Introduction

Why an HMO Subject Plan?

There is growing concern at the increasing number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and the concentration of such accommodation in certain parts of Belfast City Council area.

Local community groups and the media have highlighted the impact that such accommodation and associated activity is having on the amenity of these areas. Issues associated with concentrations of HMOs include:

- Late night street noise and disturbance;
- Neglected appearance of dwellings, gardens and residential curtilages;
- Preponderance of unsightly “to-let” boards;
- A higher incidence of crime, especially burglaries;
- Lack of community integration;
- Dumping of house clearance material at end of university terms; and
- Service delivery problems.

The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP), set out criteria for Conversion of Buildings for Multiple Occupation under Policy HOU6. Representations received during public consultation on BMAP suggested the policy did not go far enough in addressing the issues related to HMOs and in particular, lacked a spatial dimension.

A Subject Plan that specifically addresses the issues of HMOs within Belfast is considered the best method of developing and implementing planning policies for the City, particularly for those areas where HMOs are concentrated.

The HMO Subject Plan will cover Belfast City Council area and is intended to run in parallel with the ongoing preparation of BMAP. The Subject Plan will provide planning policy on the specific topic of HMOs in Belfast City Council area for the period up to 2015.

The Department of Environment (DOE) published a “Notice of Intention” to prepare an HMO Subject Plan for Belfast City Council area on 30th June 2005.

What is an HMO?

In May 2004 the Housing Executive introduced a Statutory Registration Scheme for HMOs. The scheme defined an HMO as “a house occupied by more than two qualifying persons, being persons who are not all members of the same family”.

The granting of a license will be dependent on meeting criteria in relation to management of the property, compliance with physical standards (including safety standards) and any adverse impact the proposal will have upon the amenity or character of the area.

Following publication of the Planning (Use Classes) Order (Northern Ireland) 2004, all new proposals for HMOs (as defined by the Housing Executive) now require planning permission.
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Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

The Issues Approach

This Issues Paper is prepared in accordance with the requirements of Article 5 (3) of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. It is intended to guide and encourage debate and discussion focused on those issues of significance, which will shape the preparation of the Draft Subject Plan. For ease of use, this Paper sets out a series of issues. (See page 5).

Partnership Working

The issues surrounding HMOs are diverse and therefore need to be tackled in a multi-disciplinary way through partnership with other relevant bodies. Planning policy represents only one strand of a comprehensive strategy for tackling HMOs. Such a strategy should embrace planning policy, alternative opportunities of meeting housing needs, area management, new design solutions, service infrastructure and service provision if the issues are to be fully addressed.

An Inter-Agency Strategic Group, under the chairmanship of Belfast City Council’s Chief Executive, has been established to develop a comprehensive strategy for HMOs. Planning Service and all other key agencies are represented on the Group. Planning Service can make an important contribution to this strategy through the development and subsequent implementation of spatial and land-use planning policies for HMOs.

Plan Purpose

The Belfast HMO Subject Plan will:-

• Consider the possibility of limiting the number of HMOs within defined areas (% capping);
• Endeavour to accommodate housing need in relation to the HMO issue;
• Consider ways of improving the quality of the environment in areas where HMOs are concentrated; and
• Seek to facilitate planning policies or mechanisms, which will lead to an improvement in residential amenity of areas where HMOs are concentrated.

In addition, and as part of the partnership approach, Planning Service will also consider:-

• The scope to increase the provision of purpose built and managed student accommodation in suitable areas; and
• The role HMOs could play in regeneration.
Regional Policy Context and Guiding Principles

Regional Development Strategy (RDS): The Subject Plan for Houses in Multiple Occupation will be developed within the context of the RDS. The RDS seeks to promote sustainable patterns of development and recognises the need to create a thriving metropolitan area centred on a revitalised City of Belfast.

The RDS also recognises the development of balanced communities should be encouraged by promoting a mix of housing types. Also, the creation of quality built environments can contribute to the achievement of safe, complete and balanced communities.

Planning Policy Statement 7 (Quality Residential Environments), highlights the need for residential development in urban areas to respect its immediate setting in order to avoid a level of intensification, which can adversely affect local townscape character and identity.

Planning Policy Statement 12 (Housing in Settlements), provides planning control principles for housing within the context of the Strategic Planning Guidelines contained in the RDS. Its objectives include:

- Management of housing growth in relation to housing need;
- Achieving more sustainable patterns of residential development;
- Promoting the provision of higher density urban housing; and
- Encouraging the development of balanced local communities.

Policy HOU 6 of Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015, identifies the criteria for granting planning permission for the conversion of buildings to multiple occupation.

The policy also highlights that provision of this type of housing should be controlled in order to ensure that the accommodation is of a satisfactory standard, and that there is no adverse impact on the amenity of neighbouring properties and the character of the surrounding area.

Sustainable Development

The United Kingdom has embraced the principle of sustainable development based on stewardship of the environment and has widened the concept to include economic and social considerations. Consequently, preparation of the Subject Plan will include the objectives of social progress that meet the needs of everyone and effective protection of the environment.

The policies and proposals contained within the Plan may be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Equality of Opportunity

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 has placed the following statutory requirement on each public authority:

1. To carry out their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
   
   (a) Between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
   
   (b) Between men and women generally;
   
   (c) Between persons with a disability and persons without; and
   
   (d) Between persons with dependants and persons without.

2. Without prejudice to its obligations under subsection 1 above, a public authority shall, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

The Department will seek to ensure that the Plan does not have the effect of discriminating against individuals or groups of people who fall within these categories.

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Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

Recent Trends

The two principal factors that have driven the growing need and demand for HMO accommodation are:

- The changing demographic profile; and
- The increasing intake of students into higher education.

The following analysis focuses on South Belfast, where the most significant concentrations of single person households, private renting and HMOs can be found. Inner South Belfast includes the wards of Ballynafeigh, Blackstaff, Botanic, Shaftesbury, Stranmillis and Windsor.

Demographic Change: Trends in GB have exhibited an increasing number of single person households due to lifestyle preferences, postponement of families and relationship breakdown.

In 1998, approximately 27% of households in GB were single persons. According to the 2001 Census, this figure had risen to 30%. The 2001 census also recorded that 27% of households in Northern Ireland were single persons. Between 1991 and 2001 the number of single person households under pensionable age doubled. Over 50% of all single person households are now under pensionable age.

Student Intake: Within Belfast, student housing in the form of HMOs is concentrated in Inner South Belfast close to Queen’s University. Government policy has seen a significant increase in the number of students in higher education over recent years. However, the universities have indicated that increasing numbers of students are living with parents and/or taking part-time courses. It is believed this trend may continue if “top-up” fees are introduced.

Private Rented Sector: HMOs are most often found in the private rented sector. This sector plays a vital role in the overall housing market and provides accommodation for those who are unable, or would prefer not, to access home ownership or the social rented sector.

Approximately 70% of Northern Ireland’s private rented accommodation is located within Belfast City Council area. The sector now makes a significant contribution to meeting housing need and rising demand, particularly from young professionals, when affordability is an issue.

As the trend of rising house prices continues, affordability may become a greater issue.

HMOs: The introduction of the Housing Executive’s Licensing Scheme has made it easier to record the distribution of HMOs. Their geographic pattern very much emulates the distribution of the private rented sector and single person households but with even greater concentrations in South Belfast. The Waterworks and Chichester Park areas of North Belfast also have a significant concentration of HMOs.

In 1991 the Census recorded that private renting represented only 5.8% of tenures in Northern Ireland. By 2001, this figure had risen to 9.2%. Private renting tends to be concentrated in urban areas. In 2001 approximately 13% of all dwellings in Belfast were of this tenure. The 2001 Census recorded that 34% of all dwellings in Inner South Belfast wards were privately rented.

Private Renting as a % of all Tenures by Ward

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The Issues

The aim of this Paper is to promote debate on issues which are likely to influence the preparation and development of the HMO Subject Plan. The format is designed to highlight major opportunities and constraints for comment.

This Paper presents a range of issues to which there may be a variety of responses. Its purpose is to encourage debate on the relevant issues, therefore, it does not contain predetermined solutions.

The issues raised in this Paper are not exhaustive. Comment on any issue of relevance to the Subject Plan is welcomed, whether or not it is referred to in this Paper. All representations received by the Department in relation to relevant issues will be given consideration in the preparation of the Draft Subject Plan.

Where an issue cannot be addressed by planning policy, it will be referred to the Inter-Agency Group for consideration.

1. Housing Need and HMOs

A Housing Need Assessment, prepared by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, was published as a technical supplement to the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. The Assessment considered housing trends across a number of housing categories, many of which are relevant to those parts of the City where HMOs are concentrated. This included an analysis of regeneration, social housing, the private rented sector, student accommodation and affordable owner occupied housing.

The Assessment highlighted a number of trends:-

- Growing social housing need in South Belfast and insufficient sites available to meet such needs;
- Increasing demand and need from single person households;
- Emerging affordability issues in parts of Belfast, particularly South Belfast;
- Significant increase in private renting;
- Concentration of private renting and HMOs in South Belfast; and
- Student numbers stabilising, although student accommodation continues to be concentrated in the South of the City.

What is the likely future need for HMO accommodation and what factors will influence this?

What other housing needs are there in areas where HMOs are currently concentrated?

How do the different categories of Housing Need relate to one another?

Could the student village concept help meet student needs and what opportunities are there for such developments?

What impacts will the housing need from migrant workers have?

What role can HMO development play in regeneration?
2. Spatial Policy

The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 does not designate specific areas in relation to the future control of HMOs. It is recognised that a spatial plan may not, in itself, deal with all the issues presented by over-concentration of HMOs, but it will have the potential to limit the level of HMO provision in particular areas.

The Housing Executive has identified HMO Action Areas as part of its statutory registration scheme for HMOs. These could represent the basis for planning policy designations.

Those areas where HMOs are mainly concentrated tend also to be characterised by flat or apartment development. In many instances such development takes the form of conversions from single houses. Flat or apartment development in these areas may give rise to further pressures on an area's residential amenity.

Should future HMO development be concentrated or dispersed?

What criteria should be applied in identifying areas where further HMO development may be restricted?

Should the HMO Subject Plan include policies to control HMO development outside those areas where HMOs are concentrated?

Should a percentage limit be introduced on the proportion of HMOs in certain areas?

Are there any other means by which the Plan could address spatial policy issues?

Should planning policy seek to control flat or apartment development in those areas where there is a high concentration of HMOs?

3. Balanced Communities

Both the RDS and the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Plan 2015 state the importance of having balanced communities. A balanced community is one that is not dominated by one particular household type, size or tenure.

The concentration of HMOs has dramatically altered the residential profile of some neighbourhoods, in particular the Holylands and Stranmillis areas, where many students tend to live. As a result, long-term residents can feel marginalised and their quality of life adversely affected.

This can potentially lead to tension between the ‘host’ community and new residents. Local services such as schools and community facilities may be under threat as their customer base changes significantly.

In what ways can the plan promote more balanced communities in areas where HMOs are concentrated?

4. Area Amenity

HMO accommodation is often characterised by short-term tenancies. The high turnover means that residents seldom see themselves as part of that community. As a consequence they may not have a long-term commitment to the area and as a result community pride and cohesion suffer.

HMO accommodation can appear untidy when responsibility for its upkeep is shared. This, coupled with regular changes of tenancy and higher than average levels of wear and tear, can have an impact on the physical fabric of such dwellings.

The high level of turnover also gives rise to:-

- Numerous and often unsightly ‘To Let’ boards; and
- Illegal dumping when tenancies change.

How can the negative impact of HMOs on the physical appearance of an area be reduced?

What can planning policies do to encourage owners, landlords, agents and short-term residents to address the issues that can damage a residential area’s amenity?
5. Physical Infrastructure

There are various issues associated with physical infrastructure requirements in areas where HMOs are concentrated. These include:

- Proper provision of adequate services for water, sewage and waste disposal in areas with relatively high densities of population;
- The additional demands on parking provision. In many instances the only provision in areas where HMOs are concentrated is on-street parking; and
- In many instances, resident parking in areas of HMO concentration competes with commuter parking, e.g. South Belfast.

BMAP staff undertook a sample car parking survey during May 2005 as preparation for the HMO Subject Plan. The overall aim of the survey was to gain an insight into parking issues in areas where HMOs are concentrated.

From the findings it became apparent that there was a high concentration of on-street parking in both the Stranmillis and University Areas. During the day, car parking within these areas reached capacity. On occasions and in addition to conventional parking, a considerable level of illegal parking was also recorded.

What measures should be taken to upgrade utilities in areas where HMOs are concentrated?

What alternatives are there to the provision of parking in HMO areas?

Should consideration be given to “Residents Only” parking schemes in certain HMO areas?

6. Anti-social Behaviour

Areas with a high concentration of HMOs often experience above average levels of anti-social behaviour. Residents, both short-term and long-term, not only suffer the nuisance such behaviour brings but often feel intimidated and concerned for their personal safety. The anti-social activities associated with HMO areas include:

- Drinking in the street and other forms of delinquent behaviour;
- Damage to property and parked cars;
- Noisy house parties;
- High incidence of disturbance from revellers returning home; and
- Burglaries and muggings.

Are there any particular ways in which the built environment contributes to anti-social behaviour in HMO areas?

Are there any ways in which the planning system can help reduce anti-social behaviour in areas where HMOs are concentrated?

7. Area Management

The management of HMO areas is an important consideration for their future development. There are various strands to management, which include:

- Management of Street Cleaning/Refuse Disposal: The Health and Environmental Services Department of Belfast City Council are responsible for dealing with street cleansing and public health nuisances such as illegal dumping, littering, pest control and refuse collection;

- Management of Noise Control: The Health and Environmental Services Department of Belfast City Council (Pollution Control) are responsible for the monitoring and enforcement of breaches regarding unacceptable levels of noise. The social lifestyle associated with HMOs, particularly those occupied by young singles and students, can give rise to a significantly higher incidence of noise pollution;

- Management of Crime/Vandalism/Anti-Social Behaviour: The Police have identified that where HMOs are concentrated there is a higher incidence of crime. This includes burglaries, drinking on the streets and acts of vandalism to properties and cars; and

- Management of Community Safety: It is intended that a Warden Scheme for the Holylands area of South Belfast will be introduced in Autumn 2005. This is in response to the complex social and environmental issues affecting this particular community. The Scheme will be managed through Belfast City Council and jointly funded by a number of agencies.

What scope is there for further Inter-Agency Group initiatives?

How can management be improved in areas where HMOs are concentrated?

Are there any additional measures that could be implemented for the control of anti-social behaviour, crime, environmental damage and deterioration in public order within HMO areas, other than the Warden Scheme being introduced in the Holylands?
Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

Next Steps

Comment is invited on the issues raised in this paper and on any other matters which may be relevant to HMO planning issues. Comments must be submitted no later than 5.00 PM on 21st November 2005.

Comment can be submitted in a number of ways

1) Written comment to
   The Manager
   Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Team
   2nd Floor Bedford House
   16-22 Bedford Street
   BT2 7FD

2) By e-mail to: belfast.ma.plan@doeni.gov.uk

One or more events may take place at which members of the public or other interested parties may be able to participate in order to comment and discuss the issues. These events will be advertised as appropriate and chaired by consultants appointed by the Department. The consultants will submit a report to the Department, which will collate the views recorded at these events.

All views expressed and recorded by 21st November 2005, together with those conveyed through the consultants’ report, will be considered in preparation of the Subject Plan.

It should be noted that all representations received will be available for public inspection during the Subject Plan preparation process.