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Built-up areas

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Purpose of briefing

This briefing provides a summary of built-up areas in West Sussex, specifically focusing on the characteristics of areas with a usual resident population of between 5,000 and 30,000. This summary is based on data taken from the 2021 Census which was released by the Office for National Statistics in August 2023.

The aim of this briefing is to support public health colleagues and the public to learn more about built-up areas and the characteristics of households living in these areas at the time of the 2021 Census. This includes demographic characteristics, such as age and sex of usual residents, alongside general health, housing tenure and employment (Public Health England, 2017).

Background

What are built-up areas?

The census is a survey of all households and communal establishments in England and Wales undertaken by the Office for National Statistics every ten years. The census collects information on topics such as population characteristics, education, religion, ethnicity, employment, living arrangements, housing, and health (Office for National Statistics, n.d., 2025).

Results from the census are broken down into a variety of different geographies to help researchers and analysts study demographic, economic, and health trends (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Since 1981, the census has published data for urban areas, which refer to areas of land that have urban characteristics and include settlements such as villages, towns and cities. In 2011, urban areas were officially renamed to 'built up areas' to avoid previous inconsistencies in terminology used by the rural-urban classification (which differentiate between rural and urban areas) and provide a more accurate description of the geography (Office for National Statistics, 2015).

Built-up area geographies are produced by a process which uses topographic data and satellite imagery to classify the boundaries of built-up area development and recognise individual settlements, such as villages, towns and cities (Office for National Statistics, 2023). A new edition of this geography was produced by the Ordnance Survey and released in 2022. This edition of the geography included several changes to previous versions which means it is not directly comparable (Office for National Statistics, 2023). For further information on the changes, refer to Appendix A.

The latest census data in 2021 can be allocated to built-up areas by aggregating the statistics of one or more output areas to form the total estimate. Output areas are the lowest level of geographical area for census statistics in England and Wales, with an average population of approximately 300 people (Office for National Statistics, 2022). In August 2023, the Office for National Statistics published analysis of the characteristics of built-up areas in England and Wales, based on the 2022 edition of the geography produced by the Ordnance Survey and estimates from the latest census in 2021. This was the first Office for National Statistics release to use the new 2022 edition. To access the 'towns and cities' release and underlying data used to produce this briefing, refer to this Office for National Statistics site.

Focusing on data for built-up areas provides a more natural way to understand the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of towns and neighbourhoods based on how they exist on the ground rather than relying on administrative boundaries. In addition, this data allows us to make comparisons between people living in built-up areas and those living elsewhere.

There are different classifications of built-up areas based on their population size. Table 1 provides a summary of these classifications, taken from the Office for National Statistics 'towns and cities' release.

Table 1 Number of built-up areas in West Sussex by size classification

Population range (Usual resident population)	BUA size classification	Approximate settlement type
0-4,999	minor	hamlet or village
5,000-19,999	small	larger village / small town
20,000-74,999	medium	medium towns
75,000-199,999	large	large towns / smaller cities
200,000+	major	cities

Source. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics

In 2021, there were 6,439 built-up areas in England, including 33 in London. Across the country, 94.9% of the usual resident population lived in built-up areas.

How many built-up areas are there in West Sussex?

To determine the number of built-up areas within West Sussex, a series of look-up tables were used. These look-up tables are provided by the Office for National Statistics' Open Geography Portal and allows us to relate one or more geography to another (Gregory, 2022).

As built-up areas are based on physical developments rather than administrative boundaries, such as electoral wards and district and boroughs, some areas lie wholly within West Sussex whereas others cross county borders and overlap with neighbouring authorities, such as Surrey, Hampshire and East Sussex (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

A total of 126 built-up areas were identified as wholly or partially overlapping with West Sussex. This briefing focuses solely on built-up areas where the entire population falls within the county boundary. As a result, 7 built-up areas were excluded because they extended the county boundary and have residents outside of West Sussex. This left a final total of 119 areas.

The majority of these built-up areas were classified as "minor" ($n = 94$; 79.8%), with an approximate settlement type of a hamlet or village. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of built-up areas in West Sussex by size classification.

Table 2 Number of built-up areas in West Sussex by size classification

Built-up area size classification	Number within West Sussex	Proportion
Minor	94	79.0%
Small	16	13.4%
Medium	7	5.9%
Large	2	1.7%

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Spotlight on areas with population of between 5,000 and 30,000 usual residents

Instead of summarising the characteristics of all 119 built-up areas, the remainder of this briefing will focus on the characteristics of built-up areas within West Sussex with a population size of between 5,000 and 30,000 usual residents. At the time of the 2021 Census, there were 19 built-up areas within this population range in West Sussex.

Most of these were classified as 'small' built-up areas (n = 16; 84.2%), with an approximate settlement type of a larger village/small town. See Table 3 for a breakdown of the 19 built-up areas by size.

Table 3 Number of built-up areas in West Sussex by size classification (based on size criteria)

Built-up area	Size classification
Barnham (Arun), Billingshurst, Broadbridge Heath, Crawley Down, East Wittering, Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint, Henfield, Littlehampton, Midhurst, Selsey, Southwater, Southwick (Adur), Steyning, Storrington, Wick (Arun), Yapton	Small
East Grinstead, Lancing and Sompting, Shoreham-by-Sea	Medium

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Alongside a summary of the characteristics of built-up areas within this population range, benchmarks will be provided against the national average for the corresponding area size.

Resident demographics

Age

Broadbridge Heath and Wick shared the lowest median age (36) across built-up areas in West Sussex at the time of the 2021 Census. This is 12 years younger than the average median age for small built-up areas in England (48 years).

Selsey had the highest median age of residents, 57 years, which is nine years older than the average median age for small built-up areas in England (48 years).

Alongside the median age, data was provided on the number of usual residents by five-year age group and sex. This allows us to create population pyramids to visualise the age and sex distribution across built-up areas. A document with accompanying tables and figures for this briefing, including individual population pyramids for each built-up area, is provided in Appendix B.

Country of birth

As part of the 2021 Census, residents were asked which country they were born in. Those who were not born in the UK were then asked to write in the current name of their country of birth.

Residents were classified into three high-level groups: born in the UK, born in non-European union (EU) countries and born in EU countries. For further information on countries within the EU, refer to Appendix C.

The proportion of people born in the UK ranged from 86.3% (East Grinstead) to 93.6% (East Wittering).

As shown in Table 4, Wick had double the proportion of residents who were born in EU countries when compared to the group average for small built-up areas in England (7.1 vs 3.5%). Wick was also among the 49 (5.8%) of small built-up areas across England with the highest proportion of residents who were born in EU countries.

Broadbridge Heath had the highest proportion of residents who were born in non-EU countries, including British Overseas (7.9%). This was 3.6% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (4.3%).

Table 4 Proportion of usual residents by country of birth and individual built-up area

Country of birth	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
Europe: EU countries	East Wittering (2.5%)	Wick (Arun) (7.1%)	3.5%
Europe: United Kingdom	East Grinstead (86.3%)	East Wittering (93.6%)	88.2% (medium) & 92.3% (small)*
Non-EU countries (including British Overseas)	Selsey (3.1%)	Broadbridge Heath (7.9%)	4.3%

*As East Grinstead if classed as a medium built-up area and East Wittering a small built-up area, the national group average for both sizes are presented.
Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Accommodation type

Crawley Down had the highest proportion of households who lived in a caravan or other mobile or temporary structure (7.4%). This was 6.7% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (see Table 5).

Littlehampton had the highest proportion of households who lived in a flat, maisonette or apartment (33.7%), 20 percentage points higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England. Littlehampton was also among the 15 small built-up areas across England with the highest proportion of households who lived in a flat, maisonette or apartment.

In Storrington, just under half of households (48.2%) lived in a detached house or bungalow. This was 18.8% higher than the average for small built-up areas in England (29.4%).

Table 5 Proportion of usual residents by accommodation type and individual built-up area

Accommodation type	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
A caravan or other mobile or temporary structure	East Grinstead (0.2%)	Crawley Down (7.4%)	0.4% (medium) & 0.7% (small)*
Flat, maisonette or apartment	Yapton (9%)	Littlehampton (33.7%)	13.5%
Whole house or bungalow: Detached	Wick (Arun) (15.2%)	Storrington (48.2%)	29.4%
Whole house or bungalow: Semi-detached	Storrington (19.2%)	Southwick (Adur) (41.2%)	34.6%
Whole house or bungalow: Terraced	Crawley Down (7.2%)	Broadbridge Heath (33.7%)	21.8%

*As East Grinstead is classified as a medium built-up area and Crawley Down a small built-up area, the national group average for both sizes are presented.

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Housing tenure

Housing tenure refers to whether a household (either one person or group of people who share the same residence) rents or owns the accommodation they live in (Murphy & Grundy, 2024; Office for National Statistics, 2023). This can help us to understand differences in people's living conditions across the country.

In Broadbridge Heath, just under half of households (49.5%) owned their home with a mortgage, loan or shared ownership. This was 17.4% higher than the average for small built-up areas in England (32.1%; see Table 6).

Table 6 Proportion of usual residents by housing tenure and individual built-up area

Tenure	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
Owned: owns outright	Broadbridge Heath (23.9%)	Selsey (54.2%)	38.2%
Owned: owns with a mortgage or loan or shared ownership	Selsey (22.1%)	Broadbridge Heath (49.5%)	32.1%
Private rented or lives rent free	Crawley Down (6.7%)	Littlehampton (28.6%)	15.7%
Rented: social rented	Barnham (Arun) (7.7%)	Midhurst (19.7%)	13.9%

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Employment status

Employment refers to usual residents aged 16 years and over who are economically active and in employment, either as an employee or self-employed during the last seven days before Census 2021.

Good to know

The Census 2021 occurred during the pandemic and therefore, estimates of employment for England and Wales may have been impacted by the national lockdown and furlough schemes. For further information on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on England and Wales census 2021 outputs, refer to this Office for National Statistics webpage.

In Broadbridge Heath, over seven in ten residents (72.2%) were employed, 15.1% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (57.1%; see Table 7).

In Selsey, over half of residents (54.5%) were unemployed, retired, studying, looking after home or family, or long-term sick or disabled. However, this data should be interpreted with caution as this does not refer to the age standardised proportion which considers the age structure of the population.

Table 7 Proportion of usual residents by employment status and individual built-up area

Employment status	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
Employed	Selsey (45.5%)	Broadbridge Heath (72.2%)	57.1%
Not employed	Broadbridge Heath (27.8%)	Selsey (54.5%)	42.9%

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Qualifications

As part of the 2021 Census, residents were asked to indicate all qualifications held or their nearest equivalent. Table 8 provides an example of qualifications included within each level.

Table 8 Overview of the distinct levels of qualification

Level	Examples of Qualification
1	1+ O level passes, 1+ CSE/GCSE any grades, NVQ level 1, Foundation GNVQ.
2	5+ O level passes, 5+ CSEs (grade 1's), 5+ GCSEs (grades A-C), School Certificate, 1+ A levels/AS levels, NVQ level 2, Intermediate GNVQ.
3	2+ A levels, 4+ AS levels, Higher School Certificate, NVQ level 3, Advanced GNVQ, ONC, OND, BTEC National etc.
4	First degree, Higher degree, NVQ levels 4 and 5, HNC, HND, Professional qualifications (for example teaching, nursing, accountancy).
Other	Vocational/Work-related Qualifications, Foreign Qualifications, includes any qualifications not mentioned above.

There was variation in the highest level of qualifications reported amongst residents aged 16 years and over across the built-up areas. However, there are many factors which could account for differences in qualifications, including the age profile of the built-up area. For further information on potential factors, refer to this webpage from the Office for National Statistics.

Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint had the highest proportion of usual residents who held level 4 or above qualifications (44.5%), 14.4% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (31%; see Table 9).

Table 9 Proportion of usual residents by highest level of qualification and individual built-up area

Highest level of qualification	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
Level 1 and entry level	Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint (8.2%)	Wick (Arun) (13.2%)	10.2%
Level 2	East Wittering (13.6%)	Southwater (19.3%)	14.6%
Level 3	Selsey (15.6%)	Broadbridge Heath (20.6%)	17.5%

Highest level of qualification	Lowest proportion	Highest proportion	Group average
Level 4 or above	Wick (Arun) (22.5%)	Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint (44.6%)	31%
No qualifications	Broadbridge Heath (9.4%)	Selsey (24.4%)	17.8%
Other	Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint (6.6%)	Selsey (11.7%)	8.9%

Source. Office for National Statistics. Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Industry

Residents aged 16 years and over were asked to provide information about their firm or organisation's main activity. Their responses were then coded and combined into 19 high-level categories.

Good to know

This analysis is based on the residential address of workers and not the location of their workplace.

The broad industries with the highest proportion of residents across the 19 built-up areas were human health and social work activities, wholesale, retail and motor trade, education and construction.

Littlehampton had the highest proportion of residents working within both the human health and social work activities and wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles industries (18.2%). This was 3.9% and 2.7% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (14.3% and 15.5% respectively).

Crawley Down had the highest proportion of residents working within financial and insurance activities (6.1%), nearly double the group average for small built-up areas in England (3.2%).

A table of the lowest and highest proportion of usual residents across the 19 industry groups is provided as part of supplementary files within Appendix A.

Occupation

In Census 2021, residents aged 16 years and over were asked to provide their full job title for their main job and the main activity of their employer. If residents were not working, they were asked to provide this information about their last main job. Their responses were then coded using the Standard Occupational Classification 2020 and categorized into nine broad groups (Office for National Statistics , 2022).

In Hassocks and Hurstpierpoint, over a quarter of residents aged 16 and over were in professional occupations (28.2%). This was 9.5% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (18.7%).

Storrington had the highest proportion of residents working as managers, directors and senior officials (18.7%). This is 5.4% higher than the group average for small built-up areas in England (13.3%).

A table of the lowest and highest proportion of usual residents across the nine occupation groups is provided as part of supplementary files within Appendix A.

Conclusion

This briefing provided a summary of built-up areas in West Sussex, based on data taken from the 2021 Census which was released by the Office for National Statistics in August 2023. This briefing focused on built-up areas with a usual resident population of between 5,000 and 30,000 and provided comparisons across a range of different characteristics such as age and sex, housing tenure and occupation.

By focusing solely on built-up areas, this can help local authorities to gain further understanding of the characteristics of these areas at a more granular level and identify areas of need which could inform the delivery of funding and support for residents. However, it is important to note that census data does not take into account the wider social and economic context – for example, when summarising data on housing tenure, this would be the consideration of factors such as the supply of social housing or legislative changes within an area.

Further information

The Public Health and Social Research Unit have written a briefing of Thorney Island, a minor built-up area in Chichester, and undertaken various analyses of coastal areas across the county. For further information on these pieces of work, refer to the West Sussex JSNA site.

References

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Appendix A

For example, whilst built-up areas still need to be at least 20 hectares (200,000 square metres) in size to be included, areas that are 200 metres or less away from each other have not been merged together to form a single area (unlike the 2011 edition). For further information on the process used to define built-up areas, refer to this Ordnance Survey webpage.

Appendix B

Supplementary files

For further information on supplementary files which accompany this document, such as population pyramids for individual built-up areas included in this briefing, refer to this document: BUA Briefing - June 2026 Accompanying Tables.docx

Appendix C

List of European Union member countries

Member countries in March 2001: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden.

Member countries joining after March 2001: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

Source. House of Commons Library (2026) Constituency data: Country of birth (Census 2021, 2022)