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Social Research

DWP COVID-19 Employer Pulse Survey

Interim summary report

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A report of research carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

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Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Department for Work and Pensions or any other government department.

Voluntary statement of compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics

The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) is built around three main concepts, or pillars, trustworthiness, quality and value:

- trustworthiness – is about having confidence in the people and organisations that publish statistics
- quality – is about using data and methods that produce assured statistics
- value – is about publishing statistics that support society’s needs for information

The following explains how we have applied the pillars of the Code of Practice for Statistics in a proportionate way.

Trustworthiness

This survey fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI, working to the Government Social Research code of practice. The analysis of the survey findings and the writing of the report was conducted by analysts at the Department for Work and Pensions and has been checked thoroughly by analysts at the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure it meets the highest standards of analysis and drafting.

Quality

The survey was carried out using established statistical methods. The research has been quality assured using Ipsos MORI’s internal quality checking processes, which have been shared with the Department for Work and Pensions. The analysis of findings and report writing has been quality assured by analysts at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Value

This survey provides insight into employers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to key issues of pertinence to the Department, including how employers are responding to the policy changes put in place by the Department. It contributes to wider evidence being gathered about employers during this period. Findings from this survey are informing policy development relating to employers.

Executive summary

This interim report presents a summary of findings from a new Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) COVID-19 Employer Pulse Survey. The aim of the survey was to understand how employers are supporting and managing the health of their workforce, how they are engaging with Government schemes and guidance, and whether they have altered certain business practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fieldwork for this survey was carried out over 3 waves with a total of 3,921 employers in Great Britain (GB) between 17th June 2020 and 8th April 2021. Employers could respond either online or by telephone.

At wave one, employers were asked about their policies in relation to employees who are required to isolate because they or a household member displays symptoms of COVID-19 and they cannot work from home. Just over 7 in 10 (71% of employers) currently trading said that some or all employees were not working from home. These employers said they would use a range of practices if employees were required to self-isolate because they or a household member displayed symptoms of COVID-19. The most frequently reported ones were employees getting paid Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) (46% of these employers), continuing to receive their full pay (34%), or being furloughed (29%). However, 11% of these employers said that some or all of their employees would be asked to take holiday leave or unpaid leave in this situation¹.

At wave one, employers were asked whether they have staff who may be vulnerable to COVID-19 and if so whether they were able to work from home. A quarter (24%) of all open businesses or organisations who did not have their entire workforce work from home/furloughed said all their employees who are vulnerable to COVID-19 were able to work from home. Almost three in ten employers (29%) stated that none of their vulnerable staff could do so. Sometimes a case-by-case decision as to whether a vulnerable employee could work remotely was made (7% of employers decided by taking into account the employees' health condition, 14% took into account their job role). The remaining employers either had no vulnerable employees (24%) or didn't know (1%).

At wave three of the survey employers were asked if they were aware of the NHS111 Isolation note and if so, would they accept this as evidence for sickness absence or self-isolation. Five in ten (54%) employers were aware of the NHS111 Isolation notes, while four in ten (41%) weren't aware of these, and less than one in ten (5%) were unsure. Of those employers who were aware of the NHS111 Isolation notes

¹ Not all employees qualify for SSP. To be eligible, they must be classed as an employee, earn an average of at least £120 per week and have been sick or incapable of work for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days). Employees not entitled to SSP may have been eligible for UC, ESA or the Government's self-isolation payment.

nine in ten (92%) would accept these as evidence for sickness absence or self-isolation.

At all three waves of the survey employers were asked if they had used Occupational Health (OH) services in relation to COVID-19. The percentage of all employers who were operating at the time of the fieldwork that said they had used Occupational Health (OH) services in relation to COVID-19 varied between 10% at wave one, 15% at wave 2 of the survey, and 13% at wave 3 of the survey. The percentage of employers who had not previously provided their employees with access to OH before the pandemic but had used OH in relation to COVID-19 varied between 3% at wave one, 8% at wave two, and 6% at wave three.

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Glossary and abbreviations

CATI	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing, i.e. interviews conducted by an operator over the telephone.
Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)	Launched in March 2020, the CJRS (also known as the “furlough scheme”) enables employers who cannot maintain their workforce because their operations have been affected by COVID-19 to furlough (i.e. put on temporary leave) employees and apply for a grant to cover a portion of their usual monthly wage costs.
Coronavirus Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme	The scheme, launched in March 2020, enables small and medium-sized employers to claim back up to two weeks of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) paid to employees from the first qualifying day of sickness if an employee is unable to work because they have coronavirus symptoms, are self-isolating because they live with someone who has symptoms or because they have been notified by the NHS or public health bodies that they have come into contact with someone with coronavirus, or because they are shielding.
DWP	The Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for welfare, pensions and child maintenance policy.
Fit note	Fit notes are issued by GPs or hospital doctors following an assessment of an individual’s fitness for work by either a GP or hospital doctor. Assessments determine whether an individual is either ‘not fit for any work’ or ‘may be fit for work’ if certain workplace adjustments are in place. If an individual is found ‘not fit for work’, a fit note makes a recommendation for how long the employee ought to be off work.
Furlough	See “Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme”.
NHS 111 Isolation note	Since March 2020, people who are unable to work for more than seven days because of COVID-19 can obtain an isolation note through an online service, which provides evidence to employers that they have been advised to self-isolate due to coronavirus, either because they have symptoms themselves or they live with someone who has symptoms.
Occupational Health (OH)	The definition used in this research with employers was: Occupational health services are advisory and support services which help employers carry out functions such as health surveillance, advise about fitness for work and sickness

	absence and also help to maintain and promote employee health and wellbeing.
Occupational Sick Pay (OSP)	A contractual sick pay provided by an employer that is more generous than Statutory Sick Pay (SSP).
Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)	The minimum amount an employer must pay eligible employees who are sick or incapable of work. The current amount is set at £96.35 per week and is payable for up to 28 weeks per sickness absence. SSP is also available if an employee cannot work because they are self-isolating, for example because they or someone they live with has coronavirus symptoms, or because they are shielding (where shielding advice is in place).

Employer sizes

Micro employers	Businesses or organisations with 2-9 staff members.
Small employers	Businesses or organisations with 10-49 staff members.
Medium employers	Businesses or organisations with 50-249 staff members.
Large employers	Businesses or organisations with 250 or more staff members.
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)	Businesses or organisations with fewer than 250 employees (i.e. covering all micro, small, and medium employers).

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on employers, both financially and in terms of the way they are able to operate. In response to the situation, the Government has introduced a range of support measures, including the Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme and the NHS 111 Isolation note and has issued guidance for employers around vulnerable employees, home working, making workplaces safe, and social distancing.

The DWP commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a survey in order to understand how employers are responding to the evolving situation and how these new Government policies and schemes are received by them.

The survey provides evidence in the following areas:

- Workforce management during COVID-19, particularly in relation to sick, vulnerable, shielding, and/or self-isolating employees
- Awareness and use of the Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme
- Changes to certification for sickness absence due to COVID-19
- Use of OH services in relation to COVID-19
- Changes to workplaces or processes in response to COVID-19
- Changes in employer pension contributions due to COVID-19
- Plans for future recruitment/redundancies
- Employer awareness and engagement in Government policies and schemes.

This interim report presents findings from the survey sections on workforce management, changes to certification for sickness absence, and use of OH services. It is anticipated that a full report will be published later in 2021.

The survey sample was drawn from the DBS, a commercial database with over 1.8 million business enterprises sourced from the latest Companies House file and other sources. Employers with a workforce of two or more employees across GB were eligible. Businesses and organisations that were fully or partially operating during fieldwork were in scope (for the full questionnaire), as were those that had temporarily closed (for a shorter route through the questionnaire). However, businesses or organisations that had permanently closed were screened out. Large and medium-sized employers were oversampled to allow for analysis within the size category.

Sequential multi-mode data collection was used, whereby an online survey was followed by a telephone survey for those employers who had not responded to the online survey. However, large employers were contacted mostly by phone straight away.

The survey was completed by the most senior person with responsibility for personnel issues in the organisation as a whole (usually HR Director in medium and large organisations and the business owner/managing director for small employers).

Fieldwork for wave 1 of the survey took place between 17th June and 2nd July 2020 with a response rate of 51%². A total of 1,354 employers completed the survey, which included 830 of whom took part online, and 524 via CATI. Of the 1,354 employers who completed the survey 527 were micro employers, 449 were small employers, 266 were medium sized employers, and 112 were large employers.

Fieldwork for wave 2 of the survey took place between 12th and 31st October 2020 with a response rate of 12%³. A total of 1,197 employers completed the survey, which included 693 who took part online, and 504 who took part via CATI. Of the 1,197 employers who completed the survey 442 were micro employers, 392 were small employers, 249 were medium sized employers, and 114 were large employers.

Fieldwork for wave 3 of the survey took place between 3rd March and 8th April 2021 with a response rate of 37%. A total of 1,370 employers completed the survey, which included 864 who took part online, and 506 who took part via CATI. Of the 1,370 employers who completed the survey 509 were micro employers, 461 were small employers, 289 were medium employers, and 111 were large employers.

When asked about their trading status, 66% of those employers included in the sample at wave 1 had continued to trade or operate throughout COVID-19, 16% had recently reopened or started trading again after a period of closure, and 18% were still temporarily closed or had paused operating or trading⁴. At wave 2 of the survey 79% of employers were currently open, 16% had recently reopened or started trading again after a period of closure, and 5% were temporarily closed or paused operating or trading. At wave 3 of the survey 82% were currently open, 4% had recently reopened or started trading again after a period of closure, and 13% were temporarily closed or paused operating or trading.

The survey data was weighted by size and sector to be representative of the GB employer population. All figures and tables report weighted data but include the unweighted base sizes.

The survey results are subject to margins of error, which vary depending on the number of respondents answering each question and pattern of responses. The overall effective sample size at wave 1 was reduced from 1,354 to 761 once design weights were applied with a confidence interval of +/- 3.6 percentage points for a question asked of all participants. At wave 2 the effective sample size was reduced

² Figures quoted are adjusted response rates (complete/valid sample).

³ Due to low response rates an additional sample was used towards the end of the wave 2 fieldwork period. This additional sample achieved an unadjusted response rate (complete/fieldwork sample) of 3%. It should be noted however that this sample were not sent reminder emails as is standard practice and had limited time to respond.

⁴ Please note that these, as all percentages in the report, are weighted percentages.

from 1,197 to 612 once design weights are applied, with a confidence interval of +/- 4 percentage points. At wave 3 the effective sample size was reduced from 1,370 to 683 once design weights are applied with a confidence interval of +/- 3.8 percentage points.

Where data does not sum to 100%, this is due to rounding and/or because the question allowed for multiple response options to be selected.

Workforce management during COVID-19

At the first wave of the survey (17th June and 2nd July 2020), employers were asked about their policies in relation to employees who are required to isolate because they or a household member displays symptoms of COVID-19 and they cannot work from home. Where employees were required to self-isolate because they or a household member displayed symptoms of COVID-19 and they were unable to work from home, employers used a range of practices⁵.

Just over seven in ten (71%) of employers currently trading said that some or all employees were not working from home. Of these, one in three employers (34%) said they would continue to pay the full salary to some or all of their staff for at least a certain period of time while they were unable to work. Almost half (46%) reported paying SSP, and 7% OSP. Three in ten (29%) said they would consider furloughing staff if they had to self-isolate and one in ten (11%) suggested some of their staff would have to take the time off as holiday leave or unpaid leave.⁶

Table 1: Which of the following, if any, would apply to your employees if they are required to isolate because they or a household member display symptoms of COVID-19 and they cannot work from home?

	Cell percentage		
	Size of employer		
	Total	SME ⁷	Large ⁸
Full pay	34%	33%	35%
Statutory sick pay	46%	45%	63%
Occupational sick pay	7%	6%	24%
Furlough	29%	29%	26%
Take time off as holiday/unpaid leave	11%	12%	8%
None of these apply/other	9%	9%	-
Don't know	5%	5%	2%
Base	900	805	95

⁵ Employers were able to select multiple response options where they applied different policies to different members of their staff or for different periods of time.

⁶ Not all employees qualify for SSP. To be eligible, they must be classed as an employee, earn an average of at least £120 per week and have been sick or incapable of work for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days). Employees not entitled to SSP may have been eligible for UC, ESA or the Government's self-isolation payment.

⁷ Small and medium-sized enterprises = 2-249 employees (micro, small, medium-sized employers).

⁸ Large employers = 250+ employees.

Base: All employers at wave 1 currently trading and where not all employees are working from home. This represents 59% of employers (71% of employers that are trading).
 Caution: Low base size for Large employers (under 100). Results should be interpreted with caution.

Employers were asked at the first wave of the survey whether they have staff who may be vulnerable to COVID-19 and if so, whether they were able to work from home. Of all open businesses or organisations who did not have their entire workforce work from home/furloughed, a quarter (24%) said all their employees who are vulnerable to COVID-19 were able to work from home. Almost three in ten employers (29%) stated that none of their vulnerable staff could work from home. Less than one in ten employers (7%) said decisions about vulnerable staff working from home depended on the employees’ health condition, whereas just over one in ten (14%) decided by taking their job role into account. The remaining employers either had no vulnerable employees (24%) or didn’t know (1%).

Table 2: Are any of your employees who may be vulnerable to COVID-19 able to work from home?

	Column percentage
	All
All vulnerable staff can work from home	24%
Case-by-case basis depending on the health condition	7%
Case-by-case basis depending on the job role	14%
No vulnerable employees can work from home	29%
No employees are vulnerable	24%
Don't know	1%

Base All employers at wave 1 that are trading, and not all staff are working from home or furloughed (885). This represents 58% of employers.

Changes to evidence requirements for sickness absence and self-isolation

Employers were asked at the third wave of the survey whether they are aware of the NHS111 Isolation note and if they would they accept this as evidence for sickness absence or self-isolation. Five in ten (54%) employers were aware of the NHS111 Isolation note, while four in ten (41%) weren't aware of these, and less than one in ten (5%) were unsure.

Table 3: Are you aware of the NHS111 Isolation note?

	Column percentage
	All
Aware of the NHS111 Isolation note	54%
Not aware of the NHS111 Isolation note	41%
Not sure	5%

Base All employers at wave 3 that are trading (1,239). This represents 87% of employers.

Of those employers who were aware of the NHS111 Isolation note, nine in ten (92%) would accept these as evidence for sickness absence or self-isolation.

Table 4: Would you accept an Isolation Note as evidence for sickness absence or self-isolation?

	Column percentage
	All
Would accept NHS111 Isolation note	92%
Would not accept NHS111 Isolation note	1%
Not sure	5%
Not applicable	2%

Base All employers at wave 3 that are trading and aware of the NHS111 Isolation notes (748). This represents 47% of employers.

Use of Occupational Health services in relation to COVID-19

At all three waves of the survey employers were asked about their use of OH services. Employers reported that before the COVID-19 pandemic, between a fifth (19%) and a quarter (25%) of them had provided their employees with access to OH services. At least one in ten of all employers who were operating at the time of the fieldwork had used OH services in relation to COVID-19. Less than one in ten employers newly purchased OH during the pandemic specifically to help them deal with COVID-19-related OH issues.

Table 5: Employers' access to OH services before the pandemic and their use of OH in relation to COVID-19

	Cell percentage		
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Percentage of employers who provided access to OH before the pandemic	22%	19%	25%
Percentage of employers who used OH during the pandemic	10%	15%	13%
Percentage of employers who were new purchasers of OH during the pandemic	3%	8%	6%
Base:	1,151	1,154	1,239
Base: All employers currently trading at waves 1, 2, and 3. This represents 82% of employers at wave 1, 95% of employers at wave 2, and 86% of employers at wave 3.			

Next steps

This interim summary report provides evidence on how employers are managing their workforce in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to evidence requirements for sickness absence and self-isolation, and use of OH services. It is anticipated that a full report covering all survey sections will be published later in 2021.