

UK Labour councils relocating residents hundreds of miles away in social cleansing blitz

Paul Bond**11 October 2021**

More than a quarter of those placed in temporary accommodation by local councils in England are being moved outside their home borough, in some cases halfway across the country.

Case numbers have risen dramatically. The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has reported that 95,450 households in England are currently in temporary accommodation. Of these, 26,170, more than 27 percent, have been placed outside their local area. This amounts to 65,686 being placed outside their home borough, a 316 percent rise in the last ten years.

Because of the cost of accommodation, London has long been the focus of the practice. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) considers an area has affordable private rents if they make up 30 percent or less of local residents' income. In London the figure is currently 37.7 percent, compared with 26 percent in the east of England and 22.3 percent in the East Midlands.

In the last three years, London local authorities have increased out-of-area temporary accommodation placements by 11 percent, affecting 21,470 households.

Labour-run Waltham Forest council, in northeast London, has been vigorous in pursuing the policy. Councils are responsible for housing their homeless residents until they can find them an affordable property. Waltham Forest has a 10,000+ waiting list for council homes, and, like all of London, private rents are staggeringly high. The council in 2019 entered a contract with Reloc8 UK to provide homes in cheaper cities. Reloc8 have similar contracts with nine other London councils, the majority Labour-run. Waltham Forest is the biggest user of Reloc8's services, but other councils use different agencies to the same end.

Four Conservative-run councils are among Reloc8's clients. Hillingdon have relocated 74 households, Barnet

one, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea five, and Bexley eight. But Labour councils have provided most of Reloc8's London work. Waltham Forest alone has used them to transfer a staggering 94 households out of borough, Ealing have transferred 60 households, Brent 15, Haringey five, Barking and Dagenham two, and Hammersmith and Fulham three.

Another 120 households in Waltham Forest have not accepted Reloc8's "offers". Nadia Zaman, a single parent of three children under 10, has lived in north London all her life. In July she was one of 162 households told to go to Stoke-on-Trent, over 100 miles away.

Offered a maisonette in Stoke on a Wednesday, Nadia was told to decide by that Friday. A council email said they regarded this as concluding their responsibilities: "Please note that this offer of suitable private sector accommodation will discharge our duty to you whether you accept or refuse the property. You will only receive this offer of suitable accommodation".

The offer, it continued, "cannot be held open for you for more than 24 hours and the council will assume that you have refused the accommodation offered if you fail to attend."

Nadia told local press that she had been refused any chance to see the property, in a town she had never visited. Her children are at school in Waltham Forest, and all her family and friends are there.

She was instructed to meet a Reloc8 agent at the property on the Saturday to sign the contract, offered a "travel warrant" for her tickets and asked to advise the council if she needed any help removing her belongings from the temporary accommodation.

By treating such offers as discharging their responsibilities, the council treat any resident who refuses—even if they have never seen the property or

visited the city—as making themselves “voluntarily homeless,” so can be removed from their temporary accommodation.

“They said I’ve made myself intentionally homeless, so they’ve taken me off the list,” Nadia told the press.

Following media attention, the council have now agreed to help her find private rented accommodation “as soon as possible,” although they insist “this may need to be outside of Waltham Forest.”

Other desperate residents have already been forced out. Karen Beckett and her three daughters, aged 16, 14 and 12, were relocated to Telford, 150 miles away.

A Freedom of Information request from the *Waltham Forest Echo* revealed that the furthest move proposed by Reloc8 was to a Barnet household, offered a property in Newcastle, 283 miles away. A member of Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL) spoke to *Waltham Forest Echo* about another family told to relocate to Stoke, 168 miles away, who were ruled “voluntarily homeless” for missing an appointment to view the property.

The single biggest obstacle to Nadia’s accommodation is the cap on household benefits, introduced in 2013, which makes private accommodation unaffordable. Labour councils led the way in relocating families out of borough to adapt to the benefit cap. Waltham Forest’s cabinet member for housing, Louise Mitchell, described their approach as being “in line” with other councils, saying blandly, “We regret that rising property costs in the borough and in the private rented sector, which we are forced to use, combined with the government benefit cap, means that housing people locally in decent accommodation where they can make stable settled homes isn’t always possible.”

Even as they were trying to relocate Nadia, Waltham Forest were approving the building of 25 flats in Leyton without any nominally “affordable” properties. Developer NPLH Midland Ltd had originally proposed that one-third of the flats should be affordable but withdrew the offer because of rising costs. The council accepted this, and the company’s offer of a one-off payment of £50,000 and a review of profits after 75 percent of the homes are sold or let.

Labour have also led the way in deals with property developers and speculators. ITV News reported on Fransoy Hewitt, who reported a leaking ceiling in her flat in Labour-run Croydon for months last year. While council maintenance workers turned off the electricity to her lights and fridge, to prevent electrocution, the leak

was not fixed. She and her two young children ate their Christmas dinner last year under umbrellas. Croydon declared itself bankrupt last November, in part because of debts due to “undeliverable” income from its in-house property developer.

In Haringey, another of Reloc8’s clients, the Labour council established a hugely unpopular Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV)—a partnership with global private developer Lendlease. Local hostility to the HDV saw council leader Claire Kober replaced with what was trumpeted as a “Corbyn council” in May 2018. That council’s first action was to tell local Labour Party members it would “have to” cut its budget further.

Kober later joined housing management group Pinnacle and construction company Taylor Wimpey. She has now been appointed to the board of landlord Notting Hill Genesis (NHG), which recently announced a deal with property developer Hill to build 780 homes in west London. It has reported a 48 percent jump in its annual surplus following the £140 million sale of a development site to a property investor.

Anger is rising at the increasingly intolerable situation. Bus driver Anthony Brathwaite has been fighting for a “stable and permanent home” for him and his two children, one of whom is autistic, since the breakdown of his marriage in 2017. Lewisham council have recently offered him two private rentals: one was outside the borough, in Greenwich, while the other cost £1,300 without bills, beyond his budget.

The council decided he had made himself intentionally homeless and sought to evict him and his children. Around 20 protesters came to his defence, forcing a nine-hour standoff with enforcement officers and the suspension of his eviction.

What is required is a programme of social housing to provide decent, safe accommodation for all. This will not come from property developers or private partnerships. It requires the immediate requisitioning of empty accommodation and the expropriation of the fortunes of the super-rich to fund a social housing and provision programme under democratic control.



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