Office for National Statistics

Article

Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Data and analysis on towns in England and Wales, with a focus on population and employment growth.

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1 . Main points

- In the North East region of England, 44% of towns are in the high deprivation residential group of towns that combine low job density and high residential income deprivation; by contrast, the South West, South East and East of England regions have less than 10% of towns in this high deprivation residential group.
- 34% of towns in the South East region are in the "lower deprivation working" group (that combines high job density and low residential incomes deprivation) compared with only 4% of towns in the North East.
- Between 2009 and 2019, population declined in 13% of towns, with the highest shares in the North West (27%) and North East (23%) regions; declines in population were most common in "residential" towns (which have low job density) and less common in "working" towns (which have high job density).
- 31% of towns had population growth above the England and Wales average between 2009 and 2019, with the share over 40% in the South East, South West, East of England and East Midlands regions compared with less than 15% in the North East, North West and Wales.
- Employment declined in 36% of towns over the 2009 to 2019 period; this share was highest in the North East (51%) and South West (49%) regions and lowest in the South East (25%).
- 31% of towns had employment growth above the England and Wales average between 2009 and 2019, with the share by region ranging from 39% in the East of England to 21% in the South West of England.
- 56% of towns categorised as higher deprivation residential towns had a decline in employment over the 2009 to 2019 period, compared with 18% of towns categorised as low income deprivation working towns.
- Employment growth in towns totalled 20% in a corridor heading from north of London towards and into the East Midlands, in contrast to areas of the South West and North East regions where employment in towns declined.
- Towns in conurbation areas are more likely to have low job density than high job density reflecting the prevalence of commuter towns in these areas; in rural areas, a majority of towns have high job density reflecting their hub town status in rural economies.
- A higher share of towns had declining employment between 2009 and 2019 in rural Travel to Work Areas than in urban Travel to Work Areas.

2 . Towns analysis – deprivation and job density

This section updates the analysis first published as Section 5 of the Understanding Towns: An Introduction article of July 2019. The aim is to provide a useful initial categorisation of towns that encompasses both their workplace and residential aspects. This is important for consideration of towns policy because in many cases the incomes of residents in a town and the size of its own workplace economy are not directly correlated.

In Figure 1, 1,082 towns in England and 104 in Wales are plotted against a workplace measure (job density) on the y-axis and a residential-based measure (income deprivation) on the x-axis. The job density measure shows the number of jobs[1] in the town as a proportion of residents aged 16 to 64 years while the income deprivation axis is based on the proportion of the residential population in a town experiencing deprivation relating to low income.

This income deprivation measure is taken from the income deprivation domain of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)[2] and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)[3]. The measure is based on the proportion of the residential population in a town experiencing deprivation relating to low income. For each country, the towns have been ranked based on the income deprivation score and placed into deciles, with the towns with the highest average score of income deprivation in decile 1 and the towns with the lowest average score of income deprivation in decile 10. English towns are ranked relative to the English IMD income domain and Welsh towns ranked relative to the WIMD income domain, which measure income deprivation in a similar but not identical way. They have been shown together on Figure 1 for ease of illustration in terms of highlighting both English and Welsh towns in the corner segments. However, it should be noted that the English and Welsh scores on the horizontal IMD axis are not directly comparable[4].

A grid that splits Figure 1 into nine segments has been added to help sort and explain the data.

Figure 1: Larger towns tend to have higher job density and deprivation

Analysing towns by comparing workplace characteristics (job density) and residential characteristics (income deprivation), England and Wales, 2009 to 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London area because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

2. Income deprivation rankings were calculated separately for England and Wales. Because percentiles of income deprivation are relative to each country, percentile 1 of England is not the same as percentile 1 of Wales.

3. Job density is based on total employment (which includes employees and working proprietors) from the Business Register and Employment Survey 2019 data, divided by resident population aged 16 to 64 years (Mid Year Population Estimates).

4. English income deprivation is aggregated from LSOA to BUA/BUASD using the methodology outlined in Appendix N of the English indices of deprivation 2019 Technical Report.

5. Welsh income deprivation is published at BUA/BUASD level by StatWales.

Download the data

Towns in the bottom left segment are towns where job density is low and the level of income deprivation is high. In subsequent charts and tables, the towns in this segment will be grouped as "higher deprivation residential". This group includes towns such as Deal, Maesteg and Wallasey.

The towns in the top left segment are also towns with relatively high levels of income deprivation among residents. However, they are also towns with a high job density. Therefore, this group will be described as "higher deprivation working" towns. This group includes towns such as Mansfield, Walsall and Barrow-in-Furness.

In the top right segment are towns that have a high job density, reflecting a high level of local jobs relative to working-age population, and a relatively low level of income deprivation among residents. We will term this group "lower deprivation working" towns. This group includes towns such as Solihull, Harrogate or Guildford.

The bottom right segment is a group of towns in which income deprivation among residents is low, while job density is also low. We will term this group "lower deprivation residential" towns. This group includes towns such as Christchurch, Formby or Ramsbottom.

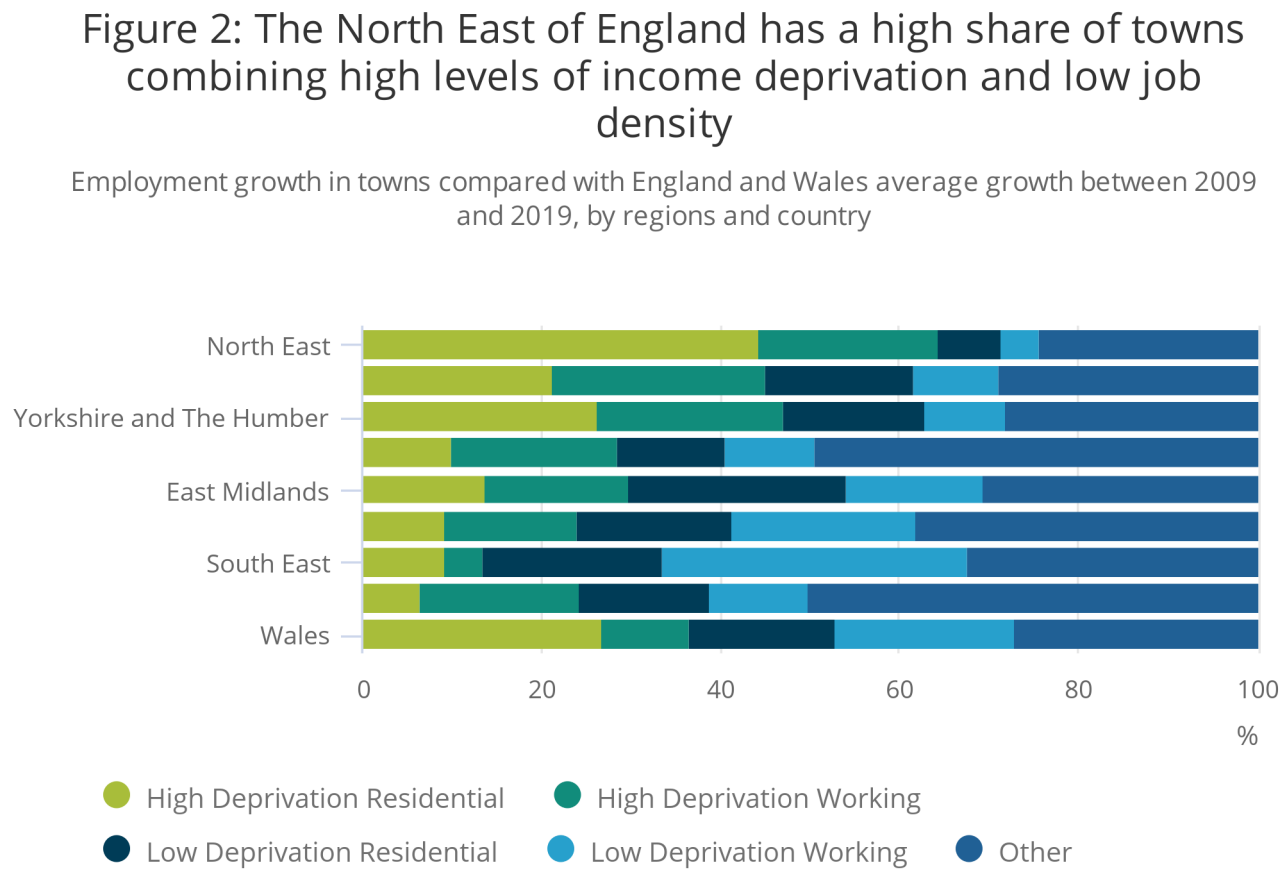
One important point to note is that towns are found in all these groups. It is quite common for a town to have relatively few local jobs but to still have relatively wealthy residents (such a town may have many of its residents who are out-commuters to well-paid jobs or are wealthy retirees). It is also common for a town to have a relatively high level of jobs but have a high level of income deprivation amongst its residents. In other towns, there might be a more direct link between local job density and resident incomes.

Commuting is an important reason behind some of these differences. Many residents in a town may commute to a workplace elsewhere such as in a neighbouring city or other nearby town. Equally, many jobs in a particular town may be filled by in-commuters from the neighbouring towns or countryside. So, it is always worth investigating both the workplace and residential data associated with a town when aiming to understand its policy needs. It is also useful to consider its location relative to other towns and cities and this topic is discussed later in Section 3.

Figure 2 shows, by region and country, the proportion of towns that fall within the four groupings discussed previously (towns that have either mid-level deprivation or job density are listed in the "other" category). It illustrates some large regional variations.

Figure 2: The North East of England has a high share of towns combining high levels of income deprivation and low job density

Employment growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019, by regions and country



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

2. Scores of deprivation in England and Wales are not directly comparable. Therefore, the income deprivation rankings were calculated for each country separately, that is percentile 1 for Wales is not the same as percentile 1 for England.

In the North East region of England, 44% of towns are in the high deprivation residential group of towns that combine low job density and high residential income deprivation. Wales and the Yorkshire and The Humber and North West regions of England also have a relatively high share of towns in this category (27%, 26% and 21% respectively). By contrast, the South West, South East and East of England regions have less than 10% of towns in this high deprivation residential group.

The highest share of towns in the "lower deprivation working" group (that combines high job density and low residential incomes deprivation) is in the South East of England (34%) followed by the East of England (21%). In the North East, only 4% of towns are in this grouping.

The "higher deprivation working" towns (that have high job density but also high income deprivation) are quite rare in the South East of England (4%). However, they make-up 15% to 24% of towns in the other English regions. Meanwhile, towns in the "lower deprivation residential" group (that have low job density but also low income deprivation) make up 24% of towns in the East Midlands but down to 7% of towns in the North East.

Figure 3 illustrates all 1,186 towns, showing their location and the segment they fall into based on this analysis. Towns that have either medium-level income deprivation or job density do not fall into one of the four corner segments being analysed and are labelled "other".

Figure 3: Many lower deprivation working towns are located in the South East of England

Map of towns grouped by workplace (job density) and residential (income deprivation) characteristics, England and Wales, 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. In addition to towns, the list therefore includes some large villages, small cities and other urban settlements with population within the defined range. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London area because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

2. Income deprivation rankings were calculated separately for England and Wales. Because percentiles of income deprivation are relative to each country, percentile 1 of England is not the same as percentile 1 of Wales.

3. Job density is based on total employment (which includes employees and working proprietors) from the Business Register and Employment Survey 2019 data, divided by resident population aged 16 to 64 years (Mid Year Population Estimates).

4. English income deprivation is aggregated from LSOA to BUA/BUASD using the methodology outlined in Appendix N of the English indices of deprivation 2019 Technical Report.

5. Welsh income deprivation is published at BUA/BUASD level by StatWales.

Download the data

Notes for Towns analysis – deprivation and job density

1. Job density data are based on total employment (which includes employees and working proprietors) from the BRES.

2. The English Index of Multiple Deprivation is a measure of multiple deprivation based on combining seven distinct domains of deprivation. For more detailed information on the English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 please see The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 research report.

3. WIMD is currently made up of eight separate domains (or types) of deprivation. Each domain is compiled from a range of different indicators. More detailed information on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 Technical Report (PDF, 2MB) is available.

4. There is more information in the ONS's article on Similarities and differences between the Indices of Deprivation across the UK.

3 . Examining towns within their Travel to Work Areas

The role of a town, and the success of a town, can be highly influenced by its surrounding area. For example, a town of 30,000 population that is the largest urban centre for miles around exists in very different circumstances to a town of 30,000 population that is only a few miles from a major city. Therefore, while it is important to understand the data relating to a particular town (such as that discussed in Sections 2 and 3), it can also be very useful to understand the geographical context of the town and understand what other towns or cities might be located nearby and be influencing the town being examined.

This section proposes that one useful way to examine the geographical context of a town is to examine it as part of a Travel to Work Area (TTWA). This can help provide local context and allow data for surrounding towns to be considered alongside the town being examined. In addition, this article introduces a Travel to Work Area Classification that can further help in distinguishing geographical context, as it groups TTWAs depending on whether they are, for example, mostly rural or part of a conurbation. So, as well as being able to examine a town within its own surrounding area (via its TTWA), this approach can then be used to compare with towns elsewhere in the country that exist in similar geographical contexts (via the classification).

Figure 4 provides a data tool for examining towns data within the TTWA context. By choosing a town, the tool will provide a map of the TTWA that the town falls within, with the other towns and cities in the TTWA also shown. The bar charts then show the population and employment growth of each of the towns and cities[1] in the TTWA, allowing users to see how the town being examined has fared relative to its neighbours within the same TTWA.

Figure 4: Explore towns in the context of their Travel to Work Area

Population and employment growth by towns, England and Wales, 2009 to 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. In addition to towns, the list therefore includes some large villages, small cities and other urban settlements with population within the defined range. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

2. Classification of TTWAs used in this publication has been created based on the Rural Urban Classification (2011 Census Output Area version) and 2011 Census Usual Resident Population.

Download the data

To take an example, when investigating the town of Ramsgate, we find that it is part of the Margate and Ramsgate TTWA. This TTWA includes four towns that have been included in this analysis (because they have population between 5,000 and 225,000), and we can see that Ramsgate is the second-largest of the towns in the TTWA.

In terms of its population growth, we find all four towns experienced population growth between 2009 and 2019 with the largest growth occurring in Margate. The employment data show that employment increased over the same period in Margate and Ramsgate but declined in Deal and Broadstairs. Similar insight can be found on any of the 1,186 towns.

One additional piece of information provided by the Figure 4 tool is the classification group for the TTWA. In the case of Margate and Ramsgate, we can see it is in the Small Town TTWA group. This is one of four groupings that we have used to help differentiate between the TTWAs in terms of their own geographical location. The groupings are:

- "Major Conurbation TTWA", in which the majority of the population of the TTWA are resident in one of the UK's conurbations
- "Large Town TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in an urban area, but not a conurbation and the TTWA includes at least one town or city of population greater than 70,000
- "Small Town TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in an urban area, but not a conurbation and the TTWA does not have any towns or cities of population greater than 70,000
- "Rural TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in a rural area

The rationale is that these four groupings describe very different economic circumstances that require different policy approaches. Towns in the Major Conurbation TTWAs will inevitably be influenced by the large city areas within the conurbations and these associations need to be considered in policy-making. By contrast, a town in a Rural TTWA may be the focal hub of the area's local economy, requiring a very different approach to policy.

The distinction between Large Town and Small Town TTWAs is also important. Many of the Large Town TTWAs are on well-connected transport routes, in particular motorway and rail routes heading to and from London, with a large town or city as a focal point. By contrast, many of the Small Town TTWAs are in less well-connected locations, for example, in coastal locations.

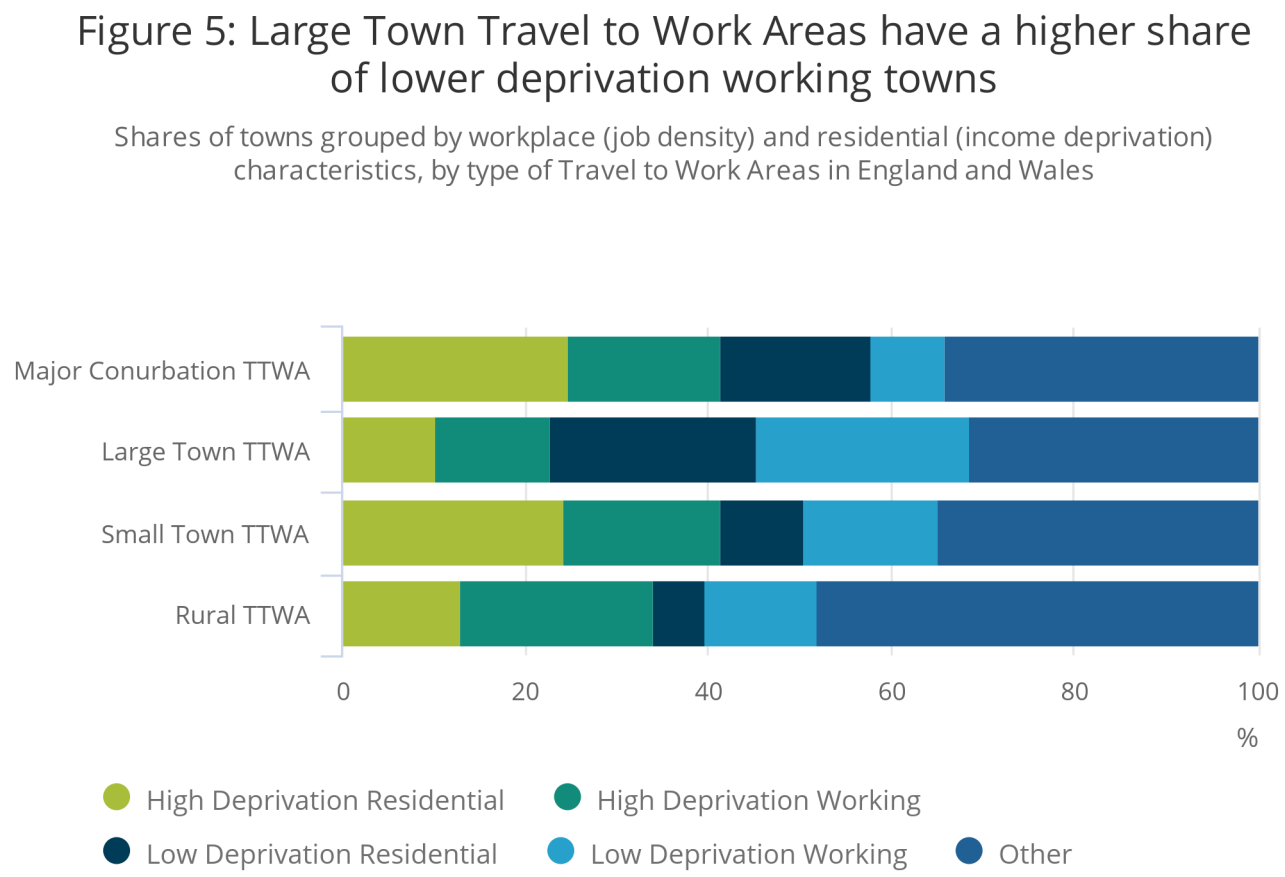
Combining this analysis with the results of Section 2, we find that the Major Conurbation TTWA group has more residential towns (147) than working towns (93), reflecting that many might have a commuting role given their locations near the major UK cities. The opposite is true in the Rural TTWA group, where working towns (65) outnumber residential towns (29). This is to be expected given that towns in rural areas will often act as a local economic hub. In the Large Towns TTWA group and Small Towns TTWA group, the numbers of residential and working towns are roughly even.

In terms of income deprivation, the Rural TTWA, Small Town TTWA and Major Conurbation TTWA groups all have around 70% more towns in the higher deprivation category than in the lower deprivation category. By contrast, the Large Town TTWA has twice as many towns in the lower deprivation category than the higher deprivation category. This is a large contrast and highlights that the Large Town TTWA category covers many of the areas of the country with relatively low deprivation.

Combining the job density and deprivation data gives us the results shown in Figure 5, which confirms a high share of low deprivation (both working and residential) towns in the Large Town TTWAs. Both the Major Conurbation TTWA and Small Town TTWA groups have a relatively high share of higher deprivation residential towns, while the Rural TTWA group has a relatively high share of high deprivation working towns.

Figure 5: Large Town Travel to Work Areas have a higher share of lower deprivation working towns

Shares of towns grouped by workplace (job density) and residential (income deprivation) characteristics, by type of Travel to Work Areas in England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

2. Scores of deprivation in England and Wales are not directly comparable. Therefore, the income deprivation rankings were calculated for each country separately, that is percentile 1 for Wales is not the same as percentile 1 for England.

In the Major Conurbation TTWAs, 81% of towns had population growth below the England and Wales average between 2009 and 2019. The share was 63% to 68% in the other TTWA classifications. Meanwhile, 55% of towns in the Rural TTWAs had declining employment between 2009 and 2019 compared with 41% in the Small Town TTWAs, 35% in the Major Conurbation TTWAs and 31% in the Large Town TTWAs.

It should be noted that use of the TTWAs is not the only approach available to consider the wider context of a town. For example, returning to the case of Ramsgate, another way to consider the town would be in comparison with other coastal towns. The recent ONS article on coastal towns followed this route, providing analysis of 169 coastal towns in England and Wales.

It might also be useful to consider towns in wider geographical contexts than just individual TTWAs in order to reflect the interactions between economies in neighbouring areas and the long-distance impacts of some of the larger cities such as London. The next section partly takes this approach by including analysis looking for wider clusters of towns that have had high or low population and employment growth.

Notes for Examining towns within their Travel to Work Areas

1. For this section of the analysis data have been included for 19 cities with population greater than 225,000 as well as the 1,186 towns defined by population between 5,000 and 225,000. No city or town data are provided for Greater London.

4 . Employment and population growth, 2009 to 2019

Figure 6 shows the employment growth and population growth by town for the period 2009 to 2019. The towns have been labelled depending on whether they have had growth in both employment and population; growth in either population or employment only; or declines in both.

Figure 6: 57% of the towns experienced both population and employment growth over the 2009 to 2019 period

Map of towns in England and Wales grouped by population and employment growth between 2009 and 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. In addition to towns, the list therefore includes some large villages, small cities and other urban settlements with population within the defined range. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

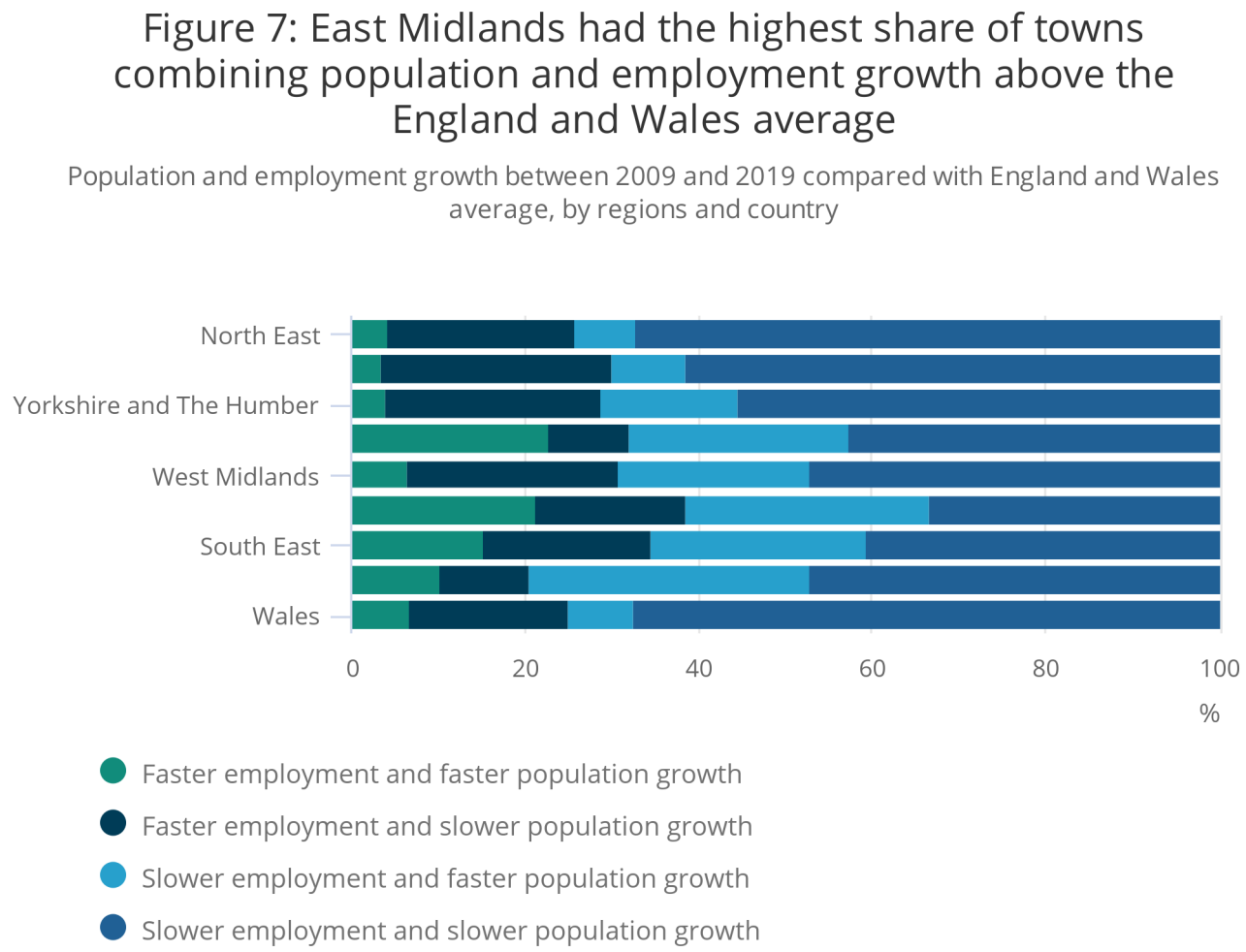
Download the data

Overall, 57% of the towns in the analysis experienced both population and employment growth over the 2009 to 2019 period, with the regional shares varying from 40% in the North East to 70% in the South East. In contrast, 6% of towns experienced a decline in both population and employment, with the regional shares varying from 2% in the South East and the East Midlands to 14% in the North East.

Another way of examining these data is to compare growth in the towns with the average growth for England and Wales overall. Between 2009 and 2019, the growth in population across England and Wales was 8%. The growth in employment was 12%. Figure 7 shows the share of towns with growth above or below these levels by region and country.

Figure 7: East Midlands had the highest share of towns combining population and employment growth above the England and Wales average

Population and employment growth between 2009 and 2019 compared with England and Wales average, by regions and country



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

The share of towns that had both population and employment growth above the England and Wales average ranged from 4% in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and The Humber regions to 23% in the East Midlands. The share of towns with both population and employment growth below the England and Wales average ranged from 33% in the East of England to 67% in Wales and the North East.

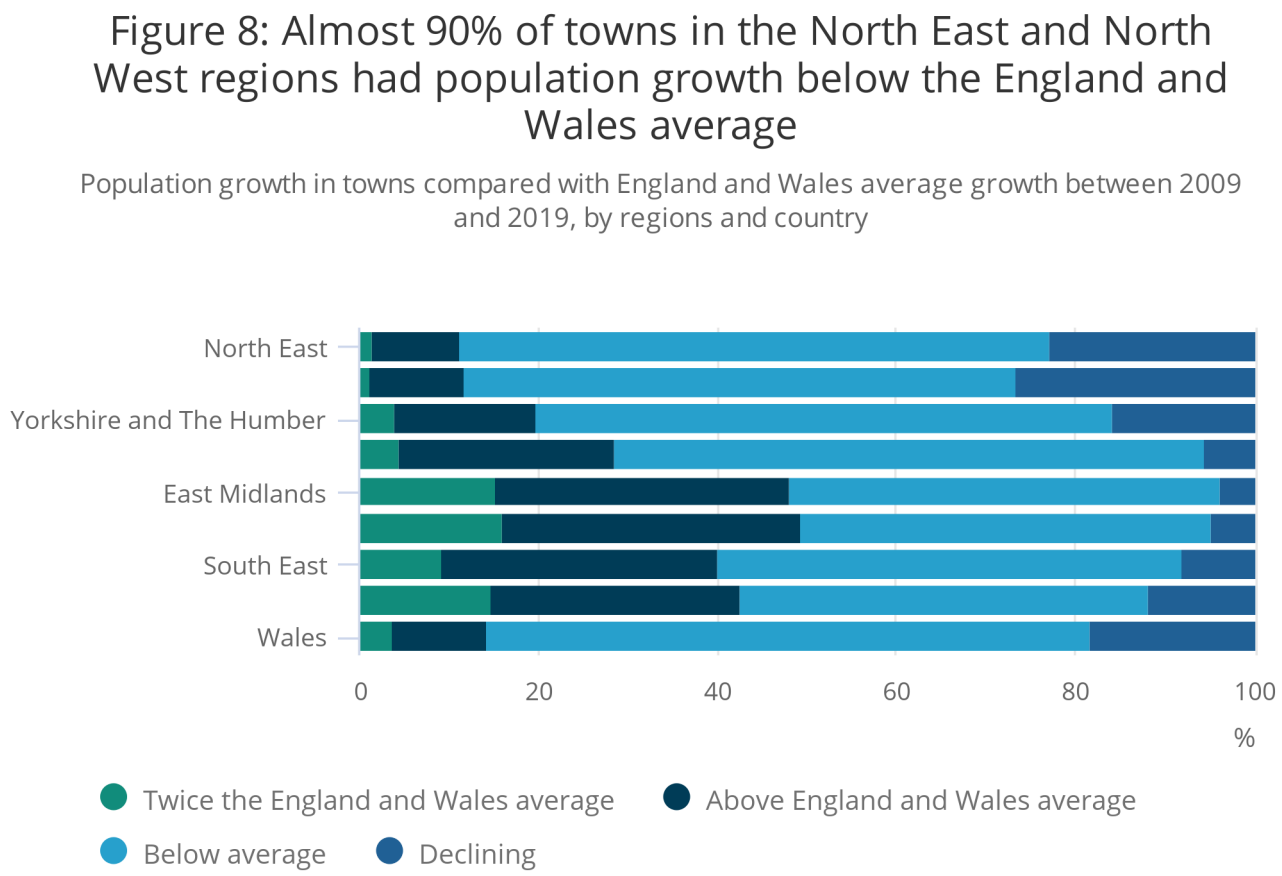
Population growth

Among all towns, 31% had population growth above the 8% England and Wales average between 2009 and 2019, including 8% of towns that had more than twice the England and Wales growth rate. As shown in Figure 8, regional variations were quite wide, with over 40% of towns in the South East, South West, East of England and East Midlands regions having population growth above the England and Wales average compared with 11% in the North East, 12% in the North West and 15% in Wales.

Population decline occurred in 13% of towns, with the highest shares in the North West (27%) and North East (23%).

Figure 8: Almost 90% of towns in the North East and North West regions had population growth below the England and Wales average

Population growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019, by regions and country



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

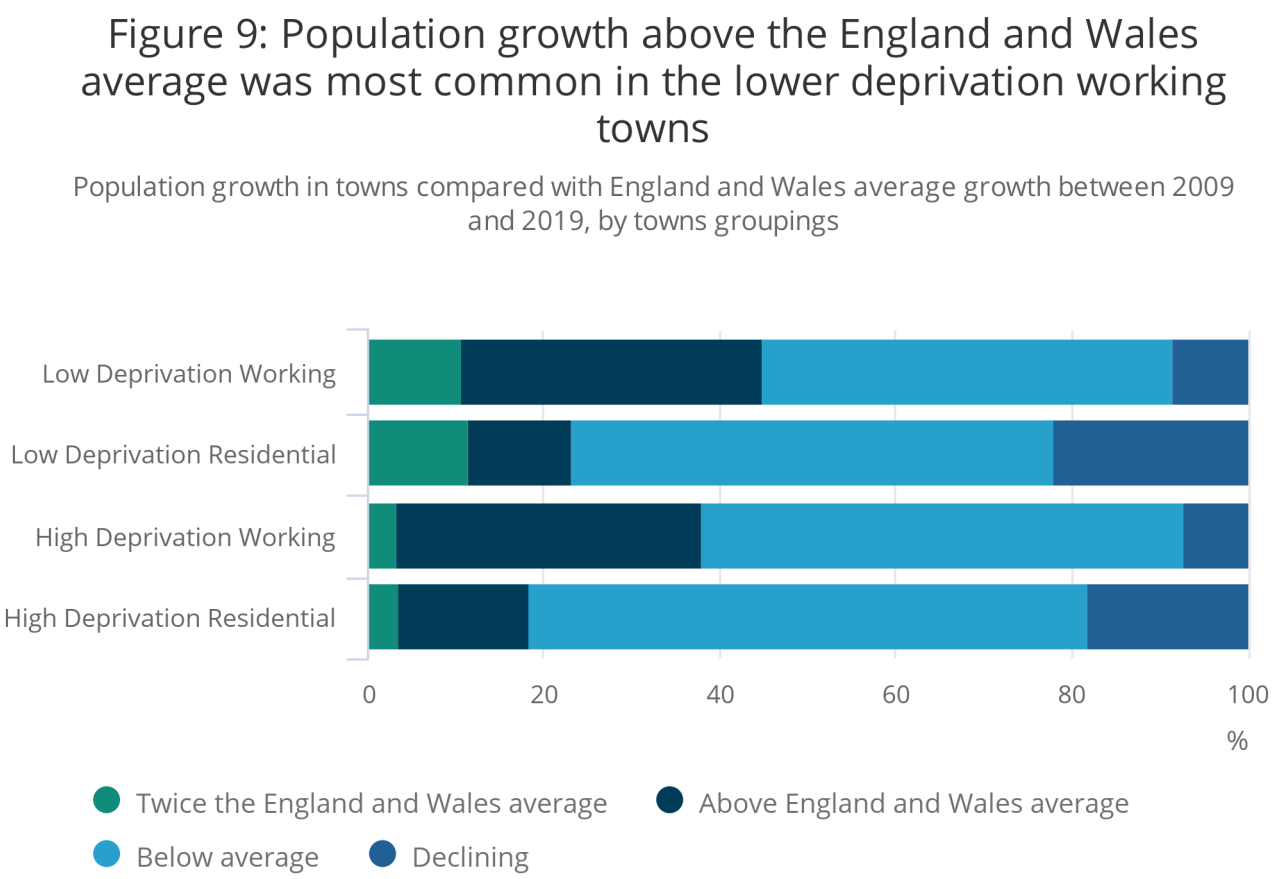
Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 9 shows that the declines in population were most common in the “residential” towns (which have low job density) and less common in the “working” towns (which have high job density). The level of deprivation did not appear to have much impact on the population growth rates.

Figure 9: Population growth above the England and Wales average was most common in the lower deprivation working towns

Population growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019, by towns groupings



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

To provide further information on the location of towns that have been experiencing high or low population growth we carried out analysis to identify clusters of high-growth and low-growth towns and we have used this to identify a number of areas that are now discussed in more detail, alongside some other areas of policy interest.

The cluster analysis (see Glossary) identified a corridor of high population growth in towns spreading north out of London, via the Travel to Work Areas (TTWAs) covering Watford, Luton and Stevenage through to Milton Keynes, Bedford, Cambridge and Peterborough and onto Corby, Northampton and Loughborough in the East Midlands. Population growth from 2009 to 2019 totalled 11% in towns in this corridor[1], with the growth spread relatively evenly among smaller (12%), medium (11%) and larger (10%) towns.

By contrast, moving further north, the corridor from Liverpool and South Lancashire in the west to South and West Yorkshire, via Manchester and the Pennines, had average population growth[2] of 6% over the 2009 to 2019 period. However, within this area there was a difference between the largest cities[3], which had aggregate population growth of 10%, and the towns, which had aggregate population growth of 4%. Furthermore, growth in this area was also linked to size of town, with population growth of 6% in the larger towns, 4% in the medium-sized towns but only 2% in the smaller towns.

In the North East of England, Newcastle had population growth of 10%. There was only a small number of towns (or smaller cities) including Durham, Spennymoor, Ingleby Barwick and Hebburn that had similar above-average growth in the region. Overall, population growth in the towns in the North East of England totalled 2% over the 2009 to 2019 period for the larger and medium-sized towns and 3% for the smaller-sized towns.

In Wales, the area of south Wales encompassing Swansea, Cardiff, Newport and the valleys had population growth of 5%. Again, the growth was stronger in the larger towns and cities, with Cardiff and Newport growing 8%, while the medium and smaller towns averaged 4% and 3% growth respectively.

These examples illustrate a pattern amongst the more densely populated parts of the north of England and the south of Wales, where the population growth over the decade to 2019 was higher in the cities, and lower in the towns, with often the smaller towns having the lowest growth. This contrasts quite sharply with the high population growth corridor stretching from London to the East Midlands in which population growth was similarly strong amongst smaller, medium and larger-sized towns.

There are also clusters of high population growth towns, and also of towns with low population growth, in the less densely-populated areas of England. For example, the towns in the area covering Boston, Spalding, King's Lynn and Wisbech in the East of England had population growth totalling 11% over the 2009 to 2019 period. There was also high growth in towns around the Ashford and Canterbury TTWAs, as well as around Andover, Evesham and in some parts of Devon and Cornwall. The A11 corridor between Cambridge and Norwich also had high population growth along the small towns en-route such as Mildenhall, Thetford, Attleborough and Wymondham.

By contrast, towns on the East Yorkshire coast (covering Whitby, Bridlington and Scarborough) only totalled 1% population growth over the period, while population declined by 2% in towns on the coast of Cumbria[4]. Figure 10 allows for further exploration of the population growth data for the 1,186 towns, with data also included for the 19 cities of England and Wales (excluding London).

Figure 10: There is a cluster of high-growth population towns stretching north from London towards the East Midlands

Map of population growth in towns and cities compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. In addition to towns, the list therefore includes some large villages, small cities and other urban settlements with population within the defined range. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

2. "Cities" in this publication are based on built-up areas boundaries outside London region with population above 225,000. "Cities" data were added for comparison purposes.

Download the data

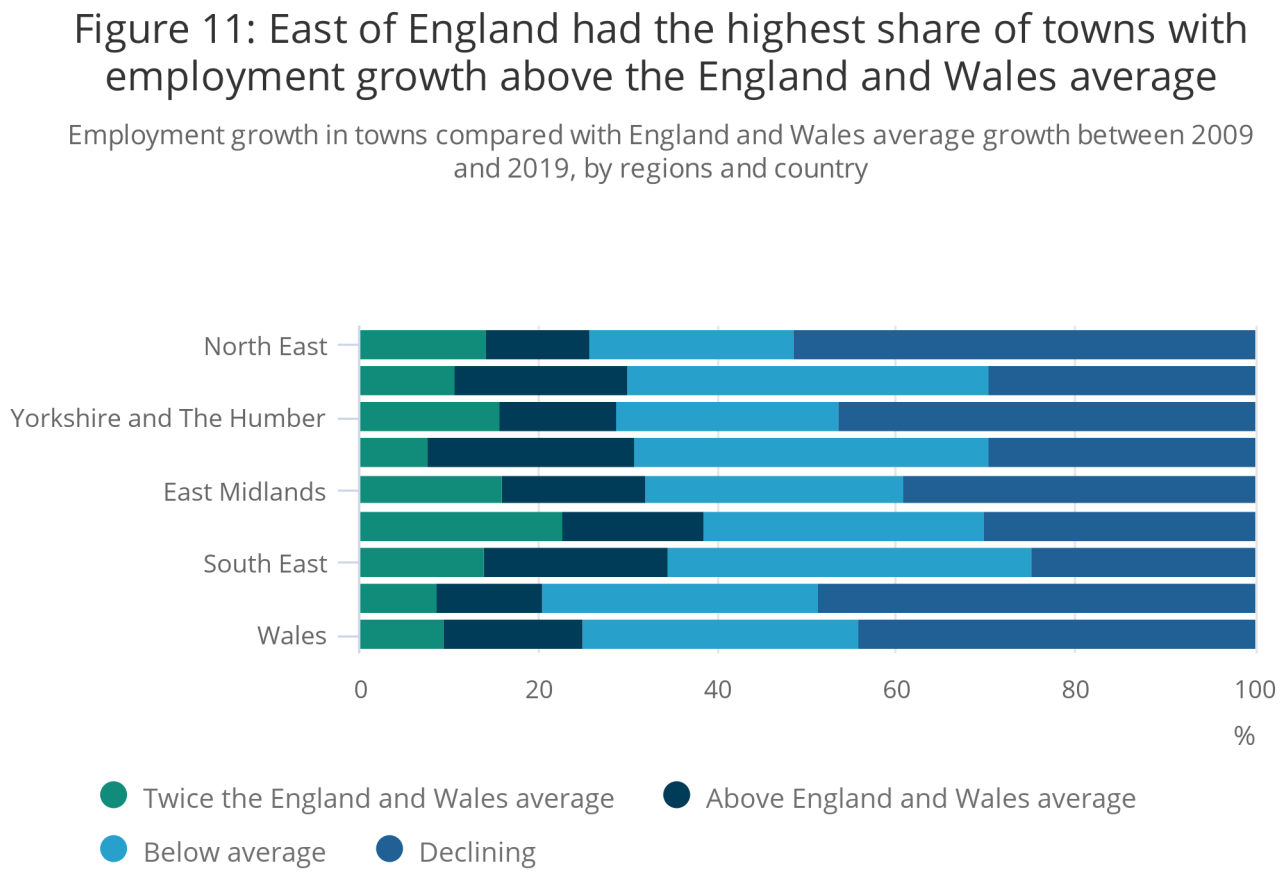
Employment growth

Among all towns, 31% had employment growth above the 12% England and Wales average between 2009 and 2019, including 14% of towns that had more than twice the England and Wales growth rate. In the East of England region, 39% of towns had employment growth above the England and Wales average, the highest share among the English regions. The lowest share was in the South West region at 21%.

Among all towns, 36%, meanwhile, had a decline in employment levels over the 2009 to 2019 period. This share was highest in the North East (51%) and South West (49%) regions and lowest in the South East (25%).

Figure 11: East of England had the highest share of towns with employment growth above the England and Wales average

Employment growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019, by regions and country



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

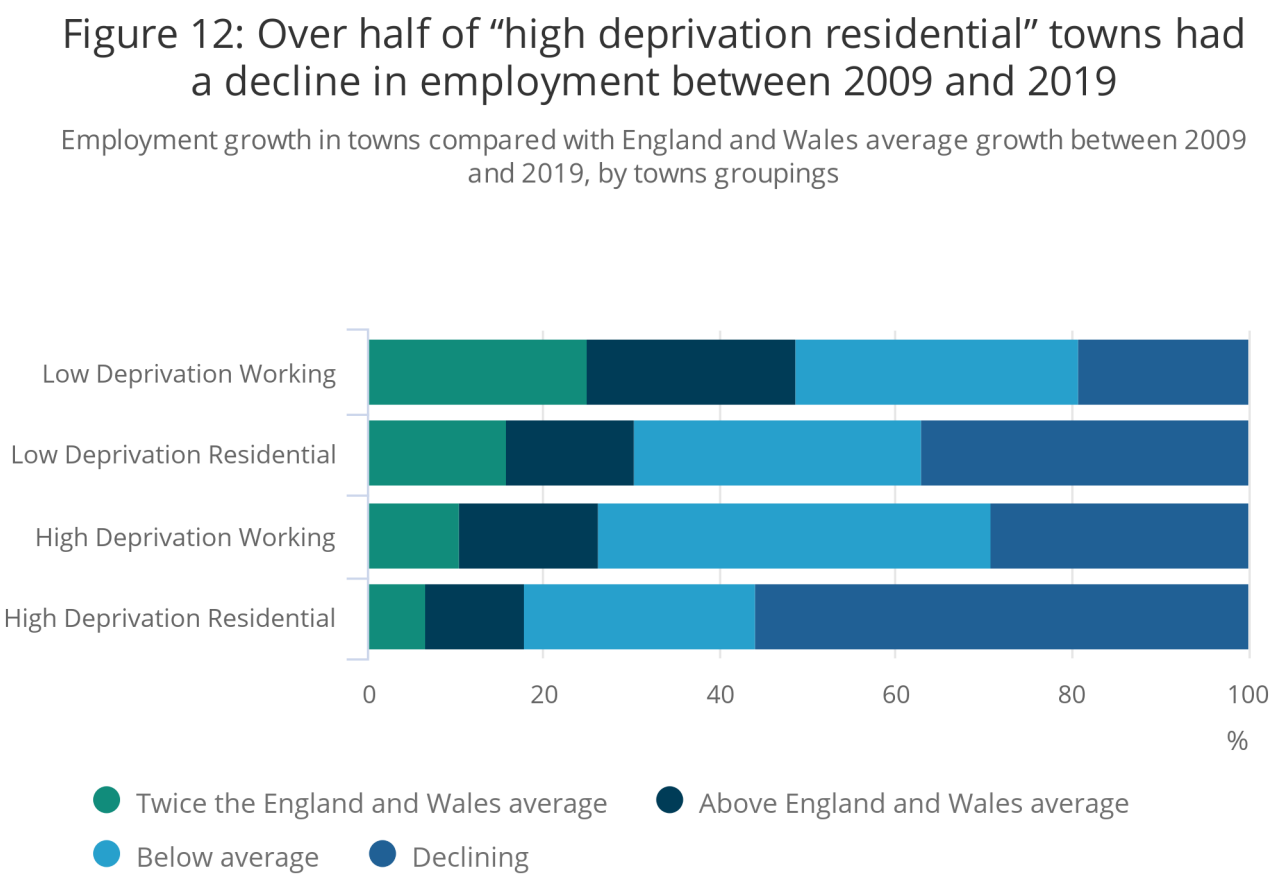
1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 12 shows that a decline in employment was most common among the "high deprivation residential" towns. Only 18% of these towns that are currently characterised by high income deprivation and low job density had employment growth above the England and Wales average over the period, compared with 56% that had a decline in employment.

In contrast, growth in employment was most common among the "low deprivation working" towns that are currently characterised by high job density and low income deprivation; 49% of towns in this group had employment growth above the England and Wales average, with only 19% having a decline in employment.

Figure 12: Over half of "high deprivation residential" towns had a decline in employment between 2009 and 2019

Employment growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019, by towns groupings



Source: Office for National Statistics – Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Similar to the population data, employment data also show a corridor of high employment growth spreading out from the north of London towards the East Midlands. The towns in the Travel to Work Areas of Luton, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Kettering and Wellingborough, and Corby had an aggregate employment growth of 20% during the 2009 to 2019 period, with similar growth rates among the larger (20%), medium (22%) and smaller (18%) towns in these areas.

In the corridor from Liverpool and South Lancashire to Sheffield and Leeds, via Manchester, employment growth in towns totalled 8% over the 2009 to 2019 period. There was little difference in the average growth figures by size of town but there was a difference depending on location relative to Manchester. Approximately half of the 1.8 million employment in towns across this corridor occurs within the Manchester Travel to Work Area and, in these towns, employment growth totalled 12%. Across the rest of the corridor, employment growth in the towns totalled 5%. These figures compare with city employment growth of 26% in Manchester and an aggregate 12% across the other cities in the corridor (Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford).

In the North East of England, the employment growth for towns was just 1% over the 2009 to 2019 period. Towns nearest the largest city again fared better overall, with towns within the Newcastle Travel to Work Area having an aggregate employment growth rate of 7% (same as for the city of Newcastle), while for towns in the rest of the region, employment declined by 2%.

In the West Midlands, there has been a noticeable difference in employment growth between towns (such as Solihull and Nuneaton) in the Birmingham and Coventry Travel to Work Areas (with an aggregate growth of 17%) and those in the Dudley, and Wolverhampton and Walsall Travel to Work Areas (with an aggregate growth of 1%). In Wales, the area of south Wales encompassing Swansea, Cardiff, Newport and the valleys had total employment growth across its towns of 2%.

Looking away from the more urban areas of England and Wales, there is a large cluster of towns across Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall where employment plateaued between 2009 and 2019. Heading west from Yeovil and Bridport in Somerset towards Land's End in Cornwall, the total employment in towns declined by 1% over the period. There were a couple of exceptions such as Truro and Falmouth, which had above-average employment growth, but the majority of towns in the south-west corner of England either had a decline in employment or only slow employment growth during the decade to 2019.

These examples illustrate the differences in terms of employment growth in towns depending on the area of the country. In higher growth areas around London, there were clusters of towns with total employment growth of around 20% over the 2009 to 2019 period. By contrast, some clusters of towns elsewhere in the country had much lower growth or a decline in employment. For example, there was a decline in employment of 2% for North East towns outside the Newcastle Travel to Work Area, a decline of 1% for towns across much of Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, and growth of only 1% for towns in the Black Country and 2% for towns in south Wales. Figure 13 allows for further exploration of the data.

Figure 13: The South West region has the highest share of towns with declining or below-average employment growth

Map of employment growth in towns compared with England and Wales average growth between 2009 and 2019

Notes

1. The "towns" list in this publication is based on the built-up area subdivision boundaries (and built-up areas if there are no subdivisions), with 2011 Census usual resident population between 5,000 and 225,000. In addition to towns, the list therefore includes some large villages, small cities and other urban settlements with population within the defined range. The list does not include any towns within the Greater London because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area.

2. "Cities" in this publication are based on built-up areas boundaries outside London region with population above 225,000. "Cities" data were added for comparison purposes.

Download the data

Notes for Employment and population growth, 2009 to 2019

1. The data are calculated for towns in the 10 Travel to Work Areas of Luton, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City, Bedford, Milton Keynes, Cambridge, Peterborough, Leicester, Northampton, Corby, and Kettering and Wellingborough.

2. Data calculated for towns in the 16 Travel to Work Areas of Birkenhead, Liverpool, Preston, Blackpool, Burnley, Blackburn, Halifax, Warrington and Wigan, Manchester, Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley, Wakefield and Castleford, Leeds, Huddersfield, and Bradford.

3. The large cities are Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield, as defined by Built-Up Area Subdivisions. Smaller cities with population less than 225,000 are included as "towns" for this analysis.

4. Workington, Whitehaven and Barrow-in-Furness Travel to Work Areas.

5 . Data

Understanding towns in England and Wales: spatial analysis
Dataset | Released 7 December 2020
Towns in England and Wales: towns list, classification, population and employment data.

6 . Glossary

Town

In line with the previous towns article, to qualify for inclusion in the towns list for this article, the population must have been between 5,000 and 225,000 in 2011 (according to the census) with the town boundaries used being either Built-Up Area boundaries or Built-Up Area Subdivision boundaries.

It needs to be recognised that this is a statistical approach to examining towns, and that not every place in the list will have "town" status. Some of the smaller places included will be villages, and there will be quite a few of the larger places included that are small cities. However, the aim has been to make sure as many towns as possible are included within the analysis and for statistical analysis it makes sense to group these medium-sized urban settlements together. We chose the upper population limit of 225,000 to include the largest towns in the country, namely Reading and Northampton.

The 1,186 towns include 91 large towns with a population above 75,000, 347 medium-sized towns with a population between 20,000 and 75,000, and 748 small towns with a population between 5,000 and 20,000.

This analysis does not include any towns within Greater London because the built-up areas geography does not provide subdivisions within the London area. The built-up areas geography is also not defined for Scotland or Northern Ireland. Instead, Scotland has its own definitions of urban areas, known as settlements and localities. These could be used for a similar type of towns analysis for Scotland but, because the underlying definitions differ to those in England and Wales, it is not possible to make direct comparisons. Therefore, our towns analysis is focused on England and Wales only.

Travel to Work Areas

Travel to Work Areas (TTWAs) are a geography created to approximate labour market areas. In other words, they are derived to reflect self-contained areas in which most people both live and work.

Travel to Work Area Classification

A labour market area in a sparse rural area of England will be very different from a labour market area based on a major city. Therefore, given that Travel to Work Area Classifications (TTWAs) are being used in this article to help explain the local context of individual towns, we have developed a simple classification that provides a description of a TTWA based on whether it exists in a conurbation, a rural area, a mostly urban area that includes a large town or city, or a mostly urban area that only includes smaller towns and villages.

To produce this classification we have used population data combined with the Output Area (OA) version of the Rural Urban Classification (RUC) to categorise each TTWA as follows:

- "Major Conurbation TTWA", in which the majority of the population of the TTWA are resident in one of the UK's conurbations as defined by the Rural Urban Classification
- "Large Town TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in an urban area (as defined by the OA version of the RUC), but not a conurbation and the TTWA includes at least one town or city of population greater than 70,000
- "Small Town TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in an urban area, but not a conurbation and the TTWA does not have any towns or cities of population greater than70,000
- "Rural TTWA", in which a majority of the population of the TTWA live in a rural area as defined by the OA version of the RUC

Figure 14: Map of Travel to Work Areas classification, England and Wales

Notes

1. This publication uses the Census 2011 Travel to Work Areas.
2. Classification of TTWAs used in this publication has been created based on the Rural Urban Classification (2011 Census Output Area version) and 2011 Census Usual Resident Population.

Download the data

Cluster Analysis

We used Hot Spot (Getis-Ord Gi*) to identify statistically significant spatial clusters of high values and low values of employment and population growth over the 2009 to 2019 period. Results indicated the areas where the observed spatial clustering of high or low values is more pronounced than one would expect in a random distribution of those same values. We have also used Cluster and Outlier Analysis (Anselin Local Moran's I) to identify hot spots, cold spots, and spatial outliers of employment and population growth over the 2009 to 2019 period. Results indicated where the apparent similarity (a spatial clustering of either high or low values) or dissimilarity (a spatial outlier) is more pronounced than one would expect in a random distribution. In both Hot Spot and Cluster and Outlier Analysis, we have included values for all 2,567 built-up areas with 2011 census population above 1,500 usual residents and used a 30-mile distance band.

7 . Data sources and quality

This article provides data and analysis on 1,186 towns in England and Wales with a focus on population and employment data. The population data is sourced from ONS mid-year population estimates and the employment data from the Business, Register and Employment Survey (BRES).

Job density data is based on total employment (which includes employees and working proprietors) from the BRES. This means that some self-employment figures are not included because of the quality of the data at smaller geographic areas.

Since the first towns publication in July 2019, we have updated the method used for matching BRES employment data to the geographical town boundaries. This has improved the accuracy of the figures. However, it means that the employment data have been revised for many towns since the previous publication.

8 . Future developments

This article is the third of a series of towns articles being produced by the Centre for Subnational Analysis at the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It is an expanded update of the first article from 2019. A coastal towns output was published in October 2020. Further articles will follow in 2021.

9 . Related links

Coastal towns in England and Wales: October 2020
Article | Released 6 October 2020
Data and analysis on seaside and other coastal towns in England and Wales.