

Communities Scrutiny Commission Agenda



Date: Monday, 27 January 2020

Time: 10.00 am

Venue: Room 1P05, 1st Floor - City Hall, College Green, Bristol, BS1 5TR

Distribution:

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Date: Wednesday, 22 January 2020



Agenda

6. Chair's Business

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Chair's Statement

Councillor Anthony Negus, Chair of Communities Scrutiny Commission.

Student Issues and Bristol City Council; towards comprehensive benefit

1. It is recognised that students make a valuable contribution to Bristol's development and income, but as residents they and their accommodation providers make no contribution to Bristol City Council's cost of providing services to all its citizens.
2. Landlords do not contribute to council tax but instead this is part of their business tax, after discountable expenses, that central government now keeps for itself though it did make an estimated repayment to Bristol City Council (BCC) for (usually under-estimated) commensurate council taxes until about 12 years ago. Until that time central government recognised the burden on local taxpayers of having one or more universities within their Authority. If we are to manage this huge local issue then we must be given more autonomous powers to govern ourselves. As requested in the Council motion we should, alongside the Local Government Association (LGA) and others, lobby for BCC taking local action on landlords' business rates.
3. Additionally, student accommodation within existing houses displaces residents who would pay Council tax
4. Further the secure investment value of unstoppable increase in student numbers in a small contained city creates an unalterable imbalance in the economics of the private rented sector and the housing market. It is a copper-bottomed investment that allows its developers to out-bid and trump alternative options, including private housing that is not encumbered by being obliged to accommodate an affordable quota. Student pressure is displacing more people than we can build new homes for each year and making those homes increasingly unaffordable for more people and so is steadily reducing the percentage of the tax-paying citizenry.
5. The national planning system could be finessed to provide for a balance of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) but presently cannot differentiate those occupied by different groups
6. BCC is developing proposals that encourage Purpose-built student accommodation (PBSAs) and extend discouragement of HMOs in certain parts of the city. It now levies 200% council tax on empty properties. With the extension of permitted development rights it has no powers to stop developers turning buildings that contribute tax revenue into those that contribute none and that might well undermine the city's emerging policy. Could this, like government deregulation of private house conversion to HMOs, also be locally controlled?
7. While there has been a review of the impact, strength and geographical area covered by present HMO provision in the emerging Local Plan this has been delayed because of the rejection of the Joint Spatial Plan. Further, indicating where new PBSAs may be favoured gives credibility to new student zones or villages which may be populated from HMOs rather than PBSAs as a consequence of economic drivers. Planning criteria for new student

accommodation should match that for all housing provision including viability testing and should aim to lessen the risk of public and private ghettos.

8. For far too long there has been a failure to communicate between the universities, the landlords and the council. GDPR has made this more difficult just as the new licensing system was making some information clearer to understand. It is essential that such information exchange is facilitated, ideally by persuasion, if only to establish a best estimate of future numbers and how they are to be housed.

9. Crucially, there must be better liaison across the council with all departments that are daily-involved or hold data relating to the current situation: numbers, localities, council tax, housing, private rented team, phasing out government support, recycling, nuisance reporting, planning controls and all types of enforcement etc. As one example, at present BCC's private rented sector team can issue landlords licenses upon payment of a fee without any checks on whether that property would be granted planning approval. It is actually worse than this for the law says that they must not take this into account and not inform the planning department. This is not the case with commercial licensing.

10. The motion about this issue that was approved by Full Council in 2017 called for liaison, at least, with similar cities and consideration of joint action with the government, universities and other key agencies. There has been no follow-up report on how this essential conversation has progressed.

11. It is clear that there have been meetings with the universities to impress on Vice Chancellors that BCC cannot absorb their business costs. They already have 80% of their business rates liability mitigated. BCC taxpayers are being required to cover the loss of an estimated £13.3 million p.a. and 89% of our residents are paying the cost of services provided to the other 11% of the population. The universities, the landlords and entertainment and service providers are certainly benefiting from a very high student population, As indeed may be some employers and the country as a whole. Bristol City council and its taxpayers, and most particularly those less advantaged citizens trying to find somewhere affordable to live, are losing out.

12. The long-resisted Supplementary Planning Documents which has been recognised as essential by many in the field to inform the Local Plan on issues of 'studentification' in established communities and dense new student ghettos must be all-embracing. We should use this opportunity to review the very out of date Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) information on numbers of HMOs.

13. A comprehensive modelling exercise is required of the impact on the local housing 'market' of extra families, extra non-student HMOs, extra student HMOs (now 10%;15% in future, and maybe higher).

14. This huge sector over which BCC has so very little control should nevertheless feature much more prominently in the councils Business Plan and in our Corporate Strategy

15. The present landlord licence issued by BCC contains a set of criteria that are unenforceable due to government regulations. It is hard to imagine how such a license has

any legal status. If it is to be worth the paper it is written on and its fee there should be sustainable obligations on both sides. At present, with notable exceptions the universities, the landlords and to some extent the police have an arm's-length relationship with student tenants. University of Bristol has recently made staff changes in this area and suspended its long-standing Community Liaison meetings, perhaps for good. Most of the initiatives that brought real improvements to student/community well-being came out of the Student/Community Partnership, a panel of officers from the two Universities and departments within BCC, landlords, police, local councillors and students that operated between 2009 and 2015 when the likelihood of further large-scale improvements did not justify further regular meetings. Since that time conditions have worsened and this group should be reconvened. The Landlord's license could have a good neighbour clause that simply reflects reasonable behaviour that applies to everyone. There is merit in promoting and adopting a charter setting out good practice from landlords and agents for all tenancies that could become at least a Kitemark and ideally a standard perhaps developing in the same way as the ACORN model.

16. BCC should investigate and report on the contribution of present student letting practice to transience/lack of engagement/Anti-Social Behaviour and poor conditions. The Universities should better recognise their obligations to their students in the provision of decent accommodation. Huge organised parties (some with commercial involvement) starting by invitation after the University's recommended end time go on until the following dawn with perhaps 140+young people carousing with little regard for neighbours or the police in an old house built for maybe 3 or 4 occupants. There will be a tragedy here or somewhere else that too late will regulate this but no-one is taking any action Every time this happens (and there are streets where 90%+residents are living in student HMOs) with more than one party a week, it ruins a nights' sleep for easily 200 adults and children. This isn't how many people want to live and is not fair.

17. BCC should investigate mutually-beneficial joint use of University-provided facilities e.g. libraries, health and sports

18. There is a case for examining how students might be encouraged to be more embedded in the temporary communities. Although they may live for less than 9 months in any one area after their first year there is a burgeoning student voluntary programme that often cannot be sustained for all who want to take part. When services are stretched partly because BCC receives no payment from student occupation, wouldn't there be some congruity in taking up volunteer applicants as a gratefully-received and gladly-given payment in kind?

19. Students can bring positive benefits to the city. These may even be development generators such as improving the financial viability of local shopping streets or entertainment venues and sustaining the all-day vitality of Centres such as old Broadmead from student residents at upper levels. Young people can and probably should bring a different dimension to the way we live. We should seek that as much as possible of the impact of large numbers of transient young people is positive for us all, and taking forward these suggestions will I believe make that more likely.

20. The Chair calls on members of the Communities Scrutiny Commission to support this statement and agree to it being sent to the appropriate Director and the Mayor with a request to prepare a report as soon as possible to bring back to this commission or its successor that sets out:

- the actions taken as requested in the approved motion to Full Council in July 2017 developed and supported by the all-parties working group (Appendix1)
- draws together from the points on this statement and beyond, all the positive and negative effects of the current and increasing number of students
- produces a clear assessment of how these are presently dealt with by various council teams and how these issues could be better managed by greater cooperation and redistribution of areas of work within this council.

Appendix 1

FULL COUNCIL MOTION – 18 July 2017

Motion: Mitigation of University Expansion

Full Council notes the benefits that the Universities bring our City: vibrancy, earnings, new value added businesses, employment opportunities and a source of civic pride. But there are downsides too and as recent growth has been high and is expected to reach 60,000, these new generally short term residents are increasing the severe strain on council services, the housing market and longer term residents in high-density student areas.

Particular groups are disproportionately affected:

- Anyone renting, due to increased demand for accommodation and so paying higher rents, and this includes university staff and their post and undergraduates too.
- Residents living in communities which are affected by high concentrations of this one demographic,
- Council finances; the provision of services to tens of thousands of students. These services used to be funded by the Government from a block grant but this is being cut to zero.

Full Council therefore asks the Mayor to:

- 1) In conjunction with other Council Leaders, engage with the Government, to highlight that the current approach to university growth is creating unsustainable pressure on Council resources; having to service 100% of its population with only 85-90% of them paying council tax. Adequate funding arrangements will probably require changes to planning obligation and taxation advantages given to university and student accommodation of all sizes. A grant or a means of local collection and redistribution of taxes needs to be put in place so Councils can provide services like street cleaning and implement the housing and transport solutions required to ensure balanced communities and mitigate the effects of university expansion on the housing market.

In addition Full Council agrees that necessary work should be done locally in Bristol and in the Combined Authority to update the Universities' masterplans so as to deliver sustainable future expansion, housing and transport solutions. Co-operative recording and planning policies need to be updated and true recognition given to the impact that unbalanced communities bring to all residents.

Further Full Council requests the Mayor to instruct officers to:

- 2) Develop a bespoke SPD which looks at best practice around the country, uses up to date data from Universities on their impact, both positive and negative and seeks to improve the amenity of everyone's lives in areas hard hit by current and future growth in numbers.
- 3) Require the Universities to support transport and housing solutions for more than just first years.

- 4) Set up an all-party commission to oversee the above processes and liaise with Universities to progress other possible approaches, and keeping members informed.