

**Paper for Employment and Learning
Minister from NUS-USI on student
accommodation in Belfast in the
future**

Introduction

NUS-USI would like to express our gratitude to the Minister for inviting us to submit our views around student housing in the future in Belfast.

Following our discussion with the Minister around the impact of Ulster University Jordanstown's move into Belfast on the landscape as regards student housing, we have created a paper on the issue.

Belfast - A city of learning

Students are the future of our society and are Belfast's future. They are Northern Ireland's future business leaders, community leaders and political leaders.

It is very important that students feel welcome and more are encouraged to move here and stay here. Northern Ireland has lost so many people seeking employment elsewhere or studying elsewhere, and it is imperative that Belfast does all it can to encourage as many students as possible to stay here, so that they are not lost to Northern Ireland.

Students play such an important part in making Belfast the vibrant and culturally

exciting city that it is. It is important that the pivotal role that students play in the success story of Belfast can continue and grow in the future. This requires vision and investment to ensure that more purpose built student accommodation is created and that this accommodation is made as affordable as possible, as current student specific accommodation can be quite expensive.

Belfast City Council has highlighted promoting Belfast as a learning city and this is a very positive concept.

We believe that it is vital that the current range and amount of accommodation must be augmented significantly to meet the needs of students and to ensure that Belfast can reach its potential as a learning city. The move of some courses from Jordanstown to Belfast further underlines Belfast as a learning city.

Purpose built student accommodation

With the moving of some courses from Jordanstown to Belfast, many students may choose to live beside the Belfast campus if purpose built student accommodation is built. While more

students may wish to live in Belfast than previously, if Ulster University Belfast students want to live near the new campus they are studying, and purpose built accommodation is available near there, this may decrease the number of students living in the Holylands area.

NUS-USI would like to see more purpose built student accommodation created in Belfast as a matter of urgency. It is important that new low cost purpose built accommodation is provided, and NUS-USI would like this accommodation to be owned and managed by the education institutions or publically, as opposed to private ownership and management. We believe it is important that new purpose built student accommodation is delivered in a student village format near Ulster University Belfast campus.

We believe that if the halls are owned by the council or by universities and colleges, then the accommodation could potentially be far more responsive to the needs of students than halls that are run by private companies whose only concern might be making a profit.

NUS-USI would like to see a wider range of accommodation available so that students have more choice and can find the purpose built accommodation that meets their budgetary constraints.

Student village

With Ulster University's plan to relocate many courses from Jordanstown to Belfast, it offers the opportunity for the institution, the council and government the opportunity to examine the potential for creating a student village near Ulster University's Belfast campus.

This could be an extremely beneficial move for students, and could enable the creation of a new area which could be of significant cultural and economic impact to the city.

Creating a student village should be considered by the institution, the council and government as it would provide a ready-made network and community of students for those who leaving home for the first time to start university.

Any student village should be comprised of a diverse range of student accommodation, for example very low cost accommodation and accommodation of other price ranges too. It's also extremely important that a range of accessible accommodation is made available for people with disabilities within any student village or other purpose build student accommodation too.

It appears that there will still be places in student residences in Jordanstown after the move, however, we believe that given many courses have moved demand for

purpose built and private student accommodation could still increase very significantly.

It is important that those who run purpose built student accommodation help create cohesion within the accommodations and also good relations between those using the accommodation and the wider community.

In terms of internal cohesion it is important that communal spaces and rooms exist within the student village or purpose built student accommodation and that those who own the halls provide resources to deliver good relations.

Impact of increase in demand for accommodation

The education institutions and all aspects of government here must work together to ensure that the Ulster University relocation of many courses from Jordanstown to Belfast does not push purpose built student accommodation and private rented accommodation prices up. More supply must be provided to meet additional demand to prevent price inflation.

While it appears that many students that study in Jordanstown live in South Belfast already, the impact that the increase in student numbers in Belfast due to Ulster

University plans could have could be quite significant.

NUS-USI believes that building a student village comprised of more publically or institution-owned halls of residence would have a very positive impact in relation to this potential increase in demand for accommodation.

Recent figures would suggest that only one in 16 students live in halls in Northern Ireland. In cities like Cardiff or Leeds around one in five students live in university accommodation. This situation must be addressed as soon as possible.

Also, it has been recently stated that of the approximately 42,000 students in Belfast, education institutions provide around only 2,700 accommodation places in the city. This clearly demonstrates the need for more student specific accommodation to be provided.

It is crucial that planning policy is correctly focused to enable the building of more purpose built student accommodation. We would be concerned about any subjective planning criteria which might be difficult to define, because we would be worried that council or the planners could potentially oppose/ refuse planning permission for all applications to build halls of residence. If the criteria are quite vague and abstract they could potentially be used to deny students the creation of more places in low

cost purpose built accommodation that there is such a high demand for.

We believe that the potential deficit in lower cost purpose built student accommodation needs to be addressed as soon as possible and we believe that the building of extra accommodation of this nature is essential, particularly with some courses from Ulster University in Jordanstown moving into Belfast soon.

Another key planning requirement should be that each purpose build student hall should have at least two student representative on the accommodation's management board. Also, at least two of the students that live at the hall of residence should be appointed as paid student wardens for that location, to ensure that the concerns of students are heard and addressed by those running the accommodation.

It is essential that planning policy requires that the student voice is heard in relation to the running and management of purpose built student accommodation to ensure that it meets the needs of students.

Need for joined-up approach on building student halls

A joined-up approach between education institutions, the council and government must be in place to ensure co-ordination of

efforts and deliver more purpose built student accommodation.

If all these elements work together, it will significantly help in ensuring that demand for places in purpose built halls of residence can be met.

The Belfast Masterplan executive summary discusses encouraging the preparation of university masterplans and encouraging student housing strategies. It is extremely important that any planning delivers the amount of purpose built student accommodation needed to meet demand and it must be affordable too.

Students often have to live in private rented accommodation as they cannot afford to pay the rent for halls of residence, and the issues of affordability as regards rent for purpose built student accommodation must be addressed immediately. It is crucial that joined-up working helps deliver on affordability.

Education institutions must ensure that international students are given the opportunity to have accommodation on or near the campus. There some potential concerns that when many of the Ulster University courses move from Jordanstown to Belfast, many international students could be living in Jordanstown, yet there courses may be being delivered in Belfast and this could have a negative impact upon the student experience of some international students. It is extremely

important that international students get a fair deal it is important that their accommodation needs are met.

It is essential that government and the planners recognise the need for more student accommodation to be provided to meet this change in location of some courses from Jordanstown to Belfast, and it's important that government are ambitious as regards the development of more purpose built student accommodation.

It is vital that strong provisions are in place to ensure safety and quality standards are met as regards both purpose built student accommodation and private rented accommodation.

Affordability

Affordability in relation to purpose built student accommodation is key to encouraging more students to study in Belfast. Affordability is also vital to allow more students to be able to avail of a place in halls of residence.

We would like government and the council to place in planning regulations a stipulation that to be granted planning permission for purpose build student accommodation, at least 30% of the purpose built student accommodation in the plan must be lower cost.

The high cost of student specific accommodation has forced many people to rent in the private sector and NUS-USI believes that every HE student in Northern Ireland should at least have the opportunity to live in halls for their first year of study if they wish to.

Halls of residence provide an excellent and safe environment for students to get used to living away from home, make friends, settle in and get the best out of their allround education experience.

The halls should be designed with the needs of students in mind. NUS-USI would like to see the education institutions, the council, government or a public body running the halls because we would have concerns that any private company's priority might be profit rather than providing the best possible service for the students paying to live there.

The quality of the accommodation is also extremely important and it should be a requirement that accommodation quality standards are demonstrated in planning applications.

Private-rented sector housing

Many students gain accommodation within the private rented sector and we believe that government and the council must

ensure that the private rented sector operates in a manner which enables the city to reach its potential as a learning city.

It is absolutely essential that planning policy is put in place in relation to minimum size of rented rooms. This would help prevent overcrowding.

NUS-USI would oppose any situation whereby any house in multiple occupation (HMO) licensing could be used, in conjunction with planning regulation for Belfast which limits the percentage of properties allowed to be used as HMOs in some areas, to decrease in the supply of HMOs.

This would have an extremely detrimental impact on students and others who rely on there being a strong supply of HMOs to keep prices relatively low to enable them to rent accommodation.

The Belfast City Council area HMO Plan from 2008 states that certain areas are only allowed to have 30% of properties as HMOs. If some HMOs are rented by families for example, they will drop off the register, and if the area has over 30% properties as HMOs, they will not be able to be used as HMOs again until the percentage falls under 30. That means, in the areas with a limit on the percentage of HMOs, their number is very likely to fall, and supply could dwindle to such an extent that rent rises sharply. This could result in homelessness, could see those properties

being let as unlicensed HMOs and could also potentially lead to overcrowding.

In having licensing of HMOs, it is absolutely essential that government keeps a close watch on the HMO market and acts accordingly with flexibility to ensure that these measures do not have an adverse impact on supply. A reduction the supply could significantly drive up prices which would have a very negative effect on the lives of people who wish to rent accommodation and could see some HMOs being let on an unregulated basis, which could see less safeguards being provided for tenants.

Any move which is likely to drive down supply will hinder the prospect of equality of opportunity for people seeking to rent accommodation in HMOs.

Accommodation within the private rented sector must also see stringent regulation to ensure affordability, safety, high standards and landlord responsiveness. This applies not only to student accommodation, but also all accommodation being rented by anyone else.

Students can experience significant problems as regards private rented sector and research that we conducted with students prior to the creation of the tenancy deposit scheme showed that 48.3% of the over 1,000 respondents said that they have had a deposit unfairly

withheld by their landlord / lettings agency. This worrying figure helps highlight the need for strong regulation of private rented accommodation and landlords.

Another potentially significant factor for students with regard to the changes that could come about as a result of the move of some courses from Jordanstown to Belfast is transport links. Improving the public transport infrastructure around the city and having one single student travel discount card from Translink could significantly help students and could ensure ease of access to education institutions.

Good relations

We want to see the excellent work already being done by students, students' unions, universities and the statutory agencies to promote positive relations with communities that students live in being supported even further by government.

We would like to see government taking a joined-up approach on helping to deliver and maintain awareness programmes for landlords and students by providing specific funding to student unions or the student movement to enable them to deliver such programmes. This type of pro-active approach, delivered to new students at the start of their course would have an

extremely positive impact for everyone. For landlords that take part in an awareness course, we believe that a reduced HMO license fee rate could be available to encourage participation.

We are also very concerned about the impact of the withdrawal of warden service in the wider Holyland area because this puts massive pressure on others who are working hard to promote and work to ensure good relations in the Holyland area. The loss of wardens could put student officers in an even more difficult situation than they were already in and could have a very detrimental impact on the extremely good work pro-actively done on this matter.

Key conclusions:

- The impact that some courses moving from Jordanstown to Belfast will have could lead to significant housing pressures
- Belfast needs more purpose built student accommodation created and the Belfast campus area needs a significant number halls places created
- Affordability is key. Low cost purpose built student accommodation must be created and a broad range of

accommodation must be available. Plans for new purpose built student accommodation should have at least certain percentage of places being lower cost accommodation.

- Need to examine the creation of a student village near Ulster University Belfast campus
- Government, the council and education institutions need to work together to deliver joined-up working to build student village/halls
- These elements need to work together to prevent any potential increase in the cost of student accommodation which could come about due to the increase in demand for places following the move of some courses to the Belfast campus.
- It is crucial that the student voice is heard. Students should have at least two places on the management committee of each student hall and at least of the students living in each hall should be appointed and paid as student wardens for that hall of residence, to help ensure issues raised by students can potentially be addressed by the owners of the accommodation.
- Having a warden service in the Holyland area is key to ensuring good relations
- Making public transport links more frequent and having one student discount card could make it easier for students to live in a broader geographical area and have good access to the education institution.

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