

N.C. 1222
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cc Secretary
Mr Loughran
Mr Simpson
Mr Crowther
~~Mr Elliott PAB~~

TO: PS/MINISTER (Mr Needham)

FROM: MR F McCANN

DIVIS FLATS

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to outline the current policy for the Divis complex, to consider alternatives and to recommend a change of tactics in response to various demands for complete demolition of Divis.

Background

2. In November 1984 the then Minister (Mr Patten) announced the current strategy for Divis. It included the demolition of Pound and St Brendans blocks (a total of 87 units), a pilot refurbishment of Milford block and the vertical isolation of the remaining blocks.
3. The announcement (Annex A) emphasised that the demolition and improvement elements in the overall package would be implemented in parallel and in his letter of 26 November 1984 to the Chairman of NIHE (Annex B) Mr Patten made it clear that demolition was conditional on acceptance by the local community of the complete package. Mr Patten made clear his belief that the demolition of the rest of the Divis complex was not a realistic option and could not possibly be justified on any responsible grounds and asked that this should be brought out in any discussions with the Residents Association about implementation of the package of proposals. This line has been fully and scrupulously adopted by NIHE.
4. The strategy was arrived at only after the fullest consideration. Independent consultants employed by the Housing Executive recommended that the flats should be rehabilitated because they were physically sound and we were aware that Assist architects of Glasgow acting for the Residents' Association had said "we would find it hard to argue for demolition on purely technical or financial grounds".
5. Since the announcement was made the residents, elected representatives, the Roman Catholic Church and many others have been critical of the strategy. It is very clear that their preferred option is total demolition and the pressure to encourage the government to change its mind is unlikely to weaken. Any agreement which they give to refurbishment is seen by the residents as condemning them to live in Divis for many years to come.

Options

6. The options are severely limited. We can -
 - i. adhere to the present strategy - demolition of Pound and St Brendans but only if we have agreement by the residents to get on with refurbishment works initially via a pilot scheme for one block;

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- ii. agree to demolish Pound and St Brendans as soon as they can be cleared with no strings attached;
- iii. agree to demolish Pound and St Brendans as soon as they are cleared; leave the refurbishment proposals on the table; make it clear that demolition of the whole complex is simply not a practical possibility and is unlikely ever to become one although the publication of the BUA Plan Review would provide an opportunity to re-examine the matter; and stress the opportunities which exist to make some improvements in living conditions;
- iv. agree to total demolition phased over a long period.

Option 6(i)

- 7. This option is unacceptable to the residents and their representatives and it has been impossible for the Housing Executive to make any progress during the last thirteen months. It is clear that some changes, even if these are only presentational, would be necessary in order to induce the residents to reduce their resistance.

Option 6(ii)

- 8. Under this option the Executive, if its Board agreed, would be able to press ahead with the demolition of Pound and St Brendans which are in a considerably worse condition than the remaining flats. This would however give the total demolition lobby great heart, would be unlikely to lead to agreement on the refurbishment aspects of the present package and would undoubtedly intensify and widen the calls for further demolition in the near future or for a statement of intent to demolish the whole complex over a period of years.

Option 6(iii)

- 9. This option, if supported by the Executive, might also enable a start to be made via the demolition of the two worst blocks. It would break the link between agreement to refurbishment and demolition and the Executive could proceed as soon as they had cleared the blocks (which could however take a considerable period). It would remove the argument of the Residents Association that the Department and the Executive were indulging in blackmail tactics by saying that demolition would not take place until refurbishment was agreed but letting demolition proceed would be unlikely on its own to persuade the Association to look more kindly on the refurbishment proposals or to agree to their implementation. If we add that further demolition cannot be contemplated because the remaining property is sound and capable of refurbishment and because it would be physically impossible to accommodate in West Belfast those displaced but add the rider that this would be re-examined when the results of the BUA Plan Review are available, we would be going as far as is possible. My own view however is that this will not persuade the Residents Association to do more than press for a statement of intent to demolish, for an instruction to be issued to the BUA Review team to take the problem of replacing Divis within its remit and for an undertaking that the timing of removal of Divis would

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be decided and announced when the results of the Review are known. But I could be mistaken and we would at least have shifted our position sufficiently to allow us to claim that we were being as reasonable in responding to the case made by the residents of Divis as it is possible to be in current circumstances.

Option 6(iv)

10. This change in our position would go a long way towards the position of the Divis interests but in practical terms we could not rehouse the 500 families (excluding the Tower Block) presently living in Divis in the Lower Falls area where they would wish to stay or even in the greater West Belfast area because of shortage of available land. Moreover a surrender of our present position on this scale would be unlikely to be acceptable to the Board of the Housing Executive and it is unlikely that an imprecise timetable would be acceptable.
11. While the financial cost of total demolition might not be regarded as a key factor the point needs to be made that scarce resources would have to be diverted from other important programmes. To rehouse the 500 Divis families would cost in very rough terms $500 \times £24,000$ (the cost per house) ie £12m. This figure excludes the heavy costs of demolition and services and land wherever it was identified. Savings would amount to roughly the £5½m, identified for rehabilitation of the Divis complex giving a net cost at the most conservative estimate of around £6½m (a better estimate would probably be in the region of £10m).
12. A decision to demolish Divis would demonstrate that constant pressure gets results. We could anticipate that similar pressure would built up for the demolition of Unity Flats in North Belfast and perhaps Artillery Flats as well. Unity is arguably a worse place to live than Divis.
13. Total demolition would not go unnoticed by "Unionist" politicians. They would cite the flats at Annadale which had many similar problems to Divis as an example of how refurbishment can work to transform an estate given the co-operation of the local community. The Divis problem is now overtly political and although SDLP and other constitutional politicians support the stance of the Residents Association the moving force is seen to be Sinn Féin. Demolition would be construed as capitulation to the "Republicans". (There has been recent press coverage about Annadale and how it has been transformed by a refurbishment programme. The residents now regard it as a desirable place to live and it has been turned around from a "difficult to let" estate to one with a waiting list in excess of 200).

Recommendation

14. Option 6(i) is clearly not working and it is most unlikely that the Housing Executive will get agreement to the refurbishment proposals which would in turn enable the demolition of Pound and St Brendans to proceed. A stalemate has been reached and it is difficult to see how it might be broken.

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15. Option 6(ii) would not do more than allow early demolition of the two worst blocks.
16. Option 6(iv) is really a non starter for the many reasons which have been given. Any proposal now for phased demolition would lead to pressure for a timescale acceptable to the residents and their elected representatives.
17. The only proposal for a change of our current policy which seems to me to offer some advantage is Option 6(iii). In particular it might break the current stalemate by divorcing the demolition of Pound and St Brendans from the refurbishment proposals and if our views about the impossibility of discussing any further "relaxation" before the review of the BUA Plan has been completed are presented robustly we might see some movement in the Association's position. We would at any rate be in a more defensible position vis-a-vis the current claim that we are exerting a form of moral blackmail on the residents of Divis.

NIHE

18. The content of this paper has not been discussed with the Housing Executive.

Political Implications

19. The Political Affairs Branch of NIO has been consulted.
20. PAB are firmly convinced that the replacement of Divis by a more human and individualised development would help to alleviate the current public order problems associated with the complex and could lead eventually to a change in the residents' political attitudes. It would certainly remove one of Sinn Fein's most valuable propaganda weapons and would undermine their claim that HMG is indifferent to the housing problems faced by nationalists in West Belfast. In this context, it is well worth noting that Sinn Fein are likely to continue to oppose any attempts to improve the amenities in the existing flats so that they can continue to exploit the situation for their own purposes. They will maintain their campaign for demolition knowing that this is extremely unlikely but will be ready to claim it as a significant victory if it is ever conceded.
21. PAB accept that for the reasons set out above, early demolition or a firm commitment to future demolition is not a viable option. They would therefore support option 6(iii) and would recommend that the Minister should address the Divis issue as soon as practicable. Certainly, they feel that there is no point in awaiting any developments in the Anglo-Irish context. They hope that it will be possible to improve the existing accommodation: people who have a pride in their homes and their environment are generally far less likely to support rioting or acts of terrorism in their locality because of the inevitable damage to property and to the quality of life that such acts bring in their train. Finally, the Minister should bear in mind that Sinn Fein may try to link their campaign on Divis to their similar campaign on the Rossville Flats in Londonderry.

Conclusion

22. The Minister is committed to writing again to Bishop Daly about Divis. It

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would be helpful if it was possible to schedule an early discussion with him on the contents of this paper.

F McCann

F McCANN
20 December 1985

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28 November 1984

MINISTER APPROVES DEMOLITION OF BELFAST FLATS

Mr Chris Patten MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary responsible for the Department of the Environment, has given approval to Northern Ireland Housing Executive proposals for action at Divis, Moyard, California Close and Forthriver Drive in Belfast.

Mr Patten announced that he had approved the demolition of the Pound and St Brendan's blocks in the Divis complex as part of a package of proposals estimated to cost some £1.1m. The proposals involve the vertical isolation of the remaining deck access blocks into three groups and the rehabilitation of Milford Block. Eight blocks of maisonettes containing 113 units at Moyard off the Springfield Road are also to be demolished by the Housing Executive in a phased programme as is California Close the last remaining block of three 6/7 storey flats and maisonettes in the Lower Shankill. In addition proposals by Belfast Improved Houses Housing Association to refurbish three blocks, comprising 48 units at Forthriver Drive (Nos 52, 54 and 84) for small households have been accepted in principle by the Department. If this scheme proves successful the Minister has indicated that he will be prepared to consider similar action in relation to other difficult to let blocks in the estate.

The proposals follow a review carried out by the Executive and the Department of the Environment into priority and difficult to let estates throughout Northern Ireland. The review concluded that very considerable progress has been made overall through rehabilitation, selling, increased security, improved management and maintenance at estate level and, where justified, demolition. However, problems remain particularly in a number of Belfast estates where early action was considered to be both particularly desirable and possible.

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Commenting on his decision Mr Patten said, "I have been most impressed with the progress which has been made by the Housing Executive and Housing Associations in arresting the decline and deterioration in many of our most difficult estates. This has been achieved through a concentration of financial resources, imaginative initiatives and community involvement. The particular Belfast estates on which action has now been approved are at a key stage and I am anxious to see further progress made with them.

"The decision which I have announced in relation to Divis, Moyard, California Close and Forthriver Drive will, when completed, make a very real contribution to the quality of the living conditions of the residents in those areas. It is particularly welcome to be able to make announcements of this kind for a number of different estates at the same time and this is further evidence of the continued priority which I and my colleagues give to housing in Northern Ireland."

Commenting specifically on Divis, Mr Patten emphasised that demolition of Pound and St Brendan's was part of a package of proposals which would also include the vertical isolation of the remaining blocks and a pilot refurbishment of the Milford Block. The demolition and improvement elements in the overall package would be implemented in parallel.

The Minister went on to say that the demolition of the rest of the Divis complex was not a realistic option and could not possibly be justified on any responsible grounds. The remainder of the estate is structurally sound and with the improvements proposed will provide satisfactory housing. Mr Patten said, "While I understand that a majority of the 500 remaining families would wish to be rehoused in traditional accommodation in the Lower Falls, I have to say that this is simply not practicable because of the shortage of available land in the area." The Minister added that the land made available through the demolition of Whitehall, Farset, Pound and St Brendan's would facilitate the building of a number of traditional houses and enable the Executive to upgrade existing facilities in the centre of the complex.

DIVIS

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ANNEX B

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (N.I.)
STORMONT, BELFAST BT4 3TX



N Ferguson Esq
Chairman
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
The Housing Centre
2 Adelaide Street
BELFAST
BT2 8PB

27 NOV 1984

26 November 1984

Jim Norman,

PRIORITY AND DIFFICULT TO LET ESTATES

The Board at its meeting on 26 September approved Paper 232/4(8) dealing with Priority and Difficult to Let Estates and this was submitted by the Executive to the Department on 28 September.

As you know since then there has been considerable discussion between our officials on the review of progress and on those estates which now require decisions as to future action. I welcome this co-operation and have given very careful consideration to the conclusions reached in the review. I can now convey the following approvals:-

1. Divis

Approval to the demolition of St Brendan's (51) and Pound (36) blocks as part of the package of proposals previously approved by the Board on 1 March 1982. The estimated cost of demolition of St Brendan's is £85,000 and of Pound is £65,000. Vertical isolation into 3 groups in accordance with the previously approved strategy is estimated to cost £227,000 and refurbishment of Milford Block plus vertical isolation is estimated to cost £756,000. My approval is conveyed on the understanding that the complete package of proposals is implemented concurrently. I think it important that progress is made with the improvement proposals at the same time as rehousing of the existing tenants from St Brendan's and Pound Blocks. In view of the fact that the remainder of the estate is structurally sound and provides satisfactory housing accommodation I do not believe further demolition in the Divis complex is justified. I believe this should be brought out in any discussions with the Residents Association about implementation of the package of proposals.

2. Moyard

Approval to the phased demolition of the remaining 8 blocks of maisonettes containing 113 units, the timing to be decided by the Board based on its ability to rehouse the existing tenants in suitable accommodation. I am satisfied that this represents the most sensible way forward for the estate in present circumstances.

3. California Close

Approval to the demolition of the last remaining block containing 38 flats and 20 maisonettes. Because of technical difficulties and the unacceptably high cost of rehabilitation I have decided not to approve a

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scheme by the Belfast Improved Houses Housing Association. The site would be suitable for a small scheme for traditional family houses to be integrated with a rounding off scheme on the adjoining site which was cleared some years ago.

4. Forthriver Drive (52, 54 and 84)

Approval to the sale of these blocks to Belfast Improved Houses Housing Association for refurbishment for small households and for single people. I have declined for the present to approve a scheme by Fold Housing Association at 23-31, 33 and 35-43 Forthriver Road for sheltered housing. However, I will be prepared to reconsider in due course a possible refurbishment scheme in the light of the progress on 52, 54 and 84 Forthriver Drive.

I intend to announce these decisions on Wednesday 28th November. I attach a copy of the text of my announcement in advance so that you will be able to respond positively to any questions which may then be directed to you and my officials will liaise with your office in turn. I very much appreciate the time and effort which has been put into the preparation of these proposals and hope that they will get the reception they deserve from the general public.

*Yours,
Chris*

CHRIS PATTEN

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