

Article

# The impact of strikes in the UK: June 2022 to February 2023

A range of sources exploring the impact of strikes in the context of the wider economic and social landscape.

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# 1 . Main points

- In total, 2.472 million working days were lost between June and December 2022; of these, over three-quarters (79%) came from workers in transport, storage, information and communication.
- There was evidence that rail strikes led to displacement of card spending towards buses and taxis as consumers changed their behaviour to mitigate the impact of strikes; in store transactions at Pret A Manger stores located in stations fell on most strike days.
- Nearly 1 in 5 people reported having their travel plans disrupted by rail strikes that occurred in December 2022 and early January 2023, however fewer than 1 in 10 of those disrupted were unable to work.
- Over half of parents reported that they would be affected if schools closed because of strikes, with 31% saying they would have to work fewer hours and 28% saying that they would not be able to work.

This article covers a range of geographies within the UK, and time periods between June 2022 and February 2023. For each section or indicator, the reference geography and time period are stated.

## 2 . Overview

Between June 2022 and February 2023 there have been increasing numbers of strikes occurring across a range of industries, including many parts of the rail and bus networks, postal workers, civil servants, teaching staff and NHS staff. This article brings together a range of sources to explore the impact of the strikes that have taken place since the summer of 2022.

### Causes of labour disputes

Our [analysis of the history of strikes in the UK](#) shows that since the late 1800s, strikes have become frequent occurrences in UK industrial relations. They occur when working people withhold their labour to bargain for better pay and conditions.

Pay disputes have been the most common [cause of strikes in the years for which we have comparable data](#). Between 1999 and 2018, pay disputes accounted for around 75% of all working days lost because of workplace disputes.

Recent labour disputes have occurred in the wider context of the UK's rising cost of living. After accounting for inflation, the real value of regular wages fell by 2.5% on the year in October to December 2022, as shown in our [Average weekly earnings in Great Britain: February 2023 bulletin](#).

## 3 . Impacts of strikes

### Measuring the impacts of strikes

Strikes can impact society and the economy in a variety of ways which are not easily isolated when measuring the economy. The obvious impacts are where output may be lost in industries where strikes occur through reduced working hours. This then also results in impacts to the economy where the public and businesses may change their behaviours. Some examples of typical responses may include:

- in response to travel disruption, people may choose to work from home where that was not previously possible, or change the timings of any personal travel plans, where possible
- people may change their spending behaviours on days they are unable to travel if they have chosen to work from home
- when children are out of school because of industrial action taken by teachers, parents or guardians may be unable to work to provide childcare or change their normal working patterns
- when postal services are disrupted, individuals may choose to purchase goods in person or switch to other postal delivery services, delay or bring forward purchases

There are two main reasons why accurately measuring the full impact of strikes can be complicated.

#### **Isolating impacts from strikes from other co-occurring events**

The period since June 2022 has seen not only an increase in strikes but several other major factors and events, including the rising cost of living, the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the first winter FIFA World Cup. Additionally, there have been other seasonal events, such as the bad weather that occurred in late December 2022. Although we present some data that may show impacts of strikes in certain periods, it is not possible to isolate how much of any change was because of strikes.

#### **Data gaps and limitations**

Strikes may impact data collection, which can disrupt time series or result in a lack of data to assess any effects. Strikes in certain industries may have impacts that are harder to capture in the data available. For example, impacts of NHS strikes such as appointment cancellations would not be captured in spending or real time indicators.

## Working days lost

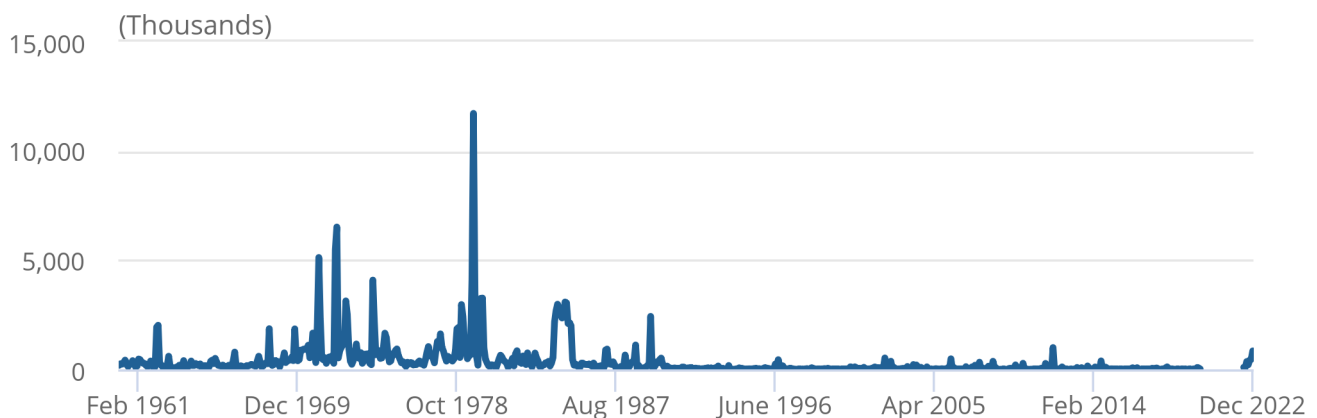
The number of working days lost because of labour disputes has been increasing since summer 2022. In June 2022, 93,000 days were lost, which rose to 461,000 in November and a further 83% increase to 843,000 in December 2022. December saw the highest recorded monthly total since November 2011, though this is still much lower than the number of days lost in the 1970s and 1980s (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The highest number of working days lost in the UK was in September 1979**

Working days lost, monthly totals UK, 1960 to 2022

### Figure 1: The highest number of working days lost in the UK was in September 1979

Working days lost, monthly totals UK, 1960 to 2022



**Source:** LABD: Labour disputes in the UK from the Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. Estimates for the period of February 2020 to December 2021 are not available. Data for the period of January to May 2022 will be made available shortly.
2. The data presented in this figure are taken from our [Labour disputes in the UK dataset](#), which includes data collected from 1931 to 2022. The highest number of working days lost was observed to be September 1979 for this time period. This dataset will not reflect other peaks in working days lost that occurred before 1931.

## Industry and working days lost

In total, an estimated 2.472 million working days were lost between June and December 2022. Of these, over three-quarters (79%) came from workers in transport, storage, information and communication. Transport, storage, information and communication consistently had the highest number of days lost because of industrial action from June 2022. This industry includes both rail transport and postal and courier activities, which experienced strikes throughout this period.

The education sector (which includes higher education, tertiary, and primary and secondary education) saw the second highest number of days lost between June and December 2022. This peaked in November 2022 where 174,000 days were lost in education, 38% of the total number of days lost that month. This reflects the primary and secondary education strikes that occurred in Scotland, the sixth form and college strikes that occurred in England, and university strikes that occurred across the UK.

In December 2022, almost all the working days lost came from transport, storage, information and communication (725,000 days or 86% of total days lost), with the second highest number coming from health (70,000 days or 8% of total days lost). This reflects the rail, postal and health strikes that took place that month.

### **Figure 2: The highest number of working days lost comes from transport, storage, information and communication, and education**

**Total working days lost because of labour disputes, by industry, June to December 2022, UK not seasonally adjusted (thousands)**

#### **Notes:**

1. The mining, quarrying, electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning industry experienced working days lost because of labour disputes in October 2022. This has been omitted from the graph because of scale.

#### **Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

# Trade union membership and working days lost

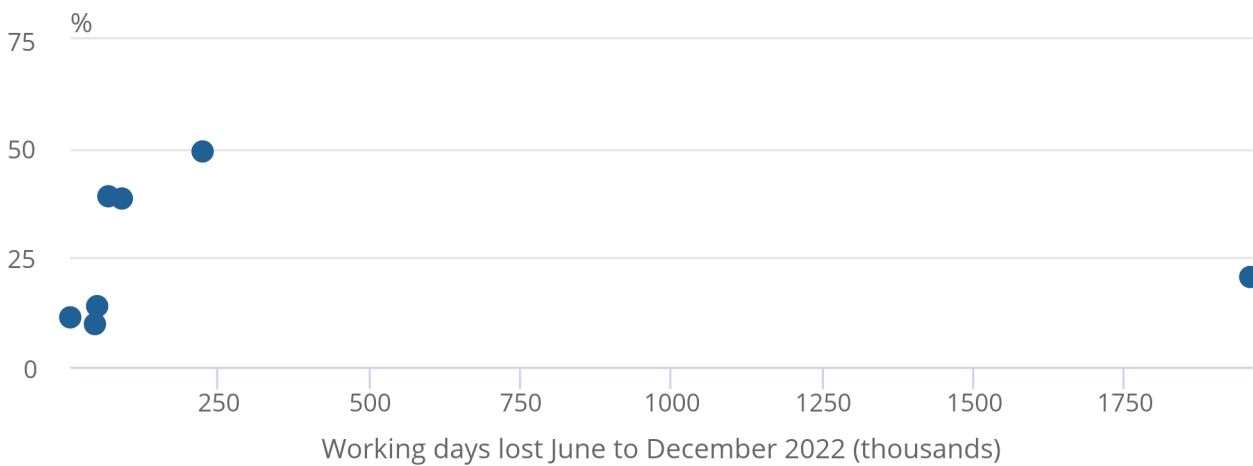
According to the [Department for Business and Trade's Trade union statistics](#), 23% of all UK employees were trade union members in 2021. Trade union membership rates were higher than average among employees in education (49%), health and social work (39%), and public administration and defence (39%), which were three of the four industry sectors that saw the most working days lost in the period June to December 2022. Transport, storage, information and communication, which saw the most working days lost in this period, had a unionisation rate slightly lower (20%) than that seen for all industries.

**Figure 3: Industries with higher working days lost in 2022 had higher trade union membership rates as a proportion of all UK employees in 2021**

Trade union membership rates in the UK, as percentage of all employees recorded in 2021 by industry and total working days lost between June and December 2022 (thousands)

Figure 3: Industries with higher working days lost in 2022 had higher trade union membership rates as a proportion of all UK employees in 2021

Trade union membership rates in the UK, as percentage of all employees recorded in 2021 by industry and total working days lost between June and December 2022 (thousands)



Source: Trade union statistics from the Department for Business and Trade, 2021, LABD: Labour disputes in the UK from the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Notes:

1. Not all industry sectors are included; the graph shows industries with the highest working days lost to labour disputes between June and December 2022.
2. Some data have been suppressed because of small sample sizes.
3. Based on the Department for Business and Trade's (DBT's) analysis of the Labour Force Survey: 2021 trade union membership rates were the proportion of employee adults, aged 16 years and over who are trade union members per UK industry; excluding employees in the armed forces.
4. Membership rates have been reweighted from industries to industry sector level, for more information, see [Section 6: Data sources and quality](#).

## Country, region, and working days lost

Across the UK, Scotland saw the highest number of working days lost (34 working days lost per 1,000 employees) in December 2022. The South West was the English region that saw the highest number of working days lost (30 working days lost per 1,000 employees). Over the period June to December 2022, the highest number of days lost were seen in:

- Northern Ireland (129 working days lost per 1,000 employees)
- the North West (105 working days lost per 1,000 employees)
- Scotland (99 working days lost per 1,000 employees)

**Figure 4: The highest number of working days lost because of labour disputes, as a proportion of the number of employee jobs in the region, was seen in Northern Ireland, the North West and Scotland**

**Working days lost per 1,000 employees by country or region, UK, June to December 2022**

### Notes:

1. The sum of the regions does not equal the UK total because disputes occurring in more than one region are recorded in each relevant region but only once in the UK total.

**Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

## Economic impacts

### Monthly gross domestic product (GDP) by industry

Although monthly real gross domestic product (GDP) estimates for the last three months of 2022 were relatively flat at the overall level, industries that have experienced strikes have shown some evidence of shrinking output in the last months of 2022. GDP is estimated to have fallen by 0.5% in December 2022.

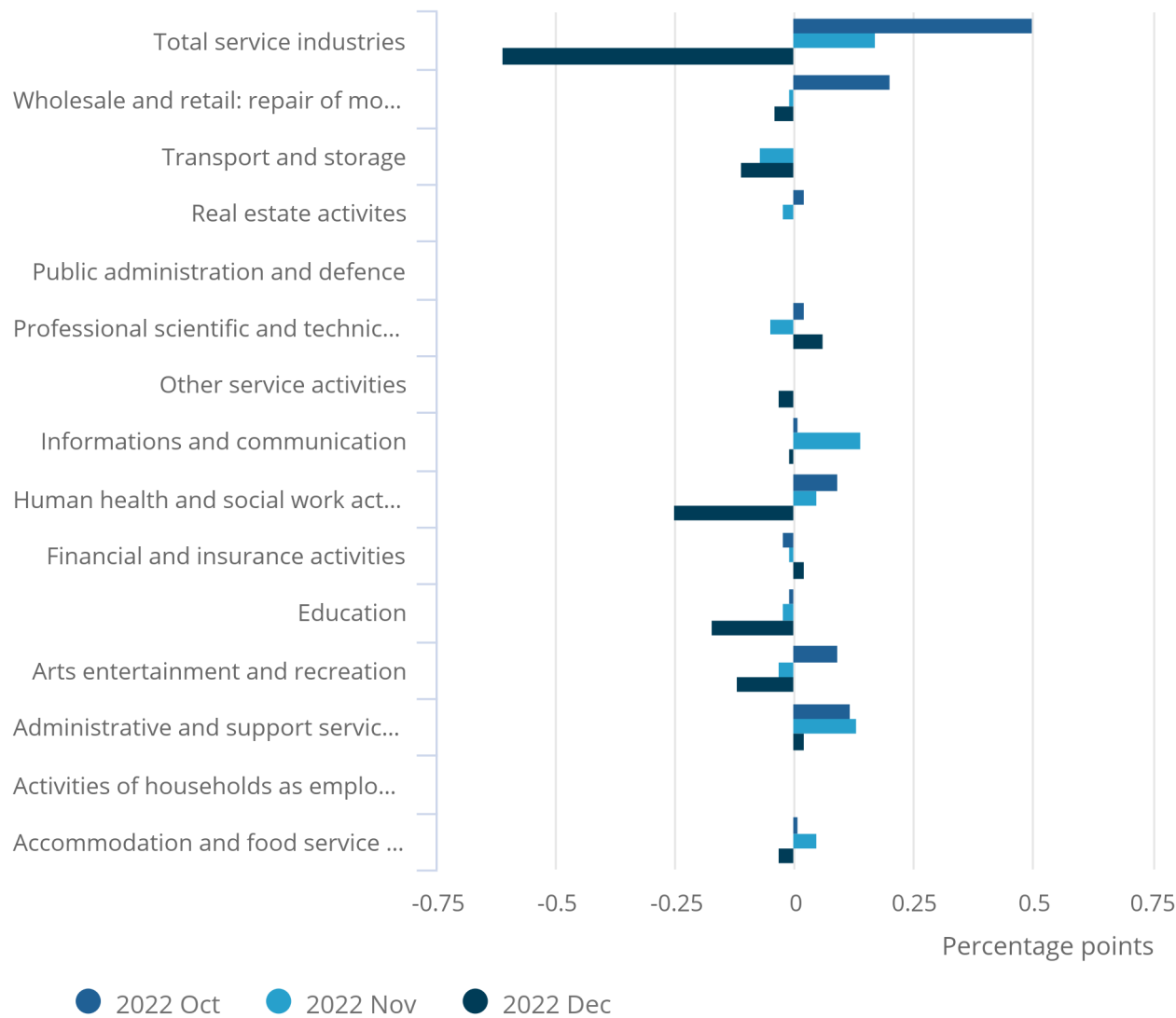


**Figure 5: There were declines in the output of the human health and social work, education and transport and storage industries**

Monthly services contributions to gross domestic product (GDP), UK, October to December 2022

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Monthly services contributions to gross domestic product (GDP), UK, October to December 2022



Source: Gross domestic product (GDP) monthly estimate from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

- 1. Sum of component contributions may not sum to total services growth because of rounding.
- 2. The data presented in the graph show contribution to growth, latest month on previous month.

As reported in our [GDP monthly estimate, UK: December 2022 bulletin](#), the largest contributor to the fall in services in December 2022 was human health and social work activities, which fell by 2.8%. This included fewer GP appointments and operations, partly because of the impact of strikes.

The rail transport and postal and courier activities industries have seen decreases in output over the last quarter. The largest decreases were in December 2022, a month when both rail and postal workers held numerous days of strikes. The rail transport industry fell by 7.0% in December 2022. Postal and courier activities fell by 10.5% in December. This can be seen in our recent [Index of Services, UK: December 2022 bulletin](#).

## Spending and travel impacts

Industrial action on the railways on 13 to 14 and 16 to 17 December 2022 as well as 3 to 7 January 2023, did not appear to have had a large negative impact on total consumer spending, either in terms of total spent or when they spent. This can be seen in our recent [How discretionary spending has been affected in recent winters article](#).

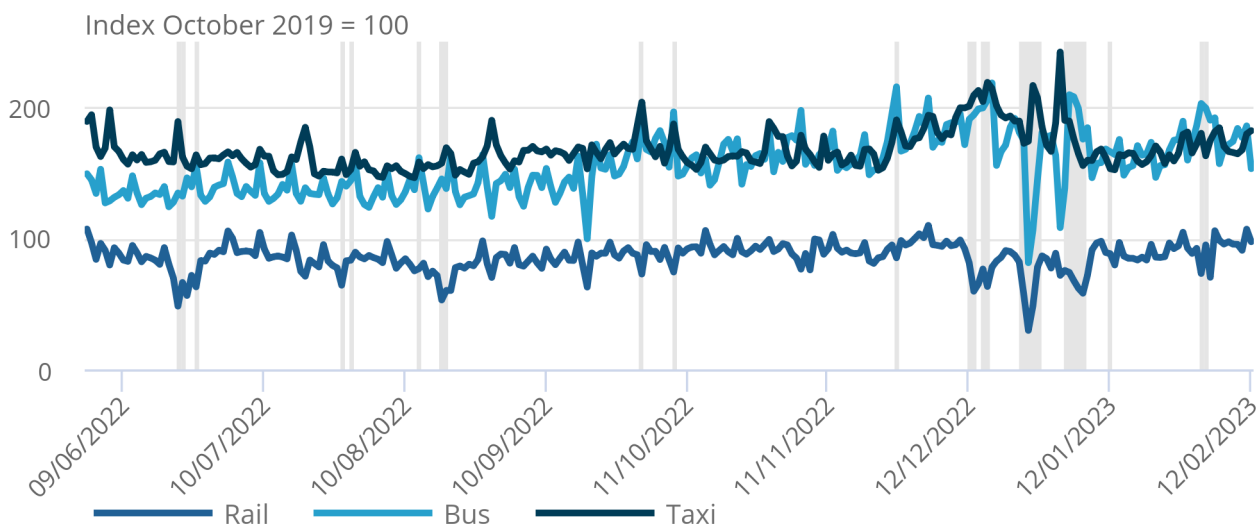
Although consumers could not travel on many parts of the rail network on strike days, total spend on travel only decreased slightly on these dates. Subcategories of travel spending show some evidence that rail spending tended to decrease on days where there were rail strikes, with these decreases met with increased spending on buses and taxis (Figure 6). This could indicate displacement behaviour where people changed their travel mode from trains to buses or taxis to lessen the disruption caused by strikes (although this pattern of behaviour would have also been affected by Christmas).

**Figure 6: Spending on rail decreased around strike days**

Revolut card spending on transport by category, June 2022 to February 2023, October 2019 day of the week average= 100, UK

### Figure 6: Spending on rail decreased around strike days

Revolut card spending on transport by category, June 2022 to February 2023, October 2019 day of the week average= 100, UK



Source: Revolut – Office for National Statistics (ONS) calculations

#### Notes:

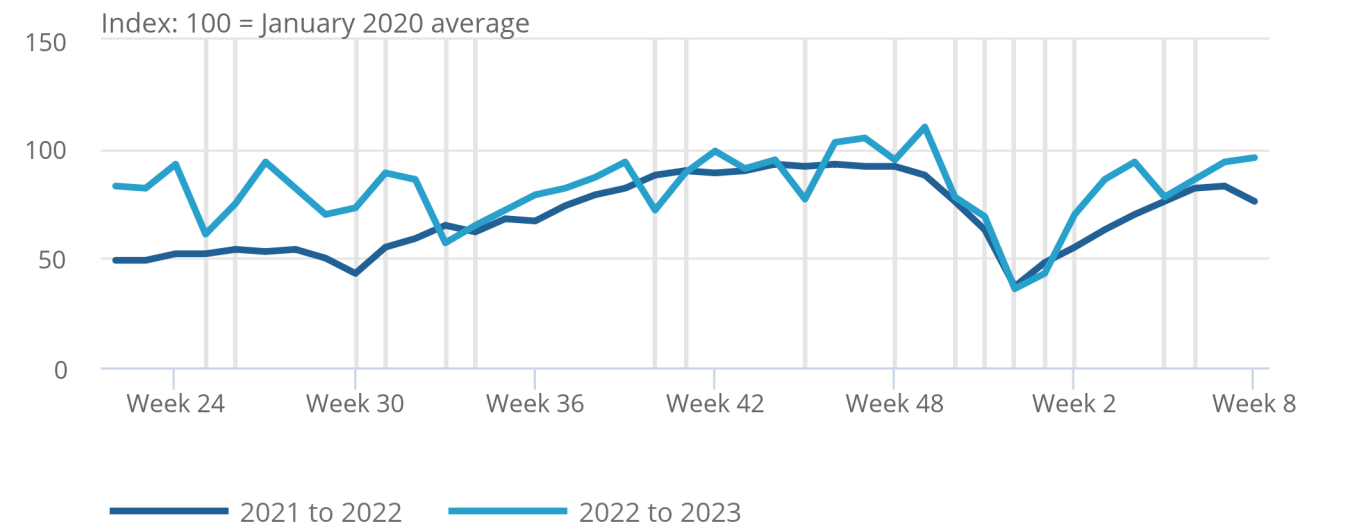
1. Revolut is a newer source of spending data, and its users are typically younger and more metropolitan than the population as a whole. Therefore, these data are not necessarily representative of overall UK consumer spending trends. Analysis is done on a per-account basis to adjust for the consumer base growing over time.
2. Vertical grey bands represent the rail strikes that occurred on 21, 23, 25 June 2022; 27, 30 July 2022; 13, 18, 20 August 2022; 1, 8 October 2022, 26 November 2022; 13 to 14, 16 to 17, 24 to 27 December 2022; 3 to 7, 12 January 2023; 1, 3 February 2023.

Comparable with the trends observed in card spending, the Pret A Manger index showed that in-store transactions at London and regional station locations saw falls in most of the weeks when rail strikes took place across the period. Between mid-August 2022 and mid-November 2022, those weekly falls at station locations also took transactions below the level reported in the equivalent weeks of 2021, including the week to 10 November 2022 (Week 45) when several days of planned rail strikes were cancelled with late notice.

**Figure 7: Transactions at station Pret A Manger locations consistently experienced weekly falls in weeks of rail strikes**

Index of transactions at Pret A Manger stores located in regional stations, UK, June 2022 to February 2023, non-seasonally adjusted

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Index of transactions at Pret A Manger stores located in regional stations, UK, June 2022 to February 2023, non-seasonally adjusted



Source: Transactions at Pret A Manger from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Vertical grey bands show weeks in which major rail strikes took place (including the week to 10 November 2022 when several days of rail strikes were cancelled with late notice).
2. Vertical grey bands represent the rail strikes that occurred on 21, 23, 25 June 2022; 27, 30 July 2022; 13, 18, 20 August 2022; 1, 8 October 2022, 26 November 2022; 13 to 14, 16 to 17, 24 to 27 December 2022; 3 to 7, 12 January 2023; 1, 3 February 2023.

## Experiences of strikes

Around 1 in 10 people (11%) surveyed in our Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) reported having their travel plans disrupted by rail strikes in the two weeks before the latest survey period ([OPN survey period of 8 to 19 February 2023](#)). This compares with 19% and 18% during the previous two periods ([OPN survey period of 11 to 22 January 2023](#) and [OPN survey period of 21 December 2022 to 8 January 2023](#), respectively) and 15% when the question was first asked between [OPN survey period of 22 June to 3 July 2022](#), during a previous wave of strike action.

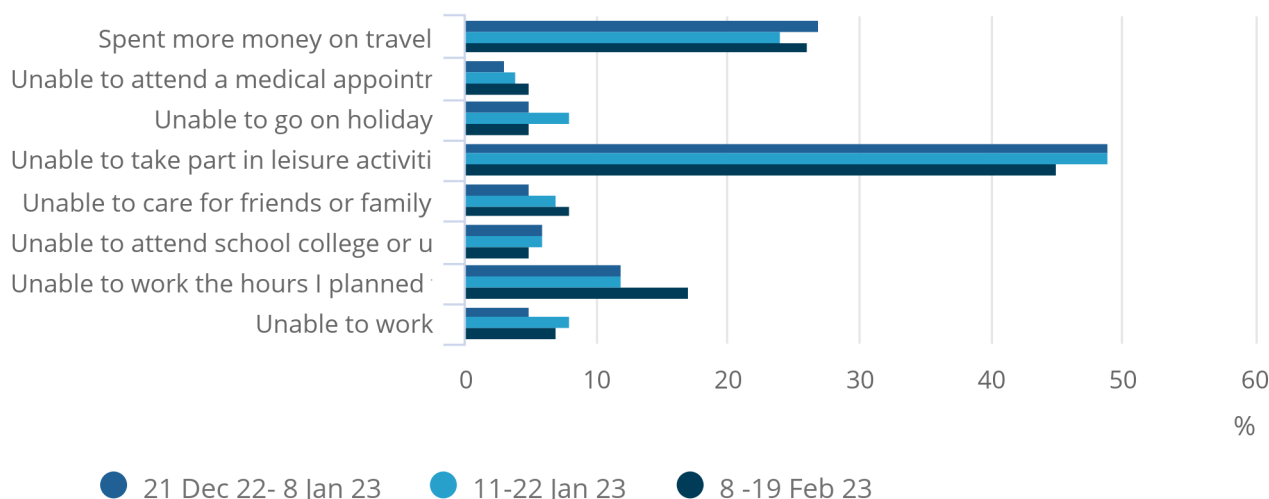
Among those who reported that rail strikes had disrupted their travel plans in the latest survey period, almost half (45%) said this disruption affected their ability to take part in leisure activities. In addition, around a quarter (26%) reported having to spend more money on travel. Fewer than 1 in 10 (7%) of those disrupted said they were unable to work.

### Figure 8: Almost half of people reporting disruption from rail strikes, said they were unable to attend leisure activities

Proportion of adults who have said they were affected by rail strikes by how they were affected in Great Britain, December 2022 to February 2023

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Proportion of adults who have said they were affected by rail strikes by how they were affected in Great Britain, December 2022 to February 2023



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) from the Office for National Statistics

#### Notes:

1. Respondents were given the option to select "Other" when answering the question "In the past two weeks, how have rail strikes affected you?". Responses for this option are not presented in the figure.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.

Compared with the low rates of people reporting that they had been affected by rail strikes, over half of parents reported that they would be affected by schools being closed. During the [OPN survey period of 7 to 18 December 2022](#), we asked adults who said they were working and had a child in a primary or secondary school how their own work would be affected if schools closed because of strikes. Around two in five (41%) parents said their work would not be affected. This compared with 31% who reported they would have to work fewer hours and 28% who reported that they would not be able to work.

## Experiences of NHS strikes

According to [NHS data on industrial action](#), there was a total of 16 days of strike action affecting the NHS in England during December 2022, January and February 2023. Action by nursing, ambulance and physiotherapy staff took place across the country, with other health care workers taking action in some local areas. During these 16 days there were 154 organisations where staff took industrial action.

In total, at least 93,022 outpatient appointments, 18,716 elective procedures, 27,957 community service appointments and 9,634 mental health and learning disability (MHL) appointments have been rescheduled because of strike action. These are reported figures and not all trusts submitted data, so they will be lower than the true figures.

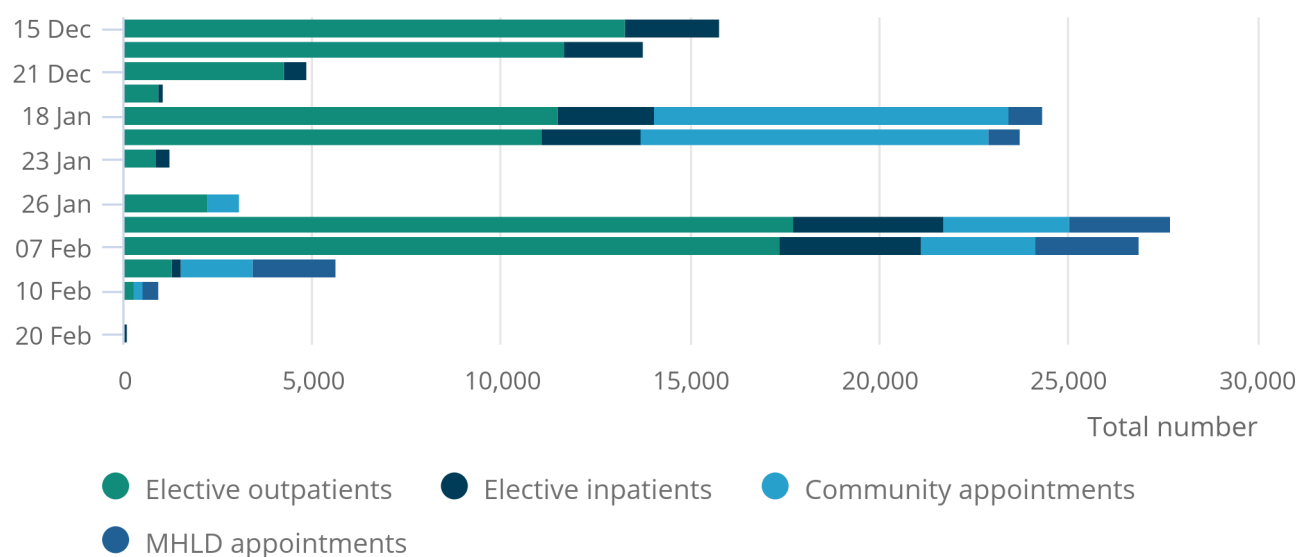
Usually, the different professions took action on different days, but the ambulance strike on 6 February 2023 coincided with the nursing strike on 6 and 7 February, resulting in at least 35,193 outpatient appointments and 7,704 elective procedures being rearranged in England during that two-day period. The region most heavily affected over the combined strike dates (when accounting for the number of people waiting for treatment) was the North West.

### Figure 9: The most frequently rescheduled planned activity because of NHS strikes in England were outpatient appointments

Total number of planned activities rescheduled as a result of healthcare industrial action, for different strikes, England, December 2022 to February 2023

Figure 9: The most frequently rescheduled planned activity because of NHS strikes in England were outpatient appointments

Total number of planned activities rescheduled as a result of healthcare industrial action, for different strikes, England, December 2022 to February 2023



Source: Preparedness for potential industrial action in the NHS from NHS England

#### Notes:

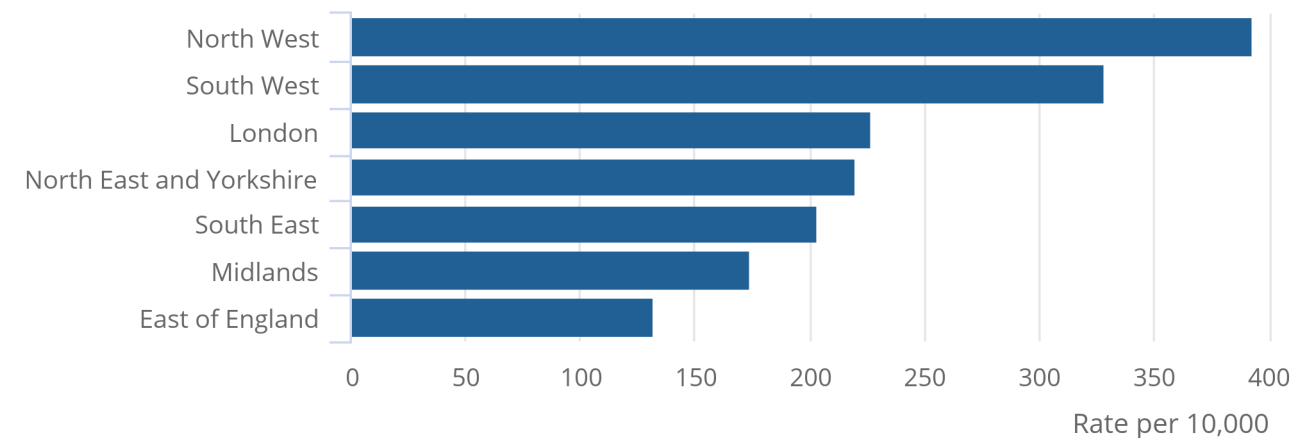
1. Nursing strikes took place on 15 and 20 December 2022, 18 and 19 January 2023 and 7 February 2023. Both ambulance and nursing strikes took place over 6 February 2023. Physiotherapy strikes took place on 26 January 2023 and 9 February 2023. A number of smaller, localised strikes affecting the healthcare workforce also took place during this period.
2. On 13 February 2023 a local strike took place in one trust, with no rescheduled activity.

**Figure 10: The North and South West saw the highest numbers of rescheduled planned activities because of strikes in December 2022 to February 2023**

Total number of planned activities rescheduled per 10,000 patients on waiting lists by region, across all strike dates, England

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Total number of planned activities rescheduled per 10,000 patients on waiting lists by region, across all strike dates, England



Source: Preparedness for potential industrial action in the NHS from NHS England

Notes:

1. The number of patients on waiting lists is taken from the number of incomplete referral to treatment pathways in each commissioning region. If a patient is on more than one waiting list they will be counted more than once.

**Businesses’ experiences**

Of UK private sector businesses, 16% reported being affected by industrial action in December 2022, compared with 45% and 47% who said they were not affected (in the two survey waves that asked about December 2022), according to our [Business Insights and Conditions Survey \(BICS\)](#).

Of those businesses affected by industrial action, the highest proportion in December 2022 was in the human health and social work activities sector, at 33%. This was almost double those asked in the previous wave (16%). Fewer businesses in transportation and storage reported being affected by industrial action in December 2022 (7% in both survey waves that asked this question) than in November 2022, when 18% reported being affected. The most frequently reported impact of industrial action by businesses in December 2022 in the latest available survey wave that asked about industrial action (Wave 75), was the inability to obtain necessary goods (25%) followed by the inability to obtain necessary services (21%).



## 4 . The impact of strikes in the UK data

### [LABD: Labour disputes in the UK](#)

Dataset | Released 14 February 2023

Monthly estimates of labour disputes back to 1931.

### [GDP monthly estimate, UK](#)

Datasets | Released 10 February 2023

Gross domestic product (GDP) measures the value of goods and services produced in the UK. It estimates the size of and growth in the economy.

### [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain](#)

Datasets | Released 24 February 2023

Social insights on daily life and events, including the cost of living, working arrangements and well-being from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN).

### [Revolut spending on debit cards](#)

Dataset | Released 2 March 2023

Experimental indices of Revolut debit card transaction data, UK. Includes sectoral, age and online versus in-store breakdowns. Daily seven-day averages updated weekly plus monthly averages.

### [Transactions at Pret A Manger](#)

Dataset | Released 2 March 2023

Weekly transactional data from approximately 400 Pret A Manger stores around the UK.

## 5 . Glossary

### Industrial action

Industrial action happens when trade union members are in a dispute with their employers that cannot be solved through negotiations. There are different types of industrial action: workers can go on strike or take other action, such as refusing to do overtime (known as “action short of a strike”). Sometimes an employer may stop their workers from working or coming back to work during a dispute. This is called a “lock-out”.

### Strike

A strike is a type of industrial action, where workers refuse to continue working because of an argument with an employer about working conditions, pay levels or job losses.

### Trade union

Trade unions are organisations of usual employees who negotiate agreements with employers on pay and conditions.

### Working days lost

Working days lost are defined as the number of days not worked by people as a result of their involvement in a dispute at their place of work. In measuring the number of working days lost, we only account for the time lost in the basic working week. Overtime work is excluded, as is weekend working where it is not a regular practice.

A full list of definitions for technical terms used when outlining labour disputes in the UK can be found in our [Labour disputes in the UK: 2018 article](#).

## 6 . Data sources and quality

This article contains data and indicators from publications published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as well as other government departments.

Quality and methodology information on the publications cited in this article and their strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the respective publications' "measuring the data" and "strengths and limitations" sections.

### Measuring working days lost

Figures given for working days lost per 1,000 employees use employee jobs for each year taken from our most recent estimates of workforce jobs. In this article, we provide working days lost per 1,000 employees for UK region and countries. This breakdown uses employee jobs by UK region. More information can be found in our [Labour disputes inquiry Quality and Methodology Information report](#).

### Re-weighting industry divisions to sectors

Trade union membership rates by industry were re-weighted to sector level for the purpose of this article. Membership statistics by UK industry division were published by the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) in 2021. Divisions were re-weighted to sectors according to [Standard Industrial Classification 2007](#). Sector level membership rates were expressed as the sum of their divisional membership levels divided by the sum of their all-employee population. More information on how industries have been combined can be found in our [Labour disputes Quality and Methodology Information report](#).

## 7 . Related links

### [Economic activity and social change in the UK, real-time indicators](#)

Article | Released 2 March 2023

Early experimental data and analysis on economic activity and social change in the UK. These real-time indicators are created using rapid response surveys, novel data sources and experimental methods.

### [Business insights and impact on the UK economy: 23 February 2023](#)

Article | Released 23 February 2023

The impact of challenges facing the economy and other events on UK businesses. Based on responses from the voluntary fortnightly business survey (BICS) to deliver real-time information to help assess issues affecting UK businesses and economy, including financial performance, workforce, trade, and business resilience.

### [Cost of living latest insights](#)

Web page | Updated frequently

The latest data and trends about the cost of living. Explore changes in the cost of everyday items and how this is affecting people.

### [How discretionary spending has been affected in recent winters, UK: 2019 to 2023](#)

Article | Released 21 February 2023

How consumer behaviours over the festive winter period have changed for discretionary spending in 2022 in comparison with previous winters.

### [Labour disputes in the UK: 2018](#)

Article | Released 17 May 2019

Analysis of UK labour disputes in 2018, including working days lost, stoppages and workers involved.

### [The history of strikes in the UK](#)

Article | Released 21 September 2015

A look back on official statistics on strikes from when they were first collected in 1891. Providing an overview of strike action, who was involved and the outcomes.

## 8 . Cite this article

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