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# Flight Crew Furloughs. Management summary



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## Flight Crew Furloughs. Management summary

A data-informed assessment of the impacts of HMG-supported furloughs on flight crew competencies, including retention of learned routines, faith in officialdom, faith in employers and subjective outlook.

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### **1 Introduction**

Data was gathered via an on-line questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The on-line questionnaire, available to British Air Line Pilots Association members via the BALPA web-site between 16 March 2022 and 6 April 2022, attracted 223 responses.

The major findings are summarised below. These findings are described in greater detail in the full report, which runs to 32,000 words.

The author would like to thank the staff and membership of the British Air Line Pilots Association for their enthusiastic support for the project.

### **2 COVID-19**

The COVID-19 virus emerged in 2019. The World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. In 2020, researchers Yang Cao, Ayako Hiyoshi and Scott Montgomery calculated the mean and median case fatality rate (CFR) for COVID-19 to be 3.31% and 2.19%.

### **3 Flight-crew competencies and retention of learned routines**

Furlough schemes could see pilots spend significant time away from the flight-deck. One Captain, furloughed on 1 May, 2020, returned to work on 30 October 2021.

Respondents were asked to assess their performance during their first post-Furlough duty. They reflected on how they performed during their first duty (the location of which could be either the flight-deck or simulator), scoring their performance on a Likert scale of one to ten, one being unsatisfactory and ten being satisfactory. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 1:

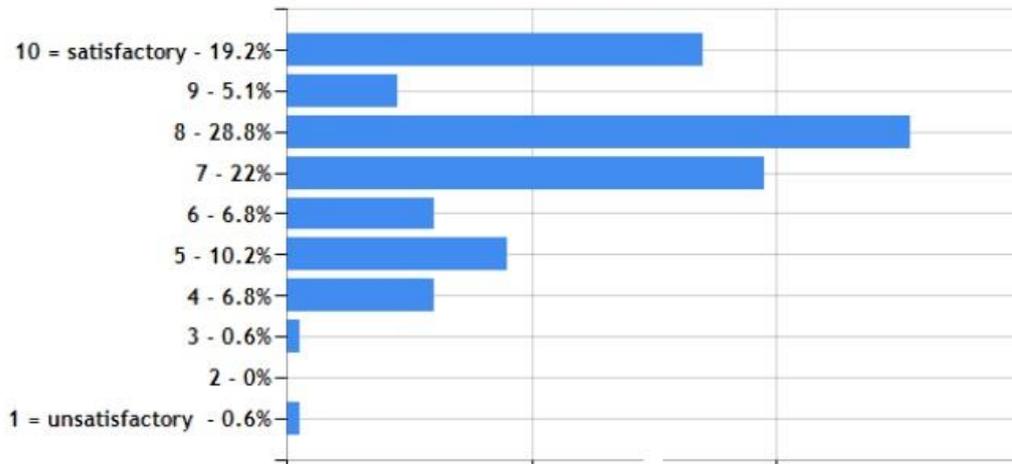


Figure 1 Respondents' subjective performance assessment of their first duty (flight-deck or simulator) following their first period of Furlough

The data showed a Median value of 8 and a Mode value of 8. Further mining of the data revealed that fourteen respondents scored their first duty (flight-deck or simulator) in the range 1 – 4 (Table 1).

First duty score	Number of respondents
1	1
2	0
3	1
4	12
Total	14

Table 1 Performance data post Furlough #1

The pilot who scored his first post-Furlough #1 duty (a simulator session) at 1, observed: '[My performance was affected by] total lack of recency/practice. Given a difficult simulator profile that was designed to catch you out. Unsympathetic and unrealistic examiner. I passed, but felt very useless compared to my normal performance'. This pilot, a Captain, had been furloughed between 01/03/2020 and 31/08/2021.

A pilot who scored his first post-Furlough #1 duty (a scheduled service operated on 23/07/2020) at 4, observed: '[I] really struggled with SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures] – reverting to old procedures. Muscle-memory poor, so panel-scans and cockpit flows were slow, and often had to be repeated. Setting-up took roughly five times longer than pre-COVID, with 2-3 attempts at certain flows or tasks'. This pilot, a First Officer and CRM Instructor (a human-factors and teamwork trainer), had been furloughed between 01/03/2020 and 01/07/2020.

When asked to comment on their employer's performance and that of the CAA, respondents raised issues connected to training and recency (Table 2).

Rank	Comment (respondents' testimony is reproduced verbatim)	Airline offering
First Officer	Considering the toll on mental health and the lack of currency, I think the CAA could have mandated more extensive training before pilots returned to flying.	Low-cost

Captain	[My airline should have provided] much more training. Two years of constant Furlough during a type-rating course means that the bare minimums simply are not appropriate. Specifically, I feel I should have had twice as much line training. With just six sectors, I had barely strung together two consistently good landings before I passed the line-check and was rostered line flights as Captain.	Charter
Captain	[The CAA should not have] allowed companies to cut corners getting pilots current again. In fact, [the CAA] should have insisted on extra training and greater safeguards until full recency [was] regained.	Low-cost
Captain	[My airline should have] introduced refresher simulator sessions sooner.	Charter
First Officer	The CAA could have insisted on more simulator training for those not regularly flying.	Full-service

Table 2 Sample of testimony pertaining to training and recency

A pilot's performance is partly a function of recency. That is, of how recently the pilot:

- practiced their motor skills
- executed learned routines
- applied experiential knowledge.

As human-factors experts Ron Campbell and Michael Bagshaw put it in their 1999 book *Human Performance and Limitations in Aviation*: 'Flying an aircraft is a psycho-motor skill ... [C]onstant reinforcement of the acquired psycho-motor skills is necessary ... to maintain competence in the flying environment'. Captain Linda Orlady observes in the 2010 book *Crew Resource Management*: 'It is agreed by about all that manual piloting skills degrade if they are not used. It can be somewhat distressing even to experienced pilots transitioning ... from a more advanced ... aircraft to an earlier automation-level aircraft ... and observing that their basic instrument scanning skills have degraded'.

Without reinforcement, skills and knowledge fade. There is a positive relationship between recency and individual performance, and, obviously, between individual performance and safety. Sub-standard performance produces latent and active errors. Active errors produce near-misses, incidents and accidents. Accidents cause death, injury, psychological trauma, reputational damage and financial loss. Writing in the *Journal of Economics and Finance*, academics Jay Squalli and Mohsen Saad note how '... perceptions about accidents with serious injuries and fatalities lead to cumulative decreases in enplanement'. Major accidents have the potential to put the largest airlines out of business. No airline is too big to fail.

#### 4 Faith in officialdom

Several questions probed respondents' faith in officialdom, which included the Westminster Government, the devolved governments, agencies such as the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), representative organisations such as trades unions and international agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The question that asked respondents to consider the adequacy of the Westminster Government's performance in safeguarding the interests of commercial aviation drew the following response (Figure 2):

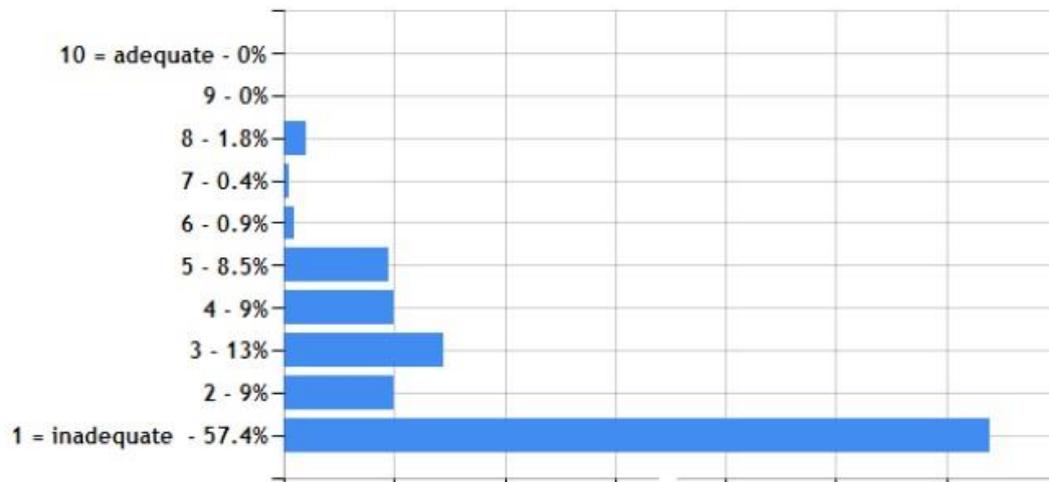


Figure 2 Adequacy of the Westminster Government's performance in safeguarding the interests of commercial aviation

The data showed a Median value of 1 and a Mode value of 1. Many respondents were severely critical of the Westminster Government's performance. Typical responses included this claim by a First Officer: 'Why can't I select Zero? They have never cared about aviation and seem to have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to end the industry'. A Captain observed: 'Woeful – they did not care at all. Quite happy to throw us on the rubbish heap .... Aviation and transport in general was an "easy win" for ministers wanting to look like they were doing something, even though it is well proven that international travel restrictions were completely useless after the virus was detected here. Populism over science and reason at every turn. Having used us as such, they then failed to provide any additional support for what, along with hospitality, was the worst-affected industry on the planet'. There were some positive responses, such as the following from a Captain employed by a freight airline: 'Sensible – given the circumstances'.

The question that asked respondents to consider the performance of the devolved governments drew the following response (Figure 3):

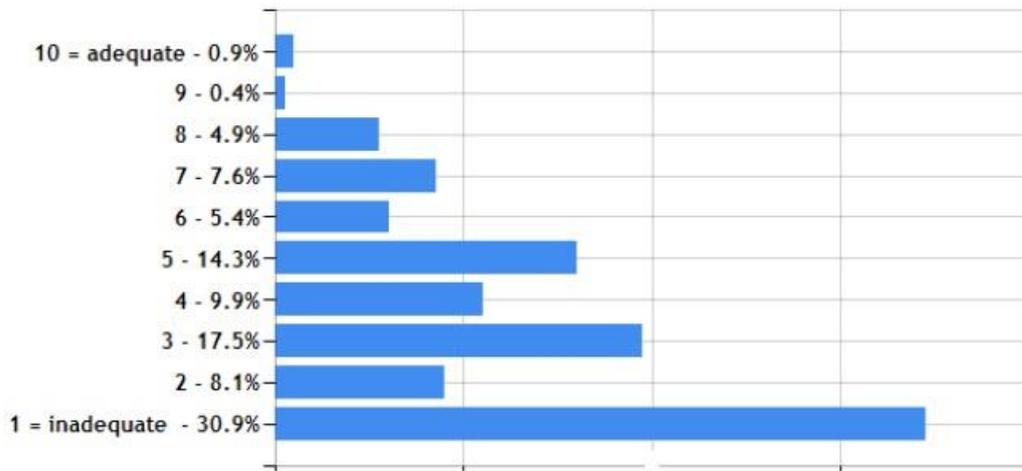


Figure 3 Adequacy of the response of the devolved administrations

The data showed a Median value of 3 and a Mode value of 1.

The question that asked respondents to consider whether the UK's fragmented system of government reduced the effectiveness of the response to the pandemic drew the following response (Figure 4):

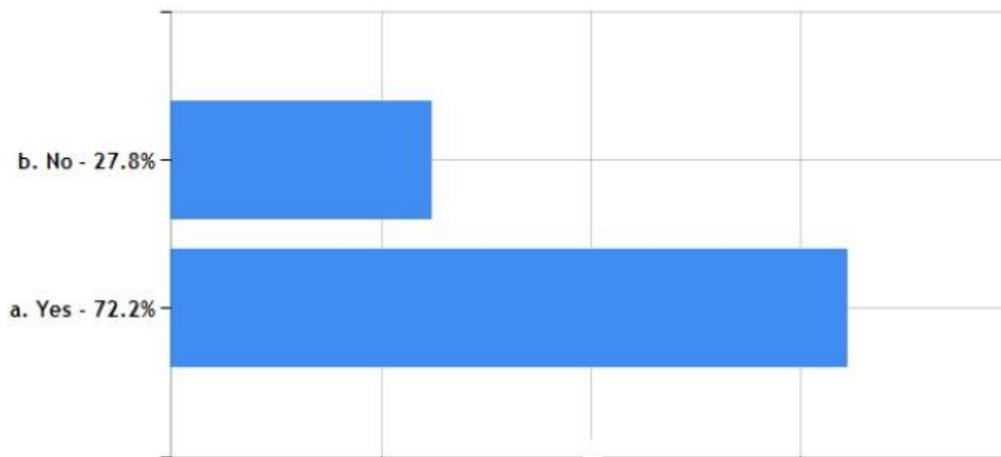


Figure 4 Did fragmented government reduce the effectiveness of the response?

Typical 'yes' responses included this comment by a Captain employed by a rotary-wing operator: 'The same disease being responded to in four different ways does not exactly correspond to "following the science"'. A Captain at a passenger airline observed: 'It was about politics. Nothing to do with health – pathetic'. Typical 'no' responses included this comment by a Captain at a passenger airline: 'At least with a fragmented system we had more competent leaders (Wales and Scotland) embarrassing the English (UK) Government to do the right thing, even if it was late'.

The question that asked what the CAA could have done to mitigate better the impacts of the pandemic on employers and employees drew a range of responses, including: 'Requir[ed] more regular simulator training to keep pilots current [First Officer]'; 'Been more proactive in ensuring

companies provided return-to-flying training [Captain]'; 'Paid closer attention to what airlines were doing to their crew (or threatening to do) ... the way some airlines approached dealing with their staff was atrocious and will have long-term implications on staff morale/motivation, and therefore ultimately safety [First Officer]'; 'They [the CAA] were quick to extend the validity of medical certificates, which was great .... They were also pragmatic about simulator validity as well [Captain]'.

### 5 Faith in employers

The on-line questionnaire asked respondents to reflect on how they felt about their employer before the pandemic (Figure 5) and after the pandemic (Figure 6).

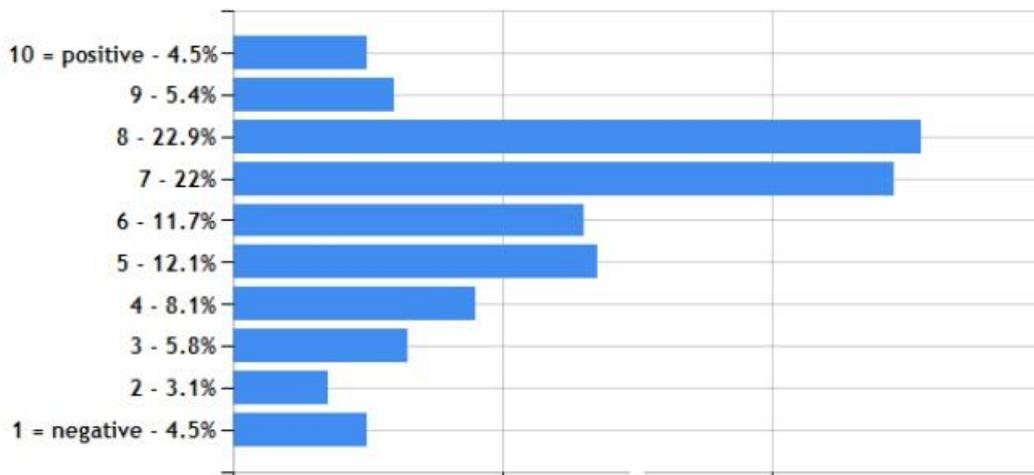


Figure 5 How respondents felt about their employer before the pandemic

The data showed a Median value of 7 and a Mode value of 8.

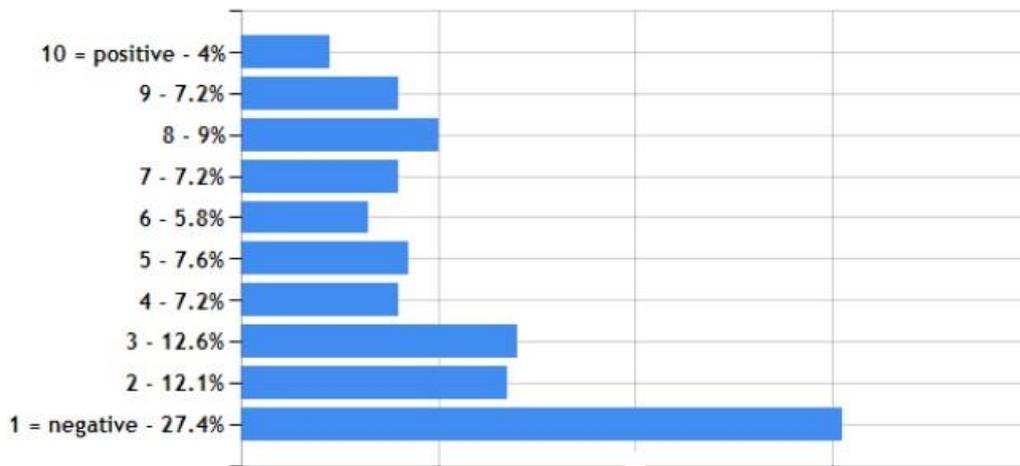


Figure 6 How respondents felt about their employer after the pandemic

The data showed a Median value of 3 and a Mode value of 1.

The data suggests that many respondents felt less positive about their employer after the pandemic. As to why, many claimed their employer had used the pandemic to change terms and conditions in favour of management. That is, employers had seen the pandemic as providing a rationale and vehicle for a root-and-branch reform of terms and conditions. As one Captain observed: 'My employer looked at the pandemic as an opportunity to break agreements, change working practices, slash the workforce and cut pay ... they should have acted with a lot more compassion and kept an eye on the future recovery'. It is interesting to note that at the time of writing this report (June 2022), airlines were experiencing difficulties ramping-up operations. The Westminster Government accused the industry of overselling flights and holidays. The industry pointed to post-pandemic staffing and logistical issues. '[L]ots of people left the industry and didn't come back' noted Jet2's CEO Steve Heapy. On 16-17 June, Gatwick and Schiphol announced they were restricting flights and passengers due to staff shortages. On 17 June, *Business Insider's* Stephen Jones noted: 'The global aviation sector has been battling a shortage of baggage handlers, airport management staff and pilots at a time when demand for travel is reaching the summer peak'.

It is an established fact that morale correlates with individual performance. The better one's morale, the better one performs. Consequently, anything that lowers morale – for example, negative feelings towards one's employer – should be of concern to employees, employers and consumers.

Respondents were asked to quantify their personal morale before the pandemic (Figure 7) and after the pandemic (Figure 8).

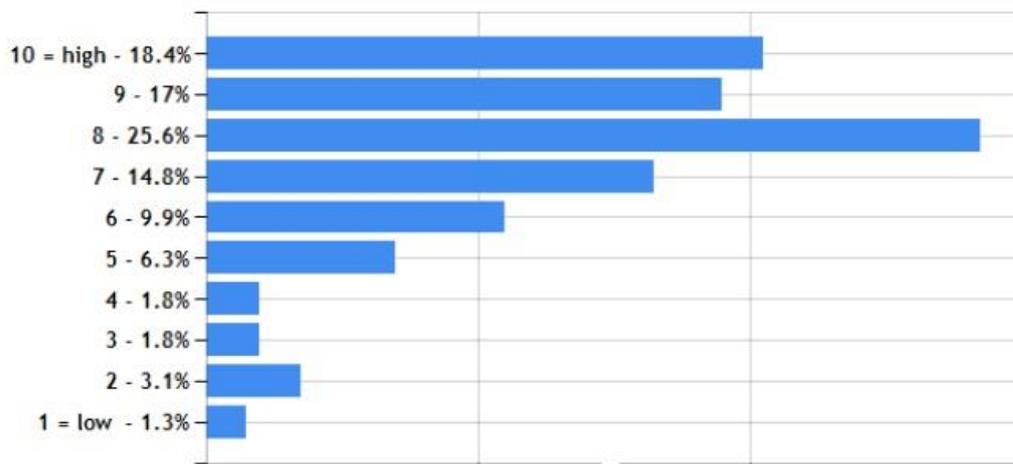


Figure 7 Respondents' self-assessed personal morale before the pandemic

The data showed a Median value of 8 and a Mode value of 8.

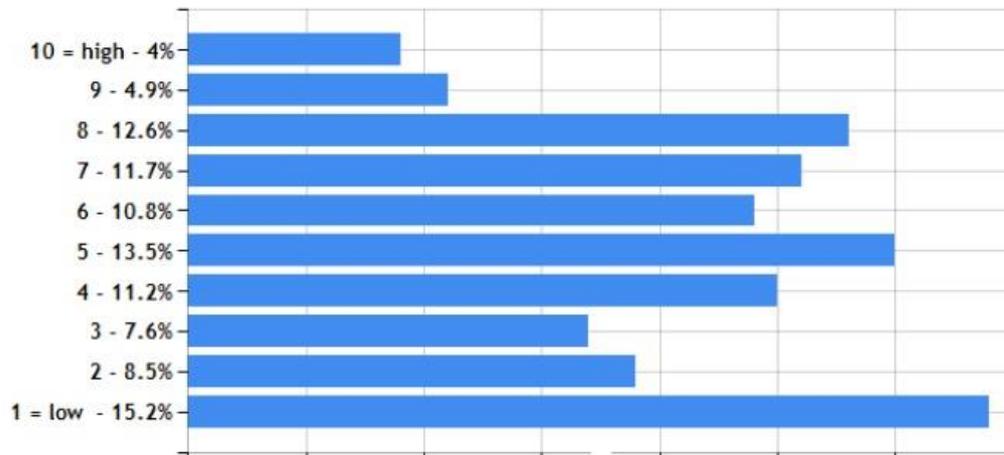


Figure 8 Respondents' self-assessed personal morale after the pandemic

The data showed a Median value of 5 and a Mode value of 1.

## 6 Subjective outlook

Several questions probed respondents' and interviewees' frame of mind following two years of pandemic-induced uncertainty.

To establish a baseline, the on-line questionnaire probed respondents' experiences of lockdown. For example, the questionnaire asked respondents to assess the tolerability of lockdown (Figure 9).

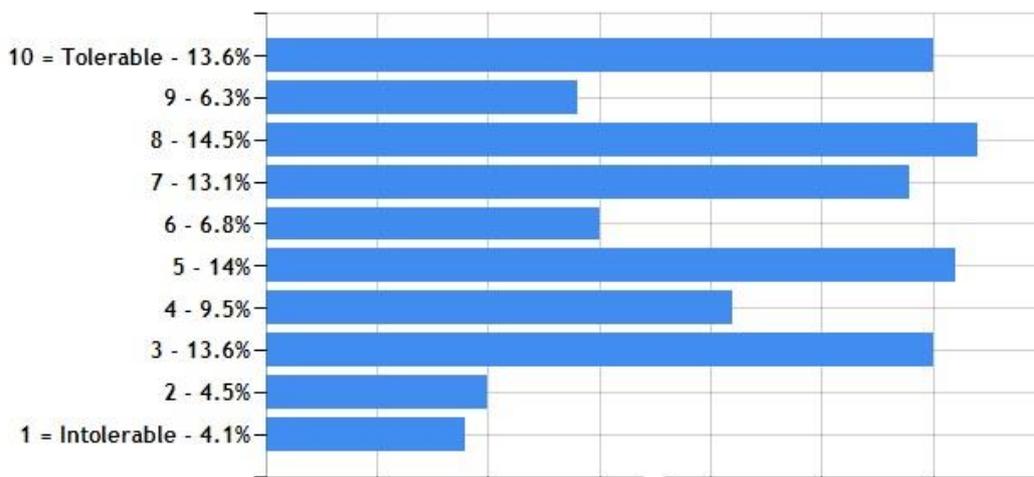


Figure 9 Tolerability of lock-down

The data showed a Median value of 6 and a Mode value of 8. The data suggests respondents considered lockdowns marginally more tolerable than intolerable.

Reactions to lockdown varied, with some respondents experiencing them as problematic and others experiencing them as cathartic. Those who experienced them as problematic used a variety of words with negative connotations in their testimony, including 'worry' and 'anxiety' (Table 3).

Rank	Comment (respondents' testimony is reproduced verbatim)	Airline offering
First Officer	Feelings of hopelessness/despair in the eyes of my family, who I support financially. Overcome with <b>worry</b> about volatility of career.	Low-cost
Captain	Lock-down was incredibly isolating, and the <b>worry</b> of a third redundancy in four years played heavily on my mind.	Low-cost
Captain	The stop-start nature of the various lockdowns took a toll. My mental health, in particular <b>anxiety</b> , became unmanageable at times. This left my work-based confidence in tatters.	Charter

Table 3 Negative experiences of lockdown

Those who experienced them as cathartic used a variety of words with positive connotations in their testimony, including 'exercise' and 'running' (Table 4).

Rank	Comment (respondents' testimony is reproduced verbatim)	Airline offering
Captain	March-June 2020 – fantastic experience. Two months off work, great weather, lots of time in the garden, <b>exercise</b> every day. PE with [name deleted] was a big part of our routine. Home-schooling was enjoyable. DIY projects. All positive. Absolutely no negative sides to this lockdown.	Low-cost
First Officer	I was <b>running</b> all the time and looking after myself physically .... 90% of [Lockdown] was really positive for me. I decided to take on <b>running</b> challenges and fitness challenges and got myself back into a really good state of fitness, which is something I have lost through flying and the inability to maintain proper meal times. For me it was actually quite positive.	Low-cost

Table 4 Positive experiences of lockdown

When asked whether they would like to raise any issues not directly addressed in the on-line questionnaire, a number of respondents mentioned mental health. Following the 2015 Germanwings suicide-by-aircraft loss that cost the lives of 150 passengers and crew, regulators urged employers to give pilot mental health more attention. Standing orders were amended. Circulars and advisories were issued. Sample comments are reproduced below (Table 5):

Rank	Comment (respondents' testimony is reproduced verbatim)	Airline offering
Captain	Being away from flying and [my airline] was a huge relief. I realised how much the job had damaged my physical and mental health.	Full-service
First Officer	Time off initially was beneficial and caught up on sleep and managed to get fitter and stronger. Worst – long-term mental issues. Developed health anxiety and lost confidence due to stress [of] not being at work and uncertainty.	Low-cost
Captain	The disregard for pilot mental well-being by airlines and the CAA was unforgivable. Thank you for raising these issues.	Full-service
First Officer	Mental well-being is a factor that almost nobody has taken into account when back to the line. It impacts safety, as	Low-cost

	performance is well below what it used to be. Most of us are still suffering the consequences and the stress to fix the problems that arise with what happened during the pandemic, and no plan has been made so far to cope with it. A phone call is not enough. Proper help and support should be available.	
Captain	[Managers] should have been sympathetic to the physical and mental health [needs] of the workforce as [a] priority, but instead they warned of job losses and severe cuts in Ts and Cs [Terms and Conditions]. Crass and thoughtless.	Low-cost
Captain	I genuinely believe it has been a national trauma .... I think it has been hugely damaging to the majority of people, and the majority of people do not have the self-knowledge, psychological know-how and resource to pull themselves up. It has screwed [a slang expression suggestive of psychosis] plenty of people up for a while, some for ever.	Low-cost
Captain	Worst [aspect of Lockdown]: the constant worry about losing my job. Checking emails every day to see if I still had a job. The stress did really push me down and affected both [my] physical and mental health.	Charter
First Officer	I am a contractor, and after IR35 [off-payroll working] and the pay cut, I now have three jobs and work every day of the month to keep the bills paid and have any sort of life. I feel unappreciated and demoralised. I suffered from depression last year [2021] and could not risk being taken off line and not earning anything.	Low-cost
First Officer	You should ask people about their current mental state and whether they have tried to find help for it.	Low-cost
Captain	I was three days from the end of my B787 type-rating course when lockdown one happened. I returned in November 2020 to finish the simulator training with just one refresher simulator session before two days of testing. That was incredibly stressful. I then returned to the monotony of Furlough and hit a mental low. That is the first time in my life I have ever suffered with mental health.	Charter
First Officer	More attention needs to be put on fatiguing rosters and mental health. Airlines have taken advantage of people during the pandemic, and terms and conditions have been slashed. Pilots are desperate and more pressure is being put on crews to do more. There is also a drive by some CEOs to pretend to care about wellbeing, but [they] are actually doing the complete opposite.	Low-cost

Table 5 Testimony pertaining to mental health

## 7 Author's observations

Flying is a vocation pursued by committed, conscientious professionals. Pilots' commitment drives one of the United Kingdom's most successful industries. Taxes levied on aviation help pay for public services. Respondents' testimony suggests a lack of empathy in official circles for the

industry and its employees. It suggests employee disillusionment. It confirms the link between uncertainty, stress and mental health. It is recommended that politicians, regulators, airline boards and other actors reflect on their actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, canvass the opinions of front-line staff and work to restore, at the very least, the *status quo ante*.

**Doctor Simon Bennett**

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