



Why population matters for the 2015 UK general election

This document sets out why political parties should adopt policies to halt progressively and ultimately reverse the rapid, damaging and eventually unsustainable population growth of the United Kingdom.

1. Summary

Population growth means ever more houses, power stations, roads, reservoirs, hospitals, schools, etc. must be built, staffed and maintained. This continuous infrastructure expansion comes at a great cost to taxpayers while bringing no improvement to people's lives – it's simply about keeping up with population growth.

The cost of living, the national debt and social tensions are increasing; employment opportunities for young people, green spaces and quality of life are decreasing. Policies to make population environmentally, economically and fiscally sustainable are badly needed.

From 2001 to 2011, the population of the United Kingdom increased by four million. From 2012 to 2013, the population increased by 400,000. By 2050, the population will grow from 63 million now to between 67 and 86 million, according to Office of National Statistics projections.

2. How population connects with today's issues

Public finances

Building ever more schools, hospitals, power stations, etc. simply to keep up with population growth masquerades as investment but in fact simply reflects rising maintenance costs. It takes all the running we can do to stay in place while adding to our children's debt burden and diverting funds from being used for actual improvements to public services.

Unemployment and social inequality

Population growth is a key driver of unemployment and social inequality, as ever more people compete for jobs that increasingly pay less. The 2014 *Global Employment Trends* report by the United Nations International Labour Office predicts that global unemployment will continue to increase for the foreseeable future because economic growth is unlikely to generate enough jobs to keep up with population growth. This affects young people in particular. Curbing population growth is necessary if we are to improve employment opportunities and reduce social inequality.

Housing, transport, services and utilities

A growing population puts increasing pressure on housing, pushing up prices and rents and increasing both overcrowding and housing benefit costs. Increasing population is a driver of climate change, which contributes to flooding while creating pressure for development in flood plains and more paved areas, which also contribute to ever-growing costs from flooding.



Population growth also worsens road congestion and overcrowding on public transport. Both adversely affect people's quality of life; increase travel times and the resulting cost to the economy; and necessitate expensive, disruptive, controversial and damaging infrastructure projects.

Rising numbers of people means more pressure on already stretched health, education and other public services. In addition, growth in population entails a growing demand for energy; increasing costs; endangering security of supply; increasing dependence on unreliable sources; and necessitating expensive, disruptive, controversial and damaging infrastructure projects while also making it ever more difficult to meet greenhouse reduction targets.

Cost of living and quality of life

Population growth increases the cost of living as ever more people compete for limited housing and other amenities and demand growth necessitates expensive new infrastructure projects. The real economic costs of population growth are immense.

Population growth forces people to undertake long commutes to work, reducing people's quality of life while increasing their environmental impact. Crowded transport and traffic congestion further affect air quality and quality of life.

Pressure for development of all kinds as population grows necessarily means the loss of green spaces and amenities. This can include the loss of unspoiled countryside, the conversion of farmland to housing and in developed areas the loss of gardens, playing fields and other recreational areas.

National security

In an increasingly crowded, industrialised and uncertain world, the national security of the United Kingdom is affected by the country's dependence on other countries for many of the resources it requires. Population growth simply increases that dependence.

Climate change

Ever more people use ever more energy and emit ever more greenhouse gasses. It is impossible to achieve sufficient reductions in overall emissions to avoid significant climate change if the number of emitters - i.e. people - continues to grow. Food production is already a major contributor to climate change and a warmer world is likely to be a world in which it is harder to grow food.

Ecological sustainability

According to the Blue Planet Award-winning Global Footprint Network, the United Kingdom is already about 300 per cent ecologically overshoot – the country can only provide about 25 per cent of the ecological services necessary to sustain its numbers and consumption. This means the country is already overpopulated and relies on other countries to sell it essential resources and absorb its waste. To achieve ecological sustainability, the United Kingdom must ultimately reduce either its numbers or consumption by 75 per cent. The more the country reduces its numbers, the less it will need to reduce consumption per head. The longer ecological overshoot is not addressed, the greater the vulnerability to shortages, increased prices and disruption of supply as the global population grows and resources become scarcer.

3. What can be done

Public leadership and messaging

Population growth makes many of the most pressing and important problems the United Kingdom is facing harder to solve. Government messaging should be clear on the expectation that individuals and couples will make responsible reproductive decisions. This includes promoting the benefits of small families to parents, children and society at large, as well as reproductive health and responsible relationships.

Change to economic strategy

Responsible public governance requires leaders in government to abandon traditional economic models that pursue growth at all costs and are often used to justify seeking to increase the population. The economy must serve the needs of the population - not the other way around. Policies that increase immigration and ill-considered development are about economic growth rather than improving well-being, and are ultimately unsustainable.

Sex and relationships education

Sex and relationships education in schools is highly variable. Making it a statutory part of the curriculum, as recommended by professionals such as the members of the Sex Education Forum, would contribute to improving the quality of the education and reducing sexually transmitted disease, teenage pregnancies and children's vulnerability to abuse. Subjects should include population and reproductive ethics.

Sexual and reproductive health services

Most estimates indicate that almost half of all pregnancies in the United Kingdom are unplanned. We would like the government to make reducing unplanned pregnancy at all ages a goal.

Family subsidies

We think that the government should send a signal that larger families are not desirable. We believe therefore that child-related payments or tax credits after the first two children in a household should not be automatic, while ensuring that children are protected from poverty. We suggest that this only apply to children conceived after the policy is changed. Such a policy removes the unfairness to those with few or no children subsidising those who choose to have larger families and delivers significant savings to taxpayers.

Migration

We believe the United Kingdom should prevent net migration from fuelling population growth. This is likely to include the curbing of the misuse of temporary and student visas and the abuse of family reunification routes.

International development

The United Kingdom should increase the proportion of its foreign aid spent on family planning services to enable people to choose to limit their family size. Some of the poorest areas of the world are also places where women face the most difficulty in accessing family planning services. Helping to address the neglect of family planning funding would advance human rights and reduce migratory pressures.

4. An ageing society

The notion that ever more old people need ever more young people is an obviously unsustainable Ponzi scheme. Each additional old person costs the public no more for pensions and healthcare than an additional young person does for education, health and childcare. The costs of an ageing society are manageable through reducing unemployment and supporting the needs of working mothers and older workers.

5. Costs: a win-win situation

These proposals are not expensive. The proposal on family subsidies actually saves money. The proposal on making sex and relationship education statutory does not have a significant cost. Those on sexual health and migration are relatively inexpensive and will pay for themselves through the reduced social and infrastructure costs resulting from lower population levels.

6. Conclusion

United Kingdom population growth exacerbates the problems of an increasingly crowded country in an increasingly uncertain world. Continued growth will make life harder for everyone while putting ever more pressure on overstretched public finances. Population growth will not stop if steps are not taken to tackle it. Taking moderate action now to slow and reverse population growth would help the United Kingdom to meet many of the policy challenges it faces.