

Westminster Higher Education Forum Keynote Seminar: Next steps for student housing: investment opportunities, regulation, impact of new providers, and the integration of students within local communities – 26th Feb 19

[The place of student accommodation within communities: local authority and university collaboration, ensuring a balance between the needs of students and permanent residents, and fostering beneficial integration]

NORA Speech (as intended to be delivered: however many of the points had already been covered, so it was abbreviated):

“Studentification” is the word coined by Professor Darren Smith of Loughborough University, some 20 years ago, to describe the effect that large numbers of students can have on neighbourhoods when no other form of accommodation is available. Universities can be both a blessing and a curse to cities and towns: on the one hand bringing learning, commerce, life and energy; but meanwhile colonising vast areas of affordable housing, and changing the nature of Society there by driving out families.

With the huge expansion recently of British universities, student accommodation has become rather an afterthought, with concentration on teaching space, in preference, leaving the students and parents to find their own accommodation.

Bedrooms on campus for only one year is often the norm; but, when one understands the numbers, one can see the problem. In nine or so English towns and cities students are more than 20% of the population, and most of them are living in houses meant for families. Nottingham, Falmouth, Bath, Oxford, Lancaster and Loughborough are between 20 and 30%, but in Canterbury the proportion is 36%, and Durham has a whopping 38%! Even in larger cities heavy concentrations of students can occur, such as in Fallowfield, Manchester; and Jesmond, Newcastle. This often results in untidy gardens, strewn rubbish, noisy parties, ugly conversions as more rooms are added, pressure on parking because greater numbers are being accommodated, closure of local schools and GP practices, wholesale changes to the nature of local shops, significant reduction in Local Authority income as students do not pay Council Tax, and skewing of local politics as students register to vote. At the same time, these districts can become graveyards in the vacations.

How does this happen? In the absence of campus accommodation the private sector takes over. Investors see an opportunity and either buy a family home (being able to outbid residents) to convert it to a House in Multiple Occupation (known as an HMO); or find a vacant or under-used site where a block of Purpose Built Student Accommodation (a PBSA) can be erected – all very lucrative, especially if not much attention is paid to the rules or to decent behaviour. Thus, two-bedroom semis become five- and six-bed HMOs: and PBSAs (mostly aimed at the overseas students as they are seldom affordable for those in the UK) replace the useful small workshops, studios, convenience stores, affordable

housing, meeting rooms and storage units which are usually found in suburbs. All rather depressing for the host population.

What can be done about it? NORA has gleaned from its members the following solutions, but none of them, is easy or total:

Firstly, Universities have to recognize that this is their problem, instead of avoiding the issues and ignoring it. This requires recognition by the Local Planning Authority (the LPA) with the adoption of a Student Housing Policy. For example, in Oxford, the LPA will consider Planning Applications for more teaching space from its two universities only if they agree to accommodate any consequential significant rise in student numbers on their own campus or land, known as 'Consuming one's own smoke'. At the other extreme, Bath and Durham residents, have been calling in vain for Student Housing Strategies for years.

Secondly, the effect of HMO's can be mitigated if the LPA introduces Article 4 Direction, limiting their concentration to a set figure and forcing them to be spread more widely across the town. This can also be made to apply to PBSAs. In addition, the LPA can introduce a Special Licensing regime requiring HMO landlords to adhere to a list of decent facilities.

Thirdly, most universities and Local Authorities establish 'Student/Community Partnerships' to address Town/Gown problems and to foster relationships. In some cities, such as Bristol and Newcastle, extra police, compulsory 'anti-social behaviour classes', or substantial fines are arranged by such partnerships to help in controlling rowdy student behaviour. Some Universities reserve the right to "send down", students who have behaved particularly badly, for a term, or even without the hope of return. Lastly there are local Residents' Associations which invite University Students' Unions to join them as 'Affiliate Members'.

All these ideas (and more) are worthwhile, but the key is convincing Universities to 'own the problem' as part of the duty of care for their students.

Leaving University is not just about achieving a degree. In my experience, the workplace requires respect for others and comes by example and what better place to establish that ethos than at your place of learning!!

Robin Kerr

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