

# The agenda Workplace stress

**LGC Exclusive** Survey raises concerns that workloads are becoming unmanageable

## Stressed and overworked: 60% of senior staff consider quitting

David Paine & Jon Bunn  
david.paine@emap.com

Three-fifths of senior officers have considered quitting their jobs in the last year amid a rising tide of stress in local government's top management ranks, which is revealed for the first time today by a major LGC survey.

According to the research, undertaken in association with the Association of Local Authority Chief Executives & Senior Managers, 48% of the 285 respondents believe their workload has increased significantly in the past year to an almost unmanageable level, while more than one in 10 say it is already unmanageable.

Almost three-fifths (59%) say they are currently working more than the 48 hours a week legally permitted by the working time directive. Two-thirds (66%) of chief executives and 57% of senior managers say they worked beyond this level.

Two-thirds of respondents report their job has become more stressful. Perhaps unsur-

prisingly, three-quarters say they know of a colleague who has experienced mental health issues.

In an interview corresponding with the survey, Solihull MBC chief executive Nick Page reveals he has a mental health condition which has been exacerbated in the past by the pressures of his job.

Urging senior officers to "debunk" the myth around mental health conditions, he calls upon local government's leadership bodies to "galvanise our sector to talk about mental health".

Writing for LGC, Alace chair Tracey Lee, Plymouth City Council's chief executive, said growing stress levels of stress were unsurprising when councils were absorbing significant spending cuts.

She questioned whether the "toxic mix" of stress and long working hours was sustainable without significantly impacting on staff wellbeing.

Ms Lee added: "Will it be reflected in future in a higher incidence of senior staff

becoming ill, including by suffering mental health issues?"

Society of Local Authority Chief Executives & Senior Managers head of policy Piali Das Gupta said financial and operational pressures were adversely affecting staff at all levels, with recruitment becoming more challenging.

"Councils make life-altering choices and life in a senior position is not easy," she added. "However, colleagues often remark it is 'the best job in the world' and the ability to work and influence your local place is tough but also an experience to treasure."

Of all respondents, 51% said stress and/or workload had led them to sometimes/always perform badly in their job in the past 12 months. Thirty-three per cent of chief executives said this applied to them, compared to 59% of directors and senior managers.

### A stressed sector



**60%**

have  
**CONSIDERED LEAVING THEIR JOB**  
in the past year (51% of chiefs; 65% of senior managers)



**67%**

say their job  
has become  
**MORE STRESSFUL**



**59%**

work  
**MORE THAN 48 HOURS**  
a week (66% chiefs; 57% senior managers)



**51%**

say stress/workload has led them to sometimes/always  
**PERFORM BADLY**  
in the past year

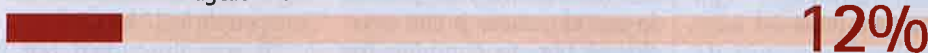


**56%**

have  
**RARELY FELT RELAXED**  
in their job in the two weeks prior to taking the survey

### MY WORKLOAD OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS HAS...

Increased to unmanageable level



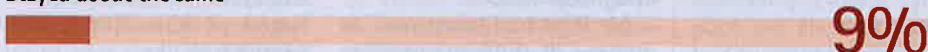
Increased to almost unmanageable level



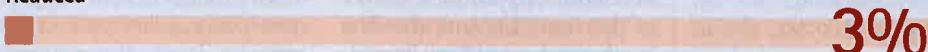
Increased, but remains at manageable level



Stayed about the same



Reduced



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## NICK GOLDING EDITOR

To be continually asked to do more with less is not conducive to one's personal welfare.

Yes, there may be initial pride at victories against the odds but eventually the inevitable happens: as budgets fall, an organisation falters, staff begin to buckle under pressure and anger rises among elected members and service users.

Life as a senior officer in local government has not been easy this decade. Medals have been in short supply from above but complaints about your pay being excessive, your organisation's



“Sector leadership bodies now need to rise to the challenge of standing up for senior officers

performance faltering and even whether your employer gives you biscuits – yes, it's that trivial – have been abundant.

Unsurprisingly there has been an impact on chief executives and senior managers. They have performed huge feats as they seek to serve their local populations to the limits of their abilities, but they cannot perform miracles. Senior management has been disproportionately targeted for cuts and yet senior managers are now expected to (and indeed keen to) reach out to partner organisations locally and assume new responsibilities as a leader of their place. This all equates to more meetings, more complexity and more work.

LGC's survey this week, in association with the Association of Local Authority Chief Executives, reveals a majority of senior managers are considering leaving their role. Most report a workload escalating into 'unmanageable' territory and most say they know of colleagues experiencing mental health conditions. Our survey makes difficult reading – but it is important reading.

We need to talk about the impact of growing stress on senior managers. Yes, they crave responsibility; yes, leadership roles should be demanding; and, yes, there are huge rewards from having the influence to shape the destiny of your local area, but the growing burdens heaped upon them must be recognised.

LGC also reveals how three-quarters of managers know of a colleague who has a mental health condition. We should salute the courage of Solihull MBC chief executive Nick Page who has had the bravery to disclose how he has experienced mental health issues. He has opened up to his council's staff to show them they are not alone as they struggle to operate in a tougher world. And now, through LGC, Mr Page is revealing his condition to a broader local government audience in an attempt to break down the stigma associated with mental health.

Mr Page's interview reminds us that local government needs to support its dedicated staff. They have vulnerabilities and struggles.

For too long officers' welfare has not featured in the debate about local government – but this must now change. Sector leadership bodies now need to rise to the challenge of standing up for senior officers: councils' unsung heroes.

Local government by its very nature looks after its local population. While it should and will continue to do everything it can for residents, it must also look after itself: its members and, in particular, its officers. Without their toil and inspiration, local communities would be diminished.

## INTERVIEW Solihull MBC's chief executive talks a Nick Page: 'Work exa

David Paine  
david.paine@emap.com

Solihull MBC's chief executive has spoken to LGC about living with a mental health condition and urged other senior officers to do more to break down barriers with their own staff and tackle the stigma attached to the issue.

Nick Page said councils need to start taking mental health issues more seriously as staff struggle to cope with increasing professional and personal pressures.

He made the plea as an LGC survey of 285 chiefs and senior officers revealed three-quarters know of colleagues who have a mental health condition.

Mr Page said: "My stress, depression and anxiety comes from me, it doesn't come from work, but work draws it out and exacerbates it because I spend most of my time at work. That's the key thing... therefore stress, depression and anxiety, mental health for us as a sector shows more now in work."

He likened coping with his mental health condition to trying to stop a glass of water from overflowing.

"In 2012, completely out of the blue, the glass had a catastrophic overflowing. I just lost it," he said. "I had periods in my life where it had overflowed but, to continue the analogy, I had managed to mop it up and that's due to things like having a great wife and kids. But on that occasion, it was just like a cataclysmic flood and I just lost all control and perspective."

Mr Page had taken over as director of children's services at Salford City Council which, at the time, became the first local authority to have its chil-

dren's social care services fail an Ofsted inspection under the coalition government.

That period was "quite intense, really hard at work but my focus and energy carried me through".

"It was only towards the end of the improvement journey that my cracks started to appear," he said. "For a short period of time I was in a very lonely, dark and dangerous place where to be honest I didn't care for and about myself."

He sought professional help and is now successfully managing his mental health condition through a combination of medication, cognitive behaviour therapy, mindfulness, and acupuncture.

Four years ago, Mr Page was appointed Solihull's chief executive. About a year later he said he felt sufficiently secure and confident in his role to tell staff he "suffers with mental health". He added: "I also live with it, and I also manage it. I am lucky."

Mr Page said he was keen to be open because he recognised some parts of his workforce were beginning to struggle under pressure.

"We were seeing sickness absence in some of our teams going up and that was primarily stress related, and it just felt right for me to say I know how my people feel," he said.

"It was unscripted but it needed saying. I don't mind admitting my knees were knocking but I thought if I am asking people to go an extra three or four miles, let alone a mile, then they need to know from their leader and my privileged position that I know what it feels like."

Mr Page said openness plays a key part in the way he leads the council's

## What do you think?

We value your views

email the editor at [LGC.newsgroup@emap.com](mailto:LGC.newsgroup@emap.com)

living with stress, depression and anxiety and why the sector needs to do more to support staff

# 'Worsened my mental health condition'



Mr Page said that, unlike with a physical condition, there is "a mystique and a narrative around mental health" which can lead to some people telling others to "just get a grip of yourself".

"I just think that is such a cruel and outdated way of approaching this," he said.

Mr Page urged other chiefs and senior officers to "debunk" the myth around mental health conditions.

"The national evidence is one in four suffer with some form of mental health condition," he said. "Local government needs to look at this and get stuck in. Because even if you don't have a mental health condition you will know somebody, or love somebody, or sit next to somebody at work who will have it.

"It doesn't mean they are less than anybody else. Sometimes it can mean they are a bit more because they have some empathy that we don't have."

Mr Page said having "a few pals around you [at work] who know everything" is key to helping to manage a mental health condition but he urged people to get support from loved ones before opening up to others as "it can be very traumatic for them too. I am feeling so much better now and Solihull looks after me".

However, Mr Page said "we need to galvanise our sector" to talk about mental health. He said he hoped bodies like the Local Government Association and the Society for Local Authority Chief Executives & Senior Managers will put the issue high on the agenda.

"We have a societal role as leaders to give ourselves the opportunity to talk about it," he said. "What we do about it then is the next chapter."

“It's not rocket science, it's mental health and wellbeing science. It is behaviour change

management.

"I am finding, as part of that leadership journey, I am having to give more of my own narrative because I find it difficult to stay authentic otherwise. I am having a wonder-

ful response from my staff to that."

Mr Page said he knew he had been right to tell staff when a long-serving colleague gave him a hug and told him he had a mental health condition too. It has now opened up a conversation between staff members.

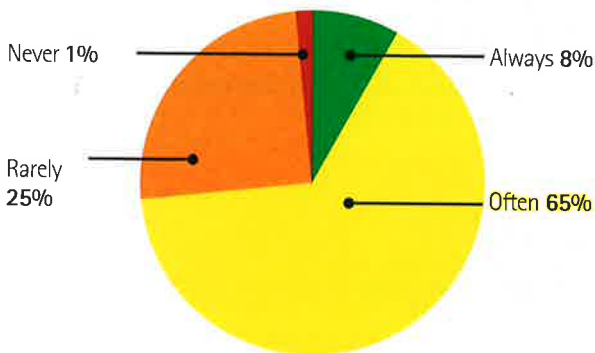
At Solihull, almost 30% of sickness absence is related to stress, anxiety and mental health. As a result, mental health workers have been brought in, while about 400 members of staff, as well as school children, have been

trained in mental health first aid. Work-time activities including Nordic walking, yoga and meditation have been introduced, while Mr Page is urging his staff to not send emails after 7pm, at weekends or when on holiday.

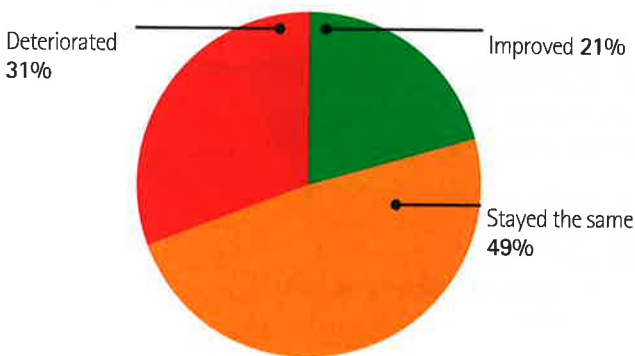
"I will only do an email if it is life-threatening – everything else can wait. That is important. That is the privilege of leadership where you can pace-set. The feedback I have had from that is wonderful. It's not rocket science, it's mental health and wellbeing science. It is behaviour change."

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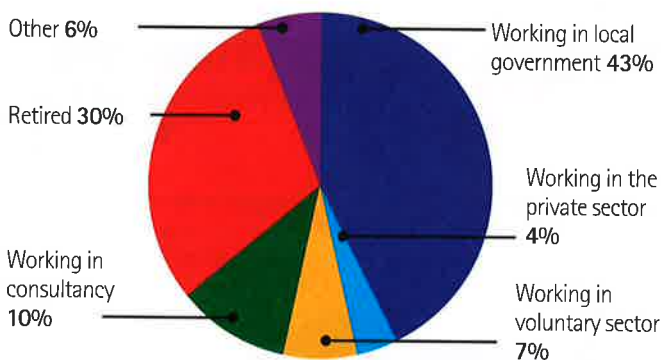
**In the previous two weeks I have felt optimistic in my job...**



**In the past year, morale in my senior management team has...**



**In five years' time, I will be...**



**I feel adequately supported in my role by my...**



## “What you are saying”

### What's the best thing about your job?

“The people I work with, brilliant bunch who go the extra mile for the public despite austerity, job losses and the apparent indifference of government”

“No two days the same: plenty of challenges and pressures.”

“It is simply a daily privilege to be able to come into the office to run a local authority.”

“The rare occasions when I am able to do the job I am trained and paid for.”

### If your workload has increased, what has caused it?

“My role used to be done by three people, with a dedicated support team, a full time PA and an exec officer. No longer.”

“Significant reduction in management capacity due to fewer senior managers and an almost continuous addition of new duties.”

“Political tensions and indecision – the joys of a hung council and inexperienced group leaders.”

“Less senior management, loss of experience, problems with retention and recruitment, fewer people to delegate to.”

“The government being

### OPINION

## This toxic mix of long hours

Tracey Lee, chair, Association of Local Authority Chief Executives

This is the most comprehensive survey of pressures facing senior council staff for some time.

It is of great interest to Alace as the only union that represents exclusively chief executives and senior managers working in local government across the UK. I would like to thank LGC for organising the survey and all Alace members and others who took part for providing such rich feedback.

The survey results present an interesting conundrum. On the one hand most respondents are satisfied with their jobs (almost two-thirds giving a marking of 7/10 or higher). A similar proportion both felt often or always optimistic about their job in

the previous fortnight, and believe they are adequately paid. However, a clear majority feel their workload has increased to an unmanageable or almost unmanageable level in the past year, which is reflected in those who rarely or never felt relaxed doing their job in the fortnight before the survey.

The crux comes in the two-thirds who felt their jobs had become more stressful in the past 12 months, affecting performance in about half of cases, but with only a very small proportion having time off as a result of a condition exacerbated by exhaustion. People who fill senior management roles in local government have to be resilient



unable to leave things alone for five minutes."

"Senior officer capacity has reduced by 45% and the imperative to work in partnership with others in the public and private sector requires my personal attention, leaving little room for the public administration part of the job."

**Have you considered leaving your job? If so, why?**

"Pressure and personal abuse from media and elected members."

"Dirty politics against managers."

"The organisation is close to not being financially

sustainable."

"Having to do so much more with little recognition, understanding or reward. Behaviour of members is now worse given no real standards regime."

"I have been in post for 7.5 years and it feels right for me and the organisation to revitalise and reinvigorate. The thought of perma-austerity and 'reimagining' services for the third time is unpalatable."

"I am tired, I do not feel valued by the organisation despite running a successful department. I know I am not as enthusiastic as I should be."

**Job satisfaction**

7.3/10

Average job satisfaction rating of respondents

65%

Believe they are adequately paid

73%

Feel optimistic about the future of their organisation and its services

6.7/10

Average rating for how valued people feel by their employer

27%

Say their senior management team has experienced a 'brain drain' of people leaving for less stressful/more lucrative roles



**and stress will surely cease to be sustainable**



and able to cope with pressure and competing demands. However, prolonged exposure to stress is not good for everyone, even though a clear majority of respondents seems still to enjoy their jobs.

The levels of stress reported are not surprising when local government has absorbed significant spending reductions. Demonstrably, it is the most efficient part of the public sector. Chief executives and senior managers have transformed what local government does and implemented new and effective service delivery mechanisms. In many cases, these include leadership roles in two or even three councils and shared services,

which add to workload and complexity. In successfully arguing for chief executives to receive the same 2% pay increase in 2018 and 2019 as other local government staff, we made those points to the Local Government Employers.

However, perhaps the toxic mix of long hours and stress will cease to be sustainable. Will it be reflected in future in a higher incidence of senior staff becoming ill, including by suffering from mental health issues? It is clear that most chief executives and senior managers draw on their immediate management team colleagues for support. The high proportion reporting they know colleagues who have experienced

mental health issues is bound to include a level of self-reporting, but the stigma senior managers feel in talking about their mental health is a concern.

Providing strong leadership in these challenging times should not mean individuals have to subjugate their own health to the interests of the organisation. If the perception of stigma reflects that colleagues feel it is a sign of weakness or incompetence to admit to suffering from mental health issues, Alace, other unions, employers and professional representative bodies need to work together to dispel that.

The expert consultancy support Alace offers its members in respect

of employment issues ranges from focusing on restructuring or grievances to relationship issues and disciplinary cases.

As a membership-led organisation, Alace will pay particular attention to the response suggesting that only a third of senior managers feel adequately supported by representative organisations. This message may be directed at a range of bodies such as the Local Government Association and professional bodies. Nevertheless, we should not be complacent and we will study carefully the detailed comments that have been provided in this exceptionally helpful survey.