

CENTRE FOR LONDON



# East x South East: Local research in Poplar, Stratford and Thamesmead

*Patrick Diamond, Claire Harding and Farah Hussain*



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## About this report

This report is about how three different places in East and South East London - Stratford, Poplar, and Thamesmead - have changed since 2000, and how they may continue to change up to 2040. It was produced as a partnership between Queen Mary University of London and Centre for London, and was initially presented at Centre for London's East x South East conference in March 2022.

## About Queen Mary University of London

Situated in a Russell Group university located in the East End of London, the Mile End Institute brings together academics, politicians, policymakers, and the public to discuss and debate the major challenges facing the country in a fast-moving and ever-changing world. In 2022, a decade on from the London Olympics, the Institute is especially focused on the communities and politics of East London, considering how London's centre of gravity has moved eastwards since 2012, and exploring the challenges facing people living in and around Mile End after the Covid-19 pandemic.

## About Centre for London

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London faces complex and evolving challenges. We develop policy solutions to tackle them. Help us make London better for everyone.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful to all our interviewees for this project, and to those who helped connect us with people to interview. Our thanks also go to our current and former Centre for London colleagues, Nick Bowes for shaping the project, Emma Smith for data research, and Klara Blazek for design of both the conference presentation and this report, and to Thomas Chidwick from the Mile End Institute.

All errors and omissions are the authors' own.

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# **Introduction**

The last few decades have seen enormous change in many areas of the UK - and perhaps some of the most significant change since the turn of the millennium has been in East and South East London. The Olympics in 2012 led to huge physical change across large parts of the area, new transport links have altered the ways people live their lives and there has been immense social change too, as new people have moved into the area - some into the many new-build homes, and others into homes that previous residents have moved out of.

East and South East London are far from homogeneous: it encompasses the financial district of Canary Wharf, two of the largest housing estates in England (Becontree in Barking and Dagenham and Thamesmead in Bexley/Greenwich), the inner city neighbourhoods of the East End, the Olympic Park, the historic buildings of Greenwich, and, of course, many miles of waterways around the Thames and its tributaries.

Rather than trying to analyse change across this whole area, we have chosen to look at three distinctive neighbourhoods within it - Stratford, Thamesmead and Poplar - and look at how they have changed since 2000. Through interviews with key local stakeholders and analysis of local data, we discuss which aspects of life and work have changed most and least - and what the people who know these areas hope to see in the coming decades.

## Our Research Areas



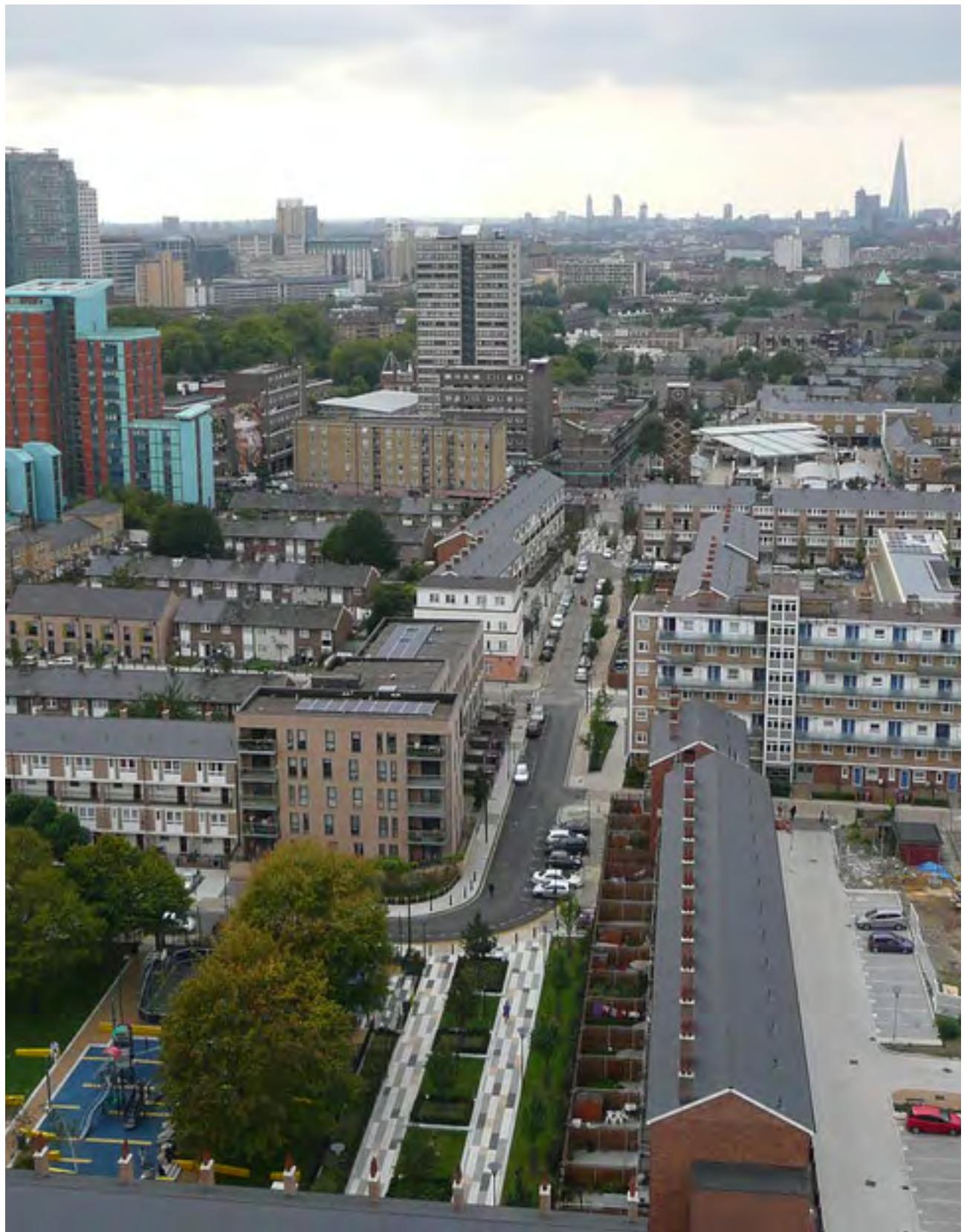
### **How we chose our research areas**

We selected three places that are within East and South East London, as this part of London was the focus of Centre for London's East x South East conference in March 2022.

Within these places, we wanted to examine a mix of neighbourhoods that have changed or are changing in distinctive ways. We did not seek to choose areas which are 'representative' of East and South East London: the area is too varied for that to be possible. But we did look for places which have significant differences from each other, and in particular, which are different distances from central London. Specifically, we selected Stratford because of its significance in hosting the 2012 Olympics; Poplar because of its proximity to Queen Mary University of London and Canary Wharf; and Thamesmead because of its planned regeneration programme.

Stratford & New Town and Poplar are both individual wards - although ward boundary changes in Tower Hamlets mean that Poplar ward is a fairly recently created small ward, represented by just one local councillor, while Stratford & New Town no longer exist as part of local government boundary changes in Newham. Thamesmead is partly in Greenwich and partly in Bexley, so we looked at two wards: Thamesmead Moorings (Greenwich) and Thamesmead East (Bexley). These wards are not a perfect match to the Thamesmead estate, but they offer a reasonable fit for data collection.

# 1. Poplar



The area of Poplar south of Tower Hamlets and north of Canary Wharf began to change dramatically more than twenty years ago. Following ‘the death of the docks’ in the 1960s and 1970s accompanied by rapid depopulation, the area entered a period of post-industrial decline with rising unemployment accompanied by urban decay. As a result, Poplar became the focus for government regeneration initiatives. The first phase of the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) opened here in 1987, epitomising a new phase of greater transport connectivity and economic growth. Yet despite significant changes to the types of people who live there since the 1980s, population expansion over the last two decades has been relatively modest compared to London as a whole.

People who live in Poplar often depict it as an island hemmed in by the built environment, particularly the glass skyscrapers of Canary Wharf. It is a traditionally working-class district now surrounded by immense wealth. That wealth has unquestionably generated improvements for local people and communities: contributions from economic development have enabled the local council (Tower Hamlets) to invest in community infrastructure. Yet the regeneration of Poplar has created significant problems too, notably a lack of affordable housing and the erosion of social cohesion that once defined communities in the East End of London.

## People who live in Poplar

The Borough of Tower Hamlets (in which Poplar is located) has the largest Bangladeshi community in England: Poplar is home to an ethnically and socially diverse population with among the highest levels of deprivation, poverty and child poverty in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Tower Hamlets is the second poorest borough in London. The area around Poplar is particularly notable because of the physical imposition of the A12 road along the Lee Valley which divides the area. The eastern part of the borough is noticeably poorer compared to the west: there has been less economic activity and regeneration in this area.

There is also significant population movement and transience: decades ago, there was a large Irish community and a growing Bangladeshi community in Poplar. The Irish community has gradually moved on. There continues to be a feeling amongst locals that Poplar is a place where families that aspire to do well often leave, moving further eastwards for the suburbs. The Bangladeshi population has continued to grow following the wave of Bengali families who arrived thirty years ago, initially encountering significant hostility and discrimination. There are schools in the borough are now almost entirely Bengali. As an indicator of past community tensions, a British National Party (BNP) Councillor was elected on the Isle of Dogs in the early 1990s.

One of our interviewees noted that Poplar has often felt neglected as a community. It was among the poorest wards in the country in the 1990s. Moreover, the area did worse because of perceptions that its local politics were dysfunctional. There have been improvements in recent decades, but the price of gentrification has been growing inequality and population displacement. Some of the people we interviewed said that they felt that people moving into the area are less inclined to involve themselves in community projects and activities. Canary Wharf symbolises the ongoing division between rich and poor. Since the area was properly established in the early twentieth century, Poplar developed a reputation for political radicalism which continues to this day.

## Homes, buildings and transport

The policy issue that is most commonly discussed among local residents is housing. Housing access and affordability is a major issue across London, but it is particularly acute in Poplar. Prices have increased inexorably, in part because of constrained housing supply. Social housing is very limited. The

Docklands redevelopment in the 1980s was associated with the loss of 500 council homes. It was once the case that three quarters of the residents of Tower Hamlets were living in council housing, including on iconic estates such as the Lansbury Estate in Poplar.<sup>2</sup> In the intervening decades, social housing has been depleted by the ‘right to buy’ programme while Poplar’s proximity to the financial districts in the Canary Wharf and the City of London has served to drive up property prices further, putting home ownership out of reach for many.

Young people growing up in the area are invariably forced out since they cannot afford to live there, even if they have a relatively well-paid job. As a consequence, the proportion of young people (aged between 15 and 34) has declined sharply in Poplar since 2000.<sup>3</sup> Some families are forced to remain in overcrowded accommodation; others are compelled to move long distances to find affordable housing. There is greater reliance on private rented accommodation in Poplar, while the right to buy has clearly had a major impact on the availability and quality of the housing stock.

At the same time, our research has revealed that Poplar is characterised by a strong sense of community: families are often willing to stay in inadequate housing due to their strong sense of attachment, local ties and commitment to place. There are plans for the regeneration of major housing estates, notably Crisp Street, Aberfeldy, and the Brownfield Estate. Poplar HARCA is a resident-centred housing organisation that has been particularly effective in engaging communities by focusing on the needs of the local area. There are still concerns about local amenities: for instance, many residents complain that Poplar High Street no longer has many decent shops or facilities. The regeneration of Crisp Street market is eagerly awaited by many (although dreaded by others). There have been some important environmental improvements: for example, air pollution has fallen significantly in the area since the high point of the mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup> But according to those we interviewed, there is much more to be done to improve the physical fabric of these neighbourhoods.

## Work and education

Although up to date Census data for Poplar is not available, the data we do have suggests that skills have been improving over the last 20 years across Tower Hamlets, and Poplar has felt the benefit. The share of residents with Level 4 (degree-level) qualifications has nearly doubled, while the proportion of residents with no formal qualifications has declined dramatically, although it remains among the highest in London.<sup>5</sup> The improvement in the educational profile of the population may reflect increasing numbers of graduates moving in rather than exclusively those born there doing better – although that is clearly a factor. We also know that local people without formal qualifications are significantly more likely to be economically inactive. Those in the Bangladeshi community, for example, are less likely to have formal qualifications and are more vulnerable to long-term unemployment and disadvantage.

According to academic research, ‘The high community unemployment results from a range of barriers, such low rates of literacy and numeracy, language, social isolation, living conditions, poor social mobility and high proportions of worklessness’. Yet there is also evidence of a mismatch between skills and employment in the Poplar area: for example, even those with Level 4 qualifications or above are still more likely than people with these qualifications elsewhere to be employed in low skilled occupations. The data indicates that there are barriers to accessing the high skilled segments of the labour market that may relate to discrimination, as well as geography. Tower Hamlets Borough Council has developed its own Employment Service that aims to encourage more local residents into high-skilled jobs. The evidence is that among the biggest skill shortages in the area are jobs in the digital high-tech and service industries alongside the creative economy.<sup>6</sup>

Poplar has a mix of areas containing both high and low levels of educational deprivation. As a consequence, it has been noted in the past that, ‘Residents lacked the right skills and NVQ/degree qualifications required to access many jobs in Canary Wharf, the City Fringe and other growth industries’. However, that situation appears to be gradually improving as younger generations attain higher level qualifications. Poplar has some highly successful state primary schools and a secondary school at which pupils are achieving excellent GCSE and A-level results, then going on to higher education. The stock of human capital in the area has been growing, although post-16 options for those not taking the conventional academic pathway have historically been limited. The New City College Campus in Poplar is now making significant further education and work-focused provision available, but there is more to be done to expand the range of options available.

## Health and well-being

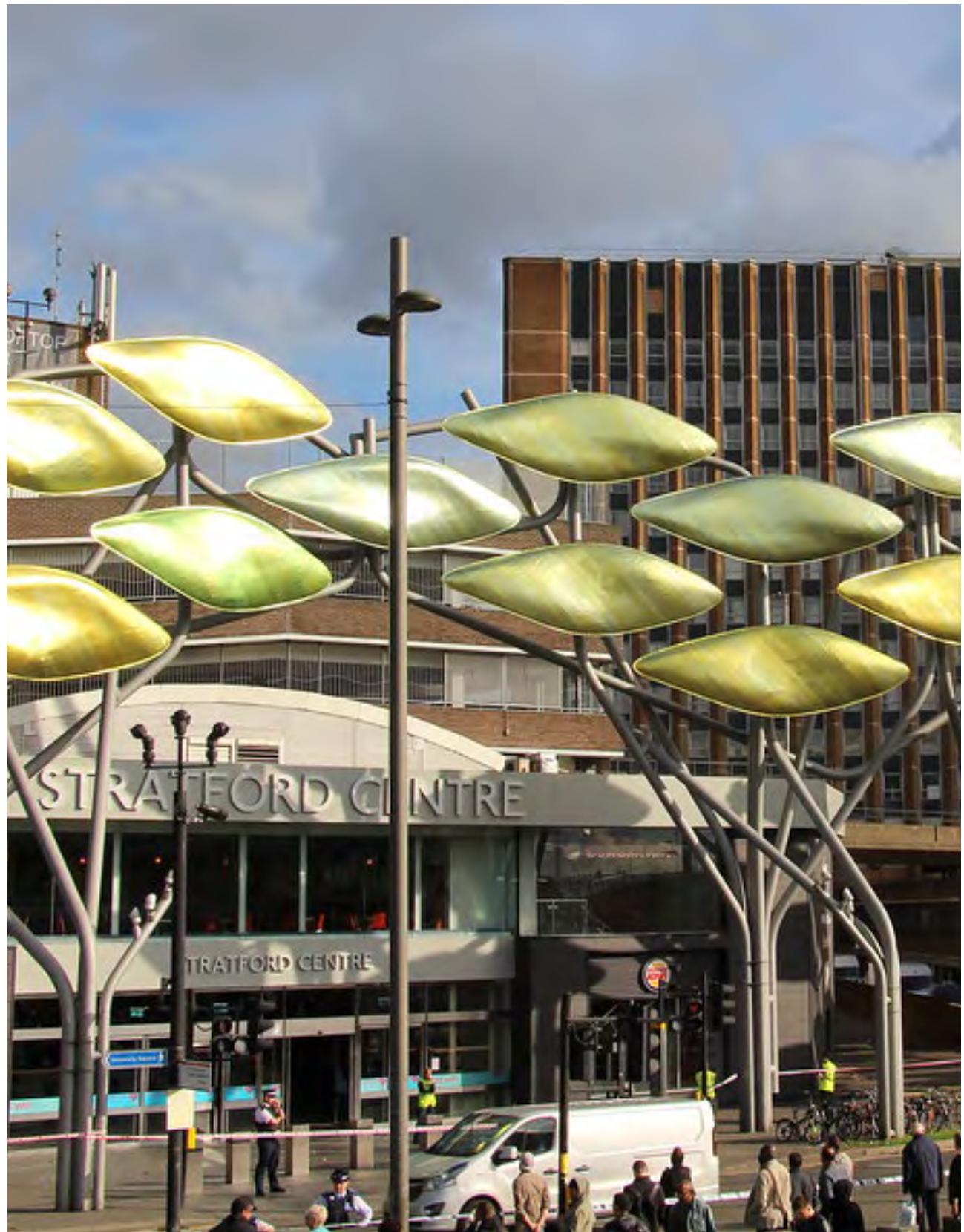
There are huge variations in health outcomes and life expectancy across London. In a community such as Poplar, the rate of ‘early preventable deaths’ is twice that for the City of London, for example.<sup>7</sup> Although the average age of those living in Tower Hamlets (where Poplar is located) is only 31, the older population is growing and the number of residents with care needs is increasing.<sup>8</sup> We know that local residents in the borough, among the most deprived in London, are significantly more likely to die of heart disease or a stroke before the age of 75. East London is also more prone to the effects of long-term health inequalities.

It has been said previously that for every stop travelled on the Jubilee Line from Westminster to Canning Town, average life expectancy declines by a year. Higher numbers of residents than average are overweight, while a higher proportion of local people have a mental illness such as depression. There are likely to be relatively low levels of physical activity among residents in these areas.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the local NHS is under greater pressure with longer waiting times from referral to treatment and acute services that are over stretched.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also hit areas such as Poplar in East London very hard. Poplar has a population that is more prone than other parts of London to vaccine hesitancy, while underlying health inequalities appear to have led to a higher infection and mortality rate. Data produced by colleagues at Queen Mary, University of London indicates that suspected Covid infection rates are 1.9 times higher than average in the South Asian population and 1.6 times higher in the Black population of Tower Hamlets.<sup>10</sup>

The same research study on the impact of Covid-19 also found that ‘The risk factors associated with worse underlying health status are likely to be linked with wider social factors such as poor living conditions, being employed as a key worker and even language barriers that may get in the way of people adopting preventative measures to avoid getting sick. Structural racism also plays a role in generating and reinforcing inequities and must be acknowledged and addressed’. Although it is in a different borough, some of these factors are similar to those found in Stratford.

## 2. Stratford



Before the Olympics in 2012, Stratford was divided into two parts: a residential area to the south and east of the station, much of it comprised of 19th century terraced housing, and an industrial area, bordering on Hackney, in the north and west. When London was awarded the Olympics in summer 2007, work began to convert the industrial area into the Olympic Park - sporting facilities, public art, a public park, and accommodation for athletes. After the Olympics, the park, aquatic centre and stadium (now converted to West Ham United's football ground) remained and the athletes' village was converted for other uses, mostly housing. Because of its sporting facilities, and perhaps because of its proximity to Westfield Shopping Centre and good transport links, it is popular to visit for people from a wide area.

## Homes and places

The Olympic Park has an unusual governance structure – after the Games, it was transferred to the London Legacy Development Corporation, a Mayoral Development Corporation (there is one other, at Old Oak and Park Royal in the west of London).<sup>11</sup> The LLDC has planning powers for both the park itself and the land around it up to 2025, when it will be wound down and the powers returned to local authorities. Overall, the LLDC is expected to deliver 32,000 homes by 2026.<sup>12</sup> Some people feel that there has not been enough affordable housing built in the area as a proportion of total housebuilding, making it inaccessible to many of the people who live around it, including those who worked or volunteered as part of the games.

Stratford has exceptionally dense transport links, with many bus routes, two tube lines, the Docklands Light Railway, national rail including the High Speed One link to Kent, London Overground, and the Elizabeth Line due to open later in the year (at the time of writing). Stratford International DLR station was a new stop on the line opened for the Olympic Games and now serving the park. However, many of the routes are congested, and the station has reached capacity earlier than planned: some people say that a King's Cross-style redevelopment is needed so more people can use the station safely and comfortably.

## People living in Stratford

Stratford's population has more than tripled in the last twenty years and the ward of Stratford and New Town now has a population close to 40,000.<sup>13</sup> Most, although not all, of this growth has been on the Olympic site. The population growth has been so high that the ward will see its boundaries redrawn after the 2022 local election.<sup>14</sup> Housebuilding in the area is still continuing, with new residential developments around the Olympic Park. While much of the growth has been since the Olympics, some of it was before the Games, as construction workers moved to the area to work on the site, leading to high levels of crowding in some properties. The older area of Stratford continues to have a large number of houses in multiple occupation, alongside single-family properties.

Most of the new homes on the Olympic site are relatively small flats, many of them in the private rental sector. Although expensive by national standards, they are less expensive than other parts of London. They tend to appeal to people who are in work and relatively early in their careers, leading to a sharp uptick in the proportion of people aged 15 to 29 in the area - nearly 40 per cent of the population are in this age bracket, compared to 24 per cent in Poplar. In recent years, the proportion has dropped slightly, possibly because some of the people who originally moved into the new properties have now reached the age of 30.<sup>15</sup>

Stratford's recorded level of deprivation has fallen significantly in the last few decades, but this probably reflects a new, less deprived group moving into the area as much or more as it does reduced levels of deprivation among the current residents. Some people in the area feel that there is too much of a divide - physical and social - between the new

Olympic Park builds and the older housing on the other side of the station. The station with its multiple railway lines stands between the two areas, and the only connection is a footbridge: since many people travel in and out of the station, they may rarely visit the "other side" of the area, particularly since the scale of Westfield shopping centre means people can buy many of the things they need without crossing into the rest of Newham.

## Health and wellbeing

Stratford has a transient population, connected to the high proportion of housing in the rented sector - people often live there for a few years and then move on, perhaps to larger properties further out from Central London, or perhaps out of London or the UK altogether. Population transience is not a problem in itself - it is economically valuable for people to be able to move around for jobs and having new people moving in and out of an area can make it feel more dynamic and creative. But it does make it harder to build a sense of community, especially in newly built developments without existing social groups and connections – some people feel that this is a problem in the Olympic Park area of Stratford.

When the Olympics came to London, the government at the time said that this would increase participation in sport and physical activity. In the year or so following the Games, data did suggest an increase in participation,<sup>16</sup> but overall in the decade since the Olympics, activity levels (defined as at least 150 minutes a week on all forms of exercise including brisk walking and cycling) have remained fairly constant – although physical activity became much harder for some people during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> There is no ward level data available on physical activity rates, but overall, the proportion of adults who are physically inactive in Newham is well above the national average, and it does not seem that the coming of the Olympics has transformed physical activity levels in the area.<sup>18</sup> Obesity rates at age 4/5 are above the London average in Stratford and New Town, although they have been falling in the most recent years that data is available – however, this should be treated with some caution because of the high level of population churn in the area.<sup>19</sup>

Like many parts of East London, Newham was hit hard by Covid. Ward level data is not available but many of the factors that were linked to high Covid rates are present there, particularly in the older (non-Olympic Park) area of the ward. This includes large numbers of crowded and/ or multi-generational households, meaning that even during lockdowns, Covid spread widely within people's homes, and many people worked in key worker roles making them more likely to be exposed to the virus. Some people had to work even when they knew or suspected that they were infected, because their jobs did not offer sick pay and they could not afford to miss work.<sup>20</sup> At the time of writing, coronavirus infection levels were below the national average in Newham and, indeed, in other parts of East and South East London, but vaccination take-up remains below average and most of the factors which led to the rapid spread of the disease are still there: the risk of further waves of Covid or other infectious diseases has not gone away.<sup>21</sup>

## Skills and employment

As the population of Stratford has grown and changed so much in recent years, there is little data available on its current skills and employment profile. The people living in the area before the Olympics had a mix of different skills and employment types, with some relatively well-paid commuters into Central London, some people working in local retail and industry, and some working at other local employers like the University of East London. The residents of the newly built flats seem to be largely commuters into central London, attracted by the area's exceptional transport connections.

The building of the Olympic Park was sometimes framed as the

reclamation or conversion of land which was not much used. It was not used for housing, but it was industrial land, with communities around it which were lost when the Park was built - some people who we spoke to in this research feel that this loss has not been recognised enough in discussion about the Olympic legacy.

In recent years, LLDC and Newham Council have made attempts to create more employment hubs in and around the Olympic Park, with the development of Stratford's International Quarter, now home to some major public, private and voluntary sector employers, and the creation of an "innovation and technology campus" at Here East. The latter has a particular focus on community and sustainability<sup>22</sup> – some people see this and similar projects as a way to bring back the small-scale entrepreneurial spirit which characterised the industrial land in the area before the coming of the Olympics.

### 3. Thamesmead



The local authority wards of Thamesmead Moorings (in Greenwich) and Thamesmead East (in Bexley) largely contain the Thamesmead social housing estate - a series of large high-rise blocks interspersed with smaller buildings along the southern bank of the Thames built by the Greater London Council, built to house people from more central parts of South East London which were damaged in the second world war. It is now expecting large-scale change from a major regeneration project and new transport links coming to the area. Although a very different area, the scale of the change may be similar to that experienced in Stratford and Poplar over the last few decades.

## Homes and places

Like many similar projects, Thamesmead was built in the 1960s and 1970s, with utopian intentions – based on experience in Sweden, the GLC’s architect Robert Rigg believed that the lakes between the buildings would calm people, reducing antisocial behaviour and providing a more pleasant community.<sup>23</sup> As with many mid-century social housing projects, the reality for many residents was rather different - there were problems with crime and anti-social behaviour, particularly on the walkways between flats, which were raised from the ground in order to reduce the risk of flooding. Research in other parts of London at this time found that women who were moved to high-rise flats were more likely to experience depression; this may also have been relevant in Thamesmead.<sup>24</sup> While many people admire the architecture of the original blocks of flats and their setting near a wide part of the river Thames, to others it feels dystopian – indeed, it was the setting of Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>25</sup>

When Thamesmead was built, it was deliberately very focused on residential and outdoor recreation space – there were few shops and few potential employment sites. This remains broadly true – unusually for the size of the population, there is not a main high street or a clear central point: as one interviewee commented, “it is hard to get a sandwich”. As a result, there are limited employment opportunities without travelling outside the area, and some people feel that it feels rather isolated from the rest of London.

The location of the estate - on a bend in the river, formerly marshland, means its transport connectivity is poor by London standards. Although it is geographically fairly close to parts of London north of the Thames, getting to them is difficult, as there is no river crossing between Woolwich to the west and Dartford to the east. Abbey Wood station (currently on National Rail and soon to be on the Elizabeth Line) is useful for people on the eastern side of the area and some believe it will transform connections to central London as trains will be much more frequent than the existing rail service, but it is a long walk for those on the western side. Many people rely on buses, but these make for a long journey into central London.

In recent years, Transport for London has made plans to extend the Docklands Light Railway to a new station at Thamesmead, but the network has lost a lot of money in fare revenue because of the pandemic, and this means the extension is now uncertain – a Treasury decision is expected this summer. Even if approved, it would take many years to build, particularly as it would involve crossing the river from Beckton.<sup>26</sup> Some people are also concerned that bus services will be reduced as these are subsidised by TfL’s income from tube fares.

There has been some housebuilding in Thamesmead in recent years, particularly in the western (Greenwich) side, and more recently, new blocks of flats have been built close to Abbey Wood station, to take advantage of the Elizabeth Line. Indeed, one interviewee commented that Thamesmead has been in a state of constant change since it was built. But much more significant change is coming, with a billion-pound regeneration programme just underway.<sup>27</sup> This includes renovations to existing homes, demolition and rebuilding in some areas of the estate, new housebuilding,

and new social, arts and community facilities - change on a scale that we have seen in Poplar and Stratford over the last few decades. As is usually the case, local people have mixed feelings about this change. An estate ballot in the Lesnes Estate, in the southern part of Thamesmead, approved a programme of demolition and regeneration in 2020<sup>28</sup> – but some people are worried about long-term disruption from building works, and about the gentrification of the area – both of which have been significant issues in other London regeneration projects.

The people involved in the regeneration – which is led by Peabody, the housing association that manages the estate – say that they are keen to learn the lessons from previous regeneration programmes, particularly around the importance of community involvement throughout the process, and space for people to gather for social and cultural activities.

But some noted that this is becoming harder because of the government's levelling up agenda – for example, the reduction in Arts Council funding for London has resulted in cuts to the money available in Thamesmead. While London does receive a high proportion of arts funding, much of this is for national institutions such as the central London museums, which take a long time to travel to from Thamesmead – they do not substitute for local activities.

## People who live in Thamesmead

The combined population of the two Thamesmead wards is about 40,000, with Thamesmead Moorings (Greenwich) a little larger than Thamesmead East (Bexley). This has grown by about 50 per cent in the last few decades, driven a near doubling of population in Thamesmead Moorings and more modest growth in Thamesmead East. This population growth was fairly steady from 2000 to 2018, with population growth of roughly 1000 people per year throughout the period. This is a different trajectory to places which have seen very intense housebuilding – at one point, Stratford added 7000 people to its population in a year – but the overall effect is large. The population is likely to increase much further in the next few decades because of the regeneration programme.

Over the last twenty years, the proportion of people aged 45 to 74 in Thamesmead has increased compared to other adult working age groups, and the proportion of children aged under 14 and adults aged over 75 has held broadly steady. This may be because more adults in this age group have moved into the area, or it may be because a previously younger population has grown older while living there. The proportion of Black people, many of whom are Nigerian, in the area rose significantly between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses,<sup>29</sup> while the proportion of Asian people stayed about the same and the proportion of white people fell. It is likely that the 2021 Census will show further change – this had not been released at the time of writing.

## Health and wellbeing

Life expectancies in Thamesmead are close to the national average - higher than in some inner London neighbourhoods but lower than in wealthier parts of outer London.<sup>30</sup> Life expectancy tends to be linked to deprivation, and Thamesmead's ranking on the Index of Multiple Deprivation has fallen over the last few decades, as in many parts of London. This does not necessarily mean that people's experiences of deprivation have changed – it may be that the people who have moved into the area are different to the people who were already living there. Thamesmead's riverside location means that air pollution is lower than it is in many parts of London, but it can be an issue for the whole city on high pollution days.<sup>31</sup>

Childhood obesity rates are well above the London average: there are signs of a fall in the most recent data available but coronavirus and enforced time at home may have changed this. These high rates are

perhaps linked to the fact that many people live in flats without access to private outdoor space.<sup>32</sup> While there is a fair amount of green space within the estate and reasonably easy access to parks outside it, parents will often not allow younger children to play there unsupervised. The coronavirus pandemic may have worsened these inequalities in access to space, since children were not able to take part in school or club sports.

## Work and education

Thamesmead is split between Bexley, which has selective secondary schools and Greenwich, which does not. This makes it difficult to have a meaningful discussion of the results young people get in its schools, as some are educated at grammar schools outside the area – indeed the possibility of attending a Bexley grammar school seems to be a key attraction of the area for some parents.

From the data that is available at ward level, (now rather out of date) employment rates in the area are fairly low compared the London average and household incomes are also lower<sup>33</sup> - but of course many people who now live in Thamesmead did not grow up there so it is hard to link this to the local education system. These low incomes are probably connected to the twin issues of lack of employment opportunities in the area itself, particularly for higher paid work, and difficulty travelling to other areas where better paid jobs are available. Issues with access to employment tend to be associated with towns outside London but they are significant in many outer London areas, particularly in the south and east of the city: London's challenges are very different in different places.

While the planned regeneration programme is expected to bring many jobs to Thamesmead - many in skilled building trades - some people are worried that it will be hard for local people to take on these jobs because they do not have the right technical skills, and there are not sufficient programmes in place to help them to get them. This speaks to a longstanding issue with a lack of technical education pathways in England and difficulties with getting training set up for specific projects.

# **Conclusion**

The places that we have researched for this report vary enormously in their social characteristics, as well as their recent histories of economic development and change. There have been enormous alterations in the built environment in Stratford around the Olympic Park, while in Poplar the changes stretch back several decades to the 1980s and 1990s with the development of the Docklands. In Thamesmead, the transformation of the built environment is, by and large, yet to come. Meanwhile, educational outcomes have improved and the link between household income and school attainment in these places is being eroded, while deprivation (as measured by the multiple deprivation index) has been falling. New housing has created homes for people across East and South East London.

Yet success has been patchy, and it has come at a price. Deprivation appears to be falling in parts of East London because wealthier households are moving into places such as Poplar, Stratford and Thamesmead. There have been less noticeable improvements in the life-chances of long-standing local residents for whom poverty remains persistent. The interviews for our research show that in Stratford, some residents believe that the regeneration associated with the Olympics has brought benefits such as new businesses, but there are too few community amenities and too little has been done to build a distinctive sense of ‘place’. In Poplar, the economic success of Canary Wharf and the Docklands redevelopment has priced out local families who can no longer afford to live where they grew up. In Thamesmead, transport connectivity has remained poor, making it harder for local residents to access jobs in the Central London economy.

The experience of these areas and communities across East London has been very different. The research in this report has led us to draw three broad conclusions about the public policy priorities for East and South East London in the immediate future:

### **Improvements in public transport are needed for regeneration but transport infrastructure on its own is not enough**

Our research emphasises that areas need investment in social as well as physical infrastructure in order to thrive. It is vital that communities can access high quality public services that include affordable childcare, alongside access to sport and physical activity. Childcare has been particularly neglected in recent years, despite the fact that we know investment in early years provision helps to reduce poverty and promote social mobility, while enabling working parents to access the labour market. A recent report found that childcare costs in London are the highest in the UK, while the availability of childcare provision is shrinking.<sup>34</sup> The Olympic legacy has led to long-term improvement in sports participation in East London (over 3500 people a week are using the Stratford Aquatics Centre, for example), but take up is still uneven and patchy.<sup>35</sup>

The research further underlines the importance of skills. If areas are going to benefit from inward investment that creates jobs, the local workforce needs an adequate level of skills and human capital. East London is endowed with world-leading research-intensive universities which play a key role as anchor institutions, yet post-16 institutions and vocational provision have been historically neglected. There have been striking improvements in East London’s school standards over the last twenty years, but there is a risk that the academisation of secondary schools leads to a narrowing of the curriculum, while there are still too few options for those who want to pursue a work-orientated path following compulsory schooling. It has been noted that post-16 examination performance in London is relatively poor compared to other regions of the country, while the low number of industrial jobs and the transient population allows high-skill labour to be brought in from the outside, further undermining the vocational skills system.<sup>36</sup>

Transport is only part of the story. The quality of local public services, access to amenities, and building a sense of community are vital in establishing thriving, liveable places.

### **Community involvement in regeneration has to be realistic in order to be meaningful**

Our research unsurprisingly reveals a good deal of cynicism about community involvement in regeneration. There is a need for better understanding of how regeneration can be done effectively, particularly where regeneration and housing projects are being delivered at a rapid pace. In Stratford, for example, thirty years of infrastructure was built in seven years from 2005 to 2012. Of five new housing neighbourhoods built in Stratford, only one is now complete.

There is a fear that communities that are experiencing rapid change will become more transient and disconnected places, where people are even less likely know their neighbours. The regeneration of Canary Wharf in Poplar forty years ago led to a loss of social housing which meant that many local families have since been pushed out of the area. There is a concern that other parts of East London await a similar fate. Meanwhile residents in places such as Thamesmead feel that the regeneration process is ‘never-ending’.

Future economic and housing developments have to be seen to benefit local people. Organisations such as Poplar HARCA are viewed as promoting a more resident-centred approach to regeneration, directly engaging local communities. There is also a key role for local councils in using local democratic and scrutiny processes to ensure that the voices of local people are heard in the regeneration process across East and South East London.

### **London is hugely varied and has its own levelling up challenges**

We know that London currently faces significant levelling-up challenges. Covid hit East London very hard due to high levels of residual poverty and inequality, especially within particular BAME communities. The major differences in economic and social outcomes between the places we have researched for this report, all of which are within East London, demonstrates the limitations of the present Government’s geographical approach to levelling up. While there are wealthy pockets in London, there are also concentrations of social deprivation and acute need, with levels of life expectancy that are among the lowest in Europe. The life-chances of Londoners vary enormously according to where they live, where they work, and the type of housing that they can access. Moreover, the Olympic legacy in Stratford exposes the limitations of levelling-up programmes that focus exclusively on physical infrastructure.

At the same time, supporting communities in Poplar need not come at the expense of supporting communities in Peterborough. Economic transformation is not a zero-sum game. Investment in one area will create opportunities for other places. Our report contains a warning that rather than levelling up the rest of the UK, the Government’s current approach may simply level down London, exacerbating inequalities within the capital. The recent Levelling-Up White Paper argues: ‘While London and much of the South-East have benefited economically [from the global economy], former industrial centres and many coastal areas have suffered. This has left deep and lasting scars in many of these places, damaging skills, jobs, innovation, pride in place, health and well-being’.<sup>37</sup> Yet exactly the same argument applies within London. There are places and communities within East London that have been structurally disadvantaged by deindustrialisation since the 1960s and 1970s and the UK’s long-term integration into the global economy.

Moreover, if the public transport system is underfunded and run down, it will make it harder for Londoners to get to work and build their own businesses, leading to deteriorating productivity that weakens the long-term growth potential of the UK economy. Places like Thamesmead, where residents struggle to travel to get jobs elsewhere in London, will be hard hit. Other parts of the UK need improvements in public transport connectivity, but the aim of policy should be to improve transport infrastructure in every region, not to level down London so that other places can catch up. Doing so would ultimately mean less tax for the Treasury, and therefore less money available to invest in public services and infrastructure across the whole of the UK.

# **Data Appendix**

## Data on Poplar, Stratford and Thamesmead

These tables and chart summarise some of the publicly available data on Poplar, Stratford & New Town and Thamesmead wards. We have combined data for the two Thamesmead wards where we could, but for some data sources this was not possible. This report was prepared in spring 2022, before the release of Census 2021 data, so we have avoided using the 2011 Census as a data source – especially since there has been very significant population growth and churn in some of these areas in the last eleven years.

In some cases, for example employment, we found that ward sizes were too small for meaningful and statistically significant data – especially as Poplar is a small ward by London standards, and since there are only two data Census data points available. We have not included data on educational outcomes as we found it hard to create a meaningful comparative set: young people frequently attend a school outside their ward, particularly in Bexley which has a grammar school system.

Some data for Poplar is not available before 2014 as the ward did not exist before that point.

Discussion of this data can be found in each chapter of the report.

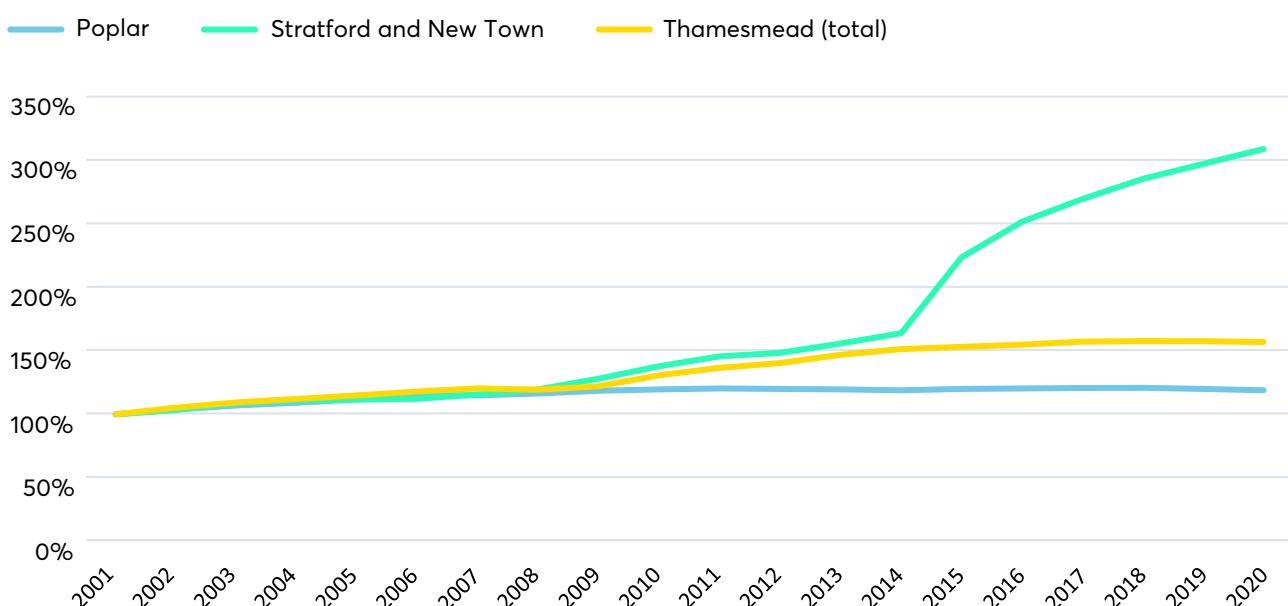
## 1. People

### Population in 2020

Poplar	7,999
Stratford and New Town	38,114
Thamesmead	40,950

Source: ONS population estimates at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/wardlevelmidyearpopulationestimatesexperimental>

### Population change since 2001, indexed to 2001 level



Source: ONS population estimates at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/wardlevelmidyearpopulationestimatesexperimental>

### Population age structure: % population aged 15 to 29

	<b>Poplar</b>	<b>Stratford and New Town</b>	<b>Thamesmead (total)</b>
2001	30%	27%	22%
2002	31%	29%	22%
2003	29%	30%	22%
2004	30%	32%	22%
2005	31%	33%	22%
2006	30%	34%	22%
2007	31%	36%	22%
2008	31%	37%	22%
2009	31%	37%	21%
2010	32%	38%	21%
2011	32%	38%	22%
2012	31%	36%	22%
2013	29%	35%	21%
2014	29%	35%	21%
2015	28%	39%	21%
2016	27%	41%	21%
2017	25%	41%	21%
2018	24%	41%	21%
2019	23%	40%	21%
2020	24%	39%	20%

Source: ONS population estimates at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/wardlevelmidyearpopulationestimatesexperimental>

## 2. Health and wellbeing

### Life expectancy

	1999-2003		2008-12		2020	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Poplar</b>	NA	NA	NA	NA	79.9	80.3
<b>Stratford and New Town</b>	72.5	78.6	76.2	82.4	78	83.4
<b>Thamesmead East</b>	75.0	79.6	77.6	80.8	79	81.3
<b>Thamesmead Moorings</b>	73.8	79.3	76.3	77.5	77.5	78.1

Source: 2014 and earlier data <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/life-expectancy-birth-and-age-65-ward>; 2020 data [https://www.localhealth.org.uk/#c=indicator&i=t4.le\\_m\\_v&view=map8](https://www.localhealth.org.uk/#c=indicator&i=t4.le_m_v&view=map8)

### Child weight: obesity among children in reception, %

	London	Poplar	Stratford and New Town	Thamesmead (total)
<b>2008/09 to 2010/11</b>	9.1	12.9	13.6	14.5
<b>2009/10 to 2011/12</b>	9.0	12.7	11.5	15.3
<b>2010/11 to 2012/13</b>	8.9	12.3	11.1	16.5
<b>2011/12 to 2013/14</b>	8.9	12.0	11.3	16.4
<b>2012/13 to 2014/15</b>	8.8	12.5	14.3	16.2
<b>2013/14 to 2015/16</b>	8.8	13.0	14.1	16.3
<b>2014/15 to 2016/17</b>	8.8	12.2	14.9	16.7
<b>2015/16 to 2017/18</b>	9.0	11.5	12.6	16.5
<b>2017/18 to 2019/20</b>	10.1	11.3	11.0	14.0

Source: PHE fingertips tool, National Child Measurement Programme: <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/national-child-measurement-programme/>

### Index of multiple deprivation: average score

	2004	2007	2010	2015	2019
<b>Poplar</b>	54.8	51.4	57.5	44.0	34.1
<b>Stratford and New Town</b>	43.7	45.0	44.5	32.4	28.8
<b>Thamesmead East</b>	28.6	29.8	29.6	28.2	26.3
<b>Thamesmead Moorings</b>	33.7	36.2	37.5	28.7	25.5

Source: author's calculations based on converting LSOA data to wards, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-indices-of-deprivation> (higher scores = more deprivation)

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**Published by:**

Centre for London 2022

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