

UNISON report into Covid preparedness in NHS workplaces

January 2024

Background

UNISON's Health Group and Health and Safety Team surveyed all UK based UNISON NHS health and safety representatives to seek their view on COVID-19 preparedness in workplaces. We also asked questions about other health and safety issues affecting them.

The results show how ready UNISON health and safety reps feel employers are if COVID-19 rates continue to rise, or a new variant poses a greater risk to staff and patients.

Headlines

- Over two thirds of health and safety reps felt their workplaces were not ready for a fresh outbreak of COVID-19
- The top concern was social distancing and mask wearing on NHS premises
- There are high levels of concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on staffing levels
- Not enough has been done to improve workplace ventilation
- More employers should sign up to [Independent Sage's COVID-19 pledge](#)

Survey findings

146 responses were received from across the UK. The majority (88 per cent) from an NHS Trust in England (n79) or an NHS employer in Scotland (n58). The return rate was around 16 per cent.

Results

Confidence and concerns with employer plans

In the event of a fresh COVID-19 outbreak 62 per cent were not confident in their employer's plans. (table 1).



Table 1: Confidence in employer plans

The top three areas of greatest concern if employers had to reintroduce COVID-19 safety measures were:

1. *People respecting requests for social distancing and mask wearing on NHS premises*
2. *Employers not supporting individuals who have symptoms or test positive to stay away from work*
3. *Out of date or inadequate risk assessments*

In addition, high levels of concern remain around vulnerable staff not being able to work from home or be redeployed, lack of adequate ventilation measures, access to testing for staff, access to suitable and sufficient PPE, access to testing for both staff and patients and isolation of patients testing positive (table 2).

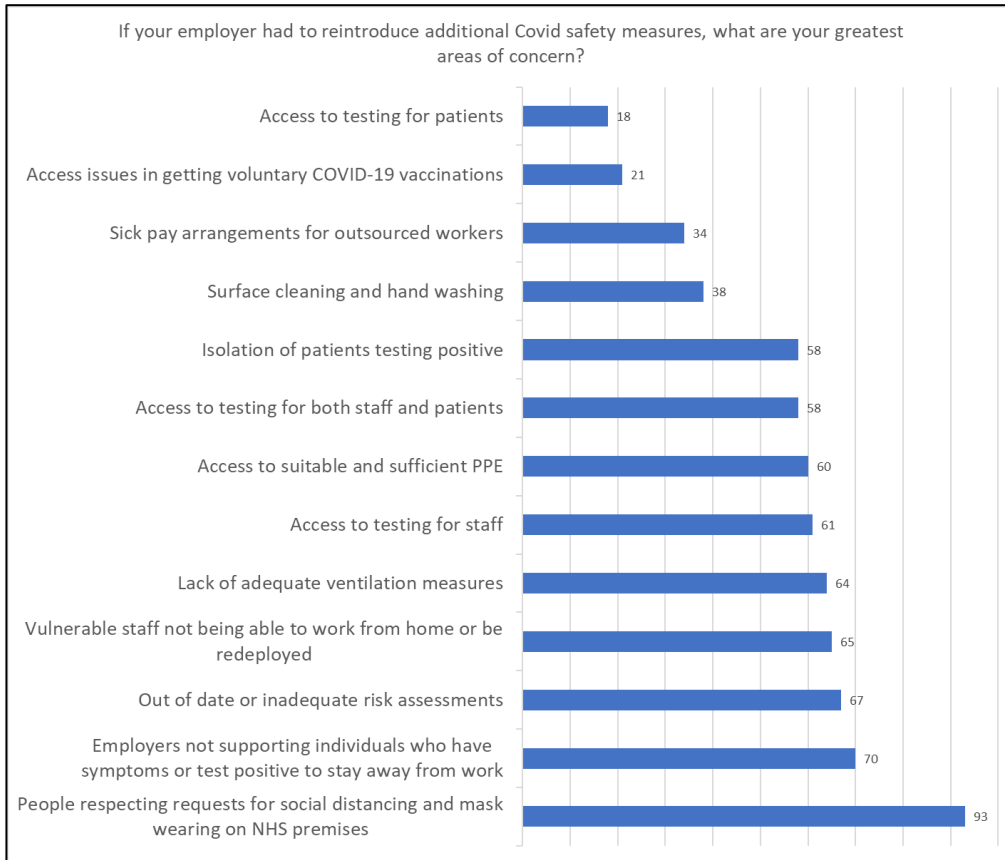


Table 2: Greatest areas of concern if covid safety measures reintroduced

Staffing levels

We wanted to understand how staffing levels would cope with increased COVID-19 related absences. 80 per cent felt there were insufficient staffing levels to cope with an increase (table 3).

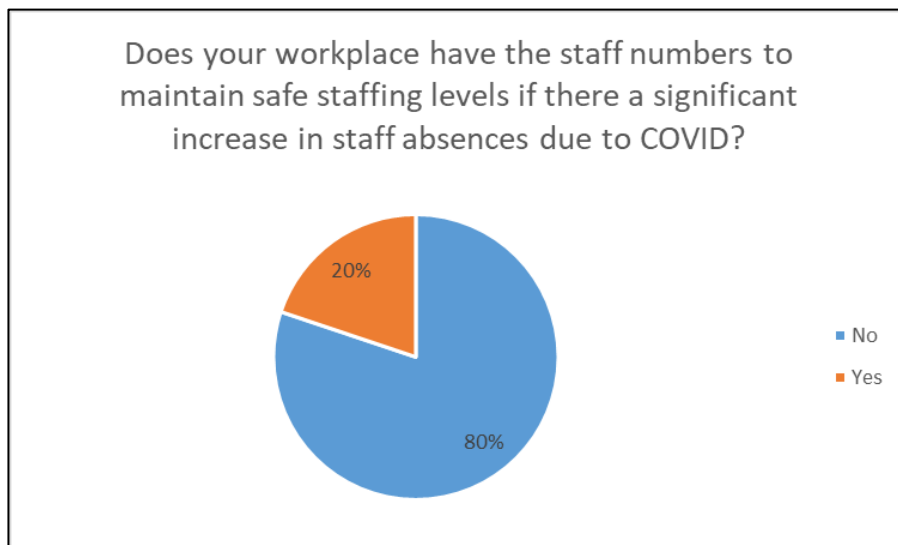


Table 3 Staffing levels

Ventilation

Improved ventilation is recommended to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory infections such as flu. Over half (55 per cent) of respondents either didn't know or said nothing had been done to improve ventilation (table 4).

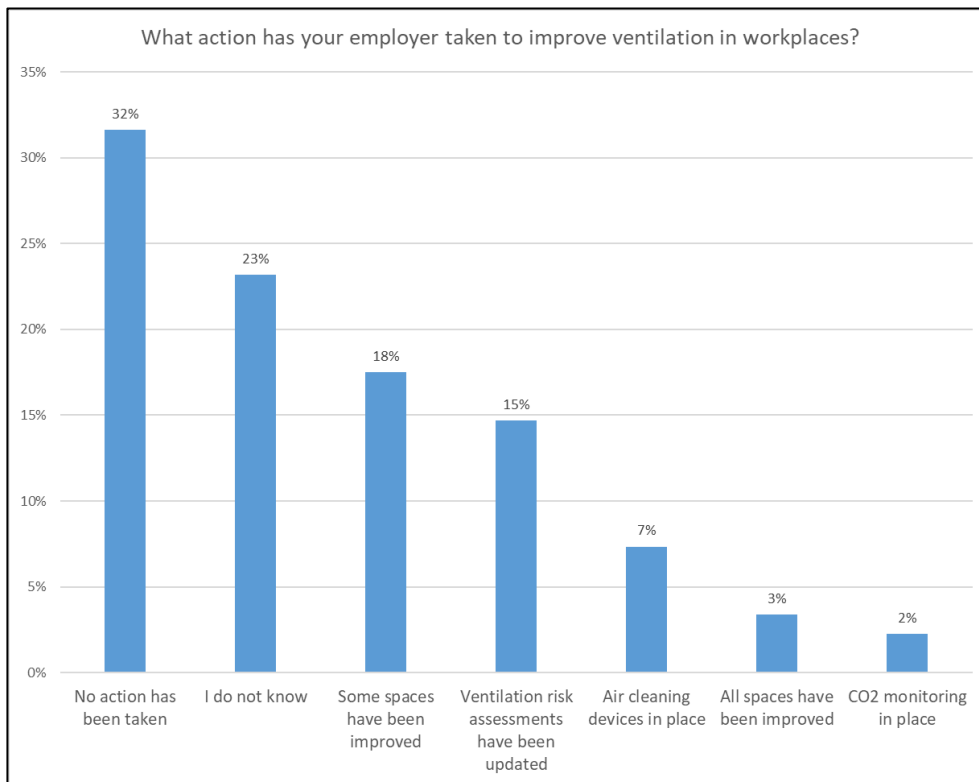


Table 4 Actions to improve ventilation

Where improvements have been made, respondents highlighted the following best practice:

- *“Excellent policy and procedure and contingency plans / risk assessments in place and continuously updated when required. All retained and will be easily re-introduced if required.”*
- *“Opening of windows where air cleaning devices are not available every hour for 10mins.”*
- *“We have an excellent health and safety team at the Trust in fact our branch secretary is part of that team and ensures that all H&S processes are in place.”*
- *“Employer monitors outbreaks and IPC is high on the agenda at all times.”*
- *“Expanded ventilation spaces available (lessons learned from the previous waves).”*
- *“The organisation has a mask face fit testing regime in place with all new starts to the organisation being fitted with the correct FFP3 masks.”*

Covid safety pledge

Only 6 respondents were confident that their employer had signed up to the UNISON COVID-19 safety pledge (table 5). The majority were not sure.

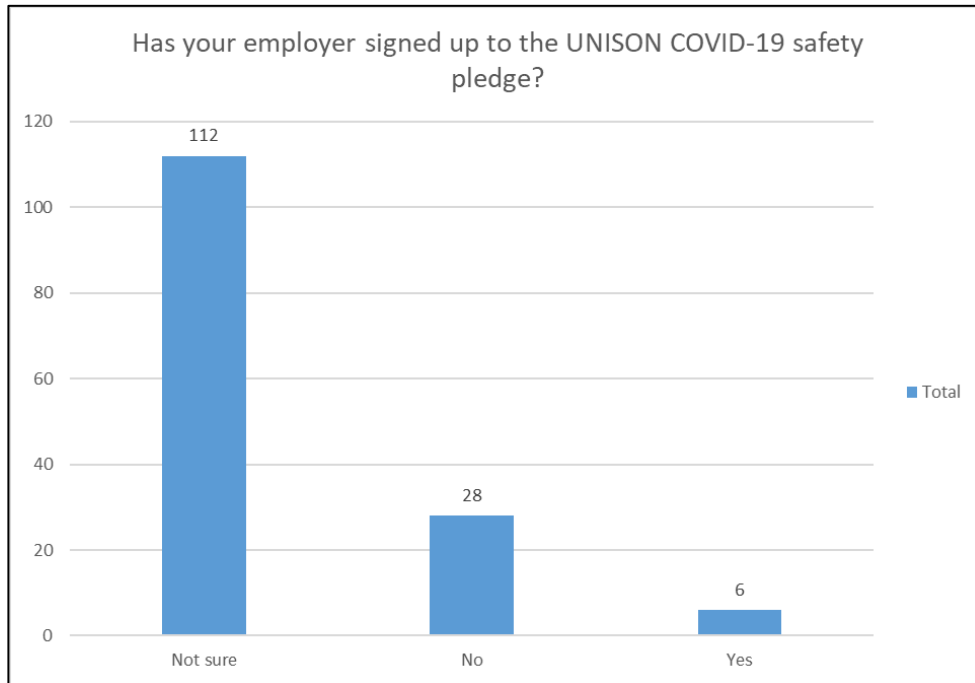


Table 5 Employer signed up to COVID-19 pledge

Long Covid dismissals

Respondents were asked about long covid dismissals. 31 respondents reported a recent increase whereas 64 said they had not seen an increase. 51 respondents were not sure.

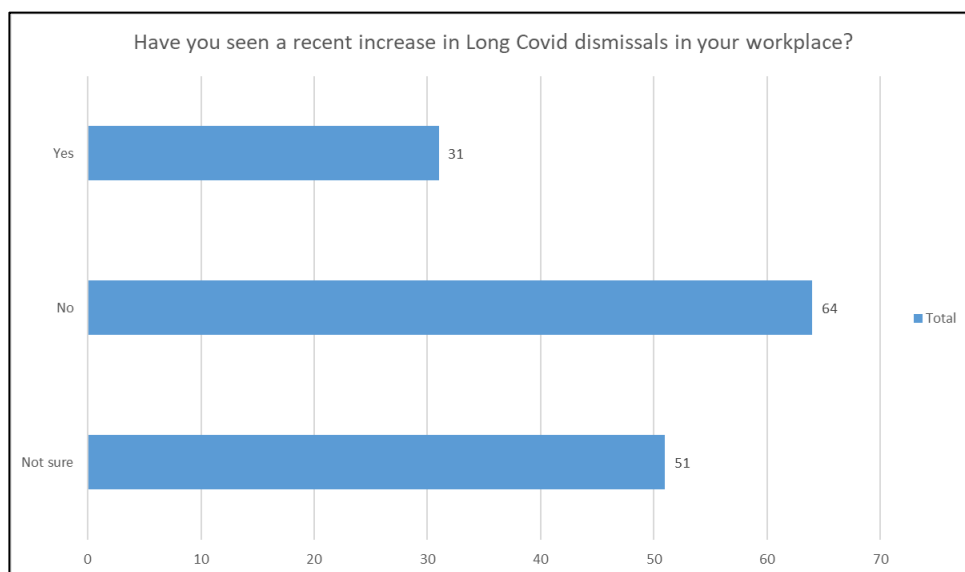


Table 6 Recent experience of long covid dismissals

Other Health and Safety concerns

Respondents were asked about other concerns within their workplace. Free text comments were analysed with the top 3 concerns being

1. Violence and aggression (27 per cent)
2. Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) (20 per cent)
3. General poor building maintenance (13 per cent)

Table 7 presents other concerns including asbestos, staffing levels and staff absence.

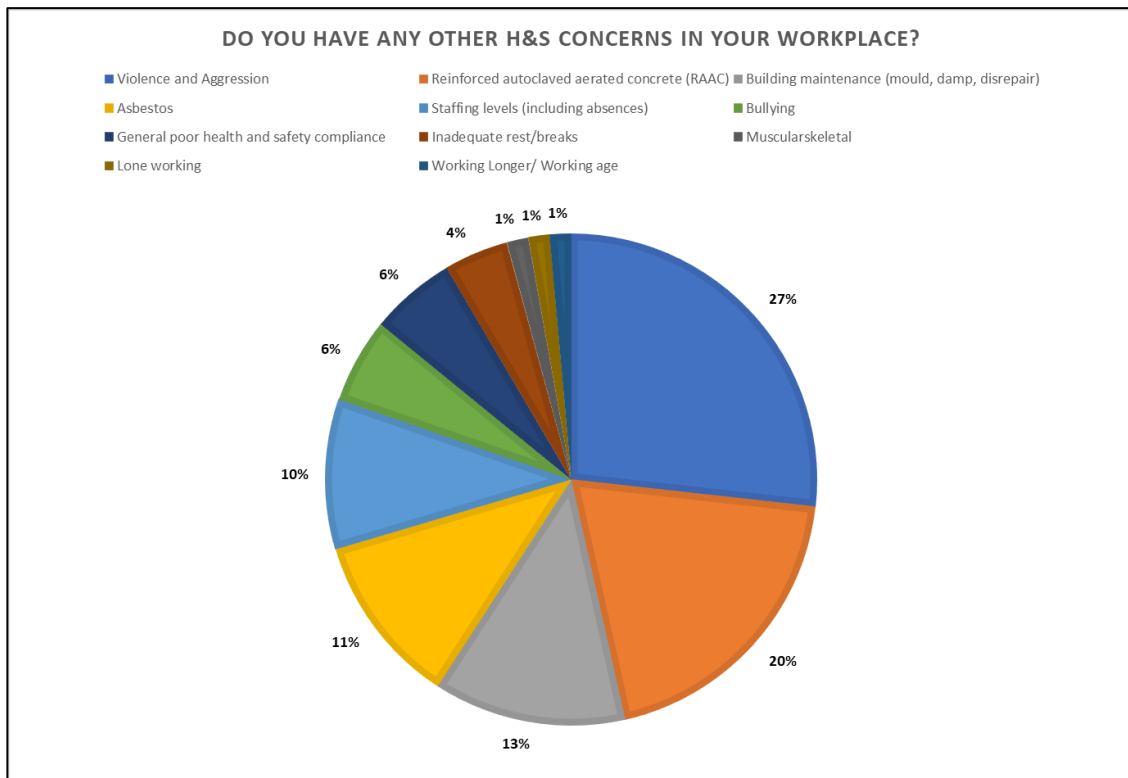


Table 7 Health and safety concerns

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting legacy across the world. In the UK, public services like the NHS were the frontline in battling this novel virus. However, viruses mutate and another wave of COVID-19 or a new virus could emerge at any time. Indeed, at the time of writing a new variant (JN.1) has emerged which, although classified as low risk by the World Health Organisation (WHO)¹, is putting pressure on health services at the same time as a surge in other winter respiratory illnesses including influenza.

¹ [worldhealthorganizationdepartmentofcommunications.cmail20.com/t/d-e-vkkjyud-jyyhcddb-f/?s=09](https://www.who.int/department-of-communications/cmail20.com/t/d-e-vkkjyud-jyyhcddb-f/?s=09)

The WHO advice for health workers and health facilities is:

- *Universal masking in health facilities, as well as appropriate masking, respirators and other PPE for health workers caring for suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients*

and

- *Improve ventilation in health facilities*

It is important that lessons are learned from this pandemic and that health and safety concerns are dealt with because doing so protects lives. Patients are protected where employers put in place the right safety measures to remove and reduce risks to patients and staff.

UNISON health and safety representatives across the whole UK are concerned about workplaces not being ready for a fresh outbreak or the next pandemic. We are in the midst of the worst workforce supply shortage the NHS has ever experienced; a shortage which will last for several years.

While employers are focusing in on staffing, more can and must be done to improve working environments. Employers taking action to promote safer workplaces acts as a strong retention factor signalling to existing staff that the employer cares about their health, safety and wellbeing.

The issues with buildings and maintenance reflect the ageing NHS estate but regardless, more needs to be done to make older buildings safer through improvements in ventilation, removal of asbestos and RAAC.

Whether it is COVID-19 or any of the other respiratory illnesses, more can be done to promote ventilation and put in place safety measures. This starts with assessing the risk posed in workplaces and employers working in partnership with health and safety reps to implement measures to remove and reduce risk.

A good starting point for this is to work with union health and safety reps to sign up to the [Independent SAGE's Covid safety pledge](#), which includes pledging to protect staff, users and customers from Covid by:

- Assessing the physical environment and working practices according to health and safety law
- Abiding by the best public health advice and supporting staff who test positive for Covid

Next steps

As well as feeding back our findings to our health and safety reps, UNISON will use the results from this survey to lobby employers and governments for safer workplaces.

As the results of this survey mostly relate to NHS staff working in acute hospitals, more should be done to seek views from community and ambulance staff.

Current guidance for employers

National infection prevention and control measures (England):

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/national-infection-prevention-and-control/>

Managing healthcare staff with symptoms of a respiratory infection or a positive COVID-19 test result:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-managing-healthcare-staff-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection/managing-healthcare-staff-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-or-a-positive-covid-19-test-result>

COVID-19: information and advice for health and care professionals:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-information-and-advice-for-health-and-care-professionals>

The latest advice sets out occupational health, vaccination and IPC considerations for staff:

- ✓ Systems should remain in place to ensure that vaccination and testing policies are implemented.
- ✓ Employers must ensure that COVID-19 is included in risk assessments for any health and care staff who come into contact with COVID-19 due to their work activity. (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/index.htm>)
- ✓ All staff should be vigilant for any signs of respiratory infection.
- ✓ Symptomatic staff should follow the guidance for people with symptoms of a respiratory infection. (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/people-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-including-covid-19>)