

Crossgate Community Partnership

The Crossgate Community Partnership (CCP) is a charity whose objects are:

- to promote the conservation and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Crossgate and the surrounding area in Durham City
- to promote the establishment, continuation, and improvement of local amenities
- to build and maintain a strong, safe, healthy, and balanced community by encouraging the residents of Crossgate and neighbouring areas to participate in community activities.

The principal way we do this is to hold monthly residents meetings to identify current issues and address them. We also have an email list where members can exchange views between meetings. We have 140 local residents registered as members, and attendance at our meetings in 2016 averaged 16.

We welcome this consultation as a sign that the Council is at last moving towards statutory regulation of lettings boards, which the experience of several years of voluntary schemes has demonstrated is the only way to rid the City of the visual blight of notice boards. Given the Council's rapid and decisive action¹ over two discreet and quirky advertisements in form of bicycles, there is no basis for any further delay of a much more widespread and unsightly form of advertising. We therefore urge the Council to proceed with its Option 3, and to apply for a Regulation 7 with a complete ban.

While we are aware of the exemption of lettings boards from the normal planning regulations under deemed consent, we regard this as a response to circumstances which are no longer relevant. While the letting of property may once have necessitated advertising boards outside the premises, both observation and conversations with students and landlords alike convinces us that this is no longer the case. The main business of letting is now carried out through internet advertising, and the lettings boards serve not to advertise the individual premises, but rather to promote the services of the agency in general. Further evidence in support of this view is provided by the longevity of the boards proclaiming not that a property is to let, but that it has already been let (sometimes appearing without a preceding "to let" sign). This general advertising should be treated as such, brought in line with other forms of advertising, and regulated accordingly, and we are very pleased to see the Council moving towards doing this.

We regret that the proposed Regulation 7 is restricted to the Conservation Area. We understand that there are good reasons for this, but we continue to observe the spread of letting boards outwith that area (throughout Neville's Cross, for example) and hope that this first step may be followed by a ban on lettings boards throughout the City.

¹ Reported in the local press
http://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/15050280.Businesses_and_police_in_Durham_told_to_remove_quirky_advertising_in_row_over_bikes/?ref=erec

We see no advantage to Option 2, applying for a Regulation 7 with some restriction on letting boards. Although this would make whatever Code is agreed on notionally enforceable, it would be open to disputes over interpretation. CCP members already pass on to the Enforcement Officer complaints about "let by" signs which are displayed for longer than the period permitted not by the Voluntary Code but by statutory regulation, only to be told that the agency denies that the let is final. Statutory force for the Voluntary Code would open up new areas of dispute, and create unproductive work for the Enforcement team.

In addition, there is at least one aspect of the Code for which it appears no satisfactory form can be found. We are informed that the Code is only binding during the period in which advertising is permitted: for this reason the formulation of the Voluntary Code issued in Autumn 2016 permits advertising from 1st October 2016. While I am assured by Council Officers that this was not the intention, the effect was the opposite to that requested by residents, to defer the start of the advertising season as late into the autumn term as possible. In this we are in accord with Durham Students' Union, whose STOP.THINK.SIGN. Campaign² urges students to defer committing themselves until the New Year:

The University Counselling Service and the Students' Union Advice and Help Service have noticed a distinct rise in students seeking support and advice about their health and well-being in private accommodation since students started to sign housing contracts earlier in the academic year. In over 80% of these cases, students had signed contracts by November.

We back the campaign in saying that the culture of signing early for accommodation has to stop. The inability of the Code, even enforced to the letter, to work towards this renders it unfit for purpose, and is in itself a reason to reject Option 2.

The document on a Regulation 7 put to Cabinet in July 2015 included in its closing Case Studies the remark that when Newcastle consulted on its options, "There was a general consensus in favour of a complete ban, not only among residents but also lettings businesses, who felt this would provide a level playing field." We hope that the same conclusion will emerge from the current consultation, since a total ban on letting boards does seem to be the simplest, fairest and most effective option.

2 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/accommodation.office/durhamstudentunion/>