

# London: 8,000 council homes set for demolition

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Over 100 council housing estates across London are to be demolished in the latest bipartisan attack on social housing in the UK's capital.

The continuing social cleansing of the city, euphemistically labelled “redevelopment,” will see over 31,000 social housing residents forced to leave their homes, with 118 housing sites set to be demolished or “regenerated” over the coming years.

This could lead to the loss of as many as 8,000 homes.

The figures, obtained through a BBC Freedom of Information request, show that of the 118 estates to be regenerated, over 80 of them will be fully or partially demolished.

On the Ebury Bridge estate in the London Borough of Westminster, for example, the local council plans to pull down 300 social homes, to be replaced by 750 new properties. Most of these properties will be sold at prices far exceeding the budgets of most social housing tenants. Only around 340 of the new homes will be classed as “affordable,” of which 287 will be council properties. However, given that “affordable” housing is defined as a property costing up to 80 percent of the average local market rent—which in Westminster stands at a staggering £2,247 a month—claims that these properties are a viable option for Westminster's evicted working-class residents are bogus.

The London borough set to see the biggest loss of homes in the coming years is Southwark in South London, whose Labour-run council has given planning permission for hundreds of “regeneration” schemes. This will see the loss of 2,196 socially rented homes, according to data collated by Green party co-leader Sian Berry.

These are only the most recent developments, following decades of social cleansing in the

capital—carried out under the auspices of successive Labour and Conservative mayors—which have seen thousands of working-class people forced out of the city.

Southwark has already been the stage for fierce battles over regeneration schemes, particularly on the Heygate and Aylesbury estates. Over 1,200 council homes on the Heygate estate were flattened between 2011 and 2014, with a luxury development named Elephant Park built on the site. Just 82 of the 3,000 new homes built on the site were socially rented.

Out of 3,000 people housed in 1,276 units on the former Heygate Estate, only three could afford to come back to the area after it was demolished in 2014. Those evicted received just 40 percent of the value of their homes. The council sold the land for Elephant Park to private developer Lendlease for just £50 million. It is estimated that Lendlease will return a profit of £200 million from the Heygate gentrification.

According to Berry's data, 624 council properties have already been lost in Southwark in the 15 years since 2003. Across the whole of London, the number of council homes demolished in redevelopment schemes since 2003 stands at 4,142.

Between 2016 and 2017, London suffered a net decrease of 3,620 council homes, according to the government's own annual figures on housing stocks in London. This is the first time since 2014 that new council builds did not make up for the loss of council homes through regeneration projects and through “Right to Buy” schemes.

When “Right to Buy” and stock transfers to housing associations are taken into account, the number of local authority homes in London has fallen by around 100,000 since 2003, according to figures from the Ministry of Housing.

In response to this drive to socially cleanse the capital, Labour Party London Mayor Sadiq Khan criticised the government for failing to give London councils the freedoms required to ensure that homes sold under the “Right to Buy” scheme are replaced. In May, he pledged to build a further 10,000 council homes over the next four years. In July, Khan brought in legislation requiring London councils to ballot residents on major regeneration plans if they wish to secure City Hall funding.

The inadequacy and hypocrisy of Khan’s supposed solutions are stunning.

With currently around 250,000 Londoners on housing waiting lists, the proposed 10,000 home increase will do virtually nothing to reduce London’s enormous housing shortfall. Furthermore, Labour councils are every bit as complicit as Conservative-run local authorities in the reduction of council housing across the capital.

If anything, Labour councils are by far the worst culprits. Of the 10 London boroughs with the worst records for social housing destruction through regeneration, seven have Labour-run councils. This includes the Labour-run boroughs of Southwark, Greenwich and Barking—the three councils planning the destruction of the most social housing in the coming years, at a total of 2,196, 1,238 and 969 homes to be lost respectively. With 353 socially rented homes lost in Greenwich since 2003, these figures represent a marked increase in the projected loss rate.

With the loss of these socially rented properties, many working-class tenants (or at least those who can afford it) will be forced onto expensive and insecure private rental contracts. But with London private rental costs consistently rising year on year—with average rent in the capital now standing at £1,632 a month as of August this year—lower-paid workers and their families will be forced to London’s fringes and beyond. In some areas of London, including Camden, Lambeth and Westminster, average rent has reached the astronomical heights of more than £2,000 a month.

In Haringey, supporters of the Momentum group, who back Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, are now in control of the council after winning their seats in May’s elections based on pledges to oppose a massive £2 billion sell off of public assets, including the demolition of 1,400 council houses on seven estates.

Since their election, while formally ending the selloff plans, the programme of social cleansing is being continued by the new council leadership in other forms.

These include plans to demolish the Love Lane estate as part of Lendlease’s £1 billion “regeneration” project, High Road West. Some 297 council houses will be flattened to make way for the development.

Despite being promised it in Labour’s election manifesto in May, tenants at two tower blocks in the borough’s Broadwater Farm area are not being allowed a say, via a ballot, on proposals to demolish the blocks. Also in the Tottenham area of Haringey, property developer Argent is proceeding with plans to build the luxury Tottenham Hale Centre development, including 38 storey towers. This will comprise 1,036 homes with housing available for a “social rent.”

The reduction in council housing is not just limited to London but is a nationwide phenomenon. According to government statistics, since 2010, the total stock of local authority housing has decreased by some 184,000 homes, from 1.78 million in 2010 to 1.6 million in 2017. Around half of councils in England have no social housing at all.

In August, Theresa May’s Conservative government released a social housing green paper, in which it promised to “[build] a new generation of council homes to help fix our broken housing market.” However, the green paper did little more than propose minor reforms to the way in which councils can use profits from “Right to Buy” schemes and proposed to scrap a planned asset levy on higher value council housing.



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