

Population Change and Local Government

Summary and Recommendations

COSLA officers are engaging with councils and with Scottish Government on the implementation of Scotland's population strategy, *A Scotland for the future: opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population*. This paper discusses, firstly, the topline demographic data emerging from the 2022 census. It then sets out the programme of work undertaken thus far, and, based on that, our proposed activities going forward.

The paper invites Convention to agree that COSLA should:

- i. Continue to engage with our member councils to build a more fine-grained understanding of the impacts of demographic change;
- ii. Clearly articulate to Scottish Government the impact that demographic change is having on councils; and
- iii. Advocate for meaningful strategic interventions which seek to address those impacts in a coordinated manner, both through the Population Strategy and more broadly.

References

No previous reports to Convention

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Purpose

1. COSLA officers are engaging with councils and with Scottish Government on the implementation of Scotland's population strategy, [A Scotland for the future: opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population](#). This paper discusses, firstly, the topline demographic data emerging from the 2022 census. It then sets out the programme of work undertaken thus far, and, based on that, our proposed activities going forward.

What is changing?

The demographic context

2. Scotland's population is changing, as confirmed by the 2022 Census results released in September 2023.
3. Our overall population is growing, but slowly. The population grew by 2.7 per cent between 2011 and 2022, to reach 5,436,600 people. This is slower growth rate than between 2001 and 2011, which was 4.6 per cent.
4. That population increase is, in aggregate, entirely due to migration. Without inward migration, Scotland's population would have shrunk by 49,800.
5. Our population is aging, fairly rapidly. There are now over one million people aged over 65. The number of people over 65 grew by 22.5 per cent between 2011 and 2022 – a much faster growth rate than the population overall.
6. Different local authorities are on different demographic trajectories. Broadly speaking, east coast councils around Edinburgh have seen rapid population growth. Midlothian increased by 16 per cent, East Lothian by 12 per cent and Edinburgh by 8 per cent. West coast authorities have seen population decline: Dumfries & Galloway and Inverclyde fell by 4 per cent, North Ayrshire by 3 and Argyll & Bute by 2 per cent.
7. Sub-council data gives a clearer picture of much more rapid growth and decline in localised populations. Every council has pockets of growth and decline, but some far more than others. For example, 73 per cent of data zones (areas of 500-1000 residents) in Edinburgh are increasing in population, while 82 per cent of zones in Inverclyde are decreasing.
8. Over the coming year, more data will be published by National Records of Scotland. Additionally, existing data will be improved, which is only possible post-census.

The policy context

9. While throwing up interesting details and providing a finer-grained picture, the census broadly aligns with expectations. Those expectations informed the Population Strategy, published by Scottish Government in 2021. Importantly, the strategy highlights the need for a population that is sufficiently balanced and well-distributed so that all communities can flourish. It also focuses on family friendliness, healthy living and migration.

10. The Population Strategy is being overseen at an officer level by a Population Programme Board which is comprised of directors from across Scottish Government, and representatives from the enterprise agencies and COSLA. It makes recommendations to Scottish Ministers.
11. The Programme Board's work is informed by the Population Roundtable, co-chaired by COSLA and Scottish Government, involving all 32 local authorities. Both the Programme Board and Roundtable meet quarterly. There is also a Migration and Population Expert Advisory Group, the purpose of which is to provide independent expert analysis and advice to Scottish Government ministers on migration and population.
12. To date, work on the Population Strategy has focused on two areas: depopulation and rapid growth. Scottish Government has published an [Addressing Depopulation Action Plan](#). This has included pilots for settlement officers in depopulating councils to work on attracting people to their areas. A small amount of funding was earmarked for (rural only) councils to bid for, to be used for small grants for an officer or to commission research. Work is also beginning on understanding the implications of population growth, with initial discussions looking at what the implications of rapid growth are for councils experiencing it.
13. Two thematic areas have been identified for further attention: housing and connectivity (both digital and transport). Scottish Government has shared discussion papers on these topics, which councils have been invited to comment on, and has asked its Expert Advisory Group to provide research on the same.
14. COSLA's approach thus far has been to ensure the experiences and priorities of Local Government are well understood by Scottish Government. We are working hard to ensure Local Government's voice is heard in its full complexity: not every council has the same experience, and we need to articulate that diversity. Additionally, it is critical that the full impact of demography on councils is well understood, and that we advocate for meaningful, coherent policy to address it.

Proposed COSLA position

15. This paper seeks the views of Convention on our proposed strategic approach which will: engage with councils to deepen our understanding of their population challenges; articulate those in the context of both the Population Strategy and the other key strategies which can play a key role in tackling the challenges associated with demographic change; and work with councils and Scottish Government to develop policy proposals that meaningfully address Scotland's demographic challenges.
16. To this end, we will engage in work across the following key strands:
 - i. *Map the issues.* Officers will continue in our programme of outreach to understand in greater depth the implications of population change. We have held a large number of meetings, either one to one or with groups of councils, to understand what the implications of rapid change are, and how councils are managing it.
 - ii. *Build a more sophisticated taxonomy.* We are at risk of falling into a crude dualism of "depopulating councils" and "growing councils". This is unhelpful: it is too broad-brush, suggests a zero-sum game, has the potential to pit councils against each other, and ignores councils which may have neutral aggregate growth rates but which face sharp population change in some localities.
 - iii. *Deepen understanding of the issues and their cross-cutting nature.* We are bringing together policy teams across COSLA to map policies that are having / could have an

impact on demographic change, and will also convene policy specific groups of Local Government officers, as appropriate, to better understand the challenges. This will include consideration of policies in relation to, for instance:

- a. Economic development (including infrastructure policy, city region deals, and associated fiscal frameworks)
 - b. Housing
 - c. Transport
 - d. Local Government funding
 - e. Digital connectivity
 - f. Tourism policy.
- iv. *Foreground the lack of policy consistency.* Scottish public policy states that we want to address demographic change, but in many areas Scottish Government policy is inconsistent with this. We will identify such policy inconsistency and seek means of addressing it.
- v. *Surface the trade-offs and inject realism into the discussion.* Local Government is well placed to understand the concrete policy interventions that could have an impact on the ground, and will articulate those clearly to Scottish Government at both an officer and political level.

Next Steps

17. A short presentation will be delivered to Convention articulating and inviting discussion on the points set out in this paper. Officers will also be available at the Migration Team's 'marketplace' stand in Verity House after Convention.
18. Taking into account the comments provided by Convention, officers will continue to work with councils and Scottish Government colleagues, reporting back through Leaders and the appropriate Board structures, as required.

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