



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill:
Queen's University Belfast

5 November 2015

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Fra McCann (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Roy Beggs
Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr Adrian McQuillan

Witnesses:

Mr Damien Toner	Queen's University Belfast
Ms Caroline Young	Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): We will now have a presentation from Caroline Young and Damien Toner from Queen's University Belfast (QUB). I formally welcome you to the Committee this afternoon. I am sure that you have listened for quite a wee while to the other presentations. I want to put it on record again that, although the Bill has not been formally referred to us for its Committee Stage, we are doing this because we want to stay within the legislative time frame to do this. Nevertheless, this session is still extremely valid and important to us. I thank you for attending and invite you to make any additional remarks that you want. Your submission is in members' packs.

Mr Damien Toner (Queen's University Belfast): Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for inviting us along. I will give a brief synopsis of our current approach to student accommodation, which is obviously very relevant to the Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Bill, and Caroline will talk about the specifics of that Bill. We will be quite brief.

I am sure that you all know what Queen's University is, but let me give a wee bit of context. Let me say again, if it needs to be said, that we are now in the top 1% of universities in the world, employing over 3,500 staff and educating over 22,000 students. We have quite an ambitious growth target over the next five years to increase our international and postgraduate student numbers. These growth targets will undoubtedly significantly increase the student numbers, and with that the demand for student accommodation. Our preference is for that to be dealt with through purpose-built managed student accommodation (PBMSA). Our preference for PBMSA, as it has become known, is related to the fact that we can manage directly the quality of the service, ensure the best possible student experience and promote good behaviour through the stringent conditions of occupancy that we ensure that our students sign up to.

It is obviously not possible to accommodate all the demand for student accommodation through the purpose-built model. Therefore we recognise that, alongside the provision of PBMSA, there is a need for good, well-managed, regulated private-sector housing for students in Belfast. Since 2000, Queen's has invested over £60 million in developing purpose-built managed student accommodation, and we have a rolling refurbishment plan for the residential estate to maintain the high-quality environment for students. The university currently provides a high-quality, safe and secure living environment for over 2,240 students, many of whom are housed in the Elms Village. That is underpinned by a comprehensive management plan for the operation of the accommodation which is already aligned to the UK code of practice. As a result of this, we have been recognised as a top 10 UK student accommodation provider. We have been voted first for student experience in accommodation for our INTO students across the UK. For those who do not know, INTO Queen's is a partnership between INTO and Queen's which offers academic courses and English-language programmes specifically designed for international students, and it is located in Lennoxvale on the Malone Road.

With our ambitious targets, we have an identified shortfall, by 2020, of bed spaces in the region of 2,500. We have plans in place to secure up to half of those in the short to medium term. In this current academic year, we turned away 1,000 students seeking purpose-built student accommodation. In that context, I pass to Caroline to talk specifically about the Bill.

Ms Caroline Young (Queen's University Belfast): Thank you, Damien. I thank the Committee for taking time to listen to us this morning. Our view of the Bill is that anything that is going to increase and improve the quality of accommodation and increase the safety of, and reduce risk to, residents is welcome. Anything that we can do to provide a safer living environment for our residents is welcomed.

We note that clause 3(2) defines students' term-time accommodation as their main residence. That is welcome, and we recognise that. Our approach to providing accommodation is very much about having a safe, fun and secure living/learning student accommodation. Obviously, we support improving standards by looking at proportionate risk. As the previous group of witnesses noted, providing accommodation to students in a managed environment can manage that risk but, where it is unregulated, it is very difficult to manage risk. On that basis, we welcome schedule 1, which sets purpose-built managed student accommodation outside the HMO, in recognising that we already, very clearly, have a structured approach to management of our accommodation. It is regulated, and we would happily sign up to the Universities UK code of practice and the ANUK/Unipol code of standards for larger accommodation. There is regulation in the marketplace, and it is in place in England and Wales. We currently work to those standards, so they would not be new to us. In supporting this, we recognise that purpose-built managed student accommodation would come under those schemes.

There is one point in the Bill that we wanted to clarify, and that is in relation to clauses 20 and 28, where the renewal of a licence must be made before the licence ceases to exist. This is about protection for our residents and the tenants. If a house is being sold and the HMO licence goes with the person who is selling it, what happens to the tenants in the intervening time? In particular, if the licence is not given to whoever buys the property, what protection will there be? Giving protection and ensuring that there is legislation to keep the residents of the accommodation safe and secure is very important to us. The standards and the code of practice that we work to are very clear, and we have a very clear procedure on the management of noise, antisocial behaviour and waste management. We are very comfortable with anything that comes forward with that in relation to what has been used in England and Wales.

Ultimately, we provide a 365-day 24/7 wraparound service for our students. We do not simply check people in in September and check them out in June; we look after them all year round. We look after them and manage their behaviour, but we also manage their pastoral needs, provide good-quality accommodation and make sure that they get the most out of their time in Belfast and at Queen's.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): OK, Caroline and Damien. Thank you. Your submission deals with paragraph 5 of schedule 1, which is about not registering the purpose-built student accommodation as HMO. Would you care to elaborate on that? Why the need to deregister that?

Ms Young: In terms of the registration, as we noted a number of years ago, we are paying significantly more to register our student properties than the rest of our comparators in the UK. They have signed up to the codes, as set out in the Housing Act 2004. They are already working to those codes; we are working to them, but we pay significantly more. We have to pass those costs on to our students. We work within those confines, and we do not see why there would be any difference in

moving us outside. There is a code of practice set out, and we would be comfortable in meeting that code of practice.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): OK. Thank you for that.

Mr Beggs: Also on that issue, you were saying that you want the code followed in England and Wales applied here. You indicated that there is already heavy regulation:

"England and Wales and therefore aligns the approach for this type of accommodation within the sector and is already heavily regulated."

What is the regulation?

Ms Young: To comply with the Housing Act 2004, all higher education institutions had to sign up to one of three codes: the student accommodation code; the accreditation network, which is the ANUK code of practice of student accommodation that is managed by higher education; and the same code managed by companies that are not universities. Those are in place.

Mr Beggs: One of the previous witnesses suggested that you should still have to join the register but perhaps be given exemptions. There would be a clear point of focus for all houses that are in multiple occupancy, but you would be given some exemptions and reductions, I am assuming, because there may be other codes applicable. Does that sound to be a reasonable approach?

Ms Young: Yes. The key point here is about looking at the regulation and the proportionate risk. The previous witnesses talked about a "light touch" to where it is clearly managed. If we have a code that we currently work to — and it is regulated and managed very proactively — then we would much prefer that the emphasis is put on dealing with the areas where there is highest risk. That highest risk is where there are absent landlords or unregulated HMOs.

Mr Beggs: You mentioned that the costs would have to be passed on to students. What would be the difference in costs under what is being proposed if you were included and the costs that, for instance, are currently applicable in England and Wales?

Ms Young: I will take an average year. Currently we are registering on a five-year basis, so the difference is about £10,000 a year that we are spending at the moment on registering. It would be anything from £500 to £2,000, depending on the different codes. There would be a significant difference, and that goes back into how we can manage the accommodation.

Mr Beggs: Just clarify the difference in numbers.

Ms Young: The UK universities code for student accommodation is approximately £650 to £1,000, depending on the number of rooms, whereas the accreditation network code of practice is about £2,000. We are paying about £10,000 through the current HMO system.

Mr Beggs: What penalties exist if you were not to meet the universities codes — if you were not meeting the codes that you had signed up to? What regulatory penalties exist there?

Ms Young: There is an independent audit. There are a whole range of areas where we have to clearly show that we meet the codes. I am not 100% about what penalties exist. The rest of the universities in the UK have been working to it. This is not something that we would ever consider not applying to and complying with.

Mr McQuillan: In your opening statement, Damien, you said that you had turned away 1,000 students this year for accommodation. What happens to those students when you turn them away?

Mr Toner: They invariably end up going into private rented accommodation.

Mr McQuillan: Do you give them any help or advice about where to go or where to look to make sure that they get the right landlord?

Ms Young: There are two things. We provide our accommodation on the basis of distance, so those students who are unable to secure accommodation tend to be more local students. Some of them — a great many of them — will travel until we can provide accommodation. We run a waiting list and, as we know, people arrive in September and maybe it is not what they want, so they move out, and we then update and continue to offer places on the waiting list. For those who look to the private sector, we have in the last couple of years worked very closely with the students' union. This year, we had a Facebook social media site for students registering through the students' union to say where there was suitable accommodation. We try as best as possible but, clearly, we cannot give advice on accommodation, and we cannot check it to see whether it is regulated or managed.

Mr McQuillan: But you try to advise them.

Ms Young: We certainly advise them, and the students' union is very proactive in doing that.

Mr Toner: Clearly, we prefer to put them into our own purpose-built accommodation.

Ms Young: When the students first come to university, their parents are very involved in the decision. They want them in safe, secure and managed accommodation.

Mr Toner: Indeed, from a global perspective, we are out there competing with universities that are trying to attract the same pool of students. One of the reasons for having our own accommodation to the extent that we have is to offer that end-to-end package. That is a sell to the parents, as well as the students: that we can give them safe and secure accommodation alongside the quality of education that they are after, as well.

Mr Flanagan: You have roughly about 25,000 students at Queen's, is that right, give or take?

Mr Toner: Give or take.

Mr Flanagan: That was probably before the most recent cutbacks. About 17,000 of those are undergraduates.

Mr Toner: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: You offer 2,240 of what you described as PBMSA places. Are they oversubscribed every year?

Ms Young: They have been for the last three or four years, yes.

Mr Flanagan: By a similar figure of roughly 1,000?

Ms Young: No, it has been changing and increasing in the past number of years. We provide —

Mr Flanagan: Do you intend to put in any additional investment to try to meet that need and prevent an increasing number of students having to live in HMOs across the Holylands and places like that?

Mr Toner: Yes. We would prefer to address our predicted shortfall in meeting demand by 2020 of 2,500 bed spaces through purpose-built accommodation. We are in an EU procurement process to try to secure up to half of that. It is obviously subject to that procurement process, so it is not guaranteed at this point. However, that is our first step in trying to address that need.

Mr Flanagan: And where is that proposed for?

Mr Toner: City centre locations.

Mr Flanagan: The reason that I ask is not only the impact that it has on communities in the city centre through growing numbers of people who are not normally resident in those communities but also the cost of housing for people coming from rural areas into Belfast is as big an issue as tuition fees — perhaps even more so. It is something that we need to address for several reasons. Do you have any

additional plans on top of that to meet the continued shortfall in meeting demand between now and 2020?

Mr Toner: We have no definite plans, but our intention is to move to the next stage. As I said, we are trying to get our first step out of the way, which is the process under way at the moment, and then we will look to phase 2.

Mr Flanagan: If Queen's can get that investment, do you think that it will solve some of the problems with HMOs in that area?

Mr Toner: We like to think so, yes.

Mr Flanagan: You briefly mentioned that clause 3(2) of the Bill has the definition of a full-time FE or HE student and their main residence. It says:

"A person who occupies living accommodation during term time for the purpose of undertaking a full-time course of further or higher education is to be treated, at all times during that person's residence, as occupying that accommodation as the person's only or main residence."

First, is the term "full-time course" a legally accepted definition that you are aware of?

Mr Toner: I am not aware of whether it is or is not.

Mr Flanagan: And is there consistency across the FE and HE sector about what constitutes a full-time student?

Mr Toner: Again, I cannot specifically answer the question, but I imagine that it is a universally recognised term.

Mr Flanagan: I am just trying to figure out how we determine who is and is not a full-time student. Some of your courses are very intensive — 35 or 40 hours a week — and some are eight or nine hours long with 40 hours of independent reading.

Mr Toner: Yes. On that basis, there are definite full-time and part-time courses. You may argue that the extent of some of the part-time courses makes them full-time, but they are clearly set out as either full-time or part-time.

Mr Flanagan: OK, so you have a definition in the university.

Ms Young: We do, yes.

Mr Flanagan: Is somebody who studies nine hours a week but is expected to do 40 hours of independent reading on a full-time or part-time course?

Ms Young: That is a full-time course.

Mr Flanagan: It is a full-time course.

Ms Young: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: OK. However, you are not aware whether that is the same across other universities and FE providers.

Mr Toner: Universities tend to benchmark across the country; I imagine that it is like for like.

Mr Flanagan: OK. Clause 3(2) talks about "term time" as well. Is all term time in each HE and FE providers from September to June? Do any of them run from January to December? What way does that work?

Ms Young: Currently, most of them are September to June, but that is not to say that there will not be changes over the coming years. I certainly know that we have students in place from September right through to September. The primary intake of students is obviously September, but we have a second intake in January and February and we also have students who arrive in June to do language courses, so we have an intake then as well. We take in throughout the year.

Mr Flanagan: Do the vast majority of your international students live in Queen's-provided accommodation?

Ms Young: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: Do you have a percentage figure?

Ms Young: Currently, 53% of students living in our accommodation are from outside Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: OK. Do you have a figure for what percentage of international students that accounts for?

Ms Young: Of the 53% from outside Northern Ireland, probably about 30% or 35% — I do not know what you want to class as being international — are from areas outside Great Britain and Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Just for information, we are checking the Department's view. It has not defined what a full-time course is, but, in guidance from DEL, it would classify that as a course of at least 15 hours a week for at least 30 weeks in the academic year. I am giving that to you for information.

Mr Allister: Just two factual issues. Does the university know the residence address for each of its students?

Ms Young: We ask all of our students to provide us with their term-time address on registration and enrolment, so, yes, it is part of the requirement.

Mr Allister: Is that verified in any way?

Ms Young: We do not go and knock on people's doors to make sure that they are there.

Mr Allister: So how do you verify it?

Ms Young: They are asked to ensure that the information that they give is correct.

Mr Allister: So it is just whatever they tell you.

Mr Toner: It is where information would be sent to them in relation to their course and other matters, so we need their postal address for university information.

Ms Young: There would be no reason for them —

Mr Allister: Not to tell you.

My second point is this: does the university know the identity of the landlords of all its students?

Ms Young: No.

Mr Allister: Has it any means of knowing that?

Ms Young: No, unless we make a request through the HMO, but, no, we do not.

Mr Allister: So if there are particular issues of complaint from local residents about some of your students, you are not in a position to know who the landlord is.

Ms Young: Typically, we deal with the students first and foremost, so we go to the students. In some cases, we will ask them who their landlord is, but obviously that is their business. We do not have a right to know who the landlord is. There is no register, as you are aware.

Mr Toner: We clearly welcome the ability to know that information.

Mr Allister: Why would that information be useful to you?

Mr Toner: For the reasons that you described there, in relation to student behaviour and ensuring that support is given to our attempts to close that down with the landlords in the area.

Mr Allister: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): It is probably fair to say that there has been a lot of local knowledge and local liaison with landlords and representatives of landlords. There has been a lot of ad hocery as well, but very often it works. From my experience, sometimes it does not work, and that is part of the issue that some of the residents raised earlier.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. When representatives of the Holyland residents' group came in, I asked them about a breakdown of 10% of the local settled community. Have you any idea what percentage of students in that area belong to Queen's University? I know that it is not just Queen's University; the Ulster University has students there as well.

Mr Toner: In the last assessment that was done, I think that 40% were identified as Queen's students.

Mr Douglas: So the other 60% would be —

Mr Toner: UU and others.

Mr Douglas: I have met some people from Queen's, and we all know about the difficulties over the years. To be fair, I think that you have done an excellent job to date. There have been big and positive changes, but I am not saying that everything is sorted. How do you see the future in terms of the Bill and what you are doing now? Do you see any changes that you will have to make to keep up to speed with what you are doing to date?

Ms Young: Very clearly, purpose-built managed student accommodation is very student-led and very customer-led. Our customers, who are paying to live in their accommodation, are very clear on the standards that they expect. The standard of purpose-built managed accommodation is very high, and the wraparound service — the 24-hour safety/security/pastoral side — is of a very high standard. That, in our view, is what needs to continue as we continue to attract students from other parts of the world to come and study in Belfast.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): No other members wish to speak. I think that members are content, from what they have heard and read. Caroline and Damien, unless you want to add anything, we are happy to leave this evidence session.

Mr Toner: I only want to say that members are welcome to visit our student accommodation. We would appreciate the opportunity to show you first-hand the quality that we provide and the differential between that and what would be classified as HMO accommodation.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): OK, thanks very much for that.

Mr F McCann: I have just one wee point to make —

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): No, you cannot go.

Mr F McCann: Phil raised a question about your accommodation, and you said that you are looking towards the city centre. I take it that you are talking about Queen Street or the College of Technology at College Square North?

Mr Toner: I would not want to confirm that or otherwise. It is subject to an EU procurement process.

Mr F McCann: They are the only two areas —

Ms P Bradley: Nice try.

Mr Toner: There are 7,000-plus bed spaces in for application at the moment, and they would be part of that 7,000.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Clonfadden is excluded from that zone.

Mr Douglas: I think Damien has given us the right answer: he can neither confirm nor deny.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): If you two want to spend the night in the accommodation to continue the discussion, you are free to do that. *[Laughter.]* Damien and Caroline, thank you for coming and helping the Committee, like other delegations, in our deliberations on this important issue. The invitation from us to contact you and for you to get back to us is a standing invitation. Thank you very much.