



## Transparent, affordable, simple, accessible

Hi, I'm AK and I'm running for accommodation officer.

You may recognise me from my many posts asking for local landlords and hotels to accommodate the many freshers looking for housing at the beginning of the year, or from How to Rent talks over the past few years.

I've been on the accommodation subcommittee for 2 years now, working alongside members of the Union, the Rector's committee, and the Campaign for Affordable Student Housing (C.A.S.H.). I have also sat in on meetings of the Senior Student Forum, and between the town's letting agents. I have represented students in both halls and private housing, so I know what current problems are, and what can be achieved to solve them.

During my time in the subcommittee we achieved, among other things, a 40 % reduction in the price of laundry in halls, an increase in the accommodation bursary and an intensive campaign trying to secure housing for 300 freshers left in the cold by the university.

In short, I'm really passionate about accommodation. I have so many ideas that this manifesto has become quite long. Therefore:

*If you read just 3 points, I ask that they're these:*

*2.1 Delay the halls application deadline*

*1.5 Support for students living and looking to move outside St Andrews (also 4.1)*

*1.6 Increased transparency from letting agents*

Thank you for your time and support. Please direct questions to my [facebook page](#). You can find links to policy explainers [here](#).



My aims for St Andrews:

**1. Transparent**

- 1.1. Marks out of Tenancy
- 1.2. Detailed breakdown of halls prices on the application portal
- 1.3. Leuchars and Dundee properties
- 1.4. Hall committees
- 1.5. Living outside St Andrews
- 1.6. Letting Agents
- 1.7. Fines
- 1.8. Summer storage
- 1.9. Social media channels
- 1.10. How-to-Rent guide

**2. Affordable**

- 2.1. More HMOs
- 2.2. Expand access to the discretionary fund
- 2.3. Lobbying for halls prices to increase only in line with inflation
- 2.4. Providing more halls spaces for more students

**3. Simple**

- 3.1. Delay the halls application deadline
- 3.2. Flatmate finder
- 3.3. Streamlining applications

**4. Accessible**

- 4.1. Commuters' representative
- 4.2. Make virtual viewings common practice
- 4.3. Options for students who don't identify with their legal names
- 4.4. Making renting easier to navigate for disabled students



# transparent

## 1.1 Marks out of Tenancy

Marks out of tenancy is an online rating service for properties, landlords, letting agents, neighbours, areas... pretty much anything you can think of. It's a wonderful resource for finding out what living in a property is actually like.

However, many students don't know about this. It relies heavily on the contributions from current tenants, so promoting Marks out of Tenancy is a big step in making the renting process more transparent.

For current tenants: You can set the website to keep your review unpublished until after you have moved out, in case you are worried about your landlord seeing that you left them a bad review. If you are currently living or have previously lived in private housing, please consider heading to [Marks out of Tenancy](#) to review the properties you have lived in.

## 1.2 Detailed breakdown of halls prices on the application portal

There is much confusion around why halls fees are so high, and what the money actually goes towards. Residential Business Services, who manage halls, have time and again declined to show students where exactly their money is going.

Providing this breakdown would help students understand how their money is being spent, and forces RBS to justify their high prices.

I would also like to see this information published for each hall on the application portal, so students can make a more informed decision on which hall is the best choice for them.



# transparent

## **1.3 Leuchars and Dundee properties**

As you will likely know, the university faced some issues and subsequent backlash for how they handled the unexpectedly large intake of incoming students in September 2020. They rented 40 properties in Leuchars and the wing of a private Dundee hall to accommodate some of these students.

Many postgraduates have expressed that they liked living outside of St Andrews, in smaller, university managed properties. Similarly, the Dundee hall offers a halls experience at a lower cost than the halls in St Andrews.

The university should keep these options for next year, admitting students who specifically ask for them, and only for those students. Along with this, hall committees should be established to foster a halls-feeling in these new properties.

## **1.4 Hall committees**

Hall committees are a group of volunteers elected by members of their hall at the end of every academic year, to act as a voice for residents and organise events throughout the year. Often these volunteers commit over 10 hours to their work, without any compensation.

For many years, hall committees have been asking for recognition of their hard work, for better training and more support for their wellbeing. Having seen first-hand how hard these people work, I fully support hall committees and senior students in this fight.





## 1.5 Living outside St Andrews

Each year many students make the choice to live outside St Andrews due to the high rent prices, opting to move to Guardbridge, Leuchars – even Dundee or further afield. There isn't currently much support for students who choose to do this. The Townsend Society is a group of commuting students who are always keen to offer advice and support, but I think the Union needs to provide more help on this.

Expanding resources in the How To Rent guide, published by the subcommittee every year to include things like those listed below would go a long way in providing students with viable alternatives to living in St Andrews.

- Where to start
- How to find flats
- Building a community outside and in St Andrews
- Public transport links

This would be under the remit of the new Commuters Representative on the subcommittee.

## 1.6 Letting Agents

Part of why the renting process for houses is so difficult to navigate is that letting agents and landlords provide so little information along with listings. There are several documents that landlords much have on file anyway, which give a lot of information on living in the property. I think these should be available to all tenants before applying, so students are able to make informed decisions, and get a flat they are comfortable with. A few times a year there is a meeting between the letting agents, which the accommodation officer is invited to, and I intend to ask for the following things:



# transparent

First, energy efficiency certificates should be provided. These give a rather accurate view of what heating bills are like. Similarly, information on whether windows are double or single glazed, and how water is heated are strong determinants of the size of bills.

Inventories should also be provided. While most student properties will come furnished, it is difficult to know whether smaller furnishings are provided, like lamps, mirrors, bath curtains, bedding, pots and pans... This will be on the inventory, and can save you money and hassle when moving in.

As mentioned under Accessibility, having a virtual catalogue of flat viewings is extremely useful, and should be provided to anyone interested in the flat. This means students do not need to limit themselves due to time constraints of balancing flat viewings with coursework and other responsibilities.

Lastly, if current tenants are comfortable with it, their contact details should be provided upon request. Viewing a flat in-person is a great way to ask current tenants about bills, neighbours and the landlord. With virtual viewings this will be more difficult, but it's still an invaluable resource when making a decision about where to live.

## **1.7 Fines**

Many students have complained about being fined by the university for an infraction while living in halls, feeling like they were fined unfairly or not understanding why they were fined at all.

Campus Sexual Assault is working on changing the university's disciplinary policy to separate whether harm occurred to a person or property, and in line with this I would like the university to be more clear on why someone is fined, why they are being fined this amount, and how the money will compensate the behaviour.



## 1.8 Summer storage

Many students currently have belongings in halls rooms but have no way of retrieving these before the summer without breaking covid restrictions. It looks like the university will be providing a similar service to last year, offering for someone to pack up your belongings and store them over summer, or ship them to you. However, students who used this service last year faced much confusion on how it would work, about deadlines, and had trouble getting their belongings back when they returned to St Andrews.

Hopefully the university has learned from last year's mistakes and has set up the service in a more useful way – however, I would like to ensure that this really is the case, and it is set up in the way that works best for students. This includes announcing deadlines and costs early, clearly and widely, and giving students choices on which of their belongings are packed and how this is done.

## 1.9 Social media channels

It may come as a surprise that the Accommodation Subcommittee has a [facebook page](#) and several pages on the YourUnion website. I intend to use these channels more often and more efficiently.

This will include resources on renters' rights, an information campaign on the availability of housing, and highlighting resources already offered by the Union, such as attending flat viewings on your behalf, and legal advice.

I would also like to host town halls at the beginning and end of every semester, giving students a place to voice concerns. Of course, I will be available year-round on the Accommodation Subcommittee facebook page, the Instagram and at [srcaccommodation@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:srcaccommodation@st-andrews.ac.uk).



# transparent

## 1.10 How-to-Rent guide

Each year the subcommittee publishes a How-to-Rent guide, with a long list of resources for renting in St Andrews, including how to check the validity of a listing and a landlord, a checklist to use when visiting a property, and details on your rights and obligations as a renter.

This year it was published quite late, which meant many students went into the renting process without this resource. I would like to publish the guide in semester 1, ensuring that it can help as many students as possible. If possible, I would also like to bring back physical copies of the guide, as these have been extremely useful to me every time I've moved.

In a similar vein, I know many students felt that the halls application deadline wasn't publicised properly this year, with many students missing the deadline as a result. I would like to publicise this deadline along with the How-To-Rent guide at the end of semester 1, to make sure students have a fair chance to apply.





# affordable

## **2.1 More HMOs**

HMO licenses give the right for more than 2 people, unrelated to each other, to live in the same property, and Fife Council currently limits the number of active HMOs in St Andrews. This means landlords who do have HMOs have a great advantage over those who don't, and will often charge unreasonably high rents.

Increasing the amount of HMOs available will not only give more 3+ person properties, but will also reduce the power of landlords with HMOs.

It will also mean that the university can provide more self-catered spaces in halls, as the current number is limited by the university's HMO licenses.

## **2.2 Expand access to the discretionary fund**

The current grant programmes available from the university and UK governments only take into account household income. However, many families have multiple children at university, and have to pay double or triple the costs.

I would like the university to take into consideration families who may not be able to spend all their disposable income on their student at St Andrews.



affordable

### **2.3 Lobbying for halls prices to increase only in line with inflation**

The university reserves the right to increase halls prices by 2 % each year. However, inflation has been much lower the past years, and their expenditures have increased at sub-inflation levels. There is now an offer of multi-year contracts, where students who wish to stay in the same hall for multiple years can opt to keep their rent at the level of the first year, avoiding the yearly rent increase.

Along with the university publishing a detailed breakdown of what halls fees are spent on, we ask that they publish data on how their expenses change year-on-year. This will mean they have to justify any increase in fees as directly related to an increase in their expenses.

### **2.4 Providing more halls spaces for more students**

The university strategy includes taking in more and more students each academic year, reaching 10,000 students by 2025. At the same time, the most affordable rooms at Albany Park are torn down.

The university should commit that any increase in the yearly student intake is matched with an increase in halls spaces. There should be space for incoming students and returners alike.



simple

### **3.1 Delay the halls application deadline**

Each year, many students feel pressured to apply for and accept a place in halls out of fear of being left homeless the following year. This application deadline is a holdover of a time before the Scottish Housing Act of 2016, prior to which the large majority of properties would be announced in January/early February, meaning that students knew with relative certainty whether they'd secured a place outside of halls.

As of 2016, tenants only have to give 28 days' notice, meaning that most students hand in their notice to leave in April or May, or even over the summer. As the landlord cannot advertise the property before receiving the notice, many flats now only become available in April/May or later. Hence many students end up with a halls contract they would rather not have, and then struggle to get out of.

Delaying the halls application deadline even by a month or two would allow more students to feel out the private housing market, and make a more informed, calm decision about whether to go back into halls. As the total number of applications to halls would be smaller, it would also mean that more students may be offered the coveted self-catered spaces.

### **3.2 Flatmate finder**

Currently, the most effective way to find a flat is a facebook group, where your post is very quickly drowned out by the sea of other facebook posts.

I would like to facilitate a platform where students can find others who share their budget, interests and bedtimes. This would allow students to form groups to flat hunt together, and for empty room to be advertised easily and effectively.



# simple

Further, many lettings agents require students to physically attend flat viewings, or hand in physical copies of documents. This can be a great barrier for international postgrads who usually opt to go straight into private housing, and the incoming undergrads who have not yet been to St Andrews. It would allow these people to team up with groups in St Andrews, to allow them the same access to private properties.

### **3.3 Streamlining applications**

A big part of the How-To-Rent guide is information on each individual letting agent in St Andrews, and how they differ in the application process. This makes the process unnecessarily confusing, complicated and stressful. Anyone who has been through this process knows how time-consuming it can be.

Asking each letting agent to require the same documents in the same formats, and having St Andrews wide guarantor forms would take away much of that stress, and mean the same materials can be used for different lettings agents, reducing the time and effort needed to apply.





# accessible

## 4.1 Commuters' representative

As it stands, commuting students don't have a voice on the committee – this needs to change. Often these students have been pushed out of St Andrews by the high rents, and they should have a voice on the committee. Commuting students need just as much, if not more support on renting, as those living in St Andrews.

Part of the representative's job would be establishing resources for students looking to move out of St Andrews, as outlined under *transparent*.

## 4.2 Make virtual viewings common practice

With covid not allowing in-person viewings, many letting agents have moved over to virtual viewings, creating video tours of their properties. I would like to make virtual viewings the norm. Many students struggle to find time to attend all the viewings they'd like, and many have disabilities that prevent going to many viewings.

Having virtual viewings available for all properties would mean that students have equal access to viewings, and creates a fairer housing market. It also means international students, and those who aren't physically in St Andrews can make a more informed decision.

This would work in conjunction with the points mentioned in *transparent* → *Letting Agents*, so students will still get the benefits of in-person viewings.



# accessible

## **4.3 Options for students who don't identify with their legal names**

Many students in St Andrews don't like to be addressed by their legal name, for a number of reasons. While students will still need to provide their legal name for legal reasons, they shouldn't have to experience the discomfort or trauma that comes with being addressed this way in every correspondence.

Letting agents should have options for students to choose a "known as" name, similar to the university. This should be allowed without justification. Renting is complicated enough as it is, this shouldn't be an additional hurdle.

## **4.4 Making renting easier to navigate for disabled students**

Finally, students who have been through the renting process know how stressful, long and complicated it is. This is even more true for those with disabilities. Many of the points in this manifesto aim to make renting more accessible for students with disabilities, such as virtual viewings being better suited for students with mobility issues. The stress of the renting process can also cause mental health issues to worsen, and the many forms can be difficult to navigate for those with conditions such as dyslexia or OCD.

There are a few easy things the university and letting agents can do to ensure those with disabilities can find housing appropriate to them, on equal footing with other students.

The university recently removed the free-text box at the end of halls applications. This means students with specific disabilities can no longer specify requirements for their rooms, and has, among other things, led to students with mobility issues being offered rooms on the second floor.



# accessible

Lettings agents should disclose how disability-friendly their properties are, highlighting properties that have step-free access, allow pets, have large bathrooms, etc.

These small improvements would mean that groups who have been left behind by the current letting process will have better access to housing.