# Skills for Health

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# COVID-19 Insights

## Impact on staff and priorities for recovery

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November 2020

# Foreword

For most of us working in and for the Healthcare sector, the fight against COVID-19 has been a full on, 24/7, no time to draw breath, slog of epic proportions. No one has experienced anything quite like it, in particular where the consequences of getting it wrong can have such a catastrophic impact on the patients and service users we serve.

Healthcare practitioners and leaders have had to draw deep on their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills but many have also relied on intuition and gut feeling, particularly in the absence of timely insights and intelligence.

As we approach the next phase of the pandemic, I know many will be approaching the task with the same degree of passion and commitment, and this time around we have the benefit of insights and intelligence, like this important report from Skills for Health 'COVID-19 insights - impact on staff and priorities for recovery'.

The report highlights, that among other things, organisations have relied on the five 'R's to help manage the pandemic; Reduced spending, Redeployment, Recruitment practices, Remote working, and sadly and likely to increase, Redundancies.

There has been an understandable significant impact on the mental and physical health of staff, brought about by increases in remote and lone working and from the anxiety and additional hours involved in the direct care of patients.

Yet, we have also seen positive impacts on team working, collaborative working and communication to staff, and over half of the 2,363 respondents to the research have noticed a positive impact on work performance and the ability to manage and lead staff.

This insight report also helpfully highlights the support employers need in the immediate and in the longer term. Chief among these are the need for additional well-being support for staff and the ongoing need for Organisational Development.

Leadership development, workforce planning, effective rostering and learning management solutions also feature on the list of must haves.

As the sectors move into recovery leaders will be focused on creating a new shared vision for the sector, more integration and enhanced collaboration with other sectors, as well as their own learning and development.

When this research was commissioned, I had hoped to be writing a foreword reflecting back on how the sector had responded and risen to the challenges of the pandemic. However, as we approach the next wave, it seems right to emphasise the ongoing support we need to give our staff and leaders who have been nothing less than inspirational over the last six months.

I hope you enjoy the report.

**Dean Royles**
President
HPMA

# Mental health impact

## Over two thirds say COVID-19 has had a severe impact on their mental health.

The pandemic has had a substantial negative impact on the mental health of healthcare workers, with **68.7%** reporting a decline in mental health as a result of working and living during the crisis *(Figure 2.1)*.

Poor mental health during the pandemic has generally stemmed from two different work-related settings:

1. remote working which has made people feel more isolated, and
2. stress of working in healthcare settings with direct patient contact (higher workloads, new ways of working, risk of catching the virus, patients dying).

This has in numerous instances led to staff being on sick leave, or even resigning. The impact COVID-19 has had on staff's personal lives, such as not seeing friends and family, has also made it more difficult for the healthcare workforce to cope.

> *It was difficult keeping so far from friends and loved ones, and missing family who were shielding or unwell. Living with fear and worry was exhausting.*

> *It became difficult to remain positive, seeing so much suffering, and as some of our patients died. Felt isolating. Boring as unable to do much after work. Felt busy at work, and often mentally challenging and exhausting.*

# Physical health impact

**46.9%** of healthcare workers have reported a negative impact on physical health as a result of the pandemic. This is mainly due to the extra pressure the pandemic has placed on the healthcare sector such as working extra hours and coping with related stressors which can have physical manifestations *(Figure 2.1)*.

As the pandemic has brought about an increase in home working, a number of respondents commented on the unsuitability of their home offices, and how as a result they have suffered from musculoskeletal issues.

Exposure to the virus for healthcare professionals has also been higher than for the average person, and many have described instances where either themselves or colleagues have contracted the virus.

However, **23.2%** have reported that the pandemic has had a positive impact on physical health. This has largely been due to greater numbers of staff working from home and thus partaking in additional exercise *(Figure 2.1)*.

*I like the work/life balance home working has given me. I don't have the additional two hour commute. My physical health has improved, as I now have more time for exercising which has had a positive impact on my wellbeing.*

**Nearly half report their physical health has suffered due to the pandemic.**

# Impact on teamwork

Perhaps surprisingly during such an uncertain and stressful time is the positive impact the pandemic has had on several aspects of working life. **74%** of respondents reported that the pandemic has resulted in improved team working with members of staff collaborating extensively to ensure the best outcomes possible for patients *(Figure 2.1)*.

> *My team has taken on beds in a nursing home to enable direct care from hospital (30 beds) without additional support. Team has pulled together to care for our patients in the community."*

## 74% reported collaborative working has improved due to the pandemic

Possibly closely tied to improved team working and the shared aim of containing COVID-19, a large proportion of respondents (**70.9%**) have stated that staff commitment to organisational goals has improved as a results of the pandemic.

Many have commented on how determined their teams have been in providing good quality care for their patients and residents and how flexible everyone's attitude has been to challenges encountered and new ways of working *(Figure 2.1)*.

> *Staff have pulled together and actively embraced re-deployment showing loyalty and commitment.*

> *Staff have continually shown a variety of ways in which they are prepared to step up to new challenges and adapt to changing circumstances.*

# Impact on communication

## Nearly two thirds say internal communication has improved due to the pandemic

**63.8%** have recorded an improvement in communication because of the pandemic. Both in terms of an open and honest communication flow between employers and staff as well as improved means of communications through the implementation and use of new software and platforms *(Figure 2.1)*.

> *We are seeing excellent communication, after an initial wobble, and lots of new processes and new platforms have been installed and these will continue. These will also have a long-term effect on saving on traveling between sites and claiming expenses.*

However, **21.1%** of respondents stated that communication across their respective organisation had worsened due to the pandemic. This mainly related to a lack of, or unclear communication flowing down from managers to staff. Such substandard communications have resulted in misunderstandings, stress, and reduced levels of teamwork *(Figure 2.1)*.

> *The company has taken every step to ensure staff wellbeing with welfare calls daily, meetings and communication between managers and staff has increased and the overall sense of team working and general commitment to our roles has increased due to the hard work and determination of all staff to ensure that the service we provide has remained outstanding.*

# Impact on performance and leadership

Over half of the respondents have noticed a positive impact on work performance (56.6%) and the ability to manage and lead staff (54.4%). The former is due to processes being made more efficient to deal with the pandemic. The ability for some to work from home has meant that these staff have been able to focus better and thus get more work done *(Figure 2.1)*.

*Work performance has improved with fewer distractions and a crazy amount of time has been saved not traveling to and from meetings.*

Leadership ability has improved because of clear shared goals in relation to handling the pandemic and in some cases, the implementation of video conferencing has made it easier to connect with staff working across sites.

## More than half say leadership and management has improved throughout COVID-19.

# Support provision

## 60.9% of employers have stated that they need additional wellbeing support for staff

With the negative impact the pandemic has had on the mental and physical health of the healthcare workforce, many employers have put support structures and other wellbeing initiatives in place to help alleviate these issues such as free counselling, regular check-ins and taking account of individual needs. Staff themselves have also made extra efforts to help colleagues by sharing experiences and supporting each other.

## Over half of employers' state that Organisational Development is needed for the long-term.

Employers also recognised a need to provide additional support, with **60.9%** stating that staff wellbeing processes are an immediate need, as well as employee engagement (**47.9%**). More long-term needs centre on leadership training & development (**52.6%**) and Organisational Development (**52%**) *(Figure 1.5)*.

> *Steps were put into place early. Investments have been made into staff mental health & local organisations are offering free counseling to staff. We have daily check-ins from our Chief Executive & we're kept well informed of the Trust's position.*

# Organisational priorities

Employers have realised that once the pandemic is over, improving on positive workplace cultures and leadership development are key priorities to address. Organisations have also recognised the need to improve their digital offer and many are looking to enhance cyber security and engage virtually with clients or service users.

Over **70%** of employers are keen to further empower a remote workforce with remote access to everything. It also seems that the pandemic has made many organisations take stock of the number of meetings and business travel having taken place prior to COVID-19. Thus, approximately **70%** would like to see a reduction in these *(Figure 2.4)."*

*New ways of communicating when not in the building have also improved communication and made people less reliant on face-to-face meetings.*

*Remote working has reduced travel costs.*

Around 70% of employers aspire to reduce business travel and physical meetings whilst aiming to increase remote access.

# Summary

The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the mental health of healthcare workers with nearly 70% reporting a decline in mental health due to working and living during the crisis. This has led to staff requiring leave, or even resigning.

Additionally, nearly half of the healthcare workforce has experienced a negative impact on physical health as a result of the pandemic. This is mainly due to the extra pressure the pandemic has placed on the healthcare sector, such as working extra hours and coping with related stressors, which can have physical manifestations.

However, nearly a quarter of respondents have reported that the pandemic has had a positive impact on their physical health. This has largely been due to greater numbers of staff working from home and being able to partake in additional exercise. Further positive impact has been improved team working, with members of staff collaborating extensively to ensure the best outcomes for patients. A large proportion of respondents also stated that staff commitment to organisational goals has improved as a result of the pandemic.

In addition, over half of the respondents also noticed a positive impact on work performance, and the ability to manage and lead staff.

With the pandemic having had such a negative impact on the mental and physical health of the workforce, many employers have already put support structures, and other wellbeing initiatives in place to help alleviate these issues. Employers have also realised that once the pandemic is over, there are certain key priorities to address, such as improving on positive workplace cultures, and leadership development.

Organisations have also recognised the importance to improve their digital offer, with many looking to enhance cyber security, engage virtually with clients or service users, and further empower a remote workforce.

The COVID-19 Workforce research was carried about by the Research division at Skills for Health, led by Senior Researcher Sabina Enback, whereby we conducted a national survey of 2363 respondents in June 2020.

# About Us

We are the UK's leading not-for-profit workforce experts, committed to the development of an improved and sustainable healthcare workforce.

Established in 2002 as the UK's Sector Skills Council for Health, we help to inform policy and standards focused on training, skills and education. We are your trusted provider of workforce and organisational development, designed to increase quality of healthcare, patient safety and productivity.

Our solutions are based on one core mission, to develop a more skilled, productive and flexible workforce for the future. We do this by championing better jobs, careers and sustainable employment, developing employer-led competencies and raising standards in training to maximise quality and improve patient outcomes.

# Appendix

COVID-19 Insights
Impact on staff and
organisational priorities

- 2,363 individuals across the Healthcare sector took part in the survey.
- 22.7% of respondents' organisations had experienced skills loss as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.1 Skills loss as a result of the pandemic.
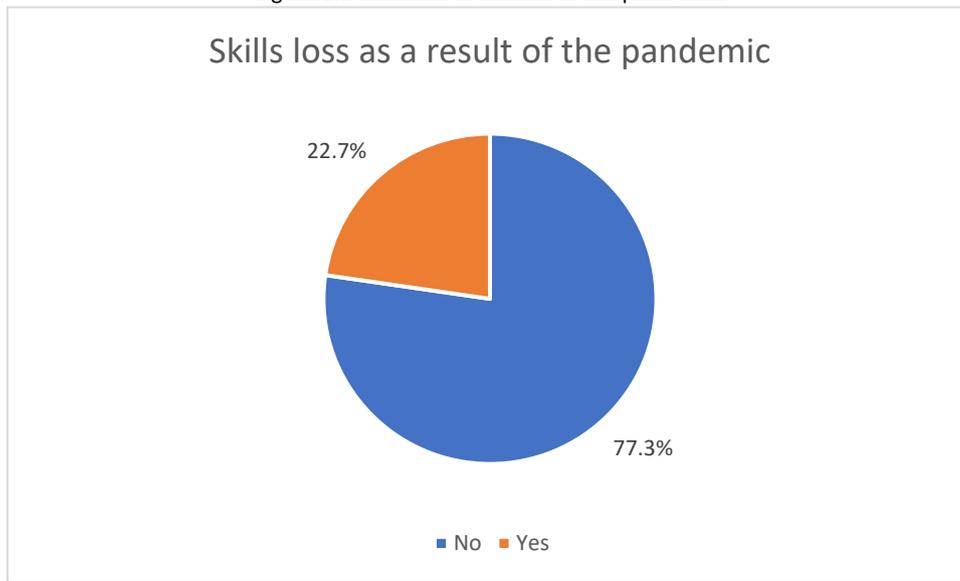


- 72.2% of respondents reported that training needs have increased as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.2 Effect of pandemic on training needs.
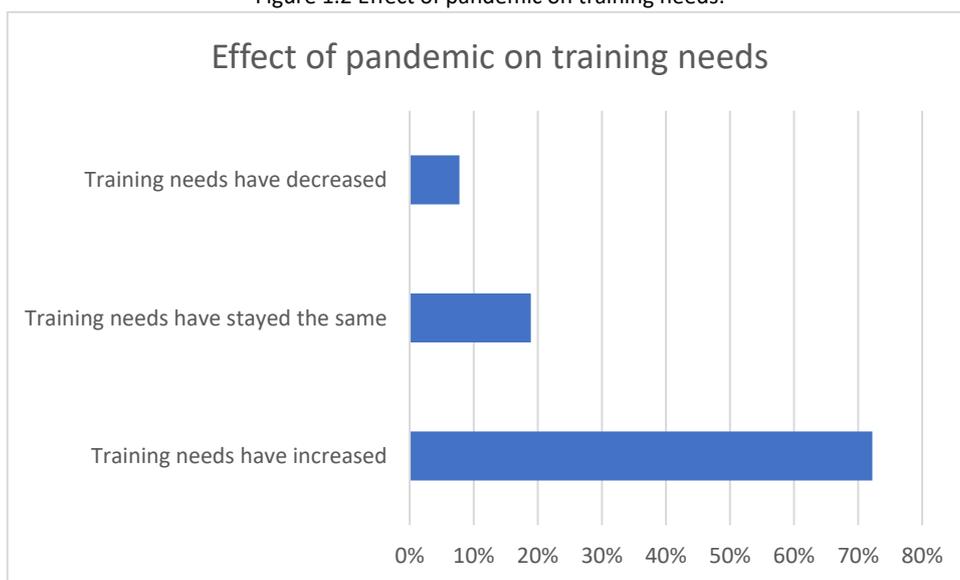
- 46.5% reported that recruitment will be increased in their organisation over the next 6 months.

Figure 1.3 Recruitment over the next 6 months.



- 44.3% stated that their organisation would make changes to organisational structures as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 1.4 Changes to organisations structures as a result of the pandemic.
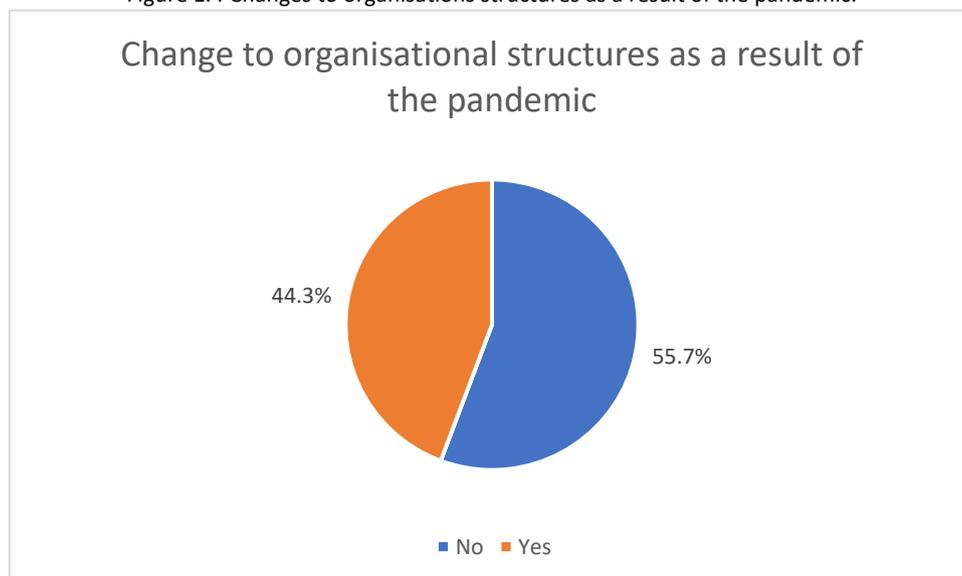
- To aid revised organisational structures, employers stated that they would like immediate support with staff wellbeing processes (60.9%), employee engagement (47.9%) and workforce planning (37.9%). Employers requested support in the long-term with leadership training & development (52.6%) Organisational Development (52%) and Learning Management Solutions (49.1%).

Figure 1.5 Activities to support reviews organisational structures.
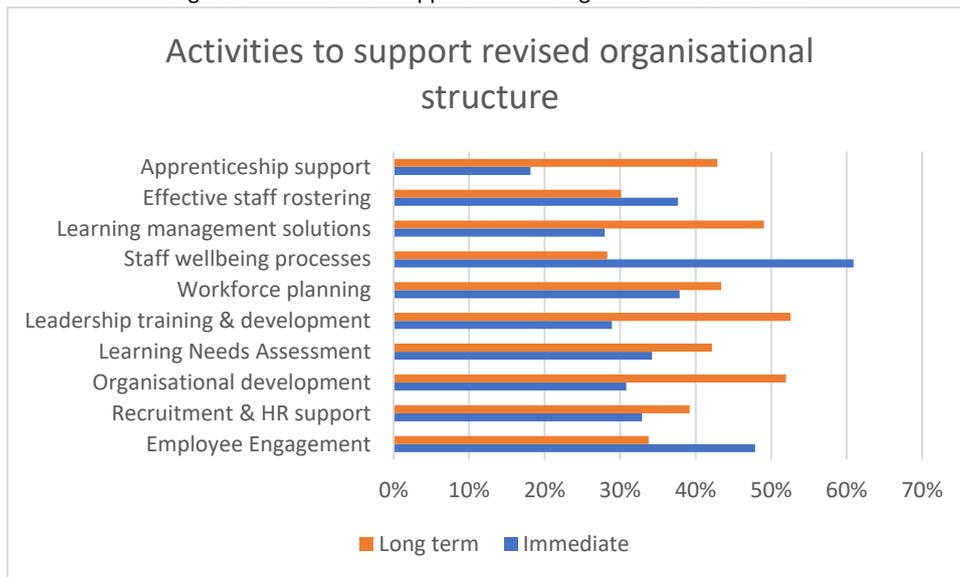


- 86% is currently using a contingency plan in dealing with the pandemic.

Figure 1.6 Contingency plan for COVID-19.
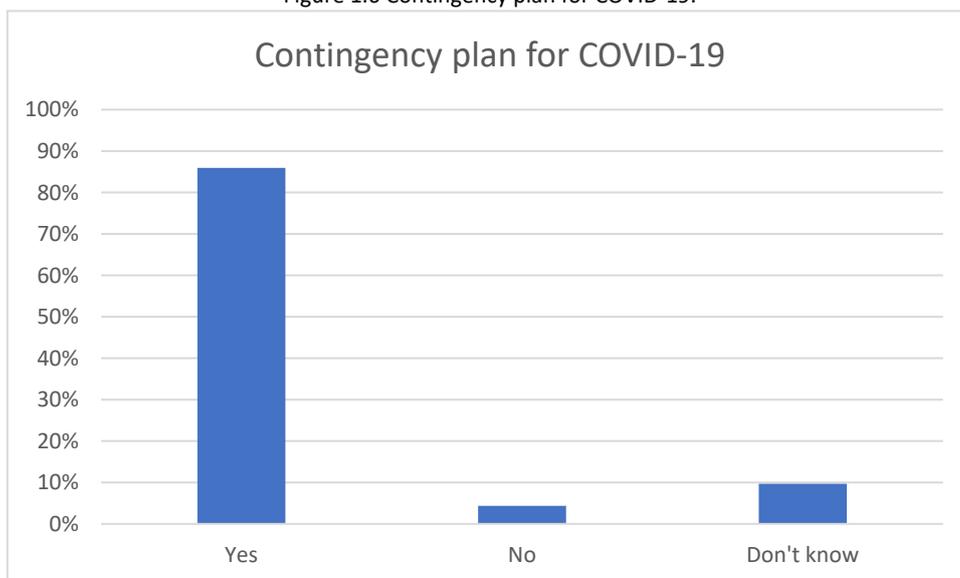
- 71.2% of respondents reported that their organisations have enabled remote working, 57.1% have redeployed staff to other parts of the organisation and 40.2% have increased staff training as a response to the pandemic.

Figure 1.7 Organisational measures in relation to the pandemic.



Organisatinal measures in relation to the pandemic
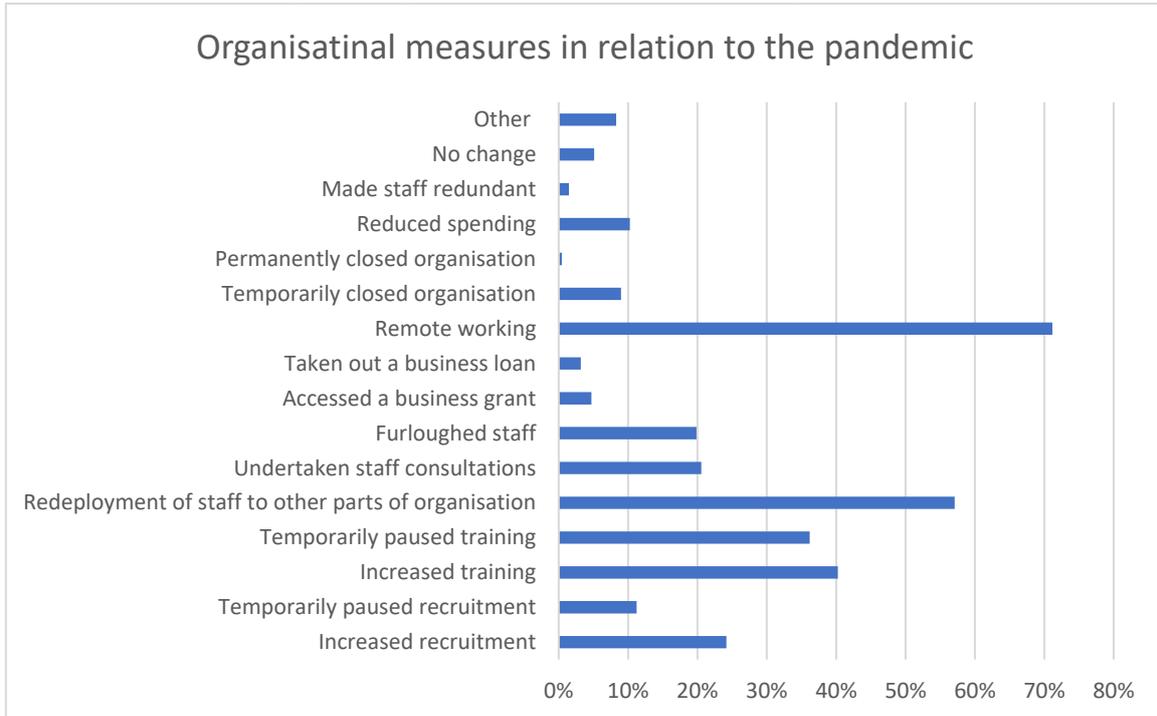
- 96% of respondent have implemented new ways of working in their organisations.

Figure 1.8 New ways of working due to COVID-19.



New ways of working due to COVID-19

4.0%

96.0%

■ No ■ Yes
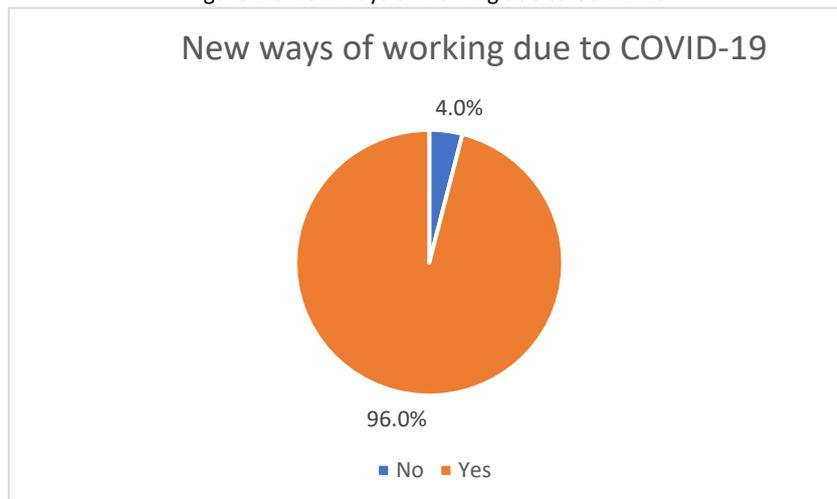
- 40.6% did not feel that their organisation was adequately prepared for a shift in working methods.

Figure 1.9 Organisational preparedness in relation to shift in working methods.



Organisational preparedness in relation to shift in working methods

40.6%

59.4%

■ Yes   ■ No
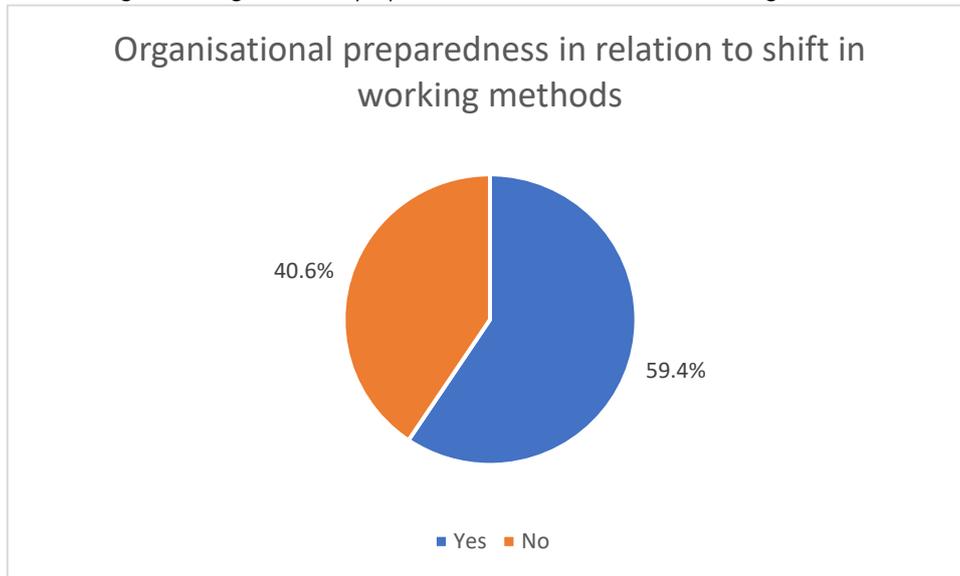
- 68.7% of respondents stated the pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health of employees with 46.9% reporting a negative impact on the physical health of staff. The pandemic has also had a positive impact on staff for a number of measures such as team working (73.9%), staff commitment to the organisation and its goals (70.9%), communication (63.8%), work performance (56.6%) and the ability to lead and manage staff (54.4%).

Figure 2.1 Effect of pandemic on staff



Effect of pandemic on staff

■ Negative   ■ No effect   ■ Positive
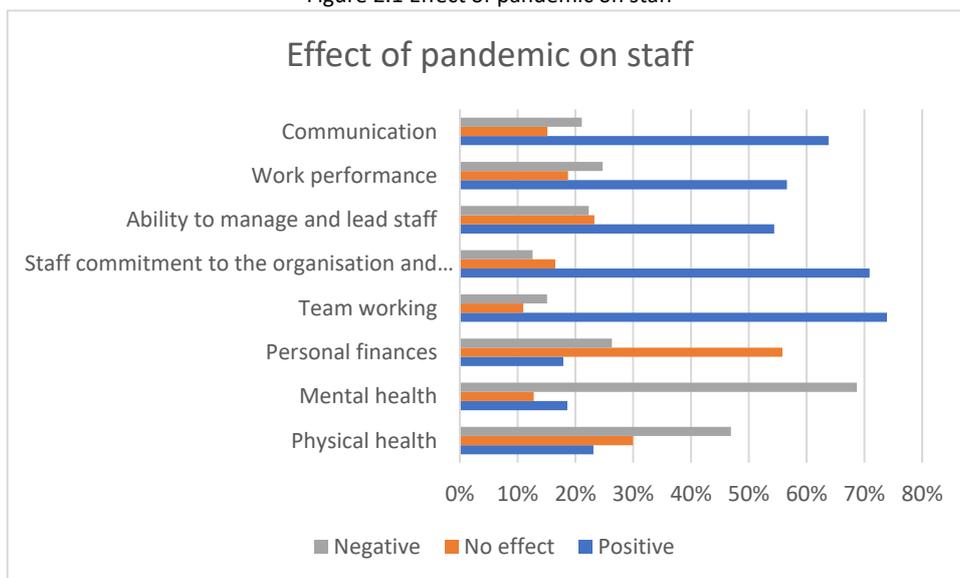
- The vast majority of respondent's state that infection prevention and control (97.6%) and conveying information effectively 97.7% will be a key future skill. 95.1% thought that dealing with out of the ordinary situations would be crucial for staff going forward.

Figure 2.2 Post-pandemic key skills.



## Post-pandemic key skills
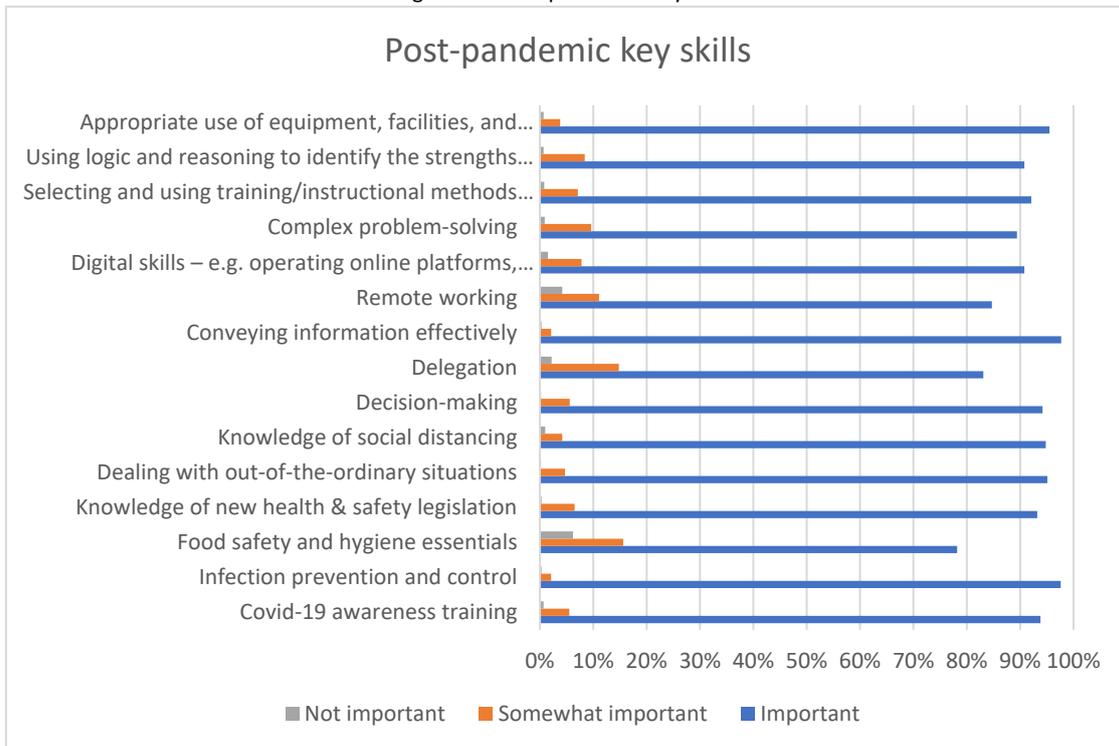
- Key skills relating to resilience and cultural change centred on awareness of changing clients/service user's needs (96.7%), active listening (96.5%) and awareness and understanding of others' reactions (96.4%).

Figure 2.3 Skills related to resilience and cultural change.



## Skills related to resilience and cultural change
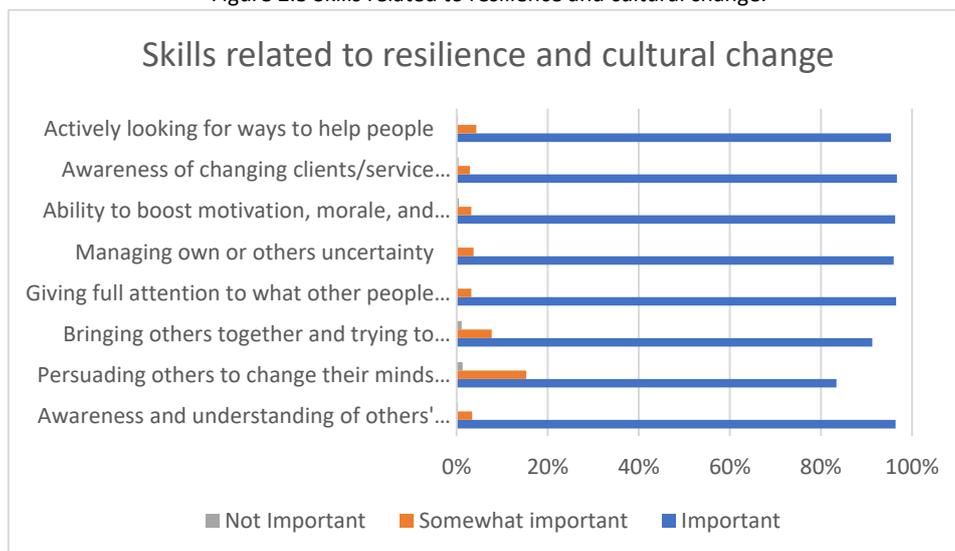
- After the pandemic, organisations key activities for respondents will be to improve on positive workplace culture (93.8%), protect against new cybersecurity risks (89%) and leadership development (89%).

Figure 2.4 key activities after COVID-19.
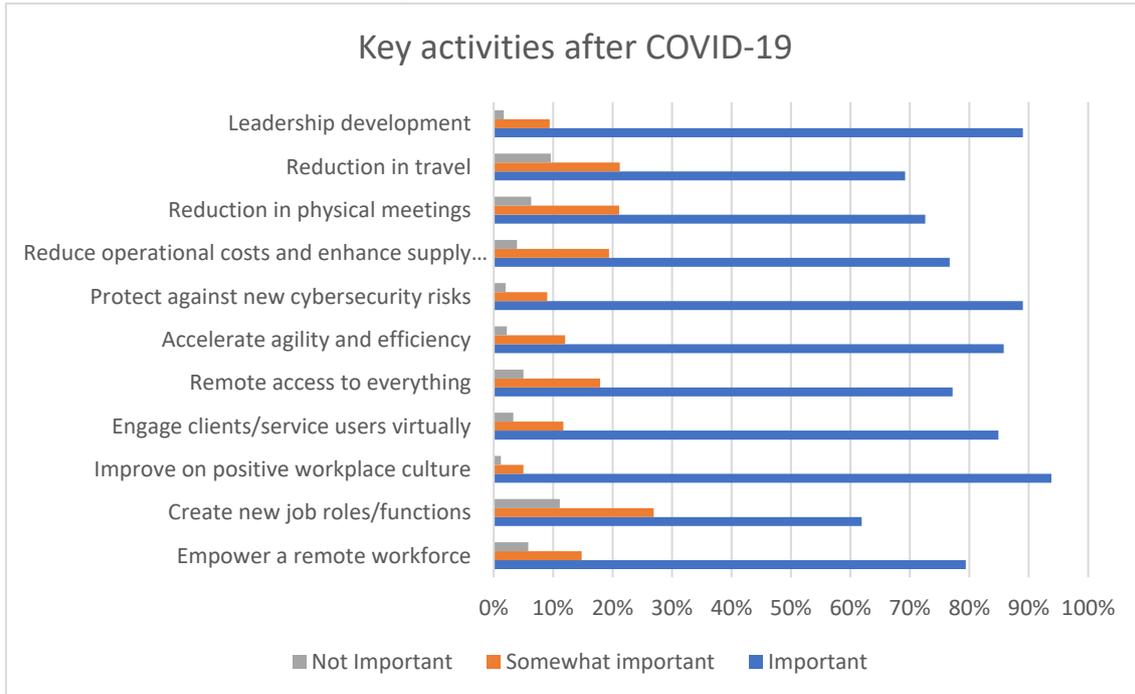


- To aid with recovery from the pandemic, employers would also like help with creating a shared vision of sector requirements for recovery after COVID-19 (71.9%) as well as guidance on sector specific infection control requirements (67%).

Figure 2.5 Support required in the recovery stages.