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# My job as a health and safety lead

Covid-19 has meant an intense few months for PCS health and safety reps like Paula Skillin, who even caught the virus herself in March, 2020.

Having been a health and safety rep since the union helped her with her own industrial injury case in the 1990s, she now uses her experience to support DWP safety reps and members in south west England.

## **Tell us about your job and PCS work**

I'm a DWP working health decision-maker, based at Clearbrook House in Plymouth, Devon.

I normally do 50% union duties, 50% "day job" but since the onset of the pandemic I have had 100% official time for Covid-related health and safety (H&S) functions.

## **What have the last 6 months been like?**

My husband caught Covid-19 at a meeting in March and passed it on to me. I call it my 16 days of hell. I still have mild post-viral fatigue on top of finding it very hard to switch off and the work being unrelenting. I'm not being a martyr though.

H&S always has busy times, but this has been to a whole new level. What's been different is how it's all been evolving so fast.

One of my main jobs is ensuring the SW H&S leads and reps have the information they need. Management have been in a similar situation – not knowing what's going to happen from one minute to the next. We do get managers with an eye for the main chance who try to do their own thing, but most want to do it right and are working with their reps.

## **What kinds of issues are you dealing with?**

On the jobcentre side, they seemed slow to close the sites and the stepped reopening has been problematic. We've had some managers trying things that

breach the risk assessments, hoping to extend the service without really considering the rising infection rate and implications.

I've also been dealing with contentious things like food sharing. You can feel a bit of a killjoy.

The latest issue is trying to shoe-horn in staff because of the numbers DWP is recruiting. Some managers decide they'll just put as many in as they want, socially distanced or not. As soon as we've got that resolved in one site, it happens somewhere else. In one site one of my safety reps reported they're making toilet access a free-for-all because they can't make social distancing work. Sometimes it's like health and safety whack-a-mole, genuinely.

That said, it's rarely contentious because we should all be working to a set of laws and guidelines. Mostly the manager hasn't got a leg to stand on.

**What do you like about health and safety work?**

My day job involves dealing with the law, and H&S legislation is quite clear – so that sits well with me. When I give my meeting reports, I preface it with 'now you've got the anorak session; the mysterious and arcane world of H&S', because a lot of people think it's a bit strange.

There's this idea that H&S is there to obstruct and prevent. I always say, 'no, it's there to get things done in the safest way possible'. We're not dinosaurs.

**What does the next six months hold?**

I take it day by day. If anybody had told me 12 months ago we'd be in this situation now I would never have believed them. Six months ago, I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel – it was a case of trying to work with what we had, but things are changing all the time. I don't think it pays to look too far ahead.