The Case for a 2026 Emergency Census in England

Dr Rakib Ehsan

Foreword by Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi

The Case for a 2026 Emergency Census in England

Dr Rakib Ehsan

Foreword by Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi

Policy Exchange

About the Author

Dr Rakib Ehsan is a British researcher, writer, and commentator of Bangladeshi Muslim heritage who is a Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange. A prominent national authority on matters of immigration, integration, and identity, his work has received support across the political spectrum. Rakib has authored several Policy Exchange reports, including 'A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion' (2024) which was co-authored with Iain Mansfield (Director of Research, Policy Exchange) and 'Small-Boats Emergency: Fixing the UK's Broken Asylum System' (2023).

Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks to Iain Mansfield, the Director of Research at Policy Exchange. Others at Policy Exchange who also deserve a special mention include David Goodhart (Head of Demography, Immigration & Integration), Dr Paul Stott (Head of Security & Extremism), and Sir Trevor Phillips (Senior Fellow). I thank Eric Kaufmann (Professor of Politics at The University of Buckingham), Alice Sullivan (Professor of Sociology at the UCL Social Research Institute), and Paul Morland (Associate Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London) for their part in the external peer review process. I also give my thanks to Policy Exchange's Tom Kennedy (Director of Communications) and Sophie Bolsover (Director of Corporate & Parliamentary Affairs). Importantly, I must thank both Lord Godson (Director of Policy Exchange) and Julia Mizen (Managing Director of Policy Exchange) for providing me with the opportunity to take on this project. Most of all, I am grateful to my immediate family for their love, support, and encouragement.

Published by
Policy Exchange, 1 Old Queen Street, Westminster, London SW1H 9JA

www.policyexchange.org.uk

ISBN: 978-1-917201-82-7

Contents

Foreword

By **Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi**

Former Chancellor of the Exchequer (July - September 2022), former Secretary of State of Education (September 2021 - July 2022), former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment (November 2020 – September 2021).

Co-founder and former chief executive of YouGov.

Modern Britain is a place which has undergone significant economic, social, and cultural change.

As a proud British man of Kurdish heritage who was born in Iraq, I still firmly believe that the UK remains one of the most successful examples of an advanced diverse democracy. However, massive population growth, spurred by unprecedented levels of mass migration in the last five years or so, makes the case for an emergency census next year inarguable. November 2025 polling by YouGov showed that seven in ten British people believe immigration has been too high over the last decade. Public concerns over the impacts of migration on public services, social cohesion, and national identity must not be shunned - a new census would provide civil society with fresh population data which deepens our understanding of how radically the situation has changed on the ground. The UK – especially relatively disadvantaged parts of England that have experienced extraordinary population increases fuelled by international migration and need fresh insightful data to guide public-service delivery – simply cannot afford to wait until the 2031 Census.

As vaccine government minister during the Covid-19 pandemic, I understand the potential social value of an emergency 2026 census for England, as recommended by this Policy Exchange report. The up-to-date, precise, and insightful data which can be produced through a fresh methodologically-sound census can also help the UK Government, along with relevant regional and local authorities, to better prepare for national emergencies.

Ethnic, racial, and religious variations in age profile, occupational background, multigenerational living, health status, English language proficiency, and geographical distribution must be better understood in the context of crisis preparedness and management. This also involves pinpointing populations which are more resilient (or exposed) in the event of a public health crisis. A fresh census would also enable the

identification of the most serious pressure points when it comes to critical infrastructure - such as hospitals and emergency services. With England having witnessed remarkable forms of population growth and demographic change since the 2021 Census, there is a compelling case for an emergency edition in 2026 to equip national, regional, and local authorities with the data needed for the development of effective crisis-management strategies – especially in the form of pandemic preparedness.

In an era where public confidence in politics and democratic institutions is depressingly low, committing to an emergency census would demonstrate to the public that those in power are willing to be responsive to the concerns of their citizens over the impact of massive immigration-driven population change on their public services and social stability in their local communities. This proposed emergency census could indicate the UK Government's promotion of the public good at a time where institutional distrust is alarmingly high.

Policy Exchange's recommendation of using a 10% national sample for the proposed 2026 emergency census, along with the orchestration of full local censuses for five 'special study areas' which are all relatively deprived, is an innovative, socially responsible, and cost-effective approach that would add considerable value to England's population statistics system.

Endorsements

"What a good idea – this new Policy Exchange report recommends the holding of a 2026 'emergency census' in England to capture the degree of demographic, cultural, and economic change which has taken place since the 2021 edition.

It matters for policy: the reality is that dramatic state funding 'deficits' for public services, with differential demand locally for everything from social housing to school places, is partly due to out-of-date population data. The suggested full local censuses in five 'special study areas' that have experienced significant forms of population change since the March 2021 Census - Preston, Middlesbrough, Leicester, Luton, and Bournemouth - seems an excellent antidote to a one-size-fits-all approach.

In truth, the 2021 Census was also poorly designed in parts. So, what a relief to see this Report recommends removing that infamous 2021 Census question on gender self-identification that led to serious data issues. Who can forget the ludicrous overestimation of trans people in Newham - a London borough with a notably high proportion of socially conservative Muslims of Bangladeshi heritage.

So, more accuracy; clearer questions and an update of detailed data in our rapidly changing country – an excellent plan."

Baroness (Claire) Fox of Buckley, non-affiliated peer and Director of the Academy of Ideas.

"Considering the sheer volume of population growth in some of England's most deprived areas since the 2021 Census, I support Policy Exchange's proposal of holding an emergency census next year.

In the interests of protecting critical infrastructure and identifying risks of civil unrest, the country needs up-to-date population data which provides vital on-the-ground insights. If we are truly serious about integration as a society, fresh information is needed on forms of neighbourhood segregation and levels of English language proficiency in local communities.

I strongly encourage the Labour Government to take note of the social justifications for an emergency 2026 census in England, as articulated in this report."

Lord (Maurice) Glasman, Labour peer and founder of Blue Labour.

"I welcome Policy Exchange's recommendation of holding an emergency census for England in 2026.

Modelled on the 1966 mid-decade Census, the proposed 10% national sample along with a select number of 'special study areas' is an innovative approach that will increase our understanding of the ever-evolving portrait of modern-day England, whilst keeping public costs relatively low.

The case for an emergency census in England is a strong one, especially when we consider how the Covid-19 pandemic negatively influenced the quality of data which emerged from the March 2021 edition. It is vital that the country has fresh and accurate population data on labour market participation and health status – especially in economically disadvantaged parts of the country.

As stated in this report, an emergency corrections census for 2026 – one where the Office for National Statistics benefits from specialist external input from other sectors - would make an invaluable contribution to the English population statistics system."

Lord (Karan) Bilimoria, crossbench peer in the House of Lords.

Executive Summary

The March 2021 Census for England and Wales (and a separate count in Northern Ireland on the same day), along with the 2022 separate Scottish equivalent, showed that modern Britain has experienced significant population change in the shape of ethnic, racial, and religious diversification. The complex reality of modern Britain was emphasised by Policy Exchange's 'Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion' published in October 2024 – telling a story of a society which is a curious mix of becoming both more secular and Muslim; less Christian but also more socially conservative in some of its parts; less white but simultaneously witnessing the significant growth of its Eastern and Central European communities.[1] The rapidly-changing ethnic composition of England's population was underscored by recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) data which showed that from April to June 2025, 53.2% of live births were to white-British mothers.[2] In 2020, 58.6% of live births were to white-British mothers; in 2015, this was at 62.5%.[3] In 2010, 66.3% of live births were to white-British mothers – meaning it has dropped by thirteen percentage points in the space of fifteen years.[4]

Despite the unquestionable richness of population data provided by the 2021 England and Wales Census, this Policy Exchange report recommends the holding of an emergency census in England, based on a 10% national sample and full local censuses in five 'special study areas': **Preston, Middlesbrough, Leicester, Luton, and Bournemouth**. The case for an emergency census to be held next year is based on three key reasons:

- The unprecedented level of immigration-driven population growth which has taken place in England since the March 2021 Census.
- The degree to which the March 2021 Census – held during the Covid-19 pandemic – was affected by Covid-related distortions (especially employment and health data).
- The extent to which the March 2021 Census was affected by methodological flaws – especially in terms of question and response framing on matters of national identity.

The national census is not merely an interesting survey exercise. The population data derived from it plays an integral role in helping to determine the distribution of tax revenues between regional and local authorities – the allocation of state resources for the delivery of public services and provision of social goods across healthcare, housing, education, policing,

1. Ehsan, R. and Mansfield, I. (2024), 'A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion', *Policy Exchange*, 14 October. Available at: https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A_Portrait_of_Modern_Britain.pdf, last accessed: 24 October 2025.
2. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Quarterly births in England and Wales, provisional', 24 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/quarterlybirthsinenglandandwalesprovisional, last accessed: 31 October 2025.
3. Office for National Statistics (2024), 'Birth characteristics', 17 May. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales, last accessed: 7 November 2025.
4. Ibid.

environmental protection, and waste management. The sound maintenance of public infrastructure rests on understanding the nature of local and regional populations, which can differ vastly across the country. These data-driven considerations are not only based on the number of people living in a particular area, but also its demographic character – affluent or deprived, young or old, established citizen or foreign newcomer. If population data struggles to keep pace with demographic change, this could impact the provision of public services. For local authorities which have experienced both massive population growth and significant demographic change, dramatic state funding 'deficits' for public services (because of out-of-date population data) can intensify the perceived competition for social goods – such as council housing, school places, and GP appointments – between different communities. Local authorities which have experienced high levels of population growth and major funding issues include Slough, which effectively declared bankruptcy in July 2021 and has received continued forms of 'exceptional support' from central government to avoid doing so again.[5]

Up-to-date data derived from the national census can also serve the vital purpose of helping the UK Government to prepare for national emergencies – especially those of a public health nature, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The effectiveness of one-size-fits-all approaches to managing and controlling a nationwide emergency is much reduced if the national public is incredibly diverse – especially if there are considerable ethnic and racial variations in terms of age structure, occupation type, housing quality, health status, English language proficiency, and geographical distribution. It is vital to have a solid understanding of local contexts – especially identifying the presence of 'vulnerable' populations, harder-to-reach communities which may not be as well positioned to access and process mainstream forms of public guidance, and 'pressure points' regarding the sustainability of public services (especially NHS hospitals). Considering the ever-diversifying nature of the general population – accelerated by the massive immigration-driven population growth experienced since the 2021 Census – there is a strong case for an emergency census to better equip national, regional, and local authorities when it comes to crisis preparedness and management.

Since the March 2021 England and Wales Census, modern Britain has experienced unprecedented levels of immigration-driven population growth following the liberalisation of post-Brexit visa rules under former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. For the year ending March 2023, total immigration to the UK amounted to an astonishing level of 1.47 million – an amount exceeding to the entire national populations of Cyprus and Estonia (with a record level of net migration of 944,000 registered for this period).[6] Recent data published by the ONS found that for the year to June 2024, the UK population increased by 755,300 - the second-largest annual numerical increase for over 75 years (with 98 percent of this growth being down to net international migration).[7] From June 2021 to June 2024, based on new ONS estimates published in November 2025,

5. Clark, N. (2025), 'Slough Council kept afloat with £15 million government money', *Slough and South Bucks Observer*, 21 February. Available at: https://www.sloughobserver.co.uk/news/24954918.slough-council-kept-afloat-15-million-government-money/, last accessed: 31 October 2025.
6. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Improving long-term international migration statistics, updating our methods and estimates: November 2025', 18 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/improvinglongterminternationalmigrationstatisticsupdatingourmethodsandestimates/november2025, last accessed: 25 November 2025.
7. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

the number of people who arrived in the UK in the form of long-term international migration was over 3.9 million – dwarfing the mid-2024 population estimate for the whole of Wales (just under 3.2 million).[8] In addition to this, recent UK Government data revealed that for the year ending June 2025, a total of 852,000 visas were issued for a 'non-visit reason' (such as work, study, family, and humanitarian reasons), with the provisional estimate published by the ONS for long-term immigration during this period being 898,000.[9] [10]

From June 2021 to June 2024, the UK's population increased by 3.4% - over 2.3 million in the space of three years.[11] According to recently published ONS population estimates for mid-2024, this increase of 2.3 million exceeds the combined population of the cities of Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool.[12] The population growth has been more pronounced in England than the other home nations, increasing by 3.7% from June 2021 to June 2024. For Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the corresponding figures are 2.6%, 2.5%, and 1.2% respectively for this three-year period.

There has been a radical shift in the patterns of inward migration in the post-Brexit context, from EU member-states to Commonwealth countries such as India, Pakistan, and Nigeria – all three having significant issues with religious fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, and communal strife. This has disproportionately impacted places such as Leicester, where the 2022 riots were attributed to failures in integrating "new and emerging" communities.[13] There are serious questions to be asked over the degree to which our post-Brexit immigration system is defined by quality as well as quantity control – the extent to which the UK is prioritising highly-skilled workers and academically-gifted students. In addition to this, resettlement routes have been recently established for Ukrainians after Russia's military invasion, Hongkongers escaping Chinese-state oppression and Afghans following the Taliban regaining control (which included a so-called 'secret scheme' set up by the UK Government in response to a Ministry of Defence [MoD] data breach).[14] Considering its historically stable demography, the UK has received an extraordinary volume of migrants since the turn of the century – but especially since the March 2021 Census.

It should also be noted that the March 2021 England and Wales Census suffered from certain shortcomings. It was held under lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic – an exceptional period which was bound to interfere with the quality of data on work and travel patterns. The 2021 Census was also poorly designed in parts – with one by-product being the overestimation of the proportion of trans people living in England and Wales (which was eventually dropped as an official statistic).[15] The data distortions regarding gender identity – the first time it was included as a survey item in the Census – led to absurd results, such as Newham (an east London borough with a high proportion of socially conservative Muslims of Bangladeshi heritage) supposedly being home to a higher proportion of trans residents than Brighton (a university city which is known for its radical cultural liberalism). There are also methodological questions to

8. According to ONS estimates published in November 2025 (based on a new methodology), the number of people who arrived in the UK from June 2021 to June 2024 in the form of long-term international migration was 3,932,000. The ONS's exact population estimate for Wales (mid-2024) was 3,186,581.
9. GOV.UK (2025), 'Accredited official statistics: Summary of latest statistics', 20 October. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2025/summary-of-latest-statistics, last accessed: 27 October 2025.
10. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2025', 27 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2025, last accessed: 27 November 2025. The ONS's provisional estimate for long-term immigration in the year ending June 2025 (898,000) means that an estimated 4.83 million people arrived in the UK from June 2021 to June 2025 in the form of long-term international migration.
11. The ONS's newly-published provisional estimate of the population of the UK (on 30 June 2025/mid-2025) is 69.5 million people (69,487,000). For more info: Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Provisional population estimate for the UK: mid-2025', 27 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/provisionalpopulationestimatefortheuk/mid2025, last accessed: 27 November 2025.
12. This are the population estimates for Birmingham (metropolitan district), Manchester (metropolitan district), and Liverpool (metropolitan district).
13. Nagesh, A. (2022), 'Leicester disorder 'not exclusively' Hindus and Muslims – police', *BBC News*, 26 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-63038691, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
14. Seddon, S. (2025), 'What we know so far about Afghan data breach', *BBC News*, 16 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c79qyl907lxo, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
15. Office for Statistics Regulation (2024), 'Review of statistics on gender identity based on data collected as part of the 2021 England and Wales Census: Final report', 12 September. Available at: https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/review-of-statistics-on-gender-identity-based-on-data-collected-as-part-of-the-2021-england-and-wales-census-final-report/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

be asked over framing of certain questions and the ordering of options available, especially over matters of British and English national identity.[16] Due to the re-ordering of options offered to respondents, the 2021 Census witnessed a dramatic increase in the reporting of a British-only national identity and a precipitous fall in the expression of English-only national identity.

Considering the sheer scale of population change since the 2021 Census and doubts cast over its methodological integrity, this Policy Exchange research paper recommends the holding of a 2026 'emergency census' in England to capture the degree of demographic, cultural, and economic change which has taken place since the 2021 Census. This is not without precedent and is permissible under the 1920 Census Act, with a mid-decade census being held in 1966 (between the 1961 and 1971 editions).[17] This was based on a 10% sample and was carried out on the back of cross-party concerns over the impact of high levels of Commonwealth migration on social cohesion and public services, as well as the scale of internal North-to-South relocation in England.

This Policy Exchange report recommends that the UK Government hold an emergency 2026 census in England based on the '1966 model' of a 10% national sample, along with full censuses for five 'special study areas' of interest: a possible list with a sound regional spread being Preston (north-west England), Middlesbrough (north-east England), Leicester (East Midlands), Luton (eastern England), and Bournemouth (south-west England).

The proposed special study areas have experienced significant forms of population change since the March 2021 Census:

- The non-metropolitan district of Preston experienced the highest estimated increase in its population between June 2021 and June 2024 in the UK (bar the City of London).[18] In this three-year period, Preston's population rose from 147,786 to an estimated 162,864 - a 10.2% increase. This already dwarfs the growth of Preston's population during the decade between the 2011 and 2021 censuses – 5.4%.
- During the decade between the 2011 to 2021 Census, Middlesbrough's population grew by four per cent. In the three-year period leading up to June 2024, Middlesbrough's population grew by an estimated 8.5% - the highest increase in the North East region.
- Recent population data published by the ONS show that from mid-2021 to mid-2024, Leicester's population rose by an estimated 5.8% - more than 21,400 people in the space of three years.
- In the three-year period leading up to mid-2024, the population of Luton increased by 6.3%, from 224,958 to an estimated figure 239,090 – consolidating the Bedfordshire town's position as the most densely-populated English local authority outside of London.
- From June 2021 to June 2024, the Bournemouth, Christchurch,

16. Henderson, A. and Denham, J. (2022), 'Census 2021: are the English really British?', *UK in a Changing Europe*, 6 December. Available at: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/census-2021-are-the-english-really-british/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.
17. Office for National Statistics (2022), 'Story of the Census', 20 June. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/storyoftheCensus/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.
18. According to analysis of ONS population estimates, the highest rate of population growth in the period from mid-2021 to mid-2024 was in the City of London – 73.9% (8,689 to 15,111 residents).

and Poole unitary authority's population increased by nearly 9,000 people – likely to be driven by a large influx of migrants arriving in central parts of the seaside resort and university town.

For the proposed 2026 emergency census in England, Policy Exchange also recommends:

- A revised questionnaire with a special focus on racial identity, ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, national identification, length of UK residency, place of birth, level of educational attainment, employment status, and housing tenure. It is also recommended that the 2021 Census questions on gender self-identification and sexual orientation are both removed, with new items on how long one has been living at their current home and where they lived immediately before, to develop a richer understanding of internal movement (including people relocated within England by local authorities).
- The Census responses to the question on national identity in England (sense of home and feelings of belonging) should be modelled on the 'Moreno Question' – with respondents having greater choices available to express the relative strength of their British and English identities.[19] This would avoid the dramatic fluctuations between the 2011 and the 2021 censuses due to the changed ordering of responses and their restrictive nature.
- The introduction of denominational options for Christian and Muslim populations (such as Catholic, Protestant, Sunni, and Shia) for the Census, which would allow politicians, policymakers, and practitioners better understand the diversity of two of modern Britain's two largest faith groups of faith (as well as detect potential areas of heightened sectarian risk).
- The devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland should have the choice to 'opt in' and commit to an emergency national census for their respective nations. Due to their smaller national populations, these could be held at a larger sample size than the recommended 10% for England – with possible 'special study areas' being Glasgow, Cardiff, and Belfast (each experiencing the largest rates of local population growth in their respective home nations).
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) should deepen its co-operation with organisations across the private and third sectors (such as private marketing firms, polling companies, and reputable community organisations) as part of a dynamic and integrated multi-agency approach to population data collection. Non-state agencies with considerable experience of questionnaire design, coding survey responses, and engaging with harder-to-reach minority populations, should be prioritised for involvement in the proposed emergency England census.

19. The Moreno Question asks individuals to indicate the relative weight of English and British identity: options being 'English not British', 'More English than British', 'Equally English & British', and so on.

1. The Origins of the Census and 1966 Mid-Decade Edition

The origins of the census are older than the Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilisations - dating back to the Babylonians in 4000 BC who used a census as an essential guide to how much food they needed to find for each member of the population.[20] The first official England and Wales census was held by the UK government in 1801. The leading pioneer behind the establishment of the national census was English statistician John Rickman, who made the case for it as early as 1798 and repeated his argument numerous times on the parliamentary estate. One of the main justifications was that a census would elevate collective understanding of the population – both its strengths and weaknesses; sources of resilience and fragility. In Rickman's words, "the intimate knowledge of any country must form the rational basis of legislation and diplomacy" and that a census "would indicate the Government's intention to promote the public good". There were also economic and security considerations, with Rickman arguing that "the life insurance industry would be stimulated by the results" and that "the number of men who were required for conscription to the militia in different areas should reflect the area's population".[21]

Rickman, widely considered to be the 'father of the census', ran the first four national censuses.[22] The 1841 Census was a special event, recording the occupants of every UK household on the night of Sunday 6 June 1841. It was described as the "first modern census" – being the first to record information about every member of the household and administered as a singular exercise under central control (rather than being devolved to the local level). These changes were introduced through the enactment of the 1840 Population Act under the second ministry of prime minister William Henry Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne. Bar the wartime interruption of 1941, the UK government has - since 1801 - carried out a full national census on a decennial cycle.

1966: The Mid-Decade Census

There is just one instance of a partial mid-decade census being held. The 1966 United Kingdom Census was a census carried out across all four home nations on 24 April of that year, midway between the 1961 and 1971 censuses. The 1966 Census covering England and Wales was a 'sample census' with only 10% of households across the two home nations being asked to participate.

As it was a sample-based survey, the 10% sample Census of 1966 was

20. Office for National Statistics (2016), 'Census-taking in the ancient world', 18 January. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/aboutcensuses/censushistory/censustakingintheancientworld, last accessed: 4 November 2025.

21. The History Press (2017), 'Counting the United Kingdom: The census from 1086 to now', 10 March. Available at: https://thehistorypress.co.uk/article/counting-the-united-kingdom-the-census-from-1086-to-now/, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

22. Office for National Statistics (2022), 'Story of the Census', 20 June. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/storyofthecensus/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

able to generate faster results than a full census at a significantly lower cost. Its implementation, which was underpinned by cross-party consensus, was designed to provide up-to-date data on the UK's – specifically England's – rapidly-changing population and living conditions in the post-WWII era. The authorisation of the 1966 Census was based on the premise that the results would inform government policy (especially in terms of planning for housing and infrastructure).

Post-WWII Commonwealth migration

In the aftermath of WWII, Great Britain – which had hitherto been demographically stable and largely racially homogeneous – experienced notable streams of inward non-white migration from parts of the Empire and newly-independent nation-states which were previously British colonies. The 1948 British Nationality Act gave Citizenship of the UK and its colonies to all people living in the British Empire and Commonwealth (giving the right of entry and settlement).[23]

The first stage of Britain's postwar ethnic, racial, and religious diversification gave rise to community tensions and anxieties over cultural-demographic change – in some cases, spilling over into race riots and acts of racial violence against minority populations. A major flashpoint in UK race relations were the 1958 Notting Hill riots, with racially-charged disorder also unfolding in the Nottingham area of St. Ann's the same year.[24] Shortly after the 1961 Census came the Dudley riots of 1962.[25]

Responding to a growth in anti-immigration sentiment and increasing racial tensions, the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed under Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan.[26] This ended the automatic right of Commonwealth citizens to enter the UK. In addition to this, the period of ordinary residence required for Commonwealth citizens to register for UK citizenship under the British Nationality Act 1948 was increased. However, there were unintended consequences, with the restrictions contributing towards a rush of families – especially wives and children – joining Commonwealth migrants already in the UK.[27]

Against a backdrop of political concerns over the impact of large-scale Commonwealth migration and the challenge of integrating newcomers into mainstream British civic life, parliamentary debates over the possibility of holding an emergency census were triggered. In December 1963, the joint parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Health, Lord Newton (Peter Legh MP), presented the case for a mid-decade census between 1961 and 1971, as it was "a time of rapid change and development" and because the traditional decennial cycle was "too long to wait for the hard figures which only a census gives".[28]

Lord Newton argued that the effective use of manpower and the planning of land use, housing, environmental, health and social services, ultimately rested on the availability of fresh population data in an era of unprecedented demographic change. The holding of a cost-effective census based on a 10% sample (bar a selection of 'special study areas' of "exceptional characteristics") was justified on the grounds that it would

23. Legislation.gov.uk, British Nationality Act 1948, available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/11-12/56/enacted, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

24. BBC News (2028), 'St Ann's riot: The changing face of race relations, 60 years on', 25 August. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-45207246, last accessed: 25 October 2025.

25. Briercliffe, S. (2022), 'Understanding Dudley's Race Riots: pt.1 – What Happened', *Black Country Living Museum*, 12 August. Available at: https://bclm.com/2022/08/12/understanding-dudleys-race-riots-pt-1-what-happened/, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

26. Legislation.gov.uk, Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/10-11/21/contents/enacted, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

27. Sales, R. (2007), *Understanding Immigration and Refugee Policy: Contradictions and continuities*, Bristol, Policy Press.

28. UK Parliament (Hansard), 'Census in 1966 – Volume 254: debated on Monday 16 December 1963'. Available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1963-12-16/debates/1db5e8fb-64d9-47c3-a7ca-a15372f6eb99/CensusIn1966, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

enable more effective implementation of Government policy, as well as being an invaluable resource to those "engaged in research in the social sciences, economics and medicine and to industry and trade".

North-to-South Internal Migration

The 1966 mid-decade census proposal had cross-party support. Baroness (Edith) Summerskill of the Labour Party – a physician who was a founding member of the Socialist Health Association - argued that a truly national census was needed to consider "striking social changes" and to understand "pockets" of segregation for the improvement of integration outcomes among recently-arrived Commonwealth migrants (with worries over low levels of English language proficiency among some newcomers).[29]

In addition to the concerns surrounding Commonwealth migration, Summerskill highlighted the pressures on housing, schools, and hospitals due to internal North-to-South migration. In Parliament, Summerskill declared that she attached "great importance" to the migration of people from the North to the South and that this was not the internal movement of old people, but of the young.[30] Considerable migration from the northern regions to southern England was spurred by London's economic and commercial development. The 1960s was the time of "Swinging London" - a period characterised by new trends in music, fashion, and youth culture that emerged in the capital, heightening its international cultural status. The economic and cultural gravitational pull of London, combined with faltering heavy industries and the decline of traditional industrial cultural identities across the northern regions, encouraged this youth-dominant stream of North-to-South internal migration in England.

Along with London's growing status as an international economic and cultural powerhouse, North-to-South internal migration in England was motivated by the 'new towns' movement. Under the 1946 New Towns Act and 1952 Town Development Act, a string of new towns was founded, along with the expansion of existing established settlements.[31] [32] The first wave of independent new towns was designed to address housing shortages in the aftermath of WWII. While there were two new designated sites in County Durham in north-east England under the 1946 Act, Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee – established in 1947 and 1948 respectively – the majority were in southern England (primarily to accommodate for London overspill). Four were in the county of Hertfordshire – Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead, Welwyn Garden City, and Hatfield (where a technical college was founded in 1948 and evolved into the University of Hertfordshire). Other major new towns included Basildon and Harlow in Essex, Bracknell in Berkshire, and Crawley in West Sussex (where Gatwick Airport opened in May 1958). The 'second wave' of 1961-64 included only five further new towns. While three were in northern England (Skelmersdale in Lancashire, Runcorn in Cheshire, and Washington in Tyne and Wear), the other two were in the West Midlands – Redditch in Worcestershire and Dawley New Town in Shropshire (later renamed as Telford).

Concerns over the impact of international migration from

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Legislation.gov.uk, New Towns Act 1946, available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/9-10/68/contents/enacted, last accessed: 26 October 2025.

32. Legislation.gov.uk, Town Development Act 1952, available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6and1Eliz2/15-16/54, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

Commonwealth countries and internal migration from the northern regions to southern England meant that the proposed mid-decade census for 1966 commanded support across the political spectrum. With the initial decision to hold it being made under a Conservative government, the first mid-decade census — with a 10% sample — was held across the UK on 24 April 1966, shortly after Labour prime minister Harold Wilson's landslide general election victory.

2. The 2021 Census and Subsequent Population Change

The most recent England & Wales Census (along with the census in Northern Ireland) took place on 21 March 2021, with the census in Scotland being held on 20 March 2022. The censuses across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland were conducted as scheduled despite the Covid-19 pandemic, which was justified by the relevant authorities on the grounds that it would assist government policy during a public health emergency and heighten civil society's understanding of the impact of the coronavirus. These were the first censuses which were predominantly conducted by means of online returns, following a recommendation made by 'Beyond 2011' - a project of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) to assess the value, cost, and alternatives to running a 2021 census in England and Wales.[33]

The cost of the 2021 England and Wales Census – as part of a wider eleven-year modernisation programme in the ONS – was in the region of £900 million. The total cost was calculated by the ONS as being less than £1.50 per person (in England and Wales) a year, over the period of eleven years. This process aimed to "bring controlled online access to ONS's data collections", as well as integrating other sources of data with ONS survey data to "create new insights and new and quicker ways of sharing statistics".[34]

Covid-related Distortions in the 2021 Census

While the holding of the 2021 England and Wales Census under lockdown conditions due to the Covid-19 pandemic was defended on the grounds that it would deepen collective understanding of how everyday life changes during a public-health emergency, there are concerns that it interfered with the quality and accuracy of the population data collected. As the 2021 Census was held under the third official lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, the phenomenon of 'temporary displacement' is likely to have contributed towards the suspected undercount of the population in urban metropolitan centres such as London. Young people, students, and migrant workers were among those who may have temporarily moved away from cities in large numbers and not yet returned by the census date from places such as their family/parental home. This temporary snapshot of the population means that the census is likely to have missed many residents who were living elsewhere on Census Day but later moved back to cities where they could be considered long-term residents (which

33. Office for National Statistics, 'Beyond 2011'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/beyond2011censustransformationprogramme, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

34. Office for National Statistics (2021), '2021 Census: Costs, data sharing, fines, data security, and questions', 1 April. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/2021censuscostsdatasharingfinesdatasecurityandquestions, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

risked having significant implications for the allocation of state funding for public services).

The ONS, by its own admission, has highlighted the possibility that the coronavirus pandemic distorted the census – especially when it came to employment and disability. For example, discrepancies between the Census and Labour Force Survey (LFS) data suggest that some people under-reported their employment status when participating in the former due to being furloughed – reporting that they were out of work, despite technically remaining in paid employment (albeit at a lower rate than their usual salary under the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme).[35] An estimated 616,000 furloughed jobs may have been misreported because individuals responded based on their temporary furlough status rather than their usual place of work. Other contextual influences have also been noted for other measures such as disability, where it is possible that the pandemic may have heavily influenced how people perceived their conditions or illnesses.[36]

Methodological Flaws and Data Mismanagement

The questionable data quality and flaws in survey design for the 2021 Census was especially apparent around the matter of gender identity. The ONS lost a court case brought by 'Fair Play For Women', which challenged the guidance for the 2021 census's question "What is your sex?". A High Court judge ordered that the question be interpreted as legal sex, not self-identified gender, for the census.[37] The question on gender identity was found to be confusing and unclear for some respondents - leading to a response that may not have accurately reflected their gender identity. It has been noted that this was disproportionately a problem among people who had lower levels of English language proficiency.[38] The data distortions regarding gender identity – the first time it was included as a survey item in the Census – led to absurd results, such as Newham (an east London borough which has a high proportion of socially conservative Muslims of Bangladeshi heritage) supposedly being home to a higher proportion of trans residents than Brighton (a university city which is known for its radical cultural liberalism). The overall overestimation of the proportion of trans people living in England and Wales resulted in the relevant data being eventually dropped as an official statistic, with the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) reclassifying this data from the status of "accredited official statistics" to "official statistics in development".[39]

35. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales', 13 March. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/comparingcensus2021andlabourforcesurveyestimatesofthelabourmarketenglandandwales/13march2023, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

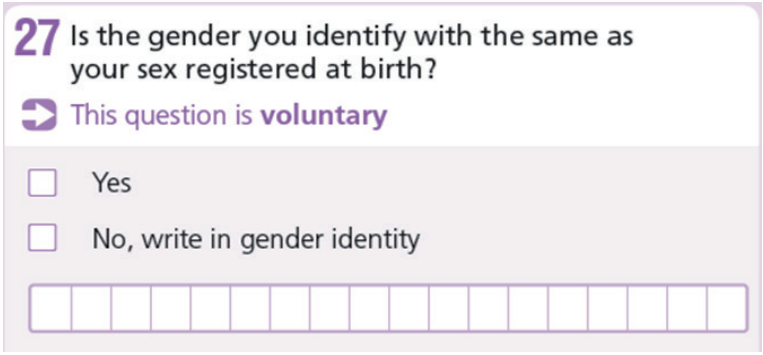
36. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'Disability by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021', 8 February. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/disabilitybyagesexanddeprivationenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=There%20were%20differences%20in%20the,group%20and%20sex%2C%20England%202021, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

37. Fair Play for Women (2021), 'Fair Play For Women wins High Court challenge and judge orders sex must not be self-identified in the Census'. 17 March. Available at: https://fairplayforwomen.com/fair-play-for-women-wins-high-court-challenge-against-ons-census/#:~:text=Fair%20Play%20For%20Women%20wins,arguments%20can%20be%20accessed%20here%5D, last accessed: 26 October 2025. **Fair Play For Women wins High Court challenge and judge orders sex must not be self-identified in the Census**

38. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'Quality of Census 2021 gender identity data', 8 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/genderidentity/articles/qualityofcensus2021genderidentitydata/2023-11-13, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

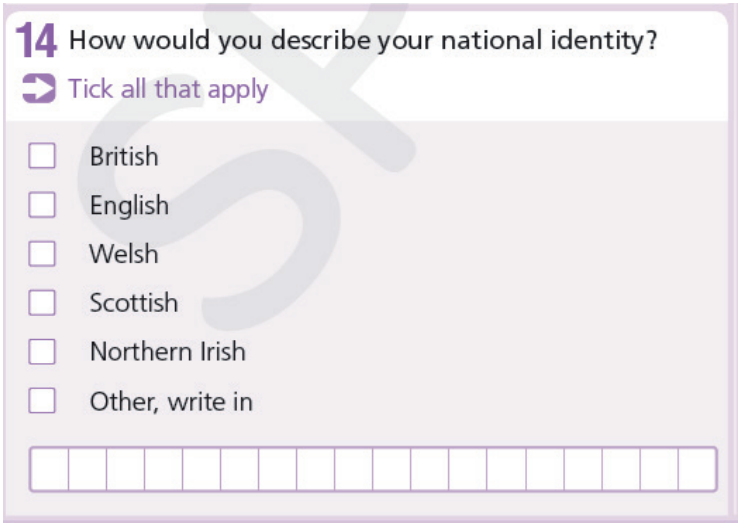
39. Office for Statistics Regulation (2024), 'Review of statistics on gender identity based on data collected as part of the 2021 England and Wales Census: Final report', 12 September. Available at: https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/review-of-statistics-on-gender-identity-based-on-data-collected-as-part-of-the-2021-england-and-wales-census-final-report/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

Figure 1: Question on gender identity (England questionnaire for 2021 Census)



There are also methodological questions to be asked over the choice and ordering of options available to those completing the Census, especially over matters of national identity. As a result of the ONS's decision to lift "British" to the top of the response list for the question on national identity in England – the first time it did so - more than half of the usual resident population (54.8%) chose a "British" only national identity in 2021, a rise of 35.8 percentage points from 19.1% in 2011. The opposite trend was seen for the "English" only identity. This fell by 42.8 percentage points, from 57.7% in 2011 to 14.9% in 2021. Neither trend has been replicated in any other survey, meaning it is unlikely to be the result of a dramatic identity shift across England's population.[40] The "Moreno Question" may be preferable and deliver more insightful results. This asks individuals to indicate the relative weight of English and British identity: options being 'English not British', 'More English than British', 'Equally English & British', and so on. The questions deliver slightly different results. In most surveys of opinion in England that use this question, 'equally English and British' tends to be the largest national-identification group - yet only 15% of census respondents ticked both boxes in the 2021 exercise.

Figure 2: Question on national identity (England questionnaire for 2021 Census)



40. Henderson, A. and Denham, J. (2022), 'Census 2021: are the English really British?', *UK in a Changing Europe*, 6 December. Available at: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/census-2021-are-the-english-really-british/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.

Meanwhile, in the 2022 Scottish Census, those born in Rome (Roma in Italian) who now live in Scotland may have mistakenly selected the Romani ethnicity category.[41] Analysis by the National Records of Scotland (NRS) found a much higher proportion of individuals born in Italy identifying as Roma than expected. Around 36.5% of people who reported their ethnicity as Roma said their country of birth was Italy, compared with only 19.1% for Romania. In addition to this, there were data coding errors of note which were corrected in the quality assurance process. One example occurred because the Welsh version of the national identity question had a different box order than the English version, with another issue being an address-matching tool incorrectly matching addresses in Northern Ireland to those in England and Wales.[42] The numerous problems surrounding Covid-related distortions, confusing question framing and ordering of responses, and general data mismanagement, does not only highlight the need for an emergency census for England; it also naturally gives rise to the question of whether the ONS could do with assistance from elements of British civil society to help carry out the Census in a fast-paced and complex era of social, cultural, and economic transformation. Indeed, the independent review by Sir Robert Devereux KCB on the "performance and culture" of the ONS, published in June 2025, raised concerns regarding the difficulties over recruiting and retaining necessary skilled staff due to office locations and level of analyst pay.[43] Therefore, there is a compelling case for cross-sector collaboration which sees the ONS benefiting from external assistance in the orchestration of the proposed emergency census, along with the processing and analysis of population data. To the ONS's credit, it has demonstrated an openness to receiving external input by holding a "topic consultation" for the 2031 Census (as well as consulting on the harmonised standard for data collection on ethnicity).[44]

Major Population Change Since the 2021 Census

Since the 2021 Census – which, as we have seen, had its fair share of Covid-connected data distortions and methodological shortcomings - the United Kingdom has experienced unprecedented demographic change. This is primarily in the form of mass-scale population growth driven by international migration since the January 2021 post-Brexit liberalisation of work and student visa rules under former prime minister Boris Johnson. For the year ending March 2023, total immigration to the UK amounted to an astonishing 1.47 million – with a record level of net migration of 944,000 – three times the people in Nottingham built-up area [BUA]).[45]

Recent data published by the ONS found that for the year to June 2024, the UK population increased by 755,300 - the second-largest annual numerical increase for over 75 years (with 98 percent of this growth being down to net international migration).[46] The 2021 Census revealed that in the decade from the 2011 edition, England's population grew by 6.6% - an increase in the region of 3.5 million people. However, new population estimates suggest that from June 2021 to June 2024 – a period of only three years – England's population had grown by 3.7% (representing an

41. BBC News (2025), 'Italians mistakenly identify as Roma in Scotland's census', 8 October. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgj1912955wo, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

42. Office for National Statistics (2022), 'How we assured the quality of Census 2021 estimates', 7 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/methodologies/howweassuredthequalityofcensus2021estimates#:~:text=Some%20examples%20of%20issues%20identified,other%20information%20available%20to%20us., last accessed: 13 October 2025.

43. GOV. UK (Cabinet Office), 'Independent Review by Sir Robert Devereux KCB, June 2025', 26 June. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-performance-and-culture-of-the-office-for-national-statistics/independent-review-by-sir-robert-devereux-kcb-june-2025#recommendations, last accessed: 7 November 2025.

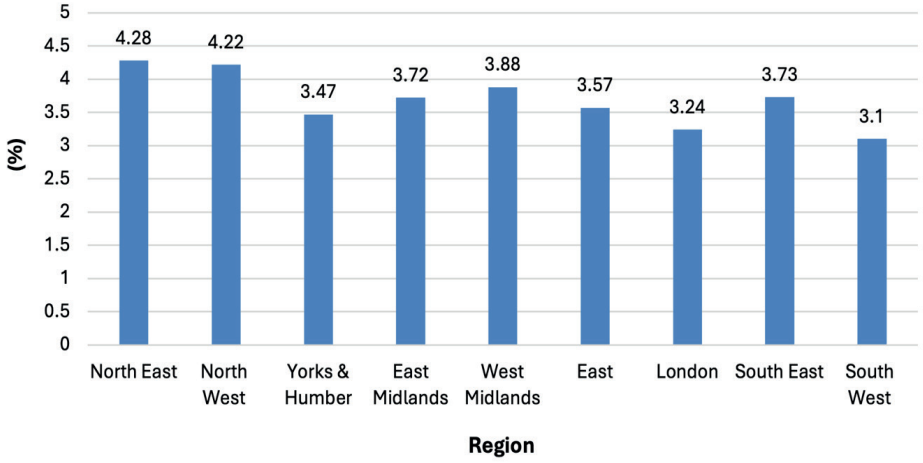
44. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Census 2031 topic consultation', 28 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/aboutcensus/census2031/census2031topicconsultation, last accessed: 7 November 2025.

45. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Improving long-term international migration statistics, updating our methods and estimates: November 2025', 18 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/improvinglongterminternationalmigrationstatisticsupdatingourmethodsandestimates/november2025, last accessed: 25 November 2025.

46. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

increase of over 2.3 million people).[47] This rises to as high as 10.2% for the city of Preston in north-west England – the highest rate among all local authorities in the UK (excluding the City of London).[48] The UK government office region (GOR) with the highest rate of population growth during this three-year period is the north-east of England – 4.3% (rising to 8.5% for Middlesbrough).

Figure 3: Rate of Population Growth in English Regions (June 2021-June 2024)



The other three home nations have lower rates of estimated population growth than England in the period between mid-2021 and mid-2024 – Wales (2.6%), Scotland (2.5%), and Northern Ireland (1.2%). From June 2021 to June 2024, based on ONS estimates, the number of people who arrived in the UK in the form of long-term international immigration was over 3.9 million – dwarfing the mid-2024 population estimate for the whole of Wales (just under 3.2 million). In addition to this, new UK Government data revealed that for the year ending June 2025, a total of 852,000 visas were issued for a 'non-visit reason' (such as work, study, family, and humanitarian reasons).[49] The new provisional estimate published by the ONS for long-term immigration during this period is 898,000.[50]

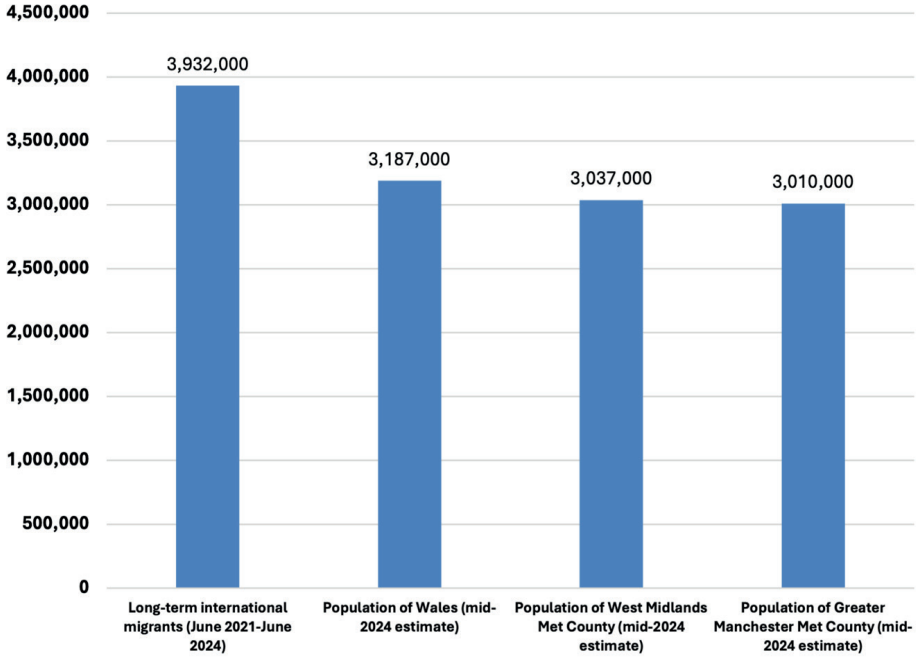
47. Office for National Statistics (2022), 'Population and household estimates, England and Wales: Census 2021', 28 June. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

48. Ibid. According to analysis of ONS population estimates, the highest rate of population growth in the period from mid-2021 to mid-2024 was in the City of London – 73.9% (8,689 to 15,111 residents).

49. GOV.UK (2025), 'Accredited official statistics: Summary of latest statistics', 20 October. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2025/summary-of-latest-statistics, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

50. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2025', 27 November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2025, last accessed: 27 November 2025. The ONS's provisional estimate for long-term immigration in the year ending June 2025 (898,000) means that an estimated 4.83 million people arrived in the UK from June 2021 to June 2025 in the form of long-term international migration.

Figure 4: Number of long-term international migrants (June 2021-June 2024) and mid-2024 population estimates (Wales, Wets Mids Met County, and Greater Manchester Met County)



There has been a radical shift in the patterns of inward migration in the post-Brexit context, from EU member-states to Commonwealth countries such as India, Pakistan, and Nigeria – all three having significant issues with religious fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, and communal strife. This has disproportionately impacted places such as Leicester, where the 2022 riots were attributed to failures in integrating "new and emerging" communities.[51] In addition to this, resettlement routes have been recently established for Ukrainians, Hongkongers, and Afghans. The nationwide riots in the summer of 2024 – triggered by the Southport atrocity and subsequent social-media disinformation over the background of the perpetrator - disproportionately unfolded in deprived parts of the country.[52] Previous Policy Exchange research has shown that small-boat migrants – predominantly younger unattached males - have been disproportionately dispersed to the poorer parts of the country.[53]

Considering its historically stable demography, the UK – England in particular - has received an extraordinary volume of migrants since the turn of the century, but especially since the last Census. This warrants the holding of an emergency census as opposed to sticking with the decennial cycle and waiting for the next edition (which is currently scheduled for March 2031). But it is important that any emergency census held as a matter of urgency is both methodologically-sound and provides solid value for the British taxpayer.

51. Nagesh, A. (2022), 'Leicester disorder 'not exclusively' Hindus and Muslims – police', *BBC News*, 26 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-63038691, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

52. Rowe, F. and Mason, M. (2024), 'The role of social media and local deprivation in UK anti-immigration riots', 26 August. Available at: https://www.franciscorowe.com/post/uk-antimigration/, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

53. Ehsan, R. (2023), 'Small-Boats Emergency: Fixing the UK's Broken Asylum System', *Policy Exchange*, 11 July. Available at: https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Small-Boats-Emergency.pdf, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

3. The Methodology of the Proposed 2026 Emergency Census

It is proposed that an emergency census is held for England for late 2026 – one that is modelled on the 1966 mid-decade census which was based on a 10% sample of households and a full count in 'special study areas' defined by their 'exceptional characteristics'. It is worth noting that the 1966 mid-decade census – a model that this emergency census draws inspiration from – was around a quarter of the cost of the 1961 full census which preceded it. The devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland should be given the choice to opt in and hold their own emergency census (which could be based on a larger sample due to their relatively small national populations in comparison to England, with potential 'special study areas' being cities such as Cardiff, Glasgow, and Belfast).

Along with the costs saved by virtue of using a 10% sample as opposed to doing a full nationwide count, the fielding of a simpler questionnaire will add to the cost-effective nature of the proposed emergency census in England. This questionnaire should only incorporate items on the following (with a particular focus on measuring forms of racial, ethnic, and religious demographic change, along with socio-economic and socio-cultural metrics of integration):

- Biological sex
- Age
- Racial background
- Ethnic/ancestral heritage
- Religious affiliation
- Marital status
- Citizenship
- National identity (sense of home and feeling of belonging)
- Length of UK residency
- Country of birth
- Level of educational attainment
- Employment status
- Housing tenure
- Command of the English language
- Disability

- Self-reported health status

While most variables listed should allow for the fielding of replicated items which will enable direct data comparisons between the 2021 Census and 2026 emergency census, it is recommended that certain changes are made.

It is recommended that the 'voluntary questions' on gender identity and sexual orientation – which were introduced for the first time in the 2021 Census - are removed from the questionnaire. This will avoid the methodological and data problems associated with the two items, which can be considered an inefficient use of time, energy, and resources for no meaningful gain in terms of enabling precise public-service delivery.[54] In addition to this, the question which asks what the sex of the partner who the respondent is (or was) married to or partnered to in a registered civil partnership, should clearly state this is referring to biological sex.

It is recommended that the responses for the religion item are more detailed for Christians (the largest group of faith in England) and Muslims (the second-largest and fastest-growing sizeable religious grouping), providing denominational options (such as Catholic, Protestant, Sunni, and Shia). As well as deepening our understanding of the diversity within England's Christian and Muslim populations, this will also enable the identification of 'interface areas' where there may be heightened levels of sectarian risk. It is also proposed that a new question is asked of the respondent on the length of their residency in the current home and the location of their previous place of residence. This will allow for a greater understanding of internal movement/migration within England (which includes people relocated by local authorities for reasons such as homelessness and social care provision).

Along with the 10% sample census for England, it is recommended that a full census – an exact count – is held in five 'special study areas' which have been identified for their 'exceptional characteristics'. It is proposed that these are areas which have experienced major population growth and significant demographic change in recent times, as well as a recent history of civil unrest and community tensions which are connected to matters of immigration, integration, and identity. The five special study areas should represent a comprehensive regional spread – preferably incorporating five different regions in England (and being a mixture of cities and towns). Due to the importance of perceived competition for limited public resources placing a potential strain on community cohesion, the five special study areas are relatively economically-disadvantaged (especially in terms of employment and housing).

This report recommends the following five special study areas where a full census can take place alongside the main nationwide census based on a 10% sample - but stresses that this is not a definitive list and recognises the fact that other areas could warrant inclusion due to their demographic, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics, along with recent incidents of civil unrest and social disruption:

54. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Sexual orientation and gender identity quality information for Census 2021', 8 April. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/methodologies/sexualorientationandgenderidentityqualityinformationforcensus2021, last accessed: 27 October 2025.

- Preston, Lancashire, North West England
- Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, North East England
- Leicester, Leicestershire, East Midlands
- Luton, Bedfordshire, Eastern England
- Bournemouth, Dorset, South West England

Preston

The city of Preston is the administrative centre of the county of Lancashire in north-west and home to the main campus of the University of Lancashire. As well as being a major centre of the British defence aerospace industry, several freight and haulage companies are based in the transport hub of Preston.

From the 2011 to 2021 Census, the population of Preston increased by 5.4%, from just over 140,200 in 2011 to around 147,800 in 2021.[55] There were significant ethnic and religious changes of note in Preston. From the 2011 to 2021 Census, the white population dropped from 80.2% to below three in four people (72.6%), with the Asian population increasing from 15.5% to 20.2%. Along with a sharp decline in Christian identification within Preston from the 2011 to 2021 census (61.0% to 47.6%), there was a notable increase in the proportion of the city's residents identifying as Muslim (11.2% to 16.1%).

Out of all the local authorities across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (excluding the City of London), the non-metropolitan district of Preston experienced the highest estimated increase in its population between June 2021 and June 2024. From mid-2021 to mid-2024, Preston's population rose from 147,786 to an estimated 162,864 – a remarkable increase of 10.2% within the space of three years, which is three times larger than the estimated rate of population growth for the UK during the same period (3.4%).[56] When it comes to the components of population change, the ONS has estimated that for the year ending June 2024, net international migration for Preston was 4,249. For this period, net internal migration was minus 132 – while 11,700 people moved to Preston from a different local authority in the UK, 11,832 people left Preston to relocate in another local authority.[57]

The provisional August 2025 figure for the average house price in Preston was £185,000 – up by 3.8% from August 2024. Private rents rose to an average of £749 in September 2025 - an annual increase of 9.0% from £687 in September 2024.[58] Recent population growth in Preston means that the number of doctor consultations/treatment services per 100,000 people in Preston is 12.3 – notably lower than the mean figure of 16.3 across all English local authorities.[59] Data published by the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) at the end of October 2025 found that 17% of Preston's neighbourhoods are 'highly deprived' – above the England national figure of 10% (the first decile of deprivation).[60]

There are recent political and cultural developments in Preston which are

55. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'How life has changed in Preston: Census 2021', 19 January. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000123/, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

56. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

57. Internal migration represents residential moves between different local authority districts in the UK, including those that cross the boundaries between the four UK nations: England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

58. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Housing prices in Preston', 22 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E07000123/, last accessed: 31 October 2025.

59. Local Government Association, 'Number of doctor consultations/treatment services in an area per 1,000 population in Preston'. Available at: https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=10287&mod-area=E07000123&mod-group=AllLaInCountry&mod-type=comparisonGroupType&mod-period=1, last accessed: 13 October 2025. Examples of services which fall under doctor consultations/treatment services include independent doctors consulting rooms, NHS GP practices, slimming clinics, early medical abortion clinics, travel vaccination services and polyclinics.

60. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025), 'Accredited official statistics

61. English indices of deprivation 2025: statistical release', 30 October. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release. Note: 'Highly deprived neighbourhoods' are in the most deprived 10% across England and this is based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (the official measure of deprivation in England).

worthy of attention from a social-cohesion perspective. In the May 2025 local English elections, Reform UK gained control of Lancashire County Council, while pro-Gaza independent Muslim candidates won in the City and South East wards of Preston. In September 2025, two demonstrations against immigration and asylum policies – one in Preston's historic Flag Market and the other at the Tickled Trout Hotel in nearby Salmesbury – were held.[62]

Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough, a port town in North Yorkshire, is a manufacturing stronghold which has witnessed the emergence of the digital technology sector. Teesport – a large sea port owned by PD Ports - is a major employer in the town. Middlesbrough is home to Teesside University – formerly a polytechnic which was granted university status in 1992. It has been one of the main locations for the rehoming of asylum seekers in the UK since the turn of the century.[63]

From the 2011 to 2021 Census, Middlesbrough's population grew by four per cent – from approximately 138,400 to 143,900.[64] Recorded as the most densely-populated local authority in the North East region, Middlesbrough has become a more racially and religiously heterogeneous place. While the wider White population dropped to 82.4% in the 2021 Census (from 88.2% in the 2011 edition), there were modest increases in the proportion of Asian, Arab, and Black residents living in the port town. Along with the significant 'de-Christianisation' of Middlesbrough's white-British population, the 2021 Census found that one in ten people in the town were Muslim (rising to 10.2% from the 2011 figure of 7%). Recent ONS data revealed that in the three-year period leading up to June 2024, Middlesbrough's population grew by an estimated 8.5% - the highest increase in the North East region and one of the biggest in the UK.[65] This is also more than double the rate of population growth in the unitary authority during the ten years between the 2011 and 2021 censuses. In the year ending June 2024, net internal migration for Middlesbrough was estimated to be minus 3,483, with the estimate for net international migration being 5,673.[66]

Civil unrest broke out in Middlesbrough as part of the summer 2024 nationwide riots, with Cleveland Police describing the violent disorder as "staggering" – with more than 170 people arrested in the town (including 13 women and 35 children). A Channel 4 documentary engaging with Middlesbrough residents over the riots highlighted local perceptions that migrants and asylum seekers were the beneficiaries of preferential treatment when it came to the provision of all-inclusive accommodation and other forms of financial assistance from the British state.[67] Middlesbrough's housing market has witnessed major price increases. The average house price in the town was £140,000 in August 2025 (provisional figure), up 7.0% from August 2024. Meanwhile, private rents rose to an average of £673 in September 2025, an annual increase of 8.1% from £622 in September 2024.[68]

62. Khan, S. (2025), 'Crowds gather outside Tickled Trout hotel housing Afghans', *The Lancashire Telegraph*, 14 September. Available at: https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/25464775.crowds-gather-outside-tickled-trout-hotel-housing-afghans/, last accessed: 15 October 2025.
63. Reed, J. (2015), 'Why does Middlesbrough have the most asylum seekers?', *BBC News*, 23 October. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34597022, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
64. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'How life has changed in Middlesbrough: Census 2021', 19 January. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E06000002/, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
65. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
66. Ibid.
67. Long, J. (2025), 'Middlesbrough a year after the UK Riots – what's changed?', *Channel Four*, 28 July. Available at: https://www.channel4.com/news/middlesbrough-a-year-after-the-uk-riots-whats-changed, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
68. Office for National Statistics (2025), Housing prices in Middlesbrough', 22 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E06000002/, last accessed: 31 October 2025.

Recent data published by the MHCLG revealed that Middlesbrough has the highest concentration of 'highly-deprived' neighbourhoods out of 296 English local authorities – 50% (five times the national figure of 10%).[69]

Leicester

The city of Leicester has the second-largest economy in the East Midlands region (after Nottingham) and is home to two universities (the University of Leicester and De Montfort University [DMU]). Leicester has a strong association with textiles, clothes, and shoes, with there being long-standing concerns over working conditions in such sectors.

In the 2011 England and Wales Census, 50.5% of Leicester's residents reported being white (with 45% of people in Leicester belonging to the white-British ethnic group).[70] [71] The 2021 Census showed that Leicester had become a majority non-white city, with one in three residents belonging to the white-British population —33.2%.[72]. Along with the drop in Christian identification, there was a notable growth in the proportion of Muslim and Hindu residents,and marginal growth in the proportion of Sikhs. Around one in six of Leicester's residents were born in India – rising from 11.3% in 2011 to 16.2% in 2021. The 2021 Census revealed intense forms of religious segregation in the city. The neighbouring areas of Belgrave South and St Matthews & Highfields North have Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority populations respectively (the former being 73.3% Hindu and the latter being 74.0% Muslim).

At the end of summer in 2022, large-scale disorder broke out in Leicester – primarily between Hindu and Muslim male youths in eastern parts of the city such as Belgrave. A failure to integrate 'new and emerging communities' was cited as a contributory factor, with new arrivals from the Indian subcontinent —concentrated in lower-paid menial roles and overcrowded housing —being blamed for a rise in anti-social behaviour in the build up to the communal riots. Recent population data published by the ONS show that from mid-2021 to mid-2024, Leicester's population rose by an estimated 5.8% —more than 21,400 people in the space of three years.[73] For the year ending June 2024, the estimated net internal migration figure for Leicester was minus 9,305.[74] For the same period, net international migration for Leicester was 13,110, with nearly 20,000 long-term international migrants arriving in the city in this one year.[75]

Housebuilding in Leicester has been especially slow considering the significant population growth it has experienced in the last few years. According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG), only 300 new dwellings were completed in Leicester in the year 2023/24 – well below the mean figure among English local authorities (536).[76] This has contributed towards an upward pressure on house prices and monthly rents. The average house price in Leicester was £232,000 in August 2025 (provisional), up 2.9% from August 2024. Meanwhile, private rents rose to an average of £1,011 in September 2025 —an annual increase of 7.4%.[77] There is also significant pressure on school

69. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025), 'Accredited official statistics. **English indices of deprivation 2025: statistical release', 30 October. Available at:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release.

70. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'How your area has changed in 10 years: Census 2021 Leicester. **How life has changed in Leicester: Census 2021', 19 January. Available at:** https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E06000016/, **last accessed: 13 October 2025.**

71. BBC News – Leicestershire (2012), 'Census 2011: Leicester 'most ethnically diverse' in region', 12 December. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-20678326, last accessed: 5 November 2025.

72. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'How your area has changed in 10 years: Census 2021 Leicester. **How life has changed in Leicester: Census 2021', 19 January. Available at:** https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E06000016/, **last accessed: 13 October 2025.**

73. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

74. Year ending June 2024 for Leicester – internal migration inflow: 22,231; internal migration outflow: 31,536.

75. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

76. Local Government Association (2025), 'Number of new dwellings completed - total in Leicester'. Available at: https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=54&mod-area=E06000016&mod-group=AllLaInCountry&mod-type=comparisonGroupType&mod-period=1, last accessed: 31 October 2025.

77. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Housing prices in Leicester', 22 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E06000016/, last accessed: 31 October 2025.

places, with around one in three primary and secondary schools at or over capacity, according to recent data for Leicester – significantly higher than the national average of 16% and 24% respectively.[78]

While one in ten neighbourhoods in England are classified as 'highly deprived', recent data published by the MHCLG showed that one-fifth of Leicester's neighbourhoods fall into this category.[79]

Luton

Luton is a large town and borough in the county of Bedfordshire. Historically associated with the hat-making industry, the local economy has traditionally been focused on other industries such as car manufacturing and brickmaking. Major employers in the town are Luton Borough Council and the Luton & Dunstable University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, along with EasyJet and TUI Airways in the private sector. An expansion of London Luton Airport was recently approved by the UK Government.[80] The town is also home to the University of Bedfordshire.

Between the last two censuses (held in 2011 and 2021), the population of Luton increased by 10.9%, from just over 203,200 in 2011 to around 225,300 in 2021 – a rate of growth outstripping that for both the East of England region and England overall. Like Leicester, the 2021 Census confirmed Luton's status as a majority non-white local authority, with the white proportion of the town's population dropping from 54.7% in the 2011 Census to 45.2% (while the broader Asian-origin proportion increased from 30.0% to 37.0%). In the 2011 Census, under half of Luton's population fell into the white-British ethnic group (44.6%), dropping to below one in three —31.8% —in the 2021 edition.[81] The latest Census showed that one in ten Luton residents are Black, with the town also being home to growing Central and Eastern European communities. With nearly one in three residents identifying as Muslim in the 2021 Census (32.9%), Luton has one of the highest concentrations of Muslims in the UK at the local authority level (rising to three in four residents in the Kingsway area).

ONS data published since the 2021 Census has shown that Luton has experienced significant population growth in the last few years. The recent population estimates published by the ONS show that in the three-year period leading up to mid-2024, the population of Luton increased by 6.3% —from 224,958 to an estimated figure 239,090 (an increase of over 14,000 people).[82] This has consolidated Luton's position as the most densely-populated English local authority outside of London and being a national hotspot for overcrowded housing. Based on the mid-2024 population estimates, Luton's population density is 5,515 people per square km² (the figure for England is 450 per km²). While 10,905 people arrived in Luton from another UK local authority in the year ending June 2024, 17,837 people relocated to another local authority – providing a net internal migration figure of minus 6,932. For the same period, net international migration for Luton was 10,200.[83]

Along with international migration, a crucial factor behind Luton's

78. GOV.UK (2025), 'Academic year 2023/24: School capacity', 27 March. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-capacity/2023-24, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
79. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025), 'Accredited official statistics. **English indices of deprivation 2025: statistical release', 30 October. Available at:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release.
80. Fullbrook, D. (2025), 'Luton airport expansion approved by government', *BBC News*, 3 April. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy4vg2d9v7no, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
81. Luton Borough Council (Research and Geospatial Information Team), Luton Borough Profile: 2011 Census Data. Available at: https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Planning/Census/2011%20census%20data/LUTON%20BOROUGH%20PROFILE.pdf, last accessed: 5 November 2025.
82. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.
83. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

significant population growth is its relatively high birth rate, with recent ONS data showing Luton has the highest total fertility rate [TFR] in England – 2.00 children per women,with the figure across England and Wales being 1.41.[84] For the year ending June 2024, an estimated 1,434 deaths took place in Luton – dwarfed by the 3,639 births in this period.[85]

The average house price in Luton was £285,000 in August 2025 (provisional figure) —up 4.2% from August 2024. Meanwhile, private rents rose to an average of £1,187 in September 2025 - an annual increase of 6.3% from £1,117 in September 2024.[86] For the year 2023/24, only 470 new dwellings were completed in Luton – well below the mean figure among English local authorities (536).[87] There are also concerns over the availability of doctor consultations/treatment services in Luton, with recent figures putting this at 13.4 per 100,000 people (below the mean for English local authorities of 16.3).[88] Recent MHCLG data showed that fourteen percent of Luton's neighbourhoods are 'highly deprived' – higher than the national figure of ten per cent.[89]

Bournemouth

Bournemouth is a coastal town which sits in the Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole unitary authority area within the county of Dorset. Once an uninhabited heathland in south-west England, Bournemouth evolved into a thriving resort town with fine Victorian architecture at its centre. The town has a services-oriented local economy where the tourism industry plays an important role and is also home to Bournemouth University. It is recommended that the full local census focuses on Bournemouth built-up area (BUA), as opposed to the entirety of the Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole unitary authority area.

The 2021 Census showed that for the wider Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole unitary authority, the white-British proportion of the population stood at more than four in five residents – 82.4%. This dropped to under three in five people for the East Cliff area of Bournemouth (55.7%) and further down to 27.9% for a neighbourhood in the coastal town which incorporates the Avenue Road/Commercial Road intersection.[90] While around one in ten residents in the wider unitary authority (9.3%) reported an exclusively non-UK national identity (where their feelings of belonging lie and what they consider to be 'home'), this increased to more than one in four people in central Bournemouth, along with the town's areas of East Cliff and Boscombe West. There are several neighbourhoods in and around the middle of Bournemouth where more than half of the residents fall into this category.

In the last few years since the 2021 Census, Bournemouth has been the subject of considerable attention due to transformative demographic change and its relationship with immigration. While the tourism industry has historically employed migrant workers, the scale of recent immigration and rehoming of asylum seekers in Bournemouth's hotels has, according to some established residents, undermined the traditional cultural identity of the town.[91] There have also been flashpoints which have fuelled concerns

84. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Births in England and Wales: 2024 (refreshed populations)', 27 August. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024refreshedpopulations, last accessed: 25 November 2025.

85. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2024', 26 September. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2024, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

86. Office for National Statistics (2025), 'Housing prices in Luton', 22 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E06000032/, last accessed: 31 October 2025.

87. Local Government Association (2025), 'Number of new dwellings completed - total in Luton'. Available at: https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=54&mod-area=E06000032&mod-group=AllLaInCountry&mod-type=comparisonGroupType&mod-period=1, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

88. Local Government Association (2025), 'Number of doctor consultations/treatment services in an area per 1,000 population in Luton'. Available at: https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=10287&mod-area=E06000032&mod-group=AllLaInCountry&mod-type=comparisonGroupType&mod-period=1, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

89. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025), 'Accredited official statistics. **English indices of deprivation 2025: statistical release', 30 October. Available at:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release.

90. Office for National Statistics (2023), 'How life has changed in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole: Census 2021', 19 January. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E06000058/, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

91. Holland, L. (2025), 'Bournemouth: The seaside town 'changed' by immigration - where non-British-born population rose nearly 50%', *Sky News*, 25 August. Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/bournemouth-the-seaside-town-changed-by-immigration-where-non-british-born-population-rose-nearly-50-13414657, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

over the impact of immigration on public safety in Bournemouth, such as the March 2022 murder of aspiring royal marine Jordan Roberts by Afghan asylum seeker Lawangeen Abdulrahimzai.[92]

In September 2025, a demonstration of more than 300 people took place in Bournemouth, organised with the 'Bournemouth Patriots' including a 'stop the boats' message (the ongoing small-boats emergency on the English south coast).[93] 'Stand Up to Racism' protesters were also present with a 'refugees welcome' counter-message. It is reported that three hotels in Bournemouth are currently housing newly-arrived migrants, with a string of criminal proceedings recently taking place against asylum seekers who have been dispersed to the town.[94]

Table 1: Rate of Population Growth (Proposed Special Study Areas for 2026 Emergency Census) – March 2011-March 2021 and June 2021-June 2024

Local Authority	Population Growth Rate (March 2011 – March 2021)	Population Growth - Number of People (March 2011-2021)	Population Growth (June 2021 – June 2024)	Population Growth - Number of People (June 2021 – June 2024)
Preston	5.4%	7,632	10.2%	15,078
Middlesbrough	4.0%	5,510	8.5%	12,218
Leicester	11.7%	38,732	5.8%	21,408
Luton	10.9%	22,061	6.3%	14,132
Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole	5.7%	21,307	2.2%	8,812

Table 2: Population Density (The UK and Proposed Special Study Areas for 2026 Emergency Census) – June 2021 and June 2024

	June 2021 Population Density (people per km²)	June 2024 Population Density (people per km²)	June 2021 to June 2024 change (people per km²)
UK	276	285	+9
England	434	450	+16
Scotland	69	71	+2
Wales	150	154	+4
Northern Ireland	141	142	+1
Preston	1,039	1,145	+106
Middlesbrough	2,671	2,898	+227
Leicester	5,003	5,295	+292

92. BBC News (2023), 'Bournemouth e-scooter row murderer given life sentence', 25 January. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-64389346, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

93. Waple, K. and Humphrey, S. (2025), 'Hundreds gather as immigration protest takes place', *BBC News*, 20 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgjjdj2e28o, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

94. Young, A. (2025), 'The UK's 'most dangerous' migrant town braces for more aylum seekers as hotels turn into taxpayer-funded bedsits', *Daily Mail*, 13 October 2025. Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15185165/Residents-dangerous-migrant-town-brace-arrivals-plans-turn-hotels-taxpayer-funded-bedsits.html, last accessed: 13 October 2025.

Luton	5,189	5,515	+326
Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole	2,469	2,523	+54

4. Conclusion

The birth of the England and Wales Census was motivated by the core belief that it would demonstrate the political establishment's commitment to the common good – a desire to better understand the population over which it governed; working towards an efficient allocation of resources in the name of lifting the economic condition and strengthening the public safety of local communities. The national census is an invaluable resource, one that can be utilised by democratic institutions, business confederations, research associations, healthcare agencies, and media outlets to inform the national conversation on matters of population change. Using census data, these integral parts of British civil society can not only identify sources of human resilience and civic stability, but also pinpoint where social, economic, and cultural risks lie.

While the England and Wales Census conventionally takes place every ten years, there have been exceptions in times of radical and transformative change. The 1966 mid-decade census was motivated by concerns over the degree to which large-scale migration from the Commonwealth – and the reaction to it among the native established population – were undermining social cohesion and public order. There were also public anxieties over pockets of segregation forming in the urban metropolitan centres of England – with a lack of English language skills among some new arrivals being a barrier to economic, social, and civic integration. There were also worries over the scale of 'internal migration' from other parts of the country to southern England spurred on by London's growing status as an international economic and cultural powerhouse, as well as the emergence of new towns in counties such as Hertfordshire.

Despite the traditionally confrontational and adversarial nature of postwar British political culture – fuelled by its historically two-party system – the 1966 mid-decade Census commanded cross-party support. It was an innovative form of population data collection which adopted a sensible approach to costs. Its methodological basis – a 10% sample along with a select number of 'special study areas' – meant it cost only a quarter of the full 1961 census which preceded it. An emergency 2026 census – specifically for England – based on this framework, would be an invaluable contribution to Britain's wider population statistics system at a reasonable cost. While the 2021 England and Wales Census was hugely informative in some ways —especially in terms of documenting the degree of racial, ethnic, and religious diversification which had taken place in modern Britain – it was somewhat plagued by Covid-connected data distortions in areas ranging from employment to health, problems

regarding questionnaire design which created absurd results, and various issues over data processing and management.

The population data derived from the national census plays an integral role in helping to determine the distribution of tax revenues between regional and local authorities – the allocation of state resources for the delivery of public services and provision of social goods such as school places and hospital appointments. The maintenance of critical infrastructure is heavily reliant on understanding the demographic character of local and regional populations – not only in terms of overall size and density, but inter-related characteristics such as age, socio-economic background, and health status. In an era of fast-paced diversification – spurred on by considerable immigration-fuelled population growth – the risks of existing demographic data 'ageing' quickly are far greater. The failure to hold an emergency census heightens the risk of imprecise and ineffective public-service delivery in local authorities which have developed much larger and more diverse populations in recent times – including the likes of Preston in Central Lancashire and Middlesbrough in North Yorkshire. This in turn can have a taxing effect on social cohesion in socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of the country.

Up-to-date, precise, and insightful data which can be produced through a methodological sound emergency census can also help the UK Government, along with regional and local authorities, to better prepare for national emergencies such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Ethnic, racial, and religious differences in age structure, occupation type, housing quality, health status, English language proficiency, and geographical distribution must be better understood in the context of crisis preparedness and management. This also involves pinpointing populations which are more resilient/vulnerable in the event of a public health crisis – in turn enabling the identification of both sources of civic strength and the most serious pressure points when it comes to critical infrastructure (such as hospitals and emergency services). With England having witnessed remarkable forms of population growth and demographic change since the 2021 Census, there is a strong case for an emergency census in 2026 to better equip national, regional, and local authorities when it comes to matters of crisis readiness and control.

The UK is unusual among advanced and industrialised societies, having neither a singular register of national residency nor a mandatory national citizen ID card system. While there are other surveys which provide a richness of socio-demographic data such as the Annual Population Survey (APS) – a UK-wide continuous household survey – they should be considered complementary sources of population data which do not usually investigate matters of international (and internal) migration and national sense of home/belonging. The national census is therefore of particular importance and sits at the very heart of our population statistics ecosystem. The Census should continue to play an integral part in determining the distribution of funds to local authorities and the shaping of effective public-service delivery – meaning that it is vital that

it is methodologically sound and provides a precise understanding of the country at the neighbourhood level. There are lessons to be learned from the 2021 Census and acknowledging these flaws includes holding an 'emergency corrections' census for England – one which strengthens the ONS's credibility, is respectful of concerns over the impact of population change on the sustainability of public services and social cohesion (especially in times of crisis), and is as kind as possible to the public purse.

£10.00
ISBN: 978-1-917201-82-7

Policy Exchange
1 Old Queen Street
Westminster
London SW1H 9JA

www.policyexchange.org.uk