

Report of the Years Ahead Demographic Ageing Task Group

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Introduction

The *Demographic Ageing Task Group* had the objective of assessing the impacts of ageing society on North East England over the next 25 years and to debate the challenges and opportunities these changes will present for the region.

At the outset, the task group agreed that it should not proceed from the point of view that demographic ageing was 'a problem' for North East England. Instead, an open-minded approach was adopted throughout. It was also agreed that we should present our findings in a questioning, challenging and forward looking way so as to help key stakeholders detach themselves from taken-for-granted assumptions about the impact of an ageing society.

Our starting point was to debate how the interests, needs and attitudes of older people may change in the future rather than to plan on the basis of what older people's needs are now. This involved us making assessments about the way that younger people's current attitudes and aspirations could translate into needs and wants in later life.

Making predictions is beset with difficulties. But we were not working on a blank canvas. Demographic data provides indications about the shape of the age structure of the North East in the future, just as contemporary and historical research provides insights into the way that society may be transformed over time.

What follows should not, then, be regarded as an authoritative academic statement, but rather, an informed *think-piece* to provoke discussion and further research enquiry.

The evidence base

Collectively, the task group brought to the table wide-ranging expertise and understanding of the social, economic, political, environmental and cultural conditions in North East England. This was bolstered by scrutiny of statistical and research evidence from a wide range of sources. It was recognised that the task group could not fully evidence its observations and predictions on how demographic change may affect North East England.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there is an insufficiency of robust demographic data for the region. As a consequence national data were interpreted by task group members who were able to draw upon their understanding of contextual factors.

Secondly, while we recognised that it is possible to determine changes in the adult age structure over the next 25 years, there is much else that cannot be predicted with such certainty. Consequently, much of our activity focused on exploring the complex inter-relationships between a range of social, economic, cultural and environmental factors based on a wide range of recent research on ageing in the UK.

Demographic change: key indicators 2004-2029¹

The population of the North East is expected to remain fairly static over the next twenty-five years, with the revised² projected increase in population being only 19,500 from its estimated level in 2004 of 2,542,200, an increase of only 0.8% compared to 11% nationally. However the static nature of the population disguises large variations in population growth and decline across different age groups.

For example the sixty plus age group are expected to *increase* by over 244,000 individuals whereas the numbers of individuals under the age of twenty-five are expected to *decrease* by around 100,000.

Chart 1 illustrates the distribution of the population by five-year age group for the North East of England. The left-hand (blue) bars illustrate the estimated population levels for the region in 2004, the right-hand (burgundy) bar illustrates the project population in 2029 and the middle (yellow) bars illustrate the net difference in the age group.

The chart clearly illustrates the substantial growth in the numbers of older people and in contrast the decrease in the number of younger members of the population (with the exception of 25-29 year olds which show a small increase.) In summary:

- The number of individuals under the age of fifteen is projected to fall by 50,000 from 447,000 to 396,400 between 2004 and 2029
- The number of the working age population (15-64 year olds) is projected to decrease by 129,000, falling from 1,667,800 people in 2004 to 1,538,400 people in 2029
- The number of individuals in the 65-79 age groups is projected to increase steadily over the next twenty-five years, from 321,000 in 2004 to 432,200 in 2029 – an increase of 111,300 individuals
- The number of individuals aged eighty and over will also increase greatly (87,400) across the period, increasing in number by 82% from 107,100 to 194,500 in 2029

The effects of an ageing population will impact on North East England more rapidly than the other English regions because of the demographic distribution of the population. During the 1980s and 1990s the North East experienced significant levels of outward population migration.

¹ The data analysis in this section was undertaken by Rebecca Hulbert and Michael Jackson, North East Regional Information Partnership, November 2007.

² Revised 2004 Sub-national Population Projection from the Office for National Statistics
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=997>

At its peak, this resulted in annual net outward migration of an estimated 9,000 individuals (who were predominantly of younger age and seeking employment elsewhere). As a consequence of this mass exodus, there has been a greater decline in the overall birth rate in the region than that at the national level.

Chart 2 illustrates the future impact of the demographic distribution of the North East compared to the UK population in 2029. The left-hand bars illustrate the projected proportions of the regional population by five-year age groups, while the right-hand bars illustrate the UK distribution.

The chart illustrates that for each age band over 65 years of age there is a greater proportion of the population in the North East than in the national population, while there is a smaller proportion of 25-54 year olds and 14 years & under in the region.

Lower fertility rates are likely to become a significant feature of the North East as Chart 3 illustrates. Each bar represents the regional variation from the national average by age in 2029. The chart projects fewer children in the region under the age of fifteen years, with over seven per cent fewer infants aged under four-years than the national average. Similarly there are fewer individuals in each of the working population age groups, with nearly eight per cent fewer in the 30-34 year age group than nationally.

The North East population in 2029 is projected to have more people in the over-sixty years age groups than the national average: indeed, the 70-74 year age group is expected to be nearly 15 per cent higher. Running against the general trend, the 15-19 years and 20-24 years age groups are also expected to be higher than the national distribution.

What are the social, economic, cultural and political consequences of demographic ageing in North East England?

Older people play a pivotal role in maintaining social relationships through their family roles, political and community involvement. The majority of older people live independently and continue to invest energy into society late into life; and yet, it is commonly assumed by the young that older people are a drain on society's resources.

Many older people need and are entitled to the support and care of society - but it is not a one-way street. Older people play a pivotal role in the maintenance of family stability by providing support and care to children and grandchildren through the life course.

Children usually provide care and support to their parents in later life, especially so in deep old age or when parents suffer from bereavement or infirmity. For the most part, however, older people are relatively independent. When planning for the support of older people, there is a tendency to paint a more negative picture of the problems associated with ageing than need be.

As is likely to be the case now, family support will continue to flow mainly from older generations to younger generations - especially so in relation to the provision of childcare for

grandchildren, and in more affluent families, financial support to children and grandchildren.

The impact of changed family and household structures on caring

Family life has changed dramatically over the last few decades. There is an increased prevalence of divorce, single parenthood, falling marriage rates, increased rates of teenage pregnancy, estranged fathers and single person households. In demographic terms, family life is not experienced in the same way by people from all backgrounds. In many BME communities (but not all), cultural traditions continue to encourage strong intergenerational bonds and support in families compared with white families.

Resource rich households are often 'time poor' because both adults are in paid employment - and further, may be geographically distant from grandparents, so restricting the scope for the receipt of support from them. Resource rich people tend to marry when they are older and they have children later too, widening the gap between the generations in age terms. Many resource rich women now wait until their late thirties or early forties before they have children, and there is an increased number of single child households which will have consequences on intergenerational support relationships in later life.

Resource poor households tend to have children when they are younger, so narrowing the age gap between generations. It may be the case that this increases the level of support between generations in the family building stage - but also contributes to the sustenance of a pattern of economic and social deprivation in such households. Young fathers who become estranged from their children may have particular problems which may carry through into later life - resulting in fractured family relationships and limit patterns of support.

Gender has traditionally been and will probably continue to be a key factor in caring relationships within and between the generations. Women commit more time than men to caring for children as parents or grandparents, and also invest more time caring for their own older parents, relatives and neighbours. This is not to say that men do not participate in caring - indeed, men provide much spousal care in later life in both resource rich and resource poor households.

Caring contributes enormously to the maintenance of family and neighbourhood life and can be considered as a significant informal contribution of voluntary work in the community. This hidden voluntary work is more prevalent in resource poor households where there is insufficient opportunity to pay for others to provide support.

As is the case in much of Europe, fertility rates in North East England are falling. There is relatively little evidence to support the idea that men and women are childless by choice: instead, lowering fertility rates are shaped by contingency.

One key factor affecting lower levels of fertility amongst professional and highly educated women is their propensity to commit to careers in their twenties and thirties, so reducing dependence on marriage for economic security. Delaying marriage or long-term cohabitation reduces the

likelihood of starting a family. In resource poor households, fertility rates are also falling. Across all income groups, falling birth rates signify both changed attitudes about family life and increased opportunities to avoid parenthood through contraception and abortion.

Assertions about reduced average fertility rates need to be qualified by significant variations behind headline figures. In resource rich households, for example, many women do make stronger commitment to career and reduce the likelihood of having children. At the same time, many women in resource rich households who commit to the family career are having more children than on average.

Across Europe there has been much debate about the re-introduction of pronatalist social policy such as was introduced in the post war years (including, at that time, the introduction of family allowances and tax incentives, nursery care and discriminatory action in the labour market to deter women from working).

Many such policies are now politically unpalatable, given changed economic, cultural and social attitudes and conditions, and so would be unlikely to yield success. Pronatalist policies, at best, might encourage those households which already have children to have more of them, but it is unlikely that they will affect fertility rates in those households which are not.

Demographic ageing, neighbourhood and community life

Increased population density of older people in the community may have unforeseen effects on neighbourhood life. As now, there may continue to be areas where there are pockets of affluent older people who choose to live in such areas because of their status, amenity, social life, aesthetics and community safety.

The North East will not share the characteristics of the South Coast and South West of England (where some areas have become enclaves of the relatively affluent retired population) simply because there are many more older people in the region.

On the contrary, there are areas in the North East which have suffered from decades of embedded deprivation. In such areas, many people are forced into retirement at a relatively young age through labour market discrimination, low skills, ill health and the lack of availability of work. The challenges of demographic ageing in such poor communities will be significant and will become a major focus for public policy.

Housing may become a significant issue in future. This will provide both opportunities and challenges for the public sector, private sector and third sector housing providers. For the resource rich population, there are already indications that speculative builders are providing alternative lifestyle choices for older people with the growth in the number of stylish apartment blocks in or near to town and city centres. It may be the case that speculative builders will emulate the commercially successful gated communities model which has become prevalent in the United States - so increasing the social divide between the resource rich and resource poor. What is certain, is that the resource rich will expect to

have more choices about their lifestyles in future rather than take the once conventional route into suburban bungalow living.

For resource poor older households the prognosis is less positive if their communities continue to suffer from multiple deprivation. Fear of crime in such areas is already relatively high (but, for the most part, much higher than the actual prevalence of anti-social behaviour and crime).

A key challenge for public policy, therefore, is to continue to support the development of positive pathways into work and business for younger members of the community so as to raise the quality of life, affluence and amenity in these neighbourhoods.

The third sector can play a key role, if supported sufficiently, to bridge gaps between generations, help to build aspirations amongst younger generation and find new pathways into work or business amongst older people whose employment careers have been disjointed by industrial restructuring, ill health, loss of confidence or employer discrimination.

Government is currently committed to the notion of developing mixed tenure communities to help tackle the prevalence of embedded deprivation in neighbourhoods. This is an ambitious objective given the tendency of resource rich people to move away from areas which suffer from social problems.

With demographic ageing, however, it could be the case that commitment to place will become stronger amongst many long-standing members of the community and as a consequence there will be increased investment in neighbourhood life, community engagement and political representation.

The North East has some of the most beautiful landscape in the country and this is often vaunted as one of the region's strongest lifestyle attractions. Conceiving of the countryside as a residential retreat, playground or weekend escape from the city for second home owners can, potentially, distract policy makers' attention from significant deprivation in rural areas.

Affluent rural residents, and especially those who work in cities, continue to live an urban lifestyle in rural areas (by engaging in shopping and leisure mainly in urban environments rather than supporting local services).

For the resource poor in rural areas, rising house prices can force younger people to live elsewhere resulting in the loss of mutual support between the generations and further undermine the economic sustainability of local shops, services, post offices and pubs. Labour market change in rural areas may also be affected in future by challenges to the Common Agricultural Policy, so making rural living more insecure for the resource poor. Increased isolation amongst older people in rural areas in future, in sum, is a potential threat for the North East and should therefore become a focus for public policy

Patterns of leisure and consumption

Lifestyle choices were once thought to be the preserve of the relatively young. This is changing, especially so amongst the resource rich older population who have sufficient income, social capital and motivation to buy into or generate new modes of social and cultural activity into later life. As the Sunday papers would have it, for many affluent older people, 70 has become the new 50 - where empty nesters plan retirement around residential moves (or second homes), travel and tourism, active engagement in education, volunteering, local or single issue politics and so on.

The business community has already, and will continue to seek out new niche markets to meet the changing needs and desires of older consumers. While the affluent proportion of the older population in the North East is smaller than elsewhere in the UK, there will be opportunities for private sector business and social enterprise to tap into new markets which may be focused entirely on meeting the needs of older people in the region, or growing on their businesses to provide for markets at national and international levels.

For resource poor older people, the scenario may be less positive. The increased density of older people in poorer communities may impact on the provision of social, retailing and service facilities. The experience of forced retirement through redundancy or ill health has a significant impact on people's social world.

While early retirement can be a very positive experience for the resource rich, for the resource poor, social horizons can be shortened as people become locked into communities with few options for education, leisure or employment. Instead of 70 becoming the new 50, the reverse can be the case.

There may be compensatory factors at work in relatively resource poor communities, however, such as building stronger social bonds in such areas where intergenerational family and community cohesion is made possible by lower levels of geographical mobility in families. Residential stability and face-to-face community contact is more common in less affluent areas, but this does not necessarily signal the prospect of social isolation in more affluent communities or introspection in poorer ones. On the contrary, increased ICT availability and literacy across the social classes will become an important source of communication, social engagement, retail and service provision (and also, potentially, political participation). The North East is particularly well placed in this respect as broadband availability has reached most communities.

Income and wealth

The benefits the resource rich will bring to the local economy in the North East in the future are not clear cut. On one hand, the resource rich may export more of their wealth from the region through: patterns of investment; property ownership; travel and tourism; and, the consumption of high-value products and services from other areas. On the other hand, there is a reasonable prospect that many resource rich native North Easterners will return to the region in later life and invest in the area in economic, social, cultural and political terms.

Economic vulnerability amongst older people will continue to be a significant problem in the North East. Multiply deprived areas will remain a key focus for public policy, but it is important to recognise that economic vulnerability is not just a class or area based issue.

Women are generally more economically vulnerable than men in later life. Divorced men from resource rich households are more likely to fare well economically and are also more likely to remarry. Divorced women are comparably disadvantaged for a number of reasons: the most important of which are low levels of pension wealth due to women's dislocated employment careers and participation in low paid work.

Married women's conventional reliance on men to prepare for later life in financial terms may undermine their economic wellbeing in later life due to the increased prevalence of divorce and separation.

Economic vulnerability is a key consideration in measuring the wellbeing of older people, but this is not related just to actual levels of economic wealth - additionally it is about the willingness of older people to spend money and their propensity to claim benefits from the state to which they are entitled.

In the case of spending levels, across the social classes, many older people make themselves vulnerable in terms of their social and physical wellbeing by depriving themselves of services they need and indeed of basic requirements such as food, heating, transport and communication with others.

The evidence suggests that fewer older people now feel stigmatised than was once the case about claiming benefits to which they are entitled - although researchers disagree on the extent to which this is so. There is a strong likelihood that older people who sit in an intermediate position between the resource rich and the resource poor will be economically vulnerable in this sense. Those people who have lived a relatively thrifty lifestyle to save for later life and who are just above the threshold for pension credits and other benefits may continue to deny themselves essential spending needs.

Political engagement and civil society

Proportionately, political engagement and participation by older people will probably increase in the future. It is already the case that the majority of elected Members are older people, as is the case across the UK. Political engagement is not just about becoming a Councillor, of course, but involves many other patterns of participation. Expectations of public service providers will increase over time as older people become less willing to accept what they see as sub-standard services. This may result in more direct political action by older people.

Members of the 'baby boom' generation grew up in an era where social mobility was more prevalent, increased affluence an expectation, and a changed political climate where it became acceptable to challenge traditional forms of authority. As now, political activity may be more prevalent amongst the resource rich - but the key point is that there will be many more such people in the region than was the case in the past (due to the higher levels of post-compulsory

educational participation and levels of social mobility which were achieved in a changed occupational structure).

Future levels of social mobility will be lower than in the past. Labour market structure will, no doubt, change in unanticipated ways - so producing more jobs in this sector or that. But the proportion of the population in the professions, management and higher skilled technical jobs relative to those in lower skilled occupations will not shift as significantly as was the case in the last half of the twentieth century. A consequence of this may be increased intergenerational stability in social stratification terms.

It is not possible to predict precisely what the impact of this will be, but it is possible that patterns of inheritance will help resource rich families to maintain their superordinate economic status over resource poor households in the property market. A negative consequence of which may be that members of the resource rich older generation may find themselves responsible for their children's economic well being much later in life than was once the case.

Indeed, there are already discernible signs of highly educated younger middle-class people remaining dependent on parents well into their twenties (as so-called 'boomerang kids' who continue to live with parents intermittently or permanently after attending university) or thirties and forties as parents find themselves re-mortgaging homes to get their children on the first rung of the housing market ladder or putting together post-divorce rescue packages.

In the case of resource poor households and neighbourhoods, loss of opportunities for long-range intergenerational social mobility will also have unforeseeable consequences. There is little research evidence to support the now discredited notion that such communities are vulnerable to becoming an 'underclass' which is in some sense separated from mainstream society.

It may be the case however, that political consciousness may change and possibly reinvigorate political activism as communities become less accepting of their experiences of only being able 'get by' in their lives as opposed to 'getting on'. What is abundantly clear is that an increased prevalence of embedded patterns of social exclusion will be unacceptable in public policy terms in this region, especially so if other regions are seen to be becoming more affluent.

The extent to which demographic change will impact on patterns of civic engagement remains contentious, especially in relation to the extent of voluntary action. Much of the debate on changing patterns of voluntary participation hinges on two key factors: firstly, the impact of changed attitudes of older people to civic action; and secondly, the constraining impacts of economic pressures on older people's time.

Those commentators who offer the explanation that increased attachment to consumer culture will dissuade (or distract) older people from engaging with voluntary work in future draw tend to draw attention to increasingly consumer oriented lifestyles and consequent emphasis on conspicuous consumption for the construction of self identity.

Certainly, there is much evidence to support the view that patterns of consumption are more important in the construction of self identity now than was once the case. However, it remains unclear whether consumer behaviour

will fundamentally and directly undermine older peoples' positive orientations to civic engagement in the future.

It may be the case that levels of volunteering reduce, but for different reasons. One reason is that older people will be obliged to remain in paid work until later life due to changed patterns of pension provision. Another reason may be that there will be a greater reliance upon older people to provide income support for their children and care for their grandchildren. Whichever way the situation is best explained, trends suggest that levels of formal voluntary action are currently falling in many ageing societies in the Western world - North East England, like as not, will also follow this trend.

Employment

Economic restructuring in North East England over the last few decades has had a significant impact on the aspirations and opportunities of people in former industrial communities. A legacy of structural changes in the labour market is a very much higher proportion of older people, especially men, in such communities who have been unable to reintegrate into the labour market.

Explanations for this include: the lack of available employment; inappropriate skills and knowledge; ill health; difficulties in adjustment to loss of life-time employment in staple industries; refusal of other forms of work; and the poor economic advantages of shifting from state benefits to low-paid and/or insecure employment. While there is some evidence to suggest that a traditional mindset gained from the old industrial communities continues to prevail in some areas, it cannot be anticipated that such attitudes will cross intergenerational boundaries.

There is a likelihood that many younger people will have to extend their working lives, but it is not yet clear which groups of people will be most likely to choose this as an option or be constrained to do so. This may impact on the potential of individuals to enjoy 'successful' retirement transitions.

A positive outcome of people working longer, either full or part time, may be that older workers will become more visible in the workforce and therefore become more acceptable to both employers and, especially in service industries, customers. This may have a positive impact by tackling current levels of discrimination against older workers.

Furthermore, as the current younger generations become older, there is a likelihood that their experience of flexible working and significant career changes during their working lives may encourage them to try new employment opportunities in later life. It may also be the case that people in their 50s and 60s may become more interested in developing business ventures or self employment relatively late in life.

Health and wellbeing³

Demographic ageing is likely to put new demands on the health and social care sectors. There is a growing awareness that future generations of older people may be more likely to suffer from earlier onset of ill health due to lifestyle factors, particularly in relation to sedentary lifestyles, binge drinking, obesity, sexual health problems, drug use and so on.

Changed attitudes amongst younger generations may result in a different set of expectations about health and wellbeing in later life and possibly greater demands on services. Professional - patient relationships are also likely to change in response to younger people's questioning approach to health professionals' decision making, and the professions' own growing interest in co-production (that is, patients and doctors sharing responsibility for managing conditions) in the health sector.

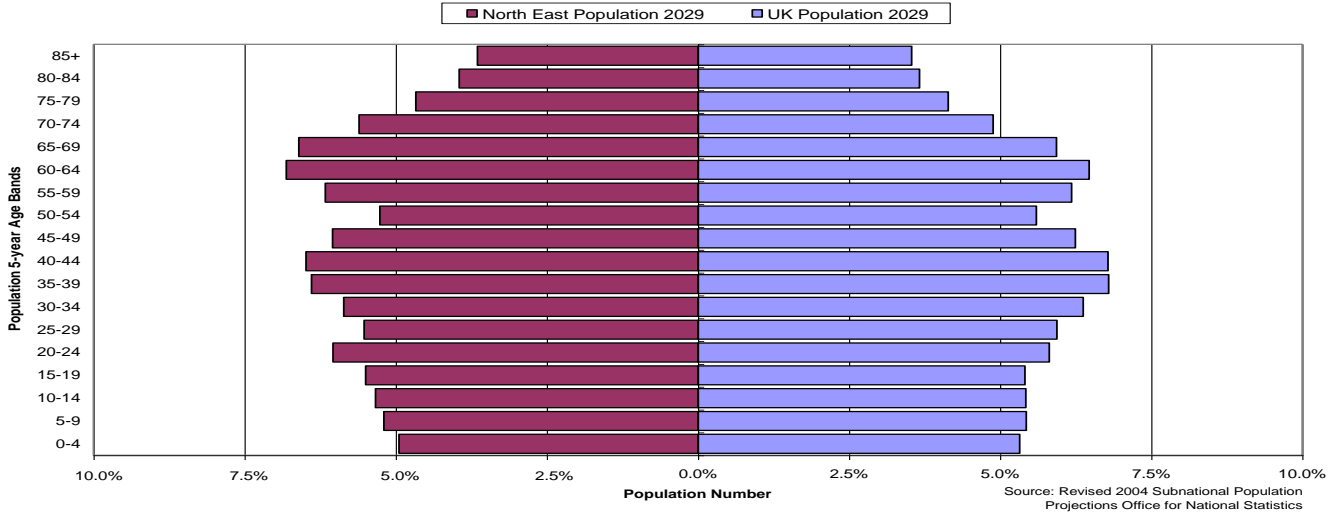
As older people's (and their families') expectations about higher quality customer oriented services penetrate the social care sector, there is a possibility that costs of social care may raise significantly. This will be an important issue for public policy, but also for families who help to make decisions about the care of their older relatives. It may be the case that the long-term trend for more and more care dependent older people to live in private, voluntary sector or local authority care homes rather than their families may reverse over time.

Summary of implications for public policy

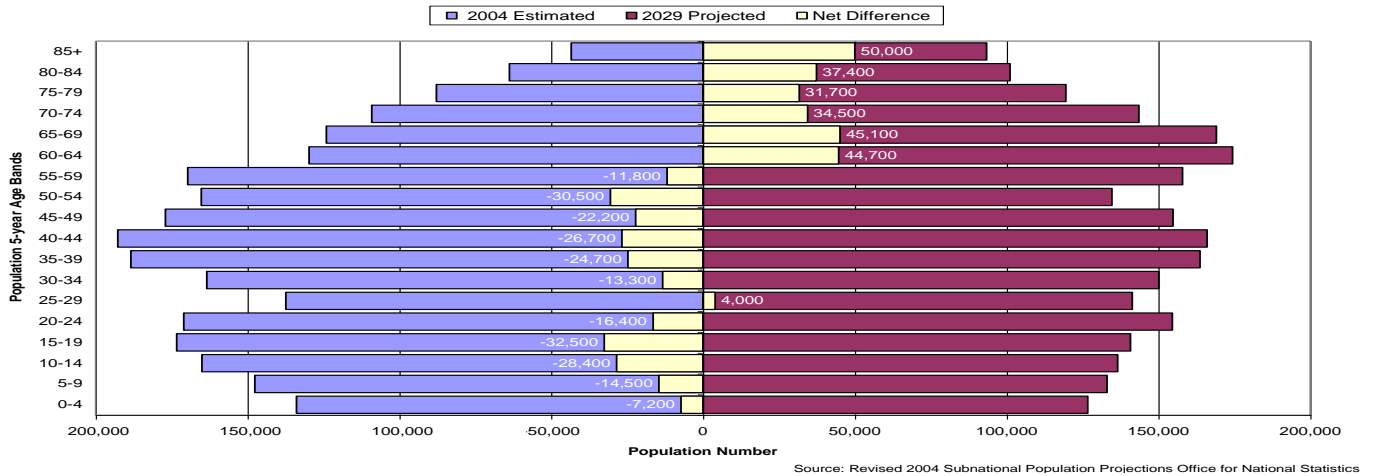
- Political engagement and protest amongst older people may increase as people carry through changed expectations about rights and responsibilities into later life. It is less likely that public policy can ignore 'grey power' in future.
- The greater density of older people in the population may lead to changed expectations about older people's participation in employment and lead to a questioning of current levels of age discrimination by employers
- The consumer orientation of older people in future may lead to higher expectations about successful retirement transitions with a stronger focus on life-long learning, voluntary work, leisure and working into later life.
- The pattern of community life may change significantly in poorer areas with increased population density and residential stability of older people. Current trends towards increased political apathy may begin to reverse as a consequence.
- The demands on housing supply will change in response to more diverse household structures and new housing preferences. Public policy will need to respond to these changes
- Caring relationship between the generations will change over time, with greater demands placed on older people to provide care and resource to children and grandchildren. Patterns of caring for older people in later life may change as expectations of service and tolerance to concomitant cost rises - possibly leading to more caring within the family context.
- Older people may have an increasingly positive impact on the regional economy by working longer or entering into business ventures later in life. The leisure orientation of resource rich older people may increase business opportunities in the region, but could also lead to more leisure spending outside of the region.
- There is a growing awareness that future generations of older people may be more likely to suffer from earlier onset of ill health in later life due to lifestyle changes, particularly in relation to sedentary lifestyles, binge drinking, obesity, sexual health problems, drug use and so on.

³ Years Ahead also has a Task Group specifically to explore health issues, see the Year's Ahead website for its report.

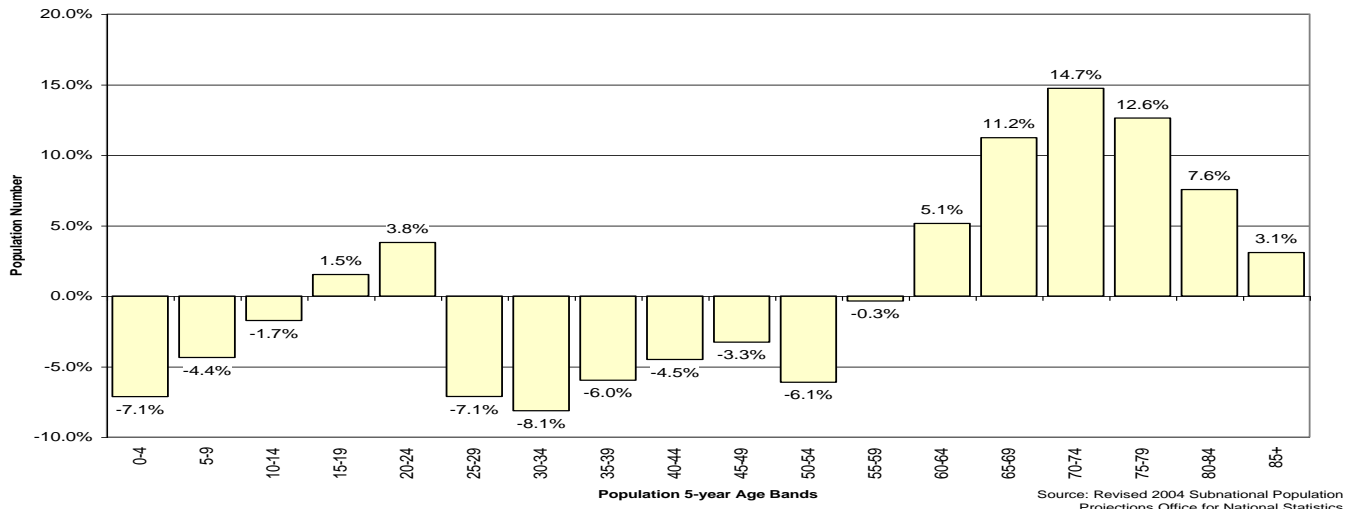
Proportion of Projected Population by Age Group - 2029



North East Population by Age Group - 2004 & 2029



Population Distribution by Age Group 2029
Variation of North East from UK Average



Further Reading

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