

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY PANEL ON PARTY HOUSES
3.00pm 28 JANUARY 2014
COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL
MINUTES

Present: Councillor Bowden (Chair) Bennett and Robins

PART ONE

1. INTRODUCTIONS AND CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

- 1.1 The Chair of the panel, Councillor Bowden, introduced himself and fellow panel members Councillors Bennett and Robins, and welcomed everyone to the scrutiny panel meeting.
- 1.2 The Chair said that the panel had come about because he had had a number of complaints from residents about party houses. He had not found a suitable way of addressing the complaints, and felt that the 'party house' industry fell between a number of departments, without anyone taking the lead in managing them. The aim of the scrutiny panel was to look at the topic of 'party houses' and the trouble that they were causing for nearby residents.
- 1.3 Today's meeting was intended for members of the public to tell the panel about their experiences living near to party houses. Party house operators, the fire service, police and council officers would be invited to speak at future meetings.

2. RESIDENTS' COMMENTS AND EXPERIENCES OF LIVING NEAR PARTY HOUSES

2.1 SW, Speaker One

- 2.2 SW lived next door to two party houses in Roedean for 14 months. Each could sleep around 14 people and were booked every weekend of the year as well as some weekdays. The houses have since been sold to families so they no longer suffer. The house owners were taken to court by BHCC and fined £10,000 but this was overturned on appeal.

The impact of the houses was huge, it invaded her whole life, it was much more than noise nuisance. The general pattern was the guests arrived between 3 and 10pm on a Friday, though some would arrive on a Thursday which would mean that her young year old daughter would be too tired to cope at school the next day. On Friday nights, they would hear screaming, shouting and music through the walls, doors slammed, high heels clattering. As the drinking increased, the noise increased. Friday nights tended to be when the guests would party in the house, sleep would be impossible until the party house quietened down, often at 5-6am. Smokers outside would make a tremendous

noise in an otherwise silent street. In summer they couldn't have windows open because of the noise and the smell of cigarettes. Her daughter would often have to stay at grandparents in order to get some sleep.

SW would always go and speak to the house guests; they always said that they were not told that they would be in a residential area, or that there was a child next door. They were sympathetic but carried on anyway and SW regularly ended up cancelling weekend plans.

Saturday nights were just as disruptive, after holiday guests slept all day, they would start drinking in the early evening. Strippers and cocktail makers would arrive increasing the noise level and often double parking, blocking residents in. Guests would go out at about 9pm, it would be half an hour of taxis slamming and people screaming in the street. The family would fall asleep knowing that they would be woken up in the middle of the night, with fleets of taxis returning. SW's daughter would often wake up terrified, thinking that people were in her room due to the noises that she could hear.

Sundays were a write off, and they could never have a normal family weekend either because of the noise or the exhaustion. SW underperformed at work, and could not carry on other hobbies. On bank holidays the noise was even worse, it extended for longer.

The house owners put a security guard on patrol but he could not stop the noise of 14 people. Other negative effects were the huge piles of recycling and refuse from the house, left to become litter on the street. Party houses in residential areas are not ok, the lifestyle is not compatible with families who live there.

The revenue brought in to the city is almost totally outweighed by resident experiences who do not benefit in anyway and just suffer.

- 2.3 The panel asked SW who she contacted for help. She said that she contacted Roedean's residents' association first, and then the council's noise patrol team. The noise patrol were very helpful and supportive although unfortunately their operating hours of 10pm-3am meant that they were often not on duty when the party guests came home. The noise patrol suggested calling the police but she did not feel that she needed them to help. The PCSO made contact but by then, Environmental Health was monitoring the situation.

The panel asked if anything could have been done differently to help. SW said that the council had been very supportive and she felt that they were on her side from the start. It would be better to have a larger noise patrol presence if possible, and to provide this on a Thursday, as no support as available then.

From a rental point of view, the website information did not tell people that the houses were in a quiet residential location; this should have been made clear.

2.4 Kingscliff Society, Speaker Two

2.5 The second speaker spoke on behalf of the Kingscliff Society, who welcomed the council's scrutiny. The number of party houses is growing in the East Cliff Conservation area.

Their concerns include:

- The number of residential properties turning into 'party houses' in the city appears to be increasing and have a significant impact in the area. For example, several residential streets already have 3/4 party houses each, which represents a significant proportion of the total number of properties. Currently there is nothing to stop that number growing. All of the properties being used for party purposes were previously single residential dwellings, often family homes. The loss of so many residential properties is unacceptable.
- The party houses must be taking trade away from established guest houses and shops. Guests often arrive laden with alcohol, which has not necessarily been purchased locally.
- Residents contribute to the local economy all year round. Their needs should thoroughly be taken into consideration. At the moment they have no control over the situation.

There used to be a council policy aim for a balance in areas with residential and commercial mix. That balance could be damaged if more and more residential becomes commercial. Because of the changing nature of their residential streets, more and more people are likely to move away (with the likelihood of properties up for sale being bought up by party houses developers).

- The speaker said that it appears that party houses are not subject to the same regulations as guest houses/hotels, for example in the number of bathrooms. There are also concerns over adherence to fire regulations.
- Some houses have 'no smoking' rules which can result in guests congregating outside the house to smoke, drinking and noisily chatting alongside. This can have an effect on passers-by, who follow suit.
- The party-goers at some houses choose to decorate them externally with streamers, balloons, etc which does not look very appealing.

2.6 The Kingscliff Society would urge the following action:

- The early introduction of measures to apply guest-house level health and safety regulations to all party houses.
- All properties should pay the uniform business rate of tax.
- Planning permission should be required for change of use - and must be in place in advance of operation as a party house.

- In addition, to guide planning decisions a formula should be adopted indicating the number and location of such changes of use allowed in a given geographical area - i.e. akin to that relating to planning decisions in connection with change of use of a property to an HMO in the context of its surrounding neighbourhood.
- A further concern was the 'hidden' party houses, which pop up from time to time. They would be much harder to reach.

2.7 Dexter Allen, Business Safety Manager for East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) commented that fire safety regulations would apply to party houses in the same way as to guest houses. ESFRS work with operators to promote fire safety knowledge and enforce standards. ESFRS had closed two properties down temporarily due to lack of fire safety standards.

2.8 JT, Speaker Three

2.9 JT also lives in Kingscliff and supported the statement from the Kingscliff Society.

JT has lived in her street for thirty years; it is a small narrow street of 19 houses; activity on the side of the street opposite one's house can impact across. Sadly the sense of being a small community is being eroded. Of the 19 houses three are now party houses, two being adjacent and the third one facing them. These were eroding the community feel. JT felt if the well-being of residents counts for anything then there should be policy and planning control over the conversion of residential homes for this party business purpose.

The noise created by short lets is experienced as of a different nature than from houses permanently occupied, including people shouting out to each other and congregating outside smoking. There can be a sense of fear about what behaviour might be coming and fear of approaching guests if they are causing a disturbance.

Party houses adversely affect their quality of life and do not protect the amenity of residents which is a planning consideration.

JT was also concerned about the impact of party houses on the housing stock of the city. There is already a significant shortage of permanent accommodation in the city, and the conversion of family homes into party houses is adding to the problem. She was concerned that landlords might convert longterm rentals into party houses, which would affect residents who rely on rental accommodation.

A possible solution would be for the council to adopt robust policies to overcome the serious problems and consequences of the growth of short let party houses – these are consequences affecting both the individual well-being of residents and the city's housing need. She backed the suggestions put forward by the Kingscliff Society in respect of adoption of a local short term lettings policy would be a huge step in the direction of maintaining balance.

2.10 PR, Speaker Four

2.11 PR was until recently a resident of Queens Park and secretary of the Local Area Team. He said that as Brighton's economy was changing to a more digital future, was there a need to promote the city as a holiday destination as much as before? There were alternative income streams instead.

PR said that, from a developer point of view, party houses provided a gold rush, with huge income against limited outgoings. There was a sense of freedom, and limited enforcement was taken. The party houses escaped the controls of hotel management, as no one was on site to manage behaviour in any way. The management of party houses relies on neighbours reporting problems. Having a party house next door to you will mean that your house is unsellable, if you have made complaints about noise or nuisance.

The council needs to find a way of regulating this type of accommodation.

2.12 BD, Speaker Four

2.13 BD lives in a small mews which has three party houses in a small street. Two were converted in 2009 without consultation or consideration. Since 2010 he and other residents have had a succession of problems including noise, antisocial behaviour and cars swamping the street, blocking residents in. He has complained to the managing agent but his complaints have been ignored. He feels that the agents do not deal with the problems proactively, although they have now put some security measures in place. The agents have apologised but what good are apologies when people can't get to sleep?

BD tried to complain through the council's noise patrol but this was not really suitable due to the sporadic nature of the noise. Noise diaries were sent out but when the properties were quiet for a while, there did not seem to be any point in completing them. He has not contacted the police as he does not feel that they would attend.

Party house operators may tell guests that they will be fined, but no one remembers this at 3am, and they make the noise anyway.

2.14 LM, Speaker Five

2.15 LM, her sister and their mother live in a Central Hove townhouse. The property next to their house was advertised as sleeping 18 people. Their main concern has been the fire risk, as people are allowed to smoke in the garden and have been smoking out of the windows. There is only one main exit; the other has been bricked up to make room for more living accommodation inside.

They have also experienced huge noise problems; for example one afternoon 'Butlers in the Buff' came to the garden next door to entertain a hen party, which led to ongoing shrieking and screaming. The noise could be heard throughout the street. Noise is a problem in the afternoon as well as throughout the night. The agent's security company have helped when called, for example moving guests back into the house rather than being in the garden.

The property is not suitable for a hen party; they have often heard guests complaining that it is not what they were looking for.

2.16 RS, Speaker Six

2.17 RS was speaking on behalf of his 94 year old mother who has a party house next door to her property in Clifton Hill. The property can house 15 people. On a number of occasions over the summer noise nuisance has been intolerable and disruptive. They have reported the matter to the landlords but has had little success in coming to an agreement. No amount of signs in a property cautioning against noise and nuisance have any effect for a party coming down to drink and celebrate, it is what they've paid for. Agents and property owners are incapable of controlling such noise whatever "security" arrangements they advertise - noise nuisance is a difficult matter to pursue and prove.

RS feels that secondary parliamentary legislation may be necessary to bring such short term lets within the remit of planning and licensing, requiring "change of use" legislation be introduced to put such houses on a par with hotels and guest houses, which can be controlled.

2.18 KE, Speaker Seven

2.19 KE lives in the same mews as the fourth speaker BD, and has experienced the same problems. Landlords are more responsible now than they used to be but you cannot stop people partying when they are only in Brighton for a weekend and even when they are trying to be quiet, 40 people or more will make some level of noise. Its not just the actual disturbance but also the anticipation of disturbance that is so hard to bear.

KE said that she had been told that the police could get involved if there was noise nuisance in the street but in the property, it would come under Environmental Health's jurisdiction and it would need to be a long term problem for any action to be taken. Planning Enforcement officers have told KE that they will not be taking any action.

There should be a change in planning legislation for a change of use to a short term let, and then authorities could enforce this.

2.20 CL, Speaker Eight

2.21 CL was attending on behalf of two Queens Park residents who have a hen party house next door to them in Queens Park Road. They have ended up moving out of their house to avoid the weekend noise, which is very difficult as they have a young baby. They have asked the owners not to book stag and hen parties in the house; the owners have agreed but then book the groups anyway.

2.22 Councillor Bowden, Chair of the Panel

2.23 Councillor Bowden thanked everyone for attending and sharing their experiences with the panel. There were some common themes emerging including the lack of response

to complaints about noise disturbance, the difficulty in enforcing against the properties, a lack of relevant planning law and the impact on the community.

There would be three further meetings; everyone was welcome to attend and observe.

The meeting concluded at 4.30

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of