CIPD

LABOUR MARKET

OUTLOOK

VIEWS FROM EMPLOYERS

Winter 2025/26

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

Labour Market Outlook

Winter 2025/26

Contents

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1 Foreword from the CIPD

The quarterly CIPD *Labour Market Outlook* (LMO) provides an early indication of future changes to the labour market around recruitment, redundancy and pay intentions. The findings are based on a representative survey of more than 2,000 employers.

This quarter, almost all of our indicators remain unchanged and reflect a job market which is difficult for jobseekers, but one that is becoming easier for employers to navigate. There has been little movement around employer hiring intentions, which remains at an unparalleled low, outside of the pandemic. The overall net employment balance remains low at just +7, despite more certainty being offered by the 2025 Budget and the passing of the Employment Rights Act (ERA). The continued effect of rising employment costs drags on business confidence, with businesses reporting that the National Insurance rise was the biggest cost pressure in 2025.

In the public sector, the net employment balance has fallen further this quarter from −8 to −11, meaning that more employers in the public sector believe their staff levels will fall than rise in the next three months. 2025 was beset with restrictive recruitment practices in the civil service, with the net employment balance in the public sector being negative across the entire year. This is in keeping with reports that there is currently an assortment of voluntary exit, voluntary and compulsory redundancy schemes, and several recruitment freezes across UK government departments. The number of entrants to the civil service decreased by more than 30% from March 2024 to March 2025, the largest year-on-year decrease since between 2009/10 and 2010/11. However, as the Institute for Government highlights in its *Whitehall monitor 2026*, the civil service is still missing a strategic workforce plan. The plan was first scheduled for the summer of 2025; however, the government has now committed to publishing it in the first half of 2026.

2026 marks the start of the implementation of the measures in the ERA. Now the ERA has received Royal Assent, businesses can act with more certainty as there is a firmer timetable for when many of the measures will come into force. However, the expedited nature of some of the reforms places pressure on HR and businesses to understand both how to implement them and the cost involved. In this *Labour Market Outlook*, we find that not only do most employers expect the ERA to increase their employment costs, but two in five also expect to hire fewer permanent workers due to some of the key reforms.

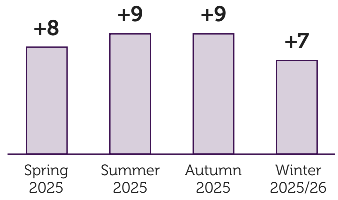
Our data is also at odds with the expectation of the government about the impact of trade union reforms. The government's latest economic analysis on the likely impact of the act assesses that improving worker representation, by giving trade unions greater freedom to organise, represent and negotiate on behalf of their workers, could reduce workplace conflict. We find that almost a third of employers expect these reforms to increase workplace conflict, with just 4% expecting it to decrease. A third of employers also report that the substantial changes to the unfair dismissal qualification period and the day one right to statutory sick pay are likely to increase workplace conflict.

James Cockett, CIPD Senior Labour Market Economist

Read on for our latest labour market data and analysis on employers' recruitment, redundancy and pay intentions this winter.

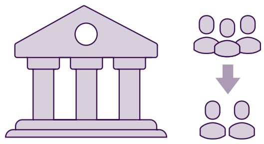
2 Key points

- The net employment balance – the difference between employers expecting there will be an increase in staff levels and those expecting there will be a decrease in the next three months – remains low this quarter at +7.



Net employment balance

- Employment intentions in the public sector have fallen to –11 this quarter. This means that more public sector employers expect staff numbers to decrease than increase over the next three months. It has remained below zero for the last four quarters.



Public sector expects staff decrease

- Just 15% of employers are anticipating significant problems in filling vacancies in the next six months.

Hard-to-fill vacancies remain low

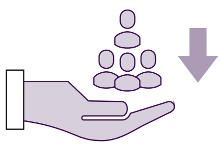
- The median expected basic pay increase remains at 3% overall, and across all sectors.

Median expected basic pay increase at 3%

- Three-quarters of employers expect the Employment Rights Act (ERA) to increase their employment costs.

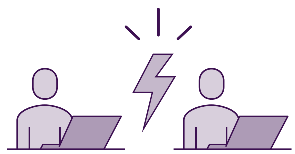
74% of employers expect the ERA to increase employment costs

- Approximately two in five employers expect to hire fewer permanent workers due to the key ERA reforms.



Employers plan to hire fewer permanent staff due to ERA measures

- Over half of employers anticipate an increase in workplace conflict because of at least one of the key ERA changes being introduced.



Employers believe ERA measures will increase workplace conflict

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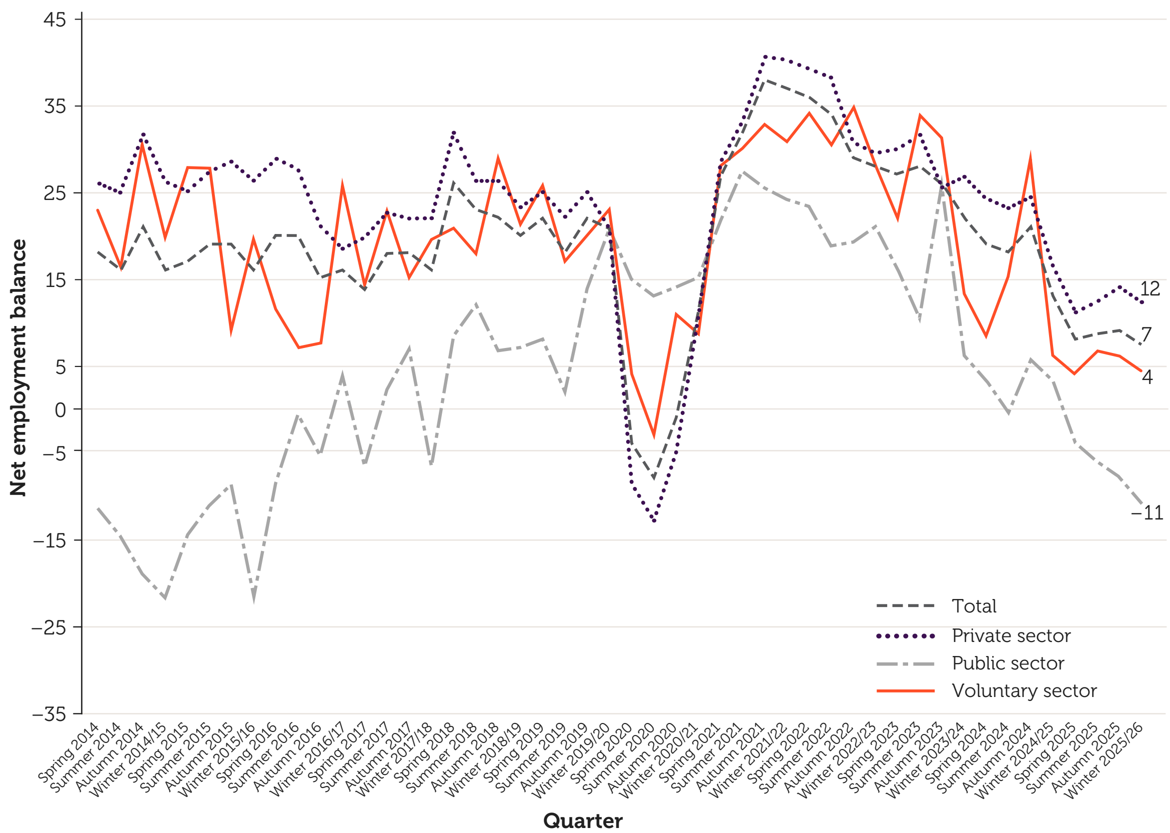
3 Recruitment and redundancy outlook

The net employment balance – the difference between employers expecting there will be an increase in staff levels and those expecting there will be a decrease in staff levels in the next three months – has dipped from +9 to +7 this quarter. Employer hiring intentions remain at the lowest level on record since we began collecting this measure in 2014, apart from during the first year of the pandemic. Employment intentions continue to be stable in the private sector at +12, having fallen to a record low outside of the pandemic at +11 in spring 2025.

Employment intentions in the public sector have fallen further and remain negative, meaning that more employers in the public sector expect a decrease than an increase in staff levels over the next three months. The net employment balance has fallen to –11, from –8 last quarter, and has remained negative for four consecutive quarters. There is currently an assortment of voluntary exit, voluntary and compulsory redundancy schemes, and several recruitment freezes across government. The number of entrants to the civil service experienced the largest year-on-year fall since between 2009/10 and 2010/11, decreasing by over 30% in the year to March 2025.[1]

Net employment balance low, but stable

Figure 1: Net employment balance, by broad sector



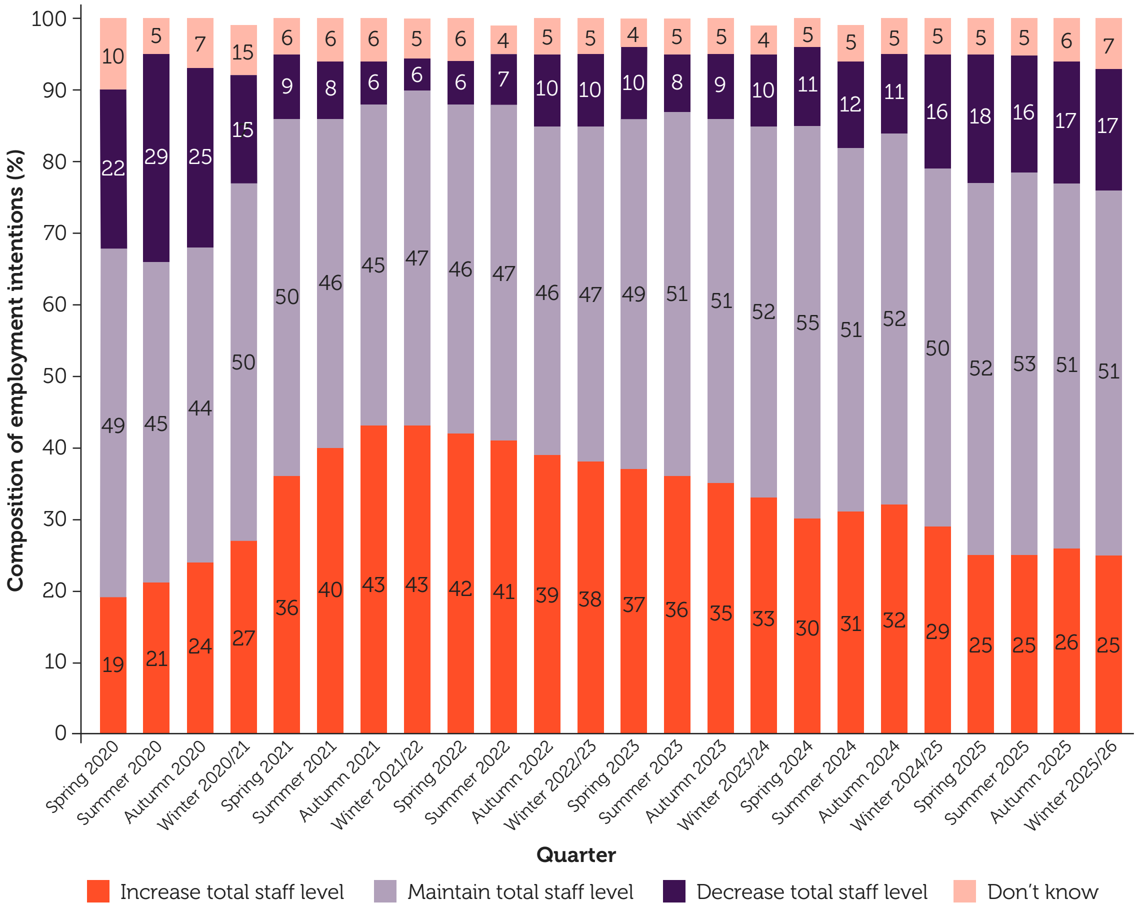
Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (total: n=2,082; private: n=1,538; public: n=380; voluntary: n=164).

[1] Institute for Government. (2026) *Whitehall monitor 2026*.

Twenty-five per cent of employers expect their staff levels to increase in the next three months. The proportion of surveyed employers expecting a decrease in staff levels over that timeframe remains 17%, comparable with all quarters since the 2024 Budget. There was no step change because of the 2025 Budget. Like last quarter, half (51%) of all employers believe their staff levels will be maintained in the next three months (see Figure 2).

Employment intentions continue to show little change

Figure 2: Composition of employment intentions (%)



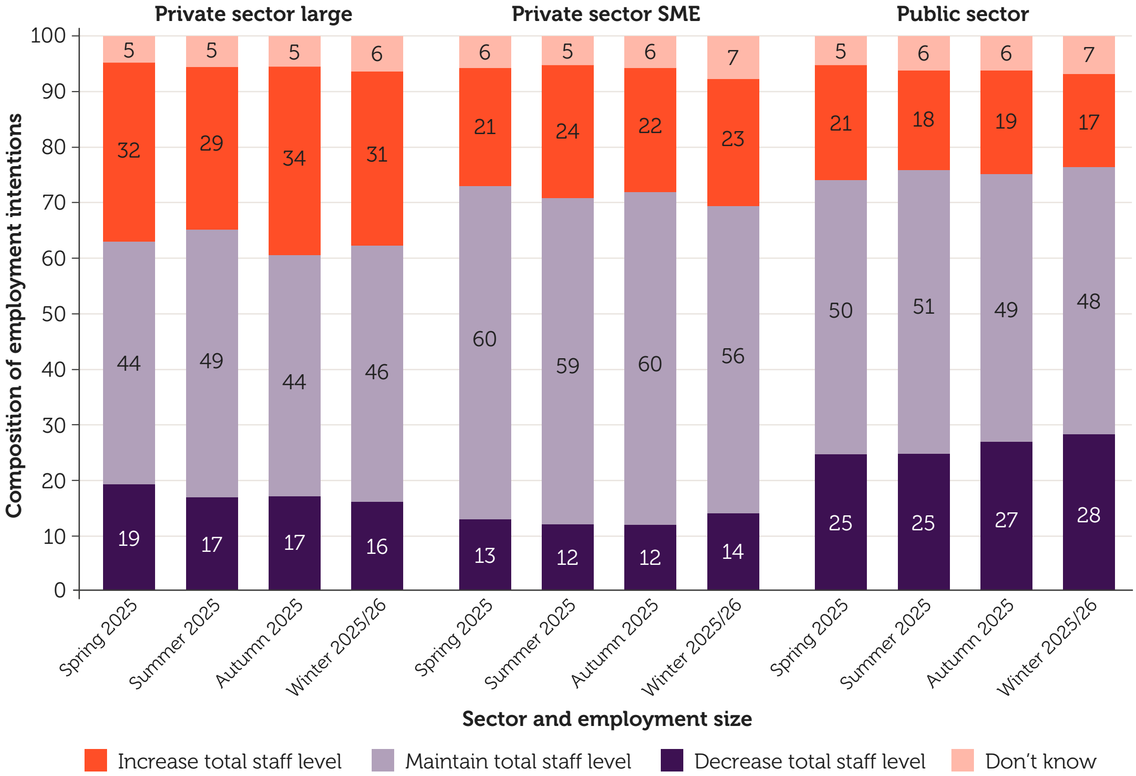
Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

Thirty-one per cent of large private sector organisations expect there will be an increase in staff levels in the next three months. This is significantly higher than the intentions among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (23%) and the public sector (17%). As a result, among large private sector employers, fewer plan to maintain staff levels compared to SMEs.

Twenty-eight per cent of public sector employers expect a fall in staffing levels over the next three months. This is at a higher rate than both large private sector organisations (16%) and SMEs (14%) and has been so for the last four quarters.

More than one in four public sector employers expect staff levels to fall

Figure 3: Composition of employment intentions, by broad sector (%)



Base: winter 2025/26 (private sector large (250+): n=513; private sector SME: n=1,025; public sector: n=380).

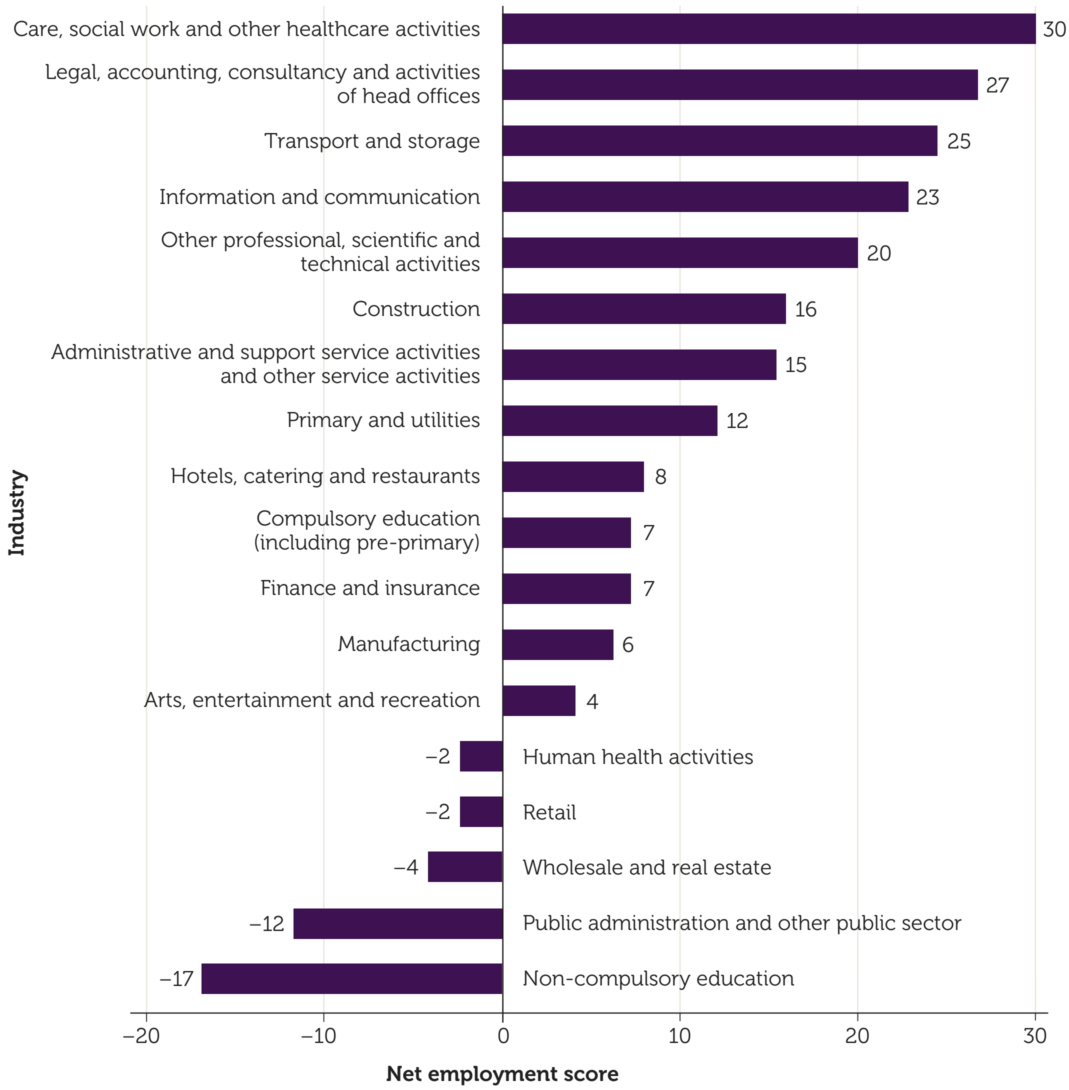
There are stark differences in employment intentions between industries. While there are positive employment intentions in care, social work and other healthcare activities (+30), legal, accounting, consultancy and activities of head offices (+27), transport and storage (+25) and information and communication (+23), several industries have either negative or very low positive net intentions, reflecting low confidence among employers.

The net employment balance remains lowest in non-compulsory education at –17 this quarter. Many higher education institutions continue to face a financial crisis, with many laying off staff (this is due in part to a fall in international student numbers).

The net employment balance also remains low among public administration and other public sector employers at –12, the same figure as the last two quarters. The net employment balance has bounced back in hospitality, rising to +8 from –7 last quarter. It was +5 in our summer 2025 report. The net employment balance in this industry has the tendency to fluctuate due to seasonal demand.

Employers expect staff levels to fall in several industries

Figure 4: Net employment balance, by industry (%)



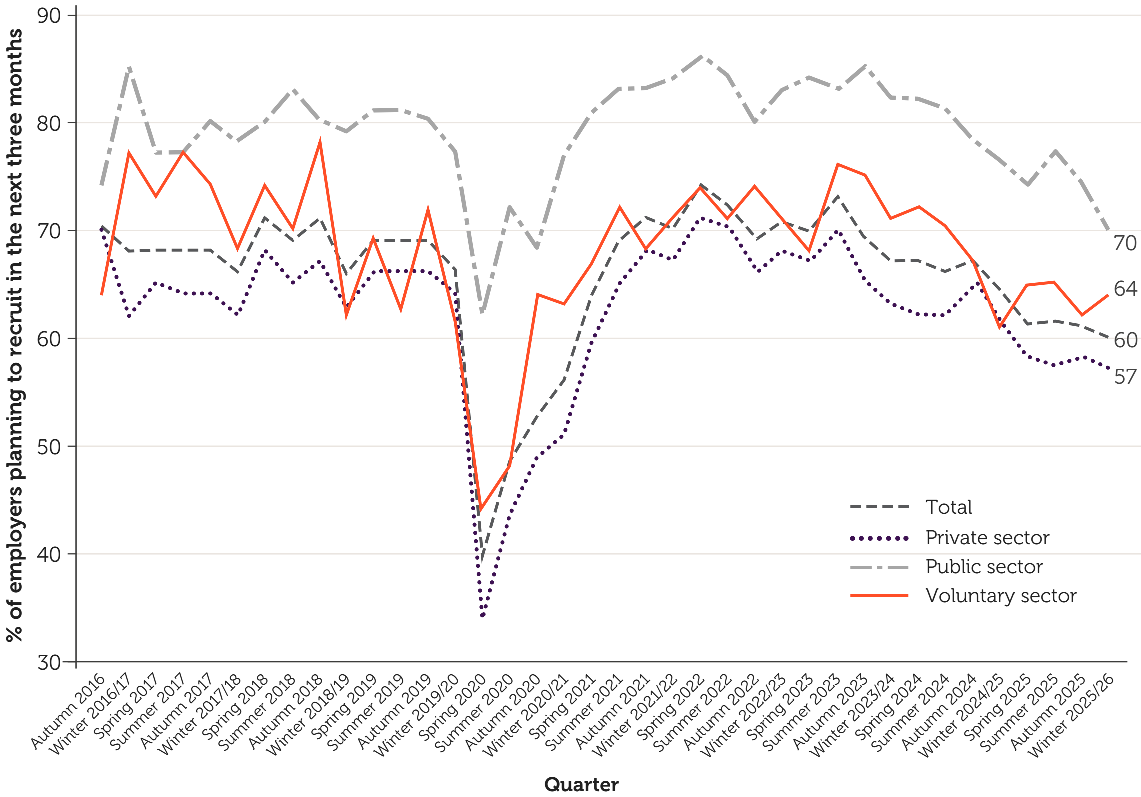
Base: industries with base sizes of less than 50 have been excluded. For a breakdown of base sizes, see Table 5.

Recruitment

Sixty per cent of employers plan to recruit in the next three months, significantly lower than the 67% recorded 12 months ago. Recruitment intentions remain highest in the public sector, with 70% planning to recruit in the next three months. Fifty-seven per cent of employers in the private sector plan to recruit in the next three months (see Figure 5).

Recruitment intentions remain stable

Figure 5: Recruitment intentions, by broad sector (%)



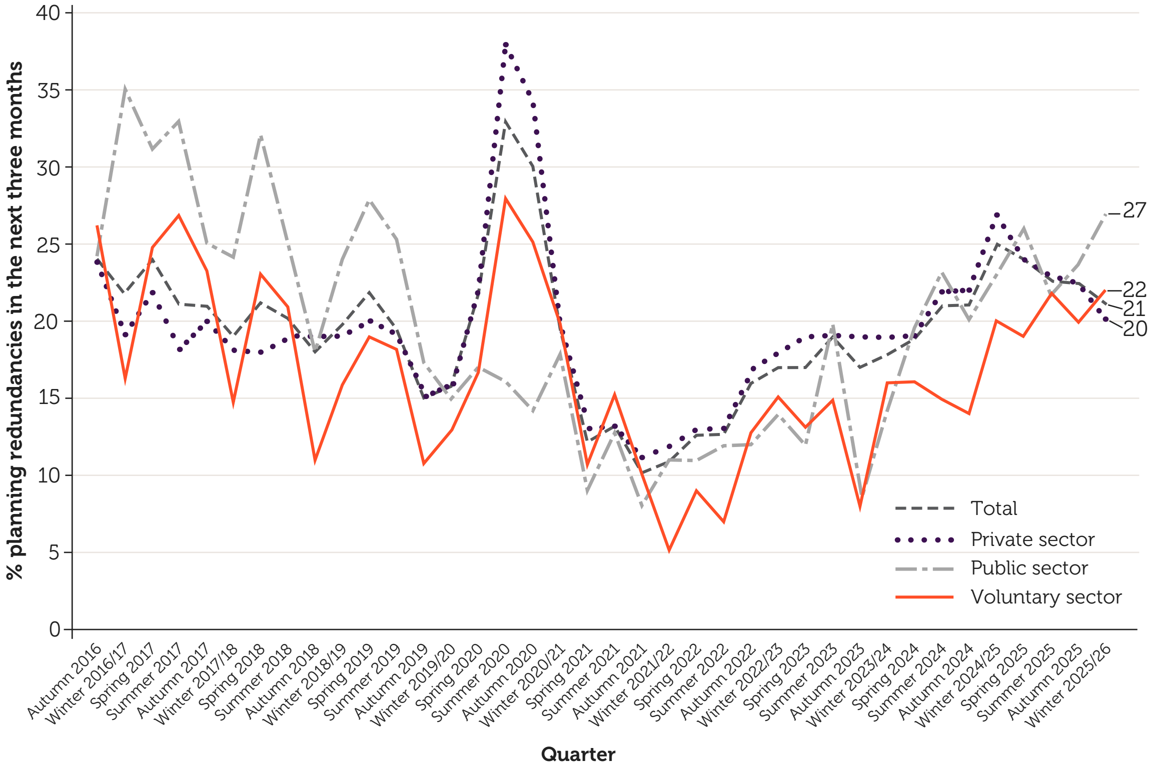
Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (total: n=2,082; private: n=1,538; public: n=380; voluntary: n=164).

Redundancies

Twenty-one per cent of employers are planning to make redundancies in the three months up to March 2026. Public sector employers are significantly more likely to be planning redundancies than those in the private sector (27% versus 20%). Redundancy intentions in the public sector have not been as high as this since spring 2019.

Public sector employers more likely to make redundancies in the next quarter

Figure 6: Redundancy intentions, by broad sector (%)



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (total: n=2,082; private: n=1,538; public: n=380; voluntary: n=164).

Further reading and practical guidance

- CIPD | **Managing redundancy**

A guide to help deliver fair, effective redundancy processes that protect your people and reputation.

- CIPD | **Induction tools**

Set up new hires for success with our effective onboarding tools.

- CIPD | **Recruitment tools**

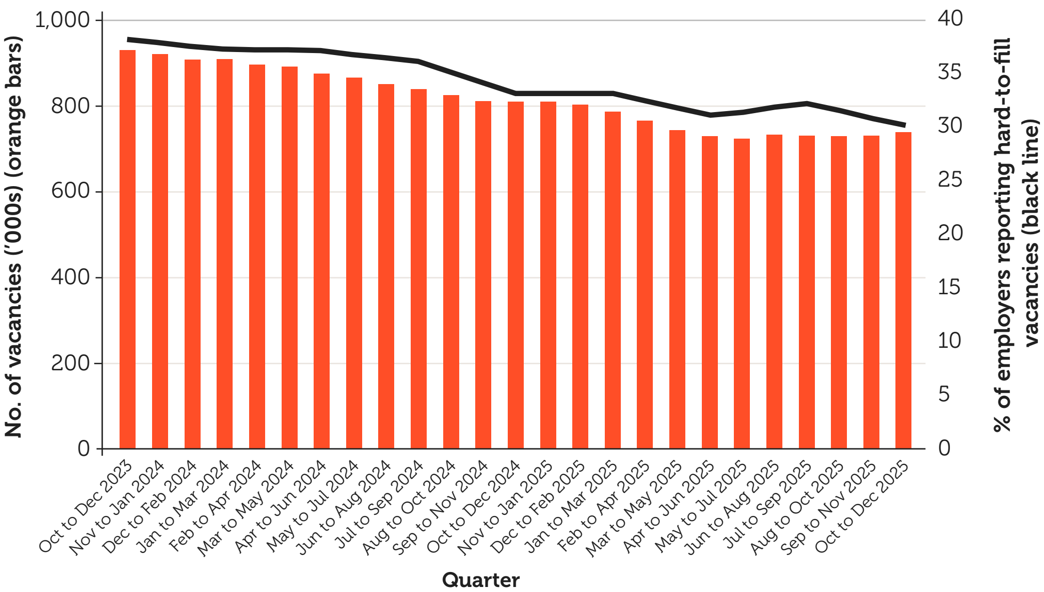
Practical tools to help you recruit the right candidate.

4 Job vacancies

The labour market appears to have stabilised, with official data published in mid-January showing little change in the number of vacancies in recent months.[2] Comparing this official data against our measure of the level of employers reporting hard-to-fill vacancies shows both have tracked each other closely in the past two years (see Figure 7). Thirty per cent of employers reported hard-to-fill vacancies in the latest quarter.

As overall vacancy levels have fallen, so have hard-to-fill vacancies

Figure 7: Official vacancy data versus the level of employers with hard-to-fill vacancies

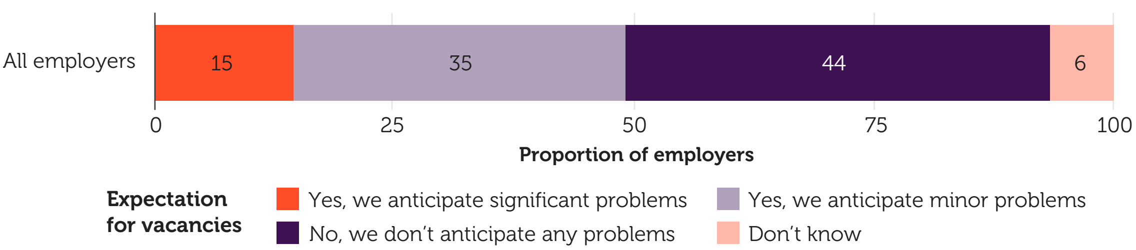


Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

Just 15% of employers are anticipating significant problems in filling vacancies in the next six months. Forty-four per cent do not anticipate any problems.

Few employers anticipate significant problems in filling roles

Figure 8: Expectation for vacancies in the next six months (%)



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

[2] Office for National Statistics. (2026) *Vacancies and jobs in the UK: January 2026*.

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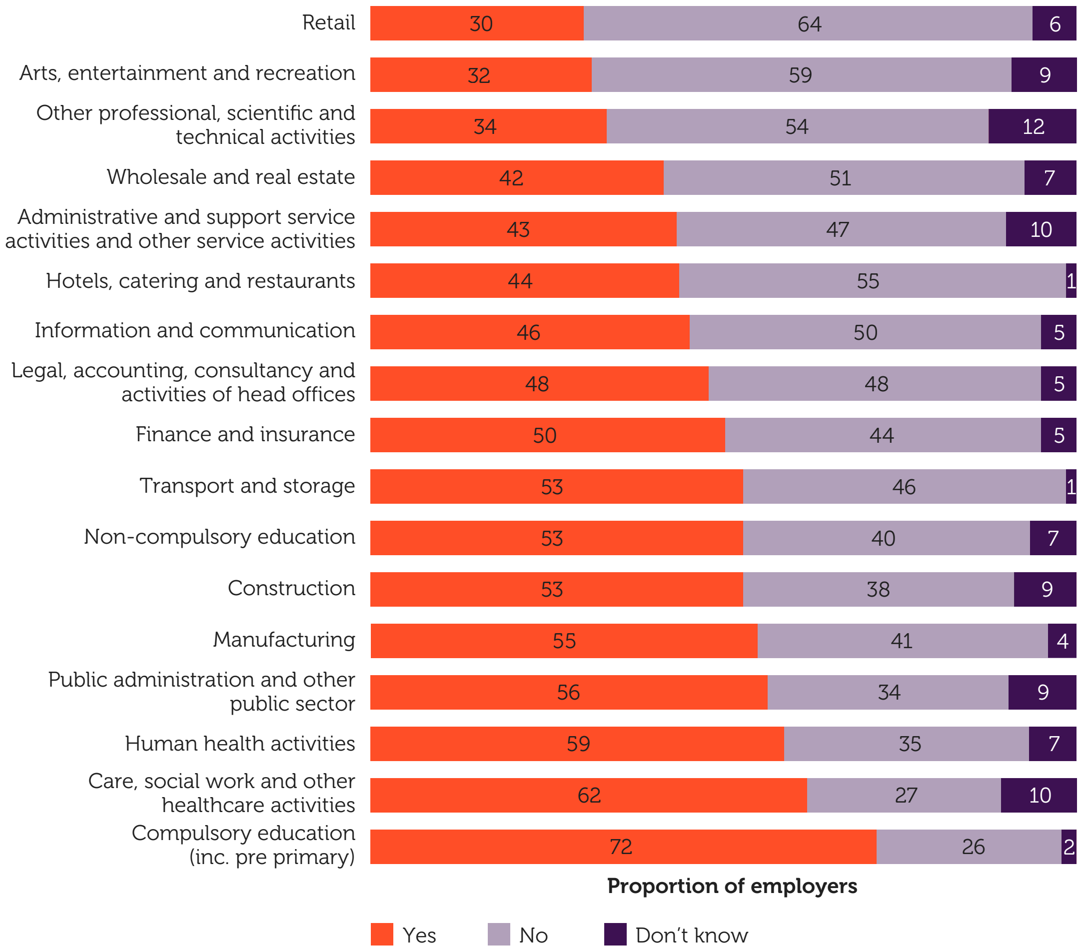
Recruitment pressures have eased in some lower-paying industries. At least five in 10 employers in retail (64%), arts, entertainment and recreation (59%), and hospitality (55%) report not anticipating problems in filling vacancies in the next six months. However, anticipated problems in filling vacancies over that time period remain high among employers in compulsory education (72%), care and social work (62%), and healthcare (59%).

Recruitment pressures have eased for some employers, but not others

Figure 9: Anticipated problems in filling vacancies in the next six months, by industry (%)



Base: industries with base sizes of less than 50 have been excluded. For a breakdown of base sizes, see Table 5.

Further reading and practical guidance

- CIPD | **Skills matching: Using and deploying people's skills effectively**

Use your people's skills effectively for job satisfaction and enhanced productivity.

- CIPD | **Employer brand**

Build a strong brand to attract and retain talent with our detailed factsheet.

- CIPD | **Responsible investment in technology**

Drive job quality and performance through smarter tech investments.

5 Pay outlook

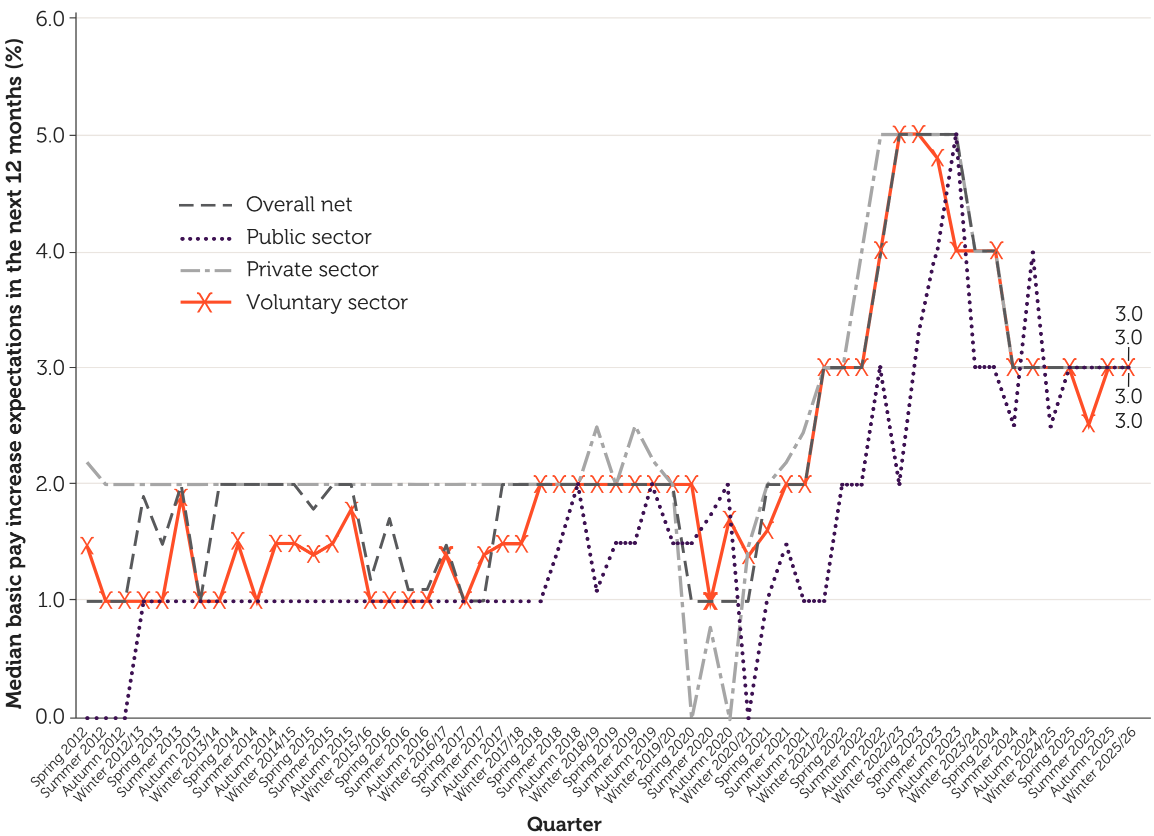
Among employers looking to increase, decrease or freeze pay in the next 12 months, the median expected basic pay increase for the next 12 months remains at 3% overall for the seventh consecutive quarter. Expected pay awards held at a historic high of 5% between winter 2022/23 and autumn 2023, before falling to 4% in winter 2023/24 and spring 2024.

The median expected pay award remains at 3% in the private, public and voluntary sectors. To put the median expected pay awards into context, the Consumer Prices Index – the Office for National Statistics' preferred measure of inflation – in December 2025 was 3.6%.

It should be noted that the average basic pay award covered in this analysis is only one component of pay growth. Many people will also benefit from incremental progression or promotion, bonuses or a pay bump when switching jobs.

Average expected pay awards remain at 3%

Figure 10: Median basic pay increase expectations



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers expecting and able to estimate a pay award in the next 12 months (total: n=751; private: n=522; public: n=156; voluntary: n=73).

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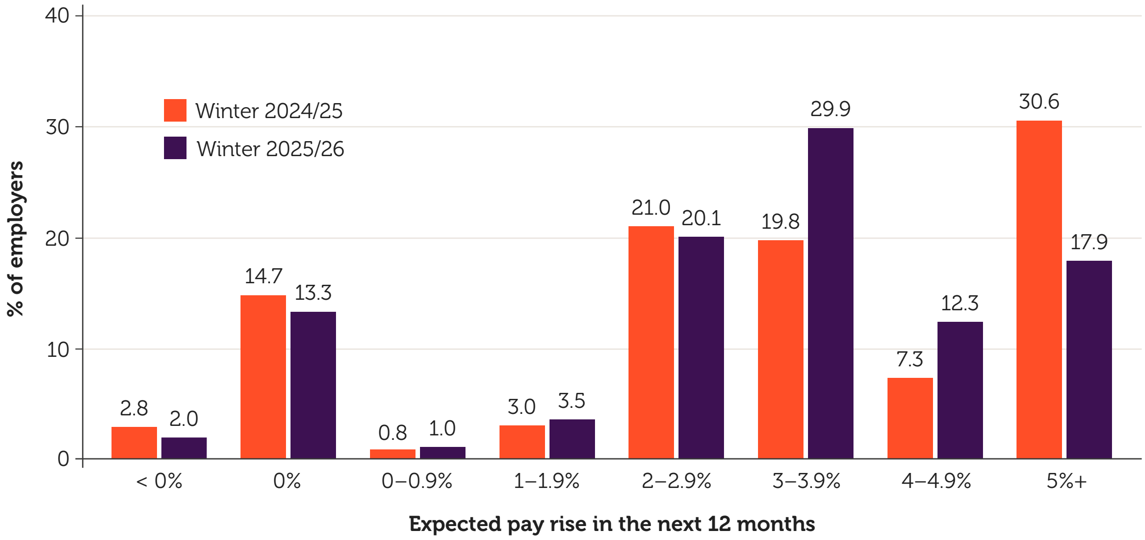
Even though the expected median pay award has not changed for some time, there have been downward shifts among many employers in the level of pay awards they plan to give. Whereas 12 months ago 31% of employers planned to offer a pay rise of 5% or more, this has fallen to 18% of employers this quarter. Instead, more employers are within the 3–3.99% range, rising from 20% to 30% of employers. Despite the current financial headwinds, few employers anticipate that they will have to cut pay or freeze it.

In terms of the distribution, the lower quartile is estimated to be 2%, with the upper quartile at 4% – the same values as the last two quarters.

Fewer employers expect to offer pay awards in the 5%+ range

Figure 11: Distribution of expected pay awards (%)



Base: all employers expecting and able to estimate a pay award in the next 12 months (winter 2024/25: n=824; winter 2025/26: n=902).

Further reading and practical guidance

- CIPD | **Pay fairness and pay reporting**

Use our factsheet to understand fair pay and legal reporting requirements.

- CIPD | **Strategic reward and total reward**

Develop a comprehensive reward strategy to support the needs of both employee and organisation.

- CIPD | **Performance-related pay**

Link pay to performance fairly and effectively with our factsheet.

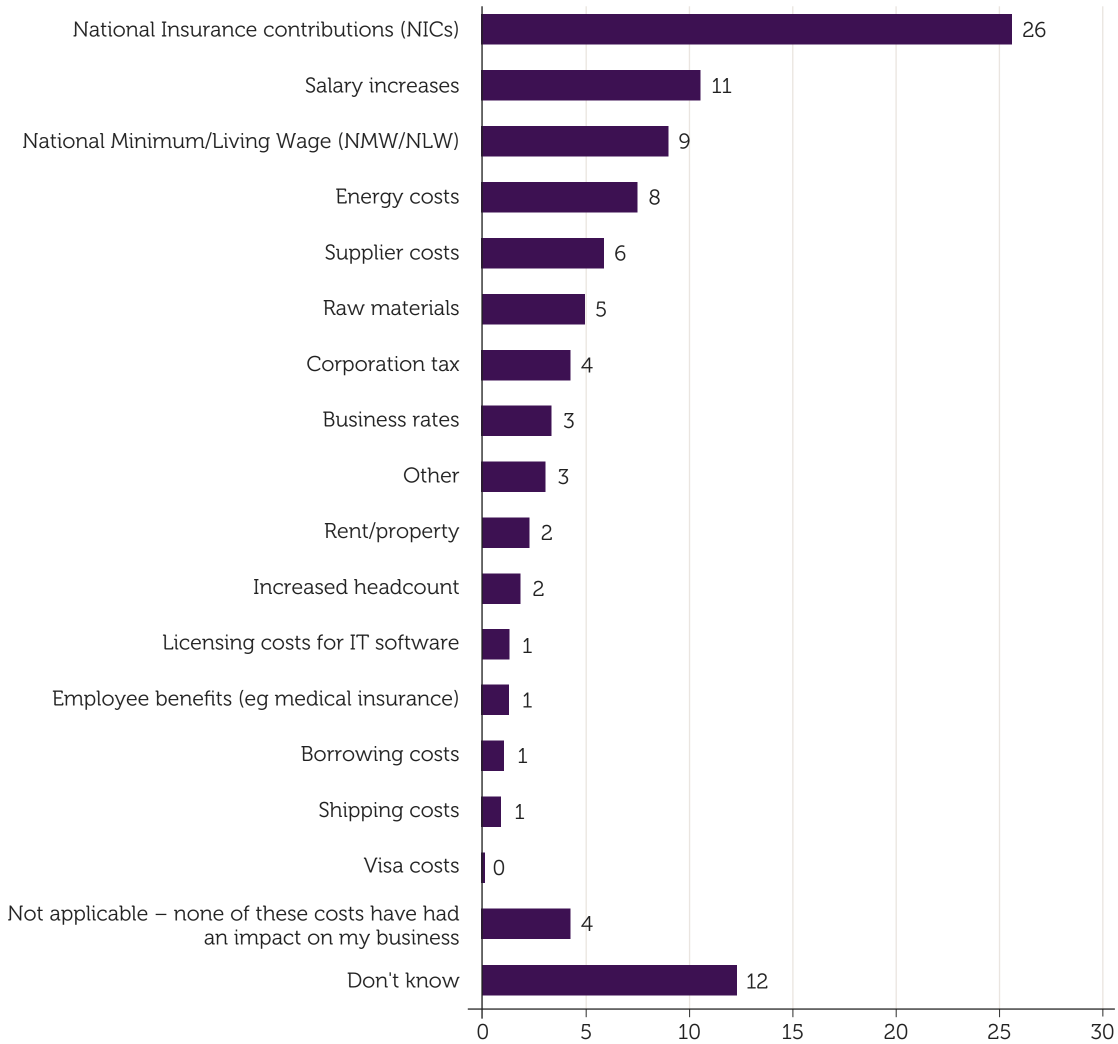
6 Outlook for 2026

Looking back at 2025, employers identified the rise in the rate of employer National Insurance contributions (NICs) as having the biggest financial impact on their business last year (26%). This announcement in the 2024 Budget was a huge contributor to the fall in the net employment balance 12 months ago. This has been reflected over the last year in the official labour market statistics, which have seen a fall in the number of job vacancies, an increase in redundancies, and a rise in unemployment.

There are a range of other factors which have increased costs on business in the last year. One in 10 employers (11%) reported that salary increases were the biggest cost pressure in 2025, as average salary growth remained well above historical norms, while 9% of employers cited National Minimum Wage/National Living Wage increases, which again increased by near record rates. Eight per cent of respondents identified energy costs as being the biggest financial cost for their organisation, highlighting that businesses are facing a wide range of cost pressures.

NICs rise seen as having the biggest financial impact on businesses in 2025

Figure 12: Cost pressure with biggest financial impact in the last 12 months (%)



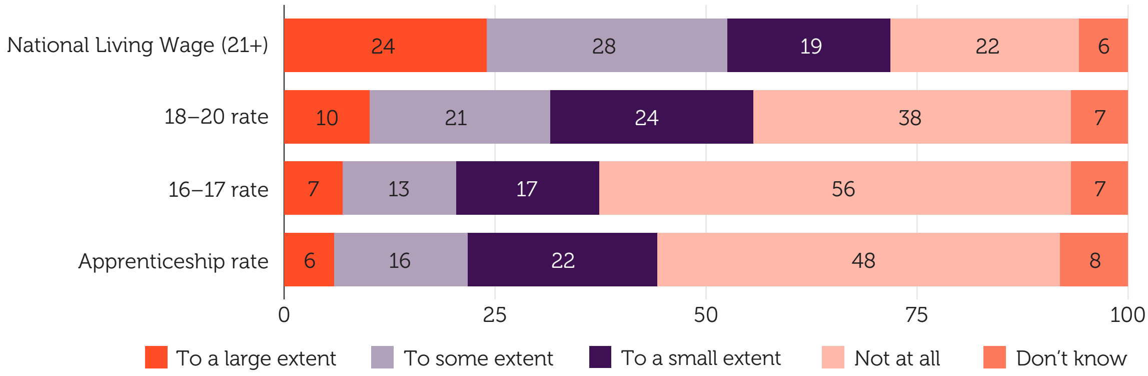
Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

The year ahead

Looking ahead to April 2026, National Minimum Wage rates will rise again in the UK. Around seven in 10 employers (72%) believe the rise in the National Living Wage (for adults 21+) will increase their employment costs. Employers also believe increases to the 18–20 rate (55%), the 16–17 rate (37%) and the apprenticeship rate (44%) will increase their employment costs. Looking further ahead, around half (51%) of respondents believe that the £2000 salary sacrifice cap will increase their costs when it is introduced in April 2029.

Employers set to be impacted by rising minimum wage rates in 2026

Figure 13: Expected impact of minimum wage rises on employment costs (%)



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

This year also marks the start of the implementation of the measures in the Employment Rights Act (ERA). The CIPD is pleased that the ERA has received Royal Assent and that there is now a firmer timetable for the implementation of measures it includes, which will give more certainty to business. However, the expedited nature of some of the reforms places great pressure on employers to understand both how to implement them and the cost involved. Table 1 shows the effective date of selected ERA measures we focus on below.

Table 1: Effective date of selected ERA measures

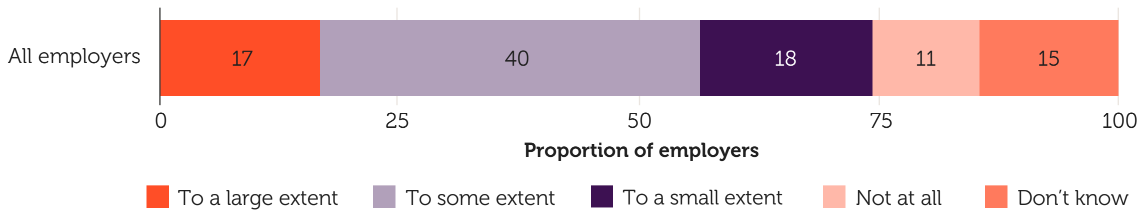
Measure	Effective date
New rights to make it easier for trade unions to take industrial action	18 February 2026
New rights to make it easier for trade unions to achieve statutory recognition	April 2026
Day one right to Statutory Sick Pay	6 April 2026
Reducing the unfair dismissal qualifying period from two years to six months	1 January 2027 (but will apply to any employees hired on or after 1 July 2026)
New rights for trade unions to access workplaces for recruitment and organising purposes	October 2026
New rights for zero-hours and low-hours contract workers, including guaranteed minimum hours contract offers, advance notice of work schedules and compensation for shifts cancelled at short notice	2027

While the headline cost of the ERA on business has been estimated at £1bn, the economic impact assessment does not fully account for the time spent by business, and HR in particular, in getting to grips with and implementing the raft of legislation. For example, it is currently estimated it will take just an hour or less for HR to familiarise themselves with the new rights for trade unions to access workplaces for recruitment and organising purposes.[3]

We find that three-quarters (74%) of employers believe their employment costs will increase due to the measures introduced as part of the ERA, while a further 15% of employers don't know. Overall, 17% of employers believe their costs will increase to a large extent; this rises to 31% in social care and 28% in hospitality.

Three-quarters of employers believe the ERA will increase employment costs

Figure 14: Expected impact of the ERA on employment costs (%)



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

As details of the reforms become clearer, it is important to understand their possible unintended consequences by examining how employers plan to respond to the changes.

Currently, the UK has a low level of workers in 'involuntary' temporary or casual work compared with OECD countries. We have highlighted that this may in part be due to the current balance between the rights for permanent, temporary and casual work in the UK. Our concerns were reflected in the Department for Business and Trade's (DBT) economic assessment of the ERA, which included a key risk: "If policy is not well-targeted, there could be greater incentives for employers to use temporary work if reforms are not considered holistically."[4]

The data in this report suggests that key Employment Rights Act measures are likely to reduce employers' willingness to hire permanent staff, leading to a possible rise in temporary employment. Overall, we find more than a third (37%) of employers plan to hire fewer permanent staff due to at least one of the Act's key reforms.

Between 18% and 24% say they will hire fewer permanent staff dependent on the individual measure. The change in the unfair dismissal qualification period and the day one right to Statutory Sick Pay (both 24%) are expected to negatively impact recruitment of permanent staff the most. Just over half (54%–58%) of employers report their recruitment will be unaffected based on the individual measures.

[3] Department for Business and Trade. (2024) *Strengthening workers' rights to trade union access, recognition and representation: Final stage impact assessment*.

[4] Department for Business and Trade. (2026) *Employment Rights Act 2025: Economic analysis*.

Very few employers (between 2% and 5%) plan to hire more permanent workers as a result of the reforms, with around a fifth uncertain on how this will affect their recruitment activity (17–21%).

Some employers plan to hire fewer permanent staff due to the ERA measures

Figure 15: Expected impact of the ERA measures on permanent staff hiring intentions (%)

Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

Another consideration of the reforms is how they will affect the amount of workplace conflict that occurs. Workplace conflict, which can take many forms, is a huge cost to business.[5] The economic assessment of the ERA highlights that updating trade union legislation means trade unions will be able to better support dispute resolution processes and settle workplace conflict before it reaches an employment tribunal, the costliest end result for the employer. However, given a very large majority of employers don't recognise trade unions, particularly among the UK's 1.4 million micro and small employers (1–49 employees), it is difficult to see how union representation or recognition will reduce conflict in any material way.

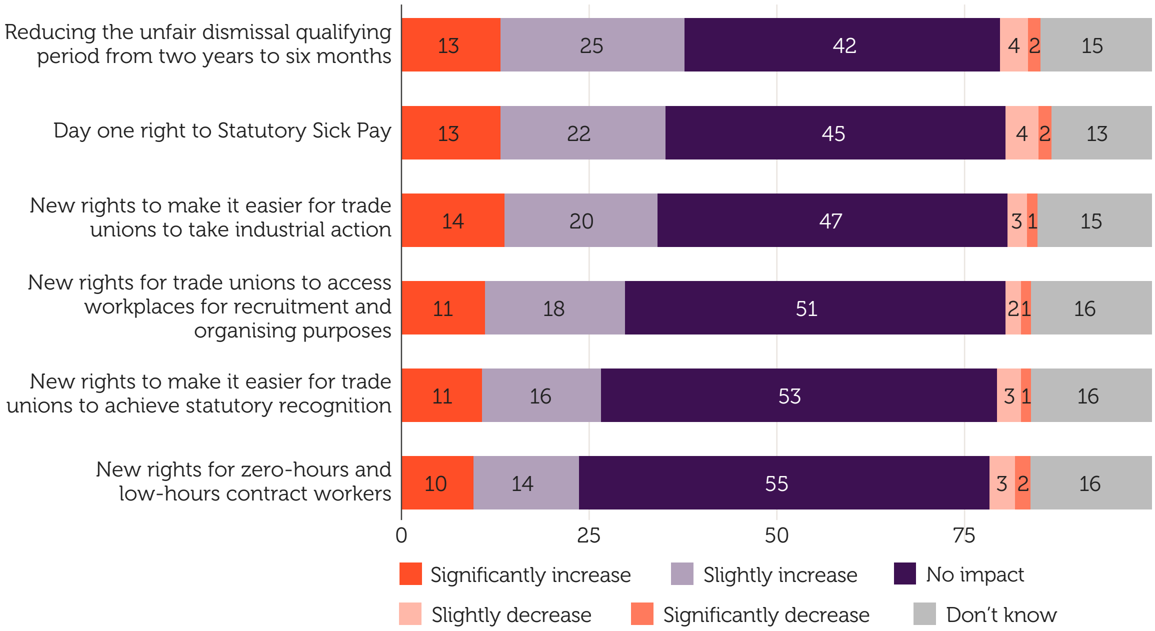
The data in this report suggests that key Employment Rights Act measures are likely to increase rather than reduce conflict at work. Overall, over half (55%) of employers believe there will be an increase in workplace conflict due to the changes either in the unfair dismissal qualification period, the day one right to Statutory Sick Pay, increased rights for zero hours contract workers or the trade union reforms.

[5] Acas. (2021) *Estimating the costs of workplace conflict*

In addition, there is a proportion of employers (13–16% based on the individual measures) who say they don't know how the ERA measures will impact workplace conflict. This uncertainty highlights that some employers may lack knowledge of how the reforms are likely to impact workplace practices and behaviour.

Employers believe the ERA measures will increase workplace conflict

Figure 16: Expected impact of the ERA measures on workplace conflict and disputes (%)



Base: winter 2025/26, all employers (n=2,082).

In all, 38% of employers expect an increase in the amount of workplace conflict and disputes due to the reduction in the unfair dismissal qualification period to six months, while just 5% believe the reduction will reduce conflict at work.

This is perhaps not surprising given employers have been used to operating with a two-year unfair dismissal qualifying period since 2012. Complying with the introduction of the reduced six-month qualifying period from 1 January 2027 will require employers to review and make changes to induction, onboarding and contractual probationary periods, as well as training line managers. Employers should be starting to prepare for this change now given that any employee with six months' service or more on 1 January 2027 be able to claim unfair dismissal. Many small firm owner-managers will be oblivious of this very significant and pending change to the law. The provision of advice and support for SMEs will be critical in helping small firms get ready for the change.

Over a third of employers believe the day one right to Statutory Sick Pay (35%) will increase conflict and disputes. The increase to Statutory Sick Pay costs will place an onus on employers to get better at managing absence to reduce potential conflict and costs as a result of these changes. However, many SMEs have limited knowledge and capability of best practice and will need support and advice to help them adapt.

Our data is at odds with the expectation of the government when it comes to the impact of trade union reforms. The government's latest economic analysis on the likely impact of the Act finds that improving worker representation, by giving trade unions greater freedom to organise, represent and negotiate on behalf of their workers, could reduce workplace conflict. We find many employers believe conflict will increase as a result of the new rights that will make it easier for trade unions to take industrial action (34%) and achieve statutory recognition (27%), and the new rights for them to access workplaces for recruitment and organising purposes (29%). This compares with roughly 4% of employers who believe workplace conflict will decrease because of these measures.

Most organisations have limited experience of working with trade unions and there is a need to strengthen employment relations skills on both the employer and trade union side to help ensure voluntary agreements can be reached and to avoid disputes. To support employers and prevent conflict arising out of these new rights, Acas and the Central Arbitration Committee will need additional resources. The CIPD has also highlighted the need for a statutory code of practice on collective employment relations to set out the core principles and behaviours that both employers and trade unions need to uphold in reaching agreements.

Further reading and practical guidance

- CIPD | **Tracking law changes: Employment Rights Act 2025**

Keep up to date with what is changing under the Employment Rights Act 2025, the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill and the plan to Make Work Pay.

- CIPD | **Timetable of employment law changes in the UK**

Keep up to date with the latest employment law developments and proposed future changes.

7 Recommendations for employers and people practitioners

- ✓ **Take a strategic approach to workforce planning**
  With employer confidence at record lows, prioritise forward planning over short-term cuts. Use skills audits and internal redeployment to maintain capability and manage costs sustainably.

- ✓ **Refresh attraction strategies as hiring pressures ease**
  Falling vacancy levels create space to strengthen employer brand. Focus on job quality, inclusion and realistic role design to attract and retain good employees.

- ✓ **Make fair, transparent pay decisions**
  With pay growth steady at 3%, link reward to organisational performance and communicate decisions clearly. Balance affordability with fairness to sustain motivation and trust. Consider a financial wellbeing strategy to help those with money concerns, such as paying for household essentials.

- ✓ **Prepare in advance for changes to unfair dismissal rules**
  Both employers and people professionals should ensure that they are familiar with how to manage dismissal procedures properly and take into account how they may have to manage these potentially happening at an earlier point in a staff member's employment due to new rights for workers established in the ERA.

- ✓ **Upskill employment relations across your team**
  Many organisations have limited experience of working with trade unions and will need to strengthen employment relations skills on both the employer and trade union side to help ensure voluntary agreements can be reached and to avoid disputes.

- ✓ **Manage absences effectively**
  To reduce the impact of employees being able to claim Statutory Sick Pay from day one of employment, employers and people professionals should take a proactive approach to ensuring they are working to prevent and manage absences effectively.

8 Survey method

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 2,082 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18 December 2025 and 17 January 2026. The survey was conducted online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK employment by organisation size, sector and industry.

Weighting

Rim weighting is applied using targets on size and sector drawn from the BEIS *Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2025*. The following tables contain unweighted counts.

Table 2: Breakdown of sample, by number of employees in the organisation

Employer size band	Count
2–9	441
10–49	445
50–99	141
100–249	237
250–499	161
500–999	163
1,000 or more	494

Table 3: Breakdown of sample, by sector

Sector	Count
Private sector	1,538
Public sector	380
Third/voluntary sector	164

Table 4: Breakdown of sample, by region

Region	Count
Scotland	137
Wales	85
Northern Ireland	29
Northwest England	207
Northeast England	58
Yorkshire and Humberside	116
West Midlands	122
East Midlands	123
Eastern England	137
London	371
Southwest England	189
Southeast England	291
All of the UK	216

Table 5: Breakdown of sample, by industry

Industry	Count
Administrative and support service activities and other service activities	208
Arts, entertainment and recreation	77
Care, social work and other healthcare activities	62
Compulsory education (including pre-primary)	136
Construction	115
Finance and insurance	150
Hotels, catering and restaurants	96
Human health activities	167
Information and communication	125
Legal, accounting, consultancy and activities of head offices	119
Manufacturing	176
Non-compulsory education	84
Other professional, scientific and technical activities	117
Police and armed forces	23
Primary and utilities	38
Public administration and other public sector	106
Retail	99
Transport and storage	60
Voluntary	49
Wholesale and real estate	75

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