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# A case of employers never letting a good crisis go to waste? An investigation of how work becomes even more precarious for hourly paid workers under Covid

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## Abstract

The fragility of employers' voluntary, business-case-based improvements to employment standards for front-line hourly paid staff is revealed in two organisational case studies from the art and care sectors. For different reasons, Covid provided a catalyst for employers to enact passive and active exit strategies that made work more precarious.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised interest in and concerns about how work is changing. Even within low-paid service sectors, there have been contrasting employment effects. Care staff have had to work intensively at risk to their health while hospitality and art venues have often been closed. Workers in these sectors have either lost their jobs or been put on furlough that is kept temporarily on their employers' payroll with the state funding 80% of their wages. Although the sector and type of activity are shaping Covid-related work experiences, limited attention has been paid to employers' reactions to the pandemic and how their actions and strategies are reshaping work. In the weakly regulated UK labour market characterised by limited collective bargaining, employers have considerable scope to shape employment arrangements, only subject to limited

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legal regulations and specific product market conditions (Grimshaw et al., 2016). Current legal regulations in the United Kingdom fall short of what can be considered necessary to render work nonprecarious, that is, to decommodify employment by enabling workers not only to better survive and reproduce themselves but also to plan for their own and their families' futures (Bosch, 2004). This does not mean that all employers in these sectors conform to the very lowest common denominator; some offer improvements on minimum conditions, sometimes to address specific company or sectoral concerns or alternatively because of organisational inertia or concerns not to destabilise employment relations. Such voluntary actions by employers could be considered a partial decommodification of employment if the outcome is to protect workers from insecurity, low income and irreconcilable work and life demands (Bosch, 2004). At the other extreme, some employers seek to evade regulations, thereby moving employment conditions towards even greater commodification than that implied by the minimum set of legal protections in the United Kingdom (Clark & Herman, 2017; Dickens, 2012).

Employment arrangements that rely on voluntary employer policies and are not protected by organised worker power (Johnson et al., 2019) may not be enduring. Events such as the Covid pandemic could act as a catalyst for change, encouraging employer action either to address specific pandemic effects or to change their long-term employment practices. This study draws on two organisational case studies, offering contrasting examples of a care organisation and an art centre, to explore employers' strategies pre-Covid towards employment arrangements for its lower paid staff and how these have been changing in the context of the Covid pandemic. Both these organisations place great emphasis on their reputations as being good employers in their sectors, claiming to provide better employment conditions than their local counterparts. We seek to assess how they were able to make these claims using Bosch's (2004) decommodification framework, which identifies nine dimensions that can be used to assess whether the 'substance' of the conditions of work enables workers to 'reproduce both themselves and the society in which they live' and plan for their own and families' futures (p. 620). Although decommodification of labour can only ever be partial under capitalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990), it cannot be achieved solely through the welfare state but requires employer actions to guard against excessive work, facilitate investments in training and enable a private life, as well as to ensure adequate income. However, what the study revealed was that even pre-Covid, these claims to being good employers resulted in only a limited degree of decommodification, often providing conditions only marginally above legal minimum standards. Workers valued these minimal improvements that led to subjective evaluations of these employers as 'good employers', which is indicative of how poor-quality jobs were in the area and how subjective job quality is based on an assessment of the opportunities available (Brown et al., 2012; Findlay & Thompson, 2017). Even so by the end of the first wave of the pandemic, both employers had retreated in part from these provisions. Although their motivations for providing better conditions in the first place and for reversing these advantages are found to be variable and context specific, the reality of retreat in both cases indicates the fragility of relying on employer voluntary actions to improve conditions and sounds a warning as to how employment conditions could deteriorate in a post-Covid and post-Brexit Britain.

The article is organised as follows. The next section identifies the importance of employer voluntary policies for improving working conditions in the lower paid and nonorganised services sectors in the UK context and develops a framework building on Bosch (2004) for analysing how employment practices can contribute towards reducing or increasing precarity. After describing the methods used and the data collected, the main section presents a comparative sectoral and time period analysis of employer strategies. We conclude by discussing the

theoretical and policy implications of the findings for the post-Covid recovery if there are no policies to oblige employers to develop more secure and decommodified employment relations.

## **2 | PRECARIOUS WORK, EMPLOYERS' STRATEGIES AND THE SHAPING OF THE LOW-PAID LABOUR MARKET**

The United Kingdom has a large and increasing share of jobs that can be considered to constitute precarious work in the sense that, without state or family subsidies, they would not provide sufficient for adults to survive and reproduce or to plan their own and their family's future (Bosch, 2004; Fudge, 2017; Lewchuk, 2021). This applies particularly to non-standard forms of employment including freelance, gig economy, zero-hour contracts (ZHCs) and agency work as well as more regular part-time work. It also increasingly applies to some full-time permanent jobs (although with limited legal redress if terminated) that are precarious in the sense of offering only low incomes and/or working time requirements that do not respect needs for personal or family life. This era of 'increased precarious employment' (Lewchuk, 2021) has come about in the United Kingdom through a long-term process of decline in voluntary collective bargaining and the erosion of social norms with respect to fair employment conditions. Such norms pervaded even non-organised firms in the period when there were credible threats of unionisation if organisations did not follow sectoral norms shaped by collective regulation (Cunningham & James, 2021). Some partial compensation for the collapse of collective regulation has come from the increase in individualised legal regulation, often driven by European Union (EU) protective standards (Dickens, 2012). Nevertheless, with the exception of the minimum wage that is now positioned towards the top of EU standards (measured relative to median earnings), regulations in the United Kingdom remain weak, either restricted to EU minimum standards (sometimes even with opt outs, e.g., on maximum working hours) or indeed absent where there are no EU obligatory measures—for example, in relation to guaranteed working hours or working time scheduling.

In a system of weak legal and voluntary regulation, variation is likely in the employment conditions offered, particularly in sectors where labour costs are not the critical factor or where too poor conditions may result in high turnover or low workforce motivation or skills (Dickens, 2005). Within organisations, strategies may vary by class of worker; a key divide is between salaried workers, regarded as both core workers and a fixed overhead, while hourly paid workers represent a variable cost where minimising the unit costs of additional staff hours matters (Lambert, 2014). However, Walsh (1990) disputes the link between core status and contractual conditions as in services it is often the hourly paid who perform service-critical roles under poor employment conditions. Employers may still be motivated to 'decommodify' employment relations for those at the bottom for business case reasons, whether linked to product market or labour market conditions. Product market conditions could include encouragements to upgrade employment conditions if procurement in the public sector emphasises social value (McCrudden, 2012; Wright & Conley, 2020) or where employers anticipate improving their business through a reputation for high-quality service or as an 'ethical' provider (Deakin et al., 2012; Werner & Lim, 2016). Labour market factors may also influence employers' decisions leading to decommodification strategies to lower workforce turnover. Wills and Linneker (2012) found that the main reason employers gave for paying the living wage was its positive impact on both reputation and retention, amounting to an average of 25% reduction in staff turnover in the sample. Without effective union organisation, voluntary organisations such as the Living Wage Foundation have emerged to establish parameters for what being a good

employer might entail and to encourage employers to improve conditions based on 'sound business decisions' including 'ethical' and 'reputational benefits' and their own market positioning (Werner & Lim, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). One weakness of this approach is that these standards are not embedded in collective bargaining agreements (Heery et al., 2018) and may do little to improve conditions even for workers just above the lowest grade due to a lack of ripple effects to maintain wage differentials (Johnson et al., 2019). A key question is thus whether reliance on employers' voluntary action is sufficient to bring about better long run quality of work at the bottom of the labour market, without more active state involvement in setting minimum standards (Lambert, 2014; Sisson, 2019; Warhurst & Knox, 2020), in combination with a strong presence of 'collectively-negotiated solutions' (Deakin et al., 2012, p. 135).

Not all employer employment strategies arise out of rational and informed calculations as the actual costs and benefits of different human resource (HR) practices are rarely calculated (Dickens, 2005). Employment arrangements may be driven also by inertia and continuation of past practices, either because of neglect of HR issues or because of fears of reputational damage or staff demotivation (Brown & Nolan, 1988). However, changes in conditions may spur employers into action, particularly if they face few consequences from withdrawing voluntary improvements. Thus, when the context changes, employers may seek out exit points and gaps to enable them to change current practices and re Commodify work conditions. Jaehrling and Méhaut (2013) argue that changes in conditions of work occur not only due to changes in regulation but also due to changes in 'rule enactment', that is, the creative strategies employers use to find exit options at the microfirm level in response to new economic challenges. When market advantages from good employment practices decline or market pressures increase, deliberate commodification strategies may be enacted. Jaehrling and Méhaut's (2013) findings stem from service sectors in Germany and France, where strategies of avoidance included outsourcing or use of casual contracts. Likewise, in the United Kingdom, pressures from the market and competition are found to have led to downgrading of work quality as employers attempt to maintain their competitive advantage (Baines & Cunningham, 2021). This process is also found in the public sector where funding cuts have led employers to transfer risk onto their workforces by cutting wages and increasing flexibility, or by outsourcing work to lower paying employers (Moore & Hayes, 2017; Rubery et al., 2015).

To provide a framework for identifying positive and negative changes in workers' employment conditions, we draw on Bosch's (2004) 'idealised' definition of the standard employment relationship (SER) as a set of conditions that serve partially to 'decommodify' employment. We regard employers' strategies that take conditions closer to the SER and above minimum legal employment rights as decommodifying labour, whereas actions that take conditions away from the SER are commodifying labour. Drawing on Bosch (2004), Rubery and Grimshaw (2016) provide a multidimensional approach to what constitutes precarious work (i.e., the absence of the conditions in Bosch's 'idealised' SER). Nine dimensions are identified covering income support (guaranteed hours, adequate real wages, income during nonwork periods and access to social security), employment guarantees and fair treatment at work, divisions between work and non-work time, maintenance of employability through skill development, opportunities for voice and adjustments for individual needs due to health or care responsibilities. In the UK context, the onus lies very much on individual employers to provide for such employment conditions as the state only mandates very minimum conditions. Exploring how individual employers make their decisions that affect the conditions of work provides insights into how trends in the UK labour market may revive or further challenge the survival of the decommodifying substance of the SER.

We use the concepts of active decommodification and active commodification to refer to whether an employer intervened by putting in policies that change conditions of work, while a

'passive' strategy is to accept the status quo without making explicit changes, even though as relatively unconstrained employers they are free to take action. Decisions not to intervene can be considered a deliberate strategy, just as decisions to make changes.

The Covid-19 crisis already provides evidence suggestive of employers' deployment of 'exit' strategies; Cominetti and Slaughter (2020) note that workers in low-paid sectors were twice as likely to lose hours and pay than those in higher paying sectors. This article therefore investigates how far Covid-19 may be revealing the limitations of employer-led voluntary decommodification by providing employers with an escape route towards commodification. The Covid-19 crisis provides a lens to explore changing employer strategies over a very concentrated time period as labour market conditions and state interventions, alongside competitive pressures, changed dramatically. A key issue is whether employers are using the crisis as an active exit strategy to worsen employment conditions in the long term or if changes are more unplanned consequences of the pandemic, which employers fail to respond to.

### 3 | METHODS

This article draws on two case studies from a wider study investigating the causes and consequences of precarious work in a UK city region. Cases were selected to explore the influences of the state, the employer and the household on the shaping of precarious work. The two cases examined here, one an elder-care residential and nursing facility, the other an art centre specialising in cinema and theatre, were selected through purposive theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to reflect their strategic importance within their local area, as a 'good employer' and their relationships with the local state and community. Management in both organisations were keen to note that their organisations recognised unions but in reality employment conditions were effectively set by the employer. Within the care home, union membership was relatively high, with 160 of the 386 staff in membership. The trade union representative noted that they had a close relationship with the management. The art centre employed 113 members of staff and had recognition agreements with two unions, BECTU and Equity, but none of the workers studied were members or felt they had union representation in their roles.

The data were collected primarily during 2018 and 2019 with additional data collection after the peak of the first Covid wave but before the second (June to November 2020). This second phase was added to explore how employers were responding to the pandemic in sectors situated at the opposite ends of the closure spectrum under Covid (e.g., in May 2020, only 7% of social care staff were on furlough, the lowest share, whereas 75% of arts, entertainment and recreation staff were furloughed, the second highest level, Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020).

In both cases, methods included semistructured interviews with senior management, workers and volunteers alongside key informant interviews with regional sectoral policy actors, analysis of company documents and recruitment materials as well as some participant observation in the care case. Managers were selected for interview based on their strategic positioning within the organisation; three were interviewed in the art centre, and six in the residential care facility. Workers interviewed were chosen to reflect the demographic distribution of the workplace (including life stage) and key job roles.<sup>1</sup> Covid-19 follow-ups were conducted with managers based on their strategic positioning within the organisation. Workers were chosen according to the effect Covid-19 was having on their job role and according to their household situation as revealed in their first interview. Interviews were conducted with a trade union

representative in the care facility. However, this was not possible in the art centre where the unions were not actively involved with the group of front of house staff being researched.

The interview guide for the semistructured interviews was iteratively adapted to follow up on emerging new issues. Pre-Covid, managers were asked about their product and labour market challenges (including the impact of state policies) and their HR and business strategies. Workers were asked about their work–life histories and their work, personal and household experiences. For both managers and employees, the detailed data collection on employment practices was guided by the nine dimensions identified as examples of decommodification (Bosch, 2004; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2016). The selection of workers and managers for the Covid-19 interviews was based on their contract and role within the organisation under Covid to allow comparisons across the cases and time periods. Each participant was asked to outline changes in their employment experiences, employment conditions and the organisation since the onset of Covid-19. Email correspondence from management to workers detailing employment changes in the context of Covid were also used as data.

An initial a priori template structured both the interview questions and the analysis of the transcribed interviews and company documents (King, 2012) to ensure they were guided by the multidimensional conceptualisation of precariousness and by the framework that employer strategies can be expected to be influenced by changing labour markets, product markets, state policies and employees' work and household positions. Initial a priori themes relating to employer strategies were populated with data that led to overarching findings of new patterns of decommodification and commodification of employment conditions, both intended and unintended, as structures the presentations of the findings below.

## 4 | FINDINGS

### 4.1 | Pre-Covid employment strategies

The two organisations were selected for the Covid follow-up study on the grounds that pre-Covid both had expressed desires to be regarded as 'good employers' and 'ethical' service providers and offered some improvements on basic minimum employment conditions for employees in lower level jobs. This led workers in both organisations and the trade union representative in the care organisation to speak highly of the employer. This was the case despite the minimal level of improvements, suggesting that job quality was assessed in relation to other jobs on offer in the sector rather than based on any objective measurement of job quality. Further analysis revealed that, despite these similarities, the motivations for and the processes by which these improvements were enacted diverged, such that the care organisation provided an example more of active and the art centre more of passive decommodification.

#### 4.1.1 | Active decommodification in the care organisation

The care organisation was a large and well-established residential and nursing care home operating as a not-for-profit and deeply rooted within their local community. The organisation positioned itself as a high-quality care provider in order to maintain its status with the community and help ensure an income stream, but suffered, as is common in care, from high labour turnover (22% between 2017 and 2018). Its core strategy was to maintain and develop its reputation as a good provider despite funding shortfalls, as a senior manager explained: 'we're keen to keep quality standards ... you know and we don't want to go below that' (CH20).



As high turnover impinged on quality ambitions, it also adopted an HR strategy of being a good employer, compared with the poor conditions generally prevailing in the care sector. Although the trade union has an annual meeting with the employer where terms and conditions of employment are discussed, they have little say over the final decision. Strong budget constraints, exacerbated by having to implement significant rises in the national living wage (NLW), led to the care home no longer paying a premium above the minimum wage. The trade union representative noted that this meant that little could be done to improve conditions of work. The care home's core strategy of promoting high-quality care was retained, but the management did not feel able to address directly the two key reasons they were aware of why staff left, namely, the higher wages paid for less stressful jobs outside the sector and the high demands of the rota system, involving not only long hours but also schedules that clashed with workers' household caring needs and personal life. Wage premiums were ruled out, even for those on nights, due to constrained budgets: 'we look at the feedback from the exit interviews. If it's about pay then ... there's not that much we can do' (CH09). Likewise, shorter hours were deemed unaffordable, and rota flexibility was considered to jeopardise service provision. In practice, only those willing to commit to the rigid rota were 'beneficiaries' of the 'good' employer strategy. Those who were unable to manage the rota might be offered, if available, daybreak or twilight shifts (still on the rota including weekends), but the main option was joining the Bank on a ZHC where they had to bid for fill-in shifts. As a senior manager explained, their objective was to deter regular staff from requesting more family friendly patterns. Their response to such requests was said to be 'well ... join the Bank then and ... then you just dictate what you can do and then it's up to us if we accept that or not' (CH20).

Thus, the employer's policies to address its HR objectives were designed to be low cost and not to jeopardise its care quality. The key expressed aim was to retain staff for at least 12 months. After that time, according to the HR manager, 'they end up becoming loyal employees and staying maybe to 5 years plus' (CH09). A 12-month HR loyalty scheme was instigated, ensuring that training and management needs of workers were met and policies were introduced to increase certain entitlements with tenure (e.g., annual leave increased with tenure, with 2 days over the legal minimum after 2 years rising to 9 with 20 years of service). These policies provide some elements of decommodification, for example, enabling senior staff to enjoy more paid time away from work. Likewise, the provision of a week's compassionate leave policy on full pay was considered by the HR manager to demonstrate that 'we are loyal to our staff' (CH09) and constituted a contribution to fair treatment at work.

However, some of the policies introduced to boost retention can be considered to stop short of contributing to decommodification as their aim was more to foster an image of the care organisation as a good employer and were designed with the employers' perception of the worker's household and their position within it in mind. For example, the management took the view that 'one of the people that you have to convince that you are good employer is [your employee's] spouse' (CH10) to encourage, for example, tolerance of 'why isn't my tea on the table' (CH10). To persuade workers' families that the care home was a 'good' employer, low-cost perks were offered including Christmas vouchers, employee of the month schemes and health care plans for the whole family, while letters were sent to home addresses if employees were praised for doing a good job. Although in some ways augmenting rewards or fostering fair treatment at work, these measures lacked substance as was evidenced by low take up of the benefits by the workforce.

More significant as policies for improving employment conditions and more appreciated by the interviewed workers were the practices introduced primarily to support its claim to be a high-quality care provider. Three practices were of relevance here: working time policies and

rotas, staffing levels and training provision. Management's espoused top priority was ensuring adequate staffing cover for the care home. Its rota system was not to be tampered with, even though it was an acknowledged cause of turnover. Everyone had to work an average of 42 h on a 2-week rota (one heavy, one light) with the workforce divided between permanent days and permanent nights, all working weekends but with no premiums for unsocial hours. Although the rota system conflicted with staff's work-life balance needs, it had the benefit of providing both high guaranteed hours and, through the heavy/light week design, opportunities to top up earnings through overtime. Despite the rigid rota, cover was still needed for holidays, sickness and the like, so that the arrangements in many respects were mutually beneficial, despite the long hours implied by adding extra shifts as overtime. The pill was sugared both by the payment of overtime premia (not available to Bank staff) designed in part to compensate for the intrusion on their free time and by a 'pick a shift' app that allowed staff to choose if and when they did extra work. These working time arrangements were thus seen by workers as offering at least a route to making ends meet within this low-paying sector, even if at the costs of very long hours.

The working time arrangements were also linked to another part of the strategy to be seen as a quality provider, namely, ensuring above-average staffing levels in the care home. As a senior manager explained, 'we usually work on something like one to four, ... on the dementia areas ... it's less than that, we usually do one to two, one to three. I know in the bigger world out there, people have staffing ratios of like one to five, one to six' (CH20).

This reputational and quality care strategy also proved attractive to the care staff as many had had experience of working in other short-staffed homes that added to work intensity. As one care worker described it, 'coming here is heaven basically. Yeah ... I could be a carer here ... because I can have the time[to] speak to someone or ... have a chat and stop for a minute ... there[another care home], there was no chance, it was just constantly working so it was hard' (CH36). This strategy therefore contributed to feelings of fair treatment and made the long hours more sustainable even though it was enacted to improve patient care and reputation.

The third aspect of the quality care strategy to have beneficial effects on staff's perceptions of the care home as a good employer was training. The key motivation for management was to enhance care quality though some benefits for the staff were identified by senior leadership as 'their job is easier because they know how to handle things better or manage things more proactively' (CH10). Training was not only available beyond basic levels but was also provided face to face rather than the much disliked computer-based training in their own time, which some had experienced elsewhere. Also, staff could attain a certificate that enabled them to change employers in care without repeating the mandatory training (not provided by all care homes). However, although the staff appeared to recognise and value the training on offer, many felt the pay rise associated with qualifications (18 pence an hour for NVQ2, nothing extra for NVQ3 and 60 pence an hour for shift leader) was not sufficient for the additional work or responsibilities. Although training was done in paid work time, assignments had to be completed in their own time, which proved too difficult for some due to their long and unsocial working hours. For both reasons, take up was low (e.g., 35% of staff registered compared with a target of 50% with completed NVQ2 training). Thus, although opportunities were available for progression through training, workloads were too high and rewards too low for many staff to feel able to engage.

#### 4.1.2 | Passive decommodification in the art centre

Improvements in employment conditions above legal minima in the art centre in contrast did not stem from the employer's concern with turnover or their overall market position. Indeed,



unlike the care organisation, staff turnover was very low, a factor that the employer even regarded negatively ('golden handcuff') because they felt it made workers resistant to change. Positive provision above legal minima arose more out of a process of passive decommodification, shaped by a combination of their funding sources and legacy employment policies. The art centre was formed through a merger of two art venues, a cinema and a theatre. The employment legacies of each of these remained after merger, as staff were TUPE transferred with protected terms and conditions and pre-Covid little had been done to develop a common employment culture or conditions. At the time the first interviews were conducted, the organisation had only just appointed its first HR professional.

The key groups focused on in this case study are front-of-house staff, that is, box office, cinema and theatre attendants and ushers. A key improvement in conditions was said to be paying the legal NLW for adults over 25 to those under age 25, even though this fell short of local area expectations of a good employer, namely, paying the Living Wage Foundation's recommended higher rate.

now we've always wanted to pay the living wage ... but we've not got there in terms of our budget and affordability. What we do do is we pay everybody the national living wage whether or not they're over twenty-five or under twenty-five. (AC22)

Other areas of improvement included providing regular working hours and, in some departments, paid breaks. These policies reflected the history of the formation of the organisation; the theatre had been state owned, and the cinema owned by a charity. Front-of-house staff were divided between four departments: cinema, theatre, gallery and box office. Cinema and box office work contracts were regarded as the dream contracts, offering permanent contracts to work a particular shift on a particular day. These workers thus had very predictable working hours. Breaks were organised by each department so that length and payment varied. Box office staff received paid breaks organised informally between team members on shift, whereas cinema shifts had periods of unpaid breaks set by the timings of the films. Many of the workers in these two departments had worked for one of the previous organisations and had taken these regular hour shifts with them when the merger occurred. These regular shifts were hard to come by, and only when workers left were there opportunities to get an extra set shift. One worker explained how extra shifts might be accumulated:

there was an assistant manager, and he was just like, yeah, 'We've got an extra four hours, if you want to do it because you already work on a Sunday anyway,' so it was like, 'Yeah, cool.' [...] so, it was just the extra four to make it 12-9 instead of 12-5. (AC25)

Although core hours were predictable within the cinema and box office, getting enough core hours to make ends meet took time, so that many workers relied heavily on overtime. Unlike the care organisation, no overtime premiums were provided as there were plenty of core staff and also volunteers ready to bid for shifts in the gallery and theatre that were staffed on an ad hoc basis due to long periods of 'darkness' when no work was available. These shifts were advertised via Facebook or email to core staff and ZHC workers and were allocated on a first come first serve basis as one worker explained.

.... That email goes to ..., maybe fifty or sixty people [...] so the emails get answered really quick. So it's like ... a metaphor would be somebody on a big table full of gold, ... and lots of people on the floor, dying of hunger ... [clicks his tongue] and I just flick a ring finger ... a golden ring on the floor and see who picks it up, ... you want to work, you really need to be constantly on the phone .... (AC23)

Despite not signing up to the real living wage, the art centre still laid claim to being a good employer due to paying nonage-related minimum wages and employing more paid staff than other art venues where unpaid volunteers filled almost all ushering roles. There were also some perks offered, such as free theatre or cinema tickets. Again, this continued a premerger practice and in contrast to the care organisation were not designed to increase retention.

In relation to training provision, both similarities and differences emerged in comparison with the care home. As in care, front-of-house staff received training in paid work time for their specific area, but unlike care, this did not lead to any externally recognised certificate. In the art centre, pay enhancements were not related to training, unlike care, but instead reflected task responsibilities; thus, the real living wage was paid for those responsible for the cash even though this is supposed to provide a minimum floor to the wage structure. Both organisations were under obligations to provide funded training as a prerequisite for local authority support. In the care organisation, this was used to develop workforce skills as a means of furthering its position as a quality provider, but in the art centre, additional training was not made available to the front-of-house staff but to external people through internship, apprentice and volunteer schemes.

What can be seen is that most of the admittedly limited elements of decommodification offered by the art centre persisted mainly as legacies from past organisations and from requirements attached to their funding. These legacies provided workers with predictable and some guaranteed working time but without any pay enhancements, at least for adults, nor any offer of progression and training opportunities. Even so the art centre, like the care organisation, still considered itself to be a good employer on grounds of offering some conditions above the mandatory or that compared favourably to competitors' practices in the local area.

## 4.2 | Employment strategies during and after Covid

The Covid-19 crisis revealed the limitations of the employers' voluntary improvements above minimum conditions. In the care home case, it was the shift of focus from recruitment and retention to infection control that led to changes in employment conditions, whereas in the art centre, it was pressure to reduce costs that led to the enactment of changes to legacy conditions. The care home case can be considered an example of passive commodification as the changes were partly unintended consequences of its infection control strategy but the implications for staff were not a key consideration and no actions were taken to mitigate the impacts. In contrast, the art centre actively brought in a new HR policy that aimed explicitly to reduce staffing levels and associated *costs*.

### 4.2.1 | Passive commodification as the care home focuses on infection control

The key role played by care staff in front-line care and ensuring infection control might have been expected to lead to policies to provide additional support. Instead, there was a stripping

away of some of the employment benefits from the pre-Covid period. A much harsher approach was taken towards the hourly paid care staff than salaried staff. All salaried staff who were not involved in hands on roles were therefore either asked to work from home or were placed on furlough at 100% wages. In contrast, hourly paid staff had to work on site, and if they were not comfortable being present or willing to comply with new work demands, they were furloughed at 80% pay and perceived by the employer as being trouble makers. Only if they had been issues with a shielding letter from the doctor were they given 100% pay. Bank care workers were not even regarded as eligible for furlough (even though allowed under government rules). Hourly paid workers with additional caring responsibilities had to take leave to cover these (either annual or unpaid).

The change in the care home's priorities had major implications for the rota, overtime and redundancies. To contain infection, each care unit went into lockdown, so that workers could only work within their rota team and not across units. Consequently, they could no longer do the overtime they had relied on, making the 'pick a shift' strategy redundant. In the short term, this also led to job intensification, as staff could not move from overstaffed to understaffed units as a care worker explained:

I was here by myself. They couldn't send anybody onto the unit because I had Covid and their units were clear. So, they didn't want anybody to be infected, which I could understand, but didn't help me any. (CH38)

Later, following the deaths of residents, units became overstaffed and there was no more work for Bank staff. In the short term, core care staff were redeployed to tasks previously done by volunteers who were not allowed access. However, there was no long-term budget for these additional support tasks so management anticipated making significant redundancies.

I think ... two, three months down, if we run out of money, we have to make a lot of people redundant. (CH10)

... with 35 empty beds we are losing in the region of about £30,000 a week so it's like oh my god how are we going to recover from this. (CH20)

These changes to staff incomes were not fully anticipated, but as they moved from understaffed to overstaffed and as the financial position of the home deteriorated, no action was taken to compensate for these changes. Some positive benefits were added under Covid including full sick pay for Covid (as costs were covered by the local authority and not available to Bank staff) and free meals on duty. However, these were motivated by the anti-infection strategy in response to fears that staff were returning too early to work because of the low statutory sick pay (which was retained for non-Covid sickness) and to restrict movements within the building at meal times.

The Covid-19 crisis thus revealed how the pre-Covid elements of decommodification were driven by the employer's concerns to cover the rota but that, during the pandemic, these objectives were fully subordinated to the infection control imperatives. The interview with the trade union representative revealed that she had not opposed the changes put in place by the employer, and she considered the workers had been treated well during the period. However, interviews with senior management revealed that the union had not been involved in discussions regarding these changes on the grounds that the union had not been in contact with the

home during the pandemic. The employer had expected both the representative and the central union to be in touch with them to discuss Covid-19-related changes with the employer and the effect these may be having on the workers. This, in the employer's view, placed an onus on the union to communicate rather than on the employer to include them in management discussions. Further, the trade union representative noted that she had not had any communications from the central office regarding campaigns or what her role should be during the pandemic. Hence, there had been a lack of worker voice, allowing for the commodification of work and worsening of conditions of work for hourly paid workers. Although a health and financial crisis for the organisation could be expected to lead to changes in conditions, the harsh treatment of the front-line care staff who bore the burden of the health crisis stands out in comparison with the voluntary top up to 100% pay for furloughed salary staff.

#### 4.2.2 | Active commodification in the art centre's streamlining policy

In contrast to the care organisation, in the art centre, the Covid pandemic led to a complete closure of the building followed by a relatively slow reopening over the summer. Initially, the organisation adopted a good employer stance towards all staff, furloughing them on 100% wages. However, once employers were expected to make more contributions to furlough costs in the summer, furlough was reduced to 80% pay but salaried staff were allowed to rotate between being on furlough and at work to limit the impact on incomes. More significantly, the impending financial crisis at the organisation led to the development of a more active HR policy aimed at streamlining employment arrangements through consolidating contractual arrangements and increasing flexibility for the hourly paid staff. This was justified to workers as 'This is part of a range of cost-saving measures to respond to the financial challenges brought on by COVID-19' (staff email). Employer interviews revealed that this had been something that they had wanted to do for a while and Covid-19 provided a perfect opportunity to do this. 'So there's been a lot of standardization within customer services that we hadn't got before. And we know this has given us the opportunity to do that and to change their working practices' (AC70). A senior manager interviewed noted that one union had been consulted about the restructuring but this had prompted more rapid implementation of the changes by management as the union mistakenly communicated the plans to staff as a *fait accompli*.

Previously separate departments were consolidated into one 'customer services' department. Workers were still mainly given a fixed number of hours a week, though they might differ from their previous contract. They were also required to be more flexible as to when they worked, and those unable to work these hours were seen as inflexible and made redundant. Key to the restructure was the consolidation and standardisation of employment conditions coupled with more internal flexibility across areas. ZHC workers were no longer needed, as the flexible rota could cover gaps, and overtime was encouraged. For those on core hour contracts, this came with a change in job description and a standardisation of pay and breaks. Where breaks remained paid, these became shorter and only provided if the workers had worked longer hours.

This standardisation of working conditions represented for core workers a reduction in the quality of their jobs, as they were no longer specialised in their area of work. One worker noted:

what I didn't like at all was the email that said you are not a cinema usher anymore as I have always been, now you are called Customer Service Agent [...] if I am needed in a different department I am just put there. (AC23)

The standardisation also meant reduced breaks at work and more difficulties in planning their lives around work because the scheduling of their core hours now fluctuated. This increase in working time uncertainty can be considered a reduction in working time de-commodification. The employer also removed any perks such as cinema tickets that workers previously received, citing income and capacity issues.

Covid-19 provided the art centre employer with the opportunity to standardise previously complex employment conditions, thereby actively commodifying workers conditions of work and removing elements that previously provided the workers with stability and protection. The workers considered this to represent a major change in their jobs and conditions. The outcome was a deterioration in conditions of work for core hourly paid workers post-Covid both compared with the situation before the crisis and with their salaried counterparts and while ZHC workers lost their access to employment.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Three key themes emerge from the case studies: the weakness of relying on the business case to improve conditions of work; the potential for employers to use both passive and active exit strategies to lower employment conditions; and how these exit strategies are tending to reinforce traditional contractual organisational hierarchies.

For the care home, the business case was key in driving its improvements in employment conditions pre-Covid. For the art centre, its adoption of slightly better conditions than the minimum was more accidental and its vague ambition to be a better employer than their competitors was mainly to improve its standing in the sector. Even in the care home, the improvements that really mattered to staff arose out of their strategy as a quality care provider. In contrast, their direct actions to address recruitment and retention were limited and not necessarily effective, making very little material difference for workers. Furthermore, policies that offered more income security had negative implications for working time regularity. In both cases, the degree of improvement was remarkably low for organisations that aspired to be a good employer. However, the true feebleness of the business case became apparent when Covid-19 set in and strategies fell to the wayside as retention was no longer an issue. No compensation was offered to staff for loss of income due to the infection control measures, thereby supporting Warhurst and Knox's (2020) contention that the state has to act to improve job quality as employers' voluntary actions cannot be relied upon.

The two cases also provided confirmatory examples of Jaehrling and Méhaut's (2013) argument that a change in context, namely, the Covid-19 pandemic, could act as a catalyst for employers to enact exit strategies away from de-commodification either because the business challenges changed or because the crisis provided an opportunity to review long-standing practices. Exit strategies according to Jaehrling and Méhaut (2013) may vary between creative solutions or simple exploitation of gaps in protective nets, but these case studies call for an extension of the framework to include both active and passive exit strategies. Passive strategies occur when employers fail to act to offset employees' loss of de-commodification, as in the care organisation when overtime opportunities disappeared due to Covid-19 infection measures. In contrast, in the art centre, Covid-19 provided an excuse for management actively to create new contractual arrangements for their hourly paid staff that made employment conditions more precarious by design, particularly working time schedules. Nevertheless, both types of strategies can be considered deliberate in so far as their impacts could be readily understood by employers.

One similarity across the two cases is the impact of Covid-19 in increasing internal divisions between staff on different contracts. In both cases, Bank or ZHC staff were excluded from furlough and eventually lost their jobs. Salaried staff received more privileged treatment, and major negative impacts were felt by hourly paid regular staff. Contractual hierarchies thus still remain crucial in shaping terms and conditions of employment. In both cases, managers did not question the provision of more generous protection to salaried staff in relation to furlough even though the front-line service staff, the hourly paid staff, were at greater risk of commodification, job loss and infection. These findings suggest that salaried workers do benefit from being treated as a fixed cost or an overhead, as argued by Lambert (2014). However, in the care home, it was the hourly paid, not the salaried workers, who were core to the functioning of the organisation not auxiliary to it but were treated as less valuable than their salaried counterpart, echoing Walsh's (1990) findings; status not service criticality determines contract type.

Both case studies have brought insights into how emerging trends of reduced wages and job quality for those at the lower ends of the labour market may be being enacted through employer responses to the crisis. These increases in precarity may apply along different dimensions; in care, the main impact for regular hourly paid was on income, but in the art centre, it was on working time, whereas for ZHC workers, the outcome was unemployment. This emphasises that precarious work is a multidimensional phenomenon (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2016).

These results could indicate that employer responses to the pandemic could lead to widespread deterioration in the quality of work as conditions of work are further commodified, whether through passive practices arising out of new ways of working or active strategies where Covid-19 provides an excuse to enact exit strategies due to changing labour and product market constraints. These cases also demonstrate that union recognition is insufficient and that effective collective bargaining is needed to hold employers to account. In a crisis, where taking actions to be as a good employer may no longer be considered advantageous, employers are effectively free to seek exit options. All this suggests that, instead of reliance on voluntary employer action, there is an urgent need for more state intervention to bolster the level and range of minimum standards in employment and to ensure better enforcement. Such a strategy was already unlikely in a post-Brexit Britain where the focus has been on deregulation, but the pressure on business in the pandemic may make a change in direction even more unlikely, despite much policy talk of levelling up or building back better.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Table indicating the workers interviewed is available in the supporting information.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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