

A Letter Expressing Concerns About the End of the Academic Year 2019-2020 & the New Academic Year 2020-2021

from:

**The Arboretum Residents' and Tenants' Association (ARTA)
The Berrymede (North Sherwood Street) Neighbourhood Group
The Portwell (Portland Road-Cromwell Street) Residents' Group
The Lenton Drives & Neighbours Residents' Association (LDNRA)
The Nottingham Action Group on HMOs (NAG)**

also

Cllrs Pat & Lynda Lally and Residents of Beeston Central Ward

28 June 2020

Summary

A. Background

- Concerns have been logged over many years about the severe effects on the psychological health of permanent residents due to aggravations from the many students in our neighbourhoods, and their alarming lack of social responsibility.
- Recent action by Police, Community Protection and the universities has affected the behaviour of individuals, but does not act as a general deterrent. Students are generally disparaging about the universities' actions.

B. Concerns of Residents End of Academic Year 2019-2020

- Return of students to collect belongings has been disastrous. There has been little evidence of adherence to university guidelines for the process and a complete disregard for Covid-19 social distancing. Residents have felt vulnerable and have had genuine fear. There are examples of students being extremely rude, with no respect for others .
- Many students have stayed several weeks or days, and there have been disturbances day and night with permanent 'party atmosphere' and increased rubbish.
- Therefore sleep disturbance for many who are already distressed from the lockdown. These include key workers on shifts, teachers, Covid-19 sufferers and grievers.

C. Concerns of Residents for Academic Year 2020-2021

- The Autumn Term is particularly stressful for residents every year. Covid-19 imposes an extra dimension of anxiety.
- Current experience with a relatively small number of students suggests that there will be a massive lack of respect and responsibility for the guidance the universities and others provide.
- Nottingham currently has a low Covid-19 infection rate. The influx of thousands of students from different parts of the country into our neighbourhoods is worrying.
- There is a fear for the impact and pressure on our GP surgeries.
- We fear even greater use of house parties if pubs and clubs have social restrictions.
- The probable use of online courses points to even more daytime noise and gatherings.

D. Suggestions for Mitigating Action

- Extra funding for police, and in particular for dedicated CPO teams in affected areas.
- More severe penalties for students who breach guidelines or distancing standards.
- Residents feel invisible, that our needs are not met, and that decisions are made for us, not with us.

A. Background

Over the last 20 years or so the array of problems arising from concentrations of students living in and around residential neighbourhoods has been thoroughly documented in Nottingham, as in other university towns and cities across the whole of this country. So there should be no doubt about the severity of the effects on the day-to-day lives of residents and their families living in these, so-called 'studentified', areas. Therefore, it is hoped that there is no need to provide any more information here.

It is readily acknowledged that procedures designed to address the problems and implemented by Nottingham City Council, Nottinghamshire Police, and Nottingham's two universities in recent years has gone some way towards mitigating the impact of persistent student anti-social behaviour. However, although the positive impact of these measures has been welcomed by residents, it is a demonstrable fact that they have by no means resolved the problems which, unfortunately and distressingly, recur annually and persist in some form or another from the beginning to the end of the academic year.

There has been much debate about the role of the universities in particular in dealing with these predominantly anti-social behaviour problems. Many residents hold the strong opinion, voiced on numerous occasions at public and other meetings attended by universities' representatives, Nottingham City Council elected members and officers, Members of Parliament, and Nottinghamshire Police officers, that the consequences students face when they cause disturbances in our neighbourhoods, and which the universities have set out in their Codes of Discipline, need to be more severe.

The universities' responses to these instance of anti-social behaviour are predicated on whether or not Nottingham City Council's Community Protection or Nottinghamshire Police officers have taken action, and at what level. In practice, Nottinghamshire Police officers are regularly unable to attend an incident as they are otherwise engaged in dealing with more serious crime, and the Council does not have the necessary funding to provide 24-hour cover. So, if an incident is not 'witnessed by a uniformed officer', in terms of the action that the universities are prepared to take, the incident may as well not have happened at all.

This lack of firm, assertive action is frustrating for residents and demoralising, with long-term and detrimental effects on them and their families, their feelings of worth and self-esteem, as well as their physical and mental wellbeing. Unfortunately, an all too obvious consequence is that many students appear to have a disregard for their social responsibility towards their fellow students, let alone the local residents' communities. Also, it has led directly to the position that we now find ourselves in where too many students take the guidance issued by the universities with a pinch of salt. All of us have personally heard students making comments such as: 'Well, what's the university going to do? They'll hardly kick us out 'cos they want our money.' or 'I'm paying nearly £30,000 to be at uni: a £100 fine is hardly going to stop me having a party'.

Under 'normal' circumstances, this low opinion of the need to pay attention to guidance from the universities would be concerning, to say the least. At this time, when Covid-19 has required all of us to be especially conscious of our social responsibility, it has potentially alarming consequences for not only ourselves and our families, but to everyone else, including the student population.

B. Experiences of Residents at the End of the Academic Year 2019-2020

In response to the Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown at the end of March this year, the universities closed down their campuses and the majority of students returned to their homes. Because of the short notice before lockdown began, there was little opportunity for students to take all of their belongings with them. Those who remained in Nottingham through lockdown did so either because they were unable to return home (e.g. overseas students), or because of health issues, or because of work commitments.

With the end of the academic year, students have been returning to their accommodation in our neighbourhoods to collect their belongings and have been given guidance by their universities as to how to do this whilst respecting each other and local residents. This return is not going well. Every day, more and more students are completely disregarding this guidance or the requirements for social distancing imposed on all of us by Covid-19.

Residents living in those neighbourhoods in Nottingham with high student densities have been voicing their genuine fears to representatives of the residents' groups in the Lenton area (Lenton Drives & Neighbours Residents' Association), in the city centre (North Sherwood Street/Matlock Court/Clinton Court/Bluecoat Close/Bluecoat Street), in the Arboretum area (Arboretum Residents & Tenants Association), Portwell residents (Portland Road/Cromwell Street area), and to the NAG. Examples of current concerns brought to us from across all these neighbourhoods, along with extracts in italics from messages we have received, are:

B.1 Many returning students are blatantly ignoring the guidance clearly laid out by both universities as well as Westminster. Rather than collecting their belongings, as instructed by the universities, they are staying, meeting up with friends, partying, going back to each other's homes, planning on coming back when their friends are back rather than trying to avoid each other.

... here in the Arboretum after a (mostly) blissfully peaceful 12-week period of lockdown we have experienced the return of students supposedly coming to collect their belongings but actually staying and presumably seeing out their tenures in rented property. Noise levels have increased significantly and social distancing simply doesn't happen from what you can tell in the streets and park. In the last ten days, I have already had cause to report shouting and screaming at 2.00 am coming from a property not that close to our house but close enough to keep us awake, and noise disturbance from another late night garden party on our street.

A very noisy party behind me on Monday night - I didn't sleep properly until 3.00 am. I spoke to the offending tenants - over my back wall - on Tuesday and told them I was going to report them. Their attitude was "well we've graduated now, so they can't touch us". What can one do? ...

This is causing considerable stress for numerous residents ●Who are working long shifts in very difficult conditions in our hospitals; ●Who are leaving for work at 3.00 am to drive HGVs long distances for six to eight hours; ●Who are teaching classes on-line or in schools with hugely increased work loads because of lockdown conditions; ●And compounding the distress of those who are ill, who have been suffering from Covid-19, or who are grieving the loss of friends or loved ones to Covid-19.

For those who have been following guidance throughout the lockdown period – not seeing friends and loved ones – strictly adhering to these guidelines in order to keep themselves and their families safe it is upsetting to see absence of social responsibility. For those who have been shielding because of illness and vulnerability, the disregard for safety is leaving them scared and feeling even more vulnerable.

... I am in the vulnerable age group, living alone, no visitors or relatives, but now feel more 'locked down' than I have in the previous three months. I have meticulously self isolated, but this will have seemed pointless judging by the almost total disregard the students have. Their attitude of 'it can't happen to them' seems to take no account of the fact that their selfish attitude can have disastrous consequences for us. ...

B.2 Many of the students who have been spoken to are twisting the guidance to suit themselves. For example: 'The Government says you can move house'; 'The Government says you're allowed to join another household'; 'It's okay for us to come back as long as we isolate' – only then being seen as a group leaving to go shopping.

... From my car, when I have visited the pharmacy and the dentist, both under strict conditions, I have seen the increasing numbers of queuing students outside Sainsbury's Local not distancing and an increasing number at the bus stop outside the Sainsbury's shop. I see them walking very close together everywhere, plus the partying. It is as if there is not a problem, nor has been, and their attitude when spoken to reflects this. In fact I have been laughed at and told to 'get real', whatever that was meant to convey. ...

B.3 Many students are showing little understanding of what social distancing means: when entering each other's HMOs; when walking down the street in groups; when queuing at shops; when greeting each other with hugs, kisses, etc. in the streets, parks and shops. Many have the attitude 'We're young so we're not at risk' showing no appreciation of, or care for, the possible wider implication and impact on the residents' communities around them and their responsibility towards them.

B.4 Local shops and supermarkets, parks and streets have been considerably busier over the last three to four weeks with large groups of students – sometimes eight to ten in queues at the shops or walking down the street; fifteen to twenty in the parks – all making residents, particularly those vulnerable for whatever reason, feel uncomfortable about leaving their homes even when they need to, let alone when, as recommended by Government, to take their daily exercise.

B.5 Although residents are predominantly the groups most affected by the problems we are highlighting, there are students, living in HMOs, who have stayed during lockdown, either because of health issues, or because of work. A number of these have not been consulted before housemates have

returned, leaving them to cope with awkward situations where they have had to manage to adapt from living alone, or sharing with one other, to now having a house with five or six occupants.

C. Concerns about the Academic Year 2020-2021

The beginning of each academic year brings with it stress for residents and their families with heightened awareness of the high probability that, as in previous years, they will have to run the whole gamut of student-related problems: the 'groundhog day effect'. Covid-19 is adding a new, and even more stressful, dimension to concerns about the 2020-2021 academic year due to begin in September.

C.1 Many residents are asking themselves if so many of the (relatively few) students who have returned recently, are ignoring guidance, how many more will also ignore similar guidance in September? Roughly speaking, Nottingham University and Nottingham Trent University attract around 60,000 students to Nottingham each year. Using Lenton as an example, this means that, even accounting for the uncertainty in student numbers engendered by Covid-19, potentially between 7,000 and 10,000 students from across the United Kingdom (as well as from overseas), will be moving into Lenton's neighbourhoods, potentially from areas with far higher Covid-19 infection rates than we have at the moment in Nottingham. In the past, the potential for introducing and then sharing viruses has been realised. By and large these have resulted in colds and other similar minor illnesses, though outbreaks of more serious and highly infectious diseases have also occurred, and been dealt with. However, Covid-19 has killed, is killing and will continue to kill: it is not measles, or mumps, or glandular fever, or even 'flu.

The conclusion has to be that our neighbourhood will be put at risk, and residents need to know that. If we are already experiencing so many problems at a time when students are supposedly just returning in a staggered manner to collect their belongings, how will it be ensured that all students arriving in Nottingham in the autumn will follow the guidance being put in place for the new academic year?

Also, and not to be dismissed lightly, residents need not only to be told what the guidance will be, but to have input into it. It is we, our families and neighbours, many of whom are vulnerable through age, illness, or other contributory factors, who will bear the risk.

Please note that, although here Lenton is used as an example, the same situations, the same concerns, and the same conclusions apply as well to all the other studentified Nottingham neighbourhoods and their communities.

... I am very worried about what awaits us in the next academic year for a number of reasons which I outline below.

●If universities are allowing students to return to study next year they will be back in their shared accommodation travelling from all over the country to get here. Opportunities for infection will be rife.

●In student houses it is highly unlikely that any form of social distancing can be observed and certainly it can't be monitored (a number of students have recently returned to the area for the last few weeks of their letting contracts and I and my neighbours have seen a complete disregard for social distancing already in the form of parties, hugging one another in the street, shopping at Tesco in groups, walking along Shakespeare Street in groups unwilling to move to allow others to pass at a safe distance etc.).

●In the light of current behaviour not only will students be putting themselves at risk but also the permanent residents who will be in very close proximity on pavements, in shop queues and in the gardens and fronts of these narrow terraced houses where students gather to smoke and chat ...

C.2 Whilst it is understood that transmission of Covid-19 is very unlikely when passing some-one in the street, nonetheless, with a great deal more students on our streets in September than at present, it will be far harder for social distancing to take place, and this will inevitably result in a great deal of anxiety for some individuals.

C.3 During term-time, at certain points in the day, the bus stops along Derby Road regularly have twenty to thirty (or more) students waiting at any one time. It is not unusual for buses to have little or no standing room, let alone seats, and it is obvious that once the new academic year starts there will

be no opportunity for social distancing, either at the bus stops or on the buses. Again, this will inevitably cause stress and anxiety to those who are exercising social responsibility.

C.4 At this time, the queues at Sainsbury's Local are so long (and so full of groups catching up with one another) that it has been asked how anyone elderly or infirm will be able to cope with standing in the queue once all students have returned? Equally, during what pass for 'normal' times, the small local supermarkets are busy and their aisles are crammed. If any social distancing is to remain in place, how are local supermarkets and local businesses, including local pharmacies, meant to cope?

C.5 Local GP surgeries have large numbers of students registered with them. Currently, they are minimising the number of patients allowed in at any one time with the result that appointment times are spread out much more, therefore limiting the availability of appointments. Some residents who have on-going health issues are extremely concerned about the additional pressure that will be put on the surgeries in September with the arrival of a very large cohort of students, and how this will impact on their ability to access medical care.

Furthermore, the additional pressure on GP surgeries is likely to be exacerbated yet more by the predictable autumn-winter upsurge in 'flu and other viral diseases which present with a range of symptoms, many of which mirror those of Covid-19. In all probability, GPs will need to adopt new protocols as a result of this. What all of this is likely to entail will impact even further on everyone's access to GP surgeries and other NHS provisions than is already the case.

C.6 Students, some of whom are student nurses or medical students, and who are living in our neighbourhoods, have spoken of their concerns about having signed contracts prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and now find themselves in a position where they will have to share houses with others who may not be as cautious and socially aware as themselves.

C.7 A major concern which has been raised by residents in many of Nottingham's neighbourhoods with large numbers of students is that if pubs (which may still have limited capacity in September and, possibly, into 2021) and clubs are not operating as usual, the 'normal' number of gatherings and house parties which we experience will be greatly increased. Closely linked to this is the probability, since many students will be following much of their courses on-line, that there is likely to be (as we have experienced recently, and continue to do so now) far greater numbers of loud, non-socially distanced gatherings during the daytime as well.

... the continued closure of pubs and clubs (if that happens) will inevitably mean that houses in residential areas will become party venues. Even if fines are increased the universities will have no jurisdiction outside their premises and if powers of 'fine on the spot' were given to police then that would have to rely on them actually turning out when an incident is reported which at the moment they rarely seem to do. ...

... If social venues are to remain shut when term begins students will only be able to socialise at home, whether in small numbers or large, this will put an intolerable strain on neighbours. Current practice is for students to party at home on certain week nights until around midnight and then go out, leaving the neighbourhood in peace until 3 or 4 am. The continued closure of pubs and clubs (or social distancing requirements that will be enforced inside them) will encourage students to socialise at home until the early hours. ...

D. Summary of Concerns & Some Suggestions for Mitigating Actions

As you will have gathered from what we have written, and especially from comments directly sent to us by residents and which we have quoted at points in this letter, residents (including many students who have stayed for whatever reason through lockdown) in neighbourhoods in Nottingham with large concentrations of students are not only concerned by the complete disregard for guidance on social distancing, and social responsibility we are seeing around us every day now by more than a few students, but even more so by what is more than likely to happen in September when both universities bring back so many students to Nottingham. Our past experience does not instil confidence and security. If anything, and without exaggeration, the prospect of the new academic year, with Covid-19 ever present, is more daunting, and for too many people something to be viewed with more than the usual apprehension: perhaps even fear.

As a starting point to stimulate discussion and action, we conclude by making some suggestions as to what may help to mitigate against the concerns which have been raised in this letter.

- The core question is: if the universities insist on bringing so many students back into our communities this September, will they provide funding to pay for a dedicated team of Community Protection Officers with the capacity to provide 24-hour cover in neighbourhoods, such as those in the Lenton, Arboretum, City Centre areas, and those others in close proximity to the universities, so that the usual term-time problems with bins on streets, littering, street drinking and other forms of anti-social behaviour can be dealt with, along with the extra work that can be anticipated to occur when students return as a result of the Covid-19 situation?

- In addition, increased funding should be provided for local Nottinghamshire Police beat and response teams to ensure adequate policing of incidents when Community Protection Officers do not have the necessary powers.

- Additional staff need to be made available to help manage socially distanced queuing outside those small shops and businesses which cannot afford to employ their own security staff.

- A suggestion has been made that Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) be put in place to limit the number of groups gathering at any one time, either outside shops, in streets, at bus stops, or in parks. Clearly this, as with all similar legislation, would require additional resources to police it.

- In line with the recent example set by Bristol University, where the Vice-Chancellor has announced that any breaches of social distancing by its students will be treated seriously, and fines of up to £800 will be applied, Nottingham's two universities must take a similar stance, making it widely known to all students that the policy will be rigorously adhered to, whether CPNWs, CPNs, etc. have been issued or not. Fines from this could then be put towards funding for extra Community Protection and Nottinghamshire Police officers.

It has been remarked that we (residents) inhabit a different universe. Perhaps that is why we are 'invisible'. We hope this is wrong, and so we look forward to hearing what actions are being considered by both universities, Nottingham City Council (including Public Health) and Nottinghamshire Police in order to protect our communities. Moreover, we believe very strongly that these actions must also prioritise the welfare of us, our families, friends and colleagues, rather than focusing solely on the student population, and that the voices of the people who live in our neighbourhoods need to become part of whatever discussions are taking place, and before any plans are made.

We end by saying that we sincerely hope no-one feels it is necessary to remind us of the significant benefits brought to Nottingham by Nottingham University and Nottingham Trent University. We have acknowledged them, and we continue to do so. However, please remember they have:

- No relevance to a resident grieving the loss of a father and a husband whilst a BBQ with thirty guests goes on next door.

- No relevance to the HGV driver who is frightened he will lose his job because he has to turn down work so often because a lack of sleep makes his driving potentially lethal.

- No relevance to the residents who, for whatever reason, have exercised social responsibility and isolated themselves in order to protect themselves and/or their families and friends from Covid-19, and who now look on the absence of the same responsibility in the student population with frustration and trepidation.

- No relevance to the elderly resident forced to lose her independence because groups of students crowding the pavement make her afraid to shop for herself.

- No relevance to any of us as we are forced to deal day after day, year after year with the impacts of the anti-social behaviour caused by the large so-called 'minority' of students living around us.