

Organisation

University of Exeter Students' Guild

Matter 7 – Meeting Housing Needs

This submission is made in response to Matter 7, Issue 2, on behalf of Exeter Students' Guild as the representative body for all 30,000 Exeter students. First, we would like to give our appreciation to the council for their recognition of the increased financial pressures on students as referenced in paragraph 6.61, as well as their clear acknowledgement of Exeter as an expensive city in accordance with the Cushman and Wakefield report. We wholly agree that offering PBSA at a range of price points is vital in improving equitable access to higher education, particularly in Exeter where rent prices are above the national average. This, alongside the expectations laid out policy H10, set a good foundation that we are generally accepting of. However, we would like to offer a more nuanced perspective on behalf of our students which may be beneficial in further considerations.

Continuing our initial reflection on paragraph 6.61, we would first like to touch on question 3, particularly focusing on policy H10. The impacts of the cost-of-living crisis are particularly significant for students, many of whom find their maintenance loan falling short of their basic needs. Further to this, costs of PBSA are significantly higher than other forms of housing such as university halls or private lets. Our 2024 housing report shows that only 24% of students living in PBSA pay less than £650 per month, compared to 50% of students living in HMO or private lets. In contrast, the average rent for university halls sits at £527 a month. To ground this in further context, 54% of students were living in private lets, whereas only 13% were living in PBSA, with 26% in university halls. Updated figures from our 2025 accommodation hunting survey demonstrate that 17% of students now live in PBSA, but this increase is due to nominations for first-year students whilst the development of West Park happens on campus. As part of these contracts, the university has negotiated rent decreases of between £10-£15 a week, and significantly shorter contract lengths. However, these students are still paying more per week than those living in university halls, showing that there is a clear discrepancy in affordability between university halls and PBSA.

Additionally, the introduction of the Renters' Rights Act 2025 means that students living in PBSA are left with less protections than other students, including the retained right for PBSA to operate on a fixed-term basis, to request more than a month's rent at a time, and restricting students' ability to terminate their contract with two months' notice. The discrepancy between rights of students living in HMOs or private lets compared to that of students living in PBSA may also have implications for home students' willingness to occupy PBSA, leading to a potential drop in occupancy.

This is enhanced by the introduction of the International Student Levy, which may lead to a drop in international student numbers, many of whom are more likely to live in PBSA due to difficulties with private landlords. We are concerned about the implications of this in the context of the shared target between the council and the university set in 2006/07, as in a worst case scenario where we see an unprecedented drop in student numbers, we may see an overconcentration of PBSA without any further building taking place. Policy H10 does pay this some mind in H10f, which states that development proposals must be future-proofed to support alternative uses. This is further backed up in paragraph 6.62, which identifies co-living, build-to-rent housing, or office spaces as alternative uses for surplus PBSA. However, we would advocate for responsiveness with additional PBSA development to student demand, for example building more cluster flats and shared facilities rather than studios which are isolating and expensive. Whilst not directly related to the matter, we would also urge the council to ensure HMO supply remains part of PBSA discussion. In reflection of the changing nature of regulatory context and student needs, decisions related to city planning and Article 4 may result in students branching further from the city centre, impacting permanent resident housing supply in turn.

We would also like to respond to question 4 regarding the locational requirements of PBSA. We believe that the reasoning for this is clear in paragraph 6.57, which addresses the council's net zero ambitions and the subsequent need for PBSA to be well-connected and close to both campuses and the city centre. It is encouraging to see the commitment to this and the desire for students' day-to-day needs to be met through walking, cycling, or public transport as stated in policy H10a. However, in response to the parking element of question 5, we believe that it is crucial that disabled students can access blue-badge parking should they require it, so it is promising to see this laid out as a criteria in H10c. That said, the criteria are framed as restriction of other forms of parking rather than requirement of blue-badge parking, so it would be a clearer and more effective criteria if it were to move to a requirement rather than an exception to a rule. This would increase the positive preparedness of policy H10, as well as justifying the policy more equitably.

In further response to question 5, we would like to address the accessibility expectations of PBSA, particularly surrounding physical access needs. Giving a response to this question as a disabled student who has lived in PBSA before, it is good to see some accessibility features in PBSA that other types of private housing do not have, such as lifts and automatic doors. Considering Exeter's relatively inaccessible landscape, features such as these can make a huge difference to students with physical disabilities and their ability to move around their accommodation easily. However, our Accommodation Hunting Survey (2025) shows that only 10% of physically disabled students lived in PBSA, compared to 23% living in private lets and 50% living in university halls. In developing accommodation, the university works to the Building

Regulations accessibility frameworks laid out in the 2010 Approved Document for Access to and Use of Buildings, as well as ensuring they meet all standards set out by the UUK National Student Code. Whilst we appreciate that there are often discretionary decisions to be made by developers, we would strongly recommend taking concrete steps towards aligning PBSA development with Building Regulations that prioritise accessible housing for all students, as this is currently not clearly laid out in policy H10.