

Warwick Students' Union Response

HMO Task & Finish group

Report from Luke Pilot (President) & Becky Gittins (Democracy & Development Officer), Warwick Students' Union.

The Students' Union's interaction with the community and accommodation issues:

In our SU Advice Centre, we predominantly receive complaints from students regarding issues with their accommodation. We are able to help students recover thousands in deposits and compensation every year and are also often able to help relocate students in extreme circumstances. Our recorded data unfortunately does not record housing complaints in specific categories, but we are aware of landlords and lettings agents who frequently cause issues for our members. We also have a strong relationship with Warwick Accommodation and have communication with some landlords and lettings agents.

The Students' Union has traditionally, and will continue to, run a series of 'Students as Good Neighbours' and 'Leave Leam Tidy' campaigns to encourage community cohesion and mitigate the ramifications of the student end of term departures from Leamington. We have recently recruited a Community Project Worker, who will be based primarily in Leamington and will liaise with multiple community stakeholders to ultimately advocate for and benefit the lives of students in the local community, by developing integration methods and embedding an understanding of community and a collaborative relationship between all stakeholders. We have also been lobbying the University on the community and student accommodation issues.

Our response to the current context:

Warwick SU warmly welcomes Warwick District Council's decision to develop a student housing strategy. We cannot express in stronger terms the necessity for both the University of Warwick and Warwick Students' Union to be involved in the development of this strategy.

We believe a fundamental issue lies with the enforcement and monitoring of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and their landlords, with the dominant market forces, a lack of responsibility on the part of the University of Warwick and a surplus in demand contributing to both an issue in community relationships, but also accommodation problems for our students. We do not however believe this discussion should focus solely on capacity on the University of Warwick campus or whether students should live in Leamington Spa. Given the University intends to expand their student numbers, and Coventry University is constantly expanding and pushing more Warwick students out of Coventry, it is highly likely more students will look to live in Leamington Spa.

Leaving allocation of housing to the market doesn't work when you have surplus demand. The market cannot drive up standards in the absence of consumer choice, thus a lack of housing and increasing student numbers means there's no motivation for landlords to provide good quality housing.

Rogue landlords not only have no incentives to maintain housing quality, they also have no binding duty to the local community - some of them even live remotely themselves. This means they are often oblivious, or negligent towards, the problems faced by student residents and other member of the community when their properties are not appropriately looked after.

We believe widespread application of selective licensing on HMOs and charging business rates for refuse collection and other services to HMOs are insufficient solutions. It is our understanding the Council does not have the resources to enforce these rules and that these measures still do not put

the responsibility on the landlord for the maintenance of the property. Student tenants, the majority of whom are not equipped to take certain refuse or recycling to a recycling centre or to conduct DIY work on a property, would end up shouldering the responsibility, when this responsibility should lie with the landlord. Equally, landlords are far more likely to pass the expense of selective licensing and business rates on services like refuse collection onto the student tenants. Students do not have the financial ability to afford this.

We further believe that the application of Community protection Notices (CPNs) is a blunt instrument. We understand these are supposed to have a bearing on landlords too, but we believe it is all too easy for the student tenants to be burdened with handling the consequences of a CPN and the financial penalty and stress and time demanding- nature of interacting with the court process is too great a wellbeing issue and intrusion on students' time, particularly during exams and deadlines seasons.

New regulations will also require students to gain references from their landlords when looking for new accommodation. This will leave students in an incredibly vulnerable position. Not only will they be afraid to request repairs from their landlord for fear of receiving a bad reference, or no reference at all, but they will incur backlash from the community or a CPN if they choose not to request repairs from their landlord.

The transient nature of the student community, paired with a saturated local housing market and a dire national context (for housing) means we are left with very little choice and we are squeezed into a tight living situation. The lack of community cohesion and resistance towards students due to their living conditions, which they have no control over, sees some students lack the sense of duty to be an active resident and a good neighbour. This is not helpful without a required induction by landlords or induction-style introduction from the University or long term residents.

Students are also in competition with other young and transient populations. Young professionals and young people on internships and graduate schemes with companies like Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), who can either be in Leamington for short term periods (6 months) or for the long term, contribute to a surplus in demand. They are also in danger of pricing students out of 'affordable' accommodation as these young professionals are more likely to be able to afford higher rents. It must be noted these young professionals are also likely dealing with similar HIMO issues as students and contributing to tensions in the community.

It is apparent that when students graduate and choose to remain in Leamington however, there is profound economic and local benefit. Students are less likely to remain if they do not feel welcome or if they have had problems with their accommodation arrangements. It would therefore seem pertinent to develop a housing strategy, and a response to HIMOs, which encourages students to become long-term residents. The question should perhaps change from "how can we stop students living in Leamington" to "how do we facilitate students integrating into the community" and "how do we keep students in Leamington after they graduate?"

The Postgraduate issues we witnessed in September, for the 3rd year in a row, where new postgraduates arrived at the University but had nowhere to live, demonstrates the situation is not being managed properly.

What is also unhelpful is uncoordinated growth of properties and proposals for purpose built student accommodation. Coordinated resistance to all of these is also unsustainable and unhelpful. Residents, the District Council and the University need to engage in a town planning operation in which new blocks of accommodation and HIMOs are approved in an appropriate and sustainable

manner, such that the student population can be located in planned zones, potentially even in mixed economies.

It is clear several actions need to be taken:

- Standards in HMOs need enforcing, but in a way that does not impede students but does attribute responsibility to landlords
- A strategy which adequately accommodates affordable family housing, student accommodation (HMOs and not), social housing and homelessness is a necessity
- A student housing strategy which includes HMOs and purpose-built student accommodation needs formulating so their construction can be facilitated in the appropriate places

“Let the market regulate itself” is no longer an acceptable option. It is clear a joint University, local and regional engagement strategy is necessary, a strategy which also addresses the needs for an infrastructure strategy to mirror it, ensuring the community can accommodate the student population. It is imperative all stakeholders are involved in developing this strategy and that students’ voices are heard.