

2024 GENERAL ELECTION BRIEF

Immigration

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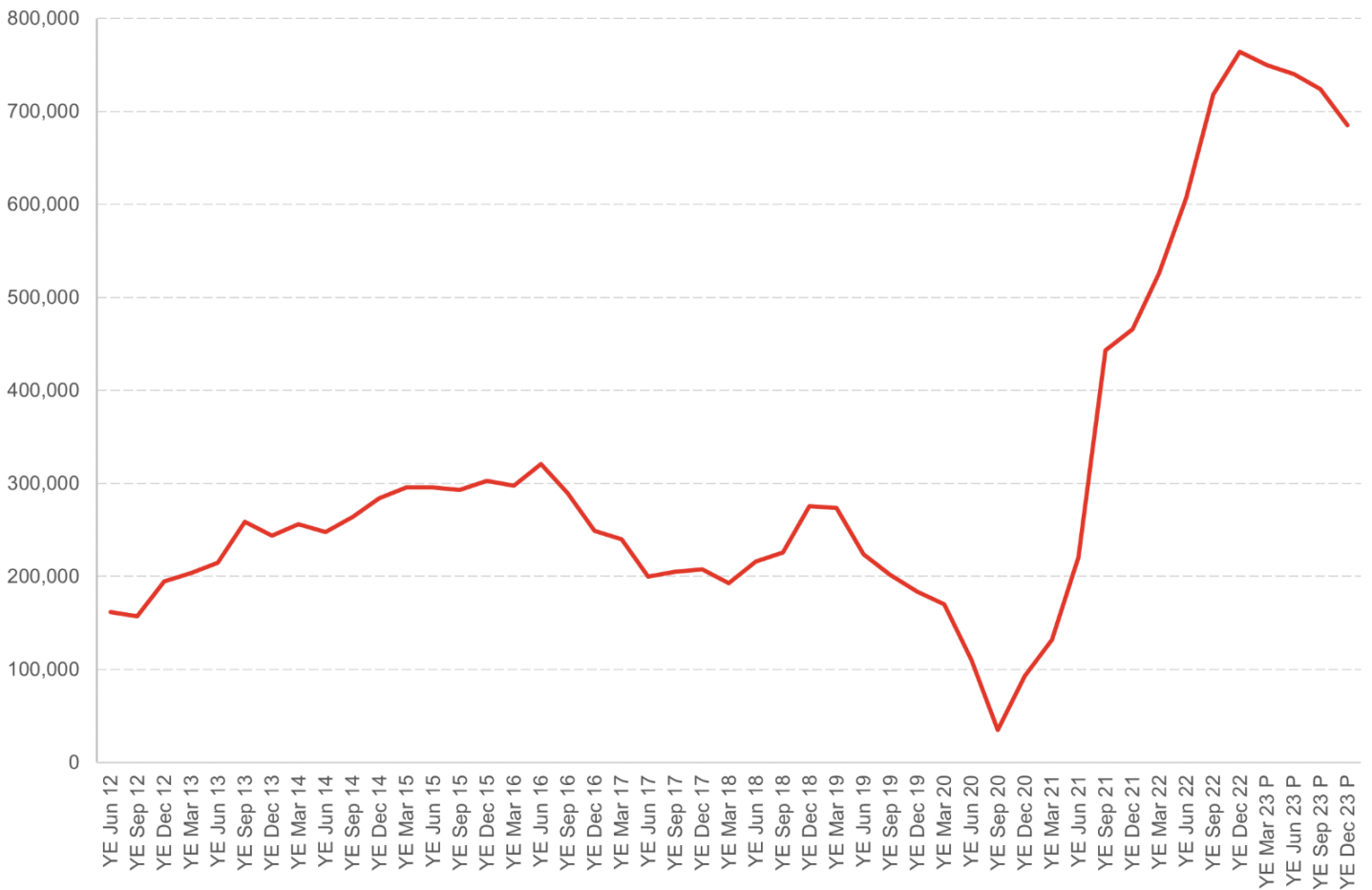
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Immigration has been a dominant topic in the election debate so far, with the two main parties pledging to bring down migration numbers in the face of near-record-high levels of net migration.

Immigration policy is explicitly reserved, so it is the role of the UK Government to set policy for the whole country. This means, of course, that policy may not be tailored to the circumstances in particular regions.

The latest data shows that almost 700,000 more people arrived in the UK than left during 2023. This is considerably higher than the pre-COVID average (2012-2019) of around 240,000 people per year (which, in itself, is much higher than the goals set by successive Conservative Governments to get it down to “tens of thousands”).

Chart: Net Migration, UK, 2012-2023



Source: ONS

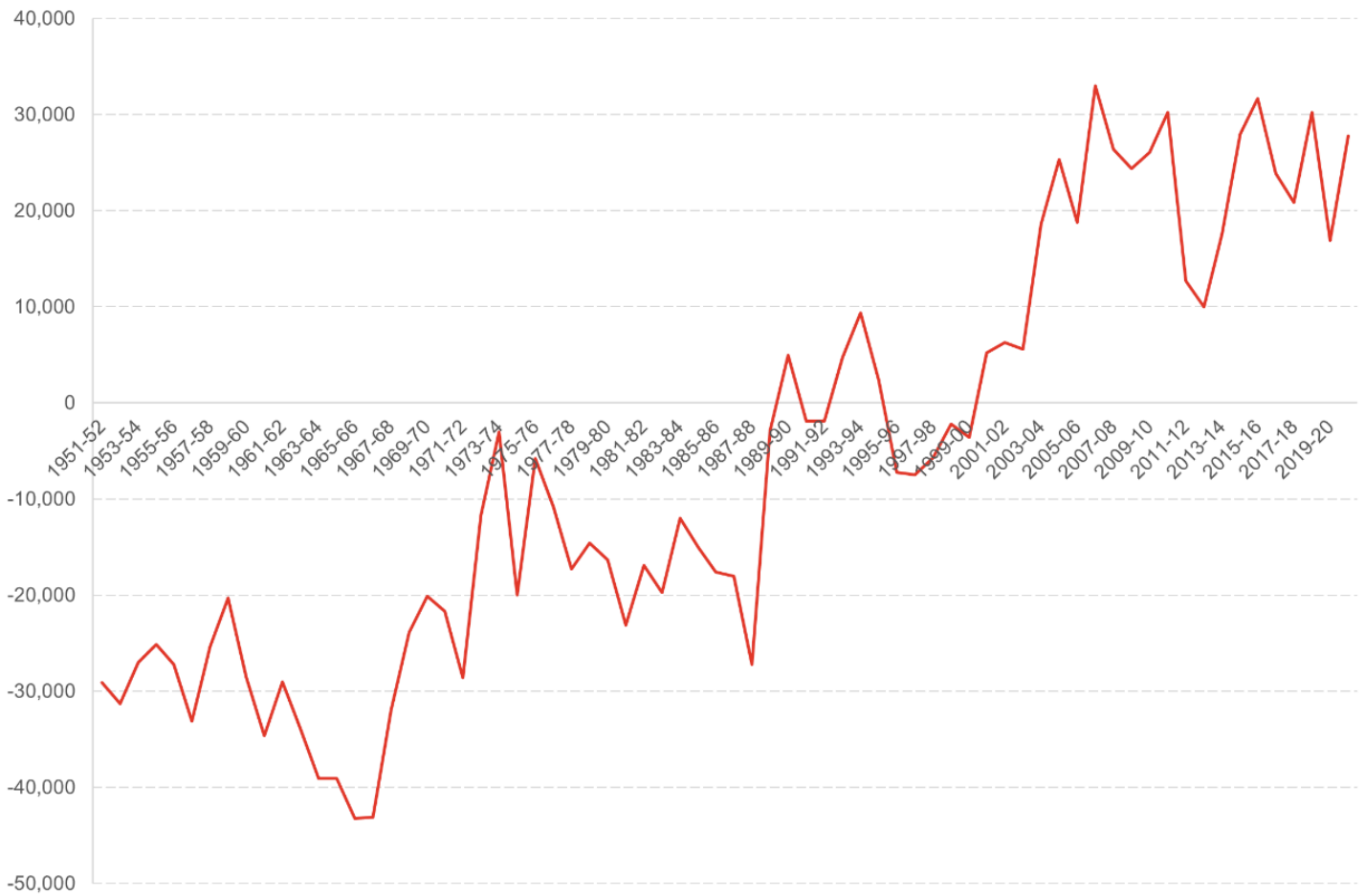
The projections for the UK population show increases from 68.4 million to 73.7 million by mid-2036 and to 76.6 million by mid-2046. Almost all of the projected population growth comes from positive net migration, with the numbers of births and deaths over this period pretty much equalling each other.

The ONS central population projections currently assume that net migration will move towards an average of 315,000. Now, the ONS will rightly say that these are projections, not forecasts, and the equilibrium number assumed is based simply on recent numbers in the net migration statistics. However, it is striking that this is significantly above the assumption in the last set of central population projections, which assumed net migration of 190,000 per year.

Scotland's demographic outlook is very different to the rest of the UK. Due to the different timing of the Scottish Census, we do not yet have comparable figures, but the current population projections suggest that we will start to see a decrease in the Scottish population over the next few years. Natural change (births minus deaths) in Scotland is negative, as it has been for many years, with population growth coming in recent years only from migration.

This is a fairly recent phenomenon for Scotland, which traditionally, since the post-war period, has been a net exporter of people. It has really been since EU accession and enlargement in the 2000s that there has been a sustained period of inward migration into Scotland. Migration Policy Scotland's recent survey on attitudes towards immigration in Scotland finds that although the level of support for reducing immigration has grown in Scotland, it remains lower than in the UK as a whole.

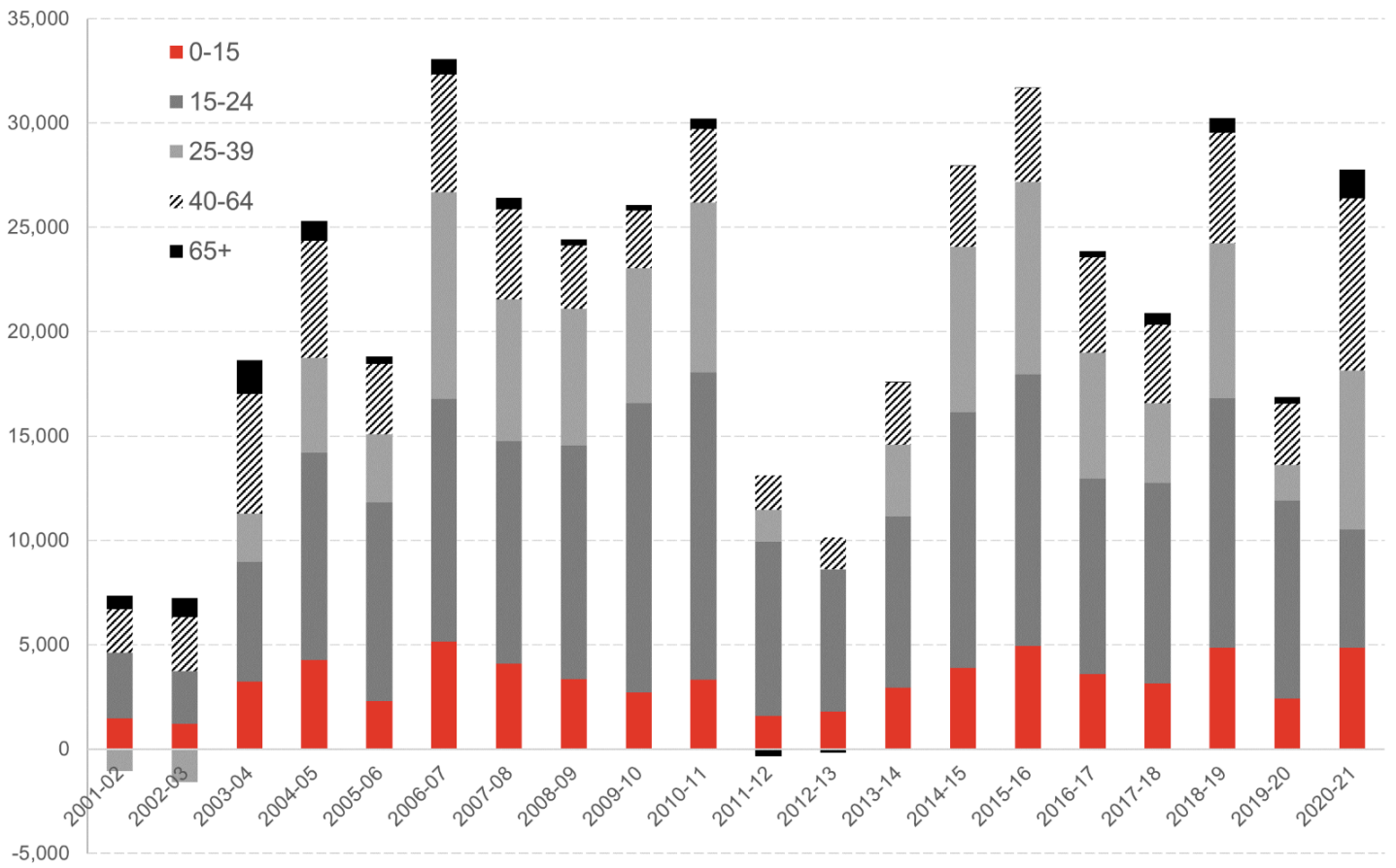
Chart: Net Migration, Scotland, 1951-52 to 2020-21



Source: NRS

The make-up of migrants during this period of positive net migration has varied over the years, but it has generally been dominated by people of working age. Positive net immigration of younger people has helped to balance an ageing Scottish-born population. Working-age immigrants to Scotland also play an important role in the labour market, where 14.3% of the Scottish labour force was born outside the UK. Impacts of potential immigration restrictions on key sectors like health and social care are therefore of particular salience in Scotland.

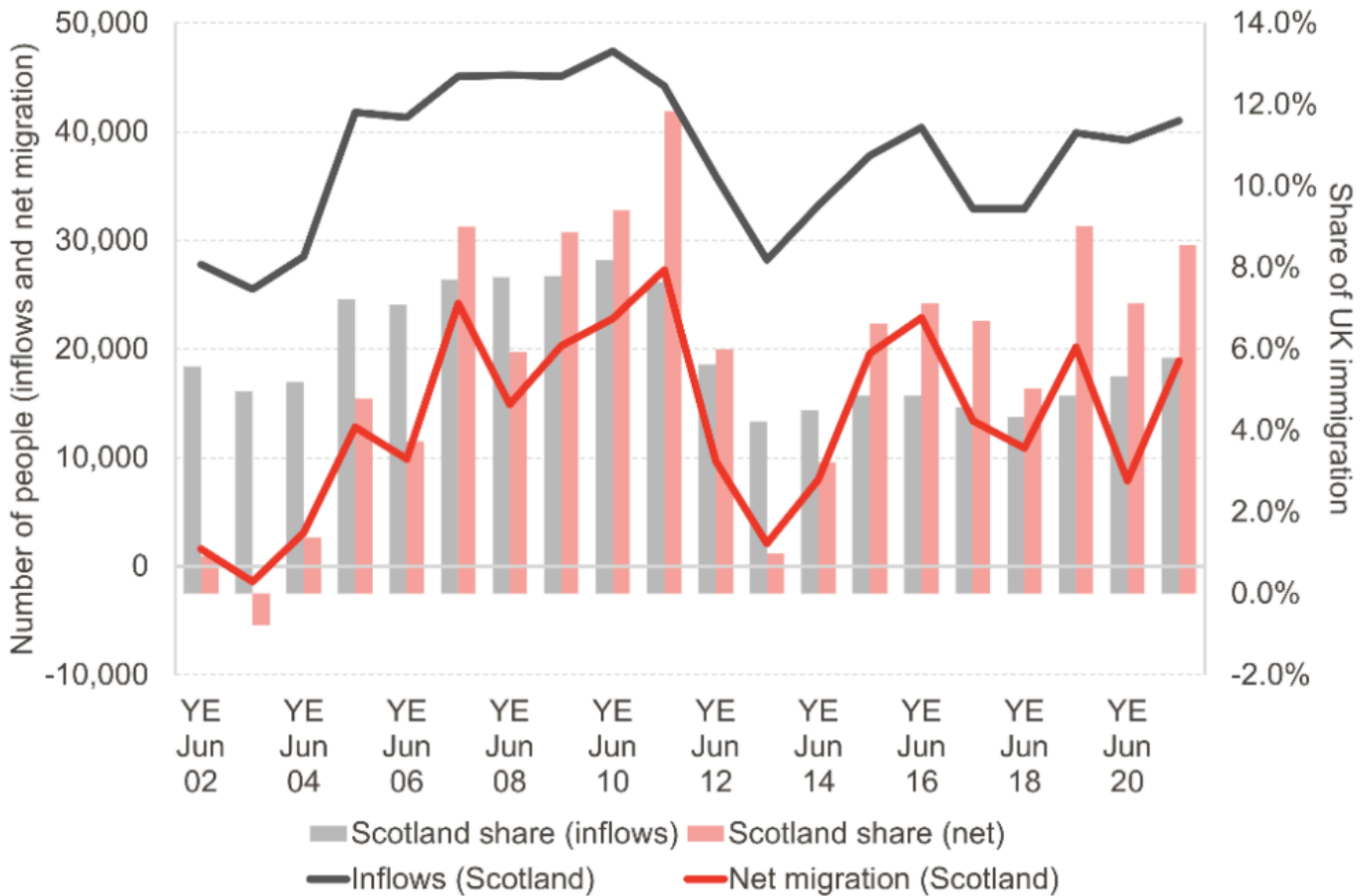
Chart: Net Migration, Scotland, 2001-02 to 2020-21, by age



Source : NRS

The extent to which Scotland receives migrants that come to the UK has varied hugely over the last few decades, but over the period has averaged at around 6%, significantly lower than the Scottish population share of 8.4%.

Chart: International migration to Scotland, YE June 2002 – YE June 2021



Source: [Randolph and Kay \(2024\)](#)

The degree to which (reserved) decisions about immigration will consider the needs of the Scottish population or labour market is a key question in the election debate in Scotland so far. Some politicians in Scotland have referred back to Jack McConnell’s Fresh Talent Initiative, which was specifically aimed at encouraging people to settle in Scotland, as an example of a tailored initiative that has been a success in the past.

What the parties have said to date

Reform UK have proposed to freeze non-essential immigration. What exactly would be defined as essential hasn’t been set out to date, but they mention doctors, nurses and business people who earn above the average salary. This has been characterised more recently as a goal of “net-zero immigration”, so that the number of people coming into the country is offset completely by the numbers leaving each year, “to keep the population stable”.

The Conservatives have proposed a cap on the number of visas each year as part of an effort to bring down numbers. They have suggested a stronger role for the Migration Advisory Committee, which would make recommendations about the size of the cap and the possible make-up, in terms of types of visas or sectors affected.

Labour also say that net migration numbers are too high, but have refused to put a particular target number on net migration. They have said that they would link the migration system to mandatory training and workforce plans for British workers – an interesting potential foray into devolved areas in Scotland if it is linked to employability schemes in some way.

The Lib Dems have not proposed particular numbers, but the sorts of proposals they published in their manifesto earlier this week are unlikely to place downward pressure on the numbers.

The SNP are calling explicitly for higher levels of migration, particularly given the fact that the demographic outlook for Scotland is for population decline with a population that is ageing more quickly than in the UK as a whole. The Alba party also explicitly calls itself "pro-immigration".

Both the Scottish Greens and the Green Party of England and Wales have in the past been liberal on migration, but neither have explicitly set out their position in this election campaign.

We will analyse all policies on immigration once the manifestos are all out and will reflect on the potential implications for Scotland.

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