

# Cathy Come Home – 50 years on

**Swindon Housing Action Campaign** and **Swindon Trades Union Council** will be organising a showing of Ken Loach's famous TV drama, **Cathy Come Home**. Many older people will know of it, young people may not. Here I explain the background to the TV play and it's relevance to today's housing crisis.

*Martin Wicks*

Imagine for one moment a country in which in the large industrial towns about a third of homes were without a bathroom, a quarter without piped hot water. Imagine having to leave your bedroom in the middle of winter and use an outdoor toilet or use a bucket kept under the bed which has to be emptied out in the morning. Imagine having to heat up water on the gas stove and take it into the front room to pour it into a metal tub which is carried into the room in order for you to have a bath. These living conditions existed in Britain in 1966 during 'the swinging 'sixties'. It was the year that *Cathy Come Home*, Ken Loach's famous TV drama was broadcast. In some areas the situation was even worse. Ken Coates book about St Anne's estate in Nottingham (*Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen published 1970*) reported on a slum area waiting to be knocked down. His research showed that 91% of homes in St Anne's did not have an inside lavatory, 85% lacked a bathroom and 54.5% lacked a hot water system. An estimated 74% of the homes in the area were considered unfit for human habitation. Millions of people lived in conditions which would seem extraordinary to a generation which grew up taking double-glazing, inside toilets and central heating for granted.

*Cathy Come Home* was shown on TV on November 16<sup>th</sup> in 1966. It was watched by an estimated 12 million people, a quarter of the population. It had a tremendous impact because it raised the issue of homelessness and unhealthy accommodation through a fictional account of a young couple who are the victims of circumstance. The husband loses a job as a result of a road accident. They cannot afford to stay in their flat and are forced to move a number of times into progressively worse accommodation. The wife ends up in a hostel from which husbands are barred, and eventually she has her children taken away from her by social services.

The play created something of a furore. Although fictional it reflected real life experience. That's why it resonated with so many people whose living conditions were appalling. Families were commonly broken up by single sex hostels. As a direct result of the play this practice was ended.

The film was shot in London and in Birmingham. It featured some of Birmingham's most poverty stricken communities and some of the scenes were shot in real houses. As with much of Loach's work the film featured real people as extras and included the voices of people telling their own stories. Birmingham Council leaders were apoplectic. Alderman Louis Glass, Conservative Housing Committee Chairman, attacked writer Jeremy Sandford and Loach for "sneaking into a Birmingham hostel to get information for their play". He said the play has smacked in the face every agency dealing with the homeless. Glass said improvements were 'in hand' anyway.

On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the showing of the Film, director Ken Loach said that:

“A film isn't a movement, it's just a film. There's an old saying, agitate, educate, organise. A film can agitate a little, illustrate, but its part of the process. Unless you organise, nothing much will happen – people turn off the telly or walk out of the cinema and that's that. So it's got to project forward, but it can change things. Our aims were modest. We were saying 'this happens and it shouldn't'. It achieved something, in that there was a change in the law that fathers wouldn't be refused accommodation with their families, but that was quite a small victory.”

Small victory maybe, yet by coincidence the campaigning organisation Shelter was about to be launched when Cathy was first shown. The film boosted the support which Shelter received. Des Wilson the founding director estimated the transmission of Cathy to be worth £500,000 to shelter alone. It helped to house a lot of homeless families.

### **Is Cathy still relevant?**

Is Cathy just an interesting old film or is it still relevant today? Whilst the situation today is not as bad as 50 years ago we still have a housing crisis which is getting worse year by year. We face a crisis of affordability. People are priced out of owning a home. The gulf between earnings and prices continues to increase. In Swindon the lowest quartile house price was 6.66 times the lowest quartile wages in 2015 (not far short of the 2008 highpoint of 7.14 times) and 6.13 times the median earnings for the median price (almost back to the 2007 high point of 6.17 times).

The loss of Council homes under [Right to Buy](#)<sup>1</sup> and the failure to build new ones has created a shortage which has been filled by the phenomenal growth<sup>2</sup> of the private rented sector into which more people are forced to live because they cannot afford to buy a property and there is insufficient 'social housing' available. **Swindon Housing Action Campaign** recently showed that rents in the private sector have increased in Swindon by up to 15% in the last two years at a time when inflation has been hovering around zero. (See [Swindon private sector rents rip-off](#) )<sup>3</sup>

### **Houses in Multiple Occupation**

In some respects the situation today is worse. Then, at least, there was a mass council house building programme and Council housing did not have the social stigma attached to it which it has since Thatcher introduced [Right to Buy](#)<sup>4</sup>. Whilst much of the new private rented sector building is of a reasonable standard, around one third of private sector rented homes do not measure up to the Decent Homes Standard. The worst accommodation is in the HMO sector (Houses in Multiple Occupation). As prices continue to rise above the level of inflation, HMO's are the only accommodation that some people can afford.

Speaking of the situation in the HMO sector in Swindon after a landlord was fined £16,000 for cramming 15 tenants into “appalling conditions”, a Council spokesperson said:

“Tenants of larger houses of multiple occupation like this are particularly vulnerable

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1 This explains the impact of Right to Buy: <http://martinwicks.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/rtbimpact22.pdf>

2 There were less than 6,000 private rented properties in Swindon in 2001, increasing to over 14,000 in 2011 and an estimated 16,000 plus today.

3 <http://swindonhousingaction.org/swindon-private-sector-rents-rip-off>

4 172,000 Council homes were built in 1966.

because they are less able to to seek alternative accommodation and therefore endure squalid conditions. Our enforcement work focuses on this area, such as properties riddled with hazards, ranging from rat infestations to inadequate fire exits and faulty electrical installations.”

## **Beds in sheds**

Who would have believed that in supposedly well-off Swindon, there would be people [renting garages to live in](#)?<sup>5</sup> There are also landlords renting out-buildings in back gardens as well. Swindon Advertiser has just reported such a case where the landlord has been fined for renting out unsafe and overcrowded premises. An Environmental Health Officer said that 'beds in sheds' “are increasingly becoming a problem locally and nationally and it appears that landlords feel they can get away with providing sub-standard accommodation”. (See [Bed in shed landlord fined £7,000](#) <sup>6</sup>)

As the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cathy approaches, the film is a reminder of the appalling conditions which the private market created for millions of people. Today's housing shortage gives the landlord the whip hand. There are always landlords who exploit people's need for accommodation to make as much money as they can squeeze out of tenants, if they are allowed to get away with it. It's a reminder also that we need to campaign for the right of everybody to have a decent and genuinely affordable home to live in. So long as housing is dominated by commodity production for the maximisation of profit then millions of people will either struggle to find accommodation and/or be forced to live in conditions that are a risk to their health. That's why a return to large scale Council house building is necessary to tackle the crisis.

For young people who have grown up in an era of double-glazing and central heating this film is a must. Whilst they may not suffer the slum conditions of the past many of them are priced out of home ownership; forced forced into precarious work; carrying big debts if they have been to college; with little chance of getting a Council tenancy. They face rents rising way above the level of inflation. With an average rent of £555 in 2014-15 for a one bed property in Swindon, more people are forced into renting a room in shared accommodation. But even here rents are rising above inflation, with the average rent reaching £419 per month. Whilst this usually includes bills, rent levels are such that even if a tenant qualifies for Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and receives the full amount, the lower Shared Accommodation Rate (which now applies to people under 35 instead of under 24) means that tenants have to find nearly £2,000 a year above the LHA rate to pay an average rent.

In the light of these circumstances, Cathy reminds us that we have to fight to improve the living conditions of millions of people today and provide more secure tenancies. Individual tenants are powerless but combining together they can build a movement which can tackle exploitative landlords. Bad housing is not an individual but a social problem. It requires a movement which promotes changes in policy at the national level to tackle the housing crisis. It requires government action to fund council house building and to implement controls in the private sector to tackle exploitative landlords and to stop above inflation rent increases.

**Visit the SHAC website at: [www.swindhousingaction.org](http://www.swindhousingaction.org)**

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5 <http://keepourcouncilhomes.wordpress.com/2015/11/26/let-them-live-in-garages/>

6 [http://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/14755563\\_Bed\\_in\\_shed\\_landlord\\_fined\\_7,000/](http://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/14755563_Bed_in_shed_landlord_fined_7,000/)