

Article

Twinned towns and sister cities, Great Britain and Europe: September 2020

British towns and cities that have a twinning link with towns and cities in European countries, mostly in France and Germany. Based on information from council or twinning association websites.

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1 . Main points

- Population growth between 2010 and 2018 has been notably higher in British towns and cities, compared with their German twins.
- There are more people aged 75 years and older in German twinned towns and cities, compared with their British counterparts.
- British towns and cities generally have higher proportions of native born people (people born in Great Britain), compared with the proportions of native born people in their German twins (people born in Germany).
- There is a notable predominance of houses in British towns and cities, rather than apartments, compared with their German twins.
- The proportion of 15- to 19-year-olds is generally higher in British towns and cities, compared with their European twins.
- British university towns and cities have similar or lower proportions of degree-level students, compared with their European twins.
- British towns and cities generally have lower proportions of employment in mining, manufacturing and energy, and higher proportions in trade, transport, hotels and restaurants, compared with their European twins.

2 . History of twinning

When you enter many towns and cities in Great Britain today you are greeted by a sign: “Welcome to, twinned with” . These signs represent a history of international co-operation and friendship, some at an official level, many as informal links between groups of people of all ages and backgrounds. Twinning became popular in Great Britain after the Second World War, with the aim that building links and exchanges between individual towns and cities would bring reconciliation and prosperity after years of conflict.

Perhaps the most famous link is between Coventry and Dresden, which both suffered catastrophic damage from aerial bombing. Other links stem from goodwill missions to help with particular post-war projects or simply from a curiosity about overseas places, as travel became easier. Many British towns and cities now also have twinning links around the world, with the idea of “twinned towns” being joined by “sister cities”.

This article from the Office for National Statistics looks at around 60 British towns and cities that have a twinning link with towns and cities in Europe, mostly in France and Germany, based on information given on council or twinning association websites in September 2020. Links can be formal or informal, with varying degrees of exchange activity.

We use data from the European City Statistics project, a joint initiative to collect and publish figures that can be easily compared across borders. This article concludes the UK’s involvement in the project. All data shown are the most recent available from the Eurostat website.

Data downloads for 2016, 2017 and 2018 accompany this article with all the data we feature, as well as many more statistics for twinned towns and sister cities. The European City Statistics database referenced at the end of this article contains data for all other major towns and cities across the UK and Europe.

What all the towns and cities in this article have in common is that they are administrative units with varying degrees of responsibility for delivering local services. In Great Britain they are local authorities that have at least 50,000 people living in a single high-density core, which represents at least half of the local authority's population.

There are many more UK cities, towns and villages with active overseas partnerships than we can cover in this article, but we hope that the selection described here will give some insight into an historical and locally important, but little discussed, aspect of British civic life today.

3 . Historic twinnings: Britain and Germany

A shared sense of history can be the root of many original twinnings. In 2017, Reading celebrated 70 years of its association with Düsseldorf, Germany. The twin was established when the Royal Berkshire Regiment, based in Düsseldorf, wrote to the Mayor of Reading asking for help for the people of the German city just after the Second World War. Twinned with Duisburg, Germany, in 1950, Portsmouth City Council suggested the twinning as an act of reconciliation, so that the post-war reconstruction would see not only buildings, but also relations between the two nations rebuilt. Twinned since 1948, St. Helens, as a leading manufacturer of glass, was able to support the rebuilding of Stuttgart, Germany, parts of which had been destroyed or damaged by bombing during the conflict.

These types of historical partnerships have continued until today when there are often still close links between the British and German communities. The towns and cities themselves, however, are not necessarily similar in characteristics. This section looks at population structure and change in British towns and cities, compared with their German twins.

Population change

Population growth between 2010 and 2018 has been notably higher in British towns and cities, compared with their German twins, reflecting a trend seen generally in the two countries since the early 1980s.

There has been no population decline in any of the British towns and cities in our study and more than half have experienced at least 5% population growth. This contrasts with their German twinned towns and cities where only a third of places have seen at least 5% growth and around a fifth have seen population decline.

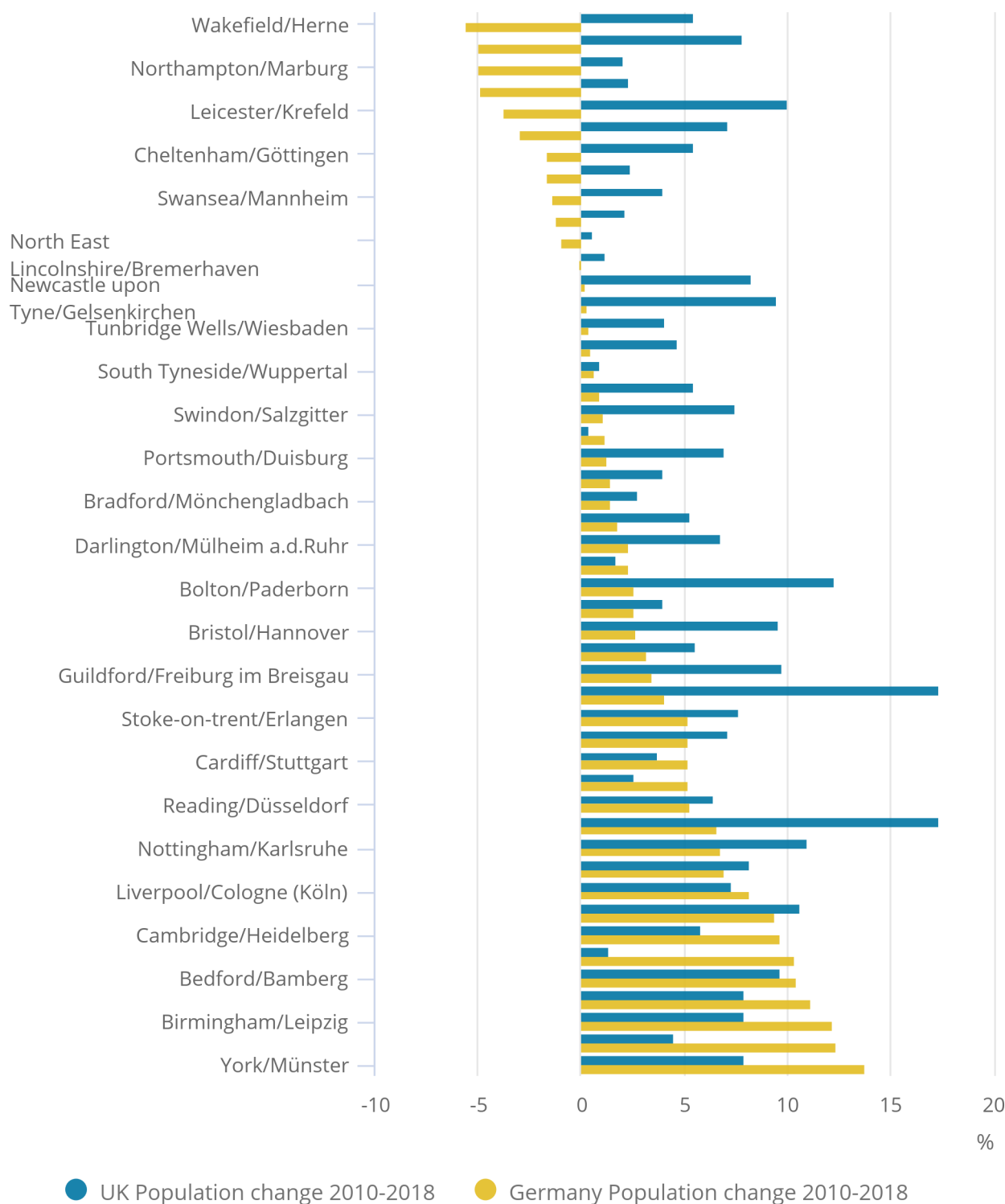
The highest population growth has been in Coventry with an increase of 17% between 2010 and 2018. This is notably higher than its twin cities of Kiel and Dresden with 4% and 7% growth respectively over the same period.

Figure 1: British towns and cities have been growing more in terms of population than their German twins

Urban Audit, 2010 to 2018

Figure 1: British towns and cities have been growing more in terms of population than their German twins

Urban Audit, 2010 to 2018



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Population structure

A comparison of the twinned towns and cities in our study shows more people aged 75 years and older in European towns and cities, compared with their British counterparts.

Structural changes to the demographics of the European population are attributed mainly to low birth rates and increasing life expectancy. In Germany, the current life expectancy at birth is 78.5 years for males and 83.3 years for females. In the UK, life expectancy at birth is slightly higher for males (79.3 years) but slightly lower for females (82.9 years).

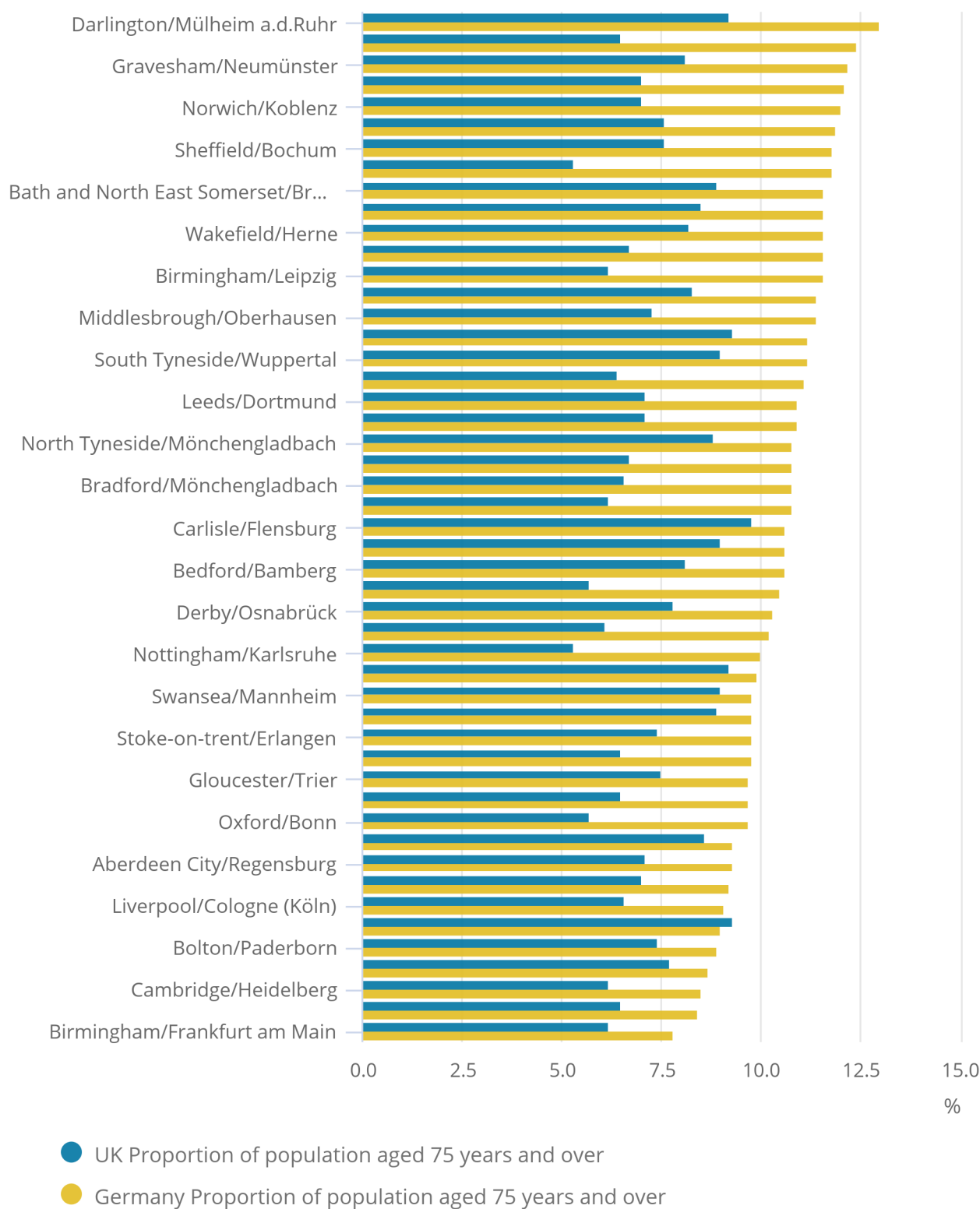
German towns and cities have higher proportions of people aged 75 years and older, between 8% and 13%, compared with their British twins, where those aged 75 years and older represent between 5% and 10% of the population, as shown in Figure 2. In Great Britain, traditionally, there has been a larger increase in the average age in rural areas compared with Great Britain's urban areas. However, the population aged 65 years and older in Great Britain is projected to grow in urban areas.

Figure 2: The proportion of population aged 75 years and older is higher in German towns and cities

Urban Audit, 2018

Figure 2: The proportion of population aged 75 years and older is higher in German towns and cities

Urban Audit, 2018



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Population ageing in Europe means that people are not only living longer but also that the proportion of people aged 20 to 64 years, which includes the majority of people working, is declining. The old-age dependency ratio (defined internationally as the population 65 years and over to population 20 to 64 years) can be an indicator to show the level of support available to people aged 65 years and older by the working population.

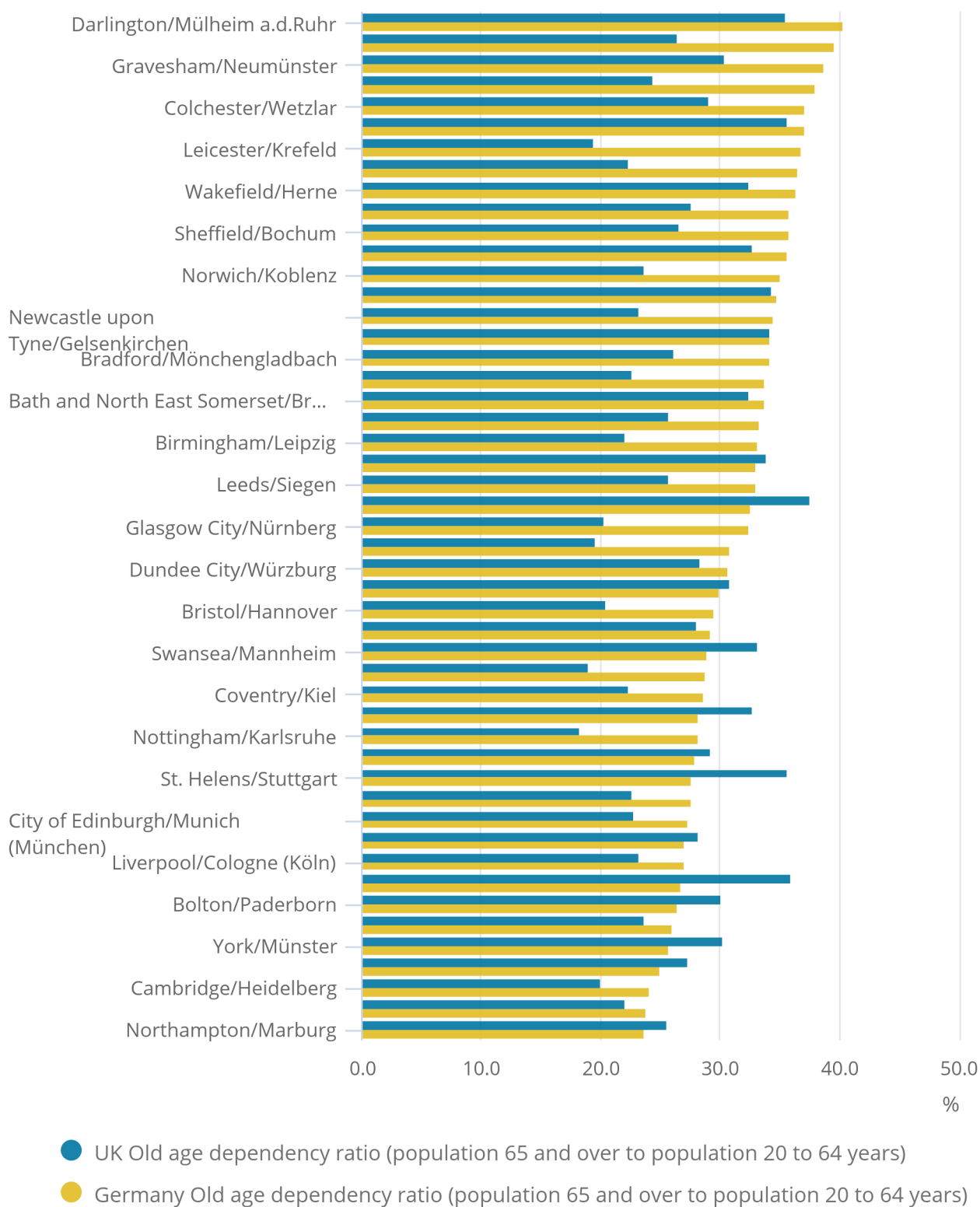
The number of people aged 65 years and older, relative to the number of people aged 20 to 64 years, tends to be higher in European twinned towns and cities compared with those in Great Britain and this is reflected among the British and German twinned towns and cities we feature (Figure 3). Krefeld, Germany, for example, has an old-age dependency ratio of 37% whereas its British twin, Leicester, has an old-age dependency ratio of 19%. The old-age dependency ratio is highest in Mülheim an der Ruhr, Germany, at 40% and lowest in Nottingham at 18%.

Figure 3: German towns and cities have a higher old-age dependency ratio

Urban Audit, 2018

Figure 3: German towns and cities have a higher old-age dependency ratio

Urban Audit, 2018



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Citizenship and country of birth

Comparable data are available for towns and cities across Great Britain and Germany, detailing proportions of a town or city's population by citizenship, as well as whether people were born in the same country as the twinned town or city (this is known as "native born" in the international definition used in the European City Statistics data).

Native born as a proportion of population for the German and British twin towns and sister cities is shown in Figure 4. Data are from 2016 as this provides the most complete coverage for the places we feature in this article.

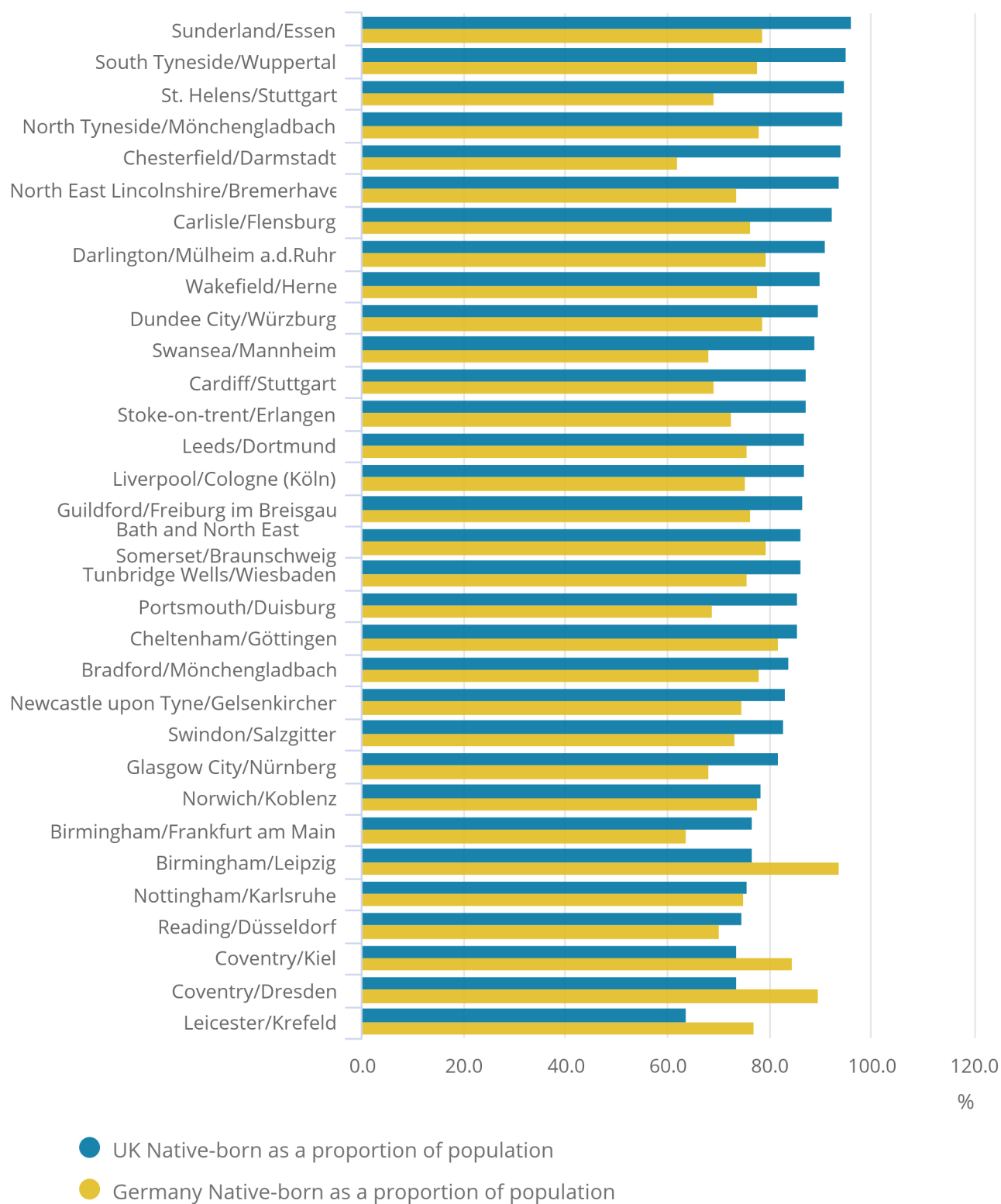
With the exception of Coventry, Leicester and Birmingham, British towns and cities have higher proportions of native born people (people born in Great Britain), compared with the proportions of native born people in their German twins (people born in Germany).

Figure 4: British towns and cities generally have higher proportions of native born people, compared with their German twins

Urban Audit, 2016

Figure 4: British towns and cities generally have higher proportions of native born people, compared with their German twins

Urban Audit, 2016



The European City Statistics project also collects data on foreign persons living in cities. In this article the term “foreign national” is used to refer to a person who does not have the citizenship of the country of current usual residence, regardless of the place of birth. Overall, the percentage of foreign nationals living in cities has risen within the EU.

In our study, the proportion of foreign nationals was generally higher in German towns and cities compared with their British twins, as shown in Figure 5. In 2016, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, reported that foreign nationals accounted for 28% of their total population, while at the other end of the range foreign nationals accounted for less than 2% of the total number of inhabitants in Sunderland.

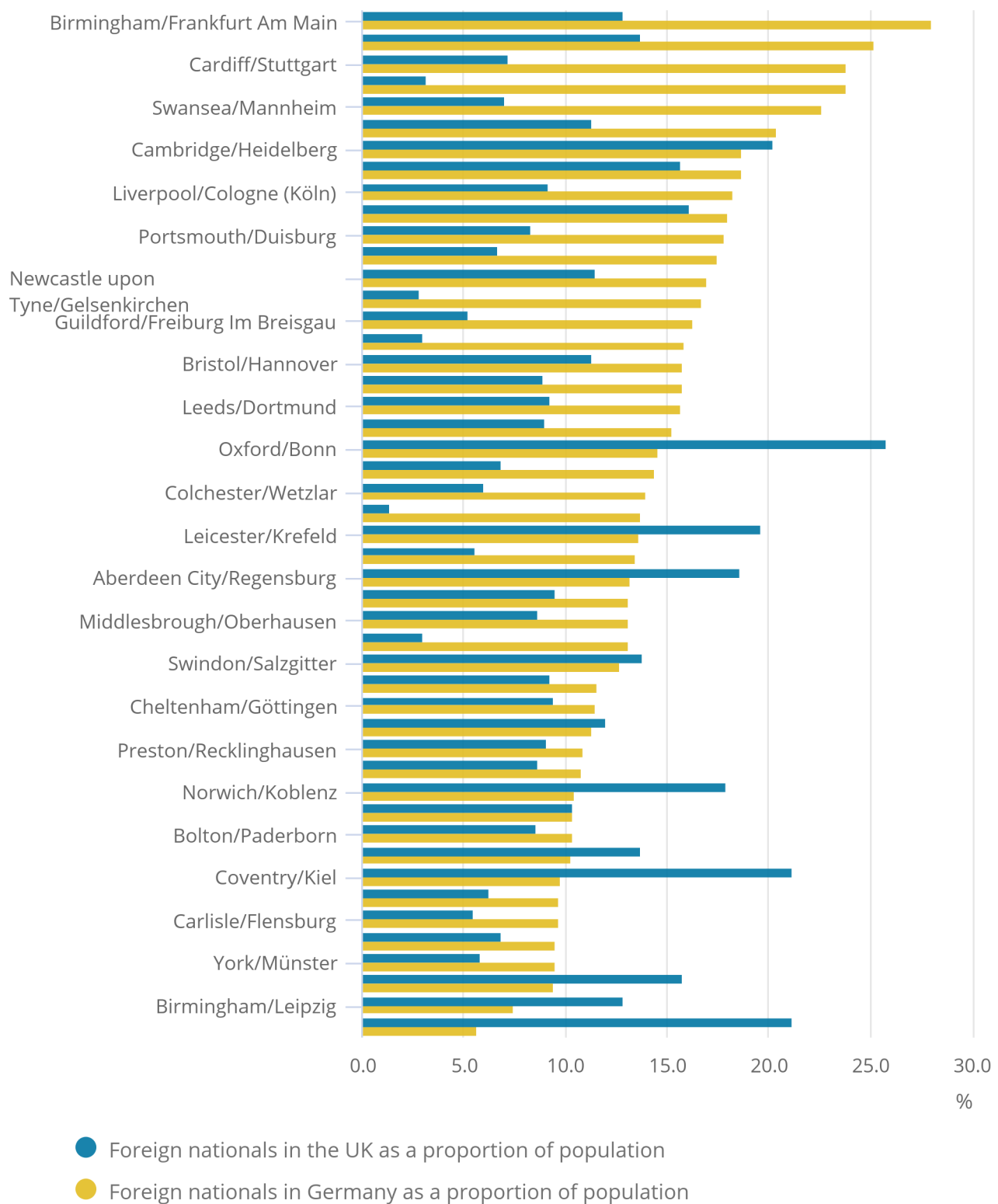
Foreign nationals accounted for nearly a quarter of the population in Stuttgart, Germany. In contrast, foreign nationals represented 3% of the population in its twinned town St. Helens. A noteworthy exception is Oxford, where 26% of its inhabitants were foreign nationals. In Oxford's twin city Bonn, Germany, the share of foreign nationals was 15%. Other British places in our study with higher proportions of foreign nationals also tend to be university towns and cities.

Figure 5: The proportion of foreign nationals is higher in German towns and cities than in their British twins

Urban Audit, 2016

Figure 5: The proportion of foreign nationals is higher in German towns and cities than in their British twins

Urban Audit, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Housing

Analysis by type of dwelling shows distinct differences in the prevalence of flats or houses across countries. There is a notable predominance of houses in the British towns and cities we feature, rather than apartments, compared with their German twins.

In 2018, Germany had the lowest share of owner-occupied dwellings (51%) compared with all other EU member states, because of a high tendency to rent property, especially flats. Cologne, Germany, particularly stands out because its high number of flats (465,920) is more than four times the number of houses in the city. Its twin city, Liverpool, in contrast, has more than two and a half times more houses than flats.

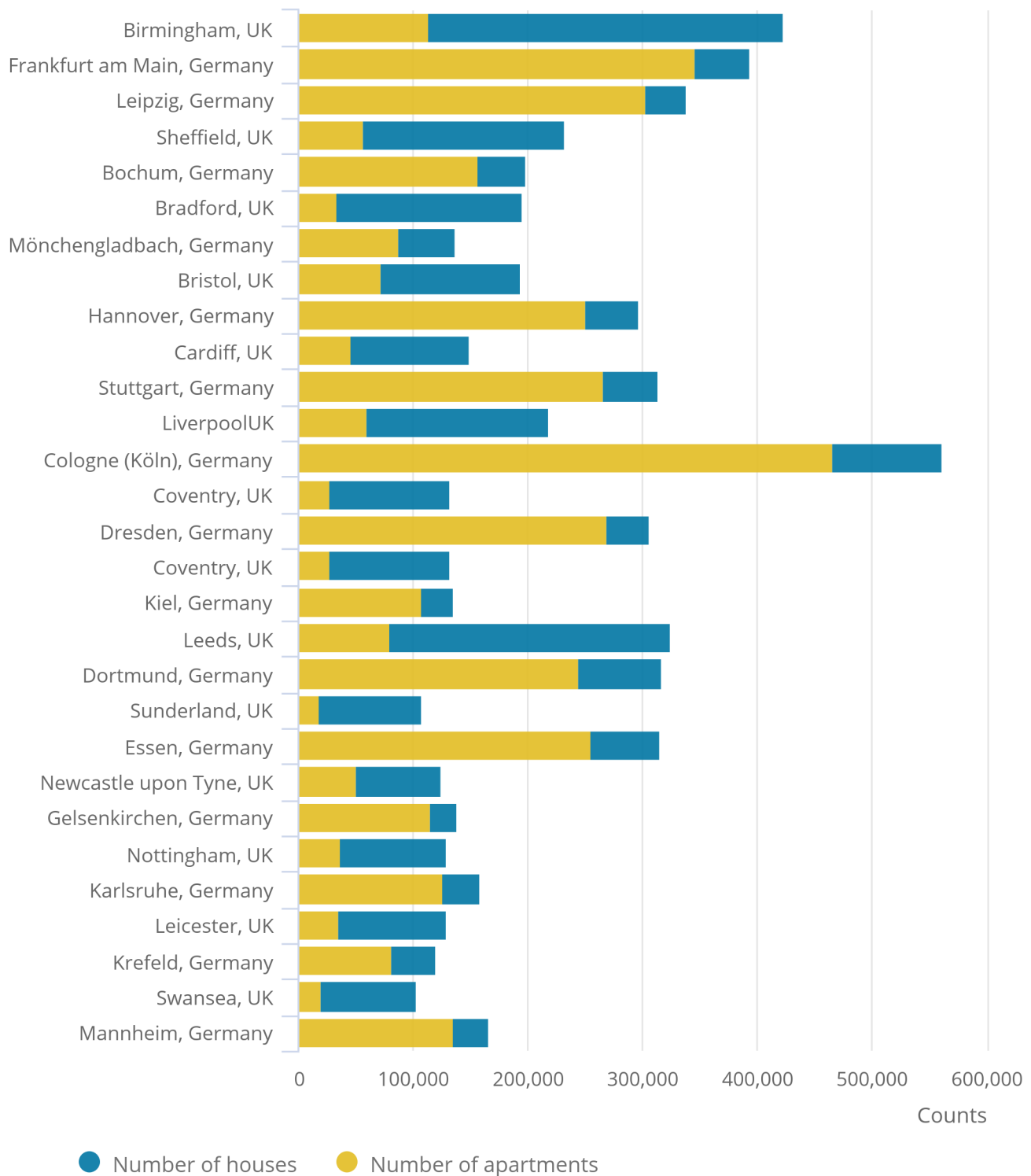
Across the EU, the share of flats in the total number of dwellings tends to be higher in cities with a larger population size, however, even in larger cities houses are common in Great Britain, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: British towns and cities have a predominance of houses rather than apartments in cities with a population above 225,000

Urban Audit, 2018

Figure 6: British towns and cities have a predominance of houses rather than apartments in cities with a population above 225,000

Urban Audit, 2018



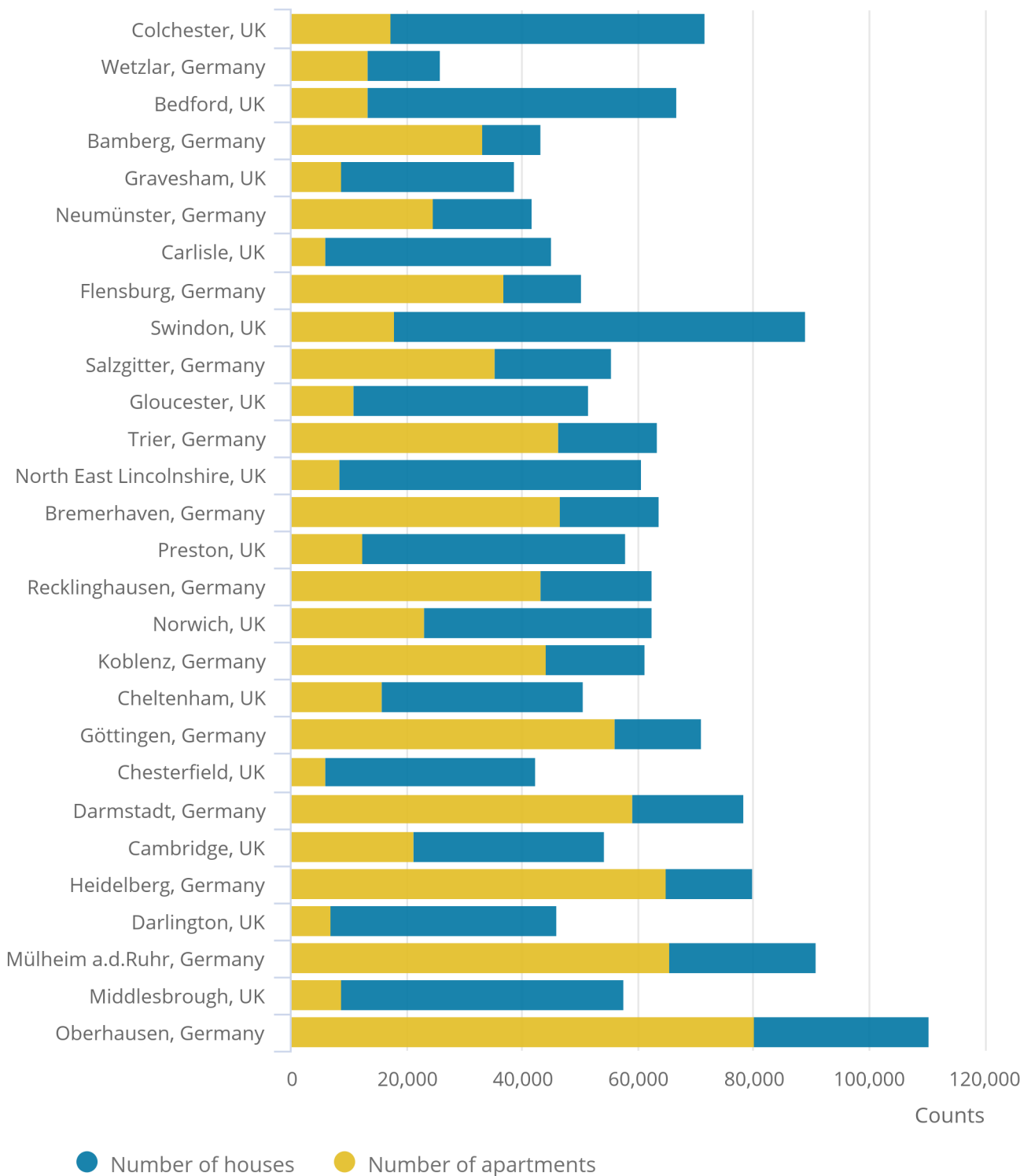
Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Figure 7: British towns and cities with a population below 225,000 have a predominance of houses rather than apartments

Urban Audit, 2018

Figure 7: British towns and cities with a population below 225,000 have a predominance of houses rather than apartments

Urban Audit, 2018



Source: Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

4 . Educational twinnings

Many of the strongest links between British and European towns and cities are because of active exchange programmes between schools. This section expands our examination of twinned towns and sister cities to other European countries, as well as Germany. For example, Strasbourg in France offers its students special grants in order to study in one of its five dedicated twin towns, which includes Leicester. In 2019, Coventry celebrated its 60th anniversary of twinning with the city of Dresden in Germany. To mark this occasion 30 pupils from Coventry visited Dresden.

People aged 19 years or younger in the population

Similar to the old-age dependency ratio, the young-age dependency ratio measures the population aged 19 years and younger compared with the number of people aged 20 to 64 years, which includes the majority of people working. Higher education institutions are often located in cities, which leads to cities having typically higher proportions of people in the 19 to 21 years age group.

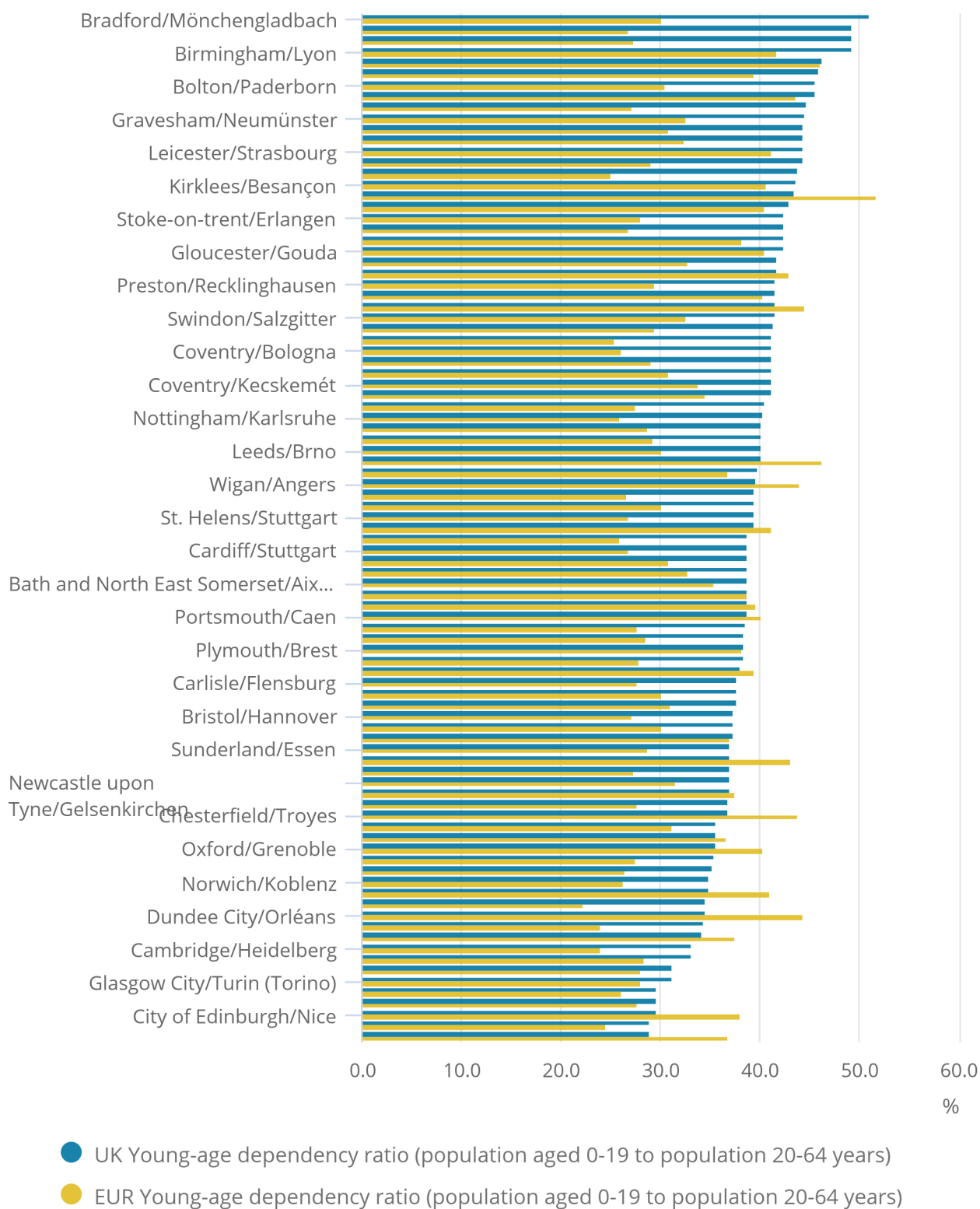
The young-age dependency ratio tends to be higher in British towns and cities compared with their European twins, as shown in Figure 8. In 2016, there were five British places in our dataset with a young-age dependency ratio higher than 45%: Bradford, Birmingham, Walsall, Peterborough and Bolton. In France, three cities recorded a young-age dependency ratio over 45% (Mulhouse, Lille and Meaux). In our dataset no twinned German town or city had a young-age dependency ratio of more than 45%. In Germany, the highest young-age dependency ratio was recorded in Bremerhaven (33%). The young-age dependency ratio in German cities is below the EU average (35%).

Figure 8: Young-age dependency ratio is mostly higher in British towns or cities

Urban Audit, 2016

Figure 8: Young-age dependency ratio is mostly higher in British towns or cities

Urban Audit, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

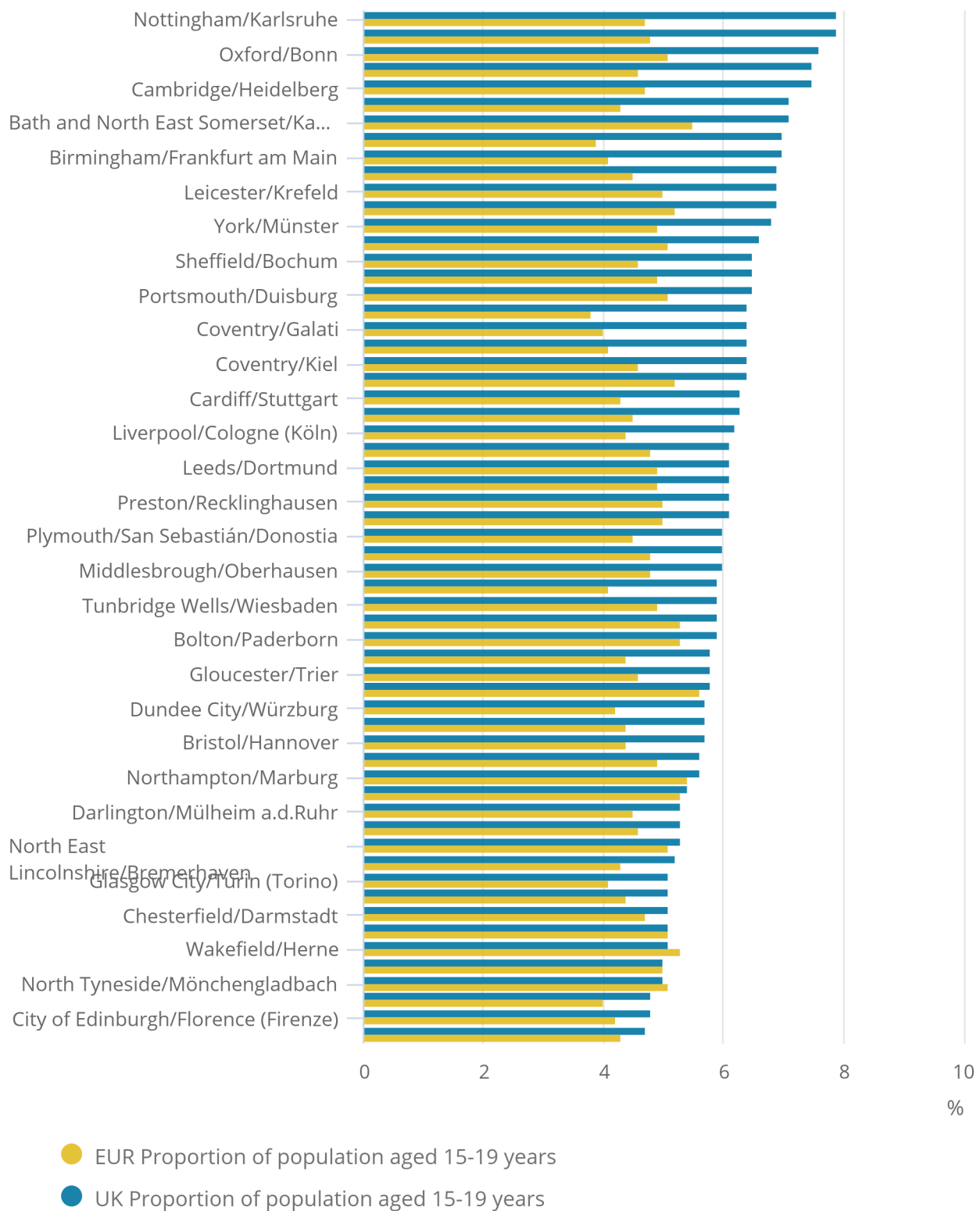
We do not yet have full coverage data for 2018, because of the way that some countries' censuses and data collection programmes work, but there are selected data on the proportion of 15- to 19-year-olds for 2018. This is an interesting age group as it covers young adults as they study for GCSEs and A levels (or the equivalents), and this group often forms part of school exchanges. In this age group there are similar or higher proportions of people aged 15 to 19 years in British towns and cities, compared with their European twins (Figure 9).

Figure 9: The proportion of 15- to 19-year olds is generally higher in British towns and cities, compared with their European twins

Urban Audit, 2018

Figure 9: The proportion of 15- to 19-year olds is generally higher in British towns and cities, compared with their European twins

Urban Audit, 2018



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

University towns and cities

Towns and cities are sometimes associated by the presence of a major university. Oxford and Cambridge are twinned with other famous university cities including Szeged (Hungary), Heidelberg (Germany) and Grenoble (France).

The European City Statistics project collects data on the proportion of students in higher education and uses an internationally comparable standard known as ISCED. Within this framework, levels 5 to 8 are equivalent to degree level and above. The source data from European City Statistics contains information on the number of students in many higher education establishments throughout the UK and Europe. In this section we focus on towns and cities that are noted for their universities, compared with their European twinned towns and cities.

There are, generally, more higher education students in European towns and cities. It is important to note, however, that Great Britain has nearly double the number of universities compared with France and around a third more than Germany. However, the number of students in Great Britain is 2.3 million, compared with 1.5 million in France and 2.8 million in Germany. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that, generally, British university towns and cities see similar or lower proportions of degree-level students than their European twins (Figure 10).

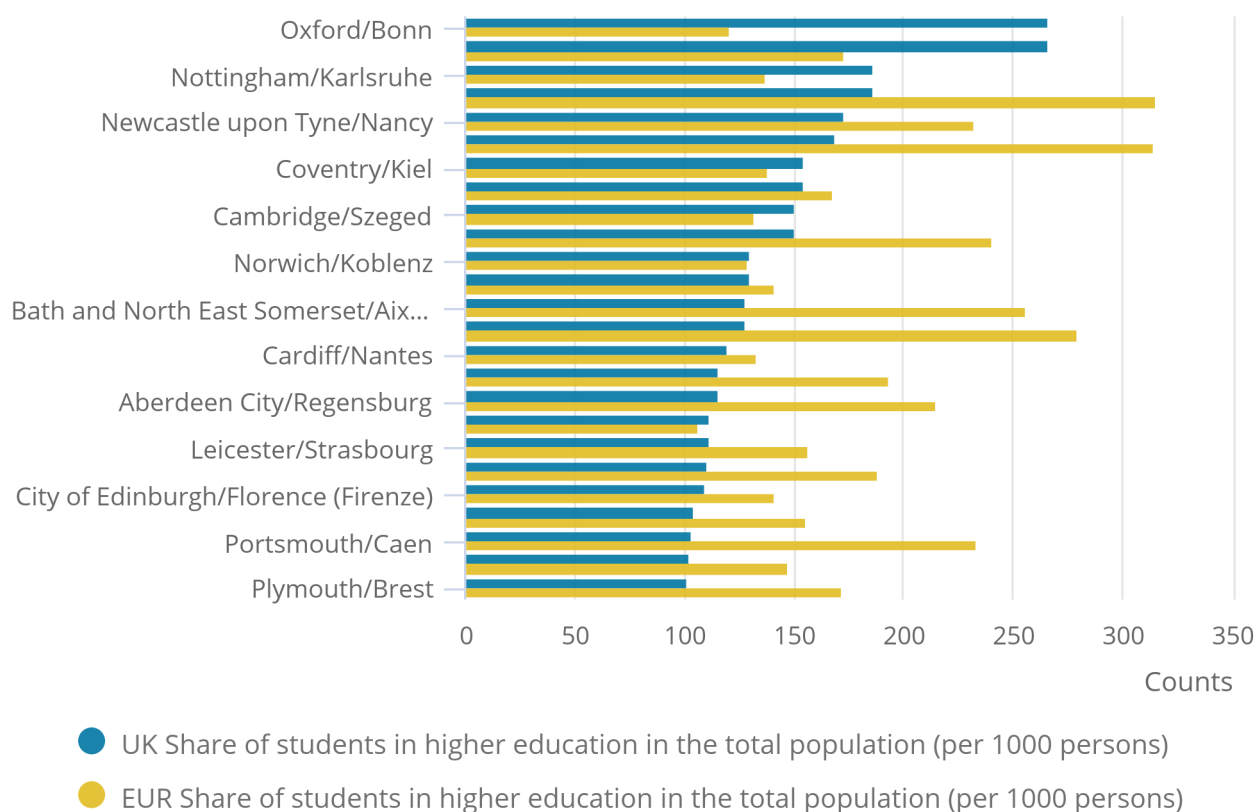
A notable exception is Oxford, where more than a quarter of the city's population is in full-time higher education. According to 2011 Census data, Oxford had the largest share of students in the usual resident population.

Figure 10: British university towns and cities have a similar or lower proportions of degree-level students compared with continental twin towns

Urban Audit, 2016

Figure 10: British university towns and cities have a similar or lower proportions of degree-level students compared with continental twin towns

Urban Audit, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

5 . Industrial heritage towns

A shared industrial past underpins the links between some towns and cities, for example, Saint-Nazaire in France was chosen to be twinned with Sunderland on the basis of a common maritime and shipbuilding heritage. Similarly, Swindon's twinning association draws parallels between its industrial and commercial past and that of its twin town, Salzgitter in Germany. The importance of their textile trade is a common interest between Preston and Nimes in France.

Clearly much has changed in terms of industrial structure since the height of these towns and cities' industrial power and even since they have been twinned. This section of the article features a selection of towns and cities with an industrial heritage and draws on employment data classed according to the international statistical classification of economic activities, [NACE Revision 2 \(PDF, 5.63MB\)](#), which equates to the UK [Standard Industrial Classification 2007](#), precisely down to and including the four-digit class level.

Employment by industrial sector

The data on employment by industry highlight some clear differences between our selected British industrial heritage towns and cities, and their European twins. There are generally lower proportions of employment in Great Britain for mining, manufacturing and energy, and higher proportions in trade, transport, hotels and restaurants, as shown in Figure 11.

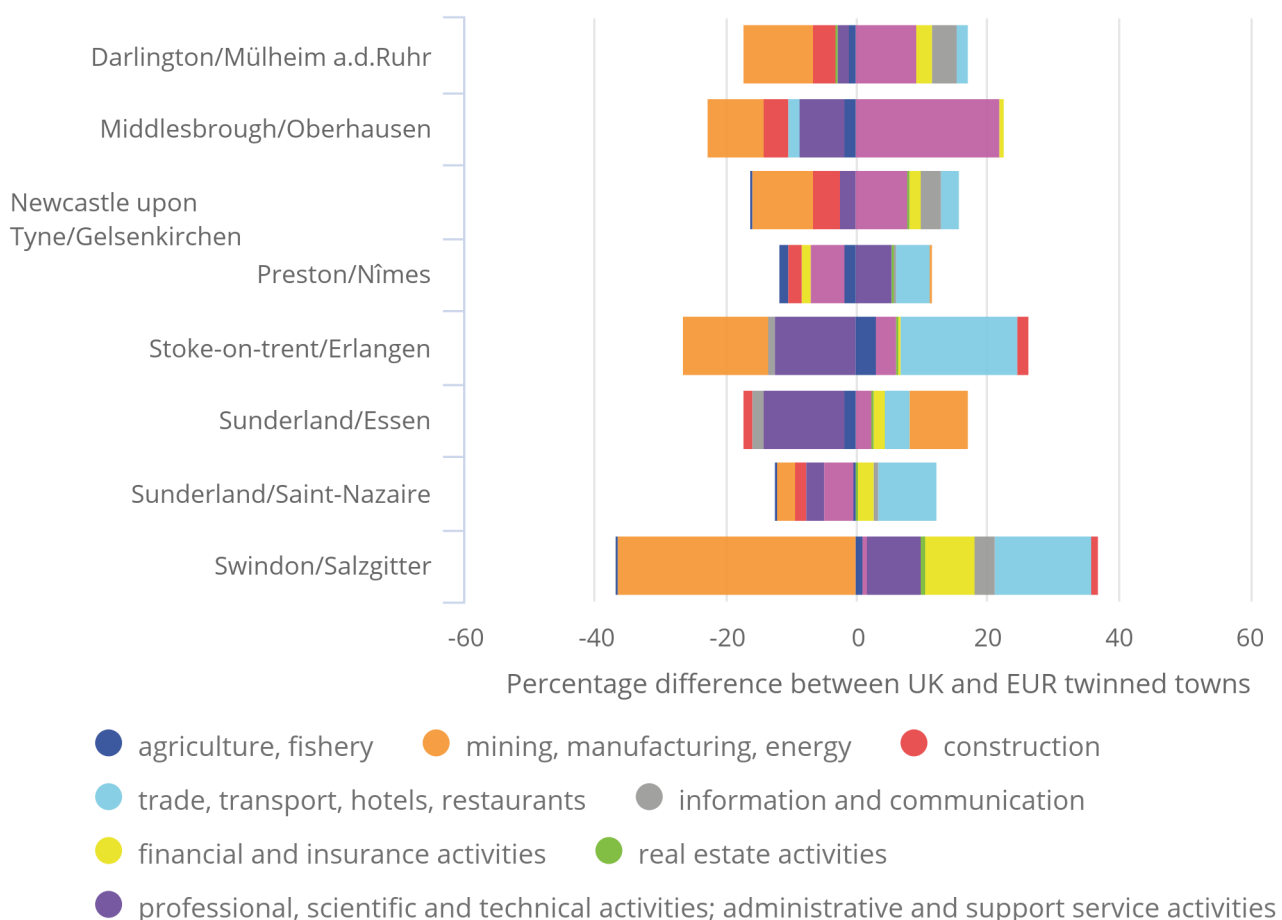
The median proportion of employment in the mining, manufacturing and energy sector throughout all major European towns and cities is 10%. In contrast, in Salzgitter, Germany, this sector still provides 46% of all employment. Salzgitter is the third-largest industrial location in Lower Saxony, Germany. In Swindon, Salzgitter's British twin, the mining, manufacturing and energy sector represents 10% of all employment. But the picture is varied, for example, in Essen, one of Germany's old mining towns, 10% of all persons employed work in this sector.

Figure 11: British towns and cities generally have lower proportions of employment in mining, manufacturing and energy, and higher proportions in trade, transport, hotels and restaurants, compared with their European twins

Urban Audit, 2016

Figure 11: British towns and cities generally have lower proportions of employment in mining, manufacturing and energy compared with their European twins

Urban Audit, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

More information on the current breakdown of employment by industry is shown in the [dataset](#) download, which accompanies this article.

6 . Data on twinning

[Twinned towns and sister cities - 2018, 2017 and 2016](#)

Datasets | Published 23 September 2020

Twinned towns and sister cities British towns and cities that have a twinning link with towns and cities in European countries, mostly in France and Germany, based on information given on council or twinning association websites in September 2020.

7 . Glossary

Old-age dependency ratio

Population aged 65 years and over to population aged 20 to 64 years.

Young-age dependency ratio

Population aged 0 to 19 years to population aged 20 to 64 years.

Foreign national

A foreign national is a person who does not have the citizenship of the country of current usual residence, regardless of the place of birth.

Native-born

Native-born means a person who was born in the country of current usual residence regardless of the person's citizenship.

Houses and apartments

Houses and apartments are defined in the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing, New York and Geneva, 2015.

8 . Data sources and quality

The background and geography of twinned towns

Twinning became popular in Great Britain after the Second World War, with the hope that building links and exchanges between individual towns and cities would bring reconciliation and prosperity after years of conflict. Our choice of towns and cities in this article is based on information given on council or twinning association websites in September 2020, as well as data availability. Links can be formal or informal, with varying degrees of exchange activity. What all the towns and cities in this article have in common is that they are administrative units with varying degrees of responsibility for delivering local services. In Great Britain, they are local authorities that have at least 50,000 people living in a single high-density core, which represents at least half of the local authority's population.

The twinned towns and sister cities featured in this article are spread throughout Great Britain. In Europe, most are in France and Germany.

The British towns and cities in this article range in size from around 100,000 people to more than 1 million. There are some smaller European cities in our list, but all have at least 50,000 people. The towns and cities we feature are detailed in with their population data in the dataset download associated with this article.

European City Statistics Project

The European City Statistics project (formerly called Urban Audit) is a European Commission-sponsored project providing reliable and comparable information on selected urban areas, described as cities. Data collection for the European City Statistics project is undertaken by national statistical institutes and supplied to Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. This article concludes the UK's involvement in the project. All data are comparable across countries and are validated before publication on the Eurostat website.

We do not yet have full European comparable data for 2018, because of the way that some countries' censuses and data collection programmes work, so we use some 2016 data, the mid-point between censuses. In the case of France, for example, these data are based on five years of collection: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 but they are called "2016". Where we use 2016 data this is because these are the most recent European data for comparison, but there is a data download associated with this article that contains the British 2018 data, as well as many other variables for the twinned towns and cities we feature. More information on [European City Statistics](#) is available on the Eurostat website, including the full range of data used in this article, for many more countries across Europe.

9 . Related links

[European City Statistics Project](#)

Eurostat

A range of statistics based on different classifications and typologies. These include data for regions, cities and greater cities, metropolitan regions, rural areas and regions.

[ISCED](#)

International Standard Classification of Education

[NACE Rev. 2](#)

Statistical classification of economic activities