

## Student Officer Report - Welfare – Ciarán O'Brien

### Housing:

#### *July/August:*

- Established the Student Renters Group (SRG), a tenants union specific to students who are in the private rented sector to help promote their rights and welfare, defend them legally, and campaign for housing justice
- Launched a campaign to ban illegal letting fees and help students reclaim money stolen through the letting fee charges – posters were designed & printed and made alongside 'Renters Rights' leaflets that contain your essential rights as tenants alongside advice regarding damp and deposits
- Student Friendly Landlord Register – working with Shelter NI and the BBC I contacted all letting agents in Belfast, particularly those engaged in the unlawful practice of letting fees and offered them a chance to partner with the SU as 'student friendly landlords' on the conditions they don't charge letting fees and publically acknowledge their illegality. Of the 55 letting agents contacted, only 2 replied, neither of which 100% met the criteria. The register however served its prime intention which was to update and intelligence data base on who still charges illegal letting fees.
- Negotiated with Shelter NI to gain funding for 10 court cases against letting agents regarding letting fees
- Research was also done into a landlord/letting agent review site – Marks out Of Tenancy was found to be the best and we initiated discussions with them about site design, features and promotion. From which we added an importance feature regarding images to combat the false advertising of properties by letting agents in the area.
- Research was done into a Housing Guarantor scheme for international students, estranged students, parental students and very low income students. A guarantor scheme is needed for students who cannot provide a UK based guarantor for their private rental accommodation. Typically students who can't provide one are

asked to pay multiple months' rent upfront (commonly 3). This report was shared with various SU's across the UK. It contained details of various possible guarantor schemes which could be utilised. We intent to propose a particular scheme to our own University.

*September/October:*

- Initial SRG meeting was held with an initial attendance of near 20 people – in which we discussed plans for the year
- Weekly door knocks around in the holylands (commonly on a Wednesday (4.30pm-6.30pm) have occurred wherein activists are delivering the renters rights leaflets and consulting students on their housing rights but also on activities in the SU such as Advice S.U, student elections, etc.
- From the door knocks our activities have gain good reputation with the older, long-term residents there who are also in joint-agreement that rogue landlordism in the area needs to be tackled
- Through the door knocks we gained knowledge of and dealt with 3 evictions, the worst of which involved the threat of loyalist paramilitaries against international students – all cases resulted in fines for the landlords who had let out unlicensed HMOs
- We also countered various cases of deposit corruption and unfair repair charges, alongside gaining copious amount of evidence for cases against letting agents regarding unlawful fees
- Marks Out Of Tenancy was promoted on the doors and through advice leaflets, it has now also begun to be share online through SRG social media channels and soon to be an OFFICIAL partner organisation of the SU
- QR Code stickers were designed and distributed which via scanner brought people to our SRG page which contains rights info, advice and letting review resources
- SRG is now expanding in NUS/USI territory as Ulster university in Derry and Coleraine seek to establish student renters groups with our help

**Sexual Health & Consent:**

*July/August:*

- A world record STI test day was planned for over Fresher's fair to tackle the stigma around STI testing for 1st timers especially – planning for this involved meeting with the Belfast Trust in order to acquire staffing for the event and ensure the facilities were going to provide for the testing was appropriate
- The event required various demands such as acquiring a testing unit, vinyl branding, security assessment, sex Ed leaflet design and also negotiations with Boojum Belfast to gain sponsorship for the event – this was achieved and they granted over £3000 worth of prizes.
- An Ask for Angela Campaign was initiated in partnership with the then Women's Officer which involved engagement with almost all the bars in South Belfast that students would frequent – Campaign resources (posters, tv graphics) were sent to some bars who agreed with the promise that at the next all staff meetings we could chat to them about the campaign
- Common Youth were also engaged about delivering Sex Ed and Consent training to staff and students

#### *September/October:*

- The world record STI test event was held over the 2 days of freshers fair wherein 905 students were testing in under 16 hours – creating a new world record!
- This was presented as a greater case for further funding and demand for Sexual Health service in the SU to the University – the event has gained significant recognition across the Health Trusts in Ireland
- Another World Record event is planned for February, alongside a Sexual Ed and Sex Positivity Day
- Resources for Contraceptive and Menstrual product care baskets were ordered and distributed in SU bathrooms with them also being extending later to library bathrooms

#### **Mental Health**

#### *July/August:*

- Attended OMNI working group meeting and subsequent meetings with QUB Wellbeing services on how we can approve online provisions
- Report was compiled on Student Reps on Academic Disciplinary Panels and on mental health training provision for those who sit on panels – this was initiated with the intention of building a case for Student Officers on academic disciplinary and appeal panels (which we don't currently sit on) wherein mental health issues arise as explanations for academic irregularity. Currently there isn't enough provision for considerations of mental health affecting studying during these committees
- Two events were organised for world mental health week – one involving PIPs suicide intervention charity and boojum, and another involving Aware NI, the Hatfield, QUB, Ulster University and Ulster Belfast and Jordanstown S.U's
- Another Mental Health awareness day is planned for February

*September/October:*

- Both events in Boojum and the Hatfield happened successfully with fair (but not exceptional attendance) and was well reviewed by those in attendance – the education sessions and free food was most appreciated and it was decided a singular joint event will be held in February wherein we'll have a BUCK THE STIGMA rodeo event to fundraise for PIPs