Agenda Item 7

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (ASCHOSC)
AD HOC PANEL MEETING: STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

2PM, OCTOBER 17 2008

COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Meadows (Chairman), Janio, Wrighton.

PART ONE

1. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

1a Declarations of Interest

1.1 There were none.

1b Exclusion of Press and Public

1.2 The Committee considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of any items contained in the agenda, having regard to the nature of the business to be transacted and the nature of the proceedings and the likelihood as to whether, if members of the press and public were present, there would be disclosure to them of confidential or exempt information as defined in Schedule 12A, Part 5A, Section 100A(4) or 100 1 of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

1.3 **RESOLVED -** That the press and public be not excluded from the meeting.

2. MINUTES (of the previous meeting)

2.1 There were none as this was the initial meeting of the panel.

3. CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS

3.1 The Chairman explained that this ad hoc panel had been established following examination of the council's draft Housing Strategy by the Adult Social Care and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee (ASCHOSC).

3.2 Whilst the council's draft Housing Strategy was formulated with extensive reference to issues relating to student housing, members felt that there was nonetheless an opportunity for a more focused piece of work on the issues relating to students

living in the local community: hence this scrutiny panel, which will seek to take evidence from local residents (including students) and from a variety of expert sources, including officers of the City Council, Brighton and Sussex Universities, the police and city landlords.

4. EVIDENCE FROM WITNESSES

4.1 Panel members heard evidence from a number of city residents with points to make about the issue of students living in the local community.

4.2 Evidence from Sheila Rough, Milner Road

4.2(a) Ms Rough made the following points:

- The Milner Road area had now reached saturation point with students, and that additional accommodation on campus was therefore needed urgently;
- Privately rented housing occupied by students ('student houses') now outnumber other types of housing in the area;
- There should be a cap on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)* permitted in one street;
- The number of student houses in the area has a negative impact on general property values;
- The number of houses occupied by a number of adults (many of whom have their own cars) causes severe parking problems, exacerbated by anti-social behaviour in relation to parking (i.e. double-parking) which has the potential to impede emergency vehicle access;
- There is a major issue of noise nuisance (esp. late night parties);
- Rubbish is a major problem, with some students not adhering to collection days, not recycling etc;
- The universities should accept more responsibility for their students living in private sector housing;
- The universities should take responsibility for informing students of appropriate behaviour in terms of living in the community;
- Noise problems are constant, with particular problems at or after 3am;
- She had tried in the past to talk to individual students about these issues, but had been discouraged by negative responses;
- She had tried to involve the police, but had been discouraged by the police response (not attending incidents etc.);
- She would suggest key areas for improvement were: imposing a street-by-

street cap on student numbers; provision of more on-campus accommodation; better guidance from the universities on appropriate student behaviour.

* NB: 'HMO' has a particular meaning in planning law – referring to housing with three floors or more/six or more occupants not living as a family unit. However, it is also frequently used more generally to refer to privately rented housing shared by several adults – e.g. to 'student houses', although relatively few student houses in the city are, technically speaking, HMOs. It seems sensible to assume that non-expert witnesses to the panel use the term HMO to refer to shared private sector rented housing in general.

4.3 **Evidence from Ted Harman, Chair of Coldean Tenant's Association**

4.3(a) Mr Harman made the following points:

- There are some problems with students in Coldean, particularly in terms of the number of adults living at some properties and in terms of parking;
- Although there have been isolated problems with student behaviour (including urinating in front gardens), most students are polite and do not cause trouble;
- Bus stops in the area can become very crowded with students queuing to go in to town etc. Sometimes the sheer number of students waiting for buses can pose a problem, particularly for older people/people with young children who can feel intimidated (even when no one intends to be intimidating);
- Given the very large numbers of people in the city on the shortlist for family homes, can it be a sensible use of resources to house students in homes more obviously suited to families?

4.4 **Evidence from Mr Wright, Southall Avenue**

4.4(a) Mr Wright made the following points:

- The major problems with students involve noise and rubbish;
- There is also a problem with absentee landlords who do not upkeep their properties;
- Clear guidance from the council and from universities (particularly in terms of refuse collection dates etc) might help;
- Furniture is frequently dumped in the front gardens of student houses for long periods of time. More pressure should be placed on landlords to ensure that this does not happen;
- Stickers placed on rubbish bins (giving details of collection days) would be useful. (This was endorsed by other audience members).

4.5 **Evidence from Anna Hunter, Hanover**

4.5(a) Ms Hunter made the following points:

- There was a growing feeling amongst Hanover residents that problems associated with students had reached an unsustainable level and that things needed to change;
- Hanover residents recognised the value of a vibrant and mixed community which welcomed students, but feared that the mix of the community had become unbalanced;
- Residents (both students and long-terms residents) could make an effort to get to know their neighbours;
- Most students are reasonable enough, but a minority cause very major disturbances; the problem is particularly centred around the Phoenix Halls of Residence and surrounding streets;
- Noise is the biggest problem in Hanover; a fact recognised by many students themselves;
- There have been positive changes in recent months, with local pubs enforcing drinking inside after 10pm and less graffiti appearing;
- The 'SSHH' campaign has had some effect and is much appreciated by residents;
- It is not always clear who people should contact with noise/ASB complaints. In particular, council Environmental Health services need a clearer pathway for complaints and all council staff need to be aware of and able to refer into this pathway. Too often, council staff offer conflicting advice to complainants;
- The situation at Phoenix Hall could be improved by Brighton University ensuring that: two security officers are present (and on duty) at nights (one officer cannot police the entire Halls effectively); that residents do not play loud music with their windows open; that more of an effort is taken to remind residents of the need to be considerate to neighbours; that firmer action (including academic sanction) is taken against persistent troublemakers.

4.6 **Evidence from Trevor Wood, Coldean Residents' Association**

4.6(a) Mr Wood made the following points:

- That students are normal people, often living away from home for the first time, and shouldn't be blamed for everything;
- Giving houses with 5 or 6 adults a wheelie bin the same size as that

allocated to normal households does not make sense, as there is inevitably more rubbish produced than the bin can hold (which means the extra rubbish goes in black bags which are then pecked open by seagulls etc.);

- There are problems which CityClean needs to address, such as unacceptably long waits for recycling boxes and CityClean operatives who refuse to pick up recycling which hasn't been left in precisely the correct place. Such actions tend to discourage students from recycling when the council should be working hard to encourage them;

- In terms of noise problems, the Residents' Association makes a point of obtaining landlord details whenever possible and contacts landlords should problems arise. This is an effective way of dealing with noise nuisance;

- Members of the Resident's Association make a point of welcoming new students to the area and trying to work together with them to address any problems which might arise (advising people where they should park etc.);

- There should be a cap on HMOs, and the universities must take some responsibility for housing their students;

- Coldean is a community which welcomes students, but it is also a pleasant area for families to live and it is very important that the family nature of the area is not lost through an excess of student housing.

4.7 **Evidence from Richa Kaul-Padte, Sussex University Students' Union**

4.7(a) Ms Kaul-Padte made the following points:

- There is a tendency to view all problems associated with young people sharing houses as being student related, but by no means all young people in shared accommodation are in fact students;

- Sussex University houses nearly all its 1st year students on campus (or students live with their families);

- There are also large numbers of part time and mature students who do not necessarily fit the stereotype of students;

- There should be a properly functioning accreditation system for landlords, to ensure that student housing is of an acceptable standard: both in terms of the quality of accommodation which students should expect to find, and in terms of the impact of student housing on the broader community (e.g. landlords should be discouraged from using conservatories as living spaces);

- The council should work together with the universities and the Students' Union on refuse and recycling issues in order to encourage student recycling;

- Students should be seen as part of the local community; students do lots of

volunteering and do make practical contributions to community cohesion;

Landlords and Lettings Agents could do much more in terms of refuse/recycling – ensuring that students have up to date information, advising on bulk waste disposal etc;

4.8 **Evidence from Gillian Fleming, Hanover**

4.8(a) Ms Fleming made the following points:

- That she does not feel the universities do enough to tackle problems caused by students – particularly in terms of noise;
- That Phoenix Halls of Residence is a particular source of problems, with more needing to be done by Brighton University to minimise the disruption caused to local residents (for example by placing tighter controls on students congregating on the 'podium' at night-time);
- That many students are very pleasant, but the annual churn of people in and out of student housing means that developing good relations with neighbours does not necessarily provide a permanent solution to neighbour problems.

4.9 **Evidence from Tanya, former student**

4.9(a) Tanya made the following points:

- Universities are in a 'catch-22' situation with regard to student accommodation: if they build halls of residence, they risk being accused of concentrating noise/ASB problems; if they rely upon private sector housing across the community, they risk being accused of not addressing the problem of housing their students;
- Universities can only fund new halls by increasing the student intake (which means increasing the future number of 2nd and 3rd year students seeking privately rented accommodation);
- Brighton University has no campus; it therefore has no option but to build halls in densely populated residential areas;
- A restriction on HMOs/student houses would only work if there was sufficient non-student demand (e.g. from young professionals) to replace students in particular areas. The risk would be that such restrictions would lead to empty homes;
- The 'problem' of students in the community may not be amenable to a single 'big-fix', but rather to a number of small scale interventions on issues such as refuse, recycling etc.

4.10 **Evidence from Tom Wills, near Lewes Road**

4.10(a) Mr Wills made the following points:

- He was shocked to hear of the behaviour of some students: such behaviour is by no means universal;
- In his experience local residents have been very reasonable and patient with students;
- Many students could manage quite happily without cars; perhaps the Students' Union could do more here to promote public transport;
- More campus accommodation is needed at the University of Sussex, particularly for 2nd and 3rd year students who would prefer to remain on-campus;
- Campus accommodation must be affordable; recent campus building has focused on the 'luxury' end of the student market (with en suites etc.) and such accommodation is beyond the means of many students;
- There is a basic lack of supply of student accommodation in the city; this means that landlords are not encouraged to bring rental properties up to an acceptable standard as they know that demand outstrips supply and that they will therefore find people who have no option other than to rent from them.

4.11 **Evidence from Julia Pilgrim, Hanover Terrace**

4.11(a) Ms Pilgrim made the following points:

- Noise is a major problem, even when the degree of noise does not reach a level at which Environmental Health (EH) services can take action;
- Noise problems are not just about students; non-students living in shared accommodation can cause just as many problems;
- Not all students cause problems; it's very much a minority;
- If the universities' contracts with students include sanctions for persistent ASB, then these should be enforced. If no such sanctions exist, they should be introduced;
- Noise can be very frightening: it's not just an issue of inconveniencing people;
- Preston Barracks should be considered as a possible site for dedicated student accommodation;

- A central point of contact for student-related problems (for people complaining about student behaviour, but also for students to use) would help, but only if it had real 'teeth';

- Given the size of local universities, they should really do more to manage their students' behaviour;

- Before EH will act on a noise problem, they require the perpetrator's exact address. Obtaining this information can be frightening, as it may involve going out on one's own in the early hours and possibly encountering the people who are making the noise who may well have been drinking heavily/taking drugs.

4.12 **Evidence from Adam, Sussex University**

4.12(a) Adam made the following points:

- That if city public transport was more affordable, fewer students might keep cars. As it is, it can be considerably cheaper to drive across the city than to take a bus;

- Students do not need to be singled out for special treatment: ASB should be treated as such whether students are its perpetrators or not;

- The universities have barred one landlord from advertising on their property lists, but that landlord is still doing business in the city, so it is not clear what effective sanction the universities actually have to ensure their students are housed by responsible landlords.

4.13 **Evidence from Sam, Brighton University**

4.13(a) Sam made the following points:

- He lives in Hanover and loves the area; he feels part of the community;

- Students should be encouraged to take an active role in the community, particularly in terms of engaging with Residents' Associations. This would help integrate students with long term residents and provide a means to address minor niggles before they escalate;

- The National Union of Students is currently running a Neighbourhood Pride campaign to encourage students to engage with their communities;

- Brighton University currently runs the SSHH campaign (silent students, happy homes);

- Housing density and inappropriate conversions of homes are essentially planning issues and the city council should take responsibility for them;

- Brighton University employs a full-time officer to liaise between the university and local communities.

5. Future meetings

5.1 The Panel plans to hold additional meetings in public on 07 November, 21 November and 05 December. Witnesses at these sessions may include officers from Brighton and Sussex Universities; officers of the City Council (including senior officers from CityClean , planning and housing strategy); police officers; academics who have studied the issue of 'studentification'; city landlords and representatives of student letting agencies.

The meeting concluded at 5pm

Signed Chair

Dated this day of 200X