

# CHANGING ROOMS

## Space to live

In the UK, people's experience of how much space they have to live in varies markedly. Some people have more space than they may need, others have too little, and overcrowding and under-occupancy of houses vary geographically across the UK. Areas in which more households are overcrowded do not also tend to contain larger numbers of homes that are underoccupied. Solving housing shortages *within* areas in the UK is not simply a matter of converting larger houses to flats and somehow 'redistributing' rooms. Overcrowding and underoccupancy of homes vary widely geographically between different, but often neighbouring, parts of the UK.

## Overcrowding and households in low occupation

Decent housing is a basic human right. Most of us spend the majority of our 24-hour day at home, either awake or asleep. The physical and social environment offered to us by our homes can have a range of impacts on our health and well-being<sup>1</sup>. Since the beginning of the 20th century, governments and local authorities have recognised that quality housing is essential and have made efforts to ensure that everyone has a warm, dry place to live where children can grow up safely. In the UK today, however, the quality of the housing we each enjoy varies enormously. One of the key indicators of housing quality employed in the UK is the relationship between the number of people who share a dwelling and the size of that dwelling, usually measured in terms of the number of rooms it has. As the distribution of people around the UK continually shifts and changes, with notable recent expansion in the cities and especially in the South East of England, the pressure on the housing supply has become notable. Plans to build new housing developments, even new towns, to satisfy the changing and growing demands



## Life in Britain

The latest Census reveals that within the UK people live in very different worlds. For some, resources and amenities abound; for others life is characterised by deprivation and difficulties, especially when their need for support is great.

The 2001 Census marked the bi-centenary of census taking in the UK. It is the most comprehensive social record of life in this country now available. Since 1801 successive governments have asked the population to assist in the taking of a Census.

This report is one of a series of 10 showing key patterns and inequalities in life in the UK revealed by the 2001 Census. These reports focus on geographical inequalities, highlighting where services and opportunities appear not to be available or accessible to those people and places that need them most.

for larger or smaller, cheaper or more exclusive housing make headlines in regional and national media. In this report we take two groups of people to illustrate and compare the current housing experiences of UK residents as recorded at the 2001 Census.

The first group are those defined as living in an 'overcrowded' house. That is to say, there are more people sharing the same dwelling than is recommended. Living in an overcrowded house is associated with physical and mental health problems<sup>1</sup>. Not having enough space can be very stressful. The government actually lays down occupancy standards that specify in a complex way exactly how many people should be living in a dwelling according to its size and number of bedrooms<sup>2</sup>, but for this study we have taken a more simple definition of overcrowding. This group might be taken as representing those who have less space than they need. The second group are those defined as living in an 'underoccupied home'. That is to say, that there are very few people living in a dwelling, given the size of that dwelling. This group might be taken as representing those who have more space than they need.

The 2001 Census asked each household for details of their dwelling, including the number of rooms available to the household. The actual question asked by the Census was:

**How many rooms do you have for use only by your household?**

- **Do not count** bathrooms, toilets, halls or landings, or rooms that can only be used for storage such as cupboards.
- **Do count all other rooms, for example** kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, utility rooms and studies.
- **If two rooms have been converted into one, count them as one room.**

Other questions in the Census establish the number of people living in the household. Using the number of people, and the number of rooms, the Census provides a count of *the number of people per room* for each household in the UK. Using this information we can compare the proportion of households that are overcrowded and those that are underoccupied in an area

and this provides a picture of housing occupancy across the country. For this analysis, overcrowded households were defined as those with more than one person per room, or more simply, households in which there are more people than rooms (using the definition of 'rooms' above). This is a reasonable and simple definition of overcrowding. The analysis defines underoccupation as households with just one or two people living in dwellings of eight or more rooms. This is a quite generous definition of under-occupancy, but it does reflect the growing desire for space in our homes.

This report compares the proportions of overcrowded and underoccupied homes for 142 areas across the UK – counties, unitary authorities and former metropolitan authorities, as used in the other reports in this series. The analysis addresses this question:

**Do areas where a higher proportion of households are overcrowded tend also to have a lower level of underoccupied homes?**

## Findings

There were 24.5 million households recorded in the UK at the 2001 Census. Just under half a million (1.9%) had more people than rooms and, by our definition, are overcrowded. Although this seems a very small proportion, it is still a very large number of households. About 1 million households (4.3%) had one or two people living in eight or more rooms, that is to say, they were underoccupied. There are therefore more than twice as many households that have more space than they might need than there are overcrowded households. Much is written about the growing gap between rich and poor in the UK, and while overcrowding is not always an indicator of poverty (but it often is), the size of the richer, underoccupied group relative to the overcrowded group is surprising. Many people in the UK have grown wealthier through the housing market and housing is now a main component of many people's overall assets.

It is interesting to consider the number of people, especially children, who might be living in overcrowded/underoccupied homes. However, in order to calculate these figures, different definitions need to be used,

since the Census tables used to produce the figures in the remainder of this report only include numbers of households. Figure 1 shows the number of people aged under 18 and 18+ living in households by occupancy rating (the alternative overcrowding/under-occupancy definition<sup>TR</sup>). These graphs show that children and young people aged under 18 are more likely to live in overcrowded housing than people aged 18+. Both graphs also show that there are far more people living in underoccupied property than in overoccupied property; there is no overall shortage of space.

### Comparing areas

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the two groups of households across the 142 areas of the UK. This graph demonstrates an 'inverse' relationship; areas with a high rate of overcrowding (high percentage of households with more people than rooms) tend also to have a lower rate of underoccupied homes<sup>TR</sup>.

Conversely, areas in which there are higher levels of underoccupied homes tend also to have low levels of overcrowded homes. The circles on the graph form a curve. This curve tells us that the relationship between overcrowding and underoccupancy is not entirely straightforward. There are many places where about 1% of households are overcrowded, but these areas have

### 100 years ago

The 1901 Census recorded 6.3 million inhabited houses in England and Wales, with an average of 5.2 people per house. Overcrowding at this time was classified as having more than two people per room, and 8.2% of the population lived in overcrowded houses according to this definition. However, there was wide variation across the country, with the highest rate – 36% – in Jarrow.

For more information see the National Archives ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)).

a variety of levels of underoccupancy. There are also a good number of areas that have a very low level of underoccupancy, but where the proportion of households which are overcrowded varies widely.

Figure 1: Number and % of people in households by occupancy rating

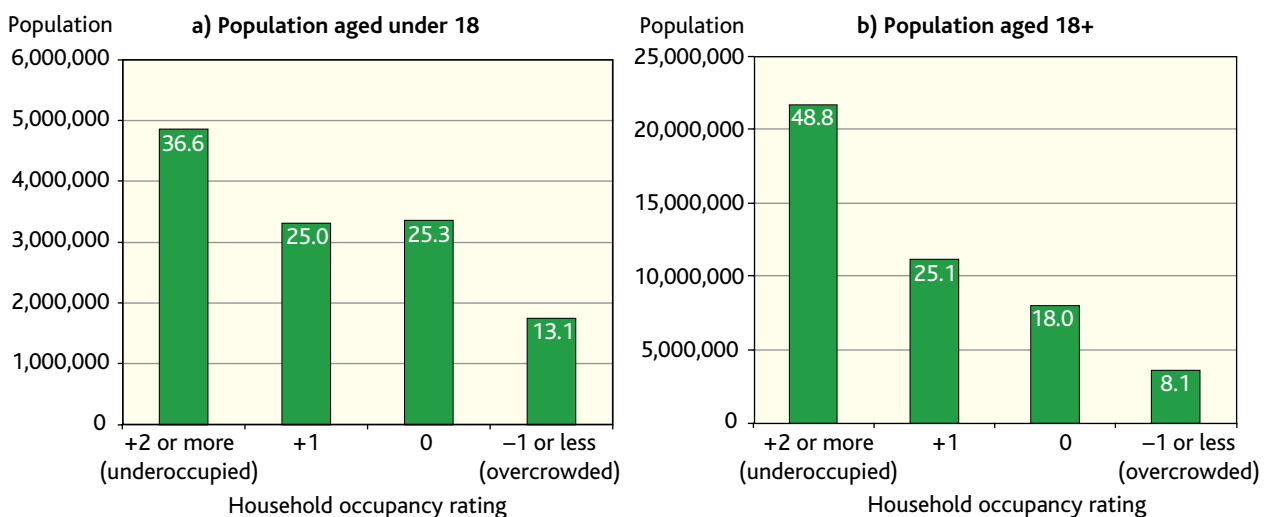
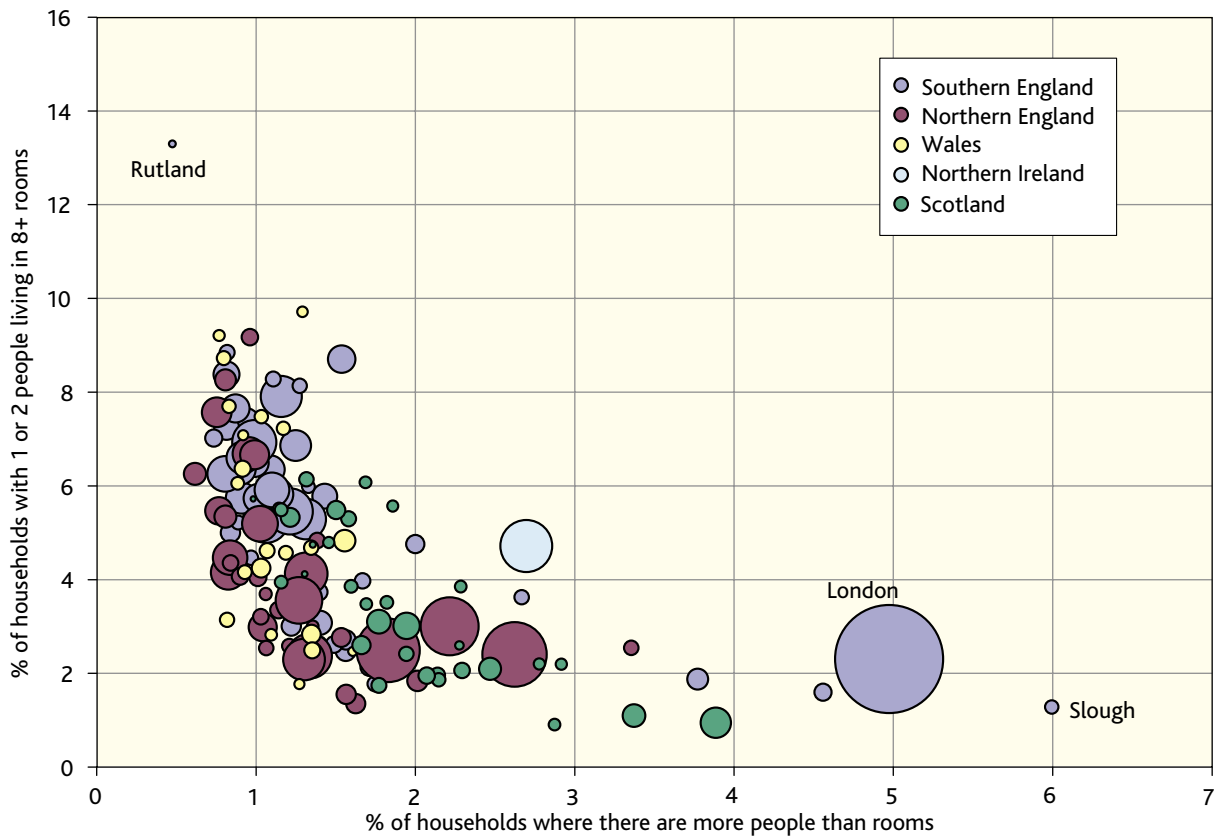


Figure 2: The overcrowding and underoccupation measures associated across the 142 areas<sup>TR</sup>



Note: Each circle is a county, unitary or former metropolitan authority, drawn with the area in proportion to the total population in 2001 (the largest circle represents London, with a population of just over 7 million). Areas in northern England are those that lie west or north of the counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire (the Severn-Humber divide).

Table 1 tells us more about the places that have the highest levels of overcrowding. The 'top five' all have levels of overcrowding of at least twice the national average and Slough has a level that is more than three times as high. All these areas also have levels of underoccupancy that are about half (or less) the national average. This shows clearly that the overcrowding cannot simply be solved by dividing up larger properties in the same area so that there is a more equal distribution of rooms to people. However, most of the areas with high overcrowding do seem to neighbour areas with high levels of underoccupancy, as can be seen by comparing the maps in Figures 3 and 4.

Table 1: The five areas of the UK with the highest rates of overcrowded households (more people than rooms) (2001)

Area	% of households overcrowded	% of households underoccupied
Slough	6.0	1.3
London	5.0	2.3
Luton	4.6	1.6
Glasgow City	3.9	0.9
Leicester	3.8	1.9
<b>UK</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>4.3</b>

Table 1 highlights London's position near the top of the overcrowding league. Figure 2 shows that this is part of a very interesting pattern for southern England as a whole. The largest circle on Figure 1 is London and its position suggests a very high level of overcrowding and low level of underoccupancy. This is no real surprise. House prices in London mean that many people have to live in one or two rooms, small flats or share household spaces. Indeed very few people can afford to have eight or more rooms. Most of the other circles denoting areas in southern England are at the opposite end of the graph suggesting that these are areas that have very low levels of overcrowding and among the highest levels of underoccupancy. This pattern is made clearer by Figures 3 and 4.

The map in Figure 3 shows the geographic distribution of the overcrowding measure. Areas with the highest prevalence of overcrowded households tend to be around London and parts of the South East of England, cities in the North and Midlands of England and southern Scotland, particularly Glasgow. The map in Figure 4 shows that the areas with the highest rates of underoccupancy are around the Home Counties, parts of South West England, Wales and North Yorkshire. The areas with the lowest prevalence of underoccupation are cities in the North and Midlands of England, and southern Scotland.

Look at South East England and the Welsh border areas on each map. These are areas that have both particularly low levels of overcrowding and particularly high levels of underoccupancy. These are also the places where, we are told, demand for housing (particularly affordable housing) has reached crisis point. Home builders are asking for planning regulations to change so that they can 'meet demand'.

Other patterns are also interesting. Scotland, particularly Glasgow and its environs, seems to do particularly badly in terms of overcrowding. This may well be due to a combination of particular kinds of housing stock there (tenement flats, which tend to have fewer, though sometimes large, rooms) as well as acknowledged levels of poverty, although new housing development is slowly improving in the city. Cities with high student populations are also highlighted to an extent on the overcrowding map. Students tend to overcrowd to keep housing costs low.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the UK's rural areas tend to have a relatively high level of underoccupancy when compared to the cities. More space and a larger housing stock contribute to this. However, it is worth noting that larger properties are always relatively more expensive, preventing younger and poorer rural dwellers from entering the housing market there. Conversions of existing larger properties in the countryside might help ease a perceived rural housing shortage, but that shortage may not be indicated well by our overcrowding measure.

## Since 2001

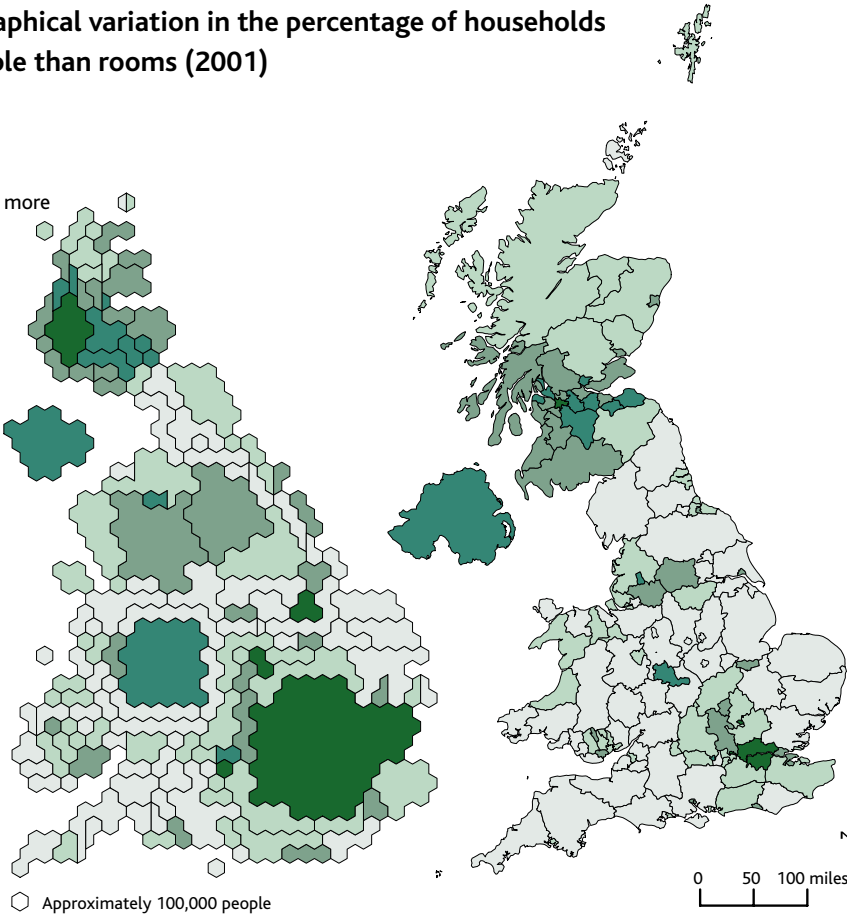
In 2004, the government announced plans to demolish 400,000 houses in the North of England, and to build hundreds of thousands of new homes in the South East and East of England<sup>3,4</sup>. Much of the housing in the North being demolished is empty, and is in some cases being knocked down in order to stimulate 'failing' housing markets – areas where house prices have fallen drastically. Simultaneous massive building programmes are under way in the South due to low availability of housing, particularly lack of affordable housing for key public sector workers, and in an attempt to cut house prices.



**Figure 3: Geographical variation in the percentage of households with more people than rooms (2001)**

% of households with more people than rooms<sup>TR</sup>

- 0.5-1.1
- 1.2-1.5
- 1.6-2.2
- 2.3-3.4
- 3.5-6.0

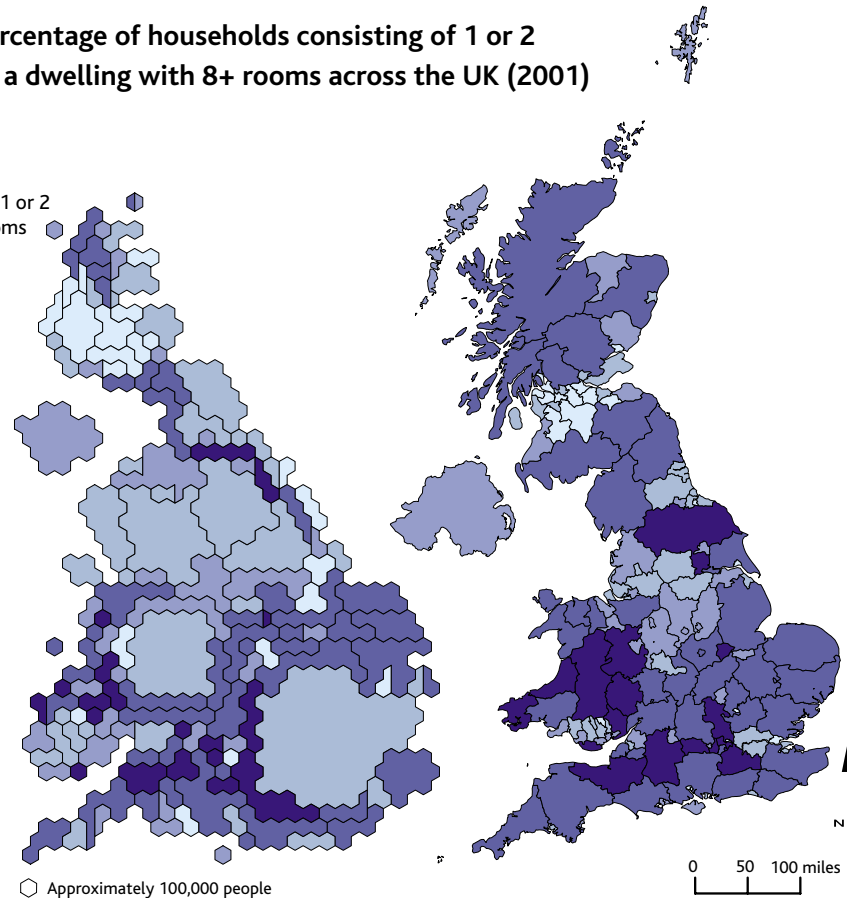


*Note:* Both maps in each figure represent the same places, shaded identically. The map on the left is a cartogram – each area is shown in proportion to the size of its population in 2001. The largest area is London, since it has the highest population of any of the places<sup>TR</sup>. The map on the right shows the actual boundaries of the areas.

**Figure 4: The percentage of households consisting of 1 or 2 people living in a dwelling with 8+ rooms across the UK (2001)**

% of households with 1 or 2 people living in 8+ rooms

- 0.9-2.2
- 2.3-3.5
- 3.6-5.2
- 5.3-7.3
- 7.4-13.3





## Discussion

The analyses have shown that in the UK people's experience of space in their houses varies markedly. Some people have more space than they need. Others have too little space. Figure 2 shows that areas in which more households are overcrowded do not also tend to contain larger numbers of households that are underoccupied. Figures 3 and 4 show that often these contrasting areas neighbour each other. Solving housing shortages *within* areas in the UK is not simply a matter of converting larger houses to flats and somehow 'redistributing' rooms. This analysis conveys that there is a broad geographical divide in terms of housing experience. However, there may also be variation among groups of people defined by other, non-geographic criteria, for example by ethnicity. Such variations are complex, and are likely to be changing over time.

Some areas have more home space than they need, others do not have enough. Consequently, suitable and affordable housing is often not available where it is most needed, but this shortage can have different manifestations, and it is often available nearby. London is the fastest growing city in the country. Many young people are flocking there, but the city's housing stock is already overcrowded. Although the population of Glasgow is falling slowly, its housing stock is not suitable for the needs of many of its people. It is outdated, in poor condition and cramped in some parts of the city, small but too expensive in others. In a number of rural areas there are plenty of larger properties, currently occupied by one or two people. These are often too expensive and too big for younger families trying to stay in the communities they grew up in.

The intention of this analysis is not to imply that people in households that have been classified as 'underoccupied' are doing something wrong. In many cases these will be family houses where children have grown up and moved away. The ageing and affluent population of the rural South, for example, want to stay where they are and enjoy their environment. The problem is that this distribution of housing is not compatible with the needs of the UK as a whole and certainly represents a serious social inequality with consequences for the health, wealth and well-being of other groups in society.

This analysis intends to show the geographical divide between people who live in overcrowded conditions and those who live in relatively spacious accommodation. These two groups tend to live in different areas in the UK and this represents a persistent and growing spatial and social inequality.




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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Shaw, M. (2004) 'Housing and public health', *Annual Review of Public Health*, vol 25, pp 397-418.
  - <sup>2</sup> The 1985 Housing Act (sections 324-6 and 358-64).
  - <sup>3</sup> 'Prescott to raze 400,000 homes', *The Observer*, 22 August 2004.
  - <sup>4</sup> 'Plan to "blitz" east of England with 500,000 homes backed', *The Independent*, 16 October 2004<sup>TR</sup>.
- <sup>TR</sup> Further information on this point is available in the accompanying technical report.

## What do we know?

- ▶ Many households in the UK experience overcrowding, which is associated with poor physical and mental health.
- ▶ Many households in the UK have plenty of space, with eight or more rooms per person not uncommon in many areas.



## What have we found?

- ▶ Areas in which more households are overcrowded do *not* also tend to contain larger numbers of households that are underoccupied.
- ▶ Solving housing shortages *within* areas in the UK is not simply a matter of converting larger houses to flats and somehow 'redistributing' rooms.
- ▶ Overcrowded areas often geographically adjoin areas where there appears to be surplus space.

## Other reports in the series

The companion report to this, *A place in the sun*, describes the location of holiday and second homes and compares this to households which may be having difficulty getting into the housing market.

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|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Doctors and nurses</i>        | 6. <i>A place in the sun</i> |
| 2. <i>In sickness and in health</i> | 7. <i>The office</i>         |
| 3. <i>Teachers</i>                  | 8. <i>Open all hours</i>     |
| 4. <i>Sons and daughters</i>        | 9. <i>Top gear</i>           |
| 5. <i>Changing rooms</i>            | 10. <i>Home front</i>        |

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