

CIPD

Report
October 2025

UK industrial --- relations

A future with trade unions

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With over 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Report

UK industrial relations: A future with trade unions

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1 Introduction

A key element of the UK Government's *Make Work Pay* plan for Great Britain is the aim to create a modern framework for industrial relations. The CIPD welcomes the government's commitment to a new partnership approach to workplace relations. Its four principles of **collaboration, proportionality, accountability** and **balancing the interests of workers, employers and the public** are a good foundation to build a modern industrial relations (IR) framework.

However, a more harmonious and productive industrial relations climate will only be achieved if the reforms are underpinned by a mutually agreed set of expectations and behaviours that bring the principles to life at a workplace level. There should be oversight and accountability to ensure that both employers and trade union officials behave in a way that reflects the four principles, for example through a code of practice and supportive mechanisms such as training and good practice resources.

More broadly, the successful implementation of the government's *Make Work Pay* reforms across Great Britain is contingent on having an effective infrastructure in place. Acas, the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) and the Employment Tribunal are crucial to their achievement. These institutions need to have the necessary resources and expertise to fulfil the additional demands that will inevitably be placed on them.

This report presents findings from our *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025* survey of employers. It includes analysis of the extent to which workplaces are unionised, the effectiveness of working with trade unions and non-union representatives, and how workplaces view the future of industrial relations in the UK. The report also considers the extent to which employers support some of the key Employment Rights Bill (ERB) reforms related to IR and their potential impact on workplace relations.

This employer survey data is supplemented with analysis of the CIPD Good Work Index 2025, which explores employee attitudes towards collective voice, including the role of trade unions, employee representatives and senior management. The report also compares the different experiences of job quality reported by union versus non-union members.

As with all elements of the ERB, the reforms relating to IR and the role of trade unions are multifaceted and complex. Exploring the experiences of both employers and employees through the two sets of survey data means we can give a rounded picture of what the future holds for workplace relations.

While the survey data used in this report is based on responses from employers and employees across the whole of the UK, the industrial relations legislative landscape is different in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Department for the Economy is pursuing slightly different reforms as part of its planned Good Jobs Bill. Nonetheless, the views summarised in this report provide useful context for policy-makers and practitioners in Northern Ireland too.

2 Key findings

Employment relations generally good but there is also conflict

- Employers are positive about the employment relations climate in their organisation, with 79% describing relations between managers and employees as 'very good/good' and just 5% as 'poor/very poor'. Public sector employers are less likely to rate relations as good compared with their private sector counterparts (68% versus 81%).
- Employees are also positive: more than four in five (82%) rate the relationship with their line manager or supervisor as good, while 72% also say their relationship with other managers in the organisation is good.
- However, a quarter of employees (25%) reported some form of conflict at work within the last 12 months, notably being undermined or humiliated in their job (12%), being shouted at or having a very heated argument (9%) or being on the receiving end of verbal abuse or insult (8%).

Clear benefits to working with employee representatives

- Overall, half (50%) of organisations have representative arrangements for informing and consulting employees, with public sector organisations much more likely to have union representatives (84% versus 23% of private sector organisations).
- The overwhelming majority of organisations (86%) with employee representation report a range of benefits, most commonly 'offering an independent voice channel to raise concerns with management' (42%), 'keeping the workforce well informed' (41%), and 'early warning signs of problems or fewer workplace disputes' (39%).
- The findings show that employee perceptions are not as positive as employers' in terms of collective voice: just over half (51%) agree that their manager is good at seeking the views of employees or employee representatives, and only 37% say managers allow them or their representatives to influence final decisions.

Trade union membership has fallen but this could change

- The proportion of UK employees who were trade union members fell to 22% in 2024, according to [official statistics](#). Overall, the [CIPD Good Work Index 2025](#) found that one in five employees (20%) are trade union members, closely aligning to national statistics.
- However, this downward trajectory could change in the future given the raft of [reforms to strengthen union rights](#) under the UK Government's [Make Work Pay](#) plan, such as a new right of workplace access and lowering the thresholds to gain statutory recognition.
- In 2024, half (50%) of public sector employees were trade union members, according to [official statistics](#), compared with just 12% of those in the private sector.

- The long-term decline in union membership has been driven by a faster decrease in membership among male employees; in 2024, union membership among female employees stood at 3.7 million compared with 2.7 million for their male colleagues, the lowest level of male membership since 1995.

Employers with trade union representation are far more positive about unions than those without

- Overall, our findings reveal mixed attitudes towards trade union membership among employees: 26% are in favour of union membership, while 30% are not. More employees have a neutral view of union membership (37%).
- However, organisations with union representatives are overwhelmingly upbeat about union–management relations, with almost half (48%) saying the relationship is positive and a further 22% saying it is very positive; just 5% rate the relationship as negative.
- One in five (21%) employers with a union presence see no barriers to effective working with their recognised trade union(s), although most (68%) report some challenges. They perceive the top obstacle as local union representatives being more interested in making a name for themselves than achieving positive outcomes for employees and the business in the longer term (23%).
- It's encouraging the obstacle perceived as least significant is that partnership is an unrealistic model (just 9% of employers). This suggests that the principles underpinning partnership, such as collaboration and a mutual interest in the success of the organisation, are still relevant for the modern workplace.

What do employers think about the shake-up in trade union rights?

- When we asked employers about the specific measures proposed within the ERB, there is overall opposition to them.
- Employers particularly oppose reducing the notice period trade unions have to give when they intend to take industrial action from 14 to 10 days, removing the current 50% turnout threshold so that a simple majority of members can vote in favour of industrial action, and extending the expiry of the mandate for industrial action from six to 12 months.
- Non-unionised employers are much less supportive and far more opposed to the reforms: for example, 30% of non-unionised employers oppose the new right for unions to access workplaces versus 8% of unionised employers.
- Twice as many non-unionised employers than unionised employers (30% versus 15%) oppose the proposal to reduce the current membership threshold for union recognition applications from 10% of trade union membership of the proposed bargaining unit to as low as 2%.

Partnership working with trade unions is the way forward

- A joint policy briefing by the CIPD and Prospect agrees that improved employment relations, and partnership working between employers and trade unions, can help to achieve the UK Government's aim to create a modern framework for industrial relations.
- Our employer findings support this view of mutual gains, with the majority (56%) agreeing that 'working in partnership with the trade unions can benefit the organisation'; this increases to 72% among public sector employers, where unions have a much greater presence.
- There's a range of critical success factors for building effective working relationships between senior management and employee representatives, from 'having clear standards describing expected behaviour' (93%) and 'clearly defined overarching values' (92%) to 'getting to know each other on a personal level' (76%).
- On a positive note, many more employers agree than disagree that 'working in partnership with trade unions can benefit the organisation' (56% versus 17%).

Employers need to look to the future

- Only a very small minority of employers (2%) without employee representation believe there is pressure from one or more trade unions to achieve formal recognition, according to our survey findings. However, wider research indicates there is significant unmet demand for union representation, with more than a third (36%) of workers based in non-unionised organisations reporting they would vote to establish a union if they were given the chance.
- Our survey findings provide strong evidence that employers need to take the unions seriously: for example, 69% agree 'trade unions still have the power to cause serious problems for the UK economy', while almost as many (62%) agree that 'the UK is entering a new, more unstable period of employee relations'.
- However, our findings also paint a positive picture of employer attitudes to trade unions, with a majority (55%) agreeing that they provide essential protection for employees from bad management (21% disagree).

3 Implications for employers and people professionals

Drawn from the evidence and expert insights gathered for this report, Table 1 summarises our recommendations for positive working relationships between employee representatives and trade unions.

Use these recommendations to prepare for the upcoming new measures for industrial relations, to ensure compliance and to build a positive employment relations climate.

Table 1: Recommendations to plan for new industrial relations reforms

Plan now to ensure your organisation is ready for the statutory changes affecting collective voice and trade union rights when the ERB and secondary legislation become law	• Visit the CIPD tracker for up-to-date information on the statutory reforms affecting trade union rights and their expected implementation timelines across Great Britain. Visit our Northern Ireland tracker for an overview of reforms proposed in Northern Ireland. • Key reforms for Great Britain include: – immediate repeal of the Trade Union Act 2016 – simplifying the trade union recognition process – electronic and workplace balloting – new employer duty to inform workers of their right to join a trade union – strengthening trade unions’ rights of access to workplaces – lowering the voting thresholds and notice periods for industrial action. • The CIPD guide Working with trade unions offers advice on working effectively with trade unions. • The UK Government has published a factsheet that gives more detail on the proposed changes. • The government’s implementation roadmap gives information on when measures will take effect.
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Table 1: Recommendations to plan for new industrial relations reforms (continued)

Ensure your organisation informs and consults employees in line with their statutory rights and as part of a strategic approach to build a positive employment relations climate	• UK employers are under a statutory obligation to consult with employees on certain issues, such as changes to employment contracts, health and safety, selling the business or buying a new one, pensions and potential redundancies. In certain circumstances, this includes a requirement to carry out 'collective consultation' with a recognised trade union or employee representatives. See Acas guidance on when and how to consult. • Develop employment relations skills among HR professionals and line managers to enable them to manage ongoing collective relationships with employee representatives. These include negotiating, communication and influencing skills. • Our guide outlines useful ways of establishing effective information and consultation arrangements.
Develop a holistic employee voice framework that combines individual with collective voice channels	• Cultivate a working environment that values employee engagement and prioritises information and consultation, so employees are informed about organisational change and can influence decision-making. • Set up multiple and complementary mechanisms for employee voice, including direct methods with individuals and indirect methods for collective voice, via employee representation. • Establish structures and processes for communicating with union and non-union representatives and employees at all levels of the organisation. • Train and guide managers so they understand the organisation's aims and practices for information and consultation, and have the skills and knowledge to promote effective employee voice. • Have a system to evaluate feedback, to ensure that people's feedback is captured and listened to from across the different voice channels. • Evaluate the effectiveness of the voice framework, including whether or not voice channels are adequate and available for all employees, and whether they meaningfully influence decision-making.

Table 1: Recommendations to plan for new industrial relations reforms (continued)

Take a joint working approach with union and non-union representatives so they understand and feel part of the organisation's purpose	• If there is a request for union recognition, it's better to engage with the unions and form an agreement based on mutual understanding, preferably as part of a joint working approach. The UK Government has advice for dealing with a recognition request. • Develop effective working relationships between senior management and trade union representatives, as well as non-union representatives. • Build trust through honesty and direct communications – this approach is key to developing positive working relationships between management and employee representatives. • Ensure a positive joint working ethos is cascaded throughout the organisation, so managers at all levels approach working relationships with representatives in a constructive way and build trust.
Develop a wider conflict management strategy to encourage early dispute resolution for individual and collective issues	• A supportive culture with positive relationships can enhance job quality and boost performance; conflict can seriously undermine it. Negative conflict takes focus away from delivering on objectives and organisational priorities. • Encourage senior leaders to understand conflict is inherent in organisations and they need to develop structured ways of dealing with it before issues escalate on an individual or collective basis. • Develop a framework to encourage early conflict resolution between individuals at source, and at the earliest opportunity. Encourage problem-solving to resolve differences and encourage people to feel safe to speak up and voice concerns. This approach will help to build more constructive and harmonious working relationships across the organisation. • Train people managers to have the confidence and capability to spot conflict and have difficult conversations. This should include specific training in conflict resolution, including mediation and facilitation techniques, and how to have difficult conversations with people. Refer to the CIPD's mediation guide on resolving workplace issues and guide for managers on preventing and dealing with bullying and workplace conflict. • Visit the CIPD's range of conflict management resources to shore up your organisation's ability to resolve individual disputes and build more harmonious collective relationships.

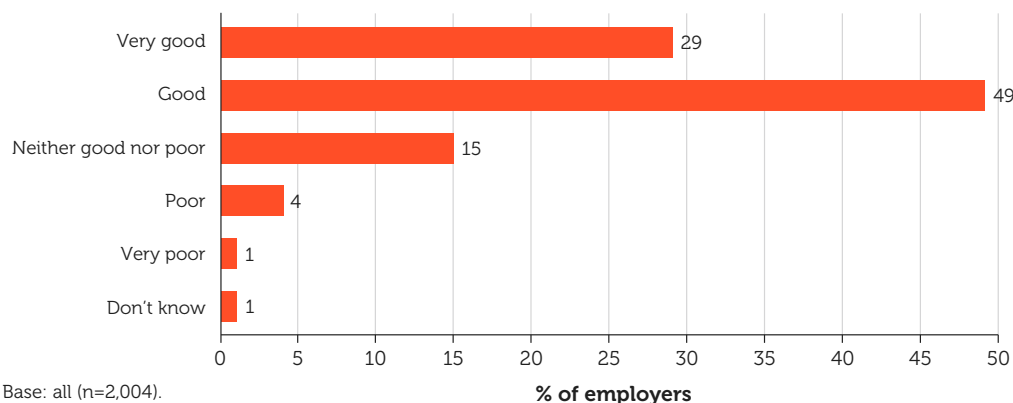
4 Employment relations climate generally good

In general, employers are positive about the employment relations climate in their organisation, with 79% describing relations between managers and employees as 'very good/good' and just 5% as 'poor/very poor', although 15% are ambivalent (Figure 1).

Employer respondents in the public sector are less likely to rate relations as good compared with their private sector counterparts (68% versus 81%).

The perceived climate also declines slightly in larger private sector organisations. For example, 87% of respondents based in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (2–249 employees) describe workplace relations as good compared with 76% of those in large organisations (250-plus employees).

Figure 1: How would you rate the relationship between management and employees generally in your workplace? (%)



How do employees rate the working environment?

Employers' perceptions of workplace relations don't always align with those of the workforce. At first glance, employee perceptions of workplace relationships are also positive in the *CIPD Good Work Index 2025*. For example, 82% of employees rate the relationship with their line manager or supervisor as good, while 72% also say it's good with other managers in the organisation. Four in five (80%) report their relationships with colleagues in their team as good.

However, a healthy employment relations climate should go hand in hand with a psychologically safe and inclusive working environment, and there are signs of these elements lacking in a significant minority of organisations. For example, one in five employees (20%) agree that if they made a mistake at work, their manager or supervisor would hold it against them. The same proportion (20%) agree that people in their team sometimes reject others for being different.

Further, a quarter of employees (25%) report experiencing some form of conflict at work within the last 12 months; the three most common types are: being undermined or humiliated in their job (12%); being shouted at or having a very heated argument (9%); or being on the receiving end of verbal abuse or insult (8%).

5 Role of employee representation: What are the benefits?

If done well, employee representation provides an effective mechanism for dialogue between management and workers, typically via their elected representatives, who can be union or non-union. For example, it provides senior management with the opportunity to impart important information or plans to the workforce and gain buy-in. For their part, employees can exercise collective voice via their representatives to make suggestions, ask questions or raise concerns.

UK employers are under a statutory obligation to consult with employees on certain issues, such as changes to employment contracts, potential redundancies or a TUPE transfer. In certain circumstances, this can include a requirement to consult on a collective basis. Further, under the Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Regulations, workers have a legal right to request information and consultation arrangements about other key issues that affect their work and organisation.

What is information and consultation?

- 'Inform' means management communicates with staff to ensure they are updated about workforce matters.
- 'Consult' means management actively seeks and considers employees' views before making a decision.

Non-union employee representatives perform an important role for **information and consultation**, but trade union representatives have an additional function known as 'collective bargaining'. This means they can **negotiate** with management on behalf of the workforce, particularly over questions of pay or terms and conditions.

How common are representative arrangements?

Overall, half (50%) of organisations have representative arrangements for informing and consulting employees, according to our employer survey findings (Table 2).

Public sector organisations are much more likely to have union representatives (84% versus 23% of private sector organisations). Large private sector organisations are also much more likely to have union representatives (36% of employers with 250+ employees compared with 9% of those with 2–249 employees).

Private sector organisations are much more likely than those in the public sector to have just non-union employee representatives (18% versus 3%).

The fact that, overall, almost half (46%) of organisations have no representative arrangements to enable collective voice among their workforce is a missed opportunity for many. Individual voice channels are very important, but union and/or non-union representation gives employees a collective voice that can complement and reinforce individual channels.

Collective voice can also make a significant contribution to an organisation's employee engagement strategy, which in turn can boost performance. This is highlighted in the [Engage for Success](#) report, with evidence showing the value of engaging with a collective voice, including with trade unions.

Table 2: Organisations with representative arrangements for informing and consulting employees (%)

	All	Broad sector			Private sector	
		Private sector	Public sector	Voluntary sector	SME (2–249 employees)	Large (250+ employees)
Yes, we have union representatives	25	16	67	23	6	24
Yes, we have non-union representatives	15	18	3	20	11	24
Yes, we have both union and non-union representatives	10	8	17	9	3	12
No, we do not have representatives	46	55	10	45	77	36
Don't know	3	4	3	3	3	4

Base: all (n=2,004); private sector (n=1,492); public sector (n=347); voluntary sector (n=165); SME (2–249 employees) (n=994); large (250+) (n=498).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

Collective voice has clear benefits

The overwhelming majority of organisations (86%) with employee representation report a range of benefits from having these arrangements; just 7% say there are no benefits (Figure 2). The top benefits are:

- offering an independent voice channel to raise concerns with management (42%)
- keeping the workforce well informed (41%)
- early warning signs of problems or fewer workplace disputes (39%).

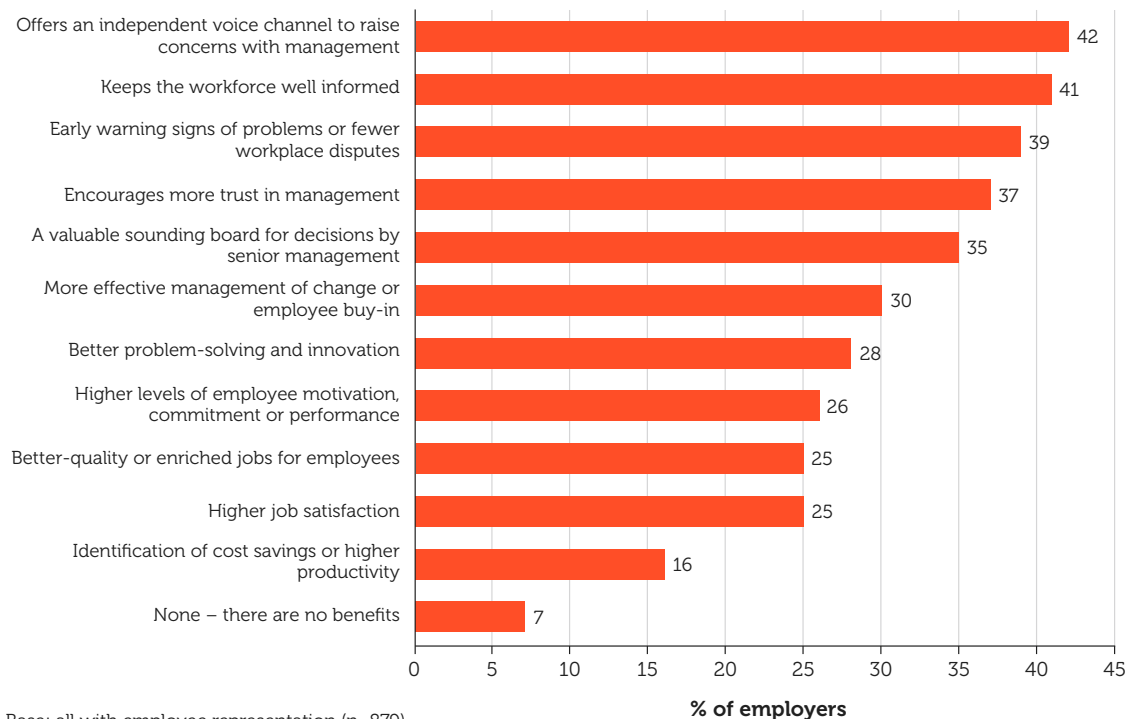
Private sector employers are more likely than those in the public sector to report any benefits from having employee representation (90% versus 78%).

For example, they are more than twice as likely to report positive impacts for:

- higher levels of employee motivation, commitment or performance (32% versus 15%)
- better-quality or enriched jobs for employees (31% versus 13%).

Overall among private sector employers, there's a very similar profile of respondents' perceptions of the benefits according to organisation size. SMEs (2–249 employees) similarly rate every advantage of having employee representation as large private sector employers (250+ employees), with the exception of 'early warning signs of problems or fewer workplace disputes', a benefit that's rated more highly by SMEs (45% compared with 34% of large private sector organisations).

Figure 2: Main benefits from having employee representation (% of employers)



Base: all with employee representation (n=879).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

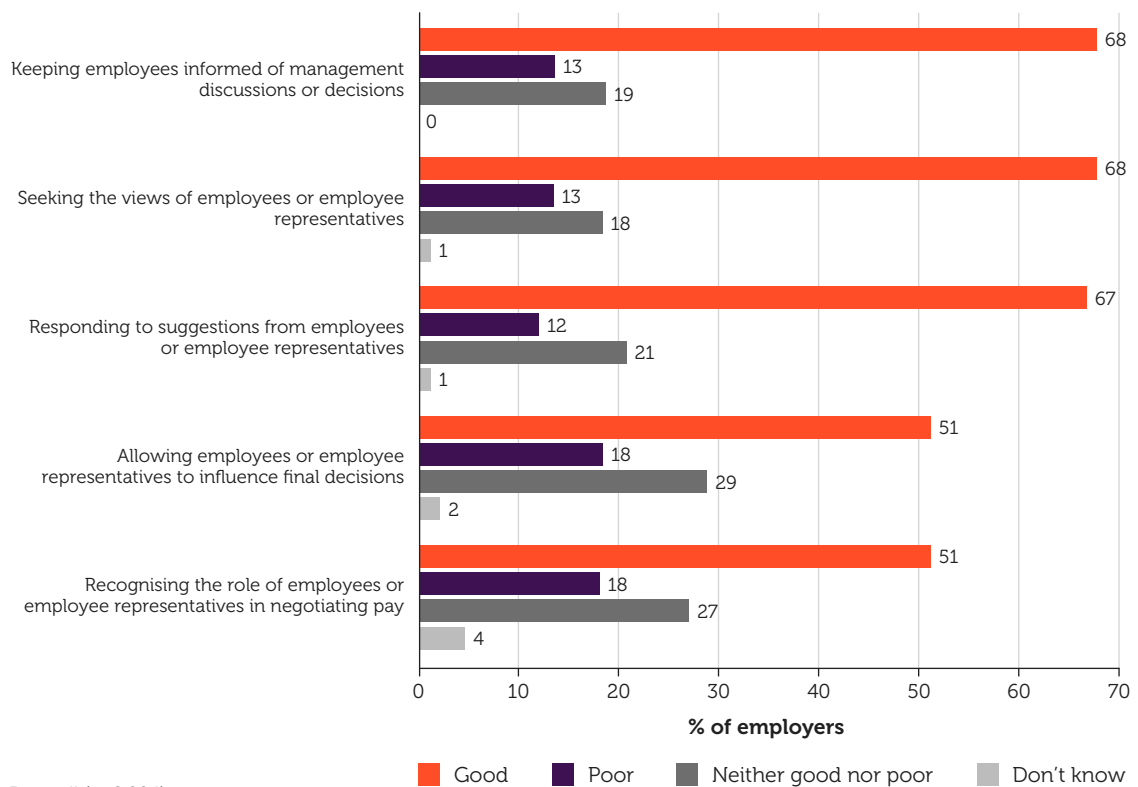
How effective do employers think they are in using employee representation?

Our employer survey explored the extent to which organisations think they are effective at using collective voice, including employee representation. Employers are generally positive across a number of dimensions, particularly in seeking the views of employees or their representatives, keeping people informed of discussions or decisions and in responding to suggestions from the workforce or their representatives (Figure 3).

Notably, private sector employers are more positive about all aspects of how their organisation uses collective voice mechanisms. For example, in terms of working with employee representatives:

- 70% in the private sector say their organisation is good at seeking the views of employees or employee representatives compared with 57% in the public sector
- 53% in the private sector say their organisation is good at allowing employees or employee representatives to influence final decisions, compared with 40% in the public sector
- 54% in the private sector say their organisation is good at recognising the role of employees or employee representatives in negotiating pay compared with 42% in the public sector.

Figure 3: How good or poor would you say your organisation is at...? (%)



Base: all (n=2,004).

Source: CIPD Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025.

What does the workforce think of employee representation?

The *CIPD Good Work Index 2025* explores employees' experience of voice, including the role played by managers in enabling collective voice and employee representation.

The findings show that employee perceptions are not as positive as employers', with much room for improvement. For example:

- Just over half (51%) agree that their manager is good at seeking the views of employees or employee representatives.
- Less than half (46%) agree that their manager is good at responding to suggestions from employees or employee representatives.

- Only 37% say managers allow them or their representatives to influence final decisions.
- Four in 10 (39%) agree that their manager is good at recognising the role of employees or employee representatives in negotiating pay.

The *CIPD Good Work Index 2025* also examines how employees rate the effectiveness of employee representatives themselves. Among those organisations with employee representation, the majority (58%) of employees said employee representatives were 'good' at seeking the views of employees, while 18% said 'poor' (24% said neither good nor poor). A similar proportion said that employee representatives were 'good' at representing employee views to senior management (54% versus 19% who said 'poor') and 'keeping employees informed of management discussions or decisions' (55% said 'good' and 20% said 'poor').

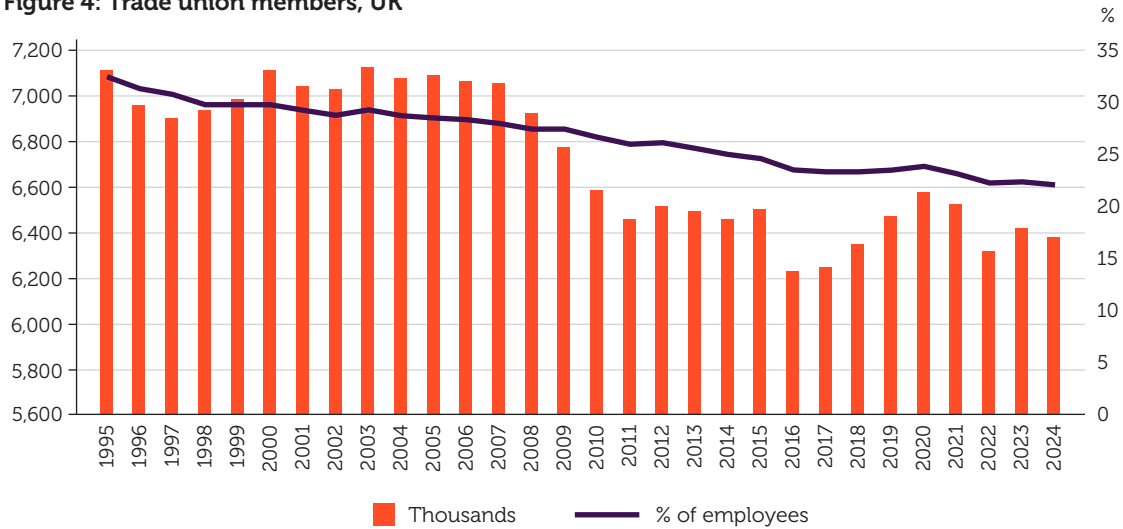
6 Downward trend in UK trade union membership continues for now

The proportion of UK employees who were trade union members fell to 22% in 2024, according to [official statistics](#) (Figure 4). Overall, the *CIPD Good Work Index 2025* found that one in five employees (20%) are trade union members, closely aligning to national statistics.

In 2024, 6.4 million employees in the UK were trade union members. This marks a continuing overall downward trend since this data was first collected in 1995 and marks the lowest union membership rate across this time period.

However, this downward trajectory could change in the future given the raft of [reforms to strengthen union rights](#) under the UK Government's [Make Work Pay](#) plan, such as a new right of workplace access and lowering the thresholds to gain statutory recognition.

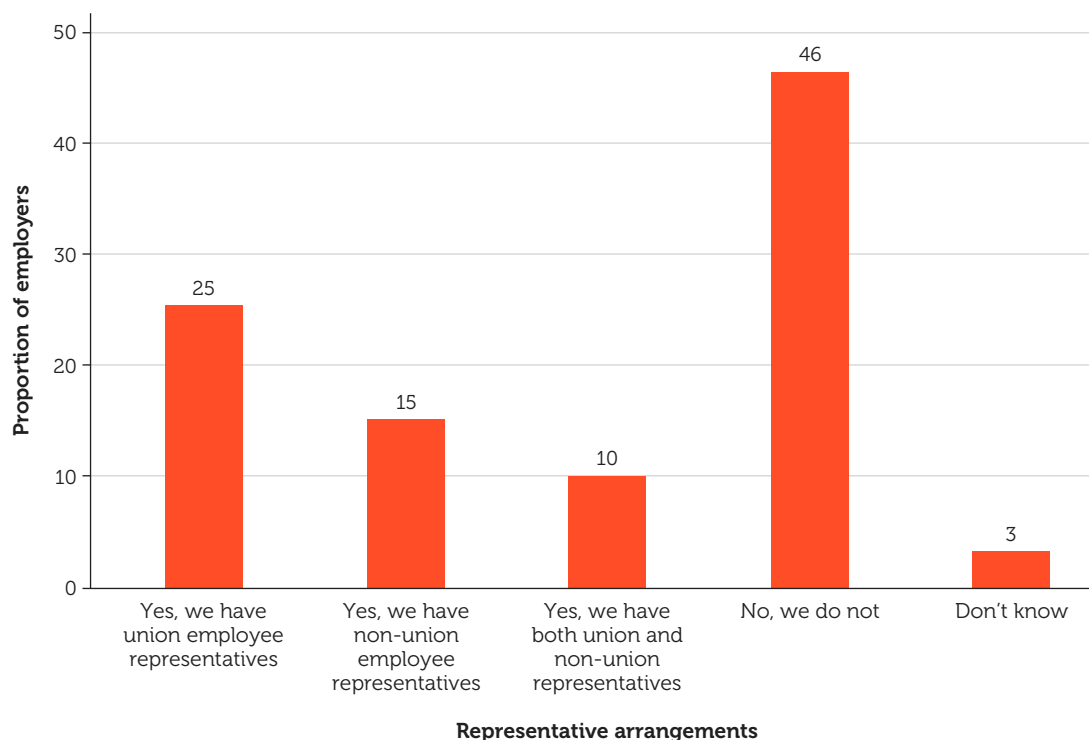
Figure 4: Trade union members, UK



Source: [Official Statistics: Trade union membership, UK, 1995 to 2024: statistical bulletin](#), 22 May 2025, Department for Business and Trade.

Our employer survey found that more than a third (35%) of organisations have trade union representatives (Figure 5). More workplaces have trade union representatives only (25%) than have a combination of both union and non-union representatives (10%). A further 15% of organisations have just non-union representatives, meaning about half (46%) of all employers do not have any formal indirect mechanisms for informing and consulting colleagues.

Figure 5: Does your organisation have representative arrangements for informing and consulting employees? (%)



Base: all (n=2,004).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

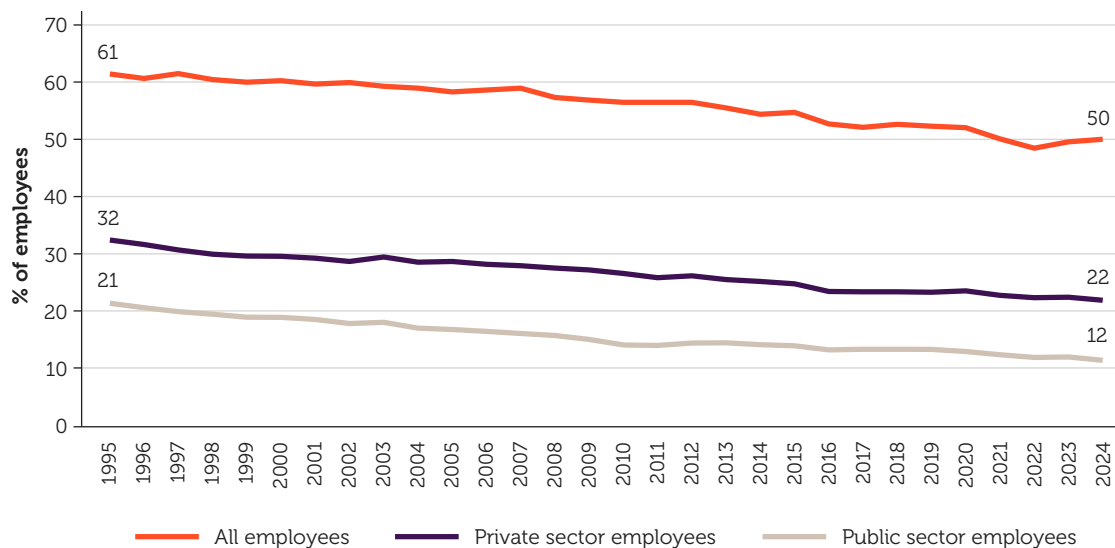
A public–private sector divide

In 2024, half (50%) of public sector employees were trade union members, according to official statistics (see Figure 6). This compares with just 12% of those in the private sector.

The gap between levels of public versus private sector unionisation used to be much narrower but has widened considerably since the start of this century in particular. It's the fall in private sector union membership that has widened the gap overall.

The current official data reinforces this trend, with the 2024 decrease in trade union membership levels being driven by private sector employees. Private sector trade union membership levels decreased by 57,000, to 2.5 million in 2024, the second lowest level since comparable records began in 1995. This compares with 3.9 million public sector employees belonging to a trade union in 2024, an increase of 20,000 compared with 2023.

Figure 6: Public and private sector trade union membership 2024 (%)

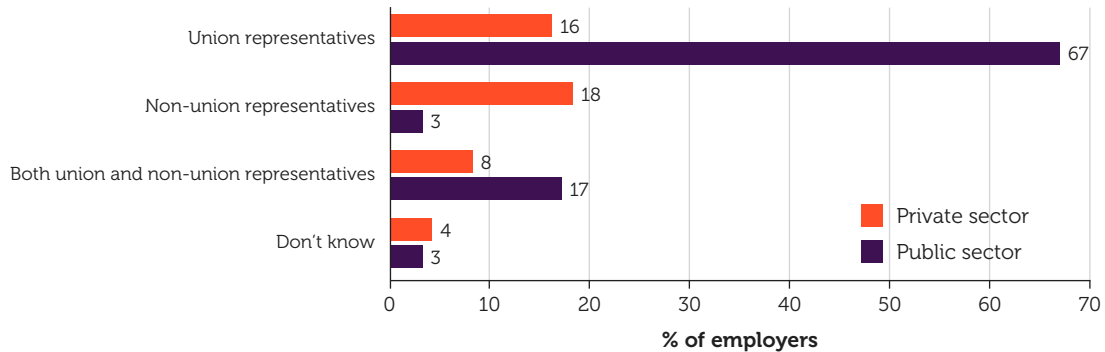


Source: Official Statistics: Trade union membership, UK, 1995 to 2024: statistical bulletin, 22 May 2025, Department for Business and Trade.

The majority of public sector employers (84%) have some form of representative arrangements for informing and consulting staff, according to our employer findings (Figure 7). Two-thirds (67%) of employers have only union representation and a further 17% report both union and non-union representation.

As expected, union representation is much less common in the private sector, with 23% reporting such arrangements. Size of organisation has a significant influence on the likelihood of trade union presence, with 36% of large private sector workplaces having union representation compared with just 9% of SMEs.

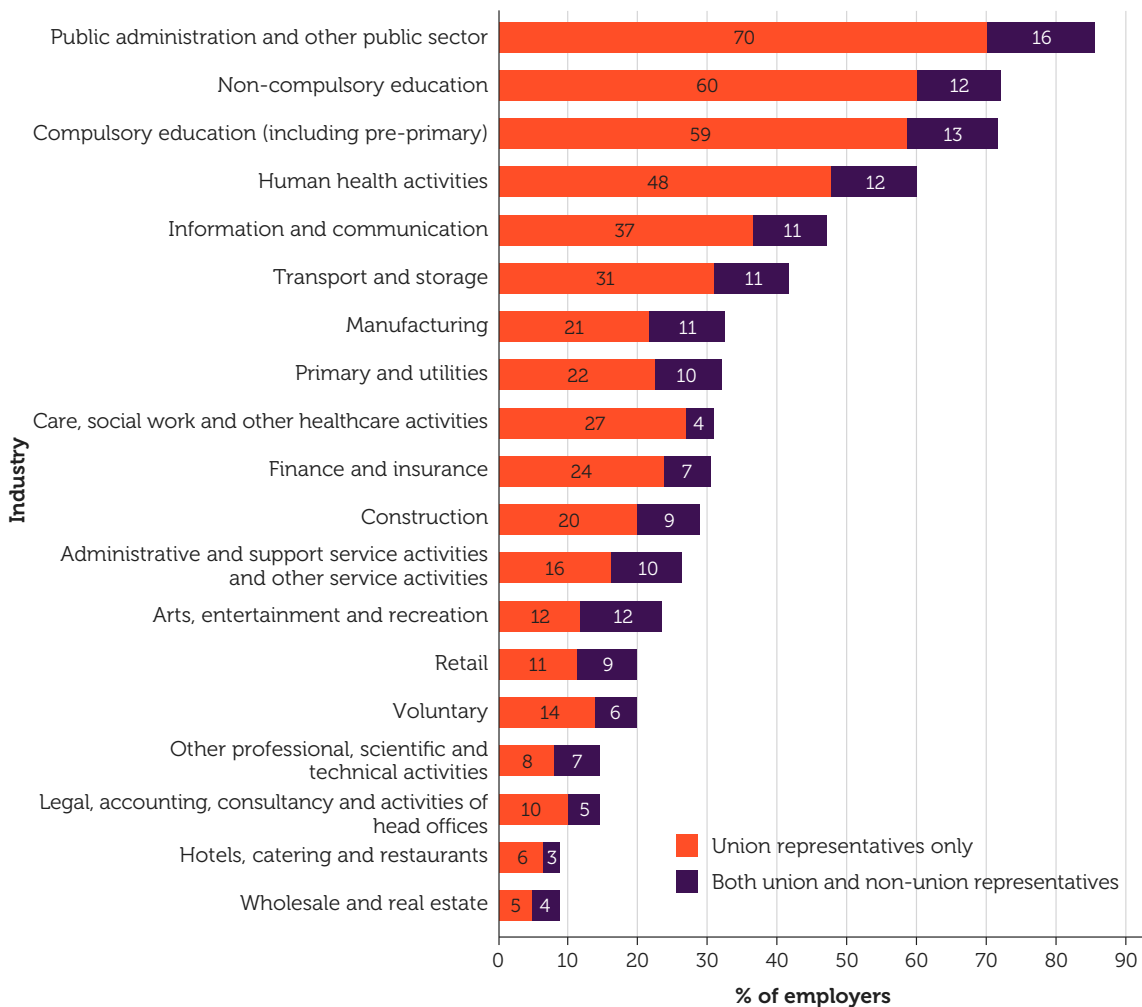
Figure 7: Union versus non-union representative arrangements to inform and consult employees, by public/private sector (%)



Base: private sector (n=1,492); public sector (n=347).
Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

At an industry level, less than 10% of employers in wholesale and real estate, and hospitality have a trade union presence (Figure 8). Fewer than one in five employers in retail, the voluntary sector, and among professional activities have trade union representatives.

Figure 8: Trade union representation at an industry level (% of employers)



Base: all employers. Industries with base sizes less than 50 have been excluded. For a breakdown of base sizes, see Table 2.
Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

Trade unions: a snapshot of membership in the UK

According to UK official statistics, trade union membership levels have declined from their peak of 13.2 million in 1979 to 6.4 million in 2024, driven mainly by a fall in membership in the private sector. In comparison, union membership among public sector employees has stayed relatively stable. Overall, union membership has declined in the past four decades, although the decline has slowed. From 1996 onwards, the rate of decline has slowed significantly.

Other notable national trends include:

- The overall long-term decline in union membership has been driven by a faster decrease in membership among male employees, leading to female employees accounting for the majority of union membership from 2005 onwards; in 2024, union membership among female employees stood at 3.7 million compared with 2.7 million for their male counterparts, the lowest level of male membership since 1995.
- Older employees are more likely to be union members: in 2024, 37.7% of union members were aged 50 years or older, compared with 4.4% aged 16–24 years and 20.6% aged 24–35 years.
- A higher proportion of employees who have a disability under the Equality Act 2010 were members of a trade union in 2024 (27.2%) than employees who do not have a disability, at 20.8%.
- **UK-born employees are significantly more likely to be a member of a trade union** than non-UK-born employees: 23.1% of UK-born employees were trade union members in 2024, compared with 17.4% of non-UK-born employees.
- **Higher income earners are more likely to be union members:** 19.9% of those earning £1,000 and above per week compared with 7.7% of those earning less than £250 per week.
- **Higher-educated employees are more likely to be union members,** with union density at 26.3% for those with a degree compared with 14.9% of employees with no qualifications.

Source: [Official Statistics: Trade union membership, UK, 1995 to 2024: statistical bulletin](#), 22 May 2025, Department for Business and Trade.

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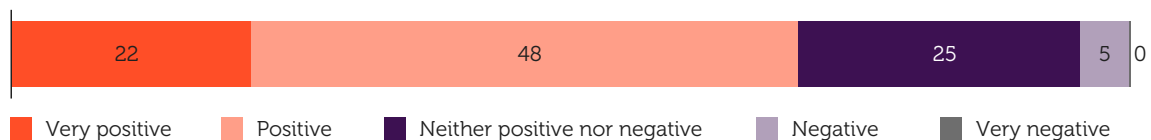
Trade union representation and relations

Overall, our employer findings reveal mixed attitudes towards trade union membership among employees: 26% are in favour of union membership and 30% aren't, but the highest proportion are neutral (37%). Public sector respondents are considerably more likely to be in favour compared with those based in the private and voluntary sectors (54% versus 19% and 31%, respectively).

However, organisations with union representatives are overwhelmingly positive about the relationship between trade unions and management, according to our employer survey findings (Figure 9). Almost half (48%) say the relationship is positive, with a further 22% saying it is very positive. Just 5% rate the relationship as negative.

Private sector organisations are significantly more likely to say it's positive (77%) compared with those based in the public sector (62%).

Figure 9: How would you rate the relationship between management and the unions? (% of employers)



Base: all with union representation (n=602).

Source: CIPD Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025.

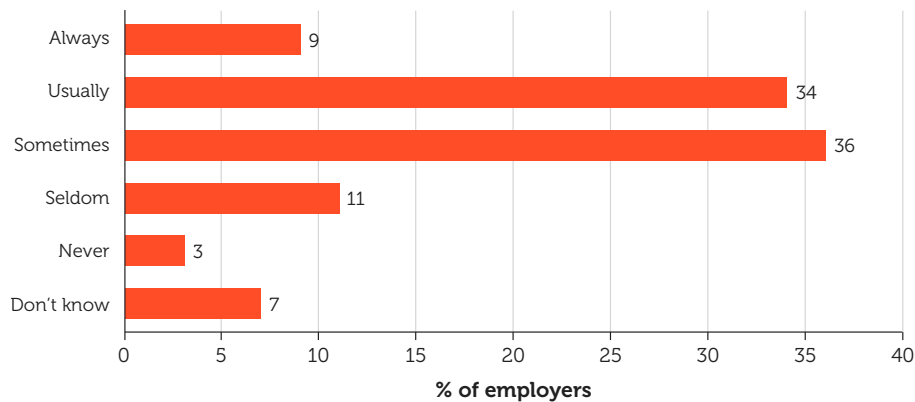
How much power do the unions have?

In unionised workplaces, the dominant view is that unions have significant power, with 54% of respondents agreeing that unions have a great deal or quite a lot of influence, compared with 41% who report them having not much or none at all.

It's worth pointing out that private sector employers, who report more positive working relationships with their unions, also report that they have greater influence. More than six in 10 (62%) private sector respondents agree that their unions have a great deal or quite a lot of influence compared with 48% in the public sector.

Overall, respondents in unionised workplaces are more positive than negative about their unions taking a constructive approach (Figure 10). Around a third (34%) of respondents say unions usually take a constructive line when major changes are proposed. A further 9% say this is always the case and 36% say it's sometimes the case. There's no significant difference in responses according to broad sector.

Figure 10: Can management rely on the unions(s) to take a constructive approach when major changes are proposed in your organisation? (%)



Base: all with union representation (n=602).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

What are the challenges of working with trade unions?

One in five (21%) employers see no barriers to effective working with their recognised trade union(s), according to our survey findings. However, most employers (68%) report some challenges (Figure 11). The top obstacle is that local union representatives are more interested in making a name for themselves than achieving positive outcomes for employees and the business in the longer term, reported by almost a quarter of employers (23%).

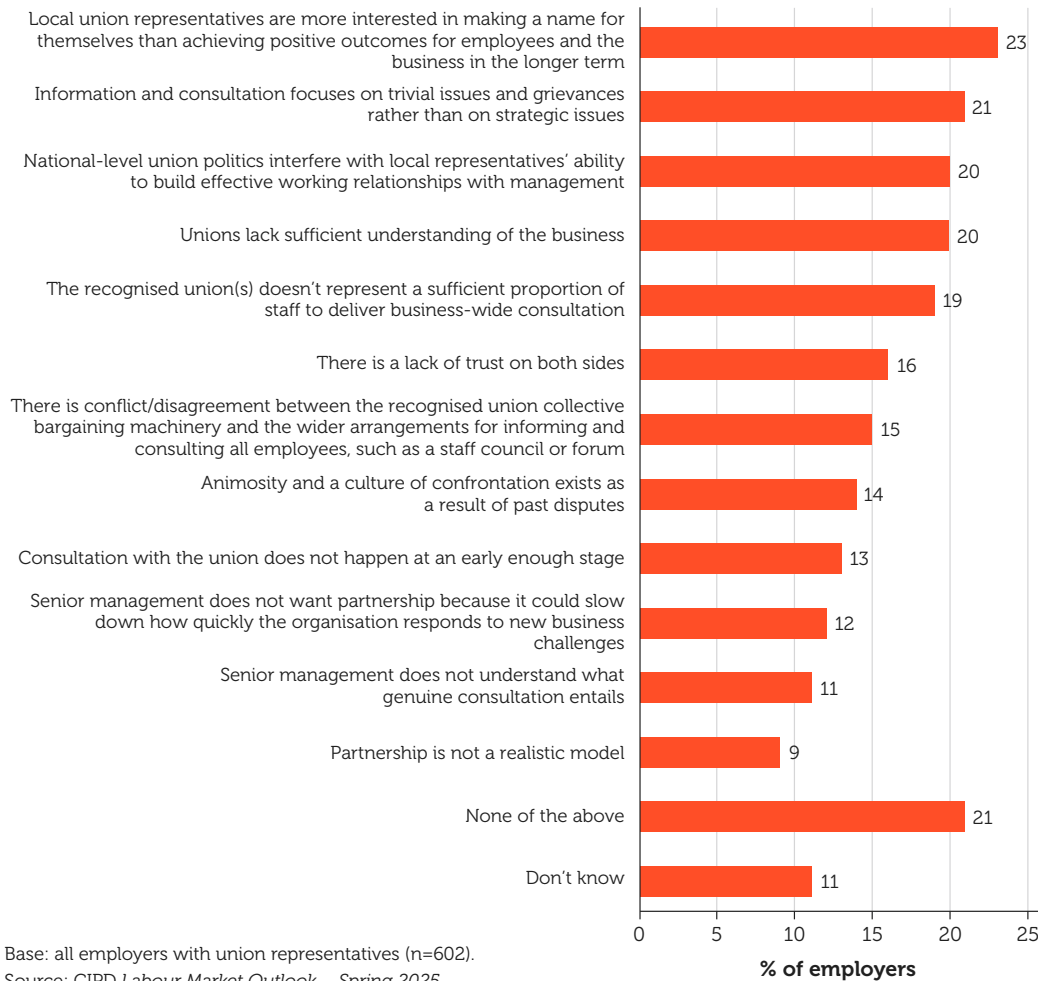
It's encouraging that the obstacle perceived as least significant is that partnership is an unrealistic model (just 9% of employers). This suggests that the principles underpinning partnership, such as collaboration and a mutual interest in the success of the organisation, are still relevant for the modern workplace.

The findings show that it's more the practical implementation of union relations that encounter obstacles, such as a focus on trivial rather than strategic issues and unions lacking sufficient understanding of the business.

It seems there can also be a disconnect at a national versus local level, with one in five (20%) employers citing national-level union politics interfering with local representatives' ability to build effective working relationships with management as an obstacle. This is more likely to be the view of public sector employers (26% versus 15% of private sector employers).

For their part, private sector employers are more likely to report conflict between the recognised union collective bargaining machinery and the organisation's wider arrangements for informing and consulting all employees, such as a staff council or forum, as a barrier (20% compared with 10% of public sector employers).

Figure 11: Main obstacles to effective partnership with trade unions (%)



8

Employers' views of UK Government trade union reform

The UK Government's reform agenda will introduce a raft of new rights for trade unions and their representatives across Great Britain, including one enabling them to access workplaces in a 'regulated and responsible' manner.

When we asked employers about the specific measures proposed within the ERB, there is net opposition to them (Figure 12). Employers particularly oppose reducing the notice trade unions must give when they intend to take industrial action from 14 to 10 days, removing the current 50% turnout threshold so that a simple majority of members can vote in favour of industrial action, and extending the expiry of the mandate for industrial action from six to 12 months.

A new right of access to workplaces

Where an access agreement with an employer is reached, trade union officials will be able to physically access workplaces, or communicate with workers digitally to represent, recruit or organise members, and to facilitate collective bargaining. The reforms will also introduce an enforcement framework for trade union access to the workplace, allowing cases to be referred to the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) for arbitration. Stronger access rights are also being proposed in Northern Ireland.

Overall, our survey results are mixed in terms of employers' attitudes towards a new access right, with 31% in favour and 21% against (Table 3). However, non-unionised employers are much less supportive and much more opposed to the reform.

Table 3: To what extent does your organisation support or oppose the introduction of new rights for trade unions to access workplaces for recruitment and organising purposes? (%)

	All	Unionised	Non-unionised
Support	31	51	21
Neither support nor oppose	29	22	33
Oppose	21	8	30
Don't know	19	19	17

Base: all (n=2,004).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook* – Spring 2025.

Union recognition will become easier

Currently, there are strict rules governing statutory trade union recognition. For example, a union needs to show that at least 50% of workers in a proposed bargaining unit are likely to support an application for trade union recognition. Further, at least 40% of workers in the bargaining unit must vote in favour to support union recognition when a ballot takes place. There is a proposal to remove both of these threshold rules for statutory recognition so that a union is only required to secure a simple majority of those voting in a ballot to achieve trade union recognition.

Overall, 24% of employers oppose and 21% support the relaxation of the statutory union recognition rules. Twice as many non-unionised as unionised employers oppose this regulatory change (30% versus 15%; see Figure 13).

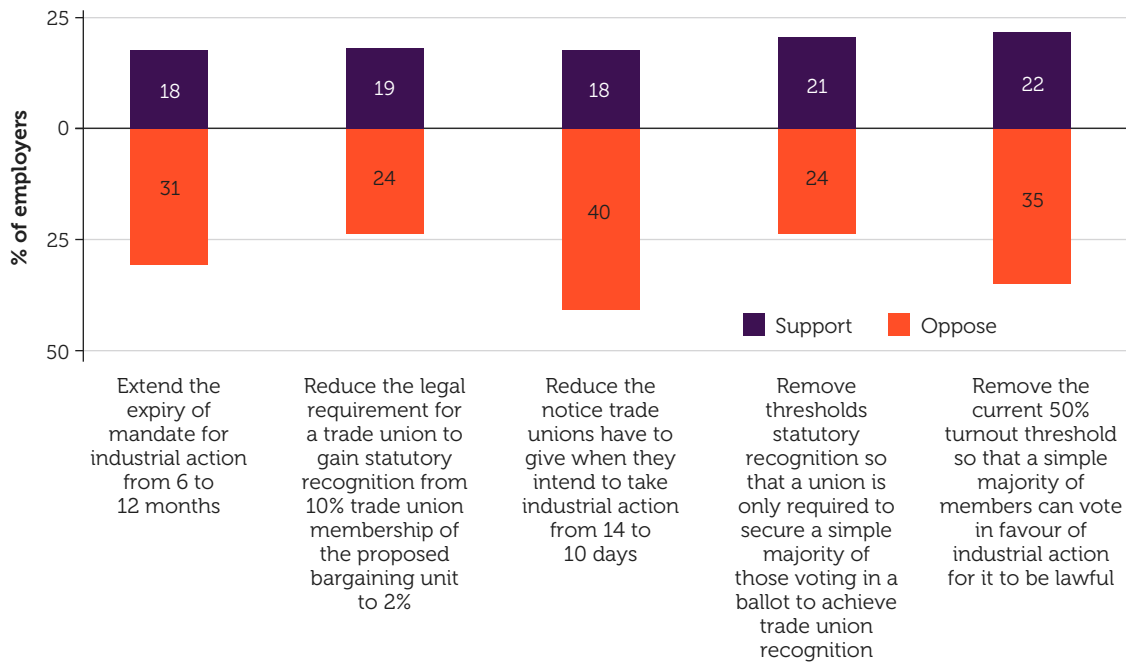
The ERB also gave the UK Government the power to reduce the current membership threshold for union recognition applications from 10% of trade union membership of the proposed bargaining unit to as low as 2%. This further reform will be the subject of a future consultation. As mentioned, 24% of employers overall oppose and 19% support the relaxation of this statutory union recognition rule. Again, twice as many non-unionised as unionised employers oppose this regulatory change (30% versus 15%; see Figure 13).

Industrial action will become easier

There are also far-reaching reforms afoot in relation to unions taking lawful industrial action, and employers are firmly opposed to all those we asked about (Figure 12):

- 31% oppose and 18% support extending the expiry of a trade union's mandate for industrial action from six months to 12 months.
- Where trade unions intend to take industrial action, 40% oppose and 18% support reducing the notice they give to employers from 14 days to 10 days.
- 35% oppose and 22% support removing the current threshold requirement for a 50% turnout so that in future a simple majority of members can vote in favour of industrial action for it to be lawful.

Figure 12: To what extent does your organisation support or oppose these changes?

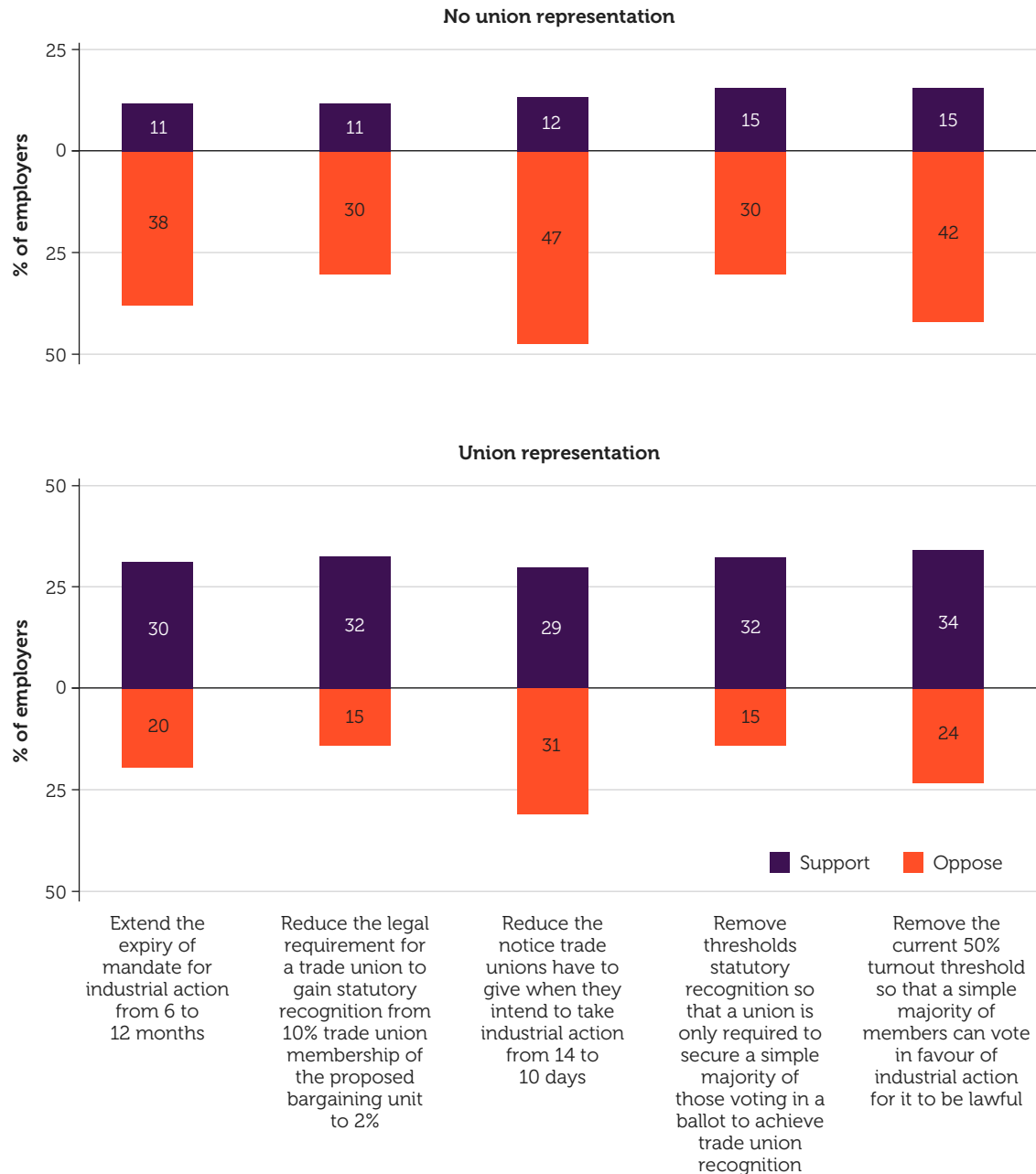


Base: all (n=2,004).

Source: CIPD Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025.

As expected, those employers without union recognition are even more firmly opposed to these legislative reforms (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Unionised versus non-unionised workplaces: to what extent does your organisation support or oppose these changes?



Base: all (n=2,004).

Source: CIPD Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025.

What does this mean for SMEs?

Our employer survey findings reflect the wider context that micro and small businesses (fewer than 50 employees) – which represent the vast majority of SMEs – are unlikely to be engaged in trade union relationships. Even SMEs overall, with up to 249 employees, are much less likely to have trade union representatives than large organisations with at least 250 employees (6% versus 24%).

However, our findings also show that respondents in SMEs are more positive than large employers about their employment relations climate, with 87% of respondents based in SMEs describing their workplace relations as good compared with 76% of those in large organisations. This underlines the point that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to industrial relations. Effective voice and employee representation arrangements don’t necessarily rely on having trade union representation, particularly in small and micro businesses. The culture and management communications in small organisations can be more agile, and less formal approaches with direct voice channels can still build a positive climate for workplace relations.

While the new trade union rights cover all workplaces, some reforms, such as new recognition arrangements, are likely to have more immediate impact on larger private sector organisations. SMEs, including smaller businesses, would still be wise to reflect on their industrial relations culture and employee voice mechanisms. Even in organisations with fewer than 50 employees, there could be a collective dimension to some strategic business and/or employment issues where it could be beneficial to have a staff forum, for example.

9

How can employers and employee representatives work together for mutual gain?

The UK Government’s policy intent for its Make Work Pay plan is to create a modern framework for industrial relations based on four principles: collaboration, proportionality, accountability, and balancing the interests of workers, employers and the public. The CIPD agrees these are good foundations from which to develop effective industrial relations in workplaces. A renewed emphasis on partnership working and employee engagement can play a key role in helping organisations adapt to the multiple challenges facing them, for example as they manage rapid change or seek to adopt new technology.

A joint policy briefing by the CIPD and Prospect agrees that improved employment relations, and partnership working between employers and trade unions, can provide the foundation for much of what the UK Government needs to achieve to support its ambition to improve productivity, growth and living standards. The employers taking part in our survey support this view of mutual gains, with the majority (56%) agreeing that 'working in partnership with the trade unions can benefit the organisation' (Figure 15). This increases to 72% among public sector employers, where unions have a much greater presence.

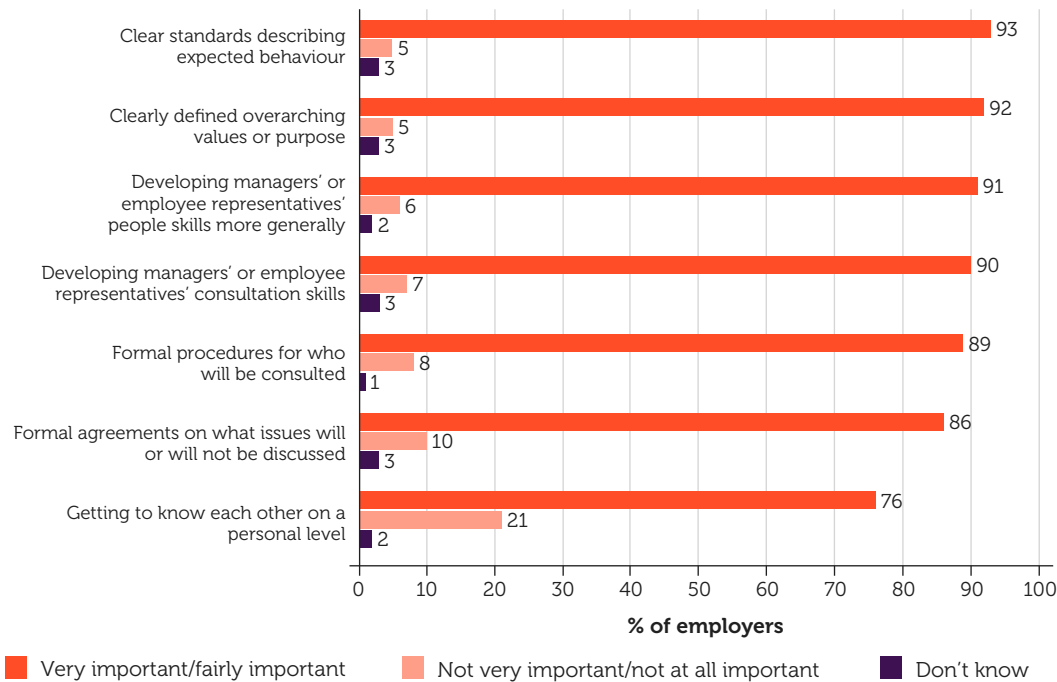
However, our policy briefing also makes the crucial point that legislation on its own will not improve job quality or translate into more harmonious working relationships. This requires a complementary focus on promoting partnership, improving employment relations skills and strengthening key institutions. Areas for action include:

- The UK Government should take concrete steps to improve employment relations and partnership working across the UK to ensure the proposed new rights for trade unions don't lead to more workplace disputes and industrial action. These should be underpinned by a new statutory code of practice or guidance which sets out the principles and behaviours that need to be upheld by both employers and trade unions to support a positive employment relations climate.
- The UK Government should establish a robust and effective institutional framework to support and promote good practice and prevent disputes. This will require additional resources for Acas and the Central Arbitration Committee to help mediate and resolve disputes and support voluntary agreements where possible between employers and trade unions. There is also a need for additional resources for the Fair Work Agency, the other enforcement bodies and the employment tribunal system.
- The UK Government should work with stakeholders on a plan to raise the employment relations skills and knowledge of HR professionals, managers and trade union representatives. This would include steps to strengthen sector bodies to drive collective employer action to improve partnership working at an industry level.

How can managers and representatives build effective partnership?

Our findings show that employers consider there's a range of critical success factors for building effective working relationships between senior management and employee representatives. These cover both formal and informal approaches and range from having clear standards describing expected behaviour and clearly defined overarching values or purpose to getting to know each other on a personal level (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: How important, if at all, are the following for effective working relationships between senior management and employee representatives? (%)



Base: all employers with employee representatives (n=879).

Source: CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*.

These findings show how important it is for organisations to establish a clear framework for joint working with employee representatives. There need to be regular meetings with a set agenda of items to work through, with open channels of communication to raise issues.

10

Industrial relations and trade unions: What does the future hold?

Is there unmet demand for unionisation?

Only a very small minority of employers (2%) without employee representation believe there is pressure from one or more trade unions to achieve formal recognition, according to our survey findings. There's no difference according to broad sector, although the proportion rises marginally to 5% in large private sector organisations.

However, the reforms enacted through the ERB will drastically change the landscape for industrial relations in the coming years, potentially leading to a rise in union representation across a wide range of sectors and industries.

Initially, it's likely that the most change will be experienced by large private sector employers currently without union representation.

The *Skills and Employment Survey 2024*, which surveys working adults in Britain, provides further evidence that the level of unionisation could change in the coming years. It reports high levels of unmet demand for unionisation among workers. More than a third (36%) working in non-unionised organisations say they would vote to establish a union if they were given the chance (31% said 'no', while 32% were undecided). The level of unmet demand for union representation within non-unionised organisations increases to 43% among those aged 20–29 years.

The survey also explores how the unmet demand for unionisation varies across different employee groups, including those with protected characteristics as defined under equalities legislation. Among employees from the LGBTQ+ community who work in non-unionised organisations, six in 10 (60%) report they would vote for the establishment of a union.

Those who suffer from long-term ill-health conditions are also more likely to be in favour of the establishment of a union, with this rate increasing according to the extent to which they report being limited by their ill-health condition. For example, just over half (51%) of employees who report that they are limited a lot by an ill-health condition indicate that they would vote to establish a union at their workplace, compared with 34% among those who report having no ill-health conditions.

Employers need to give serious consideration to unions

Further evidence that trade unions retain their influence in the modern workplace is provided in our employer survey findings. For example, 69% agree 'trade unions still have the power to cause serious problems for the UK economy', while almost as many (62%) agree that 'the UK is entering a new, more unstable period of employee relations' (Figure 15).

It's important that we take a balanced view of how employers perceive the role of trade unions, and it's certainly not a one-sided picture. Overall, a majority (55%) agree that unions provide essential protection for employees from bad management (21% disagree), and many more employers agree than disagree that 'working in partnership with trade unions can benefit the organisation' (56% versus 17%).

Employers currently with arrangements for union representation are much more likely to take a positive view of the role unions play in respect of both these statements (see Figure 16).

These findings are a firm endorsement for the continued relevance of unions in a turbulent and complex business environment.

Figure 15: Employer attitudes to employment relations (%)

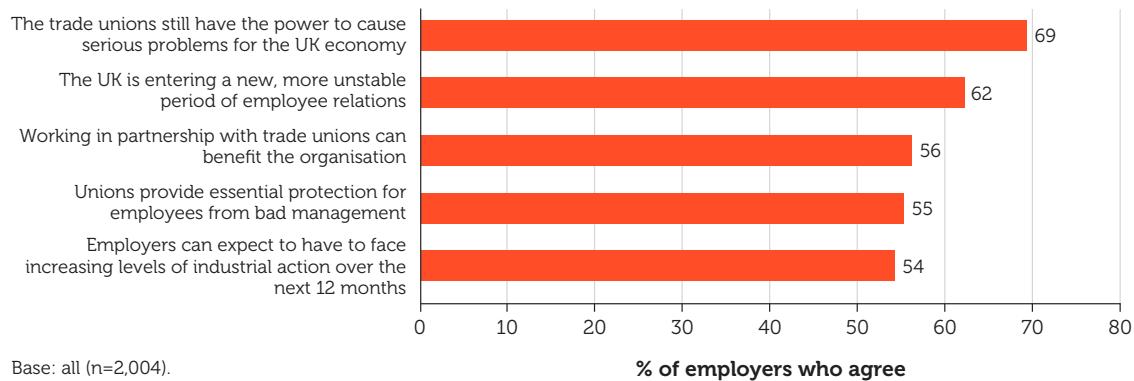
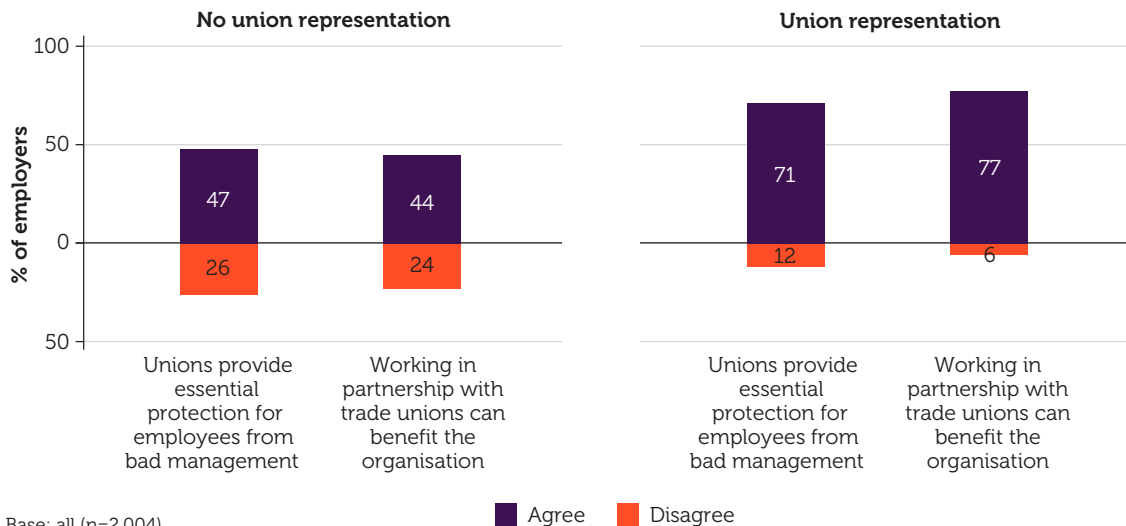


Figure 16: Views of unionised versus non-unionised employers



Collaborative collective voice is the way forward

Employers as well as employees stand to gain the most from employee voice if they develop a holistic framework that combines a range of individual and collective channels that use union and non-union representatives. If there is demand for unionisation, it is much better to work with union officials and employees to develop effective working relationships based on trust from the outset.

Given the radical trade union and wider employment reforms due to be implemented, this could be a challenging period for some organisations, particularly if they have not previously worked with unions. Employers and people professionals should start planning now for these changes by reviewing their collective voice arrangements and ensuring they have the necessary employee relations skills to develop effective partnership arrangements with representatives.

Many employers and people professionals have well-established and productive relationships with their recognised trade union(s). We need to learn from these examples to help more organisations to build capability in this area. This includes communicating a narrative that emphasises the opportunity there is for employers and unions to work together towards a common interest. This won't always be easy and will always take commitment, but the mutual gains could be significant.

11 Background to the research

This report, exploring industrial relations and employee participation in UK workplaces, is based on findings from a survey of 2,004 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK, conducted by YouGov Plc as part of the CIPD *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025*. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24 March and 15 April 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK employment by organisation size, sector and industry.

Table 4: Breakdown of sample, by industry

Industry	Count
Administrative and support service activities and other service activities	217
Arts, entertainment and recreation	63
Care, social work and other healthcare activities	54
Compulsory education (including pre-primary)	149
Construction	147
Finance and insurance	126
Hotels, catering and restaurants	59
Human health activities	132
Information and communication	164
Legal, accounting, consultancy and activities of head offices	136
Manufacturing	156
Non-compulsory education	100
Other professional, scientific and technical activities	122
Police and armed forces	12
Primary and utilities	47
Public administration and other public sector	82
Retail	53
Transport and storage	58
Voluntary	64
Wholesale and real estate	63

Respondents come from organisations of all sizes and work within a wide range of industries. Overall, 75% work in the private sector, 17% in the public sector and 8% in the voluntary sector. SMEs refer to organisations with fewer than 250 employees.

The report also includes findings from the *CIPD Good Work Index 2025*, an annual benchmark of job quality in the UK. Each year, we survey more than 5,000 workers from different sectors and occupations about key aspects of their work and employment. The resulting data and our analysis provide evidence-based insights for people professionals, employers and policy-makers to improve work and working lives.

All figures in graphs have been rounded to the nearest percentage point. Due to rounding, percentages may not always total 100.



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