

# The impact of Covid-19, social restrictions, and lockdown – analysis of the current situation through the lens of EDI

*The [Infrastructure Client Group](#)'s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Group consists of representatives from the most progressive economic infrastructure clients. The members met virtually at the height of the Covid-19 crisis for a special session under Chatham House rules to share lessons learned so far.*

The Group discussed how infrastructure client organisations have had to adjust due to the Covid-19 pandemic; how these changes have created opportunities and challenges for the workforce; and the lessons that can be learned from this crisis.

## The Overall Picture

There were some concerns that the particular working conditions during lockdown made some staff feel pressure to demonstrate productivity either with longer than normal working hours or by arranging back-to-back video meetings without taking proper breaks. Such practices were having a negative impact on the physical and mental health of staff.

There was concern that an organisational divide might be created between those able to work from home and those in front-line roles who were still required to maintain usual working patterns. Staff surveys reflected an initial tension which has been managed through clear communication from the top. Most organisations had found that "pulse" surveys to monitor how staff were coping through rapidly changing circumstances were an effective measure of wellbeing and a useful way to communicate concern. Although it was acknowledged that not all questions could be framed as "yes/no" when the answer is more appropriately "sometimes" – for example "are you feeling anxious?"

It was recognised that those with needs requiring reasonable adjustments in the working environment were not all able to replicate those conditions at home – some employers had allowed staff to take home necessary equipment or to purchase additional supplies.

It was recognised that working at home was not equally accessible for all staff. Those with challenges included those with significant caring responsibilities, with health conditions requiring shielding or those caring for people who require shielding, as well as those facing increased risk of domestic abuse. Refuge, which runs the national domestic abuse helpline in the UK, has [reported a 950% increase in visits to its website compared to pre-Covid-19](#). And two-thirds of survivors responding to a Women's Aid survey in April said violence had escalated under lockdown.

Whilst the crisis has impacted similarly upon men and women in similar roles in the workplace the expectations by some senior leaders has differed such that even where both parents are working, caring and home-schooling are considered to be mainly the responsibilities of mothers rather than fathers. One contributor to the discussion revealed a corporate response that

assumed childcare was the majority responsibility of working mothers. Although their comments were positively framed around offering support for mothers in the workforce, the assumption that working fathers do not have to juggle childcare and work responsibilities is troubling. Whilst [the data tells us that women are bearing the brunt of additional unpaid work](#), organisations need to be mindful not to create responses with this as their default position.

Management of remote teams was recognised as an essential skill which has become more important in the current climate. Some of the organisations have produced guidelines or toolbox kits on how to manage remote teams but have not been able to monitor whether they are being implemented.

Many of the organisations felt that core EDI work would be maintained post lockdown, particularly when it contributes towards organisational KPIs such as accreditations and talent management plans. However, some noted already that EDI personnel had lost jobs and believed that leaders may shift their focus away from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the short term.

It was recognised that in the longer term the negative impacts of Covid-19 will be felt disproportionately by different groups. A financial downturn will impact upon younger people, with some of the companies already planning cuts to their graduate recruitment.

The group were aware that Covid-19 has affected different groups disproportionately and that organisations need to be aware of these differences when planning their exit from lockdown. These inequalities in the impact of Covid-19 are due to structural oppression and discrimination within our society rather than policy decisions by Government or organisations; nevertheless, employers need to be aware of them and to shape their responses mindful of the whole picture. [Whilst we are all in this together, we are not all in it equally](#):

- BAME communities are suffering disproportionately - analysis by The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the death rate amongst British black Africans and British Pakistanis from coronavirus in English hospitals is more than 2.5 times that of the white population. And deaths of people from a black Caribbean background are 1.7 times higher than for white Britons. (<https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14827>)
- Data shows that women are bearing the brunt of extra childcare and housework and are losing jobs in greater numbers than men. [Another report](#) by The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the UCL Institute of Education found that mothers were 47% more likely to have permanently lost their job or quit and were 14% more likely to have been furloughed since the start of the crisis.

### **Positives:**

The crisis situation of Covid-19 has led to changes in behaviour which would benefit organisations if these are maintained:

- Greater take-up of remote / flexible / agile working patterns with collaborative working and meeting spaces in place of typical office layouts
- More frequent communication from leaders with the whole workforce
- Greater focus on health and wellbeing of all staff
- Greater understanding of the pressures of those with caring responsibilities
- 'thinking of people in their entirety'

### **Areas of concern:**

It will be important not to assume that child-care is the sole or majority responsibility of women when considering home-working scenarios.

It was noted that the Gender Pay Gap reporting had been suspended to relieve some of the administrative burden on organisations. This was understood, although organisations are urged to continue with their reporting such that they are able to chart progress effectively and to monitor any impact of the changes that Covid-19 has made to working practices such as the uptake of flexible working patterns.

Consideration should be given to the inequalities created by Covid-19 and how they might have further increased existing divisions in the workforce and to shape their lockdown exit strategies in ways which will not widen these divisions.

Organisational leaders should not dial down their EDI efforts in a post-lockdown world where an increased uncertainty will require organisations to be more innovative and productive – both of which are proven benefits of a more diverse workforce.

## About ICG

The [Infrastructure Client Group](#) brings together the UK's most progressive economic infrastructure clients in partnership with government and industry to drive improvement in the development and delivery of the UK's economic infrastructure for the benefit of end users – society. The work programme of the ICG focuses on initiatives where clients can have the biggest impact: delivery models ([Project 13](#)), digital transformation, zero carbon and people development.

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