



'DON'T CALL IT SOCIAL CLEANSING'

ANALYSIS

'IT'S THE TERRIFYING REALITY OF OUR HOUSING CRISIS'

CAMPBELL ROBB
 Shelter chief executive:

The news that Newham council has written to a housing association in Stoke-on-Trent asking them to house 500 London families exposes the terrifying reality of our housing crisis. According to Newham Council, changes to housing benefit, coupled with rising rents, mean they can no longer afford to house homeless local families.

It illustrates the dangerous cocktail of pressures on our overheated housing market.

Changes in the Localism Act (2011) mean councils can push homeless households into unstable private rented housing rather than offering them a settled home. We expect to soon see the government publishing regulations to determine exactly what kind of rented accommodation is suitable.

If the regulations don't include rules about where homeless families can be sent, we could see more London councils trying to ship vulnerable homeless families hundreds of miles away from schools, jobs and support networks at the very time they need them most.

This is not going to help these families back on their feet – it is a totally unsustainable way to address the issue. ●

NEWHAM COUNCIL WANTS TO MOVE 500 FAMILIES OUT OF LONDON. KEITH FERNETT, DIRECTOR OF NEWHAM-BASED CHARITY ANCHOR HOUSE, SAYS THE HOUSING CRISIS REQUIRES DESPERATE MEASURES



The prospect of people being 'shipped out' of London has attracted national attention but we at Anchor House have seen huge pressures on the availability of housing mounting for some time. No-one is forcing anyone to move to another city. Yet everyone involved in housing has known something was going to have to give. Talk of 'social cleansing' has been an unhelpful distraction from the problems in need of solutions. Once again, the poor, vulnerable and homeless are becoming a political football to be kicked around, as the talk turns to what 'benefit scroungers' deserve or have the right to expect.

In Newham, we have the highest unemployment rate in London and there are 32,000 people on the local housing waiting list.

And as a small homeless charity with 118 bed spaces, Anchor House is in the most deprived ward in Newham. The demand is so overwhelming we've had to close our own waiting list for the time being.

Young professionals want the kind of housing in the East End that what you might call the working class used to live in. Then there is the housing benefit cap, which has meant that people in central London can't make housing affordable there and are moving further out to find something cheaper.

The inner London boroughs can afford to pay private landlords a 'golden hello' payment – perhaps a few thousand pounds – to house some of their homeless. The London Borough of Newham, however, doesn't have the same resources and therefore can't compete.

The fact that the Olympics has pushed up rents further has not helped either. If you talk to the landlords about coming to a deal to house people in need they say:

"We can get a better deal from someone else."

Some won't take anyone aged under 35 now because of new restrictions to housing benefit. It's like a tsunami – a brick dropped in the middle of the pond and the waves emerge further out. There is simply very little affordable housing left in London.

So as a rather sensible policy principle, Newham council has written to providers in different parts of the country asking if there are properties outside of London that are available to lease for 500 families. To call it 'social cleansing' as some have done is childish, emotive and unhelpful.

No-one wants to move anyone who has made London their home. We have people in Anchor House from Sheffield and Manchester who had lived and worked in London for some time. Having lost their jobs, they have said they would be willing to go back to Sheffield or Manchester, if they could be sure a job was waiting. Of course, no-one is in a position to give that guarantee.

There is a responsibility to find decent housing somewhere. The tsunami impact of the housing benefit cap and so many other problems in our housing market puts housing professionals in a very difficult position.

Perhaps, at least, talk of 'social cleansing' has brought some of these problems out into the open. None of this is going to go away soon. ●



Social housing in London's East End, where an influx of young professionals and the benefit cap are forcing up prices

Photo: Peter Features