

# Housing How To...



## Moving in

Students' unions can play a critical role in equipping students with the information they need to ensure that moving in goes smoothly, both for them and for the local community as a whole. This briefing will set out what students' unions, whether large or small, can do to support their students during the moving in period.



## Introduction

Housing is one of the most critical factors in ensuring that students can thrive both personally and academically, and as such, moving into a new home can be one of the most stressful times of a student's career. It is also the starting point for all of the relationships students will build with their neighbours and the community as a whole.

This can therefore be one of the best times to communicate key messages about the rights that students have as tenants and what it means to live in the community, particularly if they are renting for the first time. Students' unions have a critical role to play in equipping students with the information they need to make their stay in the community a success.

## Fostering neighbourly relations

The education sector often speaks about the relationship between 'town' and 'gown' in fairly abstract terms. However, it is important to remember that this relationship is made up of many more individual relationships between students and the neighbours and other local residents that they cross paths with during their studies. This means that while it is important that institutions (and particularly those which draw a large number of students from outside their immediate locality) and their students' unions work together on high level community engagement activities, it is equally important to consider how you can facilitate positive interactions between students and their neighbours on a one-on-one basis.

The moving in period is a perfect opportunity for students to get their relationship with their neighbours off on the right foot. Where there is an absence of communication, prejudices can thrive, particularly if some residents have had negative experiences of living around students or other young renters in the past. Although this is by its nature a very individual or small-scale interaction, some students' unions have done some really innovative work to help facilitate positive interactions between students and their neighbours.

## 'Meet your neighbour'

'Meet your neighbour' initiatives encourage students to be proactive in forging positive relationships with their neighbours by dropping a note through their door or by simply knocking and introducing themselves. The idea behind this is that by making the introduction early on, it enables both parties to think of each other as individuals and people rather than 'residents' and 'students.' This can help to break down the imagined barriers between them and enable them to build a positive relationship. This can aid things later on by making both parties more likely to be communicative at each point, for example by notifying each other if they intend to have a party, and maybe to set out a time when they'd prefer music to be turned off.

Some unions encourage students to meet their neighbours using things like postcards and teabags that can be dropped through a neighbour's letter box, but even without any budget or very much time at all, students' unions can consider posting tips on how to introduce yourself via social media or through their website. Students can then be encouraged to share their positive stories of meeting their neighbours.



## Understanding expectations

When students move into a new house, whether they have rented before or not, they may be unfamiliar with what is expected of them in terms of their responsibilities, and particularly any specifics of the requirements placed on tenants living in that specific locality. One of the most significant issues which unfortunately reoccurs all over the country is residents complaining about students failing to properly manage their waste, leading to excessive rubbish in the streets and a 'loss of visual amenity'.

As students' unions well know, a vast majority of students are hugely environmentally-conscious and issues with waste management often have more to do with a lack of information rather than being unwilling to do things in the correct way. Students' unions can therefore work constructively with their local authority, institution and local landlords' associations to look at how best this information can be communicated to tenants. Many students' unions have found that using social media channels is an effective way of reminding students of when relevant waste collections are throughout the year.

This is just one area among many others where students' unions can be proactive in ensuring that students are better equipped to understand the expectations they face when living in the private rented sector.

## Likely challenges for Sus

There are some challenges to this kind of work in terms of the role that students' unions should be playing in allaying the concerns of others in the community. It is important for students' unions to be able to help others to recognise that students are not children, and that they are likely to respond best when information is provided in such a way as to make them understand not just *what* is expected of them, but most crucially *why* it is expected.

Some students' unions may however find themselves under pressure from various angles to take more aggressive forms of action, for example undertaking 'sshh' campaigns (Silent Students Happy Homes). Not only is there no evidence of the impact of these kinds of campaigns, but they can serve to reinforce negative stereotypes of students and the division between them and the rest of the community. Any initiative around noise is likely to be more successful in the long run if it looks at the relationships themselves and creating meaningful mutual understanding, rather than looking purely at behaviour and targeting a single demographic.

Sometimes it can be useful to remind others of the diversity of the student body, and that the mother complaining of noise next door could very well be a student struggling to write her dissertation, just as the culprit causing the noise could be someone in full time employment. Sometimes, although there may be real problems at the heart of things, it is therefore important to also interrogate the assumptions and prejudices that conclusions about students are based on. The perception of student behaviour can often be some distance from reality, and students' unions as the representative body are best placed to help bring discussions back to the evidence and what is likely to work.

## Understanding what to expect

There are of course, as we've already discussed, a number of expectations placed on students when they move into a new home, but equally important are the things that they have a right to expect of their landlord or letting agent. Ensuring that student tenants have a strong understanding of what they are entitled to at the start of their tenancy means that they're less likely to encounter problems later on, and are more likely to be able to address problems where they occur.

As well as the house-hunting period, the moving in period should be a key point in the year for SUs to put out targeted information to students (N.B. There is often overlap between these periods in towns and cities where students tend to look for housing later on, in which case there is a prolonged period for targeting of information!) The two key things that students should be advised to expect when they move into a private rented house are:

1. Proof that their deposit has been protected in a registered government scheme within 30 days of it being received by the landlord or letting agent
2. A full inventory of the contents and condition of the property as close as possible to the date they take possession of the property

It is important that students are not only told that these things should happen, but the reasons why they are valuable and likely to reduce problems later. These issues will be covered in detail in the next edition of this series.

*This briefing forms part of a series, which will be released by NUS throughout the year to help students' unions develop their work on key housing issues and campaigns.*