

Abertay Students' Association Housing Campaign

2020 Report

Introduction:

In its first Student Representative Council session of the academic year 2018-19, Abertay SA representatives voted to start a campaign around housing and student homelessness. The main focus of the campaign started on the latter issue, which, while Abertay University was providing for, it was apparent that clear statement had to be made that Abertay students would be housed in the event of homelessness, where possible. As a result of the campaign the university issued that statement in December 2018. The focus of the campaign has since shifted to the costs and conditions of living in Abertay halls (including those of third party providers, ie: Parker House).

This has resulted so far in the recommendation that rents for Abertay-owned student halls be frozen for the academic year 2020-21, and that Abertay University seek cheaper third party providers to help students settle in Dundee for their studies. However, this report will highlight other recommendations that the Students' Association would make, in particular with regards to social spaces, hygiene and the cost of laundry to students.

Abertay SA hope that this report will educate and inspire direct action, on the parts of students, representatives, officers and Abertay University.

Owen Wright

President, Abertay Students' Association.

The cost of living at Abertay:

It should be noted that Abertay University does not own all the accommodation it advertises to applicants. Abertay University owns Lyon Street and Meadowside Halls, and thus has full control over those rents, maintenance and conditions. Parker House and Keiller Court are not owned by Abertay University, and thus Abertay only have influence over those. The University, as we understand it, does have some control over the number of rooms offered as a guarantee to Abertay applicants in those halls on an annual basis.

Lyon Street Hall Rents: £270.30/month to 510.93/month, depending on room configuration and length of contract.

Meadowside Hall Rent: £507.69/month.

Parker House Rents: £554.99/month to £662.96/month, depending on room type and length of contract.

Keiller Court Rents: £481/month.

Based on the numbers provided, Abertay SA has discerned that the average cost of a room for a student renting from Abertay-owned halls is approximately £410 per month. In third-party halls, the median cost is about £570 per month.

When it comes to looking at these costs from a historical perspective, on average Abertay-owned student halls have seen a consistent rise in their rents for the past 5 years. Overall, these halls cost students 7.8% to 13.5% more than they did in the academic year 2014-15 (with more expensive hall options seeing the bigger rises in rents). Since records began for Parker House in 2017-18, the rents have seen an increase of 3.7% to 6.2% (again, with more expensive halls seeing the bigger rent rises).

When it comes to student affordability, most students living in Abertay halls find their rents unsustainable. From the surveys, almost 60% of students living in Abertay-owned halls said they could not sustain living in them. For third party halls, this number for students saying they were unable to sustain living in their accommodation was 50%.

48% of students living in student halls owned by Abertay University said that they (at one or more points) were prevented from buying basic essentials, such as food or hygiene products, due to the cost of their rent. This figure for third-party halls is lower, at 28%.

Students overall in both Abertay-owned halls and third-party halls were dissatisfied by how much of their student loans/grants were spent on rent. In Abertay-owned halls, 89% felt too much of their student support income was spent on rent. In third-party halls, this figure was 83%.

All these figures above make sense when comparing the costs of rents in Abertay student halls to student support income. Students will receive sometimes as little as £475 to live on through a single month. Given the approximate average cost of Abertay-owned student halls sits at about £410 per month, this leaves these students as little as £65 per month to live on, sometimes less. Living in third party halls recommended by the University, students

could find themselves in a deficit of almost £100 per month. In any case, it is easy to understand why many find living in student halls at Abertay unsustainable.

Those who cannot fully afford student halls rent are more likely to need to find a job to fit alongside their studies. This impacts students' mental health and their ability to study and stay in university. Job-hunting is particularly prominent among EU students, as they do not have access to financial support from Student Awards Agency Scotland, and often will not have access to financial support from relatives.

There is a note to be made for the third-party accommodation. From our surveys, it is clear that students living in these halls (Parker House and Keiller Court) are notably more likely to afford them, although the numbers remain high in those unable to sustain rents and living costs. This points towards a certain demand for more expensive halls, but also a need for less expensive halls to be made available to students, and for the cheaper halls that already exist to remain affordable.

Conditions, services and social spaces:

In Abertay-owned halls, 29% say they have encountered instances of mould, and 36% say they have encountered bugs in their halls at one point or another. In third-party halls, particularly in Parker House, issues with mould were certainly more prominent, with 47% of residents saying they have had issues with it. Issues with bugs in flats and rooms are less pronounced in third-party halls, with only 16% saying they had ever encountered any.

On the doorstep, it was found that many students were having issues with heating in their halls, particularly in Lyon Street where students found it impossible to control the heating in their flat, leading them to feel too warm in the Spring and Autumn months.

Most students find repair services in halls adequate and timely, with 91% of students being satisfied in third-party halls, and 76% being satisfied in Abertay-owned halls.

In Abertay-owned halls there is a dissatisfaction with available social spaces, with 64% saying they found their accommodation lacking in space to socialise. This seemed particularly pronounced in Lyon Street accommodation when speaking to students on the doorstep, with many finding their kitchen/common living rooms too small. In third-party halls, we found almost the opposite, with 66% of residents being satisfied with the social space that was available to them.

Laundry Services:

Most students living, or having lived, in halls have had a bad experience of laundry and the cost of laundry at Abertay accommodation, both in Abertay-owned and third-party halls. Only 14% of students asked felt that the laundry services worked well in Abertay-owned halls, with 45% only saying sometimes, and 41% saying not at all. It was worse in third-party

halls, with as few as 12% saying that the laundry services worked well for them, 32% saying only sometimes and 56% saying the service did not work.

Across all accommodation, many of the issues reported were to do with inconsistencies in payments and machines actually performing the washing, as well as issues to do with capacity and availability. It is worth noting that in Abertay-owned halls, equipment for laundry services has now been replaced.

Cost of laundry was also a particular sticking point to students living in Abertay halls. Over 85% of all respondents in our surveys said they found their laundry services too costly. This follows, as it costs approximately £4 for students to wash and dry their clothing items, compared to under 50p in most other homes. If a student hopes to do their washing at least once per week, they will be paying approximately £160 to £200 per year on their laundry (depending on the length of their lease), which equates to about £16 per month. When asked on the doorstep, nearly all students we spoke to said they felt the laundry was unreasonably expensive.

Recommendations:

It is abundantly clear from this research that the cost of living in Abertay Halls is an increasingly pressing issue. Most students say they cannot afford to live in their accommodation, and the reasons are very clear that it is to do with their rents relative to their income. It is also clear that students can become stressed should they feel the need to find a job to cover their cost of living, impacting their mental health and their ability to study to their full potential.

On the cost of living, Abertay SA has already made two key recommendations in early December 2019, based on the factors of increasing rent prices and lack of availability of cheap accommodation. The first was a recommendation that Abertay University freeze the rents for the year 2020-21 on the accommodation that they own and manage. The second was for Abertay University to seek out cheaper third-party accommodation to partner with and advertise to students coming to study in Abertay University.

On the issues of conditions and social spaces, there are two things to note. Conditions in most Abertay halls seem acceptable, however, care needs to be taken to ensure that third-party providers and the university are meeting a high standard of hygiene in the accommodation they provide. Abertay University also needs to make an effort to provide for the lack of social spaces in the university-owned student halls. Whether this needs to come in the form of social space in halls or simply social space in the university itself needs further examination.

As is currently the case, issues individuals face in their accommodation and cannot fix themselves need to continue to be addressed in a proper and timely manner.

On the issue of laundry services, it is clear that discontent exists among students living in all halls, mostly around prices. Most view it as a hidden addition to rent, and many students at

the time of our surveys did not feel the services worked for them. Furthermore, most students told us they felt frustrated of being unable to dry their clothes without the need of a machine for that purpose. Student laundry in Abertay halls is provided by Circuit, which provides a massive portion of student halls in the UK with laundry services, some would say to monopolistic level.

Action needs to be taken by Abertay University to reduce the cost of laundry to students, as well as improve the reliability of its services. Abertay SA would recommend Abertay University explore the possibility of running its own laundry service to ensure students get the best service possible at the best price possible, with better accountability. To help reduce the cost of laundry in the short term, Abertay University should, along with the third-party providers it partners with, look at the policies they all hold towards students drying their clothing in their rooms. If that is not possible to change, then an effort should be made to provide students with a place they can dry their clothing without charge.

Conclusions:

All of the issues discussed in this report can be considered core to the sense of student belonging at Abertay. The ability to study and live without the fear or stress of being left out financially or socially is essential to the student experience, and anything feeding to the opposite of that contributes to poor retention and a poor time at university. From the information we have gathered, we at Abertay SA cannot say that the accommodation experience at Abertay University is a good one, considering the issue of cost. As such, we hope that the data, points and recommendations made in all of this report are taken into serious consideration when halls places and rents are decided and student accommodation strategy is developed.

Final Notes:

It is important to note that this report does not cover certain statistics, such as looking more directly at Abertay students' incomes, and does not go into huge detail on data on the demographics of students which responded. Near all of the demographic data gathered for this report was gathered through door-knocking and conversations with students. This was primarily due to a lack of time, however, we do not believe it discounts any of the findings in this report.