

COVID-19: BIALL 'STATE OF THE NATION' SURVEY 2021

BIALL Covid-19 'State of the Nation' Survey 2021: an Introduction

Abstract: In Autumn 2021 the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) carried out a follow-up survey to the May 2020 'Covid-19 Industry Survey'. BIALL President, Catherine Bowl, gives an overview of the findings of 'State of the Nation' survey which was published in December 2021. The results of the survey are to be found on the pages that follow this introduction.

Keywords: national lockdown; Covid-19; legal information professionals; legal information managers; law librarians; surveys

In February 2021 BIALL Council agreed to conduct a follow up to the Association's 'Covid-19 Industry Survey' which was carried out in May/June 2020. The original survey was commissioned to gain a sense of the impact of the pandemic on the legal information profession.¹ The second survey, the BIALL 'State of the Nation', was carried out in the Autumn of 2021 and published in December 2021.² The survey was completed by 191 respondents, representing a response rate of 36.5% of BIALL's membership.

For the purpose of producing accurate comparisons with the 2020 survey, the original questions were retained for the 'State of the Nation' survey. However, as almost 18 months have passed since the initial survey, we took the opportunity to consider the following:

- *The current status of members' physical libraries*

At the time of the survey, October/November 2021, 7 in 10 of all physical libraries had returned to being fully open, rising to 8 in 10 in the academic sector and London and the South-East. However, soon after the survey was published, the arrival of the Omicron variant resulted in most of our members being advised to work from home, and consequently a temporary closure of members' physical libraries. Being directed to transition from the physical library to remote working at short notice required library and KM professionals to draw on all the resourcefulness for which we are renowned.

- *Approaches to hybrid working*

Of those participating in the survey, 7 in 10 respondents reported that their organisations actively encourage hybrid working. However, this trend appears to be less pronounced in academic environments and smaller organisations.

- *Uptake of BIALL's virtual activities*

Three in four respondents participated in at least one of the BIALL virtual activities over the last 12 months, with

completing BIALL surveys and attending the annual conference most popular. Around 1 in 6 took part in Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings, online training and virtual coffee catch ups.

- *Rating of, and comments on, BIALL's support during the pandemic*

Encouragingly, respondents rated BIALL's support during the pandemic as either 'Excellent - 17%' 'Good - 67%' or 'Average - 16%' with no ratings of 'Poor' or 'Very Poor' recorded. This feedback is a testament to the excellent work carried out by the BIALL committees, Council members and other volunteers who ensured that, despite the absence of face-to-face contact, the membership remained supported. Whilst we look forward to returning to in person meetings and networking events, some of the initiatives which evolved due to Covid will remain in place. Zoom webinars and online SIG meetings have proved popular as well as making these sessions more inclusive for the membership. Where possible, respondents' suggestions for how BIALL can offer further support will be considered by Council and the Association's Committees.

Fortunately for our members the prevalence of individual redundancy and furlough has remained low since the 2020 survey. On the other hand, overall organisational level redundancies have increased since the first survey.

The consequences of Covid-19 have produced significant short-term implications for our profession and the landscape is ever-changing. It is difficult to predict the medium to long term impact of the pandemic on the legal information community. However, future trends are likely to be recorded in forthcoming Law Firm and Society of Legal Scholars/BIALL Academic surveys and will no doubt make for interesting reading when the time comes.

My thanks go to our analyst, Clive Morris, for his professionalism throughout the course of the survey, and to Diane Miller and Karen Brown, BIALL President Elect

and Immediate Past President, respectively, for their continued support. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the BIALL members who contributed to the

survey. Without their input there would be no data to form the basis for this survey which I trust will be a useful resource for future reference.

Footnotes

¹ Karen Brown, 'BIALL Covid-19 Industry Survey 2020: an Introduction' (2021) 21(1) *Legal Information Management* 2–3.

² The full results of this survey were published on the BIALL website in December 2021 and are available to BIALL members only: <https://www.biall.org.uk>. For reasons of confidentiality some pages of the survey have not been included in the version published with this article (ie. pages 24 and 26).

Biography

Catherine Bowl is BIALL President for 2021/2022 and is Deputy Head of Research at City law firm, Travers Smith LLP. She began her law librarian career in Perth, Western Australia. Catherine was Hon. Treasurer of the Association from 2004 to 2008, Conference Finance Officer from 2009 to 2014, Chair of the BIALL Conference Committee from 2015 to 2018 and a member of Council from 2018 to 2020.