

Horizon scanning: Demographics

## **Changing population**

**The future of sport and physical activity**

**Part one – Identity and belonging**

May 2026

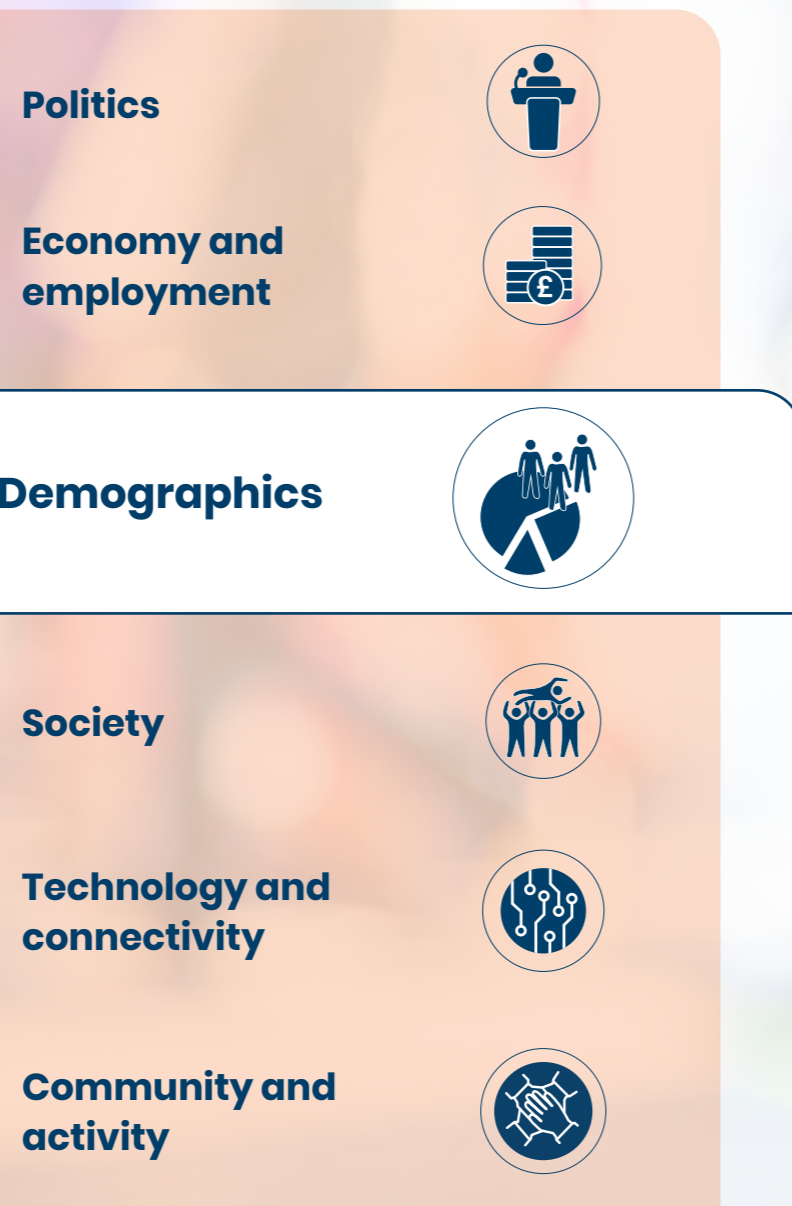
# Horizon scanning

As part of our Horizon Scanning theme on demographics, this series explores how population change is reshaping who we are as a nation and what that means for sport and physical activity.

Sport England's [Horizon Scanning](#) helps us look beyond the immediate and understand the long-term shifts shaping sport and physical activity. We identified 16 trends across six themes: politics, economy and employment, demographics, technology and connectivity, society and community and activity.

We examined how these trends and changes across these themes may impact on the sport and physical activity sector as well as people's attitudes and behaviours to physical activity. You can explore the individual trends under each of these themes in our Horizon Scanning report [here](#).

## Themes:



**Population change is relatively slow moving but is one of the most significant overarching themes identified through our horizon scanning work. Demographic shifts are reshaping who we are as a nation – influencing how we live, age, and take part in sport and physical activity.**

To understand these changes and possible implications, we commissioned [Trajectory](#), a specialist trends and foresight agency, who identified nine interconnected population trends which are listed below. These trends draw on evidence from the 2021 Census, wider national and international research, and consultation with stakeholders.

These findings are explored in a series of three parts which each focus on different elements of demographic change. Each part groups related trends to show how they interact and combine to form broader themes shaping the future of sport and physical activity:

### Part one

#### Identity and belonging

- A. Changing population dynamics
- B. Changing diversity in England
- C. Immigration and integration

### Part two

#### Ageing and health

- A. Older and more diverse
- B. Healthier ageing – but not equally
- C. Increasing disability in England

### Part three

#### Generations and place

- A. Widening socioeconomic groups
- B. Rural and urban shifts
- C. Young Britons

# Identity and belonging

This is the first of a three-part series focusing on demographic changes – specifically here we explore three interconnected trends: changing population dynamics, changing diversity in England, and immigration and integration – to understand how identity and belonging are changing in England. It highlights the importance of inclusive, culturally relevant, and locally grounded approaches to sport and physical activity.



Millennials are now England's largest generation, 22% (12.2m) in 2021

## A. Changing population dynamics

Wider shifts in the make-up of our population are underway. How we age is changing, with greater diversity in both pre-family and later-life experiences. Some people act 'younger for longer,' impacted by housing costs, while others enjoy longer, 'mature and free' post-family life stages creating a more individualised and less age-centric life journey.

Housing tenure is becoming a key factor in how we think about life stages and social patterns across England. Private renting is rising, while later life renting and mortgages will have an impact.

Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) are now England's largest generation, increasingly shaping national government priorities and culture.

### KEY FACTS

Millennials accounted for around **22% (12.2m)** of England's population in 2021.

The number of people aged 65+ renting privately is projected to **exceed one million by 2033** – up from 0.5 million in 2025.

**Growth of private renting** into later life is reshaping housing and financial security.

The meaning of **age and life stage is shifting**, with extended early adulthood and delayed family formation.

Sources: Wilmot & Nelson, *Complicated Lives, Trajectory Analysis 2024*; ONS 2022; *English Housing Survey 2023*.

### Potential impact:

Shifting life stages, housing, and changing generational power will shape society over the next decade.

- Later-life renting and mortgages, alongside continued economic and health inequalities, risk creating significant difficulties for those entering older age.
- Life stages will become more individual and less defined by age, challenging traditional demographic models. Sport and physical activity approaches should focus less on chronological age and more on lifestyle and life stage.
- As millennials' preferences increasingly shape culture and policy and more people rent and work later in life with reduced disposable income, opportunities must remain flexible, inclusive, and affordable for all life stages.

## B. Changing diversity in England

Cultural diversity continues to grow, especially from Asian communities – though the largest increase since 2011 has been among people identifying as ‘White Other’. Most of this diversity is concentrated in urban areas.

Religion is changing, too: the proportion of people reporting ‘No religion’ rose to 37.2%, up from 25.2% in 2011. The number of people identifying as Muslim increased from 2.7 million in 2011 to 3.9 million in 2021.

There’s also increasing diversity in gender and sexual orientation, including among older generations.

### KEY FACTS

**+1.3m increase** in Asian population (people identifying as Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh) (2011–2021).

**+1.2m increase** in Muslim population (2011–2021).

7% – The North East of England remains the **least diverse region** of the UK – with only 7% of residents identifying as Asian, Black, Mixed or Other.

14% – gap in proportion of active **over-65s** between White British (53%) and Black (39%) Britons.

Sources: UK Census 2021; Sport England Active Lives 2023–2024; ONS 2022.

### Potential impact:

England will become increasingly diverse due to both migration and higher birth rates among some population groups, especially in cities.

- Identities will grow more complex and intersectional, making communities harder to define, understand and monitor.
- Lack of diverse role models, cultural awareness, or workforce representation risks exclusion of certain communities.
- Sport and physical activity can foster social cohesion – if the opportunities and its workforce reflect diverse interests and needs.
- Addressing misconceptions about certain groups and adapting offers to cultural needs will be essential for genuine inclusion.

## C. Immigration and integration

International migration has risen steadily – by 2021, one in six UK residents were born outside the UK, up by 2.5 million since 2011. While EU migration declined after Brexit, non-EU migration has grown. Most migrants are aged 18–29, and study remains the main reason for moving to the UK.

Overall, migrants report strong integration into British life, though identification with ‘English’ identity tends to be lower.

### KEY FACTS

**95% of migrants** live in cities or other urban areas.

**+2.5m increase** in migrant population since 2011.

Net migration is expected to account for much of the UK’s **population growth** over the next 20 years.

Sources: UK Census 2021

### Potential impact:

Migration looks to remain high but lower than recent peaks, continuing to shape the UK’s workforce and demographics. A rapidly changing government position on migration will impact on how this trend develops.

- Migration will help fill key workforce gaps, with potential for a sport and physical activity workforce that better reflects the interests and needs of the population.
- Urban–rural divides may deepen due to differing migration experiences. Sport and activity opportunities must remain flexible, inclusive, and reflect the needs of communities.
- Understanding the first and second generation migrant experiences are essential for better engagement with sport and physical activity.
- Communication and language barriers must be tackled to make sport and physical activity more accessible.

## Conclusion

The changing dynamics and increasing diversity of the population in England are reshaping how identity and belonging are understood and experienced. As communities become more varied and complex, sport and physical activity must evolve to remain relevant, inclusive, and accessible to everyone, regardless of background or circumstance.

Sport has a unique and powerful role to play in bringing people together, breaking down barriers, and fostering a sense of connection. Through shared participation and collective experiences, sport can help individuals feel part of something bigger – contributing to a more united, active, and inclusive England.



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