

Party Houses in Bath – FoBRA statement for Bath City Forum

I want to paint a picture for you of “partying” in central Bath, two years hence. 67 large houses in the city are no longer inhabited by families, who would be quietly going about normal life and looking after their neighbourhood. This is because these 67 will be “Party Houses”, empty during the week, but erupting into a blaze of noise, bad behaviour and fire danger at the weekend by offering just under 700 beds for Hen and Stag Parties. It’s very good business for the owners because the Hens are prepared to pay a lot, and these Party Houses are untaxed, unregulated, unlicensed, free of planning approval or much in the way of overheads, and the law on them is so weak it can largely be ignored; but, on the other hand, it’s terrible for the neighbours; and central Bath has been inexorably ‘hollowed out’ by a combination of Airbnb and Party Houses (like Florence or Venice, and, in the UK, York and Brighton), though the disruption of Party Houses is much worse than from short term lettings. That’s what it will be like in 2019 unless we do something about it. In 2014 we had 23 of these Party Houses with 10 or more beds – some as many as 20: now we have 50, and more are in the pipeline. Is this what we want?

Bath is a beautiful place to spend the weekend, with plenty of pampering, great shops and things to do. The problem is that the partygoers habitually celebrate into the small hours and even go in for lewd behaviour, such as naked butlers or blow-up genitalia tied onto the front entrance door. The behaviour is often visible, either through the windows (no curtains!) or in the garden. With a hen party, almost always there is much drinking, dancing to loud music and a lot of candles – a potent recipe for a serious accident as well as the noise and the terrible disruption.

Here’s what neighbours say: *“We are isolated between two houses which are empty all week, depriving people of making these lovely houses their permanent home.” “One guest said: ‘We’ve hired this house and we can do what we like.’” “I’m not a killjoy but the regularity and inevitability of the whole procedure is extremely depressing.” “Luckily my bedroom is at the front of the house but I feel incredibly sorry for the residents on the ground floor.” “If they had said ‘We’re going to let it to hen parties every weekend’, we would have complained, but we didn’t, because nobody knew.” “I think it’s incredibly unfair that, essentially, what’s happening is a very lucrative business that they have no licence for.”*

There are not many applicable regulations, and the law is confused. Bath’s party houses would normally be occupied by one family or perhaps several families if the building is divided. So, the number of properties available for people to call their home is decreasing - by at least the current 50 party houses so far. The sense of community is greatly diminished. The Council says it is proud of the 10,000 people who live in the centre of the City, which is Council policy, and the Placemaking Plan,

calls for another 1150 homes in Bath, as it is good for Society, for security and for the maintenance of these great houses that constitute part of the attraction of our World Heritage Site. However, numbers must be nudging down to 9,000, as the Party Houses are not now used for living, but partying. Some might say that opposition to party houses is just rich residents being mean-spirited, trying to preserve their quiet quarter of Bath. However, the opposite is actually the case: central Bath houses are usually flatted and often occupied by families or individuals on modest incomes who buy or rent their house and want to preserve the buildings. They, like all of us, have a right to quiet enjoyment of their homes.

So, what is to be done? Firstly, the law needs to be strengthened: at present there is only one example of Case Law which applies, and two refused Planning Appeals, the problem being that these places do not fall clearly into a planning use category; by default they are treated as C3 (residential), but they are clearly not being used for normal residential purposes. There is case law for treating them as a 'special'; but this is not satisfactory in the long term, and the law needs to recognise it as a defined use. I am pleased that our new MP is aware of the problems and is already taking some action. The National Organization of Residents' Associations has briefed the Ministry on this problem, and will be taking part in discussions with them later this month. Selective Licensing may offer another route to control, but it needs detailed investigation. Moreover, there are good examples to be found abroad, notably in Amsterdam.

Secondly, the frightful fire hazard, which Party Houses are, needs to be brought in line with the regulations which apply to hotels, B&Bs and HMOs. Party Houses do not, at present, have to be inspected or comply with fire regulations, not least because most are operating unlawfully, without the correct planning consent. Of this lack of formal notification, Avon Fire & Rescue Service were unaware, but have now been alerted, with details of the large Party Houses in Bath – we don't want another Grenfell Tower!

Thirdly, the owners and operators of Party Houses need to pay business rates, because they are obviously operating as a business, presumably making a profit from the very high costs (and very low overheads) of renting a party house.

Lastly, the Council has to play its part by recognizing the problem. They say they receive few complaints from neighbours, but this is largely because neighbours dare not blight their properties with an official complaint or no one will buy it. The Council must either take action to require owners to apply for planning permission, thereby ensuring that other planning, building, and fire regulations are obeyed, and providing a chance for neighbours and statutory bodies to have a chance to oppose it; or introduce Selective Licensing.

The key question our Councillors and Council officers should ask themselves is "Would YOU want to live next door to a Party House?"

Robin Kerr, FoBRA Chairman, final, 11th Sep 17