

Supporting good practice in student accommodation: considerations for senior university leaders

With over 1.2 million full-time students in the UK (close to 60%) living away from their own or family home¹, accommodation is a huge part of many students' experience of university. It's crucial that all students have access to safe, good-quality, and affordable accommodation throughout their higher education.

Recently, some UK towns and cities have experienced shortages of suitable accommodation, with knock-on effects for students. The availability of suitable student accommodation is highly variable throughout the country; with some areas under significant pressure, while others currently manage, just-manage, or are even experiencing an accommodation surplus.

However, UCAS predict that undergraduate student numbers are likely to continue increasing until at least 2030, when there could be up to a million applicants to university each year². The trend towards greater proportions of both postgraduate and international students is also likely to continue affecting demand for accommodation³. At the same time, accommodation shortages – driven by a range of factors, including macro-economic circumstances - are forecast to become more widespread, with StuRents predicting a shortfall of 450,000 student beds by 2025⁴.

¹ [Where do HE students study? | HESA](#)

² [What is the journey to a million? | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

³ [Figure 1 - First year higher education \(HE\) student enrolments by level of study 2012/13 to 2021/22 | HESA; Higher Education Student Data 2021/22 | HESA](#)

⁴ [New data reveals shortfall in student beds by 2025 - PBSA News](#)

Changes in local and national housing policy can also significantly impact developer and landlord behaviour, as has been especially notable in Scotland in recent years.

We know that many universities and their senior teams take a long-term view to considering student accommodation, which is especially important given suitable approaches and solutions are likely to take some time to put in place. This note, which draws on the insights and experiences of others in the sector, is intended to support that process.

Despite common themes, every university and location will face its own challenges, so there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. However, we hope the reflective questions and case studies within this briefing note will be useful to support university leaders in considering their long-term approach to student accommodation.

The impact of issues with accommodation on students

We know that issues with accommodation can have serious impacts on students' university experience, including their wellbeing and mental health, as well as academically and financially. Chloe Field, NUS Vice President Higher Education, tells us:

"The shortage of affordable student housing in towns and cities across the UK will only get worse without universities prioritising a strategic approach. This should be based on supply and demand, rather than prioritising student numbers without considering capacity.

"This is not just a matter of inconvenience to students. Compromising on where you live while studying – whether that be on the basis of location, cost or quality – has a significant impact on students' academic, financial and social situations. There are also the mental health impacts, with NUS surveys finding that insecure housing and the risk of homelessness contribute to higher levels of anxiety.

"These issues contribute to decreased student satisfaction and consequent reputational damage to institutions. During a cost-of-living crisis in which student rent is outstripping the maintenance loan in England and students are reporting higher rates of homelessness, it's clear the status quo is unsustainable for both students and institutions.

"An inaccessible rental market represents a barrier to students thriving in their education, and supply issues hit crisis point in several cities at the

beginning of the 2022/23 academic year. The longer-term approach advocated for in this briefing will benefit students and help institutions to plan more effectively.”

Assessing the current and future situation

Clearly, different student bodies will have different needs in relation to accommodation: whether an institution operates a highly ‘residential’ model, has higher numbers of commuter students, or falls somewhere in between. However, as pressures grow, it will be important for universities to continue to make regular, realistic assessments of likely future demand for accommodation from their students, and the corresponding housing supply – considering not just university- and privately-managed purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), but also other available accommodation within the local area, the bulk of which will be houses in multiple occupation (HMOs).

Where a local area has more than one higher education institution and is likely to have an impact on the same local housing stock, the benefits of doing this in partnership are clear.

- What does data tell you about students’ patterns of living and available housing stock in the local area? Some available data sources are listed below. It’s likely that several data sources used in conjunction will provide greatest accuracy.
 - Student records data on students’ current, term time addresses
 - Data from local and national letting agents eg [Zoopla Property Data](#)
 - [HESA data](#) on students’ term time addresses for current and previous years will provide some information on student residence patterns over time
 - [Census data](#) showing the proportion of full-time students within local areas, as well as changing patterns of renting from ‘competing’ market sectors such as young professionals (in England and Wales)⁵
 - Local authority data – organisations such as [Unipol](#) may be able to offer specialist support with analysing this data. Council tax exemptions, planning applications and HMO license registers will also all provide useful evidence.

⁵ The most reliable equivalent in Scotland comes from the 2011 census, so may be out-of-date.

- Are there other higher education institutions in the local area whose students make use of the same housing stock? How should they be factored into this?
- Considering your future student number projections, how many students (and their dependants) do you expect to require accommodation, either purpose-built or privately rented, in the coming years? It will be important to consider students at all points of study, for the duration of their time at university, not just those typically subject to an accommodation guarantee. It is also helpful to consider the proportion of students who are likely to go on to the Graduate route and remain living in the same housing stock.
- Do you understand the different types of accommodation your student population is currently looking for, and their cost? Do you expect the demographics of your student body to change in the coming years (eg undergraduate/postgraduate mix; international student domicile; proportion of students with dependants), and is this likely to change the nature of demand? We recognise that due to the ongoing political uncertainty around future international student recruitment policy it may be necessary for universities to plan for several scenarios.

Case study: understanding demand for accommodation at Bournemouth University

At Bournemouth University, an annual analysis is carried out to understand demand for student accommodation from the first-year undergraduate and postgraduate student intake. The team calculate the percentage of first-year undergraduate and postgraduate students who book accommodation within the university's available portfolio. This is split into four categories: domestic undergraduate; international undergraduate; domestic postgraduate; and international postgraduate. Over the past five years, the university has built an understanding of average demand in each category, which can be used to forecast demand against future student recruitment targets. They can also understand how many rooms are likely to be required - including a prediction of over or under supply – at an early point in the recruitment cycle.

For instance, the university identified that there was likely to be a small accommodation shortfall for the September 2022 intake, and developed a support package for any first-year student unable to find long-term accommodation by the

start of term. This package included free travel on university and some local buses; a monthly payment to help with higher costs of living; and a space on the priority waiting list for the next available room in the university portfolio. All students in receipt of the package were offered a room by the end of October.

This analysis model is now being used to inform student recruitment numbers, by indicating how many students the university is likely to be able to house within its own portfolio in future years. While currently only targeted at the first-year undergraduate and postgraduate intake, its ability to accurately predict accommodation demand from different applicant types is valuable in allowing the university to plan its accommodation offer accordingly. The university is currently considering whether there is scope to expand and develop this model to forecast accommodation demand for their total student population.

Internal working

Accommodation is closely linked to other elements of a university's operations, including recruitment, admissions, internationalisation, and student wellbeing. It is important that there are strong links between the relevant internal teams, and that they all work cohesively together.

In addition, some universities, especially those with large postgraduate student intakes, may be less directly involved in providing accommodation to all new students than has typically been the case for first-year undergraduates. Especially where there are accommodation shortages, it will be important to consider how all students receive accurate information about the local accommodation market, to support them in making informed decisions about how best to secure suitable housing. This may entail offering more direct advice and information on suitable options, including within the private rented sector, including in collaboration with the students' union and/or specialist agencies. Such support will also benefit returning undergraduate students.

- Do the teams responsible for student recruitment and admissions, both domestic and international, engage regularly with the teams responsible for accommodation in relation to student number planning?
- Does the university team responsible for the delivery of the accommodation offer have a broader remit and strategic understanding of accommodation demand and supply in the local area?

- Does student number planning include a consideration of the longer-term, residual impact of accommodating students in the local area for the duration of their studies, even where the university does not have a direct role in providing this accommodation (eg within the private PBSA and HMO sectors)?
- What is the university's current accommodation guarantee? What changes might be needed to ensure this guarantee is fair, transparent, and achievable? Does the guarantee prioritise the student groups most in need of such support?
- How can you ensure students are housed within reasonable distance of the university? If students' expectations cannot be met, how is this communicated to them, and what mitigations (eg travel grants) are put in place?
- Does the institution have an agreed position on whether it considers itself the housing provider of last resort to students? If so, how is this pursued eg temporary accommodation in dorms/hotels? What relationship would this have with statutory responsibilities, and how might these evolve? In particular, in Scotland the Scottish Government is considering whether to include universities within scope of legislation that would place a requirement on public sector bodies to prevent homelessness, which could potentially represent a significant shift in expectations of institutions.
- What support and information, including via the students' union, is available to students who experience issues with housing, including affordability? If this is not provided 'in-house', are students signposted elsewhere?

Case study: University of Leicester student number planning

The University of Leicester recognises that student experience must be a key consideration in future planning. To support this, the university's Estates and Campus Services department has been integrated into the student number planning process for several years. Representatives from the department sit on the university's Student Number Planning Group, which also includes the Head of Admissions and Head of Recruitment.

This group meets bi-monthly and aims to consider all relevant perspectives in determining student number targets, before raising these to the Executive Board for approval. The group also generates a 'golden source' dataset which is used to ensure

that student number plans inform other key business planning processes, including accommodation bed planning.

The inclusion of Estates and Campus Services enables the department to sense-check projections against the estate masterplan; identify potential operational challenges; and ultimately providing a holistic view of available university space and how it can be used. The department is also involved in the annual clearing process at both operational and strategic level, supporting decision-making with 'live' information on accommodation occupancy levels.

In addition to the clear benefits for student accommodation, this way of working also allows planning in relation to other areas, including the physical teaching estate and catering services.

Working with others

Even in areas where there is only one higher education institution, issues with student accommodation can quickly have a big impact on the local area, affecting a range of wider areas such as local transport infrastructure. City-wide solutions are needed, with collaboration from all higher education institutions, the local authority (or authorities), and private accommodation providers.

- If your institution is already having bilateral conversations with a range of local stakeholders, could there be benefit in joining these up to bring greater coordination and clearer messaging?
- Is the local authority aware of your student number projections and accommodation supply for the coming years? Are these being considered in local housing and planning policy, including in relation to HMO licencing schemes, and factored into the Local Plan? Are consequential impacts on other local services (eg transport; education) also being considered?
- Do the university and the local authority have a shared view on the kind of purpose-built accommodation developments that would be most necessary or suitable in the local area, taking into account diversity of student needs and budgets? Can the local authority encourage or facilitate the university's engagement with private accommodation developers?

- Could the university and the local authority find areas of mutual benefit in relation to student accommodation? For instance, could there be opportunities to collaborate on meeting shared sustainability goals, incentivise brownfield development that leads to city centre regeneration, address concerns about student noise in residential areas, etc.
- Does the university have a good understanding of, and links with, the local private rented sector? Is there a local landlord's forum? The local authority may well be able to facilitate such meetings.

Case study: Nottingham student living strategy

Nottingham Trent University, the University of Nottingham and Nottingham City Council have recently launched their first joint 'Student Living Strategy'. This strategy aims to support the needs of the student population in Nottingham, while maximising the benefits and addressing any challenges to the city as a whole.

The two universities have long engaged with each other, and the city council, about student accommodation, albeit on a bilateral basis. However, to take a more coordinated approach, several years ago they decided to 'join-up' these relationships into a partnership approach. This partnership has led to the development of this strategy, allowing all partners to take a more proactive, evidence based, medium-long term approach to student living.

Both universities and the council commit to a range of actions in the strategy, including working together to promote diverse types of purpose-built student accommodation. The council will develop the student accommodation planning policy guidance for accommodation developers. All partners are also committed to improving the quality of HMO provision. As well as considering the availability, quality, and affordability of student accommodation, the strategy also focuses on encouraging student neighbourliness, in recognition of the impact students can have in their local communities.

The partnership has been productive, and allowed the universities to take a coordinated, proactive, medium-to-long term approach to the provision of student housing. Steve Denton, Chief Operating Officer and Registrar at Nottingham Trent, reflected that the partnership has been successful as it is built on a spirit of openness

between all partners, actions are evidence-based and measurable, while also being realistic about the demands each of the partners are facing.

Solutions

Each university and local area will face its own challenges, and the scale and nature of any solutions will therefore vary. It will be important to bear in mind that while both local PBSA and HMO markets are likely to play an important role in any solutions, the optimum ways of working with these, and the degree of direct influence a university can have, will likely differ.

- What information about accommodation does the university make available to students in advance of them joining? How does this set their expectations, and does it give them sufficient time to make informed decisions? Are communications to students clear about the need to secure accommodation before arriving on campus, including signposting international students to relevant Home Office support pages and advice?
- Does the range of accommodation on offer in the local area (both university and private PBSA, and HMOs) offer a diverse range of options, suitable for different types of students? For instance, accommodation at a range of price points, PBSA suitable for returning students, HMO and non-HMO accommodation that is more suitable for families...
- What is likely to be an appropriate balance between PBSA and the local private rented sector in fulfilling housing demand, in the local context?
- What is the university's pipeline for its own student accommodation, and is this likely to need future-proofing work (eg to meet sustainability goals)?
- Could the university develop a statement and/or position on the types of PBSA development they are likely to favour, and make this readily available to private developers?
- Is the university able to incentivise the development of more innovative solutions – for instance, by taking on joint financial risk in developing new types of accommodation, or looking at tech-enabled

solutions, such as those explored by the University of Glasgow (see below)?

- Are there ways the university can encourage high accommodation standards in the local private rented sector, such as working with local authorities to champion and implement landlord accreditation, or by promoting landlord review sites? The '[Rate Your Landlord](#)' site has been important in some student cities, including Coventry and Leeds.

Case study: innovative solutions at the University of Glasgow

Glasgow is home to five higher education institutions, and has long been a popular student city. It is now the fourth largest student city in the UK, having seen a 10% increase in full-time students since 2019. As a result, student accommodation has come under pressure due to a combination of high demand and a significant reduction in suitable properties in the private rented sector.

The University of Glasgow recognises the impact issues with accommodation have on students' university experience, and is proactively seeking solutions. The university is currently leading talks between the five institutions and Glasgow City Council, aiming to develop solutions that meet the needs of the universities, their students, and the city of Glasgow as a whole. This partnership working between the universities ensures joined-up messaging, and recognises that issues with accommodation affect the whole city and require collaboration to solve.

The university are considering a range of solutions, especially in the private rented sector. This includes the development of brownfield sites (such as former department stores and hotels) into student accommodation, and considering how they ensure these offer a diversity of accommodation types to suit a variety of student needs. They are also exploring a partnership with a new startup company, which offers a tech-based solution aiming to make private renting more transparent for students. The app will put students in touch with verified landlords, increasing transparency and access, while also handling paperwork, increasing security. This is one of a range of solutions, as the University of Glasgow recognises it must work collaboratively and innovatively to solve issues with student accommodation.