




No country for young people:

The problems of accelerating rural-urban age segregation

Sylvan Lutz
Intergenerational Foundation



The Intergenerational Foundation (www.if.org.uk) is an independent, non-party-political charity that exists to protect the rights of younger and future generations in British policy-making. While increasing longevity is to be welcomed, our changing national demographic and expectations of entitlement are placing increasingly heavy burdens on younger and future generations. From housing, health and education, to employment, taxation, pensions, voting, spending and environmental degradation, younger generations are under increasing pressure to maintain the intergenerational compact while losing out disproportionately to older, wealthier cohorts. IF questions this status quo, calling instead for sustainable long-term policies that are fair to all – the old, the young, and those to come.

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Foreword

We at the LPDF are delighted to support this excellent report. The LPDF shares many of the values of the Intergenerational Foundation having for a number of years through its own publications highlighted the intergenerational unfairness of our housing market and the subsequent unequal distribution of wealth between the age cohorts (in particular see our short Housing Emergency pieces and An affordable housing emergency: The national failure to provide the homes we need).

This report highlights a nationwide problem, that many of our rural areas are becoming no more than retirement communities leading to a collapse in rural economies and placing pressure on what were once vibrant, mixed age, communities to sustain vital services such as schools, doctors surgeries and transport infrastructure. In many places this is exacerbated by the issue of second homes and holiday lets themselves a symptom of the unequal wealth distribution referred to earlier in this foreword.

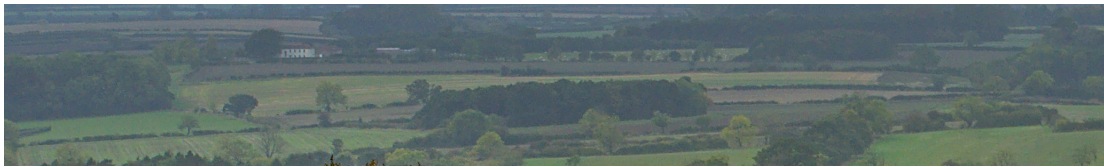
IF have highlighted in their policy recommendations the necessity to build more homes, in particular all tenures of affordable homes, build more homes focussed on our ageing population, question how Green Belt policy is managed in the future, challenge the culture of anti-development sentiment that pervades many communities and to introduce measures and incentives to make more efficient use of our existing housing stock. We at the LPDF agree with all of these recommendations.

Government needs to act now on these policy recommendations, adapting its focus on the major urban areas and to broaden its policy approach with a more positive pro-development stance in the country as a whole. In a plan led system this is made more difficult by the fact that 67% of Local Plans are now out of date and, as a consequence, unlikely to be meeting the housing and wider economic needs of their local area. Accordingly, Government needs to act decisively now to encourage all local authorities to put in place an up-to date Local Plan. Measures to facilitate this, even via the Government's currently proposed simplified plan making process within the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill, will take many years to have the positive impact necessary to achieve the goals envisaged in this report. Therefore, immediate action to stimulate housing supply in the short term is required before the marked trends highlighted in this report become further entrenched.

Paul Brocklehurst, Chairman

Land Promoters & Developers Federation (LPDF)





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Executive summary

Areas in England and Wales are becoming increasingly segregated by age:

- The median age of residents has risen more than twice as much in rural areas than in urban areas in the 20 years since 2001
- The most rural areas aged more than four times compared to major urban areas over the same period
- The share of areas with a median age of over 50 has increased by almost 700% between 2001 and 2021, almost entirely driven by ageing in rural areas
- The share of urban areas with a median age under 25 has increased by almost 33% over the same period
- The share of regions whose median age is close to the national median is decreasing

An age-segregated society places a burden on younger generations and decreases the quality of life for both younger and older people:

- Young people have less chance of living in, and understanding, the countryside
- Anecdotally, villages, like Lofthouse, that experienced a 10-year increase in their median age since 2001 are facing school closures due to a lack of young people
- Older generations are increasingly ageing in rural areas where the per-capita costs of social services are increasing
- Older generations are increasingly living away from younger generations and more social spaces

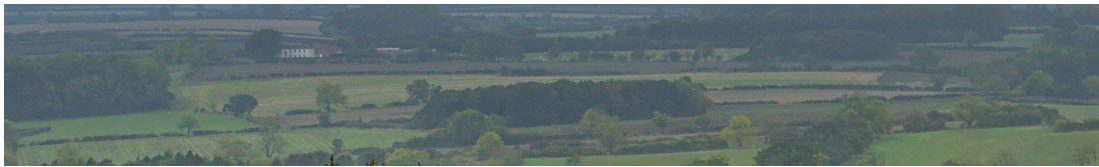
Age segregation may be contributing to other social and economic injustices in the UK including:

- **High housing prices**
- **Political polarisation**
- **Mental health challenges**
- **The ability of younger generations to choose where they want to live**
- **Ageism which exists in a positive feedback loop with age segregation**

Despite a nationally ageing population, we are seeing increasing age based polarisation between rural and urban communities on a macro scale.

Policies are needed to:

- **Ensure urban areas remain accessible to all generations (older people, young families and young people)**
- **Promote economic development outside of urban cores so that young people can remain in more rural communities**
- **And, improve the utilisation of the housing stock in both rural and urban areas**



1. The importance of understanding age segregation

In 2016, the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) researched whether younger and older generations are increasingly living further apart in England and Wales.¹ This is the first in a series of reports that update IF's previous work² on age segregation in England and Wales and expands on how age segregation presents challenges and opportunities for intergenerational fairness in the UK. This report summarises some of the research on why increasing geographic age segregation is costly to society as a whole. It also quantifies how the larger census areas across England and Wales are becoming increasingly polarised by age.³

Census 2021 analysis confirms that the UK continues to face the largest demographic challenge of the 21st Century: a rapidly ageing population.⁴ Between 2001 and 2021: the median age in England and Wales increased from 38 to 41, but this obscures significant variation between the rural and urban areas. The pace of rural ageing has been double the rate of urban areas; the areas classified as most rural by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) aged more than four times compared to the major urban areas.

For policy to address the challenges that come from increasing age segregation, we need a better understanding of these trends. If not more carefully addressed, the impacts of rapid rural ageing will cause a significant strain on UK society in terms of:

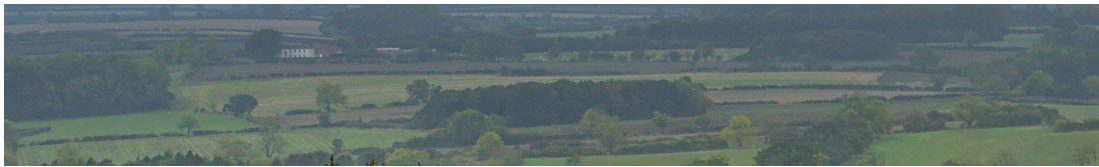
- 1) Struggling rural economies - a lack of schools and few opportunities for employment may continue to drive a brain drain to urban areas and result in a lack of local businesses
- 2) Government spending: reduced younger populations in rural areas may lead to higher costs and lower quality of service and leisure provision

¹ The research revealed that between 1991 and 2014, rural areas have aged at twice the rate of urban areas. IF also found that neighbourhoods within cities were becoming increasingly polarised by age. Kingman, D. (2016) Generations Apart? The Growth of Age Segregation in England and Wales. London: Intergenerational Foundation: <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/generations-apart-the-growth-of-age-segregation-in-england-and-wales>

² Kingman, D. (2016) Intergenerational Foundation. Generations Apart? The Growth of Age Segregation in England and Wales. London: : <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/generations-apart-the-growth-of-age-segregation-in-england-and-wales>

³ Medium Super Output Areas (MSOAs) are the level of analysis used in the paper. See section 4 and appendix A for more details.

⁴ Rychtaříková, J. (2019) Perception of Population Ageing and Age Discrimination across EU Countries. Population and Economics: <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.3.e49760>



3) Decreased social connection: when younger and older generations interact less in shared spaces they are less likely to understand each other's needs or maintain friendships that are valuable to mental health

4) Equity and choice: young people are losing the ability to choose to live in the countryside

“Ageism is widespread in institutions, laws and policies across the world. It damages individual health and dignity as well as economies and societies writ large. It denies people their human rights and their ability to reach their full potential.”

António Guterres, UN Secretary General⁵

Age segregation is the macro-level manifestation of ageism which are mutually reinforced in “a segregation-ageism cycle.”⁶ Like other forms of segregation and discrimination, age segregation/ageism research deals with the exclusions of a particular group from society. Sociologists have closely linked age with identity, culture and politics and identified it as a potential rift in the social fabric.⁷ Age segregation research asks the question: how are different generations separated from or integrated into society?⁸

In 2008, social geographer Professor Danny Dorling, identified that in the UK people are increasingly living “alongside people with similar age, economic and lifestyle status.”⁹ Further research has identified that most spaces and institutions outside the household are increasingly age-segregated along these lines and that there are few spaces in urban areas for generations to mix.¹⁰ However, think tanks, academics and policy makers have primarily focused on how older people have been excluded from society. IF looks to build on that research by identifying how an increasingly age-segregated society will place a burden on younger generations and decrease the quality of life for both younger and older people.

⁵ World Health Organization et al. (2021) Global Report on Ageism. The United Nations: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240016866>

⁶ Hagestad, G. and Uhlenberg, P. (2005) Journal of Social Issues. The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00409.x>

⁷ Hagestad, G. and Uhlenberg, P. (2006) Should We Be Concerned About Age Segregation?: Some Theoretical and Empirical Explorations. Research on Ageing: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027506291872>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dorling, D. et al. (2008) The University of Sheffield. Changing UK: The way we live now Sheffield:

¹⁰ Hagestad, G. and Uhlenberg, P. (2005) The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism ; Milias, V. and Psyllidis, A. (2022) Measuring Spatial Age Segregation through the Lens of Co-Accessibility to Urban Activities. Computers, Environment and Urban Systems: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compenurbsys.2022.101829>



2. Costs of age segregation

While individuals of different ages and life stages are getting fewer and fewer opportunities to interact within communities, this itself may not be a cause for concern for policy makers. However, the scale of increase in rural-urban age segregation outlined in this research could lead to large and growing consequences which include: increasing ageism from old to young as much as from young to old; declining levels of mental health; rural areas and high-cost city centres without young families; higher costs for and reduced access to key medical services for older generations; and a lack of housing for younger people. All these issues lead to reduced well-being for younger and older people. Social separation by age, ethnicity, and social class was estimated to cost the UK economy £6 billion a year in 2014;¹¹ it is likely that with the increasing age segregation measured in this report, this number would have only increased.

2.1 Ageism

The World Health Organisation (WHO) notes that around the world ageism affects: older and younger people's job prospects; their ability to receive the services they need; and adds billions of pounds in healthcare costs in similar countries, such as in Australia and the United States.¹² Ageism exists in a positive feedback loop with age segregation and is defined by the WHO as "when age is used to categorise and divide people in ways that lead to harm." This disadvantages all generations and creates "injustice and erodes solidarity across generations."¹³ By increasing intergenerational contact WHO finds that the effects of ageism are likely to decrease.

2.1.1 Increasing polarisation in democracy

It follows that age segregation may be one of the features driving polarisation in our democracy. The Social Integration Commission argues that "who we vote for, and whether we vote at all, will be determined by our ethnicity, age and social grade."¹⁴ The British Election Study has already shown that in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general elections voter turnout and party support were strongly correlated with age.¹⁵

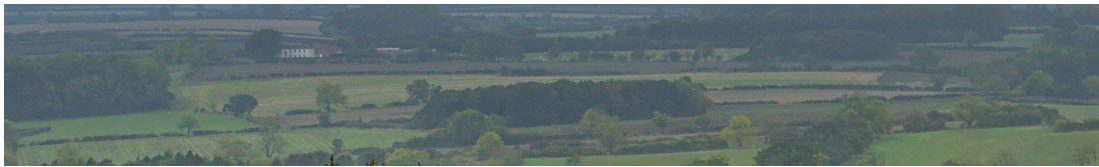
¹¹ The Social Integration Commission (2014) 2nd Report – Social integration: A wake-up call. London: Social Integration Commission

¹² World Health Organization et al. (2021) Global Report on Ageism

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ OpCit.

¹⁵ The British Election Study Team (2021) Age and Voting Behaviour at the 2019 General Election. The British Election Study: <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/age-and-voting-behaviour-at-the-2019-general-election>



Anecdotally, the growing electoral differences between the university town of Canterbury and rural areas in the South East that surround the town show how increasingly age-polarised communities have different political preferences. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many correlated factors may have driven the electoral results in the South East.

While not measured directly in this research, the Intergenerational Foundation thinks it is important to highlight that if younger and older people do not live in the same communities their political preferences will become increasingly entrenched. Simply put, if older and younger generations are not mixing in their communities (see median ages and ageing trends in Figures 3-10), they will fail to see the value of investing in the needs of the other generation. This makes integrating long-termism (the view that social planning decisions are best made when a time horizon beyond one's lifetime is considered) into policy increasingly difficult.

2.2 Mental health

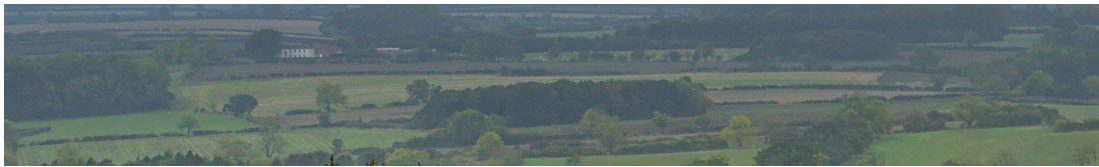
Research also suggests that mixed-age communities can have positive effects on health outcomes for both children and older adults. A recent study from the US has shown that opportunities for mixing between older (age 85 years) and younger (age 23 years) generations benefit the subjective well-being and increase the positive mood of both groups.¹⁶ Another UK report argues that frequent contact between generations can reduce ageist attitudes and that “well-designed” intergenerational contact should be integrated into policy-making and planning processes across all levels of government.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the research tends to focus on the benefits that contact with younger people has for older people, rather than the costs of increasingly age-segregated societies. To understand these costs to society we must begin with an understanding of the current trends in rural and urban ageing across England and Wales.

2.3 Increasing costs and decreasing quality of social and leisure services

Anecdotal evidence from across the UK is increasingly showing that – from primary and secondary education to the NHS – the costs of service provision are increasing, and quality is being undermined. While there are many factors affecting service provision (from an ageing society to government underfunding) it is important to consider these challenges in the context of an increasingly age-segregated society.

¹⁶ Kahlbaugh, P. and Budnick, C.J. (2023) *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*. Benefits of Intergenerational Contact: Ageism, Subjective Well-Being, and Psychosocial Developmental Strengths of Wisdom and Identity : <https://doi.org/10.1177/00914150211050881>

¹⁷ Drury, L., Abrams, D. and Swift, A. (2017) *Making Intergenerational Connections: What Are They, Why Do They Matter and How to Make More of Them*



Recent reporting has shown that London is facing a crisis: young families cannot afford to continue to live in and around London; children are leaving inner-city schools thereby increasing the cost per child of schooling; and their parents are no longer available to provide critical services from nursing to childcare having moved their families out of the city centre.¹⁸

Across the country, the NHS is under increasing pressure. For example, the West Midlands Ambulance Service Area has seen a 37-time increase in the number of deaths related to ambulance delays since 2020.¹⁹ While we cannot directly link this increase to age segregation, the bifurcation of the region into a younger Birmingham region and older surrounding rural areas (see Figures 3 through 10) since 2001, has only made the older residences of the region more isolated from those who may be able to care for them in advance of an emergency. Furthermore, the sheer number of older people living in rural areas may increase the demand for long-distance (and time-consuming) ambulance trips. Of course, these are related to the general ageing of society and not only rural-urban age segregation: the Office for Budget Responsibility found that average annual healthcare spending grows slowly and gradually from 18 (around £1,000) to 65 (around £2,000), but increases significantly and quickly after age 65 reaching around £10,000 per capita by 85.²⁰ The Intergenerational Foundation believes that the ballooning healthcare costs associated with an ageing society will be exacerbated by the trends in rural-urban age segregation identified in this report.

2.4 Housing

Perhaps the clearest signal of the pressures age segregation is placing on society can be seen in the housing market. Age segregation has been increasingly linked with housing unaffordability in urban areas.²¹ In the UK there is increasing polarisation in both the wealth and age of neighbourhoods which is leading to clear social demarcations by age (which IF first identified in 2016)²² and wealth.²³

¹⁸ Chakraborty, A. (2023) Disappearing Schools, Families Forced out – and We Call This Progress. The Guardian, April 13, 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/13/city-without-children-dystopia-new-reality-london>

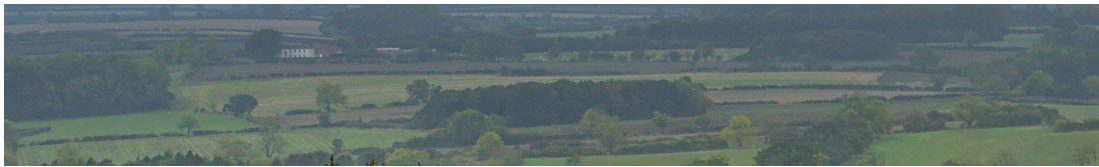
¹⁹ Davies, G. (2022) Deaths Linked to Ambulance Delays Increase 37-Fold since 2020 in One of England's Worst Regions. The Telegraph, December 9, 2022: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/12/07/deaths-linked-ambulance-delays-increase-37-fold-since-2020-one>

²⁰ Licchetta, M. and Stelmach, M. (2016) Office for Budget Responsibility. Fiscal Sustainability and Public Spending on Health

²¹ Sabater, A. and Finney, N. (2023) Age Segregation and Housing Unaffordability: Generational Divides in Housing Opportunities and Spatial Polarisation in England and Wales. Urban Studies: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221121088>

²² Kingman, D. (2016) Intergenerational Foundation. Generations Apart? The Growth of Age Segregation in England and Wales

²³ While this report does not look at age segregation within neighbourhoods, IF will return to this subject when the data becomes available for 2021

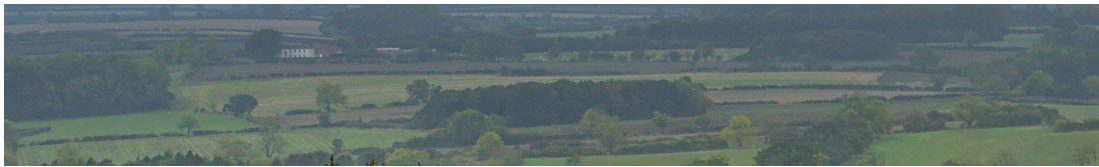


The price of an average UK house grew around 250% from about £96,000 to £251,000 between 2001 and 2021 (normalised for inflation).²⁴ This is keeping young people off the property ladder, in shared flats with other young people, or in their parents' basement.²⁵ When young people do move into their own spaces, it is often to move to increasingly age-segregated university towns (see Section 5.3 below). Age-based stratification in housing markets has created a situation where the family remains the only social space that maintains high levels of intergenerational mixing.²⁶ As we will see below, the age structure of England and Wales (particularly rural areas) is now posing a threat to this last bastion of intergenerational mixing.

²⁴ UK House Price Index (2023) House Price Statistics: <https://landregistry.data.gov.uk/app/ukhpi/browse?from=2003-05-01&location=http%3A%2F%2Flandregistry.data.gov.uk%2Fid%2Fregion%2FUnited-kingdom&to=2023-05-01&lang=en>

²⁵ Office for National Statistics (2022) Young Adults Living with Their Parents: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/youngadultslivingwiththeirparents>

²⁶ Hagestad, G. and Uhlenberg, P. (2006) Should We Be Concerned About Age Segregation?: Some Theoretical and Empirical Explorations



3. Research findings

In 2016, IF identified that age segregation operates on multiple spatial and temporal scales – within small communities (micro-level) and across different areas (macro-level). Therefore, any single analysis must be understood as a small detail that is part of a larger picture. This report focuses on the macro-level (background of the picture) to provide an understanding of ageing trends across England and Wales. Future research will zoom into the areas where policy to address age segregation can have the highest impact on social well-being. Macro-level age segregation is identified by using the 2011 ONS rural-urban classification (RUC) system for Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs). The RUC system classifies MSOAs into an urban or rural category (see Figure 1). Both urban and rural categories have four sub-classifications (eight in total) that are used in the report (see Figure 1 and Appendix A for more details).²⁷ MSOAs are census-based geographic units that contain about 5,000-10,000 residents. This report uses both median ages (either provided by the ONS or calculated by IF research) and regional age profiles (at the most detailed level of specification available for the year).

Finally, it is important to note that the pandemic may have affected the results. Census data is only released once a decade, so it is not possible to determine exactly how the pandemic has affected the 2021 results. The long-term trends we are investigating may have been temporarily dampened or accentuated by the snapshot of the population taken in May 2021.²⁸ Nevertheless, a decade's worth of age polarisation across England and Wales will have neither been entirely created nor obscured by the pandemic. Given the widespread nature of the trend across England and Wales and its continuation since at least 1991,²⁹ we can be confident in the direction of our results; if anything, any temporary return of young adults to their parents' homes, or exodus from urban centres is likely to have temporarily dampened the trend.

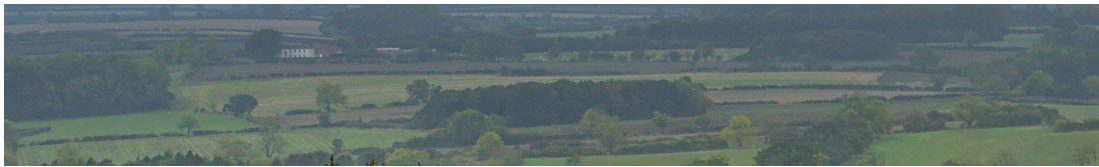
3.1 Ageing trends in England and Wales

The data visualised in Figures 1 and 3-10 are striking: median age has risen more than twice as much in rural areas (seven years) than in urban areas (three years) between 2001 and 2021. The difference in the average rate of ageing between the two areas accelerated between 2001 and

²⁷ Office for National Statistics (2017) Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Middle Layer Super Output Areas in England and Wales

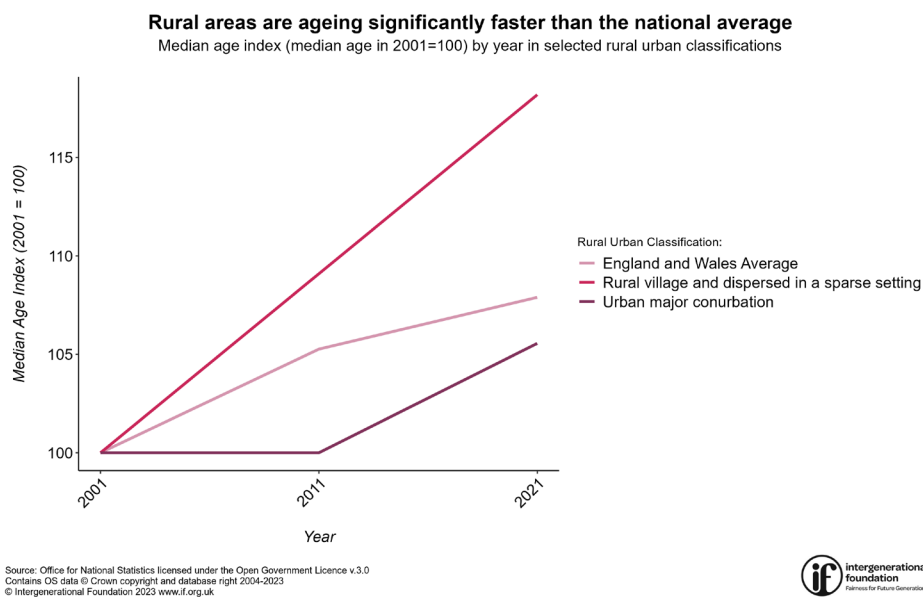
²⁸ During the census collection period from March-May 2021 the UK was under a variety of lockdown measures which may have resulted in living in non-standard living situations

²⁹ Kingman, D. (2016) Intergenerational Foundation. Generations Apart? The Growth of Age Segregation in England and Wales



2011 vs 2011 and 2021.³⁰ This is despite changes in living arrangements brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic which involved younger people fleeing city centres for the first time in a generation.³¹

Figure 1.



Even the urban-rural trends obscure the extreme divergence between certain areas. In the major urban conurbations across England and Wales the median age has only increased by two years over the last two decades; in the most rural areas (rural village and dispersed in a sparse setting) the median age has increased four times more (eight years) (see Figure 1). There is a continued and growing divergence between urban centres and rural communities.

Comparing the RUCs in Figure 2 with the drastic increase in blue areas (where median ages are 45 and above) seen in Figures 3 to 8, highlights how rapidly rural areas are ageing. Urban areas have largely maintained their relatively young populations (with a median age of 39 and under) and some urban areas have even seen their median ages decrease (Figure 9).

³⁰ The increase in median age from 2001 to 2011 was +4 years and +2 years for rural and urban regions respectively. From 2011 to 2021 the increase in median age was +3 years and +1 year for rural and urban regions respectively. Therefore, the difference in difference is growing (4/2 to 3/1).

³¹ Hill, A. (2021) 'We're Happier, Calmer': Why Young Adults Are Moving out of Big Cities. The Guardian, February 8, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/were-happier-calmer-why-young-adults-are-moving-out-of-big-cities>








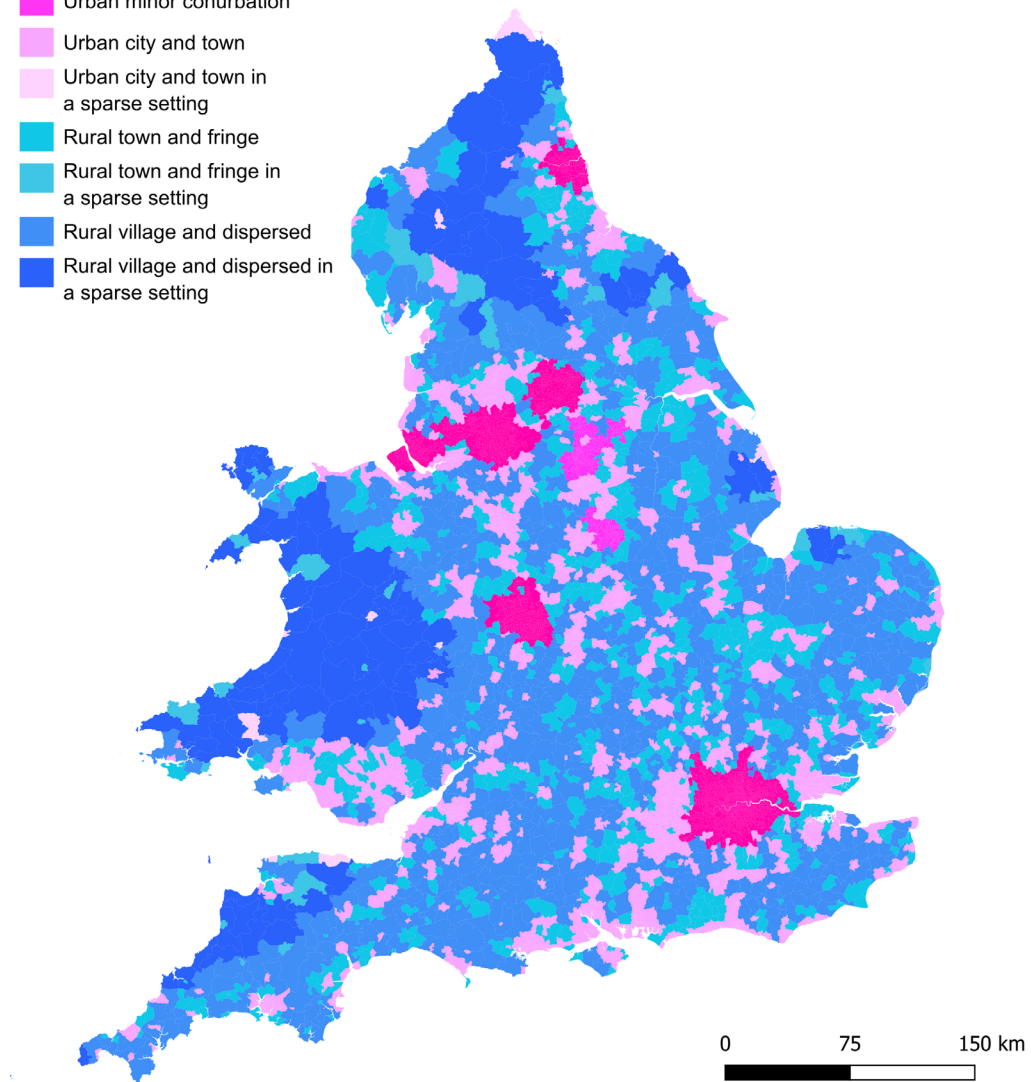
Figure 2

2011 Rural-urban classifications (RUC) in England and Wales

Legend

Rural-urban classification

-  Urban major conurbation
-  Urban minor conurbation
-  Urban city and town
-  Urban city and town in a sparse setting
-  Rural town and fringe
-  Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting
-  Rural village and dispersed
-  Rural village and dispersed in a sparse setting



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Figure 3

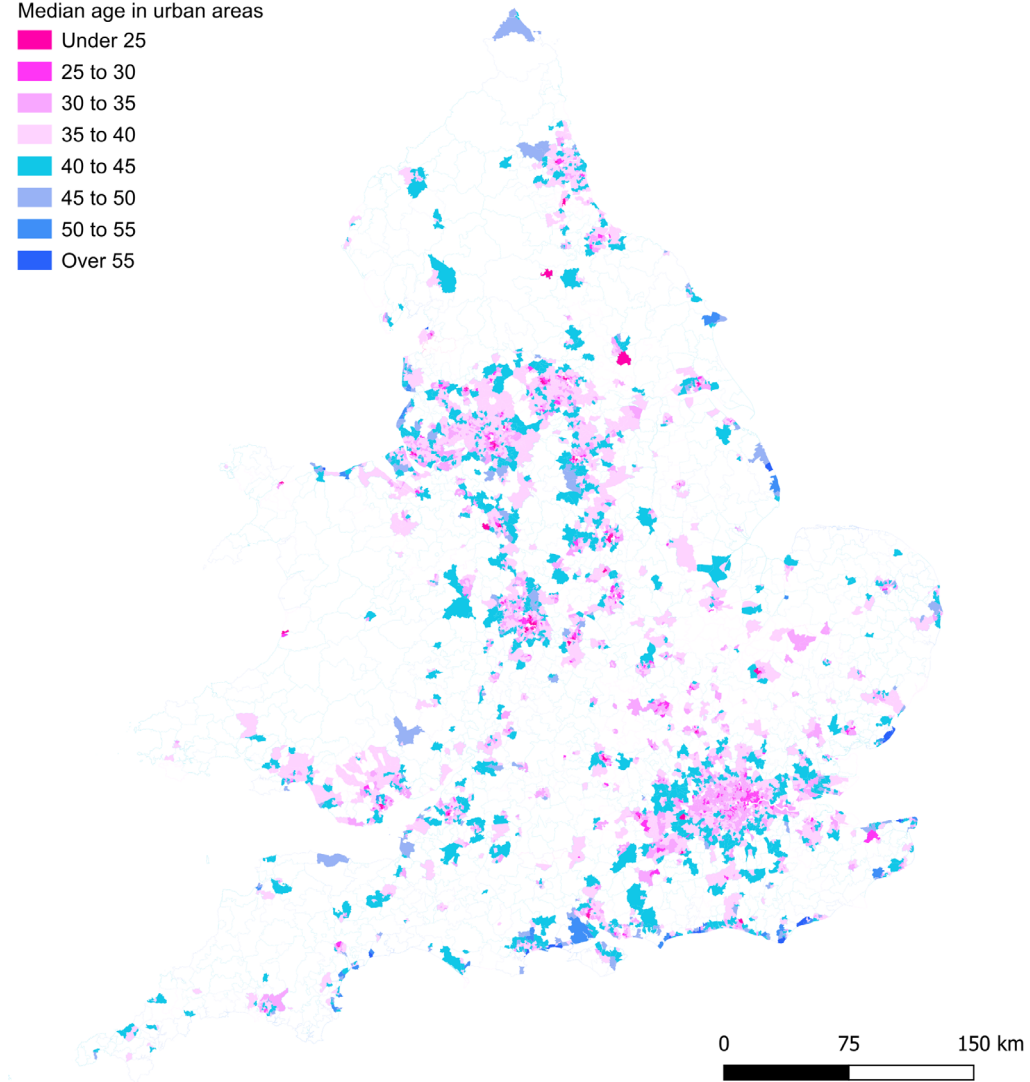
2001 Median age in urban areas of England and Wales

Legend

Rural areas

Median age in urban areas

- Under 25
- 25 to 30
- 30 to 35
- 35 to 40
- 40 to 45
- 45 to 50
- 50 to 55
- Over 55



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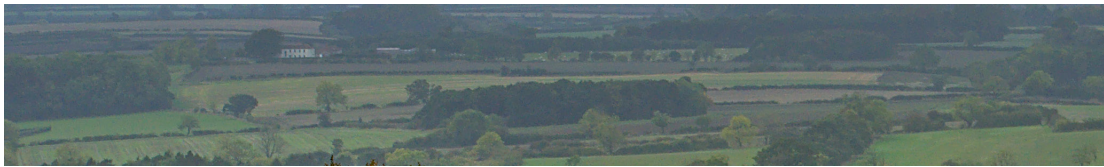
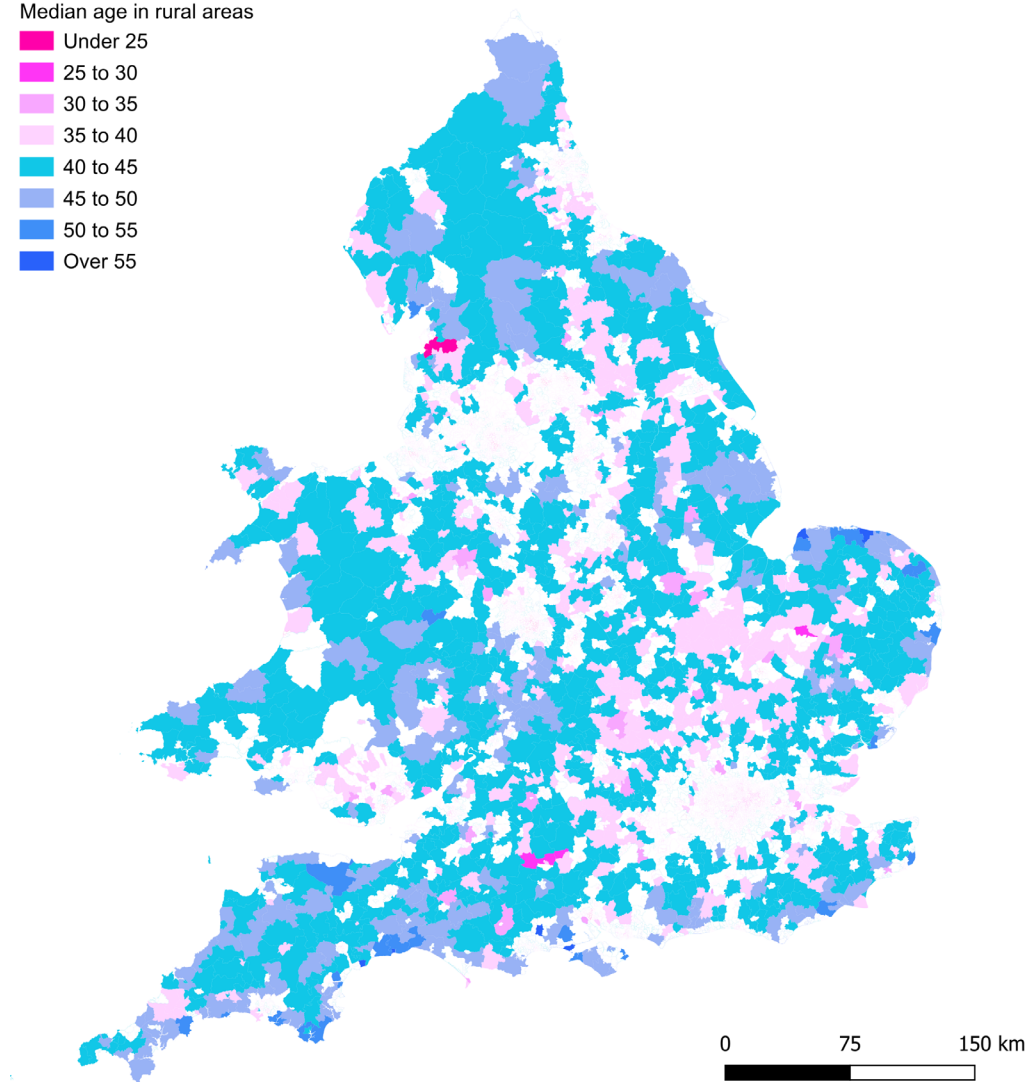


Figure 4

2001 Median age in rural areas of England and Wales

Legend

- Urban areas
- Median age in rural areas
- Under 25
 - 25 to 30
 - 30 to 35
 - 35 to 40
 - 40 to 45
 - 45 to 50
 - 50 to 55
 - Over 55



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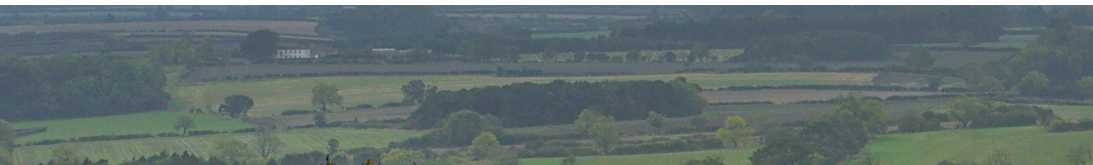


Figure 5

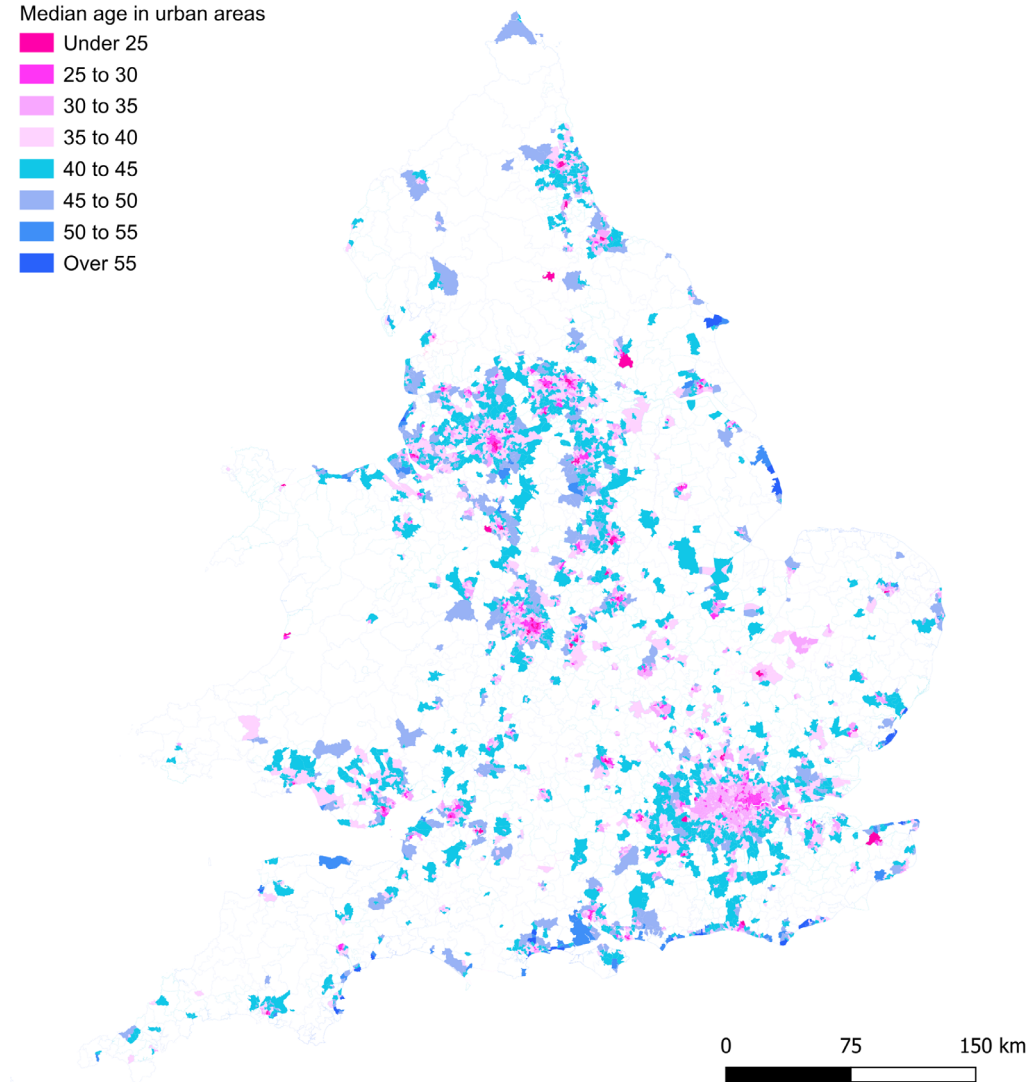
2011 Median age in urban areas of England and Wales

Legend

Rural Areas

Median age in urban areas

- Under 25
- 25 to 30
- 30 to 35
- 35 to 40
- 40 to 45
- 45 to 50
- 50 to 55
- Over 55



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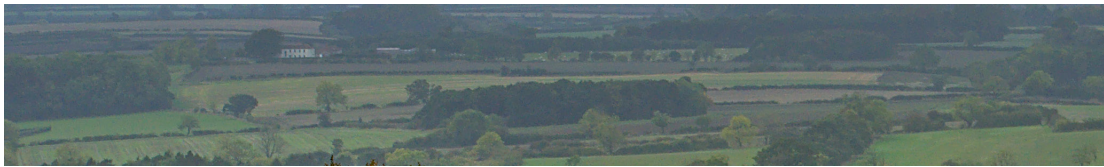
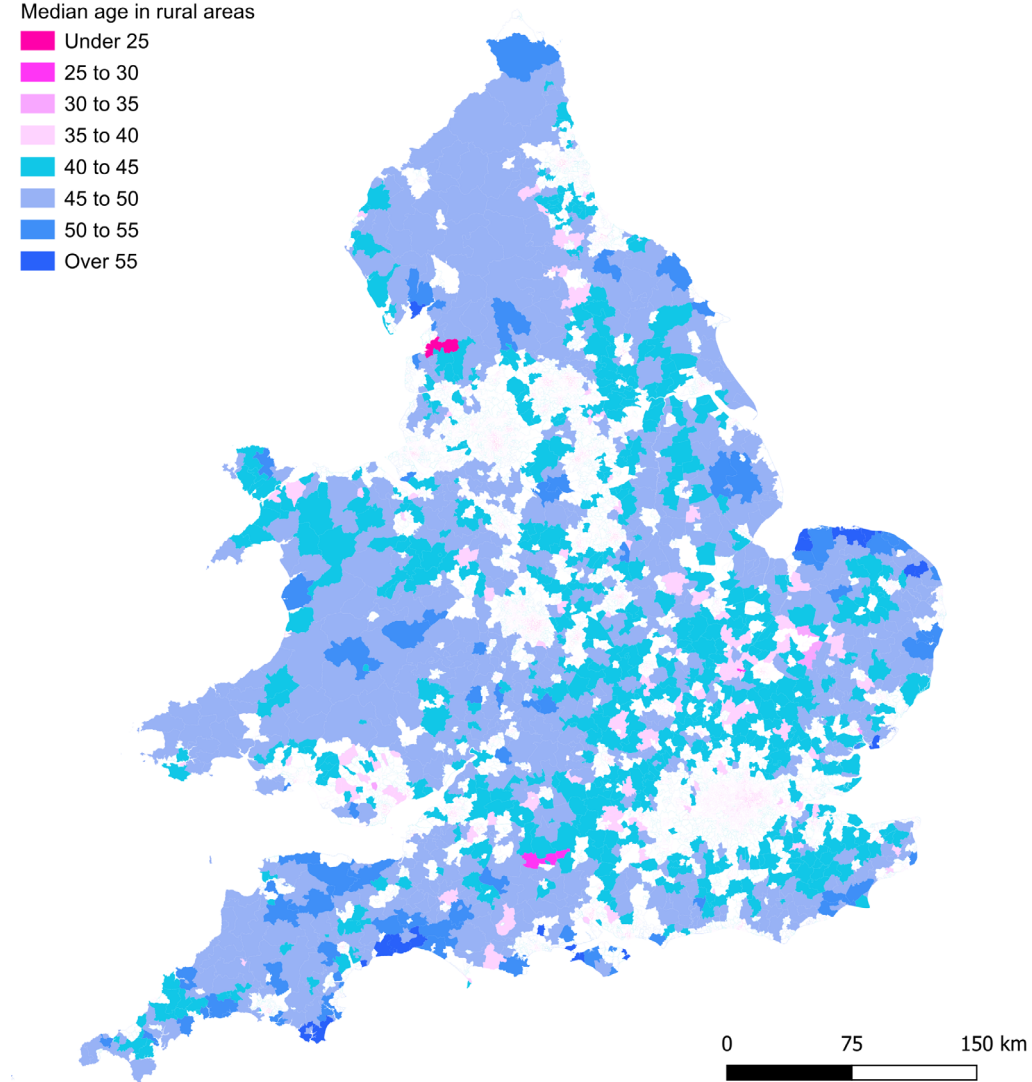


Figure 6

2011 Median age in rural areas of England and Wales

Legend

- Urban Areas
- Median age in rural areas
- Under 25
 - 25 to 30
 - 30 to 35
 - 35 to 40
 - 40 to 45
 - 45 to 50
 - 50 to 55
 - Over 55



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Figure 7

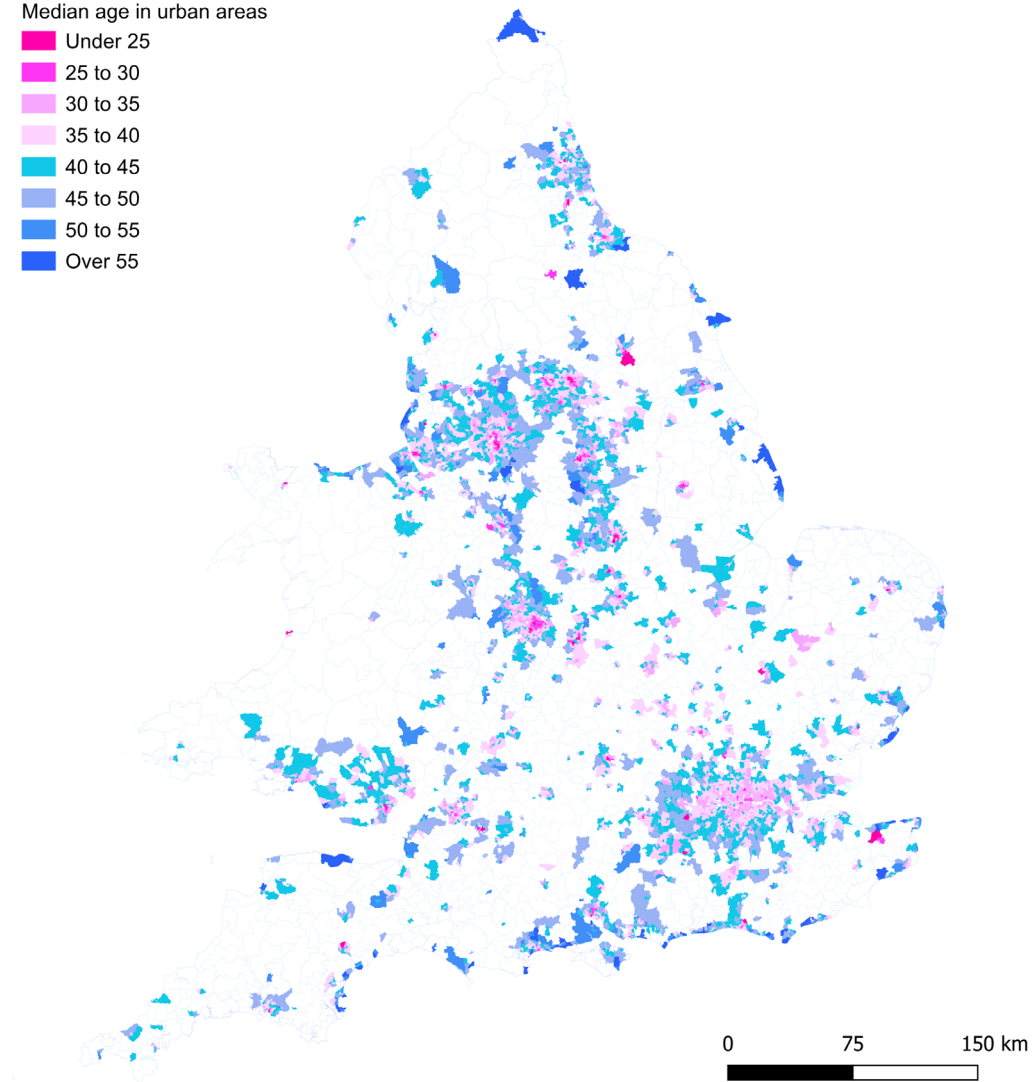
2021 Median age in urban areas of England and Wales

Legend

Rural Areas

Median age in urban areas

- Under 25
- 25 to 30
- 30 to 35
- 35 to 40
- 40 to 45
- 45 to 50
- 50 to 55
- Over 55



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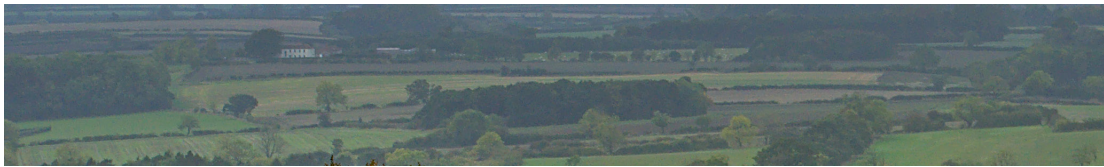


Figure 8

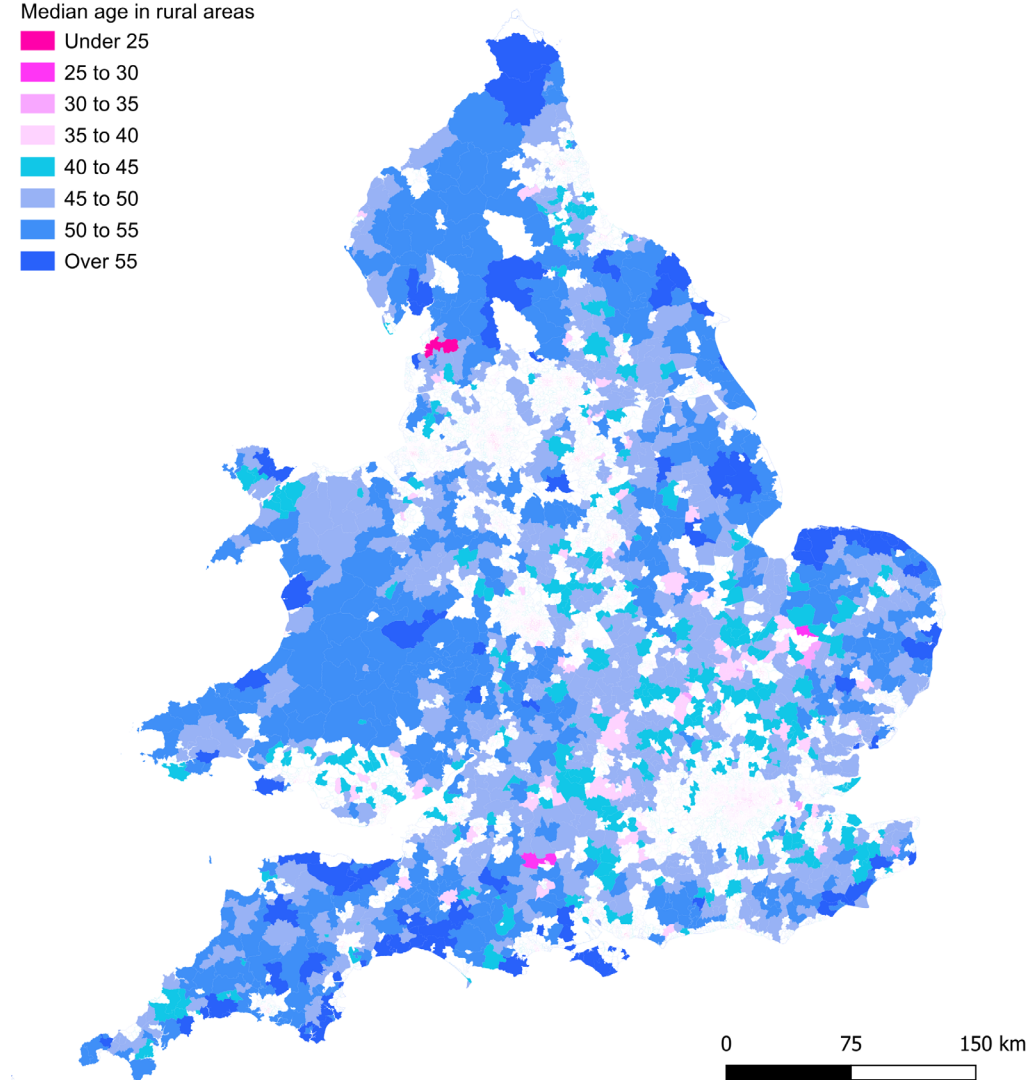
2021 Median age in rural areas of England and Wales

Legend

Urban Areas

Median age in rural areas

- Under 25
- 25 to 30
- 30 to 35
- 35 to 40
- 40 to 45
- 45 to 50
- 50 to 55
- Over 55



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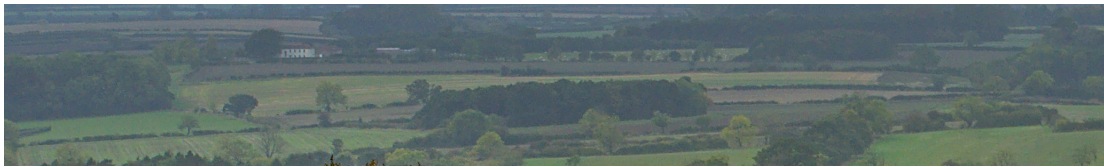


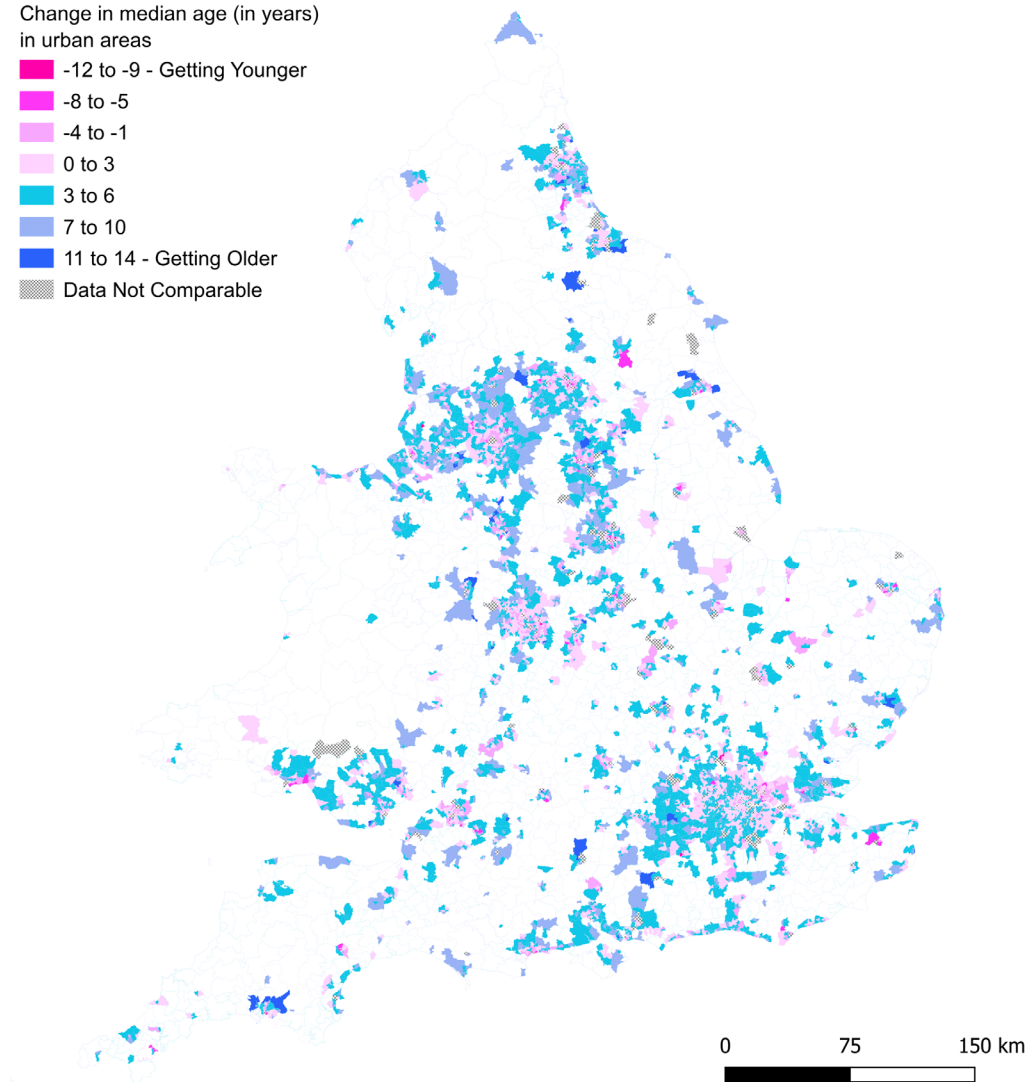
Figure 9

Most urban areas are getting younger or ageing slowly

Change in median age in urban areas (MSOAs) between 2001 and 2021 in England and Wales (by number of years)

Legend

- Rural Areas
- Change in median age (in years) in urban areas
- -12 to -9 - Getting Younger
 - -8 to -5
 - -4 to -1
 - 0 to 3
 - 3 to 6
 - 7 to 10
 - 11 to 14 - Getting Older
 - Data Not Comparable



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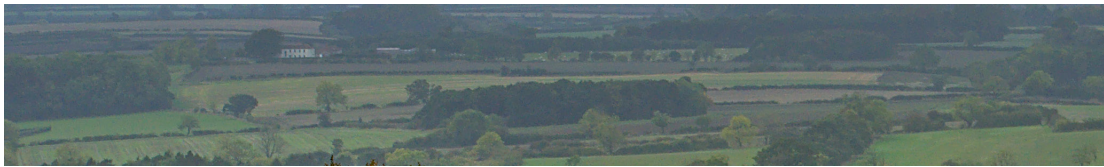


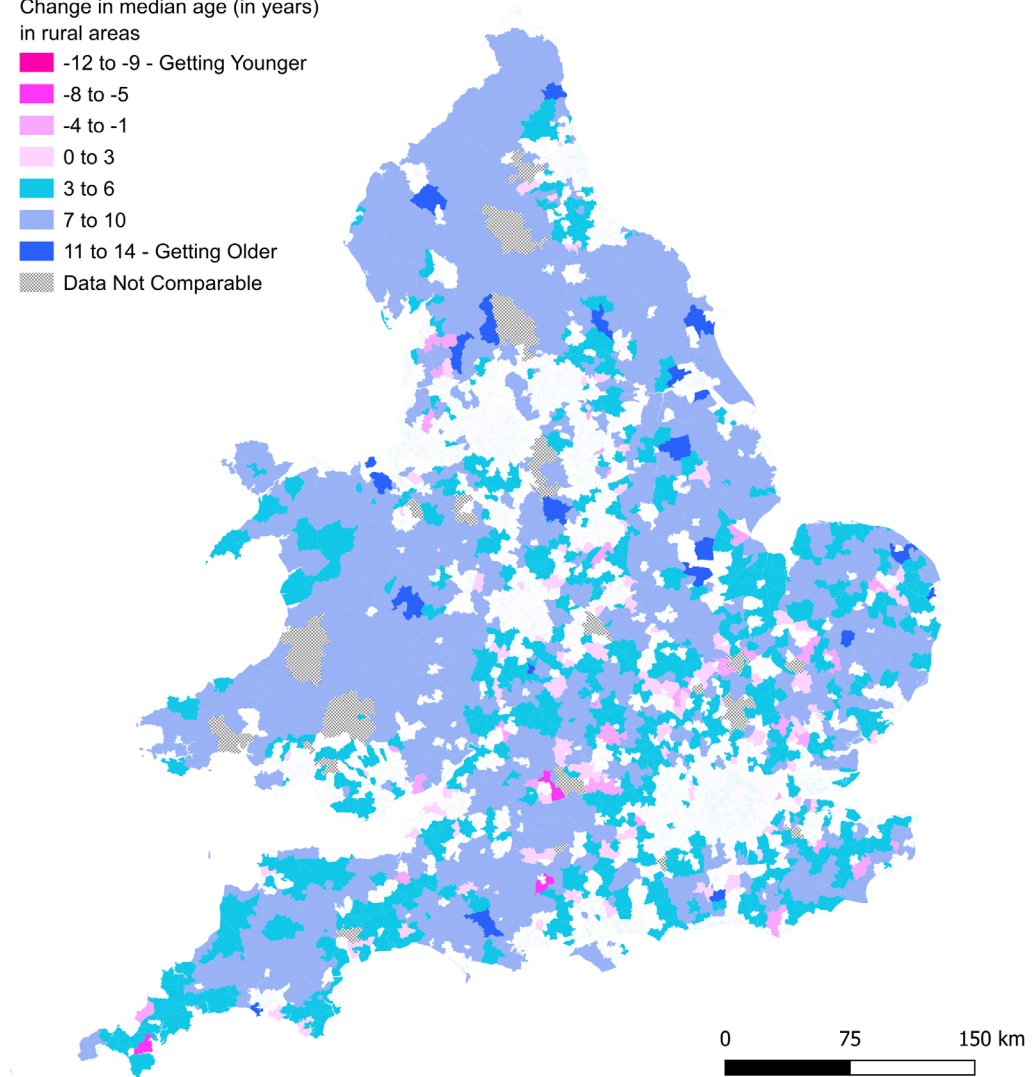
Figure 10

Most rural areas are ageing rapidly

Change in median age in rural areas (MSOAs) between 2001 and 2021 in England and Wales (by number of years)

Legend

- Urban Areas
- Change in median age (in years) in rural areas
 - 12 to -9 - Getting Younger
 - 8 to -5
 - 4 to -1
 - 0 to 3
 - 3 to 6
 - 7 to 10
 - 11 to 14 - Getting Older
 - Data Not Comparable



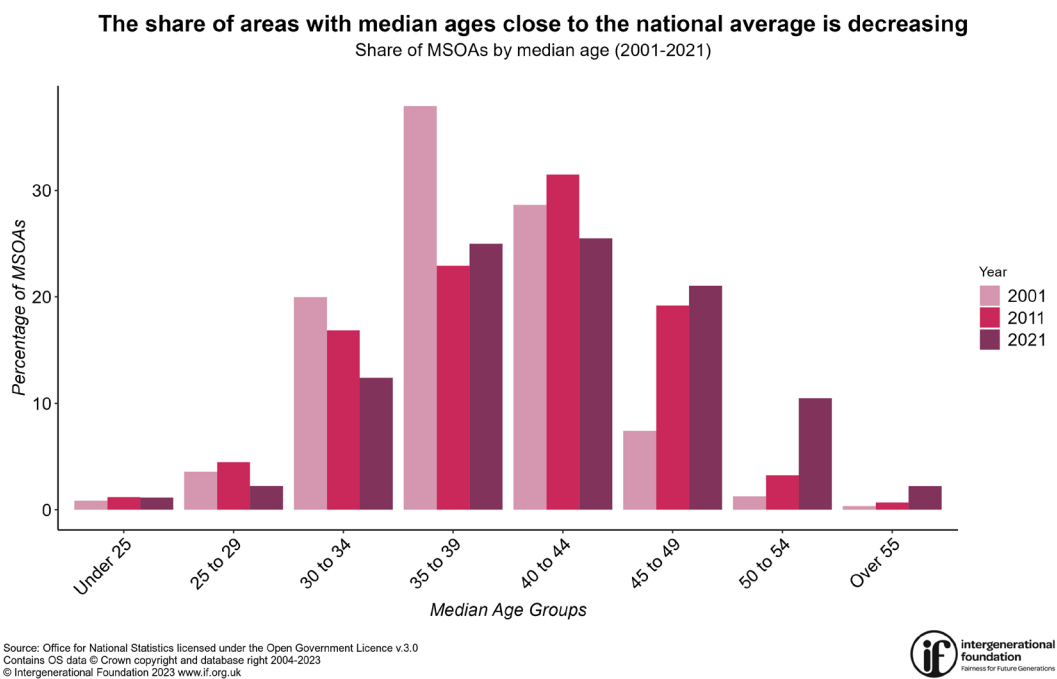
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3.2 There are increasing numbers of MSOAs with median ages far from the national median age

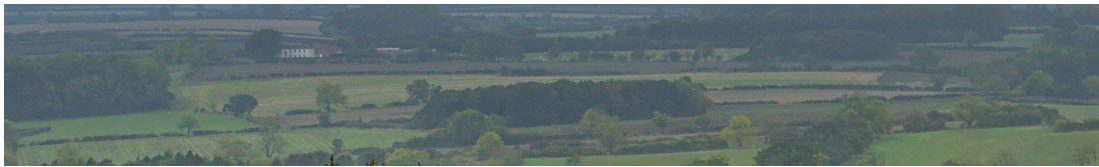
Figure 11



Age polarisation between MSOAs has increased significantly since 2001 (Figure 11) with MSOAs with a median age of over 55 and under 25 increasing significantly. At the same time the share of MSOA's with median ages between 25 and 44 have been decreasing. This has been driven by an increase in older people in rural areas and to a lesser extent the concentration of young people around university campuses.

In 2001 there were only 25 MSOAs (0.35%) with a median age of over 55 and 115 MSOAs (1.6%) with a median age of 50. In 2021, it had increased to 161 (2.2%) MSOAs with a median age of 55 or over and 923 (12.7%) with a median age of 50 or higher. That represents a 528.5% increase in the share of MSOAs with a median age over 55 and a 693.8% increase in the share of MSOAs with a median age over 50.

Areas in Cornwall and near the coasts are driving the increase in older census areas with a maximum increase in median age of 14 years in the past two decades (Figure 5). Parts of Cornwall saw the median age increase by 14 years over the last two decades; the largest increase in England and Wales.



While the most extreme case, the Cornish age increases exemplify the broader trend in rural areas (rural town and fringe) which have seen across-the-board increases in median ages (Figures 4,6,8 and 10 represent this visually). The Yorkshire village of Lofthouse demonstrates what happens when communities age unsustainably.

From 2001 to 2021 median age rose 10 years. Then in the summer of 2022, the governors of Fountains Earth CE Primary School announced the closure of the village school due to inadequate numbers of children.³² While anecdotal this is not an isolated phenomenon. In Ryedale, another rural village that experienced seven-year increase in median age from 2001 to 2021, the governors of the school approached the local council about closure due to the lack of pupils.³³ Both schools are in rural areas of outstanding natural beauty.

At the same time, the share of MSOAs with a median age under 25 has also increased by 32.5% while the share of the MSOAs with a median age closest to the national median age has decreased. Universities continue to be a driver for communities where young people (under-25s) are separated from other age groups with some areas; university towns have seen their median ages drop up to 12 years since 2001. The RUC categories that saw the largest decreases in median age were cities and towns (not urban centres) that host universities. MSOAs in West Lancashire and Guildford both saw median age decrease by 12 years over that period. This was likely due to an influx of students to West Lancashire College (which opened a new campus in 2008) and the University of Surrey.

Despite a nationally ageing population, we are seeing increasing age-based polarisation between rural and urban communities on a macro scale.

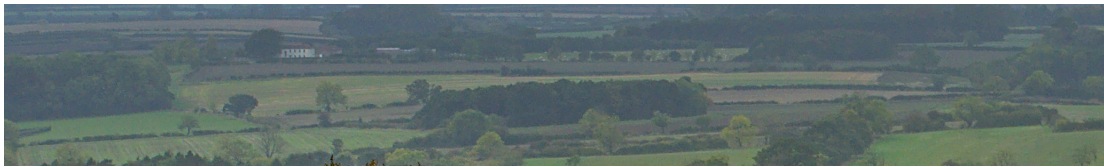
3.3 Shifting age structures

The age pyramids in Figure 12 highlight a further worrying trend across England and Wales.³⁴ Not only have the large group of late-40s to early-60s rural population (that existed in 2011) aged a decade but they have also been joined by their elderly friends and now, in their 50s to 70s, make up most of the rural population. The 2021 rural age structure shows a high share of the population leaving to urban areas shortly after the age of completing secondary education; this has increased significantly since 2011.

³² Andrew Robinson (2022) Tiny Yorkshire village school facing closure as it only has 11 pupils, Yorkshire Live, July 8, 2022: <https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/local-news/tiny-yorkshire-village-school-facing-24437384>

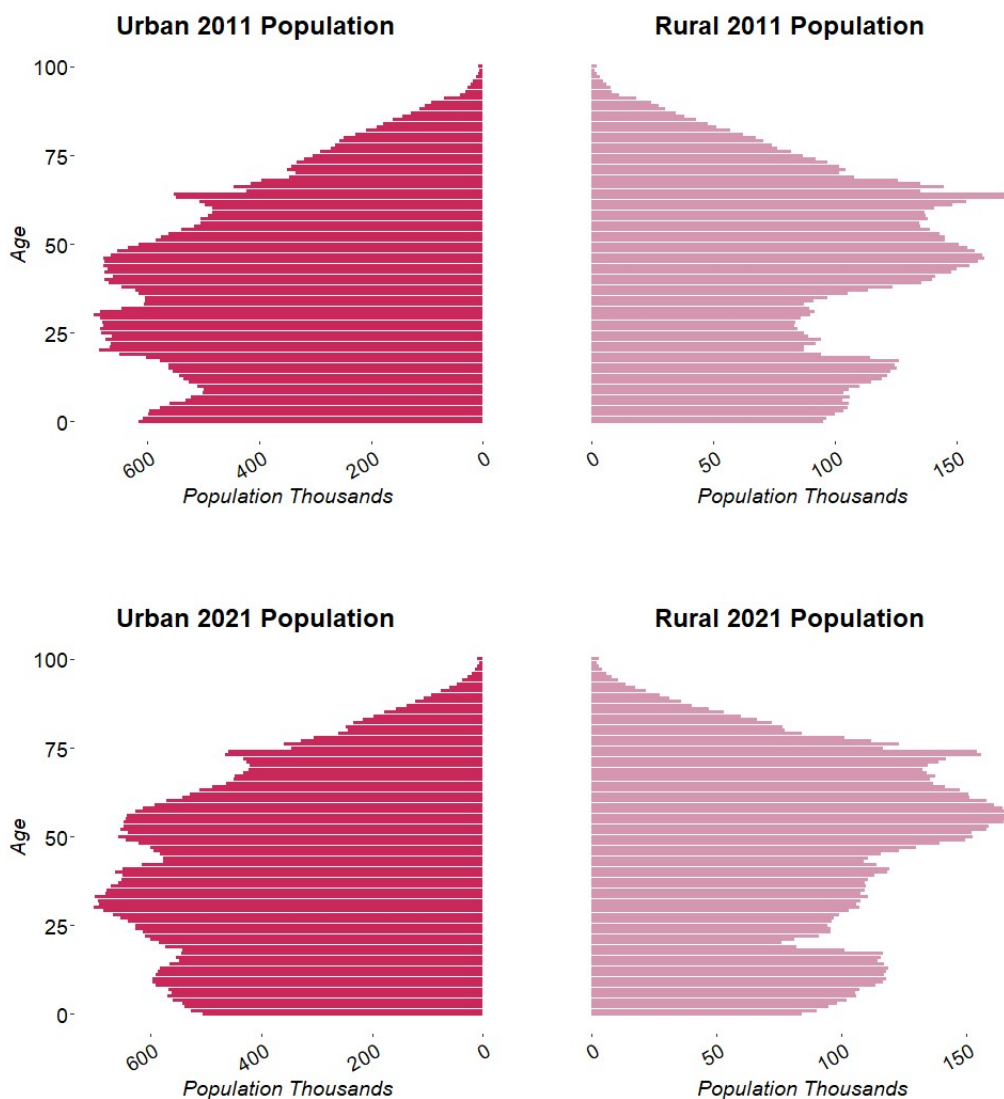
³³ Jon Burke (2023) Village School in Malton to Close, Greatest Hits Radio, 21 March, 2023: <https://planetradio.co.uk/greatest-hits/york-north-yorkshire/news/village-school-malton-closing>

³⁴ These rural/urban age pyramids obscure regional variation in different rural and urban areas. The loss of young children in urban areas between 2011 and 2021 may be driven particularly by the high cost of living in London, and various rural areas exhibit an even more extreme inversion.



The most worrying trend is the increasing inversion of the age pyramid (fewer people on the lower end of the pyramid than on the upper end) since 2011. When the age pyramid is inverted it means a decreasing number of young and working-age people must support an increasing number of older people; a situation the UK is currently unprepared for. It is also a bi-product of decreasing fertility rates which, while a general marker of wealthier societies, undermines the family's role as the last intergenerational social space for many individuals.

Figure 12³⁵



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³⁵ Data by single year was not available for 2001 and the available data was visually misleading. Nevertheless, the trends, when compared to similar 2011 and 2021 data structures were the same



While the inversion of the age pyramid is occurring in both urban and rural areas, it is particularly apparent in rural areas with high median ages. Urban areas continue to experience more rapid growth than rural areas.³⁶ The increase in numbers lower on the population pyramid reduces the strain of caring for older generations on individuals in the working-age population. In contrast, rural areas face a larger portion of the population that is now too old to have additional children.

An outflow of the young and working-age population (seen in Figure 11) risks hitting a critical mass where there are no longer enough similar aged members of the population to mix with; in an extreme scenario this could result in an almost wholesale exodus of the middle of the age pyramid.

The steepness of the decline in the number of young children, coupled with the rapid loss of university and younger working-age populations in rural areas (Figure 11), means that the problems associated with an older population without e.g. care workers will only continue to increase. This is likely to increase the cost of healthcare provision, increase the incidence of loneliness and negatively impact physical and mental health outcomes among older age groups.

The UK needs policy to create more intergenerational rural and urban areas and more intergenerational social spaces within those areas so that the costs of an inverted age pyramid are minimised.

³⁶ Government Office for Science, “Trend Deck 2021: Urbanisation” (UK Government, June 28, 2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation>



4. Policy implications

The UK needs to plan for as well as address increasingly age-segregated and ageing communities. It should be a goal of policy makers to reduce the age polarisation between communities across the UK. Policies are needed to:

- Ensure urban areas remain accessible to all generations (older people, young families and young people)
- Promote economic development outside of urban cores so that young people are able to remain in their communities
- Increase and improve the utilisation of the housing stock with a focus on building affordable housing in both rural and urban areas

Each generation will require a specific set of policies.

4.1 For older generations

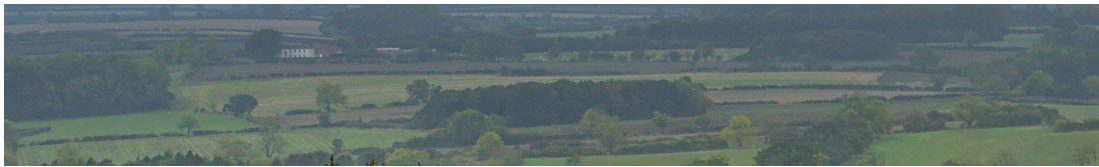
The romantic notion of “escaping to the country” to live out retirement may not be in retirees’ best interests. Policy makers should consider creative solutions that encourage older generations to free up equity, downsize, yet stay in their existing local communities. Some policies would include:

Increase the attractiveness of urban areas

- Offer a range of educational and recreational programmes tailored to older adults, including fitness/wellbeing classes, arts and crafts workshops, and lifelong learning opportunities
- Encourage intergenerational learning and volunteering initiatives to foster social connections and knowledge exchange between older adults and younger generations
- Ensure parks, transport and other public infrastructure accommodate mobility restrictions

Address market failure in the retirement housing sector

- Encourage the construction of age-inclusive housing developments that offer adaptable and accessible features, including single-storey units, grab bars, and wider doorways
- Promote mixed-generational housing projects that facilitate intergenerational connections and mutual support within urban neighbourhoods



- Encourage greater downsizing – either by selling and moving within local communities or encouraging greater downsizing-in-situ³⁷
- Encourage greater intergenerational living by bringing up lodgers through the uprating of the Rent-A-Room Scheme³⁸

4.2 For families/children

Policy makers should consider how best to prevent local communities (in both rural and urban areas) from losing working-age families and young children so much that services such as schools and medical practices can remain open for all.

Help with the cost of raising a family in major urban areas like London

- Support to decrease the costs of raising children (especially where it is prohibitively expensive in urban cores)
- Encourage urban design that ensures green spaces and other key amenities are available for children
- Ensure new developments have units suitable for families

Increase economic development in rural areas

- Build more affordable homes for young families working in rural communities
- Increase funding for rural schools and educational programmes, ensuring access to quality education and extracurricular activities that can help retain young families

4.3 For young people

Young people continue to be excluded from affordable rental and housing. Encouraging various forms of downsizing and mix age communities will benefit young people by creating more housing supply and reducing the costs of social service provision in the long term. In addition, policies are needed to encourage their mixing with the broader community and being able to afford to get to work. Travel passes should be made available for young people in rural areas to increase mobility.

³⁷ OpCit.

³⁸ Lutz, A. (2023) Bring back the lodgers: How the UK Housing Stock Could Be Used to Combat the Rental Crisis. London Intergenerational Foundation: <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/bring-back-the-lodgers-how-the-uk-housing-stock-could-be-used-to-combat-the-rental-crisis>



Increase young people's access to housing supply

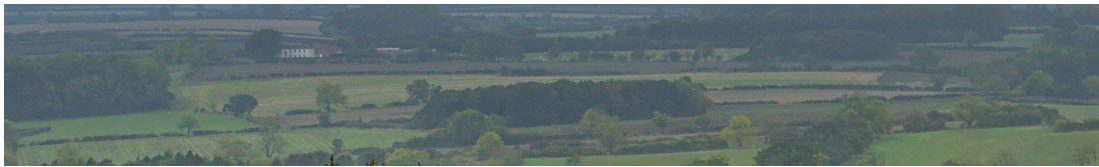
- Implement policies to increase the availability of affordable housing options in rural areas, enabling young people to establish their lives and families there
- Promote policies that better align the number of bedrooms with those who need them
- Encourage greater downsizing, either by selling and moving within local communities or encouraging greater downsizing-in-situ
- Encourage greater intergenerational living by increasing the number of lodgers through the uprating of the Rent-A-Room Scheme

Increase government spending on economic development outside of major cities so that young people can find opportunities for work and education in their communities

- Invest in better public transportation networks to connect rural areas with urban centers, making it easier for young people to access education, employment, and cultural opportunities
- Ensure reliable and high-speed internet connectivity in rural areas to bridge the digital divide and provide access to online education, remote work, and telehealth services
- Provide financial incentives, grants, and mentoring programmes to support the establishment and growth of small businesses in rural areas, attracting young entrepreneurs and creating job opportunities
- Identify and develop industries that have growth potential in rural areas, such as renewable energy, agriculture, or eco-tourism, to stimulate economic activity and retain young talent
- Establish vocational training centers or partnerships with local industries to provide skills training and apprenticeship programmes, equipping young people with job-relevant skills

4.4 For everyone

- In both urban and rural areas, increase public transport options and affordability for everyone (not just those over 65 as is the case in many regions in England and Wales)



Appendix: Methodology

Macro-level age segregation was calculated to determine the differences in age profiles of rural and urban areas. This was done using data from middle layer super output areas (MSOAs): large census-based-geographic units containing about 5,000-10,000 individuals. This report collected age data from 2001, 2011 and 2021 censuses to compare age profiles in England and Wales over time. MSOAs were selected as the geographic level of analysis for macro-level analysis because they are directly comparable to IF's previous work, the number of national observations was not so great that data management was still possible, and the 2021 data was readily available.

The geographic scope of this project is limited to England and Wales due to the consistency of the data provided by the 2001, 2011 and 2021 censuses. Despite this there are some minor inconsistencies in the way age data was collected by MSOAs over time. To ensure that the results were significant the authors checked the distribution of the median ages across MSOAs and found that in all three censuses, there was a similarly normal distribution with statistically significant differences in median ages between areas and years. To ensure the geographic areas were relatively comparable over time the author looked at the MSOA codes between years and dropped all MSOAs from analysis where suitable comparison was not clear due to boundary changes.

Between each census, the MSOA boundaries remain fairly stable. Nevertheless, they are still subject to some change. Between 2001 and 2011 there were 154 MSOAs that don't match (about 2.1%), and between 2011 and 2021 there were 184 MSOAs that do not have a match (about 2.5%) for a total of a 4.6% failure to match up MSOAs across the period studied.

MSOAs were then compared to the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Small Area Geographies (RUC) created by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The system is based on output areas (the smallest census-based-geographical unit).³⁹ The RUC system uses OA as the basis for the classification system. OAs are classified as urban if they are found in a settlement with over 10,000 individuals, otherwise OAs are classified as rural. MSOAs are assigned a classification based on how the majority of their constituent OAs as classified. The ONS then assigned each MSOA to the appropriate subclassifications based on population density and proximity to other MSOAs with similar population densities.⁴⁰

³⁹ OAs have a size of around 100 residents and are created by amalgamating adjacent postcode areas where necessary. Due to the challenge of preserving individual anonymity in small unit data, most datasets are released at larger geographic units by the ONS.

⁴⁰ See this ONS paper for a full methodology: Office for National Statistics, "Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Middle Layer Super Output Areas in England and Wales"



An important caveat with MSOA-based analysis is that it introduces a certain level of ecological fallacy into the results. This obscures trends that may be more localised or result in OAs with opposing trends being linked together into a bigger area. The larger the geographic unit of analysis the more likely this is to occur and the more likely there will be opposing trends within the unit. Therefore, this report is a preliminary analysis of the 2021 age related census data and further analysis should be done to investigate more localised geographic patterns.

Additionally, given the evolving nature of human geography, areas that were classified in one RUC in 2011, may belong in a different RUC in 2001 or 2021. 2011 is still chosen for the RUC because it minimises the difference between periods studied (as opposed to using a 2001 classification) and there are methodological inconsistencies between the 2001 RUC and 2011 RUC that make comparisons between the two undesirable. The changes in MSOA boundaries over time are likely due to some form of physical development (housing projects, etc.) that change the characteristics of the region. This is an inevitable consequence of using geographic data over time; however, in this case it might hide some interesting details about the changing demographics in the MSOAs whose physical characteristics have changed most significantly between 2001 and 2021.

The author also did a number of other calculations and some basic economic calculations to ensure that the results were consistent across methodologies. No matter how you calculate ageing (mean age, median age, age profile of different RUCs) the trend in MSOA age polarisation remains constant and strong.

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