News Release

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IHS MARKIT / CIPS UK SERVICES PMI®

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Service sector output and employment fall at much slower pace in February

KEY FINDINGS

Business activity almost stable in second month of lockdown

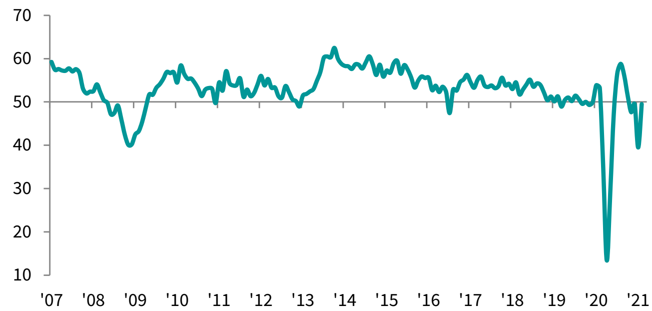
Slowest drop in staffing numbers since pandemic began

Optimism continues to rise in response to vaccine roll out

February data were collected 11-24 February 2021.

Services Business Activity Index

sa, >50 = growth since previous month



Sources: IHS Markit, CIPS

February data indicated that a degree of stability returned to the UK service sector after the sharp downturn in output at the start of 2021. Restrictions on travel, leisure and hospitality due to the national lockdown continued to curtail overall activity, but there were some pockets of growth in technology and business services.

Staffing levels decreased at the slowest pace since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic first hit employment numbers last March. Furlough arrangements again softened the degree of job shedding among consumer service providers, while there were also reports that improving optimism towards the business outlook had helped to stabilise employment.

Vaccine roll out progress and confidence about the prospect of looser restrictions on trade resulted in a fourth consecutive monthly rise in business expectations across the service economy.

The headline seasonally adjusted IHS Markit/CIPS UK Services PMI® Business Activity Index registered 49.5 in February, up sharply from an eight-month low of 39.5 in January. The headline index has posted below the crucial 50.0 no-change mark in each month since November 2020, but the latest reading signalled the slowest decline in service sector output over this period.

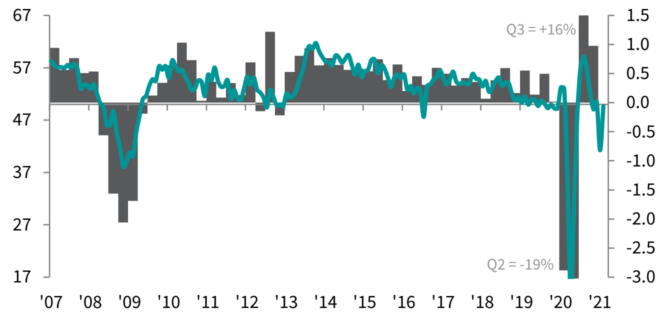
New business volumes fell only slightly during February, with the rate of contraction easing considerably from that seen at the start of the third national lockdown in January. Subdued demand was mainly attributed to a lack of sales opportunities and hesitancy among clients due to the pandemic. Survey respondents also cited Brexit-related difficulties as a factor holding back sales to customers in the European Union. Latest data indicated that new work from abroad continued to fall sharply. While the rate of decline slowed since January, it remained sharper than that seen for total new orders. International travel restrictions were the most commonly cited reason for lower exports, followed by regulatory and supply chain issues that had arisen since Brexit.

A lack of forward-bookings and reduced pressure on business capacity contributed to another decrease in backlogs of work across the service economy. Moreover, the latest fall in unfinished business was the fastest since June 2020. However, job shedding was only marginal and business expectations for the next 12 months improved in February, with vaccine roll outs and hopes of a sustained economic recovery leading to the highest level of confidence since December 2006.

The latest survey highlighted a sharp and accelerated increase in average cost burdens at service sector companies. Input price inflation was the strongest for 12 months, with higher fuel bills and greater shipping costs among the most commonly cited reasons in February. Efforts to relieve pressure on margins and, in some cases, improved pricing power due to pent up customer demand, resulted in the fastest rise in output charges across the service sector since February 2020.

IHS MARKIT UK COMPOSITE PMI®

Gap between manufacturing and service sector performance narrows



Sources: IHS Markit, ONS.

UK private sector output fell only slightly in February and the rate of decline was much slower than at the start of the year. At 49.6 in February, up from 41.2 in January, the seasonally adjusted UK Composite Output Index was below the neutral 50.0 value but broadly in line with the average seen during the final two months of 2020. The index is a weighted average of the Manufacturing Output Index and the Services Business Activity Index*.

The gap between manufacturing and service sector performance narrowed considerably in February. Manufacturing production growth eased for the second month running to the weakest since the recovery began last June. While service sector activity remained in decline, the speed of the downturn was much slower than in January.

Employment numbers across the private sector as a whole were close to stabilisation in February (index at 49.7, up from 45.5 in January). Rising staffing levels at manufacturing companies contrasted with a slight reduction in the service economy.

Inflationary pressures intensified during the latest survey period, with overall input prices increasing to the greatest extent since October 2018. Manufacturers recorded a particularly steep rise in purchasing costs and this resulted in the fastest rate of factory gate price inflation for just over three years.

**Composite PMI indices are weighted averages of comparable manufacturing and services PMI indices. Weights reflect the relative size of the manufacturing and service sectors according to official GDP data.*

COMMENT

Tim Moore, Economics Director at IHS Markit, which compiles the survey:

“UK service sector activity was relatively stable in February and so it appears that the third national lockdown has seen limited spillovers to parts of the economy beyond the scope of government mandated closures. While customer-facing businesses continued to report severe constraints on activity due to the pandemic, there were signs of growth in technology and some business services after a disappointing start to 2021.

"Tighter restrictions on international travel meant that export sales remained an area of weakness for the service economy. Survey respondents cited regulatory issues and supply disruption as factors holding back new business wins from EU customers, which more than offset the positive impact on overseas demand from the economic recovery in the US and Asia-Pacific.

"Higher fuel bills and shipping costs pushed up operating expenses in February. Service providers have mostly absorbed pressure on margins from rising input costs over the past 12 months, but their latest increase in average charges was the fastest since the start of the pandemic. This often reflected additional charges due to greater transport costs and there were some reports that pent up domestic consumer demand had improved opportunities to raise prices for forward-bookings."

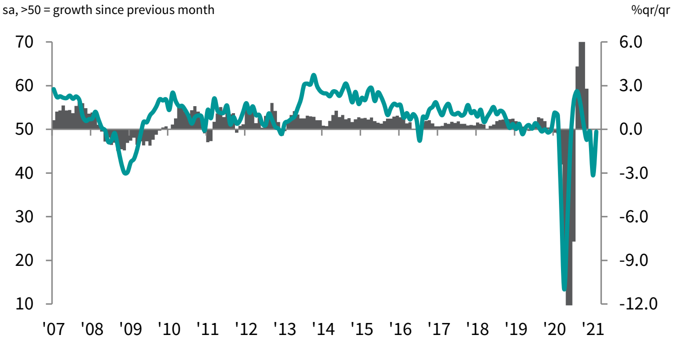
Duncan Brock, Group Director at the Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply, said:

"The dominant services sector bounced back in February and though remained in the contraction zone, presented a more positive picture than at the start of the year. Some growth from non-customer facing businesses helped to stabilise overall levels of activity. Vaccine programmes and the promised uplift in marketplace restrictions offered hope to ailing firms looking forward to a summer of roaring trade as optimism climbed to its highest since December 2006.

"The rain on this parade comes in the form of the highest rise in input costs since February 2020 which is being passed on to consumers at a faster rate, as shipping, fuel and fresh food deliveries went up in price. Added to this, the true employment picture is still hidden by extended furlough schemes making any surge in UK consumer spending limited if job insecurity ramps up and inflation rears its ugly head.

"No large reassurance offered here if border disruption continues for businesses, and any potential tax rises from the Chancellor today increases pressure on an economy damaged by Brexit and the pandemic combined."

Services Business Activity Index
Index of Services



Sources: IHS Markit, ONS.

CONTACT

IHS Markit

Joanna Vickers
Corporate Communications
T: +44 207 260 2234
joanna.vickers@ihsmarkit.com

Tim Moore
Economics Director
T: +44-1491-461-067
tim.moore@ihsmarkit.com

CIPS

Trudy Salandiak
Corporate Communications
T: +44-1780-761576
trudy.salandiak@cips.org

Methodology

The IHS Markit / CIPS UK Services PMI® is compiled by IHS Markit from responses to questionnaires sent to a panel of around 650 service sector companies. The sectors covered include consumer (excluding retail), transport, information, communication, finance, insurance, real estate and business services. The panel is stratified by detailed sector and company workforce size, based on contributions to GDP.

Survey responses are collected in the second half of each month and indicate the direction of change compared to the previous month. A diffusion index is calculated for each survey variable. The index is the sum of the percentage of 'higher' responses and half the percentage of 'unchanged' responses. The indices vary between 0 and 100, with a reading above 50 indicating an overall increase compared to the previous month, and below 50 an overall decrease. The indices are then seasonally adjusted.

The headline figure is the Services Business Activity Index. This is a diffusion index calculated from a question that asks for changes in the volume of business activity compared with one month previously. The Services Business Activity Index is comparable to the Manufacturing Output Index. It may be referred to as the 'Services PMI' but is not comparable with the headline manufacturing PMI figure.

The Composite Output Index is a weighted average of the Manufacturing Output Index and the Services Business Activity Index. The weights reflect the relative size of the manufacturing and service sectors according to official GDP data.

Underlying survey data are not revised after publication, but seasonal adjustment factors may be revised from time to time as appropriate which will affect the seasonally adjusted data series.

February data were collected 11-24 February 2021.

For further information on the PMI survey methodology, please contact economics@ihsmarkit.com.

About IHS Markit

IHS Markit (NYSE: INFO) is a world leader in critical information, analytics and solutions for the major industries and markets that drive economies worldwide. The company delivers next-generation information, analytics and solutions to customers in business, finance and government, improving their operational efficiency and providing deep insights that lead to well-informed, confident decisions. IHS Markit has more than 50,000 business and government customers, including 80 percent of the Fortune Global 500 and the world's leading financial institutions.

About CIPS

The Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS) is the world's largest procurement and supply professional organisation. It is the worldwide centre of excellence on purchasing and supply management issues. CIPS has a global community of 200,000 in over 150 countries, including senior business people, high-ranking civil servants and leading academics. The activities of procurement and supply chain professionals have a major impact on the profitability and efficiency of all types of organisation and CIPS offers corporate solutions packages to improve business profitability.

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About PMI

Purchasing Managers' Index® (PMI®) surveys are now available for over 40 countries and also for key regions including the eurozone. They are the most closely watched business surveys in the world, favoured by central banks, financial markets and business decision makers for their ability to provide up-to-date, accurate and often unique monthly indicators of economic trends.

ihsmarkit.com/products/pmi.html.