Briefing: Lochaber Population Projections

June 2025

Lochaber Redesign Project

Population projections for Scotland's sub-council areas (SCAP) have not been undertaken since the Scottish Local Government Improvement Service publication of 2020.[1] Using a 2018 mid-year population estimate as the base year, they cover the period to 2030, and the Lochaber projection currently informs the clinical specifications developed by Buchan Associates for the service models of the redesign project.

There is no confirmed schedule for the update of the SCAP, either by the Improvement Service or the National Records of Scotland (NRS). NRS regularly publishes population projections for Scotland and administrative areas, including councils and health boards.[2] Previously, individual local authorities undertook population projections as requirements for local area planning.

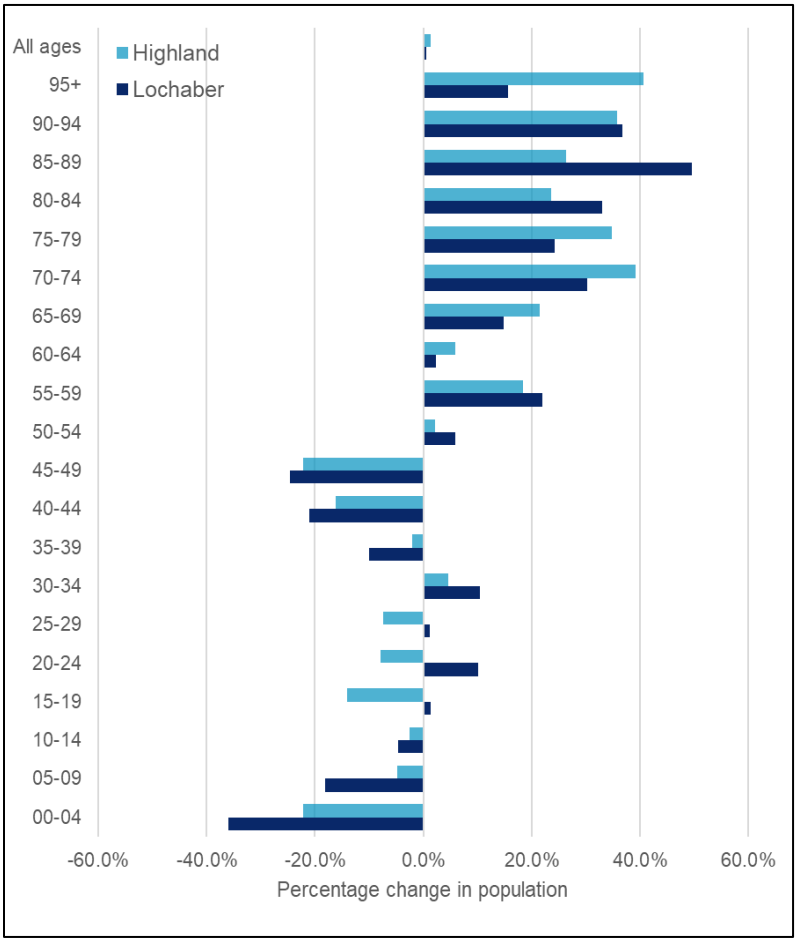
The most important source of new demographic evidence since the development of the clinical specifications is the Scottish Census in 2022, providing the most accurate population size and structure count since the previous Census of 2011.[3]

At the Census in 2022, the total population of the Lochaber area was 20,081, a 0.5 percent increase from 2011. In comparison, the population of Highland increased by 1.4 percent to 235,341.[4,5]

Maintaining or growing population numbers in Lochaber, as in Highland and Scotland, depends on inward migration, offsetting negative natural population change caused by deaths exceeding births, and the outward movement of people seeking education and employment elsewhere.

Nationally and locally, adverse life expectancy trends and further reductions in birth rates to historic lows over the last ten years mean population growth requires attracting people to replace negative natural population loss and outward migration.

Exhibit 1: Percentage change in the population of Lochaber between the Census of 2011 and the Census of 2022 [4,5]



The total population of Lochaber grew by less than one percent over the intra-census period.

A particularly large reduction in young children reflects very low annual birth rates.

The population structure continues to age, with people born in the post-war period and the 1960s baby boom getting older.

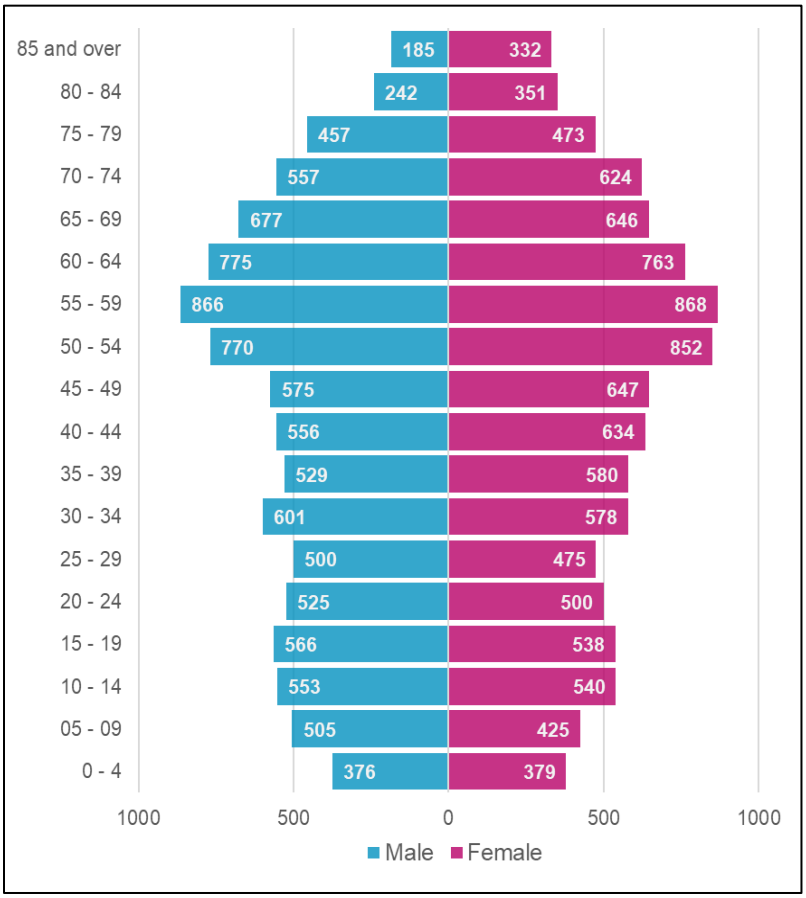
There are now more people aged 65 and over than people under 15 in the area.

Migration flows, particularly for small populations, are difficult to project or forecast accurately, with uncertainty increasing over any projected period.

Scenarios for higher population growth in Lochaber, reliant on economic developments driven by the expectation of a new factory at the Fort William aluminium smelter site priming inward migration to the area, published in population forecasts commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 2018, now appear overly optimistic. [6]

What is certain is that, given Lochaber's current population structure, population ageing will continue as larger cohorts age and are replaced at younger ages by smaller numbers.

Exhibit 2: Population of Lochaber at Census 2022 by age band and sex



The age structure of the Lochaber population is already top-heavy with large cohorts of people in older age groups, supported by fewer people of working age and younger people.

Over the next twenty years, the larger number of people born in the baby boom years of the 1960s, currently aged in their 50s and early 60s, will reach older ages and be replaced by the smaller cohort currently in their 30s and 40s.

The proportion of older people can be expected to increase substantially, often in areas within Lochaber that are considered demographically and economically fragile, where population numbers are static or decreasing. [7] These areas are commonly the most under-served by health and social care services.

There is a strong link between age and health, and the general demographic picture currently informing clinical planning for the hospital and community services in Lochaber of smaller populations of children and young people, further reductions in the working-age population, and an increase in the proportion of older people is consistent with what is known about the components of population change in the area.

In common with the rest of Highland and Scotland, as the population continues to age in Lochaber, rising demand for treatment, care and support, plus increasingly complex healthcare needs, must be considered in planning for the local health and social care system, recognising the challenges to the available workforce.

References

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[2] National Records of Scotland. Population and migration. Available from: https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/population-migration-and-households/# [Access 12 June 2025]

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[4] National Records of Scotland. Scotland's Census 2022: Age by single year of age – Table UV103 by data zone. Available from: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/search-the-census#/topics/list?topic=Demography%20and%20migration&categoryId=2 [Accessed 11 June 2025]

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[6] Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Population and demographic projections for Lochaber. Inverness. Ekosgen and Context Economics. 2018. Available from: https://www.hie.co.uk/media/2987/lochaberpluspopulationplusprojectionsplus-plusreport.pdf [Accessed 11 June 2025]

[7] Highland and Islands Enterprise. Review of fragile areas and employment action areas in the Highlands and Islands. 2014. Available from: https://www.hie.co.uk/media/3105/reviewplusofplusfragileplusareasplusandplusemploymentplusactionplusareasplusinplustheplushighlandsplusandplusislandsplus-plusexecutiveplussummaryplus-a2363434.pdf

[Accessed 11 June 2025]