

Population change in the UK and lessons for Labour's five missions

FACTSHEET

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The size and shape of the population is driven by trends in the three components of fertility, mortality and migration. For the past 90 years, the key driver of population change has been the birth rate.

Much attention has rightly focused on the consequences of the ageing baby boom generation, born between the late 1940s and early 1960s, who are now entering retirement. Less attention has been paid to the rise in births during the 1980s and then again during the 2000s.

Here, we highlight seven key demographic facts, considering these trends and their implications for policy planning and responses in relation to Labour's five missions.

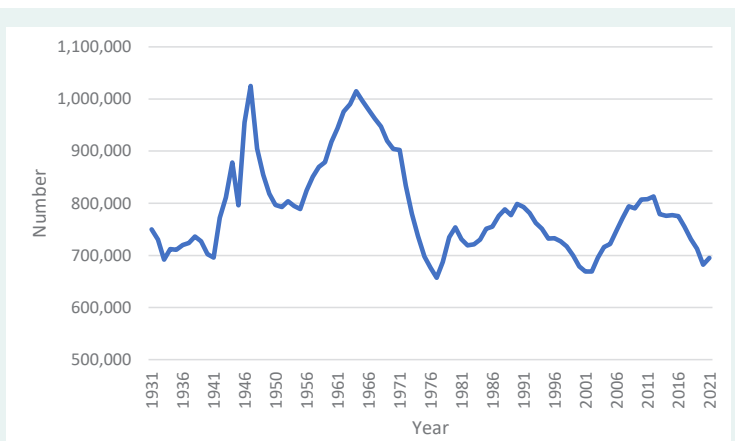


Figure 1: Annual number of births, 1931-2021, UK

Source: ONS (2023) Vital statistics in the UK

KEY FACTS

1. The number of 18- to 25-year-olds in the UK has been falling, but from 2024, we will see a decade of growth in this segment of the population

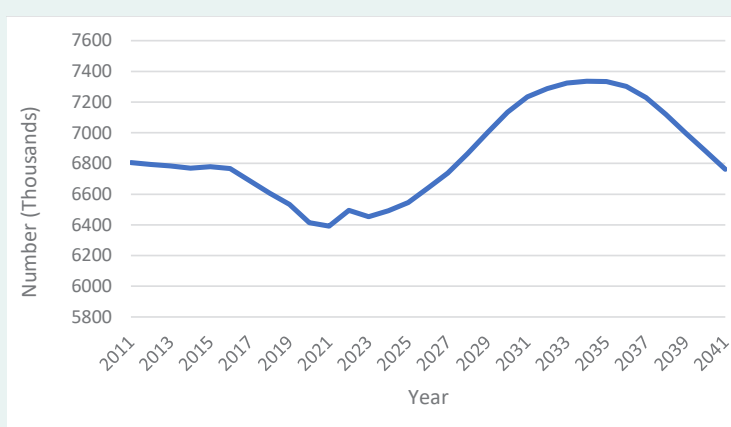


Figure 2: Number of people aged 18-25 in the UK, 2011-2041

Source: ONS Mid-year population estimates to 2022, ONS Population Projection from 2023

Even with positive net migration amongst people aged 18-25, until recently the numbers in this age group have continued to fall. But as a result of higher births during the first decade of this century we are entering a 'demographic tailwind'. It will be important to harness this decade-long window of opportunity, before numbers start to fall again in 2036.

To kick start economic growth, it will be essential to invest in the skills of young people, maximising the societal benefits of an increased share of young, working-age people in the population.

At present, Scotland is the only devolved nation with a population target, explicitly recognising a link between people and prosperity.

2. In contrast, over the next decade, the number of 5- to 10-year-olds in the UK will fall

Progressive education policies could capitalise on the shrinking primary school-age population, using this window of opportunity to drive down average class sizes and drive up standards.

For example, Labour's manifesto pledge of 3,000 new primary school-based nurseries and introducing free breakfast clubs in every primary school aligns with this principle.

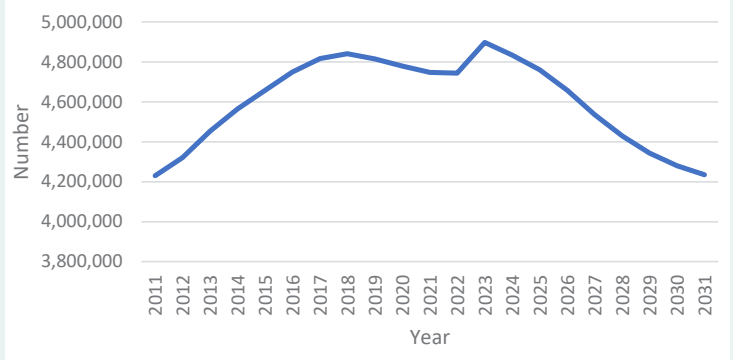


Figure 3: Number of children aged 5-10 in the UK, 2011-2031

Source: ONS Mid-year population estimates to 2022, ONS Population Projection from 2023

3. As the baby boomers age, the UK's population is ageing rapidly

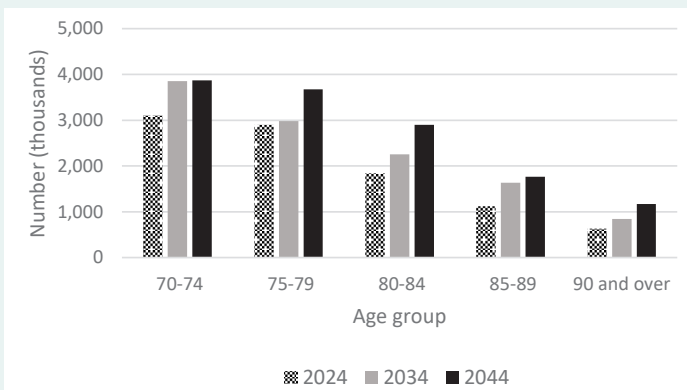


Figure 4: Number of people aged 70 and over, 2024-2044, UK

Source: Authors' analysis of ONS Population Projections 2021-based

In 2024, there are 9,591,000 people aged 70 and over; by 2044, this number is projected to rise to 13,380,000. The number of older people will increase across all age groups, but those aged 90 and over will see the largest proportional growth, almost doubling from 629,000 in 2024 to 1,173,000 in 2043. As the oldest-old are most vulnerable to support needs, there will be more older people requiring care over the next two decades.

Longer lives require a rethink of the the meaning of age. Rather than using a chronological age such as 60 or 65, one alternative is to consider that we start to become 'old' when we face a 1% chance of dying in a year, and become 'very old' when that chance increases to 10%. In 1951, men in the UK faced a 1% chance of dying at age 50; by 2011 this had risen to 62 years, and by 2021 to 65 years. So, the good news is that for men, 65 really is the new 50, and for women, 69 is the new 56! These improvements in longevity will need to be taken into account when planning future pension policies.

However, life expectancy gains over the past century have been uneven, with significant differences by region and socioeconomic group. In 2018-2020, the lowest UK life expectancy at birth was in Glasgow city, where it was 73.1 years for men and 78.3 years for women. This contrasts with the highest life expectancy at birth for men of 87.7 years, found in Westminster, and 87.9 years for women in Kensington and Chelsea.

	1% chance of dying	10% chance of dying
Men 1951	50	75
Men 2011	62	84
Men 2021	65	87
Women 1951	56	78
Women 2011	67	87
Women 2021	69	88

Table 1: Age when the annual probability of dying reaches 1% and 10%, men and women in the UK

Source: Falkingham (2016) Updated with 2021 data based on latest mortality projections

It is laudable that as part of its health mission Labour aims to tackle the social determinants of health. Its goal of 'halving the gap between the richest and poorest regions in England' needs to embrace all four devolved nations.

4. One in five women aged 55-59 are currently providing unpaid care to a parent, spouse or neighbour

Women and men in their 50s represent a vital resource within the labour market.

To retain experience and talent within the economy, attention must be given to ensuring that older workers can combine their unpaid caring responsibilities with paid work. There must also be support provision available for if and when they need to increase the time they devote to providing care for loved ones.

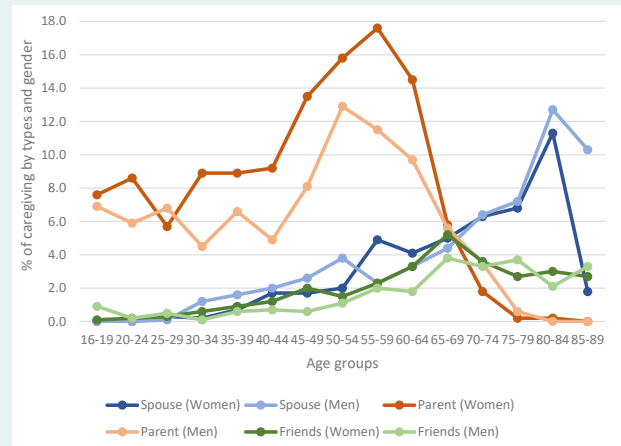


Figure 5: Percentage of women and men in the UK providing unpaid care by type, 2020

Source: Authors' analysis of ONS Population Projections 2021-based

5. The availability of kin to care is also changing

Kin type	Cohort (year of birth)	
	1938	1964
Grandparents	-	0
Parents	-	0.02
Siblings	0.5	0.8
Children	2.2	1.8
Grandchildren	4.4	3.4
% childless	11%	20%

Table 2: Cohort changes in kin

Source: Butterick et al. (2024) Using CG Kinship Model v1.0

The family remains the dominant source of care and support in later life. However, the mean expected number of kin that future elders may potentially be able to rely upon for support in later life is changing. Future cohorts will have lower numbers of adult children and grandchildren; those born in 1964 are forecast to have 1.8 adult children and 3.4 grandchildren when they are aged 80, compared to 2.2 children and 4.4 grandchildren amongst the 1938 cohort at the same age. Also, 20% of the 1960s baby boomers are likely to be childless.

A priority of the new administration should be to adequately plan for when the 1960s boomers reach their eighties. Creating the National Care Service and moving the NHS towards a more preventative system are important steps in this direction.

6. Larger families are a persistent feature of UK fertility

While the average UK fertility rate has declined in the past decade, those who do have children still tend to have two or more. Larger families are more common among disadvantaged groups. Previous policy changes restricting child-related benefits to two children have not led people to have smaller families, but have instead led to more children living in poverty.

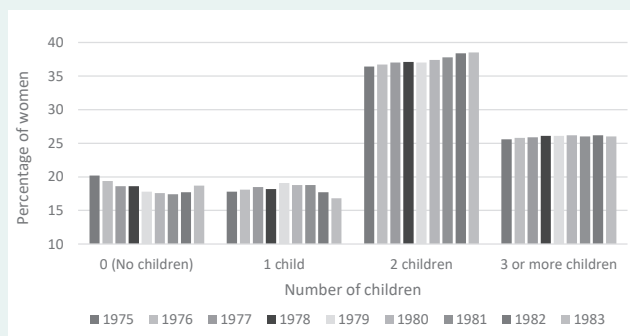


Figure 6: Distribution of family size by mother's year of birth

Source: ONS Cohort Fertility: England and Wales dataset

7. Migration cannot 'solve the problem' of population ageing

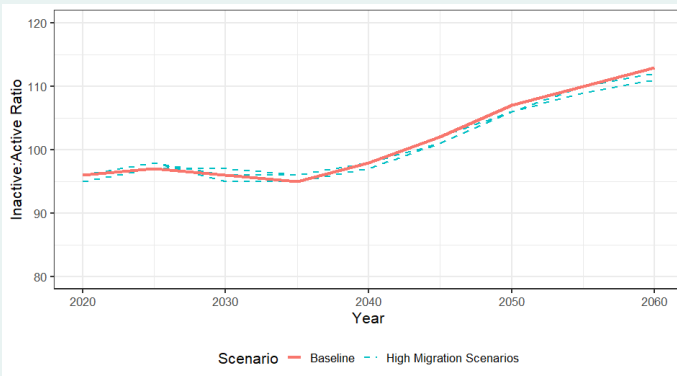


Figure 7: UK economic dependency ratio under different migration scenarios

Source: Quantmig Migration Scenarios Explorer

It may be tempting to consider migration as a potential approach for dealing with the challenges of population ageing, purporting that immigrants will fill the gaps left by ageing and declining populations. However, migrants also age, and ageing is primarily driven by historical fertility trends. The number of economic dependents per worker is expected to increase over the next 30 years, even in scenarios where migration is high. Migration may be desirable for a range of other reasons, but more holistic solutions, such as those focused on labour market participation or various options for retirement, are needed to address the challenges of funding an NHS and social care system fit for the future in the context of an ageing population.

Summary

The UK's demographic landscape is undergoing transformations driven by trends in fertility, mortality, and migration. The recent and upcoming increase in the population of 18- to 25-year-olds presents a unique opportunity for economic growth, emphasising the need to invest in education and skills. The decline in the number of 5- to 10-year-olds offers a chance to improve education standards by reducing class sizes. As the ageing population continues to expand, particularly among the oldest-old, urgent action is needed to address the growing demand for care and support, while also acknowledging persistent disparities in life expectancy across regions and socioeconomic groups.

Unpaid caregiving, especially among women in their 50s, highlights the need for policies that allow older workers

to balance employment with caring responsibilities. The decline in family size and the anticipated reduction in available kin for future elders underscore the importance of planning for adequate care provision, particularly as the 1960s baby boomers approach old age. Larger family sizes persist in disadvantaged groups, leading to higher levels of child poverty, despite policies aimed at limiting child-related benefits.

Finally, while migration is often viewed as a potential solution to population ageing, it is not a long-term fix due to the inevitability of migrants themselves ageing. Instead, a broader approach focusing on labour market participation and structural reforms in healthcare and social care is essential to address the challenges posed by an ageing society.

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Further reading



The changing meaning of old age (CPC Policy Briefing 31)



Changes in kinship: Implications for the availability of kin to care (CPC-CG Policy Briefing 74)



Fact: Migrants get older like everyone else (FutuRes Myth Busts)



As Europe builds resilient labour markets, migration can help - but will not be enough (Population Europe Policy Insight)



Migration Scenarios Explorer (QuantMig)