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Economic Inactivity Report 1: Literature, Context and Quantitative Analysis on Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland; And A Review of the Welfare System in relation to Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland

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Understanding the Northern Ireland Post-COVID-19 labour market and
economic inactivity: identifying causes, consequences, and paths forward

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1. Introduction

Economic inactivity has historically been much higher in Northern Ireland (NI) than has been the case in the other UK regions (Devlin, 2022), and is consistently documented as having a negative effect on the NI economy. The literature on economic inactivity in NI is relatively limited, despite it being a well-noted problem. Therefore, increasing the evidence base on inactivity is key to enabling NI policymakers to make policy based on robust academic and up to date research. Timely evidence is particularly important given the recent events which have affected the NI economy namely the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit.

Economically inactive describes those individuals of working-age who are not in the labour force, whether employed or unemployed. The economically inactive population is made up of retirees, students, those who are long-term sick/disabled, those who have left the labour force to look after the home/family and a small proportion who are inactive for other reasons (typically discouraged workers – those who were looking for work for some time but with no success have become discouraged and left the labour force). Given the varied nature of the reasons for inactivity the drivers behind inactivity are multifaceted. For example, ineffective childcare policies are understood to have contributed to the number of people who are inactive (typically impacting mothers who continue to adopt primary care giving responsibilities), while social security policies related to disabilities impact on inactivity on the grounds of sickness/disability (ICTU 2019; Magill and McPeake 2016; Northern Ireland Committee ICTU 2019; Employers for Childcare 2021; Employers for Childcare 2022).

In some countries, including the Republic of Ireland, state policies have eschewed the largely pejorative term ‘inactivity’, preferring instead to focus on more positive conceptions of

‘participation’ (with policies geared to maximising the potential for this; Ballentine et al., 2021). Participation refers to those actively engaged in the labour market, including both employed and unemployed segments of the population (i.e., those working and those looking for work). There is debate that the term ‘economic inactivity’ is inappropriate, undervalues certain activities such as caring (Benoit & Hallgrímsdóttir, 2011; Women’s Budget Group, 2020; Women’s Budget Group, 2022) and has associated negative connotations. The term also fails to account for the limitations faced by segments of the population (e.g., those with disabilities).

Notwithstanding these points the following report utilises the term inactivity due to its continued use in official data sources in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. In the following sections we briefly summarise the literature for different types of inactivity and examine the current state of inactivity in the UK with an emphasis on NI. We begin by examining the headline inactivity rate and then each type of inactivity is dealt with individually given the heterogeneity between inactivity forms. Finally, we examine differences based on gender and age etc. and how inactivity may have changed post-pandemic.

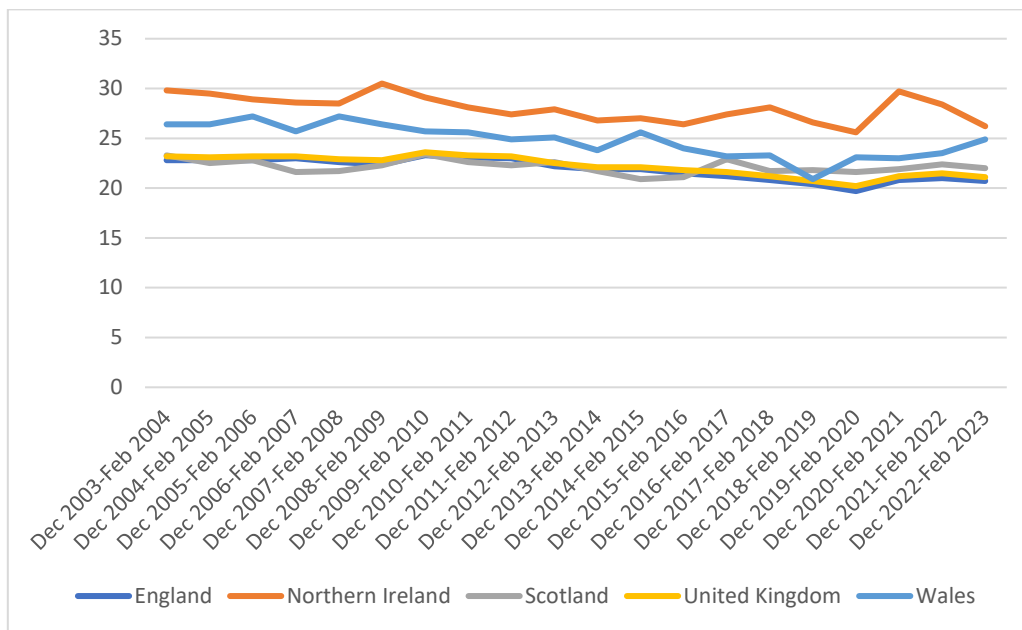
2. Economic Inactivity in NI

This report is based primarily on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to examine rates of inactivity in NI, reasons for inactivity and details of the individual.

As shown in Figure 1, economic inactivity is much higher in NI than the other constituent countries of the UK. Annual data for 2021 found NI to have an inactivity rate of 28.7% compared to 21.3% for the UK as a whole. For April 2023 to June 2023 there were 310,997 people inactive in Northern Ireland. This compared to 7,150,896 million people in England, 779,281 in Scotland and 451,660 in Wales. Inactivity in the other UK countries has trended

down consistently in the last 30 years while it has been stagnant in NI. Indeed, in 2001 inactivity in Wales was only 0.8 percentage points lower than that of NI – the gap in 2021 was 5.7 percentage points.

Figure 1: Economic inactivity, UK Constituent Countries, December 2003-February 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office of National Statistics (ONS)

Notes: Economic inactivity rates are for those aged 16-64 and are seasonally adjusted.

Of even more importance is what inactivity looks like when broken by reason (Figure 2). For example, students are less concerning to policymakers as they are investing in their human capital with a view to entering the labour market in the future. Those who are long-term sick or disabled on the other hand are less likely to enter the labour force especially if they are older (ONS, 2022a). The economic inactivity rate in NI has a large proportion of people who are inactive on the grounds of long-term sickness/disability. It isn't much larger than Scotland or Wales, but NI also has a younger population (ONS, 2022b), but is significantly larger than is the case in England. That NI has a younger population may lead one to believe overall population health should be better and there should be a lower prevalence of disability given

the known link between age and disability. NI surprisingly has a lower proportion of people who are inactive due to caring responsibilities despite poorer childcare provision, this may be due to people reducing hours rather than exiting the labour market completely (while men in NI work longer hours than the UK average women in NI work less (ASHE, 2022)) or may be due to more informal childcare being used (Family and Childcare Trust, 2016).

Figure 2: Economic inactivity by reason, 16-64 years



Notes: Proportion of those inactive by reason for inactivity.

Source: ONS, author's calculations. Data for July 2021 – June 2022.

While normally we look at inactivity as a proportion of the population or working age population it may also be worthwhile considering the scale of the inactive population. Table 1 shows the number of people inactive in each of the UK constituent countries both pre and post pandemic. There were 13,759 more people inactive in Q2 2023 than was the case in the same quarter in 2019. This may be due to the pandemic, but it also may be due to an increase

in the number of people of working age or reflective of macroeconomic changes over the same period.

Table 1. Number of working age people who are economically inactive

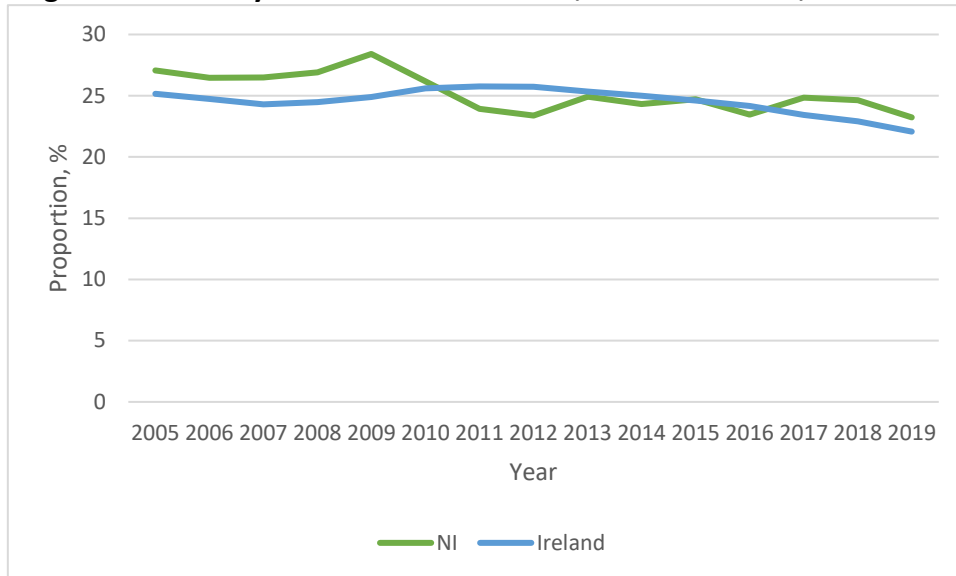
	<i>Pre-pandemic (Q2 2019)</i>	<i>Post-pandemic (Q2 2023)</i>	<i>Change</i>
<i>UK</i>	8,562,450	8,692,834	+130,384
<i>England</i>	7,103,308	7,150,896	+47,588
<i>Scotland</i>	744,982	779,281	+34,299
<i>Wales</i>	416,922	451,660	+34,738
<i>NI</i>	297,238	310,997	+13,759

Source: Labour Force Survey

While it is standard to compare NI to the rest of the UK and data sources allow for such a comparison across the devolved UK nations and external factors are broadly, but not always, consistent between the UK countries. Comparisons can also be made with other jurisdictions though findings require that thought be given to the contrasting social policies, social security systems and education systems in place (amongst other things). Figure 3 shows economic inactivity in Ireland and NI, both using their respective Labour Force Surveys. The economic inactivity rate in Ireland is very similar to that of NI and has been since the Great Financial Crash. As of 2019, inactivity in NI for 20–64-year-olds¹ was 23% compared to 22% in Ireland.

¹ Given the number of students who remain in full-time education it is standard in Ireland to consider working age to be 20-64 year olds rather than 18-64 year olds as is the case in the UK.

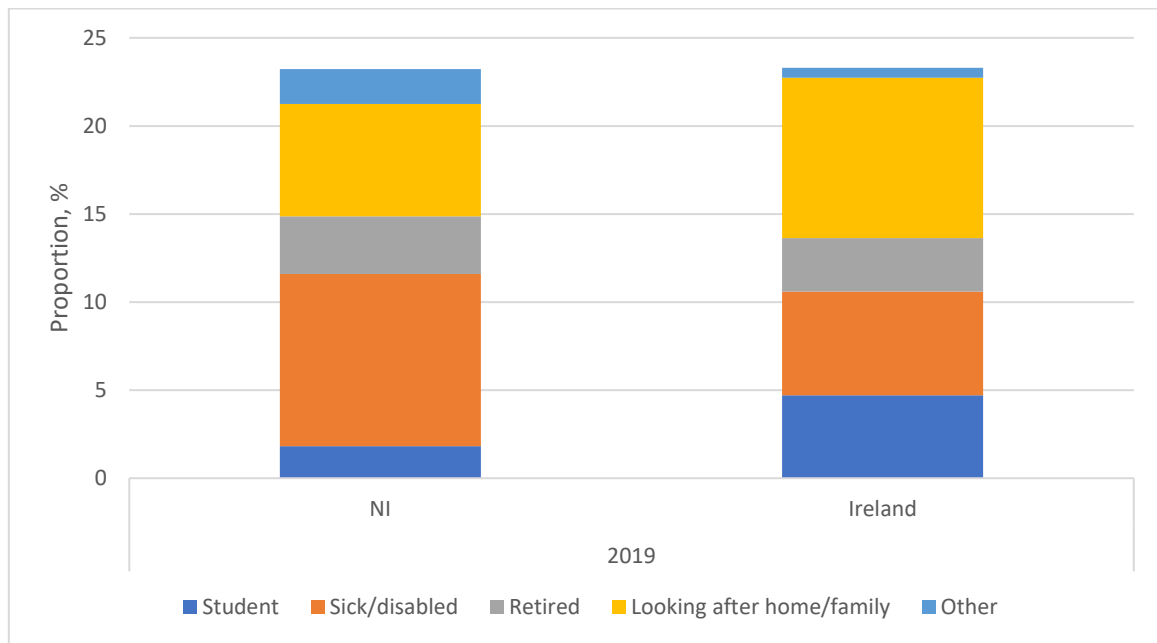
Figure 3: Inactivity Rates in NI and Ireland, 20-64 Year Olds, 2005-2019



Source: ONS, author's calculations for NI. CSO, author's calculation for Ireland.

Despite the similar rate of overall inactivity in both jurisdictions there are significant differences in the makeup of that inactivity. Figure 4 shows the reasons for inactivity in NI and Ireland in 2019. The rate in NI is driven by a large proportion of individuals who are long-term sick/disabled while Ireland has much higher rates of people who are studying and more who have caring responsibilities. That there are a high number of students in Ireland compared to NI is in line with recent studies of education in NI and Ireland (Smyth et al., 2022; Devlin et al., 2023). The proportion with caring responsibilities in Ireland may be reflective of the difficulty in securing childcare particularly for children under 1 in Ireland (Curristan et al., 2023).

Figure 4: Economic inactivity by Reason, NI and Ireland, 20-64 Years



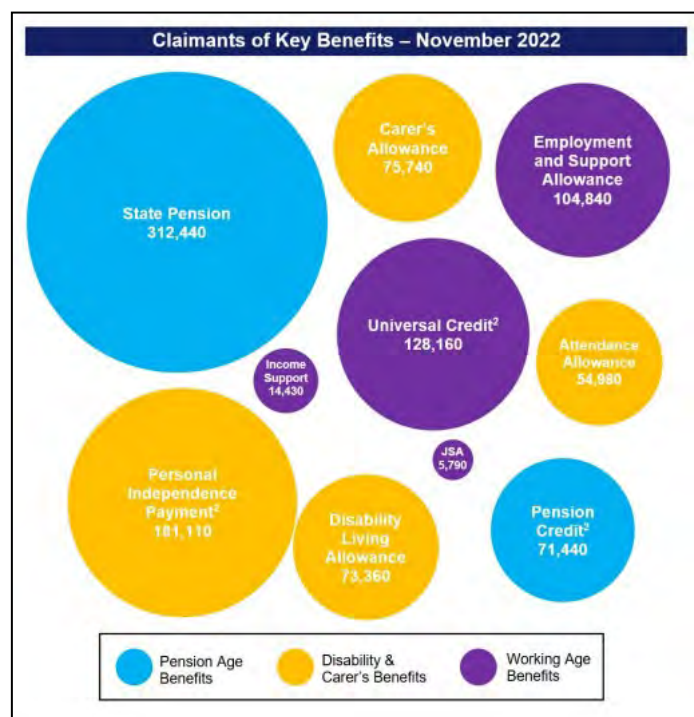
Source: ONS, author's calculations for NI. CSO, author's calculation for Ireland. Data for the calendar year 2019.

3. Forms of inactivity – Literature and Descriptive Analysis

3.1 Inactive due to sickness/disability

Before examining inactivity due to long-term sickness/disability, it is instructive to briefly consider a breakdown of key benefit statistics in Northern Ireland. Of special interest here in relation to inactivity due to sickness/disability are the figures for Disability and Carer's Benefits in Northern Ireland, wherein the majority of claimants are female and working age (65% female compared to 35% male in the case of Carer's Allowance; of all claimants in this category 70% or 52,960 people were of working age).

Figure 5: Claimants of Key Benefits – November 2022



Source: [NI Benefits Statistics Summary - November 2022 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk)

Reducing the proportion of individuals who are inactive due to long-term sickness/disability has, for some time, been an aim of the NI Executive. NI has higher rates of disability regardless of how disability is measured. The Department for Communities (who have responsibility for issues affecting people with disabilities) states that one in five of the NI population have a disability of some kind (DfC, 2023). The 2021 Census found that 24% of the NI population report being limited in their day-to-day activities either 'a little' or 'a lot'. This compares to 17% and 22% respectively in England and Wales². The gap is much larger when we look at disability benefit receipt, at its peak in 2016, 11% of people in NI were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

Not only do we have a higher prevalence of disability in NI but we also have worse outcomes for people with disabilities particularly when it comes to the labour market. Notably, NI has

² The Census in Scotland was not conducted until 2022 and results are yet to be released.

the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities, the highest economic inactivity rate for people with disabilities and the highest disability pay gap of the 4 UK countries ([DfC, 2022](#)). Individuals with disabilities are also more likely to live in poverty than their peers who do not have disabilities ([Disability Rights UK, 2020](#)).

International case studies on disability rates suggest that disability rates are driven by the strength of local labour markets, with health a secondary determinant (Duggan & Imberman, 2009; Benítez-Silva et al., 2010). Devlin et al. (2023) found that this relationship doesn't hold in NI. Examining self-reported measures of limitations and self-reported receipt of disability-related social security they found that the high rates of activity limiting disability³ in NI can be explained by the labour market and health, but not for three other measures (work limiting disability⁴, Employment Support Allowance (ESA) receipt⁵ and DLA receipt⁶). The high rates of DLA at the time were found to be unexplainable by health or labour market strength, the authors believe this can be potentially explained by higher levels of deprivation in NI, a legacy from the NI conflict, and underreporting of benefit receipt in England.

In Figure 6, the proportion of the working age population who are inactive due to long-term sickness or disability is plotted over time. What is particularly concerning about this group is that in NI, but also in Scotland and Wales, it has been increasing in recent years. The lowest rate of those inactive due to sickness/disability was following the Great Financial Crash. Despite the three regions seeing increases since 2012 these have been largest in NI. Inactivity

³ Activity limiting disability is when individuals' ability to carry out daily activities are hampered by a long-term illness or disability.

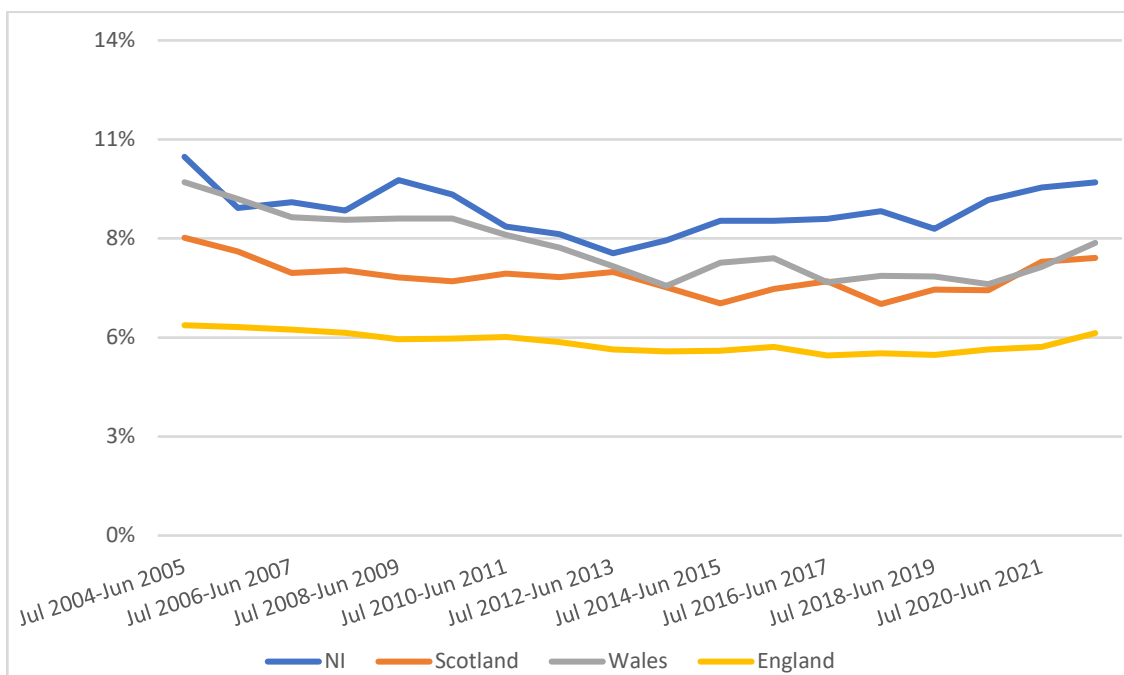
⁴ Work limiting disability is when individuals are hampered in the amount or type of work they can do by a long-term sickness or disability.

⁵ A social security payment designed to replace income for individuals unable to work due to sickness/disability. Also includes Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) and Incapacity Benefit (IB) which preceded ESA.

⁶ A social security payment designed to cover the additional costs which can be incurred due to living with a disability. DLA has since been replaced with the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) for most claimants.

due to sickness/disability amongst the working age population in NI has increased by 25% from 2012/2013 to 2021/2022, while corresponding increases for Scotland, Wales and England were just 5.3%, 8.8% and 8.8% respectively. Analysis of more specific age bands reveal the largest increases amongst the youngest age band in NI (16-24 years) and the oldest age band (50-64 years). That inactivity due to long-term sickness/disability is increasing amongst the youngest people of working age may be cause for concern. The scarring effects of non-employment particularly at younger ages is well documented.

Figure 6: Proportion of the working age population who are inactive on the grounds of sickness or disability, July 2004-June 2021



Source: Authors own using ONS data

The most recently available data (covering 12 months until March 2023) shows there to be 115,500 people inactive in NI due to sickness/disability. Not surprisingly there is a clear age gradient associated with this. There are 6,100 people inactive on the grounds of sickness/disabled who are aged between 16 and 24, 43,400 people aged between 25 and 49, and 65,900 people aged between 50 and 64. This is also displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Number of people inactive in NI by reason and by age group, April 2022-March 2023

	Age Group			
	16-64 Years	16-24 Years	25-49 Years	50-64 Years
Student	82,300	78,100	4,000	0
Looking after home/family	51,200	1,500	32,700	17,000
Sick/Disabled	115,500	6,100	43,400	65,900
Retired	33,500	0	800	32,800
Other	20,800	4,300	9,400	6,800
Total	303,300	90,000	90,400	122,900

Source: Authors own, using ONS data

Notes: Due to disclosivity some small numbers have been reported as zero so rows and columns may not total as expected.

3.2 Inactive due to retirement

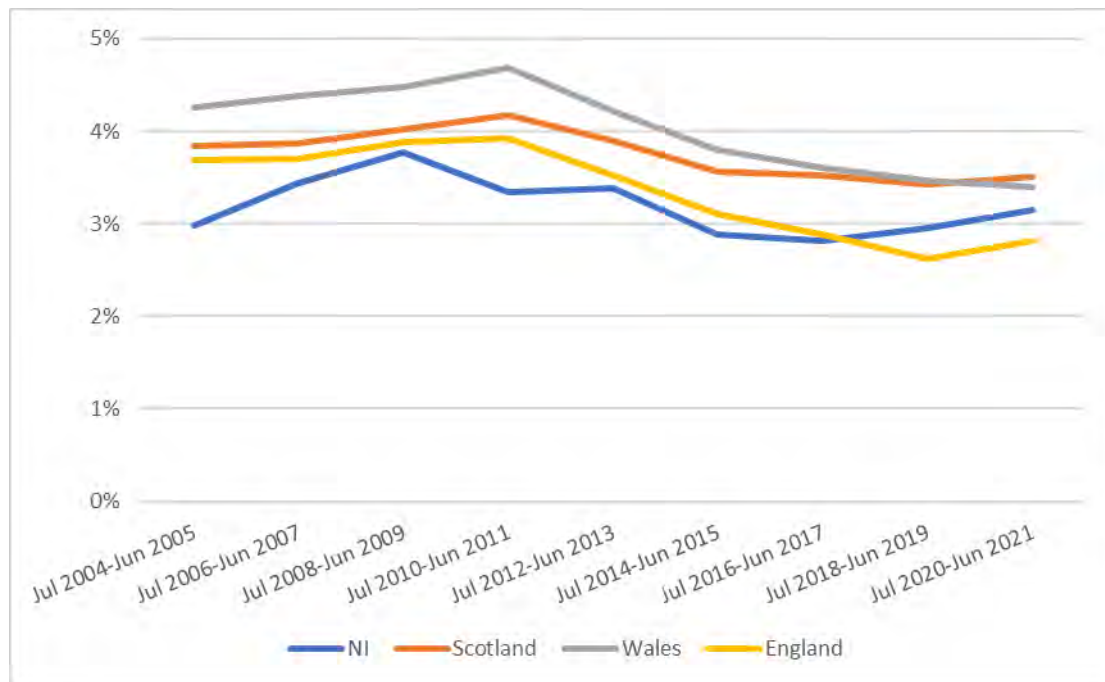
The literature in this area is complex and there are many reasons for retiring before the normal retirement age (NRA). Traditional economic theory suggests that retirement is a labour supply decision with individuals constrained by the number of hours in a time period seeking to maximise their utility by either working to earn income or retiring to benefit from leisure time. On this basis, the decision depends on the value given to leisure time by the individual, the opportunity cost of leisure (i.e., income), other income sources, and future expectations. However, this is a simplification of the decision-making process and in particular down plays the importance on non-financial variables such as caring responsibilities or social norms. There is a growing literature which looks at how retirement is changing. There is a shift away from the traditional retirement transition of moving from employment to inactive but now individuals have been known to 'unretire', that is retire and then go back to work (Platts at al., 2017), undertake 'bridge employment' whereby they move from one job (normally a long-term or career job) to another job which is less taxing in some way before retiring (Beehr & Bennett, 2015), or people have being known to wind-down to retirement by cutting their hours as they get closer to retirement (Centre for Ageing Better, 2018). These changes to retirement also mean that it can be hard for respondents in surveys to identify as one particular discrete category, with working age people now potentially being retired (in that they have left a job and are collecting an occupational pension) and also in employment. This is particularly likely in certain occupations which offer flexible working patterns e.g., nursing (Kaewpan & Peltzer, 2019). Caring responsibilities are another important driver of retirement and not surprisingly this is mostly the case for women. Women nearing retirement age are more likely to retire when they have grandchildren (Lumsdaine & Vermeer, 2015).

While sources on caring responsibilities are hard to come by recent work has found families in NI utilise informal childcare and care by family much more than families in neighbouring Ireland (Curristan et al., 2023). Furthermore, in NI there are concerns around the increase in the proportion of women who due to childbirth being later and people living longer are now part of the sandwich generation and are caring for both dependent children as well as older parents/other relatives (McKenna, 2017). It is currently unclear whether and how experiences from COVID-19 may work to encourage higher rates of early retirement in the upcoming years.

As the population continues to age and the UK government attempts to cut social spending, reducing retirement before the NRA is a key policy objective. The government now encourages active ageing with continued labour force participation an important aspect of this. A key objective of this research entails generating a stronger understanding of whether/how the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to higher rates of early retirement and other sources of inactivity.

Figure 7 shows the proportion of the working age population who are inactive as they are retirees. The trends are relatively similar in all regions. Again, there have been falls in the proportion of working age people who are inactive due to retirement following the Great Financial Crash. However, there appears to have been slight upticks in recent years at least in England and NI which may suggest a change during the pandemic.

Figure 7: Proportion of the working age population who are inactive on the grounds of retirement, July 2004-June 2021



Source: ONS, author's calculations.

For the year ending March 2023, there were 33,500 people who were retired in NI. The large majority of these, 32,800 people, were aged 50-64. There were an additional 800 people aged 25-49 years who were retired. Not surprisingly, no younger people reported as retired.

3.3 Inactive due to being a student

In policy terms, inactivity due to training in education has prospective benefits for human capital development and a future job at the higher end of the labour market. A key determinant of investing in education, it may be argued, is thus returns from education that will be gained over the life course from the skills or qualification gained. In the UK, there is clear empirical evidence that university qualifications lead to higher incomes (Blundell et al., 2004; Department for Education, 2017). However, again this is an oversimplification with many other factors likely to influence the decision such as social background, confidence,

availability of financial support, caring responsibilities. It is worth noting that in NI some of these factors are particularly important, social background plays a much bigger role in students' educational attainment than is seen in neighbouring Ireland (Devlin et al., 2023).

Despite education being seen as human capital development and individuals with more education being seen as future contributors to the economy, it is worth noting the specifics with regards NI. The brain-drain whereby students go to GB to study often staying there for employment is often cited as a concern for the NI economy (Pivotal, 2021). However, upon closer examination of the data this may be exaggerated. Looking at a regional breakdown rather than UK country breakdown a very different story emerges. 75% of NI students study in their home region, behind only Scotland whereby 94% of students study in the region they are from (in Scotland, this situation is complicated by the presence of free tuition for Scottish school leavers). While 96% of English students remain in England much less remain in the same region. The proportion of students who remain in their home region in England for study ranges between 36% and 69%. Table 1 shows the proportion of students who study in their home region.

Table 3: Enrolment flows outside home domicile by country and region, 2020/2021

Location of Domicile	% Enrolled at HEI within domicile	% Enrolled at HEI outside domicile	Total enrolments
North East	69%	31%	71,680
North West	64%	36%	217,620
Yorkshire and The Humber	60%	40%	147,930
East Midlands	50%	50%	133,765
West Midlands	56%	44%	187,105
East of England	36%	64%	180,930
London	53%	47%	395,505
South East	38%	62%	262,200
South West	51%	49%	152,565
England	96%	4%	1,749,295
Wales	69%	31%	110,380
Scotland	94%	6%	191,265
Northern Ireland	75%	25%	65,545

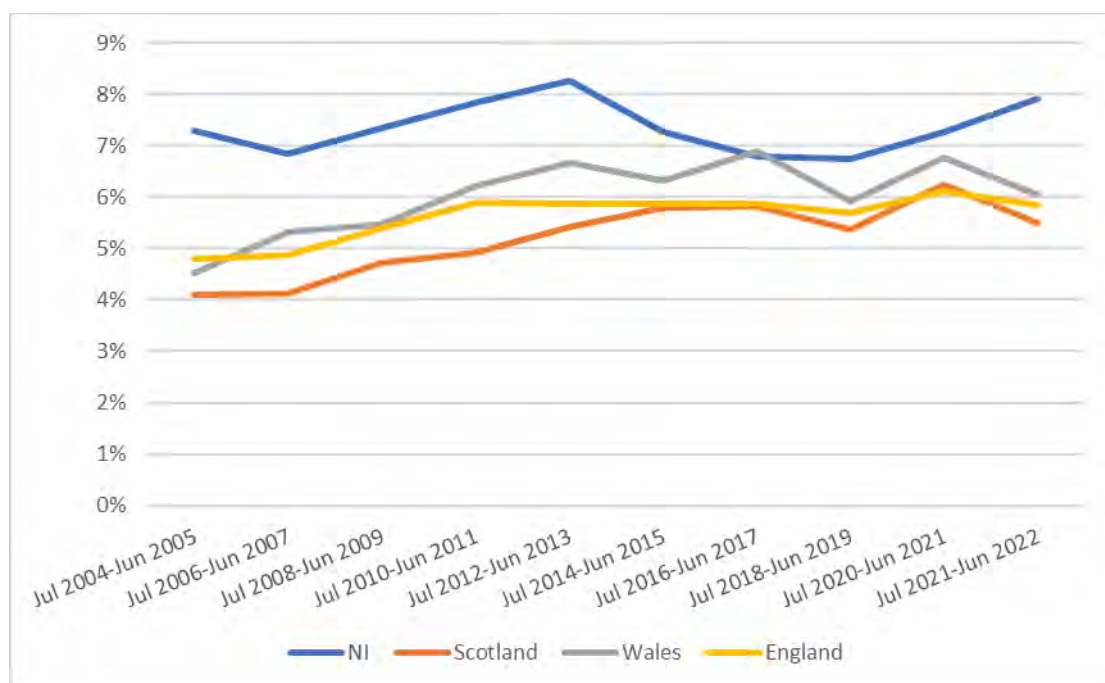
Source: [Higher Education ad-hoc tables \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/higher-education-ad-hoc-tables)

There are also concerns around those who remain in NI to study before leaving for better job opportunities. A prime example being teachers, with many from NI upon completion of their studies going to the Middle East or Australia to work albeit usually temporarily. Bergin and McGuinness (2022) argue that education levels in NI have increased yet productivity levels have fallen significantly over the past two decades which raises questions about job quality in NI. At present there is no evidence as to what exactly might be the problem it could be a reflection of the sectoral make-up of the job market, particularly for graduates e.g., graduates working in call centres, or some other aspects reflective of job quality. Therefore, high levels

of inactivity due to studying may not be as beneficial in the long-term to the NI economy as it might be in other jurisdictions.

Figure 8 shows the proportion of the working age population who have been inactive as they are students over time. NI is different from the rest of the UK in that it has been relatively constant at between 7 and 8% of the working age population. In England, Scotland, and Wales there are clear upward trends over time in the proportion of students. This has led to convergence with NI over the last 20 or so years, this is interesting given that NI has average levels of educational attainment (Smyth et al., 2022). Interestingly, the proportion of those inactive as they are studying increased in the pandemic period in NI while the opposite was true for the other UK regions.

Figure 8: Proportion of the working age population who are inactive on the grounds of being a student, July 2004-June 2022



Source: ONS, author's calculations.

For the year ending March 2023, there were 82,300 students in NI. Again a age gradient is evident although in the opposite direction. 78,100 people aged 16-24 were studying and 4000 people aged 25-49. There were no students amongst the over 50 cohort.

3.4 Inactive due to looking after the home/family

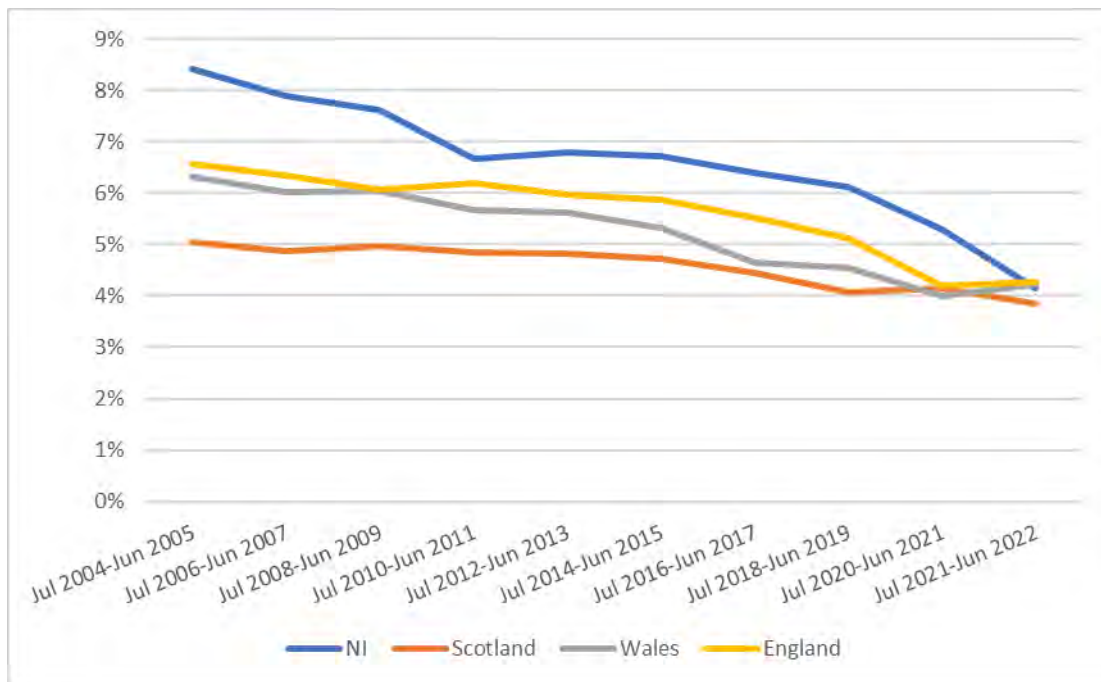
Despite heightened awareness of gender imbalances in society, it remains the case that caring responsibilities are largely performed by women. While there have been significant increases in female labour force participation over the last two decades it remains that women still perform the majority of childcare, other care (e.g., older relatives), and household tasks. Within this picture a range of life circumstances and socio-economic factors influence decisions to stay at home. For example, situations include parents/family members perhaps with lower levels of educational attainment for whom working is deemed not economically feasible when they weigh up potential income earned against costs associated with going to work, particularly when there is a lack of affordable childcare (PwC, 2023). These are likely to be people who are sole parents or perhaps the other parent is on a lower income as well. On the other end, women in families with the primary income earner is on a high wage may find they can afford to stay at home particularly while children are young. Other individuals may choose to reduce their hours at work (e.g., perhaps working part-time rather than full-time), or may opt to undertake low-paying, more flexible work to fit around their non-work responsibilities (i.e., underemployed). Between July 2020 and June 2021, 64% of female employees worked full-time and while this has increased over time it is still less than the same figure for men (89%) (NISRA, 2022). In terms of work quality indicators, gender gaps are quite small with the exception of flexible working, career progression and earnings above the real living wage. In 2021, 61% of females reported flexible working compared to 42% of men

(NISRA, 2022) Simultaneously, female employees were less likely to report career progression opportunities (49% vs 58%) and earnings above the real living wage (76% vs 81%) It also possible in a bid to fit work around unpaid caring responsibilities people (more than likely female) may undertake employment in the informal economy.

Figure 9 shows the proportion of the working age population who are inactive as they are looking after the home or family. While this was much more common in NI in 2004/2005 than in other UK regions this has diverged considerably over time, as of 2021/2022 the rate was nearly identical in all 4 constituent countries of the UK. It is particularly interesting that NI has seen such a large fall in the proportion of working age individuals who are not in the labour force due to caring responsibilities given that childcare provision is less in NI than in other UK countries. This may reflect differences in how children are cared for while their primary caregivers are at work. Data suggests NI families use more informal care than is the case in England, Scotland, and Wales (Family and Childcare Trust, 2016). In particular, given the geographical proximity within NI it is likely that people are able to benefit from childcare from family members, e.g., grandparents, that may not be the case to the same extent in other UK countries.

A further explanation may be that women have entered the labour market in part-time roles. Average hours worked in NI amongst women are the lowest of all UK constituent countries despite men on average in NI working more than their counterparts in neighbouring jurisdictions (ASHE, 2022).

Figure 9: Proportion of the working age population who are inactive on the grounds of looking after home/family, July 2004-June 2022



Source: ONS, author's calculations.

The data for the year ending March 2023 shows there to have been 51,200 people in NI who were inactive due to looking after the home/family. 1,500 of these were in the youngest age group, 32,700 were aged 25-49 and 17,000 were aged 50-64. It is unclear in the data whether these people are looking after children/grandchildren or whether they are undertaking eldercare. It is likely that for some people they are doing both.

3.5 Inactivity and the impact of COVID-19

Outside of the above factors, there remains considerable debate over the impact of Covid-19 on economic inactivity following patterns of enforced home working, sustained lockdown periods and the introduction of furlough schemes at the heights of the pandemic (Marks, 2022; Sull et al., 2022; Tessema et al., 2022). Since this period, terms such as 'Quiet Quitting'

and 'The Great Resignation' have been propelled by social media, referring to alleged trends wherein workers have chosen to leave or change jobs due to attitudinal changes in the context of the pandemic. Investigation of this claimed trend is ongoing (and indeed, such narratives have partly informed the current research project), Marks' work in this area found only mixed indicators for a 'Great Resignation', suggesting only a small increase in pre-pandemic people resigning from work. Of interest, however, Marks observed one group of workers as more likely to leave the workforce and not return (Marks 2022: 410):

'This group of workers are the over 50s or more precisely the 50–70-year-olds. The ONS (March 2022) reported that for those aged over 50, there was the largest increase in workforce inactivity since records began in 1971. This move to labour force inactivity has been predominantly for men in professional occupations or men who were self-employed.'

The main reason for this departing group is undoubtedly retirement, with some due to ill health, both potentially due to COVID-19. Attitudinal changes during the pandemic may also have affected older workers differently, forcing them to reconsider how they value leisure time as they near retirement. Marks also suggested an 'asset boom' may have further encouraged early departures from work thus making retirement a more attractive option (Choonara, 2022).

Given that inactivity rates have nearly reached pre-pandemic levels in NI it is unlikely that any of these concerns are significantly impacting labour force participation in the NI economy. This is examined more formally in our econometric analysis.

3.6 Inactivity and the Informal Economy

There is limited research on the informal economy as either an alternative or addition to work in the formal sector in Northern Ireland. This omission represents a substantive gap, for, as

Leonard (2000) notes drawing on a past study on Belfast, 'to focus (solely) on the formal economy and formal employment statistics as measures of the economic vitality of any society is to ignore the heterogeneity of forms of work outside formal employment and to undermine the continued economic importance of kinship, friendship, and community ties' (pg. 1069). Based on empirical work (with a community in West Belfast in the 1990s) Leonard found kinship between neighbours within localities especially important during times of economic distress, arguing that reciprocal favours between neighbours was a common feature of social reproduction within low-income community 'where resources for satisfying needs in other ways are low' (pg. 1074).

Hidden forms of self-employment and informal labour remain unrecorded, and areas such as West Belfast have long been known to involve forms of entrepreneurship involving little capital, basic technology, and skills to generate small, irregular incomes. In her own study, Leonard found these activities commonly resulted in goods and services needed for daily needs of low-income households. As part of this research, Leonard encouraged caution when interpreting the 'entrepreneurial' activities in the informal economy, suggesting much informal work and pseudo entrepreneurship was at risk of being romanticised, particularly forms of disguised labour channelled into larger (formal) supply chains (e.g., in garment making). This latter trend is significant in relation to the moral acceptability of informal work. For instance, research by Williams and Horodnic (2016) has examined the relationship between the informal economy and what the authors term 'tax morale' (in this reading, the lower the 'tax morale', the greater likelihood one will take part in the informal economy),

observing that UK populations are more tolerant of individuals rather than larger firms which take part in informal work⁷.

Paramilitary activity and drugs

Other research into old industrial cities and labour markets with high rates of poverty (e.g., Glasgow, London; Smith 2005) have examined coping practices of poor communities, including the influence of criminal gangs (Cumbers et al. 2010; Boland et al. 2020a; Boland et al. 2020b). Observations have commonly focussed on impacts on younger segments of the community, noting those lured into drug-related and other criminal activities via organised groups commonly engage due to limited alternative options and the reward of higher incomes compared to low-end formal economy work. Boland et al. (2020) have observed that this latter form of ‘hidden employment’ may also be read ‘as a form of community resilience in revealing how certain local people cope with economic turbulence, i.e., ‘shocks/jolts/triggers’ such as structural decline, absence of investment and lack of jobs.’ (Boland et al., 2020a). In terms of employment within the illegal drugs industry, the same author argues that conventional economic indicators fail to account for ‘hidden employment’, including activities linked to the illegal drugs economy and what they term ‘drug paramilitarism’ (Boland et al., 2020b). However, the drugs economy is interpreted, the continued presence of paramilitary organisations (who provide informal regulation roles as well as illegal enterprise) represents a distinct challenge for working class urban communities in particular, and reportedly affect between 15 and 30% of Northern Ireland’s total population (Guardian, 2023). In relation to the current cost of living crisis paramilitaries have been reported as targeting people at food

⁷ However, the authors note an exception ‘is those claiming benefits without entitlement, such as whilst working informally. This is the most unacceptable of all behaviours’, arguing that ‘such individuals are here viewed as “taking our money” rather than seeking to “keep their own money” (pg. 728).

banks and in receipt of universal credit, placing pressure on vulnerable residents to comply with illegal loan sharks, which may increase the risk of continued involvement in informal activities as a means of repaying debts.

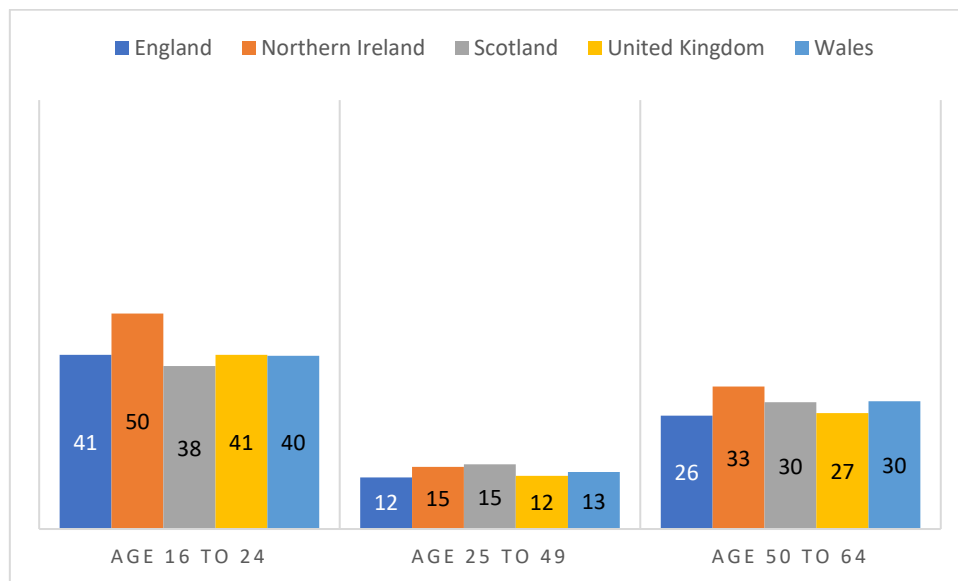
4. Additional Descriptive Analysis

4.1 Age

There is value in examining inactivity across the UK broken down into broad age bands given there is likely to be considerable differences in inactivity based on age. We look at three age categories: 16-24 years, 25-49 years, and 50-64 years. The rates of inactivity and the make-up differ considerably over these age groups. Rates are high for the youngest group mainly driven by students; they are then lowest for those aged 25-49 before increasing again for the older working-age people due to retirement and sickness/disability. The most recent data for NI (April 2021-March 2022) finds 50% of the younger group are inactive compared to 15% of those 25-49 years and 33% of the older group. This is shown alongside the other UK countries and the UK average in Figure 10. The rate in NI is particularly high amongst the younger group with the rate in NI being 9 percentage points higher than the UK average. Despite Scotland having a strong education system and large number of graduates inactivity at this age group in Scotland is much lower than NI at 38%⁸. There isn't much difference for the middle age group with rates between 12 and 15% for all countries. And then for older working age people the rate is much higher in NI at 33% compared to a UK average of 27%.

⁸ It is worth noting that students in Scotland can start university at 17 but given that most degree programmes in Scotland are 4 years and the majority start university at 18 despite the option of an earlier start we believe this not to impact our comparisons in any meaningful way.

**Figure 10: Inactivity Rates by Age Group in constituent countries and the UK, April 2021-
March 2022**

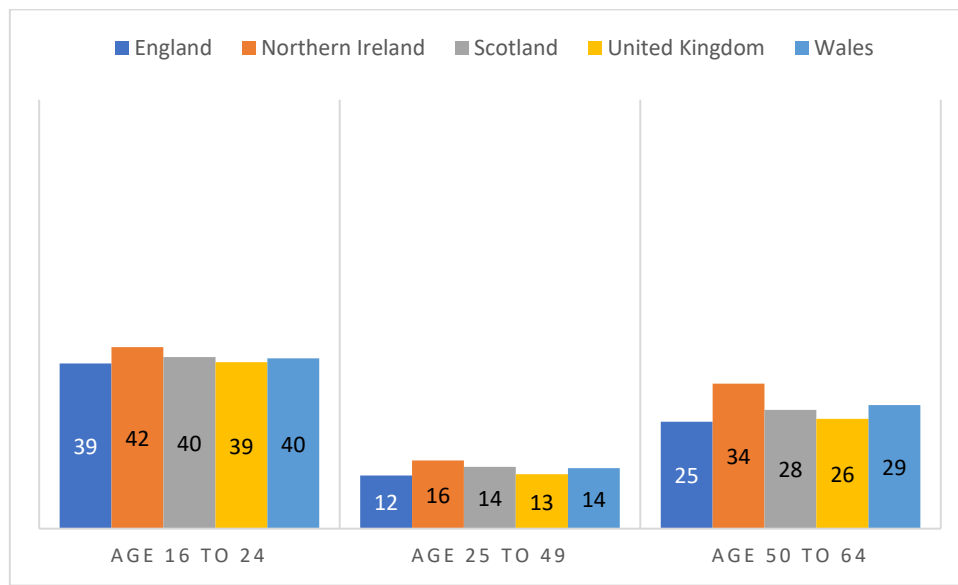


Source: ONS, author's calculations.

It is possible that inactivity by age could be impacted by the pandemic particularly as student numbers jumped in many universities at the time. Below, Figure 11, we look at economic inactivity by age group in the year prior to the pandemic (April 2019-March 2020). The only clear difference is that prior to the pandemic NI had a much lower inactivity rate amongst the younger group than it does in the most recent data. For data up to March 2023 50% of young people were inactive, for data prior to the pandemic it was 42%, a considerable jump in two years. It is possible this is driven by higher numbers of young people in education, but other factors may also be at play. For example, the COSMO study found young people in England have been affected in a multitude of ways by the pandemic with disproportionate impacts felt by those in disadvantaged communities (COSMO, 2023). Similar findings have been found in Ireland through the Growing Up in Ireland study (Smyth & Murray, 2022). Without similar

data available in NI it is hard to prove but it is likely the same effects have been seen in NI (NICVA, 2020).

Figure 11: Inactivity Rates by Age Group in constituent countries and the UK, April 2019-March 2020

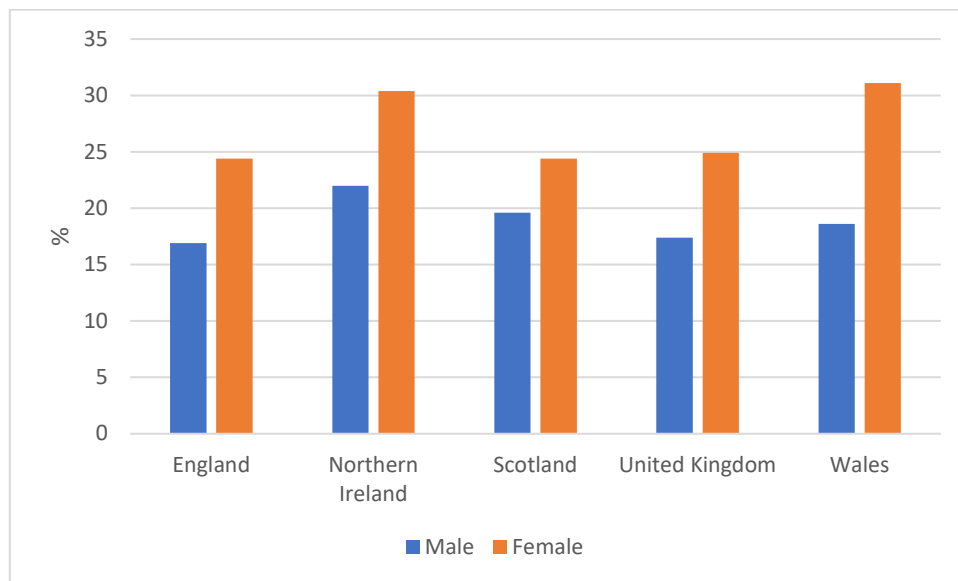


Source: ONS, author's calculations.

4.2 Gender

Not surprisingly, there are considerable differences between men and women in terms of inactivity rates. Inactivity rates are higher amongst women. Data from the Labour Force Survey for Jan 2023 – March 2023 finds that 22% of men are inactive in NI compared to 30% of women. Figure 12 shows the regional inactivity rates by gender for the same time period. Some constituent countries have larger gender differences than others, the female inactivity rate, for example, in Wales is 1.67 times the male rate. Scotland and NI have significantly lower gender differences with the female: male ratio 1.24 and 1.38 respectively. Scotland's gender gap is much smaller than Wales due to low female inactivity in Scotland while the lower gap in NI is driven by higher male inactivity.

Figure 12: Inactivity rates (%) for the constituent countries and the UK by Gender, Jan 2023-March 2023



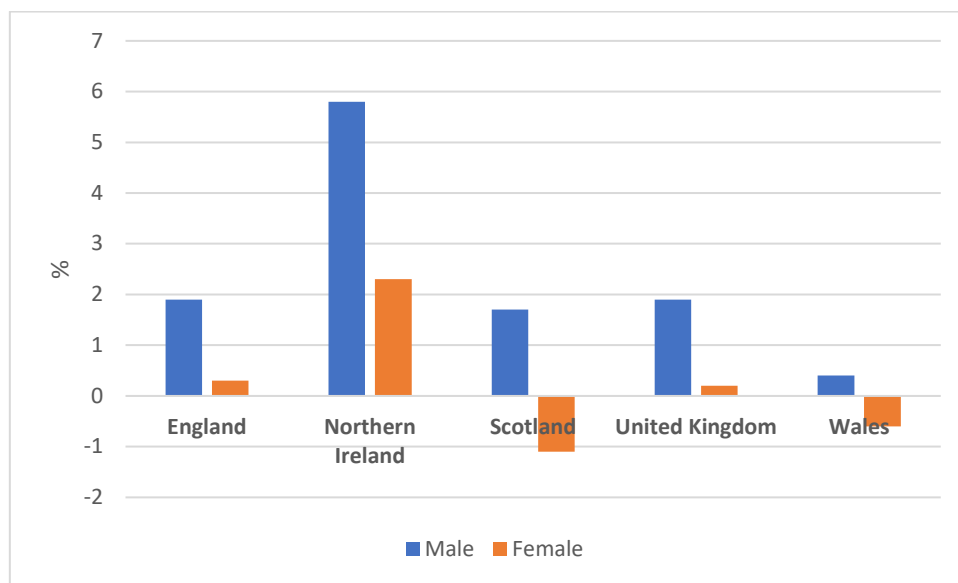
Source: ONS, author's calculations.

In 3 of the 4 constituent countries economic inactivity rates changed over the first year of the pandemic with the increase much larger in NI than other countries using quarterly data up to February for 2020 and 2021 (4% vs 1.1%, 0.3% and 1%). This has been driven by particularly large increases in long-term sickness and students in NI over the course of the pandemic. These changes were not mirrored to the same extent in other UK countries. However, while NI seen the sharpest increase in inactivity due to the pandemic this later fell.

There are also significant regional gender differences in terms of economic inactivity and the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, economic inactivity increased by much more for men than was the case for women. This is shown in Figure 13. Increases were seen across the board but to a much greater extent in NI where inactivity increased by 5.8 percent over the year to Dec 2020-Feb 2021. In the other countries the change was less than half that. For females the change was much smaller and in fact in Scotland and Wales the inactivity rate for

females fell over the first year of the pandemic. This is interesting given the concerns that females bore the burden of care and home-education through the pandemic (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021).

Figure 13: Year-on-year changes in inactivity for the constituent countries and UK by Gender, Dec 2020-Feb 2021

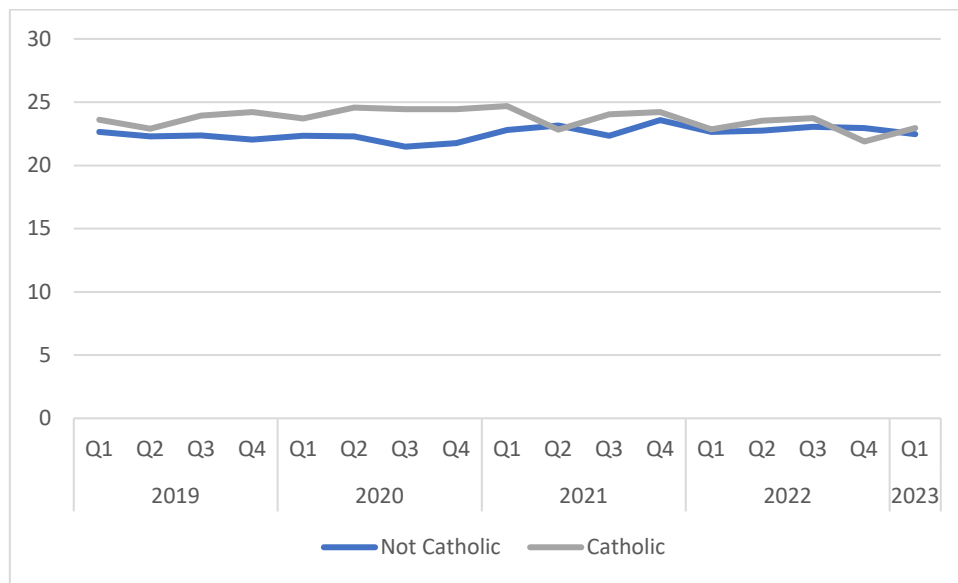


Source: ONS, author's calculations.

4.3 Religion

In the NI context it would be amiss to not examine the inactivity rate by religion. Particularly given the historic labour market differentials between Catholics and Protestants (Rowland et al., 2022). Figure 14 shows the economic inactivity rate by religion over the last 4 years. Individuals are grouped as either Catholic or Not Catholic, which groups together all Protestant denominations and other religions. Interestingly, there was some divergence over the pandemic period with the inactivity rate amongst Catholics growing slightly. This has diverged again in the aftermath of the pandemic with there being no religious differences obvious in inactivity.

Figure 14: Economic Inactivity Rate in NI by Religion, 2019-2023



Source: Labour Force Survey

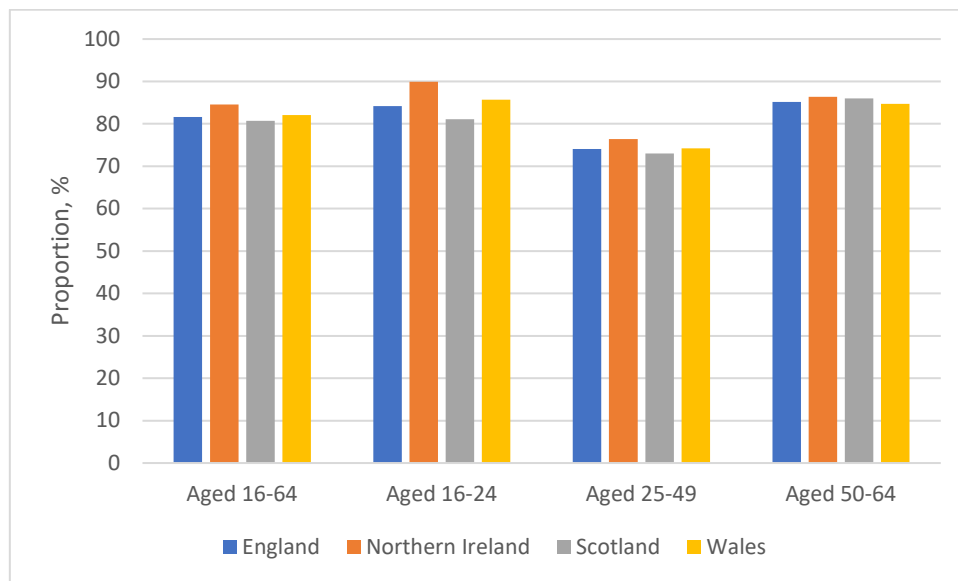
4.4 Want a job?

We can also examine those who are inactive who want a job and those who do not want a job. It is worth noting that as these individuals are inactive they are not looking for a job (which would make them unemployed) but that they are inactive, not looking for work but would like paid work if it was possible. This is useful information in that it gives an indication of those who are closer to the labour market and who may be easier to get into the labour market with suitable policy levers.

Data for the year to June 2022 (Figure 15) shows that 85% of those inactive in NI did not want a job comparable with 82% in England, 81% in Scotland and 82% in Wales. However, this reflects increases in the proportion who didn't want a job in England, Scotland, and Wales over the last decade.

Figure 15: Proportion of those who are inactive who do not want a job by age group, July

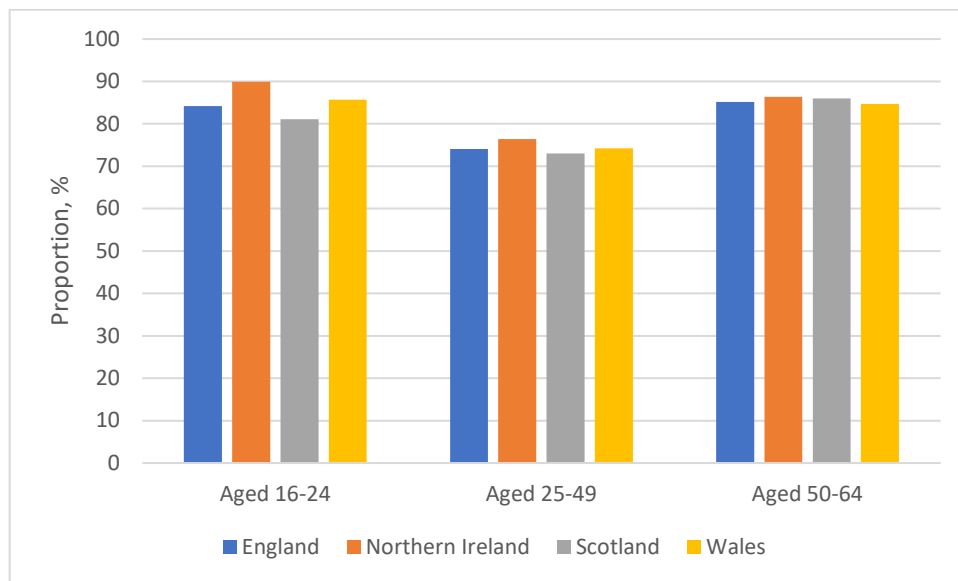
2021-June 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey

Looking at those who do not want a job by age there are differences across the age groups shown in Figure 16. Proportions of those who don't want a job is highest amongst the youngest group (16-24) and the oldest group (50-64) and lowest for those aged 25-49. The regional differences are more apparent for the youngest group with 90% of this cohort not wanting a job compared to 84%, 81% and 86% in England, Scotland and Wales. For the oldest cohort, 85/86% of those inactive do not want a job in all regions.

**Figure 16: Proportion of those inactive who do not want a job by age group, July 2021-
June 2022**



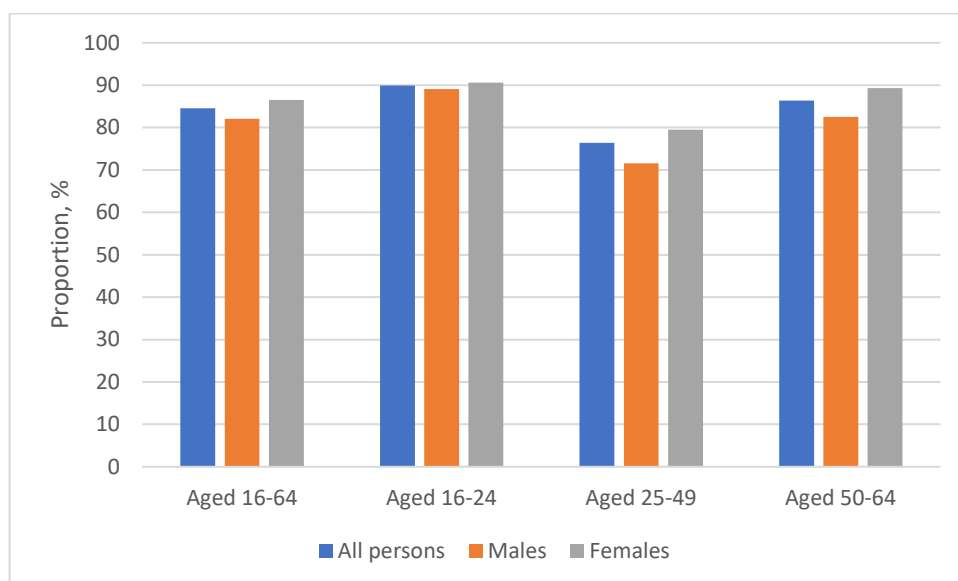
Source: Labour Force Survey

These higher rates amongst the younger cohort may be driven by students not wanting to work and this is likely to be a temporary state as they invest in their human capital and postpone entry to the labour market. 92% of students aged 16-24 in NI did not want a job compared to 81% of those the same age who were long-term sick and 82% of those who were looking after home/family.

It is also likely given the heterogeneity between men and women that there are differences in the want to work, particularly, when we think of the reasons why they may be inactive and the caring and other responsibilities women may face outside of the labour market which men do not to the same extent. Given the regional differences in this section are not as evident in recent data we examine NI only rates which allows us to examine gender and intersection of characteristics (e.g., young women vs young men etc.) in more detail.

Figure 17 shows the proportion of men and women who are inactive and do not want a job and shows how gender differs for the different age groups. 87% of women who are inactive do not want a job compared to 82% of men. Within the youngest age cohort, the gender gap is smaller with 91% of females not wanting a job compared to 89% of males. The gap is largest for the 25-49 age group, 80% of inactive females did not want a job compared to 72% of males. For the oldest age group those aged 50-64 89% of females did not want a job compared to 83% of women. The differences amongst the 25-49 age group may reflect gender differences such as childcare while for the older group the difference may be due to different norms around retirement age as well as potential grand-childcare.

Figure 17: Proportion of those inactive in NI who do not want a job by gender and age group, July 2021-June 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey

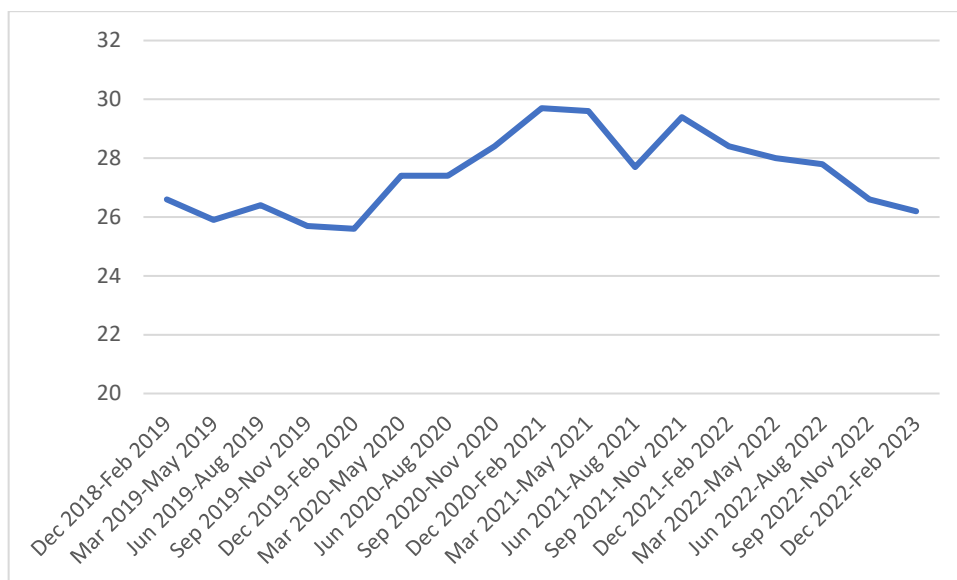
4.5 COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on economic inactivity has been much disputed with arguments that it has increased significantly and worryingly so while others have argued it was a short-

term blip and it would return to pre-pandemic levels. In fact, in many cases the most recent figures would suggest the latter to be true. However, this does not make the impact of COVID-19 irrelevant as it has shone the light on inequalities.

Inactivity in NI before the pandemic was 25.6% (Dec 2019-Feb 2020) the following year it rose to 29.7%. It peaked around this time as shown in Figure 18. It then subsequently fell in the latter half of 2021 and in 2022 as the effects of the pandemic trailed off.

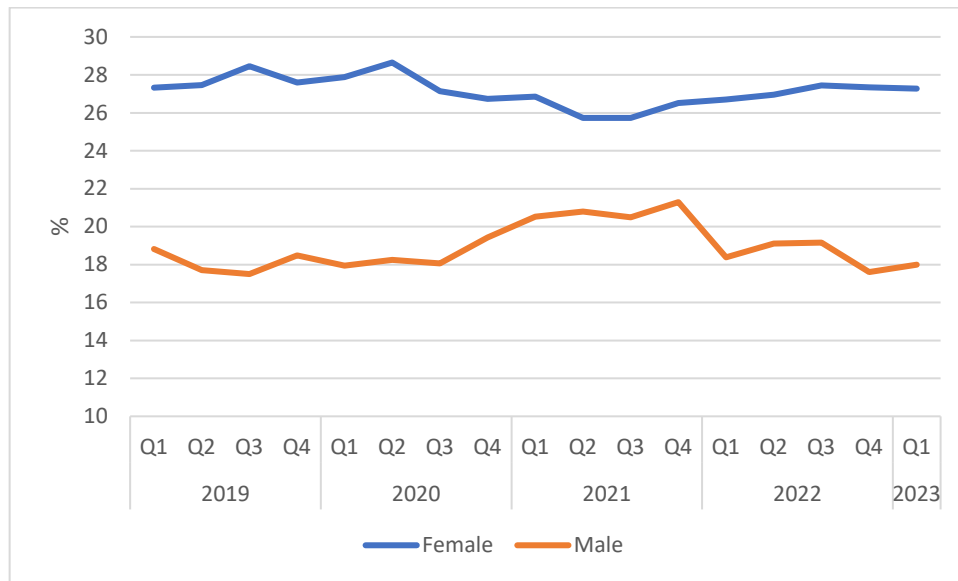
Figure 18: Inactivity rate in NI over the pandemic period, December 2018-February 2023



Source: Labour Force Survey

However, when we examine this using a gender breakdown the results are very different there is a substantial increase in inactivity amongst men and a fall in inactivity amongst women. Female inactivity rates were relatively low in the second half of 2020 and through 2021. For men on the other hand rates increased throughout 2020 and remained high in 2021 before falling in 2022 as the pandemic tailed off. These changes led to a convergence in the inactivity rates of men and women, but this has since diverged again throughout 2022 as shown in Figure 19.

Figure 19: Economic inactivity rates in NI, 20-64 Years, Gender, 2019-2023

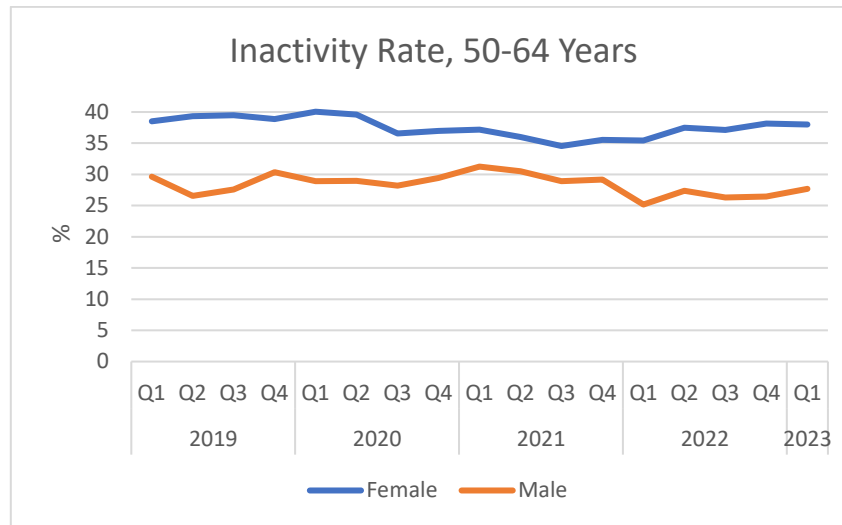
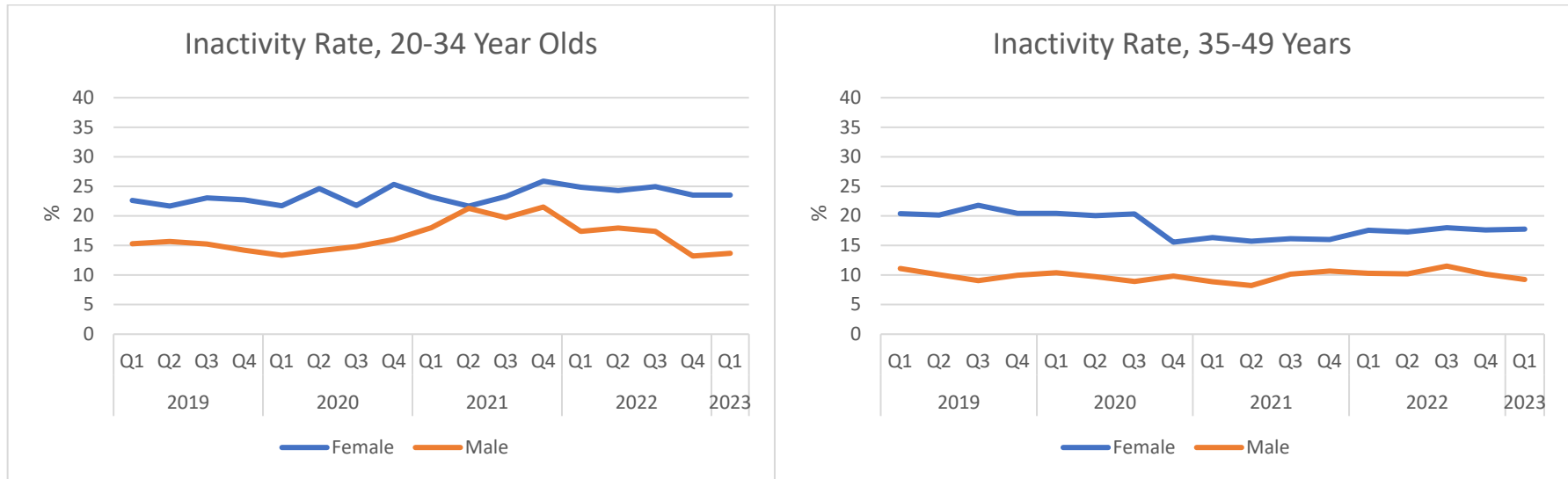


Source: Labour Force Survey

Furthermore, while the headline rate did not change much there were also differences by broad age group. Those aged 35-49 years saw a small fall in the inactivity rate in 2020 and 2021. For the youngest cohort, those aged 20-34 years, there was a rise in economic inactivity.

This is also evident when we look at the inactivity rate by age group and gender. That convergence throughout the pandemic as female inactivity falls and male inactivity increases is evident in all 3 age groups. Figures 20-22 on the following page show these patterns. The impact of the pandemic it seems is greatest for the youngest group in that the inactivity rate for young males increases quickly but also falls again quickly. The changes for older groups are smaller.

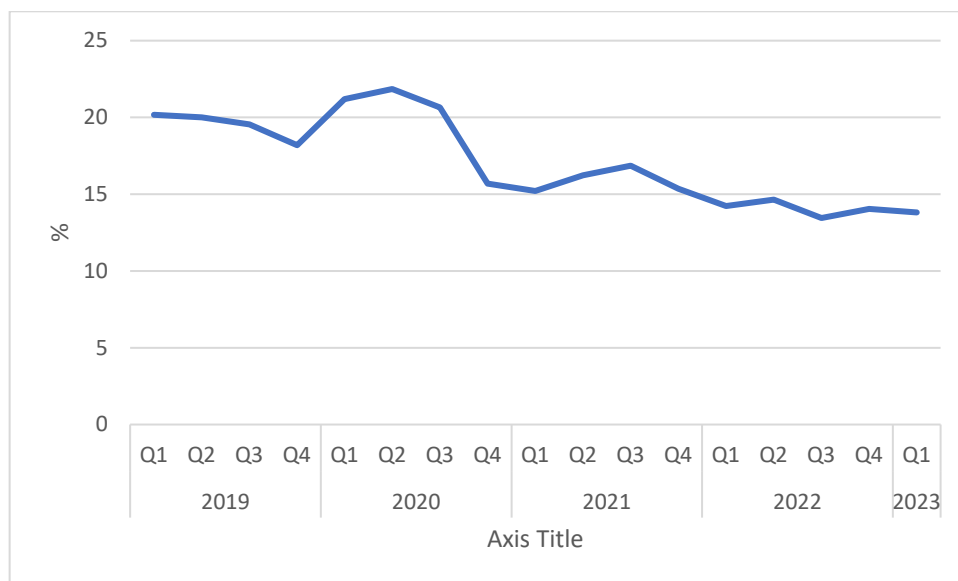
Figures 20-22: Inactivity Rates in NI by Gender for Three Age Groups, 2019-2023.



Source: Labour Force Survey

While data is still emerging, it is possible to interpret shifts in the proportion of inactive people who are not looking but would like a paid job, and how this changed over the pandemic period. Figure 23 displays this trend. The proportion of the inactive population who would like paid work has fallen since the outset of the pandemic and unlike headline inactivity rates it has not recovered in the same way. In Q2 2020 at the outset of the pandemic, 22% of those inactive were not looking but would like a paid job by Q1 2023 that figure was 14%. The failure of this figure to recover may point to those who are inactive being discouraged given the ongoing tightness of the labour market and the competition for limited vacancies.

Figure 23: Proportion of those inactive in NI who are not looking but would like a paid job, 2019-2023



Source: Labour Force Survey

5. Econometric Analysis

Table 4 shows the results of probit models whereby economic inactivity is a binary dependant variable. Marginal effects are displayed. In the first specification gender, age, marital status, and educational attainment are controlled for. Females are more likely to be economically

inactive than males, those who are older are also more likely to be inactive and those who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are less likely to be inactive. Those with the highest levels of education are also significantly less likely to be inactive. In the second specification we also control for the time period when COVID-19 was impacting the labour market that is Q2 2020-Q2 2021 (inclusive). Surprisingly, there is no statistically significant results for this variable, at least in the pooled model with all respondents.

In Columns 3 and 4 results are shown which are restricted to subsamples of females and males only. Marital status is a weaker predictor of inactivity when the sample is restricted to females only and a stronger predictor for males. More precisely, males (females) who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are 21 (10) percentage points less likely to be inactive than their peers who are single/widowed/divorced etc. Furthermore, education is a greater protector against inactivity for females than is the case for men. Females with the highest levels of education are 19 percentage points less likely to be inactive than those with less education, this is 11 percentage points for males.

It is worth noting that such a probit analysis does not account for causality, but it does allow us to understand the extent of relationships between variables and how they differ across groups.

Interestingly, there is only a statistically significant relationship between the COVID-19 period and inactivity for men. While the marginal effect is small this does line up with the increase in inactivity rates amongst men at the time of the pandemic and particularly amongst young men as shown previously.

Table 4: Results of Probit Analysis for NI

	All		All		Female		Male	
Female	0.09	***	0.09	***				
Age (Ref: 20-34 Years)								
35-49 Years	-0.01	**	-0.01	**	-0.02	***	0.00	
50-64 Years	0.16	***	0.16	***	0.14	***	0.20	***
Married/Cohabiting /Civil Partnership	-0.15	***	-0.15	***	-0.10	***	-0.21	***
Higher Education	-0.16	***	-0.16	***	-0.19	***	-0.11	***
COVID-19			0.00		0.00		0.01	*
N	57728		57728		30701		27027	
Pseudo R2	0.11		0.11		0.09		0.14	

Notes: Dependant variable is whether the respondent reports as inactive. Marginal effects are displayed.

Source: Labour Force Survey

This may be a simplistic analysis given the heterogeneity that exists within economic inactivity. In the rest of this section, we use similar econometric models but rather than the dependant variable being a binary as to whether or not the individual is inactive we break out the reasons for inactivity so the dependant variable is, for example inactivity due to long-term sickness/disability or inactivity due to looking after the home/family. The results differ considerably when this more precise approach is taken. Other variables are also included as deemed necessary. When we model inactive due to looking after the home/family we also control for the presence of children under 16 in the home as well as the number of children aged 4 or under. When we model inactive due to long-term sickness/disability we also control for disability status.

The results of these more specific models with inactivity by type as the dependant variable are displayed in Table 5. The top half of Table 5 shows the results when the dependant variable is looking after the home/family. The most basic model not surprisingly finds that women are more likely to be inactive than men. In fact, females are 7 percentage points more

likely than their male peers to be inactive due to looking after the home/family. Those who are married/cohabiting are also more likely to be inactive due to looking after the home/family while those with the highest levels of education are less likely to be inactive due to looking after the home/family. COVID-19 has no relationship with inactivity due to looking after the home/family.

Not surprisingly, when we model these specifications by gender the results differ considerably. Using the basic specification containing socio-demographic information, females who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are more likely to be inactive to look after the home/family. Females with the highest levels of education are also less likely to be inactive to look after the home/family than their peers with lower educational attainment. For men the same relationships are not evident. We then control for the presence of dependent children under the age of 16 in the family and the number of children aged 4 years or under. Women with any children in the family are 9 percentage points more likely than those without children in the family to be inactive to look after home/family. Furthermore, for each child under the age of 5 the likelihood of being inactive to look after the home/family increases by 5 percentage points. Again, these relationships are not evident for males. Males with dependent children under the age of 16 in the house are 1 percentage point more likely than their peers without under 16s in the family to be inactive to look after the home/family. The number of children aged 4 or under is statistically significant but is extremely small. These results reflect the social norms around childcare provision that are still evident in family life. Interestingly, the COVID-19 indicator is statistically significant for women. The COVID-19 pandemic has a negative relationship with being inactive due to looking after the family home which suggests that there was a fall due to the pandemic and

not because of demographic or family factors. Although this finding is not conclusive without using advanced econometric techniques to prove causality.

The bottom half of Table 5 also models inactivity due to sickness/disability. In the first specification age is positively correlated with being inactive due to sickness/disability but then self-reported disability is included in a further specification the marginal effect of the age bands falls toward zero. The other variables are as we would expect. Those who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are 2 percentage points less likely to be inactive due to long-term sickness/disability than their peers. Those with the highest levels of higher education are 10 percentage points less likely to be inactive due to long-term sickness/disability than those with lower levels of education falling to 2 percentage points when disability is included. Those with a disability are 30 percentage points more likely to be inactive due to sickness/disability than their peers who do not report as having a self-reported disability. Results are more consistent across the genders than we saw when examining inactivity due to looking after home/family. Females (males) who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are 1 (2) percentage points less likely to be inactive due to long-term sickness/disability than their peers. Females (males) with a disability are 33 (36) percentage points more likely than those without a disability to be inactive due to long-term sickness/disability. There was no statistically significant effect for the pandemic period.

Table 5: Results of probit models for NI, economic inactivity due to looking after the home/family and inactive due to long-term sickness/disability, marginal effects displayed

Inactivity - Home/Family	All		All		Female		Female		Male		Male	
Female	0.08	***	0.08	***								
Age (Ref: 20-34 Years)												
35-49 Years	0.00		0.00		-0.01	**	0.01		0.01	***	0.01	
50-64 Years	0.00	**	0.00	**	-0.03	***	0.06	***	0.02	***	0.03	
Married/Cohabiting/Civil Partnership	0.00	***	0.00	***	0.02	***	-0.01		-0.01	***	-0.01	***
Higher Education	-0.06	***	-0.06	***	-0.12	***	-0.11	***	-0.02	***	-0.02	***
COVID-19			0.00	**	-0.01		-0.01	*	0.00		0.00	*
Dependent children in family							0.09	***			0.01	***
No. of children 4 years or under							0.05	***			0.00	*
N	47520		47520		25098		25098		22422		22422	
Pseudo R2	0.12		0.12		0.06		0.12		0.06		0.06	
Inactivity - Long-term sick/disabled	All		All		Female		Female		Male		Male	
Female	0.00	*	0.01	**								
Age (Ref:20-34 Years)												
35-49 Years	0.06	***	0.01	***	0.01	***	0.01	***	0.00	**		
50-64 Years	0.15	***	0.02	***	0.02	***	0.02	***	0.01	***		
Married/Cohabiting/Civil Partnership	-0.13	***	-0.02	***	-0.01	***	-0.01	***	-0.02	***		
Higher Education	-0.10	***	-0.02	***	-0.02	***	-0.02	***	-0.01	***		
COVID-19			0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	**		
Disability			0.35	***	0.33	***	0.33	***	0.36	***		
N	49939		49810		25263		25263		24547		24547	
Pseudo R2	0.20		0.58		0.56		0.56		0.60		0.60	

Source: Labour Force Survey

In Table 6 we show similar models for inactivity due to retirement and inactivity due to other reasons. If we look first at the model whereby the dependant variable is those who are inactive as they are retired, that is the results in the top half of the table. In the initial specification, age in this instance is only in 2 categories with the reference category those aged 20-49 years, we find that those aged 50-64 are 13 percentage points more likely to be inactive due to retirement than the younger group. The marginal effect for gender and education level is close to zero. In the next specification, we also control for COVID-19 periods and self-reported disability. Individuals with a disability are 1 percentage point more likely to be inactive due to retirement than their peers who do not have a disability. We then run separate specifications for males and females. Age has a strong relationship with being inactive due to retirement for both genders, but the marginal effect is largest for females, 14 percentage points, compared to males, 9 percentage points. This is likely to reflect the different social norms and expectations around retirement between men and women. The other variables have small marginal effects as previously seen in the pooled model.

In terms of inactivity due to other reasons females are 1 percentage point more likely than males to be inactive for this reason. Those who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are less likely to be inactive for other reasons as are those who have higher educational attainment. The youngest age group, those 20-34 years, are the most likely to be inactive for other reasons. When disability is included, it has a positive and statistically significant relationship with inactive due to other reasons that is those with a self-reported disability are 5 percentage points more likely to be inactive due to other reasons than those without a disability this may be due to some people being unable to work due to a short-term illness or being discouraged from the labour market. There are no stark gender differences when we look at this type of inactivity.

Table 6: Results of probit models for NI, economic inactivity due to retirement and inactivity due to other reasons, marginal effects displayed.

Inactivity - Retirement	All		All		Female		Male			
Female	0.00	***	0.01	***						
Age (Ref: 20-49 Years)										
50-64 Years	0.13	***	0.12	***	0.14	***	0.09	***		
Married/Cohabiting/Civil Partnership	0.01	***	0.00	***	0.01	***	0.00			
Higher Education	0.00	***	0.00	***	0.00	*	0.00	***		
COVID-19			0.00	***	0.00	**	0.00	**		
Disability			0.01	***	0.01	***	0.01	***		
N	46792		46662		23804		22858			
Pseudo R2	0.25		0.26		0.27		0.25			
Inactivity - Other Reasons	All		All		All		Female		Male	
Female	0.01	***	0.01	***	0.00	**				
Age (Ref: 20-34 Years)										
35-49 Years	-0.04	***	-0.04	***	-0.04	***	-0.04	***	-0.03	***
50-64 Years	-0.02	***	-0.02	***	-0.02	***	-0.03	***	-0.01	***
Married/Cohabiting/Civil Partnership	-0.08	***	-0.06	***	-0.05	***	-0.04	***	-0.06	***
Higher Education	-0.03	***	-0.03	***	-0.02	***	-0.03	***	-0.02	***
COVID-19			0.00	*	0.00	*	0.00		0.01	***
Disability					0.05	***	0.05	***	0.05	***
N	46820		46820		46687		23642		23045	
Pseudo R2	0.11		0.11		0.13		0.11		0.15	

Source: Labour Force Survey

In a final set of models, Table 7, we examine the characteristics of those who are inactive and not looking for work but who would like a paid job. We model the characteristics associated with being inactive but wanting paid work. Using a pooled model of the whole sample we find those who are most likely to be inactive but would like a paid job are those who are aged 35-49. They are 9 percentage points more likely than the youngest cohort to want a paid job while the oldest subgroup, those 50-64, are 4 percentage points less likely than the youngest group to want a paid job. Females are less likely than males to want a paid job, as are those who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership. And those with the highest levels of education are 3 percentage points less likely to want a job than their inactive peers with lower levels of educational attainment. This may reflect the different reasons behind being inactive e.g., a lifestyle choice rather than facing barriers to the labour market. In the second specification we control for the COVID-19 pandemic. During pandemic times inactive individuals were 2 percentage points more likely to want a paid job than before and after the pandemic. By way of reminder, the pandemic period is Q2 2020 – Q2 2021 (inclusive). In a final specification on the whole sample of inactive individuals we also include disability, presence of children U16 in the family and the number of children U5 in the family. Individuals with a disability are 4 percentage points more likely to want a paid job than those who are inactive without a disability. Those who have dependent children under the age of 16 in the family are also more likely to want a job but not be looking. These are both reflective of the constraints these groups face in accessing the labour market. The number of children under 5 in the family did not have a statistically significant relationship with whether those who are inactive would like a paid job.

We then examine this full specification by gender. Age has a much stronger relationship for males than for females with the likelihood of being inactive but wanting a paid job. Those who

are 35-49 years are 12 percentage points more likely than the youngest group to want a paid job while this is only 4 percentage points for females. The oldest group had no statistically significant relationship for males which the oldest group of females were 5 percentage points less likely to want a paid job than the youngest females. This is probably reflective of retirement around age 60 for women. Women who were married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership were 7 percentage points less likely than their peers to want a paid job, marital status was not significant for males. Females with a higher education were 2 percentage points less likely to want a paid job than their peers with lower educational attainment and again this was not significant for males. The COVID-19 period was not significant for females while males were 3 percentage points more likely to want a paid job but not be looking at this time. Females with a disability were 6 percentage points more likely than those females without a disability to want a paid job while for men this was 2 percentage points. There were also gender differences in how family makeup related to being inactive but wanting a job. For women having dependent children under 16 in the family increased the likelihood of being inactive but wanting paid work while the number of children under 5 had a positive relationship for males who were inactive. For women as the number of children in the family under 5 increased the likelihood of wanting a paid job fell probably due to the affordability of childcare for those with children not yet in school.

Table 7: Probit results for NI of being inactive wanting a paid job but not currently looking, marginal effects

Would Like A Paid Job	All		All		All		Female		Male	
Female	-0.03	***	-0.03	***	-0.04	***				
Age (Ref: 20-34 Years)										
35-49 Years	0.09	***	0.09	***	0.07	***	0.04	***	0.12	***
50-64 Years	-0.04	***	-0.04	***	-0.03	***	-0.05	***	-0.01	
Married/Cohabiting/ Civil Partnership	-0.05	***	-0.05	***	-0.05	***	-0.07	***	0.00	
Higher Education	-0.03	***	-0.03	***	-0.02	**	-0.02	**	-0.02	
COVID-19			0.02	**	0.02	**	0.01		0.03	**
Disability					0.04	***	0.06	***	0.02	*
Children in the Family					0.06	***	0.07	***	0.01	
No. of children Under 5					-0.01		-0.02	**	0.04	**
N	1296		1296		1296		8086		4877	
	3		3		3					
Pseudo R2	0.03		0.03		0.03		0.05		0.02	

Source: Labour Force Survey

6. Summary of Data Analysis

Economic inactivity has long been higher in NI than in other areas and is driven by much higher rates of inactivity due to long-term sickness/disability. This research brings the literature in this area up to date which is particularly important given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing debate about the impact it has had on inactivity.

All constituent countries of the UK saw increases in inactivity over the first year of the pandemic, but the increase was largest in NI. This large increase was driven by increases in the proportion studying and those who were long-term sick/disabled. These trends were not mirrored in other UK countries to the same extent. However, in the latest LFS data (July 2023)

headline inactivity rates in NI have nearly fallen back to pre-pandemic levels which cannot be said for England, Scotland or Wales which remain elevated.

Looking at the individual types of inactivity in turn those who are inactive due to long-term sickness/disability are a driver of the high inactivity rates in NI but during the 2008 financial crisis there was considerable convergence between NI, Wales, and Scotland. However post-crash this diverged again. Inactivity due to looking after the home/family is in line with other UK countries however this has converged over time. This convergence is likely to be due to the lower gender employment gap and lower gender pay gap in NI. However, it could potentially mask women who are underemployed due to their caring/home responsibilities. NI also has a relatively low proportion of individuals inactive due to retirement although Scotland and Wales have seen their rates falling over time. NI has a somewhat younger population, but it may also be reflective of the large proportion, who are likely to be older, who are inactive due to long-term sickness/disability. NI also has higher proportions of working age people who are inactive as they are studying, this type of inactivity is less concerning as these individuals are investing in their human capital with a view to entering the labour force later and with better prospects.

Further data is examined with an emphasis on subgroups with particular characteristics and combinations of characteristics. Rates in NI are on average for those aged 25-49 years but are higher for those aged 50-64 and particularly for those aged 16-24. This has jumped over the course of the pandemic. In terms of gender, NI has much higher rates of inactivity amongst males than the other UK countries while for females it is lower only when compared to Wales. We also find that inactivity amongst males increased much more over the pandemic than was the case for females. This is interesting given concerns around women during the pandemic being forced to undertake additional caring responsibilities.

We also examine those who are inactive and are not looking but would like paid work. These people are more likely to be successfully nudged into the labour force than those who would not like paid work. Younger people are least likely to want paid work, but this is due to students not being interested in paid work at that point in time. There has been little change over time in the proportion of those inactive in NI who don't want paid work while it was historically high in NI the other UK countries have converged in recent years while NI has seen little change. The gender differences are quite small in terms of proportion who don't want paid work, particularly for the youngest cohort (those aged 16-24 years).

We then do closer analysis of changes over the course of the pandemic. The headline rate changes very little however this masks significant gender differences. The inactivity rate for females drops slightly while the rate for males increases. This is particularly the case for those aged 20-34 years. The proportion of those inactive who do not want paid work has fallen over the pandemic and there has been little recovery in this data in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Regression analysis is then carried out to examine who is inactive which may be helpful in targeting policy to reduce inactivity. Women, older people, those who are not in a relationship and those with lower levels of educational attainment are all more likely to be inactive. Age has a strong relationship with inactivity particularly for males while education has a stronger relationship for females than males. We then examine each type of inactivity, and the results are mostly as we would expect e.g., self-reported disability is strongly related to being inactive due to long-term sickness/disability and having children in the family is strongly related to inactive due to looking after the home/family, at least for females. We control for those

periods when COVID-19 was most impacting normal life and find the marginal effects to be very close to zero.

We also model a specification whereby the dependant variable is not looking for but wanting a paid job and find that those who are inactive due to sickness/disability or other reasons are more likely to want paid work. Those with disabilities and those with children are also more likely to want paid work which suggests the barriers these individuals face in accessing the labour market. Policies to alleviate such barriers to the labour market could therefore be key in reducing inactivity.

The next steps of our analysis will take a qualitative approach with the aim of exploring the potential reasons behind people being inactive, what is keeping them out of the labour force and what would help them to access the labour force should they wish to.

7. The Welfare System in NI and Economic Inactivity

The welfare system and inactivity are interlinked, with a significant proportion of those who are inactive in receipt of some form of social security. In recent years there has been ongoing debate as to whether the social security system is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland and the UK more generally, with concerns raised as to whether passive benefits in particular act as a disincentive for work. This concern has been particularly marked by the growth in workfare policies introduced in the 1990s in the UK, with an emphasis on compulsion to work for those engaging with the benefits system. Considering this argument and the economic situation following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, significant welfare reform has taken place over the last decade or so with the primary goal of getting people into work. The term “making work pay” has been frequently used. In the following sub-sections, we look at welfare policy and welfare reform and how they interact with each type of inactivity given the considerable

heterogeneity that exists between the forms of inactivity. We also set out the policy background in NI as welfare policy diverged from the rest of the UK at the time reforms were made.

7.1 Welfare reform

Following the Great Recession, austerity measures were introduced in the UK and an extensive programme of welfare reform was initiated by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition voted into power in 2010. A variety of benefits were reduced including benefits for people living with disabilities along with cuts to council budgets and social care spending. The government argued that the welfare reforms were necessary as benefit recipients had no incentive to work as the alternative to benefits was low paid work and working incurred associated costs (e.g., transport, childcare etc.). The Welfare Reform Act 2012 was designed to:

- “make the benefit system fairer and more affordable
- Reduce poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency
- Reduce levels of fraud and error” (DWP, 2015).

The reforms included changes to several areas of the benefit system. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was introduced to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and eligibility was based on how the disability affected an individual’s daily life and was designed to be “more sustainable”. Universal Credit was introduced to replace a range of working-age benefits (namely jobseekers allowance, employment and support allowance, income support, working tax credits, child tax credit and housing benefits) and was intended to “make sure work pays” and a cap was introduced on the maximum that households can receive from the welfare system so that a household on benefits did not have a higher income than the average

working household. The reforms also set out to ensure that anyone on old-style incapacity benefits replaced in 2008 by ESA would be moved from the legacy benefits and ESA claimants would now have to undergo a Work Capability Assessment to ensure ongoing eligibility. Furthermore, changes were made to housing benefits with the introduction of the social sector size criteria, or 'bedroom tax', which would cut the amount people received if the government deemed them to have more bedrooms than they needed (Department for Work and Pensions, DWP, 2015).

The reforms were designed to make the system fairer, however, the changes disproportionately affected those already living in poverty and those with disabilities. The Centre for Welfare Reform (2013) predicted the reforms would affect disabled people nine times more than other citizens bearing 29% of the cuts despite making up only 8% of the population while those with severe disabilities would bear 15% of the burden of welfare reform despite being only 2% of the population. This was later found to be the case (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015; Just Fair, 2014; Reed & Portes, 2014) Prior to these reforms people with disabilities were already more likely to live in poverty than those without disabilities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found in 2005 (before austerity measures were introduced) that 30% of adults with a disability were living below the 'breadline'. More recently, UK media outlets reported that one third of those with disabilities were unable to afford food (Independent, 2019 and The Guardian, 2019). While poverty and food insecurity have long been issues for people with disabilities they have experienced the fastest growth in food insecurity in the UK in recent years likely due to these austerity measures (Loopstra et al., 2019).

There were also significant reforms introduced because of the Welfare Reform Act 2009. Again, the aim was “to improve support and incentives for people to move from benefits to work” (UK Parliament, 2009). This legislation touched on many aspects of the welfare system including abolishing Income Support and moving all claimants to other benefits either jobseekers or ESA; the introduction of sanctions for not attending the jobcentre when required and introducing the need for work-related activity to receive ESA.

The Welfare Reform Act 2007 introduced ESA to replace two disability benefits - Incapacity Benefits (IB) and income support paid on the grounds of incapacity. The key element of the ESA introduction was that it was accompanied by a work capability assessment designed to take into account both physical and mental ability compared to its predecessor the personal capability assessment (PCA) which was based mostly on the individual’s physical disability and ability to work (Mencap, 2008). That mental health is now assessed is important given that the disability employment gap is largest for those with mental health conditions (Powell, 2020).

Alongside reforms to the benefit system, several changes to retirement and pension policy have also been introduced. Like disability-related social security, the state pension was also thought to be unsustainable and faster than anticipated increases to the State Pension Age were deemed necessary. The Pensions Commission reporting to the government in 2005 recommended that the State Pension Age (SPA) be increased in line with expected increases in life expectancy. As a result, the Pensions Act 2007 was introduced to increase the SPA gradually to 68 for men and women between 2024 and 2046. This was followed by the Pensions Act 2011 which was intended to equalise the retirement ages for the sexes and increased the SPA to 66. The Pensions Act 2014 brought forward the increase of the SPA to

67 years and meant this increase would come into effect 8 years earlier than previously planned. An impact assessment carried out by the DWP (2014) found 8 million people in GB were affected by this change.

Changes to the State Pension Age were resisted by groups such as The Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI). They argued that women born in the 50's, some 3.8 million individuals, have been treated unfairly and unequally due to a lack of warning and faster than expected pension increases meaning many are unable to re-plan accordingly for retirement. WASPI have found that due to the way the pension age was increased women born one year apart may have a three-year difference in their retirement age.

Alongside changes to the state pension age the pension reforms brought about by these acts also legislated for the introduction of automatic enrolment into workplace pensions. Under the Pensions Act 2008 every employer in the UK who has at least one member of staff must enrol their workers into a workplace pension scheme. Automatic enrolment was designed to increase the number of people in the UK with private pensions upon reaching retirement age and therefore more savings for later life (The Pensions Advisory Service, 2021). Automatic enrolment was brought in from 2012 and by early in 2018 all employers in the UK should have a pension scheme in place for their employees.

The changes to the pension age and to pension provision in the UK are likely to affect how individuals retire. It has already been documented in the literature that retirement is changing and is no longer a simple transition from work to worklessness when one reaches state pension age.

7.2 Welfare Reform in NI

It is important to note that welfare reform was not undertaken in NI in the same way as the rest of the UK with certain measures being mitigated against by the NI Executive. It was recognised that welfare reforms introduced because of austerity which included reform to DLA were going to disproportionately affect those living with disabilities in NI. Beatty & Fothergill (2013a) argued that the financial loss felt by NI after welfare reform would be “substantially larger” than anywhere else in the UK and that Belfast would be the hardest hit of all major UK cities. The move from DLA to PIP was deemed to be a major contributor to this adverse impact of austerity and Beatty & Fothergill (2013a) also argued that the most deprived areas would feel the greatest impact.

In recognition of these adverse impacts, the NI Executive introduced a suite of mitigation measures in November 2015 to stave off the impact of the reforms as part of the Fresh Start Agreement. These measures included £585 million designated over 4 years to fund welfare supplementary payments. These were designed to cover any loss of income due to the welfare reform which had to be enacted as per The Stormont House Agreement 2014 (Northern Ireland Office, 2014). PIP was introduced in June 2016 - claimants not awarded PIP continued to receive their DLA award until their appeal; claimants who qualified for PIP but lost more than 10 pounds a week were paid 75% of the amount they lost and those not eligible for PIP but with conflict-related disabilities continued to receive payment (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2019). The mitigation package also contained provisions to offset the bedroom tax and benefit caps. The welfare mitigations were initially set to run until March 2020. In February 2022 the mitigation against the bedroom tax was made indefinite given the

current make-up of families and the housing stock in NI it was believed to be particularly detrimental to those on low incomes.

In 2019 the Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission Northern Ireland reported on the impact of the welfare reforms. Given the high proportion of people with disabilities in NI, he felt that the region would be disproportionately affected by the move from DLA to PIP. A quarter of those reassessed for the new benefit had been deemed no longer eligible and this was likely to have a significant detrimental impact on the mental health of people with disabilities (Equality NI, 2019).

More recently, an independent advisory panel report (2022) advised on several new mitigation measures which would benefit those in NI on the lowest incomes but with no Executive these measures recommended have not been implemented. The report also recognised that NI has a NI-specific issue of high inactivity and that many families out of work are so due to caring responsibilities or disability which on their own are associated with higher poverty rates (DfC, 2022).

As mentioned, the welfare system is most relevant for those inactive on the grounds of illness/disability. There are two main social security payments for disability; PIP which is designed to help with extra living costs associated with having a disability and is available to people who are in work and Universal Credit which has replaced a variety of social security payments but is available to support people with a health condition or disability which limits their ability to work or the amount of work they can do. The latter therefore given it acts as income replacement is the most relevant for inactivity. On this basis, it may be that for individuals with a disability who are unemployed and having difficulty finding work disability-

related social security payments may be a more logical option than continued use of the unemployment social security system and the job search requirements that come with it.

Altering social security payments for those with disabilities has been found to be complex, an Australian reform which reduced the generosity of disability payments as well as increasing the conditions for receiving the payments in a bid to lower numbers saw no significant impact after 12 or 24 months (Broadway & McVicar, 2020). Furthermore, there is also a link between the welfare system for the unemployed and inactivity of people with disabilities, Reeves (2017) found that as the proportion of unemployment insurance claimants with a disability who were sanctioned increased the disability rate amongst the inactive population also grew which suggests if there are more sanctions against disabled people this will be a deterrent and people will exit the labour force completely.

Beatty & Fothergill have published multiple studies on disability in particular regions finding that hidden unemployment may occur in the form of movements into disability, their seminal work in 1996 found that when coalmines closed in England there was very little change in unemployment, but disability rolls increased significantly. Beatty & Fothergill (2013b) subsequently did not dismiss the importance of health as a minor driver of disability but argue that a triangular relationship exists between employment, unemployment, and sickness. Other authors have found similar patterns. Lindsey & Houston (2013) find that disability benefit receipt is determined by health, strength of the labour market and employability. People with disabilities often struggle with employability in competitive job markets especially when low skilled (Powell, 2020).

More recently, Beatty & Fothergill (2020) have summarised their extensive research - spanning over three decades - on industrial transformation and argue that this diversion from

unemployment benefits to disability benefits continues in many areas across the UK, particularly those areas which were affected the most by deindustrialisation. They argue that there exists a level of 'hidden unemployment' in respect to disability benefits in the UK i.e., those eligible for sickness-related benefits may be put off actively searching for work when labour markets are slack. Fothergill (2001) defines the hidden unemployed as the individuals who would work in an economy with full employment but who are counted as "sickness" rather than "unemployed" due to the unemployment definition requiring that individuals are searching and available for work.

Post-COVID in the UK there have been increases in inactivity and while many attribute this to an increase in those who are long-term sick/disabled due to long COVID, the Low Pay Commission in fact found the movement from employment to inactivity to mostly have taken the form of older working-age individuals (50-64 years) moving into retirement (2023). Furthermore, despite a sharp increase in inactivity in NI at the onset of the pandemic headline inactivity rates have fell back to pre-pandemic levels.

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