



Participation for Social Justice



Mt Vernon resident's Concierge Campaign

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has numerous policies which govern its commitments to residents and tenants in Housing Executive dwellings.

Residents and tenants should expect to live in conditions which are fit for human habitation including cooking, washing and the general needs of living. Residents and tenants should expect to live free from anti social behaviour and the stresses such behaviour visits on people, particularly the elderly. There are also policies which enshrine other rights for residents and tenants.

But what if you live in a troubled estate and you feel you have no voice. What if your estate has a history of poverty, deprivation and neglect? What if the dwellings you find yourself in are not up to standard?

Mt Vernon

Mt Vernon is an estate with a troubled history. If the news reports are to be believed this is an estate which is consumed with paramilitarism and paramilitary violence, has a history of virulent sectarianism and is rarely a place of good, positive stories.

If you Google Mt Vernon, Belfast, you will read about the untouchables, catholic schoolboy Thomas Devlin's murder, of weapons being stored in the Ross House flats, of rioting and of UVF involvement in extortion, drugs and various other illegal activities.

It is a general perception that Mt Vernon is a very hard place to live in or even visit. To argue that this reflection of Mt Vernon is not an accurate one is to wholly go against general perceptions.



It is rarely reported that Mt Vernon, a stone's throw away from Fortwilliam Park, one of the wealthier areas in Belfast, suffers almost 70 per cent unemployment, very low educational attainment, poor provision of facilities and poor health outcomes. Mt Vernon is an estate mired in poverty yet it is rarer still to hear reports of the work being done to alleviate this state of affairs.

However altering the general perception is exactly what residents in Mt Vernon are aiming to do and part of the regeneration of the area is a campaign to redevelop the two Tower Blocks which dominate the entry to the Mt Vernon Estate, Mt Vernon house and Ross House.

The Ross House flats concierge campaign

Amongst community art projects, reprofiling of the paramilitary murals and partnership activities with neighbouring communities, one of the central campaigns within the Mt Vernon estate is the Ross House **Concierge Service** campaign.

A group of residents from both blocks of flats have put forward that, just as in other trouble spots, New Lodge, Belvoir Park and Rathcoole, one of the major difficulties is the lack of security in the multi-story flat complexes.

With Ross House there is almost no security at all, the security doors do not work and other access points are easily entered, so anyone can enter the flats complex even when there are caretakers or security guards on duty.

Equally importantly, Ross House is a flats complex in general state of

disrepair; dark dingy hallways and stairwells, lead to small poorly up kept flats, some riddled with damp, rotting wood frames on doors, poor plumbing and with the added security difficulties, some flats are being used as party houses, this exacerbates an already deteriorating situation.

Most residents would tell you that their physical and mental health suffers from their living conditions. When you live in poor conditions and you add fear into that mix, it hardly improves your well being.

So the residents are campaigning for a concierge service to be put in place.

Why a concierge service?

Part of the campaign has the Mt Vernon residents meeting up and working with residents from the New Lodge 7 Towers flats. The joint meetings are known as the 9 Towers North committee and discuss how the concierge service in the New Lodge came about and what impact it has had on resident's lives.

A decade ago the 7 Towers were in similar position to the Ross House flats. The flats were in poor state of repair, they had no security, and were considered a dumping ground for undesirables and people with mental health difficulties. Many of the flats became party flats and often intimidating anti social behaviour was the order of the day.

The setting up of an area within the flats for vulnerable women necessitated change.

The introduction of a concierge service with 24 hour security, modern facilities and trained staff led to the flats being refurbished; a



general upgrade was carried out. Now the flats are considered desirable places to live. It is a similar story in Divis and Belvoir Park.

It is this service and the attendant improvements to the living space that Ross House residents wish to see implemented in their flats and the concierge service extended to Mt Vernon house.

The campaign

There are a number of aspects to the campaign. The general arguments in favour have been outlined above but in order to prosecute those arguments with some authority the campaign committees have undertaken a number of activities.

They have visited the New Lodge, Belvoir Park and Divis flats and been shown the concierge services that are implemented there, and talked to residents about how it has worked.

They have sent press articles to local papers; they have invited and had a visit from the department of Social Development minister, at the time Alex Attwood, and it would

be reasonable to say that he was supportive of the campaign.

Beyond that, the production of a campaign video has been undertaken with support from the Community Foundation of Northern Ireland's Voices Fund and the Northern Ireland Anti Poverty Network.*

The residents are now looking to take their campaign to the DSD Assembly committee hoping to influence the new minister.

Through these activities residents in Mt Vernon have been aiming to establish their voice.

The question of policy

One might ask how is it that many of the tower blocks in Belfast have been fitted with concierge services and Ross House and Mt Vernon house has not. The argument seems to be over allocation of funds.

No-one can argue that the service isn't successful. A brief trip to either Belvoir Park, Divis Tower or the New Lodge shows how impressive the concierge services are, how their introduction has a substantial

impact not just on security but on combating isolation and fear, helping older residents, keeping an eye on children, ensuring the flats are kept clean, that rubbish doesn't pile up and many other attendant issues. It is generally agreed that the installation of a concierge service improves resident's health and well being.

While there are an array of general policy guidelines on how to live in high rise flats detailing what is required of residents and there are guidelines for the caretaker service and for concierge employees it does not appear as if there is a policy for the introduction of concierge services as a standard procedure in multi story living areas.

This may be something that goes hand in hand with the specific campaign i.e. a call for the introduction of a concierge service in Mt Vernon, along with a suggestion that as a standard policy the Housing Executive should install concierge services for all High Rise flat complexes.

Regardless of the outcome, the campaign is slowly allowing the voices of Mt Vernon residents to be heard.

Quotes from residents

“Ross House flats are like East Germany and New Lodge is like West Germany – the difference in living conditions is stark”

Alex Mt Vernon resident

“Ross House feels like a prison. It is dark, dingy, and run down with no security. It feels like we have been forgotten about and that no-one cares about our living conditions.”

Lily Ross House resident

“People say that there is no respect here. That people don't respect where they live, but that's not right. We are decent people but we don't live in decent conditions. That's why we are campaigning for a concierge service, because we want to be treated with respect.

Alex Mt Vernon resident

“The way things are now we live with a lot of added stress, a lot of added pressure because of anti social behaviour. And this is from people outside our area coming in to use the flats because they can get in any time they want.”

Lily - Ross House resident

“We had a visit from the housing minister and that was good but he spent a long time talking and he used a lot of fancy words. What we need to see is action.”

Percy - Mt Vernon resident

*The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network is a lead organisation working with and for those experiencing poverty in Northern Ireland.

We work together with individuals experiencing poverty, the voluntary and community sector, public and statutory bodies to develop a poverty free society.



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