

Trying to forget the homeless

HOMELESSNESS was a forgotten subject... until an evicted mother and her five children were housed for two nights in Liverpool's Holiday Inn Hotel.

Then there was an outcry. Predictably, the leader of the council, Bill Smyth, managed to absolve his party from any blame.

He did this by launching a bitter attack on homeless families. "Welfare benefits are going to scroungers." And he said the social worker who put the family in a four-star hotel would be for the 'high-jump'. Other social workers were threatened with the sack if it happened again.

Almost no-one thought to ask why there wasn't a home available, either temporary or permanent, for the evicted family.

And yet over the last eighteen months homelessness has reached crisis proportions.

The Homeless Families Unit was set up by the Social Services Department just over a year ago and already it has given some help or advice to over 700 families.

Up to 85 families a week this year have been looked after in bed and breakfast hotels, at a cost of £3,500 a week.

Frequently cheap hotels are full. Many are dingy and overcrowded, and at least one is a part-time brothel.

Rarely are the classier hotels used, although three other families have had to be housed at the Holiday Inn this year.

The social worker only placed the mother and five children in the Holiday Inn after searching for an alternative for three-and-a-half hours.

And two weeks BEFORE this family of six were given just one small room there, the Director of Social Services, Dr Meredith Davies had sent a letter to the Director of Housing.

He warned that unless flats were allocated urgently, then top hotels would have to be used.

The Liberals have been in power for just twelve months. They cannot take all the blame for the scandalous homeless situation in the city.

When the Tories were in power about 170 families were being evicted from council homes each year. And although the Labour Party cut these

evictions to about 24 from 1972 to 1974, house building in the city during this period reached one of the lowest points since the war.

More importantly, homelessness will never disappear while homes are built for profit and 70p in every £1 of council rent goes in interest charges.

As Hands, a neighbourhood project wrote in a report in 1973: "The homeless... are the losers who are so essential to the winners in our competitive way of living... the people who find themselves overtaken by the burden of living permanently on the breadline."

But the Liberals could have cut the number of homeless by some purely administrative moves, and by a small injection of cash. They wouldn't have ended homelessness, but would have lessened the misery for a number of families.

The Liberals, however, couldn't see any votes to be won from the homeless.

They were determined to go into the election with the nastiest political gimmick of the decade - A Penny Off The Rates.

So they refused the Social Services' request for an extra £15,000 to spend on families in trouble.

Ironically, this will cost far more because preventing homelessness is much cheaper than caring for homeless families.

What's more, the Liberals had a get-tough policy on council rent arrears. Last year, 58 families were evicted or abandoned their homes because of rent arrears.

Six families were evicted in one day alone. And the hated Burgess Detective Agency was re-employed to put families into the street.

Just over a year ago the government sent out a circular which laid down ways to prevent and tackle homelessness.

Of course, it's easy to send out paperwork when the only answer is cash and a massive housing programme. But, even so, some of the suggestions could have helped.

Local authorities were told housing departments should take over all responsibility for rehousing homeless families. This would end the conflict which exists between the housing and

social services departments.

It was a small step forward.

But it was a step Smyth didn't want to take. He was openly contemptuous of this 'legislation'.

It was stupid, he said, that the Housing Department which took out eviction orders for rent arrears would have to find accommodation for the same people.

"I think there is too much feather-bedding by the welfare state," he proclaimed.

This attitude has meant Liverpool has become one of about four authorities which haven't so far implemented the reforms.

Yet the muddle and inefficiency which exists in Liverpool between the two departments shows exactly why some change is needed.

At present Langtry House is the only accommodation which exists in the city for housing families in an emergency. It is always grossly overcrowded. Built for 10 families, it normally houses 17.

The only other temporary accommodation is 20 flats normally in the poorest council blocks. Both these and Langtry are almost always blocked. Certainly social workers try there best to avoid putting families there... because it's difficult to get them out.

This is because the Housing Department and the council have imposed restrictions on who they rehouse into permanent accommodation.

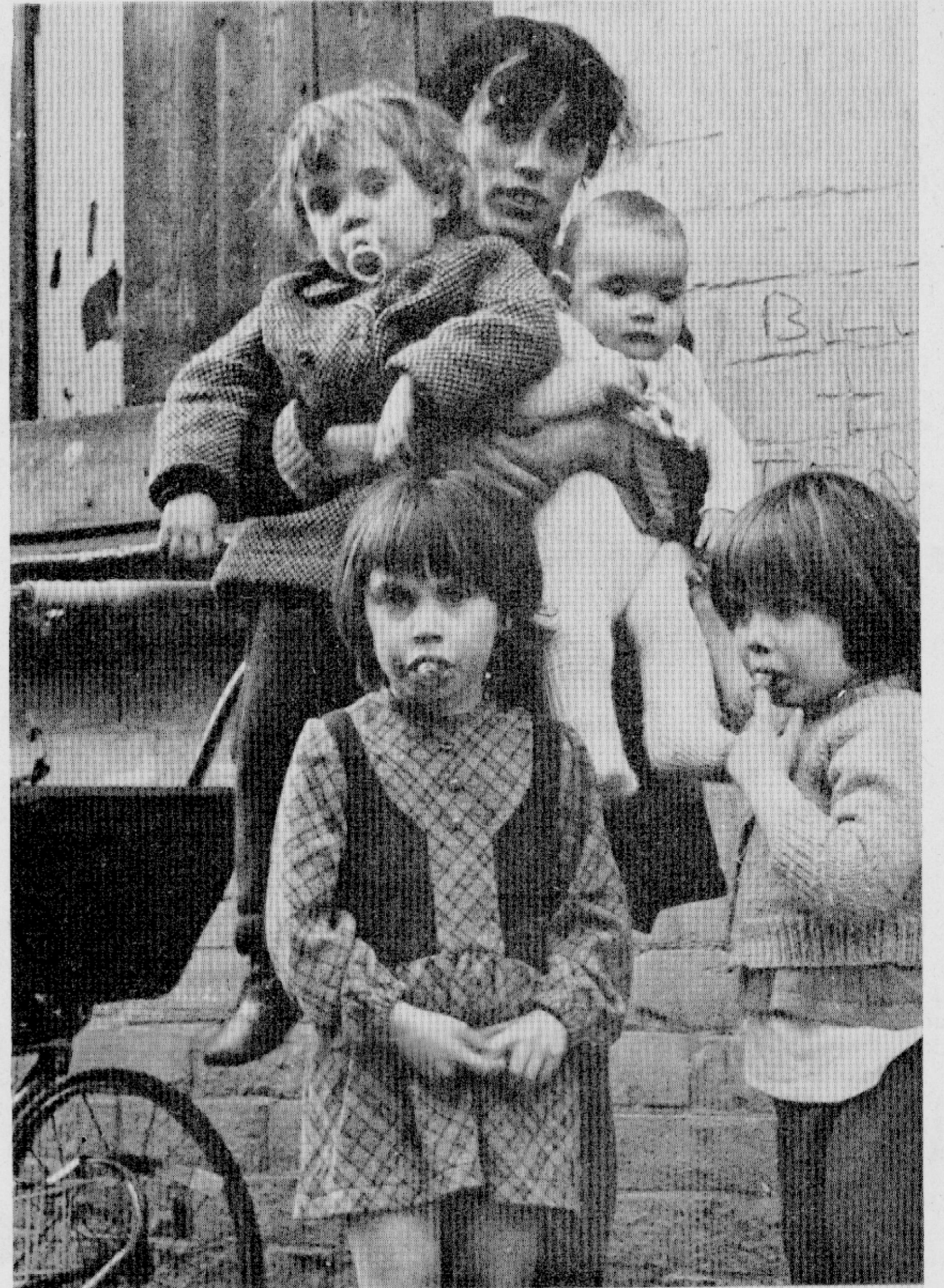
They won't rehouse families with mortgage or corporation rent arrears. Or families who have split up, unless they are divorced - or virtually divorced.

These restrictions block up all the emergency accommodation. One family lived in Langtry for TWO YEARS.

So in emergencies, social workers now have to house families in B & B hotels - whatever the cost. And the Housing Department continue to ignore the stupidity of these restrictions.

Nine months ago the Housing Dept told the Social Services they would allocate more hard-to-let flats in areas such as Netherley and Speke.

Social Services asked for 40. Since January only 10 have been given. And four of these can't be used



One of the homeless families on the doorstep of Hands, the neighbourhood project.

because of lack of repairs due to the electricians' strike.

Over nine months ago the Social Services and Housing Departments drew up a joint report designed to implement the government circular... and to reduce homelessness.

It's recommendations were accepted. They were:

- Housing Department to bear the cost of housing and responsibility for the homeless.
- Progress very slow. Housing have accepted the cost of Langtry. But until forced by Social Services they did not budget one penny for homelessness in their April budget.
- A homeless officer be appointed to co-ordinate and control homeless and housing aid services.
- Progress... nil. The post has been advertised three times, but the three political parties are squabbling over whether a trained social worker is needed.
- Langtry to be used as a short term

reception and assessment centre for families for about three to four days. Progress... nil.

- 200 hard-to-let properties to be allocated to rehouse homeless families. Progress... nil.
- Another housing aid centre for the northern part of the city. Progress... nil.
- The Social Services to concentrate on preventing homelessness and helping homeless families. Progress... almost nil.
- Preventive measures should be taken to stop families becoming homeless. Progress... worse than nil. Prevention is breaking down. Evictions up and the preventive work budget cut.
- Finally, these recommendations should be implemented "as soon as possible". No comment needed.

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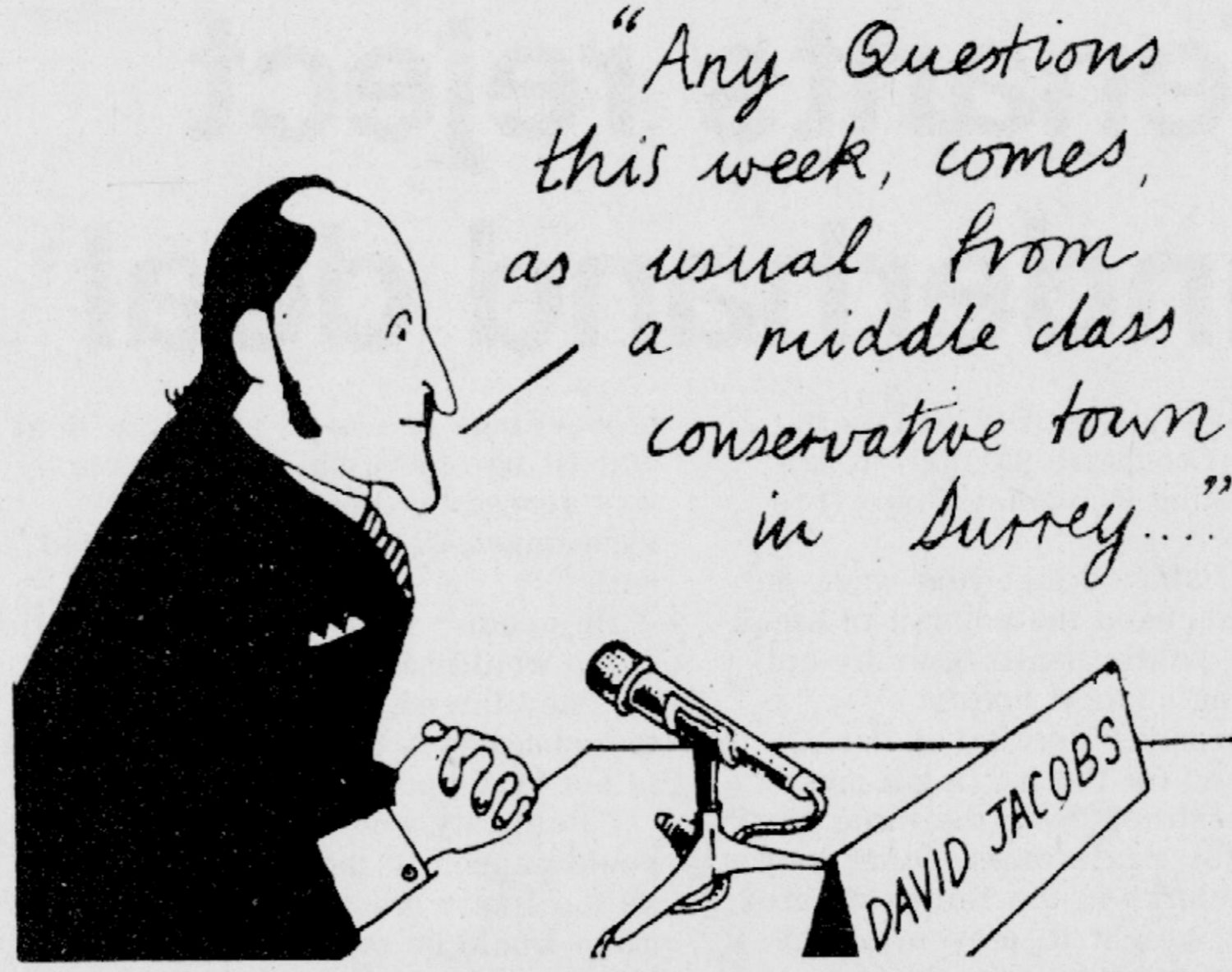
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Sit-in enters fourth month

THE SIT-IN by 100 building workers at the Cammell Laird shipyard is entering its fourth month.

And, as the weeks pass by, the action of the company in sacking the original contractors for their new £28 million slipway becomes more mysterious.

Simon-Lind were sacked, it was said, because of long delays in the construction work.

Cammell Laird said the slipway was urgently needed if the shipyards were to be competitive. But the company hasn't rushed to choose a new contractor.

And, in the meantime, a new slipway has been opened in Sunderland which will allow ships to be built and

rolled off in a matter of months.

Three firms, Wimpey, Fairclough, and Norwest, have been put on the short-list. But this isn't very encouraging for the men who have refused to allow Cammell Laird to take away their jobs.

Wimpey, the favourites, are notoriously anti-union. And all three companies have told union officials they would employ the shop stewards... but not the rest of the men.

An interesting attempt to break united ranks that.

- Support/donations to: 6533 T&G Branch Transport House Islington Liverpool.

Smyth ignores hunger strikers

ERIC AND AGNES Hodgkinson and their four children still haven't a home... although they went on a hunger strike protest three weeks ago.

The couple were joined on their 112 hour fast by Mrs Kathy Kenwright a Netherley tenant, and another friend.

The four camped out in St George's gardens in the city centre, and refused to budge until they were offered a home.

They only left when told the Housing Department would rehouse them.

The family were driven out of their Netherley home because Eric suffered numerous breakdowns through the noise outside.

Their maisonette was sandwiched between a lift-shaft and an off-licence. Both of these attracted groups of young people.

The hunger strikers gained widespread support. About 20 of Eric's workmates at Whitbread, the brewers, took a dramatic and unusual form of action.

They decorated their lorries with placards, and they planned to drive in slow procession around the city centre.

Whitbread were so shaken they offered to put the Hodgkinsons up in a hotel for a month. And that's where they are at the moment.

Tenants from Netherley had also joined in. They picketed the home of councillor Bill Smyth, the Liberal City Council leader, for two days, and blocked roads around Netherley.

The tenants are bitterly angry about the blatantly unfair way houses are being allocated.

While the Hodgkinsons were homeless, another family moved from one four-bedroom house in Netherley to another... something which is virtually 'impossible'.

How did the family manage it? It seems Fords, the husband's employer, intervened.

Naturally, tenants want to know why the Housing Department listens to Fords but not to them.

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