AS Sociology Essay: “Assess the causes and consequences of changes in the UK population” (24 marks)

In regards to the UK population, there have been many changes – the causes and effects of these shall be studied.

Since 2001, the UK’s total fertility rate (the average number of children that women have during their fertile years) has risen from 1.63 children per woman to 1.4 by 2006. Whilst this is a relatively significant increase, it is lower than the rates in the past. One reason for this is the changes in the position of women that have been brought about during the 20th century. Said changes consist of: legal equality with men; increased educational opportunities and as a result, more females in paid employment; laws preventing sex discrimination and unequal pay; changes in attitudes to the women’s role in family life; easier access to divorce; and the widespread availability of reliable contraception methods. It is due to these changes that females are now choosing paths in life other than the traditional housewife mother – for example, many women are choosing to follow their careers, delaying childbearing in the process – this is supported by how one in five women aged 45 were childless in 2006, which is double that of the number 20 years earlier.

Furthermore, the infant mortality rate (the number of infants who die before their first birthday per thousand babies born alive yearly) has decreased, from 154 to 4.44 come 2014. The reasons for this include: improved housing and sanitation (i.e. flush toilets and clean drinking water, thus reducing the chance of being infected by a disease); superior nutritional intake; improved knowledge of hygiene and child health; and improved services for mothers and children, such as antenatal and postnatal clinics. It is worth noting that prior to the mid-20th century, the likelihood of medicinal factors directly affecting the infant mortality rate is unclear, though from roughly the 1950s, these factors played a large role in that mass immunisation against childhood diseases such as diphtheria came into being, along with the use of antibiotics and the improvement of midwifery and obstetric techniques. It is because of these changes that the 2014 infant mortality rate stands at 4.44 – which is less than a third of the 1900 rate.

Moreover, children have become what is being termed an economic liability in that there are currently laws that forbid child labour, introduce compulsory education, and raise the school leaving age so children therefore remain more economically dependent on their parents/guardians for longer periods of time in contrast to the past wherein children would be made to take up work responsibilities from an early age. Another example of this economic liability is how due to changing norms, the cost of raising children has risen due to higher material demands – that has resulted in many parents being unwilling to have a large family, as well as adults making the decision to not have children in the first place.

To add to this, there is increased child centredness within society that promotes childhood as a vital period to the development and wellbeing of individuals, so parents are now willing to have fewer children and so makes for more time being spent with them.

Ultimately, the number or babies being born has had three distinct effects on society through the family, the dependency ratio and public services and policies. With the family being smaller, women are more likely to work which in turn creates the dual earner couple dynamic – however, more affluent couples may be too busy to maintain larger families and childcare whilst still allowing for the dual earner couples.

In terms of the dependency ratio (the relationship between the sizes of the working and non-working/dependent parts of the population, where the earners, working taxies (which in turn must support the dependent population), the lack of births reduce the burden of dependency on the working population. However, when the situation is analysed in the long-term, fewer births will result in fewer adults and so a smaller working population that would increase the burden of dependency.

The consequences of a lower birth rate are such that the number of schools, child health and maternity services may decrease, as well as effects on the cost of maternity/paternity leave and the types of housing necessary.

The number of deaths in the UK has remained steady since 1900 at roughly 600,000 per year, though at that point in time, the population was vastly smaller than that of today, though there have been events that have caused these numbers to alter – namely, the world wars and the influenza epidemic of 1918 (which brought deaths to a staggering 690,000). The death rate (the number of deaths per thousand of the population yearly) in 1900 stood at 19, which has practically halved, to 9.34 as of 2014.

One reason for this is improved nutrition, which Thomas McKeown (1972) states increases the resistance to infection and thus increases the chances of survival. This point has been critiqued, however, in that it doesn’t explain why females (who obtain a smaller share of the family food supply) lived longer than men, nor why certain infectious diseases such as measles, came into being during a period for improving nutrition. On top of this, there have been several medical improvements (widespread immunisation; blood transfusions; higher standards of midwifery/maternity services etc) that help to lower death rates. Additionally, there has been a decline in hazardous jobs such as mining, as well as better ventilated/less crowded housing accommodation, cleaner drinking water, improved sanitation, Clean Air Acts (which have effectively reduce air pollution), the pasteurisation of milk and the introduction of laws to prevent the sullying of food and drink.

As the death rates have decreased, the life expectancy (how long on average a person born in a given year can expect to live) has risen – evidence to support this is how males born in England in 1900 were expected to live on average until the age of 50 (57 for females), whilst males in 2003-2005 were expected to live for 76.9 years (81.2 for females). However, notwithstanding the increase in life expectancy, class, gender and regional differences still remain – an example of which being that women tend to live longer than men, though this differences has decreased due to changes in lifestyle (e.g. women smoking) and employment.

Another factor that contributes to changes in the UK population is the ageing population. The average age for the UK population is increasing – from 34.1 years in 1971 to 39 in 2007, and ultimately to a projected 42.6 come 2031. The causes for this are as follows: the increasing life expectancy (people are living longer); declining infant mortality (not many infants die early in life); and declining