

How urban planning policies can mitigate climate risks

In the largest climate survey to date, two-thirds of over 1.2 million people regarded climate change as a global emergency and supported comprehensive climate policies to tackle the crisis. This summer's extreme temperatures highlighted just how tangible the effects already are.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Europe had its second hottest June on record in 2022, with temperatures sitting at approximately 1.6C above average. It is clear that extreme heat, amongst other climate impacts, is a reality we will be faced with, and should therefore be a prompt to impose fundamental changes from us all.

Many impacts of climate change are irreversible with around 1.2 degrees of global warming 'locked in' due to historic emissions. However, urgent and comprehensive adaptations to current behaviour will support positive change in the long term. When looking at sector-specific activity, especially urban planning and construction, there are two primary issues to address: reduction of GHG emissions and adaptation to rising temperatures.

Urban planning solutions are already at play, ranging from solar shading to increased levels of greenery in front of buildings. But key factors should be prioritised to directly address the issues facing the sector:

Policy and regulation

The sustainable trajectory of the built environment is reliant on effective policy and regulatory measures. As this summer's intense heat demonstrated, UK infrastructure is not currently equipped to handle extreme temperatures. The adaptation and renovation of buildings, homes, and infrastructure to withstand warmer temperatures and extreme weather events will require a coordinated national effort. Policy intervention and incentives are not unprecedented, however. Feed-in tariffs have already played an important role in incentivising the use of renewable energy and other government schemes can support the continued uptake in sustainable measures.

Insufficient and outdated policy can have reverberating consequences as well. In 2019, the Department for Business Enterprise and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) *reported* that roughly 20% of London homes will require air conditioning by 2035, increasing to 75% by 2050. But most air conditioning systems are both energy and carbon intensive. Without a strategic policy offering sustainable cooling measures we risk energy demand spikes in the summer months.

Reliance on retrofitting

The UK's 2050 net zero target also puts pressure on policymakers and building owners alike. Given that 80% of the UK's current building stock is expected to still exist in 2050, the retrofitting of existing buildings will be as integral, if not more so, as optimising new constructions.

However, the adaptation of the existing built environment to meet net zero targets will be especially challenging. A 2021 *report* by the UK's Environmental Audit Committee concluded that as it stands, the UK would take 700 years to decarbonise residential heat.

The extreme heat of this summer has made it clear: action to mitigate the effects of climate change in the property sector is imperative. We must act accordingly to facilitate the transition to a green built environment.

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