

Article

Is staff retention an issue in the public sector?

Exploring the rate of retention in public sector occupations, including teaching, social work and nursing, using the Annual Population Survey.

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Release date:
17 June 2019

Next release:
To be announced

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1 . Introduction

Sometimes changing career leads to exciting opportunities, and new people can bring fresh perspective, new ideas and expertise to the workplace. But when people move on, employers can lose knowledge, experience and institutional memory.

Retaining staff, while maintaining a healthy turnover, is important for efficiency. Recruiting and training new people costs time and money. The government invests in supporting the training for many of the largest public sector occupations, which means retaining those staff is important for giving value for money.

So, how much of an issue is retention in the public sector? How do retention rates compare across different occupations in the public sector workforce? How do rates vary at different points in peoples' working life? And how have rates changed over time?

2 . Statistician's comment

“Most of the larger public sector occupations, including doctors, nurses and midwives, and primary school teachers, have a one-year retention rate above the UK workforce average. One-year retention rates in the public sector were lower in 2016 to 2017 than they were in 2012 to 2013, with the biggest fall in rate for social workers and public sector care workers.”

Anna Bodey, Office for National Statistics

3 . How have we defined retention?

When we talk about one-year retention rates in this article, we are referring to the percentage of people who were in one of the following categories:

- in the same workforce sector (either the public sector or the private sector) in 2016 and 2017 and have remained in a similar occupation (similar occupation is defined as staying in the same three-digit Standard Occupational Classification)
- in the same workforce sector in 2016 and 2017 and have been employed by the same employer for more than one year

For more information on Standard Occupational Classifications, please see [How are the occupations defined?](#)

Staying in the same occupation does not mean staying in the same job. For example, if primary school teachers moved to a different school, became special educational needs teachers or became headteachers, they would be classified as being retained. This is because, in all these cases, they have remained in the teaching occupations.

However, people who were primary school teachers in 2016 but were teaching assistants in 2017 would be categorised as having left the occupation because they are no longer in the teaching professions, as their new role is supportive. Primary school teachers who became unemployed or left the labour market would be categorised as having left the occupation as they are no longer employed as teaching professionals.

Primary school teachers who left a permanent role to work as supply teachers (for a local authority or an agency, for example) would be classified as having been retained if they reported working for the public sector.

4 . One-year retention rate of police officers, nurses and midwives and teachers was above the UK workforce average

From 2016 to 2017, the UK workforce one-year retention rate was 83% and the public sector one-year retention rate was 84%. Figure 1 shows that 10 of the 15 largest public sector occupations have a retention rate above the total public sector average.

The police had the highest retention rate in the public sector, with 94% remaining as police officers between 2016 and 2017. The police were closely followed by nurses and midwives, and heads of educational establishments; both occupations had retention rates of 92%.

Primary school teachers were more likely to stay in the teaching professions than secondary school teachers (87% compared with 82% respectively).

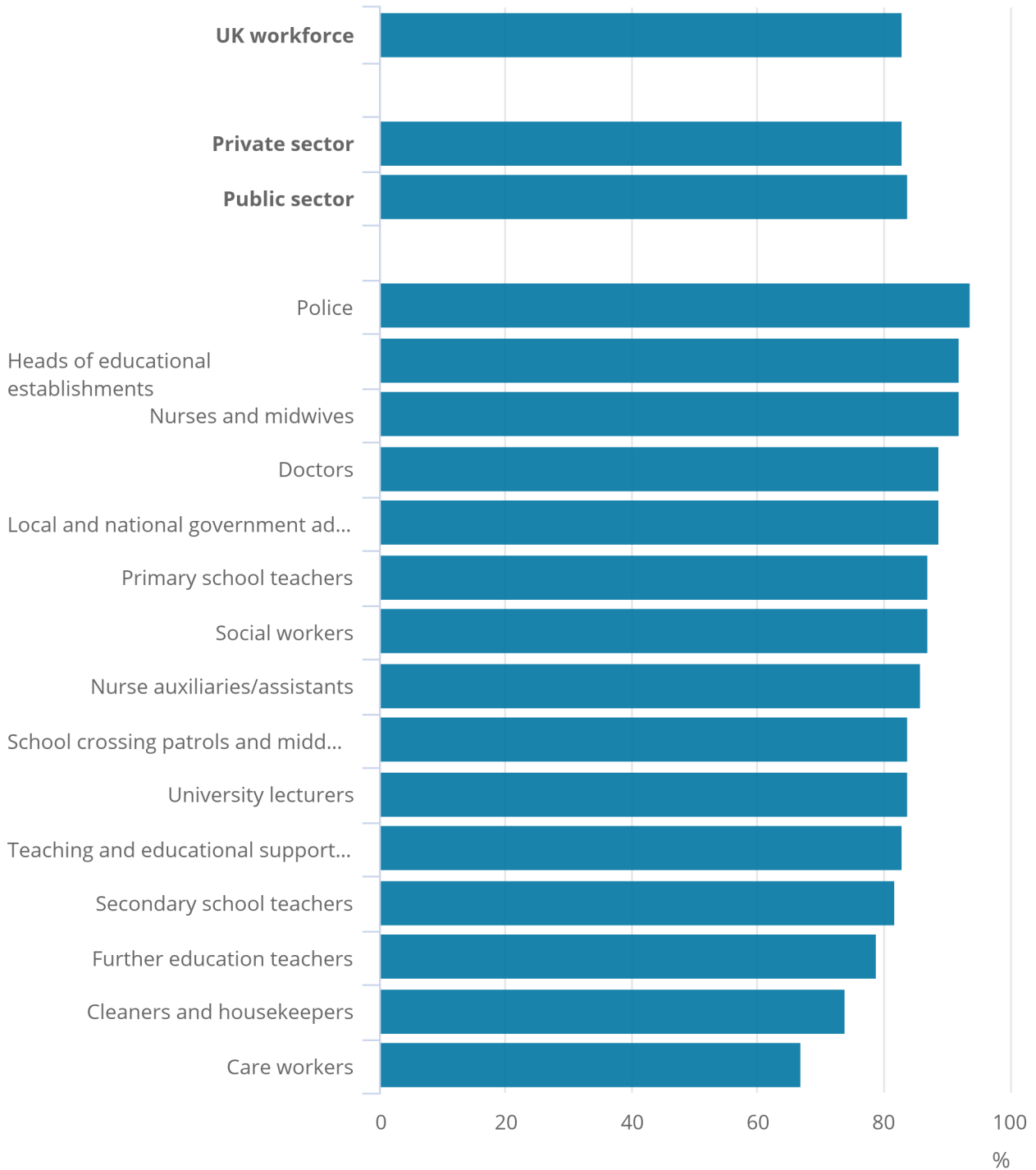
Further education teachers had a below-average retention rate; 79% remained in teaching professions, which is lower than the retention rates of all other teaching professions. Care workers, and cleaners and housekeepers also had below-average retention rates (67% and 74% respectively).

Figure 1: One-year retention rates in the largest public sector occupations are mostly above the workforce average

One-year retention rates, by occupation, UK, 2016 to 2017

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One-year retention rates, by occupation, UK, 2016 to 2017



Notes:

1. Occupations shown are the largest public sector occupations. See [How are the occupations defined](#) and [Who works in the public sector?](#) for more information.

5 . How have retention rates changed over time?

Similar to the trend seen across the workforce, most of the larger public sector occupations saw a fall in their one-year retention rate, between 2012 to 2013 and 2016 to 2017.

A noticeable fall in the one-year retention rate is seen in public sector care workers. This could be due to more care workers being contracted to the private sector.

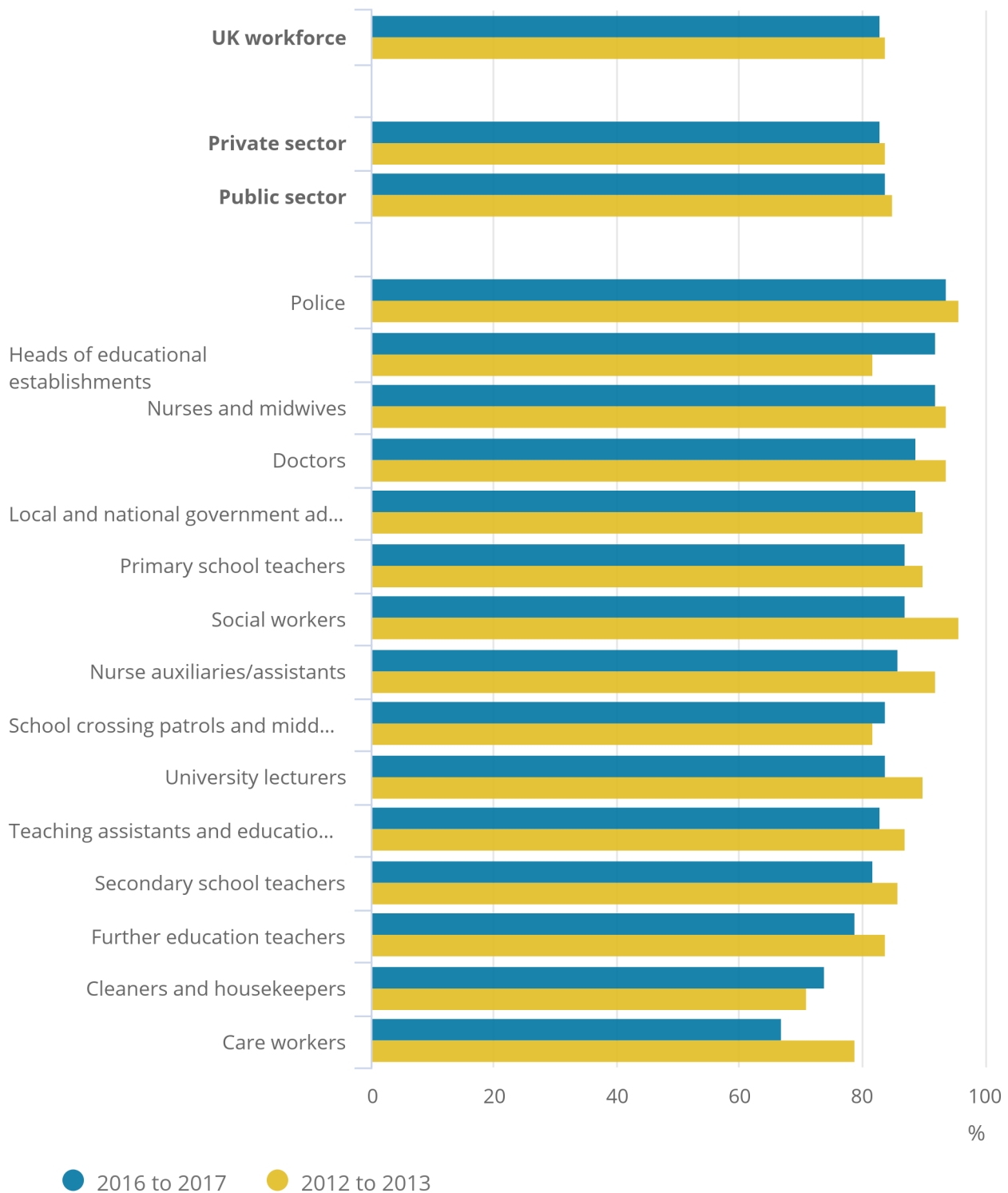
Heads of educational establishments were a group that bucked this trend. In 2012 to 2013, 82% of heads of educational establishments were retained. This figure rose to 92% in 2016 to 2017.

Figure 2: One-year retention rates in public sector occupations are similar to or lower than rates in 2012 to 2013

One-year retention rates in largest public sector occupations, UK, 2012 to 2013 and 2016 to 2017

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One-year retention rates in largest public sector occupations, UK, 2012 to 2013 and 2016 to 2017



Notes:

1. Rates showing as 0% mean that the rate is unpublished for disclosure and quality reasons.
2. Occupations shown are the largest public sector occupations. See [How are occupations defined?](#) for more information.

6 . Retention rates vary by age and occupation

The UK workforce, public and private sector follow the same pattern when considering retention in age groups: workers aged 35 to 49 years have the highest retention rates, followed by workers aged 50 to 60 years then workers aged 18 to 34 years. Different patterns emerge when we look at the particular age ranges within the largest public sector occupations.

Medical occupations had high retention rates for workers aged 18 to 34 years: 96% of nurses and midwives remained, 93% of nurse auxiliaries remained and 92% of doctors remained.

People in the middle of their working lives, those aged between 35 and 49 years, had the highest retention rates as social workers (93%), primary school teachers (92%) and police officers (92%).

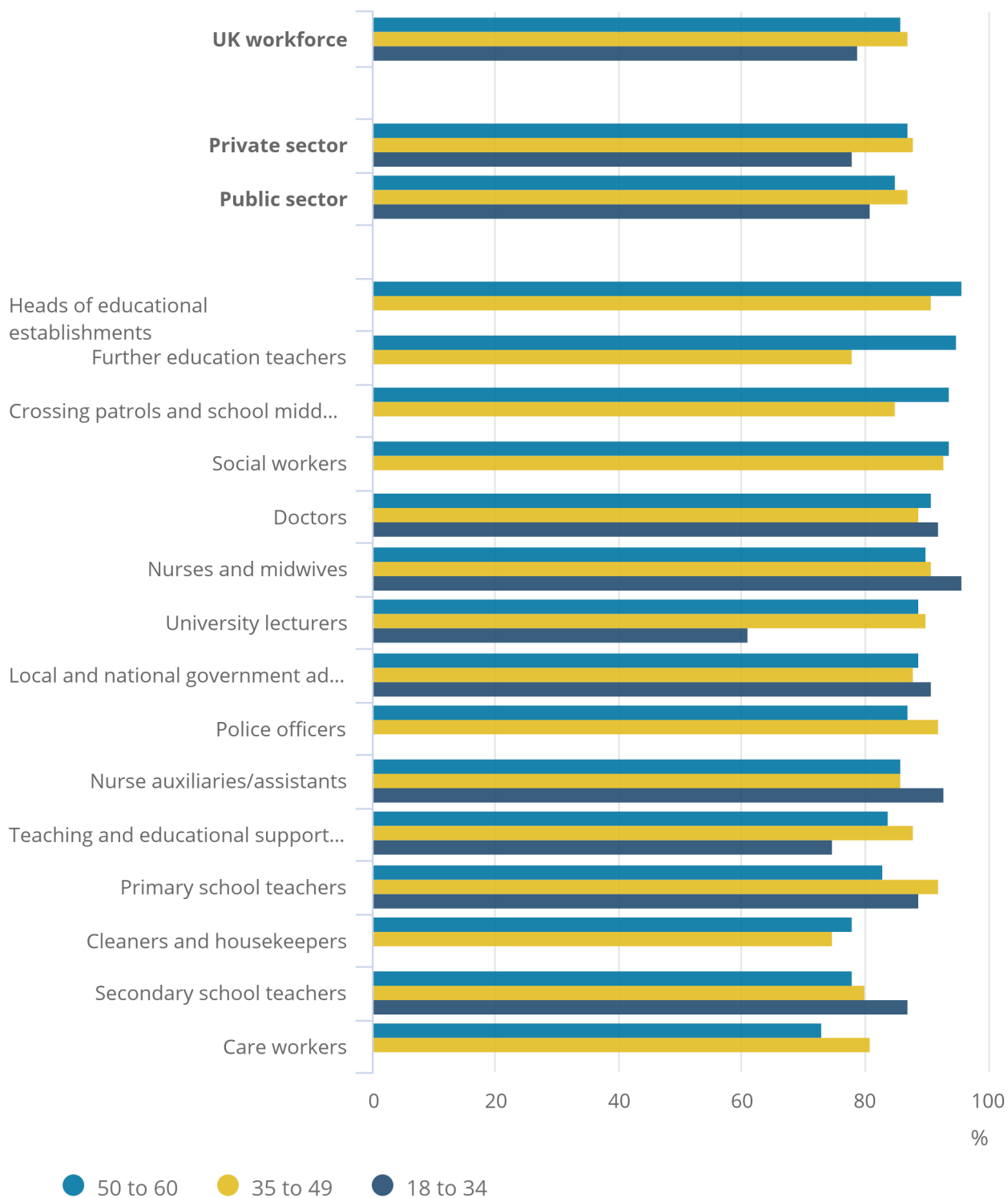
Retention rates for those aged 50 to 60 years varied between occupations. Primary and secondary school teachers in this age range had the lowest retention rates within these occupations. In contrast, heads of educational establishments and further education teachers aged 50 to 60 years had two of the highest retention rates (96% and 95% respectively) of all occupations considered.

Figure 3: At a UK level, those aged 35 to 49 years have the highest retention rate, but levels vary between occupations

One-year retention rate, by age group and occupation, UK, 2016 to 2017

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One-year retention rate, by age group and occupation, UK, 2016 to 2017



Notes:

1. Rates showing as 0% mean that the rate is unpublished for disclosure and quality reasons.
2. Occupations shown are the largest public sector occupations. See [How are occupations defined?](#) for more information.
3. The 50 to 60 years age group contains workers who were nearing retirement, some of whom may take early retirement.

7 . One-year retention rate of workers on temporary contracts was higher for the public sector than the private sector

Approximately 9 in 10 workers in the public sector have permanent contracts, but a minority are employed temporarily. Unsurprisingly, the average retention rate of workers on temporary contracts is lower than those on permanent contracts. Yet, public sector workers on temporary contracts are considerably more likely to be retained than workers on temporary contracts in the private sector (68% compared with 58% respectively).

The one-year retention rate of workers on temporary contracts varies greatly between the main occupations.

Doctors and nurses have similar rates of retention for workers on different contracts, both around 90%.

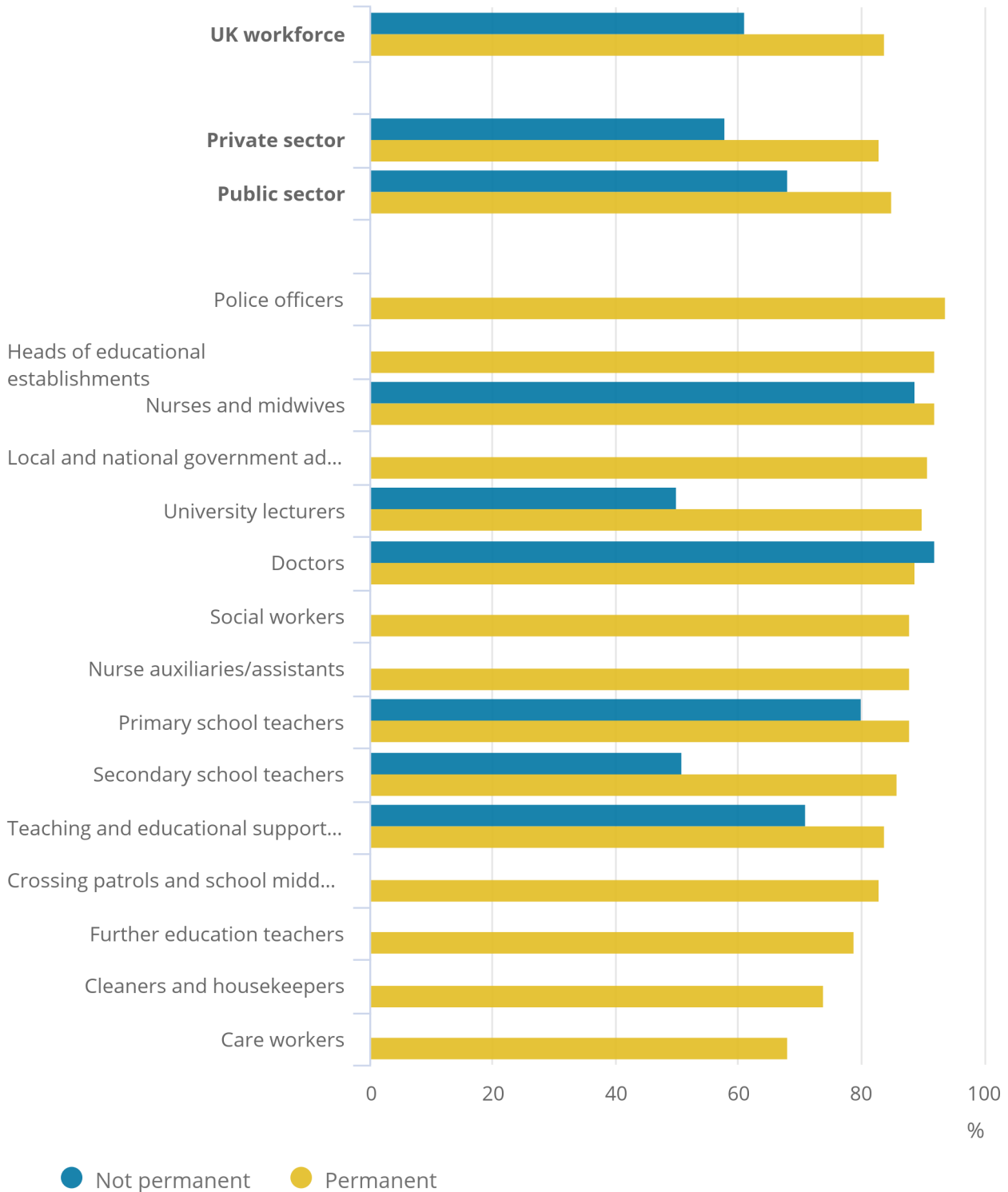
But it is a different story in the education sector. Here, the difference between the retention rates for permanent and temporary staff is much bigger. While 86% of secondary school teachers on permanent contracts were retained, only 51% on temporary contracts stayed within the teaching professions.

Figure 4: Employees on temporary contracts in the public sector have higher retention rates than those on temporary contracts in the private sector

One-year retention rates by contract type in largest public sector occupations, UK, 2016 to 2017

Figure 4: Employees on temporary contracts in the public sector have higher retention rates than those on temporary contracts in the private sector

One-year retention rates by contract type in largest public sector occupations, UK, 2016 to 2017



Notes:

1. Rates showing as 0% mean that the rate is unpublished for disclosure and quality reasons.
2. The permanency of a job relates to the job itself, not the respondent's intentions about that job.
3. Occupations shown are the largest public sector occupations. See [How are occupations defined?](#) for more information.

8 . How are the occupations defined?

The occupations used in this analysis are based on Standard Occupational Classification 2010 codes (SOC 2010). Table 1 shows the occupation labels used in this article, SOC 2010 codes and the SOC 2010 titles (if different to the label).

The occupations selected were the largest occupations in the public sector and 46% of workers were in one of these occupations. The occupation that was one of the largest (3% of workers) was “other administrative occupations not elsewhere classified”. This was omitted from our calculation of the largest occupations as it is not a specific occupation.

For more information on SOC 2010 codes, please see the [SOC 2010 volumes](#).

Many of these occupations will have some people employed in the public sector and some in the private sector. However, this analysis includes only those people who worked in the specific occupations listed and reported working in the public sector. It is likely that supply teachers who work in state schools are included as primary and secondary school teachers in this analysis.

To avoid duplication, we restricted our analysis to people's main occupation only.

Table 1: Occupation definitions used in this article compared with Standard Occupational Classification 2010 codes and titles

SOC2010	SOC2010 title	Occupation label	Size, % of public sector workers
2231, 2232	Nurses (2231), Midwives (2232)	Nurses & midwives	8
6125, 6126	Teaching assistants (6125), Educational support assistants (6126)	Teaching & educational support assistants	5.8
2315	Primary and nursery education teaching professionals	Primary school teachers	5.3
2314	Secondary education teaching professionals	Secondary school teachers	4.6
4112, 4113	National government administrative occupations (4112), Local government administrative occupations (4113)	Local & national government administrative roles	4
6141	Nursing auxiliaries and assistants	Nurses auxiliaries /assistants	3.1
2211	Medical practitioners	Doctors	3.1
3312	Police officers (sergeant and below)	Police officers	2.2
2311	Higher education teaching professionals	University lecturers	2.1
6145	Care workers and home carers	Care workers	1.7
9233	Cleaners and domestics	Cleaners & housekeepers	1.5
2312	Further education teaching professionals	Further education teachers	1.4
2442	Social workers	Social workers	1.2
2317	Senior professionals of educational establishments	Heads of educational establishments	1.2
9244	School midday and cross patrol occupations	School crossing patrols & midday supervisors	1.2

9 . Data sources and more information

The latest longitudinal Annual Population Survey (APS) available for analysis collected data on people's employment arrangements in 2016 and 2017. This allows us to see if respondents were in the same occupation in 2017 as they were in 2016. We can also see whether they stayed in a similar sector, the length of time they were employed and whether they moved occupation or left the labour market.

The APS allows direct comparisons to be drawn across the UK labour force, between occupations and sectors. No other single data source allows such broad comparisons to be made. Therefore, figures from the APS are particularly valuable when read in relation to one another.

Other data sources and reports give more detailed statistics into questions of retention in specific occupations. They are not directly comparable because, unlike the APS figures presented here, they are each calculated using different methodology.

Other data sources and reports

- [School workforce census](#)
- [Analysis of teacher supply, retention and mobility \(September 2018; PDF 2.2MB\)](#)
- [Teacher recruitment and retention in England \(February 2019; PDF, 753.2KB\)](#)
- [NHS Digital turnover statistics \(England\)](#)
- [Report of the Health Committee: The nursing workforce \(2017 to 2019; PDF, 3.4MB\)](#)