

Annex C: Graduate Students' Association Response

To: Councillor James Alexander
Leader – City of York Council
West Offices
Station Rise
York
YO1 6GA

Cc Councillor Janet Looker
Councillor Tracey Simpson-Laing
Dr Jane Grenville
Dr David Duncan
Article 4 Review Team
Higher York

Review of Article 4 and the impact on student families

Dear Councillor Alexander,

We are aware that the City of York Council is currently undertaking a review of Article 4 as a means of controlling the concentration of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) within the City. The Graduate Students' Association (GSA) is a member of Higher York and that group plans to submit a response to that review. However, we would like to separately highlight one side effect of Article 4 that we believe has negatively impacted a small but significant number of our membership – student families.

The GSA runs the Student Family Network¹, which is designed to support students, their partners and their children and is open to both UK and international families. The University of York has a limited number of student family housing available and has a policy of only allowing families to stay in university managed accommodation for 50 weeks². This policy is in place in the interests of fairness to ensure that people unfamiliar with York have a year in which to find something in the private accommodation market. Generally, Family Network members are personally, or have partners who are, enrolled in a course spanning several years. This means we expect the majority of Family Network members to have to find private family accommodation at some point during their time in York.

In talking to families over the past year we have come to the conclusion that one of the unintended consequences of Article 4 has been that landlords with a HMO licence, who have properties which would be suitable for families, are unwilling to rent to them as they would immediately lose their HMO licence and with it the flexibility to cater to both student families and the more traditional single student/young professional market.

¹ <http://www.yorkgsa.org/site/welfare/university-of-york-student-family-network>

² <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/housing-and-money/accommodation/families/>



On the assumption that Article 4 is will remain in force for the foreseeable future we would welcome a dialogue to look at ways in which HMO licencing can be made more flexible and attractive to landlords who may wish to convert current HMO-licensed student accommodation to student family accomodation and mitigate the perceived difficulty in regaining HMO-status should they wish to re-enter that market.

We believe the simplest solution to this problem would be to allow landlords to keep a HMO licence for a period of time – a maximum of two years – after they convert from a HMO-compliant group (such as students or young professionals) to family housing. This would allow them to ‘take a risk’ on renting to a family without feeling they would be at risk of losing their HMO licence. However, we understand that such an option would be impossible under section 62 of the Housing Act 2004 which allows, at maximum, a six-month suspension of the licence.

We believe that the following minor policy interventions may help the situation:

- One possibility would be to make the process of reapplying for a HMO licence easier for landlords in good standing who previously gave up their licence in order to rent their property to a student family. We note that there may be room in the current licence fee structure³ to offer discounts to landlords who fall into this category.
- Similarly, we wondered if it would be possible to offer a ‘fast-track’ reapplication process for landlords who fall into this category? They then could be confident of a faster decision should they find the housing market in and around York shifts in any given year.
- We would also welcome an opportunity to work together in talking with private landlords and letting agents about the benefits of renting to student families, such as a fixed income for at least three years.

The goal of Article 4 was to create balanced communities in York. We have collected evidence to suggest that, in some circumstances, rather than limiting the number of HMOs for single students in York Article 4 has made landlords *less* likely to open up their properties to student families. Attached as an appendix to this letter are some anomonus comments from members of our Family Network on the issue.

We understand that housing policy is a complex issue and discussions about the merits and drawback of Article 4 are ongoing. We hope however that you consider the issues raised here and our suggestions to help eleviate the situation on our student families.

We would welcome further discussion on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Kelvin Elphick
GSA Principal Officer with responsibility for family accommodation

³ http://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/5917/licence_fee_structure



Appendix A – Sample of anonymous feedback from student families on approaching student letting agencies and student landlords.

“We approached [letting agency] and when we mentioned it was for a family they didn't even try a waiting list, but were straightforward and said they only did SINGLE students accommodation. We also approached [another letting agency] and they took our contact details to "let us know" when something suitable for families came up, but that it was highly unlikely to happen (and indeed in one year in their waiting list we were never contacted)...”

“...to my experience, student letting agents don't have many properties available for student families. Most properties are available for students sharers and do not accept children. On the other hand, when I looked for a property at the residential market, the properties are suitable for family, BUT some of them do not accept students. So, it's not easy to find a property for students with children.”

“Student letting agents focus on single students and letting shared houses which are not suitable for families. Even if there is any house which can be used for a family for example with two bedrooms, they prefer to rent each room separately.”

“One student letting agency explained that it was more profitable for landlords to let their houses based on individual students rather than to a family and so the limited number of houses for students for families reflected this. They also mentioned that more landlords appear to go down the route of letting out by per student basis.”

“[letting agent] seems like very difficult to understand the needs and circumstances of a student with family. Very very late even sometimes just ignore the e-mail to answers any reports of problems in the house etc. :(“

“Yes, I approached them, but no student family house available.”

“In addition, when we deal with property agents which are not specialised in student properties, we need to go through referencing procedure, like other (normal/non-student) families, which also I found difficult. I was asked to provide a minimum of 1,600 pounds income per month as a reference. Obviously, as a student, I can't meet that requirement. Even my scholarship can't be used as a reference because it's below the minimum amount of referencing. Some students might be lucky to have spouse who works and earns income that meet the referencing requirement, but that's not always the case.”

“We were fortunate to only be asked for a month's deposit and a month of advance rent but I have heard my friends complained that there were instances when six months to nine months rent was asked. It was also mentioned that most of the affordable housing for families were in areas that were not family friendly or were quite far from uni. Those that managed to find a family accommodation close to uni were too small and did not meet their needs as a family. And because of these reasons



when we viewed our current house, we felt quite pressured by the letting agent to immediately put in an application as we knew there were a limited number of good houses for families.”

“...it becomes very difficult for people like us with children travelling to England for the first time. Plus we seriously hope there's no drunk people knocking at our doors or throwing stones at our windows in the middle of the night in private sector accommodation. That would be terrible for the little ones.”



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