Refurbishing the Seven Towers, Belfast
Independent Scoping Review
by Professors Geoff Green and David Ormandy
Commissioned by Participation and the Practice of Rights Project
on behalf of Seven Towers Residents Group

Introduction

Our concern is the residents of 384 homes in the Seven Towers located in the New Lodge district of North Belfast. They form a close knit predominantly Catholic community in one of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. The socio-economic context is elaborated by the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service. New Lodge is the 3rd most deprived of 582 electoral wards in Northern Ireland. The ‘Living environment’ which includes housing, is ranked 8th worst and ‘Health and Disability Deprivation’ 3rd worst.

On good authority we make a fundamental distinction between ‘homes’ and ‘dwellings.’ The World Health Organization (WHO) defines home as a haven; ‘a refuge from the outside world, enabling a sense of identity and attachment,’ providing ‘safety, intimacy and control.’ Lorna Fox O’Mahony, formerly of Queens Belfast, now Professor of Law at Durham University highlights ‘Respect for the Home’ in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

NIHE is committed to improving the 384 dwellings. WHO defines a dwelling as ‘the physical structure, providing shelter and the necessary space, facilities and amenities for the household.’ Professor Fox distinguishes occupants’ right to a decent home from landlords’ legal rights to the dwelling.

Residents wish to ensure that investment in their dwellings ensures a good outcome, a decent home for all. They are assisted in their campaign by the Participation and the Practice of Rights Project (PPR).

Objectives

Residents wish to see NIHE investment achieve three objectives for their homes. They should be (a) warm and comfortable (b) dry, damp-free (c) with fuel bills that are affordable.

WHO and the UK Government measure warmth and comfort by temperatures of 21°C in living rooms and 18°C in bedrooms. Dry homes are free both of penetrating damp and damp and mould arising from condensation. Affordable is spending less than 10% of available household income on energy bills.

Residents wish to maintain and sustain their community. They agree with WHO that the ‘social cohesion of the community and the sense of trust and collective worth depends on the quality of the neighbourhood and urban design.’

References

1. www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/mapxtreme/report.asp?
2. New Lodge is the 3rd most deprived of 582 electoral wards in Northern Ireland. The ‘Living environment’ which includes housing, is ranked 8th worst and ‘Health and Disability Deprivation’ 3rd worst.
3. On good authority we make a fundamental distinction between ‘homes’ and ‘dwellings.’ The World Health Organization (WHO) defines home as a haven; ‘a refuge from the outside world, enabling a sense of identity and attachment,’ providing ‘safety, intimacy and control.’ Lorna Fox O’Mahony, formerly of Queens Belfast, now Professor of Law at Durham University highlights ‘Respect for the Home’ in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.
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5. Residents wish to ensure that investment in their dwellings ensures a good outcome, a decent home for all. They are assisted in their campaign by the Participation and the Practice of Rights Project (PPR).
6. Residents wish to see NIHE investment achieve three objectives for their homes. They should be (a) warm and comfortable (b) dry, damp-free (c) with fuel bills that are affordable.
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8. Residents wish to maintain and sustain their community. They agree with WHO that the ‘social cohesion of the community and the sense of trust and collective worth depends on the quality of the neighbourhood and urban design.’
Residents’ objectives accord with the overall aim of the NIHE. Its Mission is “Working together to ensure that everyone has access to a decent affordable home.” The NIHE is also guided by the government report ‘People and Place’ which gives community and social renewal equal weight to economic and physical renewal of the 36 most deprived neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland. New Lodge is one of these.

Question: Does NIHE agree that these three objectives of dry, warm and affordable homes are both desirable and achievable?

3. Technical solution

Constructed circa 1960, the tower blocks require major refurbishment to prolong their life. The NIHE proposes a £7 million refurbishment programme to clad the exterior of the tower blocks with a PVCu rainscreen.

The primary objective is to protect the external fabric of the tower blocks from wind and rain and ensure their survival. There is a subsidiary objective of improving energy efficiency and therefore warmth.

NIHE commissioned the Building Research Establishment to review the current proposal to clad the buildings against its primary objective. The report recommends further testing to establish whether the proposal will meet its limited objective.

Elsewhere in the UK and Europe there are refurbishments of 1960’s tower blocks which achieve the three objectives of warm, damp-free and energy efficient homes, fully tolerating a spectrum of lifestyles. A good example is the refurbishment of the Seven Hillside Towers in Sheffield. Recent tower refurbishments in the city are equally successful.

Questions: Does the proposed cladding programme achieve the three objectives of warm, dry and energy efficient homes? If not, has the NIHE considered alternatives which do deliver on these objectives?
4. Cost-Benefit

The cost of the over-cladding proposal is £1 million per tower block of approximately 55 dwellings. NIHE’s limited cost-benefit analysis of securing the structure of the towers concludes that the scheme represents value for money.14

An alternative or enhanced programme to fully meet objectives of warmth, comfort and energy efficiency may cost more but could produce greater monetary benefits.

We recommend a more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis which should also monetise the health gains to residents, the value of community cohesion and wider benefits to society from improved school and labour market performance and less demand on the criminal justice system.15

Questions: Are cost considerations a constraint on an enhanced refurbishment programme? Has the NIHE considered the wider benefits? Would the cost benefit ratio be more favourable?

5. Implementation

We agree with the NIHE that any refurbishment programme would be better economically and practically if it proceeded by a pilot scheme for one tower block.

‘People and place’ should be measured and monitored before and after the refurbishment to assess cost-effectiveness and point to desirable modifications for the remaining 6 towers.

Questions: How does the NIHE propose to monitor the effectiveness of the pilot refurbishment? Has it the resources to do so?

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14 Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2007) Economic appraisal report for Cladding the external facades of 384 dwellings at Carlisle Mullens. NIHE.

Geoff Green is Emeritus Professor of Urban policy at Sheffield Hallam University and expert on assessing the wider impacts of housing investment. David Ormandy is Professor and Head of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Housing Standards and Health at the University of Warwick.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation pre-refurbishment</th>
<th>Situation post-refurbishment</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Expenditure</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Seven Towers, Sheffield, England¹</strong></td>
<td>Refurbished between 1993-1996 at a cost of £29,000 per unit</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>336 flats built in the 1960s in an area of high deprivation, unemployment ill health and poor housing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Flats recorded a temperature increase of 7° which brought them in line with WHO standards</strong></td>
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<td><strong>60% of residents could not afford to heat their homes properly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Heating bills fell by 27%</strong></td>
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<td><em>Average temperature recorded at 15° (WHO standards are 18° and 21° for bedroom and living areas respectively)</em></td>
<td><strong>Virtual elimination of all dampness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seven Towers, New Lodge, Northern Ireland²</strong></td>
<td>NIHE plan to refurbish at a projected cost of £18,271 per unit¹⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>384 flats built in the 1960s in an area of high deprivation, unemployment ill health and poor housing</strong></td>
<td><strong>There is no information forthcoming from the NIHE in either the Economic Appraisal or the Building Research Establishment’s investigation into the plans.</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>52% of residents are unhappy with the heating because it costs too much and is inefficient</strong></td>
<td><strong>There is no information forthcoming from the NIHE in either the Economic Appraisal or the Building Research Establishment’s investigation into the plans.</strong></td>
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<td><em>Average weekly spend on heating in Winter:</em> £35-40</td>
<td><em>The BRE report does suggest that the plan could worsen the problem by causing interstitial condensation.</em></td>
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<td><em>Average temperature recorded at 12.5° (WHO standards are 18° and 21° for bedroom and living areas respectively)</em></td>
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² For further reading on the work of the Seven Towers Residents Group, please see www.pprproject.org

³ Calculation based on projected cost to install a pvc rainscreen to the Seven Towers based on information supplied in NIHE (2007) “Economic appraisal report for cladding the external facades of 384 dwellings at Carlisle Multies.”

⁴ It is important to note that the current economic climate has seen a reduction in construction costs which would indicate that the 2007 based calculations would have more “buying power” in 2011.