

TO: Assembly

FROM: Will Brown (Undergraduate Academic Officer)

RE: Durham Contribution to North-East Mayoral Election Manifesto

DATE: 7 March 2024

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### **Assembly notes**

On May 2 2024, an election will take place for the new mayor of the North East combined authority (Newcastle, County Durham, North Tyneside, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland). Following the devolution deal<sup>1</sup>, the combined authority and its new mayor will have increased powers, as well as a £1.4 billion investment fund over 30 years.

Durham SU has been collaborating with other SUs in the North-East (Newcastle Students' Union, Sunderland Students' Union, Northumberland Students' Union) in the lead up to the North-East Mayoral Election. Alongside these SUs, Durham SU intends to present a combined manifesto to the candidates with a list of demands for the new mayor.

### **Assembly believes**

The new mayor will have increased powers in several areas including: housing, finance and transport. Each of these areas has an impact on the lives of students, so it is essential that Durham students engage in the upcoming election and ensure student interests are responded to.

By working with three other SUs, a combined manifesto will make the demands all the more powerful.

### **Assembly resolves**

To approve the following submission from Durham SU to the North-East SUs Mayoral Election Manifesto.

That the completed North-East SUs Mayoral Election Manifesto will include contributions from other partner SUs, and therefore will require editing, which will be undertaken by the SU Officer Team in collaboration with the above SUs.

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<sup>1</sup> [North East devolution deal - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/north-east-devolution-deal)

## **Durham Contribution to North-East SUs Mayoral Election Manifesto**

### **Housing**

1. Support the promotion and development of co-operatives
  - a. We propose that the mayor both financially and politically supports the development of alternative models of housing across the region, namely housing co-operatives, in a bid to challenge the power of landlords.
  - b. The key benefits associated with housing co-operatives are principally: control over rents and rent-setting, increased democratic ownership over the home due to the absence of landlords, improved community ties and associated benefits, such as better mental health, and greater opportunity to develop modes of sustainable living<sup>2</sup>.
  - c. Housing co-operatives have proven highly successful in a variety of isolated contexts. In Berkeley, USA, there is the [Berkeley Student Cooperative](#), which has over 1300 members and 20 properties and has been paving the way since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in affordable housing. Closer to home, [Edinburgh Student Housing Cooperative](#)<sup>3</sup> stands as a shining example of the co-op model in practice, with 106 student residents in a property charging less than £100 pounds a month what the previous owners were.
2. Uniform landlord licencing rules across the North-East
  - a. A key challenge for students is the quality and standards of the homes they are renting.
  - b. Across Durham, for example, there are variations in the application of mandatory HMO licensing. Most notably, in the most student-dense post-code, DH1, there is little licensing at all. As a result, a key priority of our work has been securing additional licensing for the DH1 area to bring HMOs of less than 5 beds up to standard and make these standards more enforceable.
  - c. In the same vein, we propose a much more robust, uniform, set of licensing rules which are applied across the North-East. Whether a property is in Sunderland, Newcastle or Durham, there are clearly some fairly objective standards regarding quality which could be agreed and enforced by their

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<sup>2</sup> "Lessons from the History of Affordable Housing Cooperatives in the United States: A Case Study in American Affordable Housing Policy" by Gerald W. Sazama, 2000.  
 Avilla-Royo, R., Jacoby, S., & Bilbao, I. (2021). The Building as a Home: Housing Cooperatives in Barcelona. *Buildings*, 11, 137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings11040137>

<sup>3</sup> Kallin, H., & Shaw, M. (2019). Escaping the parasite of the student flat: Reflections on an experiment in co-operative housing. *Radical Housing Journal*, 1, 223-226

respective councils. As such, we propose the development of these rules are supported by the mayor, to improve housing standards across the region, not just in areas deemed to have need of them based on extensive lobbying.

3. Lobby councils to create repairs portals
  - a. We propose the adoption of the Renters (Reform) Bill<sup>4</sup> guidance on Privately Rented Property Portal service within the North-East, specifically highlighting its benefits for both student accommodation and the broader private rented sector. This legislation mandates landlords to register on the Property Portal, ensuring legal compliance and providing a centralized hub for guidance.
  - b. The Property Portal enhances transparency for tenants, offering comprehensive information before renting and empowering them to enforce their rights. Additionally, it serves as a valuable data source for local councils, addressing challenges in identifying non-compliant properties and owners. Implementation in the North-East aligns with our commitment to housing standards, promoting transparency, and safeguarding residents' rights. This initiative will not only streamline administrative processes but also contribute to a responsible and transparent private renting environment for all constituents.
4. Operate as the 'sign-off' for licencing and housing certificates
  - a. We propose that the Mayor should be the officiant for sign-off of licensing and housing certificates. Whether due to capacity issues, a lack of transparency or failing to meet the basic criteria in the first place, the certification for properties across the North-East have not been published.
5. Add timescale to repairs instead of 'reasonable time'
  - a. Currently, landlords must carry out repairs within a 'reasonable time'<sup>5</sup> of the issue being reported. The law does not state how long a reasonable time is – it depends on how urgent the issue is and how vulnerable those living at the property are. This can lead to issues taking a prolonged time to be resolved and tenants living in sub-par conditions.
  - b. We propose that the mayor supports the addition of timescales for when issues should be resolved. Issues can be categorised depending on severity<sup>6</sup> e.g. a broken boiler should be addressed within 2 days, whereas a leaking tap should be addressed within 4 working days. Setting timescales will give

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/privately-rented-property-portal-renters-reform-bill>

<sup>5</sup> [How long should a private landlord take to do repairs? - Shelter England](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Understanding Section 11 of the Landlord and Tenants Act 1985 - Taylor Bracewell](#)

landlords more accountability for addressing issues and provide tenants with knowledge of when they can expect problems to be resolved.

6. Cap “no guarantor” upfront payments at 2 months rent
  - a. If students are not able to provide a UK based guarantor (either because they are international, estranged, care experienced or from low income backgrounds), they are often asked to pay several months’ rent upfront<sup>7</sup>. This can lead to several issues – students may not be able to afford this, they may struggle to get reimbursed should they have to vacate the property and it may disincentivise landlords from maintaining the property.
  - b. We propose that the mayor support the limitation of rent that is required to be paid upfront if tenants cannot provide a UK based guarantor.
7. Lobby to include students as an independent group in local council schemes
  - a. We propose that the mayor should be the officiant the sign-off for licensing and housing certificates. Whether due to capacity issues, a lack of transparency or failing to meet the basic criteria in the first place, the certification for properties across the North-East have not been published: ‘More than 20 per cent of shared homes (HMOs) in the county - 193 in total - have expired gas and electrical safety certificates, according to the latest data. ’ This is especially problematic in county Durham where we struggle to even keep track of a comprehensive HMO list yet alone to follow up on houses that do not meet the minimum standards.
  - b. The mayor, in acting as an officiant for these safety checks and housing certificates, ensures that an external body has accredited the property on the bare minimum of safety while holding the county accountable for performing these checks and updating their data regularly<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [What to do if you can't get a guarantor | Advicenow](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Safety failings exposed in hundreds of County Durham homes | The Northern Echo](#)

## Cost of Living

1. More public spaces with heating that are suitable for studying / Support for Warm banks<sup>9</sup>
  - b. We propose to extend the opening times of public libraries as well as council buildings, churches, community spaces, museums to the public. This would provide students with more options for studying, working and accessing resources as well as reducing their living costs and improve their educational outcomes. Additionally, public buildings should be adequately equipped as study spaces, including providing facilities for basic food preparation like microwaves, hot water fountains and fridges.

## Transport

1. Combined regional student ticket across all modes of transport
  - c. Soaring costs and a huge backlog of driving tests have made car ownership increasingly less accessible for younger demographics<sup>10</sup> This makes the need for affordable and easily accessible public transport even more crucial for young people, including much of the North East's student community.
  - d. We are asking the new mayor to use their regional influence and significant powers over transport to take the next step in optimising the accessibility of public transport by working with service providers to implement combined ticketing, especially for students and young people, valid across the three main modes of public transport – bus, metro, and train – that serve our region.
  - e. Combined ticketing will make it more feasible for students to live further out from their campus, allowing them access to more affordable housing and better blurring divides between 'student' and 'local' areas. It will also allow students to explore more of the North-East outside of their university towns and cities, increasing their civic connection to the wider region and boosting local economies.
  - f. The successes and ambition of Greater Manchester's *Bee Network* (which plans to introduce combined ticketing by 2030),<sup>11</sup> championed by Mayor Andy Burnham, shows what is possible with the creation of Combined Authorities when mayors invest suitable political and financial capital into

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/warm-banks-uk-cost-of-living-crisis/>  
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<sup>10</sup> A. Robbins, 'How cars went from the ticket to freedom to an unaffordable luxury', *The Telegraph*, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/consumer-affairs/death-of-the-car-young-are-giving-up-on-car-ownership/>

<sup>11</sup> C. Vitale, 'Manchester Bee Network set to launch 2025 integrated ticket rail pilot', *Railway Technology*, 2023, <https://www.railway-technology.com/news/manchester-bee-network-set-to-launch-2025-integrated-ticket-rail-pilot/?cf-view>

public transport. We hope that the North-East mayor will be similarly ambitious, including around combined ticketing.

2. Discounted fares for all students including mature students

- a. As a 2022 Sutton Trust Study<sup>12</sup> found out, the North-East is the region within the UK where students are most likely to commute to University, many of whom by public transport. As it stands, however, the current student travel provisions are inadequate. The 16-25 railcard has a minimum fare during peak week-day times, precisely when many students will be commuting to lectures. Similarly, while many bus companies in the North-East do offer student tickets, these are not universally offered and have been steadily increasing in price over the last few years, with day tickets in Durham having increased from £1 to £1.50. The Mayoral Authority has a devolved budget of up to £732.3 million over the next five years specifically to be spent on the development of local transport, and we are asking that a portion of this budget be put towards subsidising fares for all students in the North-East region.

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<sup>12</sup> [Microsoft Word - Home and Away - formatted final final \(suttontrust.com\)](https://www.suttontrust.com/research/microsoft-word-home-and-away-formatted-final-final/)