

SHELTER

ESTATE REGENERATION

A literature review

August 2026



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S T I M E T E N U R E C O N T E N T S



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

90,000

new social homes each year for the next decade to address the housing emergency.

England would need to build around 90,000 new social homes each year for the next decade to address the housing emergency. Although ambitious, this scale of delivery is not unprecedented. During the twentieth century, mass council house building played a central role in meeting chronic housing need, with an average of 120,000 social homes built each year during the 1960s. The council estates created in that era provided secure homes for generations of families.

Today, however, many of those estates are under threat of demolition. Rather than responding to the housing emergency through a renewed programme of council house building, contemporary policy has increasingly framed the regeneration of existing estates as a way to address housing need by increasing housing supply. In practice, this often involves the privatisation, demolition, and redevelopment of social housing estates to deliver higher-density, mixed-tenure schemes in which market housing plays a central role.

Estate regeneration is a term used to describe a contemporary urban policy that prioritises targeted investment in and the redevelopment of council and social housing estates. Following decades of disinvestment, the structural condition of many estates is deteriorating, and they are often characterised as places with high levels of economic disadvantage and social deprivation.¹



Introduction

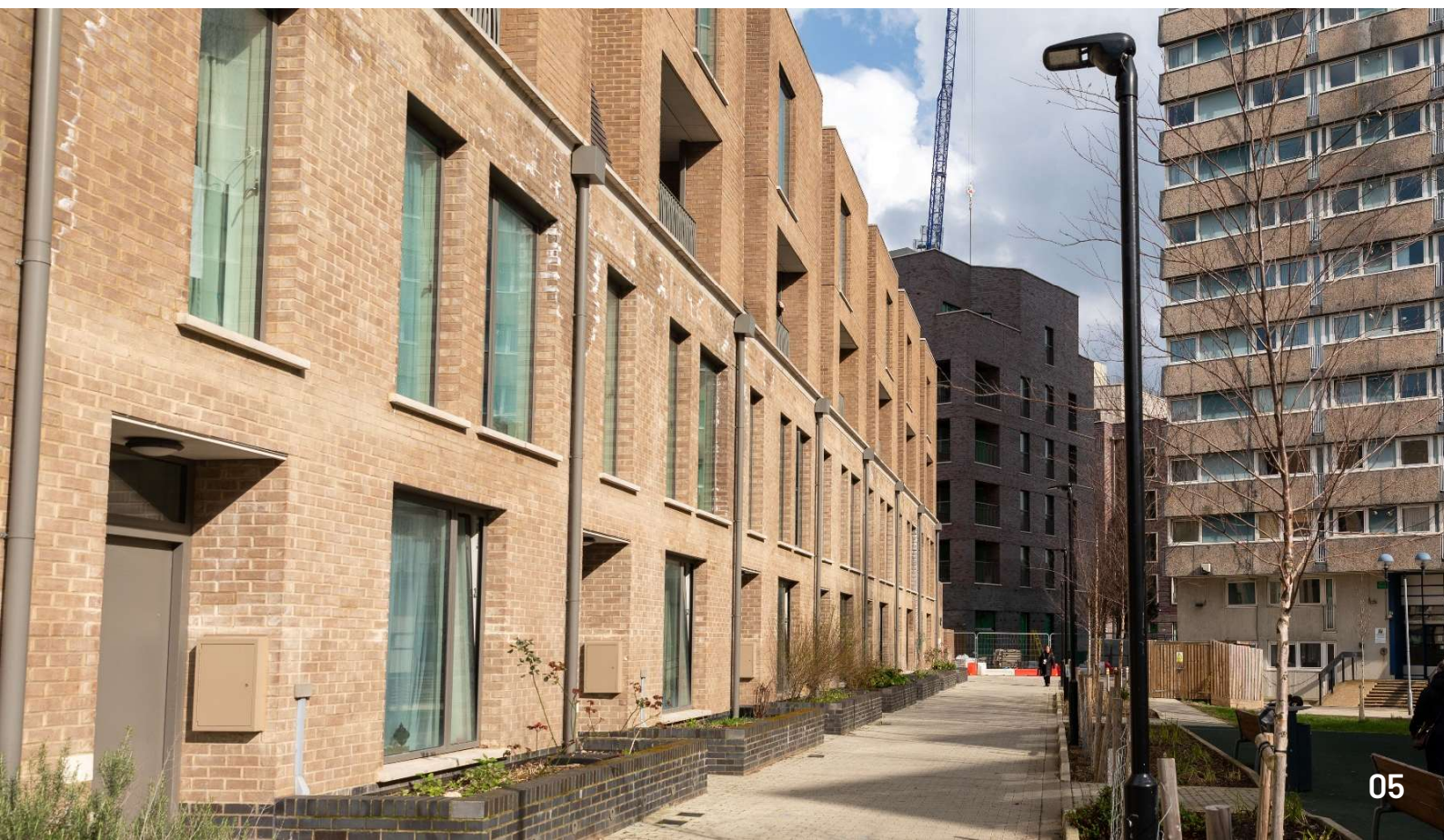
Authorities present regeneration as an opportunity to simultaneously improve the quality of housing in estates and the 'life chances' of their residents by redeveloping the built environment, creating employment and training opportunities, and providing new community services.² Estate regeneration schemes can encompass a range of interventions, from the refurbishment and retrofitting of existing structures and housing stock to the comprehensive demolition and redevelopment of entire estates.

This literature review focuses on estate regeneration policies that have been implemented since the late 1970s, following the post war period of mass council house building that occurred between the 1950s and 1970s. Most of the literature reviewed here focuses on estate regeneration in London, reflecting the acute housing pressures in the capital.

This review synthesises the views of a range of stakeholders, including academics, campaigners and policy makers, and reflects Shelter's analysis of the debate on estate regeneration. It does not set out a policy position.

The first section of this paper provides a summary of the two competing discourses on estate regeneration. It also describes the justifications given for regeneration policies and how they have developed over time following political and economic shifts and changes in attitudes toward social housing since the 1970s. Consideration is also given to the reasons why specific estates have been selected for regeneration and how other government policies, such as the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) and the Right to Buy (RTB), have shaped or interacted with estate regeneration. The second section examines the outcomes of regeneration, focusing on changes in the tenure mix on redeveloped estates and the consequences of regeneration projects for the supply of social housing. The important topic of the impacts on residents living on estates selected for regeneration is also examined, including those from vulnerable and marginalised groups, along with the issues of displacement and gentrification. The third section discusses what is considered to be good practice in estate regeneration, according to different perspectives, and describes some examples of regeneration projects that have been recognised in the literature as having relatively good processes or outcomes.

In conclusion, the literature on estate regeneration is shaped by a persistent tension between official claims that it improves housing and social outcomes and critical evidence that, in practice, it often produces displacement, privatisation, and reductions in secure, genuinely affordable council housing.



Why does estate
regeneration happen?

WHY DOES ESTATE REGENERATION HAPPEN?

The literature broadly identifies two distinct and competing sets of discourse on estate regeneration: the official and critical discourse.

Why does estate regeneration happen?

Justifications for estate regeneration

Discussions around estate regeneration are ideologically loaded and arguments, often presented as facts, reflect contested political worldviews. Social housing and council housing estates emerged from welfare-state reforms that became prominent during the first half of the twentieth century. By contrast, while contemporary estate regeneration is presented as politically neutral, in practice, whether by design or by effect, it reflects neoliberal values that reduce the size of the state's role in housing provision.

The literature broadly identifies two distinct and competing sets of discourse on estate regeneration. The first is the 'official' or hegemonic discourse put forward by the government, local authorities, and developers, which generally portrays estate regeneration as positive-sum and shapes policy approaches. The second is the critical or counter-hegemonic discourse that is prominent among activist scholars and community campaigners, which interprets estate regeneration as the neoliberal restructuring of urban space for the benefit of wealthy groups at the expense of marginalised working-class communities.³

The 'official' justifications for estate regeneration are set out below:

Wider Housing Needs

The 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy',⁴ published by the Conservative government in 2016, argues that estate regeneration can help deliver thousands of additional homes by making more efficient use of public land in areas where there is a high demand for housing. In the strategy, some estates are characterised as being built at relatively low density and containing large areas of undeveloped or 'degraded' open space. Regeneration is therefore presented as a way of increasing housing density by building on unused public land within estates and/or demolishing existing low-density social housing estates and replacing them with mixed-tenure higher-density developments to increase the local supply of homes. In this framing, regenerating social housing estates is suggested as a means of increasing housing delivery to address wider housing need.

Why does estate regeneration happen?

Improving Conditions

Over time, the condition of some council housing estates has deteriorated. In certain cases, it is considered that the extent of disrepair is so significant that renovation is no longer financially practical, making demolition the most cost-effective way to deliver suitable housing. The principle behind this justification is that poor quality housing conditions can negatively impact residents' health. Therefore, demolishing outdated buildings and constructing new ones is seen as a means to improve residents' health and wellbeing by providing modern, higher-quality, energy-efficient homes built with contemporary designs and materials.⁵

Where refurbishments are considered to be economically viable, regeneration through repairs and retrofitting with modern, energy-efficient materials is proposed as a way to improve conditions in existing social housing estates and reduce energy costs for residents.⁶

Economic

The 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy' argues that private investment can help to reduce the need for public spending on the construction and maintenance of social homes and ensure the financial viability of estate regeneration projects. Estate regeneration schemes take a long time to complete and require substantial funding. Local authorities can use regeneration projects to attract investment from private-sector property developers and financial institutions, as the sale of market homes in redeveloped estates with increased housing density can generate financial returns for investors and cross-subsidise the building of social housing.⁷

The official discourse also frames estate regeneration as a way to stimulate localised economic growth, enterprise, and innovation by increasing local people's skills through training initiatives and creating commercial space, businesses, and employment opportunities. Regeneration schemes are presented as a means of reducing public spending by streamlining local service delivery to create better outcomes for users. Government research suggests that estate regeneration can generate significant savings in spending on out-of-work benefits, healthcare, and crime.⁸

Social

The 2016 government strategy claims that 'many estates...are often inward looking and physically, socially, and economically disconnected from their surroundings, leading to higher concentrations of social deprivation and limited opportunities for communities living there'.⁹ Estate regeneration is therefore framed as a way to improve social outcomes for residents by integrating estates into the wider local area¹⁰ and preventing 'neighbourhood effects', which is a theory suggesting that living in deprived areas, particularly in social housing, can negatively influence people's social outcomes.¹¹

Regeneration projects are portrayed as a way to address crime and anti-social behaviour on 'sink estates' by improving the design of the built environment to prevent criminal activity and increasing social cohesion with mixed-tenure communities.¹² 'Sink estates' are council housing estates which are considered to be the cause of poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, crime, and anti-social behaviour.¹³ This is based on the assumption that the physical architecture of some council estates – high-rise towers, hidden alleyways, poorly lit areas – when combined with significant socioeconomic deprivation, contributes to the reproduction of further social problems. As a result, demolition and redevelopment are often presented as the most effective way to improve the quality of life for residents.¹⁴

Why does estate regeneration happen?

The critical discourse

The critical or counter-hegemonic discourse contains two main, overlapping themes that challenge the official discourse: anti-gentrification and anti-demolition. According to this perspective, estate regeneration is often a euphemism for state-led gentrification. Critics argue that class-based and racialised stigmatisation of council estates and their residents is used to justify estate demolitions and enable private developers to generate substantial profits by building market properties for more affluent, mostly White, incoming social groups.¹⁵

Campaigners also argue that the 'managed decline' of estates in London depresses land values and creates a 'state-induced rent gap' that increases the potential profits for developers.¹⁶ From this view, the regeneration process promotes the displacement and social cleansing of established multicultural working-class communities. Critics further suggest that, in many instances, the demolition of estates is not necessary, and refurbishments could address the disrepair resulting from decades of disinvestment in maintenance, while allowing existing communities to retain attachments with local neighbourhoods.¹⁷ There is also evidence that retrofit regeneration projects can be more environmentally sustainable and less costly than demolishing and replacing entire estates, including those that are in a poor condition.¹⁸



How have justifications developed over time?

During the 1970s, coinciding with wider political and economic changes, the status and condition of council housing began to decline, and many council estates came to be identified as 'failed' places. An increasing number were poorly managed and deteriorating due to cuts in maintenance budgets and significant design and construction faults caused by modernist architecture and industrial building techniques that had previously been promoted as more efficient during the mass construction of council housing in the 1960s. Some inner-city estates were also becoming increasingly unpopular with tenants because of high levels of disrepair, crime, and vandalism. Together, these issues contributed to high turnover rates and growing numbers of 'hard-to-let' empty properties.¹⁹

In the 1980s, some politicians, academics, and mass media outlets began to put forward arguments about 'neighbourhood effects'. Social housing and the design of council estates came to be seen by many as the cause of an array of social issues, including poverty, unemployment, and crime. Mixed-tenure communities, comprised of private and social homes, were promoted as a solution to entrenched urban deprivation, whereby the introduction of middle-class private homeowners would address spatial concentrations of poverty and poorer social housing tenants' 'life chances' could be improved by living alongside wealthier neighbours.²⁰ The policy of creating mixed-tenure communities was based on the idea that 'failed' places, typically run-down council estates, required 'community building'.²¹

Mobilising 'community' is a key principle underpinning welfare reform and regeneration policies associated with what is commonly termed as 'roll-back and roll-out neoliberalism'.²² 'Roll-back neoliberalism' is used to describe policies which began in the 1980s and are characterised by the rolling back of the state from social and economic interventions, including cuts to public spending and the welfare state, privatisation, and the deregulation of markets.²³

'Roll-back' neoliberal policies are exemplified by the reduction in public expenditure on social housing, which was cut by 60% between 1979-80 and 1993-94.²⁴ Similarly, the privatisation of social housing through the transfer of council homes to housing associations and the Right to Buy (RTB) policy, which enables social tenants to purchase council properties at a discounted rate, is aligned with the 'roll-back and roll-out' neoliberal agenda. The RTB has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of social rent properties with a corresponding increase in the number of households on council housing waiting lists and people living in temporary accommodation.²⁵

'Roll-out neoliberalism' refers to policies and modes of governance that facilitate and encourage free-market enterprise into all aspects of social life. 'Roll-out neoliberalism' can also encompass what are argued as being penal policies intended to aggressively regulate and discipline marginalised communities who are seen as being dispossessed, or in the context of housing, displaced, by 'roll-back neoliberalism'.²⁶ When neoliberalism is the dominant social order, neoliberal worldviews tend to locate the source of social difficulties, such as deprivation and dispossession, within individuals, framing them as personal faults or misfortunes, rather than political or structural failings.

Since the 1980s, successive governments have claimed that 'strong communities' are key sites for producing responsible, entrepreneurial citizens. They are also proposed as being a panacea for social problems resulting from 'roll-back neoliberalism' and globalisation.²⁷ 'Failed' council estates that mainly house social tenants are considered as being unable to cultivate 'strong communities'. Therefore, the introduction of private homeowners to create mixed-tenure communities is seen to raise social aspirations and encourage entrepreneurialism among deprived and/or unemployed social housing tenants living in council estates.²⁸

Based on these arguments and the physical decline of many council estates, concentrations of urban poverty, poor design, disrepair, crime, and anti-social behaviour were increasingly used as grounds for estate renewal or regeneration policies in the 1980s and 1990s. The demolition of what was often considered sub-standard housing, particularly in densely populated high-rise blocks, was used to facilitate the replacement of 'sink estates' with lower density mixed-tenure neighbourhoods, with houses often being preferred over flats in redevelopments.²⁹

Why does estate regeneration happen?

The term 'sink estates' is a derogatory label applied to council housing estates with high levels of social and economic deprivation. The term originated in a 1976 article written by Jane Morton for the *New Society* magazine, where she argued that, 'Somewhere, in every town that has council houses at all, there's a sink estate-the roughest and shabbiest on the books, disproportionately tenanted by families with problems, and despised by those who live there and the town at large...As long as families on the margins are shunted into second best accommodation, there will be sinks'.³⁰

Slater argues that the term is deployed as a 'symbolic frame' to justify social housing policies that have caused considerable social suffering for marginalised communities. It is used to describe council estates where the residents' behaviour is heavily morally criticised and is seen as both the cause and consequence of poor housing conditions and wider social disadvantage. It has been widely utilised in political discourse since Tony Blair's speech at Southwark's Aylesbury Estate in 1997.³¹ Blair used the estate as a backdrop to talk about 'an underclass...cut off from society's mainstream without any sense of shared purpose', while suggesting that 'sink estates' had become 'no hope areas'.³² Blair's New Labour government accelerated neoliberal housing policies, including the transfer of council housing stock to housing associations and the further rolling back of state support for social housing.³³

In the 2000s, estate regeneration was commonly framed within broader neoliberal 'urban renaissance' agendas that positioned improved urban design as a means of attracting private investment and middle-class residents back to what were considered as declining inner-city areas. Council estates became key sites for replacing 'low-value' housing and businesses with 'higher-value' development. Academics have noted that the policy emphasis on creating 'mixed-tenure communities' largely operates in one direction, which is remaking low-income neighbourhoods for higher income groups.³⁴



Why does estate regeneration happen?

A key difference between current and earlier justifications for estate regeneration is the objective of addressing housing needs.³⁵ The most recent government policy focusing specifically on social housing estate regeneration, the 2016 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy', suggests that there is a preference for the demolition of low-density estates in areas where there is a high demand for housing, so that public land can be used more efficiently with higher density developments.³⁶ There has not been any further policy direction on estate regeneration at a national level over the past decade since the strategy was published.

It is noteworthy that the demolition of mid to high-rise council buildings and their replacement with, often taller, high-rise mixed-tenure blocks is somewhat paradoxical considering that high-rise architecture is often suggested as contributing to high levels of crime and other social problems when it is used in council housing estates.

Austerity policies implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and subsequent Conservative governments since 2010 have encouraged local authorities to sell public assets. In a context of limited budgetary capacity to build and maintain social housing, councils have used estate regeneration to raise income by selling or leasing public land to private developers and investors. This income is then used to fund local services and infrastructure.³⁷

In some cases, developers are granted permission to regenerate council estates through section 106 agreements that require them to build a certain number of 'affordable' homes. By increasing housing density, developers aim to build enough market properties to 'cross-subsidise' the construction of new social or 'affordable' housing³⁸ and meet section 106 obligations. However, developers regularly renege on section 106 agreements, with little to no opposition from councils, by claiming that building affordable and/or social homes is not financially viable following changes in market conditions.³⁹



Why does estate
regeneration happen?



Why are specific estates selected for regeneration?

The official reasons why a specific estate is selected for regeneration and the type of regeneration scheme chosen can depend on a range of factors including:

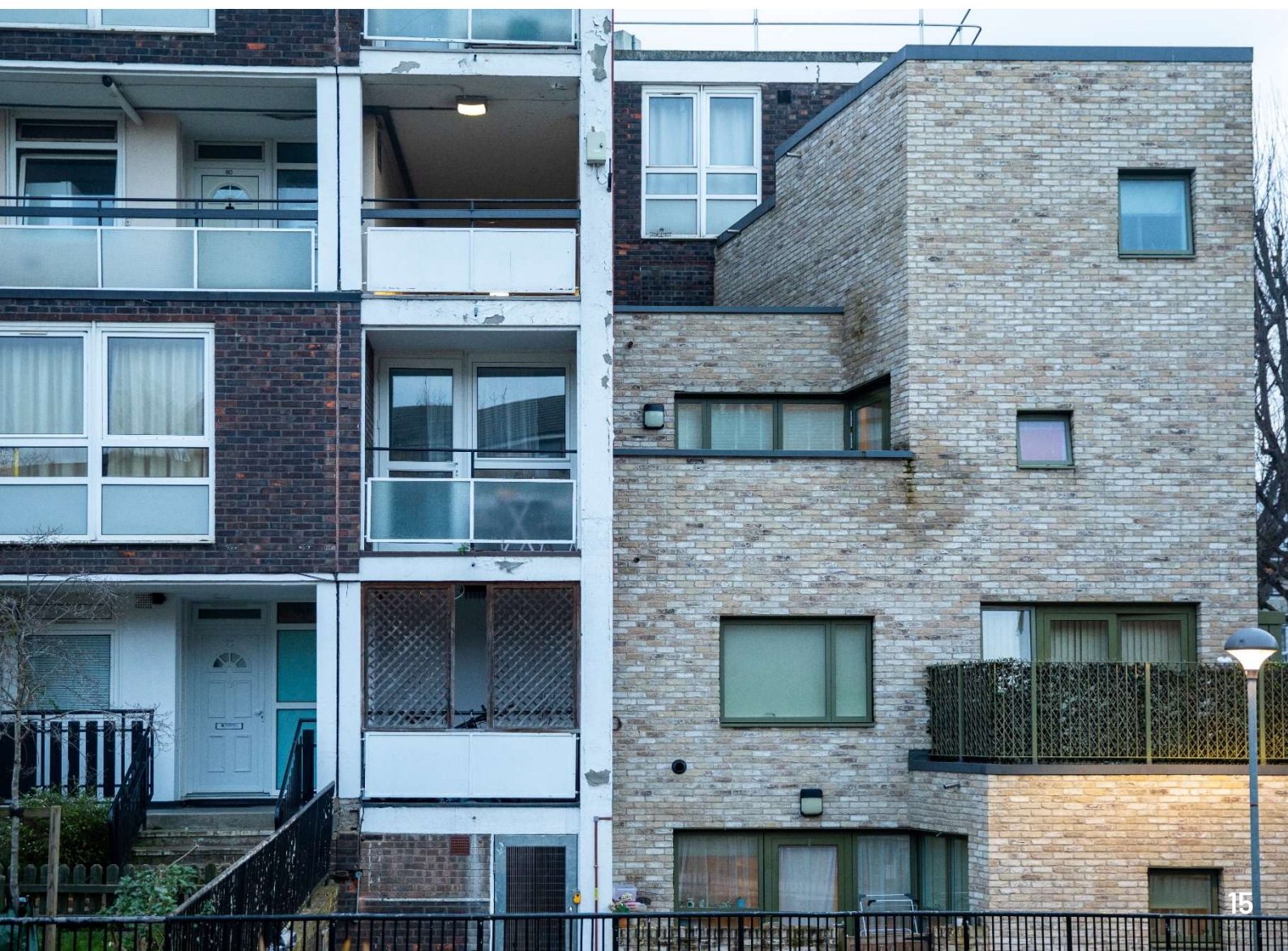
- socioeconomic issues
- the type, age, and condition of buildings
- economic viability of refurbishments
- location

However, as discussed previously, estate regeneration is a contested issue and resident campaign groups who oppose projects and dispute official justifications have emerged on many estates. The anti-gentrification narrative within the critical discourse suggests that the main reason estates in inner-London boroughs are selected for regeneration is due to the high value of land they are situated on, which makes privatisation particularly lucrative.

- Cathall Road and Packington Estate in Islington: selected for demolition and regeneration because it was not economically viable to repair prefabricated structures.⁴⁰
- Aylesbury Estate in Southwark: selected for demolition and regeneration due to poor design, disrepair, deprivation, and high levels of crime (disputed by residents and campaigners).⁴¹
- Heygate Estate in Southwark: selected for demolition and regeneration due to disrepair, refurbishment not economically viable, deprivation, high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour (disputed by residents and campaigners).⁴²
- Cressingham Gardens Estate and Central Hill Estate in Lambeth: selected for demolition and regeneration because the cost to repair structural issues was not economically viable (disputed by residents and campaigners).⁴³
- South Lambeth Estate, Westbury Estate and Knights Walk Estate in Lambeth: selected for demolition and regeneration due to “considerable potential” for increasing housing density to help address local housing needs.⁴⁴
- Woodberry Down Estate in Hackney: initially, 31 of 57 blocks were selected for demolition and regeneration following a survey reporting that it was not economically viable to repair/refurbish them. Later, following a land transfer to a housing developer and housing association, plans were drawn up for the complete demolition and regeneration of the estate.⁴⁵
- Anonymised Housing Association estate (formerly council) in Northwest England: selected for partial demolition and regeneration with refurbishments and retrofit of energy-efficient materials and new central heating systems for existing housing stock.⁴⁶

Why does estate regeneration happen?

- Central Estates in Birmingham: selected for partial demolition and regeneration partly because of entrenched deprivation and also due to residents' protests about the levels of disinvestment and disrepair on the estate.⁴⁷
- Charlestown, Langworthy, Kersal, and Boughton (CHALK) neighbourhoods in Salford: selected for extensive demolition and regeneration because of deprivation and 'low demand' council housing (disputed by residents and campaigners).⁴⁸
- Carpenters Estate in Newham: selected for complete demolition and regeneration due to disrepair and the local council lacking funds to conduct refurbishment work. There were increasing complaints from tenants about disrepair, but a campaign group has been formed who are against demolition and argue that buildings could be refurbished.⁴⁹
- West Hendon Estate in Barnet: selected for regeneration because of deprivation and 'neighbourhood effects'. Watt argues that West Hendon 'is a stark example of regeneration as state-led gentrification'. Resident campaigns attracted attention from politicians including The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who visited the estate to announce his estate regeneration guidelines.⁵⁰



How do government policies interact with estate regeneration?

The Decent Homes Programme (DHP)

The DHP was introduced by the New Labour government in 2001. It set a minimum standard (the Decent Homes Standard – DHS) that social homes were required to meet. However, no government funding was made directly available for councils to achieve the DHS, and many academics argue that the policy encouraged further privatisation of social housing. Additional funding was only made available following stock transfers to housing associations, the creation of Arms-Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), or councils entering private finance initiative contracts. As a result, many councils relinquished portions of their housing stock to access funds that were urgently needed to address the disrepair on their rundown housing estates.⁵¹ In cases such as Woodberry Down, councils claimed that disrepair on estates was so bad that they lacked the funds to carry out refurbishments to bring properties up to the DHS, making demolition with private investments to fund redevelopment the only viable option for improving conditions.⁵²

Watt argues that the DHS was ‘not particularly high’ and the investment was ‘too little too late’ for many council tenants. He suggests that the purpose of the DHP was, in part, to improve standards, but also to accelerate the privatisation of social housing. Watt claims that, ‘had Labour wished to improve (tenants’) lives quickly, it could have granted funds directly to local authorities’. The complex governance arrangements required to access funding caused delays and DHS progress was slow, particularly in London.⁵³

Council properties earmarked for demolition in estate regeneration projects were regularly left out of the DHP and councils spent minimal amounts on their maintenance. Due to the long-term timeframes of regeneration projects and delays that would often occur, many tenants were left to endure deteriorating conditions in already non-decent properties as they waited to be re-homed.⁵⁴ In some instances, such as the Woodberry Down Estate, tenants were decanted from some properties in blocks selected for demolition and excluded from the DHS, but the same non-decent properties are currently being used as temporary accommodation by local authorities.⁵⁵



Why does estate regeneration happen?

The Right to Buy (RTB)

The RTB is a key privatisation policy that interacts with estate regeneration. Although the current government strategy states that mixed-tenure communities are an objective for regeneration projects, the sale and resale of council homes since the 1980s has already produced mixed-tenure estates comprised of council tenants, private homeowners or leaseholders, and private tenants. This tenure mix has caused delays and increased costs on regeneration projects where major works or demolitions are planned because of legal challenges or councils and/or developers having to obtain compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) for privately owned properties.⁵⁶

Regeneration-led right to buy refers to the use of RTB with the objective of making a cash gain when a property is reacquired for a regeneration project. Research has found that, on many estates in London, there was an increase in RTB applications after the announcement of regeneration plans. While this might occur because tenants want to make a financial gain, it is also likely that estate agents and private finance companies exploit RTB for profits by offering tenants cash incentives to purchase properties on their behalf.⁵⁷

Regeneration policies

There have been many iterations of government policy aimed at estate renewal or regeneration since the late 1970s, including The Priority Estates Project 1979-1987, Estate Action 1985-1994, Housing Action Trusts 1988-2007, the Estate Renewal Fund 1995-2000, the Single Regeneration Budget 1994-2008, New Deal for Communities 1998-2010, and Housing Market Renewal 2002-2011. These policies mainly focused on repairs and refurbishments to homes and the physical environment, but the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities prioritised employment and community initiatives.⁵⁸

These policies did help to improve the appearance and quality of some estates and homes. There were also some successes in community development. However, both population growth and the worsening housing emergency made it easier for councils to find tenants for less desirable 'hard-to-let' properties, and they were often the most in-need households who had the least choice.⁵⁹ Furthermore, there was only limited success in addressing poverty and deprivation.⁶⁰

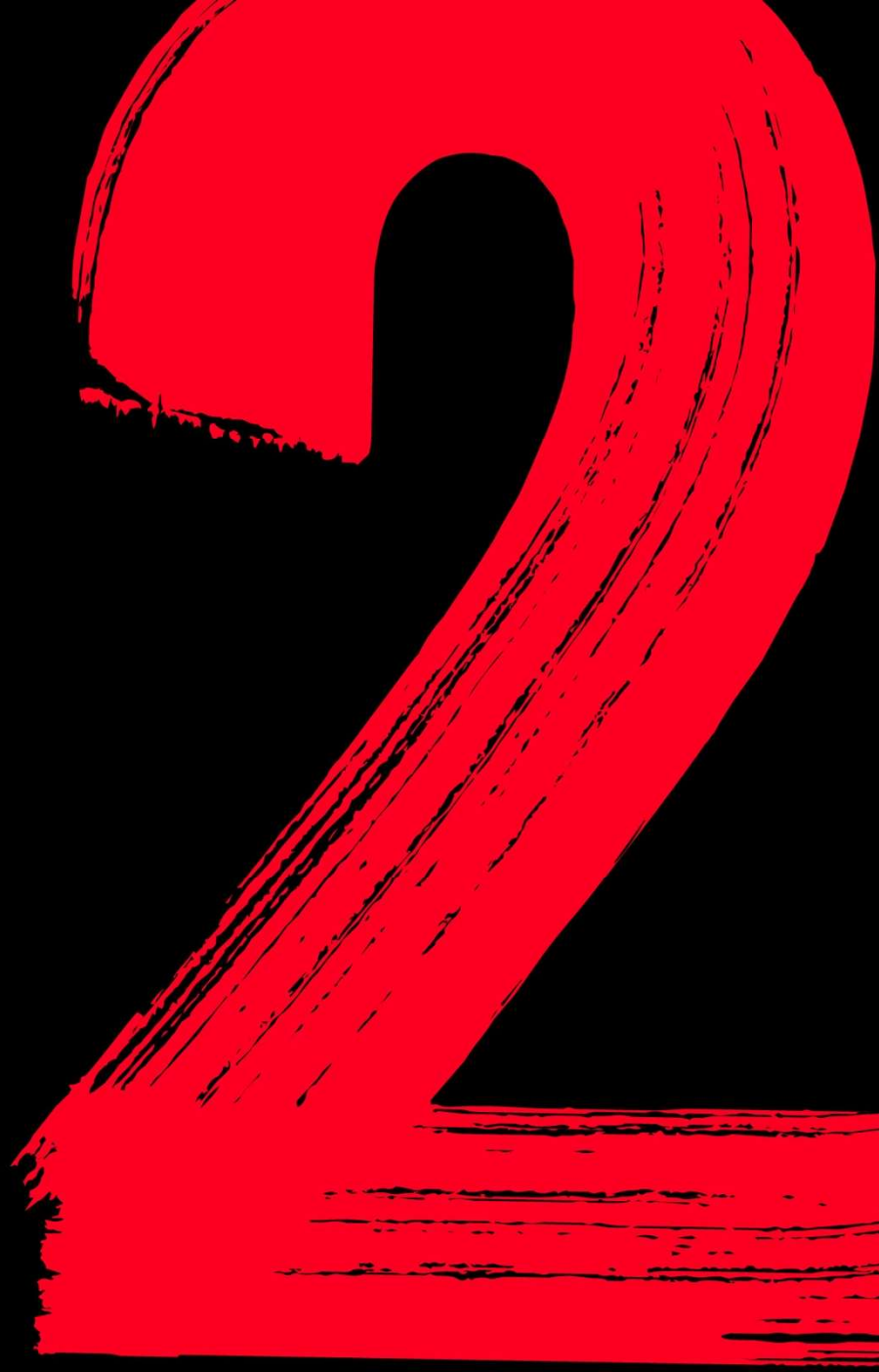
Between the 1980s and 2010s, policies including Estate Action, Housing Action Trusts, and the Single Regeneration Budget encouraged and facilitated stock transfers to housing associations. This was, in part, because transfers made it possible to access private finance, which enabled an increase in investment in new and existing social housing.⁶¹

The push to demolish council housing gained momentum with the Housing and Planning Act of 2016, which made £140 million available to fund the clearance and redevelopment of more than 100 so-called- 'sink estates'.⁶²

The Affordable Homes Programme 2021-26 and its successor, the Social and Affordable Homes Programme 2026-2036, have made grant funding available for projects that support the development of 'affordable' homes in England, including the regeneration of existing social housing estates.⁶³ In London, developers have been able to access funding to build 'affordable' homes and regenerate estates through the Homes for Londoners; Affordable Homes Programme 2016-2023 and 2021-2026 and most recently the New Social and Affordable Homes Programme 2026-2036.⁶⁴

Funding from the mayor of London was only made available for new build properties, rather than for refurbishment or retrofitting of existing homes, which has made the demolition and redevelopment of social housing estates in London a more financially viable option.⁶⁵ Furthermore, new build properties are exempt from VAT, which is an added cost for refurbishments. However, VAT has recently been removed from works that improve energy efficiency on existing homes.⁶⁶

What are the outcomes
of estate regeneration?



WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES OF ESTATE REGENERATION?

Regeneration often results in a net reduction in the number of genuinely affordable council homes needed to meet local housing needs.

What are the outcomes of estate regeneration?

What happens to the tenure mix of estates that are regenerated, particularly in terms of social rent homes?

The reviewed literature shows there is usually a substantial increase in the total number of homes on regenerated estates, but most of the additional homes are private market properties. Although this seems to address the demand for housing, the high prices of market properties, particularly in London, are very often unaffordable for people on average salaries, therefore leaving housing needs largely unresolved. In inner London boroughs, a significant share of the new market homes on redeveloped estates are sold to overseas buyers.⁶⁷ At the Elephant Park development, which replaced the Heygate Estate in Southwark, an entire block containing 51 properties was purchased 'off plan' by overseas investors.⁶⁸ Up to 55% of the new market properties in phase one of the Woodberry Down Estate regeneration were sold to overseas buyers.⁶⁹

At the same time, regeneration often results in a net reduction in the number of genuinely affordable council homes needed to meet local housing needs. When new social homes are built in regenerated estates, they are often owned and managed by housing associations and/or quasi-privatised special purpose vehicles (SPVs) set up by councils.⁷⁰ Rents in housing association and SPV properties are similar to, but often higher than, council rents, which can be significant for low-income households.⁷¹ They may also provide less secure tenancy agreements than council-owned properties and sometimes require tenants to pay additional service charges.⁷²

The examples in tables 1.1 and 1.2 from the reviewed literature show pre- and post-regeneration tenure mixes on selected social housing estates. These examples were chosen because the sources provided clear and comparable breakdowns of tenure categories.

What are the outcomes of estate regeneration?

Table 1.1: Examples of pre- and post-regeneration tenure mixes on council-owned estates.

	Pre-regeneration				Post-regeneration			
	Total number of properties	Social rent	Intermediate rented tenures	Private/market homes	Total number of properties	Social rent	Intermediate rented tenures	Private/market homes (inc shared ownership)
Heygate Estate/ Elephant Park Southwark*	1,212	1,033	-	179	2,922	114	167	2,641
Aylesbury Southwark*	2,758	2,402	-	356	4,208	1,568	527	2,113
Central Hill Lambeth*	462	318	-	144	1,184	320	-	864
Woodberry Down Hackney*	1,980	1,614	-	366	5,500	1,350	1,376	2,774

*Provisional figures

Table 1.2: Examples of pre- and post-regeneration tenure mix on housing association-owned estates.

	Pre-regeneration				Post-regeneration			
	Total number of properties	Social rent	Intermediate rented tenures	Private/market homes	Total number of properties	Social rent	Intermediate rented tenures	Private/market homes (inc shared ownership)
Eastfields Estate Merton*	464	250	-	214	671	156	234	281
South Acton Estate Ealing*	1,800	1,440	-	360	2,800	1,400	-	1,400
Crossways Estate Bow	298	248	-	50	679	423	-	256
Geoffrey Close Estate Lambeth*	134	134	-	0	441	137	26	278

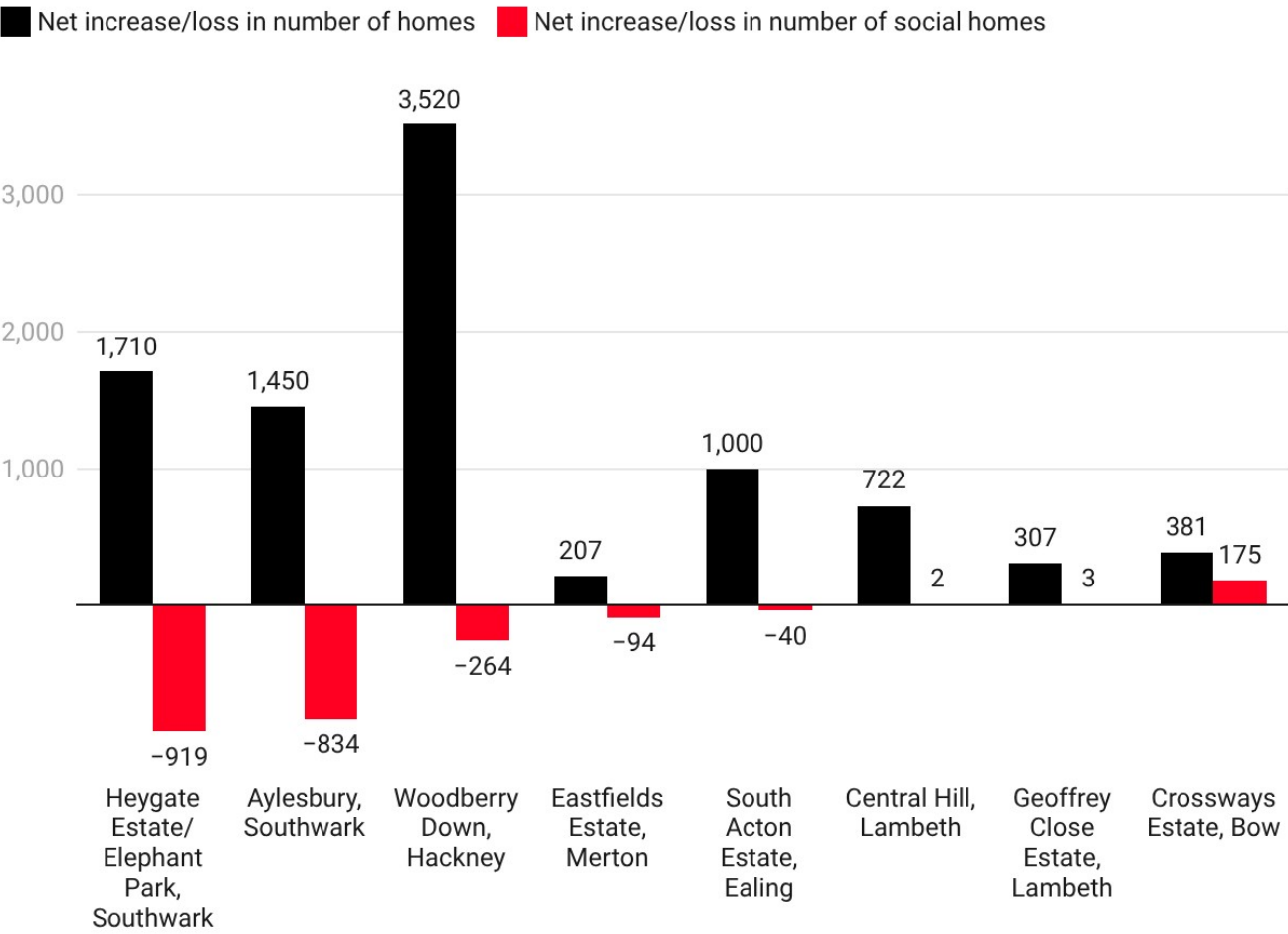
*Provisional figures

Sources: Beharrell, A, von Bradsky, A, Derbyshire, B, Goulcher, M (2016) Beharrell, A, Bergin, R, Devlin, P, Dove, C, Lea, S, McCullough, B, Oosthuizen, R, Patel, T (2022) Hackney Council (2024) Penny, J (2024) Southwark Notes (2026)

What are the outcomes
of estate regeneration?

Figure 1

Estate regeneration often leads to a loss of social housing,
even if there is an increase in the total number of homes.



Figures for Heygate, Aylesbury, Woodberry Down, Eastfields, South Acton, Geoffrey Close, and Central Hill are provisional.

Chart: Shelter • Created with Datawrapper

How does estate regeneration impact people living in selected estates?

The official discourse acknowledges that estate regeneration can be difficult for residents. The 2016 government's 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy'⁷³ and the mayor of London's 'Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration'⁷⁴ both suggest that resident engagement minimises disruption and uncertainty for people living on estates that are being regenerated. Even so, official accounts tend to normalise and depoliticise regeneration by portraying it as a broadly benign process that ultimately benefits residents. Some academic studies support this view, suggesting that demolition and rehousing can be progressive because they enable residents to move away from poor-quality housing and turn what are considered declining neighbourhoods into improved homes and communities.⁷⁵

The catastrophic fire and tragic fatalities at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 exposed systemic failures caused by deregulation, lack of government oversight, and authorities ignoring residents' perspectives and warnings. Non-fire-resistant cladding was installed on the tower as part of a wider regeneration of the Lancaster West Estate in North Kensington, located next to some of the most expensive properties in London.⁷⁶ The use of cheaper non-fire-resistant cladding was a consequence of cost-cutting by the local authority, private contractors seeking to maximise profits, and government failure to implement safety regulations recommended after the fire at Lakanal House in Southwark on 3 July 2009, which killed six people.⁷⁷

Much of the critical discourse focuses on the negative impacts of estate regeneration on residents. Like the official guidance, critical perspectives also consider resident engagement essential to avoiding harmful outcomes that might result from regeneration schemes. Campaigners and residents on many estates have argued that consultation processes are top-down and opaque, they were not given enough information to make informed decisions, and that their participation was tokenistic.⁷⁸ Campaigners have also highlighted examples in which ballots took place without refurbishment being offered as an option. In some cases, residents were effectively asked to choose between the demolition of their homes or no change and the status quo of disinvestment and disrepair.⁷⁹



What are the outcomes of estate regeneration?

Campaigners in London have also identified several other issues that undermine any democratic outcome and fairness in the ballot process on regeneration projects.⁸⁰ Developers have been able to avoid mandatory ballots introduced by London Mayor Sadiq Khan for regeneration projects involving demolition by choosing not to apply for mayoral funding. Furthermore, several large regeneration projects in London were exempted from the requirement as they had already received funding. Developers can invest significant resources into YES vote campaigns, whereas residents' NO vote campaigns are usually unfunded. Even when residents' campaigns achieve a NO vote, developers repeat the process until they achieve their desired YES vote outcome. Temporary accommodation residents, intermediate rent tenants, and private tenants are usually restricted from taking part in ballots. However, in some instances, where temporary tenants have been able to take part in ballots, they were promised secure tenancies by authorities to incentivise YES votes.⁸¹

Britain's ethnic minority communities are disproportionately concentrated in urban centres and often live in the most rundown council estates⁸² due to a combination of factors including institutional discrimination and structural racism.⁸³ Similarly, female-led single-parent households⁸⁴ and people with long-term physical and/or mental health conditions are also more likely to be residents in council housing estates.⁸⁵ This means that estate demolitions and regeneration disproportionately impact marginalised groups and vulnerable people who might face additional barriers coping with disruption or challenging council processes.

A key issue, on which anti-gentrification and social cleansing arguments are based, is the displacement of established working-class communities from regenerated estates. Secure tenants have faced evictions, and some people living in temporary accommodation on estates that are being regenerated are decanted without a right to return.⁸⁶ Leaseholders and owner-occupiers are regularly priced out of redevelopments because the cost of new market properties on regenerated estates is substantially higher than the compensatory amount they receive for their homes.⁸⁷ Furthermore, some leaseholders must endure lengthy legal battles to challenge compulsory purchase orders (CPOs).⁸⁸ Campaigners argue that displacement exacerbates the structural disadvantages experienced by marginalised communities living in council estates. They suggest that displacement disrupts established support networks, access to employment, and educational continuity, while also producing significant adverse effects on individuals' mental and physical health.⁸⁹

Research by Reades on estates in London shows that regeneration does cause displacement.⁹⁰ The study found that long-distance displacements are less common than media reports sometimes suggest, with most people remaining in the local area, or 'in-borough'. Long-distance displacements were more common among owner-occupiers and leaseholders leaving London because they could no longer afford housing costs in the capital. Even local re-housing, however, can still have negative effects on displaced residents. The data showed that residents were often moved to more deprived areas, which contradicts claims that regeneration and 'mixed-tenure communities' improve people's social mobility or 'life-chances'.⁹¹ Rather than alleviating deprivation, regeneration in these cases caused higher concentrations of poverty in other local neighbourhoods.

Residents who remain on estates that are being regenerated can also encounter multiple and complex difficulties.⁹² Regeneration projects are often protracted and can leave residents in a state of limbo, feeling stressed, anxious, and facing uncertainty while they wait to be rehoused.⁹³ Some tenants with a right to return face added disruption if their current home is due to be demolished and they are required to move into temporary accommodation while they wait for new homes to be built.⁹⁴ The noise and dust created by building works and demolition can also have a detrimental impact on people's mental and physical health.⁹⁵ Some residents have described feeling a sense of loss or trauma, following the demolition of long-term homes where they had developed emotional attachments.⁹⁶

Some estates' residents have felt that a sense of community and neighbourly connections had been lost because of regeneration. Rather than creating mixed-tenure communities that improve social outcomes for poorer residents, some long-term residents have suggested that regeneration has produced 'them and us' class tenure divides and inequalities between social tenants and residents in private homes.⁹⁷ Several studies in London found that there was little evidence of increased social interaction on regenerated estates. Instead, the studies found that social tenants faced prejudice and stigma from wealthy private residents who accused them of anti-social behaviour, excessive noise and giving the neighbourhood a 'down-market' look.⁹⁸

What are the outcomes
of estate regeneration?



What is considered to be good
practice in estate regeneration?



WHAT IS CONSIDERED TO BE GOOD PRACTICE IN ESTATE REGENERATION?

What is considered to be good practice in estate regeneration?

Good practice in estate regeneration according to the 'official' discourse

The official discourse, reflected in the 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy'⁹⁹, the 'Altered Estates'¹⁰⁰ report, and the mayor of London's 'Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration'¹⁰¹, emphasises a long-term, place-based approach that improves housing and neighbourhood quality while protecting existing communities. Across these sources, good practice is associated with strong local leadership, viable funding and partnerships, high-quality design, mixed-tenure communities, and early, meaningful resident engagement. They also stress the importance of phased redevelopment, single-move rehousing, improved social infrastructure, community investment, and long-term management to support sustainable outcomes and minimise disruption.

There are, however, some differences within the official discourse. The 'Estate Regeneration National Strategy'¹⁰² places greater emphasis on delivery and viability, focusing on funding models, partnerships with private developers, and efficient construction methods. Whereas the 'Altered Estates'¹⁰³ report is more critical of market-led developments with limited public investment, arguing that such approaches can provoke resistance from existing residents. It also challenges policy preference for demolition and suggests that the Right to Buy (RTB) should be suspended during regeneration. The mayor of London's guidance¹⁰⁴ is more prescriptive and rights-based, setting out clear minimum requirements for affordable housing replacement and residents' rights to return.

The mayor of London's 'Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration'¹⁰⁵ suggests that schemes involving demolition should include:

- an increase in affordable housing. Demolition should only be pursued if it does not result in a net loss of affordable housing. As a minimum, affordable homes, including those with social rent levels, should be replaced on a like-for-like basis. Estate regeneration should be used to increase the number of affordable homes.
- a full right to return or remain for social tenants. When tenants are required to move, they should have a full right to return. Regeneration projects that involve demolition should be phased, so that residents do not have to move more than once. Tenants should have a right to a property of a suitable size, similar level of rent, and same security of tenure on the regenerated estate.
- a fair deal for leaseholders and freeholders. Leaseholders and freeholders whose homes are to be demolished as part of a regeneration project should be fully compensated. Landlords should always attempt to negotiate with leaseholders and freeholders and avoid compulsory purchase orders (CPOs). Valuations should be conducted by independent professionals.

What is considered to be good practice in estate regeneration?



Good practice in estate regeneration according to the critical discourse

Estate regeneration often prioritises financial viability and land value uplift over social value, climate responsibility, and the needs of existing residents.

Residents should be supported with resources and independent expertise, and presented with credible, fully costed alternatives to demolition.

Refurbishment and retrofit should be prioritised, with demolition pursued only as a last resort if it can be supported by robust, transparent evidence.

Drawing on the experiences of communities facing redevelopment, the 'Alternative Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration'¹⁰⁶ sets out a resident-led framework for estate regeneration which challenges the demolition-first, market-led approach that campaigners argue is produced by current official policies and practices. The guide argues that estate regeneration often prioritises financial viability and land value uplift over social value, climate responsibility, and the needs of existing residents, which results in unnecessary demolition, displacement, loss of social rented housing, and long-term harm to disadvantaged communities. It also challenges safeguarded developer profit margins and the lack of transparency in viability assessments, which campaigners argue results in the limited provision of social housing.

The 'Alternative Good Practice Guide'¹⁰⁷ proposes a strengthened decision-making process in which residents are treated as equal partners – rather than just being consulted – from the outset of projects. It suggests that residents should be supported with resources and independent expertise and presented with credible, fully costed alternatives to demolition. The authors argue that refurbishment and retrofit should be prioritised, with demolition pursued only as a last resort if it can be supported by robust, transparent evidence. The guide identifies widespread exemptions, bias, and procedural flaws in current ballot practices that undermine the democratic consent of residents. Campaigners have suggested that ballots should be held on any project with demolitions before decanting begins, regardless of the estate size or funding source, and should include refurbishment as a clear option. The guide also argues that a vote against demolition should trigger guaranteed refurbishment.

The guide¹⁰⁸ highlights the high social costs of large-scale decanting and displacement, including years-long delays, empty sites, pressure on housing waiting lists and the breakdown of established communities. It proposes phased redevelopment where residents move directly into new homes on their estate, with firm delivery guarantees in place before any demolition occurs. For leaseholders, it rejects complex and risky shared-equity schemes in favour of a fair, mandatory home-swap model that enables residents to remain in their community on like-for-like terms. The authors argue that estate regeneration must deliver better homes and better places, not just denser developments. This includes high energy-efficiency standards, protection and enhancement of social infrastructure, retention of existing local businesses, and strong, transparent monitoring to ensure promises are delivered. It also calls for independent auditing, public reporting and meaningful enforcement powers to restore trust and accountability.

Estate regeneration must deliver better homes and better places, not just denser developments



Which estate regeneration projects have been recognised in the literature as having positive outcomes or processes?

As mentioned previously, estate regeneration is a contested subject. A regeneration project can simultaneously receive praise for being a success story in terms of design and community development while also receiving criticism for causing unnecessary harm to disadvantaged groups. An example of this is the Woodberry Down Estate regeneration, which won 'London project of the year' in 2018 for 'improving not just the physical environment but also residents' economic aspirations and social wellbeing'. The project has also been cited by campaigners as an example of state-led gentrification that has caused the displacement of working-class communities.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, as identified in the data in Figure 1, the regeneration of Woodberry Down, which began in 2007, could result in a significant reduction of over 260 council properties, despite these homes being essential in addressing local housing need.

In Woodberry Down, some residents considered their new homes as an improvement on their old properties, but this was mainly due to the poor conditions that they had to endure on the estate before it was regenerated.¹¹⁰ However, even 'good' regeneration can impact different residents in different ways. Some residents appreciated the modern design and amenities in the new flats on Woodberry Down, while others thought that the new builds were flimsy in comparison to the solidity of their former homes and new facilities were 'not for us', but built for wealthier incoming residents instead. Other residents felt that new blocks of flats were designed like hotels, which contributed to feelings of isolation and loss of community.¹¹¹



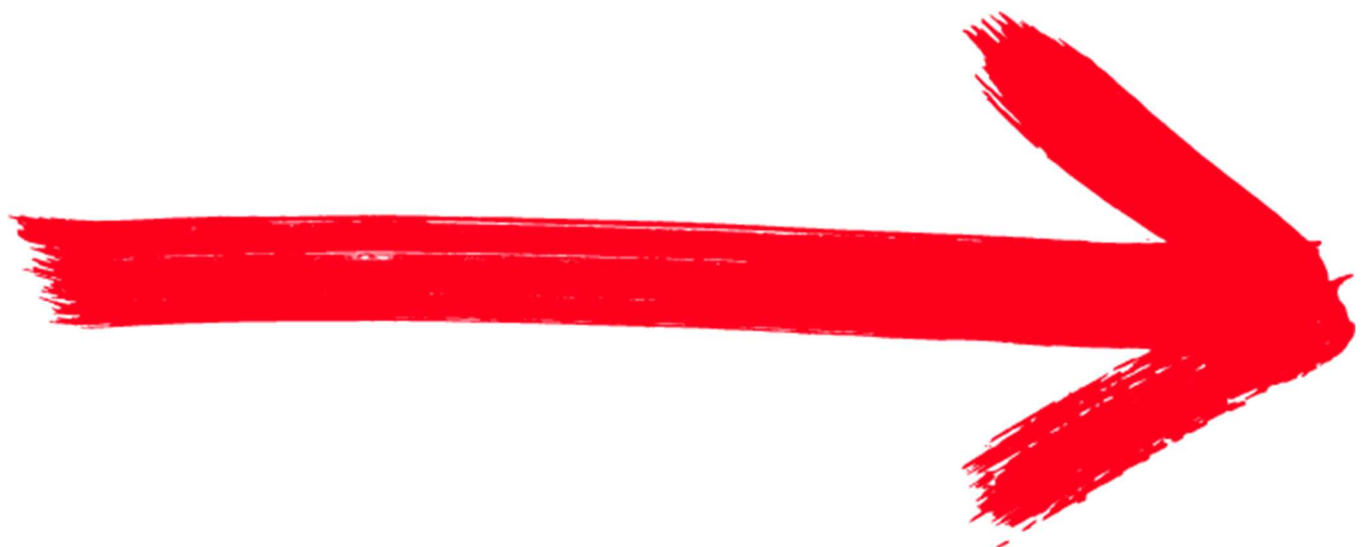
What is considered to be good practice in estate regeneration?

The Central Estates in Birmingham have been cited as an example of relatively successful regeneration.¹¹² Although the scheme was driven by both state and private sector interests, it is argued to have delivered real material gains for existing residents rather than producing purely negative outcomes. Residents' protests about the levels of disrepair on the estate were a catalyst for regeneration, and they were reported as being broadly supportive of the project. Although the regeneration took longer to complete than initially planned, it largely managed to achieve the main objectives: better-quality housing, a mix of tenures, a new school, parks, community and health facilities, and commercial opportunities. Improved energy efficiency in a wider variety of high-quality new build and refurbished social housing was also regarded as a benefit to residents.

There was little to no evidence of direct displacement, suggesting a comparatively well-managed and regulated regeneration process with meaningful resident involvement.¹¹³ The original plans proposed demolishing 1,400 homes and refurbishing another 1,400 out of 2,900 council properties, alongside the construction of 2,500 new mixed-tenure homes. Initially, 550 of the new homes were designated as affordable, mostly social rented housing. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, the developer stopped building and sold two shell-stage blocks to a housing co-operative, which were then used as additional social housing. There are still legitimate questions about who benefitted most from the project, whether the regeneration amounted to intentional gentrification, and whether the improvements are sustainable. Murie¹¹⁴ argues that, had the regeneration not taken place, continued disinvestment and disrepair would have been harmful to the local community and may have led to gentrification anyway.

An article by Bellamy¹¹⁵ examines a regeneration project on an anonymised social housing estate in the Northwest of England and identifies what could be considered a relatively positive process. It also shows how potentially positive outcomes of improved energy efficiency were later undermined by external factors. The housing association that owns the estate made attempts to engage with residents in a scheme involving partial demolition, refurbishment, and retrofit of energy-efficient materials to existing homes. The project included the demolition and replacement of 124 social homes, the retrofit of a further 94 homes and the construction of 166 mixed-tenure properties.

The housing association provided detailed information about the scheme and the expected timescales, and residents could choose whether they wanted works carried out on their homes. An empty property was used as a demonstration unit to help residents make informed decisions, and compensation was offered for redecoration needed after works. Although some residents were unhappy about delays, unnecessary damage, or what they felt was tokenistic participation and lack of genuine choice, many were satisfied with both the process and the completed work. Overall, the project was successful in improving energy efficiency and the quality of homes. However, any financial savings that residents might have gained through improved efficiency were offset by high inflation and energy prices,¹¹⁶ highlighting how low-income residents remain vulnerable to energy market pressures shaped by external events.



CONCLUSION



Conclusion

Effective resident engagement is essential in ensuring people living in estates selected for regeneration can influence decisions, are kept well informed, and benefit from rather than bearing the costs of changes to their neighbourhood.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed here suggests that estate regeneration is not simply a neutral programme of physical renewal, but a contested policy process shaped by conflicting political and economic priorities. The official discourse communicated by the government, local authorities, and property developers, acknowledges that estate regeneration can be challenging for residents. However, it is generally portrayed as a relatively benign process that can address housing needs, stimulate economic growth and improve disadvantaged residents' social outcomes. The evidence reviewed here shows that these aims are often undermined by market-led funding models, demolition-led approaches, and weak protections for existing communities.

Different government policies aimed at estate renewal have produced some material improvements, but they have also often facilitated the privatisation of public housing and the remaking of low-income neighbourhoods for wealthier groups. Many estates are in a poor condition following decades of disinvestment and critics argue that estate regeneration is often a euphemism for state-led gentrification, which mostly benefits property developers and private investors while causing considerable harm to disadvantaged and marginalised communities living in social housing estates.

Across much of the literature, regeneration increases the total number of homes but frequently reduces the stock of secure, genuinely affordable council housing, displaces residents, and reproduces inequalities rather than resolving them. The evidence reviewed here shows that regeneration has a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, female-led single parent households, and people with long-term mental and/or physical health conditions, because these groups are more likely to live in social housing. Regeneration can also expose residents to prolonged uncertainty, poor temporary accommodation conditions, displacement into more deprived areas, and the erosion of established support networks and community ties. Projects that encounter years or even decades of delays can exacerbate the harmful effects of estate regeneration on residents.

There is little evidence that regeneration reliably improves social outcomes for existing social tenants, while leaseholders are often priced out and subject to compulsory purchase processes. Rather than consistently producing social cohesion, mixed-tenure redevelopment often generates new class and tenure divisions between social tenants and private homeowners.

Good regeneration is achievable, but the literature suggests it depends on stronger public investment, meaningful resident engagement and power sharing, robust protection of council housing, and a clear preference for refurbishment over demolition where viable. Effective resident engagement is essential in ensuring people living in estates selected for regeneration can influence decisions, are kept well informed, and benefit from rather than bearing the costs of changes to their neighbourhood.

Further research is needed to improve understanding of viability, cost assumptions, and why demolition is so often presented as more cost-effective than refurbishment. This would provide a clearer picture of how viability arguments can limit the possibility of achieving net gains in social housing through regeneration, and what level of public investment would be required to deliver high-quality regeneration that genuinely benefits existing residents. Future research could also address remaining evidence gaps on the displacement of disadvantaged communities and the impact of estate regeneration on residents' health.

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