Executive summary

- Unite workplace representatives (reps) are at the forefront of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis at work. This paper reports on their valuable insights into the pandemic and how it is being dealt with.
- The survey pays particular attention to workplace Covid-19 issues in respect of health and safety.
- Mental health tops members’ issues that reps are dealing with and it’s getting worse. Over eight in ten (83%) of respondents reported having to deal with an increase in members reporting mental health-related issues, a huge 18 point rise on the 65% which topped Unite’s May 2020 reps survey.
- A proactive approach from employers’ to dealing with employees’ mental health challenges and practical public policy support for mental health services remain of vital importance.
- There was also a large jump in increases of dealing with ‘bullying’ (to 40% from 26%).
- Three-quarters (75%) of respondents reported that their employer is behaving responsibly (up from 63% last year). 8% said that their employer is behaving recklessly.
- However, a fifth of respondents (20%) reported that their workplace didn’t have adequate Covid-19 protection measures.
- Areas of inadequate provision identified were ‘social distancing measures’ (79%), ‘ventilation’ (48%), ‘Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)’ (47%), and ‘hygiene measures’ (47%).
- Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents reported that there had been more than 1 positive case of Covid-19 in their workplace, with initial analysis finding some ‘clusters’.
- 80% of respondents said that their employer had consulted with them on Covid-19 issues. Of those consulted, 88% said that the consultation was ‘on an ongoing basis’.
- Just over half of respondents (52%) reported the negotiation of policies specific to Covid-19. The most popular types of policies negotiated were ‘Health & Safety’ (71%), ‘Use of holidays’ (61%), ‘Sickness’ (59%) and ‘Home/lone working’ (56%). 34% reported the negotiation of pay policies specific to Covid-19.
- Nearly a third of respondents (30%) reported having had a workplace visit from a regulator/health authority around Covid-19 issues. Of these, when asked which regulator visited, responses were: 58% Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (Health and Safety Authority in Republic of Ireland), 30% Local Authority/Government, 19% Health Authority.
- However, only a third (35%) of respondents reporting a visit from a regulator/health authority said that the regulator had spoken to the reps.
- Regulators need to produce official figures on workplace visits and the involvement of workplace reps.
- We need stronger trade unions to create healthier, safer workplaces and a fairer post-Covid economy.
**Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had, and is having, a devastating impact. Unite workplace representatives (reps) are at the forefront of dealing with the crisis at work representing members who have continued to work (including at home) through this pandemic as well as those on furlough.

In May 2020 Unite Research published the results of a survey – the first of its kind - of Unite reps reporting on their valuable insights into how the crisis was being dealt with and what should happen next.¹

This latest paper reports on initial findings of an online survey distributed to all Unite reps in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland² that was live between 24th March and 7th April 2021. Responses were received from 1447 reps from across all of Unite’s industrial sectors and regions. The survey paid special attention to specific workplace Covid-19 issues in respect of health and safety.

**Survey findings**

**Mental health is still a huge issue...and it’s getting worse**

Over eight in ten (83%) of respondents reported having to deal with an increase in members reporting mental health-related issues. This is a huge 18 percentage point rise on the 65% which topped the May 2020 survey.

Unite has previously highlighted some of the key issues around mental health and the pandemic calling on employers to take a proactive approach to dealing with employees’ mental health challenges³ and producing a mental health guide⁴. This remains of vital importance, as does practical public policy support for mental health services.

There was also a large jump in increases of dealing with ‘bullying’ to 40% from 26%.

In respect of these particular increases this might be an indication of managers (particularly line managers) experiencing difficulties in managing remotely with a greater proportion of workers working from home.

Other issues that respondents reported increases in include ‘concerns over pregnancy, maternity, paternity, adoption or other family leave’ (33%, down from 40% last year), ‘employers or managers exploiting the isolation of individual members’ (30%, down from 33% last year), ‘issues related to disabilities’ (26%, up from 24% last year), ‘discrimination based on equality’ (i.e. sex, race, disability,

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¹ From Crisis to Change: Coming out of COVID-19 (Unite Research, May 2020) [URL](#)
² Approximately 18,350 reps
³ Mental health issues top of workers’ lockdown concerns (Unite press release, May 2020) [URL](#)
⁴ Unite Mental Health Guide – Under the strain of a pandemic [URL](#)
LGBT+, age, religious, nationality discrimination) (13%, up from 8% last year), ‘members applying for Universal Credit’ (6%, down from 9%). (See Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1: Increases in members’ issues dealt with by Unite reps

(Note: Question: In your capacity as a Unite rep, have you had to deal with an increase in the following during the crisis? (Tick as many as apply). N=982)

Employers becoming more responsible...

Respondents were asked about how they think their employer is responding to the Covid-19 crisis. **Three-quarters (75%) of respondents reported that their employer is behaving responsibly.** Examples include working with Unite representatives, carrying out proper risk assessments, facilitating working from home, proper provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and social distancing. **8% said that their employer is behaving recklessly** to the crisis citing practices such as lack of PPE and slowness to act (see Figure 2 below).
The same question was asked of reps last year and it can be noted that in the past year there has been an increase in the proportion of reps reporting that their employer is behaving responsibly, up 12 percentage points from 63% to 75%. (The proportion thinking that their employer is behaving recklessly has fallen from 18% to 8%.)

This increase could reflect a better understanding of the situation and the putting in place of appropriate measures compared to the start of the pandemic last year.

In this respect, it is worth noting that there is a difference between ‘responsible’ and ‘reckless’ employers depending on whether the employer has consulted with reps over Covid-19 issues. This is reported in more detail further in this paper (see section on consultation under ‘Unite reps make a difference’).

...but many workplaces still don’t have adequate protection

However, two in ten respondents (20%) reported that their workplace didn’t have adequate Covid-19 protection measures with 80% reporting that their workplace had adequate Covid-19 protection measures.

Asked to tick those areas where inadequate provisions were made, 79% identified ‘social distancing measures’, 48% ‘ventilation’, 47% ‘Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)’, and 47% ‘hygiene measures’. 21% also cited ‘other’ examples such as lack of testing.
Three quarters of reps report cases of Covid-19 in their workplace

Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents reported that there had been more than 1 positive case of Covid-19 in their workplace. (11% said ‘no’ and 11% said ‘I don’t know’.)

Initial examination of the findings concerning the numbers of workers testing positive finds some ‘clusters’. Placing numbers of workers testing positive in bands of five from 1-4 workers up to 45-49 workers and then 50-99 and 100 or more sees a spike in ‘5-9’ trailing off and then picking up again to show 148 reports at over 100 positive cases (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: How many workers have tested positive?

![Figure 3: How many workers have tested positive?](image)

(Note: N=1124)

Unite reps make a difference...

Unite reps continue to deliver a ‘union premium’, not least in respect of their role in negotiating and being consulted on work issues relating to Covid-19.

Just over half of respondents (52%) reported the negotiation of policies specific to Covid-19. The most popular types of policies negotiated were ‘Health & Safety’ (71%), ‘Use of holidays’ (61%), ‘Sickness’ (59%) and ‘Home/lone working’ (56%). 34% reported the negotiation of pay policies specific to Covid-19 (see Figure 4 below).
Figure 4: What types of policies have been negotiated specific to Covid-19?

(Chart showing the percentage of respondents who negotiated policies related to various topics.)

(Note: N=749)

80% of respondents said that their employer had consulted with them on Covid-19 issues (20% said ‘no’). Of those consulted, 88% said that the consultation was ‘on an ongoing basis’, with 12% reporting it was a ‘one off’.

Further analysis also shows that reps who say they have been consulted are much more likely to say that their employer is behaving responsibly in responding to the Covid-19 crisis than those who have not been consulted (82% compared to 48%). Conversely, reps who have not been consulted are more than twice as likely to say that their employer has behaved recklessly than those who have been consulted (17% compared to 6%).

...but need to be involved and recognised more

Nearly a third of respondents (30%) reported having had a workplace visit from a regulator/health authority around Covid-19 issues or someone acting on their behalf (70% said ‘no’). Of these, when asked which regulator visited, responses were as follows: 58% Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (Health and Safety Authority in ROI), 30% Local Authority/Government, 19% Health Authority, and 1% Office of Rail and Road (ORR). 13% cited ‘other agencies or health & safety not regulators and 3% ‘none of the above’ (see Figure 5 below).
Figure 5: Which regulator / health authority have you had a workplace visit from around Covid-19 issues?

(Nota: N=409)

However, only a third (35%) of respondents reporting a visit from a regulator/health authority reported that the regulator had spoken to the reps when they visited (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Did the regulator speak to the reps when they visited?

(Note: N=401)

This is a very alarming finding as this issue has been raised by Unite with all the regulators concerned, who insist that contacting reps on visits is a matter of course.
Regulators do not produce official figures on this issue in regular reports providing little accountability. This finding demonstrates that this needs to change. Unite has also pointed out how the HSE and local authorities are under incredible financial pressure due to a decade of cuts.\(^5\)

Trade unions and union workplace representatives have been at the forefront of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis at work, making a real and positive difference to people's lives. Good, responsible employers have recognised this and worked with them.

But the work of trade union representatives also needs to be supported by public policy and political action. This latest report, as well as last year's Unite reps survey, shows that we need stronger trade unions to create healthier, safer workplaces and a fairer post-Covid economy.

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\(^5\) Urgent government action needed to allow safety inspections of key COVID-19 workplaces (Unite press release, May 2020) [URL]