

'Twindemic' could cost more lives due to the severe shortage of cleaning staff, industry leaders warn

3 years ago



Industry leaders are very concerned and reasonably warning that the ongoing severe staff shortages affecting the £59bn cleaning, hygiene and waste sector could cause any 'twindemic' this winter to be much worse.

The situation could become absolutely critical and be exacerbated due to the cleaning sector recruitment crisis if UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) fears of a resurgence in flu infections, coinciding with a major wave of Coronavirus cases, comes to pass, the [British Cleaning Council \(BCC\)](#) is warning.

The cleaning, hygiene and waste sector – which is one of the ten biggest industries in the UK – has played a vital role in keeping people safe, healthy and well during the Covid-19 pandemic so far, but that work could be hampered by the 18-month long staffing crisis.

The scale of the recruitment crunch was recently highlighted when figures from the Recruitment & Employment Confederation's Labour Market Tracker showed that the number of job postings for cleaning staff increased by 11 per cent in just one week, a higher rate than for nurses, care workers or primary school teachers.

The BCC, which is the industry body representing the sector, fears the critical role of cleaning staff in keeping public spaces free of viruses could be dramatically reduced by the lack of staff, thereby putting more people at risk if the flu and coronavirus waves happen this winter.

It has been calling since late last year for Government help to alleviate the recruitment crisis, which began

after immigration rules were tightened early last year, and it is still hoping to agree a date on which to meet Cabinet Secretary Simon Case to discuss key industry issues.

The BCC launched the 'We Clean, We Care' campaign in March to reflect the pride that staff have in their vital role.

BCC Chairman Jim Melvin said: "Once again we repeat that we need the Government to recognise the sector's frontline role and step in to help us deal with these severe staff shortages.

"It is arguably true that time and action was lost in the pandemic and there was a lack of clear direction. We will never know as to whether a speedier approach could have helped to save or assist more people.

"Therefore, do not make the same mistakes and if Covid and flu do significantly increase this winter as the UKHSA are now clearly and publicly warning and this is heightened by the fact that cleaning personnel are unable to fulfil their vital role of keeping people safe, healthy and well because of widespread vacancies, the Government cannot say that they were not warned.

"The existing recruitment crisis could be further exacerbated by employee absences as staff themselves become ill.

"The sector's skilled, professional staff are responsible for maintaining high standards of cleanliness and hygiene in hospitals and healthcare facilities, public transport, factories, workplaces, supermarkets and almost every other public building and facility.

"Any individual entering these busy facilities and touching surfaces could easily pass on a virus to other people if good standards of cleaning and hygiene are not maintained because of the lack of personnel.

"We've been trying to engage the Government on this issue but they simply haven't listened or engaged with us. I can't believe that they simply don't care, but this can't go on and with winter approaching and flu and Covid on the horizon, it is now extremely urgent.

"The poultry, truck driving and fruit picking sectors all received Government help over the last year or so. Cleaning and hygiene has a direct effect on the public and therefore the economy, so it's a very straightforward question and one that should concern members of the general public as to why the cleaning and hygiene sector being is consistently ignored?"

The UKHSA warned last Wednesday of 'strong indications' of the threat of widely circulating flu intensified by lower levels of natural immunity due to less exposure over the last three years, combining with an increase in Covid-19 variants that can evade the immune response, to cause what has been called a 'twindemic' in the coming months.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, cleaning and hygiene staff focused on ensuring workplaces and public buildings remained virus-free and safe to use, with enhanced cleaning regimes and new working practices being introduced across the board, often requiring staff to work more intensively.

But many parts of the sector, which employs 1.47m people, have been increasingly stretched since immigration rule changes inconceivably and without any justification (and as was demonstrated throughout the pandemic) classified cleaning and hygiene operatives as low-skilled, making it more

difficult for overseas staff to find work in the sector.

The cleaning and hygiene industry has always depended on employees of all nationalities, with Labour Force Survey figures from 2020, before the immigration rules changed, showing that 20 per cent of the cleaning and hygiene industry workforce nationwide were from overseas, rising to 55 per cent in London.

UK nationals have traditionally not joined the industry and so vacant positions are proving difficult to fill. The fact that in May the Government advised that the UK had 1.3m more vacancies than people to fill them also completely and utterly negates the false and damaging narrative that such positions can be filled by UK nationals. They cannot and the Government are fully aware of this fact.

The BCC is urgently calling for the Government to recognise that cleaning staff are frontline keyworkers and play a vital role in keeping people safe, healthy and well.

The BCC wants the Government to work with the industry to:

- review recruitment in relation to staff availability, the Immigration Act, the Apprenticeship Levy, rates and specification requirements
- develop a short-term and long-term strategy for the industry in relation to training and skills and changing cultural and social attitudes to make the profession a more attractive choice of career.