

Brighton & Hove City Council

Housing Committee

Agenda Item 65(c)

Subject: Member Letter: Housing Policy & Drug Dealing

Date of meeting: 16 March 2022

Ward(s) affected: All

For general release

**Councillor Nancy Platts
East Brighton Ward**

3rd March 2022

Housing policy and drug dealing

Dear Cllr Hugh-Jones and Cllr Gibson

I would like to ask for your support for a review of housing policy to be conducted as a matter of urgency. This review needs to look at housing policy around 'sensitive lets' and the goal of zero evictions in relation to the placement of people with a history of drug use and drug dealing onto housing estates that have previously and recently experienced a similar problem.

As you may be aware, the residents of Craven Vale have been put through a disturbing, frightening and thoroughly miserable experience due to drug taking, dealing and cuckooing on their estate.

The residents of Craven Vale take a pride in their estate. This is reflected by the neat and tidy garden areas and there are always new projects in the pipeline to improve the environment.

There is an active residents' association that organise lively and fun events, socials, a food bank, café and regular meetings to keep people involved. People take an interest in their neighbours and care for one another.

It was a very happy and peaceful community. But in recent years' that peace has been disrupted by the scourge of drugs.

Residents have experienced disturbed nights, violence, broken windows and doors and even a person collapsing outside a block allegedly after taking drugs secured from a dealer who was living there.

We have organised multi-agency meetings to try and get organisations to work with one another to understand the impact on residents and do something about the problem. After a slightly bumpy start, we succeeded in establishing a way of working where residents' reporting delivered sufficient evidence that resulted in court action and evictions.

To get this far required a lot of courage and I am proud of the residents for coming together to tackle this problem and for making statements to the police that could be used in court. I also made a statement to the police for use in court about the impact on residents.

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We were able to take this action because we built an environment of trust and support at those multi-agency meetings and believed it would return to residents the peaceful life they had previously enjoyed and that they are entitled to.

In addition, because we are not naive in believing the problem will go away, you'll recall that I put forward a budget amendment in 2021 for a Drug Impact Coordinator and summit. We wanted the learning from that awful experience to act as a template for how agencies, residents and Councillors work together in the future to stamp out drug dealing on our estates. That amendment was agreed across all political parties.

The idea of the role was to raise the voice of residents and understand the impact on them, because they feel the Council focuses too much on the vulnerability of those engaged in dealing.

That role is now in place and we await the summit.

Meanwhile, the success we had on Craven Vale has quickly unravelled due to our Housing Policy.

Following the evictions of those involved in drug dealing, it was agreed that certain flats would be subject to 'sensitive lets' so as to give residents some respite. However, whilst this covered the specific flats from which people were previously evicted, we were told that it couldn't cover the whole estate.

As a result, in a matter of weeks, we have found ourselves back at square one.

There are active dealers back on the estate, living in Council properties. In addition, people with a history of dealing, have been housed close to people who are recovering from drug abuse, undermining those individuals' efforts and the officers supporting them. We need a more joined-up approach to these problems.

Light bulbs have been broken so that the dealers can operate under cover of darkness. I asked for all of these to be repaired in January and for all lights to be proactively tested, as a matter of urgency, and gave the reasons why. Those repairs have still not been completed.

Residents are at their wits end. Trust and confidence in the Council and other agencies are being rapidly lost. Residents believe the current situation is a 'dereliction of duty' by the Council and the duty of care they owe to the residents who are not involved in drug dealing but are seriously impacted by it. The Council's goal of zero evictions appears to actively work against the interests of residents who are having their day-to-day lives destroyed by drug dealing.

In short, the relationship between the Council and residents on this estate is in a downward spiral.

I am going to read you some of the comments that have been sent to me – and these are anonymised because whilst trying to get some change for residents, I also have a responsibility to protect them

'...the after-effects of Hadlow Close which took years to address are still felt today'.

'Images and sounds etched in residents' minds, voices filled with pain, holding back tears, as they're coming forward to share their experiences to help in trying to resolve the current situation...'

'For a few months we, on the Craven Vale Estate, felt what it was like to be in a safe environment - as is promised by the Council to tenants. That time is now over, for we see the council has housed two people (in separate tenancies) who are immediately blatantly dealing.'

'We have still not recovered mentally, physically or financially from the havoc of last years' situation.'

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'...there's been nothing but trouble, drugs people in and out all day and night banging. It wakes us up at least four nights a week. The problems haven't stopped.'

'We will not cope, as a neighbourhood...if yet another dealer (or vulnerable individual, who WILL be instantly cuckooed) is moved into this premises. We have seen how it takes years to resolve. We are now incredibly familiar with the pattern that follows. We see what is going on daily - a drug gang has stamped on this estate and is just waiting for a vulnerable tenant to move in - and then they swoop in.'

'The residents are just really angry that the council are supporting people that are working illegally and causing trouble and when they have a problem takes years to get them out

'...people are absolutely livid at the moment ...you'll get one out and then they put two more in.'

In conclusion, it is my view, we now need to take a tougher line and I ask for your support for the following actions:

1. Where there have been drugs problems on an estate, we need a period of time when our residents can have respite from this problem. We need to review Council housing policy - both permanent and temporary - on sensitive lets and ensure that we don't resolve the problem one day, only to bring it back the next.
2. Whilst the original goal of zero evictions may have been arrived at with the best of intentions, it is now having the unintended consequence of preventing law-abiding residents from feeling safe in their own homes and this needs to be reviewed.
3. We need to speed up progress towards a plan of action to stop drug taking, cuckooing and drug dealing on our estates.
4. When residents or Councillors ask for urgent action, such as lights to be repaired, to make life more difficult for dealers to operate, we need it to happen.
5. When residents are asked to report incidents, we need that process to be clear and reassurance given that the information will be treated seriously, logged and maintained, not for residents to be ticked off for reporting the wrong things, to the wrong people or for sending too many emails.
6. We need to get better at understanding the impact and vulnerability of our residents who are doing the right thing and to improve our response.
7. We need to get better at co-ordinating across Directorates and within Directorates and across other agencies. We should not expect residents to have to negotiate a route through a maze of bureaucracy, whilst losing weeks when we could be working together to solve the problem instead.

On behalf of the residents of Craven Vale, please seriously consider our requests and review Council policy on sensitive lets, evictions and housing people with a known history of drug dealing on our estates.

I would be grateful for a written response that I can share with residents that fully addresses the points set out in my letter.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Nancy Platts
East Brighton Ward

