

Labour Force Survey quality update: October 2026

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

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1 . Main points

- Response levels for the Labour Force Survey (LFS) have shown clear improvement since 2023 because of interventions, including increases to survey incentives and interviewer numbers, to improve quality, with response levels for Waves 2 to 5 above their pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic level in April to June 2026.
- An operational error occurred in May 2026, which led to temporary under-resourcing in LFS telephone collection operations; our analysis suggests that the resulting reduction in successfully linked records is unlikely to have materially changed the broad pattern or direction of longitudinal labour market estimates, but a smaller sample does reduce estimate precision, particularly for net flows.
- Caution is 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.
- Coherence between the LFS and other labour market data sources, although improving, remains a challenge, and we continue to monitor this closely; updates will be given quarterly in our quality article.
- Our comparison of LFS and RTI has shown the 25 to 34 year old age group are showing divergences in the levels; investigations will continue and updates given in future articles.
- 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 [Progress and plans article series](#).

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 led to [the suspension of labour market publications based on LFS data](#) between October 2023 and February 2024, and the [withdrawal of accredited official statistics status for publications based on LFS and Annual Population Survey \(APS\) data](#) from 2024 onwards.

On 11 August 2026, [the ONS wrote a letter to the OSR](#) stating that LFS and APS derived outputs that are currently [official statistics in development](#) will move to [official statistics](#). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) will not be seeking reaccreditation. Instead, our priority is for outputs based on the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS), as the online-first sustainable replacement for the LFS and APS, to achieve the standards required to become accredited official statistics, and for the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) to consider their accreditation at the earliest opportunity.

In response to quality concerns, several changes were made to the operation and processing of LFS data since late 2023. These are detailed in our [Labour market transformation – update on progress and plans article series](#).

Since October 2023, the ONS has made several changes to address these 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 onwards. Since then, further changes that were introduced to help increase response levels may have an ongoing impact on the survey. These include allocating more interviewers to the LFS from March 2025, which helped drive a recovery of the response levels for the LFS to close to pre-coronavirus pandemic levels in 2026. Despite the improvement in LFS responses, some volatility remains, particularly for estimates for mid-2023 and throughout 2024, and for granular breakdowns, where sample sizes are smaller. Caution should be taken when drawing conclusions from short-term changes, and we advise users to focus on long term movements in the data. We recommend using 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 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 refer 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: July 2026 article](#). It also provides

- our latest assessment on coherence across our labour market data sources
- an update on the impact of the LFS operational issue on our longitudinal estimates
- an update on our RTI age analysis relative to the population

The article focuses on the LFS. However, given the linked design of the two surveys, changes to the LFS also affect the size and quality of the APS. We published an [update on APS quality](#) in September 2026.

3 . Latest on LFS quality

In this section, we cover Labour Force Survey (LFS) data up to April to June 2026, to align with the latest data covered in our [LFS performance and quality monitoring report: April to June 2026](#), published in August 2026.

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 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 81,193 responses to the LFS in April to June 2026. This is an increase of 36,955 from the low point in July to September 2023 but 2,869 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 UK response levels for Wave 1 almost recover to pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels. There were 8,633 Wave 1 household interviews in April to June 2026, compared with 8,963 in October to December 2019. Waves 2 to 5 have increased to above pre-pandemic levels, with 27,661 responses (including imputed households) in the latest period, compared with 26,823 at the end of 2019.

LFS data collection during April to June 2026 was affected by an operational issue with how telephone interviewers' time was allocated. This issue affected the data collection of the survey and directly affected response rates by causing a reduction in those excluding imputed cases. The subsequent [lessons learned review](#) identified a number of actions to strengthen operational oversight, governance and assurance. The incident had a minimal impact on headline labour market estimates, it identified a small but noticeable impact on estimates of average hours and, consequently, total actual hours worked, more information can be found in our [July 2026 LFS quality update article](#). The next section examines the impact of the operational issue on our LFS longitudinal estimates.

Other than the most recent period, we have seen improvements to response rates to the LFS, although they are more moderate by this measure and are still 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](#).

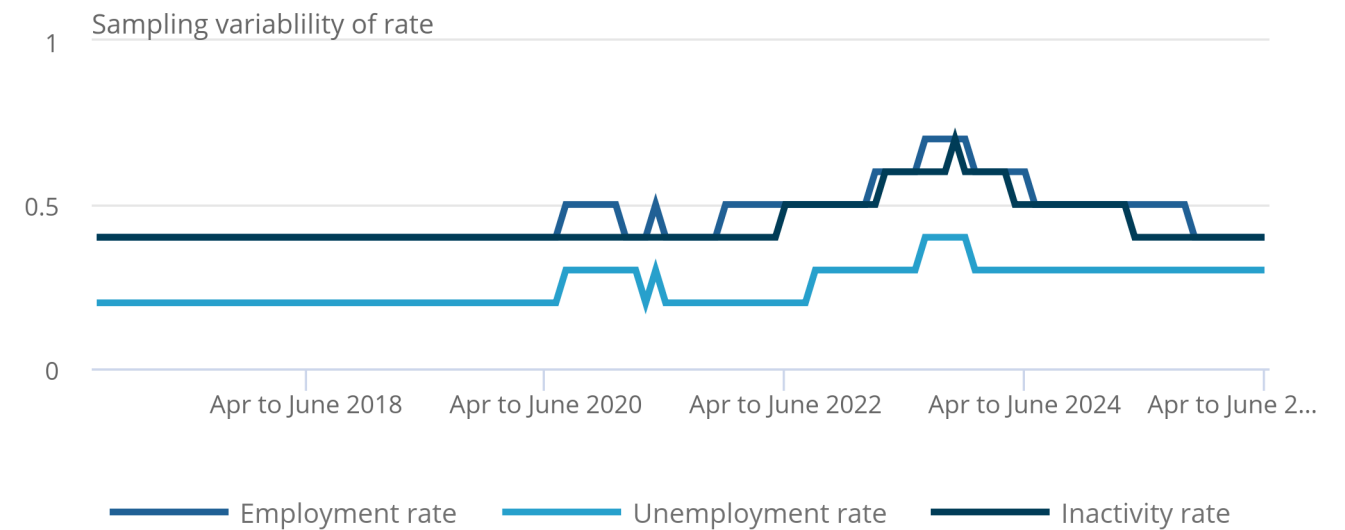
The higher LFS response level helps to increase the precision in our estimates. This is shown by the confidence intervals for our headline labour supply estimates, which are presented in Figure 1. Across all three headline rates, these have narrowed since mid- to late-2023, which suggests improved precision 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 has returned to its pre-pandemic levels

Sampling variability (95% confidence intervals) of UK Labour Force Survey estimates, July to September 2016 to April to June 2026

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Sampling variability (95% confidence intervals) of UK Labour Force Survey estimates, July to September 2016 to April to June 2026



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. 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.

4 . LFS Operational Issue – impact on longitudinal estimates

An operational error occurred in May 2026, which led to temporary under-resourcing in Labour Force Survey (LFS) telephone collection operations. In our [Labour Force Survey quality update: July 2026](#), we shared our analysis that indicated that the error had a minimal impact on headline estimates. The error also affected the longitudinal LFS dataset, which is used to estimate movements between employment, unemployment and economic inactivity. Around 4,000 fewer records were successfully linked between waves, reducing the longitudinal sample used for the April to June 2026 flow estimates published on 18 August 2026.

Our analysis assesses whether a reduction of successfully linked records could have materially affected the longitudinal estimates. We focus on hazard rates, which measure the proportion of people moving between, or remaining in, employment, unemployment and economic inactivity between two periods, alongside gross and net flow estimates. The analysis assesses the sensitivity of these estimates to a smaller longitudinal sample but does not identify the affected records or provide corrected estimates.

In our simulations, we used January to March 2026, the latest unaffected longitudinal dataset. We ran 10,000 simulations removing around 4,000 linked records, with removal more likely for records with characteristics associated with non-response. We reweighted the remaining sample and produced seasonally adjusted estimates, which we compared with the published estimates to assess the potential impact and variation across simulations.

The effect of removing linked records depends both on which records are missing and how many are missing. Where missing records are similar to the wider sample, simulations should vary around the published estimate, with greater variation as the number of missing records increases. A consistent upward or downward difference would be more indicative of a systematic effect.

Hazard rates and flows describe the same labour market transitions: flows measure the number of people moving between statuses, while hazard rates express these movements as a proportion of the relevant origin population. Table 1 therefore presents hazard rates only, as the simulations affect them in similar ways.

Table 1: Published and simulated mean seasonally adjusted labour market hazard rates, and the percentage difference between them, people aged 16 to 64 years, UK, January to March 2026

Labour market hazard rate	Published	Mean of simulations	Percentage difference between mean and published	Central 95% range of percentage differences
Employment to unemployment	1.17	1.17	0.12%	-4.47% to 4.74%
Employment to economic inactivity	1.65	1.64	-0.25%	-6.03% to 5.32%
Unemployment to employment	27.11	27.08	-0.10%	-3.90% to 4.07%
Unemployment to economic inactivity	22.79	22.75	-0.20%	-5.11% to 4.47%
Economic inactivity to employment	6.45	6.46	0.21%	-4.41% to 4.43%
Economic inactivity to unemployment	5.49	5.5	0.09%	-4.74% to 4.72%
Still in economic inactivity	85.32	85.31	0.00%	-0.44% to 0.44%
Still in employment	97.22	97.22	0.00%	-0.12% to 0.11%
Still in unemployment	47.35	47.35	0.00%	-2.86% to 2.74%

Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Percentage differences are calculated as the simulated mean hazard rate minus the corresponding published hazard rate, divided by the absolute value of the published hazard rate.
2. Percentage differences are calculated using unrounded estimates and rounded to two decimal places for presentation.
3. A displayed percentage difference of 0.00% does not mean that the unrounded published and simulated mean estimates are identical.

Gross flows measure the total movements into and out of each labour market status. Gross inflows are the movements into a status from the other two statuses, while gross outflows are the movements from that status into the other two statuses. Net flows are the difference between larger gross inflows and outflows, so small changes in either can produce a relatively large percentage difference. This is particularly relevant for unemployment, where the relatively small, published net flow amplifies percentage differences.

Table 2: Published and simulated mean seasonally adjusted labour market gross and net flows, and the percentage difference between them, people aged 16 to 64 years, UK, January to March 2026

Gross and net flow	Published	Mean of simulations	Percentage difference between mean and published	Central 95% range of percentage differences
Employment gross inflow	1,078,661	1,079,397	0.07%	-2.70% to 2.81%
Employment gross outflow	915,281	914,421	-0.09%	-3.65% to 3.41%
Unemployment gross inflow	876,644	877,546	0.10%	-2.57% to 2.69%
Unemployment gross outflow	912,102	910,765	-0.15%	-2.48% to 2.18%
Economic inactivity gross inflow	951,949	949,800	-0.23%	-3.66% to 3.24%
Economic inactivity gross outflow	1,079,871	1,081,557	0.16%	-2.77% to 2.95%
Employment net flow	163,380	164,976	0.98%	-15.01% to 18.02%
Unemployment net flow	-35,458	-33,219	6.31%	-18.64% to 32.69%
Economic inactivity net flow	-127,922	-131,757	-3.00%	-24.85% to 17.95%

Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Percentage differences are calculated as the simulated flow estimate minus the corresponding published flow estimate divided by the absolute value of the published flow estimate.
2. Percentage differences are calculated using unrounded estimates and rounded to two decimal places for presentation.
3. Percentage differences for net flows should be interpreted with caution because the net estimates are smaller than the gross movements from which they are derived.

Overall assessment

Under the scenarios tested, removing around 4,000 linked records increases the uncertainty and variation around the longitudinal labour market estimates because they are based on a smaller sample. However, the simulation mean averages remain close to the published estimates for hazard rates and gross flows, with no clear indication of a systematic upward or downward shift. The simulated variation also remains within the range of quarter-to-quarter movements observed historically.

The effect is more pronounced for net flows, where relatively small changes in the much larger gross inflows and outflows can lead to larger percentage differences. This means there is greater uncertainty around the precise size of the net flow estimates, although their direction is maintained across the scenarios tested.

Overall, the results suggest that removing around 4,000 linked records is unlikely to materially change the broad pattern or direction of labour market movements, but it does reduce the precision of the estimates.

Our analysis has shown that the operational issue had minimal impact across our estimates. Therefore, we have no plans to make any further updates on the impact of this issue on our data.

5 . Coherence of our labour market data sources

This section provides additional commentary to help users assess differences between the employment-related data sources we publish. It will be updated quarterly, having previously been included in the [Labour Market overview bulletin](#).

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is our survey of households and remains the lead measure for data on labour market participation. Workforce jobs (WFJ) primarily uses business surveys to measure employee jobs with the LFS covering self-employment jobs. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) data come from administrative tax records and cover only payrolled employees.

Because these sources are collected and processed differently, differences in levels are expected (for example, jobs compared with people, or varying reference periods). Divergence across indicators for more than one period is not unusual and we advise users to focus on longer-term movements in the data. Our [Comparison of labour market data sources methodology](#) compares data sources and discusses some of the main differences.

Despite the coherence challenges, the LFS remains the sole source for unemployment, economic inactivity and self-employment data, offering detailed breakdowns unavailable elsewhere.

Latest employee data

The number of payrolled employees has generally been falling over the last two years, to now stand at 30.3 million people, and continued to fall in the three months to September 2026. The latest flash estimate for September 2026 was largely unchanged on the month, increasing by 13,000 (0.0%), though this is subject to revision when more data are received next month. Our view remains that RTI currently provides the most reliable measure of employees.

Enhancements to the LFS, introduced since January 2024, mean that movements in the LFS since then reflect both underlying developments in the economy and improved survey quality, including obtaining more responses from employed people. As survey improvements have helped bring the level of measured employment in the LFS more in line with other indicators, recent LFS measures of employment growth are likely to be temporarily higher. As a result, levels have moved closer to RTI, with the number of LFS employees increasing by 314,000 on the year to 29.9 million in June to August 2026; but measures of change may be less aligned with RTI because they capture both real labour market shifts and changes arising from the survey improvements.

[Exploratory research using linked HM Revenue & Customs Pay As You Earn \(PAYE\) data](#), published on 28 September 2026, has also provided new insights into labour market trends, helping to explain periods of divergence between survey and administrative measures. It showed a stronger recovery in employment after the pandemic and a smaller and less prolonged rise in economic inactivity than suggested by the published LFS estimates alone. The research also suggested that recovery in the LFS during 2024 and 2025 may have reduced non-response bias, as using the linked payroll data made only a small difference to the level of employment and inactivity estimates in 2025. We are undertaking further analysis of this and will provide further updates in future articles. In the following section we present our work on RTI rates and explain some of the further work we are investigating on coherence between LFS and RTI.

We published the latest estimate of WFJ in our September 2026 labour market publication. The employee component of WFJ has fallen slightly in the most recent quarter. WFJ can sometimes lag behind other indicators, as seen at the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

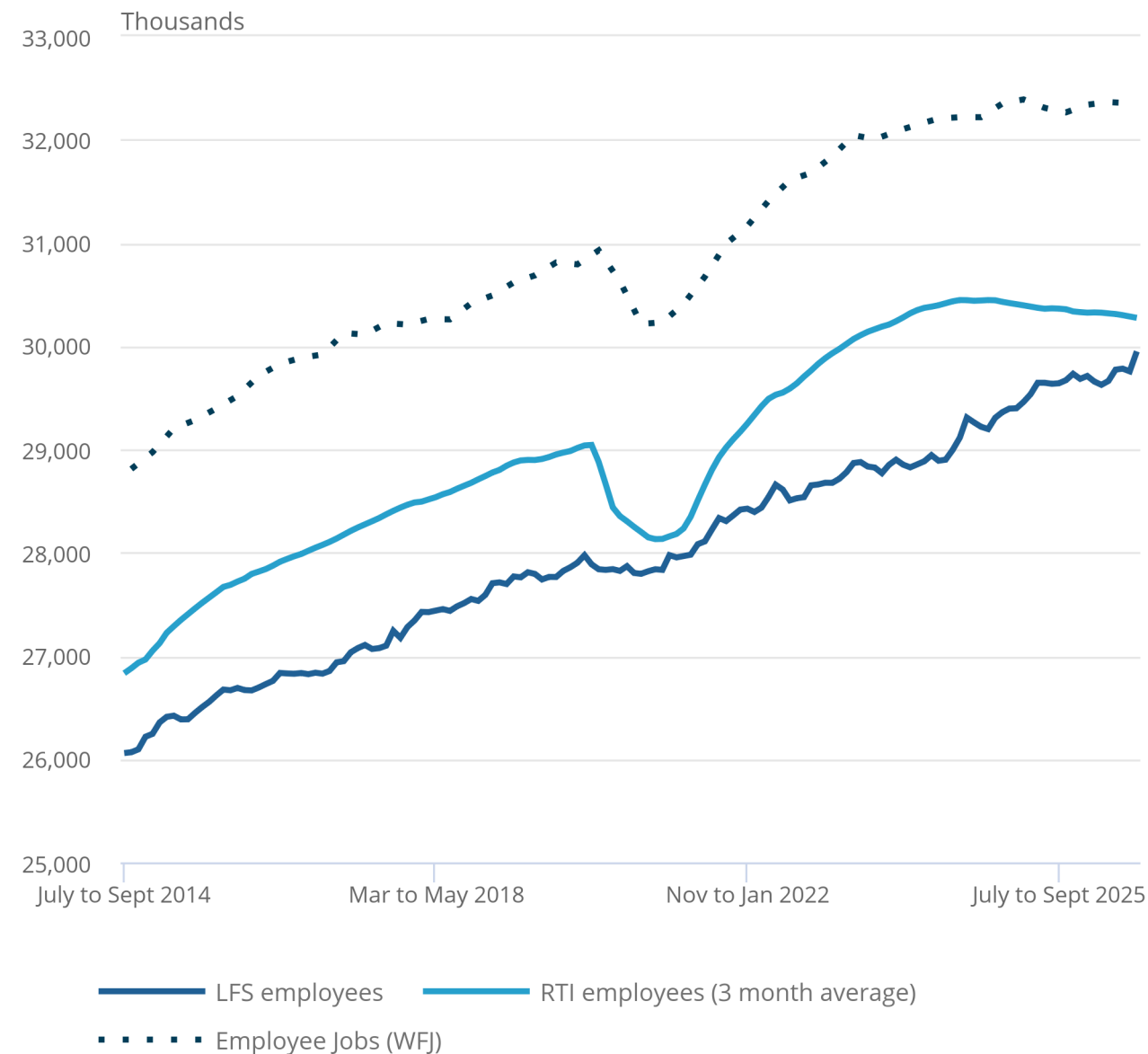
Figure 2 shows the three employee indicators over a longer time series.

Figure 2: Employee measures show a mixed picture over the last year, with RTI continuing to fall in the three months to August 2026

Comparison of employee estimates over time, UK, July to September 2014, to June to August 2026

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Comparison of employee estimates over time, UK, July to September 2014, to June to August 2026



Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Workforce Jobs (WFJ) from the Office for National Statistics, and Pay As You Earn Real Time Information (RTI) from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC)

Notes:

1. Three-month averages of RTI payrolled employees have been used here for comparability.
2. Workforce jobs are published for the months of March, June, September and December. For presentational purposes, they have been plotted against the middle month of the time period shown. For example, March is plotted against February to April.

We are continuing to further analyse the current differences in estimates of change between our measures of employees and will provide updates in future quarterly quality articles. We plan to align our articles with the publication of our workforce jobs estimates, meaning our next assessment of coherence will be in December 2026.

6 . Payrolled employee estimates relative to the population

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publish estimates of Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) payrolled employees monthly, including a breakdown by age group. These estimates are presented as levels.

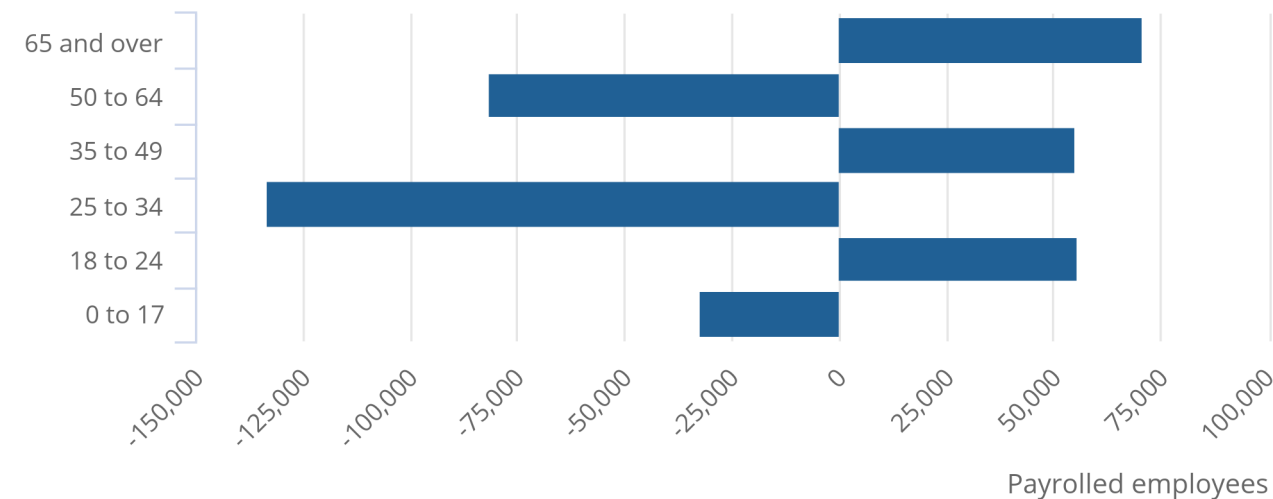
The early estimate of payrolled employees for September 2026 decreased by 66,000 (0.2%) on the year to 30.3 million. The 25-to-34-years age group has seen the largest annual falls in payrolled employees, while the 65-years-and-over age group has seen the greatest increase. Figures for September should be treated as provisional estimates and are likely to be revised when more data are received next month.

Figure 3: The group aged 65 years and over has seen the greatest increase in payrolled employees since September 2025

Payrolled employees, absolute change on September 2025, seasonally adjusted, UK, September 2026

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Payrolled employees, absolute change on September 2025, seasonally adjusted, UK, September 2026



Source: Pay As You Earn Real Time Information from HM Revenue and Customs

Notes:

1. The September 2026 estimates are based on early data and therefore are more likely to be subject to slightly more substantial revisions.

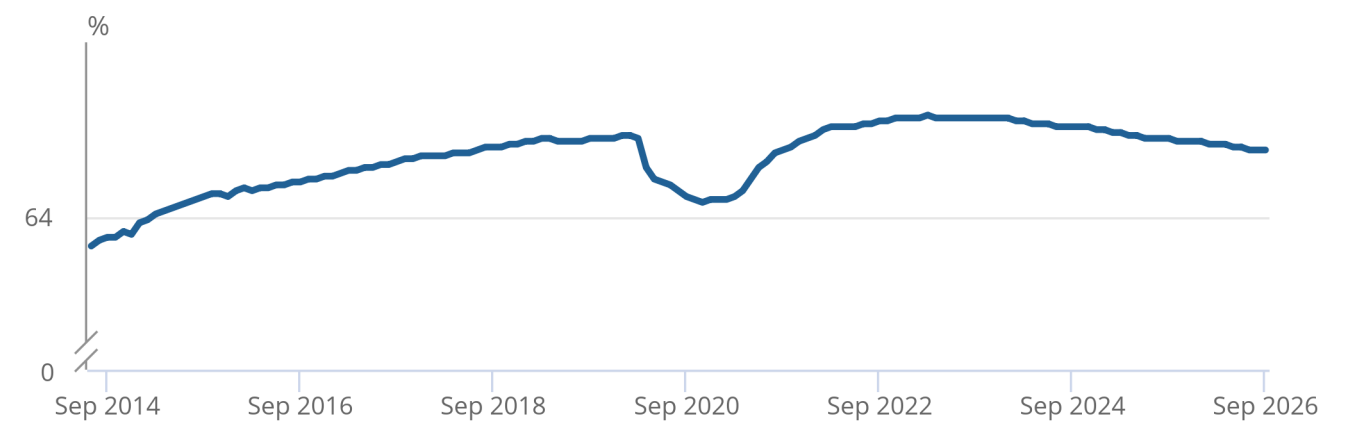
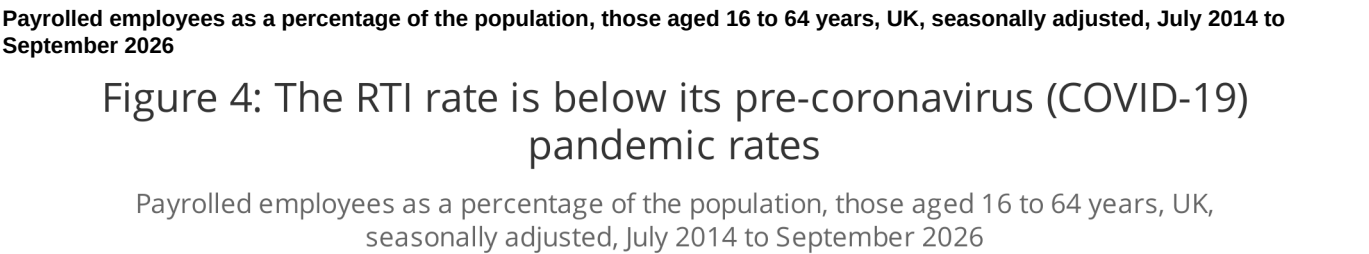
As reported in our [quality article in July 2026](#), to fully understand changes in payrolled employees by age, it is useful to look at the data relative to the population, to account for the difference in the size of the population by the different age groups.

We have used ONS population estimates and adjusted projections to produce RTI estimates of payrolled employment as a percentage of the population – referred to here as “RTI rates”. The population estimates are based on mid-year population estimates for 2011 to 2024 (as published in September 2025) and mid-year population projections for 2025 to 2030.

The RTI rate differs from the LFS employment rate, which includes other types of employment, such as self-employment, not just payrolled employees. There are other differences between LFS and RTI, which are summarised in our [Comparison of Labour Market data sources article](#).

When looking at payrolled employees for those aged under 65 years as a proportion of the population, as shown in Figure 4, the rate has generally been falling since March 2023 and stands at 66.3% in September 2026. It was last lower in August 2021, when it was 66.2%.

Figure 4: The RTI rate is below its pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic rates



Source: Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) from HM Revenue and Customs and Population estimates and projections from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Payrolled employees for those aged under 65 years as a percentage of the population aged 16 to 64 years.
2. The September 2026 estimates are based on early data and therefore are more likely to be subject to slightly more substantial revisions.

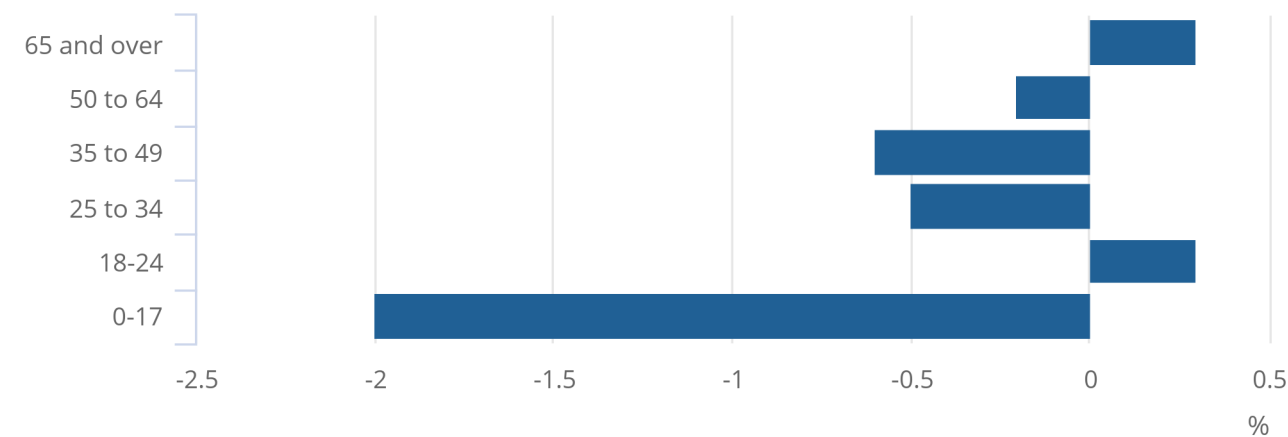
When looking at rates for the different age groups, as shown in Figure 5, the 65-years-and-over age group shows the greatest annual increase, similar to the pattern shown in the levels. However, when looking at the largest falls, it is the younger age group (those aged under 18 years) that has seen the largest annual falls in the rates in more recent periods. The group aged 35 years to 49 years sees annual increases in the level but decreases in the rate.

Figure 5: Those aged under 18 years have seen the largest annual falls in RTI rates

Annual change in payrolled employees as a percentage of the population, by age group, UK, seasonally adjusted, September 2026

Figure 5: Those aged under 18 years have seen the largest annual falls in RTI rates

Annual change in payrolled employees as a percentage of the population, by age group, UK, seasonally adjusted, September 2026



Source: Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) from HM Revenue and Customs and Population estimates and projections from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

- 1. The September 2026 estimates are based on early data and therefore are more likely to be subject to slightly more substantial revisions.

Prior to publishing more regularly, we are investigating differences between RTI compared with the LFS employees. Our analysis has shown that when looking at age groups, most of the groups show similar trends. However, the group aged 25 to 34 years is showing divergences in the levels in more recent periods (see Figure 6). As part of our broader work on the coherence of labour market statistics outlined in the previous section, we are continuing to investigate these differences between LFS and RTI, as well as expanding our analysis to include region and industry comparisons.

Figure 6: When comparing with LFS, the number of employees diverge for those aged 25 to 34 years

RTI and LFS employee by age band, UK, not seasonally adjusted, January to March 2019 to June to August 2026

Notes:

- 1. Three-month averages of RTI payrolled employees have been used here for comparability.

We published these RTI rates for the first time in our July 2026 LFS quality update article. We are continuing to seek feedback before making this information available more regularly.

7 . Future developments

ONS web transformation – impact on Labour Market bulletins

As part of our ongoing programme of website improvements, we have made changes to the Labour market overview bulletin to improve the user experience. We intend to change the individual bulletins that comprise the labour market overview to headline-only releases from November 2026 onward. We are also seeking to adjust the focus and timing of future Labour Force Survey (LFS) quality articles to align with quarterly publications and to cover the full suite of labour market statistics. Please send any feedback you have to labour.market@ons.gov.uk.

Average weekly earnings compliance review

In July 2026, the Office for Statistics Regulation published a Compliance review: Average weekly earnings in Great Britain. The review concluded that the statistics continue to meet the standards set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics and should retain their accreditation status. We are working on updating our [quality and methods information \(QMI\)](#) to address the improvements identified, specifically ensuring content and links are up to date and to bring greater transparency around our user engagement and development plans.

We are also improving the production of average weekly earnings (AWE) statistics through a programme of methodological and systems enhancements. More information on this given in the [ONS surveys and economic statistics improvement plan, quarterly progress update: October 2026](#).

Labour Market transformation

The 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 the LFS to the 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 next update is planned for November 2026.

Further progress has been made on the Linked Employer - Employee Dataset (LEED), which links workers to their employers and enables longitudinal tracking. We plan to publish the first set of official statistics in development on labour market flows in November 2026 from a firm and a worker perspective, which would capture new insights on UK labour market dynamism. This would include new estimates of job hires, job separations, and job-to-job flows. This will be available by firm and worker characteristics, such as age of the worker and the size and industry of the firm. These will provide new insights into how people move through the labour market, helping to improve our understanding of how the labour market is evolving.

LFS reweighting

An exercise to reweight Labour Force Survey data all the way back to 2011, using more up-to-date population estimates and projections, is underway. Because of the scale of this project, revised estimates are due to be published over a period of around two years, with the first revised estimates expected to be available by March 2027.

ESCoE Exploratory Research on Reconciling Employment Estimates

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has commissioned the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE) to undertake exploratory research into how different sources of labour market data can be brought together to provide a better understanding of employment trends in the UK. The research responds to a period in which important labour market sources, including survey-based and administrative data, have sometimes provided different signals about the strength and direction of employment growth. The project explores whether statistical reconciliation methods can help explain these differences and provide a clearer assessment of underlying labour market conditions.

The aim is not to replace existing measures, but to better understand the information contained within each source, their respective strengths and limitations, and how they can be used together to support interpretation. Through this work, the ONS is investigating whether other approaches can offer valuable insights when labour market indicators appear to diverge. As exploratory research, the project will help inform the ONS's longer-term thinking on the use of multiple data sources and evidence in labour market statistics.

8 . Related links

[Labour market overview, UK: October 2026](#)

Bulletin | Released 20 October 2026

Estimates of employment, unemployment, economic inactivity and other employment-related statistics for the UK.

[Labour market transformation - update on progress and plans: August 2026](#)

Article | Released 11 August 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.

[ONS surveys and economic statistics improvement plan, quarterly progress update: October 2026](#)

Article | Released 14 October 2026

Progress across the ONS against our recovery plans for improving our economic statistics and surveys, between July and September 2026.

9 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 20 October 2026, ONS website, article, [Labour Force Survey quality update: October 2026](#)