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## Dartford Council Eyes Stricter Rules on Shared Homes as HMO Numbers Surge

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Dartford councillors are considering more onerous restrictions on Houses in Multiple Occupations (HMOs) following a near doubling of such properties in the borough in recent years. Concerns have grown that some larger HMOs are attracting crime and anti-social behaviour, prompting calls for stronger local controls to manage the growing demand for shared housing.

HMOs are properties rented by two or more unrelated individuals who share facilities like kitchens or bathrooms. Traditionally popular with students, this type of accommodation has

become more common among young professionals in Kent who face rising housing costs and struggle to buy or rent privately.

New figures released by Dartford Borough Council (DBC) show the number of licensed HMOs increased from 40 in May 2021 to 75 by June this year. These official statistics only include HMOs with five or more residents, meaning the actual total, including smaller shared homes, may be considerably higher. The Newtown ward has the most registered HMOs, with 16, followed by the Princes ward with nine.

## Concerns and Possible Solutions

Jeremy Kite, leader of the council, expressed strong reservations about the proliferation of HMOs. He told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) that some HMOs are becoming “absolute magnets” for crime and anti-social behaviour. While he acknowledged there are reputable operators, he believes large HMOs have “no place in a modern civilised housing economy.”

The council is debating whether to introduce an Article 4 direction, a planning tool requiring landlords to apply for permission before converting family homes into HMOs. However, Cllr Kite warned that such measures would only be part of the solution, as they need to be narrowly targeted and may not be effective on their own.

Labour councillor Kelly Grehan, who scrutinised the figures, attributed the rise in HMOs to a growing demand for affordable housing. While student HMOs have long been common in some towns, Dartford’s situation differs, with more professionals and key workers, such as hospital staff, living in shared properties. The Darent Valley Hospital reportedly has many doctors and nurses in HMOs near the site, often in smaller homes that do not require licensing.

Cllr Grehan also highlighted the social impact, warning that the lack of neighbourly trust in areas with many shared houses risks damaging community cohesion. She supports moves to limit HMOs in the borough.

Dartford is among the fastest-growing towns in Kent, with a population increase of 20% between 2011 and 2022. This growth fuels housing pressure, pushing many to seek shared accommodation as a more affordable option.

While some local authorities have adopted Article 4 directions to control the spread of HMOs, the debate remains contentious. Critics argue that shared housing plays a vital role in providing affordable homes for people priced out of the market. In neighbouring areas like Maidstone and Sittingbourne, residents have also voiced concerns over HMOs, especially larger properties that can alter the character of neighbourhoods.

In Northfleet, a worker living in a garage converted into an HMO faced eviction due to safety concerns, illustrating the fine balance between providing affordable housing and maintaining safety standards.

Dartford council is now preparing to write to the housing minister to seek more explicit guidance on HMO regulation. This issue was notably absent from the Renters' Rights Bill currently before Parliament, leaving local authorities to grapple with solutions on their own.

As shared housing becomes an increasingly common feature of Dartford's housing market, councillors face the challenge of balancing the need for affordable accommodation with community safety and neighbourhood stability. In the coming months, more detailed proposals on how the borough can manage this delicate issue are likely.