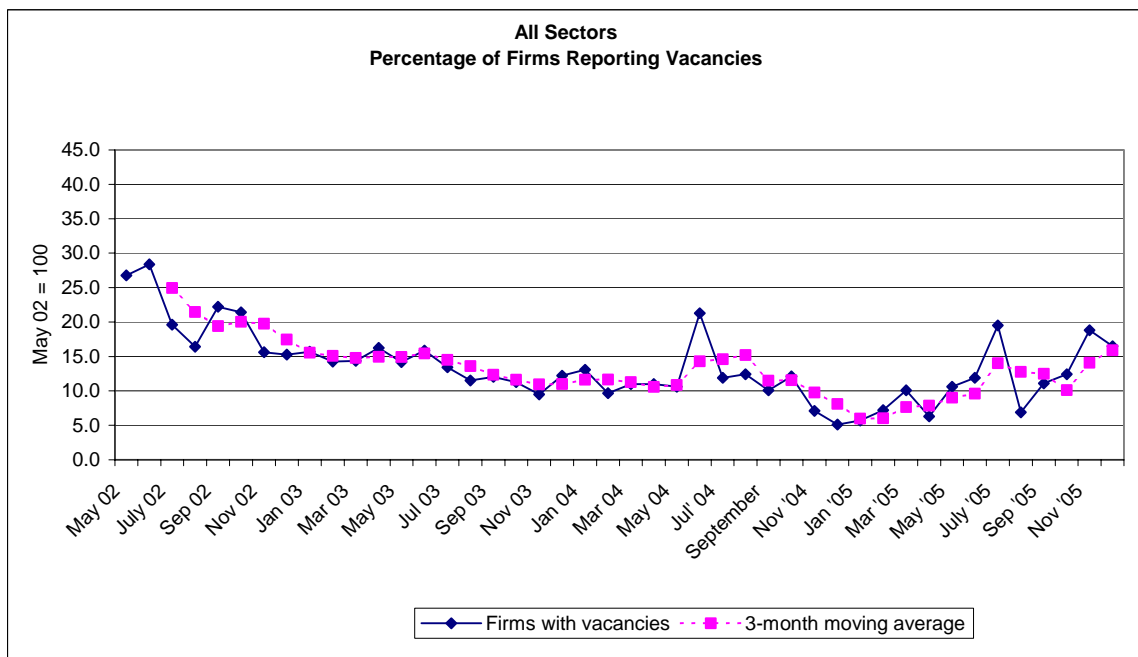




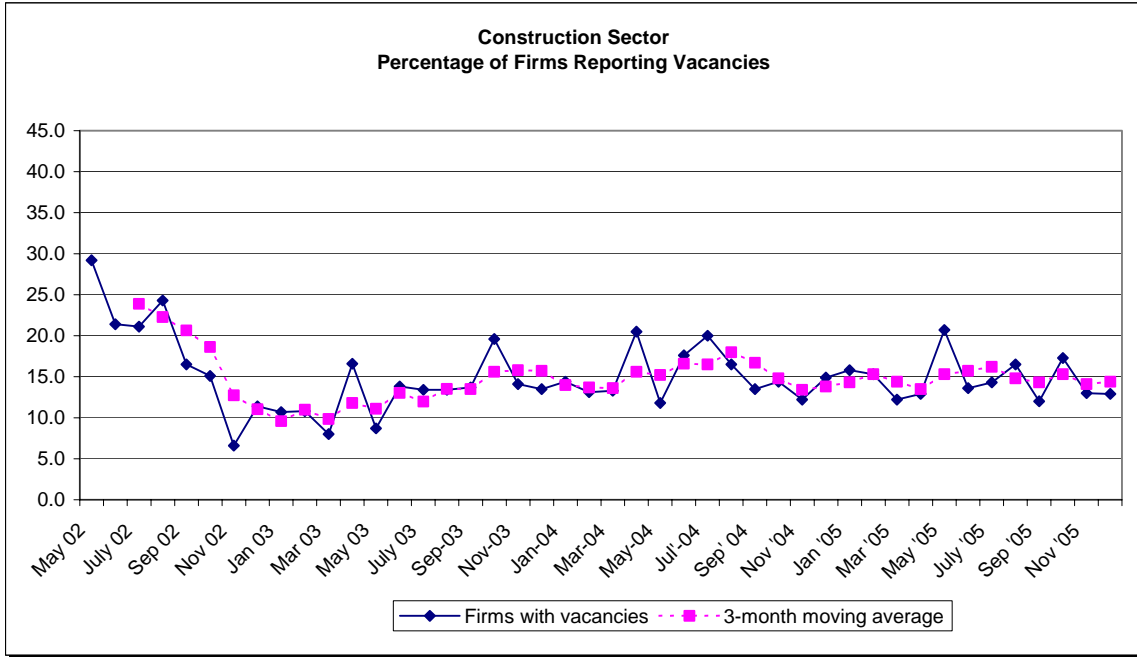
Economy Wide Vacancies Fell in December 2005

Economy wide vacancies fell by 3 percentage points in the month of December 2005. The percentage of firms with vacancies, which had increased significantly to 19 per cent in the previous month, declined to 16 per cent in December. The decrease in economy wide vacancies reflected a significant fall in the services sector and a more moderate fall in the industry sector. The percentage of construction sector firms reporting vacancies remained stable in December 2005 and the retail sector experienced an increase in the percentage of firms with vacancies.



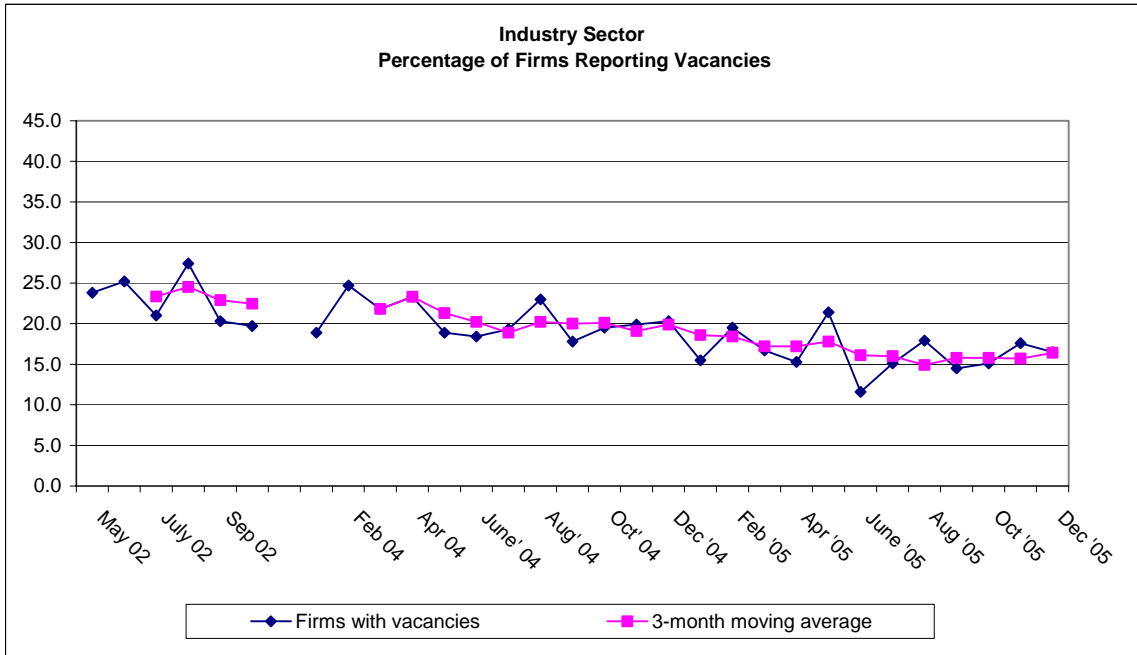
Construction Sector

The percentage of construction sector firms with vacancies remained unchanged at 13 per cent in December 2005. The decline from 17 to 13 per cent experienced in November was due to a seasonal effect as employment in the sector tends to decline in the winter months. Although there were significant deviations in June and September, the percentage of construction sector firms reporting vacancies in the second half of the year has remained fairly steady around 14 per cent.



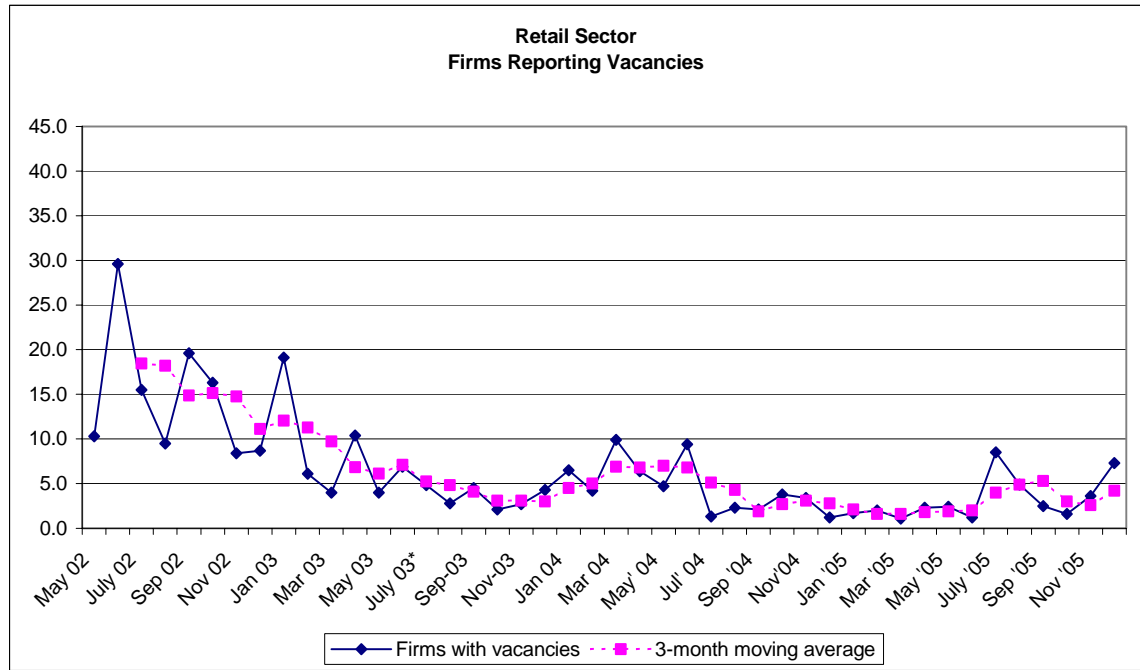
Industry Sector

The industrial sector experienced a slight decline in the percentage of firms with vacancies from 18 per cent in November 2005 to 16 per cent in December 2005. However, the 3-month moving average figure for the sector remained stable at the 16 per cent level. The industrial sector had been exhibiting a downward trend in this figure from the beginning of the period considered until June 2005. The figure stabilised at the 16 per cent level in June 2005 and has remained around that level to date.



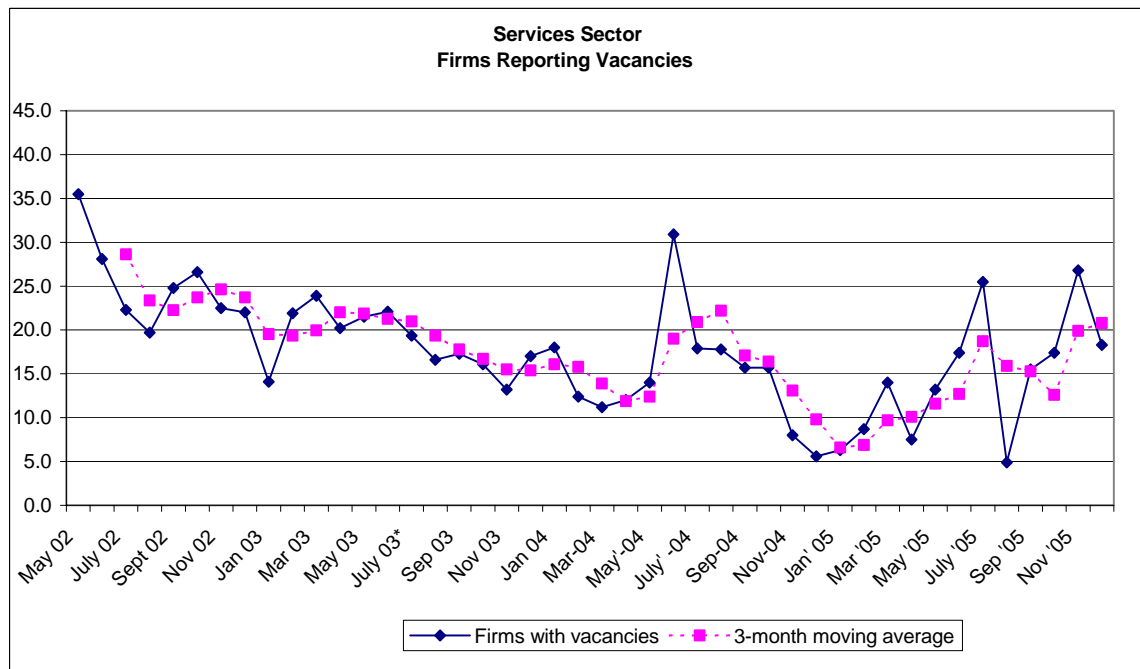
Retail Sector

The percentage of retail sector firms reporting vacancies increased during the Christmas period. In October 2005 2 per cent of firms reported vacancies. This figure increased by 2 percentage points to 4 per cent in November 2005 and a further 3 percentage points to 7 per cent in December 2005. The increase in December marks the second highest level the indicator has reached since June 2004.



Services Sector

Having increased significantly from 17 per cent in October 2005 to 27 per cent in November 2005 the percentage of service sector firms reporting vacancies fell back to lower levels in December 2005 with 18 per cent of firms indicating they had vacancies to be filled. This represents a decrease of 9 percentage points.



Difficult-to-Fill Vacancies

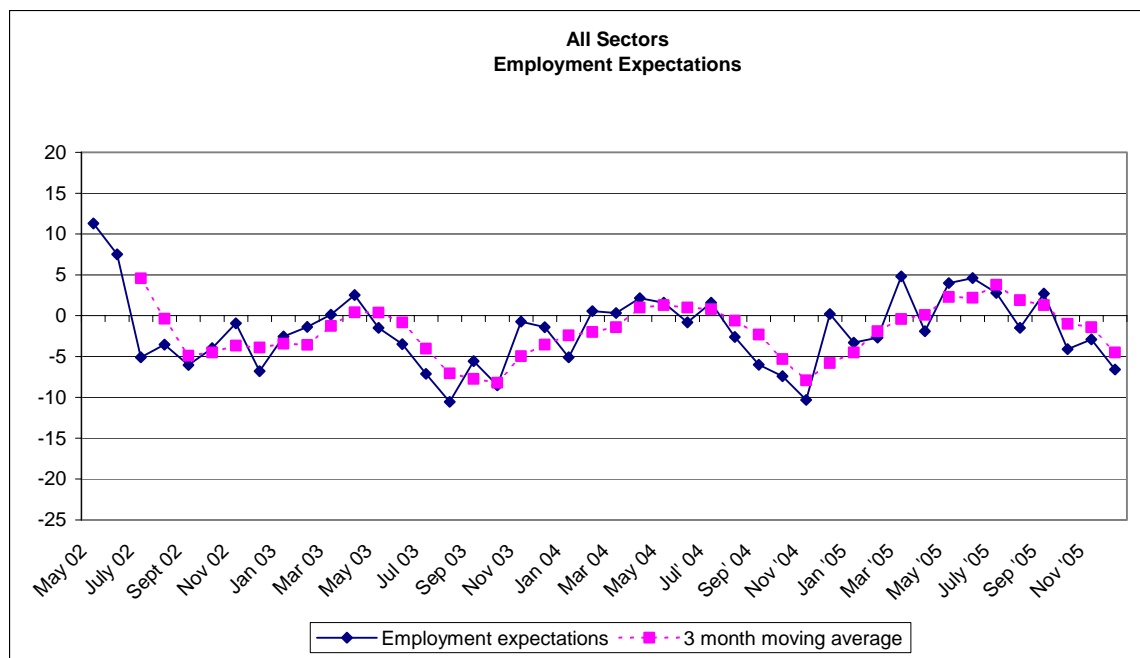
Firms are asked if they are experiencing difficulty in filling the vacancies they have and what these vacancies are. This provides an indication of the jobs which employers are finding most difficult-to-fill. In the sectors surveyed a much higher percentage of employers in construction than in other sectors have consistently reported difficult-to-fill vacancies.

The most frequently mentioned difficult-to-fill vacancies in December 2005 for the various sectors were:

- quantity surveyors and managers in the construction sector
- engineers, managers and sales personnel in the industry sector
- sales personnel in the retail sector
- architects and supervisors in the services sector

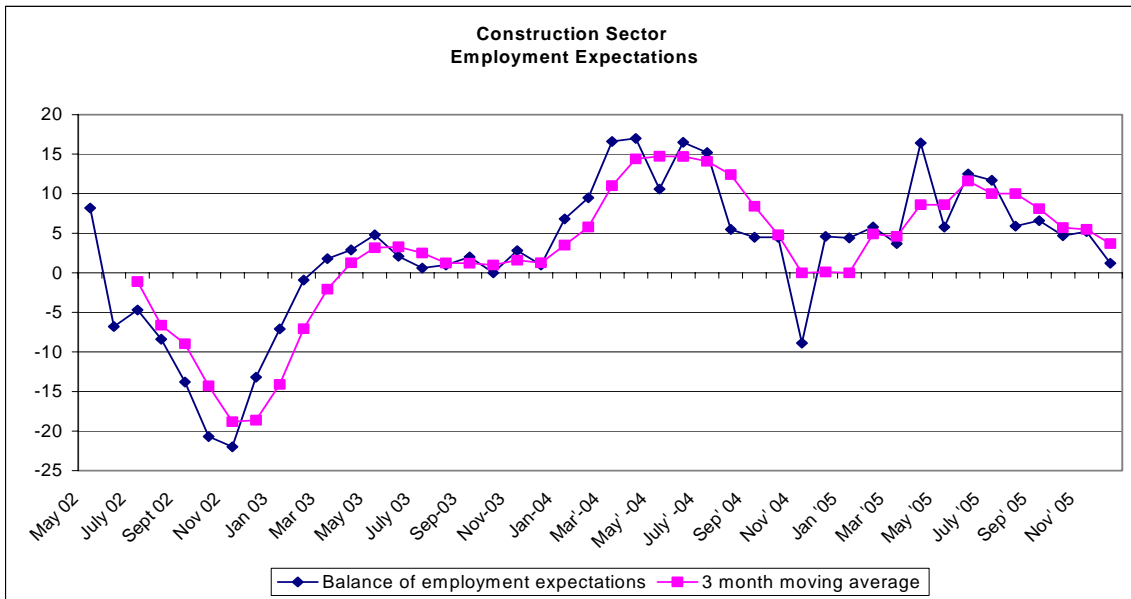
Employers are Pessimistic About Future Employment Levels

After a slight improvement in November 2005 employer expectations regarding future employment levels fell to a more pessimistic level in December 2005. The expectations indicator for all sectors in the economy fell by 4 percentage points to minus 6 per cent. This indicates that 6 per cent more firms in the economy feel that employment levels in their firms will decrease rather than increase in the near future. The three month moving average shows that there has been a deterioration in employer expectations at an economy wide level since the Summer of 2005. The sectors mainly driving this downward trend are the construction and services sectors. The Net Employment Expectations indicator for the retail sector remained stable.



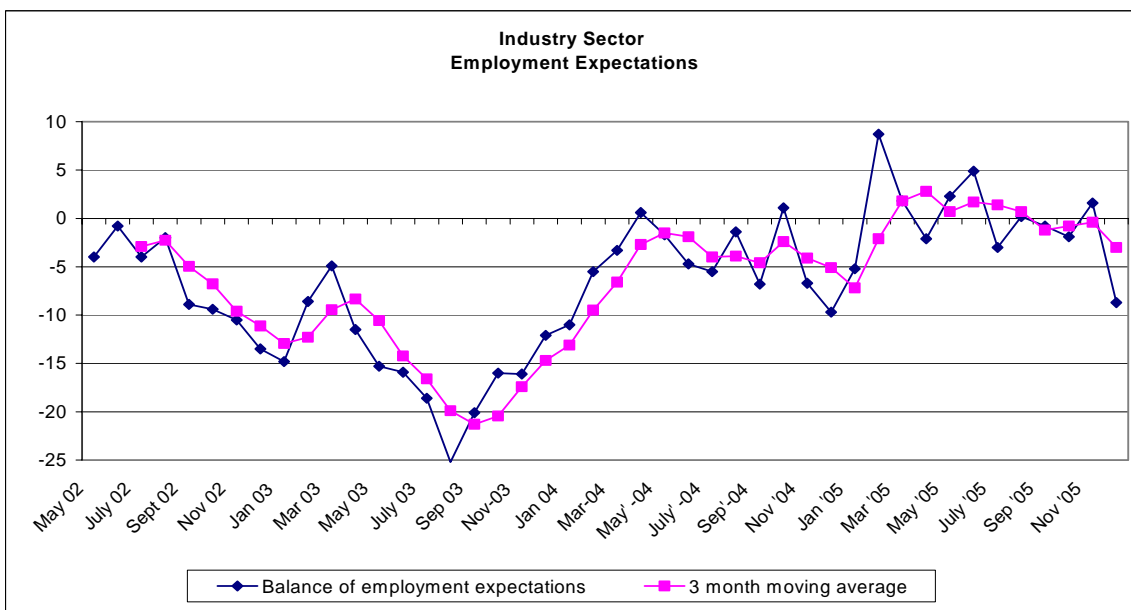
Construction Sector

The expectations of construction sector employers regarding future employment levels deteriorated in December 2005 but remained optimistic. The Net Employment Expectations indicator signifies that 2 per cent more employers in the sector feel employment levels will rise rather than fall over the coming months. The figure for December 2005 represents the lowest level the indicator has reached over the past year. The three month moving average indicates that employers in construction have become more pessimistic about employment prospects in the second half of the year.



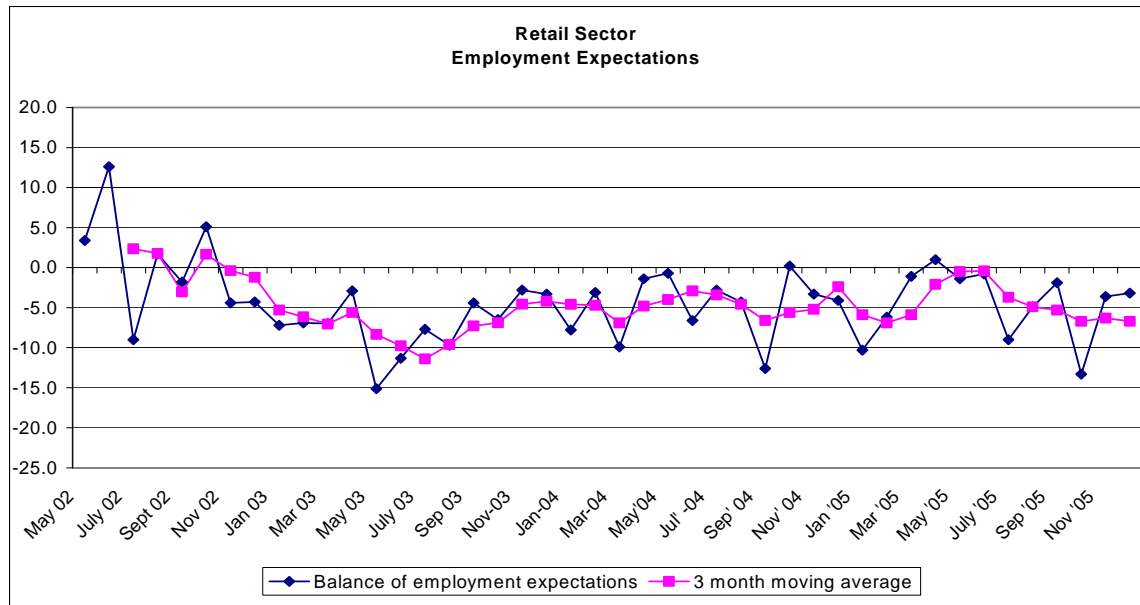
Industry Sector

Of all the sectors surveyed the industrial sector experienced the most significant deterioration in employer expectations in December 2005. The Net Employment Expectations indicator for the sector declined by a considerable 11 percentage points from an optimistic level of 2 per cent in November 2005 to a pessimistic level of minus 9 per cent in December 2005. The figure for December 2005 represents the lowest level reached by the indicator since December 2004.



Retail Sector

The Net Employment Expectations indicator for the retail sector was stable in December 2005 remaining at minus 3 per cent. This indicates that 3 per cent of employers in the sector feel employment levels will decrease rather than increase in the near future. Employers in the sector have been predominantly pessimistic for the period considered.



Services Sector

The expectations of employers in the services sector continued to deteriorate in December 2005. The Net Employment Expectations indicator for the sector fell 5 percentage points from minus 4 per cent in November 2005 to minus 9 per cent in December 2005. The three month moving average indicator exhibited a downward trend in the final part of 2005 falling a significant 10 percentage points from 5 per cent in September 2005 to minus 5 per cent in December 2005. The actual figure for December 2005 indicates that 9 per cent of firms in the sector feel employment levels will decline rather than rise over the coming months.

