

Social cleansing of London

Camden Council plans to move out 761 families

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Camden Council in north London has become the second Labour-run council to announce that it is considering moving poorer families in rented accommodation out of the borough.

The trigger for its plans is the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's cap on household benefits, which comes into effect in the summer. Part of the government's efforts to penalise the unemployed and poor, it will make housing in London and elsewhere in the south east unaffordable for many families.

In response, local councils—with Labour-run administrations in the lead—have proposed a policy of social cleansing by trying to relocate families affected up to 200 miles away.

In the largest proposed displacement so far, Camden Council has announced that it will be contacting 761 families—2,816 people—affected by the benefit cap. The prospects for these families, most of them with three children, are bleak. The council insists that “sadly the only long-term solution for some households will be to move.”

The proposals would disrupt the education of around 900 children. To give some scale of the upheaval proposed, this is an average of more than one child for every class in the borough's schools.

Under the cap, households will be limited to a total benefit payment of £500 per week. Low-income families will be particularly hard hit in London, where house prices have been driven up primarily as a result of the global super-rich looking for what they consider to be a guaranteed return on their investments.

This has affected the price of rented accommodation, particularly for larger properties. Camden has the fourth-highest rents in the country. The average wage in the borough is £37,000, 42 percent higher than the national

average.

The rents of three-bedroom properties in Camden are at least double the government's maximum welfare payment of £340 a week for such properties in north London. Under the cap, however, housing benefit will be limited to just £175 a week. The council says that on average the affected families will have to find an extra £91 a week for rent to stay in their homes. This is simply unaffordable.

Council leader Sarah Hayward stated bluntly, “The scale of the cuts, high private rental costs and lack of available housing in Camden will mean that more people will soon have to consider moving from the borough and in some cases London entirely.”

People are not “considering” leaving London. That decision is being taken for them by the council, which announced that it had had to “explore out-of-borough housing options.”

Hayward went on to claim that the council has a good record in rehousing the homeless. In fact, the waiting list for council housing rose from 18,000 individuals in 2009 to 23,000 in late 2011. Last year, 155 families presented as homeless in Camden. One quarter of these were forced to move out of London.

No credence can be given to Hayward's “guarantee that no vulnerable people will be moved from Camden,” since the measure is clearly directed against the poorest families.

Camden follows Labour-run Newham Council in London, which it was revealed last year had contacted housing agencies up to 160 miles away to take families it was considering displacing from the borough. Newham and Camden are reportedly looking to Birmingham, Leicester and other areas in the midlands, where the Local Housing Allowances (LHA) for a three-bedroomed

property is £127 a week. Camden admits having considered properties in Bradford, and residents report having been offered the possibility of rehousing in Liverpool, both 200 miles away.

The places proposed for relocation are badly affected by the social crisis. Bradford, for example, has around 20,000 people waiting for social housing, and reports 10 percent overcrowding in some parts of the city. Val Slater, Bradford's executive member for housing, noted a severe shortage of school places, "especially in those areas where families and children would likely be relocated."

As one single mother of four told the *Guardian*, "it seems like...the government just want London for the rich. They want to move people on benefits to poor areas."

Camden Council has attempted to play down the implications of the proposals. Officials told the local press they were looking to offset the impact of the benefit cap by a £1.5 million emergency fund, which goes before the council next week. A council spokesman said this would be spent helping those affected by the benefit cap into employment to boost their income. But such a paltry amount will achieve nothing under conditions where jobs are scarce and those available are generally low-paid.

Indeed, the spokesman said one area where the fund might be spent is on grants to help residents with the costs of moving. Even as the borough said it would try to help those affected remain housed in London, it was admitting that some proportion might be forced to move outside of the capital. The spokesman pledged only an attempt to maintain last year's 25 percent rate of relocation outside London of homeless households. "Clearly, " he said, "with 761 households set to be in a position where they could be made homeless, it will be a challenge to maintain that 25 percent figure, but that is what the fund would be aimed at doing."

So the council's palliative measure would be regarded as successful if only 190 families—700 people—were relocated out of London.

The situation in Camden is repeated across the capital. In 2011, Alex Fenton of the London School of Economics conducted research into the benefit reforms. Fenton concluded that "most inner London boroughs are likely to become almost entirely unaffordable" by 2016. Benefit changes would "reduce the proportion of London neighbourhoods affordable to LHA claimants from 75 percent to 51 percent" with immediate effect. This would fall to 36 percent by 2016.

Other councils have warned of the number of families that will be affected by the household benefit cap.

Conservative-run Westminster has estimated that 2,327 households will be affected.

The crisis is affecting all boroughs, but the Labour Party is pioneering the social cleansing projects. The government looked initially to pilot the cap in four boroughs—Tory Bromley, Croydon (which is almost evenly Tory/Labour), and Haringey and Enfield, both of which have Labour majorities. Haringey has appointed "temporary accommodation" teams to collect information about the "income, employment status, personal circumstances and household composition" of 1,000 families. According to the *Guardian*, the council is considering moving these families to "lower-cost areas outside of London".

Labour-run Brent has also "assessed the costs of procurement [of properties] in different areas of the country such as the Midlands—including Coventry and Birmingham." The council has already procured properties in counties adjacent to the capital.

Labour's employment spokesman, Stephen Timms, criticised the government only for being "in danger of creating a cap on benefits that actually ends up costing more than it saves."

Timms is MP for East Ham, in Newham, and is more than conversant with the council's enthusiastic rush to change its policies in line with government diktats. In October, Newham changed its housing register policy. Of the 30,000 people on its housing register, the council reported, it would prioritise members of the armed forces and those in work over the unemployed. Announcing the changes, Newham's mayor Robin Wales said the scheme was "about giving something for something" in order to "drive aspiration and form a stable community where people choose to live, work and stay."



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