

Action for Balanced Communities

AN INITIATIVE FORMED WITH COMMUNITY SUPPORT FROM

Chandos Road Community Association
Clifton & Hotwells Improvement Society
Clifton Down Community Association
Hampton Park and Cotham Hill Community Group
Hotwells and Cliftonwood Community Association
Oakfield Residents Association
Redland & Cotham Amenities Society
Richmond Area Residents' Association

1

The Action for Balanced Communities initiative started life at the Clifton and Clifton East Neighbourhood Forum in May 2015. The Mayor attended that Forum and heard many voices of concern about growing student populations in this area, and their impact on the community.

Many residents were disappointed and baffled that there seemed to be no clear recognition of the problems, and no joint strategy between Bristol City Council and the two Universities to manage the growing influx of students into certain parts of the city.

The Oakfield Residents' Association and Richmond Area Residents' Association, representing residents of Clifton East ward, drafted a briefing paper entitled 'The Studentification of Bristol' in an attempt to reflect those views and put them into context. This paper drew on the 2006 Universities UK publication '*Studentification: a guide to opportunities, challenges and practice*'. We presented our paper to the Mayor on his walkabout through the Cabot, Clifton and Clifton East Neighbourhood Partnership area in August 2015.

The paper was also circulated around other community and amenity groups, and eight groups covering Clifton, Clifton East and Cotham wards have now endorsed the initiative.

Social balance and cohesion are core to successful communities

"Mixed, balanced and sustainable communities – throughout the city, where places are shared and communities mixed, that are good places for communities to live in and are socially cohesive."

- Objective 2 of the Bristol Core Strategy

If this is the kind of city we want to live in, the council has to put its strategy into practice.

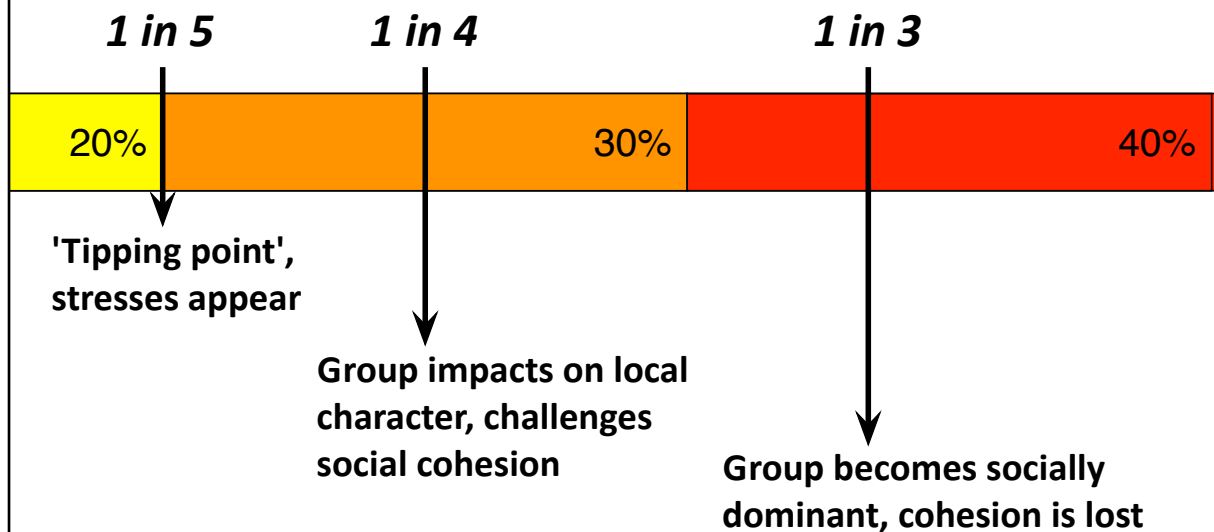
2

Bristol got it right to make balanced, sustainable communities one of its core strategy objectives. This is the kind of city we all want to live in, and we should all strive to achieve.

For the city as a whole, and our neighbourhood in particular, students are very much part of that mix. They are important to the economy and culture of our city, and most of us enjoy living alongside them. The ABC initiative is therefore not in any way anti-student. But we need to acknowledge that the student population as a whole does have impacts on social cohesion.

The problem lies in rapidly increasing numbers within certain areas, and the uncontrolled markets in housing and other services that are exploiting the student pound. Residents find themselves having to fight one planning application after another to try and keep the balance reasonably healthy and sustainable. Occasionally, we succeed, but more often than not the odds seem to be stacked against us. This is dispiriting and frustrating.

Any over-represented demographic group can unbalance a community



Source: National HMO Lobby

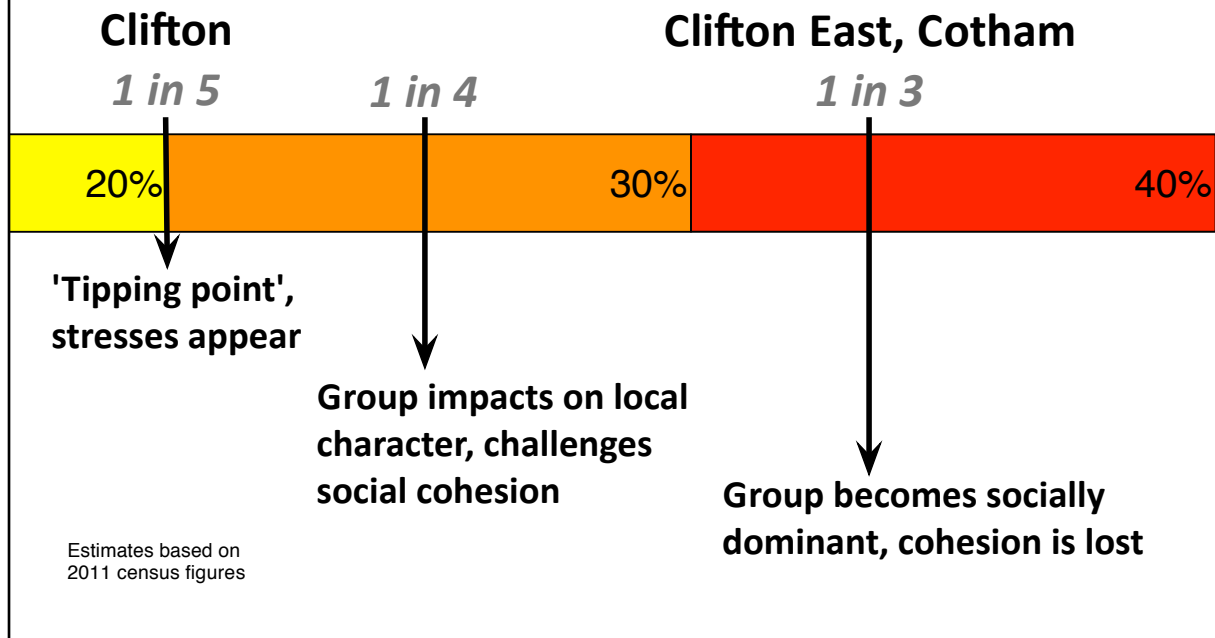
3

An unbalanced community can result when any group starts to represent more than the national or regional norm. This can apply to any age group or other demographic segment, be it young children or the elderly. 'Studentification' is only one example of this - other parts of Bristol will have different experiences.

In 2008, the National HMO Lobby produced an important report, *Balanced Communities and Studentification: Problems and Solutions*, which sets student populations in this wider context. It argues convincingly that when any demographic group exceeds a 'tipping point' of around one in five of any population, this will start to create social imbalance. At one in four, it will challenge social cohesion within the host community. By the time the proportion of any group reaches one in three, it will become dominant, and the community will fragment around it.

This report is part of a body of work undertaken in the 2000s, when the National HMO Lobby helped many university cities across the country to tackle these problems. It is unfortunate that the initiative never got off the ground in Bristol.

Over-representation of students is unbalancing these wards



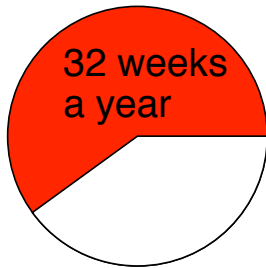
4

This scenario predicted in the 2000s has now become a reality in parts of Bristol, as student populations have grown. In Clifton ward, the student population is at the one-in-five tipping point; in Clifton East and Cotham, it is approaching one in three, and now dominates our locality.

Unless something is done, the proportion is going to reach 40%, 50% and higher. In some individual streets, it is already well beyond that point. This drives out families, working people, retired people - people who form the permanent fabric of a community. Most students don't stay long enough to become part of that fabric - although we welcome those who do. Our community groups work hard to engage our student neighbours; but every year, we have to start all over again with a new cohort.

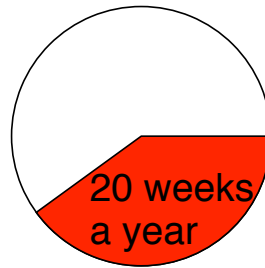
This isn't the students' fault, which is why we need to make it clear that the ABC initiative is not anti-student. In some cases, the students are suffering equally, if they are amongst those who end up living in sub-standard private sector accommodation that has been developed or converted just to make a profit. We are all victims of a failure of strategy and planning, on the part of the city and the universities, going back many years.

The imbalance impacts on host communities in three ways



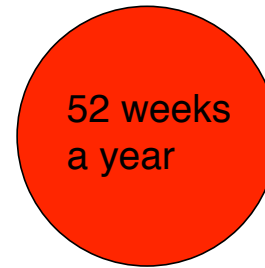
Term-time impacts

- Disturbed nights
- Overcrowded & littered streets
- Stress on council services



Vacation impacts

- Empty homes
- Letting boards & dumped rubbish
- Out-of-season economy



Permanent impacts

- Closure of local businesses
- Less retail choice
- Loss of family and workers' homes

5

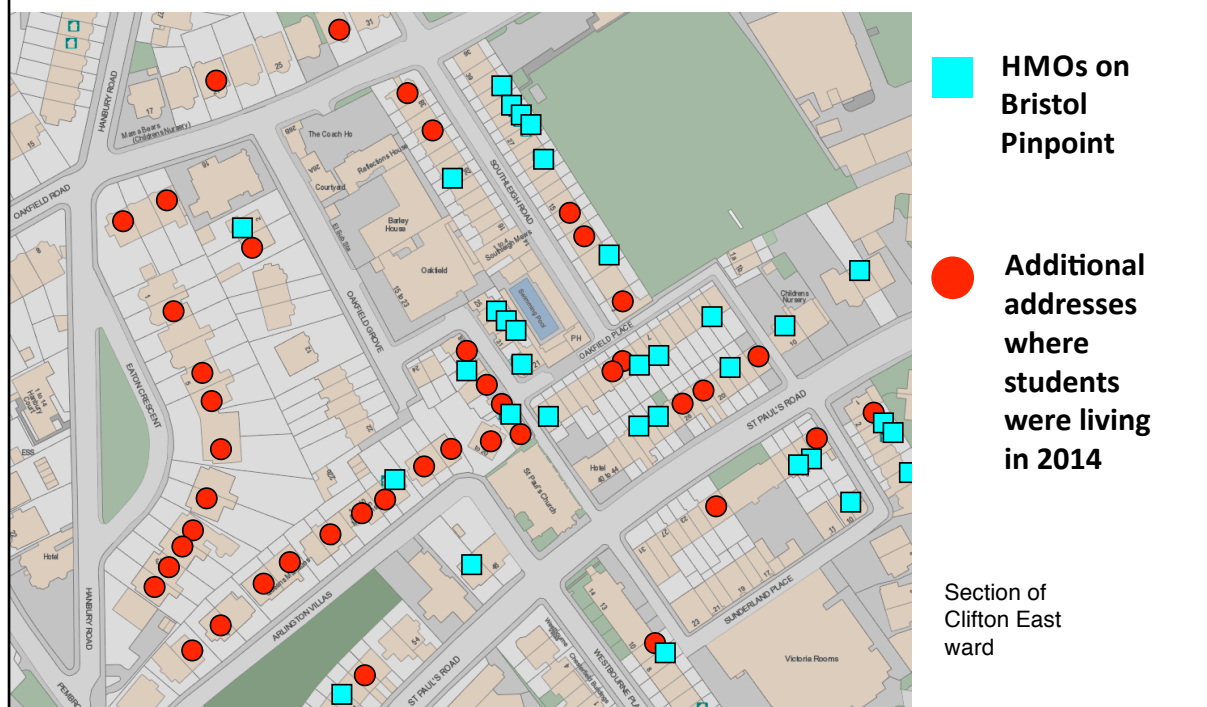
The ABC initiative is not just about residents bemoaning the high-density occupation, noise and other direct impacts of student neighbours in term-time. University liaison officers, student ambassadors and community groups are doing a great job to help overcome many of those problems, although the night-time licensed economy is still a significant unaddressed impact.

We are equally concerned about the other 20 weeks of the year, the vacation periods when some residents find themselves surrounded by empty homes and forests of letting boards. In the summer, our local economy slumps for months. None of this is healthy or sustainable.

Then there are the more insidious, permanent effects. Independent businesses close down, friendly specialist shops become alcohol-led convenience stores, and clubs, bars and takeaways spring up everywhere. We have a desperate shortage of family homes, and not enough owner-occupiers. Many properties available in the private rented sector are taken by students, who can often afford to pay higher rents than working people.

So the city has a choice. It can let our neighbourhoods become student villages where fewer and fewer permanent residents choose to live. Or it can stand up for its core objective on balanced communities.

Tackling the issues at local level: Full and accurate data is vital



6

At local level, our priority is to stem the flow of planning decisions in favour of new student housing in areas under pressure. Unfortunately, developing new purpose-built bedspaces does not release existing properties back to other sections of the community, because the demand from students in this area is so great.

Our observation is that, in many cases, planning officers don't have enough evidence to challenge new private sector developments. As an example, in the small segment of Clifton East shown above, the blue squares show Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) that appear on Bristol City Council's Pinpoint website, which planning officers use when considering applications for new developments. The red dots show additional properties where we, as residents, are aware that full-time students live. And there may well be more.

Some of these premises house 10 or 12 students, but are not HMOs because they are comprised of individual two-bed flats. This is just one way landlords get around the planning rules that are meant to govern the amount of shared housing permitted in any given area. The planners need to base their decisions on full and accurate information that is currently not available to them.

Tackling the issues at local level: current policies are inadequate

The Bristol local plan

*sets out criteria for student
and other shared housing*

BUT

*lacks definition and is
open to appeal*

*directs new residences to
the City Centre*

BUT

*leaves the door open to
other 'suitable' locations*

Article 4 Directions

*require planning consent
for HMOs in certain wards*

BUT

*offer no grounds for
consent to be refused &
do not cover non-HMO
accommodation*

**Planning officers and DC committees need stronger
policies to contain an aggressive student housing market**

7

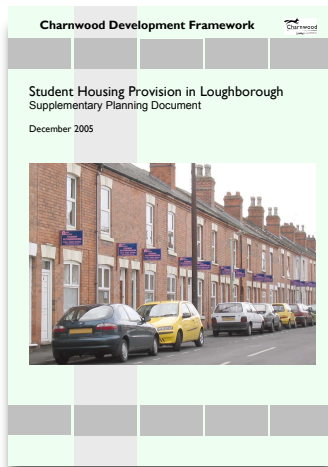
The Bristol Local Plan includes very few policies that relate directly to the problems of student concentrations within certain neighbourhoods.

Policy DM2 covers residential sub-division, shared and specialist housing, which includes student housing. This sets out general criteria which states that developments will not be permitted if they would 'harm the residential amenity or character of the area' or 'create or contribute to a harmful concentration of such uses within a locality'. It also sets out location criteria for specialist student housing. Some wards are also covered by Article 4 directions, which require planning consent for new HMOs.

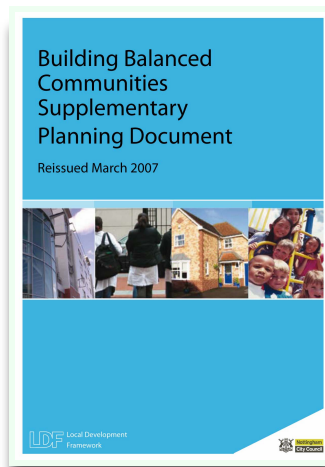
These policies are intended to protect residential communities. But they lack teeth, so are easily undermined by developers, leaving many applications open to appeal if they are refused. Planning officers and development control committees will therefore be reluctant to refuse in the first place.

We have suggested policies that trigger a presumption against any development that would exceed certain thresholds or other quantified indicators. The city planners say the council does not consider such an approach to be 'necessary or appropriate'. We believe that more robust policies are essential.

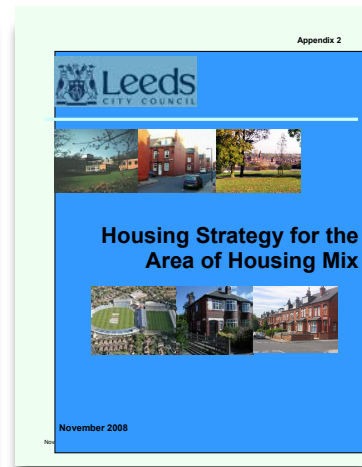
Other cities have found ways to make their planning policies more robust



**Loughborough
2005**



**Nottingham
2007**



**Leeds
2008**

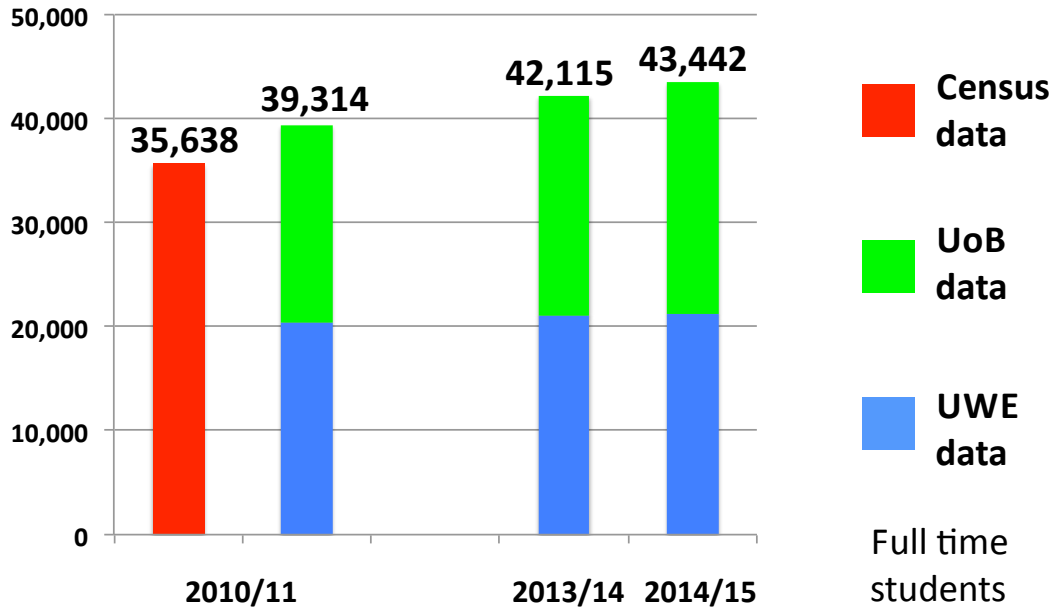
8

Other university towns and cities have taken this issue to heart and introduced specific policies to address it. Loughborough, Nottingham and Leeds are just three examples – there are many others. These councils have found ways to take control, without introducing any policy that might be perceived as discriminatory or otherwise unlawful.

And the important point is that they have been doing this for years. These policies were introduced in the last decade, and now that the universities are growing again after the financial crash, are still in place and available to planners. Bristol is ten years behind the curve on this, and has a lot of catching up to do. This is not easy, as the planning cycle is a long and complex process.

We need research into what can or cannot be done lawfully to set thresholds or otherwise strengthen existing policies. This should start by looking at what other councils with large university populations have done, the best practices that have already been adopted and are working effectively elsewhere, and how they can be fast-tracked into Bristol's system.

Tackling the issues at city level: we need a full student audit



9

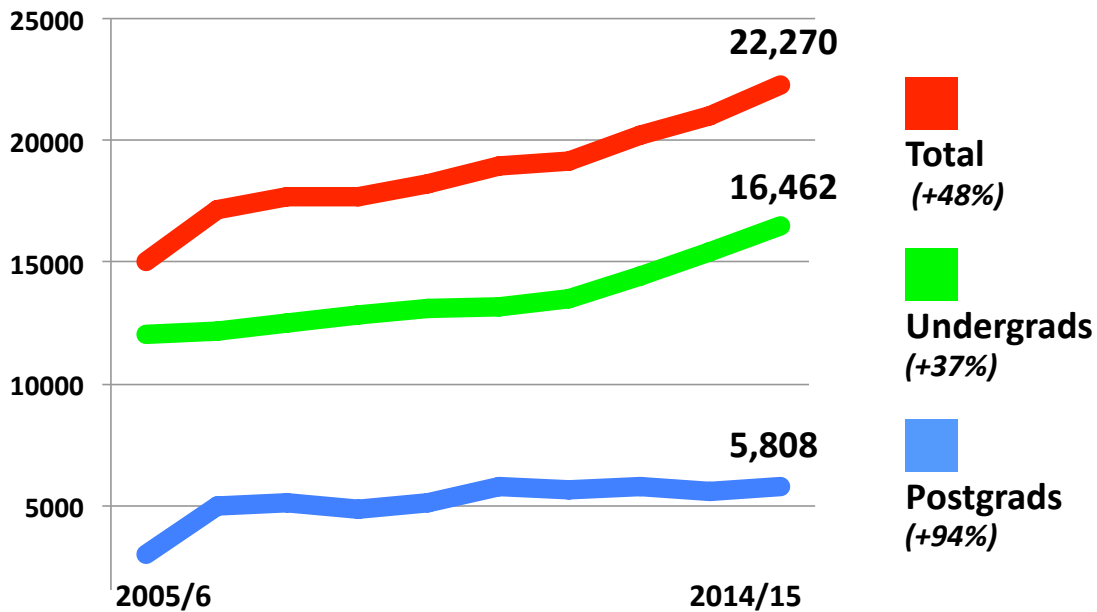
Bristol as a city has to grasp the nettle of its expanding student population. It is still working on census data from 2011, which returned a figure of 35,600 full time students, and 8.3% of the total population. This in itself was probably inaccurate, as the two universities actually enrolled over 40,000 full time students that year, most of whom would have been living in the city.

In the academic year 2013-14, there were over 42,000 full time students at our universities, a figure that represented 9.5% of the estimated 442,500 total population in mid 2014.

In the academic year 2014-15, the student population was recorded as 43,442 - we don't yet have the city population estimates for that year, but we can speculate with reasonable confidence that we are around the 10% mark.

This is a very high proportion and the city and universities need to undertake a full and accurate audit if they are going to manage this kind of growth effectively for students and other residents alike. The universities have the data and should be encouraged to share it for the benefit of all parties.

UoB student numbers have grown by nearly 50% over 9 years



10

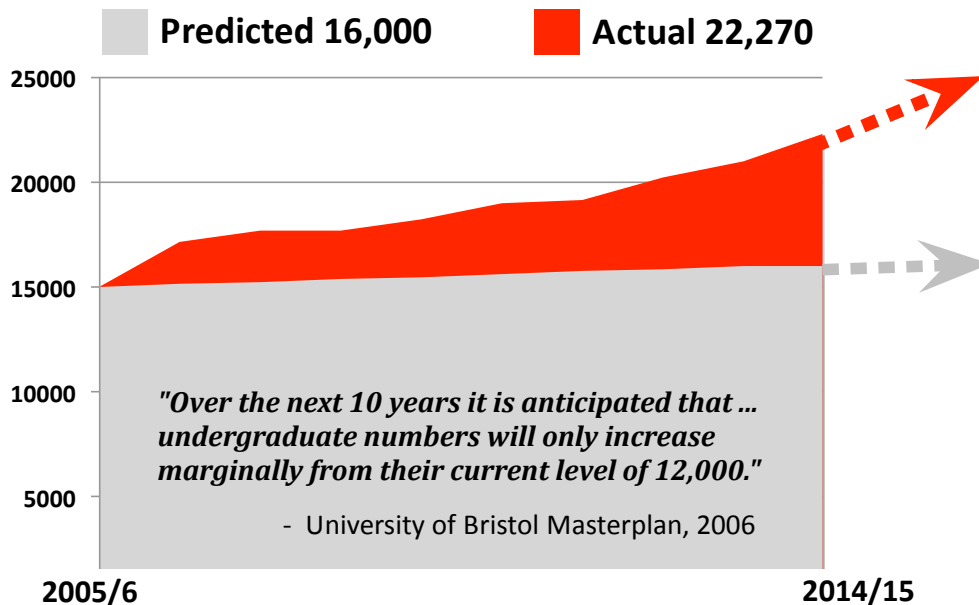
Although we have two universities of more or less equal size in Bristol, it is the University of Bristol that has the greatest impact on the Clifton and Cotham wards, because of its proximity.

In nine years, UoB student numbers have increased by nearly 50%. And this graph doesn't begin to show the long-term effect of increased intakes since the government uncapped enrolments. This means not just more new students, but ever-larger cohorts passing through their three or four year courses.

These extra students, when they move into the community in their second year onwards, come to Clifton and Clifton East as destinations of choice. That is why commercial developers and landlords are building or converting anything they can get their hands on, to make as much profit as possible from the demand.

The city needs to look at ways to achieve a more reasonable distribution of students across areas that are accessible to the university. Although new managed residences are being developed mainly in the city centre, this is not necessarily the solution for returning students: the central ward of Cabot already has over 40% of students in its population.

2014/15 numbers are 40% higher than predicted in the 2006 UoB Masterplan



11

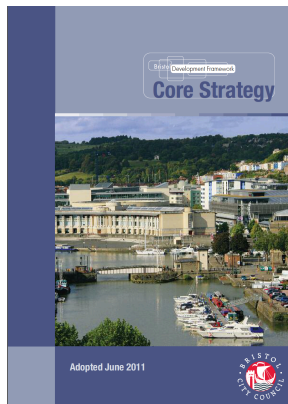
At the heart of the problem is a failure of long-term planning. In 2006, the University of Bristol produced a Masterplan for the ten years ahead. This was an ambitious programme for the development of the university's estate, primarily in the Precinct area.

This Masterplan predicted that its student numbers would grow by only 1000 in ten years - about 9%. The actual figure, shown in the previous slide, is 48%. Overall, student numbers are now 40% higher than the University predicted in 2006, but the Masterplan has never been revised.

The University has concentrated on delivering enough managed housing for first year students, as numbers have outgrown the original halls of residence in Stoke Bishop and Clifton. No consideration has been given to where these students might be housed in their second, third or fourth years. The burden has fallen on host communities closest to the University Precinct - itself once a thriving residential area where swathes of housing have been lost to academic buildings.

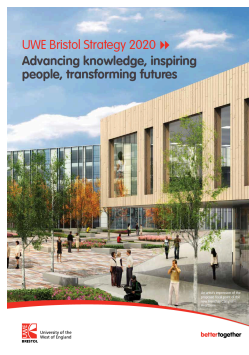
Bristol City council adopted the now redundant Masterplan as a Supplementary Planning Document, and it remains the council's only specific planning statement relating to the universities. There is nothing at all covering UWE. A great opportunity was missed by not updating this in the recently adopted Local Plan.

The city and its universities must create a joint strategic plan



Bristol Core Strategy

UWE Bristol Strategy 2020



- Sponsored personally by the Mayor in partnership with the Vice Chancellors
- Informed by the collective knowledge and experience of host communities

12

In conclusion, there is much work to be done at every level and amongst all stakeholders.

At the strategic level, this great city and its universities have to do what they should have done ten years ago, and commit to a joint strategy. There is no point having three strategies that exist in glorious isolation.

We are asking the Mayor to sponsor this personally, and to work with both Vice-Chancellors in doing so. It is a matter of good governance that the Universities and the City should be able to house the students without causing collateral damage to resident communities.

Meanwhile, we are also asking for fast-track action on a more robust planning policy to tackle an aggressive student housing market that has no interest in community coherence and, in the worst cases, no concern for the quality of its product.

All of this must draw on the collective knowledge and experience of host communities. It must involve residents' associations, amenity groups and the students themselves. The ABC initiative is a start - we need a positive response from the Council and the Universities.