Office for National Statistics

Statistical bulletin

Time use in the public sector, Great Britain: February 2024

Estimates of daily time spent by public sector workers on a range of activities. These are official statistics in development.

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Next release:
To be announced

Correction

5 March 2024 14:00

We have corrected an error in Section 7. Measuring the data under the heading 'Stage 2 interviews sample'. The previous version read 21 interviews were carried out. It should have read 20 interviews were carried out.

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- Experimental analysis of a pilot time use survey for public sector workers in Great Britain shows that, on average, workers participating in student management (including teaching), patient management, or policing activity as their main activity did so for at least 6 hours of their working day.

- On average, around 85% of all public sector workers perceived themselves to be at least 80% productive, and almost half perceived themselves to be at least 90% productive, on the working day recorded in the online diary.

- Accompanying research shows that participants generally felt that most of their administrative responsibilities were essential but highlighted some challenges in relation to volume of these tasks, systems and procedures that could make them inefficient, and scope for more delegation.

- Research participants across sectors responded favourably to the introduction of innovations related to Artificial Intelligence and automation, providing there was careful implementation and oversight; current adoption among those involved varied depending on knowledge within an area or organisation.

Estimates are based on data collected in a pilot time use survey of public sector workers. Participants only completed diaries for days on which they worked.

2 . Understanding how public sector workers spend their time

To understand in more detail how public sector workers spend their time, and their views around productivity at work, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) ran a pilot public sector time use survey. These results provide insight into the tasks and activities public sector workers undertake and will help inform our measures of public service productivity, as described in our Public services productivity review. The survey was accompanied by follow-on interviews and focus groups with a subset of the survey participants, exploring in more detail how they spend their time, their views on the impact of administrative tasks on their productivity and on possible changes to reduce administrative burden.

We would value your feedback. Please email us at hhsa@ons.gov.uk to let us know your thoughts on the pilot survey, and to tell us whether this publication meets your needs to help inform potential further analysis of the data.

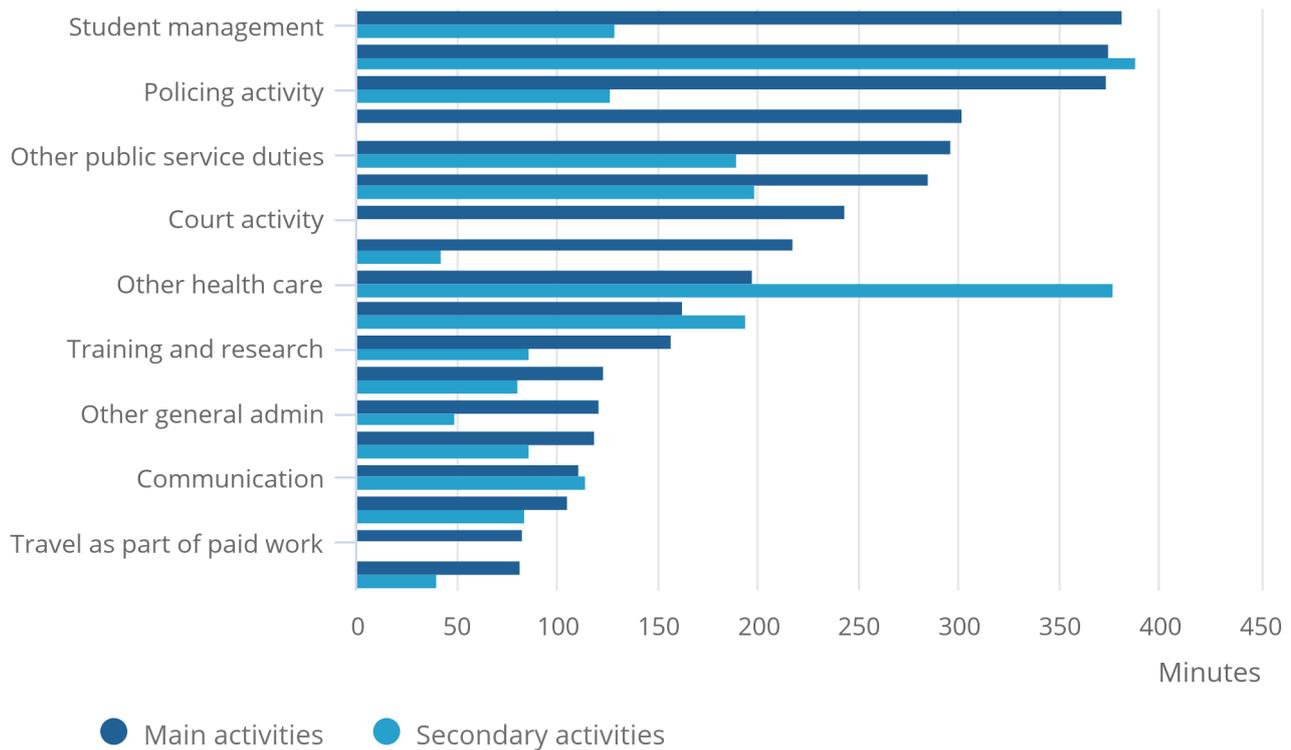# 3 . Average time and participation in activities

The amount of daily time that public sector workers in Great Britain reported spending on work activities (averaged among those undertaking those duties) is shown in Figure 1. Estimates of time are presented for primary activities (where the activity is the main focus) and secondary activities (where the activity is done alongside a main activity) based on data collected in February 2024.

Figure 1: On average those participating in student management, patient management, or policing activity did so for at least six hours of their working day

Average daily time (minutes) spent doing specified activities by public sector workers who recorded doing them as main or secondary activities, Great Britain, February 2024

Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Activities are defined in the Glossary section.

2. Main activities are those that take up most of an individual's attention.

3. Secondary activities are those that an individual does alongside or during their main activity. Participants were able to record multiple secondary activities. Main and secondary activities should not therefore be aggregated.

4. Estimates for "Other policing", "Court activity" and "Travel" as secondary activities are not included because of low sample sizes.

5. Estimates are the average time reported being spent on each activity and are not adjusted to account for different working hours or patterns.

Public sector workers participating in student management (such as teaching professionals), patient management (such as healthcare professionals) and policing activities, as their main activity, report doing so for over 6 hours of their workday on average.

Within the student management activity, on average, those public sector workers participating in teaching or assisting learners in the classroom as a main activity reported doing so for 4 hours and 46 minutes. Further breakdowns of the activities are included in the accompanying tables.

On average, public sector workers participating in communication, and separately those participating in staff management, as main activities did so for over 1 hour and 45 minutes each day. These were two of the activities with the shortest amount of time being spent on them (excluding travel and other work-related activities, which includes taking breaks) when comparing to the other activities presented.

Estimates of time spent on activities are averaged across respondents, reflecting the different occupations of public sector workers. For example, those reporting spending time on records management (2 hours and 42 minutes) or project management (2 hours and 4 minutes) as a main activity include public sector records managers and project managers as well as those who participate in the activity alongside their primary role.

The survey enabled public sector workers to report secondary activities that they participated in, alongside their primary activity. The secondary activities with the highest amount of time reported being spent on them were patient management, and other health care. This may partially reflect the connectivity of activities within healthcare, as assessing patients, observing patients, treating patients, and writing prescriptions were all recorded as separate activities.

Accompanying qualitative research with public service workers across four sectors (Education, Health, Social security and Public safety) enabled participants to describe their activities in more depth, ranging from more basic and repetitive tasks, to those requiring higher skills and professional judgement. Tasks that involved basic administrative elements included data entry or scheduling, for example planning school trips for teachers, and operational admin, such as sending appointment letters for health staff. Tasks that involved administrative elements but also decision-making and communication, requiring some sector-specific expertise and/or clearance, included medical record keeping, or writing up case reports by police officers.

In most cases, participants saw their administrative tasks as important, however they expressed some challenges in relation to the amount of time they spent on these tasks.

[The] process of looking at an individual student and then writing their report… I think it informs my teaching as well. It's clearly a very old-fashioned notion now, but that's one of the things that I find – one of the admin tasks that I find really, really useful.

Education, Focus group

Patient letters would definitely be something secretaries do, but we don't have secretaries [...] printing out the letters and putting them in envelopes and addressing them, it takes a ridiculous amount of time

Health, Focus group

We have huge admin problems at the minute in that all of our negative behaviour, anything we log has to be written with a personalised comment explaining that behaviour and the following sanction to the parent. Which is wonderful until you have to do it for seven kids in one class. For five lessons a day, it's then awful

Education, Focus group
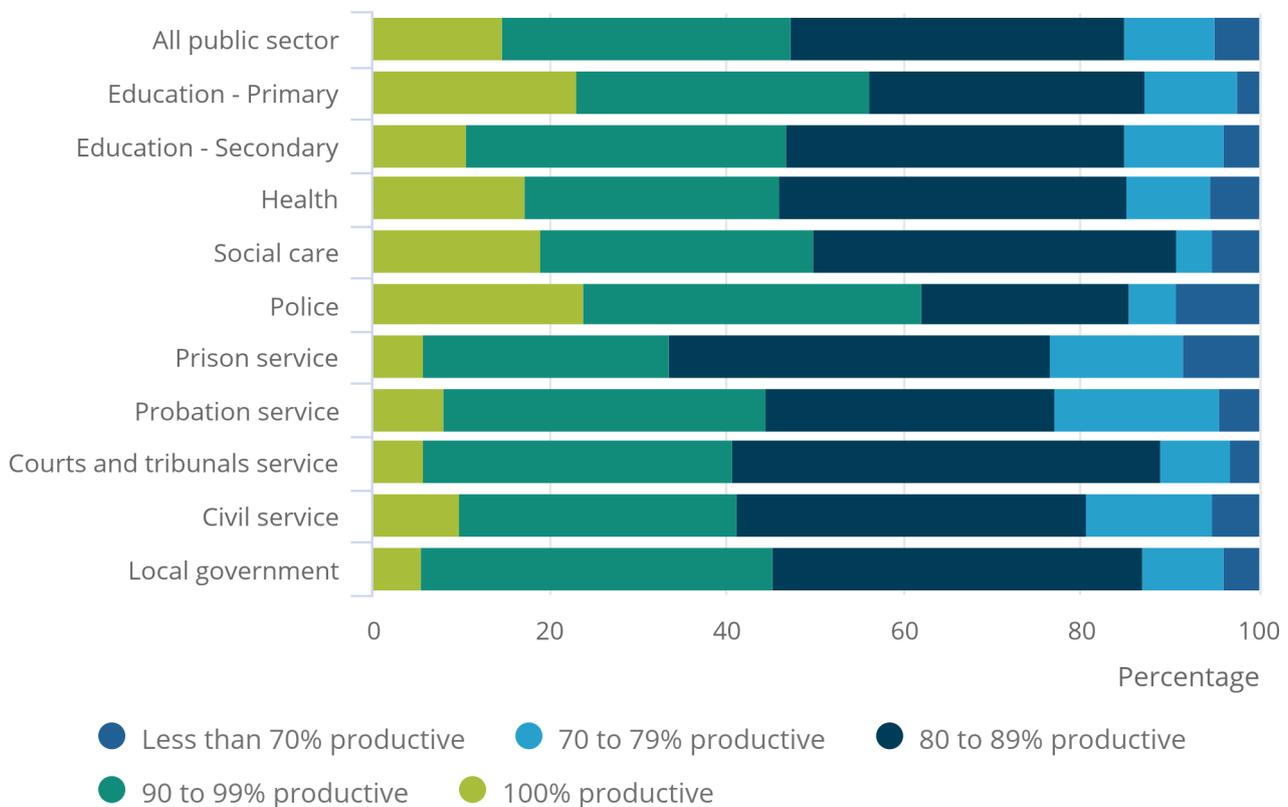
4 . Perceptions of productivity

The pilot time use survey also collected information on public sector workers' perceptions of their own productivity level on the working day recorded in the online diary. Figure 2 shows the average perceived productivity levels by selected workforces.

Figure 2: On average, around 85% of public sector workers perceive themselves to be at least 80% productive

Public sector worker perceptions of their productivity level: by selected workforces, Great Britain, February 2024

Figure 2: On average, around 85% of public sector workers perceive themselves to be at least 80% productive

Public sector worker perceptions of their productivity level: by selected workforces, Great Britain, February 2024

Source: Time Use Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Participants were asked "During this day, roughly how productive were you?" and provided with the response categories included in the chart. A definition of productivity was not provided to participants.

On average, around 85% of all public sector workers perceived themselves to be at least 80% productive, and almost half perceived themselves to be at least 90% productive, on the working day recorded in the online diary.

Figure 2 shows some variation by workforce sector, with the proportion of public sector workers perceiving themselves to be at least 80% productive, varying from 77% to 91% across the sectors.

Among respondents who reported undertaking a non-essential task within the day, the most common activities reported across all workforces were associated with the completion of tasks such as photocopying, data entry, arranging resources, booking appointments, emails, and attending meetings.

When considering administrative tasks specifically, (during the accompanying qualitative research with a subset of respondents), participants generally felt that most of their administrative responsibilities were essential and, in some cases, important for them specifically to complete.

> I would say that some of it is necessary for accountability, as well, in recording sort of the good practice and the things that we do

Focus Group, Education sector

> [Yeah, so our documentation again, I know it is not great. But] we use it as a tool really to fall back on it because litigation is massive in maternity. If it's not documented, it didn't happen, basically. Our documentation has to be top notch, basically.

Focus Group, Health sector

A small number of participants expressed that their administrative workload could contribute to feelings of pressure and stress at work, and in some instances could lower the quality of their performance for their core responsibilities, if limiting the time they can dedicate to them.

Where participants expressed concerns about their administrative workload, this generally stemmed from:

- the volume of administrative tasks they were required to complete

- tasks that provided little to no value for the amount of time involved, or that could be easily completed by someone more junior

- systems and procedures making administration inefficient

> We don't nurse anymore, we just input stuff into a computer. It's all about targets. [...] The higher up you go, the less you nurse [...] Obviously I'd like to spend less time working behind a computer, because it's not what I became a nurse for

Health, Interview

In some cases, having to complete administrative tasks outside of working hours had a negative impact on work-life balance, and could have a negative impact on staff retention.

Participants felt some tasks could be completed by an administrative member of staff or someone more junior, however it was acknowledged that sector-specific knowledge would still be required. When limitations to delegation were discussed, the main one being mentioned related to the availability of support staff.

> We have really amazing admin staff but because they're always so busy [...] we now are encouraged to do that ourselves [...] not because they're not efficient [...] because there aren't enough of them.

Education, Focus group

A number of participants felt that obsolete IT systems and a lack of connection between systems was a barrier to more effective automation, with substantial differences in the degree of implementation across organisations.

> A lot of extra work comes from needing to duplicate things that have already been done. A lot of that is from having multiple different computer systems that don't interact with each other. [...]

Health, Focus group

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation at work was discussed as a possible improvement to the way administrative tasks are completed. Adoption varied substantially among participants, and often was dependent on individual knowledge and understanding within an area. However, participants across the sectors tended to respond favourably to the introduction of innovations relating to AI and automation. This was on the condition that there was a strong rationale and business case -- including weighing up the costs and benefits, and careful implementation and oversight, which considered the risks and limitations, such as data security, and whether working in this way would adequately meet service users' needs.

Participants felt that, used appropriately, automation and AI had the potential to improve public sector worker's efficiency, reduce stress, and overload, and allow them to work on more complex or "core" tasks (those tasks that are central to their roles). Popular use cases included AI reporting tools to summarise data, practitioner notes and long documents, AI chat bots that could provide simple information and signposting to employees or customers, automated messaging and case management systems, and generative AI tools that could produce reports, learning and training resources, such as images, case studies or quizzes.

Across sectors, participants talked about the importance of protecting some human-led activities and human-to-human interactions. This was especially important for tasks that required professional judgements and risk assessments, empathy, creativity and ingenuity. Participants also felt that it was important to avoid using automation or AI where the technology might make errors or might struggle to account for the complexities and nuances involved with carrying out tasks.

5 . Time use in the public sector data

[Time use in the public sector](#)
Dataset | Released 04 March 2024
Estimates of daily time spent by public sector workers on a range of activities. These are official statistics in development.

6 . Glossary

Communication

Includes:

- emails

- phone or video calls

- instant messaging

- having a conversation

- writing letters

- creating or updating website

- noticeboard or display boards

- media or press duties

Court activity

Includes court duties.

Data processing

Includes data processing, data analysis, data science.

Meetings or events

Includes organising meetings, meeting administration; and attending a meeting or event.

Offender management

Includes:

- offender-facing activities

- other offender management activities

- security checks and searches

Other general administration

Includes:

- photocopying,

- printing or scanning

- recruitment-related administration

- booking travel and accommodation

- booking travel and accommodation

- ordering supplies or equipment

- finance-related activities; auditing

- health and safety

- postal or mailing duties

- planning

Other healthcare

Includes:

- treatment preparation

- other healthcare activities

Other policing

Includes:

- community activities or events

- other policing and public order activities

Other public service duties

Includes:

- military duties

- other public service activities

- social care activities

- working directly with members of the public service users or customers

- housing or welfare related activities

- safeguarding

- environmental or waste management activities

- checking, testing, cleaning or replenishing equipment

Other work-related activities

Includes:

- taking a work or lunch break

- changing clothes

- sleeping or resting during work time

- waiting

- other work activity

Patient management

Includes:

- assessing patients

- observing patients

- treating patients

- supporting patient care, for example, changing beds, bathing or feeding

- writing prescriptions

Policing activity

Includes:

- crime-related activities

- patrolling

- intelligence gathering

- crime prevention activities

- warrant executions

- prison interviews and non-crime-related activities, for example, public safety and welfare

Project management

Includes:

- writing or reviewing reports

- planning

Records management

Includes:

- storing, filing or managing documents

- taking notes

- creating or updating records databases, case files or similar documents

- completing or processing forms

- creating or updating an appointment or booking

- data entry

- recording medical notes

- writing medical reports or treatment planning

- reading, reviewing, or editing documentation or paperwork

- non-offender-facing activities

Staff management

Includes:

- staff management

- staff-related administration

Student management

Includes:

- teaching or assisting students in the classroom

- supervising children outside of the classroom

- preparing classroom lessons

- preparing or delivering extra-curricular activities

- registering attendance

- reporting, assessing, or marking pupils' work

- safeguarding and wider support for pupils

- other teaching or education activities

Training and research

Includes:

- conducting research

- personal study

- attending or completing a course

- physical or practical training

- delivering a training course

Travel

Includes travelling as part of paid work.

Artificial Intelligence

A form of automation with the potential to automate non-routine tasks and cognitive functions that we associate with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, learning, interacting with an environment, problem solving, and even exercising creativity, such as by generating text or images.

Automation

A set of technologies that can substitute routine, non-cognitive tasks or jobs (for example, the introduction of the telephone switchboard replacing switchboard operators, or accounting software).

7 . Measuring the data

This release contains data collected in the [Office for National Statistics (ONS) pilot public service online Time Use Study](#) (TUS), undertaken between 2 February and 12 February 2024 (inclusive). Participants were issued with eight diary days and asked to select any two days on which they worked. They then recorded the activities (both detailed work and high-level non-work activities) that they undertook during the whole 24-hour periods within an online diary tool. This included their main activities (in 10-minute periods) and up to five secondary activities (in 5-minute periods).

Estimates of the average daily time spent on different activities by the public sector as a whole and by selected sector workforces with accompanying 95% confidence intervals, are included in our accompanying dataset. Where comparisons are made between estimates, confidence intervals should be used to assess the statistical significance of the differences. Read more about confidence intervals and statistical significance in our [Uncertainty and how we measure it for our surveys web page](#).

Sampling and response

The pilot survey sampled 4,774 individuals living in Great Britain who had responded to the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey in the past year and indicated that they were working in a public sector role or organisation (and had agreed to be recontacted to participate in further Office for National Statistics (ONS) research), or who volunteered to take part following an invitation through their employer or workplace. In total, 1,915 individuals (40.1%) responded and submitted 3,005 diaries of sufficient quality, which have been used to produce the estimates in this release.

Weighting

Prior to weighting, the quality of diaries was assessed according to the amount of time and number of activities recorded, and by the duration of work activities recorded.

The Annual Population Survey (October 2022 to September 2023) was used to weight the diaries to the public sector population. Individual diaries were calibrated with calibration controls applied for age and sex groups, geographical regions, workforce sector and gross annual pay. Calibration controls were not applied for working patterns, and therefore, average daily time cannot be aggregated to provide weekly or annual time spent on activities.

Qualitative fieldwork

Two stages of qualitative research were conducted. The first stage was undertaken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to inform the design of the TUS, and cognitive test it. This stage took place between November 2023 and January 2024 and included 10 structured interviews, three focus groups and seven cognitive interviews, with participants across education, health, public safety and social security, recruited through purposive sampling.

Table 1: Stage 1 Qualitative Sample

	Health	Education	Public Safety (11) Social Security (1)
Focus Groups	4	5	6
Interviews	6	5	6
Total	10	10	12

Source: Qualitative fieldwork from the Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Combined sample from interviews and focus groups.

The second stage of qualitative research was commissioned by the ONS, and led by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to complement the TUS, by capturing a deeper and richer understanding of the tasks that public sector workers complete as part of their work, including administrative tasks, as well as facilitators and barriers to improving productivity.

Participants were recruited from a sample of 300 TUS respondents who previously took part in the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey and had agreed to be invited to take part in third-party research. A purposive sampling approach was adopted for recruitment, which involved aiming for a mix in terms of age, gender, and a balance across the four targeted sectors. The secondary characteristics and criteria we monitored for were length of service and region of the country.

Interviews and focus groups took place online between 7 and 20 February 2024, supported by structured topic guides and the use of definitions and vignettes provided to participants for concepts such as automation and Artificial Intelligence. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate the qualitative analysis.

Qualitative research involves in-depth investigation of a topic with a small number of participants recruited through purposive sampling to cover a range of individual characteristics. Therefore, qualitative findings are not aimed at being representative of an entire population; instead, they provide a richer exploration of a topic from the perspective and lived experiences of those directly involved in a phenomenon.

Stage 2 focus groups sample

A group of 18 participants attended three focus groups. The table below describes participants' demographic characteristics and roles.

Table 2: Focus group participants' demographic characteristics and roles (n = 18)

	Education (6)	Health (7)	Social security (4) Public safety (1)
Sex			
Male	1	2	4
Female	5	5	1

Source: Qualitative fieldwork from the Office for National Statistics

Stage 2 interviews sample

20 interviews were carried out. The table below described participants' demographic characteristics and roles.

Table 3: Interview participants' demographic characteristics and roles (n = 20)

	Education (5)	Health (6)	Social security (4)	Public safety (5)
Sex				
Male	3	1	2	1
Female	2	5	2	4

Source: Qualitative fieldwork from the Office for National Statistics

8 . Related links

Time Well Spent: How the ONS is improving the measurement of public service productivity
Blog | Released 09 January 2024
National Statistical blog explaining why the ONS launched the pilot time use survey for public sector workers.

Time use in the UK: 23 September to 1 October 2023
Headline bulletin and data | Released 09 November 2023
Average daily time spent by adults on activities including paid work, unpaid household work, unpaid care, travel and entertainment. Experimental statistics.

Time use in the UK: March 2023
Statistical bulletin and data | Released 04 July 2023
Average daily time spent by adults on activities including paid work, unpaid household work, unpaid care, travel and entertainment. Experimental statistics.

9 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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