

# Average Earnings and Composition of the Public and Private Sector Workforces

Theme: Labour Market  
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## Background

The 2019 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings provisional results show that, for full-time NI employees, median weekly earnings in the public sector were 31% higher than in the private sector. Although this was true for both men and women, the difference between public and private sector earnings was more pronounced for women (49% higher compared with 28% for men). Furthermore, the difference recorded in NI was more marked than that of the UK, where equivalent median full-time earnings were 11% higher in the public sector than in the private sector.

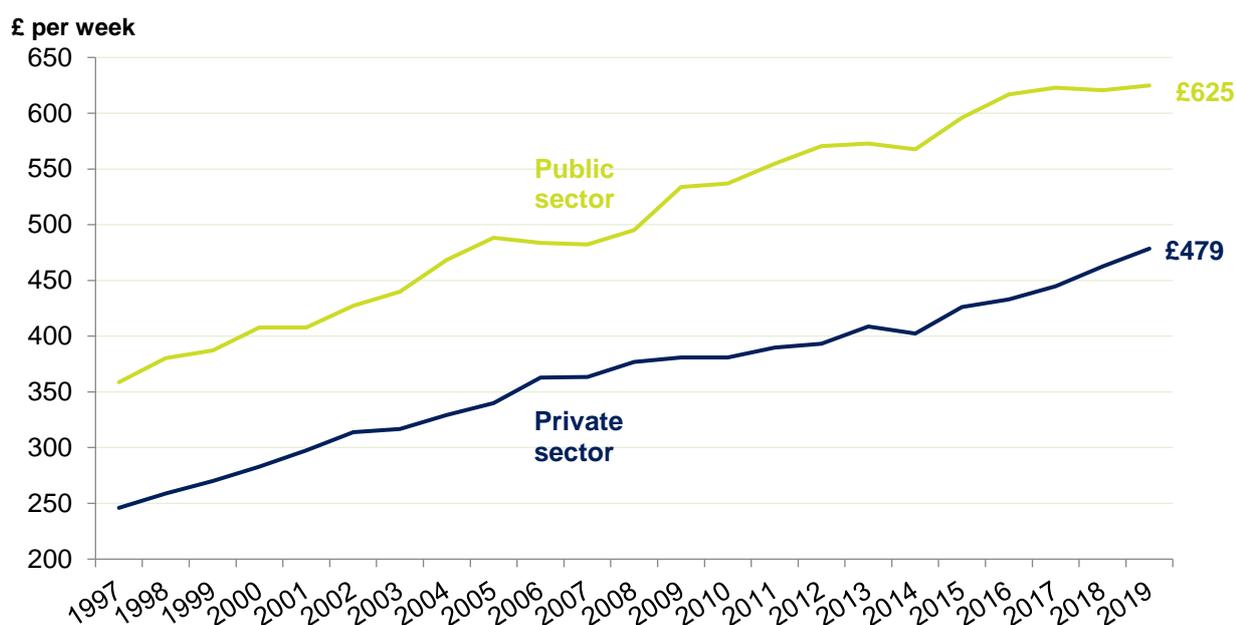
Although these differences are substantial in contrast with the UK, the percentage difference between the full-time median earnings in the two sectors was the lowest in NI since records began in 1997. The largest difference occurred in 1998 (47%), whilst the most recent data showed the joint lowest difference on record alongside 2008. Following the low in 2008, and coinciding with the economic downturn, a larger difference was again recorded in 2009, when it rose to 40%. This gap remained broadly unchanged until 2016, when, following the introduction of the National Living Wage it began to close year on year (see Figure 1).

Some of the difference between earnings in the public and private sectors, both in NI and the UK, may be due to differences in the composition of the respective workforces. For example, many of the lowest paid occupations, such as bar and restaurant staff, hairdressers, elementary sales occupations and cashiers, exist primarily in the private sector, while there is a larger proportion of graduate-level and professional occupations in the public sector. Further detail can be found at [Who works in the public sector?](#)

Table 1 illustrates this, showing that, according to the 2019 ASHE data, public sector employment was concentrated in the 'professional' occupations, which require more highly qualified staff or workers with more experience related training (see Table 4). This occupation group had the second highest median earnings in 2019. In contrast, the majority of private sector employment was in the 'Sales and Customer Service', 'Elementary', 'Skilled Trade' and 'Process, Plant and Machine Operatives' occupations, which are associated with lower earnings. However, even within each of the occupational categories, those in the public sector were likely to earn more on average than those in the private sector.

Table 5 shows the different composition of the two sectors in terms of industry, with public sector employment predominantly in 'Human health and social work', 'Education' and 'Public administration and defence', while the largest industry sectors for the private sector were 'Wholesale and retail trade' and 'Manufacturing'.

**Figure 1: Median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in NI for the public and private sectors, April 1997 to April 2019**



Note: there were a number of methodological changes during the series in 2004, 2006 and 2011. Non-zero axis

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**Table 1: Median gross weekly earnings for the public and private sector by occupation (April 2019) – all employees**

All employees	Count (thousands)		Median earnings	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Managers, directors & senior officials	11	45	924.2	736.1
Professional occupations	120	63	674.9	648.9
Associate professional & technical occupations	43	49	639.0	528.1
Administrative & secretarial occupations	45	52	419.2	344.3
Skilled trades occupations	6	71	451.6	478.5
Caring, leisure & other service occupations	38	37	310.3	255.4
Sales & customer service occupations	x	66	x	246.3
Process, plant & machine operatives	7	69	471.2	427.0
Elementary occupations	18	73	197.4	256.6

x – sample too small for reliable estimate

**Table 2: Median gross weekly earnings for the public and private sector by occupation (April 2019) – full-time employees**

Full-time employees	Count (thousands)		Median earnings	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Managers, directors & senior officials	10	39	971.2	774.0
Professional occupations	90	55	731.4	718.7
Associate professional & technical occupations	37	44	690.3	559.3
Administrative & secretarial occupations	34	30	443.3	409.1
Skilled trades occupations	5	62	482.6	500.0
Caring, leisure & other service occupations	16	17	413.6	340.4
Sales & customer service occupations	x	29	x	357.4
Process, plant & machine operatives	6	61	489.1	446.5
Elementary occupations	5	36	361.8	357.9

*x – sample too small for reliable estimate*

**Table 3: Median gross weekly earnings for the public and private sector by occupation (April 2019) – part-time employees**

Part-time employees	Count (thousands)		Median earnings	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Managers, directors & senior officials	x	6	416.9	x
Professional occupations	30	9	362.9	341.6
Associate professional & technical occupations	6	x	268.2	254.2
Administrative & secretarial occupations	11	22	270.1	214.0
Skilled trades occupations	x	9	248.4	225.5
Caring, leisure & other service occupations	22	20	229.7	175.5
Sales & customer service occupations	x	38	x	153.9
Process, plant & machine operatives	x	8	259.6	203.1
Elementary occupations	13	37	168.5	142.6

*x – sample too small for reliable estimate*

**Table 4: Major occupational groupings**

Major group	General nature of qualifications, training and experience for occupations in the major group
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	A significant amount of knowledge and experience of the production processes and service requirements associated with the efficient functioning of organisations and businesses.
Professional Occupations	A degree or equivalent qualification, with some occupations requiring postgraduate qualifications and/or a formal period of experience-related training.
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	An associated high-level vocational qualification, often involving a substantial period of full-time training or further study. Some additional task-related training is usually provided through a formal period of induction.
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	A good standard of general education. Certain occupations will require further additional vocational training to a well-defined standard (e.g. office skills).
Skilled Trades Occupations	A substantial period of training, often provided by means of a work based training programme.
Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations	A good standard of general education. Certain occupations will require further additional vocational training, often provided by means of a work-based training programme.
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	A general education and a programme of work-based training related to Sales procedures. Some occupations require additional specific technical knowledge but are included in this major group because the primary task involves selling.
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	The knowledge and experience necessary to operate vehicles and other mobile and stationary machinery, to operate and monitor industrial plant and equipment, to assemble products from component parts according to strict rules and procedures and subject assembled parts to routine tests. Most occupations in this major group will specify a minimum standard of competence for associated tasks and will have a related period of formal training.
Elementary Occupations	Occupations classified at this level will usually require a minimum general level of education (that is, that which is acquired by the end of the period of compulsory education). Some occupations at this level will also have short periods of work-related training in areas such as health and safety, food hygiene, and customer service requirements.

**Table 5: Median gross weekly earnings for the public and private sector by industry (April 2019) – All employees**

All employees	Count (thousands)		Median earnings	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	x	6	x	304.2
Mining & quarrying	x	x	x	x
Manufacturing	x	113	x	495.6
Electricity, gas, steam & air conditioning supply	x	x	x	x
Water supply, sewerage, waste management & remediation activities	x	x	x	x
Construction	x	32	x	517.5
Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor vehicles & motorcycles	x	121	x	324.4
Transportation & storage	6	21	547.2	491.8
Accommodation & food service activities	x	44	x	227.2
Information & communication	x	29	x	575.0
Financial & insurance activities	x	16	x	501.9
Real estate activities	8	x	442.9	x
Professional, scientific & technical activities	x	34	x	478.4
Administrative & support service activities	x	45	x	356.8
Public administration & defence; compulsory social security	75	x	577.8	x
Education	85	x	449.7	x
Human health & social work activities	106	40	525.2	274.4
Arts, entertainment & recreation	4	7	451.9	286.4
Other service activities	x	6	x	172.4
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	x	6	x	304.2

*x – sample too small for reliable estimate*