

## **UNITE Group's commitment to the wider community**

Most people would think twice about moving next door to a house full of students. Tales of late-night parties and anti-social behaviour have become the stuff of urban legend, reinforced by lingering stereotypes such as TV's *The Young Ones*. Yet paradoxically, each year conscientious parents across the country anxiously seek suitable accommodation for their student sons and daughters.

The massive growth in tertiary education means that having students as neighbours is a reality that more and more people in the UK will face for the foreseeable future. And nowhere is this truer than in the nation's capital. Currently home to 218,500 full time students, in 2006 34,000 students originating from outside the city started their first year in London in private rented accommodation.

As the government pledges to increase the number of school leavers attending university to 50% by 2010, these numbers are set to continue rising. Few would argue with the merits of a policy that works to ensure that more young people have access to further education and the potential life benefits this offers them. So we have to be prepared to live with students. And just as importantly, they have to be prepared to take a constructive role within the communities in which they live.

At the core of UNITE's business is a recognition of both these facts. Wherever we build accommodation, we also strive to create long-lasting relationships with those around us. By providing high-quality, well-managed developments with hospitality teams and security staff on hand to manage any problems or concerns, we nurture relationships between UNITE as a responsible developer and our local communities. Basing our business model on the re-development of brownfield sites and disused buildings, we also play a constructive role in the wider process of regeneration.

Similarly, by providing students with a better standard of living we aim to encourage a more positive collaboration between our tenants and other local residents. There is compelling evidence that students, in common with other sectors of society, respond well to a positive environment. By feeling part of the community, students can add vibrancy and richness to a neighbourhood that complement their fiscal contribution, typically £2.2m a year for every UNITE development of 400 beds.

All this is brought even more sharply into focus by the current problems with housing supply in the UK. Although laudable, the government's drive to get more people into university will undoubtedly place increasingly significant pressure on privately rented accommodation over the coming years. Whilst the Mayor has acknowledged both that the private-rented sector has a vital role to play in housing Londoners and that it houses the bulk of students not in their first year of study, there is a distinctly worrying lack of evidence that these facts have registered at a Central Government level.

This year central government has issued two key planning documents in the Planning White Paper and the Housing Green Paper. Both conspicuously fail to propose specific measures to deal with the 'student factor' – something that a holistic and comprehensive solution to the housing problem must consider. This absence of joined-up thinking on higher education and planning policy must cast serious doubts on the new Brown administration's ability to address its objectives collectively.

Intelligent and responsible development of tailored student accommodation can be an important part of the housing solution. As the mayor's Housing Strategy itself

recognises: “Building specialist accommodation for students and others willing to live in higher density developments may also help release family homes currently used for sharing”. For example, for each UNITE development occupied, up to 80 terraced houses may be released from student use and become available to other markets in the privately rented sector. These are homes which could then be occupied year round by young families or newly qualified professionals who are not yet in a position to buy their own property. Students will receive greater access to accommodation that better suits their needs. And privately rented housing will provide a much needed step on the property ladder for more appropriate tenants.

Enabling young people who would not in previous generations have had the opportunity to go to university is now an important and progressive initiative. Likewise, increasing the housing supply is undoubtedly an imperative for the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What the government must realise is that neither can be properly achieved without the other. The Mayor appears to have grasped the nettle on this point, and has set about harnessing the impact of specialist student housing on the private-rented sector, itself a vital and under-utilised tool in the UK housing challenge. Central Government must now follow.

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