

13th October 2017

By email: planning_policy@bathnes.gov.uk

Planning Policy, Planning Services
Bath & North East Somerset Council
Lewis House
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Dear Sir/Madam

Bath and North East Somerset Article 4 Proposals – Consultation Response

I would like to strongly urge you to consider the harm that Article 4 could do to areas like Bath and to drop this proposed action which we at the RLA feel could do serious harm to the town.

These restrictions do nothing to reverse the negative impact shared houses can have on an area, if anything they put areas without a HMO population at higher risk as new HMOs will be on the lookout for new areas. You may prevent more from emerging but existing ones will still remain as frozen communities - no closer to reverting to family areas than they are now.

Instead, the future lays with other solutions such as improving housing relationships with local universities and colleges and by using accreditation schemes to raise the quality and professionalism of local approved private sector landlords.

Because, underlying all this, is your council's responsibility to provide good quality rented housing for local people whose income level or chosen lifestyle rely on a plentiful supply of affordable, and often shared, housing.

Particularly the student community – many of whom chose to stay on in Bath after graduation, to begin their career with local business, and need a low-cost housing option until they have cleared the heavy debt of their education.

Low income earners, too, for whom renting is the only choice. And those with prospects but are struggling, short term, to buy their first property.

These people rely on your authority to provide the services they need. That's why Article 4 would not help the area. Quite the contrary. There are dangers and threats that suggest you are attempting to use the wrong law to solve what you perceive as a problem.

Local authorities are under a duty to meet demand for housing. A key issue is the increase in demand from the Under 35 age group who need access to shared housing because: they choose to; of the benefit cap and extension of the Shared

Accommodation Rate from 25 – 35; they are priced out of buying a home; or, they are still on a social housing waiting list. We suspect that these issues do affect Bath as they are symptomatic of such high demand and lack of supply of housing which is occurring nationwide.

The APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group) on the PRS, report recommended that Local Authorities should be allowed to use “flipping”. Flipping would mean once a landlord had received permission for a building to be used as a HMO it would be in force indefinitely enabling them to flip the use of the property from HMO to family use and back to HMO again, if they so wish. This would avoid the situation faced in some areas whereby HMOs remain empty because landlords do not want to have to go through the planning application process if they decide to let the property to a family.

It also suggested that legislation designed to tackle anti-social behaviour is properly enforced, rather than simply reaching for planning powers to start with. We feel that where occupants of shared housing cause repeated trouble and fail to respond to warnings about their behaviour, universities, student’s unions, landlords and the local police should ensure that robust action is taken against such tenants, with a much swifter process to evict them where need be.

With the current cutbacks facing local authorities is this something which a local planning authority should be focusing on at all? You make no mention of cost in your supporting documents. This leaves many questions such as will Bath have the resources for a full Borough wide scheme and deal with the consequent planning applications? How will this cost be met?

Shouldn’t local resources be better utilised, for example to actually deal with problems as they arise with better tenant education on refuse collection and more effective enforcement. This could include better enforcement of the complaints. There is the argument that those Landlords who just ‘flip’ the use of dwellings without consent already, will just continue to do so unless there is effective enforcement and proactive inspections to see that HMOs have sought the necessary permissions.

If the local authority believe they have a problem with tenant behaviour or the management of properties in Bath there are other ways of dealing with this than by changing planning laws.

We recognise an inherent danger in creating ‘no-go HMO zones’ where the abhorrent spectre of social engineering would seek to deny sections of society the freedom to live where they choose.

Landlords need flexibility to provide a service that Bath people need and which Article 4 would deny them. Flexibility to switch between letting to groups of sharing tenants or families, according to demand, without the need for planning permission each time.

We urge the council not to make it impossible, or even more difficult than it is, for private sector landlords to provide affordable homes. Especially in these difficult economic times when most people need all the help they can get.

Conclusion

The RLA reiterates its objection to the proposed scheme.

We strongly believe that in the first instance, before even contemplating removing development rights, the local authority should look for a more imaginative solution.

What is really needed, as mentioned previously, is some improved area management for the problems that you at the moment are merely anticipating. Once you have established where the problem is through effective local data, street by street property inspections can be carried out. HHSRS powers can be used to effect improvements, if voluntary co-operation will not work.

Rather than implementing an Article 4 Direction, time would be far better spent “out on the street” looking at properties and making sure that any that are needed are brought up to standard.

Landlord accreditation can also be used to ensure that HMO management is of a high standard. These and other measures have an immediate impact and address the current position whereas the Article 4 direction may only prevent new HMOs.

Again, if these planning restrictions are to go ahead we would recommend that Local Authorities like Bath should be allowed to use “flipping”, if demand changed in the Borough and more HMO accommodation is needed. As we explain earlier in this document this would avoid the situation faced in some areas whereby HMOs remain empty because landlords do not want to have to go through the planning application process again if they decide to let the property to a family.

Yours sincerely

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