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Reference Code:	2016/52/34
Creation Dates:	30 April 1986
Extent and medium:	8 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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An Runaiocht Angla Eireannach,
Beal Feirste

| May, 1986

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S19418

Mr. Eamonn O'Tuathail,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Section

18-30
2/5/86

Dear Assistant Secretary,

I enclose copies of reports on meetings concerned with public expenditure in Northern Ireland and the future of Divis flats which were held in Maryfield on 30 April 1986..

Yours sincerely,

Daithi O'Ceallaigh

Daithi O'Ceallaigh

Tabiseach
MINISTER
SECRETARY
MR. NALLY
A-I SECTION

Meeting to discuss the future of Divis Flats

Handwritten notes:
S19418
12/5/86

Venue: Maryfield

Date: 30 April 1986

Participants

Irish side

Mr. Brendan Lyons

Mr. Brendan Scannell

Mr. Gerry Corr

British side

Central Secretariat

Mr. Ronnie Spence
Under Secretary

D/Environment

Mr. Frank McCann
Under Secretary

Secretariat:

Micheal Lillis

Daithi O Ceallaigh

Daire O Criodain

Mr. Mark Elliott

Mr. Stephen Hewitt

Ms. Valerie Steele

The discussion took place against the background of a paper handed over by the Irish side on 6 March and a response from the British side transmitted through the Secretariat on 2 April.

The following account which is presented in the form of direct speech is a reconstruction from detailed notes.

Mr. McCann: Most of what I have to say is in our paper. Divis is not unique in Northern Ireland. There are many other similar groups of flats. For example, there is the Rossville Flats in Derry. It's a group of three. Originally, we had decided to knock one down and possibly refurbish the other two blocks but our investment appraisal indicated that we should knock down all three and that we are doing over

time. In the case of Divis, we are continually looking at our policy. Our past appraisals have indicated that maintaining the Flats is the best option and in any event there is no suitable spare land to house the overspill that would arise if they were all demolished. Our feeling is that Divis would be suitable for single people or small families. The big problem with knocking them down is that rehousing the people would take the entire Divis site and 17 acres and there aren't 17 acres in West Belfast. If with next year's planning review we extend the stopline there would still not be enough room. We could allow a spillover to Poleglass but that would involve a doubling of the population there. That possibility has been rejected by the Parish Priest and social workers and Poleglass is, in any event, already a sore point with Lisburn Council. Another alternative was to rehouse some of the residents in Hannahstown but there are difficulties about that. Another problem we have is that our information about population movements in West Belfast is inadequate. Partly this is due to non-cooperation with the 1981 census. In summary, we're not firm that Divis should stay. We do think it's sound accommodation and could be refurbished for the right people. The families should be got out. I grew up in the Falls area and I accept from personal experience that the perception there is that Divis must come down and I don't know how you could possibly convince the residents that any course of action other than demolition might be sensible.

Mr. Spence: Also, it would need to be borne in mind that this project would have repercussions on Housing Executive activities in other areas and spending money might work to the detriment of members of the minority community in other areas in the North.

Mr. McCann: The residents want to stay in the area because that is their community. They profoundly believe that houses could be built on the site. This can't be done. Also, the Housing Executive is very stuck for cash at the moment, much more so than in previous years. They are £40 million short of what they want. They are still doing more in real terms than when housing was designated a priority in 1982, but they're being forced to designate strict priorities themselves and Divis isn't among these. I am not yet convinced the right thing to do is to knock down Divis.

Mr. Lillis: What's the decision-making relationship between the Housing Executive and the Minister?

Mr. McCann: In theory the Housing Executive comes to us with their firm ideas about spending projects and decisions. In practice it doesn't work like that. The eventual outcome is worked out in discussion between us.

Mr. Spence: All but three of the Board are appointed by the Secretary of State, who also has power to direct the Executive. In practice, the Housing Executive is under great influence from the Department of the Environment which can steer the Executive in a particular direction.

Mr. McCann: That's not true any longer. Money is a major constraint. The Executive is forced to work within a restrictive budget which limits what it can do. So far we've been lucky. There haven't been many divergences between the Executive and the Department. If we asked for Divis to be demolished we could end up in conflict with the Executive. The Executive's failure was not to push out earlier the message that refurbishment of the flats meant that the residents would get out into other accommodation, and that they could not be forced back. Now the issue has become too politicised and Sinn Fein, who are a strong force there, would never let the residents agree to refurbishment.

Mr. Lillis: We were going to talk about Sinn Fein and the problem of alienation but obviously a person like yourself is thoroughly familiar with all that. The one point I would make to you is that this is the only issue in the North to which Peter Barry has become totally committed because of its importance as a symbol and because of the implications it would have for Sinn Fein. I would like to put to you the option of taking a decision in principle now. That in itself would be of immense importance.

Mr. McCann: But the question remains of how you would rehouse the residents and put them in an area where they would want to live. If the residents would go to North Belfast that would be easier. It would become a straight question of money but the land is what's at issue and

next year's planning changes and their implications for the stopline are unlikely to make much difference. We've already moved outside the existing stopline into Twinbrook and Poleglass. Also, family structures in West Belfast are changing. Building traditional houses for single people and small families is a waste of resources and land. We would like these people to be moving into Divis but the Residents Association are the blocking factor. They appear to have convinced Peter Barry, Bishop Daly and their Parish Priest in St. Peter's, Fr. McGurnaghan, that demolition is the answer. This represents a considerable change in the clergy's attitude over the years. Once the clergy were very much behind Divis and encouraging people to live there. In addition we have to have regard to the knock-on effects. Arguably, for example, Unity Flats are worse than Divis and if we were to do something for Divis, this would give rise to questions about them. In addition, we have a replica of Divis in Tullycarnet (in East Belfast). There have been no complaints from there so far but if Divis were to go you could be sure that Peter Robinson and company would be complaining about protestants having to subsist in substandard accommodation.

Mr. Corr: What you have said has amplified the points you made in your paper which was very helpful and for which we are very grateful. As Michael said, the issue at stake here isn't a purely technical one. It's a question of judgement. Divis has become a festering sore and to demolish it would not only hit the paramilitaries but would send out a wider message to the minority community. We accept the difference of £8 million pounds between the cost of rehabilitation of eight units and replacement housing for the ten blocks. Refurbishment and replacing the existing residents with single people and small families would destroy the existing form of that community. Divis is the centre of that parish. We accept that half the residents would have to be housed elsewhere in the event of demolition, even in the best of all possible worlds, but the local diocese is determined to be helpful on this and they are due to present proposals to the Department later in the year, which would involve making up to 15 acres available for the residents to be controlled by housing associations. Even if Milford and the other blocks are rehabilitated, the residents will never accept Divis as a long-term arrangement. In summary, the land is available, there is not

much money involved, it would be an enormous asset to the local community and to constitutional politics.

Mr. McCann: The Housing Executive has got more and more involved with housing associations in recent years and their development is something on which we are quite keen in principle. However, if housing associations were to control the land on which you would wish to rehouse the balance of the residents of Divis, it has to be borne in mind that they would have to have due regard to the normal selection procedures and priorities and to the points systems of allocation. On top of this, there is a problem with the residents of Divis who already have a tenant/management problem in that there are arrears of rent and other difficulties. The land which I understand the diocese envisages using is itself lodged between private residential areas. The residents of these areas, and in particular their Parish Priest, may be nervous of having the former residents of Divis alongside them. Also, the combined area of the two sites they envisage (McRory Park and Shaws Road) is too small. We have offered to take this land off the hands of the diocese and use it for normal public housing.

There is an important point on which you and I part company in that you appear to think that, in the event of Divis being knocked down and its residents being rehoused partly on the site and partly elsewhere, the IRA will quietly fold up their tents and go away! I don't see that happening and I am speaking from my personal experience of the Falls Road. I know that area well and I know the people well. I know Gerry Adams well.

Mr. Lillis: I am personally convinced and Peter Barry is convinced that to demolish Divis would give people in the minority community something important to hold on to. I would urge you to have a careful look at the idea of taking a decision in principle.

Mr. McCann: We have looked at it among other options but the two crucial factors you have to take into account are (1) how do you rehouse the people within a finite package of land and (2) there is the question of money. How can we justify knocking down basically sound accommodation

Simply because it has got a bad name? There are of course the political factors. However, my political masters aren't sure that the political pluses outweigh the minuses. I recognise that Bishop Daly has tried to explore various possibilities for compromise with the residents and that they won't meet him half way. What can we do?

Mr. Lyons: Is there scope for the diocese/housing association concept to cater for the spillover of residents from the demolition of Pound and St. Brendan's and the implications of the refurbishment of Milford?

Mr. McCann: As things stand, we would envisage that these people would be relocated in the Lower Falls area away from the Divis site. The church land, although it is small, would do. It would be friendly territory even though it would mean transferring the residents from the Lower to the Upper Falls, something which would have been a quantum leap in my youth!. The only thing is that the housing associations would have to bear in mind the need to apply the points system. I also agree that the demolition of Divis would be a positive political boost to moderate Catholics who would see it as a sign that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was beginning to work. On the other hand, it is something which would make moderate Protestants slightly nervous.

Mr. Spence: What are the mechanics of policy formulation on this issue?

Mr. McCann: The policy, which is shared by the Housing Executive and the Department of the Environment, is as set out in the paper. Opinion on the Board of the Executive is mixed. Some are very strongly anti-demolition, some are totally in favour and some are anxious to find some way forward short of demolition. We in the Department aren't even convinced that demolition is the right thing to do let alone that we would love to do it if it could be done! However, you are making inroads, especially on Mr. Needham! (Note: reference to a recent conversation between Needham and Lillis). Your views will be considered very carefully.

Mr. Corr: What form would the rehabilitation of Milford take?

Mr. McCann: The rehabilitation would be very thorough. It would not simply be papering over the cracks. We would envisage turning the units there into flats suitable for single people on a par with any which might be sold on the open market in the private sector. But the residents are firm in saying "over my dead body" to any change of that kind. Over the years the residents have become much harder but this is understandable because I do believe you have to be tough to survive in Divis.

The formal meeting concluded at this point.

Two points are worth noting from the conversation which followed:

- (i) Mr. Spence suggested to Mr. McCann that the announcement of a decision in principle might help resolve the problem whereby nationalists are complaining that the Conference is not making any progress on their difficulties.

- (ii) Mr. Lyons stressed the importance of ensuring that "credit" for any favourable decision on Divis should go to constitutional nationalist leaders and not to Sinn Fein.

D. O Criodain

1 May 1986