



Stress is a key cause of sickness. Helen Gilbert examines how one force has cut sickness by almost half in two years.

Photography: Lisa Ryszkowska

Stress has officially overtaken back problems as the leading cause of sickness absenteeism in the UK, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2005 Employee Absence Survey. But it is an area the police service and the Government have been investigating for some time.

In 2002, stress and mental health issues were reported as the leading causes of sickness absence among officers says Gordon Tinline, director of Robertson Cooper, a business Psychology company. By the following April the Home Office had implemented its *Strategy for a Healthy Police Service*.

The strategy was put together with the help of police staff associations, the Association of Police Authorities, the Association of Chief Police

Officers, and professional organisations involved in police care.

A total of £19 million was made available over four financial years to aid forces in developing initiatives to tackle the problem. It appears to have worked. In 2003 to 2004 the average officer sickness absence stood at 77.8 hours per year, while police staff came in at 81.5 hours. By 2004 to 2005 those figures had fallen by five per cent and eight per cent respectively.

Now the strategy is under review and ACPO is currently drawing up a consultation document on the 2006 to 2010 version, due to be published shortly.

According to Allyn Thomas, ACPO lead on health and safety and assistant chief constable of Kent Police, part of the new strategy will include best practice examples from forces that have been particularly successful in driving down absenteeism and promoting well-being at work.

"Police forces have been successful in reducing absence," he tells *Police*. "Three years ago the service was at the high end of [sickness absence] in the public sector, now it's at the low end."

For Kent, which has 6,000 staff, the reduction in absence of 25 per cent over 2003 to 2004 and 2004 to 2005 equates to 36 police officers and 30 police staff.

City of London Police is another force which has dramatically improved the quality of its employees' working life in just two years, after it employed the help of Robertson Cooper in 2003.

The organisation helped the force identify the root causes of stress by carrying out a survey of police staff and officers. Respondents were asked to honestly answer questions grouped into sections such as: attitudes towards their organisation, health and perceptions of their job. They submitted views on what troubled them in the workplace and revealed sources of pressure.

The results were then used to build a strategy, identify areas for development and roll out initiatives such as flexible working, training programmes and employee communication reviews. This was followed up with a second audit in 2005 to gauge whether the initiatives had a positive effect on quality of working life in the force.

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The results showed significant improvements. Not only have sickness projections fallen from 10.4 days per officer in 2003, to the current 5.9 days, officers are now happier with their work/life balance, more satisfied with their jobs and feel better psychologically and physically.

According to Mr Tinline, the survey drills down to the root causes of problems in areas such as workloads, relationships, and work/life balance. Findings are then recorded on a database and comparative analysis is made against results from 15 other forces, which the company is working with.

“All staff are issued with a survey,” explains Mr Tinline. “We then do an analysis and break it down into different areas such as rank for officers and level of job for staff, location, where they are working, job function, length of service etc. We then go back with a provisional report on hotspot areas and go in using focus groups and one-to-one discussions.”

Common issues have emerged from across the different forces. The pressure-cooker environment of control and communication rooms means they regularly crop up as problem areas in audits. “The job is very reactive so staff have little control over what they do,” explains Mr Tinline. “They provide 24 hour cover and they get asked to do things outside their remit. They feel their workload has increased.”

The issue of people management also features regularly and it is not uncommon for forces to show good results in one area and poor results in another. According to Mr Tinline, road policing is a prime example.

“They [officers] feel they carry a lot of responsibility. They are at the coal face of incidents happening but they don’t get the priority or attention that sexier areas of policing get. They are told they are specialists but don’t get the rewards. A lot of it is down to effective

people management.”

City of London Police set out to address issues such as these following its first audit and a quality of working life action group, including human resources, the local federation and unions, was established to make improvements.

Resource allocation was identified as a troublesome area. Carolyn Woolley, City of London Police human resources services director, says people were often stressed because they felt there were not sufficient numbers of staff with the right skills in their department. So the action group set about making changes. “It sounds basic but this causes people to be stressed,” she says.

Other changes included rolling out performance development reviews (PDRs) to every employee within the force. According to Ms Woolley, the new PDR system mirrors the integrated competency framework and gives employees a clearer idea of what they are expected to do. “That clarity releases a certain type of stress for people,” she says.

There is now more communication and transparency. Support groups, the City of London Federation and unions are invited to Basic Command Unit away days, a staff suggestion scheme has been re-launched and an anti-bullying and harassment strategy has been developed with regular presentations. Buddying initiatives, internal mentoring schemes and support groups are also in place, while a review of flexible working is also underway.

“There has been an increase in flexible working applications coming through,” adds Woolley. “We’re currently getting people to come along to workshops and tell us what works and what doesn’t. You always hear ‘my job can’t be done on a part time basis.’ We’re trying to challenge the view that there’s no point in asking because [people think] they are not going to get it.”

And that is what is encouraging about well-being schemes. They do not simply focus on those who are sick or off work. They concentrate on looking after healthy staff as well, ensuring they are content by providing support networks and avenues in which they can express concerns. This ultimately boosts productivity and works as a preventative measure.

Professor Cary Cooper, also a director of Robertson Cooper, highlights the importance of proactively managing well-being and motivation to see bottom line benefits. “Stress has long been known to affect health, but we are also increasingly making the link between well-being and productivity. Poor well-being affects an employee’s motivation and their ability to perform, as well as detracting from the value they add to an organisation.

This means that well-being has now become an issue for organisations and if they actively manage it in the way that City of London police has, they can start to see the benefits of success factors like absenteeism and productivity.”

Mr Tinline agrees: “It’s about getting chief officer level buy-in and demonstrating to them why it’s important. It’s about positive well-being for everyone, not just the acutely sick.”

Ms Woolley is a firm advocate of a holistic approach which looks at all areas of a person’s life and how that may be affecting their sickness.

“We have put in place a variety of interventions to make sure people are happy at work. A range of support will mean people will come here and stay here and give us their best. If you improve the quality of working life and work life balance, you can remove a large amount of stress for people. You should have a range of measures which encourage people to work and be well rather than to suffer and be ill.”