

MOSODI RESEARCH WHITE PAPER

Planning for sustainable travel

The role of land use



mosodi

Through their density and scope for human interaction and knowledge exchange, cities and towns have for millennia represented the most efficient way for civilisations to organise economic production and social life.

But over the last 30 years, we have begun to understand more clearly some of the damage that this paradigm has caused as cities have sprawled physically, fragmented socially, and have become more dependent on private, rather than collective, models of transportation. The limits of conventional models of urban development and transport planning have been apparent for some time, but the imperative for change is now more urgent than ever.

This damage caused by unsustainable development manifests itself in congestion, toxic air quality, poor productivity, poor public health, social and economic exclusion, and a host of other problems. These are not experienced equally – with these impacts disproportionately affecting women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and those on low incomes.

At Mosodi, we take our role and responsibilities in creating a better urban future seriously. Through our transport and highways work, our sustainable travel planning practice, and our socioeconomic and place-based research, we are united by a mission to create better, more sustainable places. We value the importance of thinking differently.



Cities have sprawled physically, fragmented socially, and have become dependent on private models of transportation.

Past approaches to transport planning have not equipped our built environment well for the new patterns of mobility we know are needed. Reforms to the planning system and the devolution of powers to combined authorities have not yet delivered the kind of transformational change our society needs.

Policy goals around transport accessibility, land use planning, and sustainability are all closely interconnected. Moreover, they don't exist in a vacuum – there is a complex relationship between policies and investments which affect our urban environment and wider societal outcomes like health, wellbeing, education, economic growth and social inclusion.

Put even more simply, how we plan for mobility directly affects the lives of everyone and the prospects of every place.



Could further devolution and policy integration lead to more sustainable and positive societal outcomes?

In this White Paper we take a deeper look at whether the spatial planning, economic development, housing delivery and transport investment systems can all properly coordinate in the interests of sustainability and positive societal outcomes. Our starting point is that more needs to be done to make our towns and cities the true engines of economic prosperity, social progress and environmental sustainability that they can be and need to be. Given the opportunities that a new government may bring, what should we do differently?

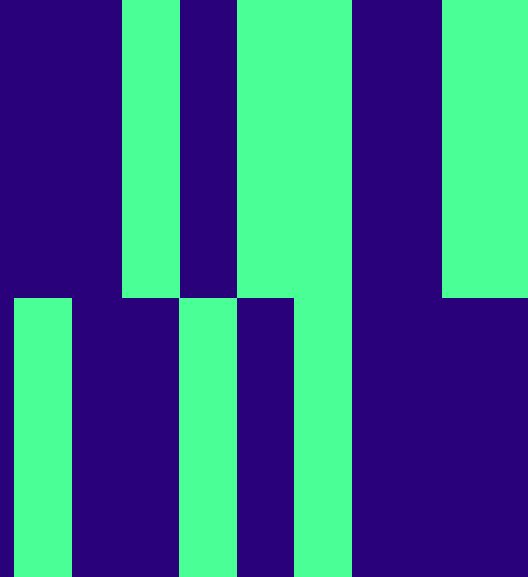
The policy context

England is one of Europe's most politically and fiscally centralised countries, and certainly one of its most economically divided. Despite a genuine commitment to devolution, it is the funding provided and the rules set by Whitehall that still matter the most. Policy coordination at central government level is critical – but so is a strong vision-led approach to local policy and delivery. Town halls, anchor institutions like universities, colleges and hospitals, and the private sector all have an important role to play.



The government's policy priorities around further devolution, economic growth and more homes represent a generational opportunity to do things differently.





There is significant policy attention and funding for new infrastructure and housing growth.

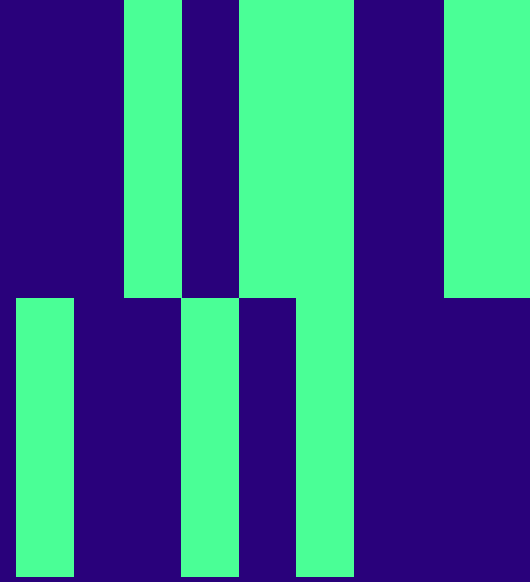
But, as with all policy, the devil is in the detail: what sort of homes in what sorts of locations? Which economic sectors and which workforces will policy favour, and where in the country? Some of these have been answered in part – for example, in 2025's [Industrial Strategy](#), or Homes England's refreshed [Strategic Plan](#) – but if policy is becoming more 'place aware', then key tools for the [economic appraisal of government investments](#) are still [lagging behind](#).

That could change with the [expected introduction of place-based business cases](#) in the 2026 reforms to Treasury's Green Book. Along with the prospects of further devolution and a more collaborative bottom-up model to governance, the early days of a Burnham government could be a watershed moment for sustainable development.

But, far from being just nuance, the details in how policies and programmes mesh together in places and reinforce each other could profoundly affect the extent to which a new government's mission on jobs and housing growth will work in concert with each other or will pull apart.



Is suburbanisation a problem?



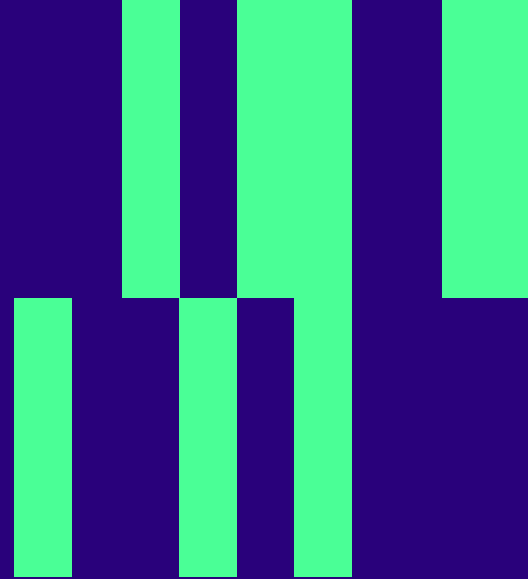
England's spatial development has been somewhat paradoxical. A highly urbanised nation, our towns and cities have a long history and a proud tradition of powering the country's economic growth. But far from pursuing a model of compact, dense urban development, the built form – even in major cities – is typified by low density, car-oriented development and gentle sprawl. Arguably nothing characterises England more than its suburbs.

If anything has influenced the tenor of urban planning policy and practice over the last 35 years – especially since the landmark Agenda 21 action plan of 1992 – it has been the related ideas of sustainability and compact cities: seeking to densify development, prioritise the reuse of previously developed land, reduce the overall need to travel, and support local economies and communities through greater mix of land uses. In England, the 1999 Urban White Paper, planning reforms and the subsequent revitalisation of the core cities have all had an impact on the pattern of urban development since the turn of the millennium.

For several decades now, doubtless influenced by critical sociological and demographic studies of concepts like transport equity, environmental justice, social capital and community, there has been significant academic and policy attention on housing and, in particular, the role of suburbanisation. It is sometimes posited that housing location decisions shoulder significant blame for social and environmental ills like barriers to employment, unsustainable travel patterns, and road congestion.



Wigan Galleries Town Centre Redevelopment - Mixed use scheme.



Geographer Roger Keil depicted suburbs as “Reviled by most professionals and academics due to their ecological impact and problematic societal effects.”

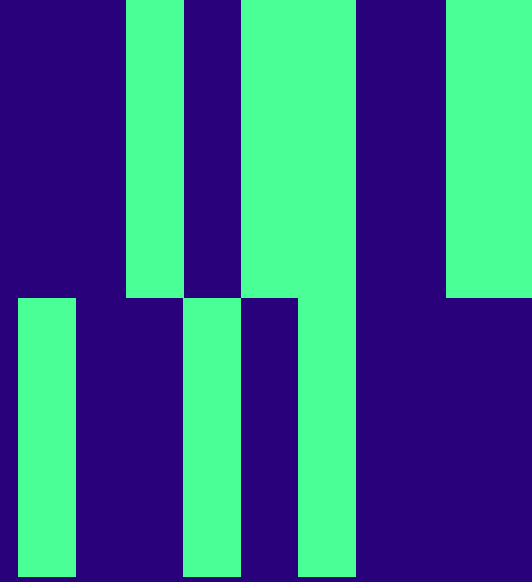
Despite the academic critique, housebuilders and homebuyers arguably still favour models of green field development and urban extensions, even though, unless well-planned, these are often criticised for being car-dependent, disconnected and difficult to serve by sustainable transport. In contrast, while England’s city centres have enjoyed some degree of residential revitalisation, this has largely been to provide smaller apartments and purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) and has not typically attracted families or older residents.

More compact forms of urban living have an important role in a diverse housing market. This needs to be set alongside the wider benefits of housing. Housing space is an important commodity – not just culturally but for sound social reasons too. Having a garden, enough bedrooms for children to call their own and do their homework in, a spare room to put up visitors – are all valued amenities, and these principles have formed the basis for much of our private and social housing archetypes for over 100 years. Good housing has myriad benefits. Is suburbanisation, then, necessarily a bad thing?

Planning policy and practice has tended to focus on the problems associated with suburbanisation of housing, whilst paying less attention to other land uses.



The decentralisation of everything



Even if we are more accepting of suburban residential typologies, it is inescapable that the sustainability and liveability of the urban built environment have not improved over the past 30-40 years. Particularly notable from a transport perspective have been significant increases in motor traffic, a steady decrease in local bus passenger journeys outside London, and the

challenges posed by faster, busier roads and greater distances for those walking, wheeling and cycling. Rates of active travel to school have failed to make any significant progress over the past 20 years. High streets are also still having a tough time 15 years on from Mary Portas' review, while traffic congestion costs the economy more than £30 billion a year and the resultant pollution contributes to thousands of deaths.



High streets are still having a tough time, while out-of-town retail parks continue to grow.

Can it be true that culpability for these trends lays primarily in the suburbanisation of housing? Alongside this, it is necessary to also consider the decentralisation of employment and other key trip generators like retail, education and healthcare.

The template for the modern English suburb was set in 1915 when the London Underground expanded out to what is now zone 6 and, through the marketing concept of 'Metro-land', the light and space of the suburbs was successfully sold to middle class Londoners. Although low in density, 'metro-land' was quintessentially transit-oriented development: travel patterns were focused on the concentration of service sector jobs in the London core and radial accessibility by rail.

But by the post-war years, suburbanisation had taken on a very different character in several important ways. These include the decentralisation of jobs in the new wave of outlying factory zones, the emergence of large council housing estates on the peripheries, often poorly connected by public transport, and the advent of mass car ownership.

Trafford Park in Manchester was the world's first planned industrial estate, followed closely in the 1930s by the government-sponsored Team Valley trading estate in Gateshead, marking the beginning of a major shift in employment geography. Policy both anticipated and facilitated mass car ownership, through the 'Beeching cuts' to the railways in the 1960s and the 'predict-and-provide' post-war road building boom. Increases in middle class prosperity and living standards in the 1980s further turbocharged these processes.

[Kingsway](#), the main road through the Team Valley Trading Estate, and [Park Side Estate](#), an example of post war council housing in Gateshead. Both photos by Robert Graham, [Geograph Britain and Ireland](#), licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 (CC BY-SA 2.0).



So, to better understand some of the problems associated with spatial development requires a closer look at the geography of work, education and retail and how this interacts with residential location.

Footfall in traditional high streets continues to be precarious, as a long transition away from transactional to experiential retail continues. In the key measure of Boxing Day footfall, it was reported that in 2025 both high streets and shopping centres had a challenging year, whilst the real winner was Britain's retail parks. This continues a long-standing pattern of expansion in large-format, out-of-town retailing, for some time driving investor interest. This has been happening despite national planning policy's 'sequential test' – nearly 30 years old – which was designed to 'ensure the vitality of town centres'.



Meadowhall central entrance. Photo by Chris Morgan, Geograph Britain and Ireland, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 (CC BY-SA 2.0).



Travel to school is another contributor to unsustainable patterns of urban development and mobility. According to the [National Travel Survey](#), 43% of trips to school by primary age children are by car. Primary schools are by their nature local services.

Distance modulates this figure significantly: if the distance to school is under a mile, most children (83%) walk. But a key barrier to active travel to school has its roots in trip-chaining. [Recent analysis by DfT](#) offers new insight into this phenomenon. The most

common type of trip chain which ends at a workplace starts from home and first goes to a school (so-called 'escort education' trips).

Given the decentralisation of workplaces and the decline in public transport services, the car may represent for many parents the only way to get to the school gate and then on to a job by 9 or 9.30am.

If the journey is under a mile, most children walk to school. But over four in ten primary school children are driven to school in England.



The costs to society of this more decentralised, car-dependent model are neither trivial nor abstract. Sedentary lifestyles and a lack of physical exercise are known comorbidities to a range of diseases. The cost to the NHS of diabetes is a staggering £14 billion per year. This represents around 6% of the healthcare budget. Our approach to spatial planning has arguably promoted sedentary lifestyles, which significantly increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and other illnesses.

Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty's annual report in 2024 noted this: "While cities provide multiple opportunities they also make it easy, and often the default, to live a life that is almost entirely sedentary with a diet that is guaranteed to reduce the period living in good health."



Cities make it easy to live a life that is almost entirely sedentary.

Understanding how everything is connected to everything else

If 2026 represents a potential watershed moment in policy, it is fitting that the DfT's new [Connectivity Tool](#) provides valuable new insights into spatial development issues and their implications for different places. Through this tool, connectivity has been given the analytical and policy attention it deserves. Planners and transport professionals should see the spatial arrangement of land uses and connectivity between them as important tools in thinking about cities, travel and land use in a more nuanced way. A truly [vision-led approach to transport planning](#) must start with strong analysis of the current situation.

One of the stark reminders the Connectivity Tool provides is of the inequalities between public transport and driving-based accessibility to workplaces (see figure 1 and 2). Even at the overall level of workplace employment (without controlling for, say, job type, quality or wages) the advantage enjoyed by car owners - irrespective of where they live - is plain to see.

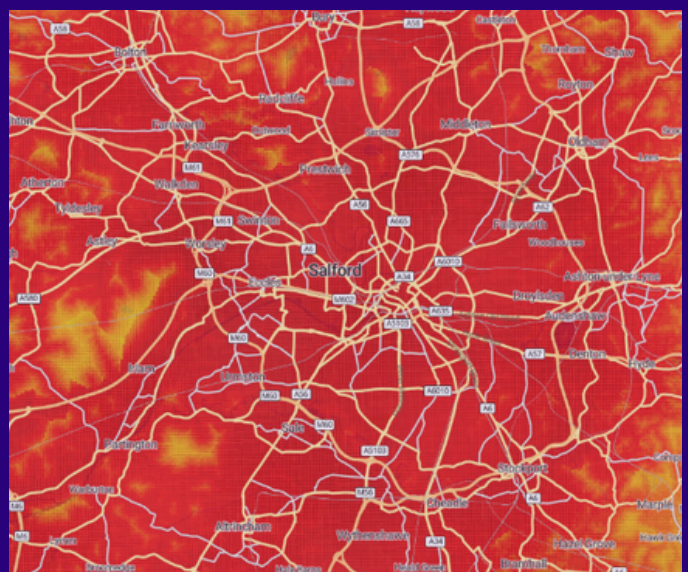


Figure 1 – driving connectivity to workplaces.

Red = high levels of connectivity, blue = low levels of connectivity.

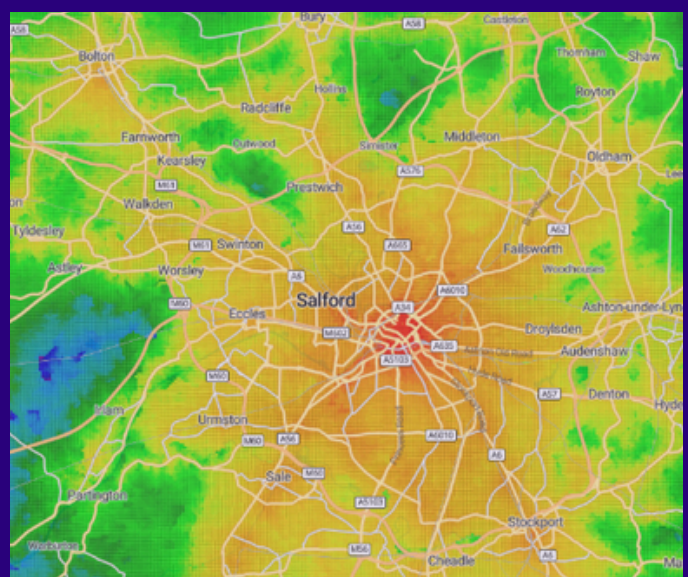


Figure 2 – public transport connectivity to workplaces.

Red = high levels of connectivity, blue = low levels of connectivity.

The car's intrinsic advantage is to provide freedom of route choice and destination, in contrast to the fixed lines of a classic public transport network. But this advantage scales up with the quantity and range of destinations that are beyond the reach of public or active transport modes. The shift towards out-of-town travel destinations for work, shopping, education and healthcare have played on and cemented the car's advantage. To understand and then better plan for more sustainable transport outcomes requires consideration of workplace locations.

This need to consider workplace locations more seriously is backed up by academic research. Jeroen Bastiaansen, Daniel Johson and Karen Lucas's [work looking at public transport accessibility to jobs](#) uses similar connectivity methods to those used in the DfT tool. They demonstrate the inequalities that result from public transport combined with jobs location, finding that young people and those living in more deprived localities are particularly disadvantaged by jobs inaccessibility.

This mirrors findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who showed how [poor quality bus services were acting as a significant barrier for job seekers living in outlying parts of major cities](#). Improving transport can only do so much if the geographic pattern of jobs has become too dispersed. It's a geographic axiom that having both decentralised jobs and decentralised houses leads to less aggregate accessibility – not more.

Petter Næss's work over several decades has researched issues related to the links between urban structure, transport and sustainability. His [2012 review of studies of the role of urban form](#) in the Nordic countries is particularly resonant in other contexts like the UK, too. Confirming the point about decentralisation and accessibility, he says, "Several studies [support the conclusion] that job decentralization from inner to outer parts of cities and metropolitan areas usually does not contribute to reducing average commuting distances".



Reinvigorating the functional role of towns and city centres

So, what can be done to improve the prospects for sustainable mobility? In England we could begin by better coordinating policy areas which deliver triple-bottom-line outcomes: more economic productivity and better social outcomes and lower carbon emissions. These and other benefits are possible if as a country we rethink our stance on spatial planning. First and foremost, this means reinvigorating the role of accessible towns and city centres as trip destinations through better policy and fiscal incentives.

The Dutch experience teaches us that this requires strong policy and political courage. As we wrestle with the housing crisis and the generational opportunity to build new towns, we need also to be thinking about where we locate new jobs and services in a way that supports sustainable travel choices.



In a fiscally constrained environment, it is tempting to seek short term operational efficiencies in our approach to using land. Consolidating and relocating facilities like hospitals and schools, often to outlying areas, has been a growing feature of asset management plans. Councils hungry for rates revenue have been quick to support out of town development at the cost of the vitality of their core areas. But these short-term fixes have made it harder to encourage sustainable travel behaviours.

We can and must think more creatively about how to utilise existing urban assets for employment and services. Planners must be flexible enough to embrace new uses for older warehouses – craft markets, sound studios and padel courts. Empty department stores can be the hospitals of the future and concepts like city centre University Technical Colleges can show that the best secondary schools needn't be in the suburbs. Above all planners must recognise that decentralised locations for economic uses like offices which do not need large tracts of land will not result in greater jobs accessibility but, on the contrary, will induce more car traffic.



The last 50 years of jobs decentralisation, weak spatial policy, and resultant 'forced car ownership' have likely held back economic growth, increased social inequalities, harmed public health, and increased emissions in many parts of the country. If we focus increasingly on more sustainable locations for jobs and services, the next 50 years will be better.



How can we help?

Mosodi are experts in understanding sustainability mobility. From ensuring that developments are designed to maximise accessibility, providing travel plan coordination services, to ensuring long term sustainability and design quality – we can help. Our newly formed Mosodi Research division brings expertise in policy, data analysis, monitoring and evaluation – providing new insights for strategy.

Drop us a line to discuss how we can together build better mobility solutions through design and innovation.

MANCHESTER

Suite 4E
South Central
11 Peter Street
M2 5QR
T: 0161 413 5168

LEEDS

3rd Floor
36-38 The Calls
LS2 7EW
T: 0113 323 0854

[MOSODI.CO.UK](https://mosodi.co.uk)
INFORMATION@MOSODI.CO.UK

mosodi