

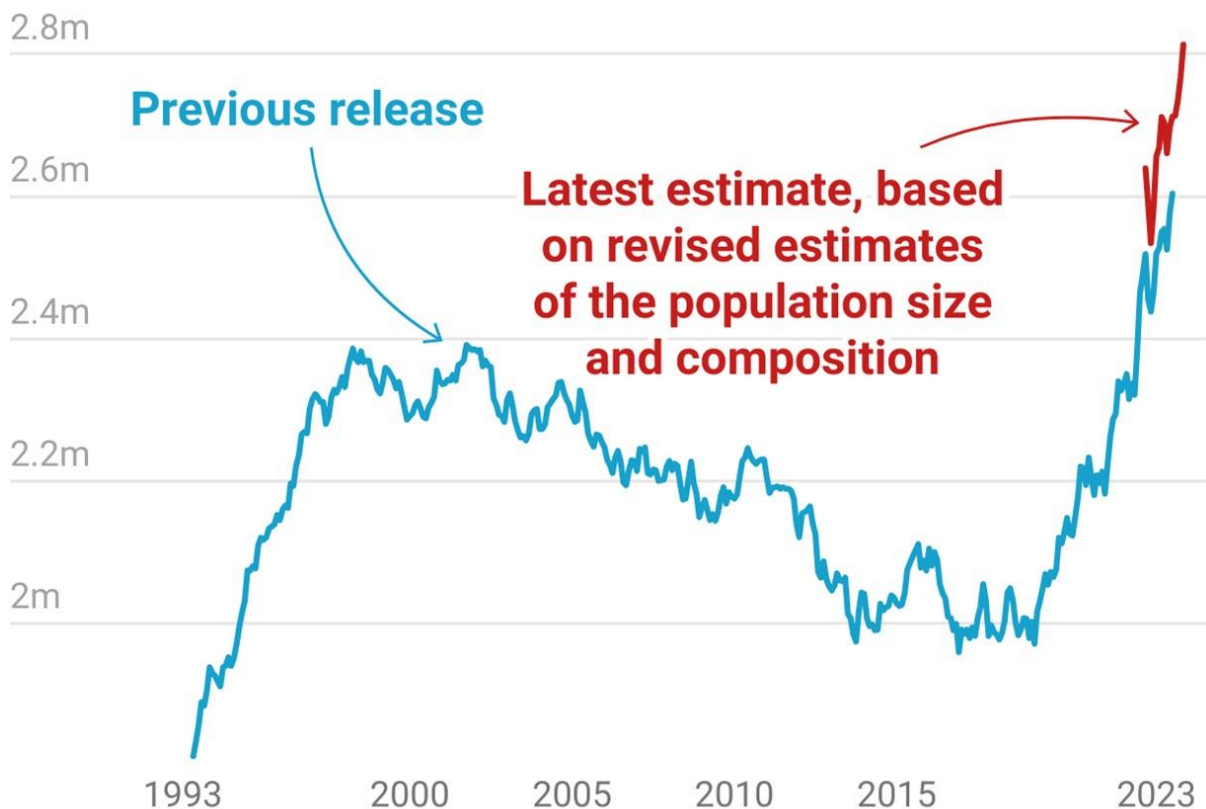
True extent of sick note Britain revealed.

By Michael Simmons

Britain has a massive sick-note problem – but we did not, until today, know just how large. Every three months, the ONS surveys 35,000 people using the results to guess how many are not working due, for example, to long-term sickness. That figure was 2.6 million last summer. But it has today been revised upwards by 200,000 – equivalent to the population of Norwich or Aberdeen – to 2.8 million. The chart of those too sick to work, already one of the most alarming in UK economics, now looks even worse.

Long-term sick

ONS estimates of economic inactivity due to long term sickness



Figures to Sep-Nov 2023

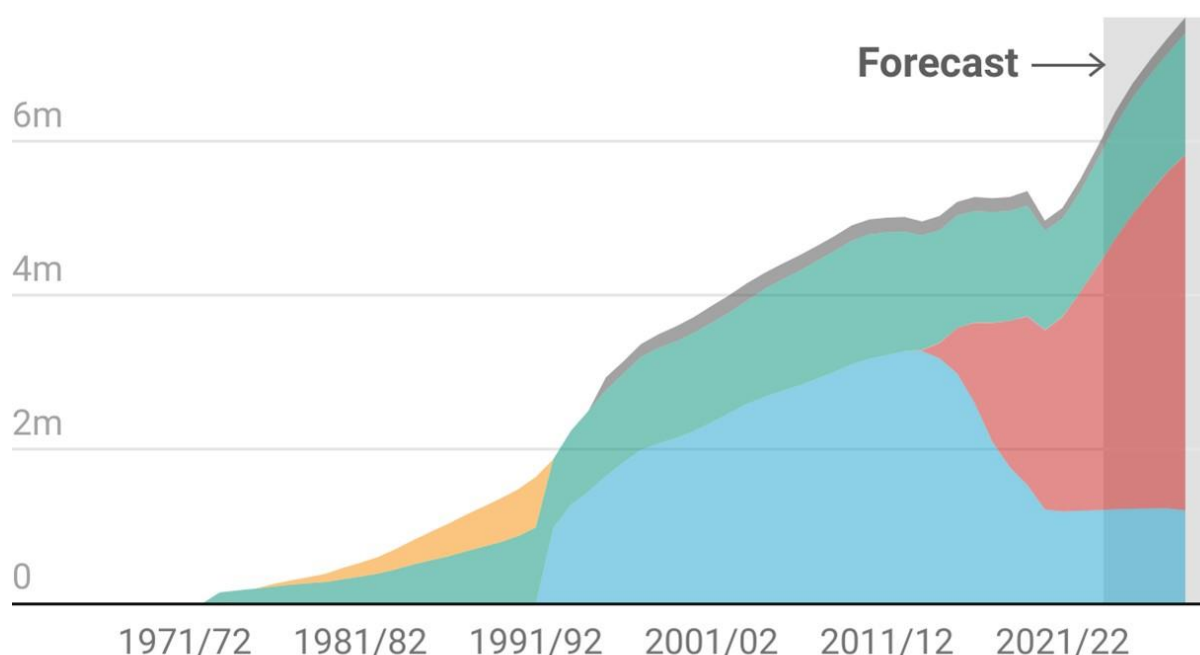
Chart: The Spectator (Ix4Le) • Source: ONS (reweighted LFS data 5 Feb 2023 & series LF69) • Created with Datawrapper

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) – the tool that statisticians use to work out employment, unemployment and economic inactivity (those out of work who are not looking for it either) – has been ‘reweighted’ because population estimates had undercounted how many people live in the UK. The UK is still suffering massive worker shortages (there are almost a million vacancies) which has been boosting the need for immigration. So the sick-note culture is creating a vacuum in the heart of the labour market, increasing net migration and the resulting pressures this brings. The Department for Work and Pensions predicts this will get much worse: we have compiled its forecasts in *The Spectator’s* [data hub](#). One of the charts is below. The shaded grey area will be a challenge that confronts whichever party wins the next election.

Disability benefits

Caseload

DLA PIP AFIP AA MA Entitled without payment



DLA = Disability Living Allowance, PIP = Personal Independence Payment, AA = Attendance Allowance, MA = Mobility Allowance, AFIP = Armed Forces Independence Payment

Chart: The Spectator (nl37i) • Source: DWP Benefit expenditure and caseload tables, Autumn Statement 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

One upshot of today's figures is that there are more people in employment than previously thought (as a result of a bigger population). The unemployment rate was also revised down to 3.9 per cent, having previously been estimated at 4.2 per cent. But the real number of people unemployed and economically inactive went up. Employment rose from just under 33 million to just over; unemployment went up by 30,000. The biggest revision was for inactivity, which rose by nearly half a million people to 9.3 million.

The revised population estimates showed Britain to be a younger country than we had previously thought too. These changes have driven the increase in unemployment and inactivity, since more and more young people are studying rather than filling jobs.

These figures are not what the government wanted. There had been hope within the Department for Work and Pensions that revisions to the LFS would lead to positive news on Britain's labour market – which has seen one of the slowest recoveries in the developed world – but the opposite has happened.

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