

Press Release

URBAN STUDENT LIFE SUSPENDED FOR 12 MONTHS FROM THE NATIONAL CODE

Following a complaint relating to Asquith House, a development in Leeds operated by Urban Student Life which was so late in being delivered that its tenants were living in hotel accommodation for at least eleven weeks after the date they were due to move in, a meeting of the Codes Full Tribunal (only the third time that the group has ever met) decided to uphold the complaint and agreed that USL be suspended from membership of the ANUK/Unipol Code for Non-Educational Establishments for a period of 12 months. In addition, the Tribunal ruled that before USL be permitted to make a re-application then ALL of the developments they manage that would be accredited under this Code should be inspected to ensure they comply.

It was alleged that USL had breached of a number of different sections of the Code, including:

- 3.0 - All property details are reported accurately without misrepresentation to prospective tenants. This will include details provided in brochures and websites.
- 3.7 - Where a building is new, or undergoing refurbishment and the building programme is running late and where this may result in pre-let rooms not being ready for occupancy, the manager informs the future tenant at the earliest possibility of this likelihood and its consequences for them;
- 6.16 and 6.17 - Tenants are provided with clear written guidelines on the fire safety procedures, (including details of the safety measures installed, why they are there, how they operate and what to do in the event of a fire) and displaying fire safety notices within the building;

The Tribunal was addressed by both the complainant (the father of a former tenant of Asquith House) and the Operations Director of Urban Student Life. The complainant stated that he believed Urban Student Life had failed to provide his daughter and the other tenants with the quality of accommodation experience that had been advertised to them in the first place, that the tenants had been misled as to when they would be able to move into the building and that USL failed to provide both guidance about fire safety procedures as well as notices of what to do in the event of a fire. In response, USL apologised to the Tribunal for the delay in the late delivery of the building and for the misleading information included on websites, but stated this was something that was beyond their control and they refuted the allegations that no fire safety guidelines were given - although they did concede that it had taken time for fire notices to be displayed in rooms. The Tribunal was also informed that the developers of the site had returned money to the tenants affected by the late building.

The Tribunal asked USL why they were unaware that a delay in the completion of the building was going to occur and their response was that they had been told by the developer of the site (Pinnacle) not to have any contact with the contractor (PHD1), and so they had simply believed the assurances they were receiving about it being on time. Similarly, they stated they had no control over what information about the site was being advertised by a third party. Finally, although USL admitted that fire notices had not always been available within the building they had issued tenants with guidance on the fire procedures via the tenants' handbook. (Full details of the Tribunal's decision can be found from the following link [add when available]).

The Chair of the Tribunal, John Martin, said "It is clear to me that although Urban Student Life were placed in an almost impossible position by the developer and contractor of the site (as well as by the third party who developed the website on which the accommodation was advertised), as the organisation that signed up to abide by the Code they were the body with whom the buck stopped and that, as such it was correct that they be held responsible for the poor experience of these tenants. The message I would like to send to the Purpose Built Student Accommodation sector as a result of this Tribunal is that they understand fully their responsibilities under the Codes and that they ensure all operational staff receive sufficient training in this area".

Shelly Asquith, Vice President (Welfare) for NUS said "I am glad the tribunal was unanimous in its decision to suspend USL from the Code, as the management had repeatedly contravened at least 10 sections of it. I was appalled by the conditions students 'living' in these Halls have endured: a three month delay, last minute cancellations and hotel stays which left some students having to share beds.

I hope this decision sends a message to the wider private market that students cannot be exploited without consequences. NUS will not tolerate poor standards for students"

Andrew Buchannan, Operations Director for Urban Student Life, said "USL accepts the findings of the Tribunal regarding the various Developer completion delays of Asquith House in Leeds from September to December 2015. USL will take note of the Tribunal comments and will re-apply for Membership of Unipol once it is satisfied that the Developers whom they work with and their supply of Student Accommodation is more closely monitored, transparent and timely in order that USL can provide the services which it wishes and aspires to provide to its students. USL also regrets any inconvenience that their relationship with the Developer Pinnacle Alliance has caused any of the Students staying at Asquith House in 2015/16"

Notes for Editors

- 1) The National Code being referred to is operated by the Accreditation Network UK (an umbrella body that promotes voluntary schemes designed for landlords of private sector rented accommodation) and Unipol (a not-for profit student housing charity what operates in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham). The Code is 'Approved' under Section 233 of the 2004 Housing Act.
- 2) Full details of the requirements of this Code are available from www.nationalcode.org/
- 3) The Code operates an independent complaints procedure, giving tenants (and former tenants in some cases) of purpose-built accommodation that is registered under the Code the ability to lodge a complaint if they believe the operators of that accommodation are not meeting with given standards.
- 4) The complaints procedures consist of different stages that matters can be escalated to - starting with the provider's own internal process and finishing with a meeting of the Full Tribunal. The latter consists of representatives of providers themselves, representatives from the National Union of Students and also allows for the involvement of the local university/students' union and housing authority from the location where the complaint first originates from. Although the procedures have been in operation since 2005, this was only the third time that a complaint was deemed so serious that it required a meeting of the Full complaints Tribunal. The Tribunal is independent of ANUK/Unipol.
- 5) Shortly after the meeting of the Tribunal took place the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service undertook a fire safety survey of Asquith House and, as a result of their findings, a Prohibition Order was issued preventing the building being used as accommodation until essential fire proofing works within the building have been carried out.

