

# Benefit claimants buy council houses with £100,000 discounts

**Nicholas Hellen**  
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BENEFIT claimants have snapped up former council houses at discounts of up to £100,000, raising fears that the coalition's attempt to revive one of Margaret Thatcher's most popular policies is open to abuse.

In one London borough, people on benefits have bought 167 properties in the two years since the coalition revived Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme by introducing generous new discounts.

The boom in applications from people on means-tested benefits has forced council chiefs to put in place tough new checks on money laundering and tenancy fraud.

Andrew Hyatt, head of

fraud for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), Hammersmith & Fulham and Westminster, said: "In terms of money laundering, it is imperative that we know where the finances are coming from to purchase the property . . . to ensure it is not from illegal sources."

Hyatt said he was "shocked" that of 39 applications received in RBKC, all but six had been withdrawn after "probing letters" were sent to the claimants.

"We're not picking on people trying to better themselves, but there is criminality involved where people are trying to make money out of state assets," Hyatt said.

He added: "It seems unfair that the benefit claimant has a similar right to someone who has paid rent."

Information obtained by The Sunday Times under Freedom of Information laws shows that 167 people on benefits have bought a house through Right to Buy in Enfield, north London, since April 2012.

Sandwell metropolitan borough council, in the West Midlands, reported 94 such sales, while Hull declared 78, South Tyneside 66, Corby 30 and Brentwood 29.

Other local authority areas with significant sales include Manchester 26, York 22, and Six Town Housing, based in Bury, and Great Yarmouth having 17 each. Wandsworth, in southwest London, sold

three properties to people on benefits, who each received a discount of £100,000.

Figures for Basildon council in Essex show 14 properties were sold to benefit claimants at an average of less than half price. One tenant spent £35,000 on a property valued at £110,000, while another bought one worth £128,000 for only £53,000.

The full scale of sales to benefit claimants is unclear because many local authorities, such as Liverpool city council, no longer manage their own housing stock. Birmingham city council said it would be too expensive to provide answers.

A total of 13,500 tenants bought their homes through Right to Buy during the first 18 months since April 2012

when the government increased the discounts.

Benefit claimants are entitled to buy their homes at a discount of up to £100,000 in London, £75,000 in the rest of England and £16,000 in Wales. They must have spent at least five years as a public sector tenant to secure a discount of 35% on a house and 50% on a flat. Long-term tenants can qualify for discounts of up to 70%.

They must keep their property for at least five years or repay some of their discount and they no longer receive housing benefit once they are a homeowner.

Those receiving means-tested support, such as housing benefit and council tax support, are usually not allowed to have assets of more

than £16,000 and are meant to declare reserves of more than £6,000.

They are, however, allowed to ask family members to help to buy their property, provided they have lived there for the past year.

Dame Anne Begg, the Labour chairwoman of the Commons work and pensions committee, said the government needed to beef up its checks on potential fraud.

But she pointed out that people on long-term sickness benefits might obtain a mortgage quite legitimately.

Kris Hopkins, the housing minister, defended Right to Buy for "encouraging aspiration" and said: "There are strong safeguards to identify and tackle fraud."

@nicholashellen

Snapped up		
Former council houses bought by people on benefits during first two years of coalition's revival of Right to Buy		
Basildon borough council		
Valuation	Discount	Purchase price
£110,000	£75,000	£35,000
£128,000	£75,000	£53,000
£132,500	£75,000	£57,500
£145,000	£75,000	£70,000
£147,000	£75,000	£72,000
£150,000	£75,000	£75,000
£152,000	£75,000	£77,000
£155,000	£75,000	£80,000
£170,000	£75,000	£95,000
£185,000	£75,000	£110,000
£120,000	£72,000	£48,000
£130,000	£71,500	£58,500
£122,500	£67,375	£55,125
£82,000	£47,560	£34,440
£1.93m	Total	£1.01m
		Total
		£0.92m

Source: Basildon Borough Council under Freedom of Information laws



## Caged, beaten: the rabbits for your plate

**Kevin Dowling**

BRITISH restaurants have been serving rabbit dishes using meat from animals forced to live in appalling conditions in Spanish factory farms, an investigation has discovered.

Campaigners went undercover to expose the horrific conditions at four slaughterhouses and 70 farms, including two which have supplied rabbits to restaurants such as the Terrace at the National Theatre in London.

Footage obtained by the Animal Equality charity shows rabbits having their throats slit while conscious, and dead animals left lying for days in cages beside live rabbits.

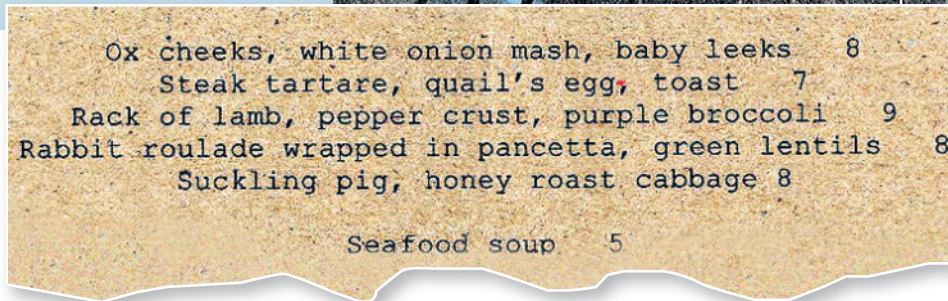
Investigators also filmed injured and sick animals being left untreated and others eating their own faeces.

Farmers were observed killing sick animals by hitting them over the head with iron bars, smashing their skulls against concrete floors or punching them.

Matteo Cupi, head of investigations at Animal Equality, said: "We are shocked by these images where farm workers kill young rabbits by blunt force trauma and sick animals are left for days crammed inside filthy cages with no veterinary treatment. As a modern and civilised society, we should not tolerate these abuses."

The consumption of rabbit meat in Britain has increased in recent years with celebrity chefs including Nigella Lawson and Nigel Slater recommending the low-fat meat.

Most is imported from Europe where more than 320m rabbits are slaughtered



each year, the majority in Spain, France and Italy.

Most of the animals are crammed into wire-mesh cages where movement is restricted and many suffer injury. Rabbit farming uses seven times more antibiotics per kilogram of meat than does poultry.

During a two-year inquiry, investigators from Animal Equality posed as university students conducting research to gain access to the farms and



Overcrowding at a Spanish rabbit farm. Rabbit meat was on the menu at the Terrace restaurant, inset and above left, but has now been withdrawn

slaughterhouses on pre-arranged visits.

At one farm, workers were filmed throwing undersized newborn rabbits on to concrete floors. Sick and injured rabbits were thrown alive into bins containing the decomposing bodies of dead animals.

Dil Peeling, campaigns director at Compassion in World Farming, which has mounted previous investigations into the industry, said: "When done at its best, inten-

sive rabbit farming involves intolerable suffering but this film adds brutality and callousness to a cruel system."

Two of the farms exposed during the investigation sell rabbit meat to C&D Wines, a wholesaler that supplies several British restaurants including the Terrace.

A spokeswoman for Grupo Arcoirs, the Spanish co-operative which supplies C&D Wines, said it abided by all domestic and European laws

and rules on the humane treatment of animals and food production regulations.

One of the farmers that supplied meat to British restaurants said the animals filmed dead in their cages had died overnight. He added that rules allowed rabbits to be killed without being stunned if they were for personal consumption, which was the case in the incident filmed.

But Felix Benito, managing director of C&D Wines, said: "I am appalled at what these videos show. I am investigating the findings and, if proven right, will stop importing this product immediately."

On its website, the Terrace is described as having "a contemporary, warehouse feel", adding that "the busy kitchen cooks up a contemporary fusion of small sharing plates".

A spokeswoman for the National Theatre said rabbit meat had been removed from the menu and the relationship with the supplier suspended pending further investigation.

Michael Kittos, owner of the Queen's Head and Artichoke near Regent's Park, central London, said although rabbit from C&D Wines had been advertised on its menu, it had recently been dropped and would not be re-introduced.

At Los Molinos restaurant in Hammersmith, west London, rabbit remained on the menu last week but the manager said it had stopped buying the meat from C&D Wines.

Animal Equality welcomed the restaurants' actions and has now begun legal action against all 70 farms and two of the slaughterhouses.

@newsdow

## Boris plans early pollution alerts

**Jonathan Leake and Raiani Sibien**

LONDONERS will be told to stay at home when toxic gases and particulates reach dangerous levels, under radical plans being drawn up by Boris Johnson, the mayor.

An early-warning system using text messages, social media, radio and television would activate whenever pollution is expected to reach "high" or "very high" levels, as has happened more than 100 times during the past five years.

Such incidents are known to lead to a surge in deaths and hospitalisations from conditions such as asthma, heart disease and stroke.

While these incidents are easy to predict, Defra, the environment ministry responsible for controlling air pollution, has refused to set up any effective system for passing such warnings to the public.

Johnson, London's mayor, once took a similar approach but is now convinced that air pollution is such a serious public health issue that it can no longer be ignored.

Under his Breathe Better Together initiative, Londoners will be asked to change their travel behaviour whenever pollution surges are forecast. They will be asked to work from home or, if they have to commute, to use public transport or bicycles.

The aim is for at least 2m Londoners to receive the alert before each pollution surge and, as a result, to reduce their vehicle journeys by up to 300,000 a day.

Londoners who decide to use their cars will be asked to share their vehicles and travel outside the rush hour to reduce the duration of their journeys. All drivers, including taxis and buses, will be asked to switch off their engines when waiting at traffic lights or parked.



Johnson wants motorists to stay at home when pollution is high

The campaign, to be launched later this year, is Britain's first attempt to issue mass warnings for smog alerts. It follows "infraction" legal moves by the European Commission to take the UK to court for failing to meet air quality standards.

Such traffic reduction schemes have already been implemented in other cities. In March a pollution surge prompted Paris to ban cars with odd and even-numbered registration plates on alternate days. It was enforced by police

at control points on roads entering the French capital.

Simon Birkett, the founder and director of Clean Air in London, said Johnson's plans were welcome but, with such powerful scientific evidence about the dangers of air pollution, were taking far too long to implement.

"London typically suffers a dozen air pollution episodes a year and this year's summer smog season will soon be upon us without any sign [that] this scheme will launch in time," he said.

## Parents close to victory in 13-year battle for truth over baby's death

**Martyn Halle**

A COUPLE are close to winning a 13-year battle to have blunders before and after the death of their baby investigated by the health regulator.

David Behan, chief executive of the Care Quality Commission (CQC), has told the parents of Elizabeth Dixon that their dossier of evidence about the case will be considered.

Elizabeth suffered brain damage when her blood pressure soared after her birth at Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey in December 2000.

She died barely 11 months later when an agency nurse hired by the NHS to monitor her at home failed to deal with a blocked breathing tube. Anne and Graeme Dixon had previously raised concerns about the ability of Joyce Aburime, who had only recently qualified as a nurse and who was not

trained in paediatric care, to care for their daughter. The agency assured them that Aburime, who was subsequently struck off by the Nursing and Midwifery Council in 2005, was "one of the best nurses they had, with extensive experience".

After Elizabeth was pronounced dead at Frimley Park Hospital, Dr Michael Tettenborn, a consultant paediatrician who had been involved in her post-natal care, drove the Dixons home with their daughter's body.

The couple want to know why Tettenborn then arranged for a colleague to certify that her death was the result of natural causes and organised for her cremation forms to be signed. "Looking back, this was quite bizarre behaviour," said Graeme.

Tettenborn, who is now semi-retired, denied errors had been made during Elizabeth's care. "If there was a recording that she had high



Elizabeth Dixon: blocked tube

blood pressure it would have been managed," he said.

He said the offer to drive the family home had been "an act of compassion" after he had concluded Elizabeth's death had been natural. He "only became aware that Elizabeth's death may have been due to a blocked tracheostomy tube some hours later".

An inquest was finally held in 2009 but to the Dixons' dismay, the coroner ruled

Elizabeth's death had not been the result of neglect.

After mounting their own investigation, they won an independent review of Elizabeth's post-natal care. Completed last September, it found brain damage "would not have been expected to occur if her BP [blood pressure] had been identified and treated earlier".

Earlier this month, Frimley Park Hospital NHS Foundation Trust apologised in a letter "for the lack of care provided to Elizabeth following her birth".

The Dixons believe, however, that an inquiry by the CQC and a second inquest are required. "We hope that a full investigation . . . will hold to account those responsible for what happened to Elizabeth," said Graeme.

Behan confirmed: "We are looking into all the information we have and considering how we can help and what the next steps should be."