

UNIPOL WORKING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE YOUR NEIGHBOURHOODS

NOTTINGHAM'S FORESTS

A forest of 'To Let' by boards, followed by another forest of 'Let By' or 'Let Agreed' boards do nothing to improve the appearance of our streets. It's a put-off to potential family buyers and renters.

It pinpoints HMOs to would-be burglars. And it reinforces the transient nature of the community. It is one of those issues that established residents and students agree on.

As a past President of Nottingham Trent's Students Union wrote for this magazine in 2007: 'We too are sick of the numerous TO LET signs left up permanently, preventing the student residents from ever feeling at 'home. ...'

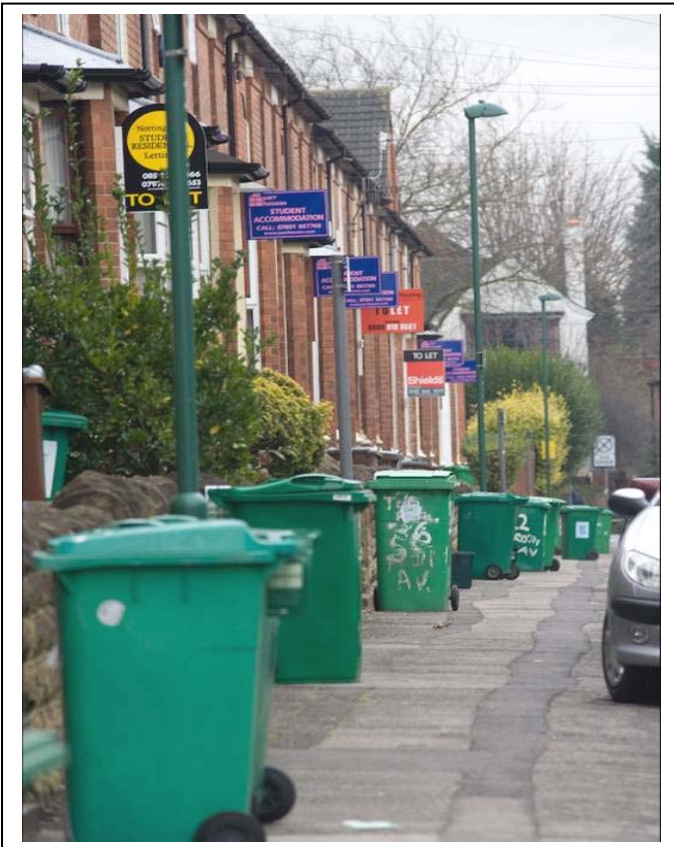
NOTTINGHAM'S JUNGLES

Another fact of life is so-called 'gardens', often little more than a patch of overgrown grass and weeds, well seeded with litter and rubbish, or, if it's big enough to take a car or two, covered in rubble and hard core with a few hardy nettles and thistles to accompany the takeaway boxes, cans and bottles. The Unipol-DASH Code states that:

- All boundary walls and fences will be maintained stable and in good repair;
- Where a garden exists, the path to and from the external door(s) to the house will be kept in good repair and free from obstruction;
- Where a garden or paved area exists this shall be kept in good order and free of waste and litter, so far as is reasonably practicable;
- Where a front garden already exists, it is not converted, in accordance with Local Authority recommendations and planning policies, into a hard standing area and, where possible where a garden already exists this shall be retained as a soft planted area (this includes low maintenance gravelling with planting)

In Leeds, where Unipol has been based for more than 20 years, garden surveys have become a regular occurrence. Unipol in Nottingham carried out its first garden survey last summer.

In this article Guy outlines some the work that Unipol is planning to do to tackle our 'Forests' and 'Jungles'.



Unipol is a not-for-profit student housing organisation aiming to raise the standard of properties through a landlord accreditation scheme called the Unipol DASH Code. Unipol works closely with Nottingham City Council,

the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University, the Universities' Students' Unions, and the Nottingham Action Group on HMOs.

Through its work with the Nottingham Action Group, Unipol hopes to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with all residents living in our local neighbourhoods.

This spring, Unipol is working on two initiatives to help improve the appearance of neighbourhoods in Dunkirk, and Lenton Ward, Wollaton Park and parts of Radford & Park Ward.

From May, in conjunction with Nottingham City Council, Unipol will be developing a scheme to control the use of 'To-Let' boards displayed on properties. Also, with assistance from the Nottingham Action Group on HMOs (NAG), Unipol will be carrying out its second Garden Survey of accredited properties in an effort to give them a good spring clean.

'To-Let' boards are a blight upon many streets in neighbourhoods with large numbers of shared houses (HMOs) making them unattractive to established residents and students alike. Unipol is currently consulting with the Council, residents, landlords and students to devise a voluntary scheme to restrict the use of lettings boards.

For a six-month trial period beginning in June, landlords will be asked to join the scheme and agree to limit their usage of boards. The scheme has the full backing of Nottingham City Council.

Cllr Dave Trimble, Nottingham City Councillor for Dunkirk and Lenton Ward, said that "Nottingham City Council will be giving its full support to this new proposed scheme and we hope it will also find the support of Nottingham's landlord community."



In conjunction with the City Council and the Nottingham Action Group, Unipol are holding the following open meetings where residents can make their views known before the voluntary scheme takes effect in June:

MONDAY, 16 MARCH:
7.15 pm, St. Mary's Church Hall, Wollaton Hall Drive, Wollaton Park

WEDNESDAY, 18 MARCH:
6.30 pm, Thomas Helwys Church, Church Street, Lenton

WEDNESDAY, 15 APRIL
7.15 pm, St. Mary's Church Hall, Wollaton Hall Drive, Wollaton Park

In particular, Unipol wants feedback from local residents about the details and restrictions of the scheme. For example, restrictions could include regulating the number of boards any one agent/landlord can display per street, the size and type of boards used, the way that the boards are displayed and the time of year that boards are permitted to be in place.



The second initiative is the Unipol Garden Survey. So far around 1,300 properties have been accredited under the Unipol DASH Code. On Thursday, 7 May, Unipol will

be inspecting hundreds of gardens at accredited properties in local neighbourhood to make sure they comply with the Code.



Faye Powell, Unipol's Accreditation Officer is looking forward to the Garden Survey and said, "After the first round of inspections last summer, there were some real transformations of poor gardens, and it's hoped it will have the same impact this time too."

[Guy Welton, Unipol Nottingham Bureau Manager, March, 2009

**HELP NEEDED
&
INFORMATION GIVEN**

The Nottingham Action Group is looking for volunteers to help Unipol with the Garden Survey, so if you are free on the day and would like to help, please get in touch

Tel: 07762-525-625

E-Mail: contact@nottinghamaction.org.uk



For more information about these schemes or about any of Unipol's activities, please contact:

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CONTROL OF LETTING BOARDS

VOLUNTARY SCHEME CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

This document provides the framework for the various public consultation meetings taking place in March and April of this year.

There are a significant number of privately rented properties in the Lenton, Dunkirk and Radford areas. This has resulted in a proliferation of 'to Let' boards in recent years, having a detrimental impact upon the visual appearance of streets in the area.

In order to control the density of boards and improve the appearance of the area, Unipol and Nottingham City Council have devised a voluntary scheme on the erection of boards. The scheme aims to control the visual impact of 'To Let' boards, whilst allowing landlords to legitimately advertise their properties.

The details of the scheme are as follows, and will operate within the boundaries of the attached map:

- Each landlord or property owner shall not display more than one board per street, per type of property
- The board shall conform to the following layout:
 - ◆ 34cm x 48cm either in portrait or landscape
 - ◆ White background with text in a single colour
 - ◆ Up to 20% may be occupied by a logo
- There shall be no 'let by' signs
- The board shall be removed within 14 days of the property being let
- Boards should be mounted on buildings and should not be placed on posts in the gardens or the grounds.

TIME FRAME

Unipol has agreed to take the lead on the voluntary scheme which will be operational from 1 June, 2009 for a period of six months after which it will be evaluated.

JOINING THE VOLUNTARY SCHEME

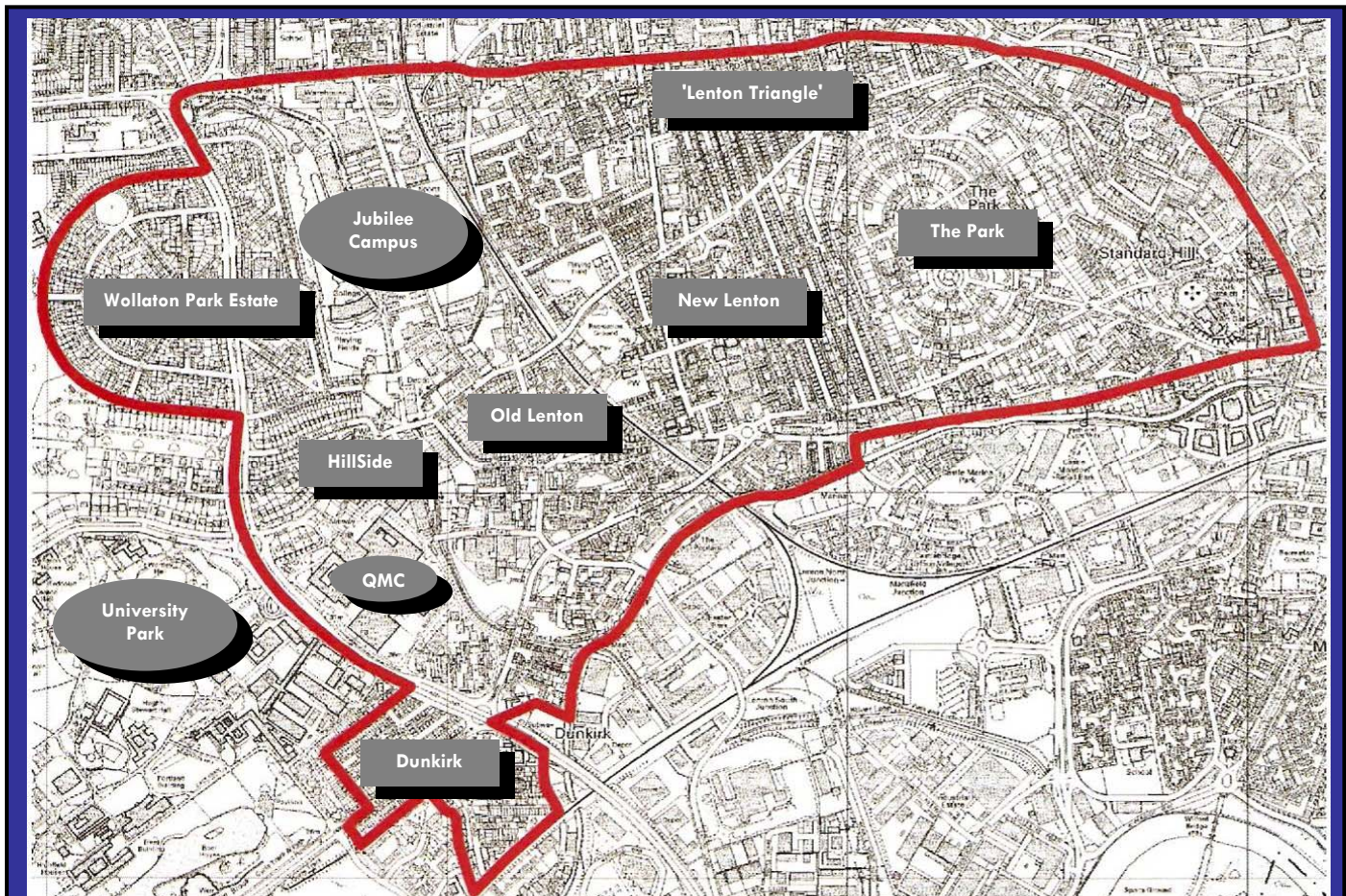
All landlords and managing agents with properties in the area will be formally invited to commit to joining the scheme.

MONITORING THE VOLUNTARY SCHEME

Unipol will engage a number of partners and they and Unipol will monitor the use of Letting Boards within the boundaries of the restriction area.

REVIEWING THE SCHEME

A review will take place in December, 2009. If the voluntary scheme has not been deemed successful, Nottingham City Council has agreed to apply for further mandatory powers to control boards from the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is envisaged that the mandatory scheme would use the same conditions as the voluntary scheme as detailed above, with the important addition of a moratorium on all boards, likely to take place during the month of November each year. During this period, no letting boards should be displayed on any properties in the control area.



PROPOSED AREA OF SPECIAL CONTROL OF LETTING BOARDS OUTLINED IN RED

LEEDS CITY COUNCIL GUIDANCE FOR LANDLORDS

You may find it useful to take a look extracts from Leeds City Council's new draft 'Guidance for Landlords on the Erection of Residential Letting Boards in Inner North West Leeds, January 2009' and compare the conditions it imposes with those proposed for Nottingham.

WHY IS THERE A CODE?

Leeds City Council has produced this document to help landlords/agents of residential properties comply with the special restrictions in place in part of inner north west Leeds.

The Area of Special Control has been designated following approval by Communities and Local Government (CLG). There are a significant number of privately rented properties in the Headingley and Hyde Park areas. Whilst there has been a proliferation of 'To let' boards in the past, a successful Code has been in place since 2006 which has improved the visual appearance of streets in the area.

In order to continue exercising the powers granted by CLG, the City Council has revised the previous Code in consultation with key stakeholders. The Code aims to control the visual impact of 'To Let' boards, whilst allowing landlords to legitimately advertise their properties.

WHAT IS THE CODE?

The code states:

- **Only one board per building will be permitted.**
- **Each board will conform to the following layout:
34cm x 48cm or 48cm x 34cm.**
- **The board shall be mounted flush to the wall above/around the front door, or if that is not possible, it shall be mounted flush to the wall on the street frontage elevation. In either instance, no part of the board shall be higher than first-floor window sill level.**
- **The board shall have a white background with black text. Up to 20% of the board may be occupied by a logo (which may be in colour).**
- **One board shall be permitted per landlord/agent per street. However, if a landlord/agent specifies on the board, the number of bedrooms in the advertised property, one board shall be permitted per type of property, up to a maximum of three per street. ...**
- **There shall be no 'Let By' signs.**
- **'To Let' boards shall be removed not later than 14 days of the granting of a tenancy for the room, house or flat in question.**
- **All 'To Let' boards shall be removed by 1st November each year with no new boards being erected until 1st January. ...**

... WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

'To Let' boards usually benefit from deemed consent i.e. they do not require permission. Within the Area of Special Control, 'To Let' boards will be subject to control by the City Council. Only those boards which are in accordance with the code are likely to be considered acceptable. ...

... WHAT ENFORCEMENT ACTION CAN BE TAKEN?

The Council's Compliance Team are carrying out regular surveys of the Area of Special Control and pursuing prosecutions where appropriate. The Council can immediately bring a prosecution in the Magistrates Court. The maximum fine on conviction of an offence is presently £1000, with an additional daily fine of one-tenth of the maximum penalty on conviction of a continuing offence.

...

LEEDS HMO LOBBY LETTING BOARDS IN LEEDS

Leeds City Council's conclusion is that: '*... Whilst there has been a proliferation of 'To let' boards in the past, a successful Code has been in place since 2006 which has improved the visual appearance of streets in the area. ...*' However, in the final analysis success has to be down to whether the people on the ground – the residents – have found that the scheme has improved the situation in Leeds, or not.

Richard Tyler's short article 'Letting Boards in Leeds' provides some background to the Leeds scheme and also an assessment of its usefulness in tackling the problems in Headingley

A decade ago, when Leeds City Council began to take seriously the concerns of the residents of Headingley about the impact of concentrations of HMOs (what has now come to be known as 'studentification'), one of the particular issues was Letting Boards. The streets of Headingley presented an infestation of these boards, particularly at the time of student 'house-hunting'.

After local consultation, in 2000 the Council agreed to carry out a pilot scheme, in which landlords were asked to observe a voluntary code of practice, restraining the use of the boards. The scheme was introduced at the beginning of 2001, and monitored partly by the Council and partly by local community associations in a trial area. The pilot was an abysmal failure.

Accordingly, the Council resolved to apply to the government for powers to impose a compulsory scheme. An application was made in 2002, but in the Spring of 2003, the government rejected it (The grounds were never entirely clear.).

Undaunted, the Council tried again. An exhaustive case was prepared, and re-submitted in December 2004. A Public Inquiry was held in February 2005, and in July, the government approved the Council's application.

In January 2006, the scheme came into effect. Deemed consent for Letting Boards within a designated area was withdrawn. This meant that anyone wishing to erect such a board required planning permission. However, the Council agreed a Code with landlords and residents: boards which respected this Code were permitted without planning permission. Initially, some landlords flouted the Code - but enforcement and prosecutions meant that in due course, the Code became widely observed. In fact, in addition to the compulsory area, members of Leeds Property Association volunteered to establish a much larger voluntary zone, which they

undertook to police. The effect has been the transformation of Headingley's streets.

The government gave permission for a period of three years, which expired at the end of 2008. Accordingly, the Council applied for a renewal in the summer of 2008, proposing some amendments to the Code and an expansion of the compulsory area, with the agreement of the LPA. Regrettably, delay by the government has meant that we still await a decision on renewal. In the mean time, the scheme as a whole operates on a voluntary basis.

[Dr. Richard Tyler, Leeds HMO Lobby, March, 2009]

NOTTINGHAM

WILL CONTROLS WORK HERE?

The experience in Leeds is mirrored by that in Loughborough. Charnwood Borough Council also has permission from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to operate controls on letting boards in a designated 'area of special control' in the town.

Also as in Leeds, the original Loughborough application to DCLG was unsuccessful. However, we gather from colleagues in Loughborough, that this was put down to the fact that a voluntary scheme was not undertaken in the first instance before Charnwood Borough Council's application to DCLG.

Once the voluntary scheme had been tried and had been shown to have failed, Charnwood Borough Council's subsequent application to DCLG was successful.

This is why, with the Leeds and Loughborough examples in mind, that here in Nottingham consultations on a voluntary code are taking place, and why that code will be assessed for its success or failure at the end of a six-month trial period.

So, will similar controls work in Nottingham if the voluntary code fails? There do not appear to be any reasons why not. The situation in the proposed area of special control here are no different from those in Headingley in Leeds and the Storer and Ashby Road parts of Loughborough.

Of more than passing interest is the knock-on effects, reported by Richard Tyler in Leeds and colleagues in Loughborough that their areas of special control have had elsewhere. In both Leeds and Loughborough, areas of voluntary control have now sprung up outside those covered by DCLG's permission to remove deemed consent. Landlords and letting agents, having been compelled to adhere to a code, have started to operate the same code elsewhere, and without compulsion.

This supports research carried out recently with Nottingham's student population which indicates that 'To Let' boards outside properties are a relatively minor way of advertising properties to students looking for accommodation. The internet in general, and specialized websites like that operated by Unipol in particular, are far more likely to be used by students when house-hunting.

It also supports the theory that landlords and agents use letting boards more as a means of advertizing themselves or, especially in the case of lettings agents, the

amount of work they do for the fees they charge their clients. In other words, the perennial display of letting boards in our neighbourhoods can be compared to the sort of 'fitness' displays and territorial marking indulged in by a variety of different animal species.

Looked at in this light, it's something to make you laugh, albeit that the laugh is somewhat hollow.

WILL THEY IMPROVE OUR STREETS?

Here are two photographs taken in Lenton and one taken in a street where the Leeds' Area of Special Control is in operation. Appearance is often a very subjective matter, but, if these examples are anything to go by, the answer has to be yes!



Letting Boards: Mettham Street & Park Road, Lenton



Burleigh Lodge Road: The 'traditional' boards on view are two 'For Sale' boards. Letting boards are small, above doors, flush to the walls and unobtrusive