



# “Left to rot”: Is estate regeneration still failing Londoners?

**A report by Zoë Garbett**  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on my visits to estates going through ‘regeneration’ across London and a sold-out event for affected residents I hosted at City Hall in February 2026. It also draws directly on the research and scrutiny of hard-working residents and campaigners around London, most of which is collated on the open-source website Estate Watch. In doing so it builds on two existing reports, which remain incredibly important and overlooked: Sian Berry’s 2022 report into the undemocratic practices of estate ballots, and Estate Watch’s 2023 report showing the gaps in the Mayor’s Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration.

This report shows there is a clear continuity between residents’ experiences of estate regeneration before and after the current Mayor’s interventions (resident ballots, new policies in the London Plan and his Good Practice Guide). Residents are still forced to live interminably through *degeneration* and the associated uncertainty and awful living conditions. Communities are also prone to displacement and gentrification, both directly and indirectly. As well as clear gaps in policy, estate regeneration continues to be beset by a lack of genuine community involvement and accountability from the GLA.

### **Chapter 1. Uncertainty and declining living conditions.**

This chapter shows that degeneration continues to be an inextricable part ‘regeneration’. Communities are forced to live through the managed decline of their estates for years, or even decades. Successful ballots do not necessarily put an end to this degeneration. In part, this is there because is a lack of scrutiny over landlord offers to residents and accountability for broken promises. But mainly because uncertainty is baked into wholesale estate redevelopment, especially schemes that depend on private developers and higher levels of market cross-subsidy. Despite this, community-led plans to find alternative, retrofit-led options are not taken seriously or lack the resources to get off the ground.

### **Chapter 2. Displacement and gentrification.**

This chapter shows how the Mayor has failed to confront the manifold ways displacement and gentrification can happen via ‘regeneration’. Policy gaps and loopholes means the loss of social housing remains a live risk. An over-reliance on private cross-subsidy means estates continue to be reconfigured around demand, and not local need. And constant changes to plans in the name of ‘viability’ (i.e. profitability) creates ripple effects that can transform communities in the short and long-term. In the face of a lack of transparency and accountability, under-resourced residents and campaigners are forced to continue stepping into the breach to stop the social cleansing and cultural erasure of their communities.

## Recommendations:

1. Implement the full suite of recommendations from Sian Berry’s 2022 report on estate resident ballots and set out the future of resident ballots, including how you will better use available levers to hold landlords to account for their promises to residents.
2. Publish a full written review and response to Just Space’s 2023 Alternative Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration ahead of publication of the draft London Plan. The Plan should take forward key policies outlined in the Alternative Guide, including:
  1. A presumption against demolition of social and other affordable housing and a far more robust options appraisal process for potential schemes involving demolition.
  2. A demand for the re-provision of all social homes and units as a minimum condition of estate regeneration, not only where residents have a ‘right of return’, with an expectation for a significant net uplift.
  3. Improved safeguards for existing residents, including a single move for all residents where demolition takes place and long-stop completion dates that reflects timetables set out in the Landlord Offer.
3. Create a ‘Community Plan Fund’ to provide residents with support to create genuine community-led plans for the future of their estates.
4. Add new conditions to GLA funding that see improved reporting and accountability from investment partners around preventing displacement of estate residents in all tenures after planning permission has been agreed.
5. Publicly call on the Government to fund a mass retrofit programme for social housing estates.



Zoë Garbett

## INTRODUCTION

London’s housing estates are the foundation of our city. Woven into neighbourhoods from Zone 1 to the city limits, they form the backbone of our social housing stock. They are a bulwark against London’s insecure and unaffordable housing market, defined by spiralling house prices and a broken private rented sector.

In many cases, they are also a source of community, belonging and identity, and are intertwined in the ecosystem of small businesses and community spaces that sustains our diverse city. In other words, our estates are precious – and fundamental to preserving what our capital is, and who it is for.

But their future is uncertain. The failure of successive Governments and councils to invest in maintaining and retrofitting estates means many residents are living in poor quality homes, increasingly unfit for the future.

Enticed by the promise of speculative private investment, justified by the stigmatisation of housing estates and their residents, and backed by successive Governments and Mayors, many social landlords pursue wholesale redevelopment.<sup>1</sup>

What usually follows is a process of demolition, densification, privatisation and marketisation of former council estates.<sup>2</sup>

As one Camden resident put it at my event: “the land under our homes is viewed as an asset too valuable for working-class people to live on.”

Since 1997, estate demolition projects in London have affected a huge number of Londoners. In that time, councils and housing

associations have demolished 160 estates, with more than 55,000 households (150,000 to 200,000 people) directly affected.<sup>3</sup> Indirectly, the possibility of estate regeneration has hung over the lives of thousands more Londoners and shaped the decision-making of councils.

Across London, at the time of writing, an estimated 139 estates are slated for demolition and redevelopment, or are currently undergoing regeneration.<sup>4</sup>

The positive connotations of ‘regeneration’ conceals the awful experiences of many residents and communities. Estate regeneration has typically been characterised by developer-imposed plans that displace existing residents and hollow out long-standing communities.

A 2015 report from the London Assembly Housing Committee, whose Deputy Chair at the time was, incidentally, the now-Mayor’s current housing chief, estimated that the 50 estates regenerated between 2004 and 2014 resulted in the net loss of around 8300 social rent homes. Meanwhile, the overall density of these sites doubled, owing to the massive increase in market housing.<sup>5</sup>

Studies into the process of displacement reveal the scale and impact of this loss of public housing. The notorious Heygate estate demolition in Elephant and Castle saw the net loss of over 1000 council homes on that estate alone, and academics found the community dispersed across and even outside London as a result.<sup>6</sup> If not for the organising of local residents, the outcomes of estate regeneration schemes, like the Heygate, would have been far worse.

Community organisations and academics have regularly termed estate regeneration ‘state-led gentrification’ and ‘social cleansing’.<sup>7</sup>

The replacement of public housing with market housing has self-evident implications for the socio-economic demographics of an area. But there is also a racial dimension to this process of replacement, whereby the racialised stigma of the ‘inner city council estate’ fuels the regeneration process and produces outcomes that disproportionately impact Black and Global Majority Londoners.<sup>8</sup>

These processes have also directly led to the loss of London's diverse cultural heritage, including the ecosystem of small businesses and community spaces that form around estates that are integral to our city.<sup>9</sup> All this remains underexplored and difficult to track. In part, this is due to the lack of data collected and published by councils and the GLA, and the limited resources of community groups and academics.<sup>10</sup>

But it is also incredibly difficult to quantify or account for the full scale of the loss that estate regeneration has wrought on individuals, families and diverse communities over the past three decades.

The current Mayor of London claims to have turned a corner based on an approach to estate regeneration that puts residents ‘at the heart of decision-making on regeneration’.<sup>11</sup>

In 2018, he introduced a requirement for developers to ballot residents on regeneration proposals, and his Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration followed the same year. Some protections for social housing tenants followed in the London Plan in 2021.

Content with these changes, the Mayor has continued to fund estate regeneration through his 2021-2026 Affordable Homes Programme (AHP), and has declared estate regeneration a priority for his 2026-2036 Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP).<sup>12</sup>

In November 2025, London Councils echoed the Mayor’s effusiveness, publishing a manifesto for more demolition and redevelopment and framing it as instrumental in a ‘decade of renewal’ for London.<sup>13</sup>

But the Mayor’s narrative hides the gaps in his interventions. Former Assembly Member Siân Berry MP’s 2022 report, *Estate resident ballots, are they working well?*, shows how the ballot process falls short on its promise of democratic decision-making for estate residents.<sup>14</sup>

*The Alternative Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration*, authored by Estate Watch (made up of community-led organisations Just Space and the London Tenants Federation) in partnership with affected residents, provides a complete breakdown of the Mayor’s Good Practice Guide, identifying where: “it leaves many important issues open to interpretation and a number of loopholes to be exploited... [and] the lack of effective mechanisms to ensure that policies are adhered to both at planning and delivery stages.”<sup>15</sup>

The GLA have taken forward some, but not all, of Siân Berry’s recommendations. At the time of writing, it has been three years since the publication of Estate Watch’s *Alternative Guide*, and sixteen months after they formally presented their findings to the Deputy Mayor for Housing, in December 2024.

The GLA is yet to respond.

This report attempts to build on this existing work by focusing on the experiences of residents going through estate regeneration.

It is based on my visits to affected estates around London over the past two years, and an event I hosted at City Hall in February 2026 alongside Estate Watch to bring affected Londoners into City Hall.

I wanted to give estate residents across London a chance to genuinely be heard, where they felt they were being failed or ignored by the processes put in place by the Mayor.

This report shows that estate regeneration is still failing many Londoners, despite the Mayor of London’s claims that estate regeneration has turned a corner.

For many people, their experience of ‘regeneration’ are still defined by years of uncertainty, awful living conditions, the displacement of their neighbours, and the gentrification of their communities – as it was throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

The appetite of communities to be involved in planning for a fairer, sustainable future for their estates is not routinely met, and developers still don’t face repercussions for broken promises.

The Mayor’s safeguards against such outcomes, like the ballot requirement and new planning policies, have not been enough to prevent the exclusion of residents from meaningful decision-making or put an end to unfair practices that see existing communities lose out in ‘regeneration’.

This is not to say some residents do not have a good experience of estate regeneration, but the widespread issues show that the involvement and experiences of existing residents is not

being taken seriously enough, and the imbalance of power between communities and developers remains far too vast.

#### A NOTE ON METHOD

This report is informed by visits to London estates over the past two years and an event at City Hall where 100 residents and campaigners came together to talk about their experiences of estate regeneration and what they wanted to change.

Residents from 17 different London boroughs and upwards of 50 estates were represented, including many currently undergoing regeneration.

The event focused on residents sharing their experiences, specifically where they felt processes had failed them. Residents self-recorded conversations and extracts are included throughout the report.

This report also compiles a fraction of the outstanding research done by residents around London to document regeneration processes on their estates, based on first-hand experience, analysis of planning documents, and freedom of information (FOI) requests. This is recorded on the brilliant open-source website, Estate Watch.

There remains a huge data deficit on estate regeneration and a worrying lack of data collection and transparency by the GLA on the projects it funds. It is almost impossible to find the voices of ordinary people living through estate regeneration who want to be heard.



Zoë Garbett AM event at City Hall, 5 February 2026  
*'Fighting London's profit-driven estate demolition and gentrification'*

## CHAPTER 1: YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY AND DECLINING CONDITIONS

During the event and my visits to estates around London, I heard from residents living with constant uncertainty. They are living in limbo, fighting for control over their lives and unable to plan for the future. Many are also living in awful conditions on estates in ‘managed decline’.

The Mayor credits his resident ballot with easing the ‘complex and difficult’ estate regeneration process.<sup>16</sup> However this chapter shows that resident ballots alone do not put an end to the uncertainty that grips communities going through estate regeneration, and they are not a substitute for a longer-term, genuine commitment to resident coproduction.

Far from being a decisive moment of resident empowerment, ballots are generally a footnote in a much longer, uncertain process of degeneration – where landlords and developers, rather than residents, are calling the shots.

Uncertainty and declining conditions are not unfortunate by-products of the process, but risks inherent to demolition and redevelopment plans. These are the type of plans favoured by developers, both financed and often poorly scrutinised by the Mayor, and presented to residents as the only solution.

During my event in City Hall, residents made it clear that developers should be held to account for promised timelines and substandard conditions, and that residents should be resourced to create sustainable, realistic alternative plans for their estates.

### **Degeneration: the pre-condition of estate regeneration**

Professor Paul Watt’s study of London estate regeneration in the first two decades of the 2000s shows that interminable processes of *degeneration* are an intrinsic part of estate regeneration.<sup>17</sup>

This breeds conditions and processes like the ‘managed decline’ of estates. Housing associations, councils and the Government make choices to deprive estates of funding for essential maintenance, or retrofitting to bring them up to a good standard.<sup>18</sup>

Not all these choices are ideological or intend to run-down estates. But they are choices, nonetheless – to extract funding from estates rather than invest in them; to starve councils of funding; to persevere with tax loopholes and planning policies that incentivise demolition over retrofit.

Conditions decline and residents have to live through degeneration, for years or even decades at a time – taking a huge toll on individuals’ mental and sometimes physical wellbeing.<sup>19</sup> Demolition and redevelopment is then presented as a solution.

Degeneration is also the backdrop of resident ballots. It is far easier for developers to sell demolition to residents when the alternative is the status quo. As Estate Watch have shown with examples from across London, estate ballots usually framed as a choice between complete demolition and redevelopment, or the ongoing decline of their estate.

A retrofit-led option almost never features. In many instances, Landlord Offers quite openly hold the threat of poor conditions over their heads in pursuit of a ‘yes’ vote.<sup>20</sup>

This lack of genuine decision-making power is made worse by the undemocratic practices surrounding ballots identified by Siân Berry.<sup>21</sup>

It is a process that academics have described as ‘false-choice urbanism’ – in other words, barely a choice at all.<sup>22</sup>

## THE ECONOMICS OF MANAGED DECLINE

Residents from estates around London have managed to get some insight into the economics of managed decline through freedom of information (FOI) requests.

This research has confirmed suspicions that money drains out of their estates in the run-up to regeneration proposals being put to a resident ballot.

For instance, an FOI request by West Kentish Town estate residents to Camden council found that £21.8 million had been paid by residents into the Camden Housing Revenue Account from 2002 to 2022.

Between 2006 and 2023, Camden Council spent only £3.8 million on repairs and maintenance on the estate.

On the Achilles Street regeneration project in New Cross, FOIs revealed Lewisham council spent more than £300,000 on plans for the new development in the build up to the resident ballot in 2019.

Meanwhile just £239,000 was spent on repairing and maintaining existing homes between 2011 and 2017.

This is less than a tenth of the £2.6 million income from rent and service charges accrued by the council in the same period.

## Interminable schemes and the false dawn of the ballot

Estate regeneration schemes can go on for years or even decades. Residents can live out this uncertainty on the estate amid periods of managed decline, or off the estate, typically in different accommodation around the borough.

The Estate Watch website lists 17 of these projects that have fully or partially stalled after homes have been demolished, but there are far more examples from around London.<sup>23</sup>

Notorious examples include the Carpenters Road estate in Newham, where resident resistance to unfair plans and successive failed development partnerships mean residents have not returned after they began moved out of their homes in 2005. Almost 700 former social homes continue to sit empty.<sup>24</sup>

Ten years after complete demolition, there is no progress on the empty site that used to house the Bacton estate in Camden.

On Cressingham Gardens and other estates in the borough, Lambeth council have been slowly decanting residents or not filling void homes for a decade waiting for an uncertain future regeneration date.

On the Love Lane estate in Haringey, the council began removing people from the estate way back in 2016, but there was no landlord offer to

residents until 2021. At the time of writing, more than 100 homes are still empty and the remainder of homes are occupied by people temporary accommodation residents.

Even a ‘yes’ vote in ballots for demolition-led regeneration does not necessarily put an end to this uncertainty or residents’ experiences of degeneration, despite promises made by developers.

There is a litany of instances around London to draw examples from. The High Lane Estate in Ealing produced a ‘yes’ vote for demolition and redevelopment in 2018 (a decade after the council declared the estate in ‘poor condition’) with the promise of new homes by 2026.<sup>25</sup>

At the time of writing in early 2026, all the residents have been ‘decanted’ from their homes, but the council does not have a development partner after their private development partner withdrew from the scheme three years ago. The full timeline of the High Lane Estate regeneration is featured in a case study below.

Residents of the rapidly deteriorating Avenue Road estate in Waltham Forest voted for regeneration in 2021 and they were promised they could move into new homes in 2026. But their project partner, private developer Bellway, pulled out in 2023 citing ‘viability’ issues.

The council have said construction work will not start until at least 2027, with a likely return of residents in the mid-2030s. Meanwhile, the residents continue living in awful conditions, with one resident saying, ‘our mental health hasn’t got years’.<sup>26</sup>

The Achilles Street regeneration scheme in Lewisham only reached planning in 2025, six

years after the 2019 ballot and four behind schedule; it is not clear when construction will start or finish.<sup>27</sup>

It is little wonder many of the examples of stalled and slowly progressing schemes, like these three, depend on the wholesale demolition and redevelopment of an estate with a huge uptick in private housing – rather than a retrofit-led approach.

Despite clear violations of timelines set out in Landlord Offers, and basic duties to residents, there are no repercussions for the developers in charge of these schemes. The Landlord Offer is still deemed binding.

As far as I am aware, there is only one example of a council proactively terminating a contract with a development partner for how long they have dragged a regeneration scheme on for.

In March 2026, Southwark Council took the decision to terminate its partnership with Notting Hill Genesis for the development of the Aylesbury Estate, one of the longest running estate regeneration schemes in London, ending a 12-year relationship, because of how slowly the housing association were moving along with the scheme.<sup>28</sup>

Residents on and off the estate are now forced to contend with a new era of uncertainty as the council tries to find a new way to start the scheme.

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*“Every time you try and bring private developers into public housing it doesn’t work. You end up with less homes for ordinary people.”*

*“We have been in limbo for 10 years.”*

*“We need time limits – if it cant be done in x years it should stop.”*

*“No repairs are being done and are left for over a year.”*

*“Camden has more or less abandoned any repairs it can avoid, including damp, apparently on the grounds that the Estate is going to be demolished anyway.”*

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The lack of progress on developer-led regeneration schemes shows there are a far broader set of factors and conditions influencing if, when and how schemes are delivered.

When regeneration plans aren’t genuinely produced with and for the community, residents can be forced to compete with separate ambitions for the future of their estate as defined by developers.

And with so much uncertainty baked into plans, ballots do not necessarily empower residents – especially when landlords are not held to account for their offers and promises.

## CASE STUDY: “LEFT TO ROT” ON THE LESNES ESTATE, BEXLEY

I visited Thamesmead Lesnes Estate, in November 2024, and was appalled at the state of disrepair.

There were more than 100 families living on Lesnes in freehold homes, and more than 90 social tenant households, while around 100 former households had been rehoused off-site or their freeholds purchased.

Contractors had left furnishings and rubbles from empty homes around the estate and had partially destroyed walls and fences. Fly-tipping was persistent and unaddressed. Tenants who reported damp and mould were reportedly informed that Peabody would no longer be carrying out repairs, but would offer compensation instead. A fire even broke out in an emptied home due to a shoddy job decommissioning the flat.

In a tussle with Peabody over the terms of giving up their homes, many residents view this as an intentional acceleration of decline designed to make the estate so uninhabitable that they give up their homes. Families described to me the mental and physical toll this state of limbo has had on their health.

In the absence of genuine co-production with the housing association or council, residents have taken other measures to address the imbalance of power: occupying empty blocks, non-cooperation and, now, a legal challenge in the High Court.

## Community-led solutions

It was clear from my event and visits to estates around London that residents want better options and more of a say on the future of their estates, especially amid stalling regeneration schemes, to address the imbalance of power between communities and developers.

When residents are more genuinely involved in developing the options on the ballot, much better and more achievable schemes come forward.

The Alton estate in Wandsworth and the St Raphael estate in Brent show what community plans can achieve – genuine options for residents, financially sustainable schemes, more social homes at less financial and environmental cost, and more stability for existing residents.<sup>29</sup>

Funding and resources for local communities have been instrumental in developing these successful plans and combatting the power imbalance between developers and communities.

But, too often, communities’ desire for involvement is not matched by a desire of councils, developers, or the GLA to meaningfully involve communities at all stages of the process – despite the Mayor’s claim to have a resident-led approach to estate regeneration.

The London Plan mandates that:

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*“Before considering the demolition and replacement of affordable homes, boroughs, housing associations and their*

*partners should always consider alternative options first. They should balance the potential benefits of demolition and rebuilding of homes against the wider social and environmental impacts and consider the availability of Mayoral funding and any conditions attached to that funding.”<sup>30</sup>*

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However, community-led plans – which typically have a bigger emphasis on retrofit, rather than full-scale demolition and redevelopment – rarely feature on estate ballots.<sup>31</sup> This comes down to a lack of resources for communities to develop their own plans, but also of councils and the GLA to demand developers consider alternatives seriously.<sup>32</sup>

Residents at my event also expressed concerns that landlords could continue to come back with changed plans, with little options for residents but to wait for next iteration.

The residents at the Bellevue Mansions estate in Stockwell, who recently voted down Hyde Housing’s landlord offer, have had no further information about what is next, or alternatives like retrofit-led regeneration now the proposals for wholesale demolition have been rejected.

Attempts of residents to find alternative paths through stalled regeneration projects after ballots are also being shunned. The ballot result is viewed as binding by councils and the GLA, seemingly regardless of the flouted promises to residents.<sup>33</sup>

The Lesnes estate ballot passed in 2020, on a low turnout and amid much controversy and claims of undemocratic balloting. In response to three years of stalled progress and ever-declining conditions, in 2023 residents on the estate worked with an architecture practice to develop a costed retrofit plan for its future.

This was an option residents were not provided at the ballot stage, which promised a revamp of the estate in shorter timelines and with greater certainty for existing residents.

AAB Architects describe how these proposals ‘involved workshops, site visits and detailed discussions with residents, as well as public events and exhibitions’, and they ‘helped crowd-fund for retrofit assessments to be carried out and developed a practical and achievable retrofit strategy’.<sup>34</sup>

Peabody, the council and the GLA dismissed this alternative plan for the estate. In his Stage 2 planning review of Peabody’s full demolition and redevelopment plan in 2025, the Mayor said Peabody had satisfied his London Plan requirement to consider alternatives. He concluded that Peabody had ‘demonstrated that alternatives to demolition have been fully explored’.<sup>35</sup> In response to my clarificatory letter to the Deputy Mayor for Planning, Jules Pipe, he doubled down on this assessment.<sup>36</sup>

Given that a community group with a tiny amount of resourcing managed to produce a viable alternative, it is really concerning that the GLA concluded that one of the biggest housing associations and developers in the country could not make it work.

This echoes concerns raised by Estate Watch and other community groups about how committed the GLA and councils are to enforcing alternatives to complete redevelopment, and the need to strengthen this vital policy.<sup>37</sup>

Estate regeneration does not begin with a ballot, a landlord offer, or a private development partnership; it begins with managed decline or ‘degeneration’, a process fuelled by decisions made over a number of years by Mayors, governments, councils and housing associations.

Ballots are a single moment on a much longer timeline of degeneration that starts way before any ballot and – as this chapter has shown – will likely continue for a long time afterwards. In the meantime, residents are forced to live in ongoing uncertainty and awful conditions.

Resident-backed plans have the potential to find ways forward and provide options to the community that are genuinely democratic and based in community co-production – but they are viewed as illegitimate or not given the opportunity to progress.

The next chapter shows how timelines are not the only promise made by landlords that disintegrate with time, while residents have little recourse to challenge those with the real power over their communities.

*“Communities should have the right to reclaim democratic decision making.”*

*“Ballots are a joke of the concept of democracy.”*

*“Pose an actual alternative to demolition in ballots besides simply continued underinvestment and urban decay. There should be a retrofit alternative that could be conducted with same level of public funding.”*

*“We should have time limits for developers to come up with plans. People shouldn’t be left in limbo for decades with disruption to their lives.”*

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Woodberry Down, Hackney (2025)



Bellevue Garden Mansions, Lambeth (2025)



Lesnes, Bexley (2024)

## WHY PROFIT-DRIVEN REGENERATION WILL ALWAYS CREATE UNCERTAINTY FOR ESTATE RESIDENTS.

Estate regeneration starts the moment an estate appears on a council list of sites for development. It might not conclude for decades. And in the intervening years, residents face constant uncertainty about the future of their homes and communities. But why?

In short, it is because of how estate regeneration projects are funded and delivered. Most are funded through a cross-subsidy model, where the development and sale of private homes is used to subsidise the demolition of the estate and the building of social homes. Councils or housing associations enter partnerships with private developers for this purpose.

Not-for-profit housing associations can also end up making decisions to create a surplus on their balance sheet, so end up acting more like private developers.

This brings huge risks for existing residents and their local communities. Research by UCL and the Public Interest Law Centre has demonstrated this model has been historically detrimental to communities in terms of losses to social housing.

Residents' homes, their livelihoods and communities suddenly become subjected to the extreme fluctuations of the property market. A developer might lose interest in a site to focus elsewhere where they can make more profit. They might 'land bank' – to hold land and wait for it to rise in value, before selling it on. They might recalculate what is 'viable' (i.e. sufficiently profitable) to proceed, based on factors like land values, the availability of finance, the demand for expensive private sale homes, the cost of raw materials, and the regulatory landscape. They might tell the council they have to change the plans drastically otherwise it won't proceed, regardless of what residents voted for.

Of course, these calculations are involved in most development in London. But, unlike building on empty brownfield land, people are living through the financial speculation on their homes and neighbourhoods – and every shift is felt in the very real impacts on residents' lives.

This is the reality of cross-subsidy – development fuelled by interests often diametrically opposed to that of the existing community. The more demolition and the more private homes regeneration schemes depend on, the more uncertainty is baked into the process, and the greater the risk for communities.

As will be explored later in the report, this uncertainty, and the replacement of social housing with 'market' housing, can have a number of other knock-on effects, like the erasure of community identity and cultural heritage. This is an existential threat to what London is and who it is for

## CHAPTER 2: DISPLACEMENT AND GENTRIFICATION

Estate regeneration has directly led to the displacement and gentrification of local communities. Lower-income former residents have been forced off estates in droves, as their social homes are replaced with unaffordable private homes, and leaseholders have failed to get a deal for their homes that would give them a chance of being able to stay in the redeveloped area.<sup>38</sup>

This has led to the dispersal of former residents around boroughs, to neighbouring boroughs and even outside London.<sup>39</sup>

This direct displacement, along with the demographic changes that come with flooding predominantly working-class areas with new market homes, means areas that have undergone estate regeneration have drastically changed.

Community facilities are lost and small businesses tied into the cultural fabric of diverse, working-class areas are lost immediately and over time, in the long-term ripple effects of reconfiguring whole areas of London around the wealthy.<sup>40</sup>

In response to the vocal campaigning of residents and anti-gentrification groups, the Mayor’s Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration and London Plan sought to reduce the impact of estate regeneration on existing communities.

His flagship policy was the ‘right of return’ requirement, which said existing residents should be allowed to return to a new home on their redeveloped estate:

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**“Demolition of affordable housing, including where it is part of an estate redevelopment programme, should not be permitted unless it is replaced by an equivalent amount of affordable housing floorspace. Affordable housing that is replacing social rent housing must be provided as social rent housing where it is facilitating a right of return for existing tenants.**

**Where affordable housing that is replacing social rent housing is not facilitating a right of return, it may be provided as either social rent or London Affordable Rent housing. Replacement affordable housing should be integrated into the development to ensure mixed and inclusive communities.”<sup>41</sup>**

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However, the Mayor has not grappled with the range of ways displacement and gentrification are live risks for communities.

Estate Watch’s 2023 Alternative Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration shows there are huge gaps in Mayoral policy and its enforcement, which leaves displacement and gentrification a major possibility (after three years, Estate Watch are still awaiting a response from the Mayor to their report).<sup>42</sup> The Public Interest Law Centre’s report highlights the loss of social housing as well as increased costs of social homes on redeveloped estates.<sup>43</sup>

This chapter builds on this existing research by looking at the risks of displacement still intrinsic to estate regeneration in London, building on the formidable evidence base cohered by Estate Watch and the work of individual campaign groups.

The Mayor and the wider GLA have failed to grasp the ongoing risk of displacement and gentrification, and the manifold ways it can come to fruition during estate regeneration. There is a dire lack of willingness or effective mechanisms to track this phenomenon and hold developers to account, besides the diligence of overworked, under-resourced communities.

### **Problems with the ‘right to return’**

The Mayor’s flagship ‘right to return’ policy sounds like it halts the permanent displacement of estate residents. But, for a number of reasons, the reality is far different.

### **Length of regeneration schemes**

As explored in Chapter 1, estate regeneration projects can rumble on for years, and the

Mayor and councils have shown themselves powerless to stop that happening. Social tenants who are ‘decanted’ from estates are not guaranteed when they will be able to return – if the project ever gets completed. For years or decades, people end up being displaced for their community.

At a Mayor’s Question Time last year, the Mayor of London agreed that moves off the estate are a concern, and said: “in general terms, what developers, whether they are public or not, try to do is to keep residents to minimal moves and have only one move if possible.”<sup>44</sup> But this is not mandated in policy or reflected in reality.<sup>45</sup> T

hat the London Plan only requires developers to re-provide social housing where residents take up the ‘right to return’ even creates perverse incentives for developers to draw out estate regeneration projects once residents have been decanted, and even once planning permission has been agreed.<sup>46</sup>

The Mayor does not know how many residents are dispersed around London away from their former communities, awaiting some future date of return on schemes that he is funding.<sup>47</sup>

### **The promise of a ‘like for like’ replacement home can fall short**

The Mayor promises that residents’ right to return comes with a ‘like for like’ replacement home, but this does not always happen. Residents are routinely rehoused in homes that are more expensive and often with a different social landlord.<sup>48</sup>

For instance, the Lesnes estate in Bexley was once home to 411 families living in social rented homes. But early ‘decanting’ of residents meant there were just 61 social homes in use by the time Peabody submitted their planning application in 2021.

This means only 61 households are eligible to return to the estate, and the remaining social housing can be replaced as ‘London Affordable Rent’. The applicant makes quite clear that if residents do not return, they will provide even fewer than 61 social homes.<sup>49</sup>

So, we could see the social housing provided on the estate fall from a pre-regeneration high of 411 to fewer than 61 – on a scheme set to deliver a total of 1,150 new homes.

### **Social homes out of use for years**

There is little appreciation by the Mayor or other policymakers of the ‘temporary’ loss of social housing while these schemes are underway.

As discussed in the first chapter, many estates are emptied while regeneration plans take shape – sometimes for decades. This can put a huge number of homes out of use for long periods of the time.

Southwark Council reported that there are almost 1000 empty council homes across the borough, most of which are part of an estate regeneration scheme.<sup>50</sup> In other instances, social housing blocks are emptied, demolished and then no building commences on site.

Almost 700 homes on the Carpenters estate in Newham have been empty for twenty years.

Over 100 social homes on the Bacton Estate in Camden were demolished in 2018 and the site still stands empty.<sup>51</sup>

Coralline Walk, on the edge of the Lesnes estate in Abbey Wood, Bexley, was demolished in 2020. Of the 150 homes that stood on the site, 92 per cent were social rented. Residents were moved elsewhere and new social homes were supposed to be built on the site by 2026 – but there has been no progress.

Thousands of empty or demolished social homes, which were people’s homes right up until the point of demolition, are put out of use by estate regeneration. Residents are rehoused ‘temporarily’ in other social homes, while families in temporary accommodation are effectively shunted further down the waiting list to enable these regeneration projects.

### **Social homes used for other tenures**

Sometimes empty homes are used for other types of housing, like temporary accommodation, or, in the case of Lambeth council, private renting to tenants.<sup>52</sup>

But the relative lack of rights and higher costs for tenants under these tenures means councils are using social homes to far less effectively meet housing need. In the case of Lambeth, they were even using soon to be outlawed Section 21 notices to evict residents, adding to their own borough’s homelessness crisis and creating cycles of displacement on estates earmarked for demolition.<sup>53</sup>

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*“It’s a load of shit. Residents lied to about right to return. Not being given like for like.”*

*“Social rent is different from council housing – less secure and service charges.”*

*“Plans changed after the ballot.”*

*“Balloting is useless. No guarantee what you’re balloted on is what you get.”*

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## The changing character of communities

Private densification comes with a very direct cost on the spaces and facilities essential to an area’s social infrastructure. A huge number of community facilities on the Aylesbury Estate were demolished in the densification programme.<sup>54</sup>

When I visited Bellevue Garden Mansions in 2025 – one of the few estates that voted down a developers’ regeneration plans – residents showed me the parklet and playground that the proposed development would have bulldozed and built on top of. Not only was that green well-used by the residents of Bellevue, it was also well used by the neighbouring roads and

estates who have little access to green space in that part of Zone 2 London.

West Kentish Town estate residents have highlighted to me – and through letters to the GLA – how much the landlord’s plans have

materially deviated from (controversially approved) landlord offer to residents, ranging from the density of the scheme to the height of buildings and accessibility of community facilities, which will utterly transform the look and feel of the estate.

It is also well-documented that estate regeneration can create a ripple effect in the wider area that increases market rents for residents.<sup>55</sup>

I have also heard from residents who cited how the displacement risk extends to the whole ecosystem of working-class communities, which also includes community spaces and facilities (as above) as well as small businesses. The ongoing displacement of traders from

Elephant and Castle following the upheaval of the Heygate estate regeneration is a pertinent example of how the changing demographics of an area and unscrupulous landlords and councils is leading to the permanent, ongoing erasure of diverse, culturally significant businesses from the area – stemmed only by the struggle and resilience of local traders and campaigners.<sup>56</sup>

## CASE STUDY: THE SHIFTING COMMUNITY OF WOODBERRY DOWN, HACKNEY

Woodberry Down is one of the most written and talked about estate regeneration schemes in London.<sup>57</sup> Often cited as one of the largest of its kind in Europe, it has been in the works for two decades.

I have visited Woodberry Down on a number of occasions, and most recently – in December 2025 – I was shown around the estate by long-standing residents.

They described to me how Berkeley Homes, the private developer in charge of the scheme, has been running rings around the community, and even the council. They told me how plans are constantly adjusted. Most notably, the 33% social proposed at the start of the scheme has been slowly whittled away to just 16%. This is mainly due to changes in density, with 1500 more homes now set to be built than initial proposals. There will now be 5500 homes on a site that previously had 2000, but around 230 fewer social homes than when the scheme started. Other things, like public parks, were also revised off the plans.<sup>58</sup> And there is concern that the promises to existing social tenants will be backtracked on, with many social residents even now not deeming their new homes an appropriate replacement.<sup>59</sup>

This private densification has had a range of knock-on impacts, not just for its failure to address housing need in the area. Showing me around the estate, residents pointed out the impact of this constant drive for private densification. Incredibly tall blocks stacked closely together are overpowering.

Communal spaces are now mostly internal to the blocks, in the form of gyms and swimming pools, rather than external. A community pub has been replaced by a far more expensive chain pub. All this takes life out of the estate as a whole, and isolates people’s experiences to individual buildings. Inside the blocks, residents told me it feels “isolating” and “hotel-like”, with winding internal corridors rather than the open walkways of the now-abandoned original blocks just across the road.

Residents I spoke to who were initially supportive of the regeneration project have soured on it. They describe the stress of the unknown and uncertainty of going through this regeneration. Too many broken promises and a lack of transparency by the developer means most of the trust they once had has evaporated; for many, this crystallised around the cutting down of an historic, deeply cherished tree.<sup>60</sup> Once concerns had been raised about these changes, typically by the resident group the Woodberry Down Community Organisation, residents are told it’s too late.

It seems nothing is guaranteed – and if they hadn’t scrutinised every detail of the developers’ plans and fought for every small concession, their current situation would be a whole lot worse.

## Transparency and accountability

Across London, residents are having to step in to hold developers to account. There is a lack of transparency and accountability across the whole regeneration process. Under-resourced communities are themselves having to hold developers to task for their promises to residents, attempt to rebalance the democratic shortcomings of the ballot process, and fight tooth-and-nail for a safe, secure and affordable home. The reality of estate regeneration is going unheard by the people in charge.

The Mayor of London, whose funding is usually essential for estate regeneration schemes to progress, only collects and publishes a very limited amount of data on estate regeneration. This covers what is being funded and how many new homes of all tenures will be built.<sup>61</sup>

As described above, this solitary number masks the reality of how this number will be achieved – including how many homes will be demolished, the tenure split of demolished and new homes, how many residents of what tenures are returning, when the scheme will be completed, and so on.

When I have requested some of this data, the Mayor has been unable to provide it.<sup>62</sup> This is a massive concern, as it shows he is continuing to fund these schemes without even an elementary grasp of their real impact on communities.

For every home he funds – regardless of the homes lost on the way or the wider cost to Londoners – the Mayor claims it as a ‘new affordable home’.

Meanwhile, there seem to be very few – if any – repercussions for developers who do not

meet the expectations of residents or the Mayor’s own planning policies. Whether it’s preparing a genuine alternative to demolition on the Lesnes Estate, calling out the flaky timelines for regeneration on the Gascoigne estate, or demanding a proper ‘right to return’ on Woodberry Down, it’s communities who are routinely left to fight for their own futures.

If the Mayor is unable to stand up for communities and if he is unable to enforce developers’ promises to residents, then he should back communities to stand up for themselves.

The City Hall Green Group amendment to the Mayor’s budget in 2022 called for a new ‘Resident Empowerment Fund’ to provide support to communities going through the ballot process to level the playing field.

The Mayor rejected creating this fund on the basis it was not necessary.<sup>63</sup> I still believe he was wrong to do so. But it is clear the democratic deficit of estate regeneration spreads across the whole process of degeneration and ‘regeneration’, stretching way before the ballot process and continuing for a long time afterwards.

This comes in the form of lack of genuine involvement of communities to develop sustainable plans and a lack of scrutiny and accountability when developers make promises to residents. Residents should be backed to find and pursue their own ways through regeneration, that genuinely meets their needs and the needs of the local community and wider borough – not the needs of a developer.

This would help, not hinder, the Mayor’s own stated ambitions for estate regeneration.

*“Plain English, tenant friendly resources and information.”*

*“Available funds to get campaigners heard. Residents association led by the residents. There should be local ombudsman for the people.”*

*“Families are too busy trying to survive to fight. No time to attend meetings.”*

*“Campaigners need information on how to challenge developers and councils.”*

*“Hold developers accountable for previous poor practice (i.e. Not delivering the number of affordable homes), ensure they do not receive grant funding ever again!”*

*“Having housing issues is a full-time job.”*

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Lesnes 2024



Lesnes 2024

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1

Implement the full suite of recommendations from Siân Berry’s 2022 report on estate resident ballots and set out the future of resident ballots, including how you will better use available levers to hold Landlords accountable to their promises to residents.

### Recommendation 2

Finally publish a full written review and response to Estate Watch’s 2023 Alternative Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration ahead of publication of the draft London Plan. The Plan should revise Policy H8 of the current London Plan, to take forward key policies outlined in the Alternative Guide, including as a minimum:

- a. A presumption against demolition of social housing.
- b. A more robust alternative options appraisal process for potential schemes involving demolition.
- c. A demand for the re-provision of all social homes and units as a minimum condition of estate regeneration, not only where residents have a ‘right of return’, with an expectation for a significant net uplift.
- d. Improved safeguards for existing residents, including a single move for all residents where demolition takes place and long-stop completion dates that reflects timetables set out in the Landlord Offer.

### Recommendation 3

Create a ‘Community Plan Fund’ to provide residents with support to create genuine community-led plans for the future of their estates. The Fund could also be used to support essential resident advocacy support in regenerations that are underway.

### Recommendation 4

Add new conditions to GLA funding that see improved reporting and accountability from investment partners around preventing displacement of estate residents in all tenures after planning permission has been agreed.

### Recommendation 5

Publicly call on the Government to fund a mass retrofit programme for social housing estates.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Please get in touch with me if you have any comments or suggestions.

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This report sets out my views as an individual Assembly Member and not the agreed view of the entire Assembly.

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<sup>59</sup> Woodberry Down Community Organisation (2025), Board Minutes 20 November 2025, <<https://wdco.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/WDCO-Board-Minutes-20th-November-2025.pdf>>

<sup>60</sup> Wikipedia, Happy Man Tree, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy\\_Man\\_Tree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Man_Tree)

<sup>61</sup> Mayor of London, Estate regeneration data <<https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/housing-and-land/mayors-priorities-londons-housing-and-land/estate-regeneration/estate-regeneration-data>>

<sup>62</sup> London Assembly (2025), Affordable Homes Programme 2021-26 funding for demolitions (3), <<https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/affordable-homes-programme-2021-26-funding-demolitions-3>>

<sup>63</sup> London Assembly (2022), Mayor’s Question Time, Final Draft Consolidated Budget 2022-23, [https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/londonassembly/meetings/documents/b24239/Item 4 Final Draft Consolidated Budget 2022-23 Thursday 24-Feb-2022 10.00 London Assembly Mayor.pdf?T=9](https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/londonassembly/meetings/documents/b24239/Item%204%20Final%20Draft%20Consolidated%20Budget%202022-23%20Thursday%2024-Feb-2022%2010.00%20London%20Assembly%20Mayor.pdf?T=9), p.25-6