Don't stop thinking about tomorrow

Studies of population pressure and prosperity

Robin Hodgson

With contributions from: Sir Jonathon Porritt, Professor David Miles, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, Luke Daniel, Robin Maynard, Professor Michael Clarke, Professor Sarah Harper, Professor James Sefton and Dr Madeleine Sumption

The Common Good Foundation

"Issues of demography and immigration have disfigured our public debates for too long. The general public is clearly looking for ways to address these challenges. This Report offers one such way, and it deserves serious consideration."

—Lord Glasman, Common Good Foundation

"This essay collection could not be more timely. Demographic change in Britain is accelerating in ways we've never seen before: fertility is falling further and faster than anyone expected, immigration has reached previously unimaginable highs and the population pyramid is ageing rapidly as the Baby Boomers leave the workforce. Offering neither bromides nor alarmism, this report's expert contributors outline the key challenges of demographic change and present possible ways forward worthy of discussion by policymakers and politicians of all stripes."

—Karl Williams, Research Director, the Centre for Policy Studies

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow
July 2025

About the author

Author Robin Granville Hodgson (The Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts CBE) grew up in the little Shropshire village of Astley Abbotts. After graduating from St Peter's College, Oxford, he spent five years in North America where he took an MBA at the Wharton School of Finance.

On his return to the UK, he set up Granville & Co, a specialist private equity and investment banking business focused on the mid-market sector. After 30 years as Chief Executive and then Chairman, the business was sold to a US Investment Bank. Since then, he has invested in and chaired a number of early-stage companies. In 1972, he was adopted as the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Walsall North. He campaigned in the two 1974 general elections, and in 1976 he was elected MP for the seat at a by-election following the disappearance of the sitting member John Stonehouse. After losing the seat in 1979, he became an active volunteer member of the Conservative Party, ending up as Deputy Chairman of the party in the 1990s.

He was created a life peer in 2000. His particular focus, in addition to trade, industry and finance, has been the charity and voluntary sector. He has authored a number of reports for the Government on the sector. He has a longstanding interest in demography, and he has published a series of reports on the particular demographic challenges faced by the UK.

He is married to Fiona, who as Baroness Hodgson of Abinger is a peer in her own right, and they have four children and three grandchildren.

Acknowledgements

This report could never have happened at all without intensive work at every stage by Nick Kelly and Venetia Hadow.

It also would not have its distinctive quality without the contributions from our nine experts – I am grateful to them all.

I am also grateful to the Centre for Policy Studies and the Common Good Foundation for their support and encouragement.

The conclusions and recommendations are mine alone.

Foreword

In 1971 the population of the UK was 55.9 million. Over the next 25 years it rose by 2.5 million (4.5%) to 58.4 million. But the following 25 years saw it rise by 9.2 million (15.7%) – the most absolute rapid increase of our population in our nation's history.

How and why did this happen? What was the impact on the UK from this dramatic development? Who were the winners and the losers? And, most importantly, did the British people want it, and what do they think about it?

Now the country is experiencing an even more rapid growth with the net average population increase over the last few years running at more than 500,000 per annum, equivalent to a city the size of Sheffield. Presuming only 300,000 net arrivals per annum, the Office for National Statistics forecasts our population rising by 6.6 million over the next 10 years – roughly equivalent to three-quarters of the current population of London. And it seems likely that the UK will become the most populous country in Europe by mid-century.

It is not particularly controversial to say – indeed, it is backed up by extensive polling – that this is not a prospect the majority of British people welcome. They have been repeatedly promised a policy, by political parties of all stripes, which would focus on admitting a limited number of highly skilled or creative individuals – a policy with which few would disagree. Instead, they have seen virtually uncontrolled numbers of primarily lower skilled individuals. This may have advantaged the already better-off in our society – especially in the South East – but the impact on the majority of the settled population has been less positive, with a flatlining real median wage, increased pressure on public services, continuing shortages of housing, and well-documented damage to our environment and ecology.

More importantly, as regards confidence in our government and in our civil society, polling also reflects a growing belief that few in authority listen or care but merely make placatory statements which are not followed through in any meaningful way.

In this publication we seek to examine this whole issue in some depth. We have contributions from nine authors from a wide range of political traditions (and none) – all experts in their respective fields – who suggest how we might learn from the past, as well as from other countries, to improve matters in the future.

Finally, we suggest a range of policy proposals which, taken together, could provide a strategic framework to plan for and take advantage of demographic changes over the next half century. Planning decades in advance is critical – we are currently experiencing the impacts of population growth that had their origins in policy decisions first taken 20 years ago. In doing so we can avoid Edmund Burke's famous axiom: "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it."

This report is published at a time of, at least in recent history, unprecedented political changes in the western world. This is a function of increasingly dissatisfied electorates who clearly do not think their concerns or needs are translating to policy and action. If Britain wants to avoid similarly disruptive politics, our government, and indeed all mainstream parties, need to listen more carefully to the electorate. For nearly 10 years, I have written about and campaigned on this issue to little or no avail. But there can now be no doubt that both polling and actual election results indicate that warning lights are flashing. It is time to take action.

Contents

1 Background

Population levels, and changes in them, are key drivers of fundamental long-term changes to our economy, our environment and our society.

1.1. Some of the key issues

The significance of such changes will depend, in large measure, on three factors. First, their relative size both in absolute terms or as a percentage of the population of the host country. Second, their impact on the settled population – defined as those who expect to live all, or substantially all, of their lives in the UK – in terms of both increased density of population as well as resulting pressure on public and other services. Third, the extent to which any new arrivals share the values of the country which they are joining, in that once diasporas reach a certain size they may cease to be diasporas and can create separate freestanding communities with their own value structures.

(i) Every one of us makes an impact

Whether our families have lived here for hundreds of years or are newly arrived, each of us make demands on our society.

Some of these demands are immediate and highly practical – a need for some form of economic activity or a house to live in. Others are more episodic – access to decent levels of public services such as health or education. Some are more futuristic – will we be able to feed ourselves, what will happen to our environment and our ecology or our ability to meet our climate change goals?

Finally, what is the nature of the country that we will be leaving to future generations?

(ii) Demographic change has long-term irreversible consequences

The consequences of any demographic changes are not felt immediately: they play out over the subsequent quarter of a century. So the demographic decisions taken by the Labour Government post-1997 are now making themselves felt – for example, as regards housing, especially in London, as well as in pressure on the National Health Service (NHS). And any decisions taken today about demographic policy will likely have little effect on the life of anyone who is now aged over 60. But though they may be slow to take effect, these consequences are nevertheless inexorable because every member of the settled population is entitled to various levels of state and societal support as their lives proceed.

(iii) The political cycle focuses on the short term

This long-term nature of the impacts of demographic changes does not fit well with a five-year electoral cycle. So it is not surprising that politicians prefer not to address these issues which may, at least in the short term, be controversial, preferring instead to 'kick the can down the road' and leave the problem to be addressed by their successors. However, this also means increasing frustration among the many members of the public who think their concerns are not even being recognised let alone addressed.

(iv) Is demographic change an issue for England alone?

Table 1 shows the growth in population in the different countries of the UK over the 30 years since 1971, and the relative population measured in population per square kilometre.

The percentage increases in population in the different countries of the UK are between 15% and 25% – Scotland being the outlier with an increase over the period of only 4%. But because of its absolute size compared to the other countries, England's 10.7 million increase accounts for over 90% of the total growth.

And when one examines the relative densities, the difference is even more stark. England is essentially three times more densely populated than Wales and Northern Ireland, and six times more densely populated than Scotland.

Table 1: Population and population densities in the UK (millions)

	1971	1995	2022	Current density (population/km²)	Total increase over period (million)
England	46.4	48.4	57.1	438	10.7
Scotland	5.2	5.5	5.4	70	0.2
Wales	2.7	2.9	3.1	151	0.4
Northern Ireland	1.5	1.6	1.9	141	0.4
UK	**55.9**	**58.4**	**67.6**	**279**	**11.7**

Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Put another way, during the past 50 years every square kilometre of England has had an increase of an additional 82 people, compared to 30 in Northern Ireland, 19 in Wales and three in Scotland.

Whether our families have lived here for hundreds of years or are newly arrived, each of us make demands on our society.

It should also be noted that the current population density in France (total population 64.8 million) is 122 people per square kilometre (44% of the total UK levels and 26% of England alone). People returning from a trip or a holiday in France often remark what an 'empty' country it appears to be. Compared to England, it is.

The comparable figure for Germany (total population 83.8 million) is 232 people per square kilometre, broadly half the density of England or 80% of the UK as a whole.

From the UK's European neighbours, the only one comparable to England's population density is the Netherlands (total population of 17.6 million), which has a population density of 541 per square kilometre. It has one advantage over the UK in that its extensive land borders give room for easier population movement.

(v) What do the public think?

Polling was specifically commissioned for this publication. It revealed a high degree of public concern. The detailed results are given in Chapter 6.

Polling figures need to be treated with caution because they can be influenced by short-term events, but they do give a sense of the underlying direction of travel. In particular, they give the opportunity to probe in a little more depth areas of particular sensitivity.

1.2 Why don't we discuss and plan for population change?

Professor Diana Coole

Diana Coole is Professor Emeritus of Political and Social Theory at Birkbeck, University of London. She completed her postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics and the University of Toronto, and has since taught or researched at various universities in England, the USA and Australia. With a background in social and political theory, Diana has long held an interest in applying critical theory to contemporary political issues. In more recent years, this interest

has become increasingly focused on environmental challenges and materialist approaches to embodiment, both of which have led to her current concern with the demographic dimension.

She has undertaken research about this and has identified six arguments which tend to, at best, inhibit and, at worst, shut down discussions about population.

(i) Population scepticism

Population growth is no longer a worry because birthrates are levelling off/ declining and the global population will stabilise during this century.

The key word here is 'global'. The United Nations (UN) latest global projection suggests that the world population will reach a peak of 10.4 billion in 2086. It should not be overlooked that this will mean an increase of 2.2 million (or more than 25%) over today's global population of 8.2 billion.[1]

But, while it may be in some sense reassuring to look at global numbers, one must not forget that all demography, like all politics, is local. In a country like the UK – made up of islands that are already relatively overcrowded – the local level of population is very important.

There are no projections that suggest that the UK's population in 2100 will be lower than it is today. Projections vary, but all suggest that the increase will be no less than 5 million, with the most recent UN projection being that the UK will have a population of 74.3 million by 2100.[2] This increase is the equivalent to just under two cities the size of Manchester Metro Area. In the interim, the increase in our population seems likely to be very much higher, with the latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures suggesting an increase of 6.6 million over the next 10 years (10%). More detailed numbers are given in chapter 3.

(ii) Population shaming

Anyone who suggests that there are trade-offs or downsides to population growth, and that there is a case for considering the advantages of stabilising our population, is exhibiting morally reprehensible characteristics.

Implicit in this is an immediate assumption that any attempt at population stabilisation must involve policies with an element of compulsion, such as China's one-child policy, India's forced sterilisation programme or, at the very least, government interference in the right of individuals to have the number of children they wish.

Apart from pointing out that any such policies would, quite rightly, be faced with immediate and understandable opposition, the fact is that with a UK total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.4 – some way below a replacement rate of 2.1 – any such steps are not needed.

Demographic decisions need to take into account the rights and concerns of the existing settled population – of whom 18% are now members of minority groups. Failing to address these issues seems unlikely to increase confidence in our system of government or indeed to aid social cohesion.

(iii) Population growth

Politicians argue that population growth is a sign of national vigour, and that growing the absolute size of one's population gives extra clout in international discussions. Further, that only a growing population can give the necessary boost to the UK's absolute economic size, is also claimed to be an important element in our international standing.

As a response to the first argument, is it really a good policy for the UK – a relatively small and already crowded island – to engage in a population numbers race with other countries of vastly larger geographical size?

Second – apart from the fact that the longer-term overall benefits resulting from large-scale population growth to our productivity record and our economy generally are far from proven – absolute

Channel crossings – many of which are economic migrants any way – give particular opportunities for press photographs and articles, but they account for about 10% of total net migration. Iraq, Sudan, Syria and Vietnam made up the bulk of these arrivals.

economic size surely should not be a totemic issue. For the existing settled population of the UK, the key concern will be prosperity per head. Perhaps even more important will be the median wage – the wage at which half the population is earning more and half earning less. Changes in this figure show the extent to which any gains in the country's prosperity are fairly shared. The flatlining of the median wage since 2008 is not encouraging.

(iv) Population decline

When the TFR falls below the replacement rate, the dependency ratio (the ratio between those in education or retirement compared to those in work) shifts unfavourably, making the costs of providing education, pensions and health services unsustainable. Only an increasing population can provide an answer.

The problem with this approach is that, inevitably, today's young people are tomorrow's old people. This will, in turn, require yet further increases to sustain the population. As Sir David Attenborough has put it, we would be creating a "population Ponzi scheme".

Some transitional adjustment may well be needed in any move to a more balanced population. But it could be eased *inter alia* by addressing the anecdotal evidence of 'under employment' – in particular, by creating conditions to enable those who wish to, to work longer; many appear to need to do so either for financial reasons, in that they have not saved enough to enable them to live as they wish, or because they like the sense of purpose that a job provides.

(v) Population deconstruction

Media and political focus inevitably prioritises individual cases of appalling mistreatment, often involving children, which have caused people to seek asylum in the UK. Even to raise concerns about the impact that admission of such people might have on the country is to invite accusations of, at best, hard-heartedness and an absence of any moral framework. In particular, the British people are generous-minded and so are instinctively supportive of individual cases of mistreatment. So, while public opinion is generally concerned about high levels of general population change and the consequent impact on the lives of the settled population, such concern melts away faced with cases of individual hardship and mistreatment.

But the UN estimates that there are 122.6 million asylum seekers and internally displaced people worldwide,[3] of which 47 million are children. An open and transparent debate about the relative moral obligation of the UK in helping to address this huge challenge, including taking into account the right of our settled population – too often overlooked in debates on demography – is long overdue.

Finally, it shouldn't be forgotten that the major demographic challenge comes not from refugees or asylum seekers, which in the year to June 2024 totalled 99,000. In the same period, the total number of people migrating to the UK was 728,000. In general terms, refugees and asylum seekers account for about 10.0% of our overall population growth.[4]

(vi) Population fatalism

Population fatalism argues that, while there may be problems arising from population growth, there is nothing that can be done about it, and we must just accept whatever hand fate deals us. However, it is hard to see why we should not be preparing for the strategic consequences of 6.6 million additional people (two cities just under the size of the Manchester Metro Area) expected in the UK by 2035, in particular when there is clear evidence of public concern about this issue.

It is the nature of this 'fatalism' that this report seeks to explore. For it is surely astonishing that, when it is expected that government should have plans ready to address challenges in nearly every aspect of our lives, we make no plans for probably the single most important issue – an issue that underpins all those other plans – namely the likely size and make-up of our future population. The failure of the mainstream political parties to provide a convincing and coherent response has given room for more extreme views to make themselves heard.

Notes

1 https://population.un.org/wpp/

2 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision. (Medium variant)

3 https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees

4 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2024/summary-of-latest-statistics

2 How did we get to where we are?

Probably the single most significant event that has prevented a calm, evidence-based discussion of the widespread and fundamental trade-offs resulting from demographic change – up or down – took place in Birmingham on 20 April 1968. This was the date on which Enoch Powell made his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

From that point, any discussion about demographic change became irretrievably indistinguishable from a discussion about race – first in the minds of much of the commentariat, but also in parallel among the general public. Only now, 56 years later, are its echoes beginning to die away.

The reality is that nearly all of us – born here or newly arrived, no matter our race, our colour or our creed – have broadly the same objectives. We want a secure home, an adequately paid job, decent access to public services for our families, a policing and legal system that, together with effective armed forces, offers an adequate degree of security at home and abroad, sufficient open space for recreation and leisure, and an atmosphere of tolerance in which we can express our views freely.

In return for this, we are required to accept and comply wholeheartedly with the core values of this country – the host community. Increasingly, in recent years, concerns have grown about whether we will be able to leave a better country for the next generation to enjoy those things we have taken for granted. As part of this, there are also concerns about whether the policies that followed in recent years, which have resulted in a very rapid increase in the UK population, may have put these objectives at risk. What is the historical context?

2.1. The position 1970–1995 – steady state

Over the period 1970–1995, the UK total fertility rate (TFR) (the number of children born to each woman) fell steadily. As a result, the natural increase (excess of births over deaths) fell by some 60% over the period from around 250,000 to 100,000 per annum. Indeed, in three separate years in the late 1970s, deaths exceeded births. Meanwhile, immigration and emigration remained broadly stable, with the total UK population only growing slowly – 2.4 million (4.3%) over the 25-year period.

The figures are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: UK fertility rate 1970 to 1995

	1970	1980	1990	1995
Total fertility rate (TFR)	2.44	1.90	1.83	1.7
Natural increase (000s)	249	92	156	90
Immigration (000s)	226	173	267	312
Emigration (000s)	291	228	231	236
Net immigration (000s)	(65)	(55)	36	76
Total UK population (million)	**55.6**	**56.3**	**57.2**	**58.0**

Source: ONS.

2.2. The period 1995–Brexit – accelerated growth

Under the Blair government, Britain's immigration policy went from a highly restrictive approach to a very expansive one under what was termed a 'managed migration policy'. There were two significant aspects: broadened admission criteria; and EU expansion.

Broadened admission criteria

First, work permit criteria were relaxed, the number of international students doubled, while existing low- and high-skilled migrant schemes were expanded, and new ones introduced. This resulted in a large increase in new arrivals, in particular from South Asia.

EU expansion

Second, in 2004, eight new countries from Eastern Europe joined the EU, and this in turn gave their citizens automatic right of access to the UK. The government received expert advice that these flows were unlikely to be large, so did not apply to the European Commission for permission (then available under EU rules, and used by France and other countries) to apply the temporary brake on numbers. In the event, the flows were substantially larger than the experts predicted.

These two developments increased the number of young people in the population, so the decline in the TFR flattened out and, as a result, the natural increase in our population began to rise again. The three years 2010–2012 saw the largest natural increase in the past half-century, more than 225,000 in each year.

The figures are shown in Table 2.

Impact on UK society

Overall, the result of these policy decisions was that, over the 20 years 1995–2015, the UK population increased by 7.1 million (12.2%). This is compared to 2.4 million (4.1%) over the previous 25 years. At the same time, the nature of British society began to change quite rapidly – for example, as evidenced by the fact that, in 1970, about 10% of births were to mothers not born in the UK, whereas by 2021, that figure had risen to 31%.

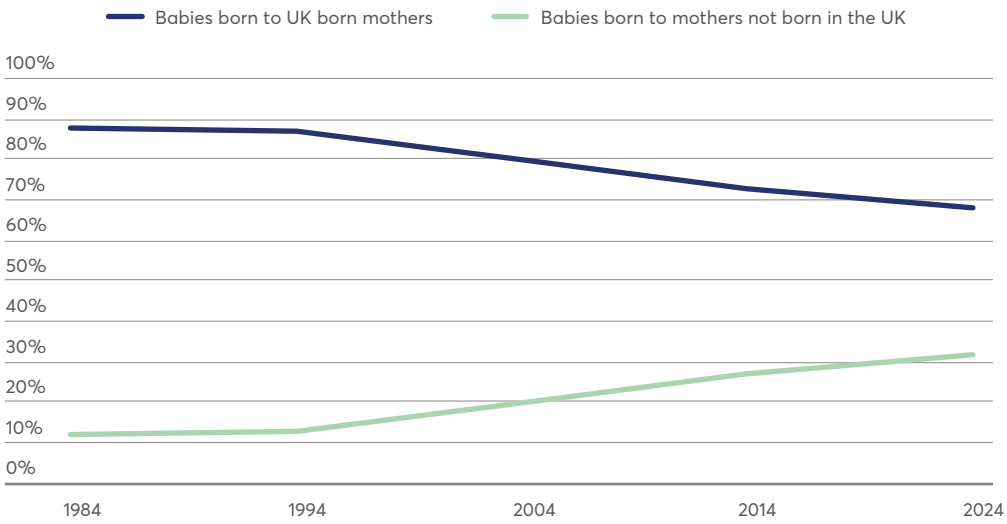
It was the results of these policies – the implications for housing, public services, the environment and social cohesion – that began to raise in the public mind worries about the far-reaching and irreversible implications of demographic change; thus began a process which is still unfolding today.

Table 2: UK fertility rate 1995 to 2015

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Total fertility rate (TFR)	1.71	1.64	1.76	1.92	1.81
Natural increase (000s)	90	68	140	246	172
Immigration (net) (000s)					
EU	23	6	96	77	183
Other	104	213	198	218	189
British	(51)	(62)	(88)	(43)	(40)
Subtotal immigration net	**76**	**158**	**267**	**256**	**332**
Total UK population (millions)	**58.0**	**58.9**	**60.4**	**62.8**	**65.1**

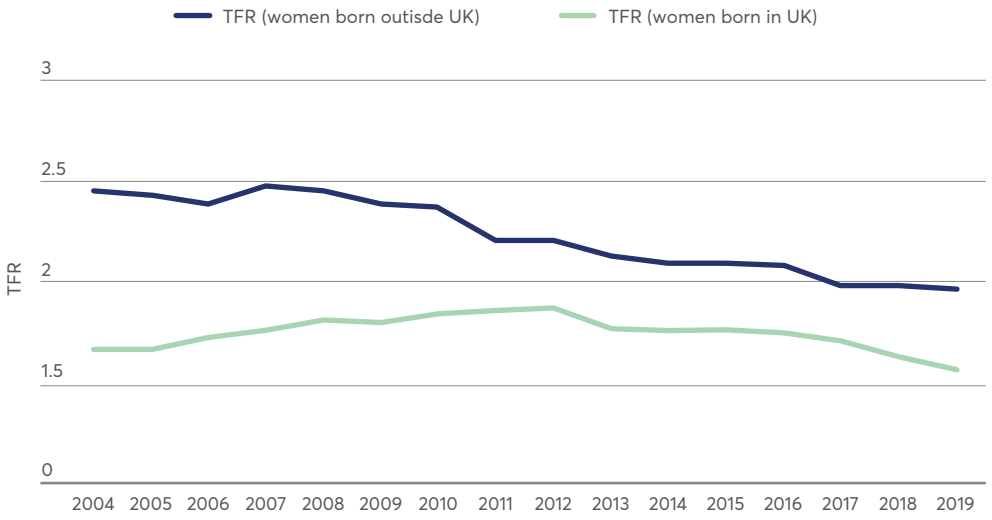
Source: ONS.

Figure 1: Birthplace of babies and mothers, 1984–2024



Source: ONS.

Figure 2: TFR by mother's country of birth – England and Wales, 2004–2019



Note: The TFR of new arrivals is also on a downward slope but remains significantly higher than that of the settled population.
Source: Migration Watch UK and ONS.

But such concerns the general public may have had were effectively ignored by the commentariat as well as the major political parties. This is reflected, most famously, in the exchange in 2010 between Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister, and Gillian Duffy a Rochdale voter who raised some concerns about what was happening to her neighbourhood and was later described by the Prime Minister as "that bigoted woman".

Perhaps worse still for public confidence in our system of government was the tendency by the two major parties, on occasion, to accept somewhat grudgingly that there were public concerns, talk about the need to address them, but then take no effective action to follow through.

Gillian Duffy meeting Prime Minister Gordon Brown, 2010.

Table 3: Long-term net migration in the UK, rolling 12-month estimate

Year	New arrivals from EU	New arrivals outside the EU
2010	90,000	218,000
2015	200,000	153,000
2020	58,000	316,000
2022	-37,000	441,000

Note: A change in methodology means that new data cannot be compared directly with figures from before March 2020. Old estimates use the International Passenger Survey. New estimates are based on administrative and survey data, supported by statistical modelling. They are experimental and subject to change.
Source: ONS.

2.3. Post Brexit – continued high rates of growth

One of the difficulties of reaching clear evidence-based conclusions about the effect of demographic change is the absence of good data. Only two existing official bodies regularly undertake work on this topic – the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which collects and regularises data and makes outline projections of the likely future trends; and the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) whose role is confined by its terms of references to an important but rather narrow analysis of the economic aspect of migration flows. By contrast, polling shows that public concerns about the impact of demographic change go much wider than this and include concerns about the consequent impact on the availability of housing, the pressure on public services, damage to our ecology and our environment – in particular, our ability to meet our climate change goals – and strains on social cohesion.

Complicating factors

These interpretative difficulties have been increased by four factors:

- The decision to leave the EU made any analysis more complicated. It meant that EU citizens would now form part of the measured inflows and outflows. Up to that point, no such recording had taken place because of the EU's free movement of labour provisions.

- The Brexit campaign placed a heavy focus on 'taking back control of our borders'. It is true that Brexit gave the government new powers to control population movement with the EU. However, the public never fully appreciated that the UK had **always** had the power to control **non-EU** migration, which, as the figures in Table 3 show, is an equally substantial contribution to population growth.

- Before any long-term trends about the specific impact of Brexit on demographic change could be discerned, the pandemic rolled through the world and fundamentally disrupted people's movement over a period of years.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of the second world war.

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of the second world war.

The failure to take back control after Brexit

1. Arrivals from the EU have dropped – supporting the Remainer view that the UK would be seen as 'unfriendly' post-Brexit. Since September 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of EU nationals leaving the UK has been greater than those arriving.[1] In the year ending December 2022, the long-term net migration of EU citizens to the UK was negative, at -51,000, according to ONS estimates published in May 2023. Net migration from the EU turned negative in 2020, after the beginning of the pandemic, and continued falling in 2021 and 2022.[2] However, this is not the full picture.

2. More EU citizens already here sought **'settled status'** – supporting the Brexiteer view that leaving the EU did not make a fundamental change to our relationship with continental countries. Since September 2020, the number of EU citizens applying for UK citizenship has been greater than the number leaving the UK. As of 30 September 2024, there have been 8.2 million EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) applications made by 6.3 million people (some individuals submitted multiple applications) since the scheme launched. Of these, 4 million were granted settled status, and a further 2.8 million (35%) were granted pre-settled status.[3]

3. Non-EU/non-refugee/asylum seekers migration rose from 218,000 in 2010 to 441,000 in 2022. Since 2021, the total number of new arrivals from outside the EU has been consistently above 300,000 (rolling 12-month estimate).

4. Many Ukrainian citizens made their homes, at least temporarily, in the UK. From March 2022 to September 2024, there were 214,400[4] arrivals from Ukraine under the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme. This figure includes:
   - 58,400 under the Ukraine Family Scheme
   - 155,900 under the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme.

Notes

1 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/

2 Ibid.

3 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2024/summary-of-latest-statistics

4 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-family-scheme-application-data/ukraine-family-scheme-and-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-visa-data--2

3 What the future holds

Estimates of future population levels are inevitably uncertain. Nevertheless, given the long term and irreversible impact of demographic change efforts need to be made to consider and plan for a range of outcomes.

At this time forecasting has been made particularly hazardous because the level of admissions in the single year 2023 revealed an all-time high of just under 1.3 million – an increase not far short of two percent of the entire population – driven, in part, by external events such as events in Hong Kong and Ukraine.

This absolute increase linked to publicity about possible abuses in the system led to specific actions by the then Conservative government in respect of student and work visas. These are outlined below.

Further, during May 2025, as this Report was in its final stages of preparation, two significant developments took place.

First, the Labour Government published a White Paper "Restoring Control over the Immigration System" (CP 1326). It was heavy on aspiration but light on detail as summarised on page 27 at the end of this chapter.

Second, on 22 May the ONS issued its preliminary estimate of the change in the UK population in 2024 – the first year which had the impact of the policies introduced by the Conservative government referred to above. It too is summarised at the end of this chapter; the headline number was the significant reduction in the net increase from 860,000 to 431,000. But this latter figure still represented a very high figure by historic standards and after allowing for a small natural increase means that we are adding nearly half a million annually to our population with all the implications for housing, public services, net zero, environment etc.

3.1. Position today – new emerging patterns

More generally, the UK TFR has been declining year-on-year in recent years. The TFR for England and Wales in 2012 was 1.92, but by 2022 had fallen to 1.49.[1] It is now some way below 2.1 at which population levels remain stable long term. In Scotland, the TFR was 1.33 in 2022 and in Northern Ireland, the TFR was 1.71,[2] the highest TFR of the four UK countries. When added together, the UK's TFR in 2022 was 1.51. In the UK, women would need to have, on average, 2.08 children to ensure long term "natural" replacement of the population.[3] The ONS figures for 2023, are as follows. Note that the admission figures shown in Table 1 are gross (i.e. do not take into account any departures).

How many stay on?

So much for the gross numbers of arrivals. However, from the point of view of the UK's demographic challenge, while the number being **admitted** has significance, the fundamental question for the UK is: how many of these people will **stay permanently**?

There are two major relevant groups: study visas, and work visas.

1. Study visas

There have been concerns that too many students have been undertaking a course of study at a UK university, at the end of which they can morph into the permanent workforce as a way of short-circuiting the normal immigration system. This risk was considered to be the greater by reason of their ability to bring their dependents with them for all courses. The economic case for increasing the number of overseas students is discussed later in this chapter. But, in response to public pressure, in January 2024 the Conservative government implemented a number of changes – in particular, removing the right for international students to bring dependants unless they were on postgraduate courses currently designated as 'research programmes'.

Table 1: UK population increases in 2023

Natural increase	
Births	591,072[4]
Deaths	581,363[5]
Subtotal – natural increase	**9,436**
New arrivals	
Work	335,447[6]
Study	393,000[7]
Work/study families	81,000[8]
Subtotal – new arrivals	**809,447**
Refugees and asylum seekers	
Asylum applications	75,340[9]
Ukraine	179,500[10]
Afghanistan	31,944[11]
Hong Kong British National Overseas visa	182,600[12]
Subtotal – refugees and asylum seekers	**469,384**
Total	**1,279,540**

Source: ONS.

International students have become an increasingly important source of revenue for UK universities.

The number of dependents entering the UK increased from 16,000 in 2019 to 136,000 in 2022. Other changes reduced the ability for international students to switch out of the student route into work routes **before** their studies had been completed, and ensured that all international students were predominantly undertaking face-to-face courses.

After the change of government in July 2024, Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, announced that the government would…

> "continue with the previously announced measures to ensure that international students, the institutions they are coming to study at, and the immigration system as a whole are protected from those who wish to exploit it".[13]

2. Work visas

Similar concerns have been expressed at how certain types of visas are being used to avoid the normal immigration system. For example, the Health and Care Worker visa was launched in August 2020 as part of the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressure on the care system has been such that the government has exempted the £37,800[14] salary level required to qualify for a visa. Instead, the minimum salary for a care worker is £23,200.[15]

A large number of workers entering the UK on Health and Care Worker visas do not end up working in the sector.

But, once admitted and working in the sector, there is poor enforcement to ensure that the person remains employed within the sector. The Migration Advisory Committee has noted that a large number of workers entering the UK on Health and Care Worker visas do not end up working in the sector. Border Force queried the documentation of a migrant who was sponsored by one care provider, who had had 498 visas granted since May 2022. The Care Quality Commission confirmed that this care provider had been dormant since September 2021 and was no longer providing any services. UK Visas and Immigration stated that five sponsor licences in the care sector had been revoked in May 2023. Between the five, these sponsors had made more than 1,100 main visa applications.[16] This gives some credibility to the suspicion that a few months working in a care home provides a shortcut for a way to work in the UK.

How will this impact population growth?

- The **Migration Observatory** at University of Oxford undertook academic analysis of likely long-term "staying on" rates. The findings are published in Madeleine Sumption's chapter *Limits to Power – how immigration policymakers influence demographic change* later in this report. Key findings from this research are, first, that people on work visas contribute the largest share of net migration in the long term. Second, that students are also large contributors. Even though students' stay rates are lower than any other group, the number of students is sufficiently large that a small share remaining permanently can make a meaningful contribution to long-term net migration.

  From this research, the Migration Observatory makes an estimate of the likely level of those who stay on – and so represent a permanent increase in our population. After deducting departing British (30,000 per annum) and allowing for some overs and unders, the Migration Observatory estimates a net annual increase in our population in the range of 300,000 to 350,000.

- **Office for National Statistics (ONS)** By contrast, the ONS has recently released its updated figures which estimate that the UK's population increased from 67.6 million in 2022 to 68.3 million in 2023 – an increase in this one year of 677,300. This is a 1% increase to the population between July 2022 and June 2023.[17]

This is the largest annual percentage increase in the UK's population since comparable data began in 1971.

It underlines a concern that official figures appear not to be capturing the reality on the ground.

Table 2: National Insurance numbers

Nationality	Number	Percentage
EU	69,927	7.4%
Other European	49,302	5.2%
Asia	544,241	57.9%
Rest of the world	261,711	27.8%
Other/unknown	14,857	1.6%
Total	**940,039**	**100%**

Source: Stat-Xplore.
Note: Statistical disclosure control has been applied to this table to avoid the release of confidential data. Totals may not sum due to the disclosure control applied. Date: 17 September 2024.

The picture is further confused by the number of National Insurance numbers (NINOs) being issued.

Members of the settled population are automatically issued a NINO on their 16th birthday. However, people coming from overseas require a NINO to be able to work legally. A NINO is permanent (e.g., if you come to pick fruit in several successive years, the same NINO will apply).

A reply to a Parliamentary Question on 9 September 2024 revealed that a total of 940,039 NINOs were issued to overseas nationals in the 12 months prior to June 2024, of which 544,000 (58%) went to Asian nationals and 13% to those from Europe.

It is unclear how this figure of just under 1 million can be reconciled with the issue of Work visas (335,447 in 2023).

The above figures, all gathered in good faith, suggest substantially different directions of travel. It underlines the need for better and more focused data.

The future

It has been said that making demographic projections is like trying to lower a ping pong ball on the end of a fishing line into a bucket 25 yards away in a gale.

Which government departments are involved?

This inherent uncertainty is made worse by the confused landscape of British Government policy, where the major policy decisions are taken in individual departmental policy silos, with no department responsible for taking a strategic overview. The major reasons for population change, and the government departments responsible, and the numbers admitted last year are:

- Right to Work – Department for Work and Pensions
- Right to Study – Department for Education
- Right of Family Resettlement – Home Office
- Refugees/Asylum Seekers – Home Office
- Natural change – Cabinet Office/ONS

The sources for the numbers can be found in Table 1.

Long-term impact

As already noted, the key issue determining long-term impact on a country is not primarily the number of admissions, but the number who subsequently stay permanently.

Anyone arriving in this country will immediately make some demands on our society – which may or may not be balanced by their contribution to it. But if a person chooses to stay permanently – particularly if that person chooses to bring a family here to join them –their impact increases substantially.

The ONS produced two forecasts: for 15 years 2020–2035; and 25 years 2020–2045.

3.2. 2020–2035 – rapid growth continues

Over the period to 2035, our population is expected to grow by a further 6.6 million (9.9%). This figure assumes an annual migration figure of 315,000, a TFR at the end of the period of 1.59 (2.1 is the number needed for a stable population) and life expectancy of 81.3 years (men) and 84.6 years (women). See Table 3 for a breakdown of figures.

What does this mean for urbanisation and loss of open space? An example, Manchester Metro Area has a population of 2.8 million and occupies an area of 1.276 square kilometres. So, to house 6.6 million people, we will have to build over just under two cities the size of the Manchester Metro Area This will cover 3,062 square kilometres. Compare this figure to existing counties – Berkshire 1,263 sq km, Cheshire 2,344 sq km or Northumberland 5,013 sq km – and one can see the extent to which this country is going to change.

3.3. 2035–2045 – growth slows

The ONS expects that the second 10-year period to 2045 will see a further increase of only 2.9 million, taking the overall increase for the 25 years of 9.5 million people. As a result, the total population will increase from 67.0 million in 2021 to 76.6 million in 2046.

The reduced rate of increase is the result of several factors. Notably, from about 2035, deaths are expected to exceed births, so over the 10-year period, there are projected to be 1.4 million more deaths than births.

Table 3: Population change 2020–2035

Millions	Natural increase		Migration
Births	10.8	Immigration	13.7
Deaths	10.3	Emigration	7.6
Increase	0.5		6.1

Source: ONS.

3.4. 2045–2100 projections – the UK becomes the most populous country in Europe

Beyond 2045

The ONS provides a central projection for the UK population up to 2072. This is based on life expectancy for males of 80.5 years (today 78.8) and females of 84.2 years (today 82.8) a TFR of 1.6 (today 1.44) and net migration of 340,000 per annum (2024: 750,000).

This predicts a UK population in 2072 of 75.3 million – fractionally below the expected total for 2046 of 76.6 million.

It is worth considering how sensitive the total is to any change in these three key parameters:

- If the TFR were to increase to 1.7 from 1.44, the population would increase by a further 1.0 million to 76.3 million.
- If the life expectancy were to increase for males to 82.2 and females 85.8, the population would increase by 600,000.
- If net migration were to increase to 420,000 and 525,000, the population would increase by 1.8 million and 3.8 million respectively.

And if all three happened, the population of the UK would be 79.9 million – 4.6 million above the existing projection.

3.5. Background political imperatives

Why have governments found it so difficult to agree to establishing some way of analysing, planning or responding to changes in population levels and the public concern about them?

Overall is the inherent uncertainty of our world. For example, nobody could have predicted the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which led to the biggest refugee crisis in western Europe since 1945. Further, the next world health crisis – which some suggest as likely to be an antibiotic-resistant disease – may not be resolved as quickly as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of no less relevance are the constraints imposed by the five-year electoral cycle. Demographic policy changes are slow to take effect – though they are inexorable in their long-term consequences. Further, they may well cause short-term political pain, with gains only accruing many years later. There is therefore an understandable temptation to 'kick the can down the road' and avoid potentially controversial decisions.

In this connection, governments have been particularly impacted by three policy areas, each of which has powerful and influential advocates: economics; soft power; and morals.

(i) The economic case

British industry's argument for recruiting overseas can be summarised as being due to a lack of British people skilled enough or motivated enough to carry out the work required. On closer examination, the answer can be reframed as not having the people in the right geographical areas with the right skills. This in turn has led to firms recruiting labour from overseas – in the words of the Migration Advisory Committee – as "the default option".

Impact of the Treasury

And of course the Treasury, with its significant economic influence, has played a major role. It may come as a surprise, but the Treasury automatically increases its gross domestic product (GDP) growth estimate if there is an increase in the number of people expected to arrive; so more arrivals means an automatic upward tick in forecast GDP growth.

No allowance is made for the nature or skills of a new arrival so, a luckless asylum seeker – who is quite possibly unable to speak, read or write English – is believed

by the Treasury to contribute as much to our economy as a multi-skilled English-speaking Hong Kong citizen. Further, no account is taken of whether the individual is a solo arrival or is accompanied by dependents. Small wonder that every chancellor of every political party looking for ways to boost economic forecasts is reluctant to agree to policies that may turn down the arrivals tap.

Recent policy decisions

In 2023, the then Conservative Government announced that it would increase the salary threshold for people arriving on Skilled Worker visas in two stages: the first in April 2024, and the second in 2025. The Confederation of British Industry, Britain's leading business lobby organisation, responded by saying that "this level of increase will do nothing to address the shortages that are currently holding back business investment and growth".

British industry's argument for recruiting overseas can be summarised as being due to a lack of British people skilled enough or motivated enough to carry out the work required.

After the general election, Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, said the Labour Government intended to implement the previous government's planned policy to increase the general salary threshold for people arriving on Skilled Worker visas. However, other changes would not take place until the Migration Advisory Committee conducted a review.

Pressure from the business community has undoubtedly been one reason for this delay. An article published in *People Management* in August 2024 argued for the necessity of working age migration in the context of an ageing population.[18] In April 2024, Khyati Sundaram, Chief Executive Officer of hiring platform, Applied, argued that the fall in overseas workers due to the increase in the income threshold was worsening the skills shortage for employers who depend on international recruitment to fill the talent gap and bring unique perspectives and knowledge to teams.

Consequences for UK economic performance and society

Several commentators have taken issue with this current approach. They have suggested that, unless the policy regarding new arrivals is to restrict admission to those with high skills, the benefits, if any, to the UK economy as a whole are very short lived. They say that any longer-term benefits will accrue to new arrivals themselves – and good luck to them – as well as to the already better-off among the settled population.

Further, they argue that this policy is one of the causes of this country's poor productivity record, since it enables businesses to defer or reduce capital investment and take advantage of Britain's flexible labour market by recruiting from overseas. So, making it harder to recruit from overseas may result in an increase in capital investment and a longer-term consequent improvement in the UK's productivity performance.

Stagnant real median wage

A more important result of extensive overseas recruitment is the knock-on effect on the economic position of the less advantaged members of the settled population. Many commentators focus on the way an increase in the average wage is distorted if one group of the population has a significant advantage. They go on to argue that better measurement of the extent to which increased prosperity is being spread is the change in median wage – the wage at which half the country earns less and half earns more. During the period 2010–2020, the median weekly wage rose from £506[19] in April 2012 to £640[20] in April 2022. Adjusted for the effect of inflation, the latter figure should be £764.55. Accordingly, this means that as many as half the settled population of the UK likely saw no real increase in their standard of living over this period.

Ministers are under pressure to allow higher levels of new arrivals – for example, to assist with harvesting crops.

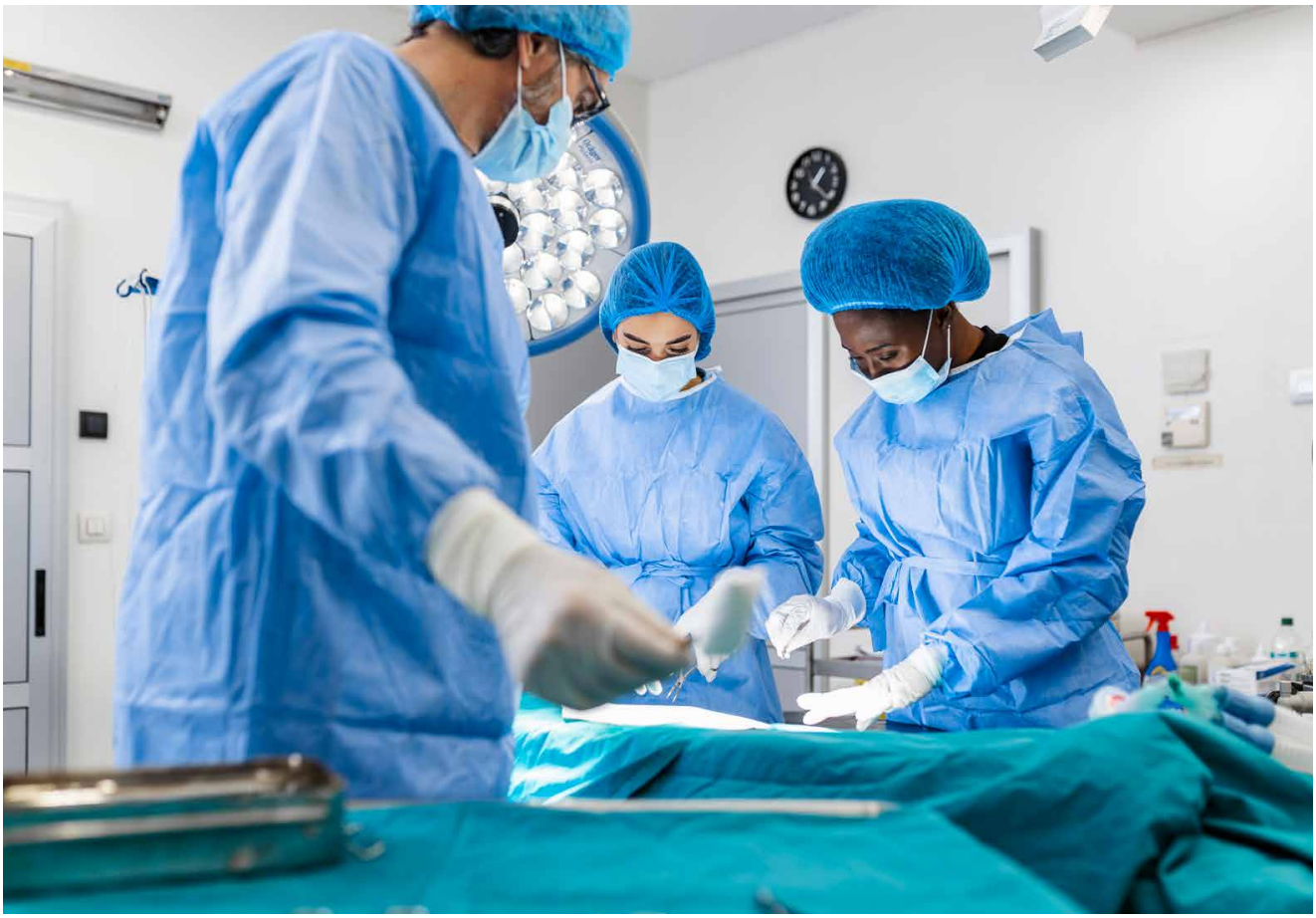
Underemployment

At an individual level, the consequences may be equally corrosive. As a nation we are proud of our high levels of employment. But the ONS definition of employment is "at least one hour of paid employment per week". So, the issue of underemployment looms large: zero-hours contracts; members of minority communities locked into low pay; low prospect jobs; and, last but not least, those aged over 50 who find it hard to get any job at all. Underemployment among the over 50s has declined in recent years but remains above 30% – a situation that would be politically unacceptable for younger people.

High-skill migration

All political parties have signed up to the concept of 'high-skill' migration, so why has this policy proved so difficult to implement? In short, because individual well-publicised cases put the minister of the day on the back foot – so a farmer standing in the middle of a field of cabbages which he says he cannot harvest without labour from overseas, or the managing director of a leading-edge engineering firm explaining that his export drive will be hampered if he cannot recruit from overseas, give graphic examples that can swing the mood of political and/or public opinion.

As noted before, the last Conservative Government made a decision to increase the basic salary for 'skilled' migrants. This was to be in two parts: part one increased the basic salary from £18,600 to £29,000; with an additional increase to £34,500 later in 2024 and to £38,700 in 2025. From £18,600 to £29,000 looks like a large increase (36%), but adjusted for inflation, since the £18,600 was first set in July 2012, it is only 11% in real terms. Further, there are also those who argue that the proposed £38,700 minimum salary is hardly the level expected by a skilled person. Nevertheless, it represented an effort to address the issue and was due to take effect from April 2025. But, as noted earlier, the incoming government have



Under half of UK students who apply to medical school each year are accepted, while at the same time the NHS increasingly relies on overseas recruitment, often from less developed countries.

decided not to implement these increases pending further research into the impact of the policy by the Migration Advisory Committee.

(ii) The soft power case

The basis of this argument is that people who come here to study will form a favourable impression of the UK and so, in their subsequent career, will be inclined to favour this country – politically, economically or socially. Each one of us will have our own view of the validity of this argument.

Flaws in the university business model

This argument has been particularly used by university vice chancellors, some of whom have built their business model on attracting large numbers of foreign students to whom they can charge higher fees than the £9,535 maximum chargeable to UK undergraduates. So, any restrictions on recruiting from overseas puts this business model, and therefore their university, at risk of financial collapse. Unsurprisingly, they are inclined to give maximum publicity to this possibility.

In a *Telegraph* report on 30 September 2024, the University of East Anglia vice-chancellor warned that the slump in international students has spurred universities to "aggressively" recruit more domestic students, but warned there weren't enough students to go around.

In a *Guardian* report published on 7 September 2024, Professor Max Lu, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Surrey, praised the incoming Labour Government for welcoming international students. This report went on to say that universities attracting more international students have been able to cross-subsidise domestic undergraduates, whose tuition fees in England have been frozen since 2017, their value eroded by inflation. Politically, any

suggestion that a university or a college of a university might have to merge, let alone close, will lead to an uproar in the community in which it is located.

Impact on students from settled populations

From a demographic point of view, as already noted, the actual number of international admissions has limited significance, though there may be an effect on the quality of teaching offered to undergraduates from the settled population; there appears to be considerable debate among undergraduates as to the extent to which the present arrangements represent value for money.

Of much greater importance demographically is whether a student is going to be accompanied by a family, and whether they are to return home at the end of their course.

The proportion of students granted further leave to remain in the UK following their studies more than tripled between 2019 and 2023 from 18% to 56%.[21] Further, the proportion of students who remain in the UK after their studies by switching to another type of visa increased from 15% in 2019 to 56% in 2023.[22]

It was this that led the Conservative Government to introduce a series of new regulations which came into force in January 2024.[23] So far this new policy is reported to have reduced the number of applications from 115,000 in the year ending June 2023 to 80,000 in the year ending June 2024.[24]

(iii) The moral case

Again, put simply, the UK is a rich country and so we have a duty to help persons less fortunate than ourselves; further, there are international agreements to which this country is a signatory – some of which, it is argued, were designed and written for the very different conditions of western Europe in the aftermath of the second world war. The emergence of highly profitable but morally appalling business models – such as people smuggling – requires us to take immediate action to end them.

Safe and legal routes

In recent years there have been proposals to create 'safe and legal routes' as a means of answering the moral imperative, while simultaneously breaking the business model of the people smugglers. Clearly there are advantages to such an approach – but, as ever, the devil is in the detail: How many safe and legal routes are proposed, how many individuals will be allowed down each route and, critically, what happens when that latter figure is reached? Given the number of refugees in the world today, such a figure may well be reached quickly. Unless we are to have an 'open door' policy without limit on the numbers who may use each route, it seems highly probable that, once any set limit for a safe and legal route is reached, the people smugglers will merely resume where they left off.

Relatively small numbers

A parallel argument is that, even under this present 'stressed' condition, the numbers arriving by this route represent a very small proportion of new arrivals. As noted earlier, in 2023, of the 809,447 new arrivals, 75,340 or 9.3% were refugees. So, it is argued that the primary demographic challenge we face is the result of continuing high levels of arrivals to work or to study.

A moral dilemma

Meanwhile, other commentators have raised the issue as to whether it is morally right for the UK – a rich country – to recruit skilled workers from less developed countries where these skills are desperately needed. Take medical training: in the last year, 29,000 UK citizens applied to train as doctors, but there are currently only 7,000 training places available (shortly to be increased to 15,000). In 2024, 22,000 young UK citizens were unable to follow their chosen career choice. Yet in the same period a third of doctors and three in 10 nurses working in the National Health Service (NHS) were non-UK nationals in 2023. The overall number of foreign nationals working for NHS England in

2023 was 20.4%, up from 13% in 2016 and 11.9% in 2009 when the data was first made available.[25]

In summary, unsurprisingly, given the strong conflicting views, government ministers have found it very difficult to construct and hold a policy line on the moral case. Individuals, especially young children, rescued from drowning are bound to, and should, attract our sympathy and so create pressure for automatic admission. Policies designed to date, such as the Rwanda scheme (the UK and Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership), can appear, or can be portrayed as appearing, heartless.

The new government appears to be finding just how intractable an issue this is, with conflicting pressures from all sides. To date, no clear policies have been brought forward beyond increasing border security in the Channel.

3.6. Government White Paper May 2025

As this report was about to go to print, the government published a white paper, *Restoring control over the immigration system* (CP 1326). It is a 76-page paper built around four themes: work reforms; study reforms; enforcement of rules; and improved integration and community cohesion.

It would be unfair and churlish to disregard the paper's points wholesale. But, not only are they just proposals, but many are proposed that will only be implemented after 'consultation'. So, it is not yet clear what details of the package the country is being asked to accept. However, what is clear is that there is no overall strategy for balancing, measuring and reconciling the trade-offs between the four themes. Each government department will continue to have its own agenda, which its ministers will undoubtedly pursue vigorously. And this has proved to be the Achilles' heel of many similar approaches in the past.

Importantly, there are no numerical objectives, only aspirational ones. As the Home Secretary says in the white paper: "Migration matters but it must be controlled so the system is fair and works for the UK." Probably every Home Secretary for the past 20 years would have put their name to that sentence and sentiment; but progress has never happened primarily because, without an overall framework, special pleading or individual policy objectives have proved more influential. And in particular, without any numerical and measurable framework, no one can be blamed or held responsible.

This white paper may be different but, given past experiences and the fact that no structural changes are proposed, the odds against a different result must be high. For those all across the country who have seen the side effects of rapid population growth – in particular those living in the blue/red wall seats – this looks like another refusal to confront these complexities fair and square. Instead, as has happened over the past 25 years, the approach is to 'kick the can down the road', and (like Dickens's Mr Micawber) hope that "something will turn up".

Importantly, experts suggest that the proposals in the white paper increase complexity and will lead to more court challenges. As the Law Report of 22 May 2025 puts it "Immigration plan means legal bonanza".

3.7. Latest migration statistics

On 22 May 2025 the ONS released first figures on the change of the UK population in 2024. These are preliminary numbers and may well be – and in past years often have been – adjusted as more detail becomes available.

The summary numbers (EU and non EU) are:

000's	2023	2024
Immigration	1,326	948
Emigration	466	517
Net Increase	**860**	**431**

We can conclude that

- all these figures are likely to have been influenced by the unwinding of the impact of Brexit and, more importantly, Covid.

- the annual increase in the UK population – after adding a small natural increase – remains close to half a million; this figure would historically have been regarded as staggeringly high. It carries with it huge implications for the settled population since, inter alia, it will require the building of an additional 200,000 houses, over and above what is needed to meet domestic demand.

- the bulk of the reduction appears to have come from "low hanging fruit" – mostly as a result of changes introduced by the last Conservative Government. Reducing numbers from this new lower level may well prove challenging.

Non-EU Student Visas

As noted elsewhere in the Report, changes were made by the last government to the terms of student visas – importantly restricting the ability to bring in the families of those on undergraduate study and to reduce the ability to undertake a degree entirely or predominantly online. This has led to the forecast reduction in student visa applications and more significantly in family visas.

Non EU Students	2023	2024
Students	423	266
Families	121	17
Total	**544**	**283**

However the ONS noted that the number of students "transitioning" i.e. moving from a student visa to another – probably work visa – has risen substantially. Of those entering the UK on a student visa in 2019 only 18% transitioned, for those in 2021 46% did so. This may suggest that obtaining a student visa may still be being used to short circuit the normal entry process.

Non-EU Work Visas

Also as noted elsewhere the last Conservative Government raised the salary thresholds at which "shortage" exemptions come into force. As forecast this as led to a reduction in work visas to 262,000 from 369,000 in the prior year.

Humanitarian/Asylum Seekers/ Families

There was a small reduction in these categories from 260,000 in 2023 to 222,000.

Conclusion

More detail is needed to see the full implications of these preliminary figures but two things are clear:

- overall the number of people wishing to stay in the UK remains stubbornly high.
- that attempts at further reductions may well be challenged by a combination of those involved in industry and commerce, higher education or humanitarian activities.

Notes

1 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2022refreshedpopulations

2 Scotland: https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/vital-events-reference-tables-2023; Northern Ireland: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/births-deaths-and-marriages/births.

3 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2022refreshedpopulations

4 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2023

5 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathregistrationsummarystatisticsenglandandwales/2023

6 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2023/summary-of-latest-statistics

7 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024/summary-of-latest-statistics

8 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2023/summary-of-latest-statistics

9 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2023/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to

10 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2023/statistics-on-ukrainians-in-the-uk

11 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data

12 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2024/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-via-safe-and-legal-humanitarian-routes

13 Source: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-07-30/debates/e3a19436-8e8b-4d88-90e2-9aa911e5a077/WrittenStatements#contribution-1DB53222-EF26-4DC3-A960-2B29665A7FFE

14 Tougher visa rules unveiled in plan to cut migration – BBC News

15 Minimum wage for different types of work: Overview – GOV.UK

16 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-advisory-committee-annual-report-2023

17 https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-07-30/debates/24073046000015/

18 https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1885090/dear-sir-keir-help-employers-recruit-overseas

19 https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2012-11-22

20 https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2022

21 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/analysis-of-migrants-use-of-the-graduate-route/analysis-of-migrants-use-of-the-graduate-route

22 Ibid

23 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-student-visa-route-will-reduce-net-migration

24 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2024

25 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7783/

4 Experts' analyses of the consequences of population pressure

So far, we have been examining and considering the physical numbers of our population – past, present and projected.

But we now need to consider the impact they will have on us, as individuals, as well as our society, our environment, our ecology, our food and water security and – no less importantly – future generations and the prospects for the country we will be leaving them.

In this chapter, nine experts give their views in essays about what they think lies ahead in their area of expertise: how well we, as a country, prepare for these developments, and what needs to be done to improve things.

A. Goodbye to the hedgehog? The impact of population change on biodiversity

Sir Jonathon Porritt CBE

Jonathon Porritt is an eminent writer, campaigner, and advisor on sustainable development. He co-founded Forum for the Future in 1996, helping business and civil society transition toward a sustainable future, and also co-founded the Prince of Wales Business and Sustainability Programme. A former Co-Chair of the Green Party and Director of Friends of the Earth, he chaired the UK Sustainable Development Commission (2000–2009) and served on the board of the Southwest Regional Development Agency. He is now focused on intergenerational justice, supporting youth-led climate action amid the Climate and Biodiversity Emergencies. Jonathon is President of The Conservation Volunteers and Population Matters, and was Chancellor of Keele University (2012–2022). He was awarded a CBE in 2000 and is the author of 10 books, including *Hope in Hell*.

> "Quite simply…human population increase is … the biggest threat to the welfare of our wildlife in these islands." – Norman Maclean, Emeritus Professor of Genetics, University of Southampton.[1]

Introduction

When I was born in 1950, the UK population stood at 50 million, neatly coinciding with the new decade. Today, the UK is home to 67.6 million people, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) projecting an increase to 74.2 million by 2035 – a growth of 6.6 million more people in one generation.[2] Equivalent to building five to six cities the size of Birmingham, plus all the additional transport infrastructure, health and public services (including over 2,000 new primary schools and 1,000 secondary schools) to meet the needs of those extra people.[3]

Over the same period, once common and iconic wildlife species have declined. The turtle dove, immortalised in the traditional song 'The twelve days of Christmas', has proved all too mortal, crashing from an estimated 125,000 pairs breeding in the UK in the 1950s to just 2,000 pairs recorded by the British Trust for Ornithology in 2024.[4] Also, being voted the UK's 'favourite mammal' in 2016 hasn't slowed the hedgehog's demise, with 95% 'lost' over the past 70 years.

State of Nature report

2016 marked the publication of the *State of Nature* report, the first comprehensive audit of the UK's fauna and flora since national statutory nature body, the Nature Conservancy Council, was broken up by Nicholas Ridley in 1991. That first report gave a damning indictment of the UK as being "one of the most nature depleted countries in the world",[5] relegating us to the lowest 10% of countries globally in terms of 'biodiversity intactness'.[6] Subsequent reports of 2019 and 2023 showed no improvement in the overall downward trend.

> "It is widely accepted that the UK's biodiversity has been massively depleted by centuries of habitat loss, management changes, development and persecution…" (SoN 2019);

and

> "No let-up in the decline of our wildlife, with one in six species at risk of being lost from Great Britain." (SoN 2023).

With farmed land making up 70% of the UK's overall area, agriculture is highlighted by many conservationists as the key driver of change to our countryside and principal cause of the negative impacts upon its wildlife. The 'second agricultural revolution', after the second world war, focused on maximising yields per acre and output per 'livestock unit', embodied in the policies and incentives initiated by the Agriculture Act 1947, then amplified through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, which pushed wildlife to the margins.

Hundreds of thousands of acres of 'unproductive' woodland were cleared, more than 300,000 miles of hedgerow grubbed out, a quarter of million farmland 'dew ponds' drained and ploughed over to increase field size and accommodate bigger, more efficient machinery.[7] Add the damage to our wildlife and its natural food sources through the arsenal of chemical insecticides, herbicides, wormers, and artificial fertilisers aggressively marketed to farmers, and intensive agriculture certainly fits the suspect profile.

Recent studies across Europe have found that the abundance of insects has declined by between 38% to 75%.[8] Similar declines in abundance and distribution have been seen in UK populations of bees and hoverflies, butterflies and moths, beetles, and freshwater insects – with bees and hoverflies suffering the most dramatic losses since the 1950s. It is incontrovertible that wildlife has declined dramatically across the UK, in particular wildlife that used to be common to our farmland.[9]

What lies ahead

These days, policymakers are tasking farmers with both continuing to produce 'cheap' food and reversing the losses to our native fauna and flora. Notable progress has been made: for example, Tim Scott, a tenant farmer for the Countryside Regeneration Trust, has transformed a former mono-cropped 'prairie farm', restoring its hedgerows and watercourse

Pressures on the environment are even threatening the hedgehog – one of Britain's most beloved creatures.

According to the Department of Plant Science at Cambridge University, about 75% of our food crops depend on pollination. Declining numbers of pollinators will affect our food production.

wildlife margins, and installing 'beetle-banks' – attracting back bats, barn owls, otters, and those on the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, such as the grey partridge.[10] Productive farming *can* co-exist with wildlife, but achieving that balance becomes ever more challenging as our population grows, farmland is taken for development, and what remains is required to yield more food.

More than 700,000 hectares of farmland were lost to development (housing and industrial) in the 50 years following the second world war, an area of land amounting to all of Greater London, Berkshire, Herefordshire and Oxfordshire combined.[11] Today our countryside and farmland, even the 'scrubby' corners and marginal areas that have escaped development to date, are under renewed threat. The Labour Government plans to deliver on its manifesto promise to build 1.5 million homes in its first five years (300,000 a year), doubling that if it wins a second term. That would be 3 million additional houses in one of the most densely populated countries in Europe – with 438 people per square kilometre in England, 279 for the UK overall.[12] Only the Netherlands and Malta have higher densities.[13]

Risks to the green belt

The government has conjured up 'five golden rules' it claims will need to be met before allowing the development of sites in the green belt. These add little to the previous government's requirement that developers should prioritise brownfield sites first.

Campaigners are already seeking to rebrand what is and isn't 'proper' green belt, coining a new variant of 'grey belt' land that its friends in the Home Builders Federation can use to diminish and carve off areas they consider as of 'poor quality', 'scrubby' and 'ugly'. To whom? Wildlife seems to like those scrubby remnants; far from being 'wasteland' devoid of wildlife, scrub offers a vital habitat for at least 10% of the UK's listed *Biodiversity Action Plan* priority species.[14]

Such blurring of definitions and boundaries is a deliberate strategy to undercut landscape and wildlife protections in a policy that prioritises short-term

economic outputs above long-term environmental 'goods'. Even if the majority of those houses are built on previously developed brownfield land, planning experts have calculated that an area of greenfield sites double the size of Milton Keynes will be needed to meet the housebuilding targets. Emboldened, those same 'experts' argue that 'confident bites' should be taken out of green belt land[15] – dismissing the founding principle and purpose of that planning designation being to prevent urban sprawl and the creeping loss of distinction between countryside and urban areas.

We simply cannot afford to compromise our already dwindling wildlife and its remnant habitat.

Some conservationists appear to accept that nothing can be done to reduce forecast demand and, instead of standing up unequivocally for nature, wildlife and green spaces, are making somewhat desperate pleas to tweak the development – with even the chair of Natural England naively claiming that, "development could unlock the vital funding needed to turbo-charge recovery in these areas."[16] The president of the once unambiguously pro-countryside CPRE, the Countryside Charity (formerly known as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England) has joined the housebuilders' choir:

> "We need more homes. We need homes for rural communities to thrive and for the countryside to thrive. The countryside isn't this place for nostalgia. It's not set in aspic, not just for pretty calendars."[17]

Rural areas indeed need to be economically viable and able to sustain vibrant communities. But we simply cannot afford to compromise our already dwindling wildlife and its remnant habitat – we must have the honesty and courage to acknowledge, like Professor Maclean, that human population growth here and abroad is a direct factor in nature's demise. This is also acknowledged by such luminaries as Sir David Attenborough, Gordon Buchanan, Dame Jane Goodall and Iolo William, yet not by the conservation groups that are only too keen to feature those wildlife champions in their marketing materials.

A call for action

Here in the UK, designations protecting our green spaces and wildlife should be fiercely defended and strengthened, not weakened. We need more 'wild belt' land encircling and cutting through urban areas, allowing wildlife to recolonise and reconnect, for our own wellbeing as well as the ecosystem services that nature provides – and wild belt that even includes areas that should be 'no go' for human trespass. The headlong rush by some 'green groups' for everyone to 'spend time in nature', may have been well-intentioned, but has inevitably placed additional stresses on natural areas and their wildlife.[18,19]

As I write, many of those non-governmental organisations will be attending the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Cali, Colombia. The UK has been 'exemplary' in signing up to these international agreements over the years, boasting of its record as being the first country to draft a national Biodiversity Action Plan, following the original Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in 1992, and then reaffirm that commitment via a revised Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020, and the 20 Biodiversity Targets agreed at Aichi, Japan in 2010. No matter that not one of those targets was met. A new set were drafted at COP15 in Montreal in 2022 – the best-known target being to protect and manage 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (known as '30 by 30').

Easy to sign up to, harder to achieve: currently, only around 3% of land in the UK is protected or managed for wildlife, while

(at a generous pinch) it could be claimed that 8% of our marine areas are protected. As Chris Packham noted in the foreword to Norman Maclean's *A less green and pleasant land: Our threatened wildlife,* the UK conservation business is failing in its purpose:

> "If conservation in these islands were a single company business, all the effort, endeavour, all the strategies, money, and employees were under one roof, and that company had shares to purchase on the stock exchange, would you invest in them? Based on the results? I wouldn't. Not because I think that the company isn't sincere or isn't trying hard enough, simply because its results are not only poor – they are disastrous. Let's be frank, in all of our major animal and plant groups, the declines are catastrophic. Even some of our most cherished species, the cuckoo, the nightingale, most butterflies and moths, the salmon, our orchids and sadly so many more are cascading to extinction. In our business, in most departments, targets are not being met, and in many we're going bust."

We must force policymakers and developers to be innovative in how they accommodate our current population and its needs.

The international dimension

This report is focused on population growth and its impacts here in the UK, but global population growth is also relevant to any consideration of our UK biodiversity, wildlife and countryside. Millions of the birds frequenting our gardens, countryside, and coastal wetlands migrate annually to the UK to feed and breed in the spring, with as many heading off south to warmer climes in our winter. The 2 billion songbirds, and other species migrating to and from Europe and Africa, are just half the number estimated in the 1950s. Human population pressure and encroachment is certainly a factor in that decline. For instance, Africa's total population was just over 250 million people in 1950; today it is over 1.4 billion, projected to increase by another billion by 2050, and to exceed 4 billion by the end of the century. This high rate of population growth will inevitably entail the continuing conversion of wildlands to agriculture, housing and development.

Our streams and rivers

No article on the UK's biodiversity can avoid referring to the state of our rivers, lakes and seas – and their pollution by our human waste. Every day in the UK, over 10 billion litres of wastewater and sewage are released into the sewer system from our baths, showers, washing machines, and flushed down the UK's guesstimated 45 million domestic toilets.[20] This waste ends up in a sewage system that clearly isn't up to the job, given that raw sewage is routinely discharged into our rivers, streams, lakes, and coastal seas by the UK's 11 privately owned water companies. The most recent (2022) survey by the Environment Agency for England (Wales and Scotland are little better) shows that, on average, every day there were 825 discharges of raw, untreated sewage – made up of human faeces, sanitary products, wet wipes, and much else besides. As Professor Jamie Woodward, Professor of Physical Geography at the University of Manchester noted: "Each discharge is a toxic cocktail of many pollutants, including microplastics and pathogens."[21]

Who is to blame for this? For sure, the water companies, whose private owners have been more interested in extracting profits and returning dividends to their shareholders during the three decades following privatisation than in upgrading the system.[22] Hardly surprising, given that more than 70% of those owners and shareholders are based outside the UK, who care nothing for the impacts of cost-saving and dividend-maximising business decisions upon the rivers, streams, lakes, and seas that they will never dip a toe in.[23]

But all of us discharging our individual waste into the system hold some

responsibility too, having for decades flushed the loo without thinking where it all ends up and its impacts downstream. A significant percentage of the active pharmaceutical ingredients of the drugs (legal and illegal) and medications we take simply pass through our bodies and find their way into our rivers and streams. Consequently, our wildlife is being 'medicated' on a wholesale basis: anti-inflammatory drugs have been isolated from the fur of otters tested across six English counties.[24]

It is pollution from both treated and untreated human sewage that is the greatest threat to aquatic biodiversity, causing more damage than all the pesticide, fertiliser, and livestock manure runoff from farms.[25,26] It is already a failing sewage system to which this government is anticipating connecting at least 2 million more toilets over the next five to 10 years in all the new houses. And there will be another 6 or 7 million people adding to that burden over the next 25 years, with no planning whatsoever as to where all their waste will go.

Conclusion

Delivering on Biodiversity Action Plans – and standing firm on the protection of nationally important natural habitats, greenfield and green belt land – is absolutely essential to stop the continuing decline of our wildlife. Also, we must force policymakers and developers to be innovative in how they accommodate our current population and its needs, without recourse to the easy, 'cheap' option of taking bites out of the green belt.

Rejecting that option also forces policymakers to acknowledge the elephant standing in plain sight – our human numbers here in the UK and globally. As Professor Maclean stated at the top of this article, population remains the key driver of wildlife loss. But it is a driver that could still be managed and modified through a combination of progressive policies, many of which are covered elsewhere in this report – including, preeminently, a long-term sustainable population and migration policy for the UK.

Debates about the inevitable trade-offs resulting from rapid demographic change tend to be dominated by the loud voices of those concerned with shorter-term economic impacts. But polling shows a general level of concern about what the future holds for the environment of this country – in particular, worries about the climate crisis among the younger generation. As Caitlin Moran wrote in *The Times*:

> "For, really, what victory has been gained if our country is one of the wealthiest in the world but our rivers are too sewage-riddled to swim in, our dawns stripped of the dawn chorus, and our children can reach university age without having heard a spring cuckoo, seen a swallow in flight or a hedgehog trundle across the lawn?"

This essay reflects the views of the 'still small voices' of those who, while they may well certainly have short-term concerns, are even more concerned when they reflect on the sort of country we may be leaving to future generations. It is therefore critical that we find some way to analyse, discuss and seek to agree ways forward that can take into account and weigh these many conflicting factors.

Notes

1 https://assets.cambridge.org/97811084/99828/frontmatter/9781108499828_frontmatter.pdf

2 https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uk-population/

3 https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/energy-and-housing-in-birmingham/

4 https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/peer-reviewed-papers/status-uk-breeding-european-turtle-dove-streptopelia

5 https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf

6 https://data.nhm.ac.uk/dataset/bii-bte

7 https://heartofenglandforest.org/news/lifeline-nature-valuing-forests-hedgerows

8 https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0619/#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20trends%20for%20global,between%2038%25%20and%2075%25

9 https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2022/12/Bugs-Matter-Summary-Report-2022-A4.pdf

10 http://www.ecifm.rdg.ac.uk/current_production.htm

11 https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/Bridging-the-Divide_2023_English.pdf

12 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2022

13 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=EU

14 https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/39590874-8927-4c42-b02a-374712caccd6/JNCC-Report-308-SCAN-WEB.pdf

15 https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jul/08/labour-housing-plans-green-belt-land-new-towns-david-rudlin

16 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/07/27/green-belt-not-sacrosanct-tony-juniper-natural-england/

17 https://www.thetimes.com/uk/environment/article/labours-housebuilding-plan-backed-by-countryside-charity-chief-hxs39d5nm

18 https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1283-disturbance-distances-review-updated-literature-review-disturbance

19 https://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/v2/Content/Norfolk_seals_die_after_humandisturbance.aspx?s_id=65022623

20 https://pumphouse.org.uk/sanitation-november-2017/

21 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-65099906

22 https://www.ft.com/content/e298ca8d-ab02-4e1a-bae1-452004905cc6

23 https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/more-70-englands-water-industry-owned-foreign-companies#:~:text=Almost%20three%20quarters%20of%20England's,businesses%20based%20in%20tax%20havens

24 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4213582/

25 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gcb.16934

26 https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/21/treated-untreated-sewage-greatest-threat-river-biodiversity-study

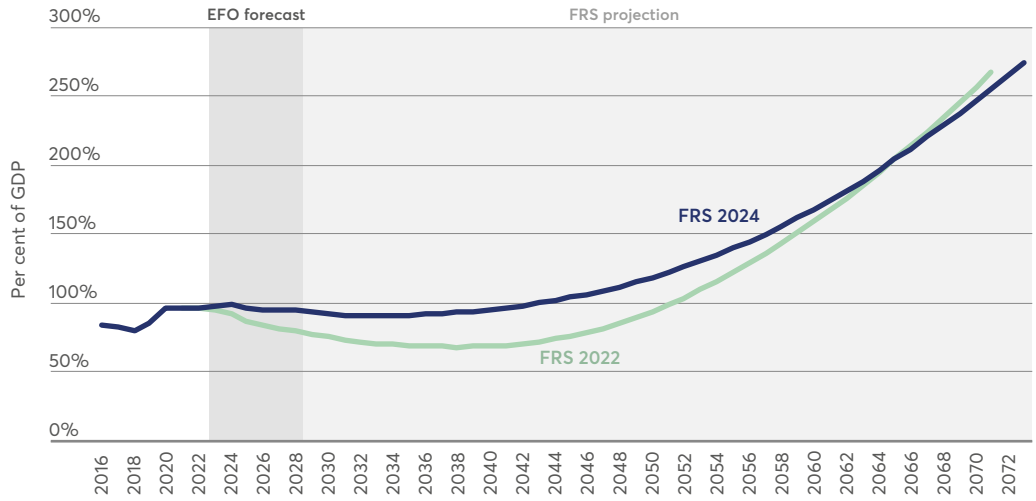
B. Population Ponzi scheme – Migration, public services and the fiscal outlook

Professor David Miles CBE

David Miles is Professor of Financial Economics at Imperial College London. He has had previous academic positions at Birkbeck College, London and at University of Oxford. He has undergraduate and masters degrees from University of Oxford and a PhD from the University of London. He is a member of the Budget Responsibility Committee of the Office for Budget Responsibility, where he takes the lead on economic analysis. He is a member of the Commission of the Central Bank of Ireland. He was a member of the Monetary Policy Committee at the Bank of England between May 2009 and September 2015. As an economist he has focused on the interaction between financial markets and the wider economy. He was Chief UK Economist at Morgan Stanley from October 2004 to May 2009. In 2004 he led a government review of the UK mortgage market. In 2018 he completed a review for the UK Treasury on reference prices of UK government bonds. He has been an advisor to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to the Reserve Bank of New Zealand. He is a research fellow of the Centre for Economic Policy Research and at the CESifo research institute in Munich. He was awarded a CBE in January 2016.

The longer-term fiscal outlook for the UK is deeply problematic. For several years, analysis by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has suggested that, with current tax and spending policies over the longer term, spending will probably run ahead of tax revenues to an extent that means the stock of debt will ultimately rise at an ever faster rate, which will become unsustainable. Figure 1 is from the OBR's latest *Fiscal Risk and Sustainability* (2024) assessment of a plausible trajectory for the stock of UK Government debt over the next 50 years on broadly unchanged policies on tax and public spending. (The figure shows assessments made in 2022 and 2024). Those trajectories for government debt will, at some point, become explosive and therefore unsustainable. Were there to be a feedback from rising debt to higher interest rates demanded on that debt, the path could well become infeasible some time before 2074; so the path illustrated is less a forecast – for it could probably not be sustained over a 50-year horizon – but more an illustration of the scale of fiscal adjustment that is required.

Figure 1: The path of the UK Government debt to GDP ratio



Source: OBR.

The UK is not alone in facing formidable longer-term fiscal challenges. Most developed countries – the majority of European countries and certainly including the USA – face similar challenges. And that is because there are two common factors that account for the problems ahead. First, current government debt relative to national incomes (gross domestic product (GDP)) has risen greatly over the past 15 or so years since the global financial crisis of 2008. This means that the starting point for assessment of fiscal sustainability is very much more unfavourable than for most of the past 75 years. Second, and the focus of this report, is that demographic trends are bringing an ongoing ageing of the population – that is, a rise in the proportion of those who have in the past tended to be of an age where they are not working relative to the population who are most likely to be working. Should current work and retirement patterns persist, and at current levels of generosity of state pensions and of health spending and income taxes, that will mean government spending faces upward pressures and tax revenues face downward pressures.

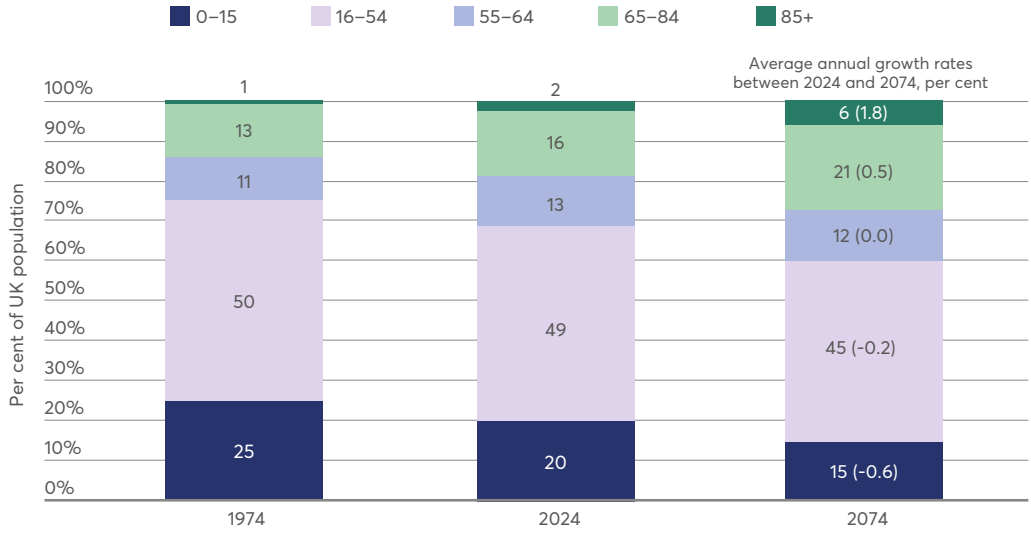
Figure 2 illustrates how this may play out in the UK. Between 2024 and 2074, the old-age dependency ratio (OADR) (defined in a somewhat arbitrary way as the ratio of those aged above 64 to those aged between 16 and 64) is set to rise by one half, from around 31% to around 47%. And the pace of this rise has been revised up consistently, (even over the recent past) as the OBR estimates from 2022 relative to those of 2024 illustrate.

This ageing of the population reflects the combination of sustained rises in life expectancy over many decades and (more recently) a prolonged and very dramatic fall in the birthrate among the UK population. But the substantial fall in the birthrate is not being accompanied by a falling population – nor even a flat one. That is because of the scale of net migration to the UK. This attenuates the pace of ageing. It leads some to conclude that, for the UK – and for Europe as a whole – much higher levels of net migration are needed to offset the dampening effect on growth of total GDP from lower population rises due to the birthrate from women currently resident in the UK.

The scale of ageing of the UK population shown in Figure 2 already factors in substantial and persistently very high (by historical standards) levels of net inward migration. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) had a central projection of net immigration in 2024 of 315,000 into the UK each year over most of the next 50 years – and higher levels in the very near term. This ONS assumption on net immigration is higher than its previous forecast. It generates a likely path for the UK population that rises steadily and at a pace

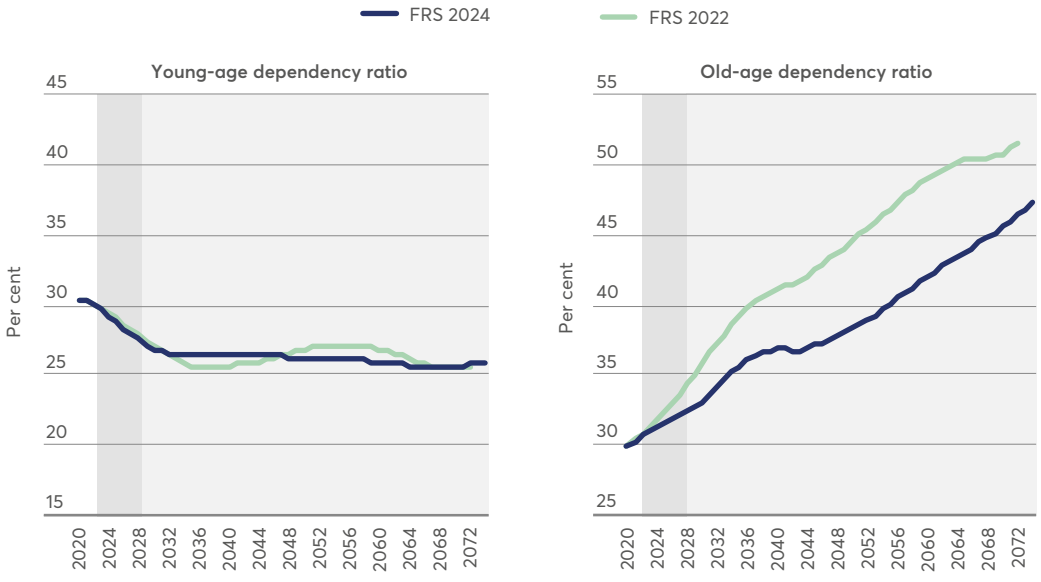
faster than projections made just a few years ago. Figure 4 shows the central paths in various vintages of the OBR Fiscal Risk and Sustainability (FRS) reports. The 2024 line is well above the 2022 line, reflecting how the ONS assumptions on ongoing immigration have risen substantially. The current estimate is that the UK population will rise from a level in 2024 of around 69 million to around 82 million by 2074.

Figure 2: UK demographic structure



Note: 2024 and 2074 from the FRS 2024 population projection. Annual growth rate is for the share of the population.
Source: OBR.

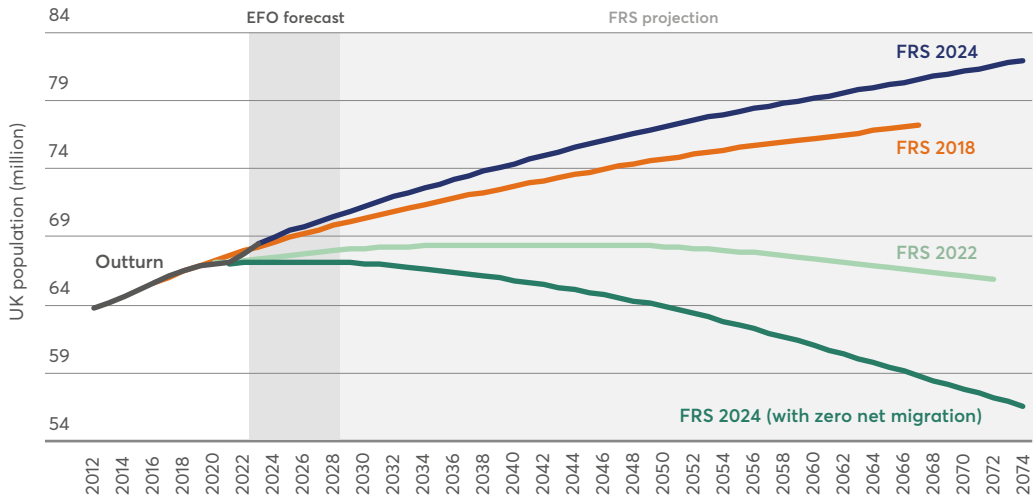
Figure 3: Central paths of OBR forecast of dependency ratios



Source: ONS, OBR.

The so-called total fertility rate (TFR) in the UK – the average number of children born to a woman over her life – is now well below 2. Were it to continue at its current level of just under 1.6, it would mean that, in the absence of net inward migration, the UK population would fall. Figure 4 shows that, with zero net migration, rather than rise to more than 80 million by 2074, the UK population would likely fall by a substantial amount to a level of under 60 million.

Figure 4: Population projections



Source: ONS, OBR.

To summarise: ageing of the population – given current work and retirement patterns and likely levels of state pensions and health spending – brings considerable fiscal pressures, which, on current trajectories, require either substantial fiscal tightening, or else lead to unsustainable public finances. Immigration – which primarily involves those of working age who are many years away from retirement – both delays the impact of the ageing of the population and is (at the current UK TFR rates) the driver of population growth, which generates a substantial rise in the UK population over a 50-year horizon. Some conclude from this that a faster rise in the population – either from a rise in the TFR or from higher net immigration than implied by the population projections shown in Figure 4 – will be beneficial in alleviating acute underlying fiscal pressures.

Would more people solve the problem?

But, even setting aside the fact that it is GDP per capita that matters for average standards of living – and growth in population does not obviously boost it – there are serious problems with the idea that faster population growth can consistently alleviate fiscal problems. New people – either children born here or older people arriving as migrants – consume public services and do so to a greater extent at older ages when their likely contribution to taxes to fund spending on public services falls away. So, even if there is a gain in the fiscal position for a while, it fades. And to hold demographic structure steady, and halt the decline in the ratio of those above (an arbitrary) line between the elderly and the working age populations, requires *ever rising* population.

I first illustrate this final point before considering in more detail the lifecycle pattern of taxes paid and public services used, so as to assess whether more rapid increases in population can help solve problems of fiscal unsustainability.

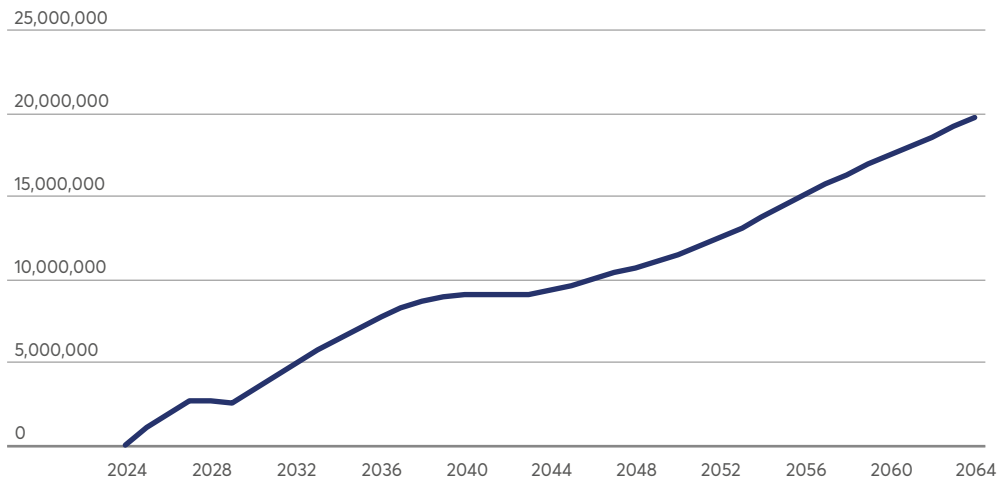
How many more people might be needed?

What scale of population increase could prevent the OADR from rising in the UK over the next several decades? I consider how this could happen in what many think is the most fiscally advantageous way – by a rise in annual net immigration of those of working age who are in their early 20s so do not draw upon the state education sector, and remain of working age for most of the next 40 years.

I illustrate with a simple calculation by assuming that additional net migrants to the UK (over and above the 315,000 a year assumed by the ONS that underpin the population projections described above) are aged 24 on arrival. So, for 40 years they remain in the under-65 age group, where

I arbitrarily draw the line in the calculation of an OADR. I calculate how many of such new arrivals would keep the dependency ratio at its 2024 level. Figure 5 illustrates the results of that calculation. This shows that around 20 million extra young people would need to arrive in the UK over the next 40 years to stabilise the dependency ratio at its current level. That would imply a UK population of around 100 million by 2064.

Figure 5: Extra net immigration to stabilise the old-age dependency ratio



Source: Author's calculations based on ONS population projections.

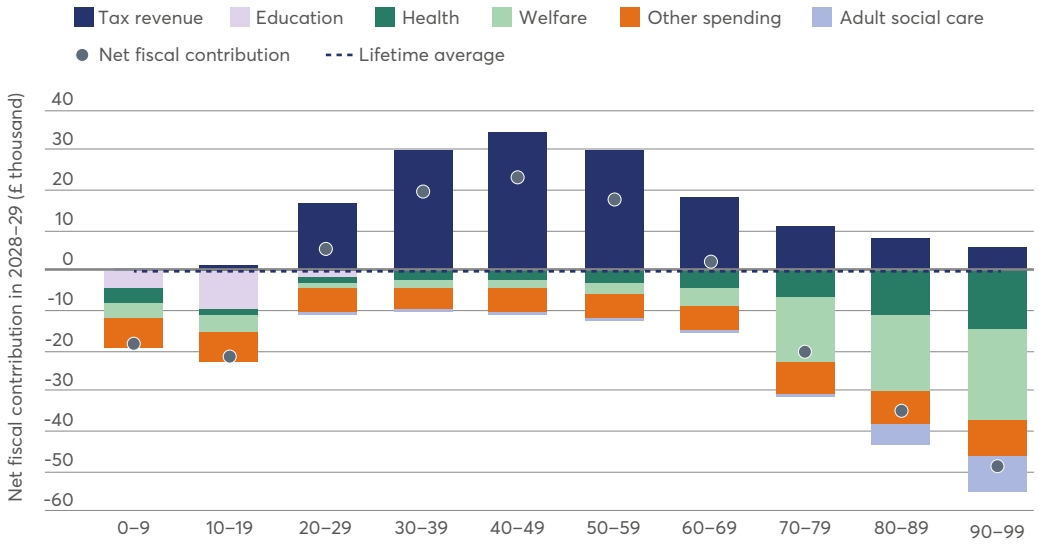
Would there be fiscal benefits?

Setting aside the issues of housing pressures, congestion, and the extra challenge of achieving emissions targets that such a rise in population might bring, there would still remain questions over whether such a rise in population would bring substantial and enduring (narrowly defined) fiscal benefits.

Such fiscal benefits as might exist depend very much on the lifecycle pattern of demands upon public services and tax revenues paid by UK residents. Not surprisingly, that pattern is very uneven across ages. Figure 6 illustrates this using OBR estimates of typical use of public services, and taxes paid, by age in the UK. Taxes paid, net of age-related spending on public services, are typically negative for people until around an age of 20. They then usually become positive for ages between the early 20s and early 60s. Below age 20, and especially above the mid-60s, the typical UK resident pays substantially less in tax than the consumption of public services.

Of course, these are averages across widely diverse experiences of people of the same age. Those who work longer, earn more and draw less upon health services, the welfare system and social care, and will generate a much more favourable fiscal balance than the (less fortunate) who earn less, have worse health and draw much more on welfare support.

Figure 6: Tax and public spending by age



Source: OBR.

Level of earnings is a critical factor

Just focusing on differences in average wages reveals something important about whether faster population growth can bring substantial overall fiscal benefits. Figure 7 is a calculation of the plausible cumulative net fiscal impact of migrants who arrive in their mid-20s (as is the average) and who stay in the UK. Three trajectories are shown: for those with well above average UK earnings; for those with an average lifetime pattern of earnings; and for those with well below average UK earnings.

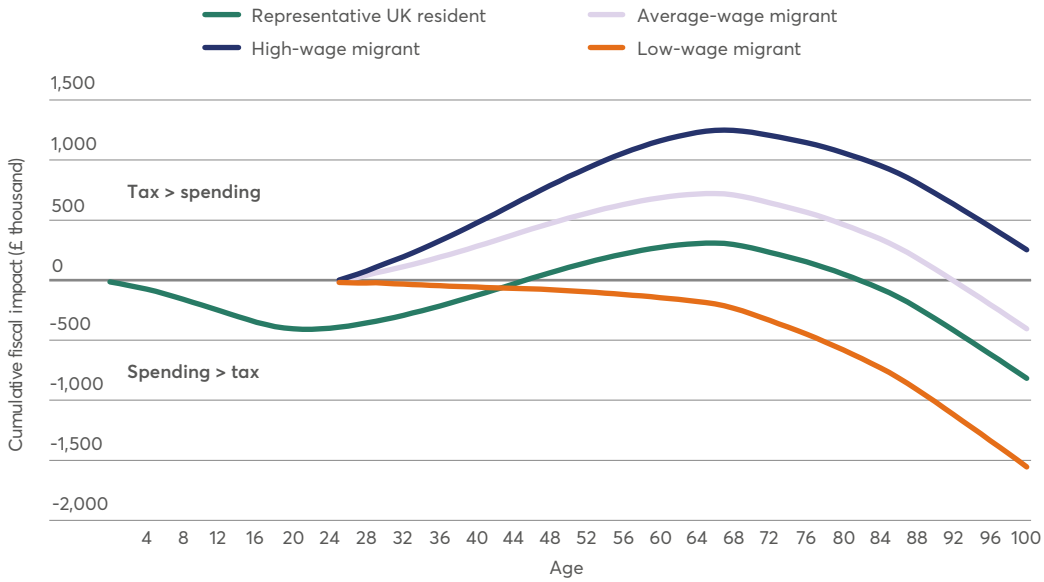
Migrants who earn only half average wages generate fiscal costs at all ages. These reach a deficit of around £500,000 by age 80 and around £1 million should they live to age 90.

The calculations assume that migrants do not draw upon public education resources, and do not get to claim welfare benefits until they have been in the UK for five years (after which they become eligible).

High-wage migrants are assumed to earn twice the average UK wage throughout a typical working life. They would generate a substantial cumulative fiscal surplus by age 80 of around £1 million. Migrants earning average UK wages generate a surplus by that age of about half as much, and which falls to close to zero by the late 80s. Both these trajectories are more favourable than for a typical person born in the UK whose costs of education and of healthcare typically exceed tax paid until they reach their early 20s, and whose cumulative net fiscal balance does not become positive until around age 40.

Migrants who earn only half average wages generate fiscal costs at all ages. These reach a deficit of around £500,000 by age 80 and around £1 million should they live to age 90.

Figure 7: Cumulative fiscal impact of representative migrants



Note: Cumulative fiscal impact includes the cost of a Skilled Worker Visa, NHS surcharge, indefinite leave to remain and immigration skills charges for employers. Figures for migrants include the fiscal spending required to keep public capital stock per person constant.
Source: OBR.

So, in a narrow fiscal sense, it matters a great deal what the level of earnings are for those who arrive and stay in the UK. Exactly the same is true of those who are born in the UK. The fiscal benefits of raising the incomes of those who are born in the UK and who might be on a trajectory of consistently below average wages are as great as the benefits of having more people come and stay in the UK with average or, especially, well above average earnings.

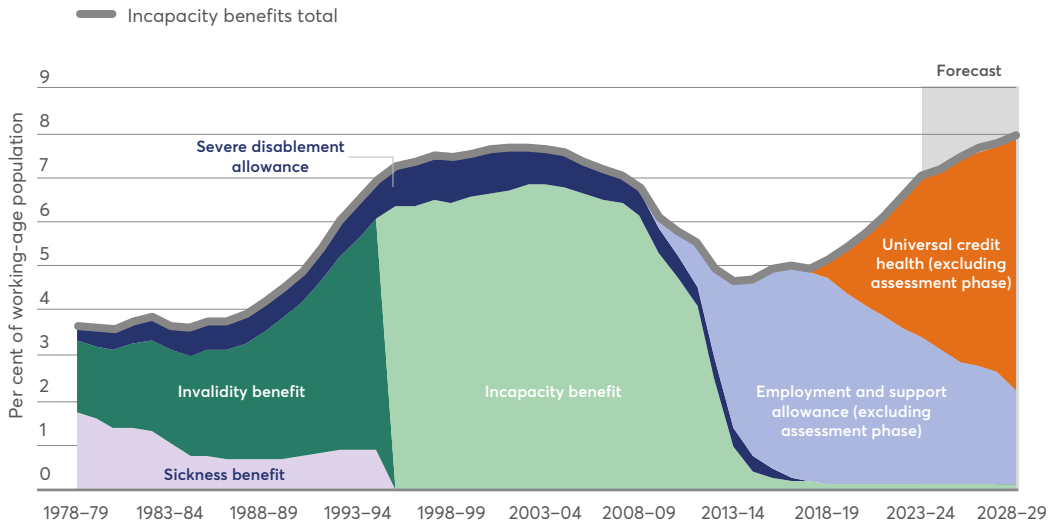
But the consequences of raising incomes for workers who are already in the UK and would otherwise earn a below-average wage, are different from having higher net immigration of those who would earn above-average incomes – the second route to higher average UK incomes obviously entails a higher population. The pressures from a UK population rise by many millions over the next several decades – if that is to be the way to offset fiscal pressures from ageing – are likely to be substantial.

Of course, raising the incomes of those already in the UK on very low wages has fiscal benefits that can offset strain from an ageing population, and this has different effects from encouraging an ever-rising population. But, this says nothing about how it might be achieved – so, how to do it?

Inactivity, health and life outcomes

One route to that would be to improve outcomes for the very large number of UK people who are now in receipt of health-related benefits, many of whom are judged to be so unwell as to be incapable of work. The number of such people has risen greatly in recent years (Figure 8). Close to 3 million people of what is considered prime working age are in receipt of sickness benefits – far more than those who are unemployed. A great deal of the recent substantial rise in inactivity rates in the UK (that is, people neither in, nor looking for, work) is due to illness. To what extent that is a reflection of a deterioration in health of the prime working age population, and how much is contributed by the ways in which the welfare system works, is unclear. What is clear is that the level of benefits received by those judged to have health issues inconsistent with working is far greater than the levels of unemployment benefits.

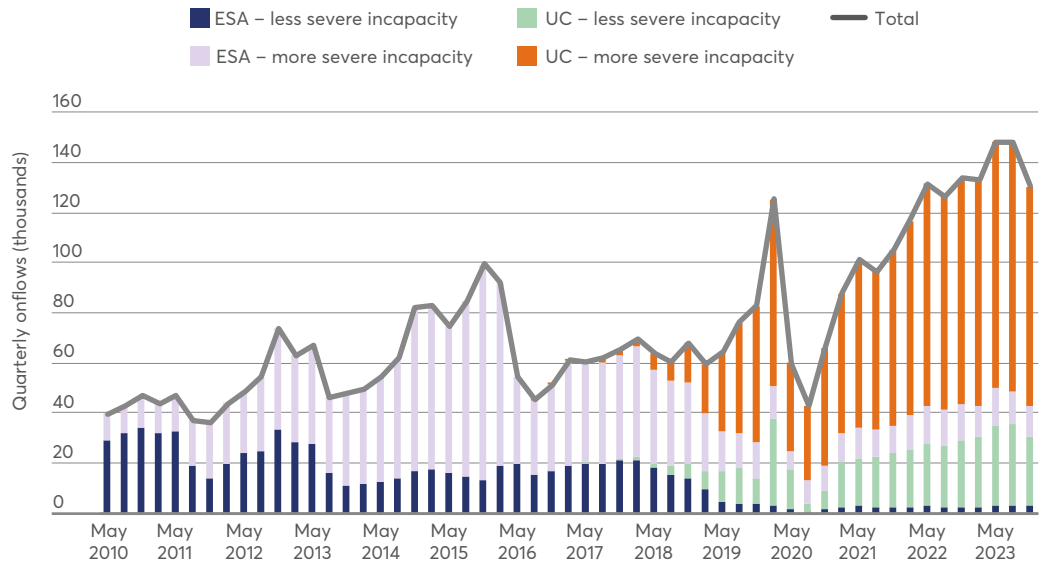
Figure 8: Sickness benefits since 1978



Note: Universal credit (UC) is a benefit paid to households rather than individuals. We estimate the number of individuals on the forecast UC health caseload based on the relationship between households and individuals on the UC health caseload in outturn, which increases the number of individuals counted on UC relative to the predecessor ESA system. UC/ESA dual claims are counted as ESA claims and we exclude income support (incapacity/sick and disabled) because almost all income support claimants also receive one of the other benefits listed above.
Source: DWP, ONS, OBR.

And the level of conditionality is very much lower. Those on unemployment benefits need to demonstrate a near full-time commitment to job search. In contrast, those deemed too unwell to seek work are now often effectively left on benefits after an initial decision. And among those claiming illness benefits, it is this group that now has the greatest number of applicants, and for whom acceptance rates are higher than in the past (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Flows onto sickness benefits



Note: Figures include the three months up to and including the month referenced. Onflows only captures initial WCA assessments. UC, LCW and LCWRA initial onflows are estimated based on the split of initial and repeat assessments in third-party assessment provider data, with a one-month log. DWP intend to publish revised initial UC WCA outcomes in a future UC WCA statistical release.
Source: DWP, OBR.

The non-economic benefits of employment

The fiscal benefits of helping people, especially young people who potentially have many years of work ahead of them, back into employment are substantial. A double effect comes into play with taxes from earned income rising and welfare spending falling. And this is unlikely to come at the expense of the welfare of those who successfully transition to employment. There is a great deal of evidence that mental health in particular is typically improved by being in work. And mental health problems have been a very significant factor behind the recent rise in illness-related inactivity.

Conclusion

There is little doubt in the direction of the fiscal effects of getting people off health-related benefits where they might otherwise spend long periods out of the workforce and often isolated. In contrast, the purely fiscal benefits of higher immigration to offset unfavourable fiscal effects of an ageing population are less clear. They depend on how long migrants stay in the UK, whether they work, and how much they earn.

The higher population route to fiscal sustainability by slowing the ageing of the population is uncertain. Today's young people are tomorrow's old people, so fiscal benefits fade. And the rise in the population needed to completely offset ageing in demographic structure is very great and gets bigger over time. It could not be sustained.

C. The ties that bind – Social cohesion at a time of rapid demographic change

Dr Michael Nazir-Ali

Monsignor Dr Michael Nazir-Ali is a distinguished theologian and church leader with a career spanning both Anglican and Catholic traditions. Ordained as an Anglican priest in 1976, he served in Pakistan and England, becoming the first Bishop of Raiwind in 1984. From 1989 to 1994, he was General Secretary of the Church Mission Society. In 1994, he was appointed the 106th Bishop of Rochester, serving for 15 years and becoming the first Diocesan Bishop in the Church of England born outside the UK. In 1999, he entered the House of Lords as a Lord Spiritual, contributing to national and international discussions on ethics, interfaith dialogue, and human rights. After resigning in 2009, he founded the Oxford Centre for Training, Research, Advocacy and Dialogue (OXTRAD), focusing on supporting Christians in challenging contexts. In 2021, he was received into the Catholic Church and ordained as a priest for the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham. In 2022, Pope Francis appointed him Prelate of Honour.

The fundamental trade-offs

So much of the recent debate on population change, whether from the natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) or new arrivals, (both legal and illegal), has been about numbers. This is important, of course, as the numbers of those coming in increase – on the one hand, they bring skills and benefits to the country, but, on the other, they also create pressures on our physical and social infrastructure. How much more traffic, for instance, can our crumbling roads take, or how much more overcrowding can there be on trains, the Tube or the buses? Then there is increasing building on green fields to provide for the housing needs of a growing population, much of it fuelled by population change. While the National Health Service (NHS) relies heavily on migrants to provide for our health needs, it is also under strain because of increased numbers calling on its services. Again, migrants are willing to do jobs others do not wish to do, but then there is rising worklessness in the settled population, and the resentment that can accompany this.

Such a list could go on, and yet there are some who appear to believe that the UK can continue holding an open door to all comers and that the very concept of 'illegality' in relation to immigration should be challenged. No responsible government could agree with and provide for such an attitude. The government's first priority must be provision for and the wellbeing of the population already here – the settled population – and its policies generally will have to be formed in the light of its duty to its citizens and others who live here. The challenge and debate should be about scale.

It is not just about the economy and maths

The debate about population change should not, however, be restricted to mathematics and economics. There are deeper issues at stake here about the origins and development of communities

Gospel choirs, drawn from the Afro-Caribbean communities, have brought a new dimension to church services.

and nations. Against the social contract theorists, who imagine individuals to be prior to society, and who have brought about the latter for mutual protection and assistance, Edmund Burke, (echoing the social teachings of the Bible), held that it is society that is prior, and that we are intrinsically social beings. Every society has its own sense of identity and history. Language, memory and customs are formed by a common history and contribute to a sense of belonging. This can be seen, for example, during great local or national occasions such as Remembrance Day and important anniversaries or milestones in the life of the community.

For Burke, culture and tradition can be a surer guide to our views of what is right or wrong rather than the exercise of 'pure reason' alone, as shown in the radical Enlightenment's influence on the French Revolution. British social and political culture is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and our attitudes to fundamental freedoms of thought, expression and association, for example, have been formed not so much by the Enlightenment alone as by a continuous spiritual, moral and intellectual tradition which goes back to Alfred the Great and the Common Law, the Charter of Liberties, Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and the successive repeal of the Test Acts in the cause of greater toleration of dissenting minorities. What has happened here is that the cumulative wisdom of the past has been used to address contemporary and emerging problems.

Learning from others

"No man is an island", they say, and the same can be said of communities and nations. In spite of being an island, Britain has never been insular in the sense of being 'closed in' on itself. There has always been vigorous interaction with the Continent of Europe and much further afield. Talented and ordinary, good and 'dodgy' individuals, have gone from here into the wider world and we have, similarly, received such into this country. Those who have come, have often brought their own ideas and values with them, which have been tested and received or rejected here. Also, there is a long history of welcoming individuals, families and communities, especially those fleeing persecution because of their beliefs, the wrath of tyrants or unreasonable restrictions on their liberties. Such hospitality has been based on the Bible's injunction to not only love our neighbour but to also love the stranger.

British citizenship ceremonies emphasise rights but also responsibilities, including a need to respect the 'red lines' of the host community.

We should be clear, however, both to ourselves and to new arrivals, that they are not arriving in a cultural and moral vacuum, but rather into communities and into a country with a rich tapestry of common beliefs, values which arise from them, hard-won freedoms, a shared history and collective memory. Most of these are rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its insistence on personal freedom as well as social responsibility. King Alfred wanted his emerging Common Law to be consistent with the Ten Commandments and, as a very senior judge wrote to me, our laws continue to be based on these and on Jesus's summary of them in terms of loving God and our neighbour with our hearts, minds and strength. That is to say, with our whole selves. It is not for nothing that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the most widely known and we are instinctively guided by it in our dealings with the sick, the needy and with strangers. As Tom Holland in his book *Dominion: How the Christian revolution remade the world*, and Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual: The origins of western liberalism*, have shown, even the most secularised of values can often be traced to the pervasive and prevailing influence of this tradition.

There are 'red lines'

Those arriving here and hoping to settle should be required to have an awareness of the fundamental features of British society – not just when applying for citizenship but immediately upon arrival and, perhaps, even before they arrive. Requirements for coming here to work should not be restricted merely to knowledge of English and the relevant professional qualifications, but also some knowledge of the history, beliefs and values that have made British society what it is. These together not only make for the necessary social cohesion but also provide a vantage point for the social and political critique of government and its accompanying bureaucracy. The struggle for justice, concern for the poor, the care of the sick, the inclusion of the marginalised and much else spring from a particular spiritual and moral history which cannot be, and should not be, ignored.

We can, of course, criticise outdated customs, false values and even bad laws but we can only do this while being aware of and standing within a cultural and moral tradition, while also contributing to it and enriching it from a variety of backgrounds.

Nor is knowledge enough. We should also be expecting those who wish to come here to have some empathy for the way of life here, and some desire to identify with the nation's beliefs, values and history. This should not be seen to exclude their own contribution to a living tradition that is developing along with changing times, opportunities and challenges.

Rather than dwelling on the nostrums of multiculturalism – which some argue have spawned social fragmentation, isolated communities and mutual incomprehension – we should be working towards an integration that goes beyond the merely mechanical requirements of language and skills to one that looks for cohesion based on common beliefs about the human

condition and the day-to-day values and behaviours that spring from these. In terms of national and local government policy, this also means providing for the development of housing, schools, community facilities and higher education which promote social cohesion rather than separateness. Physical and social mobility in terms of education and employment should also help in bringing diverse people together as they learn together and work together.

Integration not assimilation

It should be made clear that integration does not necessarily mean assimilation without remainder. A number of communities in Britain, of longstanding presence and of relatively recent arrival, have shown that it is quite possible to be fully integrated into the fabric of national life and yet retain cultural and religious distinctives. The Jewish community is an obvious example of such integration, as are the Huguenots who arrived here from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes towards the end of the 17th century led to persecution in their homeland. More recently, different communities of East African Asians have settled here and have made significant contributions to business, politics, education and medicine, while retaining their cultural and religious heritage.

Requirements for coming here to work should not be restricted merely to knowledge of English and the relevant professional qualifications.

There is, of course, a shadow side to the narratives of those who have integrated well. Immigration procedures, which deal with both regular and irregular arrivals, need to be alert to the possibility of those seeking to come here with extremist and totalitarian ideologies, quite at variance with the traditions and values of this country. Everyone seeking entry to the UK should be aware, for instance, that customs such as child or forced marriage, the mistreatment of women, discrimination on the basis of caste, race or sex are against the law and will be dealt with accordingly.

Everyone is free to have views on national and international issues, and to express them peacefully both in public and privately. This also involves recognition of and respect for others to hold and to express opinions different from their own. Those with religious affiliation should be free to observe the personal law of their faith but, equally, everyone should be able to access the public law of the land to safeguard their person, property, livelihood and liberty.

Impact on the settled population

There has been so much discussion and debate about newer arrivals here that some in the settled population feel left out, especially those who have become economically, socially and educationally deprived. There is no sense here of the much vaunted 'white privilege'! If we do not address their sense of grievance and their needs, it is unlikely that we will be a society at ease with itself. The need to stabilise and strengthen family life, with parents being present and contributing in their own particular ways to the nurture and welfare of their children, must be a starting point in giving children a fair start in life. More and more research is showing, for example, that fathers relate to their children in ways quite different from mothers. Such collaboration in difference contributes to the all-round development of the child in making and sustaining good relationships with their own and the opposite sex. Single parents do a heroic job in bringing up their children, and need all the support they can get, but they would be the first to acknowledge that it takes a long time for the human child to mature, and that two are better than one in the bringing up of children.

Schools cannot take up all the slack from homes with absent parents, but there needs to be better provision for children and improved discipline, as this has been

shown to affect educational attainment in even the most deprived areas. It is good that so many are going to university, perhaps, for the first time in their families, but we need increased recognition that this is not the only way to a vocation, a fulfilled life and a decent standard of living. Access to vocational training, apprenticeships and secure employment would certainly make for social stability and the easing of tensions within and between communities.

Looking ahead

The UK remains an attractive destination for people looking for a new and better life, and for those escaping actual or perceived persecution. The Office for National Statistics projection for this country for 2035 suggests a further increase of 6.6 million – equivalent to building 2.4 cities the size of Manchester in 10 years. To suggest that this can be achieved without careful analysis of the trade-offs is fanciful.

Moreover, while the effects of population change may be slow to take effect, they are irreversible; anyone who has arrived here legally is entitled to the same rights and is required to fulfil the same responsibilities as all of us.

We need to think about these challenges. We need to find a way to debate and discuss them in a way which reassures the settled population that their concerns have been registered, listened to and, where appropriate, acted upon.

These issues of a need for 'social' as well as 'economic' wellbeing cannot be overlooked if we wish to maintain a country that is at ease with itself.

D. Capital overreach – The nation as a home, not merely a marketplace

Luke Daniel/The Common Good Foundation

Luke Daniel is a researcher at The Common Good Foundation, and a writer for various publications on the topics of migration, law, and the 'administrative state'.

Background

For the last couple of decades there has been one belief that has bound together our political class: that mass immigration is an almost unalloyed good with the only downside being that the public doesn't much like it – 69% of the public are dissatisfied with the way the government is dealing with the issue, according to latest polling).[1] See chapter 6 for the latest details.

Every government since 1997 has been elected on a manifesto promise to reduce immigration, and every government has failed to do so. In the year ending June 2024, the figure amounted to 1.2 million coming to Britain.[2] The failure to deal with this pressing concern is a glaring example of the democratic deficit in modern Britain. Here, as on the continent, this debate above all others is fracturing the political landscape; but British elites trail wildly behind our European counterparts in contending both with the mistakes of the past and the policy that will be needed to correct course.

Britain is our home. It isn't best explained by its gross domestic product (GDP) or place in the global markets, but rather by its particular history and culture. Ours is a story of mutual cooperation from those of disparate backgrounds to promote the common flourishing of those who live here. While it is true that Britain has seen previous waves of immigration – Jewish and Huguenot, for example – these were in no way comparable to the modern day in terms of scale. These previous waves also drew from discrete communities closer to our shores.

This should be a world in which common human flourishing is an end which is built, through conscious determination, in a particular place between groups of people who are not fungible economic units but who have their own relationships and attachments. This takes time. It is the work of generations. Successive governments' policies of mass immigration risks undoing that work.

Scepticism about mass immigration is frequently decried in partisan terms as a policy of the right. But, as with any contentious issue, the real question is not whether it is left or right, but rather: what is the real-life overall outcome? In this case, it is big business that benefits from this policy (and even then, on only a short-term basis), and ordinary people who lose out.

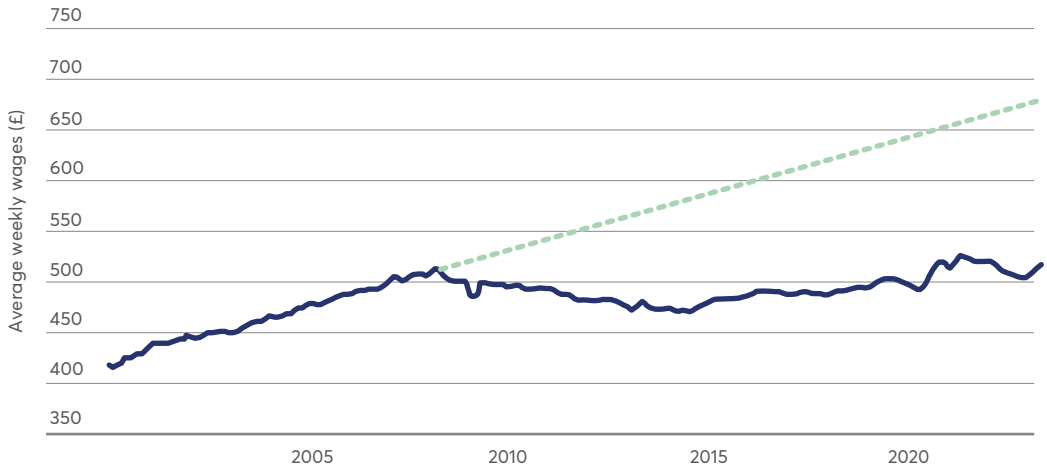
The winners and the losers

Mass immigration has not delivered the prosperity promised. Support for the policy of mass immigration has often been framed in terms of *necessity*. It is the easiest lever to pull for governments who have swallowed Treasury orthodoxy that it is the simplest way to inflate GDP figures and support industry. To grow the economy, simply grow the population.

This orthodoxy has failed on its own terms: GDP per capita's stagnation tracks alongside the largest migration figures we have ever witnessed in this country.

Meanwhile, real wages have stagnated over the last 15 years, (see Figure 1), and purchasing power has dropped.[3,4]

Figure 1: Average weekly wages, adjusted for inflation



Source: ONS; based on December 2022 prices.

The status quo does a disservice to both workers and newly arrived migrants alike, putting upward pressure on property prices and downward pressure on wages. As such, the chief beneficiary of current levels of migration are business owners and those with sizable investments, particularly in property. It is often argued that new migrant labourers are needed to find employees for jobs that British workers refuse to do.[5] But it is never considered that these particular jobs may be ones that British workers refuse to do *at the wages offered*.

Arguments put forward by the business lobby that numerous industries would face significant difficulties if not for migrant labour, and that the health of these industries will be affected, should be met with some scepticism. Industries that have become fragile as a result of the overreliance on the ready supply of cheap labour from overseas are likely unsustainable in the long run, and their costs are borne elsewhere. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that low-paid migrants arriving at age 25 cost taxpayers £187,000 each by the time they reach 65.[6] A study from the University of Amsterdam estimated that the Dutch Government has spent roughly EUR 27 billion per year on immigration between 2015 and 2019.[7]

After the December 2023 announcements that salary thresholds would be raised, the usual complaints from business lobby groups came flooding in. The lobby group UKHospitality bemoaned that "these changes will further shrink the talent pool… and only worsen the shortages hospitality businesses are facing".[8] The general secretary of the University and College Union warned that the changes would affect the abilities of universities to attract 'talent' among people "who will become pioneers of the future".[9] In the latter example, the role of universities as a vehicle for training and cultivating talent among members of the settled population appears to have been conveniently left out of the narrative.

Mass immigration has become a form of government subsidy for businesses at tremendous cost to the taxpayer. It serves to prop up those businesses that have refused to innovate and invest in productivity-increasing technology as well as adequate skills training.

Keeping wages low

Developments in the economy since the 1990s towards more precarious work, especially in lower paid jobs, have shifted power into the hands of the employer. This has been facilitated by a ready supply of migrant labour: employers are able to promise newly arrived migrants higher pay than they would have received in their countries of origin, but often still not enough to flourish in Britain.

Jonathan Portes argues that there has been little overall effect on the wages of low-skilled workers because they have broadly tracked the changes in median hourly wages for both medium- and high-skilled workers between 1997 and 2017.[10] They have of course benefited from large increases in the National Minimum Wage.[11] However, he rightly points out that the data are unclear when it comes to the broad impact on wages:

> "The fact that wages are weak when immigration is falling is likely to reflect the fact that lower wages make the UK less attractive as a destination".[12]

Of course, a ready supply of surplus labour would result in an overall recalibration of wages. That is precisely the point. The conditions may have otherwise emerged in which wages for low-skilled workers, in particular, should increase but instead remain stagnant – a carefully designed wage equilibrium.

The story changes when we look at certain individual sectors. A 2015 study cited by Portes demonstrated that a:

> "1 percentage point rise in the proportion of migrant workers in the low-skilled service sector led to a fall in wages for UK-born workers in that sector of 0.12%."[13]

Nicholas Oulton, however, argues that this study underestimates the effect of immigration on native wages with this study using "data from the boom period", and he estimates that the growth in "standard of living (consumption per hour worked)" for members of the settled workforce in a UK economy with fast labour growth "will always be about 3% less than in a slow-labour-growth one".[14]

A study by the Migration Advisory Committee, meanwhile, estimated that "an extra 100 non-EU working-age migrants are initially associated with 23 fewer native people employed" between 1995 and 2010.[15] While economists reject the 'lump of labour fallacy'[16] – the idea that there are a fixed number of jobs in the economy – mass migration may have a disproportionate impact on those with lower skills, keeping wages from rising and resulting in a low wage equilibrium.

'Social dumping' of the kind that French President Macron rallied against when the EU introduced the Posted Worker's Directive, allowing French companies to import workers from poorer countries and pay them at the rate of their home country, was exemplified by Britain's former Shortage Occupation List (SOL) which allowed businesses to recruit migrants for jobs far below the median salaries for their respective occupations.[17]

As of April 2024, the SOL was renamed the Immigration Salary List and the going rate was increased from the 25th to the 50th percentile.[18] Health and care is nevertheless exempt from this change and "occupations on this list still receive a 20% discount compared to the general salary threshold".[19]

Industries are neglecting investment in skills training and productivity-increasing technology

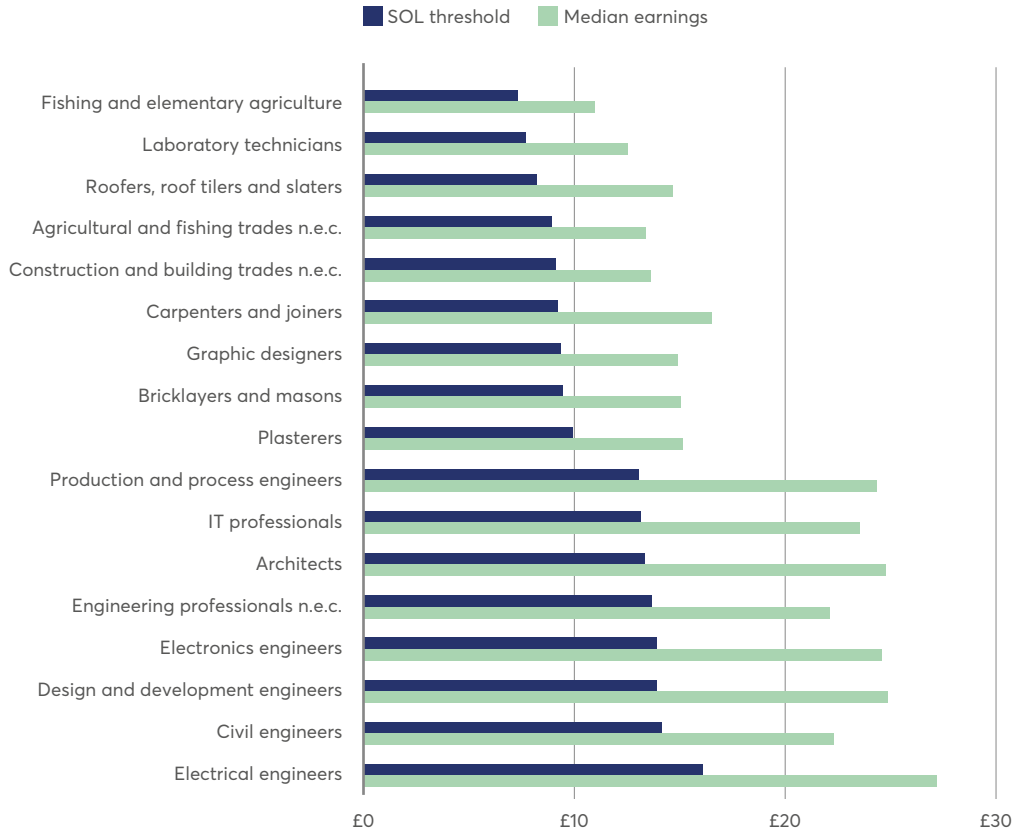
Investment in skills and training for work has been much neglected in Britain over the last 15 years.

The idea of *vocation*, of stable, reliable and dignified work has fallen out of fashion as the economy has recentred itself around labour market liberalisation. The growth of the gig economy and precarious jobs, which require low commitment from employers as to wages and conditions, have created the demand for a churning workforce in which many Britons, understandably, are

unwilling to participate. In the boardroom, strategising over short-term profitability appears to have too often won out over long-term planning about training and retaining a workforce.

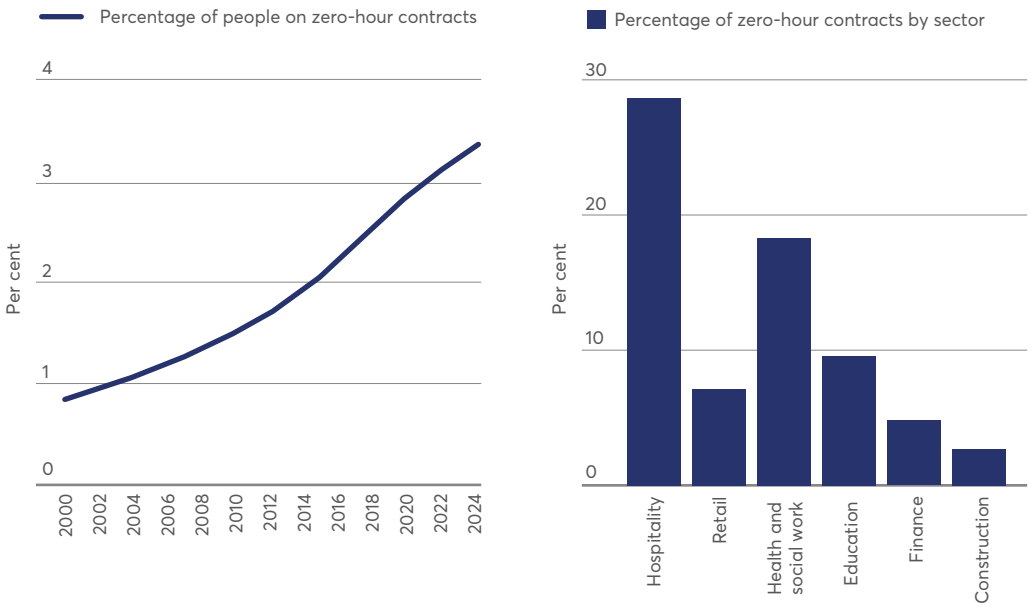
In the UK, 3.4% of the workforce is now employed through zero-hour contracts, compared with 0.8% in 2000.[20] Around a fifth of employers report hiring employees on zero-hour contracts.[21]

Figure 2: Shortage occupation hourly salary thresholds and median hourly salary in 2023



Source: N O'Brien, New data on low wage migration, Neil O'Brien's Substack, 2 January 2024.

Figure 3: Zero-hour contracts



At the state level, we have seen the same approach play out in the National Health Service (NHS) and with social care. A shortage of nurses and doctors does not result from changes in the weather, but from seriously negligent industrial policy, such as the 2017 removal of bursaries for the training of nurses.[22] There should be no shortage in these vital professions when it is within the capacity of the state to provide or incentivise the provision of the necessary vocational training to adequately meet demand. Instead, when such technical capacity is needed, we are often offloading the costs of training to poorer countries that desperately need their own supply of skilled workers in relevant sectors.

In 2023, 142,800 entry visas were issued for the Health and Social Care Sector. This accounted for 68% of all Skilled Worker visas. Data from the first half of 2024 suggests that, with the introduction of the 'genuine vacancy' test for skilled workers, this number has dropped, but that the social care route remains the most popular at 58%.[23]

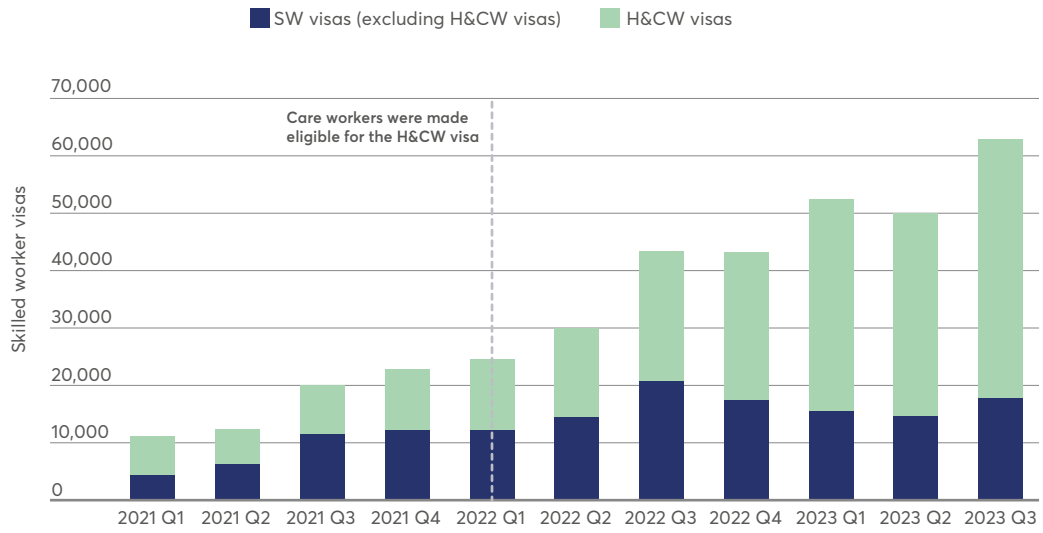
Of sponsored care workers, 99.9% – and 98% of those issued Health and Care Worker (H&CW) visas – were from non-European Economic Area (EEA) countries.[24] The breakdown is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Top nationalities using the Health and Care Worker visa by occupation

Rank	Care workers	Senior care workers	Nurses	Doctors
1	India (26%)	India (42%)	India (42%)	India (20%)
2	Nigeria (24%)	Nigeria (15%)	Philippines (26%)	Nigeria (15%)
3	Zimbabwe (17%)	Zimbabwe (15%)	Nigeria (13%)	Pakistan (13%)
4	Ghana (8%)	Ghana (6%)	Ghana (4%)	Egypt (11%)
5	Bangladesh (7%)	Philippines (5%)	Zimbabwe (3%)	Malaysia (4%)

Source: MAC, Annual report 2023, cap.2 'Health and Social Care Revisited'.

Figure 4: Skilled Worker visas



Source: Migration Advisory Committee, Annual report 2023, Home Office.

As the Migration Advisory Committee report points out, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Ghana are on the World Health Organisation (WHO) Red List[25] – countries that have experienced threatening levels of 'brain drain'[26] of doctors and nurses in recent years. WHO recommends that these countries should not be actively targeted when recruiting healthcare professionals.

The duty of the government to ensure the training of health workers in this country is, then, a moral concern that extends beyond our own borders. It is simply unfair to outsource vital training to poor countries in order to push down costs in this country.

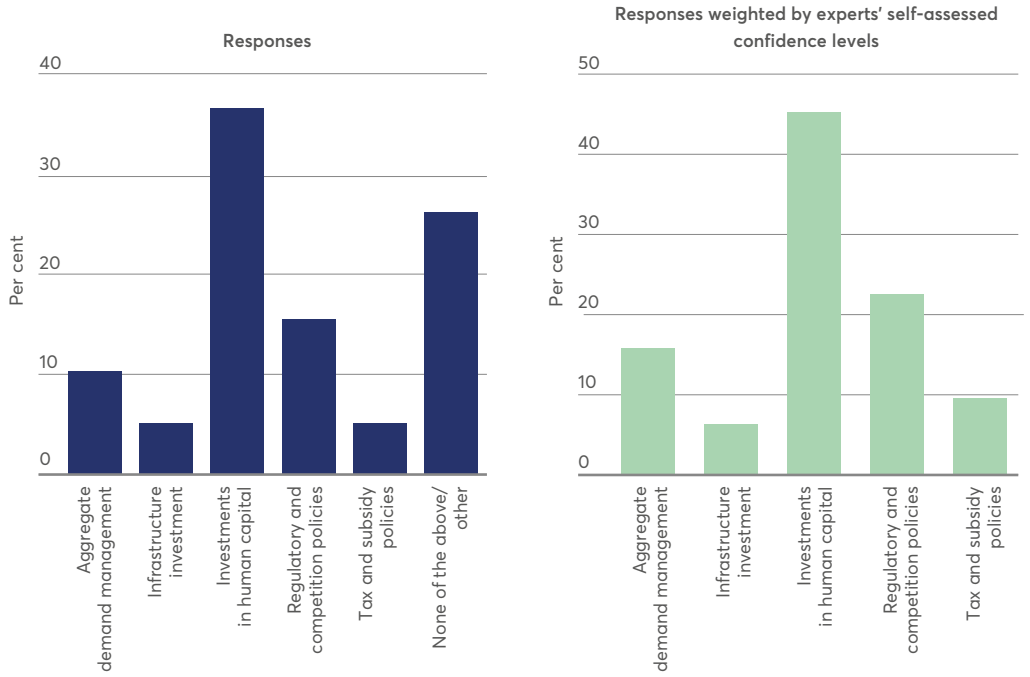
Labour market factors, including mass immigration, and the related lack of investment in skills, have been pointed to as significant factors impeding productivity growth. In one Centre For Macroeconomics (CFM) survey of top UK economists, 43% of respondents raised labour market factors and a further 39% highlighted workers skills as the main issue.[27] Chryssi Giannitsarou (Cambridge University) noted that "in an accounting sense, the drop in productivity can be largely accounted for with the increase in employment rates."[28] Kate Barker (British Coal Staff Superannuation) explained the "erosion for some young people of a skills premium alongside the loss in workers' bargaining power".[29] Nicholas Oulton further suggested that "cuts in unskilled immigration could boost productivity as it would induce firms to increase capital investments".[30]

One stark example of the refusal of British industry to innovate is the failure to adopt new productivity-enhancing robotic technology in favour of reliance on low-wage labour. Britain falls behind every other major manufacturing nation according to the International Federation of Robotics, with only 101 industrial robots per 10,000 workers.[31] This is a third of the number in Japan.

Respondents to the CFM survey were asked for their policy recommendations to boost private sector productivity. The responses are shown in Figure 5.

The panel of economists placed an overwhelming premium on investment in human capital and jobs retraining in finding a solution to the decline of productivity growth in the UK. A serious look at skills and capital investment in productivity-enhancing technology requires a pivot away from an economy that relies on an open tap of cheap labour from overseas.

Figure 5: Policy recommendations to boost private sector productivity



Source: CFM survey.

Exploitation is believed to be widespread, but only occasionally does it break into national prominence, as with the case of the Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay.

Exploiting those who come

The demand for cheap labour risks treating people as a transferable commodity. Workers who come to Britain are human beings with relationships and families and deep connections to their places of origin. Their hopes for higher wages and a better life are often taken advantage of by employers, and they are exploited by the highest earners who overwhelmingly benefit from cheap nannies, cleaners, and Deliveroo drivers. A fair look at immigration has to take into account not just the effect on local communities, skills investment, and wages, but also the exploitation of those who have come here.

Zero-hours contracts and other forms of precarious work remove workers' agency over their lives due to the repercussions of turning down work, the lack of opportunity for training and progression, and continual uncertainty about statutory rights and employment status.[32] Migrants are significantly more likely to be hired for non-permanent jobs, shift work, and zero-hour contracts.[33]

At the behest of capital, we are importing a servant class made up of individuals who are treated as dispensable or interchangeable units of value. This labour flexibility serves businesses but often denies new arrivals the chance to establish roots and become equal members of our society.

We have also seen chilling abuses in the healthcare sector leading to concerns about human trafficking and slavery. Unseen UK has reported that there were more than 700 potential cases of modern slavery in the care sector in 2022.[34] In addition, the Migration Advisory Committee annual report for 2023 notes that bonded labour has become a risk of low-wage visa routes to the UK:

> "UKVI [UK Visas and Immigration] have seen numerous examples of bonded labour linked to the adult social care sector. One individual had paid £8,000 directly to the sponsor for rent upfront and another had paid £21,000 to their sponsor for the visa. There have been other cases where migrants have had to spend large sums of money, sometimes in excess of £25,000, to 'agents' who forge documentation so they can obtain a H&CW visa."[35]

Discussion of mass immigration should not become an indictment of the individuals

who take the risk to come over to this country to seek an improved life. But it is entirely fair to criticise the companies that take advantage of these people, and the policy that allows this to happen.

Treating these people as units of value, as goods to be traded, rather than as rooted members of a community does a disservice to the well-meaning and ambitious. They are exploited as a means to an end. It is a great mistake to treat the free movement of goods – a 'real commodity' – just like the free movement of labour, which *should be no commodity at all*. It deprives workers of their dignity and expects them to provide value with no expectation of commitment in the form of training or reasonable wages in return.

Conclusion

Only by turning off the tap of an unlimited supply of cheap labour will we be able to redress the betrayal of workers' dignity by capital. And only a pause on the numbers migrating here will allow the time and space for these new migrants to be brought into the fold of our society: to be treated equally and fairly as human beings with full agency over their lives; and to reconcile the sometimes divergent interests and values of rapidly changing communities. But the pace and degree of change imposed by successive governments makes that slow, hard work impossible.

Notes

1 Ipsos, 'Dissatisfaction with government on immigration at highest level since 2015', 25 March 2024.

2 The Migration Observatory (2024). 'Net Migration to the UK', 2 December 2024.

3 Economics Observatory, 'Why has it taken so long for stagnant pay to become central to UK politics?', October 2023.

4 BBC Panorama, 'Stalling wage growth since 2008 costs £11,000 a year, says think tank', BBC, March 2023.

5 J Osman (2011). 'Immigrants do the work you won't touch', Channel 4, July 2011; S P Chan, 'The struggle to get lazy Britons to follow skilled migrants into work', the *Telegraph*, December 2024.

6 S P Chan (2024). 'Low-skilled migrants cost taxpayers £150,000 each', the *Telegraph*, September 2024.

7 J H van de Beek et al. (2023). *Borderless Welfare State; The Consequences of Immigration for Public Finances*. Amsterdam School of Economics, University of Amsterdam, April 2023, pp.127, 131.

8 UK Hospitality. [no date] 'Labour shortages to worsen under new immigration'.

9 University and College Union (2023). 'UCU slams government migration plan as 'massive own goal'', December 2023.

10 J Portes, *What do we know and what should we do about Immigration?*, SAGE Publications Ltd. (2019), p. 32.

11 Ibid, p.33.

12 Ibid.

13 S Nickell & J Saleheen (2015). 'The impact of immigration on occupational wages: evidence from Britain', Working Paper No.574, Bank of England, 18 December 2015.

14 N Oulton (2018). 'The UK (and Western) Productivity Puzzle: Does Arthur Lewis Hold the Key?', Centre for Macroeconomics, London School of Economics, 25 March 2018, pp.32–33.

15 Migration Advisory Committee (2012). *Analysis of the Impacts of Migration*, January 2012, p.2

16 J Portes (2019). p.28. It is worth noting that while 'lump labour' is used to argue that new workers aren't taking native jobs in aggregate, it may still be the case that an unnecessary or unproductive job is being created for which the taxpayer is ultimately footing the bill.

17 N Oulton (2018). p. 32.

18 Migration Advisory Committee, Annual report 2024, Home Office.

19 Ibid.

20 ONS (2024). ONS dataset November 2024

21 Silkin, L. (2024). 'Labour party proposals to strengthen rights and protections spotlight on zero-hour contracts', 7 June 2024.

22 K Garrat (2024). 'The NHS Workforce in England', House of Commons Library, 29 February 2024, p.62.

23 Migration Advisory Committee, Annual report 2024, Home Office.

24 Migration Advisory Committee, Annual report 2023, cap.2 'Health and Social Care Revisited'.

25 NHS Employers (2024). Code of Practice red and amber list of countries, 3 December 2024.

26 A Olufemi (2023). 'There won't be enough people left: Africa struggles to stop brain drain of doctors and nurses', *The Guardian*, August 2023.

27 E Ilzetski (2020). 'If the UK is high tech, why is productivity growth slow? Economists weigh in', London School of Economics, blogs business review, March 2020

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid; Centre for Macroeconomics Survey UK Productivity Puzzle.

31 N Timothy & K Williams (2023). *Stopping the Crossings; How Britain can take back control of its immigration and asylum system*, Centre for Policy Studies, December 2023, p.19; R.C. Whitton, 'Britain's exceptional lack of automation', *Doctor Syn*, 27 June 2022.

32 Silkin, L. (2024). 'Labour party proposals to strengthen rights and protections spotlight on zero-hour contracts', 7 June 2024.

33 The Migration Observatory (2024). 'Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview', July 2024.

34 Unseen UK (2023). 'Modern slavery in the care sector – problems and solutions', July 2023.

35 Migration Advisory Committee, Annual report 2023, cap.2 'Health and Social Care Revisited'.

E. Nine meals from anarchy – The food and water challenges for the UK from an increasing population

Robin Maynard

Robin Maynard is an independent writer, consultant and campaigner. He has previously served as Executive Director, Population Matters, Friends of the Earth's Senior Countryside and Agriculture campaigner, Director of Campaigns and Communications at The Soil Association, and Director of Communications, Forestry Commission England. He has also worked as a Producer and Presenter on BBC Radio 4's 'Farming Today'.

Background

The five main functions of government are generally understood to be: defending the country and its interests via our armed forces; maintaining law and order through the judiciary and police; providing decent public services such as the National Health Service (NHS); delivering 'good education for all children' through the state school system; and raising taxes to pay for all of the above.

I argue for a sixth: food and water security – that is, ensuring sufficient, affordable, and resilient supplies of food and water (and the resources and ecosystems needed to produce it).

Food security does not mean the UK should be 100% self-sufficient, producing all the food and drink we consume here. Indeed, we never could be 100% self-sufficient, but our diet, health, and enjoyment of food would be the poorer without imports. But it is of concern that the proportion of UK home-grown food has been steadily declining over the past 30 years.[1]

Over the same period, the UK's and the world's populations increased and are set to grow further; overseas regions and international transport routes have become more vulnerable to disruption by climate change, by war and regional conflicts triggered by drought and extreme weather events linked to climate change, and many food-exporting countries having their own growing populations to feed. In addition, the type of food being consumed is changing and, as incomes rise, people have also become increasingly concerned about the impact on climate change goals of transporting large amounts of food around the globe.

Recent history

Food security has not been entirely off the political agenda. When Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair as prime minister under the last Labour Government in 2007, the first policy review he commissioned was to "examine our approach to food policy across the board". Its key conclusion was that our national food security is entangled with and affected by global issues:

> "The principal food security challenge for the UK is a global one. A world in which food is scarce, less affordable, is less stable."[2]

Brown had experienced the fuel protests of 2000, which nearly brought down the Blair government, as truckers and

Modern industry seeks to reduce its capital employed by running on the tightest of schedules. This makes an island nation like the UK particularly vulnerable to interruptions in supply

farmers joined forces to blockade oil depots and supermarket distribution hubs in protest against rising fuel prices. Their actions revealed how vulnerable the UK supermarkets' 'just in time' shelf-filling systems were to even short-term disruptions and shocks. At the emergency Cobra Committee convened to discuss the crisis, supermarket bosses warned that London and other major cities were within three days of running out of food. As a result, as was expressed in technicolour terms, the UK was just 'nine meals from anarchy.'[3]

The warnings were taken seriously, with the Treasury finding the money to cut fuel and excise duty, so ending the protests. But if that challenge to the nation's food supply was seared into Brown's memory, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) civil servants were more relaxed in their response:

> "The UK currently enjoys a high level of national food security, which reflects the diverse and abundant supply of foodstuffs available in our supermarkets. We produce much of our food ourselves, and because the UK is a developed economy, we are able to access the food we need on the global market."[4]

A perfect storm

That response seems dangerously complacent in the face of today's challenges to both our national and global food security:

- UK and global population growth
- Accelerating climate change, including more extreme cycles of floods and droughts
- 'Black swan' events such as the COVID-19 pandemic
- Ongoing degradation, loss, and annexation of agricultural land here in the UK and globally.

These challenges, which already amount to a 'perfect storm', are being supercharged by global geopolitical instability, not least the displacement of millions of climate refugees worldwide – predicted to exceed 1 billion people by 2050.[5]

Population – mind the food gap

Over the past 30 years, the UK population has grown by more than 11 million people, from 57.8 million in 1994 to 69.1 million today.[6] Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) forecast a further increase of 6.6 million by 2035; with increases at lower rates thereafter – all requiring housing, educating, and of course, feeding.[7]

Around half of our food imports come from countries already considered 'climate impact hotspots' that are in a state of 'low climate readiness.

Globally, our human population is projected to increase by more than 2 billion from the current 8.1 billion to 9.7 billion by 2050, and 10.4 billion by the mid-2080s.[8] So, the UK will find itself in an increasingly competitive world market. In its 2018 report, *Creating a sustainable food future*, the World Resources Institute warned of a 56% food gap between total calories then produced with those which would be needed to feed the world's population in 2050: "Expected population growth of 2.8 billion people between 2010 and 2050 drives the majority of expected growth in food." The area of farmland needed to close the food gap was calculated at being 593 million hectares – nearly twice the area of India.[9]

Climate change – global dependency, global vulnerability

Defra's civil servants set great store on our food imports being spread among many different suppliers: "no one country provided more than 11% of those imports". With nearly 40% by value imported from our near European neighbours, that argument might seem reasonable. However, considerable quantities come from further afield, both as food for direct human consumption, with much greater amounts indirectly as livestock feed. Much of this comes from countries with different climates that are – or have been – best suited to growing foodstuffs that we can't, but whose weather patterns are now changing.

According to the non-profit Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU), around half of our food imports come from countries already considered 'climate impact hotspots' that are in a state of 'low climate readiness'. These imported food and drink items include many that the British public have come to regard as staples of their weekly shop, such as tea, coffee, bananas, and rice. For example, according to the ECIU, of the '100 million cuppas' we Brits drink every day, more than half of the tea has been grown in Kenya.[10] With an expected global average temperature rise of at least 2 degrees Celsius, tea production in Kenya and across East Africa is predicted to decrease by 40% by 2050.[11]

As another example, the two main countries supplying rice to the UK are India and Pakistan, where monsoon rains have reduced output. In 2023, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi banned the export of non-Basmati rice, as climate-linked heavy rains reduced yields. This may become a regular restriction as India's population overtakes China's to become the largest in the world at around 1.4 billion people, increasing to more than 1.7 billion in the mid-2060s.

Geopolitical instability – creating trade 'choke points'

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the disruption to grain exports, global feed prices have risen by 50%. The war has more than halved Ukraine's productive arable area from 15 million hectares in 2021 to 7 million currently. In the Middle East, Yemen's Houthi rebels have responded to Israel's military operations in Gaza and The Lebanon by attacking merchant shipping in the Red Sea, halving the number of ships passing through the Suez Canal. On the other side of the world, lack of rainfall linked to climate change, has restricted the

In Hertfordshire, the river Beane ran dry due to water extraction (Financial Times).

number of ships able to pass through the Panama Canal, impacting another 5% of maritime trade.

Each year, 30 million tonnes of animal feed are imported at a cost of more than £5.5 billion, requiring 850,000 'ghost acres' overseas.

'Ghost acres'

The UK is blessed with productive, rain-fed lowland and upland grassland, characterising what many people value in our farmed countryside, and producing much of the red meat and dairy produce we consume. But almost all our livestock production relies on some supplementary feed, the majority grown in countries thousands of miles away. Each year, 30 million tonnes of animal feed are imported at a cost of more than £5.5 billion (the single highest input cost to UK agriculture), requiring 850,000 'ghost acres' overseas.[12] The majority of soybeans are sourced from just one country – Brazil.[13] Soya production has long been linked to the clearance of rainforest and high biodiversity habitat. Further destruction is likely as climate change disrupts temperature and rainfall patterns, making over 65% of current areas unsuitable for soybean cultivation, forcing further clearing of natural forests.[14]

Water – "Entering the jaws of death"

The UK's food growing areas are also vulnerable to climate change – 60% of our 'best' Grade 1 farmland lies close to or below sea level, making it vulnerable to flooding or the incursion and seepage of seawater into the soil. The currently highly productive arable areas of East Anglia, and rich dairy pastures of the Somerset Levels are most vulnerable.[15] Analysing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) future global average temperature rise scenarios, the UK's Environment Agency concluded that the "sea level will continue to rise to 2300 under all climate change projections".[16]

A shortage of water is just as much a concern, with climate change and population growth combining to stress available sources for crop irrigation and as drinking water. In 2019, Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive for the Environment Agency, described the UK's future water situation as "entering the jaws of death", with climate change and increased demand leading to shortages within 20 years.[17] Meanwhile, the Royal Geographical Society, has ranked southeast England at 161st out of the world's 180 most water stressed regions (1 being the least and 180 the most stressed) and gave the astonishing fact that less water per capita is available in the region than in Sudan.[18] As a sign of what may lie ahead, Southern Water has recently announced plans that would enable it to ship 45 million litres of water every day in tankers from Norway.[19]

Tech will save us (again)!

Shifting weather patterns and population growth globally raise serious doubts as to the UK's long-term reliance on food imports, but optimists point to technological innovation and societal adaptation as available solutions. The pressing issues, such Panglossians argue, are not lack of supply, but of access to affordable, nutritious, healthy food. Those

are the main takeaways from the National Food Strategy review published across 2020 and 2021: its recommendations focused on: addressing junk food; reducing diet-related inequality; making the best use of our land; and shifting food culture.[20] Population growth is not considered as an issue nationally or globally, other than in a brief reference to the 'Green Revolution' of the 1940s–1970s and its initial success in heading off world hunger through the high-yielding crop varieties developed by the agronomist, Norman Borlaug.

No food security without land security

Given these accelerating challenges, you would expect UK farmland to be protected as 'strategic national infrastructure'. Yet, according to a report by CPRE, the Countryside Charity (formerly known as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England) published just two years ago, almost 14,500 hectares of the country's best and most versatile agricultural land with the capacity to grow over 250,000 tonnes of vegetables a year, has been 'lost to development' over the past 10 years. CPRE highlights the inconsistency of government policies on nutrition with its assessment that 2 million people lost one of their recommended five-a-day portions of fruit or vegetables along with those 14,500 hectares. The developments that those productive hectares were lost to were mainly housing and renewable energy projects: since 2010, 300,000 new homes have been built on 8,000 hectares of prime farmland, with 'solar farms' covering another 1,400 hectares.[21]

The government has committed to building a great many more of both. According to planning experts, greenfield land double the area of Milton Keynes (38,000 hectares) will be needed to meet the government's pledge to build 1.5 million new homes over the next five years.[22,23] A particular focus has been the creation of the Oxford–Cambridge 'corridor' – permanent changes to, and loss of what should be seen as strategically critical, irreplaceable food growing land, as noted by the then Chief Executive of CPRE, Crispin Truman:

> "For the first time in several generations, our food security is at risk – yet we've seen a 100-fold increase in the loss of our best farmland to development, since 2010. Heating, eating and housing are fundamental needs. A healthy environment, mitigating and adapting against the devastation threatened by the climate emergency, is the bedrock that underpins them all."[24]

Conclusion

As noted earlier, it was a Labour prime minister who last raised concerns over the UK's food security, and a Conservative one, Sir Edward Heath, who set up the Population Panel in 1971 to assess the policy impacts of population growth nationally and globally. The Panel's report, published in 1973, recommended that the government should prioritise a population policy overseen by a dedicated minister. The Panel's conclusions remain pertinent:

> "Looking further ahead to the middle of the next century, problems of accommodating a further 10 or 20 million people are likely to be progressively more difficult. Sooner or later, Britain must face the fact that its population cannot go on increasing indefinitely."[25]

This country's population is now 69.1 million. In 1973 it was 56.2 million – and we are seeing increased public concern about the consequences for many aspects of our national life. It is to be hoped that the political parties will be brave enough to find a way to address these concerns in a strategic, transparent and evidence-based way – and one in which the vital issues of future food and water security receive due consideration.

Notes

1 https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/self-sufficiency-day/

2 Food Matters Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century, Cabinet office Strategy Unit July 2008: https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2008-1813/DEP2008-1813.pdf; https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmenvfru/213/213we70.htm.

3 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/11/nine-meals-anarchy-sustainable-system

4 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024-theme-3-food-supply-chain-resilience

5 https://www.prnewswire.com/ae/news-releases/iep-over-one-billion-people-at-threat-of-being-displaced-by-2050-due-to-environmental-change-conflict-and-civil-unrest-301125350.html

6 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2022

7 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2021basedinterim

8 https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population

9 https://www.wri.org/insights/how-sustainably-feed-10-billion-people-2050-21-charts#:~:text=A%2056%20percent%20food%20gap,agricultural%20expansion%20by%202050%3B%20and

10 https://ca1-eci.edcdn.com/food-vunerable-Nov-2023.pdf?v=1701692173#:~:text=CLIMATE%20IMPACTS

11 https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/05/climate-change-is-threatening-kenya-black-tea-industry

12 https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/future_of_feed_full_report.pdf

13 https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/future_of_feed_full_report.pdf

14 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0048969720329016

15 https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/131221-NERC-LWEC-AgricultureForestrySource1-LandUseSystems.pdf

16 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60378c448fa8f5048f78a5cf/Exploratory_sea_level_projections_for_the_UK_to_2300_-_report.pdf

17 https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsta.2022.0003#:~:text=In%20a%20speech%20in%202019,not%20be%20enough%20%5B18%5D.

18 https://www.rgs.org/about-us/what-is-geography/impact-of-geography/water-policy-in-the-uk

19 https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/sep/26/southern-water-considers-shipping-supplies-from-norwegian-fjords

20 https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org

21 https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/building-on-our-food-security

22 https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/MK%20LEA%20Final%20Report%20-%20July%202019.pdf

23 https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jul/08/labour-housing-plans-green-belt-land-new-towns-david-rudlin

24 https://www.cpre.org.uk/about-us/cpre-media/huge-quantities-of-productive-land-lost-to-development-our-research-shows/#:~:text=Crispin%20Truman%2C%20chief%20executive%20of,and%20housing%20are%20fundamental%20needs.

25 https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1974-07-22/debates/63372693-a6db-4ab9-a488-84ec6d90b117/Population

F. "Ask not what your country can do for you" – The implications for national security of demographic change

Professor Michael Clarke

Michael Clarke is Visiting Professor of Defence Studies at King's College London and former Director General of the Royal United Services Institute. He is currently Defence and Security Analyst at Sky News, and his latest book (2024) is *Great British commanders: Leadership, strategy and luck*.

The concept of 'national security' encompasses two broad areas of policy, and demographic change affects both of them in ways that are sometimes direct, sometimes more subtle, but never less than consequential. One side of national security concerns the protection of the state from external threats – threats to its legitimate interests in the international world, or even to the sovereign homeland itself – those that are generally the concern of the armed forces, the security and intelligence agencies and the Foreign Office. The other side of national security encompasses threats to governance, internal stability and the social cohesion of UK society – the concerns of a broader range of governmental departments and agencies that may have to deal with everything from natural disasters, cyber-attacks, or organised criminality through to terrorism or outright political subversion. The spectrum of what must now be regarded as legitimate national security concerns has never been broader for modern states in the networked, globalised world. For the sake of clarity, it is useful to look at these two facets individually, though of course, their concerns constantly overlap.

Demographic change and external defence

The first duty of government is to protect its citizens, and the size and structure of the population of any state is an important starting point for any judgement on how that duty is to be undertaken. In global population terms, Britain is one of the bigger countries among the 'second rank' of populations, and is within the top 50 most densely populated, among some 250 territories across the world.

According to Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysis of the 2021 census, the UK's natural net population is on course to increase only marginally, with just over half a million annual births over deaths in the period to 2036. In that time, the overall population is on a trend to increase by 6.6 million people – almost 10% – creating an anticipated population of 75.0 million by 2036. Some 6.1 million of the growing population will therefore be accounted for by net immigration. On these assumptions, an ageing native population seems likely to be increasingly dependent on net immigration levels to provide working-age citizens, where these are needed, to drive the economy.[1] On the basis of ONS long-term assumptions for fertility, mortality and net migration levels, the UK's population can be expected to begin to shrink from 2058.[2] Further, the ONS population projections published in January 2024 forecast a UK population of 77.9 million by 2045. United Nations (UN) projections suggest continuing growth, predicting that the UK population could reach more than 86 million by 2100, making the UK the most populous country in Europe.

From this population, the government now draws historically small numbers into the armed forces. In 2024, there were 148,200 trained and in-training members of the UK armed forces – 56% of whom were in the Army, the others fairly equally split between the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.[3] This is a small force and, in the last 25 years, more have left the armed forces than have joined, in all but six particular years.

Representing the society it protects

It is normally assumed that, to be optimally effective and motivated, any nation's armed forces should be 'appropriately representative' of the national population; neither neglecting significant elements within society, nor over-representing particularly disadvantaged or minority groups who may seem to be defending the more privileged. The current picture in the UK is mixed. Currently, some 12% of the armed forces are women (compared with 51% amid the whole population), and just over 11% are described by the Ministry of Defence as minority ethnic individuals (compared with 17% amid the whole population) though the proportion of those described as 'minority ethnic' individuals in the Army jumped in 2024 to just under 18%.[4]

The UK population could reach more than 86 million by 2100, making the UK the most populous country in Europe.

Such dynamics between demography and the armed forces are, of course, driven primarily by political decisions and the allocation of resources. But underlying these considerations are two deeper realities: the population's numerical ability to sustain mobilisation; and the population's social susceptibility to participating in military service.

David and Goliath

The first issue is the *numerical ability* of any population to sustain a national mobilisation effort should the need arise. In both absolute and relative terms, the proportion of the UK's population annually reaching 'military age' when they might be attracted to serve in the armed forces – or in dire circumstances, be conscripted into them – is small in relation to those powers who currently threaten UK security interests. The UK is 30th in a list of 145 states. for the numbers within its population coming into military age, with just under 750,000 adults annually.[5] India tops the list with 23.7 million, China is second with 19.7 million. Even the United States only has 4.4 million. More comparably, Germany stands at 842,000, France at 753,000.

Table 1: Numbers reaching military age

Country	Millions per annum
India	23.7
China	19.7
USA	4.4
Iran	1.4
Russia	1.2
Germany	0.842
France	0.753
UK	0.750
Ukraine	0.470
Sweden	0.105

In peaceful times, such gross numbers are barely meaningful since the size and capabilities of the Armed Forces are determined by entirely political choices. But in times of war and instability such gross numbers begin to matter. So the prospects of a protracted and destructive war are inherently easier for Russia to contemplate than for Ukraine. Israel's figure is 126,000, suggesting that Israel would find long term – still less open-ended – mobilisation very difficult and costly in its current Middle East wars. Iran, for example, stands at 1.4 million.

Britain's relative military strength may well be tested in a more uncertain world. (Royal Marines on exercise in the Baltic Sea.)

Sweden and Finland are small countries with figures of 105,000 and 56,000 respectively, but both are prepared to put very significant amounts of national wealth into their large reserve forces and wartime mobilisation.

Mobilisation prospects are therefore very context-specific. Like Germany and France, the UK is facing global, militarised competition from Russia, China and Iran. Such adversaries would be justified in feeling more confident in their own potential for long term mobilisation, should they feel the world tipping towards long term, warlike hostility between the 'western' powers and the new autocratic challengers in many different regions. The UK's Ministry of Defence has long had to contemplate the reality that the pool of eligible adults from which it could draw its standing Armed Forces was falling amid an ageing population. In an era where 'industrial-age warfare', involving near-full mobilisation, has returned to Europe in Russia's Ukrainian invasion, different demographic trends between particular countries have taken on a new relevance.

Readiness to serve

The second factor is the *social susceptibility* of that population to being drawn into military service or supporting it as civilians. All the indications are that the UK population of military age has a decreasing propensity to serve in the military and more volatile attitudes in general to the profession of military power in defence of the state. The Ministry of Defence worries that it will be increasingly hard to persuade a younger generation not merely to serve in the proportions it assumed in the past but also to be as supportive of the military instrument among those who don't serve.

The ways in which the UK's demographic structure is expected to change in the coming decades will all play into its recruitment and any potential mobilisation challenges.

The 'Generation Z' population (born 1997-2012, ranging from 12–27 years old in 2024) offers some pointers. It currently makes up less than 26% of the regular armed forces and less than 9% of the reserves (more than 60% of whom are ex-regulars). Yet almost half of those who leave the 'other ranks' military are Gen Z individuals, though less than 14% of those who leave as officers are Gen Z, since officers normally have longer military careers and are, on average, older.[6] But there is no doubt that defence ministers and officials are concerned at the apparently diminishing attractions, despite strong advertising campaigns, of a military role for Gen Z.[7] In short, relatively fewer Gen Z young people want to serve, and those who do tend to leave the military earlier than was previously the case.

Impact of modern media

Broader attitudes within the Gen Z population also show differences with previous eras.[8] As the King's College London Policy Institute reported, Gen Z's faith in the UK's armed forces remained high, but within a framework in which trust in all the country's institutions was declining in relative and absolute terms.[9] Perhaps most evident is the weight Gen Z individuals put on 'lived experience' factors. Modern attitudes to the role of the military are affected by the expectation of constant connectivity among Gen Z individuals, a greater emphasis on civil and social values, as opposed to straightforward patriotism, and a series of particular criticisms, either arising from recent operations of British forces,

or else longer-term questions about orientation.[10] As one study postulated, shifting attitudes to the UK military among younger people tend to be influenced by: the increased access to information – and disinformation – through digital media; greater exposure to diverse viewpoints through strong media narratives; and greater concern for the outcomes of operations – particularly in relation to casualties and second order political consequences.[11]

Fewer veterans

Another significant driver of this greater disconnection with the military establishment is the knock-on effect of shrinking numbers of armed service personnel and the fewer veterans in society whose experience may affect the attitudes of other individuals. In 2016 there were around 2.5 million men and women who had served in the armed forces living in the UK – around 5% of all household residents aged over 16. That figure will have fallen to 1.6 million by 2028 – less than 3% of all household residents. There is a slight uptick trend in the workplace, however, since veterans are now younger, having left the military earlier than before, and an increasing number – over 40% – join the workforce, including the 10% to 12% of veterans who are female.[12]

Possible outcomes

Of course, this is so context-specific that, as the international picture darkens and the UK comes self-evidently under greater military pressure from its adversaries, thinking may change quite quickly, as happened among previous generations, such as in the mid-1930s. But to date, the younger generation's attitude to military operations is best described as generally more sceptical and part of a "broader dialogue about national identity and responsibility", as Total Military Insight puts it.[13]

Demographic change and internal cohesion

Modern societies are uniquely penetrated by external influences in every sphere of human activity. It is an inevitable characteristic of globalisation, which became a recognisable phenomenon in the mid-1980s. And though 'globalisation' is regarded as going through a first phase, then a '2.0' phase and now even perhaps a '2.1' evolution, the penetrative power of global communications both within and between societies has reached historically unprecedented levels. Whatever 'globalisation' is thought to be, it is nevertheless era-defining and it interacts with the demographic structure of any society.

What is national cohesion?

'National cohesion' is difficult to define in the absence of context, but in principle it can be affected by a multiplicity of different factors. Demographically, the greater factionalisation of UK society – its self-defining subgroups within a multicultural society – pose challenges for any national government seeking to maintain social cohesion if it also perceives itself to be under an international security challenge.[14] The UK has always been a highly pluralistic society, but there is little question that, over recent decades, 'British pluralism' has come under strain from the emergence of groups self-identifying based on a range of different characteristics – religion, ethnicity, nationality within the four nations, socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, even geographical location.[15] From the perspective of defence and security, this only matters insofar as subgroup identification is capable of being manipulated in malignant ways by the country's adversaries to attack Britain's social cohesion. It is hardly a new phenomenon. The 20th century saw many attempts to sow discord within the UK during its major wars and in the long Cold War standoff with the Soviet Union.

In the current era of modern media, however, members of self-identifying groups can be, and are, more intensively

targeted by the country's adversaries, based on highly specific and customised attempts to undermine mainstream news and official information. The burgeoning power of social media is able to feed to individuals and small groups information and disinformation to which they are assessed to be particularly receptive and which could be designed to attack the country's social fabric.

Social media also makes the body politic more vulnerable to importing foreign conflicts into domestic affairs. Throughout the crises in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, our European partners experienced considerably more domestic fallout from those conflicts than did the UK, since their demographic make-up linked some of their communities directly to the fighting. After the 9/11 attacks, however, the UK's demography – and significant Hindu and Muslim diasporas in the UK – made the country more sensitive to events in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Kashmir. So, too, with events across the Middle East – a sensitivity as the 2024 general election revealed, that has only been increased by religious and ethnic subgroup identification in light of Israel's ongoing Gaza and Lebanon wars.

As Anne Applebaum points out, the UK's autocratic adversaries do not try so much to push an alternative narrative of the world to susceptible self-identifying subgroups as much as to create a sense of cynicism and powerlessness.[16] It saps the faith of subgroups in the institutional fabric of UK society and the actions of its democratic government. Modern electoral studies have shown the effectiveness of customised and manipulative social media feeds to influence the voting behaviour of particular groups or individuals. The UK's security services are in no doubt that the same techniques are at work in relation to the country's policies on European defence and security and the war in Ukraine.[17] An international study in December 2024 revealed that, of the more than 150 significant hybrid attacks on NATO countries inspired by Russia alone since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, over a third of them were classed as 'election and information' campaigns.

Where we are now

The UK is currently subject to 'sub-threshold' warfare by its major adversaries and challengers – named in official reviews as Russia, Iran, China and North Korea. Sub-threshold warfare involves challenges up to the threshold of outright military conflict, though involving many of the elements that might be part of an outright military exchange, such as sabotage, interference with pipelines and cables or satellite communications, cyber-attack or interference with supply chains. Such sub-threshold pressure is also structured around constant attacks on the UK's own social cohesion. Ministers and officials in the UK's security and defence establishments openly warn that the UK has become subject to a series of ongoing, open-ended, sub-threshold attacks that go right up to the threshold of outright military hostility, though so far have not crossed it.[18]

Conclusion

The UK's demographic development and the way it interprets its own deep and erstwhile pluralism can be either a strength or a weakness in these circumstances – on the one hand, a source of deeper resilience; on the other, a series of fault-lines capable of exploitation by the country's adversaries.

With a fast-growing population driven by immigration, challenges to national cohesion are bound to arise where different cultures and value systems all seek to express themselves – sometimes through a country's institutions, sometimes by trying to create or preserve their own sense of autonomy separate from mainstream institutions or political parties.

Governments know only too well that this creates a political minefield for them. They feel more comfortable addressing the peripheral issues surrounding questions of national identity or the most egregious challenges to social cohesion as and when they arise. The national riots following the 'Southport killings' in August 2024, for example, demonstrated a sense of anger – completely misplaced, but anger all the

same – by sections of the population who felt that government would not address the central concerns about *their* version of British culture. It's a discussion that successive governments have not wanted to have. But as long as they don't, the internal and external security challenges of our demographic evolution will be addressed largely through strategies merely of hope, rather than anything more precise, or new approaches based on better knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon.

Notes

1 Office for National Statistics (2024). *Statistical Bulletin, National Population Projections: 2021-based Interim*, 30 January 2024, p. 3.

2 UK's natural population set to start to decline by 2025 *Financial Times*, 12 January 2022.

3 Esme Kirk-Wade (2024). *UK defence personnel statistics*, House of Commons Library, 7930, 13 August 2024, p.11.

4 Ibid, p. 5.

5 Global Firepower.com, Population reaching military age annually by country (2024).

6 Ministry of Defence (2023). *UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics: October 2023*, 21 December 2023.

7 'How Gen Z is the UK military?' *BFBS Forces News*, 15 January 2024.

8 National Centre for Social Research (2024). *Society Watch 2024*, 'Understanding the New Generation of Voters', 21 May 2024.

9 Reported in, 'Gen Z has a trust problem with British institutions', *The Conversation*, 16 August 2024.

10 See for example, Jonathan Parry and Christina Easton, 'Military recruitment is a moral minefield', blogs.lse.ac.uk, 5 March 2024; or Child Right International Network, 'British army targets youngest and poorest for riskiest roles', CRIS Press Release, 22 August 2019.

11 Total Military Insight (2024). *Understanding the British Armed Forces and Public Perceptions*, 21 July 2024.

12 Ministry of Defence (2019). *Population Projections: UK Armed Forces Veterans Residing in Great Britain 2016-2028*, 10 January 2019. These figures will be lower now given the steeper decline in armed forces numbers since this evidence was collected.

13 Total Military Insight, op. cit.

14 In 2006, the government was concerned to promote 'core British values' in the school curriculum in direct response to the 2005 London terror attacks. See,Eva-Maria Asari, et.al., 'British National Identity and the Dilemmas of Multiculturalism', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 14(1) 2008.

15 See, Joseph Norris (2023). 'Power dynamics among UK interest groups: pluralism and its implications', *Arcadia*, 30 July 2023. Also, research commissioned by the Government Office for Science in 2013 expressed the issue. Ethnic diversity, in particular, it found, was only a significant source of social dislocation where it also coincided with other subgroup characterisation such as population mobility or economic deprivation. See, David Owen (2013). *Future Identities: Changing Identities in the UK – the Next 10 Years*, Government Office for Science, Foresight Programme, January 2013.

16 Applebaum, A. (2024). *Autocracy Inc: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*, New York, Doubleday, 2024.

17 'British spy agencies warn of AI threat to democracy', *Politico*, 25 October 2023. See also, 'Societal Harms' in Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, *AI Safety Summit: Capabilities and Risks from Frontier AI*, October 2023, pp. 19–22.

18 See for example, 'Russia remains UK's top security threat, warns intelligence chief', *Financial Times*, 30 May 2023; 'Spy chiefs of the CIA and MI6 convene, on a couch and for a crowd', *New York Times*, 7 September 2024.

G. Working longer and smarter – tackling the challenges of an ageing UK

Professor Sarah Harper CBE

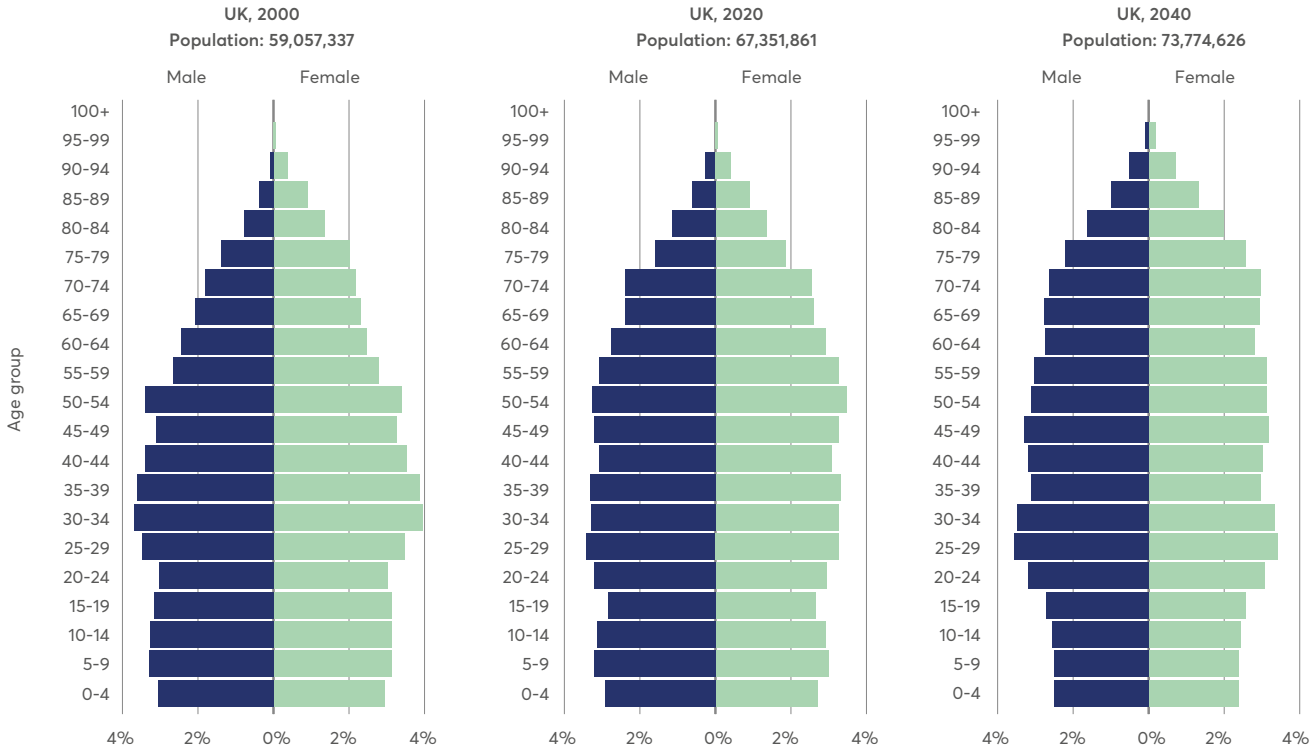
Sarah Harper is the Clore Professor of Gerontology at the University of Oxford and Director of the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing. She served on the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology, advising David Cameron and Theresa May on demographic change. She also chaired the 2017 Foresight Review of the UK's Ageing Population. Sarah is the author of books and papers on global population change, and serves on various international and national population committees. She was appointed a CBE in 2018 for her services to Demographic Science.

Demographic background

As the childbearing rate falls, the population of the UK, along with most high-income countries, is projected to age across the 21st century.[1] According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), between 2022 and 2023, the total fertility rate (TFR) for England and Wales decreased from an average of 1.49 children per woman over their lifetime to 1.44, the lowest rate on record. Scotland stands at 1.3 births per woman, with Northern Ireland the highest at 1.7. Social and economic policies aimed at increasing birthrates, including improved parental leave, complimentary childcare, financial incentives, and additional employment rights, offer only a modest increase in fertility rates. Thus, the UK, like the majority of high-income countries, is likely to continue falling short of replacement-level fertility. Currently around 19% of the UK population is aged over 65. That figure is projected to reach some 25% by the middle of the century, with 2% aged over 85 – around 1.5 million, and likely to double within the next two decades (see Figure 1).

The shift from predominantly young to predominantly older populations raises concerns over the ability of nations to finance the social security and long-term health and social care required to support a growing absolute and relative number of older dependents. It is the growth in the oldest – over 85 years – that will put most stress on the financing and provision of health and long-term care, occurring alongside below replacement childbearing, which reduces the numbers of workers to provide increased practical support and care. It is feared that this will lead to considerable macroeconomic challenges, as ageing and declining workforces will influence not only labour market outcomes but also productivity, savings and investment behaviours, and interest rates.

Figure 1: UK population and demographic forecast



Source: PopulationPyramid.net

How to address this?

UK government policy has so far addressed the challenges of this large demographic shift through focusing on direct interventions, such as reforming pension policies and health and social care. However, at the macro level there are a range of options that can impact the wider population trends:

- Promote increased childbearing
- Increase the overall productivity of the workforce and, in particular, encourage older adults to remain in the labour market for longer
- Increase the number of immigrant workers, especially from Europe, who are most likely to be circular thus more inclined to return to their country of origin once their skills are no longer needed, or temporary, unlike long-distance migrants.

Regarding the first of these, the low childbearing rate has been driven by the education and emancipation of women, and it is thus unlikely that policy will return childbearing rates to replacement levels, either in the UK or elsewhere. In addition, low rates of childbearing are desired by many women, and have benefits for them, their children and families. Couples who wish to have children should be supported in this through high-quality childcare, economic opportunities, and housing and employment security. However, evidence from across the globe suggests that policies that directly aim to encourage women to bear more children appear to be counterproductive.

This essay will argue that an increase in circular or short-distance migration, combined with retaining, retraining and recruiting older workers, holds the key to many of the UK's challenges. There is now a considerable body of literature on the importance of retaining the experience and knowledge of mature workers which, combined with younger workers, can lead to the increased overall productivity that mixed-age teams and groups brings. Thus, the facilitation of young migrants coming to the UK for work, combined with the retention of older adults in the workplace,

provides a strong combination of talent to boost productivity.

What is short-distance immigration?

Specifically, unlike long-distance immigrants, those migrating over shorter distances within our geographical region of Europe tend to have more circular or temporary patterns. These migrants are more inclined to return to their country of origin once their skills are no longer needed. In addition, currently around 45% of work visas issued are to family dependents, and according to the Migration Observatory, people on family unification visas are more likely to settle long-term in the UK than those on work or study visas.

Ageing and declining workforces will influence not only labour market outcomes but also productivity, savings and investment behaviours.

Thus, European migration has a higher tendency to follow employment opportunities in certain occupations, with a higher level of return or 'circular migration. By contrast, long-distance migration is more likely to facilitate the need for further migration as new occupational demands arise, without the return of the original immigrants. This partially accounts for the considerable increase in overall net migration (the difference between 'in' and 'out' migration) since the UK departed the single market.

Before continuing, we need to take into account two important concepts: dependency ratios; and the generational economy.

Dependency ratios

The age structures described above may be conceptualised in terms of the so-called dependency ratios. These ratios describe the relationship of dependents, young and old, to workers. They are typically described in terms of the old-age dependency ratio, the number of persons of working age (aged 15 to 64) per person aged 65 or over; youth dependency ratio, the number of persons of working age (aged 15 to 64) per person aged 15 or under; and total dependency ratio, the number of those aged 15–64 compared with those outside this age range. The old-age dependency ratio is given as the proportion of dependents per 100 working-age people in the population. The UK was reported at 57.85% in 2023, however, this has been balanced by a fall in youth dependents.

Relatively high immigration rates since the late 1990s have brought to the UK a migrant population that is younger than the overall UK population. Furthermore, the UK has experienced greater economic activity at older ages, in particular, with the growth of economic activity among those over age 50. Currently there are around 300 of state pension age per 1,000, which will rise to some 360 per 1,000 by the middle of the century.

What is the generational economy?

The relationship between population ageing and economic growth draws on the idea of the redistribution of resources through the generations, linked to the economic lifecycle – often described as the 'generational economy'. The generational economy comprises four distinct activities: producing, consuming, sharing, and saving:

- During an individual's prime working years, he or she will typically produce more than they consume.
- Consumption takes place across the lifecycle, and may be consumption of goods or services.
- Sharing may be publicly via taxation, which funds education, healthcare and pensions, for example, or privately within families and households.

- Saving allows assets accumulated at one stage of the lifecycle to be used at a later stage, as in paying off a housing loan or creating a retirement pension.

In traditional societies, older people continue to produce well into old age. However, one of the key issues in modern societies in high-income countries is that, after retirement, people consume more than they produce. This consumption takes the form of pensions, health and long-term care, and the drawdown of assets.

Developing policy solutions

Alongside specific social security and healthcare policies, the retaining, retraining and recruiting of older workers, combined with attracting younger workers, will address many of the UK's challenges. As noted above, there is now a considerable body of literature on the importance of retaining the experience and knowledge of mature workers, which, combined with younger workers in mixed-aged teams, can lead to increased overall productivity.

How to increase the number of over 50s in the workforce

There has been a general increase in the percentage of those aged over 50 who are now in the workplace in advanced economies; more than one-third of this age group in the G7 countries report interest in working after retirement age. Even given the uncertainties following the COVID-19 pandemic, the employment rate of people aged between 50 and 64 in the UK, for example, increased from 55.8% in 1984 to 70.7% in 2022, but this means that 30% of over 50s are still unemployed.

1. Improving the health of the whole population and especially the over 50s

The rise in the number of older workers can be attributed, in part, to improved health among individuals now entering mid-life and old age. The overall health of the population has improved, including those transitioning into later life, resulting in progressively healthier groups of older adults. In addition, education levels among older cohorts have also risen.

These factors together facilitate extended working, allowing individuals to maintain their fitness for work and acquire the skills that employers seek. Future policies need to reinforce these trends.[2]

2. Recognising the potential contribution of over 50s to increasing productivity

Productivity has been shown to increase up to the age of 65, even in work environments requiring substantial physical strength. Post-COVID data suggests that the over-55s now have higher productivity than those workers aged under 25, though myths and stereotypical views remain that older people are unproductive. In a recent large-scale study of occupations, those under 25 consistently had lower productivity than other groups; organisations with a higher-than-average number of older workers was not associated with lower productivity. In contrast, those with a higher-than-average proportion of employees aged under 30 were linked to reduced productivity levels.

3. Focusing on the special skills of over 50s for a modern economy

In a modern knowledge economy, in particular, older adults have many of the skills required. Research shows that older adults exhibit enhanced verbal capabilities, characterised by a broader vocabulary and improved communication skills. They also experience advancements in inductive reasoning, which leads to superior problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, their visual-spatial skills – the capacity to assess movement and position in space – improve with age. Additionally, older adults play a vital role in mixed-age teams, as they possess a heightened ability to disregard negativity. This is due to increased calmness in the brain's emotional response area during unfavourable situations, resulting in a boost in positivity.

4. Increasing access to lifetime education

Looking ahead, continuous education, training and skill enhancement will be crucial across the life course. In fact, the absence of ongoing training and the

Research suggests that mixed-age teams can lead to improved productivity.

resulting low employability of older workers have long been recognised as significant obstacles to boosting the employment rates of older adults in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of reports have advocated for policies that would allow older workers to remain active in the workforce. This approach aims not only to alleviate pressure on public finances, but also to sustain a dynamic economy amid the challenges of population ageing, particularly by leveraging the extensive skills and experiences of older individuals.

5. Application of technology

The UK is currently undergoing a fourth industrial revolution. The integration of technology into production is reshaping work and the workplace, potentially prompting older adults to stay in the workforce longer or even boost their productivity. For example, advancements in automation and artificial intelligence can make tasks less physically and manually taxing. Digital work is allowing more flexibility, creating a more accommodating environment for older workers. Fostering lifelong skills is essential for improving the employability and productivity of older workers, especially through training in digital technology use.

6. Creating a 'silver demographic dividend'

The second demographic dividend refers to the increase in productivity driven by the accumulation of wealth and human capital. It occurs when individuals of all ages elevate their demand for wealth to support their consumption in their later years. The premise suggests that, as the working population ages and a larger share approaches retirement, there is a strong incentive to build up savings. Whether these new assets are invested domestically or internationally, the national income will increase. Moreover, the productivity of the economy may also improve as older workers choose to remain in the workforce longer. Leveraging the capabilities of older adults could even lead to a third demographic dividend – referred to as the 'silver demographic dividend'. Countries that create favourable policy environments for innovation and entrepreneurship are likely to reap the most benefits from this 'silver economy'.

Increase short-distance work-related migration

Despite the public rhetoric, numerous studies have highlighted that youth migration – whether circular (with the intention of returning), temporary (where return migration is expected but not

required), or permanent – is generally beneficial to the receiving country. In particular, migration within Europe – where there is a far higher likelihood of it being temporary or circular – can have added benefits as the workers follow the need for their skills wherever these may be demanded, and move on when the need for labour in this area has been reduced. Thus immigrants can boost output, create new opportunities for local firms and native workers, supply abilities and skills needed for growth, generate new ideas, stimulate international trade and contribute to long-term fiscal balance, by making the age distribution of high-income countries more balanced.

1. Immigrants undertake supplementary work

Immigrants often take on jobs that are different from, and supplementary to, those of native workers, rather than directly competing with them. For instance, immigration meets the demand for certain manual and labour-intensive positions, allowing skilled native workers to concentrate on more complex roles, which in turn enhances their productivity and wages. By shifting to more complex jobs, native workers can protect their income from competition with immigrants while benefiting from the job creation that complements the labour done by immigrants. This dynamic can be particularly advantageous for less-educated members of the settled population as it can lead to more hiring in those sectors. Furthermore, a review of the existing research suggests that the effect of immigrants on the average wages of native workers is minimal.

2. Immigrants create local demand

Immigrants boost local economies in several key ways. Their spending and investments create demand for goods and services, leading to increased job opportunities for local workers. Furthermore, immigrants often fill labour needs in sectors like service and healthcare, allowing native-born workers, (particularly women), to participate more fully in the workforce, increasing overall productivity. Businesses respond to this influx of people by expanding and relocating, generating further investment and jobs. Finally, many immigrants are entrepreneurs themselves, launching businesses and generating even more employment for the local community.

3. Young immigrants expand the labour force and lower the old-age dependency ratio

In ageing societies, the influx of young workers alleviates the fiscal pressures on pension systems and assists in covering the medical expenses of retirees. Importantly, native populations typically exhibit a negative net fiscal balance during their youth and old age, while maintaining a positive fiscal balance during their working years. Since immigrants often arrive in the host country at the beginning of their working lives, they tend to generate a higher net positive fiscal impact. Host countries benefit from the absence of educational costs for these immigrants and gain from their many years of contributions prior to retirement. Indeed, regional migration – in the UK's case, from the rest of Europe – is more likely to have the highest return, with migrants returning to their countries of origin before retirement. The impact of long-distance migrants, many of whom will bring their families with them, is much less pronounced.

Conclusion

In the UK, new cohorts of highly educated, skilled and increasingly healthy populations are approaching traditional retirement ages, and are increasingly remaining in economic activity – producing, consuming, and paying taxes. The need to save more for a longer retirement and the changes in the age distribution of a population have the potential to raise asset income of a nation. Increased productivity, increased savings and, given the high level of wealth currently accumulated by older populations, continued consumption, and the ageing of populations may not herald the scenarios currently being forecast.

Alongside the need to widen the scope of social security systems and improve the

efficiency of healthcare services, the UK must look to enhance the employability and skills of older workers, and foster greater labour market inclusion for women and young people – both native-born youth, and migrants. In particular, new policy strategies should facilitate and encourage lengthier working lives through continuous education, skills development, and the establishment of suitable work environments for older workers. Furthermore, they should promote overall wellbeing and support healthy, active lifestyles to minimise chronic illnesses and healthcare expenses, while encouraging active contributions to society for as long as possible. Recognising the importance of healthy ageing would also increase the employability of older adults, supported by policies addressing barriers to the employment of older workers, such as mandatory retirement and lack of flexible work arrangements.

Across high-income countries there is a growing need to recruit skills to compensate for the challenges of ageing populations. Since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, the country has seen a significant reduction in immigration from the European Economic Area (EEA) and a large increase in immigration from non-EEA countries. In addition, the EU itself has observed a rise in circularity, indicating a notable adaptability of labour force migration in response to regional labour market changes. Many migrant workers, especially low-skilled, regard their time abroad as temporary and frequently favour multiple short-term stays to provide financial support for themselves and their families at home. Circular migration thus provides an opportunity to strengthen the UK's position in addressing various 21st-century challenges, including escalating geopolitical instability, declining populations, and potential future migration crises.

References

Department for Work & Pensions. (2022). *Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time: September 2022*.

Government Office for Science. Future of ageing, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-ageing.

International Labour Organization (2024) Challenges and Opportunities of an Ageing Workforce.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2019). *Working Better with Age, Ageing and Employment Policies*. Paris, OECD Publishing.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2022). *Ageing and the long-run fiscal sustainability of health care across levels of government*. Paris: OECD Working Papers on Fiscal Federalism, No. 38, OECD Publishing.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2024) International Migration Outlook. OECD Publishing.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023). Births in England and Wales: 2023. Live Births. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirthsbulletinsbirthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2023#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20there%20were%20591%2C072,dropped%20below%20600%2C000%20since%202002.

Oxford Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford. https://www.ageing.ox.ac.uk

The Migration Observatory. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA). (2021). *Shaping Europe's demographic future: Pathways for societies to thrive in a world of rapid demographic change.* Sofia: Ministerial Conference on Demographic Resilience.

Notes

1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision. (Medium variant)

2 See the Health trends in England report for further information: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/health-trends-in-england.

H. Falling fertility rates – is this an opportunity or a challenge?

Professor James Sefton

James Sefton is Professor of Economics at Imperial College. He has previously held senior research positions at UBS and Winton Capital Management, as well as posts at Department of Applied Economics (Cambridge University) and National Institute for Economic & Social Research. He has published widely on national accounting and public policy. His current research studies the changes to the distribution of resources across the generations over time, contributing to the debate on intergenerational fairness. James is UK representative of the National Transfer Accounts Project funded by the United Nations Population Fund. He was previously a member of the Academic Panel of the Intergenerational Commission, advisor to HM Treasury on their Long-Term Public Finance Review, and sat on the Office for National Statistics Consumer Price Advisory Committee.

> "Norway needs more children. I do not think I need to explain how this is done."
> – Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway, January 2019

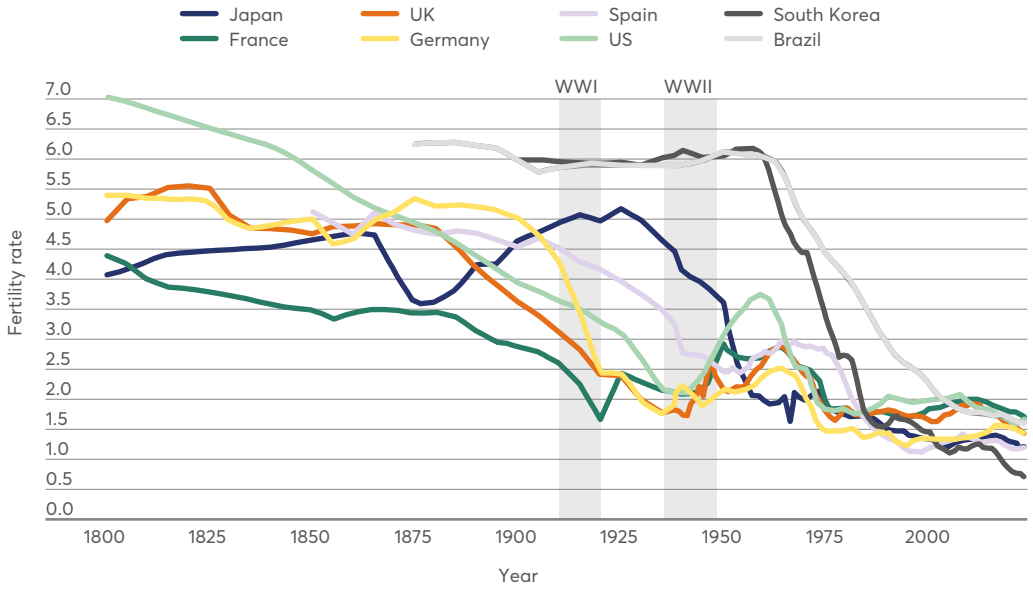
Headlines across the developed world warn of the risks posed by falling fertility rates. The concern centres on a shrinking workforce struggling to support a growing elderly population, leading to mounting economic and fiscal pressures. More nuanced reports recognise the positives of these trends, such as greater female autonomy and longer lifespans, but quickly move on to emphasise the financial challenges they bring.

In this short essay, I propose a different perspective on these issues. Falling fertility, I argue, becomes a problem only if younger people, particularly women, wish to have more children than they currently do. Is there a significant fertility gap? Evidence suggests there might be, and if so, it warrants concern and targeted policy action. However, addressing rising dependency ratios should not be the primary motivation for encouraging higher fertility or higher levels of immigration, as these can likely be managed through alternative policies – most notably, by encouraging older individuals to remain economically active for longer.

Completing the demographic transition

Most developed economies are firmly in the final (fourth) stage of the demographic transition, defined by low fertility and mortality rates. As shown in Figure 1, early developers such as the UK, France, Germany, and the USA experienced declining fertility in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Later developers, including Spain and Japan, followed in the 20th century, with developing nations like South Korea and Brazil transitioning more recently.

Figure 1: Historical fertility rates from 1800 to today



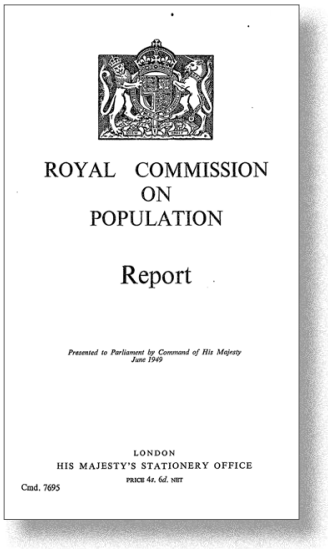
Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects 2024 for data after 1952; Gapminder prior to 1952; ONS for UK post-1938.

The total fertility rate (TFR) of the early developers already fell below the replacement rate (roughly 2.1 children per woman) in the inter-war years.[1] There were indeed significant concerns in the UK in the 1930s about the low fertility rate. A Population (Statistics) Bill, aiming to collect more detailed demographic data on births and marriages, was only defeated in Parliament in 1937 due to fears about privacy.[2] Despite this setback, mounting anxiety over low fertility prompted the establishment of a Royal Commission in 1944 to investigate further. Its terms of reference tasked it with examining "why the number of births fell short by 20% of the number required to replace the next generation".[3]

The Commission reported in 1949. More than 75 years later, some passages resonate so clearly with the discussion today, that it is worth quoting them in full:

> "There are, however, other unpleasant consequences associated with a declining population. The present age structure and the rise in the expectation of life make a rise in the ratio of dependants to productive workers inevitable. The proportion and number of old people is bound to increase, and the social cost of their maintenance … has almost certainly risen. It is thus desirable that the period of working life should be extended.

These changes in the age structure are certain to make the economic system less flexible. An increase in the proportion of older workers will make it considerably more difficult for the younger generation to gain early promotion, and this, in turn, may lead to pressure for an earlier retiring age, which would not necessarily be in the national interest. The scarcity of labour might make it difficult to man industries which are commonly considered unattractive, and it may be necessary to draw on immigrants for that purpose. The Commission does not, however, consider that a programme of continuous large-scale immigration is practicable."[4]


ROYAL COMMISSION
ON
POPULATION

Report

Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty
June 1949

LONDON
HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
PRICE 4s. 6d. NET

Cmd. 7695

And it is worth remembering that, in the 1930s, only about one-third of British women over the age of 15 worked outside the home, with the majority of these employed in domestic service. Further, many jobs such as those in the civil service or teaching, required women to resign when they got married. So, when we later discuss possible reasons for the fall in fertility, let's not lose sight of the fact that fertility was already low when the labour market was very different.

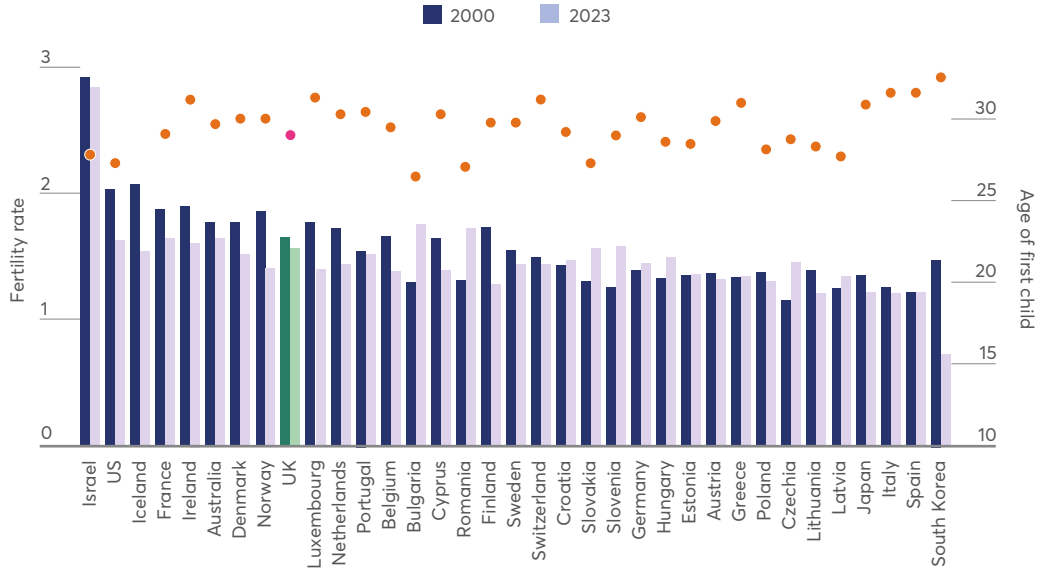
All OECD countries, except Israel, now have fertility rates below the replacement level.

The baby boom of the 1950s and 1960s should be seen as an anomaly, not a return to 'business as usual'. It was unexpected: the Royal Commission stated in 1949 that the post-war rise in births was "unlikely to prove a permanent phenomenon". Similarly, the Pension Commission later described the baby boom as playing "a crucial but transient role" in shaping the UK's old-age dependency ratio.[5]

What is the fertility gap?

Figure 2 shows the most recent fertility rates across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries alongside their levels in 2000. All countries, except Israel, now have fertility rates below the replacement level. Despite vast differences in economic advantages, labour market structures, and welfare systems, the majority of these countries have fertility rates under 1.7. Given these trends, a significant rise in the UK's fertility rate appears unlikely. Even the current Office for National Statistics (ONS) projection of a TFR reaching 1.6 by 2045 seems optimistic.[6]

Figure 2: Fertility rates of OECD countries in 2000 and 2023, and average age of mother on birth of first child in 2023



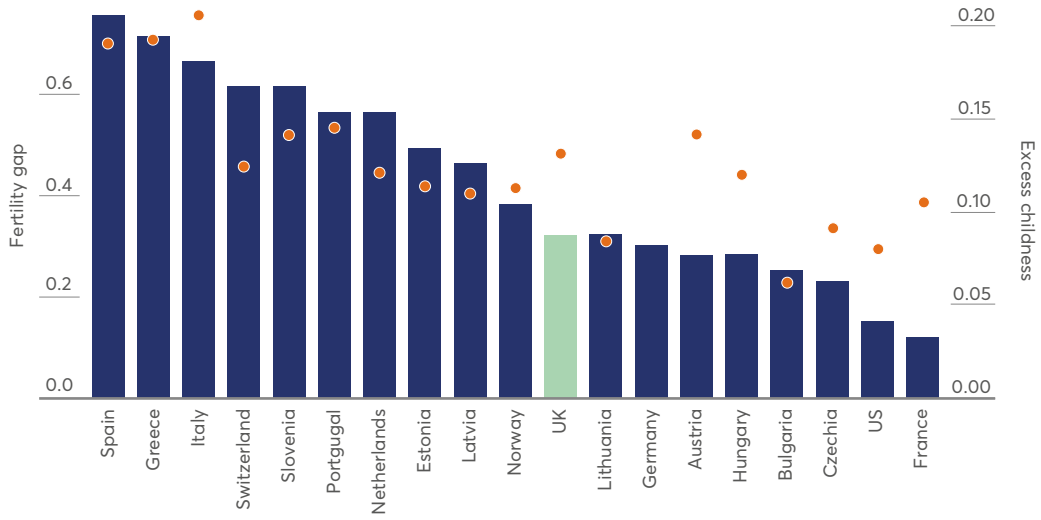
Note: The columns are the TFR rates with respect to left-hand axis, and the circle markers are the age of mother at first child with respect to right-hand axis.
Source: Fertility rates – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects 2024; age of mother – OECD data explorer.

Should we be concerned? The key question is whether women – and men – want to have more children, but are unable to due to various constraints. This concept, known as the 'fertility gap', reflects the difference between the number of children women intend to have when young and the number they actually have later in life. Measuring this gap is challenging.

The most comprehensive cross-country study on the fertility gap, by Beaujouan and Berghammer (2019),[7] compared the fertility intentions of specific cohorts to their achieved fertility by age 45 (roughly 20–25 years later). Across all countries, the mean intended family size ranged from 2 to 2.3, children with minimal variation. Consequently, the fertility gap is largely determined by the difference between 2.0–2.3 and the actual fertility rate achieved over the 23 years, as shown in Figure 2.[8]

Figure 3 highlights these gaps, which are largest in southern Europe, smallest in France and the USA, and more moderate across other European countries, including the UK.

Figure 3: Cross-country fertility gaps and excess childlessness



Note: The fertility gap is a cohort estimate of the difference between the surveyed women's intended family size and achieved fertility. Excess childlessness is the difference between the percentage of surveyed woman wishing to remain child-free and the percentage that are childless by age 45.
Source: Beaujouan and Berghammer (2019).

Berrington and Pattaro (2014), using data from the 1958 National Child Development Survey, estimated a fertility gap of 0.39 for women in the UK.[9] Their analysis revealed that more educated women were less likely to achieve their fertility intentions. This negative educational gradient was linked to the greater tendency of highly educated women to delay childbearing,[10] work full-time in high-earning jobs, and remain unmarried. No similar patterns were observed among men.

Beaujouan and Berghammer (2019) also found a similar negative educational gradient in nearly all European countries. Other studies highlight the critical role of partnership outcomes: women who marry are far more likely to achieve or even exceed their fertility intentions. Globally, 85% of children are born to married women, but this figure drops to 60% across OECD countries (2020) and just 50% in the UK.

Figure 3 further shows Beaujouan and Berghammer's (2019) cohort estimates of excess childlessness – the difference between the percentage of women childless at age 45 and those who intended to remain child-free. While a growing number of individuals are choosing to be child-free, the proportion remains small (less than 10%).[11] Among women, unintended childlessness is notably higher among those with higher education, driven by the same factors as discussed earlier. For men, the pattern reverses: unintended childlessness is more common among those with lower levels of education.[12]

Overall, there is good evidence that younger cohorts today would prefer to have more children, but many of those

who would choose to have children remain childless. No single cause dominates; rather, it is a combination of factors – careers, partnerships, economic costs, and broader uncertainties – that together shape these outcomes.

Would pro-natal policies work?

Many countries have attempted to boost fertility rates through various pro-natal policies. Motivations for these policies are diverse, ranging from alleviating the fiscal pressures of an ageing population and addressing workforce shortages to preserving cultural identity and strengthening military capacity. However, the scale of the fertility shift required to meaningfully address these issues renders this approach impractical. What should be the primary concern for any government is ensuring the wellbeing of its current citizens – its settled population?

Despite significant resources spent on pro-natal policies, their impact has been largely ineffective. According to the United Nations (UN), 28% of countries have adopted some form of pro-natalist policy. This lack of success is unsurprising, given that declining fertility is a near-global trend, driven by powerful economic and cultural forces unlikely to be reversed by relatively modest interventions.[13]

Countries such as Sweden and Norway, which offer the most generous parental leave and heavily subsidised childcare, still have fertility rates lower than the UK. Hungary, a notable case, spends nearly 5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on pro-natal policies, including lifetime personal income tax exemptions for women with four or more children, and substantial housing, childcare, and financial assistance for smaller families. Yet Hungary's fertility rate remains below that of the UK.

In the UK, the high cost of living – particularly for childcare and housing – is often cited as a deterrent to having more children. Labour market uncertainty and concerns about climate change are also frequently mentioned as contributing factors to declining fertility.

These concerns are real and undeniably make life challenging for young families. Supporting these families through targeted policies could easily be justified as addressing genuine societal needs. However, it would be overly optimistic to assume that such measures would also produce a significant and sustained increase in fertility rates.

An ageing population – the implications

Britain's rising old-age dependency ratio (OADR) is the result of both declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. The Pension Commission (2004) estimated that approximately two-thirds of this rise is due to falling fertility and one-third to longer lifespans. While greater longevity is to be celebrated, it inevitably places additional strain on the welfare state, particularly on pensions and healthcare expenditures. In response to the Pension Commission's recommendations, the Pension Acts of 2007, 2011, and 2014 raised the state pension age (SPA) to 66 by 2020, with further increases scheduled to 67 by 2028 and 68 by 2046.[14]

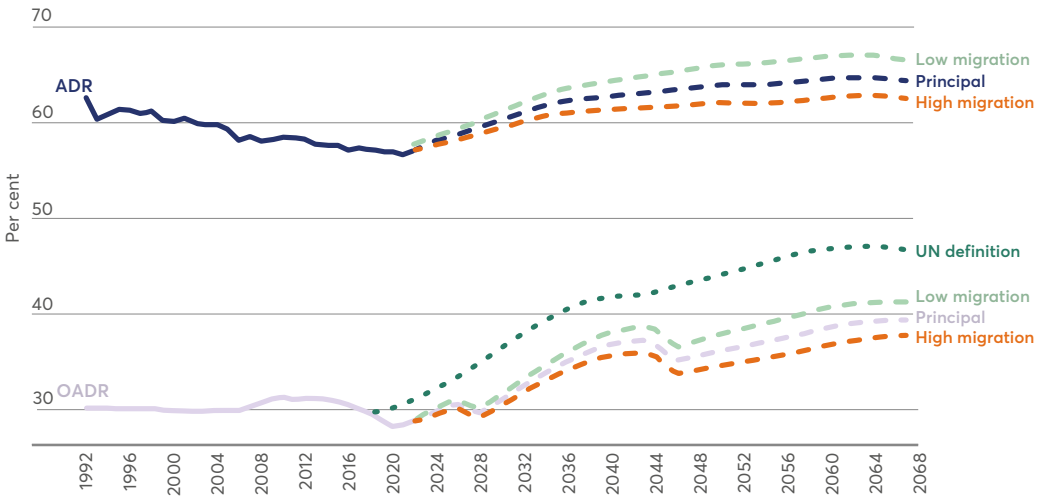
Figure 4 illustrates the OADR using two measures: the ONS metric, which compares the population over SPA to those aged 16 to SPA, and the UN definition, which effectively assumes that the SPA remains at 65.[15]

Raising the SPA has gone a long way to stabilising this dependency ratio, reducing it by 8 points from 44% to 36% in 2050. This impact far outweighs that of a policy introducing 100,000 additional migrants per year from 2025, which would only reduce the OADR by 1.5 points. Further, higher immigration, unless it is persistently at this level, only delays the transition and requires public expenditure on services to meet the expanding demand from the increased population.[16]

However, what ultimately matters for fiscal pressures is the proportion of the population that is active in the labour market relative to those who are inactive. In 2019, the ONS/ Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) published projections

of the activity dependency ratio (ADR), which measures the ratio of the labour market inactive population (aged 16 and above) to the active population. The projections assume that the trend of rising labour market participation among older age groups (55–70) will continue, albeit at a slower rate than in the previous decade. Under this assumption, the ADR increases far less dramatically than the OADR, offering a more optimistic outlook for the government's fiscal sustainability. The OBR (2023, section 2.56) estimates that an increase in labour participation rates of 1.2% (the increase roughly implied by these projections) would reduce borrowing by £18.7 billion per year from 2028.

Figure 4: The old-age dependency ratio and the activity dependency ratio



Note: The OADR is the lower set of lines. 'Principal' is the ONS central estimate of OADR defined as the ratio of population over the SPA relative to population aged 16 to the SPA. 'Low' and 'High Migration' are the OADR under alternative scenarios when migration is 100,000 per year lower or higher than their principal assumption of 190,000 per year. The UN Definition is the OADR if the SPA had remained at 65. The ADR is the higher set of lines. The ADR is the ratio of those economically active over the age of 16 to those inactive. Again 'Principal' is the central estimate and the 'Low' and 'High Migration' variants assume 100,000 less or more migrants per year respectively.
Source: ONS (2019) and ONS (2024).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of individuals across all age groups claiming incapacity benefits, raising concerns about a persistent loss of economic activity. However, by the end of 2024, activity levels among those aged 65 and older had risen well above pre-pandemic levels, while participation among those aged 50–65 had returned to pre-COVID norms. In contrast, younger generations have yet to fully recover their pre-pandemic activity levels. In the long term, however, it is the participation of older age groups that will play a crucial role in reducing dependency ratios.[17]

The OADR paints an overly pessimistic picture of the challenges posed by an ageing population. Continued growth in labour market participation among older generations could significantly alleviate the fiscal pressures on the welfare state. Supporting this positive trend toward longer working lives is a far more achievable goal than attempting to reverse the entrenched trend of declining fertility rates or encouraging higher levels of immigration.

Conclusion

The decline in the UK's TFR is part of a worldwide trend that has persisted for over a century. In this context, the post-1945 baby boom should be seen as a temporary stalling of this long-term historical trend. Implementing demographic policies to either reverse or offset this trend – such as increasing immigration levels – seems unlikely to provide a satisfactory long-term solution,

not least because today's young people are tomorrow's elderly. In this way, such policies would not only postpone addressing the challenge but also amplify its eventual impact.

Pro-natal policies – even when carefully targeted – seem unlikely to significantly reverse the underlying decline in TFR. The most pragmatic response to the demographic challenges posed by an ageing population is to reinforce the existing trend of older workers retiring later. Greater participation among older age groups is likely to have substantial benefits – fiscally for the nation as a whole, and in terms of improved mental and physical wellbeing, as well as increased wealth for those involved.

This underscores the need for a strategic, holistic approach in which all trade-offs spanning various government departments can be assessed in a transparent, evidence-based manner.

References

Aksoy, C.G. (2016) *Short-term effects of house prices on birth rates*, EBRD, Working Paper No. 192.

Beaujouan, E. & Berghammer, C. (2019) 'The gap between lifetime fertility intentions and completed fertility in Europe and the United States: A cohort approach'. *Population Research and Policy Review*. 38 507–535.

Berrington, A. and Pattaro, S. (2014) Educational differences in fertility desires, intentions and behaviour: A life course perspective. *Advances in Life Course Research*. 21 10–27.

Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) (2023) *Fiscal risks and sustainability report*, September 2024, CP 970, HMSO.

Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) (2024) *Fiscal risks and sustainability report*, September 2024, CP 1142, HMSO.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2019) Living longer and old-age dependency – what does the future hold? https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/livinglongerandoldagedependencywhatdoesthefuturehold/2019-06-24#an-alternative-to-the-old-age-dependency-ratio-.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2024) A05 SA: Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity by age group (seasonally adjusted). https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/employmentunemploymentandeconomicinactivitybyagegroupseasonallyadjusteda05sa

Pensions Commission. (2004) *Pensions: Challenges and choices: The first report of the Pensions Commission*. The Stationery Office.

Pensions Commission. (2005). *A new pension settlement for the twenty-first century: The second report of the Pensions Commission*. The Stationery Office.

Royal Commission on Population (1944), *Nature,* Vol 153, pp 387-389.

The Royal Commission on Population (1949). 'The Report of the Royal Commission on Population', (HMSO). *Nature,* Vol 164, pp. 298–302.

Sardon, J. (1991) Generation replacement in Europe since 1900. *Population an English Selection*. 15–32.

Skirbekk, V. (2022) *Decline and prosper! Changing global birth rates and the advantages of fewer children*. Palgrave Macmillan, Springer.

Notes

1 Sardon (1991) found 11–15 European countries (with data) were not replacing their populations in the inter-war years; that is, their net replacement rate (NRR) was below 1. France had not been replacing its population as early as 1890. The NRR is the average number of surviving daughters per woman, taking into account both prevailing fertility and mortality rates.

2 There were fears that such data gathering on fertility would infringe on civil liberties.

3 Royal Commission on Population (1944).

4 The Report of the Royal Commission on Population (1949).

5 Pension Commission (2004), Appendix E, p 128.

6 The official long-run projection for the TFR has fallen steadily every revision since 2014 from 1.89 to the current 1.59. John Burn-Murdoch, 'Data Points', Financial Times, 25 October 2024 argues that demographers world-wide have consistently under-estimated future declines in the TFR.

7 Beaujouan, E. & Berghammer, C. (2019) 'The gap between lifetime fertility intentions and completed fertility in Europe and the United States: A cohort approach'. *Population Research and Policy Review*. 38 507–535

8 There are differences, as this study uses cohort fertility rates and measures achieved fertility in the 2010s rather those reported in Figure 2, which are for 2023.

9 Berrington, A. and Pattaro, S. (2014) Educational differences in fertility desires, intentions and behaviour: A life course perspective. *Advances in Life Course Research*. 21 10–27

10 See Figure 2.

11 Skirbekk (2022, chapter 7).

12 Men in the UK without a degree are less likely to marry, participate in the labour market or have children than their female peers. The lack of discussion of this issue must not be understood as a diminution of its importance; simply that it deserves its own dedicated discussion.

13 The policies explored typically include generous parental leave, child or family allowances, tax credits, subsidised childcare, flexible working arrangements, and baby bonuses. See Skirbekk (2022) chapter 19 for more details.

14 Current legislation stipulates that the SPA will rise to 68 by 2046, though this is currently under review and may change.

15 The UN definition of the dependency ratio is those aged over 65 to those aged 20–64. Rather than using this definition, the ratio here is relative to those aged 16–64 to ensure comparability with the ONS figures.

16 OBR (2024, section 4.32) estimates an additional £20,000 capital expenditure per additional person, though does later qualify this figure as an upper estimate.

17 There have been some question of the reliability of these numbers due to the low response rate in the Labour Force Survey. As John Burn-Murdoch says in the Financial Times on 6 December 2025, 'What if the UK isn't actually the sick man of Europe'. The illness-related inactivity crisis in the UK can be partly explained by incentives within the benefit system.

I. Limits to power – How much can immigration policymakers influence demographic change?

Dr Madeleine Sumption MBE

Madeleine Sumption is the Director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, which provides impartial analysis of migration in the UK. Her research focuses on the design and impacts of immigration policies in the UK. It has covered immigration policy and labour market shortages, the social and economic impacts of policies towards work, family and humanitarian migration, and migrants' integration. Madeleine has a PhD in Public Policy from Maastricht University. In 2017, Madeleine received an MBE for services to social science.

Trade-offs are inevitable

People with different political and social perspectives have very different views on the benefits or costs of population growth. Some welcome it: for example, in Canada – which has much lower population density than the UK – the Century Initiative advocacy group argues that the country should more than double its population to 100 million by the end of the century, claiming this would boost the country's influence on the 'world stage'.[1]

Under certain circumstances, population growth can have economic benefits. For example, it can help ease the burden of paying off existing public debt.[2] However, population growth also brings costs. In the UK, for example, housebuilding does not keep pace with population growth, which has thus contributed to upward pressure on the cost of housing. A growing population also requires more investment in infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals in order to maintain the same standard of living. In practice, the UK has not always been very good at building this infrastructure.[3] Population growth will also have harder-to-measure social impacts, for example, related to how we use the land and built environment. However, in this essay, I focus on economics.

Anyone with a view – positive or negative – on population growth will struggle to discuss it without focusing on international migration. That is because net migration has become the main driver of UK population growth over the past 20 years. In fact, in the coming decades, net migration will be the exclusive source of population growth, according to official projections, as deaths start to exceed births on a regular basis.[4] In this piece, I do not take a view on what level of population growth is desirable for the UK, though this is an issue that undoubtedly requires public debate. Instead, I look at how migration policy affects net migration – and thus population growth – and what trade-offs policymakers face when taking decisions in this field.

What is net migration?

Net migration is immigration minus emigration. It tells us how much international migration adds to the UK population. Net migration is a limited measure. It does not reflect migration's full impacts on public finances, productivity, public services, the environment, or local communities. Indeed, many of the economic impacts of migration depend

For communities to take root and thrive, there needs to be an appropriate level of shops, bars, cafes, GPs' surgeries and other places where people can meet.

more on who is migrating rather than how many.[5] Nevertheless, when we examine population growth, net migration is the right measure to use.

Before discussing policy options, we should explain two analytical traps to be avoided in discussions about net migration. First, the immigration rules can only determine the level of net migration indirectly. More liberal rules will undoubtedly lead to higher net migration, but policymakers cannot make a legislative or regulatory decision about the level of **net migration**. This is because, even if there were hard caps on all immigration categories, the government does not, and never will, control the many forms of **emigration**.

Instead, policymakers take many little decisions, for example, about different kinds of work visas, as well as family, study and humanitarian migration. These decisions add up to shape total net migration. As a result, there is little point in talking about desirable levels of net migration without a realistic understanding of the specific policy decisions that would get us there. The temptation to do this appears to be one of the main reasons rhetoric and reality about net migration have parted ways over the past decade or so.

Second, in the medium term, immigration and emigration levels are closely linked to each other. Most emigration from the UK involves non-citizens who entered in the past five years or so. In migration categories where many people come to the UK temporarily, such as work and study, higher immigration will thus mean higher emigration down the line, and vice versa. Last year's immigrants are next year's emigrants. It is thus not possible to make calculations about future net migration levels by thinking about immigration only and assuming that emigration will remain the same.

So, in the long run, net migration will depend on absolute immigration levels as well as the share of migrants who choose to remain in the country permanently. What determines how many migrants remain long term? Unlike entry visas, the government does not set emigration policies directly. However, policymakers can specify how long migrants are allowed to stay, and whether they get a permanent immigration status. For example, Youth Mobility Scheme visas last for two years and cannot be renewed. This should

generate a high emigration rate and thus a small impact on net migration in the long term, although that impact will not be zero. Some people who hold Youth Mobility Scheme visas may then apply for other visas such as long-term work or family visas. The government cannot predict this share precisely in advance, although when policy remains stable for a reasonable period of time, it can look at previous data to get a good idea of how many people will switch to other visas and remain permanently.

What lies ahead?

By way of illustration, Table 1 shows how given levels of immigration might lead to given levels of net migration in the long run. It shows a hypothetical scenario explained in more detail in a Migration Observatory analysis,[6] in which immigration falls following the visa restrictions implemented in early 2024, and migrants in each category remain in the UK at roughly similar rates as they have done in the past. It does not include the further restrictions announced in May 2025, which should push the numbers down slightly, but do not dramatically change the overall picture.

It is not a confident prediction of future net migration. All the assumptions are up for debate. I present the figures here simply in order to illustrate the range of policy decisions that might affect overall net migration – and therefore population growth – in the future.

Table 1: Hypothetical future net migration scenario

Category	Long-run immigration	Stay rate	Long-run net migration	Non-British net migration
Work visas	245,000	56%	137,200	38%
Study visas	250,000	26%	65,000	18%
Family visas	80,000	80%	64,000	18%
Asylum	75,000	90%	67,500	19%
Hong Kong British National Overseas visa	20,000	90%	18,000	5%
Other visas	20,000	31%	6,200	2%
Resettlement refugees	4,000	100%	4,000	1%
British net emigration			-30,000 to -80,000	

Source: Adapted from Hall, T., Manning, A., and Sumption, M. (2024) *Why are the latest net migration figures not a reliable guide to future trends?* Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford.

In this scenario, net migration settles at roughly 300,000 in the long run. This is close to the figure used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in their latest demographic projection, which is based on the assumption that migration will continue at roughly the average level the UK has seen over the 10-year period ending in mid-2023. In other words, ONS also projects that net migration will continue to fall from the most recent figure of 430,000 in 2024 – and down from the unusually high level of more than 700,000 per year in 2022 and 2023. ONS forecasts that international migration will add around about 10% (6.6 million) to the UK population over the period to 2035, and around 20% over the next 50 years.

The largest contributor to net migration in the hypothetical scenario in Table 1 is work visas. In fact, the contribution of work visa policy is larger than the table implies at first glance. This is because most of the contribution of international students to long-term net migration relies on work visa policy. Study visas do not lead to settlement in their own right, but students

can switch to other visas, and when they do so it is usually for work. In the past, a small share of students (typically around 10%–15%) remained in the UK long term.[7] Even if only a small share of students remain permanently, this can have a meaningful impact on net migration because the number of students initially coming to the UK is significant. However, students in the post-Brexit immigration system also became much more likely to switch to long-term visas that provide a route to settlement.[8] One analysis suggests that as many as 40% of the 2022–2023 student cohorts might remain in the UK permanently, although this pre-dated the restriction on international students' family members, which might reduce the rate at which students settle in the UK.[9]

Students in the post-Brexit immigration system also became much more likely to switch to long-term visas that provide a route to settlement.

Family visas and asylum also contribute meaningful shares to net migration. This is not because they make up a high share of immigration, but because a high proportion tend to remain in the UK permanently.

Note that these figures exclude unauthorised migration among people who do not apply for asylum – whether this involves people arriving without permission or overstaying their visas. There are no reliable estimates of the total number of people living in the UK illegally, or how this has changed over time. The most credible (though still shaky) estimates are for the late 2010s and put the figure in the high hundreds of thousands.[10] The lack of data makes it rather difficult to say anything more about how much unauthorised migration affects demographic change, or where policymakers concerned about this phenomenon should focus their attention.

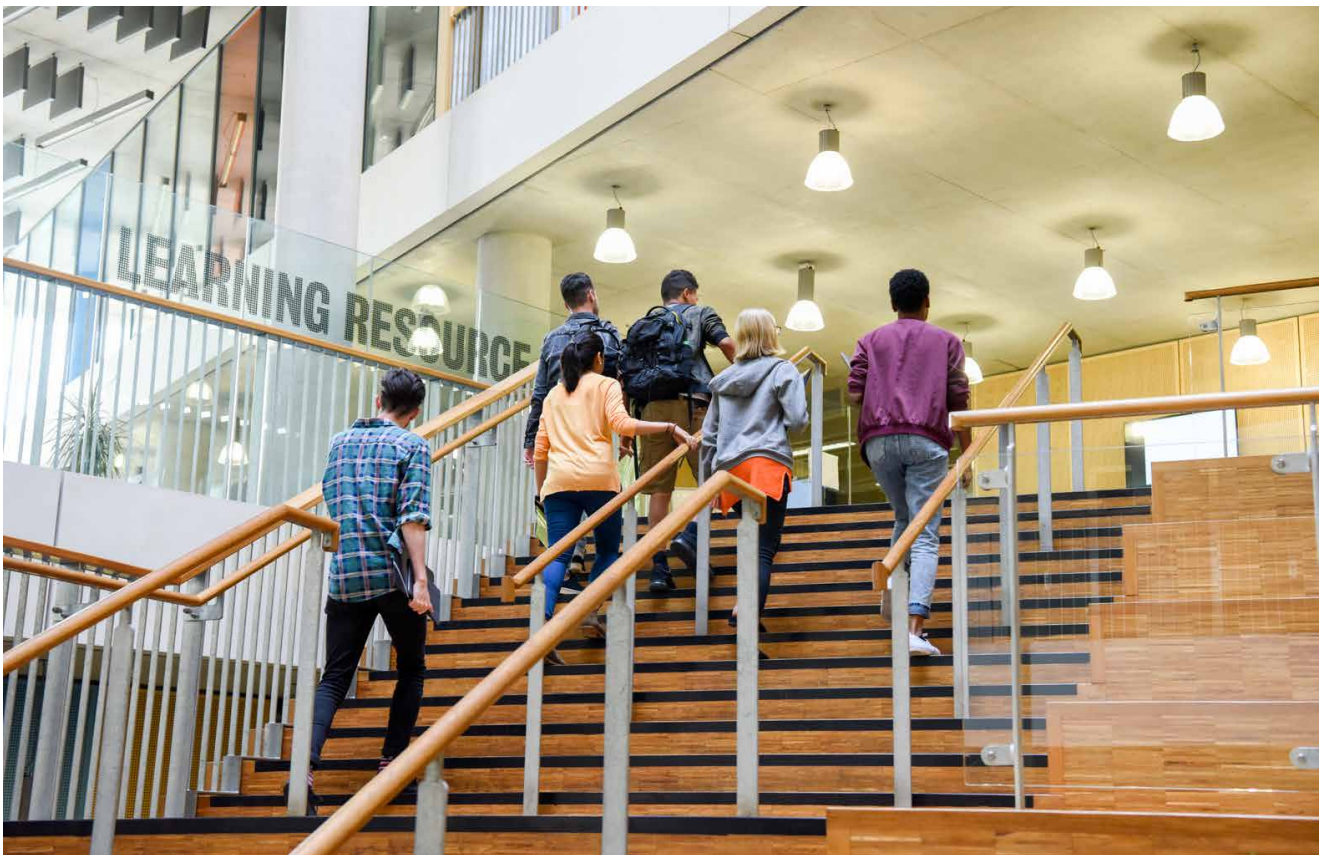
How governments affect population growth

If policymakers want to reduce migration in order to mitigate the pressures on the housing market or infrastructure (which is, realistically, where migration is most likely to have economic costs), in theory, they will want to target restrictions at types of migration that bring the smallest benefits. In practice, deciding which economic, social or political benefits matter the most is a difficult exercise requiring political judgement and not simply technocratic expertise.

Work visas

The main category of work visa that contributes to long-term population growth is the Skilled Worker route, which includes the Health and Care Worker visa. The Conservative Government made substantial changes to the Skilled Worker category in early 2024, including significantly higher salary thresholds in the private sector and a ban on the dependants of care workers. The new government has said that it will maintain these restrictions and has proposed further cuts. These include ending direct overseas recruitment into the care sector and making work visas in middle-skilled jobs temporary.

At the time of writing, it was still too early to assess the impacts of recent and proposed changes. However, we can make two broad observations. First, the salary requirement of at least £37,800 in private sector jobs appears to have had the largest impact on visas granted in lower-paid skilled jobs – the jobs where there is more likely to be a negative fiscal impact. As a result, most Skilled Worker visa holders in the private sector who remain eligible will now be making net contributions to public finances because of their relatively high salaries – though the precise size of the contribution will depend on factors such as whether they bring family members with them. The tax they pay will not always make it to the right places at the right times: there may be pressures on infrastructure or public services in the



Post-Brexit, an increasing number of students switched to long-term visas.

short run before funding adjusts (or indeed in the long run if policymakers choose to spend the money on something else). Nonetheless, substantial further restrictions on higher-paid migrants would thus come with a trade-off – that is, a negative fiscal impact.

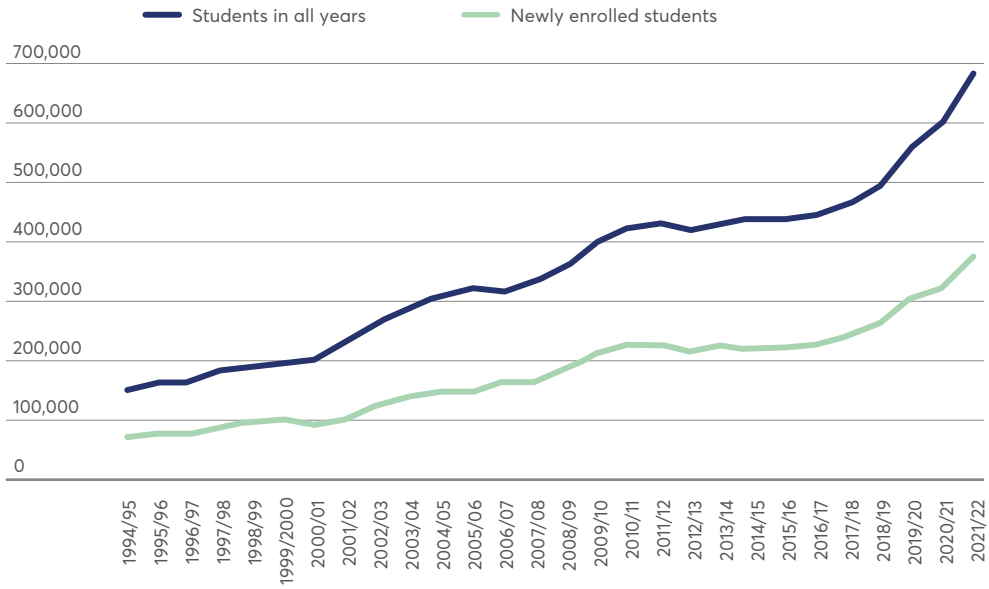
Second, the main group of long-term work visas where workers are not highly paid is Health and Care, and particularly the care sector. Here, the trade-off is different. The decision to restrict Health and Care Worker visas does not have a significant direct economic cost. There may be a social cost (such as more limited availability of care),[11] so the question is now whether the government is willing to increase funding for care enough to mitigate the impacts of closing the route by supporting more attractive pay and conditions for workers in the sector.

A third option for reducing work visas' contribution to net migration is to make more of them temporary. The current government has indicated it will do this for middle-skilled roles. There is now relatively convincing evidence that temporary migration has a more positive net fiscal impact than permanent migration, including because temporary migrants are, on average, younger.[12] (In practice, temporary migration sometimes leads to longer-term stays, because people may be able to switch to other immigration routes. Nonetheless, stay rates are considerably lower on strictly temporary routes.) A temporary migration strategy also comes with trade-offs, most notably the potential for negative social impacts resulting from preventing integration.

Study visas

The main economic impact of international Student visas is to help fund the UK's higher education system. This is because international students pay higher tuition fees that cross-subsidise domestic undergraduate students and research. Decisions that affect the number of students coming to the UK thus heavily affect the UK's overall strategy for higher education funding.

Figure 1: Number and share of international students in UK higher education (non-UK domiciled students, 1994/95 to 2021/22 academic years)



Note: These counts comprise part-time and full-time undergraduates and postgraduates. Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Counts for 2015/16 and after are more comprehensive than previous counts so are not strictly comparable.
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HESA data. For 1995/95 to 2015/16: Students in Higher Education. For 2016/17 to 2021/22: Higher Education Student Data: Where do HE students come from?

In the past, the large majority of international students came to the UK on short-term visas and were expected to leave within a few years, making limited contributions to population growth in the long term. This trend changed post-Brexit, not just because of the post-study Graduate work visa, which allows people to remain in the UK to work for two to three years, but – arguably more significantly – due to the care visa route.[13] The early 2024 policy changes and the proposed closure of the care route by 2028 may reverse that trend to some extent. In particular, the ban on most students' partners and children may reduce the student stay rate because people without family members are less likely to stay permanently. Higher salary thresholds for work visas in the private sector may also make it harder for graduating students to find long-term work visa sponsors.

If policymakers want to reduce students' contribution to net migration, they have two main options. First, they can restrict the number of students – for example, by rationing the number of sponsorship certificates universities can issue. Second, they can make it harder to remain in the UK to work after studying. The two main ways to do this would be restricting the graduate route, or restricting transitions to long-term work visas. Even though the graduate route is strictly temporary, it gives students more time to find employers to sponsor them for work visas and thus will have some impact on net migration in the medium term. However, restricting transitions to long-term visas – which allow former students to remain permanently – would probably have a larger impact on net migration than removing the graduate route.

Restricting either student numbers or the graduate route would come at the cost of reducing revenue from international student fees, which subsidise the higher education system. This impact would fall unevenly on different institutions.

Family visas

Family migration primarily involves the partners of British citizens or people with permanent status in the UK. On one hand, family migration is less economically

beneficial than work and study migration. For example, people coming for family reasons have lower employment rates than people coming for work and study,[14] presenting a net cost to public finances.[15] On the other hand, the underlying purpose of family visas is not economic but humanitarian. Restrictions on partner migration can have a large negative impact on the families themselves – British citizens unable to live in the UK with their partners.

Asylum and humanitarian routes

Traditionally, the large majority of refugees have come through the asylum system. The UK cannot control the number of people who apply for asylum. Like many other countries, successive governments have tried to prevent people from reaching the UK to claim asylum (e.g. through visa restrictions) and to deter them from choosing the UK over other destinations. International evidence suggests that such measures have highly variable impacts, and that they are often smaller than policymakers might hope.

By contrast, the UK Government decides how many refugees to resettle directly from overseas (e.g. through cooperation with the United Nations). In the past, these numbers were usually small. However, much larger numbers have come through country-specific humanitarian routes, established in response to specific crises, notably for Ukrainians and Hong Kong nationals. In the 2024, the Ukraine and Hong Kong British National Overseas visa programmes together contributed 42,000 to net migration.

Conclusion

Successive governments have promised lower levels of net migration but have not delivered it. This essay has illustrated some of the reasons that might be the case.

First, some categories are more amenable to policy than others. For example, migration through the asylum system might well be the category policymakers would most like to reduce, but the prospects for doing so are uncertain.

Second, policymakers face many trade-offs. On one hand, many members of the public welcome the idea of lower net migration, which would reduce the pace of social change.[16] Lower migration would also reduce pressure in the housing market, since homebuilding has routinely failed to keep up with population growth. On the other hand, the concrete strategies that would be needed to reduce net migration have costs, either social or economic. For example, work and study visas are effectively providing a subsidy to largely publicly funded sectors, namely care and higher education.

Making some forms of migration more temporary might bring benefits to public finances but would also increase churn in communities, bringing social costs. Partner visas bring substantial benefits to British citizens who have partners overseas. The Ukraine and Hong Kong visa routes have foreign-policy implications. Balancing these trade-offs is an inherently political task, and reasonable people will disagree about how to do it.

Finally, the UK often lacks the data to measure the trade-offs that policymakers must resolve. Data on net migration appear to be improving, following a rocky period as the ONS moved to new sources of data. Administrative data on migrants' journeys through the visa system are much better than they were in the past. However, some data sources have deteriorated – most notably the Annual Population Survey, which was once the main source of high-quality data on migrants and their economic impacts. In theory, administrative datasets that link immigration, tax and health records can give us a much better picture of how different types of immigration affect the UK. They are being developed as we speak, although progress has been very slow. But if policymakers are to have any hope of informed decisions to balance the trade-offs they face, these new datasets will be essential.

Notes

1 Century Initiative, 'Why 100 million', https://www.centuryinitiative.ca/, accessed 28 October 2024.

2 https://obr.uk/frs/fiscal-risks-and-sustainability-september-2024/

3 Southwood, B., Hughes, S., and Bowman, S. Foundations: Why Britain has Stagnated. https://ukfoundations.co/

4 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2021basedinterim

5 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/net-migration-frequently-asked-questions/

6 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/reports/why-are-the-latest-net-migration-figures-not-a-reliable-guide-to-future-trends/

7 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/

8 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/international-students-entering-the-uk-labour-market/

9 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-advisory-committee-annual-report-2023/migration-advisory-committee-mac-annual-report-2023-accessible

10 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/irregular-migration-in-the-uk/

11 Migration Advisory Committee social care report.

12 Note that the opposite is true of children, who impose a fiscal cost in the short run but grow up to contribute to tax revenues if they remain in the UK long term. As a result, strictly temporary visa routes that allow people to bring children might have a negative fiscal impact overall, depending on how many children use the route in practice. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-in-the-uk/

13 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/international-students-entering-the-uk-labour-market/

14 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an-overview/

15 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-visa-financial-requirements-review

16 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/

5 What are the lessons from overseas?

The UK is far from unique in facing the challenges of population change and strong public reaction to the consequences of these shifts. Are there lessons to be learned from other countries? Obviously an examination of every country's policies is some way beyond the scope of this report, but it was felt that it might be helpful to look in a little more detail at the experience and approach of three countries: the Netherlands, a geographically restricted country facing echoes of its own colonial past as well as its share of the high levels of migration into Continental Europe; Denmark, also facing space/geographical constraints but, as a Scandinavian country, coming from a region that many argue has tackled challenges of population growth more successfully than most; and Japan, facing the opposite challenges of a rapidly declining settled population and an almost complete absence of new arrivals. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the UK and these three countries.

5.1. The Netherlands

Background

The Netherlands was selected as a good comparator with the UK because of its shared culture, space limitations (particularly in comparison with England), colonial inheritance, and membership of the EU, with its associated requirement for free movement of people. As in the UK, there has been considerable public concern about the implications of population growth. The Netherlands is densely populated, with 529 people per square kilometre,[1] nearly five times the EU average. Moreover, given the low-lying level of much of the country, climate change may well reduce the amount of liveable land areas, adding to this pressure.

Table 1: Comparative demographic profile

	UK	Netherlands	Denmark	Japan
Population 1995	58.2 million	15.46 million	5.2 million	125.1 million
Population 2023	67.6 million	17.6 million	5.9 million	125.8 million
Percentage increase in population from 1995 to 2023	16.2%	13.8%	13.4%	0.6%
Population per sq km 2022	278	529	138	324
Area (sq km)	243,610	41,543	43,098	377,975
TFR (total fertility rate)	1.75	1.62	1.72	1.30
Life expectancy	81.77	87.78	81.40	81.09
Population increase (2023)	1%	1%	0.77%	-0.48%
Refugees (2023)	38,761	27,140	1,485	303

Source: ONS.

Global warming has given increased urgency about demographic change to low-lying countries like the Netherlands.

How has The Netherlands's population changed in recent years?

Since 2010, the impact of migration on population growth in The Netherlands has been greater than that from the natural increase. At the same time, surveys on intended birthrates versus realised birthrates revealed a significant 'fertility gap' – the number of babies women say they would like to have compared with how many they actually have.

The total fertility rate (TFR) for The Netherlands was 3.12 in 1960; by 1979, it had fallen to 1.59. It has been broadly stable since, standing at 1.62 in 2021. Life expectancy in the Netherlands was 73.39 years in 1960, increased to 76.88 years by 1990 and, by 2021, had risen further to 81.46 years.[2] As in the UK, increased life expectancy and the resulting ageing population is having a significant impact on The The Netherlands demography. Combined with increased numbers of new arrivals in the country, this is putting pressure on The Netherlands' infrastructure and economy.

Membership of the EU

A critical difference to the UK is that The Netherlands remains a member of the EU, so people from all other member states are entitled to work and live in The Netherlands if they wish. Most migrants to the Netherlands are from other EU states, whereas in the UK, most new arrivals are from outside of the EU. This is significant, as many EU migrants are expected in due course to return to their country of origin or move to other EU nations for work. Of the 1.6 million migrants from within the EU or the European Free Trade Association (without Dutch nationality) who have arrived in the Netherlands since 1999, 944,000 had left again by 31 December 2022. By contrast, far fewer migrants to the UK are expected to return to their country of origin later in life. This points to greater long-term permanent population growth in the UK than in the Netherlands.

Responding to the demographic challenge

The response from the Dutch Government Commission to public concern was to use powers under the constitution to set up the State Commission on Demographic Developments 2050. The Commission was set up by the Dutch Cabinet in 2022 to produce policy advice for current

and future governments as ageing and immigration bring change to the make-up of the population.

The Commission is independent of the government and, to emphasise, this is not attached to any single government department. The Commission spent 18 months gathering evidence from experts across the political, geographic and social spectrum. It then made a series of evidence-based recommendations in areas such as the labour market, housing, education, the environment and social cohesion.

The State Commission noted that, not only the size of the Netherlands population but also its composition, is set to change in the coming decades.

The evidence considered includes historical trends on migration, and the overall population growth of the Netherlands. It also considered how existing government policies on migration, the labour market, and the economy would impact the general level of wellbeing in the Netherlands.

The State Commission was supported by the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), a research institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences affiliated with the University of Groningen. Studies conducted by NIDI found that (as in the UK) most people were worried about population growth and the impact this would have on the country. Also, as with the UK, polling suggested that policymakers have been out of step with public opinion on this issue in recent years. So, an important purpose of the Commission was to ensure that their evidence-based recommendations to the government, fully and directly aired and addressed the concerns of the people of The Netherlands.

The Commission has completed its first report to the House of Representatives and is now working on a second report on the demographic development of the Caribbean Netherlands. State Commissions in the Netherlands are temporary organisations, and no decision has been made about the future of this State Commission once its work on the Caribbean Netherlands is completed.

The State Commission recommendation

The recommendation of the State Commission was for the Netherlands to plan for moderate population growth by 2050.[3] The population of the Netherlands is currently 17.7 million and is projected to increase to 23 million by 2020. The State Commission has recommended that the Netherlands population should not grow higher than 20 million people by 2050 – an increase of about 10%, much in line with the current Office for National Statistics (ONS) projection of the likely increase of the UK population over the same period.

Possible lessons for the UK

The Netherlands State Commission does not make specific policy recommendations to the government. The conclusions of its report are strategic and are based on evidence about different policy areas and submissions from members of the public. Accordingly, the Commission looked at the broader implications of population growth in areas such as the housing and the employment market as well as on implications for Dutch society.

The Commission noted that, not only the size of the Netherlands population but also its composition, is set to change in the coming decades. On the one hand, cultural diversity is increasing which, in parallel with the ageing of the population – expected to peak in the next 10–15 years – will result in a permanently 'older' society by 2050. It considered the multiple impacts of this permanent demographic shift and made some suggestions as to how the Netherlands should adapt to meet it.

In particular, the Commission noted how the impact of migration and population ageing were markedly different across the individual regions of the Netherlands. Further, it noted that the differences in wellbeing between generations – both as a result of levels of education and between native Dutch and recent arrivals – are forecast to increase. It acknowledged that it has implications for the country's social cohesion.

All the above challenges resonate in a UK context, and the idea of a State Commission – whether temporary or permanent – as a way to address them, may be a useful template for the UK to consider.

5.2. Denmark

Background

The Scandinavian nations are popularly supposed to have a very relaxed attitude to the demographic challenges resulting from immigration. However, over the last 25 years, Denmark has responded forcefully to these challenges, specifically by agreeing the need for a sustainable immigration policy.

How has Denmark's population changed in recent years?

The population today of Denmark is 5.9 million,[4] with the population expected to grow by 100,000 by 2026 – a 1.7% increase compared to the 2.8% increase expected over the same period in the UK.

Denmark's TFR was 2.57 in 1960, declining to 1.60 by 1979; it increased during the following two decades, and has since remained broadly stable at the 1.72 recorded in the 2021 census.[5] Life expectancy has increased steadily in Denmark over the last 60 years, from average life expectancy of 72.16 in 1960, rising to 74.81 by 1990, and reaching 81.40 by 2021.[6]

Before the 1960s, Denmark's migrant numbers were minimal. However, in the 1960s, Turkish migrants began arriving, followed by migrants from other parts of the world. By the 1990s, there was a growing concern among the settled population about the impact this was having. The number of new arrivals rose from 100,000 per annum in 1965 to 300,000 per annum by 1995.

An important cause of this increase was the Danish Government's decision in 1983 to relax immigration laws and specifically give asylum seekers and refugees greater rights. As a result, by the 1990s, refugees made up the bulk of the inflow of immigrants.

Membership of EU

Denmark is also a member of the EU which brings with it free movement of labour. Like The Netherlands, the bulk of arrivals are from within the EU. For those outside, the country has taken a tougher line on the need to integrate, as seen below.

Responding to the demographic challenge

By the 1990s, levels and consequences of immigration had become a sensitive subject in Danish politics. In the 2001 elections, the Danish People's Party significantly increased its share of the vote to 12%, picking up 22 parliamentary seats, mainly due to its policy of advocating cutting immigration numbers. The response from the mainstream political parties was to implement stricter immigration rules, which remain in force today.

The Danish People's Party stood on an immigration platform that was not unlike that of populist parties today – which are seen growing in support throughout Europe – including the Reform UK party. In this sense, Denmark was ahead of the curve and so provides a valuable case study of one way of responding to public concern about population growth.

Mattias Tesfaye, Danish Minister for Children and Education.

Since that 2001 election, a consensus has existed in Danish politics regarding immigration. There is a cross-party agreement on limits to immigration numbers, including restrictions on migrants bringing partners or dependents. The government also sets strict limits on the number of refugees allowed into Denmark. As a result of these policy changes, the number of family reunification permits granted fell from 13,000[7] in 2001 to only 3,400 in 2022.

With effect from 2017, the Danish Parliament approves annual funding for a resettlement quota as part of its yearly budget. Currently, the allocation provides up to 500 resettlement places for refugees per year. In extraordinary circumstances, the minister in charge of immigration has the power to allow the number of people resettled to Denmark to exceed 500. This power was used as part of a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Emphasis on integration

Denmark places considerable importance on new arrivals taking active steps to integrate into Danish society. To secure residency, the government requires migrants to demonstrate that they are fluent in Danish, and new arrivals are expected to undertake training and testing to prove they have met this language requirement. The government also requires new arrivals to find work and meet other visa conditions. Compliance with these conditions includes knowledge of Danish culture, as well as language, through attending courses. Work visa requirements, and monitoring whether individuals are actually employed, are rigorously enforced.

In 2021, Social Democratic Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen made migration policy even stricter. The focus has shifted from integration to returning to countries of origin. In 2021,

the Danish Government revoked the residency permits for more than 200 Syrian refugees and deported them to Syria.

The then Minister for Immigration and Integration, Mattias Tesfaye, himself the son of an Ethiopian refugee, said the following:

> "If you look at the historical background, it is completely normal that left-wing politicians like me are not against migration but want it to be under control. If it isn't – and it has not been since the 1980s – low-income and low-educated people pay the highest price for poor integration. It is not the wealthy neighbourhoods that have to integrate most of the children. On the contrary, the areas where the traditional social democratic voters and trade unionists live face the greatest problems."[8]

So, today, most new arrivals are on temporary student visas or employment visas that include strict rules about integration into Danish society.

Possible lessons for the UK

A key feature of Denmark's immigration policy is its use of data and information. For example, the Danish Government has accurate information on where migrants live, where they work, and how much money they earn. Everyone living in Denmark is given a social security number, and the state uses this to monitor what new arrivals to the country are doing. This consistent collection and subsequent use of data helps Denmark control immigration and encourages integration. The policy responses from the mainstream political parties to the rise of populist politics – demonstrated by the subsequent electoral success of the Danish Social Democrats – could offer important lessons to the UK and the rest of Europe.

We held a number of other conversations as part of our research. An important and interesting side-note from these was that, as a consequence of the government's specific requirements imposed as a precondition of remaining in the country, the destination of choice for those who decided to move on was the United Kingdom where is was believed that enforcement levels were much laxer.

5.3. Japan

Background

Japan's population has remained relatively stable over the last 50 years. Unlike the UK, The Netherlands, and Denmark, new arrivals to Japan have remained relatively low, and the laws restricting them have not changed significantly.

How has Japan's population changed in recent years?

Japan has seen a steady fall in the TFR from 4.01 in 1950 to 1.37 in 2022.[9] Over the same period, Japan's life expectancy has risen from 57.6 to 85.15, so that over-65s who made up 7.1% of Japan's population in 1970, today now account for 29.6%.[10]

As a result of its declining TFR since 2010, Japan's population has been in a slow overall decline as the deaths continue to outpace births. This ageing population is now the key demographic driver. The impact of this can been seen most dramatically in the shape of the following 'population trees' – in 1970, 1995 and 2020.[11]

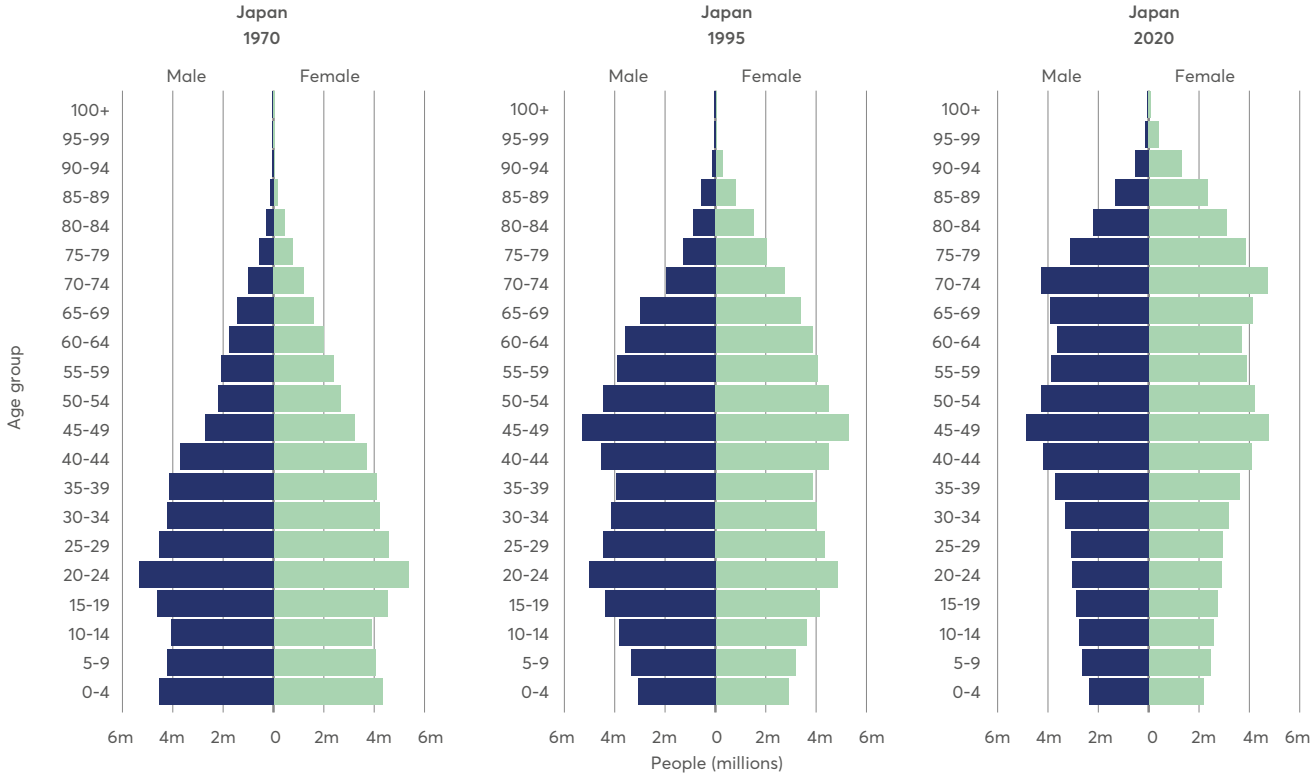
Responding to the demographic challenge

Japan's super ageing population poses various special challenges. Though the Japanese Government increased the civil servant state pension age from 60 to 61 years of age in 2023,[12] the official pension age has been 65 for some years. The financial cost of pensions and social care for older people remains high. One important consequence has been an emphasis on employing older workers. In 2023, some 25% of people aged over 65 in Japan were employed[13] – roughly double the 11.9% of people over 65 employed in the UK.[14] Moreover, 40% of Japanese firms now employ people over the age of 70,[15] and this percentage is steadily rising.

The driver of this shift has not only been government pressure as a means of reducing the fiscal impact, but the dramatic decline in younger workers which has paralleled it. The percentage of those over 65 is expected to rise to 40% by 2050.[16] Over the same period, it has been projected that about 40% of municipalities, including cities and towns, will lose half of their population of younger women.[17] In Tokyo, the TFR has now dropped below 1.0, so that the fall in population is gathering pace.

In terms of legal protections for older workers, Japan passed legislation prohibiting age discrimination against older workers in 1960[18] – much earlier than the UK or other European countries.

Figure 1: Population trees for Japan in 1970, 1995 and 2020



Source: Statistics Dashboard.[19]

Opposition to increased immigration

Unsurprisingly, this decline in Japan's population has resulted in a fierce debate. There has been increased pressure from employers to allow more significant immigration. Some economists have expressed concern that this population decline will slow the country's economic growth. Others argue that it is also likely to be a more stable and sustainable approach than economic growth based on rapid population growth, which would in turn put pressure on Japan's infrastructure, natural environment and social cohesion. Public opinion appears to be firmly on the side of the latter.

Nevertheless, in 2018 the Japanese Parliament made a small concession, which allowed foreign workers to come to work in Japan for up to five years in specific professions, including nursing/carers, agriculture, hospitality and food, construction and specific manufacturing industries.[20] However, Parliament specifically banned these migrant workers from becoming residents or allowing family members to accompany them. This policy would have permitted up to 345,000 workers to enter Japan over a five-year period. In reality, very few migrants arrived because Japan almost immediately closed its borders in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even this modest increase in immigration was met with widespread opposition. The governing centre-right Liberal Democratic Party, which has dominated Japanese politics since the end of the second world war, is sensitive to voters' concerns that increased immigration would be a threat to Japan's national identity.

Japan is an ethnically homogeneous country, other than indigenous peoples in Hokkaido and Okinawa. Though, as of June 2023, a record 3.22 million people with foreign nationality were living in Japan,[21] it is important to note that Japan does not grant citizenship to anyone who is not of Japanese descent. This means that even fifth-generation Japanese-born Koreans or Chinese are counted as having foreign nationality.

Possible lessons for UK

Like Japan, the UK has a falling TFR with a resulting imbalance in the old-age dependency ratio. Japan has tackled this challenge with a much more open attitude to employing older workers than exists in the UK. Quite small changes in older worker participation can have a dramatic impact on the dependency ratio and so on a country's fiscal position.

The Japanese debate on the interplay between population levels, rates of economic growth, gross domestic product per head, median wage levels and social cohesion may have lessons for the UK.

Notes

1 https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/netherlands/population_density

2 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN

3 https://nidi.nl/demos/state-commission-advises-moderate-population-growth-for-the-netherlands

4 https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/borgere/befolkning/befolkningstal

5 https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/borgere/befolkning/fertilitet

6 https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/borgere/befolkning/middellevetid

7 'Denmark's immigration issue'. BBC News. 19 February 2005. Archived from the original on 12 January 2015. Retrieved 20 October 2014.

8 'Danish society has problems with too much migration from the Middle East – Denmark's left-wing immigration minister defends country's strict asylum policy'. Remix News. 2022-01-25. Archived from the original on 3 August 2023. Retrieved on 14 July 2023.

9 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=JP

10 https://www.e-stat.go.jp/en

11 https://dashboard.e-stat.go.jp/en/pyramidGraph?screenCode=00570&regionCode=00000&pyramidAreaType=2

12 https://www.jinji.go.jp/content/000010595.pdf

13 https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/how-companies-are-addressing-workforce-shortages-through-senior-employment-in-japan/

14 https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/peopleaged65yearsandoverinemploymentuk/januarytomarch2022toapriltojune2022

15 https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/08/japan-working-age-labour-shortage/

16 https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/society/general-news/20231223-157406/

17 https://www.firstpost.com/world/how-lack-of-young-women-puts-over-40-per-cent-of-municipalities-in-japan-at-risk-of-vanishing-13763447.html

18 https://leglobal.law/countries/japan/employment-law/employment-law-overview-japan/04-anti-discrimination-laws/

19 https://www.e-stat.go.jp/en

20 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-46492216

21 https://www.gov-online.go.jp/pdf/hlj/20231201/hlj_202312_24-25_life-in-harmony-promotion-month.pdf

6 What do the public think?

YouGov was asked to carry out a nationally representative polling of UK adults as part of the background to this report. The polling took place on 25–26 February 2025.

The poll focused on three areas: general attitudes to population growth; attitudes to immigration; and attitudes to having an official body for population growth. The summary results are as follows.

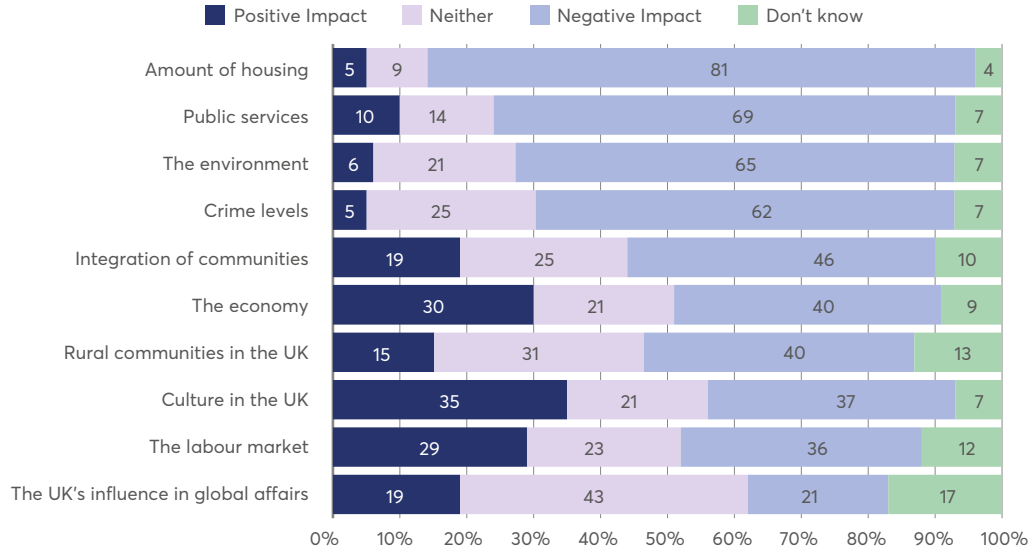
6.1. General attitudes to population growth

- There was a general feeling (68%) among all those polled that the population in their own region had increased in the last five years, but was slightly higher among ethnic minorities (72%). It was felt most strongly in London (81%) and the West Midlands (79%).
- Overall, a majority (57%) felt that Britain had too little space for its current population; this being felt more strongly by each older age cohort: 37% of those aged 18–24; 52% aged 25–49; 64% aged 50–64; and 68% at age 65 and older.
- Generally, regardless of geographical area, Britons think population growth has had a negative impact – particularly as regards the amount of housing (81%), public services (68%) and the environment (65%) – as seen in Figure 1 below.
- A majority (58%) thought having a population of 76.1 million by 2045 would be bad for the country – 62% of white and 36% of ethnic minority respondents.

6.2. Attitudes to immigration

- Of the total polled, 63% thought the number of people migrating to the UK each year was too high – 66% of white and 48% of ethnic minority respondents.
- There was a strong correlation with age – 34% of 18–24-year-olds thought the number was too high, compared with 55% aged 25–49; 75% aged 50–64; and 78% of those 65 and older.

Figure 1: Perceived issues of population growth



Source: YouGov (2025).

- As regards a cap on the number of arrivals – 41% thought that there should be a fixed cap; and 49% felt that the number of permitted arrivals should reflect demand for work, family or study visas.

- When asked what level an immigration cap should be set at, four in 10 (39%) weren't sure. The most popular response was a cap of up to 50,000 people a year (22%). A further 12% said there should not be a cap at all.

6.3. Attitudes to an official body for population growth

- Overall, 70% think the government does not have a plan to manage population growth – 64% among ethnic minorities.
- Of 2024 voters, 56% supported the idea of an official body, with particularly strong support from Labour voters (68%) and Liberal Democrats voters (65%). There was 61% support among ethnic minorities.

- When asked which party best represented respondents' views on how to deal with population growth, half (49%) either thought that none of the parties (25%) represented their views, or didn't know (24%); 10% felt that Labour most closely aligned with their personal views on the issue, compared to 8% for the Conservatives; and 5% said the Liberal Democrats. By contrast, around a fifth (22%) said Reform UK represented their views on population growth.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence of the foregoing pages shows that the UK will face fundamental demographic challenges over the rest of the 21st century. Against this background it needs to be recognised that:

- There are organisational practices and structures that stand in the way of properly addressing these challenges.
- There are examples of fresh thinking, both here and abroad, that might help find new ways forward, but which are largely overlooked.
- Polling shows a high degree of public concern about future population growth.
- There are actions that could, and should, be taken now.

7.1. Macro demographic picture

Over the last 20 years, our population has increased by 9.2 million (15.7%) from 58.4 million to 67.6 million. The major impact of this increase has been on England, particularly south and east of a line broadly drawn from The Wash to Bristol and then to Bournemouth.

The population can be expected to continue to grow by a further 6.6 million (10%) over the next 10 years. Of this, only 0.5 million will come from natural increase.

Further out the trends inevitably become less clear, but the trajectory is upward for the foreseeable future. The point at which our population growth can be expected to slow is steadily being pushed further out into the future. The evidence suggests that, by the second half of the century, the UK will have the largest population in Europe. This differential is made more stark when one compares the increase in the density of population measured in people per square kilometre. During this century, according to UN projections, the UK's is expected to increase from 242 to 321 (33%); by comparison, Germany's will rise from 107 to 124 (15%); and France's will rise from 122 to 125 (2.5%).

It is worth noting that the equivalent figure for the USA, as a whole, is 36 million. Only two states – New Jersey and Rhode Island – are more crowded than England.

These figures and their implications for this country must surely pose some serious questions about our future, which need to be addressed urgently.

7.2. Structural and operational challenges

Irrevocability – no turning back

Once new arrivals are settled here legally, there is no turning back. They are entitled to all the rights and carry all the responsibilities accorded to a citizen of the UK. Meanwhile, any natural increase or decrease in our settled population in any year is, by nature, then fixed.

It takes 15 to 25 years to see the full impact of any increase, any imbalance, or any decrease, in our population. So, if we make no effort today to discuss or plan for the consequences of what appears to lie ahead demographically, it will be the 2040s when we will have to face the results of any actions taken or not taken today. Unfortunately, these timescales do not fit well with the imperatives of a five-year electoral cycle.

Short-term reactions by individual government departments – 'sticking plaster' solutions

In the absence of any strategic guiding hand, the standard response has been a series of shallow-rooted initiatives undertaken by individual government departments responding to specific crises. For example, there was a tightening up of the terms of Student visas following allegations of misuse, and almost simultaneously a loosening of the terms of visas for care home staff following publicity about sector shortages. No less important, at no point does there appear to have been any consideration of the consequential implications of

these standalone decisions for other government departments, or indeed for our society as a whole. This approach has provided an easy way to avoid taking hard decisions.

Firewalls persist

There remains a knee-jerk reaction among many that the serious strategic challenges raised by demographic change are not appropriate subjects for a comprehensive and thoroughgoing debate. See Professor Diana Coole's analysis of this in the opening chapter.

In part, this is the result of any discussion of demographic change being seen as a Pandora's Box – the opening of which might lead to unpleasant accusations, such as of racism or practising eugenics; in parallel there is a belief that, if only people would stop talking about the issue of population growth, public concern would die away. However, the evidence of the past 15 years does not support this view.

The result is a tendency among many opinion formers to avert their eyes. For example, in recent months the prime minister, faced with the latest figures of population increase, agreed that these figures were too high and that they should be reduced, but declined to go beyond that broad statement. Elsewhere, a recent House of Lords report, *Making the most out of England's land* (HOL paper 105) did not consider it necessary or appropriate to make a single mention of future population levels – surely a key component of future land use. Finally, Sir Jon Cunliffe, newly appointed Chair of the Independent Water Commission, writing in the *Financial Times* on 21 February 2025 about the challenges facing the water industry, could not bring himself to mention an increasing population as an important factor.

Unsurprisingly, the millions who have concerns about the implications for themselves, their communities and future generations, conclude that our political and cultural leaders won't grasp this nettle.

This frustration has had an unfortunate byproduct of coarsening the terms of the debate.

Rise of freedom-restricting harassment

In her government-commissioned review on social cohesion, Dame Sara Khan used the phrase, "freedom-restricting harassment" to describe behaviour that leads people into silence or self-censoring. This phenomenon plays a major role in any discussion on demographic change.

Too often the basic assumption is that such a discussion must be an attack on some person or some group. By contrast, it should be seen as trying to provide a way to discuss and to balance the conflicting demands of, need for sacrifices by, and general requirements of different sections of our society as a result of population changes. The letter of the week in the *New Statesman* (June 2024) pointed out that it was unhelpful to label those who oppose mass migration as being "hard right" – people who

> "simply do not wish the make-up of their country and the neighbourhoods to be transformed according to the hyper liberal orthodoxy should not be labelled as 'extremists'".

The author went on to point out that

> "Labour Governments until only a few years ago would have regarded holding immigration below 100,000 per annum as uncontroversial".

This is reflected in the widely differing levels of 'acceptability' of discussing individual big strategic decisions. Take climate change and net zero. These issues have been the subject of extensive debate – which everyone agrees is important. Few of those arguing the net zero case seem ready to accept that it is people who are at root the fundamental cause of climate change, so that adding 6–10 million more people to the population of this country must significantly set back our progress to net zero. But, while it is acceptable to

discuss climate change itself, it seems unacceptable to add the importance of population change to the mix.

Inadequate data – do we really know what is happening?

There seems to be a problem finding properly based and appropriately focused data to tell us what is really going on. Too often, data are gathered over different chronological periods and uses different bases of measurement. It remains very difficult to reconcile certain key statistics – for example, the number of work visas issued and the number of National Insurance Numbers (NINOs) granted; and indeed, who oversees and controls the issue of NINOs.

Two bodies, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), operate efficiently within their terms of reference. But there is no strategic analyses of what gaps exist in the current data collection that might help illuminate the overall impact of population change. Further, both these two bodies inevitably have budgetary constraints that limit the number of datasets they can collect, and it is vanishingly unlikely that any government will wish to insist on collection of data that may reveal politically unwelcome outcomes.

Inadequate enforcement – are the rules observed?

Nowhere are the gaps more evident than in the recording of those who overstay their visa or who come to the country illegally. Estimates inevitably vary widely, but mostly fall within a range of 750,000 to 1.5 million (equivalent to 1%–2% of the country's official population, or a city up to half the size of Manchester).

For example, there appear to be no significant checks on those who arrive here on one type of visa – for example, to work in a care home – and who, after a relatively short period of employment in a specific sector, morph into the workforce generally. Nor is there any analysis of the consequent effect of this practice – economic or otherwise – on the settled population. This arguably negligent approach is dramatically different to the approach adopted by other countries, as the section on Denmark in chapter 5 shows.

Weighing and measuring impacts

There are two main voices arguing for a relaxed approach to population increase: British industry and commerce ("the British won't work on the terms and conditions we offer"); and the higher education sector ("my university will go bust unless we maintain/increase our level of overseas students"). There is a third influential voice concerning the country's moral duty to help refugees and asylum seekers. While this attracts a high level of publicity, the numbers involved in this category are much lower than the first two.

In addition to having powerful supporting voices, the first two arguments also have the advantage of being measurable. As Peter Drucker, the management guru, put it: "If you can measure it, you can manage it". Economic and other quantitative data can be relatively easily measured and so managed. The result is that 'hard' data tend to dominate debates; by contrast, while there have been advances in recent years, 'quality of life' data, often about issues of great concern to people, is not so easily harnessed. As a result, the latter can too easily be crowded out in any public discussion – particularly where well established but arguably outdated economic arguments are put forward by powerful advocates.

7.3. A need for fresh thinking

My wish to involve experts from outside the political mainstream was to bring fresh intellectual vigour to the thinking on this policy area, which too often has been tired, outdated, clichéd and self-interested. Additionally, I hoped that each of the three countries (the Netherlands, Denmark and Japan), whose approach

to their own demographic challenges has been documented in chapter 5, would give valuable comparative data. I have not been disappointed, and I am grateful to them all.

Most, if not all, of the themes and approaches suggested in the nine essays and the overseas research do not feature prominently in the current public debate; more importantly, there is no way of bringing them all together – along with many others – in any coherent evidence-based approach.

7.4. Recommendations

Demographic change – in particular, where it is caused by immigration – is a polarised and polarising subject. So, what can we do about it?

A way forward

The most effective way forward would be to proceed on a twin-track approach – a new responsibility on government to face up to the serious consequences arising from demographic change; at the same time, the creation of a new body that would provide a commentary on the government's stated policy objectives, to undertake research into demographic issues, and to provide an open transparent forum to reassure the public that these challenges were not being overlooked.

The strategic objective would be to open up these issues to transparent, evidence-based analysis, so as to detoxify it and, importantly, create conditions in which extreme views of all sorts would be marginalised and the 'wisdom of the crowd' would assert itself. This will require concrete policies to be created and delivered that acknowledge the complexity of the issues and associated trade-offs. At root, it is clear that the UK cannot long sustain population growth at the present levels.

New government responsibility

Governments should be expected to monitor and disclose the likely level of population change in the near term (the period to the next general election) and longer term (10–20 years). They should clearly state whether these projected numbers were satisfactory or whether they appeared too high or too low. In each case, governments would be expected to lay out proposals that would result in actual populations reaching the levels the governments had previously identified as desirable.

In due course, such policy statements should form part of a party's general election manifesto. It is astonishing that, given all the commitments and statements made during general elections, views about population levels – one of the most important drivers of fundamental change in our country – are hardly ever commented on.

Establishing a new authority

A new authority would be called the Office for Demographic Change (ODC) or Office for Population Sustainability (OPS). This title does not mention growth or reduction to reflect the fact that there are those who argue that the major challenges in the future will be from a *falling* not an *increasing* population.

a) Functions

1) **Learning from the past** to collect evidence about and analyse the policies that have led to the country's current demographic position.

2) **Looking to the future** to consider the likely results of future changes in this country's population, including economic, environmental, ecological and societal consequences – particularly in relation to the government-stated demographic objectives.

3) **Developing new research** on demographic development, and learning from best practice around the world.

b) Structure

The new authority would be governed by a council of up to 20 members and a chair. Appointments to the council would be made by the prime minister for a maximum of nine years, consisting of three three-year terms.

Appointments would, as far as possible, reflect a balance of practical and academic experience, the geography of the UK, and an appropriate gender balance. The council would report to the Cabinet Office.

c) Migration Advisory Committee

The new authority would absorb MAC and its specific work-related experience as an important part of a larger strategic role.

d) Performance

The authority would be required to report at least annually to Parliament. It would be required to perform its duties objectively, transparently and impartially. It would not be a policymaking body.

e) A broader role for the new authority

Additionally, the new authority could help encourage a broader, better, and more balanced discussion about demography:

- **Absorption levels:** There is a need for a debate about how many additional people this country can, on average, reasonably absorb in any one year. Many would argue that the current figure of 1.25 million new arrivals, with 0.5 million departures leading to a net increase of 0.75 million, is not sustainable (for a range of reasons).

  But there must be a range of annual increase – perhaps a three-year average – that would balance the conflicting pressures already making themselves felt in this already relatively crowded island.

- **Optimum absolute population levels:** Too often, governments become preoccupied with absolute levels of gross domestic product (GDP) as a sign of national 'virility' – and so lay down a marker for this country's standing in the world. Absolute levels of GDP are driven in large measure by population size, so there is a temptation to see higher immigration as a means first to maintain or increase our position in world league tables, and second to raise our standard of living.

  This is a fool's errand – a relatively small island cannot hope to compete in absolute GDP terms over time with geographically much larger countries and greater populations. GDP per head is a better measure of economic prosperity, but it can be distorted if one group of the population benefits disproportionately. By contrast, the median wage – the point at which half the population earns more and half less – indicates how widely the benefits of increasing prosperity have been spread. The flatlining of this for the past 15–20 years indicates that globalisation, with its consequent policy of high immigration, has not delivered much to many of our settled population.

  Evidence in the earlier chapters indicates that there is a 'sweet spot' where a stable (maybe slowly declining) population is likely to lead to the greatest level of prosperity for all, with the minimum risks to our environment and our social cohesion.

- **Improving data sources:** The lack of relevant focused data is an issue that has presented itself several times in this report. The new authority would quickly build up the experience necessary to introduce new datasets and so improve the quality of the debate.

- **Learning from other countries:** Demographic change – in one direction or another – is an issue that concerns nearly every country. Accordingly, much research is going on about the implications.

  Research on just three countries – the Netherlands, Denmark and Japan – revealed a number of

interesting points. This suggests that there is much useful information to be gathered in a wider study.

- **Increasing our total fertility rate (TFR):** There are those who argue that an appropriate range of government policies might reverse the recent decline in our TFR, and that this would have a significant beneficial impact on our social cohesion. Research could usefully explore the nature and causes of this 'fertility gap'.

- **Population balance:** We are all accustomed to seeing the pictograph representation of the age distribution of the country's population following the shape of a Christmas tree. Historically, the tree has always had significantly lower (i.e. early age branches) – resulting in an ever increasing population – a feature that presents a particular challenge to an already relatively crowded island such as the UK. But that shape is now changing, shaped by an interplay between increasing life expectancy, a lower natural increase of births, and increased immigration. Research into this interplay – causes and consequences – could help the development of appropriate long-term policies.

Conclusion

There will be those who, unsurprisingly, say that this is a futile endeavour. They will argue that the canvas is too broad, the existing conflicting points of view too noisy and well dug in, and the time taken to show the benefits of a different approach too long for the modern public attention span and, no less importantly, for the political cycle.

To those I say: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Over the last quarter of a century, demographic issues have been bubbling below the surface of our society with an increasing tendency to break through – sometimes violently. It is self-evident that demographic projections over the next half century give rise to very special challenges for the UK as an already relatively crowded small island. We are undoubtedly living in a more febrile political climate, and it is not hard to see how this issue, left unaddressed, could drive people to extreme parties.

Of course, we can muddle along, hoping for the best, using some short-term expedients to assuage the more obvious signs of public disquiet and so 'kicking the can down the road'. But we have to accept that the public are increasingly concerned about this issue, and that it is the public who can determine election results. In the polling described in chapter 6, two-thirds of those polled have noticed an increased population in their own region; 60% think that the country has too little space for its existing population; and more than 80% think that population growth has had a negative impact. More importantly, 70% think that the government does not have a plan to manage population growth, with overall 56% supporting the establishment of an official body to provide advice on managing the country's population growth (68% and 65% in the case of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters).

So, when the country enters the second half of the 21st century and, as seems likely, short-term fixes have proved insufficient, people may then be tempted – when so much will be seen to have been largely or entirely predictable – to ask why, as a country, we did not have the determination to look forward and adopt policies that more directly addressed the concerns of the settled population of the country whose general welfare must surely be the primary objective of any government.

Image credits

p.9 CC-0 1.0
p.15 © Lewis Whyld/Alamy Stock Photo
p.19 Aston University/Flickr CC BY-NC-2.0
p.25 © KeyWorded/Alamy Stock Photo
p.26 © stefanamer/iStock
p.33 © Andy Willis/Unsplash
p.34 Fir0002/Flagstaffotos CC-BY-NC
p.49 © Sipa US/Alamy Stock Photo
p.50 UKinUSA CC-BY-SA-2.0
p.59 Graham Chastney/Flickr CC-BY-NC 2.0
p.63 Oast House Archive CC-BY-SA-2.0
p.65 © Financial Times
p.70 UK MOD © Crown copyright 2023
p.78 © fizkes/iStock
p.90 © K Nevile/iStock
p.93 © JohnnyGreig/iStock
p.99 Howard Stanbury/Flickr CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0
p.102 EU2023ES CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow
July 2025