

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
10 Downing St
London
SW1A 2AA

24 May 2023

Dear Prime Minister

I am writing to you as Executive Director of Population Matters, a UK-based campaigning charity, promoting the value of sustainable global population and consumption, to protect nature and improve people's lives. While our focus is global, we are based in the UK – as are many of our supporters.

There is increasing public discourse in the UK on matters related to population, both domestic and globally. Subjects under debate include, but are far from limited to, legal migration figures, the consequences of an ageing population, housebuilding on Green Belt land, regional depopulation and even outlandish claims that a low birth rate is the “*greatest threat to Western society*”.ⁱ

Issues that are less widely discussed, but which remain of critical importance, include the impact of our population growth on domestic biodiversity loss and achieving the UK's climate targets, the effects of migration restrictions on remittances to low-income countries, and the impact of UK aid funding cuts on population growth elsewhere.

This level of public concern about and around the issue of our population nationally and globally is no surprise to Population Matters, as it reflects the public opinion polling we commissioned from YouGov in 2018ⁱⁱ which found that:

- 74% of UK adults believed the government should have a national strategy for addressing population
- 64% thought the population growth projected by the Office for National Statistics at that time was too high and just 2% considered it to be too low
- 63% supported government setting targets for the UK population.

That public concern is reaffirmed (across UK regions, society, and political affiliations) in a survey conducted earlier this year by PeoplePolling and commissioned by Lord Hodgson, who has taken a longstanding interest in UK policy regarding populationⁱⁱⁱ:

- Six in ten are concerned about current population forecasts suggesting the UK population will grow by another 5 million people to 71 million by 2045
- 66% of the public agreed with the statement, “*The United Kingdom is overcrowded*”
- Delivery of public services and availability of housing are the main worries related to population growth (highlighted by 59% of those polled)
- 65% of those polled believe population growth has a negative effect on global warming and the environment.
- Concern crossed political boundaries with, for instance, Leavers and Remainers united in the view that the government has no plan for addressing population growth (74% and 71% respectively).

Public concern regarding domestic population and the need for policies to address it are clearly reasoned and justified. Our level of population, its age distribution, the fertility rate and the extent and rate of demographic change arising from immigration and emigration have critical bearings on almost every aspect of policy. The level of investment required to meet demand for public services increases with population growth overall and within age cohorts.

At a more fundamental level, demand for infrastructure (of all kinds), food, energy, water and housing rises with increased population. These demands in turn increase pressure on natural resources, habitats and biodiversity, increase pollution and carbon emissions and, critically, reduce the effectiveness of mitigating actions, such as provision of alternative energy.^{iv} At a personal level, few people favour increased crowding and congestion, be it on public transport, at the beach, or in the waiting room. Population growth in the UK now diminishes quality of life and ultimately manifests as harmful changes to the fabric of our country and its environment.^{v vi}

Externally, our levels of consumption and carbon emissions have a direct, and usually negative, effect on other countries. The UN’s most recent *Sustainable Development Report* examines “spillover” – the extent to which any country’s actions have a positive or negative effect on other countries’ ability to meet the SDGs. A lower score represents a greater negative effect: the UK ranks 152 out of 163 countries evaluated in 2022.^{vii}

Spillover is also influenced by aid, trade and migration policies. For example, the Government’s regrettable decision to cut overseas aid to 0.5% of GNI has caused a number of negative effects:

- On the wellbeing of individuals and communities through reducing programmes advancing poverty alleviation, education, gender equality, child and maternal health, and sexual and reproductive rights and health
- On low income countries as consequent population growth erodes their chances of achieving the SDGs
- And on the UK itself, by exacerbating environmental, resource, and social instability, exacerbating threats to security – including our own food security – and so increasing the number of climate and conflict refugees.

We are also seeing an increase in pronatal rhetoric in the public sphere, including an alarmist “baby bust” narrative that chooses to ignore the multiple and profound problems created by an increasing population as outlined above, and denies the rational, positive and available policy solutions, which can address the challenges of demographic change without increasing birth rate.^{viii} Alongside this narrative, there can often be a regressive pronatalist agenda promoting “traditional” family and gender roles as political objectives. An agenda and an ideology, which stigmatises those who choose to have no or fewer children and mischaracterises individual choice regarding family size, gender equality and full sexual and reproductive rights as a threat to national or political interests.^{ix}

Despite a strong majority of public concern about these significant and interlinked issues as evidenced by the polls above, none of the major political parties appears to have a comprehensive understanding of the implications of demographic change, or a long-term plan to manage or influence such change in an integrated, evidence-based fashion. All political parties should commit to developing sustainable policies on population and demography. The prerequisite of which is an informed, objective evidence base.

We therefore reiterate our longstanding call that the UK needs a politically independent, advisory public body to provide Parliament, government and the public with a long-term analysis, options for forward planning, and internationally responsible perspective. The creation of such a body would be consistent with other mechanisms to ensure effective, informed and integrated policymaking, such as the Climate Change Committee and Office for Budget Responsibility. Indeed, Lord Hodgson has independently called for the formation of an Office for Demographic Change consistent with the OBR model.

The remit of such a body should include:

- Assessing the impact of changes in UK population across *all* policy fields, including environmental commitments and objectives

- Identifying and highlighting the international impacts of (a) UK demographic change and (b) domestic policy decisions affecting demography, especially within the context of the UK's obligations under international law and multilateral agreements, including in respect of human rights
- Identifying global trends and potential policy developments that could affect demographic trends in the UK
- Assessing the impact of UK policy options or proposed measures on future demographic change within the UK
- Providing evidence-based, independent advice to Parliament, ministers and the public to inform long-term policy

Demographic changes of all kinds pose multiple and profound challenges to any nation: a specific policy framework in the UK to equip us to meet those challenges is long overdue.

Complementary to such a national body, it is essential to the UK's international standing and responsibility, as well as in our own national interests, that UK overseas aid is restored to at least 0.7% of GNI.

A version of this letter has also been sent to the leaders of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green Parties. We look forward to discussing the above matters and proposal with you in greater depth.

Yours sincerely



Robin Maynard
Executive Director
Population Matters

ⁱ *The Guardian* 15 May 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/may/15/low-birthrate-is-uk-top-priority-tory-mp-tells-rightwing-conference-miriam-cates>

ⁱⁱ <https://populationmatters.org/news/2018/07/poll-74-want-to-see-a-uk-population-strategy/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Overcrowded Islands*, by Lord Hodgson (Civitas, 2020)

<https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Overcrowded-Islands1.pdf> Further information re poll in attached press release from Lord Hodgson, dated 25 May 2023

Patrons: Sir David Attenborough · Gordon Buchanan · Prof. Sir Partha Dasgupta · Prof. Paul Ehrlich · Dame Jane Goodall · Prof. John Guillebaud
Susan Hampshire · Adrian Hayes · Leilani Münter · Chris Packham · Sara Parkin · Jonathon Porritt · Malcolm Potts · Judy Ling Wong

- iv <https://populationmatters.org/news/2021/06/uk-parliament-committee-backs-family-planning-and-tackling-consumption-to-protect-biodiversity/>
- v <https://populationmatters.org/news/2016/09/state-of-nature-report-overlooks-population-growth-impact/>
- vi <https://populationmatters.org/statement-in-response-to-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review/>
- vii <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings/spillovers>
- viii <https://populationmatters.org/resources/silver-linings-not-silver-burdens-executive-summary/>
- ix <https://populationmatters.org/gilead-watch-protect-womens-rights-from-pronatal-politicians/>