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Speech

Universities Minister at Student Accommodation Conference

In a recorded message to the Student Accommodation Conference 2020, Chris Skidmore set out the Government's expectations for the sector.

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From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP](#)

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Good morning. I'm very sorry not to be with you in Salford today – in my absence, I wanted to send you a message to share with you the Government's expectation for the student accommodation sector.

It's hard to overstate just how important student accommodation is to the university experience, with students spending more time in their accommodation than in study spaces, and in so many cases, finding their first 'home away from home'. However, students are not the only agents in this sector; accommodation is hugely important to HE providers in allowing them to attract students globally, and provides a thriving business opportunity to PBSA developers and investors.

When done well, student accommodation can provide so much for a student: a place of safety, of support, and of social interaction. All students should live in places where they can thrive and have the quality of student experience they deserve.

However, we have all seen that problems can arise. As your Universities Minister, I am keen to ensure that no student is exposed to the types of issues we sometimes see in the news; no student should be left in the lurch due to late completion, priced out of adequate accommodation or end up in a building with too few social spaces that can leave them feeling isolated or lonely.

Most importantly, the Secretary of State has made it clear in his letter to all Vice Chancellors that providers are expected to step up fire safety, ensuring that all student accommodation is safe and fit for purpose. Earlier this month, we saw King's College London relocate hundreds of students from an accommodation block due to fire safety concerns. This type of collaboration on the safety of buildings is vital when lives are at stake.

Tackling these awful and disappointing issues will require sustained collaborative effort. That's why I called together students, sector bodies, universities, PBSA providers and regulators just before Christmas, to make sure their voices are heard on how we work together to identify solutions in this new decade.

I've had a chance to reflect on the fascinating insights that came out of this summit, and I am struck by the opportunity student involvement can pose for developers and universities.

Meaningful consultation with students in the design of rent structures can help ensure timely rent payments while easing money worries and boosting wellbeing. Involving students, universities and local authorities at the design stage of new accommodation allows individual places to ensure they have the right mix of rooms and spaces for their specific student population, and makes sure students are happy with what they're paying for.

Some messages were not as positive. It is not right that accessible accommodation is often the most expensive option available to students; if disabled students are forced to pay premium prices for suitable rooms, this is tantamount to a tax on disability, and cannot be allowed to continue.

Furthermore, going forward, I would like to see a wider range of accessible accommodation becoming available. It is not only wheelchair users who require accessible rooms, and accommodation developers need to ensure that all social spaces, and not just bedrooms and bathrooms are accessible for all types of students.

Speaking to some of you in the sector, I have been impressed by the real-life benefits that have been realised through partnership-working. There are so many positive examples of this; I want to continue to see PBSA suppliers notifying universities early of construction delays so impacts on students can be minimised, and of accommodation managers developing information sharing arrangements to deliver support to struggling students.

I am proud of the collaborative effort last year that went into producing the British Property Federation's mental health and wellbeing guidance, for which I wrote the foreword, and strongly urge every private provider in the country to engage with that guidance.

So what are the next steps? We need to address issues around student accommodation now so that the system is resilient to the rapid increase in student numbers coming over the next few years. We in the UK have the potential to provide the most comprehensive high-quality network of student accommodation in the world, and I want to see this realised and maintained as our student numbers increase.

We need to make sure higher education institutions, students and developers have the right relationships in place, so that PBSA offers real value for money and the steep trajectory of rent rises ends; so that the virtual tax on disabled students paying premium prices for accessible accommodation ends; and so that fire safety standards give students complete confidence in the security of their university homes.

We also need to look at what the latest updates to the Unipol and UUK accommodation codes should be. I want us to consider not only what we can do to strengthen compliance with them, but also to hit developers hard in the pocket if they refuse to seek code accreditation.

We all need to think hard about the quality and availability of accommodation information to students and their families, including its costs and where the profits go. Students must have access to the right facts to be able to make the right choices - they have consumer rights. And I want us to think about what the best-practice models of PBSA provision are and how we ensure the sector adopts them.

Whether that's self-build by universities allowing them to reinvest their own accommodation surpluses or whether it's partnerships between private PBSA providers and institutions, the guiding principle for any model is that it gets the right accommodation built in the right location, at the right quality and price to meet students' needs.

The student accommodation of the future must take account of the fact that students' needs have never been more diverse, given the range of backgrounds today's students come from and their differing identities, a 'one size fits all' approach will not, and is not, suitable.

All of this presents a challenge – a challenge that I know you are ready and able to take on. I'm sorry I cannot be with you in person today, but I look forward to engaging with you in the future and witnessing all the exciting developments the world of student accommodation has to offer.

Thank you.

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