Title: The Impact of Stress on Parish, Town And Community Council Staff in England and Wales

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Abstract:

This research project examined the impact of stress on employees of parish, town and community councils in England and Wales (local councils). Using representative data from a national survey and one-to-one interviews, the research identified that local council employees, particularly those working for smaller councils with a budget of less than £100,000, experience higher levels of stress-related health and behavioural problems than the general population, leading to absence from work and employee churn. Primary causes of stress were identified as excessive workloads and inappropriate behaviour by councillors including bullying and harassment. The research considered the implications for the sector, and explored potential improvement measures which could be implemented by sector bodies, councils and their employees. The main priorities identified were improvements in employment practices and the need for a more robust Code of Conduct to tackle problems stemming from councillor behaviour towards employees.

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List of Abbreviations/Acronyms

ALCC	Association of Local Council Clerks
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel Development
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
HR	Human resources
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
LGA	Local Government Association
MBSR	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NHS	National Health Service
ONS	Office for National Statistics
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks

Chapter 1 Introduction

This research project was inspired by a concern about the levels of stress being experienced by people working for parish, town and community councils in England and Wales (local councils) and the impact that this has on their health and wellbeing.

As an active Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) branch member it had become very apparent to the researcher that many fellow members are experiencing significant levels of stress relating to their work and the behaviour of some councillors. There is also a common perception that the situation is getting worse.

The researcher had directly observed significant anecdotal evidence to suggest that local council employees were being overstretched by the demands of their jobs. A recent survey commissioned by SLCC (Hoey and Ainscough, 2018) had provided evidence of Clerks being subjected to bullying and harassment, a problem that had also been reported by local SLCC members. The lack of effective sanctions for breaches of councils' Codes of Conduct had been reported as a significant concern.

The research was designed to test the hypotheses that:

- **local council employees experience significant levels of stress**
- **more action is required by sector bodies and individual councils to protect their health and wellbeing**.

The research also sought to identify measures that managers can implement to better support their staff and steps that council employees can take to help themselves.

The research comprised an online survey conducted in March and April 2018, followed by one-to-one interviews conducted in September and October 2018.

The researcher is Town Clerk to Stroud Town Council in Gloucestershire, managing a team of 12 staff and a budget of £1.2m.

Chapter 2 Literature review

What is stress?

Human bodies are designed to react quickly and automatically to threats: in a threatening situation our hearts beat more quickly, we breathe faster, our muscles tense and we start to sweat. This is known as the **fight or flight response** (Harvard Medical School, 2016). When the danger passes everything returns to normal, but if the *perceived* threat persists for a long period, e.g. for people working in a continually stressful situation, these physical reactions can lead to health and behavioural problems (Harvard Medical School, 2016).

Stress in itself is not an illness, but if it is excessive or prolonged it can cause a wide range of health issues (NHS, 2017; LGA, 2017b).

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is a government agency whose role is "to reduce work-related death, injury and ill health". The HSE define stress as:

> "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them." (HSE, no date, b)

Conversely, mental health charity Mind say that,

> "There's no medical definition of stress, and health care professionals often disagree over whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them". (Mind, 2013a)

Signs of stress

It is important to distinguish between *pressure* which can "create a 'buzz' and be motivating" and *stress*, which occurs "when this pressure becomes excessive" (HSE, no date, d, p.3).

Stress can have a positive impact on performance, but there is a tipping point beyond which it becomes detrimental (Robertson, 2016, p.54; Robertson, 2017), which is illustrated by the Yerkes-Dodson law (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908), which can be displayed as a simple curve:
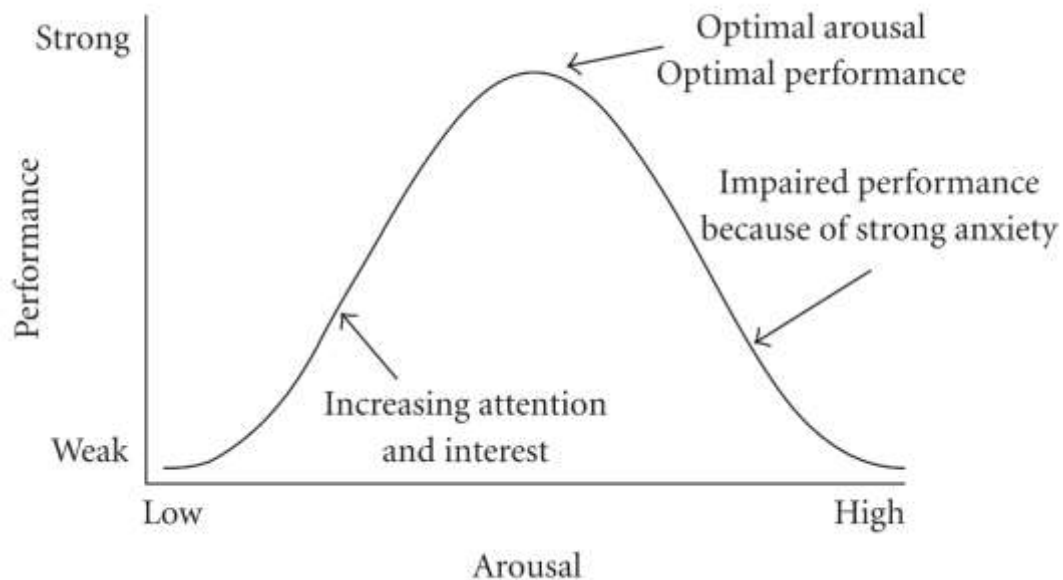
Figure 1: Yerkes-Dodson law (Hebb, 1955; Diamond et al, 2007)

The HSE advise employers to look out for the following signs of stress in their employees, i.e. in the way people act, think or feel:

- taking more time off
- arriving for work later
- being more twitchy or nervous
- experiencing mood swings
- being withdrawn
- losing motivation, commitment and confidence
- increased emotional reactions – being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive (HSE, no date, b)

The following may also indicate the presence of stress within a team:

- arguments

- higher staff turnover
- more reports of stress
- more sickness absence
- decreased performance
- more complaints and grievances. (HSE, no date, b)

The NHS identify the following emotional, mental, physical and behavioural symptoms of stress:

- **Emotional**: feeling overwhelmed, irritable and "wound up", anxious or fearful, or lacking in self-esteem.
- **Mental:** racing thoughts, constant worrying, difficulty concentrating and difficulty making decisions.
- **Physical:** headaches, muscle tension or pain, dizziness, sleep problems, feeling tired all the time, or eating too much or too little.
- **Behavioural:** drinking or smoking more, snapping at people, or avoiding things or people you are having problems with. (NHS, 2017)

Mind (2013a) report a similar list, but include more detail:

- **Emotional/mental:** feeling impatient or wound up, over-burdened, nervous, like you can't switch off, unable to enjoy yourself, depressed, uninterested in life, like you've lost your sense of humour, a sense of dread, worried about your health, neglected or lonely and sometimes suicidal.
- **Physical**: shallow breathing or hyperventilating, panic attacks, blurred eyesight or sore eyes, problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares, sexual problems such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex, grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw, chest pains, high blood pressure, indigestion or heartburn, constipation or diarrhoea, feeling sick or fainting.

- **Behavioural**: finding it hard to make decisions, biting your nails, picking at your skin, restless, like you can't sit still, being tearful or crying.

Health effects of stress

<u>Sickness absence</u>

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) report that an estimated 137.3 million working days were lost due to sickness or injury in the UK in 2016 (ONS, 2017), an average of 4.3 days per worker. Stress, depression and anxiety resulted in 10.6 million of these days (7.7%) (ONS, 2017)[1].

The HSE estimate the annual cost of work-related stress, anxiety and depression in Great Britain 2014-15 at £5.2 billion with around 500,000 workers affected (HSE, 2016).

The Local Government Association (LGA) report that stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue were the most common cause of sickness absence for local government[2] employees in England in 2015-16 (22.3%) (LGA, 2017a).

The ONS research also highlights the following differences in sickness absence rates from all causes:

- women higher than men (2.5% versus 1.6%)
- public sector workers higher than private sector workers (2.9% versus 1.7%)
- part-time workers higher than full-time workers. (2.6% versus 1.9%) (ONS, 2017)

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[1] The most common causes were minor illnesses like coughs and colds (24.8%) and musculoskeletal problems (including back pain, neck and upper limb problems) (22.4%), which in themselves can be signs of stress.
[2] Shire Counties, Metropolitan Districts, English Unitaries, London Boroughs and Shire Districts. Does not include parish, town and community councils.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is the professional body for HR and people development. Their annual survey on absence management (CIPD, 2016), reported growing levels of stress and mental health-related absenteeism, particularly in the local government sector. Stress is the most common cause of long-term absence (53% all employees/all sectors). The most frequently reported causes of stress were, in order: workload, non-work relationships/family, and management style.

Causes of stress at work

Six main areas of work design which can contribute to stress at work have been identified by the HSE:

- **Demands:** Includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- **Control:** How much say people have over the way they work.
- **Support:** Includes encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- **Relationships:** 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 roles do not conflict.
- **Change:** How organisational change (large and small) is managed and communicated.

(HSE, no date, d)

A meta-study by Professor Tennant (2001) of the University of Sydney School of Medicine reports similar factors, and draws on studies which assess the effectiveness of different levels of intervention for managing stress:

- "primary interventions (organisation/structural change),
- secondary interventions (stress management/coping strategies) and
- tertiary interventions (interventions targeted for those actually stressed)"

The results reported by Tennant (2001) suggest that secondary and tertiary interventions can be effective in the short term, but the results of studies on primary interventions are inconsistent.

A long-term study of civil servants (the Whitehall II Study[3]) by researchers from University College London has produced numerous insights on work-related stress factors. For example, lower employment grades, monotonous work, low job control, and poor levels of work satisfaction and social support were all shown to be strong predictors of poor health outcomes (Marmot et al, 1991). Another report from the same study concludes that:

> "Social support and control at work protect mental health while high job demands and effort-reward imbalance are risk factors for future psychiatric disorder. Intervention at the level of work design, organisation, and management might have positive effects on mental health in working populations." (Stansfeld et al, 1999)

Looking at the wider workforce, Lewis et al (2017) found that people working in SMEs are just as likely to experience bullying and harassment as those working for larger business (7% experience bullying and 15% harassment). They also identified a strong and negative association between bullying and autonomy at work and the ability to control the pace and timing of work tasks.

Grote and Guest (2017) propose a new focus in working life research based on an updated Quality of Working Life framework (**Table 1**), which suggests a much broader range of considerations that may be useful when approaching employee wellbeing in the changing workplace.

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[3] also known as the "Stress and Health Study"

**Table 1: A revised list of quality of working life criteria
(adapted from Walton, 1973, 1974), (Grote and Guest, 2017, p156)**

Criterion	Description
Adequate and fair compensation	Pay meeting socially-determined minimum and fair standards; equal pay for equivalent work
Safe and healthy environment	Promotion of healthy work and work environment
Development of human capacities	Jobs that promote skill development, decision-latitude and task identity
Growth and security	Jobs that promote employability and opportunities for personal development
Social integration	Positive organisational climate and psychological safety; accommodating diversity
Constitutionalism	Respect for and protection of employees' rights and mechanisms for employee representation
Consideration of the total life space	Adequate concern for balancing demands from different life domains
Social relevance	Adherence to socially responsible practices in the organisation
Individual proactivity*	Support for personal initiative without undue transfer of employment risks to the employee
Flexible working*	Flexible working schemes to bridge organisational and employee interests

Note: * not included in Walton's original list.

Causes of stress for the local council sector

<u>Working hours</u>

The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) conducted a survey of Clerks' working hours in 2013 which demonstrated that: (a) the majority were working more than their contracted hours (96% of part-time and 92% of full-time Clerks), and (b) for 84% their workload had increased in the previous 5 years (SLCC,

2013b). These results suggest that the **demands** on Clerks are high – a potential source of stress as identified by the HSE (no date, d). As a result of the survey the SLCC made a number of recommendations, including:

- Introducing of a table of minimum working hours for various categories of councils – *this was approved, but individual councils and Clerks are free to make their own agreements.*
- Including regular reviews of working hours and the conduct of annual appraisals in the NALC/SLCC National Terms and Conditions Agreement – *outstanding[4].*
- Carrying out research into efficiency measures which can be shared as best practice – *outstanding.*

Front-line services

Tummers et al (2015) reviewed the literature relating to the stress experienced by front-line public sector workers, e.g. police officers, teachers, healthcare workers and social workers, when delivering public services and how they adapt to cope. Although local council staff are not involved in such critical (often life and death) roles, the nine coping techniques identified in the study could potentially by adapted for the local council sector (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Coping families and ways of coping (Tummers et al, 2015)

Coping family	Way of coping	Description
Moving towards clients	Rule bending	Adjusting the rules to meet a client's demands
	Rule breaking	Neglecting or deliberately obstructing the rules to meet a client's demands

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[4] The agreement was last updated in 2004 (NALC/SLCC, 2004) and the model contract in 2011 (NALC/SLCC, 2011).

	Instrumental action	Executing long-lasting solutions to overcome stressful situations and meet client's demands
	Prioritising among clients	Giving certain clients more time, resources, or energy
	Use personal resources	Using one's own time, money, or energy to benefit the client
Moving away from clients	Routinising	Dealing with citizens in a standard way, making it a matter of routine
	Rationing	Decreasing service availability, attractiveness, or expectations to clients or client groups
Moving against clients	Rigid rule following	Sticking to rules in an inflexible way that may go against the client's demands
	Aggression	Confronting clients in a hostile manner

Ethical standards/Code of Conduct

In 2017, SLCC commissioned surveys of SLCC members and Monitoring Officers[5] to gather evidence on:

"issues relating to council governance, the Code of Conduct and standards arrangements under the Localism Act 2011" (Hoey and Ainscough, 2018)

Key data from the report include:

- 15% of responding councils reported serious issues with councillors' behaviour (ibid, p3)

[5] The role of Monitoring Officers is established by s.5 of the Local Government & Housing Act 1989, as amended by schedule 5, paragraph 24 of the Local Government Act 2000. In this context their role relates to the investigation of complaints made about members under the local council's Code of Conduct.

- 15% described the atmosphere in their council as "generally negative" (p5)
- 10% described negative relationships between councillors and staff. (p8)

It was also reported that people have "ended up being hospitalised through stress" (p14). Problems are caused:

> "more by individuals who are seen as disruptive elements, acting in an aggressive, disrespectful and bullying way than by a complete breakdown in governance in the council." (p6).

These results suggest significant **relationship** issues – another potential source of stress identified by the HSE (no date, d).

Some Clerks reported that they had left previous roles as a result of the way they had been treated, and some were either pursuing or considering employment disputes (p4). An expectation that Clerks should work more than their contracted hours remains (p5).

High levels of complaints were reported relating to disrespectful behaviour (83%), bullying (63%) and disruptive behaviour (31%) (p.12). A significant level of dissatisfaction with the way complaints are handled by monitoring officers was reported, which Hoey and Ainscough surmise may be caused by the lack of effective sanctions available (p11). A minority of Clerks reported that they (and sometimes their councillors) "no longer see the point in making a complaint" (p3).

The report's recommendations were fed in to the Committee on Standards in Public Life consultation on local government ethical standards (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2018). SLCC's response to the consultation noted the impact of poor behaviour on health and staff turnover and recommended a

national Code of Conduct and effective sanctions, including the ability to suspend or disqualify an elected member (SLCC, 2018b).

NALC also conducted a survey on ethical standards and reported majority support for:

- a single mandatory Code of Conduct
- stronger sanctions for breaches of the Code
- more Code of Conduct training. (Lancod-Frost, 2018)

The Ledbury Case – *R (Harvey) v Ledbury Town Council* [2018]

This judicial review considered Ledbury Town Council's response to a grievance raised by two employees relating to alleged bullying and harassment by two councillors. The conclusion was that all complaints about councillor conduct should be dealt with through Code of Conduct procedures, even if they are raised by employees, unless they can be dealt with informally. This leads to concerns about heavier workloads for Monitoring Officers, more principal authority involvement in local councils, and further delay and distress for complainants (Moore, 2018, p.17).

Managing stress

Employers have a legal duty to "protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it" (HSE, no date, a).

The HSE provide sample risk assessments (no date, c) and a workbook for employers which provides advice and guidance on how to manage stress in the workplace (no date, d). These resources may be useful to local councils up to a point, especially those with larger workforces, but will be of limited value to smaller councils for which they are overly complicated.

The most commonly used management techniques reported by the CIPD survey (2016) include:

- Stress reduction: "staff surveys, flexible working options/improved work-life balance and risk assessments/stress audits".
- Mental health: "flexible working options/improved work-life balance, employee assistance programmes and counselling".
- General wellbeing: "access to counselling services and employee assistance programmes", and well-being activities focusing equally on "physical health, mental health and good lifestyle choices". (CIPD, 2016, pp.5-6).

Sector-specific guidance

Guidance specific to local councils is very limited. The National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) *Being a Good Employer* contains only one passing reference to stress in relation to workloads (NALC, 2016, p9). A request was submitted to NALC for any literature or research data relevant to this research, but no response was received (Bojaniwska, 2018).

SLCC publish no advice specific to stress, but do publish guidance on related topics: handling criticism (SLCC, 2009), employee handbooks (SLCC, 2013a), resolving conflict situations (SLCC, 2012), and a dignity at work/bullying and harassment policy (SLCC, 2018a).

The LGA (representing employers of public sector staff in local authorities) might be expected to publish guidance on stress, but only offer advice on managing stress specific to councillors' role and not officers (LGA, 2017b).

Medical research

This section highlights research which is helping to shape approaches to tackling the issue of workplace stress.

Some studies have explored the link between personality type and temperament regarding stress.

Friedman and Rosenman (1959) identified common personality traits in coronary patients: "immensely competitive, over-achieving, impatient, under time pressure and hostile" (p79).

Harzer (2015) demonstrated that personality traits and character strengths directly relate to a person's ability to cope with work-related stress and protect against its negative effects. This has positive implications for managing stress because there is evidence that training can help develop relevant character strengths and improve coping skills (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, in Harzer (2015)).

Jamieson et al (2012) tested the theory that, "changing the way we think about our bodily responses can improve our physiological and cognitive reactions to stressful events". Their results confirm the possibility that people can be trained to "cognitively control their responses to stress (i.e. show 'mind over matter')", which supports the idea that people can be trained to manage stressful situations more effectively.

Robertson (2016 and 2017) also explores the potential for changing patterns of thinking and simple actions, such as clenching one fist or adopting a "power pose", to alleviate stress.

The benefits of mindfulness and meditation training are also a strong focus for research. Carmody and Baer (2008) found that participants in a "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program" who had been suffering from "stress-related problems, illness, anxiety, and chronic pain" experienced improvements to their wellbeing and a reduction in their symptoms.

Research by Klatt et al (2008) demonstrates that even a "low dose" intervention in the form of a MBSR programme can create significant reductions in stress levels.

Keller et al (2012) investigated whether people's perceptions that stress has negative health outcomes influences their actual outcomes. They concluded that:

> "High amounts of stress and the perception that stress impacts health are each associated with poor health and mental health. Individuals who perceived that stress affects their health and reported a large amount of stress had an increased risk of premature death."

Another area of research considers the efficacy of social connectedness as mitigation for stress. Research by Cacioppo and Hawkley (2003) and Uchino et al (1996) demonstrated the efficacy of social connectedness in mitigating the serious health effects of stress. Poulin et al (2013) have demonstrated that people who regularly help and support others experience a reduction in stress-related mortality.

Employment law

In addition to their duties under health and safety legislation as described above, Councils have contractual obligations to their employees which include an implied term that they will:

> "provide and maintain a working environment which is reasonably tolerable to all employees. Such term must apply to protection from unacceptable treatment and behaviour and unauthorised interference in work duties". *Moores vs Bude Stratton Town Council* [2000]

Summing up

The literature review identifies potential causes of stress-related illness and absence from work in local government and suggests a number of areas for research within the local council sector to examine the extent and nature of the problem and then explore potential solutions.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

Research questions

The following questions were informed by the Literature Review (Chapter 2).

1. To what is extent is stress a problem for local council staff?
2. How are staff affected? (Medical symptoms, sickness absence, emotional and behavioural issues, staff turnover etc.)
3. Is there any correlation between particular job roles, the size of the council, working hours and the level of stress?
4. How do the levels of stress and sickness absence for local council staff compare to the public sector generally and the wider population?
5. What are the causes of stress and are there any that are peculiar to this sector?
6. What steps are local councils and their staff taking to manage stress and how effective are they?
7. What support is available to council employees? Is more needed?
8. What could sector bodies do to help councils fulfil their responsibilities as employers?

Research design

The chosen research design was a cross-sectional survey of staff working for local councils in England and Wales, followed up by telephone interviews with a randomly-selected sample of 6 survey respondents.

It is acknowledged that there is a potential for bias in that people who have experienced problems with stress were more likely to respond to both the survey and the invitation to participate in the surveys. In an attempt to overcome this, the invitations included a prominent message that people did not have to have experienced stress to participate.

There is also the potential for "social desirability bias", defined as:

> "A distortion of data that is caused by respondents' attempts to construct an account that conforms to a socially acceptable model of belief or behaviour" (Bryman, (2012, p.716)

Some of the questions refer to mental health issues, which still have a degree of stigma associated with them. The ability to respond anonymously has potentially helped to overcome this, but there remains the possibility that some people may be reluctant to admit, even to themselves, that they are experiencing these kinds of problems.

Research framework

The research was conducted in accordance with the *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association* (2002), and the De Montfort University *Guidelines For Good Research Practice* (2016a)*,* and *Policy on Conducting Sensitive Research* (2016b).

Research ethics

Careful consideration of the impact on respondents of revealing personal health-related information was required, and a risk assessment was carried out to look carefully at measures required to protect both participants and the researcher (**Appendix 1**).

People were allowed to participate in the survey completely anonymously in the hope that this would encourage people to speak openly about their experiences with no fear of any consequences. Name and contact details were provided only by those willing to participate in the interviews (31% of respondents).

Interview participants were provided with both a written and a verbal warning that in accordance with the *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association* (2002, para.37) and the risk assessment (**Appendix**

1), the researcher would be obliged to report any concerns if their responses indicate a clear risk that they intend to cause physical harm to themselves or others.

Data protection was an important consideration – all survey and interview data were stored securely, with password protection for electronic records, and destroyed as soon the results had been processed.

Recognising that the survey might raise troubling memories and emotions for participants, a list of suitable sources of help and support was provided at the end of the survey. Where appropriate, interview participants were also provided with recommendations for further advice and support.

Interview participants were also advised that they could suspend the interview at any time (*British Sociological Association,* 2002, para.22).

Survey

The survey was delivered online between 14/5/2018 and 6/6/2018, using the SurveyMonkey website (SurveyMonkey, 2018). A complete set of the eighteen questions asked is provided in **Appendix 2**.

Table 3 sets out how the survey questions relate to the research questions.

Table 3 - Survey questions mapped against Research Questions	
Research Question	**Survey Questions**
1. To what is extent is stress a problem for local council staff?	5, 8, 9, 10, 13
2. How are staff affected? (Medical symptoms, sickness absence, emotional and behavioural issues, staff turnover etc.)	6, 7, 8, 9, 10
3. Is there any correlation between particular job roles, the size of the council, working hours and the level of stress?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

4. How do the levels of stress and sickness absence for local council staff compare to the public sector generally and the wider population?	8, 9
5. What are the causes of stress and are there any that are peculiar to this sector?	10, 11, 12,
6. What steps are local councils and their staff taking to manage stress and how effective are they?	14, 15
7. What support is available to council employees? Is more needed?	16, 17, 18
8. What could sector bodies do to help councils fulfil their responsibilities as employers?	16, 17, 18

In order to maximise the potential response rate, the survey was made open to all staff employed by local councils in England and Wales. An invitation to participate in the survey was published via the following channels:

- posts on SLCC online forums[6]
- email to Chairs and Secretaries of all SLCC branches with a request to circulate the survey to their branch members
- email to all county associations and One Voice Wales (NALC, 2018) (representative bodies for local councils in England and Wales, respectively) with a request to circulate the survey to their branch members (NALC, 2018).

It is acknowledged that not all councils belong to their County Associations, not all council employees are eligible to join the SLCC and not all Clerks are members either, but there was no practical means of contacting council employees with no connection to either organisation. However, these approaches had the potential to reach the majority of councils as membership rates are high:

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[6] At the time of survey publication SLCC was in the process of transferring from forums on Yahoo (SLCC, 2018e and 2018f) to a new forum based on its own website (SLCC, 2018c). To ensure maximum coverage all of these forums were used to promote the survey.

- SLCC members work for 5,000 councils (SLCC, 2018d)
- 85% of the 8,572 councils in England belong to NALC (via their County Associations) (NALC, 2017, p.5)
- 75% of 730 councils in Wales belong to One Voice Wales (One Voice Wales, 2016, p.5, and Welsh Government, 2018).

As the main point of contact for the majority of councils was likely to be the Clerk, the invitation included a request that the survey be shared with other council employees to promote a broad range of participation from people in other job roles.

The survey questions were designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The invitation to participate contained a realistic estimate of how long it would take to complete the survey, which Bryman (2012, p.675) suggests encourages participation and prevents people from dropping out part-way through. The survey also contained a progress bar, which is also said to prevent people dropping out (ibid).

Questions 1 to 5 were designed to gather data to test if there is any relationship between the levels of stress reported and respondents' roles or the sizes of the councils that they work for (based on their budgets and number of employees).

Responses to "Other" for Question 1 were either coded against the nearest equivalent of the options provided (e.g. "Clerk, RFO and Proper Officer", "Clerk/Finance Officer" and "Clerk/RFO" were all added to the total for Clerk/Chief Executive). Additional roles identified were:

- Community development
- Councillor
- Events Officer.

Responses to Question 4 (number of staff) ranged up to 100. To assist analysis results were therefore grouped as follows:

- 0
- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-100

Responses to Questions 1 to 4 were then mapped against the responses to Question 5 to check for any correlation.

Questions 6 and 7 were designed to test which stress symptoms respondents have experienced, and how frequently. The options for both questions were based on the descriptions provided by the NHS (2017) and Mind (2013a). Bryman (2012, p.258) counsels against stretching people's memories too far, so a one-year period was chosen to provide a good window into people's experiences. It was felt that most people should be able to remember whether they have been feeling stressed or unwell in that time-frame.

Question 8 was a simple test of the levels of stress experienced, acknowledging that some people will have sought medical help, but not then taken time off work. Question 9 then quantified how many days sickness absence had accrued, so that a comparison could be made to data for local government and the wider population (LGA, 2017a; ONS, 2017 and CIPD, 2016).

Questions 10 to 12 sought to identify the causes of stress. Question 10 asked respondents to estimate their ratio of personal to work stress on a scale of 1 (all work), to 100 (all personal). This acknowledges that people may be

experiencing stress for reasons completely unconnected to work. Question 11 included 12 statements – two based on each of the six causes of stress identified by the HSE (no date, d) – see **Table 4**.

Table 4: Statements classified by HSE categories (HSE, no date, d)		
A	I am able to choose the work that I do and how I do it.	CONTROL
B	I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are.	ROLE
C	I am consulted about any changes that the Council(s) is/are considering making.	CHANGE
D	I am provided with any necessary training or support if changes to my job are made.	CHANGE
E	I experience bullying and harassment at work.	RELATIONSHIP
F	I find it hard to meet my work deadlines.	DEMANDS
G	I receive support and encouragement from my line manager.	SUPPORT
H	I understand how my work fits in to the Council's aims and objectives.	ROLE
I	My councillors support me when problems arise.	SUPPORT
J	My relationships with work colleagues are good.	RELATIONSHIPS
K	My working time can be flexible.	CONTROL
L	I am able to complete all of my work within my agreed working hours.	DEMANDS

The responses were then scored as shown in **Table 5**. A weighted average was calculated to determine the relative significance of the statements. Where the statements were positive in nature, higher weightings were given to lower occurrences in the respondents' experiences, and vice versa.

Table 5: Scoring matrix for survey question 11					
	Score				
Question 11 Statements	**Never**	**Seldom**	**Some-times**	**Often**	**Always**
Positive (A, B, C, D, G, H, I, J, K & L)	5	4	3	2	1
Negative (E & F)	1	2	3	4	5

Question 12 provided an opportunity for respondents to provide examples of observed causes of their stress. Responses were coded as detailed in **Appendix 3**.

Question 13 tested whether or not the situation was improving or deteriorating.

Questions 14 and 15 were designed to test which steps respondents had taken themselves to solve their problems and whether or not those steps had been effective. Responses to "Other" for Question 14 were coded as detailed in **Appendix 3.**

Questions 16 to 18 were designed to test what measures councils have put in place to address issues relating to stress, whether or not those steps had been effective, and to elicit further ideas for improvements.

Responses to "Other" for Question 16 were coded as detailed in **Appendix 3**.

The combined results for Question 16 were then grouped into the following categories to aid analysis:

- staff policies
- staffing contact
- staff training
- stress policies
- other support
- none/not required.

Responses to Question 18 were coded as detailed in **Appendix 3**.

Respondents were then asked whether or not they would be prepared to be interviewed and, after completing a data protection statement, there was an opportunity to provide their name and contact details.

Interviews

Potential participants were selected at random from those who had expressed a willingness to be interviewed on the telephone. People known to the researcher were excluded from the selection in order to avoid bias based on prior knowledge. Invitations to participate included explanations about confidentiality and research ethics – for full text see **Appendix 4**. Fourteen people were approached, eight people responded and six interviews were carried out in September and October 2018.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain additional qualitative information by exploring participants' personal experiences of stress, (if any), using open questions in a semi-structured format to: "let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the interviewer" (Denscombe, 1998, p.113).

Telephone interviews were chosen in preference to face-to-face, partly due to cost and time considerations, but also acknowledging that participants might feel more comfortable answering sensitive questions without an interviewer being physically present (Bryman, 2012, p.488). It was considered that people would feel uncomfortable being recorded, so handwritten notes were taken.

Following a brief introduction about the purpose of the research, participants were reminded about the issues mentioned in the invitation concerning confidentiality and reporting concerns. The subsequent questions explored participants' experience of the issues raised in the survey and their feelings about what solutions might work best for them.

The survey notes were then reviewed and the results are analysed in Chapter 4.

An email was received from a Clerk who had experienced significant health issues relating to stress at work who wanted to share their experience as a warning to other council employees about the importance of taking stress seriously. Their story is reported with the interview results in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 Results and Analysis

Survey

Response rate

There were 381 responses to the online survey.

It is not possible to state exactly how many councils are represented, because there may have been multiple respondents from some councils. However, it is estimated that this represents between 5.6% and 6.1% of local councils. This range is calculated by comparison to the total number of councils (9,302) in England and Wales (8,572 and 730, respectively) (NALC, 2017, p.5; One Voice Wales, 2016, p.5), where:
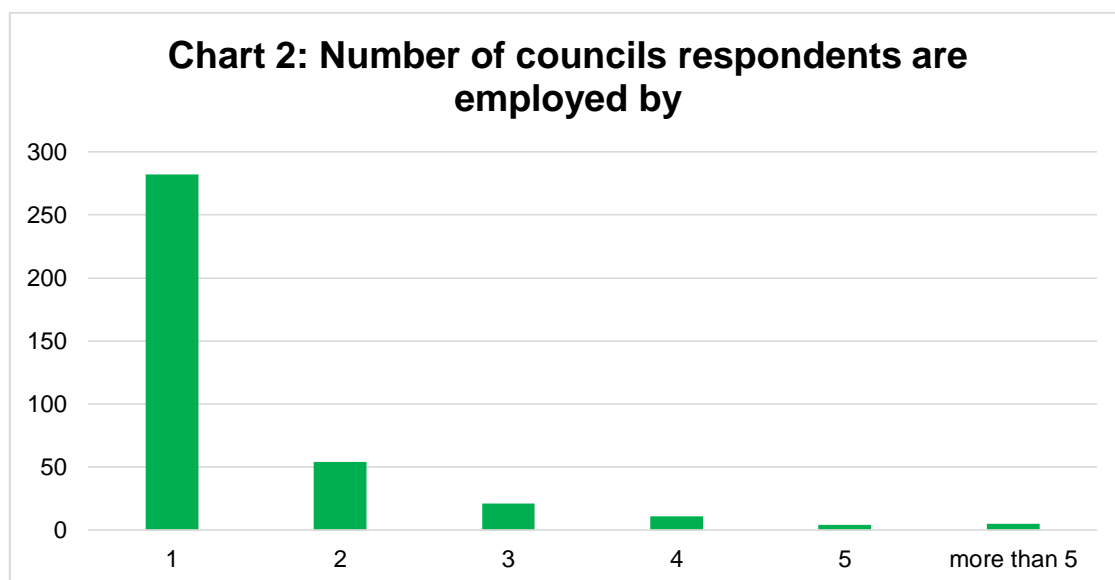
- Minimum = respondents in Clerk or equivalent roles multiplied by the number of councils that they work for (councils normally have one Clerk or equivalent) (520)
- Maximum = total respondents multiplied by the number of councils that they work for (568).

25% of respondents work for more than one council.

Profile of respondents

The majority of respondents (62%) work for smaller councils with a budget (or average budget for those with more than one employer) of up to £100,000 (**Chart 1**), and the majority (75%) work for just one council (**Chart 2**). The number of councils that respondents work for ranged from 1 to 15.

Although there is likely to be some duplication of work for Clerks who work for multiple councils it was surprising to find 3 respondents working for 10 or more, given that the SLCC recommended minimum is 17.5 hours/month (SLCC, 2013b), which, when compared to the full time equivalent of 210 hours/month (37 hours/week), would suggest a maximum of 9 councils.

Chart 1: Average 2018-19 budget

A bar chart titled "Chart 1: Average 2018-19 budget" with the y-axis showing percentages from 0% to 35% and the x-axis showing budget categories:

- under £25,000: ~32%
- £25,000 to £99,999: ~30%
- £100,000 to £199,999: ~11%
- £200,000 to £299,999: ~11%
- £300,000 to £399,999: ~5%
- £400,000 to £499,999: ~3%
- £500,000 to £999,999: ~6%
- Over £1m: ~2%

Chart 2: Number of councils respondents are employed by

A bar chart titled "Chart 2: Number of councils respondents are employed by" with the y-axis showing values from 0 to 300 and the x-axis showing:

- 1: ~282
- 2: ~53
- 3: ~20
- 4: ~10
- 5: ~3
- more than 5: ~4

Experience of stress

30% of respondents had experienced either a great deal or a lot of stress-related health issues over the last year, and only 11% none at all (**Chart 3**).

Chart 3: During the past year, how much effect has stress had on your health?
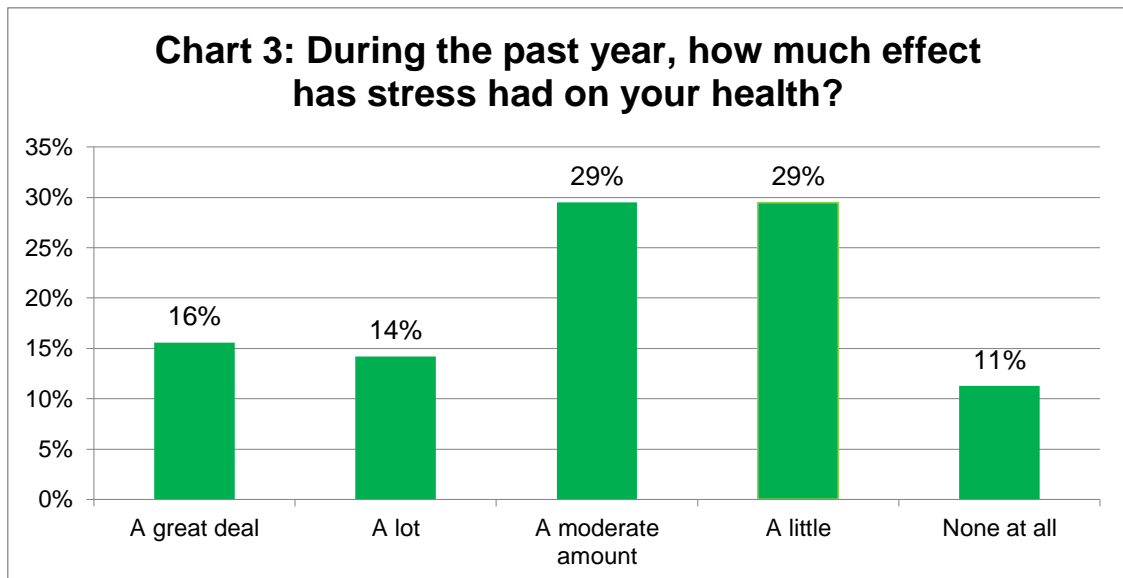
The number of responses from employees in roles other than Clerk were relatively small (11%) and from a wide range of different roles, which meant it was difficult to measure any variation in stress effects between different jobs. A simple comparison between Clerks and all other roles, did not demonstrate any significant differences (**Chart 4**).

Chart 4: Experience of health effects from stress by role
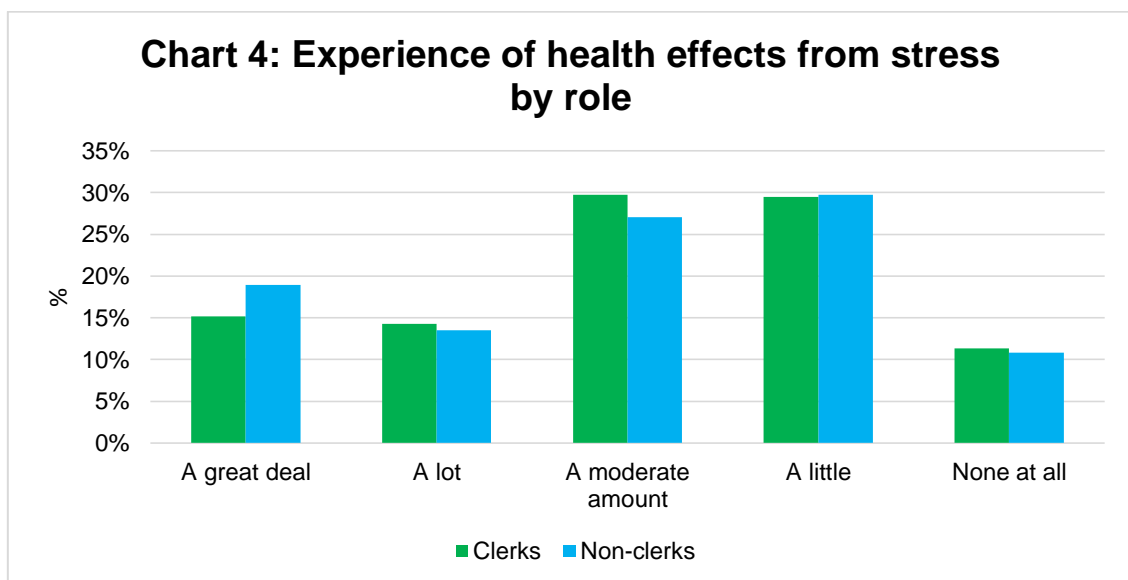
Further analysis compared the levels of stress to the size of council in terms of budget (or average budget for people work for more than one). Responses to Question 3 were scored using a weighted average and then compared to bands

of budgets (Chart 5). People working for the smallest councils (budgets below £25,000) reported the highest levels of stress – with an average score of 3.44, which is between "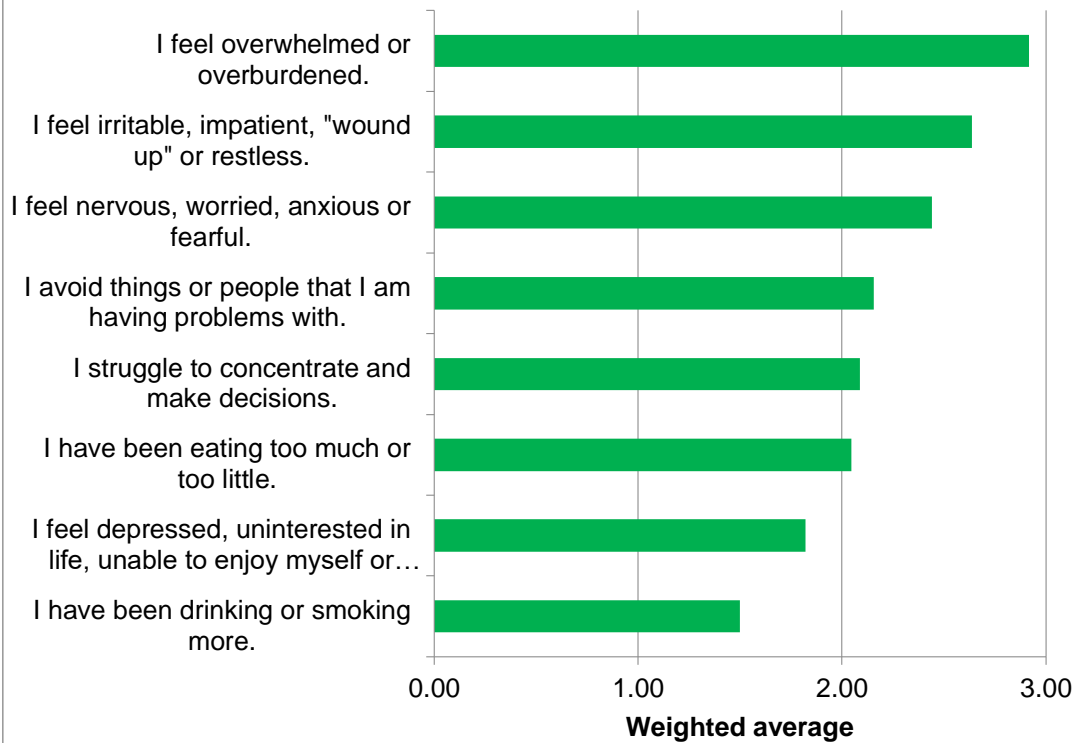moderate" and "a lot". The lowest score was recorded for the £200,000 to £299,999 band (2.44) which is between "a little" and "a moderate amount". However, the number of respondents working for councils with a budget over £100,000 was relatively low (Chart 1), so it is difficult to draw any significant conclusions from this.

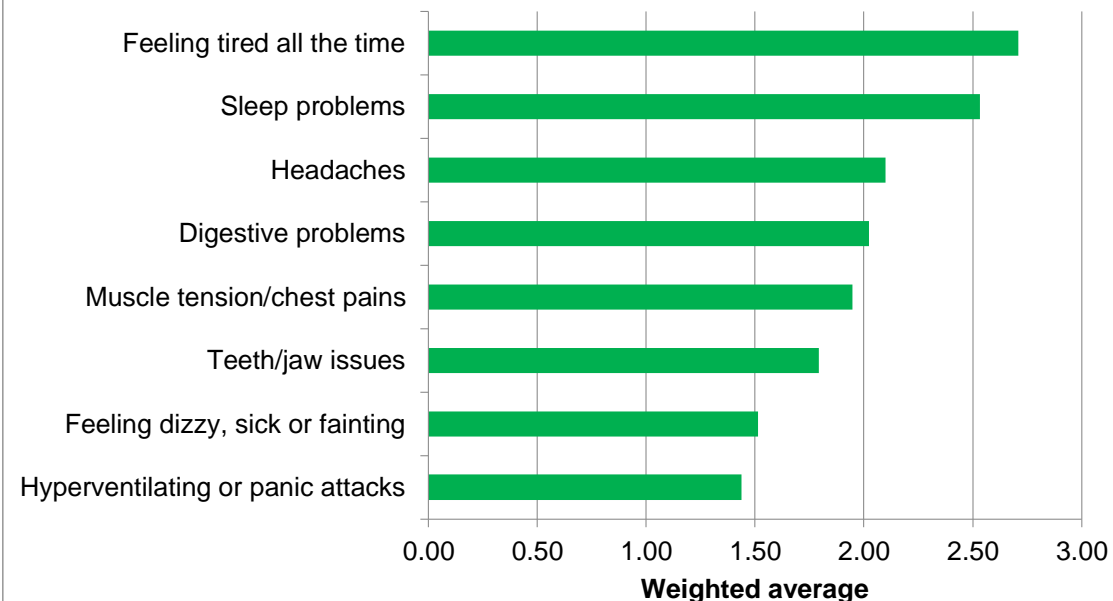**Chart 5: Experience of stress by size of council**
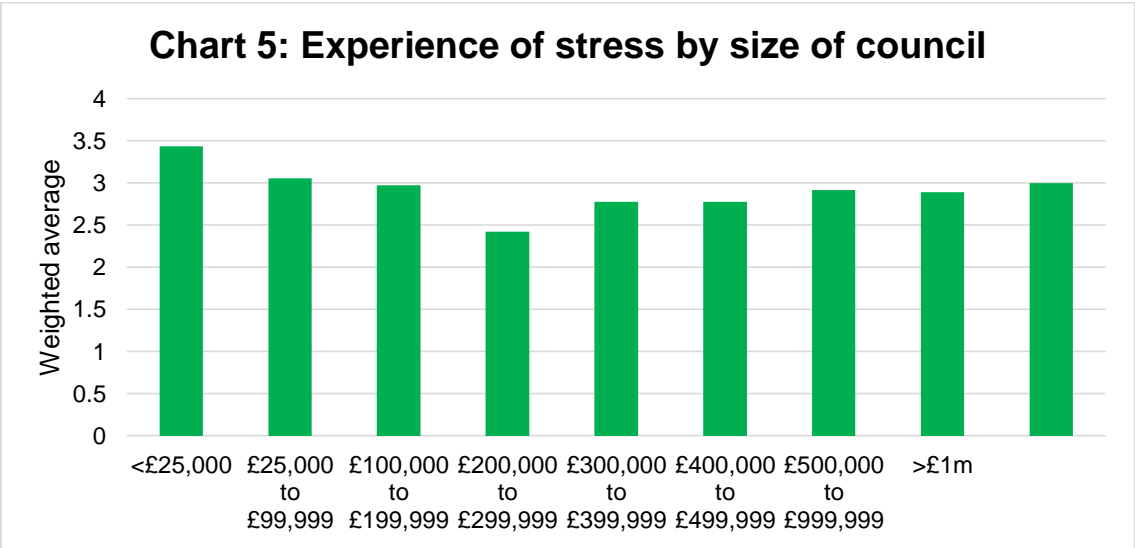
Stress symptoms experienced

Chart 6 shows weighted average scores demonstrating the frequency with which respondents experienced typical behaviours and feelings associated with stress. The highest average was for "I feel overwhelmed or overburdened", with a weighted average of 2.92 which most closely equates to "Some of time", which was scored at 3.

Chart 6: Behaviour and feelings

Statement	Weighted average
I feel overwhelmed or overburdened.	~2.9
I feel irritable, impatient, "wound up" or restless.	~2.6
I feel nervous, worried, anxious or fearful.	~2.5
I avoid things or people that I am having problems with.	~2.1
I struggle to concentrate and make decisions.	~2.05
I have been eating too much or too little.	~2.0
I feel depressed, uninterested in life, unable to enjoy myself or…	~1.8
I have been drinking or smoking more.	~1.5

Chart 7: Physical symptoms

Symptom	Weighted average
Feeling tired all the time	~2.7
Sleep problems	~2.5
Headaches	~2.1
Digestive problems	~2.05
Muscle tension/chest pains	~1.95
Teeth/jaw issues	~1.8
Feeling dizzy, sick or fainting	~1.5
Hyperventilating or panic attacks	~1.45

Chart 7 shows weighted average scores demonstrating the frequency with which respondents experienced typical physical symptoms associated with

stress. The highest average was for "feeling tired all the time", with a weighted average of 2.71, which most closely equates to "Some of the time", which was scored at 3.

22% of respondents had visited their doctor in the last year as a result of the stress they had experienced.

In the survey there were 334 responses to the question *How many days sick leave have you taken in the last year as a result of the stress symptoms you have experienced?* 9% had taken sick leave and reported a total of 492 days, and an average of 16.4 days of sick leave, which equates to 1.47 days per worker. The longest absence from work was 112 days.

ONS (2017) report that on average a worker takes 4.3 sick days per year of which 7.7% are attributable to "stress, depression and anxiety", which is 0.33 days per worker. The survey reported an average of 1.47 days, which is thus **4.45** times higher than the general population (see **J** in **Table 6** below).

ONS (2017) report higher sickness rates for public sector workers (2.9% versus 1.7% for private sector workers, against an average of 1.9%), so if we expect sickness rates for local council employees to be similar to those in the public sector generally, they would be 53% higher than average, i.e. 0.51 days per annum. The results were in fact **2.91** times higher than that (**K** in **Table 6**).

| Table 6: Analysis of absence rates			
ONS survey (2017)	**Code**	**Result**	**Formula**
General population			
Average days off per person - all causes	A	4.30	
% of days off caused by stress etc.	B	7.7%	
Average days off per person caused by stress etc.	C	**0.33**	A x B
Public sector			
Public sector sickness rate	D	2.90	
Private sector sickness rate	*E*	*1.70*	
General population sickness rate	F	1.90	
Ratio public sector/general population	G	1.53	D/F
Public sector - average days off work per person caused by stress etc.	H	**0.51**	C/G
Survey results			
Average days off per person caused by stress	I	1.47	
Ratio of days off compared to general population	J	**4.45**	I/C
Ratio of days off compared to public sector	K	**2.91**	I/H

By comparison, CIPD (2016) report an average of 10.5 days sick leave for local government employees of which 13% is attributable to "stress" (1.37 days), which is much closer to the survey results.

It would be wrong to draw firm conclusions from these results as the methodologies of these studies differ in terms of how the data was collected and the definitions of stress used, but they do provide a useful indication of typical absence rates for comparison purposes and suggest a potential area for further research. The number of responses to this survey is also very small in comparison, but does suggest that absence levels related to stress for local council employees are higher than those of the general population and at least equivalent to those in local government generally.

<u>Causes of stress</u>

The average rating of the proportion of stress that was attributable to work was 32 (where 1 = all work-related and 100 = all personal). This suggests that 68% of respondents' stress is work-related. As can been seen from Chart 8, the highest peaks were at the high and mid points, where stress is either all or partly due to work. The highest peak was for all stress is work-related (20%).

Chart 8: Is stress related to work or personal issues?
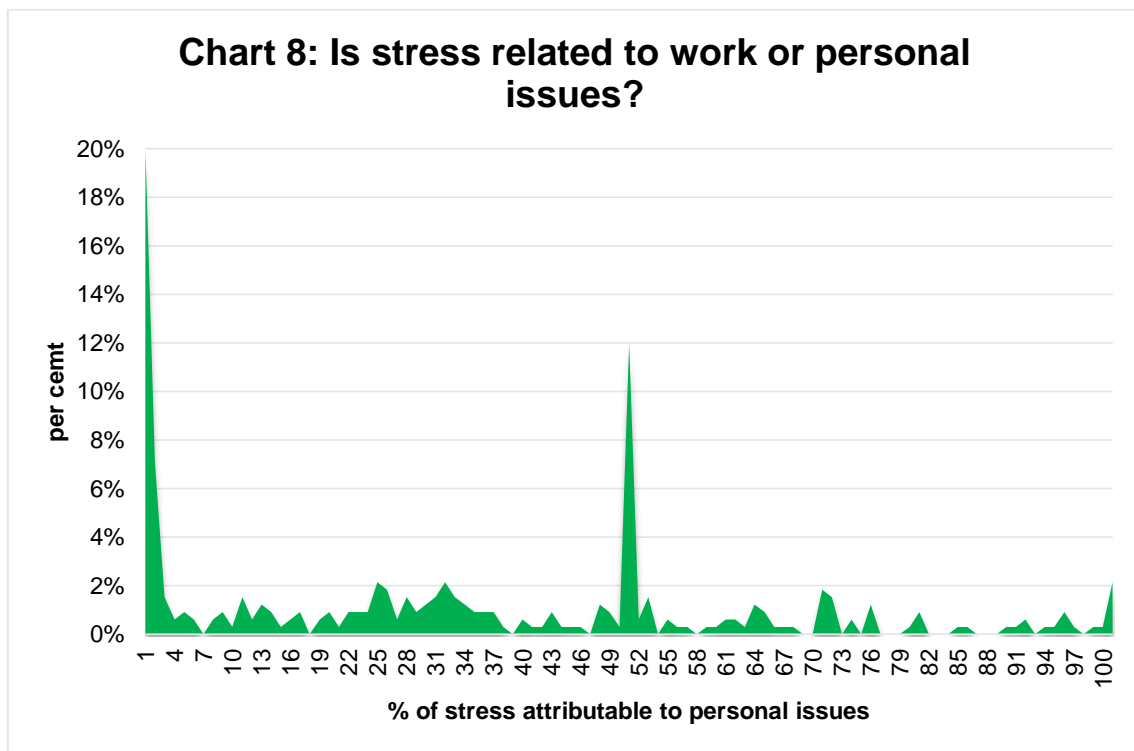
The responses to the 12 statements in Question 11 are shown in **Table 7** below. These indicate that the demands of the job (volume and deadlines) are the greatest causes of stress. (Italics indicate where statements have been reversed for scoring purposes.) In terms of the causes of stress identified by the HSE (no date, d), "demands", "support" and "control" represent the most significant causes of stress.

Table 7: Analysis of causes of stress		
Statement	**Category HSE (no date, d)**	**Weighted average**
I am *(not)* able to complete all of my work within my agreed working hours.	DEMANDS	3.46
I find it hard to meet my work deadlines.	DEMANDS	2.69
I *(do not)* receive support and encouragement from my line manager.	SUPPORT	2.58
I am *(not)* able to choose the work that I do and how I do it.	CONTROL	2.42
My councillors *(do not)* support me when problems arise.	SUPPORT	2.36
I am *(not)* provided with any necessary training or support if changes to my job are made.	CHANGE	2.20
I experience bullying and harassment at work.	RELATIONSHIPS	2.03
I am *(not)* consulted about any changes that the Council(s) is/are considering making.	CHANGE	1.97
My working time can *(not)* be flexible.	CONTROL	1.80
My relationships with work colleagues are *(not)* good.	RELATIONSHIPS	1.77
I *(do not)* understand how my work fits in to the Council's aims and objectives.	ROLE	1.71
I am *(not)* clear what my duties and responsibilities are.	ROLE	1.67

Particular work issues reported are shown in **Table 8**:

Table 8: Analysis of work issues	
Work issue (% of comments)	**Typical comments**
Work volume deadlines (36%)	• "Insufficient contracted hours to enable me to deal with ever-increasing workload." • "It is purely the quantity of things to deal with and the unrealistic expectations of council "customers". The "me me" world has taken over." • "Constantly being asked to work extra hours and being contacted and expected to work at weekends and when I am on holiday" • "Council wont [sic] precept for more staffing so I end up working to get things done as my part time staff are unable to work extra."
Cllr behaviour (31%)	• "Constant criticism from some Councillors who do not understand the role of the Clerk" • "Bad behaviour by a few Councillors who bully and harass staff and other members, and who seem out of control."
Specific tasks (19%)	• "New regulations on transparency • "GDPR" (22 mentions)[7] • "Managing volunteers" • "Year End activities and deadlines"
None (16%)	
Public behaviour (10%)	• "Vexatious members of the public for which there seems to be no real protection from for the clerk or cllrs" • "Council not dealing adequately with bullying behaviour of parishioners and or ex councillors"
Managing staff (4%)	• "Being the "go-between" between staff and councillors." • "Management of staff who constantly have to be reminded they are there to work"
Lone working (2%)	• "I don't really have any work colleagues to discuss issues/ best practice with, or ask advice from." • "Being the lone worker & being responsible for everything is stressful."

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[7] The survey coincided with the period leading up to the regulations coming into effect on 25/5/2018.

Lack of training (2%)	• "Have learnt 'on the job' so sometime [sic] feel I am winging it with regards to legislation & finance issues!" • "I am new to the role and finding out information and details I need as part of the learning process can lead me to worry what I might have missed from the past or stuff I need to learn that I don't know." • "There never seems to be any additional 'down' time to get on with other things such as CiLCA/training."
Problems with principal authority (2%)	• "Small councils are bombarded with information from the unitary authority"
Resigned (1%)	• "I have been bullied by 4 Councillors ... I have lost motivation and I am moving on and have handed my notice"

When asked whether their situation was improving or deteriorating, only 14% of respondents reported that things were getting better, whilst 55% said things were getting worse. 31% said things were staying the same.
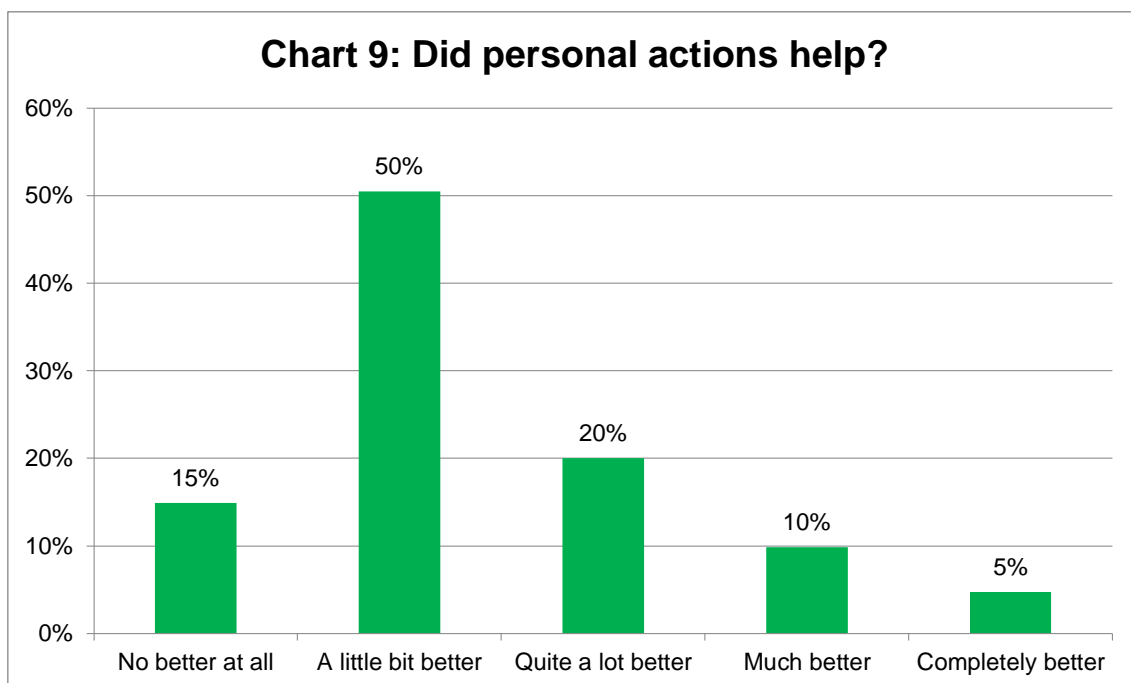
Combining the responses to the questions about the causes of stress and the impact on employees, given that workload and deadlines are greatest cause of stress, it is no surprise that the most commonly reported feelings are: "overwhelmed or overburdened" and "irritable, impatient, 'wound up' or restless", with associated physical responses of "feeling tired all the time" and "problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares".

Problem solving measures taken by respondents

Table 9 shows the commonest measures respondents had taken themselves to solve their problems.

Table 9: Analysis of measures taken by respondents	
Measure	**Proportion of respondents**
Talked to friends and family	66%
Talking to other clerks/employees	58%
Discussed issues with line manager	34%
Mindfulness	23%
SLCC or ALCC helpline	22%
Made a formal complaint	13%
Self-help books	10%
Moved to a new council	9%
Nothing	*8%*
Counselling	6%
Exercise	3%
Changed working style	3%
Considered leaving	1%
Fewer councils/hours	1%
Dealt with personal issues	1%
Took a break	1%

Generally these steps were reported to have helped (see **Chart 9**), even if only a little bit. However, only 15% felt much or completely better as a result, which suggest that more help is needed. It is notable that the first resort for respondents was to talk to people close to them, rather than their managers or councillors, which suggests that people value having personal support networks to call on when they feel stressed. Only 22% had made use of SLCC or ALCC helplines. One response that stands out is the 9% of respondents who said that they had moved to a new council, which suggests significant churn of jobs.
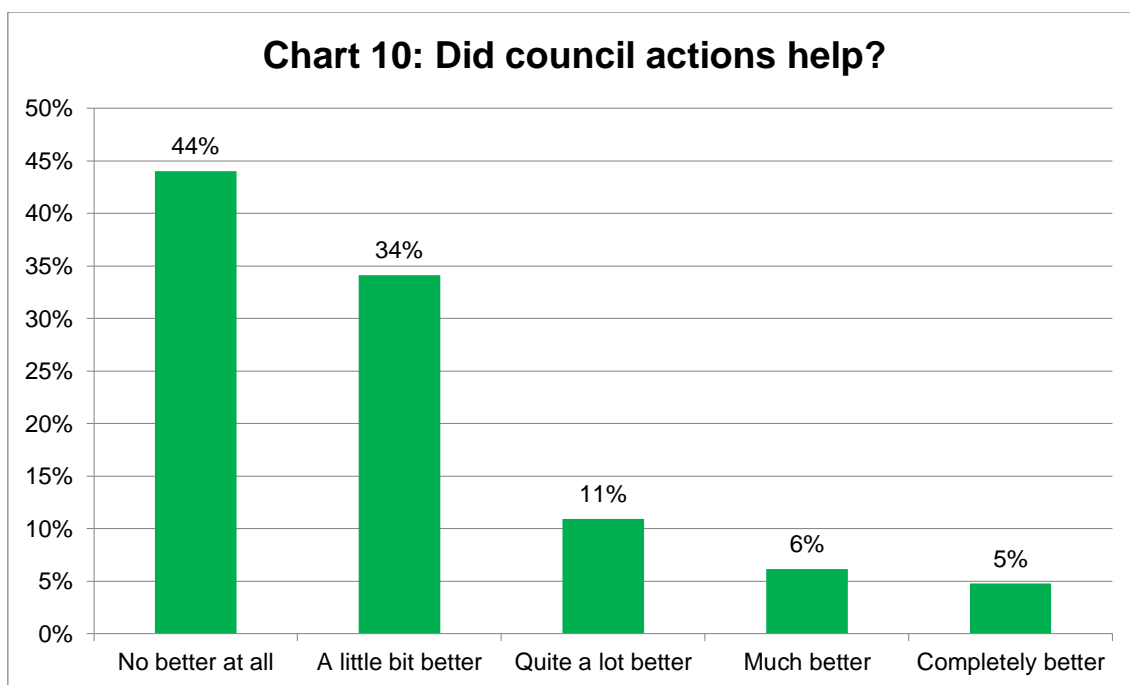
Chart 9: Did personal actions help?

A bar chart titled "Chart 9: Did personal actions help?" with the y-axis ranging from 0% to 60% and the following categories and values:

- No better at all: 15%
- A little bit better: 50%
- Quite a lot better: 20%
- Much better: 10%
- Completely better: 5%

Problem-solving measures taken by councils

The survey asked what measures councils have in place and what actions they have taken to help employees manage stress. Responses are shown in **Table 10**.

Table 10: Analysis of measures put in place by councils	
Measures	**Respondents reporting this**
Grievance and disciplinary policies	19%
Staff training and development policy & budget	14%
Periodic staffing reviews	13%
Family-friendly policies (e.g. Time off for Dependants and Flexible Working Hours, Compassionate leave)	13%
Employee handbook	8%
Regular staff meetings	8%
Other: None of the above	*8%*
Member/officer protocols	7%
Other: Councillor support	3%

External support (e.g. occupational health or counselling)	2%
Stress management policy	2%
Stress risk assessment	1%
Other: Not required	1%
Other: (appraisals; councillor training; helpline; more staff; payrise)	1%

Generally these steps were reported to have helped, but only 11% felt much or completely better as a result, and 44% felt no better at all – **Chart 10**. Given that some of the policies listed could be considered basic requirements for responsible employers (e.g. grievance and disciplinary policies and employee handbooks), and some are legal requirements (e.g. stress risk assessments), the reported rates are very low. It's is also of concern that 8% report that none of the items listed are in place and 1% felt that they were not needed.

Chart 10: Did council actions help?

No better at all	44%
A little bit better	34%
Quite a lot better	11%
Much better	6%
Completely better	5%

When asked what further steps respondents' council(s) could take to improve things the following suggestions were made (**Table 11**).

Table 11 Suggestions for further steps	
Suggestions (% respondents)	**Typical comments**
Manage workload (24%)	• "Have more realistic expectations on workload." • "Either reduce my workload or increase my hours."
Support staff more (15%)	• "Make sure holidays can be taken" • "I often find that Clerks are there to motivate staff, Cllrs and volunteers, but who is supposed to motivate us Town Clerks?"
Training for councillors (12%)	• "Better training for councillors re Code of Conduct at meetings (and outside meetings)." • "Understand that they are 'employers' regardless of the fact that they are volunteers!"
Provide more staff (11%)	• "Take on additional staff to relieve the pressure"
Communication improvements (9%)	• "Regular meetings between staff and Councillors, outside of the monthly council meeting" • "Take time to listen and view what is actually happen [sic] in the office."
Manage councillor behaviour (9%)	• "Deal with the rogue members, who are in a minority and stop them from dominating meetings!"
Stronger code of conduct (3%)	• "Nationally a Code of Conduct is needed which can disqualify a Councillor from office if they are found to bully other Councillors or the Clerk."
Replace councillors (3%)	• "All resign and get a new bunch of councillors in who are more in tune with modern thinking."
Training for staff (2%)	• "Let me take some formal training e.g. ILCA" • "As a parish who's [sic] precept is half the clerks [sic] salary we cannot afford to send the clerk/treasurer or councillors on training."
Performance review/appraisals (2%)	• "More frequent reviews & feedback"
Specific techniques (2%)	• "CBT and Relaxation techniques"
More hours (1%)	• "Provide enough staffing hours to carry out work with less pressure and more emphasis on quality and some praise."

Pay more (1%)	• "Review salary payments between staff members"
Use policies (1%)	• "Use of new policies to restrict councillors undermining staff."
Powers to deal with vexatious members of the public (0.4%)	• "Be given more powers to deal with vexatious members of the public"
Private health insurance (0.4%)	

These comments are consistent with the causes of stress reported earlier in the survey and collectively indicate a need for many councils to take their responsibilities to their employees more seriously in terms of managing their workload, and ensuring that they have systems and policies in place to manage workplace stress.

Interviews

The six interview participants between them work for 10 councils including:

- 2 larger councils – budgets over £500,000 and more than 20 staff
- 1 medium size council – budget £200,000 to £299,999 and 2 staff
- 7 smaller councils – budget <£100,000 and 1–4 staff.

Their roles included 2 Deputy Clerks and 8 Clerks. Although participants were randomly selected they were broadly representative of the survey respondents.

Five out of six interviewees had experienced work-related stress, predominantly as a result of general workload pressures and inappropriate behaviour, either by councillors or colleagues. The interview results are summarised below and include both the issues raised and potential solutions.

Workload

There were consistent reports of councils failing to anticipate workload requirements:

- one respondent was working 125 hours per month when only contracted for 10 per week; another regularly works 45 hours per week, when contracted for 37.
- taking on extra work without additional staffing, e.g. a major building project and picking up additional responsibilities/services from principal authorities.

Councillor behaviour and Code of conduct

Many examples of inappropriate behaviour were reported, ranging from a lack of respect – "they speak to you like an office junior" or describing a Clerk as a "secretary", to more serious misconduct.

A pattern of strong language emerged with participants describing problem councillors variously as: "classic bullies", "monsters", "misogynist", "hateful man".

The Code of Conduct was described as "pathetic" and "not worth the paper it is written on". Several examples were reported of Clerks having been driven out of their jobs following targeted campaigns by a "particular councillor". In one case even after a grievance and Code of Conduct complaint had been upheld, the councillor was able to remain on the council for 6 months. It was suggested that whilst Clerks can influence councillor behaviour, they are powerless to deal with "loose cannons".

A Monitoring Officer had advised one Clerk that it would be pointless sending a councillor guilty of making racist and homophobic comments for training – it wouldn't work, because he had no understanding of what he had done wrong[8].

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[8] In this case the situation was resolved by persuading the councillor to resign.

All agreed that a stronger Code of Conduct with robust sanctions, including disqualification, was needed. It was felt that the Ledbury case – *R (Harvey) v Ledbury Town Council* [2018] had not helped.

Failing to acknowledge stress

Two respondents reported having become seriously ill because they had failed to acknowledge the health risks of stress. The following comment was received by email:

> "Nearly six months ago I suffered a heart attack at the age of 51 which was directly linked to stress ... It came completely out of the blue – I have no history of [health issues]. But, as my cardiac consultant said 'you can't live constantly with stress hormones for five years and think you will get away with it'."

Another reported that before being signed off work they had told them self, "I could cope, it was just pressure". There was also some evidence of people just putting up with stress and accepting it as an unavoidable part of the job – they "shrug and get on with it". The importance of being able to recognise the tipping point between normal work pressure and stress was identified.

Staff relationships

One respondent reported a dysfunctional relationship with their line manager which councillors had failed to address and where HR advice had been ignored. A Clerk from a larger council spoke of the importance of regular communication with staff and the need for councils to adopt family-friendly policies. Managing staff, especially those who do not pull their weight, was difficult because of HR law.

Lone working

Physical and psychological isolation was reported as a stress factor for Clerks working alone from home – "there is nowhere to go to let off steam at lunchtime".

Public behaviour

Issues relating to public misunderstanding of the role of local councils, particularly regarding planning, were reported. It was felt that more could be done to raise awareness of the sector's role and responsibilities.

Other issues

Issues were suggested during interviews which had not been mentioned in survey. Comments included:

- Gender – as an issue relating to bullying.
- Politics – political councils can be more stressful, particularly where dual-hatted councillors are involved and when different parties control different levels of local government.
- Disability – failure of councils to recognise and make adjustments for disabled staff.
- Social media – e.g. councillors making racist comments on Twitter (2 mentions).
- Training – one respondent was being pressured to complete CiLCA, but not being allowed study time.
- Recruitment failures – e.g. a Clerk with no "people or management skills".

Councillor training and recruitment

Some respondents felt that regular training for councillors would be welcome, but there was no consensus about whether compulsory training would work. An online training course for councillors was suggested, like the ILCA and CiLCA courses. One respondent described their councillors as "old and stuck in their

ways". Several described their councillors as "old school" and resistant to training, because they have been doing it so long they think they know it all. It was felt that councils could benefit from encouraging younger people to stand for election.

<u>Training for staff</u>

The following suggestions were made:

- Time management – to help with workload.
- Personal resilience

<u>Other potential solutions</u>

- Allowances – it was proposed that compulsory payment of an allowance to all councillors might encourage greater professionalism.
- Principal authorities could take responsibility for ensuring that local councils are informed about legislative and regulatory changes. (Respondent had worked for councils with no county association of SLCC membership.)
- Having a strong Chair or another line manager to turn to, was seen as important in coping with the cause of stress.

Survey results and interviews combined

The experiences described in the interviews are entirely consistent with the survey results, with issues relating to workload and inappropriate, and in some cases malicious, behaviour by a minority of councillors emerging as primary causes of stress.

Areas for further research

Equality related issues were frequently mentioned in the interviews, specifically sexism, racism and in one case a failure to recognise a disability. The bullying and harassment of female Clerks was mentioned several times. More targeted research is needed to identify the extent and nature of this problem.

More training for councillors (and potentially making it compulsory) was suggested – more research could be directed at understanding councillors' training needs and their willingness to participate.

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This results of this research confirm the hypotheses that **local council employees experience significant levels of stress** and **that more action is required by sector bodies and individual councils to protect their health and wellbeing**.

It has been established that local council employees take more time off work as a result of stress than the general population, and that 9% of respondents had changed employers as a result of stress. This impacts on service delivery and has cost implications for local council tax payers.

The impact on individual employees is manifested in reports of health and behavioural symptoms consistent with exposure to stress. 22% had visited their doctor for stress-related issues in the last year. Use of SLCC and ALCC helplines was low at 22%.

The most significant reported causes of stress were workloads and deadlines, and unacceptable behaviour by a minority of councillors. To an extent council employees expect their jobs to be stressful at times, and there was some evidence of people tolerating consistently adverse working conditions without complaint. However councils, like all employers, have legal responsibilities to their staff under Health and Safety legislation and contracts of employment. It was concerning that very few councils had even basic employment policies and procedures in place and only 1% had carried out stress risk assessments.

There is a clear need for councils to take their duties as employers more seriously and for sector bodies (SLCC, ALCC and NALC) to do more to encourage and support this.

Recommendations for sector bodies

- Continue to lobby government for a stronger Code of Conduct with robust sanctions, including where necessary disqualification of councillors.
- Commission a toolkit and training to support stress management, including sector-specific guidance on assessing and managing workload, and producing stress risk assessments.
- Provide training for employees on personal resilience and dealing with difficult people.
- Campaign for greater awareness of the impact of stress and fight the stigma associated with the mental health issues that it can cause.
- Promote advice and support services more.
- Promote the establishment of local support networks to reduce isolation for lone working Clerks.

Recommendations for council employees

- Clerks to encourage their councils to adopt appropriate employment policies and procedures. (Potentially with support from County Associations where resistance is met.)
- Learn to recognise the signs of stress and seek support when necessary.
- Seek out training and support, particularly techniques based on reframing your response to stress, e.g. McGonigal (2015) and Robertson (2016).
- Try mindfulness and meditation techniques.

Recommendations for councils/councillors

- Recognise that although being a councillor is a voluntary role it comes with important responsibilities, including legal duties towards employees.
- Seek training on employment responsibilities, especially for any councillors on staffing committees.
- Carry out a risk assessment, put in place steps to mitigate stress, and review regularly.

Final words

Advice from a respondent who had suffered a stress-related heart attack:

"Stress is not worth risking your health over."

[Word count: 9,858]

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Appendix 1 Risk Assessment

<table>
<tr><td colspan="9" align="center">Risk Assessment Form</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="9">Task/Activity: Research Project on The impact of stress on parish, town and community council staff in England and Wales</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Location/Dept: SLCC Comm. Gov. Course</td><td colspan="4">Date Assessed: 2/4/2018</td><td colspan="2">Issue Number: 1</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Assessed by: Helen Bojaniwska (17033753)</td><td colspan="4">Review Date: None</td><td colspan="2">Reference Number:1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Activity/ Task</td><td>Hazard/Risk</td><td>Persons at risk</td><td>Controls in place</td><td>Severity (1-5)</td><td>Likelihood (1-5)</td><td>Risk Rating</td><td colspan="2">Additional controls required</td></tr>
<tr><td>Online survey</td><td>Psychological or mental distress triggered by the discussion of sensitive or disturbing experiences.</td><td>Survey participants</td><td>Participants can abandon survey at any time. List of sources of advice and support provided.</td><td>2</td><td>2</td><td>4</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Telephone interviews</td><td>Psychological or mental distress triggered by the discussion of sensitive or disturbing experiences.</td><td>Interviewees Interviewer</td><td>Clear instructions issued to participants, including option for either researcher or interviewee to suspend interview if it becomes too distressing. List of sources of advice and support provided.</td><td>2</td><td>2</td><td>4</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
</table>

Storage of confidential data	Psychological or mental harm or distress caused by accidental breach of data security. Prosecution for breach of Data Protection legislation.	Survey participants Interviewees	Surveys can be completed anonymously. Personal data collected only with consent. All electronic data stored on secure systems and password protected.	2	1	2	
Telephone interviews	Harm to self or others	Interviewees	Clear instructions issued to participants, including a note that if their responses indicate a clear risk that they intend to cause physical harm to themselves or others, their confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Interviewer to report any concerns to appropriate authority. (See: Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association (March 2002), Online: www.britsoc.co.uk/media/23902/statementofethicalpractice.pdf paragraph 37).	5	1	5	

Number Risk grades for this Risk Assessment	High 0	Medium 0	Low 4

Risk Rating Indicator Key

Severity (Consequence)
1. Negligible (delay only)
2. Slight (minor injury / damage / interruption)
3. Moderate (lost time injury, illness, damage, lost business)
4. High (major injury / damage, lost time business interruption, disablement)
5. Very High (fatality / business closure)

Likelihood
1. Improbable / very unlikely
2. Unlikely
3. Even chance / may happen
4. Likely
5. Almost certain / imminent

RISK RATING PRIORITY INICATOR MATRIX

LIKELIHOOD	5	5	10	15	20	25
	4	4	8	12	16	20
	3	3	6	9	12	15
	2	2	4	6	8	10
	1	1	2	3	4	5
		1	2	3	4	5

SEVERITY (CONSEQUENCE)

Summary		Suggested Timeframe
12-25	High	As soon as possible
6-10	Medium	Within next 3-6 months
1-5	Low	Whenever viable to do so

Appendix 2 Online Survey

CONFIDENTIAL - Stress survey

INTRODUCTION
This survey is part of a research project on The Impact of Stress on Local Council Staff. It is open to all staff employed by parish, town and community councils in England and Wales (not just Clerks or chief executives). Please share this survey with your colleagues if your council employs other staff.

Please note that you do not have to have experienced problems with stress to participate in the survey.

The survey can be completed entirely anonymously, but if you would like to participate in further research there will be an opportunity to provide your contact details at the end.

1. What is your job title?
- ⦿ Clerk/Chief Executive
- ○ Deputy Clerk
- ○ Assistant Clerk
- ○ Finance officer/RFO
- ○ Projects officer
- ○ Administration officer
- ○ Estates/green spaces manager
- ○ Grounds person or ranger
- ○ Caretaker
- ○ Other (please specify) [   ]

2. How many councils do you work for?
- ○ One
- ○ Two
- ○ Three
- ○ Four
- ○ Five
- ○ Six
- ○ Other (please specify) [   ]

About your council(s)

3. What is the 2018-19 budget for the council(s) that you work for? *(Please use the average budget if you work for more than one council.)*

○ under £25,000

○ £25,000 to £99,999

○ £100,000 to £199,999

○ £200,000 to £299,999

○ £300,000 to £399,999

○ £400,000 to £499,999

○ £500,000 to £999,999

○ Over £1m

4. How many staff are employed by the council(s) that you work for? *(Please use the average number if you work for more than one.)*

○ One

○ Two

○ Three

○ Four

○ Five

○ Six

○ Seven

○ Eight

○ Nine

○ Ten

○ Other (please specify) [   ]

Your attitude to stress

5. During the past year, how much effect has stress had on your health?

○ A great deal

○ A lot

○ A moderate amount

○ A little

○ None at all

<u>Your experience of stress</u>

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" http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/wbk01.pdf

Stress can lead to many different physical, mental and emotional symptoms.
In this section the questions relate to your personal experience of stress (if any).

6. Behaviour and feelings

Please tick all of the statements that have been true for you in the year:

	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
I feel overwhelmed or overburdened.					
I feel irritable, impatient, "wound up" or restless.					
I feel nervous, worried, anxious or fearful.					
I struggle to concentrate and make decisions.					
I feel depressed, uninterested in life, unable to enjoy myself or tearful.					
I avoid things or people that I am having problems with.					
I have been drinking or smoking more.					
I have been eating too much or too little.					

7. Physical

Please tick all of the stress-related symptoms that you have experienced in the last year:

	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
headaches					
muscle tension or chest pains					
feeling dizzy, sick or fainting					

feeling tired all the time					
shallow breathing, hyperventilating or panic attacks					
problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares					
grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw					
digestive problems (e.g. indigestion, heartburn, constipation or diarrhoea)					

8. Have you visited your doctor in the last year as a result of the stress you have experienced?

○ Yes

○ No

9. How many days sick leave have you taken in the last year as a result of the stress symptoms you have experienced?

[   ]

Causes of stress

10. Do you think that the stress that you have experienced over the last year is related to work or personal issues?

completely work related   equally work and personal   completely personal   50   Clear

11. Please rate the following statements about how your job affects your wellbeing:

	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Some-times	4 Often	5 Always
I am able to choose the work that I do and how I do it.					
I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are.					
I am consulted about any changes that the Council(s) is/are considering making.					
I am provided with any necessary training or support if changes to my job are made.					

I experience bullying and harassment at work.					
I find it hard to meet my work deadlines.					
I receive support and encouragement from my line manager.					
I understand how my work fits in to the Council's aims and objectives.					
My councillors support me when problems arise.					
My relationships with work colleagues are good.					
My working time can be flexible.					
I am able to complete all of my work within my agreed working hours.					

12. Are there any particular work issues which make you feel stressed?

13. In relation to work only have your stress levels changed overall over the last year?

- ⦿ much worse
- ○ a bit worse
- ○ the same
- ○ a bit better
- ○ much better

14. Other than seeking medical help, what steps have you personally taken to improve things?

- ☐ Sought advice from SLCC or ALCC helpline
- ☐ Used self help books
- ☐ Talked to other clerks or council employees
- ☐ Use mindfulness techniques, e.g. meditation
- ☐ Sought counselling
- ☐ Talked to friends and family
- ☐ Made a formal complaint (e.g. under Code of Conduct or grievance policies)
- ☐ Moved to a new council
- ☐ Discussed issues with line manager
- ☐ Other (please specify)

15. Have these steps helped? As a result of these steps I feel:

○ no better at all

○ a little bit better

○ quite a lot better

○ much better

○ completely better

What can councils do?

16. What measures do your council(s) have in place and what actions have they taken to help you manage stress?

☐ Employee handbook

☐ Family-friendly policies (e.g. Time off for Dependents and Flexible Working Hours, Compassionate leave)

☐ Member/officer protocols

☐ Stress management policy

☐ Stress risk assessment

☐ Grievance and disciplinary policies

☐ Periodic staffing reviews

☐ Staff training and development policy & budget

☐ Regular staff meetings

☐ External support (e.g. occupational health or counselling)

☐ Other (please specify)

┌────────────────────────┐
│   │
└────────────────────────┘

17. Have these measures helped? As a result of these steps I feel:

○ no better at all

○ a little bit better

○ quite a lot better

○ much better

○ completely better

18. What further steps could your council(s) take to improve things?

┌──┐
│   │
└──┘

Further research

19. Would you be willing to participate in further research (a short telephone interview) on this subject?

  ○ Yes

  ○ No

Contact details

20. Please provide your name and contact details below.

Name	
Email Address	
Phone Number	

Data protection

21. Data protection
I consent to my personal information being held only for the purposes of this research. I understand that my personal information will be stored securely and not shared with anyone else.

  ◉ Yes

  ○ No

Thank you

Thank you for helping with this survey.

Help and support

If you feel that stress is a problem for you, more help and support can be found from the following sources:

SLCC counselling service 0117 927 1912

ALCC professional, independent employment support and advice

www.nhs.uk health advice

www.mind.org.uk health advice

Appendix 3 Coding of Survey Responses

Question 12

- behaviour of councillors
- behaviour of members of the public
- lack of training
- lone working
- managing staff
- none
- problems with principal authority
- resigned (where respondents indicated that they had resigned to avoid problems that were causing stress)
- specific tasks (e.g. implementation of new General Data Protection Regulations and "year end")
- volume of work and deadlines.

Question 14

- changed job
- changed working style
- considered leaving
- dealt with personal issues
- exercise
- extra staff support
- family support
- fewer councils/hours
- medication
- nothing
- prayer
- took a break
- training.

Question 16

- appraisals
- changed working pattern
- councillor training
- helpline
- more staff
- pay rise.

Question 18

- communication improvements
- manage councillor behaviour
- manage workload
- more hours
- more staff
- none
- pay more
- performance review/appraisals
- powers to deal with vexatious members of the public
- private health insurance
- replace councillors
- specific techniques
- stronger code of conduct
- support staff
- training for councillors
- training for staff
- use policies (that are already in place).

Appendix 4 Invitation to participate in further research

Earlier this year you kindly completed my survey on stress at work and indicated that you would consider helping out with further research. Your name has been selected at random from the list of people who volunteered for this. I would be very grateful if you could let me know if you would be willing to take part in some further research in the form of a short telephone interview during the next few weeks. Please note that you do not have to have experienced problems with stress to participate.

This research is being carried out for a dissertation on 'The Impact of Stress on Local Council Staff', as part of my final year of study on the Society of Local Council Clerks Community Governance degree course in partnership with De Montfort University.

The purpose of the interview is explore in more depth some of the issues identified in the survey and to learn from people's first-hand experiences of working for local councils. The interview will take about 20 minutes and can be arranged at a time to suit you (daytime/evening/weekend). The results will be presented completely anonymously and any notes taken will be securely stored and destroyed as soon as the dissertation has been completed.
I recognise that for some people discussing stressful experiences might be psychologically or mentally distressing, so you will be completely free to suspend or abandon the interview at any time should you find it too troubling.

The research is being carried out in accordance with the guidance in the [Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association](#) (March 2002). I must draw your attention to paragraph 37 as you should understand that I am obliged to report any concerns to an appropriate authority should your responses in the interview indicate a clear risk that you intend to cause physical

harm to yourself or others. In those circumstances alone, your confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

 To arrange an interview please telephone [MOBILE NUMBER] or email [EMAIL ADDRESS]

Helen Bojaniwska