

Statement to B&NES Cabinet – 2nd December 2015

I am Chris Beezley, a member of FoBRA.

FoBRA has long pressed B&NES for a formal strategy to address the challenge of housing large numbers of students in a compact city that hosts two popular universities.

Predicting future student numbers is notoriously inexact, and nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in a B&NES' Information Paper, referred to in the draft Placemaking Plan (PMP) before you today.

Previous versions of the Paper concluded that there would be little, if any, problem housing students up to 2026, with a best-case scenario freeing-up significant numbers of HMOs and a worst-case where the 12,000 students already living in the city might increase by just 1,000. FoBRA consistently disagreed, concluding that 3,000 extra student beds could be required.

FoBRA has recently revisited the issue, and now concludes that demand is more likely to be a staggering 6,500 within 10 years.

In the draft PMP, B&NES finally accepts FoBRA's view stating that, as early as 2020, even if 1,000 extra beds were provided on campus, there is likely to be a shortfall of over 5,000 private sector beds; that is another 1,300 HMOs, 11 accommodation blocks the size of the Green Park development, or some combination of the two.

With 24,000 students, Bath already hosts one of the highest proportions of students per head of population – over a quarter – and the PMP accepts that Bath currently 'over performs as a host to higher education'. With total student numbers predicted to rise by 8,000 in 5 years, it further states:

- that there is not enough land in Bath to accommodate the universities' expansion aspirations;
- that any further accommodation blocks will be limited to 'windfall' sites not identified for other uses;
- that beyond some point the cost of developing land for student accommodation blocks becomes harmful; and
- that the current rate of increase of HMOs under Article 4 Direction is far below that needed to absorb demand.

To some, the obvious solution is to accommodate more students on campus. Universities guarantee accommodation for new entrants, which amounts to a quarter of all students. After their first year, students prefer to live in town; also both campuses are tightly constrained by Green Belt and AONB designations.

In the absence of a strategic plan, with undefined sites for future accommodation blocks and the campuses approaching capacity, short of somehow limiting student numbers, FoBRA sees no alternative other than to watch HMO numbers rapidly increase across the city, probably by another 1,000 properties over the next 5 years. Is it sustainable that students should number one-third of the population and occupy well over 4,000 HMOs exempt from Council Tax?

In summary, FoBRA welcomes B&NES' acknowledgement, at last, of the extent of the challenge.

The PMP states that student accommodation is clearly a matter requiring a planning policy framework and policy direction at a strategic level, yet, and this is the important point, it offers no solutions.

FoBRA therefore seeks Cabinet's assurance that the long-overdue Student Housing Strategy is now developed as a matter of urgency, is regularly reviewed, engaging openly with the universities and residents, and that the Placemaking Plan is guided by it.

Chris Beezley

Federation of Bath Residents' Associations