



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Research Paper

---

Paper 03/26

16 December 2025

NIAR255-25

**Dr Raymond Russell**

# The Real Living Wage in Northern Ireland

**NIAR 255-25**

An update of a previous paper concerning those paid below the *Real Living Wage* (RLW) in Northern Ireland. As requested, the paper includes a breakdown by gender, and full-time / part-time employment status for the eleven local district council areas. Any regional disparities that exist are also highlighted in the Paper.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Assembly staff in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.



## Table of Contents

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 1   | Background .....  | 4  |
| 2   | Real Living Wage Rates .....                                  | 5  |
| 3   | Northern Ireland .....  | 6  |
| 4   | Employees earning less than the Real Living Wage by LGD ..... | 8  |
| 4.1 | All Employees .....   | 8  |
| 4.2 | Gender .....  | 10 |
| 4.3 | Employment Status .....                                       | 11 |
| 5   | Summary .....   | 12 |

## 1 Background

The *Real Living Wage* (RLW) is the only UK wage rate calculated based on what it actually costs to live. The 2025-26 Real Living Wage rates were announced on 22 October 2025 for London and the rest of the UK. They were calculated by the Resolution Foundation, and overseen by the Living Wage Commission on behalf of the Living Wage Foundation.

In broad terms, the calculation is founded on the construction of a basket of goods and services that together represents an acceptable standard of living, as determined through research with members of the public. This is known as the Minimum Income Standard (MIS). The hourly wage rates required to afford the items in that basket of goods and services are then calculated by taking a weighted average of the earnings needed for a range of family types <sup>1</sup>.

According to the Living Wage Foundation, in the UK, over 490,000 workers benefit directly from the Real Living Wage and [16,596 employers are formally accredited](#) (November 2025), while others informally shadow the rates.

As per the Member's request, this report presents the number and proportion of employee jobs paid below the RLW in the 11 district council areas (LGDs). The analysis is based on data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for the years 2024 and 2025 <sup>2</sup>. The Real Living Wage is announced in November each year and employers have six months to implement the new rate. This means all employees should receive the new rate by 1st May of the following year. The living wage in place at the time of the ASHE survey (April of each year) is the previous year's rate. Therefore, data for 2024 is based on the living wage rate of £12.00 and 2025 is based on the rate of £12.60.

---

<sup>1</sup> N. Cominetti and L. Murphy (2025). Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the rest of the UK: 2025: Resolution Foundation, October 2025 Available at: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/calculating-real-living-wage-london-and-rest-uk-2025>

<sup>2</sup> ASHE is based on a 1% sample of jobs taken from HM Revenue and Customs' Pay As You Earn (PAYE) records. Estimates are for employees aged 18 and over on adult rates of pay.

## 2 Real Living Wage Rates

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, [the Real Living Wage for 2025/2026 was increased on 22 October 2025](#) to £13.45 per hour outside London, and £14.80 in London. In October 2025, the new rates were worth over £2,418 more per year in the UK (outside London) than the government's legal minimum (National Living Wage) and over £5,050 in London.

The Government has since announced that, from 1 April 2026, the statutory National Living Wage will [rise to £12.71 per hour](#) for workers aged 21 and over. According to the Living Wage Foundation, the new rate will still be short of what a worker on the Real Living Wage would earn, and less than a worker on the London Living Wage.

Table 1 presents the various iterations of the statutory National Minimum / National Living Wage, the Real Living Wage, and its London counterpart, the London Living Wage from 2003 onwards.

**Table 1: Past Living Wage Rates**

| Year    | National Minimum/National Living Wage | Real Living Wage (RLW) | London Living Wage |
|---------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 2003-4  | £4.50                                 |                        | £6.40              |
| 2004-5  | £4.85                                 |                        | £6.50              |
| 2005-6  | £5.05                                 |                        | £6.70              |
| 2006-7  | £5.35                                 |                        | £7.05              |
| 2007-8  | £5.52                                 |                        | £7.20              |
| 2008-9  | £5.73                                 |                        | £7.45              |
| 2009-10 | £5.80                                 |                        | £7.60              |
| 2010-11 | £5.93                                 |                        | £7.85              |
| 2011-12 | £6.08                                 | £7.20                  | £8.30              |
| 2012-13 | £6.19                                 | £7.45                  | £8.55              |
| 2013-14 | £6.31                                 | £7.65                  | £8.80              |
| 2014-15 | £6.50                                 | £7.85                  | £9.15              |
| 2015-16 | £6.70                                 | £8.25                  | £9.40              |
| 2016-17 | £7.20                                 | £8.45                  | £9.75              |
| 2017-18 | £7.50                                 | £8.75                  | £10.20             |

| Year    | National Minimum/National Living Wage | Real Living Wage (RLW) | London Living Wage |
|---------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 2018-19 | £7.83                                 | £9.00                  | £10.55             |
| 2019-20 | £8.21                                 | £9.30                  | £10.75             |
| 2020-21 | £8.72                                 | £9.50                  | £10.85             |
| 2021-22 | £8.91                                 | £9.90                  | £11.05             |
| 2022-23 | £9.50                                 | £10.90                 | £11.95             |
| 2023-24 | £10.42                                | £12.00                 | £13.15             |
| 2024-25 | £11.44                                | £12.60                 | £13.85             |
| 2025-26 | £12.21                                | £13.45                 | £14.80             |

Source: Past Living Wage Rates, Living Wage Foundation, 2025

The difference between the statutory minimum wage, and the more generous RLW (which began in 2011), can clearly be observed.

### 3 Northern Ireland

The number of accredited employers in Northern Ireland who are committed to paying the Real Living Wage is comparatively small compared with other UK regions. In December 2025, for example, [4,042 RLW employers were registered in Scotland](#), compared with only 200 such employers in Northern Ireland. However, there appears to be an upward trend in the number of accredited employers here. According to the Living Wage Foundation (2025) in November 2023 the number stood at 87; by November 2025 this figure had risen to 200.

Living Wage NI <sup>3</sup>, a local franchise of the Living Wage Foundation, was founded in 2024. The success of the Living Wage franchises in Scotland and Wales suggests that, where there is a local body on the ground promoting the real Living Wage, it drives up the number of accreditations and workers being paid the Living Wage.

<sup>3</sup> [Living Wage NI](#), a franchise of the Living Wage Foundation was [launched](#) in June 2024. It is a partnership between Advice NI and the Living Wage Foundation, and is funded by the Department for the Economy as part of their drive to create more [Good Jobs](#). The organisation raises awareness of the real Living Wage in Northern Ireland and assists employers with the accreditation process.

Living Wage employers in Northern Ireland include public sector bodies, local government, community and voluntary sectors, plus some private concerns. Examples include the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Queen's University, Ulster University, NICVA, Labour Relations Agency, Co-Ownership Housing, Belfast City Council, and Richer Sounds.

Table 2 presents a regional analysis of the estimated proportion of employee jobs below the RLW for the years 2023 – 2025.

**Table 2: Proportion (%) of employee jobs below the Real Living Wage (%) by UK Region/Country, 2023 – 25**

| Region / Country         | 2023 (%)    | 2024 (%)    | 2025 (%)    |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Scotland                 | 10.2        | 11.4        | 11.3        |
| South East               | 10.2        | 12.9        | 12.2        |
| London                   | 12.9        | 14.4        | 13.3        |
| South West               | 12.0        | 15.6        | 14.2        |
| East                     | 12.0        | 15.4        | 14.3        |
| North West               | 13.8        | 16.8        | 14.9        |
| Wales                    | 13.4        | 15.8        | 16.4        |
| Yorkshire and The Humber | 14.7        | 18.0        | 16.6        |
| West Midlands            | 14.3        | 18.2        | 16.6        |
| East Midlands            | 15.9        | 18.8        | 17.2        |
| Northern Ireland         | 16.0        | 20.5        | 17.3        |
| North East               | 15.8        | 19.2        | 18.8        |
| <b>UK average</b>        | <b>13.0</b> | <b>15.7</b> | <b>14.6</b> |

Source: ONS, Living Wage Foundation, November 2025

The table reveals that in 2025, Scotland (11.3%) had the lowest proportion of employees earning less than the RLW, while Northern Ireland (17.3%) had the second highest of the twelve UK regions. It is noteworthy that, while higher than the UK average (14.6%), the Northern Ireland figure has dropped by 3.2 percentage points from its 2024 value (20.5%).

## 4 Employees earning less than the Real Living Wage by LGD

### 4.1 All Employees

Table 3 (overleaf) and Map 1 present data on the number/proportion of employees in the 11 LGDs who were earning less than the RLW hourly rate in the three-year period, 2023 – 2025 (all data in this analysis is based upon the work address of the employee, rather than their home address).

**Table 3 : Number and proportion of employee jobs with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than the living wage by work LGD, 2023 – 2025**

| LGD                     | 2023 (revised) |             | 2024 (revised) |             | 2025 (provisional) |             |
|-------------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
|                         | No.            | Percent     | No.            | Percent     | No.                | Percent     |
| Antrim & Newtownabbey   | 11,000         | 14.0        | 16,000         | 22.1        | 15,000             | 18.6        |
| Ards and North Down     | 12,000         | 20.7        | 17,000         | 29.5        | 15,000             | 23.8        |
| Armagh, Ban & Craigavon | 20,000         | 17.2        | 24,000         | 21.5        | 24,000             | 19.6        |
| Belfast                 | 42,000         | 11.5        | 47,000         | 13.6        | 43,000             | 11.7        |
| Causeway Coast & Glens  | 14,000         | 22.5        | 17,000         | 29.2        | 17,000             | 26.0        |
| Derry City and Strabane | 17,000         | 21.2        | 20,000         | 24.9        | 17,000             | 19.8        |
| Fermanagh and Omagh     | 10,000         | 16.4        | 13,000         | 23.0        | 13,000             | 21.1        |
| Lisburn and Castlereagh | 12,000         | 14.6        | 18,000         | 21.7        | 14,000             | 15.6        |
| Mid Ulster              | 13,000         | 20.4        | 14,000         | 24.0        | 12,000             | 19.7        |
| Mid and East Antrim     | 19,000         | 22.6        | 17,000         | 21.6        | 15,000             | 19.2        |
| Newry Mourne & Down     | 15,000         | 17.8        | 18,000         | 22.3        | 18,000             | 22.6        |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> | <b>187,000</b> | <b>16.0</b> | <b>223,000</b> | <b>20.1</b> | <b>203,000</b>     | <b>17.3</b> |

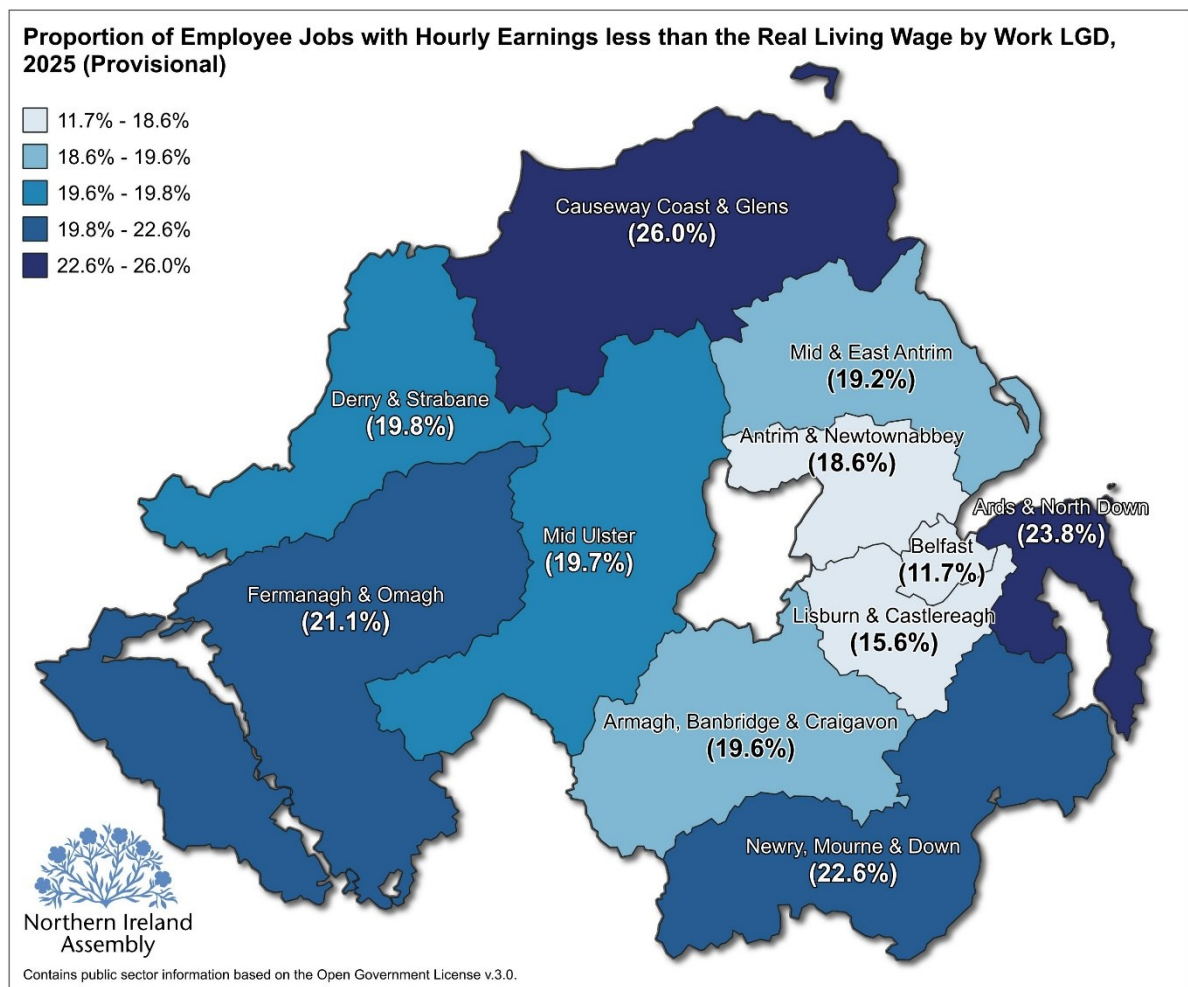
Source: ASHE 2025

Looking at Northern Ireland as a whole, the situation regarding the RLW appears to have improved somewhat over the past year. After a significant rise between 2023 and 2024 in those earning below the threshold, from 187,000 (16.0%) to 223,000 (20.1%), in 2025 this figure fell to 203,000 (17.3%). The precise reasons for this improvement are not clear from the data, but it seems likely that local wage rates for a substantial number of employees have kept pace with the rise in the RLW for 2025. It is noteworthy in this regard that the number of Living Wage employers in Northern Ireland accredited with the Living

Wage Foundation has risen from 87 in November 2023 to 200 in November 2025. Thus, the Foundation appears to have achieved some success in highlighting the issue of low pay in Northern Ireland.

As Map 1 illustrates, in broad terms, those council areas closest to Belfast tend to have the smallest proportion of employees earning less than the RLW. These include Belfast (11.7%), Lisburn and Castlereagh (15.6%), Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (19.6%), and Antrim and Newtownabbey (18.6%). Conversely, council areas in the peripheral regions of the West and North East have the largest proportion earning below the RLW. Notably, Causeway Coast and Glens (26.0%), Newry, Mourne & Down (22.6%), Fermanagh and Omagh (21.1%), Derry City and Strabane (19.8%), and Mid Ulster (19.7%). Other below-par districts include Ards and North Down (23.8%).

**Map 1: Employee Jobs with earnings under RLW by LGD, 2025  
(Provisional)**



## 4.2 Gender

Table 4 presents the proportion of employees earning below the RLW by gender and LGD. For Northern Ireland as a whole, the situation is clear – in all three years (2023 – 2023), a higher proportion of females than males were earning below the Real Living Wage. In only one council area - Ards and North Down – was there a higher proportion of men (25.1%) than women (23.0%) earning less than the real living wage.

However, the situation for women improved in 2025, with the overall disparity in favour of men falling from 8.3 percentage points in 2024, to 3.6 percentage points in 2025. Nineteen per cent of females in Northern Ireland were earning below the threshold in 2025, compared with 15.4 per cent of males. This compares favourably with 2024, when almost a quarter of women (24.1%) were earning less than the index rate. In Derry City and Strabane, for example, the proportion of women earning below the threshold has fallen from 31.5 per cent in 2024 to 22.4 per cent in 2025. Similarly in Mid and East Antrim, the relevant proportions have decreased from 30.3 per cent to 21.3 per cent

**Table 4 : Proportion of employee jobs with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than the living wage by Gender and work LGD, 2023 – 2025**

| LGD                     | 2023 (revised) |             | 2024 (revised) |             | 2025 (provisional) |             |
|-------------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
|                         | Male (%)       | Female (%)  | Male (%)       | Female (%)  | Male (%)           | Female (%)  |
| Antrim & Newtownabbey   | x              | 15.7        | 16.5           | 26.9        | 17.2               | 19.9        |
| Ards and North Down     | x              | 21.0        | 30.3           | 28.9        | 25.1               | 23.0        |
| Armagh, Ban & Craigavon | 13.2           | 20.6        | 17.1           | 25.1        | 18.4               | 20.5        |
| Belfast                 | 9.6            | 13.3        | 11.2           | 15.9        | 10.1               | 13.2        |
| Causeway Coast & Glens  | 23.8           | 21.5        | 25.4           | 32.5        | 25.1               | 26.8        |
| Derry City and Strabane | 16.7           | 25.6        | 16.9           | 31.5        | 16.7               | 22.4        |
| Fermanagh and Omagh     | x              | 15.8        | 19.8           | 26.0        | 20.7               | 21.5        |
| Lisburn and Castlereagh | x              | 16.5        | 17.0           | 25.5        | x                  | 19.8        |
| Mid Ulster              | x              | 24.6        | 15.7           | 32.9        | x                  | 21.4        |
| Mid and East Antrim     | 15.8           | 31.8        | 15.5           | 30.3        | 17.4               | 21.3        |
| Newry Mourne & Down     | 18.0           | 17.6        | 19.3           | 24.8        | 21.4               | 23.4        |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> | <b>13.5</b>    | <b>18.3</b> | <b>15.8</b>    | <b>24.1</b> | <b>15.4</b>        | <b>19.0</b> |

\*sample size too low for reliable estimate; Source: ASHE 2025

### 4.3 Employment Status

Table 5 (below) presents the figures for earnings below the RLW by employment status (full- and part-time) for the eleven local government districts (LGDs). The table shows that, in all three years, part-time employees in Northern Ireland were substantially more likely to be earning below the RLW than their full-time counterparts.

In 2025, for example, an estimated 33 per cent of part-time employees in Northern Ireland were being paid less than the RLW, compared with 10.9 per cent of their full-time counterparts. There were, however, some improvements in the position of part-time workers. In 2024, over 40 per cent of part-time employees in five council areas fell below the threshold. The following year this situation applied in only one council area (Causeway Coast & Glens).

**Table 5 : Proportion of employee jobs with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than the living wage by Employment status and work LGD, 2022 – 2024**

| LGD                     | 2023 (revised) |               | 2024 (revised) |               | 2025 (provisional) |               |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
|                         | Full-time (%)  | Part-time (%) | Full-time (%)  | Part-time (%) | Full-time (%)      | Part-time (%) |
| Antrim & Newtownabbey   | 9.1            | 26.1          | 13.1           | 45.3          | 12.2               | 35.9          |
| Ards and North Down     | x              | 32.1          | 18.5           | 45.3          | 15.7               | 36.1          |
| Armagh, Ban & Craigavon | 12.4           | 27.2          | 13.9           | 37.9          | 14.5               | 31.9          |
| Belfast                 | 6.8            | 26.3          | 8.2            | 32.0          | 6.7                | 27.5          |
| Causeway Coast & Glens  | 16.7           | 35.6          | 22.0           | 42.6          | 15.9               | 41.7          |
| Derry City and Strabane | 12.1           | 38.5          | 18.0           | 38.0          | 12.9               | 35.3          |
| Fermanagh and Omagh     | x              | 26.7          | 17.6           | 33.1          | 15.2               | 33.5          |
| Lisburn and Castlereagh | x              | 26.7          | 12.1           | 41.5          | x                  | 32.1          |
| Mid Ulster              | 16.3           | 28.9          | 14.6           | 45.5          | 13.6               | 35.5          |
| Mid and East Antrim     | 17.9           | 35.1          | 17.1           | 35.3          | 13.2               | 35.3          |
| Newry Mourne & Down     | 12.2           | 29.0          | 14.8           | 37.2          | 15.3               | 34.0          |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> | <b>10.5</b>    | <b>29.4</b>   | <b>12.9</b>    | <b>38.0</b>   | <b>10.9</b>        | <b>33.0</b>   |

\*sample size too low for reliable estimate.

In 2025, Belfast had the smallest proportion of part-time employees (27.5%) earning below the threshold, while Causeway Coast & Glens (41.7%) had the largest.

## 5 Summary

This Briefing Note contains an analysis of data on the Living Wage from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for the years 2023, 2024 and 2025. Specifically, the analysis focused on those employees paid below the *Real Living Wage* in the 11 district council areas of Northern Ireland.

The work of the local franchise, Living Wage NI, in signing up new employers appears to have had some success, with the number of accredited businesses in Northern Ireland committed to paying the RLW rising from 87 in November 2023 to 200 in November 2025. This is reflected in the proportion of employees paid below the RLW falling from 20.5 per cent in 2024 to 17.3 per cent in 2025, a drop of 3.2 percentage points.

In broad terms, those council areas closest to Belfast tend to have the smallest proportion of employees earning less than the RLW. These include Belfast Lisburn and Castlereagh, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, and Antrim and Newtownabbey. Conversely, council areas in the peripheral regions of the West and North East have the highest proportion earning below the RLW. Notably, Causeway Coast and Glens, Newry, Mourne & Down, Fermanagh and Omagh, Derry City and Strabane, Ards and North Down, and Mid Ulster.

The analysis also showed that women in Northern Ireland are more likely than men to earn below the RLW threshold. Similarly, part-time employees are considerably more likely to be paid less than the RLW than their full-time counterparts. In 2025, for example, an estimated 33 per cent of part-time employees in Northern Ireland were being paid less than the RLW, compared with 10.9 per cent of their full-time colleagues.

Regionally, Northern Ireland was ranked second highest out of 12 UK regions in 2025, in terms of the proportion of employees earning below the RLW. The Northern Ireland figure (17.3%) was nearly three percentage points higher than

the UK average (14.6%). However, this figure compares favourably with the previous year (2024) when the gap was almost five percentage points.