

Introduction

The labour market statistics published by the ONS provide a comprehensive picture of the world of work in the UK. The statistics are based on a suite of surveys that cover both households and businesses, as well as using data from administrative sources. The ONS is undertaking an ambitious transformation programme to improve labour market statistics through survey transformation and increased use of data from administrative and other sources.

The main survey that provides labour market information from an individual and household perspective is the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS has been running in some form since the early 1970s and has been quarterly since 1992. Prior to the COVID pandemic, the survey used face-to-face interviews with households, followed up by telephone interviews. However, response rates have been steadily decreasing and prior to the pandemic response for the first wave stood at 54% (compared with 63% in 2011). During the pandemic period, face-to-face interviewing was suspended and the LFS was moved to telephone only which impacted on the response rate (31% in Q2 2020) and [how representative the achieved sample was](#).

Over the last few years, the ONS has been developing a transformed version of the LFS using an online-first multimode collection approach. Since March 2020, a version of this online approach survey has been running “live” while being further developed. With recent developments, including the addition of the ability to respond by telephone, the ONS is now in a position to begin moving towards incorporating the transformed LFS data into the regular labour market data releases.

The use of online first, followed by telephone and, eventually, face-to-face collection provides a number of benefits:

- A larger and more representative achieved sample leading to better quality statistics
- More frequent and granular data
- The new survey design is also more flexible making it easier to insert new questions and remove ones that are no longer relevant
- The survey has been designed around respondents, making it easier for them to complete

However, to move the survey to online first has meant a significant change to the survey structure and the questions asked. Therefore, although the survey is designed to give the same aggregate statistics, the finer details of the survey will change. We understand this may have an impact on some of our users and we are carrying out this exercise to better understand those impacts and what the ONS can do to support you through the change.

Overview of the design of the transformed Labour Force Survey

The new LFS is an online-first multimode survey designed following three core principles to best transform the survey operation and meet user needs:

- Putting quality first
- A respondent centric approach
- A responsive, data-driven design

By focussing on quality, the transformation targets those areas where change is needed most to deliver a survey that produces data of a higher quality in line with user needs. Improvements in quality focus both on the questions being asked and on the survey design to ensure a more representative responding population and higher quality response data.

A respondent-centric approach enables this by putting the respondent at the heart of the design. This approach will help to ensure that their journey is both inclusive and accessible and that they understand what is being asked of them. These factors will increase the likelihood of their taking part and driving up the quality of the resulting data. The questions on the current LFS have been transformed using this sector-leading approach to both reduce respondent burden and better meet user needs. Questions have been redesigned to make them easier for respondents to understand and deliver the data users require. A respondent will have to answer fewer questions as repetition is removed and routing improved to ensure they only answer questions they need to. To better meet user needs, the transformed questionnaire also includes some new response options, such as for the education topic. The questionnaire has been designed using an 'opti-mode' approach, tailored to the mode of completion and reducing the likelihood of any resulting mode effects in the data.

A responsive, data-driven design enables the targeting of resources towards those areas where they are needed most, focussing efforts on achieving responses from under-represented groups. This also increases operational efficiency and the flexibility to react rapidly to changes in patterns of response or operational challenges that may otherwise have impacted on the quality of the data. Access to reliable, timely data to enable us to identify those groups and predict where operational changes may be needed is critical to evidence-based decision-making and this is built into the design. This approach builds on the knowledge gained from delivering a similar responsive-design to successfully deliver the 2021 Census operation.

Survey Design

The new LFS is designed with a large wave 1 sample, a smaller subset of which is followed up across five quarterly waves. 142,000 private households across the UK will be invited to take part in the LFS per quarter. Around half of those in England, Scotland or Wales will be asked to complete a longer survey at Wave 1, containing additional questions on top of those asked to all respondents. Of the initial sample of 142,000 households across the UK, 22,000 will be invited to take part in wave 2 and then followed through to wave 5. This design enables us to balance the user need

for a large volume of content against respondent burden and overall quality of the data.

The sample design is based on a systematic random sample. This means that all households in the sampling frame have an equal probability of being selected. The sample is drawn quarterly and then issued on a weekly basis to ensure that the sample is representative weekly by geography, with the sample being allocated proportionally to the size of each geographic area.

All households are invited to take part online initially, with a unique code included in their invitation letter to enable them to do so. A reminder letter, issued to all non-responding addresses after ten days, also states that completion via telephone is available. We may also call households at this point (in England, Scotland, or Wales only) to encourage them to respond for those remaining non-responding households. We then target doorstep visits from field officers in under-represented areas to encourage people to respond, either by collecting a telephone number to enable a telephone interview to be conducted or by encouraging them to respond online. Targeting these field visits is key to enabling us to increase response from under-represented groups and reduce the bias in the data collected.

Quality

A larger sample size with more representative data is key to delivering outputs with a higher degree of precision and enabling the production of estimates at a more granular geographic level. To increase the quality of the data, the collection operation will focus on three areas in the following priority order:

Reduce bias – this is achieved by reducing variability in response across geographic areas and across other area classifications such as Index of Multiple Deprivation and Output Area Classifications.

Reducing attrition – retaining respondents through to wave five and reducing the level of bias across each wave.

Improve response – increasing overall response rates and achieving a minimum level of response in each local authority and region.

In addition, the proportional make-up of particular respondent characteristics (age, sex, disability, country of birth, tenure, ethnicity, occupation, industry) will be compared to best available estimates of the overall population to identify particularly under-represented groups and target interventions towards those groups where possible.

By manipulating the design of the collection operation to drive up the quality of the data collected, the new LFS will better enable the production of higher quality, timely, more granular estimates that meet user needs.

Current timetable

We will seek to publish insights and early analysis from the transformed Labour Force Survey early 2023 onwards in a series of articles. Regular publications using the transformed Labour Force Survey data are expected to begin from September 2023 onwards. See table below for regular ONS publications that will be impacted:

	Publication	Frequency	Release date ¹
Employment and Labour Market	Labour Market Overview, employment in the UK	Monthly	Sep-23
	Labour Force Survey single month estimates	Monthly	Sep-23
	UK & non-UK people in the labour market	Quarterly	Nov-23
	Regional labour market summary	Monthly	Sep-23
	Labour Force survey flow estimates	Quarterly	Nov-23
	Workforce jobs summary	Quarterly	Sep-23
	Workforce jobs by industry	Quarterly	Sep-23
	Young people not in education, employment of training (NEET), UK	Quarterly	Nov-23
	Working and workless households in the UK	Quarterly	Dec-23
	Workless households by regions across UK	Annual	Jul-24
	Children living in long-term workless households	Annual	Oct-24
Labour Productivity	Labour Productivity flash estimates	Quarterly	Nov-23
	Productivity Overview, UK	Quarterly	Jan-24
	International comparisons of UK productivity (ICP)	Annual	Jan-24
	Labour costs and labour share	Quarterly	Feb-24
	Quarterly regional labour productivity	Quarterly	Feb-24
	Annual regional labour productivity	Annual	Mar-24
	Subregional productivity	Annual	Mar-24
¹ Release dates are currently estimated. Exact publication dates will be confirmed closer to the time, although they are not expected to be brought forward prior to September 2023			

What this means for our users

The transformed LFS brings a number of benefits, as outlined above, including:

- Faster, higher quality macro and micro data, including in the future, monthly estimates of the Labour Market.
- More robust and detailed data on characteristics of interest e.g., disability, ethnicity
- Responsive to the needs of the day, ability to ask new questions, quickly and safely
- Higher response from much larger sample via Strategic and Response Design

However, due to the scale of the proposed changes this will have an impact on users of the data. The biggest impact is likely to be for those who use the micro data as there will be changes to the variables available. There may also be changes to the data at the published aggregate level too.

We want to understand the potential impact on users of LFS data to give us the opportunity to put mitigation in place and support users through the transition as much as we possibly can. The answers to these questions will help us understand your needs and provide the basis for more focussed engagement around specific aspects (e.g., survey design, changes to outputs) in the run-up to implementation in 2023.

We are asking for your name and email address, as we may contact you in relation to your response. We treat the data we hold with respect, keeping it secure and confidential. To find out more, read our [Privacy Policy](#).