WORKING PAPER

Industrial relations and social dialogue

UK: Working life in the COVID-19 pandemic 2020

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Contents

Introduction

It is axiomatic to state that the COVID-19 pandemic has had momentous impact on the country and the UK economy. The initial disruption in early 2020 was to supply chains (particularly from China). As the outbreak spread around the world and into the UK, the first national lockdown was fully introduced on the 23 March (sub-period one). The public were instructed that they must stay at home, except for certain 'very limited purposes', such as shopping for essentials, one form of outdoor exercise each day. Travelling to and from work was permitted where 'absolutely necessary', with people to work from home if possible. On this date, all non-essential shops , libraries, places of worship, playgrounds and outdoor gyms closed (schools had closed from the 20 March, except for those looking after the children of key workers and vulnerable children, as had all cafes, pubs and restaurants [aside from those offering takeaway services], as well as theatres, gyms, leisure centres and nightclubs). Police were given powers to enforce the measures, including the use of fines.

From mid-May, the Government announced relaxations of the lockdown measures. For example, most non-essential retailers in England were allowed to reopen from 15 June, with further easing of restrictions on many other businesses, such as restaurants, following in July. July also saw the launch of measures, aimed at boosting the economy and helping people return to the labour market (sub-period two). However, coronavirus case numbers began to increase in September and October and thus, tighter localised measures, under a tiered system, were introduced (sub-period three). New lockdowns were subsequently introduced in most of the UK by November. While these measures and lockdowns were not as strict as those introduced in March, there were restrictions on movement and enforced closures of some businesses. Following the end of these autumn lockdowns, there was another acceleration in cases in mid-December, particularly in the south-east of England (including London) and Wales. Lockdowns were again introduced in these areas before Christmas. Scotland and Northern Ireland introduced tighter restrictions from 26 December, whilst a new national lockdown was introduced across England on the 4 January (UK Government, 2021). This fourth sub-period essentially resurrects the lockdown restrictions of the first sub-period (for instance, the closure of all schools and colleges, non-essential retail and tighter restrictions on movements).

With regard to impact on the economy, there was a -25% cumulative decline in GDP in March and April 2020. This is by far the biggest decline in the official monthly GDP data series (available from 1997). It is also very likely the largest fall in the post-Second World War era. Growth returned in May, with a 2.7% monthly increase. Faster growth then followed as GDP grew by 9.1% in June and by 6.3% in July. It slowed in August (to 2.2%), in September (to 1.1%) and again in October (0.4%). By November, GDP had fallen by -2.6% (ONS, 2020a). There has been uneven impact on sectors, with the largest declines seen in the accommodation and food sector, with output 91% lower in April and May compared with February. Output in the arts and entertainment sector was 49% lower in May than in February. However, some sectors experienced smaller falls: output in the information and communication sector saw a maximum fall of 14%, whilst financial services saw a 6% decline.

As for the labour market, as of mid-December, the official unemployment and employment rates do not show the dramatic changes that one might expect given the scale of the recession. This may be at least partly due to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), as furloughed workers are classed as employed in official statistics. Estimates for August-October 2020 show that compared with the (largely) pre-pandemic period of January-March 2020, employment levels are lower by 484,000. This is concentrated among young people (a fall of 278,000 employed 16-24 year olds). Unemployment levels are up by 326,000.

The unemployment rate has risen from 4.0% to 4.9%. The number of 16-64 year olds who are economically inactive (out of work and not looking for work) is up by 145,000. On 12 November 2020, 2.7 million people were claiming unemployment-related benefits. Between March and November, there has been an increase of 1.8 million claimants, though most of this net increase happened by May. It should be noted that not all people on these benefits will be out of work; some low-paid workers falling below Universal Credit income thresholds will also be eligible.

A number of other indicators point to the labour market being more seriously impacted, Early indicators for November suggest a reduction in employee payrolls of around 799,000 (or -2.8%) compared to March 2020, based on experimental HMRC data (this coincides with planned changes to the CJRS). The total number of weekly hours worked in the three months to October 2020 was still 9% lower than a year before, compared to the 20% fall seen in April-June. The number of employed people temporarily away from work rose from a pre-pandemic level of 2-2.5 million to around 7.9 million in April 2020. This fell to around 3.7 million in October. This figure includes furloughed workers. Moreover, job vacancies were 31% lower than a year ago during August to October, after being a record 59% lower than the year before during the three months to June.

More positively, average wages were up by 2.7% in the three months to October 2020 compared with a year earlier. Before the pandemic, average wages were rising by around 3% per year. Growth in average wages has picked up since the spring, as fewer employees were being furloughed.

Impacts of the pandemic on working life

Working from home

Felstead and Reushcke (2020) reported that homeworking rose dramatically and suddenly in the first lockdown (sub-period 1). The proportion of the workforce reporting that they worked exclusively at home rose eight-fold from 5.7% of workers in January/February 2020 to 43.1% in April 2020 and, even though it had fallen by June 2020, it remained high (36.5%). The surge in homeworking triggered by the lockdown in the UK was experienced most strongly by the highest paid, the better qualified, the higher skilled and those living in London and the South East. By the 1 October (sub-period 3), 24% were still working exclusively from home (Elliot, 2020). Similarly, the ONS Opinions and Lifestyles Survey (OPN) (ONS, 2020b) found that during the period 9 April to 20 April 2020, 45% of adults in employment said they had worked from home at some point in the preceding week.[1] The current advice at the time of writing (sub-period 4) is again, for people to attend their workplaces only where it is not 'reasonably possible' for them to work from home.

On the 3 September 2020, the CIPD (2020) reported findings from its survey research into the impact of the pandemic on working lives for April, May and June 2020 (sub-period 1 and into sub-period 2). This was a representative survey involving 6,000 respondents. Respondents reported a number of key concerns in April, including around work–life balance, well-being and job security. However, employees' experiences of working during the pandemic differed depending on individual circumstances, with some working remotely, others furloughed and many still attending their normal places of work (in April, 21% of those surveyed were furloughed; of those still working, 61% were working remotely all the time; and 39% were going to their normal workplace for some or all the time). For May and June, the proportion of survey respondents who were furloughed had decreased from 25% in May to 17% in June. Conversely, the proportion of workers working their usual hours increased from 49% in May to 56% in June. While a majority of respondents who weren't furloughed (58%), were still working from home all of the time in June, this proportion has dropped since April. More workers were being required by their employer to attend their normal place of work in some capacity, from 37% in May to 40% in June.

Work-life balance

In April, respondents reported that maintaining a healthy work–life balance had become increasingly challenging, with 32% finding it hard to fulfil commitments outside of work, due to time spent on their job (compared to 24% in January 2020). That figure increased to 39% for those who are juggling increased caring responsibilities with work. Similarly, those with increased caring responsibilities were more likely to say they are finding it difficult to do their job properly due to other commitments (14% of those with increased caring responsibilities said they found it difficult to do their job properly because of commitments outside of work, compared to 7% without increased caring responsibilities).

[1] The Opinions and Lifestyles Survey is usually a monthly survey but in response to the pandemic, was adapted to be a weekly survey used to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on day-to-day life in Great Britain. For the survey conducted from 9 to 20 April 2020, 2,010 individuals were sampled, with a response rate of 71.1% or 1,430 individuals) for the survey conducted from 9 April to 20 April 2020. The survey results were weighted to be a nationally representative sample with data collected using an online self-completion questionnaire or telephone interview).

30% reported that their ability to work has been impacted by a change in caring responsibilities since the outbreak.

The proportion of workers reporting they have too much work has stayed fairly consistent since January (28% in June, 32% in January); however, the impact of COVID-19 on key workers' workloads have been distinctly more pronounced. In June, 37% of key workers said they had too much work, compared to 24% of non-key workers. May and April saw a similar contrast between key workers and non-key workers (42% key workers vs 24% non-key in May, and 44% vs 28% in April). In part, this is because there were higher numbers reporting that they had too little work. Non-key workers, for instance, were more likely to say they have too little work. In June, 18% of non-key workers said they had too little work, compared to 9% of key workers. This is similar to May (where 18% of non-key workers said they had too little work compared to 11% of key workers).

Job and Pay Insecurity

Perceptions of job insecurity were also intensified. In April, 22% of respondents said they thought it was likely that they would lose their job in the next 12 months, compared to 13% in January 2020. This was a particular worry for furloughed workers, with 38% of such workers believing it likely that they will lose their job in the next 12 months. Perceptions of job insecurity remained high in May and June, where 23% and 19% respectively reported thinking it was likely they would lose their job in the next 12 months, compared to only 13% in January. Furloughed workers continued to be more concerned about job loss. They also faced uncertainty about returning to work – 60% in June didn't know when their furlough would end, up from 55% in May. With regard to financial security, 39% of those surveyed in April believed their financial security had worsened since the pandemic start; a figure which rose to 57% for furloughed workers. Such perceptions continued to be adversely impacted in May and June. In June, 18% of respondents of non-furloughed workers were receiving lower pay than usual, rising to 71% for furloughed workers. Unsurprisingly then, over half (55%) of furloughed workers in June said their financial security has worsened since the onset of the pandemic with 28% of non-furloughed workers also in agreement.

Health and Well-being

In April, 43% of respondents reported that their general mental health has worsened since the outbreak, rising to 52% for those with an existing mental health issue. For example, in June, 61% of those with anxiety said the pandemic had contributed this. And, 56% of people with existing mental health issues prior to lockdown said the pandemic had worsened their mental health.

26% reported that work had a negative impact on their mental health in May and June. This is similar to January and April where 27% and 28% respectively said work had a negative impact on their mental health. However, key workers were more likely to say their mental health was negatively affected by work in June (30%) than non-key workers (23%).

Conversely, 34% of respondents in June, and 38% of respondents in May said that work had a positive impact on mental health. This remains consistent with data gathered in April, where 34% said that work had a positive impact on mental health.

In April, 35% of respondents said their general physical health has become worse; this fell to 29% in May and 26% in June. Those attending their normal workplace were more likely to cite work as having a positive impact on their physical health (28% in June) compared to those working remotely (23% in June). In part, this could be due to those attending their normal place of work experiencing better workplace social connections at the moment.

Anxiety about returning to work

For those working from home or furloughed, the April survey found that 44% of respondents were anxious about returning to work, a figure which rose to 62% for those with an underlying health condition. 53% of those with increased caring responsibilities reported anxiety about returning to work. 31% of respondents felt anxious about their commute, rising to 52% for those in London. However, for those who had to go into the workplace, 58% of respondents in April said they were able to socially distance at work and had the right protective equipment (61%) (although a significant minority reported not having such resources in place). Almost half (47%) of those surveyed were concerned about catching COVID-19 at work.

Political context

There was no major election in 2020, there having been a snap General Election held on the 12 December 2019. This was the UK's third general election since 2015 (and the first to be held in December for almost 100 years). The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson – who had replaced his predecessor, Theresa May, on the 23 July, following her resignation – had called the election in an effort to increase his parliamentary majority and in so doing, end months of deadlock over the UK's exit from the European Union. Indeed, May had resigned following repeated rejection of her Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. He was successful in his efforts, with the Conservative Party winning an additional 48 seats, providing them with 365 seats overall and a comfortable majority (Baker, 2020). Johnson had campaigned around 'getting Brexit done.; The election result meant that Parliament ratified Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement and the UK left the European Union on the 31 of January, beginning an eleven-month transition period on that date.

The subsequent reduction in political uncertainty had led to improvements in business confidence in early 2020 (Brien, 2020). However, the improvement in sentiment was not reflected in GDP data for January and February 2020 (the last period before the coronavirus outbreak really began to impact the UK economy). GDP fell by -0.1% in the three months to February compared with the previous three-month period. Compared with the same period for 2019, GDP was 0.6% higher.

With regard to the impact of the political context on the approach to the coronavirus pandemic, it can be said that the laissez-faire philosophy of the neo-liberal Conservative Government was very evident in the early phase. The Government was initially very slow to act and delayed the imposition of a lockdown, despite repeated calls for such action. Although this is now denied, the original strategy had been to generate a managed 'herd immunity', allowing a 'controlled epidemic to ensue' (The Guardian, 2020; Horton, 2020). It was suggested that 60% of the population must be infected for the whole population to acquire herd immunity (Horton, 2020). With a 0·3–1% mortality, that meant a plan that would accept somewhere between 117,000 and 390,000 deaths. However, when the brutal consequences of this strategy became clear, it was quickly ruled impermissible and the goal changed to saving lives. Reasons for this initial 'laissez-faire' approach include the distraction of Brexit, a reluctance on the part of Boris Johnson to overly impinge on the rights of "free-born Englishmen", as well as assumptions based on previous influenza pandemics and the confinement of outbreaks such as Sars-CoV to Asia. Ministers also over-exaggerated the likely resistance from the public to more stringent measures (The Guardian, 2020). Britain finally entered into lockdown on 23 March. By then, the message from overwhelmed Italian doctors was finally acknowledged and a now famous Imperial College advice paper, which predicted up to 250,000 deaths if the government's strategy continued, smashed the herd immunity framework.

The government has since been criticised for a series of failures (for instance, lack of personal protective equipment for health care workers, lack of ventilators, failures of testing, failures of the 'track and trace' system, the comprehensive relaxation of restrictions in the summer months and failure to move quickly in the wake of the new more contagious variant in the current 'second wave.' The UK now has the highest COVID-19 death rate per capita in the world (Cuthbertson, 2021).

Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

The policy focus has been mainly on supporting businesses continuity and helping employees to stay in employment, with the measures intended to financially support businesses, workers and the wider public during the outbreak, as well as attempting to reduce economic uncertainty. Over GBP 200 billion of direct tax, welfare and spending measures have been announced. Support is also being provided to businesses through guaranteed loans. Early on in the pandemic (sub-period 1), the Chancellor worked closely with both the TUC and the CBI in the design of measures, for instance, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Both groups report remaining in close communication with the government throughout the past year, advising on modifications and the introduction of new measures (see 'Social Dialogue' section below). The TUC has been a more vocal critic of the government's response; it called for a support scheme for the self-employed and improved social protections. It has continued to be critical of policy shortcomings, particularly with regard to Universal Credit for the hardest-hit.

In relation to the first national lockdown (sub-period 1), two employment support schemes were implemented. The most significant single policy, in terms of cost, is the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)[i]. The scheme, also known as the furlough scheme, aims to keep workers attached to their employers, with the Government paying up to 80% of their wages. The scheme's operation has changed since its inception in March, both in terms of its generosity and duration. As of late December, the CJRS is set to close at the end of April 2021. As of 13 December, 9.9 million jobs had been supported by the CJRS. The other scheme is the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS),[ii] which aims to provide similar support to the CJRS but for the self-employed, with average annual profits of GBP 50,000 or less. The first round of the SEISS closed on 13 July. The second round closed on 19 October and the scheme is currently in its third round. As of late December, the SEISS will close in April 2021. Under the first round of the SEISS, 2.7 million self-employed workers received financial support in the second round, 2.4 million have received support. As of the 13 December, 1.7 million have received support in the latest round.

The Government is also allowing payments for taxes including VAT and self-assessment income tax[iii] to be deferred until 2021, under the HMRC Time To Pay service. This has been scaled up, allowing businesses and the self-employed to defer tax payments over an agreed period.

Sub-period one also saw the launch of a number of loans/finance schemes for business. There are four main Government-backed financial loan schemes for businesses of different sizes affected by coronavirus: The Bounce Back Loans Scheme (BBLS)[iv] offers all businesses loans of up to GBP 50,000 or 25% of turnover. The scheme offers streamlined application procedures and loans are 100% backed by the Government. The BBLS has been the most used loan scheme. The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS)[v] offers loans of up to £5 million for businesses with a turnover under £45 million. The loans are 80% backed by the Government. The Coronavirus Larger Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS) extends the standard CBILS approach to larger businesses with turnover over £45 million. The Future Fund[vi] provides convertible loans up to £5 million to UK-based companies that are unable to access other government support programmes because they rely on equity investment and are pre-revenue or pre-profit. Government support is subject to companies having at least equal match funding from private investors. The loans themselves are provided by commercial lenders, except for the Future Fund which is being delivered by the government-owned British Business Bank. The three loans schemes are open until 31 March 2021. The Future Fund is open until 31 January 2021.

Regarding finance, the Covid Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF)[vii] is a joint Bank of England and HM Treasuring lending facility for larger firms to access finance to support cash flow during the coronavirus outbreak. Under the CCFF, the Bank of England buys short-term unsecured debt from large companies in the form of a commercial paper of up to 1-year maturity. Sub-period 1 also saw other support for businesses in particular sectors. Thus, businesses in the retail, hospitality, leisure and childcare nurseries sector in England have been given a business rates holiday. They will not pay business rates in 2020/21. English local authorities estimate that around 380,000 business premises are eligible for the relief.

Grants have also been paid to businesses. The Government's initial business grants scheme paid a cash grant of GBP 25,000 to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England, outside of those in the highest valued properties. Small businesses in any sector in England received a cash grant of GBP 10,000, with over 906,000 business premises receiving such grants. English local authorities were also able to give discretionary grants to small and micro businesses not eligible for the other grants, with over 93,000 business premises received such grants.

In sub-period 3, grants are also being paid to businesses forced to close, or adversely affected, by restrictions imposed by the 3 local COVID alert levels introduced in England in October 2020. Grants were also available for businesses required to close during the second lockdown in England (sub-period 3).[viii]

A series of other measures were also announced in the Chancellor's Summer Statement in July (sub-period 2), when coronavirus cases had fallen significantly. These were aimed at boosting the economy and assisting people in getting back to work. Thus, the VAT rate for hospitality, accommodation and attractions was reduced to 5% from 20% from the 15 July 2020 and 31 March 2021. The Kickstart Scheme [ix]was also announced in July. This aims to create 6-month work placements for those aged 16-24, who are on Universal Credit and are deemed to be at risk of long-term unemployment. Extra support for those out of work for three months was also announced, to be provided through Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS), including CV and interview coaching. Other measures to boost work search, skills and apprenticeships were also implemented, including more funding for the National Careers Service and traineeships. Moreover, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee (LSG), will offer a free fully-funded college course, from April 2021, for adults without an A-Level or equivalent. More funding is to be provided for SMEs taking on apprentices, and there will be greater flexibility in how their training is structured.

[ii] Eurofound (2020), Coronavirus job retention scheme, case GB-2020-10/216 (measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[ii] Eurofound (2020) The Self Employed Income Support Scheme; Case GB-2020 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[iiiiii] Eurofound (2020), Deferral of VAT payments due to coronavirus (COVID-19), case GB-2020-12/534 (measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[iv] Eurofound (2020), The Bounce Back Loan Scheme, case GB-2020-19/944 (measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

[v] Eurofound (2020) Coronvirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, Case GB-2020-13/521 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[vi] Eurofound (2020) The Future Fund Scheme, Case GB-2020-21/945 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[vii] Eurofound (2020) COVID Corporate Financing Facility, Case GB-2020-12/522 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[viii] Eurofound (2020) Businesses to receive lockdown grants. Case GB-2021-2/1703 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[ix] Eurofound (2020) The Kickstart Initiative and Incentivising Apprenticeships. Case 2020-28/943 (Measures in United Kingdom), COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.

How COVID-19 accelerated and disrupted working life policies and impacted social dialogue

Accelerated developments

There has been increased funding for a number of essential services, such as health services and rail (Harari and Keep, 2021). Local authorities have also received fun ding to support social care services and deal with wider issues arising from the lockdown whilst the devolved administrations too are receiving increased funding.

The SEISS scheme (see above), which provides similar support to the CJRS but for the self-employed, is an extension of social protection for such workers. Moreover, the self-employed can now access Universal Credit at the same rate as Statutory Sick Pay for employees. Whilst the self-employed and those earning less than the lower earnings limit remain ineligible for SSP, some support has been introduced under the pandemic. Thus, to support these groups:

- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is payable for people directly affected by COVID-19 or self-isolating according to government advice for from the first day of sickness, rather than the eighth day.
- People can claim Universal Credit and access advance payments where they are directly affected by COVID-19 (or self-isolating), without the current requirement to attend a jobcentre.
- For the duration of the outbreak, the requirements of the minimum income floor in Universal Credit have been temporarily relaxed for those directly affected by COVID-19 or self-isolating according to government advice.

On this point, the availability and generosity of other parts of the welfare system have further been temporarily increased. At the beginning of sub-period 1, there was a wave of new claims for Universal Credit (1.8 million declarations to Universal Credit in the period leading up to the 12 April, a figure five times higher than the number of declarations for the same period last year) (Butler, 2020). The government moved to support low income households by increasing the standard allowance in Universal Credit and the basic element in Working Tax Credit for one year. Both have increased by GBP 20 per week on top of planned annual uprating. This applies to all new and existing Universal Credit claimants and to existing Working Tax Credit claimants. This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant (aged 25 or over), the standard allowance has increased from GBP 317.82 to GBP 409.89 per month.

There were also changes to the Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) Scheme, as a result of the pandemic.[x] These were that the definition of ‘incapacity’ has been widened, SSP can be paid from the first day of sickness absence (rather than the fourth), and the costs of SSP will be refunded to SME employers. Regarding the definition of incapacity, the SSP rules require that an employee be absent from work due to incapacity. This has been expanded so that SSP can be paid to those who are not themselves ill but are for example, living with someone with COVID-19 symptoms.

As regards payment from day 1, pre-COVID-19, normal entitlement to SSP did not normally begin until an employee had been off work due to incapacity for three days; day 4 is when eligibility kicked in. This waiting day rule has now been temporarily suspended and SSP can be claimed from Day 1.

Further, there is a temporary amendment to the medical evidence/fit note rules for the duration of the outbreak - those advised to self-isolate can obtain a notification via NHS 111 (rather than from a GP) which they can use as evidence for absence from work.

Finally, refunds of SSP costs will be made by the government, providing certain criteria are met.[xi] An employer can only reclaim a maximum of GBP 95.85 per week. The mechanics of the scheme are set out in the Statutory Sick Pay (Coronavirus) (Funding of Employers' Liabilities) Regulations 2020 and the online portal for recovery launched on 26 May 2020.

The Government also announced a Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution in November 2020, designed to boost a green economic recovery from the pandemic (Prime Minister's Office, 2020). The Plan will mobilise GBP 12 billion of government investment, so as to create and support up to 250,000 highly-skilled green jobs in the UK, and spur over three times as much private sector investment by 2030. At the centre of the plan is the regeneration of the UK's former industrial heartlands, including in the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands, Scotland and Wales. The ten points are:

1. Offshore wind: Producing enough offshore wind to power every home, quadrupling production to 40GW by 2030, supporting up to 60,000 jobs.
2. Hydrogen: Working with industry aiming to generate 5GW of low carbon hydrogen production capacity by 2030 for industry, transport, power and homes, and aiming to develop the first town heated entirely by hydrogen by the end of the decade.
3. Nuclear: Advancing nuclear as a clean energy source, across large scale nuclear and developing the next generation of small and advanced reactors, which could support 10,000 jobs.
4. Electric vehicles: Backing car manufacturing bases including in the West Midlands, North East and North Wales to accelerate the transition to electric vehicles and transforming national infrastructure to better support electric vehicles.
5. Public transport, cycling and walking: Making cycling and walking more attractive ways to travel and investing in zero-emission public transport of the future.
6. Jet Zero and greener maritime: Supporting difficult-to-decarbonise industries to become greener through research projects for zero-emission planes and ships.
7. Homes and public buildings: Making homes, schools and hospitals greener, warmer and more energy efficient, whilst creating 50,000 jobs by 2030, and a target to install 600,000 heat pumps every year by 2028.
8. Carbon capture: Becoming a world-leader in technology to capture and store harmful emissions away from the atmosphere, with a target to remove 10MT of carbon dioxide by 2030, equivalent to all emissions of the industrial Humber today.
9. Nature: Protecting and restoring the natural environment, planting 30,000 hectares of trees every year, whilst creating and retaining thousands of jobs.
10. Innovation and finance: Developing the cutting-edge technologies needed to reach these new energy ambitions and make the City of London the global centre of green finance.

Under this plan, both the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme and the Green Homes Grant Scheme have been extended. The latter were available from September 2020 and in November, the Prime Minister announced that the Grant will continue until the end of March 2022. The scheme is worth GBP 2 billion and is intended to help homeowners and tradespeople in green construction. Under the extension, homeowners across England will have until the end of March 2022 to have energy efficiency upgrades to their homes completed through the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme. It is anticipated that 600,000 households will participate. The scheme funds up to 2 thirds of the cost of green home improvements up to GBP 5,000, or 100% of the cost for homeowners on low incomes, up to GBP 10,000. Measures covered include insulation of walls, floors and roofs, double or triple glazing when replacing single glazing, and low-carbon heating like heat pumps.

Disrupted developments

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that many of the anticipated employment law changes have been delayed or postponed, including the proposed new Employment Bill, which had been announced in the Queen’s Speech on the 19 December 2019 (UK Government, 2019). This is expected to be published in 2021. The measures expected to be included in the Bill are the introduction of a single labour market enforcement body; a new right to request a more predictable and stable contract after 26 weeks’ service; the extension of redundancy protection to cover pregnant employees from the date they notify the employer of their pregnancy and for a period of six months after the end of their pregnancy; extended leave for parents of children in neonatal care: and a new right to a week’s (unpaid) leave for employed carers.

Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

This section should be prefaced with the usual caveat that in the UK, social dialogue is not institutionalised in the forms found in many EU member states. Moreover, the vast majority of collective bargaining occurs at the level of the workplace or company: sectoral bargaining/agreements are rare.

To begin with social dialogue, a review of that reported social dialogue by the principal employer group (the Confederation of British Industries (CBI)) and that of labour, the Trade union Confederation(TUC) over the pandemic suggests a significant increase in such activity (or least, more evidence in the public domain as to the occurrence of such dialogue).

To begin with the trade unions, throughout the pandemic, trade unions representing members in particularly impacted, front-line sectors (for instance, health, education, public transport, postal services, entertainment etc) have campaigned vociferously over issues such as health and safety throughout the pandemic. The TUC has played a lead and coordinating role, assisted such unions in highlighting sector-specific and occupational issues (for example, coordinating sectoral discussion between government and public sector unions in the public Services Forum; the facilitation of regular discussions between government and transport unions representing rail, bus, maritime and aviation workers; the issuing of joint statements with education unions in May, outlining the measures needed for the safe wider reopening of schools and calling for improvements to high-level strategic dialogue, including a taskforce comprising government, unions and education stakeholders. As result, June the government established a new COVID-19 Response School Stakeholder Advisory Group in June, a significant gains for the unions; facilitating dialogue between entertainment unions and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport).

Moreover, the TUC has also run its own campaigns and has regularly engaged with government and business groups both at the start of the pandemic and throughout. The TUC lists its activities in its recent General Council Report (2020), it details reports how, in early March, it called for the urgent introduction of a wage subsidy scheme, modelled on schemes across Europe. It held intensive discussions with government and business groups over the design of the CJRS. The TUC then called for a similar scheme to support the self-employed, continuing urgent discussions with the Treasury, including a roundtable with unions representing self-employed workers. The self-employment income support scheme (SEISS) was announced shortly after.

On the subject of wider support, including improvements to social security payments, the TUC has also argued for this throughout the crisis. To these ends, it has held two roundtables with the Chancellor, facilitated meetings between union leaders and the Governor of the Bank of England, and organised regular meetings with the Business Secretary.

With regard to health and safety of workers, the TUC states that it won significant improvements to initial government guidance on COVID-19 secure workplaces. These include a government expectation that employers publish their risk assessments, clear references to equality law and a direction for employers to consult with unions and workers. The TUC and unions were also represented across many subsequent sectoral working groups set up to develop guidance on safe working practices. The TUC campaigned for additional resources for the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and local authorities to enable them to respond effectively to COVID-19. It states that it secured additional funding for the HSE to increase its call centre capacity and continues to push for more substantial resources.

The CBI has also provided details of its achievements for business during the pandemic, through dialogue with the government. It states that it has worked closely with government, trade unions and other stakeholders, detailing meetings with the Prime Minister's Office, BEIS and HM Treasury where it has made recommendations on policy. It provides a 'timeline' of policy developments under the pandemic, outlining where it has driven these or ensured modifications (CBI, 2020).

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[x] Eurofound (2020) Changes to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP.' Case GB-2020-11/586 (Measures in United Kingdom) COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.
[xi] Eurofound (2020) Reclaiming of Statutory Sick Pay by SMEs.' Case GB-2020-12/524 (Measures in United Kingdom). COVID-19 PolicyWatch, Dublin.

Other important policy developments

One enacted and major legislative development in 2020 was the implementation of the UK's new points-based immigration system. This came into effect on the 1 December 2020, and applied to EU nationals from the 1 January 2021. In sum, employers now need a sponsor licence to hire most eligible employees from outside the UK (excluding Irish citizens and those EU citizens eligible for status under the EU Settlement Scheme). Further, under the points-based immigration system, anyone coming to the UK for work must meet a specific set of requirements, to which are attached a points allocation. Visas are then awarded to those who gain enough points (70 points under the Skilled Worker Route) (see Home Office [2020] for an overview).

Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

The Annual Review would usually include national-level data on labour disputes, as gathered and published by the ONS. However, the ONS has not gathered any data on labour disputes since January 2020; moreover, it states that it will not be doing so for the foreseeable future, as it focuses its capacity on the impact of the pandemic on the UK economy and society.

There were threats of industrial action from some sectors/occupational groups during 2020 and these will be briefly reviewed here. First, in April, Royal Mail (RM) workers voted overwhelmingly to take strike action. Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) had voted by 94.5% for a strike, in an ongoing dispute over job security, and employment terms and conditions. The CWU had dismissed an RM proposal, which included a 6% three-year pay increase, and had balloted members for the second time in four months (a strike had been averted in December 2019 when RM successfully secured an injunction against proposed action). However, after announcing the result of the ballot the CWU said it was not calling for action ‘at this point’, instead proposing that postal workers become an ‘additional emergency service’ during the coronavirus crisis (NSFP, 2020). The two-year dispute was resolved on the 22nd December 2020, with a settlement that gives staff a 3.7% pay rise, backdated to April 2020, plus a one-hour reduction in the working week, which the union said equated to a 6.5% increase over the two-year deal. In addition, Royal Mail has agreed there will be no compulsory redundancies and in return, the union has promised to support an ambitious modernisation of the business.

In addition, there were a number of walk-outs by postal staff early on in the first national lockdown (BBC, 2020), over safety concerns, namely a lack of PPE, hand sanitiser and a dearth of social distancing within sorting offices. There were a number of similar incidents across other workplaces around this time. 500 workers walked out of the online retailer, ASOS’s warehouse facility in Grimethorpe, following analogous concerns. On the 26 March, the GMB union highlighted that workers there were reporting that no social distancing measures are in place and a “complicated” clocking-in system meant large numbers of people were gathered together in small areas. Hundreds of workers were forced to break for lunch at the same time, potentially adding to the difficulty of remaining at a safe distance from colleagues (Chapman, 2020). Asos hit back at GMB’s claims, which it described as false and “part of a continuing campaign against the company and the recognised union onsite, Community. On the 28th of March, the workers walked out (Lazenby, 2020).

In April 2020, bin collectors and street cleaners working for Medway Council's contractor, Norse Group, balloted unanimously to strike over a lack of protective clothing and unsafe conditions with regard to the virus. The strikes were called off after a deal was reached (Leclere, 2020).

Indeed, in the first weeks of the initial lockdown, MPs on the Commons Business Committee received more than 1,000 emails and tweets from employees about going into unsafe workplaces during the coronavirus epidemic. The testimonies revealed staff being ordered to work closely together in small rooms, sometimes with no hand sanitiser or with no extra cleaning, even after colleagues had fallen ill with the virus (Chapman, 2020).

Later in the pandemic, in October 2020, staff across UK universities moved towards industrial action in response to “unravelling” Covid-19 management (Staton, 2020). Representatives of the University and College Union (UCU), the largest union for university staff, at Leeds, Birmingham and Warwick reported on the 7 October that their branches had voted in favour of disputes or strike ballots over coronavirus risks. This followed weeks of disagreement between management and staff at universities, with students returning for a new term amid a surge in infection rates nationwide. While most institutions pushed ahead with in-person teaching and a return to campus, unions demanded more stringent safety measures, including online learning as a default position and halting the return of students until the implementation of a reliable track-and trace system. As students arrived at universities for the new semester, cases of coronavirus were confirmed at dozens of UK universities, with hundreds of students testing positive at several institutions, including Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield. By the beginning of October, around 80 universities had reported at least 5,000 confirmed cases of the virus following the return of students to classes.

In response, Newcastle and Northumbria universities on the 7 October announced they would move immediately to online teaching in response to the city's rising infection rate, which authorities fear is being driven by students. The decision follows similar moves by universities in Sheffield and Manchester, and a threat by the UCU to ballot its Northumbria members to strike unless the university moved to online delivery.

On the 9 November, the UK government announced that universities were to move all of their teaching online by 9 December so that students could return home for Christmas during a six-day 'travel window.' Following the Christmas break, the UK Government announced a national lockdown on the 5 January, with the majority of college and university teaching to move online until at least mid-February. The UCU has called on the government to commit to keeping the majority of teaching online for the entire term to give staff and students a stable mode of delivery after they have had to deal with constant disruption and uncertainty since March. The move to remote learning follows months of campaigning by UCU to move non-essential in-person teaching online to protect the health and safety of staff, students and communities. The union tracked over 50,000 COVID cases in colleges and universities in the preceding term and also launched a legal challenge against the Westminster government's decision to ignore the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (the SAGE Committee) to move learning online.

Major developments in working time regulation as a result of the pandemic

Legislation on working time

There have been no changes to legislation on working time as a result of the pandemic.

Collective bargaining on working time

No data, given that collective bargaining takes place at site or company level. The LRD Payline database for 2019-2020 lists the results of 776 collective agreements but many of these do not contain details as to working hours, and most were conducted prior to the 2020 lockdown periods, which understandably disrupted the conclusion of agreements.

Ongoing debates on working time

A report by the Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) (2020) has highlighted the dramatic effect of the pandemic on the labour market but has also pointed to the impact of the Government’s support schemes, especially the CJRS. This has meant that the adjustment to the collapse in output has been markedly different from that seen in previous recessions, when the fall in total hours worked was split roughly equally between job losses and a reduction in average hours worked. On this occasion, firms have furloughed employees rather than cut jobs and average hours have cratered instead. Average hours worked fell sharply in the first lockdown, down by 19.2 per cent between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020. They recovered by 10.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2020.

In an ongoing debate as to the Working Time Regulations, Foster (2020), writing in the Financial Times, had reported on the 14 January 2021 that the government wanted to overhaul its regulatory regime now the UK has left the EU’s single market and customs union. It was speculated that the deregulatory measures related to the EU’s working time directive, with proposals encompassing the exclusion of overtime pay when calculating some holiday pay entitlements and ending the requirement for businesses to log employees' working hours. Following the leak, on the 19 January 2021, the Business Secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, confirmed that BEIS (the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) had launched a post-Brexit review into EU workers’ protections post-Brexit, whilst insisting there would not be a “bonfire of rights”. However, following a public backlash, the Business Secretary scrapped the proposed review on the 29 January (BBC, 2021).

Impacts of the crisis on wages and wage setting

The ONS has reported on earnings growth throughout 2020. In the first sub-period, the three months February to April saw total pay fall in real terms for the first time since January 2018; pay declined in industries where furloughing was most prominent, many of these being the lowest-paying industries, in particular accommodation and food service activities. By April, employees' average pay growth slowed noticeably. Single month growth in average weekly earnings for April 2020 was negative 0.9% for total pay and 0% for regular pay.

Estimated annual growth in average weekly earnings for employees in Great Britain in the three months to April 2020 was 1.0% for total pay (including bonuses) and 1.7% for regular pay (excluding bonuses). Annual growth has slowed sharply for both total and regular pay compared with the period prior to introduction of the coronavirus lockdown measures (December to February 2020), when it was 2.9%.

The 1.0% growth in total pay in February to April 2020 translates to a fall of negative 0.4% in real terms (that is, total pay grew slower than inflation); in comparison, regular pay grew in real terms, by 0.4%, the difference being driven by subdued bonuses in recent months.

For the period April to June 2020, growth in annual average total pay (including bonuses) among employees for the three months was negative, a figure of -1.3%. Between August and October 2020 however, it increased to 2.7%, and growth in regular pay (excluding bonuses) also increased, to 2.8%. Growth in both total pay and regular pay was higher than inflation; in real terms, average pay was 1.9% (total pay) and 2.1% (regular pay) higher than a year ago.

During the early summer months, the industry sectors accommodation and food services as well as construction, had seen the largest falls in pay, down more than 10% in April to June; in August to October, both continued to recover, with pay growth now negative 1.0% and negative 2.2% respectively.

The reported number of jobs being paid through payroll (which includes furloughed jobs) was lower than a year ago; the composition of these jobs has affected average pay growth. A notable proportion of the growth in average pay is because of a fall in the number and proportion of lower-paid employee jobs; other factors such as a fall in employees entering the labour market have also inflated average pay growth.

The OBR (2020) used an implied measure of average earnings constructed by dividing the National Accounts measure of wages and salaries by the number of employees, rather than the official ONS average weekly earnings (AWE) series (as outlined above). The RTI data generated recorded a similar pattern to the AWE series and suggested that earnings growth continued to pick up in October, with early estimates of median pay for pay-rolled employees up by 4.6%.

Despite the substantial fall in nominal GDP in 2020, the OBR estimates that average earnings will grow, though at a slower pace than in 2019. The continued growth in average earnings is partly a consequence of the CJRS subsidising the pay of employees producing little or no output, which means that earnings held up relative to nominal GDP in the near term. In 2021, the OBR expects a sharp rebound in earnings growth as the economy starts to recover from the virus-related weakness in 2020.

With regard to collective bargaining, the LRD Payline survey reports that there were (understandably) far fewer pay settlements in 2020, with many pay negotiations being postponed due to the pandemic (LRD, 2020). An LRD article on their Pay Survey reports that for some still in work, pay rises due since lockdown have been on hold, except where a statutory duty or a firm voluntary commitment required minimum wages to rise. However, others have had pay rises very similar to previous pay rounds and may even have received a "thank you payment" for their work.

The LRD Pay Survey has details of pending pay settlements in nearly 800 bargaining units for the 2019-2020 year but have not been informed of the pay outcome in over 650 of the bargaining units which were reported on this time last year.

Where pay settlements have been reported, since the start of the 2019-20 pay round last August, half have been worth 2.55% or more on their lowest basic rate (the median increase) and 2.50% for most grades or workers covered (the standard median). Weighted by the number of workers covered, the standard median was a little higher at 2.75% suggesting a slightly higher settlement level in deals covering bigger groups of workers. At an industrial level, the standard median increases (with a weighted figure in brackets) were:

Private sector

- retail, wholesale, hotels and catering: 2.80% (2%);
- construction: 2.75% (0%);
- manufacturing (chemical, mineral and metals): 2.50% (2.80%);
- manufacturing (other): 2.50% (2.50%);
- transport and communications: 2.50% (2.20%);
- manufacturing (engineering and metal products): 2.40% (0%);
- finance and business services: 2.30% (2.45%);
- energy, water, mining, nuclear: 2.30% (2.30%); and
- other services: 2.30% (2%).

Public sector

- education: 2.75% (1.80%);
- public administration: 2.63% (2.75%); and
- health: 2% (2.80%).

In sum, these figures show that where unions have been able to negotiate (including where pay review body awards applied), basic pay levels have gone up in every sector, helped by statutory and voluntary minimum wage rises. Settlements broadly kept pace with the rate of retail price inflation (RPI), which did not fall significantly until most deals had been done. In April the latest-available inflation figures (for the year to March) were still showing RPI rising by 2.60% and consumer price index (CPI) inflation rising by 1.50%. Since then inflation has slowed.

Positive pay outcomes have not been confined to pay deals coming into force before the first lockdown. There are examples with settlement dates from April onwards. Neither are pre-agreed pay rises under long-term deals solely responsible for the median pay rises of around 2.50%; there are new, post-lockdown settlements worth that much or more.

However, the LRD confirm that their 2020 survey provides an incomplete picture.

The TUC (2020) reports that many workers in galleries and museums (FDA, 2020), manufacturing (eg Jaguar Land Rover) (Cotogni, 2020) and transport (for instance, London Underground) (RMT, 2020) were furloughed on 100% wages (as opposed to the 80% guaranteed under the scheme) due to agreements reached between unions and employers.

What is new in working life in the country?

Of course, many of the measures already outlined are relevant here; for instance, the introduction of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, changes to the Statutory Sick Pay scheme etc. As these have already been discussed, they will not be detailed here. Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that many of the anticipated employment law changes have been delayed or postponed, including the new Employment Bill, which was announced in the December 2019 Queen's Speech. This is expected to be published in 2021. The measures expected to be included in the Bill are the introduction of a single labour market enforcement body; a new right to request a more predictable and stable contract after 26 weeks' service; the extension of redundancy protection to cover pregnant employees from the date they notify the employer of their pregnancy and for a period of six months after the end of their pregnancy; extended leave for parents of children in neonatal care: and a new right to a week's (unpaid) leave for employed carers.

One enacted and major legislative development in 2020 was the implementation of the UK's new points-based immigration system. This came into effect on the 1 December 2020 and applied to EU nationals from the 1st of January 2021. In sum, employers now need a sponsor licence to hire most eligible employees from outside the UK (excluding Irish citizens and those EU citizens eligible for status under the EU Settlement Scheme). Further, under the points-based immigration system, anyone coming to the UK for work must meet a specific set of requirements, to which are attached a points allocation. Visas are then awarded to those who gain enough points (70 points under the Skilled Worker Route) (see Home Office [2020] for an overview).

In relation to the pandemic, a major change to working life in the UK has been the huge increase in remote working/homeworking in 2020, given government advice – at various points during the year - to work from home where possible.

Another change has been to workplace health and safety requirements (Ferguson, 2021). On 11 May 2020, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published guidance for working safely during COVID-19 (BEIS, 2020). The guidance initially covered eight different types of working environments: offices, factories and warehouses, shops, construction sites, laboratories, restaurants, homes and vehicles. On 23 and 24 June, the Government published four new guides: close contact services, visitor economy, hotels and heritage sites. On 9 July 2020, the Government published two further guides: gyms and leisure facilities and performing arts. The guides are broadly similar, albeit with modifications to reflect different settings. Each of the guides lists eight 'priority actions' that businesses should take to keep staff and customers safe e.g. completing a COVID-19 risk assessment; regular cleaning etc.

The new guidance has no specific legal status. Rather, it is guidance for employers on how they can fulfil existing legal obligations in the context of COVID-19. Ultimately, it is for employers to undertake their own risk assessments to determine what steps they must take to comply with legal obligations. The guidance says that the Government "expects" employers with more than 50 employees to publish their risk assessments. The TUC has called for this to be made a mandatory legal obligation.

Barristers at Cloisters (2020) have also produced a 'toolkit' outlining guidance for employers on legal duties and solutions, including on health and safety.

In addition to general health and safety law and guidance specific to COVID-19, the UK Government has made a number of regulations that place additional obligations on certain businesses. These include:

- Employers in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors must ensure that staff wear face coverings if they are likely to come into close contact with members of the public (unless they are exempt).
- Employers in the hospitality sector (restaurants, pubs, cafes etc.) must collect staff and customer data for NHS Test & Trace.
- Employers must display signs to remind people of their obligation to wear face coverings.
- Employers must not knowingly allow a self-isolating employee to leave their home for work-related reasons.

Moreover, under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement Powers and Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 2 December, local authorities have powers to enforce coronavirus-related business restrictions. The Regulations enable local authorities to issue three types of notices: Coronavirus Improvement Notices, Coronavirus Immediate Restrictions Notices and Coronavirus Restriction Notices (see Ferguson 2021 for more details). These powers appear to be loosely based on the powers of inspectors to issue improvement and prohibition notices under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. The Government has produced guidance on these enforcement powers.

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