

Hove Town Hall
Norton Road
Hove BN3 3BQ

Geoff Raw
Chief Executive Office
Brighton and Hove City Council
Hove Town Hall
Norton Road
Hove, BN3 3BQ

16TH APRIL 2020

LETTER TO HOUSING COMMITTEE

Dear Geoff;

I am submitting the following letter on the subject of AirBnB and short-term lets during COVID-19 under Council Procedure Rule 23.3 to be included on the agenda for Housing Committee.

During the Coronavirus pandemic 'business as usual' has shut down - and like all others, the short-term holiday lets market has been one of the sectors affected, with an estimated drop in occupancy rates of between 70-90%. Many of these providers will be able to get through the shutdown by claiming through one of the government schemes; depending on their situation, they may be able to get small business grants and business rates relief, and others may be able to get a mortgage holiday, for example.

However, as we have previously discussed in this committee, the lack of a centralised database or official registration scheme detailing the existence and location of short-term holiday lets in the city means we are unable to clarify who all of the providers are, and what their specific situations might be. This lack of knowledge – and of regulation – of the short-term holiday lets market limits the help that the council can both receive and provide to the sector. Indeed, some weeks ago we heard media reports that some providers were seeking to advertise properties as 'retreats,' during lockdown – while in some cases this may have been an attempt to maintain business, this is a measure widely criticised as profiteering and that has since thankfully been prevented.

We have however become aware that several short-term holiday lets companies and landlords have responded to the global pandemic in more positive and proactive ways, by offering properties free of charge to NHS workers who need to self-isolate. In a city with a high number of houses in multiple occupation, NHS and care staff, and soaring rents, we recognise there will be many residents who require a safe self-isolation facility such as can be provided by short-term let accommodation providers, particularly when their normal place of residence is shared with others or if they are concerned for loved ones.

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The Short-Term Accommodation Association (STAA) have launched a scheme titled 'NHS Homes', where providers offer their homes for use by NHS staff free of charge (a £10 fee service charge needs to be paid per day but no rental charge for the actual property is levied). We have also learned that AirBnB has its own similar scheme called Frontline Stays.

With NHS workers potentially having vulnerable family members or housemates, and a wider shortage of housing in the city, we recognise that such schemes have potential to offer a comfortable place to stay as well as reassurance for workers concerned about spreading the virus to family and friends. Given that in some cases, student doctors are also being sent to work early, we also note that there are many that will be on placement in a new location and unable to secure housing elsewhere in the private rented sector. We are also aware through resident correspondence that some NHS workers are struggling to find accommodation at this time, due to concerns about new people entering an existing household.

STAA have informed me that over 2500 providers have already signed up to the NHS Homes scheme and 14 properties in Brighton signed up on 15th April alone. There are likely to be additional providers and landlords in Brighton who may have vacant homes. While the council cannot advise on the best course of action for the sector, we call on committee to consider the accommodation needs of essential workers during this crisis. We would ask that housing respond to these suggestions of urgent action in the current crisis, and consider:

- What measures can be taken to engage with landlords and companies managing short-term holiday lets in the city, such as AirBnB, to ask how their properties can be rendered helpful during the crisis; and to inform them of the existence of registration and support bodies with NHS Homes schemes (such as STAA and others);
- to continue to lobby government for powers to enable us to better control and manage the short-term lets sector, to enable all stakeholders to respond quickly in times of need, such as the current crisis; in light of the city's housing shortage, that we also continue to lobby for more regulatory powers and caps on such properties in general;
- to use means available to reach existing landlords and short-term lets providers in the city, in order to ensure that offers of support with accommodation for workers looking to self-isolate can be found and promoted; and to liaise with relevant bodies in the NHS and CCG to promote available offers of accommodation support for NHS and other essential staff.
- to share with other committee chairs and council officers where relevant who can help to follow up on any of the above actions should they feel able to

There are concerns that in a time of national crisis, many homes are lying vacant. Our city is also embroiled in a housing crisis more generally – and the rise of the short-term holiday lets market has in many cases resulted in the loss of permanent family homes. Given these factors, we welcome the potential to utilise any vacant homes or properties to support the needs of essential staff and our public health efforts and ask that committee consider how it can facilitate such actions.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Martin Osborne