



# **CROWDED OUT: LONDON'S OVERCROWDED HOMES**

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GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY  
**CONSERVATIVES**

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# Introduction

London has a severe overcrowding problem, with 20% of households with children living in homes too small for their needs, rising to 27% and 35% in the social and private rented sectors. The impacts of this can be devastating for families, especially for children's development, with an increased risk of future social problems for children from overcrowded homes. The problem has worsened in recent years, and has been associated with an increased risk of Covid mortality.

Exclusive polling data reveals that 16% of Londoners consider their homes to be overcrowded, which is nearly double the official estimate of 8.3% of London homes being overcrowded. Meanwhile, 75% of Londoners think that there are not enough affordable family-sized homes in London.

Action to deal with this is urgently needed, and an important part of this is to ensure that sufficient numbers of new larger family-sized homes are built. However, a significant problem is that the Mayor of London's policies are skewed towards smaller one and two bedroom units, resulting in fewer family-sized affordable homes being built. Just 2,005 GLA-funded affordable homes were started in the financial year 2019/20 compared with 2,892 in 2017/18, a drop by 30%.

At the same time, the Mayor has a reported surplus of £535m in his current £4.82bn government-funded affordable housing programme. In his subsequent programme he plans to build just 35,000 affordable homes with £4bn government funding.

This report sets out a number of important recommendations to tackle London's overcrowding problem. This includes restoring targets for family-sized affordable homes that the current Mayor has removed, making use of surplus housing funds, better data and monitoring, and allocating more of the Mayor's surplus public land towards family-sized homes.

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# London's overcrowding problem

There is cross-party consensus from the last Greater London Authority election in 2016 that London's faces a housing emergency. One of the main foundations of this crisis is overcrowding.

The definition of an overcrowded household is one which has fewer bedrooms than it needs to avoid undesirable sharing, based on the age, sex and relationship of household members. For example, one bedroom would be needed by a married or cohabiting couple, someone aged 21 or over, 2 children of the same sex aged 10 to 20 years old, or 2 children of any sex under 10 years old.<sup>1</sup>

Overcrowding has been a longstanding problem in London, but has become worse in recent years. In the financial year 2015/16, 7.5% of homes in London were overcrowded, according to the 'bedroom standard', which compares the size and composition of households to the bedrooms available. In 2018/19, just three years later, this had risen to 8.3%. In addition, 20% of households with children are overcrowded in London, compared with 8% in the rest of England. The problem is particularly acute in social rented homes, where 27% of households with children are overcrowded, and in the private rented sector, where 35% of households with children are overcrowded.<sup>2</sup> In 2017 it was estimated that 360,000 children lived in overcrowded homes in London.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the problem may be even worse than official figures suggest. Recent polling from YouGov, commissioned by GLA Conservatives, found that 16% of London residents considered their home to be overcrowded<sup>4</sup>. This is almost double the official count of 8.3% mentioned above. In 2019 there were almost 3.6 million dwellings in London<sup>5</sup>, of which 16% would be 576,000 overcrowded homes, far more than have currently been identified.

The impacts of overcrowding can be severe, especially for families with children. According to housing charity Shelter, overcrowding can lead to children sharing a bedroom with parents or sleeping in living or dining rooms, with sleep being regularly disturbed. It adds that "cramped living conditions harm family relationships, negatively affect children's education and cause depression, stress and anxiety."<sup>6</sup>

The London Assembly's Health Committee has previously heard some devastating examples of the impacts of overcrowding on children and their parents. This includes a lack of space for babies to roll over and crawl, no space

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/overcrowded-households/latest>

<sup>2</sup> GLA Housing and Land, *Housing in London 2020: The evidence base for the London Housing Strategy*, October 2020, <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/housing-london>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.london.gov.uk/download/housing-london/27e10d40-bb04-4028-95a6-606bd13d7777/Housing-in-London-2017-report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585272/number-of-dwellings-london-uk/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/policy\\_and\\_research/policy\\_library/full\\_house\\_how\\_overcrowded\\_housing\\_affects\\_families](https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/full_house_how_overcrowded_housing_affects_families)

for a cot so parents have to bed share with their babies, and an increased likelihood of future homelessness, mental health, criminality and drug addiction for children from overcrowded households.<sup>7</sup>

At the committee meeting in January 2018, George Hosking of the WAVE Trust described overcrowding as “a very powerful and negative effect on people’s health and general quality of life”. Geraldine Butler of the West Haringey Health Visiting Service said, “It is absolutely devastating for those parents living in those situations where they do not have room to put things away, they have stacks of clothes in bags because they just do not have the room at all, to go back into that environment day after day, or just to have the energy to get up and go out in terms of their mental health and in terms of the impact on those children.”<sup>8</sup>

The Committee has twice written to the Mayor requesting action, in December 2019<sup>9</sup> and May 2020<sup>10</sup>. The London Assembly also passed a motion in September 2020 calling on the Mayor to take action on overcrowding, noting “with concern that overcrowding remains a significant problem in London. COVID-19 has brought this issue into sharp focus, with recent analysis showing a clear link between overcrowded homes and COVID mortality.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately the required level of action is yet to be taken.

## Impact of the Covid pandemic

Recent analysis has shown a correlation between overcrowded homes and Covid hotspots. According to work Inside Housing, of the 20 local authority areas with the highest proportion of Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 people, 14 also had the highest percentage of households in homes with fewer bedrooms than they need.<sup>12</sup> Overcrowding exacerbates the significant role played by household transmission in the spread of Covid, by making it more difficult to self-isolate and shield.<sup>13</sup>

A smaller, overcrowded home also worsens the experience of living with lockdown and other Covid restrictions and requirements such as home working and remote schooling. It reduces the amount of space available to live, work and play, especially if the home lacks access to a garden or open space. Not only is this a practical issue, it can also impact on mental health and education.<sup>14</sup> With home working likely to endure in some form even after the pandemic, this is likely to become a long term issue.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/londonassembly/meetings/documents/s68424/Transcript%20-%20Health%20Committee%2011-01-18%20for%20Chair.docx?CT=2>

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/impact\\_of\\_insecure\\_housing\\_on\\_health\\_-\\_letter\\_to\\_the\\_mayor.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/impact_of_insecure_housing_on_health_-_letter_to_the_mayor.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letter\\_to\\_the\\_mayor\\_-\\_one\\_year\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_his\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letter_to_the_mayor_-_one_year_review_of_the_his_-_final.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/mayor-must-tackle-overcrowding>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/the-housing-pandemic-four-graphs-showing-the-link-between-covid-19-deaths-and-the-housing-crisis-66562>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/better-housing-is-crucial-for-our-health-and-the-covid-19-recovery#f-section-110861-anchor>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letter\\_to\\_the\\_mayor\\_-\\_one\\_year\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_his\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/letter_to_the_mayor_-_one_year_review_of_the_his_-_final.pdf)

## Lack of family-sized homes

Essential to tackling London's overcrowding problem is to build sufficient numbers of new family-sized homes, with at least three bedrooms as well as sufficient supply of larger family homes. This is especially the case in affordable tenures.

Polling data would indicate an overwhelming demand for affordable family-sized homes in London that is not being met. In YouGov's recent poll, commissioned by GLA Conservatives, 75% of Londoners thought that there are not enough affordable homes large enough for families in London. The number was consistently high amongst all age groups, males and females, amongst all political backgrounds, and from both inner and outer London. By contrast, just 10% of respondents felt that there was sufficient supply of affordable family homes in London.<sup>15</sup>

However, the current Mayor of London's housing and planning policies do not deliver this, and instead are based around delivering increasing numbers of one and two bedroom flats.

The London Housing Strategy determines how the Mayor will allocate London's affordable housing funds, which currently includes £4.82 billion provided by the government for 116,000 affordable homes<sup>16</sup>. Previous London Housing Strategies, published in 2010 and 2014, have set targets for a minimum number of affordable family homes funded by GLA, of 42 per cent<sup>17</sup> and 36 per cent<sup>18</sup> respectively. However, for the first time ever, the latest Housing Strategy, published in May 2018, does not include any such target. This means that there is no incentive for public housing funds to be invested in family-sized homes, nor for developers or housing providers to deliver them. GLA Conservative Assembly Members have repeatedly asked the Mayor why he has removed such targets from the Housing Strategy. Unfortunately, not only has he refused to take action, but he refused to even accept the clear evidence that such targets had existed in previous housing strategies.<sup>19</sup>

There are also significant problems with the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), a background document that estimates housing need in London and is referenced in the new London Plan and the Housing Strategy. Unfortunately this document is heavily skewed towards one and two bedroom housing units at the expense of family-sized homes. Its main report expresses a "need" for 55% of all new homes to be one-bedroom units, and within low-cost rented housing the figure is 69%. By comparison, it stipulates that just 14% of low-costed rented homes per year should have three or four bedrooms.<sup>20</sup> Whilst there have been subsequent changes to the executive summary to include

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<sup>15</sup> YouGov polling conducted in February 2021, commissioned by GLA Conservatives

<sup>16</sup> [London Housing Strategy](#), GLA, 2018, p209

<sup>17</sup> [London Housing Strategy](#), GLA, 2010, p16

<sup>18</sup> [London Housing Strategy](#), GLA, 2014, p29

<sup>19</sup> For example, see: <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2020/1499>

<sup>20</sup> [London Strategic Housing Market Assessment](#), GLA, 2017, p6

alternative “scenarios”, with a greater share of family-sized homes, these do not alter the main findings of the report.

In addition, the Mayor’s new London Plan, with its “small sites” policy and targets, puts existing family homes at risk by encouraging their conversion or redevelopment into smaller units.<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this approach has fed through into poor delivery of family-sized homes on schemes funded or developed by the Mayor. The number of GLA-funded family sized affordable housing starts has fallen by 30% from 2,892 in 2017/18 to 2,005 in 2018/19<sup>22</sup> and 2019/20<sup>23</sup>. As a percentage of total delivery this decline is even starker, from 23% in 2017/18 to just 11.6% in 2019/20.

Meanwhile, looking at Transport for London’s housebuilding programme on station car parks, the proportion of family-sized homes being proposed in this scheme is also very low. Looking at the five most recent planning applications for station car park sites – Arnos Grove, Canons Park, Stanmore, Rayners Lane and Wembley Park – the overall proportion of family-sized homes is just 12% of the total<sup>24</sup>. In one of these scheme, Arnos Grove, the proportion was a low as 9%<sup>25</sup>.

Rather than building sufficient numbers of larger homes, the Mayor’s approach to overcrowding is primarily based around building smaller units, to help reduce the size of overcrowded households, by providing for “concealed households” within existing overcrowded homes<sup>26</sup>. The SHMA, in particular, appears to be based on the assumption that large numbers of adult children could move out of the family home and into one-bed social rented units. However, this flawed approach would be a very poor use of housing resources as well as a wasted opportunity. In fact, the London Assembly’s ‘Crowded Houses’ report from 2011 found that building a single family home could solve the problems of several households at the same time, due to the ‘churn’ effect of freeing up other homes further down the line.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, the Mayor’s approach of effectively limiting or reducing the supply of family-sized homes risks making these homes more scarce, and therefore putting them further out of reach, creating even more overcrowding problems in the future.

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the\\_london\\_plan\\_2021.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/8945>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2020/2443>

<sup>24</sup> Data sourced from planning application documents for each of the five sites from the relevant local authority websites for Enfield, Harrow and Brent.

<sup>25</sup> <https://governance.enfield.gov.uk/documents/s85194/Full%20Committee%20Report%20-%20Arnos%20Grove%20-%202020-01049-FUL.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> *London Housing Strategy*, GLA, 2018, p148

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/crowded-houses>

## Building more family-sized homes

There are therefore a number of changes that need to be made to GLA policy in order to ensure more family homes are built, and to meaningfully tackle London's overcrowding problem.

First, it is important for family homes targets to be restored to the Mayor's Housing Strategy. This will ensure that GLA affordable housing funds can be properly directed towards a suitable number of larger homes. Without this focus, the system is more likely to default to smaller homes in order to increase the number of units being built.

There would seem to be significant headroom within the affordable housing funds that the GLA has been allocated by the government to increase provision of family-sized homes. Of the £4.82bn the GLA has been allocated in the current affordable housing programme, it has previously been revealed that £535m remains unallocated<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, the Mayor has been allocated a further £4bn for the 2021-26 affordable housing programme, yet currently plans to deliver just 35,000 homes with this funding.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, the flawed SHMA should be removed and replaced with new and up to date Supplementary Planning Guidance, giving sufficient priority to larger family-sized homes. This would provide an important steer to the planning system to increase the number of family-sized homes given planning approval, and guide London boroughs in the development of their own local planning policies to this effect.

Thirdly, there is a need to improve data and monitoring of the size mix of new affordable homes. Currently, for GLA-funded affordable homes, a size breakdown is only provided for a selection of housing schemes. This data is only published for the latest quarter, with historical data not routinely provided. In addition, affordable housing providers are not required to share size mix information for all the properties they deliver with GLA funds. The GLA should change all of this and ensure that comprehensive and historical data on the size mix of GLA-funded homes is always published, and it should require providers to share full size mix information as a condition of receiving GLA funding.

In addition to this, the London Plan is monitored on an annual basis with a wide variety of key performance indicators (KPIs). However, whilst at present there are 24 KPIs, none of these relate to the delivery of new family-sized homes.<sup>30</sup> This should be remedied by setting a new KPI to measure the number of new family-sized homes of different tenures being started and completed in London.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/londonassembly/meetings/mgChooseMDocPack.aspx?ID=6887&SID=20556>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2020/4559>

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/amr\\_15\\_final.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/amr_15_final.pdf)

Finally, the Mayor should act on his own development land to increase the proportion of family-sized homes being built. In particular, this should include Transport for London development sites, which are often at the heart of local communities and should reflect local need.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As set out in this report, London's overcrowding problem is severe and worsening. It can have devastating impacts for families living in overcrowded homes, especially in the current pandemic and beyond. The best way to achieve this is to build more family-sized homes, especially affordable homes, and polling evidence shows this is what Londoners want to see. The following recommendations demonstrate what needs to be done in order to achieve this.

### **Recommendation 1:**

**The Mayor's Housing Strategy should be amended to restore minimum investment targets for family-sized affordable homes.**

### **Recommendation 2:**

**The Mayor should fully review all surplus GLA affordable housing funding, in both the current and future programmes, with a view to allocating a significant proportion to the delivery of family-sized affordable homes. This includes the recently reported underspend of £535m in the current affordable housing programme.**

### **Recommendation 3:**

**The Mayor's Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) should be withdrawn and replaced with new Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) providing for greater numbers of family-sized homes.**

### **Recommendation 4:**

**The Mayor should require all providers of GLA-funded affordable housing schemes to provide full size mix data of all starts and completions as standard.**

### **Recommendation 5:**

**The Mayor should ensure that comprehensive current and historic data is published on the size mix of GLA-funded affordable homes.**

### **Recommendation 6:**

**The Mayor should set specific Key Performance Indicators for the London Plan to monitor the number of family-sized homes in different tenures being started and completed in London.**

### **Recommendation 7:**

**On development sites owned by the GLA or its functional bodies, the Mayor should ensure that delivery of family-sized homes is significantly increased.**



## **"London Omnibus"**

**FIELDWORK DATES: 25TH FEBRUARY - 2ND MARCH 2021**

**Prepared by YouGov plc  
On behalf of GLA Conservatives**

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## BACKGROUND

This spreadsheet contains survey data collected and analysed by YouGov plc. No information contained within this spreadsheet may be published without the consent of YouGov Plc and the client named on the front cover.

**Methodology:** This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 185,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. (The sample definition could be "GB adult population" or a subset such as "GB adult females"). YouGov Plc normally achieves a response rate of between 35% and 50% to surveys however this does vary dependent upon the subject matter, complexity and length of the questionnaire. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or if not available from the YouGov plc make every effort to provide representative information. All results are based on a sample and are therefore subject to statistical errors normally associated with sample-based information.

For further information about the results in this spreadsheet, please contact YouGov Plc (+44)(0)20 7 012 6000 or email [enquiries@yougov.com](mailto:enquiries@yougov.com) quoting the survey details

## EDITOR'S NOTES - all press releases should contain the following information

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,152 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th February - 2nd March 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults (aged 18+) in London

**NOTE:** All press releases or other publications must be checked by YouGov Plc before use. YouGov requires 48 hours to check a press release unless otherwise agreed. Please note, multiple press releases will require longer.

- YouGov is registered with the Information Commissioner
- YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council

Any percentages calculated on bases fewer than 50 respondents must not be reported as they do not represent a wide enough cross-section of the target population to be considered statistically reliable. These figures will be italicised.

# YouGov / GLA Conservatives Survey Results

Sample Size: 1152 Adults in London  
Fieldwork: 25th February - 2nd March 2021

	Vote in 2019		EU Ref 2016		Gender		Age				Social Grade		Inner/Outer London		
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Remain	Leave	Male	Female	18-24	25-49	50-64	65+	ABC1	C2DE	Inner London	Outer London
Total	279	419	130	518	340	567	585	124	612	238	177	680	472	405	747
<b>Weighted Sample</b>	<b>1152</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>423</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>675</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>587</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>740</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>749</b>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

Do you consider your home to be overcrowded?

I do	16	13	17	12	14	13	20	23	21	12	1	17	16	21	14
I do not	78	84	77	85	83	80	76	68	72	84	99	79	76	73	81
Don't know	6	3	6	3	3	7	4	8	7	4	0	4	8	6	5

Thinking specifically about homes large enough for families... Do you think there are or aren't enough affordable homes of this type in London?

There are enough affordable homes of this type	10	14	6	11	8	12	7	7	10	9	10	11	7	10	10
There aren't enough affordable homes of this type	75	70	83	74	81	72	78	79	76	75	67	75	74	76	74
Don't know	16	17	11	15	12	16	15	14	14	16	23	13	19	15	16



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