

HMOs and other Short-term Lets (STLs) in the context of the new Local Plan

Introduction

1 Recently, much of the discussion around HMOs has focussed on the perceived effectiveness of the existing regulatory mechanisms – the SPD and the licensing scheme – and the coordination, or the lack of it, between them. But whilst these should certainly be reviewed – hopefully on the basis of rigorous and up to date assessments (including how far the licensing scheme covers all relevant premises)– the key issue surely is:

What should be the Council’s future policy on existing and new HMOs and other forms of STLs such as AirBNB?

Background

2 Like the Government, the Council appears to have no policy on AirBNBs or other STLs, apart from HMOs. The SPD is intended to limit further clustering of HMOs in local areas that are already heavily impacted (where ‘local’ means well below Ward level). How far it has achieved this is not clear: Portswood, Bassett, Swaythling and The Polygon are already above the Council’s existing 10 per cent threshold (and almost certainly were when the SPD was adopted).

Argument

3 There can be no question of automatically refusing all new HMO applications if only because it seems that the Government would not allow it. As demography, household structure, labour mobility and working habits change, there may well be demand for more STLs (although neither university apparently envisages a significant increase in student numbers that will not be accommodated in purpose-built accommodation). The issue then is whether (a) the new policy should be that any new HMOs (and possibly other new STLs) will only be allowed in Wards (or sub-areas) that are less heavily impacted already, and (b) how it should be enforced, especially in view of the quantum of resource likely to be available. It should be

noted that HMOs are only one aspect of the intensification and overdevelopment in many parts of the city that the new Plan will need to address.

4 There is also the question of whether attempts should be made to unwind the existing concentrations of HMOs so as to encourage families to return to these streets. This might require some form of compulsory purchase arrangement, perhaps when properties change hands. But it would help to ensure that across the City as a whole there is a balanced, diverse and accessible range of housing provision (which is surely the ultimate objective of any housing plan). Alternatively, householders in heavily impacted streets could be encouraged/enabled to relocate.

Conclusion

5 The Local Plan offers an opportunity for these issues to be explored on the basis of proper evidence, including not only about the effectiveness of the existing controls but also about how cognate authorities with large concentrations of HMOS and other STLs are handling them (perhaps through the LGA). This opportunity should be taken.