Office for National Statistics

Article

Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2023 and 2024

Sickness absence rates of workers in the UK labour market, including number of days lost and reasons for absence. These are official statistics in development.

Contact:
Labour Market team
labour.market@ons.gov.uk
+44 1633 455400

Release date:
4 June 2025

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates have been affected by increased volatility resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, meaning that estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.
- The LFS continues to be the sole source of data for unemployment, economic inactivity, self-employment and sickness absence in the UK labour market, and provides a range of breakdowns that are only possible from LFS data.
- LFS estimates are weighted to 2022 mid-year population estimates for periods from January to March 2019; the sickness absence data therefore have a discontinuity at this point.
- The sickness absence rate - the percentage of working hours lost because of sickness or injury - fell by 0.3 percentage points over the year to 2.0% in 2024.
- An estimated 148.9 million working days were lost because of sickness or injury in 2024; this is on average 4.4 days lost per worker.
- Groups with the highest rates of sickness absence in 2024 included women, older workers, those with long-term health conditions, people working part-time, people working in the public sector and people working in elementary occupations.

These are official statistics in development and we advise caution when using the data. Read more in Section 2: Labour Force Survey quality.

2 . Labour Force Survey quality

For many years, household surveys both in the UK and in comparable countries have been facing the challenge of falling response rates. Coupled with challenges in collecting and processing survey data since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, quality concerns became acute for Labour Force Survey (LFS) data collected in 2023. This led to the suspension of releases using LFS data, as discussed in ourImpact of reweighting on Labour Force Survey key indicators article.

In response to these concerns, we made several changes to the operation and processing of LFS data in late 2023 and early 2024. These have been detailed in ourprogress updates.

Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates have been affected by increased volatility resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, meaning that estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

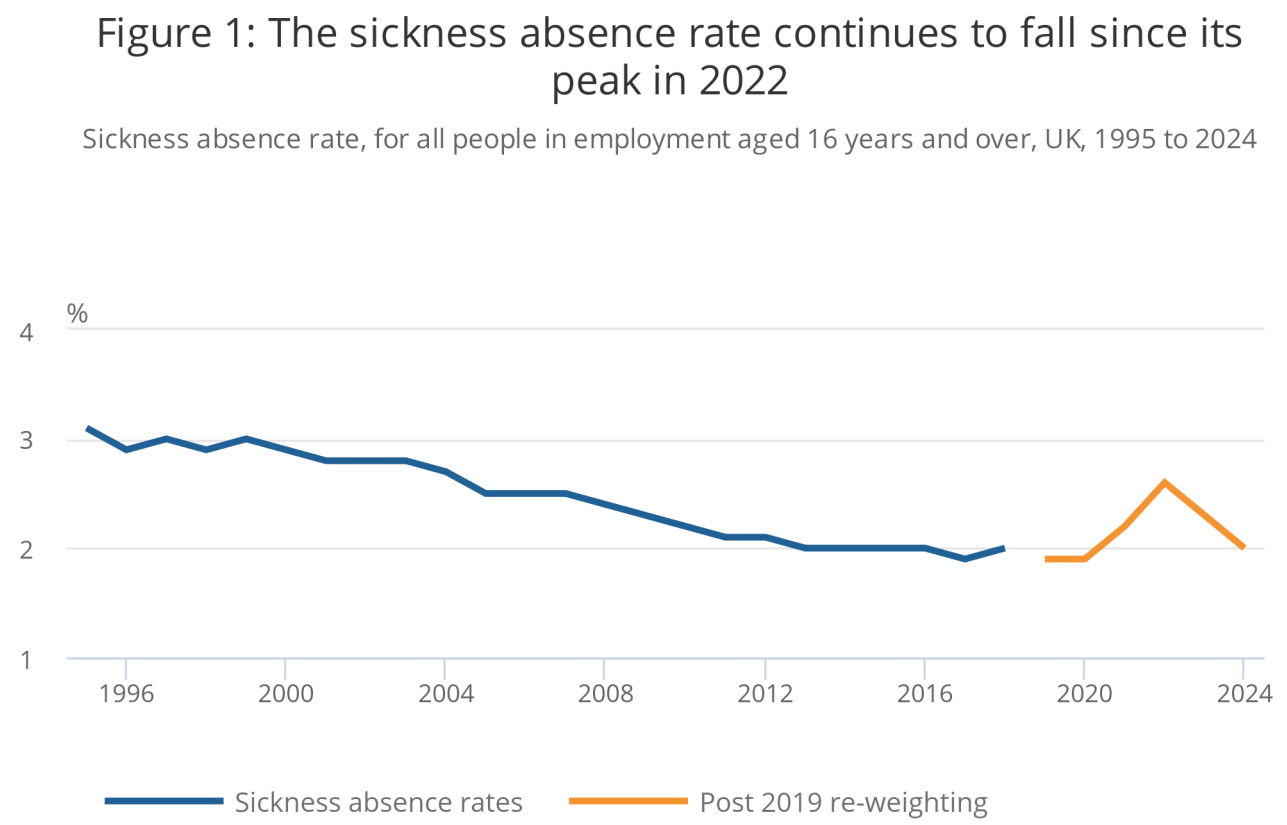
3 . How sickness absence has changed over time

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected sickness absences in many ways. While the virus may have led to additional absences, measures such as furloughing, social distancing, shielding and increased homeworking helped to reduce other causes of absence in 2020. However, the reduction of the furlough scheme and its eventual end in September 2021, coupled with the decline in homeworking, shielding and social distancing policies, and new COVID-19 variants, led to a rise in sickness absence in 2021 to above pre-coronavirus levels. Sickness absence increased again in 2022 before starting to fall in 2023.

The sickness absence rate (the percentage of working hours lost because of sickness or injury) was 2.0% in 2024, a decrease of 0.3 percentage points from 2023 (when it was 2.3%) but a 0.1 percentage points increase since the pre-coronavirus 2019 level.

Figure 1: The sickness absence rate continues to fall since its peak in 2022

Sickness absence rate, for all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

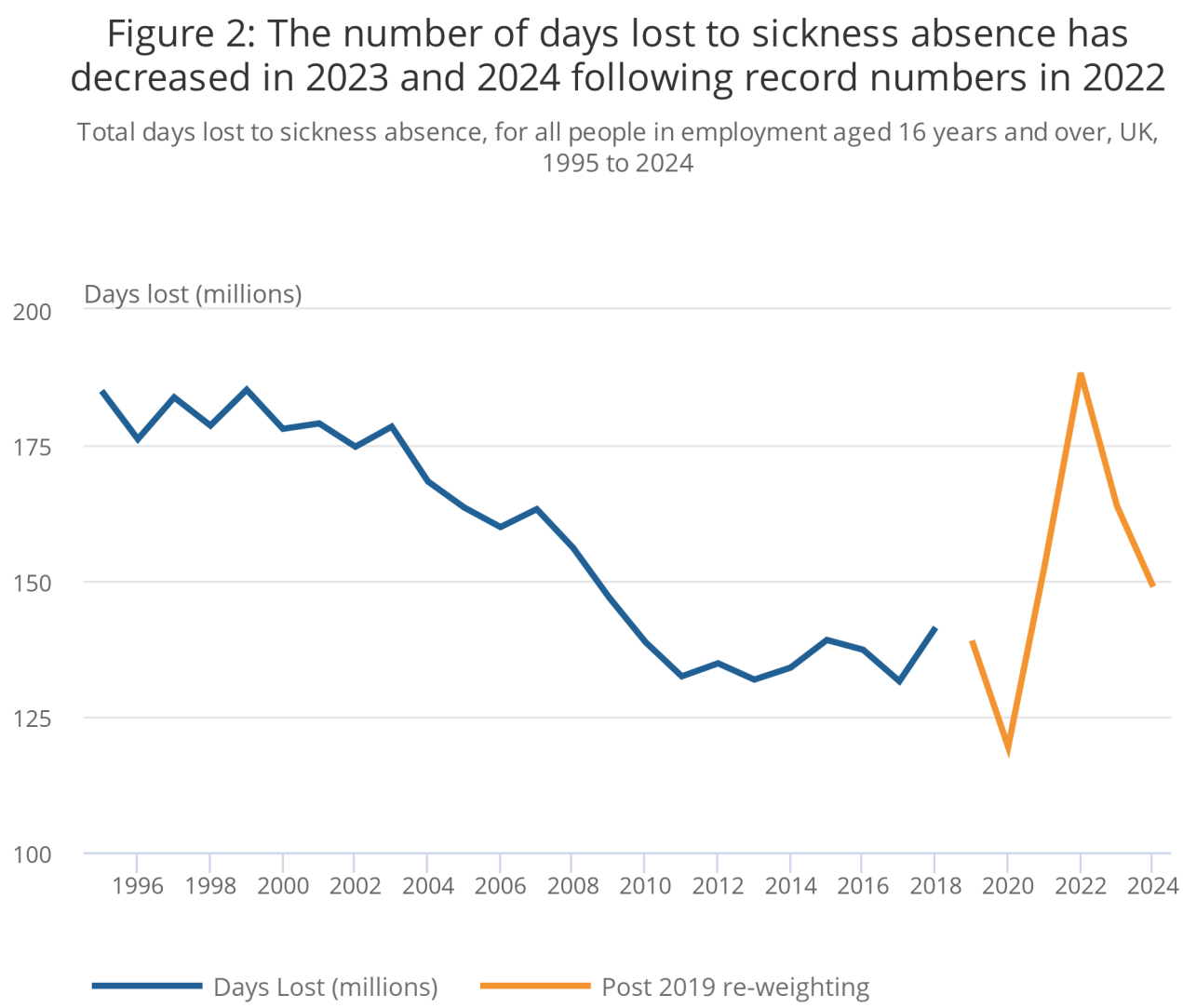
2. Data from 2019 onwards have been reweighted, causing a step change discontinuity.

The number of working days lost because of sickness or injury was an estimated 148.9 million in 2024. This was a decrease of 14.9 million from 2023 and an increase of 9.9 million from the pre-coronavirus 2019 level. There was also a fall in days lost per worker, to 4.4 in 2024, down 0.5 days from 2023 but 0.2 days above its 2019 level.

Caution should be taken when analysing total days lost and days lost per worker for 2020 and 2021, because of the impact of furlough and other policies during the coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 2: The number of days lost to sickness absence has decreased in 2023 and 2024 following record numbers in 2022

Total days lost to sickness absence, for all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

2. Data from 2019 onwards have been reweighted, causing a step change discontinuity.

4 . Reason for sickness absence

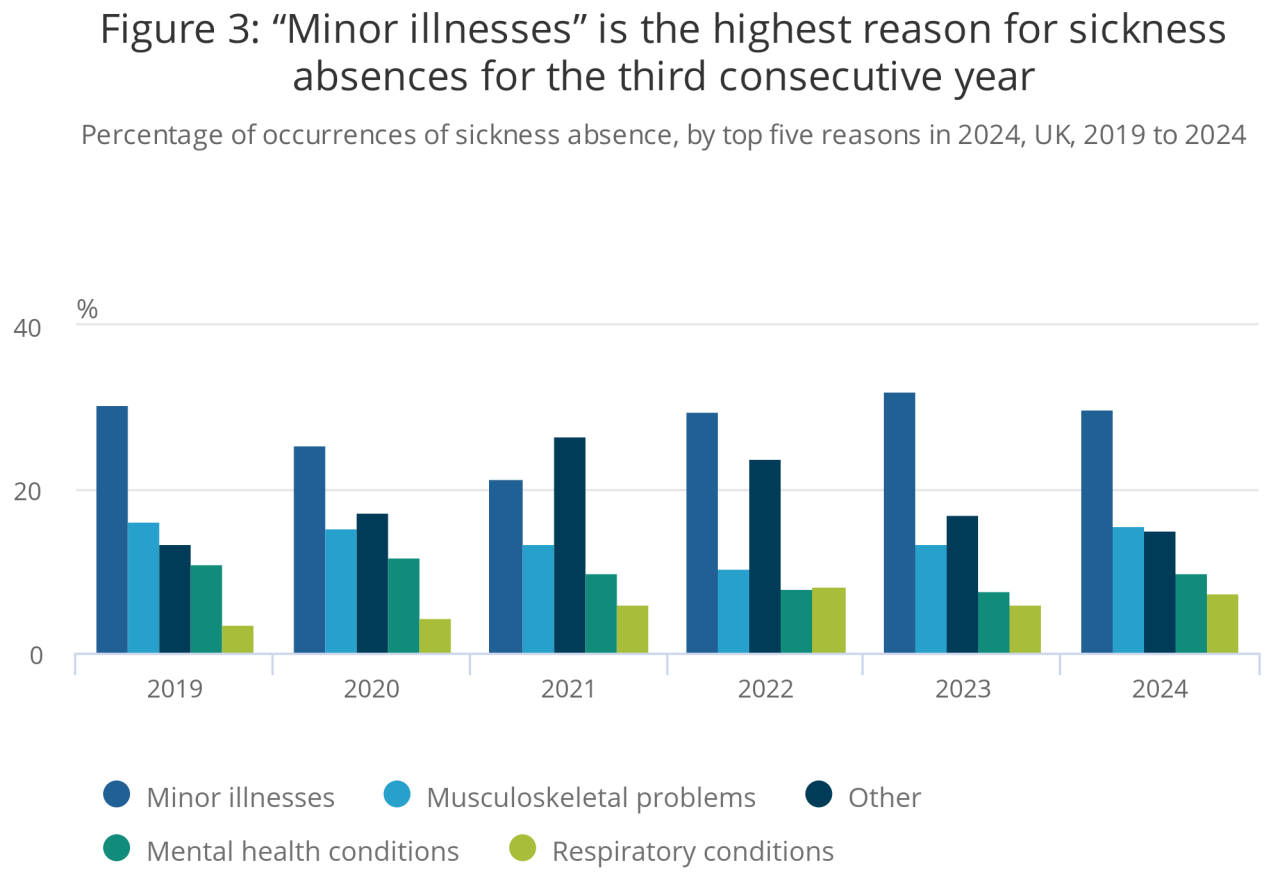
Minor illnesses were the most common reason given for sickness absence in 2024. This is the third consecutive year minor illnesses have been on top since the fall they experienced because of coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020 and 2021.

Minor illnesses accounted for 30.0% of occurrences of sickness absence in 2024, followed by:

- musculoskeletal problems at 15.5%
- "other" conditions at 15.1%
- mental health conditions at 9.8%
- respiratory conditions at 7.3%

Figure 3: “Minor illnesses” is the highest reason for sickness absences for the third consecutive year

Percentage of occurrences of sickness absence, by top five reasons in 2024, UK, 2019 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The percentage of occurrences is the percentage of times a specific reason was given for hours lost because of sickness.
2. Definitions of reasons can be found in the Glossary.
3. "Other" includes coronavirus (COVID-19), accidents, poisonings, infectious diseases, skin disorders and diabetes.
4. Reasons not included in the top five can be found in the datasets.
5. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

5 . Groups with highest sickness absence rate

The sickness absence rate in 2024 for men was 1.6% and for women 2.5%.

The men's rate has fallen 0.2 percentage points from 2023, however, it is the same as the 2019 value. The women's rate had a decrease of 0.3 percentage points from 2023 and is up 0.1 percentage points from 2019.

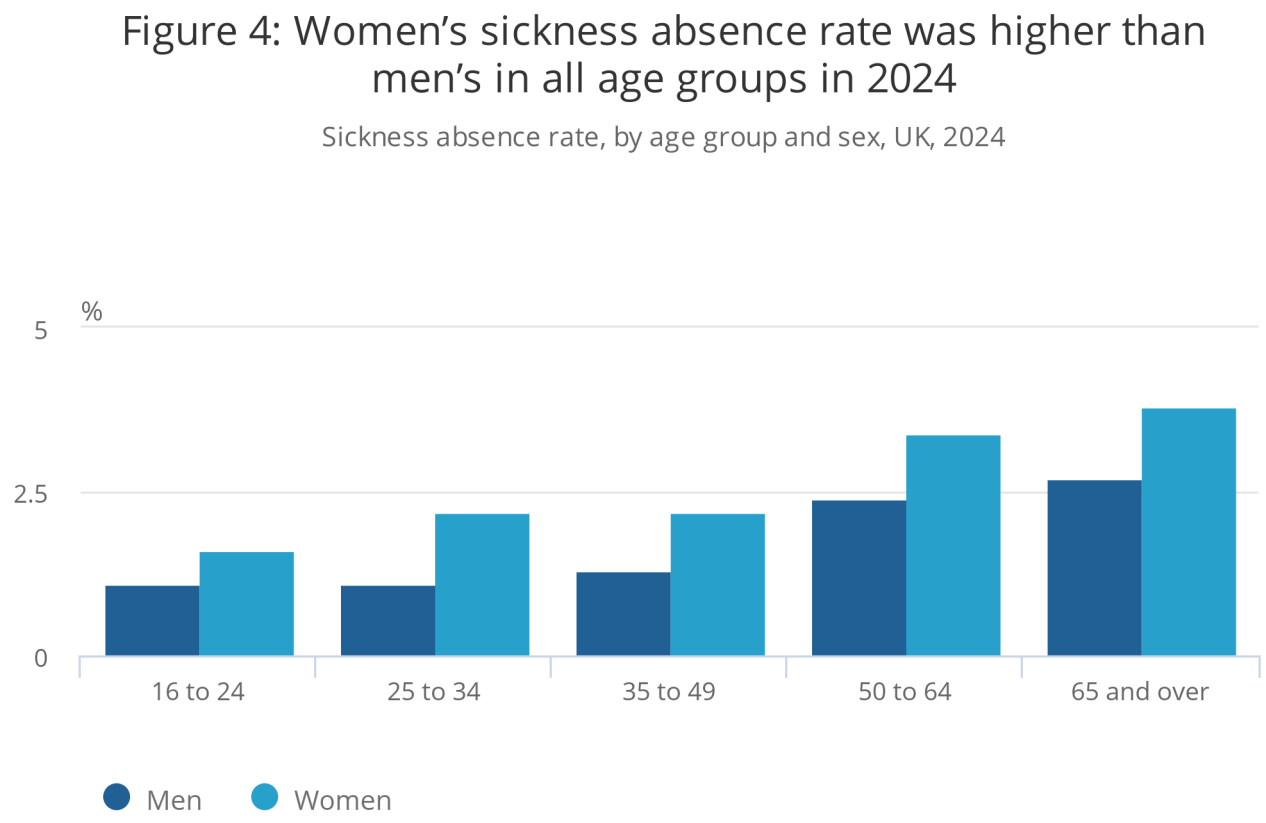
Sickness absence rates are higher among older workers than younger workers. The sickness absence rates for most age groups fell in 2024 compared with 2023. The only age group to not see a fall was for those aged 16 to 24 years, whose rate was unchanged on the year.

Women's sickness absence was higher than men's sickness absence in all age groups in 2024. The sickness absence rate fell on the year for both men and women in almost all age groups in 2024.

The largest decrease for men was in the 25 to 34 years age group (0.4 percentage points) and the largest decrease for women was in the 50 to 64 years age group (0.7 percentage points). Women aged 16 to 24 years was the only age group to see an increase over the year, rising by 0.3 percentage points to a rate of 1.6%.

Figure 4: Women’s sickness absence rate was higher than men’s in all age groups in 2024

Sickness absence rate, by age group and sex, UK, 2024



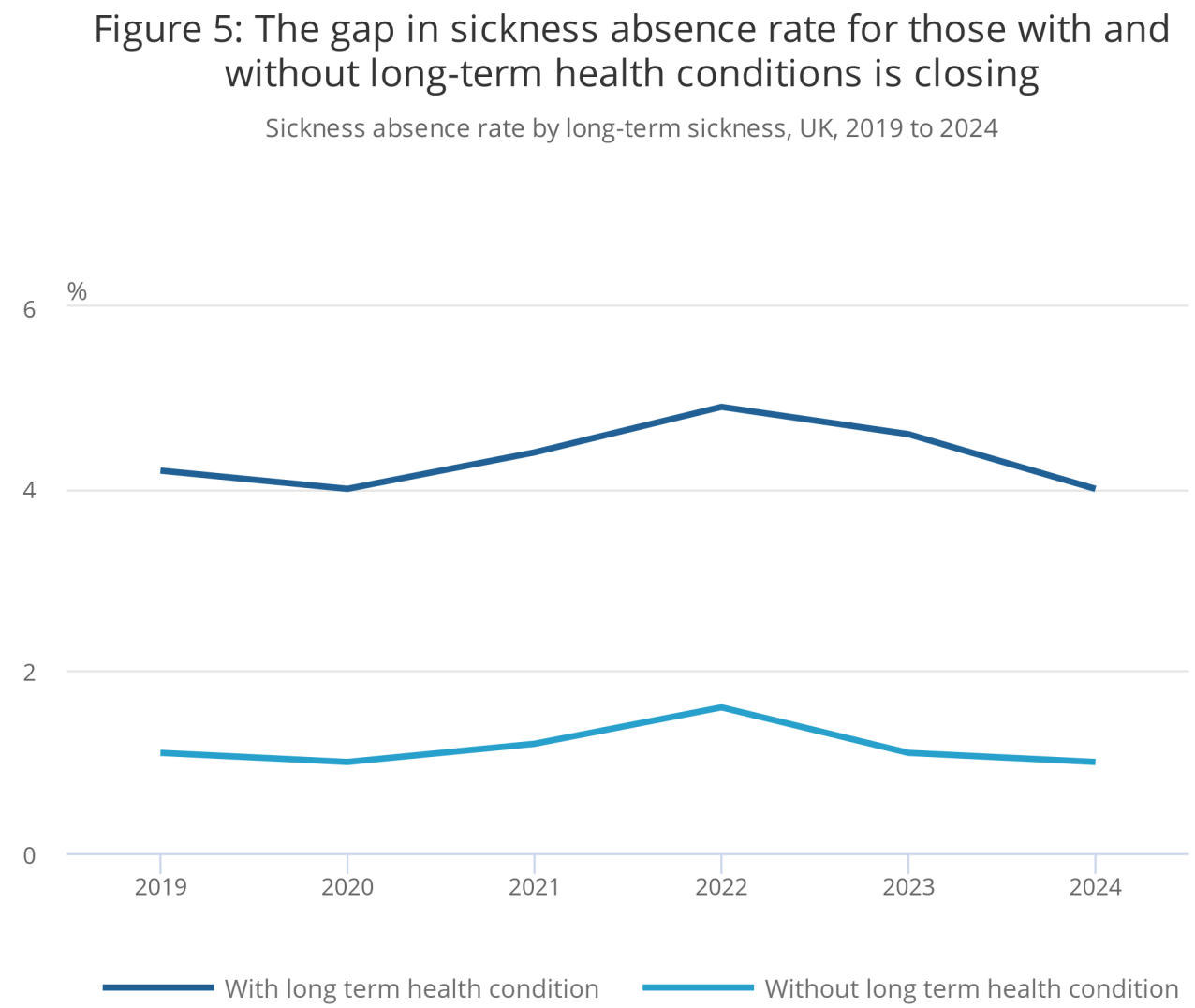
Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

Figure 5: The gap in sickness absence rate for those with and without long-term health conditions is closing

Sickness absence rate by long-term sickness, UK, 2019 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

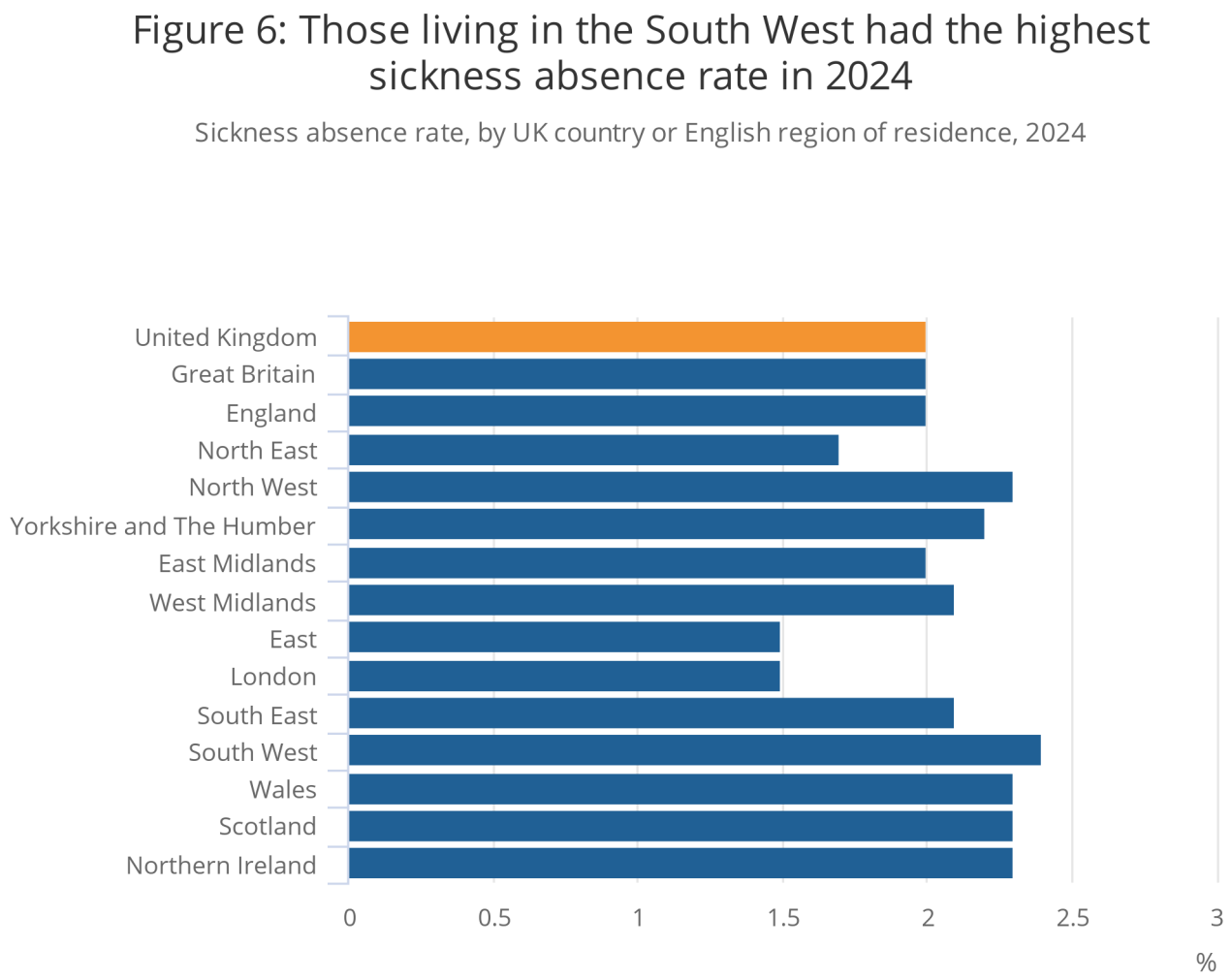
Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

The sickness absence rate for those with long-term health conditions in 2024 was 4.0% and for those without was 1.0%. There was a decrease in the sickness absence rate for both those with and without long-term health conditions compared with the previous year. The rate for those with long-term health conditions fell by 0.6 percentage points over the year, while the rate for those without long-term health conditions fell by 0.1 percentage points.

Figure 6: Those living in the South West had the highest sickness absence rate in 2024

Sickness absence rate, by UK country or English region of residence, 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

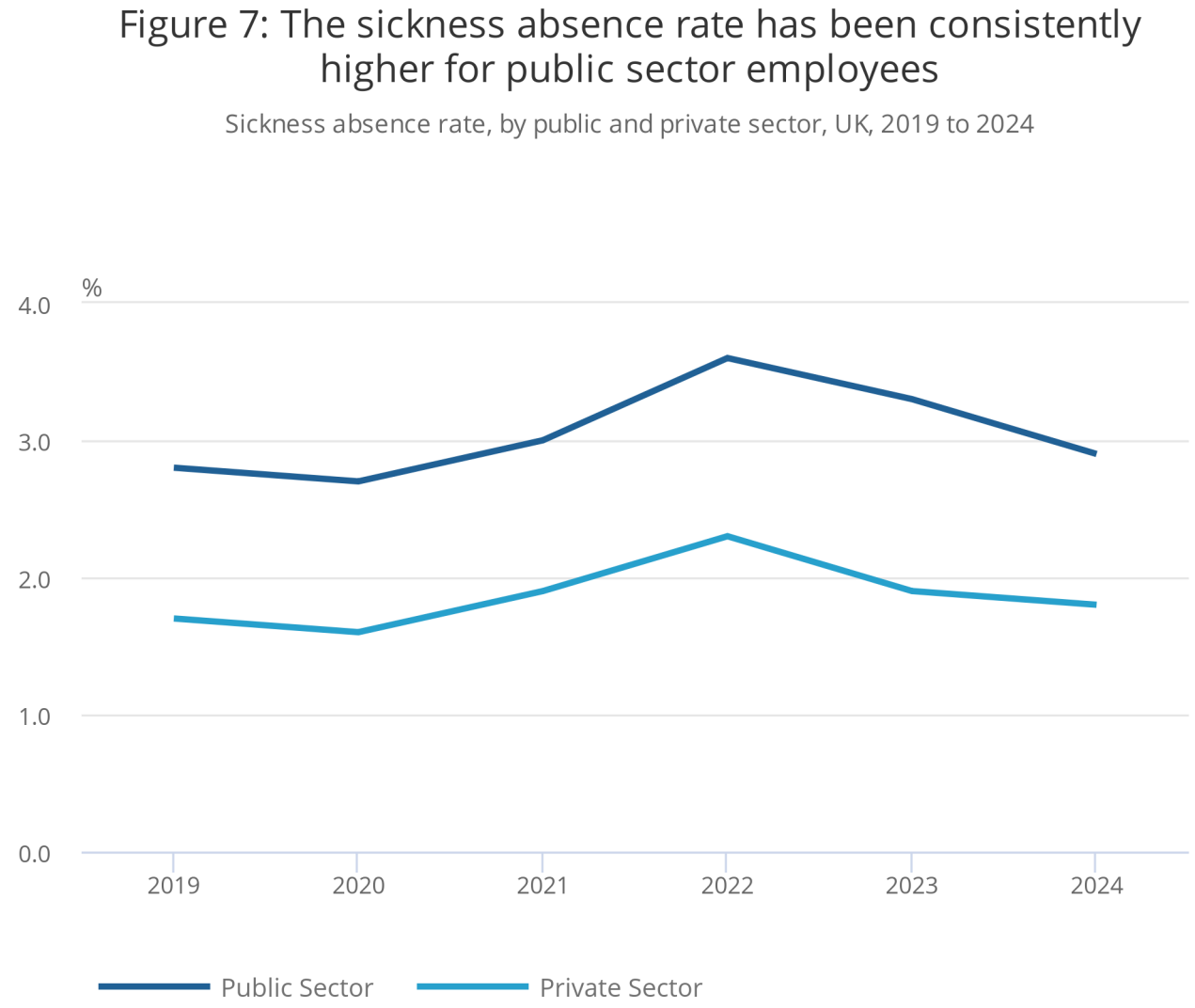
Workers living in the South West had the highest sickness absence rate in 2024, at 2.4%, and those living in the East of England and London had the lowest rates, both at 1.5%.

The majority of UK countries and English regions saw a decrease in sickness absence rates between 2023 and 2024. Northen Ireland and the South East both increased by 0.1 percentage points, and Yorkshire and The Humber was unchanged on the year.

The low sickness absence rate in London can largely be explained by the younger age profile of workers living there and the types of occupations that they do. There is also a large concentration of high-skilled jobs in London, which tend to have lower rates of sickness absence.

Figure 7: The sickness absence rate has been consistently higher for public sector employees

Sickness absence rate, by public and private sector, UK, 2019 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

The sickness absence rate for public sector employees in 2024 was 2.9% and for those working in the private sector it was 1.8%. This is down 0.4 percentage points and 0.1 percentage points, respectively, on the year. Both the public and private sector sickness absence rates are 0.1 percentage points higher than in 2019.

Sickness absence rates for public sector workers have been higher than those in the private sector for every year on record. There are several factors to consider when examining the differences between the public and private sectors, including:

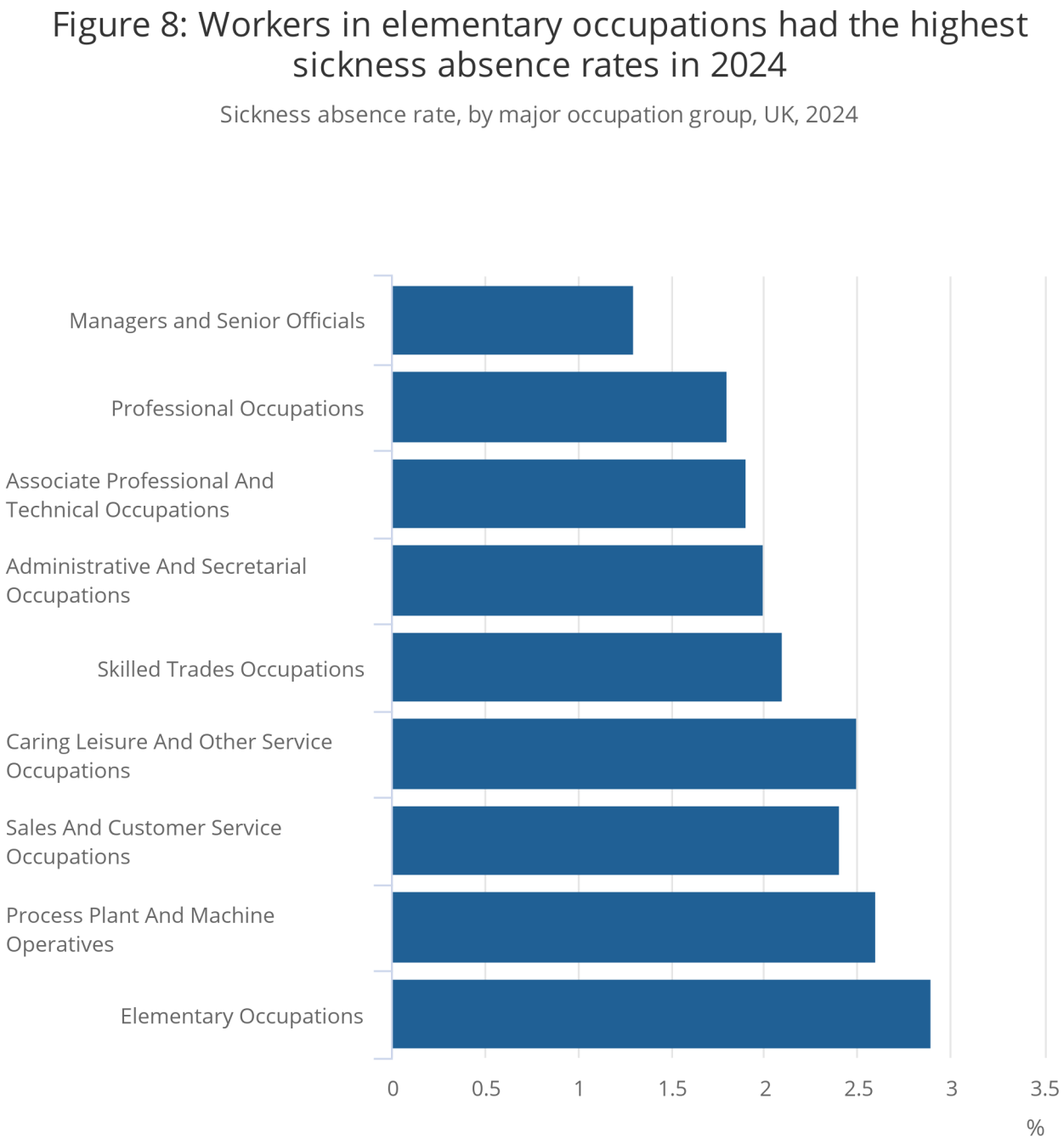
- differences in the types of jobs between the sectors, some of which have higher likelihoods of sickness than others

- workers in the private sector are less likely to be paid for sickness absence than those in the public sector

- the analysis only counts people as sick if they work fewer hours than they are contracted for and would exclude those who make up lost hours at a later point in the week; individuals in smaller workforces, which are more prominent in the private sector, may be under more pressure to make up any lost hours, but no data are collected on hours made up following sickness absence

Figure 8: Workers in elementary occupations had the highest sickness absence rates in 2024

Sickness absence rate, by major occupation group, UK, 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

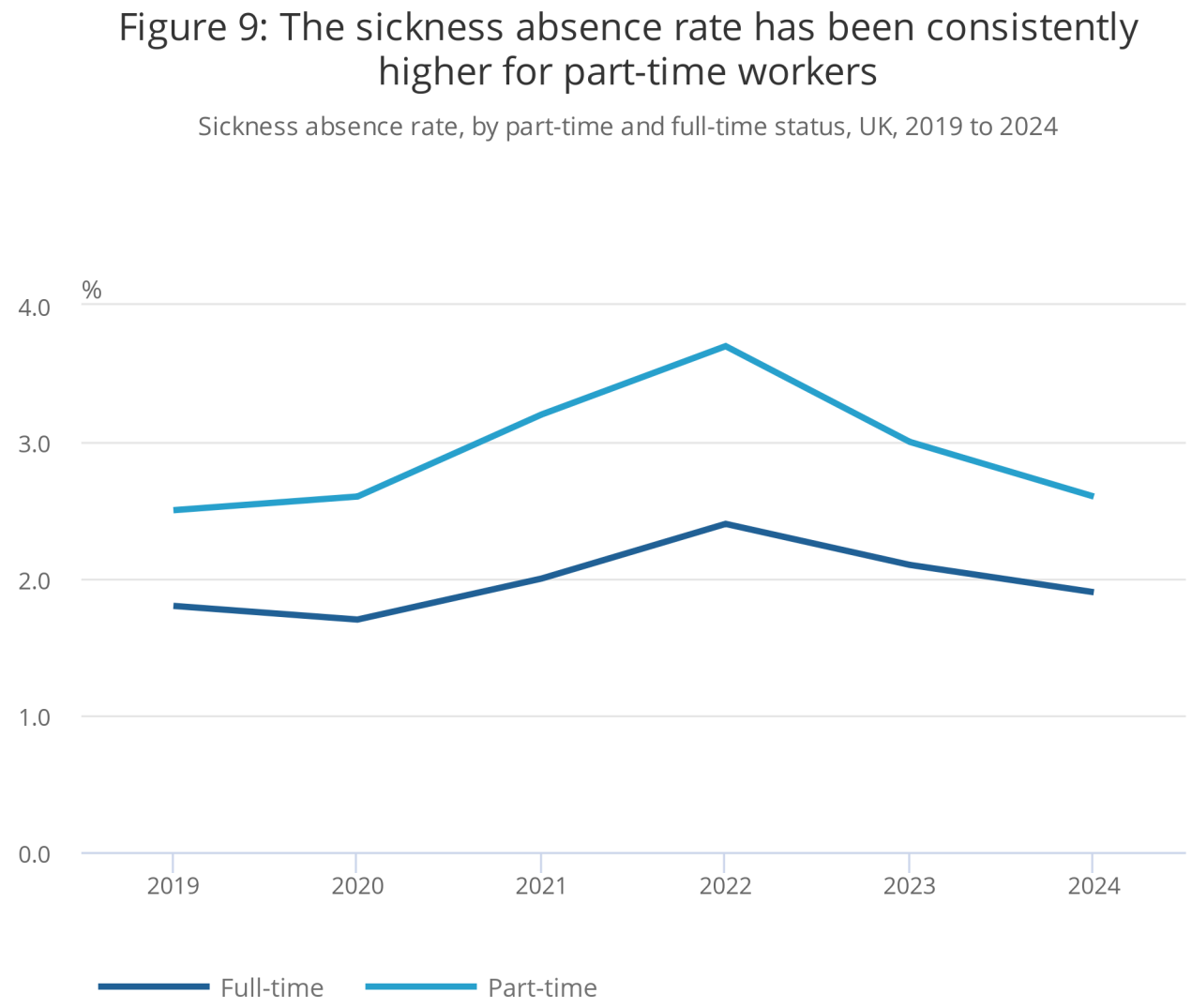
Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

Workers in elementary occupations had the highest sickness absence rate in 2024, at 2.9%. Managers and senior officials had the lowest rate, at 1.3%.

Figure 9: The sickness absence rate has been consistently higher for part-time workers

Sickness absence rate, by part-time and full-time status, UK, 2019 to 2024



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Because of increased volatility of LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, estimates of change should be treated with additional caution.

The sickness absence rate for part-time workers in 2024 was 2.6% and for full-time workers was 1.9%. On the year, the rate decreased 0.4 percentage points for part-time workers and 0.2 percentage points for full-time workers.

The sickness absence rate for part-time workers has been consistently higher than for full-time workers. This is explained in part by the higher numbers of part-time women, who tend to have higher rates of sickness absence, and by the types of jobs typically done part time.

6 . Data on sickness absence in the UK labour market

Sickness absence in the UK labour market
Dataset | Released 4 June 2025
Annual sickness absence rates of workers in the UK labour market. These are official statistics in development.

7 . Glossary

COVID-19

The name used to refer to the disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus, which is a type of coronavirus. The Office for National Statistics takes COVID-19 to mean presence of SARS-CoV-2 with or without symptoms.

Definitions of reason for sickness absence

- "Musculoskeletal problems" includes back pain, neck and upper limb problems, and other musculoskeletal problems.
- "Other" includes the total number of days lost to accidents, poisonings, infectious diseases, skin disorders, diabetes and anything else not covered.
- From April 2020, interviewers were advised to code any mention of coronavirus (COVID-19) as "other", however, it is believed people could self-report this in "minor illnesses" or "respiratory conditions".
- "Mental health conditions" includes stress, depression, anxiety and serious mental health problems.
- "Minor illnesses" includes coughs, colds, flu, sickness, nausea and diarrhoea.
- "Long COVID" may fall under any of the main categories if relevant, as long COVID can present differently and so is wide ranging; however, it could also be coded to "other" as it often presents in the same way as many other viruses do once the active viral infection has passed, despite being given its own specific name.

Furlough

A temporary absence from work allowing workers to keep their job during the coronavirus pandemic.

Number of days lost per worker

The number of days lost per worker is proportional to the number of days lost divided by the number of persons in employment aged 16 years and over.

The total number of days lost because of sickness or injury and the number of days lost per worker both saw a substantial fall in 2020. The data that feed into the total number of days lost, and days lost per worker, include furloughed workers. Therefore, some of this fall will be because fewer people were in work and taking days off because of sickness or injury. In addition, those employed but on furlough are included in the denominator for the number of days lost per worker, as they are defined as in employment, but would not be contributing to the numerator as they are away from work.

Sickness absence rate

Sickness absence rate is proportional to the total hours lost because of sickness or injury divided by total hours multiplied by 100, as seen in the following equation:

$$Sickness\ absence\ rate = \frac{Total\ hours\ lost\ due\ to\ sickness\ or\ injury}{Total\ Hours} \times 100$$

$$Total\ hours = Total\ actual\ hours\ \ (for\ those\ with\ no\ sickness\ absence)$$

$$Number\ of\ days\ lost = \frac{Hours\ lost\ due\ to\ sickness\ or\ injury\ \times 52}{7.5}$$

$$Number\ of\ days\ lost\ per\ worker = \frac{Number\ of\ days\ lost}{Number\ of\ persons\ in\ employment,\ aged\ 16+}$$

The sickness absence rate will not be affected by furloughed workers in the same way as number of days lost in 2020 and 2021. This is derived as the total hours lost as a proportion of total hours worked. Neither the hours lost, nor the hours worked measures include those on furlough, therefore this measure should still be comparable over time. Since this measure is least affected by the coronavirus pandemic policies, it is therefore the most appropriate measure to use for sickness absence analysis to ensure comparability over time.

Working day

The working day is defined as 7 hours and 30 minutes.

8 . Data sources and quality

The estimates included in this release have been produced using the Labour Force Survey (LFS). They relate to people aged 16 years and over in employment and are for the whole of the UK. Estimates are based on annual averages across quarters for each calendar year: taking an average of the January to March, April to June, July to September and October to December datasets.

Since our Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022 article, estimates for 2019 to 2024 have been revised because of a LFS reweighting exercise. The sickness absence data therefore have a discontinuity between 2018 and 2019.

Quality and Methodology Information reports

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in ourLFS Quality and Methodology Information (QMI) report.

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.

9 . Related links

Employment in the UK: May 2025
Bulletin | Released 13 May 2025
Estimates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity for the UK.

10 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 4 June 2025, ONS website, article,Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2023 and 2024