

Union reps' experience of equality issues

A TUC report

Summary

To supplement the TUC Equality Audit 2020 on collective bargaining, the TUC commissioned Labour Research Department to conduct two surveys of union reps in June and July 2021. One on equality in the workplace and one on flexible working and parental leave during the pandemic. This report contains the findings for the equality in the workplace survey, which aims to find out what equality issues unions reps are dealing with in the workplace and what support they need.

The survey received responses from 1,122 reps and asked questions on the period before the pandemic (roughly 2018 to March 2020) and during the pandemic.

The findings highlight the incredible work that union reps do in workplaces every day to tackle inequality and discrimination. Union reps have gone above and beyond to improve workplace safety during the pandemic, and many will have saved lives as a result.

The main findings from the survey and areas for further work are as follows:

1. The most common issues reps have dealt with both before and during the pandemic have been related to disability, with around four-in-ten reps saying issues had come up in this area (42 per cent in the pre Covid-19 period and 40 per cent during the pandemic). Encouragingly, 47 per cent of unions reported bargaining success for disabled workers, up from 37 per cent in 2016, in our main survey for the Equality Audit 2020. However, the percentage of unions with policies or guidance on disabled workers dropped from 54 per cent in 2016 to 44 per cent in 2020. 15 per cent of union reps who had faced issues related to disability said there was insufficient guidance on it. The sheer number of reps that are dealing with this issue and the discrimination and disadvantage we know disabled workers have experienced during the pandemic¹ suggest that it will continue to be an area of focus and one where guidance and support may be needed.
2. Union reps were asked if they felt there was a shortage of guidance to help them when dealing with certain issues – the area where guidance was in shortest supply was older workers. Almost one-in-six (16 per cent) of all reps in the survey had faced issues relating to older workers but felt there was insufficient guidance for it.
3. In 2016, 21 per cent of reps had dealt with race equality/inequality issues in the preceding couple of years, but the proportion dealing with race doubled to 42 per cent in the pre-Covid-19 period of 2018 to March 2020. It then dropped back down to 20 per cent during the pandemic. Whilst still the joint third most common issues reps dealt with, this sudden rise and then drop during the pandemic needs further investigation by our Anti-Racism Taskforce.
4. Finally, health and safety has been a primary issue for many reps over the past 18 months. 39 per cent of reps reported dealing with health and safety inequality during the pandemic, up from 22 per cent in the pre-Covid-19 period and 55 per cent reported receiving training in this area. We know that health and safety inequality will continue

¹ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/disabled-workers-experiences-during-pandemic>

to be an issue in the future. We will build on this work through the TUC's project on race and health and safety.

Introduction

To supplement the information received from national unions as part of the 2020 TUC Equality Audit², the Labour Research Department carried out a survey of trade union workplace activists to investigate their experience of dealing with equality issues at work.

This followed a similar survey carried out to coincide with the 2016 TUC Equality Audit. The main difference between the two surveys is that this time around reps were asked about two separate periods – the couple of years before the Covid-19 pandemic started (roughly 2018 to March 2020 – called here the “pre-Covid-19 period”) and the period during the pandemic, from March 2020 until June/July 2021, when the survey was run.

Responses were received from 1,122 activists who had held a post in their workplace union at some point since 2016. They came from 37 different unions. 65 per cent worked in the public sector, 29 per cent in the private sector and four per cent in the voluntary or third sector.

General equality areas reps have faced

The reps were asked if they had dealt with any equality/inequality issues related to certain broad areas, or “strands” (based on members’ personal characteristics, such as sex or age), in the two periods (table 1).

In the pre-Covid-19 period, just under two thirds (65 per cent) of respondents reported that they had dealt with issues linked to at least one of those areas. This fell slightly, though not much, in the period during the pandemic, when 59 per cent dealt with issues related to members’ personal characteristics. This drop is not surprising as, on top of the extreme change in circumstances, the period covered by the pandemic itself was shorter than the pre-Covid-19 period.

The most common issues reps have dealt with both before and during the pandemic have been related to disability, with around four-in-ten reps saying issues had come up in this area. This proportion hardly dropped during the pandemic.

² The questionnaire for the 2020 Equality Audit was completed by unions in January 2020, however the report was published at Congress 2021 and this supplementary information was collected in June/July 2021. The delay was due to the impacts of the pandemic.

Table 1: Percentage of reps dealing with issues by members' personal characteristics

Strand	pre-Covid-19 (2018-20)	during Covid-19 (2020-21)
Disability	42	40
Race	42	20
Pregnancy or maternity	24	20
Age (older)	23	21
Sex	9	16
Age (younger)	9	9
Religion or belief	9	7
Sexual orientation	9	6
Trans status	5	4

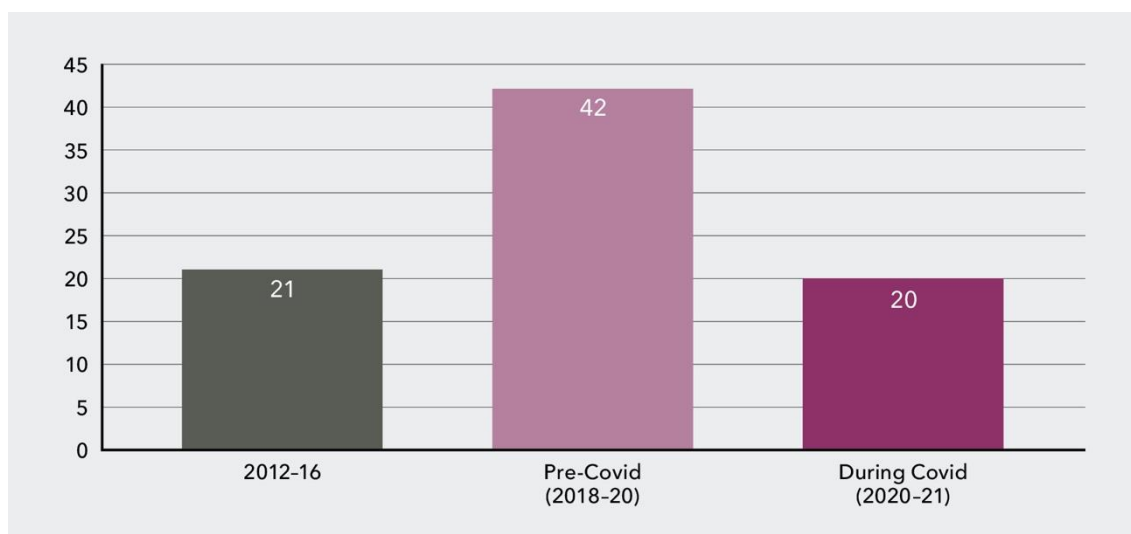
Base = 1,112

Issues related to disability had also been the most widespread broad equality area dealt with by reps in 2016. However, there has been one substantial change to the pattern of issues facing reps since 2016, which has been the growth in predominance of race-related issues. Chart 1 shows that there was a remarkable increase in issues raised around race between 2016 and the pre-Covid-19 period.

In 2016, 21 per cent of reps had dealt with race equality/inequality issues in the preceding couple of years, but the proportion dealing with race doubled to 42 per cent in the pre-Covid-19 period of 2018 to March 2020. It became as widespread an issue dealt with by reps as disability-related issues.

Once Covid-19 hit, the proportion of reps dealing with race-related issues dropped substantially, back to 20 per cent, although this related to a shorter period of time (approximately 15 months) and it was still the joint-third most common issue faced.

Chart 1: Percentage* of reps dealing with race-related issues



*Percentage of reps responding to survey of the relevant year. (Base 2012-16:1,499; Base 2018-21=1,122)

Strands posing issues during the Covid-19 pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, disability continued to be the predominant strand which produced issues for reps to deal with, albeit at a slightly lower level than beforehand. And there was a clear uniformity to this in that disability-related issues were the most common faced in every size of workplace, every region/country and in all three economic sectors (public, private and voluntary).

Disability was also the most common equality area facing reps in most individual industries in the pandemic period. The exception was finance and business services, where issues related to sex were predominant, though disability was second. In media and entertainment, issues around disability were joint top alongside those around older workers, while in construction disability was joint top with race-related issues.

The second most common issues faced by each industry was more varied. Issues around older workers were second most widespread in communications, education, local government and retail and distribution, as well as in media and entertainment. Meanwhile race was in either joint top or second place in central government, health, manufacturing and passenger transport, as well as in construction.

Although disability-related issues were the most common in all economic sectors during the pandemic, reps in the public sector were more likely than those in the private sector to have dealt with issues related to members' disability (42 per cent compared with 36 per cent). They were also more likely to have dealt race-related issues (22 per cent compared

with 15 per cent). Even more of the reps in the voluntary sector (24 per cent) had dealt with race equality/inequality.

On the other hand reps in the private sector were rather more likely than those in the public sector to have dealt with issues related to sex (18 per cent compared with 14 per cent), although those in the voluntary/third sector were more likely than both to have faced issues related to sex (26 per cent). Reps in the voluntary sector were also much more likely than the others to have dealt with issues around pregnancy and maternity (29 per cent compared with 20 per cent public and 18 per cent private).

Specific equality topics reps have dealt with

Reps were also asked about which of a range of more specific equality/inequality topics they had dealt with before and during the Covid-19 pandemic (see table 2/chart 2). Large majorities of reps had dealt with one or more of these topics in both periods: 86 per cent of reps said they had done so in the pre-Covid-19 period and 82 per cent had done so during the pandemic itself.

Table 2 shows the proportion of reps dealing with specific topics in both the pre-Covid-19 and pandemic periods.

Flexible working/work-life balance, sickness absence and disability and harassment, bullying and discrimination were the three most common equality/inequality topics dealt with by reps - both in the pre-Covid-19 period and during the pandemic.

They were the same top three topics faced by reps as in 2016, but with the slight change that flexible working/work-life balance has risen to the very top of the list, cited by 55 per cent pre-Covid-19 and 48 per cent during Covid-19. This topic had come second in 2016, just behind sickness absence and disability at the top.

In the current survey, sickness absence and disability was the second most commonly faced topic in both the two periods covered. Just over half of reps (53 per cent) dealt with this in the pre-Covid-19 period, while 48 per cent did so during the pandemic itself.

And the third most widely cited topic faced by reps - again both the pre-Covid-19 period and during the pandemic - was harassment, bullying and discrimination (also third in 2016). Half of reps (51 per cent) had dealt with this group of issues in the pre-Covid-19 period and 41 per cent have done so during the pandemic.

In fourth place both before and during the pandemic (as well as in 2016) was support with mental health problems. It is worth noting that, while there were generally fewer reps dealing with most topics once the pandemic set in, with mental health support the drop was less marked, suggesting this continued to be a major equality issue facing union reps.

An equally common topic dealt with by reps compared to mental health during the pandemic was health and safety inequality (e.g. in PPE, work from home, ability to self-isolate, social distancing). This was cited by 39 per cent of reps once Covid-19 had kicked in. Not surprisingly, this was far less common before the pandemic (22 per cent).

The next most common equality issue tackled by reps during the pandemic was risk assessments to take account of particular vulnerability, such as ethnicity or pregnancy. This was not asked about in relation to the pre-pandemic workplace.

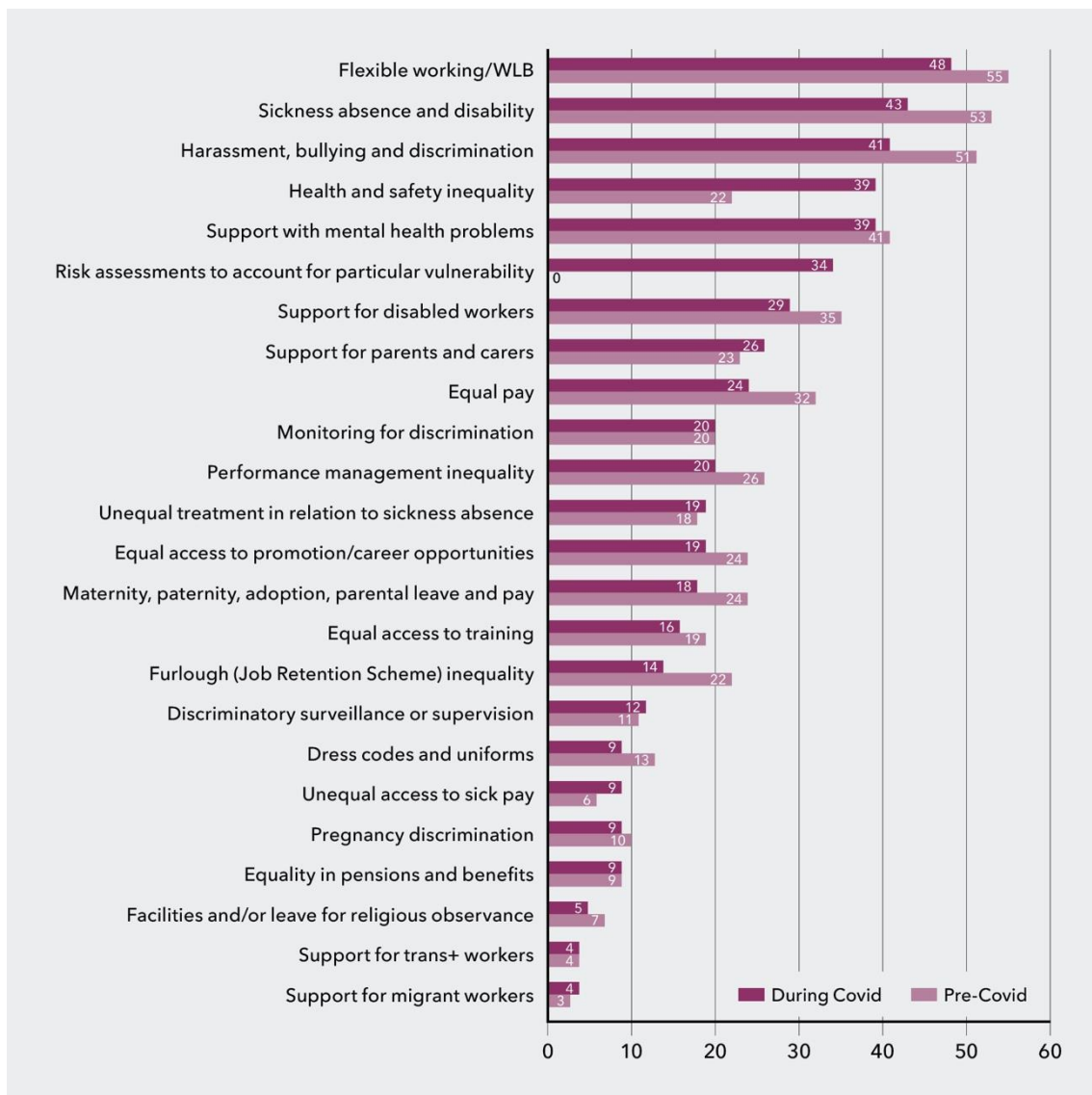
Table 2: Percentage* of reps dealing with specific equality issues

Specific equality topic	Pre-Covid-19 (2018-20)	During Covid-19 (2020-21)
Flexible working/ work-life balance	55	48
Sickness absence and disability	53	43
Harassment, bullying and discrimination	51	41
Support with mental health problems	41	39
Risk assessments to take account of particular vulnerability such as ethnicity or pregnancy	N/A	34
Support for disabled workers (reasonable adjustments)	35	29
Equal pay (eg grading, equal pay audits, job evaluation)	32	24
Performance management inequality	26	20
Equal access to promotion/ career opportunities	24	19
Maternity, paternity, adoption, parental leave and pay	24	18
Support for parents and carers	23	26
Health and safety inequality (eg in PPE, work from home, ability to self-isolate, social distancing)	22	39
Furlough (Job Retention Scheme) inequality	22	14
Monitoring for discrimination (eg in appraisals, disciplinaries, redundancies, termination of employment)	20	20
Equal access to training	19	16
Unequal treatment in relation to sickness absence	18	19
Dress codes and uniforms	13	9
Discriminatory surveillance or supervision	11	12

Pregnancy discrimination	10	9
Equality in pensions and benefits	9	9
Facilities and/or leave for religious observance	7	5
Unequal access to sick pay	6	9
Support for trans workers	4	4
Support for migrant workers	3	4

N/A; not asked. Base=1122

Chart 2: Percentage* of reps dealing with specific equality issues pre and during Covid-19)



For most of the specific equality/inequality topics listed, there was very little difference between the public and private sectors as to the proportion of reps who had faced these issues.

However, there were a couple of notable exceptions.

One was in the number of reps who had dealt with risk assessments taking account of particular vulnerability. The public sector saw 38 per cent of reps dealing with this, compared with just 27 per cent in the private sector (and 33 per cent in the voluntary sector). Half of all reps in education had tackled this topic.

The other difference between the sectors was in the number of reps who had dealt with health and safety inequality. Forty two per cent of reps in the public sector tackled this, compared with 33 per cent in the private sector and 31 per cent in the voluntary sector. Reps working in health and local government were more likely to have faced this issue than those in other industries.

The furlough scheme also threw up a differential challenge to reps in different sectors. Twelve per cent of reps in the public sector had dealt with inequalities in its implementation compared with 17 per cent in the private sector and 38 per cent in the voluntary sector.

Looking at specific industries, reps in media and entertainment companies and in voluntary organisations were three times more likely than average to report dealing with furlough inequalities.

In terms of regional variation, union reps based in London stood out as being much more likely than those in other regions to have dealt with health and safety inequality, furlough inequality and risk assessments taking account of particular vulnerabilities.

How topics arose as issues to be dealt with

The survey investigate how the equality issues which reps had dealt with had arisen as topics to be tackled. They were asked to indicate which of a range of routes presented had applied (see chart 3).

Chart 3: Percentage* of reps citing how equality issues arose, by route



*Percentage of reps answering the question (Base=969 pre-Covid-19 and 930 during Covid-19). Respondents could tick more than one answer

In the pre-Covid-19 period, the most common route was through members' grievances, cited by 59 per cent of reps. However, during the pandemic itself, issues were slightly more likely to arise in response to actions by the employer (59 per cent).

Despite the potential difficulties of holding union meetings during the pandemic, issues were slightly more likely to arise through this method during the pandemic than beforehand.

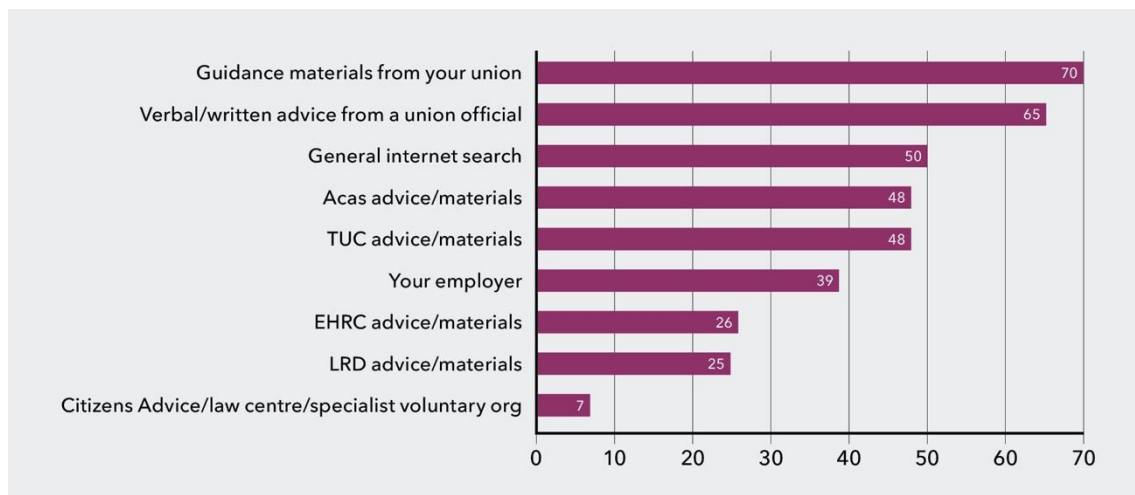
It is also worth noting that union reps were more pro-active on these matters during the pandemic than in the pre-Covid-19 period, with more than one-in-three (34 per cent) saying they raised the issues as they generally thought it was an area we should tackle. Just one-in-four (24 per cent) did so in the couple of years before the pandemic (and also in 2016).

Information and guidance

The survey investigated which of a range of sources of information and guidance reps had used when dealing with equality issues in the workplace. Almost all (93 per cent) identified at least one of the sources in the list.

The most common, not surprisingly, was guidance material from their union, cited by 70 per cent (see chart 4). This was followed by verbal or written advice from a union official (65 per cent).

Chart 4: Percentage of reps* using sources of information and guidance, by type

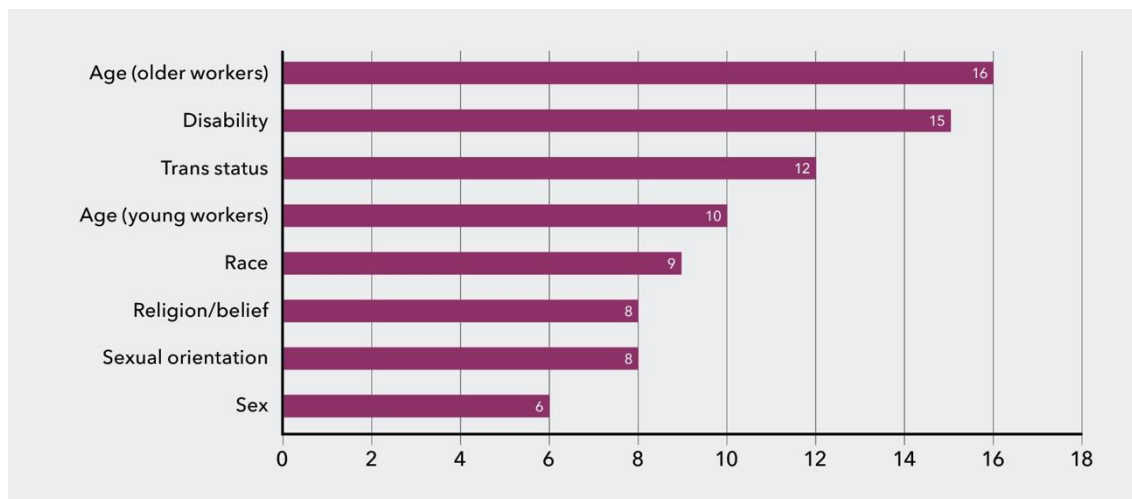


*Percentage of all respondents (Base=1,122). Respondents could tick more than one answer

The survey sought to identify topics on which reps felt they had insufficient guidance or information available to them when they had dealt with equality issues in the workplace.

Chart 5 shows the proportion of reps who said they had found a shortage of guidance or information to help them when dealing with issues related to certain strands. (The percentage figures are of all reps in the survey.)

Chart 5: Percentage* of reps saying there was insufficient guidance on areas they had tackled, by broad area



*Percentage of all respondents (Base=1,122). Respondents could tick more than one issue

The areas where guidance seemed in shortest supply in relation to need were on older workers and on disability. Almost one-in-six (16 per cent) of all reps in the survey had faced issues relating to older workers but felt there was insufficient guidance for it.

And more than one-in-seven (15 per cent) had dealt issues around disability with inadequate information.

Reps were also asked if they had found a shortage of guidance or information in dealing with specific equality/inequality topics (table 3).

The main areas of concern here are flexible working/work life balance and support with mental health problems, where around one-in-five (21 per cent for flexible working/work life balance and 19 per cent for mental health) of all survey respondents had found insufficient guidance and information when dealing with the issues.

There was also considerable concern over two issues that came to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost a fifth (18 per cent) of all reps had felt there to be a shortage of advice when dealing with risk assessments to take account of particular vulnerabilities, such as ethnicity or pregnancy. And one-in-six (17 per cent) found insufficient guidance when faced with health and safety inequality, such as in PPE, homeworking, ability to self-isolate and social distancing.

A smaller proportion (one-in-10) had found inadequate guidance when dealing with inequality in furlough arrangements.

Table 3: Percentage* saying there was insufficient guidance on issues they had tackled, by specific topic

Flexible working/ work-life balance	21
Support with mental health problems	19
Risk assessments to take account of particular vulnerability, such as ethnicity or pregnancy	18
Health and safety inequality (eg in PPE, work from home, ability to self-isolate, social distancing)	17
Harassment, bullying and discrimination	14
Sickness absence and disability	14
Equal pay (including grading, equal pay audits, job evaluation)	13
Equal access to promotion/ career opportunities	13
Performance management inequality	13
Support for disabled workers (including reasonable adjustments)	13
Equal access to training	12
Monitoring for discrimination (eg in appraisals, disciplinarys, redundancies, termination of employment)	12
Support for parents and carers	11
Discriminatory surveillance or supervision	11
Furlough (Job Retention Scheme) inequality	10
Equality in pensions and benefits	9
Unequal treatment in relation to sickness absence	9
Dress codes and uniforms	8
Support for trans workers	7
Maternity, paternity, adoption, parental leave and pay	5
Facilities and/or leave for religious observance	5
Support for migrant workers	5
Pregnancy discrimination	4
Unequal access to sick pay	3

*Percentage of all respondents (Base=1,122). Respondents could tick more than one topic

Trade union training

Reps were asked whether they had received any trade union training covering workplace equality issues in recent years.

Just under half had received some such training in the pre-Covid-19 period and a quarter had received some during the pandemic itself. (Some had received both.)

Overall, a majority of reps (62 per cent) had received some trade union training covering equality issues in the last four years. This was a higher proportion than in 2016 (53 per cent).

Of those who had received training in the pre-Covid-19 period or during the pandemic, the most common delivery type was as part of a general stewards' course provided by their union (cited by 58 per cent). 41 per cent had been on a specialised equality course provided by their union.

Online briefings, not asked about in 2016, formed an important element of reps' training experience in the area of workplace equality, used by almost one-in-four of all reps in the survey.

Chart 6: Percentage* of reps receiving equality training, by delivery training type



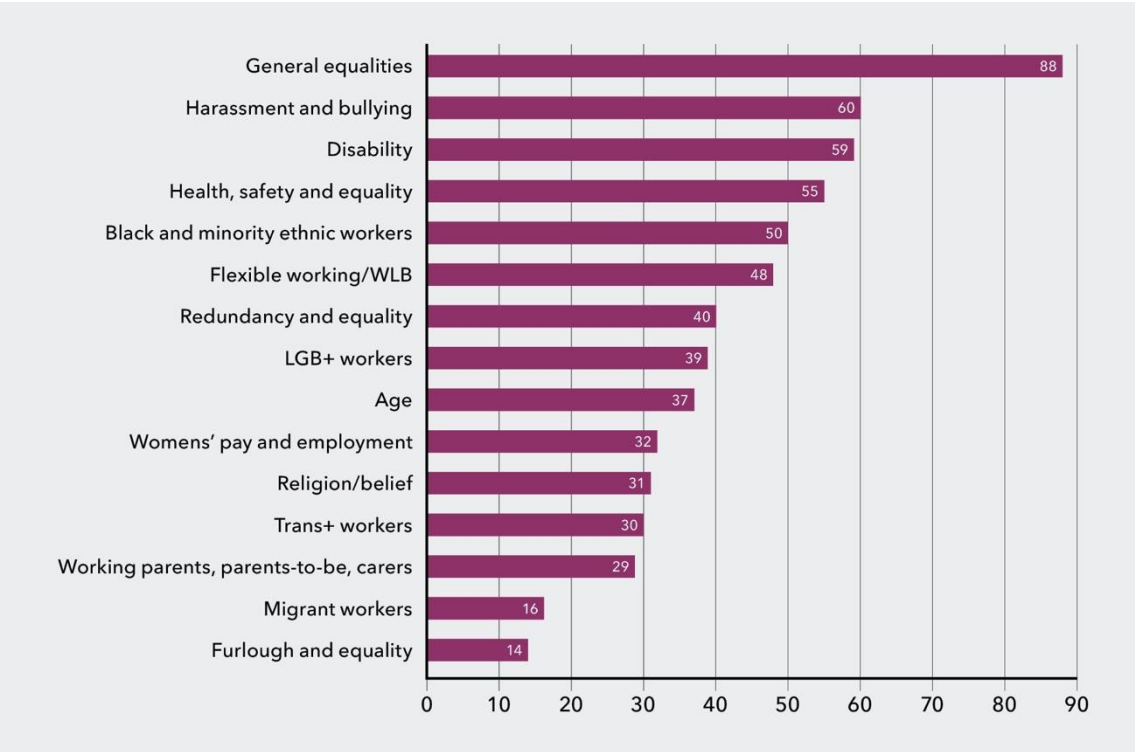
*Percentage of those who had received equality training in the pre-Covid-19 period or during Covid-19 (Base=688)

Those who had received equality training in the pre-Covid-19 period or during the pandemic were asked which equality areas their training had covered.

The most widespread topics covered, apart from general equalities, were harassment and bullying and disability (see chart 7). These are the same top two topics covered as in 2016.

Health and safety and equality, a topic not listed in the 2016 survey, was in third place, studied by over half of reps who had undergone training.

Chart 7: Percentage* of reps receiving equality training, by equality topic



*Percentages of those who had received equality training in the pre-Covid-19 period or during Covid-19 (Base=688)