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# PLANNING FOR AN OLDER FUTURE

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE  
'AGEING POPULATION' AND  
WHAT ARE THE  
IMPLICATIONS FOR  
PLANNING?

**O**ur ageing population - a phrase we seem to hear more and more often. Mostly in relation to the perennial wrangles over national superannuation. Sometimes with regard to the future impact of greater numbers of older people on our health and social services. But hardly ever in relation to resource management issues.

What is all the fuss about? And what does it mean for us as planners? This article describes the ageing population trend in demographic terms, before considering the likely impacts for planning under the Resource Management Act<sup>1</sup>. The overall conclusion is that as a profession we need to pay more attention to the implications of this significant demographic phenomenon. Planning for different types of activity is one thing; we also need to be able to incorporate different sectors of the community into our planning.

## OUR AGEING POPULATION<sup>2</sup>

One in four New Zealanders will be aged 65 and over by the year 2051, compared to one in eight at present<sup>3</sup>. Compared to 461,000 older persons today, 1.22 million out of a projected 4.81 million New Zealanders will have reached our current retirement age by 2051. The median age of our population will have increased by ten years, from 35 to 45.

While the year 2051 may seem a long way off, these figures are a continuation of a trend that is occurring already - and has been for some time (Table 1). Since early last century, the proportion of older people has been slowly but steadily increasing, while the proportion of children has been declining. The latter trend was temporarily reversed by the post-World War II baby boom from 1946 to 1965, which saw fertility (or birth) rates increase over this twenty year period.

An additional trend identified by Statistics New Zealand is the growth in the very old (people aged 85 years and over). They are projected to increase from 48,639 in 2001 to over quarter of a million by 2051. Not only will there be greater numbers of people reaching retirement age, they will have longer life expectancies at retirement.

## WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

There are two significant long-term trends contributing to our ageing population. One is the decrease in birth rates and shift to smaller family sizes. This trend is now such that the current birth rate of an average 2.01 births per woman is below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman (that level required for the population to replace itself without any migration). While there is variation between ethnic groups, birth rates are also dropping amongst those groups with higher average rates, namely Maori and Pacific Island ethnic groups.

The other major trend is increased life expectancies. There are a number of facets to this, including improved living conditions, healthier lifestyles, and advances in medical care. Not least has been the significant drop in infant mortality rates over the last century.

The effect of these trends will be exacerbated from 2011 as the baby boomers start to enter the 65 plus age range. The twenty years following 2011 will see most of the projected increase in older people. By the decade 2041-2051 the increase in over 65s will have slowed to a comparatively small 23,000, around the same time that the overall New Zealand population is expected to stop growing.

Our perception of 'old age' may be becoming older. Improved healthcare and healthier lifestyles will see those in retirement ages leading more active lives. This is already evidenced by increasing numbers of over 65s choosing to remain in the workforce, helped by legislative changes which have seen the abolition of the upper age limit for employment.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING

The most obvious planning implications of the ageing of our population lie in the area of housing provision. Many older people seek smaller units situated on easycare sections. An Auckland study on housing demand and supply concluded that the degree to which older people may trade down to smaller homes is uncertain, particularly given their

Table 1. Changes to New Zealand Population Age Structure, 1901-2051

Age Group	1901	1926	1946	1966	1986	2001	2051
Under 15 years	33%	30%	27%	32%	25%	23%	16%
15-64 years	63%	65%	64%	59%	65%	65%	59%
65 years and over	4%	5%	9%	8%	10%	12%	25%
Ratio of Under 15 to 65+	8:1	6:1	3:1	4:1	2.5:1	2:1	1:1.5
Median Age (years)	23	26	30	26	30	35	45

Source: Statistics New Zealand. Figures for 2051 are based on Statistics NZ 2001 (base) population projections.

increasing overall health and mobility (Lindsey, 2001). Some increases in demand for smaller units should be expected, however, given the size of the projected increases over coming decades. The anticipated growth in the 'very old' can at the least be expected to drive some of this demand.

In many areas our housing stock may not be able to cope with these demographic changes. Demand for smaller units may give rise to more infill housing, greater numbers of townhouses and other types of smaller units, and further increases in the construction of retirement villages. District plan provisions will need to be revisited to cater for a higher density of housing distributed more widely across our towns and cities.

A practical application of this lies in the area of local authority housing. Dunedin City Council currently provides around 1,000 community housing units, with eligibility based on age and income thresholds. The Council is undertaking population and income modelling to ascertain the likely future demand for older persons' housing across different parts of the city. This in turn will inform policy planners as to when and where increased demands for medium to high density housing units may occur.

Higher density housing invariably raises a number of design issues. Design for older persons' housing needs to have particular regard to personal safety, both in the sense of injury prevention and crime prevention, as well as taking care to avoid issues of social isolation. Housing situated on flat land is more desirable, in close proximity to transport, shops, healthcare and other community services.

It is not only the distribution of older people within urban areas that must be planned for, but also distribution between centres. The trend for people to retire to areas such as Nelson and Tauranga is not a new one. However this trend may become even more pronounced, particularly as the large baby boom cohort reaches the

retirement ages. Such centres could begin to take on a real 'retirement town' feel with increasingly high proportions of over 65s.

Within our towns and cities, infrastructure and services other than housing will also need to adapt. The demand for public transport services is likely to increase. The demand for healthcare services will also increase, with implications for both the expansion of existing facilities and where to site new facilities. Councils will need to consider and plan for the differing leisure and recreation requirements of older people.

The design of our urban spaces must adapt, whether it be public places, retail spaces or community facilities. Accessibility for the less mobile will become even more of an issue. The dominance of cars in many town centres may be challenged by increased numbers of older pedestrians. Personal safety concerns in public places will need to be addressed, with older people often having a different perception of what is a safe environment.

Planning implications may also follow from the expected decline in children aged under 15 (projected to decrease in number across New Zealand from 877,000 in 2001 to 752,000 in 2051), with some areas facing an oversupply of pre-school and school facilities and playgrounds.

## CONCLUSION

While Resource Management Act plans have ten year timeframes, they are often aligned to strategic plans with longer timeframes. As planners, we need to consider demographic trends that take effect over very long periods and build any associated issues into our plans. The ageing of our population is such that effects are becoming more and more apparent over shorter timeframes. This will particularly be the case from 2011 onward, as the large baby boom cohort starts to enter the retirement ages.


Aside from the physical resource issues

discussed in this article, the ageing population phenomenon will lead to greater numbers of older people with time on their hands. These folk will be increasingly well-educated, with a growing familiarity with technology. A likely result will be greater involvement by older people in planning and other community issues. Indeed, we should view our older people as a great resource for our communities. The flipside is that planners and politicians will ignore the future requirements of the growing grey demographic at their peril!

## FOOTNOTES

1. The myriad impacts of the ageing population for social and economic planning (eg health, welfare, labour force, and fiscal planning) are outside the scope of this article.

2. This article draws heavily on Statistics New Zealand Census and projections data.

3. The projections used here are from Statistics New Zealand Series 4 (2001 base), which assumes medium fertility, medium mortality, and long term annual net immigration of 5,000 people. 

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