

TO: Assembly

FROM: Meg Haskins

RE: Good Quality Housing Experience: Core Position

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The belief and its justification

A students' University experience can be significantly affected by their housing experience, whether this is positive or negative. Poor quality student housing is an issue which effects students nationally, with Durham's housing situation reflecting the national picture. However, good quality student housing is not solely determined by the physical condition of a property or room, but also by affordability, support from the University and the Union, the housing search and contract signing process and the experience with a landlord, letting agent or college. The Union believes that no student should have a negative experience of any of these factors simply because they are a student, or because of structural barriers. Whether privately renting, or living in college, all tenants have legal rights and should have the same standard of housing experience as any other group.

Definition of a better future

All students should have a good quality housing experience, regardless of whether this be in a private rented home, purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) or college. This means that no student should live in a home which falls below legal standards, and that all landlords, letting agents and colleges should take responsibility to ensure that all accommodation is of a good standard. Furthermore, accommodation providers should strive to meet more than the minimum standard of accessibility, in line with the Accessibility: Core Position.

There should be widespread knowledge of tenants' rights, with the Union promoting awareness of available support services. There should be continued investment in these support services, by both the University and the Union, so that all students have access to support should they need it.

Accommodation across the sector should be affordable and accessible, so as not to systematically exclude students from underrepresented groups. Ultimately, satisfaction levels amongst students should increase to reflect improvements to the student housing experience. Further, Durham University should have a care for and an interest in the broader Durham student housing market, as a key factor in a good student experience.

The barriers

Quality and cost

The historic nature of Durham City means that not all housing is fully accessible. Thus, some students are physically excluded from living in good quality student homes, due to their access needs. Additionally, the increasing costs of both private-rented and college accommodation, coupled with the University's expansion plan, presents a barrier to some students who are systematically excluded from affording a good quality housing experience. The Union recognises that the high fees set by the University for living in college have driven costs across the sector up, so they are disproportionate with both the region and similar institutions.

Poor quality student housing exists across the country, and therefore tackling the issue will require time and commitment from student leaders, the Union, the University and national student representatives. It will also require cooperation from local landlords and letting agents, who must agree to work to improve the standards of student housing in Durham.

Culture

The Union also acknowledges that many aspects of the student housing experience are the result of a deeply engrained culture of early house hunting, early signing and pressure stemming from both students and/or letting agents. Challenging and tackling this culture will also inevitably take time and collaborative efforts from all relevant parties. As above, this involves cooperation from local landlords and agents.

Belief about the change and responsibilities

The position of Durham Students' Union is:

That the Union should continue to support students by providing information and advice through the Advice Service and online resources.

That the Union should continue to lobby against increased college accommodation fees, with the view that these costs have a direct effect upon the cost of private rented accommodation.

That the Union should continue to support students in holding landlords, letting agents and the University to account for unacceptable standards of housing.

That the Union should seek to work collaboratively with the relevant parties to improve the student housing experience and lobby for providers to strive for more than minimum standards.

That the Union should challenge any barriers which systematically exclude students' access to a good housing experience.

That Durham University should have a care for, and work to mitigate the impact that the quality and cost of student accommodation has on the accessibility of Durham University and on the experience of its students.