

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

Chester Civic Trust continues to be concerned about the continuing applications for conversion of houses to houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) aimed at the student rental market. We made representations on behalf of the Civic Trust to the Cheshire West and Chester Working Group on student accommodation on 18th March this year. In recent responses to applications for conversions to HMOs we have stated the following:

Chester Civic Trust believes, and has stated on numerous occasions, that the lack of explicit policy for student accommodation is creating uncertainty for both the Chester community and for potential developers of student accommodation. Council responses are ad hoc and lack consistency and this leads to blight, controversy and potentially expensive appeals against apparently arbitrary refusals of permission. There are no planning policy criteria to define the appropriate location of both purpose-built and HMO student accommodation; applications are dealt with ad hoc. There has been a failure to implement policies HO16/17 of the 2006 Chester Local Plan concerning HMOs and conversions to student occupation.

The Article 4 Direction in the Garden Quarter is failing because, in streets with a high proportion of existing HMOs, the remaining owner-occupied property is blighted and the only prospective purchasers for such properties are HMO landlords. The HMO problem is therefore exacerbated and the control policy is in practice a dead letter.

A strategy is needed that addresses these problems. It should deal credibly and publicly with the issues raised by student accommodation within the overall housing strategy for the city and the implementation of policy SOC3 in the (draft) Local Plan. It should create certainty by defining and implementing policies on acceptable development to guide applicants in both the purpose-built and HMO sectors. Finally, it should provide criteria to assess the planning applications for student accommodation that arise. Chester Civic Trust believes that properly maintained and managed HMOs in suitable accommodation has a role to play in student accommodation but there must be restrictions on the proportion of such properties in any particular area.

To achieve that an Article 4 Direction in relation to HMOs needs to be in force ACROSS THE WHOLE CITY to avoid diversion of unrestricted HMO development into areas outside the boundary of the currently defined area. All areas and streets at risk of pressure for HMOs should be assessed and a maximum acceptable proportion of HMOs publicly designated. Criteria need to be defined and published to then guide decisions on HMO applications such as the current application. Chester Civic Trust puts forward the following criteria:

- Change of use from a C3 dwelling house to an HMO will not be permitted where there is a high concentration (perhaps 10% or 20%) of residential properties that are already HMOs (defined by specific criteria) within a short distance of the application (perhaps within 100m). The designation map described above will be used in this decision.
- In cases where the concentration of such properties is significant but less high the Council will examine property type and resident mix in more detail when considering an application for change of use.
- In areas of high concentration of HMOs, extensions will not be permitted where this can reasonably be expected to lead to an increase in levels of occupation.

- All proposals for change of use of existing properties into HMOs or flats will only be permitted where the accommodation provided is of a high standard and will not materially harm the character of the area (as defined by the Chester Characterisation Study and other relevant area design briefs.)

Andrew Pannell
Chairman of New Works Committee
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