# Family exodus threatens London schools as Elephant and Castle faces closure



Teachers at Charlotte Sharman School in Elephant and Castle have begun a strike in response to the announcement of the school's impending closure at the end of the term. This situation is emblematic of a larger crisis facing many inner London schools, driven by demographic shifts, particularly a staggering 25% drop in children under four in certain boroughs, as revealed by the most recent census. The closure is directly linked to the local context: Charlotte Sharman is located adjacent to the former Heygate estate, which was demolished in 2014 to make way for Elephant Park—a redevelopment project that highlights the stark transition from affordable family housing to luxury apartments.

Elephant Park has garnered acclaim for its so-called "placemaking excellence," but beneath this veneer lies a troubling truth. The site now features thousands of high-end residences, many priced between £900,000 and £1 million, alongside privatised public spaces populated by global retail chains, upmarket eateries, and cultural establishments. This model of regeneration prioritises profit over community, as evidenced by the fact that only 82 of the 2,704 new homes are designated for social housing. While the development touts that a quarter of the new apartments are "affordable," the term has become increasingly nebulous since the government redefined it in 2010, with many properties now still beyond the financial reach of average Londoners. Alex Mees, representing the National Education Union, remarked at the protest, “They’ve got rid of family homes in the area and replaced them with one- or two-bedroom apartments – all the families are moving out, they should have seen this coming.”

The broader narrative is one of an escalating cycle of gentrification sweeping across urban centres like London, where rising house prices are not just making family housing increasingly scarce, but are also linked to a decline in birth rates. Research conducted by the Affordable Housing Commission indicated that 13% of British adults under 45 have delayed or opted not to start a family due to their housing conditions, affecting nearly two million people. The impact is particularly pronounced in England's capital: while London's overall population continues to grow, there has been a 4% decline in the 25–39 age bracket, critical for family formation and home ownership, largely attributed to a lack of family-friendly housing options.

As families flee the capital, destinations like Bristol and coastal towns in Sussex are becoming increasingly popular, driving up property prices in those areas. The exodus has not always been welcomed, as residents flatly refer to newcomers as “DFLs” (Down from London). For example, Deal has garnered the nickname "Hackney on Sea", reflecting a demographic shift that leaves behind not just schools, but essential services such as GP surgeries and small businesses. Fernanda, an architect in Hackney, noted a dramatic change in her neighbourhood, stating, “It is getting emptier and emptier... There is a clear change in demographics happening in front of our eyes.” As families relocate, the networks that once sustained these vibrant communities are unraveling.

Despite the positive branding surrounding placemaking, which promises vibrant, economically prosperous locales, the reality often presents a contradictory picture. Urban areas, stripped of families and children, risk becoming sterile shells. While high-demand restaurants continue to thrive, the absence of children signals a deeper malaise. Census data indicates an increase in the population aged over 50, many of whom profited from previous property booms, further entrenching existing inequalities. Consequently, regions like Southwark and Hackney now showcase a puzzling landscape of affluent, partially occupied luxury developments alongside pockets of pre-gentrification homes that have skyrocketed in value, contrasting sharply with the shrinking availability of affordable or social housing.

This situation poses essential questions about the vitality of urban life: if cities can no longer support families and children, what does that say about their future? The dictionary definition of "sterile" captures the broader implications of these changes: a place unable to nurture new life. As demographics shift and community resources dwindle, the fabric of London’s urban landscape—the very essence that makes a city thrive—may be under threat, not only compromising its character but also signaling a shift towards an unwelcoming, lifeless environment for future generations. The consequences of this transformation underscore a crucial imperative: the need for policies that genuinely support families and foster diverse, vibrant communities before the city begins to lose its very soul.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/placemaking-gentrification-london-luxury-apartments-expensive-restaurants-schools), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-schools-covid-brexit-spiralling-costs-young-families-renting-crisis-b1077651.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/placemaking-gentrification-london-luxury-apartments-expensive-restaurants-schools), [[4]](https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/housing-gentrification-london-cost/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.mylondon.news/news/gentrification-causing-london-schools-shut-24699001), [[5]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-school-closures-falling-pupil-places-councils-b1140247.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/property/house-prices-london-schools-closing-house-prices-suffer-property-market/), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/13/city-without-children-dystopia-new-reality-london)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/placemaking-gentrification-london-luxury-apartments-expensive-restaurants-schools), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-schools-covid-brexit-spiralling-costs-young-families-renting-crisis-b1077651.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/placemaking-gentrification-london-luxury-apartments-expensive-restaurants-schools> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-schools-covid-brexit-spiralling-costs-young-families-renting-crisis-b1077651.html> - This article discusses the impact of gentrification, rising living costs, and declining birth rates on London's schools. It highlights how these factors have led to school closures and the exodus of families with young children from the city. The piece emphasizes the challenges faced by parents and educators as they navigate the changing educational landscape in London.
3. <https://www.mylondon.news/news/gentrification-causing-london-schools-shut-24699001> - The article examines how gentrification is contributing to the closure of schools in London. It focuses on the borough of Tower Hamlets, where eight schools have closed in the past two years due to declining pupil numbers. The piece highlights the challenges faced by educators and the community as a result of these closures.
4. <https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/housing-gentrification-london-cost/> - This article explores the financial impact of housing gentrification on low-income Londoners. It discusses how regeneration projects often fail to deliver enough genuinely affordable homes, leading to increased costs for residents. The piece highlights the broader implications of gentrification on housing affordability and community displacement.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-school-closures-falling-pupil-places-councils-b1140247.html> - The article addresses the phenomenon of 'ghost areas' in London due to school closures and the departure of families with children. It warns of the potential consequences for the city's future if these trends continue, emphasizing the need for policies that support families and maintain vibrant communities.
6. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/property/house-prices-london-schools-closing-house-prices-suffer-property-market/> - This piece examines the relationship between school closures and property values in London. It discusses how the decline in school numbers is affecting the housing market, particularly in areas that were previously considered desirable due to proximity to good schools.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/13/city-without-children-dystopia-new-reality-london> - The article discusses the impact of declining birth rates and gentrification on London's schools. It highlights the challenges faced by communities as schools close and families move out, raising concerns about the future of the city's social fabric and the vitality of urban areas.