

Mr M.O. Loughridge
Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland
Stormont
BELFAST
BT4 3SS

17th August 1983

WJC/SG/JG

Dear Mr Loughridge,

The Divis Complex

I refer to your letter of 28th July 1983 seeking the Executive's comments on the Dampness Report recently prepared and submitted by the Divis Study Group. I am also aware that the Belfast Regional Office has been liaising with your office and that you have copies of related papers approved by the Executive Board together with the report on 'The Divis Complex'; detailed proposals for the future' prepared by M.D. Architects and Planning Consultants in 1980.

Divis Complex was constructed between 1966 and 1972 by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust for the Belfast Corporation. It consists of 12 'Sectra' Deck Access blocks, the 19 storey Divis Tower and two more recent medium-rise developments at St. Peter's Court and Albert Place. The latter are not considered to be problematic. The twelve blocks plus the Tower comprise 795 units ranging from bedsitters to six-bedroomed accommodation in the form of flats and maisonettes. At full occupation it has 2833 bedspaces. It stands in a 14.8 acre site and less than 5% of the accommodation is at ground floor level.

The Complex was constructed in response to public pressure as the only acceptable solution to rehousing the Community in the same area following redevelopment. At that time, this type of solution was considered to be a reasonable means of rehousing a community whilst causing minimum disturbance and dislocation.

There is a multiplicity of problems associated with Divis ranging from physical, social economic to law and order, all of which present major management and resource problems. The physical problems, as identified in the Consultants' report range from design problems such as ¹⁾ access, ²⁾ refuse disposal, ³⁾ condensation, ⁴⁾ insulation, ⁵⁾ ventilation, ⁶⁾ heating, ⁷⁾ building form and environment to maintenance problems such as plumbing, electrics and the external fabric.

The social economic problems follow the pattern of West Belfast and an Executive Social Survey of 1980 specifically identifies the following:-

1. The average household size is 3.59 compared to 3.01 in Belfast as

a whole.

2. 20% of families live in overcrowded conditions compared to a city average of 14%.
3. Unemployment among heads of households is 71% compared with a 9.2% level within the city in 1978.

In addition, the situation is exacerbated by the high demand for housing in West Belfast. Further severe difficulties include rent arrears, squatting, high density and occupancy rates vandalism plus restrictions which make the adoption of a more flexible allocation policy difficult to achieve. In response to this complex situation a more intensive management and maintenance service has already been put into operation including:-

1. Reduced staff/stock rations.
2. The operation of a sub-office.
3. The extension of caretaking, cleansing and lift operator services.
4. The appointment of a caretaker for building and related works who operates from a base within the complex.
5. The sponsorship of an ACE scheme initiated by the Divis Residents Association.
6. Monthly meetings with the Divis Residents Association to monitor day to day operations.

In addition planned maintenance schemes for prepaint repairs, repainting and the recovering of the existing flat roofs commenced during Autumn 1982 and are programmed for completion before the end of this year. The cost of these works is estimated at £720,000.

In line with D.O.E. approval, work is also proceeding on the proposed construction of 100 dwellings adjacent to the Divis Complex. To date, 40 have been completed, 20 are under construction and 29 are programmed to commence before the end of this year. This new building has and will aid the Executive programme for the rehousing of the residents from the Whitehall and Farset blocks and their subsequent demolition of the 172 homes in these blocks, 125 have been vacated and it is considered that the 1984 demolition target will be attained.

The remaining elements of the Divis package indicated the vertical isolation of the remaining blocks into four separate groups and a pilot rehabilitation scheme for the Milford Block. Consultation with the Divis Residents Association had indicated a level of support for these major schemes and scheme design preparation is well advanced. In recent weeks, however, there are indications from the Association that they will not support these schemes in the absence of a commitment to the demolition of two additional blocks being Pound and St. Brendans. The Executive Board had approved the latter but Departmental approval was not forthcoming. The Regional Controller, Belfast will be seeking further discussions with the Departmental representatives on this issue.

I mention all of the foregoing to ensure that the Dampness Report is not considered in isolation. Indeed dampness is but one of the acknowledged difficulties in the complex which is affected by multifarious problems. I must also emphasise that it is a maintenance complaint which is dealt with on a response basis, insofar as this is practical, and the prepaint repair and recovering of the roofs have and will aid in its control.

In general there is little within the report of which the Executive is unaware. There are, however, a number of inaccuracies or misleading imputations on which I wish to comment as follows:-

1. A summary of the Executive proposals for Divis was distributed to all Divis tenants and the Residents Association. There has been no 'suppression' of information.
2. The Executive's Social Survey identified the desire of the vast majority to seek alternative rehousing but this must be considered in the context of the overall demand for accommodation in West Belfast and the desire of most Divis residents, to be rehoused within the Divis/Lower Falls.
3. The problem of dampness is also attributable to the limited usage of the heating provided in the Complex. It is notable that the problem is not considered severe in these blocks with District Heating and that the Association, in rejecting the rehabilitation proposals, also rejected the upgrading of the heating systems within the remainder of the Complex.
4. The Executive is unaware of any proof of correlation between health of residents and alleged dampness and, in the absence of such proof would not concur with the imputation in the report.
5. The Executive has a Public Liability Insurance facility within which claims for damage to tenants property are assessed. With the increasing role of community advisers on tenants rights it is not considered that there are many tenants in the area who would not seek recourse in the event of losses allegedly attributable to dampness and condensation. As in other areas, Divis tenants have received leaflets advising on the merits of insurance of their household goods.
6. There is no reason to believe that the Environmental Health Department has not diligently pursued complaints relating to dampness and condensation within the Complex. The report does not present any evidence to sustain the conclusion that there is a 'failure of the Environmental Health Department to carry out its duty to a large number of citizens of the City of Belfast'.
7. Electrical sockets are provided in each room commensurate with the standards applicable at the time of construction. Apart from those flats and maisonettes with District Heating, the remainder had gas central heating facilities although there is evidence that those systems have fallen into disuse. As indicated ~~presumably~~ the upgrading of the heating was *included* ~~indicated~~ in the Executive's 'rehabilitation' proposals.
8. Communal clothes-drying area are included within the Complex. Residents were always reluctant to use these and tended to dry their 'washing' within their homes and particularly in the bathroom. This practice has exacerbated the ventilation and condensation related problems.

In conclusion, Divis being a priority estate, has had a significant increase in management and maintenance resources. These together with the planned maintenance schemes have gone a considerable way towards stopping the downward cycle in the physical conditions within the area.

The current longer term proposals are aimed towards further improvement in the general conditions in the area. There is, however, a problem with community consensus without which progress will be extremely difficult. The Dampness Report is not identifying anything about which we are unaware and tends to be exaggerated and misleading in part. It is envisaged, nonetheless that it could well be used as further support for the Demolish Divis Campaign which, although dormant, may well be resurrected.

Yours sincerely,

J.R. Gorman
Chief Executive