



IDR

Pay Data | Intelligent Decisions



**UNIVERSITY of
GREENWICH**

**CREW | Centre for Research
in Employment and Work**



Changing the world
of work for good



All-Party Parliamentary Group:

**Occupational
Safety & Health**

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes in the food and drinks sector

**Professor Sian Moore
Dr Chris Ball
Dr Minjie Cai
Centre for Research on Employment and Work
University of Greenwich**

**Professor Matt Flynn, University of Hull
and
Ken Mulkearn, Incomes Data Research**

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

March 2021

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

1. Introduction

This report responds to the TUC's calls for a strengthened health and safety agenda, improved safety guidance and tougher regulatory activity in the light of Covid-19.

Until now little was known about the form workplace risk assessment has taken during Covid-19, its impact on prevention and work. This report identifies the role that Health and Safety (H&S) representatives have played during Covid-19, lessons learned and best practice for continuing and future waves. There is a particular focus on food manufacturing, distribution and food retail (referred to throughout the report as the food sector). The report examines organisational and sectoral mechanisms and processes for worker representation and for effective social dialogue and joint regulation on health and safety. It identifies the role of H&S representatives in risk assessment and the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), but also in the (re)organisation of work and workplace ergonomics. The report also explores the role of unions in the protection of mental health, in ensuring that health and safety measures cover all groups of workers, and in maintaining the confidence of workers in their organisation's capacity to keep them safe. It recognises the specific issues for the protection of key workers, the disproportionate outcomes for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) workers, but also for those on contractual arrangements with no direct relationship with employers.

2. Executive Summary

- **Workers in the food processing, manufacturing, distribution and retail sector have worked throughout the pandemic. In fact, increased demand has meant recruitment in the sector, but also work intensification. Case studies suggest substantial increases in the utilisation of agency workers;**
- **Four out of five workers in the food industry said that they have been identified as essential workers by their employers, 84% in food retail and 73% in food manufacture compared to 39% in other parts of the manufacturing and retail sectors;**
- **Over half (58%) of workers reported fears about the transmission of Covid-19 at work, with the figure rising to 63% for those classed as 'essential workers';**
- **A third (33%) of workers (and 40% of essential workers) worried about the impact of continued attendance at the workplace on their mental health;**
- **Over one third (37%) of workers say that Covid-19 has caused them financial worries and over one quarter (27%) say that they fear being made redundant;**
- **Almost half of managers in food retail (45%) said that a majority of essential workers had been subject to some review and change of their working time. A third (34%) of workers reported changes to hours, over a quarter (28%) to shifts and 21% to breaks;**

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Representation

- The survey research suggests an absence of health and safety infrastructure in UK workplaces. Under half of managers (47%) reported that there was a health and safety committee representing management and workers at the workplace level or at the organisational level (48%). Just over one third (36%) of managers in the food manufacturing and distribution sector said there was such a committee at the organisational level and a half (50%) at workplace level. For food retail, these figures are reversed with half (52%) of them saying that there is an organisational level health and safety committee and 38% reporting their existence at the workplace level.
- Similarly managers reported low levels of health and safety representation, union and non-union, at either the workplace or organisational level in both food retail (16% at the organisational level and 8% at the workplace level) and food manufacturing and distribution (16% at the organisational level and 6% at the workplace level).
- Under half (44%) of managers (34% in food retail and 24% in food manufacturing and distribution) reported a dedicated health and safety officer in their workplace. Under half (45%) say that their workplaces have a health and safety management team (45% in food retail and 36% in food manufacturing and distribution).
- Well over one third of workers (42%) identified the presence of union health and safety reps in their workplaces. A further 26% reported non-union reps and just under one in five (18%) said there is no health and safety representation at all.
- Workers in workplaces with a union health and safety rep were more likely to feel that they were consulted by managers over Covid-related health and safety. There was a significant relationship between consultation and the presence of union health and safety reps; 39% of workers with no health and safety rep said that they had not been consulted at all, but 26% of those with a union health and safety rep said they had not;
- While there is no evidence of the expansion of health and safety representation under Covid-19, it is clear from the case studies that existing structures provide a necessary basis for informal and frequent dialogue between union reps and managers under Covid, often on a day-to-day basis.

Risk Assessment

- Three quarters of managers (76%) reported that a Covid-19 risk assessment had been carried out in their organisation since March 2020. Covid-19 risk assessments with similar figures for food retail (76%), manufacturing and distribution (74%) and other organisations (76%);

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

- **Workers were less likely than managers to report that a risk assessment had been carried out in their workplaces - just over half (57%) did so, 18% said it had not and 23% did not know. Workers in food manufacturing and distribution were more likely than those in food retail to report that a risk assessment had been carried out (59% versus 51%);**
- **Two thirds of workers in a workplace with union health and safety representatives (66%) said that a risk assessment had been carried out. In contrast, 58% of workers in a workplace with a non-union representative and 43% of those with no health and safety representative, said that a risk assessment had been carried out. Twice as many workers in workplaces with no health and safety rep said that they did not know if a risk assessment had been carried out in comparison with those in a workplace with a union rep (30% compared to 15%);**
- **Line managers were more likely to state that the risk assessment had been shared in workplaces where a union was recognised for representation over health and safety issues (85% compared to 46% in non-union organisations), reflecting workplace relationships with health and safety reps;**
- **Where a Covid risk assessment had been carried out in their workplaces, one third (33%) of workers said that they had not been consulted. Having a union health and safety rep in the workplace made a difference; 39% of workers with no health and safety rep and 36% of workers with a non-union health and safety representative felt that they had not been consulted on their employers' responses to Covid-19 whereas only 26% of those in workplaces with a union health and safety rep felt the same.**
- **Where a risk assessment was carried out, only one in five of managers reported that risk assessments covered agency workers and less than one in four covered contracted out and outsourced workers. Only 40% of managers in food retail said that the risk assessment covered risks to customers and clients and 44% said it covered contact with the public.**

Sick Pay

- **In the worker survey respondents reported that nearly one third (31%) of food retailers and a quarter (25%) of food manufacturers had made changes to sick pay and around a quarter (23% and 25% respectively) to sickness absence – a higher proportion than in other sectors for both. Over one in four managers (26%) reported that there had been a change to sick pay with the figure rising to 34% for food manufacturers. Overall one quarter (26%) said there was a change in attendance policies, but this rose to nearly a third (30%) for food retail.**
- **The research confirms that where there is limited access to occupational sick pay, Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) is an inadequate replacement. Reliance on SSP inhibits compliance with rules on self-isolation. Workers in workplaces with a union health and safety rep were more likely than those**

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

without one to report changes to sick pay and sickness absence during Covid-19. Case study evidence shows that such changes could ensure for sick pay from day one, or provide basic pay or occupational sick pay for those shielding or self-isolating.

The role of union health and safety reps

- The case studies highlight the proactive role played by trade union health and safety reps in the food processing, distribution and retail sector, particularly in ensuring the immediacy of employers' responses to the pandemic, pressing for risk assessments, but also regulating implementation of measures at the workplace;
- Those in workplaces with union health and safety reps were significantly more likely to report sufficient PPE (73% versus 53% of those with no health and safety rep);
- Overall one in five (21%) of workers reported inadequate social distancing measures in March/April 2020. Those in workplaces with union health and safety reps were significantly less likely to do so;
- The case studies show that one of the most important roles played by unions is in monitoring risk amongst members and non-members, ensuring compliance with regulations and overcoming resistance to them - challenging what one respondent called 'a culture of denial'.

Union value

- There is evidence from the case studies that the value of health and safety representation during Covid-19 had led to membership growth and increased union profiles in the workplace as workers turn to reps for advice and support, with reps building a stronger bond with the membership;
- Managers have acknowledged the role of health and safety reps in providing the communication and liaison between themselves and the shopfloor;
- Covid-19 is an issue on which unions can work with management, enhancing relationships and encouraging greater interaction. Managers in the case studies recognised the key roles unions could play and the expertise and resources that they could bring, with potential implications for longer-term union-management relationships;
- Only around half of those in the worker survey (49%) said that felt free to report a health and safety issue related to Covid in their workplace. Having workplace representation makes a difference. Over half (57%) of workers in workplaces with a union recognised for individual representation on matters like grievances or disciplinaries agreed they felt able to, compared with 46% of those without such support. The case studies show that even where unions were not recognised, the presence of members attached to a union gave workers confidence to speak out;

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

- **The case studies found enthusiasm for the potential of roving health and safety representatives, particularly where there was no union presence and where there was a culture of denial in terms of risk.**

3. Context

Data on Covid-19 outbreaks for the week 28 December 2020 to 3 January 2021 showed a sharp rise in the number of workplaces reporting clusters. In particular, the TUC has identified that food processing remains one of the hardest-hit sectors for Covid-19 outbreaks, with some factories reporting hundreds of cases and dozens of site closures during 2020. Prior to Christmas 2020, the TUC warned that large numbers of temporary workers entering the sector would exacerbate the risk of exposure, making it harder to socially distance. It also warned that there was insufficient enforcement activity in this sector. The HSE continues to put the high number of outbreaks down to workers' mixing outside of work. However, researchers have identified potential causes as being:

- Cooling systems, as Covid is known to remain in the air longer in cooler environments,
- Close proximity of workers for prolonged periods,
- Increased projection of aerosols when workers speak loudly over industrial noise.

The TUC has pointed out that low pay in food processing is a particular problem, creating lower compliance with rules on self-isolation due to reliance on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). A TUC poll found that, of workers who were required to self-isolate, one in five received no sick pay and low-income workers were more likely than middle and higher earners to have to self-isolate without being able to work from home. In the TUC 2020 Health and Safety reps survey 82% of reps reported that their employers required workers to self-isolate following a Covid positive case being identified, while only 52% of employers paid occupational sick pay.

The survey also found there had been increased recruitment of new safety reps, with 18% of those responding having been a rep for less than one year. H&S reps were spending more time fulfilling H&S rep functions as a result of the pandemic, but only half were paid for doing so.

4. Research Methods

In highlighting good practice, the methodology underlying this research aimed to ensure subjective as well as objective evidence of the impact of risk assessment and the role of health and safety reps. In pursuit of this goal both a qualitative and quantitative approach was utilised. In addition to seven organisational case studies, two surveys were conducted between December 2020 to January 2021. Information was gathered through:

4.1 An online survey of workers

A survey of workers was carried out in two parts. A questionnaire was distributed to representatives of the main unions in the food and drink industry (Unite, BFAWU, GMB, USDAW) via the TUC. This generated 171 responses; 67 of the questionnaires were not fully completed and were therefore excluded. A second dataset was purchased from

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Survey Monkey¹, generating 893 responses; 40 were excluded as the questionnaire had not been fully completed. A request was made for responses from full- and part-time employees (i.e., excluding those self-employed) in the retail, agriculture and manufacturing industries. It was not possible to select participants specifically in food manufacturing and retail, but of the 957 responses, 335 (35%) worked in food retail and 193 (20%) worked in food manufacturing and distribution. Questionnaires were distributed electronically and comprised largely closed questions. Responses were anonymous.

Of the respondents to the two worker surveys, 43% worked for businesses which spanned the entire UK. Over two fifths (41%) reported working in retail on the shopfloor; 12% in a warehouse; 16% on a production line; and 18% said they were office based. Two thirds worked full-time (69%) and the majority were on permanent contracts of employment (89%). Of those responding 47% of respondents were women and 49% men. One in seven respondents (15%) reported living with at least one child under five; 25% with at least one child between 5 and 16 years old and 6% with at least one young person between 16 and 18. A small proportion (3%) were living with someone over 65 years old and 5% with a person with a long-term health condition. One third (34%) of respondents were members of a trade union, most of them being members of Unite (10%); GMB (8%) or USDAW (13%). Just over a third of workers (37%) reported that they worked in workplaces where a union was recognised for collective bargaining purposes.

In summary, there were two surveys in which questionnaires were distributed in different ways; that is to say, by union reps to workplace members (in the first survey) and to a sample generated by Survey Monkey (in the second). Workers were selected for the Survey Monkey survey using the criteria described above. There were some differences in the dataset profiles. Both surveys had about half of respondents from the food sector. However, while the survey distributed by union reps (because it was targeted) contained 42% of responses from workers in food manufacturing and distribution, the Survey Monkey sample only contained 18% from these sources. In contrast, the Survey Monkey sample had more responses from *non-food-sector* workers than the union distributed survey (48% versus 22%). Proportionately more respondents from the union reps survey worked for organisations spanning all UK regions than in the Survey Monkey sample (76% versus 40%). As might be expected, the union-distributed survey comprised a greater proportion of respondents (than in the Survey Monkey sample) who said that they worked in a unionised workplace (85% versus 32%) and were twice as likely to have a union representative in their workplace (81% versus 38%). Unsurprisingly although union representatives circulated the survey to both union and non-union workers, the first survey generated more responses from union members than the second one (93% versus 27%).

4.2' IDR on-line survey of Employers

An on-line survey of employers was distributed and administered by Incomes Data Research (IDR). Surveys were sent to IDR's database of 6,130 employer contacts, across all regions and most sectors of the economy. Most of the IDR contacts are at larger organisations, many of which have employee representative arrangements and/or

¹ For more information on Survey Monkey's targeted audience panel, see:
<https://cdn.smassets.net/assets/cms/cc/uploads/Audience-Data-Quality-Study-v2.pdf>

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

employee involvement in health and safety issues. Around 35% of the organisations in the IDR database recognise trade unions for collective bargaining over pay and conditions at some level. These organisations are in both the private and public sectors.

Full information was provided to participants explaining the purpose of the survey, giving contact details for any queries and assuring respondents that organisations would not be named in any research reports. The questionnaire contained a combination of closed and open questions, allowing respondents to elaborate their perceptions and activity. The survey yielded 53 responses from companies operating in all regions of the UK and covering 75,122 employees in total. Just over half (51%) were based in manufacturing and primary sectors and 42% recognised a trade union (or trade unions) for the purposes of representation over H&S issues and 42% had H&S reps at the workplace prior to Covid. In terms of the workforce there was a median male to female split of 70% male to 33% female. Just under one fifth (17%) of the sample had no 'essential workers', and over half (54%) had between 50%-100% essential workers.

The response rate was lower than hoped for, although company-level surveys of this sort do not generally receive high numbers of responses, in large measure to do with the difficulties persuading corporate contacts to answer on behalf of their organisations. In addition, the subject matter and the fact that the survey was conducted on behalf of the TUC is likely to have reduced rates further, since employers – even where they recognise trade unions – may be reluctant to co-operate with initiatives which might assist unions. The context of the pandemic also made following up potential participants more difficult than might otherwise have been the case. As the response represented a relatively small number of companies, with many outside the target areas of food manufacture, distribution and retail it was decided to conduct a supplementary employer survey.

4.3 Supplementary on-line survey of Employer Representatives

A second dataset was purchased from Survey Monkey generating responses from 374 respondents. Since 122 of these did not fully complete the questionnaire they were set aside leaving 250 completed questionnaires. As with the worker survey, responses from retail, agriculture and manufacturing industries were requested (it not being possible to disaggregate the food sector). In total, 48% of responses were from the food industry (28% from food retail and 20% from food manufacturing and distribution). Over one third (36%) of respondents were from UK-wide organisations. A similar proportion (35%) were from large organisations (250+ employees); 23% from medium sized organisations (50-249 employees) and 42% from small/micro sized organisations. The survey covers managers in a range of roles. Just under one in ten (9%) of respondents were HR managers/directors; 18% were business owners; 18% were general managers; 10% were senior managers other than HR; 20% were middle managers (responsible for managing more than one work team) and 13% were line managers. The median gender balance was 50% male (thus representing more gender balanced workforces than the IDR survey). One quarter (24%) reported that their workforces did not include any essential workers and 57% reported that at least half of workers were essential (22% reported that *all* of their workers were essential).

Over half (59%) of managers said that their employers recognised trade unions for the purpose of representation over health and safety issues. However, only 9% reported that they had a union H&S rep before Covid-19 (11% at the time of the survey). One in five

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

(21%) had a non-union health and safety representative at the workplace level and 39% of managers reported having a health and safety committee, which included management and employee representatives, in their workplaces. Over one third (35%) had a dedicated health and safety manager and 38% had a health and safety team at management level.

In summary, the first survey (IDR) included more responses from large organisations. All of the employer responses from the food industry were generated from the second survey (Survey Monkey). The Survey Monkey sample included more respondents than the IDR sample, reporting that their employers recognised a trade union for the purpose of representation over health and safety issues (59% versus 43%). However, respondents to the IDR survey were more likely than the Survey Monkey respondents to say that there was a union H&S representative at the workplace level (36% versus 9%) before Covid-19. Respondents to the IDR survey were also more likely to report having a health and safety committee in place with representation of management and workers and this sample is more likely to reflect organisations reporting good practice. Analysis below is based on the combination of both surveys and referred to as the Manager's Survey.

All comparisons which have been reported above or in the text below have been tested for significance using Chi Square test

4.4 Documentary analysis of Risk Assessments

A content analysis of publicly available Risk Assessments from the food manufacturing and retail sector published on the TUC Health and Safety website was undertaken.

4.5 Case studies of health and safety representation

The research was additionally based on seven in-depth case studies, four in food production and three in food retail and distribution. Case studies involved semi-structured interviews with 17 workplace representatives, union officers, employer representatives and workers. Where possible it examined key documentation, including risk assessments. Interviews took place on Microsoft Teams (or comparable) or, where not possible, via mobile telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants and on the basis of anonymity – case study organisations have been given pseudonyms².

² The research was approved by the University of Greenwich's Research Ethics Committee; participant information sheets and consent forms were provided to all participants, with participation based on informed consent. Confidentiality of information was guaranteed. All data has been kept securely with access password protected and subject to GDPR regulations.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Table 1: Case Studies

| Case Study | Sector | Trade union | Interviews |
|----------------|------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| FoodCo | Food Processing | Unite | 2 |
| PoultryCo | Food Processing | Unite | 2 |
| SeafoodCo | Food Processing/Distribution | Unite | 2 |
| FastfoodCo | Food retail | BFAWU membership | 3 |
| SupermarketCo | Food retail | GMB | 4 |
| DistributionCo | Food Transport/Logistics | Unite | 2 |
| SupplierCo | Food Transport/logistics | USDAW | 2 |

5. Findings

5.1 The re-organisation of work

The research shows continued production, delivery and service in food manufacturing and retail – with workers defined as essential workers and working throughout Covid-19. In the survey 61% of respondents identified themselves as essential workers (a link was provided to them to check the government's list of essential workers via the web³). The majority (83%) of food retail workers and 73% of food manufacturing and distribution said they were essential workers (versus 39% of workers from other parts of the retail and manufacturing sectors). This is also reflected in managers' responses where 84% of managers in food retail and 74% of those in food manufacturing and distribution said that over half of their workforces were made up of essential workers compared to 41% of managers in non-food sectors.

5.1.2 Manager Survey

Figure 5 below shows where managers reported that *over 50%* of the workforce was impacted by changes in work. Like workers, managers in the food sectors were more likely than those in the non-food sectors to record that essential employees continued to work, but this was also the case with non-essential employees, though less so. Managers also reported where over 50% of essential workers had been affected by furlough (23%); made redundant (13%); had their working hours changed (27%) and/or not had their contracts of employment renewed (16%). Approaching half of managers in the food manufacturing sector (44%) as well as a third in food retail (34%), for example, said that a majority of essential workers had been at risk of being furloughed at some

³ For the purposes of prioritising people for COVID-19 testing, the government has defined essential workers as including:

"...critical personnel in the production and distribution of food, drink and essential goods, including:

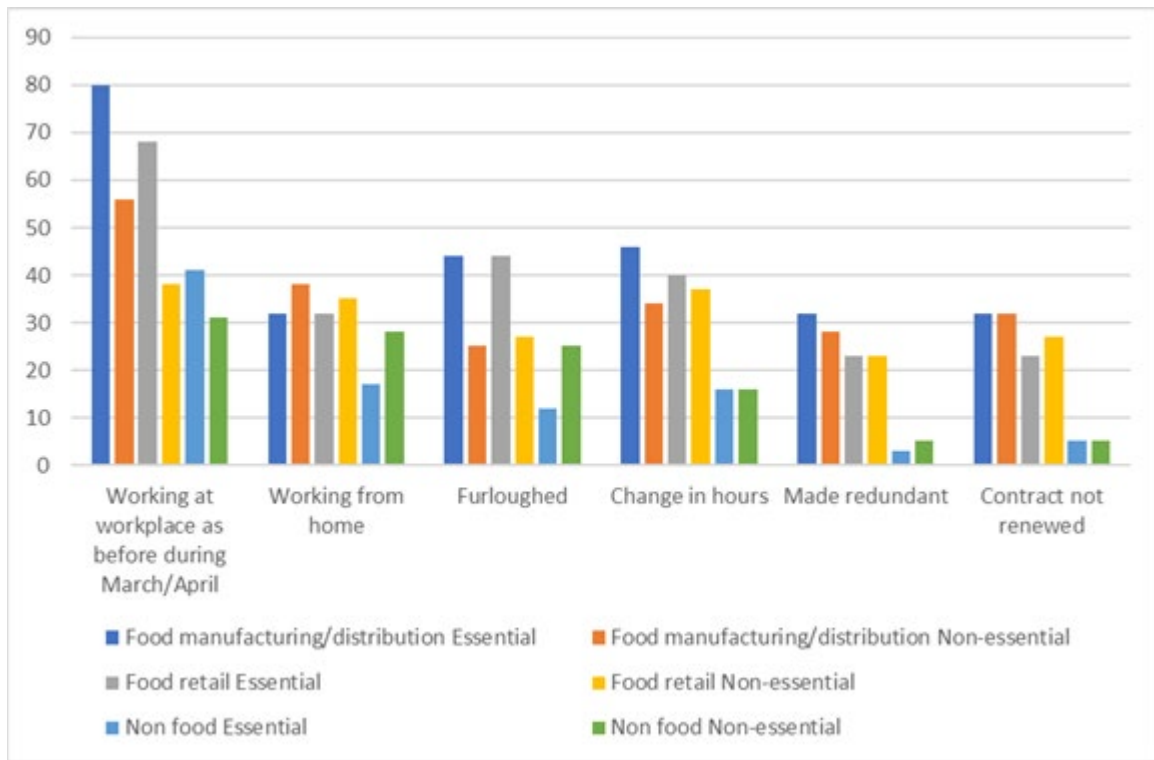
- those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery
- those critical to the provision of other essential goods, such as medical supply chain and distribution workers, and testing (such as PHE labs), and veterinary medicine"

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

point since March/April, and a similar proportion in food retail (44%) said that a majority of essential workers had been subject to some review and change of their working hours.

Managers reported some changes to work arrangements between March/April and December/January. In particular, they were more likely to report that over half of essential and non-essential workers were told to work from home (in the second lockdown (23% versus 31% and 31% versus 34%). Essential workers were also more likely to have been made redundant in December/January than March/ April (16% versus 13% reported over half had experienced redundancy) or not had their employment contracts renewed (16% versus 14%).

Figure 1: Over 50% of essential/non-essential workers affected by change of work routine: Manager Survey



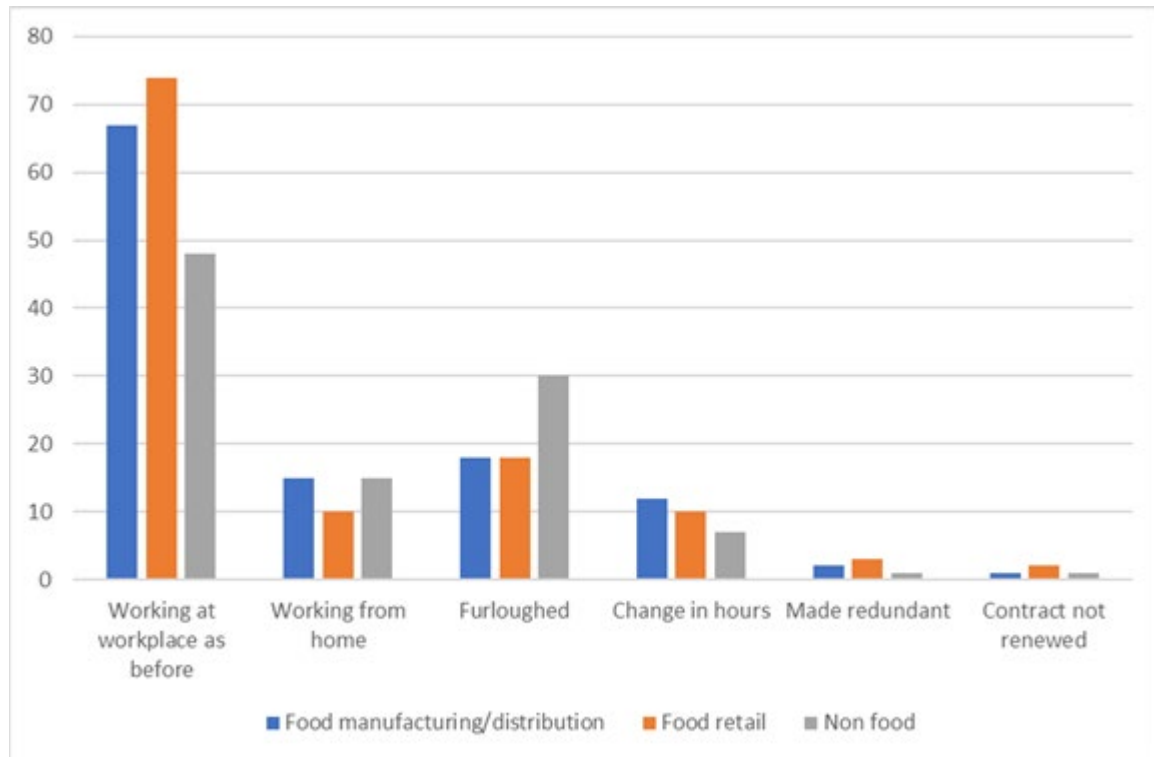
5.1.1 Worker Survey

Workers were asked whether there were any changes in their work as a result of Covid-19. Approaching two thirds (61%) had continued to work in their workplaces, with those in food retail (74%) and food manufacturing (67%) more likely to do so. Under 20 per cent (18%) in both sectors had been furloughed and smaller proportions were working from home. Workers from non-food sectors were significantly more likely to report that they have been furloughed (30% versus 18%). The one significant difference is that workers were more likely to have reported being furloughed in March/April than December/January (23% to 17%). Three quarters (74%) of workers working in food retail

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

reported continuing to work in their workplaces in March/April and 73% were continuing to do so in January 2021.

Figure 2: Impact of Covid-19 on work during March/April 2020: Worker Survey



5.1.3 Case Studies

The case studies confirm that workers in the food processing, manufacturing and retail sector have worked throughout the pandemic. In fact, increased demand has meant recruitment in the sector, but also work intensification. At food processing company, PoultryCo, the case study is based on interviews with Unite representatives covering two locations and three sites in the Midlands (two sites) and North West (one site). In a Unite survey of the workforce one respondent stated that intensification squeezed breaks:

'There is a lack of respect for workers, the speed and pace of work is too high. It's hard to keep up with the work process because of the high speed of the lines. We're being charged for a half-hour pause, from which we actually only use 15 minutes because you need so much more to get out and get to work'.

SupermarketCo has over 600 stores in the UK and the case study is based on interviews with a Senior GMB officer and Chair of the national Health and Safety Forum, a senior operations manager and two workers. It had recruited around 20-25,000 staff, many through friends and family, to support predominantly its online business and in-store replenishment teams. While store hours were reduced staff did not suffer pay cuts. An USDAW officer noted that the realignment of shifts to enforce social distancing had

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

meant a small number of redundancies of workers who could not change their working time.

International fast food company, FastfoodCo, has over 1000 restaurants in the UK, the majority franchises. The case study is based upon interviews with a union organiser from the Bakers' Food and Allied Workers (BFAWU), a representative of the Fast Food Rights campaign and a worker. FastfoodCo, initially placed staff on furlough, with complicated calculations with regard to pay for those on variable contracts. The BFAWU, has members in the company and demanded, without success, that it top up the 80% furlough pay to 100%. After the first lockdown the company phased workers paid more than furlough rates back to work. However, in the second lockdown the company did not furlough staff. Since moving to drive-through and takeaway and delivery only, it has taken on additional staff to meet demand, particularly in response to the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme. The introduction of shift bubbles had meant reduced hours for some workers, who were then paid less than on furlough. Work intensified with competitions between restaurants and prizes given to managers whose shifts served the quickest with the effect of compromising social distancing:

'They're working towards every shift to be the quickest store. And to be the quickest store sometimes safety is compromised because people – they're encouraged to work as quick as we can so sometimes it's easy to forget that we are in a pandemic. And you get extra people on to make sure that we're winning and then it's difficult to isolate'

DistributionCo provides delivery and warehousing services for supermarkets, operating from depots in the UK and mainland Europe. The case study is based upon interviews with a general manager and a Unite rep both based in a depot in the north. In contrast to FastfoodCo, at DistributionCo, productivity targets were suspended to ensure that social distancing in warehouses could be enforced, with the company accepting a drop in productivity as a general manager described:

'So we had to take decisions very early on around suspending productivity targets because we didn't want people to feel that they were put in a position where they had to breach social distancing guidance. So for us it was a lot about what controls do we have to put in place to keep people as safe as they can be, given that they've still got to come to work. We'd probably dropped 35% from a productivity perspective, which of course is a very expensive thing to do. But there was no alternative'.

The company provides delivery and warehousing services for large retailers such as Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Tesco and Waitrose. While 50 managers at head office were made redundant during the pandemic, a number of temporary drivers and warehouse operatives were taken on over Christmas. For drivers and warehouse workers changes were made to shifts and break times allowing workers to go home if they were not busy, while still being paid. Workers shielding or self-isolating got the 80% furlough pay, with the company topping it up to 100% of their basic flat rate (excluding weekend or night premia).

SeafoodCo is a UK producer and distributor of frozen, fresh, and chilled seafood; the case study is based on interviews with the HR Director and a Unite rep in the north east. During the pandemic the focus moved from food service products to retail sales and production increased (although not necessarily profit as the higher end of the market

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

contracted). Employee numbers were stable, although there was significant utilisation of agency workers particularly when there were peak numbers of workers self-isolating.

SupplierCo is a family-owned business with eight divisions, operating in the retail, wholesale distribution, food service, logistics, and shop fitting sectors. The case study is based on interviews with a Health and Safety Manager in the Midlands and a union officer from USDAW who oversees the distribution sector. A Health and Safety Manager reported that the company had done some preparation for a pandemic after the 2009 swine flu outbreak and were able to respond quickly. The company made a small number of staff redundant as normally supplies pubs. On the other hand, it also supplies local retailers and online delivery suppliers that maintained demand, so net reductions in labour needs were offset. There was a realignment of shifts in warehouses, limiting numbers of workers in the warehouse by staggering shift start times. This involved weekend working for some, but was supported by the union as it avoided redundancies. SupplierCo introduced homeworking for office staff, identifying IT and telephony requirements and providing laptops. However, following a review of the first lockdown there was realization that for some workers, home arrangements were not conducive to safe and effective longer term home working and it was arranged for a proportion to return to the office during late summer.

5.2 Health and Safety Structures and Representation

The survey of managers suggests the weakness of health and safety infrastructure and representation at organisational and workplace levels and limitations of both trade union and non-union consultation over health and safety –issues exposed during Covid.

5.2.1 *Manager Survey*

Only small proportions of managers reported that there were union H&S representatives at either the workplace or organisational level in both food retail (10%) and food manufacturing and distribution (6%). Slightly higher proportions said there were non-union health and safety reps at either level (16% and 8% respectively).

Under half of managers (47%) reported that there was a health and safety committee representing management and workers at the workplace level and a similar proportion at the organisational level (48%). Just over one third (36%) of managers in the food manufacturing and distribution sector said there was such a committee at the organisational level and a half (50%) at workplace level. For food retail, these figures are reversed with half (52%) of respondents saying that there was an organisational level health and safety committee and 38% reporting the existence of such a committee at workplace level. Under one in five (15%) of food retail managers who reported having a workplace level health and safety committee said that there was union health and safety representation, but over one third (37%) said that there was non-union health and safety representation.

Overall, 45% of managers said there was a dedicated health and safety manager in their organisation. Managers in the food manufacturing and distribution sector were less likely to report having such a role than either those in food retail or non-food sectors. Around a

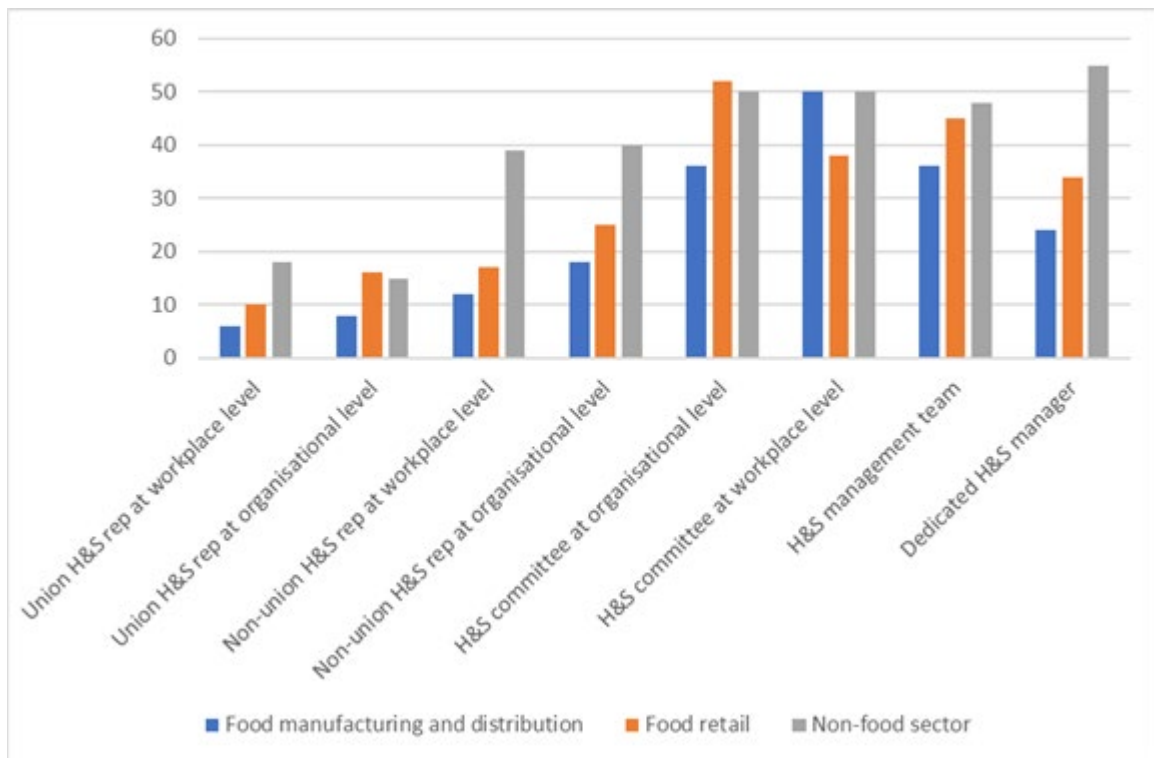
Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

quarter (24%) of managers in the food manufacturing and distribution sector reported having a dedicated health and safety manager and just over a third (36%) said that there was a health and safety management team. Their presence was better in the food retail and non-food sectors where just under half (45% and 48% respectively) said that there was a health and safety management team in their workplaces.

Large organisations were more likely to have employee representation over health and safety issues: 26% of managers in organisations with 250 or more workers said that there was a union H&S rep in their workplaces versus 5% of managers in small organisations (10-49 employees) and 9% of managers in medium sized organisations. Three in five managers in large employers (61%); under half (47%) of those in medium sized employers; and just over a third (35%) of those in small businesses reported having a health and safety committee at the workplace level.

Employers did not report any significant changes in health and safety consultation arrangements between March/April and December/January.

Figure 3: Health and Safety structures: Manager Survey



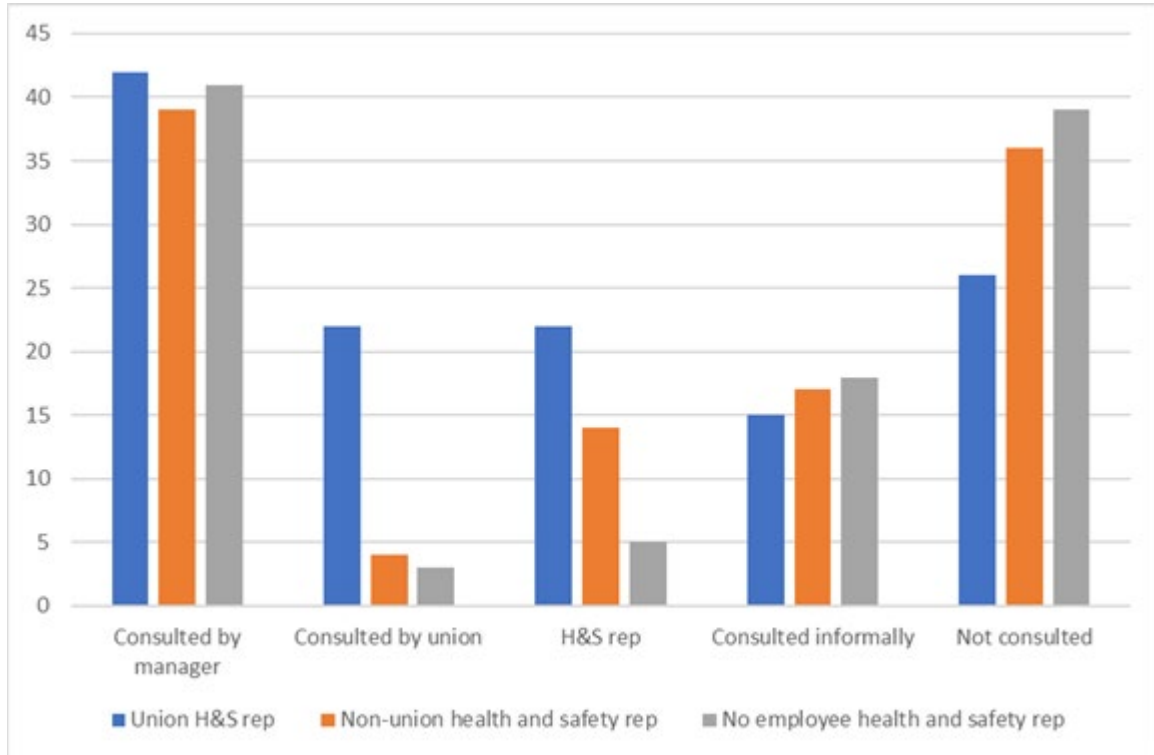
5.2.2 Worker Survey

Well over one third of workers (42%) identified the presence of union H&S reps in their workplaces (reflecting the partial distribution of the survey by trade unionists), although only one third (37%) said the union was recognised for collective bargaining. A further

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

26% reported non-union reps and just under one in five (18%) said there was no H&S representation at all. In terms of management, 43% said that their workplaces had a dedicated health and safety manager and a further 35% said that there was a manager with health and safety responsibilities. There is a significant relationship between having union H&S reps and a dedicated health and safety officer. Two thirds of workers (67%) who said that there was a dedicated health and safety manager also said that there was a union H&S rep. Only 9% of workers who said that there was no manager with health and safety responsibilities said that their workplaces had a union H&S rep.

Figure 4: Consultation over Covid risk assessment: Worker Survey



5.2.3 Case Studies

In the unionized case studies existing formal health and safety structures were the necessary basis for more informal and frequent dialogue with managers during Covid, often on a day-to-day basis, drawing on the reps' health and safety expertise and training.

At Supplierco, a health and safety committee involving local reps and local operations managers met regularly during Covid. The Health and Safety Manager said the Director of the family-owned company encouraged local management teams to meet with USDAW safety reps daily, holding socially distanced meetings on the shopfloor if necessary and allowing local issues to be discussed and resolved promptly. An USDAW national officer reported twice-weekly calls with senior managers, site managers and union reps in an arrangement he described as, '...more of a Covid task force' ensuring implementation on the shop floor:

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

“Because what we found was that (while) the message was genuinely getting out there from the top saying “I told them to do this... this is happening... I sent this out...” some of the reps (and even some of the site managers were saying) “Well we’ve not received it, whatever it was...” So I say “With the best will in the world, you as board members or senior members of the leadership team are saying things are happening, (but) we need this catch-up just to rubberstamp and make sure they are and that you’re aware of what the voice of the shopfloor is.” Because sometimes if you’re asking your site managers (and they are saying), “No there’s no problem...” well, they maybe don’t want the spotlight shining on them. So it’s been helpful to have that joint interaction every two weeks.’

DistributionCo has a health and safety committee and, prior to the pandemic, had a monthly safety meeting comprising H&S reps and senior managers. During the pandemic weekly ‘Covid Cobra’ meetings via Zoom have taken place, using break-out rooms for discussion. A joint management and union WhatsApp group additionally facilitates a quick response to Covid issues. The Unite Committee meets monthly and a WhatsApp group communicates any incidents on shifts. The rep reported constant communication between reps, but also that the company would always meet if there was an issue. Anything unresolved locally was referred to a national joint negotiating committee covering all sites, again via Zoom. The rep reported that management had consulted with the union throughout the pandemic, but as at SupplierCo the union role in implementation was key:

‘And they’ll come to us. The management team won’t just think of something themselves and then go ahead and *do* it, because they know full well that if we spot something, and it’s not been done right, we’ll just pull them up. And we’ll take them to task and say, “Why have you not consulted with us? Why have you done that, *that* way, because you’re going to cause x y and z problems”. So they come to us with everything - well 99% of everything they come to us with. There’s been the odd time, but other than that the majority of time they have come to us to seek our advice.’

Communication with members takes place via newsletters, but also via text messages and email. Text updates were sent every other day, reporting cases and union and company measures in the workplace.

At PoultryCo the health and safety committee could not meet under Covid, but there was more informal weekly liaison between reps and the Health and Safety Manager, with consultation with workers through the reps. International food and drink group company, Foodco, has 14 manufacturing sites in the UK with the case study based on two sites in the East of England. It had a fully functioning health and safety committee that usually met monthly. During Covid-19 a working party, including two members of the health and safety department, plus the union reps, met on a daily basis, undertaking audits and walk-arounds, with action teams with union representation at site-level.

Before the pandemic SeafoodCo held regular health and safety committee meetings with union health and safety representation. Subsequently these arrangements were largely replaced by weekly site-level Covid Committee meetings initially via Zoom, but then in larger offices where social distancing could be achieved. Covid took precedence over

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

other health and safety issues which tended to be dealt with under any other business at the committees. The HR Director perceived that there was a level of complacency with prevailing health and safety arrangements and that Covid required 'proactive engagement' using alternative channels and the appointment of Covid marshals or champions from outside existing health and safety arrangements, described as a 'parallel structure'. Covid led to greater central control over health and safety, stricter universal standards and more engagement with the company hierarchy:

'I think there was a recognition especially as we've gone through the Covid episode that an awful lot of our health and safety ways of working and our employee engagement could probably be deemed to be complacent. And there was an element of necessary control imposed by the centre, there was a sense of 'this is the way you are going to do it', the risks are too large to leave legacy arrangements alone and think that they would have the necessary authority, gravitas - credibility was a discussion point within the centre. And we said actually we need to impose some universal standards and expectations on these teams. Not least the level of seniority at site that was going to chair these teams, and have an accelerated input into the board of directors of our business.

At SupermarketCo nine national reps have quarterly meetings with the company at a national forum for health and safety, which considers accident statistics, changes in health and safety legislation and amendments to risk assessments. There are also sub-groups according to different functions in the company. The company meets non-union elected colleagues separately. During the first couple of weeks of lockdown the company set up a daily call between the health and safety compliance team and GMB national officers to discuss measures, including trials of PPE. Union officers would check on site to see if equipment was fit for purpose and make recommendations on implementation. The need to keep on top of fast changing guidelines and to maintain constant dialogue was underlined.

At FastfoodCo one worker respondent was unaware of any health and safety structures and reflected on the absence of workplace H&S reps in her restaurant and the difficulties workers had in raising concerns:

'I think they need to be held to account sometimes through the fact that they are making it unsafe, and especially in a pandemic and especially with how dangerous the virus can be for the elderly. And these people are still working and there's no one there to say that you're not supposed to be doing that. And we feel as workers sometimes they don't take us seriously and I think it would be really good to have someone'.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

5.3 Risk Assessment

5.3.1 *Manager Survey*

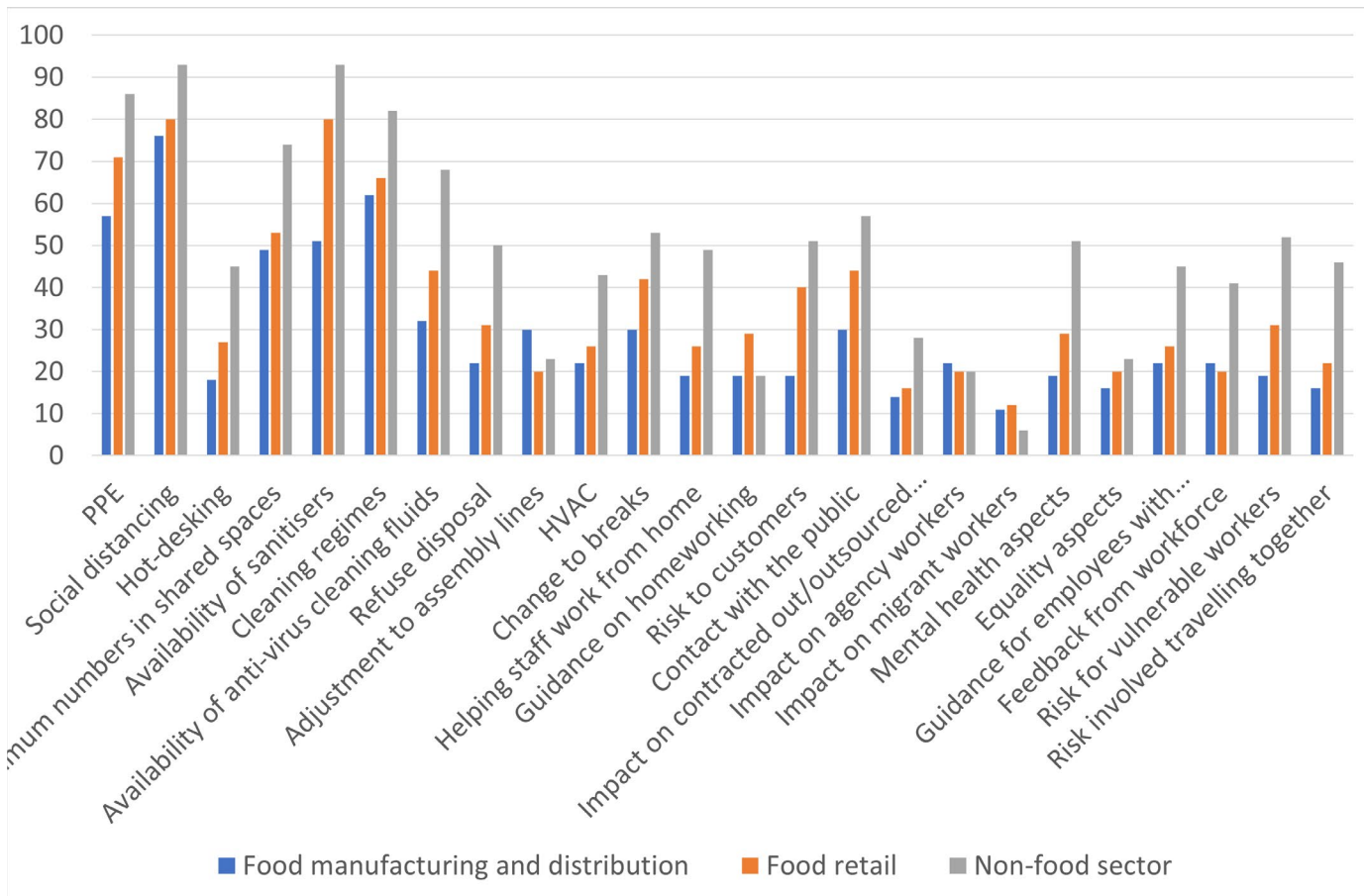
Three quarters of managers (76%) reported that a Covid-19 risk assessment had been carried out in their organisation since March 2020 (14% said that a risk assessment had not been carried out and 11% did not know). Risk assessments were in place in 74% of food manufacturing and distribution organisations; 78% of food retail and 76% of other organisations. Under one third (29%) of managers across all sectors reported that a risk assessment had been undertaken between March and April, 43% had completed Covid-19 risk assessments by June.

Managers were asked what areas the risk assessment covered. Most common were the provision of PPE, the availability of sanitisers and cleaning regimes and social distancing measures. As Figure 5 shows, managers in the food production and distribution and food retail sectors were more likely to report risk assessments which covered social distancing and cleaning regimes. Risk assessments in the food manufacturing and distribution sector were also more likely to cover assembly lines, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. They were also more likely to include contracted out, outsourced and agency workers than those in food retail or non-food sectors. However, in all cases no more than half of managers reported that risk assessments covered these groups. Managers in food retail were twice as likely as those in food manufacturing and distribution to report that their employers' risk assessment covered risks to customers. However, they were less likely to say that customers were included than managers in non-food sectors.

Of those managers responding to the survey over one quarter (29%) reported that their organisation employed migrant workers and of these, three quarters (75%) said the employer is responsible for their accommodation. However, under half (43%) of those providing accommodation stated that they had carried out a risk assessment of migrant workers' residential areas. Only 16% of managers where migrant workers were employed said the risk assessment specifically covered them, although, 62% said that the risk assessment was available in languages other than English.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 5: What the risk assessment covered: Manager Survey

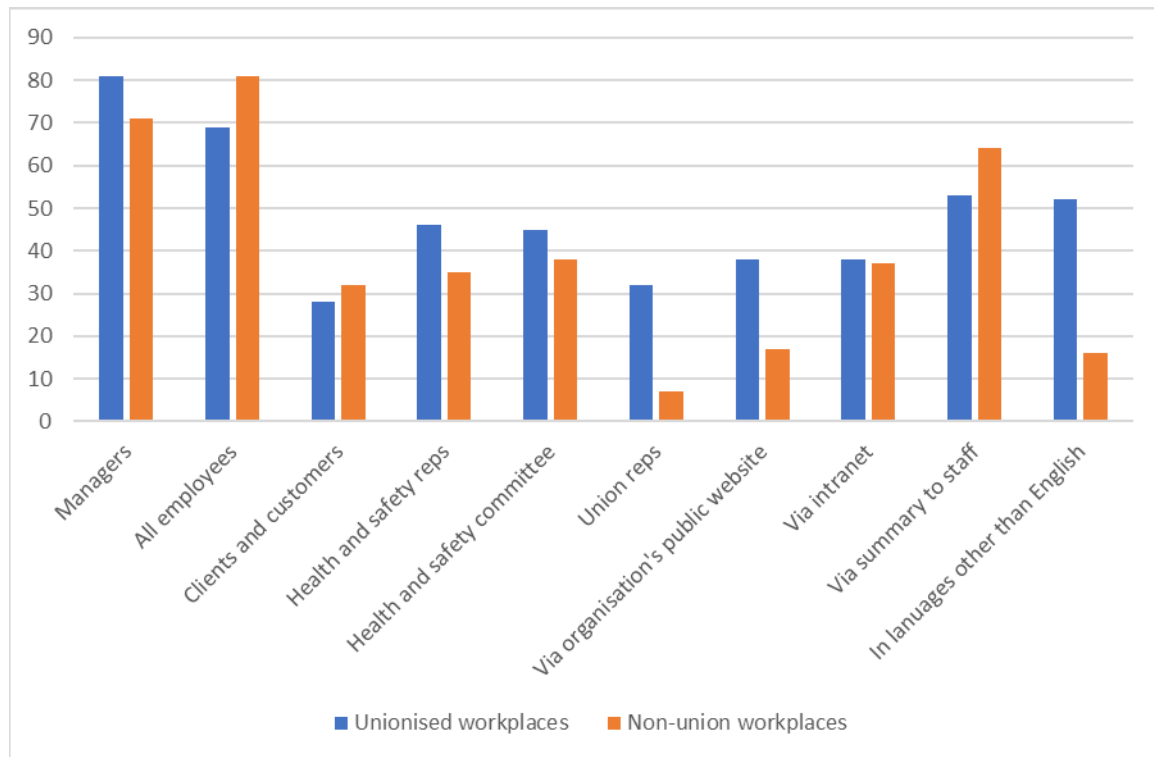


Managers were asked about how the risk assessment was made available. Those in workplaces which recognised a union for health and safety representation were more likely to report that the risk assessment was made available to the public via the organisation's website (38% versus 17%) as well as available in a language other than English.

Level of awareness of risk assessment declined lower down management chains. While 70% of HR managers and 76% of general managers reported that the risk assessment had been shared with managers, only 67% of line managers did so. HR managers in workplaces with a union presence were also more likely than those in non-union workplaces to say that the risk assessment had been shared with managers (79% versus 50%) as well as general managers (83% versus 56%). These findings are important in reflecting the positive role unions can play in helping to disseminate risk assessments to managers.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

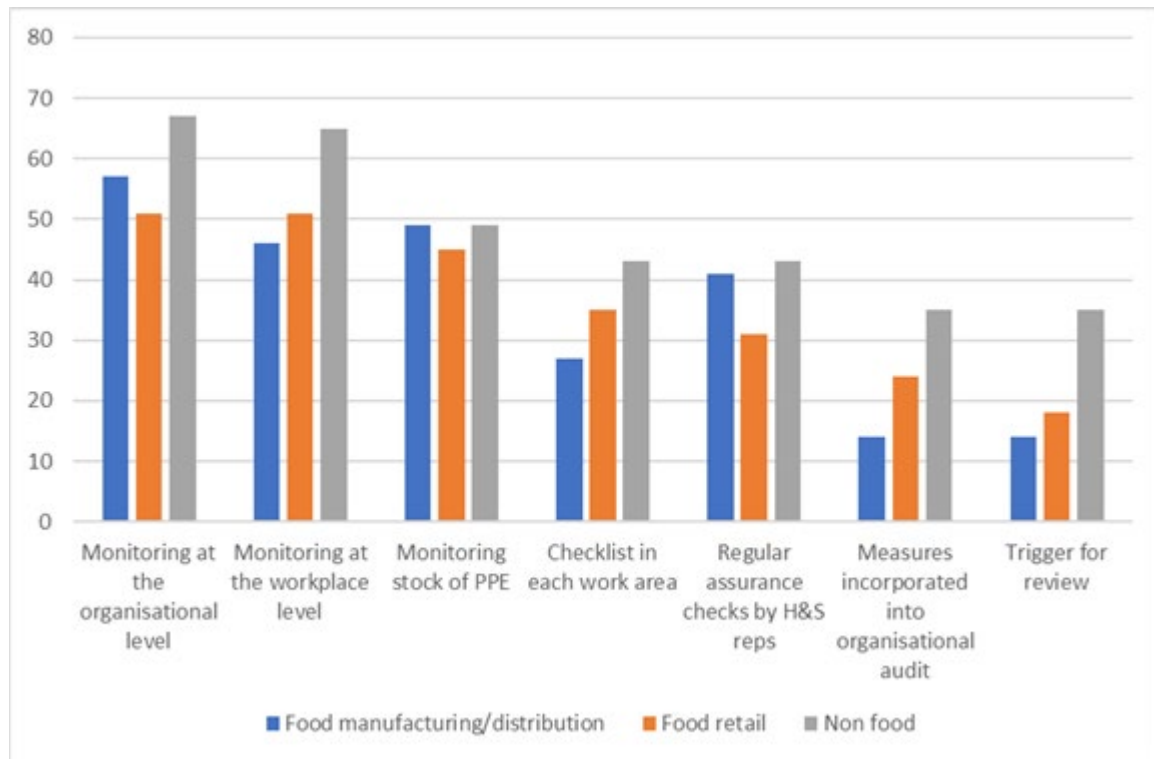
Figure 6: Dissemination of Risk Assessments: Manager Survey



Where a risk assessment was carried out, managers were asked whether there were systems in place to ensure monitoring of the resulting action plan. Managers in the food sector were less likely than those in non-food sectors to report that there was monitoring at the organisation or workplace levels. Two thirds of managers from non-food sectors said that there was monitoring at the organisational level (67%) and workplace level (65%). Just over half of food retail employers said the same (51% each), while for food manufacturing and distribution, the figures are 57% and 51% respectively.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 7: Monitoring Covid-19 measures: Manager Survey



5.3.2 Worker Survey

Workers were less likely than managers to report that a risk assessment had been carried out in their workplaces - just over half (57%) did so, 18% said there had not and 23% did not know. Workers in food manufacturing and distribution were more likely than those in food retail to report that a risk assessment had been carried out (59% versus 51%). Two thirds of workers in a workplace *with* union H&S reps (66%) said that a risk assessment had been carried out. In contrast, 58% of workers in a workplace with a non-union employee representative and 43% where there was no H&S representative, said that a risk assessment had been carried out. Twice as many workers in workplaces with no H&S rep said that they did not know if a risk assessment had been carried out in comparison with those in a workplace with a rep (30% compared to 15%).

Where a risk assessment was carried out, workers in workplaces with a union H&S rep were more likely to feel that they were consulted. One third (33%) of workers said that a Covid risk assessment had been carried out in their workplaces and that they had not been consulted. However, having a union H&S rep in the workplace made a difference; 39% of workers with no H&S rep and 36% of workers with a non-union H&S rep felt that they had not been consulted on their employers' responses to Covid-19, whereas only 26% of those in workplaces with a H&S rep felt the same.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Workers were asked whether they had been trained or given information on the risk assessment. Under one third (29%) of those who reported that a risk assessment had been carried out said they had been informed on a face-to-face basis; 27% said they received online real-time training and 18% said that they took part in an online real-time information session. Under a quarter (21%) were sent a link to online training to be completed individually and 13% received an online link to information to be watched individually. Workers who had a union H&S rep in their workplaces were more likely to report receiving online real-time training (33%) than those with a non-union H&S rep (25%) or no H&S rep at all (12%). Over one third (39%) said that the risk assessment was in languages other than English.

5.3.3 Covid-19 Risk assessment document analysis

The TUC's Covid-19 Risk Assessment Database⁴ has 303 Risk Assessments of which 100 are private, which means these organisations confirmed with the TUC that they have carried out risk assessments and yet to make their documents publicly available. The database includes 26 risk assessments from the food processing, retail, and distribution sector and 11 of these are public. Three additional risk assessments were collected via case study participants. A document analysis of these 14 risk assessments was performed to identify the extent to which they meet a range of requirements advocated by the TUC's coronavirus guideline published 4th January 2020. The following table outlines the food sector organisations in the TUC database and the sample of 14 risk assessments in this document analysis.

Table 2: Sample of Risk Assessments

| Food sector organisations risk assessment included in the TUC database | | Private risk assessments obtained by this project |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Private (10) | Public (11) | Private (3) |
| Boots | Bidfood | SupplierCo |
| Corarima restaurant | Burger Salmon LLP | SweetCo |
| First milk | CG Restaurants & Bars (Dirty Martini) | DistributionCo |
| John Lewis | Dunster farm limited | |
| Lidl | Harrods | |
| Nestlé | Humdingers Catering Limited | |
| Oscar Mayer Group | Il Mulino Italian Restaurant | |
| Lloyd Fraser (Bulk Liquids) Ltd | Rhenus Logistics | |
| Sainsbury's | Samworth Brothers | |
| Whitbread | Tesco | |
| | The Brewers Arms | |

⁴ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/resource/covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-unions-updated-04-jan-2021>

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

While broadly covering the items outlined in the TUC risk assessments and guidelines, these documents primarily addressed the biological risk of infections of Covid-19 at workplaces. The biological risk was generally termed as a hazard associated with the 'transmission', 'spread', 'exposure to', or 'contraction' of the virus. There were varying degrees of clarity in the risk assessments, in identifying specific hazards and people at risk. The levels of risk corresponding to each hazard identified in these documents is missing except from Bidfood, Burger Salmon, Harrods, and Rhenus Logistics. Despite ventilation being identified as a key and essential aspect of risk assessment in the TUC's *Covid-19 Guidance* (04 Jan 2021), only six organisations indicated consideration of this aspect. While the majority of the organisations addressed risks to vulnerable groups, four organisations in catering (including CG Restaurants & Bars, Humdingers and The Brewers Arms) failed to take this risk into account.

In contrast to the broad coverage of biological risks, only three organisations (including Bidfood and SweetCo) recognised mental health issues as being associated with home working and isolation. Samworth Brothers also recognised the risk of mental health as a result of being furloughed. Four organisations, Bidfood, SweetCo, Rhenus Logistics, and Harrods, indicated hazards associated with homeworking with a focus on workstations, and Display Screen Equipment (DSE) standards. However, none of these organisations recognised the risks of domestic violence and accommodating disabled workers in homeworking.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Table 3: Content Analysis of Risk Assessments

| Covid-19 Risk Assessment measures recommended by the TUC | Organisations that meet the guidelines | Organisations that fail to meet the guidelines |
|---|---|---|
| Individual risk associated with physical contact (incl. employees and visitors) | 14 | 0 |
| Individual risk associated with shared space/equipment | 14 | 0 |
| Individual risk to clinically vulnerable employees (incl. age, health conditions, and pregnancy) | 10 | 4 |
| Individual risks to workers displaying or having symptoms at work | 14 | 0 |
| Social distancing at work with signage detailing rules and guidelines (incl. office access; movements within building; move meeting online; shared desk space; common areas and shared facilities -i.e., kitchen; first aid rooms) | 14 | 0 |
| Social distancing at work with perspex screen | 8 | 6 |
| Social distancing at work through reducing the density of population within a building and minimising the number of staff who come into physical contacts (incl. stagger shifts; reduce the size of physical teams; cap number of users of shared facilities; restrict number of visitors; reduce attendees of physical meetings) | 10 | 4 |
| Travelling to and for work (incl. face covering; social distancing; hygiene routines upon arrival at work) | 9 | 5 |
| Cleaning regimes and hygiene procedures (incl. desks; shared office items and equipment; high contact points in shared facilities -i.e., door handles; building) | 14 | 0 |
| Personal hygiene (incl. access to hygiene facilities; hygiene instructions -i.e., handwashing) | 14 | 0 |
| Ventilation (incl. open windows) | 6 | 8 |
| Homeworking risks (incl. DSE standards; risks of domestic violence; accidents; injuries; disable workers; childcare; mental health) | 5 | 9 |
| Personal Protective Equipment (incl. face coverings, gloves) | 8 | 6 |
| Communication and training | 8 | 6 |
| Level of risk | 4 | 10 |

The document analysis also identified items that these organisations have covered in addition to those recommended by the TUC, such as self-isolation guidance for staff and compassionate support for parents with childcare issues. A number of organisations specifically address risk to clients and contractors. While many organisations recognised their risk assessments are a 'live document' that needs continual reviews, only three organisations specified the frequency of reviews and triggers for activating them. Tesco

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

used the number of reported positive cases at work as trigger while SupplierCo identified six trigger points. The table below outlines these items and the number of organisations that have and have not considered these issues in their risk assessments.

Table 4: Risk Assessment additional measures

| Covid-19 Risk Assessment measures | Organisations that have considered these measures | Organisations that have not consider these measures |
|---|--|--|
| Evacuation and emergency | 4 | 10 |
| Self-isolation guidance and support | 4 | 10 |
| Return to work policy (i.e., daily staff health screening questionnaires upon arrival at work; no-contact temperature check; staff at high risk; staff on furlough) | 7 | 7 |
| Risks to contractors | 11 | 3 |
| Risks to clients and customers | 12 | 2 |
| Triggers to review risk assessment (incl. sites of multiple reported case; frequency – i.e., weekly, monthly) | 3 | 11 |
| Addresses reduced numbers of people with H&S responsibilities on site | 0 | 14 |
| Advice to First Aiders | 5 | 9 |
| Paid compassionate support for parents with childcare issues | 1 | 13 |

5.3.4 Case Studies

At PoultryCo the union has been involved in the production of formal, regular Covid-19 risk assessments which reps felt were ‘the right balance’ between safety and ‘the profit the company is looking for’. The 70-page assessment covers visitors to the site, including delivery drivers. Risk Assessments at SeafoodCo are 10-12 pages long and were signed off at site-level by the Head of Health and Safety, the Head of Operations and the shop steward.

At FoodCo, the reps had pushed for the risk assessment and subsequently identified them as ‘a constant work in progress’ to be reviewed regularly. They were involved in frequent meetings with the managers who developed them, taking issues back to the other reps. The assessment covers all those on site, including contractors. The reps reported that there had initially been issues with the contractors, but it was then established that they could not use the same facilities, entries and exits as the workforce. At SeafoodCo risk assessment is reviewed monthly to ensure new risks are tracked and identified and mitigations put in place – measures are signed off by heads of health and safety on site and by H&S representatives.

At DistributionCo, again, reps had pressed for a risk assessment and felt the company was slow to respond. Two H&S reps and two trainers on site who had experience of risk assessments spent two days revising existing documents to account for Covid-19, to

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

produce a generic risk assessment including 4-5 pages of drills that workers had to follow when entering the site and specific risk assessments for particular tasks. Instructions included cleaning equipment and insisting that workers no longer shared equipment like headsets. The risk assessment was sent to the furloughed company health and safety managers, before being signed off and published. The Risk Assessment was reviewed again before Christmas once infection rates started increasing and a hygiene risk assessment covering cleaning added. The assessments were available in the shift manager's office, but the reps were wary of workers physically retrieving them. Since warehouse operatives do not generally have access to the company's intranet, the reps used texts to reassure the workforce that they had reviewed and improved risk assessments. They cover contractors that come on site, and rules are communicated at the gatehouse before they gain access.

At SupermarketCo, a full risk assessment covered every single job role, reflecting time on the shopfloor and with customers, and itemising PPE that has to be in place to reduce risk. It also covers customers and contractors. The union was consulted on the risk assessment, but requested additional items. The main elements are on the company website's internet site. A nightshift worker, who was not a union member, was not aware of the risk assessment, but had contact with an employer health and safety rep who briefed group meetings of staff in 'huddles':

'So we had these huddles at least once every 2 weeks, once every 3 weeks and during these meetings we'd be briefed on how to operate in the store safely, making sure that the environment was Covid secure'.

Another worker reported having to watch a health and safety video following her return to work after shielding and being walked through the store and then signing a form to say she had been shown the measures the company had put in place.

A FastfoodCo worker felt that the company had probably undertaken a risk assessment, but that it was not implemented:

'So there's many things that go on every single day that are high risk but are just sort of ignored and pushed to one side and get pushed on to the next manager who is working, then pushed on to the next one'.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

5.4 Social Distancing and PPE

PPE and social distancing are crucial measures for those continuing to work in the food and food retail sectors during the pandemic. However, one in five workers (21%) reported that pressure to achieve production targets make it difficult to enforce Covid risk measures.

5.4.1 PPE

5.4.1.1 *Manager Survey*

A similar proportion of managers in workplaces where unions were recognised for health and safety representation and those that were not, felt that sufficient PPE had been introduced in March/April 2020 (80% and 77% respectively). Managers who did not believe that sufficient PPE was available in their workplaces in March/April reported problems in getting hold of PPE (10%); cost prohibition (5%); limited information on what PPE was needed (3%); and the introduction of PPE being too disruptive in the workplace.

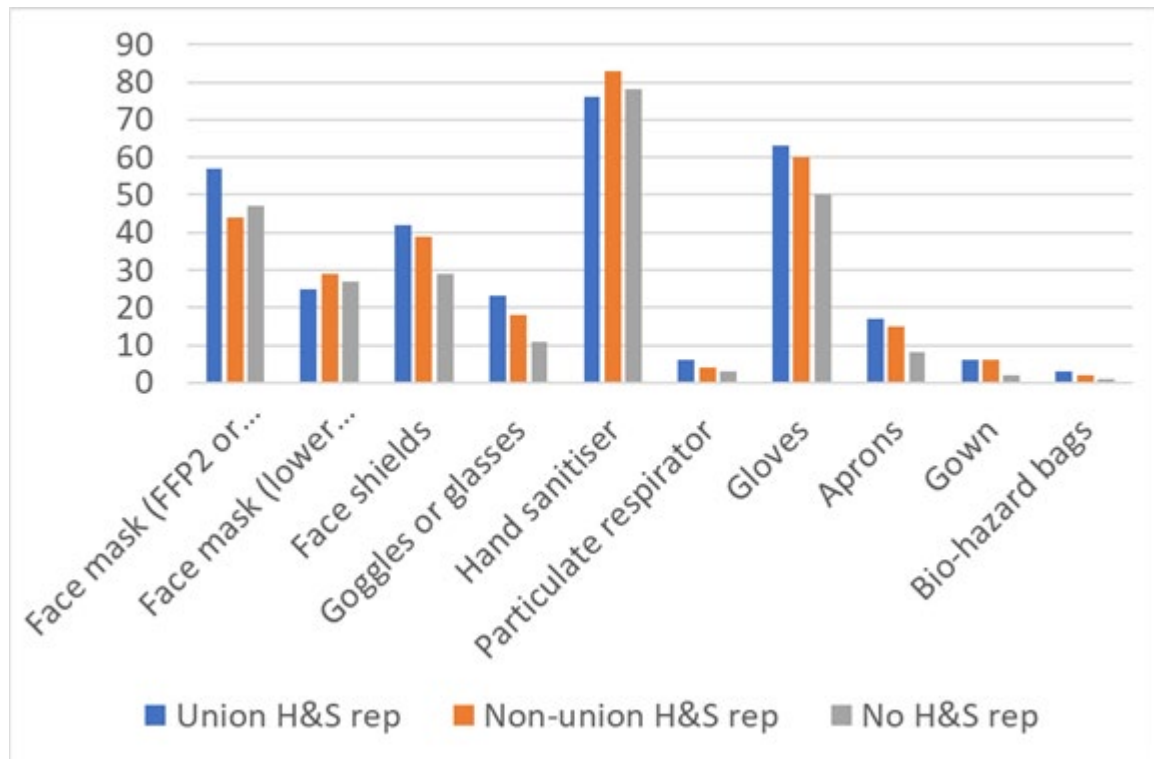
5.4.1.2 *Worker Survey*

Overall, 25% of workers reported that their employer had not provided sufficient PPE in March/April 2020, 67% said they had done so. The figure for those who said that insufficient PPE had been provided for food retail was 28% and for food manufacturing and distribution 27%.

Figure 8 illustrates provision of a range of PPE, with hand sanitiser most popular followed by gloves and face masks. Those in workplaces with union H&S reps were significantly more likely to provide sufficient PPE than those with no H&S reps (73% compared with 53%). Half of those with a union H&S rep (50%) said that the employer tested the temperature of workers coming on-site and 35% of others entering the premises; 7% reported on-site Covid testing facilities. For those with no H&S rep, the figures are 36%, 29% and 6% respectively. Over half (54%) of those with a union H&S rep reported an improvement in the availability of PPE compared to 41% of those whose workplaces have a non-union rep and 31% with no rep at all

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 8: Availability of PPE: Worker Survey



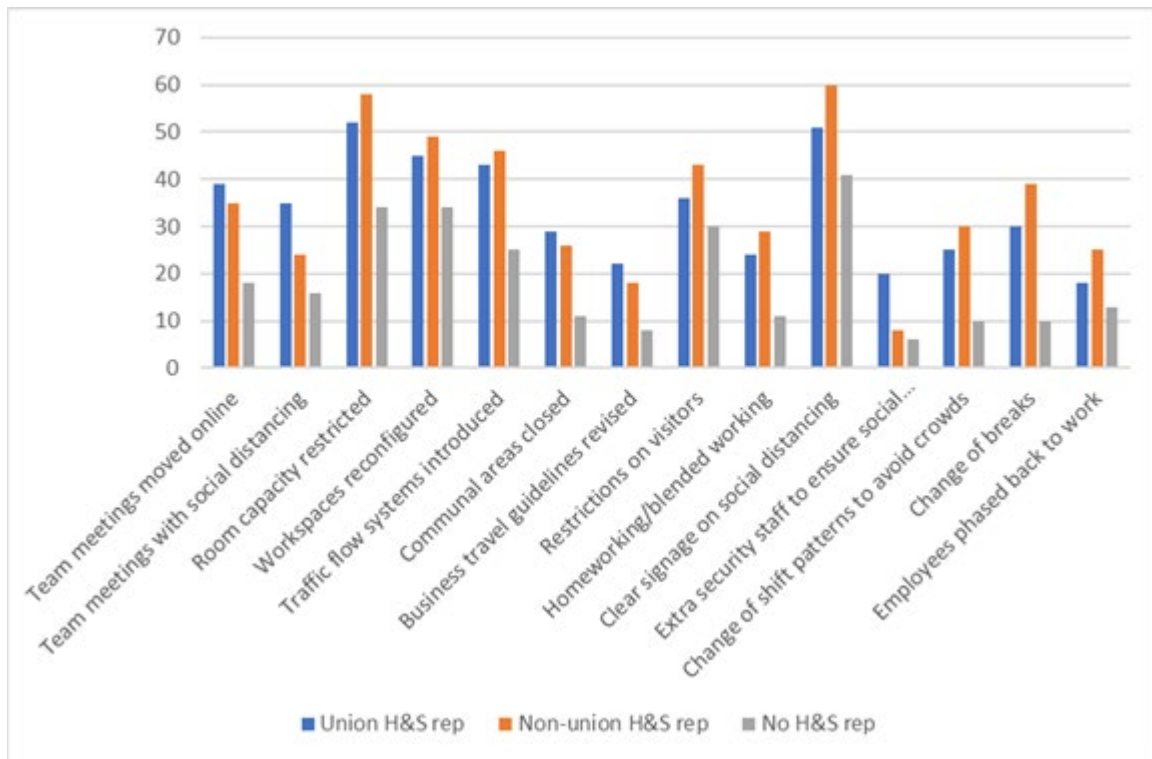
5.4.2 Social Distancing

5.4.2.1 Manager Survey

Again, there was little difference between managers in union and non-union workplaces reporting that sufficient social distancing measures were introduced in March/April 2020 (86% and 81% respectively) However, managers in workplaces with a union H&S rep were more likely to report workspace reconfigurations to socially distance employees.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 9: Workplace changes to ensure social distancing: Manager Survey



5.4.2.2 Worker Survey

One in five workers (21%) reported that in March/April 2020 their employer had introduced insufficient social distancing measures, almost three quarters (73%) said measures were sufficient. Almost half (43%) perceived measures as having improved by the end of the year, although 8% said there were fewer measures. Those in workplaces with union H&S reps were significantly less likely to report insufficient measures (17%) compared with those with a non-union H&S rep (22%) and those with no H&S rep at all (30%).

5.4.3 Case Studies

Social distancing was a key issue reported by participants in the case studies; at PoultryCo a worker reported to the union:

'The inability to provide social distancing in the cramped conditions of the production line combined with a refrigerated environment will encourage the spread of Covid-19. On the line people are shoulder to shoulder and people going up and down the line have to push past each other'.

This company had experienced outbreaks in two plants not covered by the case study with substantial proportions testing positive and both subsequently closed for a fortnight, The Unite Regional Officer wrote to the company seeking assurances that workers were not being transferred between sites and it emerged from another source that a

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

subsidiary of the company may have been sending workers from one site to another and that they were possibly sharing accommodation and potentially increasing transmission.

Attempts to maintain distancing protocols are complicated in workplaces that may be old or confined, particularly in communal areas, such as canteens, washrooms, corridors, and walkways. In retail, customer inflow is critical and a GMB officer believed workers were exposed to risk because of customer numbers in shops, limited compliance with two metres social distancing and inadequate policing of government guidance. This was confirmed by a shop floor worker in SupermarketCo:

'I don't think they've done enough because too many customers were coming in. They tried to patrol it at times but after a certain hour per day, they stopped patrolling. Until they got in trouble from the council, my store, because they were allowing loads of people inside the store at once. And they weren't stopping them so there were no safety measures with everyone virtually packed together. Customers will still come to you and speak in your face, some won't wear masks even if you ask them to. There are all these issues. People still touch all the products and put it back. Again, because they can't keep track of every single thing, I think they may have thought it was quite effective but I know a lot of staff members have said that the company do not care about their safety. There's nothing effective'.

The GMB officer stressed that SupermarketCo warehouse workers were also vulnerable, with 50-60 picking stock at the same time and examples of workgroups being exposed and having to isolate. At SupermarketCo it was reported that if workers test positive managers would track proximity to colleagues and advise them to self-isolate. However, a home shopping assistant working on the shop floor expressed concern that these guidelines had not been followed:

'I don't think there was enough safety measures there because as per knowledge, if you're in contact with someone that has tested positive for the virus, you need to isolate. But quite a few people in SupermarketCo were tested positive and nobody was informed, nobody had to isolate for the period of time when you were in contact with them.

Reps reported concern about the new strain of Covid, but only the clinically extremely vulnerable had been advised to self-isolate. However, a nightshift worker conceded that the second wave of Covid was addressed more seriously than the first:

'The second lockdown, health and safety measures were a lot more – they were taken a lot more seriously than the first one. So for example with the second lockdown, if you are not wearing a badge to say that you're not required to wear a mask, you have to wear a mask. There's no option to not wear a mask. Whereas in the first lockdown it wasn't as serious. All throughout the pandemic there was plenty of masks, plenty of gloves and plenty of hand sanitiser to go round ... They've done quite well to ensure the employees' safety'.

He also reported that workers were not allowed to car share and if they talked to each other had to stand sideways rather than face each other.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

FastfoodCo has installed screens and signage and provided masks and gloves, but social distancing is difficult in kitchens which have limited ventilation. It was reported that there was variation as to whether workers were required to wear masks. Timers go off at 20-30 minute intervals to prompt workers to sanitise their hands, however sanitisation was described as 'random' and as varying according to shift:

'Some shifts it will be really good, they keep on top of it, every time the timer goes off, there will be someone who covers you to wash your hands. And then you'll get told to sanitise things. But then there's a lot of this where it will just get ignored and you have to take it on yourselves to just do it. Sometimes if it's really busy it's difficult just to nip out for a few minutes just to wash your hands because it's that busy'.

Again, it proved difficult to regulate customer behaviour. Health and safety training was seen as minimal and there was little communication with workers. Crucially, workers reported being told to turn off the track and trace app while at work. One worker reported that potential cases were not communicated to the whole workforce:

'We're not allowed to have it on (the track and trace app) at work, that's the first thing they say to us, to turn it off. Also there was an outbreak at work but they didn't tell anyone who it was and they only notified the people who were expected on that shift. ... But they tried to keep it a secret from everyone ... There's been multiple cases, like I said it's kept really confidential about who's got it and who's not got it. You get told to isolate if you need to and I've personally not been told by anyone'.

Reports of an outbreak in one restaurant suggested there was some delay between workers being identified as positive and the store closing and deep cleaning, raising questions about the threshold for closure in terms of workers testing positive.

At Foodco there was an outbreak of Covid at one of its sites, when 14 employees were confirmed as positive. A 24-hour factory closure was imposed to allow deep cleaning. The case study covered a nearby production site. Here workers had also been asked to turn off the track and trace app because of false positives. The rep referred to similar advice at other Unite workplaces (for example Jaguar Landrover) where there had been false positives because workers left their mobiles in their lockers with the app switched on. The union rep was not happy about turning the app off as it meant that contact with partners, spouses or friends who had tested positive would not be picked up and had asked for written clarification as part of the risk assessment. The union wanted anyone who had been in close contact with the infection to be taken off-site.

At SupplierCo depots social distancing measures and enhanced sanitising and cleansing regimes were introduced, although there were difficulties taping warehouse floors for social distancing because of the impact of mechanical handling equipment, such as forklift trucks. The manager reported an increase in those testing positive in the second wave, possibly due to more rigorous testing. The company established its own track and trace system. Those infected were interviewed by telephone and asked to identify workplace contacts, those at risk were then excluded from the workplace and self-isolated.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

As with other companies in retail and distribution SeafoodCo invested in thermal image cameras at the entrance to each site preventing entry for those whose temperature was above 37 degrees – for the union representative this was the most important of the measures taken by the company:

‘So you’re not classed as being on site until you actually get through the turnstile. So people – where it’s been higher than 37 they’ve been sent home, they haven’t actually been on site. It really has worked.

The company introduced extra clocking-in machines to ensure distancing, along with perspex screens and partitions in the canteen, floor signage and PPE. It introduced Covid marshals or champions as managers felt there was insufficient engagement from H&S reps at shopfloor level, in particular to monitor social distancing:

‘One of the things we did from that point was actually establish a supplementary body of Covid champions that took responsibility – that were actually pulled out of their day jobs and took responsibility for encouraging social distancing at key congestion times, acting as key conduits for Covid issues, and had authority to raise issues and were seen as having authority to raise issues ... one of the things that came out of the site Covid committees was that some supplementary structure had to be put in place that had explicit recognition and authority. And arguably there was a dedicated role rather than just something people were doing in addition to their existing responsibilities and arguably we made the conscious point of saying go find the noisiest, most critical people we can in order to try to reassure the business that if these people are saying that we’re getting it right and are feeling as if they’re contributing, then actually they can act as key influencers to the rest of the teams’

5.5 The Union Role

Having a workplace union makes a difference to whether workers feel free to speak out when they feel workplace practices put them at risk of Covid-19. Half (49%) of workers said that they felt free to report a health and safety problem related to Covid-19 in their workplace, but that figure rises to 56% for those who say that a union is recognised for individual representation on matters like grievances and disciplinaries.

The case studies highlighted the proactive role played by trade union H&S reps in the food processing, distribution and retail sector. Those companies with union recognition all had trained H&S reps in place. DistributionCo has 90 H&S reps over seven sites and the rep suggested that these were better trained than managers, with the leading rep known as ‘the Covid King’ because of his forensic daily examination of changes to guidance. Workers approached reps for advice, particularly when the company furloughed its own full-time health and safety team:

‘And what they did is they furloughed them all in the middle of a global pandemic. So effectively they were doing their safety from home and it was me and the other safety reps who were basically running the show, feeding back to them saying ‘well this is what we’ve done’. And they were just saying “oh we’ll just check on the legality of it and we’ll get back to you”. They basically left us to do it because they know we know what we’re doing’.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

At DistributionCo, in retrospect, it was perceived that the most important measure was been the introduction of Covid marshals who ensured social distancing. This was the union's idea and initially the company wanted the union to organise it, but reps were over-run and believed management should appoint people with the authority to undertake the role. The company appointed warehouse operatives as marshals in consultation with the union. They were voluntary and if non-compliance issues arose, they reported to management.

The union oversaw the introduction of eight on-site portacabins accommodating extra rest rooms and break areas and toilets to ensure social distancing, but also a union office where workers could contact reps. Recognising the vulnerability of warehouse workers, reps helped to develop an agreed way of picking, reducing dependence on targets:

'So we've had to work along with the company to come up with an agreed way of picking so they're not chasing up the pick rates. We are 'not chasing up the pick rates. One of the various things we've said is look, you can't be looking to people for optimisation – "you've got a percentage to pick in an hour". You can throw all of that out the window because if you're expecting people to social distance as best as they can while they're doing the job, your pick rates and stuff have got to go out the window. Because you can't have people worrying about how many they're picking in an hour and also protecting themselves and others by keeping themselves away from others while they do the job. So picking is the worst job by a long way'.

PoultryCo had lost experienced reps before the pandemic, but had a new temporary team participating in on-site health and safety teams. The union had 20 reps on one site and four on another and was struggling to get the company to agree adequate time-off for the new reps to access training; they were allowed five days annually rather than the 30 days the union considered necessary for full accreditation. Since the workforce comprises high proportions of migrant workers and British BAME workers, the union has tried to ensure diverse teams of H&S reps meeting weekly. At one site the union brought a collective grievance against the company, signed by members, demanding screens, face visors or masks, sanitising units and social distancing measures in canteens and smoking shelters and that locker rooms were moved to ensure workers were not congregating in small areas. The union's initial demands were met, which was described as 'a great achievement for Unite'. The union role has been such that the senior H&S rep sits in on interviews with migrant workers who have to undertake a Covid-19 risk assessment.

At the second site the rep faced similar issues with getting basic PPE, stating 'I banged on every door!' It was three months before visors were in place and they were subsequently replaced by masks, regarded as providing better safety and protection. Risk assessment has meant changes to shifts, so shifts and breaks were staggered to reduce contact. As elsewhere, work bubbles were formed to contain possible infection with two management bubbles working alternate days. Extra canteen facilities, in the form of marquees inside the factories, and more places to smoke were introduced, with perspex shields surrounding tables in the canteen and reduced seating. Marshals outside the factory ensured social distancing. Plastic booths were introduced on

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

production lines to provide individuals with their own space. As elsewhere, ventilation presented a greater problem, refrigeration systems meaning it was not possible to have continual airflow from outside as recommended.

FoodCo had 10 accredited workplace H&S reps that met twice daily during Covid, placing information on notice boards and producing a weekly email for members and responding to emails from them. As with PoultryCo, the rep at FoodCo did not feel that the company had responded to the outbreak of the pandemic with sufficient urgency and he and another rep approached the site factory manager:

‘There was ‘an increasing sense of fear and panic within our membership and our colleagues ... and to be frank, we had a very full and frank discussion I think would be the best way of describing it. And we were particularly angry of what we perceived to be a lack of execution of the duty of care that the company had towards its employees. We left that meeting and the following day, the factory manager, to his credit, pulled us back in, his exact words were “following the bollocking you gave me yesterday”....’

The manager convened an onsite Covid working party which met twice daily, involving the two union representatives, taking them off shift to spearhead improvements. It explored social distancing measures, covering communal areas such as walkways, workstations, offices and locker rooms, introducing one-way entry and exit systems, cleaning schedules and products, as well as PPE such as nitrile gloves. Reps ‘continually walked the site’, putting in place floor stickers to indicate 2-metre distancing and ‘keep walking’ and one-way system signage. Importantly, they played a key role in urging the company to maintain restrictions over the summer when national measures were lifted. They were proud of the fact the sites had zero cases and their message to the company was ‘keep your foot on the accelerator’, although they believed the company did not do so.

At SupermarketCo, the GMB provided health and safety training for reps, including in risk assessment. The union pressed for Covid marshals, an employee providing a presence at the front of the store to advise customers to wear masks, offering free masks and sanitiser. The company also responded to the union’s demands for floor markings and one-way systems into the stores, but, implementation difficulties meant that these were withdrawn. The union continues to insist that they should be reinstated. The union insisted on face masks for the workforce before it became government regulation and pushed for the ability for workers to remove themselves from the shopfloor if they felt at risk, without repercussions.

Reps reported networks of support involving other reps and the wider union, with enhanced use of social media, particularly WhatsApp groups, to generalise good practice. The rep at FoodCo was on WhatsApp groups with reps at other sites, European Works Council reps and a national union network. The company reps group meant that the union was not reliant on management to get messages out to the workforce. The Unite national officer established a weekly zoom call with reps from major food companies to share best practice and union resources. The local rep described the union as ‘really, really helpful’. In Unite, a Covid-19 Task Group consisting of Unite Directors, Assistant General Secretaries, Regional Secretaries (representing

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

each UK nation) and National Health and Safety Officers met in a weekly Zoom call. Unite has created a 'guidance suite' built up by first looking at what was needed when reps and officers were negotiating with companies and then adding in best practice on vulnerable workers, pregnancy, controls on social distancing and hygiene.

In USDAW the national officer used his role to share best practice across companies. He reported sharing with reps and employers, information gained through meetings with DEFRA, the TUC and the HSE, giving a sense that the wider union was bringing something extra in understanding the twists and turns of Government policy and advice.

5.6 Creating a Culture of Safety and Ensuring Compliance

One of the most important roles played by unions is in monitoring risk amongst members and non-members and overcoming resistance or what one respondent called 'a culture of denial'. This is a potentially controversial role as it may be seen as policing the workforce. At SeafoodCo the company appointed Covid marshals from outside of health and safety representative structures to monitor social distancing as managers felt existing reps might feel compromised or reluctant. Marshals were able to escalate issues quickly through regular contact with the heads of health and safety on site rather than via the normal channels. As above, at DistributionCo Covid marshals were introduced as a result of union pressure, although were also independent of existing health and safety representation. Elsewhere union reps have used their embeddedness in the workplace to create a culture of safety. Reps at PoultryCo sites had to persuade workers to wear visors when they were fogging up in low temperatures:

'If you don't think about you, think about the others. I know probably it wasn't the best response they were waiting for and obviously we weren't the best guys in this story but at least it kept us safe. It was in their interest'.

The union also participated in tracking those with symptoms, particularly in circumstances where migrant workers shared cars and houses. A union survey found that nearly two-thirds of those workers responding lived with other workers. Similarly, at FoodCo most agency workers were migrants living in a close community, sharing houses and lifts to work. The union advised against the risks of car-sharing. Reps also ensured workers wore PPE, whether members or not, but also provided reassurance:

'You need to be communicating with everybody across the site regardless of whether they're in the union or not. Generally speaking, we quickly calmed a lot of fear and I can't begin to stress to you how fearful people were. It was a very, very anxious time. You can imagine dealing with something that is unknown and a lot of people really just do want – I don't know whether this is a comment on modern society - but a lot of people really do feel that somebody else has to come in and save them, if that makes sense and that is sometimes the level of personal responsibility you are dealing with'.

Union reps translated personal responsibility into collective responsibility. A SupplierCo rep stressed the importance of communication with colleagues and that it took time for people to adapt to new rules and safety measures and to overcome habits.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

In SupermarketCo, GMB reps persuaded warehouse workers to voluntarily wear face masks before they were required to do so and reported consequent reductions in the numbers of infections. At DistributionCo even though it was not a requirement in law, the reps promoted face coverings within the workplace. However, as a number of workers were not wearing them, the reps ensured they wore visors instead on the basis that they did not cover the mouth and impede breathing. The rep reported that it had been difficult at the beginning to persuade people, 'but to be perfectly honest, it's levelled out now and people are just doing it'. The union subsequently supported company policy that those refusing to use visors would be sent home without pay:

'We absolutely, absolutely supported that, because we had to protect the majority of the workforce, the ones that were worried and scared about it. It's better to wheedle out a couple of flat earthers to say "Look this is how it's working because we need to protect the rest of the workforce". It's easy to get them out of the workplace than the 80% that are doing things right. They're the ones that need protecting. So we were totally behind management, as long as it was done fairly and as long as they were given the full opportunity and everything was explained to them. And they were sat down and they were spoken to, it was all done above board'.

An USDAW officer described the importance of doing daily floor walks and the importance of educating members without fear of discipline:

'So it's understanding and getting management buy-in to say people are turning right, it's not a blatant abuse of the rules now, it's people are used to doing what they were doing. So it took some time to bed in, but it was about having those conversations with people rather than any potential disciplinary action. Because it was more around the skill of learning something different, even by just going different ways to your workstation. And it did take a little bit to bed in in certain bits but I'm hearing now that it's just become the norm again the way that people move around sites'.

At FastfoodCo, a respondent described 'a group culture of denial', fuelled by workers having to stay silent about safety and not able to voice concerns.

5.7 Absence, Sick Pay and Other Terms and Conditions

Sick pay was one of the key issues raised by participants because of its major influence on worker's ability to shield or self-isolate and thus prevent infection.

5.7.1 *Manager Survey*

The survey of managers found that over one in four managers (26%) reported that there was a change to sick pay and a similar proportion (26%) said there was a change in attendance policies. When asked to explain what changes were made, some managers noted that their organisations had made it easier for people who needed to self-isolate or had Covid symptoms to stay home and claim sick pay. Again around a quarter (24%) reported changes to pay since Covid with 42% of those in food manufacturing and distribution reporting that they had done so. In food retail, 24% of managers said

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

changes had been made to the bonus system. One noted that bonus systems had been scrapped with basic pay levelled up to compensate staff. Others said that fractional pay was offered to staff who were self-isolating. Promotion schemes generating bonuses or gift cards to retail staff were suspended in order to minimise face-to-face interaction with customers.

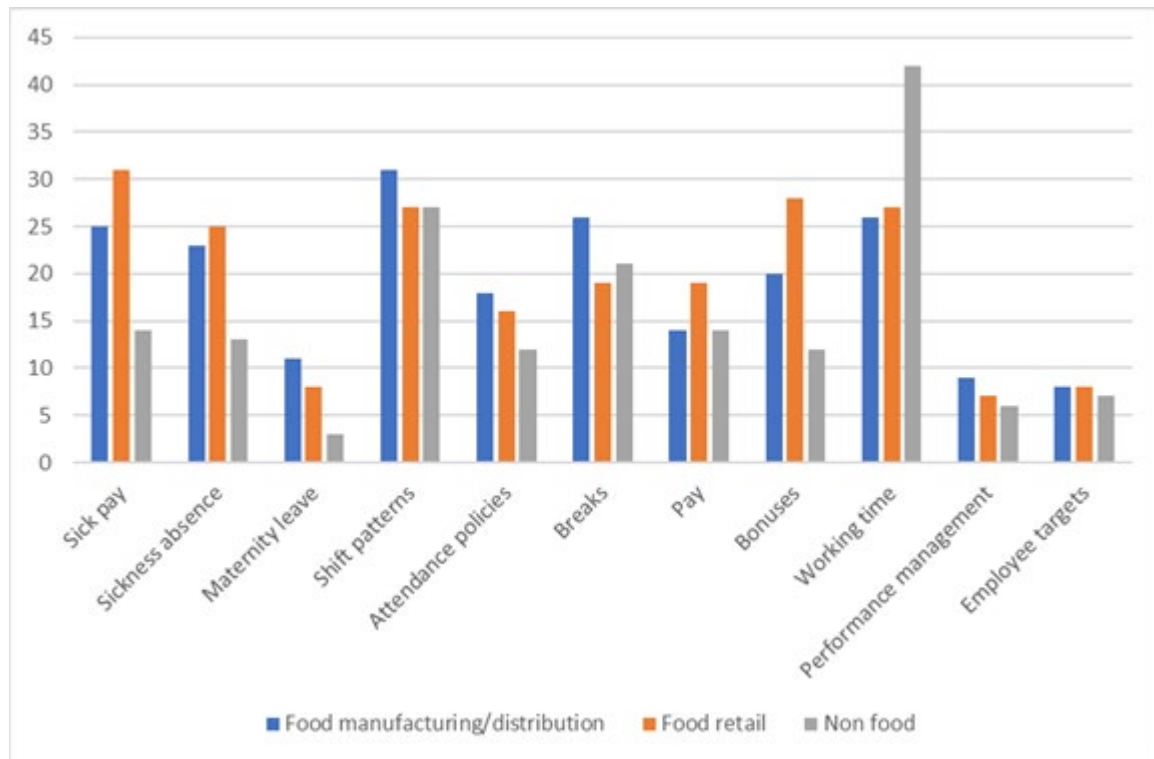
5.7.2 Worker Survey

In the workers' survey respondents reported that nearly one third (31%) of food retailers and a quarter (25%) of food manufacturers had made changes to sick pay and 23% and 25% respectively to sickness absence – a higher proportion than in other sectors for both. Under 20% reported changes to attendance policies (16% for food retail and 17% for food manufacturing and distribution). Workers in workplaces with a union H&S rep were significantly more likely than those without either to report changes to sick pay or sickness absence. In line with the case study evidence, respondents described these changes as allowing employees to be paid basic pay or occupational sick pay if they had to self-isolate or had a positive Covid-19 test result or to receive sick pay from day one.

In terms of other changes 15% of workers said there were changes to pay and 19% to bonuses with some respondents reporting cuts to bonuses and others increases, in some case cuts resulted from changes to performance management or targets (7% and 8% respectively). One third of workers (34%) reported changes to working time, although this was higher for those outside of the food sector. Over a quarter (28%) said there had been changes to shifts and just under a quarter (21%) to breaks.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 10: Changes to working conditions: Worker Survey



5.7.3 Case Studies

At FastfoodCo, there appeared inconsistency about entitlement to SSP; one worker had been off for two weeks with SSP, but reported that others had isolated for two weeks without sick pay:

'I can see why some people go into work because it's really difficult to live off sick pay that's not anything close to what you are used to earning'.

Surviving on £95 per week sick pay was not an option for many FastfoodCo workers, particularly those normally working 40-50 hours per week. The respondent reported that workers could not afford to self-isolate if they tested positive, making it likely that transmission would increase in fast food restaurants. She also reported that workers had been told to take holidays and holiday pay instead of going off sick and taking sick pay, because it was lower than holiday pay. Yet, in fact they were getting less than if they had claimed sick pay.

USDAW demands that workers get company sick pay, but a national officer perceived variation between companies, with some following government guidelines and introducing SSP from day one, but others providing company sick pay for those self-isolating. Some required workers to take at least some holiday to cover shielding. The union stressed that workers dependent on shift allowances and overtime cannot survive on SSP and would continue working:

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

'If you get things like shift allowance and overtime all built into that, and you are say a driver, a lot of them are on between £30,000 and £50,000 a year. If you were then to just go statutory sick pay of £95 a week you're basically encouraging people to switch the app off and encouraging them well, it's only a headache or it's only a slight cough, I'm coming into work because I can't afford to stay off'.

At SupermarketCo, the GMB managed to win sick pay from day one rather than after three waiting days. For those clinically extremely vulnerable, entitlement from day one covered all incidences of sickness and was contractual pay for a first incident, company sick pay for a second and after that SSP. If employees run out of SSP SupermarketCo paid the equivalent. The GMB national officer commented:

'We are always fighting that it should be company sick pay - it's a pandemic. We've had people that have been told they've had it more than once, so they've gone off more than once with it. We've had a lot of people been tracked and traced and they come back to work and then have to go off again. So we think it's a bit unfair that the longer this goes on the likelihood is you could end up on statutory sick pay'.

At PoultryCo the rep reported that the company rejected union requests for full sick pay for those isolating, compelling people to attend work out of financial necessity. A workforce survey undertaken by Unite, found that two-thirds of respondents reported they had attended work when unwell and half were aware of a colleague who had done so. The vast majority of these attended because they could not afford to stay at home and believed that self-isolating workers should be on full pay. Three quarters had not self-isolated when someone else in their household had symptoms. In contrast, reps at DistributionCo persuaded the company that if workers were reliant on SSP when isolating they would not stay off work and that they should get basic pay and absence should not be put down as a sickness incident.

Reps at FoodCo have campaigned for sick pay for agency workers on the basis that these workers had informed them that they could not afford to stay away from work if they had symptoms, when directly employed workers were paid in full when self-isolating or waiting for tests. They were waiting for a decision, but initially the company had said it could not pay agency workers because they were employed by a third-party company:

'To say that you will almost allow a company that you deal with to discriminate against people or not support them adequately, but you expect them to come in and make your products amongst the rest of the workers as well with the potential that that has to damage both the health of the site and your products' production processes and your ability to produce them. Surely it is worth you examining and looking at maybe dealing with another agency in order to protect everybody?'

SeafoodCo introduced a Covid Leave of Absence Scheme that provided those officially shielding or over 65 to remain absent from the workplace on 85% of full pay. The company had its own track and trace system and have isolated whole production lines, sending them home to minimise infection elsewhere. Where workers are caring for shielding individuals they have been encouraged to take leave, but the company has

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

been flexible. It made it clear that anyone who could not work from home, but felt they should be away from work or wanted to take a leave of absence, including for childcare, could do so and their employment would be kept open for them. The union representative at Seafood Co reported that the company had become more relaxed about absence under Covid-19:

'And after so many times you've been off you get looked at and possibly a verbal warning, because of people who have the same time off all the time, it's always the same people. But since Covid's been in they've stopped that; if you're off now, if you're off from last March up to now, still Covid's going on, anything, there's no warnings, no verbals, nothing going on. It can be classed as Covid or not Covid but they've not put pressure on anybody'.

Sick pay entitlement varies according to contractual status, there has been no change to these arrangements, but where sickness is Covid-related sick pay is paid from day one.

At DistributionCo a general manager stressed that full basic pay was instrumental in encouraging employees to take time off if they experienced symptoms:

'This I think was a fundamental change to the way managers have managed any business – because we were actively encouraging people to take time off. If they had the slightest sniffle, anything at all, we would encourage people to take time off. We knew we would be undone if we had somebody coming into work who either knowingly had Covid but couldn't afford to be off. Because at the end of the day you've got to put food on the table. We didn't at any point, and still haven't at any point put somebody to submit proof to say well show me your letter, show me your track and trace. If somebody comes to me or to one of the managers and says 'I've got symptoms', they go home. Or if they ring in and said 'my brother's got symptoms, I've been in close contact' we don't ask them for any proof, we just take them at their word because we didn't, again, want to put people under any pressure at all around doing the right thing. And that worked very well for us'.

A second issue for workers is holidays and holiday pay. At DistributionCo workers have been able to roll holidays over to 2021 if they have not been able to take them. PoultryCo reps have been clear that they do not expect the workforce to lose holidays and holiday pay for 2020 because they could not travel and that allocation should be rolled over to 2021, an issue of particular importance for migrant workers unable to travel to see family.

USDAW reported that certain major retailers have acknowledged workers' contributions throughout the Covid-19 pandemic by increasing pay by 10% or giving £1000 bonuses. Others had given vouchers, one-off bonuses or hampers. DistributionCo workers received a £100 Marks and Spencer voucher and Christmas hamper. One SupermarketCo worker reported receiving a bonus as a thank you for hard work during the pandemic of one week's pay, although receipt depended on the shifts worked. Another said the bonus was £500 for full-time and £200 for part-time workers at the peak of the pandemic. Union reps at PoultryCo were not happy when workers were given a 50p per hour bonus for only four weeks.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

5.8 Childcare

School closures and requirement to home school have presented substantial challenges to workers having to continue working during the pandemic and varying responses from employers.

5.8.1 *Manager Survey*

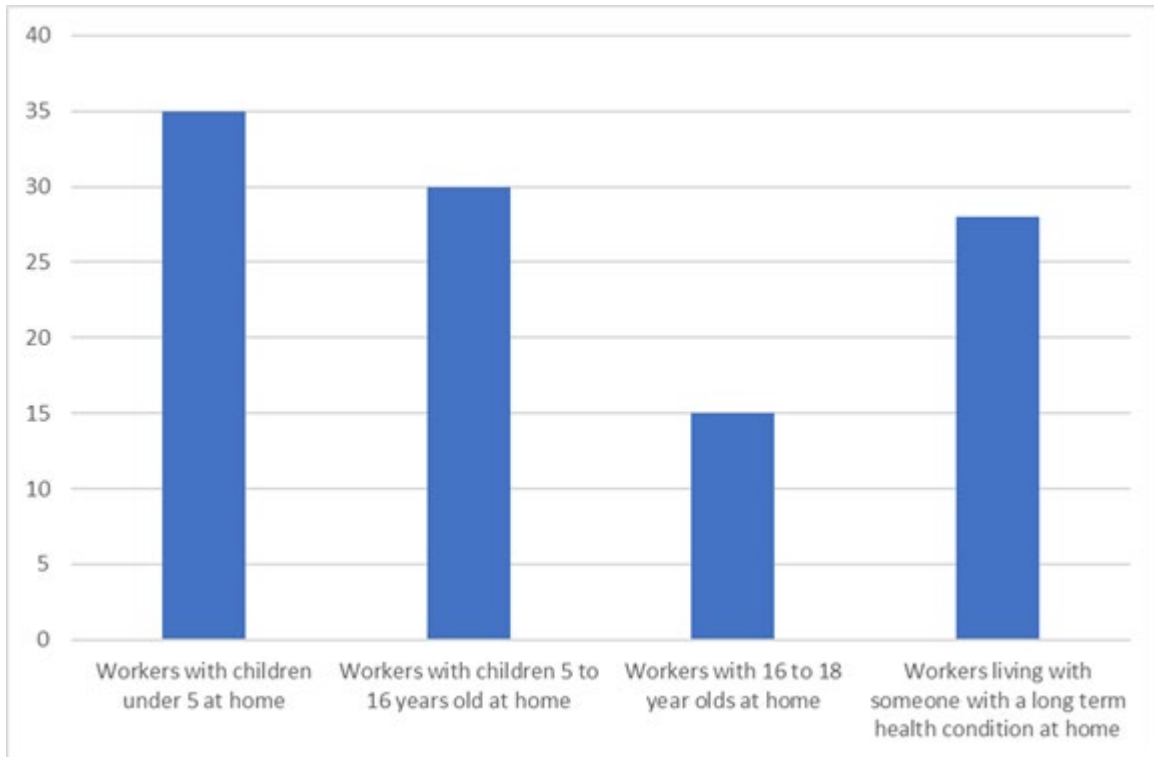
Of managers who reported a risk assessment, just under half (46%) of those in non-food sectors; one in five in food manufacturing and distribution (22%) and one in four (26%) in food retail reported that the risk assessment had considered guidance for staff with caring responsibilities.

5.8.2 *Worker Survey*

In the worker survey one third (35%) of respondents with childcare responsibilities and 28% of those living with someone with a long-term health condition reported difficulties in balancing work and childcare or caring responsibilities.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 19: Concerns about difficulties in balancing work and caring responsibilities: Worker Survey



5.8.3 Case Studies

Reps at FoodCo reported that overall the company had been supportive, issuing workers with key worker letters so that their children could remain in school. A few incidents where managers did not understand the approach were reported, but reps intervened on behalf of members to ensure fair treatment. At DistributionCo where couples were both working for the company the company allowed one partner to be furloughed. At PoultryCo there were a few cases where those with childcare were allowed to stay at home, but without pay. A welfare fund was set up to support workers who had to stay home because of dependents and who lost money, although reps reported that while the fund was advertised it had not been widely used. At SupermarketCo those with children, particularly single parents, were allowed to swap shifts, take holiday or unpaid time off, with guarantees that their job would be safe. A FastfoodCo worker suggested that there had been hostility to those with children who could not continue to work and that time-off was unpaid.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

5.9 Vulnerable Workers

At Foodco the reps worked with Human Resources to identify those workers at risk, or who needed to shield, and encouraged people to come forward if they were in a vulnerable category. Similarly, at PoultryCo, in the early stages, reps identified vulnerable workers to ensure they were not at work and negotiated that anybody absent because of Covid-19, including shielding, would receive full pay to prevent on-site infection. At SupermarketCo it was reported that those shielding were paid; one such worker who had to shield on a long-term basis received full pay, but also took some annual leave. She considered that managers were supportive and reassured her that her job was safe and in the second wave told her to stay at home. She said that those having to self-isolate got ten days sick pay. She underwent a risk assessment of her vulnerability and her 'score' was deemed low enough to return to work:

'They said I can come back to work. I was vulnerable to the government but not to SupermarketCo! They said 'it's safe for you to come back to work - at the time I'm still not sure entirely about my contract. I know they told me it's permanent but again I don't want to take the risk of saying no, and then causing an issue for my employment because I need a job. But I just said "ok I can come back to work".'

At DistributionCo those clinically vulnerable, shielding or carers were furloughed and the reps reported that the company had been very good on these issues. At FastfoodCo a worker felt that potentially vulnerable older employees were still working despite the reintroduction of furlough by the government in the second wave.

The food processing sector employs a disproportionate number of migrant workers, particularly through agencies, and some of those who continued to work felt particularly vulnerable. A migrant worker at PoultryCo commented:

'It's discrimination because we are not British people, the majority we are East Europeans we don't worth nothing for them. My question is how the government let that happen to us? How people can go and buy meat from the shops knowing that's so many people's lives in danger for that piece of meat. Where is the media, television, news? We really need help!!!!'

Language may present barriers to the communication and implementation of workplace health and safety measures. For PoultryCo the resolution was the recruitment of multi-lingual union reps, although one site faced more difficulties in encouraging a diverse team of reps. Unite played a role in translating the company's risk assessment into Eastern European languages through their reps. It was reported that the company could not afford comprehensive translation, but at one site the union ensured that safety rules were translated into at least ten languages. Notices conveying guidance on safe practices used pictures to cross language barriers. Reps also used community leaders to disseminate information.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

5.10 Mental Health

The case studies stressed the impact of Covid-19 on worker's mental health and unions have stressed that risk assessments should address mental health issues.

5.10.1 Manager Survey

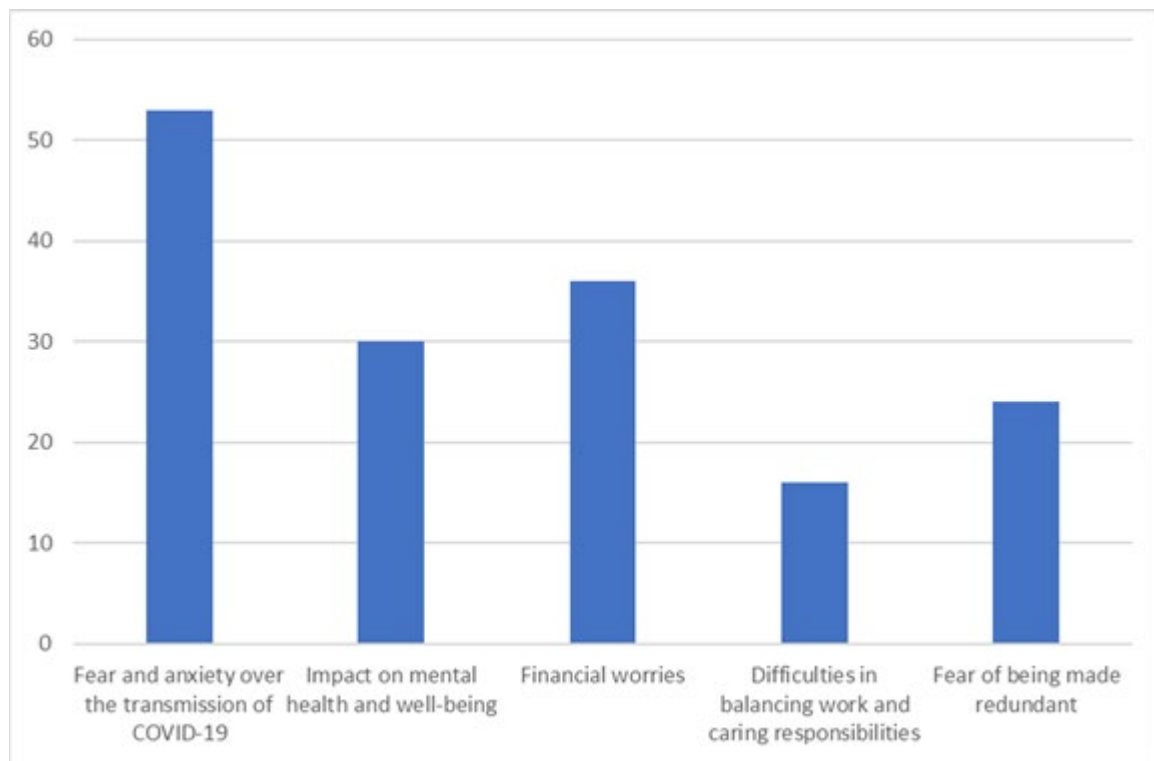
Almost half (48%) of managers said that their employees have fears about Covid at work and 28% said that their employees were worried about the impact of continued attendance at the workplace on their mental health and well-being. Just under one third (31%) report staff worries over the impact of homeworking on their mental health and well-being; 23% on work-life balance and 16% on musculoskeletal injuries as a result of homeworking. Just over one third (39%) believe that staff have worries about their finances and 30% report that staff are anxious about being made redundant. Reflecting on these concerns, 46% of managers reported that their employers are offering extra in-house mental health services and 40% were offering extra external mental health services.

5.10.2 Worker Survey

Over half (58%) of workers reported fears about the transmission of Covid-19 at work. This was especially the case for people who were living with someone aged 65 and older (63%) and those living with a person who had a long-term health condition (70%). Over one third (37%) said they had financial worries and a quarter (27%) fears about being made redundant. Nearly a third (30%) worry about the impact of continued attendance at the workplace on their mental health. Workers who have been identified as essential workers were more likely to report fear and anxiety over the transmission of Covid (63%) and the impact of continued attendance on their mental health and well-being (39%). Almost one third (32%) recorded that their employer had put extra in-house mental health services in place, two in five (40%) said there was extra access to external mental health services.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Figure 17: Fears and worries during Covid-19: Worker Survey



5.10.3 Case Studies

At FoodCo mental health was frequently discussed, aided by the fact that union reps had undertaken mental health first-aid courses just prior to the pandemic and actively asked workers about their mental health as part of Covid risk assessments. They were aware of the stress that production workers who had worked throughout the pandemic were under, particularly when there had been over 30 cases on one site:

'We are aware of the pressures that have been on people, especially production workers who have had to work right the way through and who've had to come in facing that every day. They haven't been able to work at home like office workers have and so that brings its own challenges. But equally, just going in every day [with] around a thousand people who potentially could give you a life-threatening illness... And equally that has been (the case) when Covid did hit a site - around the 22nd September it bit deep. We've had 32 plus cases now but it's the amount of people who have had to self-isolate. That then places pressures on those people that are present in order to run machinery they've been put on. And that sort of thing brings its own anxieties in itself. I think there's been a lot of increases in levels of aggression in the way that people deal with each other and – you can imagine you know, treading on somebody's toe in the locker room.'

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

At SupplierCo it was reported that homeworking was constrained by space with people working at inappropriate work stations. Concentration was affected when children were at home so that many staff preferred to return to the office. Workers commented that the pandemic meant they now knew more about their colleagues than previously, making time for regular checks-ins and pastoral care. The company subscribed to Grocery Aid, a charitable organization that supports the sector and which provides free counselling sessions to employees and their families. USDAW concedes that a focus on mental health had often lagged behind concerns for physical health, but stated that it had become more prominent issue and the union was able to direct members to gain mental health support.

Reps at DistributionCo reported that members would always approach the union before management. Reps talked through anxieties about Covid and facilitated resolutions with managers:

'The members will always come to us first before they'll go to a manager or an HR manager, always, always they'll come to us. They'll say 'can we have a chat?' And I'll say 'yeah, I'll have a chat with you, do you want a cuppa tea?' And you sit down with them 10-15 minutes and say right – "Come on we'll go up and see HR then and we'll go discuss it with them". Things like that, or childcare issues, people would come and say "we've got a bit of an issue with childcare". I say "what are you looking for, a day off or a rest day?" "That would suit me better". "Come up and have a talk to whatever, the warehouse manager or HR manager, and discuss it." That's how it works, they basically always come to us normally'.

The GMB had received feedback from workers paid to stay at home, that confinement has caused mental stress. The SupermarketCo national officer reported being contacted by workers who were living in households with vulnerable people and faced the risk of transmission from work. The union had referred them to an employee assistance programme, an independent counselling service paid for by the company.

5.11 Covid-19 and Union Learning

In the case studies, when asked what reps thought could have been done better a number commented that companies could have responded quicker and stressed the importance of early intervention. Some expressed the view that organisations were very reliant on government guidance rather than regarding it as representing a baseline from which improvements could be made. A national GMB officer said the union would like to see customer numbers reduced in shops to March levels and the enforcement of two-metre social distancing. In FastfoodCo questions were asked about the absence of queuing systems that could ensure social distancing. Another view was that elements of government guidance should be law, to ensure compliance. Reps emphasised the importance of communication, and a SupermarketCo manager emphasised how weekly structured calls allowed for speed of change and constant feedback.

An USDAW officer said that the reporting procedures were better in the second stages with companies more proactive in sharing information on infection and again that the

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

best practices were those that engaged early with the union. The difficulty had been the inaccessibility of sites and not having regular face-to-face on-site catch-ups with reps, although it was possible to do so online.

'So maybe it's more about the arm round the shoulder, the face-to-face contact that's maybe been missing but obviously missing for good reasons. But I think people have had to find support in different ways. Once I think that it started to be viewed as a lot more serious, I think the health and safety army swung into action and I think the businesses – some were, I guess a little bit slower to respond, some very proactive. But I think the health and safety reps and area officials have done a fantastic job, I think they've really worked well with companies that were allowed to continue to trade. Because the message has just been all along, well IF you continue to trade, that's fine because the rules say you can, but the rules also say that you can only continue to trade if you trade safely. So our view has always been from the start, if you want to continue to trade, it's on the proviso that you can do that safely because if you can't do it safely then you're not continuing to trade. I think we've established those sort of facts early'.

This officer was wary about the future and aware that national retailers had been looking to reduce staff before the furlough scheme was announced. He felt that when the furlough scheme finishes there will be an impact on jobs.

5.12 Roving Reps

There was enthusiasm regarding the potential for roving health and safety reps, as agreed in Scotland between unions and the Scottish government. Such reps could travel across sectors, generalising trade union health and safety expertise and playing an educational role in companies with no trade union representation, as well as engaging on risk assessment.

While roving reps were seen as particularly relevant in a pandemic, it was suggested that they could also be deployed in other crises, including severe weather and climate emergencies. The model was particularly suited to fast-changing situations to ensure companies can respond quickly. Some suggested that employer resistance would stop roving reps from being invited into workplaces, but one officer suggested that union members in unrecognised workplaces could facilitate entry. A proactive union-employer group or forum at sectoral level could provide leverage.

There was particular enthusiasm with regard to roving reps in FastfoodCo and how such a system might strengthen the position of workers in the employment relationship:

'I think any ability for a union rep to enter the building and speak to workers would dramatically transform the power relationship that workers have We've had union organisers assaulted by FastfoodCo managers when they've gone in to try and speak to workers. And it would break down the systems that individual managers operate where they are unaccountable and have a real significant amount of power over workers, whether that's being able to give them shifts, take shifts away, verbally abuse them, sexually harass... Things that are endemic in lots of FastfoodCo

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

workplaces, having someone independent who crosses the threshold and says 'you have rights in this situation and these are what those rights are' would be transformative'.

5.13 Conclusion - Trade Union Value

The case studies attest to the value of trade union health and safety reps at the level of the workplace, but also the potential for strengthening the union role. At DistributionCo the rep highlighted the union's proactivity and increased profile:

'People have realised that without us pushing the company and without us having an involvement from day one, they realise that everything that they've got - so basically being able to self-isolate and getting full basic pay rather than just statutory sick pay - they've realised that they knew that the company would only pay them statutory sick pay. If we hadn't have been here, that's all they would have got. They know that if they come to us and asked us - and we've delivered. So I would say that Unite's presence within the depot, the workforce have seen us more invaluable now than ever'.

Unite at PoultryCo had seen substantial recruitment at one site - increasing membership from 100 to 700 over nine months because of its interventions throughout the pandemic. An SupermarketCo national officer reported that GMB membership had risen in a situation where organising teams could not operate. Increased numbers of workers had contacted the union for advice and support, building a stronger bond with the membership. At SeafoodCo the rep had recruited eight members on his site in the previous month.

Covid-19 was an issue that unions could work on with management, enhancing relationships and encouraging greater interaction. The legal status of H&S reps was emphasised, but managers also recognised the resources and expertise that union H&S reps could bring, as was the case for the manager at DistributionCo:

'I think the benefit that we get from the Unite representatives is their vast knowledge, or moreover I suppose the wealth of knowledge they can call upon. So unlike a normal non-trade union health and safety rep, typically he can call on his colleagues around him, that's usually where the discussions take place. When we talk about union health and safety reps they've got a myriad of contacts in our industry but in different businesses and other industries. And I think this is where I really think the union bring value because they often do what the management team don't do, in that they bring in new ideas from outside. And for me, that kind of breath of fresh air approach that that brings with just new ideas, and I think certainly when we talk about Covid, from a Covid perspective that approach has been for me absolutely invaluable in the solutions that we've developed to help us deal with the pandemic'.

A H&S rep also reported that managers had been forced to acknowledge the union's expertise, but also its role in providing the connection and liaison with the shopfloor:

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

'They were absolutely clamouring for our help and our input on how we were going to get through the crisis and how they were going to keep people in work, keep them safe, keep the operation going. That was it, the only change was that they were really, *really* on board with us'.

A SupermarketCo manager stressed the role of reps in engaging with the workforce:

'Communicating – communication, *communication* is key in any crisis. And where the representatives have been really fantastic is – especially because they know what we will be looking at centrally, they would then cascade certain things down to their members, and down to people on the shopfloor filling shelves, or on the checkout for example. And ensure that they could reassure the individuals that from a national point of view, things were being considered, contemplated and changed as well. So it isn't just a one way system from the company down to the GMB saying 'this is what we're doing'. Working with health and safety representatives from the GMB because they've really helped us engage, consult and drive the business forward in the right way....it's endorsed from the top that we're trying to work together'.

Such communication may be particularly important where workers do not have access to company email systems as a SeafoodCo. Similarly, at DistributionCo the manager felt that the ability of the union to communicate with the workforce was decisive, particularly through the daily briefing to union members via the union's WhatsApp group:

'Most effective is the union WhatsApp group. And part of that I think is what we talked about earlier, the reason we've been successful with Covid is credibility because we've been transparent. But the senior union reps they've almost got that credibility with their members anyway which means that when something lands in their inbox or in their WhatsApp box, from their union, they get it, they understand it and they take it on board. So that's been incredibly powerful for us and again, I take me hat off to the union team for really pushing that and pushing it hard'.

The union role during Covid has potential implications for longer-term union-management relationships, as for a manager at SupermarketCo:

'I think the relationship we've got on Covid has been very good and very positive, far better than other areas that we discussed on a regular basis (or *disagree* on a regular basis is probably a better, safer word). On this one, it's been working together to get the best that we can. So they've had to bend a little and give a little bit extra. We're not getting everything we want to get but it's worked out pretty well and a very good relationship between the union and the teams at SupermarketCo that have worked on Covid'.

A FoodCo rep also felt that the union experience under Covid should have a wider impact:

'One thing I would say is that I hope that trade unions grasp the nettle here and use this as an opportunity to propel themselves more into the forefront of workers. And to be honest, I hope that we start getting the message across and

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

to some of the reps as well as some of the leaders of the unions. That we need to be – political stuff is all very well and appearing on the telly is great but it's at the grass roots level that you have to make the membership matter'.

The rep at FoodCo reflected on how Covid-19 was illustrating the value of workers and unions to companies:

'I would say that I think that in terms of this, the management have learnt a lesson as to how trade unions and companies can work together. And the other thing I would say I think they've learnt as well and that we've learnt as a workforce is we've learnt our value again. Having been told we're lucky to have jobs and all that sort of thing that you hear in these general scenarios, that you're always combating, I think they realised that it's people that actually made the money for them are the people who've been turning up'.

Even in FastfoodCo the presence of members attached to a union gave workers confidence to speak out:

'I feel safer when voicing my opinions on things and also, it's nice to know that it's not only me that feels this way about it, not just me who feels that the workplace has issues'.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

APPENDIX 1 – Case Study summaries

FoodCo

FoodCo is an international food and drink group owned by a multinational Corporation with facilities in Italy, Poland and Mauritius. There are 14 manufacturing sites in the UK and there had been an outbreak of Covid-19 at one site with a number of employees confirmed as positive. A 24-hour factory closure was imposed to allow deep cleaning. The case study is based on interviews with a manager responsible for health and safety across the UK and a Unite convenor and Unite H&S rep covering two sites in the East of England.

Workforce – More than 7,000 workers are employed by FoodCo world-wide and 2000 in the UK. Over 500 work at one of the sites covered by the case study and 400 at the other, including office workers and management. On quarter of the workforce are migrant workers from Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Romania and Russia, many agency workers. Production is highly mechanised. Job roles include production operatives, warehouse workers, hygiene, kitchen batching and ingredients workers and fork lift truck drivers. Up to 1000 people may enter sites on a daily basis, including agency personnel, drivers, laundry and security staff as well as those from other sites.

Union Representation – Unite is recognised for collective bargaining for engineers and production workers, has only individual representation rights for office staff. Union density is around two thirds of the workforce. There is a European Works Council. The reps took part in a weekly Zoom call convened by the Unite National Officer linking reps at all UK sites, there was also communication through WhatsApp groups.

Health and safety representation – There were around 20 H&S reps per site, both union and non-union. At one of the sites in the case study there were ten union H&S reps, each doubling as an ordinary workplace rep. The Health, Safety and Environment committee met monthly, attended by union and non-union reps and management.

The Response – In response to Covid-19 the company established a Business Continuity Team meeting weekly at group level, carried out a group risk assessment considering all sites and involving frequent meetings with union H&S reps. Covid action teams or working parties were set up at site-level. In the site covered by the case study union reps were taken off shift to spearhead the response and the working party met twice a week with the safety management team. Its purpose was to deal with health and safety operational issues. The Health, Safety and Environment Manager and his assistants maintained day to day contact with union H&S reps. The company also appointed health and safety champions.

While production staff worked throughout, office staff were generally allowed to work from home. The company followed government guidance, putting in place support for shielding and vulnerable employees. Reps and management jointly identified those who needed to shield and ensured they stayed off work. Covid-related absences of any kind were covered by full pay in order to discourage transmission of infection. Break, start and finish times were staggered. Further social distancing measures included routes through the factory marked by signs and floor stickers. Extra cleaning staff were hired. Guidance was issued on car sharing by employees travelling to work.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

PoultryCo

PoultryCo is a leading food processing company with sites in the UK, Republic of Ireland, Netherlands and Poland. The poultry division, devoted to the slaughtering and preparation of poultry for supermarkets, is located on six sites throughout the UK. The case study is based on interviews with Unite representatives covering two of these locations and three sites in the Midlands (two sites) and North West (one site). The company had experienced Covid-19 outbreaks in two processing plants and abattoirs elsewhere.

Workforce - Across the UK around 15,000 workers are employed by the company. On the two locations covered by the case study there were around 1500 in each, with the workforce around 40% female and 60% male. Jobs included slaughterers, carcass butchers, general operatives, machine minders and quality controllers as well as office and administrative staff. In the North West up to 200 workers were employed via a third-party agency and most workers were Romanian, with some Polish and Bulgarian. In the Midlands employees were full time and on permanent contracts – workers were mainly British Asian.

Union representation - Unite is recognised for collective bargaining and representation on the sites covered by the case study. In the north west membership rose from around 100 to over 700 members over the course of the pandemic following campaigning by the union for health and safety improvements. Membership in the Midlands sites was around 1,000 and remained stable throughout.

Health and safety representation – In the north west there was a newly appointed sole H&S rep and in the Midlands two H&S reps from one site had been promoted out of the bargaining unit, leaving no trained reps, but the remaining 14 workplace reps took on health and safety duties. The union attempted to recruit reps that could represent the large migrant workforce and were multi-lingual. There were established health and safety committees on the three sites, but during Covid-19 there were more informal weekly health and safety meetings, with frequent ad hoc communication between reps and site managers. Union reps were fully involved in the production of formal, regular Covid-19 risk assessments.

The response – Production continued throughout the pandemic and the overwhelming majority of shop floor workers worked normally. Some managers and administrative workers worked from home on rotation. There were no job losses. Workers furloughed under the government Corona Virus Job Retention Scheme received their 80% furlough payment, but this was topped up to 100% by the company. Others, including those advised to self-isolate because of sickness of a family member, received no payment other than Statutory Sick Pay, if eligible. The company established a £1 million welfare fund to support hardship cases, but reps reported that it had not been well used. A bonus of an additional 50 pence per hour worked, was introduced from 19th April to 15th May to compensate workers for extra workloads during increased demand, although one rep commented that workers would come to work to ensure they got the bonus.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

SeafoodCo

SeafoodCo is a UK producer and distributor of frozen, fresh, and chilled seafood, part of a global supply chain, and owned by a larger international food group. The case study is based on interviews with the HR Director and a Unite rep in the north east, a delivery driver and longstanding employee. In 2020 a number of workers tested positive for Covid-19 and self-isolated on full pay. It was claimed that the infections had been contracted in the community. Another of the company's processing plants in Scotland, was identified as 'high risk' in July, when ten cases of were identified.

Workforce – SeafoodCo employs over 2000 workers across eight sites in the north east with another 1000 agency workers. The majority of the workforce are in production with around half mechanised; just under 50 per cent of the workforce are female. Jobs roles include, cutters, mechanical production operatives, warehouse workers, engineers, production line workers, quality controllers, drivers and delivery workers.

Union representation – The company recognises three unions across the company with single union agreements for the main sites. On the site covered by the Unite rep, which has four factories, the union is recognised for both collective bargaining and individual representation, with over 50% density - agency staff reduce the potential membership.

Health and safety representation – There are trade union H&S reps on all shifts in the company with time-off provided. Before the pandemic regular health and safety committee meetings including local H&S reps were held at factory level, with a main management board attended by the senior union H&S rep in the region. Since the pandemic, these arrangements have largely been replaced by weekly Covid Committee meetings, comprising departmental managers, health and safety managers and H&S reps. Risk assessment is reviewed monthly to ensure new risks are tracked and identified and mitigations put in place – measures are signed off by heads of health and safety on site and by H&S reps.

The response – Round the clock production continued and increased throughout lockdowns due to demand, with the utilisation of agency workers, including to cover for workers self-isolating. Office staff worked from home and there was flexibility in start and finish times, particularly for those with caring responsibilities. Professional workers were split into three groups and their attendance on site rotated. A company Covid Leave of Absence scheme allowed shielding employees to remain absent on 85% of full pay. Sick pay for Covid-related reasons was paid from day one, with a move away from sickness monitoring. The company has invested heavily in health and safety with extra health and safety managers brought in and the widespread use of perspex screens, PPE and thermal imaging cameras at barriers to prevent anyone registering a high temperature from entering the site. The company introduced its own track and trace system which meant that it could quickly isolate whole production lines to minimise infection. Shop floor Covid marshals or champions were co-opted to monitor social distancing and employee observance of safety rules.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

FastfoodCo

FastfoodCo is a global fast food retail company with over 30,000 restaurants internationally and over 1000 in the UK, the majority franchised to a third party as the legal business owner and employer. The case study is based upon interviews with a union organiser from the Bakers' Food and Allied Workers (BFAWU), a representative of the Fast Food Rights campaign and a worker.

Workforce – Over 35,000 people are employed in FastfoodCo's UK restaurants, with roles ranging from kitchen staff, customer facing and back office jobs. Just over half of the workforce are women. The company states that many work part-time whilst parenting or studying. It uses zero hours contracts, but states that employees are offered a choice of flexible or fixed hours. Family members can also substitute for one another's shifts without notice.

Union representation – There is no union recognition. The BFAWU has been organising and building up membership in FastfoodCo, demanding payment of a minimum living wage of £10 an hour and an end to zero hours contracts, youth rates and to the bullying and harassment of workers. The Fast Food Rights campaign, has also been taking up these issues. In 2018 workers in a number of restaurants took strike action in an attempt to force concessions. Following the action the company raised pay rates substantially, but this did not cover franchises.

Health and safety representation – There is little public information on how the company consults with employees, although it states that there is a detailed system of safety management. Interviews indicated limited knowledge of any systematic health and safety management or consultation, whether nationally or at store level. Lack of training, staff shortages and pressures to achieve production targets were reported to undermine observance of regulations on hand washing and social distancing.

The Response – From the outset of the pandemic, FastfoodCo claimed its restaurants provided an essential service and that they should be kept open. Vulnerable workers were furloughed on 80% of pay, then later when restaurants were closed (with the exception of drive in and take away services) all restaurant workers were furloughed on the same terms. Restaurants began to re-open in May 2020 with screens, an emphasis on handwashing and worker's temperature taken. Implementation of these changes was reported to be uneven. When the 'eat out to help out' scheme was launched in June and restaurants re-opened, there was increased demand and workers reported that there was little time to take hand washing breaks. In January 2021, when only drive-in services were open, the company announced it was reviewing enhanced safety measures for walk-in takeaway services.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

SupermarketCo

SupermarketCo, owned by a large multinational, has over 600 stores in the UK. As with other supermarkets it has substantially increased its online sales during the pandemic. The case study is based on interviews with a Senior GMB officer and Chair of the national Health and Safety Forum, a senior operations manager and two workers.

Workforce – SupermarketCo has well over 100,000 employees in the UK in all grades, with nine out of ten hourly paid store workers. Women comprise 56% of the workforce. Employees work in customer facing roles as well as supporting on-line sales. Jobs include sales assistants, warehousing staff, drivers, delivery workers, shelf stackers, cleaners, warehouse operatives, supervisory and management staff. During the pandemic the company recruited over 20,000 workers to support its online business and in-store replenishment teams.

Union representation - The GMB is fully recognised for collective bargaining on the distribution side of SupermarketCo and has a partnership agreement providing consultation and representation rights for hourly paid retail workers and over a third in membership. Non-union employee groups represent national retail and distribution managers as well as hourly paid retail employees. Hence, unionised and non-unionised staff provide a twin track form of employee voice.

Health and safety representation – All stores should have union H&S reps and where there is no H&S rep, a national GMB officer will visit the store for the quarterly health and safety inspection, which is usually undertaken jointly by national and store level reps. A national health and safety forum comprises nine national trade union reps and company representatives. The forum covers risk assessment at store level, legislative compliance and accident and absence statistics. Issues are taken back to regional forums with provision for consultation. Special projects, led by members of the management team, enlist representation and input from union H&S reps. Separate employee meetings represent the interests of non-union staff. GMB full time officers provide guidance into Regional and National Forum meetings and link with corporate health and safety teams at different levels. National forum reps have all been store level reps and received health and safety training. The union was consulted on the company's risk assessment, which covered every single job role, customers and contractors.

The response – Management set up (initially, daily) calls with the chairs of the Retail National Forum, the Health and Safety forum, the GMB National Officer and the Health and Safety Compliance team to discuss emerging issues and required responses. It used its global reach to ensure it was informed by international practice and technical innovation and to gain access to supplies of PPE, hand gel and screens. The pandemic saw some workers absent whilst shielding and the substantial recruitment of temporary workers. The union managed to win sick pay from day one rather than after three waiting days. SupermarketCo appointed Covid safety marshals to front every store and ensure adherence to mask wearing, social distancing and sanitising. The company adopted stricter cleaning regimes, and floor markings to enforce social distancing and keep customers and workers safe.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

DistributionCo

DistributionCo is a distribution company, part of a larger multinational, that provides delivery and warehousing services for companies such as Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Tesco and Waitrose, operating from depots in the UK and mainland Europe. The case study is based upon interviews with a general manager and a Unite rep both based in a depot in the north, where warehouse facilities house chilled and frozen food for distribution to stores around the country.

Workforce – Within the UK DistributionCo has around 3,500 employees, nearly 500 of whom work full-time at the depot covered by the case study. Around 10 per cent of workers are Eastern European and 5 per cent are from East Timor. A minority (15%) are women. Key roles include HGV drivers, warehouse and cold store operatives, vehicle maintenance mechanics, transport planners, administrators and managers at different levels. Following the onset of Covid-19, 50 office staff (mainly managers) were made redundant from the head office. The volume of work for some retailers fell during the pandemic, though the DistributionCo hourly paid workforce was not reduced as a proportion had to self-isolate. Additional, agency workers, were recruited in response to short term demand pressures and the need for extra staff in cleaning and security roles. There had been rare cases of staff testing positive in the depot before mid-December, but subsequently in the second wave there had been 22 confirmed cases and 25 people self-isolating.

Union representation – Unite is recognised as the sole union for collective bargaining with the company. There is a National Joint Council covering 3,500 staff across seven sites in the bargaining unit. There is exceptionally high union density - approximately 98 per cent of workforce are union members.

Health and safety representation - At the northern depot there are 13 H&S reps, with around 90 H&S Reps across all sites. A Health and Safety Committee, which meets every month, consists of all the senior department heads, general manager and all department Unite safety reps. It continued to meet monthly, though virtually on Zoom, during the pandemic. A generic risk assessment was jointly agreed for the site with specific risk assessments for all tasks. Reps convey the essence of risk assessments to frontline workers orally and explain specific issues as required. News of decisions and activity of the Health and Safety Committee (as well as information on changes in employment conditions) are conveyed to staff through WhatsApp messaging and word of mouth by the union reps.

The Response – All staff involved in the physical movement and storage of goods worked throughout the pandemic., others were allowed to work from home. Production targets were suspended, as they were seen to encourage unsafe practices and undermine social distancing. Whilst no additional payments were made to recognise extra workloads during the pandemic, concessionary gift vouchers were given to workers.

Research into Covid-19 workplace safety outcomes

Case study: SupplierCo

SupplierCo is a family-owned business with eight divisions, operating in the retail, wholesale distribution, food service, logistics, and shop fitting sectors. Retail is the largest division of the company, the company owns approaching 300 local stores in England and Wales. It supplies to the independent grocery sector, pubs and hotel chains across the UK in partnership with franchises including Greggs and Subway. The case study is based on interviews with a Health and Safety Manager in the Midlands and a union officer from USDAW who oversees the distribution sector.

Workforce - SupplierCo has well over 7000 employees, with 1000 in logistics, just under 1000 in wholesale distribution and 5000 in local stores. The company relies on permanent contracts, including for sales assistants in retail. SupplierCo has a roughly equal proportion of male and female workers.

Union Representation - USDAW is recognised for collective bargaining and representation at SupplierCo and there is a Partnership Agreement that applies to all hourly paid employees. There are around 1000 members. There is no non-union representation.

Health and Safety Representation: While SupplierCo has a Health and Safety Committee, issues that emerged during the pandemic were primarily dealt with more informally and jointly by the union H&S representatives and health and safety managers. Local management teams continued to meet with the safety reps during the current restrictions, holding the meetings in a socially distanced manner on the shopfloor if necessary. This allowed local issues to be discussed and resolved promptly.

The Response - In the first wave of Covid-19 the company reviewed and applied its business continuity plan, developed in 2009 in anticipation of a swine flu pandemic. Subsequently Risk Assessment was continually reviewed. The company began to source equipment for homeworking in March 2020 and asked employees to work from home before the first UK national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. A Covid-19 hierarchy of control and mitigation measures was used to identify employees for home working and the furlough scheme. It emerged that some employees did not have a home working environment that met health and safety standards. This prompted the company to introduce a return to work with social distancing measures and a reduced number of staff in the same offices during summer 2020. According to the Health and safety manager, a small number of employees were made redundant during the first wave.

Social distancing measures and one-way systems were introduced in the warehouses, distribution sites and retail stores. Staggered shifts and break times were introduced to prevent congestion on sites. The company used its own track and trace system in the second wave of the pandemic and the more rigorous testing regime meant that more cases were reported than in the first wave.