

Support for Health and Care Professionals at Worcestershire County Council

The context

The Public Health Team at Worcestershire County Council (WCC) commissioned this work to build on insights developed through ethnographic research with the public in 2021. That work focused on experiences of the pandemic and, amongst wider themes, reflected national trends of declining public trust in the NHS. WCC identified a need to provide balance to this previous research by bringing to life the experiences of health and care professionals.

Key research objectives were to provide:

- Greater understanding of lived experience and specific health and wellbeing effects of the pandemic and current system pressures on the workforce;
- Insight into system workforce issues including workforce resilience, wellbeing, resource and capacity;
- Recommendations focused on how best to support the workforce.

Innovative ethnographic methods

Thinks designed an ethnographic approach which allowed us to immerse ourselves in the lived experience of 8 participants. Our sample design was essential to ensuring that we captured experiences from across the health and care system. We engaged participants working within the county in a range of roles, including front-line acute settings, primary care and voluntary and community services.

Methodology

Thinks took an iterative approach to build the relationship with each participant and support them to reflect on their experiences. This consisted of three stages:

1. **Initial briefing:** Sharing information on the process, start information gathering (including themes to follow up on), and build rapport ahead of the ethnography.
2. **2 week online self-ethnography:** To gain in the moment insight into participants' current working lives, and to reflect on what it was like working through the pandemic and the impact this has had on them.
3. **4 hour in-home ethnography:** To understand lived experiences and place insights in the context of their wider lives in the county.

Why this was the right approach for our audience?

Our participants were already under significant stress as a result of their unique professional context. It was essential that our approach did not add to this stress. It therefore had to be **flexible and participant-led**.

Blending digital and in-person modes of engagement, via online and in-home ethnographies, allowed us to capture the depth and breadth we needed, whilst

allowing participants to engage at a time that suited their routines and shift patterns.

Our use of innovative methodologies

Supporting participants to reflect on, and recall, past events was a central aspect of our research objectives. **Accurate recall is a challenge in any context, but particularly so in the context of the pandemic**, where the array of stressors can lead to compartmentalisation, and cause that period to feel 'like a blur'.

To support recall, our ethnographic approach incorporated innovative methods that provided participants with the tools and structures to remember the past. These included a range of reflective tasks, such as:

- **Creating an emotional journey map** to represent how their experiences evolved over time.
 - This allowed participants to overcome their sense of the pandemic as a 'blur', by mapping their experiences across specific periods of time (e.g. first lockdown, vaccine rollout).
- **Writing a 'letter to self'** dated January 2019 to tell their past self about what they would experience over the coming two years.
 - This allowed participants to not only reflect on the events that took place, but also what impact they had on them and their wellbeing.
- **Recording a conversation with a loved one** about how *they* perceived the impact of the participant's work on their life during the pandemic.
 - This allowed us to explore our participants' experiences with a 360° viewpoint, often surfacing observations of our participants' realities that they themselves were not conscious of until prompted.
 - Having the conversation also acted as a trigger to memory for participants and spurred further reflection on events.

These reflective tasks not only provided rich insight into personal experiences but were also **cathartic for participants**. Many had not yet had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of the pandemic, nor to discuss them with their loved ones and colleagues. The research gave them the opportunity to do this. Participants truly valued this opportunity and have since taken these activities to their workplaces, to encourage and facilitate their teams to reflect on past and present experiences.

One participant said:

"I found it really helpful taking part [in the research]. I told my colleagues in the office about the journey map, and they all really wanted to do it. It was so good to just reflect and actually think about everything we've been through – we've not had a chance to do this yet."

Impact

In a time of crisis in the health and care workforce, the insights and recommendations developed through our research point to a way to help

mitigate some of the pressures on staff and has tangible impact on a challenge of national proportions. The findings are already benefitting the WCC workforce and have the potential to have similar benefits on a national scale.

1. **Mobilising and inspiring system change**

In the context of extreme pressures in the health and social care system, this research has been critical in grounding system change in the lived realities of health and care workers.

By foregrounding participant-created content in reporting (e.g. reflective task entries, verbatims and video clips) we were able to generate personal resonance with the insights, spurring the Public Health and ICS teams to action.

Elizabeth Griffiths, a Public Health Consultant at WCC said:

"One of the most impressive things about this ethnography has been the widescale support for the findings. I think this has been down to the quality of the research, the clear narrative that has been drawn from the evidence collected...[and the] tangible recommendations that we can take at an individual, organisation and system level. This research has not only helped move forward our learning of the impact of Covid on our health and care workforce, it has also helped us champion the benefit of effective qualitative research as a tool for change and has embedded ethnography in our approach moving forward."

2. **Tangible benefits for the workforce**

The research highlighted a need for action and support in two key areas:

- **Recognition of the sacrifices made, and ongoing emotional support** within the workplace and wider society.
- **Systemic improvements and practical support**, including staffing, best practice for hybrid working, and opportunities for professional development.

Our recommendations in relation to these areas have directly shaped a variety of work that will have tangible benefits for healthcare professionals. This has included:

- **Driving the recommissioning of Worcestershire's 'Workplace Health' programme**, ensuring that there is sufficient focus on enhancing employee wellbeing, resilience and health at work.
- **Informing the local health and care system's Workforce Strategy** and work of the ICS Academy, for example enhancing opportunities for progression and flexible career pathways.
- **Informing WCC's commended workplace wellbeing initiative 'Wellbeing Week'**, including supporting the development of a suite of employee wellbeing initiatives including rewards and recognition.
- **Informing system wide work** on the links between affordable housing and NHS workforce retention.

Katie Hartwright, the ICB Director of People and Workforce and ICS Chief People Officer at WCC said:

"The ethnographic research was really well received when we presented it to our People Board (that is our health and care partnership meeting with a focus on system workforce issues). We have mapped out the recommendations contained within the research against what support we have in place – this has helped us identify gaps for action and help us understand what tangible actions we can take as a system to make improvements to resilience, recruitment and retention of staff."

3. National relevance

This research has vividly brought to life the experiences and challenges faced by health and care workers across the country.

The experiences of our participants in Worcestershire are by no means unique. The national health and care system is facing critical workforce challenges, as evidenced by national strikes. By clearly identifying learnings for system improvements and practical support, this work will make a difference for health and care professionals in a range of roles and settings across the country. Furthermore, local area insights, such as the importance of providing local opportunities and aspiration, have equal relevance for other local councils seeking to attract and retain their workforce.

As a result of the impact that this research has had for WCC, we have been commissioned to develop a video animation to capture key insights and bring the research process – and impact – to life. This video will be used by Public Health WCC to showcase the positive impact that the research has had for them, share key learnings, and inspire colleagues around the country.

Elizabeth Griffiths, a Public Health Consultant at WCC said:

"We are well aware of the relevance of this research at a national and regional level and so have commissioned a video of the research findings so that it can be easily shared across networks and a variety of health and care systems and settings across the county."