

Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Economic Bulletin

Issue 44 – April 2024

Welcome to the latest edition of the Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Economic Bulletin produced by our Economy, Skills, and Insight Teams, which provides the timeliest analysis of official Government data, national intelligence, and local insights on the state of the local economy.

Alongside information on the Claimant Count and Job Vacancies that will be a part of every Bulletin, this month's issue also provides more detailed youth claimant count analysis and updated ward level analysis of the claimant count to help identify areas which are being impacted the hardest by unemployment and a reliance on work-related benefits across Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent and where there may be a greater need for support. We also provide analysis of the latest business insolvency data to further understand how businesses are faring during the current economic climate.

We hope you find the Bulletin useful and welcome your comments and suggestions on further information you would like to see included in future editions to make sure that it continues to meet your needs. If you do have any feedback please send your comments to Darren Farmer, Economy & Skills Analyst at darren.farmer@staffordshire.gov.uk.

Stay Safe,
Darryl Evers
Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills, Staffordshire County Council



Key Messages

Local Picture

- In Staffordshire having seen **improvement in the local economy and labour market following the COVID pandemic**, as seen nationally, we have seen unemployment, youth unemployment and dependency on work-related benefits increase during the energy and cost-of-living crisis. This is reflected in this month's **further increase in the Claimant Count. Although it is positive that there continues to be a high number of job vacancies available for those that unfortunately find themselves out of work. We will continue to support our residents into work and ensure that Staffordshire has the strong workforce it needs to grow the economy.**
- We also continue to support **local businesses that face ongoing challenging conditions** due to a wide range of factors including **high interest rates and energy prices, increased commodity costs, increasing wage levels and lower consumer demand.**
- Looking at the local data in more detail, following long-term declines in the **claimant count approaching pre-pandemic levels, the number of work-related benefit claimants in Staffordshire increased by 430 this month to a total of 16,130 claimants.** This month has also seen increases both regionally and nationally.
- **The claimant rate for Staffordshire has increased this month from 2.9% to 3.0%** of the working age population. Staffordshire remains one of the lowest rates in the West Midlands, far lower than the average for the region of 5.1% which increased from 4.9%, and lower than the average for England at 4.0% which increased from 3.9%.
- This month has seen an **increase of 100 claimants in the youth claimant count in Staffordshire with a total of 3,100 young people.** The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit increased from 4.8% to 5.0% this month. This is however lower than the national rate of 5.3% which increased from 5.2% this month, and far lower than the regional rate of 7.2% which increased from 7.0% this month. Our focus continues to be to engage with our younger residents and support them to find employment or continue in education and training.
- The increases in claimants in Staffordshire, regionally and nationally is reflective of the challenging economic conditions businesses continue to operate in across the country. We will continue to support those residents that unfortunately find themselves out of work to access employment through our partnership working and dedicated Jobs Brokerage service.
- Positively, for those residents out of work, **demand for labour remains high with the number of vacancies still above pre-pandemic levels and there is currently estimated to be close to one job vacancy available for every claimant within the county.**

- **Staffordshire saw a 2% decrease in the number of available job vacancies between February and March to a total of 15,300. This is lower than the number of work-related benefit claimants. Stoke-on-Trent saw a 1% decrease in job vacancies to a total of 6,300 which is also lower than the number of claimants. Across the region in the last month there was no change, and nationally there was a 1% increase in job vacancies. Generally, job vacancies have seen minimal change this month regionally and nationally.**
- Considering the **top 20 job vacancy occupations in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire**, demand for roles in social care continue to remain high with **'Care Workers and Home Carers'** being the most in demand occupations.
- The following occupations **'Sales Related', 'Cleaners & Domestic', and 'Teaching Assistants'**, also have strong demand.
- There is **strong demand for 'Customer Service', 'Administrative', 'Bookkeepers, Payroll Managers & Wages Clerks', and 'HR & Industrial Relations Officers'**, across business sectors to support business in their recovery, survival, and new methods of working.
- The Logistics sector continues to have high demand for **'Warehouse Operatives' and 'Large Goods Vehicle Drivers'**.
- There is high demand in the Health and Social Care sector for **'Social Workers' and 'Registered Nursing Professionals'**.
- In the Education sector there is particularly high demand for **'Secondary Education Teaching Professionals' and 'Teaching Professionals'**.
- In the Hospitality sector, **'Kitchen and Catering Assistants' remain the roles most in demand.**
- Demand for **'Managers & Directors in Retail & Wholesale' and 'Sales and Retail Assistants'** in the Retail and Wholesale sector remain strong
- In the Motor Trade **'Vehicle Technicians, Mechanics and Electricians'** are in demand.
- In ICT demand for **'Programmers & Software Development Professionals'** is high.
- In the Manufacturing sector **'Plant & Machine Operatives'** are most in demand.
- It is in these areas of the economy where job vacancies remain particularly high and where we are hearing reports of **labour and skills shortages** with a mismatch of workers or skills to fill the vacant jobs.
- This has the **potential to slow down economic growth and limit business survival unless the labour shortage and skills gap is quickly and effectively addressed.** Clearly employment support organisations, skills providers and the Government's Plan for Jobs including the Restart schemes and new Skills Bootcamps have a vital role in upskilling and reskilling jobseekers into areas of demand and preventing them becoming long-term unemployed. Government and business sectors have a key role in ensuring that jobs in areas of demand are attracting workers with good pay and terms and conditions to help prevent labour

shortages.

- There continues to be a high number of jobs available in the local economy and the need now is to ensure that there is a strong local labour pool with skilled workers able to fill these roles to support business recovery/survival and improve prosperity through better pay. The national and local support which is in place to support those that have been unfortunate enough to lose their jobs is vital in both **reskilling and upskilling** as well as enabling potential applicants to access the opportunities available. Encouraging those that have become **economically inactive** due to COVID will further help to address labour shortages and skills gaps.
- **Staffordshire County Council's dedicated Job Brokerage Service** is designed to do exactly this by matching local people, employers, and training providers to fill jobs and provide people with the jobs and careers they need.
- There are clear **emerging opportunities for job creation in digital (including online retail and e-commerce) and the green economy (including retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency, electric cars e.g., Jaguar Land Rover, and hydrogen e.g., JCB).**
- We will also look to build on our existing strengths including **engineering and advanced manufacturing** through the adoption of AI, Automation and Machine Learning, **construction** to achieve Government house building targets and build major new infrastructure projects such as the West Midlands Freight Interchange which will create 8,500 new jobs. Also **advanced logistics** with ecommerce creating continued demand and the announcement by Pets At Home in Stafford creating over 750 new jobs.
- In conclusion, **the Office of National Statistics has reported the business outlook is more optimistic as energy and inflation challenges continue to ease. Cost of living pressures are also improving for households and being helped by real wage gains. Additionally, interest rates are predicted to fall later this year, and employment levels remain high. The economic climate continues to be challenging with demand and competition being a concern for businesses alongside financial pressures. We will continue to support our residents into work and ensure that Staffordshire has the strong workforce it needs to grow the economy.**

Local Initiatives

- We are continuing to prioritise support for businesses and people whose jobs or employment prospects have been impacted by the pandemic and aid the recovery, as well as putting in place the support needed locally during the cost-of-living and energy crisis.
- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent businesses that have been turned down by other lenders can now apply to the **Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Business Loan Fund**, supporting businesses to grow through affordable, unsecured loans from £10,000 to £50,000. To find out more visit [here](#).
- The **Staffordshire Means Back to Business Scheme**, a unique partnership between the county council and the county's district and borough councils to support businesses through the pandemic and into recovery. The programme is a package of schemes including backing for start-ups, financial support so businesses can thrive, carbon literacy, apprenticeship support and training. The programme was allocated £737,000 from UKCRF.
- The **Get Started and Grow scheme** has been extended which provides fully funded support for 0- to 5-year-old businesses. Businesses have already saved thousands by getting accountancy, business planning, website and branding professionally sorted completely free of charge. Now everyone, from those just thinking about setting up a side-business to those who have got past the tricky first few years can get the support that they need. It's all in response to what you've said is most important for your business growth. [To apply for fully funded SME support](#).
- Businesses in Staffordshire are able to benefit from a new free recruitment service which will help to match their employment vacancies with appropriate potential candidates. The **Staffordshire Jobs and Careers Service**, provides advice and support to both businesses and people looking for employment opportunities. It will match vacancies with candidates looking for jobs in certain sectors and with appropriate skills. The service is working with a range of partner organisations and a team of specialist brokers will advise employers and potential employees with options available to them. [Find out more about Staffordshire Jobs and Careers](#).
- **Need some support? Contact the Growth Hub** - The Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Growth Hub is your first port of call for any business-support related enquiry. It acts as the focal point for businesses that wish to grow by referring them to co-ordinated and cohesive growth programmes, business networks, growth groups and links to specialist information, advice, and services. If you would like a free of charge appointment with a qualified Growth Hub Business Advisor to discuss what options are available to support the growth of your business, please contact them on 0300 111 8002.
- **Help To Grow: Management programme** is 90% funded by the government so you only pay £750. Delivered in partnership with Small Business Charter, courses are running at leading business schools across the UK. This programme includes:
 - access 12-weeks of learning designed to fit alongside work commitments

- develop a bespoke business growth plan to help your business reach its full potential
- get 1:1 support from a business mentor
- learn from peers and network with businesses just like yours

To find out more [visit](#).

- The **Staffordshire Business and Enterprise Network (SBEN)** has introduced more support for businesses in Staffordshire. [The Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme](#) can help you to reduce your carbon footprint and increase energy efficiency. It has now been widened to include an additional Energy Efficiency Review for a business that has previously had one, and grants towards the capital costs for solar projects. Membership of SBEN is still free until the end of next March. Membership includes access to the Carbon Tracker tool. **[Why join SBEN?](#)**
- **Save up to 15% off your energy costs.** Sub-metering monitoring systems are a cost-effective way for Staffordshire businesses to manage and reduce their energy use. Sub-metering monitoring use a combination of hardware and software to collect and analyse data about energy performance. SBEN (Staffordshire Business Environment Network), through Staffordshire County Council, is providing businesses with a sub-metering monitoring grant of up to £5000 (50% match funded) to get everything set up. [Find out more and apply](#)
- **Staffordshire targets gigabit connectivity for residents and businesses** - A drive to connect Staffordshire residents and businesses to gigabit technology over the next eight years will be coordinated by the county council. Working with broadband and mobile providers, developers and national government, the county council will be aiming to ensure the vast majority of properties can access gigabit speeds by 2030. As part of the government's Levelling Up agenda, Project Gigabit aims to reach those premises in the county that are not considered commercially viable. The new Gigafast Staffordshire team (renamed from the Superfast Staffordshire team) will take a leadership role in the county to deliver the programme locally. The county council will also be working with government on its Shared Rural Network programme to boost 4G mobile connectivity. This could see coverage in Staffordshire increase from its current 78 per cent to 92 per cent. As well as improving everyday life, the move to gigabit technology could boost the local by hundreds of millions of pounds, and also supports the county council's climate change commitments - with smart technology reducing energy consumption and cutting carbon emissions. The county council launched the Community Fibre Partnership support fund for communities which could not be reached by the main programme which helped nine communities to benefit, with a further 24 communities benefitting from the Gigabit Broadband Top-up Voucher scheme. The new Gigafast Staffordshire website has launched to help everyone understand the benefits of gigabit connectivity at www.gigafaststaffordshire.co.uk.
- **Staffordshire County Council** is also supporting our residents and businesses through the **[Here to Help - cost of living support programme](#)**. This website

signposts to a range of support that is already available to people.

- The Government has launched the **Skills for Life** campaign which highlights the range of training and employment schemes available for businesses wanting to boost their workforce capabilities, including apprenticeships, traineeships, and T-Levels. The Government's [Skills for Life](#) website showcases hundreds of government-funded skills opportunities. It promotes online learning options and free essential skills courses, such as numeracy, English and digital, sector specific qualifications, Skills Bootcamps, Free Courses for Jobs, and in-work training, as well as personalised support and guidance from the National Careers Service. Refreshed [campaign toolkits](#) for the skills campaigns currently running for employers, adults and young people are available to share via your networks and channels, with your own audiences, staff and customers to help extend the reach of the campaigns to those people who will benefit most. [Find out more](#).
- **New employer information and advice service - Support with Employee Health and Disability:** A digital information and advice service for businesses is live on [GOV.UK](#), providing tailored guidance on health and disability, to prevent avoidable job loss and help people thrive at work. Employers and disability organisations have been involved in the design and testing of the service which will continue to be developed throughout 2022/23. Current features include:
 - Helping employers to feel more confident having conversations about health and disability.
 - Encouraging early intervention and sustained support.
 - Signposting to trusted expert support and resources.
 - Helping employers understand their legal responsibilities.

Please use the [feedback link](#) as your thoughts on how the content and design are shaped really will make a difference. [Read the press release](#)

- **Stoke-On-Trent & Staffordshire Growth Hub have partnered with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to offer free 1-2-1 virtual business support sessions.** Are you looking to start a business or in the embryonic stages of growth? Are you:

- keen to identify potential new markets?
- interested in bidding for public procurement opportunities?
- in need of advice on chasing late payments?
- seeking general advice and support?

Through one of these invaluable 1-2-1 sessions, you can:

- get in touch with international trade specialists
- find sources of local authority support
- learn key steps in starting a business and get assistance with many more issues/challenges your business faces

If you feel you might benefit from one of these virtual sessions, please email karen.woolley@fsb.org.uk to book a slot. This offer is open to FSB members and non-members.

- **Do you know what your employees need to be their most productive?**

Any business' most valuable asset is its people, and with adults spending most of their time at work, businesses need to know how to best support their health and wellbeing. The **Staffordshire County Council Workplace Health Service**, working with public health and local health experts, offers businesses a comprehensive and funded package of online and in-person support, including:

- mental health and wellbeing
- smoking cessation
- healthy activity and healthy eating in the workplace, and more.

But where do you start?

- 1) [Check out the business wellbeing support available online](#)
- 2) [Join the Healthy Workplace Newsletter](#)
- 3) [Check out the Everyone Health offer - in-business support](#)
- 4) [Consider starting the Thrive at Work Workplace Wellbeing Award Programme.](#)

CHECK OUT HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT FOR BUSINESS

- Businesses across Staffordshire have the opportunity to build confidence and skill-up their staff for free with the government's **Multiply scheme**. Multiply is a programme that helps employees build confidence and lifelong numeracy skills through bitesize courses, bespoke help for businesses and functional maths qualifications. In a recent poll, over 60% of businesses in Staffordshire say that they need more functional maths capacity in their workforce, for increased performance, personal and professional confidence, and team motivation, alongside career progression.

Eligibility:

- Staffordshire based business.
- Adults aged 19 plus.
- Individuals that have not achieved a Level 2 maths qualification, i.e., GCSE of at least a Grade C or equivalent.
- Individuals who may want to develop numeracy skills for work or progression.
- Individuals that want to brush up and develop their numeracy skills for everyday life and work.

Contact Multiply@staffordshire.gov.uk to explore your options.

- **Businesses in Staffordshire can now apply for free energy assessments through the Green Solutions scheme.** The scheme aims to help businesses reduce their energy consumption and costs for a greener future and more sustainable business practices. Businesses will get a free energy assessment plus expert advice to help improve energy efficiency and support to implement the proposed measures. Firms signing up will also benefit from complimentary Carbon Literacy Training. To apply and submit an expression of interest, [businesses can visit the official Green Solutions website.](#) A dedicated member of the Green Solutions team will review the submission and reach out to discuss the next steps.
- **Want to work for yourself but not sure where to start?** Now free to access support is offered by Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce, working with Staffordshire

County Council and East Staffordshire Borough Council. They've launched the Working for Yourself programme which will give you an introduction to what is involved in starting and running your own businesses in Staffordshire. Two half-day, face to face workshops will cover confidence building, skills set and work/life balance as well as start-up basics and financial management.

Get in touch to find out more on 01782 202222 or start@staffordshirechambers.co.uk

- **Development and growth of an electric charging network in Staffordshire is set to begin with the release of £4.6million Government funding.** By collaborating with four other local authorities and regional transport body Midlands Connect, Staffordshire County Council will be able to work across borders and crucially have greater strength in attracting the businesses which will install and operate the charging network. The Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) fund aims to help local councils scale up the delivery of local charge points through mainly private investment, allowing more residents, especially those without off street parking, to switch to EVs. Charge points will be installed by commercial providers between 2024 and 2028. Last year, the county council approved Staffordshire's public electric vehicle charging strategy that sets out plans on how the authority will meet the needs of communities and businesses as electric vehicle use continues to increase.

Read more

- **Planning approval has been granted for a GRIDSERVE Electric Forecourt® at i54 South Staffordshire.** GRIDSERVE, a UK based tech-enabled sustainable energy business, is expected to bring the development forward in phases on plot D of the business park, which is located on the county border with Wolverhampton. It is set to include the construction of an electric vehicle charging station with ancillary uses including retail, food and drink, associated electrical infrastructure, car parking and landscaping. The planning application, approved by South Staffordshire Council, states the Electric Forecourt® will be powered by 100 per cent net zero energy and will eventually serve cars, motorbikes and HGVs. i54 currently hosts a workforce of around 2,700 people, with half of the jobs held by people living within a 10-mile radius. **READ MORE**

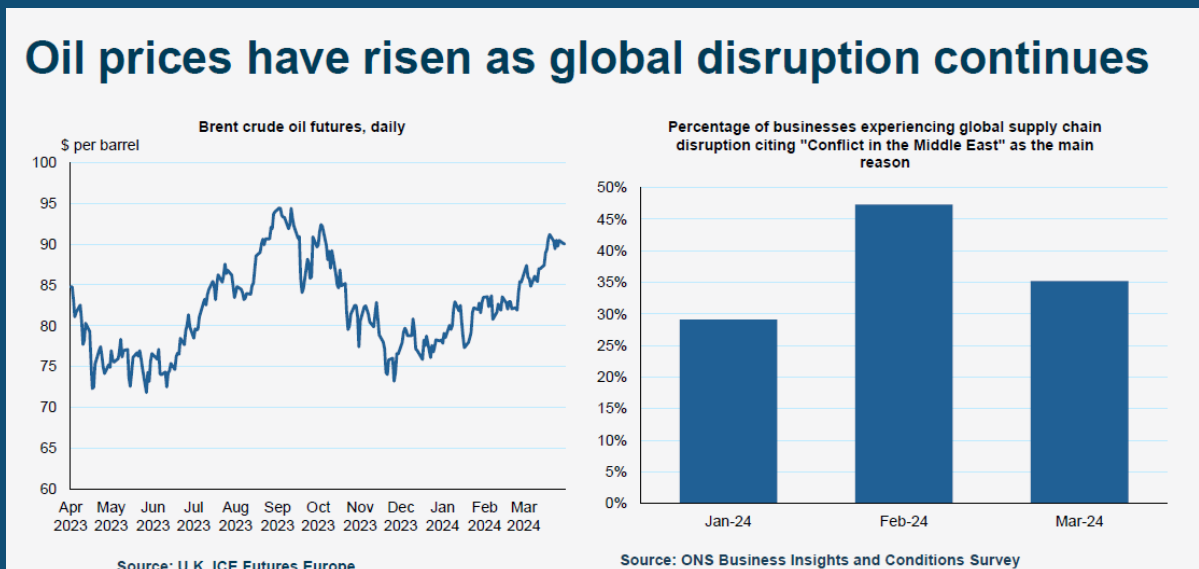
- **Businesses across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent will have a voice on a national level through a new joint committee set up by the county and city councils - also ensuring they have expert support and guidance.** The councils will take on the responsibilities of the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership when its operations end in April. It includes the running of the business advice and guidance organisation, the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Growth Hub, the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Careers Hub and the newly formed Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP). The growth hub provides expert advice and guidance to small and medium sized businesses, as well as giving them routes to funding, while the careers hub connects schools with businesses. The LVEP is one of just 40 in the

country and aims to grow and sustain the tourism and hospitality sector locally, regionally and nationally. It is funded by the county and city councils, as well as all eight district and borough councils. **READ MORE**

- Are you in the manufacturing, engineering, logistics or retail industry? If you're a small business in one of these sectors and want to innovate and grow, the **Amazon Innovation Accelerator** might be for you. Showcasing the latest trends and strategies on everything from technology adoption to leadership and management, this fully-funded training programme offers the best guidance from partners across Amazon, Amazon Web Services and the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. A cohort of 25 businesses will be selected to take part in this exclusive programme, with core workshops taking place at Amazon's new Sutton Coldfield robotics fulfilment centre. Apply now if you:
 - have operations in the West Midlands
 - are in the manufacturing, engineering, logistics, retail or related industries
 - employ 50+ members of staff or have a turnover over over £5 million
 - can commit to a senior member of staff participating in the full programme (two day workshops at Amazon on Friday 7th June and Friday 28th June 2024, participation in a 90-minute virtual masterclass webinar).
- Applications will close on the 3rd May, 2024. **Find out more and apply**

National Context

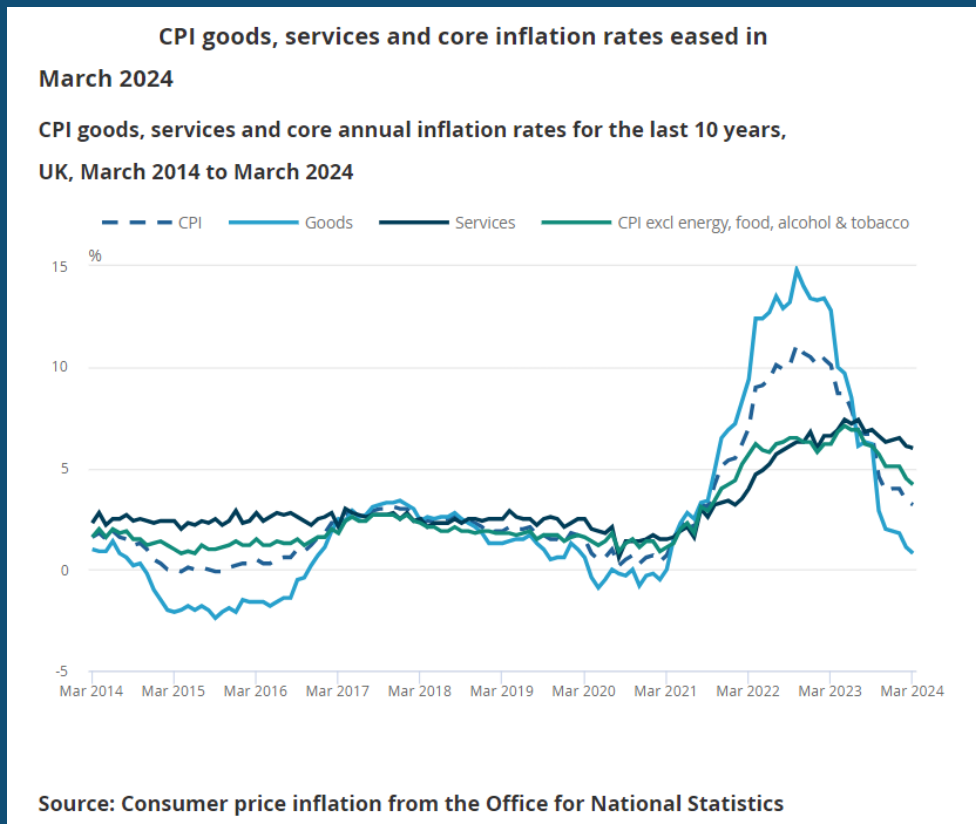
- This month there is **positive news in that the UK economy has seen a small growth** which continues the trend seen in the previous month.
- However, there **remain concerns regarding rising tension and conflict in the Middle East** with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warning that it risks leading to higher oil prices, a reversal of the recent fall in inflation and a puncturing of the optimistic mood in financial markets.



Cost of Living

- **UK inflation continues to ease while real wage growth rises.**
- **The UK's inflation rate rose by 3.2 per cent in the 12 months to March 2024, down from 3.4 per cent in February and well below its recent peak of 11.1 per cent in October 2022.** ONS indicative modelled consumer price inflation estimates suggest that the October 2022 peak was the highest rate in over 40 years (the CPI Accredited Official Statistic series begins in January 1997). The annual rate in March 2024 was the lowest since September 2021, when it was 3.1 per cent.
- The largest downward contribution to the monthly change in the CPI annual rate came from food, with prices rising by less than a year ago, while the largest, partially offsetting, upward contribution came from motor fuels, with prices rising this year but falling a year ago.
- Financial markets had predicted a bigger drop in the annual rate in March to 3.1% and saw the latest data on price pressures as putting back the timing of interest rate cuts.
- The governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, shrugged off a smaller-than-expected drop in inflation last month, saying he expected a sharp fall towards the government's 2% target next month.
- While the UK was experiencing strong disinflation, the governor said the fall was unbalanced. He said that in April household energy bills were likely to be 25% lower

than a year earlier, but service sector inflation is running at 6%. Decisions on interest rates would be influenced by service sector inflation, earnings growth and the state of the labour market.



- The annual rate of **shop price inflation** almost halved in March, with falling food costs and competition between retailers contributing to the rate easing to 1.3 per cent, according to the **British Retail Consortium (BRC)-Nielsen Shop Price Index**. This shows that annual shop price growth is now at its lowest since December 2021.
- **Real pay growth continues as inflation continues to fall.** Annual growth in employees' average regular earnings (excluding bonuses) in Great Britain was 6.0% in December 2023 to February 2024, and annual growth in total earnings (including bonuses) was 5.6%. Annual growth in real terms (adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH)) for regular pay was 1.9% in December 2023 to February 2024, and for total pay was 1.6%.

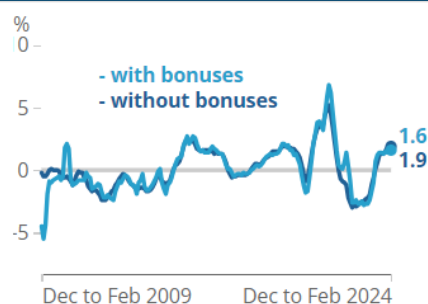


Real Earnings

Average Weekly Earnings annual growth rates - real pay (using CPIH)

In recent periods, annual growth in both real total (including bonuses) and regular (excluding bonuses) earnings has risen on the year

Source: MWSS from ONS

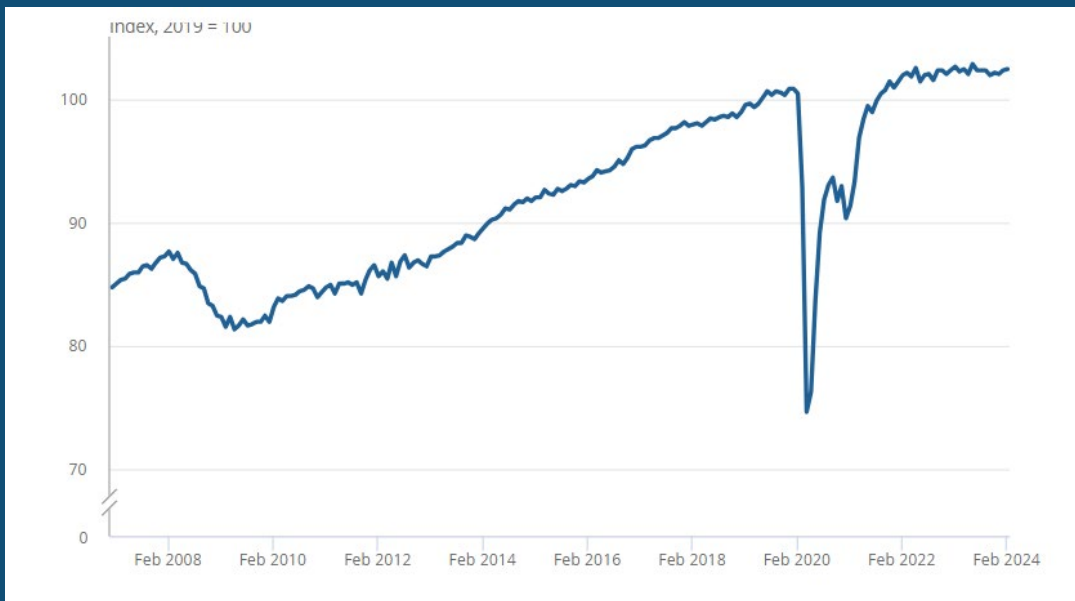


- It is positive that inflation and wages have improved, however, **rent rises** in Britain are forecast to outpace wage growth, based on projections by the **Resolution Foundation**. They have found that average rents could increase by 13 per cent over the next three years, faster than the projected 7.5 per cent wage growth.
- While over 7 million UK adults are still struggling to pay bills, based on a survey from the **Financial Conduct Authority**. The number has fallen from last year, but many households still feel "heavily burdened". The survey suggested one in nine adults had missed a bill or credit payment in the six months to January 2024.
- **Debt advice charity StepChange** advised 183,403 people last year – a 10 per cent increase on 2022. It said rising rents and the use of credit to cope with the cost of living in recent years are driving more full-time workers to seek help.
- **There still remain strikes over pay in important parts of the economy, including NHS consultants, junior doctors, and rail workers.** There were an estimated 106,000 working days lost because of labour disputes across the UK in February 2024. The health and social work industry showed the most working days lost in February 2024.

Economy

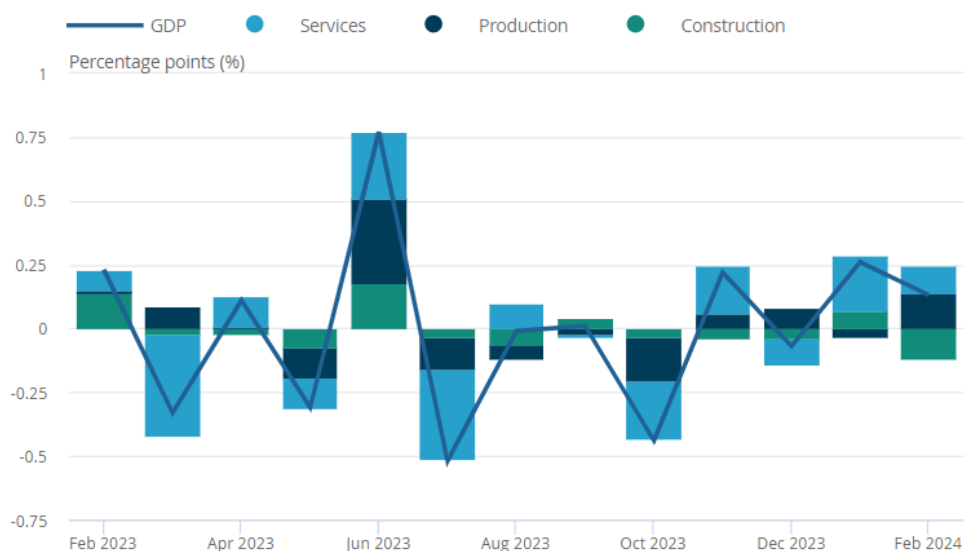
- **The UK economy grew again in February**, with monthly real gross domestic product (GDP) estimated to have grown by 0.1%, following growth of 0.3% in January 2024 (revised up from 0.2%). GDP growth is expected to continue to pick up this year and next.
- Real gross domestic product is estimated to have grown by 0.2% in the three months to February 2024, compared with the three months to November 2023.
- **Services** output grew by 0.1% in February 2024, following growth of 0.3% in January 2024 (revised up from 0.2%), and has grown by 0.2% in the three months to February 2024.
- **Production** output grew by 1.1% in February 2024 and was the largest contributor to the growth in GDP in the month, following a fall of 0.3% in January 2024 (revised down from a 0.2% fall); production output grew by 0.7% in the three months to February 2024.
- **Construction** output fell by 1.9% in February 2024, following an unrevised growth of 1.1% in January 2024; construction output has fallen by 1.0% in the three months to February 2024.

GDP Monthly index, January 2007 to February 2024, UK



Contributions to monthly GDP growth, UK, February 2023 to February 2024

2024

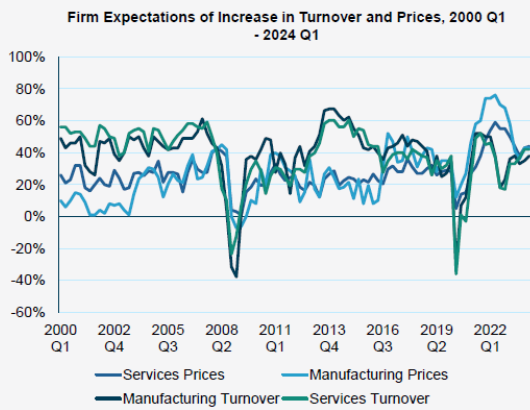


Source: GDP monthly estimate from the Office for National Statistics

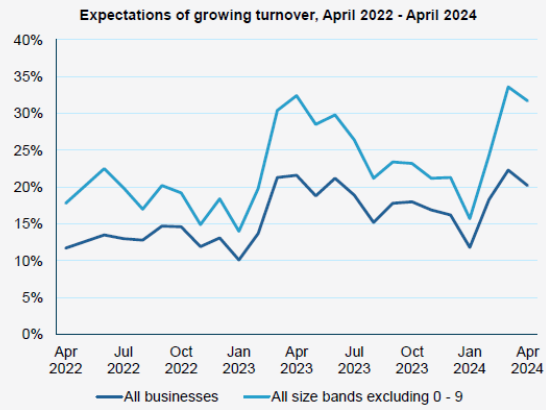
Business Conditions

- We are aware that there are still **many businesses struggling due to a wide range of factors including high interest rates and energy prices, increased commodity costs, wage pressures, supply-chain constraints, lower consumer confidence and labour market challenges.**
- Although business conditions remain challenging for many, there are **signs that the business environment is improving with a number of key indicators heading in the right direction** and it is important that we continue to support viable businesses through these challenging times to survive and then grow.

Business confidence is positive and improving



Source: British Chambers of Commerce, Quarterly Economic Survey



Source: ONS BICS

- The following charts show the latest results from Wave 106 of the **Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS)**, which was live from 2 April to 14 April 2024.

Headline figures from the Business Insights and Conditions Survey

| Indicator | Latest data compared with previous wave | Latest data compared with equivalent period the previous year | Timeline |
|--|---|---|--|
| Trading status Currently trading Units | -0.9 ▼ | -1 ▼ | 65.9 (15/06/2020) to 93.9 (17/03/2024) |
| Trading status Temporarily closed or paused trading Units | 0.4 ▲ | 1 ▲ | 33.4 (15/06/2020) to 4.0 (17/03/2024) |
| Prices Prices bought increased Units | -1.3 ▼ | -12.7 ▼ | 16.3 (01/06/2020) to 24.3 (29/02/2024) |
| Prices Prices sold increased Units | -1.8 ▼ | -4.8 ▼ | 4.9 (01/06/2020) to 10.4 (29/02/2024) |
| Financial performance Turnover increased Units | 0.2 ▲ | -0.6 ▼ | 13.6 (01/03/2022) to 15.8 (29/02/2024) |
| Financial performance Turnover stayed the same Units | 4.5 ▲ | 4.5 ▲ | 54.6 (01/03/2022) to 54.5 (29/02/2024) |
| Financial performance Turnover decreased Units | -4.5 ▼ | -3.5 ▼ | 19.9 (01/03/2022) to 21.5 (29/02/2024) |

Source: Business Insights and Conditions Survey from the Office for National Statistics

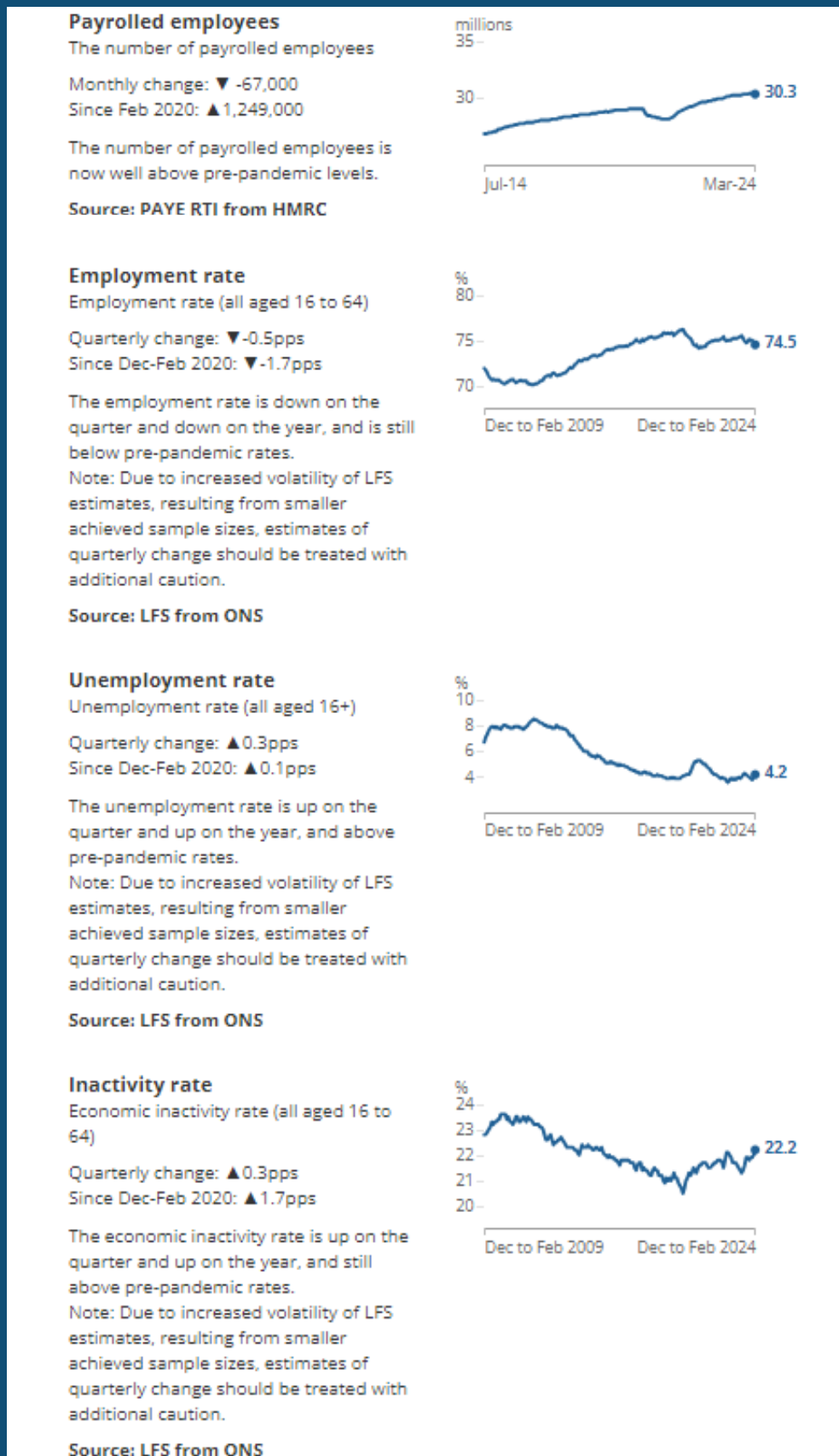
- More than one in five (22%) trading businesses reported that their **turnover had decreased** in March 2024 compared with February 2024, while 16% reported their **turnover had increased**; these figures are broadly stable with February 2024.
- In early April 2024, 21% of trading businesses reported that they **expect their turnover to increase in May 2024**, broadly stable with expectations for April 2024.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of trading businesses reported an **increase in the prices of goods or services bought** in March 2024, compared with February 2024; less than 1 in 10 (9%) said they had **increased prices sold** over the same period.
- Nearly half (49%) of trading businesses reported they were **not considering raising prices in May 2024**; labour cost (24%) was reported as the top reason for businesses considering doing so, both these figures are broadly stable with April 2024.
- In early April 2024, nearly a quarter (24%) of trading businesses reported they **expect their overall performance to increase over the next 12 months**, broadly stable with early February 2024.
- The latest business insolvencies data which shows that **in March 2024 there were a total of 1,785 company insolvencies in England and Wales, 28% lower than the number registered in the previous year (2,470 in March 2023), and 79% higher than the number registered three years previously: 999 in March 2021).** The main concern around company and individual insolvencies are associated issues such as mental health and homelessness.
- There was a worse than expected performance for **retail sales** last month, despite predictions of a consumer-led pick up from recession for the UK economy. The **Office for National Statistics** reported sales volumes were flat in March, following an upwardly revised figure of 0.1 per cent for the previous month and said sales at non-food stores helped offset declines at supermarkets.
- **Tesco** has said price pressures on grocers have eased as it reported high sales and profits for the past year. The company said price inflation in groceries had "lessened substantially".
- **Farmers have warned of a food production "crisis"** after months of heavy rain and repeated storms. Vast areas of agricultural land have been saturated since the autumn and in many cases are still under water, with arable farmers unable to plant crops and losing those that were already in the ground.

Labour Market

- In summary, there are **tentative signs that the jobs market is beginning to cool**, with both a fall in the headline employment rate from the ONS Labour Force Survey and a drop in the total number of people on payrolls from HMRC data. The number of payrolled employees remains well above pre-pandemic levels, while the employment rate is still below pre-pandemic level. Over the last quarter unemployment increased and is now above pre-pandemic level, while economic inactivity increased and remains well above pre-pandemic level. Job vacancies have

seen a further decline which reflects the long-term trend but remain above pre-pandemic levels.

- The following charts shows the latest **labour market position** and the latest Office for National Statistics data for December 2023 to February 2024:





- **Payrolled employees** in the UK fell by 18,000 (0.1%) between January and February 2024, but rose by 352,000 (1.2%) between February 2023 and February 2024.
- The early estimate of payrolled employees for March 2024 decreased by 67,000 (0.2%) on the month but increased by 204,000 (0.7%) on the year to 30.3 million. The March 2024 estimate should be treated as a provisional estimate and is likely to be revised when more data are received next month.
- Increased volatility of Labour Force Survey estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes, means that estimates of quarterly change should be treated with additional caution, and ONS recommend using them as part of our suite of labour market indicators, alongside Workforce Jobs, Claimant Count data, and Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) estimates.
- In December 2023 to February 2024, the **UK employment** level (for those aged 16 years and over) is down on both the year and the quarter.
- The **UK employment rate** (for those aged 16 to 64 years) was estimated at 74.5% in December 2023 to February 2024, below estimates of a year ago and decreased in the latest quarter.
- The **UK unemployment rate** (for those aged 16 years and over) was estimated at 4.2% in December 2023 to February 2024. The unemployment rate is above estimates of a year ago (December 2022 to February 2023) and up in the latest quarter.
- The **UK economic inactivity rate** for those aged 16 to 64 years was 22.2%, above estimates of a year ago (December 2022 to February 2023), and up in the latest quarter.
- The **UK Claimant Count** for March 2024 increased by 10,900 on the month and by 57,400 on the year to 1.583 million.
- In January to March 2024, the estimated number of **vacancies** in the UK fell by 13,000 on the quarter to 916,000. Vacancies fell on the quarter for the 21st consecutive period but are still above pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels.
- **Every constituency in Britain saw a rise in sickness benefit claims last year** according to **Times** analysis of official figures from the Department for Work and Pensions. Affluent southern areas have seen the numbers of people claiming the main incapacity benefit jump a third or more in a year, with experts warning that mental health is worsening nationwide and Britain is getting sicker.
- **Universal Credit needs to change to meet the challenges of an older and sicker**

population, a report by the **Resolution Foundation** has argued. The Resolution Foundation suggests that both the benefit system and the country have changed significantly since the Universal Credit system started to be phased in.

- **Research by the University of Liverpool and the Health Foundation, which examined 1.7 million GP and hospital records, has predicted rising rates of illnesses in adults by 2040**, with 3.7 million working-age adults suffering from major illnesses, up 25 per cent from 2019. The report also predicted that health inequalities will result in 80 per cent of the rise coming from deprived areas.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, **inflation has continued to ease and wage growth remains higher than prices rises** meaning that more people are seeing the impact of the cost-of-living reduce. However, there are **concerns regarding conflict in the Middle East** and the potential rise in costs reversing the fall in inflation.
- The **UK economy has continued to grow** and is expected to continue to pick up this year and next. **Business conditions remain challenging for many, but confidence is improving with rising expectations for growth.**
- There are early signs that the **jobs market is beginning to cool** with those in work falling, while we unemployment and economic inactivity continue to rise. We are also seeing a continued **long-term decline in jobs available for those that find themselves out of work.**
- We need to continue to **support those still struggling with the cost-of-living and support viable businesses to survive and grow during these challenging economic conditions.** By reducing the impact on our business base, we can see faster recovery and a return to economic growth to the benefit of all.
- **In Staffordshire we have a confident, diverse, and robust economy**, demonstrated by the improvement and recovery witnessed since the last lockdown due to Covid. As the **ongoing global and national socio-economic challenges** persist it remains **vital that local partners work together to support local businesses and residents.** We continue to deliver the **Staffordshire Means Back to Business Programme** which has helped hundreds of Staffordshire **businesses transition to new business models including diversification, digitisation and greenification to improve their viability and sustainability.**
- **We continue to support residents into work and help businesses address ongoing labour shortages and skills gaps** to aid survival and growth. A key part of this being the recently **established Staffordshire Jobs and Careers Brokerage Service** which is designed to match local people, employers, and training providers to fill jobs and provide people with the jobs and careers they need.
- Alongside this the **Government's 'Plan for Jobs' schemes such as Restart, and Skills Bootcamps** have an important role to play in **ensuring that local residents have the skills and training needed within the local economy to support increased growth, productivity, and prosperity.** Reskilling and upskilling

residents from declining sectors into priority growth areas of the economy such as digital, green, advanced manufacturing, advanced logistics, construction, and health and social care where they can access higher value better paid jobs will be key.

Business and Individual Insolvencies

This section covers the latest Insolvency Service monthly insolvency statistics¹ for February 2024, which shows the number of new companies and individuals who are unable to pay debts and enter a formal insolvency procedure.

Company Insolvencies

In March 2024 there were a total of 1,785 company insolvencies in England and Wales.

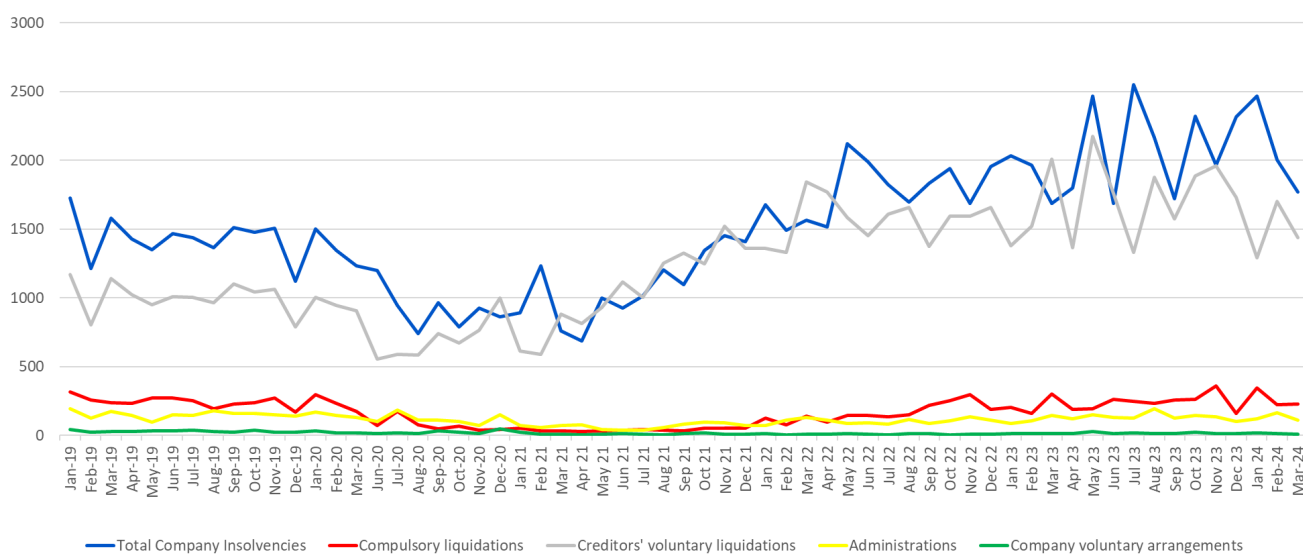
The overall number of **company insolvencies are 28% lower than the number registered in the previous year (2,470 in March 2023), and 79% higher than the number registered three years previously: 999 in March 2021).** Please note that due to the volatility of the underlying data the Insolvency Service recommends comparisons are made with the same month in previous years rather than with the previous month.

There were 228 compulsory liquidations in March 2024, which is 25% lower than the number in March 2023, and 591% higher than in March 2021. Numbers of compulsory liquidations have increased from historical lows seen during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, partly as a result in the increase of winding-up petitions presented by HMRC.

In March 2024 there were 1,436 Creditors' Voluntary Liquidations (CVLs), 29% lower than March 2023, and 63% higher than March 2021. Numbers of administrations are higher than pandemic levels at 51% higher than March 2021, and Company Voluntary Arrangements (CVAs) are lower than pandemic levels at 10% below March 2021 levels.

Company insolvencies between April 2023 and March 2024 are 9% higher compared to a year earlier, representing 2,000 more businesses.

Company Insolvencies in England and Wales



Sources: Insolvency Service (compulsory liquidations only); Companies House (all other insolvency types)²

¹Source: The Insolvency Service – [Company Insolvency Statistics March 2024 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/company-insolvency-statistics-march-2024)

²The Insolvency Service has changed its release of statistics from April 2024 to provide separate company and individual data and now provides statistics in a different format with additional data.

The sectors to have seen the largest number of company insolvencies between March 2023 and February 2024 continue to be the **Construction sector (4,403)**, **Wholesale & Retail sector (3,941)** and **Accommodation & Food Service sector (3,822)**. Levels exceed those seen for the same period the previous year with the Construction sector 6% higher, Wholesale & Retail sector 14% higher, and Accommodation & Food Service sector 34% higher than levels seen a year earlier. This can be attributed to higher commodity costs, energy costs and wage costs; lower consumer confidence/demand, the longer-term impact of the pandemic along with the higher cost of living impact, interest rate and inflation increases.

Individual Insolvencies

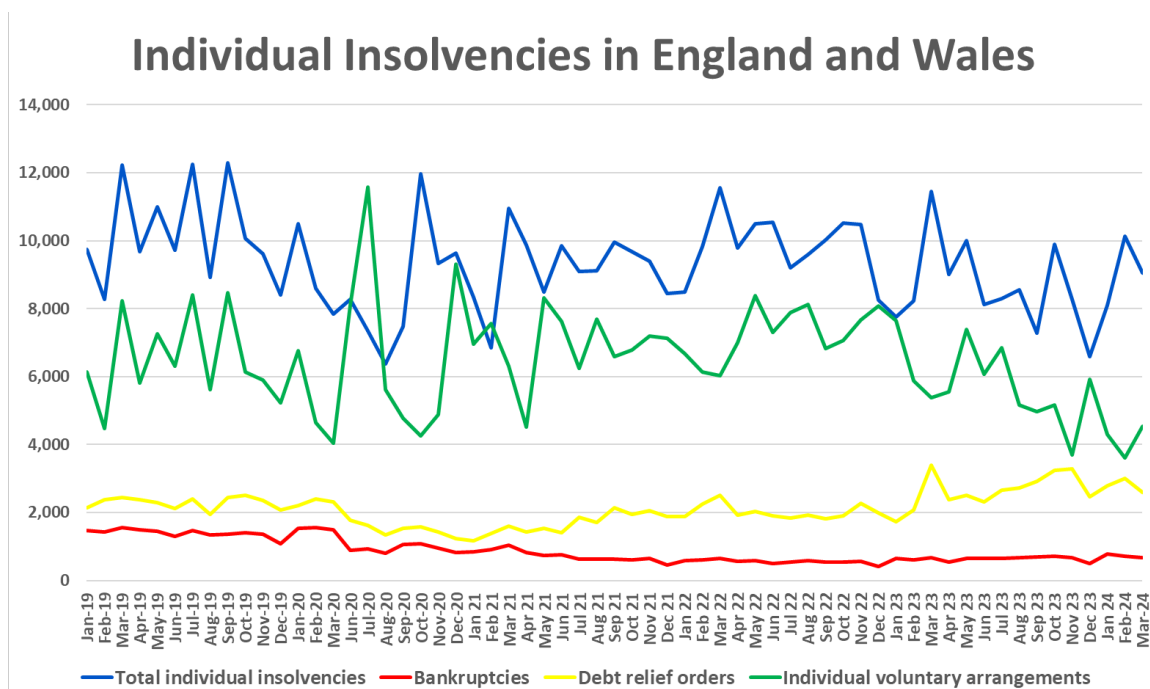
There were **9,057 total individual insolvencies in March 2024**, which was 21% lower than in March 2023, and 17% lower than in March 2021.

For individuals, **664 bankruptcies were registered in March 2024**, which was 3% lower than in March 2023, and 36% lower than in March 2021.

There were **2,592 Debt Relief Orders (DROs) in March 2024**, which was 23% lower than in March 2023, and 63% higher than in March 2021.

There were **5,801 Individual Voluntary Arrangements (IVAs)** registered in March 2024, which is 21% lower than March 2023, and 30% lower than March 2021.

Total Individual Insolvencies between April 2023 and March 2024 are 11% lower than the same period a year earlier, representing a decrease of 13,000.



Sources: Insolvency Service

There were **7,710 Breathing Space registrations in March 2024, which is 7% lower than the number registered in March 2023**. 7,610 were Standard breathing space registrations, which is 6% lower than in March 2023, and 100 were Mental Health breathing space registrations, which is 42% lower than the number in March 2023.

From the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic until mid-2021, overall numbers of company and individual insolvencies were low when compared with pre-pandemic levels. This is likely to have been partly driven by government measures put in place to support businesses and individuals during this time. **Company insolvency numbers have now returned to and exceeded pre-pandemic levels. For individuals, numbers of bankruptcies remain lower as do individual voluntary arrangements, but debt relief orders are higher than pre-pandemic levels.**

The main concern around company and individual insolvencies are associated issues such as mental health and homelessness.

Claimant Count²

The following table highlights the level of Universal Credit claimants in the Staffordshire Districts and each of the Strategic Authorities in the West Midlands Region:

Claimant Count (Universal Credit) Statistics: March 2024

| Area | Claimant Count Rate (March 2023) | Claimant Count Rate (February 2024) | Claimant Count Rate ¹ (March 2024) | Number of Claimants (March 2024) | Monthly Change in Claimants (Numbers) | Monthly Change in Claimants (%) | Change in Claimants since March 2020 (Numbers) | Change in Claimants since March 2020 (%) |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| England | 3.8 | 3.9 | 4.0 | 1,415,340 | 26,735 | 1.9% | 351,835 | 33.1% |
| West Midlands | 4.9 | 4.9 | 5.1 | 186,525 | 4,410 | 2.4% | 42,175 | 29.2% |
| SSLEP | 3.5 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 25,955 | 945 | 3.8% | 6,585 | 34.0% |
| Birmingham | 8.4 | 8.8 | 9.1 | 66,875 | 1,970 | 3.0% | 17,505 | 35.5% |
| Wolverhampton | 7.7 | 7.2 | 7.5 | 12,305 | 365 | 3.1% | 1,925 | 18.5% |
| Sandwell | 6.3 | 6.1 | 6.3 | 13,540 | 340 | 2.6% | 2,760 | 25.6% |
| Stoke-on-Trent | 5.5 | 5.8 | 6.1 | 9,825 | 520 | 5.6% | 2,505 | 34.2% |
| Coventry | 5.6 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 12,645 | 125 | 1.0% | 4,645 | 58.1% |
| Walsall | 5.6 | 5.5 | 5.6 | 9,780 | 180 | 1.9% | 1,175 | 13.7% |
| Dudley | 4.7 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 9,205 | 125 | 1.4% | 690 | 8.1% |
| Telford and Wrekin | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 4,240 | 115 | 2.8% | 810 | 23.6% |
| Solihull | 3.3 | 3.2 | 3.3 | 4,275 | 95 | 2.3% | 625 | 17.1% |
| Worcestershire | 3.1 | 3.0 | 3.1 | 11,075 | 45 | 0.4% | 2,770 | 33.4% |
| Staffordshire | 2.9 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 16,130 | 430 | 2.7% | 4,080 | 33.9% |
| Warwickshire | 2.7 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 9,495 | -30 | -0.3% | 1,665 | 21.3% |
| Herefordshire, County of | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.5 | 2,735 | 80 | 3.0% | 625 | 29.6% |
| Shropshire | 2.4 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 4,405 | 60 | 1.4% | 395 | 9.9% |
| East Staffordshire | 3.2 | 3.6 | 3.9 | 3,010 | 200 | 7.1% | 1,290 | 75.0% |
| Tamworth | 3.6 | 3.5 | 3.6 | 1,775 | 65 | 3.8% | 285 | 19.1% |
| Cannock Chase | 3.5 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 2,155 | 40 | 1.9% | 500 | 30.2% |
| Newcastle-under-Lyme | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 2,470 | 5 | 0.2% | 490 | 24.7% |
| South Staffordshire | 2.8 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 1,745 | 45 | 2.6% | 435 | 33.2% |
| Stafford | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2,165 | 10 | 0.5% | 510 | 30.8% |
| Lichfield | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.5 | 1,555 | 30 | 2.0% | 235 | 17.8% |
| Staffordshire Moorlands | 2.1 | 2.2 | 2.2 | 1,245 | 25 | 2.0% | 325 | 35.3% |

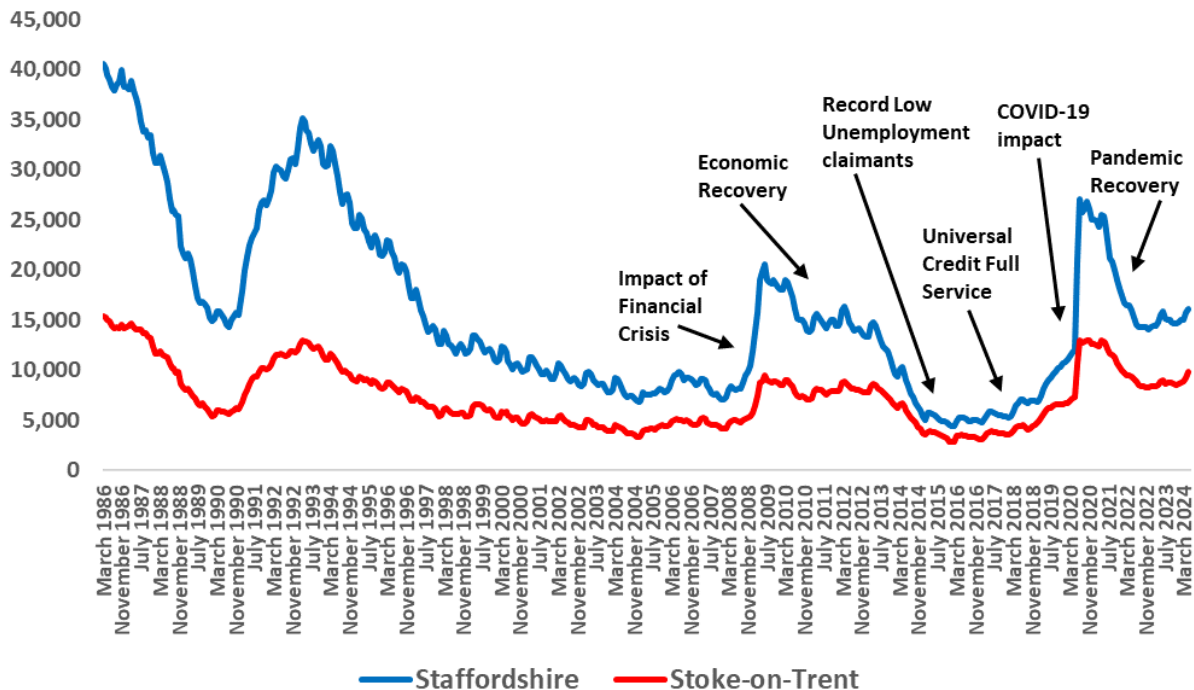
¹ The claimant rate is the proportion of the working age population claiming Universal Credit

- The claimant count in Staffordshire saw an **increase of 430 claimants in March**, with the **total number now at 16,130**. This month has also seen increases both regionally and nationally.
- The increases in claimants in Staffordshire, regionally and nationally is reflective of the challenging economic conditions businesses continue to operate in across the country.
- Over the last month, the **claimant rate for Staffordshire increased from 2.9% to 3.0%** of the working age population.
- The **rate in Staffordshire continues to be one of the lowest rates in the West Midlands and is far lower than the average for the region of 5.1%, and lower than the average for England at 4.0%**.
- Stoke-on-Trent saw an **increase of 520 claimants** over the same period with a **total of 9,825 claimants in March**, with the **rate increasing from 5.8% to 6.1%**.

² Source: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

- Whilst there was a higher proportional increase this month in Staffordshire of 2.7% than seen nationally (1.9%) or regionally (2.4%), **Staffordshire still has one of the lowest claimant rates in the region.**
- **The total number of Universal Credit (UC) claimants in Staffordshire is now 33.9% or 4,080 higher than the level seen in March 2020 (pre-COVID),** which is largely in-line with the 33.1% increase seen nationally and above the 29.2% increase seen regionally.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Claimant Count



- **It is important to note that not all claimants will be out of work.** The increases seen since COVID-19 struck in March need to be viewed in the context of the move to Universal Credit. Before Universal Credit, the Claimant Count was based upon Jobseeker's Allowance claimants - people out of work but looking for a job. However, in response to COVID-19 the Government changed the criteria for Universal Credit to allow certain people on low incomes to claim whilst in work. Therefore, there will be **a proportion of claimants that will still be in work but claiming Universal Credit because they are on a low income or have seen reduced hours (under-employment)**, although from the data released by the Government it is not currently possible to quantify claimants that are unemployed or employed but on a low income.
- It is also important to recognise that although claimant numbers are higher than pre-pandemic levels, given our strong position going into the pandemic, we still perform well given **Staffordshire's claimant rate is 3.0% of the working age population compared to 5.1% regionally and 4.0% nationally. In Stoke-on-Trent, the Claimant Count remains above both the regional and national averages at 6.1%.**

- For those that find themselves out of work, **demand for labour remains high with the number of vacancies still above pre-pandemic levels and there is currently estimated to be close to one job vacancy available for every claimant within the county.**
- Therefore, our focus continues to be to ensure that there is the support in place to help people that unfortunately find themselves unemployed to move into the high number of job vacancies that are present across Staffordshire.
- This month there were increases in the claimant count across all districts in Staffordshire.
- East Staffordshire has the highest claimant rate at 3.9% and Staffordshire Moorlands has the lowest at 2.2%. However, all districts have a lower claimant rate than both the regional and national rates.

Youth Claimant Count

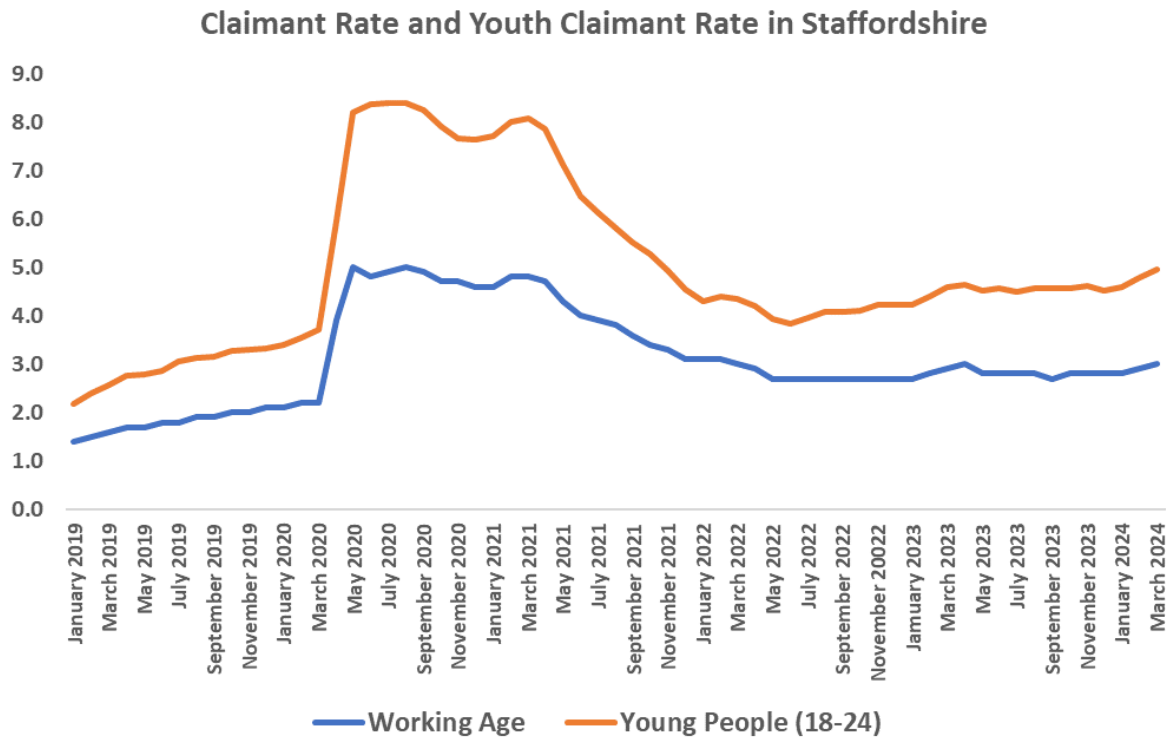
Youth Claimant Count (Universal Credit) Statistics: March 2024

| Area | Youth Claimant Count Rate (March 2023) | Youth Claimant Count Rate (February 2024) | Youth Claimant Count Rate ¹ (March 2024) | Number of Youth Claimants (March 2024) | Monthly Change in Youth Claimants (Numbers) | Monthly Change in Youth Claimants (%) | Change in Youth Claimants since March 2020 (Numbers) | Change in Youth Claimants since March 2020 (%) |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| England | 4.9 | 5.2 | 5.3 | 249,275 | 4,840 | 2.0% | 51,545 | 26.1% |
| West Midlands | 6.6 | 7.0 | 7.2 | 36,160 | 850 | 2.4% | 8,255 | 29.6% |
| SSLEP | 5.4 | 5.6 | 5.8 | 4,970 | 180 | 3.8% | 1,150 | 30.1% |
| Wolverhampton | 10.6 | 11.0 | 11.1 | 2,375 | 35 | 1.5% | 465 | 24.3% |
| Birmingham | 8.6 | 9.7 | 9.9 | 12,865 | 320 | 2.6% | 3,760 | 41.3% |
| Walsall | 8.8 | 9.5 | 9.7 | 2,200 | 60 | 2.8% | 285 | 14.9% |
| Sandwell | 9.0 | 9.2 | 9.6 | 2,730 | 100 | 3.8% | 615 | 29.1% |
| Stoke-on-Trent | 7.5 | 7.9 | 8.3 | 1,870 | 80 | 4.5% | 465 | 33.1% |
| Dudley | 7.5 | 7.7 | 7.8 | 1,855 | 25 | 1.4% | 105 | 6.0% |
| Telford and Wrekin | 5.6 | 5.8 | 6.0 | 900 | 35 | 4.0% | 140 | 18.4% |
| Solihull | 5.2 | 5.7 | 6.0 | 900 | 45 | 5.3% | 75 | 9.1% |
| Coventry | 5.0 | 5.4 | 5.5 | 2,350 | 25 | 1.1% | 815 | 53.1% |
| Staffordshire | 4.6 | 4.8 | 5.0 | 3,100 | 100 | 3.3% | 685 | 28.4% |
| Worcestershire | 4.7 | 4.8 | 4.8 | 2,010 | 10 | 0.5% | 415 | 26.0% |
| Herefordshire, County of | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.3 | 495 | 25 | 5.3% | 80 | 19.3% |
| Warwickshire | 3.8 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 1,735 | 15 | 0.9% | 400 | 30.0% |
| Shropshire | 3.5 | 3.6 | 3.5 | 770 | -20 | -2.5% | -55 | -6.7% |
| Tamworth | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.9 | 395 | 25 | 6.8% | 100 | 33.9% |
| Cannock Chase | 6.3 | 6.2 | 6.4 | 450 | 10 | 2.3% | 85 | 23.3% |
| East Staffordshire | 4.9 | 5.3 | 5.6 | 500 | 30 | 6.4% | 180 | 56.3% |
| South Staffordshire | 4.9 | 4.6 | 4.9 | 365 | 25 | 7.4% | 115 | 46.0% |
| Stafford | 4.3 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 385 | -5 | -1.3% | 70 | 22.2% |
| Newcastle-under-Lyme | 3.9 | 4.4 | 4.3 | 505 | -15 | -2.9% | 80 | 18.8% |
| Lichfield | 3.8 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 285 | 15 | 5.6% | 15 | 5.6% |
| Staffordshire Moorlands | 2.6 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 215 | 15 | 7.5% | 40 | 22.9% |

¹The claimant rate is the proportion of the working age population claiming Universal Credit

- This month the **youth claimant count in Staffordshire saw an increase of 100 claimants with a total of 3,100 young people.** Increases were also seen both regionally and nationally.
- **The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit increased from 4.8% to 5.0% this month.** This continues to be lower than the national rate of 5.3%, which increased from 5.2%, and far lower than the regional rate of 7.2%, which increased from 7.0% this month.

- **Stoke-on-Trent saw an increase of 80 claimants to a total of 1,870 claimants with the rate increasing from 7.9% to 8.3% this month.**



- This month the majority of districts in Staffordshire saw increases with the exception of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stafford which saw decreases of -2.9% and -1.3% respectively.
- Tamworth has the highest rate at 6.9%, whilst Staffordshire Moorlands has the lowest rate at 3.6%. Newcastle-under-Lyme and East Staffordshire have the highest number of youth claimants at 505 and 500 respectively, whilst Staffordshire Moorlands has the lowest number of youth claimants at 215.
- Given that it is harder for youth claimants to find a new job our focus continues to be to engage with our younger residents and support them to find employment or continue in education and training, such as through the Staffordshire Jobs and Careers Brokerage service, the Restart Scheme, and the new Skills Bootcamps to help prevent them becoming long-term unemployed.

Claimant Counts and Rates in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Wards

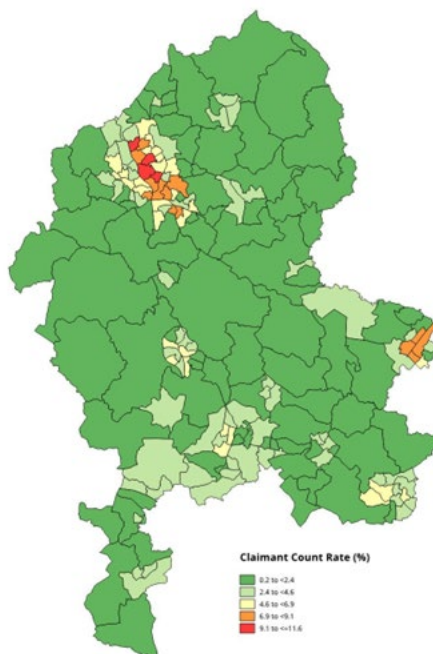
The following maps and tables provide the latest breakdown of the claimant count by wards in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent.

Claimant Count Rate March 2024

Of the 201 wards in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent, 58 were above the England average of 4.0% for the number of claimants as a proportion of the working age population.

Within the twenty highest claimant count rate wards, sixteen were in Stoke-on-Trent with the highest rates in Joiner's Square: 11.6%/535; Moorcroft: 11.2%/415; Etruria & Hanley: 11.1%/595; Tunstall: 9.2%/390; Burslem Central: 8.8%/400 total claimants.

In Staffordshire, the four wards with the highest claimant count rates were all in East Staffordshire with Burton: 8.3%/250; Anglesey: 8.1%/440; Eton Park: 7.4%/360; Shobnall: 7.2%/390; total claimants.

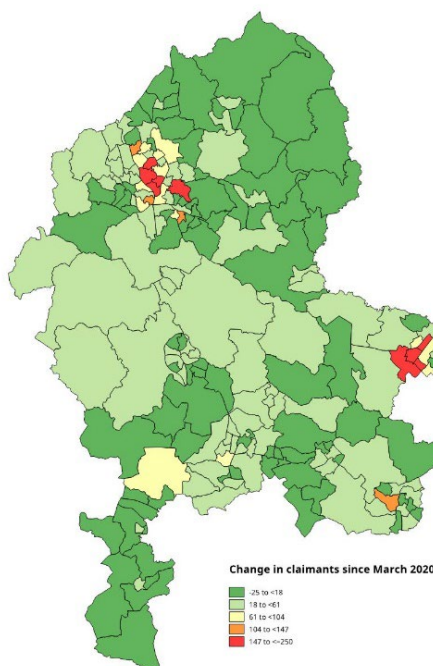


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Change in Claimant Count since March 2020

Of the top ten wards in Staffordshire with the highest change in the number of claimants since March 2020 there were six in Stoke-on-Trent including Etruria & Hanley (240 increase to 595); Hanley Park & Shelton (190 increase to 375); Joiner's Square (160 increase to 535); Moorcroft (155 increase to 415); Bentilee & Ubberley (155 increase to 555); Tunstall (140 increase to 390).

Of the remaining four wards in the top ten, all were in East Staffordshire including Anglesey with a 250 increase to 440 claimants; Eton Park with a 180 increase to 360 claimants; Shobnall with a 180 increase to 390 claimants; and Branston with a 150 increase to 214 claimants.



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Youth Claimant Counts and Rates in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Wards

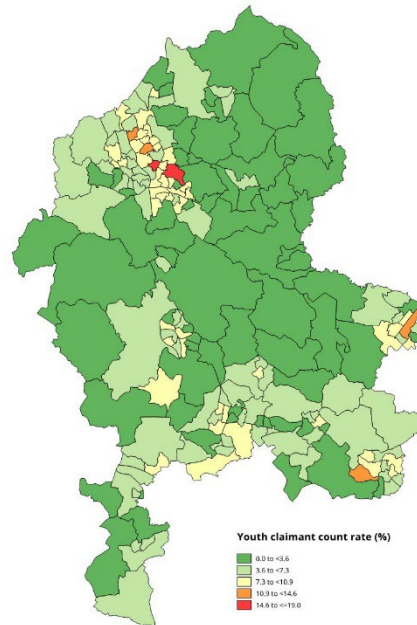
The following maps and tables provide the latest breakdown of the youth claimant count by wards in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent.

Youth Claimant Count Rate March 2024

Of the 201 wards in Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent, 87 were above the England average of 5.3% for the number of claimants aged 18-24 as a proportion of the 18-24 population.

Of the top ten wards with the highest youth claimant count rate, six were in Stoke-on-Trent including Joiner's Square: 19.0%/145; Bentilee & Ubberley: 15.0%/135; Tunstall 11.3%/70; Moorcorft: 11.2%/60; Fenton East: 10.7%/50; Etruria & Hanley: 10.4%/90 total youth claimants.

In Staffordshire, the four wards with the highest claimant count rates were Burton (East Staffordshire): 14.2%/55; Fazeley (Lichfield): 10.9%/35; Bilbrook (South Staffordshire): 10.8%/30; Cannock North (Cannock Chase): 10.3%/55 total youth claimants.

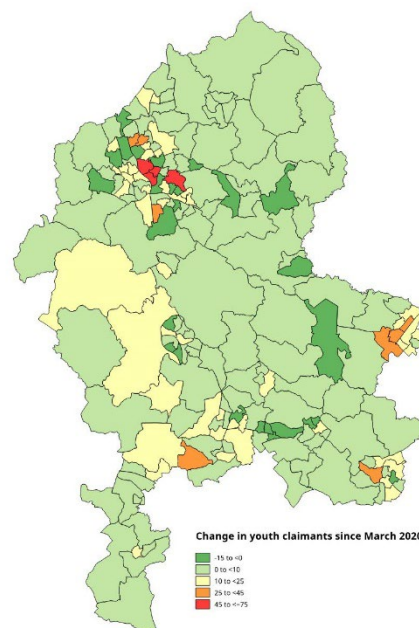


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Change in Youth Claimant Count since March 2020

Of the top ten wards in Staffordshire with the highest change in the number of youth claimants since March 2020, seven were in Stoke-on-Trent including Hanley Park & Shelton (75 increase to 105); Joiner's Square (45 increase to 145); Bentilee & Ubberley (45 increase to 135); Etruria and Hanley (45 increase to 90); Tunstall (30 increase to 70); Blurton West & Newstead (25 increase to 60); Little Chell and Stanfield (25 increase to 65).

In Staffordshire, the three wards with the highest change in the number of youth claimants since March 2020, were Castle (Tamworth) with a rise of 35 to 50; Eton Park (East Staffordshire) with a rise of 30 to 60; Shobnall (East Staffordshire) with a rise of 25 to 60 total youth claimants.

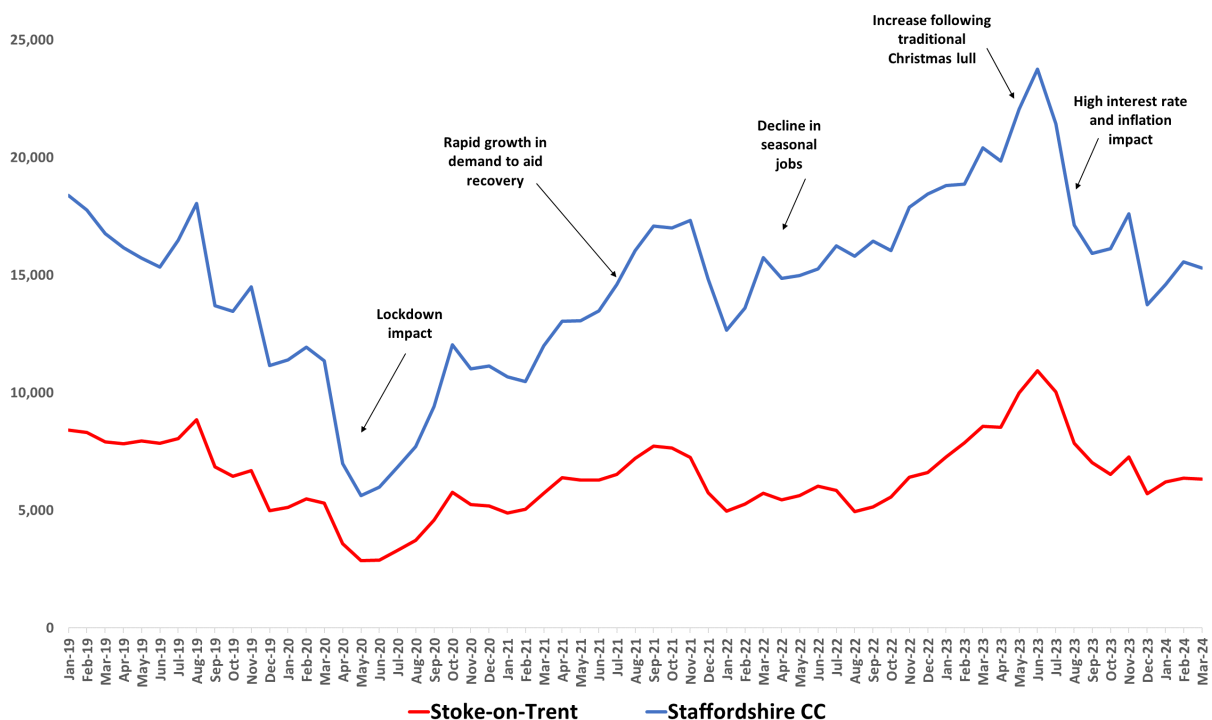


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Job Vacancies³

- **Staffordshire saw a 2% decrease in the number of available job vacancies between February and March to a total of 15,300⁴. This is lower than the number of work-related benefit claimants. Stoke-on-Trent saw a 1% decrease in job vacancies to a total of 6,300 which is also lower than the number of claimants.**
- **Across the region in the last month there was no change, and nationally there was a 1% increase in job vacancies. Generally, job vacancies have seen minimal change this month regionally and nationally.**
- In March there has been a decrease in the number of available job vacancies, compared to a year ago in Staffordshire with the number of job adverts being posted 25% lower, whilst Stoke-on-Trent decreased 26%. The chart below indicates a general declining trend overall from July last year indicating a slowdown in the jobs market as a result of business sectors delaying recruitment due to increased costs and uncertainty in the economy. Overall, the outlook remains positive and recruitment demand is strong with new job postings higher than pre-pandemic levels with Staffordshire job vacancies 28% higher and Stoke-on-Trent 15% higher. Our focus continues to be to support those that unfortunately find themselves unemployed, to transition into work.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Unique Job Vacancies Trend



Important to note that Lightcast (formerly EMSI/Burning Glass) live job vacancy data has been upgraded and improved through enhanced AI deduplication and sharper skill scraping of job postings.

³ Source: Lightcast (formerly EMSI/Burning Glass)

⁴ Lightcast updated its deduplication algorithm for UK job postings on 17 November 2023. As a result of this change historic posting counts have decreased on average by 2% to 4%.

Monthly Trends in recruitment

- The majority of occupational groups saw a decrease in vacancies during March, except for 'Sales & Customer Service', 'Skilled Trades' and 'Professional' occupations which saw modest increases of up to 1%.
- The occupations to see the most significant increases during March include **Large Goods Vehicle Drivers; Sales & Retail Assistants; Managers/Proprietors in other services; Other Psychologists; Kitchen and Catering Assistants; Quantity Surveyors; Programmers & Software Developers; Project Support Officers; HR & Industrial Relations Officers and Engineering Technicians.**

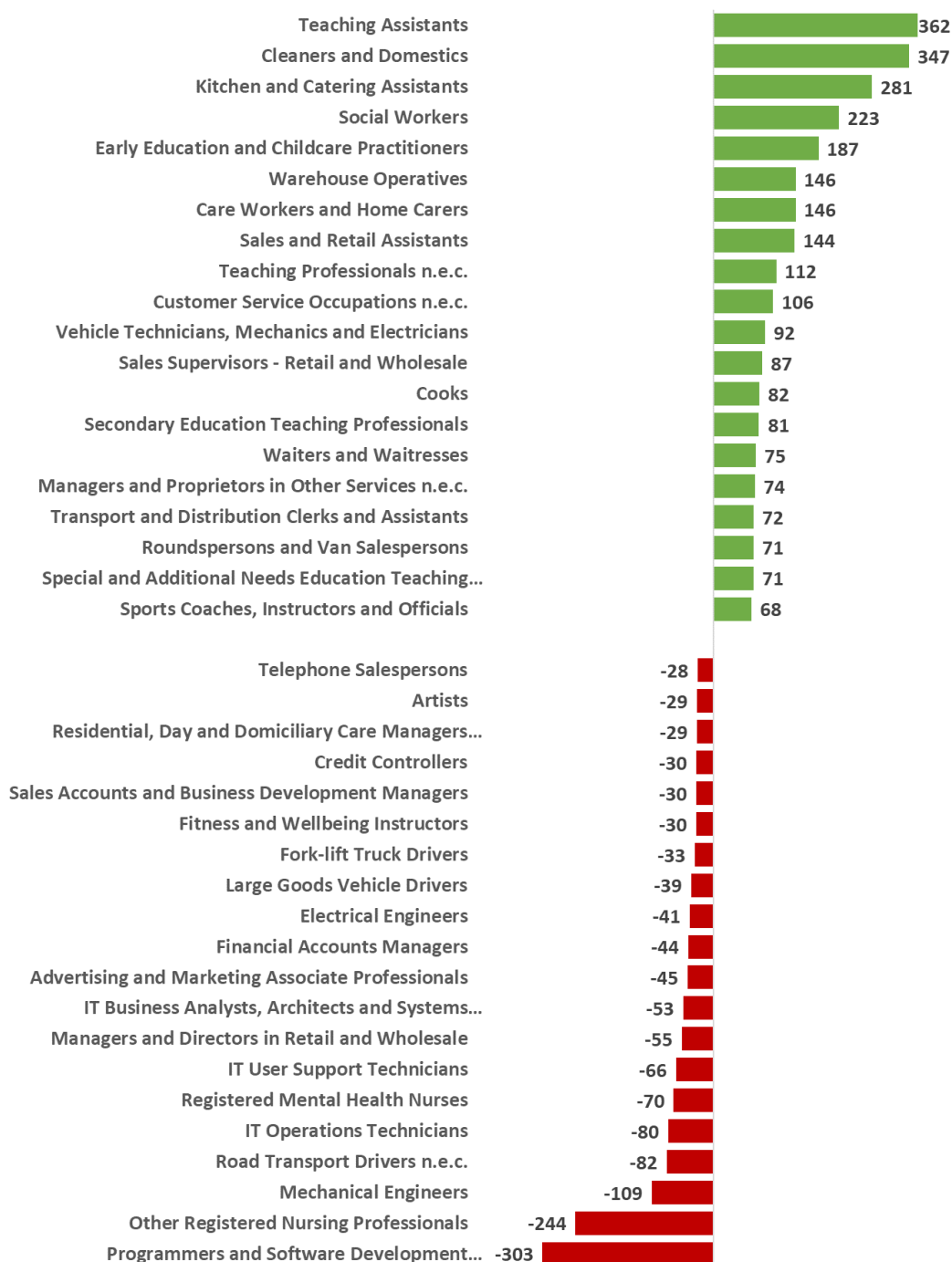
Annual Trends in job vacancies

- The occupations to see the largest year-on-year increases include Logistics (Large Goods Vehicle Drivers; Other Drivers and Transport Operatives, Road Transport Drivers), Education (Teaching Assistants; Higher Education Teaching Professionals; Educational Support Assistants), Construction (Quantity Surveyors), Health (Other Psychologists; Dental Practitioners), Vehicle Valeters & Cleaners, Childcare (Early Education & Childcare Practitioners; Nannies & Au Pairs; Early Education and Childcare Assistants), Engineering (Engineering Project Managers & Project Engineers; Science, Engineering & Production Technicians), Cross Sector Business Roles (Business Sales Executives), Beauticians & related occupations, Caretakers, IT (Computer System & Equipment Installers/Serviceers), Estate Agents & Auctioneers.

Pre-COVID baseline trends in job vacancies

- It is also found that the main occupations with higher vacancies compared to pre-COVID are mainly found within:
 - **Education** (Teaching Assistants; Teaching Professionals; Special & Additional Needs Education & Teaching Professionals; Secondary Education Teaching Professionals; Sports Coaches)
 - **Housekeepers & related occupations** (Cleaners & Domestic)
 - **Hospitality** (Kitchen and Catering Assistants; Cooks; Waiters & Waitresses)
 - **Health and Social Care** (Care Workers and Home Carers; Social Workers)
 - **Childcare** (Early Education & Childcare Practitioners)
 - **Logistics** (Warehouse Operatives; Transport & Distribution Clerks/Assistants; Roundspersons & Van Salespersons)
 - **Retail & Wholesale** (Sales and Retail Assistants; Sales Supervisors)
 - **Cross sector business roles** (Customer Service; Managers & Proprietors in other services)
 - **Motor Trade** (Vehicle Technicians, Mechanics and Electricians)
- This is reflective of the ongoing long term recruitment difficulties in these sectors.

Top 20 occupations increasing and top 20 declining between Feb 2020 (Pre-COVID) and Mar 2024 in SSLEP

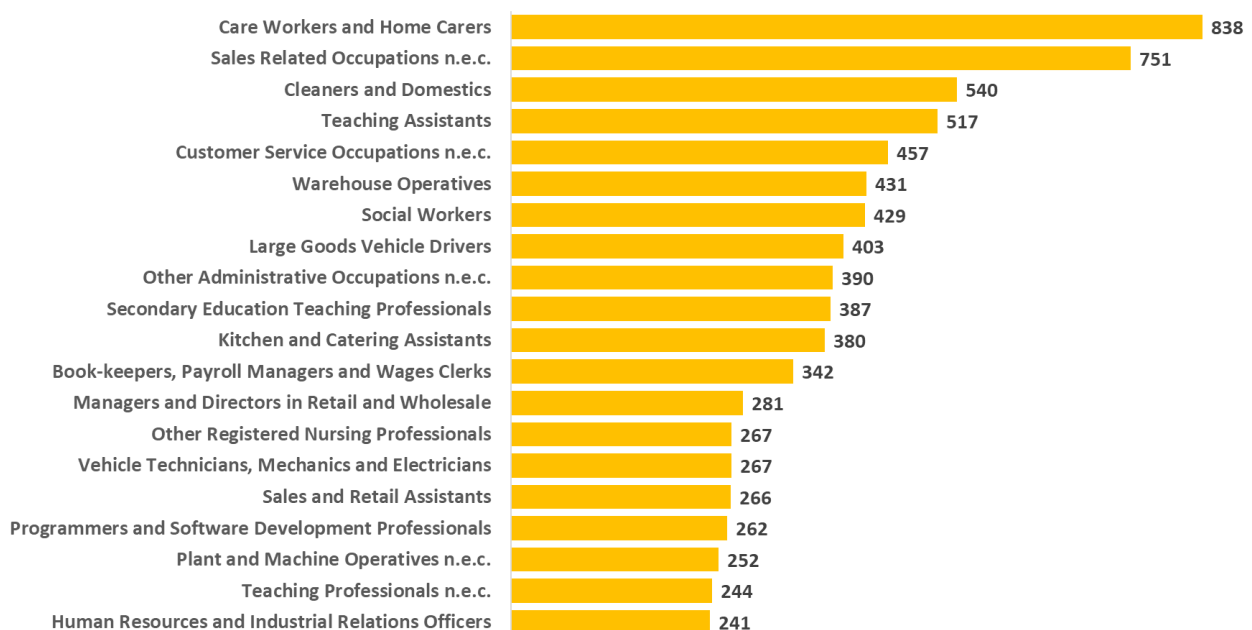


Top Occupations in Demand

- Considering the **top 20 job vacancy occupations in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire**, demand for roles in social care continue to remain high with **'Care Workers and Home Carers'** being the most in demand occupations.
- The following occupations **'Sales Related', 'Cleaners & Domestic', and 'Teaching Assistants'**, also have strong demand.

- There is **strong demand for 'Customer Service', 'Administrative', 'Bookkeepers, Payroll Managers & Wages Clerks', and 'HR & Industrial Relations Officers',** across business sectors to support business in their recovery, survival, and new methods of working.
- The Logistics sector continues to have high demand for **'Warehouse Operatives' and 'Large Goods Vehicle Drivers'.**
- There is high demand in the Health and Social Care sector for **'Social Workers', and 'Registered Nursing Professionals'.**
- In the Education sector there is particularly high demand for **'Secondary Education Teaching Professionals' and 'Teaching Professionals'.**
- In the Hospitality sector, **'Kitchen and Catering Assistants' remain the roles most in demand.**
- Demand for **'Managers & Directors in Retail & Wholesale' and 'Sales & Retail Assistants'** in the Retail and Wholesale sector remain strong.
- In the Motor Trade **'Vehicle Technicians, Mechanics and Electricians'** are in demand.
- In ICT demand for **'Programmers & Software Development Professionals'** is high.
- In the Manufacturing sector **'Plant & Machine Operatives'** are most in demand.

Top 20 occupations in demand in SSLEP during Mar 2024



- It is in these areas of the economy where job vacancies remain particularly high and where we are hearing the most reports of **labour and skills shortages** with a mismatch of workers or skills to fill the vacant jobs.
- This has the **potential to slow down economic growth and limit business survival unless the labour shortage and skills gap is quickly and effectively addressed.** Clearly employment support organisations, skills providers and the Government's Plan for Jobs including the Restart schemes and new Skills Bootcamps have a vital role in upskilling and reskilling jobseekers into areas of demand and preventing them becoming long-term unemployed. Government and business sectors have a key role in ensuring that jobs in areas of demand are attracting workers with good pay and terms and conditions to help prevent labour shortages.
- It is clear there continues to be a high number of jobs available in the local economy and the need now is to ensure that there is a strong local labour pool with skilled workers able to fill these roles to support business recovery/survival and improve their own prosperity through better pay. The national and local support which is in place to support those that have been unfortunate enough to lose their jobs is vital in both **reskilling and upskilling** as well as enabling them to access the opportunities available. Also encouraging those that have become **economically inactive** due to COVID back into work will further help to address labour shortages and skills gaps.
- **Staffordshire County Council's new Job Brokerage Service** is designed to do exactly this by matching local people, employers, and training providers to fill jobs and provide people with the jobs and careers they need.
- There are also clear **emerging opportunities for job creation in digital (including online retail and e-commerce) and the green economy (including retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency, electric cars e.g., Jaguar Land Rover and hydrogen e.g., JCB).**
- We will also look to build on our existing strengths including **engineering and advanced manufacturing** through the adoption of AI, Automation and Machine Learning, **construction** to achieve Government house building targets and build major new infrastructure projects such as the West Midlands Freight Interchange, and **advanced logistics** with ecommerce creating continued demand and the recent announcement by Pets At Home in Stafford creating over 750 new jobs.

Notes

Claimant Count and ILO Unemployment Definitions

The Claimant Count is a measure of the number of working aged people claiming benefits principally for the reason of being unemployed, including those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance plus those who claim Universal Credit and are required to seek work and be available for work.

ILO unemployment data is obtained from the national Labour Force Survey. The definition for unemployment is those without a job, want a job, have actively sought work in the last four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks, or are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start work in the next two weeks.

Understanding the differences between the Claimant Count and ILO Unemployment

According to the UK Claimant Count for May, claimant unemployment increased to 2.8 million and a rate of 7.8% – a rise of 125% in just two months, the fastest rate of growth on record. However, the ILO measure shows that unemployment has remained largely unchanged at around 1.3 million and a rate of 3.9%. Understanding the reasons why there is this difference is important for policymakers trying to determine whether we are currently in the middle of an unemployment crisis or whether this is to come as the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) is gradually withdrawn.

The following section tries to explain this incredibly confusing, complicated, and often contradictory data.

The main reasons for the difference between the Claimant Count and ILO measures include:

- **The two measures describe different periods** – for claimant unemployment, the numbers refer to claimants on a specific 'count date' with the last three being 12 March, 9 April, and 14 May. Therefore, these are point-in-time estimates, and handily we can compare what the situation was about a week before the crisis (12 March) with how things were two months later (14 May).

The ILO measure is a three-month average of survey responses between early February and late April 2020. This means that two months pre-date the crisis, while one month (April) is since the crisis began. However, ONS does release single month estimates (latest available April 2020) which show a drop in employment in April of 320,000 explained almost entirely by fewer people self-employed but only slight increase of 40,000 unemployed. Instead, there is a steep rise in 'economic inactivity' which is those who are out of work but are not looking and/ or available for work.

- **Difference in measuring economic inactivity/worklessness** - the Claimant Count measures those who are required to look/be available for work as a condition of benefit, while the ILO measure is those who say that they actually are actively seeking

and available for work. The Labour Force Survey is recording a single month increase in the number of people out of work (unemployed and economically inactive) of 330,000, but nearly 290,000 of these people are not looking for work (economically inactive). The majority of this rise is people previously self-employed and are either not eligible for, or not yet been paid, income under the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

- **Claimant Count now includes more workers on low-income** - In the Claimant Count, people with earned income can be counted as claimant unemployed if their earnings in the reference month are below a set threshold (£338 per month for a single person, or £541 per month for a couple). Before Universal Credit (UC), short hours working was penalised and so these numbers were generally low. However, UC incentivises short-hours work, and so we have seen a growth in recent years in the number of people treated as being unemployed but who have some earnings. The detailed data for UC suggests that 190,000 of the 1 million increase between March and April was accounted for by working claimants - so around one fifth of the rise.
- **Difference in recording people who are 'in work'** - in the Labour Force Survey you are recorded as in employment even if you have not done any work that week but 'have a job or business that you were away from... (and that you expect to return to).' Obviously, this category of workers 'away' from work now captures about 9 million people furloughed under the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) who are continuing to earn, but it also includes people who consider themselves to be employees or self-employed but who have no earnings. 'Real time' Pay As You Earn data suggests that this may be mainly employees, with the number of paid employees falling by 450,000 between March and April. This 450,000 could include a large number of people who may have been due to start a job in March or April but have been told that their job isn't available yet and may also be people who had very few or irregular hours before the JRS was introduced and whom employers have not submitted a JRS claim. These people may be describing themselves as being workers with a job that they are away from, rather than as being actively seeking a new job.
- **Benefit take-up/eligibility impact on the Claimant Count** - given that the claimant count only counts those who claim benefit it may be under-stating the growth in worklessness. We know that many unemployed people do not claim, and particularly young people (usually due to eligibility). Under UC, there have been on average 450,000 more ILO unemployed young people than claimant unemployed and even if that gap narrows in the crisis, as tends to happen in recessions, it is possible that ILO youth unemployment will remain significantly higher than the claimant measure.

Summary table outlining the potential estimates for the Claimant Count rise in April

| Potential Proportion of Claimant Count Change Mar-20 to Apr-20 | Potential Number of Claimants | Potential Reasons for being a Claimant | Labour Force Survey Categorisation |
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|
| 44% | 450,000 | New Job Starters/PT employees/Self-employed with no income claiming Universal Credit not supported by JRS | In Employment - even if not done any work that week but 'have a job or business that were away from... (and that expect to return to)' – rather than unemployed |
| 28% | 292,500 | Self-employed ceased trading or have very low income claiming Universal Credit (and are either not eligible for, or not yet been paid, income under the SEISS) | Economically inactive - people out of work but are not looking for work - majority people previously self-employed |
| 18% | 190,000 | Working part-time low income workers claiming Universal Credit | In Employment |
| 10% | 100,000 | Potential Redundancies | |
| 100% | 1,032,500 | Claimant Count Increase Mar-20 to Apr-20 | |

- It is hoped that this analysis has provided further clarity as to why we have seen such a spike in the number of claimants early in the crisis. What is clear is that we have seen a record fall between March and April in the number of people working and not being supported by JRS. We have also seen worklessness rising at a faster rate than at any time before. Although very few of the decline in the numbers 'working' had translated into higher unemployment in April, it is envisaged that this may be the case if people are unable to get back into work quickly.
- Looking forward, the growth in claims for UC is slowing and so the growth in the Claimant Count is also likely to slow as well. That said claimant unemployment is currently at the highest level on record. The main concern now is what happens to many workers as JRS is gradually withdrawn and it is important that we are thinking now about how to support people that are made redundant and what policy interventions are needed.