

Secure Accommodation Scheme

Abstract

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 extent of the problem and the link to poor security in these properties, which were making them more vulnerable to crime. My research revealed 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 March 1999 - 79 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, the three 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 shows that we are the only police area in the country to have launched a scheme focusing on the security and safety of student accommodation, and to be working with the local Council and Fire Brigade. We have taken all regulations governing houses of multiple occupancy into account when devising this scheme, to make sure that we get the formula right first time and do not have any conflicting views at a later date.

To date we have 45 houses accredited, and over 200 still in the process of having the relevant works carried out.

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Secure Accommodation Scheme

WHAT IS THE PROJECT TRYING TO ACHIEVE ?

Our aim is to reduce the number of burglaries committed against student occupied accommodation. This has been a problem for some time, but the right format had never been devised, before now. The major breakthrough was in encouraging landlords that the security measures were/are necessary, and to gain a commitment from them to co-operate. This 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 considered and enacted.

HOW DID WE DEFINE THE PROBLEM ?

I collated all of the information available on this subject, but found that only our crime figures were 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 and view their properties. I discovered that there is a severe lack of security and safety items installed in many of the premises. I became aware that a large number of crimes committed against student properties go unreported, as many students tend not to have house insurance, so therefore do not feel it is worth reporting the matters. We now have a good working relationship with the student union at both Universities and all Colleges, who are advising students to report crimes to Police, enabling us to monitor crime trends that may re-occur.

HOW HAVE WE DEALT WITH THE PROBLEM ?

We have devised and introduced the Secure Accommodation Scheme, obtained preferential insurance rates for both student and landlord, obtained a large number of discounts from local businesses in order to encourage the landlords to upgrade their properties. We have also launched a web site at www.saskent.co.uk. This site encourages landlords to work with us, as we are offering them free advertising on the world wide web when their properties are accredited.

In December 1999, the SAS scheme was launched nationally. A number of forces around the country are now starting their own Secure Accommodation Schemes and provision has been made for all of them to join us on the SAS web site, to advertise the accredited properties in their area(s).

WHAT IS THE SECURE ACCOMMODATION SCHEME ?

It is an accreditation scheme that landlords can voluntarily become a member of, and letting agencies can support, in order to make rented accommodation safer and more secure. At present we are focusing on student accommodation, as it is actively targeted by local criminals. The simplicity of our scheme shows how easy it can be to regulate such premises, with the co-operation of the owners.

By introducing this scheme, with the full support of many landlords and management agents, rogue landlords are going to 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 has to become a registered member. This is 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 are also required for each property, together with the landlords HMO (House of Multiple Occupancy)

registration number **(please see appendix A)**. Landlords can obtain an information pack from Canterbury Police Station or request a pack be sent out to him via the SAS web site. 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 **(please see appendix B)**.

The minimum criteria has been set in conjunction with Kent Fire Brigade and Canterbury City Council, considering all regulations, in order to prevent conflicting views at a later date.

Once the form(s) is completed the landlord forwards 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 or property manager wish to have property(s) accredited - he returns his form to Canterbury Police Station, where a survey will be arranged with an independent surveyor.

Once the property(s) has been visited by the letting agent or independent surveyor, the results are recorded on the form and every successful application is forwarded to the agency co-ordinating the scheme. If for some reason the property does not meet the criteria, the areas needing attention are recorded on a separate for which is left with the landlord, once these matters have been dealt with, the property can be accredited.

No landlord is able to survey his own property.

The landlord's details are entered into a register and a membership number generated. A certificate is issued to the landlord which specifies each property that has been accredited. Each certificate that is issued bears the landlords membership number. In many cases more than one certificate may be issued. If this is the case, each certificate is consecutively numbered for each landlord, and the numbers recorded in the register. The original application form(s), a copy of the accreditation certificate and any other correspondence are filed with each registration sheet.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST ?

The scheme is 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.

As an added incentive, we are offering free advertising to all landlords who have their properties accredited on our new SAS web site (www.saskent.co.uk).

In the recent Home Office bidding process, the scheme was awarded £6,400 to pump prime enhance security in the worst hit areas for student victimisation.

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

Letting agencies display a sticker bearing the S.A.S logo in their office window **(please see appendix C)**. Both landlords and agents indicate in any advertising, that a property is accredited by adding the initials S.A.S (Secure Accommodation Scheme).

Students are also able to log on to our SAS web site - www.saskent.co.uk.

This web site has been set up in such a way that when other forces join us at this site there will be a map of the British Isles, showing all of the areas that have SAS schemes and accredited properties. In essence this means that a student could log onto the site, select the area in which they are to attend University/College, view the lists of accredited properties

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in a selected area (all of which have been surveyed by authorised representatives) and obtain a direct contact for the owner or agent, enabling them to arrange to see the property(s), before leaving home. It is anticipated this site will assist in putting a lot of parents and students minds at rest, knowing that they are moving to safe and secure accommodation.

LETTING AGENCIES

In addition to surveying the property(s) for their clients, the letting agencies, when preparing their accommodation list 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 have been prepared to assist the agents during the surveys - this is to ensure that all parties carrying out the surveys will be referring to the same specifications.

If the landlord is currently using a letting agent, who is also participating in the scheme, they must 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 is able to confirm all details with the co-ordinating office. The co-ordinator is a manager from one of the local estate/property management agencies, with a managers from another agency also being aware of the co-ordinating system, so that he is able to take over, should the co-ordinator be away for a period of time. This way the scheme continues to run smoothly.

A list of all agencies supporting the scheme has been 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.

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- There is a voluntary 'Code of Practice' which each letting agency or independent landlord, who wish to be involved in the scheme is asked to sign. This document states that the agent/landlord will adhere to the simple guide lines set out by the organising authorities. It also states 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, the agreements states that all parties will be 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 is an impactive campaign aimed at students (and their parents) to make them more aware of security and safety issues. We are currently working on a credit card sized information sheet that easily fits into the students wallet/purse. This sheet will have all of the important information on it that the students will need to know about renting accommodation off campus, personal safety, security and safety of their property etc. All of the essential contact numbers they may need to know, in order to seek further advice or to make a complaint about their accommodation etc. will also be

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included on this leaflet. We aim to pilot these cards in Canterbury with a view to it being a country wide initiative, 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.

At Canterbury we have obtained, permission from the Universities and Colleges to attach a private lottery to these card, in order to make them self funding. The students will purchase the cards for a nominal fee, and it will be their lottery ticket for the course duration - enabling them to win course books, cash, sports equipment etc.

By attaching this 'gimmick' to the cards, the students are more inclined to keep the cards, and review it's content, as they have paid for it.

The cards will be sold in the campus shops and run by the students union.

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.

Many other local companies have offered their specialist services to us whilst we have been getting this scheme off of the ground - all have been gratefully received.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

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

We will be organising a 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 inform 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).

HAS THE SCHEME DEVELOPED AFTER THE INITIAL HYPE OF THE LAUNCH ?

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Yes. The scheme is progressing with new accredited properties added each week.

The scheme is promoted every year by the Universities and Colleges, in the application 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 are posters that have been strategically 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.

Crime Scene Officers are requested to fill out a quick 'tick-box' form whenever they attend student/rented accommodation that has been burgled. This assists us in measuring the success of the scheme, and whether the students are using the security items installed. We are also able to see if the items are in fact still installed and in working order etc. If a problem is detected, we contact the landlord and request that the repair/maintenance work is carried out as soon as possible - the landlords accreditation for the said property will be

frozen until the repairs are completed and have been checked (as per the voluntary codes of practice).

HOW IS THE SCHEME BE MONITORED ?

The accredited properties are 'Dip Tested' by the three participating authorities (Police, Fire and Canterbury City Council). This ensures the premises 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 this period the landlord will need to rectify the faults that have been detected, an independent surveyor will then attend the premises, and if everything is in order the suspension will be lifted. If the property is found to be in the same state, then the accreditation will be cancelled.

Overnight crime sheets are monitored on a daily basis to locate any student houses that may have been burgled.

RESULTS TO DATE

Following the launch of the scheme on 28th May 1999, the interest has been extremely enthusiastic. 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. To date we have 45 accredited properties, with over 200 still in the process of having necessary works carried out, before accreditation can be granted.

Reviewing the reported crime figure for burglaries committed in student occupied accommodation, and comparing them, the results are as follows:

April 1998 to March 1999 - Number of burglaries committed - 79

April 1999 to March 2000 - Number of burglaries committed - 48

This shows a reduction of 39.2%.

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. Some of the properties were being burgled repeatedly. We approached landlords/owners of these properties, explaining that we will endeavour, with their help, to make all of the student let houses on this estate secure (over 200 in total). This has been met with a very favourable response.

Research shows during the period April 1999 - March 2000, none of the houses that have been accredited to the SAS scheme, (some had suffered from repeated burglaries) have been burgled since the security improvements have been carried out.

As this scheme has been successful, we are now considering increasing it to incorporate properties three storeys and above and all other residential 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 white 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'.

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