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The Refurbishment of High – Rise Local Authority Housing Blocks*

Involving the Tenants – Lessons from the U.K.

Housing Refurbishment High-rise housing blocks Great Britain

Since the late 1960's it has been a popular perception in Britain that "High-Rise" social housing blocks (over six storeys) are undesirable and therefore a major problem for Local Authority landlords. However, the status and significance of high rise blocks in the UK is beginning to change. This article discusses some of the programmes of refurbishment of high-rise local authority housing.

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Sanacija občinskih stanovanjskih stolpnice - Vključevanje najemnikov: izkušnje iz Združene kraljevine

Stanovanja Stolpnice Sanacija Velika Britanija

Za obdobje do konca 60. let naprej velja v Veliki Britaniji splošno spoznanje, da so socialne stanovanjske stolpnice (višje od šestih nadstropij) nezaželene, zato lokalnim oblastem povzročajo velike težave. Status in pomen stanovanjskih stolpnice se vendar le spreminja. Ta članek obravnava nekatere programe sanacije stanovanjskih stolpnice, ki so v lasti lokalnih oblasti.

The High-Rise Legacy

Since the late 1960's it has been a popular perception in Britain that 'High-Rise' social housing blocks (over six storeys) are undesirable and therefore a major problem for Local Authority landlords. The 'conventional wisdom' that there are insurmountable problems concerning tower blocks in particular is indeed based on the combination of a number of different factors. Without providing an exhaustive list, it is sufficient to say that problems that have arisen and been recognised (not necessarily by the L.A concerned) fall into a number of categories:

Social Problems: usually deriving more from the insensitivity or inadequacy of letting policies of the relevant L.A. housing department;

Problems of Location: Many high-rise blocks were located either on small redevelopment sites in areas of slum clearance, that had lost their social structure and community facilities, or were built out of town on peripheral estates with little or no community or shopping facilities to start with;

Structural and Maintenance Problems: this is by far the major source of difficulties with many of the 1950's and '60's high-rise blocks, often built from experimental concrete 'factory' systems that were poorly assembled, and are now suffering from structural decay due to water penetration, etc, with low insulation standards and cheap and inadequate heating systems.

However, the status and significance of high rise blocks in the UK is

beginning to change. In 1979, the Conservative Government introduced the intention to 'privatise' (sell off) all council housing; in the 15 years of privatisation of municipal housing, the result has been the sale of over one-fifth of houses, but there has been an almost negligible effect on the stock of flats in England. Consequently, flats have doubled as a proportion of the social housing stock, from three per cent in 1979 to an estimated six per cent at the present time. With an unceasing demand for affordable rented (and therefore social) housing, flats of all types, and high rise flats in particular, are gradually coming to be seen by local housing authorities as an asset rather than a liability. However, such a change of perspective is often reluctantly reached, and only a few municipal authorities are attempting to apply more positive policies to secure the future of their high rise flats. This ambivalence towards high rise is even more marked amongst housing associations, few of which have involved themselves with the take-over of municipal blocks or with high rise refurbishment. The extent of refurbishment activity in the UK has been restrained by a combination of a lack of commitment to the future of high rise housing and a lack of finance. The resources available to municipal authorities have been progressively limited by a central government committed to reducing public sector borrowing and encouraging a greater role for the private sector. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the major source of capital funding for social housing has been through the Estate Action programme administered by the De-

partment of the Environment. Through this programme it is intended that municipal authorities, by means of competing for limited resources, should target those housing estates in greatest need of intervention. Such estates frequently include blocks of high rise flats. One of the conditions for obtaining Estate Action funding is the need to demonstrate that residents affected by refurbishment schemes have been consulted about the work to be undertaken. This in itself is a reflection of the changing status of social housing tenants in the UK, that they should have greater rights to consultation and control over those housing processes which affect their lives. The realities of such consultation and control are another matter however. Tenant involvement in high rise refurbishment is a new phenomenon in the UK in general and in England in particular. The special technical considerations involved in high rise refurbishment, and the priorities of structural upgrading, are frequently presented as obstacles to effective tenant involvement. Approaches developed at this stage of securing the future of high rise housing may well set patterns for the future and consequently, some assessment of the effectiveness of tenant involvement in high rise refurbishment is timely. The municipal authority for Birmingham, with 377 blocks, has one of the largest high rise stocks in the UK. The City Council has taken a positive approach to the future of its high rise flats, and a number of refurbishment schemes have been completed under the Estate Action programme. Over the past year, interviews have been conducted with senior officers of the City Council, and at a local level with officers and tenants' representatives on six high rise estates which have been fully or partially refurbished. The aims of these interviews have been to consider the range of approaches taken to tenant consultation; the outcome of consultation, and its effectiveness. This paper summarises progress on the six estates with particular emphasis on the relationship between 'professional' and tenant perspectives in the complex business of high rise refurbishment.

Birmingham's High-Rise Housing

Birmingham City Council has a total of 377 blocks of flats of six storeys and above (BCC, Nov 1994). Flats in general, and high rise blocks in particular, went through a process of being stigmatised in the 1960s and 1970s, then identified as a necessary housing resource in the 1980s. The introduction of the 'right to buy' scheme in 1980 significantly affected the City Council's housing stock. Total sales of houses and flats of all types reached 24,218 by 1993 (BCC, Nov 1993). Whereas flats made up 27.15 % of the housing stock in 1980, this figure had increased to 30.47 % by 1993 (BCC Annual Report, 1993). Due to the shortage of alternative accommodation, the City Council's Housing Committee reversed its 'no children in flats' policy on the 13 February 1992. In other words, tower blocks (other than those specially designated) must be used for general needs provision. Unfortunately, many high rise blocks are now in need of extensive repair, and problems have emerged which are unique to these buildings.

Establishing a High-Rise Repair Programme

In response to the specific requirements of the high rise stock, the City Council established in 1984 a Multi-Disciplinary Team, including quantity surveyors, architects, structural engineers, housing managers and materials scientists. Their role was to determine the structural problems facing the high-rise stock; to prioritise requirements, and to plan the implementation of refurbishment work. The MDT employed an abseiling team to carry out an initial survey of each block. Samples of concrete were analysed by the City Council's materials laboratory; defects were identified and the need for structural repair work was determined. From this survey, it was possible to prioritise which blocks required the most urgent repair. A programme of continual reassessment allows the Housing Department to monitor the condition of the high-rise stock. It is now estimated

that over 200 of Birmingham's blocks require significant structural repair, and are subject to water penetration and condensation. Problems such as spalling concrete and decaying outer fabric have led to the provision of protective canopies around the base of 49 blocks. Additional surveys on fire safety have revealed that 85 blocks fall into a 'high risk' category; 156 are of 'medium risk', and 196 are 'low risk' should a fire break out (BCC, Nov. 1993). The estimated cost of upgrading these blocks to fire safety standards was, in 1993, over #16m.

The High-Rise Repair Programme

Through external survey and structural examination, blocks are categorised according to one of three repair options, providing either:

1. A short term option of under 10 years following repairs, for those blocks with severe structural problems which cannot be resolved at an economic cost;
2. A medium term option of over 10 years following repairs, where there are no immediate structural defects, and where a longer term solution may become economic in the future;
3. A long term option of over 30 years following repairs.

Within the MDT, structural engineers have tried to determine broad repair solutions to meet these three criteria. The integrated work of the materials laboratory and of architects translates these solutions into appraisals of work to be undertaken, which are costed by quantity surveyors. A range of options are proposed to the Technical Services section, who consult with the Neighbourhood Office and tenants' groups to determine the best course of action. The resulting repairs are carried out as part of the City's capital programme; through capital receipts and/or Housing Investment Programme (HIP) allocation funding. If it is believed that the life-span of a block is less than ten years, then no option may be considered. Pallia-

tive repairs may be carried out on blocks which are expected to stand for up to eight years but new windows will only be fitted if a block has at least a 15 year life-span. As at October 1993, 48 % of blocks had received palliative repairs; 28 % were still awaiting attention and 11 % were due for demolition (BCC, Nov 1993). Twelve blocks had already been demolished. Where structural repairs have been carried out, only 10 % have been repaired to a 30 year life standard, and three per cent repaired to a 12 year life standard. Given that these blocks were originally expected to last for 60 years, the deterioration of the stock has serious implications for use and cost.

Project Fieldwork (undertaken by S. Wheelaghan)

In order to tackle the significant structural problems which face the city's tower blocks, the City Council has made 11 successful bids for Estate Action funding since 1988. This funding has been used to tackle both the physical deterioration of the blocks and the social decay of estates. The Housing Department's data base of the condition of the high rise stock is used in drawing up bids to central government for Estate Action funding. Estate Action programmes require local authorities to establish a consultation programme with the tenants affected by improvement. The earliest project started in 1987/88 and the programme continues to date. The requirement to consult residents on Estate Action programmes provided a valuable research opportunity to identify schemes of high rise refurbishment which involved residents. Initial interviews with the Technical Services Department and the Area Improvements Section of Birmingham City Council enabled six high rise estates to be identified which had been the focus of Estate Action. Located at Necessells, Highgate, Pool Farm, Ladywood, Hockley and Newtown, they are typical of high rise estates found throughout Birmingham and England, UK. The oldest was constructed in 1952 and was the first high

rise estate to be built in the city. The most recent was completed at the end of the 1960s when Britain's high rise boom was coming to an end. The full range of technical, managerial and social problems was represented on the estates, not least the growing division between those tenants who had been in residence for up to 40 years and those who had arrived more recently and were less 'settled'. Housing management in Birmingham has been devolved to Neighbourhood Housing Offices (NHOs). The relevant office for each estate was visited, and interviews undertaken with the Neighbourhood Housing Manager (NHM) or appropriate Housing Officers. These interviews were used to determine how tenant consultation took place; how refurbishment priorities were determined; how the programme of works was implemented, and what improvements have been made. This stage of interviewing is being followed up by interviews with representatives of all tenants' and residents' groups working on each estate. This fieldwork (which is still in progress), is intended to determine the effectiveness of tenant consultation and the views of tenants and professionals in relation to refurbishment. The findings presented below are drawn from interviews with housing officers and residents on all six estates, and have been presented by theme.

Fieldwork Findings:

1. The consultation process

It would appear that each Neighbourhood Office developed its own consultation process and without a common approach. There were no agreed guidelines on how processes should operate; on shared aims and objectives or on structures to promote greater tenant participation. Estates appeared to have been chosen for Estate Action involvement due to: a) pressure from residents, backed by support from the Neighbourhood Housing Manager, (as in Ladywood and Nechells), or: b) their identification centrally by the City Council as being appropriate for Estate Action funding, (as in Hockley

and Highgate); iii) initiatives by officers at the local level, (as at Pool Farm and Newtown).

It was apparent that consultation operated through a combination of open public meetings; door-knocking and leafletting; open days; the setting up of 'show flats'; displaying information in the NHOs and through existing tenants' and residents' groups. In all but two of the estates, the consultation process consisted of informing tenants about developments on their estates.

Exceptionally on one estate, the NHO established a process which enabled community architects to work with tenants to develop the programme for improvement and refurbishment. On a second estate, tenants were given training and support to enable them to make decisions for themselves, and eventually to take responsibility for the running of the estate.

Primarily, consultation has been used to establish tenants' preferences, with security and heating their main priorities. New kitchens and bathrooms, which were a typical accompaniment of refurbishment schemes, were often regarded as less important by tenants. In many cases, consultation has referred simply to determining colour schemes for new bathroom and kitchen units installed in flats.

2. Tenant management initiatives

On only one estate were tenant organisations actively encouraged and provided with a tenant participation worker, jointly funded by a housing association. In this case, there appeared to be a clear goal of encouraging greater tenant participation not only in the physical improvement of the estate, but also in wider management issues. The eventual aim was to create some form of 'community management board' which would manage the estate independently of the municipal authority. No other NHO envisaged such an independent future for the

management of their estate, and there was little evidence of tenants being encouraged to consider such alternatives. Although tenant organisations had been encouraged, and had been involved in the programmes concerning refurbishment, no NHO indicated that a tenant management organisation might be set up to manage housing in the immediate future. However, on another estate the NHM recognised an increased interest by tenants in the running of the estate, and a development worker had been employed to assist the tenants' group. Only one housing officer stated that he did not think the process of involving tenants in refurbishment programmes had improved landlord-tenant relations.

3. Safety and security on estates

These were the most frequently expressed concerns of residents, both in relation to the internal and external environments of blocks. In order to improve the security of high rise flats, Birmingham City Council has invested heavily in providing concierge systems in conjunction with Close Circuit Television (CCTV). Although such systems were tenants' top priority in terms of improvements, and are hugely popular once installed, their effectiveness in improving the management and maintenance of blocks has yet to be fully evaluated. Evidence of reductions in turnover rates or voids is still unclear. With the exception of Highgate, all of the blocks involved in this Project, have had or will have concierge systems installed as part of their refurbishment. Three NHOs mentioned problems raised by the central government 'Care in the Community' programme, which obliges municipal authorities to house those released from such institutional care as mental hospitals. In a number of instances, people with continuing mental health problems have experienced difficulty in adjusting to life in blocks and/or have caused problems for other tenants. Problems have included violent behaviour and abusive language by resettled tenants and a failure by care agencies to provide after-care support.

4. Other issues and problems

Tenants recognised that wider problems than the physical condition of their flats and blocks affected their quality of life. Such problems fell into two categories, either those relating to the physical environment of the estate, or to residents' socio-economic circumstances. In relation to physical conditions, issues such as removing subways from busy roads and installing traffic lights; traffic management projects to restrict 'joyriders'; incorporating 'unadopted' open space and improving street lighting were all linked to feelings of safety and security. Improving facilities for shopping; for children's play and for young people addressed the need for social and recreational provision. Whilst some of these measures fell within the Estate Action remit, they represent a 'grey' area in terms of responsibility for action, and may not be addressed by housing led refurbishment schemes. However, the other area of concern, and which fell outside the scope of physical refurbishment, was related to the socio-economic circumstances of residents. Put simply, estates which may have been used as 'dumping grounds' for 'problem' tenants in recent years, and whose residents were almost exclusively dependent on state benefits could be physically but not socially transformed. Whilst the experience of involvement in a refurbishment scheme may be empowering for a small minority, the economic conditions of the majority remained the same. Furthermore, improvements to the flats necessitate increases in rents, with the level of increase dependent on the extent of improvements, for example:

Improvement	Rate of rental increase
Concierge system	£ 5 per week
Heat-Lease system	£ 2 - 3 " "
To kitchen	£ 2 " "
To bathroom	£ 2 " "

Consequently, tenants who request all improvements could face an increase in rents of up to £ 12 per

week. Up to 70 % of tenants in flats are in receipt of full or partial Housing Benefit and because of the way the system is funded, improvements have economic implications for both municipal authorities and central government. In some cases, rent levels may force those on low incomes back into unemployment to regain eligibility for full Housing Benefit. Rent increases may force some tenants on low incomes into arrears, whilst others may make reductions in such essential areas as food and heating.

Comment

As already stated, the continuing demand for affordable family dwellings has led to the 'no-children' policy in high-rise flats being revoked by the municipal housing authority for Birmingham. The lack of alternative housing has meant that, on a majority of the estates examined, a significant number of statutorily homeless families are now being allocated to high-rise flats. Serious questions are raised concerning the appropriateness of such accommodation; its impact on children's health and the relationship between older, more 'settled' residents and young families. A key and unanswered question is whether or not physical refurbishment schemes

can help to 'stabilise' previously unpopular estates with high rates of tenancy turnover. At present, it is too early to assess the long term impact of greater tenant involvement in high rise refurbishment and its effect on the sustainability of high-rise living. Interviews currently under way with tenants make clear that their priorities are centred around issues of security and safety; housing families with children and the costs of refurbishment for tenants who are on low incomes. Ironically, current improvement schemes may miss some of these targets or even aggravate them.

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