

Ensuring Purpose Built Student Accommodation Meets the Needs of Students and Local Communities.

A Guide for Community Activists



#SAVELEITHWALK

Over the last ten years there has been a significant rise in the number of students in Edinburgh. There are now as many as 80,000 students enrolled in higher and further education in the city.¹

And no wonder, it is an attractive and dynamic place to stay. As well as a historical centre. It has modern cutting edge developments and four important universities which rank alongside the best in the world.

These universities do important work and many from within Britain, the European Union and overseas want to come and study at these.

However this development has been led by the universities and developers and local communities have often felt left out of a development that affects them. There is significant pressure on the private rented sector as many students take up flats on short term lets. There is a knock on to the local property market with more demand for buy to let in particular for 1 & 2 bedroom properties. However there is no opportunity to debate these issues.



Developer's plans for Stead's Place in Leith. An unwelcome proposal for 700 student places in a conservation area.

The development of Purpose Built Student Accommodation is often where the concerns becomes manifest as the planning process allows local communities to comment on developer's proposals. However each community has often had to approach this fresh without help from those who had gone before.

Save Leith Walk has learned about this the hard way and this short guide looks at what we learned about student accommodation in particular and how it can help others express their views.

It is important to note that in addition to the specific student guidance covered in this paper, all other planning requirements still apply and should be considered in parallel – conservation areas, listed buildings, parking, height, design, massing and so on.

Edinburgh Student Housing Guidance is likely to be updated as part of the City Plan 2030 process and this document will no longer be applicable after this.



Edinburgh Students' Housing Cooperative. An innovative way of meeting the accommodation needs of 100 students.

¹ <https://www.investinedinburgh.com/working-living/world-class-education/>

1. What the Student Housing Guidance Says

Local Development Plans establish the outline for development within a local area. They must conform to planning law and are part of a hierarchy of planning guidance and must conform to Scottish Government guidance and regional plans above and support area specific plans beneath.



Overall the Edinburgh Local Development Plan supports the development of Purpose Built Student Accommodation in order to prevent further loss of family housing to the private rented student market. However the development of PBSA must meet the relevant planning guidance

It is preferable in principle that student needs are met as far as possible in purpose built and managed schemes rather than the widespread conversion of family housing.²

In Edinburgh there are two separate parts of Local Development Plan guidance that refer to the development of Student Housing

First is Section Policy Hou 8 Student Accommodation in the LDP.

Planning permission will be granted for purpose-built student accommodation where:

- a) The location is appropriate in terms of access to university and college facilities by walking, cycling or public transport
- b) The proposal will not result in an excessive concentration of student accommodation (including that in the private rented sector) to an extent that would be detrimental to the maintenance of balanced communities or to the established character and residential amenity of the locality.

² Policy Hou 8, Edinburgh Local Development Plan, November 2016.

(Sometimes cited is Edinburgh City Local Plan Policy Hou 10 – this is an older document (2010) and covers the same points as listed above.)



Second is a 2016 stand alone Student Housing Guidance which has an additional four points of guidance

- a) In locations within or sharing a boundary with (or separated only by a road) a main university or college campus, as identified in Map 1, student housing will generally be acceptable.*
- b) Outwith criteria a) student housing will generally be supported on sites with less than 0.25ha developable area. Consideration should be given to the cumulative impact of student housing, and other land uses which contribute to a transient population, where these uses will have a detrimental impact on character.
- c) Outwith criteria a) and b) sites identified as a high probability of delivering housing within Map 5 taken from the LDP Housing Land Study (June 2014) and sites with greater than 0.25ha developable area must comprise a proportion of housing as part of the proposed development, to balance the mix of land uses and to contribute to housing land need. On these sites the new build residential gross floor area shall represent a minimum of 50% of the total new build housing and student accommodation gross floor area.
- d) Student accommodation should comprise a mix of type of accommodation, including cluster units, to meet varying needs of students.

Material Considerations

Section 25 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 states that a Planning Authority's decision on a planning application must be made in accordance with the Development Plan – unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Two main tests are used when deciding whether a consideration is material and relevant:

- It should serve or be related to the purpose of planning. This means it should relate to the development and use of land.
- It should fairly and reasonably relate to the particular application.

All these points above are termed “material considerations” and any planning application needs to account for them and their meaning. A development does not necessarily have to comply with these to receive planning permission but local authorities have the power to refuse planning applications that do not conform to these conditions.

2. Understanding the Student Housing Guidance

The rationale in the Student Housing Guidance for supporting the growth of PBSA is that it will reduce the demand for family housing from students seeking accommodation. This allows an assumption that PBSA is a good thing as long as other planning conditions are met.

However figures published by the Scottish Government suggests that the recent growth in PBSA has not reduced the level of student privately rented accommodation over the last decade. ³

In 2010 Edinburgh had 4,981 Houses in Multiple Occupation

By 2019 this had risen to 5904 HMOs - a rise of 20%

An HMO only needs to register when it has 3 separate households living in it. 1 & 2 bedroom properties (with up to 4 tenants) do not need to be registered as HMOs so there is likely to be significantly more privately rented accommodation taken up by students than these figures suggest. Nonetheless these statistics indicate that the growth of PBSA may not actually reduce the demand for family housing.

This should not be surprising as PBSA is offered principally to first year students as well as EU students and overseas students who mainly stay for only one year. The university of Edinburgh even makes an “accommodation guarantee” to overseas students that they will provide accommodation. Only 9% of Edinburgh University student accommodation is used by returning students.

a) The location is appropriate in terms of access to university and college facilities by walking, cycling or public transport

It is not clear what an “appropriate location” in terms of access to university facilities is. There is no agreed definition in the student housing guidance of what is a suitable time duration to travel, distance from university or suitable transport arrangements for it to be an “appropriate location”.

Efforts to assess the appropriateness can be made by using guidance from Transport Scotland⁴.

Para 5.21 of the Transport Assessment Guidance suggests journey times of up to 20-30 minutes are appropriate for walking and 30-40 minutes for cycling. But these should be checked for actual real life conditions not simply a map based calculation.

Para 5.22 of the Transport Assessment Guidance says that a 30 minute door to door travel time (including the walk, wait, journey time, and walk to the destination) is an appropriate choice of time-band by public transport for most types of development. In some situations a 45 minute journey would be appropriate.

In addition developers need to consider what the Trip Generation and Modal Split of the site is. This is an estimation of how many people will travel to and from the site (including how often) and by what mode. This helps to gauge the adequacy of transport facilities to cope with the development. With hundreds of new residents in an area, unless there is spare capacity or adjustments made then problems might develop.

³ <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/HousesMultipleOccupation>, Sheet 4 - Licenses in force at 31 March each year

⁴ Transport Scotland 2012, Transport Assessment Guidance

Trip databases provided by private companies are often used for this but they are of variable quality. As a result the definition of the nature of the development will have a significant effect on the proposal resulting in differing numbers for car, bus and cycle use. Car use is particularly important. Edinburgh aims to reduce private car uses but the further away a PBSA is from university facilities, the greater the likelihood that students will use cars to meet their transport needs.

- a) In locations within or sharing a boundary with (or separated only by a road) a main university or college campus, as identified in Map 1, student housing will generally be acceptable.**

This is fairly straightforward and emphasises that the preferred location for PBSA is adjacent to college campuses. Map 1 shows that the majority of University of Edinburgh PBSA is close or adjacent to campuses. A similar picture applies for Heriot Watt University.

- b) The proposal will not result in an excessive concentration of student accommodation (including that in the private rented sector) to an extent that would be detrimental to the maintenance of balanced communities or to the established character and residential amenity of the locality.**

Again it is not clear what an excessive concentration of student accommodation is. The 2010 Edinburgh City Local Plan Student Housing Guidance contained guidance that suggested any concentration of students in any locality of more than 30% was excessive. However the 2016 Student Housing Guidance dropped this reference to 30% and left it open to interpretation.

In the text of the 2016 SHG there is a reference to a figure of 50%

“Where the student population is dominant, exceeding 50% of the population, there will be a greater potential imbalance within the community”

However this is not contained within the guidance criteria itself and other levels may be acceptable depending on other issues. A decision by the Scottish Reporter may be relevant here.

This was a 2015 decision on the site of an old Homebase store in St Leonards for an 836 bed PBSA in an area close to the University of Edinburgh. Here the concentration figure was already 55% and with the new PBSA would rise to 62%. The reporter held that the “excessive concentration” condition was in conflict with the guidance that PBSA should be close to university facilities. This latter won out and the Scottish Reporter allowed the appeal.⁵

This decision implies that higher concentrations of student numbers should be permitted close to university facilities and by implication smaller concentrations should be expected further away from university facilities.

The rewritten 2016 SHG leaves this option open and the figure of 50% quoted later should not be taken as being the only possible level that would raise questions. It would be a reasonable argument that the original 30% figure should still apply in areas distant from college facilities while higher concentrations would be acceptable in areas closer to such facilities.

Working out the number of students in an area.

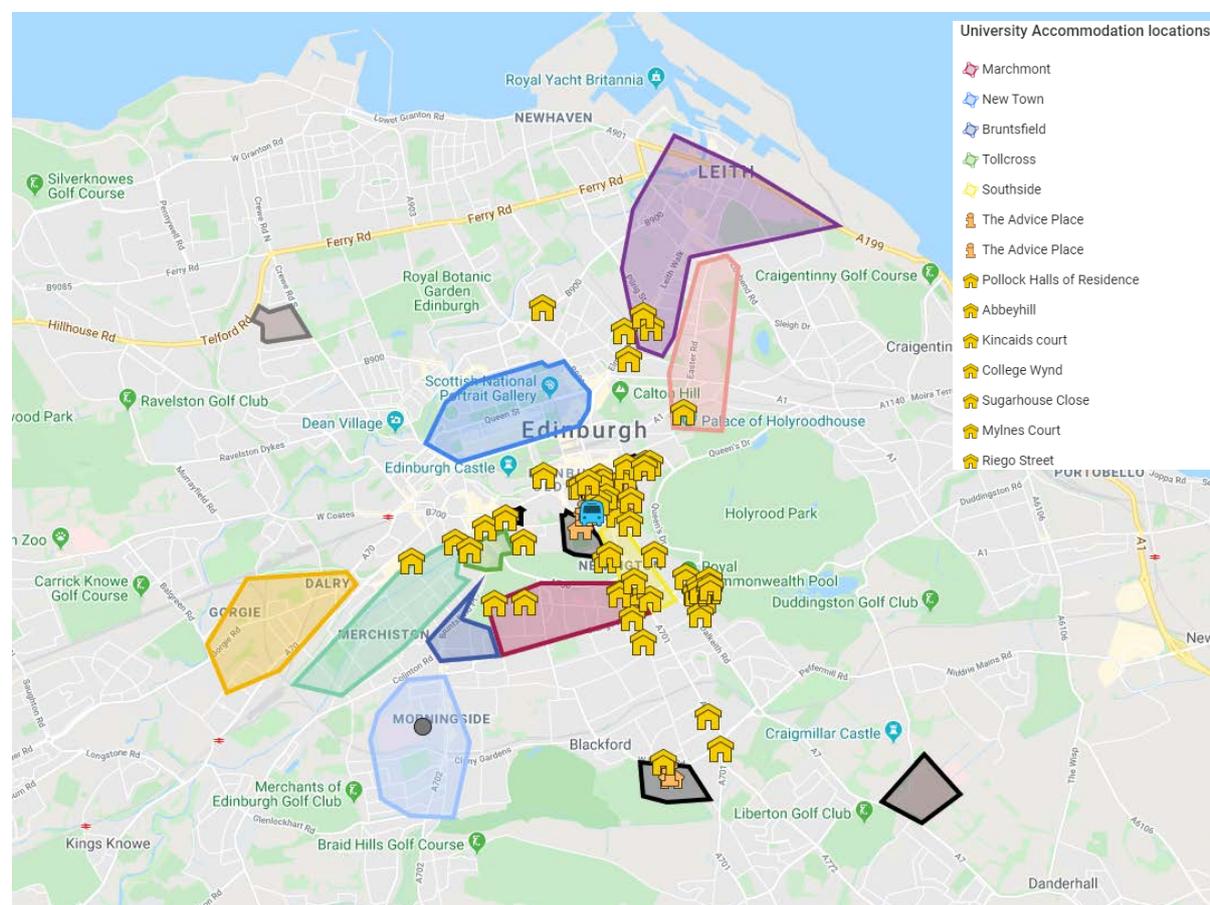
Three factors need to be taken into account

1. Students resident in the family home

⁵ www.dpea.scotland.gov.uk, PPA-230-2146

2. Students resident in private rented accommodation
3. Students residing in Purpose Built Student Accommodation

While this information is available to the Universities in Edinburgh it is not publicly available. They all know where their students live. Map 1 published in 2019 shows information from the University of Edinburgh about where students live.⁶



For planning purposes the figures for the first two have to be drawn from the 2011 census as the only current reliable source of population statistics. This information can be supplied down to very small localities providing very detailed information. But it is now 8 years out of date and the new census data for 2021 will not be available until 2023 at the earliest.

We know it's out of date because the last 9 years have seen a tremendous growth in numbers of PBSA at all Edinburgh's Universities and especially the University of Edinburgh. In 2010, the UoE was providing 7,000 bed places in University arranged accommodation. By 2018 that had risen by 4,000 to 11,000 in total - an increase of 60%⁷.

Without accurate figures it is not possible to say if the numbers in privately rented accommodation has risen by 60%. However it is fairly clear that the 2011 census does not represent an accurate figure any more. Some sources suggest that overall the number of students in Edinburgh has increased by 50% in the last decade.

⁶

https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/support_and_advice/the_advice_place/accommodation/looking_for_accommodation/where_to_find_accommodation/ accessed 24th Jan 2019 – part of legend showing

⁷ University of Edinburgh, Student Residential Accommodation Strategy 2018 – 20, 27 November 2018

Overall it is possible to argue that due to the unreliability of existing information, that decisions on the siting of large PBSA should not be taken until more accurate information is collected. This does not need to wait till the next census, local data collection could be carried out by the council at the developers' expense.

Alternatively it is worth exploring if the university will provide anonymised data over the numbers of students resident in postcode localities relevant to an application either to campaigners or to the Council's planning authorities.

b) Student housing will generally be supported on sites with less than 0.25ha developable area. Consideration should be given to the cumulative impact of student housing, and other land uses which contribute to a transient population, where these uses will have a detrimental impact on character.

This statement is important as it makes three points that need to be considered

- i. PBSA should be of a small scale
 - ii. Other local PBSA developments need to be taken into account
 - iii. Other land uses such as AirBnb & short term lets, HMOs, Hotels & hostels need to be taken into account.
- i. While developers and the colleges may prefer larger size PBSA, the council is making clear that they prefer small ones. Smaller scale PBSA of 50 -200 are more likely to be community driven internally with students easily becoming familiar with each other.

The existence of this clause can be used to argue that discretion should not be applied to larger PBSA proposals.

- ii. The cumulative impact of other student housing should be taken into account. In an area that has seen large scale recent growth in student housing should be able to argue for a pause in further developments while existing changes bed down.

It is likely that the creation of PBSA in an area will over the next few years see a rise in student demand for local private rented property as students move in their later years of study.

- iii. Databases of Houses in Multiple Occupation are available from Edinburgh Council⁸. These are searchable by council ward and by address so that detailed analysis can be made of numbers of flat and occupants.

For example in January 2020 there are 88 licensed HMOs in Leith with 543 occupants. Leith Walk ward has 443 houses licensed as HMOs with 2,245 occupants. Some of these are student residences in PBSAs where the accommodation is provided in separate flats.

Currently there is no requirement to licence AirBnB or other short term lets although some idea of the scale of lets can be gained from examining the websites of such businesses. In 2017/18 AirBnb reported that they had supported 640,000 visitors in Edinburgh.⁹ There are a number of other app that can be similarly checked

- Couchsurfing
- FlipKey

⁸ <https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/licences-permits/licensing-registers/1>

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/short-term-lets-annexes-consultation-regulatory-framework-scotland/pages/2/>

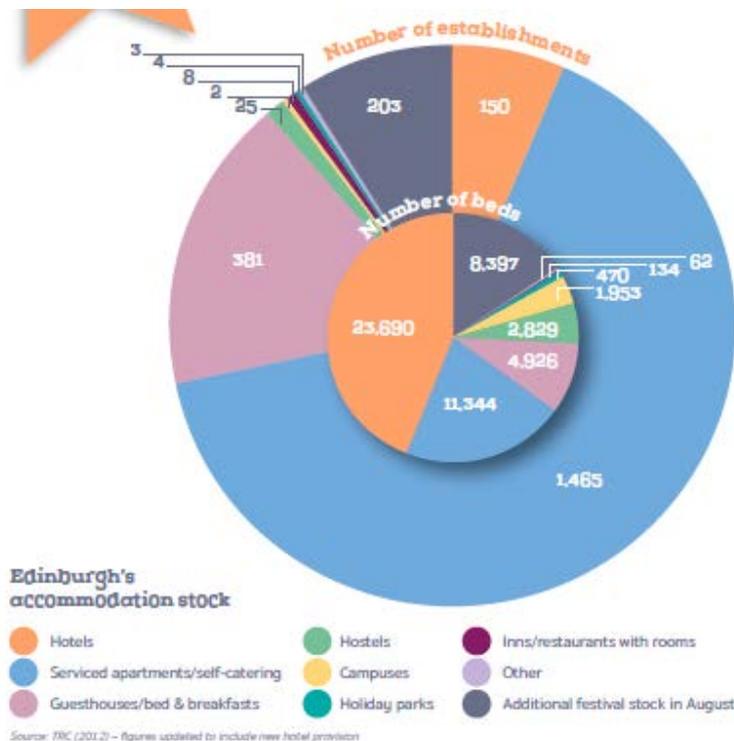
- HouseTrip
- HomeAway
- Wimdu

But from just Airbnb figures we can see the effect this is having on some areas in Edinburgh¹⁰. Leith Walk is the 2nd highest amount of listings in Scotland with 7.6% of all properties in the area listed and Leith has the 8th highest with 5%.

Table 2: Type of Active Airbnb listing by ward, May 2019¹⁸

Ward	Entire home	Private room	Shared room	Total	% of Total	Penetration rates All listings	Entire homes	Dwellings (2017)
City Centre (City of Edinburgh)	2,142	531	37	2,710	8.51	16.17	12.78	16,759
Leith Walk (City of Edinburgh)	996	449	4	1,449	4.55	7.46	5.13	19,433
Skye (Highland)	663	412	8	1,083	3.40	18.63	11.41	5,813
Southside/Newington (City of Edinburgh)	515	326	1	842	2.64	5.19	3.17	16,231
Inverleith (City of Edinburgh)	526	238	0	764	2.40	4.42	3.05	17,274
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (Highland)	421	303	1	725	2.28	10.73	6.23	6,756
Morningside (City of Edinburgh)	424	244	0	668	2.10	4.63	2.94	14,432
Leith (City of Edinburgh)	420	224	1	645	2.03	5.02	3.27	12,856
Anderston/City/Yorkhill (Glasgow City)	486	141	0	627	1.97	3.23	2.51	19,401

Some idea of the figures on hotel and B&Bs can be gained from this 2012 Edinburgh Tourism Action Group graphic but this was produced before Airbnb really developed so the current figures is larger.



¹⁰ Research into the impact of short-term lets on communities across Scotland, Scottish Government, October 2019

An area with high levels of short term tourist accommodation can argue that further large PBSA developments can have a detriment to their existing or expected lifestyle whether that be less noise at night, less children about for their own kids to play with or even places to park their cars.

The relevance of this to each area when considering applications for PBSA needs to be assessed and the appropriate amount of research carried out.

- c) Outwith criteria a) and b) sites identified as a high probability of delivering housing within Map 5 taken from the LDP Housing Land Study (June 2014) and sites with greater than 0.25ha developable area must comprise a proportion of housing as part of the proposed development, to balance the mix of land uses and to contribute to housing land need. On these sites the new build residential gross floor area shall represent a minimum of 50% of the total new build housing and student accommodation gross floor area.**

This criteria is defined to support the Student Housing Guidance which says that an acceptable way to offset the excessive concentration of students is to build more housing in the same area.

The delivery of additional housing is one way in which the planning authority can mitigate against detrimental changes in character through land use. (p6)

This should be a relatively simple calculation with the developers' plans containing floor space calculations.

However it is important to filter out non related items such as office and retail premises not related to student accommodation. But similarly it is important to include in the student accommodation figure all uses related to that function.

In the Stead's Place case, the developer suggested that a linked hotel, restaurant and communal space open to the public should not be included in the student floor space calculation which had the effect of reducing the imbalance of student accommodation to housing to only 60:40. However the guidance make clear that the figure should be gross.

The reference to Map 5 in the Student Housing Guidance highlights over 300 sites in Edinburgh identified as having a "high probability of delivering housing". Many of these are less than 0.25ha but nonetheless this criteria of 50:50 housing : student accommodation applies to them.

- d) Student accommodation should comprise a mix of type of accommodation, including cluster units, to meet varying needs of students.**

Students, like the rest of the population have a range of household sizes and needs and this criteria is aimed at making sure developers have included a range of options.

The following list of accommodation options should be used for assessing a developers attempt to meet this criteria

- Standard
- Standard with en suite
- Twin room
- Twin room with en suite
- Shared House/Flat
- Studio
- Family

- Single Room with facilities for disabled people
- Family accommodation with facilities for disabled people

There should also be an assessment of whether the student accommodation meets the cultural needs of students. This would include:

- Single Sex corridors/sections
- Prayer Rooms
- Appropriate kitchen amenities to allow for religious requirements in food preparation

While providing hundreds of identical rooms may be simpler for developers and possibly more profitable, this criteria is designed to ensure that there is a wide variety in the development of student accommodation.

Conclusion

There are many issues interrelated in the development of Purpose Built Student Accommodation. Save Leith Walk and some of these concerns have already been recognised in the discussion around the new city plan.

The consultation documents point to Edinburgh Council overhauling its rules regarding purpose-built student housing - requiring developers to provide more housing and affordable housing for schemes over a certain size. The main suggested points of the new student housing guidance are

- Student developments may have to be "built for and managed by" one of Edinburgh's universities or colleges
- The amount of studio flats are to be capped at 10 per cent - so they can be easily converted to residential housing in the future, if required.
- 50% of "the area" of all sites for student housing over 0.25 hectares must be for housing.
- 35% of the housing built on such sites must be affordable.
- Sites must be located on a direct walking, cycling, or public transport route to its intended university or college.

Some of these may make an improvement to the development of PBSA in Edinburgh. However we think that further consideration of a number of issues would lead to a more secure footing for student housing

- Accounting for the joint impact of student housing and other forms of short term lets in an area
- Considering recent developments in an area and whether a "bedding in" period is needed before further developments are approved.
- Whether the new rules about a "Direct transport route" would lead new developments to accumulate in particular areas.

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