

London's population set to reach record level

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FULL TEXT

Numbers will soon pass 1939 peak of 8.615m, but many say that without vital investment the capital will fall victim to its own success

It could be a graduate fresh out of university who has come to seek her fortune with a tech start-up. It could be a doctor from Mumbai or a Polish labourer. Or it could be an East End baby born within earshot of the Bow Bells. Whoever it is, at some point in the next few weeks - probably early February - a new arrival will push London's population to a record level, beyond the previous peak of 8.615m in 1939. According to forecasts, the figure is set to hit 10m by the mid-2030s and exceed 11m by 2050.

But just as London celebrates being richer, more diverse and more dynamic than ever, it is in danger of falling victim to its own success. Rising house prices and rents are pushing workers farther out of the centre, transport networks are crowded and resources such as energy and water are coming under strain.

According to a report published this week by London First, the business lobby group, demand for public transport is set to rise by half by 2036, the date it thinks the capital's population will reach the 10m mark. About 50,000 more homes are needed each year yet fewer than half that are being built. David Lutton, who led the London First report, said the lack of affordable housing was "becoming a serious issue for businesses" who were concerned they would lose qualified workers forced to look for jobs elsewhere.

"With Londoners moving farther out to find more affordable accommodation, the transport network needs to keep up . . . because the jobs - in finance, tourism, leisure and hospitality, for instance - are still in the centre," he added. "We are increasing the population because this is a successful city of economic opportunity but we can turn that into a negative if we don't plan for it."

Another report by the mayor's office, entitled London 2050: Bigger and Better , calls the capital "a magnet for talent, investment and visitors" but warns its inhabitants face a "diminished quality of life" unless preparations for a more crowded city start now.

By the middle of the century, the report says, London will require an additional 1.5m homes, a 20 per cent increase in energy supply, and more schools, transport capacity, green space and digital connectivity. Boris Johnson, mayor, spoke this week of the "stark needs that will face this city over the next half century".

Mr Johnson has promoted numerous big infrastructure projects while City Hall and Transport for London have plans for many more. The Crossrail train link will open in 2018; the Thames Tidal Tunnel, or "super sewer" , is due for completion in 2023; and the Silvertown road tunnel under the river east of Tower Bridge could open as soon as 2021 if it clears all planning hurdles.

Added to that are proposals for Crossrail 2 (possibly ready by 2030), the extension of the Bakerloo line to southeast London (around 2040), three more river crossings between Silvertown and Dartford, more cycle superhighways and even an inner orbital tunnel. People close to Mr Johnson believe plans for an estuary airport hub - "Boris Island" - will be revitalised once the other options have been tested and rejected.

Yet the London First report highlights other threats to the city's status: a perceived hostility in the UK to immigrants and the EU , a shortage of homegrown talent to fill higher skilled jobs, particularly in the tech sector, and the capital's lack of control over its finances compared with other wealthy cities such as New York.

Just as Scotland is winning increasing powers over taxation and spending, London is also calling for greater devolution to give it more control over revenues generated in the city.

"[As a city] we know what we need to do," says Mr Lutton, "but having to go to central government every year asking for money doesn't give London flexibility. It needs more autonomy."

The new population record will be another milestone in the capital's recovery from the economic doldrums of the 1960s and 1970s, when the docks and factories were closing and trade with the Commonwealth was falling.

"By the mid-1980s London's population was at its lowest [since the 1939 peak] but the huge increase in banking and financial services attracted a lot of young people and started the trends we're seeing now," said Jen Kavanagh, senior curator of contemporary history at the Museum of London. "Higher wages and better social opportunities made it a very desirable place to be."

Fran Tonkiss, professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, said she was optimistic London would cope with its growing numbers. "The people swelling the population are young, economically active migrants," she said. "They may be a strain on certain types of infrastructure but not on welfare."

But housing was a much greater problem, she added. "In the 1930s and later postwar period, London had a mixed housing economy. Now it is dominated by big private providers and it's not in their interest to bring in large amounts of housing even if they could."

London today is radically different to the prewar version yet there are still striking parallels. For example, the 1930s saw rapid technological change: more electric lighting, a boom in manufacturing (by 1938 there were nearly 40,000 factories employing 750,000 people) and growing numbers travelling by motor transport.

People flocked to the city, which remained largely inured to the depression felt elsewhere. By 1939 one in five of the overall population lived in London, crammed into a far smaller space than today's metropolis.

Yet almost every Londoner would have been born in the UK and waves of postwar immigration sparked racial tension - the Met Police did not hire its first black officer until 1967. By contrast, in 2015 those Londoners describing themselves as "white British" are in a minority.

View from the streets

Changing skyline shows 'that this is a major city'

Selwan Amin, 36, was born in Baghdad but has lived in the UK for 30 years. He rents a home in Purley, south London, and works as an IT consultant for a company in the city centre.

Mr Amin moved to the capital from Manchester in 2002. "Like so many people I was driven by [the search for] work," he said. After two years, however, he moved out. "I lived in a couple of places . . . but to be honest I didn't like London first time around. I was missing the university lifestyle, and when you're new in the city you're on your own."

He returned in 2007 "and that was when I fell in love with the place". He enjoys the diversity - of people, activities and attractions.

He says London is "very proud" of its rapidly changing skyline - demonstrating the amount of investment. "It declares to the rest of the world that this is a major city."

Jessica Osborn, 20, is a native Londoner. She works at a fruit and vegetable stall in Borough Market, not far from the City, a former wholesale food exchange that has become more of a tourist spot in recent years.

"The best thing about London? That I live so close to the centre: my commute is only half an hour, though the train is packed. The worst is that the centre is so busy."

Ms Osborn lives with her parents in Beckenham, southeast London. Apart from the altered character of the market, the biggest change she has seen is the increase in high-rise buildings. "I love London, but I wouldn't want to live here when I'm older," she said. She is considering moving to Italy.

Gearoid O'Rourke, 28, a software designer, moved to London from Dublin four years ago. "I had been running my own design company but I wanted to work in a tech start-up. I got to know some people in London and it seemed more active on that front," he said.

Mr O'Rourke and his wife, an assistant head teacher, rent a flat in Stoke Newington in the borough of Hackney. "We

lived in Camberwell and considered buying there, but we wanted to move to a more happening place. We couldn't afford to buy in [central] Hackney, even though we are both in good jobs."

He commutes to Vauxhall in south London, where he works for hassle.com, an online service that books home cleaners. He finds the daily commute the worst aspect of living in the capital. "But we are both culture vultures and love everything London has to offer."

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Credit: By Barney Thompson

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