

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY – 31 MAY 2012
QUESTION FOR PORTFOLIO HOLDER
UNDER STANDING ORDER NO.19

Question from Mr Knowles for the Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Development and Transport

Will Exeter City Council agree, and if not why not, that the limit of 20% HMOs in a locality is both arbitrary and too high, and that it should be reduced to 15%; that the annual count is too infrequent to keep abreast of developments; and that the large number of non-permanent residents is destroying a sense of community?

Answer

Councillor Sutton, as Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development and Transport responded to the question. She offered some background to the 20% limit of Houses in Multiple Occupation which was agreed by a Supplementary Planning Document following a period of public consultation last year. The City Council had no power to control the change of family homes into small HMO's, prior to changes in national legislation in 2010. The Council made an Article 4 Direction to give it planning control and considered and adopted the SPD. The HMO Policy was introduced to provide a balance of accommodation within the city.

The annual count provided a snapshot of households which were exempt from council tax. This is taken in May, to coincide with a Government statistical return. More frequent counts would be unlikely to show a very different result, since most students were in their accommodation for a year and there would be a significant cost to the City Council.

Cllr Sutton stated that she believed the 20% HMO limit was an appropriate level. The Article 4 Direction had only been in existence for five months and it was too early to establish how successful it had been. She suggested that the matters raised in the question be considered by Planning Member Working Group, which had a remit to discuss the planning policy issues. It was entirely appropriate that they should look at this matter and see if any changes in the limit were justified.

A Member thanked Cllr Sutton for her in depth reply and welcomed the opportunity to revisit this. He requested that this be dealt with as soon as possible, even if a report was not available. He was aware of a number of issues resulting from the increased number of HMO's in the adjacent St James ward. A Member also acknowledged that this was clearly a matter of concern for a number of people and the need to strike a balance between student accommodation and residents for the city was acknowledged. A Member also suggested that HMO accommodation was not only required or relevant to students, but could help working people and particularly younger people live independently and make a start on the property ladder.

Mr Knowles responded and welcomed that the matter would be referred to the Planning Member Working Group. He felt that the 20% limit was arbitrary and there was a real dilemma over the purpose built student accommodation with many partly vacant.

Members noted that ultimately the Executive could only determine any further change in the HMO limit, but were in support that the issues raised in the question be referred to the Planning Member Working Group for consideration.