

FEATURES London's housing crisis

Soaring rents and house prices are depriving young families of the chance of a stable home and destroying long-established communities as people are forced to move out of the city · By LIZ DODD

No place like home

AT A RECENT, church-run mayoral hustings in London, candidates were asked to outline how they would tackle the city's housing crisis. After Labour's Sadiq Khan, the Conservatives' Zac Goldsmith, Lib Dem Caroline Pidgeon et al. had finished speaking, the 200-strong audience – most of them evangelical Christians – were asked to raise their hands if they were confident that any of the candidates could deliver a solution. Five people did.

Whoever wins the election on 5 May, housing problems will be high on their agenda. Figures from City Hall planners obtained by the Green Party group on the London Assembly show that 214 estate regeneration schemes – which often involve the demolition of so-called sink estates – currently have planning permission. These will result in a net loss of 7,326 social rented homes.

For a generation of Londoners, owning a home in the capital has become an impossible dream: according to the housing charity Shelter, by 2020, first-time buyers will need an income of £106,000 to buy in London. Prices are already 10.06 times the average annual salary. This generation – “Generation Rent” – faces an unstable future of private tenancy, at the mercy of landlords in a city where the cost of renting is predicted to rise by 25 per cent over the next five years.

As Londoners are priced out of the city, they create upheaval in parishes – particularly in the fast-gentrifying outer reaches of east and south-east London. In the past, many people born in a parish would have married and gone on to raise families there; now, according to priests, parish communities have such a transient population that it is hard to get to know anyone at all.

TOWER HAMLETS, in east London, has one of the highest population turnovers of any London borough: about 20 per cent per year. Fr Michael Dunne, parish priest at the church of Our Lady and St Catherine of Siena in Bow and Dean of Tower Hamlets, said young families who would once have comprised a large part of his congregation were being driven out of the area. “Even people in council accommodation have to move out because they need more space and the council doesn't have any,”

he said. “That's exacerbated by the enormous waiting list for flats and rising rents for private accommodation, which go up about 12 per cent every year.”

He described a trend of people moving out to areas along the Central Line, which stretches east through London into Essex, terminating at Epping. “The immediacy is children,” he explained. “You get a young couple who you welcome, they begin to assimilate into parish life, and then – it can be eight or 18 months – they tell you they're moving out. The moment they have a child they need to move because all they can afford to rent in Tower Hamlets, even with two salaries, is a tiny flat.”

Young professionals were often keen to get involved with parish life, Fr Dunne said, but when they were priced out they had to abandon their commitments. “What's so unsettling is that we never seem to have people who move in to stay. You just assume that the new couple – of which there are quite a few – will come and go again within 18 months.”

FOR THOSE who do remain, life can be difficult: a multi-faith food bank supported by Fr Dunne's church has seen demand rise inexorably. Seventy per cent of its clients have somewhere to live for the moment but, according to the priest: “They can't afford to keep going. They spend more on their rental income than they do on anything else.”

The story is the same further east. Fr Sean Connolly, parish priest at St Stephen's and St Nicholas' church in Manor Park, Newham, spoke of the pastoral challenges that arise in a parish constantly in flux. “Once upon a time, I would have wanted to spend some time with them, to get to know them a little bit, visit them and so on,” he said. “But you can't because people are just on the move again; they've come and gone. It's really difficult to build any kind of sense of community. People don't have any sense that they can put down roots here with any confidence.”

Corrupt landlords and sudden rent increases also drive people away, he explained. In 2014, Shelter found that Newham had the highest rate of evictions of any local authority in England: one in 34 households had received a possession claim in the past year. One of Fr

Connolly's parishioners due to speak to me was evicted on the day of the interview.

Sr Una, an Ursuline Sister who has lived in Newham all her life, said that many people in the parish lived in substandard housing. “There is a major problem of overcrowding because so many families live in one or two bedroom flats: sometimes parents don't have a room to themselves. House prices are escalating, in part because of Crossrail [the upcoming East-West train service]. We live in an ordinary terraced street and houses around us are selling for half a million.”

As a result, she added, people were moving out of the borough “very, very rapidly”. Those who remained were often too busy earning money to get involved with the church.

Further south in Poplar, Sr Christine Frost FCJ described how social cleansing and private landlords had driven families and young people out of their parishes. Standing in the shadow of Canary Wharf, she explained: “Landlords are being offered good sums for their properties, and there doesn't seem to be any protection for their tenants.”

Sr Christine, who manages the group Neighbours in Poplar, listed her clients – a single mother with four children given a week to leave her private rental; a family in social housing suddenly moved to Southall, on the other side of London. “The three children have demanded that they stay in school in Poplar,” she said. “So their mother travels from Southall with them every day, finds something to do around Poplar and takes them home in the evening.” As we spoke, Sr Christine was arranging donations for a woman, also with three young children, who had been moved from a hostel in Barking to an unfurnished room near Heathrow – she had to leave behind the sleeping bags the family was using because they were too much to carry.

SR CHRISTINE WARNED that the situation could worsen under the Housing and Planning Bill, now before Parliament, which proposes a £40,000 income threshold – including any student loans – above which people must pay market rents. “It's almost as if they've tried to find ways to make it as painful as possible,” she said.

Through its parishes and organisations,



the Church in London does what it can. *Foxes Have Holes*, the recent report by the Christian think tank Ekklesia, laid out a 10-point plan to tackle the housing crisis. Earlier this month, Caritas [Anchor House](#), in collaboration with Newham Citizens and parishes, successfully campaigned for the housing development planned for the former West Ham football ground to include at least 25 per cent affordable homes.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster, who has spoken out passionately on the importance of affordable housing, told me the crisis is a church issue. "The lack of provision of social housing and the increasing cost of the private housing market is hitting families and the wider support network that we all need," he said. "London's services depend on those on lower incomes and there is a clear need for greater provision of social

housing. Efforts to address this shortage should be supported."

Back at those mayoral hustings, candidates proposed different solutions. Goldsmith and Pidgeon pledged to build 50,000 more homes, with Goldsmith planning to reclaim land from the public sector. Khan said he would build houses for Londoners, not foreign investors, and pledged to institute a rent cap; the Green Party's Siân Berry said she would stop destroying social housing that already exists.

That their pledges failed to convince the audience suggests it is hope, not solutions, that Londoners are short of. Sr Christine called for a church-wide campaign to meet that need. "The bishops should be far more involved in this," she said. "These are our people, our communities."

