



Key workers

Roundtable Summary Report

Module 10: Impact on Society



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Executive summary

This report does not represent the views of the Inquiry. The information reflects a summary of the experiences that were shared with us by attendees at our Roundtables in 2025. The range of experiences shared with us has helped us to develop themes that we explore below. You can find a list of the organisations who attended the roundtable in the annex of this report.

This report contains descriptions of death, suicide and mental health impacts. These may be distressing to some. Readers are encouraged to seek support if necessary. A list of supportive services is provided on the UK Covid-19 Inquiry website.

In March 2025 the UK Covid-19 Inquiry brought together representatives of organisations from different key worker sectors for a roundtable discussion to explore the impact of the pandemic on key workers, including the impact of the measures put in place to respond to the pandemic. This did not include health workers and social care workers, as the impact on these groups was the focus of [Module 3](#) and [Module 6](#) of the Inquiry.

This report summarises the themes raised in discussions with representatives across education, fire and rescue, funerals, burials and cremation¹, police and justice, retail, transport, distribution and warehousing sectors.

The pandemic had significant impacts on key workers across all sectors. They included the impacts of understanding and implementing government restrictions and managing workplace safety, and the fear of contracting Covid-19. The fear was acute amongst key workers who worried for their own safety and for that of their families, especially if they were in contact with clinically vulnerable people.

The lack of sector-specific plans for responding to the pandemic led to confusion, uncertainty and fear amongst key workers. This was further complicated by guidance being released late at night or on weekends,

¹ Further detail on bereavement and the effects of restrictions on funerals, is available in the roundtable report for funerals, burials and bereavement support [to be linked when published on the Inquiry website]. That report looks at funerals, burials and cremations from the perspective of those bereaved during the pandemic, while in this report the focus is on workers' experiences.

particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Representatives discussed how unions and workplaces had to interpret broad guidance independently, which sometimes resulted in inconsistent practices. Changes to government guidance and conflicting guidance were highlighted as key issues and left workers feeling unsure about what they were supposed to do. They also faced difficulties in trying to implement what were seen as impractical restrictions in buildings that were cramped or lacked proper ventilation. This meant that unions and trade bodies had to play more of a role in developing and sharing their own guidance to support sectors and their workers.

The pandemic also led to changes in ways of working. Some workers were able to work remotely while others were required to continue to work in person and interact with colleagues and the public. This was said to have created tensions and highlighted the hierarchical nature of some workplaces, which made workers feel less valued.

For some key workers, morale initially improved because the essential nature of their role was recognised in a new way. However, as the pandemic went on, morale declined across sectors, particularly as colleagues became unwell from Covid-19 or died. Morale also decreased due to key workers feeling increasingly stressed and as time went on, undervalued.

The guidance on workplace safety was described as inconsistent and unclear, which led to key workers feeling at risk of contracting Covid-19. Representatives noted that when measures were introduced it was not clear which measures were most important. When workplace measures were not followed, it was unclear how breaches should be reported or who should be held accountable. However, representatives did consider that in some sectors, workplace safety measures improved as the pandemic went on.

Those working in public-facing roles during the pandemic were described as most at risk of contracting Covid-19. These workers were said to be disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds and/or women. The risk of contracting Covid-19 was seen as a particular concern for people from ethnic minority backgrounds who experienced poorer Covid-19 health outcomes. Representatives also highlighted how public-facing workers faced physical and verbal abuse from the public for enforcing mask-wearing and other restrictions in settings like retail, transport and at funerals, burials, cremations and other end-of-life ceremonies.

During the pandemic, key workers experienced additional work pressures on top of the stress of pandemic life outside of work, often with little or no access to mental health and wellbeing support. Representatives felt that an absence of comprehensive mental health services exacerbated feelings of isolation, anxiety and burnout among key workers.

The pressures faced by key workers were often intensified by staff shortages. Representatives said sectors facing staff shortages sometimes put pressure on their key workers not to self-isolate or shield from Covid-19 and go into work. This risked worsening their own health and the health of those in their household.

The pandemic had a significant financial impact on many key workers, particularly those on zero-hours contracts or working for subcontractors. Workers were particularly susceptible to financial insecurity when faced with reduced hours or being asked to self-isolate without sick pay.

Representatives identified consistent lessons that could be learned from key workers' experiences across all sectors to reduce the impact in any future pandemic. They felt there needed to be more strategic planning and preparedness for a future pandemic that is tailored to the specific sectors, to ensure a rapid and organised response. Future pandemic guidance should be clear, consistent and timely. This would better support key workers to implement it effectively.

Some points made during the roundtables were applicable across sectors, while others were sector specific. We have made sector specific points clear, by using colour-coded headings to signal when a point applies to a sector:

Sectors

- **Education**
- **Fire and Rescue**
- **Funerals, Burials and Cremation**
- **Police and Justice**
- **Transport, Distribution and Warehousing**

- **Retail**

Many representatives emphasised the need for greater recognition and value to be placed on key workers in a future pandemic. This includes involving them in decision-making via their unions, improving workplace safety measures and ensuring proper recognition for their contributions, in the form of pay and gratitude. While some sectors such as transport and fire and rescue established consultation forums with the government early into the pandemic, which they felt led to more appropriate guidance for their sector, other sectors such as education and the end-of-life sector did not benefit from the same consultative approach. They felt that this led to guidance that was not practicable for their sector. Organisations across sectors also emphasised the need for a greater focus on readily available mental health support to help mitigate stress and prevent burnout.

Key themes

Impact of implementing restrictions and government guidance

Interpreting and implementing guidance

Key workers faced increased pressure during the pandemic to understand and implement the changing restrictions and guidance. They had to adapt quickly, taking on extra responsibilities like implementing enhanced cleaning protocols, enforcing social distancing, implementing mask wearing mandates and managing changes to the scope of their role. This was said to have increased the strain on key workers in an already demanding situation, further adding to their experiences of stress.

“[The government] said 'we want you to sort free school meals, you'll be health and safety experts, fix remote learning, do the testing.' There was so much demand. People were working 20 hours a day... There were so many new demands which made it really difficult.”

National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)

Guidance was described as changing rapidly, often without notice and at inconvenient times such as late on a Friday evening or on a weekend. This meant sectors did not have time to prepare or respond appropriately. The frequent changes left key workers unsure whether they were implementing guidance correctly.

“There was conflicting and contradictory guidance. A month later you'd be told not to do X, you should do Y. That shifting of the goal posts was a problem.”

NAHT

Organisations highlighted that when they were in correspondence with the government about changing circumstances and guidance, it would sometimes take weeks for departments to respond to their queries, leading to uncertainty and trepidation amongst those working on the front line.

As the pandemic progressed, frequent updates to guidance led to confusion and frustration among key workers. They often had to adapt quickly to new rules without sufficient notice, training or clarity. This lack of understanding sometimes led to confrontations with members of the public, who were equally confused. The frequent changes made some key workers sceptical about the credibility of the guidance.

“As soon as the guidance started to change, there was a complete lack of credibility at a frontline level. We are happy to enforce rules, but then the rules change. Will they change again?”

Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA)

Representatives noted unions and trade bodies were often relied on to interpret guidance and provide tailored advice to organisations and key workers. This support was necessary because there was a significant knowledge gap in workplace safety protocols and a lack of preparedness among employers during the pandemic.

This reliance on unions and trade bodies continued as the government issued more specific guidance. Representatives felt that guidance rarely made clear what needed to be prioritised, leaving workers feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Guidance was not always provided in different languages to cater for non-English speaking key workers, which meant many were unable to understand safety protocols or their employment rights. This left them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers and there were examples of employers pressuring workers to work in unsafe conditions.

"[There was] one manufacturing company having a workforce [of] entirely non-English speakers and [they were] telling them to come into work, even if they were sick... There was no guidance at this point in the sector, there was no communication in any other

language other than English."

GMB Union

Focus on: police and justice

Police and justice representatives said that the speed of changes in guidance meant there was no time for the tailored training that would normally take place for legislative changes. The Police Federation expressed concerns that the lack of clarity in new guidance left police officers insufficiently informed about how to make the changes needed at a rapid pace. They felt this affected officers' ability to implement the guidance effectively.

"What would normally happen when a new piece of legislation is being introduced, we would have 140,000 police officers who would have to implement it and you would design training. Due to the circumstances, we could not do this."

The Police Federation

UNISON highlighted a discrepancy in the way in which police, prison and probation organisations complied with the regulatory requirements for reporting health and safety concerns under the reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR). They said that police forces implemented a system for consistent reporting of suspected workplace transmission of Covid-19 under RIDDOR, while prison and probation services stopped submitting reports because of Public Health England guidance relating to proof that transmission occurred in the workplace.

"Police forces were putting in regular RIDDOR reports where it was believed there had been a workplace transmission. That wasn't the case in [HM Prison and Probation Service], they were following the [Public Health England] guidance... we were very unhappy about that... there were incidents where two people had died working in the same office in a short period of time..."

there should've been a RIDDOR report to be investigated.”

UNISON

UNISON referred to the substantial impact this had on workplace safety and considered that the absence of formal reporting potentially compromised the identification of transmission patterns, leading to more people contracting Covid-19 in the workplace.

Focus on: education

In the education sector, representatives from unions spoke about how they worked together to create checklists to support organisations in complying with guidance and understanding priorities. The unions provided training on ventilation, risk assessments and the hierarchy of control² to support members and schools to understand how best to protect their workforce.

They explained that it is a requirement in health and safety legislation to have ‘competent persons’ who have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to identify workplace hazards and control measures to protect people from harm.³ Representatives from unions said there had been a deprioritisation and underfunding of health and safety professionals in education settings, which led to the lack of ‘competent persons’ in place before the pandemic. This meant that the sector was particularly unprepared to protect people in the event of an emergency.

“You had 1000+ members joining these calls - employers were asking basic things like what a risk assessment is, just teaching them what that and a hierarchy of control was. Surreal that that knowledge did not exist, it was worse than what we thought it was. There were often no specialist safety people on site, managers were expected to have that.”

University and College Union (UCU)

² Hierarchy of Control: The hierarchy of control is a structured approach to managing workplace hazards, ranking control measures from most effective to least effective. It is a framework for selecting the best way to eliminate or reduce risks and protect workers.

³ The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, 1999. Accessible online at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/3242/regulation/7>

Efforts to promote understanding of workplace health and safety were said to have been undermined by the lack of guidance about which controls employers should prioritise to follow a hierarchy of control approach effectively. The impact of this was that controls such as improved ventilation and air cleaning e.g. HEPA filtration did not take priority over easier, lower cost controls such as handwashing, despite the possibility of airborne transmission being a primary transmission route. This reportedly caused friction between employers and unions with unions pushing for more effective workplace safety measures, but employers saying they were following government guidance.

“If you didn't understand the role of ventilation, [you were left with] the false reassurance of 'keep washing your hands.' [Safety measures] that were harder to do that would have made a difference were side lined. Easier things were prioritised. If you were spending your days immersed in it like we were, we understood this, but we couldn't get this message across.”

National Education Union (NEU)

When the vaccination programme began, University and College Union (UCU) said that many education settings used this as a justification for removing all other safety controls. The belief that the vaccine was sufficient protection for workers in education settings was described as leading to unsafe working environments.

Education unions also highlighted the impact of delays in publishing guidance for specific parts of the education sector like schools teaching children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), educators working in prisons and educators working in nurseries. Workers in these settings had to wait longer for guidance compared to other schools⁴. When the guidance was issued, they felt it did not recognise the distinct tasks teachers and learning support staff had to undertake, including administering medical care or helping pupils to use the toilet. This left workers feeling as though they had been forgotten and concerned that they were not properly complying with guidance.

NASUWT - The Teachers' Union- stated that workers had too little guidance on

⁴ SEND school guidance during the coronavirus pandemic came out on 19th April 2020, more than 4 weeks after schools guidance and closure of schools was announced in mid-March:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-children-with-send-continue-their-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

the approach they should adopt (including in relation to examinations) leading to confusion among parents and education staff about how to prepare students.

“Guidance for workers in education was lacking, it was too little, too late. Situations they found themselves in at work would not have been accepted elsewhere - some staff were in close contact with hundreds of pupils a day. The wider guidance was simply not appropriate.”

NASUWT

Education unions spoke about a lack of government engagement with their sector around the guidance, which made them feel like ‘guinea pigs’. They felt that better consultation could have avoided some of the guidance being unworkable in education settings.

“[Education] felt like an island compared to other sectors where there was some form of consistency. It was a different rule about masks and test and trace etc... that's dead isolating for a population of the workforce who are already misunderstood. They [education workers] felt isolated and ignored and then felt tested upon by government”

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

“The battle to be heard, I think that's what needs to change next time. The most extreme example was in 2021 [in January when schools opened for one day] when we ended up advising our members the day before the schools shut down to send Section 44⁵ notices to their employers.

NEU

⁵ Section 44 notices protect employees’ right to remove themselves from dangerous situations without fear of repercussions such as dismissal or other negative consequences. They form part of the Employment Rights Act 1996, accessible online here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/18/section/44>

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

Transport, distribution and warehousing representatives described how quickly they had to interpret and disseminate government guidance to their members, health and safety representatives and individual transport operators. While they said some operators worked collaboratively to interpret and apply guidance, others, particularly private companies, acted more independently. This resulted in guidance being implemented differently and a lack of communication about best practice, potentially creating safety risks for workers.

There was a lack of clarity about the legal status of guidance produced by different governments and public bodies which created confusion amongst workers. In the transport, distribution and warehousing sector, representatives highlighted the unnecessary complications involved in distinguishing between guidance, policy and law, making it hard to determine which safety measures were mandatory and which were recommendations.

“No one knew whose authority it was to enforce [mask wearing]. People didn't want to put their staff on the front line of enforcing mask wearing. As the guidance was changing, you had to agree with employers how that would work... It immediately put people in situations of more risk.”

National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

Representatives from the funerals, burials and cremation sector discussed how the restrictions and guidance issued by the government profoundly changed how funerals were conducted, denying families the opportunity for traditional farewells. Important cultural rites such as attending crematorium services, carrying coffins, singing during ceremonies, families travelling together in funeral processions and viewing the deceased before burial or cremation were all prohibited. Those working within the funeral sector said they felt considerable pressure and a strong obligation to ensure dignified farewells for the deceased, despite the strict restrictions in place.

“Trying to ensure there was a coordinated effort to ensure the people who were dying were being treated properly... we had to step in ourselves to ensure people were given the dignity they deserved.”

National Burial Council (NBC)

Organisations highlighted that when specific guidance for the sector was issued, it provided some clarity and relief by removing the burden on funeral directors, who had previously been forced to make their own decisions about how restrictions should be applied. However, there was continued confusion, as the guidance failed to account for the sector’s needs in relation to handling requirements for the deceased.

Representatives also highlighted the challenges in reconciling different faith and cultural practices with government guidance. For example, the representative for the National Burial Council (NBC) described how ritual washing is an important part of preparation for burial in the Jewish and Muslim faiths and, before the pandemic, was usually carried out by older people from the family or community. However, following the introduction of government guidance that this should not be done by those aged over 60 due to health risks, the sector had to rapidly train younger people. This added to workload and increased pressure on staff during an already stressful time. They also had to limit the number of people who took part in washing bodies.

“We couldn’t have a team in [to wash bodies] because you couldn’t have that many people in the room. No one knew how Covid-19 was transmitted. For us, it was really awful not to be able to do that final thing [washing] for someone because it was such an intrinsic part of our funeral process. It was dreadful.”

Jewish Joint Burial Society (JJBS)

Implementing and enforcing restrictions on the number of people who could attend funerals was particularly difficult in situations where the cultural or religious community would usually organise large funerals. The NBC explained that, for Muslim families, burials are deeply communal events, often attended by extended networks of relatives and community members. Limiting attendance not only disrupted these religious practices but also caused significant emotional distress. The enforcement of restrictions placed frontline staff in

difficult positions,
requiring sensitive negotiation and cultural awareness and the need to uphold dignity, faith-based customs and compassionate care.

The National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) emphasised how the instructions given to government agencies, such as Pandemic Multiagency Response Teams (PMART)⁶ and the lack of involvement of funeral directors in the initial response to Covid deaths, caused upset and confusion amongst those working within the sector, especially around routes of transmission and safe working requirements.

"There was an early case of a paramedic being sent to verify [a] death and another officer to help with... seal[ing] [the body] from top and bottom with cable tie... They tell the family not to go into a room and contact the funeral director immediately. This was problematic for several reasons: A) why had someone been treated like that? B) Identification: how can we confirm the identity without unwrapping the body? C) Trust. This government agency is acting completely differently from what we are being told."

NAFD

They also highlighted that the handling of the deceased in accordance with these instructions was regarded as insensitive, causing deep distress to both the families of those who had died and the funeral directors in attendance.

Sector leaders worked together to interpret guidance, offering peer support and advice to organisations. This collaboration was seen as important for reducing the impact on businesses, workers and the services they offered to grieving families.

"It was our collective effort that made the difference. By working together, we helped ensure the impact was not as severe as it might otherwise have been."

NBC

⁶ Pandemic Multiagency Response Teams (PMART) were specialist teams that were introduced by the government to respond to suspected Covid-19 deaths in the community across London.

Those within the sector also highlighted how there is currently no single government department responsible for overseeing funeral services, with various aspects falling under different departmental remits instead. They felt this fragmented approach created coordination challenges and meant there was no clear point of contact when guidance was issued.

"The government, by and large, doesn't deal with funerals. There is no department that deals with funerals."

JJBS

Focus on: fire and rescue

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) described how they monitored what was happening before the first lockdown and contributed to government consultations about pandemic restrictions, which enabled them to start discussions with employers two weeks ahead of the guidance being published. The FBU, fire employers and chief fire officers were able to negotiate a national agreement to keep regular emergency intervention functioning, whilst enabling firefighters to volunteer safely for the additional activities that were required of them. This was crucial for the first nine months of the pandemic in ensuring workers' safety.

However, the lack of specificity within the fire and rescue guidance meant there were different interpretations of how the measures should be implemented across fire and rescue workplaces. This was described as particularly challenging when implementing social distancing and self-isolation and affected how Covid-19 safety measures were implemented more generally.

"I'd say we had 50 different interpretations of the government guidance from each fire and rescue service."

FBU

The impact of contradictory guidance

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

The funerals, burials and cremation sector described how, at one stage, cemeteries were not permitted to be open to the public, other than for burials. However, some crematorium grounds remained open to the public for exercise, visitation and burials. This created operational problems for those managing sites that offered both burial and cremation services. They also described other confusing scenarios, such as guidance stating that cemeteries could be used for daily exercise, while funeral attendance was still restricted. This made it hard for cemetery staff to manage and enforce different rules for people using the same space for different purposes.

There was also conflicting information about operational aspects of their role, including the use of body bags and whether embalming was permitted. This caused confusion and inconsistent practices across the sector.

“Things would change daily. For example, body bags: two in Northern Ireland, 1 in England. What do we do? ...What about Embalming? People visiting?”

Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM)

Focus on: police and justice

The representative for UNISON gave an example of receiving conflicting guidance on implementing social distancing and mask wearing in the police force. They said that early in the pandemic, the police were told by the National Police Coordination Centre⁷, that as an internal workplace, where social distancing was not possible, masks should be worn. They then received guidance from Public Health England (PHE) that masks did not need to be worn. The representative said that the police force decided to implement mask wearing in any event to protect their workforce, but they said this caused confusion and undermined confidence in government guidance.

The representative for the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) described how government guidance sometimes conflicted with existing legislation, which

⁷ The National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC) provides support to forces across the United Kingdom, Crown Dependencies and British Overseas Territories.

they felt made the guidance unenforceable. Although representatives noted that there were improvements in guidance over time, they felt the issue remained that guidance lacked an understanding of the practicalities of enforcing it.

“On a number of occasions [government] guidance wasn't law and was fundamentally wrong, which created a conflict when we were trying to enforce that on a ground level because we had constant reviews. [The NPCC] were producing quality assured, legally checked guidance for our frontline staff to use, and we got to a point of saying that unless it had gone through that process, we were not enforcing it.”

NPCC

Focus on: education

Education representatives gave examples of similar issues. They said they received conflicting guidance from various government departments and local authorities. Parents would also share the guidance they had received from their own employers with education staff, which at times contradicted the guidance provided by schools. This lack of clarity created confusion and added to the workload of education staff as they tried to navigate different guidance. Conflicting guidance also meant there was a lack of confidence about how education staff could best keep themselves, their colleagues and children and young people safe when attending schools and colleges in person.

Representatives reflected on the impact of different rules in place across devolved nations and in some cases between local council areas. For workers living at the border of one nation and working in another, they had to follow and keep up with two different sets of guidance. For example, a teacher may be living in Wales, but enforcing English rules while working in an education setting in England. This led to confusion about which guidance workers should follow and implement within their workplaces.

UCU raised the impact of releasing contradictory guidance for different education sectors at the same time. They spoke about guidance for the further education sector not aligning with guidance for the higher education sector,

creating doubt and fear for workers about which guidance would be based in science and keep them safe. There were similar issues for those working in prison education with differing guidance from government departments. UCU had to interpret the guidance to determine how best to protect educators working in prisons and young offender institutions. Differences between guidance for office workers and contact centre staff in education settings and education staff created further confusion about what was safe.

Education representatives also reported that it was unclear where guidance sat legally with regards to health and safety legislation, especially where guidance undermined some of the higher level controls that would often be identified in workplace risk assessments. This made it difficult for unions to advise on what would keep workers safe across different settings, leading to significant differences in the application of guidance across the sector.

There was consensus amongst all education unions regarding the devastating impact of reopening schools for just one day on 4th January 2021. They agreed that this quick and substantial change to guidance significantly eroded trust in the government rules about education, making staff extremely anxious about their health and safety and the potential of spreading Covid-19 to others in their homes.

“The 4th January, well into the pandemic, teachers thought they weren't going back. Teachers were updating [guidance] themselves [and] were expected to be back at work that day... the messaging from [the] government was ‘you [will] be back’ and then they [weren’t].

NASUWT

Focus on: retail

Retail businesses that had stores across the UK had to navigate differing rules in each nation and attempt to communicate these accurately to their workers. This caused unnecessary complexity, increased workload for businesses and confusion amongst staff.

Remote working

Focus on: education

In the education sector, the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions necessitated a transition to online learning, alongside teaching key worker children in schools and colleges. Representatives said online learning led to safeguarding issues for both staff and students. In particular, there were concerns about privacy due to students recording online lessons without permission, making education staff feel uncomfortable. NASUWT highlighted that the shift to online learning also blurred professional boundaries, as the informal settings of students' and education staff homes were not always suitable learning environments.

Representatives highlighted the transition to online learning during the pandemic exposed inequalities in access to essential devices, such as laptops, for both workers and students. They identified barriers in accessing and using technology due to financial constraints, insufficient investment in technology and unreliable internet connections. NASUWT noted that the technology provided by schools was often inadequate, forcing education staff to purchase their own equipment, which strained their personal finances.

The transition to remote teaching during the pandemic was said to have highlighted a significant lack of preparedness and an absence of clear guidance, especially concerning health and safety issues, compliance with personal data legislation and support for SEND students. Representatives said this created additional pressures on education staff who had to navigate these challenges without proper support or clear protocols.

“There was an assumption everyone could deliver online learning despite not having been trained and not having suitable equipment... many members scrambled to buy their own laptops. Teachers often found themselves without a private space to teach from, and were then unfairly subject to scrutiny and complaints from parents about how they were teaching.”

NASUWT

NASUWT highlighted the impact of remote learning on newly qualified teachers,

who often struggled when going back into the classroom, given that a lot of their teaching experience had been online. Many of these teachers have since left the profession, demonstrating the longer-term impact of the pandemic on the education workforce.

Unions reported that clinically vulnerable workers (including pregnant women) who were advised to shield by the government were, for the most part, protected from having to go into education settings and were allowed to work remotely. However, NASUWT said that their members who had pre-existing health conditions, but did not have letters advising them to shield, or those caring for clinically vulnerable family members, often had to fight for their right to work remotely. They highlighted the anxiety this caused for education staff in these situations.

Focus on: police, justice and the civil service

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) described how across the Civil Service there were differing approaches to providing laptops and IT systems to enable key workers to work from home. While some government departments like the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) were able to quickly deploy laptops and home-working equipment, other government departments lacked the additional laptops or infrastructure to support remote working. This meant some workers had to continue working in offices, mixing with colleagues and the public, which put them at risk of contracting Covid-19.

“Technology was a lucky dip really, depending on infrastructure, and if you had to scale-up at speed... It did work through in time but for the first 2-3 months, it was quite challenging for organisations if they weren't ready for remote working, even if they wanted to access stuff.”

NPCC

PCS also discussed that, for the police and justice sector, it was not always clear from the guidance which workers could work from home and which key workers were required to attend work in person. This lack of clarity led to delays in setting out, where and how, staff should be working during the pandemic.

“There was a lack of clarity around the groups of people who the government was saying should actually work at home. So, interpretations were a nightmare, and it took some time for that to be worked through.”

PCS

Focus on: retail

Representatives in the retail sector described how tensions began to emerge between those who were able to work remotely (usually those in more senior/managerial positions or in administrative support roles) and those who could not (usually those on the frontline). They said how unfair this felt for frontline staff and sometimes emphasised the hierarchical structure of their workplace.

“There was a factory in York where the workforce on the shop floor were predominantly black workers and management white workers. Management could very quickly work from home and rarely come into the workplace. The views and concerns raised from the workforce [on the shop floor] weren't being listened to and we had a real problem with outbreaks on that site.”

Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)

Impact on workplace safety

Workplace safety measures

In the early stages of the pandemic, representatives said that government guidance and support to protect workers from contracting Covid-19 was very limited. They explained that there was little knowledge about the virus and how it was transmitted which meant safety measures were often inconsistent and ineffective. For example, representatives for retail workers described how in the early stages of the pandemic, workers were advised to wrap t-shirts in front of their mouths rather than using face masks. They reflected that this demonstrated the lack of understanding of how to prevent the virus from transmitting and put workers at risk.

“We're talking with the Health and Safety Executive early doors on guidance, but we're told there isn't any as it's a public health issue. ...Government guidance isn't enforceable, so you're in a situation where the vast majority of workers who are at work and aren't working in the education or health sector are now basically completely unprotected.”

GMB Union

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

A significant concern for funerals, burials and cremation workers was deciding how to work safely with deceased people who may have died with Covid-19. This included managing risks to their own health linked to collecting, handling and preparing bodies, as well as the onward transmission risks to their loved ones or colleagues. In the early stages of the pandemic, funerals, burials and cremation workers were not told whether people had died from or with Covid-19 because of doctor-patient confidentiality rules. This meant workers could not properly assess their own risk of exposure to Covid-19 or the risk of infecting others.

“In the early stages, bereavement workers were not told whether individuals had died from Covid-19,

limiting their ability to assess exposure risks. It was only at a later stage that registrars were permitted to disclose this information.”

NBC

The funerals, burials and cremation sector also highlighted that the risk of Covid positive people attending funerals added to the stress of those attempting to undertake funeral services, at a time of overall uncertainty.

“[There were] two [risks]: [the] deceased person and these risks, and the living people you are interacting with in these situations.”

ICCM

It took some time for workplace safety guidance for their sector to be issued and this led to organisations taking different approaches to try and protect workers. They said larger businesses tended to have stricter workplace safety protocols in place as a way of managing corporate risk. When guidance on workplace safety was issued, it was not as strict as the workplace safety measures some organisations in the sector decided to put in place, which was particularly difficult to explain to frontline workers.

“By the time the guidance arrived from the government, it looked a lot lighter than what people had decided they needed. It took a lot of time to assure people it was OK.”

NAFD

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

For the transport, distribution and warehousing sector, the workplace safety measures in place depended on specific roles and varied by organisation, including whether companies were privately or publicly owned. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) highlighted that the use of third-party logistic companies and subcontracted workforces made it particularly difficult to ensure workplace safety protocols were followed consistently. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) gave one example of a bus company using a plastic shower curtain to separate

drivers from passengers, which they said was ineffective.

They highlighted that some warehouses and factories, with dusty conditions and close contact among workers, faced higher Covid-19 exposure and sterile infection risks. In contrast, food manufacturing spaces were already focused on hygiene and maintained a more sterile environment. This meant that they were better able to implement additional safety measures like body temperature checks, testing centres and isolation rooms to protect staff.

Focus on: education

Education representatives thought the role of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) during the pandemic was not sufficiently clear, which meant that organisations did not know whether they could go to the HSE to seek guidance. This led to inconsistent workplace safety practices and lack of safety compliance in workplaces. Representatives wanted the HSE to have more of a role in keeping workers safe from contracting Covid-19 and in making organisations accountable for breaches of workplace safety protocols.

Some contracted workers in education settings, such as supply teachers or cleaning staff, were still being asked to work across multiple locations e.g. multiple schools in a trust, or across university campuses. This increased the risk of infection and spread of Covid-19 in education settings.

Workplace safety measures as restrictions eased

As the pandemic continued, there was a perception that the safety of workers became less of a priority. This was a growing concern as general pandemic restrictions began to ease, leaving key workers in some sectors feeling increasingly vulnerable to contracting Covid-19.

Focus on: retail

There was confusion amongst retail workers when social distancing guidelines were reduced from two metres to one metre in July 2020, while masks remained mandatory in retail spaces. It was believed that this specific change undermined retail workers' trust in government and eroded their confidence in the guidance.

“The guidance just became really confusing, if they had just stuck to a single message. 2 metres to 1 metre plus was, to me, the start of really impacting our members in the workplace.”

Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU)

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

Workers in the transport, distribution and warehousing sector felt significant pressure to return to normal operations. There was a perception in the sector that the economy was being prioritised over the safety of workers, creating an environment of fear and uncertainty.

“We were always worried about what was driving the changes in guidance. All the things behind the changes were being driven by their desire to open up the economy. That was overriding the imperative towards safety.”

RMT

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Across sectors, there were examples of workers who were not prioritised for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) early in the pandemic and representatives shared the impact this had on them. Inadequate PPE supplies led some workers to feel unsafe and undervalued.

Focus on: education

Education representatives emphasised how those working in schools were concerned for their own safety due to the lack of PPE when working with students. They explained how most students attending school during lockdowns were the children of other key workers, many of whom were working in the health and social care sectors. Those working in schools saw this as a huge risk.

“School staff were initially told they didn't need PPE. There was no thought to staff giving care, such as first aiders and those dealing with vulnerable children.”

GMB Union

They also spoke about how the most effective respiratory protective measures were not put in place. For example, teachers were required to wear surgical masks, rather than FFP3 masks that would have provided better protection.

UNISON and UCU raised the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on support staff, including learning support staff, library staff, halls of residence managers, professional administrative staff, bus drivers, cleaners and catering staff in education settings, who all work in close-contact roles. The UNISON representative said that these support staff were not initially included on the list of key workers and this meant they did not receive the workplace safety support they needed, including priority access to PPE. This was later amended following unions' intervention.

“Catering staff were crammed in kitchens. There wasn't any PPE, if it was provided at all. We had reports of a manager in a private cleaning contract who was trying to bribe staff to leave the union in exchange for the provision of basic PPE.”

UNISON

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

The funerals, burials and cremation sector described similar issues with access to PPE, as staff were not initially classified as key workers. Organisations had to use commercial routes or existing networks to try and secure supplies and this was not always successful.

“There was no clear mandate from government that said this is a sector that requires provision of PPE... This left the whole funeral sector devoid of any ability, other than the commercial ability, to acquire PPE.”

FBCA

“We [the funerals, burials and cremation sector] were ignored. Next to the NHS and care workers, we were the ones most impacted.”

JJBS

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

The transport, distribution and warehousing sector said that access to PPE varied considerably. RMT described inconsistent PPE provision across the transport workforce, including supply shortages for those working on buses and inadequate supply and quality of PPE for cleaning staff. This left workers feeling exposed and undervalued.

“We did a survey in 2021; the pandemic had been around for just under a year and there were all of the same problems of non-adherence to guidance [in the bus sector]. We surveyed them the following years and most of them hadn't had any PPE, most of them were completely unconvinced that their company had any idea of the guidance... We measured the levels of worker confidence and in buses it was very low.”

RMT

Focus on: police and justice

The Prison Officers Association (POA) described how guidance on the use of PPE in prisons in Scotland and Northern Ireland conflicted with advice covering England and Wales. This led to discrepancies in the level of protection for prison workers across the UK.

“We were taking prisoners to hospital that had Covid-19 and wearing the standard PPE issued in prisons and [workers] were being stopped at the hospital and told they couldn't come in as they weren't wearing ‘proper PPE’.”

POA

Representatives agreed that consistent communication from senior leadership about safety measures and PPE had a positive impact in preventing the spread of Covid-19 and deaths in police and justice settings. However, the UNISON representative felt there were issues with availability and quality of PPE in the sector, particularly early in the pandemic, with workers sometimes unaware that the equipment they had been given was not of the same standard as other emergency services.

“The unpreparedness of most public services to deal with the pandemic was also a major early problem, particularly the lack of PPE and the delays due to logistics as well as advice on what was appropriate PPE in particular circumstances.”

UNISON

Self-isolation and testing

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

The transport, distribution and warehousing sectors described how a high volume of staff being ‘pinged’⁸ by the NHS Covid-19 contact tracing app⁹ led to significant staff shortages. They said this disruption prompted some transport organisations to ask their workers to disable the app, leading to worry and distrust amongst workforces.

“The Test and Trace app became a real problem for the rail industry... because so many people were being pinged and expected to self-isolate. If everyone who had been pinged were self-isolating, the entire sector would shut down.”

RMT

The contact tracing programme advised staff to self-isolate for ten days when

⁸ Pinged: The NHS Covid-19 app sent a notification if someone around you later used their app to report a positive Covid test and you had been within two metres of them for longer than 15 minutes, you would be alerted that you had been in close contact with the virus

⁹ The NHS COVID-19 app was launched in England and Wales in September 2020 as part of the UK government's [Test and Trace programme](#). The app used Bluetooth contact tracing to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

‘pinged’ but later the government introduced a Test and Release programme where staff could take a lateral flow Covid-19 test and if negative, return to work sooner, helping to address workforce shortages. However, this angered many workers, who saw these changes as prioritising operational needs over worker safety.

Focus on: education

Education representatives reported similar issues, with teachers and support staff uncertain whether they should follow the NHS Covid-19 contact tracing app’s isolation guidance. There were reports of some education workers being asked to disable the app altogether, to keep them in the workplace.

"Teachers were getting told they should isolate on the [NHS Covid-19 contact tracing] app and then being told this shouldn't apply to school workers and they should turn the app off."

GMB Union

Focus on: police and justice

UNISON also highlighted the confusion amongst police forces in regards to the NHS Covid-19 contact tracing app. There was conflicting advice within the sector as to whether the app should be activated or not, leading to inconsistency across police forces and confusion amongst staff.

"I also wish to refer to NHS Track and Trace as there were some police forces that, early on... had suggested to staff in critical functions that they should turn it off... because there was a concern about not having a distraction from the workplace and having to self-isolate... the NPCC¹⁰ were clear that staff and officers should keep the Test and Trace app on at work and it wasn't incompatible with working."

UNISON

¹⁰ The National Police Chiefs' Council is the national coordination body for law enforcement and the representative body for senior police officers in the United Kingdom.

Focus on: fire and rescue

FBU referred to the difficulties in complying with guidance to self-isolate in the context of staff shortages. They explained that this was a source of tension in the sector because fire and rescue services did not encourage self-isolation early in the pandemic due to the pressures on services. They described how the National Fire Chiefs' Council¹¹ sought to reduce measures related to self-isolation and testing requirements for staff performing 'additional activities', such as mortuary work or driving an ambulance. Firefighters disagreed strongly with these changes, fearing an increased risk of spreading Covid-19 to those not carrying out the 'additional activities' when they returned to their fire station workplaces for their regular duties.

These reduced measures were particularly problematic for workers with pre-existing health conditions or caring responsibilities, who were concerned about their own increased risk of severe illness and infecting vulnerable family members. In some cases, this was said to have led to disciplinary action against firefighters and control staff who wanted to self-isolate to protect a loved one. The situation further deteriorated when, in late 2020, the NFCC and then the fire employers walked away from the national agreement that was made between the FBU, fire employers and chief fire officers. This national agreement had been negotiated to keep regular emergency intervention functioning, whilst enabling firefighters to safely volunteer for the additional activities that were required of them.

“There was this pressure to get firefighters to do the regular job, plus more and more of the additional activities but at the expense of safety.”

FBU

Social distancing

Focus on: education

Those representing the education sector discussed how there was an assumption among the public that schools, colleges, universities and other

¹¹ The National Fire Chiefs Council is an independent membership association of the UK fire and rescue services.

education settings were closed during the pandemic, with staff supporting online learning from home. This was not the case, with many staff, some of whom were clinically vulnerable, continuing to work in education settings. This included teaching children of key workers, teaching children in custody and providing education in prisons. This meant they were putting themselves at risk of contracting Covid-19 on a daily basis.

“Some were at home some of the time, but a lot of them were on site most of the time with no respite, working in crowded and poorly ventilated circumstances where social distancing was difficult.”

NEU

Government guidance stated students should be split into groups (or ‘bubbles’) of twelve, which would have required classes to be split into three groups. Representatives explained how the guidance was then revised so that classes would have fifteen students instead. This decision to move to larger groups conflicted with broader rules at the time about social distancing and mixing, including social gatherings being limited to a maximum of six people. This caused education staff to lose trust in the guidance and become frustrated as they thought they were being put at risk. Similarly, secondary school staff were often in ‘bubbles’ which included whole year groups.

“The Department for Education guidance on bubbles was impractical. The science would have said smaller bubbles, but the policy was having everyone back [in secondary schools]. You had 200-300 in a bubble and staff working across bubbles. In primary schools you had bubbles in class, but it's still an overcrowded system. It didn't make sense. It wasn't working and it couldn't control infection.”

UNISON

UNISON described how ‘bubbles’ were not maintained on school buses due to the number of pupils travelling on them. There were concerns raised at the time over the lack of sufficient PPE for school bus drivers and the lack of social distancing on school buses, leaving bus drivers frightened of contracting Covid-19.

Those in the education sector said that it was especially difficult to implement social distancing when working with younger children and in SEND schools. Many of these children did not understand the concept of social distancing, making it impossible for staff to adhere to the guidance. Similarly, UCU spoke about how social distancing guidance for education did not take into account the higher risk of violence in the prison estate and how social distancing may be impracticable for prison educators. They also reported that the guidance did not take into account vocational subjects being taught in schools, colleges and prisons, which required close contact when teaching.

“A five-year-old who is upset or needs an adult is unlikely to stick to a rule requiring them to keep two metres apart from others. It is giving schools impossible guidance.”

NAHT

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

Those in the funerals, burials and cremation sector highlighted that there was significant risk of staff catching Covid-19 from contact with colleagues and those attending ceremonies. The representative from the FBCA pointed out that in some cemeteries and crematoria, even with the restrictions, staff were mixing with hundreds of people a week. This was described as incredibly frightening for workers and created ongoing concerns about potential exposure levels to Covid-19.

Focus on: police and justice

The POA described how hard it was to implement social distancing in prisons. This was particularly problematic where physical contact was needed, including when prisoners were self-harming or fighting. Similarly, the representative from the PCS shared how the layout of court buildings made social distancing a challenge. However, some alternative ways of working helped to reduce close contact, such as legal professionals attending court hearings remotely.

The NPCC shared how police began to work in separate teams that did not mix in order to reduce transmission among workers and communities.

“Where you recognise you'd have to have contact with vulnerable communities and people shielding...it [team silos] meant they [police] could carry on working within their job without putting others at risk.”

NPCC

Focus on: retail

The size and type of retail space was said to have had an impact on how workplace safety measures could be implemented. USDAW described how smaller convenience stores had less space for social distancing and often poorer ventilation than larger shops and supermarkets.

GMB Union highlighted that even when staff on shop floors were able to maintain social distancing, those measures were not adhered to in the staff canteen.

“All of the controls were in place with screens up, social distancing, hand sanitisers and people were wearing face masks, then in the staff room none of that stuff applied. All the controls were working very well on the shop floor, but infection was still happening in the canteen and all your contamination risk was there.”

GMB Union

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

USDAW said that delivery companies began transporting test kits and PPE during the pandemic, which involved drivers coming into close contact with potentially infected individuals. Delivery drivers had limited guidance on how to safely navigate the delivery of items whilst adhering to social distancing measures, which created uncertainty and anxiety amongst workers.

“The parcel delivery companies were extremely busy because people were at home... but also they were delivering test kits to people who potentially had COVID... it's [a] world of unknown for those colleagues.”

USDAW

Focus on: fire and rescue

FBU described how social distancing measures did not take into account the unique nature of firefighting and the close proximity required between firefighters and emergency control staff to do their job effectively.

“They're [firefighters] sitting in very close proximity in an enclosed space. What does social distancing look like in the rest room? You're on a shift, eating together, training together, being mobilised together. What does social distancing look like in a fire engine? You've got 5-6 people in a cab. That's not 2 metres apart.”

FBU

Ventilation and other control measures

Representatives noted that as awareness of the airborne transmission of Covid-19 increased, there was also an increased focus in guidance on ventilation. As with social distancing, this was harder to implement in more confined spaces such as shops, classrooms, prisons and transport settings where ventilation was not always possible.

Focus on: education

Many education buildings had poor ventilation due to windows that could not open. Those that remained open, therefore, were unable to follow guidance and provide safe environments that would reduce Covid-19 transmission. Workers had to continue working in spaces that were not adequately ventilated, creating ongoing safety concerns about airborne transmission. In education settings where windows could be opened, representatives said that during the

winter, rooms were too cold for workers, children and young people, creating an environment that was not suitable for learning.

“When [schools fully re-opened] in winter 2021, temperatures were so low that members reported children and staff with blue hands and lips as the ventilation advice was to 'open windows'. Wrapped up for winter and able to see their own breath; it was just not a suitable learning environment.”

NASUWT

Those in the education sector highlighted practices that they thought helped to improve the consistency of workplace safety as the pandemic went on. UCU said some employers began to map out the space to achieve appropriate levels of ventilation, stopped using poorly ventilated spaces and had air conditioning and HEPA filters¹², but they felt this was implemented too late into the pandemic. Representatives also thought that CO2 monitors¹³ in education settings came too late to have a substantial impact on workplace safety, especially given that nobody was accountable for making sure that the CO2 level stayed safe, or for escalating concerns if it became too high. Staff also reported confusion about what level of CO2 made for a safe learning environment. In the prison estate and youth offender settings, UCU reported that some buildings had no heat and prison educators were being asked to teach on the wing rather than teaching in education blocks, putting them at greater risk.

“There’s a huge lack of investment in prison estates and college estates. You couldn't open windows, [had] poor ventilation, small spaces, some with no windows at all. Some had no heat.”

UCU

“Eventually when the CO2 monitors came, it was one for every other classroom, then it was one for every

¹² A HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter is a type of mechanical air filter designed to remove at least 99.97% of airborne particles as small as 0.3 microns in diameter, with higher efficiency for larger or smaller particles, effectively capturing dust, pollen, mould, bacteria, and viruses.

¹³ A CO2 monitor is a device that measures the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO2) in the air, typically expressed in parts per million (ppm), and is used to assess indoor air quality and indicate ventilation needs.

classroom, but by then we were in the latter stage of the pandemic - the rollout should have happened much earlier.”

NEU

Representatives emphasised the importance of having a union presence and health and safety representatives to help achieve safer work environments.

Focus on: transport, distribution and warehousing

The establishment of industry-specific forums, such as the Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum, were seen as important for fostering greater collaboration between transport operators and unions. They also provided a platform for organisations to agree on safe working conditions and practices.

Steps were taken to mitigate Covid-19 risks by modifying work roles and working conditions. For example, in the transport sector they relieved train staff of fare collection, staggered start times, installed handwashing stations and closed canteens. This provided workers with greater reassurance about their working environment and reduced Covid-19 fears.

Focus on: retail

Some technological adaptations provided effective protection for retail workers. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU) highlighted how the increase in contactless payment systems helped eliminate the need for workers to handle cash from customers. However, other safety measures had mixed results. While masks and screens were implemented at cash desks to enhance worker safety, GMB Union noted that customers often felt screens meant they no longer needed to wear masks, which increased transmission risks for staff.

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

Those in the funerals, burials and cremation sector described the positive impact of digital death registration services. They highlighted how the ability to register deaths and submit documents online worked particularly well, expressing hope that these digital capabilities would continue to be available.

"Something that worked well - the ability to register a death online. Hopefully [this] will come back. Being able to submit things digitally worked really well."

ICCM

The NBC noted that Jewish and Muslim communities were deeply appreciative of how swiftly the paperwork was processed. The ability to manage documentation digitally enabled families to carry out burials promptly, in accordance with religious requirements.

"Jewish and Muslim communities were very grateful at how quickly they handled the paperwork. [It] enabled us to bury our loved ones quickly, because we were able to handle things digitally."

NBC

Focus on: police and justice

UNISON and the NPCC explained that risk assessments conducted across police and probation services revealed the disproportionate risk of Covid-19 causing serious illness for workers from ethnic minority backgrounds, especially those from Black and Asian backgrounds. These assessments led to tailored support measures for staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, including remote working arrangements and shielding requests for those facing a disproportionate risk of Covid-19.

"For our members who came from [ethnic minority] communities, there was that added stress of knowing members of their own communities were being disproportionately affected with more fatalities."

UNISON

Impact on key workers' physical health, mental health and wellbeing

At the beginning of the pandemic, key workers described an initial sense of pride as they were recognised for their important roles in the early stages of lockdown, particularly in the retail, police and justice sectors. For example, GMB Union explained how, amongst the retail sector, there was a sense that the country was relying on them.

“There was some benefit due to the clapping and the recognition of the retail sector across society, which sometimes you still hear, though it seems to have been forgotten quite quickly.”

GMB Union

Similarly, BFAWU shared that in the first lockdown there was an increase in attendance at work across the retail sector. They thought this was because people felt empowered by the opportunity to ‘do their bit’ during a national crisis.

However, this early experience was not shared in all sectors and was short-lived in others. There was consensus that workers experienced a growing sense of anger and upset in being underappreciated for their work on the frontline, compared to the recognition they felt was, rightly, directed towards health and care workers.

In the transport, warehousing and distribution sector workers observed a gap between public perception and their own experiences at work. While the media often praised these essential workers, the low pay and treatment they received left them feeling undervalued. Those in the funerals, burials and cremation sector said that workers did not feel valued or recognised for the work they had done at the start of the pandemic, despite the huge pressures they faced. They felt abandoned and fearful about what was going to happen as they received little communication about decisions being made.

“For a significant period, burial workers were not recognised as key workers, despite operating on the

front line throughout the pandemic. The most difficult aspect was being part of an unseen workforce—left exposed by decisions made without consultation or adequate communication.”

NBC

This sense of underappreciation and lack of recognition was felt particularly strongly when key workers died of Covid-19 or contracted long-term post-viral conditions e.g. Long Covid. A number of organisations agreed that there should be memorials across the UK to those key workers who died of Covid-19 during the pandemic to thank them for their services. They felt that the lack of any memorial or commemoration for those who died has had a lasting impact on the morale of key workers, who continue to feel unrecognised.

Workplace pressure and impact on mental health and wellbeing

There was a consensus across sectors that the pandemic led to workers trying to juggle an important and increasingly demanding job with the pressures they often faced in their personal lives. Many were anxious about their own health, the health of clinically vulnerable family members, or had caring responsibilities. They said this meant workers faced tough choices about balancing work and personal responsibilities, with some leaving their jobs as a result.

“You are taking someone who is already doing a very emotive job and then adding another complex layer. Essentially, how do I live with these conditions in my individual life? Also, everything I am being told to do privately, I have to disregard when I go to work to be able to do my job.”

FBCA

Focus on: education

The education sector described how many support services were closed, which meant education workers had to take on extra pastoral or social care responsibilities towards vulnerable children and young people. UNISON talked about education staff being required to support children and young people who

had experienced bereavement due to Covid-19. This additional responsibility to fill a gap in bereavement support, often without specialist training, put a significant strain on staff's mental wellbeing.

They also highlighted that due to staff absence, support staff in particular were often relied on during the pandemic to run wellbeing hubs, or take on other responsibilities that would normally sit with teachers. NASUWT raised that because of these extra responsibilities, teachers would often be without learning support staff in classrooms. One to one support for children was not always available for those who needed it, which made teachers' jobs more difficult.

UCU described the mental health impact on academic, professional services and halls of residence staff in higher education settings. They were often dealing with students requiring additional support or who were in crisis, often via email or on the phone. According to their members, staff were often asked to take on these additional pastoral roles without adequate training or support.

"In higher education, [there was] a huge impact on staff wellbeing as they had to respond with very little skills [in this area] to people with extreme wellbeing concerns."

UCU

NASUWT highlighted the impact of the pandemic on newly qualified teachers who did not get the mentoring support that they would have normally received. They reported that they had dealt with cases of newly qualified teachers going into performance management in their initial years of teaching. NASUWT were confident this would not have happened if teachers and mentors had the capacity to provide earlier interventions.

"Newly qualified teachers [were] being thrown in at the deep end with no support. Some were told they were inadequate and that's wholly inappropriate... we've seen the backlash of that now as they've come through."

NASUWT

They also described how during the summer periods of 2020 and 2021,

education workers, especially teachers, experienced significant additional workload pressures due to changes to the examination and qualification award process. Teachers were required to take on further responsibilities and were tasked with implementing complex new marking and assessment frameworks that replaced standard examination procedures.

"Teachers were overloaded in the summer of 2020 and 2021 with the whole qualification awarding fiasco. The government were insistent that schools wouldn't stall with people going onto further and higher education... it created so much extra work for teachers."

NASUWT

Education unions reported that hundreds of their pregnant members experienced significant anxiety about continuing to work safely after pregnant women were classified as vulnerable to Covid-19. NASUWT added that their members from ethnic minority backgrounds or multi-generational households were also anxious about going back into school settings, as they were being told on the news that they were most at risk from Covid-19. They said that other education professionals would often tell people from these groups they should reconsider whether they should be in work. This mixed messaging had a negative impact on the mental health of staff.

Focus on: fire and rescue

The pandemic put an additional strain on firefighters, as they were in direct contact with other people when responding to incidents, potentially increasing their risk of contracting Covid-19.

"So many [firefighters] were worried about spreading the virus to their families, which had a knock-on impact on their mental health, because you are working every day in a frontline environment but the risk that you could bring something home was so high and scary. It was such a build-up of pressure and there wasn't an end to it. Workers had to be ultra conscious

and sensitive to how they were feeling.”

FBU

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

The funerals, burials and cremation sector described how workers were fearful about their increased workload and ability to cope with the unprecedented scale of deaths, particularly at the start of the pandemic. The ongoing intense pressure had a significant impact on workers' mental health, contributing to an increase in people leaving the sector and in some cases, suicide attempts.

"We've lost a colleague to suicide; several have attempted suicide. A lot of people [are] leaving the sector because they are burnt out."

NAFD

The Jewish Joint Burial Society (JJBS), described how they carried out 450% of their normal number of funerals in London in April 2020. The NBC highlighted how the numbers of deaths, combined with the importance of burying loved ones quickly, left staff feeling over stretched and anxious. Across the sector, there was also increasing fear about the government modelling that suggested there could be hundreds of thousands of deaths. The ICCM and FBCA highlighted that in February 2020 they were asked by the government, how many people could be accommodated for funerals if every cemetery and crematorium were to operate at capacity. An estimate was given quickly, however they did not receive a response for two and half weeks, which caused trepidation from their members.

"We were told at one point that we would face one year of deaths in three months."

ICCM

This uncertainty created increased anxiety amongst those working within the sector, as there was a fundamental gap between the scale of the crisis being anticipated and the practical capacity to manage it.

"At the outset there was no consultation or consideration as to what the actual burial and cremation capacity was. We were told to prepare for

half a million deaths. Had that scenario materialised, the sector would have been overwhelmed.”

NBC

There was a surge in direct cremations¹⁴ during the pandemic, driven by the restrictions in place rather than family preference. Those working in the sector faced not only an increase in their workload, but the emotional burden of knowing that many families were not receiving the type of funeral service they wanted for their loved ones. This situation created increased pressure and moral distress for those working in the sector, affecting their emotional wellbeing.

"If you look at statistics around direct cremations, [there were] 2% pre-pandemic [and] 50% during. [It] might not be what the family wanted, but what they were forced..."

ICCM

There was also confusion and distress caused by enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions on funerals during the pandemic. Police were initially charging funeral directors for what they classified as 'illegal gatherings'.¹⁵ These charges created additional stress for those working in the sector, who were already dealing with unprecedented pressures.

"[As per government guidance at the time] police [were] charging funeral directors for 'illegal gatherings'. [These were] eventually waived but another distraction and very distressing.”

National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF)

Workplace abuse

Some frontline workers experienced anger, abuse and sometimes physical violence from the public when they enforced restrictions, such as mask wearing, social distancing or rules about the maximum number of people permitted in a

¹⁴ A direct cremation is a cremation without a formal funeral service or ceremony, meaning no mourners are present at the crematorium.

¹⁵ In 2020 regulations stated that funerals must only take place in Covid-secure venues or in public outdoor spaces with up to 30 people in attendance (not including staff). If gatherings had more than 30 people in attendance police were required to address this through enforcement.

space. This was more common in public-facing roles, such as the retail, transport, distribution, funerals, burials and cremation sectors. They said this made some workers fearful to do their job and more reluctant to engage with customers and enforce the rules.

“The challenge developed during the pandemic, there was the period at the beginning where there were stock shortages and retail workers in store were expected to enforce limitations on goods that people bought, which had an impact with abuse towards retail workers.”

USDAW

The lack of clarity around enforcing mask-wearing left frontline staff feeling unsupported and at risk of abuse from members of the public who did not want to wear masks. This became more of an issue as restrictions eased and members of the public began to believe they no longer needed to worry about Covid-19. Representatives thought the abuse was disproportionately aimed at women and workers from ethnic minority backgrounds, who make up the majority of frontline workers in the retail, transport, distribution and warehousing sectors.

“Women in rail tend to be in public facing roles. They were the people dealing with interactions and there was a problem with the violence and aggression of male passengers directed towards them.”

RMT

RMT noted that the increase in abuse and aggression towards transport staff during the pandemic has persisted since. Similarly, USDAW referenced a survey that they carried out among their members, demonstrating an increase in customer abuse and violence in retail during the pandemic, which has not decreased since. Both spoke about the significant impact of the abuse on frontline workers.

“You can't underestimate the impact of violence and abuse [on] mental and also physical health, and people were being genuinely attacked on the

availability of chopped tomatoes, pasta, whatever was on the shelf and that had a huge impact on the workforce.”

USDAW

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

The funerals, burials and cremation sector also spoke about the abuse experienced when trying to enforce social distancing and limit the number of people who could attend funerals, burials and cremation services. They highlighted that cemetery and crematorium staff were submitted to daily violent outbursts in many areas. Staff were abused, spat at, attacked and vilified in the media for ensuring that funerals continued. The FBCA gave an example of over 200 people attending a funeral for a young person and how staff were asked to manage this situation, putting them at serious risk of verbal or physical abuse.

ICCM gave the example of a funeral director who was vilified in the media for enforcing restrictions.

“When the guidance was people [needed] to be 2 metres apart. At one funeral, a son moved his chair closer to his mum to comfort her and was told off by the funeral director. This hit frontpage headlines.”

ICCM

There have been many staff leaving the sector, taking early retirement or changing careers which representatives attributed to the horrific experiences workers had endured during the pandemic that many felt went unrecognised.

Contracting Covid-19

After the first few weeks of restrictions, workers across sectors were described as becoming mentally and physically exhausted. Morale worsened as an increasing number of colleagues on the frontline died. The BFAWU shared that some members of their union died from contracting Covid-19 in the workplace, or they brought the virus home and it led to the death of members of their families, particularly older relatives. They described how this devastated the people working in these environments.

“It hit morale when people started to die because it's their friends and colleagues. People took this illness home and killed their relatives, their elderly parents. That's devastating and it devastates the people in that workplace and in that community.”

BFAWU

The NPCC described how the police force had no choice but to be physically present and interact with other people. Interaction with others continued to be an intrinsic and non-negotiable part of many key worker roles, putting them at risk.

“They said that pressure was intense from the off, mentally and physically, the unknowns were mentally taxing and detainees would often use the virus as a threat, coughing and spitting. It's that sense of the unknown and not knowing what danger you were in; what danger you were potentially putting your family in.”

NPCC

Focus on: education

Education representatives discussed the significant impact Covid had on staff's physical and mental wellbeing. The NEU raised the high prevalence of Long Covid amongst staff in education settings. They suggested that unsafe workplaces led to staff contracting Covid-19 and experiencing long-term health problems. NASUWT also highlighted that the mental impact on those losing colleagues was massive.

“I had a voicemail from a member who was adamant that he'd caught Covid from a [pupil] who became ill whilst at school. He said, 'I've got to stay with this [pupil] until her parents collect her.' He was sent home to isolate, was eventually hospitalised with Covid and sadly died within 3 weeks. The impact on colleagues is immeasurable.”

Those working in education were concerned for their own families and households. The representative for the NAHT gave examples of education workers moving out of their homes to prevent spreading Covid-19 to family members. Some workers felt they had to wash the clothes they had worn to work as soon as they entered their homes to prevent contamination. Some staff were unable to work in an education setting due to clinical vulnerability, with some leaving the profession as a result of not feeling safe enough to go into work.

“As a school leader you're worried about your staff and your own situation and family. We forget how scary those weeks and months were at the beginning when people thought they may lose their life.”

NAHT

Focus on: retail

Representatives highlighted that food manufacturing workers faced disproportionately high death rates during the pandemic, particularly during the first wave between March and May 2020. The representative from GMB Union explained how workers in bakeries and other close-proximity food manufacturing settings saw some of the highest fatality rates of any key worker group. Although food manufacturing settings generally had strong hygiene practices, these were not adapted or enhanced quickly enough for Covid-19 protection. This, combined with the close contact nature of the work and pressures on workers to continue working when ill, ultimately created conditions for higher transmission and death rates.

However, their experiences remained largely invisible from public view, because they were not public-facing and represented smaller workforce numbers compared to sectors such as health and social care.

Lack of recognition as key workers

Focus on: education

In the education sector, it was felt that workers were not properly appreciated

during the pandemic. Representatives also spoke about how, in some cases, education staff were demonised in the media for concerns they raised about the reopening of schools and faced abuse from parents and carers about how they were teaching. Many members of education unions felt that there was a false perception amongst the public that schools and colleges were closed and staff were not working. It was felt they were not recognised for the risks they took, as well as taking on extra responsibilities during the pandemic.

"You were almost gaslit, being blamed for [the pandemic] 'You're avoiding going back to school,' [it was] an attack on teachers. No, we just wanted it to be safe."

NAHT

This had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of education staff. Workers in the sector continue to feel anger and resentment as they believe they were not provided with enough support or appreciation during the pandemic.

"They [teachers] felt undervalued. They were ever-present for pupils, and gave up their personal space, often whilst simultaneously educating their own children, having to deal with family sickness, the stress of online learning and additional work pressures - some heartbreakingly worked through bereavement."

NASUWT

Focus on: retail

Frontline retail workers felt undervalued and judged when attempting to access the childcare options that were available for key workers. USDAW had to write to various local authorities to justify retail workers' attempts to access key worker childcare.

"Certainly, for retail workers in places such as Poundland and B&M that people rely on for

discounted goods, there was snobbery from schools and childcare providers over whether they considered those workers... [this] impacted whether those workers could access childcare as key workers.”

USDAW

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

The funerals, burials and cremation sector described how they were not recognised as key workers, even though they were continuously working throughout the pandemic. This lack of recognition affected the support they were offered, as well as the mental health of those working within the sector.

“[There was] absolutely no support from the government. We were ignored. Next to the NHS and care workers, we were the ones most impacted.”

JJBS

ICCM highlighted that frontline funerals, burials and cremation workers were unable to access vaccinations, as they were not working at a funeral director's premises and therefore not considered key workers. Workers felt that they had been penalised for being truthful about their place of work, which ultimately put them more at risk of contracting Covid.

“... we weren't seen as key workers, so we weren't prioritised for vaccines.”

ICCM

“From our perspective, vaccines were a key aspect of workplace safety.”

NBC

Those representing the sector also mentioned that not being recognised as Category 2 responders¹⁶ deeply impacted their work, as they were not consulted on any decisions made.

¹⁶ Category 2 Responders are co-operating bodies under the UK Civil Contingencies Act 2004, including utilities (gas, electricity, water, telecom), transport operators (rail, air, ports), and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Their role is to provide sector-specific expertise and information to cooperate with all other responders during an emergency.

[We had] no representation in the decision-making process... conflicting information from different sectors – inconsistencies. The fact that we are not recognised as Category 2 responders worsened this.”

NAFD

Access to support

Many sectors described how inadequate mental health and wellbeing support for workers exacerbated feelings of being undervalued. It left many feeling isolated, struggling to cope with the pressures they faced and at risk of burnout. The transport, distribution and warehousing sectors highlighted that in many cases, there was no support available to workers.

In some cases, support was on offer, but it was felt that employers could have taken more responsibility to ensure staff made use of it. Without adequate support, workers had to rely on peer support or had no support at all.

“They burnt the workforce out. All education staff went above and beyond. We’re proud of everything they did, but it left them exhausted. The extent of the burnout hasn’t been acknowledged; they remain undervalued and underpaid.”

NASUWT

Focus on: fire and rescue

The FBU highlighted the impact of changing working practices on firefighters and control staff. They experienced a loss of their regular peer support network due to the lack of in-person interaction, making it more challenging to manage stress and demands of their job. Receiving wellbeing support via video calls and online resources, rather than having in-person sessions while on duty, left many firefighters and control staff feeling neglected and unsupported.

“There was a mass push for volunteers for emergency services and everyone had a moral duty to do what they could during the pandemic. There was an

immense pressure put on firefighters and as time went on, the fatigue took its toll. That then had an impact on people taking sick leave.”

FBU

Focus on: funerals, burials and cremation

In the funerals, burials and cremation sector there was no coordinated, national effort to offer support services for workers during an unprecedented, traumatic time. While some individual businesses and organisations set up their own support offerings, representatives reflected that the sector should have done more to offer better mental health support to all workers.

“The community offered tremendous support—gathering to ask what we needed, bringing meals while we worked, and standing by us during difficult times. We established our own bereavement support service, and many of us drew strength from our faith, with faith leaders providing vital comfort and guidance.”

NBC

Financial impact on key workers

Several examples were given of the significant financial impact of the pandemic on key workers, particularly those on 'zero hours', temporary contracts and sub-contracted/outsourced key workers. There was a consensus amongst representatives that sick pay for those who were unwell with Covid-19 was not sufficient or accessible for those who needed it.

BFAWU explained how this particularly affected some migrant workers without recourse to public funds or sick pay. There were examples of staff across all sectors leaving frontline professions and losing their income, after employers denied them permission to shield to protect clinically vulnerable family members.

“Sick pay was a huge challenge for workers; it was an issue that continued throughout the pandemic. People felt they had to go into work, even with the virus, and then the virus would spread.”

BFAWU

Focus on: police and justice

The Police Federation described how additional pay for overtime or different shift patterns in the police force was cut, due to moving to remote working. This was often an important source of income for staff, including for couples who might both be working in the sector. This sometimes resulted in workers no longer being able to afford childcare and not being able to attend work to look after their children. This affected police capacity and ability to deliver services.

“We tracked absence levels across the country by force, the primary absence was actual sickness, secondary was unintended consequences from an inability to get childcare or carer support. At one point, the worst in one force had 40% of the workforce absent.”

NPCC

Another financial impact in the probation service was that families of probation officers who died were not aware of their entitlement to death benefits. UNISON said this resulted in unclaimed benefits. They also expressed disappointment that probation workers did not have a similar scheme to the Covid Life Assurance Scheme¹⁷ offered for NHS and care workers.

“Their [probation service staff] dependents should've been advised very clearly that they had the right to apply for a death benefit under the scheme.”

UNISON

The representative for the POA described how some prison workers were able to shield with full pay, while others needed to go through an appeals procedure in order to be permitted by their employer to shield. The representative said this made some prison and justice workers feel as though theirs and their families' health was not valued.

“I can recount one case where this one man said he would not go to work and would take the disciplinary or dismissal on the chin because his wife is more important than his job. She was clinically vulnerable and he had been told to not go into a prison environment.”

POA

Focus on: education

Those representing the education sector discussed how learning support, catering and cleaning staff, were predominantly lower paid, female, and/or disabled and more likely to be from ethnic minority backgrounds. They discussed how their demographic factors and circumstances meant they were at greater risk of poorer Covid-19 outcomes. They were also least likely to be recognised as key workers and therefore not afforded the protections that accompanied that status.

¹⁷The Covid Life Assurance Scheme was an initiative funded by the UK government which provided lump sum payments to the families of eligible health and social care workers who died from Covid-19 while performing frontline duties between March 2020 - March 2022.

These roles were also usually on term-time contracts, with some on casual or insecure employment contracts. This meant they were less able to raise workplace safety concerns and lacked adequate sick pay provisions, as they feared potential retribution given their job insecurity and reliance on that income to survive. UNISON added that private contractors running catering and cleaning in schools often did not offer sick pay, resulting in staff coming into schools even if they had symptoms of Covid-19 or other illnesses.

The NEU and NASUWT both raised the issue of supply teachers, who were often employed on insecure contracts and did not have the right to be furloughed. This led to many either leaving the profession or continuing going into schools even when infected because they could not afford to lose the pay from self-isolating. By the second lockdown, education unions reported that many supply teachers had switched to other professions due to the lack of financial protection. With no supply pool, pressure on teachers and support staff to cover more lessons and each others' roles worsened, at a time when they were already under significant pressure.

“Over the years supply staff have been devalued, they don’t get paid like other teachers. Why would you risk your life going into school on £90 per day?”

NEU

GMB Union spoke about how the care workforce were able to claim furlough if they were deemed to be high risk, yet the same financial support was not afforded to teachers. Other unions agreed that this placed many clinically vulnerable staff, or staff in clinically vulnerable households, in a position where they were being asked to choose between earning money and protecting their family's health. GMB Union developed a tool across multiple sectors during the pandemic to enable members to understand and explain to employers why they might be at higher risk and need to be furloughed. They said this was well received in some sectors but not education.

“[Education employers would say] ‘There is no legal basis [for not coming into education settings in person] therefore come into school.’ People were in a bind where vocationally people wanted to be with pupils, but those living with vulnerable people worried

they'd kill the person they lived or worked with. There was no chance of furlough."

GMB Union

Focus on: transport, manufacturing and distribution

Similarly, the RMT representative described that cleaning staff working for outsourcing companies in the rail and bus sectors were disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds. Despite being particularly vulnerable to serious illness from Covid-19, they were described as feeling unable to take time off to self-isolate due to lack of sick pay and financial pressures. This meant they continued working while unwell, often without access to testing and unsure if they had contracted Covid-19. Despite their essential role, this lack of support left many cleaners feeling angry, betrayed and forgotten.

"Companies were saying: 'Our cleaners are doing deep cleans every few days, we've got our special army of hero cleaners.' All these people were outsourced and mostly on the national minimum wage. They were poster boys, or poster girls for the pandemic response. However, it was hypocritical – in reality they were not treated well and suffered..."

RMT

USDAW reiterated this point, highlighting that this was something that was felt across the entire transport sector, not just amongst cleaning staff.

"I think people felt that they couldn't afford to keep safe, they felt they had to go into work. Even sick pay from day one is significantly less than I would have got if I was working."

USDAW

Taxi drivers were described as facing pressure to work longer hours to maintain their income. This pressure, combined with their increased risk of Covid-19 exposure, led to significant worry and stress. It was reported that many drivers left the profession, losing income to prioritise their own and their family's health

and wellbeing.

Conversely, representatives noted that some working in the rail sector felt they had enough economic security to retire early and maintained that the pandemic was a catalyst for a large number of train drivers taking early retirement. This has meant an increase in staff shortages across the sector.

“People felt they had the economic security to [retire]... there has been a wave of early retirement following the pandemic in some roles - drivers, train drivers. Some of the shortages of staff that you see now is down to this, people who are just near the end of their working lives, they've got a decent pension and they've said, 'It's not worth it, I've got the option, I'm going.'”

RMT

Focus on: retail

USDAW described how some retail employers did not want to rely on the furlough scheme because they wanted their staff to be at work. They explained that some workers were instead put on 100% contractual pay, but in practice this was lower than the 80% furlough pay because zero and short hours contracts are common in retail. They described how this approach reduced the income of these retail workers, making them feel their employers did not value them

They also outlined the disproportionate financial impact on pregnant workers in retail. They explained that health and safety regulations stated that pregnant workers should be taken out of their role, or moved to a job that was safe and if that could not happen then they should be placed on full pay with maternity suspension. However, some employers did not understand the regulations, or were unwilling to follow them, so they either tried to place those workers on furlough at 80% of pay, or put them on sick leave, leaving them without their full pay entitlement. This had a knock-on effect in terms of their qualification for maternity pay and their allowance.

“There became an incentive for pregnant women to

go into work when they weren't well due to the financial changes made by their employers, which caused a key issue for key workers.”

USDAW

Lessons for future pandemics

Representatives from across sectors highlighted lessons to be learned to better support workers and keep them safe in the event of a future pandemic. The following lessons were raised consistently across roundtable discussions.

- **Develop pandemic contingency plans for essential services:** It was felt that there is a need for government and employers to develop clear frameworks and protocols for maintaining essential services safely during a pandemic, with early involvement from the Health and Safety Executive. Having these plans in place from the outset would enable a swift, coordinated response.
- **Embed the voice of key workers in contingency plans:** There was a consensus that the voice of workers and their experiences should be embedded in future contingency plans for pandemics and civil emergencies, including through trade unions and bodies. This would help ensure that guidance is tailored to their needs.
- **Provide clear, tailored and timely guidance for key workers:** Many mentioned the importance of government guidance being tailored to the realities of different sectors and worker roles. Guidance should be communicated with sufficient lead time for implementation and with priorities for implementation (hierarchy of control) made clear. The guidance should also make clear whether it is legally enforceable or advisory only. This would help give workers and organisations the confidence that they are applying guidelines appropriately.
- **Tailor guidance to cultural and religious practices:** The funerals, burials and cremation sector in particular wanted future pandemic responses to consider and incorporate people's religious and cultural needs within planning and guidance.
- **Strengthen workplace safety infrastructure and standards for key workers:** It was suggested that sectors should have consistent workplace safety measures, so that workers have equal opportunity to be protected at work. There is a need for investment in long-term workplace safety solutions, such as improved ventilation systems and space audits, readily available PPE stockpiles and adequate cleaning supplies. Across sectors there was agreement that clear, timely communication with key workers to

address concerns proactively , offer support and ensure safety measures and consistent implementation of rules and guidance across workplaces will be required in the event of a future pandemic or civil emergency.

- **Strengthen mental health and peer support systems for key workers:** It is important to have comprehensive and confidential wellbeing support, including mental health services, in order to help key workers cope with the unique pressures of a pandemic. Fostering peer support networks and positive team cultures, especially when teams change (for example, when some people start working remotely or get redeployed) was also thought to be critical for reducing burnout.
- **Ensure adequate compensation and financial security for all key workers:** There was a consensus about the importance of ensuring that all workers have access to adequate compensation and financial security, including fair wages, sick pay and benefits. This would support health and wellbeing but also make it easier for them to comply with pandemic measures without added financial stress. Implementing policies to ensure financial security could also help maintain a stable workforce and improve morale during a crisis.
- **Establish policies to prevent workplace abuse:** Representatives thought policies should be implemented by employers during and following a pandemic to reduce the violence and abuse that workers face, particularly when enforcing restrictions. They thought that additional support should be put in place for workers who are more likely to face abuse and violence while at work, such as workers who are migrants, from ethnic minority backgrounds and women.
- **Value and recognise the role of key workers:** The importance of recognising key workers' essential roles in responding to the pandemic and providing important public services was noted across sectors. Many suggested that earlier identification of key workers and category two responders, alongside consistent messaging on the value of key workers, would help improve public appreciation and reduce abuse towards them. Some representatives suggested that key workers who died of Covid should have been officially commemorated, and that for future pandemics there should be memorials across the UK for key workers.
- **Improve working relationships between government, trade unions and**

key groups representing organisations:

Improving relations and communication between unions, key groups representing organisations and the government, before and during pandemics and civil emergencies, was deemed an important lesson to be learned. It was suggested that this would enable a more collaborative and faster approach to resolving issues on the ground for workers and others relating to furlough schemes or workplace safety. It would also help ensure guidance and restrictions implemented in a future pandemic are tailored to the needs of the sector.

Annex

Roundtable structure

In March 2025, the UK Covid-19 Inquiry brought together representatives from Unions for a round table discussion to explore the impact of the pandemic and government restrictions on key workers.

This roundtable is one of a series being carried out for Module 10 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, which is investigating the impact of the pandemic on the UK population. The module also aims to identify areas where societal strengths, resilience, and or innovation reduced any adverse impact of the pandemic.

The full-day roundtable with union representatives was facilitated by Ipsos UK and held at the Methodist Central Hall Westminster.

A diverse range of organisations were invited to the roundtable; the list of attendees includes only those who attended the discussion on the day.

We would like to thank the below organisations for their attendance at the roundtable and their contributions:

- Trades Union Congress (TUC)

Retail:

- Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU)
- Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)

Education

- GMB Union
- National Education Union (NEU)
- NASUWT - The Teachers' Union
- National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
- UNISON

- University and College Union (UCU)

Transport, distribution and warehousing

- National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)
- Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)

Funerals, burials and cremation

- National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD)
- Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA)
- Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM)
- National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF)
- National Burial Council (NBC)
- Jewish Joint Burial Society (JJBS)

Fire and rescue

- Fire Brigades Union (FBU)

Police and justice

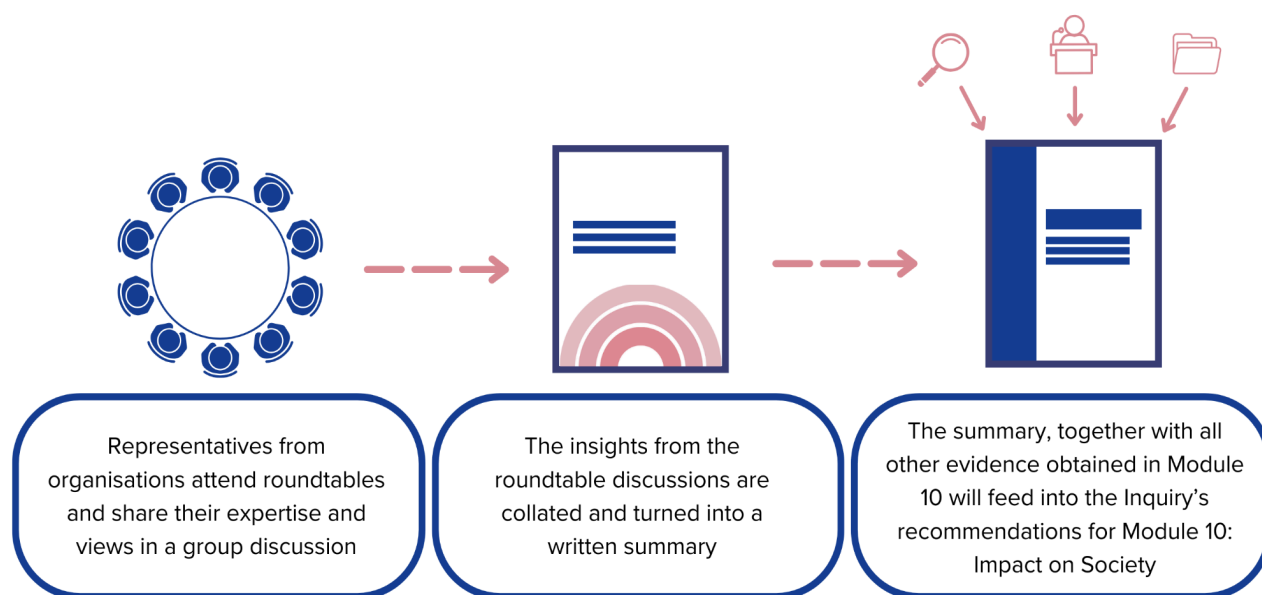
- Prison Officers Association (POA)
- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)
- Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)
- The Police Federation
- UNISON

Module 10 roundtables

In addition to the roundtable on key workers, the UK Covid-19 Inquiry has held roundtable discussions on the following topics:

- The faith groups and places of worship roundtable heard from faith leaders and organisations representing religious groups about the unique pressures and risks they faced during the pandemic.
- The Domestic abuse support and safeguarding roundtable engaged with organisations that support victims and survivors of domestic abuse to understand how lockdown measures and restrictions impacted access to support services and their ability to provide assistance to those that needed it the most.
- The Funerals, burials, and bereavement support roundtable explored the effects of restrictions on funerals and how bereaved families navigated their grief during the pandemic.
- The Justice system roundtable addressed the impact on those in prisons and detention centres, and those affected by court closures and delays.
- The Hospitality, retail, travel, and tourism industries roundtable engaged with business leaders to examine how closures, restrictions and reopening measures impacted these critical sectors.
- The Community-level sport and leisure roundtable investigated the impact of restrictions on community level sports, fitness and recreational activities.
- The Cultural institutions roundtable considered the effects of closures and restrictions on museums, theatres and other cultural institutions.
- The Housing and homelessness roundtable explored how the pandemic affected housing insecurity, eviction protections and homelessness support services.

Figure 1. How each roundtable feeds into M10



Glossary of terms

- **Contact Tracing app:** A mobile application that notifies users about potential exposure to Covid-19 through proximity tracking.
- **Hierarchy of control:** A system used in managing workplace hazards by prioritising intervention measures.
- **Key worker:** is an individual in a profession considered essential to the functioning and well-being of society, particularly during times of crisis or disruption, and whose work supports critical public services and infrastructure.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** Equipment worn to minimise exposure to hazards that cause serious workplace injuries and illnesses.
- **Remote working:** The practice of employees working from a location outside the traditional office setting, often from home.
- **Risk assessment in prisons:** is a continuous process of systematically gathering and interpreting information about an individual to predict the likelihood of them engaging in behaviours of concern, such as reconviction or causing serious harm to themselves or others.
- **Self-isolation:** A period of staying away from others to prevent the spread of infection after exposure to a contagious disease/virus.
- **SEND:** Special Education Needs and Disabilities.
- **Shielding:** is a measure to protect people who are clinically extremely vulnerable by minimising all interaction between those who are extremely vulnerable and others.

- **Social distancing:** Measures taken to increase physical space between individuals to prevent the spread of Covid-19.
- **Test and Release:** A program allowing workers to test for Covid-19 and return to work sooner if negative.
- **Ventilation:** The process of supplying a space with fresh air to improve air quality and reduce airborne pathogens.
- **Workplace safety guidance:** Refers to protocols and guidelines implemented to ensure safety and prevent Covid-19 in work environments.