

Population Ageing in the United Kingdom, its Constituent Countries and the European Union

Coverage: **International**

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Geographical Area: **UK and GB**

Theme: **Population**

Foreword

This report gives an overview of population ageing in the UK, its constituent countries and the European Union.

Median ages and percentages of people aged 65 and over are presented showing how the countries of the UK and the EU have aged between 1985 and 2010 and are projected to age up to 2035.

This report is also accompanied by a Video Podcast: [Population Ageing Across the United Kingdom and EU-27 - Animated Video Podcast](#)

Key points

- The UK population is ageing and is projected to continue ageing over the next few decades with the fastest population increases in the numbers of those aged 85 and over.
- Of the four UK constituent countries, Wales was consistently the most aged between 1985 and 2010, with the highest median age and the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over in its population. Northern Ireland was consistently the least aged, with the lowest median age and the smallest proportion of older people in its population.
- By 2035 England is projected to be the least aged of the four UK countries, with the lowest median age and the joint lowest proportion of persons aged 65 and over in its population. Scotland is projected to have the highest median age by that time but Wales is projected to have a slightly larger proportion of older people in its population than Scotland.

- The UK has gone from being one of the most aged countries in Europe in the mid-1980s to one of middle ranking among the EU-27 countries by 2010. It is projected to be one of the least aged countries in the EU-27 by 2035.

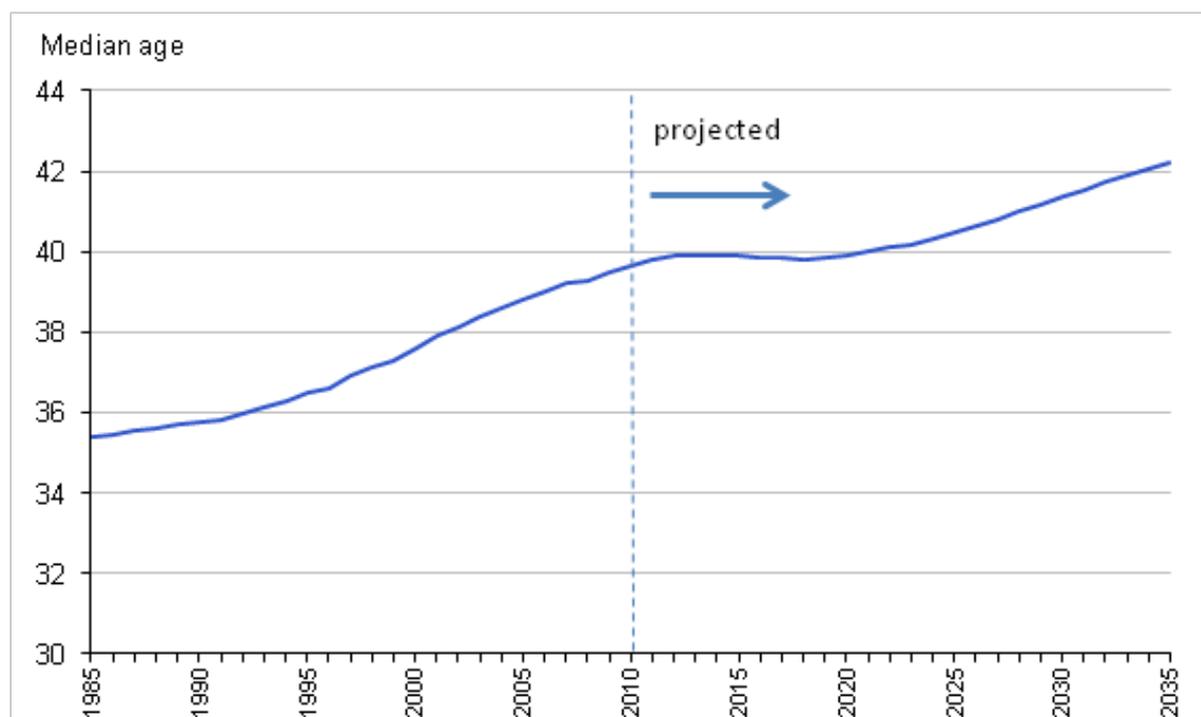
Ageing in the UK

The population of the UK is ageing. Ageing of the population refers to both the increase in the average (median) age of the population and the increase in the number and proportion of older people in the population.

Population ageing is a result of past improvements in mortality rates at all ages and continuing improvements in mortality rates at the oldest ages combined with overall past declines in fertility rates. Although the fertility rate has been increasing in the UK since 2001, it is still below replacement level.

Over the 25 year period 1985 to 2010, the median age of the UK population (that is the age at which half the population is younger and half the population is older) increased from 35.4 years to 39.7 years.

Median age in the United Kingdom 1985 to 2035



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

1. 1985 to 2010 Mid-year population estimates, ONS, NRS, NISRA; 2011 to 2035 National Population Projections, (2010-based), ONS.

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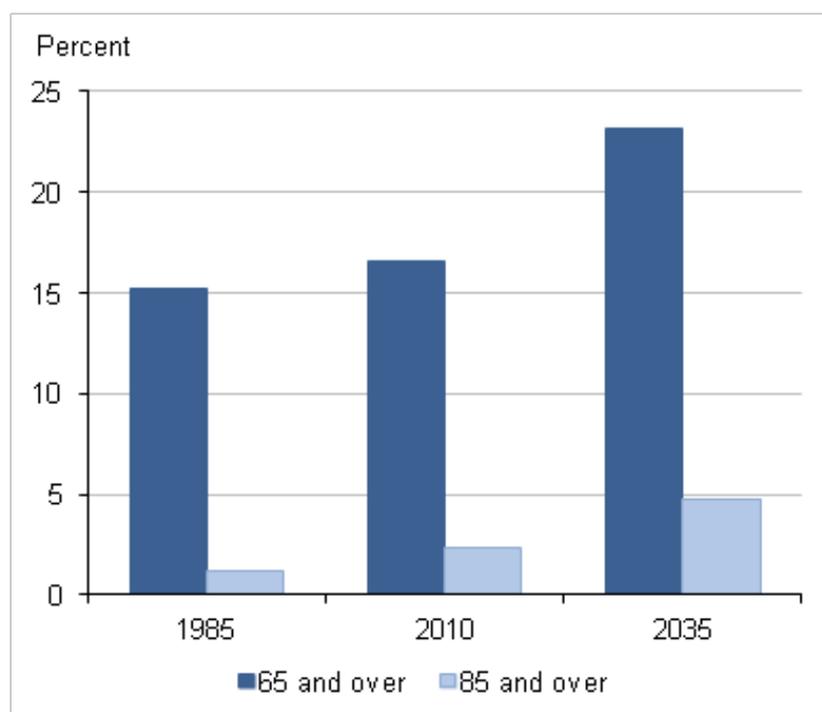
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Ageing of the UK population is projected to continue. By 2035, it is projected that the median age will have risen to 42.2 years, an increase of 2.5 years in the quarter century after 2010.

During the last century, there were peaks in the numbers of births after both world wars and a longer baby boom during the 1960s. Over the next 25 years people born just after World War II, now aged in their 60s, will continue into the oldest ages, reaching their late 80s by 2035. The 1960s 'baby boomers' currently in their mid 40s, will reach their early 60s around 2025 and by 2035 will be in their early 70s. As these birth cohorts age they will contribute to the continuing ageing of the UK population.

In terms of increases in the number and proportion of older people in the UK population, the percentage of persons aged 65 and over increased from 15 per cent in 1985 to 17 per cent in 2010, an increase of 1.7 million people. By 2035 it is projected that those aged 65 and over will account for 23 per cent of the total population.

Percentage of older people in the UK 1985, 2010, 2035



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

1. 1985 to 2010 Mid-year estimates, ONS, NRS, NISRA; 2011 to 2035 National Population Projections, (2010-based), ONS.

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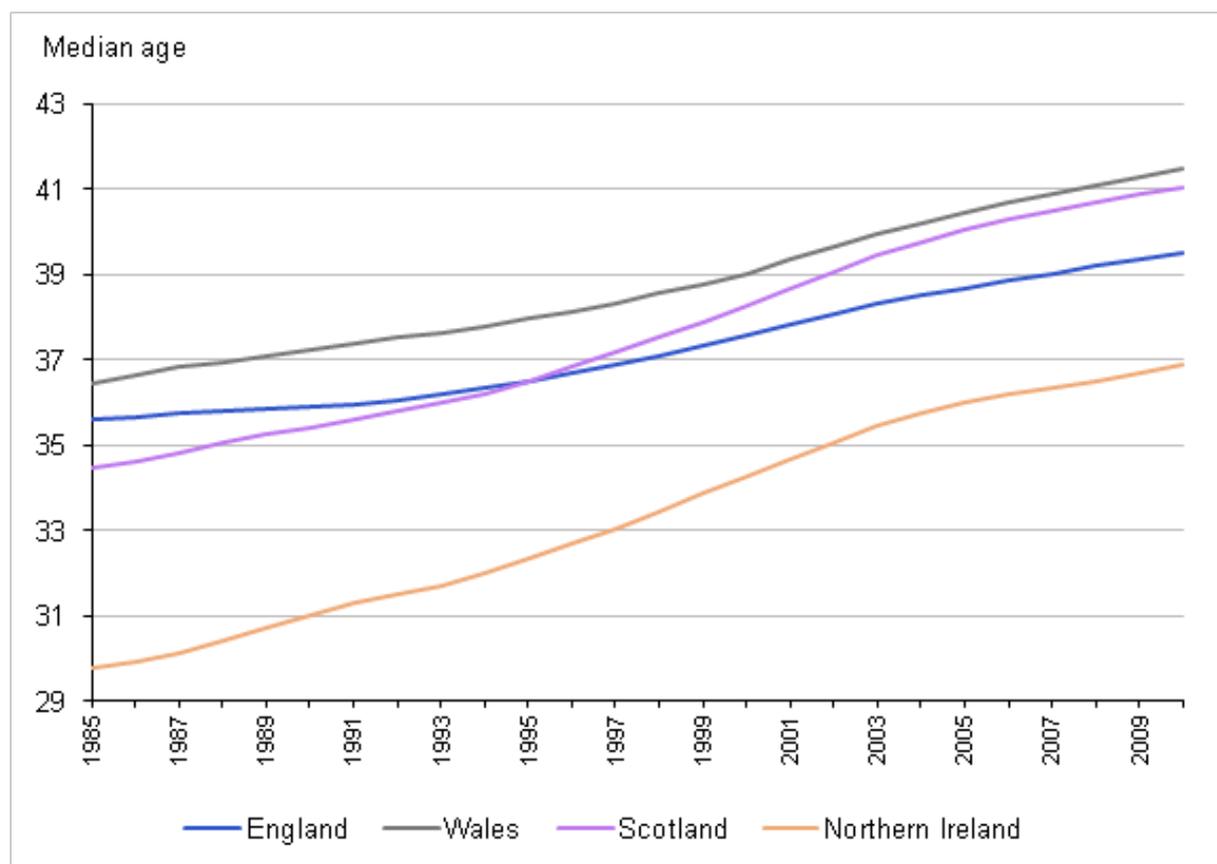
The fastest population increases have been in the 'oldest old' (those aged 85 and over). Between 1985 and 2010 the percentage of the population aged 85 and over increased from 1 per cent to 2 per cent, with the number aged 85 and over more than doubling from nearly 0.7 million to reach over 1.4 million by 2010. By 2035 it is projected that the number of people aged 85 and over will be almost 2.5 times larger than in 2010, reaching 3.5 million and accounting for 5 per cent of the total UK population.

Ageing in the UK constituent countries

The populations of all four UK countries have aged over the last 25 years, with increases in median age and in the numbers and proportions of older people. However, there are differences in the age profiles of the individual countries and they have not all aged at the same rate.

In 1985, Wales was the most aged of the four UK countries with a median age of 36.5 years. At that time, England was the second most aged of the four UK countries with a median age of 35.6, followed by Scotland, which had a median age of 34.5 years. The least aged country was Northern Ireland with a median age of 29.8 years, 6.7 years less than in Wales at that time.

Median age by UK country 1985 to 2010



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

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Over the period 1985 to 2010, Wales consistently remained the most aged of the four UK countries and Northern Ireland consistently remained the least aged; however, the gap in median ages between the four countries narrowed because they aged at differing rates.

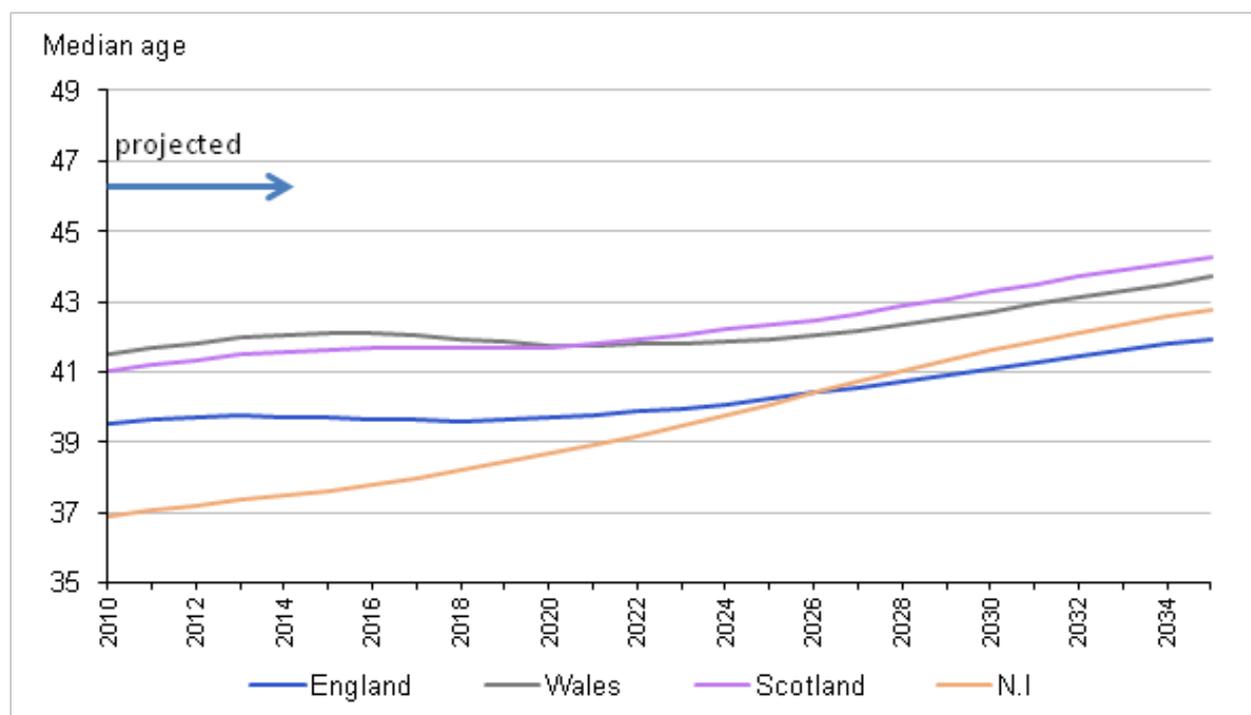
Northern Ireland aged the most rapidly over the period with median age rising by 7.1 years to reach 36.9 years by 2010. Scotland also aged relatively rapidly with a rise of 6.5 years in median age so that by 2010 it had a median age of 41 years, above England's median age of 39.5 years, and just below the median age in Wales of 41.5 years. England's population aged the least rapidly between 1985 and 2010 with a rise of 3.9 years in its median age over the period.

Northern Ireland remained less aged in 2010 compared to the rest of the UK largely because Northern Ireland's fertility rate has remained higher than in other parts of the UK over the past 25 years. England, Wales and Scotland have all experienced below replacement level fertility since the mid-1970s whereas Northern Ireland's fertility only fell below replacement level in the early 1990s.

Fertility and mortality patterns in Wales have been similar to England over the past 25 years but Wales has a more aged population than England. Part of the reason is that younger people have tended to migrate out of Wales. Also, Wales is largely rural and older people tend to live and retire to rural areas. Scotland has had the lowest fertility rate of the four UK countries since the early 1980s but also the lowest life expectancy for both males and females, with the effect of the former outweighing the effect of the latter.

The ageing of the population of all four UK countries is projected to continue over the period 2010 to 2035 with the gap between the countries' median ages also continuing to narrow.

Median age by UK country 2010 to 2035



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

1. 2010 Mid-year population estimates, ONS, NRS, NISRA; 2011 to 2035 National Population Projections, (2010 based), ONS.

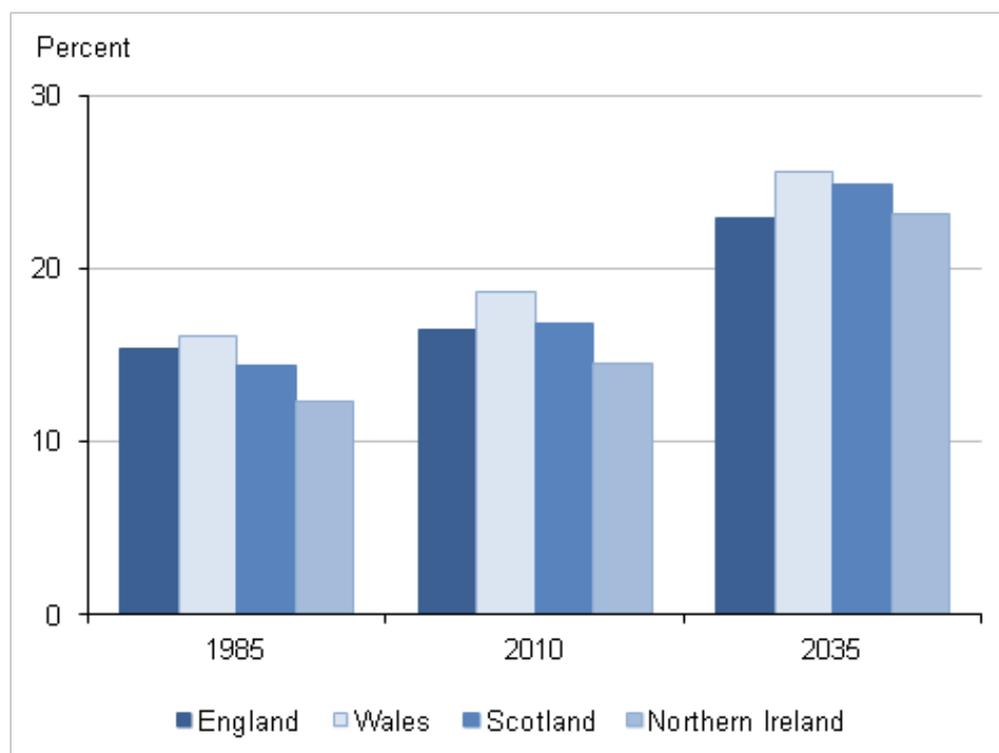
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Northern Ireland, the least aged of the four countries, is projected to continue ageing the fastest with the median age rising by nearly six years to reach 42.8 years by 2035. Wales, the most aged country is projected to age most slowly with median age rising by just over two years to 43.7 years. Scotland is projected to continue ageing relatively rapidly and by 2035 is projected the highest median age of the four UK constituent countries, 44.2 years; England is projected to be the least aged with a median age of 41.9 years.

Comparing the proportions of older people in the populations of the four UK constituent countries, in 1985 Wales had the highest percentage of people aged 65 and over, 16 per cent, compared to 15 per cent of the population in England and 14 per cent of the population in Scotland. Northern Ireland had lowest proportion, with 12 per cent aged 65 and over.

Percentage of persons aged 65 and over by country, 1985, 2010, 2035



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

1. 1985 to 2010 Mid-year estimates, ONS, NRS, NISRA; 2011 to 2035 National Population Projections, (2010-based), ONS.

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By 2010 the proportion and number of older people aged 65 and over had increased in all UK countries. Wales continued to have the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over (19 per cent) and Northern Ireland had the lowest (14 per cent). England and Scotland had similar proportions of older people in their populations, 16 and 17 per cent respectively.

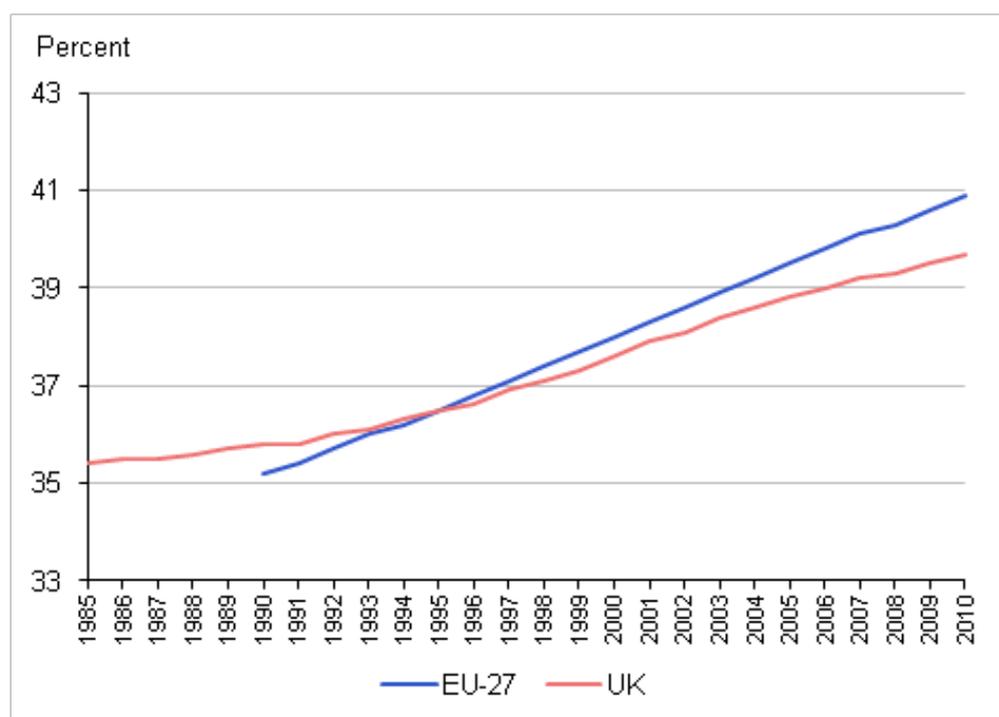
Between 2010 and 2035 the numbers and percentages of older people in all four UK countries are projected to increase, with Northern Ireland and Scotland projected the largest increases in the proportion of older people.

By 2035, it is projected that Wales will again have the highest proportion of persons aged 65 and over, 26 per cent, with Scotland in second position at 25 per cent. England and Northern Ireland are projected to have the same proportion of persons aged 65 and over in their populations, 23 per cent.

Ageing in the European Union

In the mid-1980s the UK was one of the more aged countries in Europe with a median age of 35.4 in 1985. By 1990, the median age in the UK, 35.8 years, was slightly higher than the overall median age of the 27 countries currently in the European Union, 35.2 years.

Median age, UK and EU-27



Source: Office for National Statistics, Eurostat

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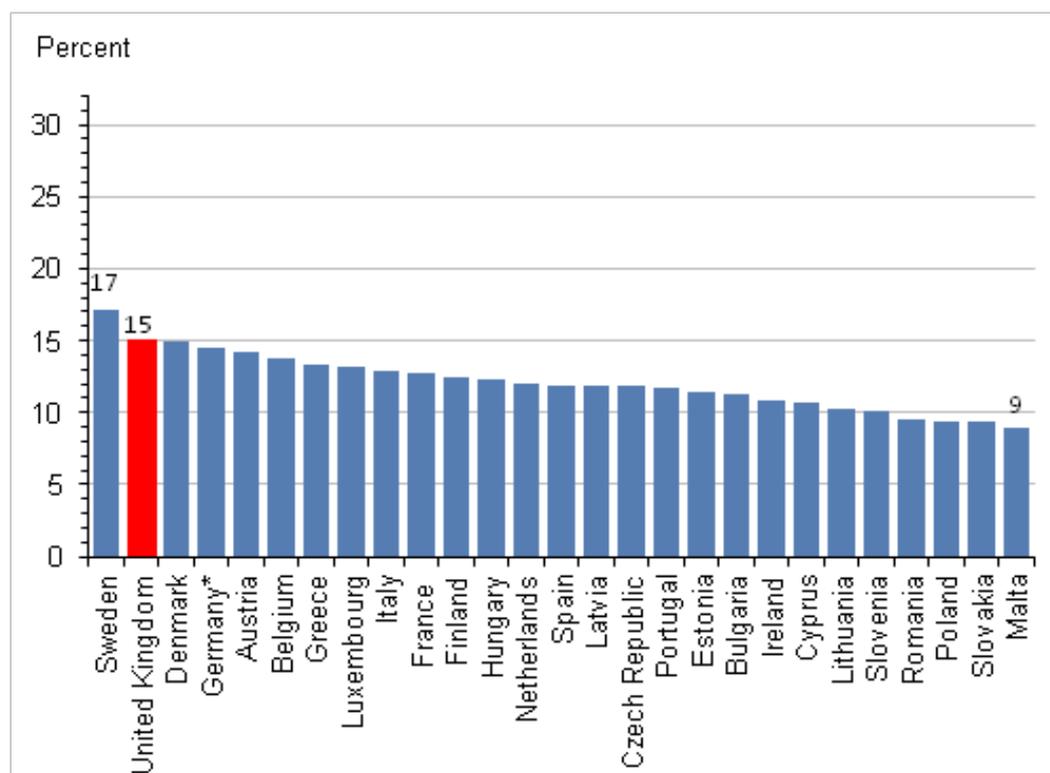
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Over the period 1990 to 2010, the UK aged less rapidly than the EU-27 average. One of the contributing factors for this was the relatively high fertility rate in the UK over the last decade compared with countries in central, southern and Eastern Europe.

By 2010, the median age of the EU-27's population was 40.9 years, 1.2 years higher than the median age in the UK of 39.7 years. The Republic of Ireland, with consistently high fertility, was the EU member state with the least aged population, with a median age of 34.3 years. In contrast, Germany, with consistently low fertility, was the EU member state with the most aged population, having a median age of 44.2 years in 2010.

In 1985, the UK at 15 per cent had the second highest proportion of people aged 65 and over in its population among the countries that are now in the EU-27. Sweden had the highest proportion, 17 per cent, and Malta had the smallest proportion with 9 per cent of its population aged 65 and over.

Percentage of persons aged 65 and over EU-27, 1985



Source: Office for National Statistics, Eurostat

Notes:

1. Estimates for Germany include ex-GDR

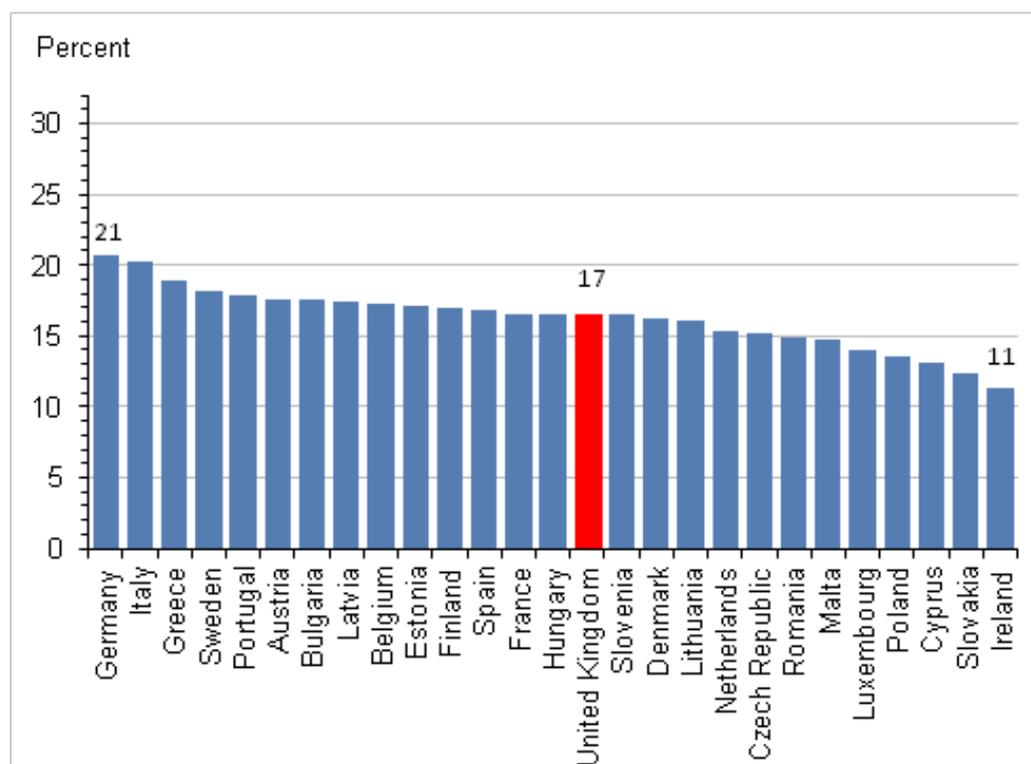
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Over the period 1985 to 2010, the proportion of older people increased in all of the EU-27 countries. In the UK, the percentage of the population aged 65 and over rose to 17 per cent by 2010. This increase in the proportion of older people was not as great as for many other EU-27 countries, with the UK dropping down to the middle of the rankings. The country with the highest percentage of its population aged 65 and over was Germany at 21 per cent and the country with the lowest percentage was the Republic of Ireland at 11 per cent.

Percentage of persons aged 65 and over EU-27, 2010



Source: Office for National Statistics, Eurostat

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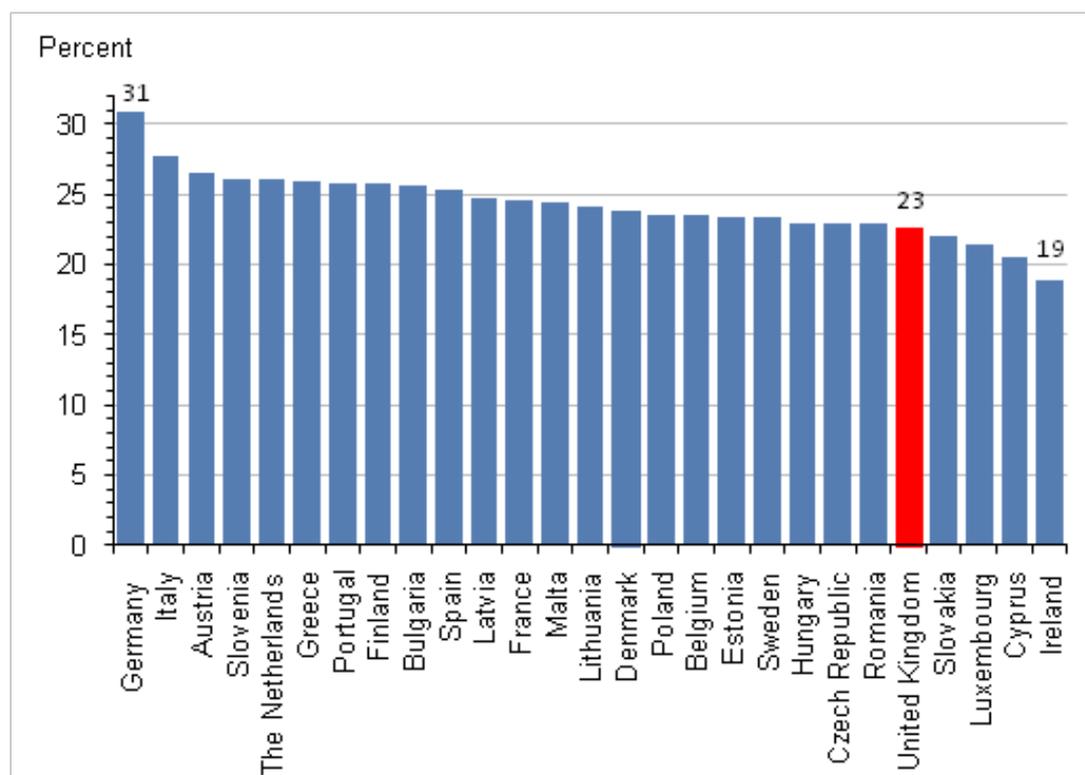
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The populations of all the EU-27 countries are projected to become more aged between 2010 and 2035 as the proportions of older people in their populations continue to increase.

By 2035, 23 per cent of the UK population is projected to be aged 65 and over. Despite this, the UK will rank as one of the least aged countries among the EU-27 member states by this time, with only four of the 27 EU countries projected to have a lower proportion of their population aged 65 and over. Germany is projected to retain its position as the most aged country with a projected 31 per cent of the population aged 65 and over and the Republic of Ireland is projected to retain its position as the least aged population with a projected 19 per cent of the population in this age group.

Percentage of population aged 65 and over EU-27, 2035



Source: Office for National Statistics, Eurostat

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Background notes

1. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html or from the Media Relations Office email: media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk

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This document is also available on our website at www.ons.gov.uk.

Supporting Information

Further information

[Estimates of Centenarians in the UK, 2010](#)

This summary is about the rapid growth in the number of centenarians in the UK between 1965 and 2010.

Appendices

Associated links

Links to [Mid-year estimates](#) and [National Population Projections](#) for the UK and its constituent countries.