

Meeting the Growth Challenge

The Smart Growth approach

Economic growth is a priority shared across the political spectrum, but it can impose major damage to the environment if wrongly managed. In recent years the UK has made significant progress in protecting its built heritage. But a century of low density, sprawling development focused on southern England, over-dependency on road transport and decline of many traditional urban areas now presents the United Kingdom with great challenges. We believe the time has come for a fresh response based on the principles articulated in Smart Growth.

The Challenges Ahead

Housing: Much of the UK is very heavily populated and England is Europe's most densely populated area. A rising population and household formation have made building "family homes" a priority, but the most pressing need for new homes will be among single people and childless couples and the majority of these will be over-55s. Almost half of the new households requiring homes in the decades to come will be retired people.¹ Moving around traditional urban areas and well-designed new housing developments is easy on foot and by bicycle and public transport, but low-density suburban sprawl inevitably relies on cars.

Rural areas: Our countryside is expected to provide most of our food, all of our water and much of our timber, flood control, biodiversity and outdoor recreation. But developmental threats are increasing, there is strong pressure to weaken protection and these pressures are putting resources like food and water supply, natural habitats and landscapes under severe stress in many parts of the UK.² Yet the planning system provides our countryside highly variable levels of protection - less than half of England's countryside, for instance, is protected by green belt, national park or other designations and stronger protection is required in many parts of the UK. Rural public transport is often deficient or wholly absent.

Towns and cities: Many urban areas have suffered economic decline and most have been damaged by other trends which reflect our car-dependent lifestyle: out-of-town shopping and the population drift to low-density suburbs. Protection for our historic town and cityscapes has been strengthened in the past 40 years, and this should be continued. But many high streets are in steep economic decline, low-quality development has made towns less attractive and economic decline has left areas of dereliction. There is enough suitable brownfield land to provide up to 1.5 million new homes in England alone³ but, throughout the UK, much of it lies derelict while greenfield sites are preferred. Regional disparities are growing, not just between the north and south of England but throughout the UK and even within city-regions. Economic and social regeneration is urgently required.

Transport: We are hugely dependent on the car, despite the threats of long-term rises in fuel prices and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Traditional urban development allowed us to move around on foot, by bike or on public transport but car-dependent development just squanders land and living there can often leave elderly people isolated. Investment in, and expansion of, public transport is urgently needed everywhere and many of our towns need to be better designed for cycling and walking, so that they become the norm for short trips.

Climate: Scientists urge at least an 80% cut in greenhouse emissions by 2050 to avoid catastrophic climate change and we are legally committed to these reductions. Cities have lower carbon emissions per capita than rural areas,⁴ but the quality and environmental sustainability of city life could be dramatically improved.

What is Smart Growth?

Our responses to these problems have too often been piecemeal. Smart Growth is holistic and tackles issues like housing, land-use, sense of place, transport and community in the round. It builds on the best elements of town planning practice in the UK and countries

such as Germany, and has already been used to powerfully address North America's urban sprawl and car dependency. The Smart Growth approach puts local authorities in a strong position to adopt and promote smarter planning principles through local plans, transport plans and other activities.

At the heart of Smart Growth is a belief in the importance of using land, a precious and non-renewable resource, efficiently and sustainably.

We need robust regional policy. We need to rethink the whole provision of housing, especially for single and older people but also for families. We need to tackle over-dependence on road transport, to revive urban areas and to protect the countryside. Smart Growth opposes both the urban sprawl brought about by the very low building densities typical of 20th-century development and town cramming through inappropriate and unsympathetic high-rise development.

How a Smart Growth Approach Can Help

In coming decades, current policies could lead to millions more homes on undeveloped land, destroying precious farmland just as food shortages begin to bite⁵ and undermining biodiversity. Growth in population and household numbers are offered as a justification for sprawl, but it makes no sense to go on building our new homes in remote, car-dependent, low density suburbs, or just concentrating ourselves around honeypots where the economy remains buoyant. Making best use of existing urban areas makes good use of existing infrastructure, services and amenities; greenfield development means expensive new provision and wastes existing investment.

New housing in higher density, urban communities can generate significant feelings of safety and community and higher levels of neighbourly behaviour, as leading house builders are starting to realise⁶. We can learn from historic patterns of village, town and city settlement and recognise that older townscape and buildings are a precious and irreplaceable community asset. We can ensure places retain their spirit and character, and guide the way we develop in the future. If Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian builders could build houses at high densities and produce desirable urban areas, then so can we.

Principles of Smart Growth

Urban areas work best when they are compact, with densities appropriate to local circumstances but generally significantly higher than low-density suburbia and avoiding high-rise. In addition to higher density, layouts are needed that prioritise walking, cycling and public transport so that they become the norm.

We need to reduce our dependence on private motor vehicles by improving public transport, rail-based where possible, and concentrating development in urban areas.

We should protect the countryside, farmland, natural beauty, open space, soil and biodiversity, avoiding urban sprawl and out-of-town development.

We should protect and promote local distinctiveness and character and our heritage, respecting and making best use of historic buildings, street forms and settlement patterns.

We should prioritize regeneration in urban areas and regions where it is needed, emphasising brownfield-first and promoting town centres with a healthy mix of facilities.

Civic involvement and local economic activity improve the health of communities.

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¹ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Statistical Release: Revised Projection of Households for the English Regions to 2026*, 28 February 2008

² UK Foresight, *Land Use Futures: Making the most of land in the 21st century*, final report February 2010, p.112.

³ Government National Land Use Database statistics quoted by Green Balance, *Building on a Small Island*, 2011.

⁴ See Dodman D, 'Blaming cities for climate change? An analysis of urban greenhouse gas emissions inventories', *Environment and Urbanization* [a journal of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)] April 2009 21: 185-201.

⁵ Bernice Lee, Felix Preston, Jaakko Kooroshy, Rob Bailey and Glada Lahn: *Resources Futures* (London: Chatham House, 2012)

⁶ *Creating strong communities - how to measure the social sustainability of new housing developments*, research commissioned by the Berkeley Group, September 2012.