Internal migration and geographical labour mobility in the UK

Tony Champion

Presentation in the Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government's Economic & Social Research Seminar series

19 March 2025

Introduction and aims

Introduction:

The policy context behind my recent research concerns two particular challenges:

(1) Slowing rates of internal migration and local residential mobility that are seen as partly causing the UK's 'productivity puzzle';

(2) Uneven growth at regional and local scales, e.g. 'left behind places' versus the 'London escalator';

My work involves updating previous research on both these fronts:

(1) Analysing migration rates using ONS and MHCLG data including the Longitudinal Study's linked census records and the English Housing Survey;

(2) Checking to see whether declining rates of address changing are resulting in a stagnating of population redistribution using DCLG's 2006 State of the English Cities (SOEC) framework.

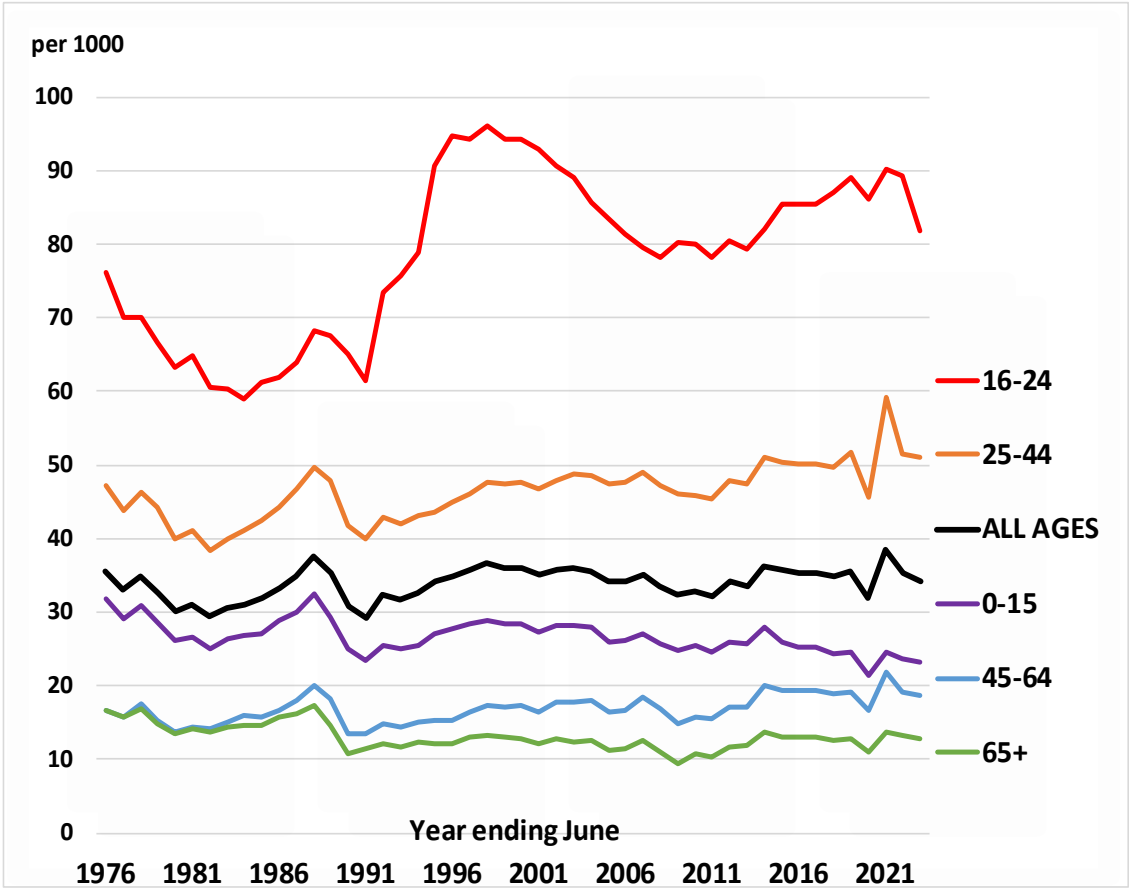
Aims:

- To present the latest evidence on rates of address changing and on the effect of any changes on England's population geography;
- To introduce a discussion about the drivers of change and the implications for policy & research agenda.

Studying trends in between-area migration using mainly NHS-derived data, 1975-2023

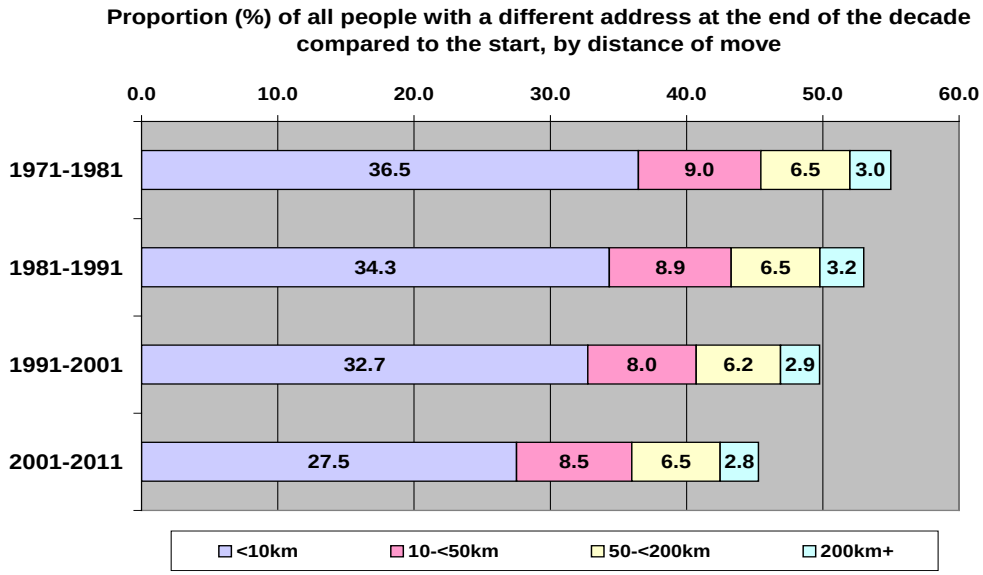
- Between-area migration only: between Health Areas until 2001, then by Local Authority, so for 80 consistent areas, and making some heroic assumptions for matching at 2001 and method changes in 2011 and 2017
- Trend line for all ages (black) reveals expected downturns at the recessions in 1981, 1991 and 2008, plus the COVID blip
- By age, fairly flat for 0-15s, 45-64s and 65+, somewhat upward for 25-44s and major surge for 16-24s in 1990s – no doubt reflecting university expansion

Internal migration rate, 1975-2023, by age, for an 80-area aggregation of health & local authority areas of England & Wales (Source: estimated by author using ONS data)

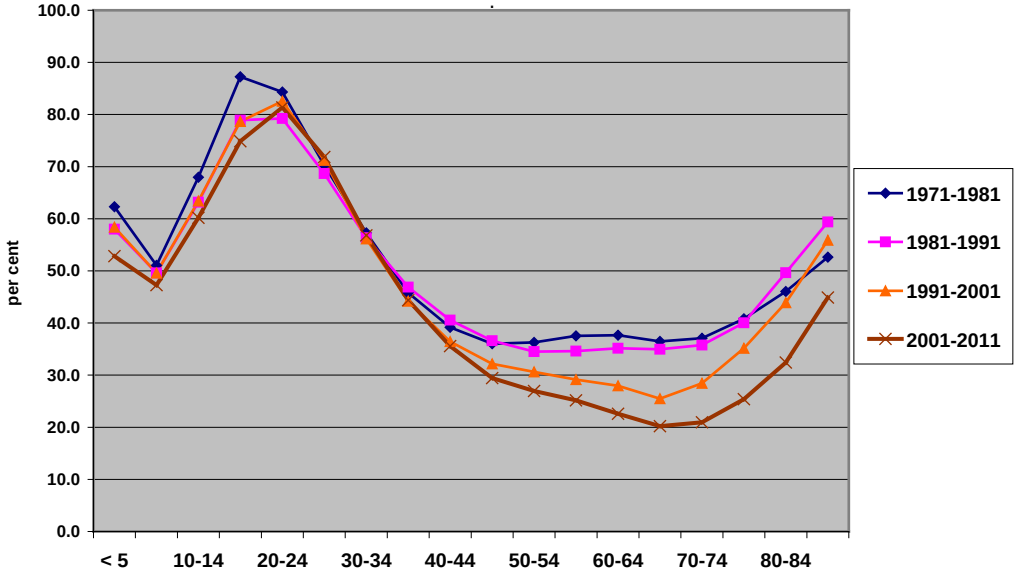


Studying trends in all address changing using data from Censuses from 1971

- Census itself is not helpful because the pre-Census year often atypical, so use ONS Longitudinal Study of linked Census records
- Based on taking the ca-1% sample at one Census and seeing where these people were living at next Census, i.e. 10-year rates for 'survivors', for all distances of move



- Top chart plots by distance of move: reduction in overall rate is mainly for short-distance moves, longer ones buoyed up by HE-related moves?
- Bottom chart plots rates by age: expected age profile peaking for those aged 15-24 at outset, progressive downward shift between decades for ages >40.



Which types of people saw the greatest % decrease in their 10-year address change rate between 1971-81 and 2001-11, by move distance?

Rank	Less than 10km			50km and over	
	Type	%		Type	%
1	65-69	-53.6		Degree	-33.6
2	Retired	-53.0		85+	-31.7
3	70-74	-50.7		0-4	-29.9
4	60-64	-47.2		60-64	-29.6
5	55-59	-43.7		Social Class II	-28.8
6	Widowed	-43.2		70-74	-27.5
7	75-79	-42.0		Divorced	-27.4
8	80-84	-39.3		Armed Forces	-26.2
9	50-54	-38.4		Married	-25.4
10	Non-UK born	-36.5		65-59	-25.3
11	Divorced	-36.0		Retired	-24.8
12	Unskilled	-35.9		Social Class I	-23.6
13	Married	-35.3		Non-UK born	-22.6
14	Sick	-32.3		Employed part-time	-21.3
15	45-49	-30.2		Owner occupier	-21.1

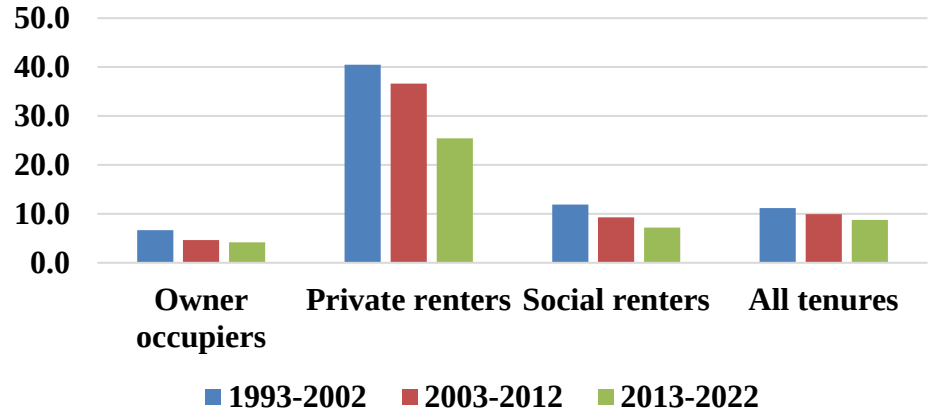
Source: calculated from ONS Longitudinal Study data by Champion & Shuttleworth, 2016

For <10km moves: mainly older people, non-UK born, unskilled, married, sick.
For 50km+ moves: again non-UK born and older people, but also <5s, degree holders, higher social status, owner occupiers and part-time employees.
But what about since 2011? Need to await the results of 2021 Census link. In the meantime, evidence from MHCLG's English Housing Survey, with thanks to GLA's James Gleeson for providing the data extract used ->>

Latest evidence from EHS, 1993-2023, by tenure and age (% resident <1 year)

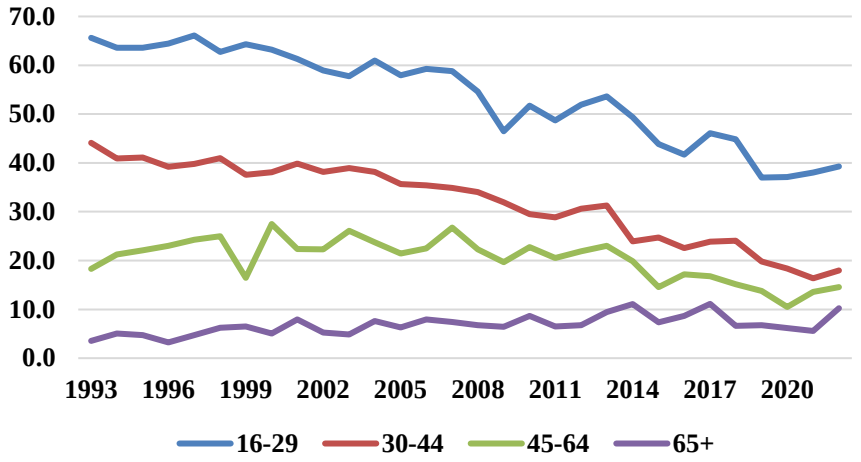
BY TENURE

% resident for <1 year by tenure (source: calculated from EHS data)

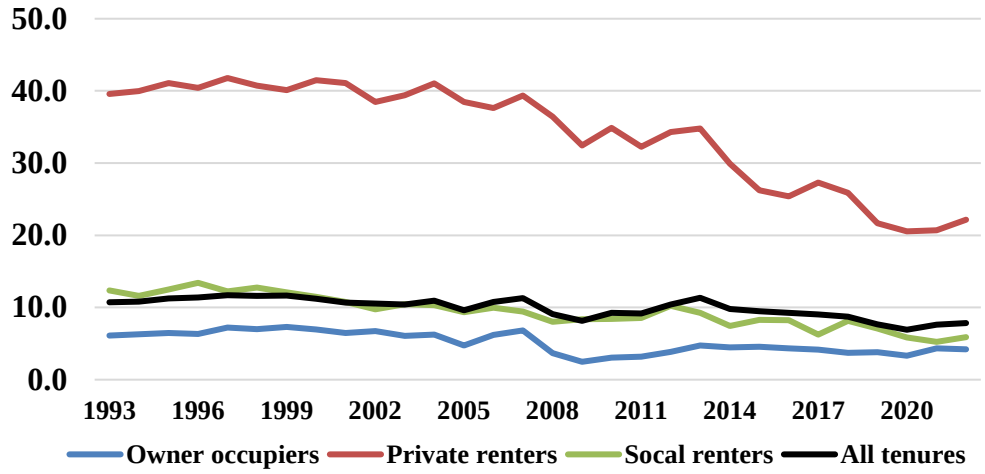


PRIVATE RENTERS BY AGE

% of private renters resident for <1 year (source: calculated from EHS data)



% resident for <1 year by tenure (source: calculated from EHS data)

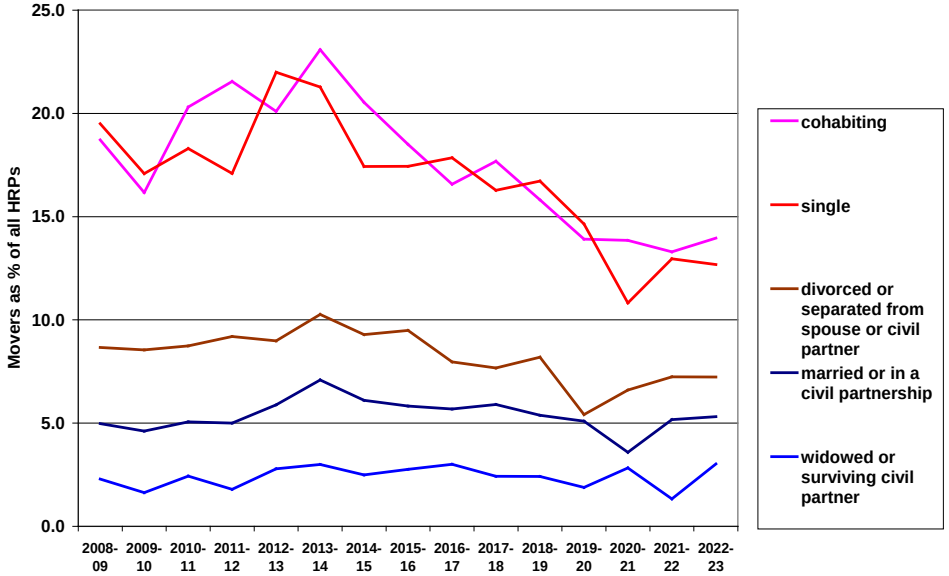


Left-hand charts:
Decline in % resident for <1 year in all three main sectors, but especially for private renting since 2008

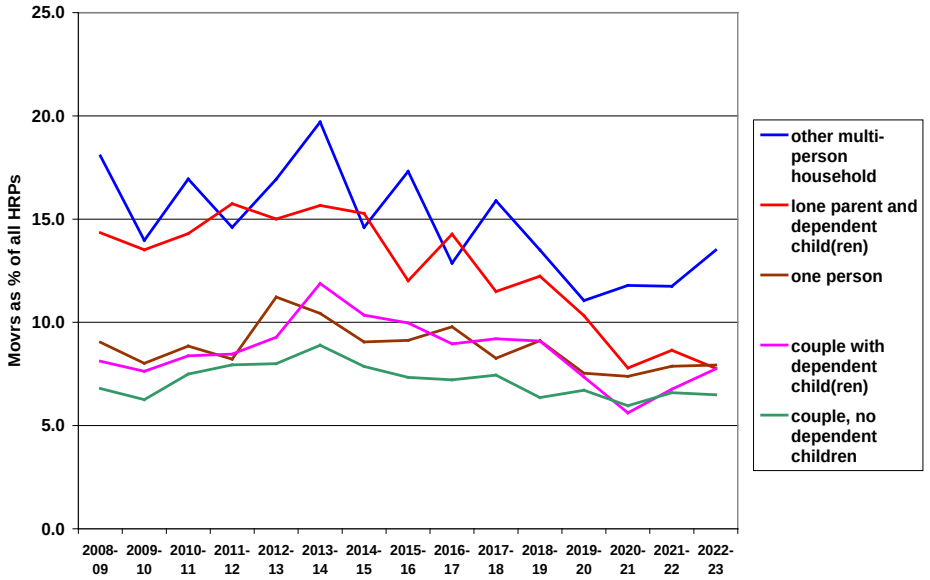
Right-hand chart:
Within private renting, a steady fall for 16-29s and 30-44s since 1990s, as chances of owning & social renting have diminished

Latest 15 years from EHS, 2008-2023, for marital status, household type and employment status

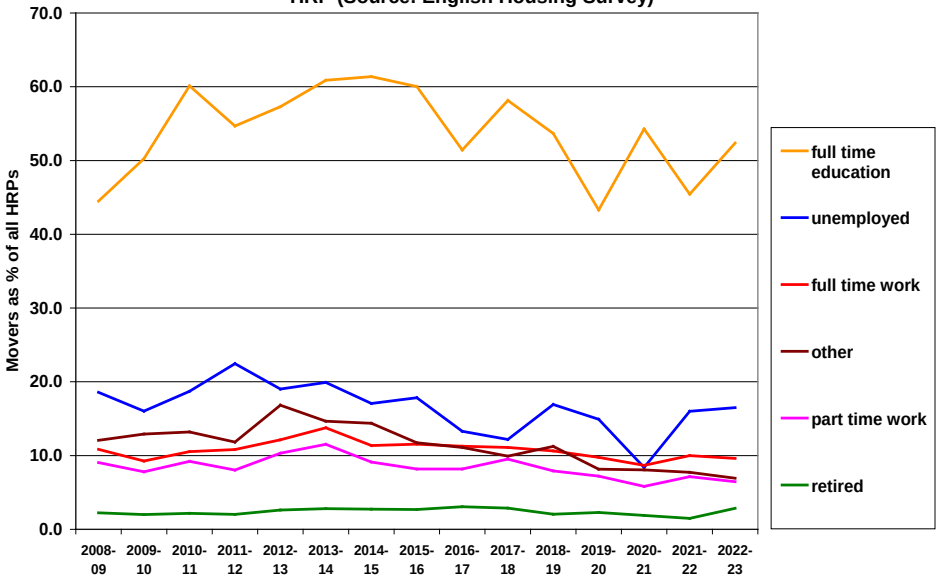
Propensity of HRPs to change address within past 12 months, by marital status of HRP (Source: English Housing Survey)



Propensity of HRPs to change address within past 12 months, by type of household (Source: English Housing Survey)



Propensity to change address within past 12 months, by employment status of HRP (Source: English Housing Survey)



Rebound from 2008/09, but drop from 2013/14 till post-lockdown

Steepest drop for cohabiting, single, divorced, lone parents, unemployed

Least drop for widowed, retired, full-time education

NB: Though EHS is based on only a small sample, these findings parallel those from LFS/APS and UKHLS/US

Main findings so far: short-distance moves

Changes over time in the overall frequency of address changing are driven primarily by short-distance relocations:

- Very little of the decline in short-distance moving rates is due to changing population composition (e.g. ageing) – nearly all types of people are now moving less often than previously
- A particularly steep drop in rate for all ages of people of 40 & over – likely factors: greater healthy life expectancy, more owner occupiers, greater housing capital growth, stamp duty and other moving costs, limited opportunity for down-sizing, social attachment, family needs
- Also, later departure from parental home and less finality in this – likely factors: longer in full-time education, more precarity in early careers, less stable relationships, lack of affordability, market blocking by older people
- Also, increasing substitution of migration by daily & weekly travel – likely factors: more 2-earner (especially dual-career) households, easier travel due mainly to rising car availability, ICT improvements leading to rise in remote working (especially from home)

Main findings so far: long-distance moves

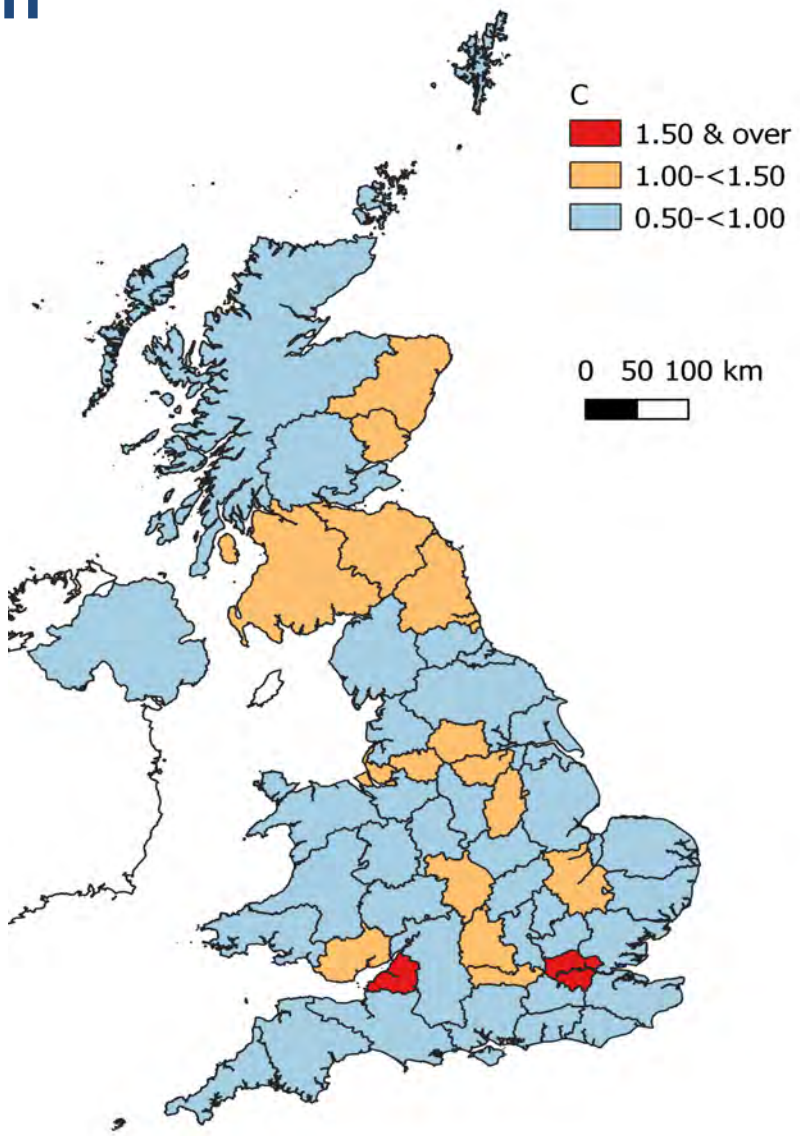
Longer-distance migration is mainly associated with economic drivers and the labour market, but some debates in the literature:

- Less regional variation in (broad) industrial structure, but greater geographical concentration of high-status work?
- More service-class and degree-level jobs, traditionally linked to high spatial mobility but not so much now?
- More self-employment and part-time employment, traditionally linked to lower spatial mobility ... and still are?
- More jobs being filled by international migrant labour, so less incentive for natives to move to tight labour markets?
- Change in welfare benefits: does this lead to more migration or discourage such risk-taking?
- Role of better ICT: does it lead to more migration (e.g. by increasing awareness of job opportunities) or less migration (e.g. by reduciong 'failed migration')?

What is certain is that rising HE participation fuels growth in young-adult moves and opens up new horizons after graduation...

Sub-regional (SR) redistribution caused by HE-related migration

- Map shows ratio of number post-uni to number pre-uni, skipping the at-uni stage of ‘studentification’
- Which SR gained the most from the migration of 2018 & 2019 graduate cohorts? **London** (1.72 = 72% gain), followed by **Avon** (Bristol/Bath)
- Only 15 other SRs made a net gain (>1.00 in orange): **‘Core Cities’, Oxbridge, M4, Dundee, Aberdeen**
- Weakest is Highlands & Islands at 0.52, i.e. net loss of 48%
- In all, fully two-thirds (36/53) lost out from the net migration of school leavers via university to workplace 15 months after graduation
- Then, with many having already moved from their home area, a greater chance of further moves



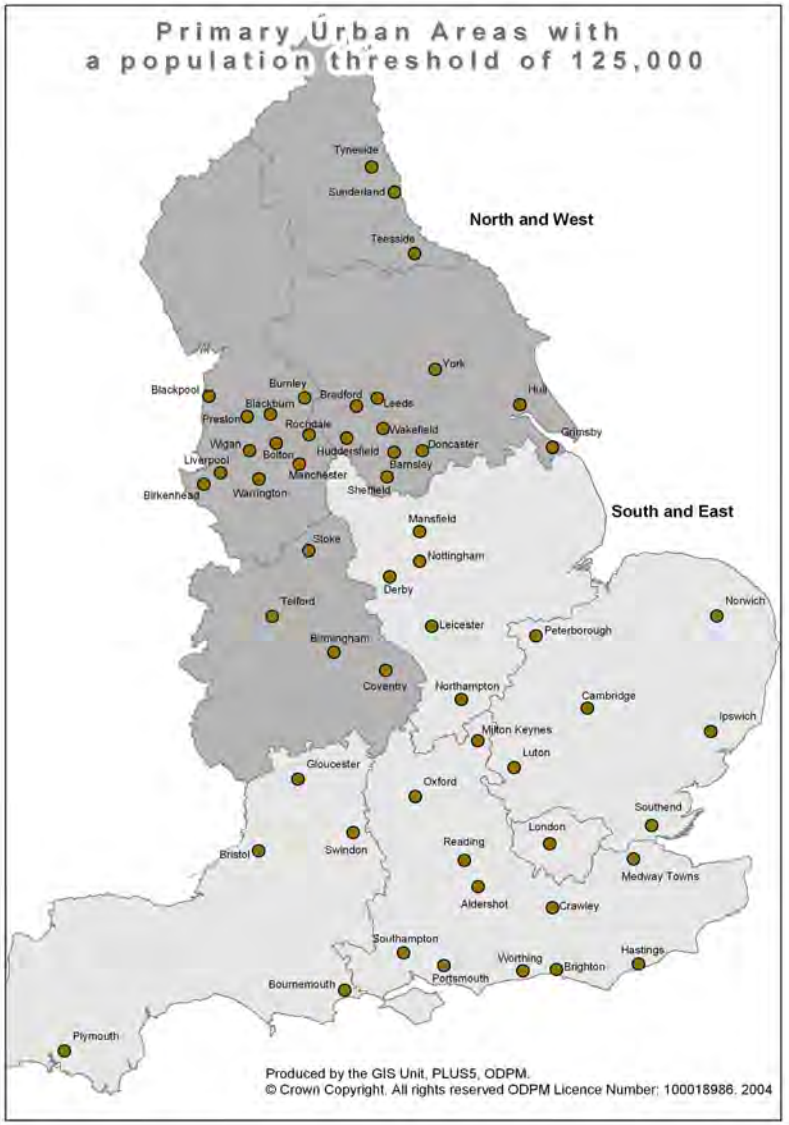
Source: HESA’s Graduate Outcomes Survey, data analysed by Champion, Green & Kollydas

Studying the effect on England's population geography using the SOEC framework

The **two traditional elements** of the UK's net internal migration have been 'north/south drift' and 'urban-rural shift', neatly captured by the State of English Cities (SOEC) framework of 2004/06

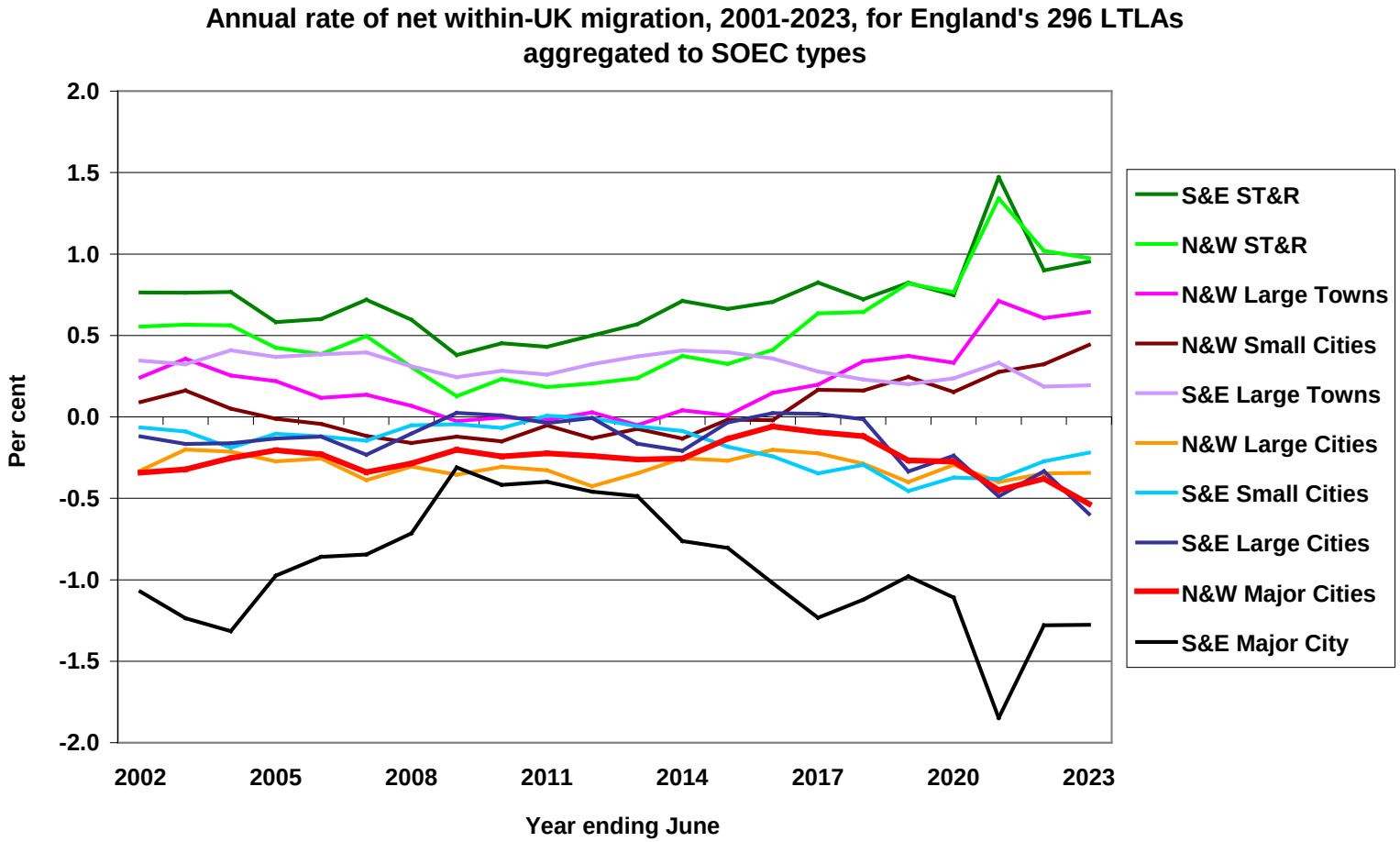
Map shows the **56 SOEC cities**, 28 in the 5 regions of 'South & East' and 28 in the 4 regions of 'North & West' – defined on Primary Urban Area basis (e.g. London comprises 46 districts)

Cities classified as Major, Large and Small; non-PUA districts divided into Large Towns and Small Towns & Rural, giving 2 x 5 = **10 types** when split into the two broad regions



Using the 10 SOEC types to track net within-UK migration since 2001

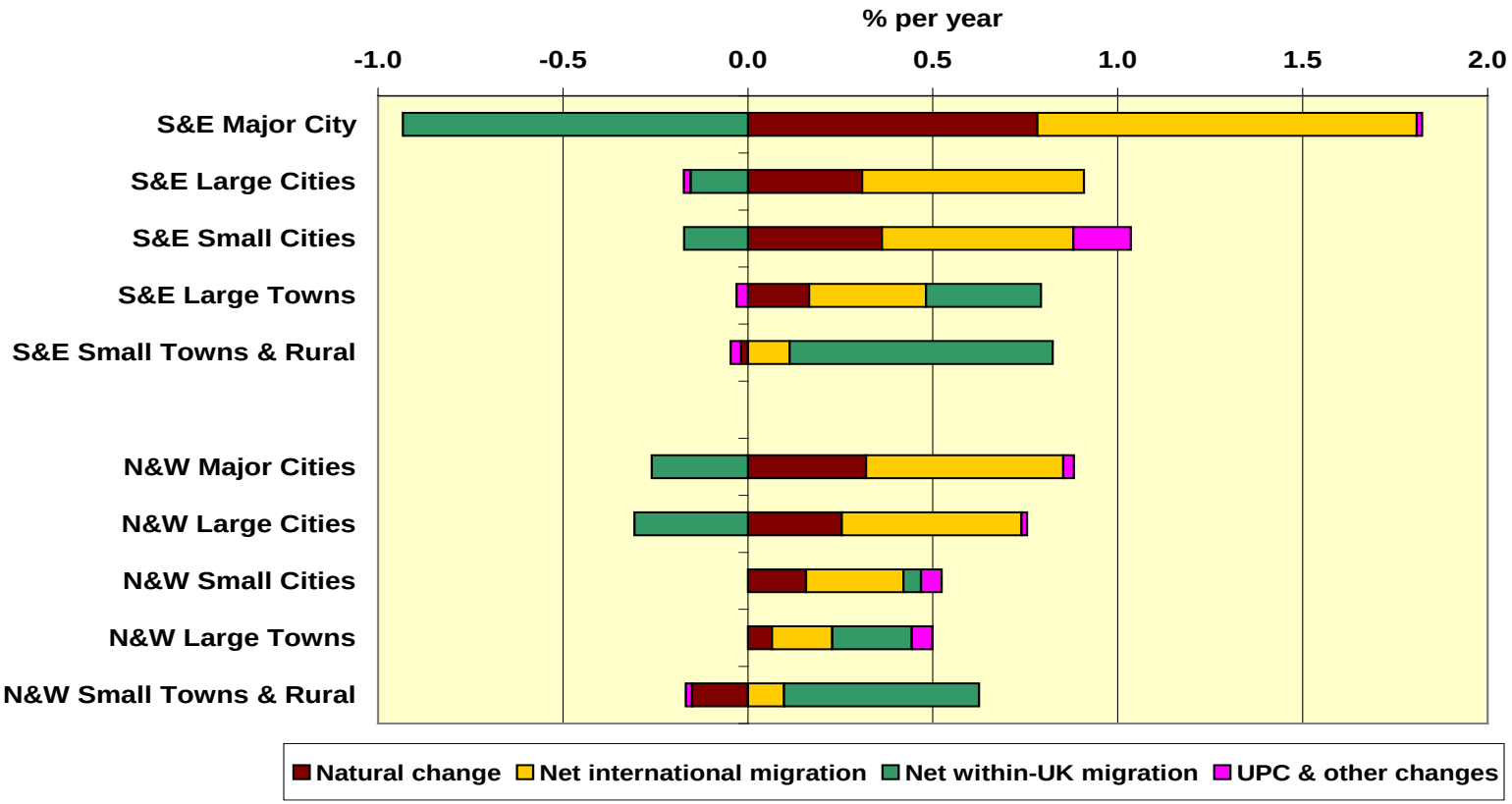
- Clear ‘counterurbanisation’ pattern persists, with strongest gains for Small Towns & Rural (ST&R, green) in both regions and greatest net loss for London (black)
- Least internal redistribution in 2008/09 ‘Great Recession’ and most in COVID lockdown year 2020/21, but latter may be exaggerated by data issues



Role of net within-UK migration in overall change, 2001-2023, for the 10 SOEC types

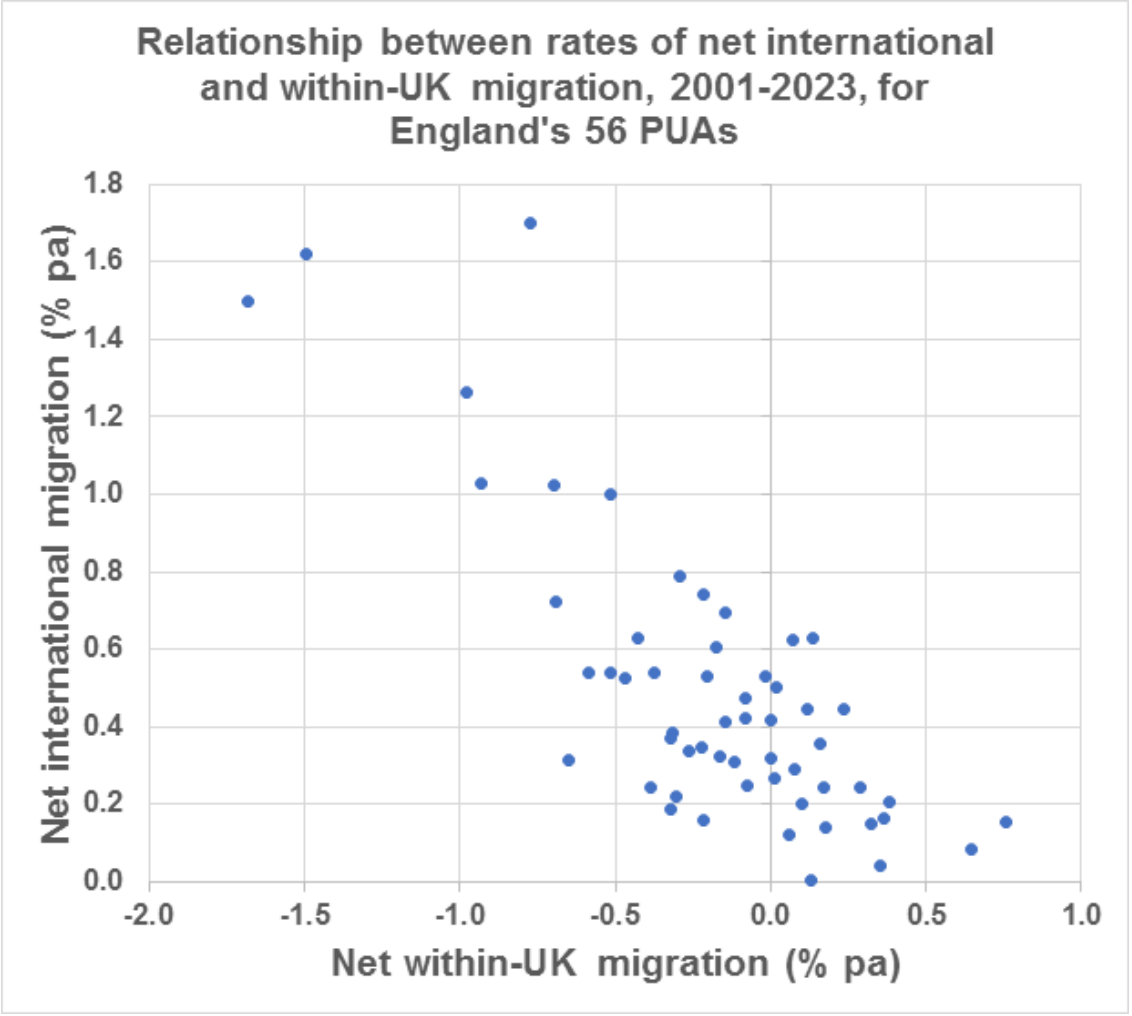
- Internal migration (green) displays clear urban-to-rural pattern in both regions, but opposite for international migration (yellow) and natural change (brown)
- London has highest intensity of change, but its pattern of natural increase, net immigration and net loss to rest of UK also found for Large Cities in both regions

Average annual change rate (%) by component of population change, 2001-2023, for England's 296 LTLAs (2023 geography) aggregated to SOEC types



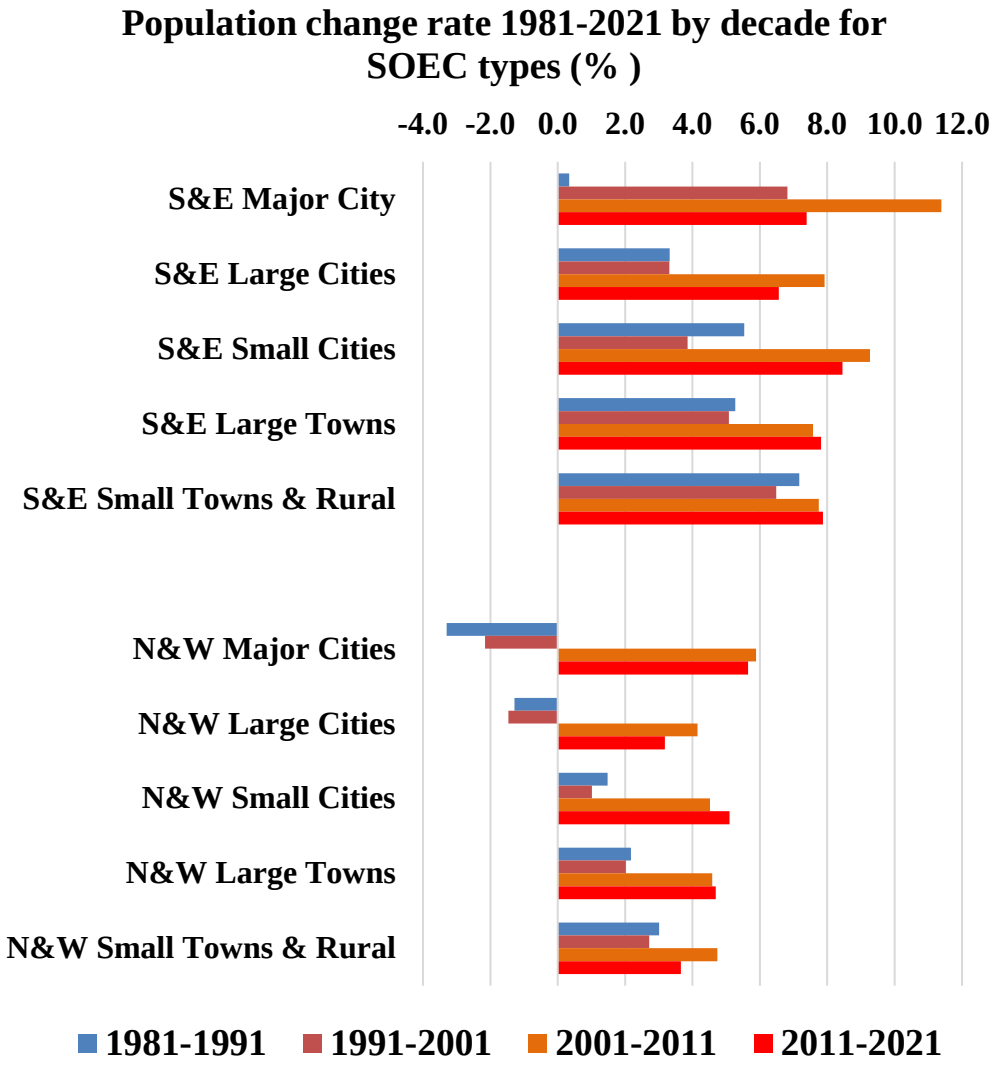
Link between net international and within-UK migration for the 56 Cities?

- This link is suggested by previous slide for 10 types
- Yes, a strong negative one: cities with highest gains from overseas (Y-axis) have highest loss to the rest of UK (X-axis)
- Why? An under-researched topic. Suggestions include: (1) Native leavers releasing homes for new immigrants? (2) Onward move of previous immigrants? (3) Pressure from immigration forcing or easing exodus of residents?
- Plus: a strong positive link between international gains and strong natural increase (not shown here)



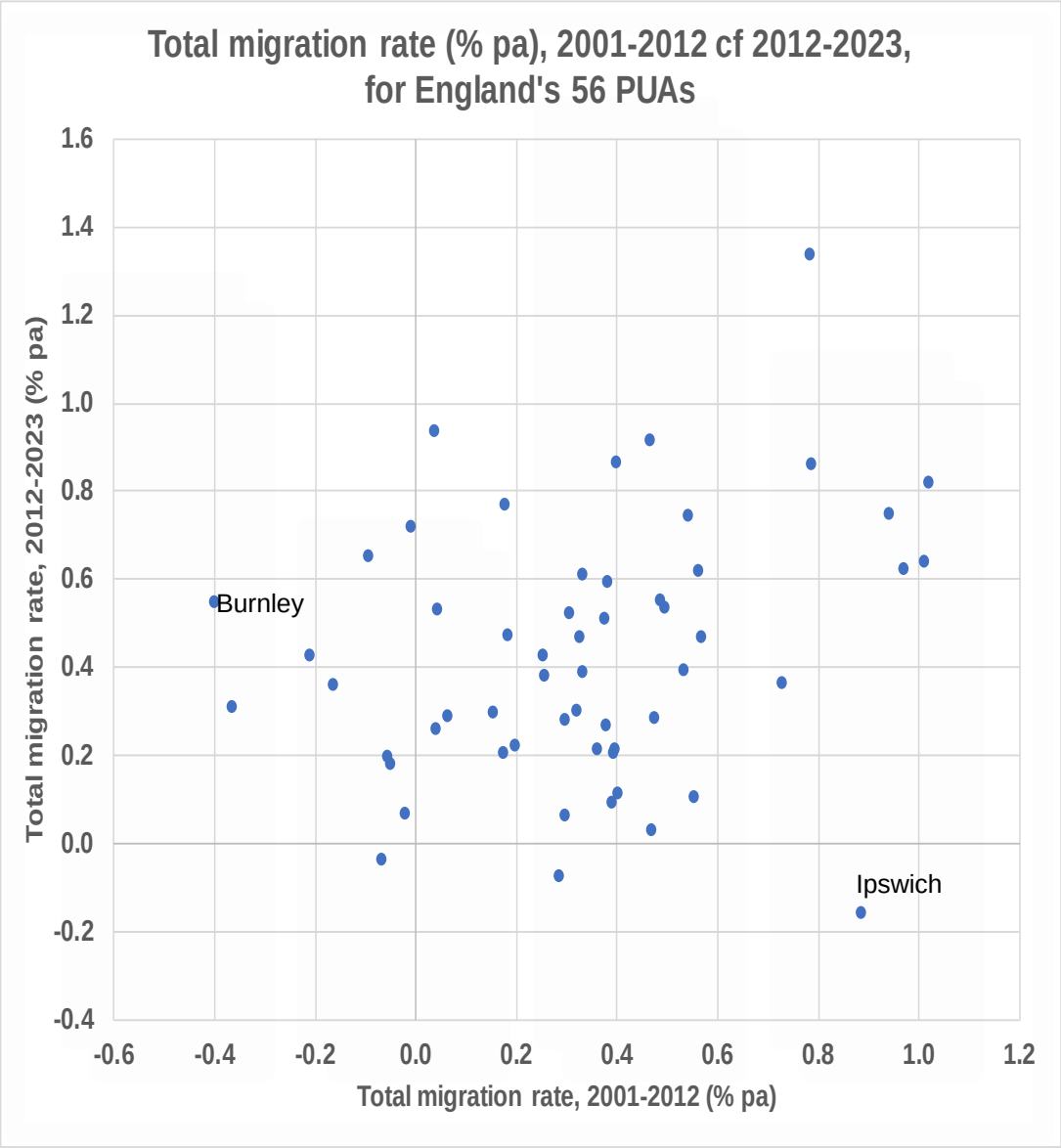
The long view: four decades of overall population change for the 10 SOEC types

- National context of a huge jump in overall population growth between 1990s and 2000s
- Biggest jump is for Major Cities – for South & East (i.e. London) in 1990s and for N&W in 2000s
- Least change for Small Towns & Rural in both regions, so no longer is there a rural 'premium' in either's population growth
- But South & East's 'premium' persists for all 5 size types in all 4 decades
- London is distinctive in the timing of its 'renaissance', underway by 1990s but then fading in 2010s (red bar)



Clearly a lot can alter between decades, also seen for 56 Cities, 2012-2023 cf 2001-2012

- How much stability in total migration rate (within-UK, international and UPC) across England's 56 Cities?
- Chart compares rate for 2001-12 (X-axis) with that for 2012-23 (Y-axis)
- Just a weakly positive relationship between the two periods and a wide spread – even if ignoring outliers like Burnley and Ipswich
- So, the past appears not to be a very helpful predictor of the future – a challenge for research, policy and projections (assuming all the data are correct)



Looking ahead – the challenge

ONS is engaged in producing 2022-based Subnational Population Projections (SNPP), with the migration component of the Principal Projection likely to be based on the previous 5 years' experience and a variant based on 10 years – provisionally due for release on 9 May

What to expect? The last 5 years has been a tumultuous time due to the pandemic & lockdowns, the potential freeing-up of residential choice due to advances in ITC, the recent surge in net immigration, etc.

The past decade is also tricky because of data issues including:

- disruption of migration data sources due to the pandemic, e.g. suspension of the International Passenger Survey, delays in recording address changes
- inaccuracy in rolling forward migration estimates from the 2011 Census, prompting ONS to include UPC (Unattributable Population Change) as an extra component in its rebased 2011-2021 mid-year estimates
- changes in methodology, with Higher Education Leavers Method (HELM) backdated to 2011 and more recent changes backdated to 2017

In any case the internal migration elements of SNPP are indeed 'projections', not designed to anticipate changes in people's behaviour nor allowed to take account of change in government policy (like a new set of house-building targets)

Instead, they are best seen as 'what if?' scenarios that flag up areas of potential policy concern rather than planning for them as if they are inevitable

Summary: an evolving scene

Clearly a lot can alter between decades and recent years have witnessed major changes including:

- the continued decline in shorter-distance address changing – for most types of people (but needs checking with ONS-LS data) – mainly due to housing factors (willingness & ability to move home), but likely to impinge on labour mobility
- longer-distance migration rates holding up better, but mainly due to rising HE participation that initially boosts university cities and towns and then opens up extra migration options, notably the London 'career escalator' but also Bristol, Manchester, etc.
- International migration (including students) now being a bigger player than in the past, but with less focus on London than previously and apparently with knock-on effects on internal migration (and natural change)

Finally, 'events' like the business cycle still cause short-term uncertainty, but at regional and local levels even more than national level it seems that the recent past provides little guide to the future – making it a particularly challenging time for producing population projections

Internal migration and geographical labour mobility in the UK

Tony Champion

tony.champion@newcastle.ac.uk