



# COVID-19 and Work in Tasmania

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**How the pandemic has affected workforce  
experiences and goals**

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The Tasmania Project Work Survey explored the experience of work and looking for work in Tasmania, and the impact of COVID-19 on those experiences. This report focuses on the COVID-19 impacts.



## COVID-19 and work – Key findings

Employed respondents were asked “How has COVID-19 affected your employment and experience of work?” The themes that emerged were:

- **Working from home and workplace flexibility:** The most common COVID-19 impact on work was experience of work from home and greater workplace flexibility, which had positive and negative impacts.
- **Increased workload and stress:** Many people reported increased workload and increased stress themselves and among those around them as a result of COVID-19, which was often exacerbated by poor management or managers.
- **Minimal or no impacts:** A number of people reported that COVID-19 had not impacted their work.
- **Accommodation of COVID-19 measures:** Following COVID-19 procedures and guidelines (e.g. mask wearing, check-ins) was a new feature of work for many.
- **Loss of work:** Several people lost work, hours, wages, or other income as a result of COVID-19.
- **Anxiety and uncertainty:** Particularly about employment, was common.
- **Job or role change:** Many people changed jobs (voluntarily and not), and some were seconded or took on role changes.
- **Online working:** Zoom meetings and online teaching were COVID-19 experiences for some.

- **Loss of connection:** Some people felt they’d lost their connection with their colleagues as a result of COVID-19 and work from home.
- **Positive impacts:** Some people felt COVID-19 had made them more creative and connected.

Unemployed people said that the job search had been harder during COVID-19, with fewer perceived opportunities, and that work from home and flexibility were now more important job characteristics.

People who were not engaged in the workforce were asked “How has COVID-19 affected your goals and participation in the workforce?” The most common theme was that COVID-19 had had minimal or no impact. Other themes included:

- **Loss of or fewer opportunities:** Many, particularly those in the arts, tourism and hospitality sectors, felt COVID-19 had reduced their working opportunities.
- **Vaccine mandate:** A small number of people felt they were no longer able to work due to the vaccine mandate.
- **COVID-19 exposure concerns:** Some were now looking for non-public facing roles to avoid exposure.
- **Reduced volunteering:** COVID-19 had limited volunteering opportunities for some.
- **Trajectory change:** Some people’s work trajectory changed, such as by retraining, earlier or later retirement, freelancing or self-employment.

# COVID-19 and employment

Most (60%) of the 1178 respondents to the Work Survey were employed (see page 12 for details of the sample and methods). Of these:

- 73% were female.
- 83% worked one job; 11% worked two jobs; and 6% worked more than two jobs.
- 62% worked 35 or more hours in the week prior to survey; 26% worked 20-34 hours, 8% 1-19 hours, and 4% did not work (e.g. due to being on leave or not being rostered).
- 11% wanted more hours. Of these, 42% wanted 30 or more extra hours, 29% wanted 10-19 extra hours, 15% 1-9 hours and 14% 20-29 hours.
- 40% were in the Professional category of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). This includes occupations such as teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, architects, IT workers, entertainers and visual artists.
- 20% were Managers; 19% were Clerical or Administrative Workers; 12% were Community or Personal Service Workers; 4% were Technicians or Trade Workers, and 3% were Sales Workers.
- In terms of industry, 22% worked in Education and Training, 21% in Public Administration and Safety, and 20% in Health Care and Social Assistance. Professional and Scientific Services was the next largest industry, employing 8.5% of respondents, followed by accommodation and food services (4%). Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, Retail Trade, and Arts and Recreational Services each accounted for 4% of respondents' employment.

We asked employed respondents *"How has COVID-19 affected your employment and experience of work?"* 500 people provided an open-ended response. These responses were categorised into non-mutually exclusive themes.

## Work from home

Reflecting the high proportion of managerial and professional employees in the same, work from home and greater workplace flexibility was the most common theme, mentioned by 121 respondents. For many, this was mentioned without elaboration and simply as an event that occurred due to COVID-19 e.g. *"3 months working from home"* *"Ability to work from home if required"*.

Others, however, spoke of the benefits that work from home and greater workplace flexibility have brought them:

*"Working from home hugely beneficial for my well-being."*

*"COVID-19 has provided much more flexibility for me at work, as I can now work from home at least some of the time and work hours that work for me."*

*"I am able to work from home which I love. Better work/life balance."*

*"I've enjoyed the opportunity to work from home. It provides a more balanced lifestyle and allows me to save some money on a relatively small wage."*

*"Our short lock down made me see how healthier I was when I worked at home. Better eating, more movement and more balance."*

*"It has made me realise that working hours can be more flexible and that if it is managed well, can be fair and equitable."*

Work from home was not universally enjoyed, with some finding that the bad outweighed the good for them:

*"The pressures of teaching and working from home in COVID-19 have had an impact on my mental health."*

*"I really enjoy being around others at work and now many people work from home. When I work from home I feel isolated. I really miss everyone coming together at work."*

*"I found it extremely hard to work from home experiencing a negative impact on an existing mental health issue"*

Many others could see both sides of the coin:

*"There's now more flexibility to work from home which has been a huge benefit. On the flip side, the reduced numbers in the office has negatively affected the office culture with reduced get togethers etc.."*

*"I have better IT to permit me to work from anywhere and our online systems are great. But people still prefer to be with other people."*

*"Much of my work is interpersonal and when it had to move online it lost something. I missed my colleagues when working from home but loved the flexibility of wfh. I miss this flexibility now I'm back in the office"*

*"There's a lot more flexibility in terms of where we do our work from. But there's less of a work-based team feeling."*

Several people referred to work from home as a past experience that occurred in line with the various stages of the pandemic. However, many felt that it had led to an enduring cultural shift with regard to workplace flexibility:

*"The forced move to working from home led to greater flexibility and recognition that this was a valid option to continue, for part of the week at least."*

*"We have more workplace flexibility now, around hours and location of work, which is something I had been asking for but making slow progress before Covid."*

Of course, this was not everyone's experience:

*"Was allowed to work from home, suddenly not allowed to work from home at all.."*

## Increased workload and stress

The next most common impact of COVID-19 on employment and experience of work, mentioned by 92 people, was increased workload and stress. This was evident in simple statements such as "added to workload", "changed conditions, more pressure", and "created more stress and a higher workload". Some respondents elaborated on their individual circumstances:

*"As an educator moving online has been very time consuming and demanded new skills. As a manager, covid protocol and preparation has presented hurdles."*

*"COVID-19 has added enormously to my organisation's workload and severely eroded my trust in government, colleagues and society. I hate my work, my organisation and society."*

*"It has made it significantly more difficult to run a business (but for our industry, our profitability has not been affected - it is just harder to achieve .....which still makes us among the most fortunate)"*

And others had noticed impacts on those around them:

*"Work is stressful and everyone is burnt out, compassion fatigue is rampant."*

*"Everything is busier and people seem more anxious and tense."*

*"Huge impact, resources are overstretched, causing immense pressure and stress on each individual"*

*"busier ...at work because the pandemic has undermined peoples sense of safety but also affect many financially so the demand for services is greater."*

For many, the increase in workload and stress was exacerbated by (perceived) poor management and a lack of recognition:

*"I am overwhelmed by the amount of work and feel disrespected/unheard for not wanting to do things outside my role. Not enough resources to do my job. I had to do someone else's job who took redundancy as well as my job...."*

*"I ...was essential so there was no avoiding getting sick which sucked. My manager went stupid and left us for most of the year so morale was zero. No one wanted to be there in the firing line of spitting coughing angry... people. And no one wanted to be doing the managers higher duties and not get paid for them."*

*"Risk to staff and other clients has been poorly managed, poor understanding of these impacts by management, poor communication of policy changes in a timely manner."*

*"Increased both stress & workload with little to no recognition or flexibility from employer."*

*"The work place became rapidly disorganised and chaotic, as did the staff and the clients"*

For some, it was compliance with the COVID-19 reduction measures that drove the increased workload and stress::

*"Significantly increased the management side of the business with so many extra regulations, rules and procedures to follow without any extra income. All well and good for governments to regulate everything but the workload only increases for the self employed without any return for effort.."*

*"Experience of work - has been focused in covid response type work. Has increased our workload."*

Importantly, the challenges brought on by COVID-19 in terms of workload and stress were not always seen as negative:

*"COVID has increased my workload considerably. However the work has been very satisfying.."*

*"COVID has made work much busier and more stressful. However more satisfying."*

*"Some aspects have become more intense and required more focus, but not in a negative way."*

*"It's been busier and have worked from home for the first time, which had some technology challenges, but in all I found it quite enjoyable and would like to do more of it COVID-19 or not."*

### **Minimal or no impacts**

A number of respondents (n=81) reported that COVID-19 had had minimal or no impacts on their work or experience of work. This was mostly expressed in simple statements such as "didn't", "hasn't", or "no impact". Several people attributed their unchanged employment and experience of work to maintaining employment or work hours:

*"It hasn't. I have stayed employed, changed jobs and increased my hours.."*

*"I've remained employed throughout so no effect there. "*

*"COVID-19 didn't really affect my employment to much, because my boss keep me full time employed and building up stock for our store."*

Others stated that their work was unchanged or "not really" changed, except for "minor inconveniences", "a few adjustments", "working from home", "less face to face", or "no travel".

## Accommodation of COVID-19 measures

A commonly cited (n=78) change to work and experiences of it was the accommodation of COVID-19 measures. For some people, the administrative burden of ensuring compliance and planning for various COVID-19 scenarios had added extra elements and/or burdens to their job role:

*"Been busier with Covid administration paperwork.."*

*"Extra administrative burden in my HR Role."*

*"Extra work with disinfection and keeping on top of border closures, more cancellations and some rebookings, more uncertainty, but this can't be helped. "*

*"Keeping up with the compliance/ WHS requirements is challenging"*

*"It has increased pressures due to the need to be careful with COVID safe procedures and guidelines"*

While others experienced discomfort and often frustration at how the COVID-19 measures, particularly masks and vaccine mandates, affected them:

*"Have to wear a mask, very uncomfortable & inconvenient, as well as being ineffective."*

*"I am forced to wear face masks which is incredibly uncomfortable and makes it difficult to breathe and talk to people."*

*"May not be employed if mandates come in"*

Many others mentioned the accommodation of COVID-19 measures, such as mask wearing, temperature screening and checking in simply as things that must be done now at work, with some noting that the measures make some tasks more time consuming.

## Loss of work

Several respondents (n=72) reported that they had lost work during the pandemic, through the loss of a job, reduction in hours, reduction in trade or earnings, or business closures due to lockdowns or other COVID-19 related interruptions.

Border and travel restrictions affected people differently. Most people who (often indirectly) referenced them did so in the context of losing work or parts of their job because of the harsh restrictions:

*"Decreased tourism numbers has jeopardised my work"*

*"Can't attend writers conferences interstate or do interstate archival research or in 2020 couldn't deliver face to face writing workshops"*

*"In 2020 I was closed for 7 months, and reliant on JobKeeper, since I reopened in October 2020, my opening hours have always been at least 1 hour shorter per day than normal, my takings have hovered between 30 and 60 percent of normal, while still paying all business and living expenses. Every time another border is slammed shut, it feels like a nail is being hammered into me."*

However, a couple of people were anticipating that the border opening would further reduce their employment.

Several respondents who mentioned loss of work also mentioned their industry, with tourism, hospitality, and arts and recreation commonly mentioned. In addition, several business owners (who tended not to specify the type of business) experienced a loss of work due to COVID-19.

*"Work hours were reduced as the tourism and arts industries contracted but Job Keeper payments provided a very good income supplement."*

*"affected the business revenue which has made things harder"*

*"Music: We lost many opportunities to record, perform, rehearse and release music, and be with our music scenes and communities."*

*"For about 12 months I did not return to hospitality (the industry I had been in pre-Covid) due to the uncertainty around lockdowns and the closure of such businesses."*

## **Anxiety and uncertainty**

Unsurprisingly, given the context of a pandemic, anxiety and uncertainty were common impacts of COVID-19 on employment and experiences of work. Interestingly, for many people, the anxiety and uncertainty weren't about COVID-19 itself (e.g. becoming ill, work being a risk to health), but around security of employment and the future:

*"Afraid of lost job, due to potential lockdown"*

*"Anxious that the industry will be so disrupted that I lose my job."*

*"Constantly afraid of losing job."*

*"Always with a feeling of uncertainty about the future"*

*"Harder to get a job in my field. Worried about ongoing job security."*

*"I have plenty of work at this stage but no job security, this has made what has been a stressful time even more stressful"*

Having said that, several people were indeed anxious about COVID-19 infection:

*"I hate my employment and I'm at risk of contracting the Covid virus."*

*"I am very uncomfortable going into schools with children under the age of 12, as they can't be vaccinated and I have risk factors."*

In addition, many people mentioned a general sense of anxiety and uncertainty that affected them and those around them as impacting upon their employment and experience of work.

## **Job or role change**

Several people (n=50) mentioned that they had changed jobs or experienced a change in their role or the way they do their job. Some people found their jobs during COVID-19, with some reporting that their jobs were created due to COVID-19. Several people reported that they had changed industry as a result of COVID-19:

*"I changed jobs during Covid. In my previous job it majorly effected my specific area as I was working in the sporting industry."*

*"I got made redundant from my role in Hydro. I believe this was partly due to the disruption of COVID19.. "*

*"I sought new employment in a completely different field."*

*"Lost my job in hospitality, retrained into aged care."*

*"Spent 18 months as a covid refugee in other employment sectors (education & office work) working incredible long hours & earning very little. Am pleased to be back in my own industry (entertainment) now that restrictions & border closures are lifting."*

Several respondents mentioned secondments or contracts taken up in COVID-19 specific roles or departments, and many others mentioned changes to the way they did their job, such as an increase in phone and online service deliver.

## **Online**

As expected, references to moving work online were quite common (n=33). Online teaching, meetings and service delivery were most commonly mentioned.

As with most themes, there were positives and negatives reported. The workload associated with transitioning teaching to online, and the pressure from parents to have constant, engaging content placed a strain on some people. Working from home and the utilisation of technology were seen largely as positive among respondents.

## Loss of connection

Intersecting with the themes of work from home and online, some respondents (n=18) reported feeling as though they had lost their connections with colleagues and, in some cases, students and clients:

*"Less social interaction in the workplace"*

*"Lost the bond with some team members"*

*"I still have secure employment, a good wage, more flexible work arrangements though there is less team interaction and communication. Good and bad results from work related choices.."*

*"Yes, more isolation and less interaction with people directly. NBN wireless connection a huge benefit in allowing zoom and downloads/uploads to work reasonably effectively."*

*"My supervisor is based interstate and has been unable to come to Tasmania due to restrictions. It has been stressful in a new job when my boss cannot come to the office."*

## Positive impacts

COVID-19 has undoubtedly had many negative impacts on people's work and experiences of work, particularly those who have lost work and/or face increasingly insecure employment. However, some (n=29) reported positive work-related changes as a result of COVID-19.

Some of these positive impacts include the aforementioned attainment of employment and

promotional opportunities. In addition, some people reported feeling positive about their adaptability and creativity during COVID-19:

*"I run my own small business with my husband. We've made dramatic changes to adapt to the new situation. We've had to pivot quickly and think on our feet. We've enjoyed the changes as it turned out. We've also worried a lot."*

*"It has given me opportunities to think outside the box and different ways to connect with people - I learned a lot about online presentations and communicating through zoom etc."*

*"Less work last year but inspired me to start a second business."*

*"Made me think me flexibly about how to deliver services"*

Several people reported improved work-life balance, and some reported improved relationships between their team, clients, and the community in general:

*"Brought us closer together as a team."*

*"It has taken a lot of the pressure out of the routine business tasks, our customers are "on our team" and we are generating more income per visitor than ever before."*

*"It has highlighted the importance of the arts and creativity for community resilience and mental health."*

*"COVID provided me with opportunities to take on more responsibilities at work, and impetus to apply for jobs with better conditions and pay. It tested the communities I work in and also strengthened parts of them"*

## COVID-19 and unemployment, job seeking and workforce aspirations.

COVID-19 also affected the experience of unemployment, and changed what many people look for and value in a job or career.

As Table 1 outlined, the Work Survey sample comprises a relatively small number of unemployed people (n=41) and a somewhat small number of people who were not in the labour force for reasons other than retirement (n=104). Though these relatively small sample sizes must be noted, we can glean interesting insights about the impact of COVID-19 and the experience of unemployment and looking for work.

Among those who were unemployed at the time of survey:

- 87% said they could have started work the week prior to survey if they had been offered a job. Among those who could not have started work, caring responsibilities and medical conditions were the reasons.
- 29% had last worked within the 3 months prior to survey; 9% 3-6 months prior, and 24% 6-12 months prior.
- 38% of unemployed respondents were long-term unemployed, with their current stint of unemployment lasting longer than 1 year (18% 5 years or longer)..
- 22% of unemployed respondents were not fussy about the industry and occupation of their next job. 22% wanted work in Professional, Scientific and Technical Services, 19% in Health Care and Social Assistance, and 12% each in Education and Training and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing

Of those who were not currently participating in the workforce, two-thirds indicated that, ideally, they would like to work.

People who were unemployed at the time of survey were asked “How has COVID-19 affected your job search experience and what you’re looking for in a job?” 17 people provided a response.

The two main themes that emerged were that the job search had been harder during COVID-19, with fewer perceived opportunities, and that work from home and flexibility were more important job characteristics.

*“Made it hard, opportunities aren't in abundance. Border closures and the like limit opportunity..”*

*“It has been hard to find part time work.”*

*“I'm looking for a permanent role, which seems impossible. I can't buy a home/get a loan without one and jobs in my skill sector are all casual, contract roles.”*

*“COVID experiences and life evaluation prompted me to resign from my previous work. I'm less concerned with it being high profile and more interested in flexibility”*

*“It's made me more picky about what I will and will not tolerate at work”*

A couple of respondents mentioned that they were seeking jobs with limited public facing duties due to COVID-19 concerns, and a couple of others indicated that their work and job search experiences had discouraged them from the job search.

Those who were not participating in the workforce were asked “How has COVID-19 affected your goals and participation in the workforce?”. 118 responses were received. The most common theme (n=29) was that COVID-19 had had minimal or no effect on people’s goals and participation in the workforce, usually indicated with simple statements such as “hasn’t made much difference”, “it has had minimal effect”, and “it hasn’t”. Some people elaborated a little further:

*“Some challenges & extra admin but no probs really..”*

*“Not very much. More safety processes and PPE requirements.”*

*“Mostly not at all except for being unable to teach workshops in textiles for a period of time”*

### **Lost or fewer opportunities**

The most common substantive themes about the ways in which COVID-19 affected people’s workforce goals and participation were lost opportunities (n=21) and fewer opportunities (n=12).

Some people’s lost opportunities were articulated bluntly:

*“YES, IT HAS DECIMATED MY BUSINESS.”*

*“Was made redundant.”*

*“COVID-19 HAS HALVED MY INCOME, AND CUT MY HOURS.”*

Other people’s lost opportunities were a result of the impact of COVID-19 on their occupation and/or industry:

*“Ended my consulting work.”*

*“COVID completely wiped out my consultant job in China. I used to visit my plant for 3 weeks each 2.5 months communicating via Teams in between visits.”*

*“Had gigs booked to play during the Unconformity Festival that got cancelled due to the recent snap lockdown.”*

*“Lost work in the tourist industry. Now it is getting to a point I am unmotivated to get back into it. My age and time has moved on..”*

Industry was also commonly mentioned by those who experienced fewer opportunities as a result of COVID-19:

*“The Arts Sector has been devastated by the impact of covid-19 and opportunities for full-time work with organisations that have a positive and value based work culture are rare and few.”*

*“The events industry has significantly change and wiped out 90% of the normal events due to the logistics around how to make people wear a face mask at larger events and should the patrons have to supply/buy their own or is that cost to be born by the club/entity holding the events.”*

*“Less opportunities in my areas [of] competence and more concerns around safety/health.”*

*“No tourists = no work”*

### **Vaccine mandate**

Nine people mentioned vaccine mandates as a factor inhibiting the achievement of their workforce goals. Three had since been vaccinated and therefore talked about the impacts in past tense, but the remaining six felt the mandate was an ongoing constraint

*“As an unvaccinated person, it is becoming impossible to find a job.”*

## COVID-19 exposure concerns

Health concerns, in particular around exposure to COVID-19, had affected the goals and participation in the workforce of 8 people. For some, it affected the type of work they were looking for, while for others it limited their willingness to work or look for work altogether:

*"immensely. I will not apply for or pursue work opportunities where the work cannot be done from home while covid-19 becomes rampant in the State. I refuse to risk my health by having to work in an unsafe work environment that does not have suitable protocols in place: mask wearing, social distancing, air purification systems etc."*

*"It has prevented me from looking for work outside of my home as I am very concerned about being exposed to Covid 19 in the work place."*

*"Yes. I refused to work on line or as a relief teacher during the Tasmanian lock-down when students were not attending school. I was worried about my vulnerability as I was 72 last year"*

## Reduced volunteering

An unexpected theme, mentioned by 6 people, was that COVID-19 had or would limit the time they spent volunteering. For one, this arose from a re-evaluation of life priorities during COVID-19; another anticipated that they would reduce their volunteering once the borders opened due to virus concerns; the rest had had their volunteering interrupted due to COVID-19 and COVID-19 reduction measures:

*"I'm anxious about attending the open plan office in Jan/Feb when it is expected that Delta will be spreading in Hobart. I will probably retreat and work from home when ever possible and not do my voluntary work for that period."*

*"In my volunteering role because I was over 70 [organisation] would not allow me to work!! I'm healthy, very active and brain active. I couldn't understand their logic when other charities did not follow this rule. Also [organisation] is all about mental health and by doing this did not take into account their volunteers' mental health."*

*"Was unable to volunteer for a period. Class I tutor for Seniors has been reduced in size for social distancing, which has not allowed some seniors who need this to attend."*

*"COVID-19 forced me to reduce the time I spent volunteering. On reflection it resulted in me being much more likely to cut back on my volunteering hours & responsibilities depending on demands in other parts of my life, such as health or family commitments. I guess I'm more aware of being able to change my commitments to achieve a better life balance."*

## Trajectory change

Several people reported that their career trajectory had changed in different ways. Two people took an earlier than anticipated retirement, while one continued working past their intended retirement date due to COVID-19 impeding upon financial goals.

One person mentioned retraining; another had moved away from career opportunities due to housing unaffordability; and two people went to freelance or self-employment.

Several people had changed trajectory as a result of discouragement, leading to the abandonment of training and hope of finding employment.

*"Destroyed the way I looked at having employment."*

# The Tasmania Project Work Survey

The Tasmania Project Work Survey asked people living in Tasmania about their experiences of work and looking for work, and their goals and aspirations in the workforce. This report looks at how COVID-19 has affected these experiences and aspirations.

## Methodology

The Tasmania Project Work Survey (Work Survey) was open between 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021 and 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022. 1178 adult Tasmanian residents participated in the survey.

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of respondents to the Work Survey. Just over two-thirds of the sample (68%) identified as female, 31% male, and 1% preferred to self-describe or to not say.

Over one third (34%) of respondents were aged 65 and over; 25% were aged 55-64; 20% between 45 and 53; 12% 35-44 and 8% aged under 35. In line with the age distribution, 28% of respondents were retirees; 60% were employed, 3.5% were unemployed, and 9% were not in the labour force for other reasons, such as studying, caring, volunteering, or dealing with illness and/or disability.

Most (62%) respondents had educational qualifications of a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 27% held an Advanced Diploma or Certificate.

The Hobart region was home to the highest proportion of respondents (39%), followed by Launceston and the North East at 21%, West and North West at 21%, and the South East with 20% of respondents.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Work Survey respondents (n=1178)**

	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	733	67.6
Male	339	31.3
Prefer not to say/self-describe	12	1.1
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	27	2.5
25-34	62	5.8
35-44	126	11.8
45-54	216	20.2
55-64	271	25.4
65+	365	34.2
<b>Education level</b>		
High school	113	10.4
Advanced Diploma, Certificate	297	27.4
Bachelor's degree or above	674	62.1
<b>Region</b>		
Hobart	451	38.9
Launceston and North East	242	20.9
South East	227	19.6
West and North West	240	20.7
<b>Employment status</b>		
Employed	707	60
Unemployed	41	3.5
Retired	326	27.7
Other (students, volunteers, carers etc.)	104	8.9