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# Census 2021: Disability Estimates

Public Health Briefing

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Public Health and Social Research Unit

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## Background

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published a Census 2021 topic summary on disability prevalence in England and Wales in 2021, broken down by age and sex<sup>1</sup>. This briefing provides an update for West Sussex, with comparisons to regional and national prevalence and to the previous Census in 2011. Disability prevalence in England is also analysed by deprivation (Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 (IMD) deciles).

In the 2021 Census, people were asked “Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?”. Of those that answered yes, those that responded “yes, a little” or “yes, a lot” to the following question “Do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?” were classed as disabled.

## Key points

- Around **16% of West Sussex residents were disabled in 2021**, with 10% regarding themselves as limited a little by their disability and 6.1% regarding themselves as limited a lot (age-standardised percentages).
- By age, **disability prevalence steadily increased from around age 30 onwards**, with steeper increases in age groups above 70 years.
- At younger ages, males had a higher prevalence of disability, but from age 15 onwards, females began to overtake males. This **gap in disability status between sexes widened in the older age groups**.
- Disability status by deprivation showed a **clear social gradient**, for both sexes, which was steepest for those who were limited a lot by their disability (e.g., 13.6% of people living in the most deprived areas in England were limited a lot, compared to 4.2% in the least deprived areas). A greater percentage of people were disabled at younger ages in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas.
- **Compared to the 2011 Census, disability prevalence was slightly lower in West Sussex overall in the 2021 Census**. However, when split by disability status, there was a **decrease in those limited a lot** by their disability and an **increase in those limited a little** by their disability.
- **Younger people, particularly females, accounted for the rise in those who were limited a little** from 2011 to 2021 – there was a notable bump in disability prevalence in the teenage and early adulthood years. In contrast, the proportion of **older people (aged 70+) who were limited a little fell substantially, as did the proportion of older people who were limited a lot**, for both sexes.

Changes in disability prevalence from 2011 to 2021 may relate to several factors, including:

- The **disability question in the 2021 Census was changed to include a new reference to mental health and to remove the prompt to “include problems related to old age”**. The reference to mental health may have contributed to the increase in disability in younger age groups, whilst the removed old age prompt may have contributed to the fall in older people regarding themselves as disabled.
- The **2021 Census was conducted in March 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic**. A range of restrictions were in place at this time, including restrictions on social gatherings, travel, recreation, workplaces and schools. There is evidence that this affected health, including mental health. The pandemic may also have affected how people viewed and reported their conditions or illnesses.

<sup>1</sup> [Office for National Statistics \(2023\). Disability by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021.](#)

## Overall disability prevalence

Around **16.0% of West Sussex residents were disabled in 2021**, with 10.0% regarding themselves as limited a little by their disability and 6.1% regarding themselves as limited a lot (percentages are age-standardised<sup>2</sup>). The age-standardised proportion of disabled people in the population was similar in the South East region and England, at 16.1% and 17.7%, respectively (table 1).

There was some **variation in the prevalence of disability at district and borough level** within West Sussex, with comparably high age-standardised proportions of total disability in Adur, Arun and Worthing (around 18%) and comparably low age-standardised proportions in Horsham and Mid Sussex (around 14%).

Adur and Worthing had the highest age-standardised proportions of people who were limited a lot by their disability (both 7.2%) and Horsham and Mid Sussex the lowest (both 5.0%).

**Table 1.** Number (N) and crude and age-standardised percentages (% and AS %) of the local, regional and national population (all ages) who were disabled in Census 2021. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Source: Census 2021.

Area	Disabled; limited a little		Disabled; limited a lot		Total disabled		Total not disabled	
	N	% (AS %)	N	% (AS %)	N	% (AS %)	N	% (AS %)
<b>Adur</b>	7552	11.7 (11.3)	5025	7.8 (7.2)	12577	19.5 (18.5)	51967	80.5 (81.5)
<b>Arun</b>	19331	11.7 (10.8)	13150	8.0 (6.8)	32481	19.7 (17.6)	132408	80.3 (82.4)
<b>Chichester</b>	13088	10.5 (9.8)	7888	6.4 (5.4)	20976	16.9 (15.2)	103092	83.1 (84.8)
<b>Crawley</b>	10475	8.8 (9.8)	7222	6.1 (7.0)	17697	14.9 (16.8)	100796	85.1 (83.2)
<b>Horsham</b>	13923	9.5 (9.1)	7881	5.4 (5.0)	21804	14.9 (14.1)	124975	85.1 (85.9)
<b>Mid Sussex</b>	14184	9.3 (9.2)	7879	5.2 (5.0)	22063	14.5 (14.2)	130503	85.5 (85.8)
<b>Worthing</b>	12592	11.3 (11.0)	8711	7.8 (7.2)	21303	19.1 (18.2)	90035	80.9 (81.8)
<b>West Sussex</b>	91144	10.3 (10.0)	57756	6.5 (6.1)	148900	16.9 (16.0)	733776	83.1 (84.0)
<b>South East</b>	915292	9.9 (9.9)	581048	6.3 (6.2)	1496340	16.1 (16.1)	7781725	83.9 (83.9)
<b>England</b>	5634153	10 (10.2)	4140357	7.3 (7.5)	9774510	17.3 (17.7)	46715538	82.7 (82.3)

<sup>2</sup> Age-standardised percentages account for differences in the population size and age structures, so give a fairer comparison than crude percentages when comparing across geographical areas.

## Disability by age and sex

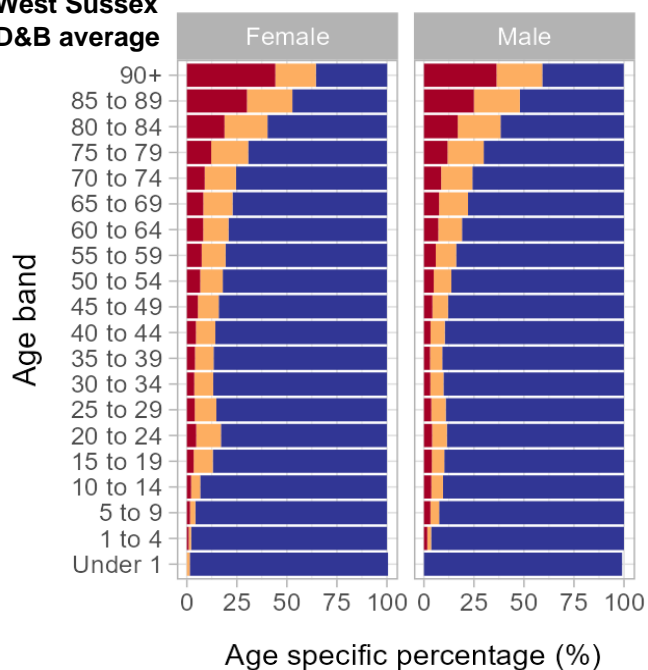
Breaking disability prevalence down by sex and age generally shows a **steady increase in the proportion of people who were disabled from aged 30 onwards**, in both sexes (table 2). Steeper increases are seen in age groups above 70-74 years, particularly in those who were limited a lot by their disability (figure 1). West Sussex districts and boroughs generally mirror the South East region and England (figures 1 and 2).

- **At younger ages, the male population had a higher prevalence of disability** compared to females. From **age 15 onwards, a higher proportion of females were limited a little** by their disability and, from **age 20 onwards, a higher proportion of females were limited a lot** by their disability.
- The **gap in disability status between sexes widened in the older age groups in those who were limited a lot** by their disability. For example, in West Sussex districts and boroughs on average, 8.9% of females aged 70-74 were limited a lot by their disability, compared to 8.6% of males aged 70-74. In those aged 90+, these proportions had risen to 44.2% of females compared to 36.2% of males.
- There was a notable **bump in disability prevalence in the teenage and early adulthood years**. Nationally and regionally, these steep rises between ages groups were in females, although some areas in West Sussex also showed increases in males (although to a lesser extent than in females).
- These **rises in young females were steepest in those who were limited a little by their disability**. On average, the proportion of 10-14 year old females limited a little by their disability in West Sussex districts and boroughs was 4.5%, rising to 9.6% at ages 15-19 and 12.3% at ages 20-24 years. This is not dissimilar from rises in the South East and England in females in these age groups.

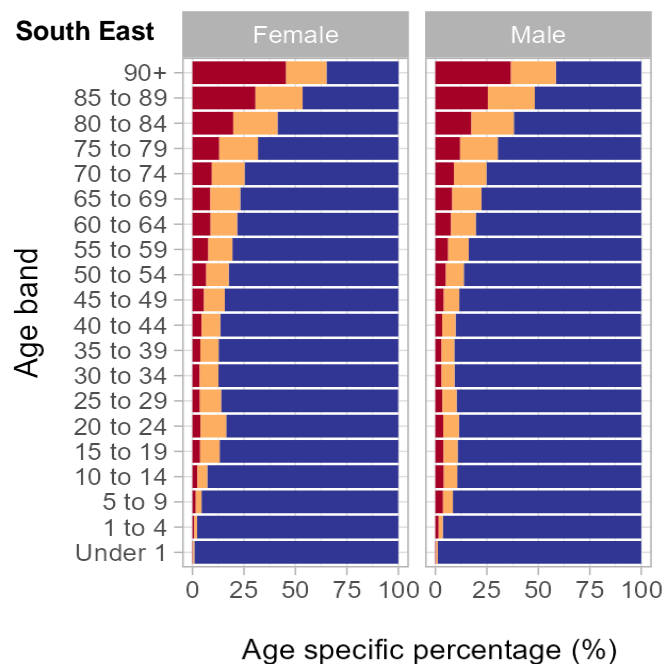
**Table 2.** Age-specific proportions of the total disabled population in Census 2021, West Sussex districts and borough average. Source: Census 2021.

Age band (years)	Age-specific percentage (%)	
	Female	Male
Under 1	2.1	1.4
1 to 4	2.1	3.6
5 to 9	4.3	7.6
10 to 14	6.6	9.5
15 to 19	12.9	10.2
20 to 24	17.0	11.5
25 to 29	14.7	10.8
30 to 34	13.1	9.8
35 to 39	13.4	9.1
40 to 44	14.2	10.4
45 to 49	15.9	12.0
50 to 54	18.0	13.7
55 to 59	19.3	16.1
60 to 64	20.8	19.0
65 to 69	22.8	22.1
70 to 74	24.6	24.2
75 to 79	30.7	29.9
80 to 84	40.3	38.3
85 to 89	52.7	47.8
90+	64.4	59.3

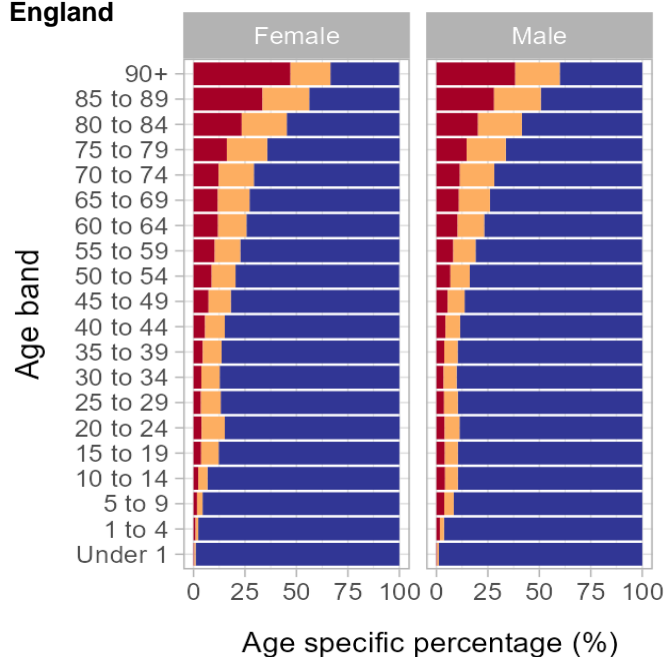
**West Sussex  
D&B average**



**South East**



**England**



Non-disabled
  Disabled; limited a little
  Disabled; limited a lot

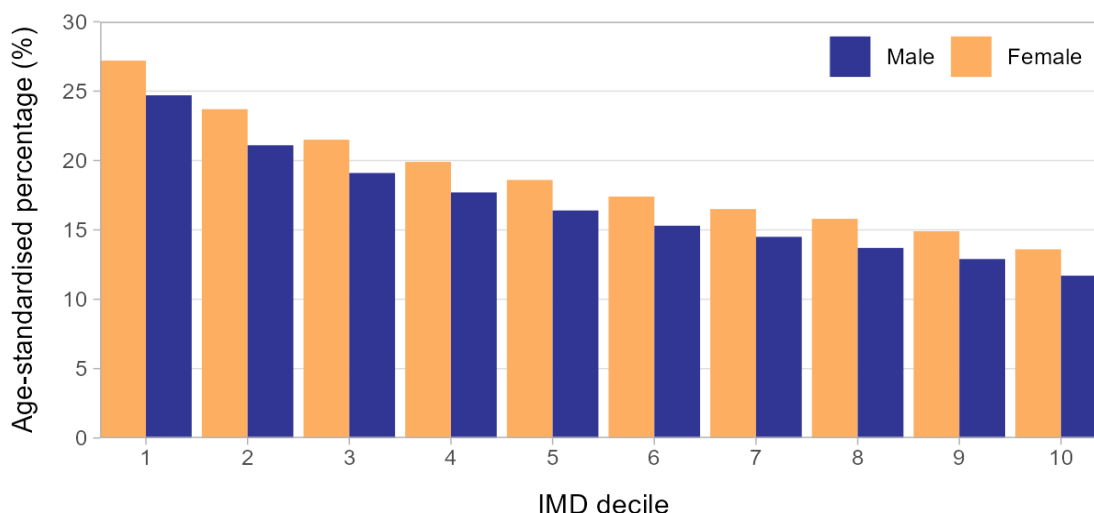
**Figure 1.** Age-specific proportions of the West Sussex districts and borough (D&B) average, South East and England population who were disabled in the 2021 Census. Source: Census 2021.



## Disability by deprivation in England

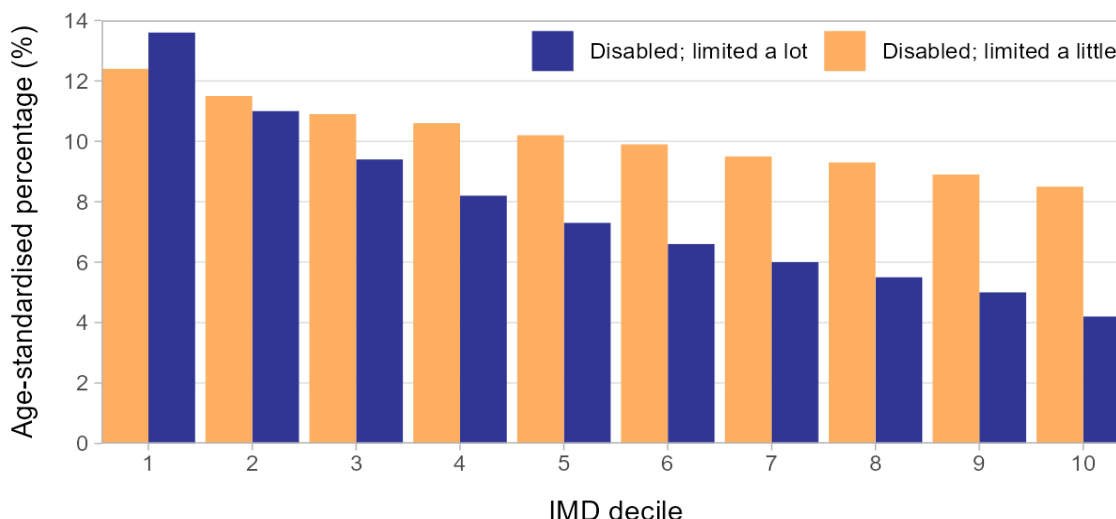
Looking at disability status by deprivation shows a **clear social gradient**. For both males and females in England<sup>3</sup>, a higher age-standardised percentage of people living in the most deprived areas indicated that they were disabled compared with those living in the least deprived areas (figure 3).

In all deciles, a higher age-standardised percentage of females were disabled compared to males.



**Figure 3.** Age-standardised percentage of the disabled population in England (all ages) by IMD decile and sex. Source: Census 2021.

This social gradient was steepest for those whose activities were limited a lot by their disability. In the most deprived areas in England, 13.6% of people were limited in their activities a lot, compared to 4.2% in the least deprived areas (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Age-standardised percentage of the disabled population in England (all ages) by IMD decile and disability status. Source: Census 2021.

A greater percentage of people were disabled at younger ages in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas.

<sup>3</sup> NB: disability prevalence data split by IMD decile is not currently available at smaller geographies. For context, West Sussex overall is one of the least deprived areas in England, although the county has pockets of higher levels of deprivation (IMD 2019).

## Disability prevalence over time – 2011 to 2021

Disability prevalence recorded in the 2021 Census can be broadly compared with the prevalence recorded in the 2011 Census.

However, it should be noted that the **2021 Census disability question was changed** to align more closely with the Equality Act 2010. A reference to mental health was also included in the 2021 question whilst the prompt “include problems related to old age” was removed<sup>4</sup>. These changes should be borne in mind when assessing trends.

**Total disability prevalence was slightly lower in West Sussex overall in 2021, compared to 2011** (17.2% in 2011 compared to 16.9% in 2021), in line with England, whilst the South East region showed a slight rise. There was **variation in the districts and boroughs**, with some areas showing a slight increase (the largest increase was in Mid Sussex, rising from 14.2% in 2011 to 14.5% in 2021).

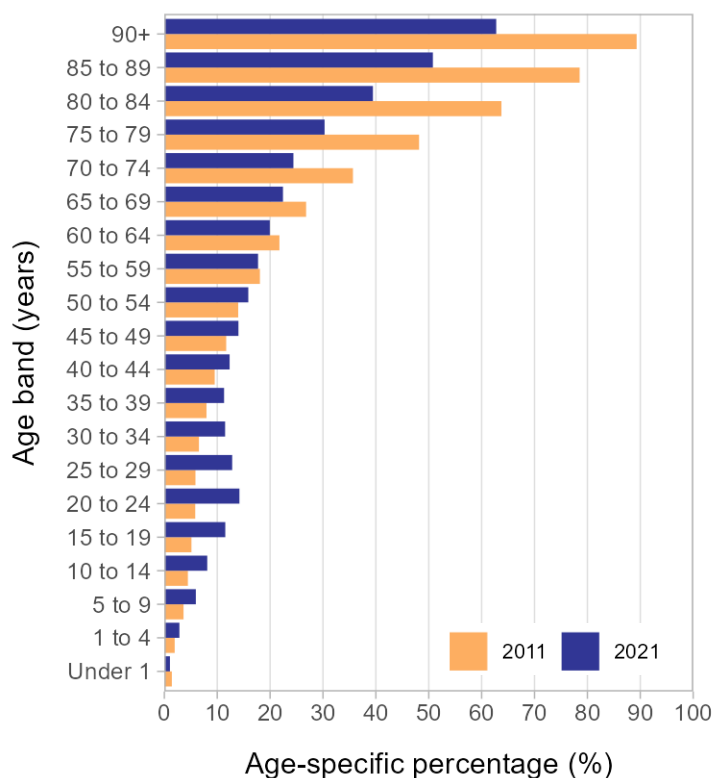
When split by disability status, England, the South East and all districts and boroughs in West Sussex showed a **decrease in those limited a lot by their disability**, and these areas – bar Arun, with no change – also showed an **increase in those limited a little by their disability**. In West Sussex overall, those limited a lot by their disability fell from 7.5% in 2011 to 6.5% in 2021, and those limited a little rose from 9.8% in 2011 to 10.3% in 2021.

### Who accounts for these differences?

#### By age

Compared to 2011, there were clear differences in disability prevalence by age band in West Sussex districts and boroughs in 2021 (figure 5). **Disability prevalence in 2021 was elevated in younger groups** (particularly in those aged 15 to 30), compared to 2011, and **reduced in older groups** (particularly and increasingly with age in those aged 70 to 90+). These patterns were similar at regional and national level.

- The **largest rise in disability prevalence** in West Sussex districts and boroughs was in those aged 20-24, with an average rise from 5.8% in 2011 to 14.2% in 2021.
- The **largest fall in disability prevalence** in West Sussex districts and boroughs was in those aged 85-89, with an average fall from 78.5% in 2011 to 50.8% in 2021.



**Figure 5.** Age-specific proportions of the disabled population by age and Census year, West Sussex districts and borough average. Source: Census 2011 and Census 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The Census 2011 disability question asked “Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months? Include problems related to old age”.



- Those aged 20-24 and aged 85-89 were the age groups with the largest changes at regional and national level, with a similar percentage-point difference.

### By sex

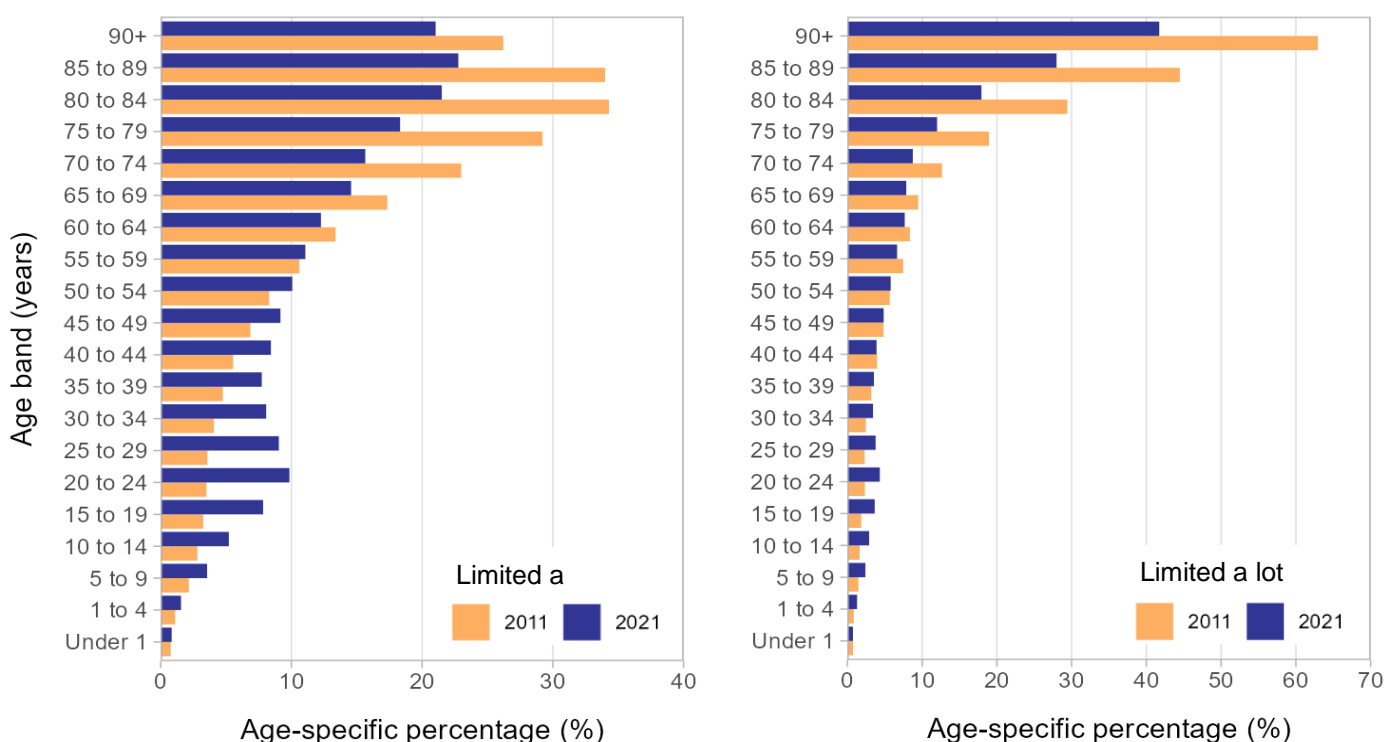
The change in disability prevalence from 2011 to 2021 was generally **greatest in females across the age bands**. This is particularly apparent in the **younger age groups (aged 15+)** and the case in the West Sussex districts and boroughs, the South East and England. For example, in those aged 20-24 in West Sussex districts and boroughs, the average difference in disability prevalence between 2011 and 2021 was 10.9 percentage-points in females, compared to 5.8 percentage-points in males.

In the **older age groups** where the decrease in disability prevalence from 2011 to 2021 was most noticeable, the difference from 2011 to 2021 was more similar for males and females (although females did show a slightly larger decrease in those aged 70-84). This was the case in West Sussex districts and boroughs, the South East and England.

### By disability status

**Younger age groups largely accounted for the rise in those who were limited a little** by their disability from 2011 to 2021 (particularly in those aged 15-30), with **smaller increases in those who were limited a lot** by their disability (figure 6). This was seen across the West Sussex districts and boroughs on average, the South East and England.

In contrast, the proportion of **older people who were limited a little fell substantially** (particularly in those aged 70-89), **as did the proportion of those who were limited a lot** (particularly in those aged 75+), for both sexes. Decreases in the proportion of older age groups who were limited a little and limited a lot by their disability in the South East and England followed a largely similar pattern to the West Sussex average.



**Figure 6.** Age-specific proportions of those limited a little (left) and limited a lot (right) by their disability by age and Census year, West Sussex districts and borough average. NB: the graphs have different scales. Source: Census 2011 and Census 2021.