

## BPS survey reveals psychology profession under pressure



A new survey by the British Psychological Society (BPS) has revealed a stark picture of a profession under pressure, with psychologists fearing that financial constraints, widespread vacancies and excessive workloads are putting patient care at risk.

In the run-up to the general election, the most comprehensive membership survey ever carried out by the BPS highlights the scale of challenges facing the psychological workforce, including overload, emotional exhaustion and poor work-life balance.

Set against the acknowledged need to significantly expand the psychological workforce to deliver the NHS Long Term Plan, the shortage of psychologists is so severe that the profession was recently added to the Migration Advisory Committee's Shortage Occupation List.

Survey respondents also highlighted significant barriers to entering and progressing in the profession, citing a lack of training places, unclear career paths and difficulty accessing continuing professional development, despite psychology being one of the most popular undergraduate courses.

Psychologists working across a number of sectors responded to the survey, including those who work in the NHS, education, criminal justice and private practice.

Members cited particular difficulty with recruitment, and that funding and resources are not matching demand, with nine in 10 psychologists with responsibility for the recruitment and management of staff in the public sector reporting that vacant posts had resulted in an increasing workload for staff, a drop in the quality of service delivery, and longer waiting lists, particularly in the NHS.

One survey respondent said austerity made it hard for patients to access support:

“On a practical level this means my clinics can be full of people who are not stable or well supported enough to use the intervention my service provides and the sheer task of helping to navigate them to a point where they can be supported is often immense.”

The survey also highlighted a range of organisational issues affecting members' wellbeing.

Overwork was a major issue, with three in 10 psychologists saying they almost always work more hours than contracted.

As many as one in three survey respondents find their work emotionally exhausting, with rates higher in the NHS compared to other sectors.

More than 40 per cent of respondents often or almost always feel worn out by the end of the day, rising to nearly 90 per cent in the NHS.

Overall, more than 14 per cent of members very regularly felt they were so stressed that they want to quit their job and 10 per cent of the members who responded had left the profession because of overwork, stress or feeling undervalued.

Those respondents working in higher education (69 per cent) are more likely to often or always work more than their contracted hours, and clinical psychologists were most likely to report signs of stress and burnout, with 50 per cent saying they are worn out and two-fifths emotionally exhausted.

BPS chief executive Sarb Bajwa warned that swift action was needed to address the impact that challenging recruitment and organisational issues are having on psychologists and patients:

“The survey paints a damning picture of the challenges facing psychologists working across all sectors that are increasingly stretched and under resourced.

The NHS Long Term Plan sets out a welcome blueprint for increasing access to psychological treatment, but it requires a rapid and significant expansion of the psychological workforce.

The results of our membership survey show that psychologists are struggling with excessive workloads, stress and a poor work-life balance, not just in our health service but across the many areas where psychologists are doing vital work.

It simply won't be possible to deliver an ambitious vision for mental health without a psychological workforce which is supported to do its job. We can't have a situation where vacancies go unfilled and create additional workload pressures for other psychologists.

One-third of respondents to the survey felt the support they receive at work is insufficient, so we need to look urgently at increasing funding and support for career progression, training and wellbeing.”

President of the BPS, David Murphy, said:

“We support the vision outlined in the NHS Long Term Plan for England, and the expansion of access to psychological services more widely in all Four Nations, but it simply won't be delivered unless the problems highlighted in this survey are addressed.

The psychological profession is highly skilled and dedicated, it undertakes demanding work under pressure and deserves to be given the support and resources it needs to deliver, whether that is for service users in our NHS or students in our universities.”

Harassment, bullying and abuse was also cited by one in seven respondents as having an impact on their wellbeing. This was frequently reported in the not-for-profit sector where staff work in tough areas like substance abuse services, but less likely in a higher education setting.

In addition to workload issues, discrimination was reported by nearly a quarter of members in their workplace in the last twelve months, with gender the most common reason cited (42 per cent), followed by age and ethnicity.

The survey also highlighted a significant gender wage gap of around £13,000 and male psychologists are around nine per cent more likely to hold senior leadership and management roles.

Sarb Bajwa added:

“The BPS is calling for all political parties to make a firm commitment to addressing these urgent psychological workforce issues. All the parties have set out their own vision for improvements in mental health and wellbeing but the vision is only achievable if the workforce is well resourced and properly supported.

We have outlined in our manifesto a set of priorities which include developing psychological professions as an integral part of the future workforce, establishing strong leadership for psychological professions and protecting the public through stronger regulation. This will ultimately deliver interventions that can both reduce demands on the NHS and other relevant sectors and improve people's lives.”

For further information contact the BPS Communications Team on **0116 252 9500** or email us at [communications@bps.org.uk](mailto:communications@bps.org.uk)

**Notes:**

The survey was sent to all students, graduates and chartered psychologists who are members of the BPS.

A total of 5,772 members took part in the survey and the overall member response rate was just under 17 per cent.

***About The British Psychological Society***

The BPS is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the development, promotion and application of psychology for the public good.

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