

Horizon scanning: Demographics

Changing population

The future of sport and physical activity

Part Three – Generations and place

July 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:

Politics



Economy and employment



Demographics



Society



Technology and connectivity



Community and activity



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

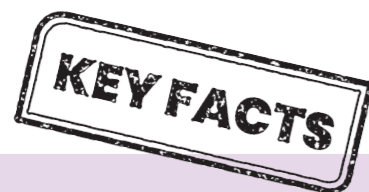
- A. Widening socioeconomic groups
- B. Rural and urban shifts
- C. Young Britons

Generations and place

This is the third of a three-part series focusing on demographic change – specifically focusing on three trends: widening of socioeconomic groups, rural and urban shifts, and young Britons. This explores how geography and generational change shape participation and delivery of sport and physical activity.

A. Widening of socioeconomic groups

England's population remains separated by socioeconomic background. The most common socioeconomic group is classed as C1, but over a fifth of people fall into the lowest DE grade. As with other trends, women, people from Black, Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds, and those from less affluent areas are more likely to be in lower socioeconomic groups.



Two million more women than men are in the lowest socioeconomic groups.

UK population by **socioeconomic background** (AB highest, DE lowest):

- AB – 23.5%
- C1 – 32.7%
- C2 – 21.3%
- DE – 22.5%

Socioeconomic backgrounds **differ significantly by region**. The proportion of the population in DE grade ranges from 17% in the South East, to 27% in the North East.

Poverty forecasts are mixed post-November 2025 Budget: lifting the two-child limit more than halves the decline in living standards for the poorest third of households. **Low-income households will see a smaller reduction in their incomes** compared to middle and higher income households.

The average household is projected to be **£850 worse off (2.0%)** in 2029/30 than 2024/25.

Sources: UK Census 2021, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025

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Potential impact:

Economic uncertainty will widen gaps between social groups, reinforcing existing gender, ethnic, and regional inequalities.

- Rising inequality may affect social cohesion, national politics and access to sport and physical activity opportunities.
- Economic instability can reduce participation in sport and activity due to cost and transport barriers. Affordable or free activity options will be increasingly important and may trend upwards.
- Inequality of experience will likely grow: those who are more affluent will pay for better experiences than those who can't afford to pay.
- The sector must better understand what socioeconomic status means to people's daily lives and consider this in its approaches and data collection.
- Economic growth may ease pressures but won't fix inequality.

B. Rural and urban shifts

Urbanisation will continue over the next decade, bringing new pressures on local council revenue, services, and infrastructure. Coastal and rural communities are often underserved and can face economic decline or limited access to services. However, new housing developments and planning approaches could help rebalance growth between regions.

KEY FACTS

The more rural an area is, the older its average age and the faster its average age increases. **25% of the rural population was aged 65 or over in 2020**, compared with 17% of the urban population.

Potential impact:

Urbanisation will continue, with more people moving to cities and new migrants settling in urban areas.

- Pressure on housing, transport, and services in cities will grow.
- Some rural and coastal communities may face decline or disconnection. Sport and activity can act as community anchors in these areas and local clubs can double as social and support hubs.
- People moving to urban centres and declines in the provision of services (e.g. rural transport) risk magnifying the vicious cycle of decline some rural regions are already experiencing.
- Access to green and safe spaces is uneven – bridging these gaps is vital for equitable participation.

Target of 1.5 million **new homes in England** over the current Parliament (five-year period).

Between 2011 and 2019 in England, urban populations grew by about 6.2%, faster than the 5.2% growth in rural populations, showing that **more people are choosing or moving to urban environments**.

Official subnational population shows that most urban areas and local authorities – especially in London and the South – are **expected to continue growing** over the next decade.

Sources: Defra Population Statistics for Rural England; ONS 2022.

C. Young Britons

The experiences of young people are changing. Falling birth rates, lower school attendance compared to pre-pandemic, more time online, and reduced access to green spaces are shaping a new generation's lives.

A continued decline in the birth rate is likely to influence future education, employment, and activity patterns.



KEY FACTS

166,000 **pupils were absent** for 50% or more of school (2024/25).

47% of LGBTQ+ young people agree that **social media has a negative impact** on them, as do 46% of disabled people. This is compared to 38% of all young people.

Young people are spending an average of **four to six hours online** each day.

70% of parents believe digital distractions mean children are spending **less time being active**.

Sources: DfE 2024/2025; Digital Youth Survey 2023; Ofcom 2024; Youth Sport Trust 2025.

Potential impact:

Falling birth rates and later parenthood mean young people will make up a smaller share of the population in future.

- Understanding how young lives are changing and their experiences is essential for long-term engagement.
- Declining attendance may reshape education and youth provision, with some areas already facing school closures.
- Having older parents may impact younger people's demand for and engagement with sport and physical activity.
- Sport and physical activity can build life skills and improve mental health, offering an antidote to social media pressures.
- The sector should embrace technology to reach and motivate young people to be more active.



Conclusion

These three trends reveal how geography and generation shape patterns of participation in sport and physical activity. Differences between regions, neighbourhoods, and communities, alongside generational change, continue to influence who has access to opportunities and who is left behind.

Young people's lives are changing in fundamental ways, shaped by shifting family structures, evolving education landscapes, digital environments, and new pressures on wellbeing, all of which affect how, where, and why they engage in sport and physical activity.

Inequalities of place, infrastructure, and investment risk widening existing gaps in participation, health, and wellbeing.

However, these disparities also highlight where the sport and physical activity sector can lead with purpose and impact. When designed and delivered effectively, sport and physical activity have the power to help level the playing field by building life skills, supporting mental health, and offering a positive counterbalance to life's pressures.

To achieve this, delivery must recognise and respond to the social and spatial realities of modern England – embracing technology, reflecting lived experience, and ensuring that where someone lives, or the circumstances of their upbringing, do not determine their ability to be active, healthy, and connected.

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