



# The UK's population problem

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*This paper was written to reveal truths which have been officially obfuscated for years. In 2008, however, a ministerial pledge not to allow UK population to exceed 70 million made the UK the first country in the EU with a population stabilisation strategy. Additional policies and specific measures introduced by the new 2010 Coalition government have yet to show results.*

## Key points

**\* UK population reached 61.8 million in 2009 and was projected to reach 77 million in 2050.**

**\* Reversing population growth is one of the measures needed to ensure environmental survival and a better quality of life. It can be done by voluntary and peaceful means, given political and individual will to act without delay.**

**\* In the UK two-thirds of projected population growth between 2008 and 2033 is either directly (45 per cent) or indirectly (23 per cent) attributable to migration.**

**\* A UK population policy of balanced (zero net) migration and voluntary reduction in family size, as first proposed by OPT in 2003, could stabilize our numbers at below 70 million by 2050.**

**\* All mainstream political parties now understand the implications of unfettered population growth, and the 2010 Coalition government has policies in place to curb it – but there's more to be done.**

## Unsustainable population growth

UK population growth is environmentally unsustainable, from a national and international point of view, and if it is environmentally unsustainable it is also economically unsustainable, for without ecologically healthy land our economy will not be able to support its own people without causing damage to the environment of other nations.

The UK is made up of four constituent countries - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together, this territory is one of the most crowded areas in the world, yet by mid-2009, according to [ONS estimates](#) released in 2010, our numbers reached 61.8 million. The number of people living in the UK has increased sixfold since 1800 and by more than a fifth since 1950, and the environmental impacts of this growth are already clear - in both the relentless development pressures on our finite supply of land and natural resources and the impacts of UK consumption on other parts of the world.

UK population grew by a staggering 394,000 in the year to mid-2009, an increase equivalent to a city larger than Cardiff. [Officially projected](#) in 2009 to rise by about 0.7 per cent a year to reach 71.6 million in 2033 - adding more than another London - population growth in the UK remains at near-record levels.

Growth at the 2008-09 rate of 0.7 per cent a year, if continued, would take our numbers to 115 million before the end of this century. England alone is home to 52 million people, making it the fifth most densely populated country in the world - if small city and island-states are excluded - with its inhabitants packed in at 398 per square kilometre. That's even more crowded than Japan. Those who already inhabit the UK recognise the dangers: OPT's July 2009 [YouGov Poll](#) showed that 51 per cent of the public thought the ideal population size for the UK was less than 60 million: only 8 per cent wanted it to be higher than 60 million.

The amount of land available to each inhabitant of the UK - to provide for our ecological needs and to absorb the waste products of our consumption - has shrunk to nearly a tenth of that available in 1750. The UK is slightly smaller than Oregon, a single state of the USA. We have a surface area of 24 million hectares of land and inland water to absorb the environmental impacts of all our consumption - that's less than half a hectare (one acre) each - and this environmental space is shrinking every year.

**Links:** ONS Estimates: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cgi/nugget.asp?ID=6>

ONS 2008-based official projections: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/pproj1009.pdf>

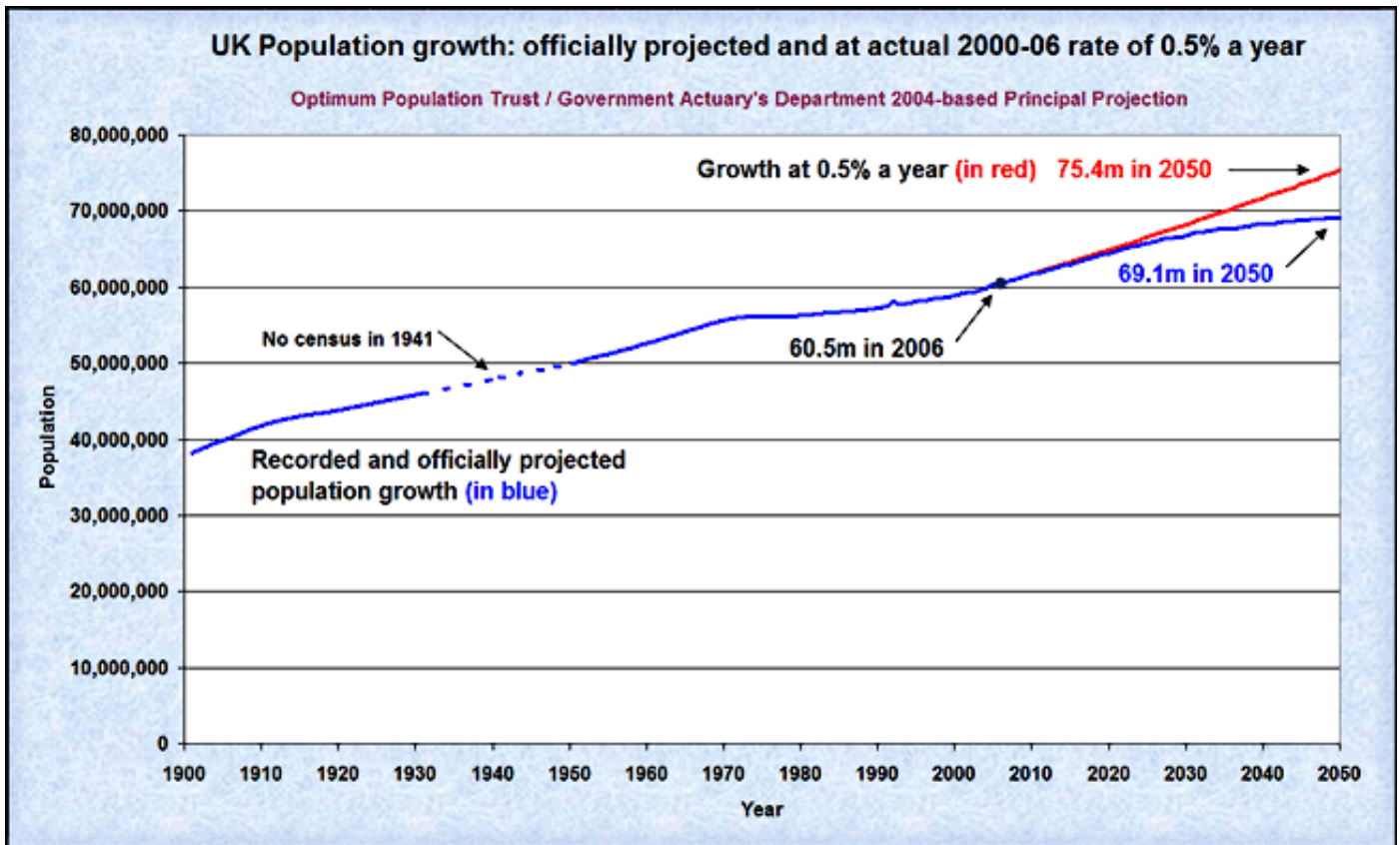
OPT YouGov Poll: <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/submissions/YouGov11Jul09.xls>

Yet until 2008 no mainstream political party in the UK had a policy aimed at stabilising or gradually reducing today's environmentally unsustainable population. Beginning to recognise the strength of public feeling on this issue, and the underlying arguments for population stabilisation, policies began to change ahead of the 2010 General Election. In 2010, the new coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government began to work out how to implement its promised cap on net inward migration to bring the level down from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands. Some initiatives have also been taken which may - as a side effect - reduce unwanted pregnancies and incentives to have large families.

**2008: GOVERNMENT CAPS POPULATION GROWTH**

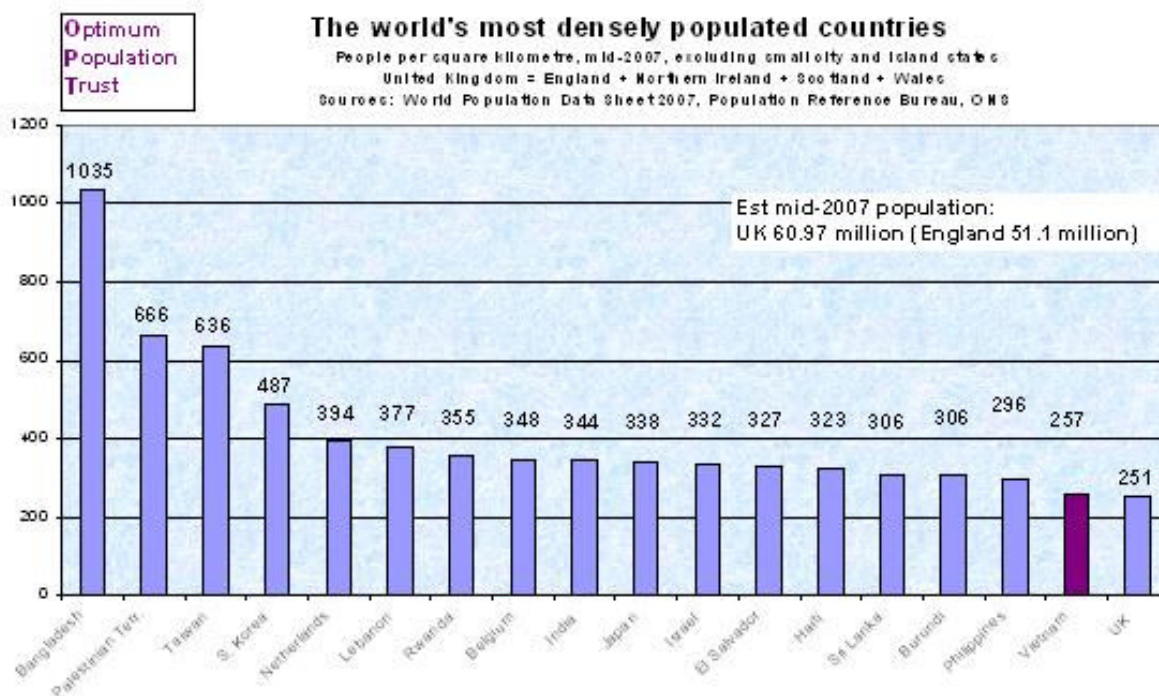
"This government isn't going to allow the population to go up to 70 million" new Immigration Minister Phil Woolas announced in an interview with *The Times* on 18 October 2008 and subsequently confirmed. OPT welcomed the long-awaited reversal of government pro-population growth policies and continues to campaign for UK population to be allowed to decrease to a long-term environmentally sustainable level - well below the 62 million of 2010..

**CHART 1: HISTORIC AND PROJECTED UK POPULATION GROWTH 2006-2050**



*Note: This graph is based on official projections which have been superseded by the ONS 2008-based principal population projection published in 2009.*

CHART 2: THE WORLD'S MOST DENSELY POPULATED COUNTRIES, 2007



## What's causing UK population to grow so fast?

Annual population growth is the result of two main factors: **natural increase** (more births than deaths) and **net migration** (more immigrants than emigrants). The number of **births** each year is affected by changes in the Total Fertility Rate\* (TFR, or births a woman is expected to have during her lifetime) and influenced by the age composition of a population. For example, if there is a high proportion of young people in a population resulting from an earlier "baby boom", they might become the source of a future surge in births. On average parents in the UK have decided that large families are not for them: in 2007 the total fertility rate (TFR\*) was **1.9 children per woman**, up from a record low of 1.63 in 2001, but below the replacement rate of an average 2.1 children needed to stabilise population in the long term.

Britons are marrying later in life, having children later in life, and dying later too - affecting the number of **deaths** each year. With expected increasing **life expectancy**, boys born in 2005-7 could expect to live to the age of 88.1 years and girls to 91.5 years. Men aged 65 in 2004-6 could expect to live another 16.9 years and women 19.9 years, which contributes to the **Ageing** of the UK population. Births have exceeded deaths every year since 1901, except in 1976. But uncomfortable though it has been to say so, the main cause of UK population growth remains high net inward migration flows and the effects of this on the number of births. "Of the 5.6 million natural increase projected between 2008 and 2033," reported the ONS in its 2008-based Population Projections, "only 3.3 million would occur if net migration were zero (at each and every age)...Thus just over two-thirds of the projected increase in the population over the period 2008 to 2033 is either directly or indirectly due to migration." Of this, 45 per cent is directly attributable and 23 per cent indirectly.

Annual population growth has quadrupled since the 1970s. Continued growth at the officially projected rate would involve adding a population of nearly 10 million - more than London's - to the UK by 2033, with all its needs for additional housing, energy and power supplies, reservoirs, schools, hospitals, transport, shops, waste disposal, prisons - and all its impacts in the form of waste and emissions. Those who argue for population growth will not answer the question of what they think is an environmentally sustainable level, nor at what level they believe growth should stop. Our numbers cannot grow for ever.

## Population density, overcrowding and environmental impacts

Government views of acceptable levels of population density which have been based traditionally on the fact that barely a tenth of UK land has been urbanised do not take into account the environmental impacts of human numbers in relation to the amount they consume and resulting damage to the environment. Population density figures show degrees of overcrowding in a simple, graphic way. And ecological footprinting, a methodology that has become much more sophisticated in recent years, demonstrates the environmental impact of its population both on the land it inhabits and the lands inhabited by other peoples. The UK, in OPT's 2010 [Overpopulation Index](#), was ranked 17<sup>th</sup> of 130 countries.

## Population distribution

London and the south-east of England are among the most densely populated areas in the world. Londoners have been moving out to suburbs and the countryside in record numbers, but finding these areas also under growing population pressure. Just as redistributing greenhouse gas emissions is no solution to climate change, population redistribution provides no long-term solution to environmental sustainability - total population numbers need to *decrease both in the UK and worldwide, alongside efforts to reduce people's individual environmental impacts.*

## Does our government still have an expansionist population policy?

No, but there's more to be done. You don't have to let population grow by another 10 million. With an annual decrease of just over 0.25 per cent from 2010, it could reach 55 million instead of 77 million in 2050. OPT's recommended sustainable population policy is to encourage couples voluntarily to "stop at two" children; to make greater efforts to prevent unwanted conceptions (particularly among teenagers), to balance migration so that the people entering the country as migrants do not exceed those leaving it, and to make better employment use of our existing, though ageing, population. That way our numbers can be allowed to stabilise and reduce gradually to a lower, environmentally sustainable level.

Links: Overpopulation Index: <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/overpopulationindex.pdf>

Stop at Two: <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/stopattwo.briefing.pdf>

### OPT POPULATION POLICY

OPT campaigns for policies to achieve environmentally sustainable population levels both globally and in the UK. The ecological issue is one of population numbers, resource demands and the environmental impacts created by different sizes of population at given levels of affluence and technology. For more details see the [Fertility, Population policy projections, Briefings and submissions](#) and other sections of this website. OPT recommends the following population policies:

Globally, that full access to family planning should be provided to all those who do not have it, that couples should be encouraged voluntarily to "Stop at Two" children to lessen the impact of family size on the environment, and that this should be part of a holistic approach involving better education and equal rights for women.

In the UK, that population should be allowed to stabilise and decrease gradually until it reaches an environmentally sustainable level, by bringing immigration into numerical balance with emigration, by making greater efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies, and by encouraging couples voluntarily to "Stop at Two" children.

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Based on the original 2003 version, various items were updated by the author until 2010.