



# COMING, BUT NOT STAYING

WHY YOUNG LONDONERS ARE RETHINKING  
LIFE IN THE CAPITAL

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LONDON HERITAGE QUARTER

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

*Coming, Not Staying: Why Young Londoners Are Rethinking Life in the Capital* was written by **Jack Airey**, Director of Housing and Infrastructure at Public First, and **Jules Walkden**, Research Manager at Public First. The research was supported by **London Heritage Quarter**.

## **About Public First**

Public First is a global strategic consultancy that works to help organisations better understand public opinion, analyse economic trends and craft new policy proposals. It has worked directly with some of the world's biggest companies, government departments, top universities and major charities to produce bespoke, original policy proposals and reports derived from an evidence base of economic analysis and public opinion research. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and is a Company Partner of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines it adheres to.

## **About London Heritage Quarter**

London Heritage Quarter is the collective of four South Westminster Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) – Victoria, Victoria Westminster, Whitehall and The Northbank. Stretching from Belgravia through to Parliament Square, Strand and on to the Royal Courts of Justice, the four districts cover some of central London's most iconic locations and visitor destinations, as well as thousands of businesses from FTSE 100 companies to smaller creative businesses and start-ups. London Heritage Quarter works closely with Westminster City Council and other partners to support business growth, enhance the environment and lobby on behalf of diverse business communities.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For generations, London has drawn young people from every corner of Britain and beyond, promising work and the hope of a better life. It is seen as a place to build a career and enjoy everything city life has to offer. But new evidence suggests that old dream, the idea that if you came to London and worked hard, you would be rewarded, is waning.

## The young are leaving London

Our research shows that while the young still come to London, they leave faster than before – and many more expect to follow. This matters because London’s ability to attract and retain young workers underpins its role as a central engine of the UK economy, helping to sustain growth both in the capital and beyond it. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows people in their late twenties and early thirties are leaving the capital at record levels. In 2024, London saw a net outflow of 22,000 people in this age group to the rest of England and Wales, around 20,000 more than a decade ago.<sup>1</sup>

**Our polling shows one in three (33%) Londoners aged 18 to 30 say they are likely to leave the capital within the next two years, which equates to around 600,000 people.** When asked about the next five years, that rises to nearly half the age group. The capital risks losing its lifeblood: the waiters and nurses, the designers, young professionals and teachers, the people who drive its growth and sustain its creative energy.

The reasons are no mystery. Our quantitative and qualitative research shows that many young Londoners feel the city has become too expensive to live in, too hard to get ahead in, and for many, too unsafe. Private rents have risen by 25% in just three years.<sup>2</sup>

Eight in ten (81%) young people say the city is more costly than they expected before moving. More than half (61%) believe the cost of living has worsened since the pandemic, and most expect it to get worse still. The city risks pricing itself out of affection with the people who work hard, often in jobs that make the city function, but who no longer feel that effort is rewarded.

## Slower progression and greater pressure

Work remains the main reason young people come to London. Yet more now question if it is the best place to build a career. **Among those earning under £30,000, two in**

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<sup>1</sup> [ONS, 2025, Internal Migration in England and Wales](#)

<sup>2</sup> Analysis of Price Index of Private Rents (PIPR) from the ONS, January 2015 to December 2025

**five say career prospects have worsened since the pandemic (42%).** Hiring has slowed across the UK, with graduate roles scarcer than before and employers facing rising costs from increases to National Insurance Contributions and the National Living Wage.

For younger workers, who evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows are starting lower down the wage ladder than previous generations,<sup>3</sup> slower hiring risks leaving them stuck in lower-paid roles for longer, limiting the opportunities for career progression and wage growth that our polling shows young Londoners most want. Even among the better-paid, there is a sense that progress demands more and more. Too many hours, too little time, and too much stress simply to afford a roof over their heads.

Meanwhile, remote and hybrid working have loosened the tie between work and place. The average London worker now spends less than three days a week in the city,<sup>4</sup> and half of young adults (51%) say this flexibility makes them more likely to consider leaving in the next five years.

### The background noise of crime

Crime has become another quiet burden, part of the background noise of life in the capital. **More than half of young Londoners say the city feels less safe than it did five years ago (51%), and four in five have been affected by crime in some way (79%).**

The rise in more visible, everyday offences, from shoplifting to bag and bicycle theft, has reinforced a public sense that disorder in London is growing. Women, in particular, are more likely to say safety shapes whether they can imagine a future in the capital.

### Growing divides: income and gender

**Income is the strongest predictor of whether someone stays or goes.** The divide between how young people on different salaries experience life in London is widening. Higher earners still describe the city as exciting, diverse and full of opportunity. Lower earners, who are twice as likely to plan to leave, describe it as stressful, crowded and exhausting.

Gender is also important. **Women start leaving London earlier than men, often in their late twenties.**<sup>5</sup> They are around 30% more likely than men in their late twenties to say they could leave the city in the next two years, and more likely to be concerned

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<sup>3</sup> [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020, What has been happening to career progression?](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Centre for Cities, 2024, Return to the office: How London compares to other global cities, and why this matters](#)

<sup>5</sup> [ONS, 2025, Internal Migration in England and Wales](#)

about the affordability of housing, crime and anti-social behaviour, and the general cleanliness of public spaces.

### Making London worth it again

The risk is not that London will suddenly be empty of young people. The capital has a continued magnetism to young people from around the UK and the world. **Just under four-in-ten 18 to 30 year olds who live outside the capital (38%) say they are very or somewhat likely to move into London in the next two years**, drawn by the promise of a better job. But there is a growing danger that for more and more people, the city becomes a place to start a career, not to build a life. If that happens, London's economy, culture and spirit will all weaken.

This matters not just for young Londoners themselves, but for London's businesses. Employers depend on a steady supply of young workers. Not only to hire, but to develop, retain and promote. Ready access to a deep and diverse talent pipeline is one of London's core competitive advantages, a key reason it continues to attract domestic and international investment and something that is crucial to the UK economy. If London becomes a place people pass through rather than put down roots, firms face higher turnover, skills shortages and rising recruitment costs. Making it easier to employ young people, and to support their progression once in work, is therefore central to keeping the city competitive.

What unites young Londoners, regardless of income, is what they want from life: good work that pays fairly, lower housing costs and streets where they feel safe. They are the simple, practical conditions that allow people to plan a future. Our research shows young Londoners can be persuaded to stay if policymakers make the city feel worth their while again by focusing on these basics. Improving these things will not happen overnight, but they are essential if London is to remain a city for the young, where ambition is rewarded and effort still leads somewhere.

# INTRODUCTION

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This report explores why young Londoners are questioning whether the city is still worth it. Drawing on new polling and focus groups, it analyses the rate at which young people are leaving, and intend to leave, the capital. It then examines how the rising cost of living, the changing job market and concerns about safety shape decisions about staying or leaving, and what policymakers can do to convince the next generation to build their futures in the capital.

## Research methodology

The polling data in this report specific to Londoners comes from:

- An anonymous online survey of 1,066 adults living in London between the 4-18 of August 2025.
- An anonymous online survey of 722 18-30-year-olds living in London between the 4-18 of August 2025.

The polling data in this report that is about the views of people in the rest of the UK comes from:

- An anonymous online survey of 2,004 UK adults between the 10-14 October 2025. Results have been filtered to include only respondents living outside of London where referenced in this report.

All results are weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking'. The results are weighted by interlocking age & gender, region and social grade to Nationally Representative Proportions. Where filtered results (e.g. by income) are shown, subsamples include at least 100 unweighted responses to ensure robustness.

Two focus groups were also conducted for this report between 27-28 October 2025. One with a lower income group of young Londoners and one with a higher income group. All participants were aged 18–35. Lower-income individuals were defined as those earning under £35,000 per year, while higher-income participants were those earning £40,000 or more.

## CHAPTER ONE:

# LEAVING LONDON?

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London's population has experienced significant churn in recent decades. More than two million people moved to the capital from elsewhere in the country during the 2010s, while close to three million people left for another part of the UK.<sup>6</sup> Despite this considerable outflow of 792,000 Londoners over the decade, the city grew by over 800,000 people as a result of natural change and international migration.<sup>7</sup>

Today, London's population reaches more than nine million people.<sup>8</sup> In the most recent estimates from 2023, annual births exceeded deaths by around 51,600 and net international migration added 154,100 to the city's population.<sup>9</sup>

The result is a city in flux. London remains younger than the national average, sustained by student inflows and new arrivals from abroad, yet it is also slowly ageing as working age Londoners leave in growing numbers. **Young adults continue to move to the city, but the number leaving rather than laying down roots in the capital is rising, and many more say they are thinking about following them.**

### Young people gravitate to London

Our polling shows that opportunities to work and study remain at the heart of why young people move to London. In our qualitative research, the city was seen by many as the only place they can develop a career in their chosen field, while its universities are a magnet for young people across the UK and globally.

The capital's pulling power for students and graduates is reflected in official data.

London attracts university students from across the UK and the world. In 2023-24, more than one fifth of the 2.9 million people studying at UK universities attended London-based institutions.<sup>10</sup> Of these 543,000 students in London, 192,000 were already London residents, 143,000 moved to London from elsewhere in the country and 208,000 were international students.<sup>11</sup> The number of students in London has grown by

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<sup>6</sup> [Trust for London, 2021, Migration in and out of London over time](#)

<sup>7</sup> [ONS, 2025, Local indicators for London](#)

<sup>8</sup> [ONS, 2025, Local indicators for London](#)

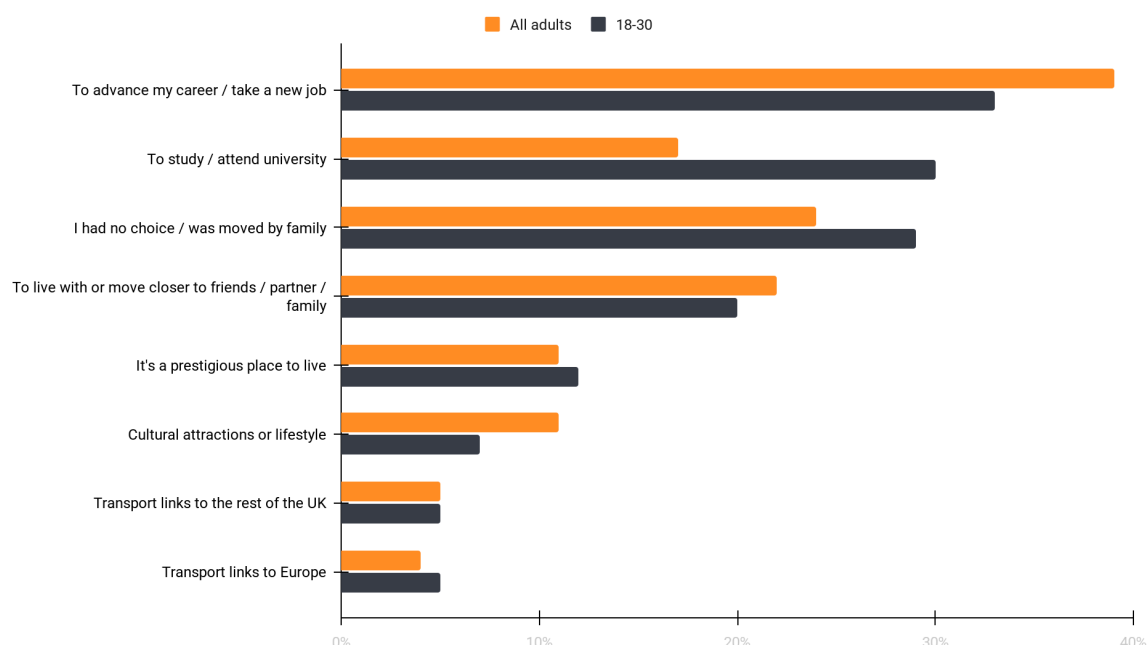
<sup>9</sup> [GLA, 2024, London's Population](#)

<sup>10</sup> [HESA, 2025, HE student enrolments by permanent address and region of HE provider 2014/15 to 2023/24](#)

<sup>11</sup> [HESA, 2025, HE student enrolments by permanent address and region of HE provider 2014/15 to 2023/24](#)

36% since 2014-15, driven by a near doubling in the number of international students from 106,000.

What was the main reason you moved to London? Please select one option [respondents not born in London]



London also remains a hub for graduates chasing professional progress. In 2024, 18% of domestic graduates who left their home town moved to London.<sup>12</sup> Recent analysis from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that young graduates who move to London can expect to earn about 15% more than their counterparts in the average UK travel-to-work area.<sup>13</sup>

The capital is particularly attractive to high-achieving graduates: research by the Centre for Cities in 2016 found that while the capital employed 22% of all graduates who relocated, it employed 38% of those with a first or upper second-class degree from a Russell Group university.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, other research from the IFS found that by the age of 32, around a quarter of those with the highest levels of GCSE achievement had settled in London.<sup>15</sup>

### Many working aged Londoners have left

**While the capital continues to attract 18-24 year olds, typically students and recent graduates, every other age group now sees more people leaving London for other parts of the UK than moving in.**<sup>16</sup> Net outward migration of 25-34 year olds has

<sup>12</sup> [ONS, 2024, Geographical mobility of young people across English towns and cities: March 2024](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025, On the move](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Centre for Cities, 2016, The Great British Brain Drain: Where graduates move and why](#)

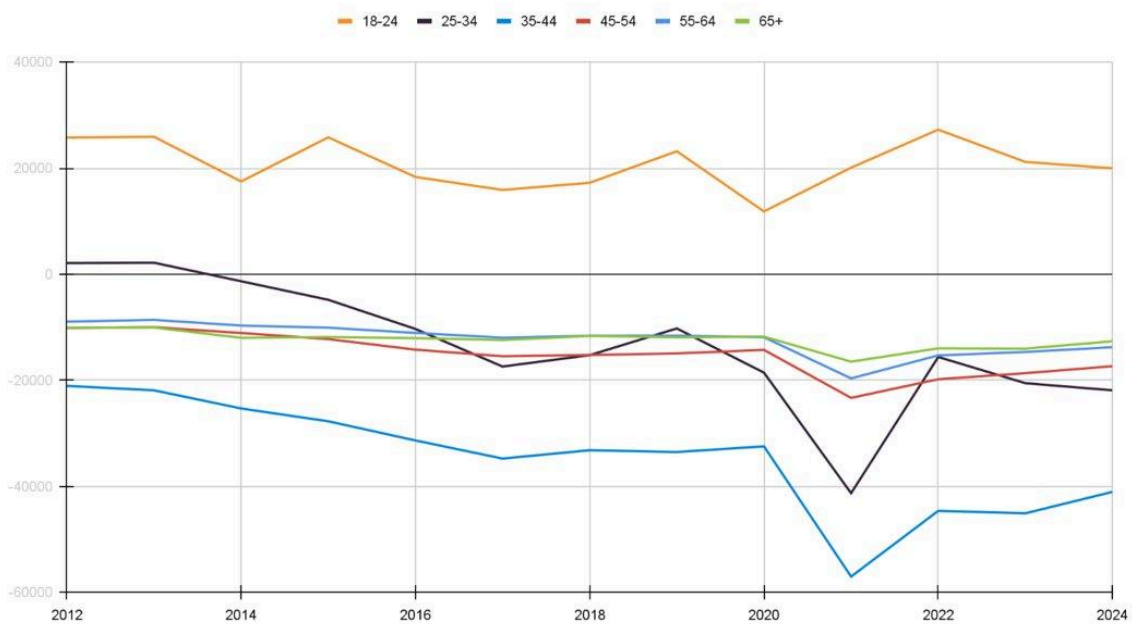
<sup>15</sup> [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025, On the move](#)

<sup>16</sup> [ONS, 2025, Internal migration in England and Wales](#)

gradually risen over the past decade. They now leave the capital in ever greater numbers than they arrive, having been a net inflow group just over a decade ago.

The age group with the largest net outflow from London is 35-44 year olds, who are now leaving London at record levels outside of the pandemic years. Analysis by the Centre for Cities shows that people aged 30-45 left at double the normal rate during the Covid years.<sup>17</sup>

Net domestic migration into London by age group since 2012

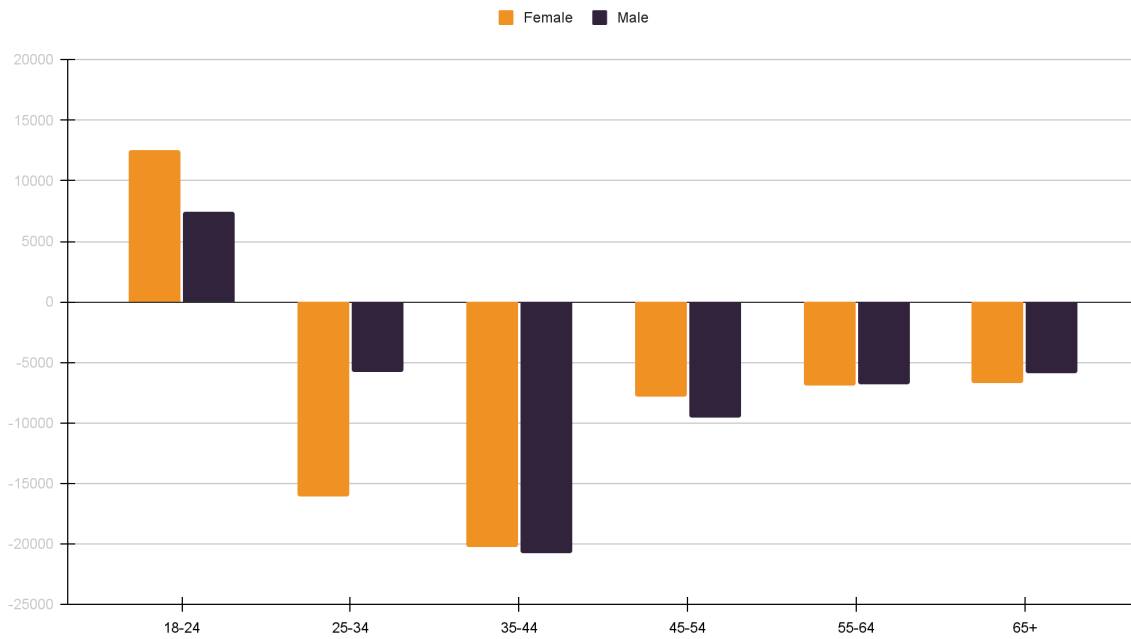


**The data also shows a clear gender divide: women start leaving London earlier than men**, with women aged 25-34 doing so in far greater numbers than their male peers.<sup>18</sup> Our quantitative research does not identify why women leave earlier than men, but, as we set out later in this chapter, it found women living in London are more likely to say they will leave the capital. We believe this important point warrants further research.

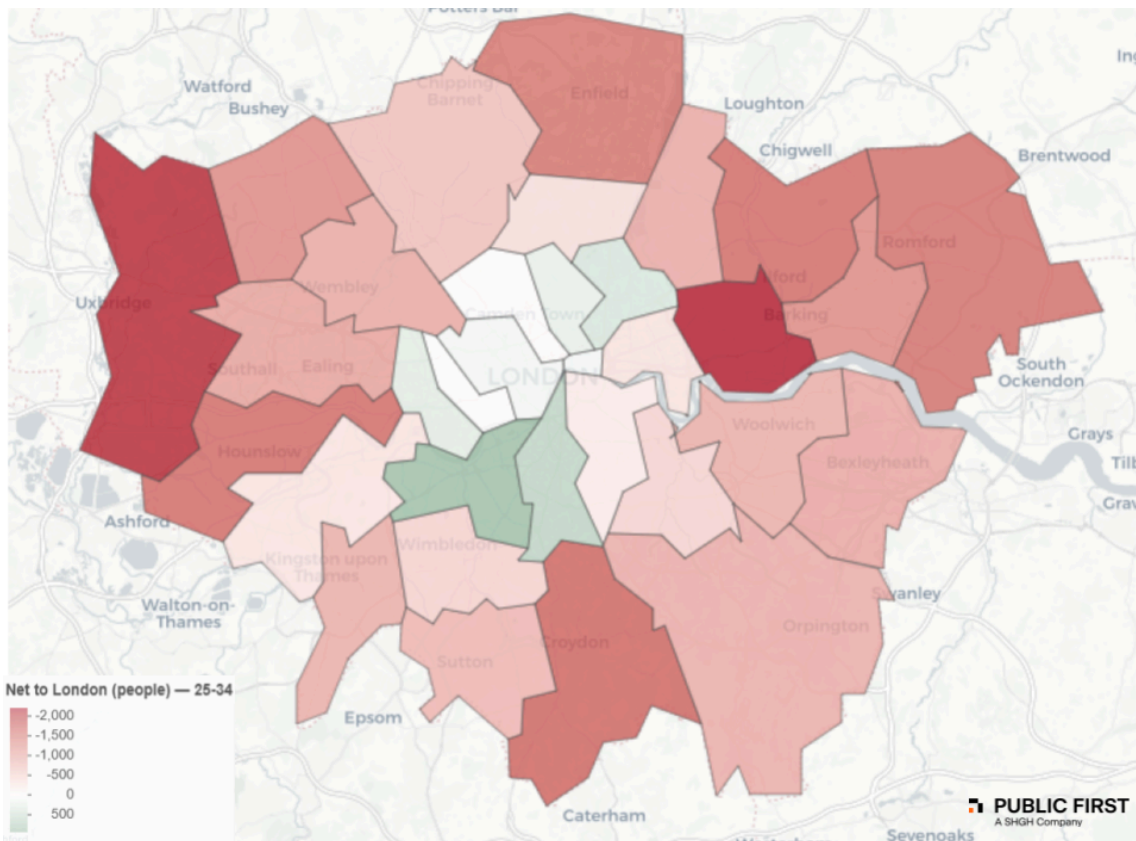
<sup>17</sup> [Centre for Cities, 2024, Escape to the country? How Covid changed London's population](#)

<sup>18</sup> [ONS, 2025, Internal migration in England and Wales](#)

Net domestic migration into London by age group and sex



The London boroughs losing the most young adults tend to have lower median incomes, while wealthier areas are drawing in more young people.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>19</sup> [ONS, 2025. Internal migration in England and Wales](#)

This creates a clear pattern: net outflows in outer boroughs like Hillingdon, Croydon, and Harrow, while inner boroughs such as Wandsworth and Lambeth gain young residents on net.

### More young Londoners say they will leave – particularly women

Our research finds that more young Londoners are likely to leave the capital. **One in three Londoners aged 18–30 (33%) say they are likely to leave the city within the next two years – equivalent to around 600,000 people.** When asked about the next five years, this rises to 40% of the age group, or approximately 800,000 people.<sup>20</sup>

**Women aged 25-30 are around 30% more likely than men of the same age to say they could leave the city in the next two years.** They're also more likely to highlight local issues that may be driving those intentions, including the affordability of housing, crime and anti-social behaviour, and the general cleanliness of public spaces.

While some of this disparity can be explained by higher numbers of female students leaving the capital on completion of their studies, other factors play a role. On average, women aged between 22-30 living in London earn around 10% less than men of the same age<sup>21</sup> - a gap that, combined with London's high cost of living, creates significant financial pressures. Reflecting this, young women are considerably more likely than men to cite the cost of living as a reason they would consider moving out of the city (66% vs 51%).

### Lower earners are most likely to leave

**Income is the strongest predictor of whether someone plans to stay or go.**

Among Londoners earning less than £30,000 a year, roughly as many expect to leave as to stay - more than 40% of this group anticipate moving out of the capital in the next two years. By contrast, among those earning £80,000 or more, the share likely to leave almost halves to 23%.

The average salary for our cohort of young Londoners is £54,000, with men earning an average of £59,000 and women £50,000. 29% of individuals in this age bracket earn less than £30,000 per year, whilst around one in three earn over £80,000 per year (34%).<sup>22</sup>

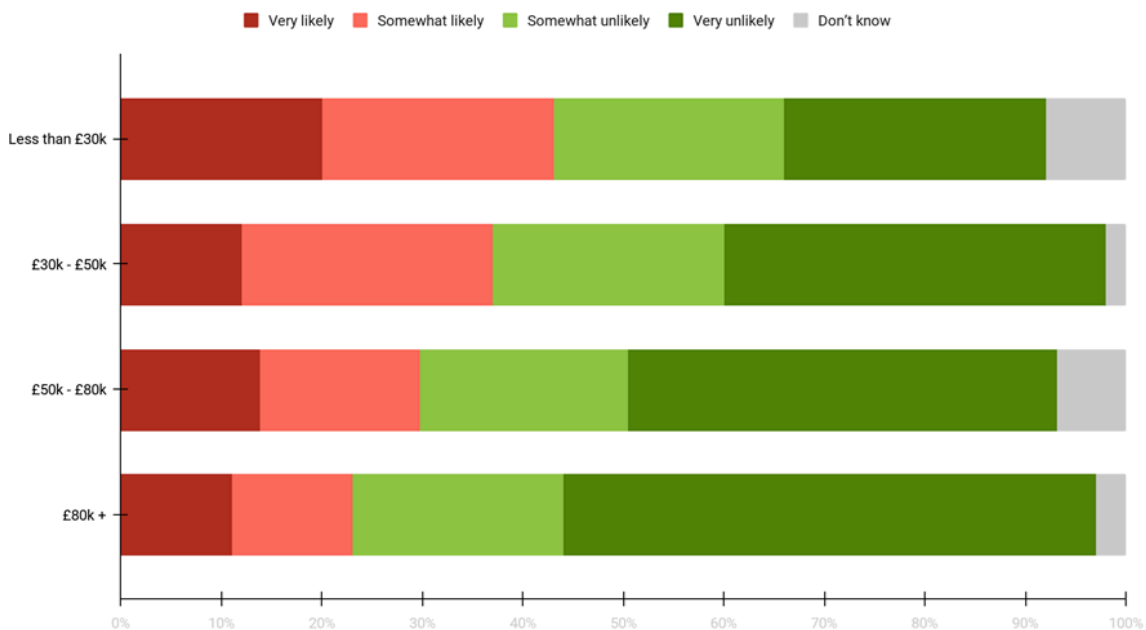
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<sup>20</sup> PF Polling and Population Data from the [Trust for London](#)

<sup>21</sup> [ONS, 2025, Earnings and hours worked, UK region by age group](#)

<sup>22</sup> PF Polling

### How likely are you to move out of London in the next 2 years? [18-30s]



In focus groups we ran, almost all the young Londoners on lower incomes we spoke to said they had seriously considered leaving London.

*"I've had a lot of friends move to Devon, or further out, to either start a family or to be closer to nature. So I think there might be something there as well that after Covid and all of these things we're spending more time maybe realising what matters."*

**Lower income woman, 20s, London**

Higher earners, meanwhile, tended to be more committed to staying, though some acknowledged that job opportunities and lower tax rates made places such as Dubai and New York appealing alternatives.

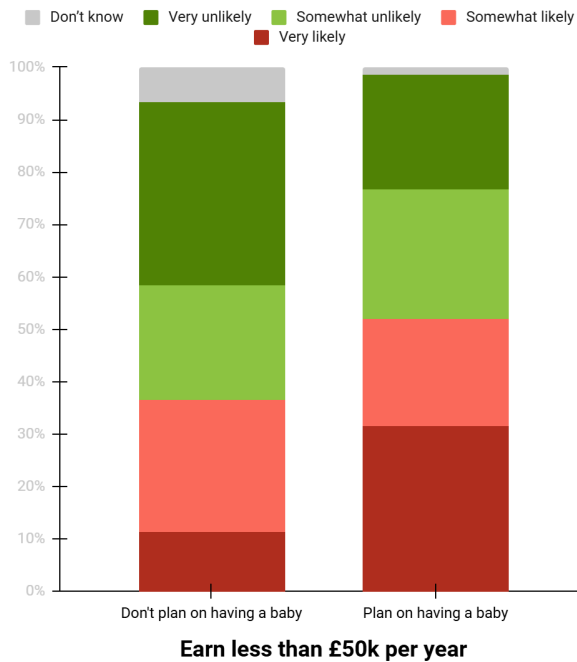
*"I work in tech and the salary differences I see across different areas of the world is absolutely crazy. If you work in New York a standard software engineer's starting salary is sixty or seventy thousand... But in tech, for me, when you start earning that high amount, the extra tax that hits you, you get to the point where if you want to go for those roles you have to sacrifice a lot."* **Higher income man, 20s, London**

## The family factor

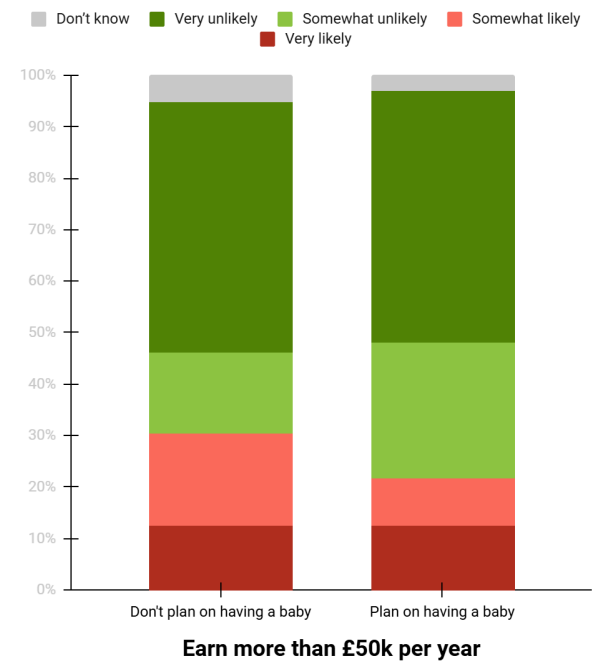
Attitudes towards raising children in London also divide sharply by income. **Low-earning young Londoners who plan to start a family are more likely to say they will leave the city than those who do not intend to have children. The opposite is true among higher-earning young adults planning to have a baby who say they are more likely to stay in London than those who are not.** Together, these

findings suggest that young Londoners on low incomes see having children as a reason to leave, while those on high incomes see it as a reason to stay.

How likely are you to move out of London in the next 2 years? [18-30s]



How likely are you to move out of London in the next 2 years? [18-30s]



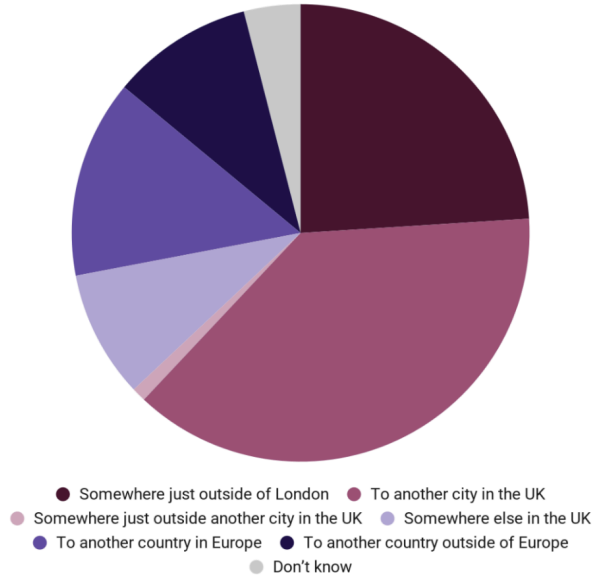
This theme was echoed in our focus groups:

*“Ask yourself, where would you raise children? It's not going to be London.”* **Low income man, 30s, London**

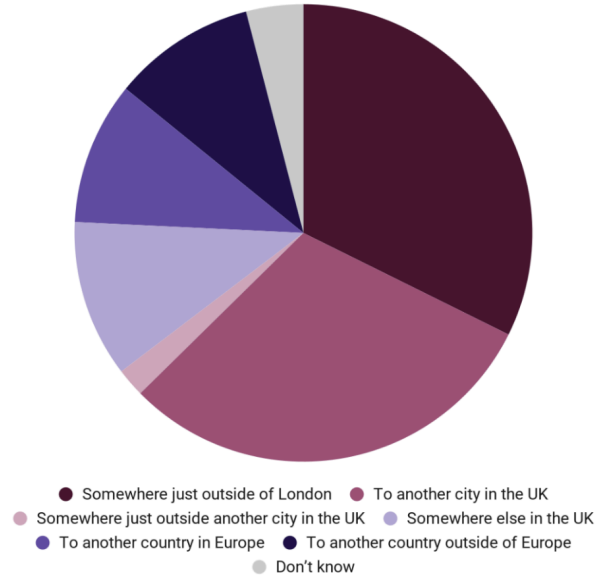
### Where young Londoners plan to move

When asked where they would go if they left London, **one in four young adults say they would move just outside the city, one in three would move to another UK city, and one-in-four would move abroad.**

If you were to move out of London, where would you be most likely to move to? [Very unlikely to move]



If you were to move out of London, where would you be most likely to move to? [Very likely to move]



For those interested in moving to another UK city, Manchester stands out as the most popular potential destination. 35% say they would consider moving there, followed by 14% to Liverpool and 9% to Edinburgh.

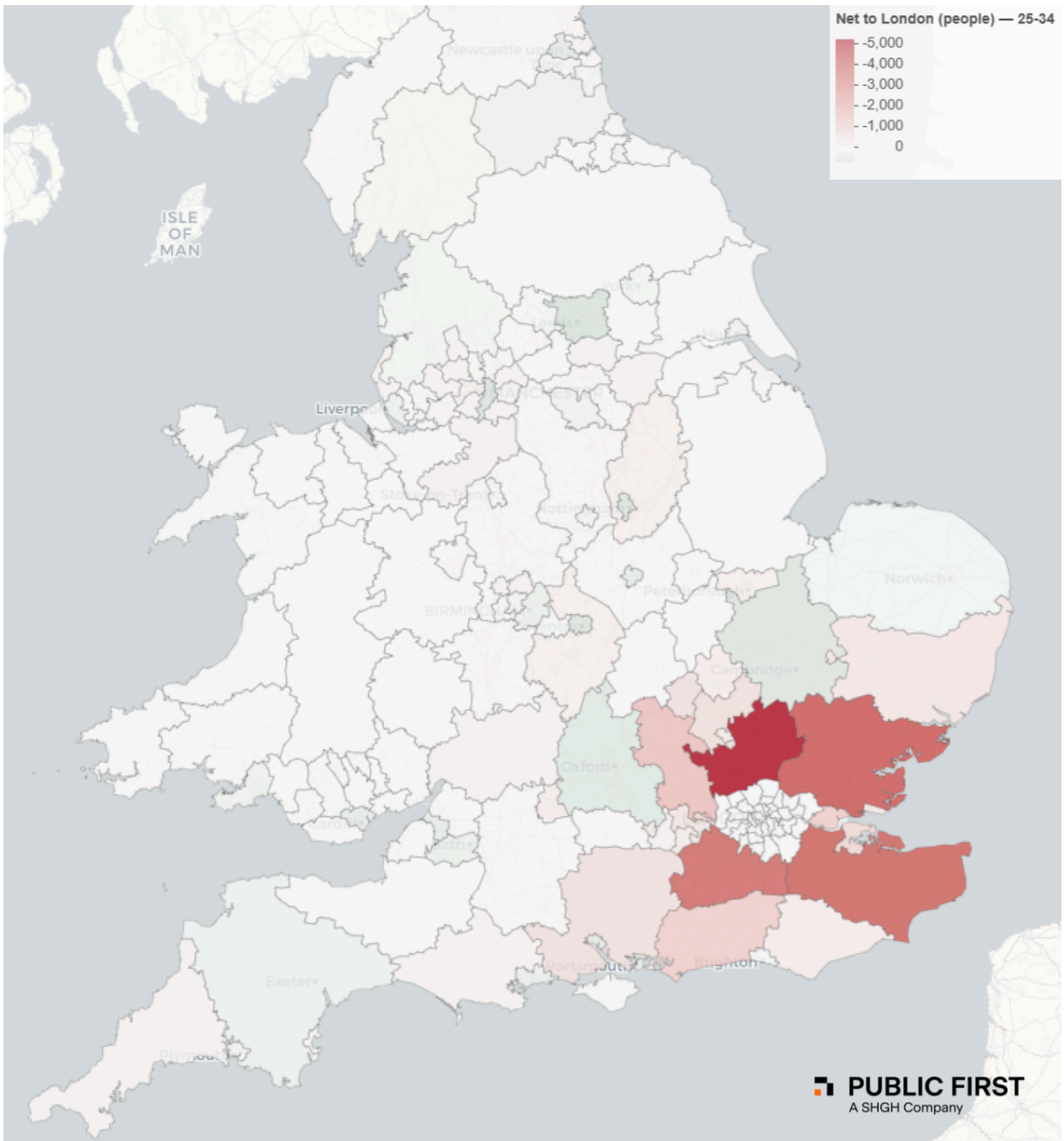
While other cities in the UK attract many young Londoners, they also remain major sources of young adults moving to the capital. Last year, an estimated 2,317 25-34-year-olds moved to London from Manchester, compared with 1,785 making the opposite move, a net outflow of over 500 people.<sup>23</sup> Over 2,000 young people moved from Leeds to London, while around 1,400 left London for Leeds, a net outflow of around 600 people.<sup>24</sup>

In practice, **many young Londoners who leave the capital move to the South East of England, with the largest flows to the home counties**, especially Surrey, Essex, Hertfordshire, and Kent, which together received over 32,500 people aged 25-34 last year alone - equal to 27% of all young Londoners who moved elsewhere in England and Wales last year.<sup>25</sup> This data largely reflects the polling results which show those wanting to leave London are more likely to say they would move somewhere just outside the city than those who want to stay.

<sup>23</sup> [ONS, 2025, Internal migration in England and Wales](#)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



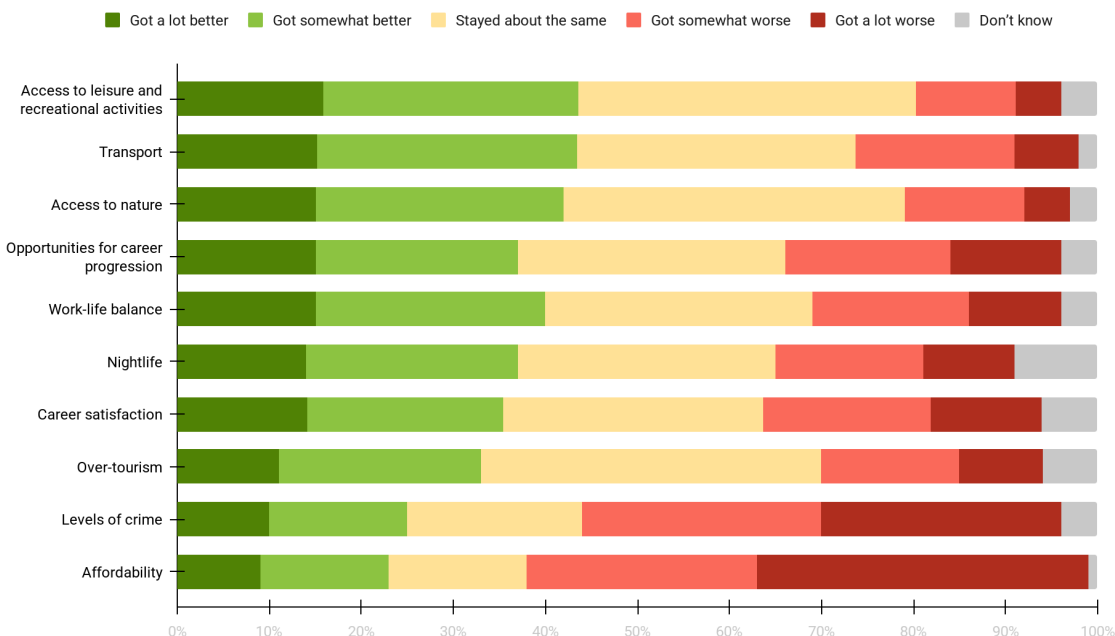
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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## THE COST OF LONDON LIFE

**Affordability is the main factor behind why many young adults are considering leaving the city.** While many aspects of city life are seen to have improved since the pandemic, including leisure and cultural activities, transport and work-life balance, the ability to afford those benefits is seen to have sharply deteriorated. A majority of young Londoners (61%) say the cost of living has worsened since Covid, compared to one in five who say it has improved. Perceptions of crime levels have similarly worsened.

Now thinking about how London has changed since the pandemic, have the following got better or worse? [18-30s]



In our research, young Londoners spoke passionately about what makes the capital special, like its culture and the sense that “it is where things happen”. Yet almost **everyone our researchers spoke to described how the rising cost of living is reshaping life in the capital**, as it is for much of the rest of the country. High rents, rising bills and expensive travel eat into disposable incomes. The sense of reward and being able to enjoy what London offers is being eroded with stagnant pay and the pressure to earn more just to stand still.

*“Whenever my family from Turkey think of London, they think we're rich and that we've got so many opportunities and so much money. Well, that's not really the case... The housing market's horrible, the job market's horrible. When I first started living here, London met those expectations. But it's slowly starting to lose it.”* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

## Rising costs have reshaped living in London

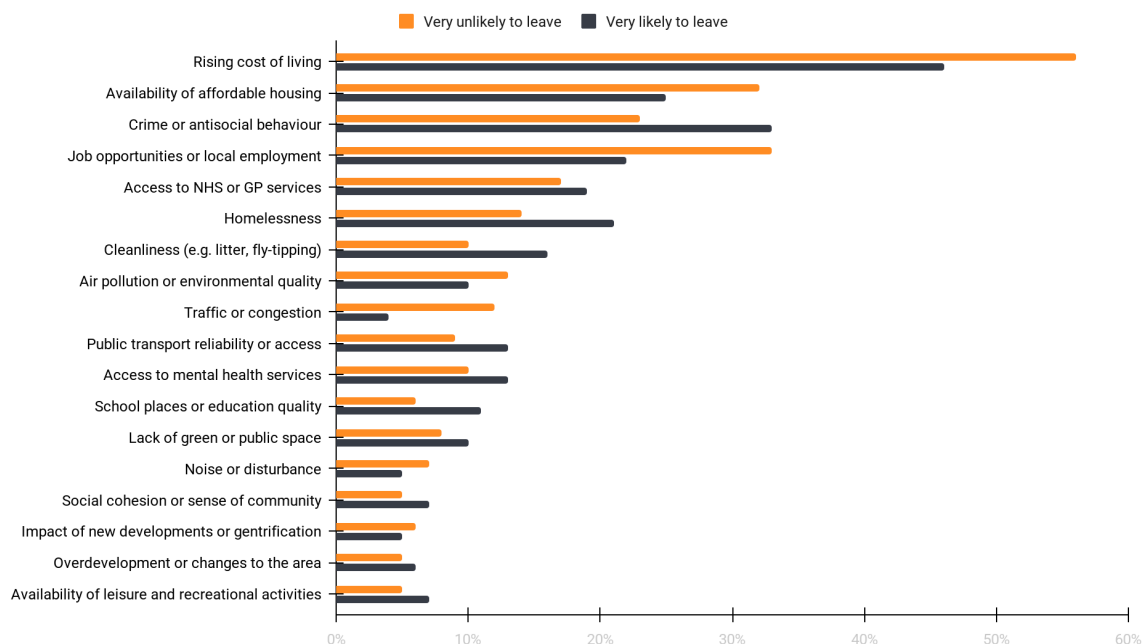
Monthly outgoings are now seen to be so high relative to income that **many struggle to do the things that once made London worth living in**. In focus groups with higher and lower earners, participants described sacrificing what they enjoy, and the aspects of London that make living in it so special – eating out, living centrally or socialising – simply to stay living in the capital.

*“Now I’m in this mentality of wanting to save money each month and that is impacting my social life. Everything costs money.”* **Higher income woman, 20s, London**

*“For me, [thinking about leaving London] was about the cost of living, it was the salary not matching the expenses. My salary was just not enough to afford living, paying rent, and to the degree I wanted to be eating good food. I think there’s also something about wanting to actually afford eating good food, not like fancy food, but just good for you, not processed and things like that.”* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

**The rising cost of living is seen as the single most important issue for young Londoners.** Meanwhile, those most likely to leave are especially concerned by crime and antisocial behaviour while those most likely to stay are also particularly concerned by affordability and job opportunities.

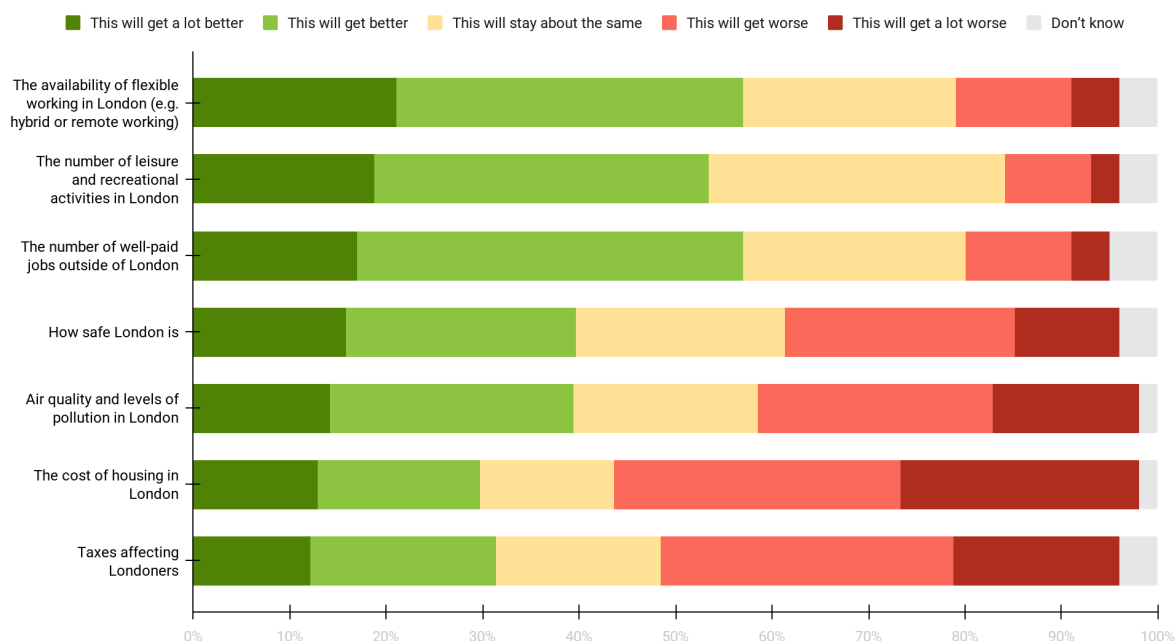
And which do you think are the most important issues facing your local area at this time? Please tick up to three [18-30s]



The vast majority of young people who moved to London are surprised by how costly it is – 81% say it is more expensive than they expected, compared to 9% who say it is

cheaper. Looking ahead, **young Londoners expect affordability and tax burdens to worsen over the next five years**, though they are more optimistic about the possibilities of working remotely, along with London’s cultural offerings.

**Do you expect the following to get better or worse over the next 5 years? [18-30s]**



The polling data also reveals a divide between those likely to leave London, for whom cost has become the defining feature of life, and those likely to stay, who see the same city through a more positive lens.

**Which of the following words best describe what it's like to live in London? Select up to three... [18-30s]**

Rank	Very unlikely to leave	Very likely to leave
1	<i>Expensive (36%)</i>	<i>Expensive (38%)</i>
2	<i>Opportunity-filled (30%)</i>	<i>Crowded (24%)</i>
3	<i>Exciting (30%)</i>	<i>Diverse (22%)</i>
4	<i>Diverse (29%)</i>	<i>Stressful (19%)</i>
5	<i>Convenient (23%)</i>	<i>Unsafe (18%)</i>
6	<i>Safe (20%)</i>	<i>Draining (17%)</i>
7	<i>Vibrant (19%)</i>	<i>Unpredictable (16%)</i>
8	<i>Welcoming (18%)</i>	<i>Opportunity-filled (15%)</i>
9	<i>Crowded (15%)</i>	<i>Exciting (14%)</i>

10	Inspiring (15%)	Vibrant (14%)
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## Finding a home in the city is ever more challenging

The biggest cost pressure for almost all young Londoners is their home.<sup>27</sup> Private rents have risen by 25% in just three years.<sup>28</sup> Competition for new properties is fierce,<sup>29</sup> and home ownership is out of reach even for many earning six-figure salaries.<sup>30</sup> **Our qualitative research found that many young adults report making ever bigger compromises to stay living in London.**

*"I think I've been okay for a while to kind of compromise on certain things, like the fresher air while living in a very central part of London."* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

One of the reasons housing costs have risen so sharply is that London simply is not building enough homes – population growth has significantly outpaced housing provision for decades, as shown in the chart across the page.

Despite very high levels of housing demand, rates of housebuilding in the capital have recently reached new lows. Just 4,220 homes started construction in the year to Q3 2025,<sup>31</sup> less than 5% of the 88,000 new homes a year that are deemed by the Government to be needed in the capital. The housing shortage drives up prices, limits choice and means more young Londoners living in cramped, insecure homes.

In our polling, we found widespread pessimism around the future of the housing market. Over half (54%) of young Londoners expect housing affordability to worsen in the near future, while **more than two-thirds (68%) say that changing housing costs will make them more likely to consider leaving over the next five years.** Even those on higher incomes say saving for the deposit to buy a first home is nearly impossible.

*"Money is the biggest thing for London. I'm looking to invest in a property by myself. I'm having to look outside of London. I don't want to leave London. But it is a financial decision."* **Higher income woman, 20s, London**

<sup>27</sup> [GLA, 2024, Young Londoners' Access to Home Ownership](#)

<sup>28</sup> Analysis of Price Index of Private Rents (PIPR) from the Office for National Statistics, January 2015 to December 2025

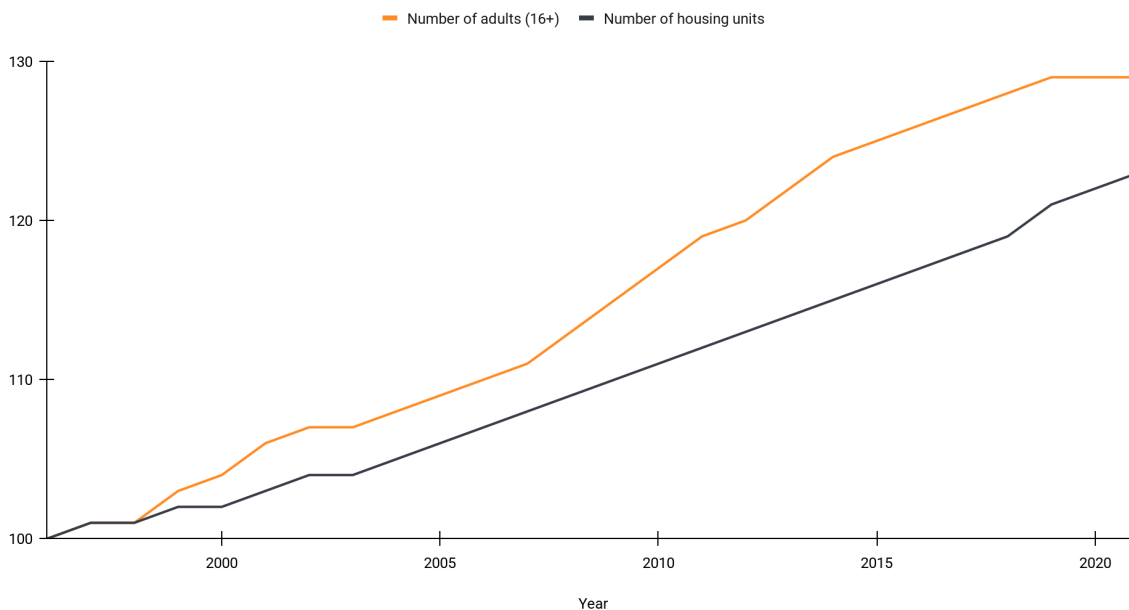
<sup>29</sup> [Property 118, 2024, London's renters face fierce competition as lettings market heats up](#)

<sup>30</sup> Public First research shows that a young Londoner today needs at least £67,900 in savings and a salary of £120,600 to buy a first home. In reality, the average young non-homeowner has just £9,100 saved and earns £27,400. [Public First, 2025, Saving the British Dream: Investing in First Time Buyers for Economic Renewal](#)

<sup>31</sup> MHCLG, Table 217: permanent dwellings started and completed by tenure and region

### Growth in number of homes and population between 1996 and 2021 in London (Index: 1996 = 100)

Data reproduced from Institute for Fiscal Studies report 'England has a poor record of building homes where they are needed'



Availability and affordability of housing are both particularly important considerations for young women, who are 26% more likely to cite it as one of the top three issues affecting their local area. Again, we think the experience of young women in London on issues such as housing is an important topic that would benefit from further research.

Despite widespread concerns about the cost and quality of housing, this situation is largely accepted to be normal. For many focus group participants, **the convenience of London's transport system was seen to partly offset compromises young people have to make in the housing market.** Even when high housing costs mean people live in neighbourhoods that are seen to lack amenities or character, people value being close to an area with characteristics they seek.

*"It's sort of the travel aspect [which] is a big important thing to me, because of my work. I work quite late nights, and then into the mornings at a music venue, so access to transportation is just a must."* **Low income man, 30s, London**

*"My favourite thing about where I live is the Jubilee Line."* - **High income woman, 30s, London**

## A FRAYING CAREER PROMISE

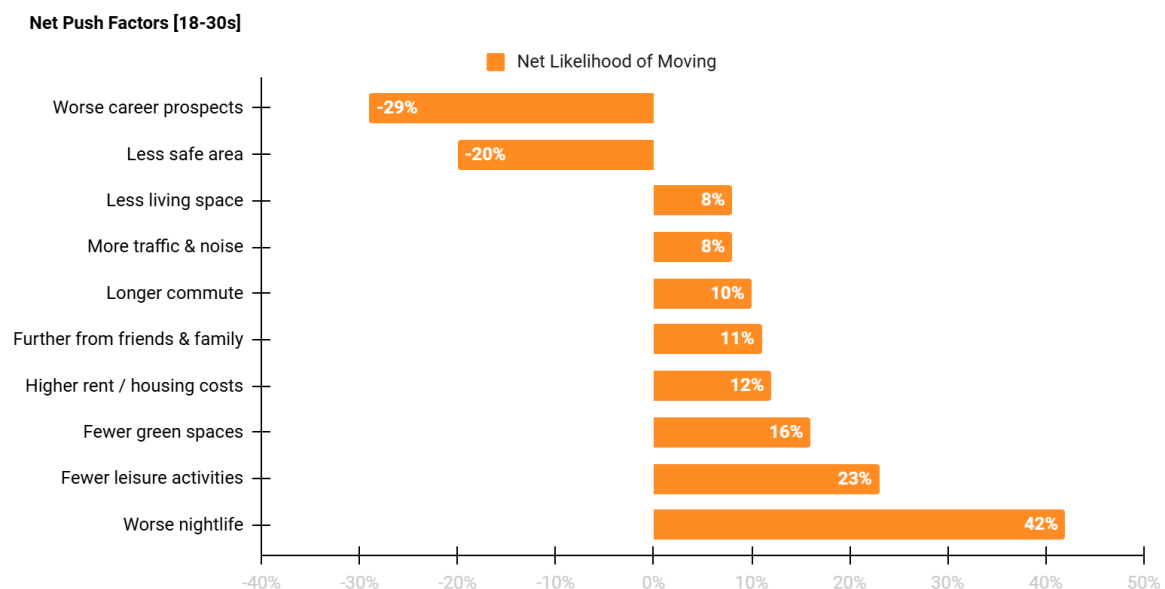
London's job market has long been its greatest draw. The chance to work, learn and rise through the ranks has defined why young people come to the capital. But that promise is beginning to fray as the career ladder is, for some, seen to be harder to climb. Many young Londoners are becoming disillusioned, and wider changes in the economy, like the recent slowdown in hiring, risk deepening that disillusionment.

### London is a magnet for the ambitious

Career development is London's strongest pull factor for adults of all ages. It is the most common reason young people say they moved to the capital, closely followed by study, and continues to underpin London's reputation as a city of opportunity.

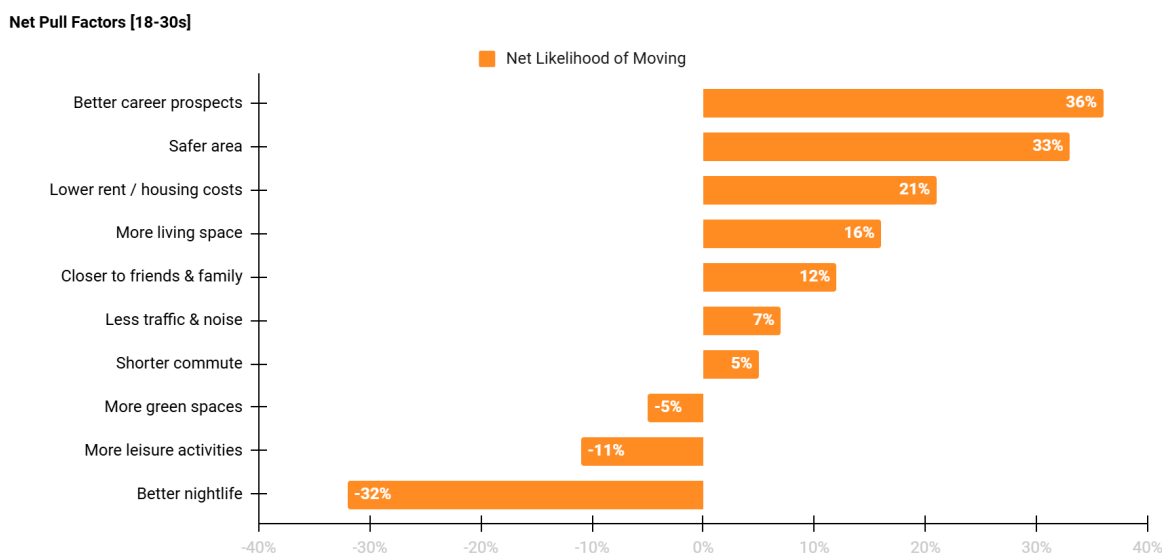
*"A young person wants to feel like, okay, if I go into this career or this field, I can build a ladder for myself where I can progress within that career, and there's enough opportunities to do so."* **Lower income man, 30s, London**

Polling for this report reinforces that sense of ambition. When presented with a series of trade-offs about where to live, **young Londoners said they would rather live somewhere less safe than somewhere with worse career prospects.**<sup>32</sup>



<sup>32</sup> To understand which factors most influence people's decisions about living in London, we ran a survey experiment presenting respondents with random trade-offs, each featuring one benefit and one drawback, and measured how likely they would be to accept each scenario.

**Better career prospects and safety are also the most important factors young Londoners look for when thinking of moving.** Nightlife and leisure activities fall at the bottom of the list.



## A London of opportunity and stagnation

While living in London is still seen as important for job opportunities, especially for graduates, our research reveals a widening divide in how young people experience those opportunities.

**Lower earners describe career progression as slower and less accessible than before the pandemic.** Among those earning under £30,000, 42% say career prospects have worsened, with fewer routes into well-paid work and more competition for entry-level jobs. More than a third (38%) also say work-life balance has deteriorated, compared with just 11% of those earning £80,000 or more.

*“I feel like the opportunities are getting slimmer and slimmer, and it's been hard to find jobs. I moved here 11 years ago and I found it quite easy to find different opportunities. I feel like the job market is very, very tough right now, and that applies to loads of people I know who are really struggling, and some of them are really highly skilled - very, very good at what they do. There seems to just not be stuff out there anymore.”* **Low income woman, 20s, London**

For many on low incomes, these shifts have created a sense of stagnation and frustration.

*“When I first moved here, 12 years ago, it was perfectly possible to walk along Shoreditch or Dalston, walk into a bar or a club, hand over your CV and get some sound engineering jobs. Nowadays, all the small to medium-sized venues are pretty*

*much closed... I think it's a reasonably new problem with nightlife in general, in London."* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

*"A lot of people are also just kind of stuck here. It's where their job is. They have to be here. They can't afford to go anywhere else, but they also can't afford to live in London. So, right now, everyone's just kind of stuck in London."* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

By contrast, **higher earners continue to see the capital as the best place to build a career.** However, they also acknowledge that progress comes at an ever greater personal cost.

*"The work is in London, that's the draw of living here. I wouldn't be in the position I am now if I hadn't been so stressed and depressed living here and toughing it out."* **Higher income woman, 30s, London**

*"It gets to the point where, of course, we know working too many hours is not good for your health, but it's also the point where people are having to sacrifice that to get a roof over their head."* **Higher income man, 20s, London**

Across income groups, young Londoners increasingly feel that the city demands more for diminishing returns.

### Perceived lack of career progression encourages many to leave

While many still move to London to accelerate their careers, growing numbers question whether the city still delivers on that promise. **Our polling shows that those most likely to leave are much less likely to believe their career goals are easier to achieve in London than those who plan to stay.** The weakening of this career advantage strikes at the main reason people move to London in the first place.

This sense of frustration reflects wider structural shifts in the job market for young people. Graduate roles have become scarcer nationwide - analysis by Indeed shows the number of roles advertised for graduates fell by a third in the past year.<sup>33</sup> Analysis by Adzuna, a recruitment data provider, shows a 35% drop in wider hiring by employers over the past year.<sup>34</sup> Recent rises in employer National Insurance Contributions and the National Living Wage have raised the cost of hiring and are expected to limit employment opportunities for young people, particularly in hospitality and the wholesale and retail sectors.<sup>35</sup>

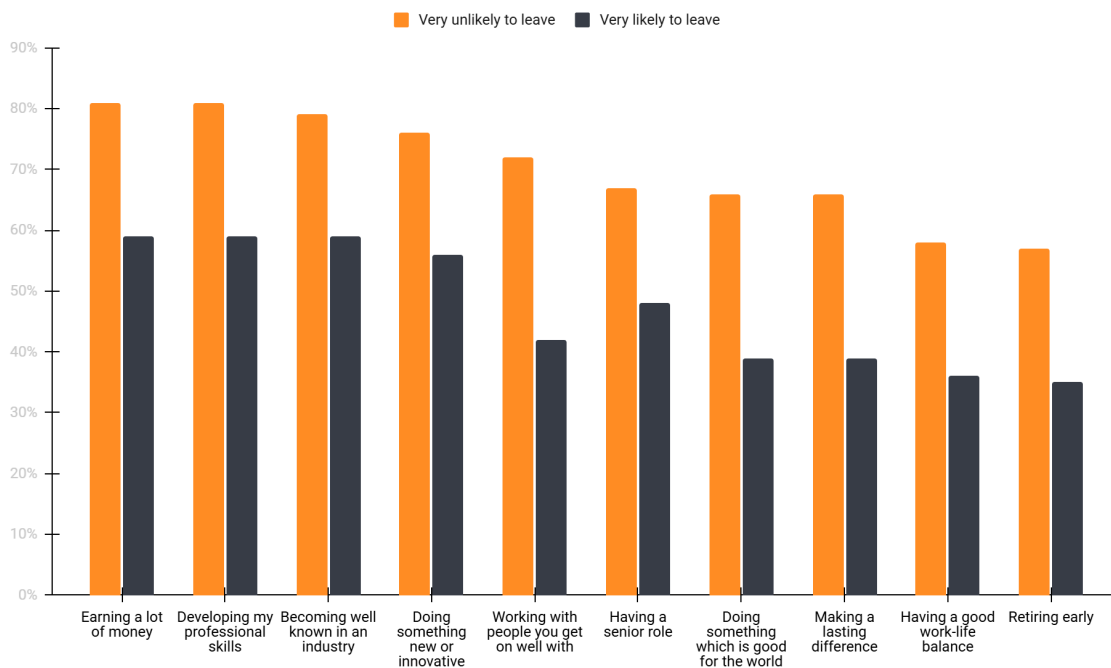
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<sup>33</sup> [Financial Times, 2025, UK graduate job openings at lowest level since 2018](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Adzuna, 2025, UK Job Market Reports](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025, Combined impact of minimum wage and tax increases may reduce opportunities for young people](#)

% that say each career goal is easier to achieve living in London [18-30s]



These short-term pressures build on longer-term shifts in the labour market. Over recent decades, younger workers have increasingly started their careers lower down the career ladder than previous generations.<sup>36</sup> **A sustained slowdown in hiring risks locking them into these lower-paid, entry-level roles for longer, narrowing their opportunities to move up and earn more, which our polling shows is a top priority for young Londoners.**

Alongside these structural changes, the rise of remote and hybrid working has weakened the need to live in London by making job opportunities more accessible in other parts of the country and world. The average full-time London worker now spends just 2.7 days a week in the city.<sup>37</sup> In our polling, **half (51%) of those aged 18-30 said remote working made them more likely to consider leaving London in the next five years.**

### The erosion of London's career edge

Young people still value work above almost everything else, but fewer now believe London is the only place where success is possible. **Among those on lower incomes, 26% say career satisfaction is worse in London than the national average, compared with just 6% of those on higher incomes.** Meanwhile, 57% of young

<sup>36</sup> [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020, What has been happening to career progression?](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Centre for Cities, 2024, Return to the office: How London compares to other global cities, and why this matters](#)

Londoners expect the number of well-paid jobs outside the capital to increase over the next five years, with 62% saying that this will make them more likely to leave.

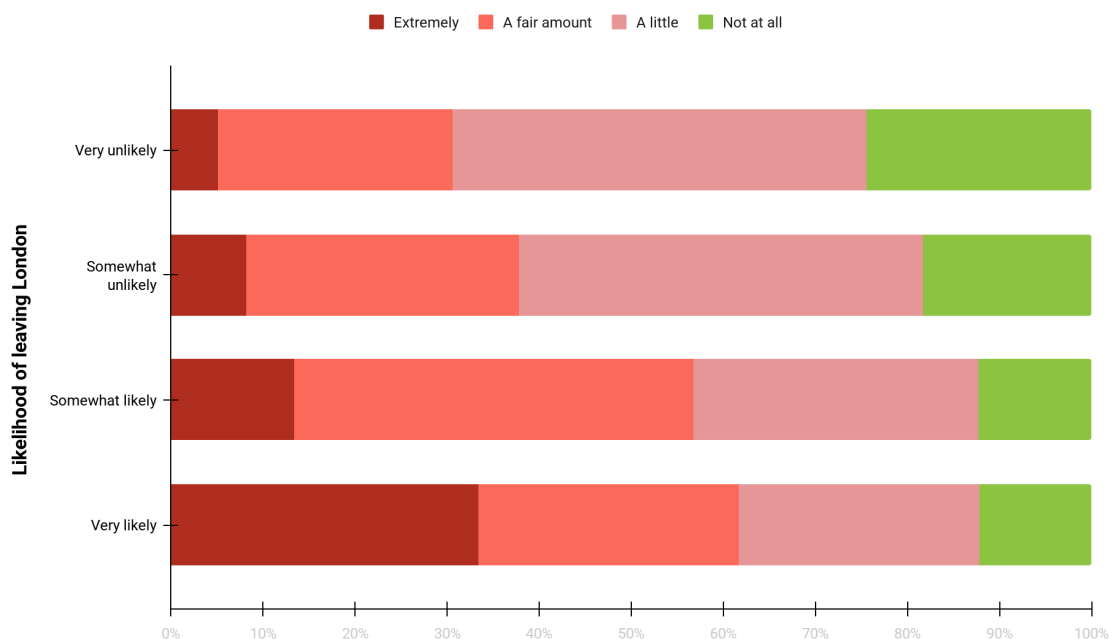
London is likely to continue to attract new graduates and early-career workers, but if more young people conclude that their ambitions can be better realised elsewhere - or that the personal costs of staying in London outweigh the rewards - the city risks losing an essential part of its labour force.

## A CITY THAT FEELS LESS SAFE

Concerns around crime and safety play an important role in shaping whether young Londoners want to leave the city. Our polling finds that **four-in-five 18-30 year olds in the capital say they have experienced the impacts of crime in the past three years (79%)**.

Safety in the city is generally seen to be deteriorating. Just over half (51%) of young Londoners say levels of crime in the capital have increased since the pandemic, compared to around one in four (25%) who believe they have fallen. A majority (56%) expect the city to feel no safer over the next five years. **Those most likely to leave the capital are also the most likely to say they have faced 'extreme' levels of crime.**

To what extent have you experienced impacts of crime in London in the last 3 years? [18-30s]



**Growing concerns about crime are likely due to the increase in 'visible' offences that people see and experience directly in everyday life.** Levels of shoplifting and snatch theft of items like phones and bags have, for example, risen rapidly in London over the past few years.<sup>38</sup> The random nature of these crimes reinforces the sense that disorder is growing and that London is becoming harder to live in, though it is

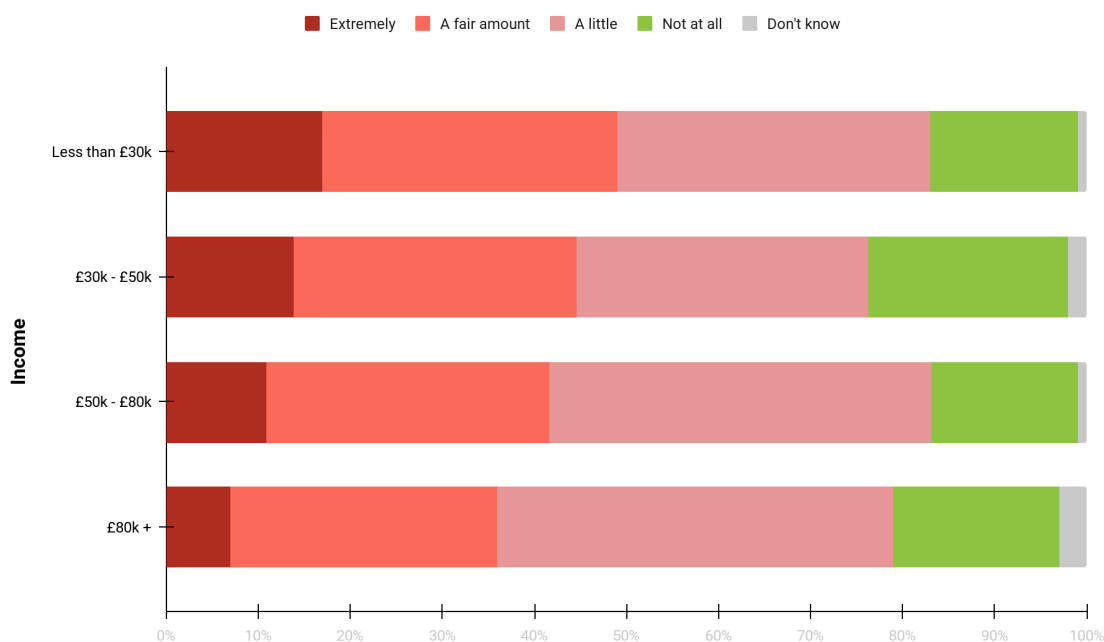
<sup>38</sup> [Financial Times, 2025, The great crime paradox](#)

important to acknowledge reports that the capital has become safer on measures like homicide rates.<sup>39</sup>

## The income divide in feeling safe

As with career opportunities, recent experience and perceptions of crime vary sharply by income.

To what extent have you experienced impacts of crime in London in the last 3 years? [18-30s]



**Higher earners are far more likely to say they feel safe where they live.** Many of the young people our researchers spoke to told us they had been subject to, or a witness to thefts of phones and bicycles. However, they viewed crime as an inevitable part of life in a big city. Most did not suggest it altered their view of living in London.

*"It's not a worry that I have usually. I think having your wits about you and knowing I'm not the target of gang-related crime in London."* **Higher income woman, 30s, London**

*"I grew up somewhere with high crime levels, but to me it feels like one of the safest places. The crime has nothing to do with us simple civilian families."* **Higher income woman, 20s, London**

*"I'm not really too worried about the crime. It's mainly crime of the petty nature. My main worry is whenever you're thinking about raising a family."* **Higher income man, 20s, London**

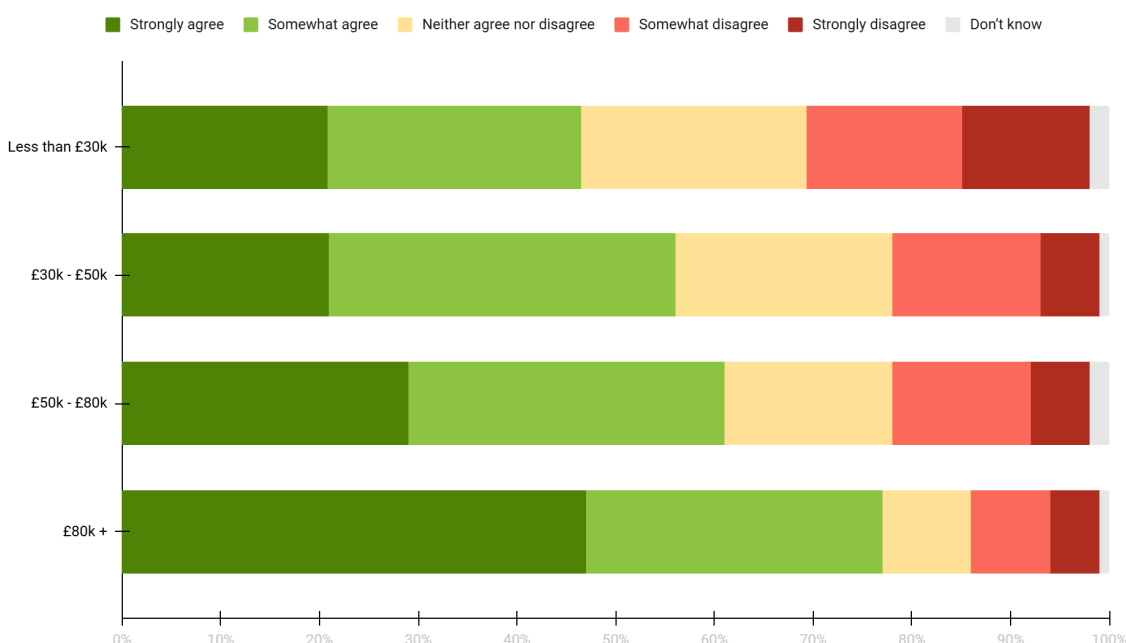
<sup>39</sup> [The Times. 2026. We've made London safer but we will keep working](#)

In our quantitative research, lower-income Londoners, by contrast, were more likely to say they have experienced or witnessed crime than those in the highest income band (49% vs 36%), and less likely to feel their neighbourhood and public spaces are clean or well maintained, with 23% describing the state of their local high street as poor compared to just 5% of those in the highest income band. For them, the sense of disorder is more immediate and constant.

## The social dimension of safety

Safety is linked closely to feelings of belonging. Higher earners are significantly more likely to say they feel part of a community than lower earners. Meanwhile, lower earners, who report higher exposure to crime and more dissatisfaction with public spaces, are also more likely to feel disconnected or transient.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I feel like I am part of a community in London'



Gender also shapes perceptions of safety. **Young women are considerably more likely than men to see crime as a worsening issue since the pandemic (57% vs 45%) and to feel London is less safe than the national average (49% vs 36%).** More than half (53%) of women say they would be more likely to stay if the city felt safer. Concerns about safety are a major reason why young women, more than young men, are considering leaving the capital.

While few young Londoners say crime alone would make them leave, it compounds wider frustrations about cost and quality of life. Together, these experiences contribute to a broader feeling that London is becoming less orderly and less rewarding.

# THE PUSH AND PULL OF LONDON

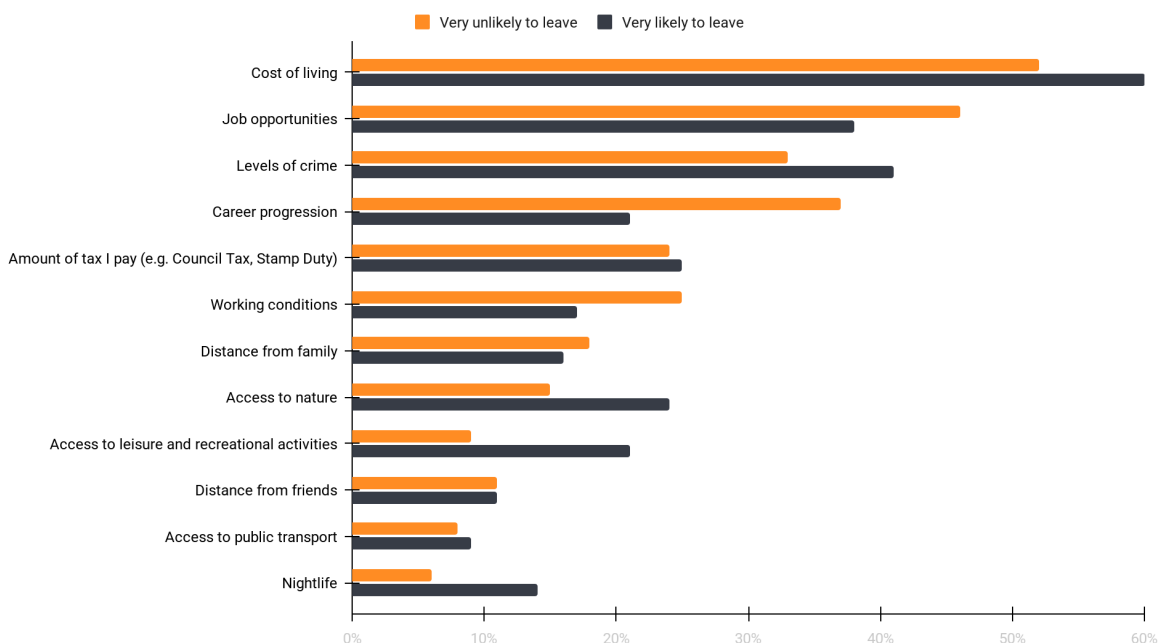
London has always pulled people in and pushed them out. Every year the young arrive from every part of the UK and the world, drawn by the hope of finding work, the opportunity to study and the thrum of culture. Every year, too, others go, worn down by the same city that drew them in.

Our research shows that **one in three young adults expect to leave London in the next two years**, influenced by a combination of push and pull factors shaping the choices of those in the capital and beyond.

## When the costs outweigh the rewards

Rising prices and concerns about crime are the main reasons young people want to leave, while perceived slower career progression is reducing the appeal of staying in the city.

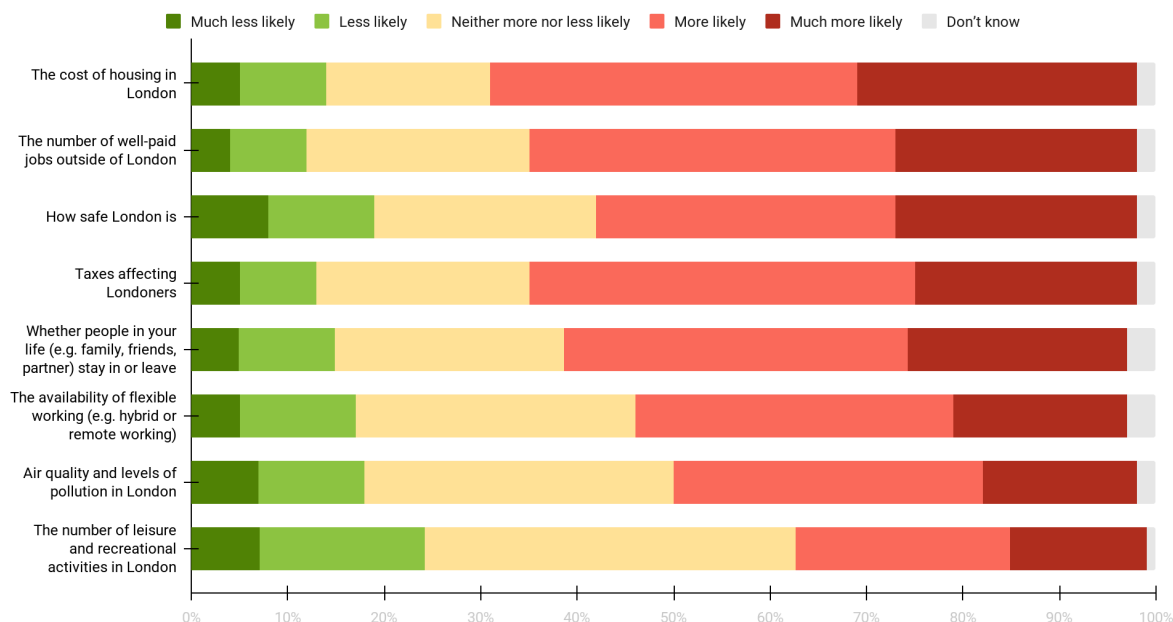
Which of the following reasons would make you consider moving out of London? Select all that apply [18-30s]



Our poll findings show that over a five year horizon, factors like concerns over high taxes and unaffordable housing, and the opportunity to find well-paid jobs outside the

capital, amplify the risk. London is at risk of being seen as a city that demands more and rewards less.

**And thinking specifically about the following, do you think each factor will make you more or less likely to consider leaving London over the next 5 years? [18-30s]**



## The appeal of elsewhere

The growing possibility of securing well-paid jobs outside of London was echoed in our qualitative research as an important pull factor. One focus group participant talked of waiting to be ‘poached’ so he could move away.

*“In London there is a great opportunity to be poached by somebody who's willing to pay for me and my family to relocate and work somewhere else. And I think that that's a good thing.”* **Lower income man, 30s, London**

The draw of leaving London is not only financial. For many young Londoners, **it also comes down to the desire for more space and to be closer to nature**. Lower earners raised this point regularly in our focus groups and polling.

*“I quite liked West Sussex when I was there, because it felt really easy to connect into London. And there's quite a few fun festivals and things going on down there, beautiful, green, a lot of nature and greenery down there. So I felt quite drawn to there.”* **Lower income woman, 20s, London**

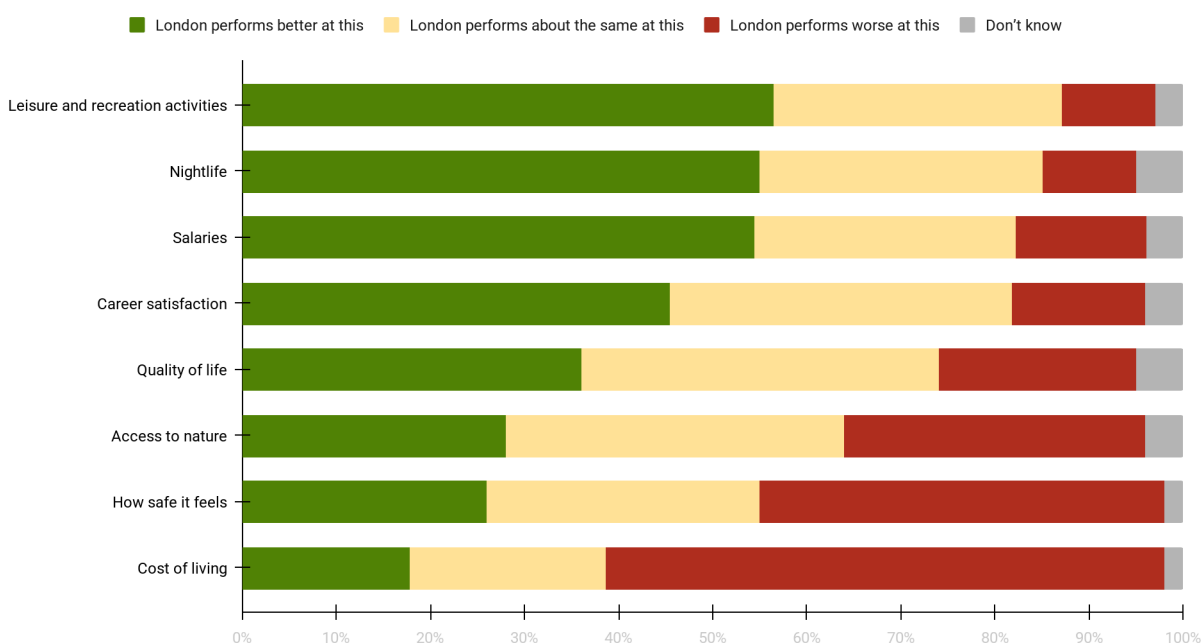
*“I've pretty much considered moving out of the UK and going to and living in a different country. I think every country has its own flaws and everything like that. There's always a problem. I think a different country can be a good way to change*

*scenery, a better financial situation, job opportunities and just better communities, to be honest.” Lower income woman, 20s, London*

## London is still seen as a place to be

Despite these pressures, London retains a number of powerful pull factors. **It is still seen by young Londoners as the best place in the UK for both career and lifestyle, offering higher salaries and an unmatched cultural life.**

Thinking about London compared to other parts of the UK, in which of the following areas do you think London performs better or worse compared to the national average? [18-30s]



London is also seen to offer unique levels of opportunity, with a magnetism that pulls young and ambitious people from across the world.

*“My parents immigrated here when I was about two, three years old. We've just kind of always lived in London because of the opportunity, the opportunities my parents get here, job wise, and the education opportunities that my parents can give me and my sisters.” Lower income woman, 20s, London*

*“The reason I moved into London was a bit of a herd mentality... but that wasn't the whole of my process but my career was right at the front. That's where the most opportunity is. That's where you can at least start your career and then have a choice later. The opportunity here is still pretty fruitful.” Higher income man, 30s, London*

*“There's also a level of convenience that you take for granted until you leave London... There is a shop on every corner. You get used to just if you need something, it's there.” Lower income woman, 20s, London*

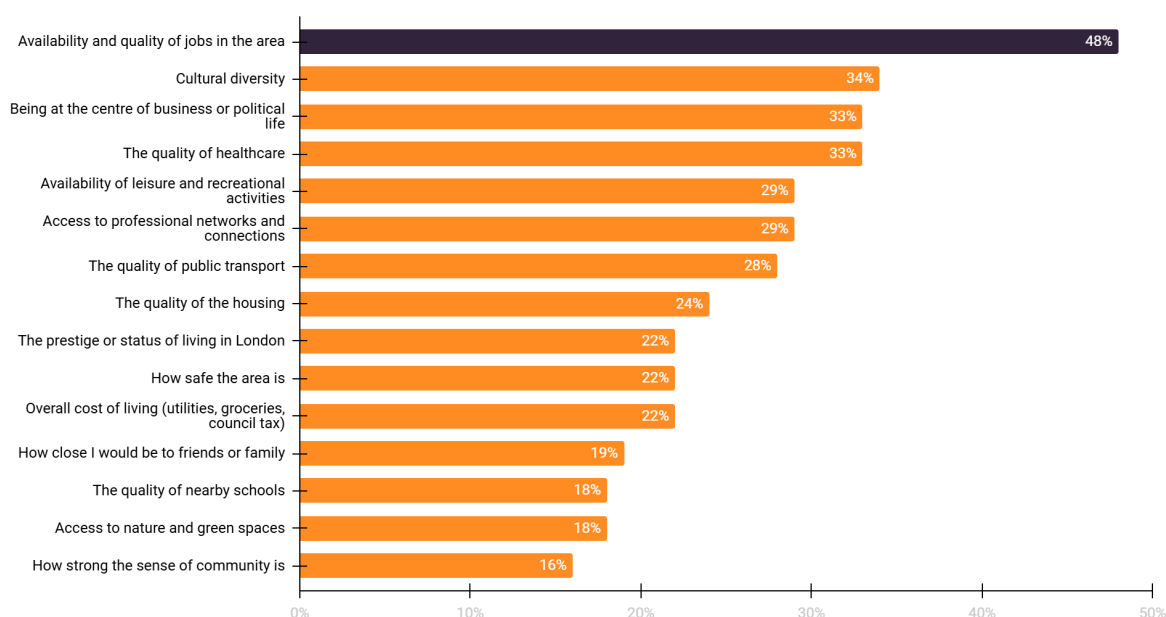
*"The sheer quality of arts and culture and music that is available is pretty special."*  
**Lower income man, 30s, London**

## The appeal to young people living outside London

London also retains its allure to young people living elsewhere in the country. In a nationally representative poll conducted for this report, **38% of 18-30-year-olds who live outside the capital say they are very or somewhat likely to move into London in the next two years.** The main factor attracting these young people is clear - among 18-24-year-olds who are likely to move to London, 48% cite the availability and quality of jobs as a draw to living in the city.

Our quantitative research further supports the perception among 18-30-year-olds of London's so-called 'star power', with 33% of poll respondents in this age group highlighting its position at the heart of business and political life as a key attraction.

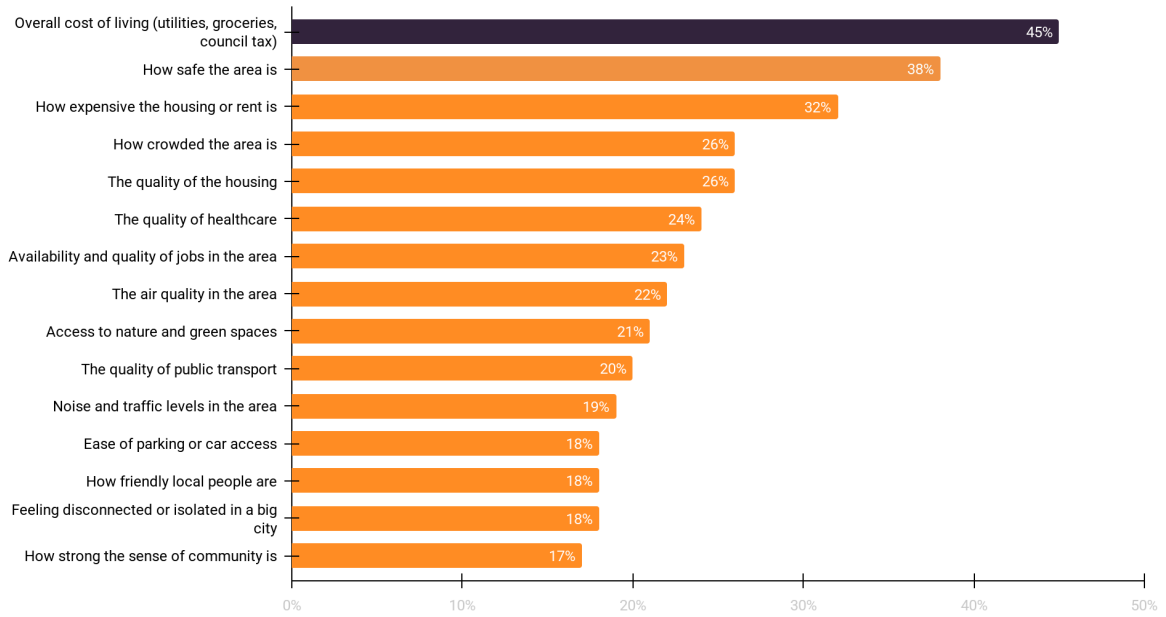
Which of the following factors attract you to live in London? Select all that apply [18-30-year-olds likely to move to London]



Although career opportunities appear to be the primary attraction, other factors also contribute to London's appeal. Young adults considering a move to the capital are also drawn by its cultural diversity and the quality of healthcare options. Access to leisure and recreational activities similarly ranks among the top five main attractions of London life for this age group.

On the other hand, the cost of living (45%) and safety (38%) top the list of concerns these young people have if they were to move to the capital. Overcrowding and poor housing quality are also seen as potential drawbacks of moving to London.

**And which of the following factors are you concerned about if you were to move to London? Select all that apply [18-30-year-olds likely to move to London]**



# CONCLUSION

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London remains one of the world's great cities in terms of its economic, cultural and educational offering, which will continue to attract others from the UK and abroad. Yet, as the findings of this research make clear, without decisive policy action to make the city feel more affordable, safe and rewarding, many young people will continue to leave.

## Why young Londoners matter

Young adults fuel the capital's social life and creativity. They are the backbone of London's economy, providing businesses a pipeline of talent from which to hire, grow and become more productive. For that pipeline to function, employers need to be able to hire people and support their progression without excessive cost or risk. Young adults also drive consumption in the capital and strengthen the city and country's tax base.

Cities and young residents benefit each other: skilled young workers make cities more productive, and productive cities attract more skilled young workers.<sup>40</sup> If more young people leave in search of better opportunities elsewhere, London will become less vibrant, less productive, and less appealing to those who might once have come. This will create a cycle that risks the city's economic future and the UK's wider prosperity.

Some may welcome London becoming a less attractive destination for young people to move to and stay. Those who want to see a more decentralised UK economy might argue this would be a boon to provincial cities. However, our polling shows a significant proportion of those considering leaving would move abroad rather than to other UK cities. This would leave the UK poorer and make the Government's growth ambitions even harder to achieve.

## Restoring London's promise

London remains a highly attractive place to young adults looking to advance their education or career, but it risks losing more and more people in their late twenties and early thirties, particularly those on lower and middle incomes.

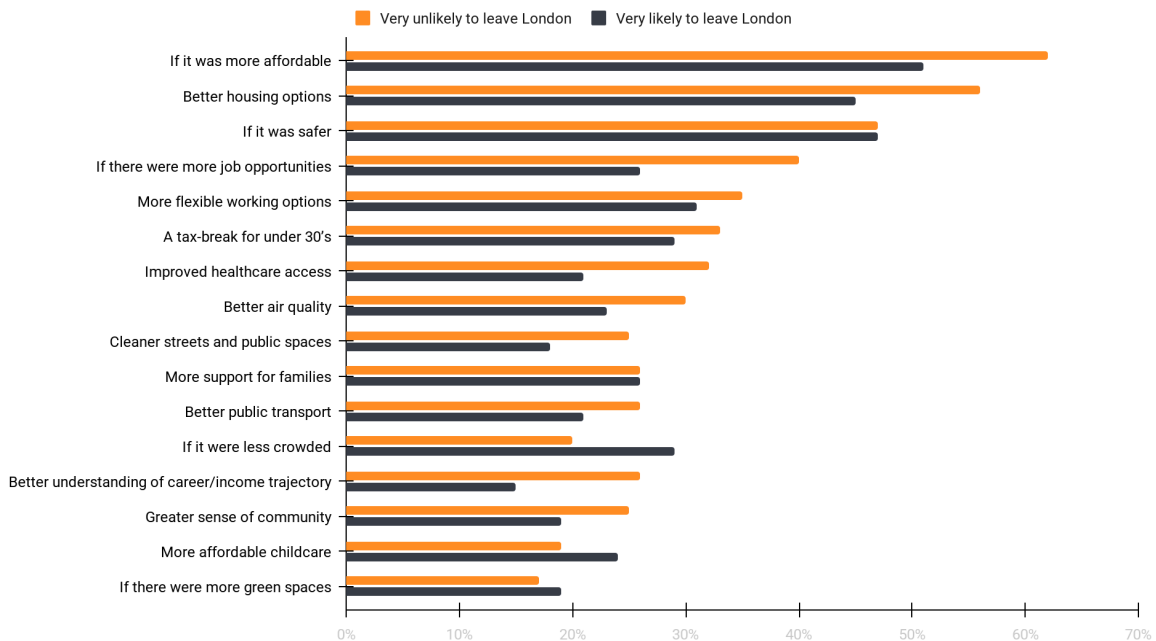
*"I've asked myself for over a year now, 'is it still worth it?' I save a lot but the food prices have gone so massively up. I've seen such a big change. It's very easy for me to commute so it's just below the line of being like it's still worth it [to live here]."* **High income man, 20s, London**

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<sup>40</sup> [Pike, Tyler and Gardiner, 2015, Spatially Rebalancing the UK Economy: Towards a New Policy Model](#)

To persuade more young Londoners to stay, they need to feel like the city is worth it. Our research shows that the most important factors are affordability, housing, safety and job opportunities.

What changes would make you more likely to stay in London? Select all that apply



Improving city life across these multifaceted fronts will not happen overnight. They require political will and prioritisation at a national and local level, but they are essential if London is to remain a city where effort and ambition are repaid with opportunity and reward. That means not only tackling the cost and quality of life pressures young people face, but making it easier for employers to take people on, invest in skills and progression, and pay rising wages. **If policymakers can begin to restore that balance, young people will not just come to the capital to start their adult lives, but also to raise families and put down lasting roots in the city.**

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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## HOUSING

To improve housing affordability and availability, **it is essential the next London Plan, the framework for new development in the capital that is due to be updated in 2027, releases enough land for the 88,000 homes a year that are needed in London**, and that they are permitted in a way that makes them profitable for developers to build. Over time, building more homes at the targeted rate would increase market choice for young people and limit price growth.

In the short term, **the Government should support homebuilding in London by introducing a new Help to Buy style equity loan scheme**. Previous Public First research found this would support tens-of-thousands of young people to buy their first home in the capital,<sup>41</sup> and would unlock the development of permissioned but unbuilt schemes that are currently unviable financially.

## SAFETY

If a visitor levy is introduced in London, the Mayor should use levy receipts to fund an **increase in police presence in town centres and high streets across the capital** to tackle crimes like shoplifting, street crime and anti-social behaviour more assertively. Alongside this, levy revenues should support **a renewed effort to communicate clearly and credibly about safety in London**, improving public visibility of policing. As our research finds, this would make London feel safer and more navigable.

Policymakers should also explore **making it a condition of security guard licenses that they provide statements of the crimes they witness at work**.

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<sup>41</sup> [Public First, 2025. Saving the British Dream: Investing in First Time Buyers for Economic Renewal](#)

## TRANSPORT

London's transport network is one of the city's greatest strengths, but continued investment is essential, particularly in outer boroughs where provision remains uneven. To strengthen connections into central London, policymakers should **commit long-term funding to major projects such as the Bakerloo Line Extension to South East London and the DLR extension to Thamesmead.**

To safeguard residents' access to reliable transport, **City Hall and Transport for London should also reconsider plans to constrain the number of private hire vehicles as part of its 80% sustainable transport target.** Private hire vehicles provide an essential connection to the rail network - especially in outer boroughs and for women - and restricting their availability risks undermining that role.

Policymakers should also **expand permissions for shared cycle operators, allowing them to operate in more parts of the city, particularly outer London.** Shared cycles are used heavily by younger people, and widening their availability would further support active travel across the capital.

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