



**COVID 19 and the Safety of Older Workers in
the Workplace**

- a report by the Scottish Pensioners' Forum

November 2020

Foreword

The Centre for Ageing Better has described the position of older workers in the current pandemic as ‘a mid-life employment crisis’- and it is certainly difficult to disagree with this view.

During the past six months, claims for unemployment benefits have almost doubled and, as this report was being prepared, employers were being asked to contribute more towards the UK Government’s Job Retention Scheme, a move that is likely to result in more insecurity for older workers.

We continually hear that the world of work will be somewhat different post COVID 19 however previous experience suggests that when it comes to public policy decisions affecting older workers in the workplace they are already largely forgotten.

Older workers who face losing their jobs due to COVID 19 are more likely to face long term unemployment with evidence suggesting that some older workers, particularly those in low paid jobs, are now being forced to extend their working lives once again to prevent financial hardship in retirement¹.

Investing in tailored skills and training for older workers in the new work environment is essential if we are to ensure that they are not resigned to enforced worklessness when approaching an already extended retirement age imposed upon them by the UK Government.

Our survey is in response to concerns raised with us by older workers and we felt that it was important, and necessary, to learn from them directly on how they were feeling having either worked normally throughout the pandemic, been placed on furlough and as they prepare for their return to work after being furloughed.

¹Institute of Fiscal Studies, The corona virus pandemic and older workers <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15040>

Introduction

Across the world, COVID 19 has had a massive impact on everyone's lives. People are having to adapt to a new way of living in their personal lives with the focus being on keeping themselves and others safe from the disease. But, as well as this, the way people work has also had to adapt with employment security, for a large majority of workers, changing dramatically.

The impact of COVID 19 on older workers can be significant; they are often at greater risk of developing serious illness if contracting the virus as well as being less likely to adapt to COVID Secure working practices.

If older workers contract COVID 19 they are also more likely to be absent from work for longer periods of time thereby isolating them from the normal daily social interaction their working environment provides for them. This could arguably result in higher incidences of social isolation and loneliness particularly when, due to geography and government restrictions, they have little contact with others when they really need it the most.

Older people are also less likely to be comfortable with digital communication, not only for maintaining social contact but also for work purposes, and the resultant impact on the mental health of those in work aged 60+ is likely to be considerable.

Statistics show that older workers, aged 55+, are also more likely to have the kind of underlying health conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to COVID 19 resulting in them being forced to shield in the past. Our colleagues at Scottish Hazards have dealt with over 200 COVID related cases and have expressed concern that shielded workers, of any age, are not receiving adequate support in order to return to work with the added reassurance that their workplace adheres to COVID Secure guidelines.

Some of the problems Scottish Hazards have encountered include employers disregarding Scottish Government guidance, lack of suitable and sufficient risk assessments, non-essential work and workplaces being wrongly passed off as essential and a distinct lack of consultation with workers on workplace health and safety matters, of which COVID 19 is undoubtedly the most serious health hazard in living memory.

The risk to workers arising from COVID 19 must be assessed in the same way as any other workplace hazard, with elimination of the risk being the top priority (home working) and provision of adequate PPE, and training in its use and disposal, as standard for those who cannot. PPE should only be considered after all other control measures have been exhausted.

Sadly, many workers are being instructed to return to work against Scottish Government guidance solely because their employers are demanding this happen. This attitude exposes people to unnecessary risk, not just in the work environment but also on their commute into work and in many other areas where they may come into unnecessary contact with members of the public.

If older workers are more vulnerable to COVID 19 due to their age than more needs to be done to protect them from risk transmission in the workplace and even more must be done to ensure older workers have a future in the world of work and their experience is not lost simply because employers cannot manage occupational COVID 19 risks in order to protect them.

Our survey

We launched our survey in September 2020, running for 4 weeks until early October 2020. During that time 550 responses were received, an average of 140 per week.

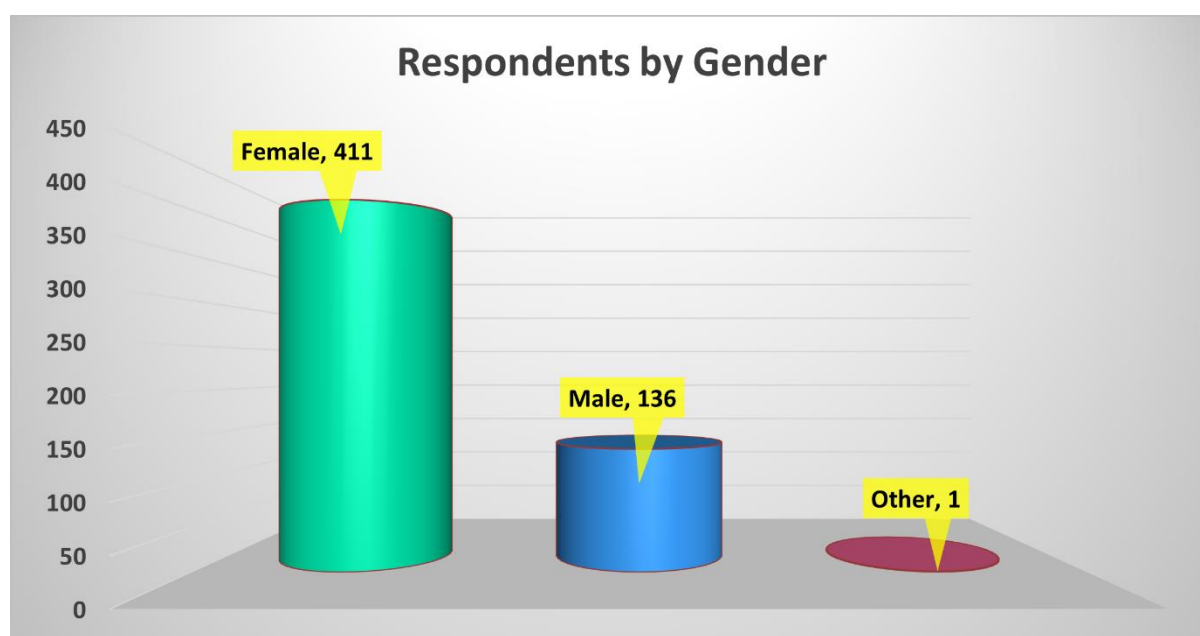
Views were sought from individuals in four age categories: 50 to 54, 55 to 59, 60 to 65 and over 65.

The survey was designed to substantiate existing anecdotal evidence regarding COVID 19 and the impact it was having on older workers, their experiences of lockdown and employer engagement throughout the pandemic and when developing COVID secure workplaces.

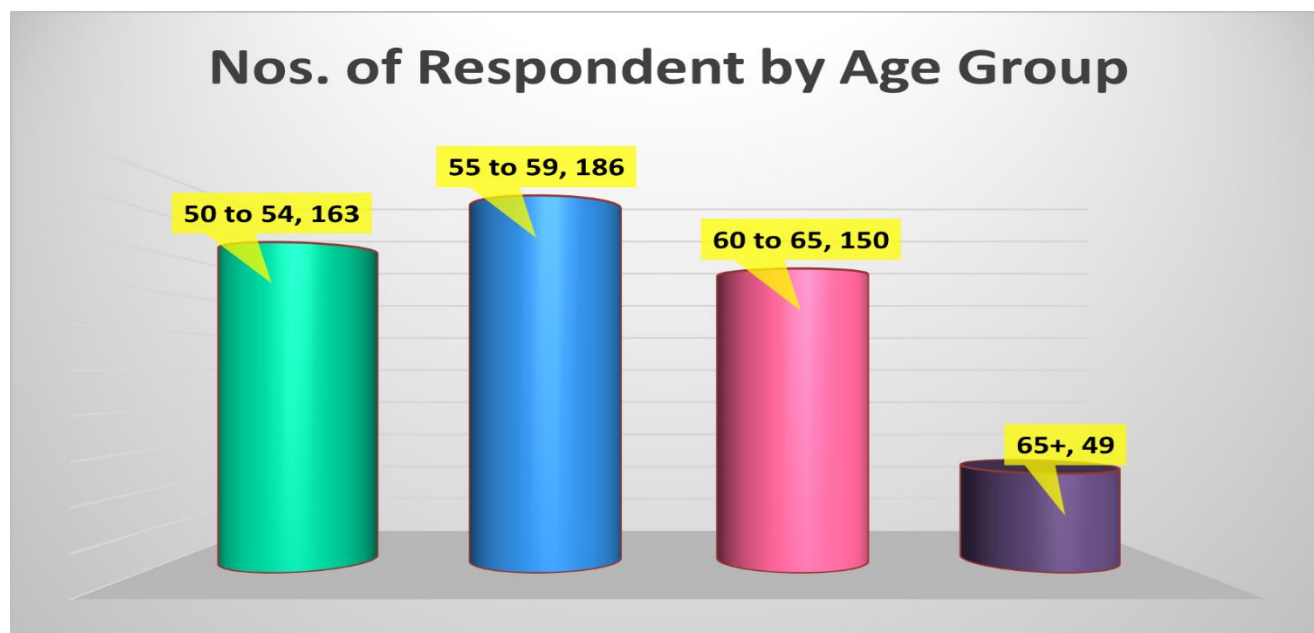
The survey was circulated to our own membership, our networks, trade unions and health and safety activists through our colleagues at Scottish Hazards. The survey could be completed online through Survey Monkey and, on request, in paper format for those without digital access or with a preference to respond in this way.

Who completed the survey?

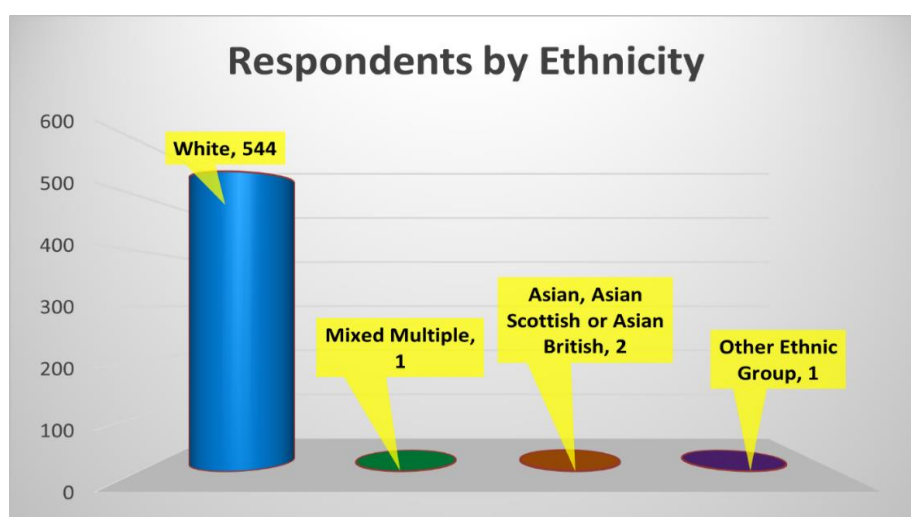
Out of 548 responses to this question, the majority came from women (411), 136 responses came from men and one respondent identified as other.



The level of responses across the age groups was fairly consistent; for those aged 50 to 54, 162 responses were received, 124 from women, 34 from men; for those between 55 and 59, 166 responses were received 144 from women and 43 from men; for workers between 60 and 65, 149 responses were received, 108 from women and 41 from men and in the final age group, those over 65 the number of responses dropped to 49, 30 from women, 19 from men.

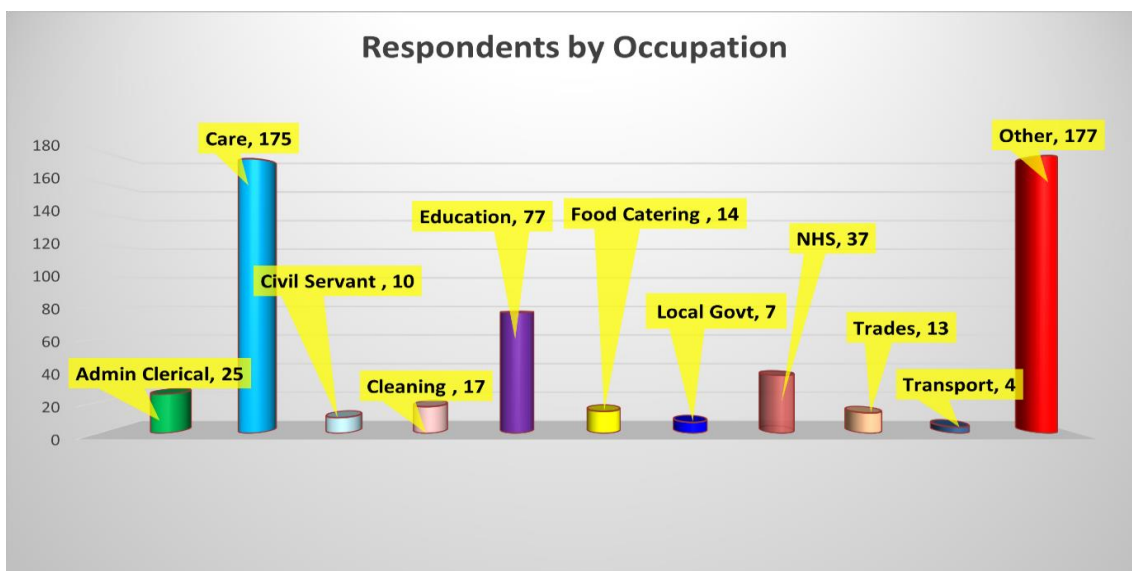


548 respondents gave details of ethnicity, only four described themselves as black and minority ethnic, 1 as mixed multiple race, 2 Asian Scottish or Asian British and 1 other ethnic group. The low level of responses from black and minority ethnic workers is disappointing but perhaps reflects the feeling of isolation many black and minority ethnic workers already feel in the workplace as well as during the current pandemic.

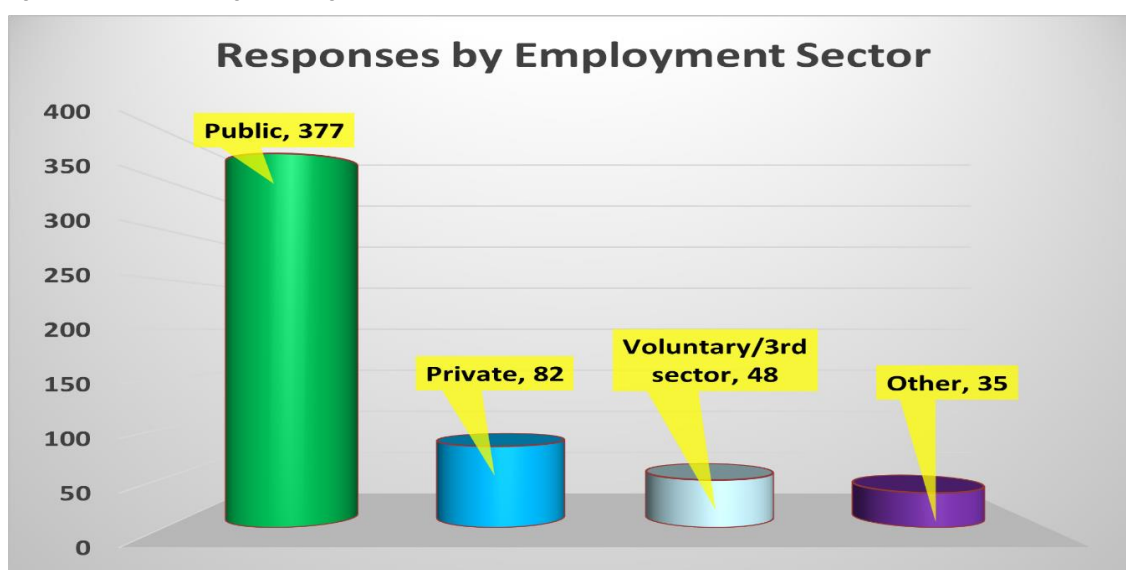


Where did the responses come from?

The largest number of responses came from workers employed in health and social care (175), Education (77) and the NHS (37). Of the 177 responses described as other, it was noticeable that workers from a broad range of occupations had taken the time to respond to the survey, perhaps an indication of the level of concern and insecurity workers felt, thus wishing to make their views known.



The greatest number of responses came from employees in the public sector (68.5%), followed by the private sector (15%), voluntary/3rd sector (8.7%) and other (6.3%).



It is important to note that on examining job roles and employers within the relevant sectors we identified that around one third of all responses were from individuals delivering home care or working for organisations supporting individuals with disabilities or other specific needs.

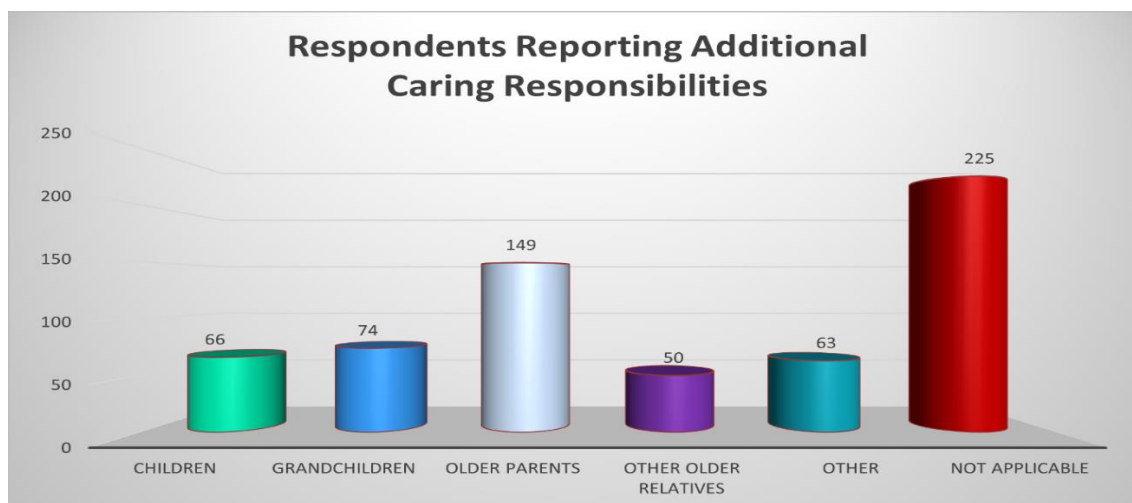
Trade Union Membership

89% of responses came from trade union members, perhaps unsurprisingly given the large number of public sector workers participating. 80% of the responses from private sector employees were from trade union members, this figure was 72% in the voluntary sector.



COVID 19 and Caring Responsibilities

The pandemic and the swift move to lockdown in March left many families unprepared for the changes they were going to have to make as the implications that school and care centre closures had on their domestic circumstances.



Of the 411 respondents received from females, 30% reported no additional caring responsibilities. However, 40 % reported having to put in place additional arrangements to care for parents and other elderly relatives, 16% took on extra caring responsibilities for grandchildren while 10% reported additional care for other individuals.

130 responses to this question were received from males with 54% reporting having no additional caring responsibilities, 26% having taken on responsibility for caring for elderly parents or other elderly relatives, only 6% reported additional caring responsibilities for grandchildren and 12% having taken on caring responsibilities for others outside their family.

The responses from both females and males in relation to additional responsibilities for their own children was 12%, 66 in total, however this probably does not accurately reflect the turmoil school closures caused for families but more an acceptance by parents that their care relationship is a parental responsibility and arrangements are required to be made to accommodate often drastic changes in domestic circumstances.

Employment and Lockdown

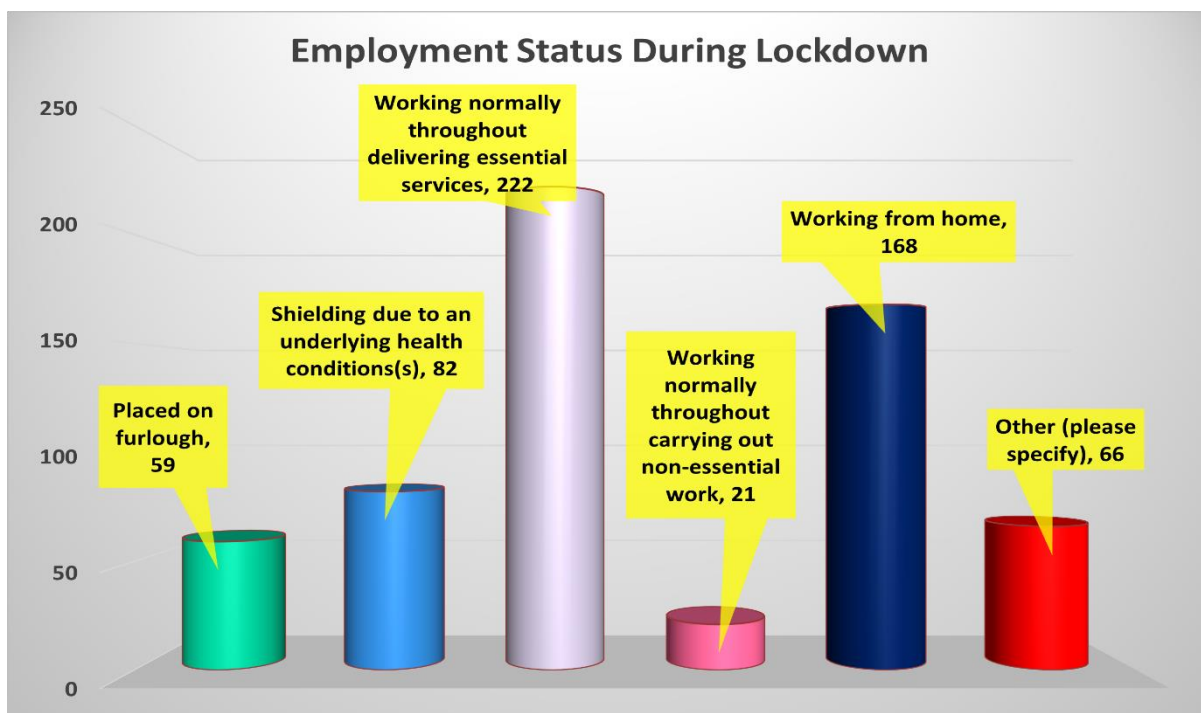
Given the number of respondents from the public sector and from those delivering care across the public, private and third sector it is hardly surprising that the largest number of responses (222) came from workers delivering essential work with a small number (59) equating to just over 10% placed on furlough. Of those placed on furlough roughly half were employed by one of Scotland's Universities, the remainder were employed in the private sector or local authority arms-length leisure trusts.

Those working at home included education workers (teachers, learning assistants), other local government workers and a smaller number of private and third sector workers.

Only 21 (4%) of workers reported working normally throughout the lockdown carrying out non-essential work. Again, this would reflect the

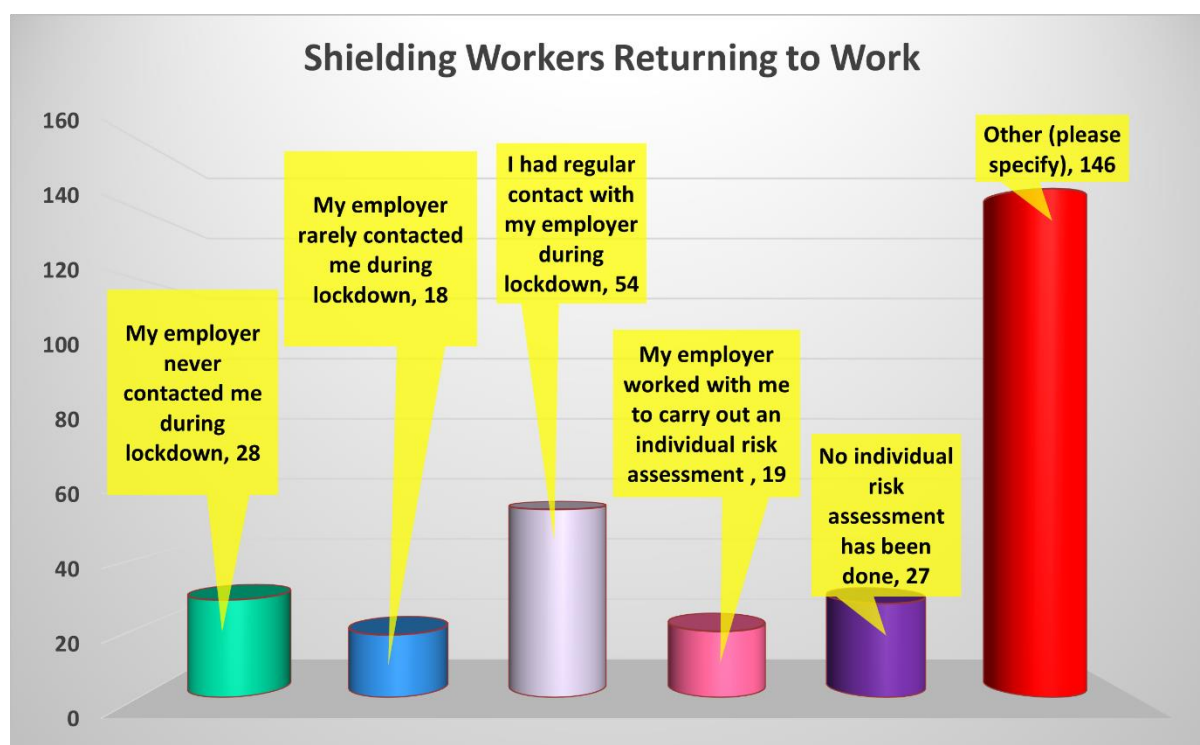
high number of respondents employed in the public sector, the nature of the work being carried out and the high levels of trade union membership from those responding to the survey.

To help complement the findings of our survey, Scottish Hazards reviewed their casework, and their experiences tell a somewhat different story particularly in relation to those working from home and working normally carrying out non-essential work. They reported that a substantial number of workers were being refused the opportunity to work from home or were being called back to the office from home working for no other reason than management mistrust or a desire to exercise control over the workforce. The occupational health and safety charity have dealt with around 250 cases involving workers in non-unionised or anti trade union workplaces and their experiences appear to be incompatible with the emerging findings in our study in several areas. This is perhaps best explained by the effective voice workers have through trade unions and through this voice being able to ensure and promote adherence to COVID 19 regulations and guidance set out by the Scottish Government.



Shielding Workers

Of all 550 respondents. 26.5% (146) had been shielding, of these 54 stated their employer had been in regular contact with them whilst 44 indicated that they had little or no contact with employers during lockdown. Scottish Hazards indicated that this was similarly indicative of their own findings but added that many shielded workers only received contact in the period directly prior to shielding being paused to discuss arrangements for their return to work.

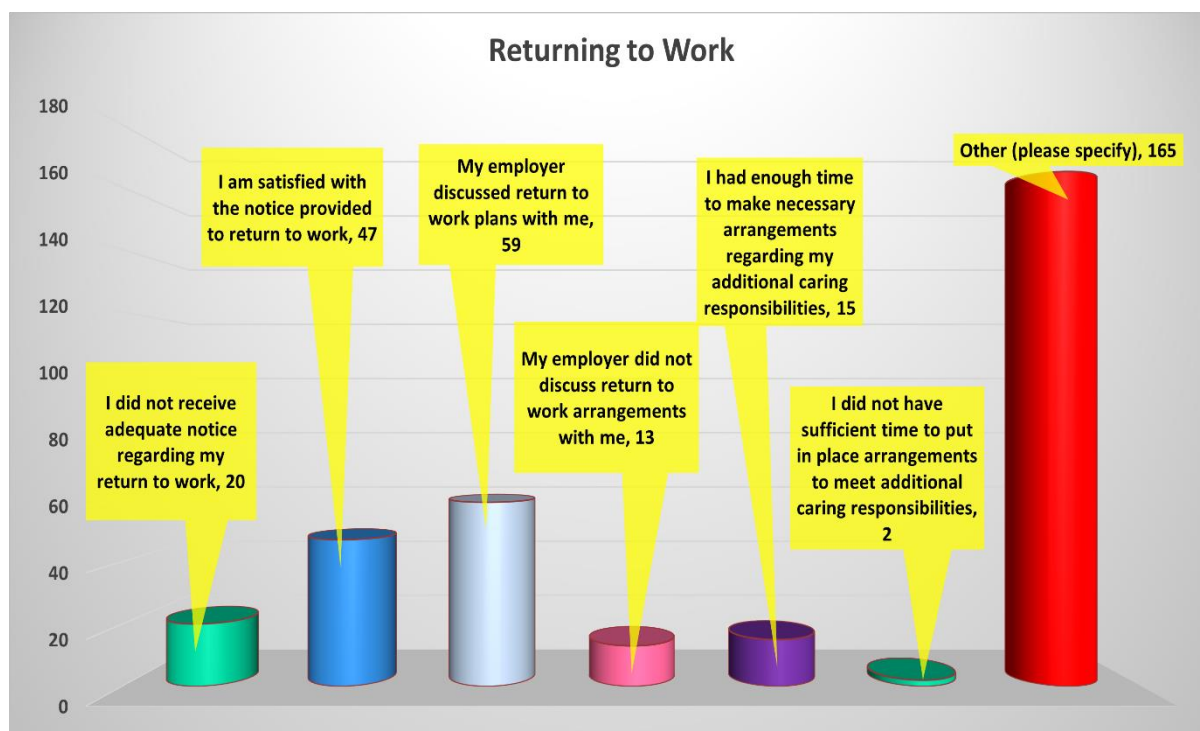


Fewer individuals (19) reported their employer carrying out an individual risk assessment than those who did not (27). These figures are concerning and would suggest a wide-spread lack of awareness of the [COVID 19 personal risk assessment tool](#) when only 13% of the vulnerable workers responding to our survey had any experience of this being used to facilitate their return to work.

Returning to Work

For those who had returned to work either after being placed on furlough or having worked from home, 38% were satisfied with the notice given by their employer to return to work, the discussions with their employers beforehand and also that they were given adequate time to make arrangements for childcare or other responsibilities. However, 12% stated they did not have adequate notice, any discussions prior to their return to work or any consideration in relation to difficulties reinstating their care arrangements.

Over half of those responding had not returned to their normal work environment and were either still working from home or on furlough.



Risk Assessment

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 all employers must carry out a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risk to workers and others created by their work activity. This includes risks arising from COVID 19

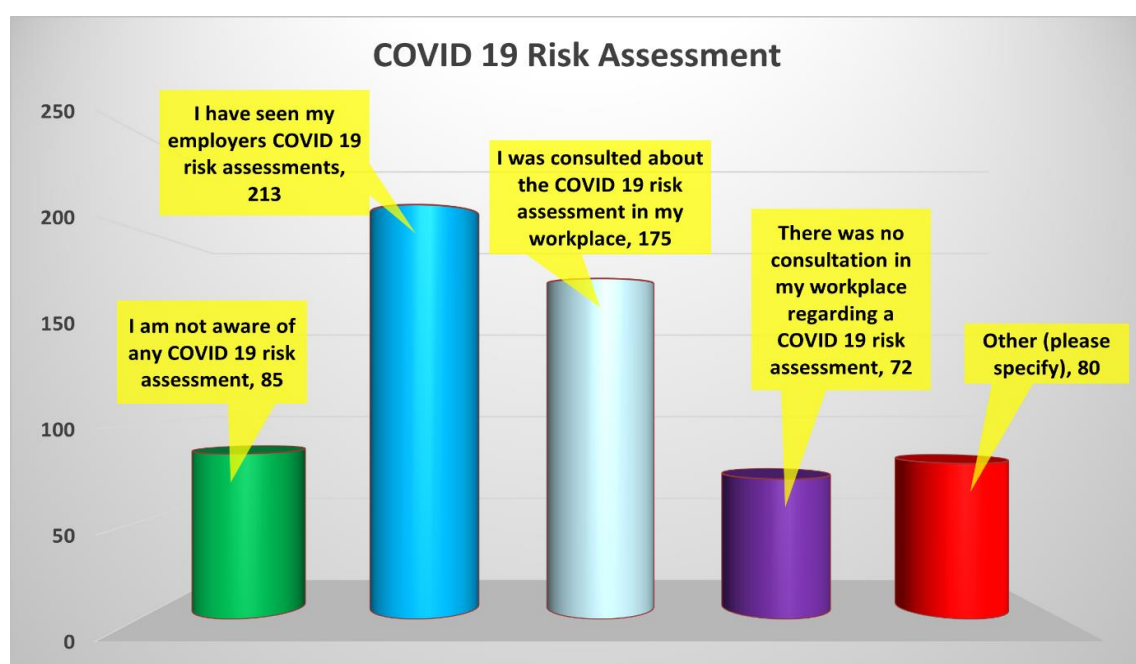
If employing 5 or more people, this assessment should be written down and any significant findings then communicated to workers.

In addition to this, two sets of regulations place duties on employers to consult with workers on all health and safety matters, they are:

- The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 (SRSCR), and
- The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996

Less than 40% of older workers surveyed reported having seen their employers risk assessment and 31% expressed the view that there had been no consultation on the assessment. These figures are relatively low but may be explained by consultation through trade unions. In workplaces where there is trade union recognition there will have been consultation with the recognised trade union(s), but the employer may not have made the risk assessment available to the workers. In workplaces with no trade union recognition, these collective consultation processes are often absent.

What is concerning however is the amount of respondents who reported not being aware of their employer's assessment (15%) or having been



consulted (13%). Employers must ensure mechanisms are in place in order that older workers are fully aware of the potential COVID 19 risks in their workplace.

The regulations applying to non-unionised workplaces are not so strong as employers do not have to consult collectively and can do so on an individual basis. Scottish Hazards tell us they have little evidence of either form of consultation with workers in non-unionised workplaces and workers, on the advice of Scottish Hazards, have frequently had to request to see their employers COVID 19 Risk Assessment, if there was one in place at all.

Trade unions have been at the forefront of ensuring workers are protected by ensuring employers meet their obligations, as far as reasonably practicable, to safeguard their workers. The Scottish Pensioners Forum believes the well documented trade union effect where workers are protected through collective consultation means that older workers will be less likely to be at risk of occupational exposure to COVID 19.

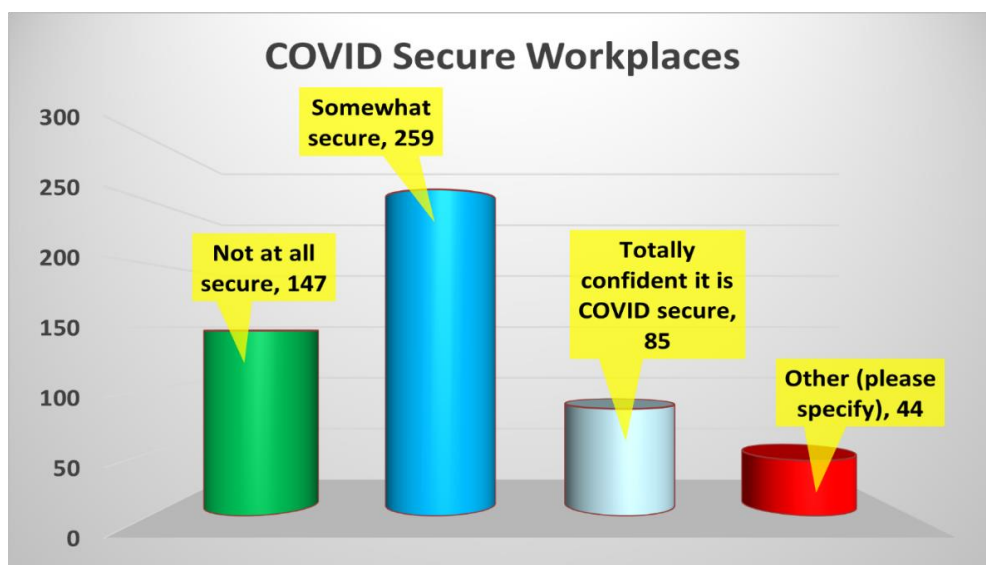
An employer is not required to carry out a specific COVID 19 risk assessment for older workers, the generic risk assessment should be suitable and sufficient to protect all workers. However, where older workers are vulnerable because of age or other underlying health conditions an individual risk assessment should be carried out using the [COVID 19 personal risk assessment tool](#), risks identified and reasonable adjustments put in place to protect older vulnerable workers. Not to do so could be a breach of health and safety legislation as well as leaving employers open to legal challenges under the Equality Act 2010.

The comments made by respondents on COVID 19 risk assessments are quite disturbing and include concerns about risk assessments being carried out after a return to work, risk assessment by phone, workers being told to carry out their own assessment, workers being told it is the trade unions remit to carry out risk assessments, workers being told just

to use PPE and do their own risk assessment and workers being told the assessment had been done (but not being provided with a copy).

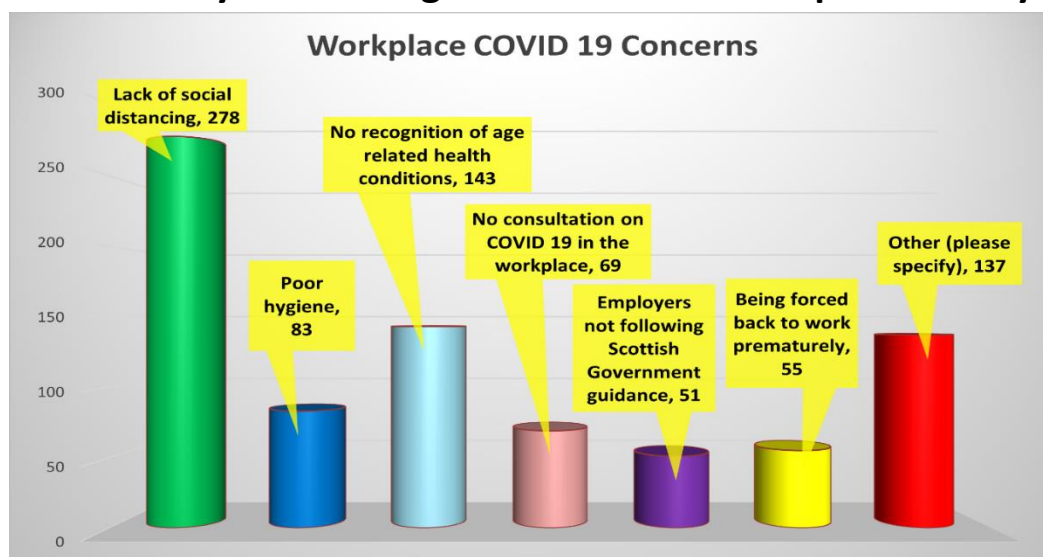
COVID Secure Workplaces

Only 15 % of respondents were totally convinced their workplace was COVID Secure for older workers, the remainder expressed some level of insecurity (48%) or believed their work environment was not secure at all (27%).



Most older workers reported lack of social distancing in the workplace as their major COVID 19 workplace concern (51%), followed by lack of recognition of underlying health conditions (26%) poor hygiene (16%) and lack of COVID 19 consultation (13%).

Only 10% felt they were being forced back to work prematurely.

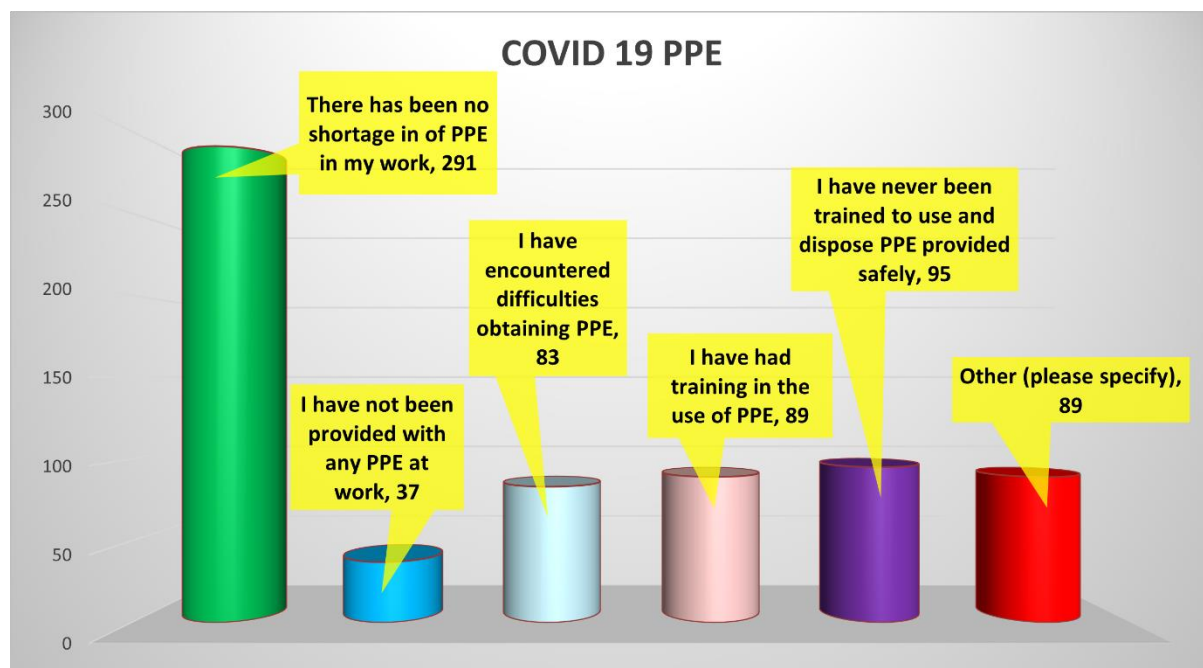


Of those expressing other concerns regarding COVID 19 some of the reasons given included their employer's landlords ignoring their responsibility, lack of social distancing in schools, working in other people's homes, external visitors, risk assessments being too general and the dismissive behaviours of their colleagues.

COVID and PPE

291 respondents (53%) reported not having experienced any shortage of PPE although 83 (16%) respondents did. Those who had been given proper training on the use and disposal of PPE (16%) were slightly outnumbered by those who had not (17%). 8% reported not having been provided with any PPE whatsoever.

The Scottish Pensioners Forum is concerned that 25% of respondents reported not having been provided with PPE or having been provided with it but given no instruction on its use.



Our final question sought views on several statements relating to older workers and whether they thought they had been disproportionately impacted by COVID 19 in relation to training, development, COVID security and future employment.

The statements and responses are as follows:

- 1. Older workers receive equal opportunities to access training in the workplace to make them COVID prepared**

17% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 47% agreed or strongly agreed 36% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 2. Pressure is being put on older workers to exit the world of work to create opportunities for younger workers**

54% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 17% agreed or strongly agreed 29% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 3. Older workers may be less likely to have the necessary skills or requirements (IT, Internet access etc) to allow them to work from home.**

37% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 34% agreed or strongly agreed 29% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 4. Older workers may have additional needs or other responsibilities which must be considered when returning to the workplace.**

11% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 65% agreed or strongly agreed 24% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 5. As an older worker I feel anxious about returning to the workplace because of my age**

38% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 35% agreed or strongly agreed 27% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 6. As an older worker I have concerns regarding using public transport to travel to my place of work**

21% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 50% agreed or strongly agreed 29% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 7. The UK Government should do more to encourage retention, retraining and recruitment of older workers considering difficulties experienced through COVID 19**

10% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 62% agreed or strongly agreed 28% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 8. The Scottish Government should do more to encourage retention, retraining and recruitment of older workers considering difficulties experienced through COVID 19**

10% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 62% agreed or strongly agreed 28% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 9. The UK Government is prioritising employment opportunities for younger people at the expense of older workers**

19% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 36% agreed or strongly agreed 45% neither agreed nor disagreed

- 10. The Scottish Government is prioritising employment opportunities for younger people at the expense of older workers**

21% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 31% agreed or strongly agreed. 48% neither agreed nor disagreed

Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of the responses to the survey came from workers in the public sector and, across all sectors, there was a high proportion of trade union member participation.

From the survey results it is clear that many older workers continue to face insecurity many months after lockdown commenced and will continue to do so as they struggle to adjust to what is often described as the “new” normal.

The Scottish Pensioners Forum believe this may well be the new way of working going forward, with many more workers being increasingly home based. If so, Governments must ensure that older workers are equipped to participate equally in this new labour market to avoid additional financial and social exclusion for many of them.

Workplaces must be COVID Secure for every worker, regardless of age. However, employers must recognise older workers may require additional support adjusting to this new work environment and working practices. This can be achieved through effective risk management and more pressure being placed on employers to follow non-statutory guidance published by the Scottish Government.

We are aware that due to the high number of responses from trade union members the findings may not match the anecdotal evidence of what is happening in workplaces where there is no trade union recognition. Scottish Hazards, who have assisted us with this survey, have indicated that, from examination of their cases, the situation in these workplaces appears far worse and perhaps this is an indication that the collective strength and effective voice provided by trade unions are key to workplace COVID Security for older workers during this pandemic.

It comes as no surprise that COVID 19 risk assessments had been carried out in most of the workplaces given the high numbers of trade union member participation. Many respondents had seen risk assessments and had also been consulted on COVID risks in their workplace although some say they had neither seen any risk assessment nor been consulted on it. That is not to say they have not been carried out but perhaps more of an indication that their employers have not communicated the significant findings arising from the process as they are required to do by law (When employing more than 5 people).

There continues to be lack of employer awareness of the individual risk assessment tools available for vulnerable workers. This is deeply concerning for the Scottish Pensioners Forum as a risk assessment for older workers, considering underlying health conditions and their age, is essential to ensure adequate control measures are in place to reduce the risk of workplace transmission.

It is concerning that less than a fifth of older workers felt their workplace was COVID Secure while three quarters had concerns it was not. Failure to implement social distancing was the main concern, followed by failure of employers to recognise older workers underlying health conditions and COVID hygiene. Two of these, social distancing and hygiene are key to preventing workplace transmissions and the Scottish Pensioners Forum is disappointed that this far into the pandemic so many workers are concerned their employers are not getting the basics right, let alone tackling the issue of older workers health conditions and the impact this may have on their ability to remain COVID free at work.

Employers cannot ignore their responsibilities and UK and Scottish Governments, as well as health and safety enforcement agencies, must hold irresponsible employers to account.

Older workers also remain anxious about returning to work and employers need to do more to relieve this anxiety and this should include ensuring safe public transport to work.

Through Scottish Hazards we are aware that many non-essential workplaces have been operating throughout the pandemic with a number resuming operations early despite the evidence being provided by the Scottish Government highlighting that it was unsafe to do so. Employers taking such matters into their own hands are irresponsible and places older and other vulnerable workers at increased risk.

The need for older workers to take on additional caring responsibilities during lockdown has been evident, both for elderly parents, children and grandchildren as day care centres, schools and other facilities were closed. Employers often failed to recognise this and were unreasonable in responding to workers requests for flexibility, particularly when returning from furlough or having been working from home.

The Scottish Pensioners Forum feels more action is required by Governments to ensure older workers continue to have employment opportunities throughout and after the pandemic, older workers have a lot to bring to the labour market but should not be placed at greater risk of being made seriously ill by COVID 19 due to their employers failure to put in place adequate control measures to protect them.

The Scottish Pensioners Forum calls for the following

- **More enforcement by the Health and Safety Executive and Local Authority Environmental Health Officers to ensure older workers can work in, and travel to, COVID Secure workplaces safely.**
- **Action taken against employers who fail to carry out individual and workplace COVID 19 risk assessments.**
- **Action taken against employers who fail to consult with workers on COVID security in the workplace**
- **Working at home risk assessments to include any additional training needs and/or equipment older workers may require, and control measures put in place to ensure they are protected from COVID 19 and any social isolation home working may cause.**
- **Vulnerable workers are not placed at risk by being forced to return to non-essential workplaces.**
- **The continuing role of older workers as carers needs to be recognised. For example, although schools have now returned, COVID 19 cases involving teachers, pupils and other staff have resulted in children having to self-isolate therefore requiring care.**
- **Investment in training and development for older workers to help them remain in work.**
- **No older worker carrying out non-essential work should be forced to return to a non-essential workplace. The Scottish Government should undertake steps to identify the extent of this problem and take required action, including legislation, where necessary, so that these workplaces remain closed.**