

Statistical bulletin

# Business insights and impact on the UK economy: 11 March 2021

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic and other events on UK businesses and the economy. Based on responses from the voluntary fortnightly business survey (BICS) about financial performance, workforce, prices, trade, and business resilience.

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# 1 . Main points

- The proportion of businesses' workforce on furlough leave remains broadly stable at 19%, which equates to approximately 6.2 million employees, in mid-February 2021.
- 69% of businesses reported that none of their sites were temporarily or permanently closed (in line with the proportion currently trading), whilst the South East and London had the highest percentages of sites temporarily or permanently closed, both at 6%, equating to around 34,000 and 24,000 businesses respectively.
- Five industries have more than 50% of currently trading businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover compared with what is expected for this time of year.
- Of all businesses currently trading, 7% are providing regular coronavirus testing to the workforce, and of those businesses 11% of their workforce are being tested.
- The human health and social work activities industry (private sector businesses only) reported the highest proportion of currently trading businesses that are providing regular coronavirus testing to their workforce, at 42%, and of those businesses 56% of their workforce are being tested.
- Additional paperwork was the biggest exporting challenge and change in transportation costs the biggest importing challenge faced by businesses who had exported or imported in mid-February.

## 2 . Other pages in this release

More commentary on the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the UK economy and society is available on the following pages:

- [Coronavirus and the latest indicators for the UK economy and society](#)
- [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain](#)

### More about economy, business and jobs

- All ONS analysis, summarised in our [economy, business and jobs roundup](#).
- Explore the latest trends in employment, prices and trade in our [economic dashboard](#).
- View [all economic data](#).

## 3 . Headline figures

The data presented here are final results from Wave 25 of the Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), which was live for the period 22 February to 7 March 2021.

For questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses were asked for their experience for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021.

All four nations within the UK were subject to lockdowns for the duration of the reference and survey live periods.

For experimental single site weighted regional estimates that have been updated up to Wave 21 (29 December 2020 to 10 January 2021), please see [Understanding the business impacts of local and national restrictions: February 2021](#).

## Figure 1: Headline figures from the Business Insights and Conditions Survey

### Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 7 to Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS).
2. Weighted estimates are available from Wave 7 onwards only. The sample redesign in Wave 7 improves our coverage for the small-sized businesses, allowing for weighted results to be truly reflective of all businesses.
3. Data are plotted in the middle of the two-week period of each wave.
4. Trading status: all businesses; for presentational purposes, currently trading categories and paused trading categories have been combined.
5. Financial performance: businesses currently trading; for presentational purposes, decreased turnover categories and increased turnover categories have been combined, and the option "Not sure" has been removed.
6. Business resilience: businesses not permanently stopped trading; for presentational purposes, cash reserves categories between zero and three months have been combined, and the option "Not sure" has been removed.
7. Workforce: businesses not permanently stopped trading; for presentational purposes, the options "On sick leave or not working because of coronavirus (COVID-19), self-isolation or quarantine", "Made permanently redundant" or "Other" have been removed.
8. Financial performance and Workforce: Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire.

[Download the data](#)

## Trading status

The percentage of businesses currently trading has remained stable throughout January, February and early March 2021, at 74%. This reflects the continuing coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions throughout these months. These levels are similar to those seen in early July 2020, when coronavirus restrictions were also widespread across the UK.

This percentage of businesses currently trading is low compared with 84% of businesses currently trading in mid-December 2020.

Tighter restrictions in [England](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) were introduced in late December 2020. National lockdowns in England and Scotland commenced on 4 January 2021, and Northern Ireland and Wales were also already in national lockdowns by this point.

Businesses that had not permanently stopped trading were asked to identify where their business sites were temporarily or permanently closed.

Table 1: The South East and London had the highest percentages of businesses with sites temporarily or permanently closed, both at 6%  
Percentage of businesses not permanently stopped trading and identified where their business sites are in the UK, weighted by count, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021

Region	% of site closures	No. of site closures
Northern Ireland	1.1%	600
Scotland	2.5%	4,200
Wales	1.4%	1,400
East of England	1.9%	4,800
East Midlands	2.1%	3,600
Greater London	6.0%	31,300
North East of England	1.2%	900
North West of England	2.8%	7,300
South East of England	6.0%	24,200
South West of England	4.0%	8,500
West Midlands	1.5%	3,100
Yorkshire and The Humber	2.0%	3,600
Not sure	1.3%	34,000
None of our sites are currently paused or ceased trading	68.5%	1,791,600

Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

#### Notes

1. Final weighted results Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses not permanently stopped trading and who identified where their business sites are in the UK.
2. Column will not sum to 100% as businesses could select multiple options.
3. These numbers are based on multiplying the weighted BICS site closures percentages by the total number of local units identified in each region on the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) for all businesses in the population that could be sampled for BICS, and rounded to the nearest 100. Additionally, the BICS population does not include the public sector, financial sector and parts of agriculture.
4. These experimental estimates help provide context on level differences between the number of sites closed in each region but caution should be taken in further interpretations as these are approximations based on a percentage of businesses with sites closed in each region apportioned by the number of sites in each region.

Approximately 7 in 10 businesses reported that none of their identified businesses' sites were temporarily or permanently closed, which is in line with the percentage of businesses currently trading.

The South East and London had the highest percentages of businesses with sites temporarily or permanently closed, both at 6%. This equates to approximately 24,000 business sites in the South East and 31,000 business sites in Greater London. These numbers are based on multiplying the weighted BICS site closures percentages by the total number of local units identified in each region on the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) for all businesses in the population that could be sampled for BICS.

## **Financial performance**

The percentage of currently trading businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover in mid-February 2021 (Wave 25), compared with normal expectations for this time of year, has fallen by 2 percentage points since early February (Wave 24), to 44%. This was last lower in mid-December 2020 (Wave 21) when it was 42%.

This slight fall in the percentage of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover is driven by the transportation and storage industry, the wholesale and retail trade industry, and the accommodation and food service activities industry, which, respectively, saw a 7-percentage point, 4-percentage point and 4-percentage point fall in the percentage of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover.

Prior to August 2020, when the original coronavirus restrictions were in place, the percentage of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover compared with normal expectation was consistently above 50%, reaching 65% in early June 2020 (when comparable estimates began). When compared with the 44% of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover in most recent estimates, this suggests current lockdown restrictions do not seem to be having the same scale of impact, perhaps because of businesses adapting.

Conversely, the percentage of businesses whose turnover has not been affected has remained stable at 38% since early January 2021, whilst the percentage of businesses experiencing an increase in turnover has risen from 6% in mid-January 2021 to 8% at the beginning of February.

## **Business resilience**

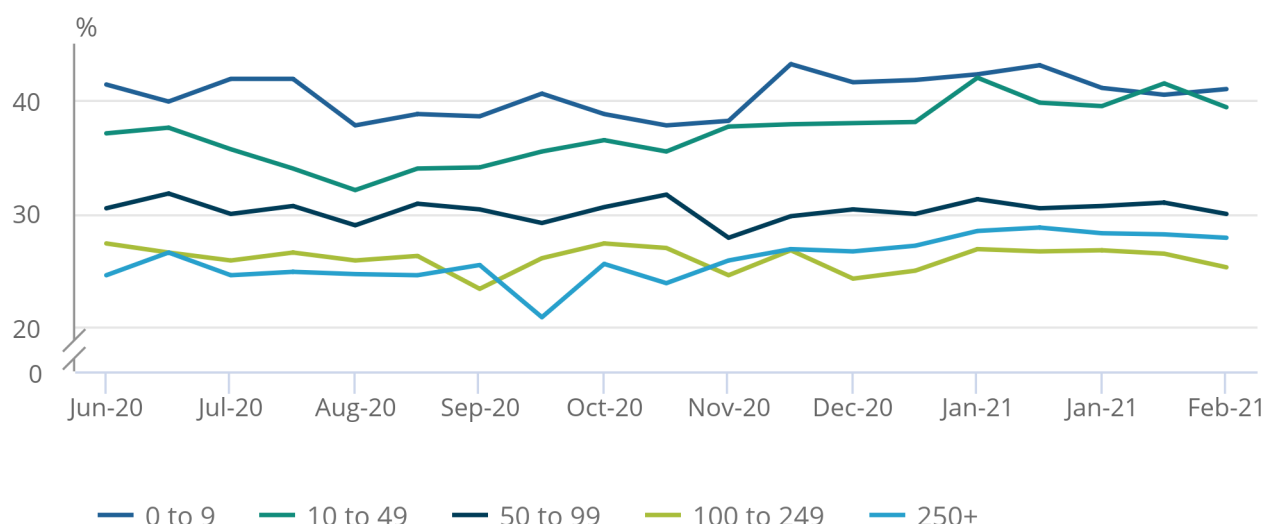
The percentage of businesses with three months' cash reserves or less (including no cash reserves) has remained stable from January 2021 to early March, at 31%. A large proportion of 2020 (mid-June to early-November), the percentage of businesses with three months' cash reserves or less was broadly flat, at approximately 27%, fluctuating between 26% and 29%. However, this percentage has slowly been increasing from the end of November 2020 to its current levels, at 31%.

## Figure 2: Businesses with fewer than 50 employees are more likely to have 3 months' cash reserves or less compared with larger businesses

Cash reserves, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by size band, weighted by turnover, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021

### Figure 2: Businesses with fewer than 50 employees are more likely to have 3 months' cash reserves or less compared with larger businesses

Cash reserves, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by size band, weighted by turnover, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

#### Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 7 to 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey; businesses not permanently stopped trading.
2. For presentational purposes, cash reserves categories between zero and three months have been combined.
3. Data are plotted in the middle of the two-week period of each Wave.

Conversely, the percentage of businesses with more than six months' cash reserves has consistently been higher than the percentage with three months or less. On average, from late July 2020 to early March 2021, the percentage of businesses with more than six months' cash reserves has remained stable at approximately 35%, fluctuating between 31% and 37%.

## Workforce

The proportion of businesses' workforce on furlough leave increased from 11% in early December 2020 to 19% in mid-February 2021. This level was last seen in late July 2020, when coronavirus restrictions were also widespread.

The 19% of businesses' workforce on furlough leave in mid-February 2021 equates to approximately 6.2 million people. These numbers are based on multiplying the BICS-weighted furlough proportions by the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) total annual employment. This will not be consistent with employment estimates from [Labour market statistics](#) as these are based on different sources over different time periods but it provides an early indication. Additionally, the BICS proportion furloughed does not include the public sector, financial sector and parts of agriculture.

For an overview of the similarities and differences between the fortnightly BICS furlough estimates and HM Revenue and Customs' (HMRC's) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) data, over the period March 2020 to January 2021, please see [Comparison of furloughed jobs data, UK: March 2020 to January 2021](#).

## **4 . Industry insights**

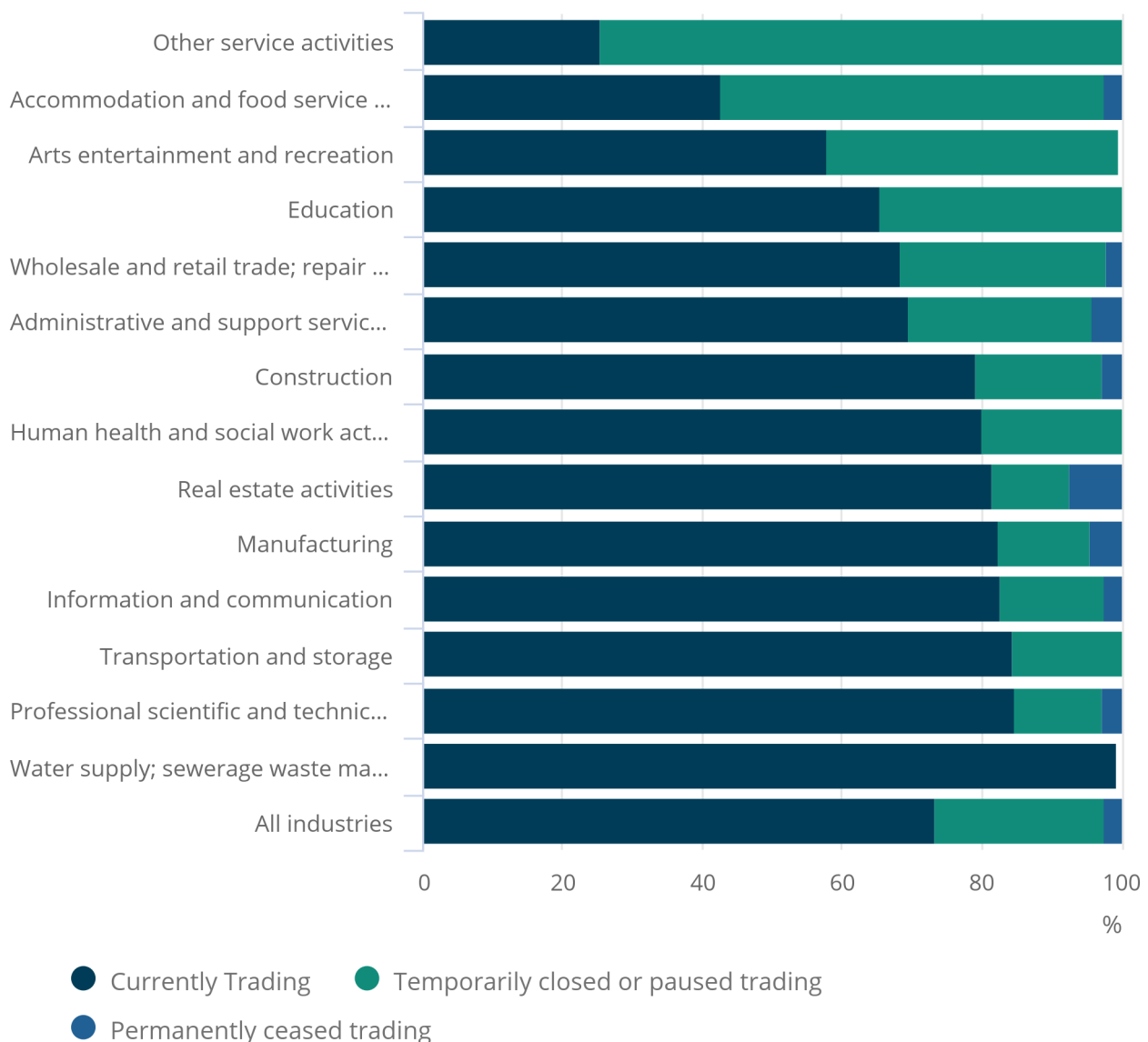
## Trading status

**Figure 3: Three-quarters of businesses in the other service activities industry were temporarily closed or paused trading in early March 2021**

Current trading status, all businesses, broken down by industry, weighted by count, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021

Figure 3: Three-quarters of businesses in the other service activities industry were temporarily closed or paused trading in early March 2021

Current trading status, all businesses, broken down by industry, weighted by count, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes:



1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS).
2. For presentational purposes, currently trading categories and paused trading categories have been combined.
3. Industries may not sum to 100% because of rounding and percentages less than 1% being removed for disclosure purposes.
4. Mining and quarrying has been removed for disclosure purposes, but its total is included in "All industries".

The other service activities industry had the lowest percentage of businesses currently trading, at 26%. This was driven by businesses in hairdressing and other beauty treatments activities, where our estimates suggest that 96% were temporarily closed or paused trading.

The accommodation and food service activities industry was the other industry where less than 50% of businesses were currently trading, at 43%.

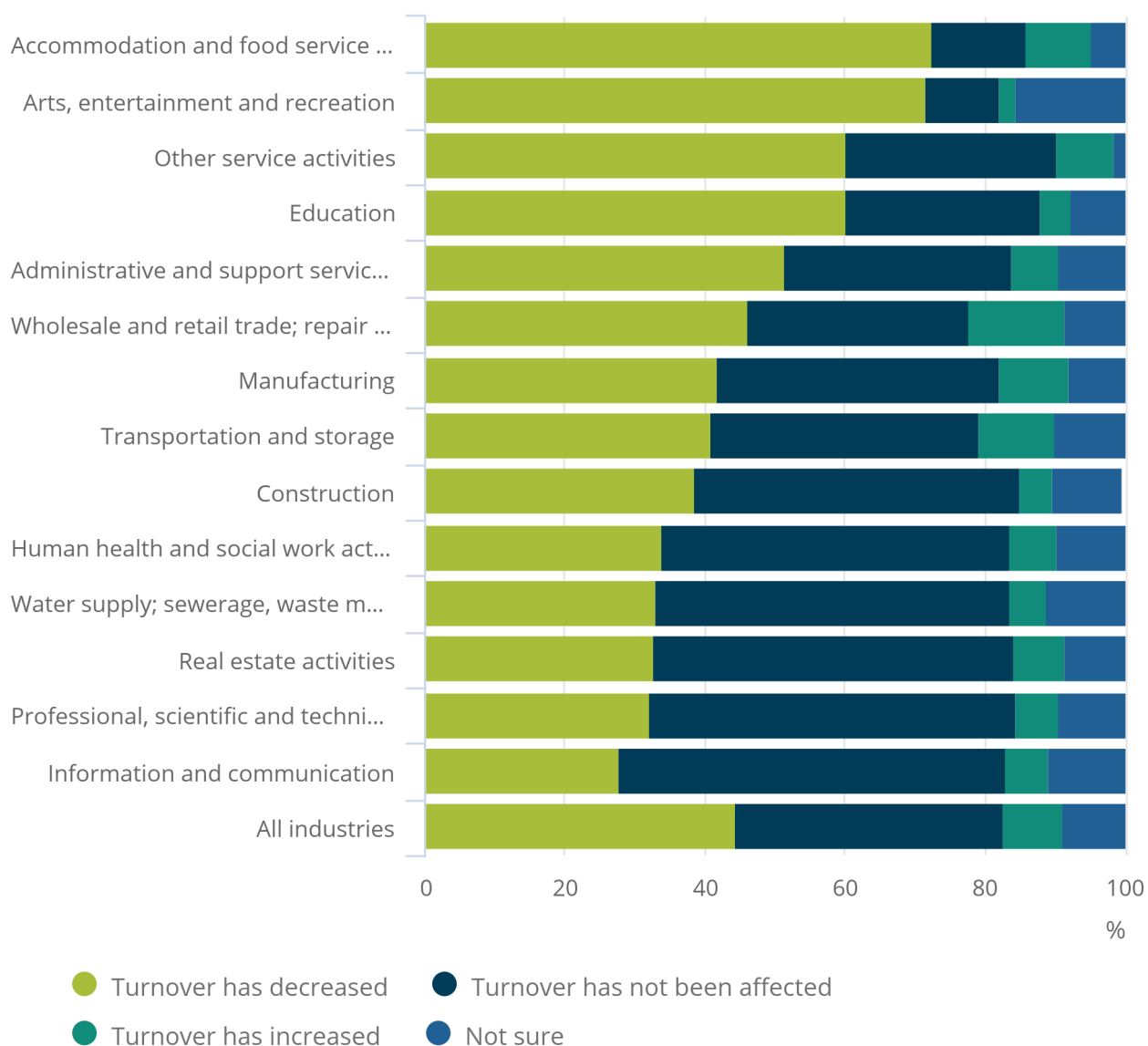
## Financial performance

**Figure 4: Five industries had more than 50% of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover in mid-February 2021, compared with what is expected for this time of year**

Impact on turnover, businesses currently trading, broken down by industry, weighted by turnover, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021

Figure 4: Five industries had more than 50% of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover in mid-February 2021, compared with what is expected for this time of year

Impact on turnover, businesses currently trading, broken down by industry, weighted by turnover, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey; businesses currently trading.
2. For presentational purposes, decreased turnover categories and increased turnover categories have been combined.
3. Industries may not sum to 100% because of rounding and percentages less than 1% being removed.

The accommodation and food service activities industry had the highest percentage of businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover compared with normal expectations, at 73%, which has fallen by 3 percentage points since early February 2021 (Wave 24).

Since June 2020, when comparable estimates began and previous lockdown restriction measures were continuing, the accommodation and food service activities industry has consistently had more than two-thirds of its businesses experiencing a decrease in turnover, with the exception of August 2020, when the percentage of businesses in the accommodation and food service activities industry experiencing a decrease in turnover was 57%. This may be because of the "Eat Out To Help Out scheme", a government policy measure aimed to support businesses reopening after the first coronavirus lockdown ended in June 2020.

Data on businesses' profits are available in the [accompanying dataset](#).

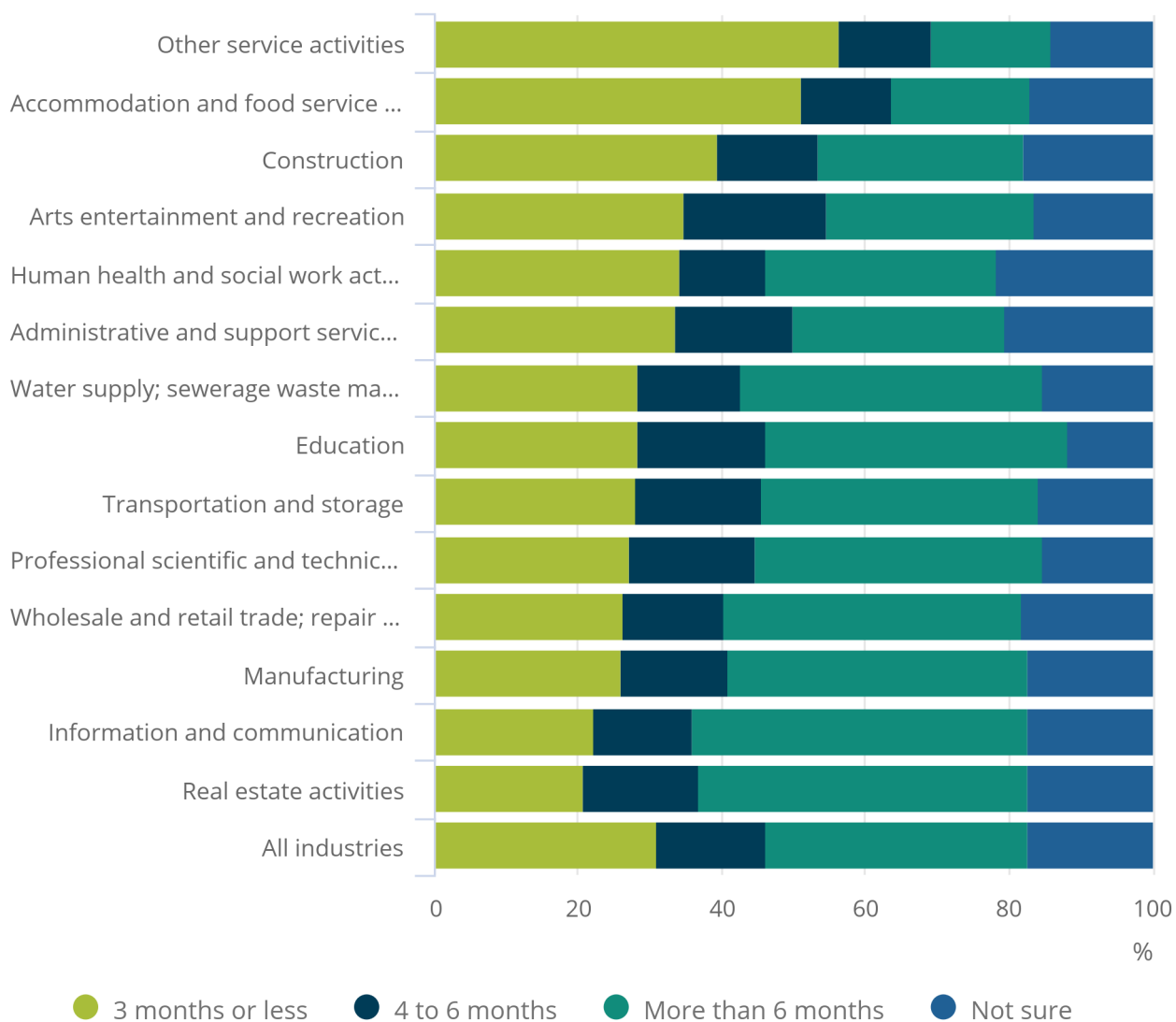
## Business resilience

**Figure 5: More than half of the businesses in the other service activities industry and the accommodation and food service activities industry had three months' or less cash reserves**

Cash reserves, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by industry, weighted by turnover, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021

### Figure 5: More than half of the businesses in the other service activities industry and the accommodation and food service activities industry had three months' or less cash reserves

Cash reserves, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by industry, weighted by turnover, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey; businesses not permanently stopped trading.
2. For presentational purposes, cash reserves categories between zero and three months have been combined.
3. Industries may not sum to 100% because of rounding and percentages less than 1% being removed for disclosure purposes.
4. Mining and quarrying has been removed for disclosure purposes, but its total is included in "All industries".

More than half of businesses in the other service activities industry (which includes hairdressing and other beauty treatment activities), and the accommodation and food service activities industry (56% and 51%, respectively) have been reporting three months' or less cash reserves since mid-December.

Conversely, the real estate industry had the lowest percentage of businesses with three months or less in cash reserves (including no cash reserves), at 21%.

The proportion of businesses in all industries with three months or less cash reserves has remained stable since June 2020 when comparable estimates began, despite significant changes in coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown restrictions.

Data on businesses' survival confidence are available in the [accompanying dataset](#).

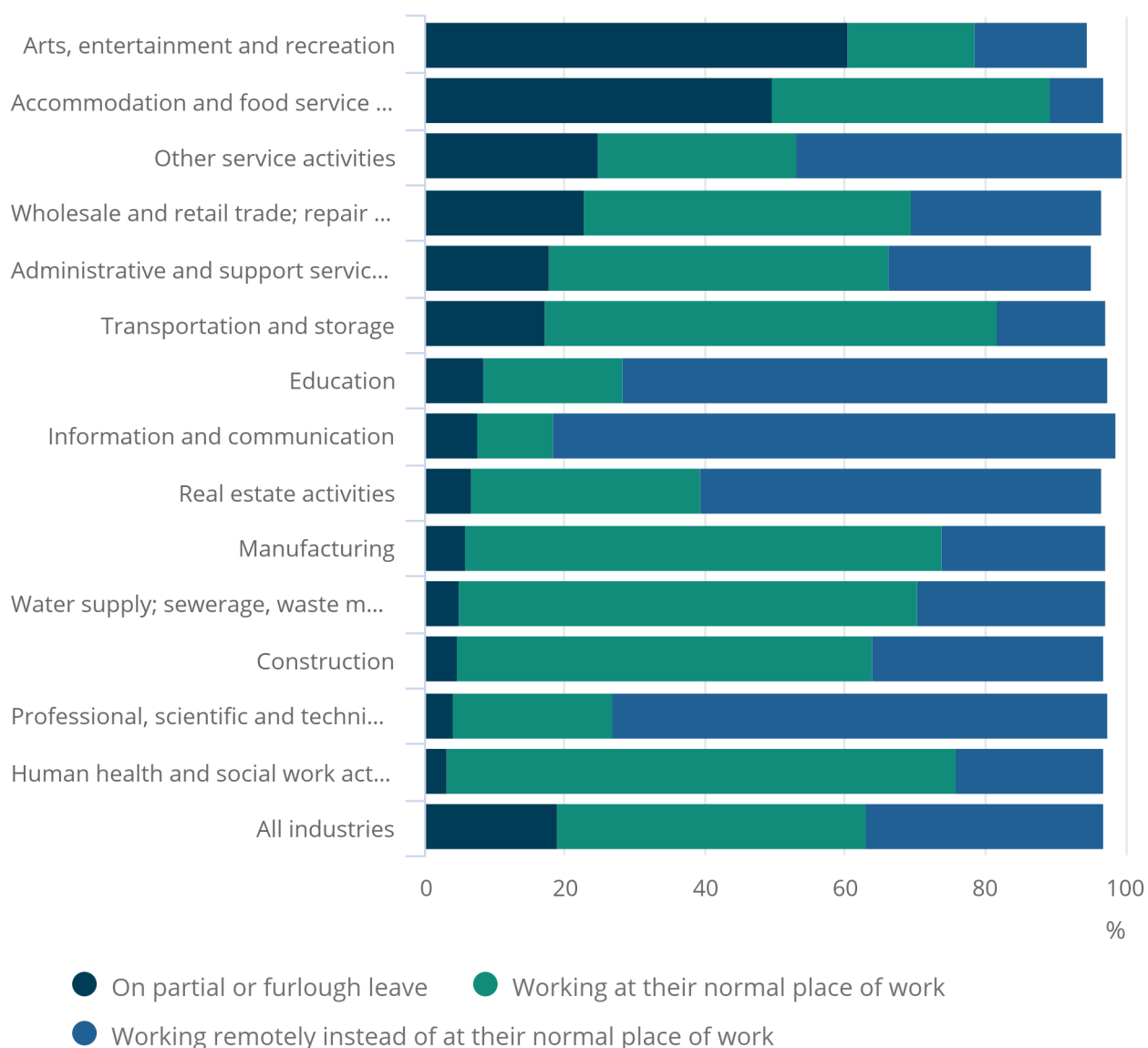
## Workforce

**Figure 6: More than 60% of the workforce in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry was on furlough leave in mid-February 2021**

Working arrangements, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by industry, weighted by employment, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021

Figure 6: More than 60% of the workforce in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry was on furlough leave in mid-February 2021

Working arrangements, businesses not permanently stopped trading, broken down by industry, weighted by employment, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey; businesses not permanently stopped trading.
2. Industries will not sum to 100% because of rounding, percentages less than 1% being removed for disclosure purposes, and the options "On sick leave or not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19), self-isolation or quarantine", "Made permanently redundant" or "Other" being removed.
3. Mining and quarrying has been removed for disclosure purposes, but its total is included in "All industries".
4. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire (22 February to 7 March 2021).

The arts, entertainment and recreation industry had the highest proportion of its workforce on furlough leave, at 61%. This was followed by the accommodation and food service activities industry, at 50%, which has decreased by 5 percentage points since the last wave (25 January to 7 February 2021). When this industry is split into finer detail, the food and beverage industry saw the greatest decrease in proportion of its workforce on furlough leave.

The information and communication industry had the highest proportion of its workforce working remotely instead of at their normal place of work, at 80%. This was followed by the professional, scientific and technical activities industry, at 71% and the education industry (private sector and higher education businesses only), at 69%.

Meanwhile, the human health and social work activities industry (private sector businesses only) had the highest proportion of its workforce at their normal place of work, at 73%. This was followed by the manufacturing industry, at 68%.

## 5 . Regular coronavirus (COVID-19) testing in the workplace

Businesses not permanently ceased trading were asked if their business was providing regular coronavirus (COVID-19) testing for their workforce, and of the businesses who were providing testing, what proportion of their staff were being tested.

Table 2 shows the percentage of only currently trading businesses conducting coronavirus testing, and the percentage of the workforce in these businesses providing testing, that are being tested.

Table 2: 7% of all businesses currently trading were providing regular testing to their employees, and of those businesses providing testing 11% of the workforce were being tested

Proportion of currently trading businesses providing testing, and proportion of workforce of currently trading businesses that are providing regular testing for coronavirus, broken down by industry, weighted by count and employment, UK, 22 February to 7 March 2021

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Proportion of businesses currently trading that are providing coronavirus testing</b>	<b>Proportion of the workforce being tested by currently trading businesses that are testing</b>
<b>Human health and social work activities</b>	41.6%	55.2%
<b>Other service activities</b>	12.2%	*
<b>Manufacturing</b>	11.0%	10.4%
<b>Arts, entertainment and recreation</b>	10.7%	10.9%
<b>Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles</b>	9.6%	8.5%
<b>Education</b>	8.7%	25.2%
<b>Administrative and support service activities</b>	7.0%	11.7%
<b>Construction</b>	6.8%	13.1%
<b>Accommodation and food service activities</b>	5.2%	9.6%
<b>Professional, scientific and technical activities</b>	3.9%	3.1%
<b>Transportation and storage</b>	3.6%	6.6%
<b>Information and communication</b>	3.6%	*
<b>Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities</b>	1.5%	*
<b>Real estate activities</b>	1.4%	*
<b>All Industries</b>	7.3%	10.8%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes



1. Final weighted results Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey; businesses currently trading and that report regular coronavirus testing for its workforce.
2. The proportion of businesses currently trading that are providing coronavirus testing is weighted by count, but the proportion of the employees being tested by currently trading businesses that are testing is weighted by employment.
3. Industries will not sum to 100% because of rounding, the results of two questions being displayed, and the options "No" and "Not sure" being removed.
4. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
5. \* equals percentages less than 1%.

Of all businesses currently trading, 7% were providing regular coronavirus testing to their workforce in early March and, of those businesses, 11% of their workforce were being tested. This equates to less than 1% of the workforce in all businesses currently trading being tested.

The human health and social work activities industry (private sector businesses only) reported the highest proportion of currently trading businesses that were providing regular coronavirus testing to their workforce in early March, at 42%, and of those businesses 56% of their workforce were being tested. This was followed by the education industry (private sector and higher education businesses only) where coronavirus testing was being provided in 9% of currently trading businesses, but of those 25% of their workforce were being tested.

## **6 . Exporting and importing challenges**

Of currently trading businesses, 12% had exported in the last 12 months and reported how their exporting compared with normal expectations for this time of year, and 13% had imported in the last 12 months and reported how their importing compared with normal. These businesses were then asked about the challenges they had experienced with exporting or importing in the last two weeks.

Table 3: The main challenge reported by currently trading businesses for exporting was additional paperwork, at 40%, but was a change in transportation costs, at 42%, for importing

Exporting and importing challenges, businesses currently trading, who had exported or imported in the last 12 months and who reported how exports or imports compared with normal expectations, weighted by count, UK, 8 February to 21 February 2021

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Export challenges</b>	<b>Import challenges</b>
<b>Did not experience any challenges with exporting /importing</b>	44.7%	39.3%
<b>Additional paperwork</b>	39.4%	40.0%
<b>Change in transportation costs</b>	30.4%	41.5%
<b>Customs duties or levies</b>	25.4%	33.5%
<b>Disruption at UK borders</b>	20.3%	26.1%
<b>Destination countries changing their border restrictions</b>	16.2%	8.6%
<b>Lack of hauliers to transport goods or lack of logistics equipment</b>	11.5%	13.7%
<b>Reduced demand for products and services</b>	9.8%	-
<b>Closure of infrastructure used to export (or import) goods or services</b>	7.6%	8.6%
<b>Work permit or visa restrictions, or lack of mutual recognition of professional qualifications</b>	3.1%	-
<b>Basing some staff in an EU member state to be allowed to work</b>	*	-
<b>Suppliers not customs ready</b>	-	5.6%
<b>Suppliers not continuing to trade</b>	-	3.6%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

#### Notes

1. Final weighted results Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses currently trading businesses, who had exported or imported in the last 12 months and who had reported how exports or imports compared to normal expectations.
2. Table will not sum to 100% because businesses could select multiple options.
3. - equals data are not available for that response.
4. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
5. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period 8 February to 21 February 2021. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire (22 February to 7 March 2021).
6. \* equals percentages less than 1%.

Of businesses that had exported or imported goods or services in the last 12 months, and of whom reported how their exports or imports compared with normal expectations for this time of year:

- 39% experienced exporting challenges and 40% experienced importing challenges because of additional paperwork
- 30% experienced exporting challenges and 42% experienced importing challenges because of a change in transportation costs (reports suggest a [surge in shipping costs between China and Northern Europe](#) over recent months)
- 25% experienced exporting challenges and 34% experienced importing challenges because of customs duties or levies
- 20% experienced exporting challenges and 26% experienced importing challenges because of disruption at the UK borders

The majority of internationally trading businesses responded that they did not experience any challenges with exporting, at 45%.

Table 4 compares how the most common exporting and importing challenges differ between smaller businesses (less than 250 employees) and larger businesses (250 or more employees).

Table 4: Exporting challenges were more common in large businesses, while importing challenges were more common in smaller businesses

Exporting and importing challenges, businesses currently trading with more or fewer than 250 employees, exported or imported in the last 12 months and reported how exports or imports compared with normal expectations, weighted by count, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021

Challenge	Exporting		Importing	
	Less than 250 employees	250 or more employees	Less than 250 employees	250 or more employees
<b>Did not experience any challenges with exporting /importing</b>	44.6%	46.4%	39.1%	44.3%
<b>Additional paperwork</b>	39.3%	42.4%	40.0%	40.6%
<b>Change in transportation costs</b>	30.5%	30.1%	41.8%	31.7%
<b>Disruption at UK borders</b>	20.4%	19.1%	26.2%	20.7%
<b>Customs duties or levies</b>	25.4%	26.9%	33.6%	32.5%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

#### Notes

1. Final weighted results Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses with less than 250 or 250 and more employees that are currently trading businesses, who had exported or imported in the last 12 months and who had reported how exports or imports compared to normal expectations.
2. Table will not sum to 100% because businesses could select multiple options.
3. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
4. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire (22 February to 3 March 2021).

When focusing on the manufacturing industry, the biggest challenge businesses faced when exporting was additional paperwork, at 63%, whilst the biggest challenge businesses faced when importing was a change in transportation costs, at 61%.

When focusing on the wholesale and retail trade industry, the biggest challenge businesses faced when exporting was additional paperwork, at 54%. For importing, it was the changes in transportation costs, at 52%.

A full industry breakdown is available in the [accompanying dataset](#).

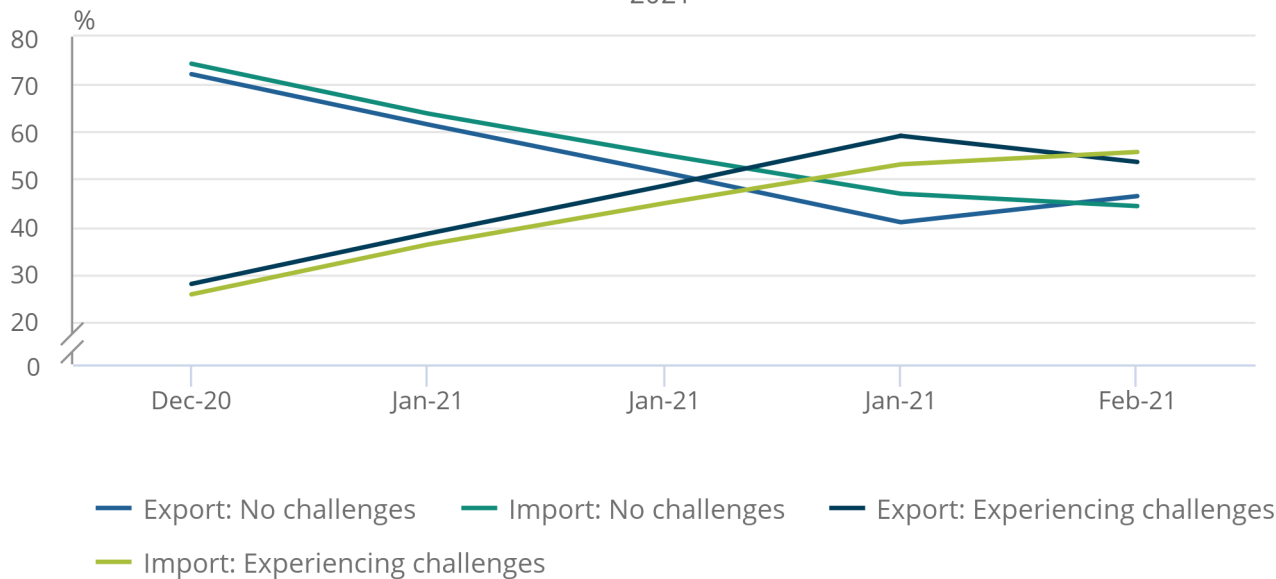
Figure 7 shows how the percentage of large businesses (with more than 250 employees) not experiencing any exporting or importing challenges has decreased since December 2020 (Wave 21) to mid-February 2021 (Wave 25).

**Figure 7: The proportion of large businesses reporting that they did not experience any importing or exporting challenge has gradually fallen since December 2020**

Exporting and importing challenges, businesses currently trading with more than 250 employees, exported or imported in the last 12 months and reported how exports or imports compared with normal expectations, weighted by count, UK, 14 December 2020 to 21 February 2021

Figure 7: The proportion of large businesses reporting that they did not experience any importing or exporting challenge has gradually fallen since December 2020

Exporting and importing challenges, businesses currently trading with more than 250 employees, exported or imported in the last 12 months and reported how exports or imports compared with normal expectations, weighted by count, UK, 14 December 2020 to 21 February 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Notes:

1. Final weighted results, Wave 21 to Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses currently trading businesses, who had exported or imported in the last 12 months and who had reported how exports or imports compared with normal expectations.
2. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
3. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference periods. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of competition of the questionnaire.
4. Waves might not sum to 100% because of rounding .

The proportion of businesses experiencing export and import challenges has been generally increasing since December 2020 before plateauing in mid-February 2021. Most businesses attribute this change to the end of the EU transition period with additional paperwork, change in transportation costs, and custom duties and levies most commonly cited, as shown in Table 3. A full breakdown is available in the [accompanying dataset](#).

There were 1,795 businesses who responded to both Wave 24 (25 January to 7 February 2021) and Wave 25 (8 to 21 February 2021) and were asked if they faced any exporting challenges. Of these businesses who reported no challenges exporting in Wave 24, 22% now indicated they faced exporting challenges in Wave 25.

For importing challenges between Wave 24 and Wave 25, 2,032 businesses responded to whether they had faced any importing challenges. Of the 770 businesses who reported no importing challenges in Wave 24, 28% now faced importing challenges in Wave 25.

For both import and export challenges, the top new challenges faced by businesses were additional paperwork and change in transportation costs.

## 7 . Movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Businesses that are currently trading were asked whether they had sent goods from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI) in the last 12 months.

Across all industries, 5% of currently trading businesses had sent goods from GB to NI in the last 12 months.

These businesses were asked a series of questions about their experience sending these goods over a two-week reference period (8 to 21 February 2021).

Table 5: Of businesses currently trading and who had sent goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last 12 months, 46% had sent, or intended to send, goods in the last two weeks

Goods sent to NI in the last two weeks, businesses currently trading and who sent goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last 12 months, weighted by count, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021

	<b>Yes, have sent or intended to send goods from GB to NI in the last two weeks</b>	<b>No, have not sent or intended to send goods from GB to NI in the last two weeks</b>	<b>Not sure</b>
<b>Less than 250 employees</b>	45.3%	43.1%	11.7%
<b>250 or more employees</b>	54.7%	26.9%	18.4%
<b>All businesses</b>	45.9%	42.1%	12.1%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

### Notes

1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses currently trading and who sent goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last 12 months.
2. Rows may not sum to 100% because of rounding.
3. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
4. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire (22 February to 7 March 2021).

Businesses currently trading and who had sent goods from GB to NI in the last 12 months were also asked about the route they used to send goods between GB and NI, and whether they had made any changes to the route used or volume of goods being sent.

Of businesses currently trading and who had sent goods from GB to NI in the last 12 months, 88% reported that the main route they used for sending these goods was from GB directly to NI.

The majority of businesses that had sent, or intended to send, goods from GB to NI in the last two weeks had not made any changes to their main route for sending these goods, at 80%.

Table 6 shows how the volume of goods being sent from GB to NI has changed in the last two weeks, reported by businesses that had sent, or intended to send, goods in the last two weeks.

Table 6: More than a third of businesses currently trading and who had sent, or intended to send, goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last two weeks have decreased or stopped sending goods to Northern Ireland

Volume of goods sent to NI, businesses currently trading and who sent goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last 12 months and in the last two weeks, weighted by count, UK, 8 to 21 February 2021

	<b>Volume has increased</b>	<b>Volume has stayed the same</b>	<b>Volume has decreased</b>	<b>Have stopped sending goods to Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Not sure</b>
<b>Less than 250 employees</b>	5.9%	54.3%	27.5%	10.0%	2.2%
<b>250 or more employees</b>	2.3%	61.2%	23.5%	1.8%	8.4%
<b>All businesses</b>	5.5%	55.1%	27.0%	9.0%	3.0%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

#### Notes

1. Final weighted results, Wave 25 of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS); businesses currently trading and who sent goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in the last 12 months and in the last two weeks.
2. Rows may not sum to 100% because of rounding, and the option "not applicable" being removed.
3. Caution should be taken when interpreting these results based on the specific routing of this question meaning that only a small number of businesses responded.
4. Businesses were asked for their experiences for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021. However, for questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses may respond from the point of completion of the questionnaire (22 February to 3 March 2021).

Additional data on these questions and businesses' experiences sending goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, including full industry breakdowns, are available in the [accompanying dataset](#).

## 8 . Business Insights and Conditions Survey data

### [Business insights and impact on the UK economy](#)

Dataset | Released 11 March 2021

Weighted estimates from the voluntary fortnightly business survey (BICS) about financial performance, workforce, prices, trade, and business resilience.

This dataset includes additional information collected as part of the survey not presented in this publication.

These data are not [official statistics](#) but have been developed to deliver timely indicators to help understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and other events in a timely way.

### Access to microdata

The BICS microdata for Waves 1 to 24 can now be accessed via the [Secure Research Service \(SRS\)](#). The BICS microdata for each wave is released on a rolling basis in the week following the publication of each wave.

The microdata are confidentialised and do not disclose any specific business.

Only researchers accredited under the [Digital Economy Act](#) are able to access data in the SRS. You can apply for accreditation through the [Research Accreditation Service \(RAS\)](#). You need to have relevant academic or work experience and must successfully attend and complete the assessed Safe Researcher Training.

To conduct analysis with microdata from the SRS, a project application must be submitted to the [Research Accreditation Panel \(RAP\)](#). To access the SRS, you must also work for an organisation with an Assured Organisational Connectivity agreement in place.

## 9 . Glossary

### Coronavirus

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause disease in people and animals. They can cause the common cold or more severe diseases, such as COVID-19.

### COVID-19

COVID-19 is the name used to refer to the disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus, which is a type of coronavirus. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) takes COVID-19 to mean presence of SARS-CoV-2 with or without symptoms.



## EU transition period

The EU exit transition is the period agreed in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement in which the UK is no longer a member of the EU but continues to be subject to EU rules and remains a member of the single market and customs union. When the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020, it entered the transition period. The transition period came to an end on 31 December 2020.

## Furlough

Furlough is a temporary absence from work allowing workers to keep their job while the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues.

## Reporting unit

The business unit to which questionnaires are sent is called the reporting unit. The response from the reporting unit can cover the enterprise as a whole or parts of the enterprise identified by lists of local units.

# 10 . Measuring the data

The Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) is voluntary and the results are [experimental](#).

Based on user feedback, the structure of the bulletin has changed to present a more rounded narrative of main business impacts (see Figure 1, for example). The purpose remains the same, to collect real-time information on important issues such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and other events on UK businesses. All data is still available either within the bulletin or in the [accompanying dataset](#).

Table 7: Sample and response rates for Waves 23, 24 and 25 of the Business Insights and Conditions Survey

Wave	11 February 2021 Publication Wave 23	25 February 2021 Publication Wave 24	11 March 2021 Publication Wave 25
Sample	39,418	39,278	39,068
Response	10,008	10,351	9,905
Rate	25.4%	26.4%	25.4%

Source: Office for National Statistics - Business Insights and Conditions Survey

### Notes

1. Response rates for all waves can be found in the accompanying dataset.

The results are based on responses from the voluntary, fortnightly BICS, which captures businesses' views on financial performance, workforce, prices, trade, and business resilience. The Wave 25 survey was live for the period 22 February to 7 March 2021. For questions regarding the last two weeks, businesses were asked for their experience for the reference period 8 to 21 February 2021. The [survey questions](#) are available.

## Survey name change

Based on user feedback, this survey has changed its name to the "Business Insights and Conditions Survey" (BICS) from Wave 24 onwards.

The purpose remains the same, to collect real-time information on important issues such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the end of the EU transition period.

## Weighting

Weighted estimates for the BICS have now been developed for all variables that are collected at a UK level. A detailed description of the weighting methodology and its differences to unweighted estimates is available in [Business Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey \(BICS\): preliminary weighted results](#).

We currently provide unweighted estimates with a country and regional split for selected variables in the [accompanying dataset](#). These should be treated with caution as only those that have responded to the survey are represented, and as such these are not fully representative of the UK as a whole. When unweighted, each business is assigned the same weight regardless of turnover, size or industry, and businesses that have not responded to the survey or that are not sampled are not taken into account.

On 1 February 2021, experimental weighted regional estimates up to Wave 21 (28 December 2020 to 10 January 2021) were published in [Understanding the business impacts of local and national restrictions: February 2021](#), as part of the Economic Review.

[Weighted estimates for Scotland for businesses with more than nine employees](#) are available from the Scottish Government.

## Unweighted regional estimates

Unweighted regional BICS estimates are produced by taking the survey return from each reporting unit and then applying this to the reporting unit's local sites. If a business has a site or several sites (also known as local units) within a country, using information from the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR), then this business is defined to have presence there.

The business is then allocated once within each region (regardless of the number of sites) and the information provided by the reporting unit as a whole is copied and used within each country.

Aggregates of regions such as the UK or England may have higher or lower response proportions than any of their constituent regions because of differences in the sample composition in terms of company workforce.

Also, if there is a substantial difference between the response proportions of larger and smaller companies in a given region, this will be reflected in the top-line figures.

## Sample

The sampling frame used in BICS was designed to achieve adequate coverage of the listed industries from the Monthly Business Survey (MBS). Coverage and response rate of the medium to largest businesses in terms of total employment are satisfactory to produce estimates on this basis.

All businesses with an employment of greater than 250 employees and that are included within the three monthly surveys (MBS, Retail Sales Index (RSI) and Construction) are included in the BICS sample with a random sample of 1% for those with an employment between 0 and 249.

As the sample is selected fortnightly, the same businesses will be selected for at least two waves depending on how many coronavirus survey selections there are between the selection of these feeder surveys. Because of the randomly selected element, there will be differences in this part of the sample once the feeder surveys have been redrawn. As this is a voluntary survey, businesses may or may not choose to respond to the different waves. Response rates can be mixed between the different waves.

While we have the ability to align the reporting unit to lower-level detail, and also increased detail on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC), it is not advisable given the sparseness of response in certain industries and size bands.

## Coverage

The MBS covers the UK for production and only Great Britain for services. The RSI and Construction are Great Britain-focused. Therefore, BICS will be UK for production-based industries but Great Britain for the other elements of the economy covered.

The industries covered are:

- non-financial services (includes professional, scientific, communication, administrative, transport, accommodation and food, private health and education, and entertainment services)
- distribution (includes retail, wholesale and motor trades)
- production (includes manufacturing, oil and gas extraction, energy generation and supply, and water and waste management)
- construction (includes civil engineering, housebuilding, property development and specialised construction trades such as plumbers, electricians and plasterers)

The following industries are excluded from the survey:

- agriculture
- public administration and defence
- public provision of education and health
- finance and insurance

## Reporting unit

The business unit to which questionnaires are sent is called the reporting unit. The response from the reporting unit can cover the enterprise as a whole or parts of the enterprise identified by lists of local units. Other than for a minority of larger business or businesses that have a more complex structure, the reporting unit is the same as the enterprise.

Where more than one type of economic activity is carried out by a local unit or enterprise, its principal activity is the activity in which most of the people are employed, and it does not necessarily account for 50% or more of the total employment of the unit. There are detailed rules for determining [Standard Industrial Classification \(SIC\)](#) for multiple-activity economic units.

## End of the EU transition period

As the shape of the UK's future statistical relationship with the EU becomes clearer over the coming period, we are making preparations to assume responsibilities that as part of our membership of the EU, and during the transition period, were delegated to the statistical office of the EU, Eurostat. This includes responsibilities relating to international comparability of economic statistics, deciding what international statistical guidance to apply in the UK context and to provide further scrutiny of our statistics and sector classification decisions.

# 11 . Strengths and limitations

## Business Insights and Conditions Survey

The Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) is voluntary.

Unweighted estimates should be treated with caution, as results reflect the characteristics of those that responded and not necessarily the wider business population.

The survey was designed to give a timelier estimate than other surveys.

## Comparison of waves

A detailed description of the weighting methodology and its differences to unweighted estimates across waves can be found in [Business Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey: preliminary weighted results](#).

The production of weighted BICS estimates will allow for comparisons between waves, as any imbalances caused by non-responding and non-sampled businesses are corrected. This means that weighted estimates in every wave represent the experiences of all businesses rather than just those that have responded.

Comparison of unweighted estimates between waves should be treated with caution because of the voluntary nature of the survey, the differences in response rates, and dependency on those businesses that only responded in particular waves.

[Insights of BICS: 23 March to 5 April \(Wave 2\) to 1 to 14 June \(Wave 7\) 2020](#) provides a time series analysis on how the unweighted estimates changed between Wave 2 (23 March to 5 April 2020) and Wave 7 (1 to 14 June 2020).

## 12 . Related links

### [Understanding the business impacts of local and national restrictions: February 2021](#)

Article | Released 1 February 2021

Experimental estimates from the voluntary fortnightly business survey (BICS), for single site businesses only, on topics such as trading status, financial performance, workforce and business resilience. Geographical breakdowns include country, regional and local authority levels.

### [Comparison of furloughed jobs data, UK: March 2020 to January 2021](#)

Article | Released 5 March 2021

An overview of the similarities and differences between the fortnightly Business Insights and Conditions Survey furlough estimates and HMRC's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics, over the period 23 March 2020 to 7 February 2021.

### [Business Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey: preliminary weighted results](#)

Article | Released 14 September 2020

Early estimates of weighted responses from the voluntary fortnightly business survey, focusing on businesses' responses on how turnover, workforce and trading status have been affected in two-week reference periods, from Wave 7 (1 to 14 June 2020) to Wave 12 (10 to 23 August 2020).

### [Insights of the Business Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey: 23 March to 5 April \(Wave 2\) to 1 to 14 June \(Wave 7\) 2020](#)

Article | Released 8 July 2020

Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on businesses' turnover, cash flow and workforce: analysis on responses to our new voluntary fortnightly business survey and how these have been affected in each two-week reference period. Covers the period 23 March to 14 June 2020.

### [Business Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey, expectation responses over time, UK: 1 June to 23 August 2020 \(Waves 6 to 11\)](#)

Article | Released 8 September 2020

Turnover expectations of the same businesses over time, using the final results of Waves 6 to 11 of the voluntary fortnightly BICS, covering the period 1 June to 23 August.

### [Coronavirus and the experiences of UK businesses, textual analysis: March 2020 to July 2020](#)

Article | Released 6 August 2020

Analysis of qualitative responses from selected questions from the fortnightly Business Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Survey (BICS), which provides further insights on individual business experiences over the course of the pandemic so far.