COVID-19 INSIGHTS: IMPACT ON STAFF AND PRIORITIES FOR RECOVERY

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SKILLS FOR JUSTICE
OCTOBER 2020

BASED ON THE NATIONAL COVID-19 WORKFORCE SURVEY

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COVID-19 has had – with no danger of understatement – the most profound global economic impact. And it has also impacted on the individual lives of billions worldwide.

Whilst there has been much learnt thus far on the worldwide pandemic policing response from material published around the globe, to date, we’ve seen nothing examining how COVID-19 has impacted on the lives of those working in policing, here in the UK. This research, by Skills for Justice, starts to address that gap.

During June this year, as the first nationwide lockdown began to ease, Skills for Justice asked around 2,600 of those working in the UK public service sector (including those working in policing) about how COVID-19 had impacted on them, and produced this report making use of that research.

It’s a very helpful basis for individuals, for policing organisations, and for those in government to start to learn the workforce-related lessons from the ongoing pandemic. Not just to be better prepared for whenever the ‘next time’ might be, but also to help identify key improvements, needed now and in the near future, to the way things are currently being done.

Whilst our National Health Service’s response to the pandemic has been most visibly in the public eye, it has fallen increasingly on our policing professionals to encourage and ensure compliance with the Government’s COVID-related rules and regulations.

That has been far from an easy ask: for example, as I’m preparing this Foreword, by a tug-of-war between local and national politicians over who decides what the rules might be. Where the message from politicians to the public is unclear, what hope for policing, and for those police officers (and staff) who have to deal with enforcement?

This report helpfully looks at a wide range of COVID-instigated factors impacting on those working in policing and provides some early quantification of their relative impact on the workforce. Whilst many of the impacts are negative, the research also identifies areas where there have been workforce-related benefits. Amongst the areas explored are:

- Mental health: A key area, with “nearly 70% reporting a decline in mental health”.
- Physical health: Not just the risk of contracting COVID-19 for front line staff, and exhaustion from longer hours, but also the impact for those unexpectedly working from home in accommodation not well designed for it – “Nearly half of the public sector workforce has experienced a negative impact on physical health.”
- Communication: Challenging for many experiencing ‘Zoom-itis’ (excessive exposure to online meetings), and much more besides.
- Teamwork: Several positives reported here, with the ‘policing family’ responding well again under pressure – “Everyone has pulled together in these unprecedented times” – but lessons are there to be learned for the future
- Planning: “40.9% of respondents did not feel that their organisation was adequately prepared for a shift in working methods”; also, “94.3% thought that dealing with out of the ordinary situations would be crucial for staff going forward.”

This report provides a good overview of workforce experiences under the pandemic, and it contains a number of key messages. I encourage you to read it in detail – and to consider its implications for your policing organisation. These implications go beyond officers and staff, with elements also being relevant for those in academia, as well as those working in policing’s wider supply chain.

Bernard Rix
Publisher of Policing Insight,
Founder of the World Class Policing Awards
45.4% of public sector workers have reported a negative impact on physical health as a result of the pandemic. This is mainly due to the extra pressure the pandemic has placed on the sector such as working extra hours and coping with related stressors which can have physical manifestations (Figure 2.1).

As the pandemic has brought about an increase in home working, a number of respondents commented on the unsuitability of their home offices, and how as a result they have suffered from musculoskeletal issues.

Exposure to the virus for public sector professionals has also been higher than for the average person, and many have described instances where either themselves or colleagues have contracted the virus.

“Threats to my own health, from people spitting or coming into close contact.”

“50% of my own team has been COVID-positive.”

However, 23.6% have reported that the pandemic has had a positive impact on physical health. This has largely been due to greater numbers of staff working from home and thus partaking in additional exercise (Figure 2.1).

“I like the better work/life balance home working has given me. I don’t have the additional two hours a day commute. My physical health has improved, as I now have more time for exercising which has had a positive impact on my mental wellbeing.”
Mental health impact

The pandemic has had a substantial negative impact on the mental health of public sector workers with 68% reporting a decline in mental health as a result of working and living during the crisis (Figure 2.1).

Poor mental health during the pandemic has generally stemmed from two different work-related settings:

1. **remote working** which has made people feel more isolated, and
2. **stress of working** in settings with direct public contact (higher workloads, new ways of working, risk of catching the virus, patients, residents, or colleagues dying).

This has in numerous instances led to staff requiring sick leave, or even resigning. The impact COVID-19 has had on staff’s personal lives, such as **not seeing friends and family**, has also made it more difficult for the public sector workforce to cope.

“It was difficult keeping so far from friends and loved ones, and missing family who were shielding or unwell. Living with fear and worry was exhausting.”

“**It sometimes became difficult to remain positive, seeing so much suffering, and as some of our patients died. Felt isolating. Boring as unable to do much after work. Felt busy at work, and often mentally challenging and exhausting.”**

Over two thirds say COVID-19 has had a severe impact on their mental health.
Impact on communication

62.8% have recorded an improvement in communication because of the pandemic. Both in terms of an open and honest communication flow between employers and staff, as well as improved means of communications through the implementation and use of new software and platforms (Figure 2.1).

“The company has taken every step to ensure staff wellbeing with welfare calls daily, meetings and communication between managers and staff has increased and the overall sense of team working and general commitment to our roles has increased due to the hard work and determination of all staff to ensure that the service we provide has remained outstanding.”

However, 21.1% of respondents stated that communication across their respective organisation had worsened due to the pandemic. This mainly related to a lack of, or unclear communication flowing down from managers to staff. Such substandard communications have resulted in misunderstandings, stress, and reduced levels of teamwork (Figure 2.1).

“We are seeing excellent communication, after an initial wobble, and lots of new processes and new platforms have been installed and these will continue. These will also have a long-term effect on saving on travelling between sites and claiming expenses.”

Nearly two thirds say internal communication has improved due to the pandemic.

“Guidance and communication lacking from senior management created very poor morale.”
Impact on teamwork

Perhaps surprisingly, during such an uncertain and stressful time, is the positive impact the pandemic has had on several aspects of working life. 74% of respondents reported that the pandemic has resulted in improved team working with members of staff collaborating extensively to ensure the best outcomes possible. (Figure 2.1).

Possibly closely tied to improved team working and the shared aim of containing COVID-19, a large proportion of respondents (68.7%) stated that staff commitment to organisational goals have improved as a result of the pandemic.

Many respondents commented on how determined their teams have been to provide good quality public services and how flexible everyone’s attitudes have been to challenges encountered and new ways of working (Figure 2.1).

“Staff have continually shown a variety of ways in which they are prepared to step up to new challenges and adapt to changing circumstances.”

“My team has taken on beds in a nursing home to enable direct care from hospital (30 beds) without additional support. Team has pulled together to care for our patients in the community.”

“Staff have pulled together and actively embraced re-deployment showing loyalty and commitment.”

“Everyone has pulled together in these unprecedented times. Police have been very busy.”

74% reported collaborative working has improved due to the pandemic.
Support provision

With the pandemic having such a negative impact on the mental and physical health of the public sector workforce, many employers have put support structures and other wellbeing initiatives in place to help alleviate these issues such as free counselling, regular check-ins and taking account of individual needs.

Staff themselves have also made extra efforts to help colleagues by sharing experiences and supporting each other.

Employers also recognised a need to provide additional support, with 69.3% stating that staff wellbeing processes are an immediate need, as well as employee engagement (59.2%). More long-term needs centre on leadership training & development (44.8%) and Organisational Development (50%) (Figure 1.5).

“We established a Welfare team who provided regular updates and information. Managers and others made conscious efforts to remain in contact. Good direction by senior managers with regular informative updates by the Chief Fire Officer.”

69.3% of employers require additional wellbeing support for staff, and half of employers report that Organisational Development is needed for the long-term.
Impact on performance and leadership

Over half of the respondents have also noticed a positive impact on work performance (54.9%) and the ability to manage and lead staff (52.5%). The former is due to processes being made more efficient as to better deal with the pandemic.

The ability for some to work from home has meant that these staff have been able to focus better and thus get more work done (Figure 2.1).

Leadership ability has improved because of clear shared goals in relation to handling the pandemic and in some cases, the implementation of video conferencing has made it easier to connect with staff working across sites.

“Work performance has improved; there are fewer distractions and a crazy amount of time has been saved travelling to and from meetings.”
Organisational priorities

Employers have realised that once the pandemic is over, improving on positive workplace cultures and leadership development are key priorities to address.

Organisations have also recognised the need to improve their digital offer and many are looking to enhance cyber security and engage virtually with clients or service users.

Over 80% of employers are keen to further empower a remote workforce and 78.5% would like to see remote access to everything.

It also seems that the pandemic has made many organisations take stock of the number of meetings, and related travel, having taken place prior to COVID-19. Thus, over 60% would like to see a reduction in these (Figure 2.4).

"Remote working has reduced travel costs."

"New ways of communicating when not in the building have also improved communication and made people less reliant on face-to-face meetings."

More than 60% of employers aspire to reduce travel as well as physical meetings.
The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the mental health of public sector workers with nearly 70% reporting a decline in mental health due to working and living during the crisis. This has led to staff requiring leave, or even resigning.

Additionally, nearly half of the public sector workforce has experienced a negative impact on physical health as a result of the pandemic. This is mainly due to the added pressure the pandemic has placed on the sector, such as working extra hours and coping with related stressors, which can have physical manifestations.

However, nearly a quarter of respondents have reported that the pandemic has had a positive impact on their physical health. This has largely been due to greater numbers of staff working from home and being able to partake in additional exercise. Further positive impact has been improved team working, with members of staff collaborating extensively to ensure the best outcomes for patients.

A large proportion of respondents also stated that staff commitment to organisational goals has improved as a result of the pandemic.

In addition, over half of the respondents also noticed a positive impact on work performance, and the ability to manage and lead staff.

With the pandemic having had such a negative impact on the mental and physical health of the workforce, many employers have already put support structures, and other wellbeing initiatives in place to help alleviate these issues.

Employers have also realised that once the pandemic is over, there are certain key priorities to address, such as improving on positive workplace cultures, and leadership development.

Organisations have also recognised the importance to improve their digital offer, with many looking to enhance cyber security, engage virtually with clients or service users, and further empower a remote workforce.

The author of the Foreword for this report is Bernard Rix, the Publisher of Policing Insight, and Founder of the World Class Policing Awards. Bernard has worked in policing, in a range of senior positions and in several different countries, for over thirty years.
Appendix A

- 2,590 respondents across the Public Sector took part in the survey in June 2020.
- 22% of respondents stated that their organisation would experience skills loss as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.1 Skills loss as a result of the pandemic.

- 70.6% of respondents stated that training needs had increased as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.2 Effect of the pandemic on training needs.
• 43.9% of respondents reported that recruitment would increase over the next 6 months.

Figure 1.3 Recruitment levels over the next 6 months.

• 27.7% stated that there would be organisational changes as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.4 Changes to organisational structure as a result of the pandemic.
To aid revised organisational structures and potential new ways of working, employers state that they would like immediate support with staff wellbeing processes (69.3%), employee engagement (59.2%) and workforce planning (49.4%). In the longer term, organisations require support with organisational development (50%), leadership training & development (44.8%) and Learning Management Solutions (41.3%).

85.5% of employers are currently using a contingency plan for the pandemic.

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Figure 1.5 Support required for new/revised organisational structures.

![Activities to support new/revised organisational structures](chart)

- Apprenticeship support
- Effective staff rostering
- Learning management solutions
- Staff wellbeing processes
- Workforce planning
- Leadership training & development
- Learning Needs Assessment
- Organisational development
- Recruitment & HR support
- Employee Engagement

Long-term | Immediate
---|---
Apprenticeship support
Effective staff rostering
Learning management solutions
Staff wellbeing processes
Workforce planning
Leadership training & development
Learning Needs Assessment
Organisational development
Recruitment & HR support
Employee Engagement

85.5%
4.5%
10.0%

Figure 1.6 Use of contingency plan.

Use of contingency plan for COVID-19

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

85.5%
4.5%
10.0%
The main measures organisations have put in place in relation to the pandemic are remote working (72%), redeployment of staff to other parts of the organisation (53.8%) and temporarily paused training (36.6%).

96% of respondents stated that their organisation had implemented new ways of working as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.7 Measures put in place in relation to COVID-19.

Figure 1.8 New ways of working as a result of COVID-19.
• 40.9% of respondents did not feel that their organisation was adequately prepared for a shift in working methods.

Figure 1.9 Preparedness for shift in working methods.

According to respondents, the pandemic has had a negative effect on mental health (68%) as well as physical health (45.4%). However, it has had a positive effect on team working (71.4), staff commitment to the organisation and its goals (68.7%) and staff communication (62.8%).

Figure 2.1 Effect of pandemic on staff
Nearly all of the respondents stated that conveying information effectively (97.1%) and infection prevention and control (96.5%) will be key future skills. In addition, 94.3% thought that dealing with out of the ordinary situations would be crucial for staff going forward.

Figure 2.2 Key future skills

Key future skills in relation to the pandemic

- Appropriate use of equipment, facilities, and... (95.8%)
- Using logic and reasoning to identify the... (93.2%)
- Selecting and using training/instructional... (93.1%)
- Complex problem-solving (92.0%)
- Digital skills – e.g. operating online platforms,... (91.8%)
- Remote working (91.0%)
- Conveying information effectively (90.7%)
- Delegation (90.4%)
- Decision-making (90.0%)
- Knowledge of social distancing (90.0%)
- Dealing with out-of-the-ordinary situations (89.6%)
- Knowledge of new health & safety legislation (89.1%)
- Food safety and hygiene essentials (88.1%)
- Infection prevention and control (87.8%)
- Covid-19 awareness training (87.8%)

Key skills related to resilience and cultural change centred on awareness of changing client/service user’s needs, active listening, and the ability to boost motivation, morale, and productivity (all 95.8%).

Figure 2.3 Key skills related to resilience and culture change

Key future skills related to resilience and cultural change

- Actively looking for ways to help people (95.8%)
- Awareness of changing clients/service user’s needs (95.8%)
- Ability to boost motivation, morale, and productivity (95.8%)
- Managing own or others uncertainty (95.5%)
- Giving full attention to what other people are saying (active listening) (95.5%)
- Bringing others together and trying to reconcile differences (95.3%)
- Persuading others to change their minds or behaviour (95.3%)
- Awareness and understanding of others’ reactions (95.2%)
• Respondents stated that following the pandemic organisational priorities would be to improve on a positive workplace culture (92.9%), protect against new cybersecurity risks (88.7%) as well as leadership development (88.5%)

Figure 2.4 Post-pandemic organisational priorities

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<td>Reduce operational costs and enhance supply</td>
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• To aid with recovery, employers would like support with creating a shared vision of sector requirements for recovery after COVID-19 (70.8%), guidance on sector specific infection control requirements (64.9%) and translating Government policy into clear guidance that also highlights business impact (63.1%)

Figure 2.5 Actions to aid recovery.

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We are a not-for-profit organisation committed to the development of an improved and sustainable workforce across the UK’s Justice, Fire and Rescue, Local Government and Armed Forces sectors.

Established in 2004 as the Sector Skills Council for the UK justice sector, we inform policy and industry standards, whilst focusing on the improvement of service delivery across all the sectors we operate in.

Our team of experts deliver workforce and organisational development; working with organisations, both public and private, to increase productivity and quality of essential services.

We have one core mission to develop a more skilled, productive and flexible workforce across all of our sectors.

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