May to November 2019. Psychological is the top listed cause.

The dotted red line is the trend for FTE numbers which is a steep angle. The blue dotted line is the trend line for days lost to Psychological illness.

The FTE has dramatically reduced. It might be expected that as staff numbers reduce that there would be an equivalent reduction is the numbers of day lost through any one illness type, but this is not reflected in the pattern for psychological conditions being the reason for absence. The level of decline is reduced.

There is a correlation between days lost and F.T.E that is clear when both are set in a graph together.

So, the variation shown above between F.T.E and days lost to psychological conditions does suggest that other factors are at play.

Days Lost to F.T.E

— FTE
— Total Days Lost
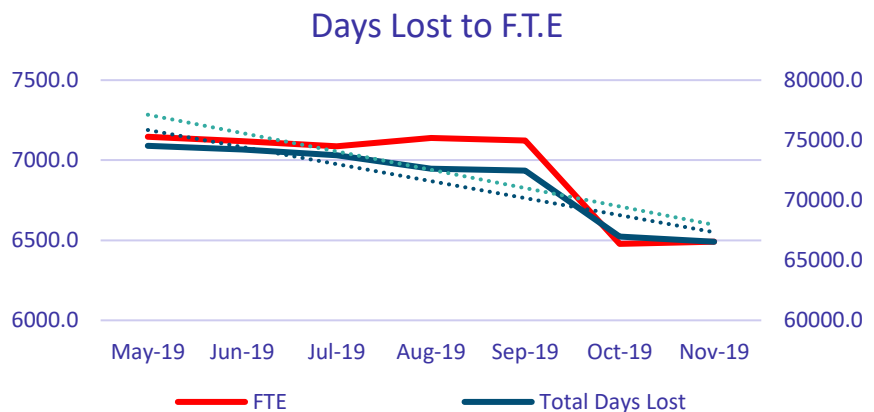
Recommendations

What can the Authority do to tackle the problem of workplace stress? The branch would propose two sets of measures.

Firstly, if the policy of using V.S.E.R is to continue, then the decision to release a member of staff through this process must include:

- Impact Risk Assessments

  The effect of the release of a member of staff must include in its decision-making criteria an assessment of the impact this will have on remaining staff in the light of increased work demands.

- Job Changes to be formalized

  The revised job roles which will incorporate additional tasks have to be formally recognized through job design processes, job descriptions updated to reflect the changes and processed through the job evaluation process to ensure that the proper rate is being paid for the revised role.

The use of proper job design techniques and principles will ensure that what has been defined earlier in this report as 'healthy job' are in place which will reduce the damaging levels of sickness absence.

Secondly, that alternative measures to releasing staff are pursued. UNISON is working in partnership with the Jimmy Reid Foundation to look at alternative models of local government funding.

One of the models being proposed, which has been successful in other authorities, is redeploying staff to areas of income generation such as the processing of bad debts, and areas where fees for services are collected. The Lord Provost made mention of this earlier in 2019 and suggested that there had been a considerable increase in revenue by redeploying staff to this type of work.

The branch would strongly recommend that the Authority to look at the Jimmy Reid Foundation paper and proposals for alternative funding. The anecdotal evidence suggests that stress and anxiety levels are very high. Managers are struggling or unprepared to cope with the effects of reducing numbers through V.S.E.R in handling the demand for services they are trying to accommodate.

As a branch we need to work with the other unions to try to shape the way forward for the Council in a constructive way.

Thanks to all who completed the survey and participated at the various stalls during the collection of this data.

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