



Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

**Use and users of BIS Statistics on  
Trade Union Membership**

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# Use and users of Trade Union Membership Statistics

## Introduction

The BIS Statistics on Trade Union Membership publication is published on an annual basis (towards the end of April). It provides estimates on:

- a) Number and percentages of trade union members
- b) the percentage of workers who work at places where trade unions have a presence
- c) the percentage of workers whose pay is affected by collective agreement
- d) median income of trade union members

The statistics are used to inform government decision making about policies and programmes, informing trade union, business representative groups' and think tank activities (for instance union focusing their priorities on organising and recruitment, and think tanks formulation of policy on employment relations) and facilitating academic research, among other things.

## About the data

The trade union membership figures presented are taken from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), except for one data series, taken from the Certification Office, which provides long run trade union membership figures. The LFS based statistics are largely for UK employees, and mainly relate to trade union membership density. The tables contained in the release provide estimates (generally covering recent years) of trade union density by high level industry and occupation, devolved country and region, age, sex and other personal and job characteristics. The tables are also provided online in excel form alongside the release, with some additional data providing some of the more detailed figures by devolved country and region for the latest year. The data are provided to the International Labour Organisation and the OECD to form part of their databases on trade union statistics.

## Known users of the Trade Union Membership Statistics

The statistics form a key part of BIS's evidence base on trade unions, along with data on trade union activities. We work closely with policy colleagues to explain the statistics and guide their use and interpretation. Internal (and external) users have been involved in shaping the publication of the statistics.

The trade union membership statistics inform government decision making about policies and programmes. Particular BIS uses of the trade union membership statistics include:

- Briefing ministers on trade union issues
- Development of employment policies that might impact on trade unions
- Informing and educating policy colleagues on aspects of trade union membership
- Informing press office and departmental briefing on trade union membership
- Monitoring possible impacts of trade union membership on labour markets

Specific examples of where the membership statistics have helped inform government decision making in BIS (and its previous incarnations) are:

- The 2010 regulations prohibiting the blacklisting of trade union membership – the trade union membership statistics were used in the assessment of the impact of the policy, including impacts on small businesses and equality impacts.
- The Union Modernisation Fund, established in 2005 (concluding in 2010) – the trade union membership statistics were used to identify where impacts were most likely to be felt.
- The Employment Relations Act 2004, introducing changes to the Employment Relations Act 2004, for instance related to the procedures for recognition of unions by employers – the trade union membership statistics were used in the impact assessment of the changes.

Outside BIS, the Statistics on Trade Union Membership release are used by a variety of organisations and individuals, ranging from government, trade unions, businesses and their representative groups, including the TUC and CBI, the media, labour market researchers and academia (university professors and students) and international organisations. The statistics are used to inform government decision making, the activities of trade unions, business representative groups and think tanks, and for facilitating academic research.

Specific examples of where the trade union membership statistics have been used to inform and support the above users and activities are described below:

- Birmingham City Council used the data to provide a wider context on trade union membership for their review of the working relationship between the city council and its recognised trade unions.
- The statistics were used to inform a discussion of the TUC Executive Committee in 2011, which led to an agreement to focus on organising and recruitment as part of the broad All Together Campaign.
- The statistics were used to inform an 2012 analysis, *Collectively agreed wages in the UK 1995-2010*, by the Labour Research Department, as part of the Collectively Agreed Wages In Europe (CAWIE) project funded by the EU. It flags up that UK data on collectively agreed wages are available, and suggests that the range should be extended with publication of existing data, eg in ASHE.

- Policy Exchange used the statistics to inform a 2010 research note *Reforming Industrial Relations*, which argued for reform of ballots for industrial action and rules around union recognition.
- Catherine Barnard (Trinity College, Cambridge) used the statistics to inform a 2005 report, *Worker Representation in the UK*.
- The trade union membership statistics were used in a number of the papers produced as part of the *Future of Unions in Modern Britain* research programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust.
- The Work Foundation used the statistics to inform its paper *British Unions: Resurgence or Perdition?*, which argued that unions would need to balance provision of services to existing members while developing organising to retain and build membership. The unions could use their promoting of workplace safety and family friendly and equal opportunity policies as a way to recruit.
- The statistics were used to compare trade union membership trends in the UK with those in other member states in the European Foundation's *Industrial Relations and working conditions development in Europe 2011* report.

Users have also informed us that the statistics are used for the following purposes:

- Profiling trade union membership, and identifying where specific challenges exist in attracting trade union membership
- To help provide a basis for student research
- Material for teaching on employment relations issues
- Information for union bargaining

## Valid uses of the Trade Union Membership Statistics

The Statistics on Trade Union Membership can be used for:

- Obtaining an estimate of the number of and density (proportion of employees/workforce comprising) of trade union members:
  - in the UK, devolved nations and English regions
  - by gender,
  - by public/private sector
  - by broad industry group
  - by broad occupation group
  - by other personal and job related characteristics (age group, ethnicity, length of service, size of workplace full-time/part-time, disability, nationality, country of birth, highest qualification)
- Trends over time for the above information (potentially back to 1995, depending on which variable is being considered, and the consistency of the LFS questionnaire over time).
- Estimates for the above breakdowns for the density of workers with a trade union presence in their workplace
- Estimates for the above breakdowns for the density of workers whose pay and employment conditions are affected by a collective agreement

- Estimates by characteristic at the regional level. However, in some cases, the sample is too small to produce reliable statistics, in which case the figures are not published.
- Obtaining UK estimates of median hourly earnings by trade union members and non-members, and estimates of the trade union premium, by:
  - Age group
  - Gender
  - Industry
  - Public/private sector
  - occupation

The information released as part of the annual publication forms a sub-set of the information potentially available. BIS are happy to discuss requests for additional trade union membership information, and where we are able to help, will look to provide the information or facilitate the requester in obtaining the information making use of the relevant LFS datasets obtainable from the UK data archive.

## Areas of unmet need

Customers sometimes request the following:

- Sub-regional estimates. The LFS is a sample survey, and the sample sizes would be too small to allow statistically robust sub-regional data.
- Longer time series. LFS data on trade union membership only goes back to 1995 for the UK, and 1992 for Great Britain. We are not aware of other data sources that would enable some longer time series for some of the breakdowns, in addition to the Certification Office overall membership numbers series.
- Quarterly data on trade union membership. While the LFS datasets are produced on a quarterly basis, the questions relating to trade union membership only appear on the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter questionnaire. There would need to be widespread demand for such data to justify considering a request to have the questions placed on each quarterly questionnaire, given the existing pressure on the size of the questionnaire. BIS does not believe that such a move would provide enough added value to justify such an approach.
- Information on those who had been members of trade unions, but no longer were. In recent years ONS has made available 5-quarter longitudinal datasets, so some analysis in this area may be possible, and BIS will look to investigate in time for the next release.

## How to comment and get involved

Users of the Statistics on Trade Union Membership release will have different needs and requirements.

We regularly meet with users within BIS to discuss their needs for trade union related statistics.

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We are looking to engage with external users, and the mechanism for doing this is primarily through the GOV.UK website where:

- We invite users with any comments or queries to contact us.
- We have asked users to complete a user survey, asking for their views on the release, information on what they use the data for, and what statistics they would additionally like included.
- We have asked users interested in being kept informed on developments to join a contact list

Additionally, we will look to offer users expressing an interest the chance to attend a presentation of the results of the release, on an annual basis.

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