



## Sixty seconds on . . . life expectancy

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### Is it really shrinking?

No, but it's not growing as quickly as it was. And the UK's slowdown in growth is greater than in any comparable country except the US.

### Who says?

The Office for National Statistics has taken figures from the Human Mortality Database and standardised them for population size and age structure in different countries to allow a fair comparison.<sup>1</sup>

### What does it show?

Comparing 2006-11 with 2011-16, UK improvements in life expectancy fell from 17.3 weeks a year to 4.2 weeks a year. In women the slowdown was steeper than in men.

### Does anyone know why?

The change began soon after the coalition government bore down on public spending, so it's plausible to believe that this is a factor. But from 2011 to 2016 many other countries in Europe also showed a slowdown. The UK's seemed more abrupt because of an extraordinarily good performance from 2006 to 2011.

### How good?

From 1960 to 2010 life expectancy rose on average by about 10 weeks a year. From 2006 to 2011 the rate was 17.3 weeks.

Figures since then could simply reflect a regression to the mean—a return to more average rates.

### Could cuts in social care be to blame?

Maybe. But mortality trends in the people most likely to be in social care, the over 80s, were no worse in the UK than in France or Germany. Still, other countries did a lot better.

### Is the trend reversible?

Yes. Japan experienced a pause in life expectancy in 2006-11, but it recovered strongly in 2011-16.

### So, is this a fuss about nothing?

That's for Public Health England to decide in a review ordered by the government.<sup>2</sup> Since 2000 the UK's life expectancy trend has closely paralleled that in other developed countries, as the Office for National Statistics report shows (see section 4).<sup>1</sup> But the trend lines are not straight: growth waxes and wanes in different countries at different times, making shorter term comparisons potentially misleading.

1 Office for National Statistics. Changing trends in mortality: an international comparison: 2000 to 2016. 7 Aug 2018. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/changingtrendsinternationalcomparison/2000to2016](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/changingtrendsinternationalcomparison/2000to2016).

2 Kmiotowicz Z. Excess deaths: government commissions review. *BMJ* 2018;361:k2795. doi:10.1136/bmj.k2795

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