Office for National Statistics

Statistical bulletin

Time use in the public sector, Great Britain: further analysis, February 2024

Estimates and opinions of time spent by public sector workers on a range of work activities. These are official statistics in development.

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- Overall, 40% of British public sector work time was spent on "sector-specific" activities such as patient management, student management, or policing, while the remaining 60% of work time was spent on "non-sector specific" activities; these include both specialised tasks such as data analysis, research and project management, and other tasks such as organising meetings and events.

- Frontline workers (those who tend to work with the public directly) spent most of their work time on sector-specific activities (66%), compared with non-frontline workers (13%).

- Public sector workers spent on average 16% of their work time multi-tasking (performing more than one activity at a time); frontline supervisors spent 20% of their time multi-tasking.

- On a four-point scale of perceived activity importance, frontline workers reported 47% of the time they spent on non-sector-specific activities as being "very important" and only 2% as "not at all important".

- Analysis of written responses found that "administrative-related" activities were often mentioned as not being essential to public sector workers' roles.

- When asked about what changes could save time, the strongest themes from our analysis of participants' written responses were resource planning, task improvements and planning and management.

Estimates are based on data collected in a pilot time use survey of public sector workers. Participants only completed diaries for days on which they worked.

2 . Understanding how public sector workers spend their time

To understand how public sector workers spend their time, and their views around productivity at work, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) ran a pilot public sector Time Use Survey in early 2024. Findings provide insight into the activities public sector workers undertake and will help inform our measures of public service productivity, as described in our Public services productivity review.

In our Time use in the public sector, Great Britain: February 2024 bulletin we discussed how public sector workers spent their time across a range of activities, their self-rated productivity, and views on administrative tasks. This article provides in-depth analysis of the same data, exploring public sector time use in more detail. Estimates are provided based on the main activity that respondents reported doing at any one time, apart from in the multitasking section, where secondary activities are also reported.

The findings and methods in this publication are in development. For this reason, caution should be taken when interpreting these results, which are based on a pilot survey. We will continue to develop both data collection and analysis techniques to meet user needs and we welcome views on how best to do this. More information is available in Section 10: Future developments.

3 . Time spent on work activities

One way of understanding time use among public sector workers is to estimate the time they spend on "sector-specific activities". These are activities that are relevant to the core service they are delivering. For example, student management is core to the education sector, as patient management is to healthcare.

We can then estimate the time spent on activities that are common across all sectors or "non-sector-specific activities" such as records management, meetings and events, or general administration.

It is not possible to generalise the qualitative results to wider populations because the quotes represent respondents' views only.

When considering the balance of sector-specific time to non-sector-specific time across the different sectors, we have focused our analysis only on days when sector-specific activities were taking place, so it only includes those workers who recorded some sector-specific-activity on a given day. This is because we want to understand what other activities are being done alongside those sector-specific activities. This also helps to ensure sectors are comparable, as some sectors need a higher proportion of staff who do not engage in sector-specific activities to run effectively.

Figure 1: On days when sector-specific-tasks took place, student management took around 81% of education workers' time

Proportion of time spent on sector-specific activities by type of service, days when sector-specific tasks were carried out and recorded as a main activity

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Proportion of time spent on sector-specific activities by type of service, days when sector-specific tasks were carried out and recorded as a main activity
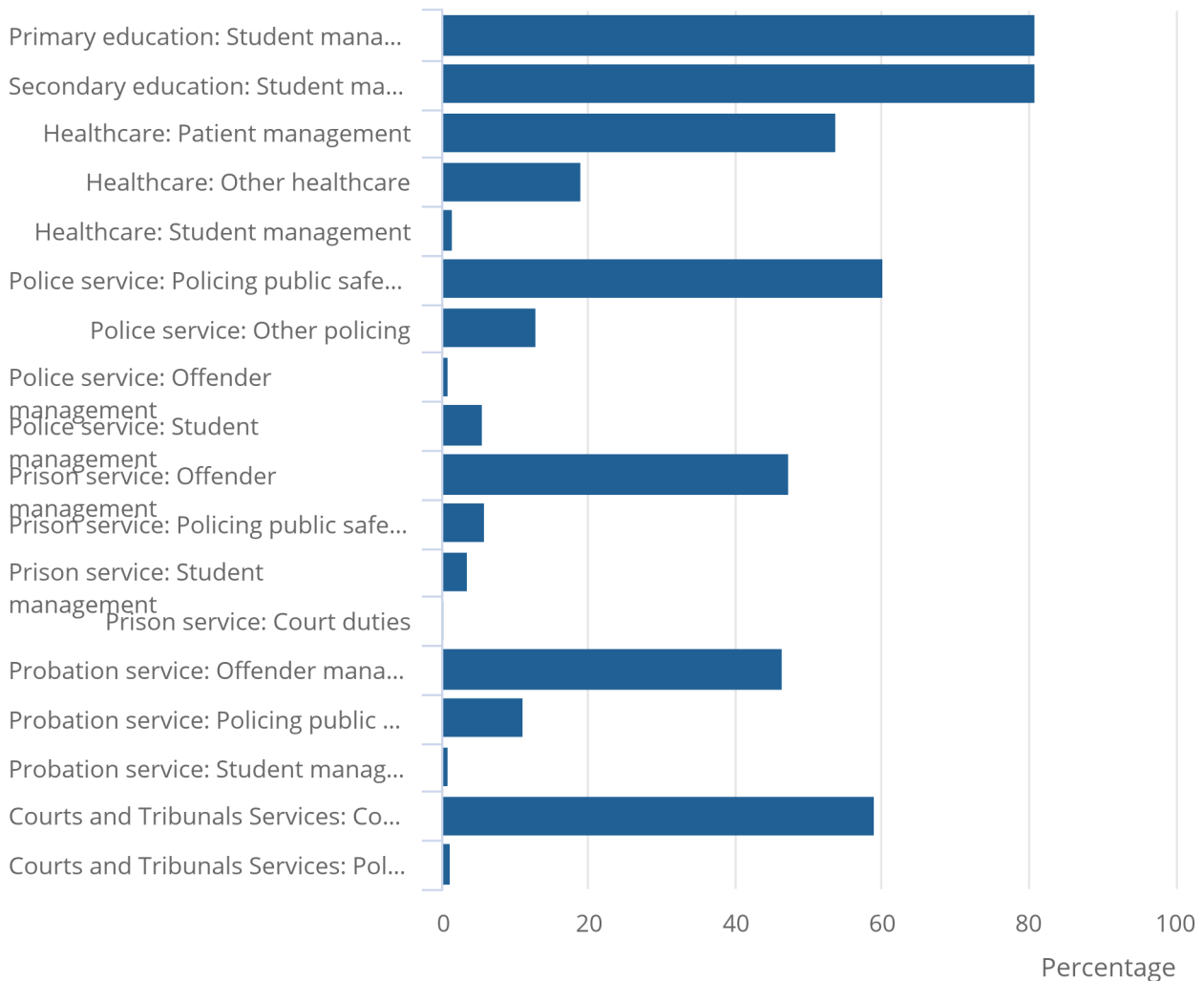
Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. For a full list of sector-specific activities see our reference tables.

2. The proportion of time spent on an activity across worktime has been calculated by dividing the time spent on the activity by total worktime and then converting this figure into a percentage.

3. Further data by type of service and by activity can be found in our reference tables.

4. Only includes diaries containing at least some sector-specific tasks.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of working time across individual public services that was spent on sector-specific activities, on workdays when they were carried out. For health, education and police services it typically accounts for around 70 to 80% of their aggregate hours.

However, for the crime and justice sectors, time spent on sector-specific activities was lower. For example, the prison service had a lower proportion of its time dedicated directly to offender management, meaning that over 40% of the work hours on those days were focused on non-sector-specific activities, such as records management, which is further explained in figure 2.

Although sector-specific activities are highly concentrated in the services dedicated to their provision, small amounts of "sector-specific" activity may happen outside the core service that provides them. For example, while student management is highly concentrated in the education sector, it also takes place in other sectors, such as in the health sector, where workers manage student placements in medical settings.

The following section examines non-sector-specific activities, that is, those which are common across all public services. Non-sector-specific activities can also be highly skilled, particularly when performed by those with specialist knowledge. For example, report writing, although common across different areas of the public sector, will sometimes be quite specialist in nature, as it takes a trained medical professional to write medical records or experienced prison staff to be able to write prison records.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of days when sector-specific activities took place that were allocated to non-sector-specific activities. For most of the services, records management takes up the largest proportion of workforce time, and that is particularly true for the prison service, probation service and courts and tribunals services, where record keeping accounts for over 15% of total workforce working time. Some of the open text responses to our survey from those working in the prison or probation services also raised record keeping as an area of concern, with participants reporting that it takes too much time. However, record keeping is understood to be a core part of prison officer work, often completed on days when prison officers are also managing offenders.

Figure 2: Records management accounted for more than 15% of the time of those working in the prison, probation and courts and tribunals services

Proportion of workforce hours spent on non-sector-specific activities, on days when sector-specific activities were carried out

Notes:

1. For a full breakdown of grouped and ungrouped activities see our reference tables.

2. The proportion of time spent on an activity across worktime has been calculated by dividing the time spent on the activity by total worktime and then converting this figure into a percentage.

3. Only includes diaries containing at least some sector-specific activities.

4. Estimates are based on the main activity that respondents reported doing at any one time.

We now focus on estimates of time spent on non-sector-specific activities. The estimates are based on all public sector workdays, to provide complete estimates for those in occupations that have been identified as being more likely to engage directly with the public, compared with those in occupations that are not (labelled "frontline workers" and "non-frontline workers", respectively).

Although the term "frontline" is commonly used, there is no standardised classification criteria. For the purpose of this analysis, we have worked closely with government departments to classify public sector workers as frontline or non-frontline. However, there are still borderline cases. For example some receptionists might be public facing, while others may be less public-facing; some may deal mainly with other public sector works, and some with private sector workers.

Overall, 40% of British public sector work time was spent on "sector-specific" activities such as patient management, student management, or policing, while the remaining 60% of work time was spent on "non-sector specific" activities; these include both specialised tasks such as data analysis, research and project management, and tasks such as meetings and events. The figure is higher for non-sector-specific work, because nearly all staff tend to perform some kind of non-sector-specific work, across all working days..

Figure 3: Frontline workers spent less time on activities such as records management, meetings and communication than non-frontline workers.

The proportion of workforce hours spent on non-sector-specific activities, by all public sector workers, frontline or non-frontline staff, Great Britain: February 2024

Figure 3: Frontline workers spent less time on activities such as records management, meetings and communication than non-frontline workers.

The proportion of workforce hours spent on non-sector-specific activities, by all public sector workers, frontline or non-frontline staff, Great Britain: February 2024
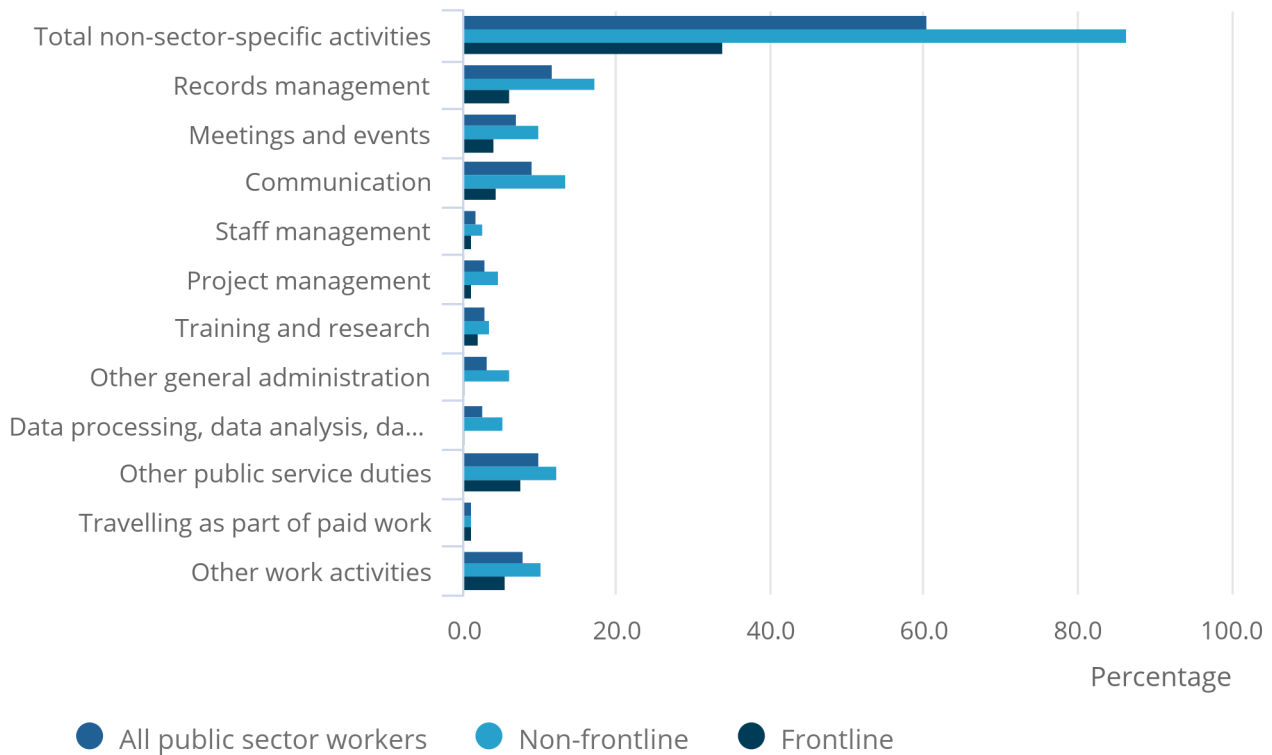
Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. For a full breakdown of grouped and ungrouped activities see reference tables.

2. The proportion of time spent on an activity across worktime has been calculated by dividing the time spent on the activity by total worktime and then converted into a percentage.

3. Estimates are based on main activities.

Figure 3 shows that when comparing frontline and non-frontline staff, non-frontline staff typically dedicate a higher proportion of their collective working time to non-sector-specific activities. The biggest difference is for records management where non-frontline staff performed records management activities for 17% of their collective working time, as opposed to just 6% of the working time of frontline staff.

Although frontline workers spent a higher proportion of their work time on sector-specific activities (66%) such as patient management, student management, offender management or policing, they still viewed their non-sector-specific time as being "very important". On a four-point scale of perceived activity importance, frontline workers reported 47% of their time spent on non-sector-specific activities as being "very important" and only 2% as "not at all important".

This aligns with previous ONS analysis published in March 2024, where feedback given by teachers was highlighted. One teacher noted:

> [The] process of looking at an individual student and then writing their report… I think it informs my teaching as well. It's clearly a very old-fashioned notion now, but that's one of the things that I find – one of the admin tasks that I find really, really useful"

Education, Focus group

However, although viewed as important, sometimes respondents reported that they viewed the activity as something that should be done by another type of job role. For example, one healthcare sector worker said:

> Patient letters would definitely be something secretaries do, but we don't have secretaries [...] printing out the letters and putting them in envelopes and addressing them, it takes a ridiculous amount of time

Health, Focus group

4 . Multi-tasking

Multi-tasking refers to the process of carrying out a main activity and one or more secondary activities at the same time. The following section provides an overview of the extent to which different types of workers are multi-tasking.

Respondents were asked to record their main activity and their secondary activities. Main activity refers to the primary activity they were carrying out at the time, for example, writing records. Secondary activities could be carried out at the same time, for example, speaking with a colleague or reading an email. Respondents could report a maximum of five secondary activities during a single primary activity.

Figure 4: Frontline workers and supervisors spent more time multi-tasking

Percentage of time spent multi-tasking by supervisory and frontline workers, Great Britain, February 2024
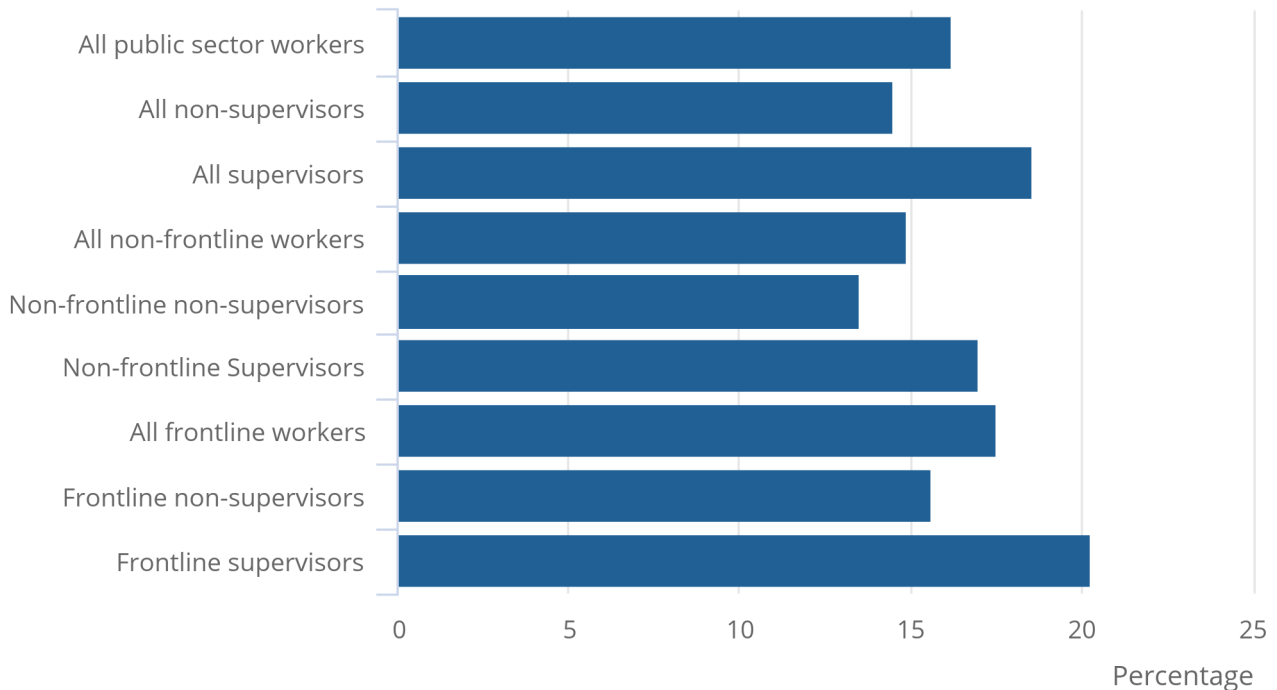
Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Estimates in Figure 4 show the percentage of time workers spent carrying out their main activity and one or more secondary activities.

2. The proportion of multi-tasking time has been calculated by dividing the total time spent multi-tasking by total work time and then converting this figure into a percentage.

3. For a full breakdown of grouped and ungrouped activities see our reference tables.

Figure 4 shows that, overall, 16% of public service workforce working time involved some form of multi-tasking. It was particularly common in the working time of supervisors and frontline staff. Frontline supervisors spent the highest proportion (20%) of their work time multi-tasking.

When multi-tasking, the most common activities were records management (49% of the time) and communication activities (30% of the time).

5 . Workers' perceptions of activities

When carrying out non-sector-specific activities such as sending emails and reviewing paperwork, public sector workers were asked to record their perceptions on how long the activity took and how important it was. They were also asked to describe any activities they carried out that were not an essential part of their role.

Public service workers reported 72% of their time on non-sector-specific activities was spent on activities that, in their opinion, took about "the right amount of time", 19% on activities that took "too much time" and 8% on activities that "needed more time". Figures do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Figure 5: Public service workers felt most activities took the right amount of time to complete

Percentage of time spent on non-sector-specific activities, according to how long participants felt they took to complete, Great Britain, February 2024

Figure 5: Public service workers felt most activities took the right amount of time to complete

Percentage of time spent on non-sector-specific activities, according to how long participants felt they took to complete, Great Britain, February 2024

Legend:
- Took too much time
- Took about the right amount of time
- Needed more time
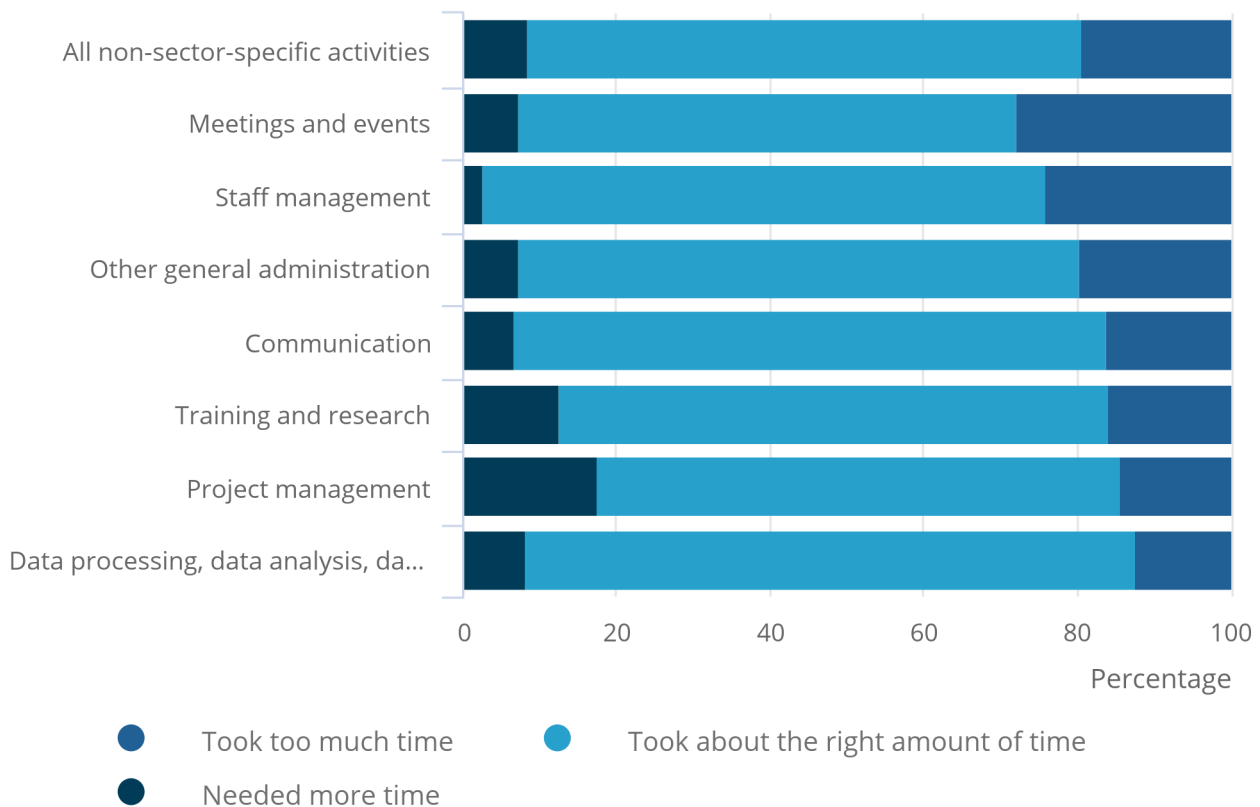
Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. For a full breakdown of grouped and ungrouped activities see our reference tables.

2. Workers were asked to describe whether the activity needed more time, took the right amount of time or took too much time.

3. Proportions were calculated by dividing the duration-rated task time by the overall total time captured for that task. This figure was then converted into a percentage.

4. Estimates are based on the main activity that respondents reported doing at any one time.

Figure 5 shows that, overall, most activities were perceived as taking the "right amount of time". However, there were some activities workers reported as taking "too much time". For example, participants reported:

- that 28% of their total time in meetings and events took too much time

- that 24% of their total time in staff management activities took too much time

- that 20% of total time carrying out other general administration activities took too much time

Public sector workers reported that 19% of their time was spent on non-sector-specific activities that took too long. However, they also stated that they spent 98% of their work time on activities that they perceived to be "slightly", "fairly" or "very important" and only 2% of their time on work activities described as "not at all important".

Figure 6: Over 80% of participants viewed non-sector-specific activities as very important or fairly important

Percentage of time spent on non-sector-specific activities and participants' understanding of their importance, Great Britain, February 2024

Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. For a full breakdown of grouped and ungrouped activities see our reference tables.

2. Workers were asked to describe whether the activity was very important, fairly important, slightly important or not at all important.

3. Proportions were calculated by dividing the importance-rated task time by the overall total time captured for that task. This figure was then converted into a percentage.

4. Estimates are based on the main activity that respondents reported doing at any one time.

Figure 6 shows that, of the non-sector-specific activities reported in this release, staff management had the highest proportion of time rated as being "very important", at 62%, while meetings and events had the least, at 26%.

The following section goes into further detail on how public sector workers perceive different non-sector-specific activities.

Meetings and events

Planning and attending meetings were reported as taking too much time more frequently than other activities. Of the time spent planning and attending meetings, similar proportions of supervisors (25%) and non-supervisors (27%) said this time was very important. Similar proportions were then also reported by frontline (29%) and non-frontline workers (25%).

Analysis of written responses showed a strong theme among respondents that meetings were not always an essential part of their role.

Staff management

Staff management activities were the second most common group of activities reported as taking too long. However, although it was felt that staff management took "too much time", respondents still believed it to be an important activity. For example, supervisors stated that 62% of time spent on staff management was "very important", while non-supervisors reported 51%. Frontline workers reported that 71% of this time was "very important" (58% for non-frontline workers).

Staff management was also a strong theme when looking at which activities people felt were not an essential part of their role. Activities such as human resources tasks, dealing with staff issues, "overly supervising staff" and "chasing things/work that had not been done" were the most frequently mentioned.

"The need to overly supervise some staff who should not require that level of supervision"

Health worker

General administration

Approximately half of the time spent on general administration was considered "very important", with supervisors reporting 55%, non-supervisors 45%, frontline workers 58% and non-frontline workers 49%. Within the category of "general administration", recruitment administration, photocopying, and booking travel were most often reported as taking too long.

Our analysis of written responses showed that, of those who completed activities that they felt were not an essential part of their role, administrative-related activities were the most frequently mentioned.

"Paperwork based tasks, tasks that were repetitive, but had to be inputted into two different systems"

Education worker

"A lot of the admin could be done by staff other than doctors"

Health worker

Communication

Within communication activities, emails were reported in 38% of diary days and were more commonly reported as taking too much time compared with other communication activities. Communication activities were considered "very important" 30% of the time for supervisors, 42% for non-supervisors, 47% for frontline workers and 32% for non-frontline workers.

In contrast, instant messaging was seen as taking the right amount of time. These findings highlight that different communication methods, perhaps for different purposes, are perceived differently. Instant messaging may provide colleagues with a quicker method of obtaining information compared with a video call or writing an email.

Our analysis of written responses showed that communication related activities such as emails, meetings and responding to enquiries were not essential to public sector workers' roles.

"Emails take up more time than they should, not least as people copy you into emails when they needn't"

Local government worker

6 . Ways to improve work activities

Public sector workers were asked to suggest ways that non-essential activities could be changed to save time. The free-text responses were grouped into six themes:

- resource planning

- task improvements

- planning and management

- better ways of engaging or communicating

- technology use

- working environment

The strongest theme overall was resource planning, with respondents often saying that ensuring there were more staff members (particularly administrative support) and financial resources, as well as appropriate training to carry out tasks, were changes that could be made to save time. This was most reported by respondents in the health, courts and tribunals, and education sectors.

Written comments by respondents included the following:

"More staff to share roles and responsibilities would mean we have more time to conduct research and improve the service"

Health worker

"Better administration support for teachers"

Education worker

Many respondents in the local government, education and healthcare sectors felt that planning and management were "important" and suggested delegating tasks and making responsibilities clear, as ways to save time. Respondents' comments included:

"Delegated to team who should be completing them."

Local government worker

"Other people should be doing what they are responsible for"

Education worker

Within the prison service, finding better ways of engaging or communicating was the most- reported way to save time. Respondents suggested having clear communication and information, as well as effective communications methods that are appropriately targeted to the main audience.

"Emails instead of meetings. Teams meetings instead of in person"

Prison Service worker

"I required better information from the police - that would have cut my primary task in half or less"

Prison Service worker

Task improvements were the strongest theme for the Civil Service and Probation Service. Respondents often suggested reducing administrative tasks, especially where duplication was involved. They also suggested streamlining administrative-related tasks, with some suggesting that the use of automation or AI could save time.

"Paperwork should be less, for an emergency service all we do is duplicate work and its relentless and counterproductive"

Police worker

"Within our team we are always looking at ways to streamline or automate our daily tasks to free up more time for planning"

Probation service worker

Some responses centered on the use of technology and working environment, with improvements to information technology (IT) and changes to travel or working locations often suggested as ways to save time.

"Better systems/ use of technology"

Health worker

7 . Data on time use in the public sector

[Time use in the public sector, extended tables, Great Britain](#)
Dataset | Released 21 October 2024
Qualitative analysis of tasks and activities completed by public sector workers that they did not feel were essential to their role and their reflections on how time use could be improved.

[Time use in the public sector](#)
Dataset | Released 04 March 2024
Estimates of daily time spent by public sector workers on a range of activities. These are official statistics in development.

8 . Glossary

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Computer programs or machines that can learn from data and perform tasks usually completed by humans. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is currently used in a variety of ways, including:

- online product recommendations

- facial recognition

- self-driving vehicles

- medical diagnostic tools

- chatbots that interact in a conversational way and can answer complex questions

All public sector workers

In this release, "all public sector workers" refers to all participant diaries, regardless of whether they did or did not carry out an activity on their diary day.

Automation

A set of technologies that can substitute routine activities or jobs (for example, the introduction of the telephone switchboard to replace switchboard operators).

Frontline worker

A frontline public sector worker is one that is considered to have an occupation that is more likely to engage directly with the public.

Non-frontline worker

A non-frontline public sector worker is one that is considered to have an occupation that is less likely to engage directly with the public.

Non-sector-specific activities

Non-sector-specific activities include a range of activities common among different services. Activities can include writing and sending emails, and attending, organising or chairing meetings and events. Some of these activities can still require specialist knowledge. For example, writing up medical notes (a form of records management), requires medical knowledge.

Sector-specific activities

Sector-specific activities include those typically only found within one type of public service (for example, patient management in the health service). Sector-specific activities often involve working directly with the public and are therefore linked to frontline occupations.

Supervisor

A supervisor is a public sector worker who is responsible for line managing or overseeing the work of other workers.

Non-supervisor

A non-supervisor a public sector worker who is not responsible for line managing or overseeing the work of other workers.

9 . Data sources and quality

Pilot survey

This release contains data collected in the [Office for National Statistics (ONS) pilot public service online Time Use Study](#) (TUS), undertaken between 2 February and 12 February 2024 (inclusive). Participants were issued with eight diary days and asked to select any two days on which they worked. They then recorded the activities (both detailed work and high-level non-work activities) that they undertook during each 24-hour period, using an online diary tool. This included their main activities (in 10-minute periods) and up to five secondary activities (in 5-minute periods).

Estimates of the average daily time spent on different activities by the public sector as a whole and by selected sector workforces, with accompanying 95% confidence intervals, are included in our accompanying dataset. Where comparisons are made between estimates, confidence intervals should be used to assess the statistical significance of the differences. Read more about confidence intervals and statistical significance in our [Uncertainty and how we measure it for our surveys web page](#).

Sampling and response

The pilot survey sampled 4,774 individuals living in Great Britain who had:

- responded to the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

- indicated that they were working in a public sector role or organisation

- agreed to be contacted to participate in further ONS research, or volunteered to take part following an invitation through their employer or workplace

In total, 1,513 individuals (40.1%) responded and submitted 3,005 diaries of sufficient quality, which have been used to produce the estimates in this release.

Weighting

Before weighting, the quality of diaries was assessed according to the amount of time and number of activities recorded, and by the duration of work activities recorded.

The Annual Population Survey (October 2022 to September 2023) was used to weight the diaries to the public sector population. Individual diaries were calibrated with calibration controls applied for age and sex groups, geographical regions, workforce sector and gross annual pay. Calibration controls were not applied for working patterns. For this reason, average daily time cannot be aggregated to provide weekly or annual time spent on activities.

Qualitative analysis

We conducted qualitative analysis of free-text responses collected as part of the Public Sector Time Use Survey, undertaken between 2 February and 12 February 2024 (inclusive).

Respondents were given the opportunity to write responses to two questions into free text boxes.

- Did you do any tasks or activities that you feel were not an essential part of your role? Could you describe what these tasks or activities were.

- Can you suggest any ways that these tasks or activities could be changed to save time?

Free-text responses often included more than one theme.

Quotes are also included from qualitative research carried out by National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). More information on this research can be found in the "Measuring the data" of our Time use in the public sector, Great Britain: February 2024 bulletin.

Official statistics in development

These statistics are labelled as "official statistics in development". Until September 2023, these were called "experimental statistics". Read more about the change in our **Guide to official statistics in development**.

We are developing how we collect and produce the data to improve the quality of these statistics. Once the developments are complete, we will review the statistics with the Statistics Head of Profession. We will decide whether the statistics are of sufficient quality and value to be published as official statistics, or whether further development is needed. Production may be stopped if they are not of sufficient quality or value. Users will be informed of the outcome and any changes.

We value your feedback on these statistics. Contact us at **psmps@ons.gov.uk**.

10 . Future developments

Survey and analysis

We would value your feedback on this analytical article to inform future iterations of the survey and analysis of the data. Following our pilot study, we plan to conduct a second public sector time-use study. User feedback and user needs are being incorporated into our design. We aim to offer more insights into sectors by having larger samples for a variety of sectors.

If you are able to support the development of the second wave or have user feedback please email us at **hhsa@ons.gov.uk**.

11 . Related links

Time use in the public sector, Great Britain
Statistical bulletin | Released 4 March 2024
Estimates of daily time spent by public sector workers on a range of activities. These are official statistics in development.

Time Well Spent: How the ONS is improving the measurement of public service productivity
Blog | Released 09 January 2024
National Statistical blog explaining why the Office for National Statistics (ONS) launched the pilot Time Use Survey for public sector workers.

Public service productivity estimates: total public service
Dataset | Released 26 March 2024
Inputs, output and productivity indices and growth rates for total public services. Includes estimates of quality adjustment, service expenditure and revisions.

How we are transforming our understanding of public services productivity
Blog post | Released 21 October 2024
National Statistical blog explaining how work on public services productivity is progressing. Includes insights about where productivity could potentially be improved

12 . Cite this article

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