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| **STRESS AT WORK** |  |  |

**A short UNISON guide for chief officers and senior managers in local authorities**

**Introduction**

Stress is a major concern for chief officers and senior managers in local authorities.

Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them”.

Millions of working days are lost each year due to work related stress. While some employers have accepted that stress is a major problem in their workplace, few have any idea how to tackle it effectively. Despite good practice among some employers work related stress continues to be an increasing problem for many UNISON members’ health and wellbeing.

UNISON believes that stress is one of the biggest health issues at work today. The true extent of stress-related problems is largely hidden because very few people are prepared to admit that they are suffering from stress, or to seek help. It is difficult for those who have not experienced depression, anxiety and despair, which often accompany stress, to fully appreciate the effect stress can have on people’s lives and on the lives of their families.

This guide is intended to give help UNISON members who are chief officers or senior managers in local government. It gives some background to the issue, explains what employers’ responsibilities are, and gives pointers on what you and UNISON can do about it.

**Stress among chief officers and senior managers – how big a problem is it?**

In 2013, UNISON surveyed local authority chief officers and senior managers from across the UK. 800 people responded, telling us about their experiences as local government leaders, delivering public services. They gave us their views on the impact of the cuts and changes in service delivery, and they told us about their concerns at work.

43% of chief officers and senior managers said that stress at work is having an impact on their job performance. This is obviously a major problem for the individuals affected, as well as for the services being provided.

**What’s causing it?**

*Overwork*

Overwork is a common cause of workplace stress. While the vast majority (85%) of chief officers and senior managers are contracted to work between 31 and 40 hours a week, the same percentage in reality actually work more than 40 hours. A massive 44% of respondents said that they work 10 or more hours in excess of their contracted hours in a typical week, without pay or time off in lieu. That 44% figure is very similar to the proportion of people who told us that stress is affecting their job performance. And what it means is that approaching half of the senior local government workforce are giving their employer 25% extra – not as occasional one-offs or in exceptional circumstances, but in a normal working week.

And in that ‘normal week’, 62% of respondents say that they have too much work to do. So it isn’t surprising that stress is such a big problem.

*Pay*

It’s a long time since local authority chief officers received a cost of living pay rise. For the last five years, pay on the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) for chief officers has been frozen – which means, with inflation rising, pay has fallen significantly in real terms.

Of course, chief officers and senior managers don’t suffer from the genuinely low pay that is rife within local government. However, stories in the press about the extent of excessive pay in local government have been grossly exaggerated. Only a fifth of chief officers and senior managers earn more than £100,000, while around half earn less than £70,000.

But whatever the pay levels, it is important to look at how *fair* pay is. More than a third of survey respondents ‘strongly disagreed’ or ‘tended to disagree’ that their pay level was fair. And we found a very strong link between perceptions of fairness in pay and the impact of stress at work. Where people felt unfairly paid, they were much more likely to feel stress that was harming their ability to do their job.

*Reviews, re-structures and reorganisations*

Instability at work can lead to stress, and in recent years most chief officers and senior managers have had to deal with reorganisations. 77% reported that there had been a review or re-organisation of their work area in the last two years, and more than two-thirds expected a reorganisation in the near future.

*Funding cuts*

Chief officers and senior managers have had to deal with the massive cuts in local government funding handed down by central government. We asked them what the impact of the cuts had been.

Nearly all respondents (91%) reported an increase in workloads. Not surprisingly, 80% reported there had been job losses, while 73% reported unfilled vacancies – which would have a real impact on the people managing the services. Given these conditions, it is hardly a surprise that 55% reported increased workplace stress as a direct result of the cuts.

Survey respondents made a variety of comments which bring this point home – referring to significant drops in morale, increased absence, oppressive and process-driven workplaces, and persistent negative media.

*Bullying*

If you are the victim of bullying or harassment at work, you are much more likely to suffer from stress. There is evidence that women chief officers in particular are more likely to be subject to bullying and harassment, for example by the male councillors they report to. This is of course unacceptable.

**So what can we do?**

*National negotiations*

UNISON is very concerned about stress at work among chief officers and senior managers.

In the pay claim submitted to the JNC in February 2014, we demanded a substantial pay increase, which recognised that most chief officers are not paid massive salaries, and in fact deserve fairer pay.

We also asked for a joint review, between unions and employers, of the impact of overwork, the lack of ‘time off in lieu’, and reorganisations on stress levels. This is a major issue which requires a national approach, between unions and employers.

At the time of writing we were awaiting the employers’ response to our claim, but we will keep pushing.

*In your local authority*

There is no specific legislation dealing with stress. UNISON believes there should be. In the meantime existing laws, such as the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, require employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. This means that employers have a legal responsibility to maintain the health, safety and welfare of employees, including risk assessing and preventing hazards at work. In addition, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to assess the risk of work-related ill health arising from work activities, ensure that these are removed or proper control measures are in place to avoid these risks wherever possible, and reduce them so far as reasonably practicable.

We recommend that all employers have a stress management strategy, covering how the employer will assess the potential risks that could cause stress, and take steps to reduce their effect and hence prevent stress whenever possible.

As a UNISON member, if you think your employer isn’t doing this, then you should contact your local UNISON branch as a matter of urgency. Ask them to talk to your employer about how it can improve its practices. Remember – your branch will be in a much stronger position to negotiate with the employer if they are armed with the experiences and views of members in each workplace. Chief officers and senior managers deal with a variety of stressful situations which your branch may not be aware of.

If you are experiencing stress yourself, it is important that you keep a written record of any problems, and put things in writing to the appropriate manager, so that there is evidence of the concerns raised and the fact that your employer was aware of them. Tell your UNISON branch as well.

You should also keep a record of how many hours you work. If you haven’t agreed a request from your employer to opt out of the maximum 48 hour working week (as laid down in the Working Time Directive), then your employer cannot ask you to work a longer week than that. And if your employer does ask you to sign the opt-out, consider this very carefully –there is a clear link between the hours that you work and workplace stress. Work-life balance is very important, and it is not possible if you work very long hours. (The 48 hour limit is an average that is generally calculated over a 17 week reference period.)

*Become a safety rep*

The law says that employers have a duty to keep workers safe and healthy and consult them on arrangements for health and safety matters. They must also talk to union safety reps about things that may affect workers’ health and safety, either as a group of workers or on an individual basis. UNISON trains our safety reps, and they do a fantastic job of making our workplaces safer. But to make this system work, we need safety reps at all levels, and in every workplace. We need safety reps who understand, and have experience of, the issues faced by chief officers and senior managers. If you’re a UNISON member, why not consider getting involved and doing your bit to help reduce workplace stress?

*Recruit a colleague*

It is vital that chief officers and senior managers join UNISON, so that we can work together to improve our knowledge of their specific issues, and campaign and negotiate to make things better. If you have colleagues who aren’t members, try to persuade them to join. Many causes of stress can be reduced, by strong, representative trade unions and employers talking and working together to find solutions.

**For more advice**

This short guide is an introduction to stress – its causes, its impact and some ideas for preventing it. But for much more comprehensive guidance, see the UNISON publication *Stress at work: a guide for UNISON safety reps* <https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/On%20line%20Catalogue/18596.pdf>.