1. This evidence describes the impact of concentrations of Houses in Multiple Occupation in a small town with a population of 16,500 (GRO 2001) which hosts a University with about 7,500 students. St Andrews is considered to be “the most historic small burgh in Scotland” (Historic Scotland). It has over 300 listed buildings and its historic core retains its medieval street pattern. St Andrews, the “Home of Golf” has worldwide recognition and an important international tourist trade. The University is the oldest in Scotland, and is an important contributor to the town’s economic success. However, with exponential growth over the past decade, the University makes increasing demands on the town’s limited supply of domestic accommodation to house its student population. New Houses in Multiple Occupation, are converted from family accommodation at the rate of about fifty each year. These provide an assured income for buy-to-let landlords, and as these are businesses, they can always outbid private buyers. As a consequence, affordable and mainstream family housing is in very short supply, and houses are priced beyond the reach of ordinary families.

2. St Andrews is a designated Area of Housing Pressure. It is no longer feasible to presume that any increase in student numbers can be accommodated in existing family accommodation in the town. Nevertheless, commercial pressures continue to place a premium on family homes, which are converted to HMOs at the rate of about fifty per year.

3. Former social housing is increasingly being converted to HMOs with some areas a virtual enclave of this type of accommodation.

4. As the student population had increased, the resident population had declined. With reduced numbers of young families, the age profile of the permanent residents is increasing. The closure of a local primary school, the replacement of family orientated shops by cafes and fast-food outlets (now 52) and a proliferation of bars are symptomatic of the decline of a community where HMOs have replaced family housing. Concentrations of HMOs create the greatest difficulties.

5. The number of new HMO licences granted has exceeded the number of new houses built in the town in each of the last five years. The Fife Development Plan envisages the building of only about fifty new houses each year, seventeen of which will be in the affordable category. In housing terms, the town is now unsustainable.
6. There is a homelessness problem in the town which is the most severe in Fife. There are no reported cases of homeless students.

7. Poor maintenance of HMO properties and their gardens, especially where there are absentee landlords, has been noted as detrimental to the historic fabric of the town in a recent Conservation Area Appraisal commissioned by Fife Council. This calls for more robust policies to restrict concentrations of HMOs. The permanent residents who provide continuity and “pride of place” now number only about 15% of the population in the historic core, and this number is declining as more HMO licenses are approved. Current policies are unable to stem this decline.

8. The Council’s draft Local Plan is designed to solve the local housing crisis but if present trends continue, the reality is that HMO licences are likely to be issued in greater numbers than all the new houses planned to be built in the area until the year 2026.

9. The Development Plan Housing Land Requirement cannot provide a reasonable basis for assessing the new housing required, as further expansion of student numbers did not come within its remit.

10. The Council has been unable to develop a comprehensive planning policy to manage the growth of HMOs and maintain a mixed and sustainable community.

11. In effect, most HMOs are “under the planning radar” because of the provisions of the Use Classes Order which only recognises a change of use requiring planning consent in a small percentage of cases.

12. No development plan or planning policy can be effective this situation unless all HMOs are subject to planning controls. In addition, robust arrangements to anticipate and cater for increases in student numbers must be the subject of robust liaison arrangements between the Council and the University. The alternative is for market forces to prevail, and for the community to become a monoculture of young single people living in what is in effect second homes who have average tenancies lasting ten months and who occupy the property only during term time.

13. Students are welcome and valued members of the St Andrews community, but they and their education will benefit from being part of a mixed, vibrant and sustainable community which has continuity and character.

14. CSARA has contributed to the petition for Better Regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation and is a signatory to the petition. It supports the proposals from Sustainable Communities Scotland (SUSCOMS) in the evidence provided to the Local Government and Communities Committee
on legislative provisions required to manage concentrations of HMOs for the benefit of HMO tenants and their host communities.

Dr Angela Montford
Secretary,
CSARA

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