

Shetland's Population

This is part of a [Series of Papers](#) providing information on Shetland's strategic challenges.

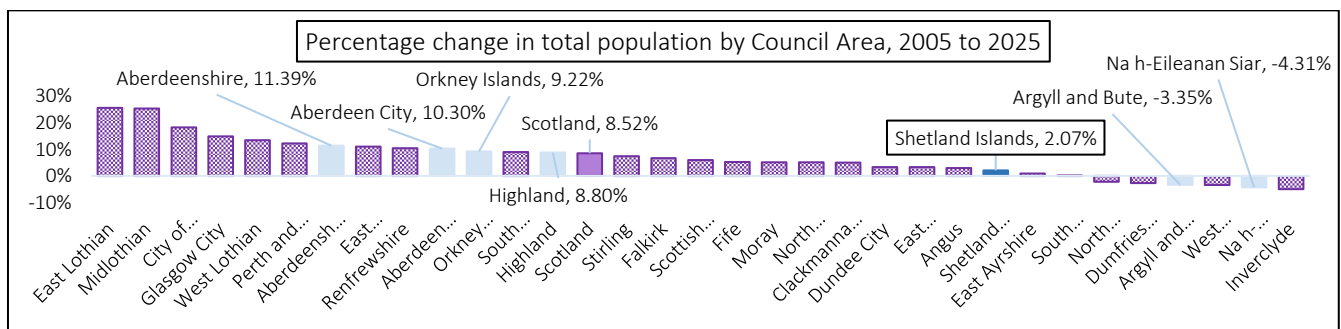
This paper provides information about population in Shetland, using nationally available data and expertise, alongside local and regional research and knowledge. It explores policy approaches to population from other areas of the world. It has been produced by a group of local experts.ⁱ

Shetland's population has remained static over the years. However, the makeup is changing. The population is ageing, and the demographic profile is increasingly fragile. Birth rates are lower than death rates, with the difference currently covered by positive net migration. These changes in population balance are different for different areas of Shetland.

It is a broad topic; Shetland's population can be impacted upon by all local, regional and national policy measures. This comprehensive evidence base aims to shed light on the situation, so that the impact of policy can be better understood, potentially applied more effectively and policy gaps identified.

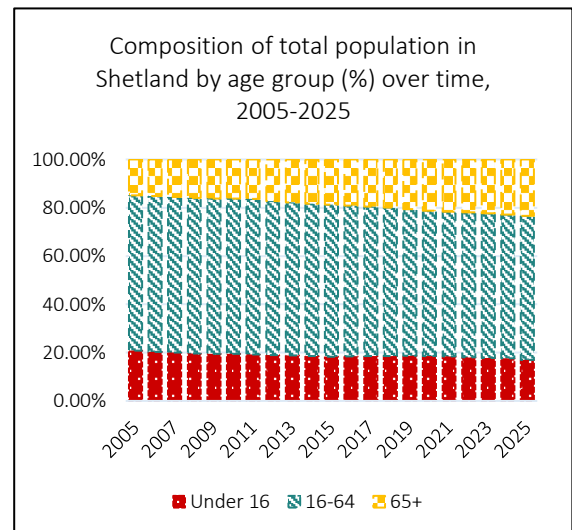
1. Shetland's Population Structure

In 2025, the total population of Shetland was 22,710.ⁱⁱ The population has been relatively stable since the early 1980s.ⁱⁱⁱ Prior to this the population had experienced decades of decline, falling to nearly 17,000 in the mid 1960's,^{iv} related to out-migration following the Second World War. Between 1971 and 1981 the population increased by 31%, driven by in-migration associated with the oil boom.



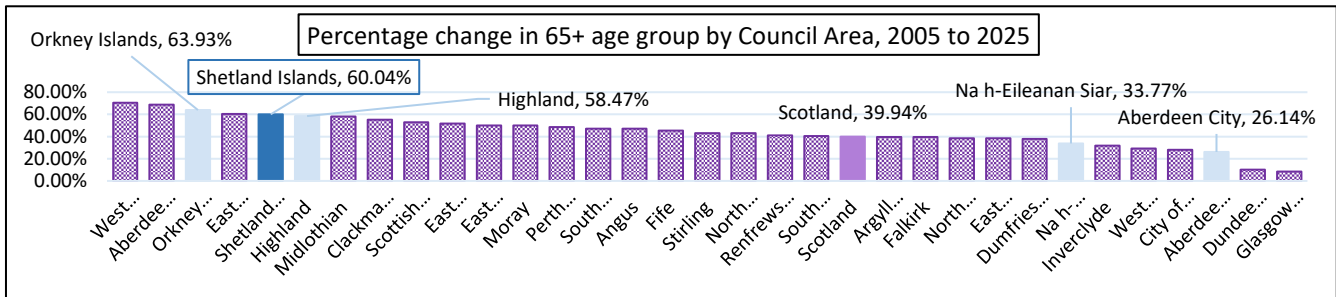
In the 20 years from 2005 to 2025, Shetland's population increased by 2.1%, compared to a 9.2% increase for Orkney and 8.8% for Highland, and a 3.3% decrease for Argyll & Bute and 4.3% for the Western Isles. In the same time period, the population for Scotland increased by 8.5%, and the population for the UK increased by 15.0%.^v In the Faroe Islands the population increased by 13.8% between June 2005 and June 2025.^{vi} Between 2001 and 2021 the population for Europe increased by 7.8%.^{vii}

During this period of stability in total numbers, **there have been changes to Shetland's age structure**, with the population aging. In the 20 years from 2005 to 2025, the percentage of over-65s increased from 14.9% to 23.3%, the percentage of under-16s decreased from 20.8% to 17.0% and those of working age decreased from 64.4% to 59.6%. Between 2018 and 2025 Shetland's total School Roll decreased by 7.1% (from 3746 in 2018 to 3480 in 2025).^{viii}



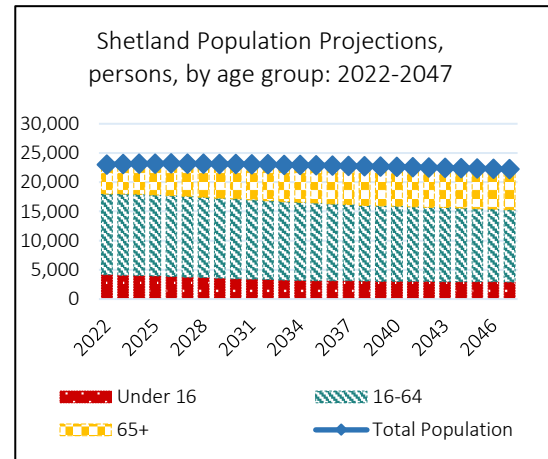
The trend in some local authority areas in Scotland (Glasgow City and the Lothians) has been an increase in under-16s and an increase in working age population, whilst all have experienced an increase in the percentage of over-65s, as life expectancy increases. Shetland is one of the authorities with the greatest decreases in under-16s (-16.3%, the sixth largest decrease across all local authorities) and the greatest increase in over-65s (60.0%, the fifth largest increase across all local authorities); this is similar to Orkney and Na h-Eileanan Siar.



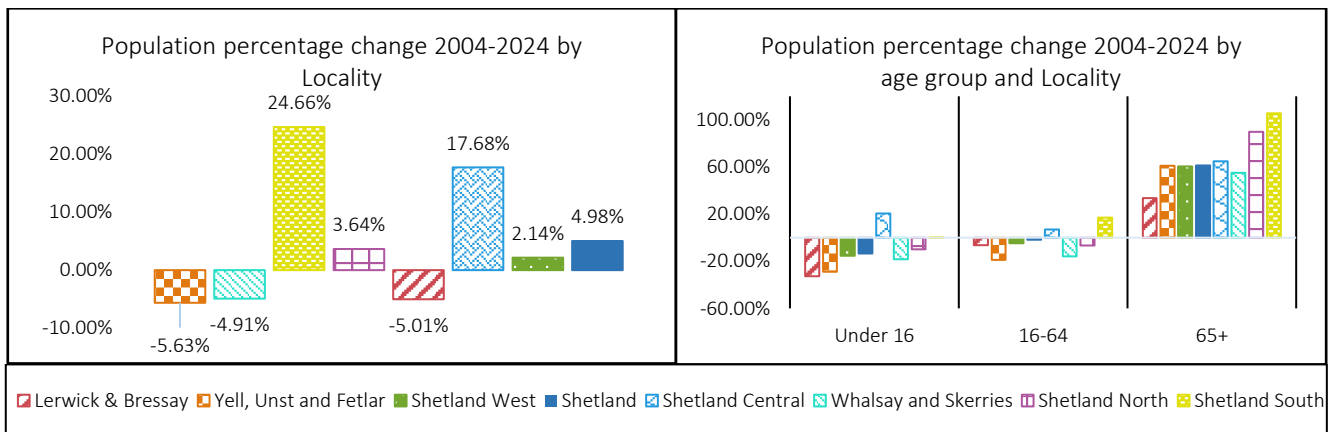


There has been an overall decrease in Scotland's under-16s (-5.8%) and an increase across the UK (7.6%), whilst Scotland (4.7%) and the UK (12.5%) had growth in working age. In Scotland those over-65 increased by nearly 40% and by 38% in the UK.^{ix} In 2024, Shetland's median age was 45, the same as for Aberdeenshire and higher than Scotland as a whole (42); Highland (48), Orkney (49) and Na h-Eileanan Siar (51) were all higher^x. Europe has the oldest median age of all the continents, and this is projected to continue. After peaking in 2010, the working age population across Europe (20-64) has decreased and is projected to decrease more than elsewhere.^{xi}

Between 2022 and 2047 Shetland's total population is projected to remain stable with a projected estimate of 22,237 in 2047.^{xii} Shetland's Population Projections, by Age Group, show the ageing population trend is set to continue, with the over-65s age group projected to account for nearly a third of Shetland's total population by 2047.



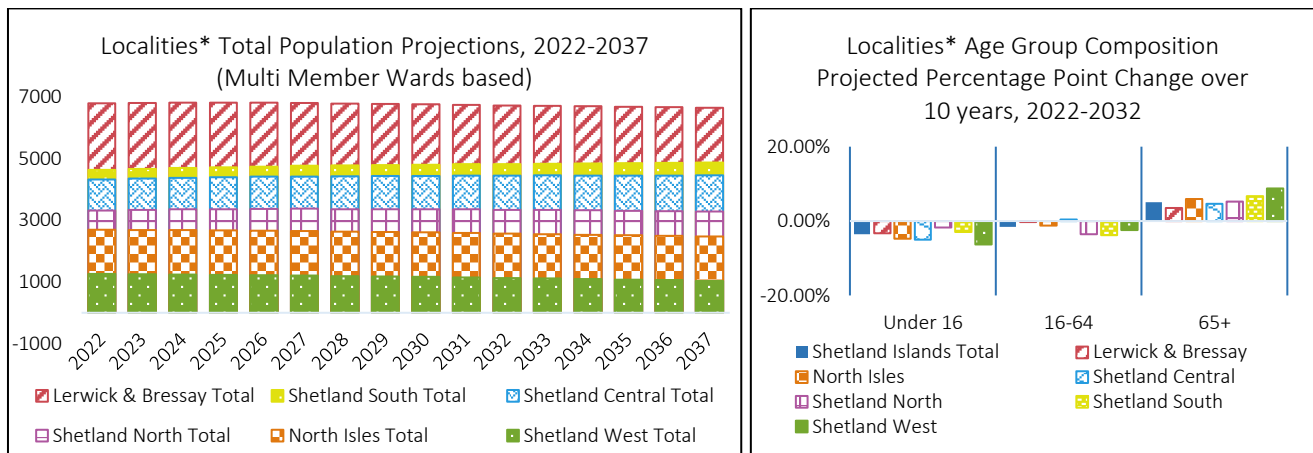
There are **differences in how population is changing across Shetland**.^{xiii} During the 20 years from 2004 and 2024, there have been increases in population in the South and Central Localities, with smaller increases in the North Mainland and West. There have been decreases in the population of Lerwick & Bressay, the North Isles and Whalsay & Skerries. The South and Central Localities have had a population increase across all ages, but other areas of Shetland reflect the overall trend of a decline in under-16s.



Between 2018 and 2025 **Schools Rolls declined** in all areas except Shetland North (which increased by 4.75%), with the greatest reductions in Shetland South (-22.01%), Yell, Unst & Fetlar (-16.28%) and Shetland West (-13.42%).^{xiv} **Council Housing demand**, measured by number of applications, is greatest for Lerwick & Bressay; 4/5 of all applicants include this area amongst their location choices. Demand is also strong in Central and South areas. Demand is lowest for Whalsay & Skerries and the North Isles. Across Shetland, applications by bedroom size for 2026 recorded 65% for 1-bed properties, 23% for 2-bed, 8% for 3-bed and 3% for 4+ bedrooms.^{xv}

There are **Projections at Multi-Member Ward** showing a continued decline in total population for Lerwick and the North Isles, relative to other areas of Shetland, up until 2037. All Multi-Member wards see a decline in under-16s and 16-64, and an increase in the percentage of over-65s.^{xvi}



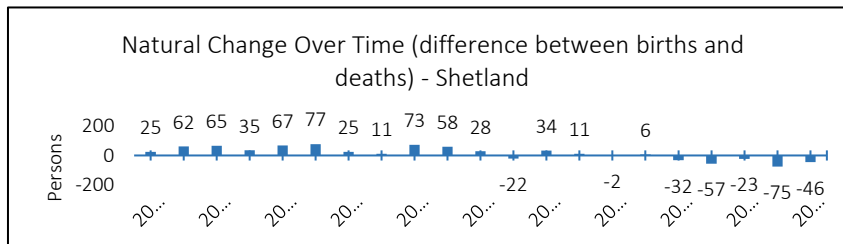


The 2022 Census also highlights other characteristics of Shetland's population; in 2022, 22% of the Shetland population reported their day-to-day activities being limited a little or a lot; 98% described their ethnicity as White; 50% are male; and 32% reported being religious, the lowest percentage of religious people compared to other rural areas and Scotland as a whole.^{xvii}

2. Components of Population Change

Population change is a result of both Natural Change (difference between Births and Deaths) and Net Migration, in addition to Other Changes. Between 2024 and 2025 there was a negative **Population Change** (-0.39%, or 90 less people), of which -0.27% was Natural Change, -0.13% was Net Migration and +0.01% was Other Changes.ⁱⁱ

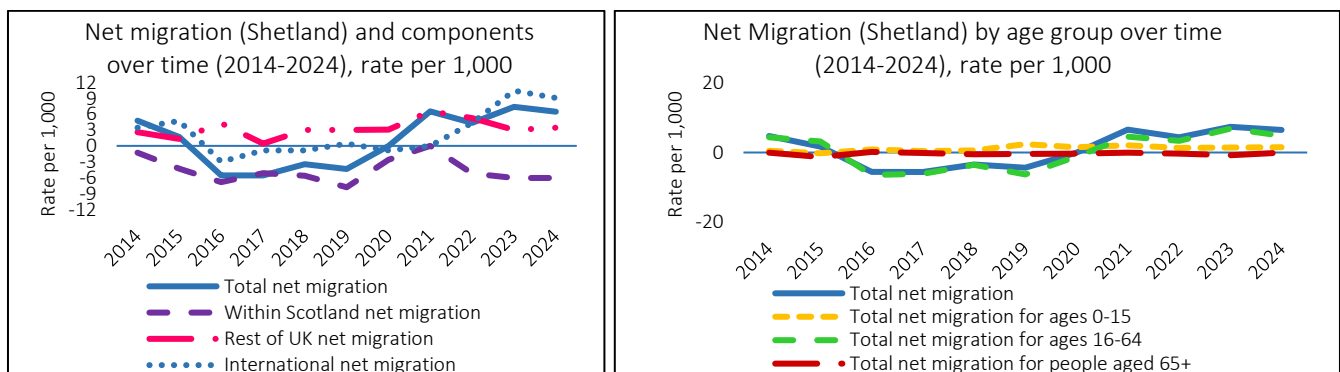
Component of Population Change	Difference 2024-2025
Total Population	-90 (-0.39%)
Natural Change	-62 (-0.27%)
Net Migration	-30 (-0.13%)
Other Changes	+2 (+0.01%)



There has been a **shift in Natural Change since 2015**. Prior to 2015, Shetland had more births than deaths. Over the last 20 years the birth rate in Shetland has dropped from 11.4 births per 1,000 people in 2003, to 7.7 births per 1,000 people in 2023.^{xviii} Scotland

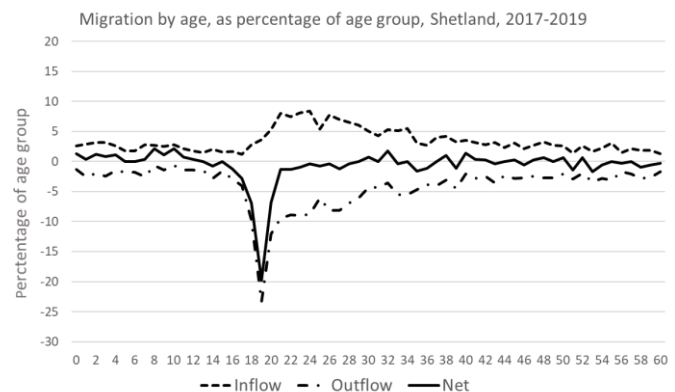
has also experienced a decrease, however this is less than that experienced in Shetland (10.3 births per 1,000 in 2003, to 8.4 births per 1,000 in 2023). Since 2015 Shetland has had a lower birth rate than Scotland as a whole.

In terms of **Net Migration**, between 2024 and 2025, there was a net out-migration of 30 people, of which a net of 100 moved to elsewhere Within Scotland, a net of 80 moved to Shetland from the Rest of UK, and a net of 10 moved to International Areas.ⁱⁱ **The pattern of migration** has changed in recent years.^{xix} For example, between 2014 to 2024 there was shift from a net negative to a net positive in-migration by 2020, although data suggests this trend has been trailing off in more recent years. In recent years, in-migration has increasingly come from the rest of the UK and, since 2021, internationally, while Shetland has experienced net out-migration to elsewhere in Scotland. Between 2014 and 2024, net in-migration was primarily among the working-age population, with some net in-migration of under of under-16s, while migration among those age 65 and over was broadly neutral.

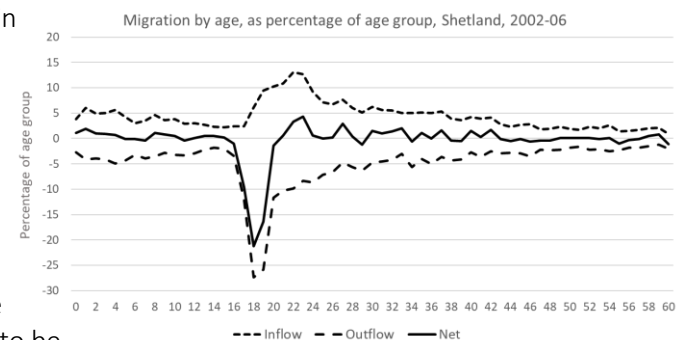


In 2025 the Scottish Government's Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population explored **the migration and mobility of young persons and young adults in rural Scotland**. The report includes a Chapter on migration data and analysis on Scotland's three Island Authorities, exploring migration data for two time periods (2002/06 and 2017/19) by age.^{xx}

In 2017/19, for all three Island Authorities, a small net inflow of children occurred, but by age 16 a small net outflow was apparent. The first significant gross and net outflow started at age 18; 10% of the age group left Shetland, lower than Orkney (11%) and Western Isles (16%). This outflow peaked at age 19, with 23% of the age group leaving Shetland, lower than Western Isles (circa 25%) and higher than Orkney (19%). Strong outflow continued at age 20, after which (for Shetland and Western Isles) gross outflows were around 10% of the age group through to age 25, after which outflow was almost matched by in-flow. Post age 45, a marginal net outflow was recorded for Shetland; in contrast Orkney saw net inflow at almost every age from 30 through to 65.



Comparing 2017/19 and 2002/06 data shows changes in age-patterns of migrations between the first two decades of the 21st century. During 2017/19 there was only a modest increase in gross or net outflows at age 17, significantly rising at age 18 and peaking at age 19 (but not exceeding 25%). In contrast, in 2002/06 there was a rise in outflow at age 17, significantly peaking at age 18 (between 26-28%), and remaining high at age 19 (the peak for the Western Isle at 29%, but still 26% for Shetland). Outflow continued to be high into the late age 20s, however these large outflows were offset by substantial inflows at the same set of ages (peaking at 13% inflow for Shetland at ages 22 and 23). For all three Island Authorities in 2002/06 there were net inflows through people's 20's, remaining modestly so right through to age 42 for Shetland (60 for Orkney and the Western Isles).



The most significant message for Shetland is that the challenge is **not simply youth outmigration**; young people leaving is normal across rural Scotland, and often beneficial. The more pressing issue is that Shetland is **not attracting enough people back, or enough new families in their late twenties to forties**, to replace those losses and maintain a balanced age structure: in 2017/19 only Orkney attracted enough adult migrants before age 45 to compensate for young adult losses, whilst Shetland showed a pattern of net outward migration for much of the rest of people's lives after their early twenties. Migrant children are often an indicator of families moving into an area. Compared with Orkney and the Western Isles, Shetland attracted fewer in-migrant children relative to its population. The authors identify this as a factor contributing to population decline alongside the pressing **impact of not having sufficient people of child-bearing years**.

3. Drivers of Migration

A 2025 Report on Demographic Change and Out-Migration in Rural and Island Scotland highlights why Shetland's **demography is impacted upon by all local, regional and national policy**, stating that the common reasons why people leave rural and island communities are: housing shortages, lack of affordable housing, difficulty accessing services, healthcare concerns, transport problems, limited employment opportunities, and travel and cost.^{xxi} Meanwhile the strongest reasons for staying are: sense of belonging, community connections, family ties, safety, local identity, and quality of life. This is reiterated through the latest Place Standard findings.^{xxii}

Extensive research exploring **the attitudes and aspirations of young people on their future intentions regarding living, working and studying** in the Highlands and Islands, was published in 2018.^{xxiii} It also captured the views of those who had moved away or were living elsewhere. As with other research, the report highlighted that many



young people leave rural and island areas to pursue education, training and early career opportunities, as a normal part of modern life. It identified the challenge being to create the conditions that make returning realistic and attractive later.

The report identified important data for Shetland, including some differences relative to other areas:

- Young people were among the most likely to want to stay or return, with attachment to place being particularly strong – this means creating routes back should be particularly successful;
- Young people often felt they could find a job, but were concerned about career progression, professional development, specialist roles and long-term prospects, with Shetlanders highlighting the benefit of graduate opportunities, professional careers and progression routes, knowing they can build a career in Shetland;
- Accommodation as a major factor affecting decisions, young people may wish to stay or return but struggle to find suitable housing that is affordable and available;
- Transport and connectivity are important to access education, wider labour markets and connections with family and friends elsewhere;
- Young people value the safety, sense of community, natural environment and quality of life; and
- The importance of having an influence, being involved in shaping the future of their communities.

The report implies that return migration is often constrained by practical barriers rather than a lack of desire to return. Taken together, the report suggests that the most effective strategy is not: *"How do we stop young people leaving?"* but: *"How do we make Shetland a place where ambitious young people can leave, gain experience, and then choose to come back?"*

In 2025, Youth Voice ran Summits in Shetland, with the following being key points for consideration:

- Concern was expressed about the impact of travel limitations on potentially retaining young people on Shetland, with some young people suggesting they would remain away following completion of Further/Higher education. These limitations are exacerbated by the cost of travel, with NorthLink and airflights considered too expensive for many young people. Although discounts for youth are available, they often exclude specific age groups or require additional passes, creating barriers for some. There was mention of families not being able to afford to fly.^{xxiv}
- Some young people indicated they were actively looking for work but had struggled to find suitable options, one saying transport or availability as limiting factors. There was a shared feeling that making careers support more visible and consistent especially through clearer communication about how to arrange follow-ups or additional appointments would be a welcome step.^{xxv}
- There is strong interest in entrepreneurship, but barriers like fear of failure and Shetland's remoteness make support essential.^{xxv}
- Young people want public areas that feel secure and welcoming, with good lighting, staff presence where appropriate, and measures to prevent anti-social behaviour without making spaces feel restrictive. Suggestions include making better use of existing facilities including adding chill-out zones, extending opening hours, creating sheltered areas, and providing vending machines or affordable food options.^{xxvi}

In 2025 Promote Shetland ran a survey from which it is possible to understand more about the key motivations of, main barriers and challenges, and important themes for different groups of people.

- Respondents who had **moved to Shetland within the previous five years** were primarily motivated by a desire for a different lifestyle, the appeal of island living, and employment opportunities. Many were attracted by Shetland's natural environment, community spirit, quality of life and opportunities for a better work life balance. Most reported positive experiences after relocating, with the majority intending to remain in Shetland long-term. However, challenges were identified around securing suitable housing, the cost and availability of transport links to and from the islands, and access to some services. Many respondents felt employers could provide more relocation assistance, especially around accommodation. While most found the community welcoming and successfully integrated into local life, some reported difficulties establishing social connections and understanding local culture.
- Those **considering a move to Shetland** were attracted by many of the same factors as recent arrivals, particularly the prospect of a lifestyle change, island living, outdoor opportunities and a stronger work life balance. Several respondents also expressed a desire to return to Shetland after previously living there or having family connections to the islands. The most significant barriers identified were the availability and



affordability of housing, access to suitable employment, transport connectivity, and concerns about the costs associated with relocation and island living. While respondents generally held positive views of local services and amenities, many wanted clearer information about healthcare, education, housing and moving logistics.

- Respondents who had **considered moving to Shetland but chose not to** cited similar motivations to other groups. However, practical considerations ultimately outweighed these attractions. The most significant factors influencing their decision were concerns about being far from family and support networks, limited employment and career progression opportunities, and the cost, availability and reliability of transport links to and from Shetland. Housing availability was a concern for some, although it was generally not viewed as the primary barrier. Healthcare access, education provision, integration into the community, and the perceived challenges of island living also influenced decision making. Importantly, many respondents indicated they would still consider moving in the future if key barriers were addressed.
- **Former residents** generally spoke very positively about their time in Shetland and highlighted the islands' natural environment, strong sense of community, safety, and quality of life as key strengths. Most had originally moved to Shetland for employment, family connections or because they were born there. The main reasons for leaving were family and personal circumstances, educational opportunities, and employment related factors rather than dissatisfaction with island life itself. While some respondents highlighted challenges related to transport, housing availability, healthcare access and the cost of living, these were less commonly cited as direct reasons for departure. Many former residents stated that Shetland had met or exceeded their expectations and that they would recommend it as a place to live and work. A notable proportion indicated they would consider returning in the future if circumstances allowed.

It is likely that the current UK Government's Migration Policy will have consequences for Shetland's recruitment and population growth.

4. Policy Implications and Local Approach

The research summarised in Section 3 highlights the importance of recognising young people will leave; places that succeed with policy measures are ones that encourage migration among people in their late twenties to early forties, particularly those with children. Policies need to make it easy for people to reconnect, return and build the next stage of their lives, removing barriers to return or move to the area. This includes: affordable and workforce housing; strong career opportunities and workforce attraction in shortage sectors; clear pathways for returners; support for young families and family settlement; excellent connectivity; maintaining good quality services including health, transport and childcare; and strong participation.

There are many examples of local policy intervention that contribute to this, such as Promote Shetland^{xxvii} (funded by the Council), the Childcare Early Adopters programmes designed to improve access to childcare, the Inter-Island Transport Connectivity Programme, various housing development programmes through the Council and Hjalmland Housing Association and the Council's recent Graduate Programme.

Therefore, Shetland may already be delivering many of the ingredients of an integrated population and migration strategy, but perhaps not driven by population and migration needs *per se*, and not recognising that the approach may need to be different for different areas of Shetland (for example, Lerwick, the commuter belt, and the Isles).

5. Policy Approaches from Elsewhere

Internationally there are examples of Policy attempts and initiatives to address depopulation and changing demographic structures. The table on the following pages summarise the key findings from a number of these case studies.

These case studies suggest that successful population strategies combine workforce attraction with measures that support people to settle and stay. Key factors include housing, childcare, health services, employment opportunities, community integration and support for young people, families and return migration. The evidence also highlights the importance of linking major developments to local skills and workforce needs, coordinating services and infrastructure, and ensuring communities play a central role in shaping and benefiting from change.



Case Study	Summary of Approach	Impact	Long-term and Unintended Consequences	Key Lessons
Provincial Nominee Programme in Manitoba (Canada) ^{xxviii}	- Attract skilled migrants to smaller communities. - Address local labour shortages. - Prioritise skilled workers, entrepreneurs and employer needs. - Involve communities and employers alongside government immigration routes. - Tailor pathways to local areas and occupations.	- Increased immigration to Manitoba. - Improved distribution of migrants beyond major cities. - Achieved relatively strong retention rates.	- Retention weakened over time. - Rural communities carried much of the integration burden. - Housing pressures emerged in some areas. - Social isolation, xenophobia and integration challenges occurred. - Success depended on support services, markedly the third sector.	- Tailoring immigration to local labour needs is relevant to Shetland's future projects. - Structured newcomer support is essential. - Integration across housing, health and education is needed. - Community Planning can help coordinate support and services. - Outwith Shetland, broader policy change is needed to recognise rural and island demographic and labour market needs, particularly around energy developments. - Outwith Shetland, broader policy change around migration is required.
Hällefors Municipality (Sweden) ^{xxviii}	- Marketed the area to Dutch "lifestyle migrants". - Promoted quality of life, affordable housing, nature and self-employment. - Emphasised family-friendly living.	- Attracted new residents. - Increased entrepreneurship and investment. - Brought new skills and slowed population decline.	- Many recruited families later left. - Limited local integration, ongoing language barriers persisted. - Some businesses struggled. - House prices increased.	- Targeted marketing can attract newcomers, but retention requires sustained support. - Housing, health, education and childcare are important for long-term settlement. - Outwith Shetland, greater support for remote working and digital connectivity could widen opportunities.
Blato Municipality on the island of Korčula (Croatia) ^{xxviii}	- Focused on retaining residents and attracting return migrants. - Supported young families through housing, childcare and education measures. - Business start-up support and community investment.	- Slowed population decline. - Improved birth rates and return migration. - Strengthened economic activity and community confidence.	- Population decline continued overall. - Required significant investment. - Relied heavily on strong local leadership.	- Family support, housing and flexible work can improve retention. - Helping young people stay or return is important. - Business support aids recruitment and retention. - Outwith Shetland, broader policy change is needed to recognise rural and island challenges.
Gotō Islands (Japan) ^{xxix}	- Place-based strategy tackling population decline. - Included renewable energy, workforce development, business support, transport and education measures.	- Created jobs and investment. - Increased employment opportunities. - Reduced migration losses.	- Initial opposition required extensive consultation. - Population decline slowed rather than reversed.	- Link major developments to workforce attraction and skills planning. Energy projects can support local skills development. - Coordinate housing and services with population growth plans. - Reinvest project revenues in wider community development.



Case Study	Summary of Approach	Impact	Long-term and Unintended Consequences	Key Lessons
	Emphasised community engagement.			Outwith Shetland, energy market reform is needed to maximise and retain local benefits.
Frederikshavn (Denmark) ^{xxx}	- Established a settlement service. - Developed an ‘experience economy’. - Built strong partnerships and communication networks.	- Settlement activity increased by 82% (2012–2019). - Greater diversity and integration. - Strengthened labour supply. - Enhanced community vibrancy.	- Population decline continued. - Young people continued to leave. - Required significant investment and staffing.	- Dedicated settlement services supporting housing, schools, employment and integration. - Identifying and addressing settlement barriers is important. - Outwith Shetland, broader policy change around migration is required.
Vágur (Faroe Islands) ^{xxx}	- Invested in youth programmes, tourism and digital nomad facilities. - Supported distance learning, sport and community-led cultural development. - Focused on community renewal and pride.	- Population grew by 4.6% (2013–2019). - Increased return migration. - Created tourism-related jobs and businesses. - Improved wellbeing and community confidence.	- Gender imbalance remained. - Some concern that traditional industries were overlooked. - Success depended on strong local leadership. - Strengthened island identity and external recognition.	- Community-led development builds ownership and pride. - Youth-focused investment helps encourage return migration. - Strong leadership is important but can create long-term risks. - Outwith Shetland, more devolved fiscal and infrastructure powers could support similar initiatives.

Nationally, the Scottish Government’s approach to population since 2020 has developed into a connected programme of work aimed at addressing Scotland’s long-term demographic challenges. Following the establishment of the Ministerial Population Taskforce,^{xxxi} Scotland’s first national population strategy, *A Scotland for the Future*,^{xxxii} was published in 2021, identifying the key challenges of an ageing population, declining birth rates, reliance on migration for population growth and an increasingly uneven distribution of population across the country. The strategy set out four themes: creating a family friendly nation, supporting healthy ageing, attracting and retaining people through migration and creating a more balanced population. Delivery of this is coordinated through the Scottish Government’s Population Programme,^{xxxiii} bringing together policy areas such as housing, health, education, skills, transport, economic development and migration. In 2024, the Government published the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan,^{xxxiv} building directly on the “More Balanced Population” theme of the 2021 strategy. This action plan focuses on communities experiencing population decline, particularly in rural and island areas, and promotes a place-based approach centred on housing, jobs, services, connectivity and community-led initiatives to help retain and attract people. Finally, the key objective of the National Islands Plan is: “Population Retention and Attraction”.^{xxxv} This plan sets out a series of commitments to support and facilitate locally led solutions for population retention and attraction. The plan also commits to directing further efforts towards achieving the ambitions set out in the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan.

Together, these policies represent a progression from identifying Scotland’s demographic challenges, to establishing a national strategic framework, and then to implementing targeted actions aimed at supporting sustainable communities and a more balanced population across Scotland.



Appendix: Current Strategic Document Reference to Population Intervention

A Co-Pilot Search across Shetland's key strategic documents showed the following references to **population trends, population balance, demographic change, depopulation, ageing population, workforce impacts, or related population challenges**, and include actions intended to address those challenges:

- **Shetland Islands Council – Corporate Plan 2021–2026**
Explicitly identifies 'Shetland's population balance' as a strategic priority. The plan highlights a declining working-age population, negative net migration, growth in the over-65 population, and a falling proportion of young people. It aims to attract and retain people of all ages to live, work, study and invest in Shetland.
- **Shetland Islands Council – Local Housing Strategy 2022–2027**
The strategy includes analysis of population and household trends, Shetland's ageing population and housing needs. Increasing housing supply and improving access to housing are presented as key responses to demographic and workforce challenges.
- **Shetland Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) – Joint Strategic Plan 2025–2028**
Directly identifies an **ageing population**, fewer younger people, increasing numbers of people with complex health needs, and the resulting pressures on services and workforce recruitment. The plan sets out actions to create sustainable health and care services in response to these demographic changes.
- **NHS Shetland – Strategic Delivery Plan 2024–2029**
References healthcare delivery for Shetland's population and is designed around the specific needs and future sustainability challenges of a small island population. The plan focuses on maintaining services and improving community wellbeing in the face of demographic pressures.
- **Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) – Strategy 2023–2028**
Includes priorities around attracting and retaining talent, developing skills, supporting entrepreneurship and sustaining rural communities.
- **University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Shetland – Strategy 2030**
Focuses on providing local learning, training and research opportunities to support a sustainable economy and community.
- **Skills Development Scotland – Strategic Plan 2022–2027**
Contains priorities around expanding Scotland's talent pool, developing workforce skills, supporting lifelong learning and addressing inequality.
- **Shetland Regional Transport Strategy / Shetland Transport Strategy Refresh 2018–2028 (ZetTrans)**
Identifies access to employment, education, services and community sustainability as strategic objectives. Transport is presented as a key enabler for sustaining communities and addressing challenges associated with living in a dispersed island population.

End Notes

ⁱ Director of Development and Infrastructure Services, Depute Director of Development and Infrastructure, Business Research Officer Economic Development Service, Community Planning Team (Shetland Islands Council), Area Manager, Head of Business Growth (Highlands and Islands Enterprise), Managing Director (NB Communication)

ⁱⁱ Mid-year population estimates are produced by the National Records of Scotland (NRS). Population estimates are based on the census and are updated each year to account for population change from 1 July to 30 June. They are based on the usually resident population which covers people living in Scotland for a period of at least 12 months, whatever their nationality. The three elements of population change are: Natural change (births minus deaths), Net migration (the difference between long-term moves into and out of Scotland), Other changes (changes in the armed forces, prison population and any rounding adjustments). NRS, published 14th July 2026

<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/mid-2025-population-estimates/>

Mid-year population estimates provide population data between censuses and are therefore more recent figures to work from. It is recognised however that this data is not a population count, rather an estimate based on a combination of data sources. Therefore, accuracy is highest in the years directly after a census, and lowest in the years directly preceding a census.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mid-year population estimates time series data, NRS, published 14th August 2025

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

^{iv} Shetland in Statistics 2025 (45th edition), produced by Shetland Islands Council, published 2025 <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics>

^v United Kingdom population mid-year estimates, sourced from Population estimates time series dataset produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), published 27th November 2025

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/timeseries/ukpop/pop>

^{vi} Population data hosted on the Hagstova Føroya (Statistics Faroe Islands) Population page, accessed 10th July 2026

<https://hagstova.fo/en/population/population/population>



- vii Eurostat Census Population data for EU countries. The figure referenced here is drawn from total population data from EU & EEA countries Census data for 2001 and 2021. A note of caution for this data is that it does not include all EU countries, as data is either not available at all, or only available for one of the two reference years (for example Germany, Croatia and Malta). Data for 2001: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/cens_hnmg/default/table?lang=en&category=cens.cens_hn.cens_hnstr Data for 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/cens_21ctz_r3/default/table?lang=en&category=cens.cens_21.cens_21dc
- viii School Rolls, Shetland Islands Council 2025
- ix Estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, from the dataset “UK population estimates 1838 to 2024 edition of this dataset”, produced by the Officer for National Statistics (ONS), published 26th September 2025 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalescotlandandnorthernireland>
- x Median Age, years, 2024. Published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), data accessed 20th July 2026 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/S12000027-shetland-islands/indicators#population>
- xi Trends referenced here are taken from the “Report from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions on the impact of demographic change”, published 17th June 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0241>
- xii Subnational Population Projections: 2022 based are produced by the National Records of Scotland (NRS). Projections are statistics on the potential future size and structure of an area’s population, based on past trends and assumptions of future levels of fertility, mortality and migration. Projections are not exact and should be treated with a degree of uncertainty, the further out from the base year (2022) the more uncertain the data should be treated. More details on the methodology behind this data can be found through the link below. NRS, published 30th September 2025 <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/subnational-population-projections-2022-based/>
- xiii Small area population estimates: mid-2023 and mid-2024 (2011 data zones) are produced by the National Records of Scotland (NRS). Data Zones are the key geography used for producing small area statistics in Scotland that are built using Census Output Areas. Revisions are made following the publication of new Census results. The data used for the mid-2023 and mid-2024 populations are based on the 2011 data zones, with data for these years not yet available at the 2022 data zone level. More information on Data Zones is provided on the Scottish Government website: <https://www.gov.scot/collections/small-area-statistics/>. For Locality level data, individual data zones are aggregated to produce data at a larger geographic level, details on how they are grouped are on the Shetland Partnership website: <https://www.shetlandpartnership.org/locality-profiles/locality-profile-indicators-sources-definitions/7>
- NRS, published 24th February 2026 <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/small-area-population-estimates-mid-2023-and-mid-2024-2011-data-zones/>
- xiv Schools Service, SIC
- xv Housing Demand data provided by Shetland Islands Council Housing Service. Applications referred to here are for ‘Live’ applications (where applicants either currently live in Shetland, have a current job, or a confirmed job offer in Shetland).
- xvi Sub-Council Area Population Projections, produced by the Improvement Service (IS). Similar to the Sub-National Population Projections, these projections are trends based and constrained to (made consistent with) the NRS 2022 based sub-national population projections. More details on methodology can be found here: <https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/products-and-services/data-intelligence-and-benchmarking/sub-council-area-population-projections/sub-council-area-population-projections2>. Sub-Council level population projections are at a Multi Member Ward geography, which does not directly match with the Localities built from Data Zones. This geography also groups Yell, Unst & Fetlar with Whalsay & Skerries. As such data here is not directly comparable with other Localities data.
- IS, published May 2026 <https://improvementservice.shinyapps.io/sub-council-projections/>
- xvii Shetland Partnership (2025) *Protected Characteristics Profiles*. Available at: <https://www.shetlandpartnership.org/downloads/download/17/protected-characteristics-profiles> (Accessed: July 2026)
- xviii Births Time Series Data, produced by the National Records of Scotland (NRS). Figures quoted are for the overall birth rates, not the “standardised” birth rates. NRS, published 26th August 2025 <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/births-time-series-data-2024>
- xix Local Area Migration statistics, 2004 to 2024, produced by the National Records of Scotland (NRS), published 18th November 2025 <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/local-area-migration-2004-to-2024>
- xx Scottish Government (2025) *Rural Scotland: trajectories of young people and young adults: report. Chapter 2: The demographic context: age profiles of mobilities*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/migration-mobilities-trajectories-young-people-young-adults-rural-scotland/pages/3/>
- xxi Winship, A., Naab, F., Nelson, B. and Atterton, J. (2025) *Demographic change and out-migration in rural and island Scotland*. Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme 2022–2027, SRUC-E2-2: Reimagined Policy Futures: Shaping Sustainable, Inclusive and Just Rural and Island Communities in Scotland (ReRIC). Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC).
- xxii Shetland Islands Council (2025) *Our Place – Your Say 2025 Final Report*. Lerwick: Shetland Islands Council. November 2025.
- xxiii Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2018) *Young People and the Highlands and Islands: Maximising Opportunities*. Inverness: Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Available at: <https://www.hie.co.uk/media/3007/youngpluspeopleplusandplustheplushighlandsplusandplushislandsplus-plusmaximisingplusopportunitiesplus-report.pdf>
- xxiv Shetland Youth Voice (2025) *Transport Summit Report*. Lerwick: Shetland Youth Voice. Available at: https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/5f16b27d-efbf-4142-9d9a-b545fc3d14f4_Appendix-1.-Shetland-Youth-Voice-Transport-Summit-Report.pdf
- xxv Shetland Youth Voice (2025) *Jobs & Fair Work Summit 2025 Report*. Lerwick: Shetland Youth Voice. Available at: https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/dd521643-2445-4e3c-9bef-85cb53d1c6c1_Jobs---Fair-Work-Summit-2025-Report-FINAL.pdf



^{xxvi} Shetland Youth Voice (2025) *Public Spaces for Young People Summit 2025 Report*. Lerwick: Shetland Youth Voice. Available at: https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/07fec85b-49f2-40f8-b6a4-4f5c74ef66f5_Public-Spaces-for-Young-People-Summit-FINAL-REPORT.pdf (

^{xxvii} A cost benefit analysis of the current Promote Shetland Service was carried out in March 2026. As the decision to move or visit somewhere is influenced by a wide range of interrelated factors, it was estimated that the activity supported through the 2022-2027 contract will help convince between 40 and 415 people that moving to work on Shetland was the right decision for them and their family. These people are expected to: generate between £2.3 million and £25.2 million GVA; and support an average of between 10 and 95 jobs each year.

In terms of strategic migration, the Promote Shetland service was found to be unique and effective, highlighting a number of good practice examples, including a joined-up approach to recruitment and retention which was so successful it achieved national recognition as a case study for successfully filling historically hard-to-fill roles.

^{xxviii} *“Demographic change and out-migration in rural and island Scotland”*, a report published by Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) as part of the Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme 2022-2027. This report examines demographic change in rural and island Scotland, focusing on depopulation and out-migration. It also provides comparative insights from international policy interventions. SRUC, published 18th November 2025 https://sruc.figshare.com/articles/report/Demographic_change_and_out-migration_in_rural_and_island_Scotland/30617195?file=59553536

^{xxix} *“Japan island depopulation: lessons for Scotland”*, a report published by the Scottish Government exploring policy approaches to depopulation on Japan’s islands. Scottish Government, published 21st September 2022 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/approaches-island-depopulation-japan-lessons-scotland/pages/9/>

^{xxx} *“Case studies of island repopulation initiatives”*, a report published by Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), presenting Scottish and international examples of successful policy interventions to support repopulation of island and remote rural communities. SRUC, published January 2020 <https://pure.sruc.ac.uk/en/publications/case-studies-of-island-repopulation-initiatives/>

^{xxxi} Population Taskforce (ministerial) established in June 2019 <https://www.gov.scot/groups/population-task-force/>

^{xxxii} *“A Scotland for the future: opportunities and challenges of Scotland’s changing population”*, published by the Scottish Government, 15th March 2021 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotland-future-opportunities-challenges-scotlands-changing-population/pages/2/>

^{xxxiii} Population Programme, published by the Scottish Government, 4th January 2023 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/population-programme-factsheet/pages/population-programme-factsheet/>

^{xxxiv} *“Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation”*, published by the Scottish Government this plan establishes a strategic policy position for Scottish Government around addressing depopulation. Scottish Government, published 16th February 2024 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-enabling-sustainable-communities-action-plan-address-depopulation/pages/1/>

^{xxxv} National Islands Plan, Scottish Government, published 23rd February 2026 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-islands-plan-2/pages/3/>

