THE DIVIS COMPLEX

DAMPNESS REPORT

Divis Study Group

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Divis Study Group is indebted to the following for their help and assistance during the preparation of this report.

Ms. Monica McWilliams of the School of Social Studies, The Ulster Polytechnic.

Mr. Pat Branniff of the Town and Country Planning Department, The Queen's University, Belfast.

The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust.

INTRODUCTION

Almost half the flats in the Divis Flats Complex suffer from dampness. The root cause of the dampness is poor standards of ventilation, heating and insulating.

The Housing Executive is well aware of the problem but instead of dealing with it they have prefered to ignore it and have even surpressed their own consultants reports.

This report traces the history of dampness in the Divis Complex, outlines the extent of the problem and details some of the consequences.

Divis Study Group do not propose solutions or make recommendations because we believe that dampness is only one of the many problems associated with the Divis Flats Complex. To spend the huge sums that would be necessary to eliminate dampness would be to throw good money after bad. Eliminating dampness would only bring about a marginal improvement; it will not make Divis a good place in which to live

The only solution acceptable to 94% of the people of Divis is total demolition.

THE GROUP

Divis Study Group is made up of a number of residents of Divis Flats, who came together in 1981 to study conditions in the Divis complex.

The Study Group found that although many claims had been made concerning conditions in the Divis Complex, little concrete evidence existed as to actual conditions. It became the groups first priority therefore, to produce facts about physical and social conditions.

With the help of a grant from the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, the group began work in the summer of 1982. This report presents the findings on one aspect of the research.

THE HISTORY

Problems of condensation and mould growth were reported in Phase 1 of Divis Flats as early as 1969.

Shortly after the first flats were cocupied, complaints began flodding into the Housing Trust about damp patches on walls and ceilings, wallpaper which kept falling off walls, mould growth and fusty odours.

Condensation and mould growth also appeared in Phase 2 of the complex and led to the Northern Ireland Housing Trust asking the contractors to carry out an investigation into the causes. John Laing Research and Development, Boreham Wood, Hertfordshire, produced between 1971 and 1972 a series of reports on condensation and dampness in the Divis Complex.

The first of these reports - Cullingtree, Condensation - recommended that ventilation, heating and insulation should all be improved and stated "Applying heating without ventilation or insulation without heating will achieve little".

A report by John Laing Research and Development 1971, recommended that controlled tests should be carried out in selected flats, using electrically operated fresh air heaters. These tests were carried out during the winter of 1971/72 and the results were carefully monitored.

The findings were passed to the Housing Executive in October 1972. Since that time nothing has been done to implement the recommendations as regards Phases 1 and 2 although changes were made to the latter phases of the contract where insulation, ventilation and heating standards were all improved and where to-day there are no complaints about condensation.

From its formation, in 1973 the Lower Falls Residents Associttion (LFRA) led a campaign about dampness in Divis Flats. In their 1st Annual Report for the year 1973/74 they said

> "One of the most common complaints is on dampness causing black ceilings, walls, mildewed furniture/clothes, causing unnecessary expense to residents in replacing these and other items such as rugs, oil cloths and wallpaper"

In addition to meetings with the Housing Executive senior management, the LFRA made several trips to Stormont where they met a number of Ministers with responsibility for the Department of the Environment. How little effect these meetings had can be judged by the fact that in their Annual Report for 1977/78 the LFRA reported that they had 138 separate complaints about dampness during the year and listed as the first of their major complaints.

"Flats suffering from Condensation/Dampness"

Clearly the Housing Executive were both well aware of the problem and of the improvements that were necessary to overcome condensation in the Divis Flats Complex. Over the years instead of taking effective action to counteract damp conditions the Housing Executive have:

1. Tried to 'blame the victim by suggesting that condensation and fungus growth were the result of bad household management.
2. Wasted huge sums of money on treatments which they were bound to know were useless This included such things as painting over damp patches with fungicidal paint orwaterproofing treatment to roofs when the root cause of the problem is a combination of poor insulation, poor ventilation and a bad and inadequate heating system.

THE SURVEY

The findings in this section of the report are based on answers given to a questionnaire by a sample of Divis households during the summer of 1982.

The area covered by the survey was the twelve medium rise - deck access blocks of the Divis complex. These blocks contain 700 flats and at the time the survey was conducted 138 flats were vacant and blocked up. A further five flats were being used for non-housing purposes, (offices, shops etc.), leaving 557 occupied flats. The households were chosen using a systematic random sample. It was originally intended to interview a 20% sample but due to a number of factors this was not possible. The final sample consisted of 94 households, (17% of total households).

The findings presented here form part of a larger study covering a wide range of social and environmental factors. A more comprehensive report is being prepared and will contain full details of research methodology.

DAMP HOUSEHOLDS

When asked if they had dampness in their flat, 41 households (43.6%), claimed that dampness existed to some degree.

The 41 households were then asked a series of questions aimed at establishing the extentof the dampness and its effect on the household.

When asked to state the number of rooms affected by dampness; damp householders responded as follows:-

Number of Damp Rooms	1	2	3	4	5
Number of Households	20	13	4	3	1
% of Damp Households	48.8	31.7	9.7	7.3	2.4
% of Total Households	21.3	13.8	4.3	3.2	1.1

Six families, (6.4%), claimed to have rooms so badly affected by dampness that they were unable to use them while 19 other families, (20.2%), had shifted children out of damp rooms in order to protect their health.

Twentyfive households, (26.6%), claimed that the health of at least one member had been affected by dampness. However, it should be stressed that we have no way of knowing how far such claims are supported with medical evidence, although we feel that the high percentage of claimed damage to health warrants further investigation by the health authorities.

HEALTH DAMAGE FROM DAMPNESS

	Number	%
Yes	25	26.6
No	19	20.2
N/A	50	53.2
Total	94	100

INCIDENCE OF HEALTH DAMAGE

	Number	%
N/A	69	73.4
Bronchitis	14	14.9
Asthma	4	4.3
Flu	1	1.1
Colds	1	1.1
Arteries	1	1.1
Chest Infection	1	1.1
Kidneys	1	1.1
Depression	1	1.1
TOTAL:	94	100

PROPERTY DAMAGE

Property damaged due to dampness was a common complaint. Over a quarter of all households, (27.7%), claimed they had suffered damage to property due to dampness. The damage varied from loss of children's clothes due to mould growth to loss of bed linen and items of furniture. Some families estimated that over a period of years they had lost thousands of pounds as a direct result of dampness.

Household income in Divis are among the lowest in the British Isles, with 82% of households having one or more members in receipt of supplementary benefit. Most families exist on an income which places them below the poverty line. They can ill afford the additional expense of replacing household possessions destroyed by dampness.

THE COST

It was found necessary to make a distination between loss of property due to condensation and mould growth and loss of property due to flooding or water penetration. In the latter case a small percentage of residents had been able to claim compensation. In the case of damage to property due to condensation we were unable to find a single case in which a resident had successfully claimed damages.

ACTION BY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

All their efforts with the Executive having failed the Lower Falls Residents Association turned, for help, to the Environmental Health Department of Belfast City Council.

Under the Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 the City Council has a statutory obligation to protect the citizens of the City against housing conditions which are injurious or likely to be injurious to health.

At the request of the Residents Association the Environmental Health Department carried out two inspection of damp flats in Divis. The first inspection in 1974 and the second a year later in 1975.

Following the 1975 inspection the Environmental Health Department requested the Housing Executive to take remedial action. However, there was no follow-up inspection and the only work carried out by the Housing Executive was to paint over damp patches with a fungicidal paint. Within three months the black patches reappeared on walls and ceilings.

Since 1975 the Environmental Health Department has only examined individual cases of dampness in Divis; there has been no further attempt to look at the wider implications of condensation induced dampness nor has there been any follow-up to determine how effective the Housing Executive's response has been in the long term.

Although individual councillors have from time to time expressed concern about Divis, at no time has the Council passed a resolution condemning conditions there, the inaction of the Housing Executive or the failure of the Environmental Health Department to carry out its duty to a large number of citizens of the City of Belfast.

HEATING:

One of the key factors in determining the level of condensation in any particular flat is the way in which it is heated.

Most flats in Divis were fitted with a gas warm-air central heating unit which provided background heating in the living room and kitchen. Ducts carry a flow of warm air into the hallway of the flat and in some cases into one of the bedrooms. The efficiency of the system depends on the heating unit operating 24 hours a day.

It was intended that the tenant would supplement the background heating with electrical heating. The only provision for heating in bedrooms is by way of a single 13 amp electrical socket.

Few tenants can afford to provide any additional heating while the majority of tenants find it difficult to provide even basic heat. Levels of fuel debt are high with 37% of households having money deducted from Welfare Benefits to pay for fuel charges.

Following the report by John Laing Research and Development changes were made in the type of heating provided in the flats. The final phase of Divis, consisting of two and a half blocks, (St. Judes, Milford and part of Cullingtree) were connected to a district heating system. Radiators were provided in all rooms including bedrooms. There are no complaints about condensation from the tenants in these flats.

In 1974, following a campaign by the LFRA, the Housing Executive were instructed by the then Minister at the DOE, Mr. Don Concannon M.P. to carry out a feasability study into the possible connection of all flats in Divis to the district heating system.

The proposal was finally rejected by the Housing Executive Board on the grounds that it would be too costly (£680,000) The Housing Executive Board did not make any alternative proposals to combat condensation presumably on the grounds that if it cost too much to provide proper heating then tenants could go on living in damp homes.

At that time the Housing Executive planned to supply heat from the Albert Street boiler house to RDAs 12 and 13 in the Lower Shankill.

Subsequently Protestant paramilitary groups claiming to represent the people of the Shankill area made it known that they would not accept heating from the Albert Street plant, saying that this would leave the heating of homes in the Shankill at the mercy of the I.R.A. As a direct result of these pressures the Executive decided to make separate arrangements for RDAs 12 and 13, thus leaving spare capacity at the Albert Street plant. It is worth noting that whereas up to this point the Executive had

claimed it would be too costly to provide district heating in Divis: from 1976 onward it became one of their main recommendations.

There is every reason to believe that the change of heart on the part of the Housing Executive had more to do with achieving optimum operating levels at Albert Street than with any real desire to solve the heating problems of Divis.

However, at the time the LFRA were proposing the extension of the district heating system it was cheap form of heating.

This is not the case to-day where because of the high cost of heating oil together with poor administration the district heating system is both costly and inefficient.

The Housing Executive has been forced to dismantle district heating at Twinbrook and pressure is mounting to have the Albert Street plant scrapped because of high costs and frequent breakdowns. Meanwhile, two out of every three homes in Divis Flats are without proper heating and as a result almost half of Divis homes are damp (66% of non district heated homes).

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APPENDIX I

EXCERTPS FROM THE LAING REPORT - OCTOBER 1972

"The bedrooms were often on one side of the block while the heated living rooms and kitchens were all on the other side. Thus not only were the bedrooms not directly heated, but they received little accidental heat, as do the bedrooms in a house, by conduction and convection from the heated areas. Any warm air that did drift to the bedrooms caused more harm than good since it was humid air which deposited moisture in the bedrooms. The bedrooms in fact acted as condensing areas for the remainder of the dwelling". (P.2 Para 1.8)

"Standards of thermal insulation to walls and roof, as required by the Building Regulations were poor, and the areas of single glazed windows were sometimes excessive, so that the costs of maintaining a reasonable temperature in the dwelling were higher than necessary". (P2 Para 1.10)

"The toilet ventilation systems - 1 - often became clogged with dirt, and thus did not provide ventilation in bathrooms; efficient ventilation of bathrooms is most essential since they are often used for drying clothes and are a potent source of water vapour".

APPENDIX II

WHAT IS MOULD GROWTH?

Where there is continuous condensation you are likely to get mould growth. Mould usually appears on cold external walls and ceilings and in areas where there is little air circulation. It can crop up behind cupboards and wardrobes and can seriously affect soft furnishings and clothes.

Mould growth comes from spores which are always present in the air. They need organic matter to grow, and this is easily supplied by small amounts of dirt, dust or grease, as well as most types of paint, paper and fabrics. However, mould would not grow without the right humidity; if relative humidity exceeds 70 per cent (together with a temperature of 15° to 20° c) for long periods, say 12 hours a day, growth is likely.

Once mould growth has started, the mould produces large quantities ofspores which can have a damaging effect on your health. The most at risk are the elderly, asthmatics, people on immuno-suppressant drugs and very young children.