



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

Settlement Patterns, Urban Form and Sustainable Development

Evidence on how planning can shape the built environment to boost economic productivity, tackle climate change, improve public health and respond to the challenges of an ageing population

The UK faces a number of long-term challenges. Many of our towns and cities lag behind their European counterparts in terms of economic productivity, while the benefits of growth are spread unevenly across society. An ageing population is placing an increasing strain on healthcare systems, while problems like obesity and air pollution are on the rise. Climate change is creating new environmental risks, and making radical emissions reductions and adaptation measures ever more necessary.

Meanwhile, much of the country is in the grip of a housing crisis. While its causes are complex, a contributing factor has been the consistent undersupply of new houses over several decades. Successive governments have responded to this crisis with planning reform - attempts to streamline the planning process and increase the volume of permissions granted for new homes. In 2015, the UK government set a target to deliver one million new homes by 2020.

The national debate around planning and housing tends to focus on three criteria: the number of houses that are granted permission, the speed at which they are built, and the affordability of the finished product. There is a wealth of data on each of these metrics, much of it published by the government, which receives considerable attention in the media. Over time, these have become used to measure the effectiveness of the planning system.

But while these are important criteria, they form just part of the picture. Planning is about delivering sustainable development, not just housing numbers. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out a wide range of economic, social and environmental objectives, which include:

- Building a strong and competitive economy;
- Supporting radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;
- Reducing vulnerability and providing resilience to climate change;
- Promoting healthy and safe communities;
- Planning for current and future demographic change.

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Planning can help to deliver these objectives by shaping urban form: the size, location, density, land use mix, connectivity and accessibility of developments. This influences patterns of settlement growth over time.

Our research paper shows that different settlement patterns and urban forms have far-reaching implications for achieving economic, social and environmental objectives by describing how:

- Large and compact settlement patterns support economic productivity by reducing the distances between homes and jobs and making efficient use of infrastructure networks;
- Settlement patterns and urban forms that promote sustainable mobility play a critical role in reducing transport emissions, with larger settlements, higher densities and mixed land uses reducing the need to travel by car;
- Larger settlements with higher densities and mixed land use improves public health by increasing physical activity, which helps to address the prevalence, severity and cost of chronic lifestyle-related diseases;
- Compact, medium density, mixed use and public-transport friendly settlements can encourage continued physical activity, economic participation and social interaction for an ageing population.

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This paper forms part of the RTPi Location of Development project, which uses data and spatial analysis to explore whether changes to planning policy are helping to deliver wider sustainability objectives.

For the full version of the report
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