

Scotland's Population 2021

The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends

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Last update: 31 August 2022

Next update: 2023

Contact Us

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[Download the full dataset](#) for these charts (Excel spreadsheet about 260KB).

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Summary



“I am pleased to once again provide some introductory comments to the Registrar General’s Annual Annual Review. Since 1855 Scotland’s Registrar Generals have delivered an annual report to Parliament and the Scottish public. Although these have evolved over time, they detail key information on births, deaths and marriages. They provide invaluable statistics that help describe and provide further insights into how Scotland’s population is changing and some of the challenges facing modern Scotland.

“I am immensely proud of the work of my colleagues over the last year. We have continued to develop and innovate in our production of crucial statistical evidence on important and relevant issues such as: suicide, drug deaths, and population change. These statistics play a vital role in supporting key policy and funding decisions, and informing broader public debate.

“We are also continuing to improve this report, to make it as accessible and useable as possible and looking for innovative ways to communicate these statistics with impact. The team responsible for the production of this report won an [Analysis in Government Award in 2021](#) for the quality of our approach but we need your help to build on that success. Please [take this short survey](#) and have your say.”

Paul Lowe, Chief Executive, National Records of Scotland

Health inequality



“Some people in Scotland experience considerably worse health than others. We also see a lot of health inequality between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

“Mortality rates are about two times as high in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas. But for some specific causes of death, we see much larger inequalities. For example, people in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more than 15 times as likely to die from drug misuse than those in the least deprived areas.

“Over the last 40 years, our overall life expectancy has improved and we’re living longer than we used to. But our life expectancy is lower than the rest of the UK and many other countries in western Europe.

“In recent years, life expectancy improvements have stalled and started to reverse. Although this isn’t unique to Scotland.”

Julie Ramsay, Statistician, Head of Vital Events

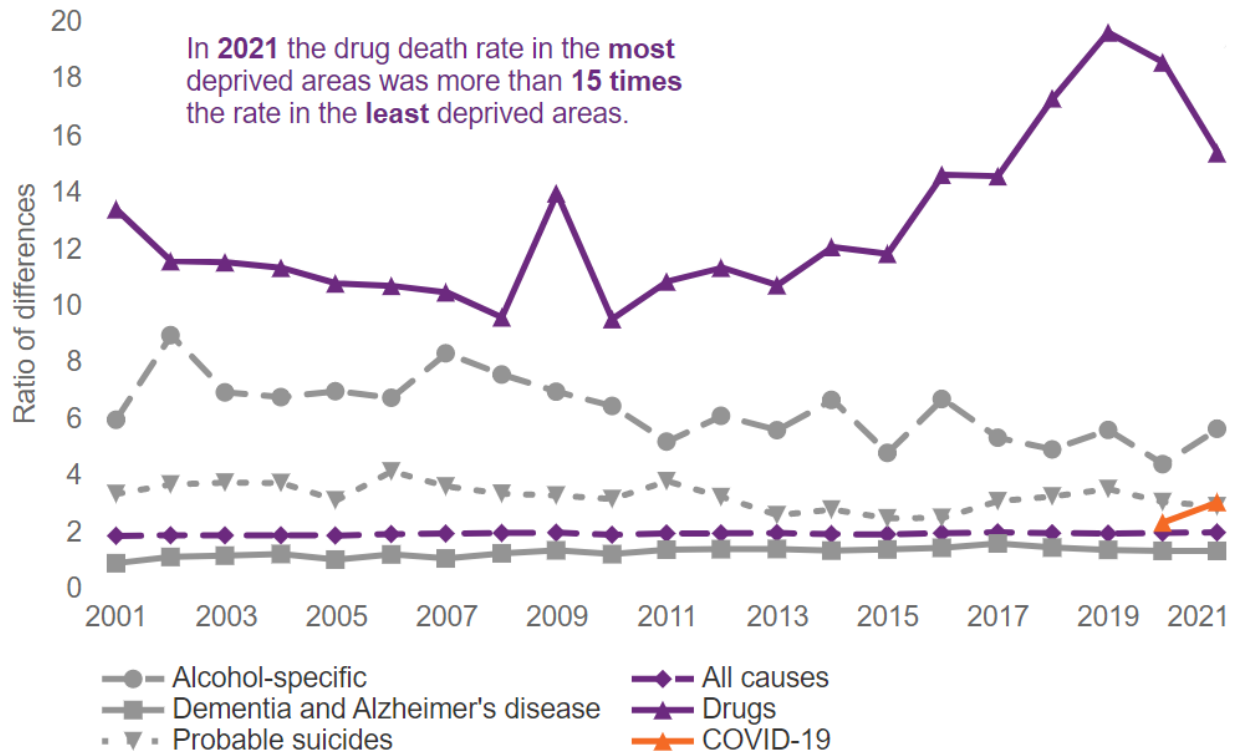
Deprivation

In 2021 we saw the second highest number of drug deaths ever recorded. Scotland’s drug misuse death rate was over 3.5 times the UK rate and higher than the rates reported for any other EU country (using a different counting method for the EU).

In 2021, people in the most deprived areas were 15.3 times as likely to die from drug misuse as those in the least deprived areas. That ratio has increased over the past two decades. In the early 2000s, those in the most deprived areas were around 10 times as likely to have a drug misuse death as those in the least deprived areas. In the last year, the gap has narrowed slightly.

Alcohol-specific deaths were 5.6 times as likely to occur in the most deprived areas of Scotland compared to the least deprived areas in 2021. Over time, this ratio has generally decreased (from a high of 8.7 in 2002) but has increased in the last few years. Changes in the ratio are mostly driven by changes in death rates in the most deprived areas. This is because rates in the least deprived areas have remained stable over time.

Ratio of mortality rates between the most and least deprived areas by cause of death, 2001 to 2021 Note: A ratio higher than one means the rate in the most deprived areas is higher than the least deprived areas.



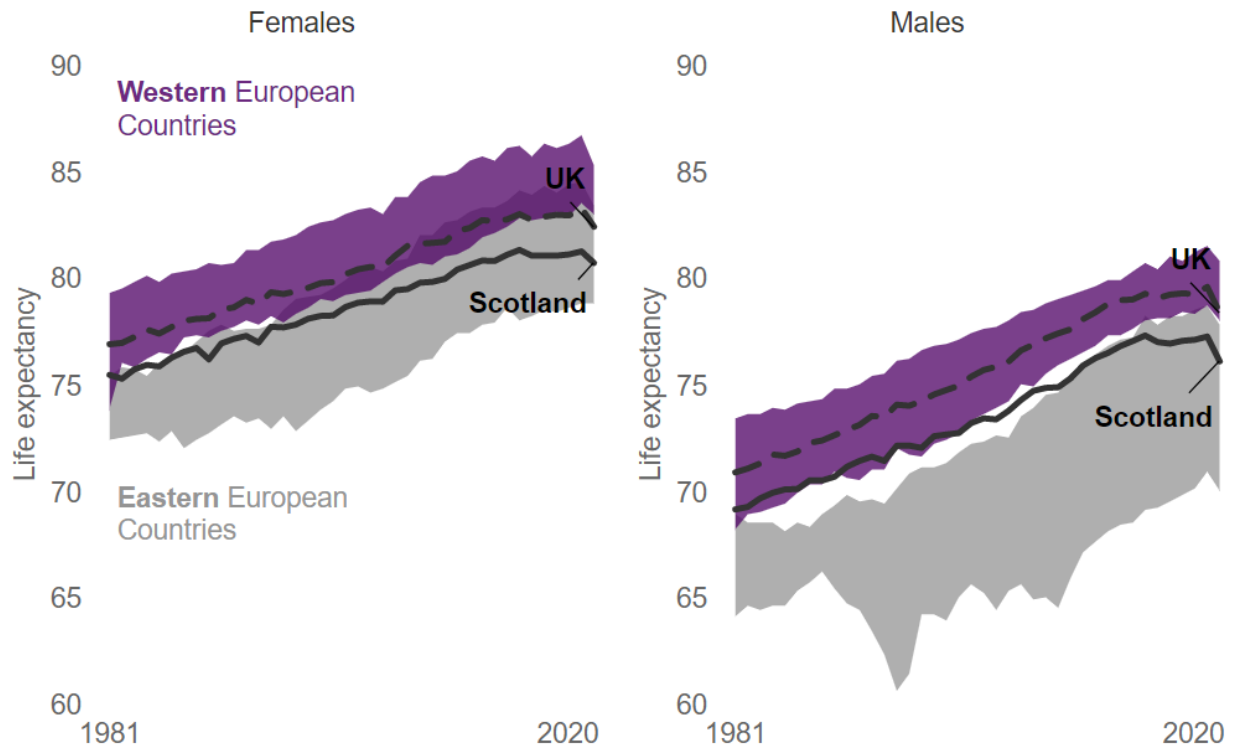
Source: [Age-standardised death rates](#)

Life expectancy

Life expectancy has improved over the last 40 years. In the last 10 years improvements have stalled and most recently have started to reverse. The recent fall was mainly due to COVID-19. But the stall was caused by a number of factors:

- past decreases in heart disease deaths have slowed down
- the number of drug-related deaths has increased
- the number of deaths from dementia and Alzheimer’s has increased

Life expectancy at birth in Scotland by sex compared to other countries, 1981 to 2020



Source: [Life Expectancy in Scotland \(NRS\)](#), [Life expectancy at birth by sex \(Eurostat\)](#)

COVID-19 inequalities

COVID-19 has not impacted everyone equally. For example, people aged 75 or over and disabled people are more likely to die with COVID-19.

Age About 72 out of every 100 people dying from COVID-19 are aged 75 or more. Only 1 in 100 people dying from COVID-19 are aged under 45. This difference is partly because older people often have other risk factors such as pre-existing health conditions.

Disability Health problems and disabilities increase as we get older. But even after taking age into account, disabled people are more likely to die with COVID-19. Compared to people whose daily activities were not limited: - people whose daily activities were limited a little were almost twice as likely to die with COVID-19 - people whose daily activities were limited a lot were around three times as likely to die with COVID-19

Ethnicity Between the start of the pandemic and September 2021, deaths of people of Chinese ethnicity and people of Indian ethnicity were almost twice as likely to involve COVID-19 than deaths of people of White Scottish ethnicity. This increased to almost four times as likely for people of Pakistani ethnicity and almost three times as likely for people of Other Asian ethnicity.

Sex The COVID-19 death rate is 112 deaths per 100,000 people. The rate for males was significantly higher than for females (138 deaths compared with 92 deaths per 100,000).

Pre-existing health conditions More than 9 out of 10 people who died with COVID-19 had at least one pre-existing condition. Dementia and Alzheimer's disease was the most common.

Find out more

- see our blog article on [Why is life expectancy stalling in Scotland?](#)
- our publication on [life expectancy in Scotland](#)
- we wrote this [comparative decomposition analysis of mortality data](#) with Public Health Scotland
- read our latest [statistics on COVID-19 deaths in Scotland](#)
- our publication on [statistics on deaths from specific causes](#)

COVID-19 deaths



“COVID-19 has accounted for 8% of all deaths during the pandemic so far (March 2020 to July 2022).

“There have also been excess deaths from some other causes, including cancer and heart disease. Excess deaths are where deaths in the latest year are higher than the previous five-year average.”

Daniel Burns, Statistician, Vital Events

COVID-19 deaths

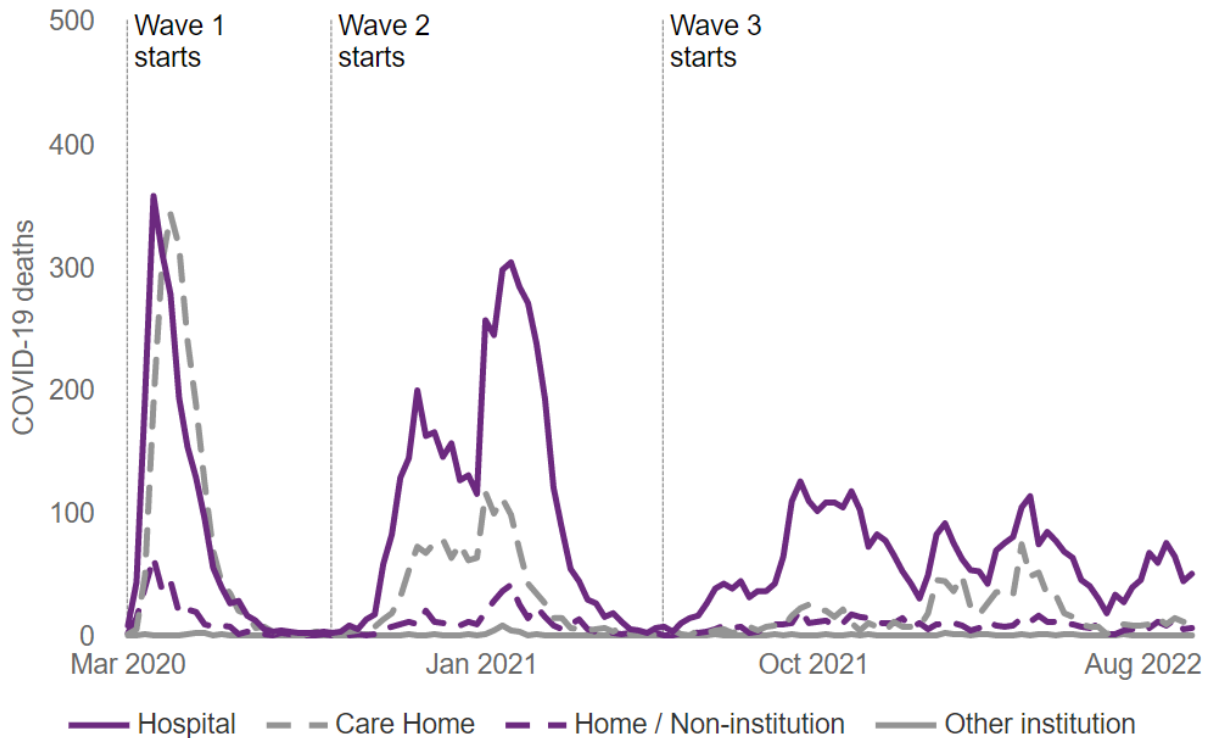
There have been three clear waves of COVID-19 deaths so far.

Each wave has lasted longer than the last. So far, wave two has seen the most deaths. Wave three hasn't ended yet.

During wave one about the same number of COVID-19 deaths occurred in hospitals as care homes (both locations saw 46% of all COVID-19 deaths).

In contrast, 71% of COVID-19 deaths during waves two and three occurred in hospitals.

COVID-19 deaths in Scotland by location of death, March 2020 to August 2022



Source: [Deaths involving COVID-19 in Scotland](#)

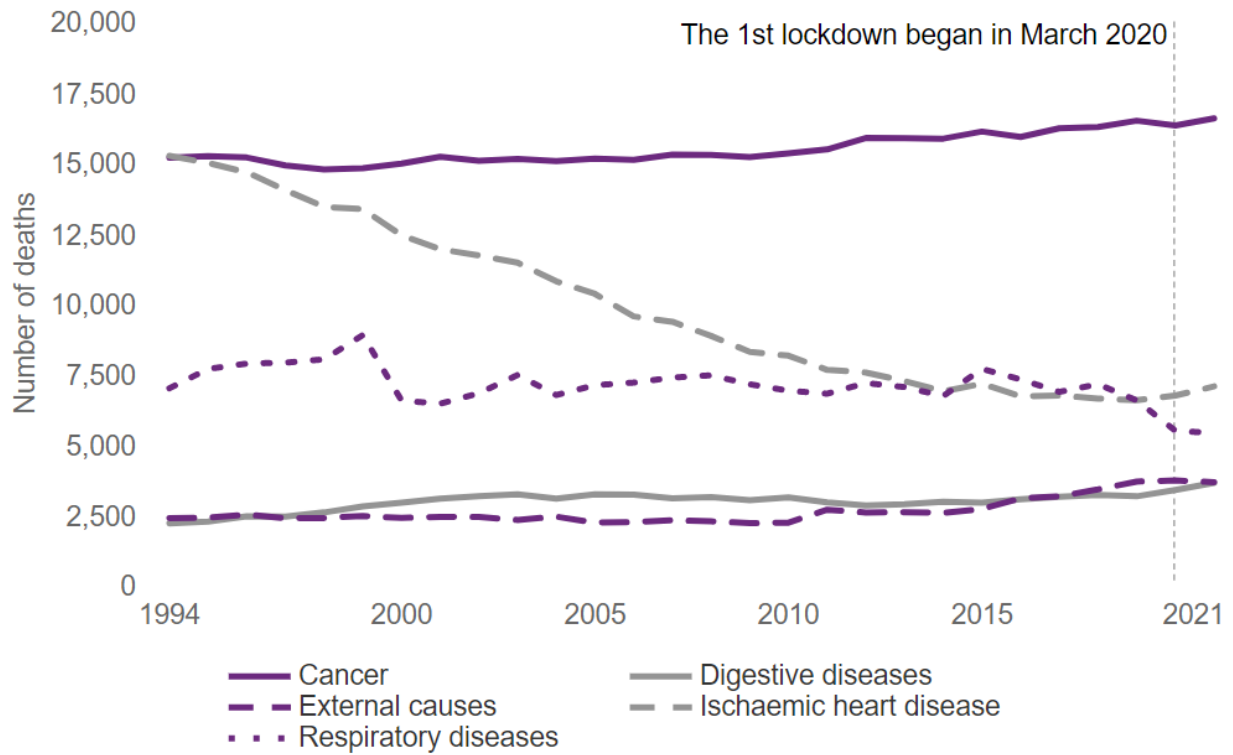
Other deaths

In 2020 and 2021 there were more deaths than usual (compared to the five year average for 2015-2019) from:

- cancer
- heart disease
- digestive system diseases (such as liver disease)
- external causes of death (such as drug-related deaths)

There were less deaths than usual from respiratory diseases (such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)). It is likely that many people who died with COVID-19 had pre-existing respiratory diseases.

Other deaths by cause of death in Scotland, 2001 to 2021



Source: [Vital events - Deaths](#)

Find out more

- read our latest [statistics on COVID-19 deaths in Scotland](#)
- statistics on [different causes of death in Scotland](#)

Population



“If past trends continue, we project that by 2045, Scotland will have a smaller and older population. Growth from migration would no longer offset the growing gap between births and deaths.

“For the first time in a number of years, we project Scotland’s population to fall in the next decade (starting around 2029). Scotland is the only UK country with a projected fall by 2045. We also project that almost half of our 32 local authorities will decline in population over the next decade.

“The population is also ageing. By 2045 we project that there will be fewer children (-22%), roughly the same number of people of working age (-2%), and more people of pensionable age (+21%).”

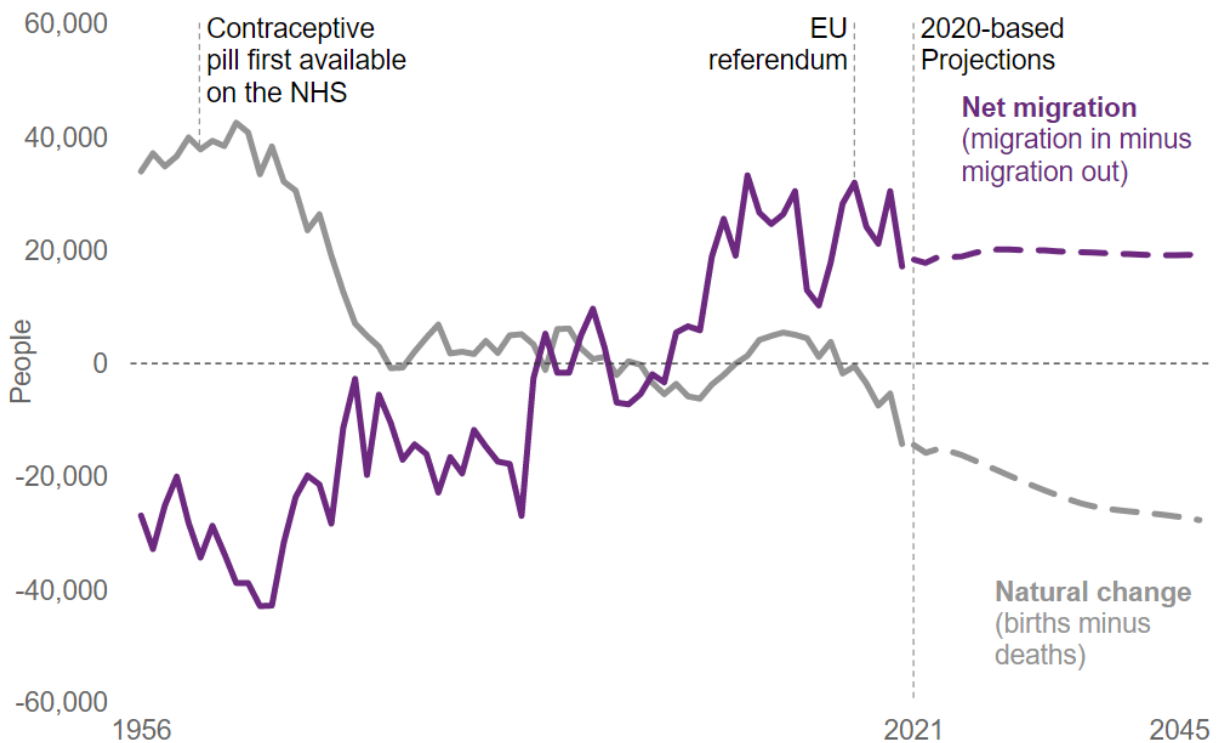
Esther Roughsedge, Statistician, Head of Population and Migration Statistics

Population decline

The population of Scotland is projected to peak in 2028 at 5.48 million. It is then projected to fall by 1.8% to 5.39 million by 2045. Three factors are causing population change in Scotland:

- births: people are having fewer children
- deaths: over the long term people are living longer (although these improvements have stalled and reversed in recent years)
- migration: people move to Scotland from the rest of the UK and outside the UK (projected to be in roughly equal numbers)

Natural change and net migration in Scotland with projections, 1956 to 2045



Source: [Mid-year population estimates](#), [Population projections](#)

Ageing population

These projections are a useful guide for those involved in planning services for the future. A fall in the number of children and increases in the number of older people will change the pattern of demand for services like schools, health and social care.

Projected population change by single year of age, principal projection, 2020 to 2045



Source: [Population projections](#)

Local differences

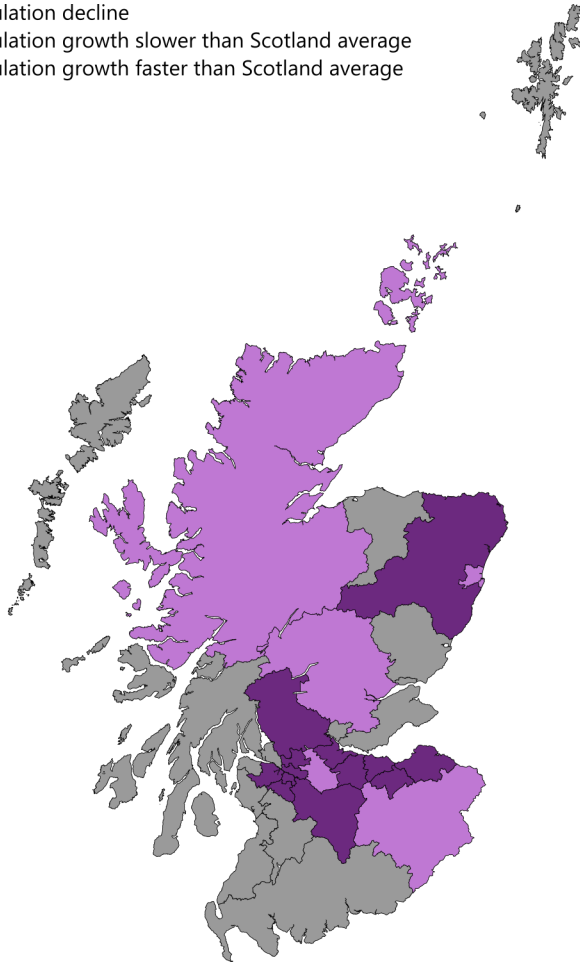
We project that almost half of our 32 local authorities will decline in population over the next decade. Most of these authorities are in the west and south west of Scotland. They tend to be local authorities with a higher percentage of more deprived areas, or a higher percentage of rural areas. Their populations are generally projected to decline due to more deaths than births, without enough migration to compensate.

In contrast, most of the central belt and other urban areas are projected to grow in population. Most of this growth is likely to be from migration, with people moving from:

- other council areas
- the rest of the UK
- outside the UK

Projected population change, 2018 to 2028

- Population decline
- Population growth slower than Scotland average
- Population growth faster than Scotland average



Source: [Population projections for Scottish areas \(2018-based\)](#)

Smaller households

People are increasingly living alone or in smaller households. This is partly because Scotland's population is ageing. Older people are more likely to live alone or in smaller households. In particular, older women are most likely to live alone.

Find out more

- our [national population projections](#) and [population projections for areas of Scotland](#)
- a [Population Taskforce](#) was established in June 2019 to consider Scotland's future population challenges
- for more on [Household estimates](#)
- explore our [interactive charts on population projections](#)

Marriage and civil partnerships



“Scotland has seen big changes in the types of unions that are legally recognised.

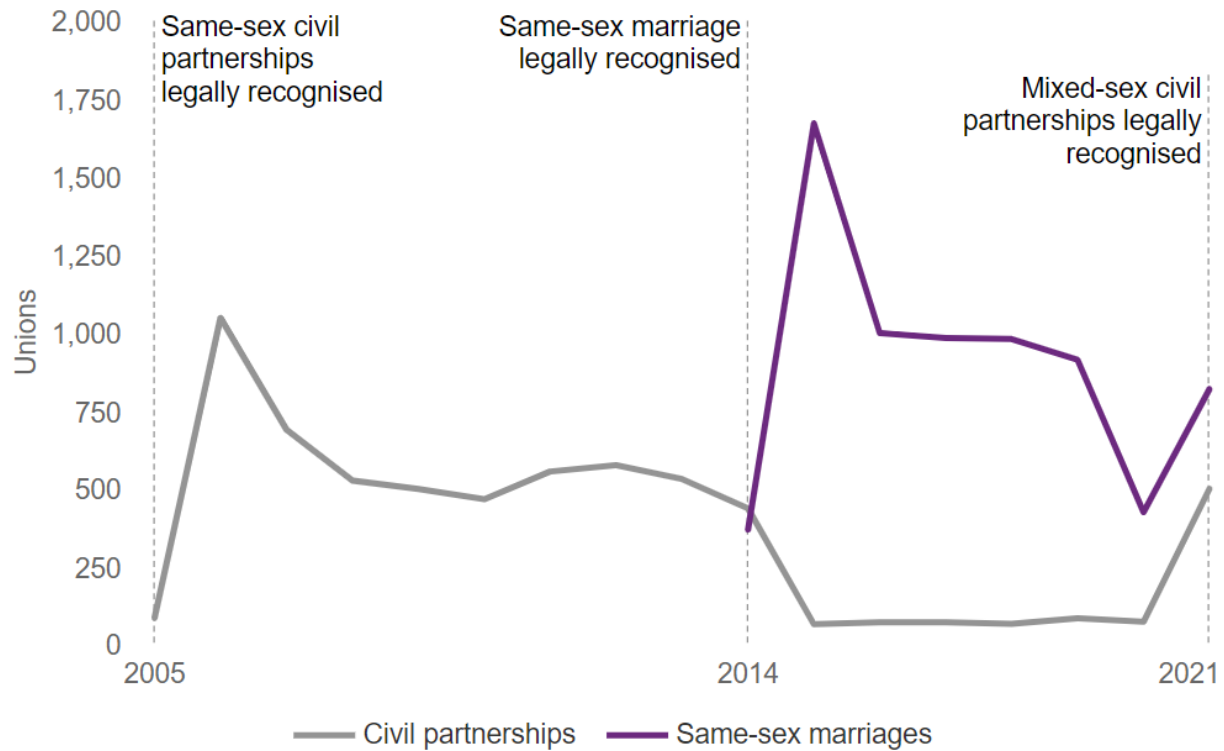
“For example, in 2021 civil partnerships became available to mixed-sex couples. More than 4 in 5 civil partnerships in 2021 were of mixed-sex couples. Scotland legalised same-sex marriage in December 2014. More than 1 in 30 marriages in 2021 were of same-sex couples.

“Humanist ceremonies were introduced in 2005 and now account for about 1 in 4 marriages. In contrast, the number conducted by the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church has declined over time. In 2021 they represented less than 1 in 10 of all marriages.”

Rhi Batstone, Statistician, Statistical Engagement and Promotion

The number of civil partnerships and same-sex marriages has changed over time in response to the law.

Civil partnerships and same-sex marriages in Scotland, 2005 to 2021



Source: [Marriages and Civil Partnerships](#)

Find out more

- our statistics on [Marriages and Civil Partnerships](#)
- you might also be interested in our [Babies first names publication](#) and [interactive chart](#)