

file v5

NOTE OF THE MINISTER'S MEETING WITH A DEPUTATION FROM DIVIS RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION
HELD IN ROOM 306, AT 10.00 AM, ON MONDAY 23 AUGUST 1982.

Deputation:-

Rev Fr Buckley

Mrs McKnight

Mrs Keating

Mr Downes

In Attendance:-

Mr Simpson

Mr Beattie

Mr Charters

Accompanying the Deputation:-

Councillor Glendenning

Councillor Dr Hendron

1. The Minister welcomed the members of the deputation and explained that he had received representations from Fr Buckley and from Councillor Glendenning and Dr Hendron on the proposals for the future of the Divis Flats Complex. He pointed out that he had recently visited Divis to see conditions at first hand and was very conscious of the problems which existed. The Minister also said that he was anxious to have the views of the Residents Association and the locally elected representatives.
2. Fr Buckley thanked the Minister for receiving the deputation and presented an agenda which listed a number of issues which the Association wished to discuss.
3. Consultation Process
 - 3.1 Fr Buckley stressed that the Residents Association did not consider that they had been fully consulted on the preparation of the proposals for the future of the Complex. Although there had been several meetings with officials of the Executive the Association felt that they had only been provided with a very broad indication of proposals, ie:-
 - (i) pilot rehabilitation scheme for Milford Block;
 - (ii) demolition of Whitehall and Farset followed by the demolition of Pound and St Brendan's Blocks;
 - (iii) vertical isolation of the flats into 4 groups;
 - (iv) joint management of rehabilitated block;
 - (v) the sponsorship of an Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme.

In these circumstances the Residents' Association welcomed this opportunity for discussion with the Minister.

- 3.2 Councillor Glendenning and Dr Hendron also highlighted their concern about the inadequacies of the consultative process with the Executive. Indeed Councillor Glendenning pointed out that although he had met the Chief Executive discussion

had been limited and he had not been provided with any additional information to that which appeared in the Press. This was not, he suggested, consultation in the true sense.

4. In a wide ranging discussion the deputation outlined the living conditions of the tenants, the maintenance problems which existed and stressed that proposals for the future of Divis must take account of the following issues:-

4.1 Condensation and Dampness

- (i) Mr Downes highlighted the problem of condensation and dampness which prevails in 200 or so of the 700 flats and pointed out that 2 reports (ie, Cullintree Condensation and Cullintree Warm Air Trails) had been completed in the 1971-2 period. These reports apparently indicated that there was no short-term solution to the problem.
- (ii) Fr Buckley pointed out that there were flats in the Gorbals area of Glasow which owing to condensation and dampness had to be vacated as it was not possible for tenants to go on living there. The same solution should be implemented in the 200 flats with condensation and dampness in Divis.
- (iii) The deputation pointed out that they considered that the pilot rehabilitation of the Milford Block was unlikely to indicate how to come to terms with this condensation/dampness problem. It was explained that the worst condensation problems were associated with the blocks in the earlier phases of development in the Divis complex. In the later phases, which included the Milford Block, the problem had already been recognised and action taken.

4.2 Lifts

Dr Hendron said that the lifts in the complex were not at all maintained. In highlighting the problem he mentioned that 2 particular lifts had been out of order since 1972 and that in the case of a recent death the coffin had to be transported to the ground floor by way of a passenger lift as the good/services lift was not in operation.

4.3 Refuse Disposal System

Mr Downes outlined the problem associated with the refuse disposal system and said that M & D Consultants had prepared a report in 1976 which confirmed that the system was not adequate. Although recommendations had been made for improvement these had still not been acted upon. It was considered that even the regular maintenance of the current system and the cleaning of the rubbish in the bin houses could help alleviate the problem. Here again, however, there was a problem of whether the Technical Services Department (city Council) or whether the NIHE were responsible.

4.4 Cleaning

The deputation also expressed concern about the lack of cleaning of the public areas. This was highlighted by the fact that there was only one cleaner responsible for the entire ground floor of the complex.

4.5 Tenant Attitudes

Dr Hendron said that a considerable proportion of his patients were tenants of the Divis complex and that he was well aware that they had a general feeling of helplessness and deep depression in view of the conditions in which they lived. Fr Buckley also took up this point and added that in the case of younger people this gave rise to vandalism, rioting and in some cases to the encouragement or paramilitary activities.

5. Joint Management Scheme

Fr Buckley said that owing to sponsorship by the Belfast City Council members of the Residents Association had been able to visit several GB housing authorities and had studied Tenant Participation and Joint Management Projects which are in operation. It was not the intention of the Executive and the Residents Association to implement a pilot joint management project in the Milford Block to coincide with the rehabilitation proposals. Fr Buckley explained that a short report outlining the findings of the Association's study into joint management had already been submitted to the City Council and that this would also be included in a much larger report the Association were preparing on Divis generally. The Minister was informed that this should be published in April 1983 and that a copy would be forwarded to him.

6. Demolition

The deputation's view was that the proposals being formulated must be linked to a commitment "to the long-term demolition of the complex" with perhaps only one or two blocks left standing for sheltered housing, adult families, etc. The Minister was, therefore, pressed to give a commitment to further demolition (ie, in addition to Whitehall and Farset) at this stage. The deputations case was largely based on the arguments that they had already put forward and on the following additional points:-

- 6.1 The rehousing problem was not as large as the Executive maintained. The Divis Study group, which was set up by the Residents Association, established that only approximately 2,000 tenants (not 6,000 claimed by the Executive) lived in the 12 inter-linked blocks which comprised 700 or so flats. As the Executive will be demolishing 172 flats (ie, Whitehall and Farset Blocks) and as 28 flats are already blocked-up this leaves 500 families to be rehoused if total demolition were to go ahead. In the 14.8 acre site approximately 300 houses could be provided with the remaining 200 being rehoused in nearby new-build schemes which are proposed in Poleglass.
- 6.2 Divis is not simply a housing problem it also gives rise to vandalism, marital break-ups, nervous illness, intimidation, environmental pollution, etc. These are issues which cannot be resolved by the rehabilitation of the flats.
- 6.3 Divis is not suitable for family accommodation.
- 6.4 The tenants desire to have houses rather than flats.
- 7.0 The Minister listened most carefully to the members of the deputation and the councillors and said that he would like to take stock of the various points which they had raised. He indicated that the proposal to rehabilitate one block should go ahead, along with the vertical isolation proposals, the sponsorship of the ACE Project to supplement existing maintenance staff and the Joint Management Project with which he was particularly impressed.
- 7.1 As far as the problems of maintenance of lifts, refuse disposal, etc, were concerned, the Minister indicated that he would be in contact with the Executive to ensure that action was taken quickly as this would help a great deal to improve the present living conditions of the tenants.
- 7.2 On the question of demolition the Minister pointed out that it would take up to 1984 to clear the Whitehall and Farset blocks and rehouse the tenants. Following this the 2 blocks would be demolished. Although the Minister said that he did not positively rule out further demolition, which may be necessary in the long term, he stressed that he could not give a commitment at this stage. The Minister agreed to make this statement public.

- 7.3 Dr Hendron enquired about the possibility of using a proportion of the large amount of housing finance which is to come to Northern Ireland from the EC for the demolition of Divis. The Minister explained the difficulties about the release of this finance from the EC and pointed out that it was already committed to the existing new-build programme.
8. The Minister invited the deputation and councillors to meet him again in November 1982 for further discussions.

S. Charters

S CHARTERS
Rehabilitation Branch

24 August 1982

cc Mr Simpson
Mr Beattie (Press Office)
Private Office