Article

Understanding towns in England and Wales: population and demographic analysis

Data and analysis on towns in England and Wales, with a focus on population and demography.

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1 . Main points

- Between 2001 and 2019, population in towns rose by 12% in England and by 8% in Wales, compared with a 16% rise in cities outside of London.

- The number of 0- to 15 years-olds living in towns decreased in the North East of England and in Wales between 2001 and 2019.

- Population movement to cities and larger towns happened mostly among students and young adults, while returns to smaller and medium towns were spread out over the rest of the life course.

- Growth in 16- to 24-year-olds between 2001 and 2019 was highest in cities outside of London, linked to the presence and growth of their universities.

- While most small towns had a relatively low share of 16- to 24-year-olds, shares were higher in the small number of small towns with a university.

- Across all regions of England and Wales, the increase in 25- to 64-year-olds was greater on average in working towns than in residential towns, over the 2001 to 2019 period.

- Population aged 65 years and over in towns grew by 32% in England and 26% in Wales, over the 2001 to 2019 period.

- Smaller non-coastal towns had the highest percentage growth of people aged 65 years and over (43%), between 2001 and 2019.

- In 2019, there were large differences in the age structure of towns and cities, with less populated areas having greater shares of people aged 65 years and over.

- The share of residents aged 65 years and over was highest in smaller seaside towns that were classified as residential in 2019.

Statistician's comment

Commenting on today's figures, Hugh Stickland, Head of Strategy and Engagement at the Office for National Statistics said:

"This analysis illustrates the magnitude of demographic change that has and is taking place across the country by analysing population statistics from over 1,000 towns.

It shows how smaller towns often have different age structures and face very different challenges to larger towns and cities. The data and analysis provides useful insights for those planning housing, schools and transport in different areas."

2 . Towns and cities analysis

This article analyses population and demography trends in 1,082 towns in England and 104 in Wales and provides comparisons with Inner and Outer London, cities outside of London, and smaller built-up areas (for example, villages) in England and Wales. The aim of the article is to improve our understanding of who is living in towns and who is moving in and out of towns in England and Wales. Data on populations at a towns level, instead of the commonly used local authority level, gives important insights for local planning such as planning housing, schools or transport.

This article analyses how resident numbers and the age structure of towns in England and Wales have changed in the last two decades. Understanding the age structure of towns can provide important insights into international and internal migration, mortality and the number of births, in order to enable well targeted policies. For example, a rise of those aged 65 years and over can mean greater funding demands for health and social care in towns.

Total population and population change, 2001 to 2019

This section gives an overview of the towns' population in England and Wales in 2019 and discusses how this population changed over time and what has impacted this change.

In 2019, nearly 33 million people lived in towns in England and Wales. Medium sized towns[1] were the most populous towns with over 13 million residents. Larger towns had over 11 million residents and smaller towns over 8 million. Figure 1 shows the growth rates of towns between 2001 and 2019 and compares it with the population growth in cities outside of London, built-up areas in London, and other smaller built-up areas (for example, villages with less than 5,000 population) in England and Wales[2].

Figure 1: Population growth, England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Notes:

1. Cities exclude London.

[Data download](#)

Between 2001 and 2019, built-up areas in London were the fastest-growing places in percentage terms. Inner London had the most significant growth rate of 27%, followed by Outer London with a growth rate of 19%.

The population in cities outside of London increased by 16% during the same period. While all cities outside of London experienced population growth, comparisons across cities reveal that the population growth was quite diverse. In Manchester, the population grew by 30% between 2001 and 2019, followed by Nottingham where the population grew by 25%. In contrast, the cities of Kingston upon Hull and Stoke-on-Trent recorded a population growth of just 4% and 6%, respectively.

By 2019, the population had grown and was 11% higher across towns than its level in 2001[3]. The population growth in larger towns was, at 12%, slightly higher than in smaller towns where the population grew by 10%.

Again, the growth in towns was very diverse. Unlike in cities outside of London, some towns saw a decline in their residents' numbers. Among all towns, population decline occurred in 11% of towns; 5% of large towns, 8% of medium towns, and 14% of small towns.

Swindon, classified here as a large town in the South West, had a population growth of 24%. In contrast, in Clevedon (medium sized town in the South West) the population declined by 3%. In Durham (medium sized town in the North East) the population grew by 28%, while in Peterlee (also a medium sized town in the North East) the population declined by 11%.

Population and population change by age group, 2001 to 2019

For local planning, it is important to not only look at total population and total population change, but also to understand the age structure of the population and how it has been changing. The age structure of a population can impact labour force participation and the levels of demand for educational and healthcare services. Different age groups may be increasing or decreasing at different rates within a locality. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the 2019 population across four different age groups for small, medium and large towns in England and Wales. It again includes Inner and Outer London, cities outside of London, and other smaller built-up areas for comparison.

The population has been ageing, because of declining fertility rates and people living longer, with international migration offsetting some of these fertility and mortality trends. At a population level, ageing is measured not only by an increase in the number of those aged 65 years and over, but also by the share of those aged 65 years and over in the population[4]. The general trend that emerges from Figure 2 is that less populated areas tend to have greater shares of older people in the population and smaller shares of younger people.

Figure 2: The share of older people in the population decreases with towns' size, while the share of younger people increases with towns' size

Percentage of residents by age groups, England and Wales, mid-2019

Figure 2: The share of older people in the population decreases with towns' size, while the share of younger people increases with towns' size

Percentage of residents by age groups, England and Wales, mid-2019
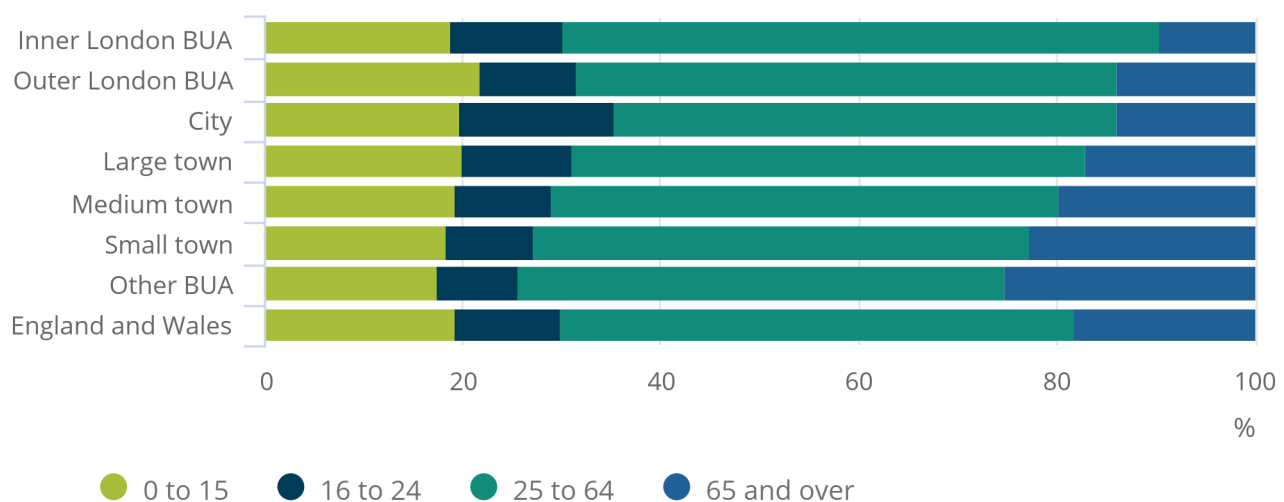
Source: Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies – Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Cities exclude London.

2. England and Wales is the total of all BUAs and BUASDs.

3. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Smaller towns were more likely to have higher shares of residents in the 65 years and over age group and lower shares in the 0- to 15-years age group, compared with medium and large towns groups. In small towns, 18% of residents were aged 0 to 15 years and 23% aged 65 years and over. The opposite was found for larger towns, with 20% of the population being aged 0 to 15 years and 17% aged 65 years and over.

Cities, as well as Inner and Outer London, followed the same trend as larger towns, with an even smaller share of people aged 65 years and over in the population. In Outer London and cities outside of London, the share of people aged 65 years and over was 14%. In 2019, Inner London had the smallest share of people aged 65 years and over in its population at just 10%.

Looking at other population groups, Inner London had the highest share of people aged 25 to 64 years, making up 60% of its population. This is likely to reflect economic opportunities in London for the working-age population. Outside of London, the share of 25- to 64-year-olds across the city, town and other categories in Figure 2 was fairly similar at 49% to 52%.

Cities outside of London had the greatest share of 16- to 24-year-olds. This is linked to the presence of major universities in cities. Nottingham in the East Midlands (22%), Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East (20%), Leeds in Yorkshire and The Humber (18%), and Manchester in the North West (18%), were the cities with the highest share of 16- to 24-year-olds. All are cities with large universities.

The same was found for towns with universities. The university towns of Bath (in the South West), Oxford (in the South East) and Cambridge (in the East of England) had the highest share of 16- to 24-year-olds among larger towns[5]. Of the total population in Bath, 23% was aged 16 to 24 years in 2019, followed by Oxford (22%) and Cambridge (21%).

Among all medium sized towns, Canterbury (in the South East) had the largest share of 16- to 24-year-olds. Canterbury is also a university town and 33% of residents were aged between 16 and 24 years.

Small towns with universities have a much different age population structure to other small towns. While most small towns have a relatively low share of 16- to 24-year-olds, small towns with universities have a high share of 16 to 24-year-olds. Aberystwyth (in Wales), reported the highest share of 16- to 24-year-olds among all towns and cities outside of London, at 38%. Similarly, in Bangor (in Wales), also a small town with a university, a high share of the population (35%) was aged between 16 and 24 years.

This section highlights two aspects. First, we see that cities held a much larger share of 16- to 24-year-olds than other areas. Secondly, and perhaps more strikingly, there was a large difference between cities and towns in their share of over 65-year-olds

Figure 3 shows population growth between 2001 and 2019 in absolute levels with Figure 4 showing percentage growth over the period. For the 25 to 64 years age group, Figure 3 shows relatively large growth of around 500,000 in each of Inner London, Outer London, cities, large towns, and medium towns. However, Figure 4 shows that in percentage terms, the growth was significantly higher for this age group in Inner London (32%) compared with the growth seen in towns (11% for large towns, 4% for small towns).

Figure 3: Population growth in small towns has occurred mainly due to increases in the 65 years and over age group

Population growth by age groups, number of people, England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Notes:

1. Cities exclude London.

In contrast to the 25 to 64 years age group, the highest growth in absolute numbers of people aged 65 years and over was in the medium and small towns, as well as in other smaller built-up areas. Figure 4 shows that the population aged 65 years and over increased by 33% in medium sized towns, 41% in small towns and by over 50% in the other smaller built-up areas. Overall, the growth rate of the 65 years and over group was much greater than that of other age groups throughout England and Wales, which reflects that people in England and Wales have been living longer over this period.

Children aged 0 to 15 years saw the highest growth in absolute numbers in Outer London, followed by large towns, while the percentage increase was highest in both Inner London and Outer London. Among the large towns Slough (in the South East and within commuting distance to London) saw the greatest growth in children in absolute numbers. Similarly, Milton Keynes (South East) saw a very high growth in absolute numbers of children.

Figure 4: The population aged 65 years and over was the fastest-growing age group in towns

Population growth by age groups, percentage, England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Notes:

1. Cities exclude London.

2. England and Wales is the total of all BUAs and BUASDs.

Cities outside of London experienced the greatest growth in the 16 to 24 years age group category. This underlines the trend that ages in cities are increasingly younger than smaller communities and that smaller towns are ageing faster. For the 16-24 age group it reflects the increase in the share of young people going to universities, which has grown strongly in many cities. For example, in the university cities of Brighton and Hove (coastal city in the South East) and Nottingham (in the East Midlands), the population aged 16 to 24 years grew by 58% and 50% between 2001 and 2019.

Further information on age-composition changes is revealed in Figure 5. This summarises the changes discussed in this section by showing changes in the proportion of each age group between 2001 and 2019. In towns, the proportion of population aged 65 years and above increased over the period while the proportion of the other age groups declined. The increase in the proportion of the over 65-years age group was larger as the size of town or built-up area reduced.

Figure 5: The share of people aged 65 years and over increased in small, medium and large towns

Change in relative age structure, percentage point change, England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Notes:

1. Cities exclude London.

2. England and Wales is the total of all BUAs and BUASDs.

The 16 to 24 years age group only increased its share of overall population in the cities category, reflecting the increased impact of universities in many cities over the 2001 to 2019 period.

Outer London saw an increase in the share of children in its population. While Inner London contained the areas with the lowest fertility rates, areas in Outer London showed the highest fertility rates within the country. In 2019, Barking and Dagenham (in Outer London) had a total fertility rate of 2.23 children per woman, one of the highest in the country.

Finally, Inner London had an increase in the share of its population within the 25 to 64 years age group. This is in contrast to the declines in the proportion of this age group seen in towns and other smaller built-up areas.

Notes for Section 2: Towns and cities analysis

1. We have grouped the towns into small, medium and large based on their 2011 Census population. See Glossary for definition.

2. Other settlements are built-up areas not included in the towns list because their 2011 Census resident population was less than 5,000 people.

3. For comparison: the towns' population of England and Wales increased by 6% between 2009 and 2019.

4. Other measures on ageing and age structure are available in Overview of the UK population: January 2021.

5. Bath, Cambridge and Oxford are classified here as towns. Please see Glossary for further information.

3 . Towns and cities cohort analysis, 2009 to 2019

The previous section looked at total population, age structure and population change in towns, cities and other small places. This section focuses on the components of population change to understand the above described trends better by trying to track where cohorts have migrated to.

A cohort represents a group of people all born within the same specified time period. Figure 6 is based on 10-year cohorts. The figure takes the number of those aged 0 to 9 years in a place in 2009 and compares this number with the number of people aged 10 to 19 years in 2019. This process was repeated for all cohorts up to those aged 70 to 79 years in 2009 (aged 80 to 89 years in 2019). Only two factors can change the size of such a cohort – migration and mortality. This section shows the net impact of migration and mortality on the size and age composition of towns, cities and other places in England and Wales. It helps to understand movement in and out of towns, cities and other places disaggregated by age as reasons for moving differ across the life course.

Figure 6 shows the clear impact of mortality in the older age groups. For England and Wales, the 70 to 79 years cohort, that became aged 80 to 89 years, declined by 37% between 2009 and 2019. A similar pattern was found in all places including towns and cities.

Figure 6: Larger towns and cities experienced strong gains of those aged 20 to 29 years in the decade to 2019

Change in size of 10-year age cohorts, percentage, England and Wales, mid-2009 to mid-2019

Notes:

1. Age as in 2019. These cohorts were 10 years younger in 2009.

2. Cities exclude London.

3. England and Wales is the total of all BUAs and BUASDs.

Data download

What particularly stands out is the cohort that became 20 to 29 years in 2019. Figure 6 shows large increases of this cohort in Inner London and cities but also increases in larger towns. In contrast, in medium and small towns as well as other smaller built-up areas this cohort declined. Migration is often age-specific, and this trend could be explained by moves to attend higher education institutions as they tend to be located in cities and larger towns, or by moves for work opportunities. It is therefore not uncommon for those places to have a net inflow of migrants of this age. The large increase in London is most likely explained by both internal and international migration.

In Understanding towns in England and Wales: an introduction we distinguished between towns that have high levels of jobs and others that are more residential in nature. Also, in this article the towns in England and Wales have been grouped according to their workplace and residential characteristics as described in the glossary. The analysis found that working towns saw an increase in the cohort (10%) that became 20 to 29years in 2019, while this cohort declined in residential towns (11%).

The 30 to 39 years cohort (aged 20 to 29 years in 2009) declined in major cities, while it increased in all other places. Given the cities include a large proportion of university students, this cohort decline is likely driven by a proportion of the university graduates moving from the cities at the end of their education, whether for work opportunities elsewhere or to commute from more rural areas.

The next four older cohorts showed a gradual trend of moving away from urban settings later in life. Specifically, smaller and medium towns as well as other smaller built-up areas showed gains in the cohort aged 40 to 49 in 2019 (aged 30 to 39 in 2009), while London, other cities and larger towns saw a decline of the same cohort. This can reflect university graduates and those who have established earnings leaving cities and larger towns and returning home. This trend could also be explained by people starting a family, moving to places where housing (stock and price) and the living environment and lifestyle is more favourable to young families with young children.

Overall, the above Figure 6 suggests that movement to cities and larger towns happened for the most part as the 10 to 19 years cohort moved into the 20 to 29 years cohort, while returns to smaller and medium towns were spread out over the rest of the life course, with trends becoming more stable across places after post retirement moves.

Focusing on large towns revealed that Oxford (in the South East) had the greatest gains in 20- to 29-year olds (aged 10 to 19 years in mid-2009). In Oxford, the cohort aged 20 to 29years in 2019 more than doubled in the 10 years since 2009. This will be explained by the large number of university students in the town. Furthermore, the number of people aged 30 to 39 years in mid-2019 was 52% lower than the number of 20- to 29-year-olds in mid-2009. This suggests that university students leave Oxford shortly after their studies. The pattern was observed across many cities and other large towns. Another example was Preston (in the North West) where the cohorts aged 30 to 39 years (aged 20 to 29 years in mid-2009) declined by 30%. However, there were some exceptions, such as Bristol, which took in a large number of young people and retained them (seeing a decline of only 6% in the 30 to 39 years cohort) which could be linked to work opportunities.

Out of all towns, the medium sized town of Durham (in the North East) saw the greatest increase in the cohorts aged 20 to 29 years (aged 10 to 19 years in 2009). The town also saw a decline in the cohorts aged 30 to 39 years(aged 20 to 29 years in mid-2009). Like Oxford, Durham is also a university town which can explain this trend.

The same picture was found in the university town of Aberystwyth (small town in Wales). The town saw a great increase in the cohorts aged 20- to 29-years old (aged 10- to 19-years old in 2009) followed by a decline in the cohorts aged 30- to 39-years old (aged 20- to 29-years old in mid-2009).

Ashford (medium town in the South East) saw a large increase in the working age cohorts aged 30- to 49-years old (aged 20- to 39-years old in mid-2009). Ashford is classified as a working town with several large firms located there taking advantage of its connectivity to markets via the M20 and high-speed rail.

Tilbury (in the East of England) saw the biggest contractions in the cohort aged 60 to 69 years (aged 50 to 59 years in mid-2009). The cohort declined by 24% suggesting residents moving away from Tilbury after retirement.

In Freshwater, a small seaside town on the Isle of Wight, the cohort aged 60 to 69 years (aged 50 to 59 years in mid-2009) and the cohort aged 70 to 79 years (aged 60 to 69 years in mid-2009) increased. This indicates that Freshwater is a popular retirement town. Similar trends were found in other small seaside towns like Budleigh Salterton (in Devon) and Walton-on-the-Naze (in Essex).

4 . Towns local level analysis, 2001 to 2019

Departing from comparisons with other areas, the data presented in this section refer only to comparisons of towns, which are the main focus of this series of articles. It drills down to a local level to understand how population change varies amongst towns across regions of England and Wales and types of town.

Between 2001 and 2019, the overall towns' population grew in every English region and in Wales, although there was substantial variation between regions. The population in towns in the East of England grew by 16%; four times the 4% growth seen in towns in the North East region during this time period.

Figure 7 shows a comparison of population growth by regions of England and Wales and by levels of deprivation.

Figure 7: In the North East towns with a low level of deprivation experienced greater population growth than towns with a high level of deprivation

Population growth by income deprivation, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Figure 7: In the North East towns with a low level of deprivation experienced greater population growth than towns with a high level of deprivation

Population growth by income deprivation, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

● High Deprivation   ● Low Deprivation
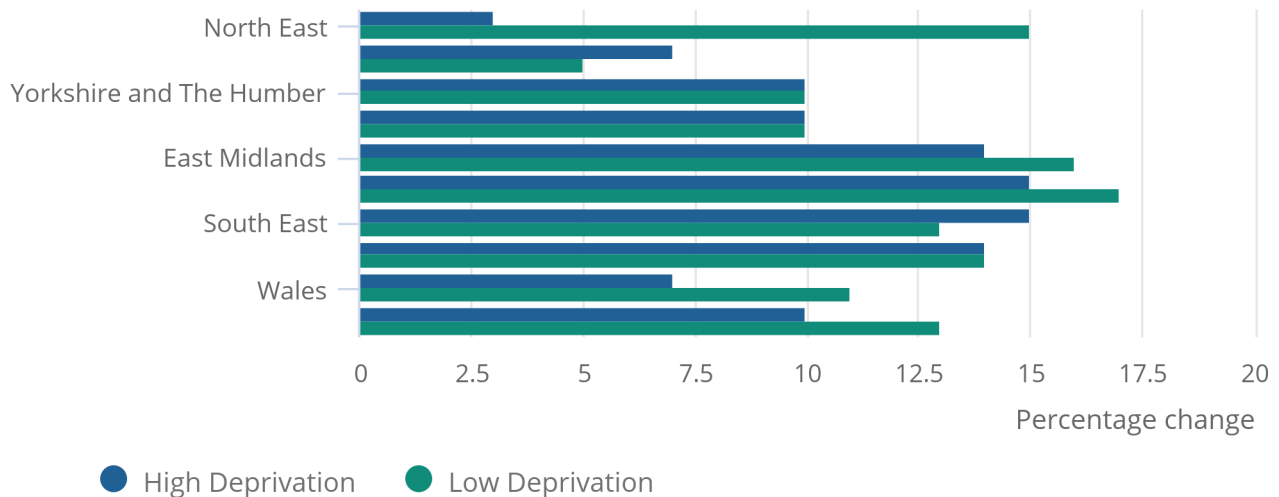
Source: Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies – Office for National Statistics

In the South West, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and The Humber, population growth in towns with both low and high levels of deprivation was roughly similar.

In the North East, towns with low levels of deprivation experienced a growth of 15% between 2001 and 2019, while towns with high levels of deprivation saw a growth of only 3% over the same time period. The number of towns with low levels of deprivation in the North East is very small and the high population growth in low deprivation towns in the region was driven by growth in towns like Ingleby Barwick and Durham. Both towns experienced particularly high population growth of 53% and 28% respectively.

In contrast, for towns in the North West and in the South East, growth was higher in deprived towns compared with low deprivation towns. In the North West, this was driven by differences in growth between residential and working towns. Low deprivation working towns in the North West had the highest growth of 10%, however, the total population in low deprivation residential towns across the North West did not grow between 2001 and 2019. While, the population in some low deprivation residential towns in the North West increased (for example in Lymm or Adlington), it decreased in others (for example in Billinge) which resulted in a negligible net change. In contrast, high deprivation towns in the North West saw growth regardless of their residential or working status.

Further analysis showed that towns around the Liverpool-Manchester corridor continue to be attractive for workers. In particular, population growth across the towns within the Manchester Travel to Work Area was much higher overall than for towns across the rest of the North West. In the South East, population growth in higher deprivation areas was also driven by working towns.

Figure 8 shows that in nearly all regions, the population growth was higher in working towns than in residential towns. The only exception was the North East, where population growth between 2001 and 2019 was similar in working and residential towns. Instead of working and residential status, the level of deprivation explained growth better in the North East.

Figure 8: In most regions of England and in Wales, population growth was higher in working towns than in residential towns

Population growth by workplace characteristics, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Figure 8: In most regions of England and in Wales, population growth was higher in working towns than in residential towns

Population growth by workplace characteristics, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019
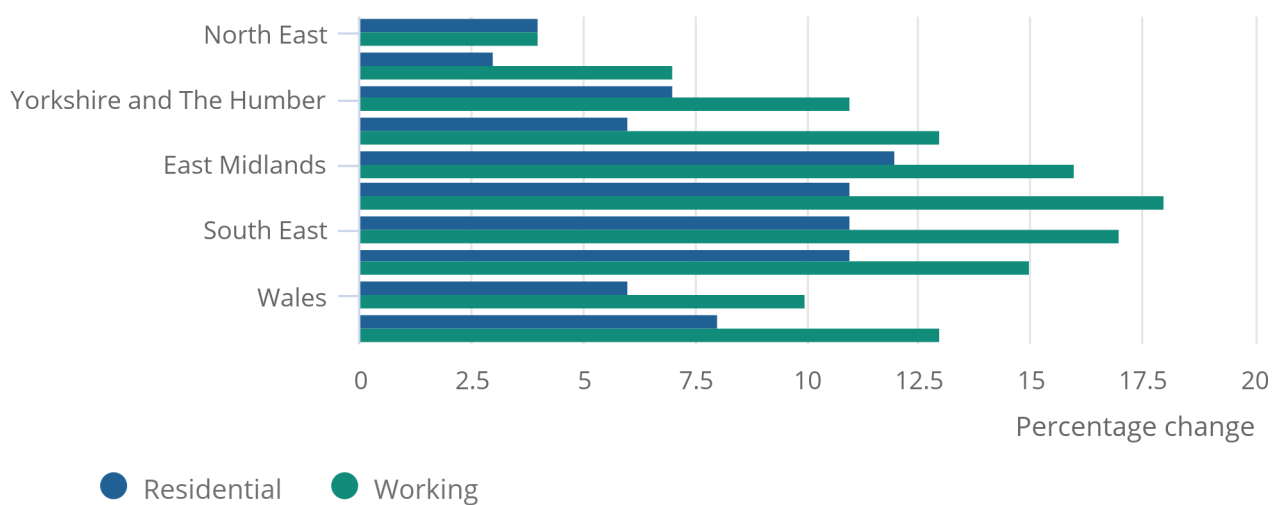
Source: Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies – Office for National Statistics

For all other English regions and Wales, however, the relative working versus residential status of towns appears to have been more important than the relative deprivation levels in explaining population growth. In our previous Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis article, the working towns were shown on average to not only have higher levels of job density on average but to also have experienced greater employment growth rates over the 2009 to 2019 period. Working age people are attracted to towns experiencing growth in employment. When comparing the total working age population living in towns, the percentage increase in population over the 2001 to 2019 period was uniformly greater among working towns when compared with residential towns for each region.

A second reason why population growth might have been lower in the residential towns is due to the age of the population. Older adults are less likely to have children. In addition those families with older children may also see those children or young adults leave for education or employment opportunities elsewhere. The data suggest this may have been most likely to happen in the lower deprivation residential towns. Lower deprivation residential towns had a higher share of 65-year-olds and over and a lower share of 0- to 15-year-olds compared with higher deprivation residential towns. Moreover, population growth was lower in smaller towns compared with larger towns and over 80% of residential towns were classified as small towns in our analysis.

Figure 9 shows the percentage population change in towns by regions of England and Wales by the age groups used in earlier analysis in this article. Towns in the North East saw an increase in the 65 years and over age group but simultaneously a fall in the population in younger age groups; 0 to 15 years and 16- to 24-year olds. Similarly towns in Wales saw an increase in the 65 years and over age group but simultaneously a fall in the population in younger age groups; 0 to 15 years. Towns in the East Midlands and the South East saw the greatest growth in the 65 years and over age group.

Figure 9: In all English regions and Wales, the population aged 65 years and over was the fastest-growing age group in towns

Population growth by age groups, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Figure 9: In all English regions and Wales, the population aged 65 years and over was the fastest-growing age group in towns

Population growth by age groups, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019
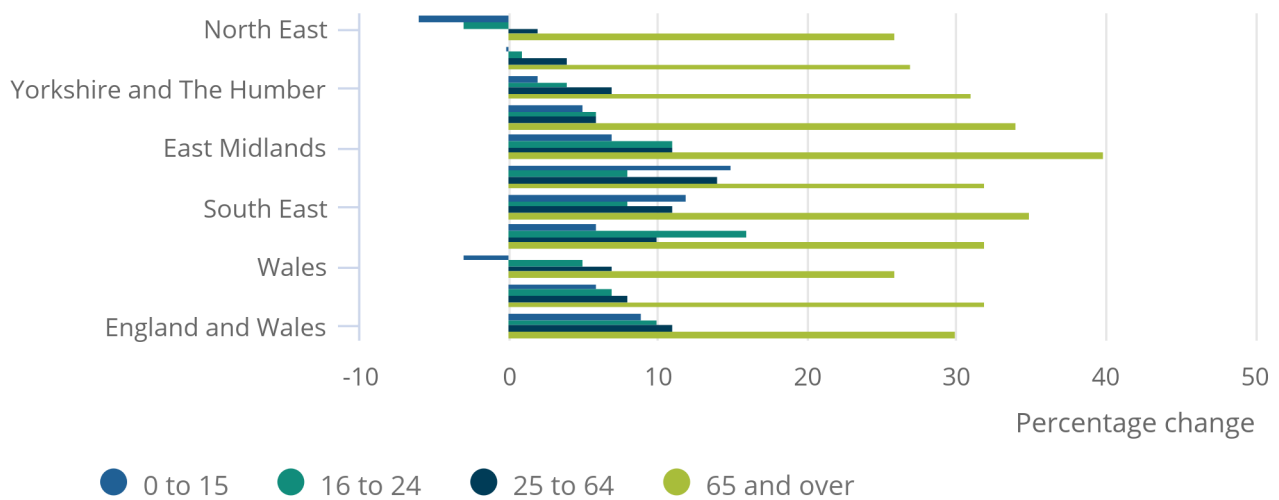
Source: Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies – Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. England and Wales is the total of all BUAs and BUASDs.

Figure 10 explores difference in growth by age groups by distinguishing again between residential and working towns.

Overall, a similar trend was seen in residential and working towns in the older age group. The growth rate of people aged over 65 years in residential towns was either higher than, or the same as, in working towns. Working towns, however, had a higher absolute number of people in this category, which shows the importance of focusing on the older age group in towns classified as working, despite those towns having a lower share of their overall population in this age group.

Figure 10 shows that the two youngest age groups, which cover those aged 0- to 24-year-olds, increased in working towns in England and Wales, apart from in the North East. These age groups increased in residential towns in the Midlands and southern regions of England. At the same time these groups have declined in residential towns in the northern regions of England and Wales.

Figure 10: The growth rate of over 65-year-olds in residential towns was higher than in working towns in most English regions and in Wales

Population growth by age groups and workplace characteristics, percentage, towns in England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

Data download

From previous ONS publications we know that people aged 65-years and over made up higher proportions of residents in coastal towns. Table 1 shows the share of people aged 65-years and over in 2019 was highest in smaller seaside towns at 30% and smallest in larger non-coastal towns at 18%. However, when looking at the growth rate of people aged 65-years, non-coastal towns experienced a greater percentage growth compared with seaside towns. Specifically, smaller non-coastal towns saw the highest percentage growth of people aged 65-years and over (43%).

The share of residents aged 65-years and over was the highest in those smaller seaside towns that were classified as residential. This probably reflects the popularity of retirement to seaside locations. In Budleigh Salterton, a small residential seaside town on the coast in East Devon, 45% of its residents were aged 65-years and over in 2019. When looking at the growth rate of people aged 65-years and over, smaller non-coastal towns like Romsey (in the South East) showed high growth rates. In Romsey the population aged 65-years and over grew by 72%.

Table 1: Population and population growth by coastal town status, England and Wales, mid-2001 to mid-2019

	Aged 65 years and over, 2001	Aged 65 years and over, 2019	Share in 2001	Share in 2019	% growth
Larger non-coastal town	2,760,080	3,607,241	15	18	31
Larger other coastal town	244,026	290,278	17	20	19
Larger seaside town	571,335	691,708	22	24	21
Smaller non-coastal town	1,094,639	1,568,147	17	22	43
Smaller other coastal town	72,744	100,774	19	24	39
Smaller seaside town	145,508	183,613	25	30	26

Source: Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies – Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. "Other coastal town" refers to non-seaside town. For more information see Glossary.

More detailed analysis on coastal and non-coastal towns showed that, for all regions in England, growth was higher inland compared with coastal towns. In contrast to England, in Wales populations saw a greater growth in population resident in coastal towns compared with non-coastal towns. In Wales, the coastal population grew by 10% between 2001 and 2019 and by only 7% in non-coastal areas. This was mainly driven by growth in Rhoose, Penarth, Llandudno Junction, and Bangor, where the population grew by 20% or more in the same period. All those areas were classified as low deprivation areas. Bangor is an especially interesting case as it is classified as a smaller working seaside town. While most smaller seaside towns in England and Wales only saw substantial growth in towns classified as residential, Bangor saw an increase in its overall population, which was mostly driven by a rise in the population aged 16- to 24-years due to its university town status.

5 . Data

Understanding towns in England and Wales: Population and demographic analysis
Dataset | Released 24 February 2021
Towns in England and Wales: towns list, cities list, classification and population data.

6 . Glossary

Towns, Cities and Greater London

This article is part of a series in which the Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides new data and analysis on towns in England and Wales. Therefore, the definition of a "town" in this output, follows on from previous ONS publications using built-up area subdivision boundaries (or built-up area boundaries where no subdivisions exist). Built-up areas (BUA) were created as part of the 2011 Census outputs and refer to urban areas defined as "irreversibly urban in character". To be classified as a town, the built-up area's 2011 Census population had to be between 5,000 and 225,000 (see Table 2). Within this context, 1,082 urban settlements in England and 104 in Wales were identified.

Table 2: Urban settlements used in the analysis, England and Wales, 2011

	Population size	Counts	England	Wales
Small town	5,000 – 20,000	748	662	86
Medium town	20,000 – 75,000	347	331	16
Large town	75,000 – 225,000	91	89	2

Source: Census 2011

It needs to be recognised that this is a statistical approach to examining towns, and that not every place in the list will have "town" status. Some of the smaller built-up areas included will be villages, and there will be quite a few of the larger places included that are small cities. However, the aim has been to make sure as many towns as possible are included within the analysis and for statistical analysis it makes sense to group these medium sized urban settlements together. We chose the upper population limit of 225,000 to include the largest towns in the country, namely Reading and Northampton. More information on this town classification can be found in our previous publications.

Please note that the built-up areas geography is not defined for Scotland or Northern Ireland. Instead, Scotland has its own definitions of urban areas, known as settlements and localities. These could be used for a similar type of towns analysis for Scotland but, because the underlying definitions differ to those in England and Wales, it is not possible to make direct comparisons. Therefore, our towns analysis is focused on England and Wales only.

For comparison purposes any built-up area boundaries with under 5,000 residents on 2011 Census Day was classified in the main text as "other smaller built-up areas" and in the figures as "other BUA" and mostly covers smaller settlements. Built-up areas that covered school, hospital, unpopulated or sparsely populated airfields, universities and airports have been removed from the dataset. Built-up areas in London with 5,000 residents or above have been split into Inner and Outer London. Built-up areas and built-up area subdivisions with below 5,000 residents in London have been classified as "other". Cities in this publication were based upon built-up area boundaries outside the London region with population above 225,000. This article includes 19 cities.

Seaside towns and other coastal towns

In this article, we used the same definition and classification of coastal towns used in the ONS publication Coastal Towns in England and Wales released on 6 October 2020. Following this article, coastal towns have been split by size and between seaside towns and other coastal (non-seaside) towns, depending on whether the town has a tourist beach and associated visitor attractions or whether the town is focused on other activities such as being a port town or a town with an industrial heritage.

Working and residential towns

Using a framework proposed in our previous Office for National Statistics (ONS) towns article, the towns in England and Wales have been grouped according to their workplace and residential characteristics.

First, they have been grouped into three categories depending on their level of job density: working towns (with high job density), residential towns (with low job density) or mixed (with medium-level job density). Then, they have been grouped on the levels of income deprivation among residents (lower deprivation towns, mid-deprivation towns and higher deprivation towns). Combining these two approaches creates nine groupings for the towns, with four of these groups being clearly distinct from each other: the higher deprivation working towns, the higher deprivation residential towns, the lower deprivation working towns and the lower deprivation residential towns.

7 . Data sources and quality

Output data haven been taken from the ONS population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies. Those are mid-year population estimates. Mid-year refers to 30 June of any given year. They are the official source of estimated population size in between censuses. The last census took place in 2011 and the next Census Day will be Sunday 21 March 2021. Population estimates are subject to adjustments after the next census. For more information on the population estimates please see the ONS Methodology guidance and Population estimates by output areas, electoral, health and other geographies, England and Wales: mid-2019. Estimates at a greater level of disaggregation, for example, smaller towns and smaller settlements, have to be treated with particular caution. Higher volatility can be expected within the data for these smaller settlements. The mid-year population estimates by different geographies can be downloaded from Nomis.

Measures of deprivation follow both the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for English towns and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) for Welsh towns. The measure is based on the proportion of the residential population in a town experiencing deprivation relating to low income. For more information on the methods see our previous publication. For more detailed information on the English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 please see The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 research report. More detailed information on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 Technical Report (PDF, 2MB) is available.

8 . Future developments

This article is the fourth of a series of towns articles being produced by the [Centre for Subnational Analysis](#) at the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It builds upon the recently published article [Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis](#). Further articles in this series will follow in 2021.

9 . Related links

[Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis](#)
Article | Released 7 December 2020
Data and analysis on towns in England and Wales, with a focus on population and employment growth.

[Coastal towns in England and Wales: October 2020](#)
Article | Released 6 October 2020
Data and analysis on seaside and other coastal towns in England and Wales.

[Understanding towns in England and Wales: an introduction](#)
Article | Released 9 July 2019
The first in a series of articles that provide new data and analysis on towns in England and Wales, to help inform policy.