

Primary Schools Review:

Overview of the position and future challenges

April 2018

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Executive Summary

Tower Hamlets has experienced the fastest population growth in the UK, and the borough's primary school provision has been expanded to meet this demand. However, the borough's population growth has not translated into the need for school places that was anticipated. The number of reception pupils in 2017/18 is about the same as it was four years earlier in 2013/14. This has led to an increasing surplus of places and has put considerable pressure on school and local authority budgets.

There are many complex factors which have contributed to the slow growth of demand for primary places in the borough. Birth rates have fallen substantially, young families are increasingly moving out of Tower Hamlets, and there has been an increase in the take up of independent provision. These trends have been driven by the borough's quickly changing demographics, housing stock, and other economic factors.

There has also been a stark contrast between the West and the East of the borough. While areas in the West have seen falls in the demand for primary school places, areas in the East have seen increases. Projections indicate that this situation will worsen over the coming decade. By 2027/28, the West of the borough is projected to have a surplus of around 390 reception places while the East of the borough is projected to have a shortfall of around 270 places.

In light of these issues, the local authority must reorganise primary school provision in the borough through a well-managed rationalisation process to ensure that all children have access to high quality and financially sustainable education in their local area.

1. Introduction

Tower Hamlets has experienced the fastest population growth in the UK in recent years. Between 2006 and 2016, the borough gained around 82,500 residents and grew by 38%. This was more than double the rate of population growth seen in London as a whole (15%) and five times the growth in England (8%).¹

The borough's primary school provision was expanded to meet this demand, but population growth has not translated into the need for school places that was anticipated in Tower Hamlets (or indeed for London more widely²). This has led to a significant surplus of primary school places in the borough, over and above what is required to allow for parental choice. In January 2018, there were around 1,860 unfilled primary school places across all year groups – equivalent to 62 forms of education (FE) or 7% of the borough's supply. In reception alone, there were around 390 unfilled reception places (10% or 13FE). Projections indicate that surpluses in some areas of the borough will continue to increase.

It would be unsustainable, both for the local authority and for schools, to maintain this level of surplus primary provision. The council is therefore undertaking a review of primary school provision to maximise the efficiency of current and future school sites so that children continue to have access to high-quality, sustainable school places in their local area.

This report brings together evidence on the demand for school places, which will underpin the council's proposals for the reorganisation of primary school places. It aims to explain how demand for primary places has grown and what is projected to happen in the future.

1.1 Technical Notes

Different sources of information use different geographical boundaries. Admissions and pupil data is generally based on catchment areas which have been designed around geographical boundaries and obstacles to allow for safe walking journeys. Other demographic data often uses wards, and the borough's ward boundaries changed in 2014. This means that the maps in this report use different geographical boundaries.

It should also be noted that for the purposes of the review, 'primary provision' refers to mainstream primary schools. Special schools are not included as they are planned for separately.

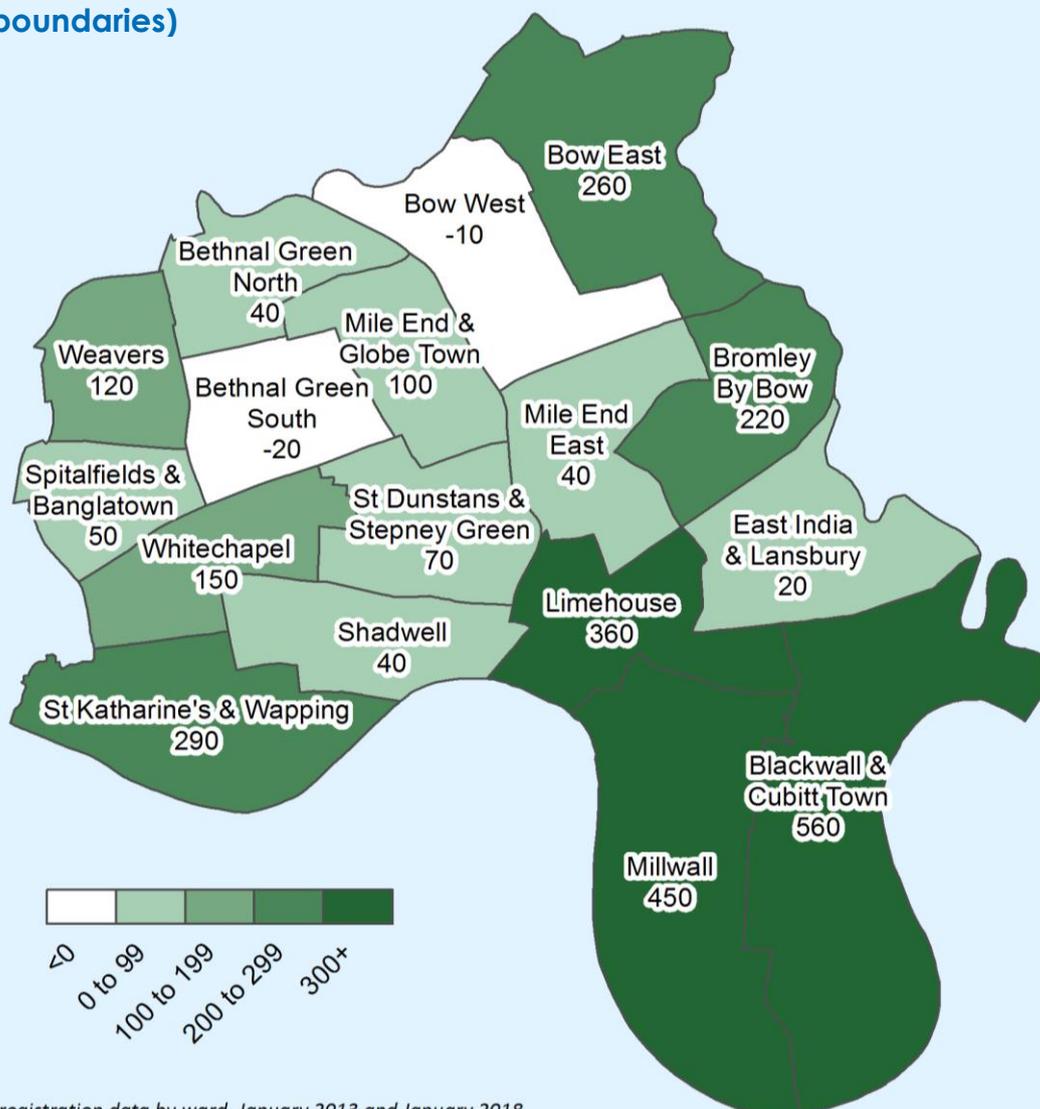
Finally, while this is a review of all primary places, much of the analysis presented in this report is focussed on reception pupils. Trends are easier to detect when looking at a single year group and reception numbers offer the best indication of demand. Historically, cohorts of pupils tend to get slightly smaller as they age through primary school.

2. Historic growth in demand

The number of primary-aged children (aged 4 to 10) in Tower Hamlets increased from 24,200 in January 2013 to 26,500 in January 2018.³ This is an increase of 2,700 primary-aged children, or 11%, over the past five years.

However, **Figure 1** shows that population growth has varied greatly between different areas of the borough. Areas in the Isle of Dogs (Millwall and Blackwall & Cubitt Town wards) have, by far, seen the biggest increase in the number of primary-aged children. Population growth in the Central and West areas has been considerably lower. Bethnal Green South and Bow West wards saw minor reductions in the number of primary-aged children living in those areas.

Figure 1: Increase in number of children aged 4 to 10, 2013 to 2018, by ward (2003 boundaries)



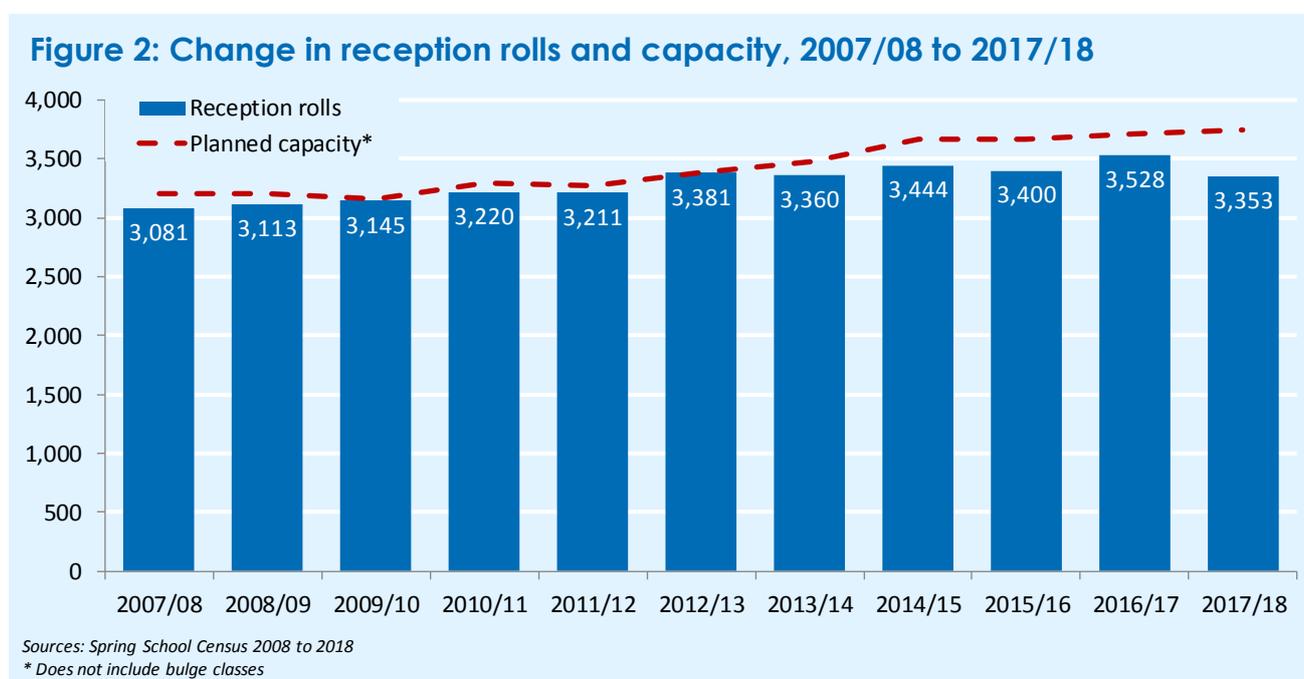
Source: GP registration data by ward, January 2013 and January 2018

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2.1 Reception rolls

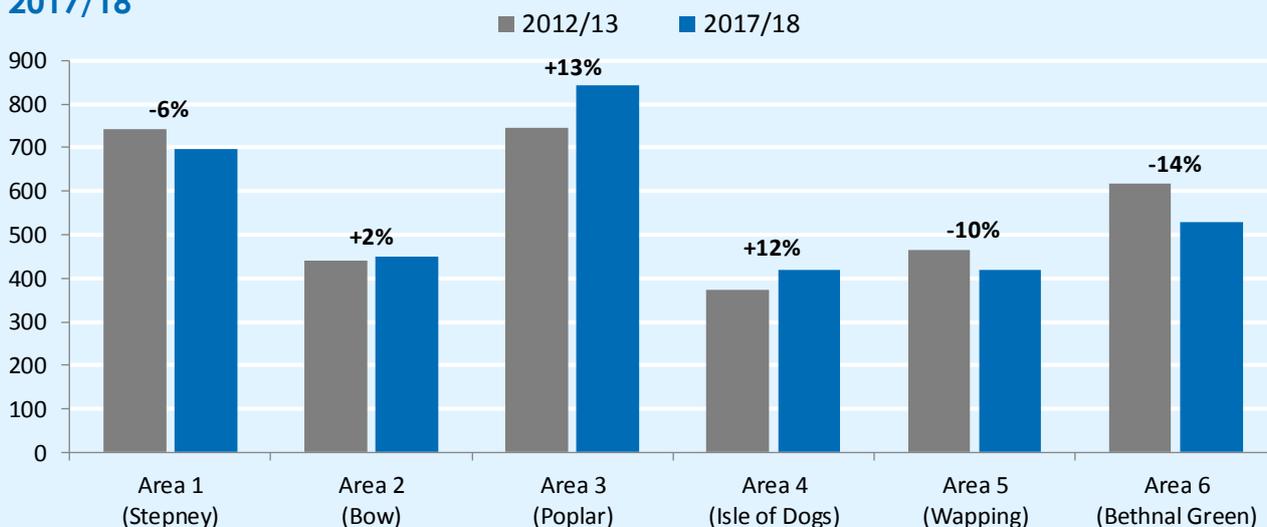
Over the past ten years, the number of reception pupils has grown by 9%, up from 3,081 in 2007/08 to 3,353 in 2017/18 (see **Figure 2**). However, there has been a great deal of fluctuation in the reception rolls in the past five years. The number of reception pupils peaked in 2016/17 at 3,528 pupils, but fell substantially in 2017/18 to 3,353 – around the same number of reception pupils in the borough four years earlier in 2013/14.

Since the borough's provision of reception places has increased at the same time, the difference between supply and demand has been growing. In previous years, the borough had surplus capacity ranging from between 0% to 4%, with an occasional need to accommodate bulge classes. However, in January 2018 this surplus stood at around 390 reception places, which is equivalent to 13 FE or 10% of the borough's current reception capacity.



There have been substantial differences in the growth of reception rolls between catchment areas. **Figure 3** shows that both Poplar and Isle of Dogs catchments have seen large increases in their reception rolls, growing by 13% and 12% respectively. By comparison, Bethnal Green (-14%), Wapping (-10%) and Stepney (-6%) catchments have seen significant reductions in the number of reception pupils over the past five years.

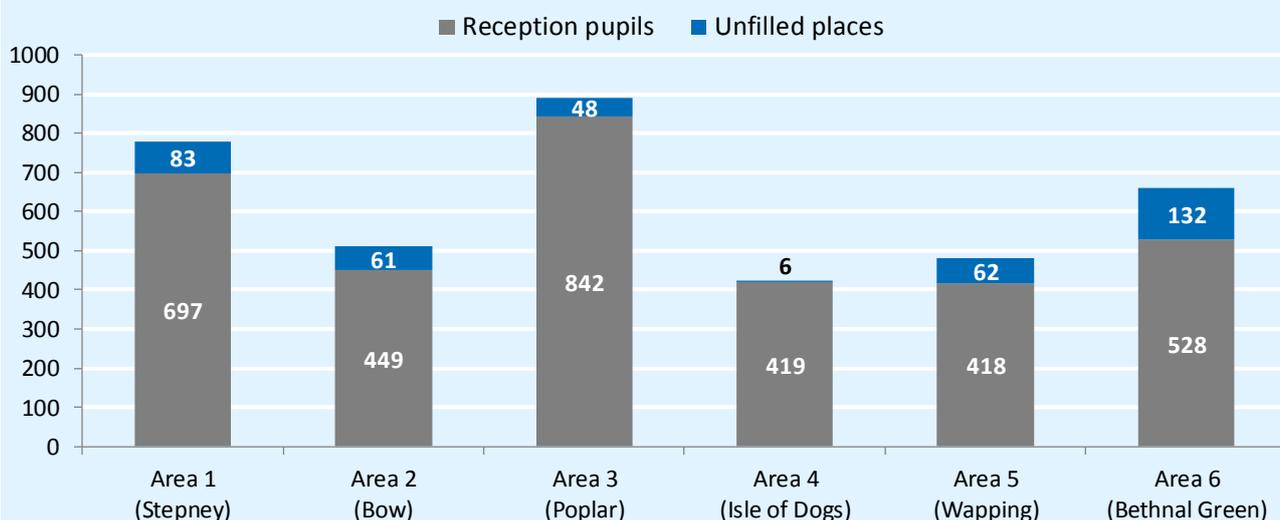
Figure 3: Change in number of reception pupils by catchment area, 2012/13 to 2017/18



Source: Spring School Census 2013 and 2018

Figure 4 shows that there is also a disparity between catchment areas in the number of unfilled reception places. Bethnal Green catchment had 132 unfilled places in January 2018, meaning that one in five reception places (20%) in the area were not filled. In contrast, the Isle of Dogs catchment had only 6 unfilled reception places, accounting for around 1% of the area's places.

Figure 4: Unfilled reception places by catchment area, January 2018



Source: Spring School Census 2018

Even within these catchment areas, there are differences between schools. While some schools are at capacity, others have in excess of 25% unfilled reception places. Figure 5 provides a map of unfilled reception places by school. It shows that while unfilled places are concentrated in the West of the borough, schools with a number of unfilled places can often be located near schools that are at or near their capacity.

Figure 5: Primary schools by percentage of unfilled reception places, January 2018

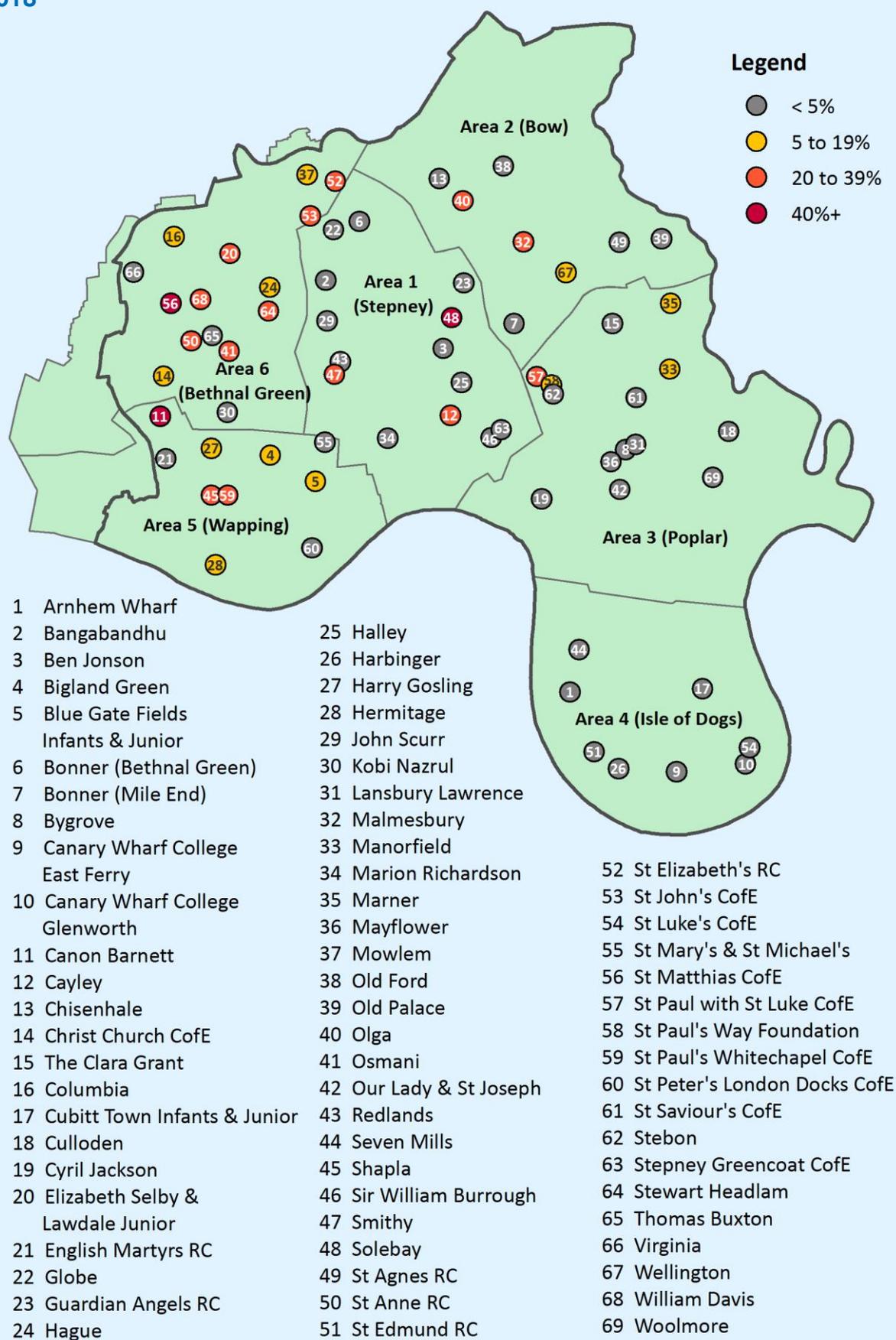
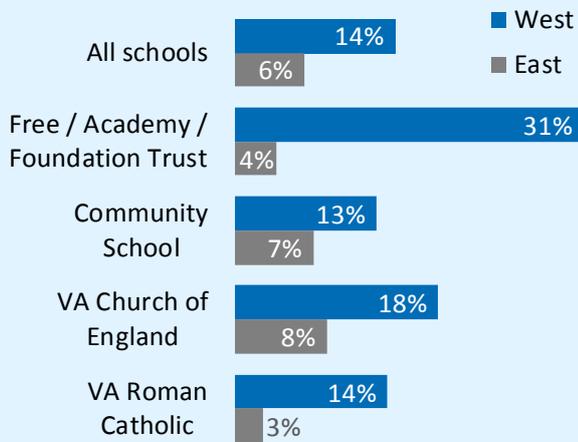


Figure 6: Percentage of unfilled reception places by sector and area, January 2018



Source: Spring School Census 2018
 West = Bethnal Green, Stepney and Wapping catchments
 East = Bow, Poplar and Isle of Dogs catchments

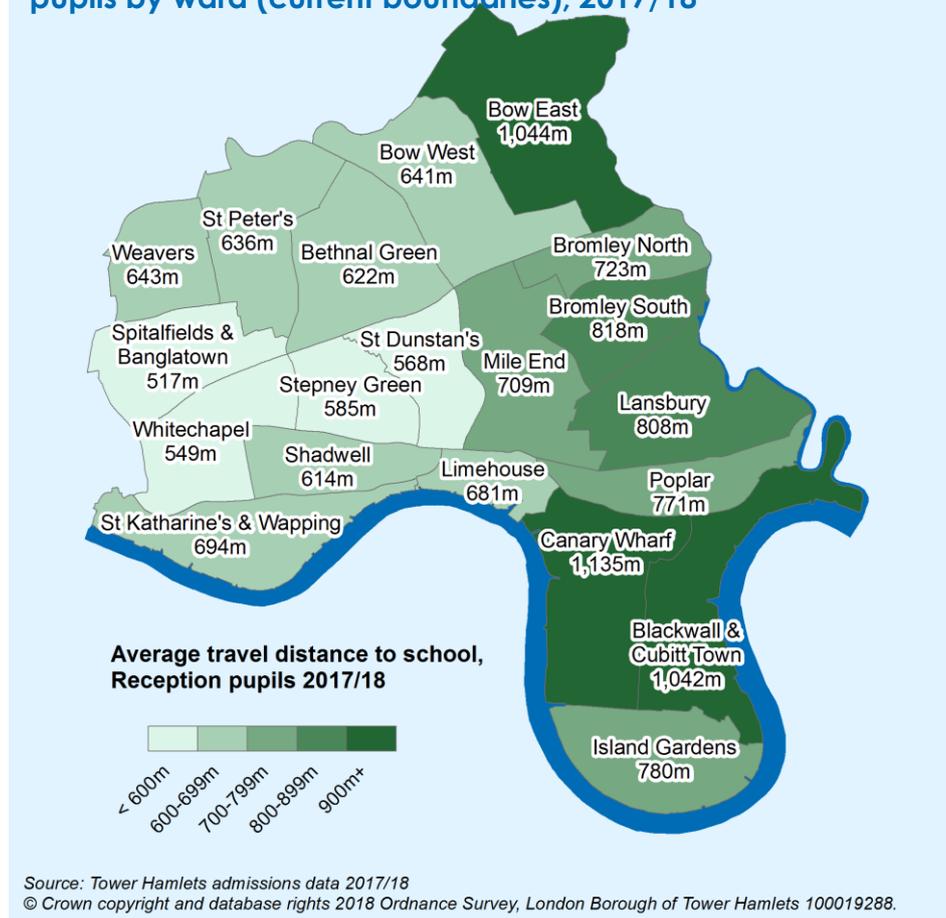
Figure 6 shows that while all sectors have a higher proportion of unfilled reception places in the West compared with the East of the borough, there are still disparities by sector. In the West, the proportion of unfilled reception places in free, academy and foundation trust schools (31%) was double the proportion of unfilled reception places in all schools (14%). Community schools had the lowest proportion of unfilled places (13%) in the West of the borough.

Differences between sectors are much less pronounced in the East, where all sectors have a relatively low proportion of unfilled places.

2.2 Average travel distances

The average travel distance for a reception pupil in 2017/18 was 729 metres which is well below the statutory travel distance. However, average travel distances vary considerably between areas. Figure 7 shows that travel distances are higher for pupils in the East of the borough than they are in the West. Canary Wharf has the longest average travel distance for pupils, at 1,135m. This is more than double that in Spitalfields & Banglatown (517m), the ward with the shortest average travel distance.

Figure 7: Average travel distance to school for reception pupils by ward (current boundaries), 2017/18

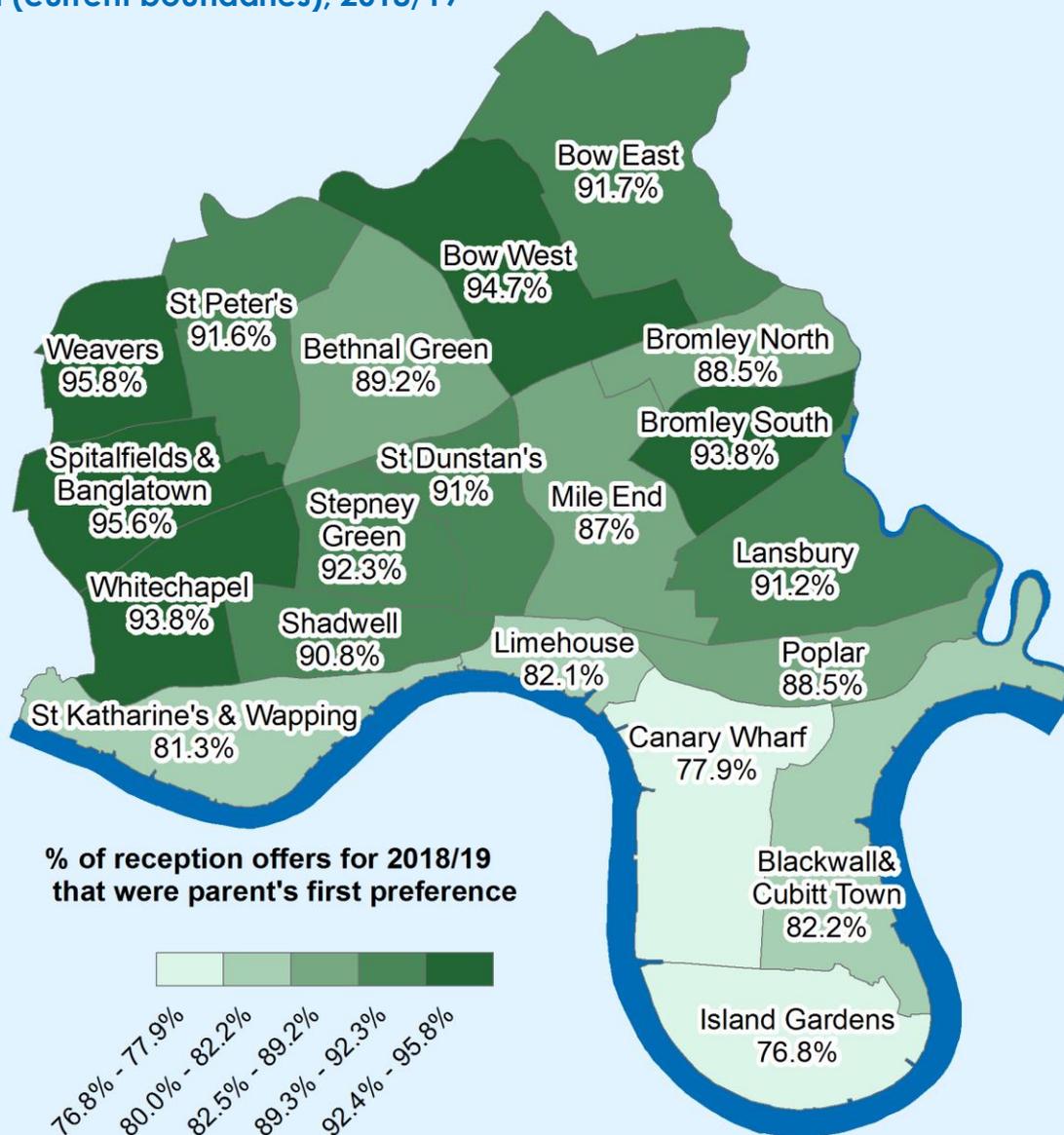


Source: Tower Hamlets admissions data 2017/18
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2.3 Parental preference

Across the borough, 89.2% of offers made for reception places in 2018/19 were the parent's first preference of school. However, there are differences by area that show a slightly different pattern of demand than the other population and pupil data above. **Figure 8** shows that pupils in the South of the borough, particularly in the Isle of Dogs but also including Limehouse and St Katharine's & Wapping, have the lowest proportion of reception offers that were first preferences for 2018/19. By comparison, wards in the North of the borough (including those in the East) have higher levels of parental preference.

Figure 8: Percentage of reception offers that were parents' first preference by ward (current boundaries), 2018/19



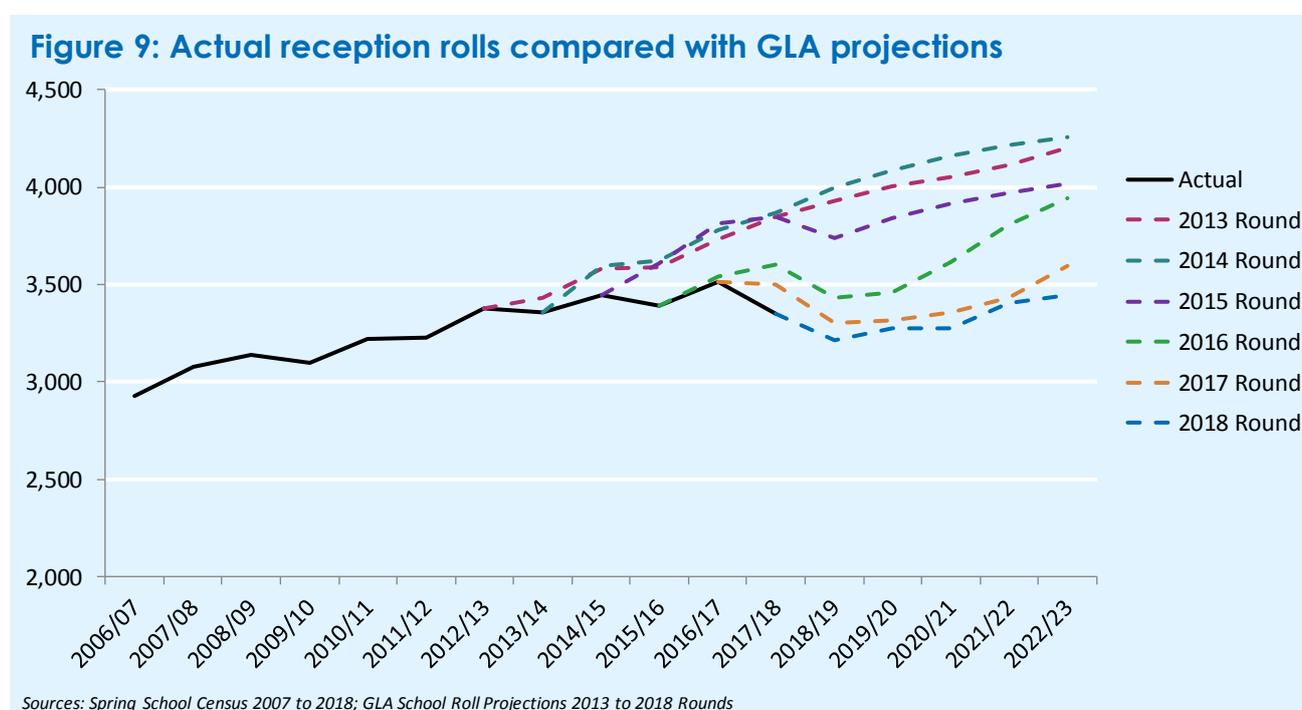
Source: Tower Hamlets admissions data 2018/19

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2.4 Actuals versus projections

It is impossible to predict the future, but statistical models use the best information available on historical trends and assumptions to project the population and future demand for school places. These projections are then used to proactively plan school provision in the borough. (For a summary of the projection methodology, see the [Appendix](#).)

Although projections have been very accurate historically, more recent rounds of projections anticipated that primary school rolls would grow much more rapidly than they have. **Figure 9** shows that earlier rounds of projections (2013, 2014, 2015) anticipated that the borough would have around 500 more reception pupils on roll in 2017/18, while the latest rounds of projections are now reflecting the slower rates of growth that have actually been experienced in the borough.



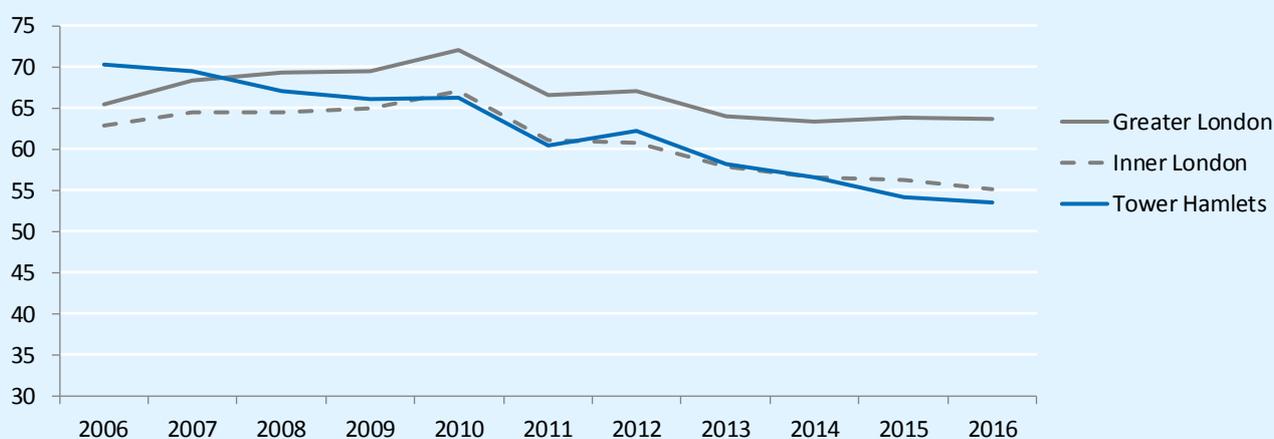
Many social and economic factors influence population change and the demand for school places, so the reasons for the borough's slow growth of primary pupils are complex. Projections largely rely on information about what has happened in the past to make assumptions about the future. This makes projections more difficult in times of demographic change, and Tower Hamlets has undergone significant change in recent years.

2.5 Births and fertility

Despite population growth, Tower Hamlets has experienced a fall in the number of births since 2013. In 2016, there were an estimated 4,592 live births in the borough – just 27 more births than there were in 2010 (4,565).⁴ This has meant that the borough's general fertility rate (measured as the number of births per 1,000 women aged 15-44) has fallen quite substantially.

Figure 10 shows that in Tower Hamlets, the general fertility rate was above both the Greater London and Inner London averages in 2006. By 2016, the rate in Tower Hamlets had fallen substantially below the average for Greater London and slightly below the average for Inner London.

Figure 10: General fertility rates (births per 1,000 women aged 15-44), 2006-16

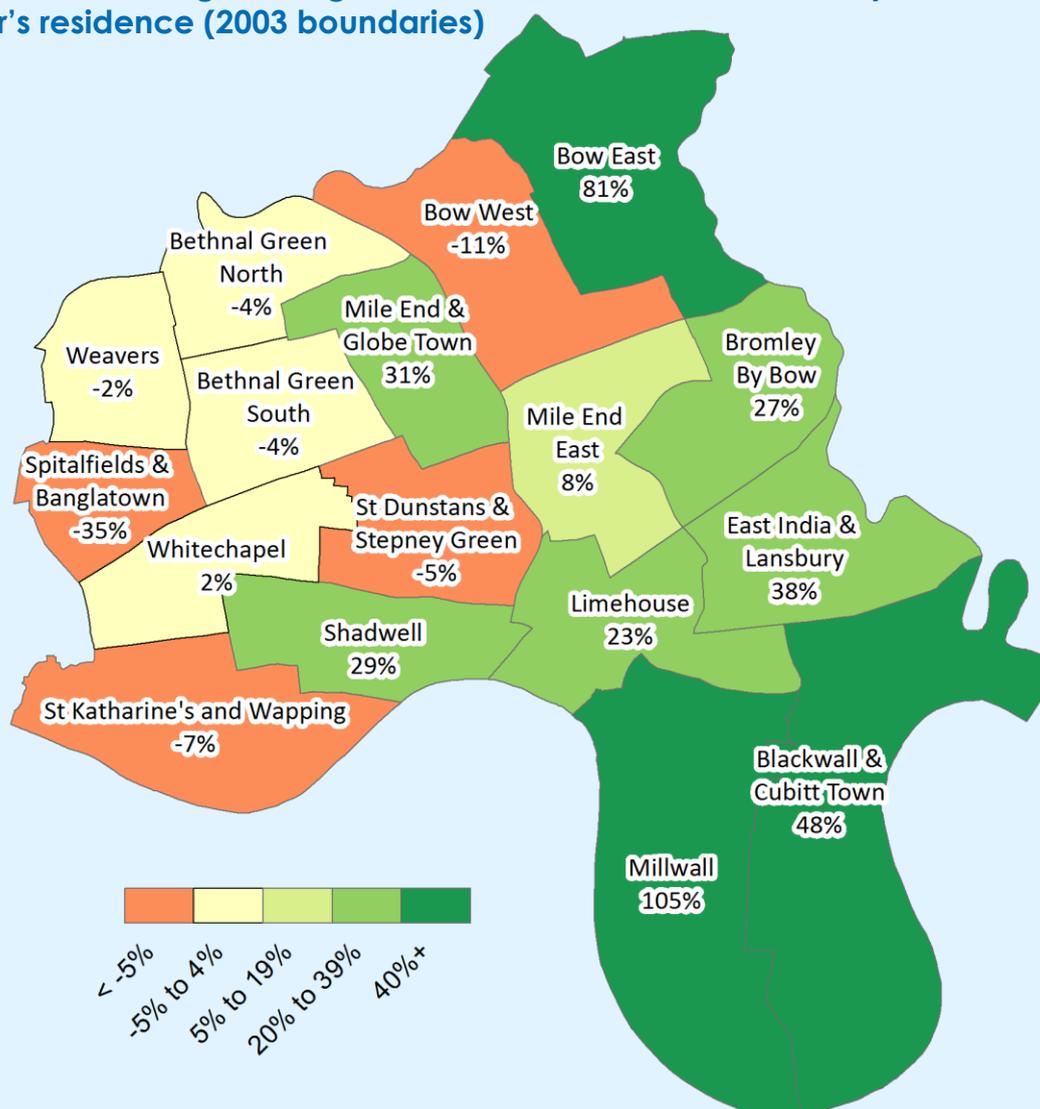


Source: Office for National Statistics, Births in England and Wales summary tables via London Datastore

The change in the number of births over time varies between different areas of the borough. **Figure 11** shows that areas in the East of the borough have seen the biggest increases in the number of births from 2003 to 2013⁵. In particular, Millwall ward in the Isle of Dogs saw the number of births more than double, from 207 births in 2003 to 425 births in 2013 (+105%). Bow East (+81%) and Blackwall and Cubitt Town (+48%) also saw significant increases in the number of births.

On the other hand, many wards in the West of the borough saw either falls in the number of births over the decade, or marginal change. Spitalfields & Banglatown saw the biggest fall in the number of births during this period – falling from 195 births in 2003 to 126 in 2013 (-35%).

Figure 11: Percentage change in number of births 2003-2013, by ward of mother's residence (2003 boundaries)



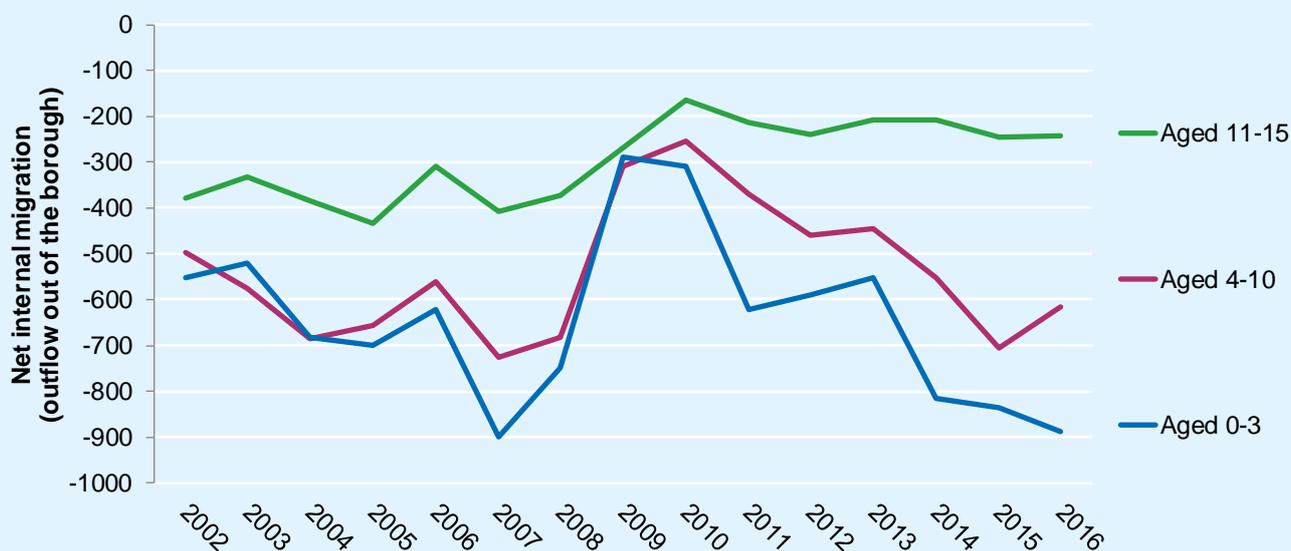
Source: Office for National Statistics, Live Births by Ward 2002-2014 (ad hoc request) via London Datastore
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2.6 Internal Migration

Internal migration is the movement of people between Tower Hamlets and the rest of the UK (for example, a family moving from Newham to Tower Hamlets, or from Tower Hamlets to Newham). There is a long-established pattern of a greater number of children leaving Tower Hamlets for other areas in the UK than children from elsewhere in the UK moving into the borough, leading to negative net internal migration. However, when the financial crisis hit in 2008, many families who may otherwise have left the borough decided to stay. This is most likely because there were better job prospects in the capital, or because of a downturn in the housing market.

Since 2010, outward migration of young families in Tower Hamlets (and indeed the rest of London⁶) has escalated and has now returned to pre-crisis levels. **Figure 12** shows that this trend is particularly pronounced for early years and primary aged children, contributing to the fall in primary school rolls.

Figure 12: Net internal migration of children in Tower Hamlets, 2002 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics, Internal Migration Flows via London Datastore

2.7 Take up of school places

Over the past five years, the number of four year olds living in the borough has increased by around 6%, based on GP registrations. At the same time, the number of reception pupils in state-funded provision is around the same as it was five years ago. This indicates that the take up of state-funded primary places in the borough has fallen. In 2012/13, around 91% of four year olds took up reception places but in 2017/18, this had fallen to 85%.⁷

The fall in reception take up is not due to a greater proportion of pupils attending schools out of borough. In 2009/10, 99% of reception pupils attending state-funded schools and resident in Tower Hamlets attended a school in the borough (the remaining 1% attended schools in the City of London or Hackney). In 2016/17, this percentage stood at 98%, so it has remained fairly consistent in recent years.

It is therefore likely that an increasing number of children in Tower Hamlets are attending independent provision, though data on pupils in independent schools is limited. There are currently eight independent schools in the borough with primary provision, two of which have opened recently. Buttercup Primary School opened in the Wapping catchment area in 2012 and Date Palm Primary School opened in the Bethnal Green catchment area in 2013.

2.8 Drivers of change

There are many interrelated factors which have contributed to the borough's falling birth rates, increasing outward migration, and falling uptake of state-funded school places. These include (but are not limited to):

- The type and size of new properties built in Tower Hamlets
- Rising rents and house prices
- Welfare reforms, such as the Benefit Cap, which have reduced incomes for families
- A change in the demographics of Tower Hamlets residents
- Properties which are vacant or otherwise not used as family homes (e.g. Airbnb)

3. Future demand

As the previous chapter illustrated, it can be very difficult to anticipate how the borough's population will change as this is affected by many different factors. Nonetheless, local authorities must use the best information available to proactively plan for the needs of their residents – not only in terms of school places, but also other types of services and infrastructure like GP surgeries and transport.

3.1 Housing development

In Tower Hamlets and in London more generally, housing development is the most important factor for projecting population growth. In the past 15 years, more homes have been built in Tower Hamlets than in any other London borough.⁸ Over the next decade, around 40,200 additional new homes are expected⁹ – which equates to about 11 new homes every day over the next ten years.

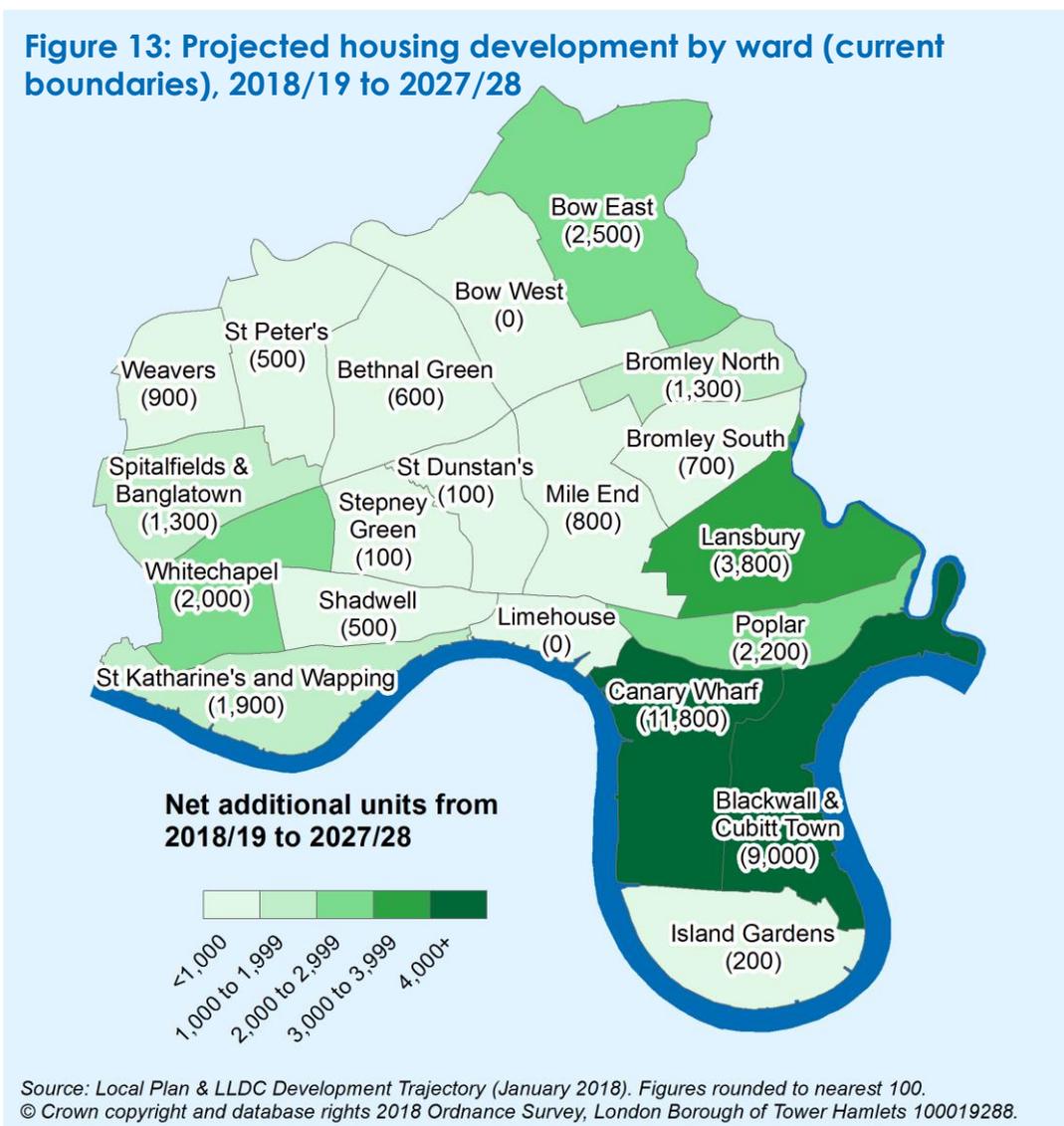


Figure 13 shows that around half of these new homes (52%) will be located in Canary Wharf and Blackwall & Cubitt Town wards in the Isle of Dogs. Housing development is also concentrated along the East of the borough and in the City Fringe area in the West of the borough. Relatively little housing development is expected to be delivered in the centre of the borough.

3.2 Population growth

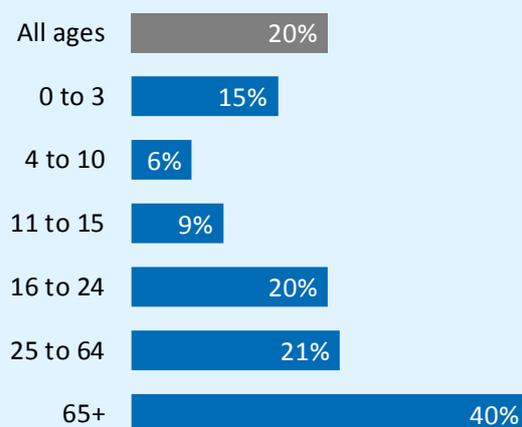
The Greater London Authority (GLA) produces population projections for London boroughs which take into account the amount of housing development expected to be delivered, as well as recent trends in births, deaths and migration.

These projections show that the borough population is expected to grow from an estimated 313,900 residents in 2018 to 375,600 residents in 2028.¹⁰ This would be a 20% increase in the population over the next decade.

However, **Figure 14** shows that different age groups in the population are expected to grow at different rates. The number of primary-aged children (aged 4 to 10) is only expected to grow by 6% over the next ten years, compared with 20% overall.

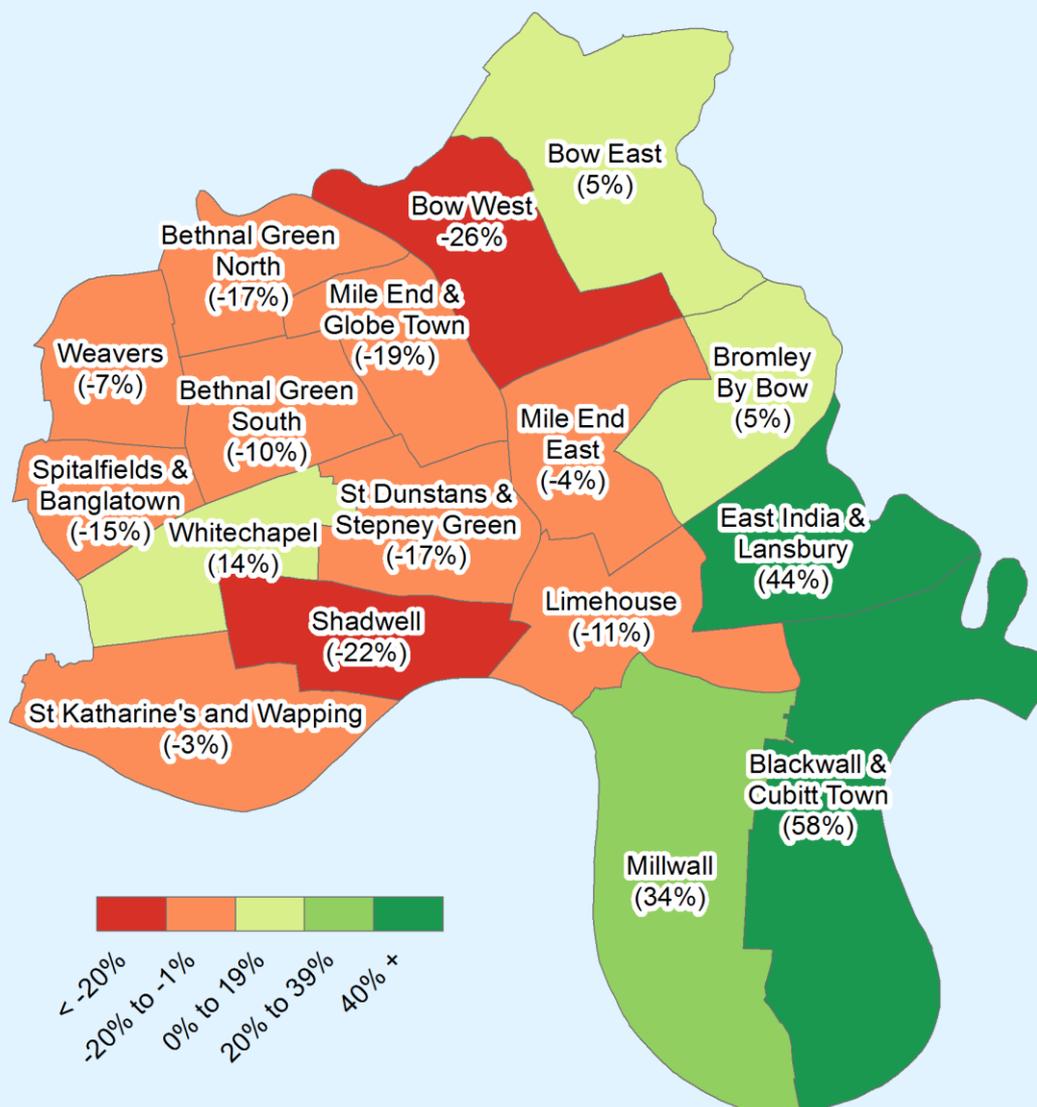
The majority of growth in the population of primary-aged children is expected to be in the East of the borough, as shown in **Figure 15**. Blackwall & Cubitt Town ward is expected to see the biggest increase in the number of 4 to 10 year-olds, growing by 58%. Areas in the West and centre of the borough are projected to see declines in the number of primary-aged children, with the exception of Whitechapel ward. The largest fall is expected to be in Bow West ward, declining by 26% over the next ten years.

Figure 14: Projected percentage population growth 2018 to 2028, by age group



Source: GLA 2016-based BPO population projections (produced March 2018)

Figure 15: Projected percentage increase in number of 4 to 10 year olds by ward (2003 boundaries), 2018 to 2028



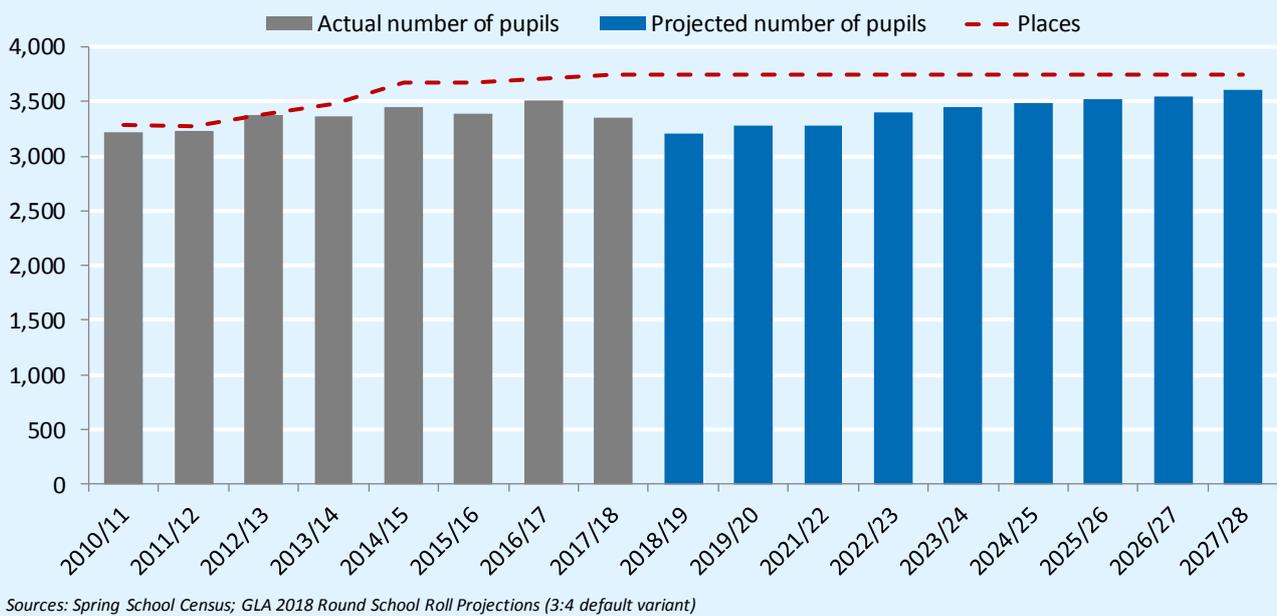
Source: GLA 2016-based BPO population projections using Local Plan & LLDC development trajectory, UPC variant.
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3.3 School roll projections

The population projections presented above, along with School Census data, are used to project pupil numbers in the future. (For an explanation of the methodology, see the [Appendix](#).)

These projections indicate that the demand for reception places in the borough will fall further over the next few years before rising slowly (see [Figure 16](#)). This would increase the borough's total proportion of unfilled reception places to 12-14% up to 2021/22 before gradually falling back down to around 4% in 2027/28.

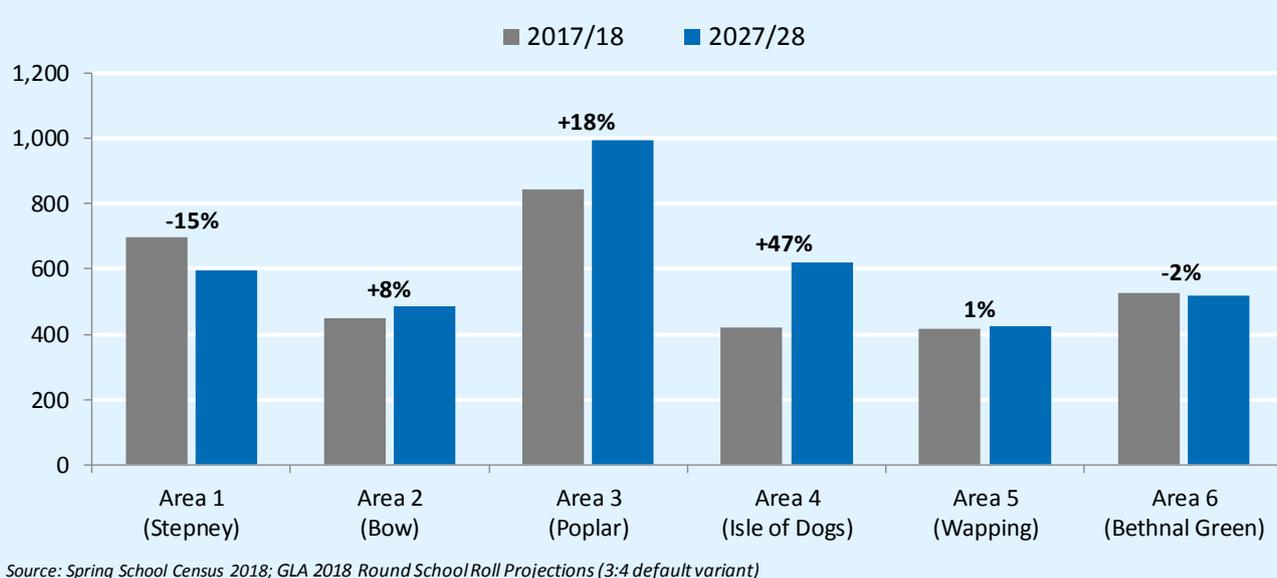
Figure 16: Actual and projected number of reception pupils vs. places



However, the growth in demand for places is projected to be unequally distributed across the borough. **Figure 17** shows that the Isle of Dog catchment is, by far, expected to see the biggest increase in the next ten years. The number of reception pupils in this area is projected to increase by around 200 pupils, or 47%. Poplar catchment is also expected to see a large increase in reception pupils, growing by around 150 pupils, or 18%.

At the same time, Stepney catchment is expected to have around 100 fewer reception pupils in 2027/28, a 15% fall. This would result increase the number of unfilled reception places from 83 in 2017/18 to 186 in 2027/28. Bethnal Green catchment is also expected to see 2% fall in the number of reception pupils, increasing the number of unfilled places from 132 in 2017/18 to 142 in 2027/28.

Figure 17: Projected change in reception pupils by 2027/28 by catchment area



3.4 Uncertainty about the future

All projections are subject to some level of uncertainty, but projections are at their weakest in times of demographic change because they rely heavily on information about historical trends. Chapter 2 demonstrated that previous rounds of school roll projections did not anticipate changes in births and migration, which led to lower numbers of primary pupils than had been projected.

Brexit makes this an even more uncertain time. It will undoubtedly impact many social and economic factors which affect the borough's population and demand for school places. However, there are still many unanswered questions such as:

- How will immigration from the EU fall, and how will immigration from other countries outside the EU change?
- To what extent will EU citizens already resident in the borough choose to leave?
- How many jobs will leave Canary Wharf and the City for other European cities, and what will be the impact on other supporting industries?
- Will property prices in the borough fall, and will that cause developers to build new homes at a slower rate than expected?

All of these factors suggest that population growth in Tower Hamlets could be lower than currently projected, but the borough may experience unexpected demographic changes. It is possible that the birth rates could rise or that outward migration could fall, which would lead to a higher demand for school places. It is therefore crucial that demographic trends are closely monitored in the future.

4. Conclusion

Tower Hamlets has experienced the fastest population growth in the UK and the borough's primary school provision was expanded to meet this demand. However, the borough's population growth has not translated into the need for school places that was anticipated. The number of reception pupils in 2017/18 is about the same as it was four years earlier in 2013/14. This has led to an increasing surplus of places and has put considerable pressure on school and local authority budgets.

These surpluses are unevenly distributed across the borough. Whilst areas in the West of the borough have seen a fall in demand, areas in the East of the borough have seen an increase.

Projections indicate that this situation will worsen over the coming decade. By 2027/28, catchments in the West (Stepney, Bethnal Green, Wapping) are projected to have a combined surplus of 390 reception places, or 13 FE. At the same time, catchments in the East (Bow, Poplar, Isle of Dogs) are projected to have a combined shortfall of around 270 reception places, or 9 FE.

This situation presents the Authority with a major challenge to limit the number of surplus primary school places. It will need to ensure that key stakeholders understand its strategy, and that an effective process is in place to manage any rationalisation of supply. This process will be guided by the following objectives:

- Maintain and improve the quality of provision in Tower Hamlets
- Reduce the number of schools with surplus places within catchment areas whilst ensuring that they continue to provide an equitable distribution of school place provision
- Ensure that all schools remain economically viable
- Maximise the value and efficiency of existing and new school sites, and where possible, encourage schools to work with community bodies and the Early Years sector to utilise surplus space
- Look at opportunities for schools to adapt space for specialist purposes such as ICT, libraries, parent/care facilities
- Minimise the cost of school buildings which are out of use
- Continue to maximise parental preference
- Minimise the impact on travel distances for pupils
- Avoid the use of half-forms of entry and vertical groupings
- Ensure that management structures and arrangements optimise links between agencies responsible for school place planning and admissions and those responsible for school improvement and fair access policies
- Establish a school organisation plan that represents a clear and meaningful exposition of the local strategy on the provision of school places.

Success in implementing this strategy will release significant resources that can benefit pupils across the Tower Hamlets area.

Appendix: School roll projection methodology

Tower Hamlets Council commissions school roll projections through the Greater London Authority (GLA), like most other London boroughs. GLA have access to data on all pupils in London (via the National Pupil Database) which enables them to model movements across borough boundaries in a way that would be difficult for an individual authority.

Projections are usually run each year in March/April using the following methodology:

- Step 1.** The borough's population is projected based on demographic trends (e.g. births, deaths, and migration) and the borough's housing development trajectory using planning data submitted by the council.
- Step 2.** The flow of pupils from their ward of residence (including those out of borough) to each mainstream state school is determined, based on the Spring School Census and estimates of the number of children living in each ward. These are turned into ratios, for example, one in five Year 1 pupils living in XYZ Ward go to ABC Primary School. These existing ratios are not available for new children entering school in Reception, so these ratios are determined based on previous years.
- Step 3.** The number of pupils in each school is projected by multiplying the flow ratios by the populations in each ward. For example, if one in five Year 1 pupils in XYZ Ward go to ABC Primary School, and it is projected that there will be 100 Year 1 pupils in the ward, then 20 pupils from this ward are expected to go to ABC Primary. The number of pupils from each ward is then added up for each school.
- Step 4.** Projections are aggregated to catchment area and borough-level to improve reliability.

Endnotes

¹ Office for National Statistics, 2006 and 2016 Mid-year population estimates accessed via [NOMIS](#) (revised estimates published on 22 March 2018).

² Greater London Authority, [2018 Pan-London School Place Demand Projections](#)

³ GP Registration Data by ward, sourced from GLA.

⁴ Office for National Statistics, [Births in England and Wales summary tables](#).

⁵ The Office for National Statistics has released ward-level birth data for 2014 and 2015 as well, but these are in the borough's new 2014 ward boundaries. The 2003-2013 time period has been used so that the data has consistent geographical boundaries.

⁶ Greater London Authority, December 2016. [Are Thirty-something Londoners Really Fleeing the Capital? \(blog\)](#)

⁷ These take up rates have been calculated by dividing the number of reception pupils on the Spring School Census (including those in special schools) by the number of four year olds on the GP register in July the previous year.

⁸ Department for Communities & Local Government, [Live tables on housing supply: net additional dwellings \(Table 122\)](#).

⁹ This is based on the Tower Hamlets Local Plan and LLDC development trajectories for conventional units. These trajectories take into account planning permissions, site allocations and the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA).

¹⁰ Greater London Authority, 2016-based Borough Preferred Option (BPO) population projections using the Local Plan & LLDC development trajectory (UPC variant, produced March 2018).