High population growth in the UK’s local authorities

UK population levels are expected to grow to 70 million by 2027. Many local authorities already face significant difficulties linked to population growth. This not only means that local authorities need more and more money to service their ever-expanding populations, it can also cause dissatisfaction among their residents.

The UK faces many issues that can be related to population growth. It has negative impacts on housing, infrastructure, education and healthcare. This briefing will illustrate how population growth currently impacts the local authorities that face the highest population growth rates. While it is possible to solve these challenges for a limited time, it is impossible to do so indefinitely. The government should see local authorities that top the growth charts as examples of what could happen elsewhere, and use them as a reminder that population stabilisation ought to be promoted.

Population growth in the UK

The UK’s population size has risen from 52.3 million in 1960 to 64.4 million in 2014.1 It is expected to reach 70 million by 2027.2

While UK population growth has predominantly been caused by natural growth due to higher birth than death rates since 1954, more than half of the increase of population since 1990 is ascribed to net migration.3,4

Differences between local authorities

There are significant population growth differences between areas in the UK. In fact, a limited number of areas could see their population size fall by 2022. However, most areas will experience population growth. The highest growth is expected in London, the South East and the East of the UK. The North East is projected to grow at the slowest rate. On average the projected growth rate is seven per cent.5

Image: ONS
Of all local authorities, Tower Hamlets is projected to see the highest population growth. It is projected that the population of this East London borough will increase by 22.1 per cent by mid-2022.6

The young age structure of Tower Hamlets — with 60 per cent of the population of child bearing age — explains the significantly higher births to deaths ratio of 5000 to 1000 individuals per year on average.7 A quarter of the anticipated population growth will be due to net inward migration.8

Housing

The UK faces a housing crisis nationally. While there is a demand of 240,000 new houses per year, only 120,000 properties are built annually.9 Housing supply is at its lowest level since the 1970s due to scarcity of available land and shortages of materials, such as bricks.10,11,12

At the same time, more individuals and households are becoming homeless. Between 2010 and 2013 the number of rough sleepers in England has increased by 37 per cent from 1,768 to 2,414.13 Moreover, approximately 1.2 million families were on local authorities’ waiting lists for housing in 2015. While this is an improvement compared to the 1.8 million on the lists in 2011, it is still much higher than in previous periods.14

Tower Hamlets faces an extreme housing crisis. This not only causes a significant challenge for its local government, it also causes worry and unrest among its residents. The following problems are recognised:

• Development of new houses is generally unaffordable for current residents. Newly-built properties are often marketed to foreign buyers, because residents are mostly too poor to afford them. Many residents believe that building projects are seen as a quick way of making lots of money and not as a genuine attempt to solve the housing crisis. Currently, 23,000 households are on the waiting list for social housing.15

• Residents fear that they will eventually be forced to leave Tower Hamlets, due to increasing rent prices. The fear of being forced out seems warranted, given that a recent study shows a stark decline of areas of acute deprivation in Tower Hamlets. Whilst this would appear to be positive news, the change is ascribed to gentrification, which means that a part of the previously deprived population is simply replaced.16 Frequent changes in population composition hinder community development, something which 98 per cent of Tower Hamlets residents regret.17

Image: The Conversation

• Rent increases mean that residents have to cut back on other expenses if they want to stay in their neighbourhoods.67
per cent of tenants asked had seen their rents increase in the past year. Leisure time and education-related expenses suffer most from this.19

- 16.4 per cent of Tower Hamlets properties are overcrowded, while 50.4 per cent have a zero occupancy rating. This impacts residents negatively. Children who have to share rooms with siblings are more likely to be sleep deprived and have a harder time concentrating while doing homework. A lack of space is also bad for mental health.21

- Residents in Tower Hamlets experience many problems with landlords and letting agents. This mainly concerns the physical state of the properties they rent. Damp walls and neglected maintenance are the major problems they face. More than 60 per cent of tenants were unhappy with the work done by their landlords.22 Tenants often do not dare to complain, because their landlords threaten to evict them if they keep complaining.23 Meanwhile, landlords and letting agents have an easy time letting their properties due to housing scarcity. As such they get away with poor maintenance and charging high rent.24

With Canary Warf located in the borough, and the City developing on its western border, Tower Hamlet is an attractive living location for professionals. It is predicted that this will lead to further rent increases and more housing problems.25

Education

In 2014, a shortfall of 63,000 primary school places was predicted for 2015 across the UK. More recently, 100,000 students missed out on their first choice of secondary school. In some areas half of all students were not allocated to their first choice of school, and around 1,000 students did not get a place in any of the six options they had listed.28

Statistically, London has the fewest applicants who receive an offer from their preferred school. On average, only 68.9 per cent of Londoners got their first choice. In Hammersmith and Fulham, 12 per cent of all applicants did not get into any of their six preferences and 48 per cent did not receive an offer for their first choice. In Southwark, 41 per cent did not get into their secondary school of choice.29

Altogether, the ten council areas that face the most difficulty have had to allocate places for 10,000 more pupils than they have room for.30

Lambeth

South London borough Lambeth’s population is predicted to double by 2020. Its schools are already overcrowded. This is problematic, because as school head Mark Clark noted in 2012:

“Many of our children come from cramped households, overcrowded homes with no outside space. They get here into a cramped school, more barriers for them in a far from ideal environment. It is a great challenge to create spaces within the school for children to learn and to be themselves.”21

By law, local authorities are obliged to provide a school place to each child within two miles from their home, but the law does not state that those locations need to be easily accessible for parents.
As a result, many parents face great inconveniences in getting their children to school, including one working mother from Brixton who said:

“I hope my daughter will not be getting a place in a school at the other end of Brixton because I won’t be able to work very many hours if I have to run from school to school.” 32

Even when parents move to a property near a school they like, there is no guarantee that their children will be able to attend the school. Moreover, siblings are increasingly being forced to attend different schools due to a lack of places, making the situation frustrating for children and parents alike.33 As Lambeth’s population is predicted to increase, these frustrations will probably increase alongside them.

Hampshire

London is far from the only area struggling with overcrowded schools. It has been predicted that there will be a shortfall of 1,778 places in Southampton in 2015 – 16. This number is the equivalent of three new schools.34

Three of Southampton’s secondary schools are teaching more students than their capacities officially allow.35 At the same time, the biggest capital funding programme ever has been launched to allow schools to meet demand at primary school level. While this approach works well, and arguably could work well for secondary schools, councillor Dan Jeffrey points out an obvious problem that local authorities face:

“We are planning a big investment in expanding places at secondary schools, but we need funding to do that.” 36

While more funding could be provided, this is no indefinite solution.

Infrastructure

London

Transport in London is already extremely overcrowded. The underground system transports up to 4,725 million passengers per day. Buses move around 6.25 million passengers every day, and there are 24,500 active taxis in the city.37

Transport for London has projected that 30 – 40 per cent of extra rail capacity will be necessary to meet the demands on the capital’s transport system in the next two decades.38 Currently, rail services carry, on average, 3.5 per cent more passengers than they are technically allowed to.39 It is hardly surprising that two-thirds of commuting Londoners are dissatisfied with the crowding of the rail services.40

Moreover, half of London’s population lives east of Tower Bridge. There are, however, only two bridges that allow for river crossing in this area, while there are 22 bridges and tunnels in the west. The area between the two eastern crossing routes is currently home to the most economically deprived London communities.41
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Norfolk

Outside London, population growth also creates infrastructure problems, as councils struggle to provide adequate infrastructure to support growing populations. West Norfolk Borough Council leader Nick Daubney stated:

“We’re being expected to deliver huge housing growth to West Norfolk and that means people need places to live, they need jobs and we certainly need proper infrastructure.”

Whilst the problem Mr Daubney highlights is of a different nature to the overcrowding London faces, it is a challenge for local authorities nonetheless. They need to meet the demands that come with increasing population levels, but without increasing resources, this is impossible.

Healthcare

Population growth in the UK places an increasing strain on the National Health Service (NHS). Hospitals are so full that patients are being discharged in the middle of the night when beds are required for other purposes.

Moreover, hospital overcrowding can lead to tragic events being more likely. At the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation, as many as 1,200 patients may have died unnecessarily due to poor care, and up to 500 patients died last year because they could not be helped sufficiently due to overcrowded hospitals. Of these 500, 350 patients were undiagnosed and 150 could not be offered a bed even though their condition required admittance.

Tower Hamlets

Population growth has caused greater deprivation in Tower Hamlets and this has a negative impact on the health of its residents.

“We are heading towards a public health crisis in London if we continue along this path. It’s shameful that London has levels of infectious disease that would embarrass many countries in the developing world.”

Sadiq Khan, London Mayoral candidate, drew the above comparison between London and the developing world in a recent speech and he is not the first person to have done so. Outrage was sparked in the early 2000s when Médecins du Monde, an organisation that is usually active in the developing world, set up a mobile clinic in Tower Hamlets. Alex Story, a resident of Tower Hamlets and a local election candidate, commented on this development, saying:

“Having a Third World medical charity based in the locality implies that the health care system is failing Britain...It’s an embarrassment, especially when so much money has been spent on improving medical services.”

While the NHS has tried to improve its facilities and service outreach in Tower Hamlets, it cannot be denied that the borough faces extremely high rates of tuberculosis (TB) and diabetes. Both of these are seen as diseases related to poverty. In general tuberculosis occurs more frequently in the UK than in other western European countries —
there were 7,892 cases in 2013, which equates to 12.3 cases per 100,000 residents. London accounts for one third of all incidences of TB in the UK.  

The local authority of Tower Hamlets has introduced a TB vaccination scheme to halt the spread of the disease. While many people suffering from the disease are recent immigrants, many have been in the UK for over ten years.

Much like in the rest of the UK, residents of Tower Hamlets are affected by cancer and heart disease. Yet it affects people on average in their 40s and 50s in Tower Hamlets, which is well below the national average age of onset for these health conditions.

On top of this, Tower Hamlets has a high number of residents suffering from mental health problems. It has the fourth highest proportion of people suffering from depression in London, and the highest psychosis rate in all of London, according to GP registers.

Conclusion

While population growth causes great problems throughout the UK, local authorities that face the highest growth rates experience them more severely. In the short term, it may be possible to cope with these problems through extra government support, but with population levels expected to significantly and consistently grow in most regions of the UK, the problems faced by Tower Hamlets, Lambeth and many other local authorities will spread.

The government should see population-related crises in areas such as Tower Hamlets as an indication of what will happen in other areas if population growth continues unabated. They must realise that policies to stabilise population growth are urgently needed to prevent this from happening.

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