

Research Bulletin 26/4 | Work Quality in Northern Ireland 2025

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Summary

This Research Bulletin examines trends in work quality in Northern Ireland using the Carnegie Framework, which assesses seven dimensions of employment.

There has been strong progress since 2020 in areas such as job security, earning the Real Living Wage (RLW) or above, flexible working and reduced levels of overtime. However, progress across the indicators has been uneven, with persistent disparities by skill level, deprivation quintile, age, and gender. Low skilled workers continue to experience poorer outcomes in pay, progression, and training, whilst high skilled workers report stronger outcomes alongside higher job demands.

These findings underline the importance of a coordinated and targeted policy response to address disparities in job quality across the labour market. While overall improvements in work quality are evident, the uneven distribution of these gains highlights the need for interventions that are carefully designed to support those workers and sectors where progress has been more limited. Sustained monitoring will be critical in tracking how job quality evolves over time, enabling policymakers to identify emerging gaps and respond proactively. This approach will help to ensure that improvements in work quality are not only maintained but are also experienced more consistently and inclusively across the workforce, supporting broader economic objectives around productivity, wellbeing, and inclusive growth.

Introduction

In 2024, the Department for the Economy (DfE) adopted the Carnegie Frameworkⁱ as a measure of work quality while focusing on a subset of indicators to track progress against the Good Jobs priority, part of the Minister's Economic Vision.ⁱⁱ

The Carnegie Framework identifies seven dimensions of work quality. These are:

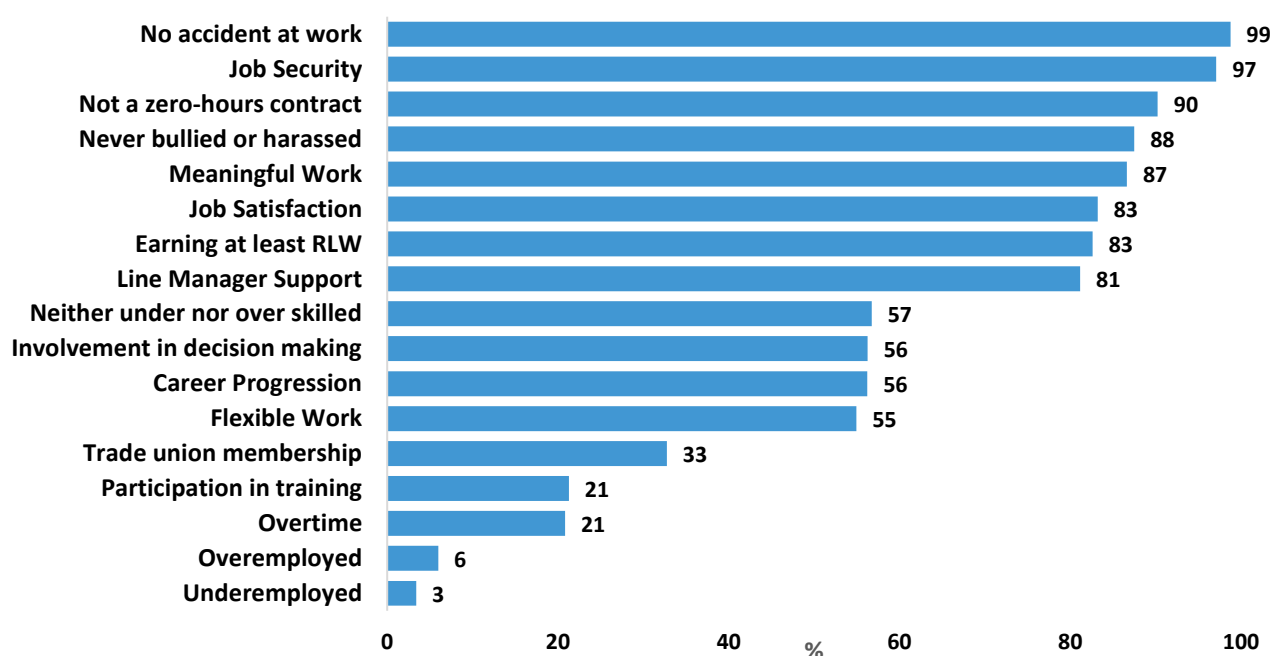
1. Terms of employment;
2. Pay and benefits;
3. Health, safety and psychological wellbeing;
4. Job design and the nature of work;
5. Social support and cohesion;
6. Voice and representation; and
7. Work-life balance.

These seven broad dimensions are underpinned by seventeen work quality indicators, which together offer a detailed and multidimensional assessment of each theme.ⁱⁱⁱ The seventeen indicators are based on employees aged 18 years or over in Northern Ireland (NI) using NISRA data from both the Labour Force Survey (LFS)^{iv} and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE),^v providing insights on work quality throughout various characteristics of the workforce. This article provides a concise analytical summary of the key trends observed within each theme, highlighting areas of relative strength and weakness.

Work Quality Indicators

Figure 1 demonstrates the prevalence of the seventeen work quality indicators for employees in NI, for the year 2025,^{vi} enabling comparison across themes and supporting interpretation of the underlying patterns in performance.

Figure 1: Overview of Work Quality Indicators, employees aged 18 and over, NI, 2025



Source: NISRA, Work Quality 2025.

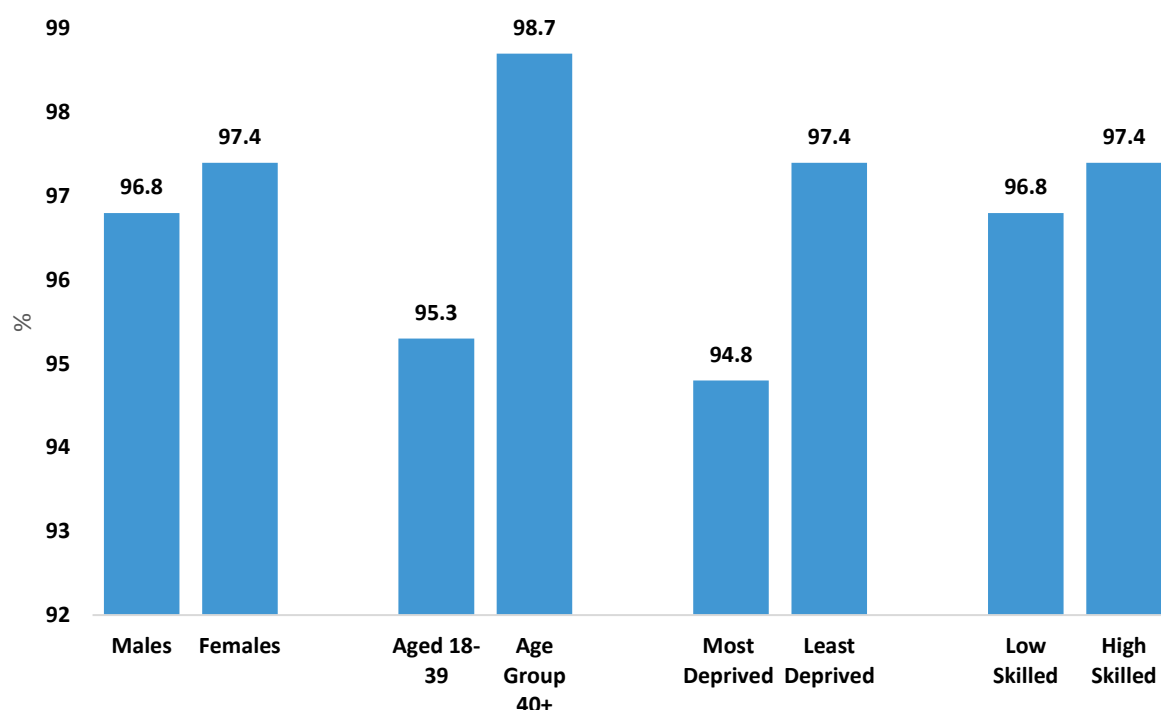
Note: This graph shows the percentage of all employees which report each work quality indicator / sub-indicator.

Terms of Employment

Fair and stable employment conditions are measured via the 'job security' indicator, which captures employees in a permanent job or in a temporary job who did not want a permanent job, and the 'non zero-hours contract' indicator.

Job security ranks as the second highest indicator, with 97.1% of employees reporting a secure job in 2025, a statistically significant improvement of 1.9 percentage points (pps) since 2021. Moreover, the gap between those aged 18-39 and those 40 and over is statistically significant in 2025, at 3.4pps in favour of those aged 40 and over (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportion of employees reporting secure employment, NI, 2025



Source: NISRA, Work Quality 2025

The proportion of employees on non zero-hours contracts has remained relatively stable since 2020, currently only 0.4pps lower in 2025. Consistently, females, 18-39 year olds, those living in the most deprived areas and low skilled workers are more likely to be on zero-hours contracts.

Pay and Benefits

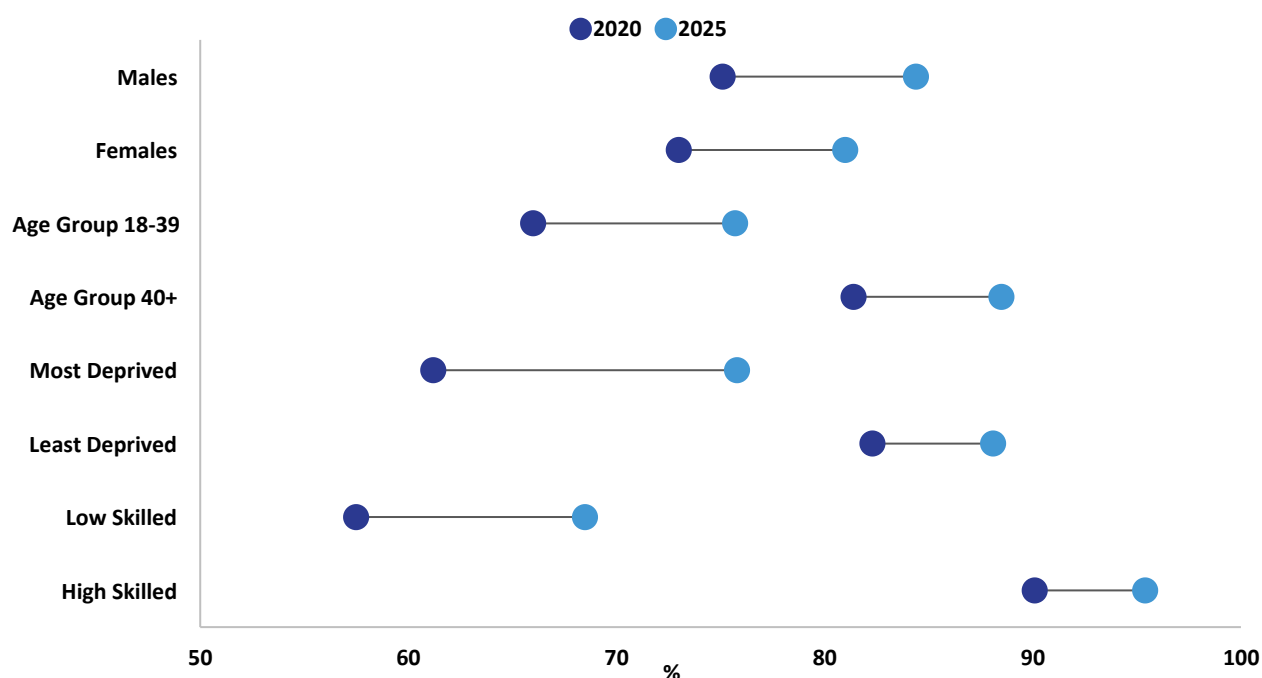
A key requirement of achieving a higher proportion of the working age population in Good Jobs in Northern Ireland, is increasing the proportion of employees earning the Real Living Wage (RLW) or above.

The RLW is an independently set wage rate which aims to accurately meet the cost of living, with two different rates, one for London and one for the rest of the UK.^{vii} The RLW rates for 2025-26 were announced in October 2025,^{viii} however our analysis will be based on the 2024-2025 UK RLW rate of £12.60 per hour. In contrast, the National Living Wage (NLW) set by the UK government for those aged 21 and over was £11.44 during the same period. The RLW is paid voluntarily by over 16,000 employers across the UK.

In 2025, 82.6% of employees in Northern Ireland were paid the RLW or above (the peak of 85.6% was experienced in 2022). Improvements were observed across several subpopulation groups, particularly among workers in traditionally lower paid groups. The largest differences in RLW attainment were found across demographic and socioeconomic cohorts, with statistically significant variation by sex, age, deprivation status, and skill level.

Employees aged 40 and over, those working in high skilled occupations, and those living in the least deprived areas were more likely to earn the RLW or above. These findings highlight persistent disparities in RLW attainment across age, sex, skill level, and levels of deprivation.

Figure 3: Proportion of employees paid the RLW or above, NI, 2020 & 2025



Source: NISRA, Work Quality 2025

The proportion of those earning the RLW or above in the age group 18-39 has increased from 66.0% in 2020 to 75.7% in 2025, a 9.7pp increase over the five year period (Figure 3). Additionally, employees from the most deprived quintile have seen a notable increase from 61.2% in 2020 to 75.8% in 2025, the largest improvement of any subpopulation group.

The largest difference measured is that between employees in high and low skilled jobs. While this gap narrowed from 32.6pps in 2020 to 26.9pps in 2025, it remains a substantial difference. The gap between these two related subgroups far exceeds any other and is more than double the difference between employees living in the most deprived and least deprived areas (12.3pps in 2025).

Health, Safety and Psychological Wellbeing

Almost 9 out of 10 employees reported that they had not been bullied or harassed in work. However, females in 2025 (86.3%) reported lower rates than males (88.7%). Those in the least deprived quintile report lower rates than those in the most deprived quintile, standing at 83.6% compared to 90.1%.

The proportion of employees who have not reported having an accident at work has remained high and stable, around 99%, since 2020.

Job Design and the Nature of Work

In 2025, 86.6% of employees reported performing meaningful work, largely unchanged from 86.1% in 2020. For employees, consistently high levels of meaningful work are strongly associated with higher job satisfaction, wellbeing and engagement. For employers, it reflects a motivated and committed workforce, which is linked to improved productivity, retention, and organisational performance. Maintaining such high levels over time suggests a resilient work environment in Northern Ireland that continues to deliver value to individuals and organisations alike.

However, the different age groups within this theme have experienced varying trends. The 18-39 age group has experienced a downward trend, with 85.8% in 2020 and 81.7% in 2025, compared to the 40+ age group experiencing an upward trend, with 86.5% in 2020 and 91.7% in 2025, which is a statistically significant gap at 10pps.

Another aspect to measure job design and the nature of work is how well aligned employees' skills are to their current duties. This is crucial for individual job quality and wellbeing, as skills mismatches and overqualification can lead to lower productivity, a critical area within the Department's Economic Vision.^{ix} The proportion has risen by 7.4pps (to 56.8%) since this aspect was first measured in 2023, a statistically significant improvement and the largest increase of all indicators. All subgroups have seen moderate gains in this since its inception.

Building upon this, opportunities for career progression have risen by 4pps since 2020, to 56.2% in 2025.¹ There is a wide variation in subgroups, with males, those living in the least deprived quintile, workers under 40 years old and high skilled workers reporting higher rates of opportunities for career progression. To tackle skills and labour shortages, many employers have placed an increased focus on skills development and career progression to boost retention as well as help with recruitment.^x

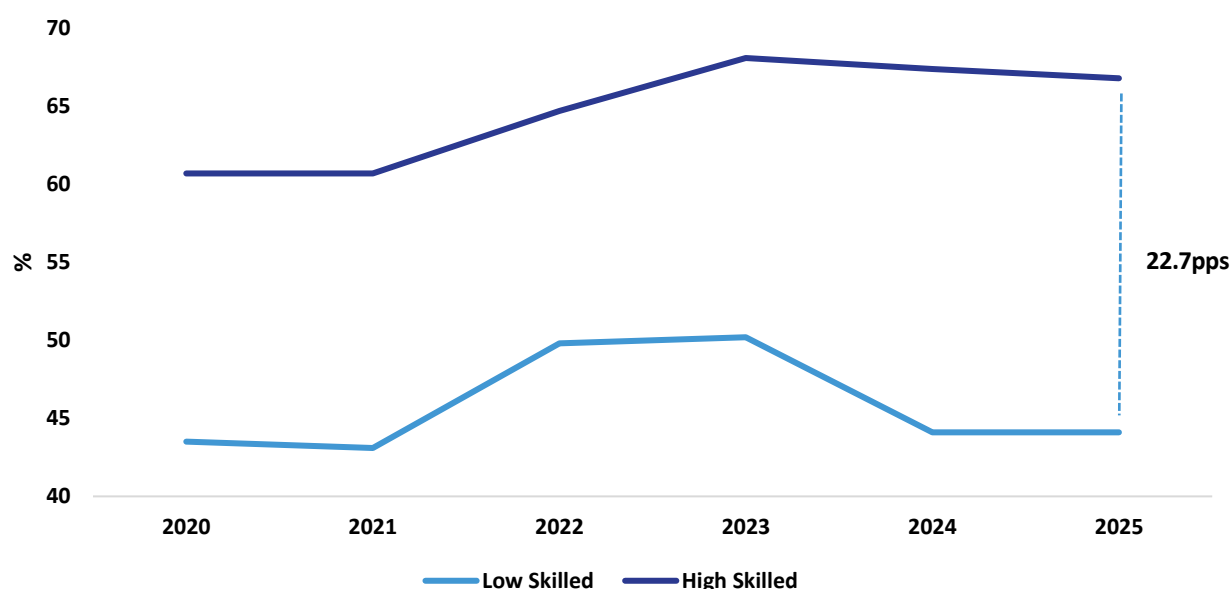
Around three-fifths (58%) of males agreed or strongly agreed that their job offered good opportunities for career progression, compared to 54.4% of females, although both have seen similar gains since 2020. Younger (18-39 year olds) workers reported higher career progression opportunities than those 40 and over, at 62.2% compared to 50.2%, a statistically significant gap of 12pps.

In the last year, those in the most deprived areas feel less positive about career progression opportunities, falling from 57.9% in 2024 to 49.6% in 2025. High skilled employees were much more likely to report opportunities for career progression compared to low skilled employees, 66.8% compared to 44.1%, a 22.7pps gap, the highest gap of any subgroup. This gap has widened since 2020, when it stood at 17.2pps (Figure 4).²

¹ This increase represents a change in the estimate rather than a statistically significant improvement.

² One indicator sits outside the Carnegie Framework, job satisfaction, and is considered an outcome of job quality. This has seen a statistically significant improvement since 2021, where it stood at 77.8%, rising to 83.2% in 2025. The largest gap is seen between those living in the most deprived areas, where 75.6% report they are satisfied or very satisfied with their job, compared to 83.4% in the least deprived areas, a gap of 7.8pps.

Figure 4: Career Progression Opportunities by Skill Level, NI, 2020-25



Source: NISRA, Work Quality 2025

The proportion of employees who have participated in training in the last 13 weeks has experienced a minor fall since 2020, from 22.6% to 21.3% in 2025, although there have been consecutive annual increases since 2021. Again, the largest gap is seen between low and high skilled workers, 6.4pps in 2025. The relatively low training rate is a concern because lower participation in training risks slowing skills development and adaptability within the workforce, potentially constraining productivity growth, innovation, and employers' ability to respond effectively to technological change and evolving labour market demands.^{xi xii}

Social Support and Cohesion

Line manager support is vital for performance at work, job satisfaction, and higher productivity levels.^{xiii} In Northern Ireland, 81.2% of employees feel supported by their line manager in their work, with relatively minor fluctuations since first being measured in 2023.

According to NISRA, there was a significant difference between males and females in 2025.^{xiv} Those in high skilled jobs and 18-39 year olds report comparatively higher rates of line manager support, with the largest gap seen between low and high skilled workers at 4.6pps in favour of high skilled workers.

Voice and Representation

Trade union membership has remained at approximately one-third of employees since 2020. Those aged 40 and over have consistently had higher rates of trade union membership than those aged 18 to 39, a statistically significant gap of around 9pps. Females and those in high skilled jobs have consistently reported higher membership, whilst there has been a marked increase from those in the most deprived areas, rising from 27.1% in 2020 to 35.9% in 2025.

The “involvement in decision making” metric refers to employees who report their line manager as good at involving employees and their representatives in decision making. The proportion of employees involved in decision making has experienced an increase since 2020, rising from 52.5% in 2020 to 56.3% in 2025. Males report higher involvement in decision making than females, with the gap standing at 3.5pps in 2025, although this has fluctuated in recent years with females reporting higher involvement in 2020 and 2021. High skilled employees also report much higher involvement, at 61.5%, compared to 50.3% of low skilled employees.

Work-Life Balance

Since 2021, there have been statistically significant improvements in the proportion of employees who work either paid or unpaid overtime, the second largest improvement experienced across all seventeen indicators. This measure has fallen year-on-year since 2020 and currently stands 8.4pps lower than in 2020, at 20.8% in 2025 compared to 29.2% in 2020.

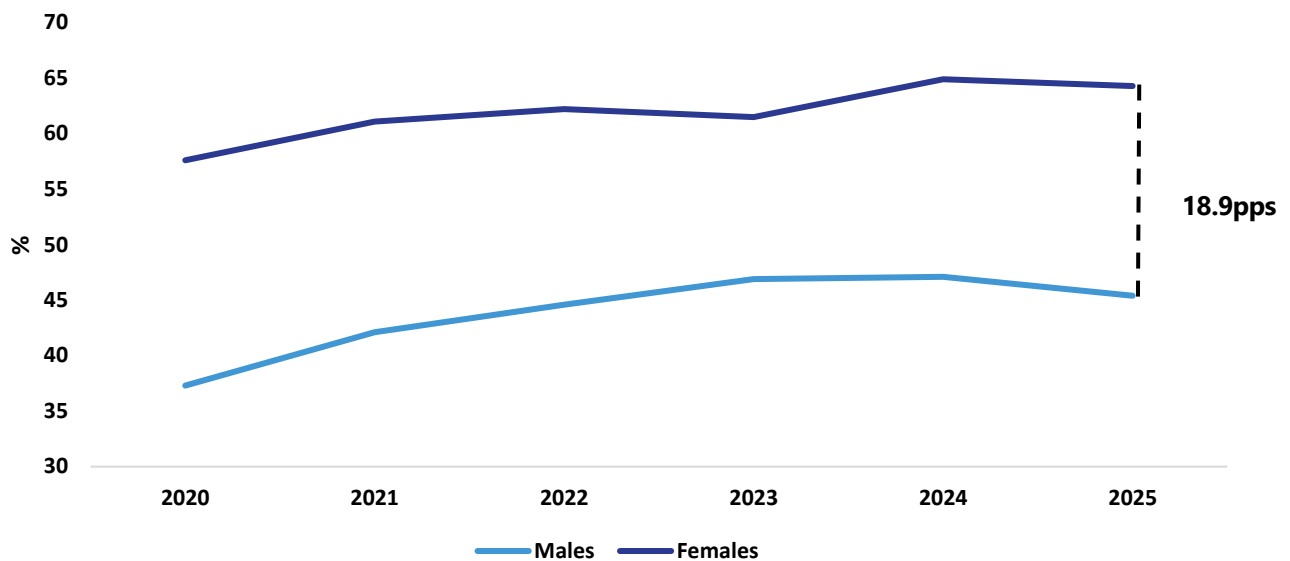
High skilled employees are more likely to work overtime (24%) than low skilled employees (17.5%). However, the gap has narrowed from 13.8pps in 2020 to 6.5pps in 2025. Those living in the least deprived quintile report working more overtime than those in the most deprived, at 23.2% compared to 20.8%, although this gap was much wider in 2020 (13pps). Males have consistently reported higher rates of overtime than females and this gap has also narrowed from 2020 to 2025. The extent to which overtime should be viewed positively or negatively is subjective and varies by worker.^{xv xvi}

The proportion of employees who are underemployed has fallen since 2020 from 6.7% to 3.4% in 2025. Continuing prior trends, those in low skilled jobs are more likely to be underemployed with 5.2% of those in low skilled jobs compared with 1.6% of those in high skilled jobs.

The proportion of employees who are overemployed has also fallen annually from 2020-2025 and is currently 6%. In 2025, 8.2% of employees aged 40 and over were overemployed, compared with 3.6% of those aged 18–39, a gap of 4.6 percentage points. While this disparity remains substantial, it has narrowed from 6.6 percentage points in 2020.

There has been a statistically significant improvement in flexible working between 2021 and 2025, with an increase of 3.3pps. In 2020, 47.7% of employees had a flexible working agreement, increasing to 55% in 2025. The largest differences are observed between males and females (Figure 5), which is a statistically significant gap. Both have seen similar increases since 2020, although the gap remains high in 2025 at 18.9pps.

Figure 5: Proportion of Males and Females in Flexible Work, NI, 2020-25



Source: NISRA, Work Quality 2025

Low skilled employees are more likely to be in flexible work than high skilled employees, at 56.7% compared to 53.3%, respectively. Those aged 18-39 (at 50.8%) are less likely than those aged 40 and over (58.7%) to have flexible work, a statistically significant gap.

Conclusion

Since 2020, there has been strong progress across several dimensions of work quality, including the proportion earning the RLW or above, high levels of job security and increased flexible working. There have also been encouraging developments linked to job design and work-life balance, including marked reductions in the proportion of employees working overtime. At the same time, improvements in job design are reflected in increasing perceptions of stronger skills alignment and clearer opportunities for career progression.

Whilst six of the seventeen indicators have experienced significant improvements between 2021 and 2025 (neither under nor over skilled, overtime (paid and unpaid), job satisfaction, earning at least the RLW, flexible working, and job security), whilst the eleven other indicators have been consistent across the time series, with no real change since 2021. Overall, the narrative across the indicators points to uneven progress, with further work required to deliver sustained improvements.

Differences by skill level are particularly pronounced: low skilled workers are less likely to be paid the RLW or above and report substantially fewer opportunities for career progression and training. In contrast, high skilled workers are more likely to work overtime and achieve stronger outcomes across many of the work quality indicators, reflecting both greater job demands and enhanced access to rewards such as progression, pay, and autonomy.

Alongside these skill-based differences, inequalities persist across deprivation levels, gender, and age. This underscores the critical role of skills development in improving job quality, supporting progression, and reducing persistent inequalities across the labour market.

Taken together, these findings underline that improvements in overall work quality must be matched by targeted interventions and sustained monitoring. This approach will ensure that the Good Jobs priority is realised not only in positive headline trends, but also through narrowing disparities between groups and delivering tangible improvements across the full range of work quality indicators.

In Northern Ireland, NISRA's annual Work Quality data underpins the monitoring of the Good Jobs priority by providing a consistent and reliable statistical framework, based on a set of indicators measured annually to track progress over time.

Although constrained by the practical limits of survey length and frequency, these official statistics are complemented by Northern Ireland's participation in the Skills and Employment Survey (SES),^{xvii} which provides richer insights into skills utilisation, job content, and worker experience beyond what can be captured in routine surveys. Taken together, these sources provide a more comprehensive evidence base, enabling the development of more targeted and effective skills interventions and policies by leveraging the complementary demographic insights captured across both surveys, further enriched by upcoming outputs from the Working in Ireland Survey (WIIS)^{xviii}, led by the University College Dublin. The WIIS is a study of job quality across Northern Ireland and Ireland. It examines a wide range of workplace topics, including skills, training, AI, remote working, employee wellbeing, trade union membership, pay, staff retention, and overall job quality.

The Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill will advance the Good Jobs agenda by improving employment rights, fair pay, job security, and work predictability. Stronger enforcement and monitoring will help improve job quality and reduce inequalities across the seven Carnegie dimensions of good work.

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For further information or queries please contact: analyticalservices@economy-ni.gov.uk.

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- i [Good Work | Carnegie UK](#)
- ii [Minister's Economic Vision | Department for the Economy](#)
- iii [Work quality | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)
- iv [Labour Force Survey | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)
- v [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)
- vi [Work Quality, Northern Ireland 2025 | NISRA](#)
- vii [What is the real Living Wage? | Living Wage Foundation](#)
- viii UK Living Wage Rate increased to £13.45 for 2025-26. See: [What is the real Living Wage? | Living Wage Foundation](#).
- ix [Minister's Economic Vision | Department for the Economy](#)
- x [CIPD Good Work Index: Northern Ireland | CIPD](#)
- xi [Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: Report of the Northern Ireland Impact Forum 2017 | L&W](#)
- xii [Labour market value of higher and further education qualifications: a summary report | GOV.UK](#)
- xiii [Good Work Index 2024: Northern Ireland report | CIPD](#)
- xiv [Work Quality in Northern Ireland 2025](#)
- xv [Working Lives Northern Ireland](#)
- xvi [Going Beyond Pay: Job Quality in Northern Ireland | Department for the Economy](#)
- xvii [Going Beyond Pay: Job Quality in Northern Ireland | Department for the Economy](#)
- xviii [Working in Ireland Survey: An All-Ireland Study 2025 | WIIS](#)