



Briefing update:

## **Population changes in Orkney**

### **Introduction**

In January 2025, the Orkney Community Planning Partnership published a briefing on the 2022 Census (See [here](#)). The National Records of Scotland have now published their mid-year population estimates for June 2024 and revised their estimates for the years running up to the last census. This briefing update incorporates this new information and summarises the main conclusions.

### **Key findings from the population figures**

The key finding is that while:

- Scotland's population growth has escalated in this current decade.
- Orkney's population growth has stopped, with no increase since 2021.

### **Population trends this century**

In the first decade of the century (2001 to 2011):

- Orkney's population grew by 10.2% over the period.
- Far above the growth for Scotland, whose population grew by only 4.5%.

In the second decade (2011-2021):

- Orkney's population slowed to 2.8% growth.
- Only a little higher than the Scottish average of 2.1%.

In the first four years of the current decade (2021-2024):

- Orkney's population has remained static.
- While Scotland's population has leaped 2.4% in just four years.

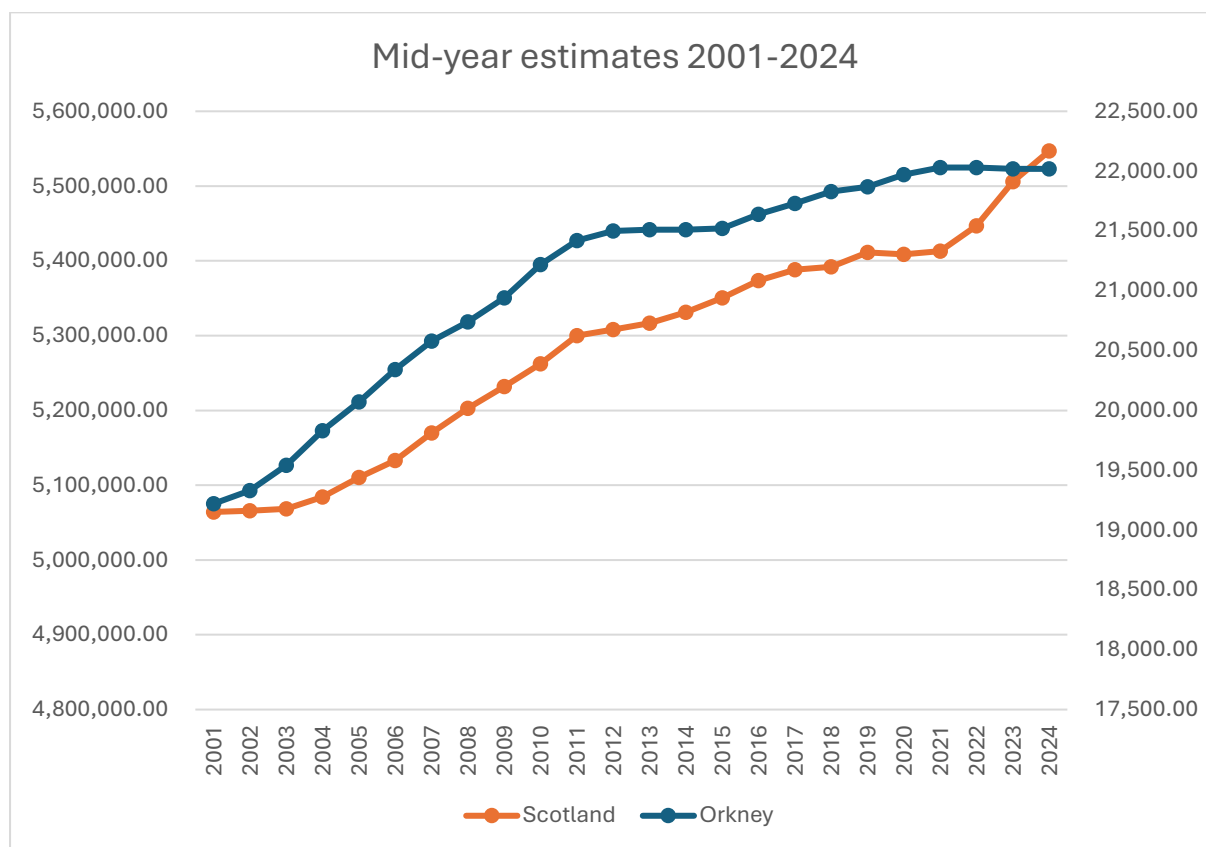


Figure one: Mid-year population estimates for Scotland (left axis) and Orkney (right axis).<sup>1</sup>

## Patterns within Orkney – Mainland and ferry linked isles

The 2001, 2011 and 2022 census results show that:

- The past growth was focused on the Mainland and Linked Isles with growth over the previous 21 years being twice (16.5%) that of the national average (8.2%).
- From 2011 to 2022, the population of the ferry linked isles has declined by 5.2%.

The mid-year population estimates are not broken down beyond council districts, but if the overall Orkney population has plateaued, past patterns indicate that there it is highly likely that there has been a further decline in the populations of the ferry-linked isles since 2022.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/population-estimates-time-series-data/>



## Demographic age balance

As the previous paper noted, the population of Scotland is aging, the population of Orkney is aging faster than that of Scotland and the population of most of the ferry-linked isles are aging faster than for the Orkney Mainland and Linked Isles. It is projected that this trend will increase.

From 2013 to 2023, even though Orkney's population grew, there was a 3.5% drop in the working age population.<sup>2</sup>

## Natural population growth and growth through net migration

The mid-year population estimates are based on two figures which affect whether a population is growing, declining or staying the same (e.g. Orkney):

- The number of births and deaths of people normally resident in an area. This is 'natural' growth or decline, and this is a known figure.
- The difference between inward and outward migration, which is called 'net migration'. This is a less reliable estimate based on available data and assumptions were made about net migration in Orkney in the last decade which proved to be over optimistic.

The figures for the census are more accurate than those for the mid-year estimates.

## Changes to the Immigration Rules

A new factor is the changes to the Immigration Rules which will restrict the number of people who can get visas to work in the UK:

- For many roles, the UK Government has increased the amount a worker must earn before they can apply for a visa, including extensions of their visas.
- The option to come to the UK as a care worker or senior care worker has been removed.
- The skills threshold has been raised.
- Many work visa types will not allow workers to bring their dependents.
- Many visa types (Temporary Shortage List) will be very short term, i.e. to the end of 2026.

Due to the recent changes to the Immigration Rules, overseas recruitment for care workers has ended, and transitional arrangements only allow current visa holders in these roles to extend or switch until July 2028. As a result, many essential staff currently employed in Orkney may not be able to renew their visas beyond this date and could be required to leave the UK unless they transition to a different eligible role or visa route.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from a draft Improvement Service and cited in a draft paper on Migration currently being prepared by COSLA.



## **Reversing population decline and restoring demographic balance**

The assumption from the Scottish Government (previous paper) and COSLA (paper in preparation) is that it is not possible to get population growth and address the demographic age balance through natural growth and that inward migration is required, alongside steps to lower outward migration. This migration maybe from elsewhere in the UK (or Scotland in Orkney's case) or from abroad.

An important way to compensate for the changing demographic age balance is by increasing employment rates within the existing population. This includes supporting those who are working part time and want to work full time (especially but not only women), individuals not in employment education or training ('NEETS') and encouraging older people to remain in the workforce.

There are numerous factors that are key to encouraging this net migration, key amongst them is:

- Housing
- Transportation
- Employment opportunities

All of these factors, and others, are relevant to Orkney, and the one most likely to make the biggest immediate impact is housing. This is because most major employers report a difficulty in recruiting staff because of the lack of houses available in Orkney for potential employees to rent or buy.

- **Housing** – Orkney's approach to ensuring there is enough accommodation for those who already live here and those who want to move here is set out in the [Local Housing Strategy 2024/29](#).
- **Transportation** – Orkney's approach to improving transport, within Orkney and between Orkney and the Scottish mainland, is set out in the [Local Transport Strategy 2024/44](#).
- **Employment** – this is addressed in the Community Planning Partnership's [Orkney Community Wealth Building Action Plan](#).
- **Ferry linked isles** – actions needed to address the specific needs of the ferry linked isles are set out in individual islands plans (only a few lack plans or they need to be updated), and the Community Planning Partnership's [Locality Plan for the Ferry Linked Isles 2024/26](#).

Other factors are discussed in the [original paper](#).

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## Appendix One:

Mid-year population estimates for Orkney and Scotland 2001-2024

	Orkney	Scotland
<b>2001</b>	19,220.00	5,064,200.00
<b>2002</b>	19,330.00	5,066,000.00
<b>2003</b>	19,540.00	5,068,500.00
<b>2004</b>	19,830.00	5,084,300.00
<b>2005</b>	20,070.00	5,110,200.00
<b>2006</b>	20,340.00	5,133,000.00
<b>2007</b>	20,580.00	5,170,000.00
<b>2008</b>	20,740.00	5,202,900.00
<b>2009</b>	20,940.00	5,231,900.00
<b>2010</b>	21,220.00	5,262,200.00
<b>2011</b>	21,420.00	5,299,900.00
<b>2012</b>	21,500.00	5,308,200.00
<b>2013</b>	21,510.00	5,316,800.00
<b>2014</b>	21,510.00	5,331,400.00
<b>2015</b>	21,520.00	5,350,600.00
<b>2016</b>	21,640.00	5,373,600.00
<b>2017</b>	21,730.00	5,388,200.00
<b>2018</b>	21,830.00	5,392,100.00
<b>2019</b>	21,870.00	5,411,200.00
<b>2020</b>	21,970.00	5,408,900.00
<b>2021</b>	22,030.00	5,412,900.00
<b>2022</b>	22,030.00	5,447,000.00
<b>2023</b>	22,020.00	5,506,000.00
<b>2024</b>	22,020.00	5,546,900.00