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Housing Executive

*Angus
12 Feb 1986*

Northern Ireland Housing Executive
The Housing Centre
2 Adelaide Street
Belfast BT2 8PB
Telephone: Belfast 240588

Chairman
N. G. D. Ferguson DL

Most Reverend Cahal B. Daly DD.,
Bishop of Down and Connor,
Lisbreen,
Somerton Road,
BELFAST
BT15 4DJ

date 20 November 1985

your reference

our reference

Dear *Bishop Daly,*

I am most grateful to you for the text of your recent homily made in St Peter's Pro-Cathedral. I have read it with interest and I appreciate the strength of feeling and concern which you have for the people of Divis; concern that is widely shared.

As you know, a great deal of thought has been given to the several problems and much has been said. However, at the risk of repetition I would like to set out briefly the Board's view on the way forward in Divis. In doing so, I know you will appreciate that very complex and difficult realities have had to be faced before this view has been formed. Since our proposals are far-reaching they have, of course, been developed in close conjunction with Government, which ultimately must provide the considerable sums of public money required.

Divis in context

First, we have had to consider the unsatisfactory conditions in Divis within the context of the very major housing problem that exists in Belfast. In 1974, almost 30,000 houses in the city, representing 24% of the total housing stock, were unfit for human habitation. Major progress has been made in the last ten years and that figure has been reduced to 13,000 (12%) today. Nevertheless, it means that there are 13,000 families living in 19th century houses most of which do not even have basic amenities such as an indoor lavatory or bathroom which each of the flats in Divis possesses. Thus, while we fully accept that there are real problems at Divis and that further action is needed, I hope you will understand that our first priority must be to direct our resources to meeting the needs of those worst off; in other words, those living in 100 year old, unfit, crumbling homes. Some of these are to be seen just a few streets away from the flats, and there are of course others in north, south and east Belfast.

Problems associated with Divis

As is already well known there are many problems associated with Divis ranging from physical to social and economic; as well there are those connected with civil disturbance.

One of the main problems, as you stated, however has been with the heating systems. Three of the deck access blocks (Milford, St Judes and part of Cullingtree) are supplied by the Grosvenor District Heating System. This system has been inefficient and unsatisfactory and, following consultation with local residents, is being replaced in the 900 homes affected. This means that we must provide an alternative heating system in each home including those in each of these three Divis blocks.

The remaining blocks have gas heating systems which, with the rundown of the gas industry, will also have to be replaced.

Another matter which has received much publicity is that of asbestos. However, after careful study I must say that we do not believe that the presence in the complex of undamaged materials containing asbestos represents a danger to residents. Such materials have been used in large numbers of homes throughout the United Kingdom; they would of course, be dealt with as part of an improvement scheme.

Action taken in Divis

In 1981, the Housing Executive declared Divis a priority estate The proposals approved then can be summarised as follows; -

- (a) A more intensive management service was put into operation. Staffing was increased, a sub-office opened in the complex and caretaking, cleansing and lift operation services were extended.
- (b) A Maintenance Contractor was appointed full time for Divis and was located within the complex.
- (c) The demolition of 2 of the deck access blocks (Whitehall and Farset) comprising 172 dwellings was proposed in order to reduce the very high density of the accommodation.
- (d) The construction of 100 traditional houses in the immediate Divis area with allocations to be made predominantly to residents of the two blocks to be demolished.
- (e) The re-roofing of the flats and the improvement of the refuse disposal system.
- (f) rehabilitation of one of the blocks (Milford) as a pilot exercise to demonstrate that rehabilitation could be effective.

- (g) The adoption of a more appropriate allocation policy to reduce the number of families with young children in the flats.

All of the above have been implemented with the exception of the rehabilitation of Milford Block which after initial acceptance, the Residents Association later opposed and no work has been carried out. Improvements to Divis Tower were also carried out with the result that the accommodation as well as the privacy and security of residents is now much better. The Tower which accommodates small households only does not possess the problems of the deck access blocks and is in demand.

Current position

As you know, the Minister announced on 28th November 1984, another series of proposals for Divis which included the demolition of Pound and St Brendan's Blocks (87 dwellings), the demolition of some of the link-ways between blocks to give residents immediately greater privacy and security, and the pilot rehabilitation of Milford Block (70 dwellings). Since 1984 we have been consulting the Residents Association about these proposals which were intended to be implemented concurrently but, unfortunately, no progress in these discussions has been made.

The Way Forward

I am sure you will accept that there is no unwillingness on the Board's part to improve conditions for the tenants in Divis. The argument has really been over the type of action needed.

It is an inescapable fact that it took some three years to rehouse residents and demolish just two of the blocks at a time when 100 new houses were being provided in the immediate locality. It is obvious that with the lack of suitable building land in inner West Belfast, and with the understandable desire of residents to remain in the immediate locality, that demolition of even two further blocks will also take a considerable time. Something must be done as soon as possible, therefore, to improve conditions in the remaining blocks. The fact that heating systems must be replaced gives the natural opportunity to do this by providing, for example, extra insulation to individual flats to minimise tenants heating costs as well as the problems of condensation. Our proposal to reduce the size of the accommodation in Milford Block to make it suitable for small households in addition to providing a new heating system is, we consider, reasonable in the light of the Divis Tower experience. This is reinforced by the fact that 50% of the waiting list for West Belfast is comprised of small households. We believe that such work when carried out will allow a further realistic assessment to be made as to the most satisfactory and effective way forward.

In short, the Executive considers that these proposals form a most reasonable and practicable approach to tackling the problems of Divis in the short to medium term, in the interests of those who live there.

For the long term it must be recognised that there is insufficient land at the Divis site to house all the tenants in conventional housing.

Our Chief Executive, Victor Blease, Director of Operations, Billy Cameron, and Belfast Regional Director, Billy McGivern and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals with you, being very concerned that the current impasse is simply prolonging the unsatisfactory living conditions of many residents. I therefore wonder if you would care to have a meeting with us so soon as convenient and perhaps you would also join us for lunch. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Norman Ferguson

N.G.D. FERGUSON
Chairman