

## Academic Forum

### Meeting 31 July 2013: notes

**attendees** – Ciaran Little (Berkley First), Simone Williams (Tower Hamlets), Richard (Dick) Jones (BT), Julia Bond (Kingston), Sophia Donaldson (Newham), Jonathan Seager (London First), Joanna Goodman (NUS), Lisa Russell (City of London), Kimberley Hopkins (Westminster Council), Roland Shanks (UOL), Michael Meadows (Deloitte), William Wilson (UCL), James Kedgh (Hackney), Sam Cuthbert (Ealing), John Bond (Kingston University), Brian Welsh (The Student Housing Company), Allan Hilton (Cass and Claredale Halls of Residence Association Limited), Asif Zaman (Unite Group PLC), Chris Cobb (University of London), Sakiba Gurda (Islington); Zhuoya Ling (GLA), John Lett (GLA), Jennifer Peters (GLA), Julie Fleck (GLA).

The fourth forum meeting addressed issues over the delivery of high quality student accommodation, provision for disabled students, and the joint working arrangements. Details of the group discussions are set out below:

#### 1. Comments on the last meeting notes (26 May 2013)

- 1) It was suggested by the London Higher representative that the Non - HESA full-time student estimates was based on the HESA survey of 2009/10. We could assume 5% annual growth rate from 2009/10 to calculate an estimate for 2012/13. The revised table is set out below:

2012/13	Estimated Student No.
Private and alternative providers	26,600
Erasmus	3,900
Association of American Study Aboard Programme	5,500
Campus Branches (approx. 20 campuses branches) e.g. UEA London, Glasgow Caledonian London, Coventry London, Northumbria London	15,000
<b>Total students not covered by HESA for London</b>	<b>51,000</b>

- 2) Impacts of student accommodation on an area should be included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph regarding the distinction between 'strategic' and 'local' need. A revised paragraph is as below:

*It was suggested that boroughs' administrative boundaries should be used to distinguish 'strategic' and 'local' need – demand from institutions within the boundary represent local need while those outside the boundary are 'strategic' need. The universities considered that the concept of 'local' need was not helpful. For example, even if a university was located only 10 minutes beyond the borough border, the local authority might justify refusal to grant planning permission for accommodation because it was not generated by a 'local' HEI. Borough representative responded that 'strategic' need would put too much pressure on the central boroughs where most universities were currently concentrated. This would undermine capacity for these boroughs to deliver conventional homes – though, beyond central London, this might be more acceptable if university based/generated employment was provided as well as student accommodation. **It was noted that student accommodation could bring economic benefits (such as boosting the night-time economy), but it could also put pressures on the existing social infrastructure e.g. health care services.** Boroughs already subject to substantial student accommodation pressures felt that these should be shared*

*more equitably across London, perhaps by dividing the strategic targets for accommodation needs (currently 1,800 – 2,700 pa) equally by 33 boroughs. New London Plan policy should allow boroughs to demonstrate their local circumstances in their development plans. Neither the universities, private providers, students nor boroughs with little accommodation pressure thought this a practical proposition.*

3) Clarification should be given in the paragraph regarding creation of a ‘cartel’:

*There was concern by the charitable sector, that, from the student perspective, partnerships between the private sector and some universities effectively created a cartel, driving out smaller and charitable providers (in the context of granting planning permission that exempts provision for students from affordable housing contributions). Universities also operated as businesses, driving up rents at the bottom of the market.*

## 2. Quality and type of provision

The chair noted that student housing was exempt from the Mayor’s Housing Standards set out in the Housing Supplementary Planning Guidance’ (GLA, November 2012). Group discussions covered topics in Chapter 2 Quality of the Housing SPG:

- There was a perception from some that poor **design** has been an issue for many student accommodation developments, which may be one of the reasons for people’s bad perception of student development;
- **Wheel chair** accessible rooms and **cycle standards** are considered by the private developers and university providers, to be the most problematic requirements,
- **Security** is a key priority in student housing which is why blocks tend to have a single point of entry than multiple entries. This can sometimes give impression that the building and inhabitants are not integrating with the surrounding area;
- **Density** is linked to the price and denser development can reduce costs. However, developers suggest that in larger and denser developments they do include more amenity space, either internally or externally. All agreed that the size of the room is less important to students than the amenity space available in the development, which is where they will socialise and spend a lot of their time.
- Though many developments also have outside amenity space, provision of outside amenity space is often subject to site constraints and it is considered not practical to require such provision in all developments.
- High density developments, particularly tall buildings are not appropriate for all areas but could play an important role in the intensification of town centres, which the Outer London Commission is currently looking at. There were examples where this is already happening, and there was general agreement that such provision could contribute to the vitality and viability of town centres, while offering students ready access to public transport facilities. High density town centre re-development, while not completely reducing demand for additional provision in central London could be a significant way of accommodating continuing

requirements, especially at the cheaper end of the market. Mixed use redevelopment was a possibility, though street level security concerns would have to address when integrating provision with commercial space. Though a borough representative considered that student development should be subject to density requirements in the same way as conventional housing, there was general agreement that the distinct nature of student housing made these inappropriate.

- It was recognised that in some cluster flat developments there had been some issues over layout, especially the relationship between access to bedrooms and kitchens. However, the biggest challenge in securing a good quality student living environment was management.
- **Integration;** There was some discussion of how student development should be integrated in to the communities. However, due to concerns about safety and security students developments are always going to be somewhat closed off from surrounding development. However, design (even if a 'gated' development) can help create a feeling of openness and it was felt that blocks and blocks of student accommodation are deemed to create problems. This again demonstrates a need for the dispersal rather than concentration of student accommodation. Although "overconcentration" is hard to define and is sometimes only a problem at the very local level, which is why design and density is so important.
- **Design standards:** Currently, there are two codes of standards for student accommodation in the industry - the ANUK code (for non-educational providers) and the universities UK Code of Practice (for educational providers). It was suggested by the group that it would be better to utilise these codes to ensure good quality development, rather than introducing new standards or trying to enforce conventional housing standards onto student developments. These codes are well enforced and there have been instances of members being suspended or thrown out of the code where they fail to adhere to it, so it is considered to be quite robust- universities would not use/register a private provider who was not a member of ANUK.
- **HMO's** – there was some discussion around purpose built accommodation and HMO's, which can be of poor quality and lack amenity space as the living rooms are often rented out as a bed room. Thus to improve quality HMO's need to be looked at as well as purpose built accommodation. It was thought that the UK Code (above) was more rigorous than the HMO regulations.
- The whole group agreed that **car parking** is not needed for student developments, although some capacity is needed for delivery vehicles.
- **Cycle parking;** The requirement of one cycle space per two bedrooms in the London Plan is considered to be too much and it would be more reflective of actual use while still being ambitious to cater for 30% of students. Moreover, it will depend on where the halls are and what university they serve, as well as the extent that cycling is a chosen form of transport. In addition, initiatives such as the Boris bikes may actually reduce the need for cycle storage. The student halls providers felt that it was a waste to have cycle storage that is not used and it also can impact the viability of a development. Given that the 50% is based on an ambition for a

modal shift towards cycling, it was felt that the target could be kept but as long as there was flexibility to reflect the site and location specifics.

- It was suggested by some that the GLA might prepare specific standards for student accommodation: dual aspect, balconies, space standards, ceiling heights, air quality, storage and daylight requirements probably all differ from those applied to conventional housing

### **3. Provision for disabled students**

Student providers felt that the current 5% provision target in the Part M building regulations is too high, they often struggle to occupy them and they are not popular with non-disabled students. Julie Fleck suggested that often this is due to the fact that the units are not designed well and look quite hospital like, whereas they should be decorated to look the same as any other unit. One speaker suggested that in design terms meeting the 5% Part M requirement plus a further 5% for units which could be easily adapted could approximate to an overall 25% increase in space requirements across a development.

The universities suggested that 1% of the population as a whole was dependent on wheelchairs, and 70% of these were aged over 70. Demographics indicated that one fifth of 1% of students were likely to be disabled, suggesting that very few students are likely to require wheelchair accessible rooms. Private providers and universities cited examples where significantly higher levels of wheelchair accessible accommodation had been provided but very little of this had actually been taken up by wheelchair users. What was important was ensuring that wheelchair users were accommodated close to university teaching facilities – this was essentially a management issue.

Against this view, was the concern that lack of choice about accommodation may be preventing disabled students from accessing university education, or at least university accommodation. If rooms are designed correctly, then they can meet the needs and aspirations of both disabled and non-disabled students. It was noted that the providers' concerns arose from requirements on new developments – much of the existing stock had not been built to wheelchair standards and the issue must be seen in light of overall provision. In addition account should be taken of the needs of disabled people visiting student accommodation, not just its occupants.

It is also important that a wider group of disabled students may benefit from larger rooms, not just those in wheelchairs. Inclusive design should be integrated in to the development from the beginning, as it's not just about the bedrooms, but the accessibility of the whole development.

There was also a concern that disabled students are only offered rooms in halls and not in cluster flats as these are not accessible. Also, it was claimed that prices are not always clear, as although a disabled student will be charged the same for a larger room as a regular room, if those larger rooms are let to non-disabled students they would have to pay more for the larger room and sometimes it is that price that is advertised on websites etc.

In addition, it was felt that knocking two standard units into one if a disabled student in need of an accessible room applies for accommodation was a poor use of space, excessively costly, did not encourage disabled students and would not necessarily mean that the whole development was accessible.

#### **4. Joint working arrangements**

It was generally agreed that a greater dispersal of student accommodation would be desirable, but achieving that requires all parties to work together much more successfully. The chair asked for views on how to do that. One approach is to ask the Mayor to continue to support the Forum to identify general issues and to set up a working group to address specific tasks.

This group should focus on providing a sounder appreciation of demand and supply to enable universities, boroughs and developers to work together to meet it in the most sustainable way. It could perhaps operate on a borough by borough basis as a mechanism to support boroughs in identifying and addressing strategic and local demand, as required by the London Plan.

The group have so far discussed a number of topics which will be the basis for their report to the Mayor, this will include:

- Scale of growth (already broadly agreed)
- Accommodation required to meet that (already broadly agreed)
- Affordable student housing – how we can encourage student accommodation that is affordable and what the private sectors role in that should be (not yet agreed).
- Dispersal of student accommodation, and how this may address affordability issues/ reduce pressure on LBs where historic provision is raising tensions with strategic policy to ensure that it does not compromise capacity for conventional homes
- Design of student accommodation
- Joint working arrangements

The Forum secretariat indicated that it would seek to prepare a draft set of recommendations for discussion at the next meeting.