

Trade Nation



Foreword

The common characterisation of tradespeople as ‘white van man’ doesn’t paint a true picture and overlooks the unique needs and aspirations of a vast and vital population. From plumbers to electricians, roofers to painters and decorators, the UK’s 900,000 tradies and their businesses are anything but the same. Simplistic stereotyping doesn’t do justice to a dynamic, sophisticated scene that is key to the future of the UK economy.

Across Whitehall departments, the trade sector is critical to delivering the Government’s missions. Who will wake up each morning to build the homes desperately needed by families throughout the UK? Who will modernise them to reduce bills for hardworking people? And who will make those much-needed repairs to your parents’ leaking roof?

Tradespeople are the often forgotten, often underappreciated, backbone of the UK economy — helping the country to grow. For politicians who long for simple monikers to understand the electorate, the days of Mondeo Man or Holby City Woman are well and truly over. But with Labour, the Conservatives, and Reform all fighting to speak for people working in manual jobs, the political class need to understand far more about what makes them tick.

Checkatrade represents 100,000 quality British tradespeople. In collaboration with Opinium, we have conducted independent research with 850 of them to help us dig deeper into who they are, the barriers they face, and how the UK can make sure they have the tools needed to grow their businesses, and grow the UK economy.

The issues tradespeople face are significant. They include a heavy tax burden, a web of regulation, and a chronic skills shortage, all alongside battling against the spiralling cost of materials and levels of tool theft.

But tradies are doers and grafters. There might be barriers, but fixing problems is in their DNA, and they are optimistic about Britain and optimistic about how to drive their businesses forward. Most who don’t already own their own business want to. They want to seize opportunities to expand into new sectors, like decarbonising homes and being a part of how the UK reaches its net-zero targets.

Other insights include how the more manual industries, like many others, are embracing new technology. The report highlights that they are not frightened by AI, for example. They want to harness it to improve the work they deliver for their customers, as well as reduce the time and energy they spend on administration which diverts away from the task at hand.

While this report offers many insights, one point stands out clearly: the growing importance of tradespeople’s votes. The political influence of them is on the rise. Their support is essential for getting governments elected, but, crucially, this report underscores why backing trades is so vital. Without the support of trades, no government would be able to tackle the pressing challenges facing the country.

Looking beyond the ‘white van man’ and better understanding the needs and aspirations of Britain’s tradespeople has never been more important.

Jambu Palaniappan
Chief Executive at Checkatrade



Chapter 1:
**Beyond
the 'white
van man'**

Chapter 1: Beyond the 'white van man'

The 900,000 people in the UK who work in the trade industry are anything but one homogeneous group. Not only do they span industries — from installing the latest low-carbon technology to retrofitting homes using skills from carpentry to electricals, plumbing to metalwork — our data shows there are four core groups that politicians need to understand if this part of the economy is to grow.

'White van man' has never been a useful proxy for understanding the UK's tradespeople. To get under the skin of how to grow this £138bn¹ industry, we need to understand what drives and limits its different groups, and what policies will support them in growing their businesses.

Jugglers

Mainly in their 20s and 30s, Jugglers are the group who tend to have a side hustle, taking on extra work outside of their day jobs. They are ambitious, they want to own their own business in the future, and finding ways to make extra money is crucial for understanding who they are.

Making up 19% of the trade workforce, they want to expand their team and hire more people, they regularly use digital tools and platforms to support their work, and they spend significant amounts of money each year advertising their business.

The two main barriers they face include the burden of administration and ensuring they have enough money to carry out their day-to-day operations. Two-thirds (65%) say that cash flow management is a challenge to growing their business, while six-in-ten (60%) say they are held back by administration taking too much time and energy for their firm.

Hungry Strivers

A fifth of tradespeople (21%) are entrepreneurs who lead their own business, or are planning to set up on their own in the near future — the Hungry Strivers. Many have built their companies up and work across whole regions of the country, employing a significant number of tradespeople to carry out their work.

Entrepreneurs primarily see their growth coming from expanding their activities across the regions where they operate, and put a premium on completing work to a high standard rather than ensuring a job is carried out as quickly as possible.

A lack of skills is the key barrier limiting growth for entrepreneurs. Seven-in-ten (70%) say they need more people to complete jobs for them, with the right training and skills, while half (49%) rely on subcontracting work to skilled tradespeople to get jobs done. The challenge of upskilling existing contractors to acquire new skills is also considered a major obstacle.



Chapter 1: Beyond the 'white van man'**Hard Grafters**

More likely to be sole traders, Hard Grafters tend to be younger, and are unconcerned about working long hours. Three-quarters (75%) say they would happily work weekends, early mornings, and late nights to earn extra money. Out of each group of tradespeople, this group are the least likely to say that they take pride in doing a job well, even if it takes longer to complete.

Grafters are also the group most wary of technology. Nearly a third (27%) say they feel threatened by artificial intelligence, with two-thirds (64%) saying they recognise that they should make better use of online tools to support them in managing their business.

Grafters are ambitious about their business growth. More than two in five (43%) want to expand the size of their team, over a third (34%) want to operate in new areas, and over a quarter (28%) want to expand their work to complete new types of jobs for customers.

But achieving that growth remains a challenge. Three-quarters (73%) say the rising costs of tools and materials is a key barrier. Meanwhile, nearly seven-in-ten (69%) say that business taxes have exceeded sustainable levels.

Simple Lifers

The final significant group of tradespeople are the Simple Lifers. They tend to be older, in their late 40s, 50s, and 60s, and are skilled in the work that they carry out. They usually work in their immediate local area, and for them, while they work hard, prioritising work-life balance is important. This means they often don't want to pick up longer, more complex jobs.

Doing a job to the highest quality is important to them. Nine-in-ten (90%) say they take pride in their work and doing a job well, even if it takes them longer to complete, and two-thirds (65%) focus on developing new skills for themselves.

**Nine-in-ten say
they take pride
in their work and
doing a job well**

Making sure they have a skilled team to work with remains a challenge, however. Three-quarters say they struggle to hire skilled tradespeople to work alongside or to directly employ. Despite this, they don't feel the current apprenticeship model is working for them. Just 16% have hired an apprentice recently, and over two-fifths (43%) say they never have, and don't have plans to.



Chapter 2: The tradespeople driving UK growth

‘British tradespeople are, and will remain, the backbone of our economy. From building new homes to making essential upgrades to our housing stock that save families money on their energy bills, their hard work keeps the country moving forward. Despite facing numerous challenges, tradespeople are Britain’s problem-solvers, creating jobs and driving growth. Without their skill and dedication, Britain simply would not function.’

Louie French MP

Chapter 2: The trades-people driving UK growth

The economic impact of the UK's tradespeople

The contribution of tradespeople is often overlooked. The latest data highlights that the construction industry, with tradespeople at its heart, is one of the largest sectors in the UK economy.² According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2023 the total value of construction-related work increased by 4.2%, reaching a record high of £139bn.³

Specifically focusing on the economic impact of skilled trades, from carpenters, builders, and electricians, to painters and scaffolders, analysis for Checkatrade's 2024 Trade Skills Index found that the home improvement sector currently accounts for 1.7% of GDP.⁴ Its economic impact is set to grow considerably over the next decade. By 2033, data shows that it will make up 2.4% of the UK's GDP, equivalent to an increase of £24bn.⁵

**900,000
people are
employed
in trades**



The number of people working in trade industries, whether in plumbing, as electricians, or in painting and decorating, is also significant. 900,000 people are employed in trades,⁶ which is 74% more than are employed full-time in the UK's civil service.⁷

Going for growth

There are billions of pounds' worth of untapped growth in the UK's trade sector, but the scale of the industry's ambitions is significant. More than six-in-ten (62%) tradespeople view growing their business as their top priority. Nowhere is this more true than with young people who work in the trades, with four-in-every-five 18- to 34-year-olds (82%) reporting that expanding their company is their number one goal.



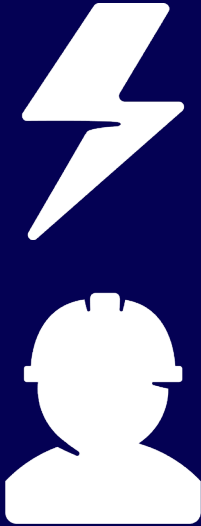
But growing existing businesses isn't the only priority. Nine-in-every-ten (90%) want to either set up their own business one day, or co-own their own firm. Trades with the highest aspirations are found in London, with almost all (98%) stating that they want to set up their own business or co-own one, closely followed by those in the South East (97%).

While business pessimism may dominate the headlines, many tradespeople remain optimistic despite the barriers they face. Seven-in-ten (72%) say they are confident about the future of their trade businesses, compared to just 7% who feel pessimistic about what lies ahead.

This contrasts with the business sector more broadly, which is less positive than tradespeople. According to analysis by the British Chambers of Commerce, only half (56%) of businesses surveyed believe there is untapped growth potential in the UK economy.⁸

Roofing trades are particularly optimistic, with more than nine-in-ten (96%) expressing confidence in the future of their businesses. In contrast, only one-in-five painters (58%) share the same optimism.

Chapter 2: The trades-people driving UK growth



Seven-in-ten electricians and eight-in-ten plumbers and heat installers believe the growth in home decarbonisation and the Government's net-zero commitments will fuel their business growth

The high-growth sectors

While tradespeople are bullish about their growth prospects, opportunities aren't evenly spread in the industry. There are a series of high-growth sectors which are likely to generate the most new jobs and the highest levels of economic growth.

The move to renewable energy is key to this. Seven-in-ten electricians (69%) and eight-in-ten plumbers and heat installers (79%) believe the increase in home decarbonisation and the Government's net-zero commitments will fuel their business growth.

Tradespeople operating in areas impacted by the push towards low carbon energy and decarbonisation are actively pushing for opportunities to grow their businesses in this way. Three-fifths (58%) of plumbing and heat installers say they are proactively exploring opportunities to expand their businesses.

This is reflected in the optimism of tradespeople who can support the move towards renewable energy. Nearly nine-in-ten (86%) electricians and eight-in-ten tradespeople working directly in renewable energy say they have a positive outlook for their business.



A close-up photograph of a person's arm and hand holding a yellow tape measure against a wooden board. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. The background is blurred, showing an indoor setting with wooden elements.

Chapter 3: **Barriers** **to growth**

Chapter 3: Barriers to growth

As evidenced above, tradespeople are optimistic about their businesses and eager to drive growth. However, challenges remain. Our data found that the five most significant barriers to growth for tradespeople were:

Rising material costs (79%)

Late payments (72%)

The skills shortage (71%)

Business taxes (69%)

The ability to organise jobs efficiently (65%)

The rising costs of materials

Unlike many other industries where service costs can be adjusted to offset inflationary pressures, tradespeople face a direct impact from rising material costs. This leaves little room to absorb the increase elsewhere. They have no choice but to keep purchasing materials to keep their businesses running and build the nation's homes.

Inflationary pressures on materials and labour costs stifle business expansion. Research from UK Finance shows that many of these costs have increased by between 15% and 20% since 2020.⁹ The rising cost of materials was identified as the biggest barrier to growth for tradespeople in our research, with four-fifths (79%) citing it as a factor hindering their progress, rising to nine-in-ten (88%) for the smallest businesses.

This issue is most acute in the East Midlands, where nine-in-ten (90%) consider it a key obstacle, followed closely by trades in the West Midlands (88%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (87%)

Our findings are supported by the latest Government data, which finds that construction prices have risen sharply, outpacing consumer inflation. For instance, between Q3 2024 and Q4 2024, the cost of key building materials saw significant increases.¹⁰ The price of sand and gravel rose by 7.2%, concrete by 9.5%, and bricks by 8.5%. These increases will have a profound impact on businesses seeking to grow, and may ultimately hinder their ability to meet the Government's goal of building 1.5 million homes.

Late payments

Much like other small businesses across the country, being paid on time was also cited as a barrier to growth. The Government has committed to cracking down on the issue, with proposed legislation to give powers to the Small Business Commissioner to carry out spot checks and enforce a 30-day invoice verification period.

According to research by Aldermore, over seven-in-ten (72%) of SMEs have some form of outstanding late payment from customers, with the average amount totalling over £96,000 — a 41% increase from 2023.¹¹

Our findings support this, with 72% of trade businesses identifying late payments from customers as a strain on their business. This has major knock-on implications for buying supplies, hiring staff, and committing to future work. This problem is particularly acute for the smallest businesses (1–9 employees), with almost eight-in-ten (78%) agreeing that being paid on time was a barrier to growth.

However, there is a divergence across the UK's regions. The problem is most pronounced in the North East and East Midlands, where nearly nine-in-ten (89%) cite it as an issue. This falls to five-in-ten (55%) in the South West and four-in-ten (43%) in Wales.

‘We know that late payment is an issue that impacts too many businesses and my Office is working to address this with a casework team that can deal with overdue invoices, producing content on how to contract well to get paid on time, and showcasing companies that are doing the right thing through the Fair Payment Code. There is more to do and proposed legislation will take us a big step further in building a positive payment culture across the UK. I’m on a mission to get money moving faster through the economy and hope the Checkatrade community will see the benefit of this.’

**Emma Jones CBE,
Small Business Commissioner**

Chapter 3: Barriers to growth**Skills shortage**

Severe shortages in the number of skilled tradespeople remains a key barrier to growth in this sector. If unresolved, economic growth will be limited, and there will be a major impact on the delivery of many of the Government's priorities.

71% of tradespeople say that recruiting people with the right skills is their primary barrier to growing their business

A significant majority (71%) of tradespeople say that recruiting people with the right skills is their primary barrier to growing their business. Checkatrade research found that 377,000 tradespeople need to be recruited solely to replace retirees, in addition to the 734,000 required to meet the current demand in the home improvement, repair, and construction sectors.¹²

However, there is hope that these skills gaps will close. Data from more than 250,000 students across the country finds that moving into the trade or construction sector is among the most popular career paths for young people in Year 11.¹³ Converting this aspiration into action will be key to meeting demand over the next decade.

Indeed, it will be important to highlight the benefits of a lucrative career as an electrician or plumber, for example, particularly as AI gradually replaces many traditional white-collar jobs. Tradespeople will remain relatively insulated from this shift for the foreseeable future, becoming even more important in the process.

These labour shortages concentrate in high-growth areas. In decarbonisation and net-zero sectors, labour deficiencies are most acute. Nearly nine-in-every ten (88%) plumbers and heating installers cite shortages as a blocker on their growth ambitions, despite significant demand to grow.

One of the main routes into the industry historically has been apprenticeships. But apprenticeship uptake remains low. Half (47%) of tradespeople have never hired apprentices and say they have no plans to do in future. Despite the high association between manual jobs and apprenticeship routes, just a quarter (26%) of trades say they have hired an apprentice in the last year.

The concerns tradespeople have with hiring an apprentice are wide-ranging. Concerns over costs top the list of barriers, with a third (31%) worrying about the amount of money it will cost their business. The same proportion identify finding the right candidate (31%) and finding candidates with the right skills they need (31%) as blocks on hiring new trainees.

This follows economic analysis that showed apprentice completions in 2023/24 were 30% below their 2017/18 peak.¹⁴



Chapter 3: Barriers to growth**Taxation and regulation**

According to data from the British Chambers of Commerce, 59% of businesses now cite taxation as a concern, marking the second-highest level recorded.¹⁵ This aligns with our new findings, though the issue is even more pronounced for tradespeople.

Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) consider taxation a key barrier to growth, with those looking to expand their businesses feeling the impact most, as seven-in-ten of those looking to grow their business also (68%) identify it as a significant obstacle.

The tax burden is a key issue for small business expansion. Seven-in-every-ten (70%) trades say that business taxes have exceeded sustainable levels, and this problem is particularly hitting small- and medium-sized trade businesses with a turnover below £250,000.

Inflation and high interest rates are also causing challenges for more than half (51%) of tradespeople, while Government policies to increase employer National Insurance Contributions have been a barrier to growth for a third (30%) of businesses over the last twelve months.

Increased regulation is also impacting growth, with two-thirds (64%) of tradespeople saying they struggle to keep pace with Government regulatory changes. Half (53%) worry about getting into legal disputes with customers if something goes wrong, while a fifth (22%) of trades identified the Government's changes to employment rights as an area that has put pressure on their business and their ability to grow.

Seven-in-ten trades reported being able to organise jobs efficiently as a key barrier to growth

Bureaucracy and administrative tasks

Tradespeople work manual jobs — it is impossible to install a roof, a boiler, or a fuse box remotely. But the shift away from analogue methods of engaging with customers, taking payments, and ordering supplies is unavoidable. With the majority of tradespeople in small businesses, a lack of greater adoption will significantly limit growth.

Our findings show that seven-in-ten (69%) trades reported being able to organise jobs efficiently as a key barrier to growth.

Similarly, we found that three-in-five (61%) trades report that admin consumes excessive time and energy. More than half (53%) also say keeping track of invoices is a challenge, and a similar proportion (52%) believe that limited payment options are a barrier to business growth.

This is where technology can have the greatest impact. Seven-in-ten (70%) say that online tools will help them to better deliver their work, from acquiring more customers, to speeding up their ability to complete jobs.

Chapter 3: Barriers to growth

The ability for tradespeople to make greater use of AI tools to support their business growth is also popular, with more than four-in-five (83%) saying they always want to look for ways to work smarter, not harder.

Among established trades, nearly two-thirds (65%) embrace the use of AI, with a similar proportion (60%) saying they are unthreatened by it. Virtual assistants are one of the most popular areas where trades say they can cut time-consuming administrative tasks, with nearly seven-in-ten (68%) backing greater adoption. But trades recognise the challenges of using many of the tools that already exist. While

70% say that online platforms will make it easier for them to find work and get their name out there to new customers, over two-thirds (68%) feel that existing platforms aren't designed to be useful for people in their industry.

Tool theft

Tool theft has become a major issue for people working across the industry. Research shows that £98 million worth of tools were stolen from tradespeople in 2023.¹⁶ Police recorded 44,000 incidents in 2023, which is one theft every 12 minutes, and 40 thefts every single day.

Data shows that seven-in-ten (75%) of trades have had their tools stolen.¹⁷ This means jobs are cancelled and trust breaks down between tradespeople and their customers, all of which limits trade businesses from growing.



‘These statistics are devastating, but they only tell part of the story. Construction has the highest suicide rate of any profession, four times higher than others. When tools are stolen, tradespeople don’t just lose equipment; they lose their ability to work and support their families.

We need new protections for victims, so the provision in this government’s Sentencing Bill that courts must now consider the full impact on victims, not just the value of stolen tools, is an important step. We’ve secured restriction zones to keep thieves away from sites and tougher community sentences with real consequences.

But this is just the beginning. Every tradesperson deserves to go to work knowing their tools will be there at the end of the day.’

Amanda Martin MP



Recommendations to government

Recommendations to government

Maximising growth opportunities

Green revolution

- Ensure the widest possible eligibility for grants and loans under the Warm Homes Plan, to drive consumer demand for home upgrades and low-carbon technologies.
- Expand eligibility for Government-commissioned work to additional schemes so skilled tradespeople can maximise the growth opportunities that decarbonisation presents, while protecting consumers and helping the Government reach its targets.

AI adoption

- Create a digital adoption fund to provide low-level, interest-free loans to SMEs to trial adopting approved technologies, helping firms take the first step towards a technological future.

Planning

- Expand permitted development rights for larger home extensions and for energy-saving home upgrades.

Tackling barriers to growth

Skills

- Exempt apprentices from employee NICs contributions, provided they remain in their apprenticeship for at least two years.
- Give tax incentives to construction businesses who take on apprentices for the first time.
- Partner schools with construction firms to provide work experience for interested pupils safely on sites aged 15, matching them with potential future employers.

Tax

- Review the small business tax regime, to eliminate the complex system of reliefs, allowances, and 'cliff edges' throughout the tax landscape while holding Dividend Tax and Capital Gains Tax at their current levels.
- Reform Stamp Duty to incentivise specific investments pre-house sale, through reliefs that offset heat pumps, insulation, or window improvements.
- Increase the VAT registration threshold to save more businesses from its administrative burdens.

- Increase the Advisory Fuel Rate to above-market value for electric vans to encourage greater uptake.

Tool theft

- Introduce harsher penalties and collaborate with industry to tackle the scourge of tool theft.

Day-to-day burdens

- Implement Making Tax Digital (MTD) in full, including through e-invoicing, supporting businesses to a smooth transition.

Late payments

- Introduce legislation to end late payments in this parliamentary session.

Regulatory burdens

- Launch a full review of the building regulations to remove provisions that do not provide sufficient benefits.

Methodology



What people think, feel and do

To understand the UK's tradespeople, Opinium carried out research with 850 people working across the industry. Field work took place between 11 and 25 July 2025, and the sample was weighted to be representative of the current trades market. To weight the sample, we used the most recent ONS datasets, focusing on industry and business size. We recruited respondents across a range of business sizes and industries and applied a balanced weighting scheme to align the sample distribution with the true market, based on the ONS dataset, without reducing the effective sample.



¹ GOV.UK. BEIS Construction sector team. [\[online\]](#)

² GOV.UK. BEIS Construction sector team. [\[online\]](#)

³ Office for National Statistics (2023). Construction statistics, Great Britain. [\[online\]](#) Ons.gov.uk.

⁴ Trade Skills Index 2024 (2024). Trade Skills Index 2024. [\[online\]](#) FlippingBook. Launched at Labour Party Conference 2024.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kingfisher.com. (2023). UK to lose out on £98bn of growth by 2030 due to shortage of tradespeople. [\[online\]](#).

⁷ Worlidge, J., Aiyar-Majeed, S. and Grama, T. (2024). Civil Service Staff Numbers. [\[online\]](#) Institute for Government.

⁸ British Chambers of Commerce. (2025). Subdued Summer as Business Costs Hit - British Chambers of Commerce. [\[online\]](#) [Accessed 15 Sep. 2025].

⁹ Dyson, A. (2024). The evolving cost of construction in the UK: Trends, challenges, and future outlook. [\[online\]](#) UK Finance.

¹⁰ Department for Business and Trade (2025). Construction building materials: commentary February 2025. [\[online\]](#) GOV.UK.

¹¹ Aldermore.co.uk. (2024). SME late payments increasing by 48% with £348 billion in outstanding payments | Aldermore Bank. [\[online\]](#)

¹² Trade Skills Index 2024 (2024). Trade Skills Index 2024. [\[online\]](#) FlippingBook.

¹³ Insight Briefing: Student and career readiness 2023/24 (2024). The Careers & Enterprise Company.

¹⁴ Trade Skills Index 2024 (2024). Trade Skills Index 2024. [\[online\]](#) FlippingBook.

¹⁵ British Chambers of Commerce. (2025). Toxic Mix As Businesses Prepare for Tax Rise - British Chambers of Commerce. [\[online\]](#)

¹⁶ DLG Website. (2024). £98 million worth of tools stolen from tradespeople. [\[online\]](#)

¹⁷ Builders Merchant News. (2025). Nearly 90% of UK tradespeople worry about tool theft in 2025. [\[online\]](#)