

## **Party Houses in Bath – FoBRA statement for Chronicle**

A 'party house' in Bath is usually located in the city centre, often in a five-storey Georgian terrace, and probably in a Listed Building – an important part of our heritage. There are at least 48 party houses in the centre of Bath, each one offering more than 10 bedspaces, regularly more than 15 and sometimes as many as 20 bedspaces in one house. Imagine living next to a house which has, almost every weekend, up to 20 partygoers, coming to our City to celebrate. Often the celebration is a hen party, sometimes a stag party and occasionally a family celebration.

Bath has plenty of pampering, great shops and things to do. It is a beautiful place to spend the weekend, and a good place to have a party. In most cases, the owners rent the houses out solely for parties, and make a lot of money doing so. During the week, party houses are unoccupied. Then, at the weekend, they erupt into a blitz of life and it's very hard on the neighbours who probably bought their property before the party house use began next door, unlawfully, without planning permission. The problem is that these 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 alongside a bridal veil. The behaviour is often visible, either through the windows (no curtains!) or in the garden. With a hen party, almost always there is much alcoholic drink taken, 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.

By contrast, there are not many applicable rules or regulations, and the law is confused or does not apply in all cases. Bath's party houses would normally be occupied by one family or perhaps several families if the building is divided into flats to buy or rent. So, the number of properties available for people to call their home is decreasing - by at least the current 48 party houses so far. The sense of community is greatly diminished. The Council says it is very proud of the fact that about 10,000 people live in the centre of the City. It is Council policy, through the Placemaking Plan, which calls for another 1150 homes in the Bath urban area, to encourage people to live in the City, as it is good for Society, for security and for the maintenance of these great houses that constitute such a large 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. If we're not careful, all of Bath will be hollowed out, like Florence or Venice and other towns and cities around the world, and in the UK, such as York and Brighton. Not for nothing is this phenomenon called the 'doughnut effect'. Some might say that opposition to party houses is just rich residents being mean-spirited, trying to preserve their quiet quarter of Bath. If this is true, then why not? 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 adapted and strengthened. FoBRA is pleased to see that our new MP is aware of the problems and is already taking action. The National Organization of Residents' Associations has briefed the Department for Communities and Local Government on this problem, and will be taking part in discussions with them in September. Secondly, the frightful fire hazard, which Party Houses are, needs to be brought in line with the regulations which apply to hotels, B&Bs, HMOs, etc. 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 and therefore a lack of formal inspection, Avon Fire & Rescue Service were unaware, but have now been alerted and put on notice, with details of the 48 known 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, as 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 their property when they decide to sell. The Council must take enforcement action to require owners to apply for planning permission for change of use, thereby ensuring that other planning, building, and fire regulations are obeyed. By making a planning application, neighbours and statutory bodies have a chance formally to voice their support or opposition to this particular change of use, just as they would in any other circumstance where a change of use is proposed.

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, 20<sup>th</sup> Aug 17