



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.¹ 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.



wishes occupants' right to a decent home from landlords' legal rights to the *dwelling*.

Residents⁵ 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).

1. 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.

WHO⁶ and the UK Government⁷ measure warmth and comfort by temperatures of 21C in living rooms and 18 C in bedrooms. Dry homes are free both of penetrating damp and damp and mould arising from condensation.⁸ Affordable is spending less than 10% of available household income on energy bills.⁹

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.'

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.'² 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*.³

NIHE is committed to improving the 384⁴ dwellings. WHO defines a *dwelling* as 'the physical structure, providing shelter and the necessary space, facilities and amenities for the household.' Professor Fox distin-

¹ www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/mapxtreme/report.asp?INIT=YES&POSTCODE=BT152EH&DESC=FromGeneral&CurrentLevel=COA&ID=95GG350012&Name=95GG350012&Override=WARD&OverrideCode=95GG35&OverrideName=NEW%20LODGE

² David Ormandy (editor) (2009) *Housing and Health in Europe: The WHO LARES Project*. Routledge.

³ Lorna Fox. (2005) The idea of home in law. *Journal of Home Cultures*. Volume 2(1): pages 25-49.

⁴ Most of these dwellings are social housing; the responsibility of the NIHE and DSD. A few, originally bought under the Right to Buy scheme, are owned by occupiers and landlords who are responsible for the internal living conditions of their dwellings and pay a fee for external maintenance.

⁵ The views of residents referred to in this document were gathered in visits to Belfast in June 2010 and via meetings with the Residents Group during a visit to the Seven Towers in May 2011.

⁶ David Ormandy and Veronique Ezratty (forthcoming 2011) *Health and Thermal Comfort in Housing: from WHO Guidance to Policy*. *Energy Policy*. Special Issue.



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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.'¹⁰ The NIHE is also guided by the government report 'People and Place'¹¹ 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.

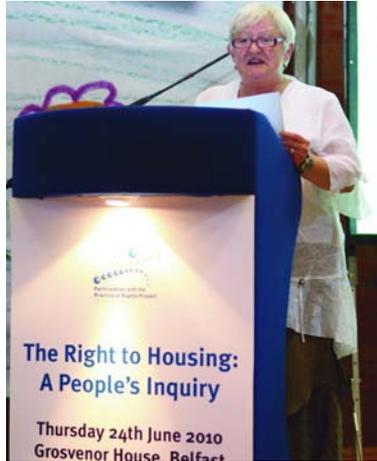
Question: Does NIHE agree that these three objectives of dry, warm and affordable homes are both desirable and achievable?

2. Baseline

What is the current position, the starting point for a programme of refurbishment? Surveys by residents have found many homes are (a) cold and (b) damp, yet (c) with high energy costs, despite a partial refurbishment programme.

Six monthly monitoring completed by the residents early in 2011 shows that conditions have worsened since the People's Inquiry event in June 2010, with the percentage of residents experiencing damp/mould increasing from 25% to 45% and those expressing dissatisfaction with the economy 7 heating system rising 51% to 90%.

Question: Does NIHE agree that there is a major problem with cold, damp and high energy costs in the Seven Towers?



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 report¹² 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.¹³ 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?

⁷ Department of Trade and Industry (2001) *The UK Fuel Poverty Strategy*. DTI. London.

⁸ See in particular, pages 53-58 ODPM (2006) *Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Operating Guidance*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. London.

⁹ http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/what_we_do/consumers/fuel_poverty/fuel_poverty.aspx

¹⁰ www.nihe.gov.uk/index/about-us-home/mission_and_values

¹¹ Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. (2003) *People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*.

¹² Building Research Establishment (March 2011) *Technical review of the cladding system proposed for installation on Carlisle Multi tower blocks in Belfast*. BRE. Garston.

¹³ Geoff Green, David Ormandy, John Brazier, Jan Gilbertson. (2000) *Tolerant Building: the impact of energy efficiency measures on living conditions and health status*, in Fergus Nicol & Janet Rudge (editors) *Cutting the Cost of Cold: Affordable Warmth for Healthier Homes*. Spon Press. London.



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?



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

¹⁵ Jan Gilbertson, Geoff Green, David Ormandy, Bernard Stafford (2008) *Decent Homes, Better Health: Ealing Decent Homes Health Impact Assessment.* Sheffield Hallam University.



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		Expenditure	Situation pre- refurbishment		Situation post refurbishment	
			Heating	Dampness	Heating	Dampness
Seven Towers, Sheffield, England¹	336 flats built in the 1960s in an area of high deprivation, unemployment ill health and poor housing	Refurbished between 1993-1996 at a cost of £29,000 per unit	60% of residents could not afford to heat their homes properly Average temperature recorded at 15° (WHO standards are 18° and 21° for bedroom and living areas respectively)	30% of residents had damp in their homes	Flats recorded a temperature increase of 7° which brought them in line with WHO standards Heating bills fell by 27%	Virtual elimination of all dampness
Seven Towers, New Lodge, Northern Ireland²	384 flats built in the 1960s in an area of high deprivation, unemployment ill health and poor housing	NIHE plan to refurbish at a projected cost of £18, 271 per unit ^{3,4}	52% of residents are unhappy with the heating because it costs too much and is inefficient Average <i>weekly</i> spend on heating in Winter: £35-40 Average temperature recorded at 12.5° (WHO standards are 18° and 21° for bedroom and living areas respectively)	26% of residents have damp in their homes	There is no information forthcoming from the NIHE in either the Economic Appraisal or the Building Research Establishment's investigation into the plans.	There is no information forthcoming from the NIHE in either the Economic Appraisal or the Building Research Establishment (BRE)'s investigation into the plans. The BRE report does suggest that the plan could worsen the problem by causing interstitial condensation.

¹ For further reading please see: Green, G. (1996) "Sheffield, United Kingdom. Housing Plus: Improving Domestic Energy Efficiency and the Health of Residents", WHO (EURO) Health Cities Project, EURONET/ICLEI Consortium, and Green, G., Ormandy, D., Brazier, J., and Gilbertson, J., (2000) "Tolerant Buildings: the impact of energy efficiency measures on living conditions and health status, in Nicol, F., & Rudge, J. (eds) "Cutting the Cost of Cold: Affordable Warmth for Healthier Homes"

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 Multities."

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.