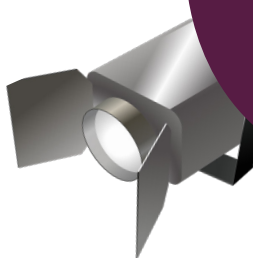


# SPOTLIGHT ON . . .

## SUPERMARKET KEY WORKERS



Emma Coates  
Editor

**NHD Editor, Emma Coates, speaks with two key workers who have been tackling the challenge of keeping our supermarkets stocked and us fed during the CV-19 crisis.**

Since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, our lives have changed significantly, whether that's due to the restrictions we've all been subjected to, a change of job role, loss of livelihood, or generally having to find new ways to do everyday things.

The way we shop for food has been impacted greatly, with increased demand on supermarkets and stores; resulting in socially distanced queuing, limits on how much of some items we can buy and at times complete scarcity of essential products.

Emma has been a Registered Dietitian for 14 years, with experience of adult and paediatric dietetics.



### MEET VICTORIA BENNETT

Victoria is a primary school teacher who previously worked in the retail sector. She has two grown up sons (aged 18 and 19) and lives near Chester with her partner. Having relocated a few years ago, she built up a friendship network by going to the gym to take part in dance-based fitness classes. She also enjoys learning new skills, such as needlework, when time and funds allow.

She was taken on at a local Asda store to help out during the coronavirus pandemic, when the supermarket lost 30% of their workforce due to shielding and quarantine. This combined with a huge upsurge in demand for online supermarket shopping, meant that more staff were needed.



### Tell us a bit about your role and how you came to work for Asda.

I was taken on as a Home Shopper, which involves picking out the goods that customers have ordered online. It is a surprisingly energetic role, as it involves early starts, long shifts and picking the goods at pace.

We are expected to pick goods at a particular rate and we will often walk several miles in one shift as we traverse the store. Some goods are heavy, such as multipacks of cans and bottles. Other picking lists are from the fridges and freezers, so hands end up very cold!

I have now been in the role almost 12 weeks, starting just as lockdown occurred in March. I knew my teaching contract would be ending mid-May and, due to school closures, there would not be any supply jobs. Therefore, I needed to replace my income in some way. I felt that undertaking a key-worker role would give me a reason to leave the house and interact with others, whilst still adhering to Government guidelines.

I felt the risk to my household was minimal. With only two of us at home, and neither of us with relevant health issues, I decided to balance my risks with the need to earn an income.

In the long-term, I would like to leave the teaching profession and I hope this role at Asda will provide me with up-to-date experience and possible links outside of education.

### **What's a typical shift like for you?**

On a typical workday, I get up at 5am to be at work and ready to start by 6am. Some of my colleagues start at 2am in order to get the picking completed in time for deliveries. We sign into our scanners, load up trolleys with totes and plastic bags.

After having selected our picking list from the orders that have come in, we spend the next eight hours or so scanning the designated products, loading them up and getting them back to the service area in as little time as possible, until all goods are picked, packed and ready to be put onto the delivery vans.

Being awake so early means breakfast is eaten in the car on the way to work. I will usually eat a nutritious homemade flapjack loaded with dried fruits, or a croissant. Keeping my water bottle with me throughout the shift helps to keep me hydrated and I find this quite important in the air-conditioned environment. It also helps to stave off hunger pangs until I get my break mid-morning, when I will generally have a big dish of overnight oats with lots of fruit and a nice warm cup of tea.

### **What impact has CV-19 had on your workload and your team?**

I can't really compare, as I only started working with them during the pandemic, but it has been extremely busy and great pressure is put on us to pick quickly. Some team leaders can get quite visibly stressed and this can pass down to us in terms of discouraging any chatting in order to get the job done quicker. There are many new starters, like me, and we have had to learn very quickly on the job, with minimal training. We have embraced this and both new and established staff work well together as a team.

### **How do you manage to work safely with CV-19? Are there health and safety restrictions?**

Obviously, we have to keep our distance from customers, and this can be difficult at busy times. It also slows down the picking time considerably. PPE has been made available recently in the form of masks and visors, but it is mainly front of house staff that use these and not many of the pickers do.

### **What impact has your role as a key worker had on you and your family?**

For me, personally, there have been positives. Being a key worker has meant that I have had a life outside of the home during these strange times. My partner has been working from home and I feel my job has given us the space to still enjoy each other's company. It has also given me a sense of routine and normality, which supports my positive mental health.

However, when restriction guidance from the Government started to be lifted, I did then become quite anxious about seeing other family members from outside my household, especially my children, as I worried about being asymptomatic.

### **Do you have any insights into working with the general public at this time?**

I personally feel that the general public have been fairly respectful towards us most of the time. I don't, however, think they realise how strenuous the job can be. I am aware that some people will be justifiably anxious about being in the supermarket environment; you can tell from their body language and their approach when they ask for help. It would be easy to be quite offended in some instances by the attitude of some, but we have to remind ourselves that this is not personal; they all have different and very valid reasons to be anxious.

### **Do you think this situation will mean supermarkets will change how they operate and trade?**

Only time will tell! I am not sure that any changes in operations have been so drastic that they will have any resonating impact post-COVID. However, a huge focus during this time has been on the online shopping and I think the uptake of this will probably remain higher than it was before for a good while.

### **Please, tell us anything else that may be of interest about working in a supermarket during this time.**

There is presently a very mixed bag of people working in the retail sector. Professionals and people from all walks of life are working alongside each other, having been forced out of their usual roles in the current economic situation. Many, like myself, are working for a fraction of their usual income, although all put in maximum effort. From a personal point of view, our team works well. We all respect each other – new starters alongside experienced employees, professionals alongside school leavers.

**MEET ANDREW MULLEN**

Andrew is a night shift manager at his local Morrisons store. He's a keen gardener, with a degree in Organic Horticulture. He likes experimenting in his garden and growing interesting plant species and loves spending time outdoors with his family, as well as cooking and baking.

**Tell us a bit about your role and how you came to work for Morrisons**

A few years ago, life was changing and having sprouted a young family, I decided I needed a career change with a stable income, which was close to home. About four years ago, I came across a vacancy being advertised at my local store and it made sense to apply and ultimately take the job when it was offered to me.

It gave me the chance to spend more time with my family despite permanently working nights.

As a night shift manager, my main priorities are to ensure that the store is ready and stocked for the mornings; and our products are available to customers and easily accessible within the store.

**What's a typical shift like for you?**

I generally go into work an hour before my night shift team arrive, around 8pm, to get a handover from my daytime manager colleagues. I also check the workload required for the shift ahead.

I then plan how to distribute my staff and allocate tasks before they arrive. This is important and ensures that the work is completed by the end of our shift. I need the right person on the right job to make everything run smoothly.

A typical task on a night shift is to stock all departments throughout the store. If one department is struggling, it's my responsibility to assess and prioritise the workload; reallocating staff if required. I also conduct routine checks on equipment within the store, such as chiller cabinets, fridge alarms, etc. These are then noted and passed onto our maintenance teams in the morning.

There is always a delivery or two to receive as part of a night shift. These will be moved into the store to be distributed during the shift or at a later time. As the morning staff prepare to start their shift, I provide my handover.

**What impact has CV-19 had on your workload and your team?**

As the outbreak began, the store's product availability was significantly affected, as we all saw in the news reports. During the first few weeks, the shelves were empty each time I came into work. It was a real challenge to keep up with demand for us and our suppliers. We hadn't ever seen the extreme level of buying that took place over that few weeks, not even at Christmas! So, it was a real shock to the system for the whole team.

Morrisons acted fast and secured new or additional suppliers. They were also quick to recruit extra staff. Many are temporary and are generally people who have been furloughed from their usual work. We also saw a big increase in deliveries, both in size and frequency.

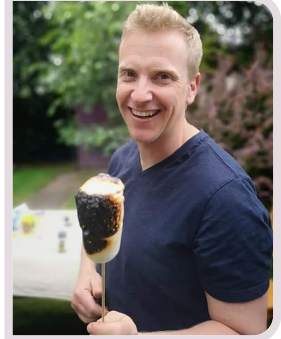
Stock levels have mostly returned to normal now, due to less panic buying and the increased supplies coming into the store. Having the additional newly recruited staff and the redeployment of some existing staff has been a great help.

**How do you manage to work safely with CV-19?**

Social distancing is very important, we have social distancing marshals within the store who continuously observe practices as we work and while customers are shopping. We are actively encouraged to wash our hands frequently, with hand sanitising stations being available throughout the store. We've managed well with the social distancing rules, as we can spread out across the store during a night shift, once the store is closed.

Perspex screens have been put in place next to all checkouts and the contactless payment limit has been increased to allow people to pay without the need for handling cash.

Our security team are in place at the entrance to regulate how many customers are entering the store.



**What impact has you working as a key worker had on you and your family?**

Being a key worker hasn't really had an impact on me or my family. Having the option to continue to access school services was a good safety net, but, due to changes with my wife's work, we didn't need to rely on that.

I haven't felt too concerned about working or going outside of the home. This is mostly because the amount of people I interact with on a night shift is much lower than if I was a daytime manager. Also, our team have been excellent in observing social distancing rules as they work. I am proud of them for that.

**What changes do you think will take place in supermarket retail after CV-19?**

I think there will be more options to shop remotely and it will become much more common for customers to shop this way, with online ordering, 'click and collect', more home deliveries than before the outbreak. Many stores have introduced them already, but it takes time for some customers to adapt to use them. However, it has been proving successful in many stores.

For more on the impact on CV-19 on the food supply chain and our shopping habits since the pandemic, see Emma's article on

*Lockdown Food Trends* in the June/July issue of *NHD* (issue 154 pg 7).



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