

Policy name: Student Housing Co-operatives

Approved by Council: 09.02.22

Student Council Notes:

There remains both persistent and numerous issues in members being able access affordable and quality accommodation for students across Northern Ireland. The lack of supply is especially evident through issues that presented in the summer 2021 where Queen's University Belfast was over-subscribed to the point of being unlikely to provide lodging to any student within a 40-mile radius of the campus for the 2021-'22 academic year.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note the possibility that Ulster University could find itself in a similar situation in the next academic year, especially given the coming School of Health Sciences move to Magee, and Greater Belfast Development transition.

Through lack of supply and high demand, many students are finding accommodation options extremely difficult to fund. With private student accommodation costing on average £6,698 for a forty-week contract, and the maximum finance available to NI undergraduate students being £6,428, the average rent surpasses the entirety of the maximum student finance<sup>2</sup>, leaving many locked out of accessing accommodation, or having to work alongside studies to afford the bare essentials. And while according to the same NUS report from 2021, Northern Ireland's institution-provided student accommodation averages comparatively cheaper at £4,565 for a forty-week contract, some Ulster University accommodation prices have also increased far beyond the rates of inflation in recent years (see appendix one).

The lack of quality accommodation is evidenced through the continuous casework around the issue within our Advice Bureau service, including moulded walls, permanently unresolved maintenance issues, and unfairly withheld deposits. NUS research from 2019 found that 40% of students living in private housing were in hazardous properties. 42% lived with damp and mould growing on their walls and ceilings. 20% shared their homes with mice, rats, slugs or other pests. Even more alarmingly, 16% of students reported that there were electrical hazards in their home, and a further 9% reported an issue with gas safety, despite it being illegal to rent out a property in this condition<sup>3</sup>.

The transient nature of students makes the demographic one which can be easily exploited by landlords, as short tenancy agreements result in repairs often being indefinitely deferred to the next tenants. Furthermore, as many students arrive directly from high school and are unlikely to have received any education on housing rights, there is a lack of awareness about the quality of accommodation students are entitled to.

Considering the continued struggles students face with housing, and the fact that reform has proven exceedingly slow and often piecemeal, alternative housing solutions must be explored. Student Housing Co-operatives have proven to be successful in America, Australia, and Canada, and have seen an accelerating rise in the UK over the past decade, with the likes of Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-58577911>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unipol.org.uk/acsreport2021>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nus.org.uk/articles/homes-fit-for-study-report>

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Birmingham Student Housing Co-op, Sheffield Student Housing Co-op, and Brighton Student Housing Coop recently being founded. Additionally, the 'Independent Commission for Co-operative and Mutual Housing' found that co-operative housing consistently delivers long-term benefits with regards to community-building in communities impacted by a lack of trust (Bliss, ed 2015). This will be helpful in aiding the fight against misrepresentation of students in the media as a negative influence in communities.

Accommodation is a hugely important aspect of the student experience, due to its impact on one's ability to socialise, foster positive mental health, and focus on academic goals, with each being interlinked. The World Health Organisation notes, "that various aspects of housing are associated with, and potentially may reinforce or enhance, social pathologies such as depression, isolation, anxiety, etc."<sup>4</sup> Between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 academic year, there was a 32.5% increase in student wellbeing/ mental health appointments at Ulster University (UU) – of these appointments 57% were related to mental health (anxiety, depression and other conditions/issues – 46.5% in 18/19).<sup>5</sup> Inadequate housing must therefore be addressed to ensure students are fully supported during their time at Ulster University.

Student Housing Co-operatives also empower students to act towards a more sustainable future through equitable housing models. With findings from Students Organising for Sustainability, it is evident that students are interested in taking environmental action<sup>6</sup>. The likes of Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op recently renovating their empty garage into a events hub using only recycled and sustainably-sourced materials demonstrates the capacity for environmental action which control over one's property enables<sup>7</sup>.

#### Student Council Believes:

That student housing co-operatives have been found to offer affordability, value, and an alternative accommodation offering that can address numerous issues which students face due to inadequate, inaccessible, and unaffordable housing. The successful foundation of such co-ops also has the potential for indirect impact on the quality and cost of surrounding property, due to the competitive nature of the market. Additionally, student housing co-operatives can act as incubators for new co-operative and mutual businesses which could benefit Northern Ireland more widely.

The control over accommodation which the co-operative model would allow members could ensure it most effectively meets students' needs, especially regarding wellbeing and sustainability. This would help achieve UUSU's current 'Climate Crisis' policy, which mandates the union to "To provide a platform for students to engage with the UN Sustainable Development goals' through societies, campaigns, projects and events in order to create a lasting interest in environmental sustainability."<sup>8</sup>

Due to the high volume of housing issues reported in the Holylands, the most appropriate campus for piloting such a scheme would be in Belfast. This would also allow for collaboration with Queen's University Belfast Students' Union and NUS-USI, who have both been active participants in the tentative early

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/Housing-and-health/activities/the-large-analysis-and-review-of-european-housing-and-health-status-lares-project/large-analysis-and-review-of-european-housing-and-health-status-lares-2007>

<sup>5</sup> Figures provided by Ulster University Student Wellbeing

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/student-opinion-sustainable-development-goals> <sup>7</sup> This was shared during a virtual tour which VP Magee 2021-'22 attended: <https://architecturefringe.com/festivals/2021/how-can-106-students-renovate-their-co-operative-home> <sup>8</sup> <https://www.uusu.org/pageassets/student-voice/get-involved/policies/my-uusu-policies/Climate-Emergency2020.pdf>

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research stage of this long-term project. This collaboration would give access to a wider pool of tenant members for the co-op, thus reducing the risk of empty beds and potential loss.

The scope and scale of this project is too early to foresee at this policy writing-stage; however, updates, consultation, and committees will be a key-part of the project going forward.

#### Student Council Resolves:

1. For UUSU to explore and research the business case around the foundation of a Student Housing Cooperative.
2. For the Vice-President of the Belfast Campus and a relevant internally delegated supporting officer to be UUSU lead on this project.
3. To work with Student Co-op Homes, Co-operative Alternatives, Queen's University Belfast Students' Union, and any other relevant stakeholders in the design of a potential pilot project.
4. To act on the findings of the business plan.
5. That if the Housing Co-operative is decided to be progressed and found to be successful, to encourage further expansion of the project across the campuses.

#### Appendix

##### **Note One:**

Between the 2018-'20 academic year, Duncreggan Student Village (DSV) blocks 1-3 increased from £87 per week to £96, resulting in a 9.6% increase over two years.

Over the same period, DSV ensuite increased from £100 per week to £110, resulting in a 9% increase. In

comparison, the inflation rate over the same timeframe would be at roughly 4%.<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/indexofprivatehousingrentalprices/february2021>