

# NATIONAL WORKPLACE HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING REPORT

**CSIRO STAFF ASSOCIATION  
DECEMBER 2021**



**CSIRO STAFF  
ASSOCIATION**

A section of the CPSU

## Executive summary

There's little doubt that CSIRO staff are dedicated to their work and strongly believe in the contribution that the organisation makes to the public good and in the national interest.

However, like many members of the Australian community, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and mental health has taken its toll.

CSIRO management's Pulse survey, conducted in March, found that while staff remained engaged, challenges are emerging.

As we near the end of the year and the second anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic, this report finds that the resilience of CSIRO staff, while still strong, has been tested.

Data collected by the Staff Association through additional survey exercises in May and November, highlight issues of concern when it comes to the health and wellbeing of CSIRO staff.

CSIRO employees are deeply committed to the work they do and while a large majority consider the organisation a safe place to work, a growing number of staff describe their working life as increasingly stressful.

Workplace anxiety and stress levels are rising, with staff citing the key drivers of workload pressure and project delivery. Others have more recently nominated the impact of feeling disconnected due to working remotely.

The results regarding mental health levels should also give pause for thought; our recent Wellbeing at Work check-in survey found that nearly half of respondents reported a decline in wellbeing during the months since April 2021.

In general, staff still feel supported by CSIRO and connected to colleagues. But, crucially, for a majority that's only a pass mark given the circumstances of the pandemic. In other words, not a ringing endorsement.

We estimate that up to two thirds of staff continue to work from home consistently and have done so for an extended period this year. That seems to have had a split impact on workloads; with similar numbers of staff either reporting little to no effect while for others the burden has increased and the boundaries between home and work have blurred significantly.

So, what happens next? Working from home seems here to stay, with a majority of CSIRO staff interested in pursuing hybrid or blended arrangements that incorporate some onsite work.

However, those who have returned to workplaces are reporting increased pressure to fulfil the corporate citizenship and volunteer roles that keep sites functioning.

Over time, organisational responsibility for CSIRO's Covid workforce response may shift from the Situation Management Team to the Health Safety and Environment (HSE) function.

But what is the future role for CSIRO staff in terms of managing risks associated with coronavirus and meaningful consultation on key workplace health and safety issues?

Australian workplace health and safety laws mandate a role for staff in the form of the Health and Safety Representative (HSR). These are employees, democratically elected by colleagues, to independently represent staff and help keep workplaces safe.

The Staff Association continues to maintain a constructive relationship with CSIRO HSE as a resource and support role but the union also recognises the vital and central health and safety work performed by HSRs.

Worryingly, this report found that many CSIRO staff didn't know the difference between the HSE function and HSR role; nearly half don't know the identity of their local HSR.

Quality consultation can have a positive affect on worker engagement, whereas a lack of consultation can contribute to undue stress and fuel uncertainty in workplaces.

HSRs have a positive and significant role to play in providing staff consultation around workplace health and safety issues, which may prove to be increasing importance as the CSIRO workforce seeks to reconnect with each other following the fragmentation caused by the pandemic.

## Recommendations

1. Boost workforce consultation on workplace health and safety with the direct involvement of HSRs. This includes auditing all CSIRO Designated Work Groups, new initiatives to encourage HSR nominations and fill vacancies plus a fresh commitment to offering all HSRs a training guarantee.
2. Maintain and continue equitable access to flexible work arrangements with adequate material support.
3. Establish an inclusive process, directly involving HSRs, which focuses on sharing the workload for corporate citizenship and other volunteer roles, site by site.
4. Acknowledge and recognise that workplace stress is on the rise and the development of specific policies and initiatives to deal with the problem.
5. Adopt a proactive approach to encourage better mental health and wellbeing at CSIRO.

# Background

The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on workers around the world and across Australia, including CSIRO staff.

For many employees, the work environment has changed dramatically, with home-based work replacing on-site activity for long stretches of time, often to comply with public health measures aimed at reducing community transmission of COVID-19.

At the beginning of 2021, as many CSIRO staff continued to work from home, a small but growing number had begun to return to sites.

Conducted in March, the results of management's Pulse survey suggested that while staff remained engaged and connected, workplace stress and anxiety had emerged as an issue of concern, as had a growing divide between the satisfaction ratings of staff who had returned to sites and those still working remotely.

While a short Staff Association survey conducted in May found that a large majority of respondents agreed that CSIRO was a safe workplace, other results suggested that mental health and wellbeing, workplace stress and workloads remained issues of importance.

However, the widespread outbreak of the delta variant of the coronavirus – beginning in New South Wales during June but later to include Victoria and the ACT – led to long lockdowns in an effort to reduce community transmission.

As growing vaccination rates around the country led to an easing of restrictions across jurisdictions during October, the Staff Association conducted a brief Wellbeing at Work check-in survey to check in on CSIRO staff after a challenging period.

These results, taken together with some of the additional data mentioned above, form the basis of this national workplace health, safety and wellbeing report.

## Methodology

This report uses data from three main sources.

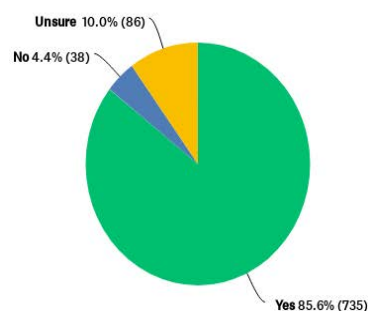
Selected results from CSIRO's 2021 Pulse survey, conducted in March 2021 and involving 3,060 participants. CSIRO Staff Association's Workplace Health and Safety survey, conducted in May 2021 and involving 866 respondents. CSIRO Staff Association Wellbeing at Work check in survey, conducted in October 2021 and involving 456 respondents.

## March to June 2021

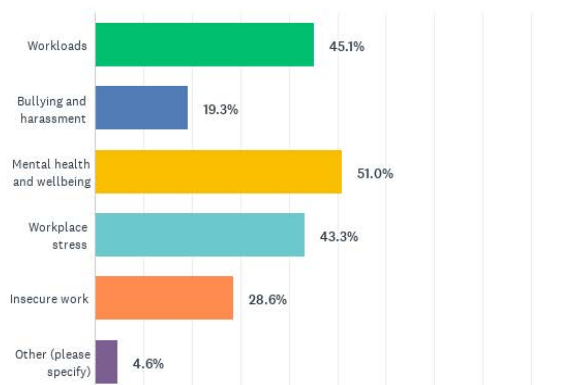
Key findings from the March to June 2021 include:

- CSIRO's Pulse survey, conducted in March 2021, found that staff levels of engagement and commitment to the organisation remained high.
- However, the report acknowledged that 'wellbeing, fatigue, anxiety are still a concern due to high workload in a constrained environment.'
- Nearly half (42 per cent) of respondents reported often feeling anxious over the previous month (February 2021).
- An analysis of the responses offered by those staff who identified as feeling anxious nominated excessive workloads (25 per cent), project delivery (17 per cent) and unrealistic deadlines (14 per cent) as the major stressors.
- The Staff Association's Workplace Health and Safety survey, conducted in May 2021, found that 86 per cent of respondents felt that CSIRO is a safe workplace.
- Survey participants also indicated interest in more information on mental health (51 per cent), workloads (45 per cent) and workplace stress (43 per cent).

1 Overall, do you feel that CSIRO is a safe workplace when it comes to health & safety and mental health at work?



2 Which health and safety issues would you like more information about?



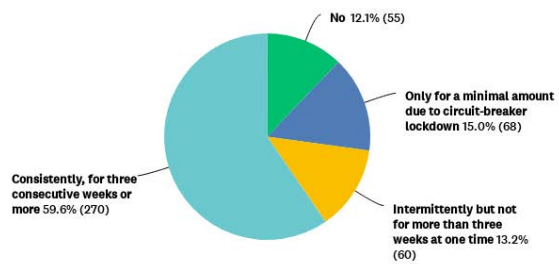
# Wellbeing at Work check-in survey

During the second half of 2021, public health measures to curb community transmission of COVID-19 resulted in many CSIRO staff subject to lockdowns and working from home for long periods.

For others, the impact of restrictions over the past few months were felt in different, more indirect ways.

In October, to check-in on the wellbeing of CSIRO staff, the Staff Association conducted a brief, anonymous survey. Close to five hundred (466) CSIRO staff participated in the exercise.

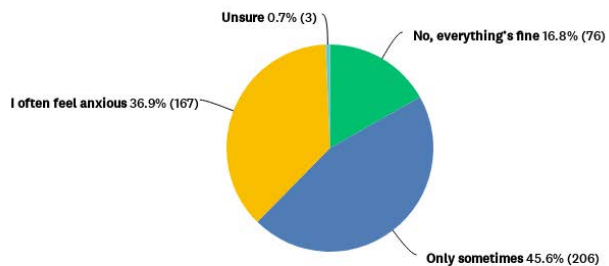
Q1 Have you had to work from home during the second half of 2021 due to public health measures to contain COVID-19?



## Key findings

- Working from home** – During the second half of 2021, nearly 60 per cent of respondents reported working from home for three consecutive weeks or more due to public health measures to contain COVID-19.
- Anxiety** – More than 80 per cent of respondents felt anxious about work in over the previous three months, with more than a third (37 percent) reporting often instances of anxiety.

Q2 Have you felt anxious about work over the past three months?



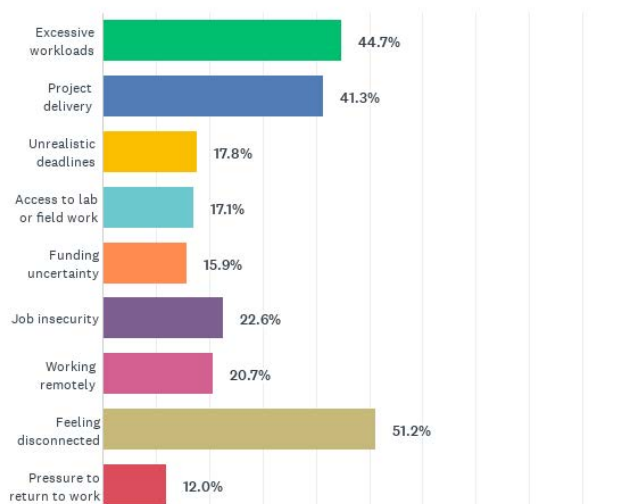
## Selected comments

- I'm unable to switch off from work while working from home.
- Working from home makes me feel like I need to be accessible all day.
- CSIRO has done everything possible to make this period as manageable as possible. However, there will always be stress associated with project delivery, which has been made much more difficult to manage practically and emotionally because of the lockdown.
- There's been a large amount of project replanning, recontracting and additional paperwork, and time spent seeking alternatives and juggling labour availability in managing projects under Covid restrictions.
- Disconnect between those who have the ability and are encouraged to work from home and those who must work onsite as they cannot perform their work from home.
- Social isolation from my colleagues - not being able to bounce ideas around in an informal, face to face setting.

- Stressors** – When asked to name the key drivers of workplace stress, the five most common responses included:

- Feeling disconnected (51 per cent)
- Excessive workloads (45 per cent)
- Project delivery (42 per cent)
- Job insecurity (23 per cent)
- Working remotely (21 per cent)

Q3 What are the major issues driving workplace stress?



Q4 Compared to April 2021, how would you now describe your mental health and wellbeing?

## Key findings - continued

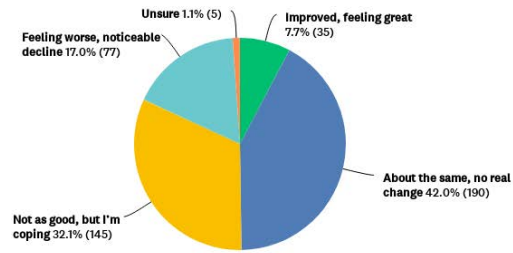
Conducted in October 2021, the Staff Association conducted a brief, anonymous survey to check-in on the health and wellbeing of CSIRO employees.

Close to five hundred (466) staff participated in the exercise.

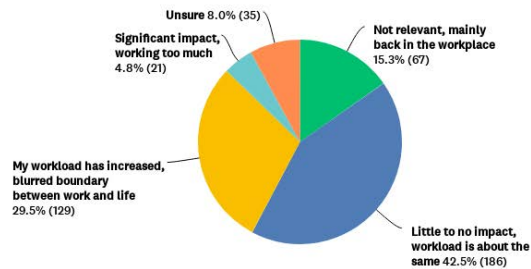
- **Mental health** – Nearly half (49 per cent) of respondents reported a decline in mental health and wellbeing from April 2021 levels.

- **Workloads** – More than a third (34 per cent) of participants reported an increase in workload due to extended working from home.

42 per cent reported little to no impact.



Q5 How would you describe the impact of extended working from home on your workload?



## Selected comments

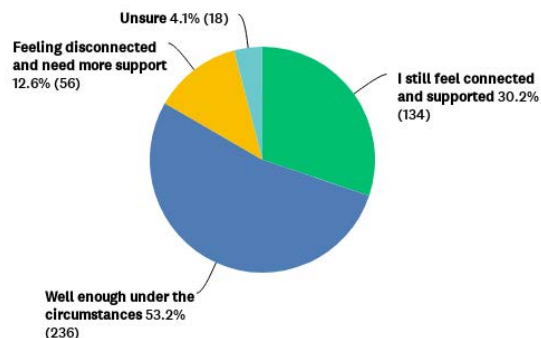
- Working from home has been great, it allows me to balance work and home/childcare commitments more effectively.
- Onsite full time and workload is excessive to allow others to work from home.
- Had enough, lost all direction.
- Working 15 hr days and weekends to keep up.
- Difficulty is associated with lack of easy contact with colleagues working on same projects, as they aren't sitting nearby and often can't ask them a quick question.
- My line managers have been really supportive with my workload but work and home life definitely feels like it is melding into one.
- My workload back onsite has increased to cover those who work from home, such as taking on more HSE and site roles.

Q6 Do you feel supported by CSIRO and connected to colleagues?

- **Support** – When asked whether staff felt supported by CSIRO and connected to colleagues, 83 per cent of respondents agreed (to some extent) with the statement.

However, 53 per cent only felt well supported under the circumstances.

13 per cent reported feeling disconnected and in need of more support.



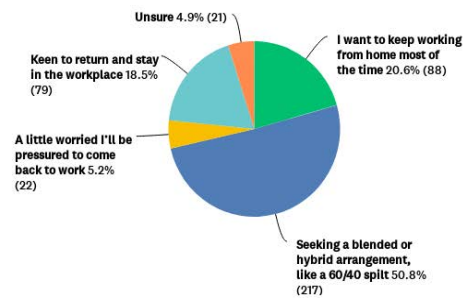
## Key findings - continued

- **Future of work** – 21 per cent of respondents want to continue working from home most of the time.

51 per cent of participants will seek hybrid or split arrangements, while 19 per cent are keen to return to the workplace.

Only 5 per cent feel worried that they will face pressure to return.

Q7 Do you intend to mainly keep working from home or return to workplace?



## Selected comments

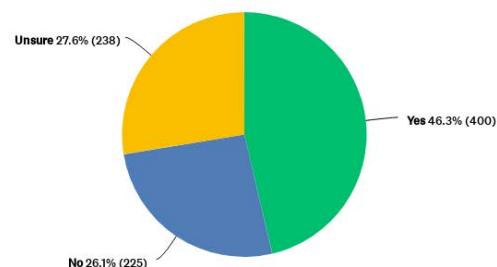
- I like working from home and is productive, but something like two days on site would be a good mix socially.
- I've been back in the workplace for a long time and I'm happy with that.
- Anxious about the uncertainty and unclear messaging on the hybrid arrangement.
- Having the flexibility to work remotely when needed is best suited to me, rather than a strict 60/40 split.
- A flexible mix of both would be great.
- Very worried and anxious about being pressured to return to the workplace.
- I am a little worried the expectations will change and will be pressured to return to the office... would feel better if I could be given more certainty about expectations in relation to this in the future.
- In some ways WFH has been good, but I now realise I do need some more face-to-face connection to colleagues.

## Health and Safety survey

CSIRO Staff Association conducted a Workplace Health and Safety survey in May 2021, involving 866 respondents.

- **Responsibilities** – More than half of participants (55 per cent) did not know or were unsure about the difference between the roles and responsibilities of CSIRO HSE and that of independent, workplace Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs).

Do you know how the roles and responsibilities of your HSR and HSE are different and function in your workplace?



## Health and Safety Representatives

- Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) are employees, democratically elected by colleagues, to independently represent staff and help keep workplaces safe. HSRs represent their Designated Work Group (DWG) with health and safety issues, concerns and interests of their colleagues. HSRs can facilitate communication and consultation and provide a crucial link between employers and employees.
- Australian workplace laws allow for HSRs to receive training to fulfil the role and powers to enforce compliance with workplace health and safety legislation. Email [csstaff@cpsu.org.au](mailto:csstaff@cpsu.org.au) for more information on the HSR role.

Q8 Do you know who your HSR (Health and Safety Representative) is?

- **HSRs** – Of those staff surveyed, nearly half (46 per cent) were unsure or did not know the identity of their local Health and Safety Representative.

