

Great Places Commission Visit to Lenton Green Tuesday 10 July 2018

I'm Maja Fletcher, and first a bit about myself.

I helped found the Nottingham Action Group on HMOs (or NAG as it's come to be known) in 2004, and I've been involved in housing, planning and community issues for it must going on to 20 years now.

I've lived in tied cottages, I've been a lodger in a family house, a council tenant, and an owner-occupier. In a few weeks time I will have lived in Lenton for 40 years.

I won't go into details about what the NAG is, what it does, and what it's achieved. All of that is on its website (www.nottinghamaction.org.uk).

However, I will say that the NAG, as its name implies, is a Nottingham-based group (although it is also one of 30 or so towns and cities which form the National HMO Lobby) and everyone who is involved in it is a volunteer. Although the group has been primarily concerned with HMOs, over the years it's become increasingly engaged in 'housing' issues as a whole, and, particularly the private rented sector.

That we have been active, and continue to be so, is evidence by the fact that, in addition to mandatory HMO licensing, Nottingham City Council has introduced Additional HMO Licensing, and, recently, Selective Licensing of PRS properties. Following successful campaigning for changes to the Use Classes Order (in which the NAG, our local MPs and our Councillors and their officers played a significant role), Nottingham also has an Article 4 Direction requiring planning permission to be sought for conversion of dwellings to C4 HMOs, and a highly visibly successful Regulation 7 Directive (recently renewed) enabling control over what had become a forest of letting boards in Lenton and other parts of the city.

As has been pointed out in the past, the 'NAG does what it says on the tin'.

Neither do I want to go into the impact that concentrations of HMOs have on the social, economic and environmental health of the neighbourhoods around them. That's been well-researched, well-documented and widely acknowledged. So, I'm sure you're all familiar with it.

But I will make three statements. They are at the root of what brought people together from neighbourhoods across Nottingham to form the NAG. They continue to drive our NAGging (okay – 'campaigning' or even 'lobbying' are nicer words) and the work we do nationally as well as locally.

And, they inform our thinking about how to tackle the challenge of what Lenton, and places like it, can become in the future.

Maybe they will also help inform your commission's investigations.

First is, I hope, a given - the right to have a safe and secure roof over your head, regardless of the type of tenure and the shape and form of that roof.

Second is that houses are more than bricks and mortar – investment opportunities for buy-to-let/second home speculators ...

They are homes, the building blocks of neighbourhoods and cornerstones of communities.

It's possible, if the will is there, and the legislative toolkit is in place, to clean up streets, get rid of litter and rubbish, deal with persistent, albeit usually low-level anti-social behaviour, and the worst excesses of landlords and their tenants. That's what's being done here in Lenton and other parts of Nottingham, and in towns and cities across the whole country which share the same problems associated with concentrations of HMOs, and the same restraints on resources as Nottingham has.

Time, money and energy sapping ...

But, none of this effort makes neighbourhoods like those in Lenton with absentee landlords and highly transient and peripatetic tenants, capable of sustaining and renewing themselves. For that you need places where people are prepared to put down roots, feel responsibility for, and to, their neighbours, and, ultimately contribute to the long term health and future of the greater community. People for whom houses are first and foremost homes, and who are prepared/able to stay for the long haul.

In other words, places where people can have a sense of place.

Third, and this may come as something of a surprise, but it's at the root of why, despite the many things in its favour – and I could talk about those for a lot than I've got today – Lenton isn't generally reckoned to be an attractive place where people, other than students, want to come and live.

On average, per square metre, houses in Lenton are amongst the most expensive in Nottingham to buy – or to rent.

Why?

Take an ordinary 3-bedroom C3 dwelling, convert it into a C4 6-bedroom/study HMO, charge £70+ a week per tenant. The end product is absentee landlords, and speculators, often not even resident in this country, and a highly transient and peripatetic tenant population which has no feeling of belonging to the place.

The result is that families (whatever shape or form they take), whether they want to be owner-occupiers or want to rent, have been priced out of the local housing market. And, as my own neighbourhood is experiencing, the natural cycle of regeneration and renewal has been broken and the only predictable change is that tenants will come and go every nine months or so.

How can you mend it?

I don't suppose there is one, simple answer. One magic formula. I certainly haven't heard of it, or anyone whose succeeded. But ... we have to try.

In 2013 a round table meeting, which the NAG helped set up, brought together local MPs, councillors, council officers, and others with expertise in a wide range of housing-related subjects, to look at Lenton's housing and come up with a 'Vision for Lenton'.

Unfortunately, I don't have spare copies of the notes of the meeting, but they are also on the NAG website (<http://nottinghamaction.org.uk/key-issues/changing-lenton/changing-lenton-lenton-s-housing-and-a-vision-for-lenton/>).

The catalyst driving the decision to hold the round table was the redevelopment of the site of the Lenton high rise flats - now of course Lenton Green - as affordable family housing rather than doing what has been done elsewhere – selling it to a private developer.

You're seeing something today of what bricks and mortar have made here in Lenton. Clearly, something that Nottingham City Homes should be justifiably proud of. What is not obvious is that Lenton Green

- and the people it is bringing into Lenton is a stride in the direction of rebalancing Lenton's communities,
- that it's a highly visible pointer to the fact that Lenton isn't just a 'student village',
- and an example of what can be done in regenerating other sites in Lenton.

I'm thinking of two very different sites: Prospect Place (close to where you had lunch), and the Hillside Club site (just off Derby Road alongside the River Leen). Both, if the will and the imagination are there, and not solely the desire for a quick and substantial investment return, have so much potential to follow on from the contribution Lenton Green is making to the renewal of Lenton and its future as a place where people want to live and ... not leave!

That, for me, is the essence of what makes a 'great place'.