

2nd Feb 2018

The Editor,
Bath Chronicle

Dear Editor,

Student Accommodation in Bath, and its Effect on Affordable Housing

A fundamental issue of concern to Bath's residents is the excessively high demand for private sector student accommodation caused by the universities' rapid expansion, whilst providing accommodation for only about a quarter of their students.

As part of its preparation of a new Local Plan covering the period to 2036, B&NES recently issued a consultation paper in which Bath's student population is forecast to rise to almost 30,000 within 3 years. This would represent close to one-third of the city's population. Last year, demand from the 11,700 students who sought accommodation in the private sector resulted in 2,335 student Houses in Multiple Occupation which, through Council Tax exemptions, deprived B&NES of over £4M of income. Demand for off-campus student housing is forecast to rise by the equivalent of a further 375 HMOs within 3 years.

It is not surprising that, as sharing an HMO remains considerably more affordable than renting a room in purpose-built accommodation (whether on or off-campus), the demand for HMOs continues to increase. B&NES' Core Strategy calls for the creation of 7,020 new dwellings in the city to meet forecast housing demand, about one-third of which will need to be affordable housing. Increasing numbers of students taking up accommodation in the city, whether in HMOs or in purpose built student accommodation, can only add to the pressures on housing in Bath.

The Federation of Bath Residents' Associations (FoBRA) has no wish to see students saddled with further debt. For decades, we have been calling, in vain, for a Student Housing Policy for Bath. The universities, with their healthy annual surpluses and charitable status leading to Business Rate reduction, should be required (subject to the constraints of the Green Belt and Cotswolds AONB) to

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provide affordable campus accommodation for a significantly higher proportion of students; and planning permission for further expansion should be conditional upon their doing so, as is the case in Oxford. As an example, providing campus accommodation for a third of students (at attractive prices), rather than a quarter, could free up the equivalent of 500 HMOs in Bath.

My main question to B&NES' Cabinet is this, therefore:

“Does B&NES' Council consider it appropriate to continue to proceed without an effective Student Housing Policy that seeks to control the number of students taking up accommodation in the city?”

It has been reported that B&NES' Council has recently initiated discussions with the universities with the aim of their making “a fair [financial] contribution to the city”. FoBRA strongly advocates this approach, combined with negotiating, agreeing and implementing a well-overdue effective Student Housing Policy.

Yours sincerely,

(R.G.Kerr – Chairman)