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CABINET

HOUSING POLICY: MANCHESTERMemorandum by the Minister of Housing and
Local Government

The Cabinet decided last December that Manchester Corporation should not be allowed to proceed with their proposal to build at Lymm in Cheshire, and invited my predecessor to circulate the text of his announcement of this decision (C.M.(56) 100th Conclusions, Minute 3).

2. The Government changes then took place; and Manchester asked me, as coming new to the matter, to receive a deputation and hear their case at first hand. Having heard and studied it, I am in no doubt that I must ask my colleagues to consider the matter again. I have told the Minister of Agriculture of my intention to do so.

3. I was present, as Financial Secretary, when the Cabinet discussed this question before. What, I think, impressed my colleagues most, as it certainly impressed me, was the suggestion that Manchester could, if they tried, secure the building of 18,000 houses from 1961 onwards, and that therefore even assuming the desired and reasonable rate of 3,000 houses a year, there would be enough land to last six years, i. e. from 1961 to 1967. If this were so, a decision about Lymm could safely be left over for two or three years: and so the Cabinet decided.

4. But after going fully into the problem I am bound to tell the Cabinet that these figures do not give a realistic picture. The evidence for this is set out in the Annex to this memorandum. Briefly, it is that some of the sites included in the theoretical 18,000 will not in fact materialise by 1967, and that, for many of the others, the timing of their availability is quite uncertain and not within Manchester's control. Therefore these sites cannot possibly, by themselves, afford sufficient continuity for a steady building programme of anything like 3,000 houses a year: and without such a programme Manchester cannot effectively set itself to tackle its enormous problem of 68,000 slum houses.

5. It was argued in Cabinet that Manchester could house many more people within their own boundaries by building tall flats and achieving a higher density; indeed, at the time as Financial Secretary I remember supporting that suggestion myself. But now that I have been able to go into it thoroughly I find that that argument cannot be sustained. Manchester by their own methods (which provide for exceptionally little public open space) are achieving a density as high as London achieves, in comparable areas of re-development, with tall flats: and that is very high.

6. When the matter was considered by the Cabinet it was suggested that to give Manchester any hope of getting Lymm would weaken their incentive to seek other solutions. I cannot advise the Cabinet that there is anything in this line of thought. I have studied the facts, and since the earlier inquiry into their application for development at Lymm and Mobberley, Manchester have made a most determined and exhaustive attempt to find alternatives. Their needs are so great that they are willing and anxious to use to the full, in addition to Lymm, all the sites which are at all suitable. The sites which they have rejected have been rejected for good reasons (details of the larger sites are given in Part II of the Annex).

7. I am sure that all would agree that Manchester, in view of their appalling slum problem, should be building houses to the full extent of their capacity. They are far below this; and I believe that they have no chance of doing it unless they have one large scheme, wholly under their own control, on which they can count to produce several hundred houses a year, in addition to all the other schemes and whether or not these other sites materialise on time.

8. I feel that in the circumstances I must ask the Cabinet to reconsider their conclusion. I fully realise how difficult this is for the Minister of Agriculture, and I do not ask a decision now in favour of the Lymm scheme. What I ask is that Manchester should be granted the opportunity of putting their case for building at Lymm or elsewhere at a public inquiry, and of seeing how far they can establish, under cross-examination, that without this their housing problem is insoluble. I ask that the Cabinet should not come to a decision until this inquiry has been held. I should add that at the moment there is a complete deadlock of opinion between Manchester, which holds that its case is unassailable, and its opponents who maintain with equal vehemence that it will not stand up to examination.

9. I do not have in mind a narrow inquiry concentrated solely on Lymm. I contemplate that at the inquiry the whole question of Manchester's housing and overspill problem should be discussed on the broadest possible basis. This would cover not only the Lymm proposal but every alternative proposal that anyone could suggest.

10. In view of the great public interest in these questions, of the sharp controversy they arouse, and of the clash between housing and farming which they exemplify, I believe that it might be helpful and I accept that it would be right in this case to arrange for the inquiry to be held not by an official of my Department but by an "independent" inspector. And I should be willing, if the Cabinet thought fit, for his report to be published. I realise that that may make an awkward precedent, for this (unlike the Oxford roads case) will originate in an ordinary planning application. But I think that the Manchester case can be differentiated from the general run of cases because it goes so much wider, and because the final decision, whatever it is, will not be acceptable to local opinion, whether inside or outside Manchester, unless the facts are clearly and publicly set out, and in a document which cannot be accused of bias.

11. On this plan I would instruct the inspector simply to hear and to weigh the evidence. I would tell him that he was not required to make a recommendation, since that must finally depend on Government policy

between the conflicting claims of housing and agriculture, as he might find each of them to be established by the evidence given at the inquiry.

12. After the inquiry I would consult the Cabinet again. I should make it clear to Manchester beyond doubt that the holding of a public inquiry must not be taken as carrying any implication whatever of a favourable Government decision.

13. I ask my colleagues to agree:-

- (a) that no final decision should be taken for or against development at Lymm for the time being; but
- (b) that Manchester, in view of their enormously difficult housing problem, should be given an opportunity of making their case for building on a large site of their own, at Lymm or elsewhere, at a public inquiry on the lines suggested in paragraphs 8-11 above.

H.B.

Ministry of Housing and Local
Government, S. W. 1.

8th April, 1957.

ANNEX

Housing Sites for Manchester, 1961-71

Part I

When the Cabinet discussed this question, it was suggested that, without Lymm, Manchester would have available in the period 1961 to 1971 land for about 18,000 houses, and that this should enable them to build at 3,000 houses a year from 1961 to 1967.

2. The figure of 18,000 was made up as follows:-

- (a) 7,500 in various areas outside Manchester;
- (b) 4,500 at Macclesfield;
- (c) 6,000 on cleared sites inside Manchester.

These figures are taken from the report attached to C. P. (56) 280.

3. There is no chance of Manchester being able to build anything like 18,000 houses on this land by 1967. The reasons are as follows:-

(a) The sites for the 7,500 houses are those which Manchester have found or have been offered within daily travelling distance of the City. (They have also found a number of other such sites, which they are using between now and 1961.) Most of these sites should materialise sooner or later. It is the timing which is quite uncertain. The sites are in eight different county districts, spread over Cheshire, Derbyshire and Lancashire; in each case extensive new sewerage works have to be carried out by the district councils, small authorities with no enthusiasm for receiving overspill. Experience with the sites to be used by Manchester before 1961 has shown that small authorities of this type simply cannot be relied on to provide main services on time.

(b) 4,500 houses at Macclesfield is the figure suggested by Cheshire and accepted by Manchester. Macclesfield for a long time refused to accept any overspill at all. They now show signs of agreeing to a scheme of about 1,000 houses. They may insist on building the houses themselves, over a period of four or five years.

Macclesfield might in the end agree to the whole 4,500 though this does not seem likely at present; or Manchester might decide to proceed in the face of the borough council's opposition. But Manchester clearly cannot count on getting 4,500 houses here by any particular date. Extensive new works both for sewerage and water supply will be needed.

(c) 6,000 is the number of houses which Manchester estimate they could build inside the City. There are two points to be noted about this estimate: first, that it covers the ten years, 1961 to 1971; second, that it cannot be achieved unless sufficient overspill sites are available to enable re-housing to take place at the requisite speed.

These 6,000 houses will have to be built on sites now occupied by slums, which will first have to be demolished and the occupants moved to new houses. These new houses can be built only outside the City, in the areas dealt with under (a) and (b) above. But with these areas alone at their disposal, and with the uncertainty about timing, Manchester will not be able to build fast enough to sustain a slum clearance programme on the scale that is necessary if they are to rebuild on the cleared sites at 600 houses a year. Still less could they compress the whole 6,000 houses into the first six years, which would mean building on cleared sites at the rate of 1,000 houses a year. By no means all of Manchester's new houses can be allotted to people from cleared slums. Every year some 750 houses in the City have to be demolished as dangerous structures, and the occupants rehoused.

Part II

4. Other places which have been suggested for large-scale schemes for Manchester overspill are Crewe, Leyland, Chorley, Congleton and Sandbach. These are discussed below.

Crewe, Leyland and Chorley

These towns are too far from Manchester for people to be likely to travel daily into Manchester for their work. It follows that, if an

overspill scheme is to succeed, industry must move as well as population. Moreover, the industry should come from Manchester; to send out population without industry would not help, since the emigrating population would be likely to be replaced by a fresh influx. These towns, however, have no industrial affinity with Manchester, and both the Board of Trade and Manchester Corporation think it unlikely that Manchester industry could be induced to go there. Manchester are accordingly unwilling themselves to build houses at these places. They are prepared to encourage Manchester people to move to any houses which the local authorities there may provide, and to contribute towards the cost of any house occupied there by a Manchester family. But because of the difficulty of attracting Manchester industry, it is unlikely that building by the local authority would make any serious impact on the problem.

Congleton

Here too industry would be needed as well as population. But Congleton, mainly because of its poor communications, is still less likely to attract Manchester industry than the towns mentioned above. Moreover, Congleton must at present be ruled out, since extensive new building would seriously interfere with the operation of the Jodrell Bank radio telescope, on which much Government money is being spent.

Sandbach

Extensive building here must be ruled out because of salt subsidence.

Part III

5. Apart from the sites which Manchester have already found there is no more land available to them for some miles beyond the City boundaries. To the north and north-west, the area is largely built up as far as Bolton, Bury, Rochdale and beyond. Such unbuilt on land as exists is required either for local housing needs or for open space as part of the Lancashire County Council's green belt proposals. To the east, conditions are much the same as far as the foothills of the Pennines. To the south, open country is reached more quickly, but this is the Cheshire green belt, and the conurbation should not be allowed to spread there. Further out there is the Cheshire salt field, where the land is unsuitable for building because of subsidence. Due west the built-up area extends through Salford and Stretford to the Lancashire mosslands, which are too unstable for building.