

Durham SU: The Housing Conversation

Consultation response

18/08/2023

We are writing on behalf of the Durham Students Union, the representative body for over 20,000 students at Durham University. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the housing conversation consultation and to share our views and experiences on the housing issues that affect our members. We are responding to this call for evidence due to our organisational experience supporting and representing students on housing matters as groups and individuals.

We enthusiastically support the vision, principles, and priorities of the housing strategy, and we agree that housing is a key factor for people's health, well-being, and prosperity. In that spirit, we must highlight that students, as an essential part of the Durham city population, economy, and community, have specific housing needs and preferences that should be considered and addressed explicitly in the strategy. We appreciate that the strategy is for the whole county, not just the city; however, Durham city faces unique challenges due to its demographics which exceed its borders, both as students are now living in the towns surrounding the city centre to find affordable and quality accommodation, but also due to the increased student numbers are causing the moving of the local residents to move outside of the city, therefore enhancing the "town vs gown" struggle.

Key issues that we have identified through our research¹ include:

- Low quality and standards of student accommodation, especially in the private rented sector, where many properties are old, poorly maintained, damp, mouldy, or unsafe.
- High rents and fees put a financial strain on students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, international students, or those who rely on student loans or grants.

¹ [Housing Matters @ Durham SU](#) ; [Housing stories @ Durham SU](#) ; [Durham SU Response to the White Paper A Fairer Private Rented Sector](#) ; [Reinventing Renting in Durham](#)

- Exploitation by some landlords and letting agents, who may delay repairs, withhold deposits, or impose unfair terms and conditions.

These issues harm the quality of life, academic performance, mental health, and overall wellbeing of students. They also affect the reputation and attractiveness of Durham as a place to study and live.

We propose the following recommendations that we think would help address these issues and benefit both students and the wider community:

- A student accommodation licensing scheme that provides affordable and quality accommodation based on stricter Decent Home Standards and an online platform like the one proposed in the Fairer Private Rented Sector white paper² that will work as a [sic] *a single 'front door' to help landlords understand, and demonstrate compliance with, their legal requirements*, as well as a forum where students will log in their complaints and seek advice and help.
- Include students in affordable housing policies: County Durham includes areas categorised as quantiles 4 and 5 by POLAR4 measurements. The University's Access and Participation Plan 20/21 to 24/25 aims to increase the proportion of students coming from these quantiles. Access to decent, affordable housing would reduce the barriers to studying at Durham University for students from such areas, enabling them to improve their social and economic opportunities.
- Support initiatives of alternative accommodation like Co-Operatives for students³ and residents. Co-ops can offer a viable and sustainable alternative to the conventional housing market, which is often unaffordable, inaccessible, and insecure for many residents. By empowering local people and students to own or manage their housing collectively, co-ops can provide affordable, good quality and democratic housing solutions that meet the diverse needs and preferences of the community. Co-ops can also foster social cohesion, civic

² [A fairer private rented sector - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611212/fairer_private_rented_sector.pdf)

³ (examples of existing co-ops in the UK) [Birmingham Student Housing Co-Operative \(bshc.co.uk\)](https://www.bshc.co.uk/) ; [Student Co-op Homes – A groundbreaking new force in student housing \(studenthomes.coop\)](https://www.studenthomes.coop/) ; [Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op – affordable housing run by students \(eshc.coop\)](https://www.eshc.coop/)

engagement, and environmental responsibility among their members, contributing to the well-being and resilience of the county as a whole.

- Introduce options such as rolling or short-term contracts and set a deposit and rent cap for licenced private rented student accommodation and PBSAs.
- PBSA developers to contribute to providing local infrastructure and services that are needed due to their development. This would ensure that when developers build student accommodation, they make sure there is a GP close by, supermarkets, bike racks and other amenities that students need.

We believe that these solutions would lead to improved quality, affordability, safety, satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention of students, as well as enhanced relationships, cooperation, and integration between students, the council, the university, landlords, letting agents, and other residents.

We are happy to provide more details or evidence on any points raised in this response.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Best regards,