Research Bulletin 22/11 | Tracking Northern Ireland's Economic Recovery and Future Prospects

Economic Research Branch, Analytical Services Division, Department for the Economy

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Summary

In the last three years the Northern Ireland economy has been profoundly impacted by economic shocks. The economy has also been remarkably resilient, with a strong 'bounce-back' in economic / business activity evident. The labour market has seen recovery since 2020 and 2021, but has still some room for improvement, before it can reach the levels seen in 2019.

This article looks across a range of headline economic data, to chart Northern Ireland's recovery. It also looks to the near future, as it faces a number of economic headwinds, including current high inflation impacting on household budgets.

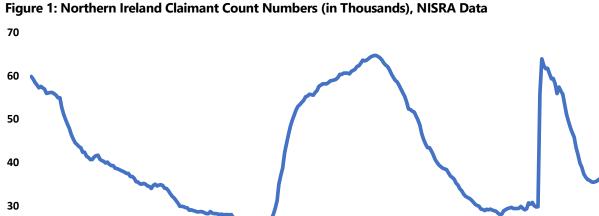
Introduction

The Northern Ireland economy is now approaching three years since the Spring 2020 lockdown. While businesses and workers have experienced profound economic shocks, it is clear that the labour market and business activity have been moving towards recovery. A full economic recovery takes time, and the Northern Ireland economy has shown remarkable resilience. However, the local economy faces a number of headwinds and challenges in the short and medium term. Economic recoveries by their very nature, can be far from smooth and straightforward journeys.ⁱ

This article briefly looks at a number of headline indicators, many of which have seen disruption, but also notable bounce-backs. The main areas examined are the local labour market, business activity and output, inflation pressures and socioeconomic developments.

Labour Market

Following the Spring 2020 lockdown, the claimant count in Northern Ireland more than doubled in a few months – increasing from around 30,000 in March 2020 to 64,000 in May 2020. The claimant count fell gradually thereafter, and in November 2022, the seasonally adjusted number of people on the claimant count was 36,200 (3.8% of the workforce). The November 2022 claimant count remains higher (by 21.4%) than the pre-Covid-19 count in March 2020. Recent figures for the Northern Ireland labour market show that payroll employee numbers have increased over the year and are above pre-Covid-19 levels. Measures of total employment (e.g. employment rate and hours worked), unemployment and economic inactivity continue to show improvement over the year but have not yet returned to their pre-Covid-19 position.ⁱⁱ



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Northern Ireland's unemployment rate (age 16 and over) for the period August-October 2022 was estimated at 2.7%. This was a decrease of 1.2 percentage points (p.p.) over the year. While Northern Ireland's unemployment rate is performing relatively well, especially considering the economic issues faced here, its employment rate declined markedly in 2020 and 2021 (annual figures). Northern Ireland's employment rate has started to recover of late, but is still over one percentage point lower (in August-October 2022) than the latter months of 2019 and lower than the employment rate in England, Scotland and Wales.iii

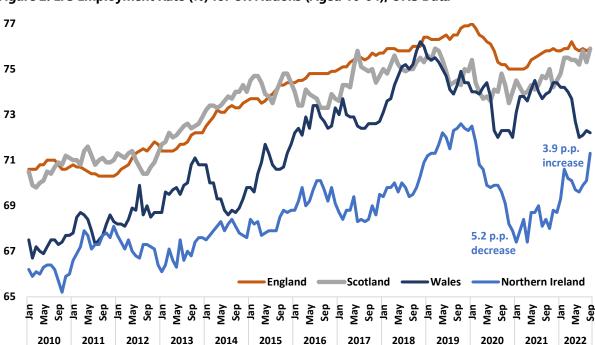


Figure 2: LFS Employment Rate (%) for UK Nations (Aged 16-64), ONS Data

In November 2022, a research report by the Institute for Employment Studies compared labour market recoveries around the world. ^{iv} With regards to the UK as a whole, the report says:

"Worryingly, we are also seeing employment recover far less strongly in the UK than in virtually any other developed economy. Across the developed world, employment rates are now at or above where they were before the pandemic began. Across the European Union for example, employment rates are on average two percentage points higher than they were before the pandemic began, while in the UK the employment rate remains one percentage point lower."

In the table below, we have compared Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and the nine regions of England in terms of changes in the employment rate, using ONS data.¹ By looking at profiles from 'peak' to 'trough' we can track how each region's labour market has been adversely impacted over the last three years, as well as assessing bounce-back in the last number of months. As different regions would have varied in terms of timings, the lowest monthly figure from January 2020 to the latest data in 2022, has been used for comparison. Time series graphs for each region can be found in the Annex.^v

Table 1: Changes in LFS Employment Rate (%) for UK Regions (Aged 16-64), ONS Data

	Highest Employment Rate Figure in 2019 Year	Minimum Employment Rate Figure 2020 to 2022	Difference Low Figure from 2019 Max Figure (p.p.)	Latest (Aug- Oct 2022) Employment Rate Figure	Bounce- Back from Low Figure (p.p.)	Difference Latest Value from 2019 Max Value (p.p.)
Northern Ireland	72.6%	67.4%	-5.2	71.3%	+3.9	-1.3
Wales	75.5%	72.0%	-3.5	72.2%	+0.2	-3.3
Scotland	75.9%	73.5%	-2.4	75.9%	+2.4	0.0
North East	71.7%	70.3%	-1.4	71.2%	+0.9	-0.5
North West	76.2%	72.7%	-3.5	73.4%	+0.7	-2.8
East Midlands	78.4%	74.6%	-3.8	74.9%	+0.3	-3.5
West Midlands	75.5%	72.9%	-2.6	73.6%	+0.7	-1.9
East	79.4%	76.8%	-2.6	79.2%	+2.4	-0.2
London	76.0%	74.1%	-1.9	75.9%	+1.8	-0.1
South West	81.0%	76.4%	-4.6	79.2%	+2.8	-1.8
Yorks & Humber	74.9%	72.3%	-2.6	74.6%	+2.3	-0.3
South East	80.0%	77.6%	-2.4	77.8%	+0.2	-2.2
UK	76.6%	74.6%	-2.0	75.6%	+1.0	-1.0

The analysis shows that Northern Ireland experienced a 5.2 p.p. decrease in its employment rate, from 72.6% during 2019, to reach a trough of 67.4% during 2021. However, the employment rate then improved by 3.9 p.p. in more recent months, and the latest figure sits 1.3 p.p. below the 2019 level, similar to the 1.0 p.p. for the UK as a whole. The North West, East Midlands, West Midlands, South West, South East and Wales all stand out as regions that have a distance to travel before full recovery on this particular indicator.

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¹ Note that ONS data released on 13 December 2022.

Labour market data is backward looking and can have a lag. There can also be substantial volatility in the data, especially over short time periods and the analysis should be considered in this context. Latest data (for August-October 2022) shows a continuing improving picture for Northern Ireland's employment rate (at 71.3%), which provides grounds for optimism. The future is highly uncertain (with upside risks as well as downside risks) and it is worth considering that after the 2009 financial crisis for example, the employment rate in Northern Ireland improved quite strongly, even during years of spending restraint.

It is important to note that people may have exited employment, or not entered employment for a number of reasons and this issue is gaining much attention amongst economic commentators recently across the UK, as well as international organisations like the OECD. VI General reasons for exiting employment, or not entering employment, can include:

- job losses / redundancy;
- to pursue full-time study;
- immigration / emigration;
- lifestyle choices (including early retirement) and/or caring responsibilities;
- due to physical sickness or mental health reasons. vii

In August-October 2022 the number of economically inactive people (aged 16 and over) in Northern Ireland was estimated at 600,000, down 7,000 from last quarter; and down 15,000 from the same period last year. The economic inactivity rate (aged 16 to 64) for Northern Ireland was 26.7%. Interestingly, the male economic inactivity rate (21.9%) decreased by 5.0 p.p. over the year, while the female economic inactivity rate (31.3%) increased by 0.9 p.p. over the year.

Businesses and Output

Overall, numbers of registered company insolvencies have remained lower than pre-Covid-19 levels since the start of the first UK lockdown in March 2020. In November 2022 there were 20 company insolvencies registered in Northern Ireland, this is more than double the number in November 2021, but 35% lower than November 2019. This comprised of 16 Creditors' Voluntary Liquidations (CVLs), two compulsory liquidations and two Company Voluntary Arrangements (CVAs), with no administrations or receivership appointments. ix

Findings from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2021 for Northern Ireland show an increase in total early-stage entrepreneurial activity (TEA) in Northern Ireland in 2021, representing a strong rebound after being adversely impacted by the pandemic in 2020. Despite a slight fall in 2021, there is still quite elevated levels of 'fear of failure'. The proportion of non-entrepreneurial individuals of working age in Northern Ireland who agreed there were good start-up opportunities but who report they are afraid of starting a business in case it might fail, fell from 61.4% in 2020 to 56.5% in 2021, but this is still at a relatively high level, when considered against historic data.^x

According to the ONS, UK gross domestic product (GDP), in chained volume measures, was estimated to have decreased by 9.7% in 2020. This decrease was mainly the result of Covid-19, causing widespread business closures and restrictions on consumers' mobility. Real GDP figures for Northern Ireland, show estimated growth in 2020 of -10.5%, very similar to England and Scotland (both -10.7%), with Wales at -11.2%.xi GDP data shows a bounce-back in output after 2020 for the UK, with experimental model-based early estimates of regional gross value showing Northern Ireland outperforming a number of other regions.xii

According to the OBR however, the squeeze on real incomes, rise in interest rates, and fall in house prices are all weighing on consumption and investment, and forecast to tip the UK economy into a recession.^{xiii}

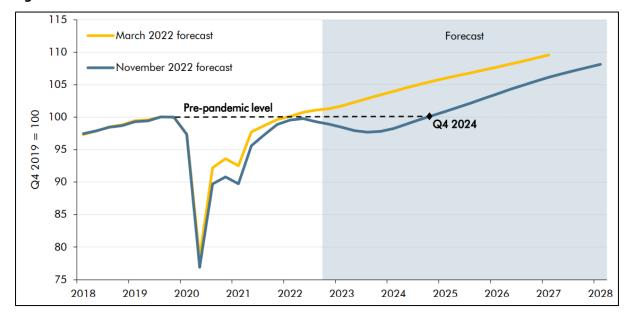


Figure 3: November 2022 OBR Forecast for UK GDP

In recent months forecasts have tended to predict negative growth overall for 2023 GDP in the UK. Furthermore, many forecasters are predicting a modest rise in unemployment. xiv The Bank of England has stated the UK would face a "very challenging" time, with a "tough road ahead" for UK households during this period.xv In the last month, a number of notable forecasts have been made:

- On 3 November 2022, the Bank of England considered that UK GDP would grow by -1.5% in 2023 and unemployment would rise from 3.7% in Q4 2022, to 4.9% in Q4 2023.
- On 16 November 2022, the OBR published their Economic and Fiscal Outlook, predicting UK GDP growth of -1.4% in 2023. Unemployment would increase from 3.6% in Q4 2022, to 4.6% in Q4 2023.
- On 22 November 2022, the OECD stated that UK GDP would grow by -0.4% in 2023 and unemployment would rise slightly, from 3.7% in 2022, to 4.3% in 2023.xvi

However, it should be noted that making economic predictions in such uncertain and ever-changing times is difficult. These forecasts, while recent, were made based on information in a particular point in time and

the outlook (and reality) may subsequently become more positive, or negative. The projections above relate to the UK as a whole and not specifically to Northern Ireland. By way of comparison:

- In December 2022, Danske Bank forecast that the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland will average around 2.9% in 2022 and 3.9% in 2023, with GVA growth of -1.0% in 2023. xviii
- In December 2022, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) predicted an economic contraction next year, with GVA growth of -1.2% in 2023, before recovery in 2024. xviii

A number of sources can be used to track activity levels over the last three years, or longer. Google Mobility data provide an indicator of changes in the volume of visits to various location types compared with a pre-Covid-19 baseline. xix

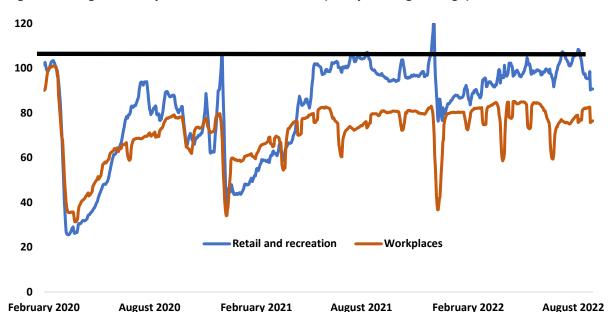


Figure 4: Google Mobility Data for Northern Ireland (7-Day Moving Average)

Visits are calculated based on publicly available anonymised data from Google users in the UK who have opted into Location History for their Google account, so are based on a subset of users. There are a number of location types available, but the graph above focuses on retail & recreation (restaurants, cafes, shopping centres, theme parks, museums, libraries, theatres and cinemas) and on workplaces. It can be seen that retail and workplace mobility increased as Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed. In interpreting the graphs, the reader should consider also seasonal events, such as the weather and holiday periods, that may impact movements in the data. Note that the Community Mobility Reports are no longer being updated as of October 2022 but all historical data remains publicly available for research purposes.**

The Tourism sector is an industry that was impacted greatly during the last three years, but is now showing strong signs of bounce-back. The number of hotel rooms sold in Northern Ireland was dramatically affected by the closure of hotels during various months of 2020 and the first few months of 2021. As hotels reopened, demand returned, and over 200,000 rooms were sold, per month, during May to September 2022.^{xxi}

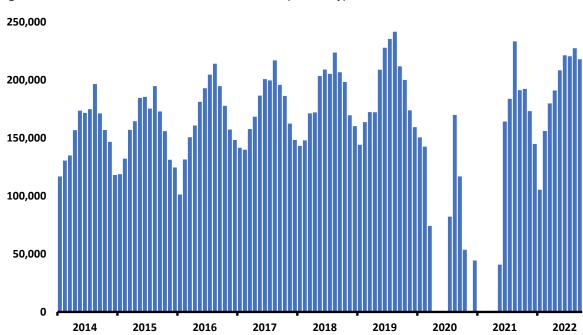


Figure 5: Hotel Rooms Sold in Northern Ireland (Monthly), NISRA Data

NISRA and CAA data shows air passenger flows improved markedly since 2020 and the first half of 2021, but thus far, 2022 is still lower than 2019 levels. It should be noted that air passenger flows relate to an estimate of passengers both in and out. Figures should not be doubled up. To give an estimate on the number of individuals, they may be halved, however it's important to note that a person may take more than one flight or may only take one flight in one direction.^{xxii}

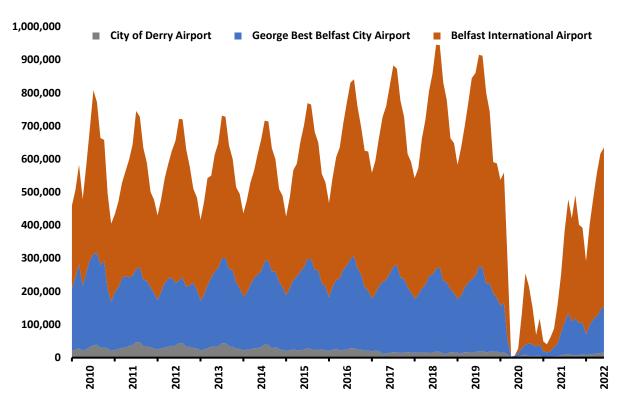


Figure 6: Total Air Passenger Flows through Northern Ireland Airports (Monthly), NISRA Data

Looking ahead to the first quarter of 2023, Tourism NI have found (as of 3 October 2022) there are almost 8,900 scheduled flights through Northern Ireland's three main airports between January - March 2023, with a seat capacity of over 1.15m. This indicates that total scheduled seats to Northern Ireland airports in the first quarter of 2023 will be at 94% of pre-pandemic levels seen in Q1 2019.

There are 11 airlines operating flights to Northern Ireland between January-March 2023, two fewer than the same period in 2019. xxiii Looking towards 2024, there are plans to launch a new transatlantic airline at Belfast International Airport. xxiv

Latest figures show car traffic on ferries to Northern Ireland from Great Britain increased by 29% in January to September 2022 compared to the same period in 2019. For comparison, car ferry traffic to the Republic of Ireland via Central and Southern Corridor routes saw decreases of 11% and 5% respectively in January to September 2022 versus 2019.**

Inflation Pressures

Following recent economic events, including supply shocks, inflation rates in advanced economies have now risen at their fastest pace in many years. **xvi* This has put pressure on household budgets.

According to the ONS, the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) for the UK rose by 10.7% in the 12 months to November 2022, down from 11.1% in October 2022. The October figure was the highest annual CPI inflation rate in the National Statistic series, which began in January 1997. Indicative modelled consumer price inflation estimates suggest that the CPI rate would have last been higher (than the October 2022 figure) in October 1981, where the estimate for the annual inflation rate was 11.2%.xxvii

According to the Ulster Bank PMI survey for November 2022, input prices continued to rise sharply, with the rate of inflation remaining above the series average. This was despite the latest increase being the softest since February 2021.



Figure 7: Northern Ireland Ulster Bank PMI Survey Data Relating to Prices

Energy continued to be the main source of inflationary pressures, but higher raw material costs and salaries were also reported. Sharp, but softer, increases in input costs were seen across all four broad sectors covered

by the survey. In line with the picture for input costs, selling prices increased at a rapid but reduced rate during November 2022. The latest rise in charges was the softest in 21 months. The increase in selling prices in Northern Ireland was slightly softer than the UK average. **xviii*

According to the latest HMRC PAYE (Experimental) Real Time Information (RTI), Northern Ireland had a median monthly pay of £1,999 in November 2022, an increase of 7.5% from same period last year. Since March 2020, earnings here increased by 14.6%, lowest of all the UK regions. **XXIX** Many workers have seen pay increases somewhat below inflation.

ONS are working in collaboration with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland to produce consumer price inflation estimates for Northern Ireland, including a sample boost to the price collection. Through its engagement with the Consumer Council, ONS have identified a number of items that may be of greater importance to the Northern Ireland economy. For example, they state that 68% of Northern Ireland households are reliant on oil as a source of heating, compared with 4% of the UK as a whole.**

A support package has been put in place for 2022 that includes payments to those on income related benefits, disabled claimants and pensioners, intended to provide support with the rise in the cost of living. Furthermore, in November 2022, the UK government launched the Energy Price Guarantee to help households in Northern Ireland, with regards to electricity and gas bills. This was in addition to the £400 energy bill discount for all households through the Northern Ireland Energy Bills Support Scheme, due later this winter. XXXIII

Socioeconomic Developments

In November 2022, The Executive Office (TEO) published figures for 2021-22 across various areas of wellbeing. Life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety measures improved over the year in Northern Ireland, while low self-efficacy and locus of control measures have shown a decline in wellbeing. Life satisfaction and happiness scores were higher in 2021-22 compared with 2020-21.

Although wellbeing can be due to a range of complex reasons, periods of unemployment are generally regarded as being detrimental to individuals and society as a whole.xxxiii Data from the TEO Wellbeing survey shows that those in paid employment reported higher self-efficacy, life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness, and locus of control figures than those not in paid employment. They also reported lower levels of anxiety and feelings of loneliness.xxxiiv It is therefore crucial to continue to track labour market performance in Northern Ireland over time, important both from an economic and societal viewpoint. The Mental Health Foundation published research with the London School of Economics and Political Science, putting the cost of mental health problems to the Northern Ireland economy at £3.4bn annually. Furthermore, a survey of 1,498 adults living in Northern Ireland, aged 18 and over, was conducted by LucidTalk in November 2022 and released by the Mental Health Foundation. Almost half of the people surveyed were anxious (44%) or

worried (41%) about their money situation, with this number rising for the younger age group (18 to 45 year olds) to over half (55% anxious, 48% worried, 33% angry).xxxv

In Northern Ireland, food bank usage rose sharply in 2020-21 before falling in 2021-22. However, food bank use is still much higher than pre-Covid-19 levels. In 2021-22 as a whole, Trussell Trust provided 61,597 food parcels in Northern Ireland, a third more than the 45,139 provided in 2019-20. ***xxvi**

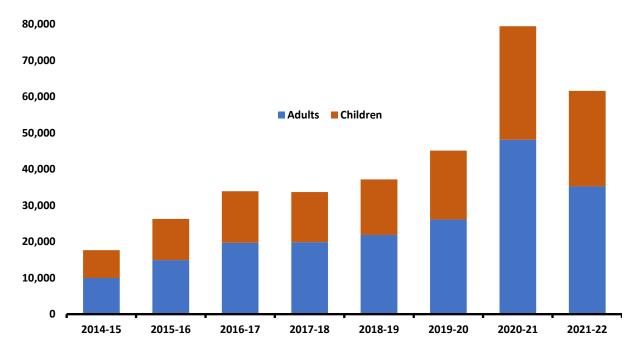


Figure 8: Number of Food Parcels Distributed in Northern Ireland, Trussell Trust

A study by the Trussell Trust and Heriot-Watt University, looked at the circumstances of those who are referred to food banks. They found, of those referred to a food bank in early 2020:

- 86% of households received benefits and 72% of people had faced a 'challenging life experience' in the previous year;
- 51% of households had someone with poor mental health, which rose to 72% in mid-2020. xxxvii

With regards to the latest data, the Trussell Trust said, across the UK as a whole, one in five people using one of its food banks was from a "working household," where either they were working, or someone else they lived with was.xxxviii

10X Metrics

The findings above show that employment is an important economic measure, but also wages / income, all of which can typically be improved with a well-functioning and stable economy. The Department for the Economy's 10X Tier 1 International Metrics have compared Northern Ireland to other small advanced economies from around the world, across a range of indicators. These measures sit under the 10X Pillars of innovation, inclusivity and sustainability. Currently there are a range of metrics, with employment rate,

household disposable income, equality / inequality levels (measured using the Gini Coefficient) and skill level 3+ all included as inclusivity metrics. Tier 2 and Tier 3 metrics sit below the Tier 1 International Metrics. An annual report will provide updated data on the 10X Metrics going forward and offer insights, while specific objectives have been set to improve performance. There is also the opportunity to learn from other countries, including small advanced economies and feed this into policy and decision-making.xl

Conclusion

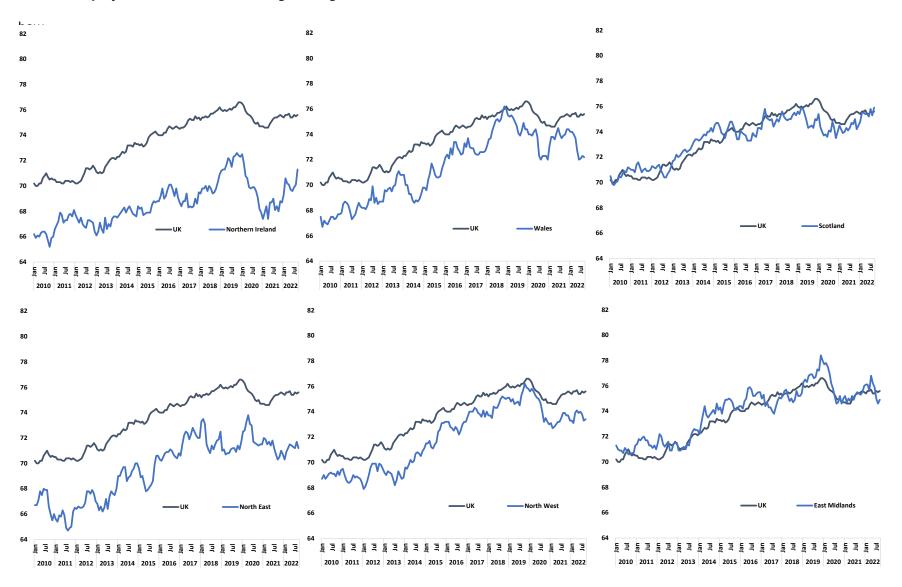
There are grounds for optimism in the latest economic data. GDP data shows a bounce-back in output after 2020 for the UK, with experimental model-based early estimates of regional gross value showing Northern Ireland outperforming a number of other regions. The tourism sector has experienced a much improved 2022, when compared to the two years prior.

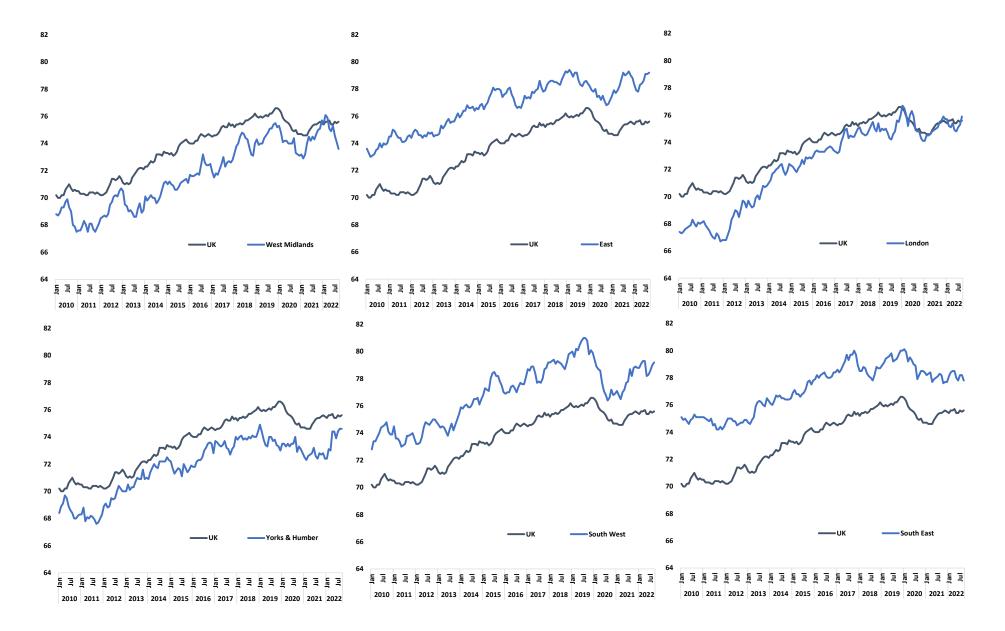
However, while the Northern Ireland economy is continuing its economic recovery, some economic indicators have not yet surpassed pre-Covid-19 levels, especially in the labour market. The economic situation, including current high levels of inflation have affected household budgets and eroded real pay. It will be crucial to continue to track economic performance in Northern Ireland over time, as this is important from both an economic and a societal viewpoint.

Economic Research Branch, Department for the Economy

For further information or queries please e-mail analyticalservices@economy-ni.gov.uk

Annex – Employment Rates (%) for UK Regions, Aged 16 – 64, ONS Data





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¹ The Path of True Recovery Is Never Smooth | Peterson Institute

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Britain's sickness crisis is damaging the economy and will only get worse (telegraph.co.uk)

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- ** COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (google.com)
- xxi September 2022 hotel occupancy survey publications (nisra.gov.uk)
- xxii Northern Ireland Air Passenger Flow Statistics: Quarter 2 (2022) (nisra.gov.uk)
- xxiii Tourism 360° Autumn 2022 (tourismni.com)
- xxiv Fly Atlantic plans transatlantic flights from Belfast International BBC News
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- *** High levels of anxiety and worry across Northern Ireland due to concerns about money
- xxxvi End of Year Stats The Trussell Trust

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