



**What kind of population policy should the UK have?**  
***an Optimum Population Trust briefing***

The population policy the UK should have, in the view of the Optimum Population Trust, is a green one. Its aim should be to stabilise population and allow numbers to decrease to a lower level; a level that would be ecologically sustainable in the long term and offer its citizens a better quality of life. In both moral and political terms, this policy should first protect the people and the natural environment of the UK, but it should also help to protect the global environment and the peoples of other nations. In numerical terms, a population decrease of not less than a quarter of a per cent a year should be its aim, to be achieved broadly by a reduction in unplanned pregnancies, by encouragement to voluntarily limit family size to two children, and by ensuring that annual inward migration does not exceed annual outward migration. It should be regularly reviewed.

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, few people understand what a 'population policy' means. It can encompass policies to improve a nation's prospects and skills by providing good education and enabling people to live long and healthy lives; or it can be interpreted as a policy to maximise the ratio of those of working age to the numbers of those too old to work, or as the way to manage the cultural mix of a country's inhabitants.

To OPT, having a population policy means first developing a rational and scientific attitude to the size, growth or decline of a nation's population in relation to its environmental or ecological impacts. Population policies formulated to achieve a desired rate of stabilisation and decrease should be part of an environmental strategy to lessen the impact of Britons on the environment of their own country and the world as a whole, particularly on climate change and resource depletion. Ecological footprint studies show that the UK requires 3.6 "UKs" to feed and supply itself - the "other" 2.6 UKs (the extra land required for our lifestyles) are abroad; and OPT's calculations show that on the basis of globally equitable allocations of ecologically renewable resources, with current technology, our 24 million hectares of land would sustain fewer than 20 million people.

There were fewer than 10 million people in Britain after the union of England (including Wales) with Scotland 300 years ago. By 1950 our numbers had reached 50 million, and by mid-2006 they had grown by a fifth again to an estimated 60.5 million, with England the fourth most densely populated country in the world excluding small island and city states. Much of the UK's population growth has taken place in the last decade, with an annual increase of 300,000 people for the last two years, and at the current growth rate of about 0.6% a year, UK population would reach 106 million by the end of this century. It is officially projected to reach 70.7 million in 2074, with net inward migration accounting for more than 80% of future growth.

A population policy must therefore address the components and causes of population growth. As defined by the United Nations, in its annual survey of World Population Policies, there are several demographic components of population size and change. Population size is usually measured by taking a census of the inhabitants of a country at given intervals. The basic measure of population growth in any nation state, in any one year, is natural change (births minus deaths) and net migration (the number of people entering the country intending to stay for more than a year minus the number of people who leave the country intending to live abroad for more than a year).

The statistical factors involved in annual natural change include those which affect the number of deaths, such as increasing longevity. Several factors affect the number of births in any one year, such as the number of young women in the population, changing patterns of marriage and childbearing, and the prevalence of childlessness. Migration flows in and out of the UK (based on the International Passenger Survey, which asks a sample of people entering or leaving the country about the length of time they plan to live in the UK or abroad) in turn affect national fertility rates, and migration patterns interact with the numbers of those who settle permanently in a country not their own.

Where does UK population policy stand now? No-one knows, because no political party has an explicit population policy and the current government has never stated what its population policy is - if it has one that has not yet been made public. Since 1973, when the recommendations of an independent Population Panel concluded that "Britain must face the fact that its population cannot increase indefinitely", and called on the government of the day to "define its attitude to questions concerning the level and rate of increase of population", no government has shown interest in considering the question, in spite of consistent public opinion polls showing that a majority of Britons believe their country to be overcrowded.

A starting point for a UK population policy would be to develop an accurate but non-intrusive way of measuring the number of people living in the UK at any given time. Migrant flows also need to be more accurately recorded. Population growth could then be reversed by a variety of measures which would not impinge on the freedom of UK citizens.

As average family size is below replacement rate and expected to level off at 1.74 children for women born after 1990, fertility policies need only reduce the number of unintended conceptions, particularly among teenagers, where pregnancies are among the highest in Europe. However, education to encourage parents voluntarily to 'stop at two' children would demonstrate the UK's willingness to reduce its impact on the world environment and enable migration policies to include larger quotas for refugees.

**Migration** and settlement policies which balance the annual number of long-term arrivals with departures will involve difficult decisions about the choices to be made between accepting different categories of economic or humanitarian migrants, but these policies should include further reductions in the granting of visas and all non-essential work permit quotas; further restrictions on settlement rights by non-EU citizens; renegotiation of EU directives on automatic rights to settle in other EU countries; faster and stricter enforcement of recent immigration laws and regulations already introduced or planned by the government, including stiffer penalties for employers of illegal labour and greater incentives to employ local labour; and it should consider new ideas to curb migration, such as the levying of green taxes on UK property bought by overseas buyers.

For more information, see *Fertility, Migration UK, Population Policy Projections* and other sections of the OPT website.

## Optimum Population Trust

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