

Science for Environment Policy

Policies to limit urban sprawl compared

There is a growing demand for new settlements in and around urban areas due to social, economic and population factors. However, this can lead to the loss of agricultural land and green spaces that provide essential ecosystem services and contribute to the wellbeing of local people. Several countries, such as the UK and Germany, have attempted to limit the growth of urban areas by encouraging the redevelopment of brownfield sites.

Centralised planning systems and the use of 'green belts' have helped to contain urban expansion in England and encouraged building on brownfield sites, according to a study which compared England and Germany's planning policies. The German planning system, in contrast, was not considered to be as effective in containing urban sprawl, although it was better at identifying different types of sprawl.

The policies and planning systems used to limit urban sprawl and support the redevelopment of brownfield sites have had mixed success. To understand the factors that could explain these differences, the study analysed the rate of urban sprawl and relevant planning documents in England, UK, and Germany.

In England, national data show that 77% of new homes built in 2008 were constructed on brownfield land, up from 57% in 1996. The UK also uses the National Land Use Database of Previously-Developed Land to monitor reuse of brownfield sites. The data suggest policies to limit urban expansion are succeeding.

The main land use statistics used in Germany focus on the absolute growth of settlement and transport areas. This fell from 120 hectares per day between 1993 and 1996 to 113 hectares per day between 2003 and 2006. To compare land use in the two countries directly, the study used CORINE¹ satellite data. This revealed that the settled area in Germany grew four times faster than the UK (6.7% compared to 1.8%) between 1990 and 2000. The corresponding land take in Germany (174,393 hectares) was almost six times higher than in the UK (30,397 hectares)

The study also found significant differences in planning policies and attitudes to urban expansion. For instance, planning policies in England stem from the 1940s' urban containment policy and the use of green belts (which have significant public support). Green belts restrict development on a band of countryside surrounding a town or city. Planning policy statements have also prioritised the redevelopment of brownfield sites. The result is strict top-down controls over urban expansion.

In contrast, the German approach to planning policy includes a strategic 'spreading' into rural areas while balancing competing land use interests. There is no direct equivalent to green belts and planners are engaged in a national discussion about whether to accept and plan for low-density, car-dependent urban expansion. However, a policy aim to reduce urban sprawl was introduced in 2002, and a planning premise of internal before external development, driven in part by environmental concerns. Local authorities are responsible for the majority of planning decisions in Germany. This explains Germany's poorer results in containing urban sprawl compared to England.

The key role of central government, together with more comprehensive planning policies, mean that English planners could implement a target of 60% for building new homes on brownfield sites and have limited urban expansion more successfully. The English system could, however, learn from the more detailed environmental targets and greater differentiation between different types of urban sprawl, as used in the German planning system.



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1. <http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/COR0-landcover/page001.html>