

City Council planning officers turn a blind eye to community imbalance

The application for conversion of Beaufort House, New North Road, to 107 room student accommodation has been approved by officers' delegated powers, without being presented for consideration at Planning Committee despite the objections raised at consultation and the opposition of our local city councillors.

Because of the location at the non-residential city centre end of New North Road, the key issue on which refusal could be argued St James' community balance, and this was raised by many who responded to the consultation. However, the Officer's Report for Delegation Briefing dismisses this issue with the astonishing admission that:

The City Council does not currently define community imbalance in any planning documents. ... The lack of a definition makes it difficult to provide evidence that the proposal fails to comply with policy H5.

Policy H5, part of the current Local Plan adopted way back in 2005, was designed to ensure *diversity* of housing provision. In the light of the planning officer's admission 18 years later, is negligence too strong a word? The development of student housing of any form, approved within St James over this time, has far outstripped that for all other demographic groups - for example, working people, families or older residents wishing to downsize – put together. Far from ensuring a sustainable diverse community, planning decisions have been leading further towards the student ghettoisation about which many residents have warned.

All too often developers cite Policy H5 as they argue their case for approval of proposals for student accommodation, emphasising that the University is expanding, students need housing and that H5 recognises their right. What they, and it seems ECC, tend to overlook is that while H5 ensures no demographic group should be overlooked within Exeter, the aim within any particular locality must be *diversity* – as the Neighbourhood Plan puts it, in St James '*the term 'community balance' refers to the desire of the residents of St James to have a diverse population which includes people at all stages of their lives and which is not dominated by a single group of the population*'.

It is very disappointing that the reason now offered by ECC for not being able to rely on Policy H5 to protect any community from imbalance, is the council's lack of a definition for this issue. As long ago as 2006, when the University gave just under 11,000 as its student number, planning officers considered the threat to community balance to be so significant in St James that it proposed restricting any further student houses in key parts of the ward, and provided for this in February 2008 when the council adopted its *Supplementary Planning Guidance: Student Accommodation Development in Residential Areas*.

The specific intention of this document was to guide interpretation of Policy H5b, whereby all planning applications for student accommodation, in any form, within the specified areas were to be refused. Reading this [document](#), still available on the Council website, is illuminating. The negative impact described is all too familiar but, instead of reducing, this has increased both in severity and the extent of areas affected. Regrettably this document, the superseding supplementary planning documents of 2011 and 2014, each intended to clarify further the interpretation of H5b, and the introduction of Article 4 Direction in 2012, have clearly failed to ensure the diversity of housing in St James that the policy seeks to achieve, diversity that would have prevented further deterioration of existing imbalance between

transient student and permanent local resident community, and gradually restored sustainable levels.

A report to Planning Committee in Dec 2006 stated that the University had plans to increase from the current 11,000 full time equivalent (FTE) to 15,000 by 2016. In fact by 2016 this was far exceeded and actual numbers have continued to outstrip each newly predicted growth figure. In November 2022, the [Exeter Observer](#), an independent not for profit community benefit society that is ‘*regulated, accountable and upholds high editorial standards*’ with ‘*journalism with community benefit at its heart*’ reported figures obtained from the University by means of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, confirming a total of 39,450 students were based at its Exeter campuses during the 2021 – 22 academic year. There is a considerable unexplained discrepancy between the figures provided under this request, which by law must be accurate, and those published on the University’s website and provided to the Council.

Whilst recognising the failure of the University to provide the Council with accurate figures pertinent for planning purposes and better predictions of future growth, considering the obvious explosion in student numbers since 2007/8 when the Council had already recognised the threat to community sustainability posed by the proportion of student residents, it is a very serious failure of the Council that it has not followed through to ensure its policy for Diversity of Housing is sufficiently robust.

It is encouraging at least that the Planning Officer’s Report suggests consideration is to be given to a new definition of community balance. It states:

The forthcoming Article Direction review will consider this, but the work is not yet complete or enshrined in policy.

The Trust Board believes it will be very important that all residents who are dismayed at the failure of the City Council to stem the tide of community imbalance, overcome widespread and understandable cynicism, and seize the opportunity to make their views clear whenever consultation over this promised Review opens. A clear definition of community balance and any other requirement to make Policy H5, and its successor in the new Local Plan, sufficiently robust to be used with confidence to refuse applications that worsen the existing community imbalance we know all too well in St James, must finally be put in place.

However, in the meantime, the Trust would encourage all concerned residents, should further planning applications for student accommodation be published for consultation, to remind the case officers that the Neighbourhood Plan does have a definition of community balance:

‘The term ‘community balance’ (therefore) refers to the desire of the residents of St James to have a diverse population which includes people at all stages of their lives and which is not dominated by a single group of the population.’

The census evidence is undeniable that the population of St James *is* already dominated by those in the 19-25 year old bracket, and hence is imbalanced. Moreover, the Neighbourhood Plan is part of Exeter’s statutory Development Plan, as the Trust finally succeeded in reminding the planning officers recently (see the report regarding the application for student accommodation in Howell Road), having been adopted by ECC in July 2013, and hence ECC *does* have a definition of community imbalance within its policy documents!