Every Story Matters Record: Key Workers In Brief

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry is an independent public inquiry examining the response to and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic to learn lessons for the future. The Inquiry is divided into separate investigations known as modules. Each module is focused on a different topic with its own public hearings. Following the hearings, a module report is published which contains findings based on all of the evidence and the Chair's recommendations for the future.

How Every Story Matters fits into the Inquiry's work

This summary covers one of the Every Story Matters records for Module 10, examining the experience of key workers working on the frontline during the pandemic.

The record brings together people's experiences shared with us:
- online at everystorymatters.co.uk; and
- in person at events in towns and cities across the UK.

Stories are analysed and used in module-specific records. These records are entered into evidence for the relevant module.

Every Story Matters is neither a survey nor a comparative exercise. It cannot be representative of the entire experience of the UK, nor was it designed to be. Its value lies in hearing a range of experiences, in capturing the themes that have been shared with us, quoting people's stories in their own words and, crucially, in ensuring that people's experiences are part of the Inquiry's public record.

Every Story Matters closed to new stories in May 2025, so records for Module 10 analysed every story shared with the Inquiry online and at our Every Story Matters listening events up until this date.

Some of the stories and themes in this record contain descriptions of bereavement, verbal and physical abuse, mental health impacts and significant psychological distress. They may be distressing to some and readers are encouraged to seek help if necessary. A list of support services is provided on the UK Covid-19 Inquiry website.

Introduction

This record brings together the experience of key workers during the pandemic. They include those working in the police service, firefighters, education workers, cleaners, transport workers, taxi and delivery drivers, security guards, retail workers and funerals, burials and cremation workers. The experiences of key workers in healthcare and social care have been included in the records for Modules 3 and 6 respectively, so are not duplicated here.

During the pandemic, many key workers faced heavy workloads, exhaustion and stress that left many feeling burnt out. For some, the impact has continued long after, with lasting physical and mental health issues including Long Covid. Many have also faced financial strain, particularly those unable to return to work due to their health conditions.

Pressures on frontline key workers

- Key workers described feeling fearful about contracting Covid-19 at work and becoming seriously ill. Many reflected on their fear for their own and their family's health.

- Many felt uncertain about what Covid-19 and the restrictions would mean for their work and daily lives, as they had minimal time to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances and new ways of working.

- Frequent changes to rules and guidance created additional stress for those dealing directly with the public, leaving workers uncertain about what advice to give or rules to enforce.

- Many faced practical difficulties implementing restrictions due to the nature of their jobs. For example, nursery workers were unable to implement social distancing measures when providing care for young children.

- Some workplaces presented challenges. Buildings with smaller rooms and windows that did not open made proper ventilation impossible.

- Many told us they felt unsafe and undervalued due to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), which, when provided, was often insufficient or inadequate. Police officers described receiving ineffective masks, and council and cleaning staff struggled to access PPE.
- Those in education settings described the challenges of implementing 'bubbles', with staff having to mix with children from many households and feeling highly exposed to the virus.

Impact on wellbeing and family life

- Clinically vulnerable key workers or those with vulnerable family members were particularly concerned about the potential impact of Covid-19 on their health.
- Many who had to go into their workplaces took steps to try and protect family members, including removing or washing work clothes when they got home. For some, these actions continue today, with some experiencing difficulties linked to anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).
- Fear of spreading Covid-19 led to painful decisions about isolation for key workers. Some stopped seeing elderly parents or sent children to stay with relatives. This contributed to feelings of loneliness for both key workers and their families.
- Many parents felt immense strain on their mental health and relationship with their partner, while trying to manage shift work and reduced childcare options. We heard how parents felt they had little support to enable them to take time off to look after their children. This left them feeling guilty and overwhelmed.

Stress and burnout

- Many faced the additional pressure of covering chronic staff shortages that were caused by furloughed staff and/or staff self-isolating. Exhaustion from these working conditions led to many leaving their jobs with burnout.
- The pandemic brought unprecedented workload pressures that often continued for many months. Those working in funeral, burial and cremation settings described working extended hours dealing with the increase in deaths because of Covid-19; these pressures were greatly exacerbated by the emotional impact of supporting grieving families during the pandemic.
- Teachers reported teaching in person all day and then setting online work in their own time. Some felt they had no energy left to home school their own children.
- Some young retail workers felt pressured by employers to work additional hours, which increased their exposure to the virus and added to their stress. They said employers asked them to work more because they were less likely to be severely affected by Covid-19.
- Some key workers also experienced verbal and physical abuse, with some retail workers from ethnic minority backgrounds experiencing racialised verbal abuse from the public and colleagues when enforcing government guidance.

Lasting health impacts

- Key workers described long-lasting and detrimental impacts on their mental health. Many described feeling burnt out because of a combination of fear, increased workload, lack of support and family pressures. Some still experience anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- Lack of employer support was also a consistent theme, with managers more focused on maintaining services than workers' wellbeing.

- Long Covid has had a profound impact on those affected. Many described dealing with debilitating symptoms, with some forced to take extended time off work. Careers were significantly impacted when employers would not accommodate necessary adjustments to their working patterns.

Financial and employment consequences

- Some key workers, particularly those not entitled to sick pay, worried about how they would cope financially if they were to catch Covid-19 at work.

- Key workers who contracted Long Covid sometimes saw their income reduced and took on debts they are still repaying. In these cases, they often did not receive sick pay when self-isolating, which had a significant financial impact.

Recognition and pride

- Many felt their sacrifices during the pandemic went unrecognised. They wanted greater appreciation and practical support, particularly around access to priority services like shopping and vaccines.

- Other workers outside of health and social care felt their roles were overlooked, while some valued the increased recognition their sectors received and took pride in their contribution to the national response.

Lessons learnt

- Key workers emphasised that the pandemic demonstrated how much society relies on retail workers, cleaners, transport workers as well as other essential workers like police officers and teachers.

- Many stressed the need for clear, consistent guidance, safety oversight, and established implementation checks across all sectors.

- Some key workers believe advance planning should extend to all essential sectors, with comprehensive plans for implementing safety measures.

- They felt it was important to have a clear national policy which defines key worker status and ensures equal recognition and consistent eligibility for support.

- Key workers said support should include sick pay for all key workers, proactive mental health support and priority access to PPE and vaccines for all frontline workers.

To find out more or to download a copy of the full record or other accessible formats, visit: https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/every-story-matters/records/