A world getting older...

What do the most recent data on ageing tell us about the health and wellbeing of the English population?

**Projections for England**

Debates over social care played a major role in the recent UK general election. You will not be thinking too much about it now, but when you reach retirement age and beyond you are likely to be living in a very different kind of society from the one you do now. Many more people will be living longer — and they may need looking after. Who is to pay and how should we organise it? A recent briefing paper from Age UK (Health and Care of Older People in England, 2017) highlights some of the key issues. It points out that the number of people aged 85+ in England increased by almost one third over the last decade and will more than double over the next two decades. See Figure 1.

![Graph showing projections for England](image1)

*Source: ONS*

**Health**

By their late eighties, more than one in three people in England have difficulties undertaking the tasks of daily living unaided. Between one quarter and a half of the 65+ age group are frail. There are also huge socioeconomic differences in disability-free life expectancy at age 65: a fivefold difference between people living in the poorest and the most affluent areas of the UK. For example, a woman aged 65 has an expected 13.1 years of healthy living in the worst area compared to 16.7 years in the best. Is this a postcode lottery or signs of deep-seated social inequality? An ageing population also means people living longer — but more of them from poorer areas will have diagnosed long-term health conditions. See Figure 2.

![Graph showing number of diagnosed long-term conditions](image2)

We will need to think hard about how our health and welfare systems will cope in the future, about preferable patterns of re-migration, and about how our housing and taxation will manage to support so many older people. Our conceptions of the ‘middle-aged’ may move to people in their sixties, rather than the forties or fifties, as now.

Professor Sarah Harper, the director of the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing and chair of the UK government’s foresight review on ageing societies, said recently that Britain will depend on immigration to maintain a workforce to support its ageing population. ‘The message from Brexit is: if you don’t want immigrants, you’re going to have to work longer. That’s how the sums work.’

*Source: Age UK and University of Oxford Medical School*

**The global picture**

The UK is not the only place in the world with an ageing population. Projections suggest that many prosperous countries in South East Asia and elsewhere will experience a rapid rise in the number of people approaching retirement age over the next 30 years. See Figure 3. Living longer is a sign of positive social development everywhere. However, how to manage and support an ageing population and how it changes cultures and perceptions of ageing are key sociological and social-policy questions we will need to address.

![Bar chart showing percentage of population over 60](image3)

*Source: United Nations (2013)*

**Figure 3** Percentage of population over 60

Go online for a printable pdf of this centre spread (www.hoddereducation.co.uk/sociologyreviewextras)