

Stress: PCS evidence on the crisis



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LRD survey introduction – stress in a cuts environment

Since the coalition government took office in 2010 PCS members along with other workers in the public sector have been subjected to a relentless attack on their jobs, pay, pensions and terms and conditions. At the same time the government cut facility time available for PCS reps in the civil service, including health and safety reps, limiting their ability to represent members. Faced with a cut environment we are more concerned than ever about the levels of stress for our members.

Work-related stress is a very serious problem – our members have told us so. From two surveys we ran in late 2013 – one on stress (the main subject of this booklet), the other on workloads, working hours and work-life balance (WLB survey) – we have the hard evidence and personal testimonies from our members about the high and damaging levels of work-related stress they experience daily.

Similarly, our health and safety reps regularly report that work-related stress is one of the top three major health and safety issues they face.

PCS commissioned LRD to undertake a stress survey of two groups in the union which represent a good cross section of the overall membership: HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Transport. As the results of the survey show, stress levels in HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Department of Transport (DfT) and its Executive Agencies are higher than average for other organisations on the Health and Safety Executive's database. On several measures they are considerably higher than average.

PCS recognise that a number of factors contribute to workers' stress levels, mental health and well-being but the workplace environment is a very significant factor in stress related problems. Within that, spending cuts, job cuts, job insecurity, increased workloads, poorly managed restructuring and poor job design, lack of or no training in stress prevention or management, bullying and discrimination – all of these and more mean greater stress levels and unhealthy

workplaces for our members.

Playing an essential role in stress prevention, our health and safety reps and other reps, continue to proactively promote and champion good health and safety practice in the workplace. However cuts to reps facility time also means they are unable to spend enough time on stress reduction strategies.

Equally, where employers have good records on health, safety and well-being, including on stress prevention, the positive effects and benefits of this approach are universally beneficial. Tackling the causes of stress properly will ensure the workforce is healthier, reduce sickness absence due to work-related stress, mean workers have more control and involvement in their work, improve performance and service levels, and create effective working relationships. A 'blame-free' and supportive workplace culture of those workers suffering from stress would replace the current chronic situation faced by our members.

PCS's evidence in this publication, with the data and findings in our workloads and work-life balance (WLB) survey 2013, highlights the negative impact of the ongoing round of job cuts, increased workloads and increased working hours.

PCS believes the evidence should be used to tackle poor employer interventions in preventing and tackling work-related stress and bullying by demanding:

- stronger regulations aimed at preventing stress, with current legislation strengthened and fully enforced;
- employers work with our reps to tackle the causes of stress and to minimise the damaging effects of stress on our members;
- steps are taken to tackle the stigma of stress and mental ill-health through as training in stress prevention measures.

Ultimately we demand, as one of the best stress prevention measures, a halt to this damaging programme of cuts in the civil and public service.

Chris Baugh
PCS Assistant General Secretary

BACKGROUND

PCS commissioned the Labour Research Department (LRD) to carry out a survey of our members in HMRC, DfT, some of DfT's executive agencies and aviation sector employers where PCS members work, with the aim of providing well-founded evidence on member stress levels in these organisations.

Employers surveyed

PCS selected the employer groups (see table 1) on the grounds that one (HMRC) is a large single employer, while the other is a medium-sized government department with number of smaller executive agencies. A wider variety of job roles are also reflected, comparable to the same/equivalent job roles in the civil service, making the survey more representative of the civil service as a whole than if just one type of organisation had been surveyed.

Table 1: employer groups included in survey

Workplace	Organisation Type
HMRC – Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs	Non-ministerial department
DfT – Department for Transport	Ministerial department
DVLA – Driver and vehicle licensing agency	Executive agency of DfT
DSA – Driving standards agency	Executive agency of DfT
Highways agency	Executive agency of DfT
Maritime and coastguards agency	Executive agency of DfT
Vehicle certification agency	Executive agency of DfT
VOSA – Vehicle operator services agency	Executive agency of DfT

Responses were also received from the following Aviation employers groups where PCS members work, but the numbers received were too low to analyse as separate groups:

BAA Plc – British airports authority Plc	Private company
CAA – Civil aviation authority	Public corporation/regulator
Gatwick airport Ld	Private company
NATS – National air traffic service	Public/private partnership – Private company

The survey

The survey was internet-based and sent to all PCS members in the surveyed workplaces for whom the union had email addresses. The survey was sent out on 6 and 7 November and was closed in mid-December 2013.

The main element of our survey was composed of the thirty five questions drawn up by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) for work-related stress surveys to establish individuals' levels of stress. We opted to use the HSE model to ensure the results would have the widest possible acceptance – by members, employers, government and the public.

The survey questions check how well or poorly an employer is managing the HSE's six Management Standards, which HSE say cover the primary sources of stress at work. The Management Standards are:

Demands – This includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

Control – How much say the person has in the way they do their work.

Support – This includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. (Analysis is actually split into two parts: Managers' Support and Peer Support)

Relationships – This includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

Role – Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

Change – How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

(Detailed explanations of these standards are available at: hse.gov.uk/stress/standards).

Separate to the 35 HSE questions we added a number of questions asking members about their personal characteristics, employer (department/agency), grade, type of contract and location. This allowed responses to the stress questions to be analysed by these factors.

Analysis tool and comparable data

HSE's Management Standards Analysis Tool into which responses to the 35 HSE questions can be fed (though not so for the additional PCS questions). This allowed the PCS members' responses to be compared with those the HSE holds on a database of organisations, which is the HSE-recommended method.

The Analysis Tool averages the scores given by the respondents under the six HSE Management Standard headings (although in fact there are seven separate headings as the scores for Support are separated into Peer Support and Managers' Support).

It then gives each of the seven headings a colour coding according to how far they are off the ideal target: this is to be at, above or close to the 80th percentile of the score of the database organisations.

Colour Coding

Our members' responses to the 35 HSE questions were put into the HSE Management Standards Analysis Tool, which compares them with its database of organisations and produces the following colour coding:

- **Blue** – Doing very well – need to maintain performance.
- **Green** – Good, but need for improvement. Represents those better than average but not at, above or close to the 80th percentile.
- **Amber** – Average but not at, below or close to the 20th percentile
- **Red** – Urgent action needed. Represents those at, below or close to the 20th percentile.

Response Rates

The total number responding to the survey by the time it was closed was 7,866, representing a response rate of at least 30%. Broken down the number of responses were:

- **HMRC** – 6,586 (response rate minimum of 28.8%).
- **DfT** – 1,280 (response rate minimum of 38.4%).

In LRD's view, these are good response rates, especially considering that measures were taken by some managements to obstruct the survey: members in HMRC were told not to respond in works' time or using office facilities; and the researchers were told by some DSA respondents that the DSA had blocked access to the survey on its equipment.

Key findings

- PCS members are experiencing stress levels well above average.
- Stress levels are higher than average compared to other organisations on the HSE's database and, on several measures, considerably higher than average.
- In six out of seven categories of HSE-defined "stressors", HMRC, DfT and its Executive Agencies are worse than average; in four categories these employers sit within the bottom fifth of organisations. The HSE Analysis Tool states that, in this situation, "Urgent action [is] needed" on the part of the organisation.
- Problem areas vary between HMRC and the DfT and its Executive Agencies, though Change is the worst area for both; the DfT and Executive Agencies have more poorly performing areas in terms of stress management than the HMRC. VOSA is the worst of the surveyed employers for stress, followed by the Maritime and Coastguards Agency.
- Worst stressor first (1) Change; (2) Control; (3) Role; (4) Managers' Support.
- Relationships is the only area in which the performance is above average (though still not in the top fifth).
- One in six respondents report that they are "always, often or sometimes bullied" (and this increases to one in five respondents in the DfT and its Executive Agencies).

Separate analysis of the survey responses

carried out by LRD researchers (not using the HSE Analysis tool) shows that:

- **Employer** – Stress levels vary by employer, with members in VOSA and the Maritime and Coastguards Agency exhibiting the worst stress levels overall and the Vehicle Certification Agency the least poor.
- **Grade/Jobs** – Administrative staff and those in unspecified "other" grades/jobs are overall the most stressed groups, but different grades of staff tend to be stressed by different aspects of work.
- **Gender** – Male respondents are on average slightly more stressed than women, except in the area of Control, where women are slightly more stressed than men.
- **Age** – Younger members (aged 21–40) are more stressed than older members, except that the small group of under 21s in the survey are the least stressed group.
- **Disability** – Disabled respondents are considerably more stressed than non-disabled respondents, particularly in the area of Relationships.
- **Race** – Respondents from unspecified "Other" ethnic backgrounds and those of mixed ethnic background are considerably more stressed than White respondents and Black respondents, with Asian respondents slightly more stressed than White and Black respondents.
- **Carers** – Carers of adult relatives had considerably higher overall stress levels than those without such responsibility.

OVERALL RESPONSES

As set out in table 2; all respondents, overall, the surveyed organisations are doing poorly-chronically on all management standards except for relationships.

Put together, they are below average in all the seven areas other than relationships – meaning there is ‘clear need for improvement’ in all those areas, according to the HSE.

Worse, the result in four of the areas – control, managers’ support, role and change – the employers sit below the 20th percentile of comparator organisations, meaning there is ‘urgent action needed’.

Table 2: all respondents (HSE analysis tool results)

Stressor	Colour code	Score	Longer term target*
Demands	Amber	3.08	3.29
Control	Red	3.19	3.72
Managers' support	Red	3.26	3.65
Peer support	Amber	3.66	3.89
Relationships	Blue	3.88	4.04
Role	Red	3.89	4.31
Change	Red	2.46	3.24

*to achieve Green colour code

The area which lags most behind the aspirational score as set out in the tool (“at, above or close to the 80th percentile” of the comparator organisations) is Change. In other words, the HMRC and DfT and agencies are particularly poor at managing the stress caused by organisational change.

Separate scores for HMRC and DfT and Executive Agencies

Looking separately at the HMRC’s, DfT’s and Executive Agencies’ performance, the score for Change sits below the 20th percentile in both

cases and comes out as the worst managed stress area for both. However, there are some differences between the two organisations (see tables 3 and 4).

In HMRC, the worst-managed stress factors apart from change are role and managers’ support. In transport, however, stress caused by lack of control is nearly as bad as stress from change, while peer support and role are also badly managed stress factors. Managers’ support does marginally better in Transport than HMRC.

Table 3: HMRC (HSE analysis tool results)

Stressor	Colour code	Score	Longer term target*
Demands	Amber	3.07	3.29
Control	Amber	3.23	3.72
Managers' support	Red	3.26	3.65
Peer support	Amber	3.68	3.75
Relationships	Blue	3.90	4.04
Role	Red	3.88	4.31
Change	Red	2.47	3.24

*to achieve Green colour code

Table 4: DfT and its executive agencies (HSE analysis tool results)

Stressor	Colour code	Score	Longer term target*
Demands	Blue	3.11	3.29
Control	Red	2.98	3.72
Managers' support	Amber	3.28	3.65
Peer support	Red	3.51	3.89
Relationships	Amber	3.75	4.04
Role	Red	4.09	4.31
Change	Red	2.46	3.24

*to achieve Green colour code

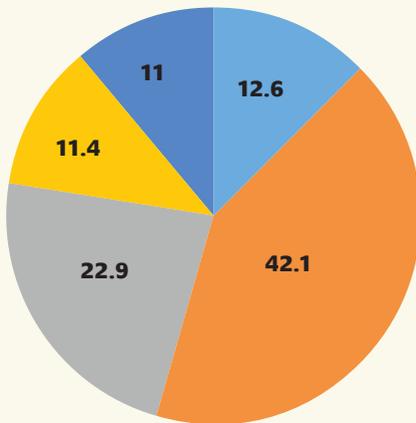
Comparing results of the stress and the workload and work-life balance surveys

The report on the WLB survey findings is available at: pcs.org.uk/en/resources/health_and_safety/health-and-safety-campaigns/pcs-ehsweek-2014.cfm

The stress survey results corroborate those of the work-life balance (WLB) survey (2013) in the following ways:

- One fifth of those surveyed (22.9%) experience work-related stress up to 50% of the time, but 11.4% of members experience stress up to 75% of the time and a further 11.0% claim to be stressed for more than 75% of the time (figure 1).

Figure 1: Members suffering work-related stress (%)



- None of the time
- 25% of the time or less
- Up to 50% of the time
- Up to 75% of the time
- More than 75% of the time

Regarding working relationships, the poorest one is again with the manager whilst the one with peers is noticeably better, and by extension less stressful.

My working relationship with my colleagues is good:

- Agree** – 83.8%
- No view** – 9.8%
- Disagree** – 6.3%

My working relationship with my manager is poor:

- Agree** – 24.2% (compared to 2006 survey result: 11.4%)
- No view** – 15.9%
- Disagree** – 59.9%

In terms of workloads, almost half of respondents disagreed that 'my workload is generally well planned and under control':

- Agree** – 36.3%
- No view** – 15.9%
- Disagree** – 47.8%

Worryingly, well over half of respondents reported that 'I am so busy that I come into work even when I am ill'. These high levels of presenteeism show that members feel so stressed that they would prefer to come into work than properly recuperate and potential worsening ill-health:

- Agree** – 55.4% (compared to 2006 survey result: 38.8%)
- No view** – 12.3%
- Disagree** – 32.3%

HSE definition: change

– how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Table 5: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for employers
Change		
I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work	Red	Urgent action needed
Staff are always consulted about change at work	Red	Urgent action needed
When changes are made at work, I am clear how they work out in practice	Red	Urgent action needed

Results

- The worst stressor for staff in HMRC/DfT and executive agencies is change. It receives a red coding for all three questions in that category.
- The result in change sits below the 20th percentile of comparator organisations, meaning there is ‘urgent action needed’.
- VOSA and MCA score particularly badly on change; VCA scores better on this than the other DfT executive agencies.
- The highest average stress levels are experienced by professional grades, followed by those in admin and ‘other’ grades. Senior and middle managers are on average less stressed than others by change.
- Change is the area which lags most behind the aspirational score as set out in the HSE tool (“at, above or close to the 80th

percentile” of the comparator organisations) – i.e. the HMRC, DfT and Executive Agencies are particularly poor at managing stress caused by organisational change.

HSE definition: control

– how much say the person has in the way they do their work.

Table 6: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for employers
Control		
I have a say in my own work speed	Red	Urgent action needed
I have a choice in deciding how I do my work	Red	Urgent action needed
I have a choice of deciding what I do at work	Red	Urgent action needed
I have some say over the way I work	Red	Urgent action needed
I can decide when to take a break	Blue	Need to maintain performance
My working time can be flexible	Blue	Need to maintain performance

Results

- The result in control sits below the 20th percentile of comparator organisations, meaning there is ‘urgent action needed’.
- MCA and DSA score badly on control.
- The highest stress levels for control are experienced by admin workers and ‘others’, followed by professional grades and then middle management. Not surprisingly, perhaps, senior management indicate the lowest stress levels for control factors.

HSE definition: role

– whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

Table 7: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for employers
Role		
I am clear what is expected of me at work	Red	Urgent action needed
I know how to go about getting my job done	Red	Urgent action needed
I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department	Red	Urgent action needed
I understand how my work fits into the overall aims of the organisation	Red	Urgent action needed
I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are	Blue	Need to maintain performance

Results

- The result in role sits below the 20th percentile of comparator organisations, meaning there is “urgent action needed”.
- DSA scores relatively well on role.
- The highest stress levels for role are indicated by admin staff and professional grades.

HSE definition: managers' support

– this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. (Analysis is actually split into two parts: managers' support and peer support).

Table 8: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for employers
Managers' support		
I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem	Red	Urgent action needed
I am supported through emotionally demanding work	Red	Urgent action needed
My line manager encourages me at work	Red	Urgent action needed
I am given supportive feedback on the work I do	Amber	Average
I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me at work	Amber	Average

Results

- The result in managers' support sits below the 20th percentile of comparator organisations, meaning there is ‘urgent action needed’.
- VOSA scores particularly badly on managers' support.
- The highest stress levels for managers' support are experienced by admin workers.

HSE definition: peer support

– this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. (Analysis is actually split into two parts: managers’ support and peer support).

Table 9: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for Employers
Peer support		
If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me	Red	Urgent action needed
I get help and support I need from colleagues	Red	Urgent action needed
My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems	Amber	Average
I receive the respect I deserve from my colleagues	Blue	Need to maintain performance

Results

- VOSA scores particularly badly on peer support; Highways agency scores worse than average.
- The highest stress levels for peer support are recorded for middle management.

HSE definition: relationships

– this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

Table 10: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for Employers
Relationships		
I am subject to bullying at work	Amber	Average
Relationships at work are strained	Amber	Average
I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour	Blue	Need to maintain performance
There is friction or anger between colleagues	Blue	Need to maintain performance

Results

- VOSA scores badly on relationships.

HSE definition: demands

– this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

Table 11: survey questions asked – all respondents

Stressor	Colour code	Action for employers
Demands		
I have unachievable deadlines	Red	Urgent action needed
I have unrealistic time pressures	Red	Urgent action needed
Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine	Amber	Average
I have to neglect some tasks as I have too much to do	Amber	Average
I have to work very intensively	Blue	Need to maintain performance
I am unable to take sufficient breaks	Blue	Need to maintain performance
I am pressured to work long hours	Blue	Need to maintain performance
I have to work very fast	Blue	Need to maintain performance

Results

- Demands factors, for which senior management group have the highest stress levels while admin staff have the lowest.

Useful websites and resources

PCS guidance for reps: Tackling stress at work
pcs.org.uk/stress

PCS well-being at work toolkit:
pcs.org.uk/wellbeing

PCS document library: various H&S and well-being resources (PCS member login access only)

External websites

TUC – Stress guidance: bit.ly/workplace-issues

TUC – Stress guidance (for European health and safety week): bit.ly/stress-guidance

Acas: acas.org.uk

European agency for safety and health – stress (resources): bit.ly/healthy-workplaces

Health and safety executive (HSE):
hse.gov.uk

Time to change: time-to-change.org.uk

UK national work-stress network:
workstress.net. ***Highly recommended:**
bit.ly/work-stress-booklet

Whitehall II study (The stress and health study) (2004): bit.ly/whitehall-study

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Contacts

Enquiries may be sent to PCS Equality, Health and Safety Department: **Tel:** 020 7801 2683

Email: healthandsafety@pcs.org.uk

Web: pcs.org.uk/healthandsafety