

Abstract

Secure Accommodation Scheme

At the beginning of March 1999 I was tasked to look at the increasing problem in Canterbury, regarding student occupied accommodation being targeted for crime, especially burglary.

I collated all of the information available on the subject to see if I could gauge the problem and the link to poor security in these properties, which were making them more vulnerable to crime, and discovered that we had no measure of this information. I spoke to a large number of students and worked from their information and crime figures from the previous year (April 1998 to April 1999 - 52 reported burglaries).

I was made very aware on speaking to students that a large number of crimes against student accommodation go unreported as the students have no household insurance, so therefore think it is not worth reporting these matters.

To this end, I approached both Universities/Colleges, and every letting agency in our area to gauge their response to an accreditation scheme, where landlords can improve the safety and security of their premises, and have them accredited. The feedback from all parties was extremely favourable, each expressing an interest to become involved.

We held a meeting for landlords and agents who wished to attend, to explain the proposed scheme and answer any questions they may have. We were surprised when over 50 landlords attended, agreeing that there was a need for this kind of scheme. At the end of the meeting we put the idea to the vote, and received a unanimous result to go ahead, so in June '99 we launched the 'Secure Accommodation Scheme' (S.A.S).

Research with other forces show that we are the only area in the country that have launched a scheme focusing on the security and safety of student accommodation, in order to reduce crime, and make them a safer and more secure environment for students. We are also the first area to be working with both authorities (Local Council and Fire Brigade) who have regulations governing houses of multiple occupancy, to make sure that we get the formula just right.

We are still in the first stages of the scheme, but early indications (calculated by the number of application forms requested by landlords - 600) we have already roused the interest of half the landlords in our area.

Secure Accommodation Scheme

WHAT IS THE PROJECT TRYING TO ACHIEVE ?

Our aim is to reduce the number of crimes committed against student occupied accommodation. This area had been a problem for some time, but the right format had never been devised to combat the problem, before now. The major breakthrough was in encouraging the landlords that the security measures were/are necessary, to which they have finally agreed. The problem was not prioritised over any other, it was the right time to broach it with the landlords, whilst new regulations are in the process of being brought in for houses of multiple occupation.

:HOW DID WE DEFINE THE PROBLEM ?

I collated all of the information available on this subject, but found that there was only crime figures available. I researched to see if I could link the problem to poor security from the paperwork, but this was impossible, so I went to speak to the students themselves. I discovered that there is a severe lack of security and safety items installed in student accommodation and was made very aware that a large number of crimes committed against student properties go unreported, as the students have no house insurance, so therefore do not feel it is worth reporting the matters.

HOW HAVE WE DEALT WITH THE PROBLEM ?

We have introduced the Secure Accommodation Scheme, obtained preferential rates for student and landlord insurance, obtained a large number of discounts from local businesses in order to encourage the landlords to upgrade their properties, initiated negotiations to obtain further discounts for the students.

WHAT IS THE SECURE ACCOMMODATION SCHEME ?

It is an accreditation scheme that landlords (with student accommodation) can voluntarily become a member of, and letting agencies can support, in order to make student accommodation safer and more secure.

I hope that the simplicity of our scheme will show how easy it can be to regulate such premises, with the co-operation of the owners.

We hope that by introducing this scheme, with the full support of many landlords and management agents, rogue landlords will find it increasingly difficult to rent out their properties and will either comply to the regulated and voluntary standards, or retire from the business.

LANDLORDS

Every landlord who wishes to be involved with the scheme would have to become a registered member. This would be accomplished by completing an application form with their details (or details of the appointed agent, should the owner of the property live outside of the UK), the details of the property(s) they wish to be accredited, and the details of all security and safety items installed in each property. Details of the gas and electrical safety certificates will also be required for each property, together with the landlords HMO (House of Multiple Occupancy) registration number.

In order for the property to be accredited to the scheme, the standard of the security and safety hardware fitted must meet the minimum criteria required (see Appendix A).

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Once the form(s) is completed the landlord would then forward it to the letting agency he is currently using, in order for the level of the security in the premises to be verified.

Should an independent landlord wish to have his property(s) accredited - he would return his form to Canterbury Police Station, where an independent survey would be arranged.

When the property(s) has been checked by the letting agent or independent surveyor, the result of the visit will be recorded on the form and every successful application will then be forwarded to the agency co-ordinating the scheme.

No landlord is able to survey his own property.

The landlord's details will be entered into a register and a membership number generated. A certificate will be issued to the landlord which specifies each property that has been accredited. Each certificate that is issued will bear the landlords membership number.

In many cases more than one certificate may be issued. If this is the case, each certificate will be consecutively numbered for each landlord, and the numbers recorded in the register. The original application form(s), a copy of the accreditation certificate and a copies of the gas and electrical safety certificates will be filed with each registration sheet.

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST ?

The scheme will be free of charge.

Landlords may incur some additional costs installing the necessary safety and security hardware. In view of this we have negotiated substantial discounts with local companies to encourage landlords to take part in the scheme. A number of contractors have also come forward and offered their services to assist with the installation of necessary equipment, at reduced rates.

A large number of the student houses may already have up to 50% of the required items installed, as some are requested by insurance companies.

HOW WILL STUDENTS KNOW IF A LETTING AGENCY/LANDLORD SUPPORTS THE SCHEME ?

Letting agencies will display a sticker bearing the S.A.S logo in their office window

(see Appendix B). Both landlords and agents will be able to indicate in any advertising, that a property is accredited by adding the initials S.A.S (Secure Accommodation **Scheme**)(phau,

LETTING AGENCIES

In addition to surveying the property(s) for their clients, the letting agencies, when preparing their accommodation list will be able indicate which properties are accredited to the scheme by adding the initials S.A.S (Secure Accommodation Scheme) to one side of their text.

Guidelines are currently being prepared to assist the agents during the surveys - this is to ensure that all parties carrying out the surveys will be doing so to the same specifications.

If the landlord is currently using a letting agent, who is also participating in the scheme, they will be able to furnish them with the details they require from the certificate, to indicate which of their properties are accredited.

If the landlord is not currently advertising with an agency, but decides to do so in the future, these details will be required by any participating agent when the premises are visited by them.

Should there be any enquiries concerning the information tendered by the landlord, the agent will be able to confirm all details with the co-ordinating office. The co-ordinator will be a manager from one of the local estate/property management agencies, with two managers from other agencies also being aware of the co-ordinating system, so that either one would be capable of taking over, should the co-ordinator be away for a period of time. This way the scheme will continue to run smoothly.

A list of all agencies supporting the scheme will be produced and forwarded to the student union at the Universities and Colleges, in order for it to be distributed to students, on request, who are seeking new accommodation.

Accommodation that is not accredited is unlikely to be recommended.

There will be a voluntary code of practice which each letting agency or independent landlord, who wish to be involved in the scheme will be asked to sign. This document will state that the agent/landlord will adhere to the simple guide lines set out by the organising authorities. We would also request that the participating agent/landlord will endeavour to maintain occupied premises and return deposits at the end of the lease, or within a reasonable period, unless there is good reason not to do so. Should this occur, we would request that all parties are informed in writing, within a reasonable period, and kept informed of events, should the matter take time to be resolved.

Should a letting agency or independent landlord be found to be acting in an unacceptable manner, the three authorities reserve the right to disassociate the scheme with the said agency/landlord. Landlords who are accredited under an agent removed from the scheme would be notified accordingly. Details would also be passed to the student union at the Universities and Colleges for their details to be removed from the list.

STUDENTS

Running parallel to the accreditation scheme will be a hard hitting campaign aimed at students (and their parents) to make them more aware of security and safety issues. This will be by way of a credit card sized information sheet that easily fits into the tenants wallet/purse. This sheet will have all of the important information on it that the students will need to know throughout their time at University/College, and renting accommodation. I have had a meeting with the President of the National Union Of Students who have stated they will assist us in getting this off the ground. We aim to pilot these cards in Canterbury with a view to it being country wide if the pilot is successful.

They will be advised on personal safety, seeking new accommodation, the secure accommodation scheme, using safety and security items installed in premises and how they can benefit from living in accredited properties.

Students will receive a list of the participating agencies from the student union to encourage them to rent secure accommodation.

They will be given an information leaflet (that will fold down to the size of a credit card) to keep in their wallet/purses which will have all of the important information on it that students need to know about being safe, secure and renting accommodation off campus.

All of the essential contact numbers that they need to know to seek advice or to make a complaint about their accommodation etc. will be included on this leaflet

Discount will be attached to this leaflet for the students, and they will also be able to obtain insurance at a reduced rate when they move off campus (it is amazing how many don't bother with insurance),

FUNDING

The scheme is sponsored by both Canterbury Crime Prevention Panel and Harrison Beaumont (Insurance Brokers) Ltd.

As well as offering discounts to students Harrison Beaumont are also offering very good discounted rates to landlords who are supporting the Secure Accommodation Scheme.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

In areas where Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (NNW) are set up, we will be encouraging the students to become involved with the schemes in their areas.

We will mailshot all student houses within NHW schemes informing them that a scheme covers their home, and what the schemes can do for them. Many students are unaware that NHW schemes exist in their areas, and if they do, they are of the impression that they are only for 'older' people -, we aim to change this view, and show students how they can benefit.

We will be informing all NHW co-ordinators, who have student houses in their catchment area, about the Secure Accommodation Scheme, and encourage them to make the students welcome (if there is an understanding between local residents and students in shared houses - it is less likely that problems may occur).

WILL THE SCHEME CONTINUE AFTER THE INITIAL HYPE ?

Yes.

The scheme will be promoted every year in the packs sent out to prospective students, at the Freshers Fair, and when current students are seeking new accommodation for their following term (second years +),

There will be posters placed in the Universities and Colleges explaining all about the Secure Accommodation Scheme, and how the student will benefit from choosing to rent such premises.

The Crime Scene Officer will also be requested to fill out a quick 'tick-box' form whenever they attend student accommodation that there has been a crime committed against it. This will assist us in measuring the success of the scheme, and whether the students are using the security items installed. We will also be able to see if the items are in fact still installed, in working order etc. If this is a problem we can then contact the landlord and request that the repair/maintenance work be carried out as soon as possible - the landlords accreditation for the said property will be frozen until the repairs are completed (as per the voluntary codes of practice).

HOW WILL THE SCHEME BE MONITORED ?

The scheme will be 'Dip Tested' by the three participating authorities (Police, Fire and :Canterbury City Council). This will be to ensure that the premises accredited to the scheme are maintaining the minimum standard required.

Should the standard of the premises checked not be upheld, then the accreditation of that property will be suspended for a period not less than 28 days. During the period the landlord will need to put right the faults that have been detected, an independent surveyor will then attend the premises, and if all of the fault have bee rectified, then the suspension will be lifted. If the property is found to be in the same state, then the accreditation will be cancelled.

RESULTS TO DATE

Following the launch of the scheme on 28th May 1999, the interest has been fantastic. Within 4-5 days the Crime Reduction Office at Canterbury had received over 50 enquires from landlords interested in becoming a member of the scheme. The letters of encouragement and enthusiasm for 'long awaited' improvements have shown that the hard work was not in vein. We are still in the first stages of the scheme, but early indications (calculated by the number of application forms requested by landlords - 600) we have already roused the interest of half the landlords in our area.

We have looked at one estate, which was a particular problem, as a separate project within the scheme. Student accommodation in this area was being targeted for crime, especially burglary. We have approached landlords/owners of properties explaining that we will endeavour to make all of the student let houses on this estate secure (197 in total), and have been met with a very favourable response.

Should this scheme be as successful as early indications show, consideration will be given to the scheme being widened to incorporate other accommodation within the rented sector.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In addition to this scheme I have also compiled a response to the white paper concerning Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation. The suggestion of voluntary accreditation schemes has been mentioned in this paper so I have suggested that consideration be given to the prospect of including a basic structure for voluntary accreditation schemes such as the Secure Accommodation Scheme. If this was to happen a student or tenant would then be able to move anywhere in the country and instantly recognise that a property is accredited (like AA or RAC approved hotels). I feel that this is an important factor in combating crime (long term) that is being committed against student/multiple occupancy accommodation, which is a problem in every area in the country that has higher education establishments.

Within the paper there is no evidence that security has been considered on the same scale as the safety aspect. It is understandable the tenants safety is an extremely important factor, as the number of deaths or injuries should be reduced whatever the statistics, as nobody should suffer due to poor management. At the same time crime is a 'real' concern for students and other residents, as they are, on many occasions, repeat victims.

By incorporating recommendations and issuing basic guidelines for voluntary accreditation schemes, all areas with Universities, Colleges and large numbers of HMO's would then operate in the same way, making it a great deal easier for students/tenants to identify safe and secure accommodation, at a glance. everybody should be able to take it for granted that rented accommodation is to a good minimum standard. They shouldn't have to 'seek it out'.

The scheme is currently only operating in the Canterbury area, but should it be successful, we will look at the possibility of it being adopted in other areas in Kent, where Higher Education Establishments are located. We have also had interest expressed by Oxford and Cambridge, who are suffering similar problems, but have not managed to adopt a successful formula to date.

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