



# Optimum Population Trust

*Fewer people, better lives*

**OPT to Stop at Two  
Here's the pledge!**

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## The UK's population problem

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For demographic information see [UK Population figures](#).

For OPT projections and policy see [Fertility](#), [Migration](#), [Briefings and submissions](#) and other sections of this website.

### GOVERNMENT CAPS POPULATION GROWTH

"This government isn't going to allow the population to go up to 70 million" new Immigration Minister Phil Woolas announced in an interview with *The Times* on 18 October 2008. OPT welcomes the long-awaited reversal of government pro-population growth policies and continues to campaign for UK population to be allowed to decrease to a long-term environmentally sustainable level - well below the current 61 million.

## Unsustainable population growth

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

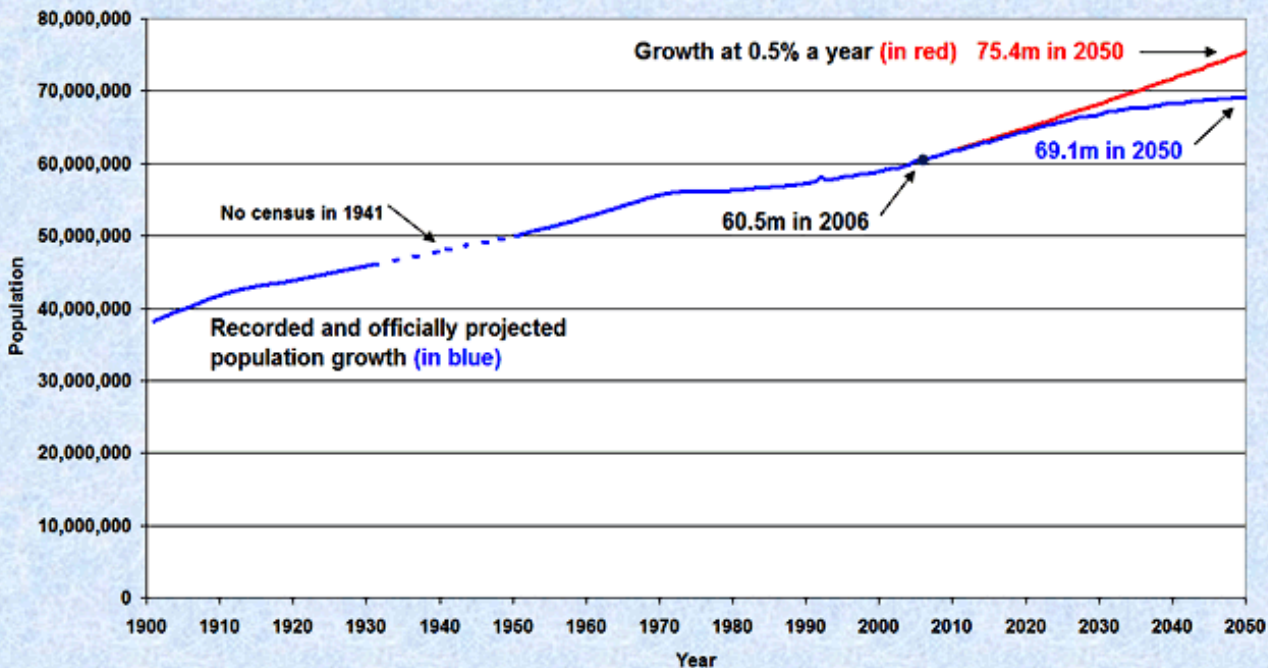
The UK is made up of four constituent countries - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together, this territory is one of the most crowded areas in the world, yet by mid-2007, according to [ONS estimates](#) released on 21 August 2008 and widely believed to be underestimated, our numbers reached 61 million. The number of people living in the UK has increased sixfold since 1800 and by more than a fifth since 1950, and the environmental impacts of this growth are already clear - in both the relentless development pressures on our finite supply of land and natural resources and the impacts of UK consumption on other parts of the world.

UK population grew by a staggering 434,700 in 2007, an increase equivalent to a city larger than Cardiff. Officially projected to rise by about 0.7% a year to reach 71 million by 2031 - an increase of nearly 10 million - population growth in the UK has reached near-record levels, and growth at the current rate of 0.6% a year, if continued, would take our numbers to 100 million before the end of this century. England alone is home to more than 50 million people, making it the fourth-most densely populated country in the world with a staggering 998 inhabitants per square mile, if small city and island-states are excluded - even more crowded than Japan. Those who already inhabit the UK recognise the dangers: in an Ipsos-Mori poll carried out in August 2006, 33% of respondents identified population growth as the most serious threat to the future wellbeing of Britain, second only to terrorism and ahead of climate change. Yet no political party has a policy aimed at stabilising and reducing today's environmentally unsustainable population.

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

### UK Population growth: officially projected and at actual 2000-06 rate of 0.5% a year

Optimum Population Trust / Government Actuary's Department 2004-based Principal Projection

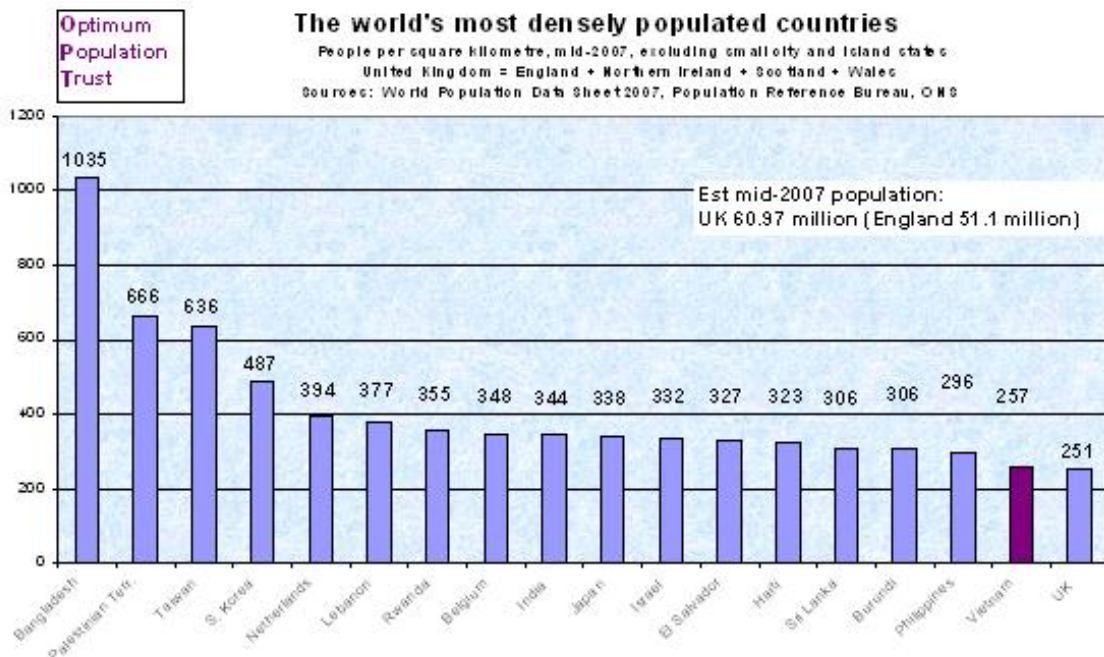


Note: This graph is based

on official projections which have been superseded by the ONS 2006-based principal population projection published in 2007.

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

### CHART 2



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

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

Britons are marrying later in life, having children later in life, and dying later too - affecting the number of **deaths** each year. With expected increasing **life expectancy**, boys born in 2005-7 can expect to live to the age of 88.1 years and girls to 91.5 years. Men aged 65 in 2004-6 can expect to live another 16.9 years and women 19.9 years, which contributes to the **Ageing** of the UK population. But the main cause of UK population growth is high net inward migration, reaching 237,000 in 2007 compared with natural increase of 197,700, and without accounting for illegal migration flows (see **UK Population Figures**.) Migration flows also have an impact on births, if migrant birth rates are higher than those of emigrants.

Annual population growth has quadrupled since the 1970s. Continued growth at the officially projected rate would involve adding a population of nearly 10 million - more than London's - to the UK by 2031, with all its needs for additional housing, energy and power supplies, reservoirs, schools, hospitals, transport, shops, waste disposal, prisons - and all its impacts in the form of waste and emissions. Those who argue for population growth will not answer the question of what they think is an environmentally sustainable level, nor at what level they believe growth should stop. Our numbers cannot grow for ever.

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

Ministerial statements following the population projections published in 2007 show signs of rethinking about the government's apparent pro-growth policy, with the highest projection indicating a possible 85 million people in the UK by 2081. In October 2008, new Immigration Minister Phil Woolas pledged not to allow UK population to rise above 70 million - but that means another 9 million more people. Although net migration figures may fall in 2008 as the UK economic recession bites, policy details designed to allow population to decrease have not emerged. Neither have the opposition Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties stated a clear position. According to the United Nations report **World Population Policies 2007** the UK government's population policy was "no intervention" on population growth, nor to intervene with fertility rates, nor migration. Not until October 2008 was this policy changed, with a ministerial pledge to cap population at no more than 70 million, and to achieve this by using the new points-based visa system to cut migration from outside the EU. See **OPT Population policies**.

You don't have to let this happen. Call for a sustainable population policy for the UK (see **Action and politics**). Our suggested policy is to encourage couples to "stop at two" children; to make greater efforts to prevent unwanted conceptions, particularly among teenagers (see **Fertility**), and to balance migration so that the people entering the country as immigrants do not exceed those leaving the country as emigrants (see **Migration**). That way our population can be allowed to stabilise and reduce gradually to a lower level. See **OPT Population policy projections**.

## Growth has been repeatedly underestimated

The latest population projection from the **Government Actuary's Department** [2006-based, published 23 October 2007, GAD] indicates even faster population growth than in previous projections. Population is now expected to reach 77 million by 2050 and 85 million by 2081, with further growth beyond that. In GAD's 1994-based principal population projection, the number of people living in the UK was expected to reach 60.7 million in mid-2031. Barely a decade later, with our numbers already more than 60 million, the 2031 figure has been revised upwards by 4.1 million people. Research and the actual experience of **local authorities** coping with increasing numbers of people flooding into their areas suggests that the population size estimates on which projections are based have also been underestimated, and actual growth has repeatedly outstripped official projections, with population increasing by an average of more than 0.5% a year from 2000-2006.

The UK's fertility rate fell consistently until 2001, but the total number of births has increased each year since then, while increasing life expectancy has reduced the number of deaths. Births have exceeded deaths every year since 1901, except in 1976, and natural increase (births minus deaths) rose to 176,339 in 2006. The total fertility rate is below replacement\*\* level, though natural increase is still causing population to grow. Net immigration, however, is now the main contributor to unsustainable levels of growth, and is expected to account directly, and indirectly due to its effect on fertility, for 69% of population growth from 2006 to 2031. See **Migration: UK**.

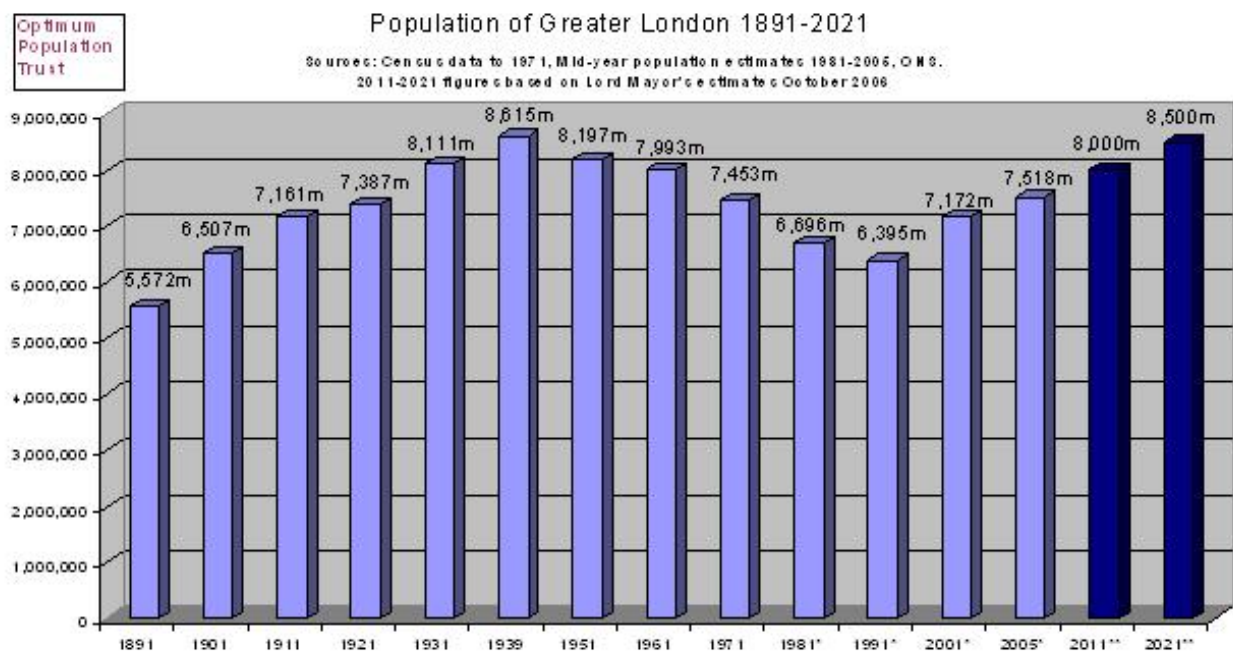
## Population density and overcrowding

Seven out of 10 people believe that Britain is already overcrowded. [YouGov poll, April 2006]. The UK is more densely populated than China and the third most densely populated country in Europe (the EU 15) after the Netherlands and Belgium, excluding the island of Malta. With population reaching an estimated 60.6 million in mid-2006, the UK as a whole had 250 inhabitants per square kilometre and in 2005 its population density (248) was the third highest in the EU 15 after the Netherlands (393) and Belgium (341). See [Europe](#). The government's view of acceptable levels of population density, based on the fact that barely a tenth of UK land has been urbanised, shows little understanding of the ecological footprint - the environmental impact of its population on the land it inhabits and the lands inhabited by other peoples.

## Population distribution

London and the south-east of England are among the most densely populated areas in the world. Greater London's population, which reached 7.47 million in 2006, is set to rise, according to the lowest official projections, by 788,000 more to reach 8.26 million in 2026. Meanwhile Londoners have been moving out to suburbs and the countryside in record numbers, but finding these areas also under growing population pressure. Just as redistributing greenhouse gas emissions is no solution to climate change, population redistribution provides no long-term solution to environmental sustainability - total population numbers need to decrease both in the UK and worldwide, alongside efforts to reduce people's individual environmental impacts.

CHART 3



OPT researchers have concluded that, in the absence of radical breakthroughs in energy technology, **an environmentally sustainable population for the UK may be lower than 30 million** if it is to be largely self-sufficient in clean energy, if continuing damage to local and global environments is to stop, and if its citizens are to enjoy an acceptable quality of life. This research is in part based on the techniques of ecological footprinting, but the key factors determining the need for population reduction in the UK and worldwide are climate change and energy requirements.

## OPT POPULATION POLICY

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

- Globally, that full access to family planning should be provided to all those who do not have it, that couples should be encouraged to "Stop at Two" children to lessen the impact of family size on the environment, and that this should be part of a holistic approach involving better education and equal rights for women.
- In the UK, that population should be allowed to stabilise and decrease by not less than 0.25% a year to an environmentally sustainable level, by bringing immigration into numerical balance with emigration, by making greater efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies, and by encouraging couples to "Stop at Two" children\*\*\*.

## FOOTNOTES

\***Total Fertility Rate (TFR):** The TFR for a given year is "the average number of children per woman a group of women would have if they experienced the age-specific fertility rates in the given year for their entire childbearing years" (*GAD*).

\*\***Replacement level fertility** is the level at which a population would be exactly replacing itself in the long term, other things being equal. In developed countries this is estimated at 2.1 children per woman to take account of infant mortality and those who choose not to have children. (*Social Trends 37, ONS*.)

\*\*\***Two children remains the most common family size in England and Wales.** Over one-third (37 per cent) of women reaching age 45 in 2006 (that is, those born around 1961) had a completed family size of two children. Childlessness has been on the increase in recent years. Nearly one in five women born in 1961 was childless, compared with one in ten women born around 1941. The proportion of women having three or more children has fallen, from nearly four in ten women born in 1941 to only three in ten women born in 1961. (*Fertility: UK fertility highest since 1980, ONS Release 22 August 2007*)

For information in media releases and a list of media coverage, see [Media](#). • For OPT's alternative stabilisation and reduction projections and policies see [Population policy projections](#) and [OPT Population policies](#). See also [Action and politics](#)

The problem is multi-faceted: [Climate change](#) • [Water consumption and supply](#) • [Consumption of energy and insecurity of energy supply](#) • [Economic impacts](#) • [Countryside, housing and development](#) • [Transport](#) • [Ageing and unemployment](#) • [The UK's ecological footprint on other countries](#).

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Briefing by **Rosamund McDougall**, Policy Director and former Co-Chair, Optimum Population Trust

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