Office for National Statistics

Article

Labour Force Survey quality update: April 2026

Assessment of Labour Force Survey data quality, including the impact of recent changes on the statistics, response levels and rates, and respondent characteristics.

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

Release date:
21 April 2026

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- Response levels on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) have shown clear improvement because of the interventions to improve quality, with Wave 1 and now also Waves 2 to 5 response levels very close to their pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic level.

- The proportion of proxy responses increased sharply during the pandemic and, although it has fallen from its peak in late 2022, remains above prepandemic levels; weighting increased the weighted share of proxy responses from 2020 to 2024, but this trend reversed in 2025.

- The composition of LFS respondents by country of birth has continued to move closer to the Census 2021 estimates, reflecting both improving LFS quality and higher levels of non-EU migration since 2021.

- Coherence between the LFS and other labour market data sources, although improving, remains a challenge, and we continue to monitor this closely; you can find detail on the coherence of the latest estimates in our April 2026 Labour market overview bulletin.

- Differences between the Claimant Count and LFS unemployment reflect in part the coverage of the two measures. Discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are continuing to further explore the nature of revisions to the provisional Claimant Count estimate and the divergence with survey data.

- Caution is still advised when assessing change over time periods (particularly those affected by operational changes) and when analysing more detailed estimates; as the quality of the LFS has improved, it is likely that these quality improvements have affected reported statistics.

- The Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) remains the long-term solution for collecting labour market data; updates on progress and plans are published quarterly in our Labour market transformation articles.

2 . Background to Labour Force Survey quality

Household surveys, in the UK and in comparable countries, have been facing the challenge of falling response rates for many years. There have also been challenges in collecting and processing survey data since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and there are substantial quality concerns about Labour Force Survey (LFS) data collected in 2023. This has led to the suspension of publications based on LFS data, and the withdrawal of accredited statistics status for publications based upon LFS and Annual Population Survey (APS) data from 2024 onwards.

In response to these concerns, several changes were made to the operation and processing of LFS data since late 2023. These have been detailed in our Labour market transformation - update on progress and plans article series.

Since October 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has made several changes to address quality concerns with the LFS. The five-wave structure of the LFS means that some of these changes take at least 15 months to fully feed through into survey estimates and at least 18 months to feed through into measures of quarterly change.

Estimates from January to March 2025 include the full effect of the improvements in LFS data collection and sampling methods introduced from January 2024. However, since then, we have increased the number of interviewers for the LFS, which has continued to increase the number of responses to the survey, particularly for Waves 2 to 5. Consequently, estimates may be subject to the effect of these further improvements, which may have an ongoing impact on the survey. An increased volatility will remain in the LFS estimates for mid-2023 and throughout 2024, so we would advise additional caution when interpreting survey change measures that include that period. We recommend using LFS estimates as part of our suite of labour market indicators, alongside workforce jobs, Claimant Count and Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) estimates.

Throughout this article, we refer to LFS data for Great Britain and for the UK. The operational responsibility for data collection is split between the Office for National Statistics (ONS, for Great Britain) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA, for Northern Ireland). The ONS has responsibility for publishing statistics at a UK level. Data regarding the collection of the survey often refers to Great Britain, while references to published statistical measures often refer to the UK as a whole.

This article provides an update to our most recent Labour Force Survey quality update: January 2026 article published in January. We cover data up to the period of October to December 2025, to align with the latest data covered in our Labour Force Survey performance and quality monitoring report: October to December 2025, published in February 2026. It also provides an update on how the quality of the LFS has evolved recently, considering the impact on response levels, the characteristics of respondents, and the published statistics. It focuses on the LFS, but given the linked design of the two surveys, also affects the size and quality of the APS. We intend to publish an update on APS quality later in the year.

Coherence between the LFS and other data sources has improved, but remains a challenge, and we continue to monitor this closely. Our latest views on interpreting LFS data and the labour market narrative will remain in our monthly Labour Market Overview bulletin.

3 . Impact on response rate and levels

The changes referred to in Section 2: Background to Labour Force Survey quality continue to have a clear positive effect on the number of achieved responses to the LFS. The overall level of response has increased steadily since the low point in July to September 2023.

Considering the number of responses for the UK, including imputation (which is the same as the number of cases available to analyse in a dataset), there were 77,927 responses to the LFS in October to December 2025. This is an increase of 33,689 from the low point in July to September 2023 and 6,135 responses below the figure seen in October to December 2019.

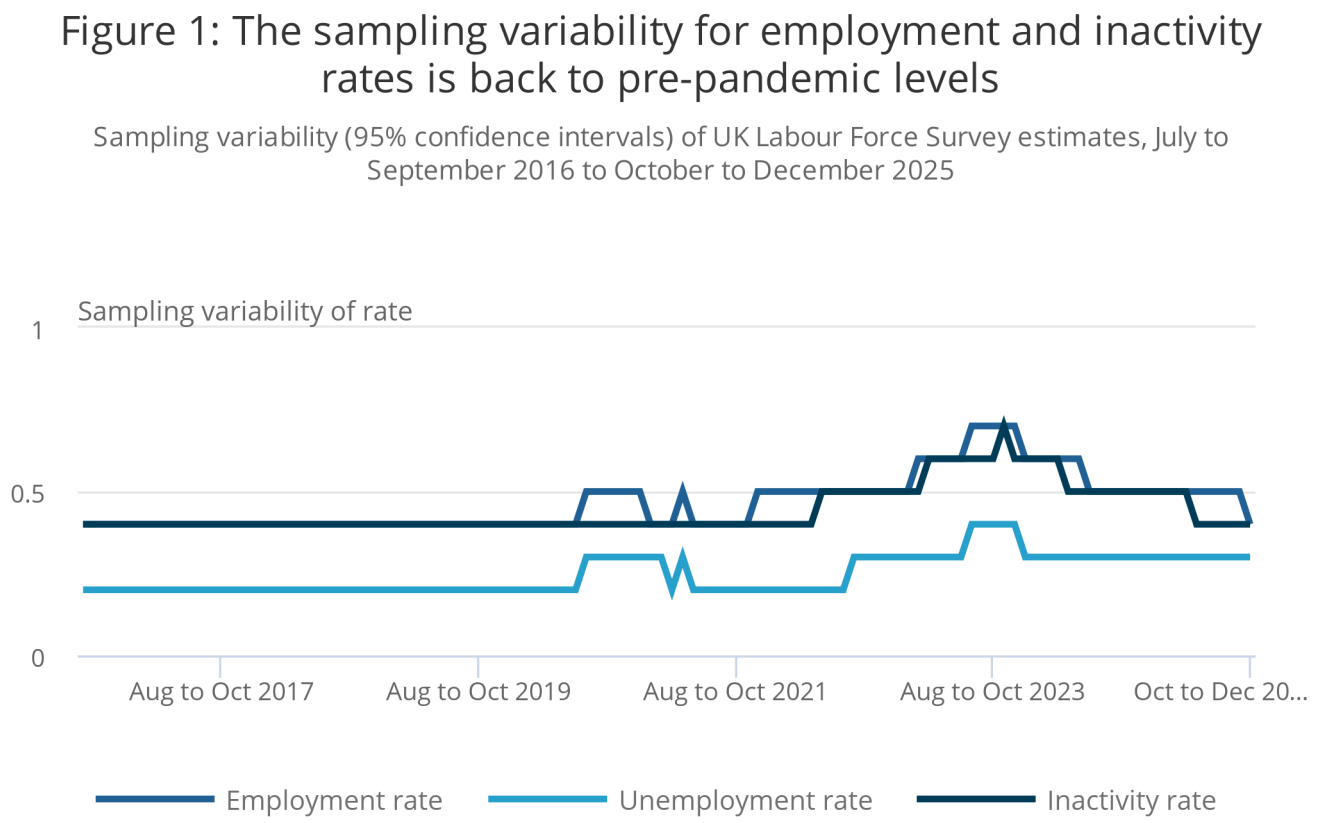
Breaking this down by wave of response, as reported in our LFS performance and quality monitoring report, we have seen response levels for Wave 1 and for Wave 2 to 5 almost recover to pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels. There were 8,346 Wave 1 household interviews in October to December 2025, compared with 8,963 in October to December 2019. Waves 2 to 5 have also increased with 26,542 responses (including imputed households) in the latest period, compared with 26,823 at the end of 2019.

We have also seen improvements to response rates to the LFS, although they are more moderate by this measure and are below pre-pandemic rates. Recovery in the level of responses is partly because of an increase in the size of the selected sample. Further information on survey response levels and response rates can be found in our LFS performance and quality monitoring report.

The higher LFS response level helps to increase the precision in our estimates. This is shown by the confidence intervals for our headline labour supply estimates, which are presented in Figure 1. Across all three headline rates, these have narrowed since mid- to late-2023, which suggests improved precision compared with the periods where response rates were at their lowest. Confidence intervals remain wider than before the pandemic for the unemployment rate, however confidence intervals are back to pre-pandemic ranges for both the employment and inactivity rates.

Figure 1: The sampling variability for employment and inactivity rates is back to pre-pandemic levels

Sampling variability (95% confidence intervals) of UK Labour Force Survey estimates, July to September 2016 to October to December 2025



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Detailed estimates will continue to see greater volatility compared with more aggregated measures. However, this has always been a feature of LFS-based analysis to some extent. The lower achieved response level for the latest periods, compared with response levels before the pandemic, will make this volatility more severe. It is also likely that variation in response rates has affected non-response bias in the survey results.

For example, we can consider estimates of redundancies or estimates of young people not in employment, education or training. Both concepts focus on much smaller population subgroups compared with the headline rates, and therefore continue to see relatively large quarterly changes, despite improved sample sizes.

The size of the two-quarter longitudinal dataset has increased since it's low point in October to December 2023 and stood at 25,653 in October to December 2025, an increase of 13,146 over that period. This is now similar to the pre-coronavirus level in October to December 2019 following an increase in the number of interviewers working on Waves 2 to 5 during 2025.

4 . Proxy responses

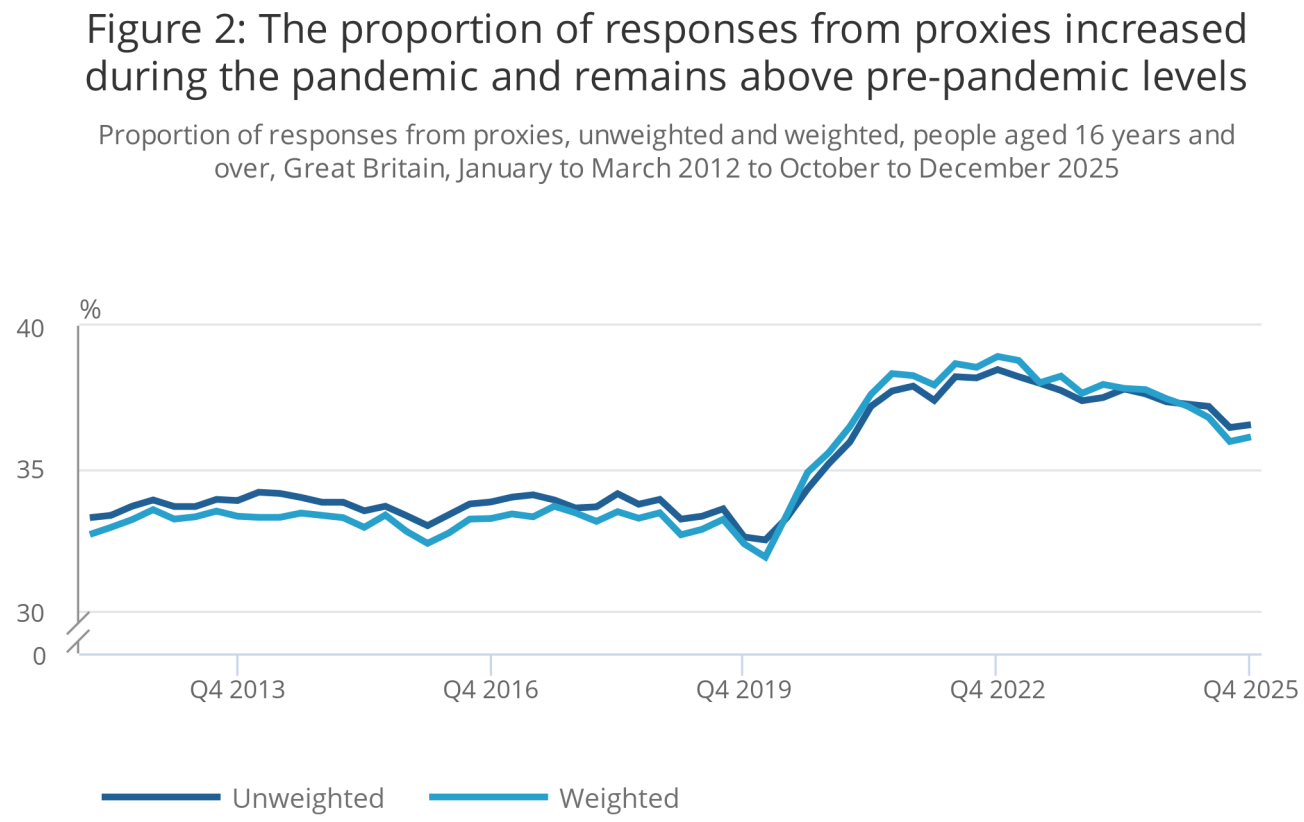
Proxy responses are those where, when a household member is unavailable for interview, information is provided by proxy from another responsible adult in the household. The proxy respondents are normally people living with a partner on behalf of their partner, and parents on behalf of their adult offspring who live with them. Proxies also include responses that were proxies in the previous quarter and have been rolled forward to the current quarter.

Since January to March 2012, the proportion of responses that were proxy responses increased from 33.3% to 36.5% in October to December 2025. Proxy responses rose sharply during the pandemic and peaked at 38.5% in October to December 2022. The proportion of proxy interviewing has decreased since the reintroduction of face-to-face interviewing at the end of 2023.

Before the pandemic, proxy responses were weighted down. The weighted proportion of responses that were proxies was around 0.5 percentage points lower than the unweighted proportion. Between April to June 2020 and October to December 2024, weighting increased the proportion of estimates that were based on proxies. Proxy responses are higher for males, unemployed people, full-time workers and people aged 16 to 24 years.

Figure 2: The proportion of responses from proxies increased during the pandemic and remains above pre-pandemic levels

Proportion of responses from proxies, unweighted and weighted, people aged 16 years and over, Great Britain, January to March 2012 to October to December 2025



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Small differences in percentage of proxy responses reported in our Labour Force Survey performance and quality monitoring reports are the result of the manual deletion of cases during data processing.

5 . Change in the composition of respondents by country of birth

Changes to the composition of respondents, according to a range of characteristics, is important when considering the quality of Labour Force Survey (LFS) statistics. This is highlighted in our published LFS performance and quality monitoring report in February 2026.

Ideally, those responding to the LFS would be broadly representative of the overall population for which we are estimating. However, we know that the likelihood of responding to surveys varies regarding several different characteristics. For this reason, we apply a range of statistical methods to our data, particularly with respect to weighting and non-response bias adjustments. These aim to ensure that our estimates are as representative as possible.

LFS weighting uses several characteristics, including:

- age
- sex
- location of respondent
- housing tenure (included since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic)

Our non-response bias adjustments operate at the household level and focus on Indices of Multiple Deprivation and Output Area Classification.

We can analyse a range of characteristics to understand how the composition of respondents has shifted over time. The trends in the changing composition of tenure, age and disability are similar in the latest quarter to earlier periods covered in our previous LFS quality updates and will be reviewed in detail in a future article. This article will focus on country of birth, comparing the unweighted distribution over time. We specifically compare July to September 2019, July to September 2023, January to March 2025 and October to December 2025. We also include the equivalent distribution from Census 2021 for England and Wales. This acts as a benchmark against which to consider the LFS estimates. Legitimate differences can arise for a variety of reasons, because of:

- differences in the questions asked
- differences in population coverage
- genuine change in the population as time progresses
- changes because of seasonal composition of the population

The analysis shows that for country of birth, we have seen a relatively large compositional shift in recent years within our unweighted dataset.

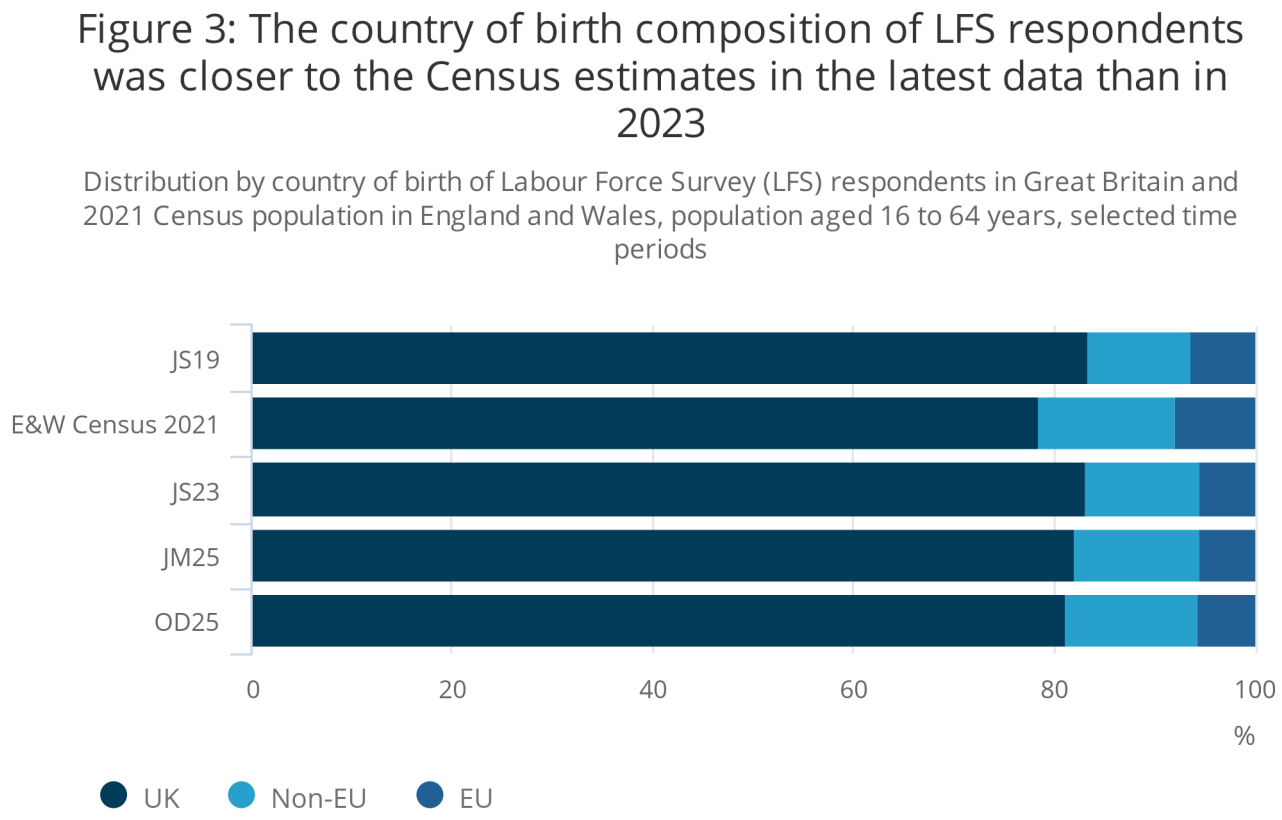
There has been increasing migration into the UK mostly coming from non-EU countries, a consistent trend since 2021, as shown in our Long-term international migration estimates. Migration peaked in the year ending March 2023, and although it has fallen since then, it remains higher than pre-COVID levels.

The profile of LFS respondents reflects the recent migration pattern and as a consequence, there is a higher proportion of non-EU-born people aged 16 to 64 years in 2025 data compared with 2019. In October to December 2025, 13.1% of LFS respondents were non-EU born, an increase from 12.5% in January to March 2025 and from 10.2% in July to September 2019. The proportions of people born in the UK and EU have both decreased in the same period.

Shifts seen during these time periods may reflect real changes among the respondents. However, these shifts could have also occurred because the composition of the responding population has changed, following survey recovery measures. The definition of non-EU countries included countries outside of the EU at the time of responding to the survey, not at time of arrival into the UK. This will affect European migrants who migrated to the UK before their birth country's accession to the EU, however the impact of this has not been assessed.

Figure 3: The country of birth composition of LFS respondents was closer to the Census estimates in the latest data than in 2023

Distribution by country of birth of Labour Force Survey (LFS) respondents in Great Britain and 2021 Census population in England and Wales, population aged 16 to 64 years, selected time periods



Source: Labour Force Survey, Census 2021, mortality, and long-term international migration data from the Office for National Statistics

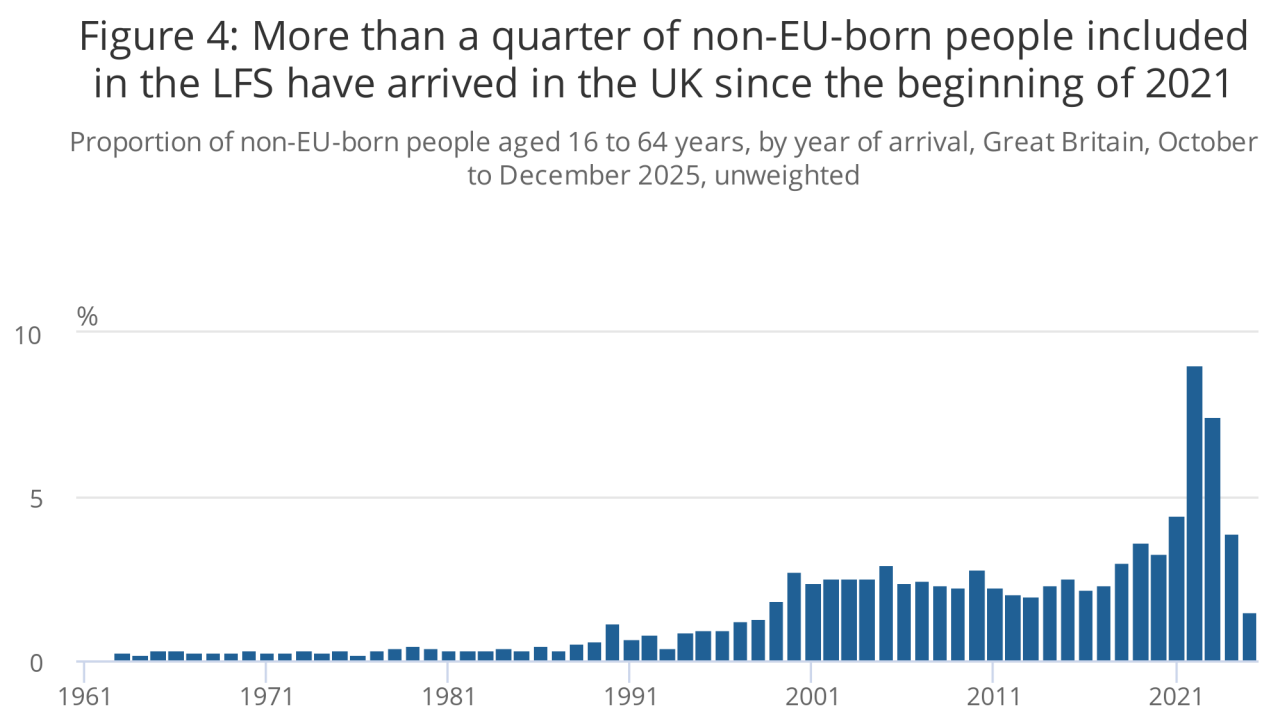
Unweighted distributions can be out of alignment with benchmarks such as the census, and this is one reason why we apply weights to our data. However, a more representative unweighted sample means that weighting makes it less likely that the data include bias that cannot be controlled for. We remain confident that weighting works as intended for each of these controlled-for characteristics.

Recent improvements in the representativeness of the LFS sample have meant that we are now focusing on developing the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS). This is also because of the practical limitations of attempting further improvements to the LFS. For this reason, we are not recommending any further adjustments to the weighting approach for the LFS. Relevant learning from this investigation will inform the ongoing assurance and development of the equivalent methods being applied to the TLFS. This approach has been assured and endorsed by stakeholders, users and academic experts on the Stakeholder Advisory Panel for Labour Market Statistics.

In October to December 2025, more than a quarter of non-EU-born respondents had arrived in the UK in the previous five years, with weighted counts increasing the proportion of recent arrivals among non-EU-born people.

Figure 4: More than a quarter of non-EU-born people included in the LFS have arrived in the UK since the beginning of 2021

Proportion of non-EU-born people aged 16 to 64 years, by year of arrival, Great Britain, October to December 2025, unweighted

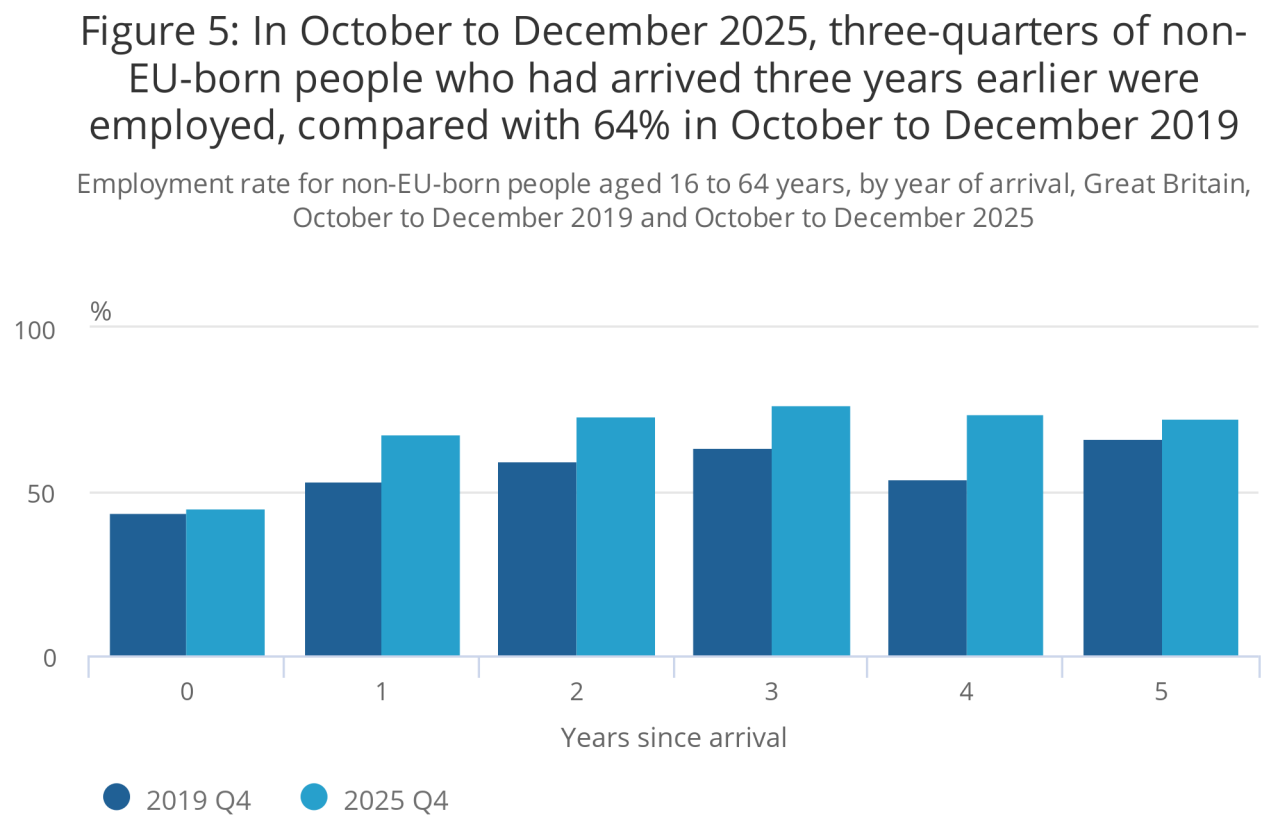


Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The employment rate for non-EU-born people is higher in 2025 than it was in 2019, and non-EU-born people are entering employment more quickly in 2025 than was the case in 2019. This points to the changing nature of non-EU migration, which can be affected by visa rules as well as demographic changes in migrants from non-EU countries.

Figure 5: In October to December 2025, three-quarters of non-EU-born people who had arrived three years earlier were employed, compared with 64% in October to December 2019

Employment rate for non-EU-born people aged 16 to 64 years, by year of arrival, Great Britain, October to December 2019 and October to December 2025



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. "Years since arrival" is defined as the year of the survey minus the year of arrival. A person who responds to the survey in the same calendar year as their arrival in the UK has a "years since arrival" value of 0.

6 . Claimant count

Administrative data such as Pay As You Earn (PAYE), Real Time Information (RTI) and Claimant Count data play an important role in telling the labour market story. In our previous quality article, we highlighted some of the work carried out on the impact of the PAYE RTI flash estimates and the nature of the recent Claimant Count revisions we have seen.

There are two measures that are commonly used to understand spare labour supply. Unemployment, as measured through the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Claimant Count, based on administrative data from benefits systems. Both important measures of spare labour capacity in the UK economy however they each record different aspects of the non-utilisation of labour. LFS unemployment counts people who are not working, actively seeking work and available to start work, as defined internationally. The Claimant Count seeks to measure the number of people receiving benefits primarily for the reason of being unemployed.

The main differences between the two definitions can be summarised as:

- people who are unemployed are not necessarily eligible for unemployment benefits or may choose not to claim even when they are eligible

- the headline Claimant Count statistics do not include 16- to 17-year-olds because of historical changes in coverage of the benefits involved; also, people above State Pension Age are far less likely to fall within this part of the benefit regime

- those in full-time education will not generally be eligible for unemployment benefits while searching for work, which particularly affects 18- to 21-year-olds

- people who are eligible for unemployment-related benefits may not fit the definition of unemployment (for example, it is possible to be employed or inactive while claiming benefits included in the Claimant Count)

- Claimant Count statistics are based on a particular "count date" falling on the second Thursday of the month, whereas the LFS unemployment figures are based on interviews across the whole of a three-month period

- LFS unemployment statistics are based on all people meeting the unemployment definition aged 16 years and over (under certain circumstances, 16- to 17-year-olds may fall within the Claimant Count and are included in some breakdowns but not in the headline Claimant Count)

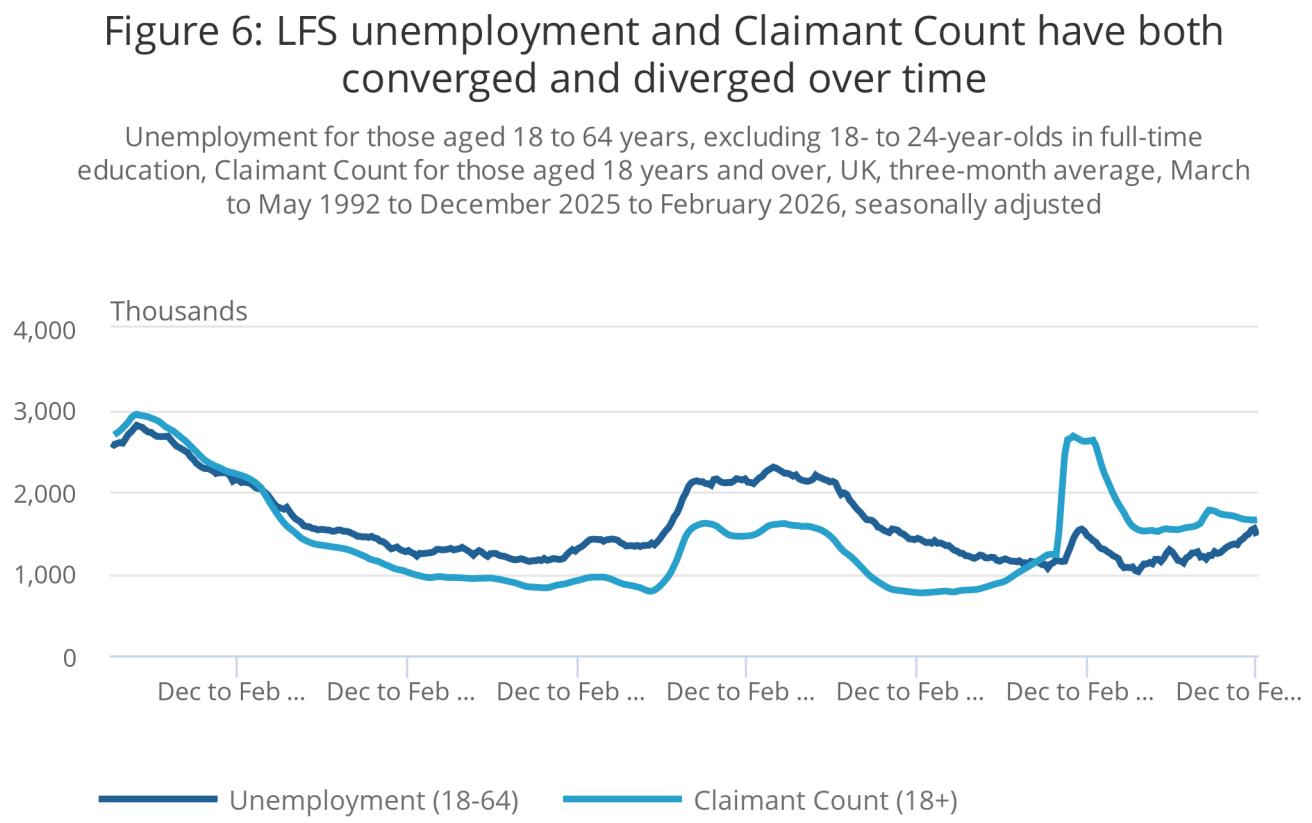
We publish a regular comparison of the difference between LFS unemployment and the Claimant Count as part of our monthly Labour market overview statistical bulletin (see our Comparison between unemployment and the Claimant Count dataset). This comparison attempts to allow for the differences in age and time coverage of the two series, and for the ineligibility of full-time students, but still reflects other definitional differences.

Figure 6 shows that over time, the two measures have both converged and diverged. The levels of LFS unemployment remained consistently higher than the Claimant Count from early 1997 to mid-2015. During the rollout of Universal Credit (UC), particularly during 2015 to 2020, the Claimant Count increased while LFS unemployment fell. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, while LFS unemployment levels increased, the Claimant Count figures saw record increases mainly because UC was utilised as part of the UK government's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This meant that an increasing number of people claimed the benefit at that time.

In more recent periods, while the unemployment level has been rising, the Claimant Count has been falling. This is in part because the Claimant Count saw a substantial increase of around 120,000 in summer 2024, following a change in the Administrative Earnings Threshold for exemption from work search conditionality. Since the initial increase, as a consequence of that eligibility change, the Claimant Count has been gradually decreasing towards its previous level.

Figure 6: LFS unemployment and Claimant Count have both converged and diverged over time

Unemployment for those aged 18 to 64 years, excluding 18- to 24-year-olds in full-time education, Claimant Count for those aged 18 years and over, UK, three-month average, March to May 1992 to December 2025 to February 2026, seasonally adjusted

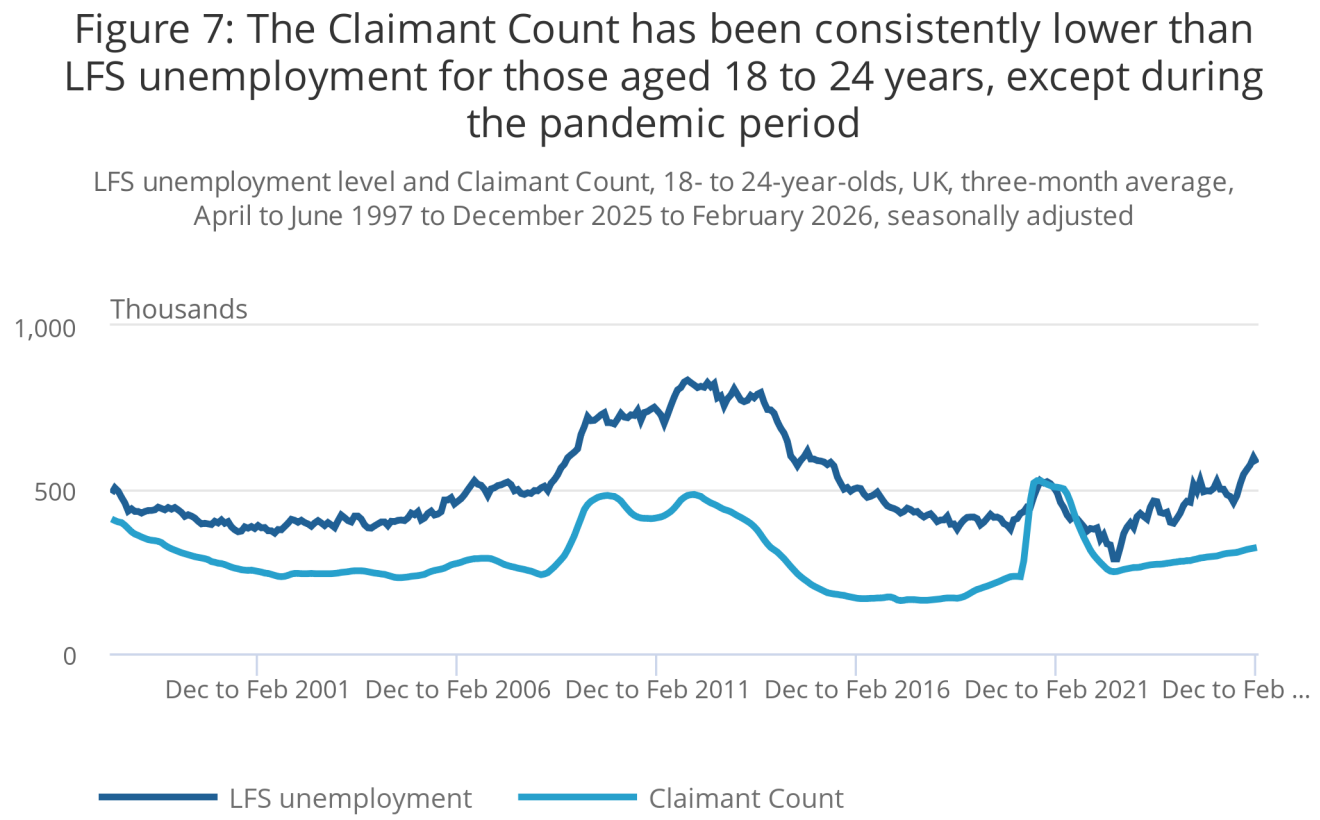


Source: Claimant Count and Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Historically, until the roll out of UC, the Claimant Count level was below unemployment for each age group, as shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9. In the period from 2015 to 2020, the increases in the claimant count levels from the transition to UC brought the level for those aged 50 years and over in line with unemployment and the level for those aged 25 to 49 years above unemployment, with the claimant count level for those aged 18 to 24 remaining below unemployment. Following the disruption over the pandemic period, the patterns seen at the start of 2020 have continued.

Figure 7: The Claimant Count has been consistently lower than LFS unemployment for those aged 18 to 24 years, except during the pandemic period

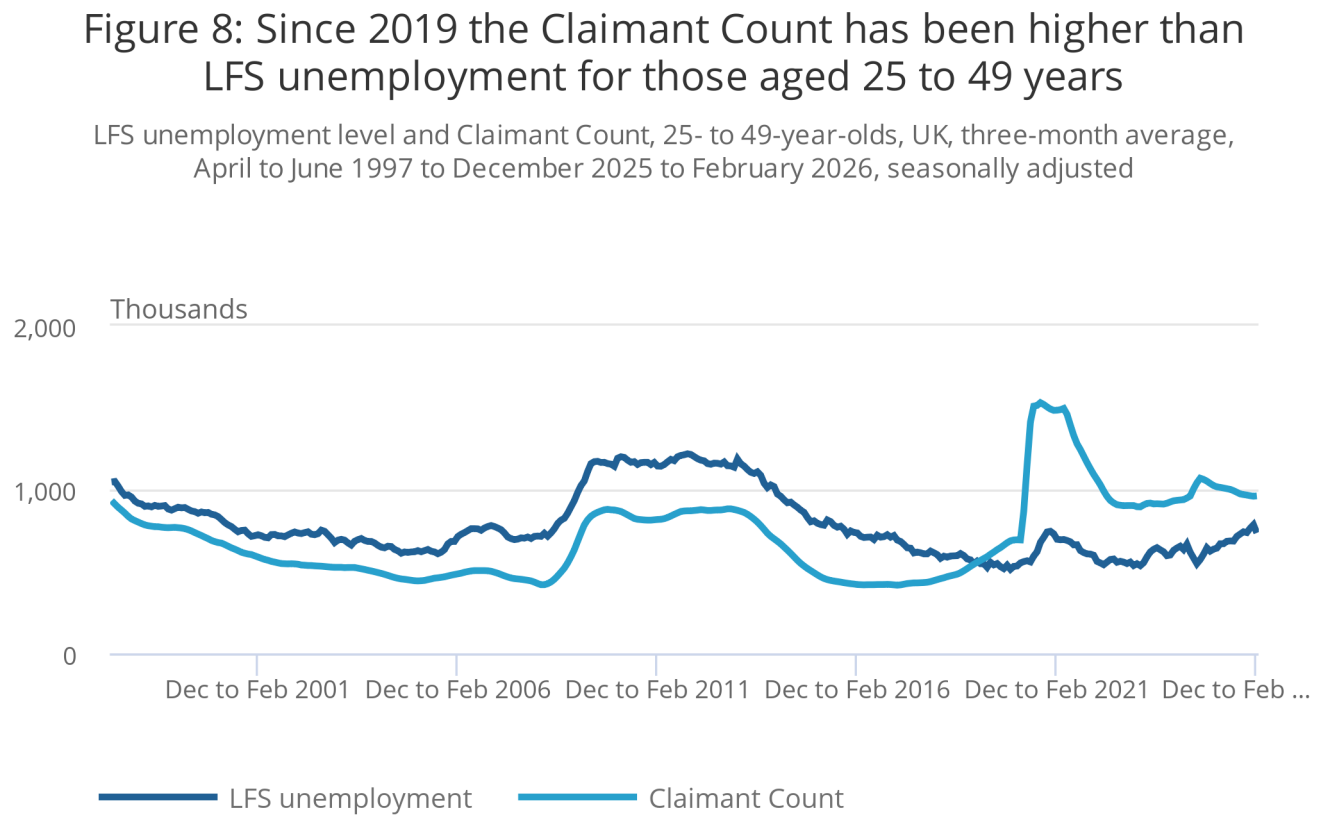
LFS unemployment level and Claimant Count, 18- to 24-year-olds, UK, three-month average, April to June 1997 to December 2025 to February 2026, seasonally adjusted



Source: Claimant Count and Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Figure 8: Since 2019 the Claimant Count has been higher than LFS unemployment for those aged 25 to 49 years

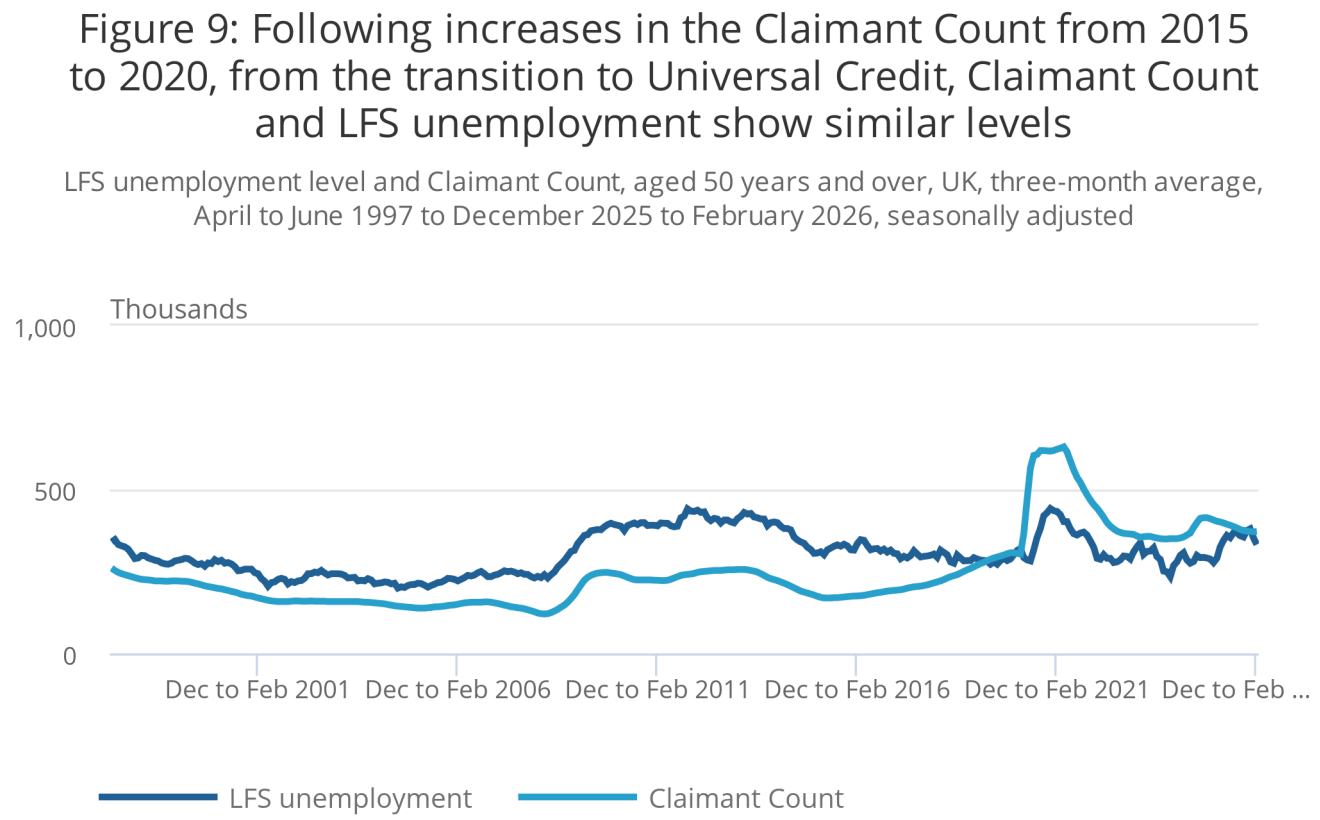
LFS unemployment level and Claimant Count, 25- to 49-year-olds, UK, three-month average, April to June 1997 to December 2025 to February 2026, seasonally adjusted



Source: Claimant Count and Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Figure 9: Following increases in the Claimant Count from 2015 to 2020, from the transition to Universal Credit, Claimant Count and LFS unemployment show similar levels

LFS unemployment level and Claimant Count, aged 50 years and over, UK, three-month average, April to June 1997 to December 2025 to February 2026, seasonally adjusted



Source: Claimant Count and Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

As highlighted in our Labour Force Survey quality update: January 2026 article, the Claimant Count has developed a recent pattern of downward revisions - usually of around 20,000 per month. This is because new Universal Credit claimants are initially placed in the Searching For Work group and then removed from it, once their claims have been fully assessed.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are continuing discussions regarding the nature of revisions to the provisional Claimant Count estimate and the divergence with LFS unemployment data. An update will be provided in the next LFS quality article. We also plan to update our Claimant Count Quality and Methodology Information report.

7 . Future developments

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) remains the lead source of labour market data and continues to run alongside the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) while development continues. We aim to transition from LFS to TLFS for our published headline labour market statistics in 2027. Updates on progress and plans will be published quarterly in our Labour market transformation article.

The importance of, and our commitment to, making improvements to our labour market statistics is highlighted in our Economic Statistics plan and our Survey Improvement and Enhancement plan, published in June 2025. We published our economic statistics and surveys improvement plan, quarterly progress update on 15 April 2026, which includes the latest progress with our short-term employment surveys, labour productivity, and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

Research is underway to understand potential employment-related variation in non-response bias in our Labour Force surveys by linking HMRC Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) to the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Early findings are providing useful insights and will be published later this year. Work is also progressing on the Linked Employer-Employee Dataset (LEED), which links workers to their employers and enables longitudinal tracking.

We are also scoping the development of Labour Accounts as part of the implementation of new international frameworks, designed to provide a holistic and coherent view of the labour market aligned to National Accounts concepts and definitions.

8 . Related links

Labour market overview, UK: April 2026
Bulletin | Released 21 April 2026
Estimates of employment, unemployment, economic inactivity and other employment-related statistics for the UK.

Labour market transformation - update on progress and plans: April 2026
Article | Released 15 April 2026
Labour market transformation overview, building on previous engagement on the Transformed Labour Force Survey.

Labour Force Survey
Web page
Introduction to the Labour Force Survey, explaining what it is, how it functions and how it is used.

9 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 21 April 2026, ONS website, article, Labour Force Survey quality update: April 2026