



Department for
Business, Energy
& Industrial Strategy



BUSINESS POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR THE UK AND REGIONS, 2019

METHODOLOGY & QUALITY NOTE

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Introduction

1. *Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions* (hereafter referred to as *BPE*) is produced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)¹. It replaces the *Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Statistics for the UK and Regions* series, using a revised methodology to improve the quality of estimates of the number of businesses. The two series should be used independently.
2. The *BPE 2010* publication issued on 24 May 2011 was the first release based on this improved methodology. The *BPE 2011* publication (released on 12 October 2011) incorporated a further improvement to the methodology (see Annex A for more information). This edition follows the methodology for *BPE 2011*.
3. There is no single database in the UK which contains details of every active business. Government's statistical business register, the Inter-Departmental Business Register (the IDBR)², contains all businesses operating VAT and/or PAYE schemes. This publication takes data on businesses on the IDBR, and then estimates the number of additional very small businesses *unregistered* for VAT or PAYE.
4. Therefore, this publication is the only official source for data on the total business population for the UK, and the employment and turnover of those businesses.
5. *Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions* is a National Statistics publication. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the *Code of Practice for Statistics*. Further information on National Statistics can be found on the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) [website](#).
6. These statistics were [assessed](#) for compliance against the *Code of Practice for Statistics* by the UKSA during 2011-12 and in October 2012 their National Statistics designation was [confirmed](#).
7. The United Kingdom Statistics Authority designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Designation can, broadly, be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are well explained and readily accessible; are produced according to sound methods and are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest. Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.
8. This document provides guidance for users on methods used and the quality of the publication. It describes how to interpret the data in the *BPE* publication, and how it differs from the previous *SME statistics* series and other data published by the government on the UK business population.
9. The [BPE](#) publications for 2010-2019 and [SME Statistics](#) publications for 1994-2009 are available from the GOV.UK website. For further information or to give feedback on the *BPE* publication please contact us via email at business.statistics@beis.gov.uk.

¹ Formerly the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

² For more details, see Annex B

Section 1 - Definitions and Coverage

Definitions used in this publication

Business

10. A *business* may be VAT and/or PAYE registered and therefore appear on the government business register (the IDBR), or it may exist without being registered.

11. A *registered business* or *enterprise* is the smallest combination of legal units (generally based on VAT and/or PAYE records) which has a certain degree of autonomy within an enterprise group. A branch or office of a larger organisation is not in itself an enterprise.

For example, a supermarket chain will count as one business, with the employment and turnover of individual stores, distribution centres etc included within this.

12. *Unregistered businesses* are those businesses run by self-employed people that are not large enough to be VAT or PAYE registered and therefore will not appear on the IDBR.

13. A single person may run more than one business and each of these businesses will be counted separately in these estimates.

Employees

14. The number of *employees* refers to the number of people working within the business under a contract of employment in return for a wage or salary. A business can be classed as having no employees if all the business is conducted by people classed as being working proprietors. In the [detailed tables](#) for *BPE 2019*, Table 1 shows employment split out between working proprietors and employees.

For example, 20 partners in a partnership could all be defined as working proprietors if none of them were drawing a salary and therefore classed as an employee.

Employment

15. This refers to the number of employees plus the number of self-employed people (or 'working proprietors') who run the business. Individuals with two jobs in different businesses, and self-employed people running two businesses will be counted against each business. Both full-time and part-time employees are counted, and both are counted as an employee.

For example, a business with two partners and three employees will have five employment.

Turnover

16. This refers to the value of sales, work done and services rendered. It excludes VAT. Turnover data for registered businesses comes from the IDBR³. Turnover data for unregistered businesses is estimated (see 'Economic contribution' in Section 2).

Size of business

17. This refers to the number of employees within a business. In the Statistical Release, we refer to small as those with 0 to 49 employees, medium as 50 to 249 employees and large as 250 or more employees. We also use the term "SME" to cover all businesses with 0 to 249 employees.

Coverage

18. With the exception of the Whole Economy table (Table 2) in the [detailed tables](#), the *BPE* publication covers the market sector - all private sector businesses⁴, even if they sell their products exclusively to the government. It excludes central and local government⁵, charities and other non-profit organisations, which are shown in Table 2 of the publication only.

19. Private households and extra-territorial bodies (SIC code sections T and U) are not included, as they are outside the scope of this publication.

20. There is no lower boundary for inclusion in the BPE publication. Even a small amount of business activity counts. However, many "no employee" businesses are labour-only sub-contractors; that is, self-employed people trading in their own skills or professional knowledge. They might work for just one customer. Many are genuine entrepreneurs or at least think of themselves as separate from the organisation to which they sell their skills. The improved BPE methodology used since the 2010 edition makes use of additional questions on the ONS Labour Force Survey around who pays the salary or wage of the self-employed and whether they pay their own National Insurance and Income Tax to better identify "true" self-employed activity (see Section 2).

21. Apart from Table 2 in the detailed data tables, which also includes Government and non-profit businesses, the BPE publication comprises businesses from three types of legal status only - *sole proprietorships*, run by one self-employed person; *ordinary partnerships* (partnerships with unlimited liability – we generally refer to these simply as 'partnerships'), run by two or more self-employed people; and *companies* (Companies can take a range of legal forms, including Public Limited Companies, Private Limited Companies, Limited Liability Partnerships, and others such as public corporations and nationalised bodies) in which the working directors are classed as employees. We

³ Where there is an enterprise group, turnover for all the VAT enterprises within the group may be notified (to HMRC) by a reporting or 'standard' unit. If this is not updated from other sources the IDBR record will hold an unusually high turnover for the reporting enterprise and other enterprises within the group will hold an estimated turnover. Therefore turnover in a small number of businesses may be too high.

⁴ The private sector includes a small number of public corporations and nationalised bodies.

⁵ The local and central government sector is comprised of all enterprises classed by ONS as having an institutional classification of either local or central government, and private sector enterprises with SIC2007 classification codes 841 (administration of the state and the economic and social policy of the community), 842 (provision of services to the community as a whole), and 843 (compulsory social security activities).

assume that all unregistered businesses are from the first two categories, and we exclude companies that are not on the IDBR due to inactivity.

22. The most detailed industry tables provided in the publication are disaggregated to 3-digit SIC 2007 level for businesses identified as employers only. This is because the estimates of the businesses with no employees relies heavily on the ONS *Labour Force Survey (LFS)* which is a sample survey and is not robust enough to provide accurate estimates at this level of detail.

23. Tables have not been provided at either 4 or 5 digit SIC level, as the level of suppression required to protect the data would be very high.

24. Companies with only one PAYE employee on the IDBR are counted in the “with no employees” category, rather than the “1 employee” category, as the employee is treated as being equivalent to a “working proprietor”. This is done to ensure that incorporations by individuals operating alone do not distort the overall numbers of businesses with employees – in businesses run as sole proprietorships or ordinary partnerships, working owners pay income tax through self-assessment not PAYE, whereas in companies they will usually draw a salary through PAYE.

25. Companies without employees can be holding companies, investment trusts or pension funds and most of these will have no associated employment. In addition, a small number are companies where, for technical reasons, employee directors are already treated as working proprietors.

26. Around 900,000 companies with one PAYE employee have been counted in the “with no employees” data in the publication, while around 10,000 companies have no employees recorded on the IDBR. For further information, refer to Table A.

27. Composite and managed service companies, that were set-up to take advantage of specific tax benefits, had been excluded from previous BPE and ONS publications. HMRC have now closed the loophole that allowed these benefits and over recent years the numbers have drastically reduced. Their exclusion from previous publications had been applied at the postcode level. Due to the closure of the loophole by HMRC it is assumed that these postcodes now hold genuine businesses. Therefore, 6,500 businesses at these postcodes are now included in this year’s BPE and ONS publications. 99.9% of these businesses are small (0-49 employees) so the impact of their inclusion will be minimal on the headline small business population figure, which stood at 5.9 million businesses at the start of 2019.

Table A: Companies (including public corporations and nationalised bodies): number of enterprises, employment and turnover by number of employees, UK, start of 2019

	Enterprises	Employment (thousands)	Turnover ¹ (£ millions)
All enterprises	1,972,750	21,726	3,873,628
All employers	1,962,595	21,718	3,865,748
With no employees	10,155	8,000	7,880
1	899,800	901	142,784
2+	1,062,800	20,817	3,722,964

1: "All Industries" turnover figures exclude Section K (Financial and insurance activities) where turnover available on a comparable basis

Section 2 – Methodology & Revisions

28. As there is no database of all businesses in existence in the UK, alternative are used to estimate the number of businesses not on the IDBR (the business register). Further background on the IDBR can be found in Annex B.

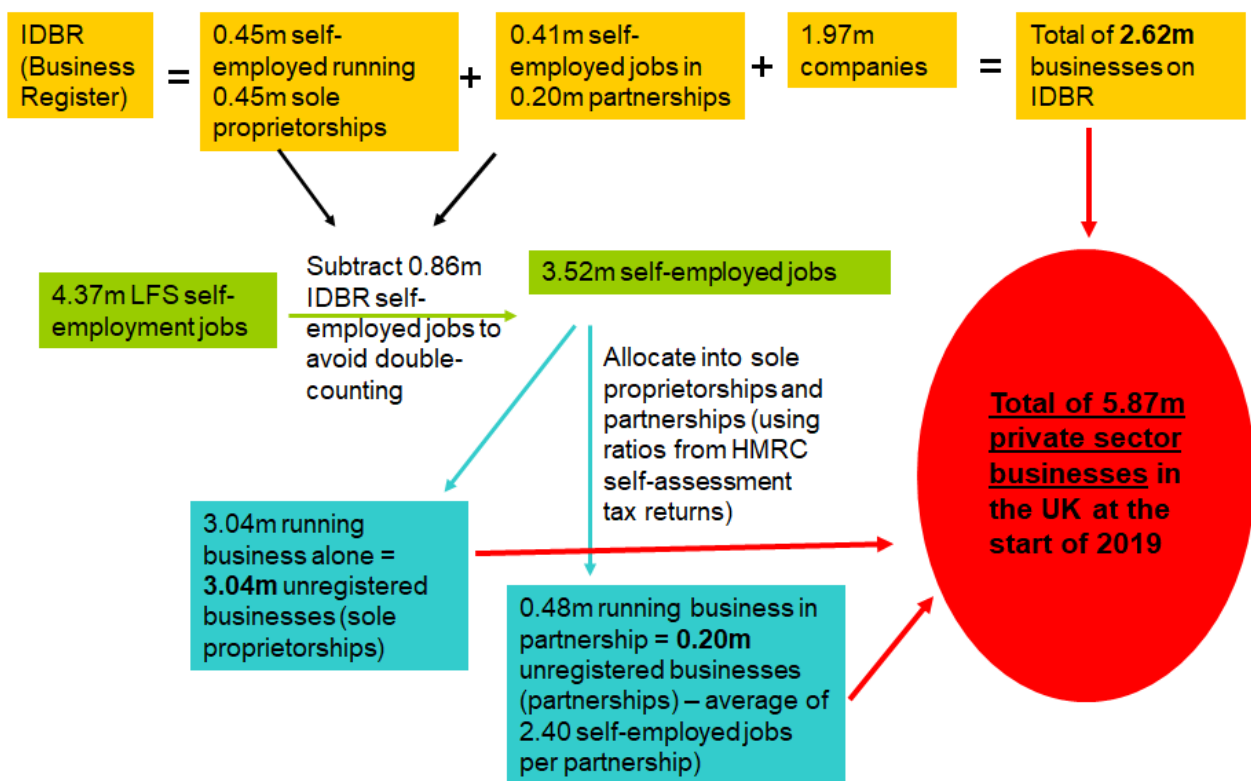
Methodology in brief

29. The IDBR contains all VAT/PAYE registered businesses. It is assumed that all active companies are on the IDBR, so no further estimate of unregistered companies is required. We therefore only need to estimate unregistered businesses run by self-employed people, either alone (sole proprietorships) or with others (partnerships).

30. We first use the ONS *Labour Force Survey (LFS)* to provide a number of self-employed 'jobs' (counting self-employment in first and/or second declared jobs separately, where applicable)⁶. Alongside this we use the IDBR to count self-employed jobs in IDBR registered businesses (working proprietors). By subtracting the IDBR working proprietor jobs from the ONS *LFS* self-employed jobs total, we know how many self-employed jobs there are in unregistered businesses.

31. We then use a ratio of self-employed working alone or in partnership and the average number of partners per partnership (from HMRC self-assessment tax return data) to allocate these self-employed jobs into businesses. This estimate is added to the IDBR count to give the estimated total business population in the UK (see Figure A).

Figure A: Flowchart to illustrate the *BPE* methodology



⁶ Further background on the ONS *Labour Force Survey* can be found at Annex C.

Methodology in detail

Self-employment estimates from the ONS *Labour Force Survey (LFS)*

32. There were an estimated 4.37 million self-employed jobs in the UK at the start of 2019⁷ where the individual was not a sole director of their own company. This has been calculated by combining data from the Q4 2018 and the Q1 2019 quarterly ONS *LFS* micro-data (seasonally unadjusted) files.

33. The 4.37 million is made up of 3.98 million people self-employed in their main job and 0.39 million who had a second job with self-employed status. Some of those with self-employment as a second job may also have self-employment as a first job but these figures can be added together because it is the number of businesses in which we are interested, rather than the number of individuals.

Overlap of the IDBR and LFS self-employment count

34. Simply adding the self-employed jobs estimate from the *LFS* to the IDBR count would lead to double counting of businesses in some instances since:

- (i) not all self-employed people run businesses on their own - some are in a partnership.
- (ii) some of them run businesses that are VAT and/or PAYE registered and so already appear on the IDBR.

35. The *LFS* does not ask individuals whether they work alone or in a partnership, or whether their businesses are VAT or PAYE registered, so this must be estimated.

Self-employed on the IDBR

36. The first step is to estimate how many self-employed people (working proprietors) are registered for VAT and/or PAYE with HMRC and are therefore on the IDBR.

37. The IDBR records employment mainly via survey forms (currently, the *Business Register Employment Survey*). If there is no source of employment information (since *BRES* is a sample survey for the smallest units), then employment is taken from PAYE jobs where available - otherwise it is imputed from turnover data. Then to allocate the imputed employment into working proprietors or employees, the number of working proprietors is assumed to be one per sole proprietorship, and around two per partnership.

38. Since directors of a company are usually classed as employees of the business, all private sector self-employed on the IDBR will be either in “sole proprietorships” or “partnerships”. At the start of 2019 there were 650,000 sole proprietorships and partnerships within the scope of the *BPE* on the IDBR, run by 855,000 self-employed people (see Figure A).

⁷ These figures are different to those published by the ONS in their *Labour Market Statistics* release. See paragraph 96 for more detail.

Self-employed not on the IDBR

39. The second step is to estimate how many businesses are run by people in the remaining 3.52 million self-employed 'jobs'.

40. HMRC's Self-Assessment Tax returns data (SA) is a further source of self-employment data⁸. A bespoke analysis of SA data is used to estimate the proportion of unregistered self-employed people working either as a sole proprietor or a partner. Unregistered businesses are approximated in the HMRC SA data by selecting those businesses with turnover below the VAT threshold and that don't have employee costs (as a proxy for businesses not registered for PAYE).

41. 2017/18 HMRC SA data (the latest data available) for these businesses showed that self-employed people who were in partnership, rather than acting alone, were in the minority. However, the ratio varied from industry to industry and in the *BPE* publication, specific ratios are applied for each industry division (2 digit SIC).

42. Each sole proprietorship is assumed to have only one working proprietor (self-employed person). Therefore, the number of unregistered sole proprietors is assumed to equal the number of unregistered sole proprietorships.

43. Partnerships are assumed to have two or more working proprietors. Using information from the 2017/18 HMRC SA data, BEIS calculate that the average number of working proprietors (self-employed partners) in each partnership was 2.40 (based on data for self-employed businesses operating below the current VAT registration threshold of £85,000 and with zero employment costs to approximate unregistered businesses). This ratio is then used to estimate the number of unregistered partnerships.

44. The results showed that amongst unregistered businesses, sole proprietorships were much more common than partnerships, making up 93% of unregistered businesses at the start of 2019 (see Table B).

Table B: Businesses and self-employment on and off the IDBR, millions (private sector; excludes SIC 2007 Sections O, T and U), start 2019.

	On the IDBR, registered for either VAT and/or PAYE		Not on the IDBR, unregistered	
	Number of businesses	Self-employed people	Number of businesses	Self-employed people
Sole proprietorships	0.45	0.45	3.04	3.04
Partnerships	0.20	0.41	0.20	0.48
Companies	1.97	-	-	-
All	2.62	0.86	3.24	3.52

⁸ For more detail on the HMRC Self-Assessment data, see Annex D.

45. Amongst IDBR registered businesses at the start of 2019, sole proprietorships represented 17% of all businesses, partnerships 8% and companies 75%.

46. Unregistered businesses are clearly very small. It is assumed that they are all in the smallest size class (no employees), and are all self-employed people working alone or in partnership. Some may generate employment, but it is likely to be transitory or low paid, otherwise a PAYE scheme would be in operation.

Economic contribution

47. Turnover in unregistered businesses will generally be lower than that of registered businesses of the same size, as turnover in the former would usually be below the VAT threshold.

48. Turnover for unregistered businesses is imputed by calculating the average turnover per working proprietor for registered zero employee businesses at the 2-digit industry division level, and then halving it. BEIS has plans to investigate whether improved estimates could be generated through a better use of HMRC self-assessment data.

49. For some 2-digit industry divisions, this still left average annual turnover per unregistered sole proprietorship or partnership above the VAT threshold. In these cases, unregistered turnover was adjusted so that turnover per business was just below the current VAT threshold of £85,000.

50. The addition to total turnover from unregistered businesses at the start of 2019 was about £120 billion (only 2.9% of the overall turnover total).

Statistical disclosure control

51. The disclosure of data relating to individual undertakings without consent is prohibited under the Statistics of Trade Act 1947, the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and the Finance Act 1969.

52. Counts of businesses based only on IDBR data have been rounded to avoid disclosure using controlled rounding to base five. Controlled rounding means that cells are rounded up or down to the adjacent multiples of five in a way that retains the additivity of tables. For example, an original value of 23 will be rounded to either 20 or 25, and rounded values in a row or column always add up to the rounded row/column total. Original cell values of zero or multiples of the base are unchanged. Values may be rounded down to zero and so not all zeros are necessarily true zeros⁹.

53. As the *BPE* publication is sourced from both the IDBR and *Labour Force Survey*, there will be a few cases where the addition of estimates of unregistered businesses to the IDBR data means totals do not equal the sum of the data in columns. In addition, percentages may not always add to 100.

54. Employment and turnover information has to be suppressed where the count is deemed to be disclosive. To avoid disclosure by deduction additional values have been removed.

⁹ Controlled rounding is performed using Tau Argus software.

55. The “with no employees” size class estimates rely heavily on the ONS *Labour Force Survey*, which is a sample survey of around 40,000 households (100,000 people) in the UK every three months.

56. In April 2004, the Statistical Policy Committee expressed a strong preference for publishing data rather than suppressing data for reasons of quality. Since then, the previously applied threshold of 10,000 (in the region of 20 respondents), below which outputs were suppressed, was removed from labour market outputs. Therefore, such estimates are not suppressed in the *BPE* publication, although users should be aware that some estimates are based on small sample sizes which could explain volatility in certain estimates (for example, regional data at a broad sector level) from one year to the next.

57. The exception to this is where estimates are based on fewer than three respondents. These could potentially be disclosive, so they are still suppressed in the *BPE* publication, along with additional values to avoid disclosure by deduction.

Revisions Policy

Planned revisions

58. Until 2019, when re-weighted (for updated population estimates) ONS *LFS* data became available, BEIS revised headline estimates of the number of private sector businesses in the UK for the relevant years. Updated estimates by size band were provided in Figure 3 and Table B of the Statistical Release and Table 25 of the detailed data tables, to reflect the impact on the unregistered business population estimate.

59. For this year’s 2019 publication, in contrast to previous editions of this release, no updated estimates are published, despite the availability of re-weighted *LFS* data. Investigating the effects of re-weighting on estimates of business numbers indicated such effects were very small and were likely to be insignificant given the degree of uncertainty present in the estimates.

60. In future BEIS will make use of re-weighted *LFS* data only if such data is judged to have significant impacts on business counts.

61. If possible, BEIS will also revise previously released estimates if new sources of information become available that are shown to improve the robustness of the *BPE*. Any future substantial methodological changes of this nature will be consulted on and pre-announced before they are implemented.

Unexpected revisions

62. These may occur due to the discovery of errors, unforeseen changes in methodology or the unexpected acquisition of new data. If an error is discovered, a corrected version of the publication will be placed on the website as soon as possible, together with an explanation of the reason for the change, where appropriate. In the case of implementation of unforeseen changes in the methodology or the unexpected acquisition of new data, it will not usually be possible to pre-announce the changes, but as far as possible we will produce a consistent headline back series to enable robust comparisons over time.

Section 3 - Quality

63. This section provides information on the quality of the Business Population Estimates, to enable users to judge whether or not the data are of sufficient quality for their intended use. The section is structured in terms of the six quality dimensions of the European Statistical System.

Relevance (*the degree to which the statistical product meets user needs for both coverage and content*)

64. As set out in paragraphs 3 and 4, there is no single database in the UK which contains details of every active business and this publication is the only official source for data on the whole population of UK businesses.

65. The sources used to compile the estimates are the Inter-departmental Business Register, the ONS *Labour Force Survey* and HMRC self-assessment data. Further information on the primary purpose, uses and quality of these sources is available in Annexes B, C and D.

66. The IDBR is appropriate to use in compiling estimates for this publication because it provides comprehensive coverage of VAT/PAYE registered businesses.

67. The *LFS* is an effective way to estimate the number of businesses not on the business register because it is an individual level survey that asks respondents about their current economic activity (with the option to cite multiple jobs), which therefore enables us to calculate the number of additional self-employed jobs not on the IDBR.

68. HMRC self-assessment data is appropriate to allocate these *LFS* self-employed jobs into businesses, because of its comprehensive coverage of the self-employed population, the ability to remove self-employed that are most likely running registered businesses and the information it gathers about whether the self-employed are operating in partnership or as a sole proprietorship.

69. The key users of this publication include central and local government, business owners, academics and students, business representative bodies, journalists and members of the public.

70. The key uses of this publication include informing policy making, policy monitoring, market research, impact assessments, facilitating academic research, etc.

71. Users have been consulted when considering changes to the BPE publication. In December 2008, BIS launched a [Public Consultation](#) on *SME Statistics* to get user views on the usefulness of the publication and suggestions for improvements. The consultation closed in March 2009 and was followed by the publication of a [Government Response](#) in June 2009.

72. Information on the changes introduced following the consultation can be found in the article [Business Population Estimates: introducing improved statistics on the UK enterprise population](#).

73. In response to user feedback, most of the BPE tables BEIS now provide specific estimates for unregistered businesses, separately from numbers of non-employing

registered businesses. Previously the two were combined to provide only a total number of non-employing businesses.

74. BEIS are aware that users would also like more information on the socio-demographic details of business owners. This is problematic since this information is not collected on the IDBR and businesses often have more than one owner-manager. Instead, users are advised to refer to surveys, such as the ONS *LFS* for characteristics of the self-employed population, or the BEIS sponsored [Small Business Survey](#), which provides estimates of the proportion of SMEs that are women-led or ethnic minority-led, for example.

75. Additionally, BEIS are aware that users would be interested in a more detailed disaggregation of the estimates, for example to a more detailed geographic level, or industrial level for the zero-employing businesses. However, the estimate of the unregistered population with no employees relies partly on survey data and sample sizes are not sufficiently large to produce robust estimates at further levels of detail under the current methodology. The level of suppression to avoid disclosure in more detailed estimates would also be high.

76. Feedback on the *BPE* publication is positive. 71% of the 42 respondents to a user survey between May 2011 and May 2012 said they found the Statistical Release very useful or quite useful. A summary of users views of the publication gathered through the *BPE* User Survey is available [here](#).

77. Further information relating to relevance is available elsewhere in this note, including the definition of key concepts (Section 1) and a description of the key sources used (Section 2).

Accuracy (including the closeness between an estimated or stated result and the [unknown] true value)

78. Since the *BPE* publication is based on a combination of survey and administrative data, it is very difficult to produce robust information on the accuracy of the final estimates.

79. Information on the accuracy of the individual underlying data sources used to produce the *BPE* publication (ONS *LFS*, IDBR and HMRC self-assessment data) is available in Annexes B, C and D.

80. Information in the publication relating to businesses with one or more employees will not be subject to survey error since it is based on complete administrative information from the IDBR (see Annex C for more quality information on the IDBR).

81. However, information in the publication relating to unregistered businesses with zero employees is based on a combination of administrative data from the IDBR and HMRC self-assessment data and estimates from the ONS *LFS*. Since the *LFS* is a sampled survey, these estimates will be subject to error.

82. The impact of this error for each estimate will vary depending on the balance between registered and unregistered businesses (and therefore how much is based on the *LFS* data) and the balance between partnerships and sole proprietors in the zero-employee estimate in question.

83. Standard errors are not available from ONS for the specific self-employed jobs measure from the *LFS* used in the *BPE* so it is not possible to produce confidence intervals around final estimates.

84. At an industry level, a 10% increase in the *LFS* element of the unregistered estimate for the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector would result in an increase of approximately 10% in the final estimate for this sector. Whereas, for the Real Estate Activities sector an increase of 10% in the *LFS* element of the unregistered estimate would result in a lower increase in the final estimate, of approximately 4%. Therefore, the impact of increases in the total *LFS* numbers will depend on the size of increases in individual sectors.

85. Information on revisions is provided in Section 2.

Timeliness and Punctuality (*Timeliness refers to the elapsed time between publication and the period to which the data refer. Punctuality refers to the time lag between the actual and planned dates of publication.*)

86. The *BPE* provides an estimate of the number of businesses at the start of a calendar year, together with estimates of their associated employment and turnover. The estimates are published annually, approximately 10 months after the reference point, which is the earliest possible date after the data have been prepared and fully verified.

87. A count of IDBR businesses that were “live” at the start of the year is achieved by referring to each business recorded start date and, where appropriate, its closure date.

88. To produce the estimate of the number of unregistered businesses, information on the number of self-employed jobs is taken from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) *Labour Force Survey* (*LFS*). Pooled data for the two quarters either side of the start of the year are used in the production of the *BPE* estimate (i.e. quarter 4 (October to December) and quarter 1 (January to March)).

89. Employment data for businesses registered on the IDBR is drawn mainly from the ONS *Business Register Employment Survey* (*BRES*). For the *BPE 2019* publication, most employment data come from PAYE data, some from the *BRES* conducted in September 2018, while some will come from earlier *BRES* surveys, other ONS surveys or will be imputed. For the smallest businesses that are less likely to be surveyed by *BRES*, either PAYE jobs or imputed employment is used, based on sector average employment. For further information refer to Annex B. In *BPE 2015* a time-series of employment in the private sector by size band (2010 to 2015) was included for the first time in the publication.

90. Turnover data for businesses registered on the IDBR is mostly based on VAT returns for a 12 month period. For *BPE 2019*, this means VAT returns relating to the 12 month period ending December 2017, or January / February 2018, depending on the reporting pattern of the business. However, for some businesses this data could be less timely or for newly registered businesses turnover will be based on estimates made by traders at the time of registration. Some turnover data comes from the annual ABS survey but if the business is small and not registered for VAT, turnover is imputed from sector average turnover per head. For further information refer to Annex B.

91. The publication date for the next edition is pre-announced on the GOV.UK [Release Calendar](#). The statistics have always been published on the pre-announced target date.

Accessibility and Clarity (*Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data. It also relates to the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice*)

92. The *BPE* publication is available free of charge to the end user on the [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

93. The *BPE* publication comprises a Statistical Release containing key results and commentary to help interpret the data in accessible PDF format, more comprehensive detailed data tables in Excel, an interactive data dashboard, a data downloader an application programme interface (API) and this Methodology and Quality Note which should be read in conjunction with the statistics.

94. If you have any queries about the publication or would like it in an alternative format, please contact business.statistics@beis.gov.uk.

Comparability (*the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain*)

95. To enable a robust comparison over time, the *BPE* publication includes a headline time series of the estimated number of UK businesses each year since 2000, by employee size band. This has been produced on a consistent basis using the latest *BPE* methodology (see Annex A for more information). Please note that where consistent data was not available (i.e. some key *LFS* information prior to 2007), modelling has been used to estimate information to produce these counts.

96. These headline estimates (available in Figure 2 of the Statistical Release and Table 24 of the accompanying detailed dataset) are revisions to earlier estimates of UK business counts published in the *SME statistics* and *BPE* series. In *BPE 2014* a time series of businesses numbers for the English regions and UK countries was added. This covers the years 2010 to 2015 – BEIS does not have sufficiently detailed data to produce consistent estimates for earlier years. In [BPE 2015](#) a time-series of business numbers by legal status (2010 and 2015) was also provided in the detailed tables.

97. As the IDBR is a live register that is continually updated each time a business registers or de-registers for VAT or PAYE, it provides a reliable record of the number of registered businesses in operation at any point in time. Since the *BPE* publication is always based on a March extract of the IDBR (and a combination of the fourth and first quarters ONS *LFS* data for unregistered businesses), comparisons of business counts from year to year can be considered reliable (though note the information in paragraphs 60 and 61 in relation to the ‘with no employees’ category).

98. The main purpose of the *BPE* publication is to provide information about the number of businesses which were operating in the UK at the start of each year, but the publication also includes information about their associated employment and turnover. Both turnover and employment information is updated on the IDBR via numerous sources and at different times (particularly for employment with the introduction of *BRES* in 2009). This makes it difficult to obtain accurate employment and turnover estimates on the IDBR because the figures for each business may not relate to the same point in time.

99. For this reason, the Office for National Statistics recommends that employment and turnover **changes** are measured using other headline indicators where available. The primary purpose of the employment and turnover data provided in *BPE* is to understand

the overall contribution of SMEs including unregistered businesses, and to compare shares across different groups within the population, e.g. industrial sectors. BEIS has produced a *BPE* employment time series in since 2015 as no other estimates of employment by size of business are currently available from ONS.

100. When making comparisons over time, consideration should be made of the discontinuities explained in Annex A.

101. In the *BPE* publication, the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) 2007 is used to classify businesses by the type of economic activity in which they are engaged. This industrial classification system is used extensively by ONS in its' publications, and is fully consistent with the EU (NACE) and UN (ISIC) systems.

Coherence (the degree to which data which are derived from different sources or methods, but which refer to the same phenomenon, are similar)

102. For a comprehensive summary of the various National Statistics sources relating to the UK business population, their key characteristics and when to use each one, please refer to the [User Guide](#)

103. The *BPE* calculations are carried out at 2 digit SIC 2007 and also at 1 digit SIC 2007 at regional level. However, at present the HMRC self-assessment data is based on their own classification – the Standard Trade Classification. There is no simple translation from one to the other, necessitating use of an approximate correspondence between the two in order to incorporate HMRC data in the *BPE*. In most cases this is a straightforward 1-1 mapping, but it can be 1-many or vice-versa. HMRC may adopt SIC 2007 in the future, which would remove this issue.

104. The headline estimate of self-employment published in the [ONS Labour Market Statistics release](#) (see Table 'EMP01') will differ from the estimate of self-employment used in the production of these estimates. This is because the ONS published measure describes the number of people who said they were self-employed in their main job (and is seasonally adjusted), whereas the *BPE* estimate counts self-employment in respondents' first and second jobs, and uses additional variables to ensure those included are 'true' self-employed jobs (by checking who pays the respondent's National Insurance, income tax and wage).

105. Further information on this can be found in the Economic and Labour Market Review article - [Business Population Estimates: introducing improved statistics on the UK enterprise population](#). A minor refinement to the process described here was introduced in 2013, using new LFS variables to directly identify 'true' second job self-employment, rather than imputing based on the relationship between self-reported and 'true' main job self-employment. This had only a marginal impact on the final figures.

106. The estimate of employment in the *BPE* publication will differ from other published sources from ONS. See the sections below on Workforce jobs and BRES for more information.

Workforce jobs

107. Workforce jobs is the ONS preferred source for the number of jobs and the industrial composition of these jobs.

108. The ONS publishes official estimates of Workforce Jobs (see Table 'JOBS01'), which totalled 35.3 million in December 2018. The total estimate of employment shown in most tables in Business Population Estimates 2019 (27.5 million) differs in that it is private sector only, and excludes employment in central and local government, charities and other non-profit organisations, HM Forces and participants on government training programmes who do not have a contract of employment. The latest workforce jobs data was published in September 2019.

109. The "Whole Economy" table (Table 2) shows total employment of 34.7 million at the start of 2019. This is still lower than the workforce jobs estimate above – which also includes individuals on government training programmes.

110. Workforce jobs are drawn from a number of different sources, including employer surveys, and are seasonally adjusted.

Business Register Employment Survey (BRES)

111. The [latest BRES data](#) published in Autumn 2018 shows UK private sector employment at 25.5 million in September 2017. *BRES* has the benefit of being able to provide sub-regional employee estimates but does not currently provide a size breakdown. It is the ONS preferred source for employee data at detailed regional and industrial level.

112. It should be noted that regional estimates in these two publications are fundamentally different since in BPE if a business has establishments in more than one region the total employment is allocated to the region where the business is registered, whilst in BRES allocation is based on the physical location of the jobs.

Annex A - Business Population Estimates methodology changes and discontinuities

1. This section provides useful information for those who wish to use the *BPE* series (2010-2019) to make comparisons over time.
2. Due to the significant methodological changes between *SME statistics 2009* and *BPE 2010*, direct comparisons should not be made between *SME statistics* and the *BPE* series. For information on discontinuities within the *SME statistics* series, please refer to other sections of this Methodology Note.
3. The *BPE* publication includes a headline UK level time series of estimates of the business population between 2000 and 2019 (published in Figure 2 of the Statistical Release and Table 25 of the [detailed tables](#)). These UK level estimates revise and supersede those annual estimates previously published in earlier editions of the release. The time series has been produced on a consistent basis using the latest *BPE* methodology (although please refer to the section below on 'Discontinuities in the *BPE* time series 2000-2019' for further information).

Methodology changes in the *Business Population Estimates* series

4. The *BPE 2019* publication has been produced using the same methodology as that used for the 2018 edition. While there have been changes in methodology over time (detailed below), the time series included in *BPE 2019* includes historical data consistent with the methodology used in 2011 onwards.
5. For the *BPE 2011* publication, there was a change in the methodology used to estimate the number of unregistered businesses. The main reason for this change was the availability of more detailed self-assessment data from HMRC. This allowed us to approximate to those individuals working within unregistered businesses by using information on turnover and employment costs as proxies for VAT and PAYE registrations. Because the data more closely represented the unregistered business population, and because of its comprehensive nature, the ratios of sole proprietors to partners and partners per partnership in unregistered businesses could be produced and used at a more detailed level. This meant that the calculation of the number of unregistered businesses became more accurate because it is based only on information on the unregistered businesses of interest. As a result, the ratio of sole proprietors to partners in the final estimate of these businesses is more in line with the source HMRC self-assessment data than was previously the case. The impact of this change was to increase the estimated number of unregistered partnerships and therefore reduce the estimated total number of unregistered businesses, so that at the start of 2011 the total estimated number of businesses was approximately 90,000 fewer than it would have been using the old methodology.
6. In the *BPE 2011* publication, businesses in SIC 2007 Division 78 (Employment activities) were included for the first time. It had previously been thought their inclusion could lead to double counting of employees, who could be counted both as employees of the agency, and as employees of the business they are currently working for. However, it was agreed with the Office for National Statistics that this was not the case and that robust estimates of both counts of businesses and employment in the 'Employment Agencies' sector can be provided from the IDBR. The impact of this

change was to increase the total number of businesses in *BPE 2011* by around 30,000. In the *BPE 2012* and *BPE 2013* publications, turnover for these businesses was also included, in line with ONS methodology for the *UK Business* publication.

Discontinuities in the *BPE* time series 2000-2019

7. In the *BPE* publication, a time series of counts of businesses by size band at the UK level is provided (see Figure 2 in the Statistical Release and Table 25 of detailed data tables), produced using a consistent methodology (using some modelled data where real information was not available). More detailed time series are provided for country/regional level counts of businesses and for different legal forms, from 2010 only because insufficient data is available to produce this for earlier years. When interpreting these time series please bear in mind the discontinuities listed below (listed in reverse chronological order).

8. HMRC introduced a new Real Time PAYE reporting system (RTI) in 2014. Although it is possible that the change may have had some marginal effects on employee numbers recorded through PAYE, HMRC found no evidence of behavioural changes in the timing of scheme registrations through the year and no clear impact on the IDBR has been identified.

9. In 2013, a minor refinement was made to the identification of 'true' second job self-employment. Rather than imputing based on the relationship between self-reported and 'true' main job self-employment, new LFS variables were used to directly identify this in line with the method used for main job self-employment. This had a minimal impact on the final figures.

10. In *BPE 2012* and *2013*, there was an increase in each year of just over 2,000 local and central government bodies that were registered for either VAT and/or PAYE. (see Table 2 'Whole Economy' in the detailed data tables that accompany the release). This increase was partly driven by changes in how parish council clerks are treated for tax purposes by HMRC. From April 2011, according to [guidance](#) issued by HMRC, Parish Clerks can never be considered self-employed for tax or National Insurance contribution purposes, must not be paid "gross" and also must be taxed under PAYE.

11. Between the start of 2011 and start of 2012 improvements made to HMRC computer systems resulted in around 50,000 extra businesses being added to the government business register at the start of 2012. Some of the 50,000 extra businesses existed before 2011 and therefore should have been included in previous estimates of the total business population. In 2014 BIS worked with ONS to identify the correct year of birth for these businesses and include them at the correct point in the time series.

12. Because of the implementation of a new computing system at HMRC, there were no quarterly updates of the PAYE data between June 2010 and March 2011 (when the IDBR extract for *BPE 2011* was taken). Therefore, in *BPE 2011* employment data for many smaller businesses related to a period of time at least 6 months before the reference point of the publication i.e. start of 2011.

13. After the publication of *BPE 2010*, ONS reclassified Further Education (FE) Corporations in England and Wales from Non-Profit Institutions Serving Households (NPISH) to Central Government, from their inception in April 1993. NPISH is often known as the 'third sector'; in National Accounts. NPISH is part of the private sector. Consequently, in *BPE 2011* over 400 FE colleges have been reallocated from the

private sector to the central government sector. For further information refer to the [link](#) provided here.

14. Between 2000 and 2002, Primary Care Trusts and National Health Service trusts were classified as public corporations / nationalised bodies, and therefore included with the figures for companies and the private sector.

15. In 2003, the ONS reclassified these trusts, resulting in 275 businesses, with employment of 990,000 and turnover of £41 billion, being moved out of the figures for companies and private sector, and into the figures for Central Government. So, in the *BPE* headline time series before 2003, private sector figures will appear larger and Government figures will appear smaller than in subsequent years.

Annex B - ONS Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR)

1. The IDBR is a business register administered by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It holds records of all businesses registered for Value Added Tax (VAT) and all businesses operating a Pay As You Earn (PAYE) scheme. The IDBR holds information on each enterprise's employment (and hence size), turnover and industry.
2. The IDBR is the main sampling frame for surveys of businesses carried out by the ONS and other government departments. It is also a key data source for analyses of business activity.
3. The main administrative source for the IDBR is HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) for VAT information (passed to the ONS under the Value Added Tax Act 1994) and PAYE information (transferred under the Finance Act 1969). Use the links provided here for the information on both on the HMRC [VAT](#) and [PAYE](#) registration thresholds. Other information is added to the register, from various sources, if required for ONS statistical purposes.
4. Some of the employment information currently on the IDBR is drawn from the most recently available *Business Register Employment Survey (BRES)* data, whilst some will be drawn from earlier *BRES* survey or from PAYE data. *BRES* is a survey of 80,000 businesses, with survey forms being sent out in September every year. Therefore, some of the employment data on the IDBR will relate to a point about four months earlier than the reference point for *BPE 2019* (the start of 2019), whilst some may be significantly more lagged.
5. Since the implementation of *BRES* in 2009, employment data is updated on the IDBR on a monthly basis rather than annually, as updates are made as completed surveys are returned. This means that, at any point in time, employment data on the IDBR will be as accurate and up to date as possible, based on the survey returns that have been received at that time. Because this is based on a sample of businesses, estimates from previous surveys and from other ONS surveys have also been used. For the smallest units, either PAYE jobs or employment imputed from VAT turnover is used. Where employment data for a single business is captured from both PAYE and *BRES*, then the *BRES* data is given precedence and is used to update the IDBR.
6. Turnover provided to the ONS for the majority of businesses at the start of 2019 is based on VAT returns for a 12 month period ending in December 2017, or January / February 2018, according to the reporting pattern of the business. For other records, in particular VAT group registrations, turnover may relate to an earlier period or survey data. For businesses who have registered more recently, turnover represents the estimate made by businesses at the time of registration. For the PAYE-only records for which there are no data, turnover is imputed from employment.
7. The IDBR is continuously updated as new data from surveys are received and as businesses register or de-register for VAT and/or PAYE. In addition, a variety of checks on individual records improve the quality of the register on an ongoing basis. Thus, there will be differences in results taken at different times from the register as new data are added and other data revised.

8. Regular VAT and PAYE updates are received from HMRC and these updates are checked with the new VAT and PAYE registrations. Many of the PAYE-based businesses will have no VAT registration; some units may be waiting to be matched to existing VAT records on the IDBR.

9. Businesses that are neither registered for VAT, nor operate a PAYE scheme are excluded from the IDBR. The threshold for compulsory VAT registration for 2018/19 was an annual turnover of £85,000 in non-exempt goods. Below that some businesses will register voluntarily for VAT. Employers who have no employees earning above the lower earnings limit for PAYE and no other reasons for deducting PAYE (such as an employee having two jobs) do not need a PAYE scheme, although some may still have one.

10. On the other hand, businesses with a turnover above the threshold are not required to register if they trade exclusively in exempt goods. If a business has no employees or only low paid (perhaps part-time) employees, then it is unlikely to operate a PAYE scheme.

11. The IDBR provides all the data on registered businesses in this publication. It is also the key source for the ONS publications *UK Business: Activity, Size and Location* and *Business Demography*.

12. The ONS provides further information on the quality of the [IDBR](#).

Annex C - ONS Labour Force Survey

1. The *Labour Force Survey (LFS)* is a quarterly sample survey of around 34,000 households (80,000 people) living at private addresses in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to provide information on the UK labour market that can then be used to develop, manage, evaluate and report on labour market policies. The questionnaire design, sample selection, and interviewing are carried out by the Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on behalf of the Statistical Outputs Group of the ONS.
2. ONS publishes full UK *LFS* results. However, the fieldwork is carried out separately; by ONS for GB, and by the Central Survey Unit of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) on behalf of the Department of Finance and Personnel.
3. The survey seeks information on respondents' personal circumstances and their labour market status during a specific reference period, normally a period of one week or four weeks (depending on the topic) immediately prior to the interview.
4. The *LFS* is carried out under a European Union Directive and uses internationally agreed concepts and definitions. It is the source of the internationally comparable labour market data, such as the International Labour Organisation measure of unemployment, known as "ILO unemployed".
5. The *LFS* collects data on economic activity, which is self-reported.
6. Additional questions on who pays the respondent's income tax and national insurance, and their wage or salary are also included in the survey.
7. This source is used by BEIS to estimate the number of self-employed jobs in the economy. By excluding those already included on the IDBR (see Annex A) and converting these jobs into businesses, BEIS is then able to estimate how many unregistered businesses there are.
8. In 2014 ONS undertook a major re-weighting exercise for *LFS* data to bring it the outputs in line with population estimates generated using results from the 2011 Census – further details are available on the ONS website.
9. In 2016 and 2017 ONS re-weighted the *LFS* data again, so that *LFS* estimates would reflect the most recent population estimates available at the time of the re-weighting. The effect of this change means that the un-registered business population numbers published between 2013 and 2016 were revised in *BPE 2016 and BPE 2017*.
10. ONS provides further information on the quality of the [LFS](#).

Annex D - HMRC Self-Assessment Tax Returns data

1. Self-assessment data is collected by HM Revenue & Customs through tax returns completed by self-employed workers either as individuals or in partnership. Full detail of the different [HMRC Self-Assessment forms](#) is provided here.
2. Data coming from the self-assessment record offers several advantages over the previously used *Survey of Personal Incomes*. For example, it is a larger record, being a near-census of the self-employed. Self-assessment data also allows us to approximate to those individuals working within unregistered businesses by using information on turnover and employment costs as proxies for VAT and PAYE registrations.
3. Despite the above advantages, there are features of the self-assessment data that make it less than ideal. For example, there are relatively high levels of missing data that cannot be coded to regions or to industrial sectors. Also, a conversion is needed to move from the HMRC classification of industry areas to SIC 2007. However, BEIS considers on balance that this is still a marked improvement over *SPI* data.
4. BEIS analyses HMRC Self-assessment data, for every 2-digit SIC classification (and for every region at 1-digit level), to produce an estimate of the ratio of sole proprietors to partners, enabling BEIS to convert the number of unregistered self-employed individuals into numbers of actual businesses.
5. Fundamentally, we would expect HMRC Self-Assessment data to be high quality; there is a legal obligation for people to respond accurately and it is in HMRC's interests to ensure accurate information. But, as BEIS is using the data for a purpose other than the main one for which the data are collected, there are other considerations. The main areas where there are quality considerations are as follows:

i) Classification into SIC

The BPE calculations are carried out at 2 digit SIC 2007 and also at 1 digit SIC 2007 at regional level. However, at present HMRC use their own classification – the Standard Trade Classification (although HMRC plan to move to SIC 2007 over the next year or two). Consequently, BEIS converts from STC to SIC 2007 and this is a possible source of error. There are also some data where STC is missing and these cannot be used.

It is important to note that the absolute number of cases overall within the SA data does not matter other than the normal rule of thumb that more data is better. HMRC data is used solely to apportion numbers that we already have, so the 15 % or so overall missing STC codes should not matter greatly, other than when it varies between sole traders and partners as described above.

ii) Regional data

As with STC data, some of the regional data are missing. However, this is a much smaller problem with less than 2% missing and there is no obvious bias (e.g. concentration in certain STC categories etc.).

iii) Partnership data

There are potentially different ways of looking at partnership data. One way is to look at the HMRC partnership return and take the number of partners reported on that. The alternative is to look at partner returns from individuals and the partnerships that they

are linked to. The latter approach yields approximately 10% fewer partners. BEIS follows this approach as HMRC advice is that this gives a better coverage of active partners, although it may exclude some valid partnership data.

iv) Proxying registered businesses

BEIS uses HMRC data to split those self-employed jobs in unregistered businesses into sole proprietors and partnerships. BEIS aims to approximate to the population of those in unregistered businesses as far as possible within the SA data. To do this, HMRC apply two filters; one on turnover and one on employment costs. These can give only an approximation to unregistered businesses, and there will be cases where the filter results in the wrong outcome. As with some of the other above cases, any possible quality effect is indirect since HMRC data is only used to apportion out numbers coming from elsewhere.

Overall summary

There are no major weaknesses in the HMRC data. The basic quality of the data is high and imperfections highlighted above are more than compensated for by the comprehensive nature of the data. BEIS continues working with HMRC colleagues to better understand the data and we can expect that future improvements will be relatively minor.

Annex E - Links to other sources of Business and Employment data

There are three National Statistics publications that provide information on the total UK business population. In addition to these publications, similar related National Statistics are released by the three devolved administrations for their countries, the Insolvency Service publishes National Statistics for corporate and individual insolvency and Companies House publishes statistics based on activity on their register. The [Guide To The Business Population And Demographics Statistics Publications](#) sets out key features of the different products to help users make an informed choice about which outputs they should use.

Small and Medium Enterprise Statistics for the UK and Regions (1994-2009) (BEIS)

For more information on the [SME statistics](#) please contact the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Analysis Directorate, Data Analytics and Business Statistics Team.

- Contact BEIS: 020 7215 8284
- Email: business.statistics@beis.gov.uk

UK Business: Activity, Size and Location (ONS)

This [annual publication](#) is compiled from the IDBR. The publication contains detailed information on VAT registered and/or PAYE registered businesses in the UK including size, classification (to 4-digit SIC), business age and location.

- Contact ONS: 01633 456902
- Email: idbrdas@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Business Demography (ONS)

This [annual publication](#) provides the best official guide to business births, deaths and survival rates. The figures cover businesses registered for either VAT and/or PAYE.

- Contact ONS: 01633 456902
- Email: idbrdas@ons.gsi.gov.uk

VAT registrations and de-registrations series (BEIS)

This former series based on [VAT registrations and de-registrations](#) alone was produced by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI). The series provided data on VAT registrations and de-registrations between 1994 and 2007. Information on [survival rates for VAT registered businesses](#) was also produced. This series was superseded by the ONS *Business Demography* publication (see above) in 2007.

- Contact BEIS: 0207 215 8284
- Email: business.statistics@beis.gov.uk

Workforce Jobs (ONS)

This [series](#) provides the best guide to employment at a national and regional level.

- Contact ONS: Debra Leaker 01633 455400

- E-mail: labour.market@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Business Register Employment Survey (ONS)

This [annual publication](#) provides the best guide to employment at a sub-regional level, and complements figures available from Workforce Jobs at a national and regional level.

- Contact ONS: 01633 456728
- E-mail: Mark.Williams@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Company Register Statistics (Companies House)

[Companies House](#) provides a monthly record of all companies registered in the UK.

- Contact Companies House: 0303 1234500
- Email: enquiries@companies-house.gov.uk

Labour Force Survey (ONS)

A wide range of labour market data including self-employment data is available from the Labour Force Survey, which is run by the Office for National Statistics. This is published in various formats, including the [Labour Market Statistics](#) release.

- Contact ONS: Debra Leaker 01633 455400
- E-mail: labour.market@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) (ONS)

The [IDBR](#) is managed by the Office for National Statistics. More detail on the IDBR can be found at the website below.

- E-mail: idbr.helpdesk@ons.gov.uk

Census 2011 (ONS)

The [Census 2011](#) asked questions about self-employment. Data are available by gender, ethnic group, location, and main industry group.

- Contact ONS Census Customer Services: 01329 444972
- Email: census.customerservices@ons.gsi.gov.uk



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