



Student Officer Report - Welfare – Ciarán O'Brien

Annual Report

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 prices.
- 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 extended 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

November/December Housing:

- Student Renters Group (SRG) door knocks continued weekly on Wednesdays (with the occasional Thursday substitute) inside the Holylands and Stranmillis
- Advised a student project group within the business management school on important and useful features for developing an business site that would help students living in the private rental sector
 - Continued to meet with Shelter NI and process the on-going legal campaign against various letting agents regarding their unlawful practice of charging letting fees
 - Executed successful banner drop against GOC estate agents who have been prolific in discriminating against students regarding illegal fees – action resulted in very popular PR for the SRG
 - Multiple short stickering runs promoting housing rights were ran and proved fruitful judging by the upsurge in emails to myself regarding deposits and letting fees charges
- Marks Out of Tenancy continues to grow slowly but surely – it is hope this will increase before and after the upcoming house hunt surge in February
- A 'Haunted Housing Rights' VR project is underway to create a fun and competitive way of learning about housing rights and advice

- Met with Ulster University Students' Union – Magee and Belfast – to advise them on initial campaigns and structures to establish in order to create their own SRG

Sexual Health:

- Met with Belfast Social Care Trust to review and plan future activity for the weekly sexual health clinic and the promotion of order-to-home STI testing kits
- Set in motion plans for another World Record STI test day in February as part of an inter clubs and socs competition

Mental Health:

- Attended a 2-day training course concerning Mental Health First Aid training which prepared myself for how to appropriately respond to scenarios which do arise whereby students or staff come to confide in myself regarding mental distress or wellbeing
- Consulted with a final year student regarding a project on developing a single app for QUB wellbeing & SU advice services in order to provide an updated and streamlined access point for students in need
- Meet with Queen's Wellbeing to consult on which e-learning platform they provide to staff and students regarding mental health first aid training – it was strongly argued by myself the need for more formal in person delivery of this training, particularly for staff who will be present on student disciplinary and appeal panels

Additional Activity:

- Helped host Advice SU promotional events at Riddle Hall and the Maths & Physics building which delivered students info on the services we provide regarding finance and academia – focusing particularly on spreading awareness of hardship fund and student support for those students in financial difficulty
- Organised within the Climate Action Group est. by Ellen our Activities officer to fight for a Green New Deal at QUB
- UCU Strikes – was heavily involved with fellow Saabs in organising students in support of striking lecturers and staff before and during the 8-day UCU strike over pay and pensions which involved drafting an emergency council motion in support of the strike, making banners and signs for solidarity and joining the daily picket and Alternative University event
- Stood in support of Irish language rights with An Cumann Gaelach in December, demanding bilingual signage on campus and further respect and resources to be granted to Gaeilgeoirí at Queen's
- Involved in helping craft multiple new constitutional amendments to make the SU a more transparent, accountable and grass-roots organisation
- Hosted a Night at Elmwood at the invite of Queen's Musical Theatre and Queens Symphony Orchestra
- Organised alongside comrades on council to defeat the neutrality motion regarding the SU' Pro-choice stance

- Co-organised and ran with fellow saabs a voter recruitment drive for the most recent British general election

January/February

Housing:

- Organised props, sorted location and arranged filming of the SU's VR House of Horrors experience that is to be rolled out in collaboration with Advice SU to create a fun and competitive learning experience to help student renters advance their knowledge on their rights and responsibilities as private sector tenants
- Met with director of Shelter NI to discuss illegal letting fee case progress and co-ordinate funding for further cases and decide which legal firm was the appropriate agents to intrust with the work
- Attended the launch of the Holylands transition study and participated in the panel to represent the student perspective on how to improve the local area and community relations
- Participated in numerous housing video projects for final year student projects to document and explain the private tenant perspective of renting in the private sector whilst as university – these projects specifically focused more on illegal fees, deposit theft, evictions, corruption, environmental health and rising rents instead of the over-documented party culture that is perpetuate in the mainstream media
- Various media interactions with the BBC all concerned with student housing issues such as those detailed above
- A housing week was planned for early February which would contain an intense period of housing activism from the SRG due to February marking the beginning of the major house hunting season for students
- Several housing stunts to promote the voice of renters went ahead successfully, however the planned 'Take back the Holylands' protest which was to involve students and older long term residents of the holylands floundered due to internal opposition and concern within the SU about its message
- The SRG broke officially from QUBSU for reasons of operational autonomy – it has since flourished with its own social media presence and it maintains a relationship with QUB SU due to the nature of the SRGs membership

Mental Health:

- Received further training in the field of mental health first aid and begun preparations to bring a mental health first aid workshop

Sexual Health:

- Informing choices NI launch – lyric theatre
- Met with the Belfast Health Trust to plan our second STI world record attempt
- Also met with the Rainbow Project to discuss possibly of rapid HIV testing event

Other:

- Advised and assisted members of An Cumann Gaelach in organising QUBs first féile
- Joined volunteer SU in attending the International Welcome week event on Jan 6th in the Great Hall to engage with newest batch of international students

- Continued to attend Climate Action Group meetings and assisted in preparing for the Green New Deal referendum before canvassing for a YES vote
- Collaborated with SU marketing and Voice to create a Student Leadership Elections video to encourage people to run and additionally promoted election nominations across campus
- Met with NUS-USI & Ulster University Su to discuss action against the potential increase in Tuitions fee hinted at my Arlene foster, attended the Anti Tuition fee hike protest at city hall, and travelled to Stormont to lobby politicians against a fee increase
- Attended QUBs first Holocaust memorial day event
- Attended the Presidents forum to promote inter-society STI competition to encourage STI testing and positive sexual health
- Continued to regularly attend disciplinary interviews and panels with students for support, and also sat on my first fitness to practice panel
- Staffed the SU stall at the Nursing open day and gave the induction talk to QUBs newest nursing and mid wife students
- Attended the LGBT History month launch
- Met with the UCU exec to plan strike action and particularly discuss how disruption can be maximised against university authorities and minimized against students
- Participated as one of the 'leaders' at Volunteer SU's Inspiring leaders event on the 15th Feb in the Great Hall
- Participated as a Judge in one of the many SU awards panels

March/April

Housing:

- The Student Renters Group continued to carry out weekly door knocks of student rental areas in an effort to educate students about their rights until the advent of COVID-19
- After the imposition of lockdown and the collapse of the hospitality industry many students began to leave their rental homes in Belfast to self-isolate at their family homes – from the SRG decided to initiate a food drive and activists went door to door collecting donations that students made after an appeal from the SRG to leave (if possible) any food or cleaning supplies behind to be donated to local foodbanks
- The SRG in March created its own social medial channels which gained immense traction during the initial period of lockdown, garnering over 700 page likes in 2 weeks
- Acted as an intermediate between students and Queen's Accommodation on property disputes that arose weeks into lockdown concerning possessions of students being removed from rooms and thrown out without notice and before students could collect their things
- Successfully lobbied Student Roost with NUS-USI to allow students early contract termination
- The SRG were quick to identify contradictions emerging in housing due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and began a campaign for a rent suspension, rent freeze, eviction ban, and penalty free early contract termination
- The SRG informed NUS-USIs demands

- SRG collected case studies of individual students to be used for NUS-USIs MLA lobbying packs
- SRG created multiple letter templates that were successfully used to lobby MLAs and councillors and additionally the department for Communities Committee
- Successfully submitted a motion to NUS-USI to mandate it to support the establishment and growth of tenants unions like the SRG across Ireland
- Met via zoom with ACORN (a prominent tenants union in England) to learn about the steps they are taking to organise a rent strike and achieve their goals
- SRG continues to organise tenants during lockdown to argue for early contract termination and rent reduction through means of collective bargaining and rent strikes
- SRG is in talks with CATU the all-Ireland community tenants union about formally tying in with them as a collective organisation
- Since lockdown have dealt with a severely intense load of case work relating to housing and food poverty

Mental Health:

- Planned and organised the Wellfest – Buck the Stigma fundraiser event for PIPs suicide intervention that was sponsored by various student friendly outlets (cancelled due to COVID)
- Successfully hosted a SuicideTalk Workshop as part of wellfest which was attended by a number of staff and students: this workshop discussed suicide in the community, how to confront it, how to spot it and how to navigate conversations about suicide
- Discussed with company My-Potential who focus on tackling anxiety with students about a potential partnership and collaboration in preparation for exam time (delayed due to COVID)

Sexual Health:

- Organised and planned a second World Record STI test day event with sponsorship from Boojum (cancelled due to nursing shortages caused by COVID)
- Organised a Sex Positivity Workshop hosted by Common Youth with the objective of creating discussions and furthering action points in order to create a sex positivity campaign next year on campus
- Successfully hosted a Sex Quiz in a near to capacity speakeasy with sponsorship from boojum, Mystic (local sexy time shop), alongside live music performance from Sean Og
- Promoted the SH24 gum clinic amid lockdown which allows students to access STI test kits and contraception by mail

Other:

- Marched in the International Women's Day Rally student contingent

- Attended the various events over the 4 days of QUBs first Féile Mac Arthur
- Supported our staff and students on the UCU picket line for numerous weeks
- Once again attended the Student Support Fund Committee to make the case that the strike money be diverted into the support fund and what measures are QUB doing to keep up with rising demand for the fund
- Attended CAGs Divestment Rally at the Lanyon
- Attended the digital SU awards
- Worked with Volunteer SU to word their give back programme to appropriately reflect the potential benefits it could have to students suffering with mental health issues
- Participated in a Live Q&A with International students to answer their queries on welfare related issues caused by COVID
- NUS-USI Conference
- With help from Debbie of Advice SU we successfully partnered QUB SU as a referral partner to more of the local Food banks in Belfast so students don't have to come to south Belfast for access to one
- Successfully aligned QUB SU with PPRs campaign for universal free wifi during COVID

May/present:

Housing:

- SRG has begun a rent bailout campaign and rent strike battle in response to Stormont inaction over student housing

Other:

- Participated in SU Bake Off
- Continue to feed into the weekly NUS-USI meetup zoom chats to relay progress on housing campaign