

# [The ambition for home ownership is stronger than ever](#)

The annual [English Housing Survey](#) came out this month. It suggested that in the last financial year 62.9 per cent of English households owned their own homes. So that was very slightly down on [last year's figure of 63.6 per cent](#). A fall of 0.7 per cent, after a rise of 0.3 per cent the previous year. Some media coverage suggested [the fall was significant](#) – although the survey itself suggested it was within the margin of error. At any rate there has yet to be any progress getting back to the peak of 71 per cent in 2003.

Furthermore this was before Gavin Barwell, the Housing Minister, sent out the [depressing message](#) that there was to be less emphasis from the Government on wider home ownership. A better response would be for the Government to redouble its efforts – notably with [a right to shared ownership](#) and a big expansion in supply to ease affordability with a crackdown on [state land banking](#).

The most startling figure in the survey was how the determination to buy has actually increased. The “proportion of renters who expect to buy” is at 44.1 per cent, up from 41.0 per cent last year. That increase is probably more than the “margin of error” (the survey is based on interviews with 13,300 households). It is also the highest since the survey began. One might have thought that the expectation of home ownership would decline as property prices rose. This indicates that the ambition is very strong. Politicians would be well advised to take note – rather than assume everyone on average incomes has just shrugged and given up on such aspirations.

Another point of interest is that the number of us living in tower blocks continue to decline. Those in “purpose built flat, high rise” consisted of 516,000 dwellings according to the 2014/15 estimate. The latest Survey puts it at 425,000. The number of Council tower block homes is down over the last year from 139,000 to 113,000. They were the future once.

[home ownership Housing](#)

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## [Press release: Landmark day in devolution as powers pass to Welsh Assembly](#)

Today marks an important milestone in implementing the Wales Act 2017 with

powers coming into force that pave the way for the introduction of Welsh Rates of Income Tax, enable the Welsh Government to invest more in infrastructure and allow the National Assembly to decide what to call itself.

These important powers put more decisions into the hands of the Assembly and the Welsh Government and give them important new levers to grow the Welsh economy and to deliver better public services across Wales.

The provisions which come into force today:

- Remove the requirement for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax are introduced
- Increase the amount that Welsh Ministers can borrow to fund capital expenditure from £500m to £1bn
- Reaffirm the Assembly and Welsh Government as a permanent part of the UK's constitutional arrangements
- Enshrine the convention that Parliament will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Assembly
- Allow the Welsh Government and UK Government to agree a protocol for managing water resources that flow between the two nations

The changes also mark the end of the Secretary of State for Wales' annual address to the Senedd on the Queen's Speech and his entitlement to take part in Assembly proceedings.

Alun Cairns, Secretary of State for Wales, said:

Today marks the transfer of important new powers to the Assembly. These are powers which affect the lives of everyone living in Wales and are a major step towards the clearer, stronger and fairer devolution settlement that we are putting in place.

The Assembly and Welsh Government are, for the first time, formally recognised as permanent parts of the UK's constitutional fabric. There is no longer a need for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax come on stream and Welsh Ministers will be able to borrow up to £1bn to invest in renewing Wales's infrastructure.

Devolution has developed significantly since 2010 and these powers mark the maturing of the Assembly into a fully fledged Parliament. From today, the Assembly can decide on a new title if that's what Assembly Members want. I and my successors will no longer be entitled to a seat in the Assembly nor will we be required to give an annual address to the Assembly on the Queen's Speech.

Together, these changes reflect the coming of age of the devolved institutions in Wales and mark the beginning of the transition to the new settlement that the Wales Act will put in place. I look forward to these powers being used to deliver for the people of Wales.

The measures come into force automatically two months after Royal Assent. The Wales Act 2017 gained Royal Assent on 31 January 2017.

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## [More must be done to place Syrian refugees; conflict sees worst violence in months – UN](#)

30 March 2017 – The world’s attention has moved away from Syria following the battle for Aleppo, despite the fact that the last few months have been “some of the worst” for civilians, the United Nations humanitarian chief today told the Security Council, reiterating calls for an end to the six year conflict.

“Violence continues to rear its ugly head in various parts of the country, even if it largely disappeared from the world’s TV screens since the evacuation of East Aleppo,” Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien told the Council.

“The last months have been some of the worst yet for civilians inside Syria,” he added. “For Syria, that is saying something.”

Today’s humanitarian discussions in the Security Council come as political discussions are underway in Geneva, assisted by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The latest discussions started on 23 March and will last through the week.

In today’s comments, Mr. O’Brien reiterated the importance of the [intra-Syrian talks](#) saying he “cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are,” and voicing support for Mr. de Mistura.

### ***Civilians threatened in Raqqa and Ghouta***

As the conflict enters its seventh year, hundreds of civilians are believed to have been killed in the past weeks alone, with tens of thousands displaced and continued attacks on medical facilities and schools.

Mr. O’Brien expressed deep concern about the safety and protection of more than 400,000 civilians threatened by military operations in Raqqa governorate, which includes the de facto capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh).

As the fighting moves closer to Raqqa city, “concerns about the fate of civilians will only grow,” Mr. O’Brien said.

“I urge all parties to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the effects of the hostilities as required, not just

requested, under international humanitarian law.”

The UN and partners have been prepositioning stocks to enable a rapid response “access permitting.”

In addition, Mr. O’Brien also said he was extremely worried about the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the besieged parts of eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, where some 400,000 people are trapped by Government forces.

The tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta

No UN humanitarian convoy was allowed access since October 2016 to eastern Ghouta, with some areas cut off since June prior.

In the past 10 days, Government forces have also reportedly prevented commercial trucks from entering, hiking up prices of staples and cutting informal trade.

“This tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta,” Mr. O’Brien said, calling for immediate access.

Delivery of humanitarian aid has been difficult throughout the country, the senior UN official lamented. He said that despite hopes that 2017 would lead to greater entry to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, “the bottom line is, however, that with a quarter of the year gone, our current levels of access are no better than this time last year.”

His comments come just days before an international pledging conference is due to be held in Brussels on 5 April. Entitled “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, the conference is co-chaired by the UN.

Mr. O’Brien thanked donors for going “above and beyond” this year, but stressed the critical needs in Syria and the neighbouring countries.

The UN and its humanitarian partners have released the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria which outlines requirements of some \$3.4 billion to undertake a comprehensive humanitarian response in Syria, including saving lives, enhancing protection and building people’s resilience.

**AUDIO:** The UN Refugee Agency, wants more countries to fulfill their pledges on resettling those fleeing the conflict in Syria, which is now in its seventh year.

*Urging Governments to make good on promises of homes*

Meanwhile, new figures show that fewer Syrian refugees were resettled in the past year than originally planned, even as the total number of people fleeing the violence surpasses five million.

“Despite the call during that meeting in Geneva on 30 March 2016 to resettle and facilitate pathways for 500,000 refugees, to date 250,000 places have been made available,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His remarks reference the High-level Meeting on Syria, held in March 2016, where participating Governments agreed to resettle 10 per cent of all Syrian refugees by 2018.

UNHCR, the agency that Mr. Grandi heads, said that while 250,000 locations have been pledged, some have not yet been made available for the people who need them.

Mr. Grandi called on Governments to make good on their promises to find new homes for the most vulnerable refugees: “We still have a long road to travel in [expanding resettlement](#) and the number and range of complementary pathways available for refugees.”

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## [Press release: National Lottery backs plan to save 20 species from extinction](#)

[unable to retrieve full-text content]20 species including shrill carder bee, chequered skipper butterfly and ladybird spider will be brought back from the brink.

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## [Press release: Troika statement on South Sudan](#)

The members of the Troika (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) reiterate their strong support for the combined efforts of the African Union (AU), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and United Nations to end the conflict in South Sudan, and join in their recent calls on all armed parties, including the Government of South Sudan, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition, and other armed groups, to commit to a ceasefire. The Troika welcomes the recent commitment by President Kiir to IGAD leaders to announce a unilateral ceasefire by government forces, and it calls upon him to ensure that his order is carried out immediately and in full effect.

The Troika underlines that the dire humanitarian crisis in South Sudan is the direct result of the conflict and demands that all parties cease violence against humanitarian workers and obstruction of humanitarian assistance. Military offensives and the obstruction of lifesaving assistance must stop immediately in order to end the suffering and severe food shortages inflicted upon millions across South Sudan.

The Troika reiterates that there is no military solution to this conflict and that a durable end to the conflict will require a political process involving all the principal parties. An inclusive national dialogue, deemed credible by the South Sudanese people, could provide a means to redress root causes of conflict and build a true national consensus. As President Kiir committed in announcing the planned national dialogue, it should supplement, and not replace, the core elements of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan.

The Troika endorses the ongoing efforts of AU High Representative Alpha Konaré and UN Special Envoy Nicholas Haysom to encourage all parties to end fighting and engage in peaceful dialogue. It also fully supports Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission Chairperson Festus Mogae's work towards a truly inclusive and effective process to implement the Agreement. In addition, the Troika endorses the work of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan, and the deployment of its Regional Protection Force. Lastly, the Troika notes the importance of breaking the cycle of impunity, and encourages further progress by the AU toward the rapid establishment of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan.

## **Further information**