

## Oxford UCU Survey: Return to on-site working

**Background:** Oxford UCU ran a survey of UCU members in the branch. The survey was open from Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> September to Monday 20<sup>th</sup> September. There were n=346 responses covering all divisions of the University.

### Summary

- **Risk assessment provision:** Concerningly, many respondents reported they had not been provided with updated risk assessments (46.6% answered “no” when asked if they had been provided with one, 22.7% did not know if one had been provided)
- **H&S issues not discussed:** Over two-thirds of respondents reported they had not had a meeting with a line manager to discuss H&S issues related to on-site working (67.4%)
- **Working practices at the time the survey was taken were working for most people:** The majority of respondents were happy with their existing levels of on-site working (63%), with most respondents not working on-site on a regular basis over the past six months (71.3%). There are approximately equal smaller groups who would like to work on-site more (17.6%) or less (19.4%).
- **Staff views not taken into account in new policy:** Many respondents felt the University’s new policy that “staff are expected to resume on-site working” did not properly take their views into account (57.7%), and even those who supported more on-site working raised questions over the policy’s blanket nature.
- **Unclear communication and consultation:** The University’s communications about the new policy were not clear for many respondents (45.6% said they were “unclear” or “very unclear”; 19.1% said they were “clear” or “very clear”)

### Qualitative summary of written feedback

1. **A lost opportunity to recognise and reinforce new ways of working**
2. **Lack of recognition of the positive effects of working from home**
3. **Lack of recognition of environmental issues**
4. **Concern from clinically vulnerable colleagues**
5. **Surprise at the change in policy on masks**
6. **A failure to take staff views seriously**
7. **A confusing situation**
8. **Contrast with Oxford’s world-leading Covid-19 research**

## Qualitative summary of written feedback

The survey had a free-text box at the end for comments and thoughts. There were many extremely detailed comments. All were read and used for formulating our collective response. A summary of the main themes is given below with representative comments.

### 1. A lost opportunity to recognise and reinforce new ways of working

Respondents recognised that on-site working is of benefit for some staff and some welcomed the return of the possibility. However, most felt that the rush to return to pre-pandemic norms was a huge lost opportunity and made little sense given that many people had adopted new patterns of working that worked for them.

- “Trying to enforce pre-pandemic patterns of work ignores the profound changes wrought by the past 18 months and signifies a lost opportunity to create a more worker-friendly and environmentally friendly workplace.”
- “Surely universities should be leading the way in terms of thought and practice when it comes to working patterns, rather than being bastions of the old way is the only way.”
- “I feel we should only be using onsite working when there is an actual 'added' value of doing so. Working onsite, just for the sake of it is potentially harmful for some and stressful for others.”
- “I feel they should have got the new ways of working proposal finalized before insisting a return to being in the office.”
- “Our Department intends to make people “feel like they are missing out” if they do not come in. This is a horrific and exclusionary approach for people who have no option but to work remotely.”

### 2. Lack of recognition of the positive effects of working from home

Many respondents reported positive effects on their mental health from working from home. There were comments and concerns about the lack of recognition of how beneficial working for home can be for those with disabilities or caring responsibilities, and for the effect of a return to on-site working on clinically vulnerable individuals.

- “Working from home has had a very positive impact on my own physical and mental health, far beyond any of the other university health and well-being initiatives that have been introduced over the years.”
- “I’m disabled, and would love a flexible approach but that’s not yet available on the current working schedules.”
- “I have had an incredibly positive experience of working fully remote, and finally feel that I am not missing out as someone with caring responsibilities...It is a real shame that this option is not being presented as a positive move.”

### 3. Lack of recognition of environmental issues

Many respondents noted the environmental benefits of more working from home and were surprised these were not mentioned at all in the change of policy and did not seem to be being taken into account for the future.

- “in the wake of the recent IPCC report, it is disappointing to find that the university seems, like many other areas of the economy, not to be seizing the unique opportunity of pandemic-enforced changes in working practices to ask whether we can take some radical steps towards longer-term 'green' ways of working.”
- “The University's Transport Strategy aims to reduce the amount of cars on the road, improve air quality and reduce the University's carbon footprint. Reducing the number of staff being required to commute in to Oxford on a daily basis is an area which would contribute to all three of those aims.”
- “If the University and the colleges were serious about their commitments to both diversity and sustainability, they would allow, and indeed encourage, flexible home working.”

### 4. Concern from clinically vulnerable colleagues

Respondents expressed concern about the impact of the policy on clinically vulnerable colleagues.

- “All of the onus has been put on clinically vulnerable individuals to have to advocate for themselves and others in their position during discussions about RTOSW - it's producing a particular level of stress that means we are permanently trapped into thinking about our basic safety and what we might be asked to do, all the time.”
- “No consideration or advice has been given to vulnerable colleagues or those who live with vulnerable people.”
- “RTOW disadvantages disabled ppl and/or those with long term health conditions - where WFH can be a lifeline to keeping a job.”

### 5. Surprise at the change in policy on masks

Many respondents were surprised by the change in policy on masks and questioned the rationale. There were multiple reports that it was not working or that departments had ignored the change to “recommend”.

- “I really don't understand why the university could not bring itself to institute a clear and comprehensive mask mandate.”
- “Encouraging' mask wearing as opposed to mandating it is absolutely not working”
- “requiring (for example) social distancing and masking in face to face encounters would not impede 'normality' but are more likely to help us to ensure that 'normality' can continue for longer”
- “Face masks are a minor inconvenience for most people and a major benefit for everyone. It goes against the scientific evidence that the University is diminishing the importance of wearing face masks whenever inside University buildings.”

## 6. A failure to take staff views seriously

Respondents reported that the new policy with its return to on-site working as the default position had not been consulted on or justified properly. Many felt it appeared out of nowhere and felt let down by communications from the University, even those who were more supportive of a return to on-site working.

- “It doesn't feel like teamwork.”
- “We are told [working on-site] is "better" and WFH is "unsustainable" without being told why beyond loose anecdotal generalisations. It breeds distrust.”
- “It felt very out of touch to suddenly change the requirements”
- “out of the blue it was announced to us at a team meeting that we would be required to return to on site working for a specific number of days per week...I feel so stressed as a result as I don't have the childcare arrangements in place...I found the way this was announced to us completely insensitive”
- “As an early career researcher, I think returning to work is important. I disagree with how the university has done it though”

## 7. A confusing situation

Respondents felt confused by the sudden change in messaging and that the policies were unclear. It was noted that changes disproportionately affect colleagues in particular roles. Respondents often felt the central University guidance was at odds with their own department's approach. They noted that the situation could well change again quickly and questioned what the long-term plan was for the autumn term.

- “Utter chaos. No-one seems to know what they're meant to be doing, and no clear message is being relayed by the senior leaders”
- “From the reaction of departmental administrators to the Vice-Chancellor's announcement about the return to on site working, I didn't feel they had been given enough notice to make preparations for all the inevitable questions and requests that came from staff members.”
- “my experience [as an academic] is clearly not shared by many of my colleagues in administrative roles...they are now having to endure commutes that take up (in some cases that I am aware of) more than two hours per day -- simply to be present in an office, in order to do work that the experience of the past 18 months has proved them to be equally capable of doing from home...this is a major issue that seriously affects many of our lower-paid colleagues”
- “Almost as soon as the university jumped to follow the government's August line, SAGE indicated that a very different approach would be needed before the end of October. The university ought to get ahead of this”
- “The university's advice was 'clear' in that it gave no guidance so in practice it is pretty unclear.”
- “Very unclear - seems to be a message of come back but don't come back. Departments seem to be unclear on interpreting what the University's guidance is requesting.”

- “To be clear, uni guidance is being ignored, nobody I interface with expects me to return on site -- and I have no intention of doing so.”

## 8. Contrast with Oxford’s world-leading Covid-19 research

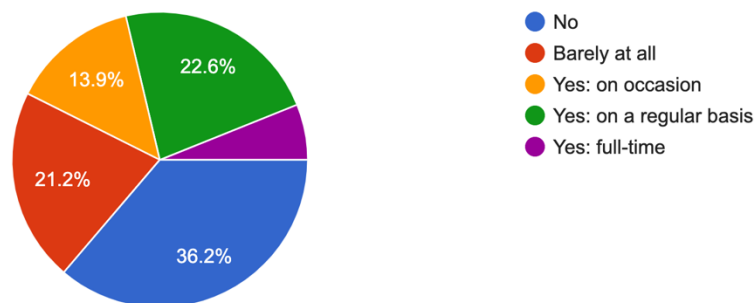
Some respondents noted an often ironic contrast between Oxford’s world-leading Covid-19 research and the University’s own guidance.

- “It is odd to have University medical experts commenting on Covid policy in the media, while the institution itself takes a contradictory, far more gung-ho official attitude towards its own premises and staff.”
- “If people can do their work remotely, they should continue to be allowed to do so. Making lax the social distancing and face mask requirements on top of encouraging people to come in, just because, is completely dumb...from the organisation that brought you the Oxford Vaccine, no less.”
- “I think it's ironic and honestly quite baffling that the same institution that has done so much research on this virus, treatments, vaccines and 'long covid' - both demonstrating and responding to the seriousness of the pandemic - is also comfortable in suggesting that we should all now pick up where we left off”

## Question-level summaries

Have you worked on-site during the last six months?

345 responses

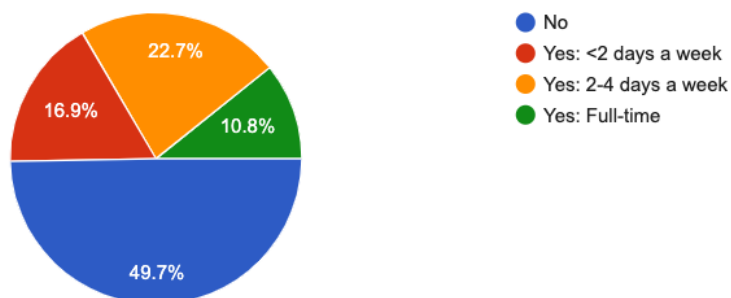


42.6% of respondents have worked on-site during the last six months. 57.4% of respondents have not worked on-site during that period. 71.3% answered “no”, “barely at all”, or “Yes: on occasion”.

## Oxford UCU RTOSW Survey

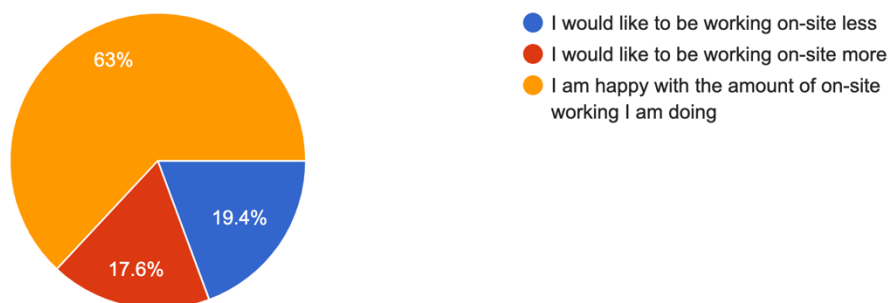
Are you currently working on-site?

344 responses



Which of the statements best describes you?

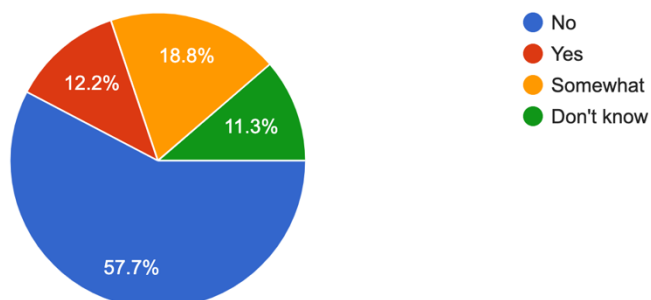
341 responses



The majority of respondents were happy with their current levels of on-site working. Of those who have not worked on-site during the last six months ( $n=125$ ) a minority 18.4% ( $n=23$ ) would like to be working on-site more.

The University's current policy is that from 6 September "staff are expected to resume on-site working" (<https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/return-to-on-s...een> properly taken into account in the new policy?

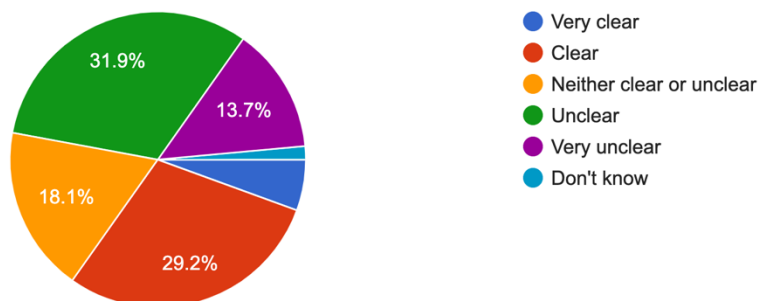
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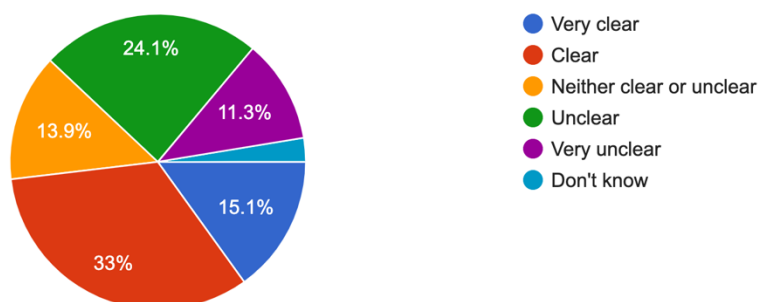
How clear do you feel the University's communications have been about the new policy for on-site working?

342 responses



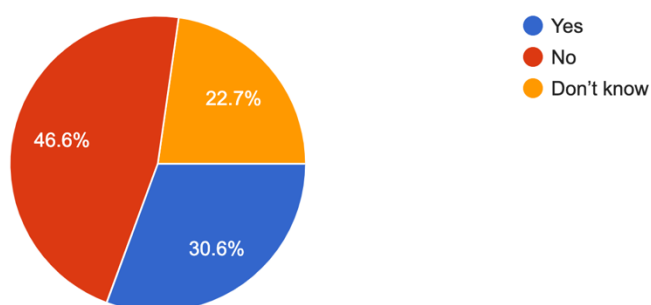
How clear are the Covid health and safety rules regarding on-site working in your area?

345 responses



Has your area provided you with an updated risk assessment related to on-site working?

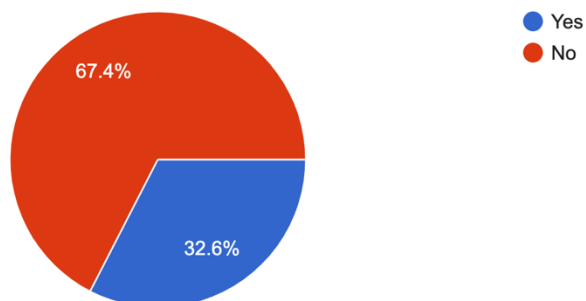
343 responses



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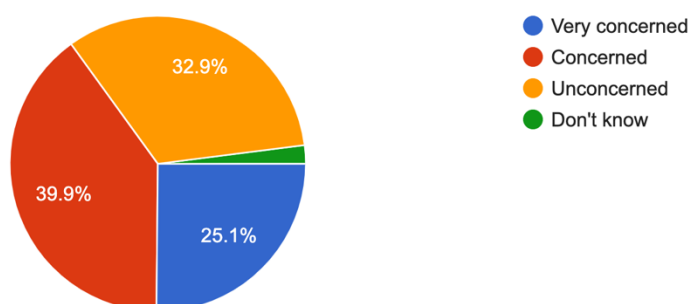
Have you had a meeting with a line manager to discuss health and safety issues related to on-site working?

341 responses



How concerned are you about your own health and safety in relation to on-site working?

346 responses



Which area of the University do you work in?

339 responses

