

From Homes for Heroes to today ...a brief history of housing in London

“Home for Heroes” is among the most famous promises ever made by a British Prime Minister and one that had a profound impact on the nation’s housing, nowhere more so than in London. Nearly one hundred years on though and the capital still faces an uphill battle to provide decent housing for its growing population

It is unlikely that the assassin Gavrilo Princip had UK housing policy much in mind when he stepped towards the car carrying Archduke Ferdinand of Austria; but the bullet he fired on 28 June 1914 was to have a profound impact on our nation’s housing that is still felt to this day.

As a prime cause of the First World War, the assassination of the Archduke was responsible for the mass mobilisation of recruits. And it was British army chiefs’ alarm at the poor health of those recruits led directly to the creation of what we now know as council housing in the UK.

The queues of young men signing up to join the war had provided the government with a startling insight into the impact of poor housing on the nation’s workers and, once the war was won, Prime Minister Lloyd George famously promised to provide them with ‘Homes fit for Heroes’.

The Housing Act of 1919, known as the Addison Act after its author, the Minister for Health Dr Christopher Addison, pledged substantial government subsidies to build half a million new homes within three years. In fact, as the economy weakened during the 1920s, the originally ambitious funding was successively cut and only around 200,000 ‘homes for heroes’ were actually built.

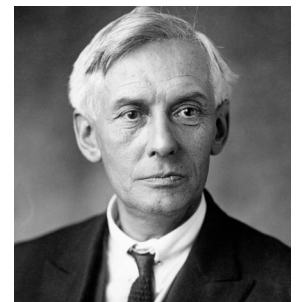
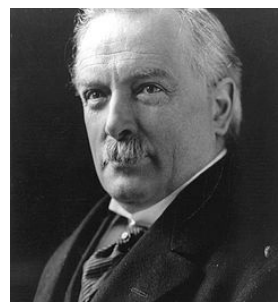
Nevertheless, the passing of the Addison Act was a hugely significant step that made housing a national priority - and made local authorities responsible for delivering decent housing as a social necessity.

Further legislation during the 1920s extended the housing duties of local authorities and a fresh act in 1930 obliged them to clear all remaining slum housing. The 1930 Act led to the clearance of more slums than at any time in history and the building



press association

ABOVE: East End slums in the 1920s BELOW: David Lloyd George and Dr Christopher Addison



of 700,000 council homes to re-house their former inhabitants.

In total, the inter-war housing acts saw councils build more than one million new homes, among them the 27,000 homes built by the London County Council at Becontree. Constructed over 15 years, across sites covering the then largely rural parishes of Ilford, Dagenham and Barking, the Becontree Estate was the largest council housing scheme in Europe at the time. It still is today.

The residents who moved out of their poor quality inner London homes to the new Becontree estate (fully equipped with previously unattainable luxuries, such as hot and cold running water, electricity and inside toilets) reflected a wider movement of people from inner to outer urban areas that saw the rapid development of the suburbs and, effectively, the creation of what we think of as modern London.

Today, more than two thirds of the land area of London is suburban, and the capital's suburbs, from Hillingdon to Havering and from Enfield to Croydon, are home to more than half of all Londoners.

London's suburbs grew rapidly and sometimes chaotically both between the wars and in the immediate period after WWII, until the introduction of the Green Belt helped define the limits of Greater London.

But even as the belt was being fastened, critical housing shortages in the war ravaged capital meant large numbers of Londoners were moving

to find new homes in satellite towns beyond the boundaries of the capital, and further afield.

As the second world war neared its end, the government had begun to attend to the issue of post-war reconstruction and specifically the need to replace the housing lost in bomb damaged cities, none more so than London.

The 'London overspill' policies pursued by national and local government from the end of WWII up until the 1970s, saw hundreds of thousands of London families relocate from the capital to places such as Basildon, Bracknell and Stevenage; and further beyond to areas such as Peterborough, Corby, Runcorn and Durham.

An express goal of the post war New Town movement, as proposed by a committee chaired by the BBC general manager Lord Reith, was to reduce the population of London by around one million people.

The New Towns Act of 1946 established an ambitious programme of new conurbations and a series of development corporations to deliver them. Stevenage was among the first of the new towns to be created and 10 more followed within a decade. Most were intended to accommodate London's post war overspill.

BELOW: Stevenage was among the first of a series of New Towns built to house London's 'overspill'



But, much like the trade upon which the fortunes of London are founded, the capital has always seen huge imports and exports of people. London's demographic waters rise and swell and disperse in a state of constant flux; and the capital's population is subject to what the statisticians call 'churn' on a scale unmatched in any city in Europe.

After falling in each successive decade from 1950 to the 1980s (when the capital's population reached a modern low of 6.6 million), recent years have seen the tide rise strongly again.

The most recent snapshot we have records that, on 16 July 2011, the 'usually resident' population of London was 8.17 million, a net increase of just over one million (or 14 per cent) on the population recorded at the 2001 census.

The rapid growth in the capital's population in recent years reflects its economic and cultural attractiveness to migrants both from overseas and from other regions of the UK.

London's population is particularly fluid and the most recent figures from the ONS confirm that London also has the largest turnover of internal migration (from and to other regions of the UK).

What may surprise people is that, while 200,000 people moved into London from other UK regions in 2011, around 240,000 people moved the other way, resulting in a 'net outflow' of 40,000 people from London to other areas – a trend that has been consistent for much of the past decade.

The most popular destination for people moving out of the capital is the South East, but every year tens of thousands of London residents move further afield; some 58,000 moving to the East of England, 28,000 to the Midlands and more than 13,000 to the North West in 2011 alone.

Despite this ebb and flow, London's population has continued to grow markedly in recent years, in part due to international migration and in part due to the higher birth rates of its population, which is noticeably younger than other regions of the UK.

Seven out of the 10 local authorities with the highest proportion of pre-school (0-4 years) children are in London. The nine authorities with the lowest proportion of over 65s are all similarly in the capital.

London's most populous borough, Croydon, is home to 363,000 residents. Eight other London boroughs have populations of more than 300,000 (by way of



ABOVE: According to the most recent Census, London's population has grown to 8.17 million

comparison, the population of Leicester is 319,000).

And while the average size of households is declining across England (the average excluding London is 2.34 persons, down from 2.36 persons in 2001), in London it is increasing. The four local authorities with the highest average household size in England are all London boroughs (Newham 3.01 person per household); Harrow (2.81); Brent and Redbridge (both 2.80).

For many years now the scale of new house building in the capital has failed to match the rising numbers of households. Simply to keep pace with known demand, London needs to build at least 40,000 new homes every year. Yet in 2010/11 there were just 19,860 new homes built in London.

The mismatch between supply and demand has its most obvious impact on the affordability of London housing. Alone among any region in England and Wales, fewer than half of Londoners own their own homes and, even as house prices are falling in many regions, in London the average house price rose by nearly 10 per cent last year, to £445,651.

Almost one in four (23.1 per cent) Londoners live in the private rented sector, where average rents of £1,272 a month are more than double that of other parts of England.

Taking London's unique housing landscape into account, reforms to the welfare system due to come into effect this year, including limiting the properties available to housing benefit claimants and caps to overall benefit payments, will further fuel the movement of London's population.

Today, the Homes for London Board, which brings together a mix of independent experts and politicians, is tasked with finding creative solutions to London's unique housing needs. The board is chaired by the Mayor's deputy for housing and includes three borough leaders from London Councils.

Working with the board, London's councils are eager to develop a new set of approaches that address the deep challenges in housing investment in the capital. These include:

- How can borough, Mayoral and other public sector land assets best be used?
- How can the private rented sector be improved to meet the needs of Londoners in a sustainable way?
- How is subsidised or sub-market to be funded and delivered to address the needs of lower paid workers in the capital?
- How can we ensure a balance of investment and paying housing benefit that can produce an efficient and enduring solution for London?
- Do the boroughs and the Mayor have the necessary powers and flexibilities to address London's housing investment needs?

As much as the standard of our housing has improved dramatically since the Great War, funding, planning and building the right homes in the right places so that Londoners have access to affordable, decent housing remains an enduring challenge.

Nearly a century on from the Addison Act, London's 33 local authorities remain at the forefront of meeting that challenge.



ABOVE: One in four Londoners rents their home from a private landlord