



# The ageing of our towns



## Centre For Towns

The Centre For Towns is an independent non-partisan organization dedicated to providing research and analysis of our towns. Whilst our cities receive a good deal of attention, we believe there should be equal attention paid to the viability and prosperity of our towns.

The Centre has a database of approximately 7,000 places across Great Britain, ranging in size from villages through to large towns and cities. The table below shows the composition of these places in the database.

Region	Villages	Communities	Small towns	Medium towns	Large towns	Core cities
East Midlands	662	65	45	21	6	1
East of England	913	65	55	25	16	0
North East	150	29	28	11	7	1
North West	284	51	75	40	17	2
Scotland	442	98	67	23	3	2
South East	984	79	80	55	21	1
South West	892	53	64	14	9	1
Wales	418	53	49	10	2	1
West Midlands	391	24	28	29	10	1
Yorks & Humber	432	50	62	14	11	2

Table 1, The regional spread and type of places in the Centre For Towns database

## Acknowledgement

The Centre For Towns uses data from a wide range of sources. The data used in this report primarily comes from the UK Census for the years 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011. This report uses data from NOMIS and the ONS. The data presented has been collated by the Centre For Towns and does not reflect the views of the ONS or NOMIS. All views represented in the report are those of the Centre For Towns alone and the author of this report assumes all responsibility for any errors contained within.

## The author

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## Executive summary

- The Office for National Statistics currently projects that by 2046 there will be **seven million** more people aged 65 and over in the United Kingdom.
- Over the last three decades, our towns and cities have experienced very different demographic trends in ageing.
- There are currently two million more over 65s in the Centre For Towns places than there were in 1981 and three and a half million more 45 to 64-year olds.
- Around three-quarters of the increase in 45 to 64-year olds and over 65s between 1981 and 2011 took place in villages, communities, small and medium sized towns.
- Over the same period, our Core Cities and large towns saw large increases in the numbers of 25 to 44-year olds. Around eighty per cent of the growth in 25 to 44-year olds has taken place in large towns and core cities.
- The net effect has been for large towns and Core Cities to 'get younger' between 1981 and 2011 whilst our villages, small communities and smaller towns have grown older.
- There are now sharp disparities in ageing between our cities and towns, even within regions. For example, Nottingham has much lower old age dependency than the small towns of the East Midlands. Cardiff has much lower old age dependency than the small towns of the south Wales valleys.
- Looking ahead, the population projections mean we should expect these geographical disparities to continue. Our cities and large towns continue to attract younger populations.
- These effects mean there will be significant challenges in public policy. We are going to need to adapt our housing stock, transport needs, healthcare services, and educational institutions to name just four huge immediate requirements of an ageing population.



## Introduction

There are more people in the United Kingdom than ever before. In 2016, the population stood at 65.6 million, up by around five million in the last decade. This trend is projected to continue until at least the middle of the century (see table 2 below).

Year	0 to 15 years (%)	16 to 64 years (%)	65 and over (%)	UK population
1976	24.5	61.2	14.2	56,216,121
1986	20.5	64.1	15.4	56,683,835
1996	20.7	63.5	15.9	58,164,374
2006	19.2	64.9	15.9	60,827,067
2016	18.9	63.1	18.0	65,648,054
2026	18.8	60.7	20.5	69,843,515
2036	18.0	58.2	23.9	73,360,907
2046	17.7	57.7	24.7	76,342,235

Table 2. Age distribution of the United Kingdom, 1976 to 2046 (projected) Source: ONS<sup>1</sup>

Mortality and fertility rates and net migration all contribute to population change. Recent increases in net migration allied to improvements in healthcare and lifestyles have combined to increase both the number of people arriving in the country and the longevity of the resident population. However, it is the latter effect (an ageing population) which this report will focus upon.

Whilst the proportion of over 65s is projected to increase by 6.7% over the next decade the underlying raw number is even more staggering; there are projected to be **seven million more over 65s in 2046 than there are in 2016**. Over the same period the proportion of 0 to 15-year old's and working-age (16 to 64-year old's) populations are projected to decline by 1.2% and 5.4% respectively.

These projections present serious challenges across civil society. Our spending on pensions will change; the health and social care system will need to prepare itself; housing demand will change, and supply will need to adapt; the education sector will need to address needs across the life course and not just for the under 25s; transport and infrastructure will need to pay as much attention to buses as it does to trains; business will need to anticipate the needs of an ageing population in the services it provides and the products it sells.

In short, the projected dynamics of an ageing population require public policy to 'get ahead' of the changes, anticipate and predict need and respond accordingly. Failure to do so risks burdening future generations with a crisis it was warned to expect.

<sup>1</sup> Overview of the UK population, July 2017 (ONS)



## The importance of where the population is ageing

As the Office for National Statistics and others have pointed out, the geographical distribution of an ageing population is not random. Cities have lower proportions of over 65s at present, and are projected to have slower growth among over 65s than the rest of the United Kingdom. Coastal areas have higher proportions of older populations at present, and will continue to do so, but inland areas will see significant increases in the proportion of older voters.

So, for example, Islington in London is projected to have roughly the same (low) proportion of over 65s in 2046 than it has at present. Similarly, the cities of Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol, Cardiff, and Edinburgh are projected to see relatively small increases (if any at all) in the proportion of over 65s. By contrast, areas outside of cities are projected to see increases either in line with overall projections are well ahead of the national projected trends.

This disparity in projected trends will need to be met with reflexive public policy. For instance, in those areas with large projected increases in over 65s local health demands will need to be met by resourcing geriatric services, the treatment of injuries from falls in older people, the provision of adequate social care provision. In those areas with flat or modest increases in over 65s, but continued increases in younger populations, local health demands will likely need to include the resourcing of mental health provision for young people, a diverse and affordable housing supply, leisure activities and a functioning commuter transport network.

However, before any of the projected population changes and the demands they place on society can be met with public policy, it is imperative that we understand precisely **where** the population is ageing. This means sub-regional data on towns and cities, which is what this report hopes to elucidate. Assuming that an ageing population is geographically patterned is not enough; data is required to flesh out the dynamics of an ageing population across Britain, whether it is in a village of a few hundred or a city of several million.



## Defining places

Defining what constitutes the boundaries of a place is one of the most difficult challenges facing research into towns. We recognize that ten people from a town are likely to have ten different answers to the question 'Where does your town begin and end?'. We cannot hope to satisfy the variety of definitions, nor do we presume to know any town better than the people who live there. However, choices need to be made, and the Centre keeps an open mind regarding its work in the future with regard to place definitions.

The Centre For Towns uses several typologies to describe the places it has in its database, each of which is likely to be contested by some. This is an unfortunate by-product of the geographical units we use to both describe places and the data we hold on those places. However, in this report we have produced the following typology and criteria for what constitutes each of the seven thousand places in our database.

Type	Definition	Number
Villages	Places with less than 5,000 residents	5,568
Communities	Places with between 5,000 and 10,000 residents	567
Small towns	Towns with between 10,000 and 30,000 residents	553
Medium towns	Towns with between 30,000 and 75,000 residents	242
Large towns	Towns with over 75,000 residents	102
Core Cities	Core cities as defined by Pike et al (2016)	12

Table 3, The Centre For Towns criteria for each of its place types

The twelve Core Cities are included for comparative reasons only. They are Nottingham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham, Leeds, and Sheffield.

In addition to the above typology the Centre has further categorized each of its places under the region in which it sits.



## The ageing of our towns

### An overview

To understand the ageing of our towns it is necessary to track the change in age group populations over the last few decades. The Centre first defined the geographical boundaries of each of its places (villages, communities, small, medium, and large towns, and core cities) and then extracted data from the last four censuses (1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011) for populations within those boundaries.

In the last three decades, whilst the population of the United Kingdom has increased, this growth has not been evenly distributed. Cities and larger towns have in effect grown younger whilst towns and villages have aged. The table below shows the population of each type of place in each of the four censuses.

Type	1981	1991	2001	2011	Change since 1981
Village	7,063,433	7,376,419	7,544,347	7,992,276	+13.2%
Community	4,471,844	4,756,369	5,027,884	5,323,367	+19.0%
Small town	8,674,752	9,031,455	9,405,163	9,918,787	+14.3%
Medium town	9,559,008	9,776,545	10,086,622	10,695,450	+11.9%
Large town	11,635,972	11,744,686	12,113,935	13,024,556	+11.9%
Core Cities	12,106,880	11,817,745	12,441,967	13,932,596	+15.1%

Table 4, Population of each place type, 1981-2011

Whilst all the places have seen sharp increases in population since 1981, the age group statistics show how the over 45s have powered most of the growth (Figure 1, below) outside the cities and large towns.

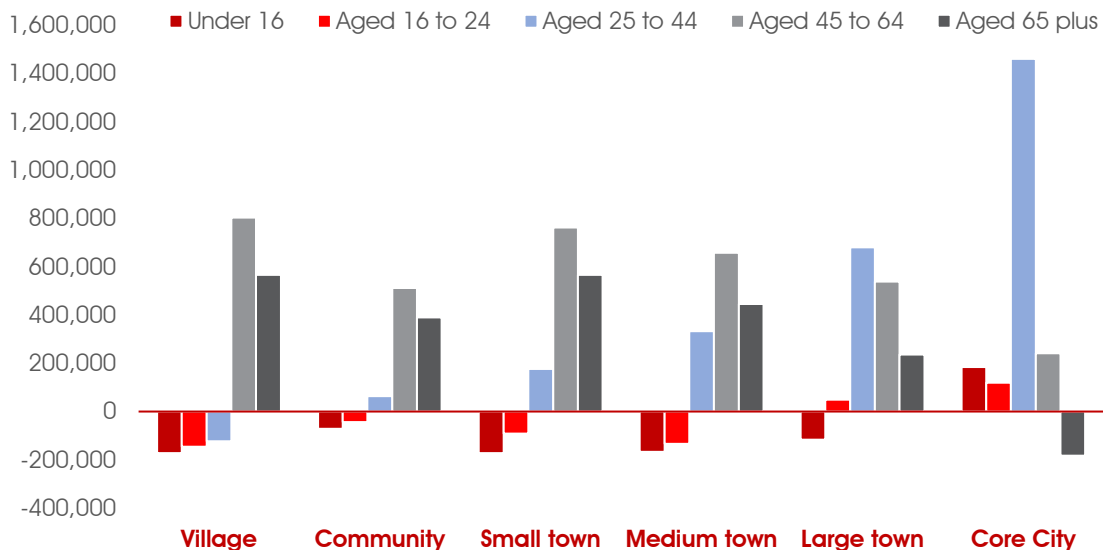


Figure 1, The increase or decrease in population between 1981 and 2001 by place type



Table 5 below sets out the data in Figure 1. Population growth has not been distributed evenly across the age groups. All places outside of the Core Cities have seen declines in the number of people under the age of 25 over the last three decades. Between 1981 and 2011 our villages, communities and towns saw the number of under 25s decrease by over one million. Over the same period our Core Cities saw an increase of over 300,00 under 25s and over two million 25 to 44-year old's.

Type	Under 16	16 to 24	25 to 44	45 to 64	65 plus	Total
Village	-172,855	-145,953	-123,044	804,394	566,301	+928,843
Community	-71,209	-43,335	63,789	512,481	389,797	+851,523
Small town	-171,743	-90,720	177,206	763,196	566,096	+1,244,035
Medium town	-166,440	-133,746	333,016	658,180	445,432	+1,136,442
Large town	-116,690	48,731	681,024	538,985	236,534	+1,388,584
Core City	185,053	120,179	1,461,593	241,939	-183,048	+1,825,716
<b>Overall</b>	<b>513,884</b>	<b>244,844</b>	<b>+2,593,584</b>	<b>+3,519,175</b>	<b>+2,021,112</b>	<b>+7,375,143</b>

Table 5, The increase or decrease in population by age and type, 1981-2011

Over the same period our towns and villages saw an increase of over two million over 65s and over three million 45 to 64-year old's. The net effect of these changes has been to age the towns and villages whilst Core Cities have naturally got younger.

These patterns also vary by region. Table 6 below shows the population growth between 1981 and 2011 by the type of town or city. The figures in red represent growth below the average for the country. Again, we see geographical disparities in population growth, with the south and east of England seeing large proportionate increases while the rest of Britain has failed to keep pace.

Region/ country	Small towns	Medium towns	Large towns	Core cities
East Midlands	14%	20%	21%	17%
East of England	26%	19%	20%	n/a <sup>2</sup>
North east	1%	3%	-7%	3%
North west	5%	1%	2%	1%
Scotland	3%	2%	0%	-4%
South east	25%	24%	23%	24%
South west	28%	28%	24%	13%
Wales	9%	10%	7%	25%
West Midlands	18%	7%	9%	4%
Yorks & Humber	9%	9%	6%	5%
Average	13.8%	12.3%	11.5%	8.8%

Table 6, Increase/decrease (%) in population between 1981 and 2011 by type and region

<sup>2</sup> East of England does not have a core city in the Centre For Towns database





## Old age dependency

The old-age dependency ratio (OADR) measures the number of people aged 65 or over for every 100 people of working age (16 to 64). For example, in Derby there are 38,904 people aged 65 and over and 167,108 people of working age. The OADR is calculated by the following formula:

$$\frac{38,904}{167,108} \times 100 = 23.3 \text{ (people aged 65 and over per 100 of working age)}$$

The measure allows us to understand the dependency between working-age and pension-age populations and is used, among other things, to support calculations for future pensions spending in the UK<sup>3</sup>. The chart below shows how the UK's old-age dependency changed between 1981 and 2011 compared with other places.

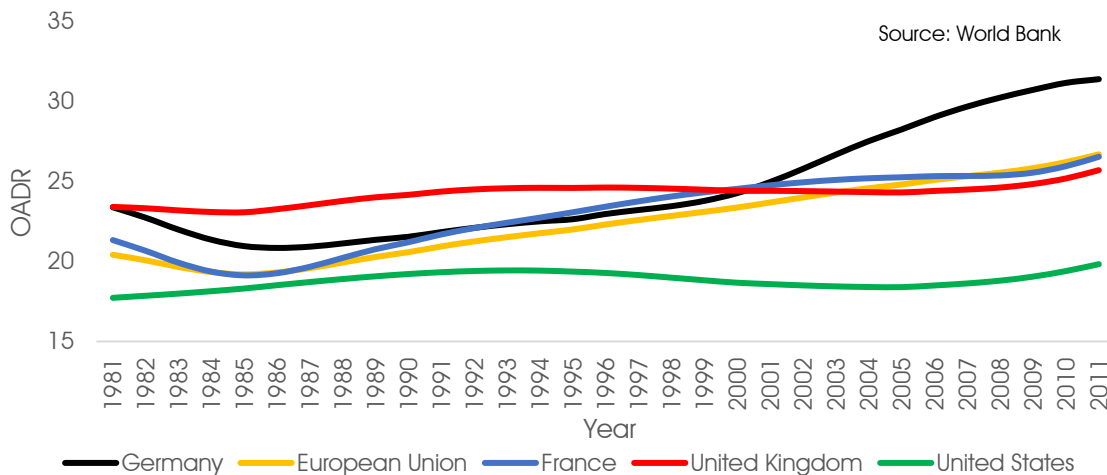


Figure 2, OADR by selected countries, 1981-2011

Whilst the OADR has remained relatively flat between 1981 and 2011, the Office for Budget Responsibility has projected that the OADR for the United Kingdom will be 34.6 by the year 2045 even with anticipated changes to the State Pension Age, and without changes to the State Pension Age (SPA) will be 47.3.

However, given the age group churn on our towns already outlined in this report, an OADR figure for the entire United Kingdom likely masks considerable underlying dependency in towns compared to cities. It is possible to use the Centre For Towns data to calculate the OADR for each of the seven thousand villages, communities, towns, and cities in the UK database.

<sup>3</sup> Office for Budget Responsibility



## Old age dependency by place type

The chart below shows how the old age dependency ratio has changed between 1981 and 2011 in each of our six place types.

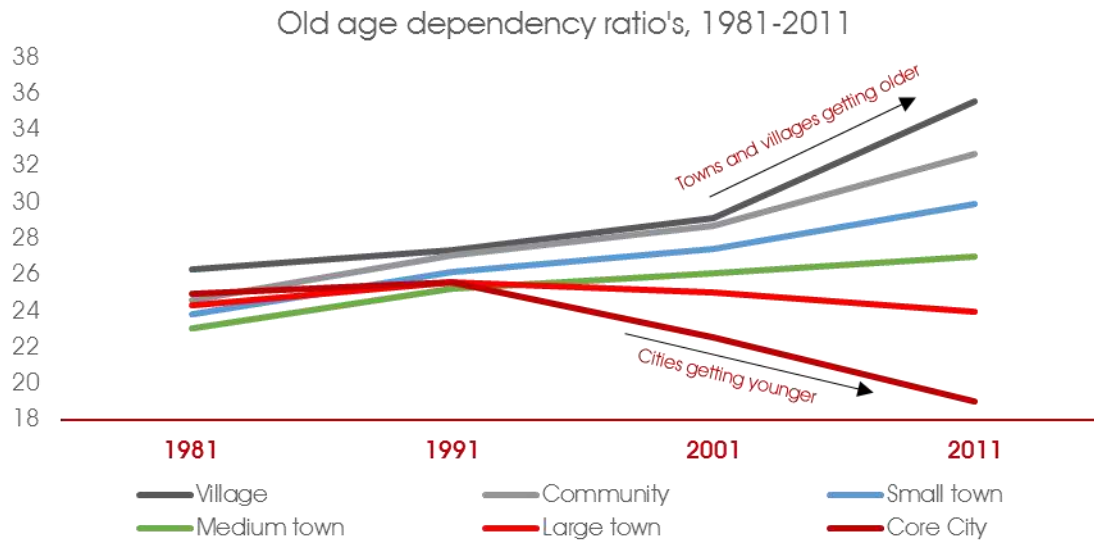


Figure 3, OADR by place type in the United Kingdom, 1981-2011

Between 1981 and 1991, the OADR remained both stable and distributed evenly between the place types. In 1981 small, medium, and large towns were *younger* than core cities. From 1991 onwards, there has been considerable change in the OADR for each of the place types.

Our core cities have seen old age dependency ratio's plummet from 1991 onwards, a reflection of the data contained in Table 5 above. Since 1991, our towns have seen sharp falls in the number of under 25s allied with sharp increases in the number of over 45s. Our cities saw the opposite: falls in the number of over 65s and sharp increases in the number of under 45s.

So, whilst UK-wide old age dependency remained flat between 1981 and 2011 (Figure 2 above) this masked considerable geographical churn between our towns and cities over the same period. These trends are projected to continue into the middle of the century, further widening the experience of old age dependency between towns and cities. This presents a considerable challenge for the governance of both towns and cities.



## Old age dependency by region and place type

The following pages show the OADR for each of our six place types broken down by region or, in the case of Wales and Scotland, country. There will be a brief commentary alongside each chart.

### East Midlands

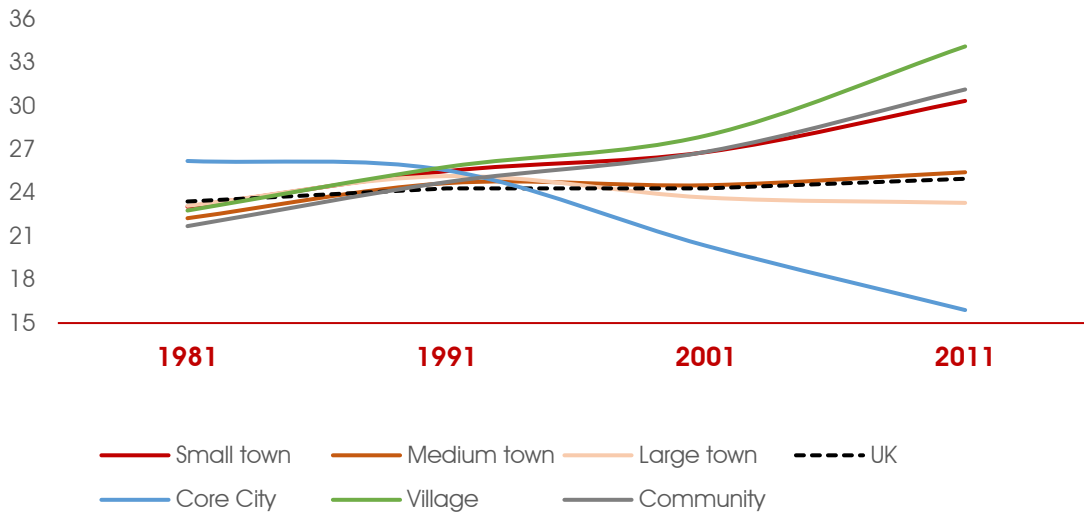


Figure 4, Old age dependency ratio for the East Midlands, 1981-2011

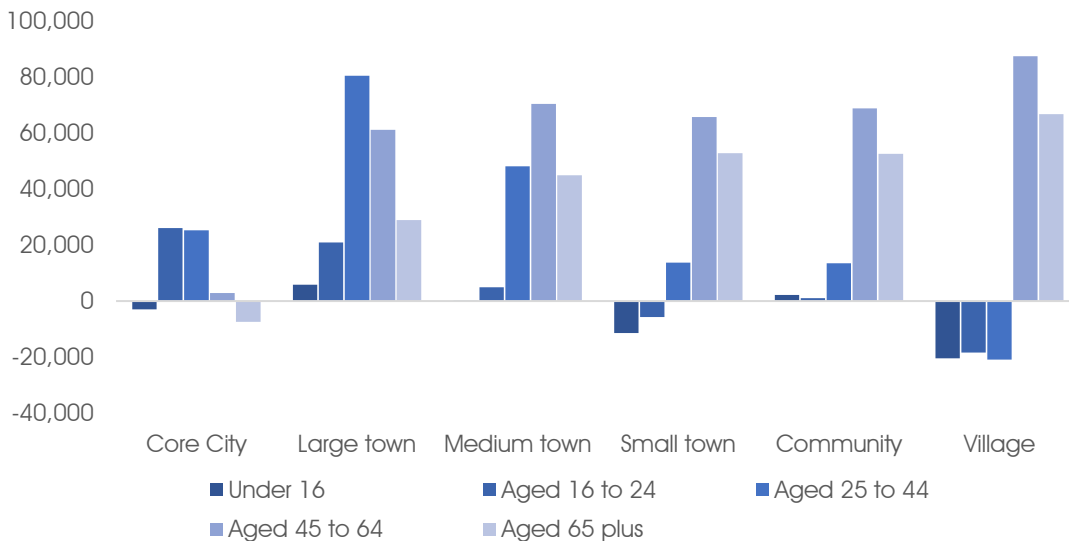


Figure 5, Growth (n) in population in the East Midlands from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (Nottingham) has seen falls in over 65s and the largest increases in people aged 16 to 24. Towns have seen the largest increases in over 45s. The net effect has seen Nottingham get younger and the towns get older.



## East of England

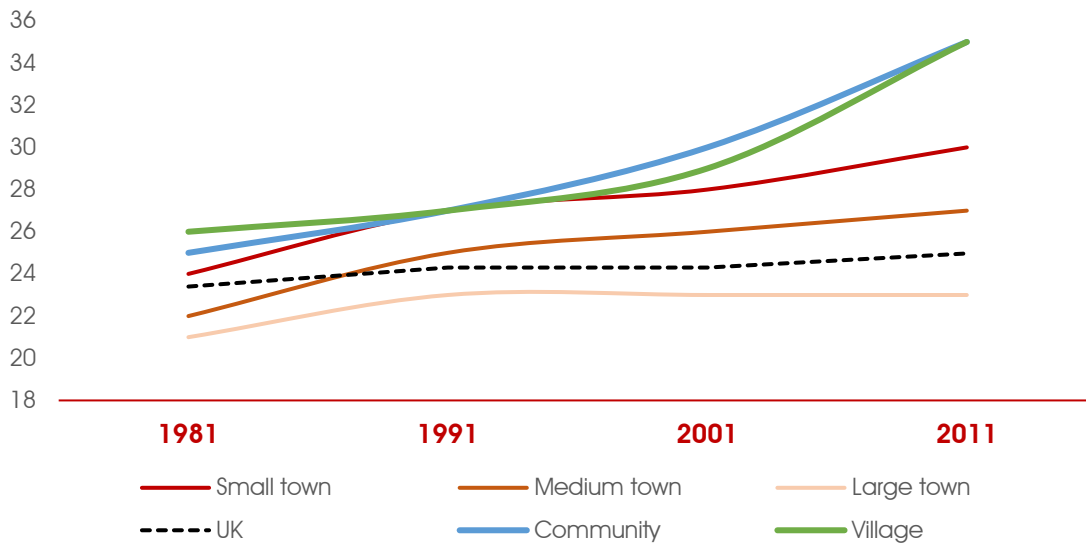


Figure 6, Old age dependency ratio for East of England, 1981-2011

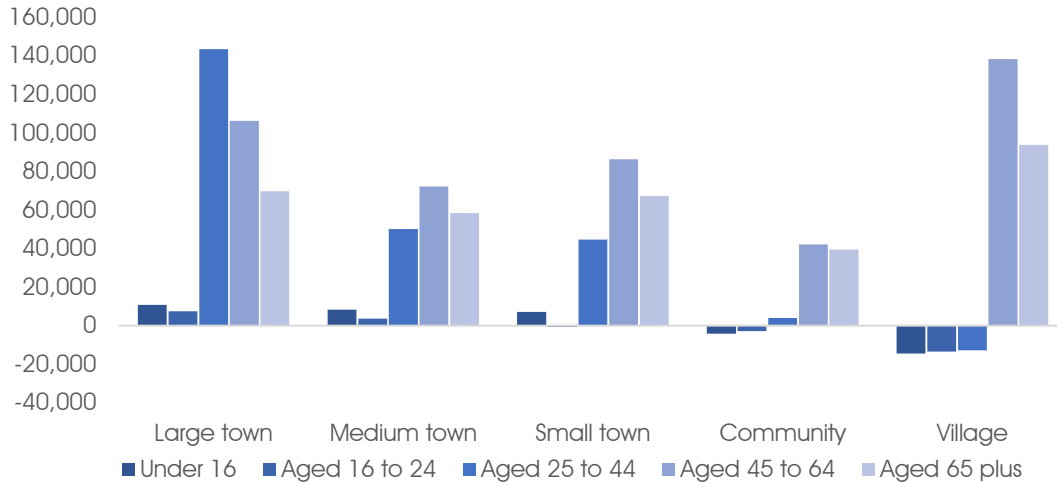


Figure 7, Growth (n) in population in East of England from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

East of England does not have a core city in the database. The largest increase in old age dependency has occurred in the villages and small communities of the East of England.



## North East

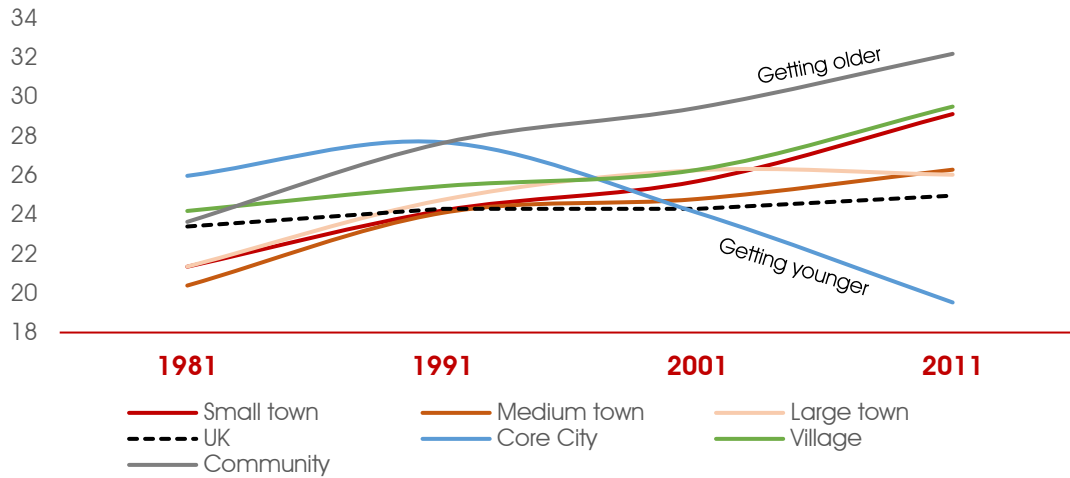


Figure 8, Old age dependency ratio for the North East, 1981-2011

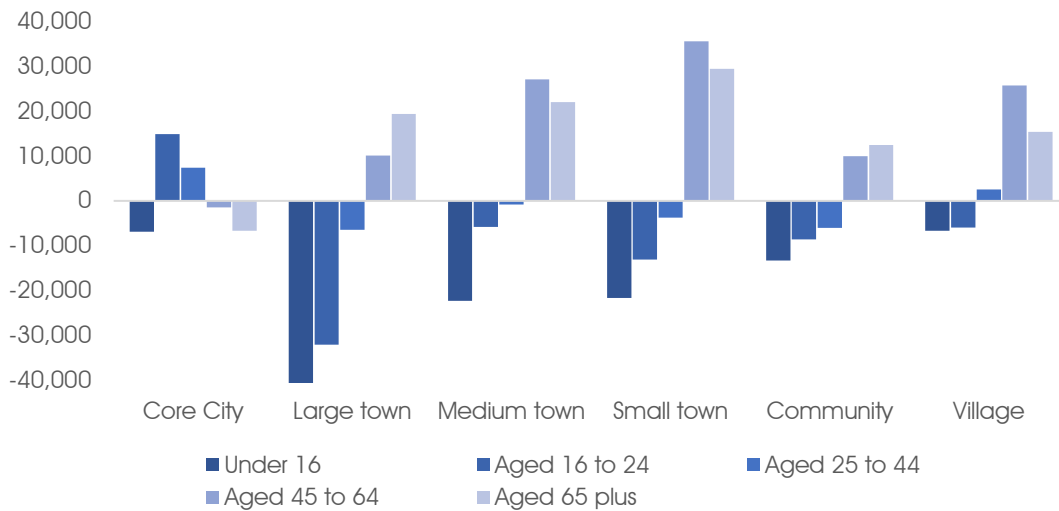


Figure 9, Growth (n) in population in the North East from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (Newcastle) has got substantially younger since the mid-90s whilst the towns and communities have got older. Towns across the North East have seen falls in under 45s at the same time as they have experienced increases in the number of over 65s.



## North West

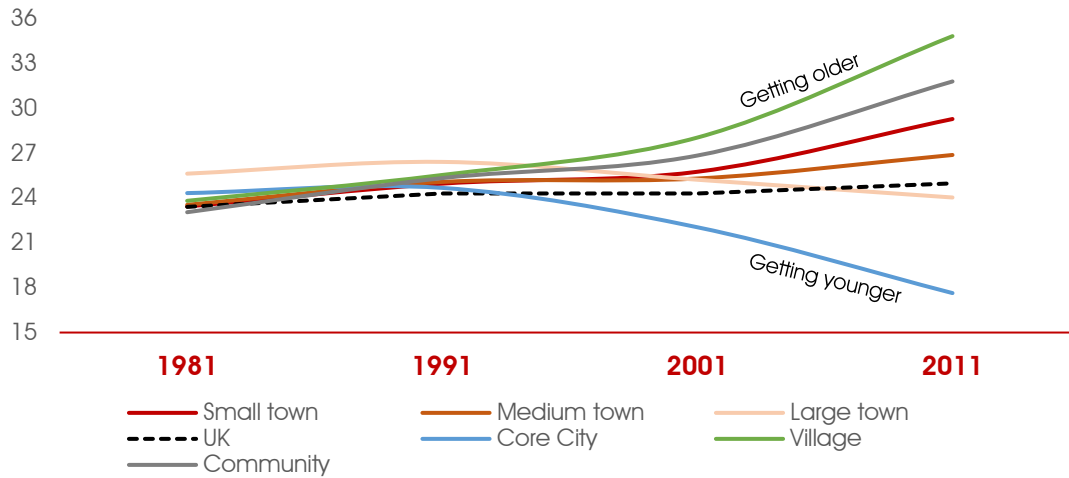


Figure 10, Old age dependency ratio for the North West, 1981-2011

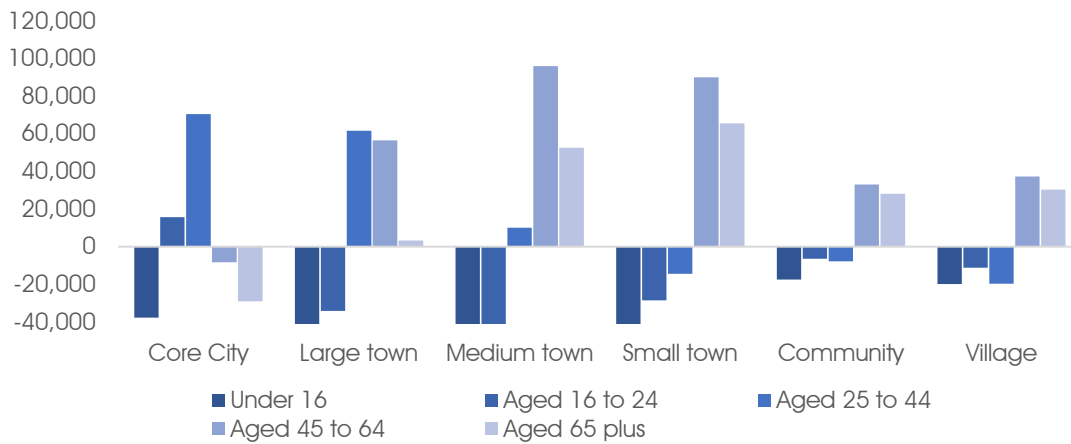


Figure 11, Growth (n) in population in the North West from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (Manchester) has seen a large increase in the number of 25 to 44-year olds since 1981 whilst north west towns have seen large increases in the number of over 45s. The effect is to transform the old age dependency ratio in both cities and towns.



## Scotland

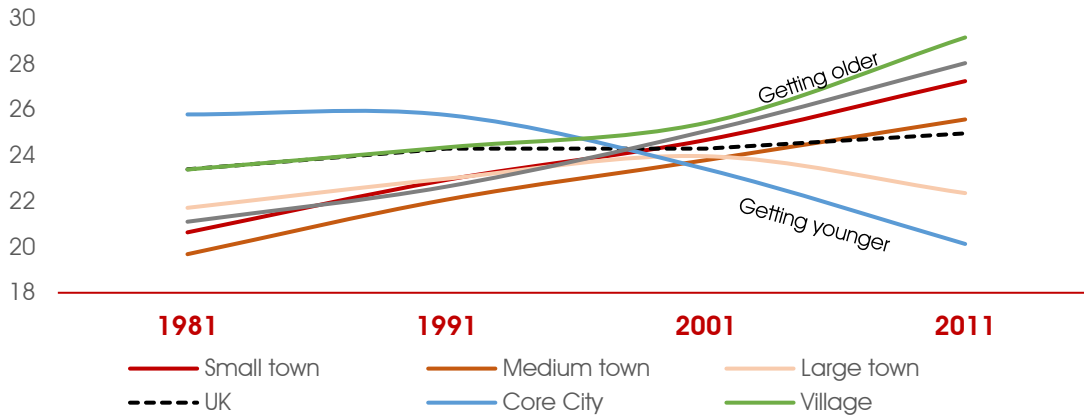


Figure 12, Old age dependency ratio for Scotland, 1981-2011

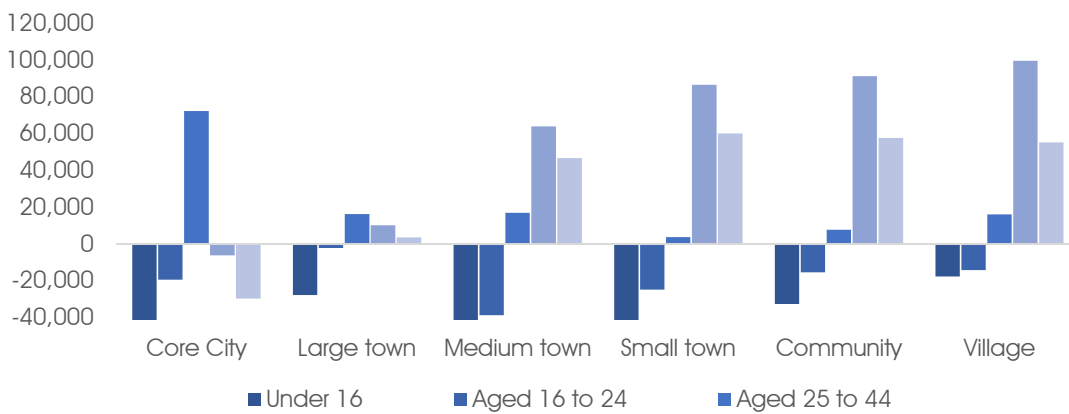


Figure 13, Growth (n) in population in the Scotland from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the large towns in Scotland, have got younger since the 1990s whilst the towns and villages have got older since 1981. In 1981, the core cities of Scotland had higher old age dependency than the UK average whilst towns and villages had lower old age dependency. By 2011, these positions had flipped, with the core cities and large towns exhibiting much lower old age dependency than the UK average.



## South East

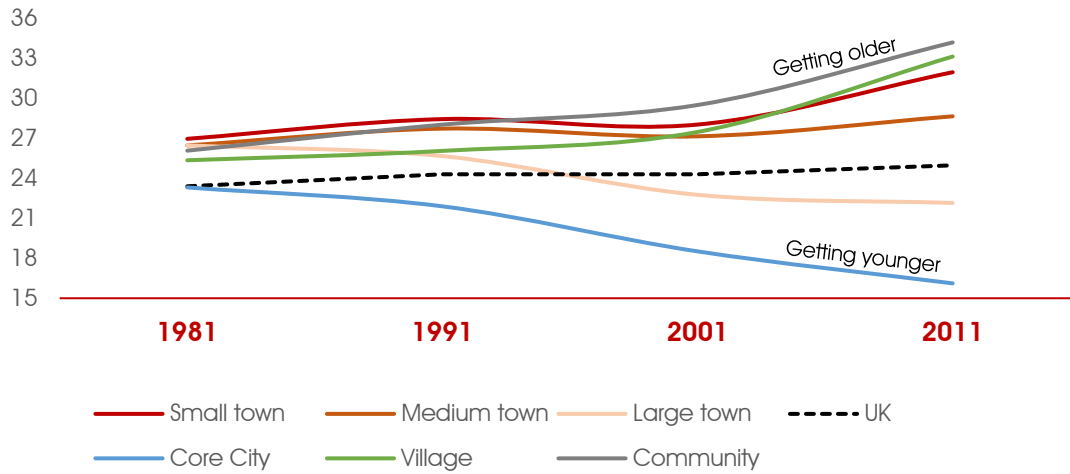


Figure 14, Old age dependency ratio for South East, 1981-2011

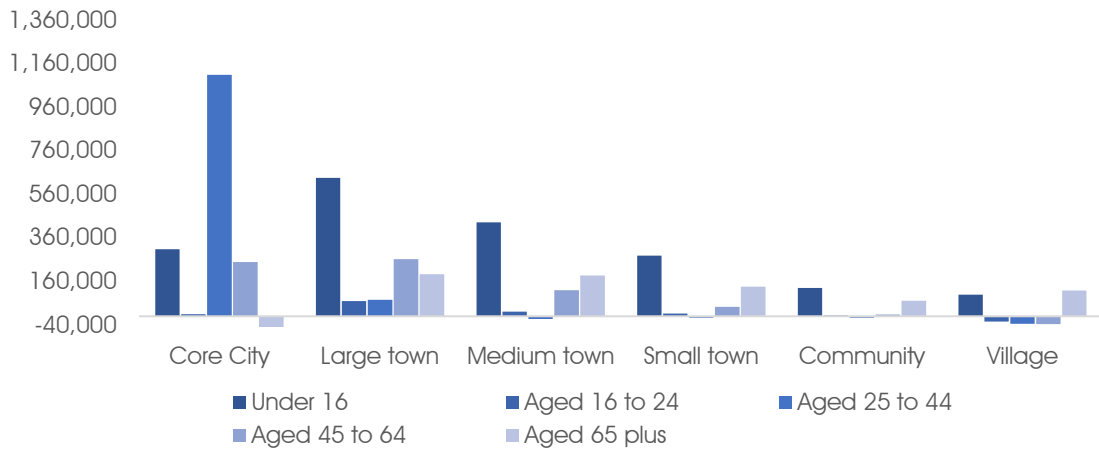


Figure 15, Growth (n) in population in South East from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (London) has seen a big increase in the number of 25 to 44-year olds whilst the rest of the region has remained relatively flat. In 1981, all the place types of the South East were above the national average for old age dependency. By 2011, the core city and large towns of the south east were below the national average whilst smaller places moved above the national average.





## South West

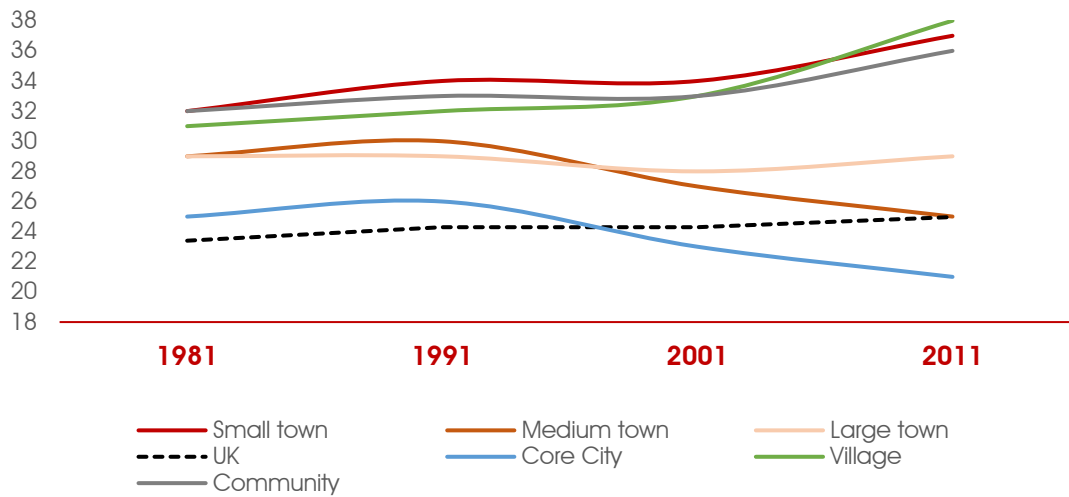


Figure 16, Old age dependency ratio for South West, 1981-2011

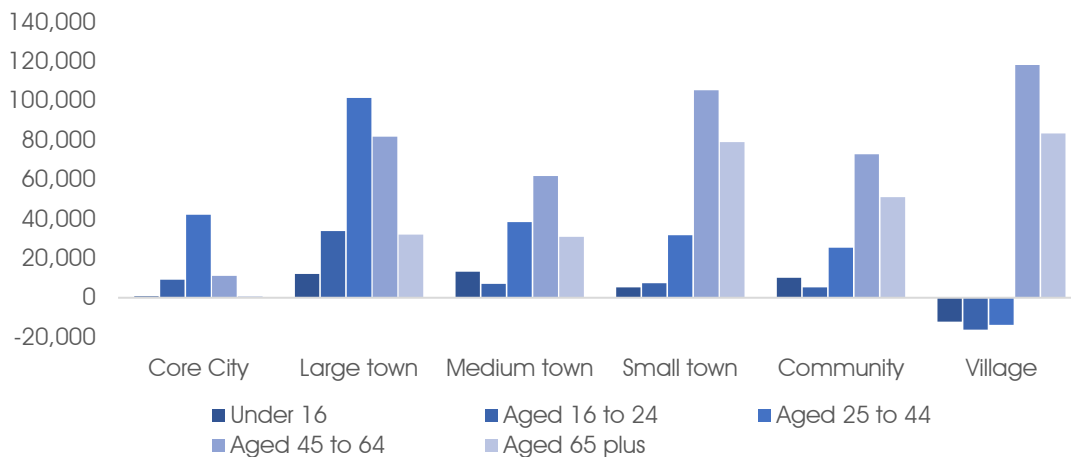


Figure 17, Growth (n) in population in South West from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

Again, the core city (Bristol) has got younger whilst the majority of towns and villages have got younger. All the places in the South West were above the national average for old age dependency in 1981. By 2011, this remained the case except for core cities and small towns, which have both dipped below the UK average for old age dependency.



## Wales

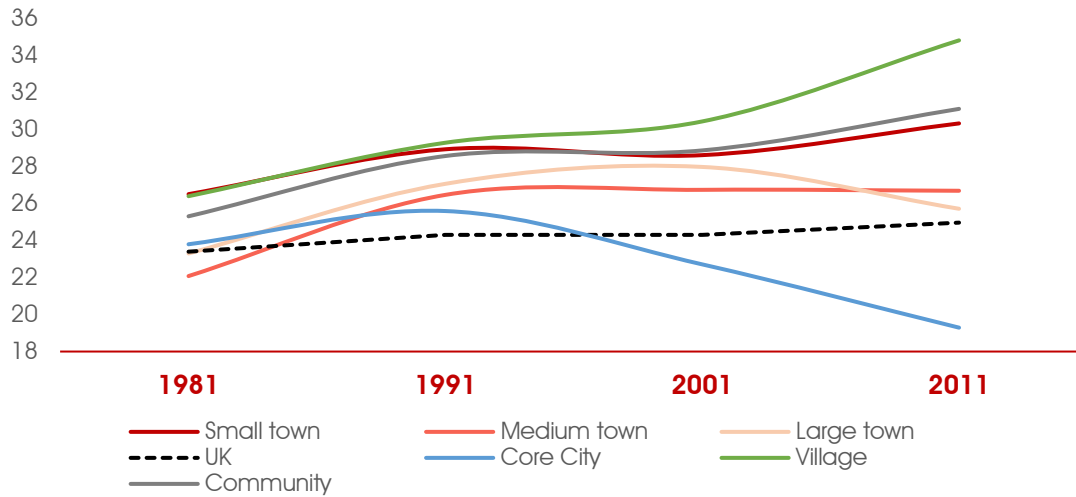


Figure 18, Old age dependency ratio for Wales, 1981-2011

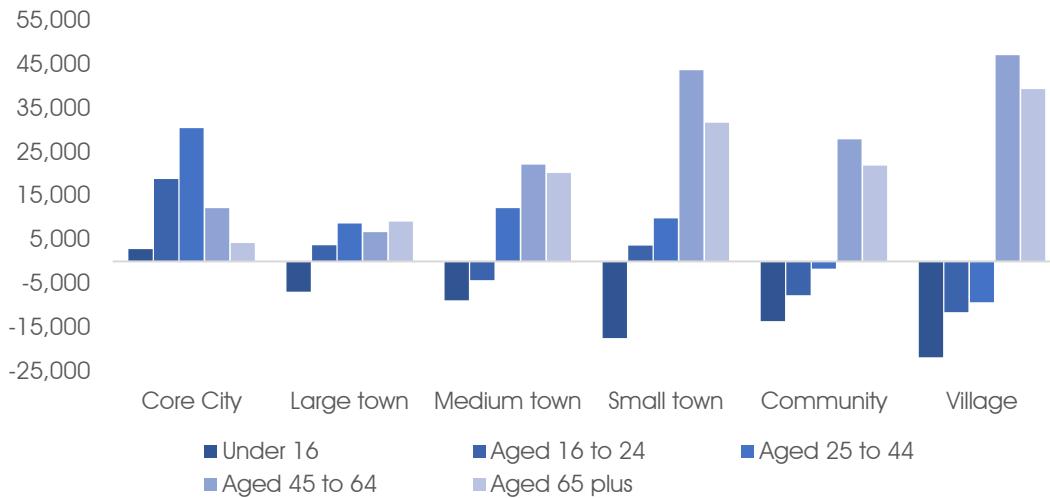


Figure 19, Growth (n) in population in the Wales from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (Cardiff) has got younger since around 1991 whilst population growth in towns and villages in Wales is skewed towards the over 45s. Villages, small communities and towns have seen falls in under 16s and 16 to 24-year olds. In 1981, the towns and villages of Wales were above the UK average for old age dependency but by 2011 villages, communities and small towns were well above the national average.



## West Midlands

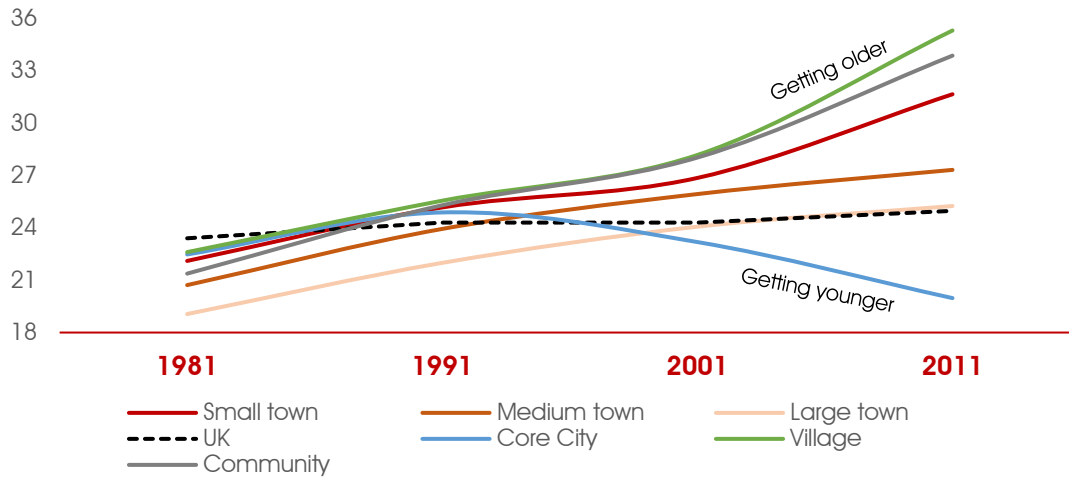


Figure 20, Old age dependency ratio for the West Midlands, 1981-2011

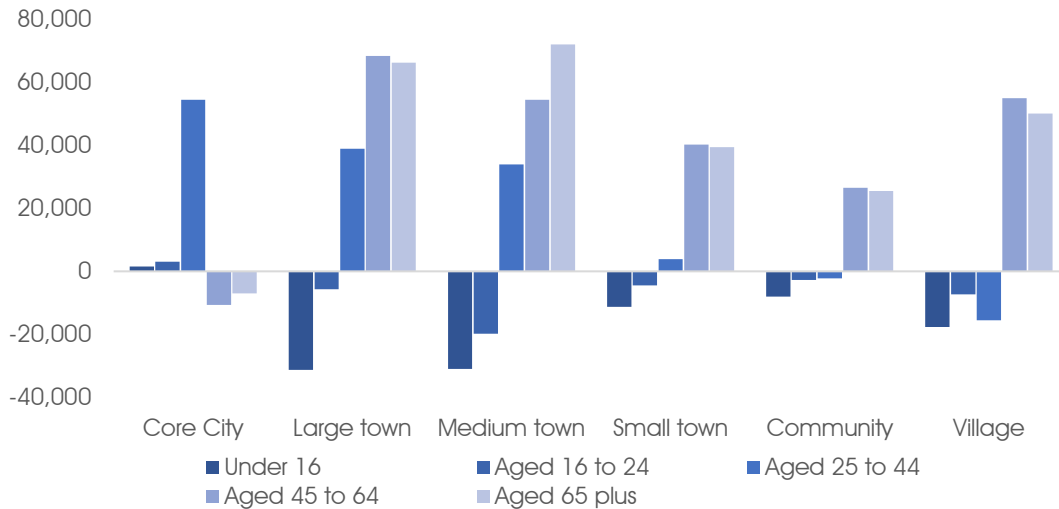


Figure 21, Growth (n) in population in the West Midlands from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

The core city (Birmingham) has got younger whilst the villages, communities and towns have got older. Birmingham has seen a large increase in the number of under 45s whilst population growth in towns and villages has been skewed towards the over 45s. In 1981, all the places in the West Midlands were below the UK average for old age dependency. By 2011, only the core city of Birmingham was below the UK average whilst the other places were above the national average.



## Yorkshire and The Humber

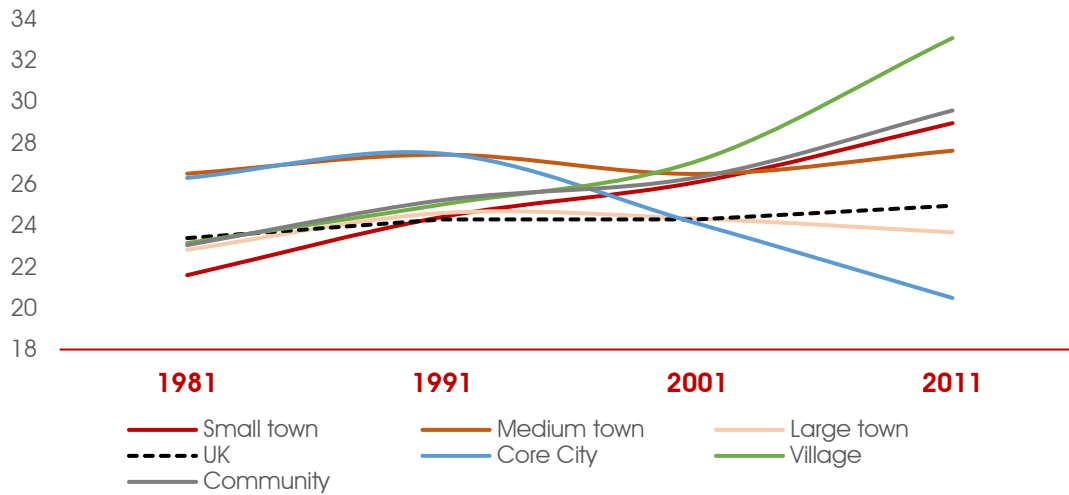


Figure 22, Old age dependency ratio for Yorkshire and The Humber, 1981-2011

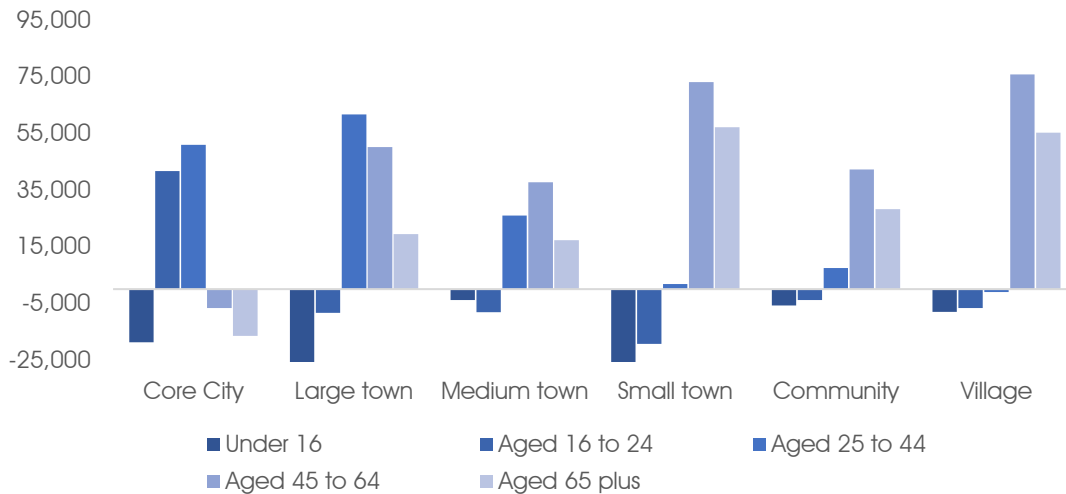


Figure 23, Growth (n) in population in the Yorkshire and The Humber from 1981-2011 by age group and place type

In 1981 the core city (Leeds) had a much higher old age dependency rate than other places in Yorkshire and The Humber. Since the 1990s this has changed markedly, with Leeds now much younger than it was then and the towns and villages of Yorkshire and The Humber much older.



## Implications of an ageing population for towns

The above research points to the marked ageing of our villages, small communities, and towns over the last three decades. Under the assumption that these geographical patterns continue, and given that population projections from the Office for National Statistics anticipate this ageing to accelerate for at least the next three decades, our towns and villages should expect to age further. The opposite is the case for our core cities and some of our very large towns, which we would expect to continue to serve as an attractive destination for the under 45s.

These spatial dynamics will present significant challenges for civic society, whether it be the outcome of our elections, the implementation of our public policy or the economic viability and productivity of the United Kingdom.

### Elections

We have already seen the early effects of population dynamics on our elections. Since 2005, the Conservatives have established a considerable lead over Labour amongst the over 65s, whilst over the same period the opposite has been true for younger voters. The geographical distribution of ageing, as demonstrated in the above analysis, means that the Conservatives should have improved their performance in towns and villages over that time, whilst Labour should have improved their performance in cities and larger towns. This was indeed the case, in both the 2015 and 2017 general elections. Similarly, the EU referendum produced distinct spatial patterns, with cities largely voting to Remain whilst towns largely voted to Leave. Whilst we would not reduce the outcome of our elections to simple age group dynamics, it is an important contributory factor, and we should expect that process to continue. Which means our political parties will need to appeal to that part of the population which is expected to grow the most, namely the over 65s. At the very least, a recognition of an ageing population means they will need to think carefully about how their policy platform meets the demands of the over 65s.

### Public policy

According to current projections, by the middle of the century a quarter of the population will be over 65, meaning there will be **seven million more** over 65s in 2046 than there were in 2016. As one would expect in such a scenario, spending on state pensions is expected to increase over the next few decades, even accounting for the implementation of a higher retirement age. Without the implementation of a higher retirement age, old age dependency is expected



to increase markedly over the next few decades. A higher retirement age dampens this effect though doesn't disrupt the trendline.

The healthcare needs of an ageing population are already being felt in the United Kingdom, but the demands will only rise further given the above population dynamics. There will be increases in the number of those in ill-health, people with disabilities and those over 75 in frail health, all of which will place high demand on already stretched services. The number of people requiring unpaid or paid care will increase markedly, and policies which support those providing such care will require significant investment. We will need more assistive technologies in the home, given that the largest increases in over 65s will be in villages and smaller towns.

Society will need to consider how an ageing population, disproportionately found in small towns or remote villages, remains connected to society at large. In such places, the challenge will be to maintain adequate public transport links for older people, many of whom may be otherwise required to travel long distances to shop or meet with friends. Loneliness can be exacerbated by a lack of viable transport options for older people. Internet connectivity will be more important than ever for remote and ageing communities.

The impact of an ageing population also has significant implications for housing, education, and the workplace, all of which will need to adapt in the face of these population dynamics. Given that an ageing population is likely to continue to be geographically clustered in smaller towns, communities and rural or semi-rural villages, the burden of adaptation will likely fall on areas with smaller populations. The opposite is the case for those parts of the United Kingdom which will continue to attract younger populations, such as cities and the largest towns. This geographical sorting will need to be reflected in the allocation of resources to those places which age and those places which don't.

