

Article

Working flexibly in the public sector

Using survey data, the article explores different flexible working patterns in the public sector in the UK. It also explains reasons why people choose to work part-time.

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1 . Introduction

Since June 2014, all UK employees have had the right, by law, to request flexible hours, although carers and parents have had the right to request flexibility to care for dependants since 1996.¹

Research has shown that [flexible working](#) can improve employee well-being, as well as personal and team productivity and efficiency.²

In 2018, of all people who worked in the public sector, 42% said that they worked flexibly through [alternative working patterns](#) (Figure 1) including flexitime (where workers can vary start and finish times, and accrue hours), compressed hours, annualised hours, term-time only working, working on-call and zero hours contracts. In contrast, only 21% of private sector workers said that flexible working was part of their agreed working pattern.

A further 15% of public sector workers worked part-time hours without any additional flexibility.

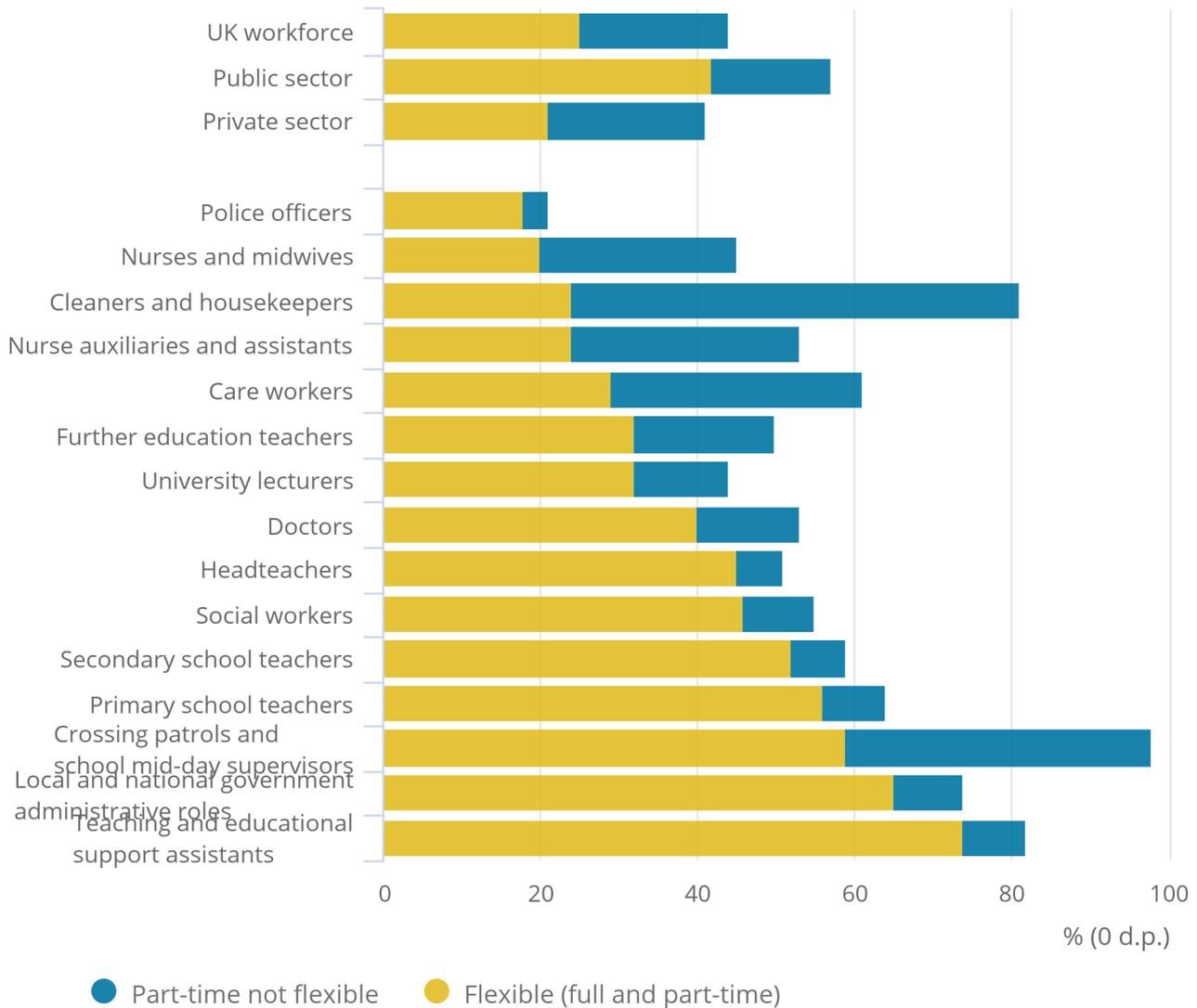
But working patterns varied considerably between different public sector occupations. The lowest levels of flexibility were reported by police officers, and nurses and midwives. Local and national government administrators and teaching support assistants reported having most flexibility.

Figure 1: Reported working patterns vary between different public sector occupations

UK, Oct to Dec, 2018

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UK, Oct to Dec, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey, Oct to Dec 2018

Notes:

1. Remaining space on the graph represents "full-time, not flexible".

Another part of working flexibly is being able to choose where you work. Only 3% of public sector workers report that they work mainly from home, compared with 17% of people who worked in the private sector.

Notes for: Introduction

1. Doug Pyper, '[Briefing paper 01086, House of Commons Library, 3 October 2018, page 5](#)'; [The Flexible Working Regulations 2014](#)
2. OECD, 2016, '[Be Flexible! Background brief on how workplace flexibility can help European employees to balance work and family](#)' (PDF, 1.59MB); '[Flexible working](#)'; Sharon Clarke and Lynn Holdsworth, 2017, '[Flexibility in the Workplace: implications of flexible work arrangements for individuals, teams and organisations](#)' (PDF, 472KB), ACAS research paper.

2 . Flexible working patterns in the public sector are strongly influenced by the demands of jobs that are not 9 to 5

The [largest occupations within the public sector](#) – healthcare professionals and those in education – are often jobs with working patterns outside of the “typical” 9 to 5. In these areas, flexible working is often determined by the needs of the job and not necessarily by the needs of the worker.

For example, 46% of those working in occupations in education- say that they can work flexibly. Yet, 76% of the reported flexible working patterns in education occupations are term-time only work and a further 16% are annualised contracts (where workers are contracted for a set number of hours each year) (Figure 2). This suggests that working patterns in education might not be as flexible as they first appear.

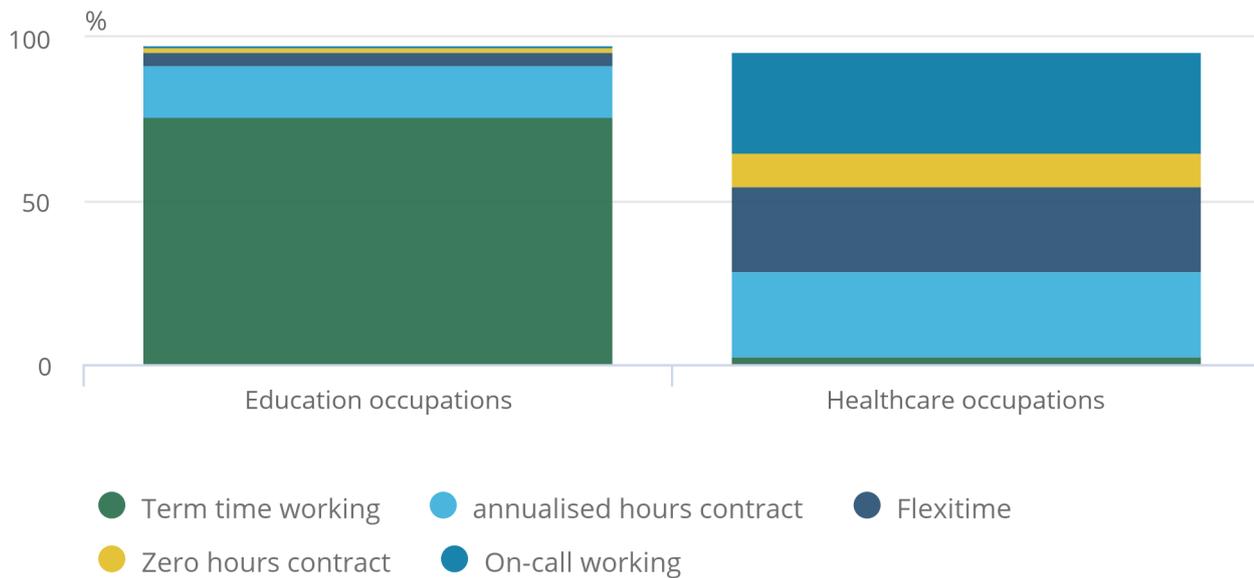
In healthcare occupations, 31% of flexible working patterns is “on-call”, followed by “flexitime” (26%) and “annualised contracts” (26%). There is little opportunity for doctors, nurses and midwives, and nurse auxiliaries to work term-time only.

Figure 2: Type of flexible working varies depending on occupation

UK, Oct to Dec 2018

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UK, Oct to Dec 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey, Oct to Dec 2018

Notes:

1. "Education occupations" include Primary school teachers, Secondary school teachers, Headteachers, Teaching and educational support assistants, and Further education teachers. "Healthcare occupations" include Nurses and Midwives, Doctors, and Nurse auxiliaries and assistants.
2. Totals do not add to 100% because other categories have been suppressed due to small sample counts.

Flexible working patterns in these public sector occupations are often constrained by the needs of particular jobs.

In contrast, part-time work can offer flexibility on the terms of the worker.

3 . Increasingly, people who work part-time do so because they want to

In 2018, of all public sector workers, 23% reported working part-time; in the private sector, 21% said that they worked part-time.

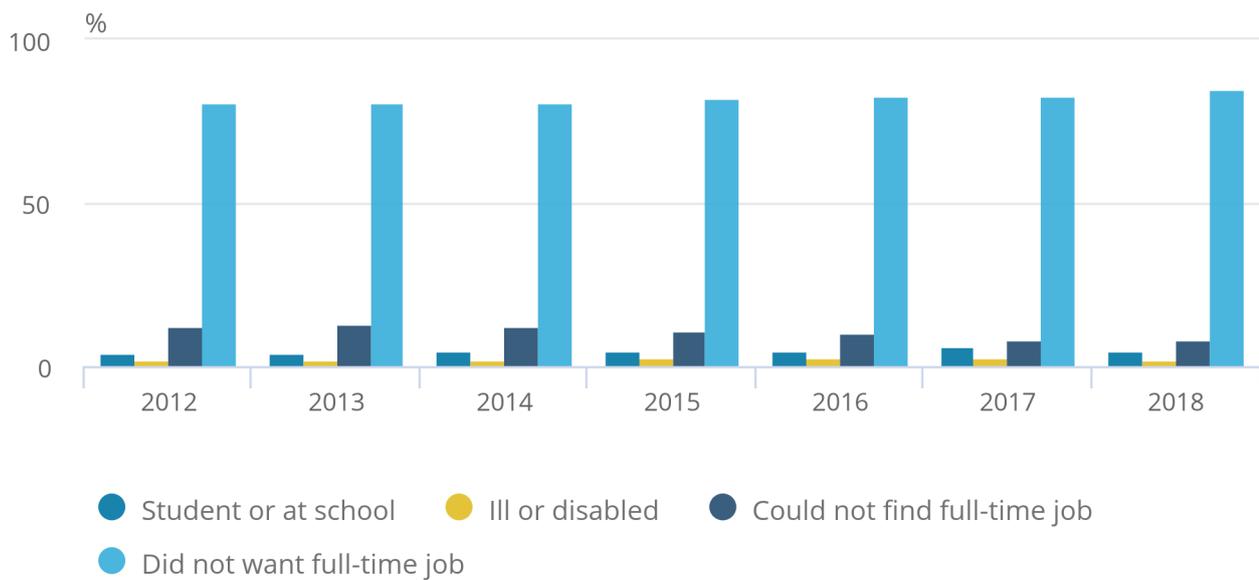
Since 2012, a growing proportion of part-time public sector workers are choosing to work part-time because they do not want full-time jobs. At the same time, the proportion of people working part-time because they could not find a full-time job has decreased (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Increasing numbers of part-time workers are part-time because they do not want a full-time job

UK, 2012 to 2018

Figure 3: Increasing numbers of part-time workers are part-time because they do not want a full-time job

UK, 2012 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey, Jan to Dec 2012 to 2018

Notes:

1. Totals do not add to 100% because other categories have been suppressed due to small sample counts.

Data for 2018¹ showed that 85% of the overall part-time public sector workforce said that they did not want full-time work (Figure 4).

This figure rose to 98% for doctors, 95% for police officers and 93% for nurses and midwives.

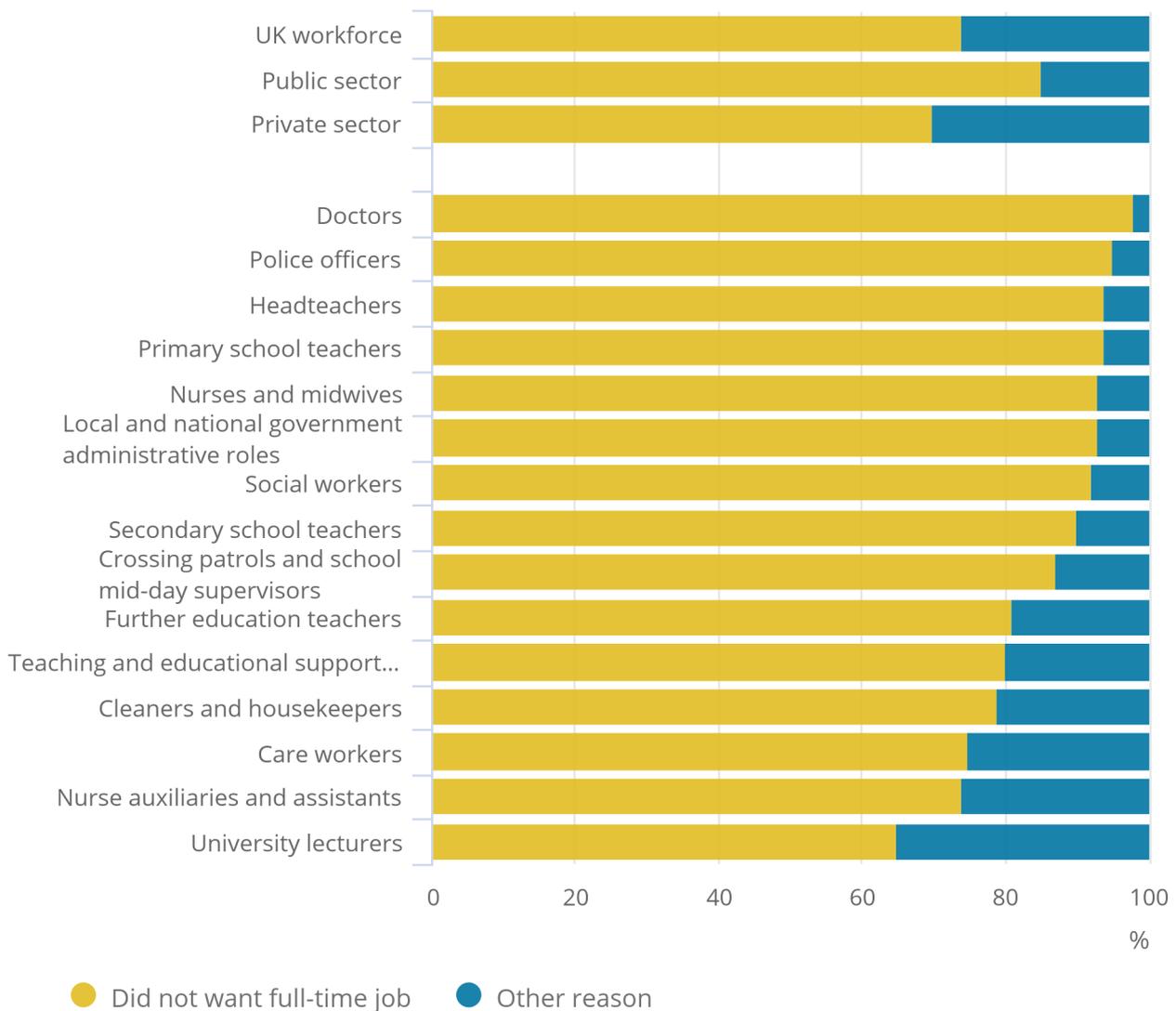
In comparison, only 70% of part-time workers in the private sector said that they worked part-time because they did not want a full-time job.

Figure 4: The proportion of those working part-time because they do not want a full-time job varies across public sector occupations

UK, Public sector workers, 2018

Figure 4: The proportion of those working part-time because they do not want a full-time job varies across public sector occupations

UK, Public sector workers, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey, Jan to Dec 2018

Notes:

1. "Other" includes "Student or at school", "Ill or disabled", and "Could not find full-time job".

Notes for: Increasingly, people who work part-time do so because they want to

4 . Men and women choose to work part-time for different reasons

Men and women working in the public sector vary in the reasons they give for not wanting a full-time job. Women are most likely to choose not to work full-time in order to spend more time with family. On the other hand, men tend to choose part-time work because they feel financially secure or because they earn enough working part-time (Figure 5).

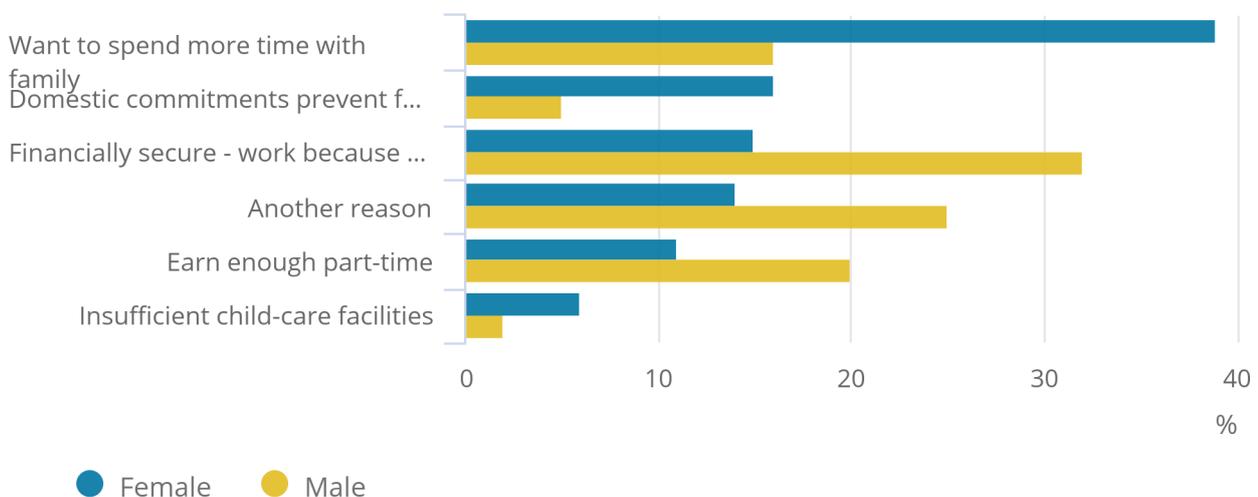
Only 6% of women and 2% of men in the public sector said that they worked part-time because of insufficient childcare facilities.

Figure 5: Men and women give different reasons for working part-time

UK, Public sector workers, Jan to Mar 2018

Figure 5: Men and women give different reasons for working part-time

UK, Public sector workers, Jan to Mar 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey (wave 1) 2018

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

5 . Care responsibilities affect working pattern

“Insufficient childcare facilities” was the lowest reported reason for working part-time by people in the public sector.

However, looking after children and/or relatives does affect working patterns.

Of those who gave family time and domestic commitments as reasons for working part-time, around three quarters said that they had caring responsibilities for their children and/or relatives.

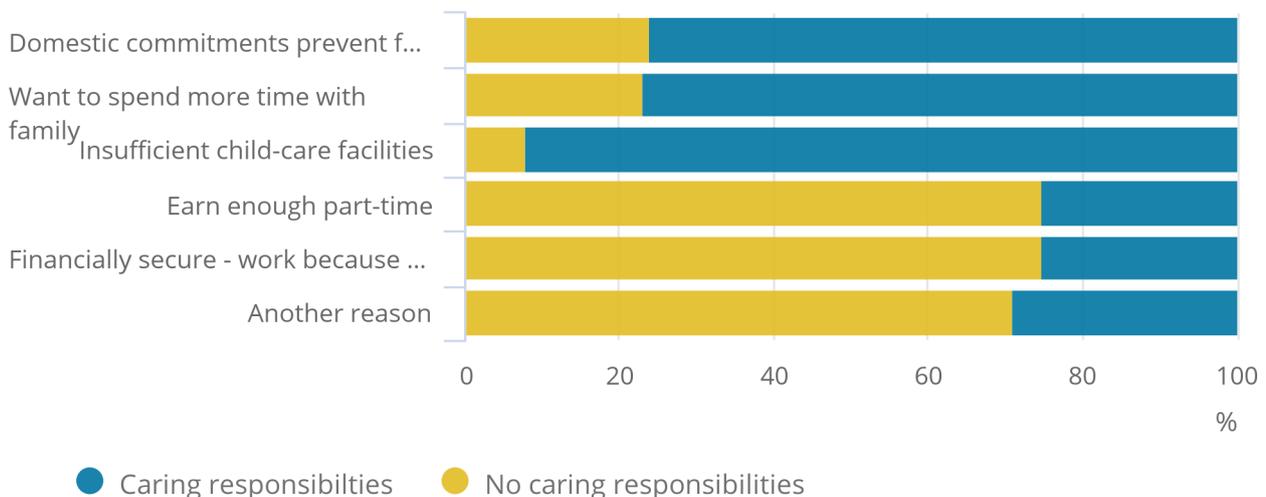
In contrast, of those who said that they worked part-time because they had enough money or because they earned enough part-time, only 25% reported having caring responsibilities (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Care responsibilities affect the reasons that people work part-time

UK, Public sector workers, Jan to Mar 2018

Figure 6: Care responsibilities affect the reasons that people work part-time

UK, Public sector workers, Jan to Mar 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey (wave 1) 2018

6 . Annex of definitions

This article uses the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS) for analysis. These are self-reported surveys. Therefore, there is no set hourly value for “part-time work” and “full-time work”.

Definitions of flexible working¹

To find out about alternative working patterns, respondents to the Labour Force Survey were asked:

“Some people have special working hours arrangements that vary daily or weekly. In your (main) job is your agreed working arrangement any of the following....”

Flexible working hours

Employees can vary their daily start and finish times each day. Over an accounting period (usually four weeks or a calendar month) debit and credit hours can be carried over into another accounting period. Variable start and finish times on their own are not enough for a flexitime system. There must also be a formal accounting period.

Annualised hours contract

The number of hours an employee has to work are calculated over a full year. As an example, an employee may be contracted for 1,900 hours per year, instead of 40 hours per week (after allowing for leave and other entitlements). Longer hours are worked over certain parts of the year and shorter hours at other periods. Variations in hours are related to seasonal factors or fluctuation in demand for the company's goods or services.

Term-time working

Employees' work during the school or college term. Unpaid leave is taken during the school holidays, although their pay may be spread equally over the year.

Job sharing

This is a type of part-time working. A full-time job is divided between, usually, two people. The job sharers work at different times, although there may be a changeover period.

Nine-day fortnight

In this pattern, individual employees have one day off every other week. The actual day off may vary so long as the employee keeps to an alternating pattern of one 5-day week followed by one 4-day week. This working pattern is full-time with compressed hours.

Four-and-a-half-day week

This typically involves the normal working week finishing early on Fridays. The short day need not necessarily be Friday, but this is the most obvious and common day. This working pattern is full-time with compressed hours.

Zero hours contract

Here, a person is not contracted to work a set number of hours and is only paid for the number of hours that they actually work.

Further notes

Respondents to the Labour Force Survey are not given the definitions of the different working patterns. When a respondent asks what is meant by the term, it is believed unlikely that they work such shift patterns and so are generally coded as not applicable. This perhaps explains the incidence of high term-time working reported by primary and secondary school teachers (who we would expect to be paid over the holidays).

For more detailed analysis on the demographics of the public sector and how and why we chose to focus on particular public sector occupations, see [Who works in the public sector?](#)

The public sector employment (PSE) estimates are the recommended source of data for understanding the number and proportion of people who work in the public sector. The LFS and the APS are used for this article because they provide demographic characteristics and opinions of UK workers that are not captured in PSE. Also, they provide comparable data between sectors.

The [LFS](#) and [APS](#) quality and methodology information reports contain further important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output including the accuracy of the data

Notes for: Annex of definitions

1. Adapted from the [Labour Force Survey user guide, volume 3](#), page 160.