

Reports document housing crisis in London

Dennis Moore
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Two reports published last month reveal a deep housing crisis in London. The studies, “Housing Crisis in London” and “Recommendations for the Reform of UK Housing Policy”, written by a new advocacy group, the Pro Housing Alliance, show that London’s housing stock is becoming both unaffordable and decrepit.

“Housing Crisis in London” draws attention at the outset to the last “[t]hirty years of national economic policies”, which have resulted in “private profits and public loss that have left deeper scars on the homes of London’s poorest citizens than elsewhere in the UK”.

The reports note that homelessness is on the rise and warns of the return of unscrupulous landlords such as Peter Rachman, who exploited tenants in the 1950s and 1960s in London. It also documents the growth of overcrowding—of the 15 most overcrowded wards in England, 13 are in London.

This data is substantiated by a July 2011 study from the Shelter charity, summarising figures from the English Housing Survey, which reveals an increase in children living in overcrowded conditions in the capital. Some 391,000 of the city’s children, one in four, live in overcrowded accommodations. The largest increase is in London’s social rented sector, where 43 percent of children live in overcrowded accommodations.

Shelter has estimated that by the year 2016, at least 10 boroughs in London will be largely unaffordable to poorer households. In 2010, 67 percent of neighbourhoods in inner city London were affordable. By 2016, this figure is predicted to drop to 20 percent. With rents in many boroughs of London currently ranging from an average of £231 to £700 a week, homes at 80 percent of the market rent are deemed accessible to only the top third of the capital’s wealthiest households.

The number of those on waiting lists for public housing has doubled between 1997 and 2010 and now

stands at 362,000, 20 percent of the UK total. This has led to large numbers of poorer households in London being trapped in privately rented accommodations that are subject to rising rents, less security of tenure, and worse maintenance.

In London, figures from 33 local authorities have shown that there are approximately 6,000 council properties that have been left unoccupied, nearly a third due to repairs not yet carried out. This figure included 2,300 properties that had been left unoccupied for more than a year. Up to half of the properties of London’s Lambeth Council fail to meet the Decent Homes Standard—i.e., they are in a state of disrepair or they are insufficiently warm or weatherproof.

In July, the London *Evening Standard* reported that many families, potentially thousands, in the borough of Southall are living in slum conditions, including in sheds in suburban back gardens. Some residents were living with their children in outhouses, sleeping on rotting mattresses with no heating or sanitation, in grossly overcrowded conditions. It is estimated that there are up to 10,000 people living across London and the Home Counties in similar conditions. Meanwhile, there has been an 8 percent increase in the number of people sleeping on the streets of London since last year.

Dr. Stephen Battersby, president of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, who brought the housing groups together, told the *Independent*, “The lack of a coherent housing policy for the past 30 years has created an expensive housing market with a shortage of affordable housing”. He added, “Housing is one of the biggest casualties of the government’s spending cuts, with some of the most vulnerable members of society paying the heaviest price for a financial crisis brought on by the bankers”.



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