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## Understanding urban sprawl and its underlying causes

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In Europe the tendency of urban areas to expand into neighbouring rural areas is often seen as problematic but the drivers for this have been poorly understood and planning controls often seem ineffective.

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### What does research tell us?

We know that in Europe:

- As populations grow, demand for building land in and around cities has become critical in many areas.
- Increased income per capita, crime rates, pollution and a temperate climate all tend to encourage expansion beyond the city margins.
- This “urban sprawl” is often uneven and unplanned.
- Cities often grow more quickly spatially than their populations, meaning land use is inefficient, sprawling outwards and fragmenting rather than infilling urban footprints.
- Cultural attractiveness of a city centre (eg arts venues) can help to discourage sprawl.
- More productive adjacent agricultural land seems to restrict outward growth of cities as land values increase.
- Agricultural land values close to city centres may rise owing to proximity to markets of high value products eg soft fruits, salads.

### What implications are there for UK policy?

Maintaining vibrant and attractive city centres may encourage residential developments in the inner-city and discourage building on the urban fringe.

Policies might be more effective in controlling development of urban sprawl by:

- Taking account of the economic drivers involved.
- Considering instruments that use the market to discourage expansion of cities: encouraging agricultural productivity and developing policies that have a positive impact on farm incomes can restrict development by driving up land prices around cities.
- Encouraging initiatives such as farmers’ markets that enable producers to sell directly to neighbouring urban populations.
- Encouraging the cultural attractions within city centres to make them more attractive places to live.
- Tackling factors such as crime and pollution that drive residents out of the city centre.

## Further information:

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- Coisnona T., Oueslati W. and Salani c J. (2014) [Spatial targeting of agri-environmental policy and urban development](#) *Ecological Economics* 101, 33–42 [doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.02.013](#)
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**CRE Policy Brief No 22**

**June 2015**