



Trade Union Membership, UK 1995-2023: Statistical Bulletin

29 May 2024

Official statistics in development

Headline Statistics

- As these statistics are primarily based on Labour Force Survey data, they have been re-classified as official statistics in development. More details are in the Introduction Section below.
- The proportion of UK employees who were trade union members increased to 22.4% in 2023 up from 22.2% in 2022, however, these years represent the lowest two union membership rates on record among UK employees for which we have comparable data (since 1995).
- The number of employees in the UK who were trade union members increased by 89,000 on the year to 6.4 million in 2023. This represents a partial recovery from the fall in employee membership of 220,000 between 2020 and 2022.
- The number of male employees who were union members increased by 172,000 to around 2.9 million and the number of female employees who were union members fell by 83,000 on the year to 3.5 million.

Public and Private Sectors

- The increase in trade union numbers among employees was also driven by the increase in private sector members, up 100,000 on the year to 2.5 million in 2023.
- There was a small fall in trade union membership numbers among public sector employees of 12,000 to 3.8 million in 2023, driven by a fall among female public sector employees of 113,000. The number of male public sector employees who were union members increased by 101,000 in the year to 2023.

Characteristics

- Around two-thirds (62%) of employee union members have a degree or equivalent or other higher education qualification compared to half (50%) of non-union employees.
- Close to half (45%) of employees who were trade union members had been with their current employer for 10 years or more, compared to under a quarter (23%) of non-union member employees.

Nations and regions

- The proportion of employees who were trade union members increased in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2023. The biggest increase was of 2.6 percentage points to 28.8% in Scotland. The proportion of employees who were trade union members in England remained the same at 20.9%.

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Introduction

The Department for Business and Trade is responsible for publishing the statistics on trade union membership. The statistics are published on an annual basis.

Data Quality

The statistics published in the Trade Union Membership Statistics bulletin are primarily drawn from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The accreditation for these statistics has been changed to official statistics in development. This is in line with the ONS, which has changed the accreditation of headline statistics from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to official statistics in development as reduced achieved sample sizes, particularly in the second half of 2023, have led to an increased volatility in LFS estimates. In line with the ONS, we advise caution in when interpreting short-term changes, especially when looking at detailed breakdowns. As set out [here](#), ONS has been carrying out an LFS Recovery Plan initiated in October 2023, and is also working towards the introduction of a Transformed LFS (see below).

Background

Official government statistics on trade union membership have been collected on a regular basis since 1892 from administrative records. Coverage of the data relates to unions scheduled or listed in Great Britain (and regulated by the Certification Officer) but will include union members from outside the UK as well as union members not in employment.

An annual question on trade union membership was introduced into the Labour Force Survey in 1989 and it has been asked in the fourth quarter (Q4) every year since 1992. Questions on trade union presence were added in 1993, and the question on collective agreements between an employer and a trade union was introduced in 1996. The LFS trade union questions have United Kingdom coverage from 1995 onwards. The publication primarily produces UK statistics for the period 1995 to 2023, with some headline Great Britain statistics going back to 1989.

The bulletin primarily reports statistics on trade union membership among employees estimated from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). It also reports on:

- Trade union membership among those in employment, from the LFS (Tables 1.3a, 1.3b)
- Trade union presence in the workplace, from the LFS (Table 1.10, 2.4a and 4.3)
- Whether employee's pay and terms and conditions are directly affected by agreements between the employer and a trade union, from the LFS (Table A18 and A19)
- Administrative statistics on trade union membership collected by government (Table 1.1)
- Employee jobs where pay is set with reference to an agreement affecting more than one employee (collective agreement) – using data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) (Tables 1.11, 2.4b and 4.4).

Data from ASHE more accurately records the proportion of workers whose pay is set by collective agreements (see Technical Information section for more details). We continue to provide the LFS based data on collective agreement coverage in the annexes in the tables published alongside the bulletin.

The statistics within this bulletin provide a record of collective representation of employees in the UK workforce and how it has changed over time. The information is mainly reported as the proportion of employees that were trade union members (trade union membership density), but some data on membership numbers is included. These estimates are also presented by age, gender, ethnicity, income, major occupation, industry, full and part-time employment, sector, nation, and region.

The data reported in this bulletin are published in the accompanying spreadsheets.

Conventions

The statistics presented in this bulletin are based on fourth quarter estimates (October to December) from the Labour Force Survey unless otherwise specified. Members of the armed forces are excluded from analysis. All tables and charts relate to employees (population aged 16 or over in paid employment) or those in employment in the United Kingdom with the exception of those specified in Chapter 1 (Long Term Trends).

More detailed information on the concepts, methods, and quality of data used in this bulletin is available in the technical information and concepts and definitions sections.

Symbols

The following symbols are used in the accompanying tables:

[u] - sample size too small for a reliable estimate

[x] - data not available

Weighting

This publication uses the latest available Labour Force Survey weights for each year for its statistics. For the datasets for the years 2022 and 2023, the latest available weights are the 2023 weights. The reweighting of 2022 data to 2023 weights has resulted in marginal uplifts in headline levels estimates, and marginal reductions in headline union density estimates. Revised 2022 weights were used for the 2021, changing headline levels estimates marginally.

Transformed Labour Force Survey

The ONS will decide whether it moves to a Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) in the second half of 2024 in June, after the publication of this bulletin. If the move happens, the 2025 bulletin will be based on TLFS statistics. The TLFS involves a larger sample of households each quarter, and an online-first survey collection mode alongside face-to-face (if feasible) and telephone modes. The latest available update at publication can be found here: [TLFS update](#).

Long term and recent trends

In the [data tables](#) accompanying this publication, Table 1.1 shows the long-term administrative data of union membership, Table 1.2a shows UK employee union membership levels and Table 1.2b shows UK employee union density levels.

Trade union employee membership levels increase following two successive annual declines.

The latest data shows that in 2023 trade union membership levels among UK employees increased by 89,000 on the year to 6.4 million. This increase in employee membership levels only partially offsets the declines in employee membership seen across 2021 and 2022 of 220,000. As a result, employee union memberships levels in the UK remain 131,000 lower than their 2020 level.

The proportion of employees that were union members also increased from 22.2% in 2022 to 22.4% in 2023. This follows a 0.9 percentage point decrease on the year in 2022. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates that civilian employee numbers overall rose by around 28,000 in 2023, so this rise in employee union membership density is a consequence of union membership among employees rising faster than employee numbers overall.¹

Union membership has declined in the past four decades, though the decline has slowed

Trade union membership levels as reported by the unions listed in Great Britain reached their peak in 1979 (13.2 million) and declined sharply through the 1980s and early 1990s. From 1996 onwards the rate of decline slowed significantly, with occasional years of slight growth interspersed with the general annual reductions in membership. In 2021 unions reported membership at 6.7 million, up slightly on the year but down 15% from the 1996 level of 7.9 million.

The trend since 1995 for numbers of employees who are trade union members as estimated from the LFS is similar. However, while there are significant falls in employee membership levels in the late 2000s, 2016 and in the two years to 2022 there are also periods of broad stability: between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, and between 2011 and 2015. There was also a slight recovery in 2017 to 2020. Overall, between 1995 and 2023 union membership levels among UK employees fell by 737,000 (10.4%) from 7.1 million to 6.4 million.

Union membership as a proportion of employees has fallen from 32.4% in 1995 to 22.4% in 2023. This is due to overall UK civilian employee numbers rising in the period by around 6.6 million to 28.6 million, while union membership among employees fell.

The decline in employee membership from 1995 primarily occurred in the private sector

Estimates from the LFS show that trade union membership among public sector employees decreased by 12,000 in 2023 to 3.8 million. This was the third consecutive annual decrease, however the falls in 2021 and 2022 were of a larger magnitude (59,000 and 35,000). Among private sector employees there was an increase in union membership of 100,000 to 2.5 million in 2023. This means that despite making up a smaller percentage of total employees, union membership is more heavily concentrated among public sector workers.

¹ Other data sources suggest different changes in employee figures in 2023. HMRC RTI data shows that payrolled employees increased by 420,000 in 2023. Workforce Jobs (WFJ) shows an increase of around 580,000 employee jobs in January to September 2023.

Across all employees in 2023, there was a large increase in union membership among male employees compared to a smaller fall among female employees. This was primarily due to the fall of 113,000 in female employee membership in the public sector. Among private sector employees, female membership increased by 30,000. Membership among male employees in the private sector increased on the year by 71,000, with male employee membership in the public sector also increasing, by 101,000.

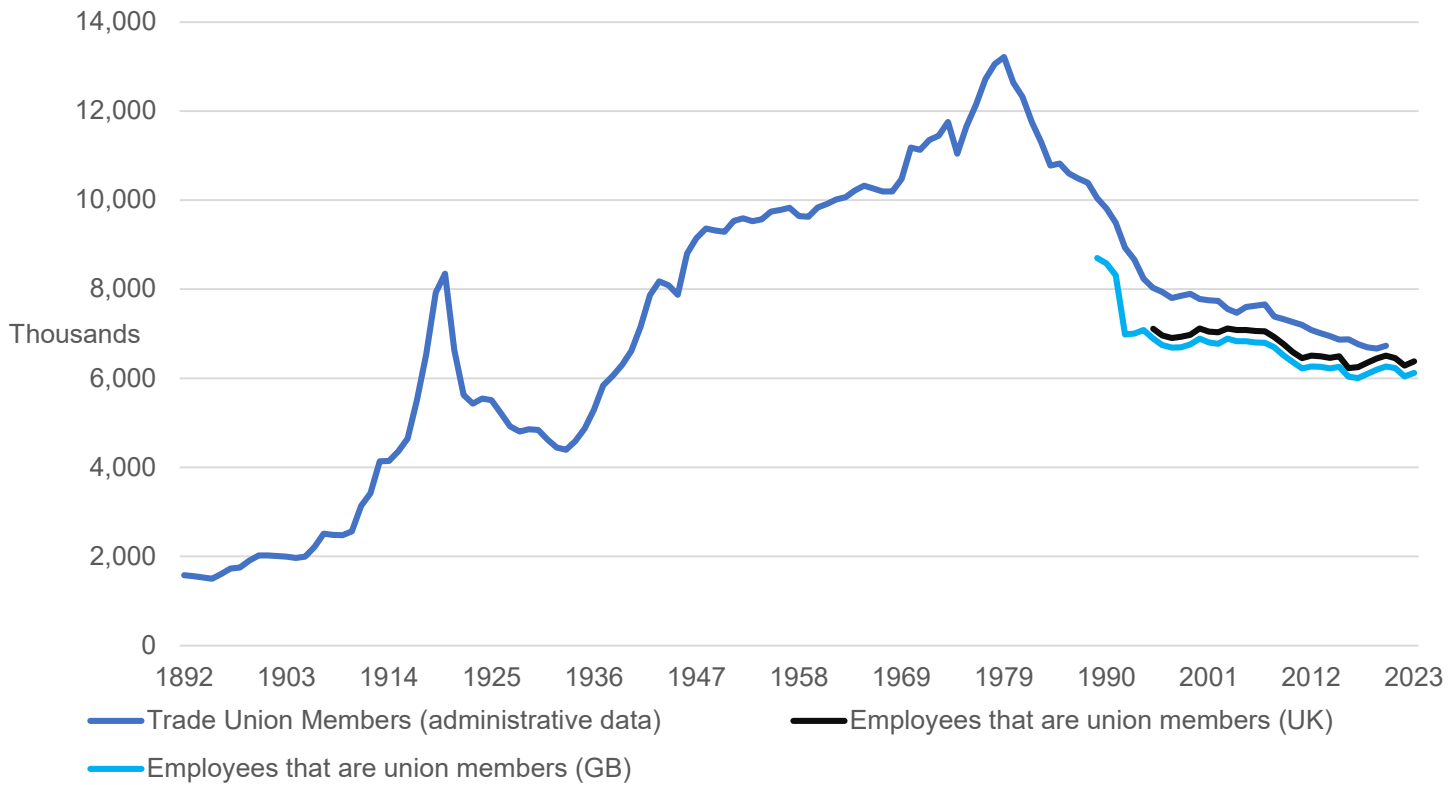
However, over the longer-term, membership among public sector employees has stayed relatively stable compared to those in the private sector, where there has been a steady decline. Total trade union membership in the private sector has declined by 856,000 since 1995, a fall of 25.3%. Whereas total membership in the public sector has increased by 119,000, an increase of 3.2%.

LFS estimates show that there was an increase in both the proportion of private sector and public sector employees that were union members in 2023. Union membership density among private sector employees increased from 12.0% in 2022 to 12.3% in 2023, and from 48.5% to 49.2% among public sector employees.

These increases follows three consecutive annual falls in the proportion of private sector employees that were union members, and four consecutive annual falls in membership proportions among public sector employees. Whilst the number of public sector employees that are trade union members has increased since 1995, the proportion of public sector employees that are trade union members has fallen by 12.1 percentage points.

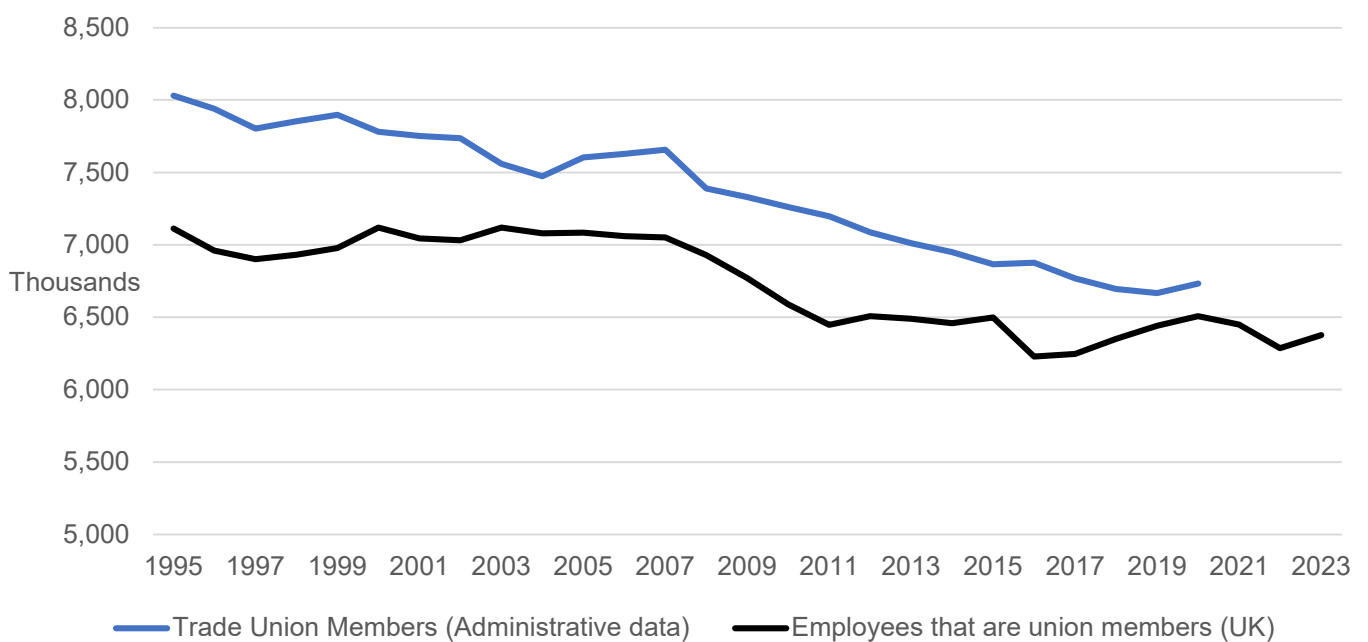
The LFS estimates for employees in the public and private sector differ from the Office for National Statistics Public Sector Employment statistical release. The LFS bases its definition of sector according to how individuals define whether the organisation they work for is a private company (private business or limited company) or some other organisation (and if so, what type of organisation, from central government to charity to public limited company to grant funded organisation etc). The ONS release is based on a survey of public sector employers in accordance with the UK National Accounts sector definitions. Overall, our estimates using the LFS sector variable have public sector employee numbers at around 7.8 million in 2023. This compares to a 5.8 million figure (excluding the military) for December 2023 from the [ONS April 2024 Labour Market release](#). It is the main public sector industries (predominantly Public Administration and Defence and Education) that largely account for the difference between the LFS public sector estimate, and the figures reported in the ONS release.

Figure 1: Trade union membership levels among employees in the UK and Great Britain, 1892 to 2023



Source: Administrative data on union membership from Department for Employment (1892-1973); and the Certification Office (1974-2021). Data on employees that are trade union members in the UK and Great Britain is based on the Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

Figure 2: Trade union membership levels in the UK, 1995 to 2023



Source: Administrative data on union membership from the Certification Office (1974-2021). Data on UK employees that are trade union members is based on the Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

The proportion of female employee who are union members has fallen to a record low

The proportion of female employees who are members of trade unions decreased by 0.8 percentage points to 24.5% in 2023, the lowest rate since comparable records began in 1995. This was accompanied by a fall in the level of UK female employees who were union members, which declined by 83,000 to 3.51 million in 2023.

Meanwhile, the proportion of UK male employees who were in a trade union in 2023 increased by 1.1 percentage points to 20.2%, a significant increase from 19.1% in 2022 which was the lowest membership ratio across comparable statistics going back to 1995. Membership levels for male employees increased by 172,000 on the year to 2.87 million in 2023.

Looking over a longer period, UK female employee membership levels increased between 2000 and 2007, then dipped slightly in 2011, before recovering to around (or just below) 3.6 million until 2015. They then fell sharply to around 3.4 million in 2016 and 2017, before rising again up to around 3.7 million in 2019 and 2020 and then falling year on year to 2023. Membership levels among UK male employees fell steadily throughout the period from 1995 to 2011, with large falls in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Since 2011, male employee membership levels have had periods of stability interspersed with falls in 2016, 2019 and 2022, before the increase seen in 2023.

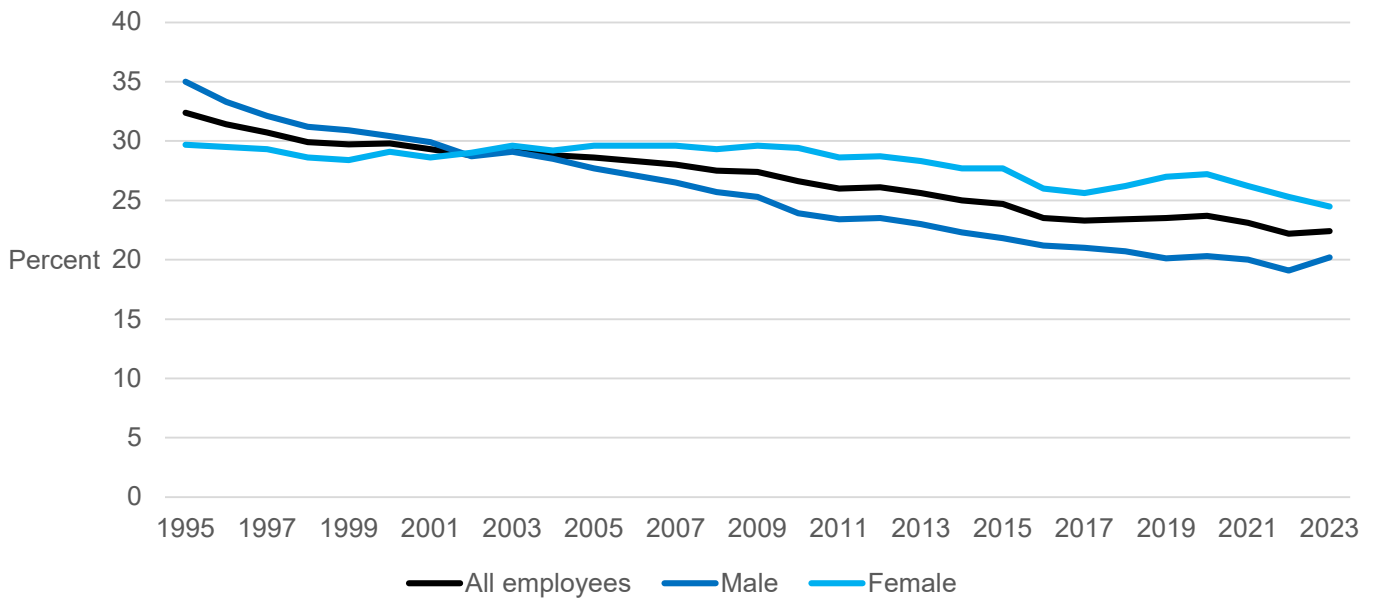
The downward trend in the proportion of employees who are trade union members since 1995 has been driven by the faster decline in the proportion of union members among male employees, with the decline in female employee membership rates much slower. In 1995, the proportion of male employees who belonged to a trade union was around 35%, compared with just below 30% for female employees. High falls in union membership densities among male employees narrowed the gap between males and females. In 2002, the proportion of employees who belonged to a trade union was around 29% for both sexes.

These trends have largely continued between 2002 and 2023, with union member densities among male employees falling from 28.7% in 2002 to 20.2% in 2023. Over the same period the proportion of female employees with union membership has remained comparatively stable, remaining around or above 29% until 2012, before declining to 24.5% in 2023, a decrease of 4.4 percentage points from 2002. The latest year's relatively high fall in union membership density among female employees contrasting with the growth in male employee membership density has closed this gap slightly. The level and proportion of trade union membership for male and female employees is provided in Tables 1.2a and 1.2b.

These changes may partly be explained by changes in the nature of labour market since 1995²:

- Female employees have increased as a proportion of overall employees.
- There has been a substantial decline in the number of employees working in Manufacturing, where male employees account for just under three-quarters of the total.
- There have been big increases in the number of employees in Education and Human Health and Social Care, where female employees comprise over 70% of the total. Close to 60% of the increase in the number of female employees was accounted for jobs in these relatively highly unionised industries.

² Based on DBT analysis of the Labour Force Survey (excluding employees in the armed forces).

Figure 3: Percentage of UK employees who are trade union members by gender, 1995 to 2023

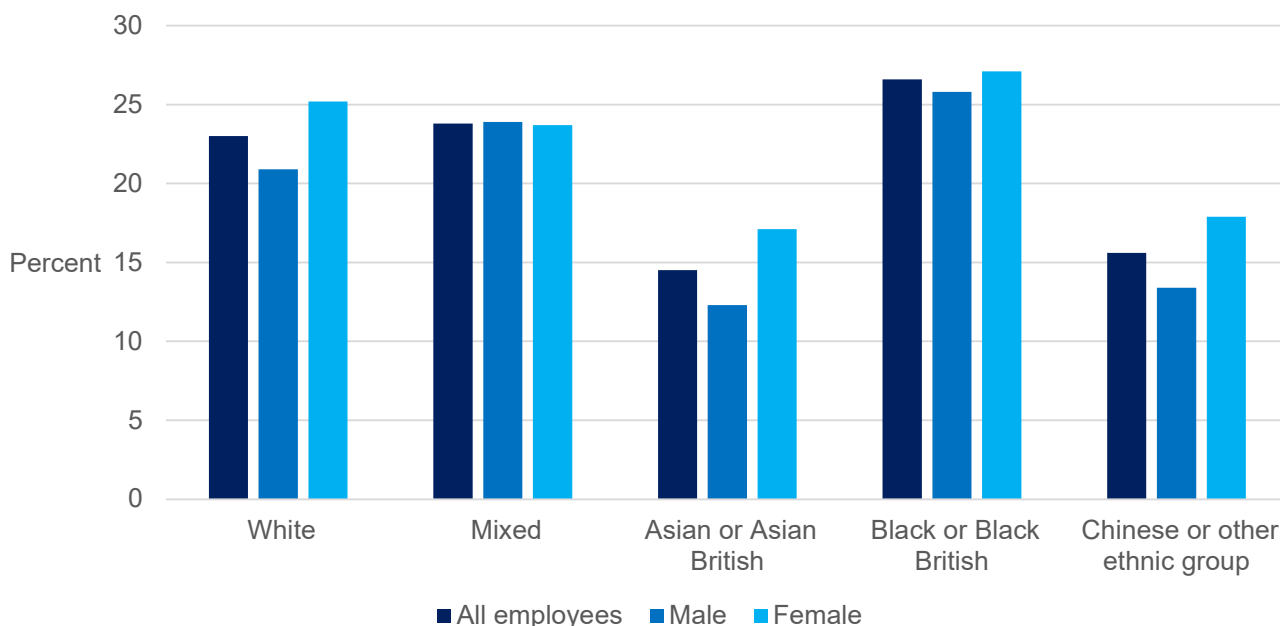
Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

UK born and Black ethnic group employees are more likely to be union members

UK born employees are significantly more likely to be a member of a trade union than non-UK born employees. 23.9% of UK born employees were trade union members in 2023, compared with 16.3% of non-UK born employees (Table 1.5).

The proportion of employees who were trade union members was highest in the Black or Black British ethnic group (26.6%), followed by the Mixed ethnic group (23.8%) and those with White ethnicity (23.0%). Trade union membership density was lowest among the 'Asian or Asian British ethnic group' employees, at just 14.5%, with membership density among Chinese or other ethnic group employees slightly higher at 15.6%. The national average was 22.4%.

A higher proportion of female employees than male employees were trade union members in each of the ethnic groups, other than in the Mixed ethnicity group where female membership was 0.2 percentage points lower. The largest disparity between the proportions of male and female employees who are members of trade unions was within the Asian or Asian British ethnic group, with a difference of 4.9 percentage points, closely followed by the Chinese or other ethnic group at 4.5 percentage points. The lowest disparity in trade union membership density between male and female employees was within the Mixed ethnicity group at 0.2 percentage points (Table 1.5).

Figure 4: Trade union density by gender and ethnicity, 2023

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Over 50% of Black or Black British employees worked in the Human Health and Social Work, Education or Public administration and defence industries in 2023. These industries accounted for over 80% of union members in this ethnic group. However, within these industries Black or Black British employees only had a much higher union membership density compared to the average across all employees in Public Administration and Defence, with union densities in both Education and Human Health and Social Work among Black or Black British employees close to those for all employees³.

Higher educated employees are more likely to be union members

The proportions of employees with a degree (or equivalent), or another form of higher education qualification ('Other higher education') who were trade union members in 2023 were 26.0% and 28.3%, respectively. These were significantly higher than the union membership proportions for employees with lower levels of qualification or no qualifications. The lowest proportion was among employees with 'Other qualifications' (those with qualifications that were not A-Level or GCSE grades A-C equivalent) at 13.7%. Those with A-level or equivalent, GCSE grades A-C equivalent or no qualifications, had union density rates of 19.6%, 17.6% and 16.5%, respectively (Table 1.5).

The size of the disparity in trade union membership density between those with higher education qualifications and those with lower level or no qualifications differs substantially between men and women. Among female employees, 30.6% with a degree or equivalent and 34.1% with 'other higher education' qualifications were union members, compared to between 18.8% (no qualifications) and 13.4% ('other qualifications') for female employees without higher education qualifications, a gap of 20.8 percentage points between the highest and lowest densities. However, among male employees the difference was only around 7.9 percentage points between the 22.0%

³ DBT analysis of the Labour Force Survey

of those with an 'other higher education' qualification and the 14.1% of those with other qualifications who are union members.

Employees in larger workplaces are more likely to have a union presence in their workplace

Employees who worked in larger workplaces (with 50 or more staff) were more likely to be members of a trade union and to have a trade union presence in the workplace (Table 1.10).

28.8% of employees working in larger workplaces were trade union members in 2023, with 67.1% having a trade union presence in their workplace. This compared to just 13.9% of employees who are employed in a smaller workplace (less than 50 employees) being union members, and 29.5% having a union presence in their workplace.

The proportions of employees who belong to a trade union were highest in the Education sector at 45.7%, followed by Public Administration and Defence (41.5%), Human Health and Social Work activities (36.9%) and Transportation and Storage (33.9%). Membership density in these industries was significantly higher than membership density across all employees (22.4%).

Similarly, employees in industries with high membership density also had a high proportion of union presence in their workplace (83.5% in Public Administration and Defence, 82.7% in Education, and 69.2% in Human Health and Social Work). Employees in the utilities industries also have high union presence in their workplaces (Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply at 56.7%, Water Supply, Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation at 65.6%). Employees in Transport and Storage had a union presence rate of 60.8%, while for employees in Mining and Quarrying it was 66.5%.

Northern Ireland was the nation with the highest membership density (33.8%), whereas employees in Wales had the highest trade union presence in their workplaces (64.6%). Among English regions, employees in the Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest rate of trade union membership (26.5%) and had the highest trade union presence in their workplaces at 54.9% (Table 1.10).

Employees working in large workplaces or working in the public sector are more likely to have had pay set by a collective agreement

The Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) collects information on collective agreements. ASHE collects information from a sample of 1% of employees in the UK. The achieved sample for 2023 was 156,000. Prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the achieved sample size of ASHE was approximately 180,000 each year, but the response rate has not recovered since. ASHE asks if the worker's pay was set with reference to an agreement covering more than one employee (for instance pay may be agreed collectively by a trade union or workers' committee). The question is slightly broader than the LFS question and covers jobs rather than individuals (as individuals can have more than one job, so the employer can only provide information on the job rather than comprehensive information on the worker). Given the differences between the ASHE and LFS questions and statistics in relation to the coverage of collective agreements, and the evidence that the ASHE statistics better reflect the coverage of collective agreements in setting pay (especially in the public sector) we have made the ASHE statistics our main measure on collective agreement coverage.

For 2023, the ASHE data shows that around 39.2% of jobs had pay set with reference to an agreement covering multiple employees (collective agreement). In the Public Sector around 88.6% of jobs had pay set by such agreements, compared to around 20.6% of jobs in the Private Sector and 44.5% in the Not-for-Profit Sector. Around 68.5% of Public Sector jobs and 22.0% of Not-for-Profit Sector jobs had their pay set by national or industry agreements. In contrast, Private Sector

jobs where pay was set with reference to collective agreements were most likely to reference organisational agreements (8.5%) or workplace agreements (6.8%).

Employees jobs in larger enterprises of '50 to 249' (18.2%) and '250 or more' (55.1%) employees were more likely to have pay set with reference to a collective agreement in 2023. This compared to 10.2% of employee jobs in micro (1-9 employees) employers and 10.5% in small (10 to 49 employees) employers (Table 1.11).

The industries with high union membership densities tended to have a higher proportion of employee's jobs with pay set with reference to a collective agreement, most notably in Public Administration and Defence (93.2%), and in Education (77.5%). The next highest proportion was in the Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply sector at 65.2% (Table 1.11).

Scotland was the nation with the highest proportion of employee jobs with pay set with reference to a collective agreement (52.6%). Among English regions, the highest proportion was in North East (49.2%) (Table 1.11).

In contrast, LFS estimates suggested that around 29.9% of employees had their pay and conditions of employment directly affected by an agreement between your employer and a trade union: 15.4% of employees in the Private Sector and 68.0% in the Public Sector. As discussed in the technical information section below, one factor in the difference between the LFS and ASHE figures is potentially a lack of awareness among some individuals about how their terms and conditions are set. This is because ASHE is a survey of employers, whereas LFS is a survey of individuals.

Employees in permanent jobs and full-time jobs are more likely to be trade union members

Overall, 22.9% of employees in permanent positions belonged to a trade union in 2023, compared to 12.7% of employees in temporary positions (Table 1.4).

A higher proportion of full-time employees (23.2%) compared to part-time employees (19.7%) had trade union membership in 2023. This trend was reflected across seven of nine major occupation groups, the exceptions being:

- Professional occupations (32.1% full-time, 47.7% part-time),
- Associate professional and technical occupations (21.8% full-time, 22.5% part-time),

79.0% of employees that are trade union members work full-time, higher than average across all employees at 76.1% (Table 3.1).

Higher income earners are more likely to be trade union members

Employees that earn less than £250 per week and employees earning between £250 to £499 per week were less likely to be members of a trade union compared to those with higher incomes (Table 1.5). The proportions of employees who were trade union members by weekly earnings in 2023 were:

- 10.9% of those earning less than £250
- 18.6% of those earning between £250 and £499
- 29.8% of those earning between £500 and £999
- 21.6% of those earning £1,000 and above

Employees in professional occupations are more likely to be trade union members

Those working in Professional occupations accounted for over four-in-ten (43.8%) of employees who were trade union members in 2023, but only 27.6% of UK employees overall, indicating that this occupational group is relatively highly unionised.

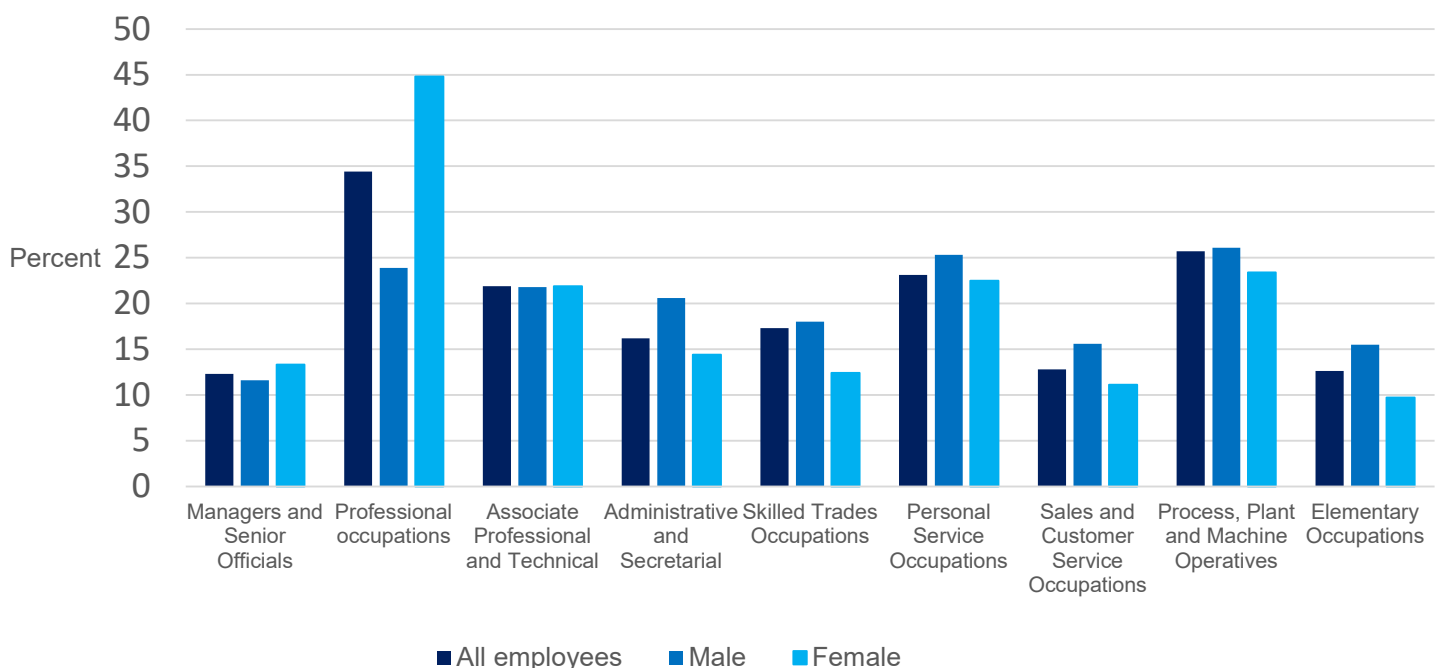
This was reflected in the high proportion of employees in Professional occupations that were trade union members in 2023 (34.4%). This was 0.7 percentage points higher than in 2022 (33.8%), but still 1.6 percentage points lower than in 2021 (36.0%).

The larger fall in the percentage of professional employee union members between 2020 and 2021 (38.7% to 36.0%) was driven by the change in SOC classification from SOC 2010 to SOC 2020. Comparisons of employees in the 2021 dataset using 2010 SOC codes and 2020 SOC codes show that the largest movements were into Professional Occupations, with over 500,000 employees newly in this group, predominantly from Associate Professional and Technical occupations. This was primarily due to degree level qualifications becoming increasingly important in providing the required knowledge to perform some jobs competently. As Associate Professional and Technical occupations have a comparatively low union density rate, this is likely to have impacted on membership density among professional employees (Table 1.7b and 1.7c).

The other occupations which accounted for a higher proportion of employees who were trade union members than employees overall were Caring, Leisure and Other Service occupations (8.4% compared to 8.3%) and Process, Plant and Machine Operatives (5.7% compared to 5.0%) (Table 3.1).

Female employees had higher union membership proportions in three of the nine occupation groups in 2023: Managers, Directors and Senior Officials, Professional Occupations and Associate Professional and Technical Occupations. (Table 1.7c).

Figure 5: Trade union density by gender and occupation, 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Employees in public sector and utility industries more likely to be in a trade union

The likelihood of belonging to a trade union varies substantially by sector. Employees in industries with higher proportions of public sector workers are more likely to belong to trade unions, including the Public Administration and Defence and Education industries. However, the rate of union membership in many industries has been in sharp decline since 1995.

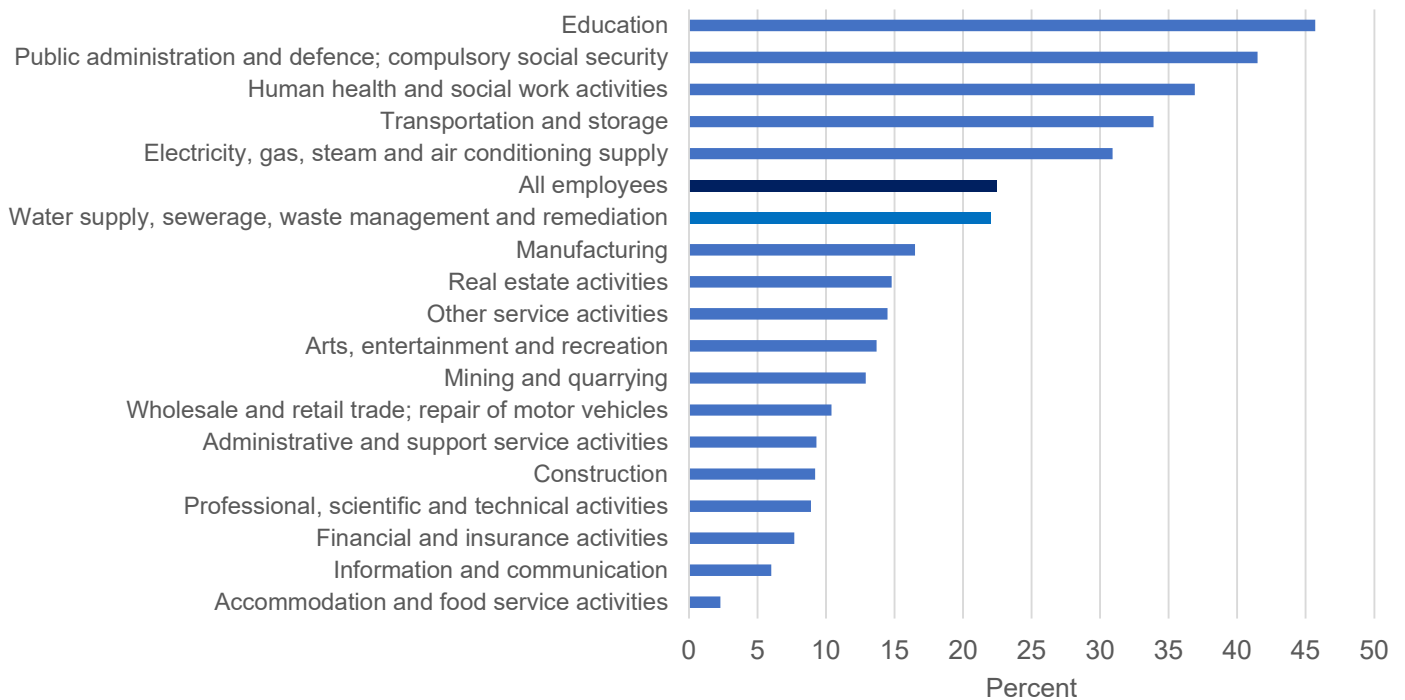
Within Public Administration and Defence, the proportion of employees belonging to a trade union has fallen by 17.6 percentage points since 1995 but it did have the largest annual increase among industries, of 3.4 percentage points in the year to 2023.

Industries such as Manufacturing, Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply, Real Estate, Professional, Technical and Scientific activities, Administration and Support Service activities, and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Industries saw small rises in union membership density between 2022 and 2023.

‘Other service activities’ is the only industry to have experienced growth in union membership density between 1995 and 2023, increasing by 1.7 percentage points, despite a fall of 0.9 percentage points in 2023.

In line with historical data, Education had the highest proportion of employees who were trade union members in 2023 at 45.7%, with Public Administration and Defence following at 41.5% and Human Health and Social Work Activities at 36.9%. Outside of the public sector dominated industries, the Transportation and Storage Sector had the highest proportion of employees who were trade union members at 33.9 (Table 1.8).

Figure 6: Trade union density by industry, 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Public and Private Sectors

In the [data tables](#) accompanying this publication, tables 2.1a and b show employee numbers split by union membership and sector, table 2.2 shows union membership densities by sector, tables 2.4a and 2.4b cover union presence and collective agreements.

This section is based on analysis of the Labour Force Survey. Therefore, it differs from the statistics published by the ONS in its Public Sector Employment Release, as discussed on page 7.

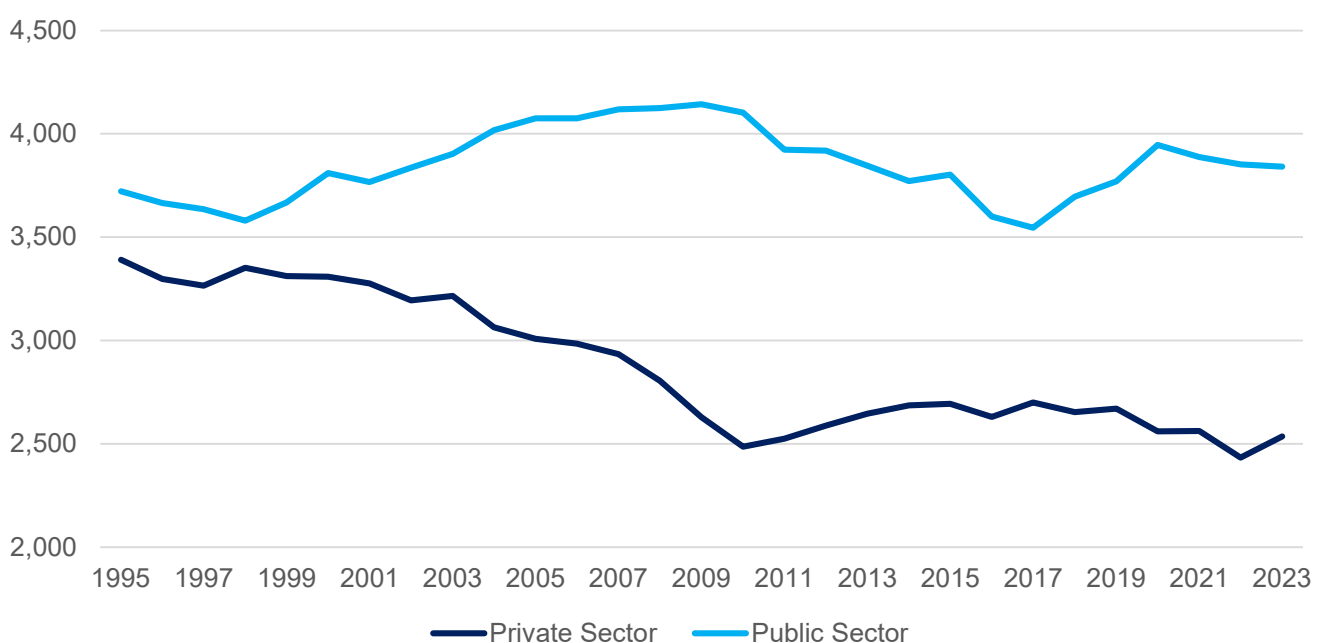
Increase in trade union membership levels was driven by private sector employees

In 2023, the number of public sector employees belonging to a trade union decreased by 12,000 on the year to 3.84 million, falling for the third year in succession. Private sector trade union membership levels increased by 100,000, to 2.53 million in 2023, up from 2.43 million in 2022, which represented the lowest level since comparable records began in 1995.

Prior to 2020, union membership levels in the private sector had increased from the previous low of 2.49 million in 2010 to around 2.7 million, partly driven by transfers from the public sector into the private sector. In the public sector, employee membership levels had fallen from 2010 to 2017 by close to 560,000 to 3.55 million before recovering to 3.95 million in 2020.

This contrasted with the previous decade, when there was a steady rise in the public sector membership levels in the 2000s up to 2005, followed by a period of stability until 2010. Public sector membership levels rose by 381,000 between 1995 and 2010. Over the same period, private sector union membership levels declined by 905,000 (Table 2.1a).

Figure 7: Trade union membership levels among employees by sector, 1995 to 2023



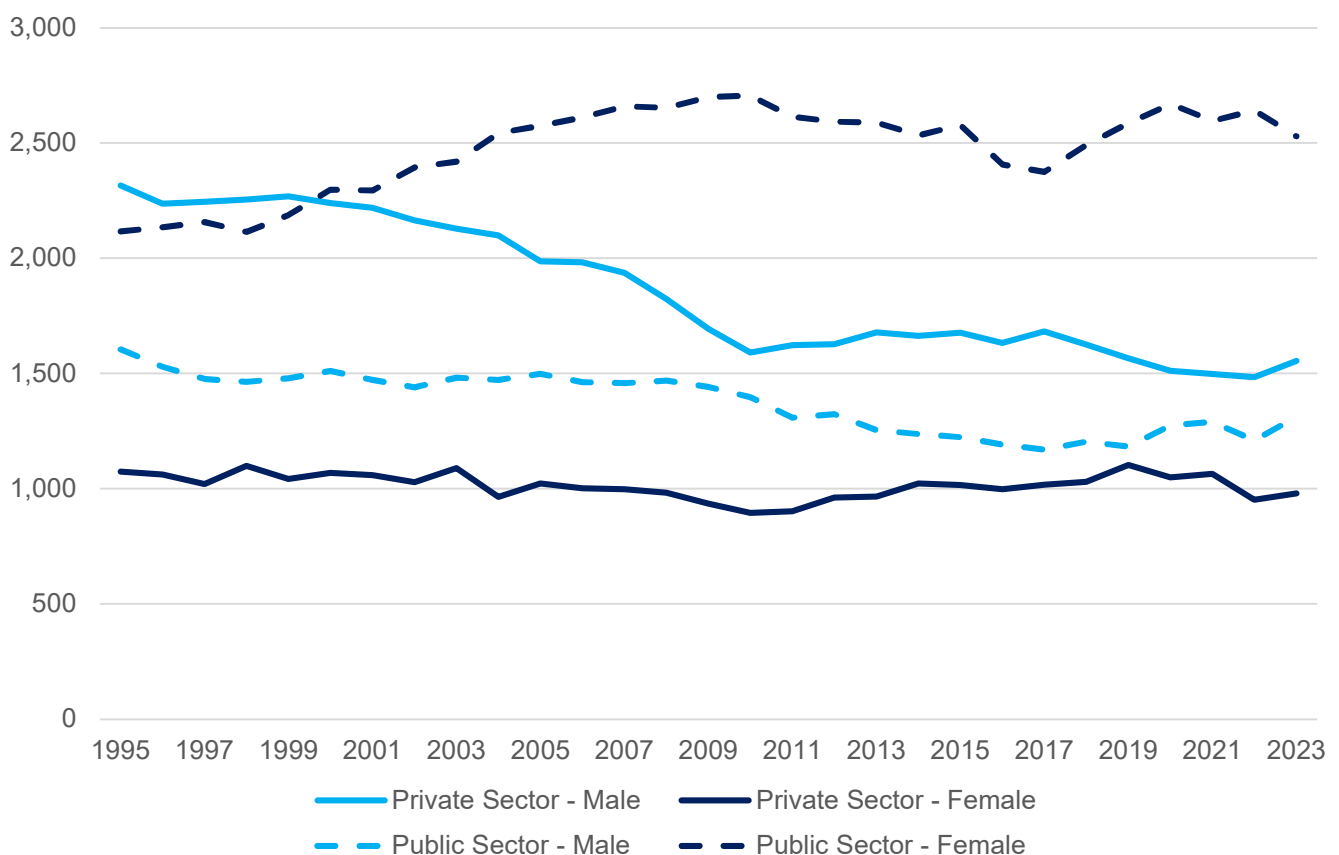
Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

Relatively strong trade union membership in the public sector has been upheld by membership among females. From 1995, membership among female public sector employees steadily increased up until 2010, then saw a slight downward trend until 2017, before rising again in the three years to 2020.

Conversely, membership levels among male public sector workers saw a generally downward trend over the period 1995 to 2016, followed by three years of broad stability. These membership levels then rose in the 2 years to 2021 before a fall in 2022. The large increase in 2023 (101,000) takes membership levels amongst male public sector workers to its highest since 2012.

Whilst total membership levels among female private sector employees have remained broadly steady since 1995, membership among male private sector employees has seen a steep decline, primarily in the 2000s, with a levelling off from 2010, before falling again in the years 2018 to 2022. Figure 8 shows that since 2020, the bulk of the decline in membership is driven by a fall in membership among female employees, primarily the fall in female private sector employee membership in 2022, and female public sector employee membership in 2023. (Tables 2.1a and 2.1b).

Figure 8: Trade union membership levels among employees by sector and gender, 1995 to 2023



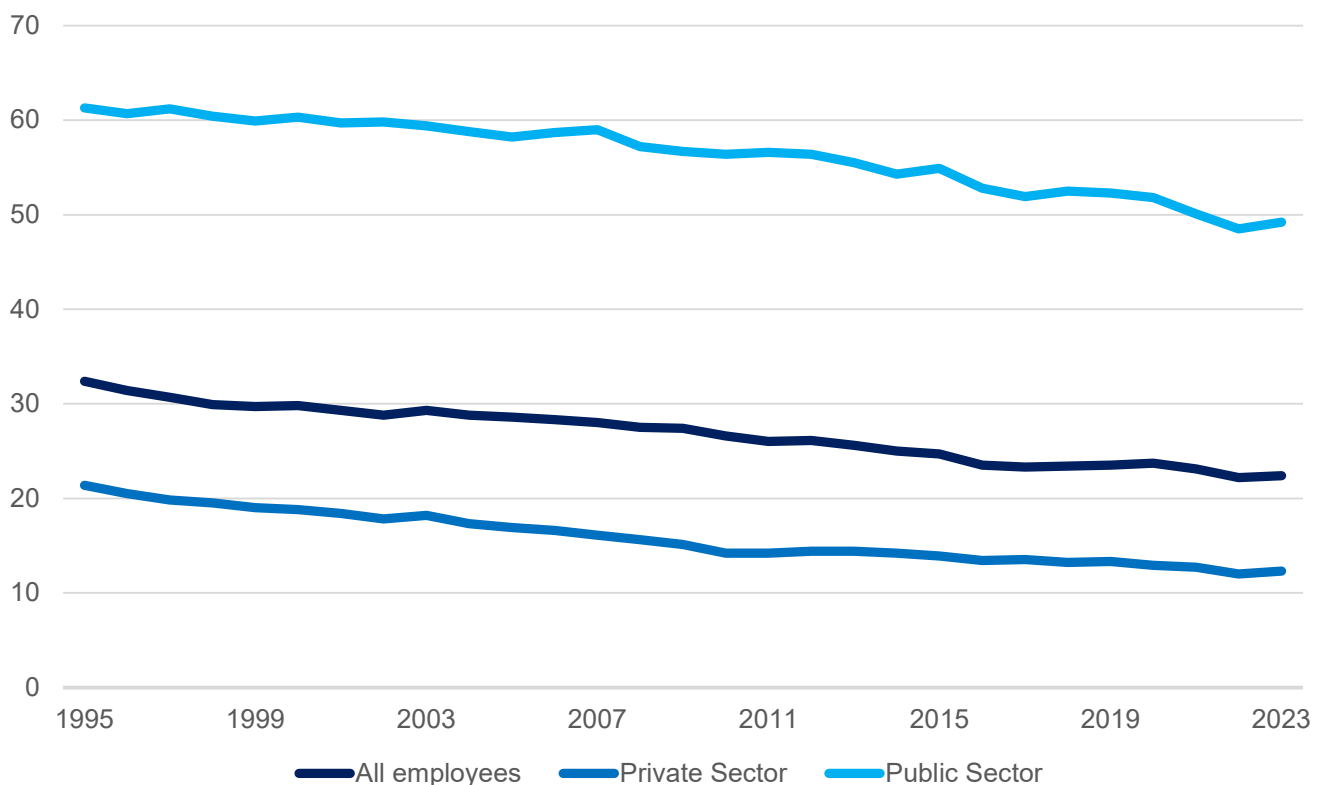
Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

Trade union density remains higher in the public sector

The overall proportion of employees who are members of trade unions is significantly higher in the public sector relative to the private sector. 12.3% of private sector employees belonged to a trade union, compared to 49.2% of public sector employees in 2023. This is only the second time since comparable records began (1995) that public sector trade union membership density has been below 50%, with the other occasion being 48.5% in 2022. The proportion of private sector employees in a union increased from 12.0% in 2022 to 12.3% in 2023.

Trade union membership is higher among female employees in the public sector (51.1% of females compared to 45.8% of males), whereas trade union membership is higher among male employees within the private sector (13.7% of males compared to 10.5% of females) (Table 2.2).

Figure 9: Trade union density by sector, 1995 to 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

The trade union wage premium has increased

The trade union wage premium is defined as the percentage difference between the average gross hourly earnings of employees who are union members and non-members. In 2023 the trade union wage gap increased by 0.7 percentage points to 4.2%. This change is due to a relatively large increase in the wage premium in the private sector of 3.5 percentage points due to faster growth in average gross hourly wages for union members. In contrast, public sector trade union members experienced slower growth in average gross hourly wages than non-union members, reducing the positive wage premium slightly (Table 2.3).

Several factors influence this figure, and the size of the premium is likely to be strongly influenced by other differences in the characteristics of unionised and non-unionised employees. It should also be noted that where pay is determined by collective agreements, these are likely to apply to both unionised and non-unionised employees in the bargaining unit (Table 2.4b).

Personal and job characteristics

In the [data tables](#) accompanying this publication, Table 3.1 compares the personal and job characteristics of employees who are union members, not union members, and employees overall.

Older employees comprise a higher proportion of trade union members

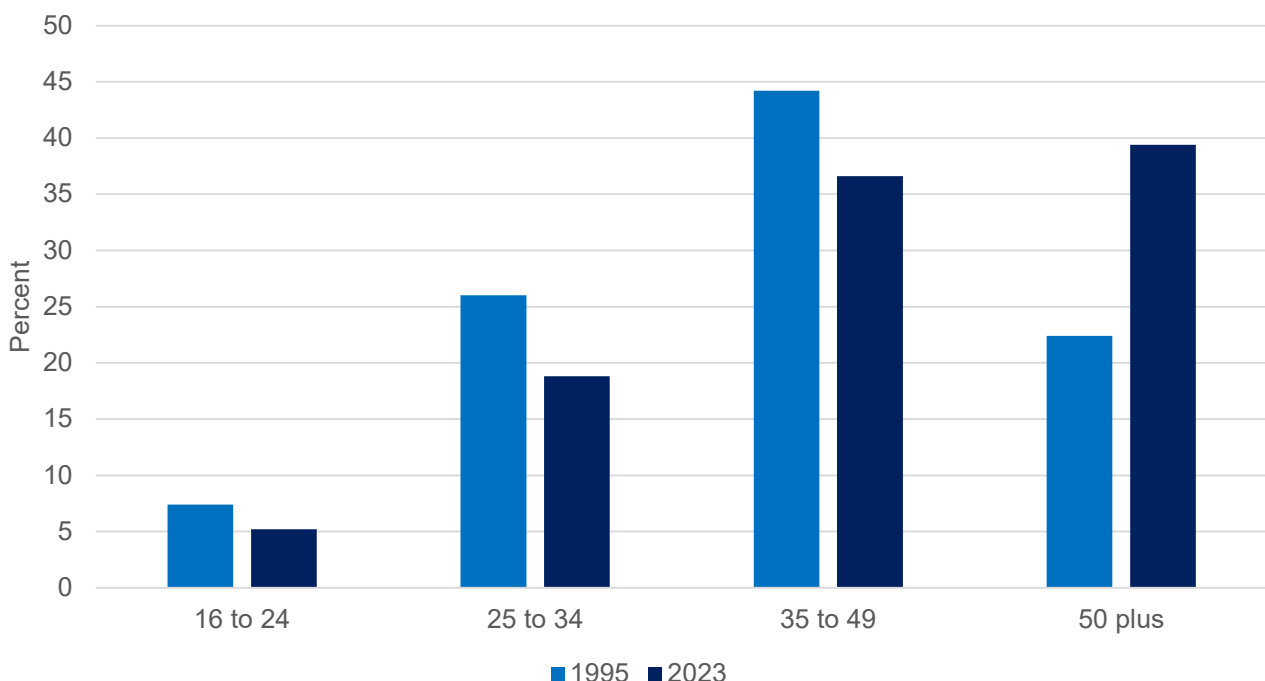
Older employees make up a larger proportion of trade union members than younger employees (Table 3.1). Of employees who were trade union members in 2023:

- 5.2% were aged between 16 and 24.
- 18.8% were aged between 25 and 34.
- 36.6% were aged between 35 to 49, and
- 39.4% were aged 50 or older.

That the likelihood of an employee being a trade union member increases with age accords with the data showing that employees who have longer lengths of service with an employer are more likely to be a member of a trade union. 24.0% of employees who were trade union members in 2023 had between 10 and 20 years of service with their employer, while 21.4% had tenure of 20 years or more. These are significantly higher than the percentages comprised of those with less than 1 year and between 1 and 2 years of service at 8.0% and 8.7%, respectively (Table 3.1).

The distribution of trade union membership across age groups has changed since 1995. In 1995, those aged 35 to 49 were the most likely to be trade union members, whereas in 2023 it was those aged 50 or over.

Figure 10: Age distribution of trade union members, 1995 and 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Employees with disabilities are more likely to be a member of a trade union

27.5% of employees who have a disability under the Equality Act 2010 were members of a trade union in 2023, above the 21.3% membership rate for employees who do not have a disability (Table 1.5).

Employees who have a disability under the Equality Act 2010 are disproportionately more likely to be a trade union member. Employees with a disability comprised 21.7% of employee trade union members in 2023, while accounting for 17.6% of all employees (Table 3.1).

Foremen or supervisors are more likely to be trade union members

The LFS has a variable that identifies three levels of managerial status for employees: manager, foreman or supervisor, and not a manager or supervisor. Employees who are foremen or supervisors are more likely to be members of a trade union relative to those more and less senior than them. 30.8% of foremen or supervisors were trade union members, compared to 21.6% of managers and 21.4% of those who are not managers or supervisors (Table 1.5).

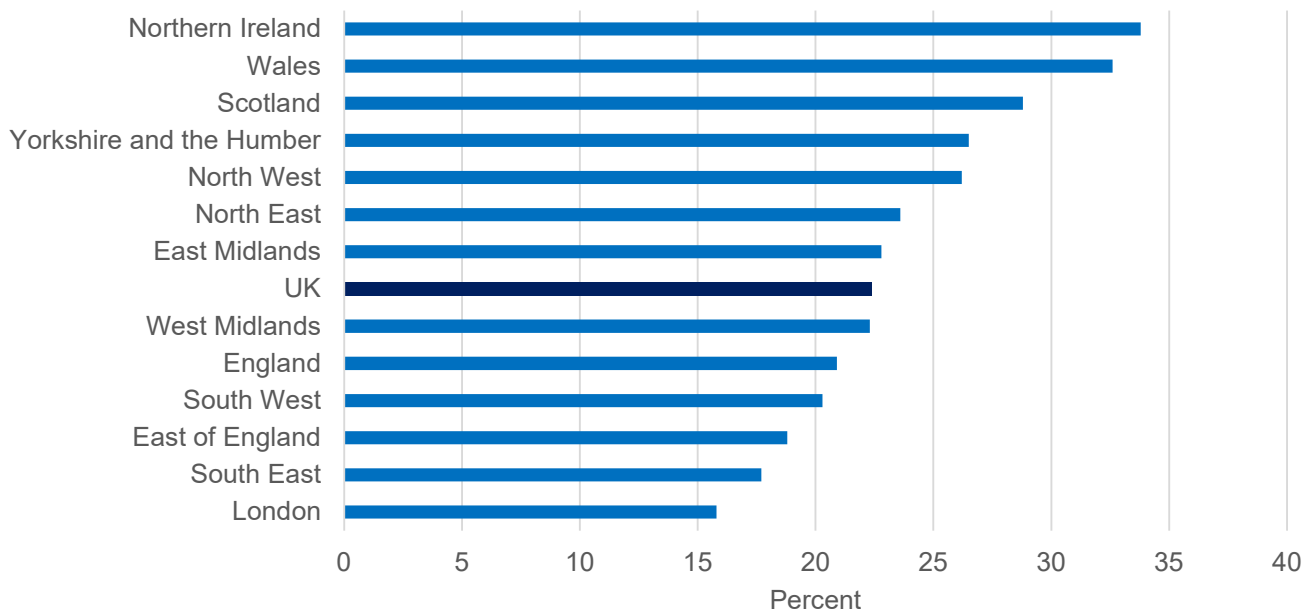
Country and Regional Trends

In the [data tables](#) accompanying this publication, Table 4.1 shows trade union membership density in the UK nations and English regions, while Table 4.2 shows their membership levels, for 1995 to 2023. Table 4.3 and Table 4.4 show data for 20 UK regions for 2023.

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all saw an increase in the proportion of employees that were members of a trade union. The proportion of employees that were members of a trade union remained the same in England between 2022 and 2023, at 20.9%. In Scotland, union membership density rose by 2.6 percentage points to 28.8%, the second largest increase across any of the nations or regions, following the 3.0 percentage point increase in the East Midlands. Trade union membership density increased in Wales and Northern Ireland by 1.2 percentage points and 0.9 percentage points, respectively.

Between 1995 and 2023, amongst the nations, Wales has recorded the largest percentage point fall in the proportion of employees who are trade union members, followed by Scotland at 11.7 and 10.2 percentage points respectively. Northern Ireland has had the lowest decrease of 8.4 percentage points, with membership density in England falling by 9.9 percentage points over the period (Table 4.1).

Figure 11: Trade union density by nation and region, 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Trade union membership levels rise in all nations

Trade union membership levels among employees increased slightly in all four nations between 2022 and 2023. Of the nations, England experienced the largest change in membership levels, increasing by 48,000 to 5,067,000. This was despite there being increases in employee union membership levels in only four of nine English regions, the largest being in the North West, where employee membership increased by around 81,000, equivalent to a 10.4% increase in membership

in the region. Trade union employee membership numbers decreased in five of the nine regions, the North East, East of England, London, South East and South West (Table 4.2).

Employees in the English northern regions and other Nations more likely to be trade union members

In 2023, across England, the more northerly regions had higher proportions of employees with trade union membership compared to Southern regions. The North East (23.6%), North West (26.2%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (26.5%), had higher densities of trade union membership than the other English regions. The East Midlands (22.8%) and West Midlands (22.3%) were above the England average of 20.9%. Meanwhile London (15.8%), the South East (17.7%), the South West (20.3%) and the East of England (18.8%) were all below the England average (Table 4.1).

Between 2022 and 2023, four English regions experienced an increase in the proportions of employees that were union members, with increase in the North West (+1.1 percentage points), Yorkshire and the Humber (+0.8 percentage points), East Midlands (+3.0 percentage points) and West Midlands (+1.2 percentage points). Membership density among employees fell across all other English regions, with the largest declines of 2.9 percentage points and 1.8 percentage points being in the North East and London respectively.

Northern Ireland (33.8%), Wales (32.6%) and Scotland (28.8%) had higher proportions of employees in unions than all the England regions. Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland had much higher trade union membership density relative to England (20.9%) as a whole.

Figure 12 shows the proportion of employees who are members of a trade union broken down by 20 geographical regions and nations across the UK in 2023. Strathclyde had the highest proportions of employees that were trade union members at 35.6%, followed by Merseyside (35.0%), Northern Ireland (33.8%) and Wales (32.6%). Inner London had the lowest proportion of workers affiliated to a trade union at just 12.9%, with Outer London (17.7%) and the South East (17.7%) the next lowest (Table 4.3).

Figure 12: Trade union membership as a proportion of employees, by Government Office Region, UK employees, 2023

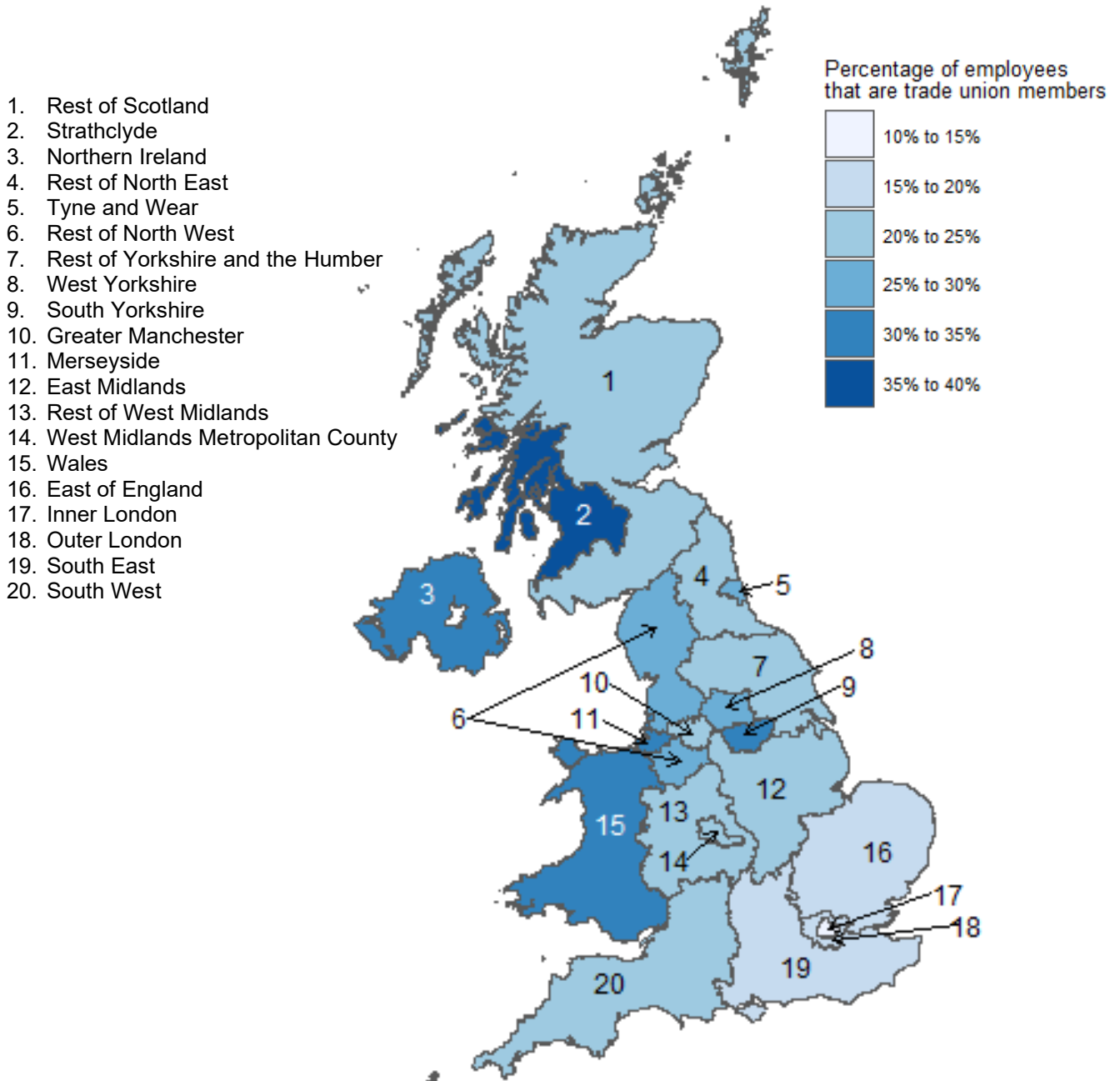


Figure 13 shows the percentage of employees with a trade union presence in the workplace in the 20 geographical regions. Strathclyde had the highest percentage of employees with a trade union presence of 65.8%, followed by Wales (64.6%) and Merseyside (61.1%). Inner London had the lowest rate of employees with a trade union presence in the workplace at 38.4%. Unsurprisingly, 3 of the regions in the highest 5 for trade union membership are also in the top 5 regions for trade union presence. Similarly, 4 of the regions in the lowest 5 for trade union membership are also in the lowest 5 regions for trade union presence.

Figure 13: Employees with a trade union presence in their workplace by Government Office Region, percent, 2023

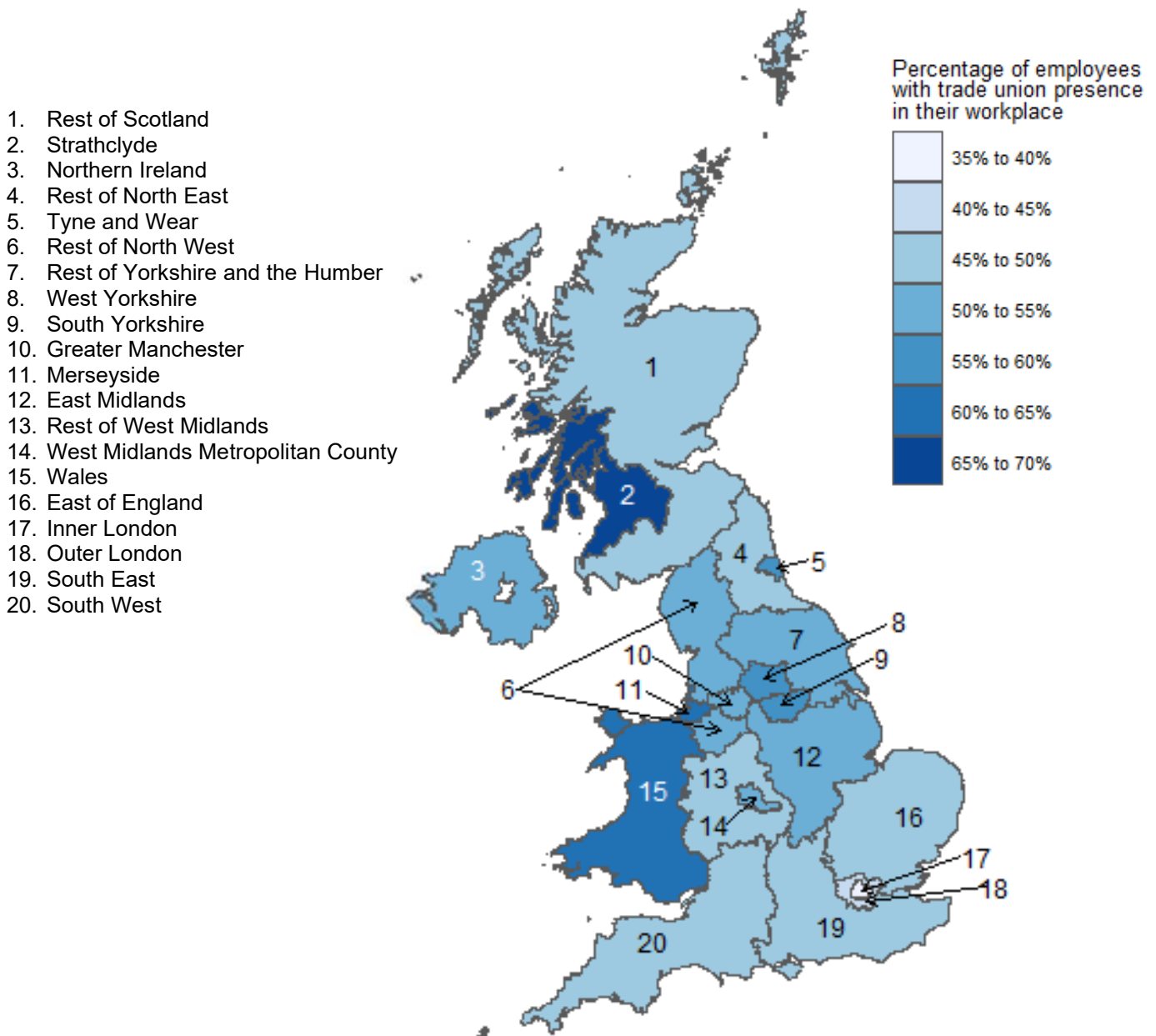
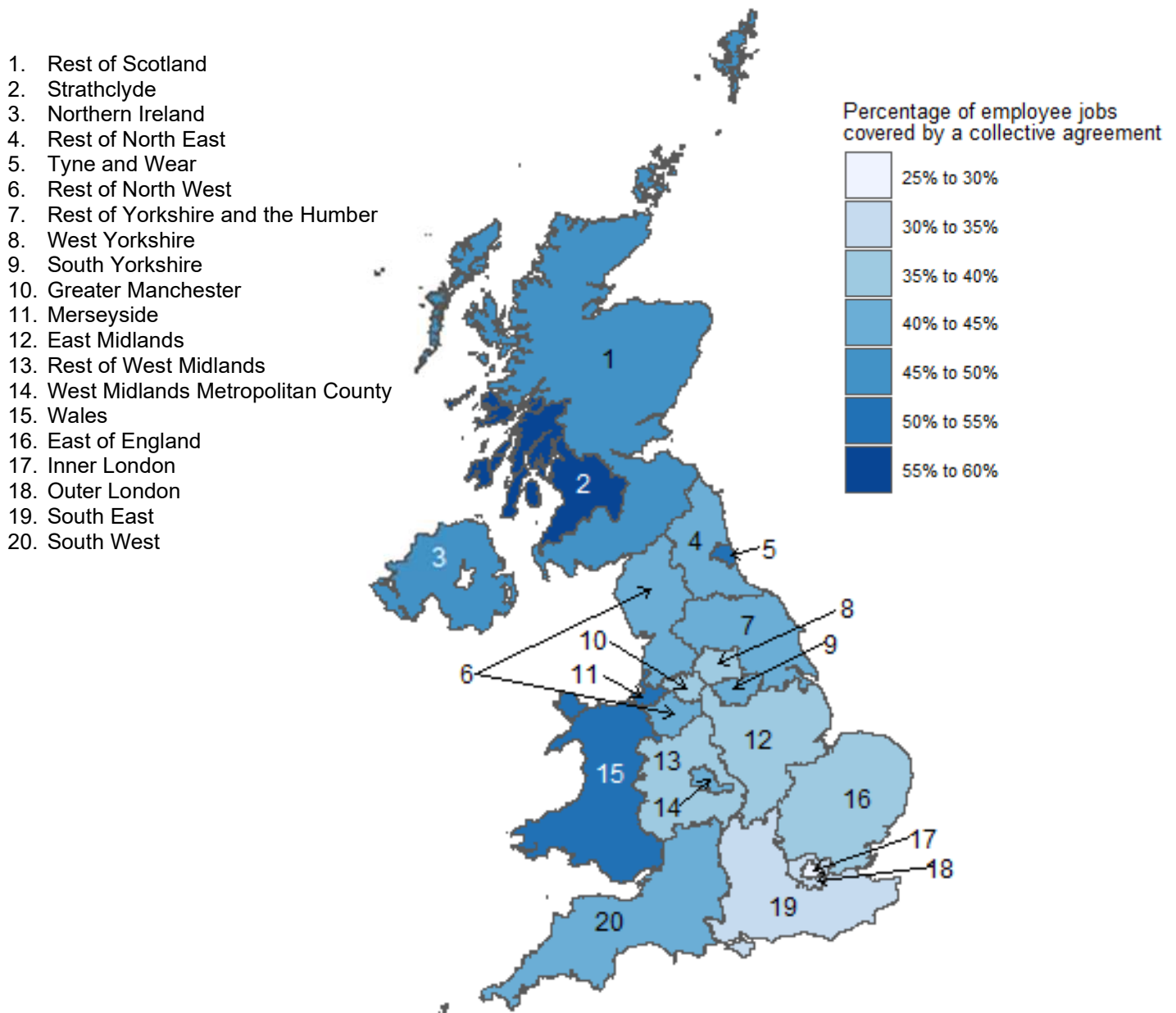


Figure 14 gives an overview of the proportion of employee jobs where pay was set with reference to an agreement affecting more than one employee (collective agreement). This is estimated from data from the ASHE survey. Strathclyde (56.5%) had the highest proportion of employee jobs whose pay was affected by such a collective agreement, followed by Tyne and Wear at 53.7%. In comparison, Inner London and the South East had the lowest rates at 26.7% and 33.4%, respectively.

Figure 14: Coverage of employee jobs where pay is set with reference to a collective agreement by Government Office Region, 2023



Accompanying tables

The following tables are available in open-source format on the department's statistics [website](#)

Table 1.1	Trade union membership, unions registered, listed or scheduled in Great Britain, 1892 to 2020-21
Table 1.2a	Trade union membership levels, employees, UK and Great Britain, 1989 to 2023
Table 1.2b	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees, UK and Great Britain, 1989 to 2023
Table 1.3a	Trade union membership levels, in employment, UK and Great Britain, 1989 to 2023
Table 1.3b	Trade union membership as a proportion of those in employment, UK and Great Britain, 1989 to 2023
Table 1.4	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by gender, full/ part time and permanent/ temporary status, UK, 2023
Table 1.5	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by personal characteristics, and work and job characteristics, UK, 2023
Table 1.6	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by age group and gender, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 1.7a	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by major occupation group and gender, UK, 2005 to 2010
Table 1.7b	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by major occupation group and gender, UK, 2011 to 2020
Table 1.7c	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by major occupation group and gender, UK, 2021 to 2023
Table 1.8	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by industry and gender, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 1.9	Average hourly earnings by union status, UK, 2023
Table 1.10	Trade union membership proportions and union presence in the workplace, UK, 2023
Table 1.11	Employee jobs where pay is set with reference to an agreement covering more than one employee (collective agreement) by agreement type, UK, 2023
Table 2.1a	Trade union membership levels by sector and gender, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 2.1b	Trade union non-membership levels by sector and gender, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 2.2	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by sector and gender, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 2.3	Average hourly earnings by union status and sector, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 2.4a	Trade union presence by sector, UK, 1999 to 2023
Table 2.4b	Employee jobs where pay is set with reference to an agreement covering more than one employee (collective agreement) by sector, UK, 2014 to 2023
Table 2.5	Trade union membership levels by Industry, UK, 1995 to 2023
Table 3.1	Characteristics of union members and non-members, UK, 2023
Table 4.1	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees by nation and region, 1995 to 2023
Table 4.2	Trade union membership levels by nation and region, 1995 to 2023
Table 4.3	Trade union membership proportions and trade union presence in the workplace by regions, 2023

Table 4.4	Employee jobs where pay is determined by reference to an agreement covering more than one employee (collective agreement) by regions, 2023.
A1-A13	Individual tables for the nations and regions, covering trade union membership as a proportion of employees by various characteristics, 2023
A14	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees, by 2-digit Standard Industrial Classification and gender, 1995-2023
A15	Trade union membership as a proportion of employees, by 2-digit Standard Industrial Classification and gender, full/part time and permanent/temporary, 2023
A16a	Trade union membership as a proportion of Polish national employees in the UK by gender and full/part time status, 2023
A16b	Trade union membership as a proportion of Polish born employees in the UK by gender and full/part time status, 2023
A17	Age distribution of employees who are trade union members, UK, 1995 and 2023
A18	Coverage of collective agreements between employers and trade unions by full/part time and permanent/ temporary status, UK, 2023
A19	Coverage of collective agreements between an employer and trade union by sector, UK, 1996 to 2023

Trade Union Membership Confidence Intervals Tables 2023

Technical information

Trade union questions in the Labour Force Survey

A question on the LFS on trade union membership has been asked annually since 1989 of all individuals in employment. Questions on trade union presence and recognition were introduced in 1993 and the question on collective agreements was introduced in 1996. The questions relating to trade union membership were reordered and reworded in 1999; these changes affect the time-series for trade union presence and collective agreements.

The trade union questions were altered in the 1999 questionnaire. The exact wording and sequence of the questions as they are now and as they were previously are shown below. The following should be noted:

- The wording of the question that asks respondents whether they are a member of a trade union remains the same, only its place in the sequence has changed.
- The question that asks whether any of the people at the respondent's place of work are members of a trade union or staff association is designed to measure trade union presence. The wording, routing and sequence of this question have changed. Previously, it was asked of all in employment; now it is only asked to those who say that they are not union members.
- Before 1999, the question on whether the respondent's pay and conditions were directly affected by collective agreements between their employer and a union (LFS variable: TUCOV) was only asked where the respondent first identified unions as being present at the workplace (LFS variable: TUPRES), and then whether it was recognised (LFS variable: TUREC). This meant that the number of people whose pay and conditions were affected by collective agreement was an underestimate. For this reason, the routing of the question was changed in the 1999 LFS and is now asked of all in employment. Users must therefore be aware that data derived from the TUCOV LFS variable in the 1999 dataset are not directly comparable with those of previous years due to the change in the question's coverage.
- It is possible that some non-sampling error arises in the series of questions on trade unions because of measurement problems. Around a third of the sample are proxy respondents (other household members answering on behalf of the individual), and the data show that this group are less likely to be identified as union members than those responding on their own behalf. An estimate of the extent of bias is provided below.

On the question of coverage of collective agreements, it is known from surveys of employers that only a small proportion of public sector workplaces are not covered, and that these arrangements are generally made at head office level or across many organisations. It is therefore likely that some employees who are not union members and/or who work in small workplaces in the public sector may be unaware that collective bargaining arrangements apply to their organisation. There is potentially a similar affect among workers in the private sector. In addition, because sector is self-reported in the LFS, there may be a number of respondents wrongly classifying themselves as public sector workers. Consequently, there may be a downward bias to this measure. Also, it should be noted that the question in the Labour Force Survey specifically refers to negotiations between the employer and a trade union that affect an employee's pay and conditions.

The [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings](#) (ASHE) conducted by ONS collects information on the number of employee jobs where pay is set with reference to an agreement affecting more than one employee (such as agreed collectively by a trade union or a workers' committee). As the information is collected from employers it may give a more accurate picture of the coverage of such agreements. The achieved sample in 2023 was around 156,000. The question asked is therefore broader than that asked in the LFS.

In this bulletin, the ASHE figures relating to collective agreements have been included in the main tables and are used as the main measure of collective agreement coverage. As explained above, we expect the figures more reliably reflect the level of coverage in the UK. The ASHE question references collective agreements agreed by a trade union or worker's committee, so possibly some non-union collective agreements may also be included (though we would not expect these to be widespread). The LFS collective agreements statistics are provided in the Annex tables.

Table A1: Structure of trade union questions in Labour Force Survey

Previous union questions	Current union questions
All in employment: (LFS variable TUPRES) At your place of work, are there any unions, staff associations or groups of unions?	All in employment: (LFS variable UNION) Are you a member of a trade union or staff association?
If yes: (LFS variable TUREC) Is it/are any of them recognised by management for negotiating pay and conditions of employment?	If no: (LFS variable TUPRES_ Are any of the people at your place of work members of a trade union or staff association?
If yes: (LFS variable TUCOV) Are your pay and conditions of employment directly affected by agreements between your employer and any trade union(s) or staff association?	All in employment: (LFS variable TUCOV) Are your pay and conditions of employment directly affected by agreements between your employer and any trade union(s) or staff association?
All in employment: (LFS variable UNION) Are you a member of a trade union or staff association?	

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Northern Ireland 1997 data issue

In Autumn 1997, incorrect routing of Northern Ireland respondents meant that only those who answered yes to TUPRES were asked UNION. Therefore, there was under-response of unknown size to UNION. Those who should have been asked UNION were instead coded as not having answered the question. DBT analysis indicates this may mean that there is an undercount of up to 10,000 in 1997 levels or 0.1 percentage points in 1997 proportions.

Variables in the LFS

Most of the classifications used to place respondents in different categories are based on a direct question relying on the person's self-assessment of their circumstances. Some are

based on a combination of more than one question, and others are coded by the ONS based on standard conventions. Details are provided below.

The classifications used in this publication are generally self-defined. This includes gender, age and ethnic group. Two types of employment status – full-time or part-time, and permanent or temporary – are based on direct questions and do not rely on any set criteria (e.g., number of hours worked). The classification for flexible working hours only includes those who work under such arrangements. Region and whether an individual is an employee are both self-defined variables. Highest qualification is principally based on a question asking individuals to nominate what qualifications they have from a list of around 50 categories. These have then been aggregated for the analytical purposes. The categories for ethnic groups have been changed in the LFS in both 2001 and 2011 to be consistent with those used in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, respectively.

Industry and occupation variables in the LFS are produced by coding textual open-ended survey answers to standard classifications, the Standard Industrial Classification and Standard Occupation Classification (SOC).

The occupation figures for 2021 are based on SOC20, which was introduced to the Labour Force Survey in 2021. The revised occupation codes primarily move occupations into the Professional Occupation major group. This reflects ONS findings that “an increasing number of occupations require the application of knowledge and expertise that is associated with a tertiary level of education”. ONS revised their coding of SOC 20 occupations going back to 2021 after last year’s bulletin was published. There were no differences to the occupation major group figures presented in this bulletin. The amended coding also affected the income weights in the LFS, though any impact on the wage figures presented for 2021 and 2022 is marginal. More information on occupation classification can be obtained from the ONS [SOC20 page](#), with information on the amended coding [here](#).

Defining whether people work in the public or private sector is based on two questions first introduced in 1993. These ask, first, if they worked in a private firm or business, a limited company, or some other kind of organisation; and second, if other, what kind of non-private organisation. The LFS defines public sector as that owned, funded or run by central or local government and the private sector is everything else. Some respondents may not know whether their industry is in the public or private sector, and, for certain types of activity, there may be no clear answer and the interviewers are given some guidelines to help sort out some common confusion. There is no indication that the reclassification of some banks to the public sector by the ONS in its Public Sector Employment statistics had any impact on how people working in these organisations classified their sector in the LFS. The estimates produced in this bulletin from the LFS data show a higher level of employment in the public sector, and a lower level in the private sector, than the ONS Public Sector Employment statistics.

Revised method for estimating union presence

From the 2017 Bulletin onwards a revised approach was introduced for the calculations used to estimate union presence in the workplace from the Labour Force Survey data. Previously, all those who answered ‘no’ to the ‘UNION’ question (about whether the respondent was a union member) were included in the population of employees used to estimate trade union presence, even if they did not provide a valid response to the ‘TUPRES’ question (on whether any people in the workplace were members of a trade union). This included people who said they used their home as their place of work or main base for work. This makes an underlying assumption

that those who did not provide a valid response to 'TUPRES' would not have others in their workplace who were members of a trade union. After examining the data, on balance it was decided that it would be more appropriate to exclude those who did not provide a valid response to the TUPRES question from the population used to estimate union presence. The revised method introduced for the 2017 Bulletin excludes this group from the estimates of union presence.

Change of disability variable

ONS introduced a variable, DISEA, into the LFS in 2013 to reflect disability as defined in the Equality Act 2010. The figures for disability in Tables 1.5 and 3.1 are now estimated using this variable.

A comparison between the figures based on DISEA and those based on the DISCURR variable that was previously used is available in Table A19 in the 2020 bulletin. There were small differences of 0.5 percentage points or less for trade union membership density for employees with a disability – as estimated from the different disability measures – for the years 2013 to 2020.

Sample size and standard errors

The cell sizes in some tables in this publication are too small to provide reliable estimates and have been marked with an asterisk. In this publication data fewer than 10,000 have not been published because standard errors are likely to be larger than the estimates themselves. Although the ONS has lifted its protocol of not releasing data under the 10,000 threshold, it is now the statistician's discretion whether to release anything under this threshold. For wage related data, the threshold used is 30,000.

As an indication of the standard errors in the trade union estimates, the 2023 standard errors around the total employment and employee union membership proportions are likely to be around 0.5 percentage points. Standard errors for union membership proportions by gender are likely to be around 0.6 percentage points. Standard errors for union membership proportions by region average around 1.5 percentage points.

The 95% confidence intervals for trade union membership, presence in the workplace and collective agreements and average wages are provided alongside the tables. These have been calculated using the survey package in R following ONS guidance on calculating confidence intervals for complex survey designs such as the LFS.⁴ Following the guidance provided in the Labour Force survey methodology documentation⁵, the address (ADD) is used as the clustering variable, unitary authority/local authority (UALA) as the low-level geography stratum, and the person weight (PWT) and income weight (PIWT) as the weighting variable where

⁴ ONS (2016) ONS methodology working paper series no. 9 - Guide to calculating standard errors for ONS Social Surveys. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/methodologicalpublications/generalmethodology/onsworkingpaperseries/onsmethodologyworkingpaperseriesno9guidetocalculatingstandarderrorsforonsocialsurveys>

⁵ ONS (2022) Volume 1: Background and methodology. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/methodologies/labourforcesurveyuserguidance/volume1combined.pdf>

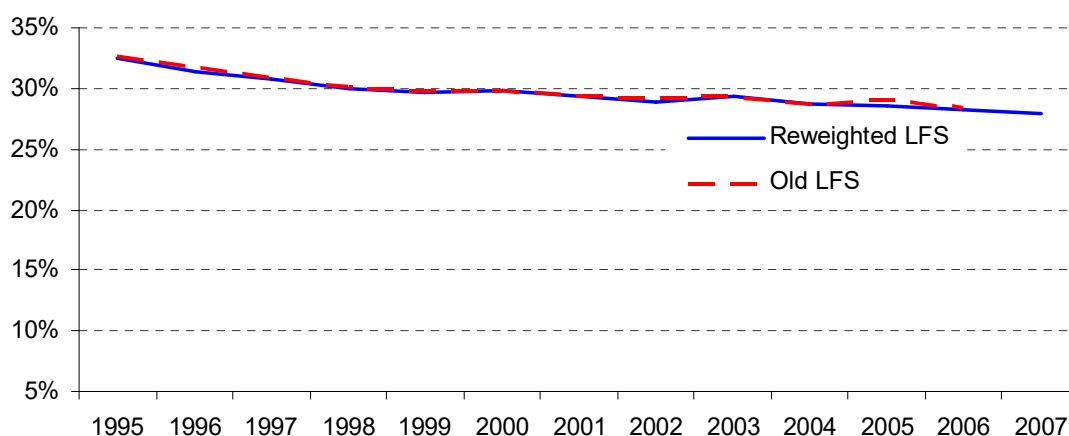
applicable. As with the tables, the domain is across employees or those in employment that are not in a military occupation.

Switch from seasonal to calendar quarters

In 2006, the structure of the Labour Force Survey switched from a seasonal quarter basis to a calendar quarter basis. The last set of published LFS seasonal results covered December 2004 to February 2005. In accordance with European Union regulations, all subsequent quarters have been published on a calendar quarter basis. In 2008, the Office for National Statistics carried out an extensive reweighting programme and all quarterly Labour Force Survey data are now published on a calendar quarter basis back to 1992. This has eliminated the structural break into the trade union membership time series associated with the change from seasonal to calendar quarters.

Figure A1 shows the trade union density of UK employees from 1995 to 2007, as shown in Table 1.2b and trade union density from the previous LFS. The chart gives evidence that the reweighting of historic LFS datasets has not materially changed the trade union densities from those that were previously published.

Figure A1: Trade union density of UK employees, 1995-2007



Per cent

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

Estimating union membership levels

Each household agreeing to take part in the LFS is interviewed on five consecutive quarters (or waves). However, there are cases on subsequent waves when households are not contactable or do not agree to continue taking part so further responses cannot be recorded. When this happens, current data may be imputed by carrying forward answers given by them in the previous interview. However, for questions that do not appear every quarter, as with trade union membership, there is no previous response to carry forward, and a 'does not apply' (DNA) response is therefore recorded.

There are two possible methods of estimating union membership levels. One method relies on calculating an adjusted weight, whereby cases with missing data are assumed to have the

same distribution as valid responses. Consequently, missing data is included in the estimates by allocation of their weight along the same distribution as valid respondents. Unfortunately, due to the restructuring of the LFS to calendar quarters (described earlier) this produced too much missing data in the seasonal quarter series to produce reliable estimates. Information was lost for September in converting seasonal to calendar quarters and no information was available to be brought forward from December. Therefore, it was not possible to display a consistent time series including the data originally collected on a seasonal quarter basis using the adjusted weight method.

In order to mitigate these issues a second method was developed to closely approximate the results from an adjusted weights approach (see Table A2) but also allow a consistent time series with the calendar quarter information to be estimated. It consists of union density multiplied by the population (as estimated by the LFS). The method is improved by making the same calculation but by detailed age, gender and regional disaggregation and then aggregating them back up to national and regional levels. Age, gender and region were specifically chosen as they are the basis on which the LFS is weighted (see the Labour Survey User Guide Vol 1.). This approach is further supported by the fact that union density figures are produced on a valid response basis and do not consider any missing data. Furthermore, union densities show a great deal of robustness under change. These estimates of union membership levels are now provided as the headline figures in this publication (see Tables 1.2a, 1.3a, 2.1a, 4.2).

To produce trade union membership broken down by public/ private sector, a further step was applied. It consists of union density split by public and private sector multiplied by the union membership population (estimated as above). The calculations involved are similar-to that of the second method described above, apart from the fact that a further breakdown by sector was used. A comparable method was used to calculate membership levels by industry with a breakdown by industry used rather than a breakdown by public/ private sector. The tables below (produced in 2011) gives a comparison of the estimates from the two methods between 2006 and 2010 by gender and employment status.

Table A2a: Estimated trade union membership levels, United Kingdom, 2006 to 2010, not seasonally adjusted (thousands)

Year	All employees, union density method	All employees, adjusted weights method	All employees, difference between methods	All in employment, union density method	All in employment, adjusted weights method	All in employment, difference between methods
2006	7,021	6,992	29	7,359	7,315	44
2007	7,005	6,978	27	7,334	7,292	42
2008	6,878	6,857	21	7,219	7,188	31
2009	6,715	6,696	19	7,054	7,017	37
2010	6,536	6,530	6	6,854	6,818	36

Table A2b: Estimated trade union membership levels, United Kingdom, 2006 to 2010, male employees and in employment, not seasonally adjusted (thousands)

Year	Male employees, union density method	Male employees, adjusted weights method	Male employees, difference between methods	Males in employment, union density method	Males in employment, adjusted weights method	Males in employment, difference between methods
2006	3,430	3,400	30	3,649	3,611	38
2007	3,379	3,355	24	3,606	3,574	32
2008	3,278	3,254	24	3,522	3,487	35
2009	3,121	3,099	22	3,344	3,311	33
2010	2,976	2,967	9	3,188	3,162	26

Table A2c: Estimated trade union membership levels, United Kingdom, 2006 to 2010, female employees and in employment, not seasonally adjusted (thousands)

Year	Female employees, union density method	Female employees, adjusted weights method	Female employees, difference between methods	Females in employment, union density method	Females in employment, adjusted weights method	Females in employment, difference between methods
2006	3,591	3,591	0	3,710	3,702	8
2007	3,625	3,621	4	3,728	3,716	12
2008	3,599	3,601	-2	3,697	3,697	0
2009	3,593	3,596	-3	3,709	3,704	5
2010	3,560	3,562	-2	3,666	3,654	12

To provide the levels estimates in these statistics, DBT uses the GOVTOR LFS variable for regions. If this variable is not available to analysts trying to replicate the results, then GOVTOF, or URESMC would provide a reasonable alternative. However, it would produce marginally different results.

The levels figures presented in the bulletin are rounded to the nearest thousand and the percentage figures to one decimal place. The year-on-year changes reported are calculated on the unrounded data (so may differ slightly from the difference between two years calculated from the published tables).

Differences between administrative data and LFS estimates

Another official source of trade union membership data is provided by the Certification Officer and can be seen in Table 1.1. Data collected annually from trade unions by the government, including the Certification Officer (CO) from 1974, provide a long and consistent back series of the number of trade unions and the number of union members. The LFS has a shorter back series, from 1989 onwards, but can provide extensive information on the respondent's individual and workplace characteristics, allowing more detailed analysis.

There are differences in how the two sources report union membership. For example, the CO membership count includes all members of unions having their head office in Great Britain (unions that are listed or scheduled by the CO), including those members in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and 'elsewhere abroad'. These figures may also include union members who are unemployed, inactive or retired. The LFS asks questions on the union status of all those in employment, thus excluding the unemployed and retired. The LFS also only covers those who are resident in the UK (or in Great Britain for the years 1989 to 1994).

The LFS union questions have United Kingdom coverage from 1995 onwards. The LFS estimates the number of individuals who are union members, rather than the individual memberships. Hence those belonging to two unions would appear twice in the CO data, but only once in the LFS data.

Due to missing annual returns from a large union, this bulletin doesn't include a 2021-22 membership figure based on administrative records.

Transformed Labour Force Survey

The next Trade Union Membership Statistics Bulletin is likely to be using data from the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) for 2024. A decision on whether to move to the TLFS as the government's main labour market survey later in 2024 will be taken in June. The TLFS will have a much larger initial sample and will be collected using an internet first approach. There will also be an increased focus on increasing response from hard to reach groups. At this stage, it is unclear whether there will be any substantial changes to the data presented in this bulletin resulting from the move to the TLFS. More information can be found on the [TLFS here](#).

Concepts and definitions

Concept	Definition
Employee	Employees are those who are in employment and paid a wage by an employer for the work that they do. People with two or more jobs are counted only once.
In employment	The number of people with jobs is measured by the Labour Force Survey and includes people aged 16 or over who did paid work (as an employee or self-employed), those who had a job that they were temporarily away from, those on government-supported training and employment programmes. For this publication, the numbers in employment exclude those doing unpaid family work. People with two or more jobs are counted only once.
Labour Force Survey	The main source for information on the labour market in the United Kingdom. It is a random household survey of approximately 37,000 households (87,000 individuals) conducted every three months by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). As well as private households, the survey includes people living in communal establishments (student halls of residence, National Health Service accommodation, etc.). The survey was conducted once every two years between 1973 and 1983 and annually from 1983 until 1991. It has been conducted quarterly since 1992, with a change to calendar quarters from seasonal quarters made in 2006. The LFS is a sample survey and consequently estimates are subject to both sampling and non-sampling error. Due to difficulties collecting data for instance through face-to-face interviewing during the pandemic, the LFS has achieved a lower response rate than previously during this period – and has partly mitigated this impact by increasing the initial sample of households to keep the number of achieved interviews relatively high.
Trade Union	The Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 defines a trade union as an organisation which consists wholly or mainly of workers of one or more descriptions and whose principal purposes include the regulation of relations between workers and employers or employers' associations.
Trade union member (LFS)	A person in employment who self-defines that they belong to a trade union or staff association when asked in the Labour Force Survey (for the question please see table above).
Union density	The rate or proportion of employees or those in employment who are a trade union member. Expressed as a percentage.
Union presence	Whether or not there are trade union or staff association members working at a workplace. In this publication, this statistic is presented as the proportion of employees who have trade union members (which could include themselves) working at their workplace.
Collective agreement (LFS)	Whether the pay and conditions of employees are directly affected by an agreement between their employer and a trade union. This is presented as the proportion of employees affected by such an agreement
Occupation	Defined using the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC). From 2021, the SOC 2020 is used. Prior to that we have used SOC 2010 for data from 2011 to 2020, and SOC 2000 for earlier data.
Industry	Defined using the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC). SIC 2007 has been used throughout. However, data prior to 2009 was reallocated using the agreed ONS approach from SIC 1992 codes.

Further information

Future updates to these statistics

The next update of these statistics will be in May 2025.

Past Trade Union Membership bulletins

[Trade Union Membership 2022](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2021](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2020](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2019](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2018](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2017](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2016](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2015](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2014](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2013](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2012](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2011](#)

[Trade Union Membership 2010](#)

Related statistics

The [Certification Officer's Annual Reports](#) includes statistics from the annual returns from scheduled and listed trade unions.

Revisions policy

The [DBT statistical revisions policy](#) sets out the revisions policy for these statistics, which has been developed in accordance with the UK Statistics Authority [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Uses of these statistics

Trade union membership statistics are used within government to help inform on worker representation within industries and occupations, and to help develop policies on employment relations.

The statistics are also used by non-government organisations such as think tanks, trade unions and employer organisations to analyse union membership and the extent of collective worker representation.

User engagement

Users are encouraged to provide comments and feedback on how these statistics are used and how well they meet user needs. Comments on any issues relating to this statistical release are welcomed and should be sent to: lm.correspondence@businessandtrade.gov.uk

The DBT statement on [statistical public engagement and data standards](#) sets out the department's commitments on public engagement and data standards as outlined by the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Statistics designation

ONS has recently re-classified its labour market estimates from the LFS as official statistics in development. This was because reduced achieved sample sizes, particularly in the second half of 2023, have led to an increased volatility in LFS estimates. Given the statistics in this publication are largely drawn from the LFS, they have been re-accredited as official statistics in development.

Previously, the statistics were designated as National Statistics. That designation was confirmed in June 2013. This followed a full [assessment](#) against the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) in 2012.

Since the latest review by the Office for Statistics Regulation, we have continued to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics, and have made the following improvements:

- Added more value by providing breakdowns previously requested as freedom of information requests as annexed tables.
- Revised the method of estimating trade union presence in the workplace following advice from an academic
- Published analysis investigating examining the potential for bias in the trade union membership statistics arising from LFS methodology.

Pre-release access to statistics

Some ministers and officials receive access to these statistics up to 24 hours before release. Details of the arrangements for doing this can be found in the [DBT statement of compliance](#) with the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008. The Permanent Secretary for the Department for Business and Trade has pre-release access to the statistics in this release.

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