



Comparison of trends in life expectancy and disability-free life expectancy between the UK and the remaining countries of the EU28

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Executive Summary

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This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research Policy Research Unit in Older People and Frailty. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Policy Research Unit Programme Reference Number PR-PRU-1217-21502

Context

Life expectancy (LE) has been increasing in most parts of the world over recent decades. However in the UK, increases in LE have stalled or reversed. The UK government has committed to increasing healthy and independent life by five years by 2035, as well as reducing inequalities between the richest and poorest in society. This report uses the Healthy Life Years indicator, a measure of disability-free life expectancy (DFLE) that is harmonised across the EU. The aim is to compare LE and DFLE between the UK and the other countries of the EU28, between 2008 and 2016, therefore prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

In the UK, between 2008 and 2016:

LE at birth and age 65

- Rates of increase in LE at birth and age 65 moved from being amongst the highest of the EU28 in 2008, to a rate below most other EU28 countries in 2011. Most other countries saw linear increases in LE at birth and age 65.
- Differences between males and females in LE at birth and age 65 narrowed throughout the period 2008-2016, albeit more slowly than in other EU countries.

DFLE at birth and age 65

- DFLE at birth and age 65 fell significantly, as did DFLE as a proportion of LE (DFLE%) and healthy life expectancy (HLE) based on self-rated health. The majority of EU28 countries saw increases in DFLE and DFLE% between 2008-2016.
- Differences between male and female DFLE at birth narrowed between 2008 and 2016. Differences between male and female DFLE at age 65 persisted over the period, as did sex differences in DFLE%.
- In most other countries, differences between males and females in DFLE indicators persisted. The exceptions were Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus, Italy and Sweden, which reported increases in the differences between males and females for DFLE indicators.

Expansion and compression of disability

- The slowing of the increase in LE at birth and at age 65, and reductions in DFLE and DFLE%, led to a period of **absolute expansion of disability** in the UK, i.e. more years would be lived in a disabled state. This has implications for the demand on health and care services as well as other policies to ensure fiscal sustainability with the continued ageing of the population.
- A small group of other EU countries (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Greece and Luxembourg) were also in a period of absolute expansion of disability.
- In contrast Ireland and Slovakia went through a period of **absolute compression of disability** but only for females.

Conclusions

Between 2008 and 2016, performance of UK life and health expectancies was worse than most other EU28 countries. The UK was one of only six EU countries to experience a period of absolute expansion of disability. The UK saw a narrowing of the difference between men and women in LE and DFLE at birth, and LE at 65, but this should be interpreted in the context of deteriorating performance in LE and DFLE. Findings of this report suggest that if current trends continue, the UK government is unlikely to achieve the increase of five healthy independent years by 2035. Moreover, although this report does not include the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the excess deaths, and the reported long-term effects on health of COVID-19, may well lead to further reductions in UK DFLE.

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