

THE UNIVERSITIES, STUDENT UNIONS, STUDENTS & THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Nottingham Action Group on HMOs (NAG) organized an open meeting in March of this year with Professor Karen Cox and Stephen Dudderidge (Nottingham University) and Professor Anne Priest and Michael Lees (Nottingham Trent University).

Following on from that meeting, it was suggested that it would be useful if the NAG were to compile a 'wish list' of actions the universities should undertake as part of a long-term commitment to playing their role in improving those of our neighbourhoods where HMOs, their owners and their student tenants have a significant impact.

In putting together the list, advice was sought from a cross-section of NAG members, and took into account the topics raised at the March 2010 open meeting and at the large number of other NAG meetings that have taken place both before and since the Group was formally constituted in 2004.

The result is not so much a list of demands as list of those actions NAG members believe can be reasonably requested of the universities. Some are measures that can be implemented relatively fast to provide 'quick' wins for all parties: universities, councils, students and, of course, established residents. Others will need long-term commitment in terms of time and effort in order to achieve results. However, the NAG strongly believes that, taken together, these actions will produce lasting benefits for everyone.

THE NAG 'WISH LIST'

1. PUBLIC MEETINGS:

NAG meetings with Nottingham's universities provide a platform from which each university can explain what it is doing, and explain the limitations imposed on it. They also provide an opportunity for feedback that is essential if all parties are to monitor the progress of actions, assess their impact on the issues that concern NAG members, and inform the development of future actions. With this in mind, it is important that NAG open meetings with the two universities (jointly and/or separately) happen on a more regular basis than hitherto. The NAG suggests that twice-yearly meetings would provide a useful starting point.

2. INFORMATION:

In relation to public (and other) meetings with residents, the universities should have facts and figures available so that they can respond to the sort of questions they should anticipate attendees will ask. They should also be prepared to brief attendees on the actions they have undertaken in response to issues raised at previous meetings.

3. CODE OF DISCIPLINE:

Residents appreciate that quite a lot has been done in developing the two sets of Codes of Discipline and they welcome this. However, they feel that to be really useful the Codes must be clear, simple to read and easily understood by students and established residents alike.

There is also a feeling that neighbourhood-related matters need to be placed fairly and squarely at the beginning of the codes so as to highlight and emphasize them to even the most casual reader.

Disciplinary procedures need to be clearly defined, be transparent, and they need to be rapid. It would be good for them to be publicized as widely as possible to established residents as well as to students.

There should also be a presumption that when an established resident complains to the universities, they have good reason to do so.

Furthermore, since there is an increasing overlap between neighbourhoods that had been traditionally 'Nottingham University student areas' or 'Nottingham Trent student areas', it is important that, at least with respect to off-campus issues, the universities need to adopt as closely as possible the same disciplinary procedures and the same sanctions.

4. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR:

Especially in respect of incidents of anti-social behaviour that occur at night, this is by far and away the one issue which, if it were to be tackled successfully, would provide a 'win-win' situation for the universities, established residents, the council, the students unions and students themselves. Feedback from NAG members on how this might be done highlights two possible avenues that should be explored. Both involve the universities' security staff and require a high degree of co-operation between the universities, the council and the police.

- (i) where feasible to set up night-time patrols of areas with large concentrations of student housing;
- (ii) and/or respond rapidly to calls from residents about problems, even if these occur late at night or at week-ends.

The general feeling is that whereas a voice mail helpline is better than nothing, it does not address the immediate need, e.g. it does not help a family to get back to sleep when they are being disturbed by noise or other anti-social behaviour.

In cases where problems can be attributed to individual properties (as is probably the usual case) rather than individual tenants (walking down the street singly or in groups, for example), the assumption is that the universities have (or at least should have) accurate information about where their students are living. Therefore it should be possible for the universities' security staff to confirm whether the problem is due to a student-occupied property and, indeed, to which university's students, and then to act accordingly. The note above about Codes of Discipline is also relevant here.

5. PARKING:

Problems associated with parking are a consistent source of unhappiness and irritation for established residents and occur in all neighbourhoods with student housing in them (whether HMOs, privately run purpose built accommodation, or university halls of residence) and encompass on-street as well as off-street parking. It is the NAG's very strong feeling that established residents should have first priority when it comes to parking provision, and both universities need to ensure that students do not bring cars to Nottingham.

Of course there is a case for making exceptions to this general rule, for example students with disabilities that make it difficult for them to use public transport. Also students, such as those reading for medical and veterinary degrees, whose degree courses mean that they have to travel outside the convenient scope of public transport.

We appreciate that the universities advice is that students do not bring cars to Nottingham. However, it is evident that this is being ignored. Therefore, we feel that the universities should make it clear to students that bringing a car to Nottingham (regardless of whether the student is living in an HMO, purpose built accommodation, or university hall of residence) without due cause is an infringement of the Code of Discipline and will be penalised.

Another issue related to parking is that of the increasing 'desirability' to the student population of properties which have off street parking available (e.g. driveway or, as in so often the case, gardens and yards that can be used to park a car). Landlords respond to this by targeting those houses which, under different circumstances, also appeal to families. This removes precisely those properties from the housing market that Nottingham as a whole actually needs to help redress its inability to provide good-sized family homes within the City's envelope, and so reduce (or reverse) the drift of families away from the City into Greater Nottingham.

6. QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF STUDENT HMOs:

Yet another consistent source of concern for members of the NAG is the lack of management and maintenance by landlords and agents of student HMOs. We support the efforts of the City Council and, latterly of Unipol, to improve the quality of HMOs, but we feel that the universities (and their students' unions) need to be much more engaged in:

6.1. Ensuring that students are actively made aware of and steered away from properties where the landlord and/or agent has a history of providing poor standards of management and maintenance, and where the HMOs and/or previous tenants, the landlord and/ or the agent have a record of causing problems to neighbouring properties.

6.2. Providing the driving force behind year-on-year and substantial improvements to the standard of management and maintenance of student HMOs.

6.3. Encouraging students to expect higher standards of management and maintenance; encouraging them to report instances when they have encountered difficulties with landlords and/or agents; and providing the facilities needed for them to do so safely.

6.4. Established residents already provide substantial amounts of information about the standards of the HMOs in their neighbourhoods. We believe that it is essential for the universities to share the data they may collect under point 6.3 above with each other, with their students' unions, with the City Council, with Unipol and, indeed, with residents themselves.

6.5. The year-on-year environmental impact that students have on the neighbourhoods they live in (along with those that they happen to travel through on a regular basis, especially late at night) is raised regularly by established residents.

The strong suggestion has been made that there are grounds for the two universities to ensure that environmental impact issues are consistently and regularly highlighted by the universities in clear recognition that the problems that arise will continue to do so and that they will need to be tackled annually.

In addition to issues around wheelie bins, dropping litter like cans, left over food, etc. and waste management in general, there is a need to also emphasize to students that when they live in HMOs they have a responsibility for ensuring that rubbish and litter are removed from the gardens and yards (front and back) of these properties. Also, that they need to make reasonable efforts to ensure that any plants, shrubs, etc. in the gardens, especially to the frontages of properties, are kept tidy. We feel that this a reasonable thing to ask of the occupants

We know that the points made above are already being tackled to a greater or lesser extent, but we feel that the universities do need to be more obviously supportive of established residents and councils and need to give stronger leadership in this matter.

7. BALANCING THE 'COMMUNITY':

The NAG believe that the universities have a real role (as well as moral and practical responsibility) to play in preventing further conversion of family homes into HMOs and in supporting established residents and councils in efforts to reverse the imbalance in our neighbourhoods resulting from increasing university student numbers.

In furtherance of this aim, the NAG would welcome the active and public support of Nottingham's two universities for the efforts of the City Council, the Nottingham Action Group (as part of the National HMO Lobby), the Councillors Campaign for Balanced Communities and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Balanced and Sustainable Communities to ensure that national planning and housing legislation provide the tools needed to enable our neighbourhoods to be places where families want to live – not leave.

8. PURPOSE BUILT STUDENT HOUSING:

To achieve the above aim means that ultimately a substantial number of students must be diverted away from HMOs and into, for want of better words, 'purpose built accommodation', not just in their first year, but in subsequent years. The NAG membership hope that in addition to strongly advocating purpose built accommodation to students (as well as explaining the differences between purpose built accommodation and halls of residence), the universities will take on the role of main players in a number of different actions:

8.1. Research into what type of purpose built accommodation (e.g. style, facilities, rental) would provide the sort of choice that would be attractive to students and which would encourage students to move into it rather than into HMOs.

8.2. Using the data from (8.1) (and working alongside the local planning authority, student unions and established residents) to commission architects to draw up ideas for future purpose built accommodation that will fulfil the requirements outlined above, and set about building this accommodation on their campuses as an example of what can be done elsewhere.

8.3. The universities alongside the student unions need to engage with schools and prospective students (and their parents) well before they reach sixth-form in order to help change the present culture and expectations. We acknowledge that this is a long-term gambit, but, if successful, it would have very substantial and positive results for all of us, including those landlords who maintain the highest possible standards and deal professionally with their tenants and established residents