

Realising Prevention: Practical Policies for Healthier Society

Planning Reform and Public Health

The issue

With 708,000 overcrowded households in England, it is clear why the government wants to build [1.5 million new homes over the course of the current parliament](#). In recent years, both parties have repeatedly insisted that reforming the planning system is the key to unlocking housebuilding. The Labour Government have laid out extensive reforms to the planning system in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

The problem is that this consensus is leading towards the deregulation of planning, which may help deliver overall numbers of houses, but is unlikely to deliver the right houses in the right places. This will in turn likely make worse other pressing policy challenges. Chief among these is an increase in non-communicable diseases, [which currently account for 89% of deaths in England and are estimated to cost £150bn a year](#).

Understanding the problem

A deregulated planning system coupled with numeric housing targets would in all likelihood lead to lower quality homes, which the evidence tells us leads to decreases in public health. This will disproportionately affect the poorest. The answer is to work towards a better planning system, and to incentivise a system of delivery that prioritises health.

Samuel's Story

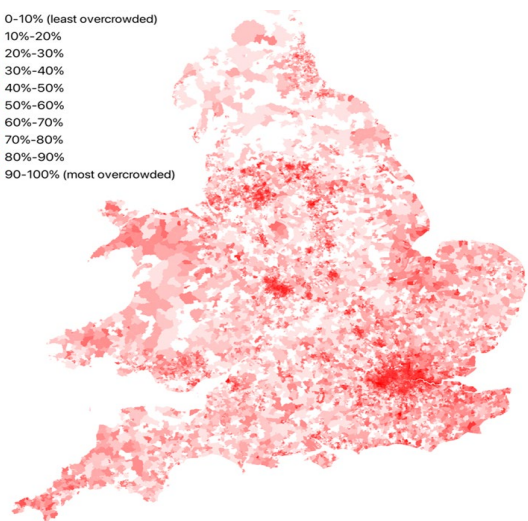
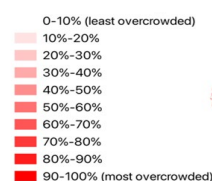
To illustrate the need to build more homes and, crucially, the need to build the right homes in the right places, TRUUD have produced this [short film](#).

It tells the story of Samuel and his two young children living in a one-bedroom flat on the 15th floor of a high-rise. The family suffer from a lack of indoor space and no safe outdoor place for the children to play. It is essential to build more homes, but

this is not sufficient. These homes need to match the profile of local residents, and all homes need to provide sufficient space indoors and safe outdoors. It is estimated that around 6 million people in Great Britain do not have access to a park or green space within a 10 minute walk.

Overcrowding across England and Wales

This map shows overcrowding across England and Wales. Overcrowding is higher in cities, where space is at a premium, and it is higher in the South where property is more expensive. Homes clearly need to be built, but they need to be built strategically, so that poor families in urban areas do not end up forced into undersized accommodation.



Five first steps for healthier planning

Combining national housebuilding targets with planning deregulation is potentially a dangerous mix that could lead to lower quality homes and lower public health. It will likely create the wrong types of homes in the wrong places and have minimal effect on overcrowding. All this will cost more in the long-term.

Instead, we need a planning system that is strategic and responsive, that doesn't just 'do less' but actually works better. The [TRUUD project](#) has developed a suite of scalable interventions to improve the planning system for health and wellbeing. We have identified hundreds of barriers and opportunities. Here are five of the key recommendations:

- 1. Understand the health outcomes of different development proposals:** To measure the health impacts of new developments, we have developed the HAUS tool (Health Appraisal for Urban Systems). The data tool enables developers and planners to identify the health impacts of development decisions and then see what the long-term costs are and who will incur them. [Find out more...](#)
- 2. Embed health data in appraisal processes:** We are currently working in partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to embed the HAUS tool in their economic evaluations and appraisal. This is an important first step. The next step is to ensure that other actors across the system are implementing this approach. [Find out more..](#)
- 3. Give planning and development teams the capacity they need:** Given the financial state of local authorities, capacity is a major challenge. To ensure that planning decisions maximise public health benefits, it is important to that there are public health experts in planning and housing departments, or effective joined up working between urban development and health departments. The TRUUD project have shown that this can work effectively. [Find out more..](#)
- 4. Ensure public health is strong enough in Local Plans:** Many Local Plans do not even consider – let alone prioritise – public health. 70.6% do not reference the joint health and wellbeing strategy, while 62.5% lack a strategic health policy. There is a need for more training and awareness among planning officials, but there is also a role for central government in ensuring that Local Plans are working to support national priorities. [Find out more..](#)
- 5. Promote use of Health Impact Assessments, but understand their limits:** In some cases, developers are required to submit a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) when they apply for planning. If used correctly, this can help prioritise health. HIAs are flexible and can also be used with other assessment mechanisms such as SEA and even further upstream to assess policy decision-making and ensure health is prioritised throughout. [Find out more here](#) and [here..](#)

[See also TRUUD's work with TCPA on a Healthy Planning Framework.](#)

Healthy planning in action

The Frome Gateway project in Bristol is building 1000 new homes and 500 student accommodation places in a deprived, industrial part of Bristol. TRUUD's researcher in residence shared data that helped model the health impact and associated economic costs of different development scenarios. We estimate the health economic benefits of the framework approach to be £80-£100 million, compared to an unmanaged approach with piecemeal development. [Find out more...](#)

Contact the authors

This policy brief was written by Jack Newman (University of Bristol), with support from the TRUUD National Government team: Geoff Bates (University of Bath), Sarah Ayres and Rachael McClatchey (University of Bristol).

The research underpinning the recommendations is the work of a much [wider range of TRUUD researchers](#). We welcome opportunities to discuss this work. To get in touch, please contact the team at truud-policy@bristol.ac.uk.



Local authority partners



University consortium