PUBLIC HOUSING: A LONDON RENAISSANCE
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Kenneth Campbell was head of the London County Council (LCC) and then the Greater London Council (GLC) housing design department, from 1960 to 1974. In charge of anything up to 250 people at one time, his was the largest department of its type in the UK. The department hired the brightest young architects of their day, many of whom later went on to make a name for themselves in private practice. Campbell personified the architect who committed to public service and to delivering high-quality homes for Londoners, a commitment forged in his early career working for the Miners’ Welfare Commission and with Sir Patrick Abercrombie on the County of London Plan.

In the immediate post-war period local authorities across the land had active architects’ departments—more than 50 per cent of the profession were public servants—but Margaret Thatcher’s policies of privatisation in the 1980s closed them all down—the GLC itself disappearing as a result of her frustrations with the left wing policies of Leader Ken Livingstone who was to re-emerge 25 years later as the first elected Mayor of London.

The housing associations and the private sector were supposed to deliver the homes that the country needed. Except they didn’t. Graphs of post-war completion show a balance between the volume of homes delivered by the public and private sectors up until the late 70s; by 1990 public housing disappears from the graph altogether. In spite of these added responsibilities, the private sector failed to fill the gap—its output has remained pretty consistent over the last 50 years. It was clear that the market was not going to provide as Mrs Thatcher hoped.

It took some time for the penny to drop, but in recent years authorities have begun to realise that they need to deliver more homes themselves if they are to meet their target for growth. Supported by government policies that have encouraged greater entrepreneurialism in the public sector, local authorities are creating their own in-house departments as well as setting up companies to deliver new housing. The devolution of the Housing Revenue Account and the lifting of the borrowing cap have all helped.

The Mayor has set up a Home Building Capacity Fund to support skills in local boroughs and he has set up Public Practice—a social enterprise to help build the public sector’s capacity to deliver homes and shape better places. It’s not quite the GLC—but it’s a part of rebalancing the way we deliver housing in the capital. In this report we look at how local authorities are making better use of public land, working with the private sector and housing associations to deliver an increasing percentage of the homes Londoners need.
... Good work must be safeguarded in spite of pressure of haste entailed by urgency. Nothing must hold up the provision of homes, yet the homes themselves must be as good as the money will buy, both in accommodation and style.

A

fter the Housing Act of Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1980, housebuilding by local authorities ground to a halt, only to be revived by the government of Gordon Brown in 2007 and further encouraged by reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) in 2011. New delivery vehicles, the lifting of the HRA borrowing cap in 2018 and funding by the Mayor of London mean that boroughs are starting to deliver more housing than at any time in the last 40 years.

To many, public housing embodies the visible support and intervention of the state when the private sector cannot ensure good-quality, affordable homes for people on low incomes—households who cannot afford to rent from a private landlord or to buy their own home. But in line with massive economic, social and political shifts, there is now much greater awareness that priced-out working households should be prioritised for subsidised housing alongside those in the greatest need. The provision of public housing that is of high quality, suitably located and affordable has therefore become a barometer of London’s health and success as an economically and socially sustainable city.

Today, the urgency of the capital’s housing crisis has stimulated rejuvenated ambitions, so that for the first time since the 1960s and 1970s many London councils have been building new homes. In recent years, many London boroughs have been setting up their own local development companies, with the aim of accelerating the delivery of new homes; more than half (17) have already done so. Other councils have focused on a different direct delivery approach, sometimes as a result of political decisions. Yet, even with more resources at their disposal, councils still need to work together with private developers and housing associations in order to provide the number of new, high-quality and affordable homes desperately needed.

With the Mayor’s commitment to accommodating London’s growth within its existing boundaries, densification and intensification are essential considerations for boroughs in order to meet housing targets. But in many London boroughs there is also a renewed sense of civic purpose: a return to a more holistic approach that recognises how local authorities have a responsibility not just to provide services and duty of care to their residents, but also high-quality, pleasant and affordable places to live and to work—places that can also support the sustainable growth of the capital.

The need to renew decades-old public housing and to build new homes directly affects thousands of Londoners, however, politicians and the industry are now recognising that success can be achieved only by putting residents at the heart of the process. Working closely with residents at all stages—and beyond, for maintenance and management—does not just mean solving immediate local issues; done well, it can also generate wider advocacy. The challenge of demanding housing targets requires more central government funding and streamlined methods of procurement, but quality—in engaging and empowering communities, in design, in delivery and management, and in every other aspect—must be the priority running through public housing projects from start to finish.
1918

Armistice Programme

Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George promises to deliver ‘homes fit for heroes’

Tudor Walters Report highlighted poor condition of nation’s housing and called for design standards as well as standardised housing types

The Housing and Town Planning Act—the Addison Act—set out how the state should intervene to assist local authorities in the delivery of housing

1921

Beacontree Estate, LCC, 1921–35: over 25,000 homes, the largest public housing estate in the world at the time

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1930

Housing Act 1930—the Greenwood Act—Labour Government. Makes housing a national responsibility. Local authorities required to draw up slum clearance plans

1939–1945

Start of WW2—during the inter-war period local councils built a total of 1.1 million houses

200,000 homes destroyed, three million suffered damage.

Barlow Report (1940) led to Uthwatt Report (1942)—‘nationalisation of development’

Subsidies increased to encourage local authorities to build more general needs housing

1949

Housing Subsidies Act—offered local authorities higher subsidies the more storeys they were prepared to build—encouraging greater use of high rise

1951

New Towns Act

1949

Aneurin Bevan’s act removed the restriction that public housing should be only for the working classes but ‘where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street ... the living tapestry of a mixed community’

Housing Subsidies Act—offered local authorities higher subsidies the more storeys they were prepared to build—encouraging greater use of high rise

1948

Housing Act and the birth of the Housing Corporation

Sterling crisis. Public spending falls

1952

Parker Morris—Homes for Today and Tomorrow, sets generous standards for public housing

1947

Election campaign: Conservatives and Labour both commit to increasing new home build to 500,000 a year. Labour win

Subsidies for private developers introduced

Cheap Money policy put in place—until Spring 1952—to help restore conditions for industry, commerce and the supply of housing. The longest period in which Britain enjoyed continuously low interest rates
The timeline shows key political and housing delivery moments from 1918 to the present.

- 1964–72: Lillington Gardens, Darbourne & Darke
- 1968–72: Dawson's Heights, Kate Macintosh
- 1971: Thatcher "Fair rents" mandatory rebate schemes for council tenants introduced
- 1973–74: Sterling crisis and IMF bail-out conditional on public spending cuts
- 1975: Right to Buy introduced by Michael Heseltine Secretary of State for the Environment
- 1976: Housing benefit system established
- 1977: Housing Act facilitated the transfer of council housing to housing associations—'stock transfer'
- 1978: Deregulation of private renting
- 1979: Home ownership reaches same proportion as those renting
- 1980: Housing Act & Local Government Act
- 1981: Grants for housing associations enabling large-scale development
- 1982: Homeless Persons Act places duty for the first time on local authorities to house homeless people in priority need. This had a major impact on those being housed in council schemes
- 1983: Housing Act & Local Government Act
- 1984: Silchester Housing, Haworth Tompkins
- 1985: Housing Act & Local Government Act
- 1986: Decent homes programme introduced "ensure that all social housing meets set standards of decency by 2010"
- 1987: Barker Review—Housing Supply published
- 1988: "Homes for the future" plan increases target to 240k homes per year by 2016
- 1989: Global Financial Crisis
- 1990: Mayor of London announces Homebuilding Capacity fund to boost planning and housing teams and help local authorities deliver more council, social and affordable homes
- 1991: Housing and Planning Act
- 1992: Lifting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap
- 1993: Reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)
- 1994: Localism Act provides local authorities with powers to act as companies leading to the setting up of housing delivery vehicles
- 1995: Janesville Housing, David Chipperfield
- 1996: Southwark Housing, Alison Brooks
- 1997: North London Housing, Alison Brooks
- 1998: Southwark Housing, David Chipperfield
- 1999: Southwark Housing, David Chipperfield
- 2000: Southwark Housing, David Chipperfield
- 2001: Southwark Housing, David Chipperfield
- 2002: BedZED, Bill Dunster Architects
- 2003: Sustainable communities plan—targets extra 200,000 homes in London & SE by 2016
- 2004: Starter home initiatives for key workers launched
- 2005: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2006: Reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)
- 2008: London Housing Design Guide published
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- 2043: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2044: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2045: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2046: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2047: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2048: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2049: London Housing Design Guide published
- 2050: London Housing Design Guide published

The timeline shows key political and housing delivery moments from 1918 to the present.
London locations with over 75 per cent social housing

Affordable housing completions from 1991/92 to 2016/17

Affordable housing starts funded by the GLA/HCA from 2008/09 to 2017/18