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International
Longevity Centre UK

British Embassy
Beijing

Making Longevity Work

Equipping the UK to engage with China's ageing economy

Health
Wealth
Technology
Income
Work
Trade Oppportunities

About this report

This report was commissioned by the British Embassy Beijing through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It was produced by the International Longevity Centre UK between September 2025 and February 2026, drawing on desk research across Chinese and international policy, market and academic sources, a structured expert roundtable, and in-depth interviews with experts.

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Executive summary

The bilateral relationship between the UK and China entered a new phase in early 2026. This followed the Prime Minister's visit to Beijing: the first by a UK leader in eight years. This visit resulted in a bilateral services partnership, an agreement to conduct a joint feasibility study for a potential Trade in Services Agreement, and a series of trade and investment deals worth several billion pounds. As the UK Government plans the next stage of engagement with Chinese ministries, this report sets out how the UK can benefit from one of the largest structural shifts that has ever taken place in the Chinese economy: the rise of the "ageing economy".

The opportunity

China is ageing rapidly. Around 22% of its population are now aged 60 or over: that's over 310 million people. The workforce is shrinking, health needs are rising, families have less capacity for unpaid care, and public finances are under growing pressure. But above all, this is a story about economic opportunity. China's current generation of older people is among the wealthiest in the country's history. They're spending (on travel, leisure, health, functional foods, technology and learning) on a scale that's reshaping China's consumer markets as well as its healthcare and care systems.

China's policy architecture around ageing has deepened rapidly. It now has national frameworks dedicated to the ageing economy, development of elder care services, age-friendly urban planning, and science and technology innovation in civil affairs. The value of this market is currently estimated at 7 trillion yuan; it's projected to reach 30 trillion yuan (£3.2 trillion or roughly 10% of China's GDP) by 2035. Government procurement is being used to drive adoption of new technology, investment is concentrating in major urban clusters, and international cooperation on standards and innovation has been made an explicit policy objective.

Why the UK?

The UK has strengths that align closely with the needs of an ageing economy.

For instance, in healthcare and care, we have developed institutional models that will be invaluable to China as the burden of care moves from families to formal provision services. The UK's National Institute

for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides a framework for evidence-based adoption, while England's regulator for health and social care (CQC) provides independent quality assurance. And in the financial sector, the UK's strengths extend well beyond products into the professional infrastructure of pensions, insurance and consumer protection.

The UK also has practical experience that's hard to replicate quickly. This includes initiatives such as deploying digital and AI tools inside regulated healthcare systems, professionalising care workforces through nationally recognised training frameworks, and integrating age-friendly housing design with retrofitting and energy efficiency standards. Functional foods, consumer lifestyle brands and creative industries add further breadth as China's older population spends more on wellbeing.

The structure of trade between the UK and China reinforces this positioning. The UK runs a services surplus with China of nearly £10 billion, with exports of services growing steadily. This reflects the underlying demand in China for the professional, institutional and regulatory capabilities required by ageing economies. As the ageing of China's population accelerates, this only increases demand, as healthcare systems, care provision, pension governance and workforce training are all service-intensive; they require sustained, relationship-based engagement. The UK has a strong track record in this field.

Both countries face the consequences of ageing but are currently at different stages in their response. China is deploying a comprehensive strategic framework and vision at unprecedented scale and speed. In contrast, the UK has already built mature institutional frameworks in pensions, healthcare regulation and healthcare standards, which can guide efficient universal provision. These complementary positions could form the basis for a partnership that goes beyond conventional trade. Both countries stand to gain from jointly developing the systems and capabilities that ageing economies require.

How UK business practitioners should approach this market

We need to deliberately build on our complementary position to create long-lasting trade relationships. Drawing on the analysis in this report, we recommend five principles to guide UK practitioners.

Bundle products with delivery support ("export-plus"). Buyers increasingly want offerings that combine products with the training, maintenance, quality assurance, and evidence needed to use them well. This shifts the basis of competition from price to quality of outcome. While some UK businesses already use this model, not all practitioners are applying this approach systematically.

Work through multi-level partnerships. The details of China's ageing economy vary sharply by province and city tier. The UK's own strengths differ by region. Matching UK specific capabilities with Chinese provinces that are actively commissioning and piloting partnerships is more effective than promoting a single national offer.

Invest upstream in standards, workforce frameworks, and evaluation. Quality standards, workforce accreditation and evidence frameworks give purchasers the confidence to spend. This is where the UK's real advantage lies. Once a standard or quality framework is adopted, it shapes what gets purchased and who gets hired for years to come.

Adapt engagement approaches to match different levels of market maturity. Some sectors already invest heavily in the ageing economy (such as health, care, finance). Others are still developing (assistive technology, age-friendly housing). A third sector requires foundational work: standards, workforce training, and quality assurance frameworks.

For UK practitioners, this means:

- In the short term, build on existing footholds in pharmaceuticals, care, financial services and research.
- In the medium term, use pilot programmes to build positions in assistive technology, age-friendly housing and manufacturing automation.
- Over the longer term, create partnerships to develop the institutional building blocks that will shape future procurement.

Pursue joint ventures and co-development alongside export. China's market increasingly rewards businesses that co-design their offerings with Chinese partners. Co-development gives UK practitioners local credibility, produces outputs designed for the Chinese context, and reduces the political sensitivity of engagement. Younger Chinese consumers increasingly favour domestic brands, which means they're more likely to consider UK products and services when they reach the market through a co-developed, Chinese-facing offering.

Recommendations for Government practitioners

1. **Treat ageing as a cross-cutting priority and organise our approach to match.** Ageing affects health, labour markets, finance, housing, technology and local government, but the UK's dealings with China are organised through separate sectoral channels that rarely connect. China is increasingly taking a whole-systems approach to ageing which the UK should match.
    - Create a cross-departmental coordination function that brings together trade, healthcare, education, foreign affairs and the Treasury, so that activity in one department reinforces rather than duplicates that in others.
    - Embed ageing as a standing item within existing bilateral mechanisms, such as the Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO) and the financial working group from the recent bilateral reset.
    - Build expertise in Chinese markets across Government, including through structured consultation with UK practitioners with experience operating in China.
2. **Move from episodic networking to sustained, solution/outcome-led partnerships.** The UK's growing services surplus with China reflects the underlying demand for expertise, but services require sustained relationships to deliver value. A one-off trade mission can sell a product, but it can't transfer a quality assurance methodology or embed a workforce training system.
    - Focus on the systemic challenges that can't be solved through episodic networking: building institutional trust, navigating regulatory differences, converting introductions into procurement relationships, and sustaining partnerships through political and personnel cycles.
    - Institutionalise continuity through working groups with defined problems, named partners on both sides, clear work programmes and metrics that track progression from introduction to procurement.
    - Invest in supporting UK organisations who enter partnerships in China with cultural preparation, including language support and practical briefings on business norms.

3. **Change the narrative and equip practitioners to act on it.** Survey evidence suggests that the single most important thing the UK Government could do is improve the public narrative around the UK-China relationship.[1] The current ambiguity deters legitimate engagement and hands the advantage to competitors whose governments provide clearer signals.
    - Draw a visible distinction between sensitive areas, such as the transfer of advanced technology, and areas where we actively encourage cooperation.
    - Provide sector-specific regulatory guidance on how to apply export controls, sanctions and the National Security and Investment Act, and facilitate structured market entry through trusted intermediaries.
    - Produce regular market intelligence on China's ageing economy and actively promote the UK as a partner of choice for ageing-related cooperation.

China's ageing economy: a market in transition

For decades, China's population size has been a core economic asset – a large workforce and consumer base that supported rapid industrial growth. But context has shifted. Decades of policies on family size, including the one child policy (1980–2015), combined with rising life expectancy, have changed the demographic picture fundamentally. Official statistics show China's overall population fell by around 850,000 in 2022 and by 2.08 million in 2023.[2]

By the end of 2024, more than 310 million people were aged 60 and over (around 22% of the population), and the number aged 65+ exceeded 220 million.[3] China is ageing, while its economy continues to shift towards services, technology and domestic consumption. This combination of factors is creating pressure on several fronts simultaneously.

The workforce is shrinking, creating labour shortages in certain industries and services.[4] Healthcare needs are rising, as more people live longer with chronic conditions and spend more years in poorer health.[5] Families have less capacity to provide unpaid day-to-day informal care, as household size has fallen and internal migration separates adult children from parents. A State Council–cited survey reports that in 2021, 59.7% of older people were "empty nesters" (living alone or only with a spouse).[6] And public finances are under growing pressure as spending rises on pensions, healthcare and care services, with differences in local fiscal capacity shaping what can scale and where.[7]

But these pressures sit alongside a less commonly told story about spending power and consumer agency. China's current generation of older people is breaking stereotypes about thrift. This generation has benefited from decades of economic growth. Many have significant disposable income and assets. They are spending: on travel, sport, learning, food, health, culture and technology.[8] The market for smart technology aimed at older consumers reached an estimated value of 11 trillion yuan in 2024.[9] Internet users aged 60 and over now make up over a third of China's online population, spending an average of 135 hours per month on mobile apps.[10]

These different factors have led to a situation that's not a single market, but a reorganisation of how services are delivered, how risks are managed, how consumers spend, and how productivity is sustained. To identify the opportunities for UK practitioners, we must explore several overlapping areas of demand.

What markets are emerging – and why?

China's new "ageing economy" is taking shape across distinct markets, driven by different needs and different ways of paying for support.

The anchor: healthcare, preventative care and care

Healthcare and care is the largest and most established pool of ageing-related spending. Per capita healthcare expenditure for people aged 65 and over has been estimated at 7.25 times that of those under 25, and 1.61 times that of those aged 25–59.[11] Between 2000 and 2020, China's per capita health spending rose around fivefold in real terms.[12] This represents sustained demand for pharmaceuticals, medical devices and rehabilitation services.

What is changing is the level of spending and, more importantly, the mix of different types. Longer lives, with more chronic disease, increase demand for long-term condition management and recovery. This includes rehabilitation, assistive technologies, monitoring, and support after hospital discharge. In places where community provision and specialist geriatric services are more limited, these "in-between" services matter more because the alternative is additional hospital use.

This includes digital healthcare. Telehealth use increased during COVID-19 restrictions – but it didn't drop to former levels once restrictions were lifted.[13] Telemedicine platforms, community monitoring systems, and assistive technologies are being used to improve access and efficiency. Adult children, many of whom live in different cities from their parents, increasingly manage their parents' care remotely, through apps and platforms.[14] The market for smart devices aimed at older consumers (such as wearables with fall detection, blood pressure monitors, emergency alert systems) has grown rapidly as a result, driven as much by family demand as by institutional purchasing.[15]

In care facilities, staffing pressure and risk management are influencing purchasing decisions. Providers are looking for tools that reduce risk and extend capacity, including automation and robotics for specific tasks to complement human care.[16]

Preventative healthcare, or "prevention", is emerging as an economy in its own right. The *Healthy China 2030* strategy (a landmark government policy launched in 2016) frames health as part of national development, with a stronger emphasis on earlier intervention, public health promotion and managing health across the life course.[17] Demand is growing for interventions like vaccination, physical activity, functional foods and diet, and early screening.

Beyond hospitals: everyday living and ageing in place

Independent living creates its own economy. As more people age at home with less family support, demand rises for practical services such as meals, errands, home help, transport and locally accessible support.[18]

This economy includes housing, in two different markets. One is incremental demand: adapting existing homes to make them safer and more functional. Typical examples include bathroom modifications, ramps, lift access, improved lighting, basic home monitoring and mobility aids. The other is structural demand: later-life living formats that bundle accessible design, shared spaces and on-site services. This category includes "wellness communities" that combine medical, residential and recreational functions.[19,20]

Consumer demand is increasing significantly, particularly in leisure and among healthier urban retirees with disposable income. Older consumers are spending on travel, sport, cultural activities and learning, contributing to what some analysts describe as the "happiness industry".[21] Tourism by people aged 60+ already accounts for over 20% of China's tourist numbers, contributing to a market estimated to be worth 1 trillion yuan.[22] These are mainstream markets driven by a generation with both time and resources to spend. Buyers mostly purchase through ecommerce and app-based services, which is why accessible, age-friendly digital design (with simplified modes, larger text, clearer prompts, safer payment steps) has become both a commercial and policy issue.

Money and access

With retirement periods lasting longer, households need their savings to go further and want ways to manage later-life costs. This is increasing demand for pensions, long-horizon savings vehicles, health-linked savings plans and insurance products designed around longevity and later-life medical risk. Banks and insurers have started

to adjust their service models for older customers, with simplified processes, accessible digital interfaces, and products designed around transparency and trust.[23]

Consumer protection matters here. Older customers are higher-risk targets for scams and fraud, which increases caution and raises demand for products and providers that are transparent and credible. In practice, families often look for reassurance as much as returns. The way people access services also matters. Where interfaces are difficult to use or risks are perceived to be high, uptake can stall even when willingness to spend exists.[24]

How policy is shaping delivery and scale

China's government has responded to these demographic and market shifts with a sustained and increasingly coordinated policy effort. China now has national frameworks dedicated to the ageing economy, development of elder care, age-friendly urban planning, and science and technology innovation in civil affairs.[25] The value of this market is currently estimated at 7 trillion yuan; it's projected to reach 30 trillion yuan (£3.2 trillion or roughly 10% of China's GDP) by 2035.[26]

The *Healthy China 2030* strategy emphasises prevention, earlier intervention and shifting care delivery from hospitals into communities.[27]

During its 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021–2025), China expanded the infrastructure for home- and community-based care, including upgrades to community facilities and support for those being cared for at home.[28] The State Council's 2024 action plan on the ageing economy covered elder care, age-friendly urban planning, and aspects of financial services reform.[29] Subsequent measures, addressing the development of the care sector, emphasise chain-style home-care provision, integration into China's "15-minute community life circle" model for providing accessible services for older people, and expansion of service settings. These measures also encourage care providers to adopt technology (health monitors, rehabilitation aids, higher-end medical devices) as part of service delivery, recognising that the practical work of technology adoption (installation, staff training, maintenance, integration into daily routines) is as important as the technology itself.[30,31]

Alongside care reform, changes have been approved that will gradually raise retirement ages between 2025 and 2040.[32] This

reinforces the emphasis on prevention and functional health, because later retirement only works if more people stay healthier for longer. National strategies on AI and industrial upgrading link automation to demographic pressures, supporting demand for diagnostics, monitoring tools, assistive devices, and care facility technologies.[33]

China has also broadened its policy architecture further, extending science and technology innovation frameworks into civil affairs. These changes cover elder care, rehabilitation, disability support and social governance for the 15th Five-Year Plan period. This reflects a broader shift in how Chinese policymakers are approaching ageing, coupling demographic strategy with industrial policy, and treating the needs of an older population as a catalyst for technology development and market creation. Government procurement is positioned as a driver of technology adoption, investment is being concentrated in major urban clusters, and – significantly for foreign partners – international cooperation on standards, technology platforms and open innovation is included as an explicit policy objective.[34,35] Several of these priority areas correspond closely to UK strengths.

Trade and industry in an ageing world: where does the UK sit?

The UK *Industrial Strategy: Plan for Change* identifies eight priority sectors (the IS8): advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, digital and technology, life sciences, professional and business services, financial services, and defence.[36] While these priorities weren't specifically designed around demographic change, many of the capabilities they represent tend to become more valuable as populations age. This means that a global ageing population could play to the UK's strengths.

The UK and China's bilateral relationship entered a new phase in early 2026 following the Prime Minister's visit to Beijing. The result was a bilateral services partnership, an agreement to conduct a joint feasibility study for a potential Trade in Services Agreement, and a series of trade and investment deals worth several billion pounds.[37] This puts the UK Government in a good position to benefit China's "ageing economy"; this should be reflected in our next stage of engagement with Chinese ministries.

1. As ageing expands demand for healthcare, care and later-life finance, economies rely more on formal institutions

Ageing changes the economy through a gradual reweighting of priorities throughout society. More people live for longer, with needs that are continuous rather than occasional. These include a need for ongoing regular healthcare and care support, financial arrangements that must last for decades, housing that remains practical as mobility changes, and technologies that are dependable in everyday use.

As care provision and later-life finance become more formal, there's a growing need for clear rules, trusted institutions, and effective oversight to set standards, manage risk and maintain confidence as systems scale. This is especially apparent in countries where family support and informal arrangements have historically carried much of the care burden.[38]

The UK has credible strengths here, with national institutions that support the formalisation of healthcare and care. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) translates clinical and

economic evidence into guidance on what should be adopted and funded, particularly when budgets are under strain. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) provides independent oversight across healthcare and adult social care. This is important because risks emerge when care is handed off between providers, and quality varies widely across organisations. The NHS *10 Year Plan* reflects this institutional approach, treating demographic pressure and workforce constraints as reasons to strengthen prevention, community care, and consistent standards across providers.[39]

How NICE decides what a healthcare system should adopt and pay for

NICE produces national guidance on medicines and other treatments by weighing clinical benefit against value for money, then setting clear recommendations for the NHS. When NICE recommends a treatment through its Technology Appraisal programme, the NHS in England is required to fund and make that treatment available within three months. NICE decisions translate directly into access.

Where a recommended treatment would create short-term cost pressures that exceed £20 million for any one year within the first three years, the Budget Impact Test allows a managed implementation timetable. Where evidence is promising but incomplete, NICE supports managed access, allowing use while data is collected. This is followed by reassessment, so systems can adopt innovation without losing control of risk.[40]

This model demonstrates how a public healthcare system can adopt innovation at pace while maintaining cost discipline – which is the central challenge China faces as demand for new treatments and devices grows.

These institutions are also international reference models. The CQC is a case in point. As the independent regulator of healthcare and adult social care in England, responsible for monitoring, inspecting and rating services against published standards, the CQC combines registration, inspection, public ratings and enforcement powers. This approach has attracted interest from countries designing their own quality assurance

systems. For China, where the care sector is scaling rapidly from a low base, and quality consistency is a stated policy priority, CQC methods offer an adaptable reference for jointly designing fit-for-context inspection and improvement standards.[41]

Rehabilitation and assistive technology is another market where UK practitioners have expertise and experience. The UK has a well-developed ecosystem spanning clinical research, product development, regulatory expertise, and service delivery. Programmes funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHCR) support the development of assistive devices from concept, through clinical validation, to adoption.[42] UK companies produce smart prosthetics, powered orthoses, mobility aids, home monitoring systems, and communication devices for people with cognitive and physical impairments. Companies such as Blatchford (advanced prosthetic limbs), Tunstall Healthcare (telecare and remote monitoring for older people) and Buddi (GPS-enabled wearables for people with dementia) illustrate the range of UK capability, from high-end clinical devices to everyday consumer products designed for independent living.[43,44,45]

Crucially, the UK also has the regulatory and clinical validation infrastructure that allows technology to be tested, certified and implemented in real care settings. This is through the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and NHS clinical networks.[46,47] As China scales its rehabilitation and assistive device sector, the gap is often less in manufacturing capacity than in clinical validation, quality testing methodology, evidence-based prescription, and user-centred design, all areas where UK expertise can add significant value.

2. Slower workforce growth shifts focus from expansion to productivity, raising the value of digital, AI and effective implementation

In economies with strong labour-force growth, it's easier to raise output by expanding headcount. Ageing changes that. With slower growth in the working-age population, productivity becomes more important, with growth in output depending on getting more from each hour worked. In this setting, digital tools, automation and AI can improve performance when staff time is scarce.

The UK has particular experience in the technologies that ageing economies need to adopt at scale, including AI-enabled diagnostics

and triage, robotic process automation for care administration, sensor-based monitoring systems, and simulation and digital twin capabilities for testing care environments before deployment. The Catapult Network (a group of Government-backed innovation centres) provides mechanisms for translating these capabilities into international partnerships, bridging the gap between UK research and commercial application in overseas markets.[48]

What distinguishes the UK's digital and AI offering is experience of implementation within regulated healthcare settings. UK organisations have developed practical experience integrating remote monitoring, telehealth and digital governance through pilot programmes. These lessons about what works in practice – from clinical workflow integration to patient consent, to algorithmic accountability – are as valuable as the technologies themselves. This wealth of experience is directly relevant to China's push towards community-based digital care.

3. Longer time horizons put the focus on finance and increase the value of trust, consumer protection and risk governance

Ageing lengthens the time horizon over which households and institutions must manage risk. People need their money to last longer, and later-life costs (especially around healthcare, care and housing) are harder to predict.[49] Pensions, insurance and long-horizon products become more central to household security and public confidence. This makes product design and governance more important. Fees, withdrawal rules, exclusions and protections will shape outcomes years after purchase.

Ageing can also influence consumer preferences for stability and predictable returns. Older consumers can be more exposed to fraud or misleading claims, particularly where healthcare and financial products overlap, which increases the practical importance of clear information, consumer protection and trusted oversight.[50]

The UK's strengths are well suited to this shift, as they extend beyond product provision into long-horizon risk governance. The UK remains the world's largest net exporter of financial services, with a £78.9 billion trade surplus in 2023.[51] A significant part of this strength sits in the professional infrastructure around finance, including actuarial design, regulated advice, disclosure, governance and assurance. IS8 sectors

reinforce each other here. Financial services depend on professional and business services, and increasingly on digital capability as finance becomes more technology-enabled, leading to the evolution of fraud risks.

Moreover, the UK has already built and tested institutional models that turn governance principles into working systems. The UK's auto-enrolment pension system, delivered through the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST), demonstrates how to build population-wide pension coverage at speed. Since its launch in 2012, NEST has enrolled around 13.8 million members and manages approximately £49.7 billion in assets, using a specific low-cost model with a public service obligation to accept any employer[52]. As China expands its own pension system to cover a much larger and older population, the NEST model's combination of behavioural design (automatic enrolment with opt-out), low charges, and independent governance, offers a practical reference.[53]

When it comes to consumer protection, Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) guidance on the fair treatment of vulnerable customers provides a framework that could be adapted for China's ageing financial consumer base.[54] The guidance sets out expectations that businesses understand vulnerability, design products that avoid harm, and ensure that communications and service delivery work for customers whose needs may differ from the general population. As China's financial services sector serves a growing older customer base facing fraud risk, cognitive decline and digital exclusion, this kind of regulatory methodology becomes increasingly relevant.[55]

4. Skills systems matter more as participation becomes a constraint, and work needs to adapt across longer lives

When labour is less abundant, focus shifts towards sustaining capability across adulthood. This includes keeping skills current, supporting adaptation to new technologies, and enabling people to remain economically active for longer. As participation becomes more valuable work patterns increasingly need to accommodate the health constraints and caring responsibilities that become more likely as employees age. This places greater value on education and training systems that support mid-career transitions, vocational routes, and practical learning that fits around work and life.

The UK is well positioned here. We are China's second most significant academic collaborator after the US, accounting for nearly 14% of internationally co-authored publications.[56] The UK's *International Education Strategy 2026* explicitly treats skills export as a growth asset, encouraging the increase of overseas delivery through new partnerships, campuses abroad and distance learning.[57]

The UK has also invested significantly in professionalising our care workforce. Skills for Care has developed nationally recognised competency frameworks covering dementia care, safeguarding, infection prevention, and person-centred care planning. These models are relevant to China because they address a challenge China is now confronting at much larger scale: how to move from informal, family-based care provision to a regulated, professionally trained sector.

5. The importance of 'place' increases as individuals' independence depends on everyday environments

As societies age, more of the practical challenges fall to ordinary households and neighbourhoods. When more people live independently for longer, as mobility and health needs change gradually, the built environment starts to carry more of the load. The policy and investment agenda should shift towards adaptation, making existing housing, streets and local facilities safer, more usable and better suited to later-life needs. Retrofitting becomes central, both to support independence and to manage cost pressures, as this is often quicker and more realistic than large-scale redevelopment.

This is where several of the UK's IS8 strengths intersect. Clean energy supports retrofit at scale (insulation, low-carbon heating and better controls) making homes are warmer, cheaper to run, and more resilient. Digital tools and technology help coordinate and monitor delivery through tools for scheduling and triage in community services, basic remote monitoring and safety tech in the home, and data systems that track whether upgrades are installed and performing. Professional and business services make these change work, through design standards for accessibility, procurement and contract management, quality assurance and inspection, and evaluation that supports learning before scaling.

The UK has led the development of practical design frameworks for age-friendly housing. The HAPPI (Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation) design principles, developed through independent

review, set out evidence-based standards for space, light, adaptability and community integration in later-life housing.[58] They have informed housing policy and design practice in several countries. In addition, the Lifetime Homes Standard provides a set of design criteria that make homes adaptable to changing needs over a lifetime without requiring any major retrofitting.[59] These offer a reference model for China's growing demand for accessible housing and age-friendly retrofitting. This is a market where the UK can offer design standards, professional services, and energy-efficiency expertise as an integrated package.

What a credible UK approach looks like

Understanding China's ageing economy, and identifying where UK businesses can add value, is the right place to start – but we need to go further. The harder question is how to convert alignment into durable engagement. The UK's growing services surplus with China (nearly £10 billion and rising) reflects the underlying demand for the professional, regulatory and institutional capabilities needed by ageing economies.[60] [61] Healthcare systems, care provision, pension governance, workforce training and quality assurance are all service-intensive. UK practitioners have experience and expertise in the kind of sustained, relationship-based engagement these require. Five principles should guide UK businesses, universities and institutions entering this market.

1. The "export-plus" approach: bundle offers around delivery

In areas that tend to grow as populations age (healthcare, care and long-horizon finance), value comes from sustained, reliable delivery; this requires well-trained staff, robust quality processes, and continuous oversight. Safe rollout, training, maintenance, integration and ongoing assurance are central. This changes what buyers expect. They want offerings that support products with the training, support, and ongoing service that ensure they perform effectively. This is "export-plus": selling products bundled with the support services that make them function reliably.

In healthcare, bundling means pairing goods with the practical support that reduces operational risk. This includes installation, clinician training, maintenance, and monitoring that allows purchasers to track performance over time. In care, Chinese national policy is pushing provision beyond hospitals towards community services, home support and technology-enabled care. In that environment, training and supervision, infection control, safeguarding, and clear accountability are central to scaling without avoidable failures. In finance, later-life savings and insurance place emphasis on customer understanding, suitability and consumer protection because products run over long time horizons. This strengthens the case for UK offerings that combine products with governance capability: clear disclosure, assurance and service models.

Bundling products with services boosts German SME exports

Successful German SME (small to medium enterprises) exporters often sell bundled solutions. These are packages designed to deliver clear outcomes. Equipment comes with installation; software with maintenance; systems with training and ongoing technical support.

Evidence from more than 4,000 German SMEs finds that businesses which bundle products and services together generate a higher share of sales from exports than comparable firms that don't. This holds true even after accounting for productivity, R&D spend, company size, and overseas investment, suggesting that bundling is part of the export advantage.

Bundling helps because it makes price competition harder (offers are no longer like-for-like), reduces buyer uncertainty in unfamiliar markets (the supplier stays involved after the sale), and supports longer relationships through service contracts.[62]

UK businesses are already demonstrating this approach in China. AstraZeneca's recent commitment to a $15 billion investment bundles medicine manufacturing with R&D partnerships and public healthcare system collaboration. This helps embed the company in China's healthcare infrastructure rather than simply exporting products to it.[63] These are models that smaller UK businesses focusing on ageing economies can learn from and adapt.

2. Build multi-level partnerships: match 'many Chinas' with 'many UKs'

China's ageing economy varies sharply by place. Coastal provinces such as Shanghai, Zhejiang and Jiangsu are ageing fastest; they also generally have stronger local finances and more developed industrial and service bases. Many inland regions have younger populations but face tighter budgets and more constraints in service capacity.[64] Consumer behaviour also differs by place: rural and urban areas see different behaviour, while higher-tier[a] cities with more developed

[a]A city tier is an unofficial classification that categorises cities based on their economic development, population size, political influence and commercial activity, widely used in business, real estate and consumer market analysis. Cities are typically classified into four or five tiers, with first-tier cities being the most developed.

private provision differ from lower-tier cities, where price sensitivity is higher and service markets less developed.[65]

UK trade data supports the use of a regional lens. The UK regions that see most exports to China are the East Midlands, West Midlands, London, the North West and the South West.[66] And relevant strengths are regionally differentiated, with different clusters, institutions and firms connecting to China through different products, partners and routes to market. This common ground can strengthen partnerships through mutual learning as well as trade. Multi-level partnerships make it possible to take advantage of regional variations, matching region-led capability with Chinese provinces that are actively commissioning and piloting, rather than promoting a single 'UK offer' everywhere.

Japan demonstrates this approach through CLAIR (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations), which was established in 1988 to systematise prefectural engagement with foreign governments. China accounts for around 20% of Japanese sister-city relationships, with examples including relationships between Osaka and Shanghai since 1980 (based on trade, specialist training, economic missions) and Chiba and Qinhuangdao since 1982 (through port management, and maritime trade). Because engagement operates at a prefectural and business level rather than national level alone, cooperation persists when national politics strain.[67]

3. Invest upstream, in skills, standards and evidence that support scale

This means investing in the standards, workforce frameworks, and evaluation methods that shape how markets operate. In any market where services are complex and outcomes are hard to assess in advance, institutional infrastructure plays a decisive role in enabling growth.

Standards, workforce accreditation, and evidence frameworks reduce risk for purchasers and create the conditions under which spending follows demand. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in the ageing economy, where purchasing decisions often involve families, local authorities and insurers, who all need assurance that provision will be safe, consistent and accountable.

For the UK, contributing to the design of these systems creates durable positioning, because standards and methods, once adopted, tend to shape procurement criteria for years. It also supports China's own

development objectives, making the engagement mutually beneficial rather than purely extractive.

Much of the UK's tradable advantage sits method and governance rather than volume delivery. This includes how to specify services, set measurable standards, build inspection routines, link training to practice, and generate evidence that gives commissioners confidence over time. Businesses and institutions that help partners make their own systems more reliable as they expand create durable relationships that outlast individual contracts. Government has a part to play here too. Treating institutional capability as a strategic export, and funding sustained partnerships between UK professional bodies and their Chinese counterparts, would underpin the commercial positioning that individual businesses and universities pursue.

Pilot programmes are a good example of upstream engagement in practice. China often uses pilots to test reforms locally, learn quickly, then scale what works. UK businesses can use their experience to support that machinery through evaluation design, outcome measurement, workforce learning, and quality improvement methods that help pilots mature into dependable services. The most credible formats are joint pilots, where a local Chinese authority or delivery body runs the programme, a provider deals with day-to-day delivery, and UK-linked academic or institutional partners support measurement and improvement, with the possibility of commercial involvement.

BSI (the British Standards Institution) has been operating in China since 1995. It has enabled more than 10,000 Chinese organisations to adopt international standards, making it a natural delivery partner for joint standards development in ageing-related technologies and services.[68]

4. Adapt engagement approaches to match different markets

China's ageing economy consists of multiple markets, that are moving at different speeds. This means that UK engagement needs a short-term focus on strengthening what already works, a medium-term focus on entering as new markets take shape, and a longer-term focus on the institutional building blocks that shape access and trust.

The three tracks described below aren't intended as sequential, but should run in parallel, with different emphasis at different stages.

Track 1 – Build where the UK already has a foothold (short term). Where UK businesses and institutions already have relationships and track records, the priority is to move from one-off transactions to export-plus offers, which pair products with support. Key sectors include pharmaceuticals and medical devices, institutional care, pensions and asset management, functional health foods and research collaboration.

Track 2 – Build position in developing markets (medium term). In areas where demand is expanding but where suppliers, standards and service models are still taking shape, entry routes run through pilots, demonstrations and early framework arrangements. A key UK contribution could be helping buyers define what "good" looks like in practice. Sectors include assistive technology, age-friendly housing, manufacturing automation and modular construction.

Track 3 – Form partnerships to create institutional building blocks (long term). Institutional infrastructure shapes multiple markets over time. This includes workforce pathways, inspection and quality assurance methods, evaluation routines, digital health governance and financial supervision. Engagement at this level relies on sustained institutional relationships. It moves slowly but influences who is accredited, how performance is judged and which assurance methods are treated as credible. For China, these partnerships could support development of the institutional capacity its ageing economy needs. For the UK, it could create long-term positioning in markets still being defined.

5. Use joint ventures and co-development alongside export

Many of the capabilities identified in this report (quality assurance methods, workforce training systems, care standards, digital governance frameworks) are intangibles that can't be shipped and installed. They need to be adapted to local regulatory environments, integrated with existing Chinese systems, and accepted by Chinese institutions as credible. Co-development addresses this by building UK expertise into the design process from the start.

Joint ventures and co-development models offer advantages that go beyond market access. They produce outputs designed for the Chinese context, increasing the likelihood of adoption. They give Chinese partners access to UK methodology while giving UK

participants deeper market understanding and local credibility. And they create shared intellectual property and revenue streams that give both sides a stake in long-term success.

There's also a commercial logic that's specific to China's consumer market. Younger Chinese consumers increasingly favour domestic brands and products that feel culturally fluent.[69,70] A co-developed product or service, carrying a Chinese-facing identity and backed by local partnerships, is more likely to gain traction than an imported offer, however strong the underlying capability. Co-development allows UK expertise to reach the market in a form that Chinese consumers and institutions recognise and trust.

Co-development also reduces the political sensitivity of engagement, as relationships are framed as a partnership of equals. Experience across sectors suggests that joint ventures with local adaptation tend to produce higher rates of adoption than imported solutions, because they are designed around local workflows, regulatory environments and user expectations from the outset.

Recommendations

Both the UK and China face the consequences of their ageing populations but are taking different approaches. While China is deploying a comprehensive strategic framework at unprecedented scale and speed, the UK already has mature institutional frameworks in pensions, healthcare regulation and standards. These complementary positions could form the basis for a partnership that goes beyond conventional trade, where both countries stand to gain from jointly developing the systems and capabilities required by ageing economies.

UK businesses see the opportunity. Survey evidence has shown that nearly 70% are optimistic about their prospects in China over the next 5 to 10 years, with over half planning to increase capital investment. The same survey found that 88% say government-to-government dialogue is important for their success, and two-thirds want clearer guidance on the type of engagement encouraged within the framework of national security.[71] The recommendations below set out the changes needed at the level of policy, institutional infrastructure and political narrative.

1. Treat ageing as a cross-cutting priority and organise Government to match

Ageing affects healthcare, labour markets, finance, housing, technology, and local government. Yet the UK's dealings with China are still often organised through separate sectoral channels, each running its own missions, partnerships, and dialogues. China, on the other hand, is increasingly taking a whole-systems approach, as reflected in its latest policy planning around ageing.

Matching China's approach would require a cross-departmental coordination function, bringing together trade, health, education, foreign affairs and the Treasury in a coherent joined up offer.

UK Government practitioners should:

- Align trade promotion, research cooperation, and regulatory engagement related to ageing, so that activity in one channel reinforces rather than duplicates that in others.
- Map where UK strengths reinforce one another (for example, combining medtech exports with regulatory science and workforce training) and design engagement around these clusters rather than pursuing them in silos.

- Build expertise in Chinese markets across Government, with sector-specific guidance for departments on what ageing-related engagement is encouraged.
- Maintain continuity across political cycles and departmental boundaries, including by embedding ageing as a standing item within bilateral mechanisms such as the Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO) (the mechanism for economic and trade cooperation between China and the UK, which includes several specialised working groups) and the financial working group from the recent bilateral reset.

2. Move beyond episodic networking to sustained, solution-led partnership infrastructure

The UK's growing services surplus with China (nearly £10 billion and rising) reflects an underlying demand for the kind of expertise the UK offers.[72] But services can't be exported in the same way as goods. They require sustained relationships, mutual confidence, and repeated interaction to deliver value. A one-off trade mission can sell a product; it can't transfer a quality assurance methodology or embed a workforce training system. Yet most UK–China engagement on ageing is still organised through episodic events. These are useful for introductions, but structurally inadequate for the kind of engagement required by that services trades.

Within this context and to support meaningful engagement, trade bodies, sector organisations and universities should:

- Anchor engagement around specific, recurring challenges rather than general relationship building. Each working group should have a defined problem, named institutional partners on both sides, a clear work programme, and a timeline for producing deliverable outputs.
- Institutionalise continuity so partnerships don't depend on individual champions. Use small working groups or programme "homes" that persist beyond a single mission. This mitigates churn, supports knowledge retention, and allows stalled partnerships to be diagnosed and either repaired or closed.
- Track conversion metrics, including: the proportion of introductions that move to scoped proposals; pilot programmes initiated; pilots

completed with evaluation; continuation beyond a few months; and movement towards commissioning or procurement, where relevant.

- Invest in cultural preparation for UK organisations entering partnerships. UK businesses report demand for cultural training, language support and practical briefings on Chinese business norms and negotiation styles. This preparation can be the difference between a relationship that progresses and one that stalls after introductions.

3. Change the narrative and equip businesses to act on it

For many businesses, public discourse around the UK-China relationship has become a bigger obstacle than any regulatory barrier. A survey of over 100 UK businesses operating in China found that 59% of those providing open feedback identified the public narrative as the single most important thing Government could address.[73,74] The current ambiguity deters legitimate engagement and hands the advantage to competitors whose governments provide clearer signals.

A core part of the problem is conflation. Cooperation on ageing economy issues, student recruitment, and financial services are treated with the same caution as the transfer of sensitive technology. Drawing a specific distinction between these categories would do more to unlock engagement than any single trade policy measure. The UK has begun to move in this direction with the recent bilateral reset. The challenge now is to embed that posture departmentally, so that the signal is consistent and durable.

But changing the narrative is only useful if businesses can act on it. In practice, this means that the UK Government should:

- Provide accessible, regularly updated guidance on how export controls, sanctions, the National Security and Investment Act and data localisation requirements apply to specific sectors, so that individual businesses need not establish this themselves at significant cost in time and legal fees.

- Facilitate structured market entry through trusted intermediaries such as universities with established partnerships in China, sector bodies with in-market presence and established firms willing

to act as anchor partners. Phased engagement, beginning with time-limited, clearly defined activity, before moving to deeper collaboration, reduces exposure and makes it easier to change course if conditions shift.

- Invest in proactive, multi-level dialogue with Chinese counterparts, including at provincial and municipal level where much procurement within the ageing economy takes place.
- Regular market intelligence briefings covering provincial procurement pipelines, regulatory developments and partnership opportunities; these would allow UK practitioners to make informed decisions about where and how to engage.
- Establish common approaches to due diligence, contracting and compliance, with built-in review points and IP safeguards, to reduce the burden on individual businesses.
- Actively promote the UK as a partner of choice for ageing-related cooperation, drawing on the maturity of its service sector, institutional credibility and research partnerships. A constructive international posture can have direct commercial consequences: it could shape how UK practitioners are received in China and influence the flow of Chinese investment and talent into the UK.

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