

North East Students' Unions Mayoral Candidates Manifesto

Your
SUnderland*

*Students' Union



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Introduction

In anticipation of the forthcoming North East Mayor election, students' unions throughout the region have engaged in a collective effort to formulate this manifesto. The participating students' unions include the University of Sunderland Students' Union, Durham Students' Union, Northumbria Students' Union, and Newcastle University Students' Union.

Sabbatical Officers and staff members from each respective students' unions convened regularly, conducting thorough student consultations within their organizations. This collaborative endeavour has brought to light three primary challenges:

- Housing
- Transportation
- Cost of living

These challenges significantly impact students' daily lives, exerting consequential effects on their mental and physical well-being, as well as their educational pursuits.

Given the heightened significance of addressing students' needs both locally and nationally, it is imperative that this manifesto, reflective of the collective interests of students across the region, garners the endorsement of the incoming North East Mayor.

Housing

Housing is a key priority for students across the North East. It is vital that the mayor use both the powers devolved to them and their regional influence to help alleviate the systemic problems that have blighted student housing. This section of the manifesto establishes a bold vision for creating a sustainable student housing market that will enable all students to have access to safe, high quality and affordable housing.

1. The devolution deal grants the mayor substantial powers over brownfield developments. This has the potential to massively increase the quantity of affordable housing in the region, including areas with high student populations. We are asking that the mayor use their power and position to ensure the following:
 - a. In areas with high student populations, that developments consider the current and future needs of students and are conscious of the potential for growth in student numbers in line with local universities' strategies. To enable this, we request that provision is made for the consultation of relevant students' unions prior to the approval of development plans.
 - b. That a variety of ownership models and their affordability are considered by the mayor's office in new developments likely to include student housing. For example, housing co-operatives, especially those run through students' unions and universities.
2. It is well-recognised that student housing is frequently poorly maintained. When asked, 21% of UK students living in privately rented student housing said that their housing was of poor quality¹. We ask that the mayor commits to taking a leading role in working alongside other local stakeholders – including students' unions, local councils, and landlords – on the following:
 - a. Standardising licensing regulations across all local authorities in the North East in line with best practice, including the creation of a recommended set timescales for repairs.
 - b. Adopting the Renters (Reform) Bill guidance regarding the use of a Privately Rented Property Portal service within the North East, allowing greater transparency for tenants, making it easier for landlords to understand their obligations, and providing more data to local councils².
 - c. Publishing licensing and housing certificates in a timely fashion. This will lay the foundations for a longer-term policy of establishing a public register run through the Mayor's office of all such certificates in the region. As well as supporting complementary schemes run by students' unions and other bodies, such as 'Rate Your Landlord'.
 - d. Supporting the development of alternative models of housing across the region, particularly housing co-operatives.
3. The student housing crisis is exacerbated by the lack of supply. Fears that there are not enough suitable beds on the market pressures students to swallow inflated rents and overlook severely sub-par quality. This plays into the hands of exploitative landlords, disadvantaging both students and responsible and ethical landlords. Increasing the number of beds on the market will help to re-level the playing field. We ask that the mayor do this by:

¹ Ibbetson, C., 'The state of student housing in the UK', *YouGov*, 2020

<https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/26215-state-student-housing-uk>

² Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, 'Privately Rented Property Portal: Renters (Reform) Bill', 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/privately-rented-property-portal-renters-reform-bill>

- a. Lobbying central government for stricter regulations on short-term rentals (e.g. Airbnb) and to introduce a vacant property tax, incentivising more property owners to enter the student rental market, as well as increasing the housing stock for long-term residents looking to rent.
 - b. To work with both central government and local councils to explore ways to streamline planning permission, especially for developments containing a significant proportion of affordable housing.
- 4. Inflation has made students poorer nationally. The real term value of the maintenance loan expected to drop by 11% between 2022-24³, whilst student rents increased by an average of 14.6% between 2021-2023⁴. A student receiving the average maintenance loan and paying the average rent would have just £24 left of their loan for the entire year, equating to just 50p a week. This forces students to increasingly rely on parental assistance and part-time jobs alongside their full-time studies to cover bare necessities. To mitigate this, we call on the mayor to commit to the following:
 - a. Working with councils, landlords and letting agents to ensure that there is a 'no guarantor' option available for every student property, and that 'no guarantor' payments are capped at two months' rent. This would make housing more accessible to students unable to provide a guarantor.
 - b. Establish and chair a regional student housing affordability working group containing representatives from relevant constituent councils, students' unions, universities, and the housing sector.

³ Bolton, P., 'The value of student maintenance support', *House of Commons Library*, 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn00916/#:~:text=Inflations%20was%20much%20higher%20in,if%20adjusted%20by%20CPI%20inflation>

⁴ Unipol & HEPI, 'Rent now swallows up virtually all of the average maintenance loan as the student accommodation market reaches 'crisis point'', 2023, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/26/student-rents-now-swallow-up-virtually-all-of-the-of-the-average-maintenance-loan-as-market-reaches-crisis-point-in-affordability/>

Transport

Transportation, and specifically public transportation, is a key priority for the electorate of the North East, with students having unique requirements which need a functioning public transportation network which caters to them explicitly. According to the Sutton Trust⁵, the North East is the region within the UK where students are most likely to commute to university, many of whom using public transport. As it stands, however, the current student travel provisions are inadequate.

1. 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. Student representatives, in consultation with the wider student body, are asking for the following from the Mayor, in order to have an affordable, reliable transportation network which caters to students as well as the wider electorate.
 - a. Enable students to view public transportation as a more appealing and viable option to get to and from their study, through the lowering of transportation fares and ensuring that local areas are not just dependent on the service provision of a single transport provider. 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.
 - b. We urge the Mayor to lobby for the introduction of discounted travel for students, without student status being defined by age. Whilst some 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, whereas other providers define student status by age.⁶ We urge the Mayor to lobby transportation services to provide student discounts to all students regardless of age, and to ensure that this is communicated effectively, either through the creation of student-specific tickets, or through the acceptance of student status discounting already-existing tickets. This should also be the case for the Tyne and Wear Metro service, where 'student' tickets are also defined as being 21-and-under.
 - c. The successes and ambition of Greater Manchester's *Bee Network* (which plans to introduce combined ticketing by 2030),⁷ championed by Mayor Andy Burnham, shows what is possible with the creation of Combined Authorities when mayors invest suitable political and financial capital into public transport. We hope that the North East mayor will be similarly ambitious, including around combined ticketing for rail, bus, and other public transportation services.

⁵ Sutton Trust. (2019). "Home and Away: Social class and social mobility in the geography of elite higher education in Britain". [Online]. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Home_and_away_FINAL.pdf

⁶ [Go North East's](#) and [Arriva's](#) 'student fare' is defined as being 21-and-under.

⁷ 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>

Cost of Living

Over the past 2 years the cost of living has increased significantly, and it is affecting the student body in the region. The financial challenges faced by students are multifaceted and require urgent attention. the burden of student debt is a prevalent issue that disproportionately affects students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The high cost of education and living expenses can deter talented individuals from pursuing higher education and certain career paths, perpetuating socioeconomic disparities in our region. The meagre increase in the maintenance loan for home students and no access to hardship funding for EU and International students are making it difficult for students to survive.

1. The Blackbullion 'Student Monday & Wellbeing 2024' survey demonstrates that students need an extra £621 to comfortably afford essential items and just 3% of students feel they have enough money to survive⁸. As a key figure in local governance, the North East Mayor's influence and decisions can significantly impact the well-being and success of students pursuing higher education in the North East of England. Therefore, we propose that the new Mayor support the following points.
 - a. Commit to ensuring students can benefit from regional initiatives around food poverty including access to food banks, food co-ops and supporting student food pantries on university campuses.
 - b. Encourage landlords and property companies to properly insulate homes, install energy saving devices.
 - c. Encourage local businesses to offer discounts and incentives to students to make essential purchases more affordable to student budgets.
 - d. Encourage local, regional and national businesses to offer employment contracts which are desirable to students, especially international students. This includes part-time work to fit around studies and full-time employment for new graduates.
 - e. Support the creation of warm banks⁹ suitable for studying and the extension of opening times of public libraries as well as council buildings, churches, community spaces and museum.

⁸ Blackbullion. (2024). "Student Money Wellbeing 2024". [Online]. Available at: <https://business.blackbullion.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Student-Money-Wellbeing-2024-Blackbullion.pdf>

⁹ World Economic Forum. (2022). "Warm banks: How the UK is addressing the cost-of-living crisis". [Online]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/warm-banks-uk-cost-of-living-crisis/>

Conclusion

This manifesto serves as an initial step in the ongoing engagement of our students' unions with the newly elected Mayor of the North East. Following the Mayor's inauguration, we aspire to convene and establish a constructive working partnership, aimed at jointly implementing these initiatives. Our collective goal is to enhance the quality of student life and contribute to the transformation of the North East into an exemplary region for residency, employment, and academic pursuit.