

February 2026

Oxfordshire Recruitment Market Overview

Compiled by Allen Associates with data insights
and analysis by Indeed Hiring Lab



Still a challenging time, but hope is on the horizon

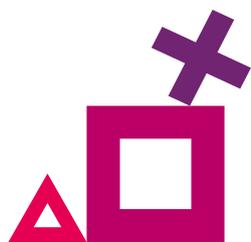
After a challenging twelve months last year, 2026 shows signs of cautious optimism for both employers and talent. Lower inflation, scheduled to fall below the Bank of England's target of 3%¹ by April, and falling interest rates, expected to come down to 3.5%², should ease economic pressures on businesses across all sectors in an economy that looks set to grow faster than those in the Eurozone. However, GDP is expected to grow by only 1.4%³, falling short of the OBR's forecast and presenting ongoing challenges for businesses.

Employers are still dealing with higher employment costs such as NICs and the Minimum Wage, a rise in the cost of materials⁴ and greater economic uncertainty after the 2025 Autumn Budget, and they're also facing the conundrum of higher unemployment (the UK's unemployment rate rose to 5.1%⁵ last year) combined with a skills shortage - 16% of businesses reported that they were experiencing worker shortages in January 2026⁶. This is expected to result in a softer hiring outlook in early 2026, although vacancies have stabilised in recent months. Wage growth is also likely to slow as fewer employers hire, and the number of jobseekers increases, making negotiations difficult for prospective and current employees. Employers are also competing for a limited number of candidates with the right skills and experience despite receiving statistically more applications for each role.

Technology such as AI is impacting the world of work, with some employers turning to it to achieve efficiencies - a recent CIPD survey found that one in six⁷ (17%) expect their workforce to shrink because of the use of AI during 2026, impacting younger employees especially and posing a risk to graduate employment prospects. All of which makes recruitment far more challenging for employers, who must adapt their recruitment strategies to reflect the new realities.

Oxfordshire, with its high employment levels and world-class innovation sectors such as clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and life sciences, continues to see strong employment and increased demand for skilled professionals. The ONS reports that the claimant count unemployment rate in Oxfordshire is 2.2%⁸, significantly lower than the national average of 3.9%. In the city of Oxford itself, that figure is 2.5%.

Hiring challenges include high salary expectations, the inability to source candidates with the right skill sets, long hiring timelines and increased candidate expectations, reflecting the need for employers to be proactive and strategic in hiring and to offer benefits such as wellbeing initiatives and flexible work options to attract and retain the talent they need.



This latest report by Allen Associates investigates the challenges and opportunities employers in Oxfordshire faced in the first half of 2026. It offers information and insights to help them remain agile and competitive in an increasingly complex and uncertain economic environment.

We've reviewed the latest data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Indeed Hiring Lab and our own activity to provide an up-to-date view of what's happening across the region and what it means for hiring managers.

The UK labour market is cooling

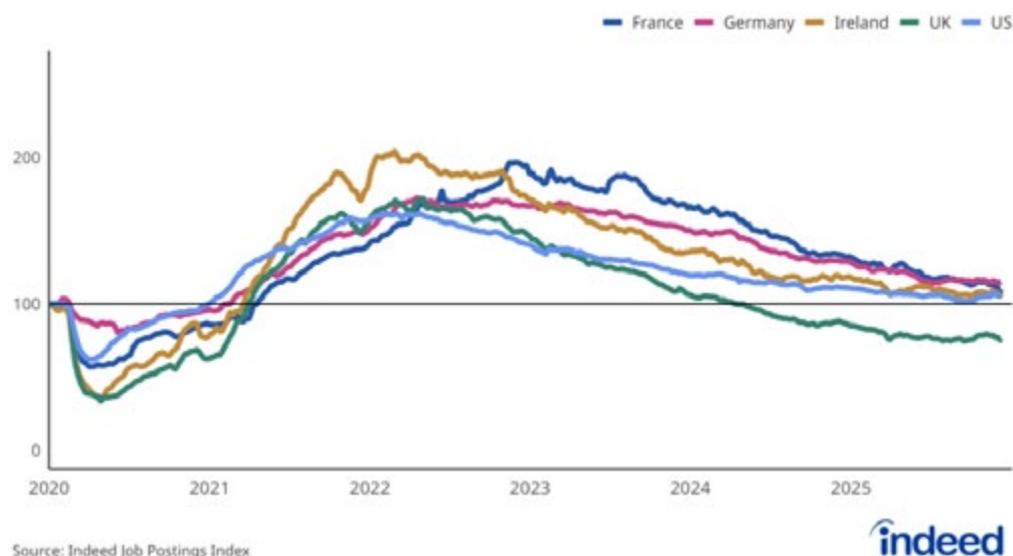
Recent data from the Office for National Statistics⁹ shows that payrolled employment is falling, with 5.1% of working-age people now unemployed - that's a four-year high. The ratio of unemployed people to vacancies now stands at 2.5, up from 2.4 in June to August 2025, indicating increasing competition for jobs.

However, UK job vacancies remain subdued, showing a decrease of 8.6%, down to 734,000¹⁰, over the last year, reflecting falling employer confidence amid tight economic conditions and rising employer costs.

Data from Indeed shows a similar trend of declining job postings. It also shows that, across the South East as a whole, job postings are lagging, while in Oxfordshire specifically, job postings are slightly weaker than the UK national average.

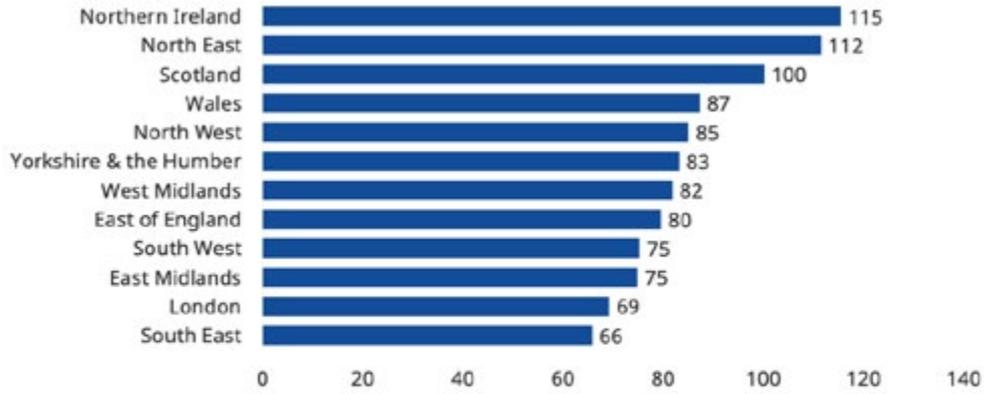
UK job postings remain subdued

Indeed Job Postings Index (JPI), seasonally adjusted, to 9 January 2026:



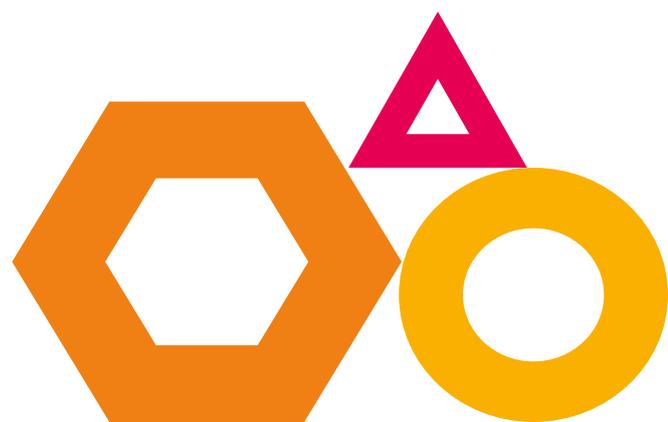
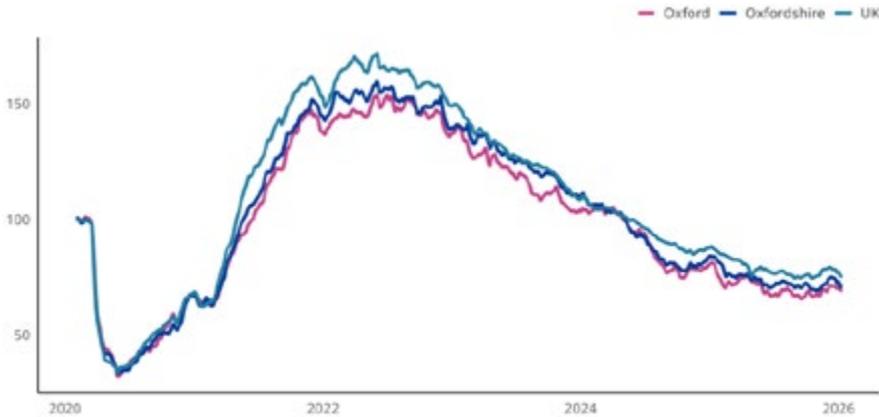
South East job postings lag

Indeed Job Postings Index (JPI), seasonally adjusted, to 9 January 2026:



Oxfordshire job postings slightly weaker than UK average

Indeed Job Postings Index (JPI), seasonally adjusted, to 9 January 2026:



Labour supply is high but skills shortage persists

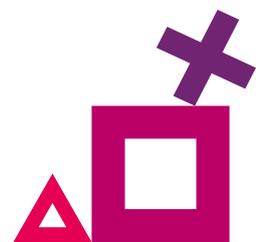
The number of people actively looking for work remains historically high, with almost 80%¹¹ of 16-64 year olds either currently in a job and seeking a new one, or not currently working and looking for one. However, this isn't necessarily the good news it seems to be for employers. Whilst the availability of talent is high, 42%¹² of HR professionals note that fewer than half of the applications they receive meet the required criteria for the role, highlighting the skills shortage that many employers in the UK face.

In a recent LinkedIn survey, up to 79%¹³ of recruiters said that finding suitably qualified candidates had become increasingly challenging last year, with some suggesting that the increasing use of 'one-click' AI-driven applications has led more people to apply for roles that they are not qualified for. This is putting pressure on both employers and recruiters as they deal with greater numbers of applicants but fewer suitably qualified ones, increasing the length of time they spend dealing with applications.

We'll look at the impact of AI on the recruitment market later in this report.

Even as we've mentioned above, with a greater number of people looking for work, either actively or passively, employers still face a number of challenges:

- Increasing numbers of people are not actively looking for work but, due to the ease of the application process, are applying for jobs 'in any case'. This is leading to increased workloads for both employers and recruiters, as well as high drop-out and low engagement rates.
- Candidate expectations are changing with more people seeking higher salaries to cope with the rising cost of living¹⁴, as well as a wider range of benefits and increasing flexibility. Not every employer can offer these, particularly those operating in retail and hospitality¹⁵.
- Candidates are increasingly cautious about moving roles before securing another job.



How a specialist recruiter can help your organisation

In recent years, employers have been boosting their brands to attract the right talent to their organisations, many with attractive roles offering a wide range of benefits. However, at the start of 2026, employers face a range of challenges, including artificially inflated application numbers, a lengthy time-to-hire, and an ongoing skills shortage. This makes securing the right person difficult without time, resources and a focused approach. And if you're trying to manage the complex and time-consuming process in-house, you'll understand the difficulties of screening, shortlisting and managing the candidate experience successfully.

Today, more than ever before, recruitment partners like Allen Associates can add value not just by accessing hidden candidate networks, but by providing strategic advice, market insights and hands-on support.

Temporary vs permanent placements

A recent report by KPMG and REC notes that temporary billings fell slightly¹⁶ during the end of 2025, but not as sharply as permanent hires, with temp wages rising for the first time in three months. This reflects employers' unwillingness to commit to permanent hires and their attendant employment costs, which has made temporary staff a more attractive option.

Candidate availability is at the highest level for almost three years, with the largest number of both permanent and temporary job-seekers since 2020. This is the result of fewer vacancies, increased costs, higher levels of redundancies and low confidence.

- Total vacancies decreased by 69,000¹⁷ (8.6%) in October to December 2025 compared with the same period in 2024.
- Wage growth across the UK currently stands at 4.8% but is expected to slow to around 3% by the middle of the year and to reach 1.2% by the end of 2026¹⁸ easing pressure on employers.



Regional variation

According to the ONS, London has the highest unemployment rate at 6.3%¹⁹ and Northern Ireland the lowest (1.5%). The South West of England has the highest employment rate (79.1%) while Wales has the lowest (69.9%).

Based on job postings alone, the South East (-31%) and London (-29%) are furthest below the UK baseline. Northern Ireland and the North East saw increases of 20% and 16%, respectively, and are the only regions with postings above baseline. Across the country as a whole, all twelve regions saw a decline in job postings in the last 12 months.

The Midlands²⁰ was the only region to see an increase in temporary billings in December, with a sharp rate of overall growth, contrasting sharply with low numbers in London, the North and the South of England.

Oxfordshire is currently outperforming the rest of the South East and England as a whole in terms of employment rates, with figures above the DWP's target of 80%²¹.

Oxfordshire has seen:

- A high number of vacancies, reflecting a tight labour market and a significant skills gap, both of which contribute towards employers facing hiring challenges.
- Men in Oxfordshire have a 4% higher rate of economic activity than women, highlighting a gender disparity. Women were also more commonly in lower-paid occupations.
- People with disabilities in Oxfordshire also face an employment gap, underlining the importance of ED&I policies to encourage more people with disabilities into work.
- The employment rate has remained consistently above England's average of 80%, currently standing at 82.4%²².



Sectoral variation

As the Chancellor has avoided significant tax increases on businesses, the UK's short-term outlook for investment is viewed as positive. Private-sector investment is likely to be led by green energy projects, new data centres coming online, and communications, while public investment is focused on infrastructure.

The strongest-performing sector in the UK in 2025 was Engineering, with increased demand for STEM specialists in sectors such as healthcare, technology, manufacturing and renewable energy²³, and the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors, which grew by 31.7%. These sectors also had the largest number of vacancies (5,000).

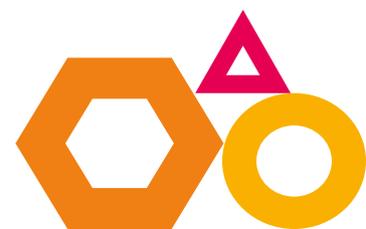
Hotel & Catering, nursing, medical care and retail, however, saw declines in permanent staff during the year due to the service sector's of 0.3%²⁴ decline. The sharpest drop in permanent vacancies was seen in Secretarial/Clerical roles²⁵ followed by IT and computing.

Oxfordshire outlook

Despite the challenges, Oxfordshire remains a strong recruitment region, with academia, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, clean energy and technology providing high-value employment for a highly educated and qualified workforce, both directly and indirectly. The county has high employment levels, currently standing at 83.8%²⁶, against a national average of 75.2%, and an unemployment rate of just 2.2% compared with the UK average of 4.4%, demonstrating a resilient and vibrant economy in the area.

However, the region still faces challenges. Executive, Professional, Secretarial and Clerical roles as well as those in IT and Computing have seen a drop in job postings²⁷, reflecting trends in the South East (-31%) and London (-29%). Employers are also experiencing longer time-to-hire and a greater number of candidates per vacancy, albeit fewer with the qualifications or experience needed to tackle the challenges of 2026. In addition, almost two-thirds of employers say that high salary expectations²⁸ are now a major obstacle in recruiting talent.

Despite this, competition among employers for experienced specialists remains high. Oxfordshire ranks highly for professional occupations, consistently scoring above the national average for Professional Occupations (34.5% vs 27% National Average), Administrative & Secretarial (9.4% vs 9.2%) and Managers, Directors and Senior Officials (12.3% vs 11.4%), demonstrating the strength of the local labour market.



Employers are responding to the region's recruitment challenges by hiring more strategically, in many cases in partnership with a specialist recruiter, such as Allen Associates. In response to the demand for more hybrid and flexible working arrangements from candidates, we can advise clients on flexible working policies, investment in wellbeing benefits and salary benchmarking - all of which are designed to help employers remain competitive and give them a strategic advantage in recruitment and retention.

The Oxfordshire labour market

Employment

Oxfordshire has an employment rate of 81.9%²⁹ for 16-64 year olds, compared to 78.2% in the South East and 75.8% in England.

Unemployment

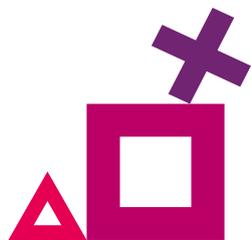
The unemployment rate in Oxfordshire for 16-64 year olds currently stands at 2.2%³⁰, against 3.1% in the South East and 3.9% in England.

Key features of the Oxfordshire recruitment market

Allen Associates has compiled the following summary based on its firsthand experiences of working with candidates and clients on business support roles across Oxfordshire:

- 61% of employers say that candidates' high salary expectations are a major obstacle to hiring³¹
- Oxford employers continue to feel the effects of rising operational costs, including the National Living Wage, NIC, wage increases, energy bills, and raw materials. Many employers facing these rises are choosing not to make new hires, preferring to retain and upskill existing talent and to exercise caution in hiring.
- Talent retention, including work and location flexibility, has become a key issue for employers in the Oxfordshire region, with many offering training and development opportunities to their existing employees to avoid impacting productivity and innovation.
- Competition for the best talent remains a key issue for employers in the area.

You can find the latest job postings data for Oxford and Oxfordshire on [Indeed's data portal](#). Just navigate to the regional tab and select from the dropdown menu.



Three long-term recruitment challenges facing Oxfordshire employers

1. Benefits are being cut back

The share of UK job postings advertising at least one benefit has dropped. These include the most popular, financial perks (-1.5), travel to work (-3.8), time off (-1.1), wellbeing (-0.6), flexibility (-2.4), medical/dental (-0.5), food (-1.3), career development (-0.3), childcare (-0.1) and relocation assistance (-0.2).

Share of UK job postings mentioning type of benefit, as of November 2025:

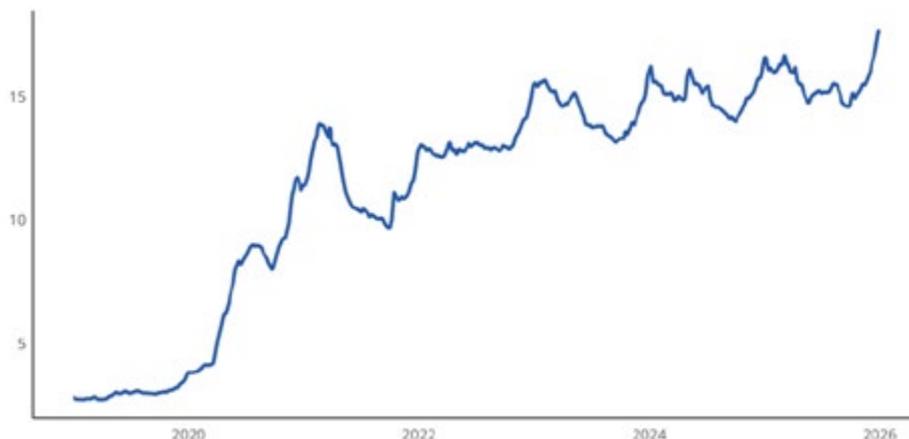
| Type | Share | Change Y/Y (ppts) |
|-----------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Financial perks | 41.2% | -1.5 |
| Travel to work | 29.0% | -3.8 |
| Time off | 18.9% | -1.1 |
| Wellbeing | 16.9% | -0.6 |
| Flexibility | 8.7% | -2.4 |
| Medical/dental | 7.7% | 0.5 |
| Food | 6.6% | -1.3 |
| Career development | 2.9% | -0.3 |
| Childcare | 0.9% | -0.1 |
| Relocation assistance | 0.7% | -0.2 |

Source: Indeed



However, hybrid working remains a much-valued benefit for employees and candidates, with the share of job postings mentioning remote and/or hybrid arrangements reaching a new high and searches for remote or hybrid work continuing at around 2.4% of all searches, close to a high³².

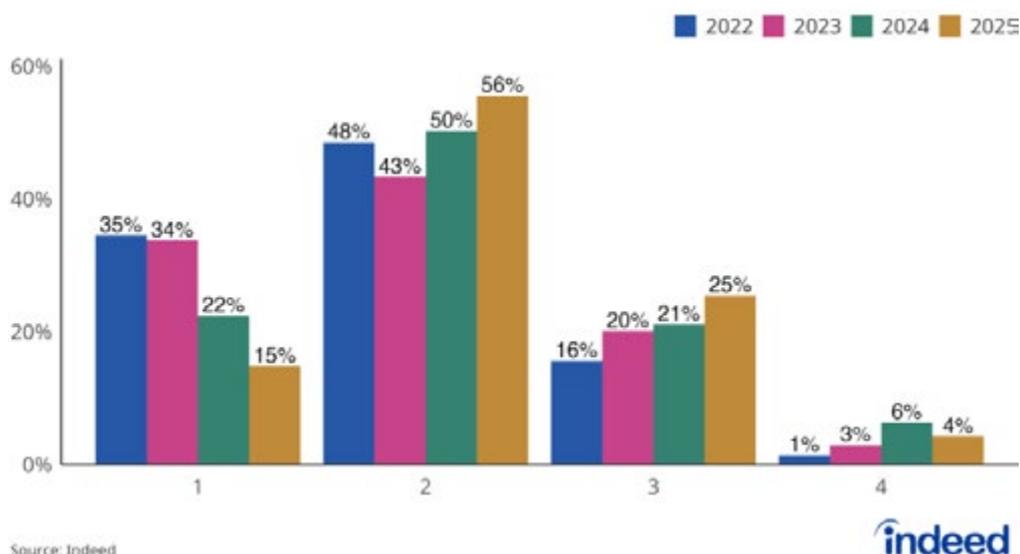
Share of UK remote/hybrid job postings (%) to 31st December 2025:



Source: Indeed



Nevertheless, one major change is that hybrid job postings are specifying more in-office days, with two days a week becoming the most common requirement, suggesting that employers are beginning to harden their stance on remote and hybrid working practices. The most common hybrid schedule:



Insights into benefits are vital for employers.

The effect of AI - the number of job postings that now mention AI has risen by 62%³³ in the last 12 months.

Indeed data meanwhile shows that AI is commonly mentioned in a range of categories, with the most relevant (Data and Analytics) having the highest share of mentions (46%). Still, the technology is also finding its way into other sectors such as Marketing & Communications (17%), Banking & Finance (14%) and legal roles (11%), reflecting how ubiquitous it is becoming. Share of UK AI job postings, as of 3rd December 2025:

| Occupation | Share |
|---|-------|
| Data & Analytics | 46% |
| Software Development | 39% |
| Veterinary | 31% |
| Scientific Research & Development | 26% |
| IT Systems & Solutions | 24% |
| Marketing | 19% |
| Media & Communications | 17% |
| Industrial Engineering | 15% |
| Banking & Finance | 14% |
| IT Infrastructure, Operations & Support | 13% |
| Social Science | 12% |
| Legal | 11% |

Source: Indeed



However, many AI references lack clear context (see below), with 'No Clear Theme' for its use coming in second after 'Core AI development and use', suggesting that some sectors are adopting the technology purely for its own sake, or referring to it in postings for employer branding reasons, rather than for a defined, strategic use.

Share of job postings in each theme grouping between July 2024 and June 2025:

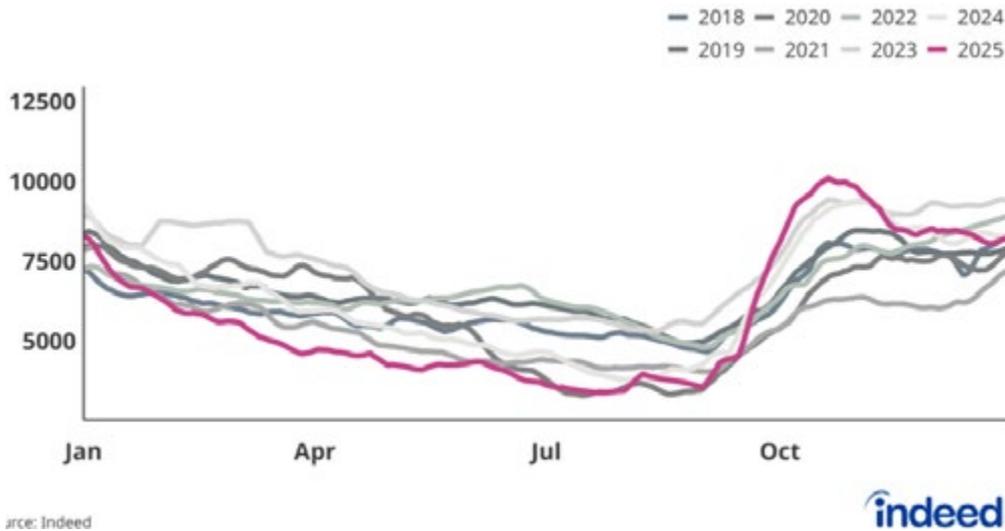
| Theme | % of postings |
|------------------------------|---------------|
| Core AI development and use | 52.1% |
| No clear theme | 24.9% |
| AI recruiting tools | 13.6% |
| Systems design | 4.5% |
| AI-powered service & tools | 3.9% |
| Transportation load matching | 1.0% |

Source: Indeed. 

2. Graduate opportunities are being badly affected

The share of graduate jobs was down by 2%³⁴ on last year's numbers and is down 13% in absolute terms, standing at the lowest since 2018. This contraction is a result of several factors: employers are achieving significant cost efficiencies, retaining their existing workforce while making fewer new hires, and entry-level roles have been affected by the increasing use of AI, particularly in the tech sector. It is also worth noting that many employers are downsizing and investing in AI rather than graduates³⁵.

Graduate job postings per million jobs on Indeed UK:



What does it mean for your hiring?

1. Skills shortages persist

Despite high demand, employers are still struggling with a lack of highly-skilled and experienced candidates, with almost two-thirds³⁶ (62%) of UK businesses reporting a noticeable skills gap.

2. Salary and benefits packages

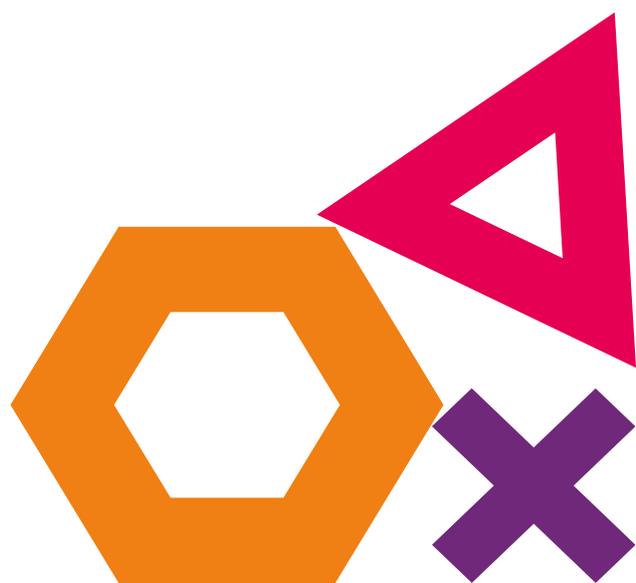
A competitive salary remains at the top of candidates' wish lists. Still, supportive benefits packages are also becoming more scarce, despite their effectiveness in attracting candidates and retaining current workers. Wellbeing and mental health initiatives, as well as training and development opportunities, are the most in-demand.

3. Hybrid work remains popular with candidates

However, many employers are reducing their flexible working arrangements, despite their popularity and their ability to attract and retain talent.

4. Strong wage growth

Several sectors continue to see strong wage growth, particularly in Legal, Software Development, and Sales and Customer Service. However, salary transparency, which has risen over the last few years, has stalled, falling from a high of over 60% in 2024 to 55% at the start of 2026. Signing bonuses have also fallen to below 1% of all advertised roles and are now most common for Veterinary and Personal Care and Home Health roles.



Recruitment advice for Oxfordshire employers

The team at Allen Associates has been supporting businesses in Oxfordshire with recruitment across PA, Administration, Marketing, HR, and Finance for over 28 years. At the start of 2026, the employment market presents a range of challenges and opportunities for both employers and candidates, with businesses expressing greater caution in their hiring strategies in response to UK and global economic conditions, evolving workforce trends, and dynamic new business needs.



Kate Allen

Founder & Executive Chair

Allen Associates

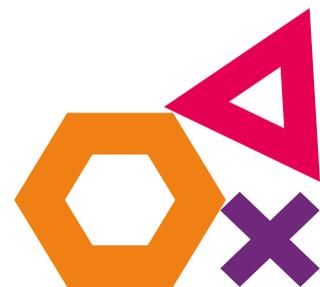


We're seeing an obvious cooling of the labour market at the start of this year, with unemployment rising to 5.1%, vacancies falling by 8.6% and sharply slowing wage growth. Under normal circumstances, this would signal a period of easier hiring for employers. However, in Oxfordshire at the moment, the reality is very different. The employment level remains high and unemployment is as low as 2.2%, reflecting the county's specialism in top-tier sectors such as clean energy, life sciences, advanced manufacturing and new technologies. This has created a surplus of candidates available nationally but a shortage of local specialists.

Oxfordshire employers, therefore, find themselves in the position of having to deal with a substantially longer time-to-hire, increasing numbers of applicants, not all of whom are qualified or suitable,

as well as rising employment costs and continued economic uncertainty. In order to respond effectively, employers must now take a more strategic approach to talent attraction, as well as being more selective about the applications that they receive. This could include creating more comprehensive job descriptions, realistic salary benchmarking and an increasing focus on upskilling their existing staff in order to ensure retention.

Partnering with a specialist recruiter, such as Allen Associates, can help employers to focus on the essential aspects of their vacancies, access untapped talent pools and cope with the realities of a market where the volume of applicants has increased but their suitability hasn't.





Eleanor Bromage

Managing Director

Allen Associates



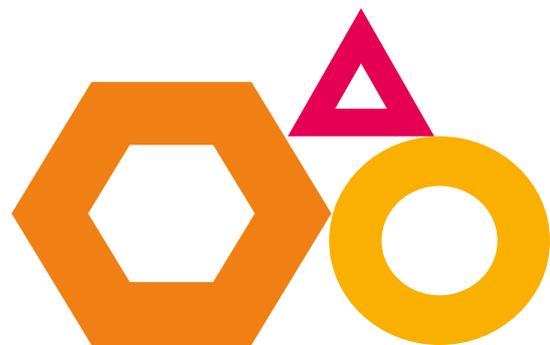
Despite the high supply of labour both in the country as a whole and in Oxfordshire in particular, skills shortages remain one of the most pressing challenges for employers at the start of 2026. AI-powered 'one-click' applications have made the application process simpler for candidates and increased the number of people applying, but they have also reduced the quality and relevance of applications, with some employers reporting that up to 50% of the applications they receive don't meet their essential criteria for the role.

At the same time, we're seeing graduate opportunities decline sharply in response to rising costs and AI-powered automation. This has the potential to create risks for future talent pipelines both in the region and the country and we'll be monitoring this situation very carefully.

Candidate expectations are also changing. Continued cost-of-living pressures mean that while wage growth has slowed, candidates still need a competitive salary. However, we've noticed that many employers are cutting

their benefits packages, including hybrid/flexibility and wellbeing initiatives, and now require their employees to attend the office in person more frequently, rather than work from home full time. These disparities risk undermining employers' attraction and retention strategies, particularly in Oxfordshire's highly competitive labour market, where demand for skilled talent remains strong.

In order to be able to respond to the challenges of the new year, Oxfordshire employers should focus on creating clear and effective employer branding, offering flexible working where possible and providing benefits such as career development opportunities to give themselves a competitive edge without a dramatic increase in costs. To widen their talent pools and attract candidates with the skills they need, they should also focus on inclusive hiring practices and increase their use of data to gain deeper insights. Above all, they should be prepared to be adaptable to the uncertain and challenging conditions that 2026 will bring.



What are Oxfordshire employers looking for in their new hires?

- High-quality candidates
- Both temporary and contract staff, in addition to permanent staff
- A range of technical skills and relevant sector experience
- Transferable skills
- Good candidate fit
- The ability to add immediate value

What are candidates looking for from their new employers?

- Competitive salary
- Benefits packages, specifically flexible working, including hybrid, compressed hours and job-sharing
- Structured career progression and development opportunities
- Wellbeing and mental health initiatives
- Flexible roles, including temporary, temp-to-permanent and contract
- Strong workplace culture
- Mentoring programmes
- DE&I initiatives

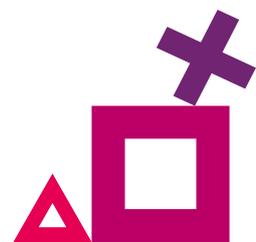
Hiring in Oxfordshire

If you're looking for quality, pre-interviewed candidates for your business support roles in Oxford or elsewhere in Oxfordshire, we would love to hear from you.

Based in Oxford, Allen Associates has been matching great people to roles and employers for more than 28 years. We apply the same rigorous recruitment processes to our temporary and permanent vacancies, so whatever your needs, you can be confident of an excellent service underpinned by passion, personality and integrity.

For support with your next hire:

Call us on **01865 335600** or email us at **hello@allen-associates.co.uk**



Useful contacts and more insights

Allen Associates runs monthly webinars on a wide range of people management topics led by guest speakers, as well as quarterly Employment Law Updates with our legal partner, **RWK Goodman**. To find out more and register for these free events, please visit **Allen Associates HR Hub page on our website**.

The very latest data and insights on the UK labour market are available at **Indeed's Hiring Lab**.

Recruitment industry news and information is available from the **Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC)**.

For more on the Oxfordshire economy, visit the **Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)**.

Previous Oxfordshire Recruitment Market Overviews are available to download from **Allen Associates Knowledge Centre**.

hello@allen-associates.co.uk | 01865 335600 | www.allen-associates.co.uk

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