

Occupational Stress Risk Assessment: AACE Ambulance Trust

Phase 1 summary findings – Focus groups with control room employees

Key points

- This project commissioned by the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives (AACE) aims to explore the **sources of stress risks in the control rooms**.
- **Phase 1** took place between Dec 2023 and March 2024. **Eight focus groups** were conducted across **four English ambulance trusts**, with a total of 29 participants.
- Through these groups, key causes and consequences of stress were identified – some aligning with the **HSE's Management Standard framework**, others unique and specific to the control room work environment.
- **National-level challenges** were identified with the current NHS and health context influencing the experiences of control room employees.
- Overall, findings highlight issues with:
 - (1) **Works demands** and limited resources to address them;
 - (2) Varied **management** support;
 - (3) Overall **negativity** that can affect the work atmosphere, and **culture around mental health**;
 - (4) Frequent **changes in protocols** with limited communication;
 - (5) **Work-life balance** struggles.

Scope of the project and aims of phase one

The overall project aims to understand the breadth of stress risks facing control room employees and identify those risks that are most predictive of mental health difficulties, so that targeted interventions can be designed and implemented. This is a two phase project and the focus of phase one was a qualitative exploration of stress risks through a series of focus groups with frontline employees. Following the HSE's Management Standards, participants were asked (among other things) about the main challenges in their work in the past year and their relationships at work. Additionally, they were asked about their perceptions of the organisational support provision regarding health and wellbeing. Although this work primarily focuses on stress and its potential impacts on mental health, participants also discussed issues that affect their physical health and overall wellbeing. These issues are reported herein and are equally important to address.

Positive topics

On a positive note, most employees experience strong peer support. The opportunity to have strong support within the team, or at least a buddy, is viewed as immensely important, with some individuals stating that this is the main reason they continue to stay in their role. Employees take pride in the job they do and find their work meaningful, experiencing a sense of fulfilment when they feel that their help has made a significant difference in a patient's situation. Some participants clearly express an internalised sense of responsibility for each patient, underscoring their commitment and dedication. Additionally, the good holiday allowance is positively rated by participants as it is deemed essential for recovering from the long and intense shifts.

Control room challenges

Participants highlight several challenges in their work. Please note that these topics are sometimes broader and more complex than the few sentences used here to depict them. The final project report will provide more detail than this summary.

Understandably, the discussions were influenced by the national health context and the challenges posed by hospital congestion and delays, which increase waiting time for patients and put additional pressure on resources for control room employees to cover their area. For some individuals, this situation is particularly challenging as it leaves them feeling powerless and infringes their ethical beliefs that their role is to protect the patients – a goal that feels increasingly difficult to achieve

given the wider health context. This context seems to influence employee attitudes, resulting in differences that cause some friction: some individuals report going the extra mile, while others seem resigned to accepting the current situation and the limitations they face (e.g., increased waiting times).

Work demands - The main challenge reported by participants is associated with work demands. From our experience, this challenge is becoming increasingly prevalent in many organisations and is not specific to the organisation or the sector. Participants highlight an intense workload due to the volume of calls, further compounded by staff shortages caused by high turnover. Work demands come in various forms and the physical environment can also contribute. In this regard, participants emphasise the high physiological arousal sometimes triggered by the control room environment (e.g., buzzers, flashing lights). Additionally, concerns are raised about the lack of adequate equipment to support individuals with health-related issues. More generally, there are also concerns about the potential for musculoskeletal problems resulting from the aspects of work station during long shifts.

Interestingly, participants did not focus extensively on the calls themselves, although they can be emotionally tough and include abuse from the public, but the focus was rather on other challenges within their working environment.

Culture - Participants detailed and discussed issues around management culture, including areas of perceived poor managerial support, challenges in managing issues within the control room leading to friction, and a variable supportive culture around stress and mental health. Some participants reported a lack of emotional support from managers, either regarding their personal life or work, or even after a major incident. Some reported that the low level of encouragement they receive leads to a feeling of not being valued or appreciated. Others describe the lack of communication and action from management, for example unacceptable work behaviours not being addressed.

In general, participants say that they are exposed to a lot of negativity, from the nature of calls they handle but also from the absence of positive feedback in the control room. Some describe an atmosphere of criticism, continual challenge and blame, which is not balanced by positive reinforcement.

In some areas, participants described the culture surrounding stress as poor, with some management not willing to acknowledge the impact of the job on employees. While there were areas of good support, some practices were reported to negatively impact on stress, including the frequency and nature of calls to those currently on leave for stress or mental health reasons.

Support provisions - There are mixed feelings about the wellbeing support provisions. Some individuals are satisfied with the available services, finding that they cover a wide range of wellbeing issues. Others feel that welfare budgets are not appropriately allocated to meet the necessary provisions, and some had negative experiences with the use of these wellbeing provisions.

Change management - Control room employees also highlight a recurring issue: the constant changes in protocols or scripts for call handlers, which they find difficult to keep up with. These changes are often communicated with very little notice, leaving employees without adequate time to fully process or become aware of the new information. Moreover, there is a perceived lack of consultation regarding these changes and participants feel that their insights could be beneficial in preventing potential issues from arising. Additionally, regarding protocols and scripts, their rigidity and the non-possibility to deviate for them are sometimes found unhelpful when the call handler's nuanced understanding of the context suggests a more appropriate approach.

Work/life balance - Finally, participants share their struggles to balance work and home / personal life, which often lead to stress. Many also describe difficulties in attending personal health appointments, that then become a source of further stress.

Next steps

These results are based on self-reports from a relatively small proportion of employees in four different trusts. While the subjectivity of these reports could be a limitation, these insights will form the basis of a bespoke survey in phase 2, which will provide quantitative data to address this. The survey aims to assess the prevalence of the reported challenges – and the extent to which these issues are widespread – across all English ambulance trusts. Phase 2 also seeks to identify challenges significantly linked to mental health difficulties. This will provide a comprehensive view of stress risks in the ambulance control room context. These insights will aid in prioritising the identified challenges and developing targeted strategies to support the wellbeing of control room employees.

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