



More homes in less space: Living at high density in London

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About the project



London has historically been a low-rise city of terraced houses and private gardens. However, if it is to accommodate a rapidly growing population without impinging on the Green Belt, as Mayor Sadiq Khan has promised, then new developments across the capital will inevitably be at higher densities—that is, more housing units per plot of land. The new London Plan calls for residential densification as an urgent policy priority.

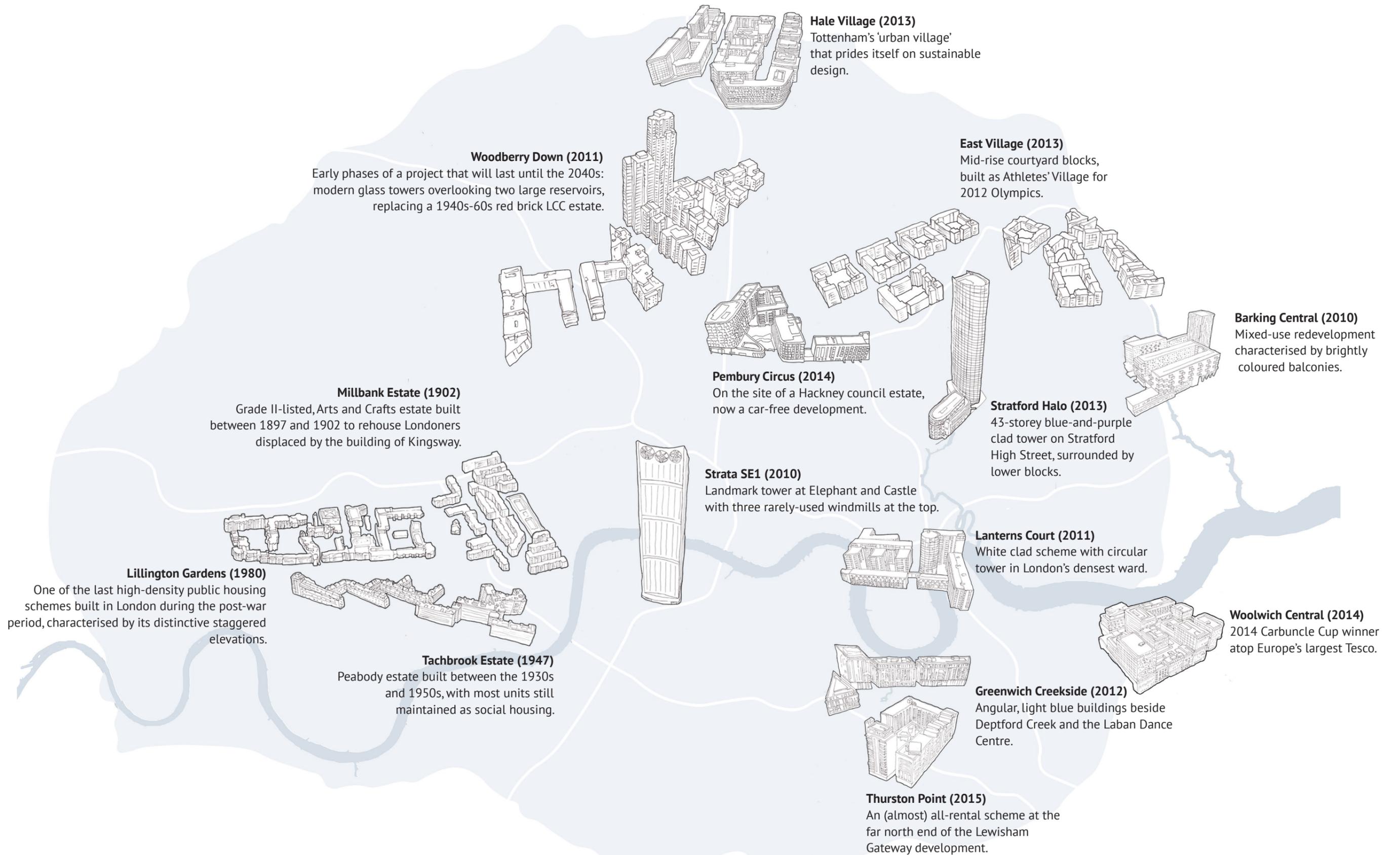
Dense new towers, courtyard blocks and riverside homes are popping up across London, but there has been little research asking residents themselves what works and what doesn't. Since 2016, a team of LSE researchers has been investigating how residents experience living in high-density housing¹.

This report summarises our findings. The full report can be found here: tinyurl.com/LSEDensity

We researched 14 high-density schemes, most in the eastern half of London (see map overleaf). Their density ranged from 141 to 1,295 dwellings per hectare and they represented a variety of building typologies (from tower blocks to lower-rise courtyard developments). Eleven schemes were built in the last ten years, and we also looked at three historic 20th-century schemes, all in Pimlico. Using online surveys, interviews and focus groups, we asked about physical characteristics and social and operational issues - who lives in these developments, why they are living there, residents' day-to-day lives, and how they feel about their communities and wider neighbourhoods.

¹: This project was undertaken in three phases, funded respectively by LSE Cities, the Greater London Authority and the LSE Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund

Case study location map



We heard from more than 500 residents...



Who lives in these homes?

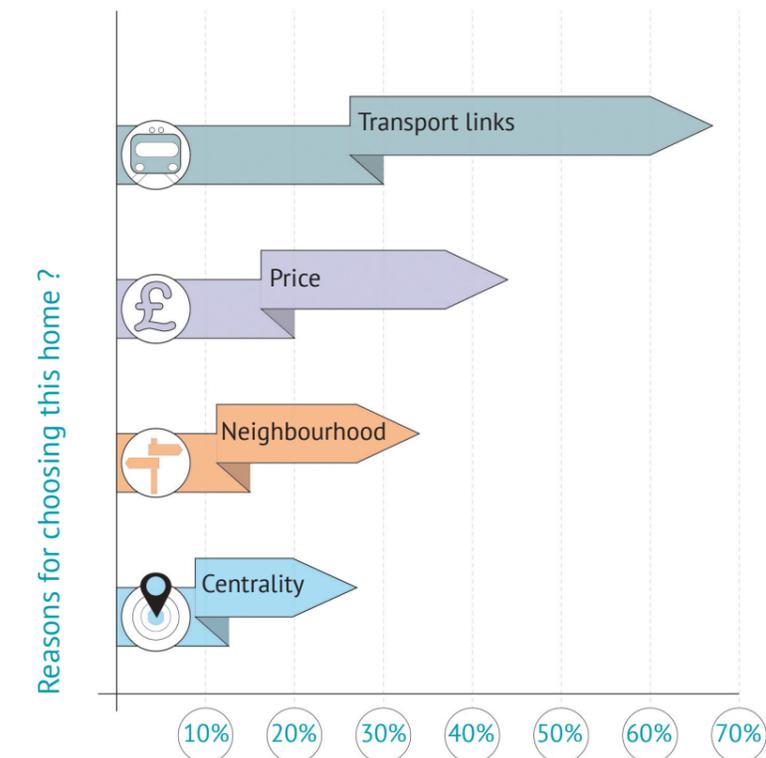
- About 50% of respondents were owners (including shared ownership), whilst 35% rented privately and 12% were social housing tenants.
- 78% of respondents lived in households with one or two persons, while in London as a whole 61% of households have one or two people.
- 71% of respondents were between 20 and 40 years old.
- Some 14% of households responding to our survey had children. This compares to 31% of London households overall.

- About 60% of respondents were from the UK, with the bulk of the rest from elsewhere in Europe.
- There was a wide range of household incomes amongst respondents, from 8% who reported incomes of less than £10,000 per annum to 6% saying they earned over £150,000.
- In most new schemes, a high proportion of households spent more on housing than the widely accepted benchmark of 1/3 of income

(I have a) "sense of (the) fragmented nature of previous/historic tenants of the area and the new 'posh' people."

(29-year-old Woodberry Down resident)

How do residents feel about their homes ?



- Overall, respondents were satisfied with their homes. Most of the case-study sites are very well connected, and residents appreciated the easy access to public transport, the modern design and good views; in the bigger, master-planned communities they praise the integration of green space and the range of amenities.
- There was a notable lack of pushback against the high-density nature of the housing in and of itself.
- 63% stated that they planned to remain a resident of their development for a number of years.

Why move to a high-density development?

- Overall, the top reason for moving into the case-study schemes was transport links. The second was price.

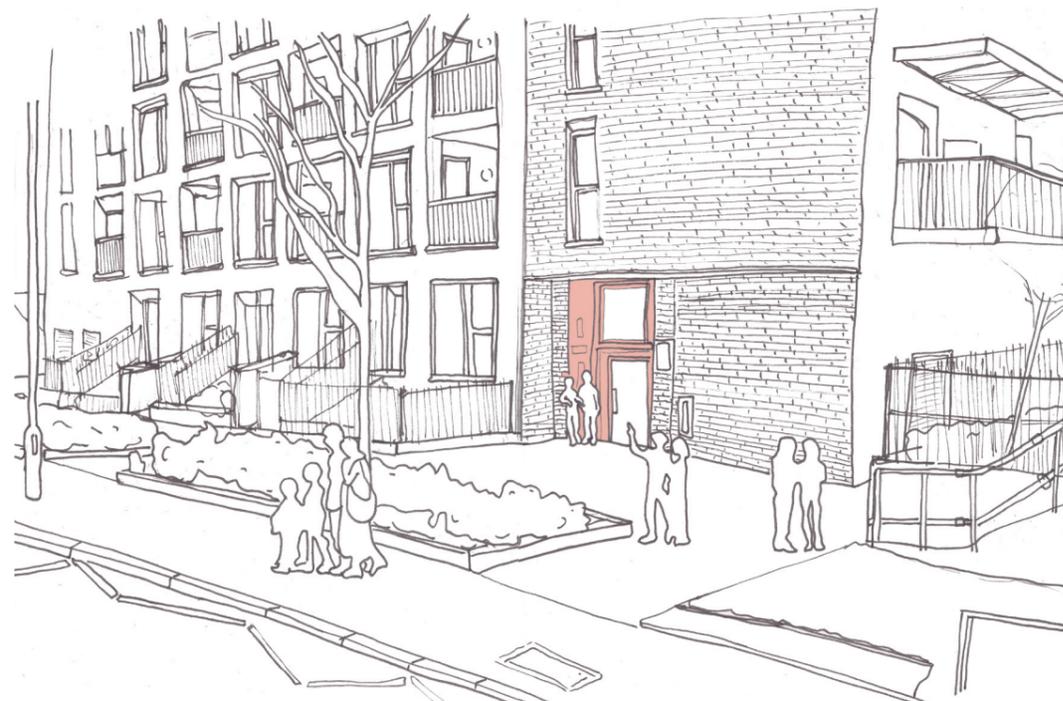
Family living

- Only 13% of respondents had children (compared to 31% of all London households) --this despite the fact that 71% were between 20 and 40 years old.
- Social tenants were much more likely to have children than owner occupiers or private tenants.
- Many childless respondents said they expected to move to a house with a garden when they started a family. Others anticipated having to move out due to affordability issues.

"I won't raise a family here unless there are no other options financially. My idea of a family home is very much a house."

(26-year-old Thurston Point resident)

Community and neighbourhood



- Unsurprisingly, people who had lived longer at their address knew more people in their scheme. Those respondents who had lived in the same place for more than 40 years (in the older Pimlico developments) tended to know at least 7 people. Recent arrivals who had lived in their homes for less than one year were more likely to say they didn't know anyone (49%).

- The number of social connections varied considerably by tenure: private tenants knew fewest people (77% knew 3 or fewer), social tenants know most (50% knew at least 7).

- A critical mass of long-term residents seems to contribute to a sense of community and security in a development.

- Some respondents in the new schemes (mostly childless, younger people) said emphatically that they had no interest in being part of a community based on where they lived.

- It takes time for schemes to integrate with wider neighbourhoods: 71% of people living in old schemes agreed that they felt they belonged in the neighbourhood compared to only 50% in the new schemes.

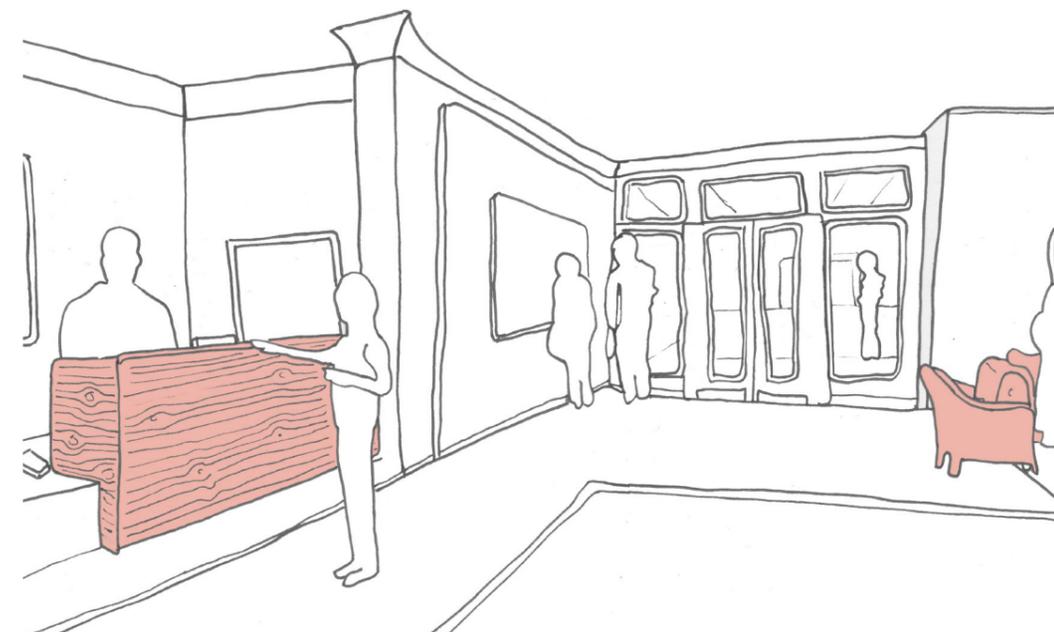
- Respondents in some new high-density schemes felt disconnected from the wider neighbourhoods. This was more often the case in relatively deprived parts of London.

- Many residents had a relationship with the neighbourhood that was more practical/functional (proximity to services/transport) than about the local culture and heritage.

"I think that a community is there, though I wouldn't necessarily seek out a close friendship with most people in the building just off the back of them being in the building."

(40-year-old Woolwich Central resident)

Management



- There was a wide range of service charges (from £2.39 to £5.07 per year per sq ft) and management arrangements in the blocks studied. However, we found no strong correlation between these service charges and how residents rated the facilities and services.

- Residents in some schemes were concerned by the rate of increase of service charges, which they saw as unrelated to the services they received.

- Physical presence matters: people like dealing with known and trusted staff. Concierges are very popular in those developments where they exist.

- Residents of new developments had high expectations in terms of building functionality. In both old schemes and new, failures (broken lifts, etc.) were a regular source of disappointment, and anger was often directed at management.

"It feels there is no community here. The only person I see is the security person."

(27-year-old Woolwich Central resident)

Built form



Density per se did not seem to be a strong determinant of resident satisfaction: rather, what affected residents' experience was the quality of design and construction of the homes themselves and the outdoor areas, the neighbourhood setting and access to services.

- Residents identified three main physical issues in the new schemes:

1 Overheating. This was often seen as a consequence of centralised heating systems that they could not control. Residents of homes that were dual-aspect were less likely to report this as a problem (23%, vs 39% for those with single-aspect homes).

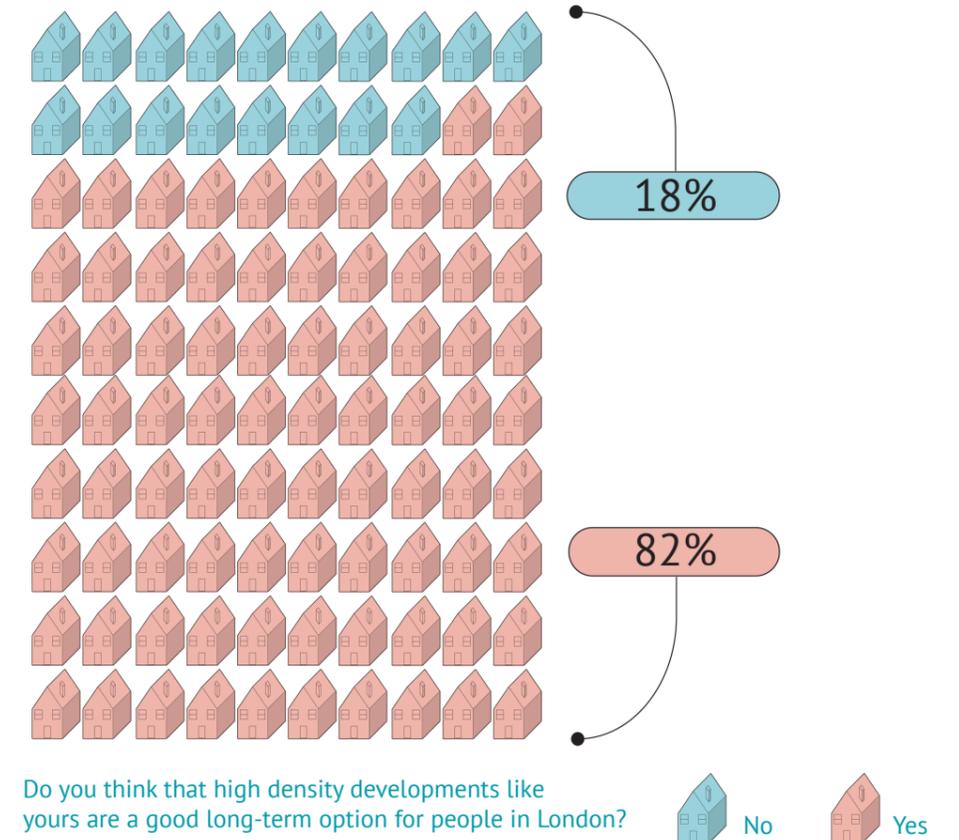
2 Noise. Some 42% of respondents said their developments were excessively noisy. This was from a range of sources both within and outside the developments, most notably the 'echo chamber' effect of some courtyard-type developments, proximity to roads/railways, and/or people being able to hear their neighbours through walls or ventilation systems. Many people said they faced a trade-off between noise (windows open) and overheating (windows shut)

3 Lack of storage. This was a particular problem for households with children.

"If you live in a flat, it is not a house and you have to accept to live differently"

(69-year-old, Lillington Gardens resident)

Developing recommendations



Our team is working with the GLA, residents, and built environment professionals to think about how we can translate these findings into specific recommendations for policy and practice. Our programme of workshops, site visits and media outreach began in Autumn 2018.

For more information, or to get in touch, please follow this link: <http://tiny.cc/LSEdensityproject>

