

# Written evidence submitted by Leeds Trinity University (COV0151)

## BRITISH FAMILIES IN LOCKDOWN STUDY:

### The Impact of Coronavirus on Businesses and Workers

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'**British Families in Lockdown**' is a qualitative study led by Leeds Trinity University which has investigated the day-to day experiences of British families during the first seven weeks of lockdown. Fifty-six families from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in semi-structured interviews and they shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children's schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use during the first phase of lockdown.

Outside of this study, reported evidence is overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights will help build a more rounded picture of British family experiences. The study was quick to respond to the pandemic and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting data from the UK population during the initial stage of lockdown. The initial findings of our study are exclusively shared for the first time in this report. Our findings demonstrate some of the complex ways in which Covid-10 has impacted businesses and workers. Our data supports quantitative reports to some extent but there is contrasting evidence and wider issues to also consider.

#### SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- For many people there became less separation between home life and work life which led to both positive and negative experiences during lockdown.
- The pressures of working from home and looking after children were significant for some parents and led to negative outcomes in terms of work productivity and family relationships.
- For many parents, working from home was a positive experience. They were more productive and the increased time with their family improved their well-being and feelings of connectedness.
- Positive home working experiences were often connected to those workers whose employers who were perceived as supportive and adaptable.
- Negative home working experiences were often associated with employers who were perceived as unsympathetic and did not reduce their expectations of employee productivity.
- When both parents were working from home with normal full-time hours and expectations, this led to negative outcomes, such as increased stress and anxiety.
- If parents were working reduced or flexible hours (contracted hours or encouraged by employers), outcomes were more positive.
- When there were additional needs in the house (such as children with special educational needs/SEN, disabilities, one or more parents in need of care/support), homeworking became more difficult.
- Many parents faced concerns about their job-security, and this led to financial worries.
- As a result of lockdown, virtual, online video meetings have become an accepted norm in most work environments and in many instances, they are considered preferable to face-to-face meetings.
- For those not working from home, social distancing was difficult or impossible.

- Understanding why some experiences were positive and some were negative is essential for strategic planning in the future.

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## **BUSINESSES**

Within our sample, there were parents from different business backgrounds whose employment roles ranged from business owners and senior executives, through to those on minimum wages, temporary workers, furloughed workers and unpaid volunteers. Due to different operating procedures, organisational sizes, geographical locations, working cultures and types of business (such as products or services offered), businesses responded and adapted to the lockdown measures in various ways.

- Many businesses who were able to continue their operations, did so, due to real and perceived concerns of “going under”.
  - Businesses which felt they could not operate as normal seemed to employ the furloughing strategy.
  - In rare instances, companies told workers that furlough was not an option since the company had taken a “moral stance” against it.
  - According to some parents, companies across different sectors placed unfair expectations on employees to perform at a similar or identical level as pre-lockdown times. Unsatisfactory performance levels were associated with negative performance reviews and threats of job insecurity.
  - Work related stress had a destabilising effect on the home and on family relationships.
  - Many companies were very supportive of their employees about the expectations of home working, particularly for those who had child-care responsibilities.
- Online, virtual meetings were popular for businesses and deemed effective by workers.
  - Pre-existing doubts by businesses about the efficacy of home-working and online video meetings were now changing.
  - Some businesses were better able to adjust to the lockdown measures than others.
  - Most businesses were unprepared for the lockdown.
  - Continuity strategies were either not in place or disaster plans were ineffective.
  - For businesses with an existing working from home culture were able to transition and continue operating during the lockdown in a more efficient manner.
  - Government advice on furloughing was considered unclear during the early stages of lockdown.
  - Some businesses took on extra staff during lockdown, although social distancing was not always adhered to.
  - In some businesses social distancing was impossible but work continued.
  - In rare cases, businesses continued to function albeit in a reduced capacity, with some workers still going into the offices, despite them not being critical services.

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## **WORKERS**

We were able to collect data from working parents from differing backgrounds and contexts including key workers, business owners, senior managers, furloughed staff and those on zero hours contracts. Some still went into work, some were able to work from home, whilst others could do neither.

- Home working was a viable option for most people, whereas for others it was not possible. Even though they were not classed as critical/key workers.
- Of those who were critical/key workers, they felt that social distancing in their workplace was not always possible or was not adhered to.
- There were some employees who were not classed as key/critical workers that continued to go into work and were able to adhere to social distancing.
- Parents of younger children, children with disabilities or SEN found balancing work responsibilities with childcare and home-schooling more difficult.
- In households where both parents were working it became particularly difficult to look after children.
- Home workers reported the use of electronic devices to occupy their children in order to get on with their work.
- Some home workers felt guilty about the increased use of electronic devices by their children.
- Home workers sometimes felt that not enough attention was being given to their children.
- Other home workers felt that their children benefitted from having their parents around more.
- Many parents were optimistic about the increased amount of contact they had with their children during the day and found that it had positive impacts on the well-being of both them and the children.
- Many individuals expressed significant benefits to working from home. It meant they were commuting less and having more time in the day.
- As a result of working from home, many individuals were spending more time with other family members which led to reports of improved and/or positive familial relationships.
- For those able to work from home, some expressed increased productivity levels. This was not only based on their personal judgements but had been confirmed by their company's performance indicators.
- Home workers whose partners were able to look after the children during working hours seemed to have least disruption to their productivity.
- Individuals in senior roles felt particularly pressured to continue working due to their responsibilities to the company and other members of staff. This is particularly relevant to those who had responsibilities for HR and finance.
- Those who had recently begun new jobs, felt under pressure to "make a good impression" and to work hard during lockdown.
- Some individuals felt that they may lose their jobs due to employer's perceptions of reduced performance.
- Many of the participants felt concerned that their jobs may be lost as a result of the financial pressures facing their company as a result of Covid-19 and the lockdown.
- Several participants believed they could still perform their normal role, despite both parents working from home and both being responsible for home schooling. They felt that there were added pressures, but also benefits.
- Some individuals who worked from home missed the social interaction of a physical work environment.
- Some enjoyed being outside of the office environment and felt it benefitted them.

- Some of the participants had already been home working prior to lockdown and they felt well placed to cope with the changes.
- Some felt that colleagues without children were unsympathetic to the demands of home schooling alongside working.
- Some participants enjoyed being furloughed and the free time to spend with their family and doing domestic jobs.
- One participant asked to be furloughed, but their company refused.

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### THINKING OF THE FUTURE

- Workers believe that changes will occur in working practices as a result of the lockdown experience.
- Employers and employees claim that they have learned lessons from the lockdown regarding improving productivity and working practices.
- Due to the technological changes experienced during lockdown, online meetings are anticipated to become the new norm for many.
- A vast amount of travel that occurred before lockdown around the country has now been described as unnecessary. Both in terms of financial cost and due to the length of time spent commuting to meetings.
- Home workers during lockdown are not looking forward to commuting, nor do they think it is productive.
- Business owners and executives have decided to invest time into developing new contingency strategies should such an event occur again in the future.
- Some individuals are now considering changing their jobs, so that they can

spend more time with their families as a result of lockdown.

- Many individuals hope to work from home more often in the future.
- Many were unsure of their rights to work at home under the Health and Safety at Work Act.

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### HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AND HOME WORKING

- Generally, people's health and fitness has improved whilst home working, with positive impacts upon their general well-being.
- Most are exercising more; but some are exercising less.
- It has been positive that the weather during lockdown was generally good. People have enjoyed spending more time outdoors including exercising.
- Quality of sleep was mixed during lockdown. Some enjoyed better quality sleep, others have lost sleep over perceived health risks of going into work (currently or imminently).
- Diets have improved for many people. There is more home cooking with fresh ingredients, and less take-aways and meals out.
- Alternatively, some have been eating more junk food and exercising less.
- Some people are consuming increased levels of alcohol.
- Lockdown has been perceived to result in less colds and viral illnesses, leading to increased productivity and ability to work.
- Awareness of personal hygiene and preventative Covid-19 measures have increased, and this will continue after lockdown.
- The importance of handwashing is something that people are much more aware of and are implementing

regularly inside and outside of the home.

- Anxiety about catching Covid-19 was evident.
- Many are suffering from increased anxiety from lockdown, such as loneliness, health worries, financial worries, job security, family pressures.
- The importance of social contact was stressed by many for positive well-being.

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## CONCLUSIONS

From our data it has become clear that people are experiencing lockdown in different ways and some businesses and workers were more ready for lockdown than others. Many workers found lockdown an improvement to their work life, whilst others faced additional pressures.

Families where both parents worked full time from home, have found home schooling and child-care more difficult. Families with younger children, adult caring responsibilities, children with disabilities or SEN have struggled and they have sometimes faced a reduction in professional support during lockdown.

For some workers, the experience of spending more time with their families and having increased contact with the spouses and children has been positive for family relationships and well-being. For those expressing a more positive and productive working from home experience, it was suggested that a supportive employer, access to appropriate resources (e.g. laptops and computers), lack of travel and less office distractions were key.

Those who continued to go into work seemed to be largely unaffected overall by the lockdown but enjoyed faster commute times and quieter workplaces. The health and well-being for home-workers and their perceived

levels of productivity and efficiency has improved for many but not for others.

There has been a technological revolution in working practices with online, video meetings becoming the new norm. These have proven to be effective for many workers and it is generally felt that online working culture will replace face to face meetings after lockdown, saving considerable costs and improving efficiencies.

Lockdown has provided businesses and employees opportunities for reflection and there are changes anticipated within the workplace. As some business are reconsidering their working practices and future strategies, some workers are reassessing their current employment, preferring to seek occupations that facilitate more home working and allow more family time.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Businesses should reflect upon their existing continuity strategies in relation to the potential likelihood of future lockdowns, pandemics and social restrictions in order to be better prepared.
- It should be noted that a reduction in commuting and an increase in family time appears to have positive impacts on productivity and well-being for the majority of workers.
- A more supportive approach from businesses can lead to less stress for workers, improved or similar levels of productivity and better health and well-being overall.
- Businesses need to be aware of family and domestic pressures some home workers may face, such as additional care needs and if both parents are working from home.

- These perceived benefits to home working and the implications of this for businesses and workers requires further research.
- Further qualitative research and statistical analysis is needed in order to understand the full impact of lockdown changes upon working patterns in relation to business and worker productivity.
- More research is needed into video conferencing and other online mechanisms in terms of work productivity, efficiency levels and future working practices, particularly given the unknown length of the pandemic and continued threat of Covid-19.

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## **PROJECT DETAILS**

### **Research Team:**

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### **Lead Academic Organisation:**

Leeds Trinity University

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